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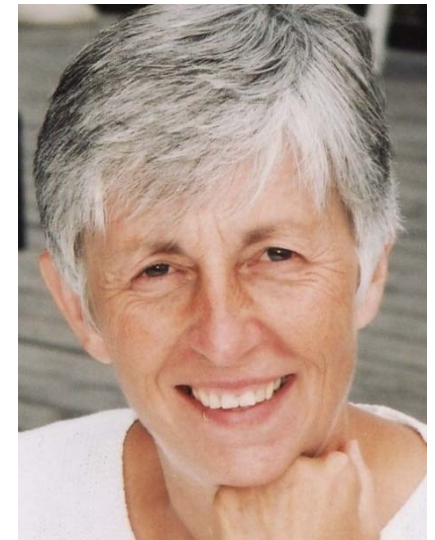
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Images of Meditation

LIZ WATSON

“When we try and speak of God,” Liz Watson says, “we’re trying to speak of something that we can never fully understand or properly describe.” So Liz uses simple metaphors from daily life that “go straight to the heart”. Her refreshing approach helps to clarify and deepen our understanding of meditation as a journey: coming home to ourselves, tuning in to the Christ within, and paddling on faithfully in all circumstances, smooth and rough.

As a member of The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) for 20 years, Liz has served in various capacities including WCCM UK School Coordinator and UK National Coordinator. She now focuses on teaching meditation, leading retreats, and offering spiritual direction. She recently contributed two chapters to the book on the Christian mystics, *Journey to the Heart*.



Transcript of talks recorded in the UK in Feb 2013 specially for the Meditatio Series

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The World Community for
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We are not trying to get rid of our thoughts or push them out or empty our mind in some sort of way. We are really saying, "It doesn't matter what the thoughts do; I am simply not interested in them. I am going to keep my attention fixed on the mantra." We do not need to use any energy to dispel them. We use all the energy we need for saying our word. We prefer what binds, what lasts in God, to the thoughts, feelings and activity of the mind which merely comes and goes.



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What we are aiming for in our meditation is God; and God is rather like the horizon that is always up ahead of us. So, however far we paddle, the horizon is going to be up ahead, and what we are really wanting is to be continually moving towards the horizon. The way we do that is simply to keep on paddling, whatever is going on around us. Remember, it is the horizon that is up ahead that we want to keep on moving towards.



So we take up our word, we repeat it in our heart, come what may; give it our attention, come what may.

If any thought should press upon you to ask what you would have, answer it with no other word but this one word, says The Cloud author.

So he knows what it means to be human. If any thought should try to interrupt us or try to steal our attention away, all we have to do is answer that distraction by coming back to the word, the same one word. The Cloud author again:

And, if you should be tempted to analyse this word, answer that you will have it whole and undeveloped.

So there we are – you are not to be tempted into thinking about your distractions. *If you will but hold fast*, The Cloud author says, *be sure your temptation will not last long.*

So whatever sort of distraction comes your way, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing suggests that you have one answer and that one answer is your word, your mantra. You keep on saying the mantra and anything that invites you away from it, you answer it by coming back to the one word.

Or as John Main says:

The only advice I have to give you is 'Say your word'.



So, that is the point – no one has ever seen God. We cannot grasp God with our reasoning mind; we cannot grasp God with our thoughts. Because this meeting with God is an intimate meeting, Gregory of Nyssa says, it is to do with love, to do with relationship. And you cannot fall in love with God by thinking about God. We cannot fall in love with anyone by thinking about them and if you do think yourself into believing that you love someone, you are very soon going to discover that you have fooled yourself and that would be a tragic mistake. It is the same for intimacy with God. It is not so much an effort of the head, of the mind or the will, but it is an affair of the heart that involves everything that we are, that catches us up whole and takes us beyond our self.

The image of a cloud is one that is also taken up very prominently by the fourteenth century spiritual text on meditation, The Cloud of Unknowing. The writer of The Cloud - we do not know the name of him or her - has at the core of the work, the idea of two clouds. There is a cloud of unknowing in which God is hidden because we cannot know God in that way. The author says:

Of God himself, no man can think. He may well be loved but not thought. By love, He may be grasped and held, but by thought, never.

So, we have to put our own thoughts in another cloud, in a cloud of forgetting; and it is only if we put our own thoughts in a cloud of forgetting that, paradoxically, we are able to direct ourselves into the cloud of unknowing where God is hidden beyond thought.

When he is talking about the work of meditation, the author of The Cloud tells us to allow ourselves to forget all of our thoughts and feelings, to put them in the Cloud of Forgetting, but to try and strike the Cloud of Unknowing with a dart of longing love.

We should reach out with a naked intent to God, he says, with no desire but Himself. And, in order to do that, he says, you can have this naked intent wrapped up and enfolded in one word. Fasten this word to your heart so it never leaves you, come what may.

1

Coming Home

There are some words in our language, which seem to go straight to the heart. We instinctively know what they mean; we instinctively know they are saying something which is deeply important to us. We don't need to unpack those words to have that sense, but if we do begin to reflect on them, then we begin to tease out some of the most meaningful strands of our life experience. 'Home' is very much one of those words.

There is an actor in England called Jim Carter who has become very well known. Recently, he was being interviewed for a magazine, and I expect you can imagine how the interview went: he was discussing the roles he had had, the ups and downs of his career, what it was like to be famous, and so on. But towards the end of the interview, Jim turned the conversation in a different direction. He wanted to say, "Well, yes, my career – that was *part* of my life, but it's not really the most important part."

He said this:

What's important is your life, isn't it? When you take off the motley (that is, your acting clothes)...when you take off the motley and get home, that's who you really are. And that's the person you've got to get right.

So when you get home, that is who you really are. When you stop acting, when you take off the masks that you have been wearing during the day, the faces you have been putting on to impress other people or to appear in the right light, you get home and that is who you really are.

So that sense of being at home, coming home, getting to the essence of it all, is there very clearly, isn't it, in what the actor was saying.

A Cloud

'Home'. It doesn't really matter whether our own experience of home has been very good or quite poor or somewhere in between, we still know that home is very important to us. We know that every child needs a good home; we know that to be homeless is a very undesirable thing to be. To be homeless means to live in a state of insecurity, to be unsure of when or where your basic needs are going to be fulfilled, where you are going to find shelter, when you are going to find food, how you can be protected from the vagaries of the weather. You are left to the mercy of others; you are reliant on the uncertain charity of others. You do not have much control over your life. We know instinctively that this is not how we are made to live; it is not how it ought to be. You cannot thrive in those circumstances. We need to belong; we need to be part of a bigger picture.

And if that sense of home is a very key one for us, then it would not be surprising to find it reflected in the Scriptures. In the Gospel of St John Chapter 14, we find this:

If a man loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will live in him and we will come to Him and make our home with Him.

So, in that idea of home which the Gospel of John presents to us, it is very much to do with loving and being loved. Home is a place where we ourselves are loved and where we learn to love others, where we live in mutual love.

In the Revelation of St John, we find:

The home of God is with men and He will dwell with them.

The Revelation of St John is talking about the end times – the time when ultimate reality will be fully realised, when there will be a transcending of death and pain and tears. The sense of 'at home' which is being put over there is a place where we will find reality, the reality which is the end of death, the end of pain, the end of tears; the place where we are with God and all is well.

It is an idea that is picked up by a number of the Christian

No one has ever seen God and, of course, we know that. It is as though God is hidden, hidden in a cloud.

The cloud is a very good image for our experience of God. A cloud can completely obscure a mountain top and if we are in the cloud, with all the familiar landmarks gone, we are very disorientated; we do not know where we are. And so it is with God. But this cloud which hides God is not impermeable. It is not a brick wall. It does not stop communication; it does not stop all communication from happening. When we are in a cloud, the cloud does not completely block out all of our senses. We can still hear although it is difficult to know where a voice is coming from. We can still touch and taste, but we are definitely out of the normal territory that we know how to navigate. We are outside of our comfort zone and when we are outside of our comfort zone, that is a good place to encounter God. God can speak to us in new ways.

When we come to the stories of Moses in the Old Testament, it is in a cloud on a mountain top that Moses has his closest encounters with God, and those encounters are profound for himself and also very fruitful for others because it is in the cloud that he receives the Law and the promise for the people. These encounters with Moses in a cloud were of great interest to some of the spiritual writers of Christianity. In the early centuries, Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, was particularly interested in them. He puts it this way:

Moses boldly approached the very darkness itself and entered the invisible things. He teaches, I think, by the things he did – that one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach.

of the breath flowing in and the breath flowing out. You are not trying to alter your breath, just observing it – the breath flowing in and the breath flowing out, the breath flowing in and the breath flowing out.

But it may well be that that simple giving of attention to your breath will in fact help your breath to smooth out and to drop a little more deeply into your body. But you are not trying to make that happen.

As John Main says:

Meditation is to the spirit what the breath is to the body.

Without the breath flowing in your body, you have no physical life and it is in the practice of meditation that we bring life to our spirit, allow life to begin to infuse our whole being.

So now you are ready to take up your word, your mantra, to begin to say it inside of yourself, listening to the sound of it as you say it, giving it your attention, but without strain. And every time your attention has wandered off, whenever you recognise that your attention has wandered off, bring your attention back to the sound of the word.



mystics. Julian of Norwich, the English mystic from the fourteenth century, says:

Utterly at home, He dwells in us forever. (She is talking about God, of course).

Utterly at home... God could not be more at home in us, and He dwells in us forever. So, it is a very beautiful and profound promise, or description of reality – that God is at home in us, could not be more at home anywhere else than in us, human beings. *Forever...* He is not sometimes there, but always there.

So we can be at home in God, we can find the place to belong, we can find the place where we are loved. We can find the place that enables us to grow in love and to love others, to come into harmony, unity and peace with others. We can find the place where we are secure, where we are always held, where our needs will be met, to which we can constantly return to be refreshed, then move out to meet the challenges and adventures of daily life.

How do we do this? How do we come home to the One who is at home in us? The answer is very simple. We make our way to the door of the heart and we enter our inner room, our deepest self. We sit down; we sit still; we sit upright but relaxed. We take our word, our prayer word, our mantra *maranatha*, or another word or phrase if we have chosen another one, and we simply repeat it over and over inside ourselves, gently, lovingly, giving it our full attention. And every time our attention wanders away, which it surely will do, we simply come back to the saying of our word, to listening to the sound of it as we say it.

Another one of our great Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart, from the thirteenth century, said:

God is at home; it is we who have gone for a walk.

God is at home – in us, of course; *it is we who have gone for a walk*. That is a very lovely metaphor for meditation, isn't it? We come home with our word, we listen to the sound of it, but our experience is that we keep going off for a walk! So we simply come back home again by returning to our word. If we persevere with this simple

practice every day, twice a day, what we discover is that gradually we are able to stay at home more and more, both during our time of meditation but also, even more marvellously, during the activities of our everyday life.



meditate, to attend first of all to stillness of the body and that is what Theophan is speaking to us about.

He says, *be like a violin string tuned to a precise note*. We are coming to do something in particular. We are coming to focus on our word, on our mantra, very clearly and precisely, albeit it gently and lovingly, so we should bring our body to the help of that goal. So whether we are sitting on a chair or on a prayer stool or on the floor, the advice is to sit with the body, with the spine in particular, upright but not stiff, and that sets the whole of the body into a good posture.

This helps the body to become both relaxed and alert, without slackness or super tension, as Theophan puts it, tuned, well-tuned - relaxed because we are coming into the presence of unconditional love. We are not trying to be anything or do anything; we are simply being in love, relaxed. But we do not want to fall asleep in that presence. We want to be awake and receptive to it, so we want the body to be both relaxed and alert.

So we can sit, if we are on a chair, with our feet flat on the floor and our hands in some way comfortably in our lap, with nothing tangled up. We begin to allow ourselves to relax.

You might begin by bringing your attention to the crown of your head and just feel the weight of your head on your shoulders, let it just sit on your shoulders, allowing any tensions, any furrows in your brow to smooth out, allowing the corners of your eyes to drop down, your cheeks to melt away and the corners of your mouth to drop down too. Then bring your attention to your shoulders and let them just sit on top of your body. You do not have to be holding them up. Then let the whole of the upper part of your body just drop down from your shoulders, drop down to the seat of the chair or the stool, or the floor if you are sitting on the floor. Trust the chair to take your weight. Feel the heavy muscles in your thighs, let them drop down; you do not have to do anything just now; let your legs just hang down from your knees and drop to the floor.

Then, if it helps, bring your awareness to your breath. For many people, this is the easiest way to begin to relax, to come out of the head into the heart. So bring your attention to your breath. Be aware

A Violin String

Here are some words from Theophan the Recluse from the nineteenth century, talking about the body in meditation. He says:

Be like a violin string tuned to a precise note, without slackness or super tension; the body erect, shoulders back, carriage of the head easy.

He is describing a very good way to sit in meditation and it is very helpful to hear from someone about the body in prayer.

Meditation is a very complete way of prayer, a very whole way of prayer where we bring our whole person to God. In most of our other sorts of prayer within Christianity, we come to God with part of our self. So sometimes we come to God with our desires, our needs, our petitions and intercessions. Sometimes we come with our thinking and reflecting – thinking about God, what God is, thinking about the life of Jesus; reflecting on the scriptures or on spiritual texts, reflecting on our own life, examining our own life. Sometimes we bring our bodies, so we may make the sign of the cross, or we may kneel or stand in worship, or we may use our body in sacred dance. Sometimes we use our imagination in particular. Sometimes we make acts of the will or set ourselves to particular intentions.

But in meditation, we bring all of those human faculties, all of those human energies together into a point of stillness, very like the stillness at the center of a moving wheel where all the energies are resolved into the single point of stillness. But it is not a dead stillness; it is a very alive and alert stillness, an energetic stillness that we have come into.

Because the human person is a unity, each part of us affects every other part of us and so we are very wise, when we come to

Bikes and Boats

When we try and speak of God, we are trying to speak of something that we can never fully understand or properly describe, so it is paradoxical that when we are thinking about the spiritual life, the best metaphors are often the ones which are drawn from the concrete experiences of our daily living. And that was very much the case with John Main when he was trying to explain what the saying of the mantra was about.

One of the metaphors he uses is drawn from his time in the Signal Corps. He thinks of the mantra as like the radar bleep which is guiding us safely home. So as we say the mantra, we repeat it and repeat it and repeat it, and it keeps us on a safe and sure course towards the goal.

In another place, he talks of meditation as like riding a bike. Of course, when you are watching someone riding a bike who is familiar with it and very practised with it, it looks easy. Similarly, we hear the instructions about how to meditate for the first time and they sound simple. They are indeed simple, so we expect it to be an easy thing to do. However, very quickly we discover that simple is not easy for us. Just as the first time we get on a bike we discover there is a bit of a knack to balancing on those two thin wheels and even more of a knack to steering it in a straight line on those two thin wheels. Probably what happens is that we fall off and we have to get back on again. Perhaps we need some encouragement to get back on again if we have had a bit of a bump. Maybe we continue to wobble for quite a while before it becomes easy for us and we do it without thinking about it.

And so we start to meditate. It is not as easy as we thought. Perhaps we stop. We think, “Well, this can’t be for me!” Maybe we are tempted to start again, and maybe we do some stopping and starting for quite a while. Maybe our progress, to start with, is very

wobbly. We are not really sure what we are doing, whether we are doing it properly, whether we are doing it well, whether it is taking us where we want to go.

But if we have some fellow meditators, they can be a great encouragement. They can reassure us that falling off, getting on again and wobbling are absolutely normal and part of the journey and if we persevere, gradually we will discover that meditating comes to seem natural. It becomes part of life. We do not have to think about it or analyse it, we just do it. Sometimes it feels like an uphill journey. Sometimes it feels easy, as though we are taking off, brakes released, and streaming downhill. Sometimes it is as though we are pedalling steadily along on a plateau.

Another way to think about what it means to meditate, what happens as we sit to meditate day by day, is in the metaphor of a canoe on a river. You can think of meditation as paddling your canoe down a river. The dipping of the paddles into the water vertically, one side and then the other, is very like the saying of the mantra – faithful, steady, rhythmic, repetition of the word, listening to it, giving it your attention. And although the action of paddling is always the same, the river is different every time we enter it. Maybe today the water is calm, maybe it is reflecting the sun, maybe the scenery along the side of the bank is very pleasant. Perhaps there are trees and spring flowers and the experience seems very easy and enjoyable.

But on other occasions, or even further on during one period of meditation, the water begins to be choppy or muddy. It seems to be very disturbed. Maybe the wind starts to blow up and it becomes rather hard work. It is much more difficult to keep on saying the mantra; we do not seem to be getting anywhere!

Perhaps different things begin to emerge into our consciousness, rather like passing down a stretch of the river where there is a lot of rubbish. But if we keep on paddling, then we shall simply paddle past the rubbish. We do not need to stop and look at it, examine it to see what it is like or to haul it on board. We can simply keep saying our mantra, paddling down the river, letting the disturbances pass by.

chair that we always go to, a corner of a room that we always go to, a place in the office if that is where we are going to do it, a place that we can make a little sacred space for ourselves with, say, an image or a candle. We line up time for it, we allow some time for preparation. It is very difficult to sit and meditate if we rush in from doing something else or have barely wakened up from sleep. So we find a place; we have a little time for preparation and then we have a timer. We make a commitment. We are going to meditate for twenty minutes or twenty-five minutes. We set the time aside and we set the time. So we create some external conditions that help us with the discipline, and help us develop a discipline.

And as we get to know ourselves, we begin to refine that a little. We begin to know that if we are the sort of person who is rather lazy in the morning, then we really do need to get up when the alarm goes off, to make that extra time. And if we are very bad about staying out late at night, so that we are never ready to get up in the morning, we might begin to realise that we do not want to do that anymore. We begin to realise that we need to adjust some of the ways we live our everyday life in order to make time for meditation and to make the conditions for meditation better. If our life is extremely distracted and always full to overflowing with one thing or another, we are not creating very good circumstances for our meditation.

So we do what we can. We provide the conditions. We choose our word. We stick to the same word through the whole time of meditation. We stay with that word every time we meditate and allow it to begin to take root in us. We discover it as a friend that we can take around with us every day, that we can use consciously during the day or allow to rise up in our mind when we are not occupied with anything else.

All those things we can do; all those things we can continue to do better, to do more faithfully, to do more lovingly, and the rest has to be done in us. That is the work of the Spirit.



what is there, in the core of us, this desire for God; and we cannot be happy until we have satisfied that desire, until we have quenched that thirst. If we do not quench that thirst, we are always going to be in need. So, to be an acorn is to have a taste for being an oak tree.

Let us imagine you saw an acorn lying on the ground and you had never seen one before; you did not know what it was. By simply looking at it, it would be impossible to imagine what it could become. It would be absolutely impossible to know that it had a potential for being a mighty oak tree. And so what Thomas Merton was saying in that image was that we have a potential hidden in each one of us to be something which is unimaginable. We cannot possibly imagine what we could be. We can glimpse, in general terms, what it looks like for a human being to develop that divine potential, and the place we can look in particular to see what that might look like is Jesus and also other holy people who speak to us of God, who look like God, who look Christ-like to us, but we cannot imagine exactly what it would like for us to have that potential unfolded.

But when we make the decision to sit down and meditate, somewhere inside us that desire to be more, to find the more that we could be, has already stirred, even though we are not yet very conscious of it.

So we begin the journey of meditation and we begin it in a way that we begin anything else that we try and do. We set a goal and want to achieve it, or we have some problems and we want to try and fix them. But it isn't long before we realise that it does not work like that. Just as an acorn cannot soften its own case, it cannot break through on its own (it needs the sun and the rain and the nutrients and the soil to do that, and then it can begin to break through into its new state, it can begin to grow), so it is for us. We cannot do it on our own, but we can provide the conditions that will help it to happen.

So what are the conditions that we need when we are going to sit to meditate?

The first thing is to try and find a quiet place; it does not make sense to put extra distractions in our way deliberately. We try and find a quiet place. We try and find a place we can go to regularly, a

What we are aiming for in our meditation is God, and God is rather like the horizon that is always up ahead of us. So, however far we paddle, the horizon is going to be up ahead, and whatever sort of things we happen to pass on the river, whatever is in the river, whatever the condition of the river, whatever the weather is like around us, whatever is there on the bank, what we are really wanting is to be continually moving towards the horizon. The way we do that is simply to keep on paddling, whatever is going on around us.

One of the great temptations that we will come across when we begin to meditate arises when we experience a sense of real peacefulness. It feels like the fulfilment of the promise of peace that is made in the gospel. In terms of the river, it is as though it is a balmy afternoon, the sun is shining, flowers are blooming on the bank, everything is very still. It is so tempting to put up our paddle and rest in that balmy stillness. But we have warnings about that from the tradition. The tradition calls this a pernicious peace, a dangerous peace. Why is it dangerous? Because it stops us on our journey. Remember, it is the horizon that is up ahead that we want to keep on moving towards. So, if we are wise and follow the wisdom of the tradition, we will lift our heads again, catch sight of the horizon, remember what we want, reconnect our attention to the sound of the mantra, begin to listen again, begin to take up our metaphorical paddle and paddle onwards towards our heart's desire, saying our word, listening to our word, giving it our attention, keeping on with it, returning to it every time we realise that our attention has drifted somewhere else.



Mosquitoes and Monkeys

I recently saw two television programmes. One was about a group of researchers in the Arctic Circle and the other was about waging war in the deserts of Egypt. When I saw these two programs, I realised that in my imagination both, the Arctic – the great waste of Arctic ice – and the desert, were vast, empty spaces.

But according to these two programmes my imagination did not have much to do with the reality, because what researchers in the Arctic found very quickly was that the Arctic was full of mosquitoes. And what those soldiers in the Egyptian desert discovered was that the desert was alive with flies so numerous that they could hardly get their food to their mouth without taking in a whole mass of flies as well.

And that made me think of meditation. It is very easy to think of meditation as emptying the mind, of creating some vast, calm space in the mind. But you can only really think that if you have not actually been there and tried it.

So, we begin to meditate. Some of us have a lovely experience of peace very early on, perhaps the first time we meditate. For others, that more difficult discovery comes straightaway – the discovery that the mind is far from being a vast, calm, empty space. Instead it is chock full of distractions.

It turns out to be impossible to keep the mind still, to stop it from thinking; the mind is naturally very distracted. But if we have some friends along the way, what we will also discover and be encouraged by is that it is the same for everyone and, indeed, it always has been. If we dip into the writings of some of the great men and women of prayer through the centuries, we will find them talking about the same things that we experience today.

John Cassian, way back in the fourth century, describes his mind at the time of prayer. *Even at the time of prayer*, he says, when he

Acorns

To be an acorn, says Thomas Merton, is to have a taste for being an oak tree. The leaves and branches of the oak are hidden in the meat of an acorn.

To be an acorn is to have a taste for being an oak tree. Thomas Merton – I think he is saying something about what it means to be human, or what it means to be human created in the image and likeness of God, as we hear in Genesis.

That idea, that truth that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God is one that was very dear to the early thinkers in the Christian Church. They were very clear that there was something about being human which is very close to God. We are very like God just by the fact of our creation. We are created in that image and if we want to, we can lead our lives in a way that allows us to be more and more like God, more and more like Christ, with ‘the mind of Christ’.

Another way they thought, was that we have the spark of God already in us and, of course, a spark can grow into a fire. So we can become on fire with God, aflame with God, as some of the early Christians liked to speak.

They also like to say that God became man in Jesus so that human beings might become God. So that was a very clear teaching – that we have the capacity to become God – and for the second century teacher, Origen, that was the point of prayer. He said that we do not pray simply to get benefits from God; prayer is about becoming like God. So he gives us a much bigger vision of what prayer is about.

How is it possible for us as human beings to know God? It is possible because we are already like God. We have in us already a desire for God. That desire is the deepest desire of our heart. That is

*No, it is not yours to open buds into blossoms.
Shake the bud, strike it; it is beyond your power to make it
blossom.
Your touch soils it; you tear its petals to pieces and strew
them in the dust.
But no colours appear and no perfume.
Ah! it is not for you to open the bud into blossom
He who can open the bud does it so simply.
He gives it a glance, and the life-sap stirs through its veins.
At his breath the flower spreads its wings and flutters in the
wind.
Colours flush out like heart-longings,
The perfume betrays a sweet secret.
He who can open the bud does it so simply.*



expects it to be calmest, he says, it's moving around, wandering around, *as if I am drunk.*

Theophan the Recluse, from the nineteenth century, says: *Thoughts continue to jostle in your mind like mosquitoes.*

Our Hindu friends use the image of the monkey mind, suggesting that the mind is like a tree full of monkeys, chattering away and swinging from branch to branch in constant motion. And those are extremely good descriptions of what we discover in our own experience.

So, join the club! This is the way it is to be human; it has always been like that. Your mind has always been this way; you are just realising it for the first time. Scientists can tell us how many times the neurons are firing inside our brain; it is a very large number! So the way to help ourselves is simply to accept the fact; it is the way it is.

But, we are not helpless in the face of it.

Teresa of Avila says:

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

But, this awareness of the distracted mind can turn out to be a first step in our self-knowledge and, therefore, a friend to us along the way if we can first accept it.

If you cannot catch the wind, say the Desert Fathers, neither can you stop distractions from coming into your mind.

But what do we do about it?

Here is a Chinese proverb:

You cannot prevent birds flying around your head, but you can prevent them making nests in your hair.

And Theophan the Recluse again, says:

Thoughts continue to jostle in your mind like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling, you must bind the mind with one thought or the thought of the One only.

And so the way we do it is to take our word, our one word, our one phrase, our mantra and we give it our attention. We keep on

saying it, we keep on listening to it, and we keep on going back to it every time we have been distracted, every time our mind has been drawn away from it. We bind our thought with the one word.

Our Zen friends say:

Treat thoughts like empty boats floating down the river. Let them float by. Don't be tempted to jump on board.

From the eighteenth century, the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade says:

Let thoughts drop away as you might let stones drop into the sea. Sometimes, they are more like rubber balls which float around us.

So, we are not trying to get rid of our thoughts or push them out or empty our mind in some sort of way. We are really saying, "It doesn't matter what the thoughts do; they are just a sort of background noise. What I am most interested in is saying the mantra. The thoughts can do what they want. They can hang around in the background, they can go away, they can be replaced by others, but I am simply not interested in them. I am going to keep my attention fixed on the mantra." We do not need to use any energy to dispel them. We use all the energy we need for saying our word. We do not do anything violent; this is a peaceful practice. When we wander away we simply forgive ourselves by coming back to the word. We prefer what binds, what lasts in God, to the thoughts, feelings and activity of the mind, which merely comes and goes. We let thoughts come and go, using the mantra as a little tool to keep us on track and give us the most direct, gentle and forgiving way to come back when we have been drawn away.

And in that, we begin to find our first taste of freedom. We may not be able to, we cannot, stop thoughts from coming into our mind, but as soon as we become aware that we are distracted, we have a freedom of choice. We can stay with them or we can come back to the word.



So in nature, we see that things are as they are and, in that being as they are, they have their own particular beauty. They cannot analyse themselves, they cannot feel pride or shame, they do not have to apologise for themselves; they simply are. And I think it is in this way that they can speak so much to us of God.

The Cloud of Unknowing from the fourteenth century says, if you wanted one word to describe God, *is-ness* would be that word. God simply *is*.

But as human beings, we have to *learn* to be ourselves. It does not come easily to us. By the time we have reached adolescence even, and certainly adulthood, we have gathered all sorts of habits of thought and ways of surviving which have made life complicated, less than satisfactory, and less than 'natural' for us. We have learned to compare and to compete. We have learned what it means to feel pride and to feel shame or guilt. We have learned to strive. We have learned to be constantly rating ourselves, evaluating ourselves and the success or failure of our strivings. We have learned to blame others or to justify ourselves and we have learned to want to be someone else, to be something that we are not. We have learned that life is not always happy, that life is not always, if ever, entirely satisfactory.

But then, maybe, a moment of grace comes, a moment of awakening. We realise more clearly that we are not satisfied and we become dissatisfied with our lack of satisfaction. We are no longer content to live in that sort of way, and we come to meditation.

We come to this simple practice where we simply are in the presence of God who simply is. We set aside all our thought and feeling and as we continue with the practice, we begin to unlearn some of those habits of thought and feeling and those ways of surviving and, in particular, we begin to unlearn our habit of striving. We begin to realise that meditation is not about trying to make anything happen. Indeed, it is not about trying to do anything out of our own effort or our own strength at all. It is about allowing the dynamic, life-giving energy of the Spirit to be more and more the life-giving, healing energy within us.

This is the way the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore puts it:

The Flowers

These are some words of John Main:

The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as the opening of a flower. To let a flower open and bloom, it is only necessary to let it be. So if we simply are, if we become and remain still and silent, our heart cannot but be open, the Spirit cannot but pour through into our whole being. It is this we have been created for.

I wonder, as you hear those words, if you have a sense of relief that prayer no longer seems to be about striving or asking; there is no strain. You are not trying to make anything happen. It is about allowing something to happen. Allowing is very much a theme of John Main's thought. He says:

*The first step in conversion is allowing ourselves to be loved.
The first step in personhood is allowing ourselves to be loved.
The first step in loving God is allowing ourselves to be loved.*

And maybe that is part of the reason so many people find that being in the natural world is one of the ways that they find something of God, that the natural world speaks to them of God in some particular way. You can see a tree on a hillside constantly buffeted by the wind, leaning over, having a hard life, but it has its own beauty. You can see where a branch has been ripped from a tree, but the wound has healed over and it has become part of the beauty of that particular, individual tree. You can see flowers that are being grown on good soil in ideal conditions which have come to a particular full glory, but you can see other flowers—maybe the same sort of flower—where the seeds have landed on much poorer soil, not receiving the best conditions, but they will still grow into something which is beautiful in its own way.

Tuning in

If you are a musical sort of person, you will probably be familiar with the tuning fork, but if you are not, let me just describe it briefly. A tuning fork is a U-shaped piece of metal which you can tap and it vibrates to give you a specific note. It gives a true note. Let us say the note 'A'. So if you want to know what the note 'A' is in order to be able to sing it accurately, the tuning fork is the way to do it. It is the way to tune yourself in to the true 'A'. If you are tuned into the tuning fork, you know you're always going to be right. The tuning fork always gives you a true 'A'.

Well, as most people who sing or are musicians find, it is quite difficult to get the true note all the time on their own and to stay on it unwaveringly.

There is now an electronic version of the tuning fork for the smartphone and when you use it, you get this lovely picture of the metal vibrating at a particular frequency, a particular wavelength. So when I sing, I am trying to get my voice to tune in, to get into the same vibration, onto the same wavelength and to become one with that particular note.

I find that a really helpful way to think about Jesus and what the life of Jesus means for us today. I think of Jesus as a human being whose humanity is perfectly tuned in to the divine frequency, to the divine wavelength, the divine note; perfectly tuned in to the Father. And I think the message we can take from that is that in Jesus, every other human being has that same capacity to resonate with God, to sing the same song as God, you might say, to reverberate with God. That sort of understanding is, I think, very helpful in making sense of what it might mean to imitate Jesus or to follow Jesus – words that are very often used in Christian discourse.

Thinking along these lines, we quickly realise that following

Jesus or imitating Jesus is not so much about reading the gospel stories, observing what Jesus did and working out how to do the same. After all, I cannot possibly be a male Jew who lived two thousand years ago! It is more about doing things the way he did by trying to get on to the Father's wavelength and then living out the effects and the consequences of that, singing this new tune in our own time and our own place and in our own way.

So when we sit to meditate, we have this simple tuning device for getting on to the divine wavelength. We have the mantra, the mantra which helps us to resonate with the spirit of Jesus dwelling in our heart. We give our word, our tuning device, our mantra, our attention. We try to resonate with it and when we go out of tune with it, when we wander off, when our attention becomes vague or unfocused, we come back. We retune, we refine our tuning, we refine the closeness of attention that we are giving to it.

And although what happens during the time of meditation may sometimes be easy and feel good, or sometimes be more distracted and not feel so satisfactory, what we generally feel afterwards is better, more spacious, more harmonious, more in tune with our self. We feel more 'ourself' and we will generally discover that it helps our day go better because of that.

But that is not all. It is not only that through our daily practice of meditation we become more harmonious with our self, more one with our self, more true to our self and able to live out of that much more naturally, but we gradually discover that we are more connected with others, more harmonious with others, more in tune with others. We are learning to listen better to others, to hear their own particular song, to get on to their wavelength. We are learning to harmonise with them, we are learning to appreciate that mine is not the only note I can hear or want to hear or care about hearing. The marvellous thing about this divine frequency is that all created things vibrate on that same frequency and, if we tune in to the divine wavelength, then we are inevitably tuning in to the wavelength on which every created thing is resonating. Each created thing has its own true and individual timbre. Just as each person in a choir has their own particular quality of voice, a unique voice, to

bring to it, when they come together they sing and create one glorious harmony.

So sit down, sit still, say your word, and listen to it faithfully with ever-deepening attention

