Self & Society, 2016
Vol. 44, No. 4, 402–410, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2015.1011917

'I dare not lean to my conceit': Growth in the understanding of contemplative experience in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

David L. Collins*

Department of Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

(*Received 13 December 2014; accepted 20 January 2015*)

In this article the nature of the contemplative experience of 'unknowing' is explored, as it is depicted in the classic of Western contemplative literature, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Attention is given to the fact that the *Cloud* author changed his description of unknowing over time, in a manner reflecting growth and deepening of his understanding of the nature of contemplative experience. The article's author also includes mention of a pair of personal meditative experiences, in underscoring the likelihood that considerable humility and open-mindedness are called for in the modern-day incorporation of 'mindfulness' in psychotherapy and programs of well-being.

Keywords: unknowing; contemplative practice; meditation; mindfulness; mystical experience

In Middle English – the language of the classic of Western contemplative literature, *The Cloud of Unknowing* – the modern word 'concept' was most often spelled 'conceit'. For the *Cloud* author, 'conceit' meant an opinion, an understanding, a view, or simply a thought. But the present-day connotation of conceit as something which involves an egoic investment, or in connection with which one has a sense of clung-to identity, is also a welcome association, given that the heart of the contemplative practice described in *The Cloud of Unknowing* entails letting go of our views, our thoughts, and our conceptual constructs, in order to cultivate an experience of selfless, unconstructed honesty and humble immediacy.

What the *Cloud* author called 'contemplation' today we would more often refer to as 'meditation'. In the *Cloud*, he describes a meditative technique that is a direct source for the modern practice of Christian 'centering prayer' (Keating, 1986), and has strong parallels with core elements of Vedantic mantra meditation, Zen *shikantaza*, and Theravadin 'mindfulness'.

Each of these, especially mindfulness, has come to receive a growing and meaningful incorporation in contemporary approaches to psychotherapy – Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and Action and Commitment Therapy being the best-known current examples. Questions can be raised, however, about the process of transporting and translating classic spiritual practices into modern forms of 'secular' therapy.

*Email: collins@utexas.edu

Figure 1. An image of a modern day Carthusian monk, from the 2005 film, *Into Great Silence*, directed by Philip Grönig.

It is my personal view that modern psychotherapy – as a discourse and practice devoted to supporting and enhancing the lived quality of human experience – is itself a form of spirituality. But be that as it may, I think it is worthwhile to consider whether modern applications of mindfulness techniques actually do justice to the depth and subtlety of classic contemplative spiritual practices. To put this a bit glibly: I find it worthwhile to reflect on the question of whether we really know what we are doing.

Contemporary efforts to study and incorporate meditative and contemplative practices in psychotherapy and programs of well-being are profoundly valuable. But I believe that a considerable degree of humility and open-mindedness is called for in this regard. To bolster and illustrate that point, I would like to look at several key features of the classic meditative practice of 'unknowing' as it is described in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and to make at least brief mention of its parallels with the practices of other contemplative traditions. I especially want to emphasize that the *Cloud* author's appreciation of the nature of meditative experience is something that grew for him over time. His understanding of contemplative practice shifted in a way that is both subtle and profound. In highlighting that shift in his understanding, I would like to raise the possibility that our own modern understandings of meditative 'mindfulness' are likewise something that are likely to be susceptible to nuance, modification, and growth.

We do not know exactly who the *Cloud* author was, since he wrote his works anonymously, but he was probably a Carthusian monk. From his vocabulary and writing style, we know approximately when and where he lived – namely, in the East Midlands area of England in the latter half of the fourteenth century. He wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* for a younger friend of his, who had asked him for guidance in the practice of contemplative prayer. Some years later, the *Cloud* author again wrote to his friend and provided him with a kind of follow-up or sequel to the *Cloud*, called *The Epistle of Privy Counseling.* A comparison of the two writings shows a subtle change in the way the *Cloud* author expressed his understanding of the essence of contemplative experience, a change that is in the direction of a greater

immediacy, simplicity, and selflessness. While the *Cloud* and *Privy Counseling* are quite literally medieval works, their author exhibits a matter-of-factly remarkable degree of insight into the mechanics of conscious experience and the psychology of contemplative practice.

For the *Cloud* author, the heart of contemplation, or, again, what we would call meditation, is the process of 'unknowing'. Unknowing involves quieting, letting go of, and no longer identifying with the occurrence of thoughts and words and images in our minds. The purpose of contemplation is to foster an experiential immediacy with a living truth that is more direct and consequential than any of our made-up thoughts or ideas. As a Christian, that living truth for the *Cloud* author is God. But I would like to emphasize that for the *Cloud* author, God is an experiential realization. God, for him, is an experiential truth that is to be found in and as an immediate, directly felt engagement with that which is always already here – something always already present to us – before our thoughts and concepts. For the *Cloud* author, God is an experience, and it is an experience that is quite literally too simple for words.

I am reminded in this connection of the reasons given by the modern Tibetan Buddhist, Sogyal Rinpoche, for why we are not all already awakened – it is too simple, it is too near, it is too profound, and it is too wonderful (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p. 50). As a Buddhist, Sogyal Rinpoche is not going to speak of awakened realization as an experience of 'God'. But when we give close attention to the actual mechanics of a number of the most basic of Buddhist meditation procedures and those of the *Cloud* author's practice of unknowing, we can see that they are often doing effectively the same thing. In the end it is those experiential mechanics that are of essential practical significance – experiential meditative procedures are ultimately more pragmatically 'operational' than, say, the theological constructs of their respective traditions – especially given the fact that these practices entail stilling our words and concepts. In short, it is not about the words here; it is about a lived experiential process.

The practice of unknowing entails bringing the mind to rest in something that is more original than our ideas or theological conceptualizations. For the *Cloud* author, expressing that resulting realization is going to involve using his cultural frame of reference and Christian vocabulary. But again, for him 'God' is not just a conceptual belief. It is not a 'conceit'. This is an immensely important point, but for the sake of brevity I would simply like to offer the following summary suggestion: in the writings of a contemplative like the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the word 'God' is most usefully and beautifully appreciated as a kind of three-letter poem. And it is a poem gesturing towards an experience – a practical and verifiable experiential realization – that is simpler, and more wonderful, than any created name or set of letters.

To practice unknowing and to cultivate what he calls 'the feeling of God', the *Cloud* author points out that, ultimately speaking, there is nothing we really need to do. The living truth is something that is simpler than words and conceits, and it is always already here. It is with us and it is part of us. And thus the *Cloud* author can say, 'He [God] asketh none help, but only thyself' (Hodgson, 1944, p. 15). Most of the time, though, we are so thoroughly identified with and distracted by our thoughts and constructed notions that we are unappreciative of the living miracle that is always and already present in and around us. And for that reason, in order to allow

ourselves to return to a more immediate and appreciative engagement with the miracle of the present moment, we need to extricate ourselves from our distractions (as the *Cloud* author will figuratively advise, 'and keep thou the windows and the door for flies', by which he means 'just guard the senses and the mind for distractions' [ibid.]).

The *Cloud* author understands that there is in us 'another way of knowing', which is more fundamental and more direct than our discursive, conceptual thinking. And in the *Cloud* he depicts that other way of knowing as something that is more a matter of our hearts than of our reasoning minds. Rather than a 'proud, curious wit', what is called for in contemplative practice is the cultivation of a humble, loving intention. The *Cloud* author speaks of that loving intention as 'a meek stirring', 'a blind love', and 'a naked intent' (ibid., p. 22).

He also instructs us to let go of everything else. We are to step out from under and to 'forget' the occurrence of thoughts and images in our minds. We are to allow, instead, a naked orientation of our loving will towards that which is most fundamentally real, always already present, before thoughts and images. This is an extremely simple exercise, but given our habitual proclivity to engage in ratiocinative thinking and to 'lean' thereby to our 'conceits', becoming so simple is not something that is easy to do. So the *Cloud* author offers a practical concession, which he calls a 'sleight', to help us: namely, he suggests using a repeated one-word thought to displace our engagement with other, more habitual and discursive thoughts. The following is my translation of a passage from Chapter 7 of the *Cloud* in which he describes this meditative technique:

> If you would like to have that intent wrapped and folded up into a single word, in order to have a better hold on it, take just a little word of one syllable, since that is going to be better for working with the mind. And such a word is the word GOD or the word LOVE. Choose whichever you want, or another one if you like, that you most prefer that is a single syllable, and fasten that word to your heart, such that it never leaves there, no matter what comes up.
>
> …With this word you will knock down all manner of thoughts under the cloud of forgetting; such that if any thought pushes itself up and asks you what you would like to have, answer him with no more words than just this one. And if he offers out of his great educatedness to expound on that word for you and to tell you all about that word's qualities, tell him you will have it whole, not undone or taken apart. And if you will hold yourself firm in this purpose, be assured he will not stay very long. (cf. Hodgson, 1944, pp. 28–29)

In Middle English the word 'sleight' carried something of the meaning it also has for us today – namely, a kind of skillful trick (as in the phrase 'sleight of hand'). But in the fourteenth century it also retained a connection with the word 'sleigh', which in our day survives as 'sly' but which in the *Cloud* author's time could also mean 'wise'. A meditative sleight, in other words, is what Buddhists call an *upâya*, a skillfully expedient means. And while 'the feeling of God' – as a lived connection with that which is always already true – is something that, strictly speaking, ultimately requires no effort on our part, most of us most of the time nonetheless need some help. We need some technique by which to aid ourselves to become less distracted and less caught up in, and identified with, our customary habits of thinking. Much like the Hindu Vedantins, in the above passage the *Cloud* author recommends using

Figure 2. A contemporary North American Carthusian.

a short mantra-like word – a kind of single-syllable thought which is, as it were, not to be thought about – in order to still and dissociate from the occurrence of other, more complicated thoughts and mental events. (Many meditative traditions use the breath in an analogous way, that is, as an ongoing aspect of the present moment with which to cultivate a direct, living, and ultimately compassionate connection, and by means of which to quiet and dissociate from the occurrence of discursive thinking.)

A great deal more could be said about the nature of unknowing as it is depicted and explored in the *Cloud*, but in the interest of space I would like to turn to note the subtle shift that the *Cloud* author makes in the way he describes unknowing in *The Epistle of Privy Counseling.* The *Privy Counseling* was written a few years after the *Cloud*, and it was addressed to the same contemplative friend, who had apparently asked its author some additional questions about meditative practice. In his reply, the *Cloud* author reiterates a number of the main points from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but he does so in a way that reflects a deepened understanding on his part of the nature of contemplative experience.

The bare orientation to the truth which is described in the *Cloud* is depicted there as a matter of the heart and the will. It is, in other words, something that is essentially *intentional*, and as such it bears an implicit if subtle division between the subject practitioner and his or her intended object, that object being the living, divine truth. In the *Privy Counseling*, on the other hand, the core of contemplative experience is described as something that is essentially *ontological*, and the subtle dualism inherent in an experiencing subject over and against an experienced object is ultimately effaced.

Here is how he describes the core feature of contemplative practice in the second paragraph of the *Privy Counseling*:

> When thou comest by thyself [for contemplative prayer] think not before what thou shalt do after, but forsake as well good thoughts as evil thoughts …. And look that nothing leave {remain} in thy working mind but a naked intent stretching into God, not clothed in any special thought …. (ibid., p. 135)

This much is effectively a repetition of the instruction he used in the *Cloud*. But the author now goes on to reframe what 'naked intent' actually means for him:

> This naked intent … shall be nought else to thy thought and to thy feeling but a naked thought and a blind feeling of thine own being: as if thou saidist thus unto God within in thy meaning, 'That that I am Lord, I offer unto thee ….'. (ibid., p. 136)

In the *Privy Counseling*, the author takes a verse from Proverbs (3:9), which in the original Hebrew concerned tithing and spoke of offering a portion of one's 'worth' to spiritual causes. But in the Vulgate Bible, the Latin word used to translate 'worth' was substantia; this prompts the *Cloud* author to reflect on that verse as an allegorical call for us to 'worship God with our substance'. When he then turns to repeat his suggestion of meditating with a mantra-like word, instead of the terms 'LOVE' or 'GOD' – which words, again, allow of a subtle degree of separation that is inherent to intentionality – the *Cloud* author now suggests practicing with the word 'IS':

> there is no name, nor feeling nor beholding {awareness} more, nor so much, according {fitting} unto everlastingness, the which is God, as is that which may be had, seen and felt in the blind and the lovely beholding of this word IS …. And therefore be as blind in the lovely beholding of the being of thy God as in the naked beholding of the being of thyself, without any curious seeking in thy wits to look after any quality that longeth {belongs} to his being or to thine. But all curiosity left and far put back, do worship to thy God with thy substance, all that thou art that thou art unto all him that he is as he is, the which only of himself, without more, is the blissful being both of himself and of thee.
>
> And thus shalt thou knittingly, and in a manner that is marvelous, worship God with himself; for that thou art thou hast of him and he it is. (ibid., pp. 143–144)

This is a 'suchness' practice, one that is ultimately much like Zen's *shikantaza.* (There is also here, of course, the phrasing that is literally reminiscent of the Upanishadic maxim, 'That thou art'.) In the *Privy Counseling*, the *Cloud* author reflects the understanding that contemplative practice is a matter of coming to rest in and as a naked, unconstructed awareness of the sheer facticity of our being, and to then offer that living truth up to its source. He understands that such a practice is the activity of worshiping the truth and the living source of all being with itself.

In this practice the implicit constructions of egoic agency – which were still potentially present in the injunction 'to love' or 'to intend' – are now effectively erased. Indeed, the *Cloud* author will go on to offer a further instruction: that as we come to connect with and rest in an awareness of the bare facticity of our being, we are to let go even of the concept that it is 'ours'.

> For wit {know} thou well for certain that, though all {although} I bid thee forget all things but the blind feeling of thy naked being, yet nevertheless my will is, and that was my intent in the beginning, that thou shouldest forget the feeling of the being of thyself as for the feeling of the being of God. (ibid., pp. 155–156)

What is depicted here is an experiential realization of the utter and simple wonder of living being – something that is not only beyond theological concepts, but beyond even the conceit of 'me' and 'mine' –which is arrived at, connected with, and appreciated, as an act of immediate simplicity and utter honesty. There is nothing more basic, and nothing more profound. It perhaps goes without saying that such an experiential practice, more fundamental than the constructions of a 'me' and a 'mine', will be difficult to put in words:

> I cannot tell thee the worthiness of this work with my boistous {crude} beastly {animal} tongue … for all that is spoken of it is not it, but of it (ibid., p. 153).

I would like to shift gear at this point to offer a brief personal excursus. I have been practicing meditation fairly intensively for several decades now (primarily with the San Francisco Zen Center and Insight Meditation communities in the USA). I have also undertaken some academic study in comparative religion (with Masters degrees in Western Theology and Buddhist Studies) and a doctorate in clinical psychology. It is clear to me that the true nature of contemplative experience is something I still do not fully understand. Furthermore, it is increasingly clear to me that the true nature of contemplative experience is ultimately something I *cannot* fully understand. And I would like to offer brief accounts of a pair of experiences that gesture towards what I mean when I say that.

In recent years I have practiced a form of Old School Buddhist altered states known as the *jhanas.* The jhanas are distinctive and rather remarkable states of 'absorption', and they occur in a set progression. Each of what are known as the first four 'form jhanas' has a characteristic profile and a recognizable set of distinct features. And each of the jhanas in this sequence builds successively from the preceding jhana, in what amounts to a realization of progressively decreasing degrees of mental 'agitation'. As an example, a characteristic element of the third jhana is a readily discernable, pervasive, and quietly blissful contentedness, a quality of experience that receives the label *sukha* (which conventionally means 'sweetness'). With time, however, even that quality of sweet contentedness comes to be appreciated as a generated state and, thus, effectively a form of 'agitation'. Less agitated still is the fourth jhana, in which even the experiential sense of contentedness becomes calmed and let go of, with a resulting pervasive experiential quality of equanimity (*upekkha*). (A comprehensive description of the jhanas can be found in Catherine, 2008.)

Around two years ago, after I had returned home from an intensive 10-day jhanas retreat, for a period of five weeks I found myself practicing the jhanas *in my sleep.* I was actually meditating while I was asleep. This was not dreaming (although that is an experience I have also had – namely, meditating as a character within a dream). There were two reasons that I knew I was practicing meditation with the jhanas in my sleep. One was that I would sometimes wake up during the night in the middle of the jhanas sequence – I would wake up, for example, in the third jhana –

together with what I can only call a kind of body memory of having traversed the first two jhanas before I woke up. The other way I knew I have no adequate way to put into words: I just knew. Some part of me, some kind of knowing that was other than my conventional waking process, knew what it was doing. I was 'doing' sleep, and I was simultaneously doing meditation. But it was obviously a different kind of 'I' and a different kind of 'doing' than what those words typically refer to in my ordinary waking functioning.

Here is the second anecdote. Recently I was meditating during a lunch break with a group at the university where I work, and on that particular day I was rather tired. During the meditation, I felt a little wave of sleepiness arise, and, for the first time in my life, I experienced that wave of sleepiness as an *agitation* of my mind. Until that point I had carried the implicit presumption that going to sleep is essentially a matter of relaxing and 'turning things off'. But in that moment it was manifestly apparent to me – and on reflection, actually not all that surprising – that sleep is a generated state. It is a thing produced. Sleep is something 'turned on'. It is, again borrowing from the language of the Old School Buddhists, an 'agitation'.

I then realized that our typical waking state is also an 'agitation'. Our typical state of being awake is also a thing that is produced. It is something generated. It is, as it were, a kind of program or 'application'. It is a constructed process.

My point in including these personal stories here in an article otherwise focused on the Christian contemplative work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is this. Such experiences demonstrate for me a first-hand appreciation that not only are our understandings of the nature of contemplative experience susceptible to growth, but even our sense of what 'understanding' means – even the 'conceit', in other words, that 'I know' – is a thing that is produced and constructed. It is something that is generated and manufactured. From within that perspective, I feel it is both warranted and beneficial that we remain humble, open-minded, and open-hearted about our working understandings of things like the true nature of meditative experience and 'mindfulness'.

Again, the increasing incorporation of meditation and contemplative experience in modern-day psychotherapy and programs of well-being is in my view a tremendously valuable development (and, frankly, one that is long overdue – given, for instance, the call made more than a century ago by a founding figure of Western psychology, William James, for their serious study [James, 1902]). But I also feel that modern psychology still has a significant way to go to catch up with the world's contemplatives.

When we realize, furthermore, that even those classic teachers and sources of contemplative practice can show growth in their understanding of meditative experience over time, it seems very likely that any thought we may have that 'we know what we are doing' will entail more than a bit of conceit.

Acknowledgement

The image from the film *Into Great Silence* was retrieved online from https://citydesert.wordpress.com/2013/11/24into-great-silence/; the second image is from the website http://laycarthusians.homestead.com/transfiguraion.html. The phrase 'I dare not lean to my conceit' comes from the Cloud author's work, 'An Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings' (in Hodgson, 1955, p. 63).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

Notes on contributor

David L. Collins, PhD, is a meditation teacher and therapist in Austin, Texas, currently employed by the Psychology Department of the University of Texas. In addition to a clinical psychology doctorate, he has Masters degrees in theology from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and in Buddhist studies from Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religion. He has a long-standing interest in the parallels in meditation practices across cultures.

References

Catherine, S. (2008). *Focused and fearless: A meditator's guide to states of deep joy, calm, and clarity*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Hodgson, P. (Ed.). (1944). *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*. London: Oxford University Press.

Hodgson, P. (Ed.). (1955). *Deonise Hid Divinite: And other treatises on contemplative prayer related to The Cloud of Unknowing*. London: Oxford University Press.

James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. New York: Modern Library.

Keating, T. (1986). *Open mind, open heart: The contemplative dimension of the Gospel*. Rockport, MA: Element.

Sogyal Rinpoche (1992). *The Tibetan book of living and dying*. San Francisco: Harper.