



Meditatio

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Centre of our Being

JOHN MAIN OSB



All growth in nature is growth from the centre outwards. The centre is where we begin. And the experience of meditation is that we return to our origin, to our centre, to God. God is our source.

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All growth that endures must be thoroughly rooted. And it's the summons of each one of us, to be thoroughly rooted in Christ. The call of each one of us from Jesus is to find our own heart, unclouded by egoism, unclouded by desire. To begin to meditate requires nothing more than the determination to begin to discover our roots. To begin to return to our source.

Pilgrimage to our Centre

To know ourselves, to understand ourselves, and to be able to start solving our problems – to get ourselves and our problems into perspective – we simply must make contact with our spirit.

What our monastic tradition has to say is this, that if we want to understand ourselves, if we want to know who we are, then we have to make contact with our own centre, we have to make contact with the ground of our being. And unless that process is underway, all our experience will leave us in the shallows.

As you know, more and more men and women in our society are beginning to understand that our personal problems, and the problems that we face as a society, all these problems, are basically spiritual problems. What more and more of us are understanding in this world, is that the human spirit cannot find fulfilment in mere material success or material prosperity. It isn't that material success or prosperity are bad in themselves, but they're simply not adequate as a final or ultimate answer to the human situation. And as a result of the materialism in which we live, so many men and women are discovering that their spirit is stifled.

Much of the frustration in our time is due to this feeling that so many have, that we were created for something better than this, something more serious than just a day-to-day survival. To know ourselves, to understand ourselves, and to be able to start solving our problems, to get ourselves and our problems into perspective, we simply must make contact with our spirit.

All self-understanding arises from understanding ourselves as spiritual beings. And it's only contact with the spirit that can give us the depth and the breadth to understand our own experience. And the way to this is not difficult. It's very simple, but it does require serious commitment and serious involvement in our own existence: that we take it seriously, and the wonderful revelation that is there for all of us to discover if only we will set out on the path with discipline. The wonderful thing for us to discover is that our spirit is

rooted in God, and that each of us has an eternal destiny and an eternal significance and importance.

And that's one of the most important things for each of us to discover – the nature that we possess that has this infinite potential for development. And that development can only come if we undertake this pilgrimage to our own centre, to our own heart. Because it's only there, it's only in the depths of our own being, that we can discover ourselves rooted in God. Meditation is just this way of making contact with our own spirit. And in that contact finding a way of integration, of finding everything in our experience coming into harmony, everything in our experience judged and aligned on God.

Now, the way of meditation is very simple. All each of us has to do is to be as still as possible in body and in spirit. The stillness of body we achieve by sitting still. So when you begin to meditate take a couple of moments to assume a comfortable posture. The only essential rule is to have your spine as upright as possible. And then the stillness of spirit; the way to that stillness that we have in our monastic tradition is to learn to say silently, in the depth of your spirit, a word or a short phrase. And the art of meditation is simply learning to repeat that word over and over again. The word I recommend you to use is the Aramaic word (Aramaic was the language that Jesus spoke) the Aramaic word *maranatha*; and to say it in four equally-stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha; to say it silently in the depth of your being. Don't move your lips, but recite it interiorly. What is important, and this you must understand from the beginning, is to recite your word from beginning to end. Learning to meditate is learning to let go of your thoughts, of your ideas, of your imagination; and it's learning to rest in the depths of your own being. Now try to remember that. Don't think. Don't use any words other than your one word. Don't imagine anything. Just sound, say the word in the depths of your spirit and listen to it. Concentrate upon it with all your attention. Ma-ra-na-tha.

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

And that's what meditation is about: our spirit totally in harmony with the Spirit of God. Remember the way: sit still, sit as upright as you can, and say the word, and say it from the beginning to the end. And if you want to learn to meditate, if you want to learn to live your life from the depths of your being, then you must build this into your every day. You have to learn to make a space in your life every morning and every evening. The minimum time is about twenty minutes, the optimum time is about thirty minutes. And once you do learn that discipline, you will begin to live your life in harmony. Harmony within yourself because everything in your life will come into harmony with God; and harmony with all creation because you will have found your place, your place in creation. And the astonishing thing about the Christian revelation is that your place is nothing less than to be rooted and founded in God. Listen to St Paul again:

We are bound to thank God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord. Because from the beginning of time, God chose you to find salvation in the Spirit that consecrates you, and in the truth that you believe. It was for this that he called you, through the Gospel we brought, so that you might possess for your own the splendour of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess 2:13-14)

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

Relinking with our Centre

Meditation is simply a way of coming to your own centre and remaining in your centre awake, alive, and still.

I want to describe to you tonight what it is we are doing when we meditate. I want to suggest to you this: meditation is simply a way of coming to your own centre and remaining in your centre awake, alive, and still. The great problem with the lives of so many of us is that we live at an incredibly shallow level, and by meditating we seek to find our way to the depths of our own being. The word 'meditation' comes from the Latin *meditare* which breaks down into the roots *stare in medio*, to remain in the centre. And the word 'contemplation' is the same; the word contemplation has nothing to do with looking at anything, God, or anyone else. Contemplation is 'being in the temple' with God; and the temple is your own heart, the depths of your own being. So we meditate leaving the shallow levels of our life behind and entering into something that is profound. Again, in meditating, we leave behind the passing, ephemeral things of life and enter into what is eternal.

The ultimate goal of all religion is a relinking, and the relinking is a relinking with our own centre. That's the purpose of all religion, that we are relinked to our own centre. In the Christian revelation, in our heart, in the depths of our own spirit, dwells the Spirit of God. And the truth we discover from our own experience, if only we will tread the pilgrimage, the truth we discover is that there is only one centre, and that centre is everywhere. And what I think each one of us has to discover from our own experience, is that this is the first responsibility of our lives. It's the first responsibility of every life that would be fully human, to return to our own centre and to live out of the depths of our own profound capacity. And what we discover is that, being reconnected with our own centre, we are reconnected with every centre.

A truly spiritual man or woman learns to live in harmony with themselves and to live in harmony with the whole of creation. And what we can say is, to be in one's own centre is to be in God. In the

words of Jesus, 'The kingdom of heaven is within you.' (Lk 17:21) And we must remember the kingdom is not a place but an experience, and the experience that it is, is the experience of the reality of the power of God. In the Christian vision, it is knowing that that power is the power of love. St John of the Cross put it this way: 'God is the centre of my soul.' And at the centre we experience silence, stillness and the 'peace that is beyond all understanding' (Phil 4:7).

The way to this is the Way of the Mantra. Now let me be very practical. In meditating, we seek to enter into an ever more profound simplicity. The way is the way of unlearning. The way is the way of dispossession. The way is the way of simplicity. And we unlearn and we dispossess ourselves, by turning aside from all our own words and thoughts and staying solely with the mantra. That is what takes us to the depths.

What all of us must understand is this: you can't just do a bit of meditation. If you want to meditate, then you have to put it in a central place in your life. And you have to make sure that everything in your life is in harmony with the harmony you find in your own spirit. You cannot live, as it were, a double life and be a harmonious integrated person on your way to depth, to enlightenment, and to profound vitalisation. You have to be a simple person. You have to be a person who is living the oneness in your own life.

I want to end by reading to you from the First letter of St Peter. This is something that all of us have to listen to carefully, because the problem for people of our own age, in learning to meditate, is to have a sufficient grasp of their own potentiality, and a sufficient belief that they can live out of profounder depths than the shallowness of every day. These words of St Peter are a call to us to recognise who we are, to recognise our own dignity, to recognise the wonder of our own being, and to recognise, above all else, our own loveableness.

So come to him our living Stone. Come to him, the stone rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God. Come to him, and let yourselves be built as living stones into a spiritual temple to become a holy priesthood, and to offer spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ. For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Pet 2:4-6, 9-10) ■

Return to our Source

All growth that endures must be thoroughly rooted. And it's the summons of each one of us, to be thoroughly rooted in Christ. To begin to meditate requires nothing more than the determination to begin, to begin to discover our roots.

I want to clarify for you what meditation is about. When we sit down to meditate and turn our minds away from thinking, from imagining, from thinking about ourselves or from thinking about God, when we do that, what we are doing is entering into the centre of our own being. And the purpose of saying the one word during meditation, the one phrase, the mantra, the purpose is so that each of us can become wholly still at the centre of our being.

All growth in nature, as you know, is growth from the centre outwards. The centre is where we begin. And the experience of meditation as we return to it day after day – there is no short cut, we must meditate every morning and every evening of our lives precisely because it is the most important thing for us – the experience is that we return to our origin, to our centre, to God. St John of The Cross describes it most beautifully when he says, 'God is the centre of my soul.'

All growth that endures in nature, all growth that endures, must be thoroughly rooted. And it's the summons of each one of us, to be thoroughly rooted in Christ. The call of each one of us from Jesus is to find our own heart, and to find our heart unclouded by egoism, unclouded by desire. To begin to meditate requires nothing more than the determination to begin. To begin to discover our roots. To begin to discover our potential. To begin to return to our source. God is our source.

In the simplicity of meditation, beyond all thought, beyond all desire, beyond all imagination, in utter simplicity, we begin to discover that we are in God – in God in whom we live and move and have our being. And we try to describe this growing awareness that we discover in the silence and daily commitment; we try to describe this in the words 'undivided consciousness'. Meditation is this state of

simplicity that we call the state of undivided consciousness. St Catherine of Genoa expressed it: 'My me is God. Nor do I know myself, save in him.' And the wonder of the proclamation of Christianity is that every one of us is invited into this state of simple loving union with God. This is what Jesus came to proclaim and to achieve. And this is what each of us is invited to be open to: 'My me is God. Nor do I know myself, save in him.'

And how do we know this? We know it because St Paul expresses it:

We possess the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:16)

That sentence of St Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians is one of the most extraordinary sentences in Christian revelation. 'We possess the mind of Christ' – Christ who knows the Father and who knows us. This is what each of us is invited to discover from our experience: that we know because we are known, and that we love because we are loved. St John writes:

The love I speak of is not our love for God, but his love for us in sending us his dearly beloved son. (1 Jn 4:10)

All great truths are simplicity itself. And we can only know when we become simple. When we sit down to meditate and begin to say our word, our mantra, we are on our way to that simplicity. We are on our way to the foundation on which our whole being rests. We are on our way to union, union with Jesus. And we are on our way with him to the fire. Just listen to these words of St Paul:

Among men, who knows what a man is, but that man's own spirit within him. In the same way only the Spirit of God knows what God is. And this is the spirit that we have received from God, not the spirit of the world, so that we may know all that God of his own grace gives us. (1 Cor 2:11-13)

St Paul calls each of us to know:

Surely you know that you are God's temple where the spirit of God dwells (1 Cor 6:19)'.

In our meditation, we seek to be as fully open as we can be, in this life, to the Spirit of God dwelling within us. ■

The Silence of Creative Energy

The way of prayer is the way of ever deeper, ever more generous silence. And to learn this silence, to be open to the gift of it, we must learn to say our mantra. Our times of meditation immerse us in this silence, and we emerge from it refreshed, renewed, and re-baptised in the power of the Spirit.

In these talks we're always starting again. It's not that in each talk anything new is said. Our aim in each talk is to come surely and gradually nearer the centre of the mystery. And meditation is always a return to our centre, to our source. And each time we sit down to meditate, every morning and every evening, our aim is to clear the ground so that the energy of the centre may radiate freely and penetrate universally.

We have only one ultimate hazard. And that hazard is distraction. As we all know from our own sad experience, we are so easily distracted. God's love is given to each of us, freely, generously, and to all of us universally. And God's love flows in our heart in a mighty stream. But like Martha in the gospel story, we are all of us so busy about so many things. And we have to learn, it's absolutely necessary that we learn, that only one thing is necessary, because only one thing is.

All of us must address our own lack of discipline; we must bring our restless, wandering minds to stillness. And it's one of the first great lessons in humility that we must learn, to realise, that we come to wisdom, we come to stillness, we pass beyond distraction, only through the gift of God. His prayer is his gift to us. All we have to do is to dispose ourselves, and we dispose ourselves by becoming silent. Silence is the essential human response to the mystery of God, to the infinity of God. And we learn to be silent by being content to say our mantra in humble fidelity.

It's as though the mystery of God is a wonderful multifaceted diamond. When we talk about God or when we think about God, it's as though we are responding to one or other of his facets. But when

we are silent in his presence, we respond to the mystery which we call God as a whole, and that omni-dimensionally. And the wonder of it is that it's the whole of us that responds to the entirety of the mystery of God. It's not just our intellect, not just our emotions, not just the religious side of us or the secular side of us. Everything that we are responds to everything that he is, in absolute harmony, in absolute love. And that's what the experience of Christian prayer is. How is this possible? It is possible through the incarnate reality that is Jesus. God is fully revealed in Jesus, fully present in Jesus. And the love of Jesus has made us one with him. By becoming open in silence to his reality, we become open in wonder to the reality of God.

That is why the way of prayer is the way of ever deeper, ever more generous silence. It's not enough just to think about silence, or to talk about silence, we must embrace it. And to learn this silence, to be open to the gift of it, we must learn to say our mantra. Our regular times of meditation immerse us in this silence and we emerge from the silence refreshed, renewed, and re-baptised in the power of the Spirit.

As I've so often said to you before, what each of us discovers in our prayer is that simply to be in his presence is all-sufficing. In that presence we are healed. In that presence we find the courage to live our lives, through him, with him, in him, and for him. And once we begin to be open to this power, everything in our lives is charged with meaning. And the meaning comes out of the silence. All our talking, all our living, all our loving, find meaning from this silence, and flow back into it. The way into that silence requires great patience, great fidelity, and it requires in our tradition that we learn to say our mantra. As Cassian puts it, the mantra contains all the human mind can express, all the human heart can feel. That one little word conveys us, leads us, into the silence that is a silence of creative energy. How long this takes is of no concern to us. To the Lord a thousand years are as a day. The only thing that matters is that we are on the way, and that means the simplicity of our daily meditations, every morning, every evening.

Listen to St Paul writing 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 whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect.
(Rom12:1-2) ■

Foundation of our Being

Basically, the idea of meditation is a way of coming to your own centre, coming to the foundation of your own being, and remaining there still, silent, attentive. And meditation is in essence a way of learning to become awake, to be alive, and to be still.

I want to try to put before you a general idea of what meditation is about. Basically, the idea of meditation is a way of coming to your own centre, coming to the foundation of your own being, and remaining there still, silent, attentive. And meditation is in essence a way of learning to become awake, to be alive, and to be still.

A lot of people looking – if some people came into the room for example where we are meditating in a few moments and saw everybody sitting still – they might think that we're all having a little snooze or something of this kind. But it's the stillness of meditation that leads you forward to that state of wakefulness, that sense of being completely alive, because you are in harmony – harmony with yourself, and gradually a harmony with the whole of creation. The experience of meditation is just as though you were in resonance with all life.

But the way to that resonance, the way to that wakefulness, is silence and stillness. And this is quite a challenge for people of our time, because most of us have very little experience of silence. Silence can be terribly threatening to people in the culture that we live in, and you have to get used to that silence. That's why the way of meditation is a way of learning to say a word, interiorly, in your heart. And when we meditate in a few moments' time what each of us has to try to do to the best of our ability, as faithfully and as sincerely as we can, is just to recite a single word. The word I recommend you to recite is the Aramaic word *maranatha*. And to recite it silently, without moving your lips, in your heart, deep in your being, Ma-ra-na-tha. And the purpose of that recitation and repetition is, as it were, to launch you into the silence, re-establish contact with your centre. And the wonderful thing we discover is that there is only one centre, and that centre is everywhere. Meditation is the

way of being linked to our own centre, and because we are rooted in ourselves, we find our place in the universe, and we find the centre of the universe. We find God. And the truly spiritual man or a woman is the person who is so rooted in themselves, but they are able to be in harmony with anyone and everyone. That is the whole purpose of this spiritual journey: To enter into that profound harmony with yourself, with your neighbour, with the universe, with God.

Let me remind you, the way to do this, the way of meditation, is a way of utter simplicity. You have to learn to say your word – ma-ra-na-tha. And it's difficult because this isn't the conventional wisdom. Most people in our society think of wisdom as growing in complexity, that the more abstruse and rarefied the ideas you can examine and master, the wiser you will become. If you say to someone, 'I'm going just to sit down every morning and every evening and I'm going to learn to say this word', many people will say to you, 'You must be a fool! Surely life is too precious; time is too precious, for you to waste time – a half an hour in the morning and a half an hour in the evening, just saying a word like this. Weren't you given your mind for something more worthy, something better than that?' So it takes a good deal of courage for each of us, as men and women of the twentieth century, actually to sit down and to meditate every morning and every evening. But that is what is required.

If you want to learn to meditate you must try to make that time available each morning and each evening. And you must learn the discipline. And it's a real discipline, but it's a discipline that will bring you to great stability, to great unity, to great harmony. And the discipline is the discipline of saying the word. It's a coming to consciousness and a going beyond a self-reflective consciousness. Meditation is learning to look out beyond yourself. Breaking out of the closed system of self-consciousness. Breaking out of that prison. And we do so by that discipline of saying the word. When you're saying the word, you're not thinking your own thoughts. You're not analysing what is happening to you. You are letting go. Meditation, in the Christian vision of it, is simply launching out into the infinity of God, through the Spirit that dwells in our hearts. And it's a letting go, it's a launching out into the deep.

And the simple rule to remember is this: find the quietest place you can find in your home or wherever. Sit down and sit upright. Don't bother, when you begin, with too much of technique. It's not

necessary to sit in the lotus position;, may be very helpful if you can, but you have to learn. Sit upright. The essential rule of posture is that your spine is as upright as possible. Breathing – the simple rule is breathe. Don't get too het up about should you breathe in or breathe out – do both. And then the rule that is the most important of all, say your mantra, say your word. And that's the art of meditation: to learn to say it from the beginning to the end. ■

Alive with the Life of Christ

Meditation is entering into and sharing that common life with the Father and his Son in the Spirit. It is an experience of the total unity of body and spirit.

Meditation is learning to be alive, from the centre of your being, in every part of your being. Listen to these words from the First Letter of John:

It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this that we tell. Our theme is the Word of life. This life was made visible. We have seen it and bear our testimony; and we here declare to you the eternal life, which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. And we write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete. (1 Jn 1:1-4)

That's what meditation is about – entering into and sharing that common life, the common life that we share with the Father and his Son in the Spirit. We gradually come to see what it means when we say that we are alive with the life of Christ. It is an experience of the total unity of body and spirit.

And so the first thing each of us must learn is to sit still, our body peaceful, silent, and still. The only essential rule of posture is to sit as upright as you can. Close your eyes gently. And when you're beginning to meditate, it's useful perhaps to take a few deep breaths just to calm you as you enter into this experience of harmony, of unity, of presence. And then, sitting still with your eyes gently closed, begin to say your word, your mantra. The mantra I recommend you to say is the Aramaic word *maranatha*. Ma-ra-na-tha. Recite it and listen to it. The mantra is just like the bleep that guides an aircraft into an airport in fog. You listen to it, you attend to it, and you travel with it to the centre.

The art of meditation is simply learning to say your mantra from the beginning to the end of your meditation. And that's a very important thing to understand when you are beginning. Often you will have the experience of peacefulness and you'll feel like resting and saying, 'This is it; I've gone beyond, now, the need to say the mantra.' Resist that temptation and say your mantra from the beginning to the end, Ma-ra-na-tha. Let go of your thoughts, of your imagination. You'll find that for some time they will invade your consciousness. And the thing to do is to learn to say your mantra, to recite it, to sound it gently. Don't use energy to try to dispel distraction; use all your energy just to listen to the sound of the mantra.

To learn to meditate, it's necessary to build it in as part of the daily fabric of your life. To meditate every morning and every evening is essential. The time, the minimum time, is about twenty minutes and perhaps the optimum time is a half an hour. And again, approach your meditation with a certain discipline. Choose a time, twenty-five minutes, or half an hour, and stick to it. There's a certain temptation when you're beginning that if your meditation is going well, whatever that would mean, that you might prolong it. Or if it's going badly you might shorten it. Meditation is passing beyond our own desire. It's a discipline that sets us free to be the unique person we're called to be, to be in a state of union with God. Unity of body and spirit; union with God. The discipline of meditation leads us to that state where we can accept totally the free gift of our own being from God's hand.

So the importance of meditation is that we discover ourselves springing from the creative hand of God. And that experience is a foundational experience for us. It's an experience that gives us a perspective on the whole of our life. And so meditation too is the great way of integration, every part of our life in a state of harmonious development.

Perhaps the lesson we all have to learn is that being must be prior to action. BEING. Unless we can learn who we are, we will never come to authentic personhood. And again, in the growing simplicity of meditation, we discover, we experience our own unique personhood. And we make this discovery because we lose our false ego, we leave behind all the images that we have about ourselves, or imagine that others have of us. And in laying down all these masks, and in learning to be content simply to be who we are, we find a profound sense of peace and of rest. We don't live vicariously, we don't live our lives with preprogrammed responses.

It is, above all, about a harmonious life, a life that's beyond all divisions. It's a life where our inner life and our outer life are always in harmony, always in a state of free flow. And it's very important to understand that it is from the interior, that all significant growth starts. Essential personal growth begins in the deepest centre of our being, and then grows out of it. And the harmony that exists when this level of growth is taking place, is a harmony not just between our inner and outer lives, which is itself a thing of no small importance, but it's a harmony with all creation. And the reason is, of course, in the vision of Jesus – the vision that he proclaims and that he calls upon us to realise and to proclaim – the reason is that the point where we begin this essential growth is God. St John of the Cross puts it: 'God is the centre of my soul.' ■

Why is meditation so powerful? Basically, because it gives us the space that our spirit needs to breathe. It gives each of us the space to be ourselves. When you're meditating, all you need to do is to BE yourself, to accept from the hands of God the gift of your own being. And in that acceptance of yourself, of your creation, of your being, you come into harmony with the Creator, with the Spirit.



JOHN MAIN OSB (1926-1982) served in the diplomatic service in the Far East, and taught law at Trinity College, Dublin, before he became a Benedictine monk. He founded an open Benedictine community in Montreal. This small community was the seed from which sprang The World Community for Christian Meditation. His books and CDs make available to people today the unique and transforming power of his teaching. They retain the authority, clarity and humour of his original teaching, and carry the spirit of the gospel directly into the heart.

In these talks, John Main speaks of meditation as a pilgrimage to the centre of our being where the Spirit of God dwells. The purpose of all religion, John Main says, is to relink us to this centre. Contemplation is 'being in the temple' with God.



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