
Meditatio Talks

SERIES A 2005

Jan – Mar

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

Excerpts from talks given in Singapore, Canada and USA

1. A Sincere Form of Prayer	2
2. The Way of Meditation I	6
3. The Way of Meditation II	10
4. Meditation and Discipleship	14
5. Freedom from the Ego	18
6. Paying Attention	22
7. The Teaching of Jesus on Contemplation I	26
8. The Teaching of Jesus on Contemplation II	32

Meditatio Talks Series A

1 A Sincere Form of Prayer

When we meditate we are entering into a form of prayer that the early Christians call pure prayer, pure because it purifies the heart of images and desires and fears and all the complexity associated with those things. What is pure is simple; we talk, don't we, about something being "pure and simple". So, when we meditate, we are not speaking to God, we are not thinking about God in a complicated way, we are not bringing our problems to God's door and pinning them up on God's notice-board and dramatising our relationship with God asking for these problems to be solved for us. There are other forms of prayer in which we may do these things and they are also valid and useful forms of prayer. All forms of prayer, if they are sincere, are fruitful and effective. Meditation does not replace other forms of prayer.

But a sincere form of prayer is what we need to understand. What does a sincere form of prayer mean? In Chapter 6 of St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives his great teaching on prayer. He says, "Go into your inner room and pray to your Father within that secret place." Don't stand in the street corners and look for other people's approval. Be simple, he says, when you pray. Don't use many words. Be in the present moment. Let go of your worries and your anxieties when you pray. Jesus' teaching of prayer in Chapter 6 of St Matthew's Gospel is a perfect description of meditation. It is a sign that Jesus is a teacher of contemplative prayer.

What I think he means by sincerity is prayer from the heart and this way of meditation has often been called the "prayer of the heart". Very often when we come to pray, and many of us were taught to do it this way, we pray with the intention of changing the world, or changing other people or changing the circumstances of our lives. That is our intention; we bring this intention when we pray to God to change the world into a better world, and *my* life into a better form of life. There's something not quite sincere about that. Because our first priority, the first principle of prayer, is that we are not trying to change the world. That is God's business. We are sincere when we come to pray if we are open to be changed as we pray. It is first of all the person who prays who must be changed. That is what makes sincerity in prayer. I am first of all prepared to be changed by my prayer, by the act of prayer. I am willing to be changed.

Then, of course, the world will change. I am part of the world. If I am different, the world is different. In the practice of meditation therefore we are not bringing our petitions or our intentions into the prayer. God knows our needs even before we ask. But we are paying attention. Not making intentions, but giving attention. This is the pure "seeing" of meditation or contemplative prayer. It is the vision of God, the seeing of God. So we do not entertain particular ideas or images or theories of God in our mind. We are not speaking to God, we are not thinking about our problems, but we are doing something much greater. John Main says that our deepest capacity is

realised when we meditate, and that is our capacity to *be* with God, in God, here and now.

Excerpts of talk at Retreat,

John Main Seminar 2002, Montreal, Canada

2 The Way of Meditation I

Let me describe the way of meditation that we practise and then we will take a little time to meditate together.

The first element that we develop and practise when we meditate is silence. That means being quiet. So the first thing we do when we meditate is to sit quietly, to be as quiet physically as you can. That means also not moving, not coughing, not unwrapping your sweets, not unzipping your bags or blowing your nose or rubbing your feet together. Basically not making physical noise. This sounds a very elementary step in the great mystical journey perhaps, but it's one that will always teach you a great deal. John Main says that just learning to sit still and not making noise will teach you an enormous amount about the spiritual journey, because it is a major step, for some of us the first step, beyond desire. So being as quiet as possible, in a relaxed but serious way, is the first step.

Then the work of silence becomes interior, because then we all discover that the mind is not still. The mind is not quiet. The mind is running around in circles; it is agitated; it is full of fears, of desires, of fantasy, of memories and plans. The agitation, the turbulence, of the mind, according to the early Desert Fathers (the first Christian monks from whose teaching John Main recovered this tradition of meditation), the distractedness of the human mind, is the real meaning of original sin. It is our incapacity to pay attention to God, in the present moment. What could be more simple than paying attention in the present moment?

But simplicity is not necessarily easy. God is; God is here; God is now. I am here; I am now. Why does God seem absent? Why does God seem distant? Why does God seem non-existent sometimes? It is not because God is absent or non-existent, but because I am not here in the present moment with God.

When we meditate, we see all of this as in a mirror. As soon as we sit to meditate, we see ourselves reflected in our own mind as very distracted, turbulent, agitated, insecure, frightened and egocentric people. Full of dreams, fantasies, fears, anxieties, anger and the fear of violence. If you could analyse what is going on in the mind at any one moment, you will find that there are thoughts of the past, whether it was what we did earlier today, or what happened last week, or what happened at some traumatic moment in our life in the distant past. If we are living in the past, we are not likely to be feeling very peaceful or joyful. We are going to be feeling sad or regretful or guilty or nostalgic.

If we are not in the past, we are usually in the future. We are planning for what we are going to do tonight, tomorrow, next year or when we retire twenty years hence. As soon as we start to plan, which we are always compulsively doing because this is our way of controlling reality, we begin to feel anxiety, because we know that we can't control reality. Anything can happen at any moment. So as soon as we start to plan or reflect on the future, we begin to stir our basic fear of death as well.

So where do we go then? Not much peace in the past. Not much peace or joy living in the future. So the mind looks rather desperately for somewhere else to escape

to, and it goes to Disneyworld. We move into a realm of fantasy, day dreams, self-indulgence. Day-dreaming may be a little break from reality but ultimately we have to come back right down to earth with a bump. So we don't find much peace and joy in Disneyworld either. So then where do we go? That question is the beginning of the spiritual journey, which we see in this distinction between the three states of mind: living in the past, living in the future, living in day-dreaming. None of these gives us peace, deep satisfaction or happiness. We can't feel the spring of joy and pure happiness in any of these states of mind. So where do we go? Is there peace? Is there joy? Do we look for it outside, and if so, where?

Eventually, this search and discernment that it involves will lead us back to the only place where we do find God, which is here, and the only time and the only moment where we can experience God, which is NOW. This is what we mean by contemplation, or the contemplative way of life, or the contemplative state of mind. It's living, being, in the present moment. This is precisely what we are practising when we meditate.

When we meditate in a few moments, our minds will be running around from past to future with a lot of day dreaming in between, all mixed up together. But what we do during this period of meditation is to pay attention, as fully and as generously as we humanly can, to the present moment, in the present moment.

We need some way of doing it? We do it with a very simple discipline, a spiritual practice, a very simple little method that you actually find in all the great religious traditions. John Main first encountered it when he was living in the East. He later rediscovered it as part of his own Christian tradition in the writings and the teaching of the early Christian monastics, the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert. What they recommend is the way of the mantra.

*Excerpts of talk at Retreat,
John Main Seminar 2002, Montreal, Canada*

3 The Way of Meditaton II

What the early Christian teachers recommended was this; a very simple and practical way of mindfulness, the practice of pure prayer. They say that, at the time of meditation, you take a single word or a short phrase, and you repeat this word or phrase or mantra continually in the mind and heart, during the entire period of the meditation. It is the simple, continuous repetition of the word that will lead you from the mind to the heart, from agitation to peace, from distraction to presence. The saying of the word creates a little narrow path of silence which you follow through the noise, the distractions, agitation, turbulence of the mind. Remember what Jesus says about the way to life. He says the way to life is a narrow path that leads to life, and few there are who find it. So saying your word is the essential discipline and also the art of meditation.

You sit down, sit still, sit quietly. The basic rule of posture is simply to sit with your back straight. That will help you to stay awake and to be alert. Then you gently, interiorly, silently, begin to repeat your word, your mantra. Say it in stillness without moving with lips or your tongue.

Choosing the word that you say is important because you want to stay with the same word all the way through the meditation period, and in fact from day to day. Meditate in the morning and in the evening, about half an hour each time. In the morning and evening meditation and in every meditation, you stay with the same word. This fidelity to the word allows that word to gradually, imperceptibly, but in a very real way to sink into a deeper level of consciousness, to sink into the heart. So choosing the word is important. You could, for example, take the name Jesus, a very ancient Christian mantra, as a prayer word. You could also take the word Abba, the beautiful word that Jesus made sacred in his own prayer.

The word that I would personally recommend, and Fr John recommended, is the word Maranatha. Maranatha is the oldest Christian prayer. It means, Come Lord. It is in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. St Paul ends his first letter to the Corinthians with it. If you choose this word, say it as four syllables. Ma-ra-na-tha. Maranatha. Articulate the word clearly in your mind; listen to the word as you say it. Don't think about the meaning of it. Meditation is not what you think. Let go of all thoughts, even good thoughts or spiritual insights during the time of meditation. How do you let go of them? Simply by returning to your mantra as soon as you realise that you have become distracted by a thought. This is what we mean by practising poverty. Letting go of everything. Happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the Kingdom of God. The way we practise this poverty, this letting go, that wonderful freedom of poverty of spirit, is to return faithfully and generously to your word. Remember to say the word gently; don't use force, but say it faithfully, and keep returning to it as soon as you realise you have stopped saying it.

When you start to meditate, if you are lucky, after two seconds you will start thinking about the past or the future, or slipping into some little fantasy or daydream, or you start having an imaginary conversation, or some fear or some anxiety begins to poke its nose into your mind or some plan begins to form about what you are going to

do. By the grace of God, and this is the mystery of consciousness you become aware of the fact that you are distracted. That's because the Holy Spirit is also praying in you. As soon as you realise that you have stopped saying your word, don't waste any time analysing or feeling guilty that you are a failure, but come back to the word and start saying it again. In this way, we synchronise our deepest selves with the Holy Spirit.

Give up the idea of success or failure. Your ego will say to you, "You are not doing this very well. This is a complete waste of time. You are no good as a meditator or anything else. Try something else that will give you a little more job satisfaction, a little more instant gratification." Now when you hear that little voice of the ego, just laugh at it and say, "Go away, please." So give up this obsessive concern we all have with failure and success. It's an ego problem: success and failure. As soon as you realise that you have stopped saying the word, you don't have to waste time judging your performance and evaluating how well you have done, but just get on with it and return to the word with the simplicity and the humility of a child. Practising this discipline will teach you in a powerful and most direct way the meaning of Jesus' words. "Unless you become like a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

So these are ways of approaching the essential teaching of meditation. People sometimes look for more esoteric teaching, or complicated methods. But it is in the simplicity that the great mysteries are revealed. "I thank thee Father for hiding these mysteries from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children." Not to be looking for esoteric sidelines, or esoteric experiences. Don't look for anything to happen. John Main used to say, "If anything happens, ignore it. If nothing happens, be grateful." Great wisdom in that. It is in the practice of the simplicity that the great mysteries of being are revealed. So the basic teaching, not surprisingly, is simplicity itself. Whether you have been meditating for 25 years, whether this is the first time you've been ever meditated, whether you have meditated once and then you gave up, whether your practice is steady twice a day, or whether you are a bit shaky and you miss a lot of meditations, we are all starting this evening from the same point. We are all beginners. We are all here and now. We are all simply setting out once again on the same path.

*Excerpts of talk at Retreat,
John Main Seminar 2002, Montreal, Canada*

4 Meditation and Discipleship

What do we mean by meditation as Christians? Why can we speak about Christian meditation? It is because it is about following Jesus. That means we're following his teaching, interiorising his teaching, putting it into practice. I like to look at some of the key points of his teaching and see how meditation makes sense as a way of following that teaching and putting it into practice with our lives.

First of all, what do we mean by the basic theology of meditation. We mean that, at the very core of our being, what we call our heart, we find the mind of Christ. Christ is praying, is paying attention, at the deep personal centre of your being and my being and every personal being. This pure attention of Christ is both utterly personal (he is paying attention to you, and to me, uniquely) and it is also utterly universal (he is paying attention to all of us, throughout history), and he is paying attention to the one he calls Father, to the source of his being and all being, to that personal, loving source of all existence, the creator. This is the great wonder and meaning of the practice of silence in Christian meditation. We enter into the very mind of Christ, that we become one with the mind of Christ, that our attention becomes his attention. This "one-ing", this union of our self with Christ, is the work of love. In the Christian tradition, contemplation has always been seen as a movement of love.

This is why the fruits of meditation are both a personal transformation, (you change because you know that you are loved; that's what changes us most when we know we are loved), and it is the meaning of the social transformation that takes place when there are enough of us on this planet who have experienced that love. Meditation is not just a private spirituality. It is a way of love that transforms us into brothers and sisters, and into responsible inhabitants of this universe.

Jesus says that, when we follow him, when we pray, we must leave self behind. No one can be a follower of mine, he says, unless he leaves self behind. That's the simple, radical, wonderful call of the Christian disciple, of the follower of Jesus. Not just to believe certain things, not just to obey certain rules or regulations, not just to be religious in an external sense but to leave self behind. What does that mean? It means to stop placing ourselves at the centre of the universe. To transcend our egotistical mind, to stop thinking about our self even, to expand beyond our own little narrow universe, our narrow ego, and to expand into the great mind of Christ.

What does Jesus say? What is the essence of his teaching? Let's come back to that key point, "Any one who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind". What does that mean – leaving self behind? It could mean something very negative, something rather self-destructive, something rather repressive. But it doesn't mean I have to repress myself. It doesn't mean I have to deny myself any pleasure in life. Does it mean I have to punish myself? Does it mean I come closer to God the more suffering I inflict upon myself. That is hardly the spirit of the Gospel. It's hardly the personality of Jesus. The gospel of Jesus is about finding peace and joy, and sharing these essential qualities of existence with others. These were the very visible characteristics of the early Christian communities – peace and joy. That is why we hear them so often in the letters of the New Testament. You are not going to be very

peaceful if your attitude to yourself is negative and repressive. So, leaving self behind is not a negative statement; there is no negative spirituality.

Sometimes, as Christians, we have slipped into a negative state of mind. We've become obsessed with guilt, with sin, with punishment, with the fear of Hell. We think that salvation is a restricted club; some are called into it and others are excluded. But none of that is true to the gospel of Jesus. The challenge of the gospel is a challenge to be fully alive, not to be frightened. Jesus doesn't want us to feel guilty about anything. It's not the meaning of repentance. He tells us to repent, but repentance means saying, "Yes, I did something wrong", "Yes, I fell short of my full potential", "Yes, I will do better", but guilt is a negative and destructive state of mind. There is nothing in the gospel of Jesus when you touch its essence that presents us with a God who will punish us. Sin contains its own punishment. God doesn't need to punish us. It would be a self-contradiction to God to inflict punishment. It's just not in the nature of love. Love can hurt; love can be a terrible standard of truth that we have to recognise, but love does not punish. So why are we so fixated as Christians on an image of a God that will punish us. You can't love a God who will punish you. If you think somebody is going to punish you, then it is very difficult to love them, to trust them.

So what all this points to is the fact that leaving self behind has nothing to do with all that negative spirituality. It is not about repression or guilt. It is about liberation. To leave self behind means to be liberated from all egotistical obsessions, from the ego-bound world, from the prison of selfishness, of self-centredness, from the prison of desire or compulsion or addiction or fear or insecurity. This is what leaving self behind means – leaving the ego behind and moving out of the small prison of the ego into the great open space of the spirit, into the freedom of the children of God.

*Excerpts of talk at Retreat,
John Main Seminar 2002, Montreal, Canada*

5 Freedom from the Ego

Meditation is about freedom, the freedom of the children of God. What happens in meditation is that you unhook yourself from your ego and you become reconnected with your true self. This is why meditation is very much about relationship, not about isolation, not about escape. It is first of all about coming into relationship healthily and truly with ourselves. That after all is the basis of our relationship with other people.

In meditation, we move out of self-fixation, self-consciousness, self-obsession into a new freedom of the spirit. A self-fixated person cannot love. A selfish person cannot be happy. There's a beautiful Buddhist text that sums up Mahayana Buddhism: "All the unhappiness in the world comes from people who are trying to find happiness for themselves. All the happiness in the world comes from people who are trying to make other people happy." That's very true to the gospel. That is what leaving self means – finding happiness by freeing ourselves from our ego, and moving into that great relationship which is God.

How do we do that in meditation? Through simplicity. We stop thinking about ourselves. We take the searchlight of consciousness off ourselves. Of course, I said simple, not easy. It isn't easy to stop thinking about yourself, because we are so caught up in ourselves. But in meditation, we reverse that process; we break that habit of mind. We try something different. We stop thinking about ourselves and our attention moves to a deeper and purer place, a more quiet place, a more conscious place as we move into the mind of Christ. Now this does not mean we are thinking about God or thinking about Christ. In meditation, we are not thinking about God but we are paying attention to God. But we are not paying attention to God as an object or thought. When we say we are paying attention to God, we really mean what Jesus says that we are loving God with our whole being, our whole mind, our whole strength. This is a very important distinction if you want to understand what you are doing when you meditate. Meditation is not about thinking.

Another essential teaching of Jesus is captured in that phrase of his that: "No one can be a follower of mine unless he renounces all his possessions." What does that mean? If it means that we all had to give up our wallets and credit cards and cars and houses and clothes, then we probably are not going to be able to follow this teaching. I'm very attached to my watch here. So what does it really mean to renounce your possessions? Does it mean we all have to begin to live like St Francis? Give away all our possessions to the poor? Maybe for some people that is what is meant and we benefit from the great example of poverty that they make. But I don't think that is what is meant for everyone. We're not all meant to become hermits, beggars or sannyasis. What I think it really means is that we must become non-possessive to the very core of our being. We have to stop trying to possess people or possess the things that we happen to have in our possession at any particular moment. We have to recognise that even what we think we possess, we are simply stewards of for a short

time. If we can practise this way of letting go of our possessions, then the way we use our possessions (our money, our credit card, our houses) will be very different.

To be non-possessive means to practise and to live detachment. That means if you come up to me and you say “I lost my watch and I really need one, can I have yours?” I ought to be able to say “sure, have it”, to practise detachment. The only way we can practise detachment while living in the real world is to get back to the root problem in our possessiveness, which is our ego. If we can let go of our ego, leave self behind, as Jesus says, then we have let go of all our possessions. If we can leave our self behind, then we have renounced all our possessiveness, and our possessions become things that we can share with others. This is something we live out in the personal relationships of our lives, but it also is a truth that takes us into the nature of society.

A third essential teaching of Jesus is, in fact he says it sums up the whole of the law: “Love the Lord your God with your whole mind, your whole heart and your whole strength, and your neighbour as yourself.” To love God and to love one another – equally important and inseparable in the teaching of Jesus. What does that mean? We cannot love the God we cannot see unless we love the person next to us that we can see. What does it mean to love your neighbour. It means, I think, that if you pay attention to that person sitting next to you, that person that we meet as a stranger, or that person who has been in our lives for many years, that person with whom you may have difficulties, that person who may have hurt us, that person who may have frightened us, that person of whom we are suspicious, if we can pay attention to that person, that person has become our neighbour in the rich gospel sense of the word, “Who is my neighbour?” And it also means if we are paying attention to them, we are loving them.

*Laurence Freeman OSB
Excerpts of talk in Singapore
November 2—1*

6 Paying Attention

Meditation is about paying attention. This is why when we find ourselves so distracted at the beginning of every meditation, we have to do the work of attention.

If we can really understand through our experience of meditation what attention means, then we also see how meditation fits into the deepest meanings and the deepest experiences of our whole lives. We see that it gives meaning to our very place in the universe, because the universe is the result of God's creative and loving attention. We have come into being as human beings because God has loved us, has paid attention to us even before we knew we existed.

It also means that in our daily relationships with one another, we are able to see every other person as a valid opportunity to find God through paying attention to them: loving our neighbour as ourselves.

People sometimes think that meditation is a very self-centred, selfish practice. We are contemplating our navel; we are avoiding our responsibilities to other people; we are cultivating a kind of private spirituality. But I think anybody who has understood the discipline and practised the attention of meditation, if you understand the meaning of the mantra, then you realise that in paying attention to your deepest self, you are paying attention to God and you are paying attention to your neighbour.

Just think about how practical and how ordinary in a sense this quality of attention is. Then we will begin to see how meditation changes our lives. Just think, at some point in your life where you had a lot of trouble, you had a problem you wanted to talk over. You go to see a friend, somebody who you trust, and you say to them, "There's something I want to talk to you about. Can you listen?" You begin talking and they listened. What you really want them to do was simply to listen, with their heart, to pay attention to you. It's not so much you want an answer to your problem, a solution. If that person really pays attention to you, really listens, then you will leave their presence with a lighter load. You will feel that you have shared some of the suffering of your life, and you will feel more empowered, more strengthened, more hopeful in dealing with that situation that is causing you distress. If that person you were talking to simply gave you an answer or a solution, or interrupted you after a few seconds and started telling you something from their own experience, in other words if they were unable to give you their full attention, then you will leave feeling that you haven't really connected. In other words, you haven't really been loved.

Attention is about love. When we pay attention to whoever we are paying attention to, we are loving them. Any work that we really do with real attention becomes a creative and a loving act.

We have been loved when we have been paid attention to. It's not romantic love but it's love. In a marriage you can live with the same person day by day, go through the routines of life with them, but as the years go by you may find that you stop paying attention to them. And then you suddenly realise that love has disappeared

from the relationship. Discovering that in a long term relationship can be a frightening, watershed experience. It's an experience that makes us aware of what it means to be in relationship. Not just to do things together? To be in relationship, to love your neighbour, means that, in the core of your being, you are giving the gift of yourself through the gift of your attention.

To pay attention, to really listen, is what love is about, loving God, loving your neighbour, loving your neighbour as yourself. Of course, as we all know, paying attention, taking the attention off ourselves, is difficult. We can do it for a short span of time and then we get tired. It's like a rubber band that snaps back when we start paying attention and thinking about ourselves again.

Learning to pay attention is a discipline. It is really the great art of living, the art of loving. This is why the discipline of attention in meditation teaches us to live more fully, more humanly.

Meditation is about paying attention. The Buddhists call it mindfulness. Christian tradition speaks about it as living in the present moment, or practising the presence of God. It's really what Jesus means by being awake, being alert. Learning to say the mantra with attention, learning to come back to it faithfully and lovingly when we have become distracted – this is precisely why meditation changes the way we live.

*Laurence Freeman OSB
Excerpts from Talk in Singapore
November 2001*

7 The Teaching of Jesus on Contemplation I

Jesus was a teacher of contemplation. He didn't go around giving talks on Christian Meditation but he was a teacher of contemplation. If you look at the Sermon on the Mount, for example, which is where we find his teaching distilled, the real essence of his teaching is there in chapters 5 and 6 and 7 of St Matthew's Gospel. What do we find there?

Interiority

When Jesus is asked about prayer, he doesn't say you must go to the synagogue every Saturday, you must put money in the collection plate, you must believe these ideas and these points of faith, you must obey the rules and regulations of your religion, and you must respect the feasts and festivals and special observances of our religion. He doesn't say anything about that. He doesn't really say very much about religious observance at all. He took it for granted, I suppose, that people were religious. What we see in the teaching of Jesus, where he really places his emphasis, is not on religious observance or religious ritual or religious doctrine, but on interiority or the experience of contemplation.

First of all, he warns us against the dangers of religious formalism, external religious practice that lacks spirit, that is just a matter of external observance. He says, "Don't think that because you are religious in this way of external practice that you have fulfilled these social expectations that you have won God's favour or approval." In other words, don't feel, don't think that you have really entered into an experience of God just because you feel good about doing something religious. That's what he means when he says to win God's approval. Don't think that you have really entered into a genuine experience of God just because you are very religious. That's something that we need to listen to very carefully, especially today in an era of religious fundamentalism and formalism. We may love our religion and we should love our religion. We should love to practise it. It's very important to us. Jesus doesn't say you shouldn't practise religion. But it isn't where he places his essential emphasis.

What he says, "When you pray, go into your inner room," which is your heart. In other words, the essence of prayer is interiority and solitude. Solitude not in the sense of isolation, but solitude in the sense of finding our true self, of being in touch with our uniqueness. So Jesus says, "You must go into your inner room," the inner space of your own identity. There you find the presence of God, and there you enter into the experience of communion with God. "You win God's approval," he says.

Trust in God

Another essential element of his teaching is trust in God. He says, “When you pray, you should not be babbling on like the heathen, who think that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard.” Now that’s quite a sobering remark for us as religious people to hear. It is a great danger in religious people that we think when we do more religious practices, say more prayers, go to church more often, do more religious things, that we are actually in some way better at attracting God’s attention just by doing these things in abundance. He warns us against that. Don’t go babbling on like the heathens. Don’t become spiritual materialists. Don’t think you can buy your way into the kingdom of heaven. Don’t think that you can earn your way into it by saying lots of prayers, or doing a lot of religious practices.

Therefore, he asks us to examine our own religious psychology. In fact the whole of the Gospel is a powerful critique of human religion, not just the Jewish religion but all religion. I think the practice of meditation in daily life also brings us to the same understanding of prayer and of the priorities of religion. If you are practising meditation, and many of you have been practising it now for many years, you don’t give up being religious. In fact, some of you may have become more religious as a result of meditating. You don’t give up going to church or praying in other ways. In fact, other ways such as reading of scripture or the Eucharist become much more powerful and meaningful as a result of this interiority. But, you do become more self-aware and maybe more self-critical of your motivation for doing these prayers and rituals. You understand why you are doing it and what it means.

The practice of meditation, entering into that inner room of your heart, makes it very difficult to fool yourself. That’s maybe one of the reasons why we find meditation difficult. Because it’s difficult to face yourself sometimes, especially when we discover that we have been fooling ourselves, deluding ourselves, or brushing things under the carpet. Meditation brings everything to light, including our religious motivation because the light that shines in our heart begins to shine on every aspect of our mind and every aspect of our life. It brings us to self-knowledge and self-awareness. It will therefore always serve to purify our religion, to prevent our religion from becoming just external, just magical, formalistic, superstitious. That’s why meditation or contemplation is the great antidote for fundamentalism. Any religion becomes superstitious if we think that it is a way of manipulating God or that it’s a way of getting something we want out of God. It’s a very human approach to religion, and it’s one that Jesus is quite clear and strong about. So he says “don’t go babbling on like the heathens who think the more they say the more likely they are to be heard.”

Then he says, “Remember that your Heavenly Father knows what your needs are even before you ask.” Now if we really listened to that and understand it and remembered it, it would change the way we pray. He doesn’t say you shouldn’t express your needs in words, in petition, or intercession. No. It’s a very human thing to do especially if you’ve got a very heavy burden on your heart, or a particular anxiety or problem. Nothing is more natural that you should express it either alone even, or especially in the presence of a worshipping community when we pray for each other’s needs or the needs of the world, provided we pray from a sincere heart. Jesus doesn’t say we shouldn’t do it. But he says, “Just remember when you do it, that

God already knows.” In other words, we are not trying to inform God of something God missed on the CNN news. We are not asking God to change his mind as if he must have had a slight lapse of memory and let this terrible thing happen to me so could he just press the “rewind” button and change his mind. Nor are we asking God to intervene on our behalf as if we were his favourites more than other people. There’s a very important verse in the Letters of St Paul – God has no favourites. Christians are not God’s favourites. Jews are not God’s favourites. God has no favourites. We are all equally chosen, equally loved by God. So we don’t pray in order to get God on “my” side against somebody else. Don’t bargain, and remember that God knows your needs.

Then Jesus goes on. There are other very essential elements of prayer such as, “Do not worry. Look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field,” he says. “Don’t worry about what you are to eat or what you are to wear.” He’s not saying these are not natural concerns of daily living. But he’s saying, “Don’t be obsessed with these material needs. Don’t become excessively anxious about them, the material anxieties of daily living.” He says, “If you do, then the best cure for that anxiety and that obsessiveness is to turn your attention to the beauty of God’s creation.” To see that life is beautiful, something we very easily forget when we allow our anxieties and worries to flood us. We can forget that life is good and life is beautiful. Even in the midst of suffering, we can celebrate the beauty and goodness of life.

So Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air, the lilies of the field.” Just looking at them may not be enough but we must see their natural simple beauty, you will also then see that life is pure gift. It’s given. You remember what Fr John said about meditation, “In meditation we accept the gift of our being.” A truly religious person is somebody who in the depth of their heart and in a deep spirit of trust has experienced the sheer gift of being. That’s the starting point of all true worship.

*Laurence Freeman OSB
Excerpts from Talk in Singapore
November 2001*

8 The Teaching of Jesus on Contemplation II

Jesus continues in his teaching on prayer to tell us that in our spiritual life we should be mindful, not distracted, not scattered. We should live with a sense of the presence at all times. This is implicit when he says, “Set your mind upon God’s Kingdom before everything else, and everything else will come to you as well”. What does this mean? Surely it means to be, to be present, to live attentively in the present moment, and then you will be mindful of the Kingdom of God, which means the presence of God within you and between us at all times. It’s very close to what the Buddhists call mindfulness. It’s what the Christian tradition calls “praying at all times”.

One of the great benefits of meditation in daily life, if you meditate regularly every day, morning and evening, is that you’ll find that more and more deeply you become aware of this continuous life of the Spirit going on in your depths, in the depth of your own being. It’s going on at all times, not just when you are praying but whatever you are doing, wherever you are, whoever you are with, at any time of the day or night and even whatever you are feeling. This is the deepest ground of being, the ground level of existence on which we are standing. This is the present moment, that present moment that contains past and future. We are always in the present moment, even if we are thinking about the past or thinking about the future, we are in the present moment aren’t we? That is what we mean by praying at all times.

To live in a contemplative way doesn’t mean we have to live in a monastery or living a very quiet form of life. It means that whatever we are doing, fulfilling our duties or our vocation, we are present to what we are doing and to the presence of God in that action. To pray at all times means that actually we are opening a deeper level of our consciousness to the prayer of Christ in us. St Paul helps us to understand this when he says, “We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays within us, deeper than words.” The symptoms of this are joy and peace. You can experience joy even when things go wrong, and you can experience peace even in times of stress or anxiety, because of this joy and peace that Jesus promised us and communicated to us – his own peace, his own joy. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I give you my own peace, my parting gift to you and I give you my joy so that your joy may be complete.” It is in this joy and peace that we find the real experience of God. They are not dependent on external circumstances. They are there in good weather and bad weather, when things go well, when things don’t go well, when you are happy, when you are unhappy. It’s always there. The contemplative life is to be rooted in that ground of being, to have your feet standing on that solid ground, to be rooted in that ground of love.

That’s the meaning of the daily meditation discipline. That’s why we do it. You don’t always feel like meditating, do you? Sometimes you are not in the mood for it. Sometimes you feel you are not doing it very well, you are not making much progress. But it’s our commitment to that regular daily practice that we discover the fruit in this

experience of continuous prayer in daily living. We find that even without trying to do it, our mind is set on God's Kingdom above everything else.

Living Fully in the Present Moment

At the conclusion of this section of St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Don't worry about tomorrow; every day has enough problems of its own." He's talking about living fully and faithfully in the present moment. Be present. Be real.

Actually, as you understand and discover what the present moment means, what it is like living in the present moment, and you will discover that in your own experience as you meditate day by day, you discover that you don't forget the past, you don't become irresponsible about the future. The past and future are now related to the central primary experience of the present moment. There may be some aspects of the past you have still to deal with, some leftover business that you haven't finished yet, some emotional or moral responsibilities that you have yet to attend to arising from your past behaviour, some things you don't understand about the past that you've got to learn to understand before you can move on. It doesn't mean either that you ignore the future and just pretend that there isn't going to be any future – you still pay your insurance policies or your car tax or make your bookings for the plane long enough in advance to get a cheap rate. The past and the future have a certain reality which we have to respect. But you will find that as you learn to live in the present moment, you will become less anxious about the future and less controlled by the past. You won't be living so much out of the fears for the future or the memories of the past. You won't be living behind yourself or ahead of yourself. And you won't be so trapped in the past especially those aspects of the past that cause anger, guilt, or sadness. You know, you've had fights, or family feuds, or people have betrayed us, or our employer made us redundant or we had a fight with a friend. Those experiences of the past are very powerful. They can linger – we may struggle with forgiveness for many years. But what you will find is that, as you discover what the present moment means, you will be able to deal with those memories and experiences of the past much more freely, much more peacefully.

Contemplation sets us free. When Jesus said that he came to show us and to bring us the fullness of life, so that we could live life to the full and maximise our full human potential, he said it is the truth that will set you free. This is what we discover through meditation: the truth.

Prayer of the Heart

So those are the essential elements of Jesus' teaching on prayer that we find in The Sermon on the Mount: being free from external obsessiveness, practising interiority, silence, trust, calmness of mind, mindfulness and being present.

If you were to say, "How can I put those good teachings into practice" what you are asking is, "how can I pray". That question, "how can I truly pray; how can I deepen my prayer, how can I pray better" is the question which when sincerely asked, takes us to a deeper level of our spiritual journey. It leads us, in God's own time, in

God's own kindness, eventually to the practice of meditation, to the prayer of the heart.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Excerpt from audiotape Meditation: An Introduction for Friends

Pecos, New Mexico, USA

December 1997