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Meditatio

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Meditating as a Christian

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

These talks to priests and religious in Myanmar are addressed to Christians who wish to meditate, and to do so in the context of their own Christian faith. Fr Laurence says that while meditation is a universal tradition, it is also deeply Christian. The doctrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit is essential Christian theology, and this experience of 'Christ in you' is essential to the Christian life. The discipline of meditation as prayer of the heart re-connects us with the Spirit and helps us to transcend the ego. We rediscover our true identity and begin to live as temples of the Holy Spirit. Fr Laurence is a Benedictine monk and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation.



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In meditation, we move from the head to the heart. That is the pilgrimage. If God has taken up his residence within each of us, the place – a spiritual place, not a physical place – the place where we find him is in our heart. That is the essential human spiritual pilgrimage: from the mind to the heart.



Christian Meditation in Christian Life

ARCHBISHOP CHARLES BO (YANGON)

We'd like to welcome Father Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk and Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation. Father, I'd like to thank you for being here, today at the seminary in the evening and tomorrow again with the young people, and then again with the parishioners and the lay people. It's quite a heavy programme, not only here; later you'll be going to Mandalay, and from Mandalay to Taunggyi also.

We have heard often about Buddhist meditation and Zen meditation. Regarding Christian meditation, personally, I started during my seminary days – at the novitiate and then throughout my religious life. But I always have problems with meditation, problems of distraction, sometimes sleeping in the Lord, sometimes as a bishop pretending to be too busy so no time for meditation. That's my personal problem and I hope, Father, you'll help me also with regard to solving all these problems.

Often also our Catholics say, "We have Buddhist meditation and Zen meditation all here and around in the country." And many are asking, "Please teach us how to meditate, how to do Christian meditation." So we are very eager you know, Father, to have your insights, and hope that after this experience, we will mature a bit more in our meditation. So a hearty welcome, and with this introduction, I become your disciple.

FATHER LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB

Your Grace, thank you very much for your generous welcome. Our community is now present in more than a hundred countries: The World Community for Christian Meditation. It began with the inspiration of my own teacher, Father John Main, an Irish Benedictine

monk who died in 1982. He started the first Christian meditation centre at his monastery in London, but he was re-presenting, he was re-discovering and presenting a very ancient tradition of prayer in the life of the Church, and that's what we are here today to be part of – this ancient tradition of Christian prayer.

We are present in more than a hundred countries and in twenty-five of those countries now, we are teaching Christian meditation to children in Catholic schools, elementary and secondary schools. I have learned a great deal from John Main, but I've also learned a great deal by seeing how children respond to meditation, so beautifully, so simply, so naturally.

I was with a group of children a few days ago – nine and ten years old – and meditated with them for about ten minutes because our rule with children is one minute per year of their age. After the meditation they were very silent. The teacher then said, "Do you have any questions for Father Laurence?" So one boy put up his hand immediately and he said, "Yes. Who *invented* meditation?"

Nobody has ever asked me that question in that way before. The answer I gave him was this: "God invented meditation." And why did God invent meditation? Because God loves us and in creating us, he has placed his presence within us, his Spirit within us. And his presence within us, his Spirit within us, is our deepest human identity. It is the mystery of being human, that the Spirit of God is alive and moving in our hearts.

But we forget that. We forget it because we become too busy; we forget it because we become angry or greedy or because our ego takes over. We can forget the presence of God within us. And God has given us meditation. He has given this gift to every human being in order for us to remember, to re-connect, to rediscover every day, every moment, this mystery of what it is to be human, to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. This takes us to the universality of meditation.

Yesterday evening, soon after we arrived, we went to Shwedagon. Everywhere, there are these beautiful statues of the Buddha in meditation. So this whole culture, Buddhist culture, is all over this part of the world, dominated by this image of meditation, of the founder of Buddhism in this state of meditation.

So meditation is universal. We find meditation as a universal human wisdom in all the great families of humanity and for this reason, meditation offers us today a very wonderful opportunity for dialogue at a deep level, for reconciliation, for the healing of the wounds of division, whether it's in politics or over race, or in economic divisions between rich and poor. In meditation, I think we can discover a common ground, a new depth of being human in the modern world with so many different forces at work, so many different divisions and so much conflict. So, I think again God has given us meditation as a gift which we are learning to rediscover in the modern world because our need is so desperate, because we need this deeper experience of being human, this deeper experience of being one family. So, there's a universal aspect to meditation.

It is also deeply Christian. This contemplative dimension is essential, in fact, to our Christian identity and our Christian mission.

A few months ago in Rome, there was a synod on the new evangelization. Our community made a small contribution to that with this idea, that in the teaching of contemplative prayer today, we are evangelizing, that the teaching of contemplative prayer from Christian faith is a form of evangelization – contemporary evangelization.

One of our patrons, a speaker at that synod was Archbishop Rowan Williams, the recent Archbishop of Canterbury. He was invited by the Pope to give the keynote address at the beginning of the synod. He said to me: "They think I'm going to speak about evangelization and ecumenism. I'm not. This is one of the last major talks I will give and I want to speak about evangelization and contemplation."

He gave a beautiful address on how central contemplation is to the Christian life, and that all our Christian work – evangelization, ministry – all of this flows out of our contemplative identity.



Prayer of the Heart

I'd like to say a little bit now about the actual practice of meditation. I'd like you to know what it is I'm talking about when I use the word 'meditation'.

The Archbishop expressed what I think is a very universal memory of many priests and religious, of a certain kind of meditation that you were perhaps taught in seminary or in novitiate, which is more the discursive type of meditation. It is using the mind rather than the heart. But we have these two organs of prayer.

In the catechism that I learned as a child, one of the questions was: What is prayer? And the answer was very simple: Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God. We have these two centres of consciousness, two ways in which we pray. What I'm speaking about in particular today is this prayer of the heart. This is what I call meditation.

Meditation, prayer of the heart, does not exclude other ways of prayer; it doesn't replace other ways of prayer. In my own life as a monk, I pray in different ways. I pray with the Office; I celebrate mass; I have my times of reading scripture and these other ways of prayer, for me, have been enriched, greatly enriched and deepened, because of my meditation. This is a very important point for us to remember as we teach the sacraments, as we take part in other forms of devotional prayer. These other forms of prayer are enriched, and we actually see their meaning more deeply, when we have discovered this prayer of the heart as well.

But this way of prayer, the prayer of the heart, what I call meditation, is something that we need to remember, we need to re-connect with it. We need to rediscover it because we weren't taught it. It's as simple as that. I wasn't taught it as a child, but it's there in our Catholic tradition.

In meditation, we move from the head to the heart. That is the

pilgrimage. If God has taken up his residence within each of us, the place – it is a spiritual place, not a physical place – the place where we find him is in our heart. That is the essential human spiritual pilgrimage: from the mind to the heart.

St Augustine said that the whole purpose of the Christian life – the reason that we celebrate the sacraments, the reason that we read the gospels – the whole purpose of the Christian life is “to restore to health the eye of the heart by which we see God”. It is to rediscover, to open again, our heart, and that is what meditation is all about.

When we meditate, therefore, we are not thinking about God in the ordinary way. We are not speaking to God with words. Those are other forms of prayer. Those are forms of mental prayer where we use our imagination, we use our words, and we think. In meditation, we go to an even deeper level of our humanity. It means we go into the heart; we discover the heart, and we stay there in silence and in stillness. It’s very simple. This is what I’d like to impress upon you today: the *simplicity* of meditation.

So never forget the simplicity of meditation. But simple doesn’t mean easy, and the older you are, maybe the more difficult it is if you are starting late. That is why it is so important, I think, to introduce this as a way of prayer right at the very beginning of our journey of faith, because it is simply part of prayer. We should learn this on Day One, when we first begin to be initiated into the Christian life.

In meditation, then, we make this pilgrimage from the mind to the heart; we let go of words. We lay aside our words and our thoughts, and we come to a place where the Spirit leads us, where we enter into the silence. It is a life-giving silence, not a negative silence. It is the silence of love; it is the silence of communion. It is the silence that we experience whenever we are in touch with God or with each other, in love. So this is the journey of meditation – from the mind to the heart.

In meditation, we let go of words and thoughts. Now that isn’t so easy, because our mind is like a radio that is on continuously. There is more than just one radio; it’s like having a hundred radios on at the same time. We have all the different radio stations in our mind

going on. We are thinking about what happened yesterday or last year; we are thinking about the future, either this evening or next week; and we are daydreaming about all sorts of things. We have hundreds of different channels going on in our mind at the same time – our thoughts, our imagination, our daydreams.

And that is where we start. Let’s be realistic about it; you can’t just turn off the radio. This is the distraction His Grace was talking about, the distractions that we all discover in meditation. So don’t expect to have no distractions. Every human being who has ever learned to meditate has discovered that we are distracted, that our minds are running on different tracks at the same time, and that may discourage you. You may think: I can’t do this, you know. I’m a busy priest or I’m a busy religious. I’m not a contemplative person; I serve God in other ways.

But don’t be discouraged; don’t give up, because this is just human. It is the human condition. Don’t expect to be more perfect than anybody else. This is just how we are, but we can make this journey. We can take the attention off this stream of thought and memory and plans and imagination; and we can, in that way, take one step at a time into this new continent of the heart. It is discovering a whole new dimension of ourselves and a whole new dimension of the mystery of Christ.

How do we do that? How do we get from the mind to the heart? We follow a very simple method, a very simple teaching on how to do it, a practical method. We take this tradition from the early Church, in particular, from the early Christian monks of the Christian desert. The teacher of St Benedict was a monk called John Cassian. John Cassian learned this from the early monks of the Christian desert, who themselves received it from the Apostolic Fathers, they said.

This is the method I would like to share with you today. This is what we lack in the Church – an awareness of a method, a simple method by which we can open up this mystery of prayer. I’m not saying this is the only way to heaven, but I am saying that this is a gift that God has given us that is simple and practical, and we can each one of us benefit from it.

This is it. You take a single word, a prayer word, a short phrase,

and you repeat this word in your mind, in your heart, during the time that we set aside for meditation.

So how do we meditate? What is the practice? We sit down. Why should we sit? Why is the Buddha sitting? St Augustine, I think it was again, who said sitting is the best position for prayer because it is halfway between standing up and lying down. If you are lying down, you are going to be, too relaxed and may fall asleep. If you are standing up like I am now, you are doing something: you are talking or you are walking or you are going somewhere. So sitting down is this balance between action and contemplation, between being and doing.

Our posture is important. Jesus tells us to stay awake and pray. Sit with your back straight; you need to be alert. Put your hands on your lap or on your knees, your feet flat on the ground. Relax your shoulders and relax the muscles of your face – your forehead, your jaw – wherever we carry tension. That is the physical preparation.

Now we begin the interior work. We take our word. Choosing the word you say is important because you want to stay with the same word all the way through the meditation. You could take the name 'Jesus', a very ancient Christian prayer word; or you could take the word 'Abba', the word that Jesus made sacred. The word I would recommend, however, is the word 'maranatha'.

Maranatha is the oldest Christian prayer in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. It means 'Come Lord'. We are not thinking about the meaning of the word as we say it because we are letting go of all thoughts in order to enter fully into the real presence, the real presence of God in our hearts.

If you choose this word, say it as four syllables – ma-ra-na-tha, maranatha. Just listen to the word gently, and say it faithfully. When you get distracted – you're thinking about the coffee break or you're thinking about problems at work or you're thinking about what you're going to do tomorrow – that's perfectly natural. Everybody will be distracted. But as soon as you realize that you are distracted, just come back immediately to your word. Come back to it gently; say the word gently without force, and say it faithfully.

So try to sit as still as you can because the stillness of body will help to bring you to a stillness of mind and heart. Keep your eyes lightly closed, and begin to say your word. The word I suggest again is maranatha, ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-na-tha.



The Wheel of Prayer

The basic theology of all Christian prayer is that we enter into the prayer of Jesus and we enter into his experience of the Father, in the Spirit. So, in a sense, we leave behind *my* prayer so that we can become fully united in *his* prayer. This is what St Paul means when he says we do not know how to pray: “We do not know how to pray... but the Spirit prays within us... deeper than words.” That is the fundamental theology of all Christian prayer. We go with Jesus, through Jesus, in Jesus, to the Father, in the Spirit.

There are different ways of prayer, different forms of prayer. I like to think of prayer as a big wheel; it is a good image for prayer, the wheel of prayer. It is a good image because a wheel has to touch the ground. We all came here this morning on wheels. If the wheels were not touching the ground, we would not have travelled here; we would still be where we were with the wheels turning in the air. In the same way, the wheel of prayer has to touch the ground of our daily life. It has to actually engage with the roadway of our life.

The different spokes of the wheel are like the different forms of prayer. We pray in different ways at different times according to our mood, according to whether we are with a large group of people or alone, or with a small group, whether we are praying in a regular way like morning prayer and evening prayer. So we pray in different ways, in different styles at different times. But remember that the goal of all prayer is that we come into continuous prayer, that our whole life becomes one prayer so that everything we do is as St Benedict says: May God be glorified in everything.

These particular forms of prayer and the times of prayer in our daily life are all helping us to enter more and more deeply into this continuous prayer of the Spirit because, by ourselves, we can't pray continuously. That would mean we would have to be thinking about God all the time, specifically thinking about God all the time, or

specifically saying prayers or doing some kind of prayer. We physically can't do that.

To pray continuously means that we open our hearts to the prayer of the Spirit. The prayer of the Spirit is like a great river, a great underground river that is flowing continuously in us. It is the stream of love that flows between the Father and the Son and *is* the Spirit. This is the Spirit uniting the Father and the Son: the Spirit of love. And this is the Spirit that Jesus promised he would send us. He has breathed this Spirit into our hearts through the power of his Resurrection.

Continuous prayer means that we open our hearts to this eternal stream of love flowing in the heart of God, and we enter into that and our lives are flooded by it. Remember, St Paul speaks about the love of God that “floods the inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us”. This is the essential Christian experience: to know that our inmost heart has been flooded. It is not just filled, but actually overflowing, with this love of God through the Holy Spirit. This is the theology of *all* Christian prayer, and it is the same theology for each of those spokes of the wheel, each of those different forms of prayer.

If you just look around this chapel, we see the different forms of prayer. We have the Eucharist, the altar, we have adoration; in the tabernacle we have the Blessed Sacrament. We have the lectern for our reading of scripture, the Stations of the Cross, the rosary, and other forms of devotional prayer. We pray in different ways at different times and, in some ways, we pray according to our background and our training and our personality. So it would be very foolish to be competitive about these forms of prayer. We don't want to become competitive or use force to tell people this is how you have to pray. We have to allow the Spirit to guide us.

However, we should know how these different forms of prayer are related. You have all these different forms of prayer, like the spokes of the wheel. But the spokes of the wheel come together in the hub of the wheel. What do we find in the hub of the wheel, the centre of the wheel? We would say we find the mind of Christ: “Christ in you,” St Paul says, “the hope of your glory to come.”

So, when we approach meditation, we approach it in a totally

Christocentric way. We could meditate with a Buddhist or a Hindu or we could meditate with a scientist who has no religious belief at all, but for us, our understanding of the experience is centred in the mystery and the person of Jesus, the Risen Jesus, in our hearts. This is what we mean by Christian meditation; this is the language, if you like, of our faith. So it is very important that we are grounded in that fundamental theology. We enter through these different forms of prayer into the prayer of Jesus.

There is another way we can answer that question: What do you find at the centre of the wheel? At the centre of a wheel you have to have stillness. The axle has to be solid and strong, otherwise the wheel won't be able to turn around it. You won't be able to control your direction. And here you have this connection between contemplation and action, between being and doing.

These are not two separate compartments of life; they are intimately connected. The quality of your being is going to decide the quality of your doing. We all know that from daily life. What kind of mood are you in? Are you sad? Are you angry? Or are you at peace? Are you joyful? That mood is going to decide how you work, how you speak to people, how you do your work, how you chair a meeting, how you bring a glass of water to a thirsty person. The way you do that is going to be influenced by the quality of your mind, the quality of your heart, the quality of your being.

This is why I am suggesting that in the Christian tradition, we integrate daily meditation into our lives because we all go out of balance. I can go out of balance very quickly. We all do. We have problems, we have disappointments, we have conflicts. Our moods change as well as circumstances in life – the people you are living with, the people you are working with. We all need continuous rebalancing.

In the spiritual life, it is not just an annual retreat; this is a daily practice. This is something that we need to pay attention to continuously to enhance the quality of our being so that our work can truly be a way of glorifying God in everything we do. If our prayer becomes his prayer, then our work becomes his work.

We all have an ego, and that ego can be a servant or a tyrant.

Your ego can master you, especially when you are under attack, or you feel insecure or you are at a difficult moment in your life, you have a transition in your life. Your ego can become agitated, fearful, frightened, or full of desire. So the ego needs to be continuously controlled. The ego has to be a servant allowing us to do this work of God with as little self-interest or self-centredness, as little *me* as possible within it.

We all know that the ego can get into anything. You set up a committee in your parish or in your diocese to bring relief to the poor or to care for refugees. It is a wonderful work; everybody is inspired by it. But after a couple of meetings, the people on the committee are fighting about who should chair the meeting. The ego manifests itself. This is human nature.

The purpose of the daily meditation is to do this continuous servicing of our spirit and rebalancing the stillness at the centre of the wheel with the activity when the wheel turns. Our work is the turning of the wheel, so in one sense, our work is our prayer. But, if there is no stillness or we have lost touch with the stillness at the centre of the wheel, then our work is hijacked. Our activity becomes hijacked by the ego.

So we need this continuous balancing. That is why in the Christian tradition we have morning and evening prayer. This is the standard balancing of the day in the Christian way of prayer. What I am suggesting is that we integrate into our morning and evening prayer at least, time for meditation.

In some way or another we all, in the modern world, need to build in these times of stillness to re-connect to that still point at the centre of the wheel of our lives.



The Fruits of Meditation

We teach and practise meditation as a way of prayer, a way of contemplative prayer. There are different stages and different ways of describing the journey of prayer. Traditionally, these could be identified as three stages. It is a slight over-simplification, but this is it.

The first is *lectio* where we take a passage of scripture. We read it in a quiet way. We re-read it, we chew the word, we ruminate the word, and we allow that particular passage of scripture to nourish us, to awaken us, to touch our hearts. That is a vital dimension of all Christian prayer: that we are nourished by the word of God on a regular daily basis.

Then the next step is *meditatio* – meditation. In this, we move along a kind of a spectrum to the stillness and the silence of the one word. So what we see here is a deepening simplification. The journey to God is a journey of simplification. Thomas Aquinas said “God is infinitely simple”. Infinitely simple. That is why Jesus tells us that we must become simple, “like a child”, if we are to enter into the kingdom of God.

So we move from *lectio*, where we are thinking, allowing the mind to reflect and be nourished by the words of scripture, into meditation where we take our one word and where we remain with the simplicity of this single verse, this single word. The reason I would recommend that you stay with the *same* word in every meditation period is because the word then becomes rooted in your heart by daily practice. It is this that allows the great mystery and the great richness of prayer to flood your life, to penetrate every aspect of your life. This is the wonderful gift of meditation.

While you’re waiting in the immigration line at the airport or when you’re at the supermarket or when you’re waiting to see the doctor, very naturally you will find that your word, your prayer word, will come back into your consciousness. It will re-connect you in

daily life to this mystery of Christ within you, the prayer of Jesus within you. That brings with it the peace and the joy of Christ.

It is there. We don’t have to make it, and it is given to us as a free gift. That is what we mean by grace: unconditional free gift. We simply have to be open to it. This way of meditation I’m sharing with you is a way. I’m not saying it is the only way, but it is a way, a practice from the beginning of the life of the Church, to enable us to be open to this continuous prayer in daily life so the whole of your life is transformed by it. There is no pill that has yet been invented that can give us this experience.

It may not be here, but certainly in the Western countries, mental illness is on the increase. Young people at university now in America go to see their counsellor or they go to see a doctor, they say they are feeling a bit unhappy, and the first thing the doctor does is give them a pill, an anti-depressant pill. We think in the modern world that we can solve these human problems just by medication or by some kind of economic solutions.

In Myanmar, it sounds to me that you are at the beginning of a big economic expansion. International investors are going to be very interested in your country. The young people are going to be very open to the influences of the economically developed world. So this is the moment for us, as the Church, to introduce a way of remaining centred so that economic growth and expansion does not overwhelm us and destroy that natural peace and harmony that we are created for.

I was talking to a young woman in England recently, who is a very successful young businesswoman. She was feeling the stress and pressures of her life and she took a secular course in meditation called Mindfulness – completely without any religious or spiritual connection at all, just to calm down, just to re-connect to herself. She found it very helpful but then, she said: “I knew there was something more.”

This is where we come in. This is what religion, in fact, is all about: the “something more” that human beings are always looking for; that “something more” that we call God. This is where we have to share what we have been given.

So then she went into the internet and connected with our website, wccm.org, she connected to one of our Christian meditation retreats, and came on that retreat. A few months later, I met her at one of the meetings of our young meditators and I said, "How is it going?" And she said: "Very well. I'm so glad to have found this discipline."

"I'm so glad to have found this discipline." That phrase stayed with me – her gratitude for finding a way of prayer that she could build into her daily life. She is still busy and successful, but she is now also balanced, and she now also feels that she is growing in her faith and Christ is truly at the centre of her life.

Certainly in Europe and North America, you are more likely to be introduced to meditation by your doctor or by your psychologist than you are by a priest or a nun. Why is that? What has happened to the Church that, when it comes to the inner life, we have to rely upon doctors and psychologists? Why do doctors recommend meditation? For no spiritual or religious reasons specifically; they recommend it because of the physical and psychological benefits that it brings.

And there has been a lot of medical research over the last sixty or so years into the benefits of meditation. We know now, from research, that meditation helps you deal with stress, stress-related illness: helps you deal with anxiety, helps you recover from depression, helps you sleep better at night, helps you control your anger, and also it helps you with recovering from addiction. So, many people just turn to meditation because of the stressful lives they are living in order to get these benefits.

How do we approach that? We believe that grace works on nature, and our nature is physical and psychological. So it is not surprising that when we open to grace – the pure, free gift of God's love – that there will be benefits that we will experience and recognize in our bodies, in our minds, and in the way we relate to other people. Those are the benefits, but we can see these benefits to be signs of grace.

When we look more deeply into these benefits, we see that they are the fruits of the Spirit or signs of the fruits of the Spirit. As St Paul describes them, the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.

These fruits of the Spirit are much more important than your cholesterol or your blood pressure because these fruits of the spirit are the signs of God's life through Christ expanding in you, divinizing you, preparing you for your union with God. We see these signs in our daily life: in our work relationships, in our personal relationships, and in our relationship with ourselves – how we handle the desires and the conflicts and the problems that we all have. So these fruits of the Spirit, I think, are really the signs of God's life growing in us, which we are enabled to release through the deepening of our prayers, through the opening of our heart.

We are, as St Paul called us, ambassadors for Christ and one of the things we have to bring in this role of ambassador is peace – peace such as the world cannot give.

*Peace is my parting gift to you; my own peace
such as the world cannot give. Jn 14:27*

It is this peace of Christ that connects the individual to the universe, a part of the whole. It is this experience of peace that transforms society. We cannot have a peaceful or a just society unless we have peace in our hearts. We have to find it in our heart, release it in our heart first. Of course, in this work of opening our heart to peace, we face resistance.

We may get impatient or we may just be lazy. These are the two obstacles to all spiritual life. On the one hand, laziness – we just don't do the work; or on the other hand, impatience and we give up because we get impatient. This is why we need a discipline, like that young woman who was so pleased to have found a discipline, a simple method that she could integrate into her daily life.

That is what we are going to share with you. If you can see this and you begin to practise it yourselves, you will find it will transform your lives and your sense of your own vocation, and you will be able to lead others into the same place, onto the same journey.

It is the work of the Spirit; you don't have to be an expert. You don't have to do a PhD in meditation in order to learn to meditate or in order to teach meditation. You only have to be learning, to be a disciple. I think it is for this reason that we could say that prayer,

deep prayer – the full picture of prayer, the full meaning of prayer – is our hope for today, globally.

We face a global crisis today on an unprecedented scale. The problems of the world are very great and very complex. What is needed is a new consciousness, a new way of looking, a new way of seeing. And this is how we, with our Christian faith, can contribute to that, because in contemplation that is exactly what we find: a new way of seeing God, a new way of responding to God's presence in the world.



The Weekly Meditation Group

I mentioned earlier about the role of friendship and community in learning to meditate. I couldn't have learnt to meditate on my own, and I think that would be true of my friends I am here with. That is why a community has come into being.

An important part of the role of any priest or religious is to cultivate and nurture Christian community; you are community builders, nurturing the body of Christ. And meditation is a very powerful catalyst, a very powerful stimulant, for developing that community. It will deepen the experience of community in your parish or in your religious community, and in your work.

To meditate, you simply have to *do* it. Set aside the time, morning and evening. Early morning and early evening are the best times, but you have to sometimes juggle your time. A weekly meditation group is also a very powerful way of supporting that daily practice. So we have many meditation groups all around the world. They meet in churches, but also in people's homes and religious communities, in schools, hospitals, prisons, universities.

So I would suggest to you to first of all think about starting the practice yourself; and secondly, to help you do that, to start a meditation group just for yourself. Start the group to help yourself get started, and see how the Spirit teaches you and where it takes you.

If you are interested in that, we as a community are here to be of whatever help we can be. You are very close to Singapore where there is at least one meditation group in every parish that has grown over the last twenty-five years. That community can certainly be a good friend in helping you to nurture these groups.

We have in our community what we call a School of Meditation, which is a programme that helps people from Day One, when they first hear about meditation, onwards until the point where they start to teach other people and beyond. It is important to be stimulated,

to be nourished, first of all to have good information so that we have a good grasp of the tradition we belong to, we really make sure we know what it means to teach Christian meditation and are confident about that historically, theologically and so on. So we have materials for that. We have a wonderful little book called *Sharing the Gift*. This is a little handbook, resource book, that we produced that would be a great little book to have if you want to start a group and introduce it to other people.

Basically, I would say, start to meditate yourself. You have just begun; you don't have to be perfect. You are not going to be perfect, so give up any idea of perfection. But we can be faithful. There's a saying from an old rabbi: "God does not expect us to be perfect, but we are not allowed to give up." You are not going to be perfect, but we can be faithful.

So, just begin and share this with your people, with your communities, with the people in your parish. And if you start a little group in your parish in a couple of weeks' time, you would find that there will be a few people who will come and join you, once a week.

It doesn't matter if there is one person who comes. You may get a hundred people the first week and two people the next week. Doing the contemplative side of your work, you don't have to count; so it is just about being faithful. But if you have a small group, I guarantee that if any of you, sisters or priests, started a group, you would find some people who would come every week to join you, and they will become your collaborators. They will become teachers in their own turn.

So, just start and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. We can provide some resources and advice and help, and in that sense meditation creates community.



Questions and Responses 1

QUESTION: A very good practical question:

Do we ever stop saying maranatha during meditation, or do we say it from beginning to end?

RESPONSE: We say it continuously because we are letting go; we are selling everything we have. We are committed to poverty of spirit through saying the word continuously. But in God's own time, the third level of prayer can come into play. That is contemplation; and that is God's decision, nothing to do with us.

Contemplation is a grace; it's a gift. There is no technique that can twist God's arm to give us contemplation, but we have to be prepared; we have to be ready for that.

So the meditation is our way of just being there, being ready; like in the parables of the Kingdom where Jesus says, you know, you have to stay awake for you do not know what hour the master's going to come back. Staying awake, staying alert, keeping your lamps trimmed – so that's what saying the word is.

When you first begin to meditate, you say the word for a few moments and then you become distracted. You feel you're a failure and you should feel a failure because we do fail at this. We are not perfect.

However, we can be faithful, so we return to the word and we keep returning to it. Then, over time, the word begins to sink more deeply into your heart and it is as if you are sounding the word more gently and the word is beginning to take root in your heart. And then eventually, it becomes that you listen to the word. You say it with less effort and your attention is easier to maintain.

In all of these stages, you are being wonderfully enriched, wonderfully blessed and you will see the fruits of the Spirit appearing in your life. The deeper you go, of course, the more God can flood your

lives with this love. It is just a question of whether we want to go deeper or not. So, you don't have to evaluate your meditation. You don't say: Was it a good meditation or a bad meditation? Just be faithful to it and you will see the fruits appearing.

Then in God's own time, as I said, you may be led into complete silence, for a few moments maybe even, where your prayer completely becomes one with his prayer. Well, that is grace; that is gift. And as soon as you realize that you have stopped saying the word, come back to the word and start repeating it again. That is the discipline, and that is the simplicity.

You have to be clear about this. Sometimes when you are meditating you can come to a very quiet and clear place in yourself. It is what the Buddhist would call 'clear mind', where the mind seems to be like the sky that has no clouds. You say to yourself perhaps: This is a good place to be. My mind is clear; my mind is open; I'm feeling peaceful. I feel the presence of God. And you may say to yourself: "I have no thoughts". But the thought "I have no thoughts" is a thought. So, as long as you are thinking like that, you keep saying the word.

But over time, you'll find that you say the word much more gently, more subtly, more peacefully. It takes root in your heart and it accompanies you throughout the day as well.

QUESTION: *Father Laurence, you mention we should repeat the word maranatha without thinking of it – the meaning. Would it not be better to repeat a word that has meaning for us, like 'Come Lord', 'Abba' or 'Jesus'? Maranatha has no meaning for me. I do not understand it; it is not my language.*

RESPONSE: It is not your language, it is not my language, but it was the historical language of Jesus. It is a sacred word because it is in the language that Jesus spoke, and because it is the first Christian prayer. St Paul ends the First Letter to the Corinthians with it: *Maranatha*, Come, Lord Jesus.

It is one of the very few words in the New Testament that is in Aramaic because, as we know, the gospel was translated from

Aramaic to Greek. We don't know the original words of Jesus; we only know his words in translation. And this is one of the few words in his own language in the New Testament. So it is a very sacred word and clearly a key word for the early Christians.

We do know the meaning of it. *Maranatha* means Come Lord, Come Lord Jesus, but because it is not in our own language, precisely because it is not in our own language, it doesn't stimulate our thought or imagination. Remember, meditation is not what you think. We are laying aside our thoughts.

This is another approach to prayer than the one that we were usually taught at the mental level of prayer. So you have to get used to this. You will feel at times, "I don't know if this is really prayer; this doesn't feel like prayer; I'm not speaking to God; I'm not asking God for things...". But those are other ways of prayer, at other times; this is a contemplative way of prayer. So, it is helpful, I'm not saying it is essential, but it is helpful to take a word that is not in your own language.

QUESTION: *How can we integrate the Ignatian way of meditation into this universal way?*

RESPONSE: Well, the Ignatian form of prayer and spirituality is one of the many branches of the great tree of Christian spirituality. There are many schools of Christian spirituality – Dominican, Ignatian, Benedictine, Carmelite – many different branches, and all these branches do not compete with each other.

They are an expression of the richness of the Christian spirituality and the deep roots of the tree of Christian prayer in the prayer of Jesus. That is expressed in the diversity of Christian schools of prayer. So you can be an Ignatian – I have many Jesuit friends, I know many Jesuits who meditate in this way. So there is no inconsistency.

This way of meditation, as I've shared with you, is not really Benedictine or Jesuit or Carmelite or anything else. This is as basic as you can get. That is why we find the roots of it so early in the Christian Church, in the early monastic movement of the Desert

Fathers and Mothers from the third to the fifth centuries. It is from there that this method is practised, is found; and it is consistent with all the other forms of spirituality.

QUESTION: *Is meditation also called Centering Prayer? How do they differ?*

RESPONSE: Centering Prayer is another school of Christian contemplative prayer which grew up in the 1970s, about the same time that John Main started to teach. There are many similarities and they certainly come out of this same root. The specific difference would be in the teaching on the word, how to say the word.

We would emphasize the tradition of the Desert Fathers which is to say the word continuously. So that is an important specific difference, but again, it is simply an expression of the richness of Christian spirituality.

QUESTION: *Is it right to give reflection or thought to the people while they are doing the meditation?*

RESPONSE: The simple answer to that is 'No'. During meditation, we are silent so there should be no music or words allowed during the meditation.

If you are having a *lectio* group with a group of people, then of course you will be using words and you will be guiding them perhaps in how to read the scripture, but in the time of this meditation, we let go of all thoughts. Remember the meaning of silence: It is even letting go of our thoughts, and entering into the prayer of Jesus.

The music, for example, or chant, can be a nice way to go into the meditation, but then, stop the music or stop the chant and stop the words, then ring the bell or have some way of going into the meditation. Somebody needs to time it, so the leader of the group will time the meditation – I suggest twenty minutes. Then ring the bell again, and you could have some music or chant. Then you could have a short reading of scripture and time for sharing. So, it is not guided meditation in that sense.

QUESTION: *How can we overcome falling asleep during meditation?*

RESPONSE: It is very natural. Everybody falls asleep during meditation from time to time; you can get drowsy.

The best cure for falling asleep in meditation is to have a work to do, and that is your word. Say your word and keep returning to the word, and that will help you to stay awake. Secondly, get enough sleep at night. Thirdly, don't meditate after a meal and fourthly, choose a good time that is good for you and your body and your schedule, to meditate.

Early morning is usually good for most people. The evening meditation may take you a little longer, but keep trying, and even if you are tired at night try to do the second meditation.

When you begin, you may find you are doing one meditation once a week. After a few weeks, you may find you are doing meditation three times a week. Keep going and keep aiming at doing it twice a day.

It doesn't matter how long it takes you; just keep going. Eventually, your own experience will teach you the value of it; and you will see that the discipline of the morning and evening meditation gives you energy, gives you joy, gives you peace, which go into your life. You learn that from your own experience. So, just start as I said, and if you fall asleep just wake up.

There is a Buddhist saying, I think the Buddha said that no one is enlightened while they are asleep, and Jesus tells us to stay awake and pray, doesn't he? Don't worry about failing; just be faithful. Keep coming back to it.

QUESTION: *Do you describe the beatific vision in your meditation talks? That would save some questions about meditation.*

RESPONSE: We have to know what we mean by the vision of God. Thomas Aquinas says that the vision of God is not us all sitting in a theatre looking up at God sitting on the throne. He says that the vision of God is when we look at each other and we see God in each other.

When we see God in each other. If I see God in you, that makes

me happy. When you see that I am happy, then you become happier. When I see that you are happier, I become even more happy. According to Aquinas, that is the beatific vision.

It is really the experience of love: Love is the vision of God. Pope Francis, I think, is emphasizing that experience of seeing God in our neighbour, especially in those who are needy and those who are poor. So that is the beatific vision really, and our meditation certainly prepares us more and more to experience that.



Questions and Responses 2

QUESTION: *We were taught to listen to the sounds near and far and then to listen to our heartbeats. Is it just an initiation or is it helpful?*

RESPONSE: I think that little technique would be an initiation. It would be a preparation for meditation. If we are teaching from the richness of the Christian contemplative tradition, then we have to make a distinction between preparation for meditation and meditation itself.

You can prepare for meditation the way we did it with some stretching, some physical preparation; or reading of scripture, or some other form of awareness exercise where your mind calms down; or music. You can use different ways to prepare for the meditation, but don't confuse the preparation with the thing itself.

We have to go into the thing itself, into the meditation; this is what people want. We have to give the full meal of prayer to people. So we have to make this distinction between preparation and the meditation itself.

What explains the meditation itself is simplicity. This is a very simple method. It can be practised by a child, by an old person, by somebody on their deathbed, by a prisoner in prison, by somebody recovering from a cancer operation, or somebody raising a family in the middle of their life. It can be practised by anyone and it is simple, not easy. I'm not pretending that it is easy, but it is simple. And as soon as we start – we only have to start – as soon as you start, the Lord comes to help you and teaches you.

QUESTION: *What you are giving is from the oldest of Christian meditation tradition. We should call it old Christian meditation. The Catholic Church is an offspring of all meditation – Buddhist, Hindu and others. Is that correct?*

RESPONSE: Yes. As I said at the beginning, we find meditation in all the great religious traditions. This is God's gift to humanity.

But if we are meditating in Christian faith, then we should learn from the specific Christian tradition, which is a historical tradition. It goes back to the words of Jesus, and we have the whole of the Christian mystical tradition to guide us. We should meditate supported by the sacraments and the other forms of Christian prayer. We should meditate with other Christians in our churches, in our communities.

So that's what makes meditation Christian, but above all, what makes our meditation Christian is our faith in Christ. And if we are deeply rooted in that Christian identity of meditation, we will then be in a position to dialogue on equal terms with all the other traditions. I've been in dialogue with other religions for many years and, believe me, we have something very precious to share with them; and the more deeply contemplative we are, the more we have to share.

QUESTION: *On the journey toward enlightenment, if the Buddha comes in, kill the Buddha, if Christ comes in, kill Christ. So externally, maybe technically, the technique may be the same in Christian and Buddhist meditation, but substantially they seem to be in conflict, opposing each other. Here it is person-centred, Christ-centred; here it is 'nobody must come in between'. How would you justify that?*

RESPONSE: The response to that is that it is in the person of Christ that we find our way to enter union with God. Jesus is not *in* the way; he *is* the way. He is not an obstacle. He is the way in which we enter into this deeper union with God. We have to really understand the mystery of Christ. Meditation hasn't made me understand the mystery of Christ in all its fullness, but I can certainly say that I understand it better because of meditation.

If we read the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, we see that he appeared to the disciples, they didn't recognize him or they were even frightened of him, and then he calmed them. He brought them to calm, and then he would disappear from their sight. But when he disappeared from their sight, they did not feel he was absent, like

the disciples on the road to Emmaus. At the breaking of the bread he disappeared from their sight, but they were filled with joy and confidence, and they ran off to proclaim the good news. All of the Resurrection appearances show that.

We know Christ, as St Paul says, no longer after the manner of the flesh; we know him in his risen form. In the Ascension, he is moved from our sight in order to be more deeply present to us from within. So that is the starting point for Christian meditation: that he is with us and he is accompanying us; we are going *with* him on this journey to the Father.

The only thing we have to remember is that there are many dimensions to this experience of Christ, many forms of prayer. In some of them, we are using our thoughts and images – in sacraments, in scripture, in mental prayer – and those are important to nourish our Christian understanding, Christian faith. But there is also as the Christian tradition teaches this level of prayer of the heart, where we are so confident in Christ's presence that we can let go of our images of him or thoughts about him and enter into a more direct and personal relationship with him.

So it is very different from Buddhism; there's no doubt. I think what Buddhism gives us, in a way, is like how the clock works. Buddhism is very rational and has good psychology, and it shows us how the mind works. We don't need to know all of that, but it is helpful and interesting to know some of it. What Christian faith brings us is the meaning – the *meaning* of time, not just the way the clock works. And what we have in Jesus is the embodiment of that meaning. To know Jesus is to know the Father; to see Jesus is to see the Father.

About this idea of emptiness, the Buddhist *sunyata*, *anatta*. For the Buddhist, the essence of all things is emptiness. That sounds very negative to us, but the emptiness is not nothingness. Emptiness is not nothingness. They define emptiness as being the nature of things, of everything – that it is inter-dependent and it is impermanent. So the nature of everything we can see, know, is impermanent and inter-dependent.

The fact that we are all here today has many causes, many interdependent causes. It is temporary: in a few minutes, we are going to go to lunch; this meeting is over. Everything in our life is like that. I think that is very similar to what we mean by “creature”. Creation is also impermanent. All things are passing away and everything in creation is dependent upon God, upon the Creator.

So I think there are key ideas in Buddhism that we can relate to within Christian theology, Christian understanding, but there is no perfect translation. And the differences between the two traditions are just as important as the similarities, as good dialogue is to respect those differences.

One of the similarities is in meditation – that we all get distracted. The Buddhists fall asleep in meditation; they struggle with it, and so on. That is the similarity.

The difference is our understanding of Christ and that in our meditation we are experiencing, at a level deeper than thought, deeper than words, the real presence of Christ in our hearts. And in that way we fulfil our destiny, which is to travel with him into union with the Father; and as we do that we learn to see him present in everyone. I think that is the Christian experience that comes out of our meditation.

This idea that we go, in some times of prayer, deeper than thought is not an importation from Buddhism, not at all. There are similarities and differences between Buddhism and Christianity. We should be very clear about the similarities, but also respect the differences. But you are absolutely right that in our understanding of the meaning of what we enter into in the silence, it is Christo-centric.

Maybe we could just end with this prayer of St Paul, which is a very beautiful summary of what I've been trying to share with you this morning, from the Letter to the Ephesians:

With this in mind, I kneel in prayer to the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name; that out of the treasures of his glory, he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being so that, through faith, Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and

firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp with all God's people what is the height, the length, the depth and the breadth of the love of Christ, and to know it though it is beyond knowledge. And so may you come to fullness of being, the fullness of God himself. Eph 3:14-21

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I don't have any instrument or thermometer to measure progress for this morning's four hours, but we have definitely, infallibly, made a step forward, a first step forward in our contemplation and our meditation. As Father has said, one thing very essential is never to give up. Don't give up.

I think, I don't know, his name suggests Father Laurence is a free man. If you are a truly contemplative person, I think, according to the Buddhist meditation also, you become a free man, a free person. So we wish that Father is really a free man, and we also are aspiring towards this freedom, the freedom of detachment.

So Father, we thank you for these four hours of your sharing your life especially with all of us, the priests and religious. Let us thank the Lord and let us also thank Father Laurence.



To pray continuously means that we open our hearts to the prayer of the Spirit, which is like a great underground river flowing continuously in us. This is the Spirit uniting the Father and the Son: the Spirit of love. And this is the Spirit that Jesus has breathed into our hearts through the power of his Resurrection.

Continuous prayer means that we open our hearts to this eternal stream of love flowing in the heart of God and we enter into that. And our lives are flooded by it, actually overflowing, with this love of God through the Holy Spirit. This is the theology of all Christian prayer.



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