



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Readings for 14/10/2012



An excerpt from Laurence Freeman OSB, *A Theology of*

Experience? from **MONASTERY WITHOUT WALLS: The Spiritual Letters of John Main** (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), p. 232-3.

John Main [once] recounted about the response to a talk on prayer he had given to a Trappist monastery in Ireland. The abbot had made an impromptu request for an hour's conference on contemplative prayer and led him into a stark church lined with two choirs of silent, hooded monks.

He spoke from his heart about meditation. At the end of the conference the monks filed out silently, but, at the end of the line, one of the oldest monks stopped by him and whispered a question: "What was the mantra?" Father John told him, "Maranatha." The old man absorbed it for a few moments and said, "You know, I have been waiting 40 years to hear this."

To those who heard him pass on the tradition of Christian meditation, John Main's personal presence and authority could be life-changing. His words were a powerful restatement of an ancient teaching brought alive in a fresh and challenging way. . . . For him, the medium of communication was not essentially a human personality but the Holy Spirit, who is equally present in speaker and hearer and in the living Word that connects them. He spoke and wrote with the authority of one who had been led directly into the living heart of the tradition and who had thoroughly appropriated it personally, but it was the living tradition, not just his private experience, that he meant to communicate.

"In your own experience?" is a phrase often found in St Paul that John Main also used often in both his oral and written teaching. He had confidence in the teaching itself to do the work of persuading through experience. The Buddha delivered his dharma with personal authority but told his disciples to test it for themselves in their own experience. Christian teaching, similarly, insists on faith developing in to knowledge (gnosis). John Cassian's *experientia magistra* ("experience is the teacher") expresses a profoundly Christian truth: that Christ is the teaching and the teacher and, if we can faithfully meet the time-tested spiritual conditions—silence, stillness, and simplicity—we will be led into experiential understanding of

this unity. So, as John Main would say, the first task of the human teacher is to "phase himself out as quickly as possible" and lead people to see Christ as the "teacher."

There is strong emphasis on experience in John Main's teaching. Meditation for him is a way of experience in faith not of belief alone. Only in the contemplative experience is this really understood. He did not develop a systematic theology or a teaching that depended on always finding something new to say. His imagination and intelligence might have led him to follow this path, but it was in fact his own experience—based on his daily meditation—that was so real it did not let him forget his own discovery that Christian prayer is about participatory knowledge, not thought: "By thought you will never know Him, only by love" (Cloud of Unknowing).

After meditation: an excerpt from Archbishop Rowan Williams, "Archbishop's Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome," October 10, 2012; full text at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

"...I believe [meditation's] potential for introducing young people to the depths of our faith to be very great indeed. And for those who have drifted away from the regular practice of sacramental faith, the rhythms and practices of [meditation] are often a way back to this sacramental heart and hearth. What people of all ages recognize in these practices is the possibility, quite simply, of living more humanly - living with less frantic acquisitiveness, living with space for stillness, living in the expectation of learning, and most of all, living with an awareness that there is a solid and durable joy to be discovered in the disciplines of self-forgetfulness that is quite different from the gratification of this or that impulse of the moment."

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