

# Meditation: The Heart of All Things

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On 9-11 1893, Swami Vivekananda of the Ramakrishna Order, the St Paul to Ramakrishna, delivered his opening address to The Parliament of World Religions meeting in Chicago. The moment was to become iconic – a sign of hope that the religions of humanity were embarking on a new path of dialogue and friendship and, instead of competition and rivalry they would henceforth unite in their diversity in a common service of humanity. Despite the obvious shadow cast by the other 9-11 and its aftermath in which we inevitably meet here in Melbourne 116 years later there is every reason to celebrate

Vivekananda's optimism. Soon after that first Parliament, at the historical apex of the British Empire, a conference of Christian protestant missionaries met in Scotland and concluded that soon, with the triumph of the Pax Britannica and the religion that fuelled it, there would be no need for missionaries as the whole world would have become Christian. Since then most Christians have learned the lessons of history and in doing so have better understood their own true nature and, within it, the meaning of Jesus.

This means that I can stand here today as a Christian monk with the support of my church in affirming that we reject nothing that is true and holy in other religions. We can go even further and say that every religious person is obliged not only to reverence the truth in other traditions but actively to learn from it and to promote it. What began as a Conference on inter-religious dialogue more than a century ago has thus helped to evolve a commonwealth of truth in which no human being is a foreigner. Confucius said that 'when the Tao prevailed the world was a commonwealth'. Let us pray that our time here will allow the Way - which every religious tradition recognises cannot be named - to prevail. And so may we help to build a global commonwealth of truth that will serve a world of peace and justice.

The challenge and the difficulty of this vision is to reconcile diversity with unity. Only too easily we can proclaim the ideal of unity only to betray it – but we say we are suspending not rejecting it – as soon as the friction inherent in diversity makes itself felt. My contribution today is to point to the perennial wisdom irradiating all religions traditions at their core and source, the wisdom of meditation, which turns the energy of this friction of difference into the spiritual chemistry of union. And I want to suggest at the outset that at no moment in history has it been more important for religious leaders and ministers to teach directly from the wellspring of this wisdom, to go back to our religious roots which run deep into the soil of spirituality, from which all religion derives whatever authority it may have.

Inter-religious dialogue is not new. When the traders of the Phoenician fleets or merchants on the Asian Silk Route sat by their campfires or haggled in the market squares, when the Chinese emperor invited Christian monks from the Middle East to

establish a monastery in their territory, religious differences were already being passionately exchanged and pondered. Today when a child comes home from university and informs his parents that he or she has changed their religion and the family sits and discusses it over the kitchen table dialogue is happening. Dialogue simply illustrates the interconnectedness of all religious traditions, the place where similarity and difference meet.

When I first came to teach Christian meditation here in Australia a Christian aborigine came up to me after the talk. He said ‘you are speaking about this 2000 year old tradition of prayer in the church. My people have been practising it for 40,000 years. I asked him what meditation meant to him then as a Christian and an aborigine. His reply moved me strongly. He said ‘my people have learned how to sit in a non-questioning silence, to listen.. As a Christian I understand that what we have been listening to all these millennia is the Word of God sounding at the heart of creation..’

No religion has been uninfluenced by others just as no racial identity is pure in the genetic sense. But what is new in our time is the globalisation of this dialogue and the speed at which its effects are being registered. Never before have our similarities and differences collided so powerfully – like the collision of galaxies that we can see beautiful images of, millions of light years away, except that this collision is here and now where we are Ninety-nine percent of human beings in the last two million years of the ‘cultural phase’ of humanity have lived in small, local, traditional communities infrequently exposed to other beliefs and ritual practices. ‘Modern’ humanity means a humanity shaped by a global and digital exchange of perspectives and experience, inter-culturally and inter-religiously, empowered by technologies of communication and ease of travel.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a good era for institutional religion or for civilisation. Europe reverted to long periods of barbarism, slaughter on an unprecedented scale and the unique horror of the Holocaust. The complicity of religion in some of this has cast a long shadow and undermined its authority. The atheist alternative fared little better. Man seems as naturally religious – in search of ultimate meaning and hungry for transcendence – as he is an artist, bound to beauty and creativity or a scientist, insatiably curious about the nature of things. Today many have reacted to this dilemma of religion by believing without belonging – drawing on the spiritual traditions of religion but rejecting its doctrines and external forms. Spirituality not religion. Yet this dichotomy ultimately does not stand up to the demands and needs of the individual spiritual journey. It is not long before a merely subjective spirituality begins to form religious needs and these can only be met either by returning to religious traditions and rediscovering and reinvigorating their symbols and rituals or by trying to invent another new religion, to reinvent the wheel.

Religion is in crisis. But what does crisis mean? As we know from times of personal crisis – when we lose someone or something precious to us and life is suddenly turned upside down – crisis brings with it the sense of losing control and of being deprived of what we took for granted. In this situation we tend to panic, to deny, to try to crawl back to an earlier security. But we can also grow to accept that change has happened and cannot be reversed. Then a new kind of knowledge arises from the void and a new meaning takes shape in the abyss of the senseless. This new knowledge is wisdom. In the Book of Wisdom it says that ‘the hope for the salvation of the world lies in the greatest number of wise people’. Unfortunately, it does not say how many –

but clearly we need more. If religion cannot increase the production of wise people it deserves to become extinct.

So what is the next step in our present crisis of religion? What form will religion take in the new millennium? Perhaps a better question is what does the modern evolution of religion tell us about the direction in which humanity is moving in a world of globalised culture and technology where the role of myth has changed and the very concept of the person has undergone a radical transformation. In a secular culture religion is not necessarily excluded but its functionality has changed – a fact that religious people understandably find hard to accept. Daily life is subject to high levels of stress. Time is money and there is less and less space in modern societies for the sacred time of religious festivals and seasons. Ritual is necessary but needs to adapt to the new consciousness. How does religion exist in this new kind of world?

Religion is not an end in itself. Its finger points to the moon. In the Book of Revelation, the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem is a Christian expression of a universal religious intuition – that we have a destiny to achieve, a goal to reach. Because it is only reached through transcendence, it can only be described inadequately using the language of this level of experience we usually inhabit. But it is a powerful vision nonetheless:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple was the sovereign Lord God and the lamb. The city did not need the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of God gave it light and its lamp was the Lamb. By its light all the nations walk and to it the kings of the earth shall bring their splendour.

There will be no Parliament of World Religions in Nirvana.

But we are united in our diversity by a sense of being on pilgrimage together. Wherever we are going, there are, as Jesus told his disciples, ‘many mansions’ in his Father’s house. We are not there yet. *Neti neti* : neither this nor that, as the Indian tradition expresses it, is no less the heart of Christian apophatic wisdom. We ‘press on’ as St Paul said because we have not yet achieved it. The ongoing life of religion is therefore both a struggle and a celebration. It is a struggle to fuse opposites, to heal divisions, to reconcile those in conflict. Religion is only religious when it does actually unite and re-link. Otherwise it is demonic and the corruption of the best is the worst. Religion also celebrates the knowledge we have of this destiny and the potential we have to realise it. Essentially religion leads us from duality to non-duality, the advaitic experience of oneness, the life of the Trinity, the oneness of God, that transcends difference without obliterating it. God does not destroy anything He has made. Violence – the usual addiction of the ego - attempts to solve the problem of difference and the conflicts it breeds by destroying what is different. Corrupt religion gets sucked into this false ‘final solution’ that is palpably not final but cyclical. True religion resolves the issue through transcendence. Only those who are interiorly free can be open to the transcendent, to what lies beyond the reach of the ego. Religion must train us for this freedom and so as the Qu’ran says ‘there is no compulsion in religion’.

So far I have been talking about religion in the light that meditation sheds upon its nature and purpose. It is a contemplative view of religion rather than a doctrinal, ritualistic or institutional view. I have been led to this perspective through the Gospels and it has helped me to see the same perspective expressed in other traditions. This

helped me to discover why it is indeed true that to go to the deep core of our own tradition opens us to the common ground of all humanity. Jesus was a religious man. He kept the Law except when it was stupid – forbidding the healing of the sick on the Sabbath for example. He prayed in synagogue and went to the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet when Jesus speaks about prayer he does not point to these external forms of prayer – in fact he warns us against the false ego-satisfaction they can give. Instead he tells us to ‘go into your inner room’, not to use many words in prayer because God knows our needs before we ask, to lay aside anxious thoughts and worries, to be mindful - set your mind on God’s kingdom before everything else, he says – and live in the present moment (do not worry about tomorrow). He tells us to ‘stay awake’ and vigilant and to be ready for the unpredictable. All enlightened religion respects the element of the unknowable in life, chance, spontaneity, the unforeseen. In this we can see that Jesus was a teacher of contemplation. In the story of Martha and Mary where he helps the overstressed and neurotic Martha to regain her balance he says that Mary has chosen the better part’. Mary is the silent witness in the story. She has been sitting listening to his words while Martha became distracted by her many tasks – the patron saint of stress for our age. In saying she chose the better part he is not putting Martha down or denying the need for good work and service of others’ needs. He is saying that being comes before doing, contemplation is the energy source of all activity that bears good fruit. Work that loses its connection with this still point of our being easily degenerates into ego-activity.

The point of the Martha-Mary story applies to all religion and indeed to the very structure of human life. In Jainism the whole way of daily life built on the teaching of non-injury to all forms of life is directly connected to the five vows of the hermit. Jesus tells the hyper-active and unhappy Martha that “only one thing is necessary”. He doesn’t define it but surely it means that contemplation and action must be reconciled and that harmony and peace within us is the necessary condition for a harmonious and peaceful society. The reconciliation of opposites is the work of meditation in daily life. What could be more apparently opposed than the different kinds of work of Martha and Mary? If the purpose of religion is to re-link and reconcile then meditation is essential to practical religion.

A Sufi story seems to me to capture something of the same understanding:

Isa one day saw some people sitting miserably on a wall, by the roadside. He asked ‘What is your affliction?’ They said ‘We have become like this through our fear of hell’ He went on his way, and saw a number of people grouped together disconsolately in various postures by the way side. He said ‘What is your affliction?’ They said ‘Desire for Paradise has made us like this.’

He went on his way, until he came to a third group of people. They looked like people who had endured much, but their faces shone with joy. Isa asked them ‘What made you like this?’ They answered ‘The Spirit of Truth. We have seen Reality, and this has made us oblivious of lesser goals.’

Isa said ‘These are the people who attain. On the Day of Accounting these are they who will be in the Presence of God.’

Heaven and hell have been vividly imagined in all religious traditions. Tibetan wall paintings and thankas and medieval frescoes show many similarities. The duality of heaven and hell, reward and punishment – is dangerously easy to teach and

understand. They are also easily employed to keep people in a state of fear and trembling. They easily lead religious leaders to succumb to the temptations of power and wealth. Where this happens you will not find meditation taught to ordinary people. It becomes seen as a specialised and restricted practice to which special access is needed – an esoteric password that only the higher initiates know. The wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita is easily forgotten, that

All have equal access to God through all acts.

But in the deeper contemplative level of religious teachings heaven and hell are understood as states that we produce ourselves through our own responsibility. The real demons, as the Desert Fathers and Mothers knew, are the states of anger, pride, greed, envy, despair and selfish lust. Heaven and Hell are not rewards and punishment but realities of our own experience over which we have power, with grace, to transcend.

All religion recognises the distinct human fields of ethics and spirituality. Corrupt religion tends to limit itself to the ethical and then to raise it to an absolute which supplants the only absolute there really is – the God or ultimate reality which is beyond good and evil as we can understand them. The heart of ethics is the simple recognition that we are like others –

See that their body is like yours and they are human as you are.

But this truth is merely a platitude, an idea that fades, unless it bursts into the flame of wisdom and becomes an insight through personal experience. Then it becomes a truth that leads to a fundamental and permanent change in behaviour. Jesus, the teacher of contemplation, is no less the teacher of non-violence. The connection between these two aspects – the mystical and the political - is the heart of all religion. It is why meditation – the work of achieving the vision of contemplation, *bodhicitta*, is not a retreat from this world's problems and sinfulness but a direct way of engaging with them.

Every religion recognises the need for repentance, for purification, for *ascesis* and long-term training. Belief is not enough as long as it denotes only conceptual assent or conformity to the ideology of the group you belong to. Religions are often defined by what they believe. But belief is more than dogma. It means conforming one's way of life to the truth expressed in the doctrines. The common characteristic of this new way of living in all traditions is non-injury to others, a passion for justice and dedication to the relief of all forms of human suffering. This is expressed first of all within the relationships that form your own community and tradition. Intra-religious dialogue is a corollary to inter-religious dialogue because charity begins at home.

When Jesus says 'repent and believe the good news' repentance means *metanoia*, a radical change of consciousness and belief means putting into practice what you now see. This is the only way that the engrained habits and patterns of the mind can be changed. As modern brain research into the effects of meditation has demonstrated, this is precisely what happens in the practice of meditation. The other ways of prayer, spiritual practices and 'skilful means' support and complete this process.

The Qu'ran says that 'man is created fretful, impatient and resentful'. At least we can agree that man becomes like this quite quickly. These states of mind are both

individual and collective as the worst examples of human inhumanity testify. They are manifestations of *maya*, the deluded vision of reality that leads to the kind of thought and behaviour that betrays our essential human nature. Violence is the inevitable product and expression of this state of delusion.

Meditation begins with the recognition that states of mind, however overwhelming and compulsive, are temporary and changeable. Therefore simply to sit and meditate is an act of hope and faith similar to the writing of a poem in a time of despair or social collapse. It is already a relief to realise that there are different levels of consciousness and that we can move from the more gross, confused and deluded states to higher, clearer and more peaceful ones. Daily meditation, integrated into the routines of ordinary life, at the very least gives us the capacity better to deal with the peaks and lows of experience and to maintain some balance, moderation and sense of proportion in a world that has often lost them. Meditation gives us that capacity for a cooling-off period when rage suddenly rises in us and brings us to the brink of violent words, thoughts and deeds. It revitalises the words of scripture with meaning related to interior experience. And, as the eleventh step of the 12 Step programs affirms, it is an essential element in recovery from addiction.

Although meditation is universal and natural it needs, like the skills of reading and writing, to be taught and learned. If modern politics recognises the universal good of literacy and even evaluates societies on the basis of its bringing this skill to its people, a religion today can also be evaluated by the degree to which it teaches meditation to its followers. Here in Australia – supposedly an incorrigibly secular society – the Catholic Church has begun to set an example that is becoming influential and inspirational to many other parts of the world by teaching Christian meditation in its schools. The feedback from teachers and parents and the children themselves has been almost unanimously positive. Children can meditate and they love to meditate – even though they realise that it is *work*, that is, a simple but not easy practice. Because they seem to feel the benefits of meditation so quickly children are eager to do this work and their response should surely teach us in our more complex state just how simple and natural meditation is.

Learning to meditate within your own religious tradition is a lifelong process and therefore best begun as early as possible. Learning it as a child sets a foundation of spiritual practice that not only helps to deal with the crises of life but also opens the mind to the paradoxes which are the portals to higher levels of development. Religion as a force for nonviolent reconciliation of conflict, as a way of re-linking people divided by their differences, depends for its effectiveness upon the personal experience of integration and inner harmony among its leaders and practitioners. Religion is only as effective as the people who practice it.

Of course meditation is not a simplistic band-aid for all humanity's problems – if it were more people would be practising it. I recently spoke with a woman who had been meditating for about a year. She told me it had been a great discovery and she felt determined to continue. But. She added, I don't seem to be getting the results you say I should be getting. My family all say I have become much more difficult. I fly off the handle and get angry about things that I didn't react to before. I asked her if she had always been like that. Oh no, she said, I never showed my anger. When I was a child my mother always insisted the biggest sin of all was to show your anger. Well, her first lesson in self-knowledge had come to her already. She was learning to

recognise her anger and – hopefully for her family – how to express it in a non-violent way. To learn requires a learning community – a sangha, church or fellowship.

Religious centres and places of worship – parish churches, mosques, synagogues, temples – should provide the support and encouragement we need to pass through the various stages of the interior journey. They should be schools of prayer including contemplative practice. But this can only happen if the leaders and ministers of those centres are themselves trained and experienced in contemplative practice. This is why I said at the beginning of this talk that the modern challenge to religious leaders of all faiths today is to reinstate the central values of interiority to religion, and that this includes to teach and practice meditation as an integral part of religious life. This is already happening widely at the grass roots. Change comes first from the periphery and from the roots rather than as decrees from the citadels of power. But the training of monks, sisters and clergy needs to be re-examined in the light of the new contemplative consciousness that is dawning collectively upon our world – one of the positive effects of globalisation.

This is a considerable challenge to all religious institutions which define themselves so often by the differences between themselves and others and especially by the differences of beliefs and practices. All religions in dialogue with each other privately know the pain and embarrassment of their own internal divisions and conflicts. No one can hate like a religious person. Yet also a religion in touch with its interiority can elevate consciousness far beyond the distorting effects of the ego and liberate us to be fully human – free to lay down our life for others.

At the heart of all and every world-historical religion and the indigenous religions that preceded them is a recognition of – an awakening to – something that intrinsically cannot be thought or imagined. St Thomas Aquinas left his great work the *Summa Theologica* unfinished after his experience while celebrating mass one morning. “All that I have written seems to me like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me,” he said. This experience is of the same order as the state of nirvana described by the Buddha as “the unconditioned” (*asankhata*) mind. This mind has achieved a clarity and purity through the resolution of its own conflicts and oppositions. It is the fourth state of consciousness of the Vedic wisdom, *turiya*, which includes and transcends the other three states of waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep.

The Platform Sutra presents the absence of thought as its main doctrine.

To sit means to obtain absolute freedom and not to allow any thought to be caused by external objects. To meditate means to realise the imperturbability of one’s original nature.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian monk who wrote the *Cloud of Unknowing* would have seen the truth of this. He believed that ‘we can never know God by thought but only by love’. The Christian contribution to the universal tradition of contemplation is its emphasis on the work of meditation as the work of love. In an age of distraction such as we have created it is important for us to learn again what the ancient wisdom knew about love – that its true nature is attention. We love what we pay attention to and we pay attention to what we love. Meditation teaches us the truth of love in a way that modern consumer culture with its often romantic and over-eroticised sense of love has forgotten. Religious traditions are better at teaching meditation than consumer spiritualities simply because they place the emphasis here – on becoming a more

loving person – rather than on the physical or psychological benefits which should be seen as useful by-products rather than as the main goal.

The modern mind is both attracted and fearful of this ‘laying aside of thought’, as the Desert Father Evagrius called it. Yet it is one of the great elements of the common ground of all religion and essential to the construction of an integrated and harmonious consciousness. TS Eliot said, “Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought” but he also identified the ‘growing terror of nothing to think about’.

The encouragement we need to do this today comes from both scientific and religious authorities. Doctors and therapists recommend meditation for its benefits ranging from lowering blood-pressure to reducing stress levels and hypertension. Spiritual traditions recommend it as the work of realising our fullest human potential.

Even some very early religious wisdom testifies to this dimension of spiritual practice. A pygmy Hymn to God tells us that

In the beginning was God

Today is God

Tomorrow will be God

Who can make an image of God

He has no body

He is as a word

Which comes out of your mouth

That word! It is no more

It is past and still it lives

So is God

If religion is about the reconciliation of opposites and the healing of division it does this work most purely and deeply in the work of meditation where thoughts, words and images are left aside. But because thought is renounced not destroyed, we pick up the tools of the mind, reason, analysis, memory, imagination after the work of meditation and we find that these tools are better equipped for the business of life because of the silence and stillness we have experienced. We are back to the meaning of the story of Martha and Mary and the one thing necessary. The discovery of the different functions of the left and right hand hemispheres of the brain is the scientific parable that echoes this wisdom. If our eyesight needs correction we need two lenses to see clearly. Contemplation and action. Stillness and thought. Religion and spirituality. The middle way that all traditions respect is a way of integration and paradox.

As Guru Nanak wrote:

In the month of Magh, I made my ablution

The Lord entered my being, I made pilgrimage within myself and was purified

I met him, He found me good

And let me lose myself in Him

As the reference to ablution shows the interior spiritual journey is not separated from the external rituals and practices of religion which prepare for and support it. But without the interiority the external practices ossify and lose their meaning. As St Augustine said

The whole purpose of the Christian life (the reason we celebrate the sacraments and read the scriptures) is to open the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen. Man must first be restored to himself that making of himself a stepping-stone he may rise thence to God.

Or as Chuang Chan wrote

All thought is reduced to the one. Existence and non-existence are mutually accomplished the long and the short are mutually measured.

The title of my talk seemed a little pretentious to me at first. But I hope I have explained what it means – why meditation takes us to the heart of all things. When I was first introduced to meditation by my teacher, John Main, I had been reading a lot in many traditions. I was trying to find the answer to my questions and my problems just with the mind. The more I studied the less I understood. Without the knowledge of the heart there is no wisdom. When he explained meditation to me I could not understand it at all with my mind but I knew, with a clarity and certainty that surprised me, that he was telling me the truth and that this was a way I needed to follow with real seriousness. It was an exciting and mystifying new journey for me. Looking back I can see that what I lacked at that time was any balance between mind and heart but that it was nonetheless the heart that was speaking to me because it was my heart that had been awakened. Meditation is simply the way to make the journey into the infinite space of the heart where God is found and all desires are realised in a ‘condition of complete simplicity demanding not less than everything.’

The crisis of religion today is part of the greater crisis of the era through which the whole human family is passing. It affects our psyche, our politics, our economy and not least our very existence on this eco-system we call Earth. Religion has a vital part to play in leading us through this crisis to a deeper wisdom and a more just and peaceful world. It will be a long and difficult journey. It is part of the great journey to the heart of all things and meditation is one of the great gifts we all share to make this journey a coming home.

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