

Meditation, contemplation – and the wanderings of our minds?

Contemplation and meditation as distinct modes of prayer are often presented in accounts of Christian spirituality, especially in the Western tradition.¹ Exploring the history of the modes of prayer as they developed and were given names down through the centuries yields rich fruit. But there is also much confusion, because terms such as meditation and contemplation are used in different ways by different spiritual authors, and then many other terms are found in the literature. Can we find our way through this labyrinth?

A classic medieval author of the 12th century, Richard of St. Victor, a theologian and master of spirituality at the service of his own monastic community, the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris, offers a helpful perspective on which I will build. He wrote a number of works describing progression in the ways of prayer, based on the tradition available to him and his own experience. The one I am concentrating on here is *Benjamin Major, or The Mystical Ark*.² A diagram will present the essential distinction he develops at the beginning of his book:

cogitation	meditation	contemplation
unfocused to and fro of consciousness	the effort of disciplined thought	the gift of penetrating gaze
imagination	(discursive) reason	(intuitive) understanding
without labour without fruit	with labour with fruit	without labour with fruit

Cogitation and Meditation: Cogitation, referred to in our title as ‘wandering minds’, appears to be out of place in this scheme. What role does it play? Cogitation is the closest English translation of Richard’s Latin *cogitatio*.³ In English the term usually denotes deep thought, but that is not what Richard means. Rather it means the to and fro of consciousness when we let our minds go free, the stream of consciousness which presents us with a kaleidoscope of feelings and images, some fleeting, others recurring. We experience this inner merry-go-round all the time, but when we decide to enter into prayer, to focus on a text, a line of reflection offered to us, a prayer, we readily experience the tension between cogitation and meditation. We try to hold our minds focused on the topic of our prayer (meditation), but so often our

¹An good example is Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition*, (New York: Paulist 1996). Chapter 5 is entitled Meditation and Contemplation.

²The translation and introduction by Grover Zinn are found in *Richard of St. Victor*, (New York; Paulist 1979). The parts that concern us more particularly are Book 1, Chapters 3 and 4.

³The latin root of *co-gitatio* is *co-agitatio*. The meaning is to agitate in one’s mind, which gives us a clue of why Richard would use the word in this way.

mind wants to wander off in a direction of its own (cogitation), and often it succeeds in doing so. As a result time and time again we have to return to our prayer. So while cogitation is without effort meditation requires effort, going against the grain. The random meanderings of our mind do not achieve a purpose, or bear a fruit, but meditation will sooner or later bear some fruit.

For Richard, at work in the first stage is our imagination, distinct from our reason which is at work in meditation. He uses the word imagination, and we might use the word psyche, which is the restless and rapidly changing inner world of consciousness which constantly beckons us. It presents images to us, and – this is something Richard does not explicitly mention – together with images it presents feelings, which we can simply allow to subside, or to which we can give an act of consent. For example, we might be engaged in meditation, but a painful or joyful event that took place recently comes back to us, we rehearse the conversation with our imagination, imagine what we might have said instead of what we did say, and the feelings of joy, love, anger, frustration, whatever, invade us again. We find ourselves back with that event rather than where we intended to be in our prayer. We might simply abandon our prayer to cultivate those feelings / images and enjoy them. Or we might make them the topic of our prayer. Or we might fight to stay on course with our original intent.

In the second stage of meditation, what is at work is our reason, which for Richard and the medievals meant the discursive reason which moves from one point to another in an orderly reflection which is intended to come to a conclusion. The use of reason requires attention, and attention requires a sustained act of the will. There are many methods of prayer which can be subsumed under meditation understood in this sense. *Lectio divina* is one: we concentrate on a text, taking it phrase by phrase or word by word. Many of the exercises in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius fit squarely into this category: they call for reflection on a number of points linked together logically, like the Principle and Foundation or the exercises of the First Week on sin. This is the type of prayer suggested by the meditation books that used to be given to novice religious: normally a meditation had three points and each one of them called for a process of ratiocination, and, of course, there was the application to oneself and one's own quest for moral perfection. When one moved to the Second Week of the exercises, another method was taught for entering into the various mysteries of Christ's earthly life, a method sometimes known as Ignatian contemplation. Its purpose is to move towards contemplation in Richard's sense, but it begins with the effort, for some quite arduous, of using one's imagination to re-create the text, its sights, its sounds, the feelings and attitudes of those who play a role in the scene and with whom we identify.

Meditation and Contemplation: Meditation in Richard's scheme leads to contemplation, and we need to grasp how he distinguishes them. Let us begin with a simple example. You or I might be struggling to understand something, marshalling images and instances and examples in our mind to help us in our quest. We work hard at it, and eventually the eureka moment of

insight occurs.⁴ Our effort is a thing of the past. We now experience a release, a fulfillment. How could we have missed the point which was so obvious? Or else we are going for a mountain hike, which is an arduous experience, and at a certain point a vista emerges that totally absorbs us and we experience a powerful feeling of peace. A tree, a leaf, a flower can do the same, often unexpectedly. During those moments effort ceases and fruit is given. Our gaze is penetrating and intuitive. Rather than seeking to grasp what eludes us, we allow ourselves to be grasped by what is real, true, beautiful, good.

Likewise in any meditative prayer we seek the living presence of God and take the best steps we can to dispose ourselves to receive that presence as a gift. The common instruction to those engaged in meditative prayer is to simply pause and relish those moments, more fleeting or more lasting, in which the presence of God takes over, usually through the medium of the text or image or topic with which we are struggling in our prayer. These are moments of contemplation, when we rest in God's presence shown to us at a time of God's own choosing. This does not always happen. Some will remain in meditative prayer, not moving towards any contemplative moment, and the effort required in persevering with the meditation will have its own purifying and transforming effect on such persons. Others will be drawn into contemplation, a simple presence of God which fulfills them, like the old man who answered the priest who asked him what he said during his lengthy prayers before the tabernacle. "It's like this, Father: I look at him and He looks at me." Why do some receive this grace and not others? That is the mystery of the provident love of God, who knows what is the best gift for each one and how and when it should be granted. Rather than a sharp distinction between meditation and contemplation, we might talk of a life of prayer which begins as more meditative and which ends as more contemplative.

Indeed at a certain point the one who cultivates prayer might – at least during certain times during his/her life – move into sustained contemplation, and experience at some length the mystical fruit that is pure gift without effort. But even in one who has arrived at that form of prayer, there is a discipline – akin to the effort of meditation -- of allowing all the thoughts, images, feelings that naturally occur within the psyche to subside, and enter into what appears to be a dark space of silence and nothingness to allow God to reveal himself. How God reveals himself varies from person to person, and from time to time. God might give an experience of a love which totally envelops our being, or a light that enables us to enter into the mystery of God and perhaps bring together many aspects of the complex mystery of our own lives, or else a darkness that reminds us that God is totally other, not a force to be domesticated or manipulated.

The role of cogitation: What Richard adds to the usual pairing of meditation and contemplation is cogitation, the wandering mind. This to and fro activity of the psyche is not simply to be discarded. It is a necessary foundation. We must build on it as we move into meditation and contemplation. God has created us with our restless psyches and he makes use

⁴Richard would use the Latin word *intellectus* which means act of understanding.

of their hither and yon to guide us in prayer. Very often the images or feelings that come our way come directly from our imagination without external stimulus (a recent event which left strong feelings in me comes back to me), but they can also directly come from our outward senses (I am deep in prayer and the doorbell rings). At times the best approach is to interrupt my effort to pray and to deal with the person at the door or the feeling, especially when it recurs. God uses our psyches and their constant movements to direct us to where he wants us to be in our prayer. A persistent and intrusive feeling/image might point to an unresolved issue which ought to take priority over what we had resolved to deal with in a prayer period. This is not falling back into the effortless of random psychic activity but changing the focus of our effort in prayer. In other words what might have been a distraction becomes that which we pray about. But an image/feeling more often than not might be a distraction, not one we need to combat – that would embed the distraction even more deeply into our psyches – but one we allow to fade from our consciousness. The wanderings of the mind often lead us to what is frivolous and meaningless. Not always, however: in the end our psyches are a gift, a medium through which God can reach us.

This suggests to us an attitude towards the wandering of our minds during prayer. On the one hand we should not adopt a laissez-faire attitude of welcoming any distraction and just going with the flow: the outcome would be not meditation but reverie. On the other hand we should not exercise rigid control over our own psyches during the time of prayer, such that any inspiration from God through the medium of our psyches would be systematically lumped together with unwelcome distractions and set aside. How to manage the bubblings of our psyche during prayer is a matter for discernment, and over a period of time, perhaps through the help of a spiritual guide, we will learn how to make that kind of discernment. Ignatian contemplation of the mysteries of Christ can play a key role in taming our psyches: rather than repressing images and sounds and feelings altogether, we harness them, allowing them to play their role as we relive a Gospel scene.

Conclusion: Two quotes from Richard's *Benjamin Major* to sum up what we have seen thus far:

By means of inconstant and slow feet, thinking (*cogitatio*) wanders here and there in all directions without any regard for arriving. Meditation presses forward with great activity of soul, often through arduous and rough places, to the end of the way it is going. Contemplation, in free flight, circles around with marvelous quickness wherever impulse moves it. Thinking (*cogitatio*) crawls; meditation marches and often runs; contemplation flies around everywhere and when it wishes suspends itself in the heights. (Bk I, ch 3)

Thinking always passes from one thing to another by a wandering motion; meditation endeavours perseveringly with regards to some one thing; contemplation diffuses itself to innumerable things under one ray of vision. (Bk 1, ch 3)

Richard's analysis could be sharpened and enhanced with pertinent contemporary reflections on the workings of human consciousness, and with many other creative contributions that he

himself makes in *Benjamin Major* and in other writings. A reminder from his masterful work *The Four Degrees of Violent Love*: one may have pursued the pathways of prayer and have experienced meditation (first degree), contemplation (second degree), and even been absorbed into a unitive experience of God's presence (third degree). The final word, however, is compassion (fourth degree), which entails a return to the vulnerability and uncertainty of human life and the psychically demanding encounters with those God puts on our path of service. The random activity of the psyche might have been slowed down in the first three degrees, but now it is speeded up, and once again we are bombarded by a plethora of images, feelings, challenges.

But there is a difference. Rather than create distraction for those who pray, and impede the fruit of their prayer, the world reflected in the images, feelings, challenges that come to them will be perceived as a sacred place where God is present and at work. These experiences will find their way into purposeful meditation and ultimately be subsumed in the unifying vision of contemplation. In this way the very texture of our active lives and ministry becomes for us the vehicle of new contemplative graces. Contemplation in action is an appropriate term for this.