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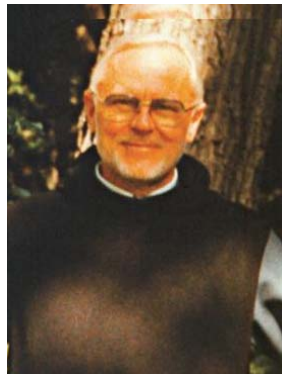
Meditatio

TALKS SERIES 2012-D · OCT-DEC

JOHN MAIN osb & LAURENCE FREEMAN osb

respond to

Questions on Meditation



Newcomers to meditation usually ask basic questions on the day-to-day practice and the simple, though not easy, demands of the discipline. In this CD, Fr John Main and Fr Laurence Freeman respond to some of these frequently asked questions.

John Main's responses are taken from his teaching during weekly meditation group meetings in Montreal.

Laurence Freeman's responses are taken from a conversation with Peter Ng at the Meditatio Seminar 'The Gift of Peace' held in Singapore in July 2012

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*John Main's
responses
to questions at meditation group
meetings in Montreal*

You have to start very gently, being very compassionate towards yourself. All of us find that we start, we give up, we start again, we give up; and so you've got to be very gentle and understanding.

What you'll find is that the experience itself is self-authenticating. You'll just find that the more you meditate, the more your day seems to come into shape, the more purpose you have in your life, the more you begin to see the meaning in everything, and the more you will find that love grows in your heart.

JOHN MAIN OSB

Times of Meditation

JOHN MAIN

Would anyone like to raise any questions?

QUESTION

Fr John, what are the best times to meditate, in the morning and in the evening? Is it best to meditate first thing in the morning when we get up? And what about the evening?

JOHN MAIN

That depends very much on individuals, but the general rules about times of meditating are: the quietest time of the day in your own life or your own heart, always before a meal if you can rather than after it, and the early morning and the early evening are the best times to meditate. The best time is probably early in the morning before breakfast and when you are at your freshest, perhaps a cold shower too might be part of the prescription. And then in the evening, probably the best time is before your evening meal. But that probably isn't always very possible for everybody – if you're coming home from work and your wife has got the meal ready, you know. It depends very much on the circumstances of your life. Those are probably the optimum times, but what is of supreme importance is that you *do* meditate every morning and every evening.

QUESTION

Would it matter if you have to change the time from day to day, if you had to?

JOHN MAIN

If you had to, no, not at all. The really critical thing is to put in those two meditations. When I was in Ireland a couple of weeks ago, I met a priest friend of mine who started to meditate about six years ago. And he said that when he started, he listened to what I had to say and said, "Well this guy is a monk, nothing to do all day, sitting around, it's very easy for him to meditate twice a day. But I am a busy parish priest, therefore I will read his signal for *me* as once a day." And so, he said, for about a year he meditated once a day. Then he said, "This is not working," and came to me to complain about it. And I said, "It's extraordinary. You meditate every morning and every evening do you?" He said, "No, no, just the morning." "Well," I said, "you meditate in the evening and then we'll listen to the complaints." And he said that he couldn't describe to me the qualitative difference, once he began his day and, as it were, prepared for his day out of that peace and inner rootedness in his essential being, and then bringing the whole day together at the end, as it were gathering all the strands into the same essential reality. He said that the qualitative difference was astonishing to him, and he said, "You know, I'll meditate every day, twice a day, for the rest of my life now, as much as I possibly can."

QUESTION

How about more than twice a day, say three times? Or should we stick just to two?

JOHN MAIN

What I would recommend you to do when you're starting is to start with a morning and evening meditation. And when you've got that absolutely regularly built in, if you wanted to and the circumstances of your life permitted it, to put in a mid-day meditation would be good. But I wouldn't come to that for maybe a couple of years or something like that.

You have to start very gently, being very compassionate towards yourself. All of us I think find that we start, we give up, we start again, we give up, and so you've got to be very gentle and understanding. What you'll find is that the experience itself is self-authenticating. You'll just find that the more you meditate, the more your day seems to come into shape, the more purpose you have in your life, the more you begin to see the meaning in everything, and the more you will find that love grows in your heart. It may be there's a good deal of meanness there as well, but the love is growing. That's the real test of meditation; you can't put any sort of test to meditation like "Do I get fantastic visions when I meditate?" or anything like that. The real test is the love growing in your heart.

QUESTION

You recommend specific periods of time for meditation, 20 minutes, 25 minutes, or 30 minutes, but isn't it distracting to keep on having to check the time?

JOHN MAIN

It's probably better to have a timer of some kind. People use all sorts of devices. Some people for example take a 45-minute cassette tape and record on it half an hour of silence and then at the end of the silence put in some quiet music so that you press the button when you start to meditate and when the music comes you know that your half an hour is up. Other people use their kitchen cooking timers. You'll want to use a fairly gentle 'ping' that won't give you a little shock at the end. It's an important practical question to know how to do it, because the really important thing is the *discipline* of meditating: that you do choose a specific time, 20 minutes, 25 minutes or 30 minutes, and always meditate for that time.

When we're starting, the temptation is, if things are going well and you're approaching cloud nine, to prolong the meditation; or if things are going badly (such phrases really have no meaning but

that's what we feel when we begin) if things are going badly we'll say, "This is a total waste of time; might as well cut this out and go and cut the lawn or something." The important thing is to stick at it, whether it's going well or going badly or however it's going. There is only one way for it to go, and that is that you say your mantra from beginning to end.

QUESTION

At the end of the meditation should we get up straight away or can we linger on in the silence?

JOHN MAIN

That's a delicate balance. I think that you'd want to try to understand your meditation as a discipline and therefore, it's very, very, useful to take a specific time: if you're beginning, maybe 20 minutes; and if you have some experience, 25 minutes; the optimum time is about half an hour. If you feel like meditating for longer, it's much better to stick to your specific time; and when your meditation is completed, the thing to do is to then get on with what you have to do. It's a delicate transition. Obviously you're not going to feel like dancing the hornpipe, I suppose, just as you finish your meditation, but on the other hand it is possible to become somewhat self-indulgent about it and try to perhaps prolong the meditation beyond the half an hour.

So I think that whatever you have to do, for example if you're a student and have to go to a lecture, when your meditation is over, get up and go to your lecture, or if you're a mother of a family and you have to give your children or your husband their breakfast, get up and give them their breakfast. That's the thing to do, but I think there will be a certain quietness in fact. For example when I ask you "Are there any questions?" very often there are no questions, because everyone feels like being rather quiet or rather in the mood of the meditation for longer.

Again, it's the delicate balance between the discipline of the meditation and the responsibilities of your life.

QUESTION

Is it necessary to play some music before the meditation period?

JOHN MAIN

We use it here before only to try to forget all the words that have been used. The purpose of the music is the transition from words to silence, and from silence to words. But certainly never music while you're meditating. Meditating must always be the greatest silence.



Doing the Best in the Circumstances

JOHN MAIN

Are there any questions?

QUESTION

What should we do if sometimes the environment is not conducive to meditating, such as not having a quiet place or a quiet time or when we are sick or tired?

JOHN MAIN

Yes, I think it's certainly much more difficult to meditate when you're tired, when you haven't a great deal of physical energy. I certainly found a couple of years ago when I was in hospital recovering from an operation that, particularly when I was very, very weak just after the operation, I would say the mantra maybe a couple of times and then I would be in a very deep and reposeful state of sleep perhaps and I would wake up and say another couple of times and be asleep again. But I think that we have to be very careful that we don't rate ourselves for success.

I think you have to do the very best you can in the circumstances that you're in. For example, ideally it is useful to meditate in a very quiet place so that you can be as recollected as possible, but if your next door neighbour starts using a steam hammer and that recollection is lost, it's much preferable to keep on meditating rather than to say, "I haven't got the ideal circumstances, therefore, I'll give up." For example, when I was coming home from Ireland last week on the plane, I decided that the time had come to meditate. The airhostess decided that it was a

good time to have a chat with a passenger who seemed to be looking rather lonely or rather quiet, so she came and sat down beside me, so I chatted with her for a while. It was on Air Lingus, Irish International Airlines, and she was rather more than usually loquacious and it took me some time before I could politely return to my meditation. So, you have to do the best you can in the circumstances. And I would always advise you not to give up; even though you are tired or you haven't a lot of energy, to do your best to put in the evening meditation.

QUESTION

Should we still meditate in the evening if we are tired?

JOHN MAIN

It depends how tired you are. If you've done a full day's work and you're feeling rather weary and shall we say you're going home at about half past nine or ten, and you're going to go to bed shall we say at about 11.30, I would think that it's a good thing to meditate then. It's a practical question that everybody has to exercise their own judgement about, but I think you'll find a real refreshment in meditation at the end of a fairly weary day. It really depends upon the degree of your tiredness. If you're utterly worn out so that if you just sat down in the chair to meditate you'd immediately fall asleep well, it might be better to go to bed. But if you're weary at the end of a busy day and you're getting home latish, I would think it's an excellent thing to meditate.

The important thing really, and this takes time, is to build up the daily discipline in your life. It's rather like if you haven't eaten all day and you come home very tired – is it wise to eat? Now the answer to that question I think is just the same. If you're just too tired so that your jaws won't work, better go to bed. On the other hand, you'll probably find from the sheer chemistry of eating that you're much refreshed by the meal. Exactly the same is true of meditation. Your spirit will be greatly refreshed by as it were letting go of the weariness of the day. Does that answer your question?

QUESTION

Fr John, I remember you saying once that you did not recommend meditating in the late evening because one of the reasons was that it makes one so alert that you simply cannot go to sleep afterwards. To my shame I must report that I have exactly the opposite difficulty; if I meditate late in the day, my difficulty is to stay awake. Even if I do it at six o'clock in the evening, I have trouble staying awake. Do you have any suggestions about the art of staying alert?

JOHN MAIN

This is a perennial problem. It's particularly acute when you're starting to meditate, but all of us, even who have been meditating for years, if we haven't enough oxygen or enough sleep will fall asleep. So the simple rules are to meditate in a place that is not over-heated, and has enough oxygen in it. A lot of people who come to meditate with us complain sometimes that we are under-heated particularly upstairs, but that's part of the process to ensure trying to keep awake. If you do meditate early in the evening and you tend to fall asleep, it might be a very wise idea to take a nap for 10 minutes or so before you meditate. You can try too a very simple relaxation exercise by lying flat on the floor and allowing the floor to take the full weight of your body by relaxing each of your limbs and areas of your body section by section, just sinking into the floor as it were.

But there is no doubt about it that we're not used to being completely relaxed and completely alert at the same time. And as we have to be completely relaxed in meditating, when we go down that road we think "Aha, all the systems are being shut down, I'm getting relaxed, this is sign I must go to sleep" and the body goes to sleep. The reverse is nobody falls asleep when they're playing a game of squash because there the adrenalin is pumping round and you're really totally alert. In meditating you want the capacity that we have to be relaxed as at that moment just before we go to sleep and awake as though we're playing a game of squash. That's something you have to learn, and you have to be very patient about it.

Apart from those simple rules of a good air supply and not too hot, not meditating just after a big meal, I always recommend people to wash their face with cold water just before meditating; it might even be a good idea to have a cold shower. Those simple practical rules are the ones to observe, and of course adequate rest, adequate sleep.

QUESTION

Would a good sitting posture help us not to fall asleep during meditation?

JOHN MAIN

The main thing you have to do is to be very patient with getting a really good sitting position, taking such expert advice as you can to learn how to sit really properly without impeding the blood supply, and so forth. But the important thing is not the sitting position, but that you meditate; It can take a Westerner maybe a year or 18 months to get a really good sitting posture, by the time you stretch the muscles on the thighs and so forth, depending on how limber you are when you start. But it's better to do that outside meditation in a sort of yoga exercise time rather than during meditation.



Without Demands or Expectations

JOHN MAIN

Would anyone like to raise any questions?

QUESTION

What exactly is the purpose of meditation? What sort of expectations should we have from meditation?

JOHN MAIN

The purpose of meditation in our tradition as monks is simply to be open to whatever is revealed to you. So I think the answer to your question is that what we are teaching in our tradition, is encouraging people to be faithful to the repetition of their word, and then to see where that leads. I think it's important to meditate without any expectation, without any demands, without anything of the "show me" kind of mentality.

Part of the great problem of a lot of prayer in the Christian tradition has been that one is often seen as trying to get God to see things our way, or trying to get God to give us this or give us that, or not do this or do that. Whereas the essence of meditation is simply coming to a oneness with God, without demands, without expectations, without the demand even for experience. St John of the Cross put it extraordinarily well when he said that in meditating you must transcend every desire, even the desire for God. So that would certainly mean transcending the desire for experience.

QUESTION

What sort of bodily or mental experiences will we get in meditation?

JOHN MAIN

I don't know. I think that when you set out to begin to meditate you're getting into realms of silence that you're not used to, and all sorts of phenomena present themselves. Now the great conviction to have is that none of them, or 99% of them, have any significance whatever. And the greatest advice that you could get is that whatever happens, clicking sounds, visions, music, feelings of acute nausea, whatever it might be, they have probably no importance whatever and the thing to do is to ignore them. Unfortunately being, as we all are when we start, so hyper self-conscious because this is what our society produces, the slightest phenomenon fascinates us, or if it doesn't fascinate us it is there just distracting us as it were; but ignore it. It doesn't matter what it is, just let it go. It probably has no significance at all I would think. Just let it go.

QUESTION

Are you supposed to actually see the light?

JOHN MAIN

No, that's a figurative thing.

QUESTION

What happens if you do?

JOHN MAIN

Ignore it. What you will find is, when you're beginning to meditate, often all sorts of psychical phenomena can be present. For some people, those who perhaps like to think of themselves as more normal, nothing at all happens. But other people, maybe people who have more imagination or more spirit or something or other, you will experience sometimes seeing colours or seeing cloud formations or something like that, or hearing beautiful singing, or whatever. But the important thing is to go straight through all those

phenomena. They're not important in themselves. They're much more likely to be associated with your liver and what you had for supper than any deep spiritual significance. The important thing is to say the mantra in a growing spirit of poverty and fidelity. That's the really important thing.

QUESTION

You seem to be downplaying the sensory part of human existence, what about the senses?

JOHN MAIN

I don't think we're trying to downplay them. I think meditation as an experience is a total integration of body and spirit. That's why, for example, I stress so much the importance of actually sitting still physically. Your physical posture is of great importance. And what you'll find in meditating is that the whole of your corporate life, your bodily life, becomes integrated with your spirit. It isn't a downplaying. It's a downplaying, if you like, of indulging your senses, but it isn't a downplaying in any sense of your life as a human being.

Meditation is about a deeper commitment to humanity, a deeper awareness in all your being, including your sensory perception. And I think what you'll find in meditating is that you see things and hear things and touch things and smell things as you've never done before. I think that you'll notice as a result of meditating how deepened and refined your perceptions become. During the time of meditation of course one is being totally still, but in your life in general – and meditation is not to be seen as divorced from your life in general at all but wholly integrated – in your life in general you'll see that the whole of your sensory perception is deepened and refined.



Saying the Mantra

JOHN MAIN

Would anyone like to raise any questions?

QUESTION

What is the function of the mantra?

JOHN MAIN

The function of the mantra basically is to bring you to silence, to take you beyond thought, imagination, ratiocination.

QUESTION

It's a way to clear your mind?

JOHN MAIN

Yes you could put it that way certainly, yes. Saying the mantra I think is very much what the English poet Blake meant when he talked of cleansing the doors of your perception. It's very much like clarifying of your consciousness, but you have to be careful about too many images even in thinking about the mantra, because otherwise your temptation is to say at the end of your meditation, "Well how much more clarification have I got this time?" Whereas you want to try and approach meditation in the least self-conscious way possible. That's the purpose: to bring you to silence.

QUESTION

What does the word *maranatha* mean?

JOHN MAIN

Maranatha means "Come Lord". You can use another mantra, but the mantra I recommend you to use is maranatha to begin with; I think it's important to use it if you can. The essence of the mantra is, as I suggested to you in the talk, that it brings you to silence. It's not a magic word, or it's not a word that has esoteric properties or anything like that. It's simply a word that is sacred in our tradition, and maranatha is the oldest Christian prayer there is after the Our Father, possibly. It's a word that brings us to great peacefulness and to rest and to calm. And certainly to begin with I would recommend you to use a word that at least has an open "a" vowel sound in it. I think that the best word you could use to start with is maranatha.

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the mantra?

JOHN MAIN

The meaning of the mantra – it is in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke – it means "Come Lord". I don't recommend you to think about the meaning when you're saying it. Say it as a word, as a sound, because if you start thinking of the meaning then you'll immediately be likely to drift off into images. The essence of meditating is no thoughts, no images.

QUESTION

Can you say the mantra while still thinking of other things?

JOHN MAIN

It's possible that that is so, yes; but in so far as you can, very gently say the mantra and let go of the other things without using force. The essence of meditation is that it is a way of great gentleness, and you don't attempt to, as it were, hit the other thoughts over the head so as to banish them in that sense. You simply attend to the

mantra more faithfully, and let the other thoughts go. You'll find that you can't learn to meditate in a matter of days or weeks. Generally speaking the first 20 years are the most difficult. But the important thing is not how long it takes, not how difficult it is. The important thing is just to be on the way.

QUESTION

As I'm trying to say the mantra there are other sound-tracks going on in my mind. What should I do?

JOHN MAIN

Just ignore it. It's one of the very humbling things about learning to meditate that you can't just switch off the sound track. You think you can. If anyone had asked you before, you'd have said "I'm completely in control of my thoughts; when I don't want to think about that, I won't." But when you start to meditate you discover that, for most people, it isn't just one sound-track but maybe a dozen, all competing in a kind of Tower of Babel. But what you have to learn to do is to *listen* to the mantra. And you have to listen to the mantra as the profoundest and most supreme sound in your being.

That's learning a very considerable discipline, and to learn it you'll have to be very patient with yourself and very faithful to morning and evening meditation every day. That's why the constant return to it is so essential. In the final analysis – generally the first 20 years are the most difficult – in the final analysis you'll find that by constantly ignoring the sound-track, and not give up, the sound-track then just runs out. That is the reason why, because you ignore it. And learning to ignore it is *the* great discipline of meditation.

QUESTION

The mantra itself is a special kind of word. There are in other circumstances other special kinds of words, for example the hypnotist might suggest to a patient to repeat a word, and the immediate aim in repeating the word would be to go into some kind

of deep relaxation. The ultimate aim might be something else, say to give up smoking. So what is the immediate objective of saying the mantra?

JOHN MAIN

The proximate objective is to bring you to silence. I think this is what everyone will experience. When you begin to meditate for the first time, most people find – not everyone – most people find that right at the beginning they do come to a most extraordinary silence and peacefulness. But then, as they proceed, this gives way to a very distracted state of being, and at that stage they feel: "Perhaps meditation is not for me, I have no time for it; all I seem to get now when I meditate is more and more and more distractions." I think that is the moment to persevere. The ultimate aim of meditation is to bring you to a total silence, and as I have probably said to you before, it has to be a silence that is entirely unself-conscious. And so, as soon as you realise consciously that you're in this silence and it's very marvellous, you must begin to say your mantra immediately.

That trains you in the generosity of not trying to possess the fruit of your meditation. And this is difficult for people, because most people in our society get into most trips so that they can experience the experience. Meditation is different from that, in that it is an entry into pure experience. And the way that the ancient wisdom expressed this was: "The monk who knows that he is praying is not praying; the monk who does not know he is praying is praying." So you say your mantra until you come to total silence, and you may be in that silence for a split second, you may be in for a minute, you may be in for twenty minutes, but as soon as you realise you're in it start saying the mantra again, and don't try to make that happen.

I think that's another hazard, that we want to make progress, we want to get some sort of verification that the whole business of saying the mantra for five years is going to be worth it. At that stage you must resist the temptation to want to possess the fruits of

meditation. You must just meditate and say the mantra, and when you realise you're not saying it, say it again. But it's those moments of pure silence that are the moments of revelation. I don't often speak of this because it would be disastrous to try to confect that experience, and no one listening to what we're saying here should ever attempt to try to confect the experience. What you must do is say your mantra, and be content to say it, be humble to say it, be simple to say it. The gift of pure prayer, the gift of pure contemplation, the gift of pure silence, is an absolute gift, never something that we can as it were earn, or twist God's arm to get. When it's given we accept it with joy, and then we say our mantra again.

QUESTION

The mantra seems such a tiny thing to do and yet has such an effect on the way we see life.

JOHN MAIN

Yes that's absolutely right and I think that, as evidently you have discovered, you can only discover this through experience. The mantra seems so small. It's like what Jesus says in the Gospel: the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, and yet when planted becomes a mighty bush and the birds of the air come and nest in it. The mantra is just the same. It's a very small thing, it's a tiny thing, but it does root you in the essence of your being and, as you say, takes you beyond ephemera, beyond things that are just passing away. And that's the big task that all of us have: Not to live our lives with what is passing away, but to live our lives rooted in what is eternal. And that's what the mantra does, roots you in that eternal reality which we call God.

QUESTION

You mention again in your prelude to the meditation tonight that we must try to eliminate all images – Images of God, images of

ourselves, images of other people. Is it psychologically possible for the human mind to eliminate all images?

JOHN MAIN

Well that's a difficult question to answer. I think the answer must be: It *has* to be possible, if total union is possible. I think when there is total union with ultimate reality there cannot be any supervening image. That would seem to me to be a logical impossibility. So I think the answer to your question is that if total union is possible, then it is possible to go beyond all images.



Breathing and the Mantra

JOHN MAIN

Would anyone like to ask any questions at all about meditation?

QUESTION

Fr John, should we be saying the mantra in combination with our breathing?

JOHN MAIN

That's something that you discover a natural rhythm for, and you needn't be either too worried about it or too self-conscious about it when you're beginning. It's difficult to give general advice on this, because people's experience is different, but probably the best way to say the mantra is to breathe in the mantra and breathe out in silence. Sometimes people find that a four-syllable mantra like maranatha is too much for their lungs and they can't breathe it all in. And if you can't while you're learning to breathe more deeply then you can perhaps breathe in *mara* and breathe out *natha*. But probably the best way to say the mantra is to breathe it all in and breathe out in silence.

Some people on the other hand can't say the mantra to their breathing at all and say the mantra to their heartbeat, others can't hear their heart beat. So it's a very personal thing. If there is a best way of saying it, the best way is to breathe it in and to breathe out in silence. The rationale for that is that you breathe in, as it were, the Spirit, and in breathing out you as it were surrender totally to the Spirit. And perhaps if you understand the rationale you can understand why it is reckoned the best way of saying the mantra.

But I don't like to say too much about that at the beginning, because in the West we tend to be obsessed by techniques. What we have to discover is that meditating is the most natural thing in the world. It's what we were created to do, that is to be in absolute harmony with the Creator. And so the least complication that you can bring to it when you're beginning, the better.

QUESTION

Are we supposed to be aware of our breathing or should we be concentrating only on the mantra?

JOHN MAIN

When you begin, it's hardly possible to begin meditation without being rather self-conscious about the whole process, because it's something we're not used to. But I think breathing while you're meditating is like breathing at all other times – you breathe in order to keep going and you're not very conscious about it.

When you begin to say your mantra, however, breathing it in you become a bit more conscious about that breathing as you do of yourself sitting still, meditating, saying your mantra – you've got to try and remember the whole thing. The very purpose of saying the mantra on a daily basis, morning and evening, is that you build it in to your natural systems, so that it does become eventually a wholly unself-conscious process so you forget that you are meditating, in that sense. The important thing is to try – a phrase I sometimes use to describe it – to root the mantra in your heart. Once it is rooted there you breathe it in and you breathe out in silence utterly unself-consciously. Does that answer your question?

QUESTION

During the day one can sometimes feel or hear the mantra being repeated within oneself, for example waiting for a bus at the bus

stop. How should we respond to the mantra arising in us outside the time of meditation?

JOHN MAIN

If the mantra rises spontaneously, supposing you're ironing a shirt and you've just put the hot iron down on the shirt and the mantra rises spontaneously, I would advise you to finish ironing the shirt before you continue singing along with it; or if you're a student, for example, and you're reading a book that's part of your course and you have to write a paper or something, I'd advise you to finish reading the book and then say the mantra. But if you're waiting at a bus stop, or waiting for the iron to warm up, or waiting for the librarian to bring the book, and the mantra arises in your heart, I would sing along with it.

But I would be very wary of trying to say the mantra at other times. It's very important, when you're beginning, to see meditation as a discipline and to say your mantra as faithfully as you can at the times of meditation, and then to do what you have to do according to your state of life, your duties. But if at other times spontaneously the mantra arises in your heart, then sing along with it.



***Laurence Freeman's
responses***

*in conversation with Peter Ng at
The Gift of Peace, Meditatio Seminar,
Singapore, July 2012*

Meditation reduces the ego to its proper function; it becomes a healthy ego. And a healthy ego is also able to step aside on some occasions and just say, "I give myself over completely to God," That's what we do in meditation.

And as the ego gets tamed you'll find that in your life as a whole you are more free, you are more competent, you are a nicer person to live with and work with, and you like yourself better. You've learned to love yourself, to love others and to love God,

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

Learning a Discipline

QUESTION

I'm going to have a conversation with Fr Laurence now, and the purpose of this conversation is to help all of us to understand the essential teaching on meditation. So I'm going back more than 25 years when I was first learning to meditate and I'm trying to put myself in your shoes, those of you who are here for the first time today to learn about meditation, and to put to Fr Laurence the questions that I put to him when I was a complete beginner. I hope that this conversation will help to clarify some of the questions that you may have in your mind, so that the teaching is understood both in conversation, and then the teaching is better understood through your practice.

So Fr Laurence, your teacher John Main summarised the essential teaching of meditation as comprising three aspects of a discipline.

- The first aspect is that if you're serious about meditating, you have to meditate every morning and every evening for between 20 to 30 minutes.
- The second discipline in meditation is in the physical posture: You are to sit still, with you back straight, your spine upright, and you are to try to maintain this stillness for the entire period of the meditation.
- And the third discipline is that during the meditation you have to let go of all thoughts and ideas, and to just simply and faithfully, give all your attention to repeating this prayer word, this prayer phrase. The word recommended is the word *maranatha*.

Three aspects of the discipline. I'd like to take each of these in

turn and have you expand on these three aspects of the teaching.

So just the first aspect, that you are to meditate every day, every morning and every evening. Where can we find the time to do that? Maybe in the monastery when you're a monk you've got plenty of time. But we are all very busy people; we have family responsibilities, we have work responsibilities, we hardly have any time during the day for meditation. So isn't it unrealistic for the teaching to say you should meditate every morning and every evening, for 20 to 30 minutes?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

I'm afraid I have to shatter some illusions for you. First is that in a monastery everybody meditates, and I'm sorry to say that is not the case. I was in a monastery recently, speaking to one of my friends, one of the monks, about meditation. I know he's very interested in it and he's trying to meditate, and he says, "You know I really want to do it, but I don't have time," So, let's put that illusion out of our minds for one thing. *You* actually can answer that question better than I can, because as you say I don't have as many demands or responsibilities and worries as you do with family and work. Yet there are men and women in every walk of life who do undertake this discipline.

So the question is, why do they undertake it? It's not because anybody is forcing them to. It's because this kind of discipline is life-giving, life-changing, and enriching. I think we need to just say a word about what we mean by discipline, because the word discipline usually makes us feel that we're going to lose our freedom. We want to be able to do what we like, when we want to do it, and we don't like to be told what to do. So the first thing to remember is that this is a freely chosen discipline. This requires a certain level of maturity.

A young woman came to one of our retreats recently; she's a successful professional young woman in London. It was her first time with meditation. She'd been looking for various forms of spirituality in her busy and stressful life, and she came into contact

with our community, our teaching. I met her a few months later and I said, "How's it going?" and she said, "Very good, I'm really glad I came." She said, "I'm meditating every day; and I go to a group nearly every week." And then she said something I was very touched by. She said, "I'm so grateful to have found a discipline." "I'm so grateful to have found a discipline." Now, if you approach it in that way, there's no problem really.

The other thing you have to keep in mind is that a discipline is a good habit. It takes time to develop. We all have bad habits, we waste our time. I was speaking to a young girl actually, at a retreat that Cathy and Ernie organised in Australia for senior students. She was a 16-year-old girl and she told me that she really hoped meditation was going to help her, because she was addicted to Facebook. She was doing 5 hours a day on Facebook, she was going to bed at 2.30 in the morning. So she was also looking for a discipline as she had a bad habit, and that bad habit gets pushed out gradually by developing a good habit, a good discipline. I think it takes time.

QUESTION

I remember when I first started to learn to meditate and you were teaching me, it took me a year to be able to just meditate once a day for 20 minutes. It took me a year, and that was because you asked me to start a meditation group at Holy Family Church, and I wasn't going to go to the group and say you should meditate every morning and every evening when I myself was not doing it. So I was under pressure, in a way, because I was going to be a teacher. But what I wanted to ask you was this. It's very difficult for people who are first starting out to be able to meditate every morning and every evening for 20 minutes, so would you suggest that perhaps this could be built up over time? To start gently, to start realistically, but to be serious about it.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

That's a good point. What I would say is, if you want to grow in the

spiritual life, do not be a perfectionist. If you are a perfectionist you are setting yourself up for failure, and you'll always feel guilty and bad about being a failure. Perfectionism is a kind of virus when it comes to religion, and it leads to all sorts of bad religion, bad spirituality. So it's not about being a perfectionist, we're none of us perfect. Remember St Paul with a thorn in the flesh. He tried to ask God to make him perfect, and God said "No, I don't want you to be perfect because actually I can work in you better if you're imperfect." So that's the Christian approach to the discipline.

Now I would say on the other hand, that this twice-daily meditation is such a life-giving and wonderful practice to develop, I wouldn't give up on it, I wouldn't settle for less. So if you can meditate once a day, start once a day. If you can meditate once a week, start once a week, if you can only meditate for 30 seconds at a time start there. So just start and don't be perfectionistic about it.

You will learn through your own experience, which is your teacher. Your real teacher is the Spirit within, teaching you through your own experience that if you meditate regularly you feel, think, act, live and love better. You will just see that. And then the next step will be to say, "I should be a bit more serious about my meditation, because I know I will be a better person for it." If you went to a doctor and the doctor said to you, "You have a little problem; you need to do this, or you need to take this medication, or you need to do this every day," you would do it. And this is similar, very similar. I was talking to a doctor recently and he said one of the biggest problems in medicine is that people do not take their medication. Doctors give them the medication but they choose not to take it, or not to follow the basic advice. So I think this is something we have to take responsibility for and learn for ourselves.

This is also why, as you discovered, we don't do this on our own. You had Patricia, she was your teacher and she was your companion, but very quickly you had a community, and you serve that community. You and Patricia served it in different ways, but you served it, and the community has now grown wonderfully here in Singapore, as it has around the world, and we meditate as we go to

God within the body of Christ within a community. So we are encouraged by the example of others, who may be more disciplined and more experienced than we are. But we can also help others. That's what a community is.

QUESTION

In regard to children, I mean if it's difficult enough for adults to meditate for 20 minutes at the very beginning, what about children? What would you suggest as an appropriate period of time for children when they are first beginning to learn to meditate.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

For children I would recommend one minute per year of their age. So if they're 5 years old, 5 minutes. And we can do that up to the age of 99; at a hundred you can go back to one minute!



Sitting Posture

QUESTION

We will now move to the second discipline, which is the discipline of learning to sit still during the meditation, and the teaching is that we should sit comfortably with the back straight with the spine upright. Is it necessary to sit in the lotus position?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

I haven't mastered it, so I hope not. No, it is not necessary to sit in any typical meditative posture. You can sit in a chair, most people do I would say, with back straight. So you have a straight-backed chair. I wouldn't meditate in your favourite armchair with your feet up because you're probably going to go to sleep, so maybe use a kitchen chair or some chair with a straight back. Many people now use a prayer stool which is a very comfortable way (it may not look very comfortable at first but you could try it) where you kneel and sit on a little stool. It's also a nice way of keeping your back straight. Or you can sit cross-legged. If you sit cross-legged I would sit in such a way that you're not putting one foot on top of the other, because your foot might go to sleep. You may need to do a little bit of practice-sitting while you're watching television or you're reading, to loosen up the muscles there.

But your posture is important. Don't become too self-conscious about it, but it is important because we are as God created us, body, mind and spirit. That's the Christian understanding of the human person. In other faiths and to some degree in the New Age movement, you might even say there is a sort of emphasis upon the body and the mind only; it's more dualistic – body, mind. But in the Christian understanding we are body, mind, and we have this

spiritual dimension which opens us to union with God. But the body and the mind have to be integrated, so your physical posture is an important part of the practice.

Clearly meditation has physical benefits, but it also will make you love your body more, respect it more, be more in harmony with it. This is one of the reasons that meditation is very helpful in breaking addictions. For example when the body becomes addicted to something, or the mind can become addicted, your physical posture reminds you that your whole being is a temple of the Holy Spirit. That changes the way you are in the world. Every aspect of your physical being is touched by this experience.



The Breath in Meditation

QUESTION

What about the rule of the breath in meditation? Quite a number of meditation traditions put primary emphasis on the breathing, but in our tradition we put the primary emphasis on the faithful repetition of the prayer word. But just now before we went into meditation, you spoke about coming to a more relaxed state by being aware of your breath as you breathe in receiving the gift of life, being aware of your breath going out returning the gift. So how should we in our tradition of meditation describe the role of the breath? Should we learn to combine the breathing with the repetition of the prayer word?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Well the first rule is to keep breathing, and I think that's not too difficult. And the second is to give your full attention to the word and the sound of the word as you repeat it.

QUESTION

So you say ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-na-tha, and you listen to the sound.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

You listen to the sound silently as you repeat it; better than visualising it. Just listen to it. Many people I think quite naturally get into a rhythm eventually. It's a bit like riding a bike. When you first ride a bike, when you look at a young child riding a bike, a bit frightened and they keep falling off, and then eventually they get it. They understand it and it becomes something they can do; they get the balance. So I think it's the same with learning to say the word. At

first it might feel a little uncomfortable but very quickly, if you're simple about it and regular, you'll slip in to a rhythm.

Many people say the word with their breath. For example you can say the word as you breathe in, ma-ra-na-tha on the in-breath, and breathe out in silence. If that's not comfortable, you could say the first two syllables ma-ra as you breathe in, and na-tha as you breathe out. But what I would say is think of the breath as a wheel that's constantly turning. So just rest the word very lightly on the wheel of the breath, but give your whole attention to the word, the sound of the word. You're not thinking about your breath, you're not strapping or tying the word to the breath, which would be a bit artificial. Just say it lightly, and then what you'll find, I think, is that the word finds its own rhythm.

One thing to keep in mind, you do of course find some schools of meditation particularly in Asia where the breath is the object of attention, but in the Christian tradition it is the word that is the object of attention. This takes us deep into the Christian and the biblical mind. Right in the first page of the Bible it says that God spoke, and it came to be. The Word of God created the world, then the Word of God came to the prophets and inspired the prophets, and then eventually the Word became flesh in Jesus. So, deep in the biblical mind and in the Christian mind, the word has a sacred meaning. I think for that reason it has been through the repetition of a single word, that the early Christian teachers preferred to guide people into this way of prayer.



Saying the Mantra and Distraction

QUESTION

We move now to the third dimension, which is the faithful repetition of the prayer word or the mantra as the way of dealing, you might say, with distractions. When people are beginning to meditate, let's say for 20 minutes, what do you think is a reasonable period of time for them to expect not to be distracted? For example, when you were meditating just now for about 10 minutes, how many minutes were you saying the mantra and how many minutes were you distracted?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

I'm sorry I wasn't looking at my watch. Distractions are nearly always there; nearly always there, so don't evaluate your meditation on the basis of your distractions. If you want to evaluate your meditation, then evaluate it on how faithful you are. Meditation is a way of faith; it's not a technique. If you really want to evaluate your meditation, practice it regularly and see the fruits of the Spirit appearing in your life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, self-control. These are the harvest of the Spirit; so *that* is why you meditate.

There are three stages, if you like, by which you learn to say your word. The first is, it feels as if you're saying it in your mind, in your head even, and you're constantly distracted. You have a sense of failure, you have a sense: "I can never do this, my mind is too busy. my mind is too agitated." Your success rate, if you want to call it that, is about point one per cent if you're lucky. So you may end the meditation and feel: "That was a complete waste of time. I'm not good at this, I should take up golf; at least that would be relaxing." But my advice to you – and it's not *my* advice, it's the advice of many thousands of years of spiritual wisdom – is "Don't give up."

Don't give up. That's what being faithful means. Don't give up; keep coming back to it.

And then you will gradually move into a second stage where you can say the word for a little longer without being interrupted or overwhelmed by your thoughts. Then it's as if the thoughts are there but they're in the back of your mind, they're not rushing forward, they're not flooding your mind. So it becomes like a background noise, like the noise of the air-conditioning or the noise of the traffic outside – it's there but you're not paying attention to it. Remember that the saying of the word is all about this art of attention. Strengthening this muscle of attention, that is so important for our human existence. Then you will find that you can say the word for a longer period of time.

And then the third stage is where you can say the word for an even longer period of time, and you're not worrying about the distractions, and even at times you may experience having no thoughts. This isn't something you may find every day; it depends on you, depends on how ready you are. But you will have moments where your mind is very calm and very quiet and still. It's like a sky without clouds, a mind without thoughts. But keep saying the word *then* as well. But by this time you're saying it very gently. At first you feel as if you have to force yourself to say the word in the first phase, but gradually it becomes more subtle, more gentle. And even if you come into this very clear and calm state of mind where you say to yourself, "I have no thoughts," unfortunately the thought, "I have no thoughts" is a thought, so you should continue to say the word. And that gives us an idea of why we're saying the word.

We're saying the word not only to relax; relaxation is a by-product. Not only to improve your cholesterol; that's a by-product. We're essentially meditating and learning to say the word in order to leave self behind, and to open ourselves fully to the presence of God within us. That's the real meaning of all Christian prayer.



Leaving the Ego Behind

QUESTION

Some days are easier than others, and although you've described this as three stages, I am still struggling to meditate after 25 years. On some days my mind is just so distracted. I sit down to meditate, and I'm thinking how I am going to organise this forum on meditation for children, I find myself constructing the programme. Or on other days when I try to meditate in the morning and there are economic developments in Europe, the Euro zone crisis, then I find myself thinking about how I can help to solve the problem in Europe. So some days are more challenging than other days. But the difference between now and when I first started is that when I first started and I was very distracted, I felt like giving up most of the time. I said, "This is not working, I might as well pack up and go and do something else." In other words, I was very anxious. I was even angry with myself for not being able to stay with the word during the time of meditation. But now after 25 years, the distractions are still there but I have learnt from this struggle that you can never achieve perfection, and that the concern about success is wrong. And therefore the distractions are still there but I'm less concerned, or even not concerned about them. So, I suppose what we have to emphasise is that when you sit down to meditate, you decide how long you're going to meditate, whether it's 20 minutes, 25 minutes or 30 minutes, and you stay there and you try as best as you can to faithfully repeat the word interiorly, regardless of whether the meditation is going well or not. Is that part of the discipline?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Yes it is. It's a discipline of transcending or letting go of our being dominated by the ego. The ego is a very useful thing. It helps us to

build things, to create things, to construct things to survive in the world; so we need an ego. But very easily in life we become prisoners of the ego, if our ego is wounded by problems in childhood especially. The natural forces of the ego are desire and fear, and it's very easy for us to be controlled by the ego. The ego is going to try to control everything, because it's a bit of a control freak. You know in your business or the business of any of you here, if you're trying to run an organisation or trying to run a family or run a church or a school and you're a control freak, it's not going to be a very well-run organisation. You're not going to trust people, there's not going to be a nice friendly collaborative spirit, you're going to burn yourself out, you're going to give yourself stress-related illnesses, because you're going to try to control everything. Well that's where the ego is completely out of control.

Meditation reduces the ego to its proper function; it becomes a healthy ego. A healthy ego is also able to step aside on some occasions and just say, "I give myself over completely to God." And that's what we do in meditation. The ego has no place in meditation. Although the ego will try and take over of course, and one of the ways the ego will try and take over, as you found, and as I found, as we all find, is "I'm not succeeding." The ego wants to be successful. So you have to just recognise that little voice and ignore it; it's just another distraction.

And then as the ego gets tamed – like your puppy that's going to have to be tamed and domesticated, the ego has to be domesticated – you'll find that in your life as a whole you are more free, you are more competent, you are a nicer person to live with and work with, and you like yourself better. You've learned to love yourself, to love others and to love God, because the ego is in its proper function; it hasn't become a dictator.



What Happens in Meditation?

QUESTION

What is supposed to happen during the meditation? Are we supposed to have experiences; are we going to get signs of God's presence during the meditation? Are we going to see visions of the light? How do we know that we're making progress in our meditation?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

John Main said once that nothing happens in meditation, and if anything does, ignore it. That might not seem a very exciting invitation, but actually it's the wisest teaching you can find on how to grow spiritually and how to deepen your prayer. We're not looking for anything to happen, we're not looking for a text message from God to solve our problems, otherwise you would have had the solution for the Euro crisis by now, it would have come to you. So that isn't how God communicates to us, by text messages.

So we're not looking for special revelations or even special experiences. I think that's very important to face and accept as early as possible in your journey of meditation, because otherwise you get really distracted and side-tracked because you're looking for something to happen, and you either imagine it's happening, or you get upset because it doesn't happen. But what happens is of course that you are allowing God to work in you, transform you, and it will be in your life above all that you see the fruits. This is why people meditate. They don't meditate because nothing happens, they meditate because everything happens. We just have to know where to look, where to see the results.

Obviously we have some meditation periods which are wonderful, very peaceful, very calm; other meditation periods, a complete waste of time it seems, hard work, no feeling. And you don't know

when that's going to happen. If I were to be honest with you, sometimes I'd be sitting in the middle row of the back seat of economy class on a 12-hour flight, and I'd have a wonderful meditation; at other times I go on a retreat for a few days of quiet and my mind is all over the place, I have to catch up with all the distractions that I've had.

So you don't know. And that reminds you that this is all about God's gift; contemplation is a grace. The more simple we are, the more present we are, as children, the easier it is of course to receive that grace. Even though your meditation might be very distracted, don't evaluate it in that way, but just learn where to look for the results. You'll see it in your life.



Fear Not

QUESTION

How would you dispel the fear that when you empty yourselves you might be inviting the evil spirit into you? Some say this won't happen as God dwells in you, but what if your faith is not strong enough yet?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Well, meditation is a deepening of your faith, strengthening of your faith, so the best way you can strengthen your faith is to meditate.

You have to be prepared for the fact that the first stage of meditation is like tidying up a very untidy house, and you may have a lot of junk lying around, a lot of unwashed clothes, waste paper baskets that you haven't emptied. So you may find that when you start to meditate there's quite a lot of stuff you have to clear out, purify. This is called the purgation, the first stage of the contemplative journey.

Everybody has to go through that. If you don't go through it now, you'll have to go through it later; the sooner you do it the better. And it's quite natural. It's not a big heavy traumatic thing, it's just clearing out. So be prepared at times in your meditation for that kind of unloading to happen. It doesn't mean that the meditation is a bad meditation. It probably means it's a very effective meditation. Don't say that this is the devil coming in. It's not the devil coming in; if anything, it's the devil coming out.

And trust the wisdom of the Christian mystical tradition. What a rich and deep tradition we are meditating in – learn a little bit about your tradition. Meditate with a meditation group. Allow your faith to be deepened.

The most frequently repeated verse of the Bible -- do you know what the most frequently repeated verse of the Bible is? "Do not fear." Jesus tells us constantly, even after the Resurrection: "What are you frightened of?" "Do not fear." Christians above all, believing in the indwelling of Christ and the triumph of Jesus over the forces of darkness, should approach meditation without that fear.



Poverty of Spirit

QUESTION

This idea that in meditation that you are emptying your mind, are you really emptying your mind? What is the emptying that goes on during your meditation? Implied in this question is the idea that you empty your mind and then you're allowing bad things to come into you. So what is the emptying that takes place during the meditation?

LAURENCE FREEMAN

Well I think *emptying* may not be the best word to describe it, because if something is empty we think it's nothing. Actually, this is where our Buddhist friends can help us. Buddhists have the idea of emptiness, but by emptiness they don't mean nothing. What they mean by *empty* is that everything that exists is impermanent, and everything that exists is inter-dependant with other things. Nothing stands alone, nothing is permanent. That to me is a definition of a creature. God created us in this way; we know we are mortal and we know that we are inter-dependant.

So we shouldn't be side-tracked by this word *empty*, and we don't have to use the word *empty* or *emptiness* at all if you don't want to. Jesus has given us a word or phrase that describes it as *poverty of spirit*. And he places poverty of spirit as the first of the Beatitudes: "Happy are the poor in spirit." Even the Buddhists will say that if you experience emptiness you experience joy. So there is a connection. Maybe not exactly the same, but there is a connection between what they call emptiness, and what we call poverty of spirit.

Poverty of spirit means letting go, non-possessiveness, not trying to control everything as it were, transcending the ego. And it

leads to true happiness. So if you want to think of what you're doing in meditation, it's not about emptying the mind; it's about becoming poor in spirit, letting go.



The Purpose & The Essence Of Meditation

The purpose of meditation in our tradition is simply to be open to whatever is revealed to you. It's important to meditate without any expectation, without any demands, without anything of the "show me" kind of mentality.

The essence of meditation is simply coming to a oneness with God, without demands, without expectations, without the demand even for experience. St John of the Cross put it extraordinarily well when he said that in meditating you must transcend every desire, even the desire for God.

JOHN MAIN OSB



John Main's responses are taken from his teaching during weekly meditation group meetings in Montreal.

Laurence Freeman's responses are taken from a conversation with Peter Ng at the Meditatio Seminar 'The Gift of Peace' held in Singapore in July 2012

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