



Meditatio

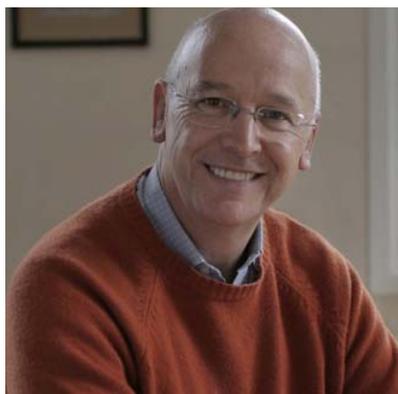
TALKS SERIES 2010 B · APR – JUN

The Tradition of Meditation

FOR A TIME OF CRISIS

Every time we sit to meditate, John Main says, we are entering a tradition. We can validly meditate outside of any spiritual tradition but, Fr Laurence says, it will always lead us back home where we belong: the heart. Prayer today has become very cut off from the heart and this, he says, is the crisis of religion in our time. The meaning of meditation in the tradition of the Desert Fathers is prayer, and prayer in this tradition is the prayer of the heart or continuous prayer: “stable tranquillity and permanent purity of mind”. That is the goal and the path we tread in meditation, bringing to life an ancient wisdom in the midst of our modern crisis. We need to understand this tradition to be fully open to its transforming influence in our own lives, and to be able to hand it on to satisfy the spiritual hunger of our time.

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB



The Tradition of Meditation

FOR A TIME OF CRISIS

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

CONTENTS

1. Hunger for Depth and Meaning	3
2. Experience Embedded in Faith	6
3. A Tradition	8
4. The Conferences of John Cassian	12
5. Continuous Prayer	15
6. Pure Prayer	21
7. The Teaching on the Mantra	26

Transcript of talk by Laurence Freeman OSB at the Canadian Christian Meditation Community National Conference, Toronto, June 2009

© The World Community for Christian Meditation 2010

THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, ST MARK'S, MYDDELTON SQUARE, LONDON EC1R 1XX, UK

www.wccm.org

1

Hunger for Depth and Meaning

Today we're facing a global crisis at many levels. The financial crisis that we are all intensely aware of has been a rude awakening in many ways, a shattering of some of our illusions. It's probably an awakening, a disillusionment, a shattering of illusions, which offers us an opportunity, a window of opportunity. There is no going back I suppose to the wild party, the extravagance, the craziness of the last few years.

So it may be that we are discovering that the kind of growth we were experiencing, that we were dazzled by materially, is the wrong kind of growth. It isn't the kind of growth that expresses or nourishes our humanity most essentially. Maybe we are at a kind of turning point. At least we have an opportunity, as in any crisis, to recover and to reintegrate what we lost somewhere along the way. We paid a heavy price for our affluence, for our technological brilliance, and for our many comforts.

Whenever we are in a crisis, whether it's a personal crisis in our lives or a global crisis, we experience fear because we're losing control. We don't know what is going to happen next. The normal ways that we can predict have been shattered. It maybe a personal loss in our lives – loss of someone we love, loss of an identity or a job or a plan, a material loss; it could be a collective crisis where we go through deep social changes and challenges. We live in an age of economic migration. All this is causing social crisis in many parts of the world.

So nobody chooses to be in a crisis. In fact, we try to avoid being in a crisis. We like to keep things calm and predictable; we like to control the rate of change. But when crisis knocks us sideways, we are also offered an opportunity; a new kind of growth, a new kind of knowledge is made possible. And we come to recognise over time perhaps that this new knowledge is wisdom. Often we look back at the personal crises in our lives and we say: "That was terrible at the

time, but looking back, I'm glad it happened. It taught me something. It made me grow in a way I would never have grown otherwise. It awakened something in me that changed the direction and meaning of my life."

I think we are facing today this opportunity to recognise a new kind of knowledge available to us personally, locally in all our forms of community, and globally. President Obama gave a speech in Cairo yesterday which is one of those turning points in foreign policy, and we hope that it's going to lead to a new kind of relationship between the Islamic world and the Western world. So a new kind of knowledge comes out of crisis with new possibilities of healing and evolution.

And meditation itself, how does that relate to crisis?

Many of us, perhaps have had the experience of the grace of seeing meditation become part of our lives so deeply that we continue to meditate even when we are in a crisis. When something terrible happens, the meditation is such a deeply embedded rhythm and life-giving rhythm and practice in our life that we keep going even through the crisis.

Part of the reason for that I think is that meditation itself is a kind of crisis. It is a controlled crisis. It doesn't lead to panic, but it leads to peace. We're choosing to lose, we're choosing to let go, because somehow or other we've begun to sense that this is the way to growth, this is the way to expand that knowledge that is the wisdom of the Spirit. We change from within in meditation, and we recognise over the time that the inner changes allow us to live differently and better in the real world. But like in any crisis, when we meditate we are facing the unknown, and we're letting go of control. That's why meditation is not easy.

Abbot Isaac in the Tenth Conference of Cassian says to Cassian and Germanus when they ask him about prayer and what prayer is and how they should pray: "You are not far from knowledge when you begin to understand what you don't know." You are not far from knowledge when you begin to understand what you don't know. And being in touch with what we don't know is a good introduction to prayer, and also to the spirit of our time.

John Main spoke about the hunger for depth and meaning that he saw and felt in the people that he met. He recognised and he understood this hunger, and he knew how to respond to it. It is a hunger that's unlike other kinds of hunger, because it is never satiated, it is never finished. It can be satisfied, but we never feel we've had enough. It is this hunger for depth and meaning, this hunger for God, that meditation helps us to understand. That's why John Main was able, I think, to respond so sensitively and widely to the spiritual hunger of his contemporaries, and why our work as a community has continued to grow.

Experience Embedded in Faith

Fr John knew that it is experience that satisfies this hunger for depth and meaning, this love-longing for God. Not books, ideas, or talks, or symbols, but it is experience.

We know that meditation is a way of experience. But if experience is taken out of context, if we just go for experience by itself, the danger is that we become too self-centred, too subjective. And also, we don't have the means to grow till we get the experience, but it is not part of any framework that enables us to grow steadily. It doesn't form the community that is necessary for sustained development. And that's why we need to see experience in the context of faith. I use the word faith, here in a way that is different from belief.

Faith is what saves, if we look at the New Testament and see the way it is used in the gospels. Faith saves you. Faith heals. Faith moves mountains. Faith is the vision of things unseen. Faith is commitment. It's trust. It's our initiation into love. And Faith is our capacity to transcend ourselves. We make acts of faith when we get married, when we enter some new way of life, commitment to a person, to a work, to a community. But that act has to be repeated, just as in meditation. We need to persevere, to go deeper into that act of faith, so that by repetition it becomes a process, and in fact it becomes a way of life.

To be a faithful person takes us to an even deeper level of human meaning. If we were to stop and do a spot-check on ourselves in our human development, that might well be the first thing we look at: Am I a faithful person? Am I faithful to the commitments I have made?

John Main speaks about meditation as a way of faith. He speaks about it as that leap of faith that we make towards the other, towards God, before the other appears and with no pre-packaged guarantee that the other will appear. He says this is the risk involved in all loving. Faith is always intimately connected to loving

And that is why meditation is a way of faith, but in the Christian tradition, it is always understood also as a way of loving, a way of love. And the test that our meditation is getting us somewhere is not how many inches we levitate or how many great experiences we may have during the meditation period. The real test of meditation is: "Are we becoming a more loving person?" With the practice, the repeated act of faith, meditation itself deepens our faith; becomes itself a way of life. We grow by being more faithful. And this growth that our modern culture has focused upon so much is human growth. We look at experiences often in terms of: "Is it going to be a growth experience? Am I going to learn through this? Are we going to grow through this?"

Growth is indeed a test of meaning. We know that life has some meaning even if through difficult, painful suffering, we are growing – growing in faith, growing in love. Experience without meaning, without faith, may be a flash in the dark, an isolated glimpse of the mystery. But experience that is embedded in faith, in love, in community, and in tradition is vision, not just a blinking glimpse but a vision.

3 A Tradition

John Main said that when we sit down to meditate, every time we sit to meditate, we are entering a tradition. Faith is the active passing on of this tradition. Tradition doesn't mean a freezer-fresh set of beliefs or customs or rituals. It is not something that is frozen in time. Tradition itself literally means a passing on, a handing on, *tradere*. It's like a relay race, a passing on without dropping the baton, and it is this passing on of a wisdom, of this knowledge, of this capacity for faith.

It's true that you can take meditation out of any kind of spiritual tradition. We see that today in our secular culture. We like to be reductionist; we like to take away all the mythology, all the belief systems, and just look at what actually it does. What does it do to your blood pressure? What does it *do*? I took my blood pressure the other day and the doctor said, "Do you meditate?" It has wonderful side effects. We can validly meditate for these reasons. But it will always lead us back, if it is actually practised, it will lead us through the experience back to where it's come from. And it takes us back home. That's why so many people express their experience of meditation as a coming home, a coming home to ourselves, a coming home to where we feel we belong

Prayer is the meaning of meditation in terms of our tradition. Our Christian sense of the meaning of prayer has been very attenuated, very restricted, It's been made very cerebral, very heady, very wordy, cut off from the heart where prayer reaches its perfection and its wholeness.

Fr John saw this. This is the crisis of Christianity, the crisis of religion in our time, the cutting off from the heart. Fr John saw this when he reconnected to the tradition of meditation that he found in the simple and deep wisdom of the Desert Fathers. He found the missing link that helps us today to see the whole picture, the whole meaning of prayer. In Cassian, and in the gospel, he again

understood the meaning of continuous prayer in the light of Christian faith: "Pray without ceasing," St Paul says.

This tradition is the heart and the work of our community. It is embarrassingly simple in a complex age like ours just to teach meditation, to keep it simple. We try to do it in our groups and in our conferences and in our books and in all the ways we try to pass on the tradition. We try to resist the temptation of complicating the essential teaching. And it is surprisingly difficult for a culture like ours that prizes quick results. From the beginning, this work of handing on the tradition has involved us in intra-religious dialogue within our own Christian communities. That means that as soon as you start to practise and to teach meditation, you start to be in dialogue with other Christians who don't understand it yet, who haven't quite got it, who don't really see meditation as prayer. It also leads us into a deep inter-religious dialogue, dialogue with non-Christians who do understand it. That's something of a challenge to many of us.

When the Desert Fathers spoke of prayer, they meant the prayer of the heart, continuous prayer. The goal of the monk for them was continuous prayer. "The whole purpose of the monk and the perfection of his heart tend towards continual and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer," says Cassian, "stable tranquillity and permanent purity of mind." That's our goal as well as the path that we are treading.

Tradition is the handing down of this wisdom, this timeless knowledge, that the world is always changing. One big difference between us and the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers is the meaning of the word "monk". The work and life of Fr John exemplify this as well as other great teachers of our time like Merton or Fr Bede Griffiths.

Cassian was a broad-minded man. He believed that you didn't have to be in the desert in order to grow into continuous prayer; you could also do it by living a good life with corporal works of mercy in the middle of a busy city. But I think he would have been surprised to see our gathering this weekend. I think he would have been pleased, and I think he would have said, "ah yes that makes sense; that's how

the tradition was meant to develop." The same tradition, but growing. And I think that the meditator today, the serious meditator, the sincere meditator, is essentially a monk, because to be a monk means, St Benedict said, simply and truly to seek God as the primary goal in life.

Prayer is a way of life, spirituality in the fullest sense of the word. Not just a hobby, not just a weekend activity, but a way of life that pervades and touches everything you are and do. It therefore means ultimately a total conversion of heart, along with deep faithful stability and integration of the personality, the healing of your wounds and hang-ups, and the incarnation of faith in all the ways that we learn to love.

The prayer of the heart, continuous prayer, is this new and ancient knowledge that is being re-discovered, reborn in the middle of our modern crisis. The better we can understand the tradition that brings this to us the better we will be able to hand it on to satisfy that hunger of our time, and the better we will be able to be open to the transforming influence in our own lives. Being a meditator today it seems to me is more than ever to understand how we are part of a living tradition, how we are formed and shaped, how we receive the grace that flows through that tradition. It comes into our own personal lives and changes our lives, but also flows on through us and the community that we then find ourselves part of towards the next generation. In recent years, as we've been teaching meditation to children, we are very conscious of that in our community.

There were two approaches about the time of the Desert tradition to the life of the monk. One was called the *vios angelicos*, the angelic life, where you remove yourself from the world, from all the annoyances of husbands and wives, children and grandchildren, and mortgages, you get out of all this and just live this beautiful life of the angels.

But there is another and I think much more realistic and more Christian view of the monk which touches and shapes the journey of each of us. It was the ideal of a person who grows in faith and love by learning to pay selfless attention to himself or herself, to be vigilant,

to be mindful. As one of the Fathers said, like a pilot at the helm of the ship watching to see where the wind is coming from. Being conscious, being wise, being humble, being open, being centred, guarding the heart, controlling our passions. Above all being a person who is longing for wholeness, longing for this experience that can never be enough, longing for that maturity that we find in our relationship, in our union with Christ: the *totus Christus*, Christ in his totality.

I think this is the great opportunity we have in this crisis to understand, in the deep meaning of our tradition, what prayer is, how prayer is the raising of the mind and heart in wholeness and in holiness, and that this experience of prayer brings us into the fullness of life that Jesus said he had come to bring us.

4

The Conferences of John Cassian

Let's begin with these words from the Gospel of Luke. When the Pharisees who were trying to trip Jesus up asked him when will the Kingdom of God come, he replied: "You cannot tell by observation when the Kingdom of God will come. You cannot say, 'Look here it is or there it is, because in fact the Kingdom of God is within you.'" Which can also be translated as the Kingdom of God is among you, or in your midst.

There are two approaches we can take to the mystery of the Kingdom, the mystery of God's presence. The *cataphatic* is what we are doing now talking, thinking, exchanging ideas, discussing them, saying things about things we know nothing about. One of the fathers of the Church said if you know it you can't talk about it, if you don't know it you shouldn't talk about it. So you have to somehow find that narrow little gap between knowing and not knowing. This is the cataphatic – talking, using images, using ideas. The other approach is of course the *apophatic*, the way of unknowing, unlearning, proceeding by negation rather than assertion or affirmation, not asserting your opinion or your ideas about something, but letting go of your attachment to that belief and discovering what faith is in the process. And that is what we do of course when we meditate.

And these are a bit like the two lenses in a pair of glasses. They have to be balanced; you have to see through both of them in order to get clear, focused vision. Talking and writing and discussing are very natural processes and we need to do that as clearly as possible – there are such things as bad ideas or wrong ideas. They are indispensable ways of transmitting, being open to the power that is the Kingdom. St Paul said somewhere else, how would we know Christ unless we had heard about him, unless someone had said it or communicated it.

But words can be just words, like Hamlet said, "words, words, words, words" – self-referring symbolic signifiers, just going round

and round in circles, like looking up a definition in the dictionary and still not understanding what the word means. Or words can, under the right conditions, convey an experience of the *logos*, of the word itself of wisdom itself.

It was one of the characteristic phrases of the Desert tradition, the early Christian monastic tradition, which flourished for about 150 years between about 250 and 400. (It's still there, you can go and visit Desert monasteries in modern Egypt today, but the great flowering of the Desert, the great Christian monastic movement, was in that period.) One of the characteristic phrases of those Desert monastics, men and women, mothers and fathers, is where a younger monk or seeker, a visitor, comes to an elder, an Abba, and says: "Father, give me a word by which I may live." Give me a word by which I may live.

And we see this in the structure of the Conferences of John Cassian written in the early 5th century when he had left Egypt and come to the south of France, to Marseilles, where he set up a double monastery for men and women. It was there that he was asked to write a treatise or series of treatises that would give some shape and order to what was at that time regarded as a rather wild, chaotic, and anarchic monastic movement. Fortunately monks have become much more domesticated, tamed, and clericalised over the last 1500 years, but at that time they were regarded as rather wild and uncontrollable figures that the Church had to control. So Cassian was asked to write this treatise, and he has left us a series of 24 amazing Conferences on different themes delivered, formally speaking, by one of the great Fathers of the Desert. It was through his contact with the part of these Conferences (9 and 10) on prayer delivered by Abba Isaac that John Main was reconnected to the way of meditation that of course he had encountered through the universal tradition when he was a diplomat in the Far East.

You know the story; it's part of our tradition as a community. He went one day to visit an Indian monk in Kuala Lumpur on some diplomatic mission, and then found that he was in the presence of a spiritual teacher of great depth. And it was from him that he learnt to

meditate, and meditated in his own Christian faith but with the advice and the guidance of this Indian Monk. When he became a monk himself some years later his novice master told him to give this up because it was clearly not Christian. John Main found this rather difficult, but in those days monks were obedient so he did what he was told although he said it was like going into a spiritual desert for a good number of years. Then after some years of monastic life and struggle he was sent to become headmaster of a Benedictine school in the States, in Washington, and it was there, at the busiest time of his monastic life, that he was reconnected to the Conferences of Cassian while trying to help a young guy who had come to the monastery looking for Christian teaching on prayer.

It was that reconnection with the *meaning* of Cassian's teaching on prayer, not just the words but the meaning of it, that has led to the growth and development of our community and continuation of our work in passing on this tradition. Cassian's words about Abbot Isaac re-activated John Main's memory of what he had learnt from Swami Satyananda 20 years before and put him back on this path of meditation.

Cassian himself was a disciple of the great intellectual Desert monk Evagrius Ponticus, but he learned from Isaac who himself was a disciple of one of the Fathers called Chronius, who himself was a disciple of the great legendary archetypal, first prototypical Christian monk Anthony the Great. So we can see ourselves sitting here in Toronto this morning as part of a lineage, with a line of succession.

5

Continuous Prayer

For the Desert teachers prayer means contemplative prayer. It means the prayer of the heart; it means continuous prayer; and it's the most important thing in the world to them. It's the source of meaning. Continuous prayer means "stable tranquillity and perpetual purity of mind". The word "mind" here, shouldn't be seen too cerebrally, intellectually, cognitively. It means heart as well. It means consciousness perhaps. This is the purpose, for the Desert teachers, of all asceticism, of all discipline, of all spiritual seeking. In fact the purpose of everything is to come to this condition of ceaseless or continuous prayer. St Augustine says the same thing on one occasion when he says the whole purpose of this life, the reason we celebrate the sacraments, the reason we read the scriptures, is to "restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen".

So what we see in the Desert tradition is a refreshing and wonderful clarity and priority of purpose. They know what the meaning of life is for them, and it's the most important thing. That's why they are living that particular style of life. But they also realise of course that we don't come to this goal immediately, that we have to see the goal as a sort of long-term goal. But then we have to have an immediate goal. The long-term goal is this Kingdom of God; the immediate goal is working day by day on yourself, purity of heart. And morality, the moral life, is seen as a means to this end.

It's something we have forgotten in contemporary Christianity where we put so much emphasis upon the moral code and moral controversies. We often tear ourselves apart arguing about a particular sexual moral issue or a medical ethical moral issue, and we condemn each other, we ex-communicate each other, we hate each other, we break up our churches, we refuse to speak to each other, we refuse to pray with each other over these moral issues, completely forgetting the wisdom of the gospel itself, that this is the foundation of the journey we are making, not the goal itself.

But the Desert monks understood this. For them the moral life, what they called developing the virtues, tends always towards perfection in prayer. That's why we struggle with our problems, with our faults of character, with the seven deadly sins, with our habits, with our patterns of intolerance or anger or greed or addiction or lust or whatever. This is why we struggle, so that we can come closer towards this pure prayer *oratio pura* which Cassian calls the capstone of the whole structure.

It's this relationship between morality and contemplation that, I think, challenges modern churches and modern church leadership very directly. And judging from what I can see, the clerical leadership of the churches, is not going to get this before the grassroots do. The change in consciousness is rising up as the Holy Spirit usually works through the grassroots not from the hierarchy.

Cassian, in a very left-brain kind of approach, very rational, logical approach, deals with this journey as if it were a project. He uses the parable of the building of a tower. He says if you are going to build a tower make sure you've got good solid foundations. Then the solid foundations will help you to withstand storms and earthquakes and all the problems that will arise in life. So the laying of these foundations is what Cassian understands as the ascetical life. Vice and passions – passion here means disordered problems as we would say or sins, or negative afflictive emotions as the Buddhists would say or negative patterns. Passion, doesn't mean just being passionate about something; it means being disordered and confused. So vice and passion must be cleared first, then, simplicity and humility can be constructed.

So in the beginning of the Ninth Conference Cassian lays the foundations for his understanding of continuous prayer by speaking about the need to control what he calls our anxiety or care about fleshly things. That immediately turns us off – here is this monk sitting out in the middle of the desert telling us not to worry about fleshly things like food and drink and everything else! But what he is talking about and he goes on to describe are these. These are what he means by fleshly things: gossip, idle talk, clowning around, pretty

well everything that we associate with the media, TV and chat shows. Turn on the radio as soon as we get into the car just to have this background chat and gossip and celebrity news, and look through the magazines to see who Hollywood stars are marrying or not marrying – that’s fleshly things. If we want to approach continuous prayer, we’ve got to control that. And then he means other things like anger, controlling anger, sadness, depression. These are things we have to work with.

These are not things we have to blame ourselves for feeling necessarily but when we recognise them, when we recognise that we are controlled by the demon of anger or the demon of sadness as the Desert Fathers described it and also psychology, then we have to work on it. We have to recognise it and work on it. Lust and the desire for money, well these are pretty common demons of our culture and of our age as well, substitutes for God, ways of avoiding the top priority, ways of running away from the goal of life.

So this is what we do every time we sit to meditate. We have to control our care for fleshly things. And this spills over into the way we live as we will see. Planning, analysing, remembering, day-dreaming, all the things that we call distraction, our busy mind. The Irish have a nice expression; when they can’t call something to mind they say I “dis-remember” it. I dis-remember it. That’s what we do when we meditate, we dis-remember, as what *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls, “pushing all the stuff down into the cloud of forgetting”. Let it go. That’s how you control it. It’s letting it go. Control doesn’t mean you have to struggle with it all the time; it means you have to let it go. And that’s the work of meditation.

Moderation and necessity, what we actually need, and using things in moderation shape the moral life. Wherever there is moderation we have what we need. But if we have more than what we need, he says, we will feel immediately care and anxiety. Well that’s a wonderful lesson here for us in the middle of our ecological crisis and our financial crisis. We are probably going to have to get used to living with less. We are going to have to come a little bit closer to the level of what we actually need to live with rather than what we imagine we

want. Too much leads to the *dis-ease*, the diseases of affluence, and there is a real hunger for simplicity in our over-saturated world.

The work of meditation changes our life if we take it seriously. When Fr John was introduced to meditation by his teacher, the teacher just said to him, “Of course I can teach you to meditate, Christian or whatever you are. I can teach you to meditate provided you are serious.” And Fr John replied, “What do you mean by serious?” And he said, “Well, that you *do* it, that you meditate each morning and each evening, and you can come back here once a week and we can talk about it.” But if you don’t do it, you don’t have that fundamental and, as Fr John says, quite moderate seriousness of practice, then we are just spinning our wheels really. That’s the challenge that we find at the heart of this tradition. It’s a challenge actually to put it into practice, to walk the talk. It’s a discipline. And this relationship between the practice of meditation and the kind of life you are living becomes more and more obvious once you do practise it seriously.

Cassian says what you want to be like at the time of prayer, you should try to be like at other times as well. In other words there’s no point in watching six hours of chat shows and Jerry Springer and polluting your mind with gossip, idle talk and clowning around, and then say I ought to meditate now, turn off the television, and do nineteen minutes of meditation. Don’t be surprised if you don’t get enlightened in the first week. So what you want to be like at the time of meditation, at the time of prayer you have to work at before and after. This is why Fr John says the times of meditation are a preparation for your life, the way you live. And the way you live is a preparation for your meditation. They are in a constant dialogue, a silent effective dialogue.

And Cassian says this approach to your moral life, your ascesis, your style of life will lead us to heaven and, he adds, even what is beyond the heavens. What does he mean by that? This will get you to heaven and even to what is beyond the heavens. I think what he’s saying here is that meditation is not as it is taught in a secular context, just about a feel-good factor – lowering your blood pressure,

lowering your stress levels, all of which are good and excellent – but it's more than that. And it's even more about what the Buddhists would call the “calm abiding of the mind”, the peaceful, restful state of the mind where at times (I'm sure we've had little glimpses of it) the mind is clear, free from care and anxiety about fleshly things, able to be lucid and peaceful and calm and enjoyable, a good meditation we might say.

But it's more than that. That's heaven, that's nirvana, and if you approach meditation seriously, it will bring you to heaven. But if you persevere with it, it will take you beyond that, beyond just a changing state of mind, however desirable and enjoyable that state of mind, into something that is unchanging, into the very nature of mind or heart or spirit. So he says let us have a real care for our souls; let's really love ourselves; let's really look after ourselves in the deepest sense.

So one of the things we can say about continuous prayer is that it calls for detachment, both in life, emotions, at the material level, and interiorly in our thoughts. It's a non-controlling, non-possessive relationship. In fact it's the essence of all loving relationships. If you have problems in your relationships, there's probably too much attachment there. To learn to love we have to learn to commit ourselves, to give ourselves, at the same time to be detached.

We learn this in meditation hands on. Continuous prayer is the fruit of this process of faith. Thoughts, Cassian says, are “transformed into spiritual and angelic likeness”. What does he mean by that? Our thoughts are transformed into spiritual and angelic likeness. Well I think what he means is that you can still continue to live in the world, you can still go to work, raise your family, you can still watch the news, or a little bit of junk TV, you can still hold your opinions and your beliefs. But these thoughts, and that word covers a multitude of things, these thoughts, or movements of the mind we might say, or contents of our mind, become a little more transparent. They are not prejudices any more, they are not obsessions, they are not compulsions, they are not addictions, they are not things we use to batter other people with, they are not occasions for argument and

division. We hold them more lightly in their transparency.

So it's not that we've become thoughtless people. To be mindful doesn't mean that you are thoughtless. It doesn't mean that you've become self-centred, just concerned about your own mindfulness, your own enlightenment, your own state of mind. That kind of self-consciously spiritual-minded person is a real bore. It doesn't mean that you've become angry with the world for distracting you from this great spiritual project of enlightenment that you've set yourself. (Everybody's getting in my way, why do you have to have to come and disturb my beautiful state of mind!) But it means that these things, thoughts, become lighter, more transparent. We can see them, we can spot them especially when they start to become negative, and we see through them.

6

Pure Prayer

At this point in the conversation Germanus, a friend of Cassian, raises the problem of distraction, not for the first or last time. He says this is wonderful stuff you are telling us but, he says, I get these moments of mindfulness, these moments of clarity but then I slip. The mind always slips from it; I lose it again. I'm sitting there beautifully calm and peaceful after meditation or a quiet day and then I get a phone call or I get an email that just puts an end to it all, and I slip from it.

Isaac then goes on to a beautiful section in the Ninth Conference where he speaks about the many kinds of prayer. In fact, he says, I don't have enough time to tell you about all the kinds of prayer there are. He summarises them by speaking of what St Paul calls supplication, prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving – four major types of prayer described in the 1st Letter to Timothy. Supplication means asking for forgiveness, recognising our faults and failures. Prayer means making intentions – I'm really going to do better, I'm really going to meditate twice a day from now on. Intercession means praying for others – I'm concerned about a friend going into hospital, a friend, a family going through a difficult situation, praying for peace in the Middle East, genuinely holding the suffering or needs of others in mind and heart. Thanksgiving is ineffable joy, just sheer happiness. And Isaac says these are four major types of prayer. They are all mixed up; you don't have to be too logical about them, but these are good four categories to work with.

But pure prayer, he says, can break in at any time. So what he says here is that pure prayer, continuous prayer, even in brief moments can break in at any time, at any place. There are many forms of prayer. If prayer is becoming continuous then everything is prayer, and therefore prayer cannot be reduced to any form or technique. And that's something Fr John insists upon. You know how important the teaching of the mantra was to him. But equally

important was the underlying understanding of the nature of prayer. You cannot reduce it to a method or technique.

This leads to the fifth and transcendent dimension of prayer, unity, what he calls the prayer of fire, beyond thoughts, beyond words, in silence where all the senses are gathered together in unity. So every sense, physical and spiritual sense, every way in which we perceive, every subtle or gross aspect of consciousness, is gathered into this silent unity. And he says this prayer of fire can be triggered by anything. He says it could be triggered by a verse from the Psalms; it could be triggered by a cantor's voice; or the death of a friend; or the awareness of our own failings. Any of these movements of the mind or impressions upon the mind can trigger this transcendent experience of continuous prayer where we are led into what he calls the secrets of profound stillness: *hesychia*.

Compunction of heart is a very important idea for the Desert monks, the opening of the heart, in tears very often. A number of people experience tears. Sometimes they think they are a bit weird; they say I've been meditating and suddenly I find myself crying all the way through the meditation. The Desert Fathers would be jealous of you; they prayed for the gift of tears! There may be many different kinds of tears, but compunction of heart and the gift of tears, Cassian says, itself can lead to joy, a release that sets you free from cares and anxieties about fleshly things, and free from your own self-centredness, free from the ego.

But, Cassian says, don't force it. Very similar to what Fr John says about meditation: just do it, be faithful to the twice-daily meditation. And he said that's a minimum. This is a wonderful teaching of Fr John. We all, at the early stages especially, put up such a big fuss, made such a big fuss about the twice-daily meditation. It's such a big deal, and he says this is a *minimum*. It's an effective minimum. It would change your life. But *do* it. Don't force it; in the first fervour of conversion people sometimes say I'm really going for a marathon, I'd like to do ten times a day. With enough experience of the minimum practice, you can then quite naturally move into a slightly more intensive practice without feeling that it's forcing it.

So it's at this point that Cassian quotes the famous saying of St Anthony of the Desert: "The monk who knows that he's praying is not truly praying, the monk who does not know that he's praying is truly praying." It's picking up the very important theme of Christian spirituality, stressing what Jesus means when he says your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing, a kind of innocence. Cassian uses this word "innocence" very often. Fr John uses the word "simple". It actually has a real meaning. It means that we are not self-consciously analysing ourselves or forcing it.

Then still in the Ninth Conference Isaac says: Is this going to work? How are our prayers answered? So much of our contemporary attitude to prayer, I would say even especially among Christians sadly, is at this level of "does prayer get answered". And because we have lost this contemplative dimension of prayer, this understanding of the meaning of continuous prayer, prayer becomes reduced to a very one-dimensional sort of piece of magical technology really.

He says there are many ways in which prayer can be heard. In other words, in which prayer is effective. And these are some of the ways: you discover communion with others, a fullness of faith, you find that you have a new generosity in almsgiving, giving to the poor. And then he says, even if you have none of these virtues you can always persevere. And perseverance is an answer to prayer as well as a means of prayer. Perseverance will lead you to the goal. Very similar to what Julian of Norwich says about how your prayers are answered. Remember, she says, if you pray to God for something and you don't get it, keep praying for it, because eventually your will, will get transformed into God's will. And then when you ask for what God wants you will get it. Transformation of desire we might say.

So Cassian and Germanus are overwhelmed by these teachings of Isaac on prayer, but not satisfied. That's the end of the Conference. At the beginning of the next Conference, number Ten, which is the one that changed John Main's life, Cassian starts talking about what he calls the anthropomorphic heresy. This was a belief that God exists in some form that we can recognise or relate to, some natural pattern, basically that God is created in our image rather than we are

created in God's image. The interesting thing I noticed in re-reading this recently is that he says the vast majority of the monks of the Desert were held in this heresy. Most of them believed it, even though they were good people, holy people and some of them were amazingly disciplined and self-controlled and excellent people of great virtue. But Cassian interestingly says that most of them were anthropomorphic, tainted by the ignorance of ancient paganism.

Now that's the challenge to Christianity in every era: How much of ancient paganism is still around? Some of it is not so harmful; it's even amusing or even beautiful. I was with some of my Irish relatives recently and I lost my car keys just as I was about to leave. I said to one of them, "I lost my car keys." She said, "Don't worry I will pray to St Anthony for you." So I said, "Well hurry up." And so she said, "Don't worry," with a beautiful Irish twinkle, "Don't worry, I'll offer him €5." So I said, "This is really an important quick job." She said "OK I will offer him 10." And then she said, with this wonderful glint in her eye, "St Anthony likes money." I thought, where on earth did that come from? It's the little people, it's the Leprechauns. It's this Celtic mythology breaking into her sincere and strong Christian faith. But it's only a bit of tainting from ancient paganism, We know Leprechauns like money, they hide their pots of gold under the rainbow. Now the money is going into the poor box, St Anthony's poor box in the church, going to a good cause, she's not doing any human sacrifices, but this is the level at which we have to check ourselves.

So Cassian refers to this and he has this great story of a discussion that takes place about this issue of the anthropomorphic heresy. And as we can see there's a lot more at stake in this than we might think, because we are still struggling with this anthropomorphism. It's still our struggle today.

Anyway they had a talk about it and Serapion, this old monk of the Desert renowned for his virtue and his goodness and his holiness, is convinced that you cannot reduce God to something you speak to or think about or talk to. In other words he's been convinced about meditation, we might say. So they sit and they start praying together. In the middle of the session, Serapion collapses on the ground in a

flood of tears and he cries in a loud voice: “They’ve taken my God away from me. To whom shall I now pray?” Beautiful moment. And it shows, just as St John of the Cross shows, how difficult it is to let go of the familiar and consoling patterns of prayer that we’ve developed. We even let go of God. We let go of our thinking about God, our images of God.

The Teaching on the Mantra

Germanus says: How can we find the discipline necessary to achieve this? He returns to the problem of distraction, the mind wandering around as if it were drunk, unclear and inconstant. At this point, Isaac introduces the teaching on the mantra, and this is how he says it. He says: “Now that you are asking the right question, now that you know what you don’t know, now you are in touch with this horizon of your knowledge, I can tell you.” And he says this is something that must be handed down. *Must* be handed down. Then he adds, it can only be made known to a very few who are really keen. So in other words, it *has* to be taught, and in fact the heart of the gospel tradition depends upon our understanding this nature of prayer. But not everyone is going to get it. As Fr John says, it’s caught, not taught.

He then goes on to what we know of the teaching on the mantra, the repetition of the formula as he calls it, or the sacred verse, which must be repeated in every state of mind – gluttony, insomnia, acedia, lust, anger, pride, distraction. In prosperity or in adversity, say your mantra, that’s what Cassian is saying. Say it continuously until, “moulded by the constant repetition of the single verse, you will come to poverty of spirit”. This is the way the Christian understands this tradition. This is what took Fr John into another stage of his own journey as he recognised what he learnt in the East but now understood it in the fullness of his Christian faith. Not a technique, not magic, but a way of faith.

And as Cassian reminds us here, it’s built upon this very important Christian evangelical understanding of human weakness, not perfection. So don’t ever say again, “I’m not a good meditator”, because that implies that you could be a good meditator or a better meditator. It’s like saying (I hear it all the time, I’ve heard it several times at this conference already) we have a group but it’s only a small group. Several people say it’s only a small group of about nine or ten, and I say most groups are smaller than that. So we’ve got to

get over this pagan mentality that it depends upon human strength or numbers. “What is more feeble than a Christian?” Cassian says. “What is weaker than a monk?” That’s poverty of spirit.

Now the interesting thing here at this point is that Germanus, who has listened to this wonderful teaching – he’s got what he’s asking for, he’s heard about the mantra, he’s been given the method of continuous prayer that he’s been seeking – and what does Germanus say: “How can I prevent the mind from wondering?” So Isaac’s response to this, loosely translated, is: look sweetheart I just told you; how many times have I got to tell you? He still doesn’t get it. So Isaac repeats it in slightly different words. This is a very important moment in the teaching of meditation and I’m sure we’ve all had this experience, when the penny drops, or it drops a little deeper into the well of understanding. Or you meet somebody who has been meditating for years. Just the other day somebody said to me, I was wondering whether I could change my mantra according to the liturgical season. That’s a nice idea, a lectio idea, but I said that isn’t the teaching. He’d heard it hundreds of times but he hadn’t got it. So this is *understanding*, spiritual understanding. It takes time and practice. And it keeps us humble because we suddenly realise that we didn’t understand nearly as much as we thought we did. That keeps us close to poverty of spirit.

The Conference ends with Cassian saying: “We were astonished by this wonderful teaching. We thought it was going to be an easy and quick method. Then we discovered that it was more demanding, more difficult than the ways we had been praying before.” Isaac insists upon how this repetition of the formula, of the mantra, leads incarnationally into continuous prayer. He says you repeat it of course in every state of mind: at work, doing whatever jobs you have to do, your responsibilities, when you are travelling, as you are going to sleep at night, even while you are sleeping, while you are eating, while you are going to the loo. Repeat it at all times. Let it go before all your waking thoughts. This is the Russian pilgrim; this is the *Jesus Prayer* as it later developed.

So just to conclude, as tradition is something fluent, something

that is flowing and passing on and developing – as Cardinal Newman says the test of any true tradition is that it develops without losing its essential truth – how might we say Fr John, in recovering and reconnecting to this tradition, and we ourselves continuing it, how did he contribute to the development of this tradition? Cassian ends the Conference by saying because this is so simple, any fool can do it. You don’t have to be learned, you don’t have to be literate. Anyone can do it. But he’s still rather like the beginning of *The Cloud of Unknowing* where it says not everyone should read this book because it’s not something everyone is going to understand. I think one important contribution that John Main has made to this tradition is to insist upon its universality. It’s not only not just for monks, it’s something that anyone can hear about and benefit from, even if they don’t do it. Well at least I hope that’s the case, because I would think about 99% of my life is wasted otherwise.

Speaking about meditation doesn’t mean that everyone you talk to is going to meditate, but I think it’s good that we know about it, that there is this horizon of understanding about prayer, and our minds are open to the deeper sense of what prayer means. This is only one thing.

Fr John has clearly established the universality of meditation in the Christian tradition. You still occasionally get an article written against meditation. I don’t know why that should be, but there is some resistance to the idea that this is universal. There is some attachment to the idea that you ought to be allowed to meditate by your spiritual director who is going to know more about you than God does and give you permission to go on to this contemplative path.

When Fr John speaks about simplicity this is a radical development of the understanding of what Cassian means by simplicity or innocence. It’s for everyone. And we see this reflected in the teaching of meditation to children. We can now say, on the basis of experience and methodical implementation in school systems, that it works – that children can meditate, that they like to meditate, and that they benefit from meditation, and in fact they inspire many teachers and parents to take up the practice themselves.

I think also Fr John has made an important contribution to the tradition at a more practical level or technical level, you might almost say, in how he speaks about the mantra. Cassian simply says, say the word continuously throughout the day. John Main writing in a modern urban context says meditate twice a day, minimum, but if you do, you will see that the way you say the mantra evolves and becomes more subtle. At first you are saying it in your head, constantly distracted by your thoughts and fleshly concerns, so you are *saying* the word. But gradually, as it sinks into the heart, as in other words we begin to de-cerebralise our consciousness, get out of our heads, we begin to sound the word more in the heart, and eventually he says we come to *listen* to it. And then he said, that is where our meditation is really beginning. That's when we begin, as we listen, because the attention is really coming off ourselves. And then he says, in God's own time, you may be led at moments into what Cassian calls "pure prayer", the prayer of fire, of union, where we do not know that we are praying, and then that is when we are truly praying.
