

THE WAY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

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WHEN I WAS A CHILD I USED TO LISTEN as adult conversations unfolded. I was not yet able to tune in to the content, but I could listen to the texture, to the sound of voices, and to the silences within or underneath the conversation. I was part of the conversation simply by being there.

I can picture too a sudden memory of being at a farm, high on Exmoor, in the middle of a cold winter with stars. I remember my father, a veterinary surgeon, absolutely attentive, blending skill and compassion as he operated on the sick animal to which we had been called out in the night. I was small enough to be both sleepy and wide awake, excited and proud to have been allowed to be with him. I remember how on that night I watched him, open-eyed. He was so focused and professional at his task that he became unwittingly a window onto another dimension of life. My memory tells me that it was a form of contemplation. I only realized later that my father had become somehow transparent to another dimension of reality simply by being himself at his best. It was as if something else had been revealed that was much bigger than the immediate reality, wonderful though this was—something else that had a great stillness to it. Most important of all, I felt that it had *always* been there.

Over years of deeper listening in retreat accompaniment, I have become ever more aware of that other dimension. Increasingly, it seems to exist in a mode that is beyond describable feeling or understanding. It seems to be without content, and yet it is absolutely trustworthy as one revelation of a God who is in and with us—most importantly, a God there all the time. There is a reality here beyond concepts, beyond understanding. This mysterious reality is at the heart of the graced relationship we call spiritual accompaniment or retreat direction.

Where can we look for clues or languages that evoke or express this mysterious reality? I have been helped by the witness of three authors: Dogen Zenji, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Ignatius

Loyola. All have been friends to me in some way; I discovered them either from natural interest or through my Jesuit formation. It is in this spirit of friendship that I share them. Disparate though they are, they have at least one thing in common: they are all fun. In all three there is a lightness which is a sure sign of authenticity. There is a long tradition of laughter associated with the gift of enlightenment in the Zen tradition, expressing a joyful integrity that laughs at nothing but laughs with everything. There is a sense of lightness in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a treatise which encourages us to play a game with God. A lightness of touch is discernible too in the gift of freedom, of new sight, associated with the Fourth Week of the Exercises.

Yet in all three of these authors, the lightness is linked to profound insight. Dogen teaches us that sitting meditation (*zazen*) is already a manifestation of enlightenment. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is not a set of reports on privileged experience, but witness to a mysteriously permanent presence of God pervading the whole of our lives. The experience of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* in my Jesuit life has fostered in me a simple belief that something like what Ignatius calls 'consolation without previous cause' is an experience to be found in everyone, common to all, grounding our lives. My conviction is that all of us have access to this mysterious fundamental reality. And this conviction can lead us, if we can share it, into profound mutual respect, both in situations of spiritual accompaniment and beyond.

Dogen Zenji: By Simply Sitting We Have Already Arrived

Dogen is an important figure in thirteenth-century Japanese Zen tradition. He taught that *zazen* (sitting meditation) is its own *Way*.¹ He devoted his life to encouraging others in this simple truth. Dogen writes that enlightenment is an essential dimension of Zen practice. Enlightenment indicates a state of awareness where all things come together in a coherent and unified fashion, a state which every mystical tradition seems to describe: inner and outer are one, light and darkness understand each other. Dogen's central teaching is that sitting meditation is already enlightenment. He advocated a practice which

¹ A *Way* or *Do* signifies a whole life-approach which is filled with transcendent truth and is capable of revealing transcendent truth. Japanese culture is well known for its spectrum of *Ways*: *Judo* (a gentle way), *Kendo* (the way of the sword), *Kado* (the way of flower arranging), *Chado* (the way of tea), etc. All these different ways of life are rooted in the one experience of enlightenment.

suggests that the only thing necessary is to sit (*zazen*) with a clear mind. Such sitting leads to a coherence of body, mind and spirit, to an integration between the physical and the spiritual.

Yet there is a paradox at the centre of Dogen's teaching: however much such sitting fosters the appearance of the transcendent, true enlightenment is by no means dependent on this condition. The transcendent has an authenticity of its own which can not be controlled or manipulated. It is not just that sitting will bring about enlightenment—but rather, the act of sitting meditation (*zazen*) is itself already enlightenment. This paradoxical approach defies purely rational analysis, and yet there is a coherence or integrity to it. Sitting (or doing anything with the same simple mindfulness) enables us to become ever more aware of an already existing state of enlightenment.

Listen to some of the ways in which Dogen describes this insight:

In Buddhism practice and realization are completely one and the same. . . . You should not hold in mind any expectation of being enlightened as something outside or apart from practice, since this practice directly points you toward your own original, innate certainty. . . . If you let go of any thought of 'I am doing a marvellous practice', your innate enlightenment will fill your hands to overflowing: if you purge yourself of any thought of 'being enlightened', this wondrous practice will operate throughout your whole being.²

In his *Zazen Rules*, Dogen says:

. . . there is only one thing . . . to train hard, for this is true enlightenment; training and enlightenment are naturally undefiled; to live by Zen is the same as to live an ordinary daily life.³

Dogen's writing suggests that this access to enlightenment is not limited by time, it is more a constant state of being. At the same time, it is more than simply potential enlightenment or a state still to be achieved. Dogen's whole message is the exact opposite. By simply

² Dogen Zenji, *The Shobogenzo or the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching*, translated by H. Nearman (Mt Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1996) pp. 22-23. This collection of talks and writings is honoured as a primary text in Japanese Zen tradition.

³ Dogen, 'Zazen Rules' in *Zen Meditation* (Mt Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1980), p. 6.

sitting we have already arrived; 'in simple sitting enlightenment already is'.

The Cloud of Unknowing

The fourteenth-century treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, presents the reality in a different way.

Lift up your heart to God with a humble impulse of love Take care that you avoid thinking of anything but himself, so that there is nothing for your reason or your will to work on except himself It is the easiest exercise of all and most readily accomplished when a soul is helped by grace in this felt desire . . .⁴

Some recent commentators have suggested that the author of *The Cloud* is talking not about one particular set of privileged inner experiences, but about the mysterious underlying presence of a God who is simply and totally present: 'union with God is not so much a stage above and beyond all others as the precondition of all spiritual growth.'⁵ For Denys Turner, the dualist language of *The Cloud* must be interpreted carefully. It is the 'unspiritual person' who 'interprets the "inner life" as a quasi-physical, quasi-psychological place "inside" consciousness':

. . . the 'inner self' possesses an interiority which knows no restrictions of space or place, no confinement to the 'inner'; for the 'inner' self the interior is a freedom, a 'nowhere' which is an 'everywhere'.⁶

We are dealing here with a sheer gift eluding all our categories; *The Cloud's* use of the language of interiority is metaphorical, referring to what cannot be limited.

There are sharp paradoxes in the text. The reality of which *The Cloud* speaks is in one way nothing: 'it is neither longer nor shorter than an atom . . . the smallest particle of time'.⁷ Yet it is also a lifetime's

⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 3. The quotations in this article are taken from the translation by James Walsh (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1981), with occasional adaptation.

⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 181.

⁶ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 207-208.

⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 4.

enterprise to 'smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love'. We are counselled to long-standing perseverance: 'Do not leave that work for anything that might happen.'⁸

The Cloud encourages us to concentrate the whole of our longing or desire into 'one little word', which serves to tread down any thoughts, even good and seemingly helpful ones. Yet this renunciation leads us to an inclusive, all-embracing understanding.

Leave aside this everywhere and this everything, in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing. . . . This nothing is better felt than seen. . . . Who is he that calls it nothing? It is surely our outward self, not our inward. Our inward self calls it All, for because of it the self is well taught to have understanding of all things bodily or spiritual, without any specific knowledge of any one thing in itself.⁹

There is also a touch of lightness or simplicity in the teaching of *The Cloud*. My favourite part of the whole work is the section where, after wryly describing the grotesque efforts of those who strain too hard, the author writes:

. . . learn to love with true fervour, with a gentle and peaceful disposition, both in body and soul. And wait patiently on the will of our Lord with courtesy and humility, and do not snatch at it hurriedly. . . . I advise you to play some sort of game . . . as though you did not wish him to know in any way how you desire to see him and have him or experience him. Perhaps you think this is somewhat foolishly and childishly spoken. But I am certain that whoever had the grace to do and feel as I say, he would find that this game was well worth playing with him, even as the father plays with the child.¹⁰

This talk of a game is not just whimsy: it conveys an important, paradoxical truth. The reality of which *The Cloud* speaks is there and steadily present for you precisely when you do *not* look for it or analyse it too closely. This same *something*, when looked at or examined, eludes your efforts.

⁸ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 6.

⁹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 68.

¹⁰ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 46.

Ignatius: A Gift of Access

A third source for my conviction about God's permanent presence is Ignatius' teaching about 'consolation without preceding cause':

To give a person consolation without preceding cause is for God our Lord alone to do; for it is distinctive of the Creator in relation to the created person to come in and to leave, to move the person interiorly, drawing him or her totally into love of God's Divine Majesty. I say without cause, that is, without any previous perception or understanding of any object such that through it consolation of this sort would come by the mediation of the person's own acts of understanding and will.¹¹

Ignatian spirituality is taken up with the fine, subtle discrimination between different sorts of consolation and between consolation and desolation. Ignatius also speaks of one moment of consolation which must have been part of his own graced experience. It is as if, within the process of prayer or life experience, God suddenly offers a moment of grace, seemingly from nowhere. It is filled with immediacy, clarity, and surprise—a grace out of proportion to what could ever have been expected. Above all, it brings with it a sense of completely free, entirely trustworthy gift. Ignatius' account of this experience reveals a preoccupation with how this reality must be distinguished carefully from the powerful afterglow which remains after it has passed.¹² This is an important and valid teaching, but it is not my concern here.

I want to concentrate on the *moment of grace* itself, on what Ignatius does *not* describe. I would suggest, tentatively, that he is talking about

¹¹ Translation from Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to the Principles and Practice* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), p. 28.

¹² Exx 336: 'Granted that when consolation is without [preceding] cause, it has no deception in it, since, as has been said, such consolation is from God our Lord alone; nevertheless, a spiritual person to whom God gives such consolation should, with great alertness and attention, examine their experience to discern the precise time of the actual consolation [without preceding cause] as distinct from the following time, in which the person is still glowing and still graced by the residue of [actual] consolation that is now over with. The reason for making this distinction is that frequently in this second period, either through one's own reasoning about the relations of concepts and judgments and the conclusions to be drawn from them, or through the influence of a good spirit or of an evil spirit, various purposes and opinions take shape which are not given immediately by God our Lord. Inasmuch as that is the case, these purposes and opinions are in need of prolonged and careful examination before full assent is given to them or they are put into execution.' (Toner, pp. 29-30.)

a moment of access to God's goodness beyond categories or concepts. When we sense something has occurred, we are *already* in the stage of reflecting on it through its felt effects. Ignatius was not concerned about the speculative issues here; what was important for him was how such an experience can serve as a touchstone or guideline, helping people along their developmental path. My suggestion, nevertheless, is that 'consolation without preceding cause' is Ignatius' way of describing a non-conceptual access to a permanent state of union with God.

Within a linear way of thinking, we often think of 'consolation without preceding cause' as a *moment* or time-bound phenomenon. It may be possible to think of it also as a *state* of access to an underlying dimension of reality: that mysterious presence which is simply there all the time. Karl Rahner describes this consolation as,

. . . pure openness to God, the nameless, object-less experience of the love of the God who is raised transcendent above all that is individual, all that can be pointed to and distinguished, the love of God as God. There is no longer 'one object' given, but the drawing of the whole person, with the very ground of their being, into love, beyond any defined circumscribable object, into the infinity of God as God himself . . . It is the positive side of the *sin causa*. . .¹³

Although Ignatius seems to be describing something essentially non-conceptual, commentators have qualified and developed this teaching. Harvey Egan writes of a sense in which 'consolation without preceding cause' *does* have conceptual matter both before and after; it is just that the consolation's authenticity does not *depend* on this matter. Moreover, such graced awareness is not just a passive state. When Ignatius writes of this consolation to Teresa Rejadell, he insists it leads to action:

It often happens that Our Lord moves and forces us interiorly to one action or another by opening up our mind and heart, i.e. speaking inside us without any noise of voices, raising us entirely to His divine love, without our being able to resist His purpose, even if we wanted. The purpose of His that we then adopt is such

¹³ Karl Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola' (1956), in *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, translated by W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), p.135 (translation amended).

that of necessity we conform with the commandments, with the precepts of the Church and with obedience to our superiors, and it is full of complete humility because the same divine Spirit is in everything.¹⁴

For Ignatius, the experience *conforms* us to our public obligations: to the observance of the commandments and to our obligations as members of the Church. It does this through the intrinsic state of *humility*—a word which, in Ignatius, indicates a gifted state of great freedom (Exx 165). Ignatius is trying to describe how we gain access to what brings about this freedom or humility. There is a reality here that eludes concepts or categories, even though it does have visible effects. Such access is unmixed and absolutely trustworthy; it comes from God alone. The experience is like a window momentarily opened by God onto a state of constant being.

An Ordinary Experience

For Karl Rahner, ‘consolation without preceding cause’ is an experience regularly occurring among maturing Christians, and somehow undergirds the movements of consolation and desolation. Jules Toner criticizes this view:

How could such an experience be thought of as usual or normal in Christian life? Most of us, I think, would be more likely to say we have never had such an experience.¹⁵

Perhaps, however, ‘ordinary’ needs to be understood differently. It need not mean that such privileged experiences occur often; perhaps indeed they are rare. But this kind of experience, whether it is frequent or rare, gives insight into a reality which is in another way utterly ordinary, indeed permanent: the sense of God beyond categories and concepts underlies just everything in our changing lives. The

¹⁴ Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 133-134. For further comment, see Philip Endean, ‘Discerning Behind the Rules: Ignatius’ First Letter to Teresa Rejadell’, *The Way Supplement*, 64 (Spring 1989), pp. 37-50, especially p. 43 and n. 15; and also the same author’s *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 159-163.

¹⁵ Toner, *A Commentary on St Ignatius’ Rules*, p. 309.

privileged moment gives access to something that has been there all the time.

I believe that this underlying union with God is given to us all, almost as a birthright. God is there for us, always, indescribable yet absolutely trustworthy. To all of us, equally, God is accessible. One sign of this access is the respect and dignity with which we come instinctively to honour each other, a respect grounding any healthy form of the relationship called spiritual accompaniment.

A Gift for All

I wrote earlier of how there was a light touch, a laughter, connected with this fundamental reality. The last paragraphs may have obscured the lightness, but it is very much part of my experience. Sometimes a person emerges, suddenly or gradually, from the emptiness of the Third Week of the Exercises into a new vision: they talk of seeing with new eyes. Perhaps this is akin to my childhood memories on Exmoor, or to the laughter of enlightenment in the Zen tradition. There is a childlike lightness in how the Christ of the resurrection garden appears as at once immediate and intangible, reminding us of the hide-and-seek so enjoyably evoked in *The Cloud*. The transforming freedom Ignatius meant when he wrote about the Third Degree of Humility may emerge in ways that make us laugh with joy at the simplicity of it all. Something seemingly so foolish and without sense (Jesus' self-emptying death on the cross) suddenly makes all the sense in the world, but in a way quite different from what we had expected.

Such new vision is at once down-to-earth and beautiful: it brings with it balance, openness, realism, freedom from fear, freedom for others, and a sense of responsibility. There is a growing compassion that is recognised to be the compassion of Christ. There is a gift of balance: living *well* in the best sense. We may also experience the gift of sudden laughter at the realization that we are still far from perfect. There is the sensitivity of the Contemplation to Attain Love: to know water and light, the fountain and the sun's warm rays (Exx 237). There is a sense of being at once inseparable both from God and from this world, of being connected in unshakeable fashion. Perhaps all these things are gifts reflecting in the *outer* dimension of our lives the *inner* state of being in God's presence always. Such insight is not the prerogative of special people. It is the birthright of everyone, a gift for all.

Dogen too insists on how enlightenment is open in principle to all:

. . . training and being spiritually awake are not two separate things. . . I have been taught that one must diligently practice the Way by doing seated meditation, and I teach this without distinguishing between those with the attitudes of a novice or of a senior, and without concerning myself with whether those being instructed are ordinary people or saintly ones.

He adds:

When it comes to realizing the Buddha Dharma, make no distinction between male and female, or between the exalted and the lowly.¹⁶

All kinds of ordinary life, what *The Cloud* refers to as the *outer ways* or Dogen as *daily life*, can be seen as *Ways* in their own right. Thus there is a *Way* of attending to a family, a *Way* of working for justice, a *Way* of teaching or writing, a *Way* of courtesy in relationships, and a *Way* of responsibility in business.

God's Presence and Spiritual Accompaniment

Any relationship of spiritual guidance or accompaniment is based in the kind of non-conceptual but absolutely trustworthy presence of God I have been writing about. This presence is there for both the one who accompanies and the one accompanied. Each shares the dignity of complete access to God; each is fundamentally equal. The one who accompanies makes a basic assent to God's active presence. This does not need to be referred to explicitly, and it leaves us free to offer the whole of our attention to the one being accompanied. This *inner* dimension does not encumber our attention, and it therefore allows us the freedom to notice all the good *outer* dimensions of development and growth, as well as the interplay of the different elements that make up the texture of our lives. Our *outer* lives are not separated from the underlying presence; they are the living manifestation of it. Just as Dogen asserts that the *way* of sitting (*zazen*) simply *is* enlightenment, I would describe the *Way* of attentive spiritual accompaniment as a form of enlightenment or access. We are on, or better *in*, holy ground. All three of my authors, and indeed virtually all spiritual traditions, insist on the need for experienced accompaniment. Those who are

¹⁶ Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, pp. 24-25, 30.

enlightened themselves can help another authenticate their own experience. One of the signs of authenticity of Zen practice is that true enlightenment is filled with compassion for others. Similarly, one sign of authenticity in retreat accompaniment is a natural and growing sense of fundamental equality between the one giving and the one receiving, an equality of compassion for each other, a recognition of the power and life to which each has access. There is no dominance on either side; there is the freedom of graced humility at its centre; the relationship *conforms us* (to use Ignatius' verb) into a state of balanced life. In spiritual accompaniment, we honour a person's outward ways of engaging with life, but from a stance nourished by inner reality. This frees the one accompanying to offer the whole of their supportive attention to the other, in whatever situation they are.



At the Well by Sadao Watanabe

Wisdom and Dignity

If a person were practised in this exercise, it would give them true decorum both of body and soul, and would make them truly attractive to all men or women who looked upon them. So much so that the most ill-favoured man or woman alive, if they could come by grace to work in this exercise, would suddenly be changed in appearance to such graciousness that all good people who saw them would wish and rejoice to have them in their company, and would be convinced that they had found spiritual peace and were strengthened in God's grace through their presence.¹⁷

I find resonance between this teaching in *The Cloud* and ideas in both Zen and Ignatian spirituality. The inner and the outer are to be integrated; there is an absolutely trustworthy presence of God that eludes concepts and categories. Medieval though this text from *The Cloud* might be, it seems to describe many women and men I meet in retreat accompaniment or other pastoral contexts. Such people may never have heard of Zen, *The Cloud* or *The Spiritual Exercises*. Yet somehow they convey a wisdom or radiance through the courage and generosity with which they live the *Way* of their own life situations. If we are engaged in spiritual accompaniment, let us offer to those who come to us the greatest respect we can, based in the unspoken but complete trustworthiness of the love of God. Like ourselves, they may have far to travel, but in a real sense they have already arrived.

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¹⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chapter 54.