

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

A course written and given by  
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at Aquinas Academy

## UNIT FOUR SESSION THREE: Detachment



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*Thirty spokes together make a wheel for a cart. It is the empty space in the center which enables the wheel to be used. Mould clay into a vessel; it is the emptiness which creates the usefulness of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in a house; it is the empty space inside that creates the usefulness of the house. Thus, what we have may be something substantial, but its usefulness lies in the unoccupied, empty space. The substance of your body is enlivened by maintaining the part of you that is unoccupied.*<sup>1</sup>



*One of the monks, called Serapion, sold his book of the Gospels and gave the money to those who were hungry, saying: I have sold the book which told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor.*<sup>2</sup>



*God asks only that you get out of his way, in so far as you are creature, and let him be God in you.*<sup>3</sup>



*Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'.*<sup>4</sup>



*But he emptied himself.*<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Lao Tzu.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, New Directions, 1960, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Meister Eckhart in Raymond Blakney, trans. *Meister Eckhart*, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:1.

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:7.

## ***THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES***

***\* There is a detachment pattern in any healthy life formation process and it is in our best interest to embrace that pattern as wisely and generously as we can.***

***\* Embracing the detachment pattern freely and graciously promotes a disposition whereby we hold lightly onto that which must be held at this time and graciously let go of that which must be let go at this time.***

***\* We embrace the detachment pattern for the sake of growing more deeply into life-giving relationships – with the Great Mystery, with ourselves, with other people and with the world in which we find ourselves.***

***\* The detachment pattern is best served by a growing experiential sense of connectedness with all that is – the Great Mystery, self, others and world.***



### **The detachment pattern**

At its core, life is a downsizing process. Life is constantly asking us to let go of this and that, at times even wrenching it brutally from us. Our taken-for-granted worlds always carry the rider: “Until further notice!” And we all constantly experience the movement of life through meetings and partings, “Hellos” and “Goodbyes,” arrivals and departures, gaining and losing, moments of great joy or comfort that inevitably give way to the more common moments of ordinariness and tedium. We say, “Life goes on!” Life has its rhythms. To live fully is to participate fully in those rhythms.

In other words, living necessarily involves a *detachment process*. It is in our best interests to embrace this process. Our joy and fulfillment as human beings lie in that direction. In any case, whether we like it or not, we simply have to let go!

The foregoing suggests a letting go that *must* happen in our lives and a letting go that *can* happen in our lives. The first is obvious. Day gives way to night, night to day, we grow old, friends come and go and so on. The second is not so obvious.

There is a letting go that we would do well to promote for our own ordinary well-being.

Consider some mundane human experiences. For example, perhaps the best advice you can give to those traveling overseas is: “Travel light!” And if you want to enjoy a meal, prepare yourself by abstaining from snacks and nibbles and when you are at the meal, be careful your eyes are not bigger than your stomach, learn to leave this and that aside, do not eat too much. And if you are giving a speech, remember that it is as important to leave things out as it is to include things, the

silence is essential to the cogency of what you present. And true love demands that we sometimes leave people alone, give them “space” as we say.

At a deeper level still, one of the essential demands of adulthood is that we let go of the attitudes, expectations and behaviours that were more appropriate to an earlier period of our lives. We all recognize how sad and debilitating it is when someone remains caught by childhood conflicts and childish ways. They just cannot move on. They are stuck. They are carrying “baggage.” And we recognize the pain of the person who has been traumatized or deeply hurt by someone or some event and they cannot get over their pain or their resentments or their anger. We might say: “Let go of it and get on with your life!” The person might respond, “I wish I could let go of it.”<sup>6</sup> Such experiences remind us that holding on is also a *being held*, possessing is also a *being possessed*. Letting go is not simply a matter of, will power. Like all those higher aspirations of life, letting go comes to us as gift when other matters are well dealt with. Paradoxically, one of the most intractable obstacles to a healthy letting go is the willful attempt to let go. But more of this later.

Beyond these two obvious experiences of the detachment pattern, the teaching of the major religious traditions suggests that, if we want to grow deep and wise, we must take the initiative with the detachment process and actively promote it at all levels of our individual and communal lives.

### **Searching for a good response to the detachment process**

This is the way life is. This is what it means to be alive. Life is constant movement – going from “here” to “there,” it demands that we leave this and embrace that. This movement operates at different levels, with or without our permission, consciously or unconsciously. Life, if we are to be part of it, if we are to *live*, demands that we embrace this pattern of movement as intelligently and creatively and generously as possible.

The willingness to embrace this pattern of our existence will be a measure of our humanity. Our ability to let go of this or that and be detached, is often the difference between living and dying, at least metaphorically, and certainly the difference between being deep or being shallow, being genuinely happy and being miserable, being ego-centred or being Mystery-centred.

So easily we get “imprisoned” or “stuck,” “bogged down” or just “weighed down” in and with possessions and thoughts and feelings associated with people and events of the past.<sup>7</sup> This failure to let go tends to make us self-absorbed. For example:

- What is it like to be with someone who is Always “at” the world, chronically

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<sup>6</sup> We did deal with this when discussing memory. See Unit Three, Session One, “The Person as Remembering”.

<sup>7</sup> Idealization is a particularly significant instance of this inability to let go and be detached. See this Course, Unit Four, Session Two.

angry and, without too much prompting, will tell you about how “they” – whoever “they” might be – hurt them?

- What is it like to be with someone who is clearly obsessed with material possessions? (Human beings have even been known to shed blood over material possessions. And consider the power of those beyond the grave to wreak havoc – intentionally or unintentionally – through a will.)
- What is it like to be with someone who has the answer for everything and seems to have no doubts and is closed to other opinions and ways of doing things?

On the other hand, consider the following examples:

- What is it like to be with someone who is free of chronic anger and negativity and is able to genuinely forgive? (Nelson Mandela comes to mind.)
- What is it like to be with someone who is generous with what they possess and quiet able to live simply?
- What is it like to be with someone who is able to listen to you and genuinely seeks to understand your point of view and is eager to learn and grow?

Detachment, however, is a highly complex process, as we have indicated above, and it has its counterfeits. It is easy to imagine ourselves, for example, becoming attached to being detached. This may be particularly the case in our Western culture where the mastery mode is a taken for granted way of approaching life – life is reduced to a series of problems to be solved. In fact, we do not have absolute control over our intra-formative processes.<sup>8</sup>

How might we describe more precisely what is happening here in the detachment pattern so we can distinguish the real from the unreal, the formative from the deformative? In any concrete situation we will generally be somewhat uncertain about this – like life itself, it is fraught with ambiguities and paradoxes and we are all beset with the genius for self-deception. We ought to be slow to pass judgment on ourselves or others. However, we can name some useful principles:

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<sup>8</sup> We should note that there is a condition that is sometimes referred to as detachment that is more or less deformative. Maybe the word “disconnected” or even “dislocated” should be used in such cases. For example, trauma and grief can provoke disconnection from our feelings. This may be spoken of as detachment but it is not what we are talking about under the heading of detachment here. Such an experience might happen to a child growing up in a violent or dysfunctional family or a soldier who has seen terrible things in battle. Another type of deformative detachment – that is, disconnection or dislocation – may grow in someone who is very selfish or greedy or arrogant. The disconnection of the traumatized child or soldier is a psychological issue. Other forms of psychological disconnection may be seen in various psychopathologies – such as schizophrenia and autism – and addictions of one kind or another. The disconnection of the selfish, greedy and arrogant is more of a moral issue. The disconnectedness of addictions may also have a strong moral content also – for example in workaholism.

- All human life formation is ultimately about life-giving relationships – with the Great Mystery beyond the mystery, with ourselves, with other people and with the world of events and things in which we find ourselves:
  - those dispositions, attitudes, choices and behaviours that tend to promote life-giving relationships are formative and
  - those dispositions, attitudes, choices and behaviours that tend to obstruct, undermine or destroy life-giving relationships are deformative;<sup>9</sup>
- The detachment pattern of healthy life formation enables and facilitates life-giving relationships:
  - we aspire to hold lightly – even if definitely – those things that contribute to life-giving relationships and
  - we aspire to let go of those things that obstruct life-giving relationships – with the Great Mystery beyond the mystery, with ourselves, with other people and with the world of events and things in which we find ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

### **The rhythm of attachment and detachment**

Life has its rhythms and patterns and laws that we would do well to hear and heed. We do not step off the wharf until the boat is there to step onto; we do not say “Goodbye” unless we have first said “Hello,” we do not leave unless we have arrived. And so it goes. There is a timing and rhythm to living, there are patterns and harmonies throughout the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> In an earlier session we considered one of these under the heading of the obedience pattern.<sup>12</sup> We are proposing the detachment pattern is another of these givens of living.

We violate these laws of existence at our peril. The more we can participate in the mystery of life the more we will be able to do what life asks of us. In other words, detachment is not something we achieve or master, it is not a willpower

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<sup>9</sup> We need to make a distinction here. For example, parents may be deeply concerned about a relationship one of their children has with a friend. They may see the deleterious effects of that relationship on their child and want, quite rightly, to see that relationship end. They might actively discourage it, even “obstruct” it. Paradoxically, this is acting to promote life-giving relationships. The child may not see it that way though. Again, as an adult, I may have developed a relationship, or at least a way of relating to someone, that is deformative. A healthy concern for developing life-giving relationships demands that we do something about that deformative relationship. This might mean terminating the relationship it might simply mean putting it on a different footing. This could apply to spouses, parent and child, neighbours, old friends and so on.

<sup>10</sup> A discernment of what is “formative” in relationships is implied here. We are not always good at such discernment. However, recognizing the need for this discernment, humbly acknowledging our fallibility and generously continuing to seek good relationships in an honest and intelligent way is the point.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion on “formation mystery” in Unit One, Session Two of this course.

<sup>12</sup> See Unit Three, Session Seven.

project that comes when we are disciplined enough to make it happen. Detachment is rather a sign or expression of participation. It will be manifest in freedom and grace. Detachment is gift, not conquest. Detachment is a sure sign that we are in tune with the mystery of life and therefore in tune with ourselves.

It is well for us to remember that it seems to be a law of life that the things right under our feet are the things we spend our lives journeying towards. It should not surprise us, therefore, that there is a strange but important paradox in detachment: We human beings need – at least in some measure – to be *attached* before we can be *detached*. And perhaps the best way to think of detachment is within the context of *what life asks of us* rather than *what we should do*. Let us reflect on these two points – the paradox and the invitation.

a. The paradox: detachment demands attachment

This paradox seems to operate on at least two interdependent levels:

- the level of *fact* and
- the level of *motivation*.

On the level of fact, obviously there can be no question of detachment unless there is something to be detached *from*. And the process of letting go and becoming detached is going to be more or less significant, depending on how significant that thing is we seek detachment from. There is nothing very profound about this. It is, in fact, common sense. Detachment from eating yak's butter is probably not an issue for most of us living in the Western world. Detachment from eating cow's butter might well be an issue.

But we could note one subtlety. Our focus should include *both* attachment and detachment and the *pace* or *timing* with which we move – or, better, *are moved* – from one to the other. In other words, we need to recognize and submit to the rhythms of being.

In a healthy life-formation process, it is good to be attached along the way. Thus infants and little children typically attach themselves to their parents, people fall in love and are attached to one another, commitment to a project or cause begets a certain healthy attachment, we have attachments to certain foods, games, places and as on, along the way.<sup>13</sup> We must first know attachment before detachment can be formatively embraced. And these normal, healthy attachments must be allowed to serve their purposes in our lives, wax and wane, then become

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<sup>13</sup> Thus homesickness and the pain of saying “Goodbye” and perhaps something of the anxiety of commitment, all are normal parts of life. Perhaps we intuit the dying that is at the core of it all. Life takes us “here” then moves us “there”, brings us to “this point” then moves us on, introduces us to various experiences and takes us further. Look behind you and see what you have had to leave behind. And this is not to suggest fatalism or passivity. Even the most willful, control freak has to face this fact, no matter what he or she believes.

part of our history. There is a season for all things.<sup>14</sup> That said, in a healthy life formation process, detachment – and with it a growing simplicity of felt needs and expectations – gradually replaces attachments. When we die, the true measure of our life will not be found in what we have, but what we have been able to do without.

The pivot is not my ego but “the in-between.” Life is conversation. Mutuality is of the essence of a healthy life formation process. The centre of gravity is always beyond myself. Life is always self-transcending. “I” is always “we.” All of which means that life, concretely, is full of tension. Life *is* tension. Living is an unavoidable experience of ambiguity. The tension will cease when we are dead. One of the factors that determines maturity is our ability to handle the tensions and ambiguities of life. The temptation is to rid ourselves of these tensions. For example, we may see life in terms of *either* attachment *or* detachment rather than *both* attachment *and* detachment.<sup>15</sup>

At the level of *motivation* we come up against even greater subtleties and complexities. The detachment pattern is something that is *given* by life rather than something we do or achieve. Our response will be a facilitative response, not a mastery response. The detachment pattern is asked of us as part of existence and it is also *given* as part of existence. Our very existence is both gift and task. Participation in the mystery includes both acceptance and initiative, givens and choices, waiting and striding forth, reception and creation. All of which includes an invitation to embrace that detachment pattern wisely and generously. In the embrace we become gracious and free. By listening and paying close attention to what is happening in and around us, and generously submitting to the truth of that, we will find ourselves being drawn more deeply into the mystery of life and slowly but definitely realizing what we must let go. Indeed, in a healthy life formation process, letting go can take us by surprise because our attention is not on the letting go but on the Great Mystery manifesting itself through the living moment. Even if the letting go is painful – perhaps terribly painful – we will be willing because it will be the most natural thing to do that. It will draw us more deeply into our humanity.

So detachment is best considered, first and foremost, as *gift*. Life is moving me on. Life is calling me more deeply into what is True and Good. Life is releasing and freeing the deepest truth of who I am. The essential context for

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<sup>14</sup> See Ecclesiastes 3:1ff.

<sup>15</sup> We are constantly acting to reduce the tension in life – or rather the tension that life *is*. Thus we reduce the tension between means and ends by turning means into ends, between the relative and the absolute by turning the relative into an absolute, between male and female by turning everything into “the male” or blurring the distinctions, between work and leisure by turning everything into work, between rights and responsibilities by overlooking rights and seeing everything in terms of responsibilities or vice versa, between the person and the group by turning everything into an individual thing or vice versa, and so on. The tragedy is that this kind of reductionism actually diminishes – at times even destroys – the richness, colour and vitality of life itself.



detachment is this deeper relationship with “the more than,” the necessary movement into increasing intimacy with the Great Mystery that is the source of the mystery of life itself.

b. The invitation of life

We could say that each of us is born with two questions waiting to emerge into our consciousness – questions that will be critical to the lives we lead. The first question is “Who am I?” and the second question is, “What must I do?”

My life’s journey will be shaped and constituted implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously by those questions and my responses at all the levels of my being, moment by moment, for better or worse. The obedience pattern and the detachment pattern are two sides of the one coin. Both evoke dispositions of active listening and abandonment in wisdom and generosity.

To the prevailing modern Western mind-set this is quite alien, indeed foolish. After the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, our emphasis has been on the rational and the functional.<sup>16</sup> The typical way of the West is the way of mastery rather than facilitation, we strive to manipulate life as a problem to be solved rather than participate in it as a mystery to be lived. Thus the Western approach to life formation tends to be ego-focused, seeking to develop and maintain ways of ego-mastery. “Be a winner not a loser!” is the catch cry.

The claim here is that we should regard ourselves as part of an ongoing conversation, always seeking to hear and heed the call of the mystery of daily living and the Great Mystery that is being expressed in that moment by moment manifestation of mystery that we call life. We are not called to be masters of the universe but shepherds of Being, stewards of creation. It is our vocation to be the place where the Great Mystery flourishes in the world, the entry point of grace and freedom. My being is a unique contribution to that.

So we let life draw us. Living is an intelligent and generous abandonment to the Real. We listen for the cues, as energetically, wisely and generously as we can, and we submit. And we are set in motion, we are increasingly caught up in the rhythms of Being. Our motivation – that is, what moves us – is more and more the attraction of the Great Mystery, and less and less the entrapments of ego. The centre of gravity shifts from ego to Mystery and in that shift we begin to discover the real self.

Detachment emerges in our lives through facilitation rather than mastery. Paradoxically, we need to be detached from being detached. Detachment diminishes the harshness of the ego and maximizes the grace of the Mystery in and through our lives. The detachment pattern – like the obedience pattern – when embraced effectively, begets a certain grace and freedom in our very beings. The individual who has attained detachment in this way becomes a potent presence for

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<sup>16</sup> See Unit Two, Session Four of this course for a discussion of different approaches to “knowledge” and “knowing”.

good in the community. Detachment allows them great freedom in relationships because they are not encumbered by other agendas, they are less likely to be imposing themselves on others or “loving” others with “Velcro love” or manipulating others or excluding others.

And just as people who are attached to this and that can be manipulated by threatening what they are attached to, so those who have attained detachment are more or less beyond manipulation because they have nothing to lose. The future belongs to such people.

### **Facilitating the detachment pattern**

Practical ways we might facilitate detachment could include the following:

- Firstly, stop striving to be detached!
- Secondly, think of detachment as life’s *gift* rather than your attainment; it is a precious gift; that way lies the fullness of all that you desire as a human being;
- Thirdly, detachment will become part of your life the more you enter the obedience pattern;
- Fourthly, foster *relationships* with the Great Mystery, with yourself, with other people and with the world in which you find yourself; this sets a life-giving context within which the truth of the detachment pattern in our regard will become more obvious; increasingly you will recognize, as if by instinct, what life is asking of you and you will recognize that because it genuinely fosters relationships;
- Fifthly, pay attention to moments of *strong emotion* in your life – you may become aware of the deeper sources of attachment; this awareness itself is the necessary basis – and, in many instances, the sufficient response – to promote the movement deeper into life through detachment; in the very awareness, often enough, brings with it the letting go; listen particularly to feelings of anxiety as this is where much of our deformative behaviour originates;
- Sixthly, enjoy the process!



## CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

*\* In Jesus we find the embodiment of what it means to be profoundly committed, passionately engaged and radically detached.*

*\* The essence of detachment in the Christian tradition is grounded in the experience of being taken hold of by Christ (see Philippians 3:12).*

*\* Out of that intimate relationship with God in Christ grows a powerful attraction that slowly becomes the central dynamism of our lives in general and detachment in particular.*

*\* Like all other Christian dispositions, detachment is an expression of the mystery of God's Love experienced in and through the stuff of our lives.*



### The treasure in the field

A good place to begin our understanding of detachment as understood within the Christian tradition is Jesus' story of the man who finds the treasure in the field.<sup>17</sup> The focus in that story – and the series of stories as recorded in Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel – is the Kingdom. And the Kingdom is the place where God's love overwhelms and liberates all. The Kingdom begins and ends with God's loving initiative to set free humanity and the whole of creation from the source of all oppression and bondage. In the story of the man who finds the treasure we can see a plot unfolding:

- Firstly, there is an individual – you and I – walking, perhaps wandering, perhaps lost; in any case this individual is not there for the purpose that is about to overtake him; he is doing something else with his life; he has other concerns;
- Secondly, the individual “finds” the treasure; “finding” is always also a “being found;” finding “happens” to us – we are not in control; we are the recipients; we are, in a sense, overtaken; finding is always, in some measure at least, gift;
- Thirdly, this individual is filled with “joy;” there is a resounding “Yes!” by this man; he is now in motion in a way that he was not in motion a second ago;
- Fourthly, the individual is moved into *transforming action*; his life is radically different now; he responds by making the *decision* – a most obvious and relatively easy decision under the circumstances – to sell everything he has in

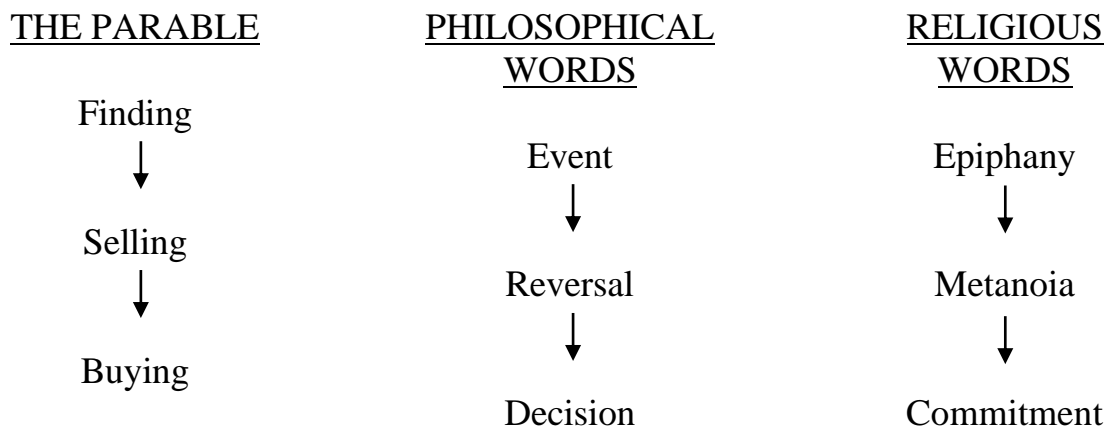
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<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 13:44. See also Paul Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus” reproduced in *Readings in Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, 146-149.

order to attain this field with the treasure; all else – good as it may be – pales into insignificance alongside this treasure;

- Fifthly, the movement of this individual’s life – now under the compelling impetus of his deep feelings which have been aroused by the finding of the treasure – expresses itself in his “*buying*” the field; he does something that both manifests a *commitment* and orients him in a new commitment; the decision arose out of the strong feelings of joy, the action followed through selling all his other belongings and buying this field;
- Sixthly, this source of new life draws him and moves him to live now in a totally new way; his life is *re-oriented*; he has left behind so much because he has been overtaken and in that overtaking he recognises that he now has so much more; he is now well and truly on that human journey of moving towards “the more than”, leaving this and that behinds so that he can embrace the more urgent longings of his being.

We could summarise the essence of this process as follows:



The detachment pattern is implicit in this process in all its complexities and subtleties. The story is actually a very secular story. We should not look for inspiration in the content of the story so much as the process – a process that is inherent in every moment, ensuring that, for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, the *secular is sacred*. And we access that process more by imagination than rational thought. Thus we see someone drawn into letting go of this and that because he is drawn to something richer and potentially more rewarding. He could not possibly have had the treasure unless he was willing to let go of those other things in his life. And he is enabled to let go of those other things because he has found the treasure. The Kingdom is like *that* says Jesus. The detachment pattern of life formation *is central to the coming of the Kingdom*.

A number of practical implications arise here:

- Firstly, our movement more deeply into life – into the Kingdom – must be grounded in an experience of God’s love. To promote detachment – or any other Christian ideal – from any other basis than an experience of God’s love will tend to lead to wilful striving. The motivation for detachment, in other words, has to be the desire for more of “the treasure” that is God’s liberating love. This will be a process of moving from attachment to what we do not ultimately want, through detachment towards attachment to what our hearts most deeply desire.
- Thus, our primary focus and efforts must be on opening up to God’s love in the daily stuff of living – that is being an attentive and awake pilgrim in the field of life, one who is likely to find “the treasure” in the ordinary, profane moments of life.
- Then, if we *do* find that “treasure”, like the man in the story we *will* want to enter the detachment pattern more fully. Indeed we will be eager to enter that pattern and let go of all those things that hinder us from receiving more of the “treasure”. Those urgent longings that are part of our very beings will be awakened and once awakened they can never be put back to rest.

We can see this principle at work in the ordinary events of daily living. We could perhaps state the principle something like this: Let the attachment to the greater good move us to detachment from the lesser good. Consider the wisdom of the Christian tradition:

*It is impossible to despise the pleasures of the mouth, if the soul, attached to contemplation, does not find greater delights in the love of virtues and in the beauty of heavenly things. The hour in which we disdain as valueless the things of the present is also that in which the look of the spirit is inseparably fixed on those that are unchangeable and eternal.*<sup>18</sup>

*(One of the Desert Fathers said): Malice will never drive out malice. But if someone does evil to you, you should do good to him, so that by your good work you may destroy his malice.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cassian cited by Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality, Volume I*, Seabury, 1963, 505. Cassian was born about 360 and lived for a number of years in the deserts of Egypt before settling in Marseilles where he set up monasteries for men and women and wrote his famous *Institutes* and the *Conferences*.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, *op cit*, 43.

## Purification and dark night

In all the great religious traditions detachment features prominently. It is generally regarded as a *sine qua non* for growth in the spirit – ie growth in humanity. We have already noted the saying of Lao Tzu. A Zen story strikes a similar note:

*Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. 'It is over-full. No more will go in!' 'Like this cup,' Nan-in said, 'you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?''*<sup>20</sup>

In the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions they speak of Nirvana as the ultimate bliss, the goal of life. The etymology of the word is revealing:

*(Nirvana) is sometimes translated as 'extinction' or 'annihilation', but it is important to note what is annihilated. Nirvana is derived from a root, va, meaning 'to blow' and nir or nis is the negative; so Nir-vana means 'blown out.' The comparison is to a lamp blown out, and indicates the passions with the individuality which is attached to them. These are extinguished in Nirvana, the unconditioned and indescribable peace and bliss which is attained at enlightenment. It is not annihilation of the eternal essence or reality, nor is it, as some dictionaries put it, 'absorption into the supreme spirit.' Rather it is the goal of life, the ultimate bliss, attained by most people after many lives.*<sup>21</sup>

The Christian tradition is no exception in its emphasis on detachment as a central feature of the path towards human fulfilment. There are two particular interrelated concepts which highlight this theme of detachment in the Christian tradition: the first is the so-called *apophatic way* in prayer and the second is the metaphor of *dark night*.

### a. The apophatic way

The *apophatic way* is described powerfully in the writings of authors such as St Gregory of Nyssa in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Dyonisius the Areopagite<sup>22</sup> Meister Eckhart (1260-1329), the anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> century English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Reys, editor, *Zen Flesh and Zen Bones*, Doubleday, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *The Wisdom of the Early Buddhists*, A New Directions Book, 1977, 16.

<sup>22</sup> This is a pseudonym of a writer who lived towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. He took the name of the man who became a Christian as a result of St Paul's speech on the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:34).

and John of the Cross (1542-1591). The essential theme of the *apophatic way* is found in its commitment to preserving the transcendent mystery of God, utterly incomprehensible and utterly uncontrollable. The origin of the word is Greek, from *phanai* meaning *speech* and the prefix *apo* which negates the speaking. We can say, therefore, that the *apophatic way* is the way of negation, of “not saying” or evening “saying not.”<sup>23</sup> It is sometimes expressed in Latin as *via negativa* – literally *the negative way*. The point is that whatever we say about God is ultimately inadequate. We must speak of God but we must, at the same time, constantly remind ourselves that God is *not* this or that but so much *more*. Our speech must lead to silence. Here is a simple instance of the *apophatic way* expressed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century spiritual guide, Jean Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751):

*The written word of God is full of mysteries: his word executed in action in the events of the world is no less so. These two books are truly sealed, the letter of them both kills. God is the centre of faith, and faith is an abyss of darkness which from that centre spreads itself over all the operations which proceed from it. All these words and works are, as it were, but the dark rays of a still darker sun. In vain do we open the eyes of the body to see this sun and its rays; even the eyes of our soul by which we see God and his works are but closed eyes. Here darkness takes the place of light, knowledge is ignorance, and we see without seeing. Holy Scripture is the language of a still more mysterious God; the events of the world are the obscure sayings of this same God, so hidden and so unknown. They are the drops of a great sea but of a sea of darkness. All drops, all brooks of water have the savour of their source. The fall of the angels, the fall of Adam, the impiety and idolatry of men before and after the Flood in the lifetime of the patriarchs, who knew and related to their children the story of the Creation and the then still recent preservation of the world: here are some of the dark words of Holy Scripture! A handful of men preserved from idolatry up to the arrival of the Messiah, in spite of the general loss of faith of the whole world: impiety always reigning and powerful: this little band of defenders of truth always persecuted and ill-treated; the way Jesus Christ was treated; the plagues of the Apocalypse! What! Are these the words of God? . . . Is this what he has revealed? . . . And are the effects of these terrible mysteries which last until the end of the world also the living word which teaches us his wisdom, his power, his goodness? All the events that form the history of the world express these divine attributes. All preach the same adorable word. Alas! we do not see it; we must believe it!*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “*Apophasis* is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark.” (Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1995/1999, 20.)

<sup>24</sup> Jean Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Image books, 1975, 42. This is a brilliant little spiritual classic and very readable!

The *apophatic way* stands as a witness to the need to be silent and contemplate God in awe – to “let God be God” as Eckhart says. There comes a point at which any name or image we utter for God is a distraction, even an obstacle. We must be willing to leave behind names and images and thus relinquish the security that they give. This process is one of purgation and purification and may be most distressing.<sup>25</sup>

Which brings us to the second theme by which the Christian tradition expresses the need for detachment. No one describes this more powerfully and clearly than St John of the Cross. And the first thing we must say about John of the Cross is that he is describing the *movement and effects of Love*. John’s prose is an attempt to elaborate on and explain his poetry. And his poetry is the most wonderful expression of a man radically and profoundly overwhelmed by Eternal Love. Listen to the following which he entitled “Stanzas of the Soul”:

*One dark night,  
Fired with love’s urgent longings  
-Ah the sheer grace!-  
I went out unseen,  
My house being now all stilled;  
In darkness, and secure,  
By the secret ladder, disguised,  
-Ah the sheer grace!-  
In darkness and concealment  
My house being now all stilled;*

*On that glad night,  
In secret, for no one saw me,  
Nor did I look at anything,  
With no other light or guide  
Than the one that burned in my heart;  
This guided me  
More surely than the light of noon  
To where He waited for me  
-Him I knew so well-*

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<sup>25</sup> Western Christianity must re-discover the *apophatic way*. It has become burdened by its excessively rational approach to the great mysteries of our faith. Western theology feels compelled to analyse and state clearly in propositions the meaning of this and that. Western theology is not at home with story or parable or silence. As a result Western theology has helped to give birth to an era in which religious language has all but lost its power and meaning. It is well nigh impossible for us to communicate the Good News in our rational, propositional ways. A generous immersion in the experience of the *apophatic way* might help us to give birth to story and parable and poetry and words that once again point to the Great Mystery with some efficacy.



*In a place where no one else appeared.*

*O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
The Lover with His beloved,  
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.*

*Upon my flowering breast  
Which I kept wholly for Him alone,  
There He lay sleeping,  
And I caressing Him  
There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.*

*When the breeze blew from the turret  
Parting his hair,  
He wounded my neck  
With his gentle hand,  
Suspending all my senses.*

*I abandoned and forgot myself,  
Laying my face on my Beloved;  
All things ceased; I went out from myself,  
Leaving my cares  
Forgotten among the lilies.<sup>26</sup>*

The metaphor of “darkness” is used by John of the Cross and many others in the Christian tradition to describe specifically the necessary purification process we must go through if we are to know and love God as we are created to do. Knowledge of God is a matter of profound intimacy and our normal method of knowing – rational knowing – is hopelessly inadequate to the tremendous riches that await us when our spirit and the Holy Spirit bear witness that we are, indeed, children of God whom we call “Abba! Father!”<sup>27</sup> Our faculties of knowing must be stripped of all that stands between us and this more radical kind of knowing. And the stripping starts with the senses of the body and proceeds to the soul – the latter purgation being far more trying than the former.

While we can actively facilitate this purification process, it is ultimately a matter of grace. The Spirit of God works deeply with our spirit to affect our lives mightily. We are transformed. Part of that transformation is a transformed way of

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<sup>26</sup> Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973, 295. This is reminiscent of the spirituality found in the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>27</sup> See Romans 8:16.

perceiving God, ourselves, other people and our world. However, in the midst of the transforming process, both physically and spiritually we can feel cut off from life, plunged into the void, forced into darkness. Our old ways of perceiving do not work anymore and we feel abandoned and lost. Paradoxically, this is a work of Love, one which will culminate in an ever-deepening ability to know and love God as God is.



## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will save it.”*<sup>28</sup>



(2) *“For everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself shall be raised up.”*<sup>29</sup>



(3) *“Many who are first shall be last, and the last, first.”*<sup>30</sup>



(4) *“He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty.”*<sup>31</sup>



(5) *“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*<sup>32</sup>



(6) *“Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”*<sup>33</sup>



(7) *“For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God”*<sup>34</sup>



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<sup>28</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 14:11.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 19:30.

<sup>31</sup> Luke 1:53.

<sup>32</sup> Mark. 10:25.

<sup>33</sup> John 12:24-25.

<sup>34</sup> 2Corinthians 5:21.

(8) *"For it is when I am weak that I am strong."*<sup>35</sup>



(9) *"He did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself ..."*<sup>36</sup>



(10) *"I say that to the extent a person can deny himself and turn away from created things, he will find his unity and blessing in that little spark in the soul which neither space nor time touches."*<sup>37</sup>



(11) *"The shell must be cracked apart if what is in it is to come out; for if you want the kernel you must break the shell.' And therefore, if you want to discover nature's nakedness, you must destroy its symbols and the farther you get in, the nearer you come to its essence. When you come to the One that gathers all things up into himself, there you must stay."*<sup>38</sup>



(12) *"How wonderfully is man's love transformed by the interior experience of this nothingness and this nowhere. .... He who patiently abides in this darkness will be comforted and feel again a confidence about his destiny, for gradually he will see his past sins healed by grace. The pain continues yet he knows it will end, for even now it grows less intense. Slowly he begins to realise that the suffering he endures is not hell at all but his purgatory."*<sup>39</sup>



(13) *"Among the central mysteries of Christian and Church life we proclaim in the Lord's Supper the death of the Lord until he comes again. We Christians, then, are really the only people who can forgo an "opiate" in our existence or an analgesic for our lives. Christianity forbids us to reach for an analgesic in such a way that we are no longer willing to drink the chalice of the death of this existence with Jesus Christ. And to this extent there is no doubt that in living out its Christian existence Christianity is required to say in an absolute and sober realism: yes, this existence is*

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<sup>35</sup> 2Corinthians 12:10.

<sup>36</sup> Philippians 2:6.

<sup>37</sup> Meister Eckhart in Raymond Blakney, trans. *Meister Eckhart*, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 246f.

<sup>38</sup> Meister Eckhart, *op. cit.*, 148.

<sup>39</sup> *Cloud of Unknowing*, Image Books, 1973, Chapter 69, 137.

*incomprehensible, for it passes through something incomprehensible in which all of our comprehending is taken from us. It passes through death. And it is only when this is not only said in pious platitudes, but rather is accepted in the hardness of real life - for we do not die at the end, but we die throughout the whole of life, and, as Seneca knew, our death begins at our birth - and it is only when we live out this pessimistic realism and renounce every ideology which absolutizes a particular sector of human existence and makes it an idol, it is only then that it is possible for us to allow God to give us the hope which really makes us free."*<sup>40</sup>



(14) *"Each child has something to teach us, a message that will help to explain why we are here."*<sup>41</sup>



(15) *"To see the infinite pity of this place./ The mangled limb, the devastated face,/ The innocent sufferers, smiling at the rod;/ A fool were tempted to deny his God;/ He sees, and shrinks, but if he look again,/ Lo, beauty springing from the breast of pain,/ He marks the sisters on the painful shores,/ And even a fool is silent and adores."*<sup>42</sup>



(16) *"O Lord, remember not only the men of goodwill, but also the men of illwill. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we have gathered thanks to this suffering - our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this - and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."*<sup>43</sup>



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<sup>40</sup> Karl Rahner's "Remarks on the Christian Life" in his *Foundations of Christian Faith*, A Crossroad Book, 1978, 404.

<sup>41</sup> *The Talmud*.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson - After a visit to the leper colony at Kalaupapa, Molokai, 1888.

<sup>43</sup> Prayer found in a concentration camp after the War.

(17) *"Acknowledge whence you have existence, breath and understanding. Acknowledge whence you have what is most important of all, your knowledge of God, your hope of the kingdom of heaven, your contemplation of glory, which in this life is of course through a glass darkly but hereafter will be more perfect and clearer. Acknowledge that you have been made a child of God, a co-heir with Christ. Acknowledge, and now I speak with daring, that you have been made divine."*<sup>44</sup>



(18) *"Knowledge of God without that of our misery, equals pride. Knowledge of our misery without that of God equals despair. Knowledge of Jesus Christ strikes the balance since in him we find both God and our misery."*<sup>45</sup>



(19) *"You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul."*<sup>46</sup>



(20) *"When I discover that I am poor, that I am confused, that you call me by my name, that you love me, then there is the moment of transformation."*<sup>47</sup>



(21) *"Gaze where you should, and that will clear your sight."*<sup>48</sup>



(22) *"Austerity is not just an instrument of political expediency, to resolve temporary difficulties; it is the means of getting to the root – and of establishing the possibility of a solid reconstruction – of a system undergoing a deep structural crisis, affecting the foundation, not just the joints. A system whose trademark is waste, extravagance, more and more unbridled consumerism. Austerity establishes a new scale of values: rigor, efficiency, sobriety, justice .... A policy of austerity, or rigor, of war on waste, is an unavoidable necessity for everybody. It is the*

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<sup>44</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Office of Readings*, Monday of First Week of Lent.

<sup>45</sup> Blaise Pascal cited by B. Bro, *The Little Way*, Christian Classics, 1980, 64.

<sup>46</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "The Steps of Humility and Pride", III, 6, in *Treatises II*, trans. M. Ambrose Conway Cistercian Publications, 1974, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Jean Vanier, *Followers of Jesus*, Gill & MacMillan, 1976, 80.

<sup>48</sup> William Shakespear, *Comedy of Errors*, Act 3, Scene 2 – Luciana to Antipholus of Syracuse.

*driving power of the struggle for the general transformation of society, or at least of the ideas on which society is built.*"<sup>49</sup>



(23) *"Take O Lord and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding, my whole will. All that I am and all that I have you have given me. Give me only your love and your grace. With these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more."*<sup>50</sup>



(24) *"Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it. We must continually suspend the work of the imagination in filling the void within ourselves. In no matter what circumstances, if the imagination is stopped from pouring itself out, we have a void (poor in spirit). In no matter what circumstances ... imagination can fill the void. ... That is we fly from the inner void, since God might steal into it"*<sup>51</sup>



(25) *Walking Away*

*It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –  
A sunny day with the leaves just turning,  
The touch-lines new-ruled – since I watched you play  
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite  
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away,*

*Behind a scatter of boys I can see  
You walking away from me towards the school  
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free  
Into a wilderness, the gait of one  
Who finds no path where the path should be.*

*That hesitant figure eddying away  
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,  
Has something that I never quite grasp to convey  
About nature's give and take – the small, the scorching*

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<sup>49</sup> Erich Fromm cited by Pedro Arrupe, "Conversion to Frugality" in *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume II*, 157-159.

<sup>50</sup> St Ignatius of Loyola's "Prayer of Abandonment".

<sup>51</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. A. Wills, Putnam, 1952.

*Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.*

*I have had worse partings, but none that so  
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly  
Saying that God alone could perfectly show –  
How selfhood begins with a walking away,  
And love is proved in the letting go.<sup>52</sup>*



(26) *“To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing.  
To come to possess all desire the possession of nothing.  
To arrive at being all desire to be nothing.  
To come to the knowledge of all desire the knowledge of nothing.  
To come to the pleasure you have not you must go by a way in which you enjoy  
not.  
To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you  
know not.  
To come to the possession you have not you must go by a way in which you  
possess not.  
To come to be what you are not you must go by a way in which you are not.”<sup>53</sup>*



(27) *“There is a story of two monks on a journey who came to a river with no  
bridge across it. As they were about to begin to ford it, a young woman came up.  
The first monk was just going to offer to carry her across, when the second said to  
her, ‘Get on my back and I’ll carry you over.’ She did so and parted from them  
gracefully on the other side. After the two monks had walked on for a few miles,  
the first monk, unable to contain himself any longer, burst out, ‘What did you mean  
by carrying that girl across the river? You know monks are allowed to have  
nothing to do with women!’ The other said, with a smile, ‘You must be tired,  
carrying that girl all this way. I put her down as soon as we got to the other side of  
the river.’”<sup>54</sup>*



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<sup>52</sup> Cecil Day-Lewis in *The Complete Poems*, Sinclair Stevenson, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> St John of the Cross, from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk I:13, 11. Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD translation.

<sup>54</sup> Cited by Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism*, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc, 1963, 68.



## Suggestions for further study

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*A Man For All Seasons* (1966) (Dir: Fred Zimmerman with Paul Scofield, Wendy Hiller and Leo McKern.)  
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*Stones for Ibarra* (1988) (Dir: Jack Gold with Glenn Close and Keith Carradine.)
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- , (“Being Captured by the Mystery”)  
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- Williams, Rowan, “Dark Night, Darkness” in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Gordon S Wakefield, SCM Press, 1983, 103-5.
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## **Suggested exercises**

1. This week pay particular attention to any more or less strong or sudden movement of emotion. Wait upon that, ask open questions and see if you can become aware of what is happening. It may expose some area of attachment in your life. (Note: Do not try to do anything about that attachment should you become aware of it. Just be aware and give it over to God. Awareness is itself healing and liberating.)
2. Take some time to read the poem of St John of the Cross as reproduced in these notes. Pay close attention to your reactions when you are reading it. Again, do not try to do anything – just become aware. Listen! Let the poem awaken a response within you – listen for that response. Be still before the unutterable and incomprehensible Mystery of God who loves you in ways that you cannot begin to imagine let alone adequately describe.
3. What sorts of things frustrate you and arouse your impatience? What is happening there? What is it pointing to about you?

