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Meditatio

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The Monastic Tradition

OF MEDITATION 2

Meditation is the total obedience of the whole self, the whole person.

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Listening to the mantra is what brings us into this state of complete synchronising with the wavelength of the prayer of Christ.

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1

Cassian's Theology of Prayer

John Cassian, as a disciple of Evagrius, was very conscious, very aware that the work of prayer involved dealing with distractions, and so he recognises that distractions are inevitable. But because the mind is inconstant and variable – ‘as light as a feather’ is an image he uses – it can just be blown away by one thought or another. Our prayer is always going to be *work*, the work of attention.

A brother came to Abba Pastor and said, ‘Many distracting thoughts come into my mind and I am in danger because of them.’ Translate that into someone today: ‘I can’t meditate because I’m so distracted; my mind is all over the place.’ The elder, the Abba, took the monk and pushed him out of the cell into the open air and said, ‘Open up the garments that you’re wearing and catch the wind in them.’ The monk replied, ‘I cannot do this!’ And the Abba said to him, ‘If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from coming into your head. Your job is to say no to them.’ It is a very important principle of the prayer of the heart that Cassian is teaching in *Conference Ten*, and it’s a very important principle for any of us as we learn to meditate.

Some of you I’m sure have had the experience of arguing about this way of prayer with people who are unfamiliar with it; maybe from some evangelical, Pentecostal Christians you will hear that this is dangerous because if you blank out your mind the devil will come in. If you’re meditating you’ll say, ‘Who has ever blanked out their mind?’ The time of meditation, we live with distractions. The purpose of meditation is not primarily to get rid of all the distractions; it is to lay them aside. The essence of prayer, according to Evagrius in one of his sayings, is: ‘Prayer is the laying aside of thoughts.’

By prayer there, he means *oratio pura*, the prayer of the heart. Cassian in the *Ninth Conference* puts the teaching of the desert on prayer into the mouth of Abba Isaac, one of the great figures of the

desert. In the *Ninth Conference* Abba Isaac speaks about the different forms of prayer. All of these forms of prayer are valid, and all of them are good and appropriate in their own way. The prayer of the heart or pure prayer does not replace the other forms of prayer. So he says:

I urge first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving should be made. All these kinds of prayer which we've spoken about are helpful and necessary to everyone, so that in one and the same person they will pray in different ways at different times, according to what your mood is, according to where you are, according to who you are with.

Yet at the same time, think about the two hemispheres of the brain. Although we pray in different ways at different times, and all of these different forms of prayer are valid, there is a movement of prayer, a direction and a continuum of prayer which is taking us towards a purity of prayer in which the soul pours itself out to God wordlessly. Cassian calls this, or Abba Isaac calls this the prayer of fire, and it corresponds to John Main's theology of Christian meditation when he says:

All prayer in the Christian understanding is a way of entering into the prayer of Jesus.

There is for the Christian, he says, only one prayer. That is the prayer of Christ – the mind of Christ which is within us, what St Paul means when he says: 'We do not know how to pray but the Spirit prays within us deeper than words (Rom 8:26).' It's not either / or. We can pray in different ways at different times, and we can therefore enjoy a really charismatic freedom in prayer, in the form of prayer that we feel appropriate on particular occasions. But at the same time there is this deep movement of progress or of a pilgrimage, of an inner journey going in a certain direction, taking us into the prayer of Christ. This is reflected in the fundamental Christian theology of prayer, which is that all prayer is moving towards contemplation. Contemplation is the goal of life. So the ultimate way of prayer is to enter wordlessly into that prayer of Jesus, of the Lord

himself. There's a beautiful passage here from *Conference Ten* which describes this state of continuous prayer:

For then there will be perfectly fulfilled in us that prayer of our Saviour, in which he prayed for his disciples to the Father saying, 'that the love with which you loved me may be in them and they may be in us that they may all be one; as you Father are in me and I in you may they also be one in us.' And that perfect love of God with which he first loved us has passed into the feelings of our heart. And by the fulfilment of this prayer of the Lord, which we believe cannot be ineffectual [in other words if Jesus prayed for it to happen it will happen], this will come to pass [this will actually become a reality for us] when God shall be all our love and every desire and wish and effort, every thought of ours and all our life and words and breath; and that unity which exists between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father has been released, shed abroad in our hearts and minds, so that, as he loves us with the pure and sincere and indissoluble love, so we will be joined to him by a permanent and inseparable movement of love, since we are united to him in a way that whatever we breathe or think or speak is God.

Whatever we think, breathe or say is God because we have come to that goal which the Lord, in his prayer, hopes may be fulfilled in us: 'that they all may be one... as we are one, I in them and you in me that they also may be made perfect in oneness... and that those whom you have given me, where I am they may also be with me. (Jn 17: 21-24)'

This is the theology of prayer that Cassian is passionately committed to in his practice. This is why he wants to come to continuous prayer. So he says this ought to be the destination of the monk. This should be his whole purpose,

so that he can possess even in the body an experience of this future bliss, and that he may begin in this world to have a foretaste of that life in heaven and that glory of the

fullness of life. This is the end of all perfection: So that the mind, freed or purged from all carnal desires, may each day be lifted more highly towards spiritual reality, until the whole life and all the thoughts of the heart become one continuous prayer.

So that's clear what he means by continuous prayer. It's a total transformation.

In the tradition of prayer there are three stages. There's the stage of *kenosis*, the purgative way: the purifying of the mind and heart, the emotions and desires, the emptying out, the purification, the hard work. But then that changes into the second stage of illumination or *henosis* where the experience of union becomes more and more intense, more and more delightful. Then finally the goal – as he calls it, 'the end of all perfection' – is *theosis*, divinisation, where we come to share fully in the life of God – that unity with Jesus that shares in his union with the Father.

The theology we see in Cassian on prayer is a very Trinitarian and a very Christocentric theology, and if you want to see that reflected in John Main, read his book *Word into Silence*.



2

The Formula of Abba Isaac

In *Conference Nine* Abba Isaac speaks about the different aspects of prayer and the final goal of prayer, and Cassian and his friend Germanus are thrilled by this. This is a great talk they've received and they feel really uplifted; their minds have been opened and their enthusiastic eagerness for the work of God has increased. So they go back to their cells.

Then *Conference Ten* opens, also by Abba Isaac. *Conference Ten* opens in a curious way by describing the anthropomorphic heresy – the heresy of thinking that we can see and imagine God merely in human terms. He begins by talking about the anthropomorphic heresy, and he mentions the story of Abba Serapion.

Abba Serapion was one of the good old monks, but still held in the grip of this anthropomorphic state of prayer. He was a sincere and good and holy monk, and he was open to discussion with some of the other monks who were talking about this pure prayer and eventually he was persuaded. He said 'I agree; I see what you mean and I'll pray in this way.' So they were praying together in this way, Abba Serapion and the monks, and then in the middle of the prayer, in the middle of the meditation, Abba Serapion collapses on the ground in a flood of tears and cries out, 'They have taken my God away from me and I do not know who to pray to anymore.'

It's a beautiful, touching, poignant moment, and a very expressive one of what we feel. This is actually very similar to what St John of the Cross describes in the beginning of the Dark Nights of the soul where he describes the night of the senses, when we have to wean ourselves off certain familiar and consoling types of prayer in order to go deeper. And there will be times where we feel we're losing God or we're losing familiar kinds of prayer. Anyone who has started to meditate while practising enriching and consoling other forms of prayer may recognise this experience.

That's a very significant little story he drops in there. He understands what it's like; he understands the personal experience of learning to move towards this goal of continuous prayer through purity of heart.

Then he comes back to the discussion with Cassian and Germanus, and now Germanus says to him: 'You know you gave us a great lecture, a great talk on prayer yesterday and we were really excited by that, but you didn't tell us how to do it. How are we going to do this, because our experience of prayer is one of endless distraction and confusion and all of these negative states of mind that you're talking about? We are overwhelmed by them we can't control them. So if we sit there we're just continually failing and we don't know what to do.' Now Abba Isaac responds saying, 'I'm very glad that you've raised that question, because you are next door to understanding when you know what question to ask.' And that is also a very interesting way of putting it. In other words, he can teach them how to come to this state of pure prayer if they are ready; if they are asking, if they want and if they're ready for it. Otherwise, he's not going to push it on them. This is a feature of the teaching of this understanding of prayer down the ages.

Abba Isaac goes on to say, 'I will now share with you a way, a method of coming to continuous prayer that was taught by the oldest monks of the desert, who themselves received it from the Apostolic Fathers.' Just as you might say to your parish priest, 'Well actually, Father, this is a very ancient tradition of prayer', so even then, Abba Isaac is contextualising this radically simple and challenging way of prayer by placing it in a historical and theological tradition. He then describes the method of how to lay aside your thoughts. He recommends a particular verse of the Psalms which should be repeated continuously; pondering it, reciting it, saying it continuously in the heart. He calls this in Latin a *formula* – what John Main refers to as the meditation word, or *The Cloud of Unknowing* the 'one little word', or the mantra, or in Centering Prayer their Sacred Word – the formula by which the mind can hold itself to this work of purification, of pure attention.

The particular verse he gives (of course throughout the tradition

different schools have recommended different mantras or different formulas), the one that he recommends is:

O God come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me.

(Ps 69:2)

That was Cassian's mantra, and interestingly we repeat Cassian's mantra at every celebration of the Divine Office or the *Opus Dei*. We can see a very strong, obvious connection here between the prayer of the heart and the other form of prayer that is very important to Benedict.

What does he say about the formula?

This then is the formula which the mind should unceasingly cling to until, strengthened by the constant use of it in continual meditation, it casts off and renounces the rich and full material of all kinds of thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of this one verse. [By the constant repetition of this single verse we renounce the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought] and so we arrive with ready ease, [in other words, we come very directly] into the experience of that first Beatitude: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

So he has put his cards on the table. He says this is how I do it, this is what I would recommend in answer to your question, and this is the way, in his experience and in the tradition, to that poverty of spirit.

So what are you doing when you say the mantra? You are renouncing thought and coming into poverty of spirit, and so one who becomes 'grandly poor'. It's a very interesting phrase – grandly poor.

By a poverty of this kind we'll fulfil the saying of the prophet, 'The poor and the needy shall praise the name of the Lord (Zeph 3:12).' [And then he says] and indeed what greater or holier poverty can there be than that of the person who knows that he has no defence and no strength of his own, and asks for daily help from another's goodness. And as he

is aware that every single moment of his life depends on divine assistance, he cries to God in prayer.

Then follows a long section in which Cassian describes the many states of mind, or some of the many states of mind, that we pass through as we practise this pure prayer or this way into pure prayer. He says sometimes you're really going to have a great meditation, you're going to feel absolutely floating in heaven and peaceful. Other times, you will feel totally bombarded by negative thoughts. You'll feel a complete failure. You'll feel even that God has rejected you, or maybe God isn't even there. So you will go through many states of mind; and in response to each of these states of mind Abba Isaac says, 'Return to your word.' Return to your formula, because in times of prosperity you don't want to get complacent. You don't want to try to possess the experience because the goal is to become *poor* in spirit and to possess *nothing*. Similarly, when your meditation is terrible and distracted and dry and empty, continue as best you can to repeat your formula, because you *need* it then; you need it to get through this little bit of a dark night.

So Abba Isaac says repeat the formula 'in prosperity and in adversity'. He says that this formula embraces all the feelings that the heart could engender. It's a very important point. The formula, the mantra, is bringing you to a singular point of total personal unity and simplicity. Nothing in you is wasted. Nothing in you is rejected, nothing in you can be repressed. Everything has to be put into the blender, and that's what the formula does. It brings together every real or potential state of mind, emotion, memory, and so on. So it is a radically simple work of unification. Yet this is not a cold and clinical operation.

He says the formula recited in this faith contains 'the glow of love'. Contains the glow of love, and this glow of love is reflected in the humility of the prayer itself. There is nothing more humbling, as many of us know, than saying the mantra. And he says,

*Repeat this verse continually in your breast without ceasing
- when you're working [whatever kind of work you're doing],
when you're travelling, when you're going to bed, when*

you're going to the toilet. Repeat this saving formula which will both protect and purify you as you go to sleep, when you are awake, and you will find [as some of you may have done] that you repeat it even in your sleep. This is the prayer of the heart.

This is why John Main says: 'The essential asceticism of the Christian life is prayer.' If we can understand first of all what asceticism of this prayer of the heart means, then we have understood this whole tradition.

Cassian and Germanus say thank you that's what we were waiting for; now we know what to do. So they go off with their mantra, and then Cassian says:

Actually we discovered we were so happy to hear this because it was so simple so direct and it made sense, but it was much harder than we thought it was going to be. However, we began to see the fruits of this prayer quickly, and especially we saw it in the way we read the Scriptures. The Scriptures were thrown open to us with a new clarity we had never known before. We got to the meaning of these Scriptures through our own personal experience, not through second-hand reflection.

Clearly these were monks who had learned the Scriptures off by heart; the first thing they would have done was to memorise the Psalms and the New Testament, and many of them had the bible off by heart as well. These were people who were immersed in Scripture. So the first thing that they found that reflected the fruits of meditation was their way of reading Scripture.

Then he ends by saying: 'So Abba Isaac brought to a conclusion his second conference on the meaning of prayer, and we were astonished. He gave this to us as a kind of outline for beginners.' What's very important to remember is, just as Benedict says that his Rule is a little rule for beginners, so Cassian says this is an elementary, simple practice for beginners on the inner journey or the spiritual journey. He emphasises the simplicity of it, the

childlikeness of it. He says it's like a child learning the alphabet – they have to learn it by continually repeating how to draw the letters. This is the image of the spirit he uses to describe meditation.

Compare that with John Main's insistence on the simplicity of meditation. Simplicity isn't easy but it is simple. Meditate with children in any of the twenty-nine countries in the world where they're teaching them at the moment, and that meaning of childlike simplicity will become very visible to you. So Cassian says:

We really admired, we were delighted, and we wished to follow as closely as we could this short and simple method. But we have found it harder to do than the way we used to read and pray before. But, it is certain that no one is kept away from perfection of heart by not being able to read.

In other words, you could be the most illiterate person in the world, but even if you didn't read – and the vast majority of the monks of the desert would have been illiterate – even if you were illiterate,

you are not kept away from perfection of heart, [this purity of heart] which lies close at hand for everyone if only they will, by constant recitation of this verse [this formula], keep the thoughts of the mind safe and sound towards God [keep our whole consciousness turned in this direction].

When he says that, it's difficult not to remember the words of Jesus and his teaching on prayer: 'Set your mind on God's kingdom before everything else, and everything else will come to you in due course. (Matt 6:33)

There's a lot more to Cassian as a psychologist, as an observer of the inner journey, his systemisation of the states of mind that we have to deal with, and of the ascetical path, but he puts these two conferences on prayer as the hinge at the centre of his great work for I think a very good reason. Because for him, all of this is not about speculation or theory; it's about practice. And when Germanus asked that simple question of Abba Isaac 'But how do we do it?' that's what Cassian is repeating to us today.

And it's what John Main heard when he was in St Anselm's monastery school in Washington DC in 1969, and he came back to meditation by reading Cassian at that moment, a rather strong moment in his life. He then came to the insight that this was a method, a way of prayer embedded in our monastic tradition which could be and needed to be shared with the whole Church, and that's why we're here.



3

From John Cassian to John Main

We've been exploring different aspects of the monastic tradition of prayer, or the place of meditation in particular in this monastic tradition. The word 'tradition' of course is a dynamic word; it means transmission. It's not a museum where you look at finished works of art, but it's a process in which we are constantly receiving, adapting, and passing on. This is the very nature of the gospel – a transmission of a living word, a living encounter, a living act. It is in this sense that I'd like to speak about John Main as a contemporary figure within this ancient tradition.

In the talk on Merton that Stephan gave today there was a picture of Merton's hermitage in the grounds of Gethsemani Abbey. Thomas Merton died in 1968; in 1976 John Main was invited by the abbot and the monks of Gethsemani Abbey to give some talks to the community. He had returned to London shortly before from a number of years as headmaster of St Anselm's monastic school in Washington DC, and he returned to his monastery in Ealing Abbey to establish, first of all, a lay community within the monastery of young people young men at that time who would live for six months in the monastery learning to meditate and sharing in the monastic life.

That was my point of entry into the monastic life. At that point we didn't integrate the meditation the *oratio pura* with the Opus Dei, with the Office, but we would meditate in a separate house where we were living and then we would walk over to join the monks for the Office, for mass, and for meals of course. Then we'd spend the day working in the grounds or elsewhere in the monastery. The monastic world had begun to hear about this, I suppose – he was invited anyway by the abbot of Gethsemani to give some talks to the monks. That was, in a sense, his first public teaching on meditation in the Christian tradition. Those talks were recorded and we published them as a little booklet called *Christian Meditation: The*

Gethsemani Talks. That still is one of the most useful, simple, and attractive introductions to meditation in the tradition and in the way that he passed it on, transmitted it.

After he had given these talks to the monastic community, he spent a few days in Merton's hermitage and he wrote to a very dear friend of his called Rosy Levitt and said 'I've just celebrated the most loving mass of my life here in Merton's hermitage.' These short few days spent in Merton's hermitage provided him with the experience and the discernment that he needed to make a very important decision, which was whether or not to accept an invitation from the Archbishop of Montreal to go there and establish a Benedictine community that would be dedicated essentially to the teaching and the practice of meditation. And it was there in Merton's hermitage that he came to the decision that he would do this.

He came back to England and eventually persuaded the abbot in the community of Ealing to agree to this. So Gethsemani was an interesting place, if you believe in synchronicity. Merton who done so much to open up the Christian mind to its own contemplative tradition, had not given a specific teaching on prayer that could be translated into the life of the ordinary Christian or a non-monastic Christian, but it was here nevertheless that John Main made a very important decision. By a very strange coincidence, this only hit me a few years ago. In 1990 I was giving a retreat to the monks of Gethsemani and I spent a few days in the hermitage as well, and it was immediately after that that we had the great seminar at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1991, at which The World Community for Christian Meditation was formed – it was named and given a constitution and organisation. So just thinking about tradition as a transmission, the continuity points in a tradition are very significant.

So John Main was clearly part of the picture, an important contemporary part of the monastic tradition that we've been exploring this week. He had total conviction about the monastic archetype. This idea that there is a monk within each person is I think central to the relevance of monastic tradition, monastic culture, monastic teaching, theology – to the Christian life as a whole. If the monastic life was simply a specialised eccentric form of life there

wouldn't be the same relevance to other forms of life. But John Main, like many others, believed that there are deep within us certain archetypes, certain fundamental orientations of our humanity. One of these could be classified in Jungian terms perhaps as an archetype. St Benedict probably gives the simplest and most powerful definition of this archetype when he says, 'The monk is one who truly seeks God.' So there is something within each of us that truly, not just superficially, not just occasionally, but truly and continually seeks God, wholeness, the source, our origin, and our destination. So John Main had a conviction about the universality of this monastic archetype and the value of monasticism to the modern world. This grew with time and through his own experience, and I'd like to give you a little overview of his life to humanise some of these ideas.

He didn't know he was going to become a monk and he didn't know that his great contribution to the world would be a teaching on this aspect of monastic prayer. He had no illusions about the failures of contemporary monasticism. Like John Cassian and Germanus, when they went to Bethlehem and found the life there was not sufficiently deep or helpful in their seeking God, they went from there to the Egyptian desert. Merton himself, increasingly during his life as a monk, wrote critically, sometimes almost very rudely, about the failures of monasticism, monastic life as it was lived. And Bede Griffiths, after twenty years as a monk in England, went to India to find 'the other half of his soul' as he said. These monastic figures believed in monasticism; they believed in the universality of the monastic archetype but they were very clear about the contemporary weaknesses and failures of monastic institutions and of monastic leadership, and John Main suffered this as well.

He was frustrated with the inertia and the complacency of some aspects of this institutional life and of the complacency of a tradition that was too weighed down by its own institutionalism. I think this is an important characteristic of John Main's vision, and this would apply to those other monastic leaders or prophets I mentioned: it's to be able to see the distinction between Tradition and Institution.

But none of these were anti-institutional figures; they weren't

anarchic. They were monks; they were trained to live in a rather hierarchical and highly organised form of life. It doesn't suit everybody, drives some people crazy to have to live in a timetable, but these figures and John Main loved the monastic rhythm of life and accepted and saw the value of the institutional structures and even the hierarchy of obedience and so on, which is not for everybody. But he was frustrated both by personal temperament as a visionary and as a reformer with the way the tradition that should be *carried* by the Institution was often *weighed down* by the institution. Nevertheless, he always believed in it. He believed in keeping the tradition in, or at least organically connected to the institution.

This is why when he did make that decision to leave the comfortable institution of his monastery in London and go and start a completely new experiment in Canada at that time, it was very important for him to carry this idea forward within the institution and get the permission of the abbot and the council, and it took him a couple of attempts to do that. He was a persuasive individual and he carried this idea over, but he carried it over within the institution.



4

John Main's Journey of Prayer

John Main was born in London in 1926 to Irish parents; the family roots were in Ballinskelligs, County Kerry in Ireland. He was educated by the Jesuits at Stamford school and was a chorister at Westminster choir school. They would go back to Ireland occasionally for holidays, but he was really brought up in England. He was very close to his family. They were a strong, loving family, very humorous, slightly wild, enjoyed each other's company immensely, and remained very close always. Immediately he left school he became a trainee journalist on a London paper; he used to do all sorts of reports like writing reports on concerts or football matches.

Then the war came. I think in 1943 he joined the Royal Signals and was attached to a unit that went ahead of the advancing allied troops in occupied Europe. The job of this particular group of soldiers was to identify enemy positions where they were sending out signals. The work of trying to identify where the signals were coming from and then getting in there was greatly helped by the invention of the quartz crystal, which you put in and it makes it much easier to identify where the signals are coming from. And he used this image much later in his life, when he was writing about prayer, to describe how we get onto the wavelength of the mind of Christ. We pick up this signal and tune ourselves into it – a contemporary use of metaphor to describe prayer.

He survived the war and after the war he came back to England. He joined the Canons Regular of the Lateran and spent a year as a novice down in Cornwall, and then was sent to Rome to study. He didn't have the happiest memories of that period. He found it very repressive; it was the kind of church, the kind of religious life that he came to renounce and reject and felt was dehumanising. But he stuck it out for some time and then finally realised that it wasn't for him. So he left and came back to London.

He studied Law at Trinity College in Dublin, and then he decided to travel. He joined the British Foreign Service and went to study Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London; and then he was sent to Malaya to Kuala Lumpur which was then in a state of insurgency fighting communists. He was attached to the Governor General's office as a Chinese translator. One day he was sent on a diplomatic mission to a place called the Pure Life Society, which was then some way outside of Kuala Lumpur; now it's in the busy suburbs of it. He was asked to go to visit an Indian monk called Swami Satyananda who the British had made a Justice of the Peace for his work in bringing about reconciliation among the different racial groups in Malaya; also he had started this Pure Life Society which included an orphanage for children who were victims of the war. He was bringing up children from different religious and racial backgrounds in a spirit of harmony. He went out to visit this monk, delivered his message, thanks and the letter, and then the conversation became a little more free, and they began to talk about the spiritual basis of this monk's life and work.

He began to realise that he was in the presence of a very holy man, a man of deep interiority and deep inner life as well as a man very generously and creatively involved in social work. So the conversation moved on to prayer and the monk asked him, 'Are you a prayerful man, Mr Main, a religious man?' He said, 'Yes I am; I pray; I'm a Catholic. In fact, I go to mass every day and I pray.' And the monk said, 'How do you pray?' Probably a very important question in the history of this tradition. John Main, or Douglas Main as he was then, explained how he prayed, and he described basically the kind of mental prayer that he would have learned and most of us here would have learned as children. Remember he was educated by the Jesuits. He described this once as the prayer of contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication (CTS) – basically those forms of liturgical and mental prayer and devotional prayer. The monk listened to this very respectfully and said it's wonderful to meet a man of spirituality. Then he began to speak about his own understanding of the prayer of the heart, which he called meditation, and he described it in a verse from the *Upanishads* that struck Fr John very deeply:

The spirit of the one who created the universe dwells within the human heart and in silence is loving to all.

'The spirit of the one who creates the universe dwells within the human heart and in silence is loving to all.' John Main was deeply moved by these words, partly because they resonated with his own Christian faith – the Creator and the indwelling of the Spirit – and also because he felt these words were being spoken by someone who knew the meaning of them, who had *lived* the meaning of them.

They spoke a little bit more and the monk explained how, in their way of meditation, they would move from the head to the heart by letting go of thoughts, words, imagination and coming into the silence, the stillness of the heart; and that they did this with a very simple practice of repeating a word or verse continually during the time of the meditation. Again, John Main was struck deeply by this in two ways: partly because of the authenticity with which the monk was speaking, and partly because it resonated with his own tradition of interior prayer, repetitive prayer – the rosary and other forms of repetition – as a way of coming to deeper prayer. But at the same time he knew it was something different. There was a radical simplicity here that he hadn't encountered before, and the clarity of a discipline.

So he said to the monk, 'As I told you, I'm a Christian; could you teach *me* to meditate?' And the monk said, 'Of course! You'll be a better Christian if you do. But,' he said, 'I can only teach you on one condition, and that is if you're serious about it.' He was a busy man and he wasn't going to waste his time on somebody who was just going to waste his time. John Main said, 'What do you mean by *serious*?' He said, 'By *serious* I mean that you will meditate every day in the morning for half an hour and in the evening for half an hour; but you can come and meditate with me once a week and if you have any questions I'll be happy to discuss them and answer them.'

So for about two years this is what John Main did. He was a very disciplined person, in his personal life very organised, and that's probably why he liked monastic life because it was very regular and he was a regular kind of guy. So he introduced meditation into his life, and once a week he would go and meditate with his teacher.

In *The Gethsemani Talks*, those talks he gave at the Abbey of Gethsemani, he said that he would sometimes ask the monk, 'How long is this going to take? What's going to happen next?' And the monk would just say, 'Say your mantra.' In a talk that John Main gave shortly before he died, he remembers this very early introduction to meditation, and he says in this talk 'These are probably the most useful and wisest words I've ever heard about prayer: Say your mantra.'

So, very much enriched in his spiritual life, John Main returned to England. He wasn't all that excited about working for the British Empire, being an Irishman at heart, but he returned to England and in fact returned to Ireland. He went back to his university where he studied law and was appointed Professor of International Law very soon afterwards. He enjoyed university life; he enjoyed being close to his family, hoping to raise his sister's children. Being very organised and also a lover of life, he said, maybe exaggerating a little bit, that he would do all his university work by ten o'clock in the morning and then devote himself to pleasure, like going to the races and concerts and walking. He loved life very much, and I think this love of life is the key to understanding why he became a monk. In 1958 he joined the Benedictine Monastery of Ealing Abbey in London.

What led him to become a monk? Clearly as a very young man, after the war, he felt a call to religious life of some kind. He didn't find it in the form that he first entered it, but the seed of that calling or vocation was there. What generated it probably was the death of a nephew of his, a young boy of twelve who was suffering from a brain tumour. He accompanied the boy and his sister, the boy's mother, and the family during very traumatic and painful illness. As a result of that, he was sent back to the very deep questions of the meaning of life. With a child who dies at the age of twelve, you ask: What is the meaning of life? And this led him to become a monk.

He came to Ealing still integrating meditation into his daily life, in daily Mass, and when he came to the monastery he looked forward to the opportunity to speak about this with a Christian monk.

When he spoke about his prayer life with his novice master, he was a little disappointed, to put it mildly, when the monk told him 'I

don't think this is a Christian way of prayer that you are doing. Maybe God had some plan in using it to bring you to the monastery, but now you should give it up.' That's not what he was expecting to hear. This was 1958, remember; this was even before the Beatles started to meditate, so meditation was very much associated in the Christian mind with something Oriental and non-Christian. So in obedience he did this, he gave up meditation, and in the Gethsemani talks he describes how this was like the beginning of being in the desert. But he was a positive and joyful man and he of course continued to pray in the other ways. Prayer was always a major part, the centre of his life. As a monk he prayed in different forms and he loved all these different forms of prayer. But he had lost this prayer of the heart, which he had learnt in the East. He hadn't yet got the means to connect it to his own Christian tradition.

Then he came to Sant Anselmo in Rome to study theology. He was here during the heavy days of the beginning of the Vatican Council, and he was very enthusiastic about the changes taking place in the mind and mentality of the Church. Then he returned to England, was ordained, and just before he was ordained was when I first met him.

I was a boy in the school at St Benedict's. We were told that there was a new religion teacher going to take us at the beginning of the term. We had destroyed our previous religion teacher, given him a nervous breakdown, and so we were looking forward to doing the same with this new teacher who was called Bro John – he was only a Brother, so we could do what we liked to him. But as soon as he walked into the room we could see that this was a man of great self-possession, confidence, and if he'd been able to deal with insurgent communists in the Malaysian jungle he'd be able to deal with a few schoolboys in West London. His gift I think for teaching children was, as he said, 'Treat them as if they are adults, but never forget that they are children.' When he was ordained he became the deputy headmaster of the school immediately. He was in the background of my four years.

Then in 1969 he was sent to St Anselm's Abbey in Washington DC to do some study – there'd been various things going on. But

very quickly was asked to become headmaster of the school. He took over the school, as he said, rather dramatically. The monks were all leaving to get married – nobody else was getting married in those days except monks who wanted to get married; the boys were all smoking pot or running wild; there was a financial crisis. He brought things into order, and became a very successful headmaster and a successful figure.

One day the Abbot said to him, 'John we have a young man who's a student who's just come back from the East. He's been staying in ashrams and Buddhist monasteries and he's full of stuff about meditation. Could you speak with him because he's asking "Is there anything like this in Christianity?"' So John Main met with him and listened to this young man who was truly seeking God and trying to seek God at that depth of experience that had been opened up to him by his exposure to the contemplative wisdom of the East. That was a turning point, a second great turning point for John Main because, in wanting to guide this young seeker respectfully and at the same level of depth, he was led back to study the roots of his own tradition.

The first point of call on this search into his own tradition was Augustine Baker the great 17th century English Benedictine. In Augustine Baker he read about the prayer of aspirations, of repeated prayers that would form part of the inner life of the monk and of other Christians. Baker refers back to Cassian as the origin of this form of aspiratory prayer. So John Main went back to Cassian, to the *Ninth* and *Tenth Conference* of Cassian and in the *Tenth Conference* he remembered and recognised the same method of prayer – the prayer of the heart, the mantra, Cassian calls it the *formula* – that he had learnt some years before when he was in Malaysia in the East. As I think you may have the impression already, John Main had a quick mind and also a decisive mind; once he had seen something he acted on it. He could wait for a long time patiently, but when he saw it he acted. So he began to meditate again himself.

I went out to see him just about this time on some personal business. He was now meditating again, and he would walk back from the school where he was headmaster to the monastery at

midday for the midday Office and to meditate. He was now meditating three times a day – in the morning before the Morning Prayer, midday, and in the evening after Vespers. I had the good fortune to speak with him at this time, and it was in one of those conversations that he spoke to me about meditation, quite unexpectedly, and what he said made a huge impact on me. He didn't give a long talk about it; he just spoke about meditation in a few light words, and this is how I think tradition happens – just a very light touch, at the right moment. It's all a question of timing isn't it, timing and receptivity?

At that moment it hit me hard, but I didn't understand what he was saying. Intellectually it made no sense to me at all. I was on an intellectual quest for spiritual truth; it didn't seem to make any sense to let go of your thoughts words and images, didn't know what that meant. But at the other level of my heart I knew that what he was saying was totally authentic and true. Not only that, but it awakened in me something new that I hadn't felt before, and I think this is something all of you can identify with – that was a longing, a hunger for the experience of this new revelation, of what this meant in our own experience. And that's a phrase that John Main came to use characteristically in all of his teaching.

It sets him in a different category from any other monastic teachers of this period because he was not only describing what he saw; in fact he recognised that what you see, what you experience, what you find out through meditation is really impossible to put into words. You can use poetry, you can use photographs, you can use theology, you can use all sorts of ways of expression to try to express it, but ultimately that's not the point. So you will not find long, beautiful descriptions of states of prayer in John Main. What you will find is a very persuasive presentation of a tradition, and of a conviction that meditation is something that is universal and that we enter into 'in your own experience' – that's his phrase.

In your own experience. This takes you right back to the heart of the *Tenth Conference* of Cassian. Cassian says *magistra experientia*, experience is the teacher. If you don't do it, you won't understand it. Isn't that what the Swami said to him: I can only teach you if you do

it, if you open yourself to this experience. And isn't that what we say today to people who come to meditation groups or retreats and so on: You have to do it experience it in order to know it.

He stayed in Washington for another few years. Now meditation was becoming more and more powerfully the centre of his life and the meaning of his own monastic journey. He then came back and persuaded or offered the idea to the abbot and the community, of setting aside one of the houses on the grounds as a house for a group of young laymen who would come and live for six months, sharing in the life of the monastery but also developing their own practice of meditation in a disciplined way and meditating three times a day. And I went to see him.

I was leaving a job at an investment bank at the time and I went to see him on a cold January evening. He was alone in this house because it hadn't opened yet, and he was telling me his vision, what it was about. I could again not fully understand it, but this seemed to connect with that hunger that I had had awakened some years before when I heard about meditation. So as I was changing my job, I could take six months and come and learn to meditate finally, because I wasn't doing any meditation. He was a little bit discouraging, and probably thought I wasn't ready for it. But anyway I joined, and it was a very unique experience of monastic living parallel to the institutional form of the monastic life which lacked meditation. Some of the monks came over and meditated with us occasionally but not very often, but they supported it and thought it was a good thing, and they all hoped that we would be vocations to that form of monastic life. The only one was me, but I didn't stay very long in that particular monastery.

It was a transformative experience because at this level where we were, we were also living the tradition; so you had the institution and the tradition in parallel. That creates some tension; institutions can be very suspicious of tradition. They don't mind their own traditions, their own customs, their own habits, but tradition itself can be quite threatening to institutional life. So there were inevitable complications there. Then, as I said, he received an invitation to start a new form of Benedictine monastic life integrating meditation with

the Office, the mass, and prayer, and also making the teaching of meditation central to the life and the work of the monastery. The work of the monastery was not to run a school, not to run a parish, not to make chocolates, or even to write books, but to teach meditation.

So in September 1977 the Abbot of Ealing drove us to Heathrow, to the plane to Montreal. We got out at Montreal in pouring rain. The Bishop of Montreal was there to greet us and drove us to what was to become our first monastery in this experiment. It was the whole of the monastic institution cut back to its roots, pruned to its essentials, but the essence of the life was there – the integration of the Opus Dei with the *oratio pura*, and the hospitality. We didn't have any guest rooms. Some of the lay community from London came out to join us, monks from other parts of North America began to visit us, the Abbot Primate from Rome came out to see him and invited him to start a new Benedictine congregation, which he would have done if he had lived longer. But it was quite new and difficult to categorise, difficult to pigeonhole. John Main's genius really and his courage, his prophetic insight was very powerful.

In 1980 he was diagnosed with colon cancer. All the evidence was that it had been caught very quickly, but it returned in the beginning of 1982 and then metastasised. He died in December of 1982.



5

John Main's Teaching on Meditation

I'll speak about John Main's teaching on meditation, the monastic roots of his teaching on meditation. I mentioned Cassian, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Augustine Baker who speak about this *monologistic* prayer, the prayer of one word. It's this monastic ambience of the tradition that influences the way he teaches.

He teaches meditation as a discipline, as an ascetical discipline – the transcending of the ego. He emphasises the simplicity of this teaching, but also that it's not easy, and because it's not easy we need community to help us to persevere with it, to learn. It's a *learning* process, he says. Fortunately, the meditation experience itself creates the community that allows you to grow and persevere with it.

It's also obediential. For St Benedict, obedience is the primary vow, not just in the sense of doing what you're told in an institutional way, but in *listening*. The word *obedience* means to *listen* deeply to the Word of God. So for him meditation is the total obedience of the whole self the, whole person. And listening to the mantra is what brings us into this state of complete synchronising with the wavelength of the prayer of Christ.

Another aspect of the monastic quality of his teaching is the daily *discipline* of the meditation. In the monastery we're used to the idea that you should go to all the Offices. John Main translates that into the daily regularity of meditation; integrate the meditation with your other forms of prayer, but do it morning and evening.

His theology of prayer which you'll find in his books and his talks: Prayer is transformation. It is the transformation of our mind and heart, the integration of mind and heart. It doesn't replace other forms of prayer, but it brings these other forms of prayer into clarity and into deeper meaning. After he had started to meditate in Washington again, he reread the New Testament and the Scriptures,

and he read them hungrily and attentively, and reacted very freshly to them, particularly to the letters of St Paul.

It is in St Paul that he hears about the mystery of Christ in you, the indwelling Christ: 'We do not know how to pray but the spirit prays within us deeper than words.' (Rom 8:26) All of this became as it did for Cassian. Remember what Cassian says: He knew that meditation was working on him because he was reading the Scriptures from his own experience. He knew experientially what the scriptures were meaning.

One of the key things, the key words in John Main's vocabulary is 'experience'. And it's very important to understand what he means by that – not 'experiences', things that happen in meditation, highs you get, or consolations you get, or visions that you get, or something happening. By experience he means an entering into the bigger, deeper, broader, indeed cosmic experience of Christ. Not just my own little experience – 'oh had a great meditation this morning' – but into the transformative experience of Christ. It is not our prayer but the prayer of Jesus.

This is exactly what Cardinal Newman refers to; this is Newman's great idea as well, that in the Christian life we move beyond notional assent, what Newman calls 'notional assent' – believing all these things with our heads but not actually experiencing them. Newman uses the word 'real' in his vocabulary; John Main used 'experience'.

John Main also believes in that theology of meditation that personal change takes place; we see life not in terms of limitation but in terms of potential expansion. He's a fundamentally joyful person, and also in one sense he is rooted in the Orthodox understanding that it is about the Resurrection even more than the Crucifixion. You can't separate them obviously, but his starting point is the Resurrection, whereas in so much of Western Christianity, Latin Christianity, our starting point and often our ending point is the Crucifixion. So his meditation had, as it were, given him a new centre of theology which was Resurrection. And he saw the Cross, he understood the Cross in the light of the Resurrection. And that's why I think we can see the teaching of meditation as a form of evangelisation, and maybe today an essential form of evangelisation.

How else are we going to get this across to people except through the experience of personal transformation, which leads to community and to a new understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world?

John Main was a churchman; he loved the Church. He was desperately frustrated with it, but also believed in it and believed that it needed to be renewed, reformed and set free from this institutional weight that had descended upon it. As I said at the beginning, and I'll finish here, he was a monk. He loved being a monk although his form of monastic life had changed as mine did. But that only brought him into a deeper experience of the monastic archetype in his own personal story.

He saw being a monk as a liberation, as a joyful liberation, and as a grace. There are many forms of grace in your life such as marriage, or having children, or building a major multinational corporation. All of those might be joyful and grace-filled experiences. Sometimes you can't put them all into one life, but for him the monastic life was a grace, a gift, and his way of expressing that was as a community of love. For him a community of love – and this is what brought me into monastic life because of the way it inspired me – is that the whole purpose of the monastic experience is to create these centres of dynamic love in which the members draw each other out into the fullness of their own personal being. Not easy. He never said it was easy, but he always saw the joyfulness of it. This is an oral tradition; the Gospel is an oral tradition. It doesn't matter how many books you write; at the end of the day, what is transmitted in this tradition is person to person, heart to heart, eye contact to eye contact, physical being with physical being. Obviously we need the media, we need the internet, we need books; we need all these forms to help us to do that, but if everyone of us were to look into our own journey we would be able to identify key moments where this personal one to one encounter took place. That's why community is so central to the monastic life and to the teaching.

There's a chapter in this book *The Expanding Vision* which is an article 'Reflections on Christian Meditation from John Cassian to John Main' by Adalbert de Vogue. Adalbert de Vogue was a great

monastic scholar, a French scholar who died a few years ago. This is a very thoughtful, nuanced appreciation of John Main's place in the historical monastic tradition. This is a very traditional scholar speaking but so traditional that he's radical. He sees that what John Main is doing in terms of Benedictine tradition (not all Benedictine monks would agree with this): John Main returned to a source of the Rule, to Cassian, to supply for a lacuna, a gap, something missing in the Rule which is left open or imperfectly filled by those who make use of it. John Main, by going back to Cassian who was a source of the Rule is able, in a contemporary form of the tradition, to supply a gap in the Rule. It's not entirely a gap, because Benedict points to Cassian, but it is effectively a gap in the Rule – the absence of a method of contemplative prayer corresponding, as Adalbert de Vague says, to the Jesus prayer of the Orthodox Church. We didn't have it. We had the rosary; for some people that is perfectly useful, good, sacred. But we didn't have in the Latin Church the prayer of the heart, a method of the prayer the heart corresponding to the Jesus prayer of the Orthodox Church.



What are you doing when you say the mantra? You are renouncing thought and coming into poverty of spirit, and so one who becomes ‘grandly poor’.



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Fr Laurence explores the monastic tradition of meditation which John Main OSB recovered for modern people yearning for spiritual depth. The monk's goal was to 'pray without ceasing'. Monastic prayer had two aspects: the *opus dei* or vocal prayer and *oratio pura* or imageless prayer. Meditation integrates our two centres of intelligence, the head and the heart, and so enables continuous prayer where work and prayer are not separate but flow one into the other.



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