



Meditatio
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Finding Oneself 2

Meditation as the way to self-knowledge

*To find oneself is to find oneself other-centred –
concerned, in empathy, in sympathy, and in
compassion for others.*

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In the Christian understanding, this self-knowledge arises from the deepest point of our union with the Risen Christ, that point at which he and I are 'one undivided person'.

1

The Experience of Being Known

And as we know ourselves at this deeper level, we know that we are known, 'for you in me and I in you, together we form one undivided person'.

There is a beautiful reading in the Office of Readings for Holy Saturday. It's the homily by a 2nd century anonymous author. This is Jesus, the Risen Jesus, speaking to us:

Arise O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we form one undivided person.

These beautiful few words take us to the heart of the non-dual message of the gospel. Self-knowledge has always been seen to be the necessary foundation of the knowledge of God. It's one of the universal truths. 'Know yourself' goes back a long way to the Egyptian temple at Luxor: 'Man, know yourself and you will know the gods' – the importance of self-knowledge. And this self-knowledge is necessary for our knowledge of the greater reality to which we are related.

In the Christian understanding, this self-knowledge arises from the deepest point of our union with the Risen Christ, that point at which he and I are 'one undivided person'. So if he and Laurence are one, what does that say about my relationship with each of you? Because each of you is also in that undivided personal reality with Christ; you also form one undivided person with Christ. I look at you, you look at me, we disagree on things, we agree on things; you like me, I like you, you don't like me, I don't like you. So at some levels, of course, our differences are very obvious but in another dimension or in another level, we are joined in that undivided union with Christ.

This is why the way of self-knowledge is a therapeutic way. It is a way of making oneself able to be known, the way of making myself able to be known by others. As I come to know myself, I am allowing myself to be known, and to know that I know. This means that I am no longer or less fixated on myself, but on this way of self-

knowledge I am throwing myself open to others and the wonderful otherness of the cosmos.

The opposite of knowledge is ignorance. But ignorance is a necessary element of knowledge; I know what I don't know, and there are some things I don't know anything about; it is wonderful just to learn that they exist. So if we are on a way of self-knowledge, we are continually discovering what we don't know about ourselves, about others, about the cosmos, and the more we know, the more we are aware that we don't know. So it keeps us humble. The fruits of meditation for example could be said to a form of the knowledge of God – love joy, peace, patience. I am knowing God through God's growing in me in these ways, transforming me in these ways. So ignorance is necessary.

This takes us to a deeper understanding of sin even. At the superficial level of religion, sin is a breaking of a rule or law or taboo. Of course rules and laws can be changed by cultural or legal decree or cultural development but generally speaking, at that superficial level of religion, we see sin primarily in terms of non-conformity – we are not conforming to the specific rules about what is right behaviour. Then again, at that superficial level of religion which is increasingly rejected by most people today, if you break those rules wilfully then you should be punished. This is just extrapolating onto the relationship with God what the state, or our parents when we were children, would do – if you break the rules, you pay for it. It is a very superficial, primitive in a way, level of religious understanding about self-knowledge and ignorance.

But when we begin the way of self-knowledge, which is of course a contemplative power, we move to a deeper level, more subtle level of religion. At that more superficial level of religion where sin should be punished, we open ourselves to conflict, condemnation, sentencing and condemnation of others, plus all the complications of condemning ourselves. I was talking with somebody in the Catholic gay movement the other day. He told me how all his life he struggled with self-hatred, self-rejection. He had interiorised both the social, cultural, and (at the time) the Church's condemnation of being a homosexual; he just turned that inward onto himself. He survived, but survived very handicapped, psychologically, emotionally handicapped all his life by this idea of sin. For him, the Church was not what Pope Francis calls 'a place of mercy'; it was a place of condemnation and rejection.

So it makes a big difference – the contemplative life, the way of self-knowledge – how we see humanity, how we see the different kinds of humanity as well as the failings and faults of humanity. And it makes a big difference to the kind of religion we are part of. If we are worried, or concerned, or troubled by what is happening to the Church in society and religion in society, this may be the way we have to look at it. It is, maybe, the cause because it is not in tune with the new kind of spiritual consciousness of our time. That doesn't mean to say the Church has to be popular or has to be fashionable but it does mean that the Church has to at least keep up with the progress that the world is making. In this life we are always conscious of how much we don't know. This is what keeps us humble and also keeps us able to grow. In the First Letter to the Corinthians St Paul says:

Now we see through a glass darkly [or dimly], but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor 13:12)

So self-knowledge grows along with the experience of discovering that we are known. We can't know ourselves as an object that we sort of put under the microscope and analyse, but we know ourselves at the spiritual level as we are known, because we are known, in the process of being known. This is something I think meditation makes quite clear to us even though it is difficult to put into words, but we know that this is what we are entering into when we meditate. We are not looking at ourselves and saying 'oh that's interesting, oh now I know a bit more of myself'. Actually we do, but that is a side effect of meditation, that it will inevitably save you money on therapist fees. I am not saying it's always an alternative to therapy of course; we may need therapy as well. But generally speaking psychoanalysis, psychotherapy is designed to bring us to an aware-ness and to an acceptance of ourselves, but first of all to be aware of our patterns, of our problems, of our interior conflicts, of the things we cannot accept about ourselves, to recognise these and just live with them.

Meditation will bring us to what the mystical writers call 'contemplation of nature', the first stage of contemplation – just to be aware of the environment around you. So in the same way we become aware of our own interior environment. We recognise our own patterns and we say 'well that's part of me; it's causing me

some trouble – maybe it doesn't flatter me, maybe I wish I could get rid of it, or maybe I wish I could grow out of it – but I can see that it's there and I have to accept it for the time being. It's like St Paul. He had this thorn in the flesh he couldn't get rid of so he had to accept it. So meditation will bring us to this psychological self-awareness. But that is not the self-knowledge that we are talking about.

The self-knowledge we are talking about is at a deeper and simpler level – the experience of being who we are. Psychological self-awareness is still at the level of thought – an analysis, a judgement. We see these things about ourselves and we recognise them, we name them, we label them. But in this deeper level of prayer, we enter into 'being' not thinking. So we are being ourselves rather than thinking about ourselves. And it is out of this being that this self-knowledge arises. It arises as grace, and as it arises, it cannot be separated from the knowledge that we are known. So as we know ourselves at this deeper level, we know that we are known, 'for you in me and I in you, together we form one undivided person'.

Our Christian faith, our reading of scripture, our celebration of the Eucharist, our life with others in community, theologising together or living within the symbolism and the tradition of the Church, all of this gives us ways and means of understanding what this means. This is everyone's life's work. It's why we have to keep awake. People on this path of self-knowledge derive happiness from it. They are happy that they are on this path of self-knowledge; not because their blood pressure is improving or because they sleep better at night or because they aren't stressed but they are just happy that they are on this path, and they are experiencing the fruits of their own humanity, developing and expanding as the Spirit of God enriches and expands them.

So we come to love our meditation. Whatever leads us to self-knowledge is something we will come to love. And when you love it you don't bellyache about having to do your meditation. You are grateful that you have your meditation to do. It may take you some time before you get to that point. But it's not an obligation you have to feel guilty about that you don't do it. There's no obligation on you to eat two or three meals a day. There's no obligation on you to do a reasonable amount of exercise to keep your muscle tone. There's no obligation on you to read so that your mind doesn't degenerate, but these are natural things that you like to do and love to do. The people on this path of self-knowledge derive happiness and pleasure

directly from it; it comes directly from the practice itself. And those who are not on this way of self-knowledge, haven't yet found a way of self-knowledge that they can follow, they will look for pleasure and happiness in other ways. ■

2

Experience of Goodness

In meditation you are offering yourself; that is the contemplative understanding of sacrifice. Then, you will be changed into who you truly are, and you will know 'what is good, acceptable and perfect'. And this experience of goodness is the source of values.

To know oneself is not just psychological awareness of one's own history and the patterns of our behaviour or mind; this comes to light incidentally. Self-knowledge itself is, I suggest, three things.

First of all it is the experience of being that is greater than our individual identity and story. In this experience of being who we are, we come to know that we belong to something and we grow in something – in a reality that is greater than our own individual identity and bigger than the story that we are, that we tell about ourselves, our own life, the life that would be summarised in two or three minutes at our funeral.

Secondly, we are part of this bigger story in a way that we can see but never fully grasp. Think of the great epic narratives, scriptures like Mahabharata to the Bible itself. When we read these great works or look at some of them, we are gripped by individual parts of the story and individual characters; we identify with them, we like them, we don't like them, we like not to like them. And this is true of ourselves. We are always reminded that they and we are part of a bigger story. We may be a kind of a self-contained subplot related to the big story, and each one of us, each human being, each particle of matter is meaningful for the whole cosmos. It's like a huge jigsaw puzzle, and if at the end of the day there was one piece missing from your jigsaw puzzle, you would feel you haven't finished it, it is incomplete. It may only be a little bit of the sky in the top left hand corner but it was not completed – fell out of the box when you bought it. So in the same way every one of us, in terms of the meaning and the wholeness of the whole, is equally important to the final product, to the final story.

Thirdly, self-knowledge gives us direct access to the meaning of

virtue; goodness. In chapter 12 of Romans, St Paul says:

My friends, I beg you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him, 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. And then you will know what is good, acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12: 1-2)

Then you will know what is right; then you will know what is good. When you have made this sacrifice, sacrificial offering of yourself, worship offered in mind and heart – this is a contemplative understanding of sacrifice, not just giving up sweets; you are actually offering yourself. And we are all called to do that; we all do that in meditation. That is the contemplative understanding of sacrifice. Then, he says you have to change the way you live; you 'adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world'. You will be a little out of step with your culture, with the consumer culture. Your values will begin to be distinguished from the popular values around you, and that will lead to a change, a transformation, a radical change within you. You will be changed into who you truly are, and it's only then that you will know what is good. We know what is good, acceptable and perfect and it is this experience of goodness that is the source of values.

Big corporations, organisations today are very often involved in writing up their values. It's easy to write up values. We do this for our business course. There's a list of something like 345 values you can choose from – there is transparency, generosity, fairness, equality and all these nice things.

The problem with these values of course is that although you may claim that these are the values by which you are living or working, it's nice when you do that at a workshop on values but it is different when you go back to work and you find yourself in a very complex situation where you have to make a decision between two people or you have to decide whether you will come clean about something that is a bit embarrassing in the company or in your life. So you say, well it is my value to be transparent but on this particular occasion I think maybe I shouldn't; I will be prudent instead. So, it is very easy to play around with values. You just basically make yourself feel virtuous or ethical but you don't actually live it. And I think what St Paul is saying, what meditation teaches us that is that

you have to have this experience of goodness and personal transformation. You have to have the experience of your own essential goodness, the goodness of your own true self. Not that you are perfect but that you know that in that level where you can be yourself, where you are yourself, you are good. You are one undivided person with the goodness of Christ who opens us to the goodness of God.

And there's another effect of this which is that it opens us therefore to all of the great virtues – justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude, all great Christian virtues. They're very similar again in many different traditions; there're the five constants of Confucianism – benevolence, justice, knowledge, integrity and proper rites – doing things in the right way, completing the rituals in the right way. We will understand the meaning of these virtues of civilised living. Not much is around today, in public life anyway; we see the paucity, inadequacy of these virtues in our leaders and in ourselves. ■

3

The Way of Solitude and Community

In Christian understanding, we enter self-knowledge by seeing, knowing, experiencing the Risen Jesus, and knowing that he is within us as we are in him.

In Christian understanding, we enter self-knowledge by seeing, knowing, experiencing the Risen Jesus, and knowing that he is within us as we are in him. That is the experience of self-knowledge for us. How do we come to know the Risen Christ in this way on our way of self-knowledge?

First of all, not through visions, voices, ecstasies, raptures, levitation, or raising your body temperature by 16 degrees. That's not what it's about. We come to know Christ on this way of self-knowledge through silence which purifies our mind, through stillness that brings us to poverty of spirit by letting go of desires, through simplicity by bringing us again to the spontaneity and the vulnerability of children: 'unless you become like a little child'. So it's through this contemplative amalgam of silence, stillness and simplicity that we begin to grow in that self-knowledge that brings us into the knowledge that we are known, the knowledge of the Risen Christ. Secondly, in our relationship to others – receiving love, being known, participating in life with others. So here is silence and honey cakes again.

The first way in which we come to this self-knowledge is silence, stillness and simplicity and the second way is being with others eating honey cakes, because it is not much fun eating honey cakes all by yourself. This means paying attention to those that we are attracted to; paying attention to those we find unattractive, that we dislike or fear; seeing reality from the other person's point of view, the meaning of dialogue; and contemplating the existence of others, quite detached from our own likes or dislikes. This is what community means. And today on the feast of St Benedict we should be thinking about how these two sides of the journey of life, the spiritual meaning of life, relate – the way of silence and the way of honey cakes. The way of solitude, discovering and embracing our own essential uniqueness, that's solitude. But spin the coin and that

solitude opens you to a wider and deeper range of relationship to others which ultimately has no boundaries because everything is related.

Jesus is known best when we get to know others who know him. I found that as I got to know John Main in the years when I was living and working with him. More important than anything that we did, from my point of view, was seeing the way he lived. Seeing how totally authentic his commitment to meditation and to the other ways of prayer was – how deep and authentic that was; seeing how he dealt with difficult situations and difficult people; how he had integrity and honesty and courage. And as I saw all of this, I was increasingly aware of the presence of Christ, and that I saw Christ in him. I wasn't confusing them, but they were one undivided person. That knowledge, that awareness, awakened in me an understanding and a love for Christ such as I had not had before, and has continued. Certainly what they both had in common, Jesus and John Main, was that they both did not seek attention from others, always pointed away from themselves – John Main to Christ and Jesus to the Father. But in that very turning away you were able to see the real person. The ego was out of the picture so you could see the real person. And then when you saw the real person, with the eyes of faith you could see Christ with him, one undivided person.

So we come to see and intuitively perceive Jesus in a new and unpredictable way. Gradually we realise that we have our own direct personal connection or a line of communication or degree of union with Jesus. This is the effect of living in the body of Christ, living with people who know him and are known by him, a community that is the essence of the Church.

Let's end with this quote from John Main for St Benedict's day.

No religious community or spiritual fellowship is justified merely by what it does. However apostolically oriented a community is, whatever service it gives, there must be silence at its centre. And this centre must be the focal point of its *raison d'être*, from which will flow all its good works and activities. Out of the solitude, good works will blossom and flow in abundance. ■

4

Manifestations of the Divine

In the Christian understanding, God is a trinity, a communion, a community of love. We know God by loving, by allowing that being of God to reflect itself through us as we learn to love one another. We are manifestations of the divine, sparks of God.

In the First Letter to Timothy we hear this description of God:

...who alone has immortal life dwelling in unapproachable light; who no one has seen or can see. To this one honour and power forever. (I Tm 6:16)

So this describes the ultimate mystery, mysteriousness of God. In the Trinitarian model this is a description of the Father. Remember the Father and the Son and the Spirit, these are co-eternal. So it isn't that the Father comes first, and then the Son, then the Holy Spirit moves in; they are co-eternal. They are part of this eternal present, and this dynamo of self-creating love.

But the Father is traditionally understood to be the abyss of being. The Son, the Word, the second person, is begotten – comes into being eternally with the Father, is one with the Father but comes into being and becomes the visible expression of the Father. Then, in the Christian understanding, this Word becomes Flesh in an individual human being in a particular time and place. And this particular individual, Jesus, who understands himself, has found his real self in relation to the Father. This is explicit of course in the Gospel of John, the most mystical, most theological, of the gospels and the latest gospel.

Then Jesus says, 'Everything I say is the Father saying this in me.' (Jn 14:10) He sees everything that he is, his self and everything that he does, as flowing directly out of the Father. And so he can say 'the Father and I are one' (Jn 10:30). But it isn't true then to say that the Father is the same as the Son, because there is a distinction. He says 'the Father is greater than I' (Jn 14:28). He's speaking from a different perspective in that other passage, or St John is speaking

for him, or the Holy Spirit is speaking through John. And all of this is quite a lot to take in, but that is what Christian faith invites us to listen to and to enter into.

Philip of course says to him, you say you're going to the Father but who is the Father? We haven't seen the Father. Where are you going? And Jesus says to him, 'To see me is to see the Father' (Jn 14:9). So the Father who is this abyss of being is visible in the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Christian theology is the unified relationship of the Father and the Son, the stream of love that flows between Father and Son, sometimes called the 'in-between God' – that aspect of God that unites and connects and is not visible but is everywhere present.

This is God in the Christian understanding: God is a trinity, a communion, a community of love. 'Being' in the Christian understanding is a communion of love, not just a platonic, mathematical abstraction called 'Being'. God is this dynamic inter-relationship of love. And how do we know God? We know God by loving, by as it were allowing that being of God to reproduce itself or reflect itself through us as we learn to love one another.

This is a school of love; life is a school of love. We learn to love ourselves. To many people in modern culture it's the biggest hurdle of all – so much self-rejection, self-alienation, self-disapproval, and everything that that brings with it, either aggressive ego or unassertive ego. But nevertheless that first step of loving oneself has to be made, and how do we do it? By sitting still; by learning to be silent. If we can do that as regularly and as simply as we can, we will begin to work through whatever self-rejection or self-hatred there is, and we will come to know and accept and love ourselves as we are. And then love of self, love of others and love of God all begins to flow from that.

So we are manifestations of the divine. Saint Augustine's great book on the Trinity is very much about the human being, how the human being itself is constructed, because we are the icon of the microcosm or we are the icon, the living icons of God – sparks of God. So the mystery of God, the abyss of being, is the mystery of the self. The Word makes this invisible being visible. But the 'Word made flesh' in Jesus both reveals and conceals it simultaneously. ■

5

Contemplative Living

Life is mysterious and mundane at the same time. Meditation makes it possible for us to live both aspects, the mysterious and the mundane, and to keep moving into the mystery. This is what we mean by contemplative living.

As soon as we begin this journey into the finding of oneself, true self, we encounter this dimension of paradox, the mystery of life. There are some very left-brain people who think that meditation is nonsensical, or can only approach meditation from a purely scientific, benefits-oriented point of view – ‘I’ll meditate because the evidence is that it’s going to be good for me’ – which is OK, a good way of starting if that’s where you start from. But eventually, the logic of meditation itself, in fact the logic of life itself, is going to lead us into paradox, the mystery of life. The paradoxical nature of reality and of the self is something that we cannot help but encounter. Whether we face it, whether we contemplate it, whether we become conscious of it and accept it, is another matter.

Paradox is not a contradiction. The left hemisphere of the brain, and the down to earth, common-sense, no-nonsense kind of mind will say this just doesn’t make sense; it’s either this or that. Science now has proven that this perception of reality is very limited, but there are many people around who still think like that. Anything that looks as if it’s paradoxical is dismissed as if it were a contradiction. And I think a lot of corporations and educational institutions, the medical profession, took this attitude in recent times, modern times, towards anything to do with spirituality or meditation. That’s clearly changing. There’s clearly a shift, cultural shift in the mind of corporations and professions today.

The point between the two sides of a paradox is the interesting point. It’s the point of everything. It’s a valid point; don’t dismiss it. If we have to and we can dwell in this, as Jesus says, ‘if you dwell in my Word, you will be free’. Life, birth, death, suffering, loss, joy is going to open us, introduce us to this point at the centre, at the

tipping point of paradox, and it's a lifestyle, if you like, to live in that point allowing the finding of the self to happen. Remember we can't find the self as if it were an object. So there's a point between the two sides where we dwell, where we balance. And once we have found the balance, it's a very strong balance, you can do what it looks as if it's impossible to do. This is what we mean by contemplative living and what meditation allows us to do. So we can think of this centre of the paradox as a point, a balancing point.

We could also think of this point as a portal, like a doorway into a deeper and more integrated non-dual reality. We all know that life is mysterious and mundane at the same time. Much of life is just mundane – routines that we repeat over and over. We hear that life is mysterious but mundane at the same time. Most people prefer to ignore the mystery and concentrate on the mundane; that's the easiest thing to do. But you can never totally avoid the mysterious because people are going to die, you're going to get sick, you're going to fall in love or you're going to fall out of love, you're going to have a child and the child is going to cause you distress and all sorts of things. So you can never avoid the mystery, that point, that portal, the centre of the paradox. If we were to say the self is dwelling anywhere, that's where the self is. That's where we are our true self. So we can't avoid it ultimately. The question is do we live it. St Benedict says 'keep death always before your eyes'. And I think the reason he says that is not to be miserable or negative or pessimistic but, quite the reverse, to be able to live life fully.

Meditation makes it possible for us to live both aspects, the mysterious and the mundane and to keep moving into the mystery. Jesus called himself the gate, and the way of course, but the gate to the sheepfold. An interesting image of a gate, a door – you can come into a door and you can come out of a door. And that's exactly what he says: They will come and go out of the sheepfold and find pasture. And 'whoever enters through me will be saved' (Jn 10:9). You can either understand that in a sort of fundamentalist way – unless you join my church you are damned – or what does it mean then? I think it means that we have to find, accept and recognise this mysterious point at the centre of the paradox of human life.

We have to recognise, as Etty¹ did, that we live this paradox. She lived the paradox of joy and tragedy at the same time. So this image that Jesus gives us of himself as the way, as the gate of the sheepfold, allows us to think of him as the centre, as the one we

find who helps us to keep our balance. He is there to help us to stay on the way. He helps us to stay on the way, to stay balanced, and then we can live in the world of mundane things and they actually become less mundane, less boring, because they begin to show their meaning and their relationship to the mysterious aspect of life, which we can also respect, we can also make time for.

So this is I think how I would understand the contemplative life. It doesn't have to be lived in a monastery; in fact you could be in a monastery and not live it. I meet more people who have found this way of living in the world than in the monastery. The experience of the self is not an ordinary or mundane experience. But in the ordinary and mundane aspect of life, we can be our true self. That's why meditation can change our life, and changes the world. While we're doing the ordinary things of life, we can be our true self. ■

Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) was a vibrant young Jewish woman who lived in Nazi occupied Amsterdam in the early 1940s and died at Auschwitz in 1943. In the months before she was arrested she underwent a profound transformation through psychotherapy. She refused to give in to hate and in this way overcame the evil of the holocaust.

6

In Your Own Experience

Silence is not just about developing quiet thoughts, but leaving thoughts behind, including the root thought of our self-consciousness: leave self behind... This is virtually impossible to describe, even though it can be interesting to try to describe it

Meditation is not what you think. People sometimes smile when they hear that expression, you've probably all heard it many times. They smile because it gives a momentary humorous insight into what meditation is. Humour often plays in a gentle way with the force of paradox or ambiguity; so meditation is not what you think means two things it. Meditation is not what you think meditation is, and when you're meditating you're not thinking. Therefore it's funny, and it's easier to connect with than a statement like 'meditation is about laying aside your thoughts'. That's equally true but it's a little more prosaic and more uninteresting.

What we say about meditation makes a difference in communicating it and in understanding it for ourselves. Ideas matter, words matter, and they can help to illuminate the truth or to obscure it. As soon as we become conscious of an idea in our minds, it has already begun to be embodied in language; you can't think of something without there being words attached to it. Behind the words there is probably an image. Research seems to suggest that the way consciousness works, before the idea starts there are words, that ideas don't just pop into existence abstractly. Behind the words are usually an image, because words are metaphors, words contain images. And behind the image, is probably a sensation; just a feeling, a sensation of some kind.

We always have to check our thoughts and ideas – how right are they? how true are they? We may think we have a brilliant idea, and then when we talk about it with somebody they point out all the faults in it, and we revalue it. That's why the left hemisphere of the brain finds it very difficult to listen to other points of view. It defends models of reality and the thoughts it has created. If we live in a left

brain world, we find it very difficult to say sorry – ‘Oh I’m very sorry I made a mistake. Thanks for pointing it out ‘. We have to check our thoughts and ideas because they’ve pass through several stages of development before becoming conscious and they might have absorbed a lot of impurities, a lot of inaccuracies as they flowed from the hidden pure spring of truth.

It's easy to replace the work of meditation, the work of silence, with ideas about meditation, with the word meditation. We could sit meditating and just be thinking about ourselves meditating and evaluating our meditation; or we could be communicating meditation to young people or to doctors or to friends, but we may not be doing a very effective job in communicating because we're not allowing the space for the person to experience it for themselves. This is John Mains’ genius as a teacher. He doesn't describe it for you, but he gives just enough description or just enough evocation of what meditation is to inspire you to want to do it. That was my first introduction when he spoke to me about meditation when I was a student and I wasn't expecting him to talk about it at all.

I'd gone to see him to talk about my problems – he was a very good listener, a wise person. And at the end of one of our conversations he simply introduced me to meditation in a very few words. It had a huge impact on me, but it was very confusing at the time. At one level, intellectually – I was at university, on an intellectual journey with too much belief in the world of ideas, knowledge, learning – at that level I could make no sense of what he was saying at all. ‘Meditation is not what you think’ didn’t make any sense. ‘Stop thinking’ or ‘let go of your thinking’ sounded like pulling the plug out of a computer. How can you use the computer if it's not plugged in? So that's how I understood it; I was confused by what he was saying. On the other hand, the way he said it, and the few words with which he said it, touched my heart and awakened something in me that has never gone to sleep again; which is a hunger for the knowledge and the experience that I could sense lay behind his words and lay there for me to discover.

One of his most characteristic phrases in his teaching is ‘in your own experience’ – find out what meditation is ‘in your own experience’, find out who Christ is ‘in your own experience’, find out who you are ‘in your own experience’ – not through somebody else, not through reading and so on. Looking back, I suppose I could say I was suddenly aware of the two hemispheres of the brain, of two

ways of approaching the truth, called the Cataphatic and the Apophatic; the left and the right. But I didn't know that; I didn't feel that or understand that at the time. But what I did know was that I had been exposed to something absolutely authentic. I trusted the truthfulness, the integrity of what he was saying, and that pushed me into trying to meditate. Like everybody else, I did it disastrously for a few years until I realised that because I was such a slow learner, such a undisciplined person, I needed to become a monk in order to meditate. I spend the rest of my life telling other people they don't need to become monks in order to meditate.

So it's very easy to replace the actual work, the actual experience of meditation with ideas about it or talk about it. Most of the time we find that we're not really meditating but thinking, whether about our problems or fantasies or even about meditation itself. So we need to listen very deeply and repeatedly to the wisdom of the tradition which tells us 'the monk who does not know that he is praying, is truly praying'. Silence is not just about developing quiet thoughts, but leaving thoughts behind, including the root thought of our self-consciousness: leave self behind; stop thinking about yourself, or let go of the thoughts about yourself. This is virtually impossible to describe, even though it can be interesting to try to describe it.

In the *Philokalia*, a collection of teachings of the early fathers of the church in the Eastern tradition, Diadochos of Photike has a wonderful work called *On Spiritual Knowledge*. And he speaks about this paradox of talking about silence, talking about what cannot be spoken about. He says that 'the unilluminated person should not embark on spiritual speculation'. So the unilluminated person should not speak about it. 'Nor, on the other hand, should anyone try to speak while the light of the Holy Spirit is shining richly upon them.' So if you are not illuminated don't speak about it, and if you are illuminated you won't want to speak about it. He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know. There's a paradox. It's actually a way into understanding something important for our work as a community for Christian meditation. He deals with this paradox very subtly and very brilliantly by saying,

For where there is emptiness, ignorance is also to be found.
But where there is richness of spirit no speech is possible.
At such times the soul is drunk with the love of God. And
with voice silent delights in God's glory.

So what do we do? He says:

We should therefore watch for the middle point between these two extremes before we speak about God. This balance confers a certain harmony on our words glorifying God. As we speak and teach, our faith is nourished by the richness of the illumination. And so because of our love, we are the first to taste the fruits of knowledge. For it is written, 'the farmer who does the work should be the first to eat of the produce'.

This is a little surprising. What he's saying is that if you can just find this middle point between not knowing what you're talking about and having some knowledge of what you're talking about, and catch it in the right way and hold it in the right way, then you can speak about it. Those of you who lead meditation groups, or those of you who have to try to speak about meditation to somebody will have a sense of what this means. But then he doesn't say 'you're doing such a wonderful work for the people, they should be so grateful to you'. He's saying '*you* will be enriched by this'. Holding this point, dwelling in this point, this balancing point, you will be the first to taste the fruits of knowledge.

He says there is a distinction between wisdom and spiritual knowledge. He says many who are illuminated by spiritual knowledge don't speak about it – it seldom happens. That means the world is full, this room is full probably, of people who know people who are illuminated by this knowledge; people who live a truly contemplative life. The world is full of wise people, and they don't speak about it; it seldom happens. He says, 'When spiritual knowledge arises from deep stillness, it seldom happens that it combines with outward expression.' So it rarely happens that this depth of spiritual knowledge, subtly and gently enjoyed, also can be expressed. This is sobering for us, sobering for the Church, and probably would make the way the Church teaches, homillises, very different. ■

7

Silence and Truth

Silence is the way to release the truth in general. We are in a post truth world because we are so noisy and cannot hear the silence. It points us to the importance of the work of silence and the work of communities like our own.

Talking about how silence is the way to find your true self, silence is also the way to release the truth in general. In a noisy world with our minds, ever noisier and estranged from truth, this is an essential and very practical wisdom for our time. The most popular word or phrase according to the Oxford English Dictionary last year was ‘post truth’. We just have been made aware by White House press conferences and other things, like Brexit, just how little truth there is in circulation and how little respect for truth there is in the people who are trying to communicate with us, whether it's advertisers or politicians, sometimes religious leaders as well.

We are in a post truth world because we are so noisy and we cannot hear the silence; the sound of silence. I think it points us to the importance of the work of silence and the work of communities like our own. In a noisy world where truth is so easily blocked out and abused, silence is the great defence and the great healer of the wounds imposed by fake news. Truth is universal, it's nonpartisan it's not opinionated; it cannot be reduced to statistics. It is transmitted in paradox such as, ‘When I am weak then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10); but the spirit prays in me deeper than words (Rom 8:26)’. Christ is not just the right answer, as the fundamentalist thinks, who destroys all other arguments and therefore we can destroy all other religions or abuse them.

The word for truth in Greek is *aletheia*, which means an opening, a clearing, an unconcealing, telling the truth, opening, reality as opposed to illusion. The alternative to that is *maya*, a Sanskrit word that you find a lot in the *Upanishads* and also in the *Vedas*, which means ‘illusion’ generally. The word ‘maya’ literally means ‘the measurer’ – what measures. The danger of measuring things, the power in thought we have of measuring, of creating limitations –

here, no further – and therefore creating divisions, this maya, this capacity, is highly dangerous. It exists within the oneness that is the truth. It's not an enemy, it's just within. It's just a capacity we have, but it's a capacity that can lead us into terrible mistakes. Maya is suspended through silence. When we meditate, we are not measuring anything, and we experience an expansion and eventually a transcendence of all limitations. That's why we become less prejudiced, more relaxed, more tolerant, more kind, more forgiving, more open to other people.

In biblical terms the word for maya is the New Testament word 'the world'. It's seen a magic show, like T.V., a surface play of forces – very gripping, very seducing, very powerful, but basically just images. This is how we have to understand, I think, 'the world' as it is described in scripture: 'Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in them.' (Jn 2:15) What is the world then? It's this T.V. show, this phantasmagoria, this brilliant and seductive world of images, 'The desires of the flesh, the desires of the eye and the pride of life is not from the Father but from the world; and the world is passing away along with its desires.' (Jn 2:16-18) This is easily misunderstood., We then created a dichotomy between the world and the Church, or the world and religion and the world and spirituality; so that statement is easily misunderstood. But I think the contemplative practitioner, somebody who is at least entering into this in their own experience, doing the work of silence, is able to understand what it means.

So if we want to create this space of silence in our life, to make meditation part of our life, what do we need? We need to have some level of motivation of course that may arise from our suffering, from our hunger, from our search from our mistakes. But we certainly also need other people. We need community. We need an environment. We need to develop a truthful life within a community of love. When John Main says that meditation creates community, he's also saying that meditation creates community and the community creates the possibility for us to continue meditating. And when we have that grounding – that's all that Bonnevaux is really about, it's just an example of that, an illustration of that – when we have that grounding, that sense of real community, it could be your meditation group, then you'll be much more capable of catching yourself when you're wasting time, when you are surrendering to the noise, when you refuse the opportunity that life does present for real leisure and

you opt instead for distraction or you replace leisure. Time spent meditating, for example, is leisure, a good use of leisure; I think watching T.V. is not leisure; its entertainment. We may need a little bit of entertainment, we're not puritans, but we could certainly say that we have overdosed on entertainment. The whole of the American culture has I think been rendered mentally disturbed, literally, by massive doses of nonstop entertainment. So we're able to catch ourselves doing this.

So here are some thoughts about what it means to find ourself and why we have to lose ourself in order to find ourself, and how really this begins and continues in great simplicity through the work of silence, and how important it is for us to witness to that in a chaotic and dangerous world and to share this gift of meditation with others. ■

8

Mindfulness and Meditation

The difference between mindfulness as it is taught in that temporary secularised form, and meditation, as we teach it, could be described as the difference in where we place our attention.

It's always difficult to compare different cultures, different traditions and to translate words, ideas and concepts. These concepts don't transfer exactly from one to another although they may refer to the same or similar things.

Basically, mindfulness is a secular technique, very popular, very help to many people today; primarily designed to help deal with the chronic epidemic of stress. It has been extracted from a Buddhist context and lifted out of that whole context and presented primarily as a technique-oriented, secular-oriented way of reducing stress. So, many Buddhists will recognise the value of this, of course. Many Buddhists will understand where mindfulness fits in to their general understanding of the practice of meditation, and many of them have a little reservation, or some more serious reservation, about the way mindfulness has been secularised, if you like, or extracted from its whole context. Buddhists would say the purpose of any mindfulness exercise is to lead you into becoming a more compassionate person. This dimension of it is lacking in the mainstream way that mindfulness is taught organisationally.

The difference between mindfulness as it is taught in that temporary secularised form, and meditation, as we teach it, could be described as the difference in where we place our attention. In mindfulness exercises or technique, the attention remains on yourself – it may be your body, your body's scan, maybe your breathing; it could be being aware of your thoughts or the feelings that are going through you or the sensations that you are having. Basically, the attention remains on what you are feeling or thinking or doing; and that has an immediate calming effect. It takes you out of what's more stressful and it has many measurable benefits. How long lasting they are has not yet been decided but certainly this has

measurable short term benefits. It changes your state of mind – not a bad thing if you are really climbing up the wall. On the other hand, in meditation the attention comes off ourselves. We are taking the attention off our thoughts, our feelings, our opinions or our sensations. This is both radically more simple but also more demanding. This takes us directly into the teaching of Jesus that we have been looking at about leaving self behind. Basically, the difference between the two is quite clear, quite simple as I see it. I have spoken about this with many Buddhists and mindfulness teachers and I think they agree that this is a way of describing the difference. There is no hostility or competition there but it is important I think today to see this clear distinction between ‘mindfulness’ as it is called and ‘meditation’ as we call it.

The fruits of meditation *include* the benefits of mindfulness. I would say that the difference between benefits and fruits is simply whether you try to measure them or not, or how well you can measure them. You could measure whether you’re sleeping better at night since you have been doing this. These are benefits that of course are certainly good and desirable and can be measured up to a point. But what about the fruits of meditation? The fruits of the Spirit as St Paul calls them are ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control’ (Gal 5:22). He says there is no law dealing with such things as these; no law, so in other words and you can’t measure them either. You can’t measure on a quantifiable scale how joyful you are, how loving you are, how patient you are, how kind you are, how gentle you have become. But you know it, and you also know at the end of the day that these fruits are reflecting a fuller experience of humanity. This is what it is to be human.

You don’t measure the human or define the human by your blood pressure, or your sleep patterns or your stress levels although that affects how human you feel maybe. But you don’t define humanity by those measurable benefits. You define or understand humanity by these fruits of the Spirit which we understand to be the life of God growing, burgeoning, flowering in us. These fruits of the Spirit are really aspects of the life of God showing through; just as the heather growing in very dry ground bursts through the soil, so the fruits of the Spirit burst through the soil of our being, flower. Our divinisation is a flowering of our humanity. And so we can say, in a theological sense, that the fruits of the Spirit show the same kind of

meaning, the same work of the Spirit as the benefits. In other words, you can measure the benefits but you can't measure the fruits. But grace works on nature. The grace of God that enters into human existence doesn't come from out of space; it comes through nature.

That's why it is very dubious to talk about supernatural things. We are always interested in the supernatural, but what's much more real and interesting is the real meaning of the natural. It is through nature, through the natural, through our own nature, our own psychology, our own physiology, our mind and body – through our human nature – that grace touches, emerges and transforms us, and that not surprisingly registers on a level of our existence which we can measure up to a point. So what we are doing, in answer to your question, is a way of contemplative prayer, and we understand that to mean that we are entering, not into 'our' prayer, but into the prayer of Jesus, the prayer of the Spirit: 'We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays in us deeper than words.' (Rom 8:26) And we discover that in doing that, as a disciplined part of our life, that we come into a deeper union with Christ.

One of the fruits of this practice of meditation is that we become more mindful. I had a student in Georgetown who told me that after he had been meditating for about a week regularly and in a very disciplined way: 'My wife told me at the end the week', "Jim I hope you keep meditating". And he noticed that as he walked to school every day, he was now aware of where he was walking and the environment he was in, and the weather, and the buildings and the trees and nature. He said, 'I never noticed it before and I suddenly was aware of it.' That was all just awareness; just being more aware, more observant. Then he also noticed, he said, 'It seemed to me that the people I was working with on the projects in the school, I had the sense that they liked me more.' Maybe he was liking himself more, or he was being himself more, and less controlling, less manipulative, and less ego-centric.

So these, I think, you could say would be aspects of how meditation makes us more aware, more mindful, more conscious, more present. More aware, for example, of how our physical presence could impact on others. Sometimes we become unconsciously very encapsulated in ourselves. We see people sitting in a large group, and come into a room full of meditating people and we just think about 'oh I am 20 minutes late for meditation, but at least I made it'. You come in and bang the door and sit down and take your

favourite seat causing a lot of disturbance. I don't think that if you've been meditating for some time you would do that. I think you would just become more sensitive, really, to the environment and to the presence of others. So I think mindfulness is very clearly one of the fruits of meditation. ■

To know oneself is not just psychological awareness of one's own history and the patterns of our behaviour or mind; this comes to light incidentally. In the Christian understanding, this self-knowledge arises from the deepest point of our union with the Risen Christ, that point at which he and I are 'one undivided person'. -Laurence Freeman



Laurence Freeman OSB is a Benedictine monk of the Monastery of Christ our Saviour, Turvey, England. He is Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation, and the spiritual guide for the community. He has published many books, CDs and DVDs.

These talks continue the theme of meditation as the way to finding oneself. Self-knowledge, Laurence Freeman says, is the experience of being in which we realise that we belong to and grow in a reality that is greater than our individual identity. In meditation, we experience ourselves as 'one undivided person' with the Risen Christ, and open ourselves the grace that expands us to our fullest humanity. This finding oneself, Fr Laurence says, is everyone's life's work.



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