



THE WEEKLY MEDITATION GROUP

By Paul T. Harris

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE WEEKLY GROUP MEETING?

The typical group meeting lasts about one hour and consists of 1) a welcome to members and newcomers, 2) a recorded talk by John Main or Laurence Freeman, or if necessary a selection from John Main's Daily Readings book, 3) a 25 minute meditation period and 4) a time for questions/answers and/or any announcements. The preparation by the group leader should be aimed at calming and quieting participants and opening them to the silence and stillness of the meditation to follow. Some group leaders will turn down the lights, play appropriate quiet music and light a candle to assist this process. The lighted candle symbolizes the presence of Christ, ("where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them, (Matthew 18-20). The location should be as quiet as possible with comfortable upright chairs. It is important as part of the discipline of meditation to start the meeting on time.

AVAILABILITY OF TAPED TALKS ON THE TEACHING

After the welcome by the leader the next aspect of the meeting is the sharing of the teaching with the playing of a cassette tape and/or CD talk. John Main's talks were originally recorded at weekly meditation groups meeting at his Montreal monastery on cassette tapes. Side "A" of each tape in the *Communitas* series is a talk directed towards newcomers to meditation. Side "B" is directed to a more experienced group. Each talk is about 15-20 minutes in length. Thus each tape represents both a "refresher" in the basic teaching and a step forward in a deeper understanding of the practice and context of meditation in the Christian tradition. From time to time the tape will also contain a question and answer period conducted by John Main. Many of John Main's and Laurence Freeman's talks designed for group meetings are now also available on CDs.

THE AIM OF THE MEETING

The important aim of the meditation group meeting is to establish a clear understanding of the basic practice and teaching and to share the teaching through the group meditation period.

The tapes or CDs will ground the group's personal and communal growth in the essential simplicity of the practice. They will also help to stimulate the group to share and articulate their concerns or ideas in any discussion period after the silence.

In various countries of the world a low cost yearly tape/CD rental service enables group leaders to play a different talk at each weekly meeting. This tape/CD rental service consists in sending out talks in the mail monthly to each subscriber. The service thus allows group leaders to provide the diversity and inspiration of the teaching at their weekly meetings at a low cost.

THE MEDITATION PERIOD

The meditation period itself is usually timed by a short (1-1½ minutes) piece of appropriate music. Many group leaders prepare their own pre-programmed tapes or CDs of introductory music, 25 minutes of silence, followed by music to end the period of meditation. A variety of these pre-programmed tapes/CDs designed for meditation group leaders are also available from centres in various countries as well as Medio Media outlets. Music has an obvious calming effect for meditation before the meditation period and helps to make a transition out of the silence afterwards.

There should be complete silence and stillness for the entire time of the meditation itself. Most groups meditate for 25 minutes. Some groups avoid vocal prayer immediately before and after the period of meditation in order to emphasize the full faith-value of the silence. However there is flexibility here and some groups do insert a short vocal prayer or scriptural quotation before starting or closing the meditation period.

THE QUESTION/ANSWER/ANNOUNCEMENT PERIOD

The discussion or question and prayer period can take many forms or none at all. It is good to be as flexible as possible here. If people, especially newcomers, wish to raise questions they should feel free to do so. Those who are leading the group can answer the questions as best they can and should, of course, feel free to refer to a more experienced source if they feel unable to give a full answer. Often members of the group itself will volunteer to answer a given question. It will happen sometimes however,

that the silence of the meditation “consumes” the questions people had in mind to ask.

One of the most effective ways to strengthen a group is to show enough confidence either to talk or to be silent in this period after the meditation. No one should be made to feel obliged to say something. This question and answer period is primarily designed for newcomers to the group who should be encouraged to raise any questions about the teaching. In regard to newcomers, John Main once said that to be serious about learning to meditate one should commit oneself to attending the group meetings for at least 10 weeks. Group leaders are encouraged to recommend this advice to newcomers. If a newcomer seems to have particular difficulty the group leader can suggest meeting together after the end of the meeting.

There is another optional role for the meditation group leader at this point in the meeting. The group leader may wish to spend a few minutes emphasizing a point made in the talk or speak from his/her own experience about some aspect of the teaching. This is usually a short intervention of five minutes but demonstrates the group’s leader’s concern for the understanding of the teaching and may induce a discussion by other group members. It is important however for the group leader to keep any discussion focused on the teaching and the practice.

AT THE END OF THE MEETING (OPTIONAL)

Some groups end the meeting with the night prayer of the church or vocal prayer, and/or with coffee/tea and biscuits. Some groups offer a social occasion every so often to allow members of the group to get to know each other better. Some groups will show appropriate videos from time to time on the teaching. In all of this there is a great deal of flexibility bearing in mind that the “heart” of the meeting is the sharing of silence in the group. Many group leaders will also have a supply of Christian meditation tapes, CDs, books and free handouts available for their members and as a resource for newcomers to the group. These can be obtained from the International Centre in London, UK or Medio Media outlets in various countries.

HOW WOULD ONE START A GROUP?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE GROUP LEADER?

The most important ingredient in starting a new group is the commitment of

a leader to the time and effort required to set up and guide a group. A decision must be made about the time of the meeting and a location must be found (a quiet location if possible). A number of things can be done to attract newcomers to the group.

THE ROLE OF THE GROUP LEADER

The leader must work in setting up the group as if humanely speaking everything depended on himself/herself, while at the same time realizing that in the dimension of faith the success of the group will depend on God. Numbers are unimportant in a group. Where two meditators are gathered there is a meditation group. Experience has shown that once a group starts, others will join in time. (“Where two or three are gathered in my name...”)

A leader will require a tape recorder, a candle, cassette taped talks or CDs on Christian meditation, and a means of timing the meditation period. But more than these material items the meditation leader will require faith and commitment. Faith to “wait on the Lord” for the increase in new members. But God works through the instrumentality of human beings. If the leader has worked to communicate information about the new group, God will bring the increase... and a new meditation group will be born and will flourish.

WHERE THE SPIRIT IS, THERE IS LIBERTY...

These are the very basic guidelines for starting and leading a meditation group. The essential point, of course, is to meditate, to say the mantra, to be silent. The work of the group is to practice and share the tradition of the “way of the mantra”. That is the reason a group will form and if it remains faithful to that commitment it will deepen and expand its Christian spiritual practice in a wonderful and a loving way. There are no hard and fast rules in a legalistic sense. “Where the Spirit is, there is liberty”, St. Paul wrote. To discover this Christian liberty of spirit we need only to be simple enough to follow the way.

“ I COULDN’ T START A GROUP ”...

People sometimes say, “I could never start a group because what if there are questions I couldn’t answer?” The leader is not expected to be a guru or an expert on all the teaching. (In fact a joke amongst meditators is that “the

leader is the one who presses the ‘play’ button on the tape recorder”). In many groups members take turns monthly in performing the function of the leader. The tapes of John Main and Laurence Freeman are a precious resource to group leaders all over the world. They give a continuous and deepening teaching week by week. Gradually they bring each person who listens to them to find their own voice and way of communicating the teaching. Any questions at the end of the meeting are often answered by other members of the group, which shows how the Spirit teaches us in and through each other.

BEYOND SUCCESS AND FAILURE

The fear of failure can stop us starting a group just as it can block us from doing many things... even meditating! Fear or a sense of failure is an egotistical idea and it is a sure sign that we are still trying to control events and people. But meditation groups, if they are schools of faith, are not controlled. They are led by the Spirit. Meditation itself takes us beyond the dualism of success and failure, and frees us to do many things we once thought were impossible, including leading a meditation group.

HOW WOULD A LEADER COMMUNICATE ABOUT THE GROUP TO OTHERS?

Communication on a personal and community basis is important in your village, town, city, or parish as one starts a group. On-going communication is also important in sharing the teaching with others. The basic communication regarding the starting of a new group should be factual and informational. There should however be no hesitancy on the part of new group leaders in utilizing whatever means of communication are at their disposal. If St. Paul were alive today he undoubtedly would be using a word processor and not a quill pen to communicate to the various Church communities.

One excellent means of communication within your parish is church bulletin and pulpit announcements. Many leaders about to start a new group send out these announcements to the various churches in a given community. Another effective means of communication is an announcement about the new group in a community daily or weekly newspaper. Posters with information about the group can be posted in key locations. Since meditation groups are ecumenical in nature these announcements usually

invite participants from various churches to join the new group. Announcements can also be sent to local cablevision, TV or radio stations as well as placed on shopping plaza bulleting boards.

WHERE DO GROUPS MEET?

Groups meet in diverse locations and at various hours throughout the day and evening, in homes, apartments, schools, churches, rectories, religious communities, Christian meditation centres, chapels, universities, prisons, government office buildings, a department store, senior citizens' homes and factories.

A list of the world wide Christian mediation groups and locations of meetings are available from Christian meditation centres in various countries and also at the Christian meditation Web site: www.wccm.org.

Paul Harris

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