What should a monk do to make progress? What spiritual exercises—inner exertions of thought and will—should he practice to attain perfection? These questions are repeatedly asked in the monastic milieu, including that of the monks of Gaza in the fifth and sixth centuries. Despite the fact that without the help of the Fathers the whole ascetic pursuit would have seemed impossible, several spiritual exercises were listed by the teachers in Gaza to mould their disciples and guide them to self-transformation: attention to oneself (προσωπή) and vigilance at every moment, watching the heart (νησίς), examining conscience (συνείδησις), meditation (μελέτη), self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια), a complete elimination of passions (ἀπόθεια), and humility (ταπείνωσις). We wish to discuss here an additional component, neglected by scholars—that is, the emergence of individual prayer in ascetic culture as a factor of spiritual progress. In the rich corpus from Gaza the theme of private prayer is elaborated with great clarity and appears to have been a major method of training for

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1 See, for example, Barsanuphius and John, Questions and Answers 196, 197, 202–203, 249, 351.
2 Questions and Answers 124, 197, 225, 260–261. For this aspect in the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John, see Perrone, “The Necessity of Advice.”
3 Melete is the common term for meditation in Gaza. It commonly refers to meditation as a general state of concentration aimed at precluding distraction of the mind (Abba Isaiah, Asceticon 3.4; 16.74). This state includes various exercises such as reciting verses from Scripture (Asceticon 3.42; see also Evagrius, Praktikos 15, 69). However, it should be stressed that in the Questions and Answers the terminological distinction between prayer, reciting psalms, and meditation can often be discerned. See, for example, Questions and Answers 730. The term melete is also used in the corpus for designating continuous concentration on death. See Questions and Answers 639. See also Evagrius, Praktikos 52, pp. 618–20. Although meditation was a common practice in this monastic circle the sources do not elaborate on it beyond general remarks. See e.g., Questions and Answers 177, 241, 431. On the combination of unceasing prayer and meditation in Cassian’s teaching, see Conferences 10, and Stewart, Cassian the Monk, pp. 101–3.
4 For the various requirements for attaining perfection, see, e.g., Questions and Answers 196, 200, 202–3, 207–8.
modifying the individual. The strength of the spiritual school of Gaza lay not in formulating a new liturgy or stipulating new regulations fixing the time and content of prayer. Its major contribution in this domain is to be found in its individual direction and help to each member in constructing his new self through the mechanism of prayer. Thus the axis of this chapter will be three private and spontaneous types of prayer: \(^{5}\) unceasing prayer (ἀδιάλειπτος προσευχή/ἐνχώρή), pure prayer (προσευχή καθαρά), and remembrance of God (μνήμη θεοῦ). Although such types of prayer were not new for Christians in the fifth and sixth centuries, in Gaza they gained new meaning, formulation, and function. They became the most radical method for cultivating the self, transforming its level, and ensuring an encounter with the divine.

As the title of this chapter suggests, its starting point is Pierre Hadot’s groundbreaking study *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.\(^{6}\) Hadot focussed on the notion in antiquity that true philosophy is a spiritual exercise—that is, first and foremost a way of life, an art of living leading to an altered level of the self.\(^{7}\) Drawing on the portrayal of monasticism as a *philosophia* depicted by Christian writers from the fourth century on, Hadot identified the components of the spiritual exercises listed in ascetic works as those prevailing in the Greco-Roman world. He based himself on various Greek philosophical schools (Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Platonism); on the writings of Philo of Alexandria, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Plotinus; and on monastic sources. The latter were mainly those whose provenance is the desert fathers of Egypt, Evagrius’ *Praktikos*, Cassian’s *Conferences*, and Dorotheus’ *Instructions*.\(^{8}\) This is not the first time that

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\(^{5}\) The term “spontaneous prayer,” currently used to distinguish all sorts of private prayer from the fixed liturgy, was coined by F. Heiler in his phenomenological study *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, Eng. trans. of the German original (1920), S. McComb (Oxford, 1937).


\(^{8}\) Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 131–36.