



Meditatio

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JOHN MAIN OSB

Fully Alive

To be fully alive, John Main says, is to experience life in the power of Jesus, to live our lives in union with him.

Jesus invites us to this fullness of life. But the invitation comes with a challenge: "If a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self."

Meditation, Fr John says, is a way of losing oneself. The selfless attention we give to our prayer word is a way of fully opening our consciousness to the consciousness of Jesus, and in that openness we expand beyond our limitations into total liberty of spirit, into the Love of God.

John Main (1926-1982) has been acclaimed as one of the great spiritual teachers of the 20th century. He became a Benedictine monk after diplomatic service in the Far East and then teaching law at Trinity College, Dublin. He founded an open Benedictine community in Montreal from which sprang The World Community for Christian Meditation, a worldwide spiritual family linked through the daily practice of meditation.

Selections from talks to meditation groups in Montreal

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The ultimate frontier we are all called upon to cross is the frontier of our own identity, the frontier, in other words, of our own limitation; to be one with all, to be one with the ALL; to practise in the depths of our own being what Jesus summons us to: The man who would find his life must lose it...

What each of us must find from our own experience is that the full vision can only come when our heart is set on God. Every one of us is summoned to this vision. The vision is the blinding light of God's almighty love.

1 The Discipline of Meditation

Meditation is a discipline, and it is a discipline that we are not used to. We are not used to being absolutely still, sitting still; and we are not used to sitting still as a discipline. As a culture, we are trained in self-indulgence and we have to learn to be disciplined. So the posture, the sitting still, and the sitting upright is a first step.

Secondly, you must learn to say your word. The word I recommend you to say is *maranatha* – ma-ra-na-tha. It is an Aramaic word, the language that Jesus spoke, and it means Come, Lord. In the early Church, it was understood to mean Come, Lord Jesus. It is the oldest prayer there is in the Church and it is the best mantra that I know for any beginner in meditation: ma-ra-na-tha. That is all you need to know about meditation for the next twenty years. Just stay with that.

You must sit still and you must say your word, your mantra, from the beginning to the end. People who have been meditating for a short time, three or four years, often think that the time quickly comes when you stop saying your mantra, when you just rest and stay in silence. What you must learn, and it is best to learn it when you are beginning, is the absolute necessity of saying your word from the beginning to the end.

There are all sorts of problems your ego poses to you. If you are a Christian, your ego poses the problem for you: Is this really prayer? Am I really praying to God now? If you are not a Christian, your ego poses the question to you: Am I really using this time to the best of my advantage? Shouldn't I be analysing the profound insights that are coming to me?

What you must learn, whether you are a Christian or whether you are not, is that you must be silent. You have to *learn* to be silent. Don't be discouraged if you find it difficult, to stay with the word, but

stay with it. Don't be discouraged if you find distracting thoughts coming into your minds, stay with the word.

To learn to meditate, it is necessary to meditate every day of your life – every morning and every evening. The time I recommend you to meditate is for half an hour every morning and every evening. Again, don't be discouraged if you fail when you set yourself that as a goal, but return to it. After thirty years or so, it is my own personal conviction that there is nothing more important for us than to practise this meditation.

The tradition tells us that what each of us needs if we are to live our life fully, if we are to expand our spirit fully, is purity of heart – that clarity of perception that will enable us to see reality as it is; to see ourselves as we are; to see others as they are, the redeemed and loved of God; and to see God as he is: Absolute Love. To see all that we require purity of heart, which means to say that we need to be able to see straight ahead of us without refracting our vision through the prism of the ego. Purity of heart.

Kierkegaard describes purity of heart as the capacity “to will one thing”. And the one thing you must *will* when you are meditating is to say your mantra, to say your word; to go beyond all the self-reflective complexities, all the complexities of the self-reflective consciousness; to be silent, and to be still. That is why the bodily stillness is so important as a sacrament, an outward sign of the inward stillness. We all need that purity of heart if we are going to have the humility to see what is before our eyes and to see it with absolute clarity of vision.

The supreme purpose of our creation is to be one. To be one with ourselves, to be one with God, and to be one with all creation. The process of meditation is that process of becoming one. And the way is the way of the one word, ma-ra-na-tha. That is the purpose of the word, the mantra: To still our spirit, to still our mind, to be at peace, to be one with God.



2 Fullness of Life in Christ

Listen to St Paul writing to the Romans:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace by your faith in him until by the power of the Holy Spirit you overflow with hope. (Rom 15:13)

One of the great themes in St Paul's writings is what he calls the fullness of Christ, the *pleroma*, the experience of fullness of life in the power of Jesus.

The Christian life can be described as life in Christ. What that means is that each of us is invited to live our life out of his power. To live our lives, in other words, in union with him who is the source of all power, of all energy, and to do so by being as fully open to his reality as we can be in this life. The way of meditation is simply the way of being open to the consciousness of Jesus, to *his* consciousness.

It is this openness to the consciousness of Jesus that leads each of us to the complete realisation of our potential, of our capacity for development, for expansion of heart and mind. And it is even more than that, because through our union with Christ we are connected, not just with the source of our own being, but we are connected to the source of all being, and all beings.

The experience of prayer is the experience of being in free-flow connection with the source of our own being. This experience rearranges for us our whole vision of reality. Our vision of the whole of creation is now inter-penetrated at every point with the redeeming love of Christ. What we are invited to know in our experience in prayer is that all are one in the power of that redeeming love.

Why our daily meditation is so important for each of us is that it reveals to us, to each of us individually, our own inner oneness. It is

by entering into our own spirit that we find our own oneness with him, with others, and with all creation. Putting this another way, we can say that in meditation we advance into the *pleroma*, the fullness of Christ, and we begin to realise that our call is to be one with the cosmic Christ who is all in all.

Why do we say that meditation is this way of expansion into the *pleroma* of Christ? It is the way of expansion because it is the way of selfless attention to the other; it is the way of loss of self because our attention is wholly absorbed in Christ. It is in this absorption that we leave behind all limitation. The New Testament is constantly using extraordinary language telling us that our mind and his mind are made one; our heart and his heart are made one. The wonder of this experience is that just as we transcend self by entering into the consciousness of Christ, in that very consciousness, we transcend even the limitations of Christ's human consciousness, and in his glorified consciousness we go beyond yet again into the mystery that is the Father.

What does fullness need in order to develop? The answer is emptiness. Meditation, as we know from John Cassian, from the whole of the tradition, is the way of poverty. We have to leave our prayers behind and enter into *the* prayer: the prayer of Christ. Our way is the way of the one little word, our mantra. All other words, ideas, thoughts, we surrender, we leave behind. Our whole being must enter into this process of emptying, emptying out all distractions, all desire, so that we may live and live fully in the mystery of Christ's redemptive love.

What each of us has to remember is that it is the daily fidelity to prayer, the daily fidelity to our meditation in humility, in poverty, in absolute faithfulness that leads us into the fullness.



3 Healthiness of Spirit

A big problem that all of us have to face is deciding what is really important in our lives and what is trivial, to learn to differentiate between what is passing away and what is enduring. The English medieval writer John of Salisbury wrote:

It's not possible for one who, with her whole heart, seeks after truth, to cultivate what is merely empty.

That is the challenge that each of us has to face: Not to cultivate what is empty because with our whole heart we seek after truth, after love.

Meditation is so important for each one of us because we live in a society that is in real danger of losing its sanity. A human spirit that is healthy demands expansion. All of us need room to breathe, to expand, to fill our lives with truth, with love. And if we are healthy, we know that we must cross all the frontiers to what is beyond.

The spirit that is a healthy spirit is the spirit of an explorer: We are not terrified by the beyond, we are not too tired to seek what is ahead. The spirit that is really healthy knows that there is no future for us unless we set out into it wholeheartedly.

Meditation is simply a way of coming to that basic healthiness of spirit, a state wherein our spirit has room to breathe, where it is not assailed and weighed down by trivia or what is merely material; a state wherein, because we are open to ultimate truth and to ultimate love, we are summoned beyond all mere trivia. We are summoned to live our life not out of the shallows but to live our lives at the source.

The ultimate frontier we are all called upon to cross is the frontier of our own identity, the frontier, in other words, of our own limitation. To be one with all, to be one with *the* All. To practise in the depths of our own being what Jesus summons us to: The man who would find his life must lose it.

The discipline of the mantra and the discipline of the daily return to prayer is simply that commitment to turning aside from everything that is passing away and to living our life out of the source of all being. That is why we must leave behind all images, all thoughts, all ideas and imaginations; and we must be silent, as profoundly silent as we can, in the presence of the author of life, the author of love.

What each of us must find from our own experience is that the full vision can only come when our heart is set on God. Everyone of us is summoned to this vision. The vision is the blinding light of God's almighty love. We must learn silence, attention, humility, concentration. The vision is to be found in your heart and in my heart.

It is not too hard for us. It is not too difficult for us if only we can bring to the task our tiny, daily fidelity. This is the problem with us Christians of the latter-day world, that it seems so much that we would give half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening, every morning and every evening. It seems so much, but it is nothing compared to the summons, to the vision, and to the love of the One who calls us.

If the world is going to be renewed, it must be renewed in sanity. If the Church is going to be renewed, it must be renewed in sanctity, based on sanity. Everyone of us in this room is summoned to this basic sanity and to the fullness of sanctity. Never let anyone lead you away from that vision of your life. In our prayer, we discover our own infinite value in God.

Here is a reading from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:

For the love of Christ leaves us no choice when once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all and therefore, all mankind has died. His purpose in dying for all was that while still in this life we should cease to live for ourselves and should live for him who for our sake was raised to life. (2 Cor: 14-15)



4 The Way of Dispossession

One of the aspects of meditation we have to come to terms with is to learn to approach it not with seeking to gain something, to possess something. We have to try to approach it much more in terms of total devotion beyond ourselves.

Christians have often approached their spiritual life in terms of reward, possession. The enemy of all spiritual value is desire: seeking reward, seeking to possess. The wisdom that unlocks the spiritual treasure is the spirit of poverty, a spirit of non-possession. Indeed, in meditation, we learn to be dispossessed.

The spiritual path is a path that leads away from self to the other. As you know from your present experience of meditation, we must tread it in faith and with courage. To learn to say the mantra so that we dispossess ourselves of all thought, of all self-consciousness requires devotion. And it leads us to absolute liberty because we have left behind all the secondary values: success, wealth, possession, power, whatever they may be. In meditation we are not concerned with the fruit of action, but only that we humbly say our mantra. The mantra is for us the way beyond desire into union. We don't cease to be human; we don't cease to be ourselves. Indeed, we *become* ourselves. The *Bhagavad Gita* puts it with beautiful humanity:

Even as all water flows into the ocean, but the ocean never overflows, even so, the sage feels desires but is ever one in his infinite peace. (Gita 2:70)

This is what each of us is invited to. Never underestimate your own vocation or your own capacity, because your capacity is limitless and your vocation, the vocation of each one of us, is into the

mystery of God himself. The infinite peace that we are all called to arises from infinite love. Infinite love. I want you to just consider that for a moment. What does it mean?

The openness of God to each one of us is like a vast space into which we expand into his infinity, and the call of Jesus to each of us is to this infinite expansion of being. The infinite expansion of being is God. All that is required of us is simple fidelity. All that is required of us is that we are serious, that we have our priorities in sane order, that God is first and last. All that is required of us is that we commit ourselves to his truth and to his love. Our weakness, our stupidity is of no importance because any failing of ours, any limitation of ours, gives way as we enter into union with him, with his love, with his being. That is what our meditation is: a simple, daily return to infinite expansion of spirit in him.

Just listen to St Paul:

Your world was a world without hope and without God. But now in union with Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood. For he himself is our peace. So he came and proclaimed the good news.... Peace to you who are far off and peace to those who are nearby, for through him we both alike have access to the Father in the one spirit. (Eph 2:11-19)



5 Death and Resurrection

This is from the Gospel of Matthew:

No man is worthy of me who does not take up his cross and walk in my footsteps. By gaining his life, a man will lose it. By losing his life for my sake, he will gain it. (Matt 10:38-39)

And a little later in the same Gospel:

Jesus then said to his disciples, "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost, but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake he will find his true self. What will a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his own true self or what can a man give that will buy that self back?" (Matt 16:24-26)

I think all of us have read the Gospel, and all of us who have tried to open our hearts to the call of Jesus can sense the truth in those words. The paradox that Jesus puts before us, that to find our life we must lose it, we know at a deep level of our being is true. The challenge which each of us faces is this: How are we going to lose our life; to lay down our life so that we can follow Jesus, not just at the limit of our life but at the centre; not just at the periphery but at the depth of our own being?

From the beginning of the time when people have listened to Jesus and tried to respond to him, his disciples knew the way of prayer, and he himself was the great example. As we know from the Gospels, he often withdrew from his disciples to be alone with his Father. That is exactly the invitation that we have: To leave the surface, to leave the periphery, and at the centre to be at one with Jesus, to be with him in the Father.

All of us who are here tonight come from different starting places, and all of us come with our own personal history, but all of us have one aim, to find Jesus and to find ourselves in him.

The way of prayer that we as monks follow is the way of meditation. Each time we sit down to pray, we try to lose ourselves in Christ and find our true self in him, the person we are, the person each of us is, redeemed by his love.

Let me just repeat for you all the way that we follow as monks. Meditating is becoming still. The first thing that all of us have to learn to do is to sit still. When we meditate in a few moments, spend a few moments getting into a comfortable sitting position, your spine upright. Lightly close your eyes. Then stay as still as you can for the whole time of the meditation. As soon as you have come to that bodily stillness, begin to recite your word; sound it silently in your heart. The word I recommend you to sound is the Aramaic word, *ma-ra-na-tha*. You simply sound those four syllables, breathing them in, breathing out, in silence. You sound them for the entire time of the meditation. The purpose of sounding them is to leave behind your thoughts, your words, your imagination; to leave behind everything that would come under the general heading of self-consciousness.

Prayer is communion, oneness. In prayer the way we travel is to become wholly absorbed in Jesus, and to travel with him in his return to the Father. It is a way of simplicity; you have to learn to be content to say your word. It's a way of discipline; you have to learn to leave behind your own thoughts, your own insights.

During meditation, very often, you may have some thought, some insight that might seem very profound, very religious, very significant, but, meditating is the way of poverty. In the time of your meditation, you surrender those thoughts, those insights into the hands of God. You learn to be childlike, to be as simple as a child, to say your word, and to be content in saying it.

The important thing in meditating is to persevere, to persevere saying the mantra from the beginning until the end of the meditation. That takes some doing; don't be too impatient with yourself. You are always bound to say when you begin, "This is a

complete waste of time. That guy has to be crazy. I can't sit here just saying this word the whole half an hour." You will find too that, inevitably almost, the power of the ego is such that you will give up meditating. You will try maybe for three weeks, maybe for three months. The important thing is to come back to it, and the essential is that you meditate every morning and every evening.

What happens is this. You begin to live out of the centre of your own life because your own life is now centred in God. You will begin to read the New Testament, as though you are reading it for the first time. And you will begin to understand the paradox on which it is based.

You will begin to understand that the Christian proclamation is death and resurrection. You will begin to understand that Jesus has died and is risen; and that he is the way, the way we must follow. We must die to self to rise to new life in him. As we sit still and become still in meditation, we die and rise in his power.



6 Liberty of Spirit

You have all been meditating for long enough now to know that meditation is an entering into the liberty of God. The experience of prayer is, above all, the experience of that total liberty of spirit that is ours when we travel beyond all our own limitations into the mystery of God.

I think that our state is something like this before we pray. We are like a householder and we are inside our house. Inside our house, we try to control everything, to have everything under our control. If you can look at it from our personal situation, it is as though we try to keep our possessions under our control, our desire under our control, and our intellectual insights under control.

When we have been in the house for some time, we begin to suspect that there is something missing. As soon as we begin to suspect that, we begin to understand that we are not controlling our possessions, but we are being controlled by them. For example, we may say that we are prepared to surrender everything to God, but we want to keep one little option open, whether the option of intellectual perception or the option of our sensory life, or the option of keeping our own possessions, some of them, under our control.

When you begin to meditate, you begin to discover this: We have to leave that little house that we have constructed. We have to steal out of it, and we have to be utterly free in order to enter into the experience of God. We must be prepared to leave behind everything – our intellectual perceptions, our possessions, every single thing.

The best time to steal out of the house is when all is silent, when all is quiet, and that is when we leave all those possessions. The silence of our prayer is the silence of total abandonment, everything surrendered into the hands of God. Then the paradox

becomes clear for us – that surrendering everything that is finite, we are filled with the infinite; we are filled with God.

Just listen to these words of St John of the Cross:

*On a dark secret night,
starving for love and deep in flame,
O happy lucky flight!
unseen I slipped away,
my house at last was calm and safe.*

*Blackly free from light,
disguised and down a secret way,
O happy lucky flight!
in darkness I escaped,
my house at last was calm and safe.*

That is the silence of prayer that John of the Cross describes so eloquently, so beautifully in his poetry. The silence of our prayer is our opportunity to steal away into the night of darkness, into the night where we are filled with the light that is love.

Again, you have all been meditating long enough to know that all that is required of us is simple fidelity. To come to our meditation every day in utter simplicity; not to be bothered about insight, not to be bothered about knowledge because our insight and our knowledge is always so limited; but to be open to the love of God. In his love, all knowledge and all insight is given. It is given not on any limited scale but infinitely. It is ours now and for all eternity because with our hearts open to the infinite love of God our love is indeed eternal.

Simplicity, fidelity, poverty. The house that we must leave is our ego. We must leave it with all its possessive values and self-important values. We must go out into the infinite liberty of God.

How do we do this? Only by having our priorities absolutely clear in our minds and in our hearts. And our priority is this: The Kingdom of God, which we seek not in third place or second place, not in the sixth hour or the third hour, but in the first place and in every hour.

The times of our meditation are like times of epiphany. God is with us always, and we seek him always, and we love him always. Our priority must be very clear: His Kingdom first.

Listen to how Jesus expresses this in the Gospel of Matthew:

Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth where it grows rusty and moth-eaten and thieves break in to steal it. Store up treasure in heaven where there is no moth and no rust to spoil it, and where there are no thieves to break in and steal...The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eyes are sound, you will have light for your whole body. If your eyes are bad, your whole body will be in darkness. (Matt 6:19-23)

We have to, in our prayer, open the eye of our heart and allow our heart to become one with the heart of Jesus, and in that experience, to enter his liberty and his love. All that is required is daily fidelity to your prayer, and in the time of your meditation, absolute fidelity to the word.



7 The Power of Meditation

When you begin to meditate, you begin to become very deeply relaxed. The early Fathers of the desert used to call their prayer “relaxing in the Lord”. In that deep peacefulness, there is just Jesus and you. You begin to take off the normal suppressing mechanisms of your psyche. Most of us spend quite a lot of our energy suppressing guilts, fears, whatever it may be.

When you begin to meditate, after some time those suppressions are taken off, and the fear that you are turning from or the guilt that you are trying to bury gradually bubbles up to the surface. So you might find after your meditation that instead of feeling more deeply relaxed you can feel vaguely anxious, vaguely worried, and you are not sure why.

The power of meditation is that as you persevere on the path, the thing that you are suppressing, or the fear that you cannot face, or the guilt that you don't want to admit to, is as it were burned away in the fire of divine love. Very often, you will never know consciously what it was, but it is gone and it is gone forever.



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