

The Jesus Prayer: Method

By Archimandrite Sophrony

I propose to devote this chapter to setting out as briefly as possible the more important aspects of the Jesus Prayer and the commonsense views regarding this great culture of the heart that I met with on the Holy Mountain.

Year after year monks repeat the prayer with their lips, without trying by any artificial means to join mind and heart. Their attention is concentrated on harmonizing their life with the commandments of Christ. According to ancient tradition mind unites with heart through Divine action when the monk continues in the ascetic feat of obedience and abstinence; when the mind, the heart and the very body of the 'old man' to a sufficient degree are freed from the dominion over them of sin; when the body becomes worthy to be 'the temple of the Holy Ghost' (cf. Rom. 6. 11-14). However, both early and present-day teachers occasionally permit recourse to a technical method of bringing the mind down into the heart. To do this, the monk, having suitably settled his body, pronounces the prayer with his head inclined on his chest, breathing in at the words 'Lord Jesus Christ, (Son of God)' and breathing out to the words 'have mercy upon me (a sinner)'. During inhalation the attention at first follows the movement of the air breathed in as far as the upper part of the heart. In this manner concentration can soon be preserved without wandering, and the mind stands side by side with the heart, or even enters within it. This method eventually enables the mind to see, not the physical heart but that which is happening within it—the feelings that creep in and the mental images that approach from without. With this experience, the monk acquires the ability to feel his heart, and to continue with his attention centered in the heart without further recourse to any psychosomatic technique.

True Prayer Comes Through Faith and Repentance

This procedure can assist the beginner to understand where his inner attention should be stayed during prayer and, as a rule, at all other times, too. Nevertheless, true prayer is not to be achieved thus. True prayer comes exclusively through faith and repentance accepted as the only foundation. The danger of psychotechnics is that not a few attribute too great significance to method qua method. In order to avoid such deformation the beginner should follow another practice which, though considerably slower, is incomparably better and more wholesome to fix the attention on the Name of Christ and on the words of the prayer. When contrition for sin reaches a certain level the mind naturally heeds the heart.

The Complete Formula

The complete formula of the Jesus Prayer runs like this: Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner, and it is this set form that is recommended. In the first half of the prayer we profess Christ-God made flesh for our salvation. In the second we affirm our fallen state, our sinfulness, our redemption. The conjunction of dogmatic confession with repentance makes the content of the prayer more comprehensive.

Stages of Development

It is possible to establish a certain sequence in the development of this prayer.

...First, it is a verbal matter: we say the prayer with our lips while trying to concentrate our attention on the Name and the words.

...Next, we no longer move our lips but pronounce the Name of Jesus Christ, and what follows after, in our minds, mentally.

...In the third stage mind and heart combine to act together: the attention of the mind is centered in the heart and the prayer said there.

...Fourthly, the prayer becomes self-propelling. This happens when the prayer is confirmed in the heart and, with no especial effort on our part, continues there, where the mind is concentrated.

...Finally, the prayer, so full of blessing, starts to act like a gentle flame within us, as inspiration from on High, rejoicing the heart with a sensation of divine love and delighting the mind in spiritual contemplation. This last state is sometimes accompanied by a vision of Light.

Go step by step

A gradual ascent into prayer is the most trustworthy. The beginner who would embark on the struggle is usually recommended to start with the first step, verbal prayer, until body, tongue, brain and heart assimilate it. The time that this takes varies. The more earnest the repentance, the shorter the road.

The practice of mental prayer may for a while be associated with the hesychastic method—in other words, it may take the form of rhythmic or a-rhythmic articulation of the prayer as described above, by breathing in during the first half and breathing out during the second part. This can be genuinely helpful if one does not lose sight of the fact that every invocation of the Name of Christ must be inseparably coupled with a consciousness of Christ Himself. The Name must not be detached from the Person of God, lest prayer be reduced to a technical exercise and so contravene the commandment, 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain' (EX. 20.7; Deut. 5.11).

Attention of Mind gained

When the attention of the mind is fixed in the heart it is possible to control what happens in the heart, and the battle against the passions assumes a rational character. The enemy is recognized and can be driven off by the power of the Name of Christ. With this ascetic feat the heart becomes so highly sensitive, so discerning, that eventually when praying for anyone the heart can tell almost at once the state of the person prayed for. Thus the transition takes place from mental prayer to prayer of the mind and heart, which may be followed by the gift of prayer that proceeds of itself.

Do Not Hurry

We try to stand before God with the whole of our being. Invocation of the Name of God the Saviour, uttered in the fear of God, together with a constant effort to live in accordance with the commandments, little by little leads to a blessed fusion of all our powers. We must never seek to hurry in our ascetic striving. It is essential to discard any

idea of achieving the maximum in the shortest possible time. God does not force us but neither can we compel Him to anything whatsoever. Results obtained by artificial means do not last long and, more importantly, do not unite our spirit with the Spirit of the Living God.

It's a Long Path

In the atmosphere of the world today prayer requires super human courage. The whole ensemble of natural energies is in opposition. To hold on to prayer without distraction signals victory on every level of existence. The way is long and thorny but there comes a moment when a heavenly ray pierces the dark obscurity, to make an opening through which can be glimpsed the source of the eternal Divine Light. The Jesus Prayer assumes a meta-cosmic dimension. St John the Divine asserts that in the world to come our deification will achieve plenitude since 'we shall see Him as He is'. 'And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure ... Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him' (cf. 1John 3.2,3,6). In order in Christ's Name to receive forgiveness of sins and the promise of the Father we must strive to dwell on His Name 'until we be endued with power from on high' (cf. Luke24-49).

In advising against being carried away by artificial practices such as transcendental meditation I am but repeating the age-old message of the Church, as expressed by St Paul: 'Exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men' (1Tim. 4.7-10)

It's Not Like Transcendental Meditation

The way of the fathers requires firm faith and long patience", whereas our contemporaries want to seize every spiritual gift, including even direct contemplation of the Absolute God, by force and speedily, and will often draw a parallel between prayer in the Name of Jesus and yoga or transcendental meditation and the like. I must stress the danger of such errors-the danger of looking upon prayer as one of the simplest and easiest 'technical' means leading to immediate unity with God. It is imperative to draw a very definite line between the Jesus Prayer and every other ascetic theory. He is deluded who endeavors to divest himself mentally of all that is transitory and relative in order to cross some invisible threshold, to realize his eternal origin, his identity with the Source of all that exists; in order to return and merge with Him, the Nameless transpersonal Absolute. Such exercises have enabled many to rise to supra-rational contemplation of being; to experience a certain mystical trepidation; to know the state of silence of the mind, when mind goes beyond the boundaries of time and space. In such-like states man may feel the peacefulness of being withdrawn from the continually changing phenomena of the visible world; may even have a certain experience of eternity. But the God of Truth, the Living God, is not in all this. It is man's own beauty, created in the image of God, that is contemplated and seen as Divinity, whereas he himself still continues within the confines of his creatureliness. This is a vastly important concern. The tragedy of the

matter lies in the fact that man sees a mirage which, in his longing for eternal life, he mistakes for a genuine oasis. This impersonal form of ascetics leads finally to an assertion of divine principle in the very nature of man. Man is then drawn to the idea of self-deification-the cause of the original fall. The man who is blinded by the imaginary majesty of what he contemplates has in fact set his foot on the path to self-destruction. He has discarded the revelation of a Personal God. He finds the principle of the Person-Hypostasis a limiting one, unworthy of the Absolute. He tries to strip himself of like limitations and return to the state which he imagines has belonged to him since before his coming into this world. This movement into the depths of his own being is nothing else but attraction towards the non-being from which we were called by the will of the Creator.

Knowledge of Personal God

The true Creator disclosed Himself to us as a Personal Absolute. The whole of our Christian life is based on knowledge of God, the First and the Last, Whose Name is I AM. Our prayer must always be personal, face to Face. He created us to be joined in His Divine Being, without destroying our personal character. It is this form of immortality that was promised to us by Christ. Like St Paul we would not 'be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life'. For this did God create us and 'hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit' (2 Cor. 5.4,5).

Personal immortality is achieved through victory over the world - a mighty task. The Lord said, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world' (John 10. 3 3), and we know that the victory was not an easy one. 'Beware of false prophets ... Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it' (Matt. 7.13-115).

Wherein lies destruction? In that people depart from the Living God.

To believe in Christ one must have either the simplicity of little children - 'Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18.3)-or else, like St Paul, be fools for Christ's sake. 'We are fools for Christ's sake ... we are weak ... we are despised ... we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day' (1 Cor. 4. 10, 13). However, 'other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 3 .11). 'Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me' (1 Cor. 4. 16). In the Christian experience cosmic consciousness comes from prayer like Christ's Gethsemane prayer, not as the result of abstract philosophical cogitations.

When the Very God reveals Himself in a vision of Uncreated Light, man naturally loses every desire to merge into a transpersonal Absolute. Knowledge which is imbued with life (as opposed to abstract knowledge) can in no wise be confined to the intellect: there must be a real union with the act of Being. This is achieved through love: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ... and with all thy mind' (Matt. 22.37). The commandment bids us love. Therefore love is not something given to us: it must be acquired

by an effort made of our own free will. The injunction is addressed first to the heart as the spiritual centre of the individual. Mind is only one of the energies of the human 1. Love begins in the heart, and the mind is confronted with a new interior event and contemplates Being in the Light of Divine love.

A Difficult Task

There is no ascetic feat more difficult, more painful, than the effort to draw close to God, Who is Love (cf. i John 4.8, 16). Our inner climate varies almost from day to day: now we are troubled because we do not understand what is happening about us; now inspired by a new flash of knowledge. The Name Jesus speaks to us of the extreme manifestation of the Father's love for us (cf. John 3.16). In proportion as the image of Christ becomes ever more sacred to us, and His word is perceived as creative energy, so a marvelous peace floods the soul while a luminous aura envelops heart and head. Our attention may hold steady. Sometimes we continue thus, as if it were a perfectly normal state to be in, not recognizing that it is a gift from on High. For the most part we only realize this union of mind with heart when it is interrupted.

In the Man Christ Jesus 'dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily' (Col. 2.9). in Him there is not only God but the whole human race. When we pronounce the Name Jesus Christ we place ourselves before the plenitude both of Divine Being and created being. We long to make His life our life; to have Him take His abode in us. In this lies the meaning of deification. But Adam's natural longing for deification at the very outset took a wrong turning which led to a terrible deviation. His spiritual vision was insufficiently established in Truth.

Our life can become holy in all respects only when true knowledge of its metaphysical basis is coupled with perfect love towards God and our fellow-men. When we firmly believe that we are the creation of God the Primordial Being, it will be obvious that there is no possible deification for us outside the Trinity. If we recognize that in its ontology all human nature is one, then for the sake of the unity of this nature we shall strive to make love for our neighbor part of our being.

Our most dire enemy is pride. Its power is immense. Pride saps our every aspiration, vitiates our every endeavor. Most of us fall prey to its insinuations. The proud man wants to dominate, to impose his own will on others; and so conflict arises between brethren. The pyramid of inequality is contrary to revelation concerning the Holy Trinity in Whom there is no greater, no lesser; where each Person possesses absolute plenitude of Divine Being.

The Kingdom of Christ is founded on the principle that who soever would be first should be the servant of all (cf. Mark 9.3 5). The man who humbles himself shall be raised up, and vice versa: he who exalts himself shall be brought low. In our struggle for prayer we shall cleanse our minds and hearts from any urge to prevail over our brother. Lust for power is death to the soul. People are lured by the grandeur of power but they forget that 'that which is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God' (Matt. 16.15). Pride incites us to criticize, even scorn our weaker brethren; but the Lord

warned us to 'take heed that we despise not one of these little ones' (cf. Matt. i8.io). If we give in to pride all our practice of the Jesus Prayer will be but profanation of His Name. 'He that saith lie abideth ii-i Him ought himself also to walk, even as He walked' (1 John2.6). He who verily loves Christ will devote his whole strength to obeying His word. I stress this because it is our actual method for learning to pray. This, and not any psychosomatic technics, is the right way.

Not a Christine Yoga

I have lingered on the dogmatic justification for the Jesus Prayer largely because in the last decade or so the practice of this prayer has been distorted into a so-called 'Christian yoga' and mistaken for 'transcendental meditation'. Every culture, not only every religious culture, is concerned with ascetic exercises. If a certain similarity either in their practice or their outward manifestations, or even their mystical formulation, can be discerned, that does not at all imply that they are alike fundamentally. Outwardly similar situations can be vastly different in inner content.

When we contemplate Divine wisdom in the beauty of the created world, we are at the same time attracted still more strongly by the imperishable beauty of Divine Being as revealed to us by Christ. The Gospel for us is Divine Self-Revelation. In our yearning to make the Gospel word the substance of our whole being we free ourselves by the power of God from the domination of passions. Jesus is the one and only Savior in the true sense of the word. Christian prayer is effected by the constant invocation of His Name: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy upon us and upon Thy world.

Though prayer in the Name of Jesus in its ultimate realization unites man with Christ fully, the human hypostasis is not obliterated, is not lost in Divine Being like a drop of water in the ocean. 'I am the light of the world ... I am the truth and the life' (John 8.12; 14.6). For the Christian-Being, Truth, 'Life are not 'what' but 'who'. Where there is no personal form of being, there is no living form either. Where in general there is no life, neither is there good or evil; light or darkness. 'Without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life' (John 1:3).

When contemplation of Uncreated Light is allied to invocation of the Name of Christ, the significance of this Name as 'the kingdom of God come with power' (Mark 9.1) is made particularly clear, and the spirit of man hears the voice of the Father: 'This is my beloved Son' (Mark 9.7). Christ in Himself showed us the Father: 'he that hath seen me hath seen the Father' (John 14:9). Now we know the Father in the same measure as we have known the Son. 'I and my Father are one' (John 10.30). And the Father bears witness to His Son. We therefore pray, 90 Son of God, save us and Thy world.'

To acquire prayer is to acquire eternity. When the body lies dying, the cry 'Jesus Christ' becomes the garment of the soul; when the brain no longer functions and other prayers are difficult to remember, in the light of the divine knowledge that proceeds from the Name our spirit will rise into life incorruptible.

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