



LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

## Spirituality in a Secular Age



THE HUNGER FOR DEPTH AND MEANING

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Olivetan Congregation and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation. In these talks he addresses the spiritual anguish of the modern Christian in a landscape where institutional religion is often held in suspicion or even rejected. How do we live a meaningful life at personal depth? And how do we relate it to our faith? Fr Laurence points us to “the one thing necessary” that Jesus calls us to, as he called Martha to: to put being before doing. It is true to the way we are made, he explains, as he illustrates how meditation offers more than what the secular approach often presents – not just self-help but self-transcendence in love: a way to live and to experience truth.

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Transcript of talks recorded on CD  
under the same title

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# 1

## Two Lenses

As you can see I wear glasses. When I read I usually take these off and put on a pair of reading glasses. So I did that recently and I got quite a shock, because I thought I had aged very rapidly because I was unable to read the page very clearly. I could just about make it out but it had become very blur. And I got quite scared actually that something had gone wrong. So I was moving the book to and from my eyes, trying to find the right focal length. That didn't work so I put on some more light. That didn't work, so then I thought I would clean my glasses. So I took them off, I cleaned one lens, and then I went to clean the other lens, and I discovered it wasn't there. It was a very nice discovery in a way: I knew it wasn't my eyes but my lenses that were the problem. So the first thing is to diagnose the problem. The second problem was to find the lens. And lenses are made to be looked through not looked at, so it took me quite a while to find the lens that had popped out. And it continues actually to pop out of my reading glasses.

I thought then this is rather similar to the situation that the Church, Christianity, has slipped into over the last few centuries. That's why we often don't see things very clearly. We don't perhaps even often see the meaning of the gospel, or the words of Jesus, or the spirit of the tradition very clearly. And we aren't really surprised that because we can't see so clearly ourselves, we are not very able to see the world clearly. Yet we are surprised that the world doesn't see us very clearly. So there's a lot of blurred vision in our religious consciousness today. And the reason, I think, is that there are two lenses traditionally by which we see God or see the truth. In theological terms they are called the *aphophatic* and the *kataphatic* lenses.

The kataphatic is what we are doing now. We are talking. We

are using words and ideas and trying to string ideas together to build up a conceptual understanding of reality. So we use words, we use our mind, or we use actually the left-hand side of the brain. The dominant function of the left-hand side of the brain is concerned with language, with reason, with linear structures, thinking. And in theological terms, we speak about God. We dare to speak about God; we dare to make great theological investigations, great theological systems like *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. But in theological terms we tend to have restricted ourselves just to this kataphatic approach to God, what we say about God, and then we very confidently say what God says. When anybody argues with you, you can always say well it is here, written in the book, the big book, it's my way of putting the big book to you, that is what God is speaking to us through these very clear words: "Thou shalt not; Thou shalt... ."

We dare to interpret, to find the nature of God. But at the heart of the biblical understanding of God and indeed at the heart of all religious traditions there is a sense of God or ultimate reality as mystery. When Moses approached the burning bush and was told to take off his shoes because he was on sacred ground he asked God for his name. What is your name? I need to be able to give the people a name when I go back and do what you are telling me to do. And God said no way I'm not giving you a name. My name is, if anything, "I am". That's all I have to say to you: I am who I am; I am what I am; I am that I am. That's who I am. And it's a profound ontological insight into the nature of reality, that God is the ground of being. God is *being* not a being within a whole range of beings, but being itself. And therefore God remains ultimately a mystery. *The Cloud of Unknowing* a little book on Christian meditation written in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century says that God can never be known by thought but only by love. And even St Augustine said that if you can understand it, it isn't God.

The kataphatic approach, speaking about ultimate mystery, defining it, has its value. It's one of the lenses and we need to use

that lens because we have that side of our brain, we have that side of our mind. But the other lens, the apophatic, actually has priority. That is the dominant perspective of vision. This is more clearly intellectually understood theologically in the Orthodox tradition in the Eastern Church which didn't separate theology from mystical experience as much as they became separated in our Western tradition of the Church.

In the apophatic vision, we know by unknowing, we grow by subtraction. We enter into the mystery by letting go of the words, the thoughts and the images. We take off the shoes of our intelligence or at least the shoes of our language and we move into silence. And it's this whole dimension of Christian faith, of Christian spirituality, of Christian prayer, of Christian theology, of Christian worship, not to say the whole dimension of our humanity, that has become so forgotten or marginalized, an object of suspicion, of fear, for all sorts of reasons through the course of Western history.

The important thing is to realize that one of those lenses has popped out and that's why we are looking at things in a rather blurred way, why we can't see some pretty plain truths. Truth is always out in the open. Truth is never hidden. Truth is always plain and clear to see, if we can see it. The word truth itself means in Greek *aletheia* which means an unveiling – it's a disclosing, it's a clearing of the fog, it's a manifestation. Jesus says: "I am the truth." If you can see him clearly, you see this manifesting of ultimate reality. That's the diagnosis of the problem.

The second element is to find the lens. And the best way of finding the lens is to look within yourself first of all, to be conscious of this search going on. If you don't feel that search at all then you won't be looking for it. But if you do feel that there is something missing, if you do feel some hunger, some attraction, some orientation, towards this other way of knowing, towards the spiritual dimension, then you are ready to learn. If you don't feel it, you'll just be curious.

St Bernard of Clairvaux says that curiosity can be a holy curiosity, where they are really looking for the truth and they are prepared to take some risks in order to find it and explore it. But, he said, there's another kind of curiosity where you are not really taking it very seriously. You are just skimming the surface; you're just flipping the pages; you're just skimming it; you're just tasting a little bit here, a little bit there, having a little bit of buffet breakfast. This curiosity he says actually can be quite harmful, because it keeps you at a very superficial level. So he says, in a rather strong way, anything that does not contribute to your experience of the truth or to your growth in the truth should be rejected. Be serious, is what he's saying.

That's why John Main says in a slightly different way, but similar: you can't do "a bit of meditation". Meditation is something that you would really *want* to do because you are serious about it. If you have that holy curiosity then that attunes you; your antennae begin to wiggle. And you begin to sense the direction in which you should be moving.

From a spiritual perspective, I would say probably at this point that God is looking for us, and a series of meetings occurs where we find ourselves brought up against a wisdom tradition. The world is filled with some wonderful wisdom traditions which are transmissions through history, through culture, above all through a personal relationship, with a series of personal relationships and teaching experiences and discipleship experiences. Wisdom is transmitted through the generations and it evolves, or the language around it evolves, its cultural context may evolve. If we run up against one of these wisdom traditions, then we find perhaps this is what I've been looking for, this is what has been looking for me, and there's a connection. And then we can begin to connect and to learn.

The Dalai Lama (with whom our community has been in dialogue for many years) always begins his talks in the West by saying that he recommends people to stay in their own tradition,

to rediscover it, to plunge its steps, to appropriate its hidden treasures which they perhaps had not been aware of. And he says you are free to change your religion, to change your tradition, but it's safer and smoother he says if you don't. But many people do because they haven't found within their own Christian tradition what we might call a transmission of wisdom. In other words they don't find this missing lens that they are looking for.

That's why it's important that we teach meditation in the Christian tradition, and that's why it's important that every little parish, church, in the country, in the world, should have a little meditation group. It's much easier clearly to absorb what can be transmitted through words and thoughts and symbols through your own tradition. That's why I would say that the Holy Spirit has been working in recent decades to re-awaken within the Christian tradition its own awareness of what it has lost or what it has marginalized or what it has forgotten. And it's the work of the Holy Spirit to do that. That's what Jesus said: I'm going away, you won't see me again, but I will send the Holy Spirit (who is his presence) and the Holy Spirit will remind you of what I have told you, and will bring to mind what you may have forgotten. He will be your Teacher. That Teacher is within. The Holy Spirit by definition is an interior intelligence, an interior presence, and universal. And it's by contacting, by connecting with, that interior intelligence that we can collectively and individually remember what we have forgotten.

## 2

### Spiritual Life in a Secular Age

What has happened in modern times is the growth of a secular mentality which presents particular opportunities and problems, challenges for our spiritual journey. How do we live a spiritual life in a secular age? Let's think what we mean by secular. It doesn't only mean the rejection of belief in God. In fact it looks as if most people do believe in God; they just don't want to have a religious label put on that belief. Most people don't say that they are not spiritual; most people say they are not religious. The secular mentality certainly implies that a certain discourse about God in public life or in education or in our institutions, that's dropped away – we don't acknowledge God, we don't talk about God in polite society, business society, or anything like that. So that's one aspect of the secular age. Perhaps though we can understand how we re-connect to the spiritual dimension of our lives in a secular age by looking at other aspects of what we mean by secular.

One of them is this question of choice. We are able to choose things that we were never able to choose before. We can choose where we want to live, we can choose who we want to marry, we can choose what kind of subjects we learn at university, what kind of careers we want to follow. We can change our careers whenever we like, more or less, change your gender if you like. And we have a sense of being able to choose who we are and how we live, with a freedom that would have been inconceivable to certainly our grandparents. Psychologists tell us that the level of happiness decreases as the multiplicity of choice increases; the more choices you have the less happy you are.

Spiritually speaking it was inconsistent with the dilemma of truth. Is truth universal? In which case how can it be local? How can it be global and local at the same time? If I'm a Christian do I

say this is truthful for me? What about the Buddhists? Are they true? Am I going to deny that they are truthful? If I say that we both have the truth or have aspects of the truth, am I relativizing the truth? But what I want is absolute truth. The question of choice also affects us spiritually because we have to make commitments.

The word faith is often confused with the word belief. But the word faith, if you look at it in the New Testament, is much more about relationship. Just as we speak about a faithful marriage or a faithful friendship, it's about a relationship in which you endure through good and bad times, and you hang in there at bad times, and then you can celebrate the joyful fruits of that endurance. To say I will be faithful to you for a week is not exactly big news. So faith implies some unconditional gift of self, even. And faith therefore implies some kind of commitment, not necessarily a legalistic commitment but a personal commitment, a gift of self.

And that is precisely what we do actually in meditation. That's why we can say meditation exists in every religious tradition. Meditation clearly offers us today a unique common wisdom, a unique common wisdom transmission that we can find at the heart of all our religious families. I can meditate as a Christian confident that there is a historical, theological, scriptural, personal authority and tradition behind it. I don't have to go to the Buddhists to learn to meditate, but I can meditate with a Buddhist, or with somebody who has no faith. And that is a serious encounter if I take the meditation seriously. There's a serious commitment there to everything that act of meditating implies. Perhaps at the simplest and deepest level of what's happening is that I'm faithful to myself, to my true self, not just to my confused ego – desiring, fearing self – but to my deep self, to the mystery that I am to myself. What the Christian would say to yourself as an image of God, I'm faithful to that. I'm not going to break that relationship with my true self. And my commitment to meditation is not just a superficial act of the will like staying on a diet or

staying on a language course till the end, but it is really this personal commitment to the mystery of my own being and to what I find in that mystery.

Another element of the secular that I think can help us understand what meditation means to us today is time. In traditional societies, time was quite a complex experience as there are many kinds of time, particularly there was secular time, which means the time that you work, working time, money-making time, business time, but there was also sacred time. And through the liturgical seasons and the great feasts and the times of worship this sacred dimension of time was woven into. There were no holidays, there were only holy days.

So sacred time was woven in and out of ordinary time and that has largely disappeared in our culture. That's why our experience of time is such a source of stress for us. We never have enough time do we, we never have enough time to do everything that we would like to do, to take all the choices we'd like to make. And very often the stress and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the limitations of time mean that we give up trying to do anything. We just watch television. We waste our time in often self-destructive ways.

So when time becomes flat-lined like that, when the sacred dimension of it has been eradicated, which has happened in our culture, where we are constantly looking at our watches, we are constantly planning our agendas, we are constantly pushing things in. Then we look for something to replace what we have lost. It isn't enough I think to say to everybody just go back to church. We respect the liturgical seasons and then we can all go down to the village pub and have a party there after the church service.

But what we can do is to build into our secular desert, because it's a very dry world very often spiritually speaking, we can build into it at least two periods of sacred space, of sacred time which are our times of meditation. And if you speak to the people who have done that with whatever degree of religious

belief that they may have, some more some less, they will say that it has changed their lives. Many of them will say: When I first began to meditate I know I was told I should meditate twice a day but I couldn't do it twice a day. I could do the first meditation in the morning; I made a point of doing that and I was 90 per cent faithful to that. But my second meditation, I couldn't get that in because by the end of the day, early evening or night time, I was busy or I was too distracted or I was too tired to meditate. I never got the second meditation in. Until you do (and there's nothing more natural than putting the second meditation into the day), it may take you a long time to achieve that, but if you do, then you feel quite a remarkable change in your experience of time, and the other 23 hours of the day or your waking hours of the day are held in a sacred balance because those times of meditation are truly sacred times.

The third element of the secular is our sense of self that has evolved. The modern sense of self is very different from the traditional or ancient self, a sense of self which was embedded, embedded in a particular culture: being a local, belonging to a local community with local traditions, being known to a certain group of people, being recognized by them and knowing things about them and being able to share things with them. There's a great need to be a local as well as to be a global citizen. We've lost the embeddedness of our sense of identity within a particular culture or community or religion or local group.

So again we face a great challenge but also an opportunity as secular people or people of a secular age, even in terms of our self-knowledge. Who am I? When you speak to most psychologists or therapists, it is that question of identity and meaning which brings people to the psychiatrist's couch. And meditation again responds to that situation because, as the tradition has said from the very beginning, meditation is a way of self-knowledge. And self-knowledge, according to the desert fathers and mothers, the early Christian spiritual teachers of the 4th century, was more

important than the power to work miracles. More important than the miracles of our technology is our self-knowledge: Who am I? And who am I cannot be reduced just to psychological self-awareness. That may be very important as part of our process of healing, self-awareness, but there is something deeper in self-knowledge than just psychological information or psychological insight. In self-knowledge we move into the mystery of being, of our own being and the ground of being.

So those are some reflections on the way we can understand meditation as a way of wisdom, as a spiritual path for ourselves in a secular age.

### 3

## Meditation in Inter-Religious Dialogue

The peace of the world depends upon finding ways in which the different religions of the world can encounter each other in friendship: meet each other without condemnation or exclusion but actually, while respecting each other's differences, learn to try to understand others, as well as to remain rooted in their own faith, their own identity. That's one of the challenges of our time, and we've made tremendous progress in the last 50 years, for example.

It's quite amazing how much dialogue has become accepted and natural at different levels. We should remember that there are different kinds of dialogue. There's the dialogue between the church leaders or the religious leaders and the theologians and the philosophers and the thinkers. There's also the dialogue among ordinary people who practise those faiths.

About a year or two ago, the Community held a dialogue with Muslims at York University and on a Saturday night we all went down to the local mosque for the final prayer of the day. Muslims came in to do their prayer and we joined them. And then we sat around on the floor of the mosque and had a cup of tea and a very friendly discussion (these were ordinary people) on both their differences and what they held in common – getting to know each other and sharing in some way our prayer together.

That's the particular focus of our Community in inter-religious dialogue. It's to try to come to this dialogue with other religions from the point of contemplation, because we believe that at the heart of all religion there is a contemplative core, a spiritual nucleus, a mystical experience. That is what has generated those rich complex traditions that we call the world religions. And if we can get back to the core, to that contemplative centre, and meditation is the way back to it, then we will find two things.

We will find first of all that we *really* know what our own religious identity means; we will know ourselves what it really means to be Christian or Muslim or Jewish or Hindu and so on. And we will also find ourselves (and this is a paradox) sharing a common ground of experience.

Before we meditate, I'll describe a simple way of meditation from the Christian tradition. It's one that finds or has a parallel in many other if not all other religious traditions as well. And when you speak to meditators in other traditions – a Buddhist meditator or a Hindu or a Muslim Sufi particularly – who have a serious contemplative aspect to their prayer, then you find you have a lot in common. When meditators meet across the religious divides, they share something quite practical in common. They know that it is difficult to meditate. They know what distractions mean at the time of meditation. They know that you go through cycles of growth when you meditate. And that you've got to go through the dry patches or the areas where you feel a bit discouraged or you feel you are not making any progress. Then you have to keep going through that and to keep going you need to have some support. The Buddhists call it a *sangha*. We might call it a meditation group or the church or community where we feel there's a personal and mutual friendship, a spiritual friendship and support rooted in a tradition that encourages us to continue to grow and not to give up.

So meditators from different traditions know what the difficulties are, and they also know the fruits of meditation. They know that there is a reason why people practise the discipline, which is a demanding discipline, of meditating; that the reason we do it is because the fruits that it brings into our lives are so amazing, so enriching. And it's quite interesting, if you actually were to try to define or describe those fruits of meditation, how similar the way they are described in the different traditions are. There is a Buddhist text called the *Dhammapada* which has a list of the benefits you get from meditation, and they are very similar,

almost the same words as the fruits of the Spirit that St Paul describes in the Letter to the Galatians – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.

Now I'm not saying that all those gifts appear in the first week of your meditation, fully formed. But any meditator in any tradition who is trying to build this seriously into their life will find that these are good names to describe some of the changes, some of the qualities, that develop in you through the practice. And at first you may not even be the first person to recognize these changes. It may be the people you live with, somebody who says to you one day, you are a little easier to live with than you were. Or you find yourself you don't get so impatient when you are driving in a traffic jam when somebody cuts in in front of you, and you're not flying off the handle so much at home, you are a better listener to people that you should be listening to in your life, you are a little more caring, a little more attentive.

How we explain that, how we put that into a belief system is going to vary from one religious tradition to the next. For the Christian we would say these are the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which means these changes that we see taking place in us, these positive changes, are signs of the life of God within us beginning to flower, beginning to expand within us, beginning to merge and unite with our life. So we begin to feel gently and slowly that the meaning of life perhaps is what the early Christians called divinization – *theosis* was the Greek word – that we are here in order to share fully in the life of God. And it begins here and now, begins in this life. That's what this life has for its meaning: preparation for this full union with God.

So I think meditation then offers us, in this great challenge of inter-religious dialogue today, a way of entering into dialogue with others at a deep level, sharing experience while at the same time respecting and in fact learning from the differences between us.

Over the years our Community has had some very enriching dialogues with the Dalai Lama and I've learnt a lot from them and

from them, from him. He always says the similarities are important. We need to recognize what we have in common. Take the teaching on non-violence for example. Jesus was a teacher of non-violence, just as the Buddha was. We find that principle of non-violence at the heart of all religion. Most religions don't live it out very well, but it's there at the heart of the founders' vision and wisdom. So the similarities are important, but he says so are the differences.

That's a very important and wise statement really, that the differences are just as important as the similarities. It's the same in any friendship or marriage or human relationship. Uniformity, making the other person like yourself, is not a very wise approach to a relationship or a friendship or a marriage, because as you get closer to someone you often discover at the same time how different you are, how deep the differences are. Those differences can become enriching and sources of refreshment and renewal and excitement and so on, or they can become divisions which divide you from the other person. It's the same between religions. We have to be able to respect the differences, learn from them, learn about ourselves from them, while preventing these differences from becoming divisions.

When a dialogue within religions is taking place, it's a two-fold movement. It moves downwards towards the centre or the heart of the religion where you find meditation in some form or other, you find this contemplative core. And it also moves outwards because the deeper you go, the more you touch into this common ground of unity, your perspective begins to broaden, your vision expands, and you begin to see how you relate to others. And you begin to meet, touch, encounter, and form friendships with people on the other side, people who are different from yourself.

So that's the movement of dialogue I think in the modern world. It is both contemplative in that it goes downwards, and it's active in that it goes outwards. And when you meet at this level with other faiths, you begin to see the world in a different way. You



begin to see we do have some common causes such as global warming, or such as social justice, or such as the work for peace, or such as the care for the poor or the neglected or the abused. These are common concerns. It doesn't matter whether you are Christian or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim, but the care and concern for these issues, for these people is integral to any true religious statement, religious faith. Contemplation and action are to be found as the dynamic really at the heart of all religion.

## 4 The One Thing Necessary

In the story of Martha and Mary the two sisters have been seen to represent the contemplative and the active aspects of the life of a Christian. You remember the story; let me just tell you the story again to refresh you.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He stops at the house of his friends Martha and Mary who were sisters of Lazarus, and Martha comes out of the house to greet him. She's the organizer, the person who makes sure there are enough chairs in the room, that there's enough food in the kitchen. Mary sits at his feet and sits there listening to his words, completely useless at least from Martha's point of view. Then we are told that Martha becomes distracted by her many tasks. She's a very typical modern multi-tasker.

We are all trained today to be multi-tasking. And the danger of multi-tasking, doing more than one thing at a time is she gets overloaded, she gets distracted. We don't know why. Maybe she found she didn't have enough food in the kitchen or the microwave broke down or something clearly led to her outburst, because she comes into the room and attacks Jesus and says: Lord don't you see that I'm doing all these things by myself! Tell my sister to give me a hand! Does that sound familiar? It's the only occasion in the Gospel I think where any disciple of Jesus tells him what to do. And I think she's telling him pretty firmly, not Lord don't you see. She's really angry. She's angry and she's hurt. She's suffering. She feels very alienated. She feels a little paranoid and she expresses all this in anger not, as she should if she were in a calmer state of mind, to her sister. All she's got to do presumably is to go up to her sister and say I need some help in the kitchen. But she doesn't. She off-loads all this anger onto Jesus – as we do. Psychologically, we project our anger onto

innocent victims. We don't want to have to deal with it ourselves.

She is showing all the classic symptoms of stress. But she's suffering, and Jesus compassionately and in a friendly way recalls her to herself: Martha, Martha, he says. He tells her what the problem is: You are fussing and fretting about so many things, but *only one thing is necessary*. He says only one thing is necessary. And he doesn't define the one thing necessary. That's for us to understand. Then he defends Mary because Mary is under attack. In the Gospel itself this is the defence of the contemplative life, a very strong defence by Jesus. Because he says Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her. End of story.

I told this story once at a Buddhist Christian meeting and a Buddhist friend of mine then said that's a really good story; I can really relate to that. What happened next? What happened next? Did Martha say oh thank you Lord, it's just what I needed to hear? Or did she rush out of the room and bang the door and take a long time to get over it?

The important thing is, I think, our reaction to the story. That's what happens next. It's how we interpret the story or how the story interprets us. How we are enlightened by the meaning of the story. The meaning is in the relationship between the story and our own experience. You probably think Jesus is being a bit unfair. Poor old Martha! After all she was slogging away in the kitchen, and she gets told that her sister who's there doing nothing has chosen the better part. That's not exactly you might say likely to make her reconcile with Mary very quickly.

But I think at this stage of the story we have to drop to another level of interpretation, which is to say not at the literal level or the psychological level even. Psychologically we can say that Martha and Mary are two personality types – some are more active than others, some are more quiet and introverted than others. But there's a deeper meaning which is at, the spiritual level or the mystical level, where what is actually being described here is something deeply at work in the souls. It's the fact that

Martha and Mary are not just two personality types psychologically, but they are the two halves of the soul, the two hemispheres of the human soul. And if Mary has chosen the better part, this isn't a put-down to Martha.

It's just a statement of our human nature of how we are actually constructed, that *being* comes before doing. And if we don't respect that priority of being over doing, then Martha is going to get into a state. She's going to be stressed out eventually. That's what's happened to our society, a stress-filled, stressful society where we don't have time. We don't have time to sit like Mary and do the work that Mary is doing. Mary is doing a *work*, we hope; we hope she's not just day-dreaming or falling asleep. The mistake of Martha is the mistake that we all tend to fall into – this is why Martha is the centre of the story, because she is *us* at this moment, for most of us. Martha does not recognize or has forgotten in her agitated state, and her ego is pretty inflamed at this moment, that Mary is doing a work too. That in sitting there, staying there, listening in silence – qualities of meditation – she is working. And this work is actually *prior* to, not that it's better than, it's just prior to the work that Martha is doing.

So what is the one thing necessary? The one thing necessary perhaps, the way I understand it but there may be other ways of putting it, is that Martha and Mary need to be friends. They need to be in harmony. These two, this duality, this very perhaps fundamental duality in human consciousness needs to be transcended in friendship. I think we wouldn't be here for a weekend like this, any of us, if we weren't already into resolving this duality. This is something that needs continually to be addressed and rebalanced.

## 5

### Living in the Present Moment

The weather in the last few weeks has been pretty damp but there is a positive side to it. Think of a beautiful poem by George Herbert called “The Flower”. George Herbert was a 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican priest, a poet, mystic, who wrote his poetry not so much for publication really but for private circulation, one of the great poets of the English tradition, the poet very much of the inner weather. He had a glittering career which he gave up in order to become a parish priest, and had a small community gathered around him. But his poetry is often a dialogue, a very intimate dialogue between his soul and the action of God within his soul, within his heart. And he clearly had his dark nights – this feeling that maybe he had wasted his life, his opportunities, and he was now stuck out, forgotten in some little corner of nowhere as it was at the time, and that his sacrifice, as perhaps he had seen it at the time, was not so meaningful anyway as he had hoped it would be. So he went through those times of self-doubt, self-rejection, perhaps of darkness where he felt the absence of God. But then on other occasions he would feel the return of the experience of God. “The Flower” one of the great poems of the English language, I won’t read it all to you, begins with the words:

*Once again I smell the dew and rain  
And relish versing  
How can it be  
That I am he  
On whom thy tempests fell all night.*

It’s a beautiful description of the passage of the soul through the dark night into a new, vital and energized and joyful and sensory awakening to the presence and the experience of God, experience of God’s presence.

*Once again I smell the dew and rain  
And relish versing  
How can it be  
That I am he  
On whom thy tempests fell all night.*

If you’ve ever been by the coast during a storm and you’ve seen the fury of a hurricane or a tempest or a major storm, and then the next day when the storm is over you say, my goodness can that really be the same place, the same scene. Herbert is describing this experience of the calming of the storm interiorly. One of Herbert’s big struggles was his struggle to accept where he was and the decision he had made with his life. He had to as it were accept where he was. His temptation perhaps was to think back to his glittering career in the court, to fantasize about all the things he could have done.

We do that from time to time; sometimes there’s a compulsive part of our mind that is so locked into the past. That’s the danger I think in our imagination in our psychology. That part of us lives in the fantasy around what might have been: What if I had done that? Would I be happier now? Would I be more fulfilled? Would I have realized more of my potential? It’s a completely useless exercise, because we do not know what might have been. T S Elliot says that doesn’t he? What might have been remains a perpetual possibility in the realm of speculation. If you’ve nothing better to do then think about it, but don’t waste too much time thinking about it because ultimately it will drain you, it will become more and more an addiction. The tug of the past or the tug of the future can become really addictive and it would drain you of the energy you need to live in the present moment. But nevertheless this is something we all, to some degree, have to battle with.

Herbert had to accept the integrity and the validity of his own experience. In other words, he had to say, well this is it. This is where I am. This is what I have to work with. I am not the Dean of

St Paul's; I'm a little vicar of some unknown little church. What we see in his poetry and what we can see perhaps in our own inner journey is the cyclical nature of the purifying process: taking the DVD and cleaning it and making sure that it stays clean so that we are playing the whole story of our lives contemporaneously. We are living our life *now*, which involves accepting the past as it was – we can't deny it, we can't change it – integrating it, in other words saying OK that's what I've done, or that's what's happened to me, and then being open to the unknown future. So we are open constantly through the present moment to the mystery of the story of our own life: What's going to happen next. And this is a cycle that we pass through. Clearly Herbert went through his dark nights and his times perhaps of depression or his times of discouragement or his times of dryness. Then he would bounce back as he does in this beautiful poem to a relishing of life, to a real enjoyment of what is present here and now, *Once again I smell the dew and rain*. He's not moaning about the weather, but enjoying that ability to smell and feel his experience.

Many of you perhaps will know or know of Desley Dike who was the previous UK National Co-ordinator, who contributed a great deal to our Community and to the Meditation Centre at Cockfosters. Desley has had a hard life, brought up four strong girls on her own, and she's now dying. She gave up as National Co-ordinator and she threw herself with tremendous energy into setting up the Retreat Centre at Cockfosters. And she's a very active person, a real Martha person who's also a real Mary person. But psychologically she's Martha, she's a very active busy person. And then very soon after that she developed myeloma, cancer of the bones and bone marrow and in the last few weeks she's been hit by another type of cancer, probably arising out of the polluted environment, she grew up in as a child in a mining town in Australia. I saw her 3 days ago before I came on this trip. I spent a couple of hours with her in her bedroom. She's lying in bed; she can't eat or drink, getting just water intravenously. And we talked

about all sorts of things, some spiritual some very practical. She's got a new project; she wants to make a little silver brooch with an inter-faith symbol. She brought in a friend of hers who's going to design it for her. And she's within days of dying. And as we were there she was giving instructions to her girls about how to pay the gardener – she had been very upset because the garden wasn't even kept tidy so she got the gardener; she was giving the gardener instructions. The gardener came in to report and she told her daughters to get the money out of her purse and told them to give him a little bit extra, and all the rest.

So attention to detail, totally in the present moment, coping with the domestic details of life, and yet to be with her you are not with somebody who is running away from the fact that she's dying. Immediately after paying the gardener she said: "You know I really don't know why I'm still here. It's about time for me to go." She's totally peaceful and present to what is happening to her and in her and she has complete confidence that the next stage of her journey, her dying, will be a transition into tremendous energy. That's how she sees it. She says "I know there's going to be a lot of energy out there."

So do we have to wait until this moment of death to be in that place where you are totally present to where you are? And that is to be present to God, even in the midst of the domestic details of life and getting the gardener paid and trying to complete little projects that you have got excited about. In Christian tradition it was often said in the Middle Ages that the purpose of life was to prepare for a good death. For many of us today it might seem a rather negative view of the meaning of life. But actually it makes a lot of sense when you are with somebody like Desley who is dying so well. When she said I don't why I'm still here, well I think I know why. She's still here because I'm telling you about it now, because she is teaching. She's a very good teacher of meditation but she's never been a better teacher of meditation than how she's living now. It's by example that we teach most effectively isn't it.

What George Herbert had to do and what Desley is doing and what we are all trying to do in our own way is to live in the present moment by accepting the validity of our own experience, not living in a fantasy world of the past with regrets or speculation, not living either in a compulsive anxiety about the future – what’s going to happen next. We have to live with a balance between these two dimensions of time, past and future, to be practical about them. On the other hand, we are able to hold that balance or tension between them much better in fact only if we are grounded in the present moment. That’s why it’s so important for us to have a contemplative practice that we make time for, because it’s the only way we can do that because we are all Marthas. We are all Marthas, it doesn’t matter how introverted you are. In this sense we are all Marthas, we are all tending towards what she has collapsed into. That’s why it’s so necessary for us to have the discipline of the daily meditation.

## 6 Addiction and Grace

Addiction is a very important thing for us to understand today. In a sense we live in a very addictive society. Our whole set-up today is designed socially to get us hooked on various things, whether it’s television or whether it’s broadband or whether it’s drink or whether it’s substance abuse or whether it’s just overwork or whether it’s not working. It’s a side-stream or other; we are always being encouraged to get hooked, to get addicted.

Addiction has been defined as the repetition of an act which is self-destructive. We keep repeating it even though we know more and more that it’s not good for us and that it could indeed be fatal. Before it kills the body it may well kill the mind and kill the spirit even, in a sense. So addiction is something that concerns us all because we live in such an addictive prone society.

But one of the great discoveries of the AA movement, the 12 Step programme which started in the last century, was that there is a relationship between addiction and grace. And that gives us a deep insight, for those of you who are Christian. Through the experience of addiction we discover what sin really means, and it begins to make sense of the whole of the gospel teaching.

Most of us I think were brought up to think of sin as something that you do, that you want to do it and you shouldn’t be doing it because it’s breaking the rules. And it’s giving you pleasure and even pleasure is a bit suspicious, and therefore you are breaking a law, which is going to get you punished. And sin is always related to punishment. You sin, you get punished.

But actually that isn’t the teaching of the gospel. In fact Christianity changes that. The real teaching of Christianity is completely opposite. The connection of sin is not to punishment but to grace. That’s what St Paul says actually, where sin is, grace abounds all the more. Where sin is, you get grace, not punishment.

That insight which was really the insight that transformed St Paul and really is at the heart of Christian doctrine, is an insight that got lost somewhere over the centuries. Sin became the breaking of a moral law or code or a rule, just like when you get caught speeding, or you get caught shoplifting, or you break some rule, and then you have to pay the price for it.

But in the spiritual sense which we find in the gospel, sin is not that. Sin is the divided self. St Paul says in the Letter to the Romans, what I want to do I do not do. What I don't want to do, that is what I find myself doing. It's a pretty good description of addiction actually isn't it? I don't think anyone who recognizes that they've slipped into addiction wants to continue it. They'd like to stop but they can't. The insight that comes out of this is that my will is divided. My very being really is split into two, what I want to do, and what I can't do. And it's into that split that grace enters.

What is grace? Well the word grace just means gift actually. Something that you can't buy, there's no price put on it. It's just pure gift. Into this divided self, this split self, it's into that gap that grace comes. It comes from within; it comes out from within. And that's where meditation really makes a huge difference to our understanding of sin and grace, because we experience in meditation that *gift*. Why is it there? We don't know why it's there; there's no reason for it. But it's there. You can call it the Spirit, you can call it love, you can call it God, you can call it the Holy Spirit, but it *is* there and it is *given* to you.

I think the AA, the Alcoholics Anonymous movement, understood this, because it was actually founded by Christians. The AA movement itself is not a religion. It doesn't carry any religious affiliation, but it is a real spirituality. On the occasions that I've been to 12 Steps or AA meetings, I felt grace very powerfully present there in that group of addicts. All of them must at least have got to the 1st Step of the 12 Steps. They admitted their problem. They knew what their addiction was, and they confessed it. They could admit it and they could speak about it.

And they knew that that addiction was stronger than they were. That split in their soul was too great for them to heal by themselves. They couldn't get themselves back together by themselves. They were *powerless* – it's the word used in the 1st Step. And that is a very spiritual moment. That's the moment where you realize that you are not in complete control of your life; that you don't know where you come from and you don't know where you are going but you know that in some way your very existence, your very being is a gift. And it's interesting that it should be when we are powerless that we are most likely to experience that and realize that. That is a moment where grace can begin to squeeze in.

The thing that makes one feel and almost see the grace at work in that group when they meet is the truthfulness there, the honesty, that people don't have to pretend. You might have a very wealthy stockbroker sitting next to some unemployed labourer, but at that moment they are equal. They are equal in their honesty in which they can speak about their problem. And the honesty of their speaking is reflected in the listening, that people really *listen* to each other.

I remember one meeting I was at not long ago, There was a young guy, quite well dressed, who looked very tense. and he began to speak. He said he'd been off drink for a year or so and he'd found a job and he had a girl friend. And he said: "My life has come back together, but at this moment the craving is so strong. all I want to do is go home and tell my girlfriend to leave, and start drinking." And it was quite moving and very painful to hear him speak about this. He knew what was happening in himself. And what was really impressive was the silence that followed what he said. Because people just listened. Nobody gave him a sermon, nobody told him what to do, nobody gave him any advice. He knew, he knew what to do. And he was doing it; he was coming back into that space where he knew grace would be present for him on the outside as well as on the inside. That's how grace works. It's all

around you. Grace surrounds you. It's the energy of love in which we swim, we live and move and have our being. He knew he was drawn to that group at that moment of crisis, and afterwards probably people went up to him and probably gave him some personal encouragement. He knew that he needed to be with other people who could embody that grace for him and make it personal, make it tangible for him. One of the key things in the 12 Step programme is you got to do it yourself; no one is going to do it for you. You need fellowship. The AA is a fellowship rather than a church. You need fellowship, you need support, but you ultimately have to do the work by yourself.

Meditation relates to the 11<sup>th</sup> Step specifically in the 12 Step programme where it tells us through prayer and meditation to raise our conscious contact, to become more conscious of God which is the personal giver of grace, as we know God. So again it doesn't force you into any particular creed or religion or set of beliefs. I think in more than six of the 12 Steps the word God is mentioned, which is surprising for a group that is not a religion that God should be so explicitly mentioned. God is the best word we have to describe the personal nature of grace that is there present in us and around us.

Now most of us, most people, don't get into such self-destructive addiction but more socially acceptable addictions. And I think if we take a few moments and think about what we are addicted to we might be surprised. If we were really honest with ourselves, if we did the 1st Step and really admitted to ourselves the things we are addicted to, we might be surprised. But at the same time we would realize that those addictions which limit your freedom – that's what an addiction does, it dissolves your freedom, it puts you into a worse kind of prison which is the prison of your own ego. That addiction even if it's not a major addiction to heroin or to alcohol or something self-destructive, physically destructive, that addiction even at a lower level is a source of grace, if we admit it, if we face it.

And so for most people I would say that the practice of meditation is a way of dealing with the addictions that we may not even know we have but which we need to admit at least. And by doing that, we expose ourselves, we open ourselves to grace.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Step it speaks about prayer and meditation. From the Christian tradition, I would say meditation is prayer. It is a way of prayer. It's not the prayer that we are normally trained to do as children, it's not the prayer of the mind. In other words, it's not speaking to God, it's not asking God for things, it's not using the mind or the words of scripture or our imagination. Those are perfectly valid, good, useful, ways of prayer. And all forms of prayer are valid. We should never go round saying my form of prayer is better than yours, or you shouldn't be praying in that way, you should be praying in this way. Because basically it is grace, which is the Spirit, and our own needs that move us into particular forms of prayer. But we *need* them. And a life without prayer is a life that is diminished, is less than fully human because we are not open to our full potential – we are not open to our potential for transcendence or our potential for self-giving.

So one way or another, human beings are wired to praying and very often we have to wait till we are in a crisis or an extreme situation before we actually discover that. But again we don't have to wait till the extreme moment, crisis moment, or the eleventh hour. We can learn to pray. We can learn to open ourselves to this grace even in our divided self through the addictions that we have in ordinary life. That would be the smart thing to do. That would be the wise thing to do. It's like paying an insurance policy materially speaking. And that's why I think it's so important that we do teach meditation to children, because we are giving them, not forcing it upon them, we are giving them a practice, a method of prayer, that can accompany them through the challenges, through the mistakes, through the disappointments, through the ups and downs of their lives and through all the stages of their development. And it accompanies them through their life. That

would be the smart thing to do. That would be a good upbringing. if we could all at least be aware of this way of prayer from the very beginning. But most of us come to it later in life. We come to it as much more complex people, and we also come to it after we've been kicked around and wounded for a long time.

## 7 The Prayer of the Heart

From the tradition that I speak from I would say that meditation is a way of prayer, but it's not as I say the usual ways of prayer we were taught. It's called the prayer of the heart. Now that might sound a bit vague, but actually the heart is a very powerful and universal symbol. The heart is not just a Valentine card sort of image of romantic love or something. The heart is a symbol of the wholeness of the human person. It's the centre. It's where body, mind, and spirit come together in the true self. The heart is my interiority, my authentic self, but it is also the wholeness that is within me. And so when Jesus says, when you pray go into your inner room, that's I think what he's saying: Go into your heart. Because it's in the heart that you will find grace. It's in your heart that you find this power, this energy this healing force of wholeness.

The word meditation and the word medicine are similar because the prefix *med* in Greek means care and attention. So when you go for medical treatment you get hopefully good care and attention from the medical professionals. In meditation we are paying care and attention to ourselves, or we are in a sense opening ourselves to care and attention with grace. So essentially it's the spiritual side of medicine. And that's why interestingly enough, even if you didn't want to approach meditation from a spiritual or a religious perspective, which is where it has always been taught for thousands of years, you could and many people do approach meditation today just at the scientific level. A great deal of medical research, psychological research and brain research has been done, is being done all over the world, proving through scientific method and research that meditation is good for you, basically, that it is good for you psychologically and physically.



From whichever way you present it I think today the value of meditation is undeniable. I don't think we should be asking ourselves should I meditate. The question we should be asking ourselves is: Why *don't* I meditate or what do I need in order to meditate?

Let me describe a very simple way of meditation and then I invite you to try it. We will meditate for a little time together. In meditation we move from the mind to the heart. That's really the big human journey. To get out of the mind to get out of our heads is the big first step because we are in one sense pretty addicted to what is going on in our head the whole time. Often we find ourselves repeating negative emotional patterns, or negative ideas. We get stuck on our worries, our problems, our anxieties. You may find that some of your favourite problems start to re-appear and you start to chew them over and over again. It's very easy for us to get caught in the addictive pattern of worry and anxiety. That's why Jesus says actually, do not worry when you pray. But that isn't as easy to do as it sounds because we are pretty deeply caught up in the mental level of anxiety and worry, and the emotional aspects of that as well. We may also be just addicted to fantasy. We live in an age in which we are, through media and through all sorts of other means, caught up in addictive patterns of the mind in the fantasy realm, just playing with images, playing with fantasy ideas. And that's a form of addiction that's pretty universal really.

So when we come to meditate, if you were to try to unhook every one of those little addiction patterns that we have in our mind, you'd never get anywhere, because another ten would have formed by the time you've unpicked one. So you need some very simple, and radically simple, way of cutting through and beginning the journey, staying with the journey from the mind to the heart. And the way we do that is to let go of the thoughts even good thoughts, words even sacred words or good words, and all your images and fantasies even nice images.

Now you let go of them in this tradition by taking a single word, a mantra, a prayer word, and repeating this single word continuously over and over again. And when thoughts, words or fantasies come into your mind, you don't fight them, because you'll never win that battle. You don't fight them but you simply let them go as well as you can, and return to your word.

Somebody said to me, I think it was in Manchester where I spoke about addiction and he said: "Look how do you know that meditation isn't addictive? That sounds a bit addictive doesn't it, staying with the same word?" Well it's repetitive, it's *repetitive*. The effect of it is to increase your freedom, not to reduce it. So it is repetitive, but it's a faithful repetition, not a mechanical repetition. Addiction is mechanical and degenerative. You keep repeating the same thing but it gets worse and worse. Perhaps it's not so surprising that the cure for that should look like it, but in fact be completely the opposite. Because this is a faithful repetition, by saying the word, you are really taking in a step of faith, it's an act of faith. Faith in what? Faith in yourself to begin with, faith in grace, faith in that relationship with grace that is within you. So you say the word, you repeat the word or the mantra continually in the mind and heart as best you can, letting go of your thoughts and words and returning to the word whenever you get distracted.

So here is a very ancient form of prayer. I said that what we do is take a single word. The word should normally be a word that is sacred in your own tradition. So I would recommend for example you could take the name Jesus a very ancient Christian mantra or the word Abba a word that Jesus made sacred, beginning with the Our Father. But the word I would personally recommend though is the word *maranatha*, Maranatha. It's in the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic; it means Come Lord. It's the oldest Christian prayer. St Paul ends his 1st Letter to the Corinthians with it. If you choose that word, say it as four syllables like this: ma-ra-na-tha. Say the word, sound the word in your mind

and your heart, and listen to the word as you say it. Don't visualize it but listen to it as a sound. And give your full attention to it.

Now that's what meditation is actually about: attention, paying attention. It's not about thinking about God or thinking about your problems or thinking about what's going to happen next week or how you are going to end up. It's not thinking, planning, it's not problem solving. But at the time of meditation just give your pure undivided attention to the word. And you do that by saying the word. So it's the pure, undivided attention that actually brings you down as it were from the mind to the heart.