

4. Noting Rest and the Prayer of Quiet

February 8th, 2018

[Please see the Handout *Note Rest Instructions* for instructions for this technique.]

You may be wondering what's so special about the state of nothing happening. If we want to gain insight into who and what we are, wouldn't it be better to focus on what *is* happening, rather than what *isn't*? There are a number of answers to that question. On a practical level, focusing on restful states is typically pleasant. At the same time, even at the most superficial level of, say, intentionally creating physical relaxation or noting defocused vision, even if you don't *feel* like you are deeply relaxed, you are still strengthening those Concentration, Clarity, and Equanimity skills. So in the simplest sense, Focus on Rest is a pleasant way to do your daily meditation reps.

Additionally, restful states tend to self-deepen. That is to say, if you focus on restful states like relaxation, you will tend to relax more, and then you can focus on that increased relaxation, which can lead to yet deeper relaxation. This positive feedback loop not only motivates you to keep meditating, but over time, it will naturally drop you deeper and deeper into calm and quiet states. Remember that last week I spoke about calm and quiet being the pleasant effects of pure concentration practices? Focus on Rest will have a tendency to foster deeper concentration and the subjectively pleasant effects of that.

As your overall rest deepens, you become less troubled by distractions and background activity. This creates a sort of container for your settling mind and body, holding other activity at bay. In this way, Focus on Rest can induce equanimity.

So right here are some great benefits of focusing on what *isn't* happening in your experience: it is a pleasant way to meditate while still doing robust training for your CC&E (and can be done at any time, anywhere); it has a tendency to lead you into deep states of concentration; and it induces equanimity.

But there are still deeper and more profound effects of Focusing on Rest. By learning to notice the difference between activity in our experience and less activity (such as the blank or soft focus of seeing rest), we are developing our sensory clarity. We can distinguish between active and less active states. As we continue to practice, we start to distinguish between the less active activity and the even-

more-subtle-by-comparison. Our clarity becomes sharper and sharper until we can notice the most subtle hints of thought or emotion or physical sensations that just barely arise out of the nothingness of the source, and eventually, we start to notice the absolute rest of nothing whatsoever happening at all. We can experience that as there being nothing to create a sense of self, and nothing to create a sense of other, outside of a self. There is nothing to want; nothing to dislike. Therefore no suffering, no anger, no judgement. Nothing to disturb the perfect quiet of the emptiness of the essential elements of being. Focus on Rest can lead to an experience of the source itself. This can be experienced as a felt as a sense of merging into everything, or dissolving into nothing, or, in religious language, communion with God, or becoming into love.

This is a real, accessible state of being. It takes some practice to be able to see clearly enough to experience it, but it not just an unobtainable mystical ideal. The fact that this experience is recognized and encouraged in so many world religions is evidence of this. The instructions differ from culture to culture, but the general idea of resting in calm or quieting one's soul in order to drop into such transcendent and life changing states is found throughout contemplative history.

We can look back as far as the Bhagavad Gita, one of the earliest writings of vedantic Hinduism. The Gita was penned round about the time of the Buddha. Here is an excerpt from a scholarly forward of a translation of the Gita (it would take too long to read and interpret the original right now):

“...the mind is like a lake, and stones that are dropped into it (or winds) raise waves. Those waves do not let us see who we are. (...) The waters must be calmed. If one remains quiet, eventually the winds that ruffle the water will give up, and then one knows who one is. God is constantly within us, but the mind obscures that fact with agitated waves of worldly desires. Meditation quiets those waves (Bhagavad Gita V.28).”

— *Huston Smith, Foreword, The Bhagavad Gita: Twenty-fifth–Anniversary Edition* [\[49\]](#)

The mystics of Judaism also sought to experience union with God. Most notably, the Kabbalists of Zvat, who were at their height in the 1700s held a mystical view of the practice of Shabbat, and performed extensive rituals that are no longer seen today. However, their influence remains in some of the traditional prayer books which are still used on Friday night services. For example, this prayer:

“...Sabbath is unification through oneness, which causes the mystery of oneness to dwell upon it... When the Sabbath begins, she is made one and separates from the other side [i.e.,

evil] and all the forces of severity pass away. She remains unified with the holy light... All the powers of ire and forces of severity are uprooted and there is no evil dominion upon the worlds...”

So Shabbat was a time set aside by the Kabbalists to experience this merging, this unification with God, and the letting go of severity and evil, during which there seems to be only goodness and light. How similar this is to the Hindus seeking to calm the waves of worldly desire in order to experience God within us, and like the practitioners of dhyanic concentration (which we talked about last week) seeking to release all attachments in order to experience the bliss or ecstasy of emptiness!

Finally, we see a very clear parallel in St. Teresa of Avila’s *Nine Grades of Prayer*. She describes four levels of a sort of intentional willful prayer and five mystical levels that evolve naturally from one to the next as a practitioner practices patiently and as God bestows his grace. She describes this passage through the levels of prayer as a journey to union with God and freedom from all earthly energies that hide from us the omnipresence of God. I am struck by the parallels with buddhist-based deep meditation practice, and in fact am intending to study the Prayers of St. Teresa more deeply now that I’ve researched them a little for this talk.

Grade 6 is the Prayer of Quiet. It follows from the Prayer of *Infused Contemplation* which primarily involves the intellect being graced by the presence of God. Rev. Prof. Jordan Aumann, a noted expert on orthodox mysticism, writes:

"The prayer of quiet is a type of mystical prayer in which the intimate awareness of God's presence captivates the will and fills the soul and body with ineffable sweetness and delight." (Spiritual Theology, p.337)

And in St. Teresa’s own words:

“From this recollection [the Prayer of Infused Contemplation] there sometimes proceeds an interior quiet and peace that are full of happiness because the soul is in such a state that it does not seem to lack anything, and even speaking [e.g., vocal prayer and meditation] wearies it; it wishes to do nothing but love.”

So while this technique that you are trying out tonight may seem on the surface to be nothing more than some guided relaxation, it in fact is one method of seeking the deepest (or highest) states of transcendence. If I want to be able to lift 100 pounds above my head, I need to start by going to the gym and lifting 5 or 10 pounds above my head. It seems easy and pointless. But over time, I am able to

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lift 20 and 30 and 50 pounds, and if I keep at it, I eventually will be able to lift 100. It's the same with this technique. If you want to experience the deepest states of stillness and emptiness and unification with all that is, you start with relaxing your shoulders.