

From the Pastor's Desk

The Monkey Mind

Ralph found life to bring continual suffering. "I get up early five days a week and drive forty-five miles to a job I hate, only to return home to a wife I wish was different," he said. "I turn on the news and find myself frustrated with all the problems paraded before me. I don't like the weather, it's cloudy and too cold. I'm not happy. Why do I have to suffer?"

Suffering is different than pain. Suffering is the result of problems we create for ourselves because our expectations are not being fulfilled. We desire things to be different, so we suffer when they are not. Suffering is created by expectations.

Pain, on the other hand, is inevitable and something that happens to us. Pain tends to be physical and suffering emotional. Pain is normally temporary and remedied with medical intervention. Emotional suffering can also be alleviated with medicine if it is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, which is often the case with serious depression, anxiety and other mental struggles.

Ralph was experiencing suffering of his own making by refusing to accept reality. His suffering was a continual presence, like static in the background of his mind. Why? Because his expectations were not being fulfilled.

Suffering can be created when we look hours, days, weeks, months or years into the past and feel bad about what happened, or into the future and fear what may happen. It's like looking through a telescope into the past or future and bringing torment into the present moment. Telescoped suffering isn't happening today, which is to say, it's a delusion.

One of the reasons living in the present moment is so peaceful is because it's free from the delusion of suffering. One of the purposes of meditation or centering prayer is to focus on the present moment, but anyone who has seriously attempted to quiet their mind has found how difficult it can be. Thoughts come streaming in, whether we want them to or not. Some refer to this as the "monkey mind" as they observe it jump into the past or future, rather than settle into the present moment.

Some techniques of meditation teaches one to focus on breathing when observing the "monkey mind" in action. While sitting in a quiet space, returning to the sensation of air gently moving in and out of the nostrils when distracted can help to bring one back into the present moment where freedom from suffering and the presence of God are found. Having to return to the sensation of breathing many times when distracted is very common in the course of a twenty minute session.

What entity within you observes the monkey mind? It's your deeper self, your spirit or your soul, whatever terminology you want to use. One of the most effective authors in distinguishing between pain, suffering and the Monkey Mind is Eckhard Tolle. He tells a story of how his monkey mind created such suffering in his life that he became suicidal. He states, *Until my thirtieth year, I lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression.*

One night not long after my twenty-ninth birthday, I woke up in the early hours with a feeling of absolute dread. I had woken up with such a feeling many times before, but this time it was more intense than it had ever been. The silence of the night, the vague outlines of the furniture in the dark room, the distant noise of a passing train—everything felt so alien, so hostile, and so utterly meaningless that I created in me a deep loathing of the world. The most loathsome thing of all, however, was my own existence. What was the point in continuing to life with this burden of misery? Why carry on with this continuous struggle? I could feel that a deep longing for annihilation, for nonexistence, was now becoming much stronger than the instinctive desire to continue to live.

"I cannot live with myself any longer." This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. "Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the 'I' and the 'self' that 'I' cannot live with. Maybe," I thought, "only one of them is real." (Eckhart Tolle, "The Power of Now", pp 3-5)

This was a huge turning point in Tolle's life. He was able to "watch the thinker" and realize he was not the thoughts running through his head, many of which tormented him. Those thoughts were created by his ego over the course of his life in response to various stimuli that then became habitual. When he learned to "watch the thinker", he began to experience a profound revelation—his soul / spirit were separate from the madness of his ego. He learned to meditate and from the perspective of his deeper self, spirit or soul, watched thoughts that previously terrorized him dissipate as phantoms in the mist.

A beggar had been sitting by the side of a road for over thirty years. One day a stranger walked by. "Spare some change?" mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap. "I have nothing to give you," said the stranger. Then he asked: "What's that you are sitting on?" "Nothing," replied the beggar. "Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember." "Ever looked inside?" asked the stranger. "No," said the beggar. "What's the point? There's nothing in there." "Have a look inside," insisted the stranger. The beggar managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold. I am that stranger who has nothing to give you and who is telling you to look inside. Not inside any box, as in the parable, but somewhere even closer, inside yourself. (Ibid., p.11)

Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is within you and me. One of our Advent Gospels proclaimed: *Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.* (Luke 17:20-21)

The Gospels record Jesus often going off to a secluded place to pray, but I don't think he was only engaged in oral or mental conversation with God. Rather, he was in deep union with God where he learned to clearly see the difference between his monkey mind and the true nature of who he really was and is. We can do the same in prayer and gathered around Word and Sacrament.

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