

Jesus Prayer in the Context of Resting in the Heart of Creation

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John Chrysostom, a Church Father and mystic who lived in the 4th century gives a beautiful imagery as he tries to speak of the mystery of the Trinity. Imagine two lakes on the top of a mountain: the first lake is surrounded by thick rocks; the lake rests in the midst of the rocks. The second lake is also surrounded by thick rocks, but there is an opening through which the lake water falls into the valley forming a mighty river. God as Trinity is not like the first lake, it is like the second lake. God as Trinity is not a God who rests in himself, but a God that pours out himself in love.

The hidden spring in the mountain is the symbol of the incomprehensible mystery of the Divine, the FATHER. The lake is the symbol of the self-unfolding of the hidden springs, the SON. The inherent current is the power of the outflow, the SPIRIT. The coming of the divine water into the world, we Christians experience in JESUS. The whole creation came into existence through the self-outpouring of the divine LOGOS. "All things came into being through the divine Logos" (Jn. 1:3). The divine presence vibrates at the heart of all things. This divine presence, immanent in the entire cosmos, became flesh in JESUS. Therefore the Divine permeates and pervades all things in the universe. We recognise this divine immanence in JESUS CHRIST. "Everything has its existence in Christ" (Col. 1:16). Christ as the divine presence is the essence of all things in creation.

The divine SPIRIT as the inherent power energises the entire creation from within. Creation is therefore the dance of the Divine. When we consider the awesome and orderly movement of the sun, the moon, the stars, the tides and the rotation of the seasons, and as we witness the divine order in the trees producing their fruits, rose bushes bringing forth roses, we must admit that the divine Spirit is at work in the heart of creation. We recognise the Spirit as the creative principle, the cause, the source and law of the universe. We acknowledge the Spirit as its creative, maintaining and sustaining principle. The Divine is the heart of creation.

The contemplative experience of this divine presence is a deep form of prayer. In meditation we realise the divine glory radiating in the sunlight, rain, flowers, trees, birds and in all beings. There is a divine energy operating in the universe sending forth all this glory into expression. We humans perceive this manifold expression. We realise the deep bonding with all things in creation. We too are being energized by the divine presence.

Let us once again come back to the imagery of the lake giving rise to the river. The divine wellspring is the FATHER, the self-unfolding of the wellspring, the lake, is the SON, the inherent power, the current, is the SPIRIT. The Trinity pours itself out into the world as JESUS, the river. Through Christ the whole creation came into being. We humans are the rivulets flowing out of this divine river. We are born from the divine source, bearing the divine life into the world. Our life evolves from the FATHER, through the SON in the SPIRIT. Our life unfolds through the promptings of the divine Spirit. We resonate with the divine vibration. Jesus Prayer is a classical contemplative meditation to experience this divine vibration within us, around us in creation.

Jesus Prayer

Jesus Prayer is the devotional repetition of the divine name of Jesus focusing the attention to the indwelling presence of Christ in the heart. By the invocation of the name of Jesus attention is not directed to the historical person of Jesus, but to the Christ of the present moment, the risen Christ, who lives in creation here and now. The purpose of Jesus Prayer is not to develop an inter-personal relation to Jesus, but to experience the spiritual power of the indwelling presence of Christ within the heart. Hence it is not a devotional form of adoring the Lord, but a meditative way of entering into the awareness of the Lord within. Inner awakening to Christ-consciousness is the essence of Jesus Prayer.

Jesus lived constantly in communion of oneness with the Father. It is this continuous state of oneness which enabled him to say, "you who see me, see the Father that sent me", "the words which I speak are not from myself, but those of the Father", "the works that do, the Father does through me", "The Father and I are ONE". Jesus did not live from the ego-sense, but he was the self-expression of the Father, the compassionate love of the Father manifested through Jesus. We are invited to live in Christ-consciousness. For this Jesus prayer is a powerful means.

We grow in Christ to the extent that we can say with Paul: “For me life is Christ, I live, not I, but Christ lives in me. Christ takes shape in me. I grow into Christ. I mature into Christ. I am transformed into the likeness of Christ.” (Phil, 1:20; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:16; 4:13; II Cor. 3:18) Christ is the presence of the Divine within us and in all creation.

The vocal repetition of the name is only a preparation for the awareness of the divine presence within. Gradually consciousness sinks into the heart with a deep contemplative awareness. To understand the process of Jesus Prayer we shall have a quick look at the levels of consciousness. One could locate three levels of consciousness:

First level is that of the mind. Mind is extrovert; mind objectifies everything; at the centre of the mind the I-sense evolves. During the day we are at this level, and hence it is called the wakeful consciousness. (*jagrit*)

Second level is that of the psyche. It is the sub-conscious level where all the experiences and memories are stored up. They constantly influence the mental process. When we sleep we are very much at this level. (*swapna*)

Thirdly there is the level of the intuitive faculty: in Christian tradition it is called *nous*, in the East it is called *buddhi*. (from this term comes Buddha). It is like the inner eye, the inner light, the inner lamp, or as Meister Eckhart calls it, the “spark of the soul”. It is with this inner faculty of in-sight that we look into the depth of reality: into the heart.

Through the *nous* / *buddhi*, consciousness awakens to the heart. In all cultures and religions the *heart* is the symbol of the sacred space in us, the divine space within us, the core of the person. It is in the heart that we actually experience the divine presence. That is why Jesus said: “when you pray, go into your inner room.” (Mt. 6: 20) The Hindu sages call it the *cave of the heart*, the Muslim Sufi mystics describe it as the *interior garden of the soul*. The mystical experience of the Divine in the heart is the deepest meeting point of all religions.

Jesus Prayer takes us from the mind level, beyond the psyche, through the *nous*, into the heart.

Phases of Jesus Prayer

In this process we can locate three phases in the practice of Jesus Prayer:

I. Active Phase (Mind / Psyche): In an atmosphere of peace and serenity one invokes the holy name of Jesus concentrating on the inner presence of Christ. With the rhythmic repetition of the divine name the mind becomes calm, still and serene. Then the negative elements of the psyche, of the sub-conscious level may surface giving the feelings of boredom, dryness and frustration, and the feeling that one is not gaining anything. We are led through a desert of inner dryness, which in fact is a process of inner purification. The divine Spirit is leading us to fresh well-springs through this dark night experience. In spite of distractions and aridity we have to pass through this purification phase holding on to the divine name. It is like the airplane that goes through a turbulent phase; what would happen if the pilot gives up all effort. No, he would rather steer the plane much more carefully through the turbulence into safety. Confronted with disturbances we shall never give up the practice of Jesus Prayer. Gradually the mind becomes serene and focused on the divine Master within.

II. Receptive Phase (Intuitive Faculty): Jesus Prayer gets more interiorized. Spontaneously one comes to a phase where the repetition stops. We listen to the divine name being repeated from within: I do not repeat the name, it repeats! Distracting thoughts and images gradually disappear. Just the name of Jesus lingers on. Prayer ceases to be the result of one's own efforts and becomes the *self-acting prayer*: the prayer of Christ in me. It gets *rooted in the heart*. One experiences stillness, peace and inner joy. The spiritual masters call it the *prayer of loving attention, or prayer of simple gaze*, where the soul rests in God.

III. Contemplative Phase (Heart): The divine name penetrates the deeper recess of the heart. The mind sinks into a deep divine silence. Only a sense of the divine presence is experienced. The soul becomes silent, alert and receptive. The Holy Spirit takes possession of the human soul: my soul and the divine Spirit merge into one. As St. Paul describes, "the one who holds on the Lord, becomes one Spirit with the Lord" (I Cor. 6, 17). This is the deep experience of mystical oneness. Gregory of Palamas, the great sage of Jesus Prayer says, "The human soul is being charged with *divine energies*. This is the experience of *Hesychia*." A process of the

divinisation of the human (theosis) takes place deep within us. Origen compares it to a piece of iron in the furnace glowing with the power of the fire. Gregory Nazianzus speaks of a prism transmitting fully the sun light. Theresa of Avila uses the image of a rain drop falling into a lake, and merging with the lake-water. In John's Gospel Jesus describes the branches totally transparent to the vital sap of the stem. Like that the human soul becomes a transparent medium of the divine light and life, power and presence. God shines through the soul. One finds oneself within the *cave of the Heart*, the innermost sanctuary, the inner shrine, the interior castle, the inner room where the Divine dwells. This experience is a gift of the Spirit and we all do experience such graced moments in our life. All that we can do is to open ourselves to the divine presence through the disciplined practice of Jesus Prayer. Genuine God-experience is ultimately a gift of grace.

God must be experienced within our inner being. It is within us that a point of contact or communion must be made, so that an absolute conviction of this divine presence can come to us. This conviction can only well up from within. This will take place in our life when we dedicate ourselves to periods of meditation, continuous practice of the presence and also acknowledging God in all our dealings. It is necessary to provide sufficient time for sitting in silent invocation of the divine name. When the presence of God fills us, we feel a sense of peace, joy and strength within.

Divine Dynamism

At the mind level we have to use images of God, personal names and forms, often supplied by religious heritage. The mind needs such images to speak of God. But as the consciousness sinks through the nous into the heart, the names and forms disappear. There is only a deep sense of the divine presence. The great masters like Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa say that we should "go beyond all forms to experience the formless One." In his deep enlightenment experience Buddha experienced this as *sunya*, which means not just emptiness but the dynamism of being (*swi = to expand*). The upanishadic Hindu sages describe it as *poorna* (fullness), which again means expansion. And in Christian tradition we speak of the Divine as *pneuma*, which means breath, movement, God as Spirit. God as Trinity is another symbol of the inner-divine

dynamism. (*peri-choresis* = mutual co-penetration, dancing together) At the depth of the genuine mystical experiences of all religions, there is a perception of the Divine as dynamic presence, as movement.

The Mantra OM

Through the practice of Jesus Prayer we attune ourselves to this divine movement; we resonate with the divine Spirit within. For this the spiritual masters of the East recommend the use of mantras and melodies. Mantra is not a word with a conceptual meaning, not a name that evokes the image of a person; rather it is a sound that creates vibrations within. Of all the mantras the classical mantra is OM. It consists of three primal sounds: A, U and M. A= the beginning / the very first sound that one can produce, U= the middle, and M= the end / the closing humming sound. OM signifies therefore the totality, the all comprehending power, the all-pervading divine presence. OM is the sound symbol of the divine immanence in the heart. OM is the articulation of the divine vibration in the cosmos, the expression of the divine creativity, the resonance of the divine presence here and now. By repeating OM one enters into a deep silence within the cave of the heart, the divine space within us.

When the name of Jesus is repeated with the mantra OM, powerful spiritual vibrations evolve within the heart. The transforming effect of the divine name is intensified when it is chanted with the mantra OM. The power of the Holy Spirit immanent in the name of Jesus unfolds when the name is chanted with OM in classical melodies. Slowly consciousness sinks into the heart.

Meditation practice

We shall have a short meditative experience of Jesus Prayer with the mantra OM. When I start chanting, kindly repeat with me in silence. After my chanting please continue the chanting for a few more minutes in deep silence.

Let us remain a moment in silence to get recollected interiorly.... *Jesu...OM...Jesu.....*

Fruits of Jesus Prayer

Before concluding these reflections let me mention some spiritual fruits of the regular practice of Jesus Prayer in our lives:

1. Christ Consciousness: The basic fruit of Jesus Prayer is participation in the mystical self-consciousness, divine consciousness of Jesus. Jesus experienced the Father as the source of his being, the subject of his being and mission. Jesus invites us to share his experience: “Just as I am in the Father, and the Father is in me, I am in you, and you are in me; just as the Father and I are one, may you all be one in us.” (Jo. 17, 21-15) Through Jesus Prayer we come to the experience that our life flows from Christ who dwells within, for “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts. 17:28). Our life becomes a manifestation of Christ in us, the true self of our being. Our life unfolds from the divine impulse, inspiration, illumination that we receive from Christ within. In this Christ-consciousness the compassion and love of Christ is expressed through our life, through our words and deeds.

Khalil Gibran gives a metaphor for letting go of the ego sense of life and merging into the Divine. “It is said that before entering the ocean a river trembles with fear. It looks back at the path she has travelled from the peaks of the mountain, the long winding path, crossing forests and villages; and in front of her she sees the ocean so vast, that to enter there seems nothing more than to disappear forever. But there is no other way: the river cannot go back. Nobody can go back in existence. The river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean, because that is where the river will know, it is not about disappearing into the ocean, but of becoming the ocean.

2. Experience of the Indwelling Spirit: The Spirit of Christ transforms our life into divine life. Just as the vital sap of the tree flows constantly into the branches the divine Spirit streams into our being through the Prayer of the name of Jesus. We listen to the divine Spirit repeating the name from within our heart. “The Spirit prays from our hearts in a way that cannot be expressed in words.”, said St. Paul. (Rom 8, 26) The God to whom we pray is the God who prays from within us. This is Christian contemplation.

3. Alertness to the Kingdom of God: Kingdom of God means that God is at work in this world transforming everything to a new creation. Through Jesus Prayer we become alert to the grace and demands of God’s Kingdom. Our life is then shaped by the values of the Kingdom of God

like love and compassion, freedom and justice, concern for the poor and for the environment. We become increasingly liberated from ego-centeredness and we grow into the evolutionary process of God's Kingdom within and all around us.

4. Seeing Christ in the suffering Humans: Through Jesus Prayer we are sensitivised to perceive Christ in the poor and the sick, in the suffering and the marginalized people. The words of the Lord, "I was hungry...I was thirsty...I was sick and homeless..." will touch our heart intensely. We become more compassionate; compassion is the fruit of contemplation.

5. Respect for other Religions: The Spirit of God works in the hearts of all human beings of all religions and cultures. Hence the followers of other religions come to God-realisation through their own symbols and names of the Divine. The practice of Jesus Prayer opens *our* mind to the diverse ways of the divine Spirit in other religions. Thus we grow to respect and acknowledge the authentic experience of God in the life of believers of other religions. In fact the prayer of the name is a universal practice found in religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism.

6. Awakening to the Presence of Christ in the heart of creation: In Jesus Prayer we wake to the presence of Christ in our heart. We realize that the same presence of Christ is shining through all beings in creation. Creatures are then seen as manifestations of the Creator: world as *theo-phany*. This is the experience of the presence of Christ filling the entire universe: this is *Christo-phany*. Awakening to the presence of the indwelling Christ we look at humans and things of nature in a new way. The universe becomes the sacrament of God's presence. "The world is charged with divine energies", as Gregory of Palamas says.

"When I prayed with my heart everything around me seemed delightful and marvellous, the trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light – all seemed to be telling me, that they witness to the love of God for the human, that all things pray to God and sang his praise...I felt a burning love for Jesus and for all God's creatures." - *Way of a Pilgrim*, 1978, 31,32,41.

"Jesus prayer awakens the presence of Christ in nature. This universe murmurs secretly the name of Jesus. It belongs to the priestly ministry of each Christian to give a voice to this aspiration, to pronounce the name of Jesus upon the elements of nature, stones and trees, flowers and fruits, mountains and sea, and so to bring to fulfilment the groaning of creation for the revelation of the glory of the children of God. - Archimandrite Lev Gillet. *Jesus Prayer* 1987, 98.

Pope John Paul II. described: "Jesus Prayer is the *breath of the soul*. Though basically it is a form of personal prayer, it has a communitarian dimension, for it binds the hearts of all who practice this prayer in a divine bond before the Lord." (L'Osservatore Romano. 46 /1996/p.8)

Let me conclude with a cosmic prayer of the Sioux-tribe (SIU), one of the largest Native American Tribe living mainly in Minnesota, North / South Dakota in the United States.

Cosmic Temple

O Supreme Spirit, I hear your voice in the winds,
I feel your breath in all living beings,
I pay homage to you with the entire creation.

Give me your power and your wisdom.
Open my eyes to see your beauty in all things.
Open my ears to hear your voice within all sounds.

May my hands touch and sense your power in all things.

May my mind perceive your hidden presence
in earth and waters, in leaves and flowers.

Help me to overcome my selfish introversion
and to move towards you with pure hands and alert mind,
and when my last breath leaves my body,
may I sink into you like the setting sun into the ocean.