The World Community for Christian Meditation

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The problem of distractions

"I want now to address a particular question that we all encounter. It is the question of distractions. What should you do when you begin to meditate and distracting thoughts come into your mind? The advice that the tradition has to give us is to ignore the distractions and to say your word and to keep on saying your word.

Don't waste any energy in trying to furrow your brow and say, `I will not think of what I am going to have for dinner', or `who I'm going to see today', or `where am I going tomorrow', or whatever the distraction may be. Don't try to use any energy to dispel the distraction. Simply ignore it and the way to ignore it is to say your word."
(John Main, Moment of Christ)

The problem all of us have in coming to an inner silence in meditation is that our minds are full of thoughts, images, sensations, emotions, insights, hopes, regrets, a never ending array of distractions.

St Teresa of Avila once said the human mind is like a boat where mutinous sailors have tied up the captain. The sailors all take a turn at steering the boat and of course the boat goes around in circles and eventually crashes on the rocks. That is our mind, says Teresa, full of thoughts taking us off in every direction. She also says:

?Distractions and the wandering mind are part of the human condition and can no more be avoided than eating and sleeping.?

The human mind has been compared to a great tree with monkeys jumping from branch to branch chattering away. Laurence Freeman, in commenting on this story, says there is a path that leads through this forest of chattering monkeys and it is the practice of reciting a mantra in our daily periods of meditation.

The mantra is help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond all distractions, words

and thoughts, even holy thoughts. We say the mantra slowly, steadily with loving attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered, we simply come back to our mantra. We cannot force this way of prayer through sheer will power. Do not try too hard. Let go; just relax. There is no need to fight or struggle with distractions. Simply gently return to saying your mantra. Unfortunately the repetition of a mantra does not bring instant peace, harmony, the absence of distractions or silence. We must accept we are on the pilgrimage of meditation. We should not get upset at continual distractions. We should not have as our aim to be free of all thoughts. John Main constantly advises us not to come to meditation with any goals or expectations. The mantra will eventually become rooted in our consciousness through the simple fidelity of returning to the mantra each morning and evening.

A problem often observed by those meditating is that the thinking process continues even while saying the mantra. There is even a term for this: double tracking. Again this is nothing to be concerned about. With perseverance the mantra will become stronger and our thoughts will diminish as the pilgrimage of meditation continues.

Adapted from Paul Harris ? ?Christian Meditation Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation?

For further help with setting up and leading groups, please look at the ?Christian Meditation Groups? Website in English, Spanish and French, based on the book ?A Pearl of Great Price? by Laurence Freeman

School of Meditation Weekly Teachings

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