

## The Three Doorways Of The Present Moment

*From*

*Into the Silent Land: A guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*

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When it comes to practicing with a prayer word or phrase such as the Jesus Prayer, the basic instruction couldn't be simpler: at the time of prayer let go of all other concerns, recollect yourself, and begin to repeat silently the prayer word. Whenever you become aware that your attention has been stolen, gently return your attention to the prayer word. Thus begins a journey to the depth of the present moment that can never be fully fathomed.

In what follows I shall speak of three doorways that must be passed through in order to discover this depthless depth within, but indeed I could have said 30 or 300 doorways, for they seem endless. But in truth there are no doorways. We should always be wary of applying linear notions of progress to our prayer life and asking ourselves: "What stage am I in?" "How far have I progressed?" Whatever "progress" in prayer is supposed to mean, it certainly doesn't work like that. This is something Thomas Merton pointed out toward the end of his life. He said, "in prayer we discover what we already have. You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize you are already there. We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess." There is nothing that separates us from this depthless depth whose ground is God. Paradoxically, however, this is only seen to be the case after crossing threshold after threshold. The present moment is a gateless gate opening onto a pathless path. Such are the paradoxes and riddles that pave the path of prayer.

It should likewise be emphasized that cultivating a contemplative practice, such as using a prayer word, the breath, sitting in stillness, is not to reduce prayer to a technique. Techniques imply a certain control and focus on a determined outcome. Contemplative practice is a skill, a discipline that facilitates a process that is out of one's direct control, but it does not have the capacity to determine an outcome. A gardener for example, does not actually grow plants. The gardener practices finely honed skills, such as cultivating soil, watering, feeding, weeding, pruning. But there is nothing the gardener can do to make the plants grow. However, if the gardener does not do what a gardener is supposed to do, the plants are not as likely to flourish, in fact they might not grow at all. In the same way a sailor exercises considerable skill in sailing a boat. But nothing the sailor does can produce the wind that moves the boat. Yet without the sailing skills that harness the wind, the boat will move aimlessly. Gardening and sailing involve skills of receptivity. The skills are necessary but by themselves insufficient. And so it is with contemplative practice and the spiritual life generally.

Contemplation is sheer gift. There is nothing we can do to bring forth its flowering, but there are important skills, without which it will be unlikely to flower. It is this sort of harmonious synergy between human effort and divine grace that leads St. Augustine to comment, "So while God made you without you, he doesn't justify you without you." St. Teresa of Avila captures the same sense when she writes, "Beloved, there is much we can do to open ourselves to receiving his favors." God is always Self-giving; it is a question of removing the obstacles that make it difficult to receive this Self-gift. This receptivity is what contemplative practice cultivates.

Teresa's famous image of the silk worm expresses what contemplative practice is for. As the silk worm spins its own silken cocoon, from which it will one day emerge transformed into a butterfly, so the soul, who gives itself diligently to spiritual practice, is responsive enough to the promptings of grace to cooperate in its own process of transformation. Contemplative practice is like the cocoon that is gradually and delicately spun and from which we will emerge transformed. "So let's get on with it, my friends! Let's do the work quickly and spin the silken cocoon."

## The First Doorway

The First Doorway is characterized by largely practical concerns from general fidgetiness to boredom and self-preoccupation. Even experienced people of prayer can go through stretches of time when it is next to impossible to sit down and be physically still for 20 to 30 minutes a couple of times a day. But somehow we get there. The prayer word has a key role, especially for crossing the first doorway. As Diadochos indicated centuries ago, the prayer word provides an anchor, something to hold on to, to constantly return to, instead of the innumerable internal videos.

In the Christian tradition there is a wide variety of teaching regarding the use of the prayer word. The early desert tradition suggested the recitation of short scriptural phrases as a way of dealing with distracting thoughts. St. Augustine tells us that these were called "arrow prayers." Evagrius has an amazing work called the *Antirrheticus*, in which he prescribes different scriptural phrases as antidotes for different types of distracting thoughts. He seems to advocate prayer phrases drawn directly from Scripture, and these in great variety, depending on the nature of the afflictive thought. For example, for those struggling with a particular form of anger he recommends, among others, such phrases as 'Do not quarrel along the way' (Gen 45: 24) or 'Do not bear a false witness against your neighbor' (Ex 20:16). If you are struggling with thoughts of sadness in some form, Evagrius suggests phrases like, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17) or 'Be not afraid before them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord' (Jer 1:8). The advantage of his approach is that it cultivates several contemplative disciplines at once: knowledge of Scripture, inner vigilance, and recollection. You have to be interiorly vigilant (and detached) in order to identify immediately what facet of which thought is afflicting you. You have also to be steeped in Scripture so that the relevant scriptural phrases come immediately to mind. Evagrius's intention is that the quiet repetition of these phrases should gradually replace the obsessive chewing on the afflictive thoughts. The result is a therapeutic transformation of our relationship with afflictive thoughts and feelings that sets the tone for the entire contemplative tradition: afflictive thoughts become opportunities for the cultivation of inner stillness and immersion in Scripture.

While Evagrius teaches a great variety of prayer words tailored to fit a variety of inner struggles, shortly after Evagrius, this tradition is streamlined into a more measured array of prayer words with a strong preference, at least in the Orthodox tradition, for some form of the Jesus Prayer.

Diadochos is an early spokesman of the Jesus Prayer tradition. The Jesus Prayer itself has long and short forms. Diadochos and Climacus are among those who advocate a short form of the prayer that basically features "Jesus." As the Jesus Prayer is handed on down the centuries, it takes on longer forms: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"; "Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me"; "Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In my own experience of working with people from all walks of life, some form of the Jesus Prayer is the most commonly used of prayer phrases, but it is not the only one from the tradition.

The student of Evagrius, John Cassian, who brings much of the desert tradition into the West, suggests as a prayer phrase, "O God come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me" as part of his "prayer of fire." This way of still prayer is for him the innermost reality and deepest praying of the "Our Father." Again we see a scripturally inspired way of silent prayer.

The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests a notably different approach to the prayer word. He thinks the prayer word should be brief. Nor should it have a lot of religious meaning, for this could then lead easily to pious reflection on the meaning of the prayer word. Therefore, he says, let it be a short word. "Take only a short word of one syllable; that is better than one of two syllables, for the shorter it is, the better it agrees with the work of the spirit. A word of this kind is the word 'God' or the word 'love.' Choose which- ever you wish, or another as you please, whichever you prefer of one syllable, and fasten this word to your heart, so that it never parts from it, whatever happens."

Either the author of *The Cloud* does not know of the Jesus Prayer tradition or he disagrees with its approach. But he does agree that the prayer word should become a place of constant refuge. In our own day there are two teachers who are particularly well known: Thomas Keating, who is largely inspired by the

author of *The Cloud*, but from a helpful and contemporary psychological perspective, and John Main, who roots himself in the desert tradition. (However, his suggestion that the prayer word should be only "Maranatha," seems unique to him.) So there is a good deal of diversity in the Christian traditions teaching on the use of the prayer word. Nevertheless, there is a common concern that unites this diversity: the acknowledged problem of the roving mind in prayer and the usefulness of the prayer word as a remedy.

You might well ask, isn't the mental repetition of a word or phrase just another video? Yes, it is in a certain sense. There is something discursive about it. But this will take care of itself in passing through the third doorway. The prayer word is something like a vaccination: a small dose of the disease in question is introduced to the patient for the purpose of calling forth those antibodies that will ultimately ward off the disease, in this case the disease in question is the overactive mind, which, while undeniably important in many of life's tasks, obscures the deeper ground of being and leaves us with the sense that we are separate from God and others. This sense of separation from God, as well as the sense of personal identity derived from thoughts and feelings, is all pasted up out of bits and pieces of mental process.

The vaccine of the prayer word builds recollection and detachment. Recollection gives us an initial sense of inner peace, which will lead to a yet deeper calm, grounding both inner peace and inner chaos (what the desert tradition calls *apatheia*). Detachment is another dynamic quality that enables us to let go of things and to see through our endless and clever mind games.

Choose a prayer word and stick with it. Some people seem to get a spiritual buzz out of choosing their prayer word. It needn't be so involved; simply choose a word that you feel drawn to or that seems right and leave it at that.

The challenge most people face in passing through the first doorway is coping, on the one hand, with the tremendous noise going on in the head, and, on the other, with paralyzing boredom. The mind seems to be darting about with a great and furious frenzy. Simply note this and then return to your prayer word, it is not a question of trying to push the chaotic thoughts away and replacing them with peaceful thoughts; for this would be yet another way of getting caught up in more thinking. Simply return to the prayer word. We might well catch ourselves commenting, "This is a hopelessly boring and inane practice." These are more thoughts. The advice is the same: note them; let them be; return to the prayer word. This simple discipline is called "practice."

Sometimes, especially at the beginning, there can be a lot of self-consciousness that can really trip us up. We either become fascinated by watching ourselves being contemplative or find this self-consciousness too awkward and distracting. The advice is the same: note the thoughts, let them be, and return to the practice.

The skill that is being cultivated in all this is what is needed to pass through the first doorway. This skill is really a sort of mental habit: we are becoming accustomed to returning to our practice in the midst of whatever is happening, whether things are going well or whether all hell is breaking loose. This habit of constantly returning to our practice is more than just a mechanical repetition. Theophan says in reference to the practice of the Jesus Prayer, "Do not forget that you must not limit yourself to a mechanical repetition of the words of the Jesus Prayer. This will lead to nothing but a habit of repeating the prayer automatically. There is of course nothing wrong with this, but it constitutes only the extreme outer limit of the work." The practice of the prayer word involves more than just fidelity to technique. "Its power comes from faith in the Lord, and from a deep union of the mind and heart with Him." When we find that this practice is really beginning to take root in us, that this is how we increasingly spend our time when the reasoning mind is not needed for some task, that we spend less and less time watching our internal videos, then we have passed through the First Doorway of the present moment, it is a subtle yet obvious passage, something like what happens to a pianist when learning a new piece of music. At first it is awkward, stumbling and halting, but with practice, practice, and more practice, suddenly it becomes natural. The awkwardness of self-consciousness is gone; the prayer word is becoming a place of refuge, and somehow quantity has become quality, as Franny put it in "Franny and Zooey".

## The Second Doorway

When negotiating the Second Doorway the main task is to become one with the prayer word, the way a weaver is one with the loom, or a dancer with the dance. Returning to the prayer word has become second nature and is refreshingly more interesting than the internal videos that continue to play. Certainly the attention will be stolen by the videos but bringing ourselves back to our practice is now well established. And so we forget ourselves in the prayer word.

Previously the prayer word was like a brick wall, and the quiet repetition of it involved a good deal of mental activity. This begins to change as we approach the Second Doorway. The repetition of it is far less a mental saying and more a part of our simple awareness.

We may also become aware of some of the physical and emotional benefits that often accompany a well-established contemplative practice. Many people find that blood pressure decreases or stabilizes, the pulse slows down, and there is greater emotional tone. Life will continue to bring its stresses and strains, but we are more aware of how we are the cause of much of our own suffering and, in any event, can somehow let go with greater facility. We get over things more quickly.

There is a certain wisdom that settles into a life that does not attempt to control what everybody else ought to be thinking, saying, doing, or voting on. Wisdom, health, life, and love cannot be found in trying to control the wind, but rather in harnessing the wind in the sails of receptive engagement of the present moment. The most searching example of doing just this is quite simply to return to our practice rather than indulge in yet another video, yet another strategy of control. This ability is a result of deepening interior silence and makes it easier to give ourselves entirely to the praying of the prayer word.

Theophan says that practicing with a prayer word is more than something mechanical. "Delve deeply into the Jesus Prayer, with all the power that you possess." While the Jesus Prayer is Theophan's prayer word, the dynamic I describe, the fruit of interior silencing, works with any contemplative practice that cultivates recollection (as well as for those who find themselves closer to John of the Cross and simply sit in loving awareness, without the assistance of a prayer word). Theophan says, "delve deeply." He has become aware of the prayer word's attractive quality. This depthless depth must be plumbed.

No effort on our part can make the Second Doorway open, but the various skills cultivated at this time are necessary in order to cross the threshold of the Second Doorway, once opened by grace and providence. The skills we learn in our practice are letting go, letting be, and living in the depth of the present moment. A generous amount of time given each day to the practice of the prayer word is the best way to facilitate this process.

The struggle with thoughts has been present from the beginning. But after crossing the threshold of the First Doorway there are some subtler dimensions of this struggle with thoughts that entail the purification of the grasping tendencies of the discursive mind.

The thinking mind dominates awareness with clenching fists that constantly search for something to grasp. Contemplation, by contrast requires open palms of simple, direct engagement. This grasping tendency of the mind is the subject of the healing, purification, and unification that will help it remain still and receptive.

Before the First Doorway, the prayer word functioned much as shield or place of refuge. We could see that a thought had stolen our attention and then we returned to the prayer word. As we approach the Second Doorway, the prayer word is steadying our gaze on something more subtle: the obsessive mental patterns that are shaping and driving the thoughts and feelings that steal the attention. Say, for example, we are struggling with thoughts of anger or resentment. As we approached the First Doorway we gained the ability to see when the attention had been stolen by angry thoughts. As we approach the Second Doorway the stillness of the prayer word allows not only the resentful thought to be spotted, but also the mental-emotional pattern that undergirds the thought. We can see ourselves whipping up a commentary on past hurts that angered or frightened us. The commentary happens when the mind uses one of its millions of hands to grab onto something (real or imagined). This grabbing, and it is lightning-quick,

produces the story we tell ourselves about our anger, this is what resentment is. It is crucial to be able to spot these stories, for there will be no liberation until we learn to drop the elaborate commentaries on our anger, and we cannot drop them until we can see ourselves doing it. As the practice of the prayer word leads us to deeper interior silence, we can calmly see this spinning of stories in our head in a way we never could before.

Theophan says the prayer word "will draw you together." One of the effects of the integration of our emotions into the prayer word is that we can now see the deeper patterns of mental obsession and grasping that shape and drive afflictive thoughts and feelings. This liberating and integrating dynamic characterizes the approach to the Second Doorway, it can be rather painful as repressed material comes into awareness, what Thomas Keating has called "the unloading of the unconscious." But this is the essence of liberating integration: allowing into awareness what was previously kept out of awareness. Until we can see this, we will not see that there is something utterly vast and sacred already within us, this silent land that runs deeper than these obsessive mental patterns.

The use of the prayer word at the First Doorway of practice is characterized by the effective use of the prayer word as a refuge or shield from the onslaught of thoughts, even pious thoughts. It isn't that the prayer word prevents thoughts from happening, but we can use it to help us from getting caught up in them. As we cross the threshold of the Second Doorway, however, the way the prayer word is used begins to change. The deeper we delve into the prayer word, the less we use it as a shield from afflictive thoughts. Rather we meet the thoughts with stillness instead of commentary. We let the thoughts simply be, but without chasing them and whipping up commentaries on them.

As important as using the prayer word as a refuge and shield had been at the First Doorway, there was still a running mental commentary that said something like "I can't have this thought." "I must let go of thoughts." An independent "I" exists who has objective thoughts that must be let go. This is very much how things look from the First Doorway. The problem with this, however, is that there is still a separation between you and the prayer word. But as the prayer word continues to facilitate inner unification, this self-conscious, independent "I" dominates less and less. As the threshold of the Second Doorway is crossed the commentary that says "I can't have this thought" goes, and we are no longer meeting thoughts as afflictions to be shielded from and deflected. Instead the prayer word allows us to meet thoughts with simple stillness instead of a commentary such as "I need to let go of that thought."

Theophan says, "Have no intermediate image between the mind and the Lord when practicing the Jesus Prayer." When we are not grasping at the thoughts, images, and commentaries that separate us from the prayer word, we are one with the prayer word. The prayer word has gradually changed from being like a shield of protection to being like a riverbed at one with the river. The riverbed makes no comment on what is coming from upstream and passing downstream. Receiving and letting go are one act. This is how we come to experience the steady flow of thoughts and feelings.

Having passed through the Second Doorway, many people find that they no longer need to repeat the prayer word or, if so, only infrequently. While some schools of Christian meditation may teach otherwise, it seems to me completely natural for the prayer word to go completely silent after the Second Doorway. It is perfectly appropriate to emphasize constant repetition of the prayer word before the First Doorway is crossed. But even here the prayer word's main purpose is simply to bring the attention back from chasing thoughts and thereby assist the gentle excavation of the present moment. While constant repetition of the prayer word is nevertheless useful training, Theophan reminds us that, "the words are only the instrument and not the essence of the work." The more silent we become the more silent the prayer word; the fewer thoughts separating us from the prayer word, the more we have become one with the prayer word.

As we cross the Second Doorway we somehow become aware of our primordial foundation in silence. The prayer word, whether mentally repeated or not, leaves a trace in awareness, a traceless trace that serves as a vehicle of this silence. Merely turning our attention to the presence of the prayer word reveals this immersion in silence in which all thoughts appear and disappear. The prayer word is effectively practiced by just being. Here we wait for the Third Doorway to open.

## The Third Doorway

Crossing the threshold of the Third Doorway requires vigilant waiting in the silence of just being. When we are well practiced in this way of prayer we will find that we have acquired a certain skill at recognizing thoughts. They appear and disappear in awareness. Now shift your attention from the thought to what is aware of the thought, the awareness itself. This is a very simple shift, but a shift that immediately reveals (however briefly) the still mind. The discursive, reasoning mind will immediately try to turn this too into an object of awareness by generating a mental image of the stillness or a thought such as "the mind is now still" and then embroider some commentary on that. But by now we are well aware of the subtlety of our thoughts. We have learned to use the prayer word as a refuge from these thoughts. We have learned to meet thoughts with stillness instead of obsessive commentary that we play over and over and over again. So now shift your attention from these objects of awareness to the aware-ing itself. The prayer word is essentially silent at this point, even if at more surface levels of consciousness it might be quietly recited. Here one waits, and when the moment is ripe the present moment opens up.

Crossing the Third Doorway we encounter the ineffable. It is ineffable because it is neither an "it" nor a "what." It is nothing that can be grasped by thoughts, feelings, words. Language wilts. The prayer word opens. It reveals not another object of awareness, but the groundless ground that is the core of all being. This typically registers to the mind as an indescribable vastness, streaming from all sides, streaming from no sides, an ocean full and overflowing with a luminous nothing. But I am not describing some particular thing that appears as an object of awareness, as some sort of visual or sensible experience, something you see happening to you. I'm trying to point to where no word has ever gone, but out of which the Word emerges. And so this Silence washes onto the shores of perception, making it stretch to receive in metaphors of light, union, calm, spaciousness.

The very attention that gazes into this vastness is itself this vastness, luminous depth gazing into luminous depth. You are the vastness into which you gaze. "Deep calls unto deep in the roar of your waters" (Ps 42:7). But we must come to know this for ourselves as we are carried through this doorway of unknowing into the silent land.

One of the characteristics of having moved through the Third Doorway shows itself in our sense of self. On the one hand a firm, quiet confidence in our identity replaces all the posturing and masquerading. At the same time we discover that concepts, language, images, feelings do not exhaust or adequately express who we are; they don't go as deep as we go. Even a notion such as "you" or "I" falls short. Most of what we call a "self" is seen to be a paste-up job. The paste-up job, what many call the ego, has its use for negotiating all the practical affairs of life and is of no little interest to the Enneagram, the medicine man, the tax man. But no label applies to this "unselfed self" who emerges from the Third Doorway.

This is not the loss of identity, but its flowering, and we inhale the perfume of a fundamental Christian truth that baptism proclaims: my "I am" is one with Christ's "I am." In the language of traditional theology, we move from image to likeness (Gen 1:26). St. Diadochos reminds us that we are all "made in God's image; but to be in His likeness is granted only to those who through great love have brought their own freedom into subjection to God. For only when we do not belong to ourselves do we become like Him who through love has reconciled us to Himself." This "not belonging to ourselves" of which Diadochos speaks is our identity in God, the core of who we are. Thoughts do not attach to it. Time does not touch it. Yet it embraces all thought, all time, our coming to birth, and our dying, it is what the prophet Jeremiah calls our self before we were born and known by God from all eternity: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer 1:5) or St. Paul's acclamation in his letter on freedom, "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

People have often used the language of light to describe this breakthrough into the utterly normal. It is dark to the discursive mind but light to the virtues and to the awakening contemplative faculties. St. Gregory of Nyssa calls it a "luminous darkness." Again St. Diadochos speaks for many when he refers to this breakthrough as seeing "the light of the mind." He understands this as the fruit of long concentration on the prayer word (for him the name of Jesus). "Those who meditate unceasingly upon this glorious and holy name in the depths of their heart can sometimes see the light of their own intellect." Diadochos is not

speaking of some sort of vision or appearance of physical light, some form that could then disappear, much less some image of God, which could only be stitched together out of concepts and images. John of the Cross uses this same imagery when he says to God, "You are the divine light of my intellect by which I can look at You." The "light of the mind" is a metaphor for the ground of awareness showing something of itself to our perception. Something of the groundless ground of God washes onto the shores of perception and registers as spaciousness, luminous vastness, a sense of the unity of all things. A sense of everything manifesting vastness, what the poet Geoffrey Hill calls "splendidly shining darkness emptiness ever thronging." It is marked by a sense of deep inner freedom, even in the midst of all sorts of constraints, limitations, trials, failings, and responsibilities.

The prayer word has served as a vehicle for this breakthrough. Once this breakthrough has integrated us into itself, has "made our thoughts captive to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5), we realize something far more precious than any jewel. This luminous ground of God, is the ground that upholds all creation, "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" as Dante put it," the depths of our own heart, awareness itself utterly steeped in and saturated by God. Here we move into the promised land, the self-forgetful consummation in silence of our created identity, transformed from image to likeness (Gen 1:26), manifestly hidden "with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

Whether we continue to repeat the prayer word or not is relevant only insofar as the discursive mind needs some steadying, in any case, it is not uncommon, especially if you use the Jesus Prayer, to continue feeling a certain devotion, reverent gratitude or sense of the sacred with respect to the prayer word. Each person may differ here, but after the Third Doorway is crossed, contemplative practice is mainly a silent and uncluttered gazing into luminous vastness that streams out as our own awareness, a riverbed of awareness in which all things appear and disappear.

Using a prayer word is more than mere technique. The prayer word is like a mirror that reflects our own awareness. When we first begin the inward turn to quiet prayer we are faced with chaos, and the prayer word serves as an anchor in a storm, a shield and refuge from the onslaught of thoughts, feelings, storms of boredom, and fidgeting. But with some practice with the prayer word we grow in recollection and concentration and begin to see that there is something deeper than the chaos within. And somehow the prayer word seems different from before; it is as though there is some depth to it and Theophan's advice to "delve deeply" into it makes sense. The doorways we begin to pass through are doorways into our own awareness. Our own inner depths where we meet in this luminous darkness the gracious God who is already shining out of our own eyes, "closer to me than I am to myself."

What precisely is the prayer word doing? The prayer word gently excavates the present moment. The resulting interior focus eventually sets off and maintains a process of interior silencing. This interior silencing in turn begins to clear away much of the noise in our head. We discover in the process that there is more depth within us than we ever dreamt. There is not only chaos, confusion, emotional attachment, anxiety, and anger's nettled memory; not just the marvel of discursive reason, imaginative insight, and unconscious instinct, but also an abyss of awareness that is always flowing with bright obscurity, grounding all these mental processes, one with all and one with God. The prayer word assists this excavation of the present moment until such time as the prayer word too falls silent. Ultimately all strategies of spiritual acquisition become silent and our practice, if it can be called that any more, is simply luminous vastness gazing on and gazed through by luminous vastness.

However, just because we have crossed the threshold of the Third Doorway, does not mean we don't go back and forth. These doors are double-hinged, and we can go back and forth quite a bit. Sometimes when life is particularly stormy we may well find ourselves practicing as though we were approaching the First Doorway for the first time. We can even feel resistance to sitting in silence at all. But once the Third Doorway has been crossed, the time spent knocking on previous doors diminishes, and we see that even the resistance to sitting in silence is minimal.

The discovery of this mystery of silence is the grace of a lifetime, the "pearl of great price." The best response to this grace is to gather in the folds of this mantle of silence and wrap them around us. Concretely this means frequent practice, just as we cannot expect to be in good health by eating a nutritious

meal once a week or to be physically fit by walking around the block once a month, so it is with contemplative practice. Like physical health and fitness the fruits of contemplative practice are seen in regular practice. St Diadochos reminds us that anyone "who merely practices the remembrance of God from time to time, loses through lack of continuity what he hopes to gain through his prayer." Regular daily practice is key.

Thomas Keating recommends 20-minute periods twice a day. This is good for establishing a practice. If just starting out, this may seem too much. Then try eight or ten minutes and slowly increase to 20. But I would recommend gradually building up to 30 minutes to an hour twice a day. Most people find the morning the most realistic time for prayer. Others find evening or before bed better. The general rule is that the best time is what allows for the most consistency day in and day out. It takes real commitment to create a workable routine. One contemplative has defined contemplation as "the art of stealing time."

But as important as time set aside specifically for prayer, is learning to sit when you are not sitting. By this I mean, whenever the reasoning mind is not required for a specific task, take this as an opportunity to practice. Commuting to and from work, shopping for groceries, showering, shaving, cooking, ironing, gardening. All of these tasks, and others, are perfectly workable with contemplative practice and the principles of common sense. Far from lulling the reasoning mind into some dull blankness, contemplative practice sharpens reason and engenders all manner of creativity. So there is no cause for concern here. The bottom line is this: minimize time given over to chasing thoughts, dramatizing them in grand videos, and believing these videos to be your identity. Otherwise life will pass you by.

With so much focus on contemplative practice and interior stillness, what about other forms of prayer? Do they simply disappear? This does happen. But it is simply because a deeper discovery has been made. By sheer grace of God, our very being itself is prayer. Heaping up prayer upon prayer makes about as much sense as writing a chatty Valentine's Day card to your beloved when your beloved is with you. There is still an important role for intercessory prayer, but don't be surprised if you discover that silent communion with the ground of all being becomes the most natural and simple way of being in solidarity with all humanity and holding all our needs before the Creator of all.

Community prayer remains important, but how you participate in it changes. Liturgical prayer has a way of becoming a fountain of grace. The flow of this sourceless source is nothing other than the visible form of the great self-emptying sacramental flow of the ground of being. In former times it was common to speak of the liturgy on earth as a reflection of the liturgy in heaven. We don't speak of liturgy this way any more, but this point of view makes more and more sense. For when we enter these doorways of silence the simplest truths of the liturgy are unveiled: liturgy, like creation itself, is the shimmering of eternity in time. Even in the most dismal of liturgies (and these are in no short supply) Christ is and has always been the only presider.

However, just because we come to intuit this as the simplest truth about liturgical prayer, this does not necessarily mean that it is easy to cope with large doses of liturgy. The Benedictine monk John Chapman has something rather sobering to say about this. In his classic *Spiritual Letters* he says, "It is common enough for those who have any touch of 'Mysticism' . . . to be absolutely unable to find any meaning in vocal prayers." Chapman is not devaluing prayers we say privately or in common. He is putting his finger on a problem many contemplatives face. We find it difficult to pray with words. Communal prayer itself is not the issue. Contemplative prayer is the prayer of just being. Sadly much liturgical prayer is often hopelessly cerebral, self-conscious, verbose, and distracted (to say nothing of having all those bits of paper waved in your face). This is no environment in which simplicity can easily flower. Each will have to negotiate these tensions for oneself.

The way of the Christian prayer word is a way of liberation. By the time the Second Doorway is crossed, we begin to see some of the effects of this liberation. There is an increasing tendency to encounter life in its varied, concrete simplicity - however it happens to be - as simply a manifestation of the ineffable luminous vastness. This is marked by improved psychological hygiene. Life still hurts, but our emotional tone is such that we get over things quicker and on the whole our pet obsessions aren't quite the same easily hooked nose rings as before.

Part of the reason for this liberation is that all sorts of projections have been withdrawn. Prior to the major breakthrough of the Third Doorway our sense of self is highly mediated and is reflected back to us as a deep attraction to the things we think we need in order to discover our true selves. And so we burn with desire to spend time in spiritual places. We think we have to enter a monastery to realize our true self. We think the perfect spouse will lead us to the discovery of ourselves. We think that our true self is something that can be acquired and we burn with zealous desire to acquire it. But as our gaze into the luminous vastness deepens and strengthens, and the prayer word grows quiet, and spiritual practices fall away due to their own ripened readiness, so do our projections onto monasteries, cathedrals, canyons, mountains, and the "perfect partner" also fall away. When we discover unshakably that the God we seek has already found us, then the "monastery" or "mountain" or "perfect partner" does not have the same pull. They are no longer holding out to us a reflection of our innermost self that is one with God. Our self hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3) is bodying forth as life-just-happening. We don't have to enter or leave the monastery in order to discover this; we don't have to enter or leave the monastery after discovering this. The all-reconciling silence of God, resounding in all sound, is the parting gift of the prayer word. "The heavens declare the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork. No utterance at all, no speech, no sound that anyone can hear; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their message to the ends of the world" (Ps 19:1-4).