

## LETTER XVIII

### *The Moon, Arcanum of Intelligence*

### *Spiritual Exercise: Cultivating Wisdom*



*The eighteenth Arcanum of the Tarot invites us to a spiritual exercise—to a meditation on that which arrests evolutionary movement and tends to give it a direction in an inverse sense. (page 494)*

*For the Arcanum “The Moon”, in so far as it is a spiritual exercise, has no other aim than to evoke the conscious desire to go further than intelligence, and to decide to make a “leap” in order to leave its sphere. (page 497)*

*No exercise whatever for the concentration of attention or for the suppression of mental activity will, alone, help you to attain intuition. No breathing exercise or mental technique of itself will be of any use here. Because in order to attain an aim higher than intelligence and the body, one has to make use of means which are also higher than intelligence and the body. That which is spiritual is achieved only by spiritual means—and these comprise no technique beyond the purely moral act and endeavour. (page 513).*

The author of *Meditations on the Tarot* has made it clear that each of the Arcana represent not only an archetype, not only a symbol or a sign, but an *exercise* — a practical discipline by which the serious seeker might be able to internalize the wisdom and insights that each arcanum represents.

As the Arcanum of Intelligence, the Moon calls us to foster the union of conscious intelligence and unconscious wisdom, a process that is formative for the emergence of *conscience* or *intuition*. But right away, our author appears to undermine this initiative: “no exercise” can help us to attain intuition “beyond the purely moral act and endeavour.”

What does he mean by this?

The concept of the “moral act” as found in ethics or even political theory implies actions that are undertaken purely for their own merit, and not out of a desire for some sort of secondary benefit. This calls to mind the politician who visits a

homeless shelter or refugee camp — but only for the photo opportunity. Or the business executive who donates money to a worthy cause, but is motivated by a combination of tax deductions and beneficial public relations. Compare this to Jesus, who instructed his followers “when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” — but even Jesus makes the concession that this anonymous giver can count on a reward from “your Father who sees in secret” (Matthew 6:3-4).

A purely moral act is not driven by public relations, or tax incentives, or even the hope of a blessing from God. Such an act is undertaken entirely because it is the right thing to do, with no hoped for benefit hiding in the wings. This helps to explain why people who do meaningful good work will often refuse any kind of reward, recognition or payment for their principled action. To accept such a secondary outcome would demean the inner integrity that inspired the moral action in the first place.

So when our author suggests that only “the purely moral act and endeavour” can foster meaningful spiritual transformation, he is in effect saying, “as soon as you perform a spiritual exercise for the purpose of self-improvement, you have undermined the purity of the exercise itself, and at this level of spiritual development you essentially render it null.”

As I reflect on this line of thinking, I cannot help but think about the modern mindfulness movement. Mindfulness is basically a secularized meditation practice designed to help individuals reap health benefits that can range from pain management to alleviating the symptoms of depression and perhaps even high blood pressure. I am not an expert on the science of meditation, but the little bit of reading and research I’ve done looks very promising. As my first spiritual director used to say, “Meditation is good for you: spirit, mind, *and* body!”

But seen in the light of *Meditations on the Tarot*, mindfulness practice seems almost transactional. Meditate in order to lower your blood pressure, or sleep better, or become more productive at work (no wonder so many corporations promote mindfulness!). Again, I do not mean to criticize this, it’s not my intention to suggest there’s something wrong with mindfulness, especially given the science that suggests there are real measurable benefits. But perhaps, on a purely spiritual level, we do in fact lose something when we meditate — or pray, or conduct any other spiritual exercise — primarily in order to attain certain benefits (whether physical or spiritual).

There’s a paradox here. We live in time and space, which means we are used to our actions (good or bad) leading to consequences (again, good or bad or in-between).

Perhaps it is part of the human condition that any act we take, on some level, is undertaken with an eye toward what *results* it will yield. Is, therefore, the purely moral act simply impossible? Is there no way in which a human being can truly foster spiritual growth, by practices that are undertaken as a “pure moral” acts, which means with no thought of any reward beyond what they themselves represent to us?

Think of it this way (and here I’m borrowing a page from the wisdom of the medieval mystic Bernard of Clairvaux). If we love God primarily because of what God can *do for* us — whether that means showering us with blessings here on earth, or saving us from hell after we die — isn’t that love ultimately rather selfish? Bernard would agree, he called this “loving God for my sake.” No judgment here: again, this is a normal human expression of love. But there is a *higher way* of loving God, where we no longer are motivated by what God can do for us, instead simply seeking to love God for no other reason than God is infinitely beautiful, lovable, and worthy of our devotion. (Bernard goes on to say that this love can in turn lead to a dimension of love where even our love of self is motivated purely by our disinterested love for God!)

How do we resolve this paradox? It’s human nature to want God’s blessing, to want to please God, to want to be a good and honorable person, and to want the best possible assignment for eternity. Are we doomed to self-sabotage our spiritual growth because of our unavoidable tendency toward self-interest?

Remember the words of Jesus, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). In other words, by the grace of God, even our imperfect efforts to improve ourselves spiritually can be transformed into means for real, meaningful, significant spiritual growth. As the old saying goes, God draws straight with crooked lines.

So to truly cultivate wisdom, paradoxically, we do not *try* to cultivate wisdom. Just as to receive a mystical experience or a sense of union with God, the last thing we ought to do is set out to *achieve* such experiences. On a human level, we all know people who are desperately unhappy, and struggle to make themselves happy (perhaps we have been that person, or even are that person today!) The irony of course, is that many people learn sooner or later that the best way to find happiness is to stop looking for it, and instead focus on being a good friend, helping others, or being of service.

So the following exercise is offered in the spirit of the Arcanum The Moon. But while I’m calling it “the Cultivation of Wisdom” on the surface it resembles the Zen practice of *shikantanza*, which comes from a Chinese phrase that literally means “just

sitting.” To cultivate wisdom, do nothing. To love God, seek nothing. To find peace, stop trying to find peace. Paradox can be maddening to the ego! But it’s an invitation to stop striving and start allowing. Allow God to work deep in your heart, below the threshold of conscious awareness. Trust that God knows what you need in terms of intuition and wisdom. We cultivate wisdom by allowing ourselves to be radically silent and still in the loving presence of God.

## **Exercise: The Cultivation of Wisdom**

In her book *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, contemplative author Cynthia Bourgeault suggests that the ultimate “aim” of Centering Prayer is what she calls “objectless awareness” — in other words, an open-minded, open-hearted willingness to simply be present, here and now, without agenda, without a game plan, without an ego-driven strategy for control. In practice, even the most advanced Centering Prayer practitioner will continually dance between such open-ended awareness and the ordinary consciousness of the ego, insisting on being in control and working to achieve its own goals. Just as Centering Prayer is a dance between silence, distracting thoughts, and getting recentered through a silent Sacred Word, so too is the prayer of the cultivation of Wisdom a process of learning to offer open-ended silence to God, and falling into the endless stream of thoughts and daydreams and feelings... then allowing that “stream” to flow away, resting once again in the objectless awareness... until the ego starts to pontificate again... and the cycle repeats itself over the duration of the time spent in prayer.

So this is an exercise in radical silence, radical stillness, radical gentleness and tenderness and letting-go and letting-be. If you work with a Sacred Word, or a mantra, or prayer beads, or an icon, use your regular method of prayer. Consider beginning and ending your silent prayer time with a simple prayer of intention or dedication: “I offer this prayer time to you, God, without condition or expectation of reward.” “I dedicate this prayer time to the alleviation of suffering of all sentient beings” or some such open-ended prayer of intent. The key is, you are trying, as much as humanly possible, to offer this silence as a “purely moral act.” Be gentle with yourself and recognize that for mortal human beings, such a “pure” act is simply impossible. But this is not about judging or evaluating yourself. You are simply offering the totality of your being: your silence, your thoughts, your distractions, your selfishness, etc. — to the love and grace of God. Trusting that God only wants what is good for you, you commend yourself and your actions, including your spiritual exercises, entirely to God. Your exercise is simple: Be still, and know that God is God. That’s all!