

## **Spiritual Openness (Docility)**

### 1) Three phases of spiritual openness

- a) Listening to the Word of life, being teachable, open to the new, ears to hear
- b) Assimilating the Word, accepting the truths proposed, internalizing values, tradition
- c) Obedience to the Word, letting myself be transformed in attitude and behavior, paying attention to details, cooperation

### 2) Qualities related to spiritual openness

- a) docility and humility
- b) docility and love, the open heart, the good soil receiving the seed
- c) docility and tradition

### 3) Obstacles to spiritual openness

- a) expectations, presuppositions
- b) over-critical evaluation of others
- c) a hardened heart, knowing everything already

## Spiritual Openness (Docility)

An attitude, in general, is the stance I freely take in the face of life, of reality. My attitude is my voluntary response to life. It is not the same as a feeling, because it is a voluntary response.

I understand spiritual openness as the attitude of docility, that is, being teachable, open to new ways of doing things or thinking about things, new ideas. A close look at this attitude of spiritual openness or docility reveals three typical phases.

### 1) Three phases of spiritual openness

a) **Listening to the Word of life.** Docility begins with hearing the word, getting the message, receiving input from a source outside my own self-contained world. The psalmist, in a spirit of docility, begs for this word from God, knowing that it will be life-giving, saving. It will bring Jesus into the situation.

“Lord, make me know your ways  
Lord, teach me your paths.  
Make me walk in your truth and teach me  
For you are God my Savior” (Ps 25:4-5)

Our open ear is the pathway that the word takes to get to us. The RB begins with the command, “Listen.” In Latin it is *Obsculta* a variation of the classical Latin verb *ausculta*, from which we get our English medical term “auscultate,” meaning to listen to a patient’s lungs or heartbeat. Benedict commands “Obsculta,” listen, give ear, listen attentively and with belief, listen in order to carry out what is said, listen obediently, listen with docility. The first verse of the prologue goes: “Listen, my child, to the precepts of the master and bend the ear of your heart; welcome gladly the advice of your loving father and effectively carry it out.”

Benedict doesn’t often use metaphors, but here he talks about “the ear of the heart.” The open heart listens as if with its own ear. The closed or hardened heart chooses not to listen. It prefers to turn a deaf ear to the word of God, because it does not want to be challenged to change its

lifestyle and undergo conversion. Benedict looks for someone who keeps the ear of the heart open, receptive, docile. The opposite of docility will be the refusal to listen, deliberate deafness.

There is this link between the ear and the heart. The word that we receive through our ear goes straight to our heart. Physiologically it goes first to our brain, but existentially the word that we hear goes straight to our heart. "I love you. I hate you." It is different with the input from the eye; what we see gets processed in the intellect and remains there; it may or may not affect our heart. The ear, in contrast, is receptive, feminine, never closed. We cannot close our ear as we can close our eyes with our eyelids.

We have no ear-lids to close our ears, because the ear is always open to the world of sound. So the ear is a symbol of the human spirit, which is a radical openness to all that is. As human beings, as incarnate spirits, we are radically open to the whole of reality, even to its furthest horizon beyond the physical. As human persons we are structured with open ears and open senses, ready to take in, to know, to relate to everything that is. Data does not simply bounce off when it reaches us but is welcomed by our sense receptors, taken in, and given its proper place within us, because our human openness is unlimited at least in principle. Our spirit is open to all that is. The human person is fundamentally and radically open to the surrounding world and even to the Creator of the world. Beyond the farthest reach of the Hubble telescope is the invisible Creator of this marvelous cosmos. The human person, as spirit, can even know the existence and some of the nature of God the Creator. And not just know but also relate to this divine Creator in a loving and personal way, person to person, or person to Three Persons, because revelation tells us that ultimate reality, namely God, is triune, threefold, related as the gift, the giver, and the giving of the gift or as love, lover, and beloved or as knower, being known, and knowledge itself.

In this first phase of docility, we take the word to heart, not just to our mind. In the play "Jesus of Nazareth" the apostle Judas tells Jesus not to be too hard on the scribes and Pharisees, because one at least of the scribes had an "open mind." But Jesus answers: "Judas, it is not an open mind I want but an open heart."

Docility is more than just keeping an open mind. An open mind is not necessarily virtuous. A person may be proud of keeping an open mind

while judging everyone else to be prejudiced and narrow. Docility is more about keeping an open, loving heart of flesh, not a heart of stone. As Ez 11:19 tells us: The Lord says: “From their bodies I will remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh.”

Isaiah talks about the fruits of listening with a heart of flesh: “Only listen to me and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Pay attention and come to me; listen that you may have life” (Is 55:2–3). Life is what we are looking for in the monastery. We go straight to the source of life, the living God himself. Docility is the key to our whole quest.

Although in this first phase of the attitude of docility I am emphasizing listening, I don’t mean listening so totally that one never speaks, never opens his mouth to put forth an opinion, suggestion, or idea of his own. None of us is likely to go to that extreme. There should be respectful exchange of ideas, insights, opinions, and suggestions. In that way we exercise co-responsibility for the smooth functioning of the group. The emphasis is on respectful speaking, putting forth one’s ideas in a humble way without insisting on them, presenting them as one person’s point of view, not as infallible declarations. Respect means receiving a contrary opinion from the other person without carrying the exchange to the point of argument, without repeating again and again what you’ve already said, and without taking personal offense because the other does not see it your way. Try to work for a compromise.

#### **b) Assimilating the word.**

Docility does not stop at mere listening; a listening openness is only the first phase of docility. Phase 2 is accepting or assimilating what I hear, learning something new or learning it in a new way. A docile person wants to be taught because he or she wants to learn. There will be a third phase also.

Let’s talk first about assimilating the word, that is, accepting the truths proposed, internalizing values or tradition; buying it. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). A docile person hears the word of God, recognizes it as a treasure, and gives up everything to buy it. He buys the entire field, the whole nine yards. That is, he assimilates it, takes ownership of it.

Docility implies a readiness to change, readiness to be formed into a new being in Christ with a new way of acting. "O that today you would listen to his voice; harden not your hearts as at Meribah" (Ps 95:8). This is the psalm with which St Benedict wishes his monks to begin each day, the invitatory psalm at Vigils. He wants us to be ready to learn something every day in this school of love or school of the divine service that is the monastery.

He wants us to renew every morning our attitude of openness, receptivity, and docility to the voice of God that will come to us not only during the Scripture reading at Vigils but in so many other ways throughout the day to come. I am thinking of our *lectio* time, the Mass readings, encounters with other brothers or retreatants, encounters with nature, the work assignments I am given, and so forth. In all of these God's word comes to me, living and active (Heb 4:12), penetrating to the core of my being, becoming implanted there, growing and eventually bearing fruit in a transformed life.

In this second stage of docility, I receive and welcome the word. I begin to make room for it in my heart and also in my mind. With my conscience, I consider adopting it and adapting to it. I consider obeying it.

#### **d) Obedience to the Word.**

If I am docile, I am willing to accept the other person's word or command and conform to what is asked of me. Why? What will be my motive? Often we do not rise above a pragmatic motive of agreeing that the new way is more efficient. If I have a heavy load to haul upstairs, and someone suggests that I use the elevator instead of the stairs, I accept their suggestion because it makes sense and is more efficient, less strenuous on my back. But there could be deeper, more spiritual motives for obedience. For example, I obey because I see this command or suggestion as coming not just from another human being but coming ultimately from God. Jesus said to his disciples, "he who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16). God's word comes to us through other people, as well as through events and circumstances. Another spiritual motive might be that I take it on faith that this word, suggestion, command, will be life-giving to me if I follow it. Life-giving on the spiritual level of grace and growth in virtue, transformation. At the very least, I will learn a new method of operation. For example, if

the neighbors tell me to grow tomato plants upside down, I might initially resist the crazy idea. Then if they give me the hanging container and the tomato plant too, I agree to give it a try, and thus I learn a new method of growing vegetables.

When I obey for spiritual motives, I will be transformed, changed. Psalm 40 says: “You do not ask for sacrifice and oblation but an open ear; you do not ask for holocaust and victim. Instead here am I. In the scroll of the book it stands written that I should do your will.” God asks for an open ear to hear and then do God’s will. That is the fundamental attitude of docility that prepares us for spiritual transformation. It includes following instructions, paying attention to the details, not trying to make improvements on the plan before I’ve ever tried the plan. Later, after I have become familiar with the new way, I might be able to improve on it. It’s like cooking from a new recipe. The first time I use the recipe, I will follow it closely. After I’ve done it once or twice, I can make adjustments, cut back on one thing and add more of something else, sprinkle with my favorite spice, etc.

## **2) Qualities related to spiritual openness (docility)**

- a) Humility. A docile heart is a humble heart that knows its true place before God and before other people, a disciple’s heart. Sometimes Scripture speaks of the ear being open, meaning the ear of the heart. For example, Is 50:4-5: “Morning after morning [The Lord God] wakens my ear to hear as disciples do; the Lord God opened my ear; I did not refuse, did not turn away.” A disciple is one who is docile, who listens with an open ear to the word of God and does not refuse to hear and obey it.

The ability gracefully to take corrections from others or suggestions from others are signs of humility. Ego does not wish to be corrected. Pride knows everything already and is not open to being taught by anyone, especially someone inferior.

Docility admits that there is much that I do not know. Somebody else knows more than I do. Maybe the fellow next to me knows more than I do, and I can learn something valuable from him, even if he is my junior. We do not always know what is

best for us.

The world teaches us to listen critically and to evaluate what we are told before we put faith in it. Otherwise we can be duped, deceived. We bring this critical spirit with us when we come to the monastery whether consciously or subconsciously. But in a monastery the basic attitude has to be mutual trust. Trust implies a level of openness and docility that we may never have experienced before. Trust in God and trust in one another.

- b) Love, that keeps the heart open, love that makes the soil of the heart fertile to receive the seed of God's word. Recall of the parable of the sower. The seed is the word. Some seed falls on the footpath, some on rocky ground, some falls among thorns. Some fell on rich soil, and they are the ones "who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance" (Lk 8:15).

I listen with docility because I love. Love is the motive of docility, love that wants to draw closer to the beloved. Loving God, I desire to be taught by God, a disciple who wants to learn from everything that might be a manifestation of God. In fact, everything might be. We can learn something even from the poorest, most boring teacher (if only learning how important it is to be more entertaining). I have heard people say that they are able to pick up at least a scrap of spiritual nourishment from every homily they hear. For the truly docile, the teachable, even one phrase can be enough. "A word to the wise is sufficient." The abbot needs only to express the problem, and off goes the disciple to solve it, without being asked explicitly.

- c) Tradition. One of the degrees of humility (8<sup>th</sup>) in chapter 7 of RB is: "to do only what is endorsed by the common rule of the monastery and the example set by his superiors" (RB 7.55). A docile person can pick up what is the appropriate way to act by observing the example of those who have lived the life for a long time. No one has to tell me to do it this way or that way. I can see how others are doing it. All I need to do is conform to the way others have been doing it for years, for decades. It is true

that not all the seniors will be good models, but try to imitate those who are. It should not be that a volunteer comes into the monastery to live his own unique version of monastic life, as if he were saying to the others “Here is the way I am going to live, whether you like it or not.” No, a teachable attitude wants to learn the tradition that has been observed at this monastery for decades, so as to be part of the group, all seeking, finding, serving, and adoring God together as one.

If you look at commentaries on the Rule of St Benedict or on St Bernard or other monastic authors, the commentator almost always makes an effort to trace the sources used by these authors. What influenced their thinking? In what line of tradition, what school of theology and spirituality does the writer stand? The authors themselves were conscious of standing on the shoulders of their predecessors, seeing farther than they could but always standing on their teachings. These spiritual masters took advantage of the discoveries of the past and carried them one step further, but always in continuity with the past. This is the spirit of docility, listening to tradition. Today, however, the lack of docility and an ignorance of tradition leads authors to begin from scratch. They come out of nowhere, out of no tradition. They teach only their own opinions. They speak only for themselves and their own subjective experience. Often their thoughts die with them.

Docility to the tradition will probably mean letting go of my own ideas and former practices. It will mean that I try not to cling to my own way even when I am convinced that it is the very best way for me. It is God who knows what is truly best for me. Docility will mean letting the other fellow have it *his* way. When a docile person comes to the monastery, he allows situations and persons to be as they are, to unfold as they will, not trying to make them go his way. The time is not ripe for doing things my way or pushing my program onto others. Instead I put my agenda in my pocket and store it for future use. Later maybe I can bring it out again, when I have earned the trust of the community. By then maybe I will be content to do things the monastic way, because I see the wisdom of it, and so I will revise my agenda

before presenting it.

You can see that being teachable in the face of monastic tradition involves some degree of dying to myself. It is part of “losing” of myself that Jesus spoke about as a necessary condition of finding my true self. “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,” says Jesus (Mt 10:39). The attitude of docility disposes me to release my tight grasp of my way and to let go of my cherished ideas, opinions, concepts, convictions, and plans, which may have served me well in the past but which might become obstacles to the union God is calling me to now in these new circumstances of my life. Docility implies a kind of flexibility.

### **3) Obstacles to spiritual openness**

#### **a) Expectations.**

An attitude of knowing in advance what someone will say or do closes us off to the word that God might be trying to speak to us. I have closed my ears and my heart to this person because I am convinced that it will be “the same old thing” for the thousandth time. Ho-hum, another talk by the abbot, another sermon by this father, another class by that one. I know exactly what they are going to say. Such expectations are deadly to docility or teachableness.

There is a good Biblical example in the story of Naaman and Elisha. You remember Naaman the leper who was the army commander of the King of Aram. His King sent him, with presents, to be cured by Elisha in Israel. Elisha did not even leave his hermitage to see Naaman but instead sent him instructions: “Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean” (2 Kg 5:10). Naaman was insulted, angry, and prepared to go back to Aram. He was not in a docile mood. His expectations kept him from being open to a miraculous cure. What were those expectations? “I thought he would surely come out to me and stand there to call on the name of the Lord, and would move his hand over the place, and thus cure the leprous spot” (2 Kg 5:11). Also he didn’t think much of the Jordan River, compared to the great rivers back home in Aram, the Abana and the Pharpar. He would rather bathe in them if he had to. Fortunately for him, his servants gave him a

cogent argument in favor of obeying Elisha and doing the simple little thing he was told to do. As soon as Naaman had plunged seven times into the Jordan, his flesh became “like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (2 Kg 5:14). His expectations almost cheated him of a miraculous healing.

Do we allow people to be different from what we expect them to be? Do we allow God to be different? If we had such openness to God and to others, we might make much greater progress in the spiritual life. God is always more than we can possibly absorb. We tend to seek God only where we expect God to be found, and to hear only what we expect God to tell us. We close ourselves to everything else and refuse to learn new things or hear new messages. Our spirit has become hardened, sclerotic, not supple and formable. What a surprise it will be when we open our eyes and ears, our mind and heart, and let go of our expectations, and then discover as Naaman did that the prophet was right. Or to discover as Jacob did when he awoke from his dream of struggling with an angel and said “Truly, the Lord is in this place and I did not know it” (Gen 28:17). As if to say, “This too is what God is like, and I never knew it, I never expected it.” God is the God of surprises.

To consider the field of science, we observe how important discoveries are made. The scientific method demands that ALL the facts be given a hearing, that allowance be made for uncertainties and surprises. Serendipity. That’s how the great scientists were able to make their discoveries. How many different filaments did Edison try before he discovered the best one for the light bulb? These scientists are also critical thinkers; they know how to sift out the wheat from the chaff. They are skilled in discernment, but fundamentally they kept open minds, open to the truth wherever it might pop up. They were always teachable, from all teachers. Every bit of data is a teacher. They tried to keep free from expectations.

If we apply to our spiritual life the principle of spiritual openness without expectations, we have a good guide in Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (Doubleday Image, 1975, p. 96). He says: “You seek for God, beloved soul, and he is everywhere, everything speaks of him, everything offers him to you; he walks beside you, he surrounds you and is within you. He lives

with you, and yet you try to find him. You seek your own idea of God [expectation], although you have him in his reality . . . [Jesus] deceived [fooled] even Mary ]Magdalen], and when, after the Resurrection, she looked for him as she imagined he would be, he appeared to her as a gardener. When the Apostles saw Jesus they thought he was a ghost. God disguises himself so that we may reach that pure faith which enables us to recognize him under any appearance.” [as a gardener or as a ghost] So, expectations blind us to reality. Expectations are the first obstacle to docility.

b) Another obstacle is an over-critical evaluation of others.

When someone tells me something or tells me to do something, do I resent it, even though I do what is asked? Take a closer look at the cause of that resentment. Is it because I am older, more experienced, than he is? Is it because I have done this task before and I know better than he does how to do it? Maybe I have a degree in the subject. Why won't he let me do it my way, for example by using a machine to help me and take the stress off my back? In all these thoughts, I am being over-critical in my evaluation of this person. I am closed to everything he says. To be a critical listener or reader is good, but to be hypercritical, if only in thought, may close us off to something good.

At its extreme, the hypercritical attitude refuses to tolerate anyone who suggests a different way of doing things, anyone who has a different opinion than I have. An overly critical and closed mind does not allow the other to be himself but wants everybody to be just like him, which is unrealistic and would also be very boring if it ever came about. Being over-critical, he tends to label people as wise guys or idiots or a sourpuss or whatever, and that's the way he sees them for the rest of their life, not allowing them to change or be other than what we have labeled them once and for all. An over-critical mind cannot tolerate constructive criticism or helpful suggestions. An over-critical person can never truly, deeply understand his neighbor or feel empathy toward him; he never walks in the other person's shoes (or sandals) to feel what life is like for that person.

The hypercritical person always finds fault, is never happy, because basically he is afraid of being content with life. If he found happiness or perfection anywhere, it would pull the rug out from under his deepest convictions about the world. He would rather be miserable and right than happy and wrong. (See <http://EzineArticles.com/5499460>)

Some hypercritical people are not aware of how they are coming across to others, or they may be aware but don't care. Either way, it might be a good tactic to say something like, "Can you tell me something that isn't negative and critical? I prefer a happy ending." In that way you have drawn attention to their own attitude.

c) The third obstacle to spiritual openness that we want to consider is a hardened heart.

The Israelites were famous for hardening their hearts against God's commands. Psalm 95, which the RB has the monks chant for an invitational every morning at Vigils, is a daily reminder to "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the desert" (Ps 95:8). The two Hebrew names mean "trial and dispute" (Ex 17:1-7) and refer to the period when the Israelites were going through the desert after crossing the Sea of Reeds and complained to Moses about the lack of water, saying "Is the Lord in our midst or not?"

God wanted their hearts to be not hard but malleable like soft clay in the potter's hand, so that the divine potter could shape and fashion them as he pleased until they reached the final form that he wished for them. We find this image in Jeremiah 18:5-6: "Then the word of the Lord came to me. Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done—oracle of the Lord. Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel."

In our spiritual life want to have a pliant heart, not a hardened heart, so that God can work with us. We want to cultivate an abiding attitude of docility or teachableness. The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) in his classic book *Prayer* says, "The contemplative . . . has to let himself be as clay in the potter's hands, and be moulded in the course of his contemplation, content not to

know the law of his transformation, [only sensing it in advance from the potter's hands, acting fiercely or gently, roughly or softly"] (p. 167). That is why docility is crucial in the life of prayer.

Hardness of heart is demonstrated in the "know it all" attitude. One writer, a Franciscan sister, recalls a childhood experience of having this attitude: "As a child I can remember my father scolding me because when he started to tell me something I interrupted with 'Yes, I know.' It is this attitude of 'I know' that destroys my ability to listen, that allows me to think that I have the total picture and that I have no need to hear again what the other is trying to say. The 'I-know-it-person' is unable to hear because she has drawn her own conclusions; things are already neatly packaged and arranged, and listening will only cause doubt to appear. Thus listening is a waste of time, because the person's mind is closed to any modification to her thought" (Mairead O'Reardon, thesis on *Justice*, 397).

The docile person doesn't know it all already, although he may know a great deal. He expects to be told, expects to learn more from this other person. To a certain degree he is rich in knowledge, but with respect to knowing all there is to know, he is a still poor man. If someone comes to the monastery without docility, he comes as a rich man, as someone who has more than enough to support himself, to live on by himself; he does not need any help or suggestions from others, because he knows it all already. His heart is closed and hardened.

The hardened heart is a major obstacle to docility or teachableness.