

Inner Call Podcast #175 Descending into the Heart August 11 2022

The counsel of the 19th century Orthodox saint Theophan the Recluse, recently posted in the Inner Call, is to descend from our head into our heart. If we live in our head, he warns us, our prayers are merely external. We keep God outside of ourselves, although such a separation is in truth impossible, since God is one and indivisible. But trapped in our mind we imagine it to be so and experience our delusion as reality. For the sincere seeker, whose desire is only to be united with the Divine Ideal, this can never be satisfactory. Were our ideal, for example, the perfection of Love, would we not want to throw overboard whatever might hold us back from that oneness?

If the thirst for union were not a sufficient motive to get ourselves out of our head, the image that Theophan offers, of the thoughts that whirl about like snow in winter or clouds of mosquitos in summer, should be a strong encouragement. Anyone with some experience of life in a northern forest will understand this well. Wind-driven snow can be blinding and deadly, forcing us to take refuge in a small cabin for long dark months at a time, but when at last the snow abates and the world becomes green again, the clouds of voracious mosquitos turn our momentary glimpse of paradise into something quite the opposite.

But most of us are not monks. We are not recluses, and we might ask ourselves how it is possible to not be concerned with thoughts. The Sufi's ideal is to live in the world yet not to be held by it, but surely to be 'here' – in family, in community, in our work – means to handle all the responsibilities and duties, all the details that seem to multiply like stinging flies. What can we do to escape them?

Hazrat Inayat Khan once gave the example of a king who devoted a certain part of every night to prayer and meditation. His advisors, thinking of his many responsibilities and worried that he was over-extending himself, asked him if it would not be better to use those hours for sleep. The king replied, "You do not understand. I pursue God at night, and during the day, He pursues me."

If, like pilgrims, we regularly descend from our head to the altar of our heart, and earnestly prostrate ourselves there, a moment will come when we glimpse the essential truth that Theophan is pointing out: that thoughts distract us from the truth of the Present, from the immanent and eternal Reality. Usually no more than distorted echoes of the past or imaginary conceptions of the future, thoughts ignore the truth of 'now' and it is only when we experience the timeless light of the heart that we understand what that means. Then our prayers, arising in the silent heart-space, are spoken in the presence of the Beloved, and nothing can compare to the recognition of a Divine response to our humble call.

Thenceforward, our thoughts become much more obedient. The snowflakes, one could say, become flower petals, and the mosquitoes rise to a different stage of evolution. With relief and with deep gratitude, we echo the phrase from Vadan Alankaras : Since Thy joyful smile has produced a new light in my heart, I see the sun shine everywhere.