Spiritual Diagnosis
Spiritual Healing

The seven deadly sins and their remedies

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“Grace builds on nature”, and our emotional life is a central part of our spiritual journey. In the 4th century the Desert Fathers and Mothers already realised that cultivation of our positive emotions and the transformation of our negative ones is among the great challenges of the spiritual journey.
Desert Fathers and Mothers

Mar Saba Monastery in the Judaean desert, AD 438-
Sayings

When Abba Macarius was living in Egypt, one day he came across a man who had brought a donkey to his cell and was stealing his possessions. As though he were a passer-by who did not live there, he went up to the thief and helped him to load the beast and sent him peaceably on his way, saying to himself, ‘We brought nothing into this world (1 Tim. 6:7) but the Lord gave; as he willed, so it is done: blessed be the Lord in all things.’
Abba Benjamin said, Be joyful at all times, and give thanks for all things.
Abba Poemen said: Someone may seem to be silent, but if in the heart one is condemning others, then one is babbling ceaselessly. And there may be another who talks from morning till evening, and yet in the heart that person is truly silent. That person says nothing that is not profitable.
Someone asked Abba Arsenius: How is it that you, with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts? He answered, I do indeed know Latin and Greek literature, but I do not even know the alphabet of this peasant.

Abba Poemen said: See this empty jar. If someone were to fill it with serpents, lizards, and scorpions and then leave the lid sealed and abandon it, all these reptiles—aren’t they going to die there? And if you open the jar, won’t all the creatures get out and sting people? And so, it’s the same for a man: if he watches his tongue and shuts his mouth, all the creatures die inside. But if he works his tongue and speaks, the venomous creatures will come out and sting his brother and the Lord will be angry.
Evagrius Ponticus (346-399)

A founder of Christian spiritual theology, the first to systematise the reflection and experience of the Desert Fathers.

Protegé of St Basil the Great and St Gregory Nazianzen. Brilliant career in Constantinople, cut short by affair.

Fled to Jerusalem, given refuge by Melania the Elder in her monastery/hospice on Mount of Olives. A nervous breakdown?

Becomes monk in Nitria, Egypt.
Sophisticated system for psychological/spiritual growth.
Based on the brilliant Origen (d. 253)
the traditions on prayer of the desert fathers
his own spiritual experience
and his acute observation of the psychology and spiritual development of the monks he knew.
A world of demons

The universe of the Desert Fathers is alive with spirits good and bad. The cosmic struggle between angelic and demonic forces, the chaos of the world itself, the struggle of humanity against its worst possibilities, was brought home to each human heart in the struggle against evil thoughts.

Thus the need for continual vigilance, because natural appetites, when uncontrolled, can develop into evil deeds.

But they are fundamentally optimistic: demonic assaults cannot be avoided but they can be resisted by free will.
Basic psychology

Three ways the mind works:

*epithumos*: desire/attraction
*thumos*: aversion/reaction
*nous*: rational/intellectual
The eight thoughts (logismoi)

*desire/attraction*
- gluttony, lust, avarice

*aversion/resistance*
- anger, sadness

*nous*
- acedia, vainglory, pride
Pride
Lust
Greed
Envy
Gluttony
Sloth
Wrath
### Diagnosis and remedy

**From William Harmless**

*Desert Christians*

**Figure 11.1.** Evagrius's map of spiritual progress.
The aim

For Evagrius the aim of dedicated Christian living is to come to *apatheia* (literally *passionlessness*)

= emotional equilibrium

“a peaceful integration of emotional energy that makes contemplation and knowledge possible” (Stewart)

John Cassian will translate this with the biblical term “purity of heart” = authenticity, integrity
John Cassian (ca. 360-ca. 435)

Became a monk in Bethlehem; later spent 15 years studying with the famous monks of Egypt; greatly influenced by teaching of Evagrius.

Founds two monasteries in southern France around 415; brings thought of desert fathers to West.

Evagrius’ *apatheia* translated as “purity of heart” (“Blessed are the pure of heart; they shall see God”).

= preferring nothing to the call of God; authenticity of life; singleness of vision; having the Kingdom of God always in sight; dismantling the false self we have built around our true self.
Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604)

The eight “thoughts” become the “seven deadly sins”:
- pride
- envy
- sloth
- avarice
- anger
- lust
- gluttony
Seven Deadly Sins

In Christian tradition they were an important guide to self-examination and spiritual formation.
Theologians commented on them; children memorised them; preachers gave sermons on them.
But the link between diagnosis and remedy was sometimes lost.
Two columns!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIAGNOSIS</th>
<th>HEALING</th>
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<tr>
<td>pride</td>
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An attentive life

- They [the ancient monks] knew that unless one could learn to attend to and eventually master the myriad conflicting “thoughts” that arose continuously in one’s mind, one’s consciousness would never be clear enough or free enough to enable one to pay attention to the things that matter most—the truth of one’s own life, the needs of one’s fellow human beings, the luminosity of the living world, or the abiding presence of God. The ascetic work oriented toward clearing space in the mind became the necessary ground out of which the very possibility of a more encompassing awareness of the whole could arise and take root in one’s life. Still, the realization of this ideal in the life of the monk was immensely difficult, for the effort to practice attention in relation to any particular aspect of one’s life inevitably raised more searching questions arising out of the deeper currents of one’s life...
• The mysterious process of reshaping one’s consciousness, which is fundamentally what the practice of attention to one’s thoughts was understood to facilitate, was at the very heart of the monastic practice of *prosoche* [attentiveness]... It meant learning to see—one’self, God and the world—with a full, free, encompassing vision. The specific practices understood to help one realize this vision—silence, solitude, dialogue with an elder, and rumination upon scripture, among others—both narrowed and sharpened the focus of the mind and opened it little by little to the widest possible horizon. The practice of rumination or meditation on scripture... opened up a space where one’s perceptive capacities became ever more refined and one could begin to sense oneself as dwelling in relation to the infinite.

Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*
The Examen Prayer

Transition: I become aware of the love with which God looks upon me as I begin this examen.

Step One: Gratitude. I note the gifts that God’s love has given me this day, and I give thanks to God for them.

Step Two: Petition. I ask God for an insight and a strength that will make this examen a work of grace, fruitful beyond my human capacity alone.

Step Three: Review. With my God, I review the day. I look for the stirrings in my heart and the thoughts that God has given me this day. I look also for those that have not been of God. I review my choices in response to both, and throughout the day in general.

Step Four: Forgiveness. I ask for the healing touch of the forgiving God who, with love and respect for me, removes my heart’s burdens.

Step Five: Renewal. I look to the following day and, with God, plan concretely how to live it in accord with God’s loving desire for my life.

Transition: Aware of God’s presence with me, I prayerfully conclude the examen.