



GARRISON INSTITUTE

Mindfulness and Heartfulness

An interview with Father Thomas Keating

Fr. Thomas Keating is one the Garrison Institute's founding spiritual advisers, and a co-founder of the international Centering Prayer movement. In the 1970s, he was one of three Trappist monks who studied ancient Christian contemplative practices such as the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert, Lectio Divina, (praying the scriptures), The Cloud of Unknowing, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. These practices went largely underground or retreated into monastic settings after the Reformation. Fr. Keating helped distill them into a simple, accessible and relevant method known as Centering Prayer, now an international movement with some 130 chapter organizations in the US and other chapters abroad, nurtured by the international ecumenical organization Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. (www.coutreach.org) which Fr. Keating co-founded. He will give a free public talk on "Oneness: Unity in Contemplation" at the Garrison Institute on Friday, October 24, 2008 at 7:30 pm (no reservations required), and then will co-lead a Centering Prayer retreat here. We interviewed him recently about the Christian contemplative tradition:

TGI: What are some similarities and differences between Centering Prayer and mindfulness meditation?

Fr. Keating: Mindfulness is a wonderful practice and has been refined and honed over the ages. These practices are found in the Hindu tradition and other Eastern traditions, and also the Hebrew tradition. There are similar practices in the Christian contemplative tradition, but with a slightly different emphasis. Mindfulness meditation is about consciousness, it emphasizes the mind. Christian contemplative practices emphasize the heart and Heartfulness.

TGI: Can you define heartfulness?

Heartfulness is the cultivation of interior silence in relation to the ultimate reality, what in the Abrahamic traditions is called God. It is a cultivation of spiritual will, the seat of the deepest level of love in the organism. It has roots in Old Testament, going back 3000 years. It is a contemplative tradition, deeply rooted. .

TGI: What is the relationship between mindfulness and heartfulness?

You might say they are not exclusive of each other. According to my understanding of Hebrew religion and mindfulness, they are meant to include both mind and heart in the deeper seat of human consciousness. The Hebrew Bible in certain passages clearly deals

with higher consciousness and contemplative states. Mindfulness also includes the cultivation of the heart, the need for the heart and mind to work together, and even modern science now supports this view.

Yet the two things are not identical. The heart is a pump, but it has its own way of “thinking.” It produces some 60 hormones to deal with various situations in the human organism. That too is a form of relationship with the ultimate reality. In dialogues I have had with Buddhists, they have the notion of ultimate reality, but their relationship to it is impersonal. This is also true in the Hindu tradition, whereas in Abrahamic traditions, the capacity to relate personally through love is very strongly emphasized.

But because the human organism is such a unity, you can’t have one without the other. You have to have a heart that is at least listening to the commentary of human reason. And obviously the heart has its limitations. But neither should we get stuck in the limits of mental creation. Contemplative traditions are moving towards the integration of both sides – mindfulness with heartfulness.

TGI: So do you also see a convergence between “meditation” and “contemplation?”

What the Eastern traditions call meditation is called contemplation in the Western tradition called contemplation. They are basically the same thing. Just as in Buddhism, there were and are many different Christian contemplative methods. Someone once told me there are 69 forms of Buddhist meditation. For example when we use the faculties of imagination and reflection and concept, it is called “discursive meditation,” whereas non-conceptual forms are called “contemplation.” That meaning in the Western tradition is really pretty identical to meditation.

TGI: Isn’t that awareness of identity a new phenomenon, or a New Age phenomenon?

Father Keating: That sense of the word “contemplation” is only just now being renewed and refined in the direction of its original meaning in Christianity. But you find that meaning active in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries AD. At that time contemplation in the sense of a spiritual practice, is preeminent. It was expressed in the blossoming of monastic life in the Syrian desert and Palestine, by figures like Anthony the Great and Evagrius, theologian of the desert fathers. Their practices come out of a couple of hundred years of solitude of Christian parish life, what they called *cenobitic* life, meaning the monastic tradition of living apart but in community. Cenobites lived and ate and sometimes slept in common dormitories.

TGI: So the monasticism we know, the Rule of St. Benedict, for example, was a revival of this much older tradition?

Father Keating: St. Benedict decided to follow the cenobitic tradition, as opposed to the eremitic, or the path of the hermit. He was concerned people would try the eremitic life before they were ready.

TGI: You mentioned St. Anthony as one of the chief figures of the Christian contemplative tradition. I think of later European paintings of the Temptation of St. Anthony, who vanquished the Devil's best efforts through prayer and asceticism. They always reminded me of *thankas* depicting the temptation by Mara of the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree.

Father Keating: Yes, they are very similar experiences.

TGI: But are they ultimately different? In Buddhist meditation the basic aim is nondualism, for example meditating on the breath as the gateway between the internal and external worlds, the self and the no-self. Does the Trinitarian object of Christian contemplative practices make Centering Prayer any different?

Father Keating: Of course everything in Christianity is rooted in this fundamental mystery of the Trinity. Nondualism is an important aspect of the spiritual journey, but needs to be understood in the cultural context. Let me give you an example: If you are in love with someone and trying to experience a feeling of being one flesh, love is intense, and there is a great deal of nonduality involved. One aspect of the Christian tradition is the spiritual marriage, the erotic love poem as the symbol of an intensely personal relationship. But at the same time, it is also true that even though you are in love, there are still two people. So beyond spiritual marriage, there is the Night of Self, the total surrender of personal identity. Expressions of this by Master Eckhart, the 13th century mystic, sound something like Zen or Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism.

The practice of nonduality is interesting. It raises the question, Can it become a permanent state of consciousness in this life? It is rare indeed to meet with such a person. Perhaps this is the direction we will go after death. I have met a lot of outstanding teachers in many traditions, and I don't know any who claim to be permanently in this state. Some of them say you can live in non-objectified reality for an hour. As long as we live in this world, we are in and out of this situation and have to adjust to it. We go back to our old habits of eating, drinking walking around.

TGI : The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield wrote a book about this called *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*. Even teachers who have attained enlightenment have to go back to the challenges of day-to-day life, and in a sense, that is the real work of spiritual practice.

Father Keating: My feeling is you need to move back and forth from these states to be a teacher, earn a living, and especially to have a family. I do know one person in the Christian tradition who claims to be in that state all the time. But what we need is to have more people pursuing this, have a bigger reservoir evolving into this.

TGI: Do you mean like Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the *noosphere*?

Father Keating: Yes, though that is still a reflection, not strict nonduality. These are wonderful concepts, but what actually happened when we let go of the false self, the self that develops its own identity in childhood over and against other people? When that self

is purified, as mindfulness is designed to do, does any self at all remain? In nonduality there is no-self, one doesn't experience oneself. How then does one walk through daily life? I suppose with the habits you had before you lost the original Self in early childhood. TGI: You spoke of a need for more people to pursue this inner path. Is that the key to creating positive social change?

Father Keating: Both engaged Buddhism and social change activism require deep interior resources to be sustained. Peace requires inner resources to persevere. The work of social action involves getting through difficulties of seeing people suffer and the inability to change it in a short time. You have to work, plan, educate, collaborate. It would be a help if all the world could collaborate, transcend our doctrines and different opinions. Imagine if humanity agreed to cooperatively address poverty, hunger, healthcare and problems facing us everyday, not to speak of ideologically-based violence. We could climb out of the swamp of unevolved human pitfalls. Obviously that's not happening yet. People aren't free enough in their attitudes or behaviors. Millions of people are now serious meditators and contemplatives. More than we have ever had before. If more did it, we could begin to change society.

TGI: Is that the aim of the Contemplative Prayer movement? Are you consciously trying to build a global movement through Contemplative Outreach?

Father Keating: We don't proselytize. We have books, websites, on-line courses. We offer mentoring, spiritual guidance. We have been doing this for 25 years. What organization there is seems to have sprung up spontaneously. There are about 120 contemplative outreach chapters in this country, and others in about 40 countries. But we don't want to be too organized, we are not a religion. We are trying to renew; we have not created anything new. We are just trying to translate the basic teaching that comes from Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. It is the basic formula we follow:

"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:6)"

Closing the door, praying in secret, suggests nonduality, retiring into a place where you can forget yourself. Then God will reward you, transform your being, bring out your full potential. This is an interpretation, but it is deep in our tradition. This passage was interpreted by the Ninth Conferece of Cassian, who investigated and preserved the practices of the Desert Fathers and brought them to Europe. St. Benedict drew on them in creating his Rule universal in the West.

TGI: So deep within the Christian tradition, then, is the idea of transformation through contemplation.

Father Keating: Especially in the US, people are coming to Christianity through meditation and coming to meditation through Christianity. Is there any difference? They aren't mutually exclusive. There is more of an emphasis on purifying of the mind in the Eastern tradition, in Christianity there is more emphasis on the purification of the heart or

the will. At the higher levels of practice the two converge. But it requires you develop freedom from the unpurified mind and heart, not to mention a body that can sustain the higher energies of transformation. An experience of the nondual can be quite frightening without preparation through some kind of practice, discipline, ritual. This is why some people greatly benefit from spiritual practice after being somewhat disaffected from the pedestrian practice of their religions when young. After making some progress spiritually they come back. When selfishness, boredom, are removed, it begins to revive, because it really is a life, religion. It doesn't just go away even when we reject it. When we calm down and make progress we are often attracted to the religion of our childhood. In Christianity some of those symbols are so warm and tender. You can't forget it.

TGI: What is the connection between this progress towards personal transformation and social transformation? Modern ideas, recent brain research for example, would argue for a kind of "application" of one thing to the other, as in applied science. And given what we face today, all our acute environmental and social crises, are you optimistic?

Father Keating: Of course. As a Christian you have to be. But that doesn't mean you exclude death. That is the way to resurrection. That is the way to triumph for positive energy. My attitude may be more realistic than optimistic. No matter what happens, the goodness of God will triumph and is more powerful than evil or limitation. I believe in spiritual evolution. Teilhard de Chardin thinks the biosphere is completed, and that bringing our species to higher intelligence completes it. So now it is intelligence and interrelationship that need to be transformed, Christ looking at humanity as the body of God. I agree. It is a way of describing continuing evolution, higher states of consciousness, transpersonal psychology, which is present in all world religions. In other words, our notional consciousness is not the end of biological evolution. It is the gate, the beginning of higher states of consciousness, of developing the brain vastly beyond where it is now. It is a prelude to a divine-human way of functioning, to all the abstract virtues of which humans are capable but which we have not yet learned to put into practice. It is inchoate in animal or vegetative life functions, and manifest in the tripartite brain. Why could it not develop beyond the neocortex, then why could it not develop to the frontal lobes? It will unless we destroy ourselves too soon. We have to evolve to respond to violence in a new way, and I trust that we will. So I think I have more trust in the future than optimism about it.

TGI: At a retreat at the Garrison Institute on Gandhi, *satyagraha* and climate change, Ved Mehta told us that Gandhi at the end of his life felt that he failed, because a million Hindus and Muslims died in sectarian violence over partition, just what he was trying to avoid. He was in continual atonement for this, but it didn't alter his faith that inner purity, an inward fire of love for others, would have a transforming effect on the world. Whether it got the result he wished for or not was beside the point, the inner work and inner perfectibility was the point, and the world would reflect them for good or ill as a kind of sacred mirror.

Father Keating: *Satyagraha* is a marvelous concept and close to *agape* in the Christian tradition: go on loving no matter what happens. That is what I mean by inner resources.