

Hypertension

Everyone loves dinosaurs. With the emergence of sophisticated computer graphics (CGI, I believe is the acronym for it) they've become so realistic that we're hard pressed to distinguish them from the real thing. From what I've seen, both the BBC and Discovery Channel have produced the best representations of dinosaurs compared with blockbuster movies geared more toward entertainment. Part of our love affair with these exotic beasts springs from the fact that in addition to being frightfully alien to us, we're living at a safe distance from them, an incomprehensibly huge number of years removed. Thus we can enjoy be scared while knowing these monsters aren't haunting us today...or until as some claim, they're cloned back to life.

I bring up the subject of dinosaurs because our fascination with a long vanished world is marked by extreme violence. The carnivorous ones preyed upon the plant eaters while these more docile creatures were trying to avoid becoming their next meal. That's how it is on land. From what experts say, the oceans were even more violent. Such violence isn't confined to these ancient beasts but is operative today, for animals continue to eat other animals. They do it just for food whereas we human animals enjoy killing for sinister purposes including the fun of it. Never will I forget some years ago when a forester told me that trees are among the most violent of all living beings. You go through a forest and everything is nice and peaceful. But when you take a closer look, quickly you discover that each tree is competing with its neighbors for sunlight and moisture. They'll do anything to crowd each other out while reaching for the sky. This forester claimed that if we could hear the trees, the roar would be deafening, far more than a herd of T-Rexes.

So what does this have to do with the article at hand which is entitled *Hypertension*? It brings to our attention that creation as we know it is marked by extreme violence. Given advances in astronomy, we can extrapolate that such violence extends beyond our world. Creation isn't violent all the time, of course, but at intervals. Translation: when some larger being is hungry, it goes after its meal, another living being. When satisfied, all is well. If this is an over-arching principle in the form of eat-or-be-eaten governing animate beings and others which aren't (the just mentioned trees, for example), what can we make of it? The mere thought is overwhelming, that we can be gobbled up at any moment...not by dinosaurs or other wild beasts but by human violence whether through an individual, group or state. If creation is so thoroughly violent, where does that put us? We shouldn't be the least bit surprised at any violence within ourselves or coming from those around us. Both we and they are simply acting in accord with nature. At least we can take comfort in that thought.

Over the centuries we've learned to control our innate violence and manage the eat-or-be-eaten environment...not always but diminish it somewhat. Still, violence is lurking around every corner waiting to spring. We can put this another way. The “survival of the fittest” mentality is reduced when we raise the standard of living across the board. That effort appears to have taken root despite plenty of setbacks. It gives greater opportunity for us to step back and consider violence within us whether naturally there or fostered by society. If we can realize that our human nature has a more noble aspect than this tendency toward violence, we're on the path to uncover something layered over. Or to put it in another way as maintained by many religious traditions, our problem consists in not realizing what we've been endowed with from the beginning. In addition to the usual obstacles appreciating this, we have the media fostering violence which makes this noble side of our character even more opaque.

As far as this brief essay goes, it is a follow-up to the one before it, *In Vs. Not of This World*. There the subject of edgy-ness was discussed, a vague unease which colors all our perceptions. In light of the present document such edgy-ness may be taken as a faint but persistent echo of that primeval violence noted above. We feel its presence as it affects us with a low grade ache just beneath the surface making it difficult to detect. This ache pervades our entire being as opposed to a specific member of our body or even mind. Yet it's within our ability to trace the roots of such edgy-ness by careful, slow self-examination, a task made all the more daunting because we've lost the ability to maintain a spirit of sustained inquiry into its source. The reasons are many, chief among them being the short attention span we've developed in part generated by exposure to electronic devices and social media.

One way of getting a handle on this, of focusing upon something related to edgy-ness, is by accessing a faculty already in our possession, and that's our desire which the ancient Greeks had labeled *thumos*. It's difficult to translate adequately, being a fairly general term pertaining to the spirit of life, inclination or that which is related to our heart. It isn't a run-of-the-mill urge but a love tinged with ardent desire. The inclusive nature of *thumos* has a lot to do with setting us on edge and keeps us in that state as discussed in the previous article. The Buddha seems to have been on to something when he says that the root of all evil is desire where *thumos* (obviously he didn't know this term, certainly the reality) is allowed to run wild.

The best way to bring *thumos* into line, if you will, is not by taking up ascetical practices but by adopting a mind set unlike any we've adopted before. It involves cultivating a spirit of sustained inquiry, an effective way to overcome our passivity to whatever *thumos* throws at us. “Sustained” is a key word, for it's not an on-again, off-again attention but one we seek to make as constant as possible as it flows with the ups and downs of success and

failure proper to our efforts. Putting it in another way, this form of attention is part n' parcel of our human constitution we don't leave and come back to willy-nilly. This is pretty hard to accept both by its obviousness and elusiveness. It should be noted further that this sustained inquiry and the attention it demands is different from concentration which is more mental.

With these few introductory ramblings out of the way, let's consider the subject which titles this essay, hypertension. The first thing that comes to mind is not the normal tension we experience every day but a more intense, continuous variety which, by reason of the strain involved, tires us quickly. Sometimes it emerges all at once or is present over a longer period of time, depending. The preposition "hyper" (*huper* in Greek) says it all. It refers to that- which-is-beyond and in reference to the word it's modifying, can be read as "beyond tension." The common way of interpreting this term tends in the direction of a souped-up tension where things get really intense. However, the preposition "hyper" can be taken in another way, as stepping out or over to the other side of tension. This approach implies a certain transcendence where tension left behind. To transcend tension sounds too good to be true because it has such a weighty lock on our lives. Instead of wistfully waiting to be relieved (which will never happen) as we sit by passively, better to engage in a sustained spirit of inquiry. Even taking a crack at it is better than nothing. Should we persevere even just a bit, we discover that yes, we're up to the task of coming to grips with our innate inertia which is one of the greatest enemies of hope.

But now I used the word "inertia" with respect to a certain passivity in the face of external forces. Internal forces also conspire to support this condition as they apply to memories which become stuck inside us and keep us passive. They effect this by repeating themselves in an uninterrupted loop from which we can't escape. Regardless of outside or inside influences, we're receptive to them in a way that's quite embarrassing when you think of it instead of rising up to challenge them. In fact, we take this passiveness as our natural state where not unsurprisingly our favorite activity is daydreaming. If we're honest with ourselves, daydreaming goes on continuously: from sunrise to sunset and from sunset to sunrise as "real" dreaming when we're asleep. This incessant activity is active and is as far as the parade of images before our minds goes and offers nothing more. Some may argue that daydreaming is essential for giving birth to valuable insights (true) and shields us from some harsh edges of reality (true again). Yet never do we come away from daydreaming fully satisfied. The insights we've garnered tend to become obstacles because they consist of a *form*, and form like a lump in the throat we wish to avoid. To be free from form is at first seems bizarre, so much we wonder if it's legitimate to speak this way. We may even take it as a sign of being mentally unbalanced. More on this a bit later.

No question about it, daydreaming and idle thoughts are enhanced through the use of mobile devices and social media, keeping us imprisoned with an endless variety of images. This phenomenon happens so quickly and almost against our will. Only after some time we realize that we've been duped and feel imprisoned even though everyone around us says how wonderful life is with these devices. The ceaseless mental activity in which we now find ourselves ensnared produces a dread that should the devices supporting our daydreaming cease to function, we'd simply die. Behind this dread is an innate fear of motionlessness stronger than being in the dark, for motion = life is a profoundly erroneous equation.

Motion can morph into an underlying apprehensiveness which never goes away, is our constant companion, and needs to be satisfied continually. At the same time it hovers in the background, not strong enough to come into full view but keeps us edgy and off balance just enough so we're not at peace. In this condition we're totally passive to impressions whether from the real or virtual world and are prevented from inquiring actively as to their source. Actually it's frightful to consider how passive we are and afraid to take steps in becoming free or better, realizing that already we are free. The images which contribute to this state of affairs don't have to come from the present but from the past, even the distant past. These old images or memories often turn out to be the strongest because they've had plenty of time to get stuck deep within us and roll around continuously. And as we all know, these images are almost always of the negative variety. Even the nostalgic ones make us feel lonely.

It's important to identify this familiar condition in an appropriate way so we may know we're on the road to recovering our true nature. The problem is that the edgy-ness caused by our prolonged state of passivity subjects us to internal lacerations. While painful, we put up with them as part of the normal course of events. Even to consider these lacerations as coming to a halt is frightful because we prefer being assaulted continuously instead of being left alone. Bizarrely speaking, we take them as signs we're alive and kicking but in actuality they reveal we're no better than zombies, the living dead: living in that we crave movement as opposed to inaction and dead in that such movement brings us nowhere. In the meanwhile they tear us into shreds, not at once but little by little.

Because everyone around us is lacerating themselves, we take it as part of life. Actually to stop and realize this is quite humorous, for we'd appear out of step with everyone else. It's a strange condition made stranger by our inability to face it head on. Instead of saying we're unable to face it, better to say we're incapable. The reason? Consistent exposure to being passive, especially when re-enforced by the behavior of other people and aided by mobile devices, renders us unable of doing anything about our condition except bemoan it. It's as though we've been paralyzed permanently. If a culture is allowed to build itself up around this paralysis, various forms of authoritarianism fill the vacuum gladly waiting to

run our lives. We even haven't noticed their presence among us and are delighted when they take charge, we being eager to be governed than to govern, to be enslaved rather than to rule.

One of the best ways to shake off this passivity—and shaking is a good analogy by reason of the lethargic state we've assumed—is to be aware of the lacerations we inflict upon ourselves. To be sure, it's a turning point when we wake up and somehow manage to shake off the inertia that has descended upon our lives as we endure unceasing small cuts that wound us daily. “Somehow” is a key word. It intimates that we've gotten fed up with the way we had lived and have attained a critical mass which at last moves us. We're not able to pin down the exact date and time, but it's irrelevant to spend time finding this out. We may have approached this point often in the past but seldom have taken the necessary next step, thinking that these lacerations are essential to daily life.

Once we've managed to step outside our passivity we discover an interesting phenomenon. Until not everything has been conditioned by a cause and an effect, but that no longer applies. How we hit upon it is secondary and a waste of time looking for the answer. We've come to see our passivity as natural but in actuality is not. It has been accrued over a long period of time both by habit and culture, quite difficult to detect head on. Taking an active mode of attention contributes to digging ourselves out from under tons of debris which is not unlike the fellow emerging from Plato's cave into the sunlight. According to this story, the man returns to the cave in order to evangelize, if you will, his former prisoners. No need to get into that here which is going too far afield from the matter at hand. Most likely that will form an essay following the current one, for it seems a logical follow-through.

While enveloped within this all-encompassing passivity, rarely do we entertain the possibility that a mode of living opposite to it might exist. We take our condition as something granted. Yet an alternate does exist, and that consists of activity. The activity intimated here isn't the same as commonly understood movement which dreads coming to a halt. Rather, the activity of interest to us is a form of attentiveness. We need something which is just all-encompassing to embrace all aspects of our passivity...in other words, to match it one-for-one. Such passivity is so obvious that we don't recognize it, hence the reason why the prisoners in Plato's caves are content to watch the images pass by while at the same time aren't bothered at being chained down. To be active with regard to our attention is both difficult and easy. Difficult in that we haven't been trained for it (no one around us seems to be engaged in it) and easy that once exposed to it, instinctively we realize it to be true. There's no need for some one to instruct us as for its existence, not unlike the Gospel's words that we'll be taught by God.

One way to migrate from a passive to an active state of mind is to set aside time for self-examination in the sense of taking into account the thoughts we entertain in the course of a given day. The bulk of them are random, many of which we had formulated beforehand. Under the banner of randomness we may include daydreaming. In fact, we daydream most of the day and find it awkward to admit wasting so much time. And this daydreaming boils down to a few themes that have caught our attention over time and repeat themselves endlessly. This repetition is the agent responsible for keeping us enslaved. So when the day is done, we reflect on what had transpired and say such-and-such events had transpired.

Although more distant events aren't in the forefront of our attention, they can have a more weighty influence because they've had time to sink in and take root despite our efforts at dislodging them. Whether these thoughts are close or far-off, good, bad or indifferent, we come away with a feeling of having been short-changed, that something is missing. That's why the evening hours weigh more heavily, the weight consisting of residual thoughts and emotions. We've just come off the day, reflect upon events, go to bed and begin the relentless process all over again on the morrow which gives little time for maneuver. Just think. Everyone is doing this in the cave, happy to remain chained there and watching the images on the wall flash by. They wouldn't even notice the fellow who in their folly is making his way up into the light. They're too preoccupied and too indifferent to persecute him. On the other hand, this can be a golden opportunity for the escapee. He can live freely among the imprisoned with no one bothering nor caring to notice.

Instead of whining about our plight we can become more aware of those lacerations that wound us and see their source which, of course, is traceable to our innate passivity. Abandoning such constant self-flagellation demands that we assert ourselves, this realization coming not from without but only from within. The best place to begin is by considering the opposite of passivity which is activity. This is scary because we're dealing with unknown territory. We simply don't know how and where to begin. Actually we've begun by recognizing that our lacerations are caused by entertaining thoughts and subsequent emotions. This could be put humorously and not inaccurately as we being entertained by them. Lacerations are wounds, and they're not fabricated from thin air which means they have a source. In the process of tracing them to their source we discover that the closer we get, the more each laceration has in common with the other one. After all, a laceration is a laceration regardless of where it comes from. We can apply the same to thoughts that please us. They are more than temporary balms but the source of much pleasure in life yet in the end, are not a cure for the cuts we have inflicted upon ourselves. This stop-gap solution requires a more radical approach.

So after taking all this into consideration, we discover that external effort is not the solution. Instead, we need to cultivate a proper understanding of where we're at right

now..not where we were yesterday nor will be this evening. The simplicity of being in the present runs contrary to our natural propensity for complexity which culture has inculcated into us. Furthermore, this complexity fosters an illusory distance between us and realization of our transcendent desire which always escape us, tauntingly so. The illusion of distance is so persistent we think it's real. It spreads the equally illusory notion that something is out of whack with ourselves essentially speaking. Already we are whole and sound, a reality that takes longer to sink in than we realize. So to arrive at this state of fulness means we don't need some kind of spiritual or ascetic practices. That's fine for achieving a goal, but why engage in something when you've achieved it already? On the other hand, leaving things as they are without tinkering with them is the goal which requires more courage than any ascetic practice. Such a hands-off attitude amounts to a gearing-down, of going backwards from complexity to simplicity, which is especially difficult nowadays. Everything around us conspires to say we're under compulsion to adopt such-and-such a program whereas the opposite is true. There's only one way to find out. Drop it all and see what happens. Therein lays the challenge.

The task being described here seems next to impossible because it smacks of a passivity where we're hanging around with our minds as a blank slate, this contrasting with our instinct to be doing something...anything...no matter what it is. Discarding the intention of forming ourselves in accord with some noble ideal sounds not just irresponsible but dangerous. However, a spirit of self-inquiry is vital, to see where it might lead us despite the ever presence of preconditioning. Talk about having no goal gives rise to the fear that we might end up no where, and to go no where is the greatest fear of them all. We've been taught that action...any type of action...is preferable to immobility. Going somewhere, even mentally or spiritually conceived, of course, is a figment of speech because we're using spacial imagery to describe what cannot be depicted. And that doesn't mean it lacks existence. Yet our dreadful ignorance of this most noble side of us, neglect of which is responsible for considerable suffering, requires a point of entry else we'd flounder about aimlessly. All along we've been engaged in this floundering and have been conditioned to it as the normal state of affairs ('Everyone is doing it') but this doesn't have to be the case.

One of the best ways to remedy our profound ignorance is to start off easy, taking a general approach which consists of examining the overall way we cope with a given day. This isn't an examination of conscience, a phrase customary among Catholic religious practices, but taking a glance at what underlies our day. "Glance" is an appropriate word since it infers a quick, natural gesture carried out discreetly while at the same time it plumbs our depths. When we do cast a glance at our lives, time doesn't weigh heavily; in fact, time is suspended or at least for a fleeting moment. The same applies with space. We've lost awareness of it or better, find ourselves indifferent to where we happen to be. So instead of pondering over our fears, joys and anything else laying within our

consciences, our gaze consists in taking in our total self at one fell swoop. In truth, we've discovered a practical application of what Einstein and others have found out scientifically regarding the space-time continuum.

To nail this down better, consider a hypothetical question which runs something like “How do you feel at the very moment from all points of view?” Such a question is more inclusive than asking about one's health or mental condition, that is, parts of us. In sum, the question is universal, nothing excepted. Obviously it's impossible to give an answer, and we may balk or laugh when it's posed. Regardless, we're startled. Yet if we stay with the question, we discover that it is addressed to something within us we haven't been aware of before. If we're disposed properly to cultivate that general gaze at our lives throughout a given day, our response would be one of sheer delight, knowing instantly we've hit upon something that always was within us. We leave aside hackneyed phrases as “true self” and so forth, because this part of ourselves—indeed, it contains all our parts—is something we're stuck with and can't escape. Instinctively we know that once discovered, we know we are home. Simple as that, no need to go further. That, of course, can be disconcerting to most folks who prefer to make the initiation process unduly complex.

To help us along with what's posed here, let's apply some terms from Gregory of Nyssa (Please note that a website devoted to him is linked with this one). Actually the following stretches his original meaning but hopefully not too far. We could say that a regular day consists of a *taxis* and the parts which comprise it as *akolouthia*. The beauty of this scheme is that just about everything can fit conveniently within it. In fact, Gregory speaks at some length concerning both terms relative to creation. *Taxis* originally pertained to the drawing up of a battle order and is an overall arrangement, if you will, while *akolouthia* is a following-upon, the components within a *taxis* arranged according to a specific order. Obviously both work hand-in-hand, one working with the other. However, one exception does apply. Should we be able to step completely outside the bounds of space and time, the notion of *taxis* alone would be able to stand alone. This would be a single entity all by itself, as it were, lacking components or having no *akolouthia* because any and all possibilities are already present. In essence, the notion of cause and effect are lacking. Why need a cause when everything is effected?

And so *taxis* and *akolouthia* represent the essence of our longing, and we struggle each day to keep them in line. We have a general type (*taxis*) of desire which could be called *thumos* as noted earlier and order it in accord with a series of actions (*akolouthia*). Perhaps this is a bit abstract, but it's intended to fit in what's difficult to express in words. What's helpful about these two terms is that they map out the natural order of things as can be found in Gregory's treatise concerning creation.

Because our lives may be defined as being played out within the bounds of a *taxis* characterized by innumerable *akolouthia*, both condition the way we answer the globally poised question “How do you feel at the moment from all points of view?” That is to say, the quality of the individual *akolouthia* of our lives impinge direction upon our response to this unanswerable question. But if we abide with the question and come to know it can't be answered in the conventional sense, it shakes us out of the restraints of time and space which condition all our responses. These responses basically are threefold corresponding to our make-up. The first response to a question concerning our health such as “Do you still have that headache?” (i.e., one *akolouthia*) is easy to answer as we all know. The second concerning our emotional state (another *akolouthia*) is more subtle but still not that difficult. It may be formulated as “Are you still angry?” As for the third *akolouthia*, it pertains to our spiritual side such as “Do you feel abandoned by God?”

Without being aware of it, we're juggling the first two *akolouthia* with their endless variations within us unceasingly. Only in a vague sense are we aware of the third *akolouthia*, so comprehensive yet so immediate it escapes our attention. The first two comprise the roots of our conditioning which make us perceive time either as passing quickly or slowly but never standing still. We either grate against this perception of time or rejoice in it while thinking this is quite normal but soon discover the contrary is true, that our perception is false or better, misguided. And being so misguided passes itself onto how we perceive the passage of time. Here we have a situation we can label as natural as opposed to the normal. The natural moves always from below upward whereas the normal, that which comprises the norm—our true homeland—descends from above. In another article this theme was developed more extensively, so suffice to mention it in passing. However, our attempt to answer the three questions just posed reflect which side we're on, almost always preferring the natural instead of the normal and “normal” taken literally as that norm or *nomos* which is a custom guiding personal and public behavior.

As just outlined, everything may fall within the context of a *taxis* comprised of individual *akolouthia*, an order comprised of multiple inter-connected steps, if you will. It seems the an idea scheme for cause and effect to flourish, but ultimately this is illusory. Anything outside temporal reality lacks cause and effect. From that point of view, the cause is already caused and the effect is already effected. What we perceive as individual *akolouthia* within a *taxis* are already “done” and have been done along. The only thing now they require is being revealed which we recognize as being so and not caused. We come to realize this already-being-present is simply being played out through our perception of space and time, and instinctively we know we transcend the effects of cause and effect with knowledge that we're made for something more. Putting this in Nyssa-like terms, we know that the seemingly improbability of a *taxis* minus any *akolouthia* indeed exists. This amounts to having an order minus individual components, an apparent

absurdity. It can be put in the form of the question posed earlier, “How do you feel at the moment from all points of view?” It takes into account that we are living on two distinct planes simultaneously, that we're born multi-taskers. Should we try to figure out the question posed to us, we could suffer a nervous breakdown or move close to one, that is, if you want to get ultimate about it.

Until this question had been asked we lacked awareness that we had been functioning all the while on two planes at once. We've been awakened, albeit rudely, and cannot remain the same. The shift from natural to normal has been made (ontologically speaking it was always with us, was always us) though it takes time to sink in on the level of day-to-day practical living. The slowness of this realization is mind boggling and can be summed up in one word, ignorance re-enforced by pride which obviously requires some clarification. Ignorance consists in living in a dualistic oriented world where all the *akolouthia* are lined up like ducks in a row, all within a given *taxis*. All is fine with this arrangement. Pride comes in when we think this is the normal order of things, is the norm (*nomos*) governing them. We refuse to acknowledge an alternative, for we love to think we're in control but in reality we are not. We may put on a brave face and give the illusion of going along as though nothing happened, even convincing ourselves that we're up to the task. The problem is we can't sustain this illusion forever. Our facade is bound to collapse, and we retreat humiliated which doesn't have to be done in public but to ourselves alone. We realize that the true antidote lies in humility, but aren't convinced fully until we pass through a bunch of humiliations and have hit bottom as they say in AA.

One form this pride assumes is that we can conquer the passage of time on our own and without assistance from a source greater than us. It comes to a surprise that we function on this level most of the time yet prefer to keep it hidden from other people, not to mention ourselves, we all being in the same predicament. Such a pretense is a prime contributor to our innate restlessness leading us desiring to be in motion constantly in order to escape where we're at. Here modern physics teaches a practical lesson, that space is tied in with time. That means we're not content to remain within the same place but are impelled to move on...always move on...and never be at rest. Such a desire for constant movement directly concerns the current remarks about hypertension which characterizes so much of the way we comport ourselves. While we have to be on our toes to detect this, it's even more a challenge to detect the release of this tension.

The release of tension is something everyone desires, yet it remains out of reach because we lack the means to simplify ourselves. Hence our situation is both comic and tragic or more accurately, one which alternates between both. Then there's the added problem of articulation. All the time we're hovering around the experience but can't quite put our finger on it because we're dealing with that which is beyond the reach of normal

experience. This requires us to pause and not so much engage in thinking as we do normally but to pause and consider that our efforts are misdirected. This pause gives space pointing to thoughts which have emerged and are present to us under the guise of memories. Instead, our focus should be on their emergence (from where, God only knows but that's secondary) since constantly they're springing forth without our control.

We can put this in a simple way. Stop and entertain just one thought (easy enough). From it others come to birth assisted by our imagination, gaining a momentum so quickly and powerfully that they prevent us from even considering a withdrawal from the thoughts themselves. The first instinct to free ourselves and to counter thought with thought, and if that fails as often is the case, the thoughts twist and turn us in the wind. Such is the ultimate meaning of the expression to be hung out to dry (refer yet again to those in the cave). It will continue indefinitely until we run out of energy like a pendulum that at last comes to rest. Knowing how to handle this most vexing of problems reveals our mettle, showing we've learned from being battered about. Failures are humiliating, better left to ourselves than shared, where we can expose them to the light of truth. And that light is the refusal to give into the fabrication of more thoughts. We don't think more thoughts, if you will, but see more or less at once the futility of all thoughts as a means to resolve the situation. This is scary because we're so used to functioning on the plane of thoughts. Not only that, we've been conditioned to believe no other reference point exists.

What's said here about thoughts in general is easier said than done, but a stab here and another there helps us master greater challenges laying ahead. These challenges are more formidable nowadays because the electronic devices mentioned earlier enabling instant communication and access to all sorts of information are ideal for fabricating more thoughts. This modern phenomenon conspires against us, throwing up a seemingly impenetrable wall of brass. That's why our little stabs or insights with regard to the futility of thought to resolve life's problems test our resolve in following through on our commitment. Even a small victory in seeing through the pretensions our thoughts goes a long way and sticks in our memory on which further insights can be built. So at the end of a day we can pause and say with some confidence that all our problems are reducible to the realm of thought. We can say this if the day's struggle had been fierce and we feel defeated. We're primed more readily to see if anything exists beyond thought no matter how exalted or sophisticated may be the insights that come our way.

By pushing back like this to the source from which thought comes, if you will, we're not trying to get rid of thoughts—an impossible task—but to establish ourselves in a position to let thoughts pass through us without latching onto them. This resembles detachment as in traditional spirituality, an apparently formidable task of shedding what's dear to us. Yes, “shedding” is a pretty good word which connotes a snake getting rid of its old skin.

The snake doesn't twist and squirm in the process but simply *withdraws*, leaving the old skin behind. This image counters notions about strenuous activity which makes the whole enterprise unpalatable when in actuality shedding is a relief. And that which is doing the shedding suffers no violence but experiences relief at the "skin" left behind.

So if we manage to get hold of what seems an unnatural process—unnatural because it runs contrary to everything we've learned to hold dear—it can effect a change like nothing else in how we comport ourselves. We may not grasp fully what's going on but have a certainty of having hit upon something really good, something that always has belonged to us. The best part is that no external intervention or effort is involved. This unique educative process teaches us how to live not so much without thoughts (in truth never can we be without thoughts) but more precisely, how to live while watching thoughts come to birth and fade away without identifying with them. Again we refer to two familiar terms, normal and natural. The natural is having one thought followed another *ad infinitum* whereas the normal acknowledges this yet prefers to watch it instead of being so engaged. Here any notions of a "life style" might come to mind, a mode of living associated with a diet and/or exercise program. This is misleading because the task at hand isn't concerned with personal improvement where impressing people turns out to be just as important. No drama is involved, externally speaking. Instead, the change is within; it's neither seen, heard, smelt nor felt but has to do with our approach to thoughts and attendant emotions.

Another way of putting this is that we've come to see the value of biological life which precedes any and all thoughts. We develop a preference to favor a direct perception of any and all bodily movements and functions which can be extended to other living beings, human and otherwise. As for thoughts, they are the root of pride which boils down to thinking we stand out from the crowd or that we're better when we are not. It turns out we're exactly the same as the next person, no better, nor worse. Thoughts separate, perceptions of biological functions unite. Such is the lesson derived from attention to our biological existence. This is easy to accept intellectually but difficult to practice because the idea that somehow...anyhow...we're better than our neighbor has been drilled into us incessantly. What a relief once we see through such a pretension and get the hang of focusing upon the physicality of existence.

We may put this in another way as follows. We start from the commonly held position that we're a rational animal and push it back further if you will, to the vegetative state. We should stop there, for going lower is devoid of life (note that vegetative is devoid of movement). We want to be alive, not unconscious, but then again, who knows the secret life of a vegetable, let alone a rock? It isn't hard to see that this movement comes across as a regression but in actuality turns out as an advancement, without precedent, as it turns out.

Even the inability for a plant or vegetable to move about turns out to be a boon. More on that shortly.

The temptation exists to say something like “If we try this out to the best of our ability.” However, this proposal presupposes we're outside where we are already, not having a share in a desired state of being. There's no need to ask the question because we have all the resources within us. This idea is difficult to accept because memories from the past suggest themselves continuously and threaten to throw us off balance by reason of their incompleteness. We're not worthy, etc., etc. or this insight is too exotic and unprovable because no one around us is doing it. Such an attitude is built around the mistaken notion we must strive to achieve what we already have or better, what we already are. However, once we understand the mechanisms involved and make the leap, if you will, we discover that everything is pretty much an illusion which means it doesn't exist. It's an illusion as far as our unaided insights go and doesn't touch where we're essentially at.

We want is first-hand proof of this fulness which turns out to be right before us, the awareness of our bodies being in perfect robot-like working order minus external interference. And “external” can apply to our minds as they attempt to direct physical bodies according to a planned pattern despite that already they are directed perfectly. The word “robot” sounds chilling, conjuring up ideas of lack of autonomy and so forth. However, its use here is quite different though has parallels insofar as we're focusing upon the automatic functioning of, for example, our bodies minus mental interference. Paying attention to them as best we can without imposing thoughts as to what's transpiring is the way to go. Not long after we've done it (we're always doing it but are now aware of doing it), we experience a release of our innate tension which is marked by a neglect of the circumstances in which this tension appeared. It's quite miraculous, really.

This neglect of circumstances is the crux of the matter. Yet we're attached to them because they are forms, and anything that's form-al grabs our attention. It doesn't matter whether the circumstances are attractive, repulsive or neutral. To abandon them is unthinkable, like abandoning life itself. So while the “robot” is humming away as it does its thing, we follow suite and allow the circumstances to pass us by without following their lead. On paper this is easy and in actuality is equally easy. The problem is realizing how attached we are to forms of any shape, size or weight, all of which have to be jettisoned. In the end it's our attachment that precludes the second step, doing it easily.

We've been attached to forms all along, no question about it, and fail to realize it leads nowhere except to more thoughts and imaginings and hence an infinite number of forms. The two function simultaneously: our robotic existence does its thing pretty much aimlessly as it should while thoughts are frantically working to give the impression that our

activity is meaningful (a lot is but is seen as less so once we grasp what's going on). Yet meaningful or not, ultimately they turn out to be fleeting. We know this with the passage of time when reflecting back on these experiences. In sum, any and all forms are limited and lack the sticking power to impose themselves on our automaton-like existence. At first you'd think our robotic existence is aimless and the forms we formulate (!) plus circumstances are the agents responsible for giving it direction. That's how we've been conditioned. However, the opposite is true. What seems aimless has a one-on-one connection with its source (let's say reality in general). We can be sure this is genuine and cannot deceive us by reason of its concreteness. On the other hand, circumstances are based upon memories of past encounters with our robotic existence and impose...re-impose...them upon what's already there. Here's the nub of the situation that we must get clear once and for all.

The example just presented reveals how resistant we are to reality staring us in the face. For some reason or other we just can't accept the distinction just made while at the same time we know it's at the root of our discomfort. We should, however, pause and consider precisely what's bothering us, and that boils down to an attachment to form. This might sound too vague, but in essence it is our problem. To get a better handle on this, we turn to our robotic-like existence, put supreme faith in it because it's indifferent to external circumstances. To use the verb “interfere” is tempting, for that suggests manipulation. It's like the intent mentioned above of making efforts to achieve what we already have or already are. The distinction just proposed has to be sharp, no fuzziness around the edges, which to uninitiated ears sounds unpalatable because more than anything we love form. We cling to it as we cling to life itself. And here love of form may be called attachment to favorable circumstances which come our way.

It could be said we're exchanging one tension for another which we can call hypertension, the former being natural and the latter, normal. Regular tension is the run-of-the-mill variety with which we're all familiar yet differs from the hyper one which makes our attention stick really close to our robotic life with its full array of mechanistic operations. Another far-out sounding idea but only so because we're looking at things from the vantage point of thoughts and the emotions affiliated with them. But the hypertension—the one beyond (*hyper-*) tension—clings so faithfully to our robotic life that it doesn't have time to settle upon anything else which makes it light-some, quite opposite to the tension of everyday life.

Another way of putting this is hypertension's proximity to robotic existence doesn't allow for our memory to interfere. Thoughts don't have enough wiggle-room to build up and create an identity we label “I” which is either diminished or built up in accord with how society views it. Instead of paying attention to this “I,” we discover a miracle transpiring

before our very eyes. Memory shifts over to recollection which means we have realized we are not self-activating agents but dependent upon a principle external to ourselves. The more that principle is allowed to operate, the freer we become. And this freedom comes about by point-to-point attention to our robotic-like activities.

Hypertension now succeeds tension, goes beyond (*hyper-*) it as the paragraph above says. Here we experience a release from that tension which is part and parcel of our lives at the very moment we become conscious of it. Another way of putting this is that we neglect the contingent circumstances connected with this tension when they appear and accept them in ourselves. Obviously acceptance is key, though two hindrances are involved. First everything is in a state of flux à la Heraclitus (*ta panta rhei*), our attention always lagging behind perception of the outside world, even if we think we're on top of things. In common parlance, this would be considered living in the present moment if and when it succeeds. But if we're honest, rarely it does succeed despite all the talk we hear of value about this practice. The alteration between such extraordinary experiences and the bulk of time when we don't is an essential ingredient to perceiving the passage of time: one moment it flies and the next it drags on interminably.

Secondly, we're so goal oriented where life must have “meaning” and that death isn't the end of it all. An entire culture weighs in upon us saying that the robotic approach as proposed here is to be avoided at all costs because it's mindless. It's a prejudice with which we must struggle and persevere, for externally speaking, the odds are stacked against us. However, should we stick with the point-to-point attention demanded by this unique form of attentiveness, quickly we discover something unexpected. That “something” can't be described but intimated. The intimation comes not from without but from our recollective faculty which goes by the name *anamnesis*. Suffice to mention it briefly without going into too much detail (it's discussed elsewhere on this home page and certainly in other places). We are reminded in the sense that our attention is brought back to its source from which all things spring and depend upon for existence.

You'd think Christianity would have a lot to say about this. It does, especially with regard to *anamnesis*, both its philosophical and theological implications, but you have to do some digging since it's overlaid with devotional and dogmatic elements. Both are valuable in and by themselves but have lost their appeal to a larger audience which nevertheless remains ripe for conversion. Right from the beginning the church wrestled with the divinity of Jesus Christ which, in turn, led to developments of dogma as it had to contend with teachings at odds with her core beliefs. In many ways both developed simultaneously. This hardened the interpretation of the Gospels which, despite being necessary, was done at the expense of living its contents. Too much time was spent defending the castle than providing for its inhabitants.

On top of this we have the sacramental system which channels grace. Of course the situation is complex, and we can't go into details here. Since the Christian religion has as its core God becoming man, you'd think it would be the most Zen-like religion on the planet. However, such was not the case. There's plenty of discussion with regard to practical application of Gospel virtues and how they relate to Jesus Christ through action and prayer. Yet this too has elements of a head trip...too much self-consciousness in the alternation between theory and practice. The result is a hybrid consisting of a lot of speculation supported by devotional practices, a rather odd combination where one side attempts to compensate for the other's deficiency but in essence never does. There's always a certain unease that spills over into how we both comport and express ourselves.

Part of the failure to speak directly and meaningfully today is a rift between philosophy and theology. Many people are interested in Christian practice, but it can come across as cumbersome and loaded with a whole bunch of regulations. In an attempt to overcome this perception some people have reached out to non-Christian teachings from the East. Indeed, heart-felt attempts at this have been made and the overall reception is marked with some skepticism, especially by those who place great stock in dogma, etc. This seems to point more to a profound difference of cultures, not necessarily incompatible insights. Yet when we consider that God...one of the three Persons of the Trinity...became a human being, you'd think the Zen approach would have natural appeal. Not so, for the focus upon orthodoxy and doctrine came to be more important in response to struggles with heresies and so forth. Nevertheless, the physicality of Zen remains an exciting prospect to consider. It touches upon a desire we all can identify with and ties in with some of the obstacles which this article is attempting to communicate.

The brief remarks of the last paragraph may be part of why Christianity in many forms isn't appealing today which doesn't mean bending over backwards to make accommodations. If we take time to get behind the surface issues, a significant part of the problem lays with neglect of cultivating a philosophical spirit. And that, of course, can work with religion, not being alien to it. Here we take philosophy in its original sense, as a love of wisdom...being a friend (*philos*) of it...propounded by Plato and other notables.

With this in mind, it can be argued that the church is misreading one of the deepest needs of the human heart in its mission of evangelization as it operates from its own deficiency, albeit blissfully unaware of the fact. It is unable to recognize what people want more than anything else, to learn how to philosophize, not to be religious. Everyone is born for it and in actuality does it. If given the opportunity to pursue the act of philosophizing in an attractive fashion, they'd jump at it. Such love of wisdom means you haven't attained it but are on the path of doing so, of trying to get there, a path which turns out to be never

ending. Some proponents of Christianity have failed to recognize that the search is the adventure and the goal is secondary. But if a person is trained to love wisdom in accord with this word's definition, what Christianity offers will fall into place more easily. Thus the teachings about Jesus Christ nor his church are the problem, for those issues find their place more readily. Getting acquainted with the philo-sophical spirit...that *philos* or friendship with *sophia* or wisdom...should come first. Trust that interest in the Christian religious message should be put on hold, a gamble of sorts, but better have adherents to that religion informed by philosophy than not.

One can argue successfully that such talk is fine for those who are well off but not for someone on the street. Indeed, they apply to persons with sufficient leisure time which is line with the ancient tradition called *otium*. This Latin word means leisure in the sense of freeing oneself from unnecessary occupations and even some which are deemed necessary in favor of time to think, and, of course, to pray. *Otium* may not be an immediate need nor pertains to the church's missionary nature but admittedly has a lot of appeal. In fact, appreciation of its necessity is bound to grow in a world that is losing its ability to step back and take a break from the action.

I conclude with a caveat of sorts. Anyone can see that this article is done in an unprofessional way. It lacks cohesiveness and presumes that the reader is familiar with terms (*akolouthia*, for example) which haven't been fleshed out as they should. Nevertheless, awareness of such glaring deficiencies do not detract from the desire to get something out there while taking delight in the process. *Hypertension* does fit in with many articles posted on this home page, hovering around what seems to be an overarching theme coming into clear focus as time moves on. Perhaps after some reflection of a more disciplined kind the material in them can be reviewed and slammed together. That remains to be seen as long as it doesn't detract from the essential delight in the process.

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12 June 2016

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