

Nikiphoros the Monk

(13th century)

On Prayer: Seven Texts

Philokalia volume 4

How the Hesychast Should Sit for Prayer and Not Rise Again Too Quickly

1. Sometimes - and most often - you should sit on a stool, because it is more arduous; but sometimes, for a break, you should sit for a while on a mattress. As you sit be patient and assiduous, in accordance with St Paul's precept, 'Cleave patiently to prayer' (Col. 4:2). Do not grow discouraged and quickly rise up again because of the strain and effort needed to keep your intellect concentrated on its inner invocation. It is as the prophet says: 'The birth-pangs are upon me, like those of a woman in travail' (Isa. 21:3). You must bend down and gather your intellect into your heart - provided it has been opened - and call on the Lord Jesus to help you. Should you feel pain in your shoulders or in your head - as you often will - endure it patiently and fervently, seeking the Lord in your heart. For 'the kingdom of God is entered forcibly, and those who force themselves take possession of it' (Matt. 11:12). With these words the Lord truly indicated the persistence and labor needed in this task. Patience and endurance in all things involve hardship in both body and soul.

How to Say the Prayer

2. Some of the fathers advise us to say the whole prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy', while others specify that we say it in two parts - 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy', and then 'Son of God, help me' - because this is easier, given the immaturity and feebleness of our intellect. For no one on his own account and

without the help of the Spirit can mystically invoke the Lord Jesus, for this can be done with purity and in its fullness only with the help of the Holy Spirit (cf 1 Cor. 12:3). Like children who can still speak only falteringly, we are unable by ourselves to articulate the prayer properly. Yet we must not out of laziness frequently change the words of the invocation, but only do this rarely, so as to ensure continuity. Again, some fathers teach that the prayer should be said aloud; others, that it should be said silently with the intellect. On the basis of my personal experience I recommend both ways. For at times the intellect grows listless and cannot repeat the prayer, while at other times the same thing happens to the voice. Thus we should pray both vocally and in the intellect. But when we pray vocally we should speak quietly and calmly and not loudly, so that the voice does not disturb and hinder the intellect's consciousness and concentration. This is always a danger until the intellect grows accustomed to its work, makes progress and receives power from the Spirit to pray firmly and with complete attention. Then there will be no need to pray aloud - indeed, it will be impossible, for we shall be content to carry out the whole work with the intellect alone.

How to Master the Intellect in Prayer

3. No one can master the intellect unless he himself is mastered by the Spirit. For the intellect is uncontrollable, not because it is by nature ever-active, but because through our continual remissness it has been given over to distraction and has become used to that. When we violated the commandments of Him who in baptism regenerates us we separated ourselves from God and lost our conscious awareness of Him and our union with Him. Sundered from that union and estranged from God, the intellect is led

captive everywhere; and it cannot regain its stability unless it submits to God and is stilled by Him, joyfully uniting with Him through unceasing and diligent prayer and through noetically confessing all our lapses to Him each day. God immediately forgives everything to those who ask forgiveness in a spirit of humility and contrition and who ceaselessly invoke His holy name. As the Psalmist says, 'Confess to the Lord and call upon His holy name' (cf. Ps. 105: 1). Holding the breath also helps to stabilize the intellect, but only temporarily, for after a little it lapses into distraction again. But when prayer is activated, then it really does keep the intellect in its presence, and it gladdens it and frees it from captivity. But it may sometimes happen that the intellect, rooted in the heart, is praying, yet the mind wanders and gives its attention to other things; for the mind is brought under control only in those who have been made perfect by the Holy Spirit and who have attained a state of total concentration upon Christ Jesus.

How to Expel Thoughts

4. In the case of a beginner in the art of spiritual warfare. God alone can expel thoughts, for it is only those strong in such warfare who are in a position to wrestle with them and banish them. Yet even they do not achieve this by themselves, but they fight against them with God's assistance, clothed in the armor of His grace. So when thoughts invade you, in place of weapons call on the Lord Jesus frequently and persistently and then they will retreat; for they cannot bear the warmth produced in the heart by prayer and they flee as if scorched by fire. St John Klimakos tells us, 'Lash your enemies with the name of Jesus', because God is a fire that cauterizes wickedness (cf. Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). The Lord is prompt to help, and will speedily come to the defence of those

who wholeheartedly call on Him day and night (cf Luke 18:7). But if prayer is not yet activated in you, you can put these thoughts to flight in another manner, by imitating Moses (cf. Exod. 17:11-12); rise up, lift hands and eyes to heaven, and God will rout them. Then sit down again and begin to pray resolutely. This is what you should do if you have not yet acquired the power of prayer. Yet even if prayer is activated in you and you are attacked by the more obdurate and grievous of the bodily passions - namely, listlessness and lust - you should sometimes rise up and lift your hands for help against them. But you should do this only seldom, and then sit down again, for there is a danger of the enemy deluding you by showing you some illusory form of the truth. For only in those who are pure and perfect does God keep the intellect steadfast and intact wherever it is, whether above or below, or in the heart.

How to Psalmodyze

5. Some say that we should psalmodize seldom, others often, others not at all. You for your part should not psalmodize often, for that induces unrest, nor yet not at all, for that induces indolence and negligence. Instead you should follow the example of those who psalmodize from time to time, for moderation in all things is best, as the ancient Greeks tell us. To psalmodize often is appropriate for novices in the ascetic life, because of the toil it involves and the spiritual knowledge it confers. It is not appropriate for hesychasts, since they concentrate wholly upon praying to God with travail of heart, eschewing all conceptual images. For according to St John Klimakos, 'Stillness is the shedding of thoughts', whether of sensible or of intelligible realities. Moreover, if we expend all our energy in reciting many psalms, our intellect will grow slack and will not be able to pray

firmly and resolutely. Again according to St John Klimakos, 'Devote most of the night to prayer and only a little of it to psalmody.'

You, too, should do the same. If you are seated and you see that prayer is continuously active in your heart, do not abandon it and get up to psalmodize until in God's good time it leaves you of its own accord. Otherwise, abandoning the interior presence of God, you will address yourself to Him from without, thus passing from a higher to a lower state, provoking unrest and disrupting the intellect's serenity. Stillness, in accordance with its name, is maintained by means of peace and serenity; for God is peace (cf. Eph. 2:14) beyond all unrest and clamor. Our psalmody, too, should accord with our mode of life, and be angelic, not unspiritual and secular. For to psalmodize with clamor and a loud voice is a sign of inner turbulence. Psalmody has been given to us because of our grossness and indolence, so that we may be led back to our true state.

As for those not yet initiated into prayer - this prayer which, according to St John Klimakos, is the source of the virtues' and which waters, as plants, the faculties of the soul - they should psalmodize frequently, without measure, reciting a great variety of psalms; and they should not desist from such assiduous practice until they have attained the state of contemplation and find that noetic prayer is activated within them. For the practice of stillness is one thing and that of community life is another. 'Let each persist in that to which he is called' (1 Cor. 7:24) and he will be saved. It was on account of this that I hesitated to write to you, for I know that you live among those still weak. If someone's experience of praying derives from hearsay or reading; he will lose his way, for he lacks a guide. According to the fathers, once you have tasted grace you should psalmodize sparingly, giving most of your time to

prayer. But if you find yourself growing indolent you should psalmodize or read patristic texts. A ship has no need of oars when a fair wind swells the sails and drives it lightly across the salt sea of the passions. But when it is becalmed it has to be propelled by oars or towed by another boat.

To gainsay this, some point to the holy fathers, or to certain living persons, saying that they kept all-night watches psalmodizing the whole time. But, as we learn from Scripture, not all things can be accomplished by everyone, for some lack diligence and strength. As St John Klimakos says, 'Small things may not always seem so to the great, and great things may not seem altogether perfect to the small ' Everything is easy for the perfect; and not everyone, either now or in former times, remains always a probationer, nor does everyone travel along the same road or pursue it to the end. Many have passed from the life of ascetic labor to the life of contemplation, laying aside outward practices, keeping the Sabbath according to the spiritual law, and delighting in God alone. They are replete with divine fare, and the grace that fills them does not permit them to psalmodize or to meditate on anything else; for the time being they are in a state of ecstasy, having attained, if only in part and as a foretaste, the ultimate desire of all desires. Others have been saved through pursuing the life of ascetic labor until their death, awaiting their reward in the life to come. Some have received conscious assurance of salvation at their death, or else after death they have given off a fragrant odor as testimony to their salvation. Like all other Christians they had received the grace of baptism, but because of the distraught and ignorant state of their intellects they did not participate in it mystically while still alive. Others excel in both psalmody and prayer and spend their lives in this manner, richly endowed with ever-active grace and not impeded by anything. Yet others, being

unlettered and restricting themselves solely to prayer, have persevered in stillness until the end of their lives; and in doing this they have done well, uniting themselves as single individuals with God alone. To the perfect, as we said, all things are possible through Christ who is their strength (cf Phil. 4:13).

How to Partake of Food

6. What shall I say about the belly, the queen of the passions? If you can deaden or half-deaden it, do not relent. It has mastered me, beloved, and I worship it as a slave and vassal, this abettor of the demons and dwelling-place of the passions. Through it we fall and through it - when it is well-disciplined - we rise again. Through it we have lost both our original divine status and also our second divine status, that which was bestowed on us when after our initial corruption we are renewed in Christ through baptism, and from which we have lapsed once more, separating ourselves from God through our neglect of the commandments, even though in our ignorance we exalt ourselves. We think that we are with God, but it is only by keeping the commandments that we advance, guarding and increasing the grace bestowed upon us.

As the fathers have pointed out, bodies vary greatly in their need for food. One person needs little, another much to sustain his physical strength, each according to his capacity and habit. A hesychast, however, should always eat too little, never too much. For when the stomach is heavy the intellect is clouded, and you cannot pray resolutely and with purity. On the contrary, made drowsy by the effects of too much food you are soon induced to sleep; and as you sleep the food produces countless fantasies in your mind. Thus in my opinion if you want to attain salvation and strive for the Lord's sake to lead a life of stillness, you should be

satisfied with a pound of bread and three or four cups of water or wine daily, taking at appropriate times a little from whatever victuals happen to be at hand, but never eating to satiety. In this way you will avoid growing conceited, and by thanking God for everything you will show no disdain for the excellent things He has made. This is the counsel of those who are wise in such matters. For those weak in faith and soul, abstinence from specific types of food is most beneficial; St Paul exhorts them to eat herbs (cf Rom. 14:2), for they do not believe that God will preserve them.

What shall I say? You are old, yet have asked for a rule, and an extremely severe one at that. Younger people cannot keep to a strict rule by weight and measure, so how will you keep to it? Because you are ill, you should be entirely free in partaking of food. If you eat too much, repent and try again. Always act like this - lapsing and recovering again, and always blaming yourself and no one else - and you will be at peace, wisely converting such lapses into victories, as Scripture says. But do not exceed the limit I set down above, and this will be enough, for no other food strengthens the body as much as bread and water. That is why the prophet disregarded everything else and simply said, 'Son of man, by weight you will eat your bread and by measure you will drink water' (cf. Ezek. 4:16).

There are three degrees of eating: self-control, sufficiency and satiety. Self-control is to be hungry after having eaten. Sufficiency is to be neither hungry nor weighed down. Satiety is to be slightly weighed down. To eat again after reaching the point of satiety is to open the door of gluttony, through which unchastity comes in. Attentive to these distinctions, choose what is best for you according to your powers, not overstepping the limits. For

according to St Paul only the perfect can be both hungry and full, and at the same time be strong in all things (cf. Phil. 4:12).

On Delusion and Other Subjects

7. I wish you to be fully informed about delusion, so that you can guard yourself against it and not do great harm to yourself through ignorance, and lose your soul. For our free will easily veers towards keeping company with the demons, especially when we are inexperienced and still under their sway. Around beginners and those who rely on their own counsel the demons spread the nets of destructive thoughts and images, and open pits into which such people fall; for their city is still in the hands of the workers of iniquity, and in their impetuosity they are easily slain by them. It is not surprising that they are deceived, or lose their wits, or have been and still are deluded, or heed what is contrary to truth, or from inexperience and ignorance say things that should not be said. Often some witless person will speak about truth and will hold forth at length without being aware of what he is saying or in a position to give a correct account of things. In this way he troubles many who hear him and by his inept behavior he brings abuse and ridicule on the heads of hesychasts. It is not in the least strange that beginners should be deceived even after making great efforts, for this has happened to many who have sought God, both now and in the past.

Mindfulness of God, or noetic prayer, is superior to all other activities. Indeed, being love for God, it is the chief virtue. But a person who is brazen and shameless in his approach to God, and who is over-zealous in his efforts to converse with Him in purity and to possess Him inwardly, is easily destroyed by the demons if they are given license to attack him; for in rashly and

presumptuously striving prematurely to attain what is beyond his present capacity, he becomes a victim of his own arrogance. The Lord in His compassion often prevents us from succumbing to temptation when He sees us aspiring over-confidently to attain what is still beyond our powers, for in this way He gives each of us the opportunity of discovering his own presumption and so of repenting of his own accord before making himself the butt of demons as well as of other people's ridicule or pity. Especially is this the case when we try to accomplish this task with patience and contrition; for we stand in need of much sorrow and lamentation, of solitude, deprivation of all things, hardship and humility, and - most important of all for its marvelous effects - of guidance and obedience; for otherwise we might unknowingly reap thorns instead of wheat, gall instead of sweetness, ruin instead of salvation. Only the strong and the perfect can continuously fight alone with the demons, wielding against them the sword of the Spirit, which is the teaching of God (cf Eph. 6:17). The weak and beginners escape death by taking refuge in flight, reverently and with fear withdrawing from the battle rather than risking their life prematurely.

For your part, if you are rightly cultivating stillness and aspiring to be with God, and you see something either sensory or noetic, within or without, be it even an image of Christ or of an angel or of some saint, or you imagine you see a light in your intellect and give it a specific form, you should never entertain it. For the intellect itself naturally possesses an imaginative power and in those who do not keep a strict watch over it it can easily produce, to its own hurt, whatever forms and images it wants to. In this way the recollection of things good or evil can suddenly imprint images on the intellect's perceptive faculty and so induce it to entertain

fantasies, thus making whoever this happens to a daydreamer rather than a hesychast.

Be careful, therefore, not to entertain and readily give assent to anything even if it be good, before questioning those with spiritual experience and investigating it thoroughly, so as not to come to any harm. Always be suspicious of it and keep your intellect free from colors, forms and images. For it has often happened that things sent by God to test our free will, to see which way it inclines and to act as a spur to our efforts, have in fact had bad consequences. For when we see something, whether with mind or senses - even if this thing be from God - and then readily entertain it without consulting those experienced in such matters, we are easily deceived, or will be in the future, because of our gullibility. A novice should pay close attention solely to the activity of his heart, because this is not led astray. Everything else he must reject until the passions are quietened. For God does not censure those who out of fear of being deluded pay strict attention to themselves, even though this means that they refuse to entertain what He sends them until they have questioned others and made careful enquiry. Indeed, He is more likely to praise their prudence, even though in some cases He is grieved.

Yet you should not question everyone. You should go only to one, to someone who has been entrusted with the guidance of others as well, who is radiant alike in his life and in his words, and who although poor makes many rich (cf. 2 Cor. 6:10). For people lacking spiritual experience have often done harm to foolish questioners, and for this they will be judged after death. Not everyone is qualified to guide others: only those can do so who have been granted divine discrimination - what St Paul calls the 'discrimination of spirits' (1 Cor. 12:10) - enabling them to

distinguish between bad and good with the sword of God's teaching (cf. Eph. 6:17). Everyone possesses his own private knowledge and discrimination, whether inborn, pragmatic or scientific, but not all possess spiritual knowledge and discrimination. That is why Sirach said, 'Be at peace with many, but let your counselors be one in a thousand' (Eccles. 6:6). It is hard to find a guide who in all he does, says or thinks is free from delusion. You can tell that a person is undeluded when his actions and judgment are founded on the testimony of divine Scripture, and when he is humble in whatever he has to give his mind to. No little effort is needed to attain a clear understanding of the truth and to be cleansed from whatever is contrary to grace, for the devil - especially in the case of beginners - is liable to present his delusions in the forms of truth, thus giving his deceit a spiritual guise.

If, then, you are striving in stillness to attain a state of pure prayer, you must journey with great trepidation and inward grief, questioning those with spiritual experience, accepting their guidance, always lamenting your sins, and full of distress and fear lest you should be chastised or should fall away from God and be divorced from Him in this life or the next. For when the devil sees someone leading a penitent life, he retreats, frightened of the humility that such inward grief engenders. But if, with a longing that is satanic rather than authentic, you are presumptuous enough to imagine that you have attained a lofty state, the devil will easily trap you in his nets and make you his slave. Thus the surest guard against falling from the joy of prayer into a state of conceit is to persevere in prayer and inward grief, for by embracing a solace-filled grief you keep yourself safe from harm. Authentic prayer - the warmth that accompanies the Jesus Prayer, for it is Jesus who enkindles fire on the earth of our hearts (cf. Luke

12:49) - consumes the passions like thorns and fills the soul with delight and joyfulness. Such prayer comes neither from right or left, nor from above, but wells up in the heart like a spring of water from the life-quickenning Spirit. It is this prayer alone that you should aspire to realize and possess in your heart, always keeping your intellect free from images, concepts and thoughts. And do not be afraid, for He who says, 'Take heart; it is I; be not afraid' (Matt.

14:27), is with us - He whom we seek and who protects us always. When we invoke God we must be neither timid nor hesitant.

If some have gone astray and lost their mental balance, this is because they have in arrogance followed their own counsels. For when you seek God in obedience and humility, and with the guidance of a spiritual master, you will never come to any harm, by the grace of Christ who desires all to be saved (cf 1 Tim. 2:4). Should temptation arise, its purpose is to test you and to spur you on; and God, who has permitted this testing, will speedily come to your help in whatever way He sees fit. As the holy fathers assure us, a person who lives an upright and blameless life, avoiding arrogance and spurning popularity, will come to no harm even if a whole host of demons provoke him with countless temptations. But if you are presumptuous and follow your own counsel you will readily fall victim to delusion. That is why a hesychast must always keep to the royal road. For excess in anything easily leads to conceit, and conceit induces self-delusion. Keep the intellect at rest by gently pressing your lips together when you pray, but do not impede your nasal breathing, as the ignorant do, in case you harm yourself by building up inward pressure.

There are three virtues connected with stillness which we must guard scrupulously, examining ourselves every hour to make sure

that we possess them, in case through unmindfulness we are robbed of them and wander far away from them. These virtues are selfcontrol, silence and self-reproach, which is the same thing as humility. They are all-embracing and support one another; and from them prayer is born and through them it burgeons.

Grace begins to operate in people during prayer in different ways, for, as the apostle says, the Spirit distributes Himself as He wills in a variety of modes, and is perceived and known correspondingly (cf. Heb. 2:4). Elijah the Tishbite serves here as an example for us (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:11-12). In some the Spirit appears as a whirlwind of awe, dissolving the mountains of the passions and shattering the rocks of our hardened hearts, so that our worldly self is transpierced and mortified. In others the Spirit appears as an earthquake, that is to say as a sense of inward jubilation or what the fathers more clearly define as a sense of exultation. In others He is manifested inwardly as a fire that is non-material yet real; for what is unreal and imaginary is also non-existent. Finally, in others - particularly in those well advanced in prayer - God produces a gentle and serene flow of light. This is when Christ comes to dwell in the heart, as St Paul says (cf. Eph. 3:17), mystically disclosing Himself through the Holy Spirit. That is why God said to Elijah on Mount Horeb that the Lord was not in this or in that - not in the particular actions He manifests Himself in to beginners - but in the gentle flow of light; for it is in this that He attests the perfection of our prayer.

Question: What should we do when the devil transforms himself into an angel of light (cf 2 Cor. 11:14) and tries to seduce us?

Answer: You need great discrimination in order to distinguish between good and evil. So do not readily or lightly put your trust in

appearances, but weigh things well, and after testing everything carefully cleave to what is good and reject what is evil (cf. 1 Thess. 5:21-2). You must test and discriminate before you give credence to anything. You must also be aware that the effects of grace are selfevident, and that even if the devil does transform himself he cannot produce these effects: he cannot induce you to be gentle, or forbearing, or humble, or joyful, or serene, or stable in your thoughts; he cannot make you hate what is worldly, or cut off sensual indulgence and the working of the passions, as grace does. He produces vanity, haughtiness, cowardice and every kind of evil. Thus you can tell from its effects whether the light shining in your soul is from God or from Satan. The lettuce is similar in appearance to the endive, and vinegar, to wine; but when you taste them the palate discerns and recognizes the differences between each. In the same way the soul, if it possesses the power of discrimination, can distinguish with its noetic sense between the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the illusions of Satan.¹

¹ St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. [Philokalia 1-4](#). N.p. Print.