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Meditatio

TALKS SERIES 2012-C · JUL - SEP

John Main

Twelve Talks for Meditators



Selections from talks to
weekly meditation groups in Montreal

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“These talks are intended to help you prepare for the silence of meditation. They are designed to help you bring your mind to a state of peacefulness and concentration and point you in the direction you need to be facing in your meditation, which is centre-wards. My recommendation is that you listen to just one of them at a time, and then begin your meditation.” JOHN MAIN

John Main’s practical teaching and his clarity and authority will inspire the newcomer to begin meditating, and encourage the practising meditator to move on in their journey with the freshness of a new start. In meditation, John Main says, we are all beginners. John Main OSB (1926-1982), a Benedictine monk of Ealing Abbey, London, recovered the Christian tradition of meditation as practised by the early Desert monks and taught it as a spiritual discipline for people from all walks of life.



The World Community for
Christian Meditation
Singapore

Transcript of talks given to weekly meditation groups in Montreal

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The language in which we express our spiritual experience changes. The reality of the Spirit does not change. St Paul wrote that “we do not even know how to pray but the Spirit prays within us” (Rom 8:26). What this means in the language of our own day is that before we can pray we have first to become still, to concentrate. Only then can we enter into a loving awareness of the spirit of Jesus within our heart.

JOHN MAIN OSB



profound and loving mutual respect. Christian community is, in essence, the experience of being held in reverence by others, and we in our turn reverencing them. This reverence for each other reveals the members of the community as being sensitively attuned one to the other on the wavelength of the Spirit, of the same Spirit who has called each of us to fullness of love. In others, I recognise the same Spirit that lives in my heart, the Spirit that constitutes my real self. And in this recognition of the other person, a recognition that re-makes our minds and expands our consciousness, the other person comes into being as he really, is in his real self, not as a manipulated extension of myself. He moves and acts out of his own integral reality, and no longer as some image created by my imagination. Even if our ideas or principles clash, we are held in unison in dynamic equilibrium by our mutual recognition of each other's infinite loveliness, importance, and essential unique reality.

So the mutually supporting and suffering dynamic of Christ's mystical body has just this creative aim – the realisation of each other's essential being. True community happens in the process of drawing each other into the light of true being. In this process, we share a deepening experience of the joy of life, the joy of being, as we discover more and more of its fullness in a loving faith shared with others. The essence of community then is a recognition of and a deep reverence for the other.

Our meditation partakes of this essence, because it leads us to turn wholly towards the other, who is the Spirit in our heart. The full revelation of otherness and of our communion with all is achieved in reverential silence. So complete is our attention to the Other that we say nothing ourselves but wait for the Other to speak. The mantra guides us into a deeper consciousness of the silence that reigns within us, and then supports us while we wait.



13

Christian Community II

Just as we can cut God down to our own size, impose our identity on him, so we can do this with other people. Indeed if we do it to God, we inevitably do it to other people. And if we do it to them, we inevitably do it to God. This is the obverse of saying what St John said:

If a man says 'I love God' while hating his brother, he is a liar. If he does not love the brother whom he has seen, it cannot be that he loves God whom he has not seen. And indeed this command comes to us from Christ himself, that he who loves God must also love his brother. (Jn 4:19-21)

Let us be quite clear what St John is saying. We cannot love God or our neighbour we love *both* or neither. And what love means is rejoicing in the otherness of the other, because the depth of this awareness is the depth of our communion with the other. In this communion, the discovery of our own true self and that of the other is the same discovery. So in the people we live with we find not objects to be cast in our own superficial likeness but, much more, we find in them our true selves. For our true selves only appear, only become realised, when we are wholly turned towards another.

In meditation, we develop our capacity to turn our whole being towards the other. We learn to let our neighbour be, just as we learn to let God be. Not to manipulate our neighbour, but rather to reverence him, to reverence his importance, the wonder of his being. In other words, to love him. Because of this, prayer is the great school of community. In and through a common seriousness and perseverance in prayer, we realise the true glory of Christian community as a fraternity of the anointed, living together in

I

Introduction

The talks in this recording are intended to help you prepare for the silence of meditation. They are designed to help you bring your mind to a state of peacefulness, to concentration. And they are meant to point you in the direction you need to be facing for your meditation, which is centre-wards, to help you to move on and also to set out once more with faith and love and openness on your pilgrimage, with the freshness of a new start. In meditation we are all beginners.

There are twelve talks and my recommendation is that you listen to just one of them at a time (they each last for about five minutes) and then begin your meditation.

These talks are not designed to provide you with something to *think* about during your meditation, but they are meant as an encouragement for you to persevere and to be faithful. If you can concentrate on each of these talks for five minutes or so, you will be preparing yourself in the art of meditation, which is also essentially concentration. But in your meditation, you will not then be concentrating on ideas or images; you will be concentrating on the mantra and the silence to which it will lead you.



2

The Tradition of the Mantra I

I have often found when talking about meditation that it is the non-Christian, even the person with no religion, who first understands what meditation is about. To many ordinary churchgoers, and many priests, monks and sisters, the mantra seems at first a suspiciously new-fangled technique of prayer or like some exotic trick method or like some kind of therapy that may help you to relax but has no claim to be called Christian. This is a desperately sad state of affairs. So many Christians have lost touch with their own tradition of prayer. We no longer benefit as we should from the wisdom and experienced counsel of the great masters of prayer.

All these masters have agreed that in prayer it is not we ourselves who are taking the initiative. We are not talking to God; we are listening to his Word within us. We are not looking for him; it is *he* who has found us. Walter Hilton expressed it very simply in the 14th century. He wrote:

You yourself do nothing. You simply allow *him* to work in your SOUL. (*The Scale of Perfection Bk I. ch 24*)

The advice of St Teresa was in tune with this. She reminds us that all we can do in prayer is to dispose ourselves. The rest is in the power of the Spirit who leads us.

The language in which we express our spiritual experience changes. The reality of the Spirit does not change. So it is not enough to read the masters of prayer. We have to be able to apply the criterion of our own experience, limited though it may be, in order to see the same reality shining through different testimonies. For example, what Hilton and St Theresa are showing us is the same experience of prayer as that which led St Paul to write that

God is not a reflection of our consciousness, but we are his reflection his image by our incorporation with Jesus his Son, our brother. Our way to the experience of this truth is in the silence of our meditation.



for *the Other*. And in our prayer we have to discover ourselves existing for the Other, because it is in prayer that we experience ourselves being created and sustained by him.

In our prayer then we let God *be*. We rejoice in his being as he is. We do not try to manipulate him, to harangue him, or to flatter him. We do not dispel him with our clever words and formulas, but we worship him. That is, we acknowledge his value and worth. And in doing this, we discover that we, created in his image, share in his value and worth as sons of God.

Everyone has experienced at some time in their lives, when they are with the person they love or perhaps at the time of deep sorrow or pain, that there is a peculiar power in silence. Silence comes naturally at times of great significance in our life because we feel we are coming into a direct contact with some truth of such meaning that words would distract us and prevent us from fully entering into that meaning. The power that silence has is to allow this truth to emerge, to rise to the surface, to become visible. It happens naturally in its own time and fashion. We know that we are not responsible for making it appear, but we know that it has a personal meaning for us. We know it is greater than we are. And we find a perhaps unexpected humility within ourselves that leads us to real attentive silence. We let the truth be.

But there is also something in all of us that incites us to control the Other, to defuse the power we dimly apprehend in a moment of truth to protect ourselves from its transforming power by neutralising its otherness and imposing our own identity upon it. The crime of idolatry is precisely creating our own god in our own image and likeness. Rather than encounter God in his awesome difference from ourselves, we construct a toy model of him in our own psychic and emotional image. In doing this we don't harm him, of course, as unreality has no power over him, but we do debase and scatter ourselves surrendering the potential and divine glory of our humanity for the false glitter of the golden calf. But truth is so much more exciting so much more wonderful.

“we do not even know how to pray but the Spirit prays within us”(Rom 8:26). What this means in the language of our own day is that *before* we can pray we have first to become still, to concentrate. Only then can we enter into a loving awareness of the spirit of Jesus within our heart.

Now, many Christians would still say at this point, ‘very well but this is for saints for specialists in prayer’, as if stillness and silence were not universal elements of the human spirit. This type of obstinate false humility is based on a plain unawareness of who St Paul was writing to in Rome, and Corinth and Ephesus. He was not writing to specialists, to Carmelites and Carthusians, but to husbands, wives, butchers and bakers. And it shows too an unawareness of the specific teaching on prayer by later masters.

St Teresa of Avila for example was of the opinion that if you were serious about prayer you would be led into what she called the prayer of quiet within a relatively short time, six months or a year. Abbot Marmion saw the first year's novitiate in the monastery as being designed to lead, at the end of it, to what he called contemplative prayer. St John of the Cross said that the principle sign of your readiness for silence in prayer, was that your discursive thinking at the time of prayer was becoming evidently a distraction and counter-productive.

There is a kind of self-important posing humility that makes us stand aloof from the call of the redemptive love of Jesus. Very often we are reluctant to admit that we are the sick and sinful Jesus came to heal. And very often we prefer our self-protecting isolation to the risk of our face-to-face encounter with the Other in the silence of our own vulnerability.

In meditation, we turn the searchlight of consciousness off ourselves, and that means off a self-centred analysis of our own unworthiness. “If memories of past actions keep coming between you and God,” says the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* “you are resolutely to step over them because of your deep love for God.” (*The Cloud*, Ch 6)

In prayer we come to a deeper awareness of God in Christ. Our way is the way of silence. The way to silence is the way of the mantra.



12

Christian Community I

If we Christians fail today to proclaim the gospel of Jesus with sufficient conviction and enthusiasm, it is due above all to our forgetting that the very essence of our meaning is to exist for others. The Church does not exist to perpetuate itself, to guard itself against injury, to increase its own security. It exists to lead others into an awareness of the redemptive love of God in Jesus, and insofar as it does really exist for the other the Church is invulnerable, triumphant.

You are the light for all the world, [Jesus told his disciples]. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under the meal-tub but on the lamp-stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. And you, like the lamp, must shed light upon your fellows so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:14)

If the world does not believe what we say about Jesus, what we say about the reality of the human spirit, is it not mainly because they do not believe that we really believe it and know it? It is not enough to turn our minds to changing the image of the Church in the world, to be constantly thinking what effect will this have, what impression will that make. We have to begin not by changing the image of the Church, but by re-discovering ourselves as the image of God.

There is only one way to do this, and it is the essential means of shedding the light with which the Church is entrusted upon everyone in the house. This is the way of prayer. The means in this matter, as in all, have to be conformable to the end. Our Christian communities do not exist for themselves but for others. Ultimately,

of the condition we are in here and now, is so overwhelming that we can hardly keep our concentration steady. We have been allowed to enter the sphere of God's grace, where we now stand. Jesus has blazed the trail for us and through his own experience has incorporated us in his present state, which is his glorious communion with the Father in his Risen life, a life that now pervades the whole of creation. We stand in the sphere of God's grace because we are where he is, and he is where we are. We are in him and his Spirit is in us.

And yet that passage I read ended with the words: "Let us exult in the hope of the Divine splendour that is to be ours." Why do we now seem to have returned to a postponement of our entering the sphere of God's grace? Is Paul's rhetoric tripping him up and leading him to contradict himself? No, what he is saying is what Jesus was saying: "the kingdom of heaven is upon you, is within you." But you must realise this; you must let your consciousness expand and your awareness develop. We are already in the sphere of God's grace because the Spirit has been sent into our hearts. But because we have been created in the image of God we are called to self-awareness. We ourselves must become aware of what Jesus has achieved for us. We must realise the persons we already are.

This is the purpose of our meditation, to lead us to a full awareness of who we are, where we are, to stop hovering in the realms of eternal postponement. We must touch down in the concrete reality of the present moment, where our divine splendour is revealed. We must become still. We have to learn how to pay attention steadily and continuously to the reality of our being in the here and now. Père de Caussade called this the sacrament of the present moment, and this is what the mantra leads us into: into a full awareness of the divine splendour of the eternal present. The mantra is our sacrament of the present moment.



3

The Tradition of the Mantra II

Jesus summons us to fullness of life, not to a self-centred reluctance to realise the true beauty and wonder of our being. The mantra is an ancient tradition, the purpose of which is to accept the invitation Jesus makes.

We find it in the ancient Jewish custom of blessing the Lord at all times. We find the mantra in the early Christian Church. We may find it for example in the Our Father which was a series of short rhythmic phrases in the original Aramaic. We find it too in the Orthodox tradition of the Jesus Prayer, the prayer that Jesus himself commended: "Lord be merciful to me a sinner." (Luke 18:13)

The prayer of Jesus himself as recorded in the Gospel leads to the same conclusions. "Lord teach us to pray" his disciples asked Him. His teaching was simplicity itself:

When you pray do not be like the hypocrites... but go into a room by yourself, shut the door and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place... Do not go babbling on like the heathen who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Your Father knows what your needs are before you ask them. (Matt 6:5-8)

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is described as praying over and over again "in the same words" (Matt 26:44). And whenever he addresses the Father for the sake of the crowd, the word Abba is always on his lips, the same word which St Paul describes the Spirit of Jesus eternally crying in our hearts.

Time and again, the practical advice of masters of prayer is summed up in the simple injunction: "Say your Mantra."

Use this little word [*The Cloud of Unknowing* advises], and pray not in many words but in a little word of one syllable. Fix this word fast to your heart so that it is always there, come what may. With this word, you will suppress all thoughts. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch7, 39)

Abbot Chapman, in his famous letter of Michaelmas 1920 from Downside, describes a simple faithful use of a mantra which he had discovered more from his own courageous perseverance in prayer than from teachers. He had rediscovered a simple enduring tradition of prayer that entered the West through monasticism, and first entered Western monasticism through John Cassian in the late 4th century. Cassian himself received it from the holy men of the Desert who placed its origin back beyond living memory, back to Apostolic times.

The venerable tradition of the mantra in Christian prayer is above all attributable to its utter simplicity. It answers all the requirements of the Master's advice on how to pray because it leads us to a harmonious attentive stillness of mind, body, and spirit. It requires no special talent or gift apart from serious intent and the courage to persevere.

No one [Cassian said] is kept away from purity of heart by not being able to read; nor is rustic simplicity any obstacle to it. For it lies close at hand for all if only they will, by constant repetition of this phrase, keep the mind and heart attentive to God. (Conference 10.14)

Our mantra is the ancient Aramaic prayer: Maranatha. Maranatha. Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus.



II A Present Reality

Someone once argued that there would be no morality and no conscience if we did not have a sense of the future. If we could see only the present, and lived wholly in the present moment, we would achieve goodness here and now, because we would be unable to postpone the moment of conversion to some indefinite future time.

Perhaps part of the explanation of the phenomenal religious impact which Judaism had on the world is that in the Hebrew language there was no future tense. This sense of the eternal presentness of God pervades both the Old and New Testaments. To Moses, God is described as calling himself "I AM. Tell them that I AM sends you." (Ex 3:14) And Jesus not only preached the kingdom of heaven as already arrived among men, but said of himself, "Before the prophets were, I am." (Jn 8:58) This sense of the presentness of the kingdom suffuses the testimony that St Paul proclaimed: "Now is the day of salvation; now is the acceptable time." (2 Cor 6:2) Listen now to these words from the opening paragraph of chapter 5 of Romans, and listen with special attention to the tenses he uses:

Now that we have been justified through faith, let us continue at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have been allowed to enter the sphere of God's grace where we now stand. Let us exult in the hope of the divine splendour that is to be ours. (Rom 5:1-2)

You will see that the main effect of this passage is to draw our attention to what condition we are in now, to draw our minds into a steady concentration on the present moment.

The extraordinary dynamism of these words, and the whole of St Paul, is that the marvel, the splendour, the unimaginable reality

The diffusion of our essential harmony throughout our being is another way of saying that prayer of the Spirit of Jesus wells up in our hearts, floods our hearts, and overflows throughout us. This is the amazing gift we have been given by Jesus sending us his Spirit. But he does not force it on us. It is for us to recognise it and accept it. And this we do, not by being clever or self-analytical, but by being silent, by being simple. The gift is already given. We have merely to open our hearts to its infinite generosity. The mantra opens our hearts in pure simplicity:

Do you not know," wrote St Paul to the Corinthians, "that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit and that that Spirit is God's gift to you?" (1 Cor 6:19) Meditation is simply our way to knowing it.



4

Saying the Mantra I

Learning to meditate is learning to say the mantra, and because it is as simple as this, we should be quite clear in our understanding of the process of saying the mantra.

We must grow in our fidelity to the mantra, and in the same proportion, the mantra will grow more and more deeply rooted in us. As you know, the mantra I recommend you to say is the word maranatha, the ancient Aramaic prayer which means Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus. And I suggest that you articulate it in your mind silently with equal stress on each of the four syllables: ma-ra-na-tha.

Most of us begin *saying* the mantra. That is, it seems as though we are speaking it with our mind silently somewhere in our head. But as we make progress, the mantra becomes more familiar, less of a stranger, less of an intruder in our consciousness. We find less effort is required to persevere in saying it throughout the time of our meditation. Then it seems that we are not so much speaking it in our minds as *sounding* it in our heart. This is the stage that we describe as the mantra becoming rooted in our hearts.

No metaphor is really very satisfactory in this matter, but it is sometimes helpful and reassuring to know that one's own experience in meditation is also the general experience of the faithful. So at this stage of sounding the mantra in your heart, you might describe it as similar to lightly pushing a pendulum that needs only a slight stimulus to set it swinging in a calm steady rhythm. It is at this moment that our meditation is really beginning. We are really beginning to concentrate away from ourselves, because from now on instead of either saying or sounding the mantra we begin to *listen* to it, wrapt in ever deepening attention. When he described this stage

of meditation, my teacher used to say that from this moment on it is as though the mantra is sounding in the valley below us while we are toiling up the side of a mountain.

Meditation is in essence the art of concentration, precisely because the higher we toil up the mountainside the fainter becomes the mantra sounding in the valley below us, and so the more attentively and seriously we have to listen to it. There then comes the day when we enter that cloud of unknowing in which there is silence, absolute, and we can no longer hear the mantra.

But we must always remember we cannot attempt to force the pace of meditation in any way, or to speed up the natural process in which the mantra roots itself in our consciousness by means of our simple fidelity in saying it, We must not be self-consciously asking ourselves 'How far have I got? Am I saying the mantra or sounding it or listening to it?' If we try to force the pace or to keep a constant self-conscious eye on our progress we are, if there is such a word, non-meditating, because we are concentrating on ourselves putting ourselves first, thinking about ourselves.

Meditation requires complete simplicity. We are *led* to that complete simplicity, but we begin and continue by saying the mantra.



We know that we are this whole person, this harmony, and yet we don't know it, because this knowledge has not yet become fully conscious. Perhaps we could say that the conscious harmony that lives in perfect joy and liberty at the centre of our being has not yet expanded and spread itself throughout our being. To allow it to do so, we must simply remove the obstacle of narrowly self-conscious thought, self-important language. In other words, we must become silent.

If a man really did know himself as body-mind-spirit, as the harmony of these three, then he would be on the way to making that knowledge fully conscious throughout his whole being. But modern man, at any rate, has lost a knowledge of his spirit and confounded it with his mind. As a result, he has lost that sense of his own balance and proportion as a creature which should lead him into the creative silence of prayer. It is only when we have begun to recover our awareness of spirit that we begin to understand the intelligent mystery of our being. We are not just an extreme of body and an extreme of mind co-existing. We have a principle of unity within our being, in the centre of our being, and it is this, our spirit, which is the image of God within us. Listen to the 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

I tell you the truth when I say that this work of meditation demands great serenity and integrated and pure disposition in soul and body... God forbid that I should separate what God has coupled, the body and the spirit. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch 41: 48)

The way to become fully conscious of this essential harmony of our being is to be silent. And to meditate is to be silent. The harmony of our essence, our centre, then as it were blossoms and diffuses itself throughout every part and molecule of our being. *The Cloud* puts it very charmingly:

When grace draws a man to contemplation it seems to transfigure him even physically, so that though he may be ill-favoured by nature he now appears changed and lovely to behold. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, ch 54)

10

Realising Our Personal Harmony II

In the last talk, I said that modern man is becoming more and more aware of the insufficiency of language as a means for leading him back to himself. There is nothing anti-intellectual about this. It does not suggest that language is not an essential means of communication between people. This recording would be something of an anachronism if it did suggest that. Language may not be able to lead us into the ultimate communion, but it is the atmosphere in which we first draw the breath of consciousness. It expands our consciousness and leads us to silence. But only in and through silence do we become fully conscious.

As an example of this somewhat abstract point, let me return to the idea of our personal harmony. As an idea, we have to talk about it in language. Language uses words. Words have meaning to the extent that they do not mean something else. So to talk about personal harmony we must analyse, distinguish, separate. By personal harmony I mean the integration, the perfect cooperation of mind and heart, body and spirit. But when I talk about them like this, as separate entities, am I not suggesting that they actually work independently of each other? Of course, you know and I know that they do not work for themselves but they work for the whole. If I hear some joyful news, I feel that joy in my body, I know it in my mind, and it expands my spirit. All these things happen; they are, all together, my response, my involvement in what is happening to me. It is not that my body is telling my mind something, or that my mind is communicating something to me through body language. I am a whole person and I respond wholly.

5

Saying the Mantra II

I want to stress for you the importance of continuing to say the mantra, because when we start to meditate we can often come quite quickly into realms of peacefulness and into a sense of pleasant well-being, even euphoria, where saying the mantra can be made to appear a distraction. We don't want to lose this pleasant plateau so we try to stay where we are, to strike camp and make no further progress up the mountainside. We stop saying the mantra. And many people are led into long, unnecessarily long, and uncreative periods when they make no progress for this very reason that they barter the potential of an expanding consciousness and a deepening awareness of the Spirit for a kind of floating piety, a kind of religious anaesthesia.

The great 4th century master of prayer, our master, John Cassian, had already noted this danger in alluding to what he called the *pax perniciosa*, the pernicious peace. His graphic phrase points out something that needs to be remembered if we ever think that we can just say, 'so far and no further; this will do'. *Perniciosa* means what it says: destructive, fatal. I am myself convinced that many people do not make the progress they should in prayer, do not become as free as they are called to be in prayer, simply because they opt for this destructive lethargy, and give up too soon in their toilsome pilgrimage up the mountainside, the constant saying of the mantra.

When we begin to meditate, we must say the mantra for the whole 20 or 30 minutes of our meditation, whatever mood we are in, whatever reaction we seem to be having. As we progress in fidelity in saying it, we must then *sound* it for the whole time of our medita-

tion, whatever the distractions or feelings that may arise. Then, as the mantra becomes rooted in our heart, we must *listen* to it with our whole attention, without ceasing.

I repeat this to impress upon you what is the essential and perhaps the only advice worth giving about meditation, which is simply this, and I'll repeat it again: Say your mantra. This is not an easy doctrine to accept, nor is it easy to follow. We all hope, when we first begin to meditate, for some instant mystical experience, and we tend to over-estimate the first unusual experiences that the process of meditation brings to us. But this is not important. The important thing is to persevere with the mantra, to stabilise ourselves by our discipline which makes us ready for the higher slopes of the mountain.

Don't be over-concerned with your motives to begin with. It is not we but the Lord who takes the initiative. As John Cassian puts it:

He Himself has struck the small spark of goodwill out of the hard flints of our hearts.

So now begin your meditation in simplicity of heart and be faithful to your humble task of saying the mantra without ceasing.



silence, then a power is released which is the power of life, the power of the Spirit. In that power we are reformed, re-united, re-created. "When a man is united to the spirit there is a new world," (2 Cor 5:17) said St Paul. The mantra leads us straight to this centre.



get back into touch with ourselves? How do we recover a sense of confidence in ourselves, the confidence of knowing that we really do exist in our own right?' It is a question we must ask, and answer, because without this basic confidence in our own existence we have not the courage to go out from ourselves to meet the other, and without the other we do not become fully ourselves.

There is also a kind of universal instinct that warns us that the answer to this question is not found in the way of cerebral self-analysis. To discover our essential harmony and wholeness, which is what finding oneself means, we cannot concentrate on just one limited part of our being. The particular re-discovery that modern man is making, though it is also a new discovery, is that reality can only be known as a whole, not in parts, and that this total apprehension can only be realised in silence.

We see this truth being discovered in many areas of life and thought today. Abstract art, for example, defies or renounces any meaningful linguistic equivalent. We cannot talk about different shades of maroon on canvas. Wittgenstein, perhaps more than any other modern writer, has brought us to the brink of saying that language cannot be trusted to represent the truth. Speech is a kind of infinite regression. Words only really refer to other words. This is a liberating discovery for each of us, provided that we can have the courage to follow it through and become truly silent. If we can do so one of our first rewards will be the awareness of our own essential harmony. The harmony we find through whole-hearted attention in prayer. And that attentiveness is something more profound, more real, than any thought, language or imagination can achieve. A whole man, who rejoices in life, in the gift of his own life, is the man who can enjoy himself as a unity: "I thank thee Lord for the wonder of my being" (Ps 138:13), sings the Psalmist.

Our task in meditation is to allow our unity to be restored, and for our scattered parts to move back into their proper harmonious alignment to the centre of our being. To do this we must not scatter ourselves further. We have to concentrate, to move towards our centre. When our consciousness truly awakens to that centre, in

6

Leaving Self Behind

Listen to these words of Jesus in St Mark's Gospel:

Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind. He must take up his cross and come with me. (Mk 8:34)

Now we meditate to do just that, to obey that absolutely fundamental call that Jesus makes and which is the basis of all our Christian faith: to leave self behind in order that we can indeed journey with Christ in his return to the Father.

Saying the mantra is a discipline which helps us to transcend all the limitations of our narrow isolated self-obsession. The mantra leads us into an experience of the liberty that reigns at the centre of our being. "Where the Spirit is there is liberty," said St Paul. (2 Cor 3:17) It introduces us to this liberty by helping us to pass over into the Other by helping us to take our minds off ourselves. This is what Jesus means by "leaving self behind".

In our own day, we have perhaps lost our understanding of what it really means to renounce self. Self-renunciation is not an experience with which our contemporaries are familiar or which they even understand very clearly, mainly because the tendency of our society is to emphasise the importance of self-promotion, self-preservation, self-projection. The materialism of our consumer society puts 'what I want' at the centre of our life and it renders the other merely an object which we see in terms of our own pleasure or advantage. But the other is only really other if approached with reverence for itself and in itself. We must learn to pay complete attention to it and not to its effect upon us. If we begin to objectify the other then its reality, its uniqueness, and essential value escape us, and it becomes not the other but a projection of ourselves.

Many people today, and in the past, have confused self-renunciation with self-rejection. But our meditation is no running away from self, no attempt to evade the responsibility of our own being or the responsibilities of our life and relationships. Meditation is rather an affirmation of ourselves, not however of the self that is involved in this particular responsibility alone, nor the self that wants this or wants that. These aspects of our self are illusory. They become little egos when we isolate them from the central point of our being where our irreducible selfhood exists in complete harmony with the Other, the Other being the source of our being and the sustainer of our selfhood. It is this whole self, the real self, which we affirm in the silence of meditation.

We cannot affirm it, however, by trying to lay violent hands on it or by trying to possess or control it. If we do so we are in the absurd position of our ego trying to command the self, of unreality dictating to reality, or of the tail wagging the dog. This is what Niebuhr meant when he said: "The self does not realise itself fully when self-realisation is the conscious aim." In meditating we affirm ourselves by becoming still, by becoming silent, and allowing the reality of our real self to become more and more apparent, to diffuse its light throughout our being in the course of the natural process of spiritual growth. We do not try to *do* anything. We simply let ourselves *be*. When we are renouncing self, we are in that condition of liberty and receptivity that allows us to be in relationship with the other, which is the condition that makes it possible for us to decide positively *for* the other, to say though not in words 'I love you'.

But we can only turn to the other, we can only make this movement of self, if we leave self behind, that is, if we take our consciousness away from its involvement with me and direct it on the thou. Self-obsession is the means of restricting and limiting the self. Self-renunciation on the other hand is the means of liberating the self for its real purpose, which is loving the other.

Meditation is a simple and natural process. It is the process that reveals our real being as a state of open-hearted receptivity to the Spirit of Jesus who dwells in our hearts. This revelation dawns

9

Realising Our Personal Harmony I

One of the most distinctive features of our time is the almost universal feeling among people, that they must somehow get back to a basic level of personal confidence, to the ground or bedrock of their life. An almost universal fear is the fear of slipping into non-being, losing touch with ourselves, living at a certain distance from ourselves. James Joyce said of one of his characters that he lived at a "certain distance from his body". It was a marvellously simple but accurate diagnosis of what we have come to know as alienation.

The reasons for our sense of alienation from ourselves, from others, and from nature, are no doubt legion. but there are perhaps two particular causes. The first is our invasion of personal responsibility. We are out of touch with ourselves because we allow someone or something else to take our personal decisions for us. How often do we say of someone when they act unconventionally, 'he has gone off the rails', with the underlying assumption that society lays down the course that every life must follow. The second reason is the way we are trained and encouraged to think of ourselves. We are trained to compartmentalise our lives too rigidly: school, work, home, family, entertainment, church and so on. And so we lose a sense of our own personal wholeness. The whole person is involved in any activity or responsibility we undertake, just as the personal presence of God is total everywhere and cannot be made into a partial or a limited presence.

Modern man is in a state of deep confusion because the complexity and fractionalisation of his life seems to have destroyed his personhood. The question he asks himself is asked by all modern men and women not just by religious people: 'How can we

This is not an experience reserved for the select few. It is a gift to you and me, and all men and women. To receive it, we must return to the centre of our being where it enters us, the source of our being, the source of the infusion of God's love through the Spirit of Jesus.



when we renounce, step aside from, the external manifestations of our consciousness such as thoughts, words, and images, and when instead we move into the level of consciousness itself. We then become silent because we have entered silence, and we are wholly turned towards the other. In this fully conscious, fully free silence, we naturally open ourselves to the word that proceeds from the silence, God's own Word, in whom we are called into being, in which we ourselves are spoken by our Creator.

This is the living Word within us. Our faith tells us that we are wholly incorporate in this Word, but we need to know it fully in the height, length, depth, and breadth of our spirit, to know it though it is beyond knowledge. The silence brings us to this knowledge that is so simple that no thought or image could ever contain or represent it. By renouncing self we enter the silence and focus upon the other. The truth to be revealed is the harmony of our self with the other. In the words of the Indian poet:

I saw my Lord with my heart's eye and said 'Who art thou Lord?' 'Thyself' he replied.



7

John Cassian

We would not still be reading the Gospels or St Paul today were it not true that the human experience of the Spirit is essentially the same at all times and in all traditions, because it is, in essence, the same encounter with the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The importance of this truth for us today is that although no one can make another's pilgrimage for him we can nevertheless benefit from the experience and the wisdom of those who have made the pilgrimage before us. In his own day and for his contemporaries, Jesus was seen as just such a teacher who had reached enlightenment through his fidelity and perseverance.

Throughout Christian history, men and women of prayer have fulfilled a special mission in bringing their contemporaries, and even succeeding generations, to the same enlightenment, the same re-birth in spirit, that Jesus preached. One of these teachers, John Cassian of the 4th century, has a claim to be one of the most influential teachers of the spiritual life in the West. His special importance as the teacher and inspirer of St Benedict, and so of the whole of Western monasticism, derives from his importance in bringing the spiritual tradition of the East into the living experience of the West.

Cassian's own pilgrimage began with his own search for a teacher, for a master of prayer, a master he could not find in his own monastery in Bethlehem. Just as thousands of young people today make their pilgrimage to the East in search of wisdom and personal authority, so Cassian and his friend Germanus journeyed to the deserts of Egypt where the holiest and most famous men of the Spirit were to be found in the 4th century. In his *Institutes* and

present moment, because your happiness and fulfilment are here and now.

To trust another is to renounce self and place your centre of gravity in the other. This is liberty, and this is love. "All these things," said Jesus of the material concerns of life, "are for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all of them." The trust which he calls on his followers to have in the fatherhood of his Father is not the immature childish presumption of getting what you want, simply because you want it. To trust in God means that to have turned ourselves fully towards another, and if we've done that we have transcended both ourselves and our wanting. In this experience of transcendence itself, we receive more than we could ever have asked for or ever have dared even to want. "Set your mind on God's kingdom before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well." (Matt 6:33)

The proper ordering of our external activities can only be achieved once we have re-established conscious contact with the centre of all these activities and concerns. This centre is the aim of our meditation. It is the centre of our own being. In St Teresa's words: "God is the centre of the soul." When our access to this centre is opened up, the kingdom of God is established in our hearts. That kingdom is nothing less than the present power and all-pervasive life of God himself permeating all creation. In the words of John Cassian:

He who is the author of eternity would have men ask of him nothing that is uncertain, petty, or temporal, not because he does not want us to enjoy the good things of life but because we can only fully enjoy them when we have received his gift of himself, of himself from whom all good things come, who is Goodness itself. (*Conference 9:24*)

The proof of his generosity is also what St Paul calls "the ground of our hope". It is "the love of God flooding our inmost hearts through the Holy Spirit he has given us". (Rom 5:5)

8

Set Your Mind on the Kingdom

If most of us were asked why we thought we were not fulfilled, why we were not simply happy, we would probably not answer using terms like essential harmony, awareness, consciousness, or spirit. We would be much more likely to point to particular features of our life – work, relationships, health, and so on – and to attribute our unhappiness or our anxiety to one or all of these. Many people indeed would not even see all these different aspects of their life as having any common point of contact. To so many of us today, the activities of our day are like parallel lines, and many actively resent one area impinging on another. The result of this is that modern life so often lacks a centre, a point of convergence, a source of unity. Consequently, men and women lose the sense of their own creative centre, and as a result they have no contact with their real selves.

The understanding of prayer that makes it merely a matter of telling God what we want or need and reminding him of our sins of omission only compounds our alienation from reality. For this was the liberating message that Jesus came to bring:

I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. (Matt 6:25)

What he is advocating is not irresponsible or fanatical indifference to the external aspects of our life, but he is urging us to develop a spirit of trust, of absolute trust in the fatherhood of the God, who not only created us but sustains us in being from moment to moment. “Do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after it self,” he taught. (Matt 6:34) Realise yourself, that is, in the

Conferences Cassian himself hardly comes across as a distinct personality any more than St Benedict does in his Rule which is so heavily indebted to John Cassian. But we do feel that we are encountering a spirit in Cassian, one which like St Benedict’s had achieved the object of its own teaching: the transcendence of self.

Cassian’s special qualities that give him such authority and directness are his capacity to listen and his gift of communicating what he has heard and made his own. It was in listening with total attention to the teachings of the holy Abbot Isaac that Cassian was first fired with an enthusiasm for prayer and the firm resolve to persevere. Abbot Isaac spoke eloquently and sincerely, but as Cassian concludes his first *Conference*:

With these words of the holy Isaac we were dazzled rather than satisfied, since we felt that though the excellence of prayer had been shown to us, still we had not yet understood its nature and the power by which continuance in it might be gained and kept. (*Conference* 9:36)

His experience was clearly similar to that of many today, who have heard inspiring accounts of prayer but are left uninstructed as to the practical means of really becoming aware of the Spirit praying in our heart. Cassian and Germanus humbly returned to Abbot Isaac after a few days with the simple question: “How do we pray? Teach us; show us.” His answer to their question, Cassian’s 10th *Conference*, had a decisive influence on the Western understanding of prayer down to our own day. It shows firstly that prayer is both the acknowledgement and experience of our own poverty, our own utter dependence on God, who is the source of our being. But it is also the experience of our redemption, our enrichment by the love of God in Jesus. This twin aspect of prayer, of poverty and redemption, leads Cassian to call the condition we enjoy in prayer a “grand poverty”.

The mind should unceasingly cling to the mantra until strengthened by continual use of it, it casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought, and restricts itself to

the poverty of the single verse. Those who realise this poverty, arrive with ready ease at the first of the Beatitudes: Blessed are they who are poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Conference 10:11)

The spiritual life for Cassian, a serious perseverance in the poverty of the single verse, is a passover. By persevering, we pass from sorrow to joy, from loneliness to communion. And, unlike many of the Egyptian ascetics who saw mortification as an end in itself, Cassian clearly teaches that it is merely a means to an end, and that that end is the unbroken awareness of the life of the Spirit continually renewing us, giving new life to our mortal bodies. Similarly, he sees the religious community as a means of leading each individual to an awareness of his communion with all in Jesus. And just as the mantra is the sacrament of our poverty in prayer, so in the community absolute honesty and frankness in our relationships with one another and above all with our Teacher is the sign and means of making the passover from fear to love.

One of his recurrent themes is the absolute importance of personal verification. We must *know* for ourselves in the depth of our own being; we must *perform* rather than teach; *be* rather than do. Above all, we must be fully awake to the wonder and beauty of our being to the mystery of the personal life of Jesus in our heart, and we must relentlessly avoid the pitfall of half-consciousness, the drowsy state, what he calls pernicious peace, *pax perniciosa*, a lethal sleep, the *sopor letalis*.

His importance as a teacher in our own day is his simplicity and directness. His are noble sentiments, inspiring ideals. But how do we fulfil the command of Jesus to “stay awake and pray” (Matt 26:41)? Cassian brought the answer to the West from the ancient tradition of Christian prayer: By knowing ourselves to be poor, and by deepening in prayer our experience of poverty in complete self-renunciation. The simple practical means he teaches is the unceasing use of the mantra. The Christian, he wrote, has as his principle aim the realisation of the kingdom of God the power of the spirit of Jesus in his heart. But we cannot get this by our own efforts, or think our way

into it. So we have a simpler more immediate goal, which he calls “purity of heart” (Conference 1:4) This is all we should concern ourselves with, he teaches. The rest will be given to you. And the way to purity of heart, to full clear awareness, is the way of poverty, the “grand poverty” of the mantra.

