

Interview with Fr Laurence



What is the importance of meditation, i.e., why and what for do we practice the meditation?

Meditation is important because it is essential to our human development that we become fully conscious in and of our spiritual dimension. In our culture we pay most attention to our mental and physical condition but have forgotten what 'spiritual' really means. Meditation is part of the universal heritage of the human family. We find it in all religious traditions from those of the indigenous peoples to the major religions. It is about the opening of the heart - the deep centre of consciousness in which the essential unity of the person is found and where we discover that peace, joy and love do not exist outside of ourselves but are inherent to our nature. The Christian would say this is because we are created in the image of God and are temples of the Holy Spirit. Knowing this - not just intellectually but experientially - is necessary for human wholeness.

Medical research shows that meditation is good for us physically and psychologically. Even the structure of the brain with its two complementary hemispheres suggests we need to respect the non-active and non-intellectual side of ourselves. However the full meaning of meditation is not defined by the good effects it has on our blood pressure, cholesterol or levels of stress and depression. The oldest wisdom of humanity is intensely relevant for us today when it speaks about the capacity of human beings to lose and find themselves in transcendence. Science explains a lot about meditation. The spiritual traditions give the meaning. For example, the Christian tradition has always understood that this work of meditation - moving from head to heart, from thought to silence - is the work of love. And so, the essential fruit of meditation and what fully develops our humanity is that it makes us more loving people.

What are the particularities/specificities of Christian Meditation?

Meditation is part of the Christian tradition of prayer - although it became marginalized and forgotten for a long time. Recovering the contemplative dimension of Christian life and faith involves the rediscovering of meditation as part of our historical and theological tradition. What makes meditation Christian? Essentially our faith-relationship with the person of Jesus. Our sense of personal relationship with the one who is risen and lives in our hearts and is at the centre of history. Understanding this is not just a rational matter - any more than getting married is only about a rational judgment. Meditation is Christian too because we are aware of meditating within an historical stream of spiritual transmission and we are supported by other practices essential to the Christian life and spiritual growth, such as the Eucharist and the reading of scripture. Basically, the Christian meditates to come to a fuller union with Jesus and to go with him, in the Spirit, in and through his humanity, to the mystery of boundless love he called 'Father'.

In November you will be directing a Christian Meditation retreat in São Paulo which theme is “The Contemplative Heart of the Gospel”. Can you tell us about this approach to the Gospel?

Jesus was a teacher of contemplation. We see this in what he says about prayer: he warns against externalism, he says 'go into your inner room, he says don't babble on in prayer because God knows what you need before you ask, he says let go of worry and anxiety, be mindful and live in the present moment.

This is the formula for contemplation. But he also says - in fact it is his single commandment as he did not give us lots of rules to keep - love your neighbour (which includes your enemy), come to the help of all those in need, cultivate a passion and hunger for justice and work for peace. This is the formula for action. We see how inter-linked they are in the teaching on non-violence. Christians have usually watered this one down because it seems so impractical and impossible. In fact it is the natural result of contemplation. So, that is why we need to remember and practice the contemplative side of the Gospel. Otherwise we burn out by becoming hyper-active and egotistical in our good works and we justify violence and structures of injustice which are anathema to the Mind of Christ.

Since 1995 you have been visiting Brasil for talks and retreats. In your view how is the response of the Brazilians to Christian Meditation?

I love coming to Brazil - for all the reasons that the Brazilians know that they are lovable and love themselves! But also because I feel inspired by seeing the growth of our meditation community here. Brazilians are very physical people and they have a beautiful land to celebrate. This makes their faith very incarnational and that I think may be why they understand meditation intuitively. Meditation is not 'head-prayer' but the 'prayer of the heart', which means of the whole person. Exuberance of personality, expressive emotions, love of music and dance - these are not opposed to times of stillness and silence. I have found that Brazilians respond well to meditation and can form strong local and national community to support the personal discipline and also share it with others. Christianity here is very diverse - some syncretism, of course, (but you get that everywhere as the Church is growing slowly over the centuries in understanding what Jesus was really saying and superstition is a hard habit to break), a lot of Catholic devotionism and evangelical and charismatic self-expression, maybe an over-emphasis on prayer as petition. But this very diversity is a sign of religious vitality. Brazilians have not sunk into the depressed secularism of western Europe yet! I find that the simplicity of meditation and its authenticity can speak to every kind of religious mentality when the person is open and sincerely wants to grow.

What special advices do you normally give to those who are beginning to meditate

Just begin. And keep on beginning. Don't evaluate your 'progress' or look for any special experiences. But see the fruits of the spirit appearing in your life and relationships. Meditate with others regularly. Keep it simple. If you can, meditate with children (teach your children or grandchildren) - and they will teach you how simple and natural meditation is. It's simple but (I'm sorry to say) it's not easy!

Could you tell us about the experience of promoting, jointly with the Dalai Lama, the encounters of the "Way of Peace"?

It was a great lesson for me in the nature of dialogue - friendship, enjoyment of our differences and celebration of our common ground, collaboration for better understanding between religions and working to heal the divisions of humanity. We began with three aspects of dialogue - because dialogue does not mean just talking. First, pilgrimage. The Dalai Lama invited a large group of Christian meditators to Bodhgaya in India. Each morning we meditated together under the Bodhi tree and spent the day after in meditation and discussion. Second, retreat. We held a week-long silent retreat together at one of our monasteries in Italy. Third, peace work. We went to Belfast and met with all sides of the divided society there and I think made a small contribution to the eventual settlement. An important aspect of dialogue is

trying to see from the other person's point of view - without abandoning your own. This can be done by reading each other's scriptures. This is actually how the Way of Peace began when the Dalai Lama commented on the Gospels at the John Main Seminar in 1995 and this was published in many languages subsequently as "The Good Heart". This is a beautiful phrase to inspire all dialogue - we all have and we all need to make contact with the good heart.

On November 12th, you will be at PUC-Rio leading a Seminar “The Way of Unknowing – Spirituality and Contemporanety”. In order to instigate our readers to participate at this Seminar, could you give us an idea of what are you preparing for that Seminar?

We live in an increasingly globalized world and yet our local cultures need to be respected and protected. Because we are so global our local problems have become significant or dangerous for the planet. Think of what you are doing to the Amazon or what the northern hemisphere is doing to the air, rivers and seas. So we need to think globally and act locally - not as easy as it sounds. For this we need a kind of 'new holiness' that operates from the essential goodness of human nature but has also expanded into an inclusive and universal consciousness. An important factor in achieving this is the secularism of modern culture. We don't have to see secularism as an enemy of religion - as many religious leaders unfortunately do. What we have learned in recent years is that religion is here to stay. It has a great contribution to make to the healing and evolution of our world. But religion itself has to change - it is changing anyway. My feeling is that it must become more contemplative- that is, for example, we should teach children to meditate from a young age and so to practice their religion with the dimension of interiority. The more deeply we make the inner journey the more fully we realise our unity with others. That's more or less what I will say, I think, so if you are too busy to come you don't need to!