

# Introduction to Christian Meditation

## Talk One: John Main's Journey

- ❖ Welcome to this series of three introductory talks on Christian meditation. There will be three parts to this series:
  - Talk One: *John Main's Journey*. That is what we will explore today, a great way of understanding his teaching better.
  - Talk Two: *The Roots of Christian Meditation*. We will then look at how it is connected to a long tradition.
  - Talk Three: *The Practice of Christian Meditation*. In this section, we will illustrate key aspects of this spiritual path with concrete examples.
- ❖ Let me start with two quotes. The first one is from Meister Eckhart, a Dominican monk who lived in Germany in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. "There is nothing so much as God as silence." In other words, silence is so sacred that it is the best way to approach the divine mystery. What he says sets the tone for these talks on Christian meditation. This form of prayer, this spiritual practice that we will be exploring together is based on silence. Through the ages, great spiritual masters like Meister Eckhart have invited us to create a sacred space of silence to find God. Poets also urge us to discover the essential elements of life in silence. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) reminds us of that important aspect of our life: "Our task is to listen to the news that is always arriving out of silence."
- ❖ John Main OSB used the expression Christian meditation to describe this way of experiencing silence. As we will be referring to it over the next three talks, Christian meditation is a form of contemplative prayer that goes beyond

	<p>words and images by the simple repetition of a prayer word also called a mantra.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ John Main OSB recovered this ancient form of prayer and taught it until he died in Montreal in 1982.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Born in London, 1926</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Born of Irish parents.</li> <li>❖ Named Douglas Main. He changed to John when he became a Benedictine monk.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies with the Jesuits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ England was at war during that time. There was bombing in parts of London very close to where he lived.</li> <li>❖ Relatively good student, liked writing.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journalist, 1942</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Junior reporter for the <i>Hornsey Journal</i>, a suburban paper in London.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlists in the army, 1943</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ He was nearly 18.</li> <li>❖ Worked in Intelligence for the Royal Corps of Signals. Trained during 1944 in the sensitive skills required to recognize and retrieve enemy signals; in England, Belgium and Germany for almost 3 years, until 1946.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The meditator, like the signaller, requires a clear frequency so as to be "absolutely spot on." <i>In the Stillness Dancing</i>, Neil McKenty, p. 36</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Later, his experience in the intelligence work will provide him with some analogies later on when he talks about meditation.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dublin: Seminary of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, 1946</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ The spiritual quest was central to his life: he joined the Canons Regular, the community which was in charge of his parish.</li> <li>❖ As a promising student, was sent to Rome, Angelicum in 1949.</li> <li>❖ Left the community in 1950, disillusioned with the religious life with the Canons.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Dublin he studies law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ First he applied to the Roman Catholic Dublin College. But they refused to recognize his studies in Rome.</li> <li>❖ So he applied to the Protestant Trinity College, where his courses were credited.</li> <li>❖ Already we can see that he would feel</li> </ul>

deep connection with both Roman Catholics and Protestants.

❖ A brilliant student. He liked the good life.

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• Joins the British Colonial Service, Malaya, 1955

❖ This was intriguing for many of his friends because he was very much a pacifist, he disliked imperialism, and he admired Gandhi.

❖ The reason was probably that since he was very curious, he liked the adventure of going to Asia.

❖ Malaya had been under British rule since 1874. In 1955, the British government promised Malaya its independence and prepared for an election.

❖ He spent several hours every day studying one of the Chinese languages.

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• Swami Satyananda

❖ One day, he was sent by the Governor to deliver a good-will message to the Swami Satyananda. Who was he?

❖ A Hindu monk and the principal of a school for boys and also one for girls. He built an orphanage and started the Pure Life Society, a community devoted to bring harmony between people of different religions and backgrounds. He was a teacher of meditation.

❖ An orphan from the age of ten, the Swami had been educated in a Catholic institution and considered at some point converting to Catholicism.

❖ Douglas assumed it would be a routine visit. But he was struck by the quality of presence of the Swami and knew he was in the presence of a holy man. Later he would say:

❖ "I was deeply impressed by his peacefulness and calm wisdom... He asked me if I meditated. I told him I tried to and, at his bidding, described briefly what we have come to know as the Ignatian method of meditation. He was silent for a short time and then gently remarked that his own tradition of

meditation was quite different. For the Swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the universe who dwells in our hearts " *The Gethsemani Talks*, p. 11

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- "To meditate you must become silent. You must be still. And you must concentrate. In our tradition we know only one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that concentration. We use a *word* that we call a *mantra*. To meditate, what you must do is to choose this word and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you. And now we will meditate." *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*, p.12
  - ❖ After hearing this description of meditation, Douglas asked the Swami to teach him about meditation. The Swami invited him to come out to the meditation centre once a week.
  - ❖ This is how the Swami spoke about meditation during this first visit.
  - ❖ (read quote to the left)
  - ❖ Once a week, for 18 months Douglas came back to meditate. The Swami insisted that he had to meditate twice a day, morning and evening.
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- "And during the time of your meditation there must be in your mind no thoughts, no words, no imagination. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra, your word. The mantra is like an harmonic. And as we sound the harmonic within ourselves we begin to build up a resonance. That resonance then leads us forward to our own wholeness... We begin to experience the deep unity we all possess in our own being. And then the harmonic begins to build up a resonance between you and all creatures and all creation and unity between you and your Creator." *The Gethsemani Talks*, p. 13
  - ❖ The Swami explained in more detail how to meditate.
  - ❖ (read quote to the left)
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- Returned to Dublin, where he taught law at Trinity College, 1956
  - ❖ Disillusioned about the British policies in Malaya concerning the transition: "All they want is to hang on to everything as long as possible."
  - ❖ Here is what colleagues said about him:
    - "One of the finest legal minds I've met"

- “He would have been able to rise to the top”.
- “Had he remained with the law, Douglas would have added to Irish legal scholarship. He could have become a national authority on the laws of Ireland.”
- ❖ Enjoyed good dining, excellent wine, first class Irish theatre.

- The pilgrimage continues
  - ❖ He continues to meditate. He will write later with a bit of sadness:
  - ❖ “I first tried to raise the subject with priest friends but to my surprise my enquiries were mostly received with great suspicions and sometimes even hostility.” *The Gethsemani Talks*, p. 11
  - ❖ “But for me personally there was all the joy and excitement of the pilgrimage of my morning and evening meditation. All the time there was a growing attraction to meditation and the morning and evening times became the real axis on which my day was built.” *The Gethsemani Talks*, p. 12

- Diana Ernaelsteen
  - ❖ Intense relationship. They got engaged but ended up deciding that they were not meant to marry each other.
  - ❖ Diana would remain a very important lifelong friend.

- Benedictine monastery: Ealing
  - ❖ His spiritual quest lead him to visit monasteries frequently and eventually to become a monk, in Ealing monastery just outside of London. He was 33 by then.

- A different form of prayer
  - ❖ Douglas Main expected to continue and intensify using the form of meditation with a mantra that he had learned in Malaya and had practiced regularly since. When he mentioned that approach to the novice master, he was told that this was not the Benedictine way. He was invited to use the prayer of the acts (adoration,

contrition, thanksgiving and supplication). Using a form of prayer that was largely word was very difficult for Douglas but still he did it in a spirit of obedience.

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- “Unwittingly my novice master had set out to teach me detachment at the very centre of my life. I learned to become detached from the practice that was most sacred to me and on which I was seeking to build my life. The next few years were bleak in terms of spiritual development but I always went back to the obedience which was the foundation of my life as a monk.” *The Gethsemani Talks*, p. 15
  - ❖ This quote reveals what was happening for him at a deep level.
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- Ordained priest at Ealing in 1963
  - ❖ Teaches at Ealing from 1963 to 1969. One of his first students was Laurence Freeman.
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- Washington, Department of Religious Studies.
  - ❖ As a result of divergent visions of the monastic life today and tension in the leadership of the community he was sent to Washington to study for a doctorate.
  - ❖ In a sense it was a form of exile. He was not particularly stimulated by the courses he took.
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- Headmaster at St Anselm’s Abbey School, in Washington, 1970
  - ❖ There was a need for a quick replacement to the position of headmaster who had left unexpectedly. John Main was believed to be the right person because he had experience in a similar position in Ealing and because he was on site in Washington.
  - ❖ A private school for boys.
  - ❖ He established good contacts with the boys and also with many of the parents.
  - ❖ To a young man who had spent some time with a Hindu master and who was wondering if something similar existed in the Christian tradition, John Main gave the thick book by Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom: a history of contemplative*

tradition. The young man's positive reaction prompted John Main to re-read it himself. He noticed particularly the mention of prayer with few words and of John Cassian.

- ❖ Challenged the status quo, promoted new initiatives, and rocked the boat.

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- Back to Ealing Abbey

- ❖ Although supported as the next abbot by half the community he was not elected and returned to his home monastery in London
- ❖ Re-read the *Conferences* by John Cassian and discovered key similarities to the meditation with a mantra.
- ❖ Recognizing that this form of prayer has deep roots in Christian tradition, he returned to the form of prayer learned by the Swami. For him it was a coming home with great joy and relief: reconciliation between his experience of Eastern meditation and his own Benedictine tradition.

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- John Cassian  
"The mind thus casts out and represses the rich and ample matter of all thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of a single verse" *Conferences*

- ❖ Who was John Cassian?
- ❖ He lived from 360 to 425, spending 10 years with the Desert Fathers and Mothers from whom he learned to live simply and to pray simply.
- ❖ In its rule, Saint Benedict, the founder of the monastic tradition in Europe, refers his monks to Cassian to learn to pray.

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- *The Cloud of Unknowing*  
"Use this little word and pray not in many words but in a little word of one syllable. Fix this word fast to your heart so that it is always there come what may. With this word, you will suppress all thoughts."  
*Conferences*

- ❖ Continuing his reading on the contemplative tradition, John Main discovered *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by an anonymous mystic.
- ❖ This source also confirms the practice of prayer with a mantra. For John Main it became a turning point. His mission will be to teach this form of contemplative prayer.

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- A meditation centre, 1975

- ❖ He was involved in the Benedictine

community as prior but he found that the monastery did not meet the needs and vision that his own monastic vision had developed through his rediscovery of meditation

- ❖ When there was an election for a new Abbott, he proposed a major renewal of the monastery: many monks supported him but not enough for him to be elected.
- ❖ His focus was on teaching meditation to young people. He used the old noviciate at Ealing for a meditation centre.
- ❖ Began with four young men, including Laurence Freeman.
- ❖ Took every opportunity to give retreats on meditation in Ireland, England, and USA.
- ❖ As a result, started meditation groups in England and Ireland.

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- Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, 1976

- ❖ What was so important about that retreat?
- ❖ Trappist monks, representing the very contemplative tradition, invited him to talk about meditation: it was a confirmation that he was deeply connected with the Church. This validated for him the urgency of teaching this form of spirituality.
- ❖ He stayed in Thomas Merton's hermitage and felt deeply connected with this major teacher of contemplative renewal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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- Montreal Priory, 1977

- ❖ He continued to be convinced that there was a need for a new foundation of a monastery with a clear focus on contemplative prayer. He explored various possibilities.
- ❖ Some of his friends from Montreal visited him in Ealing and proposed that location as a possibility. They arranged for a meeting between John Main and Bishop Leonard Crowley, the English speaking Bishop of Montreal. After some reluctance from his Abbot in Ealing, the foundation in Montreal was finally approved.



- ❖ It's a very small foundation with only one other monk, Laurence Freeman.
- ❖ The focus of this priory was to practice and teach Christian meditation. There was meditation three times a day and talks on Monday and Tuesday evening.
- ❖ Around the priory, there was a growing and vibrant lay community.
- ❖ From Montreal he continued to preach retreats and nurture meditation groups in England, Ireland, Australia and the USA.

- Death in 1982

- ❖ At the beginning of 1982, he was diagnosed again with lung cancer of which he died at the end of December.
- ❖ His death was devastating to the small lay community gravitating around the priory. It was the loss of a friend, of a spiritual teacher. What would happen to the priory and to the community?

- World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) in 1991
- "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."  
The Mission Statement of the WCCM

- ❖ As a young monk and recently ordained priest Laurence Freeman became Prior and continued in this role while supervising the rapid expansion of John Main's work globally. Because of the tension between the roles he resigned as Prior. The community however was forced to close in 1991, a decision that brought much pain and confusion at the time but that led to the development of The World Community for Christian Meditation-the 'Monastery without walls' that carries John Main's transmission of this tradition today in more than a hundred countries.

- "Meditation is not a time for words, however beautifully and sincerely phrased. All our words are wholly ineffective when we come to enter into the deep and mysterious communion with God whose own Word within us is before and after all words." *Word into Silence*, p. 7

- ❖ Here are a few quotes by John Main that give the essence of his teaching. The first one presents meditation as a prayer that goes beyond words.

- “In meditation our way forward to this growing awareness of the Spirit praying within us lies simply in our deepening fidelity to the saying of the mantra. It is the faithful repetition of our word that integrates our whole being. It does so because it brings us to the silence, the concentration, the necessary level of consciousness that enable us to open our mind and heart to the work of the love of God in the depth of our being.” *Word into Silence*, p. 13
- ❖ This next quote briefly explains the importance of the mantra.

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- “Meditation and learning to meditate is a gradual process, and the most important element in it is the practice. We must meditate every day. As you know, to meditate is itself absolute simplicity. Sit down – the only essential rule of posture is that your spine is as upright (not stiff!) as it can be – and sit still. To begin with you must really work hard at sitting still (just don’t move!). The word I recommend to you is maranatha. Four equally-stressed syllables: ma ra na tha.” *The Heart of Creation*, p. 1
  - ❖ This last quote explains the meditation process in more details.

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### *Talk One: John Main's Journey*

- John Main's Journey  
The Roots of Christian Meditation  
The Practice of Christian Meditation
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- Studies with the Jesuits
- Journalist, 1942
- Enlists in the army, 1943
- "The meditator, like the signaller, requires a clear frequency so as to be absolutely spot on." *In the Stillness Dancing: The Journey of John Main*, Neil McKenty, p. 36
- Dublin: Seminary of the Canons Regular of the Lateran, 1946
- In Dublin, he studies law
- Joins the British Colonial Service, Malaya, 1955
- Swami Satyananda

"To meditate you must become silent. You must be still. And you must concentrate. In our tradition we know only one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that concentration. We use a *word* that we call a *mantra*. To meditate, what you must do is to choose this word and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you. And now we will meditate." *The Gethsemani Talks*, John Main, p. 12

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- Returns to Dublin, where he teaches law at Trinity College, 1956
- The pilgrimage continues
- Diana Ernaelsteen
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- A different form of prayer

“Unwittingly my novice master had set out to teach me detachment at the very centre of my life. I learned to become detached from the practice that was most sacred to me and on which I was seeking to build my life. The next few years were bleak in terms of spiritual development but I always went back to the obedience which was the foundation of my life as a monk.” *The Gethsemani Talks*, John Main, p. 15

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- Back to Ealing Abbey
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“The mind thus casts out and represses the rich and ample matter of all thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of a single verse.” *Conferences*, John Cassian

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“Use this little word and pray not in many words but in a little word of one syllable. Fix this word fast to your heart so that it is always there come what may. With this word, you will suppress all thoughts.” *The Cloud of Unknowing*

- A meditation centre, 1975
- Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, 1976
- Montreal Priory, 1977
- Death in 1982
- World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM ) in 1991

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- Summary of teaching

“Meditation is not a time for words, however beautifully and sincerely phrased. All our words are wholly ineffective when we come to enter into the deep and mysterious communion with God whose own Word within us is before and after all words.” *Word into Silence*, John Main, p. 7

“In meditation our way forward to this growing awareness of the Spirit praying within us lies simply in our deepening fidelity to the saying of the mantra. It is the faithful repetition of our word that integrates our whole being. It does so because it brings us to the silence, the concentration, the necessary level of consciousness that enable us to open our mind and heart to the work of the love of God in the depth of our being.” *Word into*

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"We must meditate every day. As you know, to meditate is itself absolute simplicity. Sit down – the only essential rule of posture is that your spine is as upright (not stiff!) as it can be – and sit still. To begin with you must really work hard at sitting still (just don't move!). The word I recommend to you is maranatha. Four equally-stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha." *The Heart of Creation*, John Main, p. 1

### **How to meditate**

- Find a quiet place.
- Sit upright and relaxed
- Gently close your eyes
- Silently, interiorly begin to say a sacred word or short phrase (mantra). The word "Maranatha, meaning "Come Lord", is recommended.
- Say it slowly and regularly in four equally stressed syllables.
- Listen to the sound as you say it, gently and continuously.
- Do not think or imagine anything – spiritual or otherwise.
- If thoughts or images come, keep returning to simply saying the mantra.
- Meditate each morning and evening for twenty to thirty minutes.

### **For more information**

- The Canadian Christian Meditation Community web site: [www.meditatio.ca](http://www.meditatio.ca)
- The World Community for Christian Meditation: [www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)

### **To contact us**

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