

Talk Three: The Practice of Christian meditation

- ❖ During our first talk, we looked at John Main's pilgrimage and during our second evening, we explored the roots of Christian meditation in our tradition.
- ❖ Today, our focus is on the practice of this discipline. We will use a dozen examples to illustrate various aspects of this form of spirituality and will follow them with quotes from John Main.

Silence

"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."

Word into Silence, p. 7

- ❖ Poets and mystics of various traditions have reminded us that we find the divine in silence. I think all of us have had experience of walking in the woods, or on a beach and appreciating the beauty of nature. Sometimes, also, we decide to get up quite early on a Saturday morning to get to the park or to the trail ahead of the crowd, to better appreciate the silence of nature.
- ❖ Silence, as we well know, only gives the appearance of being empty; in fact it is full of life.
- ❖ Imagine that you're walking in a forest during the middle of winter and that you get to an ash grove. You will see how the trees have kept a good part of their copper colour leaves. In a sense, there is no life here, the leaves look dead. You are probably aware of the silence. Then, you will be attentive to the gentle breeze that comes by and makes those leaves dance and sing. All of a sudden you become aware of the abundance of life in this intense silence: a paradox.
- ❖ As a spiritual practice of silence, meditation is also a paradox. We go beyond words and images, we become quiet. And in the midst of this silence, we don't simply find a sterile emptiness. Mysteriously, we actually connect with the fullness of Life that is better met

without the hindrance of words and images.

- ❖ Let's read again the quote from John Main that we heard last week.

The mantra

"The purpose of saying the mantra is that it becomes the focus of our attention. We are not thinking of anything nor are we pursuing any insights. . . . Let them all fall away as you come to an ever-deeper silence in which the only sound in your mind is the mantra. The mantra itself will teach you the patience needed to say it. It will also teach you the humility needed. In meditating we are not seeking to possess God or to arrive at a profound insight about God. We are seeking simply to accept the gift of our own being as fully and generously as we can. To do this we learn to be still, to be silent and to be humble."

Word Made Flesh, p. 8-9.

- ❖ In Christian meditation, we enter into that sacred silence by the repetition of a single word that we recite from the beginning to the end of our prayer. We say our sacred word to connect to the divine presence in us, to keep our focus. Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who spent nearly 40 years in India, liked this story that he used to illustrate the role of the mantra.
- ❖ There was a parade going through the village, including several elephants. The first elephant drivers were trying hard to control their animals and prevent them from stealing bananas or coconuts from the fruit stands as they were walking by. Most of the time, they did not succeed and the owners of the stands were cursing them for taking some of their valuable produce.
- ❖ There was an older elephant guide that followed them in the parade and he had done something special beforehand. He had found a piece of bamboo about one foot long and given it to his elephant. The animal was holding it in its trunk with pride, as others hold a flag. And when they passed by a fruit stand, the elephant's trunk was already occupied and he did not steal bananas or coconuts.
- ❖ The mantra that we recite is the bamboo stick that we give to our mind to help us concentrate during our meditation.

Simplicity

"The way of meditation is very simple. All each of us has to do is to be as still as possible in body and in spirit. . . .

- ❖ A third aspect of Christian meditation is its simplicity. Let us illustrate this with a comparison.
- ❖ Your experience with walking trails is

Learning to meditate is learning to let go of your thoughts, ideas and imagination and to rest in the depths of your own being. Always remember that. Don't think, don't use any words other than your one word, don't imagine anything. Just sound the word in the depths of your spirit and listen to it. Concentrate upon it with all your attention."

Moment of Christ, p. 93

probably pretty much like mine. There are roughly two kinds of paths. There are those that are complicated to follow because they are not too well marked or because they constantly intersect with others. When you walk on one of them, you have to constantly be attentive not to get lost.

- ❖ Then, fortunately, there are also those paths that are very easy to follow. There is a simple sign such as an acorn, or a number, or colour markers that you see from time to time and that is all that you need. As a result, you can concentrate on enjoying the walk, you can pay attention to the trees, or the river, or the meadows.
- ❖ Meditation is like the second kind of trail: all you have to do is to recite your mantra from the beginning to the end of meditation, and to meditate twice a day.

Stay on the path

"Say your word, recite it, listen to it. I first started to meditate like this about thirty years ago. I suppose that I was as crass as anyone of my age because I was always saying to the man who taught me: "How long is this going to take? I can't sit around here saying this word forever, you know." He would look at me with a rather pained look, and either he would just look straight through me or else he would say, ' Say your mantra.' Thirty years later I am still astonished at the wisdom of that teaching. As I say, you have to take it on faith when you begin. Nothing that I can say or I suppose, that anyone can say will be very significant for you in comparison with the persuasive power of your own experience. You will enter into profounder and profounder silence. You will enter into clearer and clearer

- ❖ Another dimension of meditation could be illustrated by this expression "Stay on the path."
- ❖ When you walk in a provincial or a national park, one of the signs that you see most frequently is "Stay on the path". Often there is an explanation such as "Fragile vegetation" or "Reseeding". Sometimes it's more dramatic like "Dangerous cliffs, or "Cliffs can kill", or "People have died here".
- ❖ In terms of Christian meditation, fortunately there is no risk to our life if we stray from the path! But the invitation is as clear, as important, and as life giving. When we sit quietly, there is no need to do anything else to spice up our silence. There is no point in wandering away from the trail to explore beautiful thoughts. The only essential element is to faithfully recite our sacred word. That simple, and yet challenging discipline will open to the

simplicity.”

The Way of Unknowing, p. 29

divine. We need to stay on it every day, when we feel like it and when we don't.

- ❖ There is no such thing as good days for meditation and bad days: every day is a good day for meditation. We meditate whether things are going well for us or not, whether we feel like it or not. We stay on the path by meditating every day, morning and evening. And that leads us to the divine silence.

From words to presence

“Our aim in Christian prayer is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but *the* reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are. And so, prayer is not the time for words, however beautifully and sincerely phrased. All our words are wholly ineffective when we enter into mysterious communion with God whose Word is before and after all other words.”

The Gethsemani Talks, p. 32

- ❖ To illustrate the next aspect of meditation, we will use an example of relationships. Over the years, many couples experience a gradual change in how they relate to each other, and particularly how much they need to talk to each other. I remember an older couple who told me that at the beginning of their marriage they needed to constantly be reassured of each other's presence by words. It's as if their motto was “We talk, therefore we are.” And gradually, they learned to simply be in each other's presence, without needing to talk all the time. For sure, there continues to be periods to share how the day has been, and to listen to each other. But what is new is that it's okay at time to simply drive together without saying much, it's okay to go for a walk after supper and simply enjoy each other's company. Being together in silence is as rewarding, and sometimes more, than sharing with words. During meditation, it's like we've become an old couple with God: we don't only tolerate silence, we thrive on this simple and rewarding presence.

Distractions

“One of the first things we discover as we start to meditate is that we are already chock full of distractions and that it is not so easy to go beyond that

- ❖ To talk about distractions, I would like to start with a story that is told in the Jewish tradition and I find it is quite appropriate for us today.
- ❖ A rabbi in a small town had a number of

surface level of distracted planning and analysis, to the depth. It is very humbling, not to say humiliating, to discover that after all our education, with all the credits we have clocked up in so many clever areas of expertise, we cannot be still for more than a few moments and that our mind wanders off on the most ridiculous sidetracks. ... We cannot be still. When you begin, and as you make that humbling discovery, you will soon face two temptations. The first is to give up completely and say, "This is hopeless, it is not worth it, it is all beyond me." The second temptation is to say, "Let me analyse what is happening." The first temptation is to despair, or to evade the challenge. The second is the temptation to self-obsession, to become immoderately interested and engage by your own mental processes. Now the art of meditation is to teach you the discipline to continue, and to continue on a daily basis, as one who is committed to depth, to seriousness, to fullness of life."

The Way of Unknowing, p. 32-33

disciples learning from his spiritual wisdom. There were also some itinerant rabbis that went from village to village. The problem is that although some of them were true spiritual teachers, others were charlatans.

- ❖ When our rabbi announced to his disciples that there would be an itinerant rabbi who would come for a visit, the disciples asked their master how they could distinguish whether the visitor was a genuine teacher or simply pretended to be. After reflecting on this for a few minutes, the rabbi proposed this to his disciples. Ask the itinerant rabbi how to get rid of distractions. If he provides you with a solution, it is not a true master.
- ❖ This story reminds us that distractions are unavoidable, that the problem is not so much with the distractions themselves but with our obsession with them. The only thing to do when we realise that we have been distracted is to gently bring our attention back to our mantra. And to repeat that same process every time our mind wanders. No need to be discouraged, no need to feel incompetent.

Are we there yet?

"You have to begin in faith. There is no way you can evaluate what is happening when you begin. Later you will not bother to try to evaluate it. Because meditation is a way of faith you cannot just have a curious stab at it, saying your mantra for three minutes, then stopping to see how you're doing. You learn to say your word from the beginning to the end, every day. This is to be done without the strain of force. The art is setting the word free in your heart, not trying to dominate or control with the word. Only say the word and be."

Word Made Flesh, p. 8-9.

Active or passive?

"To meditate each one of us has to be wholly still, and that is a discipline (...) So I want you to understand that meditation does involve this real discipline, and the first discipline we probably have to learn is to sit quite still. (...) Then you close your eyes gently and begin to repeat your word – Maranatha. The purpose of repeating the word is to gently lead you away from your own thoughts, your own ideas, your own desire, your own sin, and to lead you into the presence of God, by turning you around, but turning you away from yourself toward God. Say the word gently but deliberately, say the word in a relaxed way but articulate it silently in your mind, Ma-ra-na-tha. Gradually, as you continue to meditate, the word will sink down into your heart. And this experience of liberty of spirit is the uniting of mind and heart in God."

Moment of Christ, p. 17

- ❖ "Are we there yet?" This is a question that all parents are only too familiar with. After being in the car for only one hour on a five hour trip, it's hard to know how to respond to this question from one of your kids. Should you be honest and risk discouraging the child? Or should you rather avoid answering altogether by shifting attention somewhere else?
 - ❖ In meditation, this is a question that we often ask ourselves. And in this case, the response is easy: this type of question is of no use. Whenever it arises in our mind, the best thing to do is to ignore it. We're never there, ... and yet we're already there.
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- ❖ During meditation are we active or are we passive? I would like to start with a story told by Jack Kornfield, one of the leading American Buddhist teachers today.
 - ❖ Two disciples got into an argument about the right way to practice. As they could not resolve their conflict, they went to their master, who was sitting among a group of other students. Each of the two disciples put across his point of view. The first talked about the path of effort. He said, "Master, is it not true that we must make a full effort to abandon our old habits and unconscious ways? We must make great effort to speak honestly, be mindful and present. Spiritual life does not happen by accident," he said, "but only by giving our wholehearted effort to it." The master replied, "You're right".
 - ❖ The second student was upset and said, "But master, isn't the true spiritual path one of letting go, of surrender, of allowing the Tao, the divine to show itself? Again the master replied, "You're right." A third student listening said, "But master, they can't both be right." The

master smiled and said, "And you're right too."

(Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart*, pp. 32-33)

- ❖ John Main also knows well that meditation is both active and passive, that on one hand it requires focus and determination and on the other it appeals to our simple openness.
- ❖ We could also compare this process to planting an oak tree, during which there is a clear focus on activity to begin with, and then on receptivity.
- ❖ Initially, a meditator puts the time aside, recites the mantra, and comes back to the sacred word every time his or her mind has wandered off. There is an active and necessary discipline; it is actually as hard as the work of transplanting oak trees. That initial movement is complemented by one where receptivity dominates.
- ❖ Then, the meditator does not focus so much on what he or she does, as on what takes place. It's a time for openness, for active passivity. Putting all one's energy on the discipline would be like continuing to transplant the tree every week. It would certainly not grow faster; it might even wither and die.
- ❖ During that state of receptivity, we connect with the source of our being, with the divine mystery, with our real self. We let it happen, knowing that this is a sacred space to be in. As Simone Weil once wrote, "To wait patiently in expectation is the foundation of spiritual life."
- ❖ We have a quote from John Main, focusing on this aspect.

Less is more

"The mystery of our relationship with God is one that embraces such a vast canvas that only by developing our

- ❖ In Southern Ontario, there is a Provincial Park that presented an unusual scene a few years ago. It contained a large number of mature oak trees that seemed

capacity for awe-filled and reverential silence will we ever be able to appreciate even a fraction of its wonder. We know that God is intimately with us, and we know also that he is infinitely beyond us. It is only through deep and liberating silence that we can reconcile the polarities of this mysterious paradox. And the liberation we experience in silent prayer is precisely liberation from the inevitably distorting effects of language when we begin to experience God's intimate and transcendent dominion within us."

Word into Silence, p. 5

totally healthy. In between them, lying on the ground were some red pines, maybe 15 years old, which had been cut and remained there. How would you account for this mysterious sight?

- ❖ A sign explains what has happened. Approximately 15 years ago, the Park biologist had planted 200 red pines in between the oaks, finding that the large empty space between the oak trees could be used productively. Well, recent studies determined that the original vegetation on the Park site was unique to Ontario, and it was actually called an oak savannah. The mature oaks naturally extend their branches very broadly and when their leaves fall, they tend to prevent the growth of other trees. The new Park director discovered that management had made a mistake fifteen years ago by trying to insert another species in that oak savannah that was beautiful just the way it was. So he had ordered to get rid of the artificial addition of red pines to let the forest revert back to its true origin.
- ❖ This example illustrates very well what is often happening in our spiritual life: we add words and images and concepts to grasp the divine. We tend to move away from open space. There is a saying that goes like this: "Spiritual practice is not so much about adding as it is about subtracting."
- ❖ During meditation we resist the temptation to add new rituals or concepts. We recognize that here, like in many other places, less is more.
- ❖ And the way to do this is by accepting to go in a profound and reverent silence, leaving thoughts and language behind to be in the presence of God.

In the present

"Learning to pray is learning to live as

- ❖ The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nath Han often reminds us of the

fully as possible in the present moment. In meditation we seek to enter as fully as we can into the now, and in entering into the now to live as fully as possible with the now-risen and ever-loving Lord Jesus. To be this fully committed to the present moment is to find ourselves, to enter into ourselves, to dwell within ourselves; and this we do by renouncing thought and image. In meditation we are not thinking about the past, neither our own past nor anyone else's, nor are we thinking about the future, our own nor anyone else's. In meditation we are wholly inserted into the present, and there we live to the fullness of our capacity, our consciousness expanding as we entertain the Lord of Life. The experience of this being wholly conscious is an experience of unity and simplicity."

Word into Silence, p. 22

difficulty we have of living in the present. He uses the expression "Doing the dishes to do the dishes" to illustrate his point.

- ❖ Most of the time, we do the dishes to move over to the next task and thus miss out on the possibility of enjoying the time when we wash the plates and the glasses. And typically, after we're done with the dishes, we then move on to reading a book to our child with the same intention, until the time comes to go to bed. We tend to live in the future rather than in the present. The Buddhist master invites us to mindfulness, when we are totally present to what we do.
- ❖ During meditation, this is precisely what we are doing: being totally there. That is also what John Main urges us to do.

Poverty

"In meditation, then, we declare our own poverty. We renounce words, thoughts and imagination and we do so by restricting the mind to the poverty of one word, and thus the process of meditation is simplicity itself. In order to experience its benefits, it is necessary to meditate twice a day and every day, without fail. Twenty minutes is the minimum time for meditation, twenty-five or thirty minutes is about the average time. It is also helpful to meditate regularly in the same place and also at the same time every day because this helps a creative rhythm in our life to grow, with meditation as a kind of pulse-beat sounding the rhythm. But when all is said and done, the most important thing to bear in mind about meditation is to remain faithfully repeating the mantra throughout the

- ❖ Another element of meditation could be illustrated by a tam-tam. What are its different parts? The skin, the ropes and the resonance box. What is the box exactly? What is it made of? Wood for sure, but what else?
- ❖ Yes, emptiness in the middle. What would happen if we filled it with cushions or towels? It would not resonate. Paradoxically, it is its very emptiness that makes it resonate, produce the sound.
- ❖ Something similar happens during meditation. It is a prayer of poverty, during which we let go of thoughts and words, created a sacred space in which the Spirit can come and resonate.

time put aside for it, throughout the time of what the author of the Cloud of Unknowing called 'the time of the work'."

Word into Silence, p. 12

Introduction to Christian Meditation

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