



Talks on Meditation for the Business Executive

PETER NG KOK SONG

THE CONTEMPLATIVE EXECUTIVE

Peter Ng is Chief Investment Officer at the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. He is the WCCM National Coordinator for Singapore, and also a Trustee and Guiding Board Member. Speaking from the experience of his own quest for “meaning, depth, significance, and purpose” in life, he says: “The first challenge... is to take a step away from the busyness of the business world.” This step he found in the simple practicality of John Main’s teaching on meditation. In this practice, the executive attends to the “business of businesses”, which is to allow the work of God to be done in us.

Talks 1 to 5 are extracts from Peter’s presentation at the 2007 John Main Seminar. Talks 6 and 7 were given to student meditators of Georgetown University, USA, in March 2006.



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Wisdom and Transformation

We come this afternoon to consider the significance of John Main's teaching to the corporate executive.

In the last four years, I have been working on an anthology of John Main's teaching, which has now been published by Medio Media with the title *The Hunger for Depth and Meaning*. This work has been enormously enriching for me. It helped me to understand more deeply John Main's teaching on Christian meditation, and to connect it with my own daily practice. In other words, to verify the teaching from my own experience.

I was particularly drawn to a talk which John Main gave shortly before his death. His voice was frail, but he spoke with captivating intensity and urgency. There were three elements in that talk of special significance to business executives and leaders. First, he described the knowledge that we come to in meditation as not just simply new additions to the memory bank, but the knowledge of wisdom. And he quoted from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the all-glorious Father, may give you the spiritual powers of wisdom and vision by which there comes the knowledge of him. I pray that your inward eyes may be illumined so that you may know the hope to which he calls you. (Eph. 1:17-18)

Then John Main spoke about the transforming power of meditation. He spoke of it as a process whereby our minds are re-made. And he related this to Paul's letter to the Romans:

Therefore, my brothers, I implore you by God's mercy, to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

What I found most engaging was the third element, which was the sheer practicality of how he described the way to that wisdom and transformation. He said:

This meditation, this pursuit of wisdom and love, must take place in an entirely ordinary, natural way. Meditation must be built into the ordinary fabric of everyday life. It is by being still, in a very simple child-like way, by paying attention.

And he advises:

To be fit for the great task of life, we must learn to be faithful in humble tasks.

He went on to speak about the humble task of saying our word, our mantra.

The Way of Unknowing, 'Real Knowing'; The Heart of Creation, 'Focus on the Real'

In this twenty-first century, we face more obstacles than ever before in our quest to live our lives with meaning, depth, significance and purpose. The distractions and demands that characterise much of modern living are particularly evident in the life of the business executive.

[05:00 min]

The first challenge for the business executive embarking on the contemplative journey is to take a step away from the busyness of the business world. The unrelenting globalisation of business requires more business travel, which strains family life. Being involved in an international business across multiple time zones is taxing on both the physical and mental capacities of more and more executives. And of course the advances of telecommunication and technology, which have produced electronic mail over the internet, keep many of us constantly on our toes. In the past, the home or vacation time provided much needed refuge from work and the office. But today, the executive is hooked to the Blackberry. You can see this most vividly in how quickly the business traveller whips out the Blackberry device the moment a plane lands at an airport, anxious to find out what messages had been sent to him while he was in the air. I can say this from experience, because I have done it three or four times just in the last two days as I travelled here.

The other problem of a modern lifestyle is that we are all in thrall to consumption; both our own consumption and the consumption of people who buy the goods or services that we produce. We are all in some kind of a rat race. This consumerist lifestyle forces people to work too hard in order to fulfil their consumer ambitions. Even our sports and hobbies, which are supposed to be antidotes to our busyness, can themselves be busy occupations. Instead of giving relief, they often add to our exhaustion.

John Main was very well aware of the predicament of modern people. He said:

It's as though we were rushing through our lives, and in our hearts there is the flame of a candle. Because we are moving at such high speed, this essential interior flame is always on the point of going out. But when we sit down to meditate, when we become still, when we are not thinking in terms of our success or self-importance, of our own will, when we are just in the presence of the One who is, then the flame begins to burn brightly. We begin to understand ourselves and others in terms of light, warmth and love. (Word Made Flesh, 'Integrity')

So John Main saw meditation as meeting the urgent need of modern people who live their lives at an incredibly shallow level and who desperately seek depth and meaning.

None of us, [he says] would meditate unless it had occurred to us that there is more to life than just being producers or consumers. All of us know that we can't find any enduring or ultimate meaning in just producing or consuming. So we seek ultimate meaning. And we come to meditation because an unerring instinct tells us that, just as we can't find any ultimate satisfaction in consuming or producing, so we cannot find ultimate meaning outside of ourselves. We have to begin with ourselves. (Moment of Christ, 'The Way to the Eternal')

The Road Less Travelled

I first began to meditate about twenty years ago. My wife Patricia, and I were then quite contented at the level of material needs. Our standard of living well exceeded what we had expected in our youth. I was doing well in my career and was enjoying greatly the job of investing money. Family life was happy. We had two children then, who were entering their teenage years. Patricia had quit her job five years earlier to spend more time with them, and she felt more fulfilled in caring for them than at her job. Yet there was for both of us a restlessness amidst the material contentment. We felt strongly that there was more to life than material comfort and career satisfaction. In a kind of mid-life crisis, we were searching for a spiritual path that could bring more meaning into our lives.

In hindsight, I discovered Christian meditation at that critical juncture of my life. At that point, the more likely direction of my career would have been to accelerate the pace, to try to get to the top faster. But I feel sure that I would have paid a very heavy price in terms of family welfare, personal relationships, health and spiritual development. Meditation put me on the road less travelled. I changed to a different gear, which has made the journey thus far more fulfilling, has restored a balance in my life, and brought greater depth and meaning.

The discipline of meditation was a necessary antidote to my busyness as a business executive. When I first began to meditate, it took me about two years to adjust my lifestyle and daily routine to accommodate the two daily periods of meditation. But that adjustment process was a blessing. It made me realise that I had been wasting a fair amount of time in trivial pursuits, or forms of addiction. For example, I used to spend long hours on some evenings playing the Chinese game of mahjong with friends, sometimes into the early hours of the morning. At work, I spent an inordinate amount of time in business socialising, much of it unnecessary, in the sense that my presence was not essential and it really made no difference to my business or to the host whether I was attending those functions or not. By weaning myself away from those trivial activities, I not only found the time for the twice-daily periods of meditation, but also the space and time for worthwhile causes, in my case to serve our community as the national co-ordinator for Singapore, and also in Medio Media, and as a trustee of WCCM. With the practice of meditation, I have found a new perspective of time and how to use it wisely. I now guard very carefully my leisure hours, and have learnt how to say “no” to unimportant demands on my time so as to give priority to relationships. I don’t think I have become anti-social; I still enjoy my regular games of tennis and golf with friends and business associates, but I try to limit the hours spent on them. With the practice of meditation, I have come to value silence and solitude more, and this requires a certain distancing from noise and crowds, and some abstinence from television and other distractions.

So from my own experience, it can truly be said that in giving time to meditation, we are not losing but in fact gaining time. I have gained time not only because the quality of my life has been transformed by meditation, but meditation has led me to shed certain lifestyle habits that waste time.

As a frequent business traveller, I have also found meditation very helpful in mitigating jet lag. I can rest better and sleep well even at odd hours. When we are far away from home in a distant country in a totally different time zone, there is an

inevitable dislocation to our regular pattern and routine of life and work. The morning and evening meditation provides a certain stability and anchor regardless of where we are.

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Contemplative Consciousness

I am sure most of you here have your own story of how meditation came into your life at a certain point, and made a difference. That difference is a new way of seeing life, a new way of living life.

I recently read an inspiring book entitled *Chasing Daylight*, by the former CEO of the accounting firm KPMG. His name was Eugene O’Kelly. In May 2005 O’Kelly stepped into his doctor’s office with a full business calendar and a lifetime of plans on his mind. This was how he described his job:

This job of CEO was incredibly privileged, but it was tough, relentless, full of pressure. My calendar was perpetually extended out over the next 18 months. I was always moving at 100 miles per hour. I worked all the time. I worked weekends. I worked late into many nights. I missed every school function for my younger daughter. For the first ten years of my marriage, my wife and I rarely went on vacation. Before this sounds like complaining, I must be honest. As long as I believed I could handle such a high-pressure position, I wanted it. I was profoundly devoted to and loved my family. But I could not have settled for a lesser job. People don’t walk into the top spot. They are driven.

That day in the doctor’s office, O’Kelly was told that he had brain cancer, with less than 100 days to live. From that moment, he dropped his job and set about living his remaining days focusing on what was really important: his family, re-linking with friends, restoring relationships, and preparing to die well. Before he died, he wrote the following words:

I had long believed that a successful business person could, if so inclined, live a spiritual life. And to do so it wasn’t necessary to quit the boardroom, chuck it all, and live in an ashram, as if only a physical departure that dramatic would confirm a depth of feeling about larger issues, including one’s soul.

After the diagnosis of my illness, I still believed that. But I also discovered depths to which a business person rarely goes. I learned how worthwhile it was to visit there, and sooner rather than later, because it may bring one greater success as a business person and as a human being. You can call what I went through a spiritual journey, a journey of the soul. A journey that allowed me to experience what was there all along but had been hidden, thanks to the distractions of the world.

And what did O’Kelly say he learned in the 100 days before he died?

- First, about enjoying each moment so much that time seems actually to slow down.
- Secondly, about clarity and simplicity.
- Thirdly, about spontaneity and the need to rekindle it in our lives.
- Fourthly, about spending time thinking about our death and preparing for it.

I could not tell from the book whether O’Kelly had a practice of meditation, but it was evident in those words that he had moved into a level of contemplative consciousness. [05:25 min]

O’Kelly stepped out of the treadmill of a busy life because of his imminent death.

Note that he said he wished he had stepped out earlier. John Main also saw that consumerism could lead to a dehumanising of modern life, and he suggested meditation as a way of breaking out of that pattern. John Main said:

It is so easy for us to become dehumanised, to become just consumers in a materialistic, commercial society. It is so easy to live our lives in some sort of mechanical way, going through routines each day, but losing the sense of freshness, of creativity, of freedom. As a result, we live our lives in a sort of rush, one routine following the next, distracted perhaps for a bit by entertainment, by pleasure, or deadened by the pressure of work or play. To break out of this cycle, each one of us must learn to stop the rush of activity. We must learn the priority of being. We must learn to be still. That's what our regular times of meditation are about. (The Door to Silence, 'Creative Energy')

From my experience, even if we find the work of meditation, of paying attention, of saying the mantra, a constant struggle because of the unavoidable distractions, just the discipline of taking time out every morning and evening will bear much fruit. Because of that discipline, we will learn to establish the right priorities, and to distinguish between what is really important and what is unnecessary. This will benefit not only our own lives and the lives of our families. It will also make a big positive difference to the life of our colleagues and subordinates, because we will respect their need for life-balance by not making unreasonable demands on their time.

John Main had a humorous way of saying why busy people should meditate: so that they do not become “busy bodies”.

To meditate requires an act of faith. But beginning in faith will lead us to an experience that validates that faith. And the experience is that a contemplative practice built into the everyday life of a business person will result in a better business person, and a more fulfilled human being.

In the words of St Bernard, we must attend first of all to the “business of businesses”. And our first business as human beings is to allow the work of God to be done in us.

Meditation and Leadership

I would now like to consider how John Main's teaching on meditation can affect the practice of leadership at the level of business organisations.

The literature on organisational leadership is abundant with theory, case studies, commentaries and personal models, as recorded by many leaders in their memoirs. And they all talk about the essential qualities of a leader.

About twenty five years ago, I had the enriching experience of attending several seminars on organisational management led by a Professor Moneim El-Meligi of Rutgers University. Moneim travelled extensively in the United States and in Asia giving seminars to thousands of executives and leaders in both the public and private sectors. He identified five attributes of leadership which in his view transcend cultures. These are the five universal attributes:

The Will to Lead

The first attribute is "the will to lead". The will to lead refers to a commitment of the whole person to a goal that is both realistic and worthwhile. Such an act mobilises energies of vast power. It is a movement into the world, but it springs from one's inner world. It is a readiness to assume responsibility for others, a willingness to exercise authority invested in the leadership role, and the acceptance of accountability. This will to lead assumes personal integrity. When the will to lead degenerates, the leader operates from an egocentric need, to get others to do things that one decides are worth doing, for the purpose of self-glorification, self-enrichment, or for intimacy. Thomas More wrote that a tyrant "is a man who allows his people no freedom, who is puffed up by pride, driven by the lust for power, impelled by greed, provoked by thirst for fame."

Clarity of Mind

Moneim describes the second attribute as "clarity"—clarity of mind. This clarity of mind is not to be confused with intelligence. Something more than IQ is required. This something is sound judgment. The most important component in judgment is emotional awareness and emotional control. Clarity is not commensurate with the volume of knowledge. In fact, too much knowledge causes overload and confusion. What is really needed is relevant information. What appears to be a sudden insight arising from clarity of mind is really long preoccupation with an issue. I have had the privilege in my career to observe at close range one such leader. He is the founding father of my country Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, a contemporary of Pierre Trudeau. Lee Kuan Yew stepped down as Prime Minister in 1990, but he continues to serve in the Cabinet as Minister Mentor. One of his great assets is that clarity of mind which enables him to simplify the complicated. He has a particular gift for reducing abstruse problems to the basic and communicable essentials. He sees that every problem has a heart. If you can penetrate to the very heart, the resolution of the problem will present no difficulty. Having found the essence, you can then define it to yourself and to others in crisp, brief, and simple terms.

So for example, on a day to day basis, clarity can be viewed as a habit of asking a simple question: "Am I clear?" Going into a meeting, for example, you would ask

yourself: “What is my role?” “What am I expected to offer?” or “How can I contribute?” A supreme indicator of a leader’s clarity is admission of uncertainty or of ignorance: “I don’t know, therefore I must find out.”

[06:25 min]

The Ability to Learn

The third attribute of leadership is described as “the ability to learn”. The ability to learn presupposes the willingness to learn. Some leaders stop learning when they become over-confident because of success or the admiration or flattery from others. Or a leader might reach the point of believing that he knows it all. The leader must learn from his experience. And the most effective source of learning is in the errors and mistakes the leader makes. Therefore, the leader must not be afraid to make errors in the process of decision-making, and more importantly be humble enough to admit to errors. This ability to learn enables the leader to expand his perception beyond past positions and to adapt to changing circumstances.

Being Similar Yet Different

Fourthly, Professor Moneim described another attribute of leadership as “being similar and yet different”. To be a leader, he says, you must be similar enough to your followers so that they can identify with you, or at least to be able to make sense of your behaviour and conduct. Also, a leader must respect the core values and cherished aspirations of the group. But then to lead, the leader has to be different. His responsibility extends beyond the group, because he has to regulate the interaction with other groups, within the same organisation or outside. Above all, the leader has to offer people alternatives to what they want. There comes the time when the leader has to risk making hard decisions that are not popular but necessary for group progress. In other words, the leader should be an agent of change and continuity.

Possessing Abundant Energy Resources

The fifth attribute of leadership that Professor Moneim identified was what he called “abundant energy resources”. He has two interesting insights. First, he sees leadership as a reciprocal flow of energy from one human person to another. Secondly, he stresses the wise deployment of energy, which means the regulation of one’s energy, the economical use of energy, the direction of energy, and the impact of the leader on the energies of the followers. This is in contrast to the American model of leadership, which emphasises dominance, aggressiveness and assertiveness. Leaders, especially those endowed with charisma, can arouse the enthusiasm of their followers, but may ultimately have a draining effect on them. An overactive leader may waste his own energy and the energy resources of the group.

So Professor Moneim reminds leaders that there is a world of difference between kinetic energy and potential energy. Interestingly enough, when I was reading one of Fr John Main’s letters, he spoke about kinetic energy and potential energy. Kinetic energy, as we learn in high school physics, is energy in action or energy engaged in motion. On the other hand, potential energy is energy at rest, not manifested in actual work. In other words, kinetic energy is energy that is being expended, while potential energy is stored energy, available energy. Wise leaders operate with the optimum deployment of energy, their own and their followers’.

This interchange between potential and kinetic energy has a parallel in the balance between contemplation and action. We can think of meditation as a dynamic state of rest, during which potential energy is conserved, to be released as kinetic

energy in the action that flows from contemplation.

So Professor Moneim's five attributes of leadership are:

- the will to lead
- clarity of mind
- ability to learn,
- being similar yet different
- and possessing abundant energy resources.

[12.52 min]

Humility

I like to supplement Professor Moneim's five attributes of leadership with observations from two other authoritative sources.

One of the world's best-selling business books is one by the American Jim Collins. It's called *From Good to Great*. Collins spent five years analysing nearly 1500 major companies. He distilled his findings saying that good-to-great companies usually have Chief Executives who had a blend of "extreme personal humility and intense professional will".

Authenticity

Jack Welch, the former leader of General Electric Company was once asked what core qualities are truly essential to career advancement. He gave a litany of qualities: smart, curious, collaborative, the guts to make tough decisions, self-confidence and humility, and a sixth sense of anticipating market changes. Having listed those qualities, he observed that most of these qualities have to be acquired, to be developed, and refined. Then he suggested that the crowning quality of leadership is already inside us, ready to be let out. He called this over-arching quality the authenticity or the humanity of a leader: who we are in our soul.

To be authentic means to be genuine, to be real, to be true to ourselves. So it implies a willingness to accept what we are. It means not only trusting our strengths, but also facing our weaknesses, and being patient with our imperfections. We might say it is what true humility is about.

If we are authentic, we inspire confidence in others. We can be empathetic friends and good listeners. By paying attention to others, showing genuine concern, we help people cope with conflict and anxiety. We are at peace with ourselves, and therefore we can help others to feel good about themselves. It is authenticity that makes trust possible. The trust we put in ourselves permits us to have trust in others and to establish meaningful relationships. This trust in ourselves gives us the courage of our convictions in difficult situations, helping us to remain faithful to our values. We are not flags in the wind changing with any pressure that comes along.

The Fruits of Meditation in Leadership

We have surveyed briefly the pre-requisites or the attributes of leadership. But if we examine these qualities closely, we can find a common thread running through all of them. That common thread is the extent to which the leader has transcended his ego.

The root of the word 'humility' is the Latin word *humus*, which means soil or earth. In other words, to be down to earth, being realistic, honest and truthful, to avoid the temptation to act as if we are the divine centre of the universe.

It seems to me that the transcending of the ego, which is manifested in true humility, is the link between meditation and leadership. This is how John Main describes the essence of meditation:

[It] is learning to stand back and to allow God to come into the forefront of your life. So often in our experience, we find that we are the centre of the world. So many of us see reality revolving around us. We think quite naturally of situations and of people primarily in terms of 'how is this going to affect me?' Now that's all right as far as it goes. But if we really imagine that we are at the centre of the world, then we are never going to see any situation, or any person, or ourselves, as we really are. Because, of course, we are not at the centre of the world. God is at the centre. Meditation is trying to take that step away from self-centredness to God-centredness. And the result is that we find our own place in the world. We find where we should be. We find our relationships in the right order – our relationships with one another, our relationship with creation, and our relationship with God. What we discover, and what is very important for each of us to discover, is that we do have an essential place in God's plan, each of us responding to the unique gift of our own creation.

(Word Made Flesh, 'Who is at the Centre'; Being on the Way, Tape 5A)

For John Main, the movement from self-centredness to God-centredness happens because the practice of meditation is a central onslaught on the ego. We meditate so that we may be made entirely free of the domination of the ego.

The Ethical Mind

It is because of the tyranny of the ego that we see a business world today where the standards of ethics and integrity have been severely undermined. Major corporations such as Enron, Worldcom and Arthur Anderson have been destroyed by deceit and lies. Virtue can no longer be taken for granted, and now has to be taught to executives. People are increasingly sickened by the narcissism, the greed, and other “me first” contrivances of more and more chief executives. Much of the general public now believes that CEOs are in the game for their own personal gratification.

The root of the problem lies in character, which determines values and motivation. This is a crisis that cannot be fixed by public-relations spin campaigns, or stronger government regulations and accounting rules, because morality cannot be legislated.

There is a renewed quest in the business world for the ethical mind, for a moral compass. We need leaders who by their own example can create an ethical environment, where people aspire to do good work, work of high quality that matters to society, which enhances the lives of others, and is conducted in an ethical manner.

How can the ethical mind be cultivated? Obviously, an ethical orientation begins at home where children see the values of their parents – how they live, whether they strive to make an honest living despite temptations. As they grow older, their teachers and peers have an enormous influence. At the workplace, they are exposed to business cultures, good or bad. Employees may or may not listen to what their leaders say, but they certainly watch carefully what their leaders and colleagues do. As young people go into business today, the temptation to skirt ethics is mounting. We live in a time of intense pressure on individuals and organisations to cut corners, pursue their own interests, and ignore the effect of their behaviour on others. If leaders and peers behave badly and get away with it, employees may feel emboldened to emulate them. On the other hand, leaders who demonstrate ethical behaviour, especially in spite of the temptations of the market, inspire their employees to do likewise. In the long run, the reputation of the organisation is thus enhanced. Being ethical really means not fooling yourselves or others. The questions to pose are: “Am I being a responsible worker or leader? If not, what can I do to become one?”

How does meditation help to cultivate the ethical mind? How does meditation help us to develop the spiritual instinct to do what is right? Listen to John Main:

The mantra is like the needle of a compass. It heads you always in the true direction you must follow, away from self into God. And whichever way your ego may lead you, the compass is always faithful in the direction it points you. The mantra, if you say it with generosity, with faithfulness and with love, will always point you in the direction of God... In saying our mantra, in the daily return to the discipline, we gradually learn to look beyond ourselves. We learn to see with a vision that focuses itself ahead of us, in God. In that focusing of everything on God, everything in our life becomes aligned on God, and everything falls into its proper place. Our order of values is gradually changed. Instead of the value system being based on the ego, on personal success or self-promotion... our value system becomes aligned on God.”

Way of Unknowing, ‘Why is Meditation Difficult’; The Heart of Creation, ‘The Supreme Value’

[06:23 min]

John Main spoke of the power of the mantra as loosening within us the roots of the ego that constantly lead us back into self-centredness and desire. This is because in our fidelity to the saying of the mantra, we learn to take the attention off ourselves.

Father John explains, too, why meditation has to be a gentle, gradual process.

We cannot vanquish the ego by force. That would itself be egotistical. We cannot use force, because force would be a self-directed exercise of the will. The principle to bear in mind is this: We cannot possess ourselves but we can BE ourselves. The ego is self-consciousness. To change this introverted image of self, to escape from self-obsession, we have to change the direction of our attention, of our consciousness. In other words, the only way to transcend the ego is to ignore it. No amount of self-analysis, self-pity or self-distraction, will overcome the ego. All of these would be much more likely to compound the egotistical state. Meditation, the recitation of the mantra, is the way of egolessness. It is the path to selfless attention.

Being On The Way, Tape 5A

The Consequences of Saying the Mantra

The basic doctrine of John Main's teaching on meditation is this: Say your mantra, and continue to say your mantra, and be content to say your mantra. Why is this so powerful? Fr Laurence Freeman has commented as follows:

It is difficult to suggest how the saying of the mantra commits us to the progressive loss of self....Nonetheless, it is absolutely true that simply saying the mantra commits us to living out the consequences of saying the mantra.... We cannot meditate every day and continue to pursue a policy of deception, of self-interest, of revenge. However gradually, we must also begin to commit ourselves in daily life to truthfulness, to love, to God. This is why it is our spiritual life which transforms the world. As our moral integrity begins to develop, our actions will inevitably begin to change. And so the reality of the world we live in, the world of social, political or religious beings, begins to change as well.

According to Fr Laurence Freeman, the core of John Main's teaching is this:

We must first learn to be, and then we will know what to do. The power to do good, it is said, comes from being good. What we do is only changed deeply and permanently by what we are. This is a way of saying that Christ is simultaneously present in our hearts, in our worship, and in our world.

Light Within, "Total Transformation"

Let me conclude with the following words from Fr John, which have greatly encouraged me in my personal struggle to come to wholeness. He says:

Each of us must understand the power source that is available to us by being in the presence of Jesus. All of us are sinners. All of us are capable of sin and of the desire for sin. All of us have sinned and do sin. But what is of supreme importance for every one of us is that when we come into the presence of Jesus, we are strengthened by him, and our egoism is deflated by the sheer beauty of his being. The journey is a journey away from self, away from egoism, away from selfishness, away from isolation. It is a journey into the infinite love of God. With some of us, the end of egoism requires a big struggle. Sometimes, we are carried more or less kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Door To Silence, 74-75; Being On The Way, Tape 2B

Happiness and Success

Thank you very much for this privilege to share with you out of my own experience the meaning of success, and perhaps how the contemplative life has helped me to come to fulfilment.

What is success? I came across a couple of teachings some years ago when, as a young person like you, I was reflecting on these life issues. I think it was Albert Einstein who gave a formula, so to speak, about success. He defined success as work, play, and learning to keep one's mouth shut. So Einstein had an insight into meditation. It was a very significant statement about the balance of life: work, play, and learning to keep one's mouth shut.

I was also reminded of an old Chinese prescription, not so much about success, but happiness. I don't know who the sage was that prescribed this. It was said that, to be happy, you need to have someone to love, some meaningful work to do, and something to hope for.

Happiness and success – which matters more? My wife, Patricia who died a year ago, when we had a chance to talk about our life and our children, she taught me that what matters most is that we should be happy and not successful. She said that for our children, what we would hope is that they will be happy and not necessarily successful. In other words, success may or may not matter for happiness. But even if it mattered, it is only one of the ingredients for happiness.

I was very struck by something which Patricia said just before she died. She said this: “Initially during my illness, my prayer was: Lord, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. I didn't dare to add: But thy will be done. But now I can say: Not my will but thine be done. And I really mean it. Because if at the end of my life I can really say that I have done the Father's will, then I will be happy to go. I won't be scared, because I will know that the Father loves me, I have done his will, and I have accomplished the purpose of my life, whatever that purpose is – to be a mother, to be a wife. She said these words nine months before she passed away in the midst of receiving treatment for cancer. So she spoke about the purpose of her life. She had left her work twenty-five years ago to care for my two older children. During those twenty-five years, she got into meditation. She was the founder of our community in Singapore; she was the first meditator; she taught me how to meditate. Towards the end, she said: “I have accomplished the purpose of my life.”

It is for each of us to discover what is the purpose of our life, what are we called to do. Once we have discovered what the purpose of our life is, what our contribution is, what our part in God's plan is, then it brings about happiness.

Sarah mentioned earlier on about my career as a finance professional. I grew up in a poor family, 5 brothers and 5 sisters, in a village in Singapore. Our house floor was of mud and the roof was thatched with coconut leaves. But I had the fortune of a good education in Singapore which took me to the university where I took a degree in Physics. Then I sort of stumbled into this present job of managing money. I say I stumbled into it because when I first got into the job I knew nothing about stocks or bonds. That was not the environment I grew up in. I was put into the job; I learnt the ropes and I have now been doing this job for the last thirty-five years – the management of our national savings. The work that I do is somewhat similar to that of the Chief Investment Officer of the leading university endowments in the United

States. As a finance professional, I lead a team of six hundred investment professionals around the world, and we are concerned every day about the rate of return on the portfolio and the risk that we carry in the portfolio. It is a most fascinating job; I have perhaps the most interesting job in Singapore. It is something that I could not have imagined in my childhood that I would be doing today. So when I think about the notion of success and happiness, I can say to you truly today that I am not sure whether I am successful, but I can confidently say that I am happy. The work part is one dimension of it. I am very happy with my work. I derive a great deal of satisfaction from my work. It's professionally very challenging. But more than that, it has to do with the meaning of the work. The meaning of the work for me is that, if I am able to go a good job in managing this portfolio for the Government of Singapore, it makes a great difference to the future of the people of Singapore. I have always had this yearning to find a job which is professionally satisfying and extremely meaningful. There were many occasions in the course of my career when I was approached by US investment banks who said: "Why don't you come and join us and make yourself much more money?" Mind you in Singapore we pay the market rate and I don't consider myself badly paid. I think I'm very adequately paid and I would gladly do the same job for half the pay. But that's not the point. The point is that it is a very meaningful job. Every day when I go into the office to do this work, I know that if I do a good job it will mean more facilities, better housing, better roads for the people of Singapore; that's where the meaning is. The meaning is so important as an aspect of work.

I am also very happy in my life because I have experienced love. I have experienced being loved, and I have experienced being able to love. I think love is ultimately the most important thing in life, the thing that really matters. And, of course, in our practice of meditation, this experience is central. This experience is central because, in the silence of our meditation, we come to the experience of God as love. We come to the experience that we are loved, unconditionally. And when we come to the experience of being loved unconditionally, it makes it possible for us to love ourselves, to accept ourselves and to love ourselves. From there, it is possible for us to become authentic people, people who have a sense of their own inner worth, our status as a child of God, loved by God. That experience is so important in terms of enabling us to love in return. So I feel that the experience of love, and being able to have loving relationships, is very important for happiness.

This experience of love in my life, which has brought much happiness to me, became very intense in the last two years when my wife, Patricia was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer. She underwent treatment for nineteen months before she passed away last February, on 14 February, Valentine's Day. I was very fortunate to have Patricia as my life companion. Because she loved me, she taught me how to love. The nineteen months that we spent together before she passed away was perhaps the most challenging period of our lives together. It was challenging and at time quite arduous. But when I look back at those nineteen months, I can say, and I think Patricia would also say it, that it was perhaps the happiest time of our lives. Because those nineteen months became for us a time when we had to focus on what was really essential. I was blessed that I had the capacity to be with her, and during those nineteen months, for both of us to really live in the present moment, because we knew that time was short.

Patricia passed away last year. Friends have asked me how I am coping, how I am managing. I was able to say to them: "I feel great peace, and the reason is that Patricia left me her peace." I don't know whether you had the opportunity to view this DVD

that Fr Laurence did with Patricia and me. It's called *From Panic to Peace*; it was a sharing of our experience together. I want to mention this today because of the centrality of the experience of love in our search for happiness.

What gives me a great deal of happiness also is to be able to do something outside my work and family, to be at the service of the community, to do something for the betterment of the world. What I am referring to in my life is our Community, The World Community for Christian Meditation. The World Community is a treasure that Patricia and I found because it has given us a teaching on meditation that has become central in our lives. But, more than that, it has enabled us to contribute through the community to sharing this gift with others. This leads us into this feeling that each of us is created, not for ourselves. In a sense, we exist for others. We have a calling to go beyond ourselves, which is what love is about. We have found that it is in this community that we are able to develop ourselves spiritually. And by participating actively and fully in the work of the community, it enables us to contribute, no doubt in small measure, to helping other people for the betterment of the world. And so I would say that, as far as meditation is concerned in my life, I have found that it is the kindest thing that I can do for myself. And I would also say that it is probably the kindest thing that we can do for others.

Abandonment of Desire

The essence of meditation is that we must learn to live in the present moment. Not to be regretful about the past, not to live in the past, not to be too anxious about the future, but to live in the present moment.

That's what the saying of the mantra in meditation is about. Because if we are truly giving *all* our attention to saying the mantra at the time of meditation, if we can be fully absorbed in the saying of the mantra, if we are listening to the mantra as we say it, then in that moment we are fully inserted into the present moment, and we are living that moment to the full.

I feel that it is far more important for us to be concerned about living in the present moment, to enjoy the present moment. That is why in the teaching of Fr John Main on the mantra, he says, "Say the mantra, and be content to say it." The word "content" is key: to be *content* in saying it. Because if you are content in saying it, then it takes away desire. Desire gets in the way of happiness, because you are always striving for something, and in the process of striving for something, you sometimes forget what you have. In a sense, the fulfilment of life requires a certain abandonment of desire. For my own life, I have found that it is a very good way to live, because you live with freedom. You are freed from desire.

Now this is a bit difficult to put across to an audience of people who are striving for success, my contemporaries, particularly people in the business world. In fact when I first started meditating, a few of my close friends came to me and said: "Is there something wrong with your life? Are you having some problems in your life? We have heard you've become very spiritual." I said: "No, I don't feel that I have got particular problems in my life, whether of a financial nature, marital nature, or work nature. I just feel that I don't have enough depth in my life. And I feel that in order to come to that depth, I have to go deeper in my spiritual journey. That's why I became interested in meditation, and that's why I meditate."

Then back came the question: "This spiritual life that you are going into, these values that you are now proposing, doesn't it take away your ambition, doesn't it take away your competitiveness?" You immediately realise that there is a conflict of values and attitudes. The material world, sometimes the business world, has a certain set of values and we are proposing something different. The only way I could respond to that question was to say: "Well, I don't think so. I feel that as I go deeper into the spiritual life, perhaps it makes me a better executive. Because what matters is the long term." In the long term, I think that the person who pursues a spiritual life, who is anchored in the spiritual life, will come to greater professional fulfilment, in the long term.

I think the key is to make a judgement about one's potential. What is your potential? Because your potential is God's gift to you. You don't want to squander that gift. You don't want to under-perform that potential. But neither do you want to overstretch that potential and get burnt out in the process. It's about discernment as to what your potential is, and to realise your potential. Because unless you can realise your potential, you are not operating at full capacity. So I don't think the desire to do better is taken out. Neither do you lose your so-called competitive edge. But you are able to see these things in relation to the potential that you have.