

Step Eleven

“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

PRAYER and meditation are our principal means of conscious contact with God.

We A.A.'s are active folk, enjoying the satisfactions of dealing with the realities of life, usually for the first time in our lives, and strenuously trying to help the next alcoholic who comes along. So it isn't surprising that we often tend to slight serious meditation and prayer as something not really necessary. To be sure, we feel it is something that might help us to meet an occasional emergency, but at first many of us are apt to regard it as a somewhat mysterious skill of clergymen, from which we may hope to get a secondhand benefit. Or perhaps we don't believe in these things at all.

To certain newcomers and to those one-time agnostics who still cling to the A.A. group as their higher power, claims for the power of prayer may, despite all the logic and experience in proof of it, still be unconvincing or quite objectionable. Those of us who once felt this way can certainly understand and sympathize. We well remember how something deep inside us kept rebelling against the idea of bowing before any God. Many of us had strong logic, too,

which “proved” there was no God whatever. What about all the accidents, sickness, cruelty, and injustice in the world? What about all those unhappy lives which were the direct result of unfortunate birth and uncontrollable circumstances? Surely there could be no justice in this scheme of things, and therefore no God at all.

Sometimes we took a slightly different tack. Sure, we said to ourselves, the hen probably did come before the egg. No doubt the universe had a “first cause” of some sort, the God of the Atom, maybe, hot and cold by turns. But certainly there wasn’t any evidence of a God who knew or cared about human beings. We liked A.A. all right, and were quick to say that it had done miracles. But we recoiled from meditation and prayer as obstinately as the scientist who refused to perform a certain experiment lest it prove his pet theory wrong. Of course we finally did experiment, and when unexpected results followed, we felt different; in fact we *knew* different; and so we were sold on meditation and prayer. And that, we have found, can happen to anybody who tries. It has been well said that “almost the only scoffers at prayer are those who never tried it enough.”

Those of us who have come to make regular use of prayer would no more do without it than we would refuse air, food, or sunshine. And for the same reason. When we refuse air, light, or food, the body suffers. And when we turn away from meditation and prayer, we likewise deprive our minds, our emotions, and our intuitions of vitally needed support. As the body can fail its purpose for lack of nourishment, so can the soul. We all need the light of

God's reality, the nourishment of His strength, and the atmosphere of His grace. To an amazing extent the facts of A.A. life confirm this ageless truth.

There is a direct linkage among self-examination, meditation, and prayer. Taken separately, these practices can bring much relief and benefit. But when they are logically related and interwoven, the result is an unshakable foundation for life. Now and then we may be granted a glimpse of that ultimate reality which is God's kingdom. And we will be comforted and assured that our own destiny in that realm will be secure for so long as we try, however falteringly, to find and do the will of our own Creator.

As we have seen, self-searching is the means by which we bring new vision, action, and grace to bear upon the dark and negative side of our natures. It is a step in the development of that kind of humility that makes it possible for us to receive God's help. Yet it is only a step. We will want to go further.

We will want the good that is in us all, even in the worst of us, to flower and to grow. Most certainly we shall need bracing air and an abundance of food. But first of all we shall want sunlight; nothing much can grow in the dark. Meditation is our step out into the sun. How, then, shall we meditate?

The actual experience of meditation and prayer across the centuries is, of course, immense. The world's libraries and places of worship are a treasure trove for all seekers. It is to be hoped that every A.A. who has a religious connection which emphasizes meditation will return to the practice of that devotion as never before. But what about

the rest of us who, less fortunate, don't even know how to begin?

Well, we might start like this. First let's look at a really good prayer. We won't have far to seek; the great men and women of all religions have left us a wonderful supply. Here let us consider one that is a classic.

Its author was a man who for several hundred years now has been rated as a saint. We won't be biased or scared off by that fact, because although he was not an alcoholic he did, like us, go through the emotional wringer. And as he came out the other side of that painful experience, this prayer was his expression of what he could then see, feel, and wish to become:

“Lord, make me a channel of thy peace—that where there is hatred, I may bring love—that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness—that where there is discord, I may bring harmony—that where there is error, I may bring truth—that where there is doubt, I may bring faith—that where there is despair, I may bring hope—that where there are shadows, I may bring light—that where there is sadness, I may bring joy. Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted—to understand, than to be understood—to love, than to be loved. For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven. It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life. Amen.”

As beginners in meditation, we might now reread this prayer several times very slowly, savoring every word and trying to take in the deep meaning of each phrase and idea. It will help if we can drop all resistance to what our friend

says. For in meditation, debate has no place. We rest quietly with the thoughts of someone who knows, so that we may experience and learn.

As though lying upon a sunlit beach, let us relax and breathe deeply of the spiritual atmosphere with which the grace of this prayer surrounds us. Let us become willing to partake and be strengthened and lifted up by the sheer spiritual power, beauty, and love of which these magnificent words are the carriers. Let us look now upon the sea and ponder what its mystery is; and let us lift our eyes to the far horizon, beyond which we shall seek all those wonders still unseen.

“Shucks!” says somebody. “This is nonsense. It isn’t practical.”

When such thoughts break in, we might recall, a little ruefully, how much store we used to set by imagination as it tried to create reality out of bottles. Yes, we reveled in that sort of thinking, didn’t we? And though sober nowadays, don’t we often try to do much the same thing? Perhaps our trouble was not that we used our imagination. Perhaps the real trouble was our almost total inability to point imagination toward the right objectives. There’s nothing the matter with *constructive* imagination; all sound achievement rests upon it. After all, no man can build a house until he first envisions a plan for it. Well, meditation is like that, too; it helps to envision our spiritual objective before we try to move toward it. So let’s get back to that sunlit beach—or to the plains or to the mountains, if you prefer.

When, by such simple devices, we have placed ourselves

in a mood in which we can focus undisturbed on constructive imagination, we might proceed like this:

Once more we read our prayer, and again try to see what its inner essence is. We'll think now about the man who first uttered the prayer. First of all, he wanted to become a "channel." Then he asked for the grace to bring love, forgiveness, harmony, truth, faith, hope, light, and joy to every human being he could.

Next came the expression of an aspiration and a hope for himself. He hoped, God willing, that he might be able to find some of these treasures, too. This he would try to do by what he called self-forgetting. What did he mean by "self-forgetting," and how did he propose to accomplish that?

He thought it better to give comfort than to receive it; better to understand than to be understood; better to forgive than to be forgiven.

This much could be a fragment of what is called meditation, perhaps our very first attempt at a mood, a flier into the realm of spirit, if you like. It ought to be followed by a good look at where we stand now, and a further look at what might happen in our lives were we able to move closer to the ideal we have been trying to glimpse. Meditation is something which can always be further developed. It has no boundaries, either of width or height. Aided by such instruction and example as we can find, it is essentially an individual adventure, something which each one of us works out in his own way. But its object is always the same: to improve our conscious contact with God, with His grace, wisdom, and love. And let's always remember that meditation is in reality intensely practical. One of its

first fruits is emotional balance. With it we can broaden and deepen the channel between ourselves and God as we understand Him.

Now, what of prayer? Prayer is the raising of the heart and mind to God—and in this sense it includes meditation. How may we go about it? And how does it fit in with meditation? Prayer, as commonly understood, is a petition to God. Having opened our channel as best we can, we try to ask for those right things of which we and others are in the greatest need. And we think that the whole range of our needs is well defined by that part of Step Eleven which says: "...knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." A request for this fits in any part of our day.

In the morning we think of the hours to come. Perhaps we think of our day's work and the chances it may afford us to be useful and helpful, or of some special problem that it may bring. Possibly today will see a continuation of a serious and as yet unresolved problem left over from yesterday. Our immediate temptation will be to ask for specific solutions to specific problems, and for the ability to help other people as we have already thought they should be helped. In that case, we are asking God to do it *our* way. Therefore, we ought to consider each request carefully to see what its real merit is. Even so, when making specific requests, it will be well to add to each one of them this qualification: "...if it be Thy will." We ask simply that throughout the day God place in us the best understanding of His will that we can have for that day, and that we be given the grace by which we may carry it out.

As the day goes on, we can pause where situations must

be met and decisions made, and renew the simple request: “Thy will, not mine, be done.” If at these points our emotional disturbance happens to be great, we will more surely keep our balance, provided we remember, and repeat to ourselves, a particular prayer or phrase that has appealed to us in our reading or meditation. Just saying it over and over will often enable us to clear a channel choked up with anger, fear, frustration, or misunderstanding, and permit us to return to the surest help of all—our search for God’s will, not our own, in the moment of stress. At these critical moments, if we remind ourselves that “it is better to comfort than to be comforted, to understand than to be understood, to love than to be loved,” we will be following the intent of Step Eleven.

Of course, it is reasonable and understandable that the question is often asked: “*Why* can’t we take a specific and troubling dilemma straight to God, and in prayer secure from Him sure and definite answers to our requests?”

This can be done, but it has hazards. We have seen A.A.’s ask with much earnestness and faith for God’s explicit guidance on matters ranging all the way from a shattering domestic or financial crisis to correcting a minor personal fault, like tardiness. Quite often, however, the thoughts that *seem* to come from God are not answers at all. They prove to be well-intentioned unconscious rationalizations. The A.A., or indeed any man, who tries to run his life rigidly by this kind of prayer, by this self-serving demand of God for replies, is a particularly disconcerting individual. To any questioning or criticism of his actions he instantly proffers his reliance upon prayer for guidance in all matters

great or small. He may have forgotten the possibility that his own wishful thinking and the human tendency to rationalize have distorted his so-called guidance. With the best of intentions, he tends to force his own will into all sorts of situations and problems with the comfortable assurance that he is acting under God's specific direction. Under such an illusion, he can of course create great havoc without in the least intending it.

We also fall into another similar temptation. We form ideas as to what we think God's will is for other people. We say to ourselves, "This one ought to be cured of his fatal malady," or "That one ought to be relieved of his emotional pain," and we pray for these specific things. Such prayers, of course, are fundamentally good acts, but often they are based upon a supposition that we know God's will for the person for whom we pray. This means that side by side with an earnest prayer there can be a certain amount of presumption and conceit in us. It is A.A.'s experience that particularly in these cases we ought to pray that God's will, whatever it is, be done for others as well as for ourselves.

In A.A. we have found that the actual good results of prayer are beyond question. They are matters of knowledge and experience. All those who have persisted have found strength not ordinarily their own. They have found wisdom beyond their usual capability. And they have increasingly found a peace of mind which can stand firm in the face of difficult circumstances.

We discover that we do receive guidance for our lives to just about the extent that we stop making demands upon God to give it to us on order and on our terms. Almost

any experienced A.A. will tell how his affairs have taken remarkable and unexpected turns for the better as he tried to improve his conscious contact with God. He will also report that out of every season of grief or suffering, when the hand of God seemed heavy or even unjust, new lessons for living were learned, new resources of courage were uncovered, and that finally, inescapably, the conviction came that God *does* “move in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.”

All this should be very encouraging news for those who recoil from prayer because they don't believe in it, or because they feel themselves cut off from God's help and direction. All of us, without exception, pass through times when we can pray only with the greatest exertion of will. Occasionally we go even further than this. We are seized with a rebellion so sickening that we simply won't pray. When these things happen we should not think too ill of ourselves. We should simply resume prayer as soon as we can, doing what we know to be good for us.

Perhaps one of the greatest rewards of meditation and prayer is the sense of *belonging* that comes to us. We no longer live in a completely hostile world. We are no longer lost and frightened and purposeless. The moment we catch even a glimpse of God's will, the moment we begin to see truth, justice, and love as the real and eternal things in life, we are no longer deeply disturbed by all the seeming evidence to the contrary that surrounds us in purely human affairs. We know that God lovingly watches over us. We know that when we turn to Him, all will be well with us, here and hereafter.