

Daily Meditation 10/22/2021
Thomas Aquinas, Champion of Deep Ecumenism

Good morning.

In today's meditation we are bringing forward the deep humanism found in Thomas Aquinas as he's interacting with Muslims, Avicenna, for example; with so-called pagans such as Aristotle, the scientist, and also Boethius; and of course with Jewish thinkers as well -- Moses Maimonides and of course the entire Hebrew bible And of course the New Testament is written by Jewish people as well.

In the same book on the Tao of Thomas Aquinas, based on my book, Sheer Joy: Conversations with Thomas Aquinas, I bring out his teaching on meditation, which I think is very, very Buddhist.

Of course Aquinas never met a Buddhist or read a Buddhist work in his life -- Buddhism was not visible in medieval Europe -- but listen to what he says about meditation. He says:

"The first requirement then for the contemplation of wisdom is that we should take complete possession of our minds before anything else does"... take complete possession of our minds before anything else does.

Now remember, for Aquinas, as for the Jewish tradition, the mind is not in the head; the mind is in the heart. The intellect is in the heart. Like he says, that the proper objects of the heart are truth and justice. That's a quote from Aquinas too.

So there's a lot going on in the heart, and of course the heart includes deep feelings, as well as intuition. He says:

"From God's creatures we all are led to wonder at the divine power, and in this way to hold God in reverence. The maker is nobler than the things that are made. From wonder comes awe and reverence. In addition, creatures have the capacity to warm our hearts to love the goodness of God."

So for him creatures are a source of meditation, and they bring us to the Divine, and they warm our hearts. They are expressions of the goodness of divinity.

And he cites the Psalmist from Psalm 143: "I meditate on all your works, I muse on the work of your hands."

He points out that contemplation often takes us into darkness, what he calls a "night that holds the quiet of contemplation, in which there is first the desire of the excitement of love."

And he quotes from Psalm 119: "My soul has desired you in your decrees: in the middle of the night I rose up to praise you." And this signifies, he says, "a silence of divine consolation"...a silence of divine consolation. So silence is a method for him of connecting to the Divine.

So then he says that the purpose of "taking complete possession of our minds before anything else does" is that we can "fill the whole house [meaning the house of one's heart, or soul or mind] with the contemplation of wisdom."...fill your whole house with the contemplation of wisdom. Let wisdom fill your house.

"Also," he says, "it is necessary that we be fully present there, concentrating in such a way that our aim is not diverted to other matters."

So we're saying that focus is everything. Let go: let go of ideas, let go of that busy monkey mind, but be fully present there and concentrate and not be diverted from other ideas. That sounds very much like a zen practice. And then he says:

"Scripture says (it's from Ecclesiastes 32) "Return home quickly and gather yourself together there and play there and pursue your thoughts."

And he comments on that:

"To gather together there is to draw together your whole intention," to bring everything that is within your goal to be present there. So this is a three-fold practice, and it sounds very Buddhist to me.

And playing with wisdom is the ultimate end. In fact in one place he says that the nearest word to contemplation is play; it's playing with wisdom. And that contemplation concerns ends he says that serve no ulterior purpose.

So that is like Meister Eckhart talking about working without a why or purpose. Aquinas says:

"Play is concerned with ends when you play for the fun of it, though with means to ends when you take exercise in order to keep fit."

For this reason, "the contemplative life is like a holiday. 'Be still and see that I am the Lord.' (Psalm 46) It is a life," he says, "lived with divine things."

"So return home quickly and dwelling alone, entertaining solitude" -- this is part two of this path encountering wisdom.

"I will enter my house to find rest with wisdom." What comes next? That's a quote from the book of Wisdom. And then Aquinas says:

"When our interior house is entirely emptied like this and we are fully present there in our intention, the text tells us what to do next: play there"...play there.

So there's a delight in contemplation and there is a playfulness, a return to our childlike purposelessness, because play is for its own sake, not for some other reason. He says:

"This delight surpasses all human delight; hence is written in Psalm 34, 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.' This is the ultimate perfection of the comfort of life," he says, "namely that the divine truth be not only seen but also loved."

So it's a marriage of the mind and the heart, if you will, and the deep feelings of love are brought together with the presence of the Divine. Those are some of Thomas Aquinas' teachings on meditation and contemplation.

Thank you; we'll see you tomorrow.