



THE WELCOMING PRACTICE

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I have found that there is an underlying arc to The Welcoming Practice. While it is never the same and sometimes the arc itself takes a new or unusual turn, generally the arc is as follows:

THE ARC

Bow Inside: I use the inner bow as a kind of pre-practice. It sets the stage, changes the energy, makes ready the practice itself. I have arrived at the sea. I stand before it, yet still on the sand, and express gratitude for my imminent immersion in it. Elias adds another important element, “To bow inside means to offer yourself in all humility, in your simple presence, during the sacred moments of this practice. Just your clear presence, nothing more.” Both of these approaches establish intention.

Consent to Silence: Now we consent to move into silence. In order to do so, however, we must quiet our thoughts. Let us be clear. It has been our habit to be entertained almost entirely by our thoughts for so long — an entire lifetime and, culturally, for millennia — that this habit is extremely difficult to break. We are helplessly hooked by the thinking mind.

“The world is made of rings. The hooks are all yours. Make straight your hooks and nothing can hold you.” (Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj)

Luckily, through the practice of consent, we gradually learn how to let go of thought for a few moments at a time. For me, the practice involves a simple shift of attention from the thoughts themselves to the space in between. In Elias’ words, “To consent is to allow, to open to the openness that is silent, that is the background of every moment of our lives.”

Whenever I make that shift, or open to that silence (which may be necessary many times in any given sitting, due to the persistence of thoughts), my body registers buoyancy — as if a heavy weight has been lifted. At this point in the arc I have

entered the sea. From time to time I allow myself to lift my feet off the sand, to be buoyantly suspended in the sea's embrace. But I am still in the surf where there are many currents and crosscurrents buffeting me. From force of habit, I put my feet back down any number of times, each time consenting to buoy upwards again, supported by the sea. The water grows deeper.

Welcome Love: As I let go more and more, the space between thoughts becomes longer and the unusual feeling of weightlessness begins to stabilize inside me. Thoughts have settled to a low and unobtrusive murmur. I find myself resting in the spaciousness between/below/behind thoughts and appearances. My own awareness becomes apparent — my only means of noticing this change. I have drifted now to a deeper sea, and sunk below the chaotic noise of the waves.

Eventually, in the same way that I notice the buoyancy inside me, I become aware of subtle shifts inside. Rather than taking any action — trying to control or analyze what is happening — I allow it to unfold. I am swimming in a sea of Love — a part of something much bigger than my individual self. Love sculpts itself into various forms — landscapes, sensations, caresses, feelings of belonging and homecoming may arise. Even words of wisdom. Elias sums it up beautifully: "To me, this practice has the capacity to take us beyond the quiet composure of recognizing nondual awareness — it passes through that doorway, yes — and then reveals to us a loving sacredness that is at the same time infinitely awesome and purely intimate." I surrender to and am embraced by the Great Mystery.

Through The Welcoming Practice we come to realize the heaviness of carrying our thoughts and identities, our judgments and expectations as we negotiate life in consensus reality. We learn how to slip out from under this weight, in any moment, to a liminal space replete with deeper wisdom and healing love. From this space, we return to the outer world, balanced, energized, and clear, and able to see things from a higher perspective.

The European-American culture, at least in this phase of its existence, does not spend much time, if any, exploring the inner life. Some may have read about it or stumbled upon it a few times, but as a culture we generally know very little about it, brushing such things aside as unprovable, silly or anti-science. As 20th century Sufi mystic Samuel Lewis once said, "You're damned if you don't believe in angels. But you're doubly damned if you have experienced them!" Even those who believe in the existence of an inner world often don't know how to access it, concluding either that only people with a certain propensity can find their way there, or that it's just a bunch of myths. The result is that, as a culture, we — willingly or unwillingly — acquiesce to an unrelentingly external orientation.

But consider this: Just as spending any length of time without sinking into the darkness of sleep (and its accompanying dreams) leads to emotional/mental/physical imbalance, so the fabric of our culture — which expends almost all of its energy bearing the weight of the outer world and comparably very little replenishing itself in the inner world — can and has become torn. It follows, therefore, that perhaps, just perhaps, much of our unraveling could be mended by stitching together the darkness and the light, the above and below, the inner and the outer, in a conscious and intentional way — as, for example, provided by The Welcoming Practice.

A History of The Welcoming Practice

4th C — A contemplative type of Christian monastic practice is first mentioned in writings of St John Cassian, as learned by “The Desert Father.”

Medieval Era — Orientation of monastic practice shifts from mystical to scholastic

16th C — Carmelite saints Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and more taught a similar practice they named “infused contemplation”

1962 - 1965 — Vatican II, invitation to revive the contemplative teachings of early Christianity

1971 — Thomas Merton publishes his book, *Contemplative Prayer*. Additionally he provides commentary to Vatican II guidance and calls for contemplative prayer outside monasteries as well.

1970's — Trappist monks, Fathers William Meninger, Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating answer Thomas Merton's call by creating an easily adopted form, calling it Centering Prayer

1998 — Cynthia Bourgeault studies under Father Keating during the thirty years before his death.

2015 or so — (I do not know Elias' story — how he became interested.) I encounter Elias' form of Centering Practice at a training by him in Damascus, OR under the name of The Welcoming Practice.