

## Talk Two: The Roots of Christian Meditation

- ❖ During our first meeting, we had an overview of John Main's pilgrimage and some key aspects of his message. Today, we will explore the profound roots of this spiritual practice. In our next session we will focus on the practice of Christian meditation, using concrete examples followed by quotes from John Main.

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- ❖ Today, the search for our roots is manifested in various ways.
  - ❖ One of the benefits of internet has been the easier access to genealogy. A simple search will reveal the links of ancestries and several interconnections. Modern technology facilitates a need that is widely present: to know where we came from, who our great-great grandmothers and grandfathers were.
  - ❖ We often hear of young adults who have been adopted while young children and who spend an incredible amount of time and creativity in retracing their parents: this allows them to reclaim a part of themselves.
  - ❖ In our spiritual quest, the same need exists: we want to understand the lineage. Most Buddhist masters will emphasize who their teacher was, and also from whom he had learned. It's not only legitimate, it's also very enlightening.
  - ❖ During this session, we will take the time to look at the roots of Christian meditation as taught by John Main:
    - First, it is clearly inspired by our very first model, Jesus himself.
    - Secondly, we will explore the contemplative tradition present throughout the ages in the writing of

different Christian mystics.

- Finally, we will look at three direct sources of prayer with a mantra: John Cassian, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the Jesus prayer.

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"During this time he went out one day into the hills to pray and spent the night in prayer to God." Luke 6:12

- ❖ First of all, Jesus would frequently withdraw into the hills to pray in silence. After spending the day with crowds, he found it necessary to seek solitude in order to reconnect to his Father. In him, we have a role model of silent prayer.

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"But when you pray, go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your father, who is there in the secret place; and your Father who sees what is secret will reward you." Mat: 6,6

- ❖ Jesus also invites others to pray in silence.

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"In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen, who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard." Matt 6:7-8

- ❖ Furthermore, he teaches to not use too many words. Praying with the mantra is a direct response to his invitation.

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"We do not even know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself is pleading for us." Romans 8:26

- ❖ Saint Paul also reminds us that we don't know how to pray. When we simply use a sacred word, it's one way of acknowledging that we don't know how to pray and to sit in the presence of God without daring to formulate any elaborate prayer.

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"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

- ❖ We complement these quotes from the New Testament by a verse of Psalm 46. It invites us to move away from our activities and discover God in that quiet place. It's interesting to hear that verse and then to simplify it further and further:
  - Be still and know that I am God
  - Be still and know that I am
  - Be still and know

- Be still
- Be

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Contemplative prayer: the apophatic tradition

- ❖ Let us look at the second root, contemplative prayer. It is also called the apophatic tradition, which means prayer without words, without images.
- ❖ Fr. Henri LeSaux, a French Benedictine monk who spent most of his life in India, liked to tell this Hindu story to illustrate the difference between apophatic and kataphatic prayer.
- ❖ There were two seekers who had heard about a wise master who lived far away in a cave and both wanted to learn from him. The first had walked in the mountains and the forests for a few days when he came to a river that clearly was too deep to be crossed on foot. He undertook to build a raft with bamboo he found on the shore and after a few hours he had a rudimentary boat solid enough to support him and carry him to the other shore. He was quite relieved to have overcome that obstacle and very pleased with himself. What to do with the raft, now? Well, it had been so useful that he decided to take it with him in case there was another river. Eventually the weight of the boat wore him down and he never made it to the cave of the sage.
- ❖ The second seeker also came to that same river and he had to build a raft to cross it. Once he was on the other side, he decided to leave the raft there, thinking it might be useful for others and in any case it would slow him down terribly in his walk. He made it to the cave of the wise man and was able to benefit from his profound teaching and continue growing in his quest for the divine.
- ❖ In our spiritual life, there is a need for words and rituals, like the pilgrim needed a raft:

That is the kataphatic part. It is normal, it is healthy, it is an essential approach to the divine. However, it is not sufficient for full spiritual maturity. We also have to let go of words and rituals in order to meet the God that is beyond all words, that is absolute mystery. This is the apophatic pole, where we go beyond words, images, rituals: this is also an essential part of the spiritual journey. Contemplative prayer is an expression of the apophatic tradition, sometimes also called *via negativa*.

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Gregory of Nyssa, 4<sup>th</sup> century  
“Every concept grasped by the mind becomes an obstacle in the quest to those who search.”

- ❖ Over the years, numerous teachers walked on this path of silence prayer, based on the deep belief that God cannot be named. As a result, they invited us to meet the divine beyond words and rituals that are always inadequate to express the ineffable. Here is a sample of masters of contemplative prayer spanning numerous centuries.
- ❖ Gregory of Nyssa was a bishop and a central figure of the Church. His book *Life of Moses* is one of the most important early texts in the study of Christian mysticism. His presence at both the council of Antioch and the council of Constantinople places him at the center of the Church at that time.
- ❖ It is with a recognized authority that he reminds us that concepts and words can get in the way of meeting God.

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Evagrius Pontus, 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century  
“When you are praying do not shape within yourself any image of the deity and do not let your mind be shaped by the impress of any form. Approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner. Prayer means the shedding

- ❖ Abba Evagrius was one of the Desert Fathers, well respected for his books on spirituality and prayer.
- ❖ He also invites us to stay away from images and thoughts.

of thought.”

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Augustine of Hippo, 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century  
“The best that one can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches. So be silent and don’t chatter about God. For when you do chatter about God, you are telling lies and sinning.”

❖ From roughly the same period, a Church Father, Augustine, with whose name we are much more familiar conveys the invitation to silence during prayer.

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Symeon, the New Theologian, 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century  
“Sit down, quietly and alone, bow your head, shut your eyes, breathe slowly and look with the powers of your imagination into your heart, and lead your reasons, that is, your thoughts from the head to the heart. With each breath, you should say, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!’ you should express the words slowly and quietly, with the lips or only with the breath.”

❖ If we take a leap to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Symeon explains that to pray we need to go from our head to our heart. And he adds that we could recite a simple verse.

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John of the Cross, 16<sup>th</sup> century  
“I entered into unknowing. Yet when I saw myself, without knowing where I was I understood great things. I will not say what I felt for I remained in unknowing, transcending all knowledge. That perfect knowledge was a peace and holiness held in profound solitude. It was something so secret that I was left stammering, transcending all knowledge.”

❖ In Spain, two centuries later, John of the Cross is one of the most recognized contemplatives and a teacher of the contemplative tradition whose message is immensely appropriate today. He focuses on practicing a prayer that goes beyond knowledge.

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Theophan the Recluse, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
“To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”

❖ Theophan the Recluse was a Russian monk who became bishop and then a recluse. He also teaches about the need to descend into the heart.

Thomas Merton, 20<sup>th</sup> century  
"Contemplative prayer is, in a way, simply the preference for the desert, for emptiness, for poverty. One has begun to know the meaning of contemplation when he intuitively and spontaneously seeks the dark and unknown path of aridity in preference for every other way."

- ❖ Probably the most influential spiritual writer of the last century, Thomas Merton is also widely recognized as having given a new life to contemplative prayer today. He encourages spiritual seekers to accept the path of darkness and the unknown.

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- ❖ All these masters remind us that we need to go beyond words and images to really meet God. This is also the main message behind Christian meditation.
  - ❖ Within the broad context of contemplative prayer, Christian meditation includes something more specific: the use of a prayer word or mantra.
  - ❖ There are three distinct sources of prayer with a mantra in the Christian tradition: John Cassian, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the Jesus Prayer. Let us explore each of them a bit further.

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John Cassian 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century

- ❖ Born around 360 in what is now Romania.
- ❖ When he was 18, he left his country with his friend Germanus to find a more meaningful way of living the message of Jesus.
- ❖ This was the time when Rome stopped persecuting Christians and when Christianity became the official Church under Constantine. John Cassian and Germanus first went to a monastery in Bethlehem in the hope of finding a teacher from whom they would learn how to pray: they were very disappointed by the mediocrity of the monks.

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With the Desert Mothers and Fathers

- ❖ They continued on to the Egyptian desert to meet and live with the Desert Mothers and Fathers.

- ❖ They were the hippies of their time, rejecting the corrupt society to lead a more meaningful life: hermits living a life of simplicity and prayer.

Abba Isaac, 4<sup>th</sup> century  
 “This formula must always be in your heart. When you go to sleep, let it be saying this verse till having been moulded by it you grow accustomed to repeat it even when you sleep.”

- ❖ They met Abba Isaac, a respected Father, who talked to them about ceaseless prayer: finally, someone was responding to their quest! More specifically, he proposed an approach: repeat a single verse. The one he recommended was, “God come to my assistance.”

Founded two monasteries in Marseilles

- ❖ After about ten years in the Egypt desert, John Cassian went to Rome and then he moved on to Southern France. There he founded two monasteries, one for men and one for women.
- ❖ They were different from those already present in France: Cassian wanted to create the same form of spirituality as the one he had experienced with the Desert Fathers and Mothers in Egypt.
- ❖ He taught his monks and nuns how to pray, using the simple prayer he had learned from the monks in Egypt. Later he would capture this teaching in writing, particularly in Conferences IX and X.

Wide and lasting influence

- ❖ He became very influent in the following centuries.
- ❖ Saint Benedict, for instance, invited his monks to read Cassian in order to learn how to pray.
- ❖ After the Bible, Cassian’s books were the most widely read documents in the Middle Ages.
- ❖ Several spiritual masters quoted him: Dominic, Thomas of Aquinas, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francois de Sales.
- ❖ His work was translated from Latin to Greek which was a sign of an important

document.

- ❖ In the Eastern tradition, he has been declared a saint. His feast is celebrated on February 29.

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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”

“Let the mind hold ceaselessly to this formula above all until it has been strengthened by constantly using and continually meditating upon it, and until it renounces and rejects the whole wealth and abundance of thoughts. Thus straitened by the poverty of this verse, it will easily attain to that gospel beatitude which holds the first place among the other beatitudes. For, it says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”

- ❖ In the following quotes, he invites to pray with a single verse. We can easily imagine how John Main saw the direct connection between Cassian’s discipline and the one he had learned from the Swami in Kuala Lumpur.

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*The Cloud of Unknowing*

- ❖ Approximately 10 centuries after John Cassian in France, we find in England an anonymous English mystic of the 14<sup>th</sup> century who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Why did he remain anonymous? Maybe because what he was writing was common knowledge, maybe he was someone who was humble and didn’t want the spotlight.
- ❖ The full title is quite revealing:
- ❖ *A book on contemplation, called the Cloud of Unknowing, in which cloud a soul is united with God.*
- ❖ We can apprehend the divine only through a cloud.
- ❖ This was happening while there were a number of mystics in England: Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich. In



Germany also, contemplative prayer flourished with Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Ruysbroek. Also, Bridgid in Sweden.

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*The Cloud of Unknowing*  
14<sup>th</sup> century

“So take a little word of just one syllable to help you focus your attention. The shorter the word the better, because it is more like this particular activity of the Holy Spirit. Choose a word like “God” or “love” or any other word of one syllable that appeals to you and impress it indelibly on your heart so that it is always there, whatever happens.”

*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.”

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Karen Armstrong

“The author of the Cloud dwelt on his central belief that God is essentially and ultimately incomprehensible and if we want to know God in this life, we must divest ourselves of all our ideas about the reality that we call “God”. When asked who is God, the author responded in a very direct and surprising way: “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

- ❖ His message can be summarized this way: Prayer is not the time for reflection on God. You must leave thoughts behind. During that time, thoughts must be cast aside.
- ❖ Clearly, the author recommends the use of a prayer word. Let’s hear two quotes from him.

- ❖ Karen Armstrong, a contemporary English scholar who has written abundantly on the history of religions, summarizes this way the basic message of the book. Her book “A History of God” has been on the New York Times best sellers list for many weeks.

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- ❖ As we have seen, John Cassian and the author of The Cloud both promote a mantric prayer, with the simple repetition of the same invocation or sacred word.

- ❖ It is a prayer of poverty; it is a prayer of the heart rather than of the mind.

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### The Jesus Prayer

- ❖ There is also a third direct root to Christian meditation: the Jesus Prayer.
- ❖ It goes all the way back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers.
- ❖ In the Eastern Orthodox tradition it has been maintained throughout the centuries.
- ❖ It's most frequent formulation is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."
- ❖ It is also often called the prayer of the heart, precisely because it stays away from many words and explanations.
- ❖ Sometimes the expressions "hesychast meditation" and "prayer of the heart" are used with the same meaning.

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### *The Way of the Pilgrim*

- ❖ Does anyone know the book "*The Way of the Pilgrim*"? What is it about?
- ❖ *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a classic book of Russian spirituality written in 1870, has popularized the Jesus Prayer.
- ❖ It is the story of an anonymous peasant's quest for the secret of prayer, trying to understand what St. Paul meant when he said that Christians should pray always.
- ❖ Finally he met a staretz who suggested that he recite the prayer 3,000 times in a day: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Although a bit reluctant, the pilgrim did that for a few days as he walked from village to village.
- ❖ After having integrated this practice, he went back to visit the staretz who then suggested that he needed to repeat the prayer 6,000 times now.
- ❖ Again with some reluctance, the pilgrim complied. After having done precisely this for a few days, he went back to the staretz

who then told him to repeat the prayer 12,000 times!

- ❖ Incredulous at first, the pilgrim accepted the challenge and gradually realized how the repetition of this phrase led to constant prayer.

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Jesus Prayer  
John Climacus, 6<sup>th</sup> century

“When you pray, do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple, repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. Do not strive for verbosity lest your mind be distracted from devotion by a search for words (...) Wordiness in prayer often subjects the mind to fantasy and dissipation; single words of their very nature tend to concentrate the mind.”

- ❖ The prayer is often shortened to just the word “Jesus”:
- ❖ It is a form of prayer with a mantra that is rooted deeply in the Christian tradition. Here is a quote from John Climacus about this prayer.

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Jesus Prayer  
Bishop Kallistos Ware, 20<sup>th</sup> century

“This is a prayer in words; but, because the words are so few and so simple, they enable us to reach beyond the words into silence; more exactly, they enable us to discover the silence that is hidden in the heart of the words themselves.”

- ❖ Our contemporary, Bishop Kallistos Ware, explains the importance of praying with few words, which allows us to go beyond words.

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John Main, *Word into Silence*, p. 7  
“Meditation is not the time for words, however beautifully and sincerely phrased. All our words are wholly ineffective when we come to enter into this deep and mysterious communion with God. In order to come into this holy and mysterious communion with the word of God

- ❖ Having had a look at these roots of our practice, we know that each time we meditate we are connected to numerous spiritual teachers from different parts of the world and from different centuries. As importantly, we know that we are walking on the footsteps of Jesus himself.
- ❖ Let’s conclude this talk with a quote by John Main that summarizes key aspects of

indwelling within us, we must first have the courage to become more and more silent. In a deep, creative silence, we meet God in a way which transcends all our powers of intellect and language. We have to listen, to concentrate, to attend rather than to think. Silence is absolutely necessary for the human spirit if it really is to thrive, and not only just to thrive, but to be creative, to have a creative response to life, to our environment, to friends. Because the silence gives our spirit room to breathe, room to be. In silence, you don't have to be justifying yourself, apologising for yourself, trying to impress anyone. You just have to be, and it's a most marvellous experience when you come to it. And the wonder of it is in that experience, you are completely free. You are not trying to play any role, you are not trying to fulfill anyone's expectation."

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## **Introduction to Christian Meditation**

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“Meditation is not the time for words, however beautifully and sincerely phrased. All our words are wholly ineffective when we come to enter into this deep and mysterious communion with God. In order to come into this holy and mysterious communion with the word of God indwelling within us, we must first have the courage to become more and more silent. In a deep, creative silence, we meet God in a way which transcends all our powers of intellect and language. We have to listen, to concentrate, to attend rather than to think. Silence is absolutely necessary for the human spirit if it really is to thrive, and not only just to thrive, but to be creative, to have a creative response to life, to our environment, to friends. Because the silence gives our spirit room to breathe, room to be. In silence, you don’t have to be justifying yourself, apologising for yourself, trying to impress anyone. You just have to be, and it’s a most marvellous experience when you come to it. And the wonder of it is in that experience, you are completely free. You are not trying to play any role, you are not trying to fulfill anyone’s expectation.”