



Meditatio

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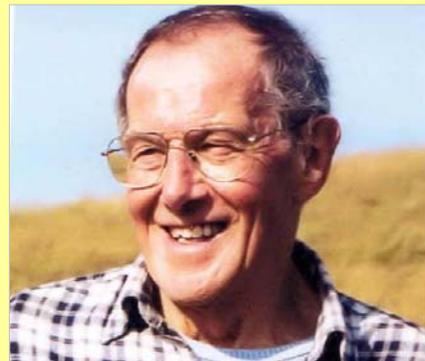
DAVID WOOD

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

Aspects of the Spiritual Life

David Wood is a retired Anglican priest. Most of his life, he lived and worked amongst declining industrial communities in Northern England organising and leading prayer workshops, retreats, and vigils of prayer, always exploring silence and solitude. When he met John Main's teaching in 1988, after searching wilderness years, he just knew he was 'home'. With his wife Sheila he then started and developed the Christian Meditation Community in Cumbria.

"These introductions to meditation," he writes, "are like aspects of the spiritual life and mystery I want to reveal more for myself, knowing that it is the same for many people I meet. We need to bring all things into our silence and let the silence work."



*This is a transcript of talks by David Wood
to help people prepare for their times of meditation*

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1

Turning Up

I'm no good at meditation and I don't have to be, and what a relief that is! I remember Fr Laurence saying once that when he started meditating he failed so many times he knew there must be something in it.

Meditation cracks the code, the code which we have all been shaped to live by in this world, this culture: the way we measure everything – good or bad, better or worse, success or failure; whether you're in, whether you're out; have made it, haven't you made it; have you arrived, will you ever.

Meditation bursts it all apart, blows it open, because meditation is *directly*, about God. And God is different. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, describes God as being different from any way we can possibly think of as difference. The very word 'difference' itself doesn't begin to measure up to it. No comparisons, no scale of measurement is possible.

God is – well – God. Just God. And our encounters with the Presence of God cannot be confined to the prisons of our expectations.

We are to have no expectations in meditation except to be there.

Frank came to one of our meditation groups. He was retired, a hugely committed churchman – hospital visitor, parish visitor, on this and that committee, you name it. But he captured the meaning of meditation when he said: "What I like about coming here is that there are no expectations. Nothing is required of me. I don't have to do anything. I am welcomed just as myself. Here I am and here I can just be."

And that's it. That's all. Clive also has it when he says: "All you have to do is turn up." That's the discipline: the turning up. Offer your sacred word, your mantra continually, moment by moment as best you can – sometimes OK, often not, sometimes far and wide – and wait.

And eventually you will be surprised. Surprised by Presence that can only be described as something quite 'other'. And you will be surprised by gifts you find you are given, gifts you cannot describe, in moments you cannot measure, you can never quite grasp. But you will know you have been given something unique and irreplaceable. Could it be described as 'a blink of joy' I wonder? Well, perhaps.

Surprised, not often, but enough to make you want to continue, to hang in to this seemingly blank space, day by day.

The writer Annie Dillard says: "I have been all my life a bell. I never knew it until that moment I was lifted and struck. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it."

In the end says R S Thomas the poet: "I think that maybe I will be a little surer of being a little nearer." That's all. Eternity is in the understanding that that little is more than enough.

2 Waiting

“Prayer is waiting.” So Brother Roger, beloved prior of Taizé, taught. And coming to silence is the heart of every gathering for worship at Taizé. I remember on one of my first visits there, many hundreds of us were crammed into the great newly-expanded church, really human sardines, as we descended together, shoulder against shoulder, thigh against thigh, into a profound silence.

After, as we prised ourselves apart, the young German next to me got up and stretched and said, “What I like about Taizé is it gives you space.” Space he said to think. But space, silence, which allowed things to clear.

Inside space, interior emptiness, is the persistent gift which is given in coming to stillness and silence in meditation. Life, someone said, comes in fits and starts, mostly fits; and the same with emptiness, the space within.

With the discipline of daily meditation it grows, bit by bit, with us hardly noticing it.

Buddhists talk about emptiness as space between the clouds allowing the blue sky to appear. They will remind us that the blue sky is always there, even though on heavy days it is completely covered over by a mass of clouds – those days when we are completely distracted, completely overcast if you like with processions of thoughts, imaginings, fantasies crowding in from the past or looming ahead on the horizon. It happens. It’s the way things are.

Gerry Pierse taught that when you find you have been completely swamped by distractions don’t despair. Rather give thanks, give a shout of joy, because it means that all these ‘clouds’ rising up from within you are being burnt off, little by little, by the eternal radiance within us. “The Kingdom of God is within you,” Jesus taught. We are being set free from our obsessions so that they don’t encumber us quite so much.

Recognising distractions is a huge step. It means that we are starting to look *at* them more, instead of going along with them. Stepping back; learning to separate ourselves from them. Letting them go. Distractions recognised sooner or later can be welcomed as a gift.

What we have to do is to continue to return and wait with our sacred word, our mantra, quietly thrumming away in our hearts – and eventually clouds will part to reveal the clear beyond, which we start slowly to realise is Presence. The emptiness is not empty after all. At all. Though we must not try to identify it, for that will immediately start to close it down.

Prayer is indeed waiting. And in the meditation group we come together to wait together. Patience, readiness is all.

3

New Beginnings

Meditation is all about beginnings. Every time we come to meditate, we start with a blank sheet. Each time is a new beginning. It will never be quite like the time before. It's a different day, a different time of day perhaps, we are in a different mood, and encounters between ourselves and others between then and now will have coloured us, affected us – good and not so good. We may even be in a different place physically, a different room.

We are to come with no expectation, for it's not the same old stuff, a repeat prayer-performance, rather a new adventure. Whilst traversing some of the same territory, we are facing the unknown – again – and it will be different, if we will let it be so, if we stop trying to shape it to our own will, our desires, our intentions for the day, or past experiences of such prayer. Part of each of us of course doesn't want it to be different because that's safer. The temptation will always be there to shape this time of prayer in our own image, to set up another 'ego' idol for me to worship, and not face the mystery of the unknown at all. Laurence so often says, "We're not going anywhere. Just be still," using our single article of faith, our mantra.

So meditation is all about new beginnings. All the time. Which is just as it should be. The difficulty for us is that we soon feel we are not making any progress. And how we do love to make progress! We might think we ought to be getting more experienced by now. Well, we are in a way if we turn it upside-down. Turning things upside-down is always part of the way of prayer and meditation especially, most particularly. We are getting more experienced in being inexperienced, in having our notions about experience and evaluation constantly undone, exposed. Letting go of it all.

In some ways, letting go can feel as if we are going backwards; we are only getting worse. We are so used to holding on, accumulating, clutching at straws, and so on.

Having to let go is just as it should be. We have to anyway as we get older. So let's go right down the line (which is not exaggerating). It is a radical upside-downness, which is also truth.

A dear friend of mine, John Fenton, is delivering a homily to a community of religious. His context is Jesus talking to his disciples about welcoming little children in Mark's Gospel chapter 10. "Let the little children come to me," Jesus says. "Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Then he put his arms round them."

So what is a little child?

Well, it's a nonentity, a nobody really. It has nothing to show for itself – no qualifications, unskilled, uninitiated, no really useful experience; it hasn't as yet notched up any brownie points. Now, as then in Jesus' time, still in most parts of the world, children are the bottom of the pile.

John Fenton points out that we in no way want to become like little children, but we have to. We have to become *like* them. And little children are the only people in the Gospel that he hugs! He goes on: “Let us give up the idea of spiritual progress, if that means being more holy, more devout.” God meets us in the absence of things, all sorts of things. And this is good news. Because we are not getting any better, but only worse; we are not making progress, but regressing fast.

The only qualification is to have no qualifications; the only admission-ticket is that we haven’t got one; we lost it, years ago, and we’ve been desperately looking for it ever since. Just say, “I haven’t got anything to show you; I can’t prove a thing; I can’t tell you who I am, or provide a good reference, or tell you whom to ring up. I’m an unqualified, unskilled, inexperienced nonentity.” Say that, and what Jesus will say is, “Come in, my dear. You are the very person we’ve been looking for.”

And this dear friends, this dismantling, is the way, the work of meditation.

4

Telling It As It Is

I say to myself, so why not tell it as it is, as it is for me. So, a few days ago, when our meditation group met, to my surprise and delight, I found my attention riveted. Almost nothing I could do could prevent it. Distractions there were of course, inevitably, but they were so fleeting, they had no power. It was as if ‘God’ or ‘Presence’ or ‘Whatever’ was a terrier hanging on to me, refusing to let go (and it wasn’t growling either and there were no bared teeth). The ‘attention’ was almost not coming from me, but from this ‘other’ direction – as if, as I once heard a bishop say, “God’s coming to get you and there’s nothing you can do about it.” It reminds me of that wisdom: “You gazing at God, and God gazing at you. There is only one gaze.”

This has happened odd times before, but not very often I can tell you – not just an instant but a fusillade of instants coming at me as it were. Reward? Rubbish! Gift? Utterly!

And then the very next time for meditation I felt I had lost the plot completely. All the old rust-filled questions – what am I doing here; what’s going on; what does it all mean? I wasn’t on track at all. And it continued like this for days.

In the end you just have to laugh. It’s what I call the great cosmic joke – this frustration, this complete breakdown between the one experience and the other. But this is, if you like, the ‘real stuff’, and it’s not very comfortable. But it is how steadiness and peace grow within; and of course that does not mean a quiet or harmonious life.

When I was all at sea what came to mind were words from whoever wrote the letter to the Hebrews (Ch 4 vv.12 & 13).

The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts like any two-edged sword but more finely: it can slip through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or joints from the marrow; it can judge the secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing can hide...

I think that’s a good place for me to stop and for us to start to meditate.

5 Forgetfulness

Why meditate twice a day?

One description of ‘sin’ which helps me is ‘forgetfulness’, and nothing illustrates my forgetfulness more clearly than when I meditate.

Bombarded by distractions as I am, and wooed away by them into some past or future happening, I have immediately forgotten what I am there for, which is not to bother about myself at all but to be in the Presence, to rest in the mystery of the Presence, which is God, heartbeat of my own heartbeat. God is present *now*, and nowhere else. God is the present moment, and my ego has whipped me away from that to re-examine my anxieties and successes, hopes, failures, hesitations, dreams, plans – which of course are all just about me and the games I play in daily life, and not about God at all. I slip away in meditation just as I do many times each day every day throughout the day from the present moment from *now*. My addictions to my pictures of myself, measuring my little self constantly over against other people, my ego hard at work makes me a very slippery customer. I need constant recall to the present moment and God, the only place where I will discover and live out who I truly *am*. I need constant recall or I’m done for.

It’s the same for us all if we are to grow in God. Meditation highlights our ego addictions in order to set us free from them, but we have lived with them so long they feel as if they are part of our true selves, bone of our bone, which of course they are not, not at all.

Recovering alcoholics, life devastated by the addiction, know they are never cured, they are only one drink away from plunging back into their delirious nightmare. They have to learn the hard way, falling and rising again, helped by others back into real life. They learn slowly they can only live one day at a time, each day a new beginning. It’s just the same for us with our more subtle addictions.

Buddhists talk about ‘mindfulness’ – the daily practice of mindfulness. It’s a good word – to be ever mindful of who we are, of the real life.

Of course, we do grow through meditation in the graces of God, but we need continuous practice to stay free, constant vigilance, or in the words of the ancient teaching: “Expect temptation till your last breath.” So meditation twice a day, as early as we can, then later in the day, helps to show us without condemnation who we really are, where we’ve been, and yes show us as well some of the gifts of love we learn to practice each day from the depths of our being, heartbeat by heartbeat, as we grow in grace.

6

Right-way-up World

One of the fruits of meditation is that the world starts to be turned the right-way-up. We've been living upside-down all this time and never knew it: we've paid lip-service to a distant right-way-up world but really no more. Then, as we dwell in meditation, the things we have heard and read in the gospels and elsewhere start to ring true deep down.

Truth, we discover, is to be found in the contradictions – to say I have to become poor in order to become rich; to succeed I have to learn to fail; to win I have to suffer defeat; to overcome I need to yield, and so on. This is putting things the right way up. I have to die in order to live. I have to let go of so much which the upside-down world of competing and conflicting egos encourages me to hold on to unnecessarily.

This is the threshold line of Life we have to cross constantly – everything is contradiction, paradox. And until we face the opposites in our own situations, we are missing out on what it is to be truly alive.

The ego says don't listen, you will lose control. The gospel says quite simply: You have to let go of who you think you are; what parts the world, in so many disguises, tries to tell you to play; to allow the true life in you, the true life-force, the energy of Love in you, God in you, to more fully emerge.

Of course we are so used to living upside down we don't want to go there. It's not particularly comfortable; it challenges so much we have taken for granted. But we do sense in our depths that it is right. If we want to stay on Christ's Way, there is no other way. It means that instead of living from 'out there', we start to live more completely from in here, the heart, the heart of me, which is God. Only God.

"If you would be my disciples," says Jesus, "meet me at the crossroads, take up the cross there, deny this other self and be with me, as I AM."

I love this story about really getting things the right way up. The hermit was sitting outside his hut as the moon shone down. Suddenly a desperate man leaps out of the trees, threatens him with violence, dives into the hut and takes his few meagre possessions – food, utensils, a book, even his bed-roll. Then he's gone. The hermit continues to sit there awhile and then says, "Oh! if only I could give him the moonlight."

John Main always teaches – be gentle with yourself, yet persist. Jesus says, "Yes, my yoke is easy and burden light, for I am gentle and humble in heart. Learn from me and you will have rest for your souls."

7

Indifference

One of the gifts which presents itself to us through meditation is what teachers of prayer all down the ages have called 'indifference'. It means absolutely the opposite to 'apathy' or 'couldn't care less', the way we usually interpret the word these days.

It means that little by little we can learn not to be trapped anymore by our own or other people's feelings and desires. It means loving everything that comes our way equally and fully, as it happens, and that everyone and everything deserves our equal total attention.

When someone tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to him he says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12 v.48) A hard saying.

'Indifference' is when we learn to be so emptied of our preferences and passions that we accept whatever happens next, knowing that everything, every atom of creation is within God and so somehow, somehow, within love. It is when, slow drift by slow drift, we go through each day less and less willing to pass judgement on people and events. This does not at all mean becoming listless and nothing but a wobbling jelly of a human being, but acting clearly and decisively out of loving kindness, accepting what it is necessary to do or to be, or not to do, not to be.

It is an emptying of desire, of pre-judging, of wanting this or that out of a particular situation: letting go of the desire for esteem and affection; the desire for power and control; the desire to change the situation; the desire for security and if necessary, the desire for survival itself.

Here's a story. The holy man lived in the heart of the village, right next to the temple where he meditated constantly. He was revered and respected; people came from all around to be with him and learn from him. One day a young girl scandalises the village by crying out that she is pregnant and insisting the holy man is the father. The parents and elders storm his hut, accusing him of hypocrisy, demanding that he leaves and pays for the baby's upkeep. He says, "Very well, very well." He goes to live outside, and no one comes to him for teaching anymore.

Some time later, after the child is born, the girl breaks down and confesses that she has lied and the father is after all, a village lad. The elders are full of remorse, go to the holy man and beg him to return to live amongst them once again. And he simply says, "Very well, very well."

John Main says: 'To mature at any level, we have to go through all the difficulties produced by change or loss, all the feelings, emotions and thoughts so generated, and learn to love God simply and strongly.' He says part of the discipline of meditation is that it teaches us to stay in that love, come what may.

And he goes on: “At this depth of faith we are indifferent to whether we have a sense of God’s close presence or a sense of his absence.”

‘Indifference’ is a gift of meditation. It is a hard gift. But it is a gift.

8 Annihilate

The word ‘annihilate’. Well, it’s not a nice word. It’s a hostile word, cold and threatening. On UK television we have a robot invader from a hostile universe called The Dalek. The Dalek has one characteristic word it utters constantly – ‘Exterminate, exterminate’. Harsh, violent, it comes out of hate and fear, pointing to death.

But in using a mantra in meditation as a way of prayer, it means something totally different, arising out of loving kindness, pointing to new life. One teacher puts it this way: “Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over again to annihilation, can that which is indestructible arise within us.”

Thus the aim of meditation practice is not to develop an attitude which allows us to acquire a state of harmony and peace where nothing can ever trouble us. On the contrary, practice should enable us to dare to let go our futile hankering after harmony, surcease from pain, and a comfortable life. Only if we venture repeatedly through zones of annihilation can our contact with Divine Being, which is beyond annihilation, become firm and stable.

And John Main has this to say: “God’s love is at the same time annihilating and creative.” Why do people often draw back from meditation as they draw back from love? Because they fear the annihilating aspect of love. And we have to confront the annihilating, the loss of self.

But what is annihilated is only the old self: our illusory self; our selfish, self-centred suffering self. What is surrendered is what is worthless. What is annihilated is what is unreal. What dies is what is impermanent anyway.

Then we are re-created. We are made into a new creation by the same power of God’s love.

9

Our Original Goodness

It's a bit of a tightrope of course, living our way through our world. Daniel O'Leary is clear: We are lopsided, unbalanced, and Church teaching hasn't always helped. He describes us as "awash with a sense of sin", guilt-ridden, because we have lost a sense of our original goodness. Original Goodness is our *first* nature, it is the first gift of Life to all. Original Sin is our second nature, not original at all, mind you. It feels a pretty close call most of the time; it can invade the womb and start to operate even before the birth cord has been cut – and it is the origin of Evil.

But read the birth poem in the first chapter of the bible. It's all about the divine goodness in which the world is set. Each day of creation in the poem is good. Light is good. Dark is good. Sea is good. Wild things are good. Every living thing that moves on the face of the earth is very good.

Fast forward to the gospels and Jesus. He is, in inverted commas 'the Son of God' because he takes up where the message of Genesis left off and became submerged through the Old Testament surfacing only here and there. He says 'The Kingdom of God is within you. It is among you' (St Luke chapter 17). When will it come, they ask. It's already here he says, always has been, if hidden. Just turn and look, repent from the way you've been looking at it all till now.

Meditation helps us to see this, to know this, to recover, because it gently yet persistently returns us to that sacred space, that Genesis space deep, deep within which is untouched, can be hidden but always remains unsullied by anything that is going on within us or around us. God's goodness. It's there. It is here. Now.

It is in the first words of the Gospel of John, there as the light that can never be put out, that no darkness can overpower – the light that is the light of all humankind. A *living* Word is God's promise to us, a living Word, Jesus, though we can play blind with our lives. And when indeed so much challenges us to believe that the goodness is there at all, sin slides in through so many crevices and is much easier to believe in.

But all we have to do is to stay with our mantra, our sacred word which will increasingly become our Living Word for us. It will do the work for us and will quietly and persistently guide us through the 7 deadly sins – and a few more – shedding the light of goodness increasingly on places and people we thought of only as threateningly dark. It becomes somewhat easier, most of the time, to shrug off the sin which so easily besets us.

Call it if you like the recovery of innocence, for that is how many experience it. As such, a new simplicity in our lives. Not the first rather bewildered, naïve innocence of a newborn but a more mature, far-seeing innocence, a simplicity and directness after all the confusions and the weathering of making our way in the world.

Our creation is a good place. Our new simplicity can help us to penetrate through and to see, in the words of St Julian of Norwich that "all shall be well".

Meditation constantly refreshes our hope.

10 Intercession

One of the things that happens if we are serious at prayer is that our compassion grows and when this happens our intercessions grow and the thoughts and words grow, and I meet people who say their life of prayer is so extended by intercession that they couldn't possibly find time to meditate. Indeed, I have met people worn out with intercession, finding it a huge burden.

Intercession, I have slowly come to realise, is focusing people, situations, more deeply into the presence of God. Not bringing them before the throne of grace, they are already there, but helping them usually to perceive, to see through in new ways, just by our being there, as best as we may, with them. To bring, somehow, new light. It's a form of invisible hand-holding if you like. You don't know what you're doing but, you have to *be* there, to assist them and ourselves at the same time to move from negativity and helplessness, or equally perhaps from undue optimism that we will witness improvements, to move through all this to Hope. For Hope is Love; Hope is the mystery of Love. You stand at their threshold, holding the door open, so that through the open door the mystery may perhaps be more clearly perceived.

Terrible days, terrible times, terrible helplessness, sometimes all these things, no denying, but then who would? We swink and sweat, we passionately plead, we present our case on their behalf. People say: "Have our prayers not been heard? Is God not listening? Where *is* God in all this?"

This is to spell out wrong questions. If however we put the self-emptying of meditation central, everything else falls more readily into place: seeking to let go of our passions, our imaginations and wants, indeed our thoughts of goodness and what we may believe is right.

Of course the names and the causes are there, we carry them around as we start to pray without ceasing which is part of our quest as people of faith. But we can move them all into our mantra, our sacred word, which carries all our faith, for it sums up who we are. Our frail-seeming little mantra is yet strong enough to catch and contain all our pleadings for us. We can, if we wish, touch the names and places with a lightness which is both instantaneous and passionate and move on through all the abominable sufferings and incredible joys as they present. This is not to be shallow. At this point we are not shallow; we are growing up, praying without ceasing.

Then let our stillness and silence which are our tokens of God's Presence totally with us, here, now, always, take over. It is our sacred word which becomes the best gift of intercession in these – in all circumstances.

Here, in meditation I am flat broke, utterly lost. As St Paul says, we do not know how to pray and the Spirit is there to help us in our weakness and knows perfectly well what is in our hearts before we ask. Let the gift of our emptiness fill all these other situations, for it is a gift of Hope. How often we have noticed how people who have so little in life can so often be filled with huge Hope. So, let it be.

Intercession is clearest for me in this way. Only 6 weeks after retiring to the Lake District, Mary discovers cancer. Panicked, scared out of her wits, she and her husband sought all help including a centre for healing. The cancer got worse.

But one day just before she died, she said at the centre: "I have never felt surrounded by so much love in all my life." And in the words of the healer: "When she died, she walked it." Some are cured without ever being healed. Mary was not cured yet she was healed.

"It is accomplished," said Jesus.

11

Running On Empty

This is what meditation invites us to do – running on empty. Meditation is a truly carbon-neutral fuel. Is it an arrogance to suggest that our meditation can help save the planet? Well, that is not any good reason at all really for meditating. Meditation is bigger even than that. The only reason for meditating is our desire to love God and know God more deeply in our lives. We are not praying for specific outcomes. Nevertheless, Bede Griffiths reminds us that coming to stillness within one individual “can affect society beyond measure”. That is our faith. After all, each of us is born with a God-given dream which goes something like this: The wolf will lie down with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall be friends, the young child will dance over the viper’s nest, our enemies shall become our friends. “They will not hurt or harm in all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

Such things so often seem impossible. It’s when we start to run on empty that change is possible; when we stop running on the usual ego fuels and our little life comes grinding to a halt, that change is possible. At the impasse, the emptiness, we face the unknown; we have to leave all the known highways and byways, all the deceits and false joys, the endless ego trips. Our definitions of happiness we recognise were always temporary. We know we have to abandon them if we are not to remain a prisoner in a life not fully lived.

Impasse. Dead End. There is no way for us to go on except to face the unknown, which can feel like failure, and as if we are plunged into darkness. Dead stop. This is the void where God habitually dwells. God *is*, always. God *is*.

The emptiness of meditation however makes space for new creation to emerge, but we cannot tell who or what it may be – and certainly we may not spot anything at all. But somehow we shall know. The empty darkness of meditation is the raw material for the making of a new world, to help bring into existence that which does not yet exist.

My dear friend Etty, a Dutch Jew, who died in a concentration camp in 1942 talks of meditation as turning one’s inner being into a vast empty plain. She tells how after the horrors of the day have slunk away into night, she can so often walk with a spring in her step, with the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent. And one day,” she says, “we shall be building a new world; for now putting up against every fresh horror, one more piece of love and goodness.” Meditation trains us to do that.

We have always been invited since the beginning to participate in making creation, not simply running repeats so often with disastrous results. Out of the space we create through meditation, for ourselves and for others, changes can appear. We shall perhaps start to see what seem like miracles where others do not see them. “Coincidences” my old vicar used to call them. He was too full of reverence to dare to call them miracles.

And we shall know. Simone Weil points out: “Our consent to Christ’s presence is the same as his presence.” Whatever. We shall know, and be content to remain running on empty.

Beauty: A Gift Of Emptiness

“The eye, looking with grace, sees beauty everywhere,” John O’Donohue who died very sadly just at the age of 53 early in 2008 said.

“The eye, looking with grace, sees beauty everywhere.” Beauty is a grace and a gift of emptiness. It is somehow always breathtaking, comes out of the blue almost, it feels, when you are not ready for it, though you are or it would not arrive. Like Truth, Beauty is indescribable and that’s as it should be, try as we might to paint it or find right words. It will always elude us because it is of God: it is the beyond in our midst, the ultimate gift transforming every landscape, every encounter with another person. A flash of beauty in a place or face is surely an eye into the Kingdom of Heaven.

I think the reason why so many come from so far, to walk in the empty spaces of our Lake District hills is to leave everything behind, seek to empty themselves, and allow themselves to be captured by beauty. To be captured you might say by God.

Rowan Williams the Archbishop of Canterbury says, “Always pause with awe on the threshold of another person.” Ike at age 72 is still a big tough man who spent all his working life down the pit. He came up one evening and told me as we watched the sunset together over the sea, in simple words of profound beauty, about holding the hand of his brother recently as he died, feeling the life go out of him. The beauty of compassion is the beauty of God, growing in us, whether we recognise it or not.

John O’Donohue points out that we live in times when people are always moving on, greedy for destinations, filling up with fleeting impressions – bits of information and half-knowledge, superficial encounters – not giving themselves enough space to allow their souls to catch up for the grace of beauty to happen to them. This ultimately breeds lack of respect for people and places.

The grace of beauty is a gift of emptiness. “Inner silence,” says Simone Weil, “is the beauty of the universe.” And inner space must be sought and maintained in a life, or Beauty will surely perish. For it is in silence that all things come together, all the virtues cohere: “joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, self-control” and, which are together, the overwhelming beauty at the heart of creation, which is the Truth of God: Love – the perfect stillness. Simone Weil says again: “There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is like a noise when compared to the silence of God.”

So the practice of emptiness, of coming to stillness and silence in meditation, make us ever more ready to receive and perceive Beauty anywhere at any moment. When the grace of the Truth of God hits us, as one bishop put it, when the penny drops, a moment of cosmic disclosure, that is sheer Beauty. And such Beauty is the happiness of God.

I had this fleeting image, as you do, in meditation once. It was of a group of 6 to 8 people, like a meditation group, all skydiving; holding hands together they seemed to hover, lie flat in the sky. Thinking afterwards, they looked so

nonchalant, so laid back, yet were travelling at tremendous speed. And their human flower-head, such a moment of beauty and grace, is the fruit of repeated discipline practising together, reaching out in trust. So we are called to be likewise in our work of meditation, thus revealing more and more God's beauty in our world.
