

“Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) - the Path of Christian Meditation
Presented by Rosalind Stockley on 9th January 2022

Good evening.

The World Community for Christian Meditation is a community comprising meditators and volunteers whose aim is to pass on and support the practice of meditating. Our mission is:

To communicate and nurture meditation as passed on through the teaching of John Main in the Christian tradition in the spirit of serving the unity of all.

I and others call ourselves members of WCCM, although in practice there is no formal affiliation requirement – we just know that we belong. And through this belonging we find fellowship with like-minded and like-hearted others. Kathy said that I am Chair of the Trust Board of WCCM in the UK, a role I can do due to a skillset gained during my working life. I would, however, still count myself as a meditational novice. Hopefully, why this is will become clearer later.

This evening, the subject of my presentation is “*Be still and know that I am God*”- *the Path of Christian Meditation*. You may well have heard the expression, “it’s not about the destination, it’s the journey which matters”, and I can confirm that this is certainly the case for meditation. With new meditators, when we share with them the ‘how’ of meditation, we also convey that there is no goal, no aim to our practice, other than to sit with God in the silence. As we move along that journey, we will begin to notice that we and the life we are leading is changing – indeed, hindsight is an excellent way to evaluate how far we have come on the journey. But it’s not generally measured, quantified or assessed – we just meditate because we know that, for ourselves, it’s the right thing to do.

The structure of my talk starts with a short introduction, followed by three ways of looking at the journey. The Introduction is important as in that I’ll share what I mean by meditation, to establish a clear base line. I’ll then look at the journey from three perspectives – firstly, via a very short history of meditation within the broader Christian church and considering two key teachers in the 20th century as a way of understanding “why Christian meditation for everyone now?”. After this comes the personal journey of meditation, at what may be called the stages, and the possible life impact, of devoting considerable time to silent prayer. And then, because the most important thing is not to talk about meditation but to do it, during the third part of this evening’s journey we shall take a short trip of our own, for 10 minutes, to meditate. An opportunity for questions will follow that period of meditation.

Introduction

So, what do I mean by meditation? We are all very familiar with Jesus having spent 40 days in the desert and being tempted or distracted by the devil; with the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10) - Mary sitting and listening at the feet of Jesus and ‘choosing the better path’; with Jesus often going apart to pray, to refresh himself during his ministry. One could say that these are examples of meditation, and I often do so when guiding teachers in the practice in schools. However, when the Bible uses the word meditation, mostly in The Psalms, it is contextually about ‘meditating on’, or ‘contemplating on’, such as when we meditate on a Biblical story in Lectio Divina. I value this pray form, but it is different from the meditation that we are here to explore this evening. Christian meditation as I am presenting it tonight is a regular, usually twice a day, practice which involves sitting with an

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upright back, with eyes gently closed, usually for 20 minutes to ½ an hour, without an objective in mind and without deliberate distractions. So, other than as an aid to relaxation before we start to meditate, whilst we meditate there is no gentle music in the background and no deliberate focus on an icon or other mental image. It is sitting in silence, in stillness and with simplicity, being open to the spirit of God who lives in our hearts. Often (and as in the tradition of the World Community), the meditator will use a mantra, sometimes called a prayer word, to anchor the mind and to assist in letting distractions go. We will come onto the ‘how’ of meditation with more clarity later when we do our own practice. During the time of meditation, we are not expecting anything dramatic or significant to happen. Especially no altered states and definitely no levitation. In fact, if something unusual does happen, we do our best to ignore it by returning to saying our mantra. If any thought we believe to be important arises, we still return to our mantra, knowing that this thought, if truly important, will come back to us after meditation.

I suppose the closest that we can get to understanding the process is that in meditation we are trying to leave ourselves behind by taking our attention off ourselves. We are endeavouring to move beyond our own ego, to align ourselves with the Mind of Christ, or the Spirit of God, who lives within us. The prayer of meditation itself is opening ourselves to self-emptying, to kenosis.

Historical development of Meditation (See also note)

One of the earliest recorded narratives of this way of praying is in John Cassian’s text *The Conferences*. This text is a record of time spent by two monks, John Cassian and his friend Germanus, with the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. They were trying to understand the compunction which had led these monks away from the city life into the barren desert. In the context of meditation, the relevant chapters of the text are Conferences 9 and 10, where the monks seek out Abba Isaac to talk specifically about the prayer the Desert Fathers and Mothers engaged in. In conference 9, Abba Isaac refers to the normal prayer forms most, if not all of us, are familiar with – that is supplication, offering, intercession and thanksgiving – and then says

“In addition, there is a state of prayer beyond even this where the Spirit prays through us, but which is not necessarily remembered afterwards.” (Conferences 9.xv.2).

Receiving this wisdom, Cassian and Germanus left for the evening, seemingly spending the night in some turmoil, as they returned next day enquiring – how can we pray like this? This is the question Abba Isaac has been waiting for, for he then reveals the discipline of meditation in some detail, for meditation is a discipline not a technique, including: the use of a mantra; how to deal with distractions; and what the outcomes, the benefits, of meditation may be.

During the centuries there have been many mystics (also called contemplatives) whose lives are worth studying, and I’ve included a list in the appendix to my talk. This list includes Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart, to name just a few. They have generally been part of religious communities, or the priesthood. Consequently, over many centuries, the mystical path of prayer was kept principally within the religious communities. Indeed, the path, one could say the secret path, of silent meditation was kept from the

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ordinary people until relatively recently. It just wasn't shared. Until, that is, the 20th century, when things began to change. To help understand the type of changes, we shall consider two principle teachers, both now dead, who played a major part in the development of meditation as a gift for the lay people and religious alike.

The first is Thomas Merton.

(This section draws from *Pray to Live: Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (PTL)
Henri J M Nouwen, Fides Publishers Inc 1972)

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Thomas Merton's life story, he was born in 1915 in France and although his parents had no particular religious inclinations, he was baptised. His mother died when he was six and his father took him to live variously in the USA, in France and in England. He finished his schooling in Oldham and was awarded a scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge. Whilst at university his father died although Merton finished his studies before returning to the USA, where he studied at Columbia University in New York. At the age of 24, he gained a master's degree. It was during this time at Columbia University that Merton became a Catholic.

It seems that the journey that led him to religion, and subsequently to silence, took in the various vantage points of

- books: novels; philosophy; and saints – e.g., St John of the Cross, St Therese of Lisieux and the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Much of this development was done in Cambridge.
- people whom he spent significant time with, principally two lecturers at Columbia University, who helped his developing religious beliefs, and a deeply spiritual Hindu monk living in New York, who pointed Merton to the existing Christian tradition of meditation.
- Two events, which principally for Merton, were joining a monastery when he became a Trappist monk. coincident with the start of the Second World War. At a personal level, both the war and his entry to the monastic life were connected, and from that moment on he asked himself the following question, “How can I be a man of Peace”. This question stayed with him for the rest of his life, and it was through meditation that he was able to pursue this path in considerable depth.

It is this question “How can I be a man of Peace” which underlies all Merton's mystical explorations, writings, and connections with the world. Merton did not wish to write – his Abbot required him to do so - and in his early autobiography, the *Seven Storey Mountain*, about his youth and early monastic life he can come across as egotistical and arrogant. However, as a result of this act of obedience, we are blessed with many publications to help us in our own contemplative path. Eventually his journey with meditation led him into the solitude of a hermit existence within the Trappist monastery itself.

On meditation itself, he wrote:

“In meditative prayer, one thinks and speaks not only with his mind and lips, but in a certain sense with his *whole being*. Prayer is there not a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart - it is the orientation of a whole body, mind, and spirit to God in

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silence, attention, and adoration. All good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God.” PTL p125.

Being a hermit did not completely cut Merton off from the world. Curiously, his wisdom, some might say social activism, became widely known, were sought after and he even travelled abroad for conferences. Sadly, it was in 1968 after Merton had been speaking at a peace conference in India that he returned to his room and was electrocuted by a faulty fan. He was 53.

My own sense is that Merton provided an opening for the non-monastic world to share in the gifts of silent prayer, although Merton himself did not endeavour to do so in practical ways. His journey seems to have been a call to record as much of his developing inner world as possible, warts and all, and we have a vast body of narrative to reflect on. And in his writings, Merton often provokes the sense that I already knew what he had written, although hadn't been able to articulate it. Resonance providing confirmation and validation.

So, if Merton was about developing an inner life and recording it for posterity as some sort of guidebook, perhaps the opposite of this is true of the other key character I would like to reflect on this evening, the Benedictine monk John Main.

John Main was born in 1926 in London to Irish Catholic parents, served in the army, joined a religious order for a short time before studying law at Trinity College, Dublin. After graduation he entered the British Foreign Service and in 1954 was posted to Malaya.

On a routine assignment to deliver a goodwill message, he met Swami Satyananda, a monk who ran an orphanage and ashram on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, and was deeply impressed by the Swami's peaceful, calm wisdom. And he learned from him a simple way of meditation: the faithful recitation of a mantra during two periods of meditation at the beginning and end of the day. This Hindu monk encouraged John Main to meditate as a Christian and to take a sacred Christian word as his mantra. Each week John Main would return to his teacher, to deepen the discipline of silence, stillness, and simplicity in his daily meditations. I find it curious that both Merton and John Main benefitted from the ancient wisdom of the East for their developing practices. Main said that during this time his own spiritual life was opened to new depths.

He returned to Europe, continuing his daily practice of meditation whilst working as a law professor in Dublin. Some years later, the monastic life called him again and he entered a Benedictine Monastery in London. Curiously he was forbidden by his novice master to meditate. Instead, he was told to use more cerebral and imaginative forms of prayer, which in obedience he did, entering what he later described as a spiritual desert. It was only 10 years later when he was drawn back to the roots of his own tradition, eventually to the desert tradition of early Christian monasticism and to John Cassian. Here, he found and knew now, for sure, that meditation was indeed part of his own Christian, spiritual and theological tradition and he began to meditate again. Over the coming years and upon returning to London, he started to share his practice with parishioners in England and then in Montreal having been asked to start a small community dedicated to the teaching and

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practice of meditation. The simplicity of his teaching and the accessibility of it to lay people had struck a chord.

John Main’s teaching on prayer is authentic and simple. He said that all Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus. And for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistractedness, to a state of attention and concentration - that is a state of awareness. He also said that the only way that he had been able to find to come to that quiet, to that undistractedness, to that concentration, was what he called ‘the way of the mantra’.

He didn’t say “this is the only way to pray” but he discovered it to be a way of deep simplicity and effectiveness. Indeed, often meditation, sometimes called the prayer of the heart, reveals and leads to an experience of greater richness in the ritual prayers of the church.

John Main died of cancer in 1982, in Canada, at the age of 56. And whilst his loss was devastating to those around him, his teaching was not lost. The small community and the limited teaching tapes and books he left behind were the foundation for a new spiritual movement and from those small beginnings the eventually named World Community for Christian Meditation has spread around the world, is open to people of all faiths and none, is recognised by the Vatican, Rev Dr Rowan Williams is one of its patrons, and it is drawing in people of all ages.

Today meditation is embraced by more and more people in response to the thirst for deeper prayer among modern people. The current Director of the World Community who assisted John Main in the early years is the Fr Laurence Freeman OSB. WCCM is now represented in nearly 70 countries. After travelling for many years to introduce Christian meditation, Fr Laurence is now based at the Bonnevaux Centre for Peace near Poitiers in France.

To round off this section let me just mention a few other names of contemporary mystics and contemplatives, who have been working in parallel with Thomas Merton and John Main to bring meditation to the modern world. These are:

- The American Cistercian monk Thomas Keating, who taught Centring Prayer, which is very similar to Christian Meditation, 1923 - 2018
- The English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, who developed a form of Christian monastic life embedded with the Indian traditional life, which had meditation at its heart, 1906 - 1993
- The American Franciscan priest Richard Rohr who established the Centre for Action and Contemplation and has written extensively for the laity, born 1943
- The American Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopalian priest and international retreat leader who was and is a contemporary and colleague of both Keating and Rohr, born 1947

So why now? To be honest I don’t know, although it seems that there is a growing consciousness in many people to being awakened to an inner spirituality. This gradual

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awakening follows an imperative to experience for oneself the love of God and to be guided by Jesus incarnate in each one of us.

The individual Experience.

Having looked at some elements of the historical journey of meditation as we know it in the west, let us consider the individual, personal experience.

As one might expect, individuals come to meditation in many different ways. They may have tried meditation within another faith tradition, or they may be coming at it through some unsatisfied yearning in their own tradition. Indeed, they may come to meditation from no tradition at all.

They may start and develop a consistent practice from the word go, or they stop and start until they find their own rhythm, or never really get off the ground. It's a bit like the parable of the sower and the seed - some seeds grow well but many don't.

Very often meditators are seeking 'something' - because the conventional church experience has become less meaningful for them, and they are looking for something 'more'. My own experience is of this type, leading to a point where I kept asking myself the same question "If God is omniscient, why do I have to say words, as he already knows what is in my heart". This question stayed with me for years until I found the answer in the eyes of a contemplative. Isabelle was an extraordinary, but at the same time ordinary, married woman who had been meditating for 30 years and was someone I interviewed for a research project. In her eyes I could see that depth, authenticity, and compassion were an integral part of her life – although these are words that I have only latterly used to describe the experience. Whatever it was I saw at the time, I knew I wanted this for myself. She must have understood that in me too as, when I left her house, she shoved a bag of books and tapes into my hands. I started to explore and for several months tested out the practice of meditation until I knew, very suddenly, that the seemingly impossible commitment of meditating twice a day, every day, for the rest of my life, was indeed possible. And I haven't look back since. One of the things which really attracted me was John Main writing that I didn't have to do any reading or gain knowledge about anything. I just had to meditate, and in fact, after reading those initial texts, I didn't do any more reading on the subject for 10 years.

All those who are seeking have different life experiences and different needs and expectations, but for them all, the journey must start somewhere. And we don't know what we are going to find along the way. But the fact of starting the journey means that we have made a bit of a conversion, a metanoia. We have decided to do something differently.

For the meditator, once the journey has started, but only in retrospect, there are recognisable steps along the path, Let me briefly identify them.

1. Early on, we are settling in, finding a rhythm and a time and place in which we can be alone in silence and stillness. This requires a certain degree of commitment and perseverance, even if we often fail to chieve a degree of regularity.

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2. During our meditation we can be physically distracted (like fidgeting) and need the same commitment and perseverance to overcome our physical restlessness. Being mentally distracted is also challenging. Our minds can be likened to a tree full of monkeys swinging from branch to branch. And indeed, to some extent, this – the distracted mind - never goes away, although we learn not to attend to it, to ‘let it go’, by concentrating on our prayer word.
3. With our mantra we are seeking to move beyond attachment to all thought, all senses. To where, you may ask? I would reply, beyond my own ego into the heart of God. There is some clarity in the words of a 14th Century English Pastor who wrote a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing* as a mystical guidebook for a young priest. He says that the Cloud of Unknowing is between us and God, who we can never see or fully know, but which, non the less, we are seeking to penetrate. He also speaks of the Cloud of Forgetting, under which we leave our own thoughts and senses behind.

Over time our journey of meditation is like any other. Sometimes, to novice meditators, I liken the journey to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. There are joyous and supportive times when it seems so easy to meditate that, as in golf for example, we can think “I’ve got it now”. There are arid spells and difficult times when we are tempted to give up. St John of the Cross shows us that even when we meditate, we can go through periods of apatheia which are devastatingly lonely, where we may feel that God has abandoned us. Some of you may have read the life of Saint Mother Theresa. She was a contemplative and took up her work in India because of a calling from God she received early on in her contemplative life. This experience at the beginning was needed to sustain her not only early on during her work in India but throughout her life, for it seems that she never had a repeat of the closeness of God that she experienced in her early days and often felt lost and alone.

Part of the experience of meditation may be the healing of past trauma, done so in a gently and loving way by the Spirit who reveals the hurt and enables something in us to move beyond it. Thomas Keating speaks of this as ‘a divine psychotherapy’ in which the unconscious is purified by being raised into awareness.

And then we may feel blessed again, grateful for the love we experience God showering on us. And so, it will go on.

Meditation is an act of faith, and those who continue along this path begin to see the steps they have taken and the graces they have received. Otherwise, why would they continue? These steps, these stages of the journey, without any noticeable actions on our part other than attending to our mantra during meditation, are moving us. Gently and often imperceptibly we can become less ego-centric and more self-emptying - increasing our capacity to be attentive to the other and to love others more fully and authentically. The graces I referred to just now are those same gifts of the Spirit St Paul spoke of in his Letter to the Galatians, 5:22 “What the Spirit brings is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Meditation offers what Isabelle showed me – a clarity, gentleness and depth of spirit which is like the pearl of great price – something we will want beyond all else.

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John Main describes the practice of meditation as a breaking down of barriers between ourselves and the other and seeing them more with the mind and eyes of Christ. He says:

“In meditation we seek to disassemble the barriers we have set up around ourselves, cutting us off from our consciousness of the presence of Jesus within our hearts. ... Once we enter into the human consciousness of Jesus, we begin to see as he sees, to love as he loves, to understand as he understands, and to forgive as he forgives.” (*Living the Mind of Christ: Mindfulness in Christian Spirituality*, Stefan Gillow Reynolds, Darton Longman and Todd 2016)

To finish, I said at the beginning that I count myself as a meditational novice. For each time we sit down to meditate we are starting again, not knowing how difficult or easy it may be in this time, but once more opening ourselves up to the Spirit of God who lives in our hearts. And no matter how easy or difficult the meditation was, there is always another new start, like a mini death and resurrection, with our next meditation.

So that’s the cue for us to take the third part of the Journey I spoke of earlier – meditating ourselves.

A short period of meditation followed by questions

Note:

The contemplative tradition in Christianity traces its origins back to the person of Jesus himself. A look at the history of the contemplative tradition include:

- the Early Church Fathers (e.g., Clement, Origen);
- the Desert tradition (e.g., Evagrius, Cassian);
- the monastic and mendicant founders (e.g., Augustine, Benedict, Hildegard);
- the early English mystics (e.g., Julian of Norwich and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*);
- classic mystics (e.g., Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, and St Theresa of Avila) and
- modern day mystics (e.g., Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Keating and John Main).

Courtesy of *Journey to the Heart, Christian Contemplatives through the Centuries* edited by Kim Nataraja, (Canterbury Press 2011)

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Resources

International Website: www.wccm.org
UK website: www.wccm.uk
On YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/@wccm>

On the **International website** there are many **resources including** how to meditate, recommended texts, numerous recordings for free under the heading *Meditatio Talks*, along with the opportunity to subscribe to regular mailings.

The **UK website** provides how to meditate, details of meditation groups (*), news and events, along with the work which is being carried out with special interest groups within the UK.

There is a **smartphone app** called the WCCM Meditation App (it is a green colour) which is a user-friendly and a practical companion for those who want to develop a more contemplative style of life while learning to meditate. This includes a timer, links to daily and weekly resources, community news worldwide, information about retreats and online events, online and physical groups and all the other web resources of the WCCM.

(*) A feeling of connection with other meditators helps the beginner keep going and deepens the experience. It also helps to realise that the deeply personal aspect of meditation is also communal.

WCCM Recommended Reading:

Word Into Silence (John Main's first book and introduction) *John Main OSB*
Door into Silence (an anthology) *John Main OSB*
Christian Meditation, Your Daily Practice *Laurence Freeman OSB*
A Simple Way – The Path of Christian Meditation *Laurence Freeman OSB*
Thirty Questions and Answers about Christian Meditation Paul Harris
Just Turn Up – the meditator's companion Julie Roberts