

Symeon the New Theologian

The Three Ways of Attention and Prayer

Translated from Greek by Demetrios S. Skagias, 11/96



Translator's note: Though of unknown author, the following text was perhaps understandably attributed to St. Symeon the New Theologian (+1022). The date of authorship has been established around the early Paleologian period, whilst its importance and popularity made it an obvious choice for the standard anthology of Orthodox mysticism, called the 'Philokalia'. [The whole five-volume work of the Philokalia is available in an English translation by bishop Kallistos of Diokleia.]

The Three Ways of Attention and Prayer

[Introduction]

There are three ways of attention and prayer, by which the soul can be lifted and become spiritually exalted, or crumble and perish. If these three ways are used appropriately and at the right time, the soul will be lifted, whilst if they are used unreasonably and at the wrong time, the soul will perish. Attention therefore should be tied and inseparable to prayer, in the way that the body is tied and inseparable to the soul. Attention should have the lead and mind for enemies as a guard, and fight sin, and resist evil thoughts of the soul. It should be then succeeded by prayer, which will destroy all those evil thoughts which attention fought against earlier, since attention alone is not able to do this.

It is this war of attention and prayer on which both life and death of the soul depend. By attention that we keep our prayer safe and therefore we progress: if we do not have attention to keep it clear and we leave it unguarded, then it is inflected by evil thoughts and we become wicked and hopeless. Hence, the ways of attention and prayer are three, we ought to explain the features of each one and leave the choice to whoever may wish to find salvation.

[The first way of attention and prayer.]

The features of the first way are these: one stands to pray by raising his hands towards the sky together with his eyes and mind. He imagines divine concepts, the good things of Heaven, the armies of the holy angels, the residences of the saints and, in short, he gathers in his mind all that he has heard from the Holy Scriptures. He recalls them in the time of his prayer looking at the sky, and he exhorts his soul to what seems to be love and eros of God. Sometimes he even has tears and cries. In this way his soul gradually becomes proud without realizing it, thinking that what he does is by the grace of God's compassion for him. Hence he pleads God to always grant him worthy of such deeds which are, however, signs of error.

A good thing ceases to be good, when it is carried out in the wrong way or at the wrong time. To such an extent this is the case here that, if this person finds perfect solitude, it will be impossible for him not to lose his mind. Should this not happen, it will still be impossible for him to acquire any virtues or detachment from the earthly. By this method are misled all those who see the Light with their bodily eyes, sense perfumes with their sense of smell, hear voices with their ears and so on. Some of them have been possessed, moving senselessly from one place to the other. Others have been misled by accepting the Devil who was transformed and appeared to them as an angel of light, and they have remained uncorrected until the very end, without wanting to hear any advice from their brothers. Some of them were even incited by the Devil and committed suicide, whilst others were crumbled and others became insane. Who can describe the various illusions of the Devil by which he misleads them!

Every reasonable person can understand the kind of damage that comes from this first way of attention and prayer. If it happens that someone by being accompanied by brothers (since these evils usually happen to those who are on their own) does not suffer any of the things we described, he nevertheless spends all his life with no spiritual improvement.

[The second way of attention and prayer.]

The second way is this: when someone concentrates his mind in himself, detaching it from all that is earthly, guarding his senses, and gathering his thoughts so that they are not scattered to the vain things of the world. Sometimes he examines his thoughts and sometimes he pays attention to the words of the prayer he recites. Sometimes he returns to his thoughts that were trapped by the Devil and were drawn to that which is evil and vain, and sometimes with much effort and struggle he comes back to himself, after being defeated and possessed by some weakness.

Having this battle and war with himself, he cannot find peace nor time to do the virtuous good deeds and receive the crown of righteousness. For this man is like the one who fights a war against his enemies in darkness and night; who hears the voices of the enemy and suffers being stabbed, yet he cannot see clearly who they are, where they came from and how, and why they are attacking him. For this damage is caused by the darkness in his mind and the confusion in his thoughts and therefore he can never escape from his enemies, the demons, so that they will stop defeating him. The piteous suffers in vain, for he loses his reward being possessed by vanity without realizing it, by thinking he is attentive. Many times he condemns the others and accuses them, praising himself and thinking that he is worthy to become shepherd of rational sheep, guiding others. He is like the blind person who promises to guide other blind people!

This is the second way; anyone who wishes to find salvation needs start by learning the damage that it causes to the soul, and be cautious. This second way is, nevertheless, better than the first, for the sky with Moon is better than the dark night without it.

[The third way of attention and prayer.]

The third way is indeed strange and difficult to explain, whilst, to those who are not aware of it, it is often incomprehensible, appearing unreal and impossible that any such thing can happen. This is because in

these days the third way is not found in many, but rather in very few. As I understand, this virtue abandoned us together with obedience, since it is the obedience one shows to his spiritual father which makes one truly free, leaving all the cares to him and staying away from the struggles of this world, whilst being a diligent artisan of this third way. (That is, if one finds a real spiritual father who has no error!) Thus he who dedicates himself and all the care to God and the spiritual father, by real obedience is no longer living his own life where he does his own wishes, but is free from any struggle of the world or his body. By what ephemeral thing then, can this person ever be spiritually defeated or enslaved, or what care or concern could he ever have? It is therefore by this way, together with obedience, that the devices and machinations of the demons to distract the mind towards many and various thoughts, are all defeated and dissolved. One's mind then stays free, and has plenty of space and chance to examine the thoughts brought by the demons, having a greater dexterity to expel them and offer his prayers to God with a clean heart. This is the beginning of the true way of life and those who do not make such a start are struggling in vain, even without knowing it.

The beginning of the third way is not by looking up to the sky, raising the hands, having your mind in heaven and asking for help from there. As we have said, these are of the first way and they are false. Nor is it to guard the senses with the mind and concentrate exclusively on this, whilst neither being attentive nor seeing the inner wars of the soul conducted by the enemies. These are all of the second way. He who uses them is trapped by the demons and is unable to revenge those who trapped him, whilst the enemies are always fighting him both secretly and openly, making him proud and vain.

But you, my friend, if you seek your salvation you should **start in this way**: after the perfect obedience which we said you should have to your spiritual father, you should then **conduct all your deeds with a clear conscience, as if you had God in front of you**, for conscience can never be clear without obedience. You should keep your conscience clear towards these things: God, spiritual father, other people and earthly things. **Towards God, it is an obligation to keep your conscience clear by avoiding the things you are aware that He neither likes nor give Him any joy. Towards your spiritual father you should do the things he orders you to do, doing nothing more and nothing less, living according to his plan and wish. As for the other people, you should keep your conscience clear by not doing to them any of the things you hate and do not wish them to do to you. Towards the earthly it is your obligation to restrain yourself from abuses, using them all appropriately, food as well as drinking and clothes.** In short, you should **do everything as if you had God in front of you**, making sure that your conscience does not restrain nor condemn you for not doing something right. This is the beginning of the true and firm route of the third way of attention and prayer.

The **third way of attention and prayer** is then this: the **mind should guard the heart in the time of prayer and always stay inside it**. From there, **from the depths of the heart, it should then lift up the prayers to God**. For once it tries inside the heart and tastes and is soothed--as the Lord is good!--then the mind will never want to leave the place of the heart. It will there repeat the words of Peter the apostle: "It is wonderful for us to be here!" [Mt 17:4, Mk 9:5, Lk 9:33] Then it will always wish to look inside the heart, remaining there and pushing aside and expelling all the concepts which are planted by the Devil. To those who have not realized this work of salvation and remain unaware of it, this will most of the times seem very hard and unpleasant. But those who have tasted its sweetness and enjoyed the pleasure inside the depths of their hearts, they all cry together with Paul: "What could ever come between us and the love of God?" [Rm 8:38-39]

Our holy fathers have listened the Lord who said that from the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander [Mt 15:19] and how these are the things that make a man unclean. [Mt 15:20] Further, they have listened to the part of the gospel where we are ordered to clean the inside of cup and dish first so that the outside may become clean as well. [Mt 23:26] They therefore left aside any other spiritual work and concentrated exclusively on guarding the heart, being confident that through this they would easily achieve all other virtues, whilst without it no virtue can be preserved. **This practice was called by some fathers 'serenity of the heart', whilst others named it 'attention', others 'sobriety' and 'detainment', others 'examination of the thoughts' and 'guarding of the mind';** for they were all absorbed in this, and by this they were found worthy to accept the divine virtues.

It is for this that the Ecclesiastes says: Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart blameless and clear, and prevent your heart from

thoughts. [Eccl. 11:9 (LXX)] The same is said in the Proverbs: If Devil makes an assault on you, do not let him enter your place, [Eccl. 10:4 (LXX)] where 'the place' means the heart. The Lord Himself tells us in the Gospel that we must not worry, [Lk 12:29] in other words not to scatter our minds here and there. Again, in a different passage He says: Happy are those poor in spirit, [Mt 5:3] meaning that happy are those who never acquired any concern of this world in their hearts and are free from all earthly thoughts. All our holy fathers wrote much on this, so may he who wishes to read their works look for those written by St. Mark the Ascetic, St. John of Klimax, St. Hesychios, Philotheos of Sinai, Abba Hesaites, Barsanouphios the Great and many others.

In short, he who is not attentive to guard his mind cannot be cleansed in his heart and be therefore worthy to see God. He who is not attentive can never be poor in spirit nor can he ever mourn and cry, or become gentle and peaceful, or hunger and thirst for justice, or become merciful, peacemaker, or persecuted in the cause of right. [Mt 5:3-10] **It is quite impossible to acquire any virtue by any means other than attention.** It is attention that you should mostly take care of, to be able then to understand the things I am saying. If now you wish to learn the way to achieve this, I will tell you.

There are **three things you should preserve beyond anything else: disinterest in everything reasonable or unreasonable and vain**, in other words detachment from everything; then **clear conscience in everything**, as we have said, by not causing its judgement for anything; **finally complete peace, having your mind detached from anything earthly.** When you have all these, **find a place quiet, seat alone in a corner**, shut the door [Mt 6:6] and **cease your mind from anything ephemeral and vain. Press your chin on to your chest so that you can have your attention in yourself**, with both eyes and mind. **Hold your breath slightly to concentrate your mind** and then, **having all your mind there, try to find the place of your heart.** In the beginning, what you will discover is darkness, much callousness and evil. But then, after having practiced this method of attention a lot, night and day, you will find--great wonder!--an incessant happiness! The mind, through struggle, will have finally reached the place of the heart, where you will see the things you have never seen or known. There you will see the heaven which is within you, inside the heart, and you will find yourself enlightened, full of all grace and virtue.

From there on, if any kind of evil thought ever appears from any direction, before even being considered or take shape, you will immediately push it aside and dissolve it by the name of Jesus with his prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." Hence forth the mind will begin to bear grudge and animosity against the demons, being in an incessant war. It will raise its justified wrath and hunt them, attack them, dissolve them. As for the things following beyond that, those you may find out yourself, with God's help, through your effort and the attention of your mind, keeping Jesus in your heart with His prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." That is why a Church-father used to say: "Stay in your cell and that will teach you everything!"

[QUESTION. Why is it not possible to achieve all this through the first and the second way?]

ANSWER. Because we are not using them as we should. St. John of Klimax compares these ways with a ladder of four steps and explains: There are those who lessen their weaknesses and humble them, others who chant, praying with their voices, others who are absorbed in the spiritual prayer and others who reach observance. Those therefore who wish to climb these steps, do not start from the top one coming down but begin from the lower ones and go upwards. They step on the first step and then on the second, then on the third one and finally on the fourth. It is by this way that one is able to be lifted from the earth and ascend to heaven. **First of all one needs to fight to diminish and cease his weaknesses. Only then he should become absorbed in chanting: praying with his voice.** It is once one has diminished his weaknesses that prayer brings pleasure and sweetness to the tongue, and he may be considered near to and appreciated by God. **Then one needs to start praying with his spirit**, and finally he will reach observance. The first is of the beginners, the second of those who are increasing their virtues, the third of those who have reached the fulfillment of virtue, whilst the fourth belongs to the perfect.

The beginning, therefore, is nothing else but the diminution and cessation of the weaknesses, which are not diminished in the soul in any other way but through attention and guarding of the heart. It is the heart where they come from, as our Lord says, the evil thoughts that make a man unclean,

[Mt 15:19-20] and it is there where guard and attention is needed. **Once weaknesses are totally diminished by the resistance of the heart, then the mind comes to yearn and seek the way to reconcile with God**, extending its prayer and becoming further absorbed in it. **Through this desire and prayer, the mind is strengthened and dismisses all the thoughts that have surrounded it in order to find their way into the heart**, and fights them with prayer. **Then starts a war and the evil demons resist with great distress**, causing confusion and giddiness in the heart, exploiting its weaknesses. However, by the Name of Jesus Christ they are all dissolved and melt like wax in the fire. Even after being cast out and having left the heart, demons do not relinquish but disturb the mind externally, through the senses. Nevertheless, **the mind will very quickly feel the tranquillity which is within**, for they have no power to disturb the depths of the mind but only the surface. To escape completely from this war and stop being confronted by the evil demons is impossible. This belongs to the perfect and those who truly left everything behind and became wholly dedicated to the prayer of the heart.

He who therefore uses these means accordingly, each one at the right time, after having cleansed his heart from weaknesses he can then become dedicated in chanting, and fight the thoughts, and look up at the sky with his sensual eyes (if he feels the need to do that some time) and stare to it with the spiritual eyes of the soul, and pray honestly and truthfully, as it is appropriate. Looking at the sky should nevertheless be avoided, for the danger of evil demons who are there, who are called spirits of the air. These can cause various different delusions, and so we ought be cautious. **This is the only thing that God asks us to do: to have our heart cleansed through prayer.** According to the Apostle, if the root is holy then the branches and the fruit are likewise holy. [Rm 11:16] Without the way which we have described, he who raises his eyes and mind to heaven and imagines various concepts, is bound to see creations of his imagination, things false and untrue, coming from his unclean heart.

As we have repeatedly said, the first and the second way do not bring any spiritual advancement. When we want to build a house, we do not make the roof first and then lay the foundation--for this is impossible!--but we firstly lay the foundation, then build the house and then add the roof. We should do the same in spiritual matters: **first lay the foundation, which is to guard the heart and cast out its weaknesses; then build the spiritual house, which is to cast out the evil spirits fighting us through our senses; finally, having overcome the war as soon as possible, add the roof, which is to depart from all things earthly, and give ourselves completely to God.** Thus we complete our spiritual house in Christ our God, to whom all glory is due, unto the ages of ages. Amen.-

Source: http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/symeon_threeways.html