



In Times of Anxiety

JOHN MAIN OSB

John Main OSB (1926-1982) a Benedictine monk of Ealing Abbey, London, recovered the Christian tradition of meditation as practised by the early Desert monks and taught it as a spiritual discipline for people from all walks of life. This selection of talks addresses the human predicament in a time of economic crisis. In Fr John's words: "So many men and women are discovering that their spirit is stifled. Meditation is the way of making contact with our own spirit, and in that contact finding everything in our experience coming into harmony, judged and aligned on God. The stresses, the challenges, all remain, but they are powerless to defeat us. We learn in our stillness in God that in him we have all things that are necessary."



In Times of Anxiety

JOHN MAIN OSB

CONTENTS

1. Spiritual Growth	3
2. Making Contact with Our Own Spirit	6
3. In Reverence in Our Hearts	10
4. Commitment to Reality	13
5. Peace	16
6. The Path to Truth	18

Transcript of talks given to groups in Montreal

© The World Community for Christian Meditation 2009

THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, ST MARK'S, MYDDELTON SQUARE, LONDON EC1R 1XX, UK

www.wccm.org

1

Spiritual Growth

Thoughtful men and women everywhere in the world today are beginning to see that spiritual growth, spiritual awareness, is the highest priority for our time. But the question is: How do we do it? How do we enter on this path?

Meditation is the way of growth, the way of deepening our own commitment to life, our own maturity. It is a most important priority for every one of us to allow our spirit two things: first, the deepest possible contact with the Life Source, and then as a result of that contact to allow our spirit space within which to expand. What does it mean for us when we say that a high priority in every life that would be truly human should be this contact with the Life Source?

Every spiritual tradition has known that in profound stillness the human spirit begins to be aware of its own Source. In the Hindu tradition, for example, the *Upanishads* speak of the spirit of the One who created the universe dwelling in our heart and the same spirit is described as the One who in silence is loving to all. In our own Christian tradition Jesus tells us of the Spirit who dwells in our heart, and again the spirit is the Spirit of love.

This contact with the Life Source is vital for us, because without it we can hardly begin to suspect the potential that our life has for us. The potential is that we should grow, that we should mature, that we should come to fullness of life, fullness of love, fullness of wisdom. That is of supreme importance for each of us. In other words, what each of us has to do, each of us is invited to do, is to begin to understand the mystery of our own being, the mystery of life. Again, in the vision proclaimed by Jesus each one of us is invited to understand the sacredness of our own being, the sacredness of our own life.

That is why the second priority is of such great importance, namely, that we should allow our spirit the space within which to expand. In the tradition of meditation this space for the expansion of our spirit is to be found in silence. And meditation is a way of silence and a commitment to silence. A silence that grows in every part of your life. A silence that we can only describe as the infinite silence of God, the eternal silence of God. And, as I am sure you will find from your own experience, it is in this silence that we begin to find the humility, the compassion, the understanding, that we need for this expansion of spirit.

That is where the tradition of meditation is of supreme importance for us, a tradition of spiritual commitment of men and women down through the ages. And that tradition is available for you and for me. The only thing that is necessary is that we enter into it, that we begin the practice.

The practice is very simple. We have to put time by, we have to spend some time each morning and each evening of our life when we make ourselves available for this work of making contact with the Source of all life, and for this work of making that space available in our lives for the expansion of spirit, for the deepening of faith. The actual practice of meditation is very simple. Simply take your word, your mantra, and repeat it.

That's one of the great problems for men and women of our time. We are so used to complexity that the simplicity of meditation, just being content to say your word, to sound your word in your heart, is a challenge. When we meditate, each of us must try to say our word as faithfully as possible, as continually as possible.

The word I recommend you to say is the Aramaic word *maranatha*. You should say it something like this: ma-ra-na-tha. Say it without moving your lips, interiorly in your heart, and continue to sound it from the beginning to the end.

Meditation is a process of growing, of growing more spiritually aware, and like all processes of growth it has its own speed, its

own pace. It is an organic process. You have as it were to root the mantra in your heart. Jesus so often spoke of the Word of the Gospel taking root in the heart of men and women and, as he tells us, it has to fall into solid ground. In other words, the whole of your being has to be involved in this process.

You sound the mantra, and by your fidelity in returning to it day after day, you root it in your heart. And once rooted, it flourishes. Indeed it flowers. And the flower of meditation is peace, a profound peace. It is a peace that arises from harmony, from the dynamic harmony that you encounter when you make contact with the ground of your being, because what you discover is that the mantra is rooted in your heart, in the centre of your being, and your being is rooted in God, the centre of all *being*.

The way of meditation is a way of great simplicity, and you take it a day at a time. You don't demand results. You don't look for progress. You simply repeat your mantra every morning and every evening for the entire time of your meditation, and in the process itself, which is a process of forgetting yourself, of taking the searchlight of consciousness off yourself, you find yourself in God. Finding yourself in God, you come to understand that your life is a gift, that you offer it back to God, and the gift that was a finite gift when it was given to you, in the offering back, becomes an infinite gift.

Making Contact with our own Spirit

More and more men and women in our society are beginning to understand that our personal problems and the problems that we face as a society, all these problems, are basically spiritual problems. What more and more of us are understanding in this world is that the human spirit cannot find fulfilment in mere material success or material prosperity. It isn't that material success or prosperity are bad in themselves but they are simply not adequate as a final or ultimate answer to the human situation.

As a result of the materialism in which we live, so many men and women are discovering that their spirit is stifled. And much of the frustration in our time is due to the feeling, that so many have, that we were created for something better than this, something more serious than just a day-to-day survival. To know ourselves, to understand ourselves, and to be able to start solving our problems, to get ourselves and our problems into perspective, we simply must make contact with our spirit.

All self-understanding arises from understanding ourselves as spiritual beings, and it is only contact with the Spirit that can give us the depth and the breath to understand our own experience. Experience is only useful and only instructive for us if we are able to evaluate it adequately. So often, as we all know to our cost, we have the experience but we miss the meaning.

What our monastic tradition has to say is this: If we want to understand ourselves, if we want to know who we are, then we have to make contact with our own centre. We have to make contact with the ground of our being. And unless that process is underway, all our experience will leave us in the shallows. The way to this is not difficult. It is very simple. But it does require serious

commitment and serious involvement in our own existence, that we take it seriously.

The wonderful revelation that is there for all of us to discover, if only we will set out on the path with discipline, is that our spirit is rooted in God, and that each of us has an eternal destiny and an eternal significance and importance. That is one of the most important things for each of us to discover. The nature we possess has this infinite potential for development, and that development can only come if we undertake this pilgrimage to our own centre, to our own heart, because it is only there, only in the depths of our own being, that we can discover ourselves rooted in God.

Meditation is just this way of making contact with our own spirit, and in that contact finding a way of integration, of finding everything in our experience coming into harmony, everything in our experience judged and aligned on God. The way of meditation is very simple. All each of us has to do is to be as still as possible in body and in spirit.

The stillness of body we achieve by sitting still. So when you begin to meditate take a couple of moments to assume a comfortable posture. The only essential rule is to have your spine as upright as possible. Then the stillness of spirit, the way to that stillness that we have in our monastic tradition is to learn to say silently, in the depth of your spirit, a word or a short phrase.

The art of meditation is simply learning to repeat that word over and over again. The word I recommend you to use is the Aramaic word (Aramaic is the language that Jesus spoke) *maranatha*. Say it in four equally-stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha. Say it silently in the depth of your being. Don't move your lips, but recite it interiorly. What is important, and you must understand this from the beginning, is to recite your word from beginning to end.

Learning to meditate is learning to let go of your thoughts, of your ideas, of your imagination, and it's learning to rest in the

depths of your own being. Try to remember that. Don't think, don't use any words other than your one word, don't imagine anything. Just sound, say the word in the depths of your spirit and listen to it. Concentrate upon it with all your attention: ma-ra-na-tha.

Why is this so powerful? Basically, because it gives us the space that our spirit needs to breathe. It gives each of us the space to be ourselves. When you are meditating you don't need to apologise for yourself; you don't need to try to justify yourself. All you need to do is to be yourself, to accept from the hands of God the gift of your own being, and in that acceptance of yourself, of your creation, of your being, you come into harmony with the Creator, with *the Spirit*.

That's what meditation is about, our spirit totally in harmony with the Spirit of God. And if you want to learn to meditate, if you want to learn to live your life from the depths of your being, then you must build this into your every day, and you have to learn to make a space in your life every morning and every evening. The minimum time is about twenty minutes, the optimum time is about thirty minutes.

Once you do learn that discipline you will begin to live your life in harmony: harmony within yourself, because everything in your life will come into harmony with God, and harmony with all creation, because you will have found your place, your place in creation. The astonishing thing about the Christian revelation is that your place is nothing less than to be rooted and founded in God.

St Paul writes this to the Thessalonians:

We are bound to thank God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because from the beginning of time God chose you to find salvation in the Spirit that consecrates you, and in the truth that you believe. It was for this that he called you through the gospel we

brought, so that you might possess for your own the splendour of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13-14)

That is what the path of meditation is about: To come into full harmony, to full union with the Spirit of Jesus who dwells in our hearts.

3

In Reverence in our Hearts

The world in which we live is passing away. As we all know, empires arise, they have great periods of power, and they crumble. The lesson of history is that when they crumble, they crumble very quickly. Wisdom is the ability to identify what endures, to understand what lasts, what is important. The early Christian community understood very clearly that each of us possesses, and possesses now already, in this life, an eternal principle within us, something in our hearts that endures for all eternity – the Lord Christ.

This is from the First Letter of St Peter

Who is going to do you wrong if you are devoted to what is good? And yet if you should suffer for your virtues, you may count yourself happy. Have no fear; do not be perturbed, but hold the Lord Christ in reverence in your hearts. (1 Pet. 3:13-15)

“Hold the Lord Christ in reverence in your hearts.”

To live our lives well we don't need to be depressed by the fact that the world is passing away, that civilizations do crumble. Nor do we need to be disturbed by the fact that the world is often a largely chaotic world. As we all know, there is so much confusion. There are so many people who are confused, and all of us know that from time to time in our lives we experience that chaos and confusion in ourselves. But the challenge for each of us, and that every human person must face, is to find in the *real* world, that is the world that is chaotic, the world that is passing away, to find in this *real* world true peace, adequate order, and a harmony that will make sense of all the voices competing for our attention.

Again, the early Christian community saw, and saw very clearly, knew from their own experience, that Jesus himself is the

way to order, to harmony, to peace. And he is the way, because he leads us into the resonant harmony of the Trinity itself, the order, the supreme order, that is based on supreme Love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The way of meditation is not a way of escape. Above all, it is not a way of illusion. We neither try to escape the real world of untidy ends and chaotic beginnings, nor do we try to construct an alternative, illusory reality of our own. What Jesus promises us is that if we do hold him in reverence in our hearts, if we believe in him and believe in the one who sent him, his Father and our Father, then all the chaos and all the confusion in the world can have no ultimate power over us. The stresses, the strains, the challenges, all remain, but they are powerless to defeat us when we have founded our lives on the rock who is Christ.

This is the real task. This is the real challenge that each of us must face: To enter into the reality that is Christ, the rock on whom we can build our lives with absolute assurance that he will love us through all our mistakes, through all our changes of heart and mind, through every moment of our lives, until the last moment of our life, because he is supreme Love.

That is why St Peter tells us of the importance of holding the Lord Christ in reverence in our hearts. Rooted in him we are rooted in the principle of all life, in reality itself. And founded in him, nothing else has ultimate power over us, not even death itself. The challenge is to find our way to him, to find our way to our own heart, so that we can hold him in reverence there.

The way of meditation is a way of learning to die to illusion, to all unreality. It is the way of learning to rise with Christ, to rise beyond ourselves, beyond our limitations, to eternal life. And to do so now, today; not to put off eternal life till the time when we get to heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is among us *now*, and we must be open to it because, as St Peter says, we must in the Spirit be alive, become alive, with the life of God. As Christians we must never settle for less. Our Christian life is not just a question of

getting through our lives. Every word of the New Testament suggests to us that it is of supreme importance that we live our lives in a state of continuous expansion, expansion of heart, expansion of Spirit, growing in love, becoming more firmly rooted in God. Each of us has to understand our potential, that we are an expanding universe, and each of us possesses the potential for an energy-expansion that is not less than infinite.

St Peter tells us in the same letter “to live an ordered life, founded on prayer” and he tells us “to keep our love for one another at full strength”. This is the way of meditation: to tap that life source, that energy source, that power source, in order that we can live our lives to the full. And we do so holding the Lord Christ in reverence in our hearts.

Commitment to Reality

It is a very difficult thing to try to determine what it is that makes a person want to meditate. It's a thing that has puzzled me over the years. There seem to be so many reasons why people start to meditate. But I think there is only one reason that keeps people meditating. That, I think, we could describe as a growing commitment to reality.

The more you meditate, and the longer you persevere through the difficulties, through the false starts, the more clear it becomes to you that you have to continue if you are going to lead your life in a meaningful and profound way. You must never forget the way: to say your mantra from the beginning to the end. That is basic, axiomatic, and let no one dissuade you from the truth of that.

In your reading you may come across all sorts of variants and alternatives. But the discipline of meditation, the asceticism of meditation, places that one demand on us absolutely: that we must leave self behind so completely, leave our thoughts, our analyses, our feelings behind so completely, as to be totally at the disposition of the Other. We must do that in an absolute way, and that is the demand that the mantra makes upon us: to say it from beginning to the end, in all simplicity and in absolute fidelity.

What is the difference between reality and unreality? I think one way in which we can understand that is that unreality is the product of desire. One thing we learn in meditation is to abandon desire, and we learn it because we know that our invitation is to live wholly in the present moment. Reality is simply being grounded in God, the ground of our being. Desire demands constant movement, constant striving. Reality demands stillness and silence. And that is the commitment that we make in meditating.

As each of you has found already from your own experience, in the stillness and in the silence, we learn to accept ourselves as we are. This sounds very strange to modern ears, above all to modern Christians who have been brought up to practise so much anxious striving: Shouldn't I be ambitious? What if I'm a bad person; shouldn't I desire to be better?

The real tragedy of our time is that we are so filled with desire, for happiness, for success, for wealth, for power, whatever it may be, that we are always imagining ourselves as we *might* be. So we rarely come to know ourselves as we are, and we rarely come to accept our present position.

But the traditional wisdom tells us: Know that you *are*, and that you are as you are. It may well be that we are sinners, and if we are, it is important that we should know that we are. But far more important for us is to know from our own experience that God is the ground of our being, that we are rooted in him, and founded in him. Each of us must know that personally, from our own experience, in our own hearts. This is the stability that we all need, not the striving and movement of desire but the stability and the stillness of rootedness. What each of us is invited to learn in our meditation, in our stillness in God, is that in him we have all things that are necessary.

The root from which we are sprung is Love. In him we *are*, and we know ourselves as lovable and loved. This is the supreme reality that Jesus came to preach, to communicate, to live, to establish. And it is established in our hearts, if only we will be open to it. This is what our meditation is about, because it is only from this love and with this love that we can understand ourselves aright and all creation. Without that rootedness in love, all we can see will be shadows and phantoms; and we will never be able to make contact with them because they have no reality.

Meditation is the invitation to journey deeply into your own heart, into your own being. What the traditional wisdom tells us is that only with this depth of experience and vision can we live our

lives in real harmony with what is. This is what meditation leads us to: the understanding from our own experience that God *is*.

Meditation is the great way into faith, into commitment. All action must be shallow, must be mere immediacy, if it is not based on this commitment to what is real, to what is eternal. This is our invitation as Christians: To know now, with knowledge, what is real and what is eternal, and knowing it to live our lives inspired by love.

That is the purpose of our meditation, that there should be nothing false in us, only reality: only love, only God.

5 Peace

One of the things that we are all interested in is finding our way not just to harmony in our lives, but something that we can only describe by the word 'peace'. The sense of peace is the sense of being intact, being together, being complete. It isn't just the sense that one is becalmed. It's not that; it's something much more positive. It is a sense of well-being, when you have discovered your own harmony, the harmony within yourself, and the harmony of which you are capable in relationship with others, the harmony for example that you experience with nature when you see a beautiful clear day or wonderful view, the marvellous sky. In those moments of revelation, it flashes in on one that this is what it's about: a sense of oneness with nature, with oneself, with others. That is why we meditate.

When you begin to meditate, you have to have some motivation. You have to have some objective to get you going, to start you on the road. To achieve that state of harmony, of peace (which in many of the sacred scriptures in both the Eastern and Western traditions are described as the state of blessedness, of glory, of salvation, or of life, the sense of being fully alive) if you want a motivation, that would be as good a motivation as any. But once you start to meditate on a daily regular basis in your life, you will begin to realize that meditation operates by its own dynamic. It is not just like any other activity in your life. You don't approach it in the way: If I meditate so many times then I will get this return, x level of peacefulness; if I am particularly faithful then I will get to x plus one, or whatever.

Once you start to meditate you realize that you come to it without demands, without looking for any pay-off. We meditate simply because this is the only way that we can find that will lead

us to this very sense of wholeness, of oneness. In meditation we discover that this is what life is given to us for: To be one, to activate all the potential that is ours for life, for happiness, for being.

Meditating is to the spirit just the same as breathing is to the body. If someone asked you what is your motivation for breathing, you would reply, 'I have no motivation. It is necessary to breathe; it is necessary for life. I have no conscious motivation for it at all.' The longer you meditate, the longer you experience your own spirit in peaceful harmony with your body, your own spirit in peaceful harmony with all creation and with your Creator, you will realize you don't need any motivation for meditating. You meditate because you *are*, and because God *is*; because that is the structure of reality: God the Creator, myself a creature, alive in God's creation. Meditation is simply the way to become wholly alive to all that.

That is what Christian prayer is about. It is not in essence about asking God for things or informing God about things. It is about being wholly open to him, wholly with him, wholly in harmony with him. Meditation is peace, it is happiness and it is total security, because in it we are anchored in total reality.

Listen to what St Paul wrote in the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine', has caused his light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation – the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6)

That is why we meditate, because the glory of God is to be found in our own hearts, if only we will be still and silent and poor. Our poverty consists in this, that we surrender all words, all thoughts, all imagination and we stay with the one word, the word of our mantra, and that we are utterly faithful to the recitation of it from the beginning to the end.

6 The Path to Truth

These are words reported in the Gospel of John spoken by Jesus.

If you dwell within the revelation that I have brought, you are indeed my disciples; you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-2)

All of us feel within ourselves the necessity to come to grips with the truth, to find something, some principle in our lives that is absolutely reliable, that is certain, something that is worthy of our confidence. All of us feel this necessity somehow or other to make contact with rock-like reality.

Now this is what the path of meditation is about. When we set out on the path of meditation we set out on the path to truth. None of us can be just content with other people's experience of the truth. All of us have to come to know the truth from our own experience.

How do we meditate? If you want to follow this path, you have to commit yourself to meditating every day, to meditating every morning and every evening. The way is simplicity itself. All you have to do is to sit down and say your word. The word that I recommend you to say is the Aramaic word *maranatha*. When we meditate together in a few moments, each of us has to accept the responsibility of saying the word from beginning to end: ma-ra-na-tha. The saying of the word is itself an experience of liberty. We let go of all our immediate concerns – everything that troubles us today, everything that makes us happy today. We turn aside from everything that is passing away in order to be open to absolute, ultimate Truth.

The wisdom teaches us that arriving at the Truth is to experience the graciousness of God and the loving kindness of

God. And in the Christian vision of meditation, the whole purpose of meditation is simply to be open to the presence of God in our own hearts. People often ask, 'Why should I meditate? Why do you meditate?' I think part of the answer is that in the experience of meditation we come to know ourselves as true, as real, not ourselves as acting a role, not ourselves fulfilling other people's expectations of us, but the experience of being who we are. Meditation is important for us because each of us has to learn to be true, to be faithful to the truth of our own being.

The one who is true is the one who is faithful. And the power of meditation is that in the experience of it, in the silence to which our word leads us, we learn to live out of the goodness of God when we make contact with his goodness in our hearts. God is true, and anyone who discovers their own oneness with God has entered into the fundamental relationship, and as a result all our relationships are filled with the kindness and the truth of God.

Jesus says: 'The truth will set you free.' The freedom is the freedom to be ourselves, and the freedom to let others be themselves. The freedom to love ourselves, to love others, and to love God. But that freedom depends upon a total commitment to truth.

People ask, 'How long will this take? I have been meditating every morning and every evening for six months and I'm not sure if it has made any difference yet.' The answer to that is that it doesn't matter how long it takes. All that matters is that we are on the way, that we are on the pilgrimage, and that daily – perhaps only by one centimetre at a time, but daily – our commitment to truth and to freedom grows. The growth is often imperceptible, but that does not matter. All that matters is that we are growing, that we haven't settled for half, that we haven't betrayed the gift of our own being, but we are committed to growth and to maturity, to truth and to freedom.

The opposite of the truth is falsehood or illusion. And meditation is a commitment to the truth, a commitment, that is, to

turn from trying to make our own reality, and a commitment to live in the light of God, to live by the light of God. The daily commitment to it, and the gentleness of it as we meditate day after day, is a way of learning to accustom our eyes to seeing what is before them, rather than trying to imagine what is before us, and then taking that for Reality.

What is real? God is real and the reality of God is revealed in Jesus. The greatest thing about the Christian proclamation of the gospel is that Jesus in all his reality is to be found in our own hearts. In his light we see Light. And in that light we know ourselves to be free.

Now when you begin you have to begin in faith, and you have to continue in faith. And the only way of arriving at that light, at that truth, at that freedom, is by faith. Every time you sit down to meditate, your faith will be tested, and your faith will be strengthened. The time of meditation, when you say your mantra from beginning to end, might often seem to you to be a complete waste of time, a complete loss of time. But remember Jesus dwells in your heart. He is the revelation of God. Only in God and only from God do we have our reality.

Saying the mantra is turning from all illusion, from all imagination, from all falsehood to ultimate Truth.