Reflection on: Death of Self

This week, we are meditating in person and have a transcript for those unable to join us. We have included some pictures and resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre/ our homes. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Opening words: Rob shares some passages from a Chapter in Fr Richard Rohr's book "Immortal Diamond" which he calls 'Who dies and who lives'. In Buddhism the death of self is called 'The Great Death' as opposed to our actual death which is called 'The Little Death'.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob and Hazel, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Introduction: Richard Rohr starts the Chapter as follows: "In one way or another, almost all religions say that you must die before you die, and then you will know what dying means – and what it does not mean! Your usual viewing platform is utterly inadequate to see what is real . It is largely useless to talk about the very ground of being, your True Self, or your deepest soul until you have made real contact with these at least once. That demands dying to the old viewing platform of the mental ego and the False Self. There is just no way around that. If you do make contact, you forever know that something is there that can be talked about, relied on and deeply trusted. You move from religion as mere belief to religion as a new kind of knowing."

The Soul

Fr Richard continues: "Henceforth, you know you have a soul, and your soul becomes your primary receiver station from there on." As a Buddhist I do not speak about 'souls' much! This is partly for historical reasons. The Brahmans in the Buddha's time did not make a distinction as Father Richard does between the 'false self' and the 'true self'. They had a word 'Atman' which meant both self and soul, and they had a theory, later shared to some extent by the Gnostics, that the body was course and contaminated but that the soul was pure and that if the coarse elements could be removed it would emerge in resplendent glory as one with Brahma. They had various ascetic practices to free the pure soul. The Buddha tried them to the extremes of not only denying himself food and water but even limiting breathing. It did not bring him closer to reality but only made him thin, unwell and hungry.

He gave it up and he taught not that there was no soul or 'true self' but that no such thing could be found or identified. This, I think is important. It is not useful to ask whether or not we have a soul within us, but it is very important to realise there is nothing with which we can identify. Identity and identification with various states of being have become very fashionable recently particularly amongst the young. However, whatever we think we can identify with, whether it be race or gender, nationality, culture or even being human, all these things are in fact impermanent and subject to gradual although often imperceptible change. This is called emptiness or in Christianity 'spiritual poverty'. The problem is one of identifying with or clinging to anything. Emptiness means the infinite possibility arising from release. I think Fr Richard understands this although he uses the orthodox terms of 'soul' or 'true self'.

Transformation

He continues: “The reason we must die before we die is expressed eloquently by Kathleen Dowling Singh, a woman who has spent her life in hospice work: ‘The ordinary mind[the False Self] and its delusions die in the ‘Nearing Death Experience.’ As death carries us off, it is impossible to any longer pretend that who we are is our ego. The ego is transformed in the very carrying off.’ Some form of death – psychological, spiritual, relational or physical – is the only way we will lose our ties to our small and separate False Self. Only then does it return in a new shape, which I am calling the Risen Christ, or the soul or the True Self.

The ego self is the self before death; the soul is real only after we have walked through the death of our ever fading False Self and come out larger and brighter on the other side. Hafiz, the fourteenth century Persian mystic poet says it as only he can: ‘God is trying to sell you something, but you don’t want to buy. This is what your suffering is: Your fantastic haggling, your manic screaming over the price!’

“Anything less than the death of the False Self is useless religion. The False Self must die for the True Self to live or, as Jesus himself put it, ‘Unless I go, the Spirit cannot come’ (John 16.7). This is rather clear but also devastating news. Theologically speaking, let me put it this way: Jesus (a good person) still had to die for the Christ (the universal presence) to arise. It is the pattern of transformation, but the letting go of the original ‘good person’ is always a huge leap of faith precisely because it is deemed to be so ‘good.’ Biblically it is foreshadowed in the killing of the innocent Passover lamb, which has been taken into the home and likely already named by the children (Exodus 12:5-6). What has to die is not usually bad; in fact it will often feel good and necessary.”

The Buddha once told the ‘Parable of the Raft’: a man escaping from dangerous territory comes across a large stretch of water on the other side of which is safety. He takes time and uses skill to build a sturdy raft which is capable of carrying him across. The Buddha then asked his disciples: “Should the man then carry the raft which has been of benefit to him on his back or should he leave it on the shore for others to use?” The disciples replied that he should obviously leave it, and the Buddha said: “Just as it is necessary to let go of bad things, so it is also necessary to let go of good and helpful things.”

Fr Richard continues: “Your True Self is that part of you that is going to live forever and sees truthfully. It is divine breathing passing through you. Your False Self is that part of you that is constantly changing and will eventually die anyway. It is the world of passing forms and looks out with itself as the central reference point – which is never true. The False Self is passing, tentative and, as the Hindus and Buddhists say, ‘empty’. Mature religion helps us speed up this process of dying to the False Self – or at least stop fighting its clear demise. This is why saints live in such a counter-cultural way. It is a free fall anyway, so we might as well jump in and cooperate, they seem to say. It is very much easier to offer a free yes ahead of time before it is forced on us on our deathbed or in tragedy. St. Francis says in his lifetime, ‘Welcome, Sister Death!”

“Your False Self is not bad or wrong. It is just mortal. It is relative and not absolute. It is passing and not substantial, a largely mental and cultural construct. It will die when you die. For some reason it is easier for us to fall in love with that which dies and is dying than that which lives and lives forever. Maybe our love of our False Self is a kind of sympathy for what is fragile and needy, an understandable attachment to transitory things before they depart – knowing at least unconsciously that they will. That is not bad and in fact gets the whole ball rolling. We grow big inside constricted space and situations, although none of us wants to admit it. Some have said that we would never grow up if we knew we were going to live forever in this world. I suspect that is true.”

Choosing to Love

Fr Richard continues: "Your False Self is your necessary warm-up act, the ego part of you that establishes your separate identity, especially in the first half of life. Basically it is your incomplete self trying to pass for your whole self. We fall in love with the part so much that we deny the Whole. God surely understands that and is undoubtedly glad that we are at least in love withsomething. Such love gets us started until we eventually realise that 'love lasts forever' (1 Corinthians 13:13) and is one thing we can forever count on and forever are.

"But we do know this. Every time you choose to love, you have also just chosen to die. Every time you truly love, you are letting go of yourself as an autonomous unit and have given a bit of yourself away to something or someone else, and it is not easily retrieved -unless you choose to stop loving – which many do. These first moments of ecstatic release from imprisonment in yourself are wonderful, erotic and immediately life giving. Eventually, however, when that expanded self wants to retreat back into itself, it realises it is trapped in a much larger truth now. It has a decision to make: it either expands – dying to its former small self – or enfolds back into itself, which is just another and worse kind of dying. But in either case you die. T.S. Eliot says it more dramatically in the 'Four Quartets;:

The only hope , or else despair,
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

"The realignment of ourselves from two to One through a loving and lifelong tug of war is the very dance of transformation. It is a trust walk, a constant testing of the reliability of love and God (which you eventually know are the same), which eventually allows us to fall trustingly back into our True Self. Then we are one again.

Just remember, we are testing God much more than God is ever directly testing us. Your ordinary dualistic, either or mind, your self-preservative ego will refuse and avoid the 'staggering change of perspective' by every means possible, so let's state it outlined and clearly:

What dies? Your False Self – and it is just a matter of WHEN not IF.

Who lives? The God Self that has always lived but now includes YOU.

And note that it is a WHAT that dies, and a WHO that lives."

I think that Fr Richard Rohr puts in a Christian context much of what I understand although as a Buddhist I would not use the same terms. I would not say that there was a partial self or later a complete self, and I would say that we have always been part of what he calls the "universal presence" and that we don't just become part of it when we let go of our constructed selves or egos; it is just that before we do we do not yet fully know it. Those who do really come to know it no longer identify either with a false self or a 'true' self – they don't identify! Actually not to identify with anything or anybody removes an enormous burden which may have been carried around for countless lifetimes.

Beginning Meditation: So we will now enter a period of formal meditation, moving into a comfortable position relaxing the body and letting go of the efforts, difficulties, triumphs and worries of our day. Bringing ourselves into the peace and the completeness of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort in the body. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Allowing and acknowledging every arrival into our mind, every experience, but not attaching or holding them up – just allowing them to go on their

way, like the porter in a guest House. Returning to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (this may be your own watch or meditation timer app)
Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Post Meditation poem: I will end with the fifth of John Donne's Holy Sonnets – a little taste of the fifth Wednesday of the month when we will share some more of his poetry.

I am a little world made cunningly
Of Elements, and an Angelike spright,
But black sinne hath betraid to endlesse night
My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die.
You which beyond that heaven which was most high
Hath found new sphears, and of new lands can write,
Powre new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
Drowne my world with my weeping earnestly,
Or wash it if it must be drown'd no more:
But oh it must be burnt! Alas the fire
Of lust and envie have burnt it heretofore,
And made it fouler; Let their flames retire,
And burne me ô Lord, with a fiery zeale
Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heale.
Note that Donne says that both parts must die – both the 'elements' (the lower or 'false' self) and the 'angelike spright' (the higher or 'true' self).

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen**
Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Images/ resources:
Immortal Diamond – Richard Rohr, SPCK
The Grace in Dying – Kathleen Dowling Singh, New York: Harper Collins
T. S. Eliot – Four Quartets
Alagaddupama Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 22
John Donne – Holy Sonnets V
Photographs from Pixabay



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.