FREQUENTLY ASKED

QUESTIONS ABOUT

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION:

THE PATH OF

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

By Paul Harris

CONTENTS AND QUESTIONS
PART ONE

Questions on the Practice of Christian Meditation

Question 1. How does one go about praying in this way? Is it difficult to master this technique? .........................

Question 2. Please explain in more detail the role of the mantra in this way of prayer? ............

Question 3. Can one say the mantra outside of the daily meditation periods? .................

Question 4. What are the benefits to the body and our
Question 5. As a newcomer can you give me some practical tips on how to prepare for meditation? ..........................

Question 6. How does one find a quiet location to meditate? ..........................

Question 7. What are the best times to meditate? ....

Question 8. I'm a newcomer to the practice of Christian meditation. Distractions are driving me crazy. What am I doing wrong? ......

Question 9. Is there a tradition of taking off one's shoes while meditating? ..................

Question 10. What role does correct posture play in the practice of meditation? What is the best way of sitting? ..........................

Question 11. Do we try to make our minds blank or void ..........................
in Christian meditation? Is our aim to have no thoughts at all? Can emptying the mind be dangerous? Will it make me vulnerable to undesirable forces or influences? ........................................

Question 12. Is there any special breathing advice for our daily meditation periods? ..........

Question 13. Should I feel guilty if I miss one of my daily meditation periods? ..............

Question 14. Does God speak to us in meditation?

Do we hear His voice? .......................

Question 15. How do we measure our spiritual progress in meditation? ......................

Question 16. What does the term "letting go" mean in the practice of meditation? ............
Question 17. Those who pray in a contemplative way speak of "the gift of tears". What exactly is this? ............................

Question 18. Is it necessary to meditate in a church location or can one meditate anywhere? .................................

Question 19. What is the "Gethsemani sleep" all about in meditation? .................................

Question 20. I'm a very busy priest with all sorts of daily commitments, obligations and responsibilities. How can I set aside an hour a day to meditate? ..............................

Question 21. Why is saying the mantra so difficult? I'm discouraged at my inability to pray this way. Is it really worth all the effort and hard work? .................................

Question 22. Can children meditate? .................................
PART TWO

Questions on the Teaching of Meditation

Question 23. Is meditation really prayer? I thought

prayer was about talking to God. ..........

Question 24. I have a simple question. Why should

one meditate? ..............................

Question 25. Why is silence important in our life

and in the practice of meditation? .......

Question 26. Why is meditation called the prayer of

the heart? How does the heart enter

into meditation? ..........................

Question 27. John Main talks about meditation as a

path of pure faith. What does he mean
Question 28. How does the practice of meditation relate to other ways of prayer? ..........

Question 29. John Main talks about leaving the "ego" behind in meditation. I always thought our ego was important and gave us our unique identity. Please explain. ...

Question 30. Why does Fr. John Main not use gender free, inclusive language in his taped cassette talks? ........................

Question 31. Is there a role for petitionary prayer in the life of someone who meditates? ......

PART THREE

Questions about Those who have Practised

Contemplative Prayer: Past and Present
Question 32. It is my understanding that John Main felt indebted to a 4th century Christian monk, John Cassian for his teaching on prayer and the use of a mantra to bring one to inner stillness. Could you comment and give me some information on the life of Cassian? ........

Question 33. What is the link between John Cassian's prayer of the desert monks, the Jesus prayer of Eastern spirituality, and the practice of Christian meditation as taught by John Main. Also could you comment on the Jesus Prayer? ............

Question 34. John Main in one of his talks speaks about the importance of The Cloud of Unknowing, its teaching on contemplative prayer and particularly its emphasis on the use of a mantra to bring one to inner
silence. Could you elaborate on The

Cloud? ......................................

Question 35. In the book Silence and Stillness In

Every Season: Daily Readings with John

Main, the entry of July 19 indicates John Main was quite familiar with the teaching of the English medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich. I also understand John Main asked to hear readings by Julian as he lay dying. Can you tell me about Julian's life and what she had to say about this contemplative way of prayer? ....

Question 36. I've heard there is a Russian spiritual classic, The Way of the Pilgrim, that speaks about the prayer of the Heart.

Please comment. .........................

Question 37. Can you tell me about a French Benedic-
tine priest, Fr. Henri Le Saux who I understand lived in India, practised
meditation, and has much to say on the subject of silence in prayer? John Main quotes him in *Letters From the Heart* and I understand recommended for reading his book *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*. ..................

Question 38. I've heard that a young Jewish girl

Etty Hillesum, who was killed at Auschwitz in 1943 is regarded as a Christian saint and actually practised meditation on her spiritual journey. Could you comment and give some details about her life? .............................

Question 39. John Main in a number of his talks refers to the French writer Simone Weil. Could you comment on her life and what she has to say that relates to the spiritual journey and the practice of contemplative prayer? .............................
Question 40. Many people feel that the great spir-
ritual writer, scholar and teacher
Evelyn Underhill paved the way for the renewal of contemplative prayer in the 1970's by John Main and other teachers of prayer. Could you comment and tell us a little about her life? ............... 

Question 41. Thomas Merton the great American Cistercian monk seems to have paved the for the teaching of John Main on contemplative prayer. Did in fact they ever meet? Could you discuss Merton? .............. 

Question 42. Could you give me a brief account of the life of John Main? ..................... 

Question 43. I understand that the Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, once said "in my experience John Main is the best spiritual guide in the Church to-day". Can you tell me more about Fr. Bede and his
teaching on prayer?

Question 44. I am reading the author Carlo Carretto

and he seems to echo Fr. John Main's
teaching on silence in prayer. Could
you comment on his life and teaching? ......

Question 45. I have seen a photo of Fr. Laurence

Freeman speaking to over 100 of Mother
Teresa's novices in Calcutta. Was
Mother Teresa supportive of Christian
meditation/contemplative prayer? Did
she write on the subject? .................

Question 46. I attended the John Main Seminar in

England in 1992 featuring Jean Vanier,
founder of the L'Arche Community for
the mentally challenged. Can you bring
me up to date about the life of Jean
Vanier and his views on the Christian
meditation tradition of prayer? ............
PART FOUR

Some Questions about the Journey of Meditation

Question 47. What is the role of Mary on the contemplative journey? ...........................

Question 48. What is the desert experience or the dark night of the soul as it relates to meditation? ..........................

Question 49. As a newcomer I felt that meditation would lead me to self-fulfilment, inner healing, peace and tranquillity. Now I seem to be getting a bigger picture, that in fact meditation is leading me to become more involved with my family, my community and the world around me. Can you clarify this relationship between prayer and action on the path of meditation? ..............................
Question 50. I've been deeply wounded emotionally from childhood trauma. Is there such a thing as "inner healing" on the path of Christian meditation? How does this work? How does one achieve closure? Is it the same as going to a psycho-therapist? ........................................

Question 51. What is the role of the weekly Chris-tian meditation group? Why should meditators meet together? Where do they meet? What happens at the weekly meet-ings? How would one start a new group? ....

Question 52. What is the relationship between 

*Lectio Divina* and contemplative prayer? .....  

Question 53. Is there a special call to this way of prayer or is everybody invited? .........

Question 54. What is meant by discursive medita-tion? ...................................................
Question 55. What if one falls asleep during meditation? ............................... 

Question 56. Is there an International Centre co-
ordinating Christian meditation groups 
around the world? Is there a Christian 
meditation web-site? .......................... 

Name Index .................................................. 

PREFACE 

It is not often one can say "this is the greatest gift I have received in my lifetime", but that is an accolade I can give unre-servedly to the teaching and practice of meditation in the contem-plative tradition. I will be forever indebted to the Benedictine monk John Main (1926-
1982) whose teaching on the daily practice of silence and stillness in prayer has now grown into the extraordi-nary contemplative renewal taking place all around the world. Though I never met him, I join many others in recognizing the voice of an authentic teacher of prayer and of the most important spirit-ual guides of our time.
Television: No Booming Voice From Heaven

It is now seventeen years since I flicked on my television dial in early January 1984 and was intrigued by a New Year's Day Eucharist celebrated at the Benedictine Priory in Montreal. Fr. Laurence Freeman spoke beautifully in his homily about a daily discipline of prayer that led to an inner stillness beyond words, thoughts and images.

Having worked all my life in the written and electronic communications media I chuckle at the fact that the gift of meditation was given to me by means of the oft denounced medium of television and not by a booming voice from heaven. A reminder that God usually works through the instrumentality of other human beings and their inventions. Since that time I have become a firm believer that we should use all the communication means at our disposal to spread the good news of this way of prayer.

After a stint as Director of the Christian Meditation Centre in London, England in 1988-89, I returned to my home in Ottawa, Canada, and since that time have immersed myself in speaking and writing about John Main's teaching and have started and led a number of weekly Christian Meditation groups in Ottawa.

The Good News Must be Communicated

John Main makes the point in several of his talks that it is not sufficient to read about
or listen to talks on meditation if in fact we do not experience meditation itself, if in fact we don't jump into the water and get wet. But the human means of communication we use in handing down the teaching of this way of prayer is of course designed to bring others to the practice. The fact is that the Good News in all its forms must be communicated.

The Question/Answer Format of This Book

This accounts for the question/answer format of this book which has long been a pedagogical way of transmitting spiritual teaching. Jesus constantly answered questions and in the first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul answers specific questions from the Greek Christian community sent on to him in writing.

John Main Encouraged Questions

It was John Main's custom at the conclusion of his talks on Christian Meditation to encourage his listeners to ask questions pertaining to the teaching. While never failing to urge his listeners 'to enter into the experience of meditation itself', he nevertheless was aware that for a head-centred generation, a conceptual understanding of meditation was a prerequisite for their 'leap of faith' into the practice.

It is in this tradition that this question/answer format is offered not only to those wishing to know more about this prayer tradition but also to those who are already meditating.
As John Main once said, in meditation we are all beginners and we begin again each day. I hope this book reflects a part of John Main's deep and yet simple teaching on Christian Meditation for newcomers as well as responding to obstacles and blocks experienced by those already on the path.

Questions Raised Over the Years

Many of the points and concerns addressed in this book were raised as questions or points of discussion in recent years as I have given retreats, seminars and conferences on Christian Medita-tion in various countries of the world. It has been my habit to arrange for listeners to put their questions in writing. From these hundreds of questions I have selected 56 of the most fre-quently asked questions pertaining to the practice and teaching of meditation. The beauty of answering a question in writing rather than orally is that one can give the time, research and thought necessary for a full response to a questioner. Too often in re-sponding to questions orally, one is forced to abridge or shorten answers in a rushed manner because of time constraints. There are no trivial or unimportant questions in this book. Some of the questions asked were spontaneous, others well thought out and writ-ten down, but I have tried to answer each question in a thorough and thoughtful way.

No One Has All the Right Answers

It should be made quite clear that this book reflects my own personal responses to the
basic issues and questions people have raised. Other individuals who give talks on the teaching and practice of meditation might respond in quite different ways. We all see "through a glass darkly" and no one has the absolute right answer to every question. All we can do is speak from our own experience and background in responding to questions in diverse ways.

This Way of Prayer is Not Taught But Caught

And finally a reminder that ultimately we can't analyze, dissect or even logically explain the "unexplainable", the often dark path of silence and stillness in contemplative prayer. There is a saying that this way of prayer is not taught but caught. All I can hope is that each individual reader through this book will enter more deeply into the actual daily experience of this way of prayer and be led to that "country beyond words and beyond names".

Paul Harris

INTRODUCTION

By Madeleine Simon

(Sr. Madeleine Simon is a religious of the Sacred Heart in London, England. She founded the
first Christian Meditation Centre in London in 1986 and a second centre in Royston near Cambridge in 1988. She first met John Main in 1963; they remained lifelong friends. She is author of Born Contemplative, a book on how to introduce children to Christian meditation and has played a pivotal role in introducing John Main's teaching principally in the United Kingdom.)

John Main says in one of his talks:

the wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as the opening of a flower. To let a flower open and bloom it is only necessary to let it be; so if we simply are, if we become and remain still and silent, our heart cannot but be open, the spirit cannot but pour through into our whole being. It is for this we have been created.¹

This is one of my favourite quotations as it seems to me to sum up in a few words the innate aptitude for contemplation in each one of us. In meditation we open ourselves to this central silence in the core of our very soul.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) has also put this so well:

The Central Silence is there where no creature may enter, nor any idea, and there the soul neither thinks nor acts nor entertains any idea either
of itself or of anything else.\(^2\)

This is the simplicity at the heart of the teaching of silent prayer from two great teachers. But even at its most sublime, words always come up short. The Chinese philosopher Hua Hu Ching writes "the highest truth cannot be put into words". Nevertheless we must still strive, despite the poverty of our human words, to express the inexpressible, and to pass on this teaching to future generations. Always bearing in mind of course that the true teach-er, Jesus, is always there invisible in our midst.

This is the gift that Paul Harris has brought over the past number of years as he has tirelessly worked to convey the basic teaching of Christian meditation to audiences around the world. In his most recent book *The Heart of Silence: Contemplative Prayer by Those Who Practise it*, he gave us the experiences of 60 men and wo-men from various countries speaking openly and freely about their own personal pilgrimage of meditation and how it has affected their lives. This year he reverts to an ancient pedagogical device of questions and answers to convey the teaching in a traditional but easy to understand form.

A fascinating aspect of this book is that questions on indi-viduals range from John Cassian and the early 4th century desert monks to the American Cistercian monk Thomas Merton; from the medi-eval anchoress Julian of Norwich to Etty Hillesum, who died at Aushchwitz in 1943; from the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to Simone Weil who wrote *Waiting on God*; from the Anglican spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill to the best selling Italian author
Carlo Carretto; from John of the Cross to Jean Vanier, Mother Teresa and John Main.

A quick glance at the lives and teaching of these individuals shows that no religious tradition, no particular age, no particular culture or gender, has a monopoly on the spiritual wisdom of silence in prayer. In these men and women we come to realize that the inner spiritual experience of contemplative prayer is in all ages the same; a longing for the Spirit deep at the centre of one's heart.

Caught up in the immediate, the temporal and the passing of our computerized world, we often forget the eternal verities and the spiritual vision of a gifted teacher such as John Main and other great teachers of contemplative prayer. This book will do much to bring a fresh perspective to John Main's teaching on meditation, as well as inform us about fellow travellers in their work of the Spirit.

QUESTION 1

Q. How does one go about praying in this way? Is it difficult to master this technique?

A. Well first of all meditation is really not a technique. My dictionary defines the word technique as a proficiency in a practical or mechanical skill. But meditation is more than a mere mechanical skill. It is a daily spiritual practice and discipline that opens us up to the
indwelling Spirit of the Lord and that bears fruit in our everyday life and relationships.

The "how to" of Christian Meditation as taught by John Main is as follows:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, inter-iorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase 'maranatha'. Recite it as four syll-ables of equal length. Ma-ra-na-tha. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything - spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.³

The simplicity of meditation

The thing that surprises most newcomers to Christian Medita-tion is its simplicity. John Main always emphasised how simple it is to enter into the experience of meditation.

As we begin to meditate it is good to become aware of our breathing. Let your breathing slow down and become regular and as John Main says, interiorly begin to say a single word. He recom-mends the ancient Christian prayer: 'Maranatha'. Recite it as he suggests in four equally stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Maranatha means 'Come Lord Jesus'. Maranatha is an Aramaic word, the
language that Jesus spoke. St. Paul ends the first letter to the Corinthians with this prayer word and St. John ends the book of Revelation with this word. It is one of the oldest Christian prayers. Biblical commentators tell us it was a password which allowed the early Christians in their homes for the celebration of the Eucharist.

Meditation is not what you think

In meditation we do not think or imagine anything spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, even holy thoughts, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so we return to simply saying our word. 'Meditation', as one T-shirt put it, is 'not what you think'. *The Cloud of Unknowing* says, 'He may be reached and held close by means of love, but never by means of thought'.

John Main recommends meditating each morning and evening for between 20 and 30 minutes (20 minutes for beginners), preferably before and after the day's work. It is better to meditate before a meal.

In meditation we do not reflect on the meaning of our word as we recite it. The author of the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* is emphatic on this point:

If your mind begins to intellectualize over the meaning and connotations of this little word, re-mind yourself that its value lies in its simpli-city.
Do this and I assure you these thoughts will vanish...

It is quite sufficient to focus your attention on a simple word...and without the intervention of analytical thought allow yourself to experience di-rec-tly the reality it signifies. Do not use clever logic to examine or explain this word to yourself nor allow yourself to ponder its ramifications...I do not believe reasoning ever helps in the con-tem-plative work.\(^5\)

In meditation we come from the head to the heart

If we worry about what we are feeling during meditation we are courting discouragement. There is no such thing as a 'bad' medita-tion or a 'good' meditation. Be indifferent to what happens in the actual times of meditation. God does not judge us on how well we say the mantra but on our generosity, our faith, and our surrender to his indwelling presence. In meditation we want to come from the head to the heart.

We should not evaluate our progress in meditation. But be as-sured that meditation will gradually transform our lives into love if we persevere. Above all we should not evaluate our progress in what happens during the actual times of meditation. Sometimes we will be
silent, sometimes we might be totally distracted. If you want to evaluate progress look to the inner transformation in love which is taking place in your daily life. (See question 15 on measuring our progress in meditation.)

Listen to the sound of the mantra

As we recite our word we simply listen to the sound. We want to go beyond thoughts. Listening to it as a sound helps our concentration. We try to keep the body as still as possible. We are body, mind and spirit, and stillness of body will help to silence the mind. Of course there is a paradox here. Stillness of mind will also help keep the body still.

Meditation is simplicity itself. We hold ourselves alert and attentive during the entire time of prayer. As a fourth-century desert father put it, 'we centre ourselves, and focus on the God whom we do not see, whom we do not hear, but whose active presence we totally accept'. This is where faith enters into our prayer.

It is hard to believe that meditation is really as simple as it seems. We are tempted to complicate it. But meditation does get simple as one goes along the path. Eventually as the mantra becomes rooted it will take less and less effort to say it as we enter into deeper and deeper realms of silence.

We watch one hour with Jesus
Meditation teaches us that being is more important than doing. The heart is more important than the mind. Our role is to be con-tent with a loving, peaceful openness to God, without concern, without the desire to taste, or cling to, or possess God. We sim-ply listen, watch and wait even though nothing seems to happen. In the Garden of Gethsemani Jesus says to his disciples 'could you not watch one hour with me?' In our daily periods we do watch this one hour with Jesus. In meditation we simply surrender ourselves and rest in God. (See also question 19 on the Gethsemani sleep.)

Meditation is a daily spiritual discipline

Meditation challenges us to overcome our self-centredness. Can we meditate without concern for where God is leading us? Can we meditate faithfully when distractions bombard us? Can we medi-tate when nothing 'happens' in meditation? Can we give up our de-sire to possess God and shed all desire for spiritual consolation in meditation?

The practice of daily meditation is also a spiritual disci-pline. The Catechism of the Catholic Church in talking about con-templative prayer states:

The choice of the time and duration of the prayer arises from a determined will, revealing the sec-rets of the heart. One does not undertake contem-plative prayer only when one has the time; one makes
time for the Lord, with the firm determination not to give up, no matter what trials and dry-ness one may encounter...The heart is the place of this quest and encounter in poverty and in faith (2710).

Say your mantra....

In meditation faith, fidelity, commitment, perseverance and patience are the most important ingredients. We must be gentle with ourselves. We must try to let go and abandon ourself before the God whom we do not see, but whose presence we totally accept. We stand before the Lord and wait. As Father John never tired of saying: 'Meditation can be summed up in three words, say your mantra'.

In the Gospel the Lord speaks also about a mustard seed as a symbol of divine love. It is the smallest of all seeds, but grows into the tallest tree with its enormous capacity for growth. In meditation the repetition of the mantra, this small seed of divine love, has the power to grow within us and to transform us.

And finally meditation is a way of pure faith. Nothing else. We simply have to put this faith into practice each day.

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QUESTION 2
Q. Please explain in more detail the role of the mantra in this way of prayer.

A. A mantra is simply a sacred word or a phrase which is repeated continuously at our times of meditation to bring us to an interior silence in the presence of the Lord. The aim of the mantra is to bring us to our own centre, our own heart where we learn to be awake, alive and open to the indwelling Spirit. In this stillness and peace we not only become aware of God's presence but we experience this presence.

The mantra says to God: I am open to Your presence.

In Moment of Christ John Main comments on the integrating power of the mantra:

The faithful repetition of the word integrates our whole being. It does so because it brings us to the silence, the concentration, the necessary level of consciousness that enables us to open our mind and heart to the work of the love of God in the depth of our being.

The mantra is a spiritual discipline, a help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond words, thoughts, even holy thoughts. We say the mantra slowly, steadily with attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered we simply come back to our mantra. There is therefore nothing secret or magical about the mantra. It is simply a daily calling upon God, a spiritual discipline of love.
John Main tells us that if we persevere on the path of meditation gradually the mantra begins to take root. It begins as it were to sound in the heart and we begin to hear the mantra at a much deeper level of our being. The mantra he says should be said unhurriedly and calmly but we must be humble and we must be patient. The mantra says to God 'I am open to Your presence, I am resting in Your presence, I am in Your hands. Do whatever You will with me'. The mantra is our surrender to God.

The history of the mantra

The use of a mantra in prayer is found in all the major religions of the world, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and of course a tradition in Christianity that is rooted in the teaching and practice of the 4th century desert fathers and a Christian spiritual tradition that has continued to this day.

The two syllable word mantra comes from the Sanskrit words for man "the mind" and tri "to cross". The mantra practised as a spiritual discipline enables us to cross the sea of the mind. The sea is another apt image for the mind. Ever changing, the sea is calm one day and turbulent the next. Our minds are drifting about on the surface, blown by every wind on the treacherous waters. We can never make the crossing without some help. That is the role of the mantra.

To use another figure of speech what the mantra eventually does is take us down to the
bottom of the sea, where everything is calm and tranquil. On the surface there may be crashing waves (our mind, our distractions) but at the bottom of the sea it is always quiet and our hearts are calm and silent.

The Christian tradition of the mantra

The Christian tradition of the mantra sprang out of the deserts of Egypt in the 4th century. A desert monk, St. John Cassian, played a very important role in bringing this ancient prayer tradition of the mantra to the Western church. In his 10th Conference on prayer Cassian talks clearly about the repetition of a prayer phrase to bring one to an interior silence. He points out this was the common practice of the early desert monks. Cassian refers to the repetition of a prayer phrase as a "formula". To-day we would call it a "mantra". (See question 33 on John Cassian.)

The mantra and *The Cloud of Unknowing*

The Christian use of a mantra has continued through the ages since the 4th century. In the 14th century the author of the famous English spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* had this to say about the mantra in contemplative prayer. By the way the term "The Cloud of Unknowing" refers to the presence of God, and the author takes this term from the
transfiguration where God appears in a cloud. Here is what he says:

Take a short word, preferably of one syllable. The shorter the word the better. A word like God or love, choose which you like, or perhaps some other, so long as it is of one syllable. And fix the word first to your heart so that it is always there come what may. This short word pierces heaven. This word is to be your shield and your spear. Whether in peace or in war with this word beat upon the cloud. (See question 34 on The Cloud of Un-knowing.)

There are many Christian mantras. The Benedictine monk Henri Le Saux, who wrote under the name Abhishiktananda advocated the word Abba (Father) as a mantra, pointing out that Scripture shows how Jesus made it His constant prayer. Abba is a word in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. (See question 37 on Abhishiktananda.)

The word maranatha as a mantra

John Main suggests the word maranatha as a mantra. It is also in Aramaic and means "Come Lord Jesus". As previously mentioned it is one of the oldest Christian prayers. St. Paul ends his first letter to the Corinthians with this word and it is the last word in St. John's Book of Revelation. Paul was writing to the Corinthians in Greek but at the end of his letter inserts the Aramaic word ma-ranatha. Scripture scholars tell us Paul was able to do this be-
cause all the early Christians fully understood this word. It was a password which allowed Christians into homes for the celebration of the Eucharist.

Maranatha also appears in one of the oldest written fragments of the Eucharist that exists. In the invitation to receive communion the priest says:

Praise to the Son of David. If anyone is holy, let them come. If anyone is not holy, let them repent. Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus.

The mantra as a spiritual tool

While maranatha is a sacred word to Christians, nevertheless at our times of meditation we do not dwell on the meaning of the word. We want to go beyond thoughts and images and rest in silence in the Lord. The mantra therefore is a spiritual tool, a help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond words, thoughts, even holy thoughts. It is also a daily discipline. We say the mantra slowly, steadily with attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered we simply come back to our mantra.

John Main tells us that if we persevere on the path of meditation gradually the mantra begins to take root, it begins as it were to sound in the heart and we begin to hear the mantra at a much more deeper level of our being. The mantra he says should be said unhurriedly and calmly but we must be humble and we must be patient.
Four equally stressed syllables, ma-ra-na-tha

In reciting maranatha we break the word into four equally stressed syllables ma-ra-na-tha. And we listen to the word as a sound as we say it gently, continuously for the full period of our meditation. John Main says there may come the day when we enter the cloud of unknowing, in which there is silence, absolute si-lence, and we can no longer hear the mantra. This absolute silence may last for only a short period of time and then we must return to saying the mantra.

But John Main reminds us that we cannot attempt to force the pace of meditation. We must let go of goals and trying to achieve anything. The mantra will become rooted in our consciousness through the simple fidelity of returning to the mantra each morning and each evening.

The mantra brings us into the present moment

The great secret of saying our mantra is that it automatically brings us into the present moment. When we say our mantra we can-not be thinking of the past or the future. We are inserted in the now. If we read the letters of Paul we realise Paul was always living in the present moment. He says 'now is the hour of salva-tion, now is the acceptable time, now is the time to rise from sleep'. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but now. The continuous re-citation of the mantra does bring us into the present moment.
Listen to the mantra as a sound

The mantra should be repeated silently with was much attention as we are capable of giving. The mantra will then descend to the deepest level of consciousness until it becomes as natural as breathing. Again, we listen to the mantra as a sound. Listening to it as a sound helps our concentration to move from thought to being.

It is hard to believe that meditation and saying our mantra is really as simple as it seems. We are tempted to complicate it. But meditation does get simpler as we persevere on the path. In the beginning we say the mantra at the surface level of our mind but eventually as the mantra becomes rooted it will take less and less effort to recite it. Our work is simply to say it with faith, love and openness to God's presence. This constant daily practice will root the mantra deep in our consciousness. It will become our friend and companion.

Finally, however, we should always remember that the way of the mantra is not a technique or a method for accomplishing some goal...even the goal of silence. Silence only points the finger towards God. The discipline of meditation requires faith, trust, letting go, openness, attention, joy and most important of all love. Everything else we leave in the hands of the Lord.

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QUESTION 3
Q. Can one say the mantra outside of the daily meditation periods?

A. Yes, definitely the mantra can be repeated outside of our daily times of meditation. This tradition ties in directly to St. Paul's admonition to "pray unceasingly" (1 Thess. 5:17).

This means that we can take every opportunity during our waking day, no matter how brief the time, to repeat the mantra. This practice will root the mantra more deeply within us and it will more quickly become a "companion" and a "friend" on our spiritual journey.

Opportunities for saying the mantra during the day

There are many daily opportunities in everyone's life to say the mantra: on the bus going to work, cleaning the house, washing the car or dishes, exercising, brushing our teeth, sitting on a park bench and many other mechanical or recreational tasks in our daily routine.

However there are other times when we need to give our full attention and concentration to the task at hand. There are times when we should not say our mantra: driving a car, operating machinery or using dangerous tools and especially when we need to give our full attention to writing, reading, listening to music, conversation with others and other concentrated tasks.

Saying the mantra in pain and anxiety
Many people find the recitation of their mantra as an aid to falling asleep. The mantra can also be a great source of consolation and strength in times of crisis, trauma and even pain. Meditators constantly talk about the power of the mantra to divert our attention and therefore offer relief from pain and anxiety. But beyond this, when we say our mantra we are calling upon God at the deepest level of our being. This is where our faith and grace enters into meditation.

One meditator recently recounted an incident after surgery. As he woke up after the anaesthesia wore off he was welcomed by the mantra sounding loud and clear within, with no effort to say it required on his part. More importantly he felt it was like an old friend welcoming him back to the land of the living and offering him support and encouragement for the approaching convalescent period.

The mantra in a time of crisis

Dr. John Hedberg, a physician from Colorado, USA, in a recent article in the Blue Mountain Meditation Centre Newsletter recalls a crisis in his life that was greatly aided by the recitation of a mantra. Late one Friday afternoon he received a letter threatening him with a malpractice suit.

"It shakes you to the core" he recalled "as a doctor your professional integrity is being
questioned”. He decided to see it as a challenge, and a test of his spiritual discipline flowing from the practice of meditation. "I had a chance", he said, "I could let this ruin my weekend with my family or I could seek "strength from the mantra".

Throughout the weekend, whenever anxious thoughts began to speed up, the mantra was something he could grab onto to keep his mind still and stay focused on having a wonderful time with his family. When he returned to his office on Monday to start a new week he says the mantra was a strength in responding to the letter in a loving manner and the lawsuit never occurred.8

The mantra is like a brook that murmurs in the heart

Once the mantra is rooted through our daily practice over a period of years, we might begin to hear the mantra sounding within, without having to do all the work ourselves. In the beginning we repeat the mantra at the surface level of the mind. But as we per-severe, the mantra becomes more deeply rooted in our consciousness. Again for the Christian this rooting ties into St. Paul's injunction to 'pray unceasingly'. Bishop Theophane the Recluse (1815-94) writes that after the initial effort of saying our prayer word the prayer becomes like a brook that murmurs in the heart.

The mantra releases a deep inner spiritual strength. And as mentioned, sometimes the mantra will spontaneously arise in our consciousness in our daily routine. This is a great
blessing and again a gift of God. Father John once said 'first say the mantra at the time of meditation, and then (soon) it will begin to sound within at other times of the day'.

QUESTION 4

Q. What are the benefits to the body and to our health in the practice of meditation?

A. An article in New Scientist Magazine\(^\text{a}\) has estimated that more than 1,000 research papers have been published on the health benefits of meditation. Scientists have done innumerable clinical studies on meditators which indicate a lower oxygen consumption during meditation, decrease in serum lactate levels (relaxation), reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, lower heartbeat, a relaxation of muscle tension, immune system enhancement and reduction of anxiety.

Since we are one entity, body, mind and spirit, these bodily side effects of meditating can be accepted graciously with thanks. However, what is important to keep in mind here is that any physiological benefits of meditation are quite secondary, or one might say signs rather than the essential meaning of meditation.

Can meditation battle tooth decay?

Some of the findings on the health benefits of meditation however can bring a smile
and in fact challenge our credulity. If your teeth are not up to par you might take heart from a recent headline in a North American paper, 'Meditating 40 minutes a day can help battle tooth decay'. The article went on to say studies have shown meditators have saliva that is lower in acid and bacteria and hence resists decay to tooth enamel.\textsuperscript{10}

Or how about this? The \textit{USA Today} newspaper recently quoted Dr. Herbert Benson, author of several books on meditation, as saying '34\% of his infertile patients get pregnant within six months, 78\% of insomniacs become regular sleepers and doctor's visits for pain are reduced 36\%, all through regular periods of meditation'.

John Main and physiological benefits of meditation

In his 250 taped Christian Meditation talks, John Main rarely mentions any of the physiological benefits of meditation. Father John obviously felt that lower blood pressure or reduced oxygen consumption paled into insignificance when one believes meditation is a spiritual path into the presence of the indwelling Christ. In other words Father John felt we must keep our priorities straight. Meditation is primarily a faith-filled spiritual discipline and any side effects helpful to the body should be considered quite secondary.

However meditators are often aware of greater physical vitality and energy, which led to the aphorism that 'meditators have 25 hour days'. In other words the one hour we devote to meditation is not lost time for we seem to get the investment of time back with
interest even in the physiological sphere.\textsuperscript{11}

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**QUESTION 5**

Q. As a newcomer can you give me some practical tips on how to prepare for meditation?

A. As you know Christian Meditation is a daily spiritual discipline, a path of faith in which we open our hearts in silence and stillness to the indwelling presence of Christ.

However from a human standpoint it is advantageous to know a little about the process of meditation. Meditation is essentially a process of stilling the mind and slowing down the rush of thoughts until the mind comes to rest. We often call meditation "resting in God". For the vast majority of us this process is long, demanding and frustrating.

The mind is like a forest of trees

The mind does not like to meditate; it wants to wander. When we first begin to meditate and try to concentrate, the mind is hyperactive. An Indian sage Sri Ramakrishna once said "the mind is like a forest of trees with monkeys chattering away and jumping from
The repetition of a sacred word or mantra is the primary means of slowing down the mind. But saying the mantra is a discipline. Here are a few tips though to help the process along.

* Try to meditate at the same fixed time each day. If you have regular times for meditation each morning and evening, even the mind knows these are times to quiet down. And come to meditation even if you have had a restless night or have not slept well. Meditation will help make up for that restless night.

* It is important in the beginning to get into the habit of keep-ing the spinal column erect in meditation. Head, neck and spine should be naturally in a straight line. This doesn't mean making your body tense. On the other hand try not to let the body slump. Your hands should be relaxed and resting on your knees or in your lap. But aside from this try not to give too much attention to the body.

What to do before meditation

* What to do at the beginning of meditation offers a personal choice. Some people will ask a blessing of God, or say a short vocal prayer in an effort to focus their attention and remind them of the purpose of their meditation. Some meditators will read a passage from a scripture.
Others will simply repeat the mantra a few times in preparation for their period of meditation. Some people spend a few minutes relaxing and getting into a comfortable sitting position. Others find a few deep breaths helpful before beginning to meditate. Some people will splash cold water on their faces before their meditation period in an effort to be wide awake and attentive. Some people take off their shoes (see question 9 on taking off one's shoes while meditating). All of these are personal choices.

Helpful tips on the practice

* Another tip. Never allow anything to come in the way of your meditation period. Meditation cannot be done in fits and starts. A simple decision will have to be made "I'm going to put meditation first". Be faithful to the daily discipline of meditation.

* Set aside a room or place in your home to be used only for meditation and spiritual reading. After a while the room will become associated in your mind with meditation so that simply entering it will have a calming effect (see questions 6 and 7 on the time and location for meditation).

the virtue of timing tapes

* A question you will have to face is how to time your period of meditation. Many meditators pre-record their own timing tapes with 2 1/2 minutes of music, 25 minutes of silence and
ending with 2 1/2 minutes of music. If you have time slots and dubbing ability on your tape recorder you can pre-record these tapes with your own preference for music. In various countries these timing tapes are for sale. Timing tapes offer an advantage over many electronic timers on the market that can send one into orbit because of excessive noise. One thing you do not want to do is keep looking at your watch which can be a major distraction.

* the best time to meditate is before a meal. The digestive process slows down our ability to be attentive and concentrate. And of course in meditation we want to be totally alert.

QUESTION 6

Q. How does one find a quiet location to meditate?

A. This can be quite a challenge often requiring the co-operation of spouses or other family members. To ensure quiet, meditators often taken the phone off the hook during their meditation period.

In regard to location it is recommended (if possible) to meditate in the same location each day. The goal here would be to meditate in a definite place set aside for stillness; a place simply to be. One could use a basement, or a bedroom; another meditator has cleared a small room and equipped it with a prayer bench, small table with candle and a Bible. If the opportunity is available, some people like to meditate outdoors in gardens, parks, and other
locations where they feel close to nature. However the sounds and scents of nature could also be a distraction to certain individuals.

On finding a quiet location

The Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, also writes about the im-portance of finding a room or some corner for prayer where one is undisturbed, and free from the tension which binds one "by sight, sound or thought".

Certainly our surroundings can assist us in coming to still-ness. And often our prayer room will be a sign to other family members that we are not to be disturbed in our time of meditation. Not only do we have to give priority to those daily times but also a priority to our spiritual environment.

The Catholic Catechism mentions that "for personal prayer there can be a 'prayer corner' with the sacred scripture and icons, in order to be there, in secret, before our Father. In a Christian family, this kind of little oratory fosters prayer in common".12

Sacred spaces

Author Mary Anthony Wagner also points out the importance of a "sacred space" where family members can respect the need for one's silence and solitude. In her book The
Sacred World of the Christian she writes:

There might also be a hermitage within the home, a space in which stillness can be assured, a space to reflect, to study, or simply to be alone. This holy space could be a den, a bedroom, or a specific room in the basement which through common agreement would not be disturbed when occupied by its "her-mit". Setting aside such space would itself be-speak the significance of taking time to be quiet and alone with God, and of respecting this kind of need and value for solitude in one another.  

QUESTION 7

Q. What are the best times to meditate each day?

A. Morning and evening are the traditional times of prayer in most of the world's religions including Christianity. The monastic tradition in Christianity starts the day with Matins (morning pray-er) and ends the day with Compline (night prayer).

Morning Meditation

In the morning nature is usually calm and quiet and brings freshness and renewal. Most people feel the best time to meditate is immediately after getting up and before breakfast and the day's activities. John Main felt it was always advantageous to meditate before rather
than after a meal. In the morning we place God first in our priorities. Before the outer world calls there is a call to enter the inner world of stillness.

Evening Meditation

The evening period of meditation usually presents a greater challenge for most people. Many of us have been involved in the hustle and bustle of the day. Because we all lead such different lives it is difficult to lay down any general guidelines for the evening time of meditation. Again, if possible, it would be desirable to meditate before the evening meal and before the digestive process begins. However this is not always possible and many people choose a later hour in the evening. Some people are 'night people' and are wide awake and concentrated in the late evening. For others a late evening meditation would simply result in sleepiness and 'nodding off'.

Sometimes choosing a time for meditation requires ingenuity. A mother of nine children who meditates finds a magic half-hour in mid-afternoon when some of her children are sleeping and other children have not yet arrived home from school. Because of the busyness and activities of the day and perhaps tiredness, it might be a good idea to take a shower before the evening meditation or at the very least splash water on one's face. Regularity and punctuality are important aspects of morning and evening meditation. It is also advantageous to try and build a regular rhythm and pattern of set times to meditate each day.¹⁴
QUESTION 8

Q. I'm a newcomer to the practice of Christian Meditation. Distractions are driving me crazy. What am I doing wrong?

A. If its any consolation to you this is the favourite question asked by meditators all around the world. Let's seek the wisdom of spiritual teachers over the centuries about this question of distractions. This is a famous story about two early 4th century des-ert monks:

A brother came to Abbot Pastor and said: Many dis-tracting thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger because of them. Then the elder thrust him out in the open air and said: open up the garments about your chest and catch the wind in them. But he replied: This I cannot do. So the elder 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.15

The poverty of distractions

The Dominican priest Fr. Thomas Philippe in his book The Contemplative Life writes:
When we have the impression that we have spent our time in prayer driving away distractions; when we have been left with our poverty with nothing but this striving for God, we can be sure that God has been acting in the depths of our soul. We perceive it afterward when we resume our other activities, by a sense of peace and rejuvenation in the depths of our hearts.\(^{16}\)

**Thoughts jostling in your head**

Theophane the Recluse, the 19th century monk, bishop and spiritual director said this about distractions:

Thoughts continue to jostle in your head like mosquitoes. To stop this jostling you must bind the mind...with the thought of one only. An aid to this is a short prayer, which helps the mind to become simple and united...Together with this short prayer, you must keep your...attention turned to-wards God. But if you limit your prayer to words only, you are as "sounding brass".\(^{17}\)

**Distractions and the wandering mind**

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) once said:
Distractions, the wandering mind, are part of the human condition and can no more be avoided than eating or sleeping.¹⁸

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) reflects on the challenge of distractions in his book *Seeds of Contemplation*:

Prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer has become impossible and your heart has turned to stone. *If you have never had distractions you don't know how to pray.* For the secret of prayer is a hunger for God and for the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language. The (person) whose memory and imagination are...with a crowd of useless or even evil thoughts and images may sometimes be forced to pray far bet-ter in the depths of their...heart.¹⁹

Distractions will always be with us

That's the first great lesson about distractions. They accom-pany us on our life time practice of contemplative prayer. The problem all of us have in coming to an inner silence in meditation is that our minds are full of thoughts, images, sensations, emo-tions, insights, hopes, regrets, a never ending array of distrac-tions.
St. Teresa of Avila once said the human mind is like a boat where mutinous sailors have tied up the captain. The sailors all take a turn at steering the boat and of course the boat goes around in circles and eventually crashes on the rocks. That is our mind, says Teresa, full of thoughts taking us off in every direction. An Indian sage, Sri Ramakrisna, once said the human mind is like a great tree with monkeys jumping from branch to branch chattering away.

Distractions and the trunk of an elephant

There is another pertinent story which illustrates the capri-cious human mind. In India the mind is often compared to the trunk of an elephant, restless, inquisitive and always straying. In India if you watch an elephant in a parade you will see how apt the comparison is. In Indian towns and villages, elephants are often taken in religious processions through the streets to the temple. The streets are crooked and narrow, lined on either side with fruit stalls and vegetable stalls. Along comes the elephant with his restless trunk, and in one quick motion it grabs a whole bunch of bananas.

The late Eknath Easwaran, a teacher of meditation, telling the story says,

You can almost see him asking, 'What else do you expect me to do? Here is my trunk and there are the bananas.' He just doesn't know what else to do with his trunk. He doesn't pause to peel the bana-nas, either, or to
observe all the other niceties that masters of etiquette say should be observed in eating a banana. He takes the whole bunch, opens his wide mouth, and tosses the bananas in stalk and all. Then from the next stall he picks up a coco-nut and tosses it in after the bananas. There is a loud crack and the elephant moves on to the next stall. No threat can make this restless trunk settle down.

But the wiser trainer, if he knows his ele-phant well, will simply give that trunk a short bamboo stick to hold on to before the procession starts. Then the elephant will walk along proudly with his head up high, holding the bamboo stick in front of him like a drum major with a baton. He is not interested in bananas or coconuts any more, his trunk has something to hold on to.²⁰

The human mind, says Easwaran, is very much like this trunk of an elephant. Most of the time it has nothing to hold on to. But it can be kept from straying into the world of thoughts, imagina-tion and fantasy by simply giving it something to hold on to - a mantra.

How to handle distractions

The mantra is a help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond distractions, including words, thoughts, even holy thoughts. We say the mantra slowly, steadily with attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered we simply come back to our mantra. We
cannot force this way of prayer through sheer will power. Do not try too hard. Let go, relax. There is no need to fight or struggle with distractions. Simply return to the repetition of the mantra. The key word here is *gentleness*.

But a word of caution. The repetition of a mantra does not bring instant peace, harmony, the absence of distractions or silence. We must accept where we are on the pilgrimage of meditation. We should not get upset at continual distractions. Our aim is not to be free of *all* thoughts. Again this would be a goal and we do not want to have *goals*. John Main constantly advises us not to come to meditation with *any* expectations. So do not struggle and fret over distractions. The mantra simply expresses our *openness* to God and his indwelling presence.

We can't force the elimination of distractions

John Main also reminds us that we cannot attempt to force the elimination of distractions. In fact we must let go of goals and trying to achieve anything. The mantra will become rooted in our consciousness through the simple fidelity of returning to our man-tra each morning and each evening. Meditation is centering our-selves on our inner core and allowing God to pray within us. Says Fr. John:

I want now to address a particular question that we all encounter. It is the question of distractions. What should you do when you begin to
meditate and distracting thoughts come into your mind? The ad-vice that the tradition has to give us is to ignore the distractions and to say your word and to keep on saying your word. Don't waste any energy in trying to furrow your brow and say, 'I will not think of what I'm going to have for dinner', or 'who I'm going to see today', or 'where I'm going tomorrow', or whatever the distraction may be. Don't try to use any energy to dispel the distraction. Simply ignore it and the way to ignore it is to say your word. 21

Attention: the other side of distractions

Simone Weil, the French author, who died in 1943 at the age of 33, was an apostle of the spiritual life and defined prayer as at-tention. The mantra leads us to this attention. (See Question 39 on Simone Weil.) Another French spiritual writer and seventeenth-century French Christian Apologist, Pascal, felt the greatest enemy of prayer was the 'Gethsemani sleep' when the apostles slept instead of watching with Jesus. Pascal felt that inattention and drowsiness were the enemies of prayer. Again the mantra helps us with this problem by bringing us to attention.

Don't get mad at distractions. This is a non-violent way of prayer. Ignore distractions by continually returning to the mantra. If one is distracted with thoughts 50 times in a period of meditation, when one returns to the mantra that is 50 times we have chosen God over the
distractions.

A problem often observed by those meditating is that the thinking process continues even while saying the mantra. There is even a term for this. It is called *double tracking*. Again this is nothing to be concerned about. With perseverance the mantra will become stronger and our thoughts will diminish as the pilgrimage of meditation continues.

It is important to remember that when we are bombarded with thoughts and images at our time of meditation our will is still tuned in to the presence of God. To handle distractions we do require gentleness and patience. We have to wait, like the wise vir-gins, in patience and hope. Gentleness and patience indicate the Spirit is working silently within us. While we are aware of distractions we should never let them disturb us. We can even see the good in distractions; they keep us awake and on the journey. They come in one door and leave by another.

Despite distractions the Spirit is working silently

Stephen J. Rossetti, in his book, *I am Awake: Discovering Prayer* has put it well:

We cannot force grace. It is a gift. We can only wait in patience and hope, like the wise virgins. Paradoxically, it is in the waiting that God is of-ten present. Usually, in the very depths of our being, the Spirit is
working silently. Our pa-tience and gentleness are themselves signs of this Spirit's presence.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite all our efforts thoughts will come. Good thoughts, bad thoughts, 'urgent' reminders. Ignore them all. We just keep saying our word silently. We try to let go of thinking. We try to keep saying your word. We repeat the mantra silently and continu-ously in our hearts. The mantra will lead us to discipline, to concentration, to silence, to God.

\textbf{QUESTION 9}

Q. Is there a tradition of taking off one's shoes while meditating?

A. Many meditators treat the location of their daily meditation practice as a \textit{holy} place where one enters into the presence of God. Rituals can be important at the beginning of meditation and might include washing hands or face, setting a timer for the length of time you wish to meditate, reciting a short prayer from the psalms or scripture or the option of taking off one's shoes.

In a holy place it seems to make sense to take off one's shoes which may carry in the contamination, dust and dirt of the streets. And on a practical level taking off one's shoes can simply be more comfortable. However each meditator should feel free to make their own
choice in this matter.

The Old Testament Tradition

There is an ancient tradition for taking one's shoes off during meditation. In the Old Testament Moses meets God in the burn- ing bush. The first thing God says is 'take off your sandals in the presence of the Lord' (Exod. 3:5). Some meditators like to follow this pattern of taking off their shoes 'in the presence of the Lord' during their meditation periods. However it is always an optional choice. For some people this tradition would simply be a distraction.

We Stand on Holy Ground

In the book *Seasons of Your Heart: Prayer and Reflections*, author Macrina Wiederskehr has this beautiful insight about shoes and prayer:

Taking off your shoes is a sacred ritual. It is a hallowed moment of remembering the goodness of space and time. It is a way of celebrating the holy ground on which you stand. If you want to be a child of wonder cherish the truth that time and space are holy. Whether you take off your shoes symbolically or literally matters little. What is important is that you are alive to the holy ground on which you stand and to the holy ground that you are.
QUESTION 10

Q. What role does correct posture play in the practice of meditation? What is the best way of sitting?

A. As the psalmist says even the body longs for prayer: 'My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God' (Ps. 84). Because we are a single entity, body, mind and spirit, the body is a companion in meditation with the mind and spirit. For that reason we must respect, take care of and love the body and recognise this union and integration of body and spirit. St. Paul was well aware of this and in the first letter to Corinthians says 'the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body' (1 Cor. 6:13).

In regard to sitting perhaps Richard Rolle, the fourteenth-century English hermit and contemplative has put it most succinctly for Christians:

   Sitting I am most at rest
   and my heart moves upward
   I have loved to sit, for
   thus I have loved God more
   and I remained
longer within the comfort
of love than if I were
walking or standing or kneeling.\textsuperscript{24}

Sitting expresses receptiveness, self-surrender and particu-larly 'resting in God'. Sitting is an ideal posture for prayer because it roots us in attentiveness while at the same time allow-ing us to be relaxed. St. Teresa of Avila once said 'we need no wings to go in search of God, but have only to find a place where we can \textit{sit} alone and look upon God present within us'. That is a good definition of Christian Meditation but note the importance she gives to \textit{sitting}.

I am not sitting, I am on a journey

Here are a few other quotes that emphasize the importance of \textit{sitting} during prayer.

Author Blaise Pascal once said 'all the troubles of life come upon us because we refuse to sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms'. A Zen Buddhist meditation saying reads 'sitting... sitting and the grass grows greener'. There is also the story of St. Sarapion, the Sidonite, a desert father of fourth-century Egypt. He travelled once on a pilgrimage to Rome. Here he was told of a celebrated recluse, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. Sceptical about her way of life, for he was himself a great wanderer, Sarapion called on her and asked: 'Why are you sitting here?' To this she replied: 'I am not sitting. I am on a journey.'
The history of sitting in prayer

However, for those who associate prayer with their early childhood training of saying their prayers on their knees, sitting in meditation may at first seem strange. Yet this is an ancient practice in most of the world's religions. For 5,000 years Hindus have been meditating in the Lotus (sitting position). Zen Budd-hists in particular are noted for their 'sitting' in meditation. In Christianity the early fourth-century desert monks sat weaving baskets or sewing while reciting a biblical mantra.

How to sit properly

In meditation we aim at a harmony of body and spirit. This is where the correct posture of an upright back plays an important role. Correct posture can assist us to remain alert and concentra-ted in our daily periods of meditation. If the body is steady, alert and still it strengthens and supports the spirit. We should sit comfortably with a straight back but not stiff or tense.

It is the universal teaching in meditation that a still body is an aid to stilling the mind. This is a primary reason why it is important right at the beginning to getting into the habit of keep-ing the spinal column (head, neck and spine) erect in meditation. This is where proper sitting in a comfortable position in medita-tion allows us to breathe freely in saying our mantra and helps us to be physically still. However we don't have to keep our body tense in sitting.
This straining would only be a distraction. We must balance our sitting with relaxedness. Stillness helps us to realize our bodies are sacred, "Temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19) and the psalmist says "He leads me to still water: He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:2).

On choosing a chair

In choosing a chair your feet should be flat on the floor. If a chair is too high place a cushion or book under your feet. The feet should be parallel with heels on the floor. A straight backed chair will be the best choice, but its comfort often depends on height or slope. A chair with arms will help prevent slumping. Look for a chair where one can sit alert but at the same time at ease. If possible it is best not to let the spine collapse against the back of the chair. Prayer stools or prayer benches are quite popular today because one's legs and back are positioned comfort-ably in another symbolically prayerful position.

Sitting on a cushion

An alternative way of sitting on the floor involves a firm cushion and sitting on its forward edge. The head should remain in line with the trunk provided the cushion is not too high and pitch-es one forward. Legs should not be held out straight but folded. Pain and numbness can be a distraction here until flexibility is acquired in this position. The chin should not be thrust forward but tucked gently in. Shoulders should be relaxed and not slumped. The hands rest on the knees or lap. If you have not practised sit-ting on a cushion
it will be hard to maintain a good sitting position for 20-30 minutes. Patience will be required to strengthen spinal muscles and flexible hips.

Finally whether one sits in a chair or on a cushion or prayer stool the one rule of thumb is to keep your head, neck and spinal column in a straight line with eyes closed.

Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice

Again a reminder that we do not want the body to be in discom-fort or pain in meditation. This in itself will be a distraction and will interfere with our concentration in saying the mantra. Having said this it is obvious that one can still meditate when one is sick or even in pain. Whether it is healthy or sick, at ease or in pain, the role of the body is in the service of the Lord. St. Paul speaking to the Romans said 'I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship' (Rom. 12:1).

Correct breathing is also an important aspect of meditation. It is a good idea to take some deep breaths before meditating and to become aware for a few moments of one's breathing. Most people synchronise the saying of the mantra with their inhaling and exhal-ing. (See question 12 on breathing.)

No one can doubt the importance of body consciousness in pray-er. Witness Christian
monks chanting the Divine Office, Indians praying on the banks of the Ganges at dawn, Moslems prostrate before God at their daily times of prayer, Jews at the western wall in Jerusalem or Zen Buddhist monks 'sitting'. St. Paul saw this importance when he said to the Corinthians 'Glorify God in your body' (1 Cor. 6:20).

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**QUESTION 11**

Q. Do we try to make our mind blank or *void* in Christian Meditation? Is our aim to have no thoughts at all? Can emptying the mind be dangerous? Will it make me vulnerable to undesirable forces or influences?

A. One of the problems we face in the teaching of Christian Meditation is that in speaking about emptying our minds of concepts and images, we might inadvertently give the impression that all that remains is a "vacuum" or as you refer to it, a "void". Some of the early Christian teachers of contemplative prayer are not overly helpful in this regard. Evagrius of Pontus says "prayer means the shedding of thoughts" but doesn't answer the question "what happens next?".25

Interior silence: filled with the presence of God

Perhaps it is better to speak in positive rather than negative terms about the setting
aside of thoughts in meditation. The inte-rior silence we open ourselves to in meditation is filled with the presence of God. Sometimes it is not a felt presence, but the spe-cial knowledge we call faith means we can 'know' in our times of meditation that the indwelling Trinity actively lives and prays within us. It has nothing to do with making one's mind a void or our inner being becoming a vacuum. In meditation we open our en-tire body, mind and spirit to the direct experience of the Spirit deep within us.

At the still point we find God who is love

The repetition of our mantra will keep us alert, concentrated and free from any kind of void or blankness. Meditation is based on faith, and this faith will keep us aware of God's presence.

John Main says:

the fruitful repetition of the word integrates our whole being. It does so because it brings us to the silence, the concentration, the necessary level of consciousness that enables us to open our mind and heart to the love of God in the depth of our being.26

The mantra says to God "I am open to your presence, I am rest-ing in your presence, I am in your hands. Do whatever you will with me." The mantra is our surrender to God.
There is no "vac-uum" or "void" in this way of prayer.

At our "still point" or our "centre" we find not emptiness but God who is love. St. John of the Cross says "God is the centre of my soul" and Julian of Norwich says "God is the still point at my centre". The path to this centre is the way of the mantra and leaving behind our ego, our self-centredness and our self-conscious-ness. (See Question 29 on the ego.)

And finally a reminder that the *Cloud of Unknowing* points out that Satan cannot enter this inner chamber of our heart in this silent prayer. He says that in this silence on can only be open to the voice of the Spirit who dwells deep within us. (See Question 34 on the *Cloud of Unknowing*.)

QUESTION 12

Q. Is there any special breathing advice for our daily meditation periods?

A. John Main with his Irish wit once said "the only important thing about breathing is to continue to do so for the full time of your meditation". In the 250 talks on cassette tape by John Main he rarely mentions any particular special role for breathing.

In this respect he joins many other teachers of meditation who feel that anything which
takes attention away from the recitation of the mantra itself is a distraction. The late Eknath Easwaren, renowned teacher of meditation in California, felt it was counter-productive to give any special attention to connecting the repetition of the mantra with one's breathing or heartbeat. Like some other teachers he felt each person comes naturally to integrating their breathing with the mantra and that we should put no special effort to this process.

The body and meditation

However bearing in mind the point these teachers are making, there perhaps is validity in recognizing that the body does play an important role in our meditation practice. (See question 4 on the body in meditation.)

The problem for so many people who come to meditate is that they breathe poorly so that their lungs are never fully used; only a small proportion of the seventy million alveoli in our lungs are extended. There is a tendency for some people who meditate to breathe shallowly through the mouth and make little use of the dia-phragm (abdomen) when they inhale. This results in only the top part of the lungs being used with only a small amount of oxygen inhaled. Tension usually results from rapid shallow breathing from the top of our lungs. Our aim in meditation is to slowly breathe deeply from our abdomen. St. Paul would understand the process in the light of his advice to the Romans 'make every part of your body into a weapon fighting on the side of God' (Rom. 6:13).
No conscious effort required

Breathing in meditation should be a slow, natural rhythmic action involving the entire torso. Ideally breathing correctly means breathing through the nose with the mouth closed and the lungs fully inhaling and exhaling. Breathing out should normally take twice as long as the in-breath. The more stale air we can exhale the more fresh air we can inhale. The breath itself should be calm and deep. Deep breathing will calm the nervous system.

As already mentioned integrating the saying of the mantra with the inhaling/exhaling process seems to come naturally and spontaneously to almost everyone who meditates. Often no conscious effort is required. Perhaps this is why John Main was hesitant to place emphasis on any particular breathing practice. He recognised that without any conscious effort on their part most meditators adapt the mantra spontaneously to their breathing.

There is no right way to breathing

However, for those newcomers who wish to have some idea of how to adapt the mantra to their breathing, here are a few examples of how this can be done with the mantra ma-ra-na-tha. Please bear in mind that the choice of these examples will vary for different individuals, depending on their lung capacity. There is no right way to do it. One could for instance say the entire mantra breathing in, while breathing out in silence. Or one could say the mantra breathing in ma-ra and breathing out na-tha. Some people say the mantra only on their out-
breath. There are also five or six other combinations, again, usually depending on one's lung capacity.

What is most important is to come to a comfortable rhythmic pattern reciting the mantra in conjunction with one's breathing and build this discipline into one's meditative practice. Again for many people no conscious effort will be required to accomplish this. The advice would be "let it all happen naturally".

QUESTION 13

Q. Should I feel guilty if I miss one of my daily meditation periods?

A. The only thing to feel guilty about is feeling guilty! There is enough religious guilt amongst Christians without adding to the burden of guilt.

Fidelity to the morning and evening meditation is important but there will be times when through the circumstances of our life or our own lack of discipline we miss a period of meditation. It takes time to establish discipline and discipline is a way of liberty not restriction. Meditators often point out they feel a gap in their day when this happens. But please, whether it is deliberate or not, don't feel guilty. Simply come back the next day with renewed commitment to the path. What is important is to hang in there for the long run. And
a false sense of guilt has no part to play on the path of Christian Meditation. Jesus calls us to re-pentence, not guilt.

There is however an Indian saying "If you skip one day's medi-tation, it takes seven days to catch up". So make every effort to build the daily discipline into your daily life.28

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QUESTION 14

Q. Does God speak to us in meditation? Do we hear his voice?

A. Thomas Merton once said that God's language is silence. So God does not speak to us with a booming voice from heaven but like Elijah we will hear God speak to us in the silence.

On the path of meditation we will certainly come to know how God has 'spoken' to us. We will see the decisions made, the pit-falls avoided, the right path followed and we will know that God has spoken to us. But we will not hear the voice of God in our times of meditation in any ordinary sense of that term. In our meditation periods, God speaks directly to our heart. God's lan-guage indeed is silence.

Of course when it comes to hearing God speak to us there may be times when we will not be absolutely certain we have heard his voice and what the right thing to do is in certain
instances. For this reason we need both faith, deep listening, and sometimes the wise counsel of others.  

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**QUESTION 15**

Q. How do we measure our spiritual progress in meditation?

A. Evelyn Underhill (1876-1941) who devoted her lifetime to the study of prayer and spirituality was adamantly against checking one's spiritual pulse and once said 'It is quite impossible for any of us to measure ourselves and estimate our progress'. (See question 40 on Evelyn Underhill.)

  Meditation is in fact all about *not* looking for progress or results. As John Main says, it is about taking the searchlight off ourselves, it is about losing our self-consciousness. If we start asking questions about 'How far have I come?' or 'How long is all of this going to take me?' or 'Am I becoming holier?' then we are becoming self-conscious - something we want to avoid. Meditation, says Father John, requires simplicity and we are led to that simplicity by faithfully saying the mantra.

  We don't turn to meditation to find "answers" or to achieve some kind of "fulfillment", or to solve the "problems" of our life. We meditate to become rooted in God, to *be*, to be
present to God's inner presence, and in that presence to be transformed into love. Meditation is a spiritual death to our "ego" and a spiritual resur-rection of our inner self to live again in Christ. John Main puts it so well.

What all of us have to understand is that we are not meditating in order to make something happen. We are not meditating in order to get some sort of insight. In fact, we are not meditating to gain any possession whatsoever. Quite the reverse. We are meditating so that we can dispossess ourselves, not just of our ideas and insights but to dispos-sess ourselves of our very selves.30

On measuring spiritual progress

It is also a truism that we cannot measure the spiritual. We can measure the depths of the oceans and the number of galaxies but we simply cannot measure the spiritual in any normal way. The only real test of spiritual growth is an increase in simplicity, compas-sion and love.

In addition, what happens in our daily times of meditation is not of great importance. Usually nothing happens. Meditation is not about entering into an altered state of consciousness or seeing and experiencing anything out of the ordinary. Wondering about our spiritual progress is really part of the self-centredness we are meant to leave behind in meditation.
Thomas Merton reminds us of this same point:

Do not be overanxious about your progress in praying. You have left the beaten track and are tra-velling by paths that cannot be charted or measured. Let God take care of your prayer and your progress in it. Seek only to purify your love of God more and more. Seek only to abandon yourself more and more perfectly to His will.31

The only way to evaluate our progress in prayer is to look to the inner transformation into love and compassion for others which is taking place in our daily lives. In this way we can get some sense of our spiritual growth. In fact it does not take a long time on the path of meditation before St. Paul's fruits of prayer begin their work within us. St. Paul's 'harvest of the Spirit' includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). All of these gifts are re-leased to us as we learn to listen to the language of the heart which is silence. But these gifts extend outwards to others in our family, the community, our work situation and in all aspects of our daily life and relationships. (See question 49 on the relationship between prayer and action.)

Returning to the marketplace

The only question we can ask about progress is are we being changed into the fire of love through meditation? Is there an in-tegration of action and contemplation? In Zen
Buddhism there is a series of pictures which depicts our spiritual journey as a search for an ox (a symbol of enlightenment). In the last picture the seeker finds the ox and immediately returns to the marketplace of everyday life, an integrated, enlightened human being ready now to love and serve others.

Love and service in little things

Does this love and compassion that flows from meditation have to be always expressed in great deeds of social action? Not really. That action can be a small unselfish act by a small child. A reminder of the words of Jesus "Unless you change and become like a little child you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18:3). The following story by Macrina Wiederkehr in the book *A Tree Full of Angels* beautifully illustrates this truism and our need for *child-likeness*:

One special moment of beauty that stands out in my mind I experienced in a bus station....I witnessed a little girl helping her brother get a drink at the water fountain. Attempting to lift him to the proper height turned out to be impossible. I was just at the point of giving them some assistance when quick as lightning she darted over to a shoe-shine man, pointed to a footstool he wasn't using, dragged it to the water fountain, and very gently lifted up her thirsty brother. It all happened so fast and it was so simple, yet it turned out to be a moment of beauty that became
a prayer for me. So much to be learned from such a little moment. Perhaps what touched me most was her readiness to seek out a way to take care of the need without waiting to be rescued. It was a moment of beauty: a small child with a single heart.32

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QUESTION 16

Q. What does the term "letting go" mean in the practice of meditation?

A. Letting go is an act of discernment and a description of a process we go through on the path of meditation. Not only do we try to let go of words, thoughts and images but also we try to let go of our concerns, fears and anxieties during our times of meditation. We even let go of trying to make the silence happen. It is also about letting go of "getting anywhere". But letting go is also very much more than this. It is a complete self-surrender to God. It is called letting go and letting God (see question 15 on measuring our spiritual progress in meditation).

We must also let go of instant results in meditation. It has been said we live in an 'instant results' society; everything from instant coffee, same-day service, to wanting to know immediately whether we have won the lottery. Our society is accomplishment and win oriented. We have a fixation on achieving goals, seeing results immediately and winning.
The need to win

The Chinese spiritual philosopher Chuang Tzu (368-286 BC) saw the danger of 'results' in his poem called 'The Need to Win' translated by Thomas Merton.

When an archer is shooting for nothing
He has all his skill.
If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind
Or sees two targets -
He is out of his mind!

His skill has not changed. But the prize
Divides him. He cares.
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting -
And the need to win
Drains him of power.33

Letting go of "getting anywhere"
This is why John Main keeps insisting on 'letting go' of ex-pectations, of goals, of results and in fact 'of winning' on the path of meditation.

A priest looking for results once went to John Main and said 'I've been meditating now for seven years, how long is it going to take me to come to any kinds of silence?' Father John, with a twinkle in his eye, said '20 years'. And the priest in telling this story said 'and just think I have only 13 more years to go'. The point of the story being that we must have the faith of a child and give up our adult self-concern about goals and about getting somewhere. Meditation is really just the opposite. It is about letting go of our self-concerns, and it's about letting go of 'get-ting anywhere'.

Letting go from our attachments

Letting go is also freeing ourselves from our inordinate at-tachments. We either let go of our attachments in the silence of meditation or in death. But the great joy of the meditator is that the process can begin before death when we begin to 'let go' in our daily life and in our times of meditation; letting go of all the things we cling to, all our attachments. We must let go of all our security, our attachment to health, material possessions, reputa-tion, everything. We are going on a journey and we must travel light. This is what Jesus means when He said to His disciples, 'take no gold, no silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff' (Matt 10:9-10).
St. John of the Cross had this to say about detachment and 'letting go'.

In order to have pleasure in everything
Desire to have pleasure in nothing.

In order to arrive at possessing everything
Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at being everything
Desire to be nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything
Desire to know nothing.34

Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies

The point John of the Cross makes is that in God we possess all things, but in order to possess God we must give up all our inordinate desires and, having done that, everything is given to us. 'Letting go' frees us from all desires that are not centred in God. It is what John Cassian meant by non-possessiveness or 'pov-erty of Spirit' (see question 32 on John Cassian).

Again this 'letting go' is aptly expressed by St. John of the Cross in his poem 'The Dark
I abandoned and forgot myself,
Laying My Face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself,
Leaving my cares
Forgotten among the lilies.  \(^{35}^{36}\)

John of the Cross had discovered that to love and \textit{let go} can be the same thing.

\begin{question}
Q. Those who pray in a contemplative way speak of "The Gift of Tears". What exactly is this?

A. The gift of tears is a charism well known to the early desert monks who saw it as a sign of a second baptism, not by water but by the Holy Spirit. St. John Climacus comments on this: "Greater than Baptism itself is the fountain of tears after Baptism". The same saint added, "tears shed from fear intercede for us; but tears of all-holy love show us that our prayer has been accepted". Of interest to meditators is a saying of Isaac the Syrian, who commen-
"that after tears, comes the stilling of thoughts".

Compunction of Heart

St. John Chrysostom emphasized that sorrow for our sins and compunction of heart (Penthos) is essential to the practice of any spirituality. This doctrine of penthos emphasizes the metanoia or conversion of heart that everyone must experience on the spiritual path. The gift of tears flows from compunction and is a melt-down of our heart of stone being replaced by a heart of flesh. The pro-phet Ezekiel says:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
And I will put my spirit within you...and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.37

St. Evagrius of Pontus once said, "Before all else, pray to be given tears, that weeping may soften the savage hardness which is in your soul". The desert monk Abbot Pimen said: "Weep, there is no other way to perfection". Both St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits and St. Benedict experienced the gift of tears but throughout all the ages Christians in every walk of life have been at times filled with such a great compunction, tenderness and long-ing for God that they have wept with both sorrow and joy.

Weeping in our own Brokenness
Weeping also seems to be an authentic experience and acknowledgment of our own brokenness and woundedness that leads us to inner healing. This acknowledgement of our own woundedness is echoed in St. Paul's cry:

But I am unspiritual; I have been sold as a slave to sin. I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate ...and so the thing behaving in that way is not my self but sin living in me.... When I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me.... What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body, doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."38

A return to the true self

This life long spiritual battle with the ego, the false or illusory self that St. Paul hints about is the process of mentonia or conversion of heart spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel. Mentonia is a return to the true self (see Question 29 on the True and False Self).

Interior tears are a sure sign of compunction at the core of our being. The prophet Joel speaks of this conversion:

...come back to me with all your heart,

fasting, weeping, mourning.
Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn.

Turn to Yahweh, your God again,
for he is all tenderness and compassion,
slow to anger, rich in graciousness,
and ready to relent.39

Isaac the Syrian, has described the gift of tears as a new birth that only comes after an inner conversion and a long purification. For a modern story about the "gift of tears" see question 39 on Etty Hillesum.

Practical Thoughts about tears

Now some practical thoughts about "tears". As mentioned tears indicate a warming of our heart. They may come at unexpected moments during spiritual reading, washing dishes, participating in the Eucharist etc. It is a gratuitous gift of God and so we cannot force "the gift of tears". Like all charisms it is a gift. How-ever one must be aware that there can be neurotic tears, tears from grief and tears that flow from hysteria. The sign of the true gift of tears is an abiding inner peace, joy and love deep in one's heart.

QUESTION 18
Q. Is it necessary to meditate in a church location or can one meditate anywhere?

A. Meister Eckhart says "God is equally in all things and in all places". It is true that the presence of Christ takes many forms. He is present in the Eucharist under the form of bread and wine, but he is also present in the worshipping community, the Scriptures and is present where two or three are gathered in his name for he says "there I am in the midst of them". He is also present, as Matthew points out, in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and those in prison. "Lord when did we see you hungry and fed you or thirsty and gave you drink?" He is also present in our hearts as well at our times of meditation.

Where a person meditates is **holly ground**

As Eckhart says when Christ is present, he is wholly present. He is not *more* present in the Blessed Sacrament and *less* present in the two or three of the worshipping community or in our hearts during meditation. So for that reason the place where a person mediates is **holy ground**, whether it is a church, a bus, beside a river, in a prison, a garden or one's home. John Main pointed out in the book *The Present Christ* that God cannot be *more or less* present, as God is indivisible and cannot be divided into *more or less*.

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**QUESTION 19**
Q. What is the "Gethsemani sleep" all about in meditation?

A. The "Gethsemani sleep" is all about attention in prayer. There is a story about a Japanese Buddhist master who was asked by a visiting foreign student to describe what was the most important teaching about Buddhist meditation. The teacher took a brush and wrote out the Japanese word for "attention" and handed it to the visitor. Thinking this to be too brief for a profound teaching, the student asked if he would add something to it. The Buddhist teaching master took his brush and wrote "attention, attention". When pressed again by the student for something additional he wrote with his brush "attention, attention, attention".

"Could you not watch one hour with me"

Certainly "attention" was what Jesus was asking his disciples for in the Garden of Gethsemani when he said to them "wait here and watch with me". In Matthew's gospel he said to his friends "my soul is very sorrowful even to death". And before going to pray he asked them to keep watch nearby. They tried, but fell asleep. Jesus was asking them for a different spiritual discipline to stay awake and keep watch. "Could you not watch one hour with me?", asked Jesus. "Watch and pray that you may not enter into tempta-tion, the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak".
The call to wakefulness

In Gethsemani, we see Jesus in his most human hour, in anguish and fear. When Jesus asked his disciples to keep watch, he was not asking them to stand guard in order to warn him when Judas came. He was not about to run away. He was asking them to watch *with* him, to wait and be awake with him in the hour of crisis. Twice he asked them, and twice he returned to find them sleeping. If Jesus had asked them to flee with him, or to rally supporters, these three disciples would certainly have stayed awake and worked tirelessly through the whole night. But he was not calling them to heroic action; he was not asking them to "do" anything at all. He was calling them to simple attention, watchfulness, to "be" with him, and, as we see in the gospel, that was infinitely more difficult.

We are asked to *be* rather than *do*

How many of us still immerse ourselves in activity, rushing to and fro, busy, busy, busy because the call of Jesus to "keep watch and wait" seems too great a challenge. Yes, keeping watch is certainly one of the hardest things. And yet that is what the practice of meditation is all about, keeping watch. Gethsemani reminds us that what we are asked to do is something more simple and difficult than springing into action. We are asked to "be" rather than "do", to simply keep watch and stay awake.

Buddha replied "I am awake"
In Mark's gospel, Jesus says "remain here and keep awake".45 That's what we do in our daily meditation. We remain with the Lord and stay awake. There is a story concerning Buddhists about wakefulness. A delegation was once sent to the Buddha and asked him "who are you, are you a god"? Buddha replied, "I am not". "Are you an angel"? "I am not", again replied the Buddha. "Are you a prophet"? they persisted. "No" Buddha replied. "Who then are you" they said. Buddha replied "I am awake".

This is what Christian Meditation is all about, staying awake. It's about answering the call of Jesus to his disciples to watch one hour with him, to stay awake and be attentive. In our daily one hour of meditation we fulfill this request of Jesus. And the continual repetition of our mantra helps us to be attentive, fully awake and keeps us from falling into the Gethsemani sleep.

Perhaps the Psalmist summed it up best: "Wait for the Lord: be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord."46

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QUESTION 20

Q. I'm a very busy parish priest with all sorts of daily commitments, obligations and responsibilities. How can I set aside an hour a day to meditate?
A. That reminds me of the desert monk who once said:

Unless there is a *still* center  
in the middle of the storm  
Unless a person in the midst of all their  
activities  
preserves a secret room in their heart  
where they stand alone before God,  
Unless we do this we will lose all sense of  
spiritual direction and be torn to pieces.\(^\text{47}\)

And then there is that wonderful story by James Truslow in the book *The Tempo of Modern Life*:

A friend of mine, a distinguished explorer who spent a couple of years among the savages of the Upper Amazon, once attempted a forced march through the jungle. The party made extraordinary speed for the first two days, but on the third morning, when it was time to start, my friend found all the na-tives sitting on their haunches, looking very solemn and making no preparation to leave.

"They are waiting", the chief explained to my friend. "They cannot move further until their souls have caught up to their bodies".\(^\text{48}\)
This is perhaps a reminder that we all, not just priests, need to let our souls catch up to our bodies. In an age of frenetic activity there is a spiritual psychological and psychosomatic need to slow down, find time for the soul and reverse patterns of excessive busyness. Constant hurry and day in and day out pressure take a cumulative toll on one's nervous system. Evelyn Underhill (See Question 40 on Evelyn Underhill) once said "A lot of the road to heaven has to be taken at 30 MPH". Even God rested from great activity. Scripture says "After all his work God rested" (Gn. 2:2, Heb. 4:4). We also need to rest each day in his loving, silent presence.

Being is more important than doing

The problem of course for many priests is that with fewer and fewer priests, feverish activity is becoming a norm. The possibility of burn out is more and more present. There is a temptation to stay on the treadmill of busyness and activity and put off the spiritual reality that being is more important than doing.

We convince ourselves that there is so much we have to do, that we have numerous responsibilities to others and that it is impossible to reverse our workaholic pattern of doing...doing...do-ing. It's a treadmill many priests feel they can't get off.

Thomas Merton and Mother Teresa on prayer and giving to others
But Thomas Merton, the great American Cistercian monk has perhaps put busyness and serving others in its proper context. Says Merton, "It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister". And Mother Teresa once said, "God is the friend of silence. See how nature, trees, flowers, grass, grow in silence. The more we re-ceive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life".

Much of the time we run on tired cylinders. There's a truism that our powers of "giving" are fairly well used up by noon time on most days. Contemplative prayer opens us up to the energy and po-wer of the Spirit. Our capacity to keep giving all day long in-creases. One is able to adjust to difficult problems and even to live with impossible situations. Of course words are meaningless unless one enters into the meditation experience itself. We have to jump in the river and get wet. We have to do it.

Meditators have 25 hour days

With the daily discipline of meditation one is able to accom-plish what needs to be done with much greater effectiveness and joy. There's a saying that meditators have 25 hour days. The hour we devote to silence and stillness in prayer is returned to us in the form of spiritual energy and vitality in our daily life.

Giving priority to the spiritual discipline
How do we get in two half hours each day? A mother of nine children tells this story. When she decided she wanted to meditate she got up a half hour earlier to get in her morning meditation. The evening meditation was a greater challenge. However she found a "magic" half hour in mid-afternoon when six children were at school and three children were sleeping. This is the kind of commitment we need. We must give absolute priority to the twice daily times of meditation. We simply have to build this spiritual discipline into our daily life (see question 49 on prayer and action). Once built into our daily lives, the practice of medita-tion will guarantee a fruitful ministry.

QUESTION 21

Q. Why is saying the mantra so diffi-cult? I'm discouraged at my inability to pray this way. Is it really worth all the effort and hard work?

A. It is the universal experience that as we move from using words, thoughts and imagination in prayer to contemplative silence, a definite purification takes place. St. John of the Cross commen-ting on prayer without words or images says:

God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn; they cannot advance a step .... as they used to now that the
sensory faculties (imagination, intellect, will) are en-gulfed in this night. He leaves them in such dry-ness that they fail not only to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, but also find these exercises distaste-ful and bitter. This usually happens to recollected beginners sooner than to others.49

One of the great obstacles in beginning the practice of medi-tation is discouragement and helplessness in wanting to control this way of prayer and the challenge of surrender and letting go. Let go and let God, as the saying goes.

Stillness: A Quiet Martyrdom

Some of the great saints, teachers and philosophers point out that coming to a state of stillness is a great challenge, even at times a quiet martyrdom.

Lao Tzu (570–490 BC), the great Chinese philosopher, once described the handling of distractions:

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;
I hold firmly to stillness.
The myriad creatures all rise together
And I watch them return
The teeming creatures
All return to their separate roots.

Returning to one's roots is know as

stillness.\(^{50}\)

Hard work, but on no account think of giving up

St. Gregory of Sinai (fourteenth century) speaks of the effort and labour in this way of prayer and that one will be tempted to give up because of the continual pain in saying the mantra. But he says 'persevere persistently and with ardent longing seek the Lord in your heart'. The Cloud of Unknowing says 'this way of prayer is hard work, very hard work indeed...but on no account think of giv-ing up'. A desert hermit, Abba Agatho said 'there is no labour as great as praying to God. Prayer is a mighty conflict to one's last breath'. So much for the challenge of the discipline of medita-tion!

The one who loses their life will find it

There is, however, a great paradox here. It is true that meditation is often one of darkness, a way of unknowing, and that God sometimes seems to have disappeared and we can no longer sense his presence. But at the same time this is often coupled with joy, inner peace and a firm conviction that we will find God in our ari-dity and distractedness through faith in his presence. At the same time as we are frustrated we nevertheless feel a mysterious yet powerful attraction to the indwelling Christ. And from time to time God will reveal his
presence to us in the darkness. This is the work of grace.

John Main pinpoints a good reason why the practice of meditation seems at times so difficult for us. He reminds us that Jesus says 'The one who finds their life will lose it, and the one who loses their life for my sake will find it' (Matt. 10:39). But as Father John points out we often become spiritual materialists, seeking to accumulate grace, virtue and merit. We are taught that success and winning is important in life, not losing. But meditation is a call to abandonment of all desire, a dispossession, a surrender and in a real sense it is losing one's life for God.

Meditation: a leap of trust into the unknown

The key here is not to become over-anxious about what is 'hap-pening' on the journey. Meditation requires a leap of trust into the unknown. God has a plan for each one of us and a particular path to follow. He already has the path mapped out. We have to be content not to see the way ahead. We have to let go of control-ling, of knowing where we are on the journey. This is part of the death of the ego. Nikos Kazantzakis describes this letting go: 'God is fire and you must walk on it...dance on it. At that moment the fire will become cool water. But until you reach that point, what a struggle, my Lord, what agony!'

The habitual experience of dryness and endless distractions reminds us that the path of meditation is one of pure faith. In the Christian perspective this darkness and suffering will
lead to light and life. The prophet Isaiah has given us encouragement when he says:

Whoever walks in darkness
And has no light shining for him
let him trust in the name of Yahweh
let him lean on his God (Isa. 50:10).

God is present in darkness as in light

St. Paul also reassures us 'you can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it' (1 Cor. 10:13).

God is as present in darkness as in light. He is just as near in times of desolation as in times of consolation. Every spiritual journey has difficulties and setbacks, but the struggle to overcome them and persevere is infinitely worthwhile. Trials and crosses can be baffling but are God's way of eliciting from us trust, aban-donment and detachment on the spiritual journey. When we cry out in our weakness we have the consoling words of Jesus to St. Paul 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (II Cor 12:9).

John Main does though give us hope when he points out that the recitation of our mantra should become easier as we persevere on the journey. With time the torrent of
thoughts lessens and one en-joys a greater sense of calmness, stillness and inner peace. This transition is aptly depicted in the Russian spiritual classic The Way of the Pilgrim. At one point the Pilgrim is ‘saying’ the man-tra, but one day he suddenly discovers the prayer ’says itself’ and he hears it spontaneously arising and sounding within himself. (See Question 36 on The Way of the Pilgrim.)

But again this 'sounding within' may only come after a life-time of commitment to the meditative pilgrimage. Silence is a free gift of God and is not earned, or the mechanical outcome of recit-ing our mantra.

One practical suggestion in handling discouragement on the path of meditation is to urge you to join a weekly meditation group (See Question 51 on the Role of Groups). In the group setting we meet fellow travellers, often suffering from the same discourage-ment, and we can obtain strength and hope from listening to others on the common pilgrimage. Meditation is a journey we should take with others.

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QUESTION 22

Q. Can children meditate?

A. Sacred Heart Sister Madeleine Simon, founder of two Christian Meditation Centres in
England, and author of the book *Born Contemplative: Introducing Children to Christian Meditation*, is quite adamant that it is never too early to introduce children to the practice of meditation. In her book she points out that the first years of a child’s life are the time to nurture the seeds of con-templation and a deep and lasting relationship with God. Says Sister Madeleine:

The form of meditation discussed in *Born Contemplative* is one in which the mind is kept in silence within the darkness of faith through the repetition of a prayer word or mantra. Adults tend to have questions and queries when coming to this form of prayer, but small children have no such problems. They take to it like ducks to water. They have not reached the stage of logical thought and are able, in their simplicity, to catch and hold God by love.\(^5\)

Not only *can* they meditate, they *need* meditation.

Sister Madeleine goes on to say that not only *can* children medi-tate but they *need* meditation in their daily lives. She points out that children today have stress, tension, competitiveness, noise, often excessive activity and over-stimulation. They do need to balance their lives with inner stillness. And the interesting ob-ser-vation of parents and teachers is that once given the encourage-ment to meditate children come to love their daily quiet times.
Sister Madeleine also feels that children enjoy a place to just 'be'. Moreover they seem to have less self-consciousness than adults and with their unquestioning faith are readily able to bring their external senses to inner calmness.

The role of parents

Many children meditate with their parents. Children are often influenced by simply seeing their parents meditating and witnessing the fruits of their parents' daily practice. This influence of parents who meditate can be incalculable in its effects on children. Small children will often peek into their meditation room to see what their parents are up to. They will soon connect a mother and father who are more patient, cheerful and kind, with their parents' daily practice of meditation.

There are varying opinions about the length of time children should meditate. Sister Madeleine suggests very young children can begin by spending a quiet time of a few minutes on the lap of a parent and then slip away. From the age of 5 she suggests about five minutes when children first start to meditate increasing to 8-10 minutes when they are ready for a longer period irrespective of actual year of age. She also points out that some 5 year olds can be quiet quite early for more than 5 minutes while some 10 year olds can hardly cope with a full 5 minutes. A discerning parent is required here.

I once visited a teen-age Christian Meditation group in Dublin, Ireland, where the
leader had adopted a rule of thumb of one minute of meditation for each year of their lives. We meditated for 14 minutes with a group of 13, 14 and 15 year old boys and girls. Their leader gave them a choice of a number of mantras.

It has been said however that the best time to start a child on the path of meditation is when the child is in the womb. We now know the fetus is alert and sensitive to its mother's emotional vibrations whether it is anger, stress, calmness or stillness. A meditating mother passes her calming inner stillness in an intuitive way to her child. The benefits of introducing young children to meditate will become even more obvious in early adult years.

How to introduce children to meditation

Sr. Madeleine in *Born Contemplative* provides guidance in bringing children to meditation through developing their inborn sense of wonder and by introducing them to the Scriptures and the dramatization of Gospel stories. She gives an example of how a parent or teacher could recount the story by three of the evange-lists about Jesus asleep in the boat. A great storm arises, with a fierce wind and gigantic waves. The apostles are terrified, afraid the boat is going to swamp. They cry out to Jesus to save them. Jesus wakes and says 'Why are you frightened' (Matt. 8:26). He says to the wind and waves 'be calm'. At this point the parent/teacher can say 'now let us spend a few moments being calm and still, letting God be with us'. Of course, as she points out, it is also important to explain to children that while Jesus was pre-sent in the biblical stories, he is equally present within us now in spirit.
QUESTION 23

Q. Is meditation really prayer? I thought prayer was about talking to God.

A. From the earliest days of Christianity there was an understanding that prayer was going beyond words, thoughts and images and entering into the presence of the Spirit who dwells in our inner heart, who dwells there in love.

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) an early Egyptian monk and teacher of John Cassian popularized the teaching of these early Christian monks. He once gave this classic definition of Christian prayer which has been handed down through the centuries:

Prayer is raising the mind and heart to God through the laying aside of thoughts. 52

Evagrius refers to these desert monks who strove to find a means to lay aside thoughts. From this practice of prayer came the desert teaching of repeating over and over a prayer phrase to bring the mind to quietness and stillness. (See question 33 on John Cassian and the Jesus Prayer.)

Saints and spiritual teachers through the ages have echoed this need for inner stillness
and silence in prayer and finding the Kingdom of God within. St. Augustine (354-430) in one of his most beautiful insights into this spiritual path wrote:

O beauty ever ancient, ever new
Too late have I loved you
I was outside and you were within me
And I never found you until I found
You within myself.53

Stand before God with the mind in the heart

Those early Christian desert monks discovered God's abiding presence within them in silent prayer through the repetition of a mantra or what in their day they called a "formula". St. Theophane the Recluse expressed this practice of prayer when he said "the principal thing is to stand before Him unceasingly day and night... with the mind in the heart, for in this lies the essence of the matter".

This way of using a prayer phrase or mantra to quiet the mind and bring one to the "still point" is the great rediscovery of prayer that we see spreading all around the world today.

Psalm 116:9 says: 'I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living'. By
becoming silent in this 'wordless and imageless prayer' we deepen our awareness of God's presence in our lives and we acknowledge our complete dependence on Him. It was in the silence of the desert that God spoke to Moses and it is in the depths of our own silence that God speaks his prayer within us. As John Main said, it is not so much 'my prayer' that matters as the prayer of Jesus into which we are led.

Meditation leads to attention, to concentration, to silence, to God

If one were to define the practice of Christian Meditation one could say it is a daily spiritual discipline which leads one to at-tention, to concentration, to silence, to God. So meditation is much more than another method of prayer. It is about pure faith. It is really a surrender of one's whole being to God. However it is more a question of what God does than what we do. Meditation in reality is entering into the prayer of Jesus to the Father in the Spirit deep within us. And as John Main says we are swept along in this prayer of the Trinity. While in effect we are doing very little in meditation from our own willpower or resources, a deeper force within us is doing everything. The Spirit prays within us.

Finding God at the centre of our hearts

The experience of so many who have begun to meditate is that through meditation we can find God at the centre of our own hearts and that our lives are transformed by that discovery, by that ex-perience. The great sixteenth-century Carmelite St. John of the Cross
(1542-91) says, 'God is the centre of my soul'. Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) says 'God is the still point at my centre'. Meditation is this daily pilgrimage to one's own centre and a way of living from this deep centre of one's being. In ages past coming to an inner silence and stillness in prayer was referred to as contemplative prayer. Today it is pursued by many who practice what we call meditation in the Christian tradition.

Meditation gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are

John Main in the 21st century is repeating in contemporary language this same teaching of the early Christian desert monks:

Meditation is a way of coming to your own centre, coming to the foundation of your own being, and remaining there -- still, silent, attentive. Meditation is in essence a way of learning to become awake, to be fully alive and be still. The way to that wakefulness is silence and stillness. This is quite a challenge for people of our time, because most of us have very little experience of silence, and silence can be terribly threatening to people in the transistorised culture that we live in. You have to get used to that silence. That is why the way of meditation is a way of learning to say a word interiorly in your heart.54

We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays within us
Through fidelity to this simple practice this prayer of the heart leads us into the prayer of Jesus Himself. In going beyond words and thoughts and resting in God we in fact allow God to pray within us. This ties into St. Paul's hint of what prayer is all about when he says "we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays within us" (Romans 8:26).

Why not be totally changed into fire

I hope this answers your question. Prayer is much more than talking to God. In fact as John Main says silent contemplative prayer is even more than a way of prayer, it is a way of life that heals, transforms and sets us on fire. A famous saying of an Egyptian desert monk echoes this symbol of God as fire:

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts; now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: why not be totally changed into fire?  

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QUESTION 24
Q. I have a simple question. Why should one meditate?

A. Frederick William Nietzsche once said "The one who has a why to live can bear with almost any how". This is an important question and anyone who asks this question deserves a full answer.

In the book The Heart of Silence: Contemplative Prayer by Those Who Practice it, 60 meditators recount 60 different reasons why they have taken up the practice of meditation. There seems to be as many "why's" as there are meditators.

John Main and the "why" of meditation

John Main was once asked this question about why people meditate and he answered it in this way. He said it's very difficult to determine what exactly it is that makes a person want to meditate and that this puzzled him over the years. He added that there seem to be so many reasons why people start to meditate. He then went on to say though that for everyone the why of meditation is an invitation to journey deeply into their own heart and there they find only God, only love.

We discover the why after we begin to meditate
I do believe that we all get an invitation to this way of prayer. Jesus in the Gospel says "you did not choose me, I chose you" (John 15:16). For most of us the experience of silence and stillness itself will teach us about the "why" of meditation. In other words we discover the real why only after we have started to meditate.

However there are many ways of looking at the "why" of meditation. For Christians the world-wide hunger and thirst for silence in prayer is undoubtedly the work of the Spirit. Perhaps we Christians are finally coming to a deeper understanding that our finite minds cannot grasp the infinity of God. We are beginning to realize that theology, philosophy or any other form of knowledge only tell us things about God. They do not bring us into the experience of God Himself.

God simply cannot be grasped or known by the senses. The senses are involved with the world of space and time, but God is beyond space and time. However, when words, images and ideas are abandoned in the silence of prayer we come to a deep intuitive knowledge and love of God.

Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee

Perhaps we are also beginning to better understand our great longing and need for God, the need to wait on God, to listen to God, to be open to God in the stillness. We finally
are beginning to realize the wisdom of St. Augustine when he said "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee". It's interesting that we often refer to meditation as "resting in God".

When we meditate we go into that secret place, that still cen-tre. And out of that stillness where we are turned towards God, comes the life of the Spirit where we are transformed into love. We Christians meditate to open ourselves to the birth of Christ within. Perhaps Meister Eckhart said it best: "God's chief aim is giving birth. He is never content till he begets his Son in us."\(^{58}\)

God plays upon us whatever melody he wishes

Why do we meditate? Because in meditation God is working deep in our soul. On this spiritual path he is cleansing our soul from our failings and imperfections, sanctifying us and increasing His divine life within us. He is doing it within us because we have left ourselves completely at His disposal, not getting in His way. We leave Him completely free to do His work. We are like musical instruments and God is the musician. We are at God's disposal and God plays upon us whatever melody He wishes.

Another why: the fruits of prayer

Why do we meditate? Because in meditation the fruits of prayer enter our life almost
immediately and if we persevere on the path of meditation, the love of God overflows in our life like a reservoir. These fruits of prayer, the fruits of the Spirit as St. Paul terms them include 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gen-erosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22-24). This love will overflow in our lives in a thousand ways. But John Main reminds us that we can become intoxicated by words. The only important thing is to enter daily into the experience itself in faithfulness and commitment.

"Come with Me to a quiet place"

Another reason why so many Christians come to the practice of meditation is the excessively noisy, busy world we live in at the beginning of the 21st century.

Even Christ and the apostles got caught up at times in activi-ty and busyness. In Mark's gospel (Mark 6:31) it is recorded that one day the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught.

Then, because there were so many people coming and going, Mark says, "they did not even have a chance to eat". Jesus at this point observing the frenzied activity, said to the twelve "come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place". Mark continues that they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

How many times in the gospel does Jesus withdraw to pray in a solitary place? Mark
says "but the fame of Him went abroad the more: and great multitudes came to-gether to hear, and to be heal-ed of their infirmities; and He returned into the desert and pray-ed". This is the perfect balance between prayer and action in the life of Jesus. This is another "why" of Christian Meditation, our need to withdraw each day from excessive noise and activity and find God in the solitary place of our own heart.

To hear the voice of God deep within us

And just as Jesus and the apostles were caught up in activity, we also often allow our lives to become too busy, too noisy. We live in an age of frenetic activity. Television and radio programs bombard us. To-day we have wall to wall distractions. Anthropolo-gists tell us we are cramming in twice as much noise and activity into our lives as our ancestors. We are losing the contemplative dimension of life, and we are paying a terrible price. Noise is drowning out the voice of God. That is also "why" we come to medi-tation -- to once more hear the voice of God deep within us.

We join others on the common path

Finally there's one more important "why of meditation".

Ken Wilber is the American author of 14 books on anthropology, spirituality, religion, psychotherapy and meditation. In one of his books Grace and Grit writing on the death of his
wife from can-ber he makes a very insightful statement about meditation. He and his wife had both meditated from their younger days. He says:

When you can find a truth that Hindus and Chris-tians, Buddhists and Taoists and Sufis in Islam all agree on, then you have probably found something that is profoundly important. Something that tells you about universal truth and ultimate meaning, something that touches the very core of the human condition.59

He goes on to say that this truth we all share despite our differing beliefs, is the direct experience of the Spirit deep within us in the practice of meditation. He says "meditation then is part of the universal Spiritual culture of all humankind".

"Too late have I loved You"

While doctrinal differences seem insurmountable between the world’s religions, the one unifying practice that brings us all to-gether is this path of meditation, of the inner silence of prayer, in Christian terms finding the Kingdom of God within. St. August-ine recognized this when he said:

Beauty ever ancient, ever new

Too late have I loved You.
I was outside and You were
within me.
And I never found You
Until I found You
Within myself.60

QUESTION 25

Q. Why is silence important in our life and in the practice of meditation?

A. Undoubtedly it has much to do with our contemporary world, the cybernetic age of speed
and frenetic activity, where we are now bombarded with an "information superhighway" that
in some countries provides 1,000 television channels. Add to this the raucous cla-mour of non-
stop radio, advertising, an inundation of E-mail, sub-liminal electronic advertising, supersonic
jets and we have over-kill with excessive noise and activity.

Our society seems to be geared to business, productivity, speed, material success and
noise. Thomas Merton succinctly com-mented on the noisy pandemonium of our age when he
said "I am up to my eyeballs in angst". To counteract this age of decibels the way of silence
and stillness in prayer speaks to us of a deep human need and a spiritual path that is rooted
in the "inner desert" of the heart where the Spirit is waiting.
Great things seem to happen in silence. On that first Christ-mas Eve Jesus came to Mary, to the world and to us in the silence and stillness of the night. The divine office within the octave of the nativity says, 'while all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of its course, Your almighty word O Lord leapt down from Your throne in heaven' (Wisdom 18:14-15). The most famous Christmas carol is called Silent Night. God still comes to us in the silence says John Main, but He comes to us now in the silence of our daily times of meditation.

John of the Cross, in a letter to a Carmelite nun, once wrote: "Our most important task consists in remaining silent before this great God...He understands only one language, that of silent love." This stillness was also aptly described in his poetry when he wrote:

One dark night,

fired with love's urgent longings

- oh the sheer grace! -

I went out unseen,

my house being now stilled.61

Love unites with a bond that does not require words
In the many times Jesus slipped away from the apostles, I be-lieve He would have spent the night in silent communication with His Father. We even find a reflection of this in human love. Two people in love often prefer to sit silently side by side, because talking would only disturb their loving union. Words would only be an invasion of intimacy. Love unites with a bond that does not require words. That is what the practice of meditation is all about.

I heard an interesting story recently along these lines. A person visiting a hospital and sitting in the waiting room noticed a man in a wheelchair in some pain with his wife sitting next to him. For a half hour the couple never exchanged a word, just held hands and looked intently at each other. Once or twice the woman patted the man's face. The person watching said the feeling of love was so tangible in the room that she felt she was sharing in their silent communion. Their silent love, she said, was also joy-ful and portrayed the fullness of a human relationship. That's what spiritual silence is all about. Love does not necessarily re-quire words, it often requires silence.

Silence gives our Spirit room to breathe

John Main revealed the depths of contemplative silence in many of his talks. He once said "you discover in the silence that you are loved and that you are lovable. It is the discovery everyone must make in their lives if they are going to become fully them-selves, fully human. Silence gives our Spirit room to breathe, room to be." Nor is this silence a value only in Christianity. It is found in all the spiritual paths of the world's great religions.
The Old Testament also talks about finding God in the silence. The psalmist says "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). The prophet Zechariah says "be silent everyone in the presence of the Lord" (Zechariah 2:17).

Elijah heard God in the deep silence

And then there is the beautiful story of the prophet Elijah. God says to Elijah "go outside and stand on the mountain; the Lord will be passing by". A strong and heavy wind comes, but the Lord is not in the wind. Then there's a violent earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake. Fire blazed up, but the Lord was not in the fire. Then came a gentle breeze and a still small voice. Elijah heard God in the deep silence (1 Kings 19:11-13).

Psychologists, social scientists, poets, writers and saints through the centuries have all understood the need for inner silence in our lives. They describe silence as a many faceted diamond and each of the following quotations give us a deeper insight into this universal thirst for silence.

A saint ripens in silence.

George Bernanos (1888-1948)

The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and my advice asked I should reply: create silence. Bring
people to silence. The word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of to-day. Therefore create si-lence.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

The old man replied: "If he is not edified by my silence, there is no hope that he will be edified by my words.

_The Wisdom of the Desert (Thomas Merton)_

I listen and hear the silence
I listen and see the silence
I listen and taste the silence
I listen and smell the silence
I listen and embrace the silence

Twylah Nitsch

I can't get Galilee out of my head. To think he remained silent for thirty years. Such a Silence!

Jean Sullivan (1913-1980)

In the morning, while it was still very dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place and there He prayed.

Mark 1:35
We need to recover an oasis of silence within the rhyme and reason of our active life, for it is in silence that we meet God face to face....silence stands outside the world of profit and utility. It cannot be exploited for profit; you cannot get any-thing out of it. It is "unproductive", therefore it is regarded as useless. Yet there is more help and healing in silence than in all useful things.

Max Picard (1888-1965)\(^\text{64}\)

The Father uttered one word;
that word is His Son.
And He utters Him for ever in everlasting silence;
and in silence the soul has to hear it.

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)\(^\text{65}\)

Let us, then, labor for an inward stillness -
An inward stillness and an inward healing;
That perfect silence where the
Lips and heart are still,
And we no longer entertain
Our own imperfect thoughts
And vain opinions,
But God alone speaks in us,
And we wait in singleness of heart,

That we may know His will,

And in the silence of our Spirit,

That we may do His will,

And do that only.

Henry Wordsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

Nothing is so like God as silence

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327)

Silence is something like an endangered species. The experience of silence is now so rare that we must guard it and treasure it.

psychologist Gunilla Norris

It is in deep solitude and silence that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother and sister....silence is not absence; it is opportunity. Silence is the condition and the doorway.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

Ecclesiastics 3:7
If we really want to pray we must first learn to listen, for in the silence of the heart God speaks.

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

We need silence to be able to touch souls. The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. God is a friend of silence. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says through us.

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)68

Silence is the folding of the wings, of the intellect to open the door of the heart. Such silence is holy, a prayer beyond all prayers leading to the heights of contemplation.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985)69

I think what all of us have to learn is not so much that we have to create silence. The silence is there within us. what we have to do is to enter into it, to become silent, to become the silence. The purpose of meditation and the challenge of meditation is to allow ourselves to become silent enough to allow this interior silence to emerge. Silence is the language of the Spirit.

John Main (1926-1982)70
QUESTION 26

Q. Why is meditation called the prayer of the heart? How does the heart enter into meditation?

A. Perhaps the famous poet and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900-1944) has said it best in *The Little Prince*:

Speaking to
the Little Prince
about love and life,
the Fox says:
And now here
is my secret,
a very simple secret.
It is only
with the heart
that one can see rightly:
What is essential
is invisible
to the eye.\textsuperscript{71}

The heart has also been defined as 'the deepest psychological ground of one's personality' and 'the root and source of all one's own inner truth'. It is in our heart that we are aware of our-selves and of God. Perhaps that is the deepest meaning of heart. In meditation we say God touches our heart or we seek God in the silence and stillness of our own heart. When we give someone our heart we give ourselves completely. That is why we often call meditation the prayer of the heart, because we give ourselves com-pletely to Christ in the deepest part of our spiritual being -- our heart. Meditation is this place where we encounter God in the depths of our own heart.

The heart: a rich biblical concept

Heart is also a rich biblical concept. Ezekiel says hardness of heart is a sin, and that we need 'contrite' hearts. St. Paul prays that 'Christ may dwell in our hearts in love'. The heart in the Old Testament's Semitic understanding of the word meant the deepest reaches of one's inner being where love is generated in self-sacrifice for the one loved. In the Old Testament the word heart occurs over a thousand times such as in Jeremiah "Deep with-in them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts" (Jer. 3: 33). In the New Testament Jesus is always talking about the heart, "Blessed are the pure of heart" (Matthew 5:8), "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be" (Matthew 6:21), "For I am gentle and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29).
The prayer of the heart

Meditation is often referred to as the 'prayer of the heart'. Perhaps the best definition of the heart is that it is the deep centre, the core of our being, the place of unity where body, mind and spirit are one. We often say we want to get to the heart of the matter. The heart is the centre of a person, the centre from which we relate to God and to others. St. John of the Cross says God is the centre of my soul. If we do 'something from our heart' we do it with our deepest feelings, from our very centre.

The heart is known as our 'inner being'. The heart is the spiritual centre of our being where God lives. Scripture tells us the source of prayer is the heart. Heart also has to do with 'openness'. When we say 'have a heart' we mean be open to me, be kind, be receptive. When we are wholehearted we commit and give ourselves fully to someone or to a cause. When someone is stubborn or closed we say that person is hard-hearted or cold-hearted. When we deal with a warm-hearted person we know we will be treated kind-ly, our sorrows and joys will be shared.

The heart as a still point

It was the desert fathers who introduced the term 'prayer of the heart' which meant a total surrender to God when one had aban-doned mental images of God and brought 'the mind into the heart'. This silent prayer tradition of the desert monks was defined as a
'straining toward God' but with a deep understanding that ultimately prayer is the operation of the indwelling Trinity praying within us. These early monks saw the heart as a 'still point' where we meet in silent self-surrender and self-giving to God.

Perhaps St. Augustine has summed it up most succinctly:

O Lord, you have created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until
they rest in thee.72

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QUESTION 27

Q. John Main talks about meditation as a path of pure faith. What does he mean by this?

A. As we begin the spiritual journey our prayer is usually ex¬pressed in words, thoughts and images. Later some may be drawn to discursive meditation where one uses thinking and imagining to re¬fect on scenes from the Gospel (see question 54 on discursive meditation). Out of this discursive prayer many hear the call to the simplicity of contemplative prayer where one uses a mantra as an aid to inner silence and stillness, a silence filled with the presence of God. In other words God calls us from self-created experiences to His deep inner presence.

God seems a billion light years away
but this presence is not always a felt presence. The practice of contemplative prayer can lead into the desert experience with an absence of consolations and a time of barrenness, dryness and struggle. (See question 48 on the desert experience.) As one meditator recently put it, "God seems a billion light years away. I have no sense of His presence". the sense of presence and of joy we may have experienced at the beginning of our practice of medita-tion now turns to ashes.

A time of purification

This is where pure faith enters the picture. This is a time when we are invited to growth and a weaning away from sweetness in prayer to more solid food. In this time of purification we enter into the fire of love and it is a time in which we require great faith. Why? Because this time is a time of dying and finding new life. It is a time of stripping away or purging and a time of de-tachement from sensible consolations. It's a time when we hang on for dear life on our dark path of meditation and a time when we do need the gift of faith. It can also be a time of great distrac-tions in our daily practice of meditation.

On entering the fire

John Main speaks about entering this fire:
The purification that leads to purity of heart, that leads to the presence within us, is a consum-ing fire; and meditation is entering that fire, the fire that burns away everything that is not real, that burns away everything that is not true, that burns away everything that is not loving. And we must not be afraid of the fire. We must have abso-lute confidence in the fire, for the fire is the fire of love. The fire is even more. This is the great mystery of our faith. It is the fire who is love. 

Finding peace and fulfillment in the dark night of aridity

Thomas Merton points out that the reason for the darkness and helplessness in this stage of the spiritual journey is that the light of God is shining directly on our souls in the daily practice of meditation. William H. Shannon in the book *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, quoting Merton, says:

This cloud of darkness is "a powerful, mysterious and yet simple attraction which holds the soul pri-soner in this darkness". Although frustration is experienced, there is no desire to escape from the darkness and return to an easier stage of the spi-ritual life that preceded entrance into the dark-ness. At the same time "there is a growing convic-tion that joy and peace and fulfillment are only to be found somewhere in this dark night of aridity and faith".
Then one day there is an illumination. The soul comes to realize that in this darkness it has truly found the living God. It is overwhelmed with the sense that He is present and that God's love surrounds the soul and absorbs it. The darkness does not cease to be darkness....but the soul has been awakened....it is being drawn towards union with Him.74

One dark night .... my house now being stilled

What does one do in the emptiness and darkness? St. John of the Cross is quite clear about this. He says:

Like a blind man (we) must lean on dark faith, accept it for a guide and light, and rest on noth-ing of what (we) understand, feel or imagine.75

John of the Cross is telling us we must enter the silence and wait for God there. We surrender to the silence by leaving behind our plans, expectations, our fears and hopes. We meditate with fi-delity in childlike confidence and faith that God has a plan for each one of us and leads us by a dark path to union with Him. John of the Cross talks about that step into the dark night:

One dark night

Fired by love's urgent longing
-- Oh the shear grace! --

I went out unseen

My house now being stilled.76

QUESTION 28

Q. How does the practice of meditation relate to other ways of prayer?

A. In our spiritual life we pray in different ways at different times in our lives. There are many different forms or ways of prayer. There is the prayer of petition or intercession, vocal prayer, liturgical prayer in the celebration of the eucharist, the divine office, (now called the liturgy of the hours), novenas, devotions, stations of the cross, the rosary, charismatic prayer, speaking in tongues, and the prayerful reading of scripture.

Some people find prayer in God's beauty in nature. Singing can be a form of prayer and then of course there is meditation, wordless, imageless contemplative prayer. In fact everything in life can be a form of prayer, gardening, washing dishes, eating, showering, changing diapers. We do not have to restrict prayer to the traditional and official forms or practices.

Indeed Isaac the Syrian, a 6th century monk and bishop, once wrote:
When the Spirit has come to reside in someone, that person cannot stop praying; for the Spirit prays without ceasing in them. No matter if they are asleep or awake, prayer is going on in their hearts all the time. They may be eating or drinking, they may be resting or working -- the incense of silent prayer will ascend spontaneously from their heart.\textsuperscript{77}

Meditation is not the only way of prayer

In a talk to Cistercian monks in 1976 at Thomas Merton's monastery in Kentucky, John Main emphasized that meditation was not the only way of prayer. However he went on to say:

As I understand it, all Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus. And for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistraction, to a state of attention and concentration -- that is, to a state of awareness. And as far as I have been able to determine in the limitations of my own life, the only way that I have been able to find to come to that quiet, to that undistracted-ness, to that concentration, is the way of the mantra.\textsuperscript{78}

Petitionary prayer and meditation
In one of his talks John Main commented on petitionary prayer: (see also question 31 on petitionary prayer).

Is there such a thing as petitionary prayer? Has it any value? Obviously there is such a thing as petitionary prayer. Jesus Himself tells us to seek so that we will find; and so that we will receive (Matt. 7:8). The more you meditate, the more you realize that all the petitions that we can think of are already contained in the prayer of Jesus .... In the time of meditation we cast all our cares, all our concerns, totally on Him, surrender them to His hands.79

All prayer converges on contemplation

It is important to note that one who begins to meditate does not have to give up other forms of prayer. Meditation does not preclude praying in any other way. What usually happens is that the daily spiritual discipline of meditation becomes a priority although we continue to pray in other ways at various times on our own spiritual path.

However the Jesuit spiritual teacher and author, William John-ston, says that sooner or later all ways of prayer must lead to that silence wherein one rests in the presence of God. 'All forms of prayer', says Johnston in his book *Being in Love*, 'converge finally on
contemplative prayer. No matter where you begin, you end with contemplation'.

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QUESTION 29

Q. John Main often talks about leaving the "ego" behind in meditation. I always thought our ego was important and gave us our unique identity. Please ex-plain.

A. Good question. Yes, in his book *Word Made Flesh* John Main says:

In commonday language, the essence of meditation is to leave the ego behind. We are not trying to see with the ego what is happening. Ego-vision is li-mited by its own self-centredness. The eye with which we see without limit is the eye that cannot see itself. The paradox of meditation is that once we give up trying to see and to possess, then we see all and all things are ours.

Our false self always wants to be at centre stage

The problems of the ego begin with terminology, depending on which psychological tradition you follow. However to simplify de-finitions the word ego comes from the Latin for 'I'. And it is true as you say, that the ego is what gives us our individual uniqueness and our
identity. Our true self is made in the image of God in which every human being is created. The ego is a mirror-im-age of the true self.

Unfortunately in all of us this mirror image can be mistaken for reality and become a false self that develops in our likeness rather than in the likeness of God. This is where we get the term 'egocentric'. Many spiritual teachers, including John Main, simply equate this false self with the term 'ego' or 'egoism'. But we must always remember that our ego in the initial stages of our life gives us our uniqueness and identity. It is not bad in itself, but it can become a point of illusion, self-seeking and self-aggrandizement.

Our false self wants to control every situation

The false self develops many masks to hide the true self. Our false self always wants to be at centre stage. The false self wants to be served first and think of itself first. Others come second. Our false self believes the world revolves around me. It is always seeking control, power, adulation. The false self wants to control every situation and manipulate others.

Ekneth Eswaran has put the false self of the ego in concrete terms:

Management consultants advise their executive cli-ents to establish priorities before they start to work. The ego creates priorities too. At
the top of those legal-sized yellow pads it puts "to be taken care of". Below on the first line it puts "me". There follows a list of all its requirements, which take up most of the page.82

Smashing the mirror of our ego

John Main speaks about our false self and the need of 'smash-ing the mirror' of our ego (false self). He says that when we are united to God 'as our supreme power source' we break through the mirror of the 'hyper-self-consciousness of egoism'. According to John Main the root of 'sin' is this self-consciousness which is a mirror, as it were, between God and our self, reflecting only our image and not God's image which is our true identity. This mirror must be smashed says Father John and meditation is the means of smashing it. But this smashing however is non-violent; it is the work of love. There is absolutely no doubt that on the spiritual path one must struggle for this detachment from egoism and self-will.

The ego: sufferings spread like wild grass

The Buddha in commenting on the ego said 'For those whom ego overcomes, sufferings spread like wild grass'. The ego's drive for self-aggrandisement inevitably leads it away from God.

William Law (1686-1761) the English Anglican mystic put it this way in Christian
Regeneration: 'see here the whole truth in short. All sin, all death, damnation and hell is nothing else but this kingdom of self, or the various operations of self love, self-esteem and self-seeing which separate the soul from God.'

Everything at risk to enter the kingdom

Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) in The Man and His Teachings says:

The fundamental step in salvation, or conversion, is taken at the level of the human heart, that is to say, at the deepest centre of our being. This conversion, this metanoia of the Gospel, is the abandoning of all self-centredness, of all egoism; it is a total turning back of the whole being to God. In other words it is to place oneself in the presence of the Saviour.83

And again he is quoted in the same book as saying:

Jesus Himself taught that a person has to abandon everything, to put everything at risk, if they are to enter the kingdom. The Gospel is essentially a renunciation of and an uprooting of the self, of the ego, leaving it behind and following in the footsteps of the Master. (See Question 37 on Abhishiktananda.)
God possesses the secret of my identity

the false self exists, but at the level of illusion. It has no ultimate reality. But we can all choose to drop the mask, the illusion of this false self and achieve our true identity in God. The journey to our true self is the journey of meditation because in the deep silence of our meditation we acknowledge our dependence on Jesus. Thomas Merton says God possesses the secret of my iden-tity and the only way to find this true identity is by losing the false self in Him.

Our false self: shedding an old snake skin

In meditation our 'egoism' or false self melts slowly away as the focus of attention shifts from self to God and then to others. Why does this happen? Because the saying of the mantra is an act of pure selflessness. Each time we say the mantra we renounce and leave behind 'my' own thoughts, 'my' own words, 'my' own concerns, 'my' own fears, 'my' own anxieties. In losing these selfish pos-sessions we begin to lose the false self. In this detachment which meditation requires, the mask, the phoney disguise, is stripped away to reveal where the true I has been hiding. Like a moth our false self is drawn to the flame where it must die. It must be discarded, says Thomas Merton, like an old snake skin.

The ego and forgiveness
Meditation develops a spirit of forgiveness. Many spiritual writers point out that forgiveness is one of the primary ways to combat the ego. When we forgive others for insults, real or imag-ined, we undercut the emotional resentment of the ego. As author Ken Wilber has pointed out in his book *Grace and Grît*, the funda-mental mood of the ego is never to forgive, never to forget. For-giveness undermines the very existence of the ego.

Meditation is taking the searchlight off ourselves

Meditation helps us to shed the false self because in fact it is about self-forgetfulness. As John Main says, it is about taking the searchlight off ourselves, it is about self-transcendence. Could this be what Jesus meant when He said, 'if anyone wishes to follow me, they must leave *self* behind, take up their cross daily and follow me' (Matt. 16:24)?

The Chinese poet Li Po put it this way:

We meditate together, the mountain and me

Until only the mountain remains.

Laurence Freeman tells the story about a sculptor who carved a superb statue of an elephant. When asked how he had done it, he replied he had started with a block of granite and then simply chipped away at everything that was *not* the elephant. That is the work of
meditation. Chipping away at our false self, so that our true self, the image and likeness of God may appear. Gradually we are purified in meditation of this false self and discover that God is within us and that He is the ground of our being.

Of course the journey from the false self to the true self is not always a pleasant, easy journey. There are hiccups along the way. We do not like to change and God who is love transforms us. To change is to die. It has very much to do with the passage from St. John's gospel, 'truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit' (John 12:24).

In meditation something dies within us, our false self, but something new is born. In starting off on this path we cling to what is familiar and dread the journey to what is unfamiliar. That is why Father John says meditation at times requires courage and in the final analysis is a path of pure faith.

Our true identity founded in selflessness

On the path of meditation our true self is more and more re-vealed and the shadow of the false self slowly dissolves. In meditation the mask of the false self is peeled away from our face and we find ourselves totally humbled and dependent on God. As Thomas Merton says, the false self is the 'smoke self' and will disappear like smoke up a chimney.
Through the discipline of daily meditation our true self is slowly revealed. When this happens we can cry out with St. Paul 'it is no longer I that lives, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20). Now the spiritual journey seriously begins. Now having found our true self we can begin to really love. Now the dance begins. We have found our true identity in love and our true self is selfless-ness.\textsuperscript{84}

\section*{QUESTION 30}

Q. Why does Fr. John Main not use gender free, inclusive language in his taped talks?

A. One must realize that Fr. John taped these talks between 1977 and 1982, before there was a general consciousness or sensitivity about the use of inclusive language.

However it is interesting to note that John Main believed firmly in the equality of the sexes and in fact left his Priesthood studies with the Canons Regular in Rome in 1950 precisely because of an anti-woman bias he found in clerical circles in Rome.

In her book \textit{Reconciled Being}\textsuperscript{85}, Mary McAleese, the President of the Republic of Ireland, comments on this interesting aspect of John Main's temperament and career, and writes about his courage in the 1950's in fighting this widespread anti-woman attitude. She refers to his positive attitude to women in the book \textit{John Main by Those Who Knew Him}\textsuperscript{86} and
says "Main had an astute insight of remark-able maturity and sensitivity, well ahead of his time".

John Main's attitude to women

In John Main by Those Who Knew Him, an Irish Priest, Fr. Paul Bowe, describes the circumstances regarding John Main leaving the religious community of the Canons Regular in Rome in 1950 as well as his attitude towards women. Says Fr. Bowe:

Sometime towards the end of the academic year in 1950 he called in to see me at San Clemente... To my great surprise he was not his usual good-humour-ed, sensible, balanced self. On the contrary he was very agitated and disturbed; there was no sign whatsoever of his sense of humour, or even of ordi-nary indignation. In fact his whole demeanour was quite out of character.

He went on to tell me that he was thinking of pulling out altogether... it emerged that he was desperately upset about the atmosphere of the international house of studies in which he was living... Apparently to use a modern term it was anti-feminist; in fact as far as the priests involved, it was quite simply anti-woman.

According to John, 'women' were as far as priests were concerned, to be regarded as 'snares of the devil'. Given half a chance
they would lead us, seminarians and priests astray from our voca-tions...

John had his wartime experiences behind him and the maturity that goes with them, so one can imagine the effect the kind of tommyrot he was being exposed to was having on him. The strange thing about the whole business was that he had never mentioned anything like that to me before, even though we used to meet nearly every day. I could only conclude afterwards that it must have been festering away like a boil that needed to be lanced but never was.

Fr. Bowe goes on to say rather prophetically, "is it too fan-ciful to suggest that in God's providence it was in Rome in 1950 that the cage was opened and the spirit of John Main was set free".

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QUESTION 31

Q. Is there a role for petitionary prayer in the life of someone who medi-tates?

A. Definitely yes! Petitionary or intercessory prayer is taught frequently in the New Testament by Jesus. In Matthew 21:22 he says to ask the Father anything in his name and it will be granted. In the Our Father we are taught to turn to our Heavenly Father and ask for bread. In John 14:13 Jesus says "whatever you ask for in my name will be given to you". St.
Paul in the introduction to his epistles is always praying for others and constantly says "I remember you in my prayers". Jesus reminded his disciples; "Ask and you will receive that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

The Christian community has always prayed for special needs

In Luke 22:31-32, Jesus says 'Simon, Simon...I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail'. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus says: 'Ask and it will be give you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you' (7:7). Throughout the ages the Christian community has prayed for its special needs. This inter-cessory prayer therefore will always be an important part of our spiritual life. We also see the role of petitionary prayer in the celebration of the Eucharist, especially in the intentions of the prayer of the faithful. We pray in this way not only for our own needs but the needs of others. The prayer of the faithful in the Eucharist is not so much to inform God what we need, because God already knows our real needs. Petitionary prayer is really for the good of those who hear the petitions. We are not so much address-ing God, as sharing our needs and concerns with the eucharistic community in the faith that God already knows and that God cares.

On trying to twist God's arm

One problem however with petitionary prayer is that we can be-come more attached to God's gifts than to God himself. We can un-consciously try to twist God's arm into giving
us things. The prayer of petition can thus become very self-centred. We can begin to see God as a Santa Claus who gives us good things and we never open ourselves to silence and stillness where in fact the Spirit works freely in our soul and prays deeply within us.

Father Patrick Eastman in the publication *Monos* talks about these false images of God:

The first, I call the "911 God", the God who is only contacted in the case of dire emergency. The second is the "Santa Claus God". This is the God who is kind of a superior magic-man who will fulfil even our wildest dreams. Finally, there is the "Vending Machine God". This is the one I most fre-quently encounter among Christians. It revolves around the idea that if I make the right kind of promises, or say the right amount of novenas, or rosaries, or attend enough masses, then, when I push the button, my request will be granted. Along with this view I find an awful lot of people who are mad at God. I mean, what do you do when you have put your money in a vending machine, pressed the button and nothing happens? You kick the ma-chine, and I find that there are a lot of people who are kicking God for the same reason.87

Babbling on in many words

There is another danger in *over-doing* the prayer of petition. At a retreat recently
where I participated a person reacted against 'the prayer of silence' by saying she had 68 people with assorted aches and pains, a laundry list that she must bring before the Lord each day. She referred to this as 'getting my prayers in'. And yet Jesus makes it clear that babbling on in many words is counter-productive. In Matthew 6:7-8 he says: "In your prayers do not babble on as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him". God, all-knowing, all-seeing knows our real needs much better than we know them ourselves. This means that all our petitions for ourselves and others can be brought silently before the Lord in an instant of recollection as we begin our times of silent meditation.

A meditator recently told me the story of a fellow meditator who had all her petitions written in a booklet which she placed beside her before meditating. She then patted the book and reminded God that she wanted to include all these petitions in her prayer as she opened herself to the silence of contemplative prayer.

A starting point on the path of prayer

Fr. Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) (See Question 37 on Abhi-shiktananda) felt that the prayer of petition was only a starting point on the pilgrimage of prayer. He once wrote:

To bring before God our needs and the needs of those who are dear to us may be, of course, a useful starting point in the path of prayer. But
to save such a prayer from turning into and remaining an endless self-centred conversation with oneself, it has to be purified and progressively drawn high-er and higher. The prayer of petition should be-come, at least with time, not so much a way of "in-forming" God of what he knows better than we do, as an act of loving adoration of his supreme Majesty, a true act of supernatural hope and of complete surrender.88

A deeper way of praying than words

Certainly the practice of Christian Meditation is a simple, deeper way of praying than words; it is a coming to the silent awareness of the indwelling Christ who is our mediator, making all human needs known to the Father through his universal compassion. It is going beyond words, beyond babbling, and through faith coming into the presence of God. This coming to awareness is not some-thing we do but something we are. And in the silence we find love at the very centre of our being and our lives are transformed by this experience and by this discovery.

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QUESTION 32

Q. It is my understanding that John Main felt indebted to a 4th century Christian monk, John
Cassian for his teaching on prayer and the use of a mantra to bring one to inner stillness. Could you comment and give me some in-formation on the life of Cassian?

A. Cassian's date of birth is unknown but it was probably around 365 AD in what is to-day Croatia, but at that time a province of the Roman Empire in which both Greek and Latin were spoken. At an early age he left his native land to become a monk in a monastery in Bethlehem. After two years, along with another monk Germanus, he received permission to visit Egypt where he spent twelve years visiting various hermits and studying the lives of the Desert monks. Twenty years later when he had become the Abbot of a monastry in Marseilles, he recorded his memories, experiences and com-mentaries in two books of his, the Institutes and Conferences.

Cassian's influence on St. Benedict

These writings of Cassian had a great influence in Christendom and especially on St. Benedict. Benedict closely modeled his rule on the Institutes and urged that Cassian be read regularly in the monasteries of his rule. Abbot cuthbert butler (1858-1934) writes "St. Benedict was familiar with Cassian's writings and was satu-ra-ted with his thought and language in a greater measure than with any other, save only the Holy Scriptures".89

Cassian and St. Thomas Aquinas
It is said that Cassian's *Conferences* were one of the two books St. Thomas Aquinas always kept on his desk, alongside the commentary of St. Chrysostom on St. Matthew's Gospel. Cassian also had a special influence on the writings and teachings of St. Dom-inic, St. Ignatius, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Frances de Sales. In addition Cassian's writings played an integral part in early Celtic and Irish spirituality. There is no doubt that Cassian is a master not only of the monastic life but also of the spirituality of the early church.

"A treatise on prayer that has never been surpassed"

Cassian recorded all that he had learned on prayer in his *Conferences IX* and *X*. Benedictine Cuthbert Butler refers to Cassian's tenth conference on prayer as "a treatise on prayer that has never been surpassed". Cassian in this conference refers essen-tially to a contemplative tradition based on continuous prayer and emphasis on the indwelling presence of Christ. These early desert monks employed a *formula* of reciting a short biblical verse to come to an interior silence in prayer. To-day we would equate the for-mula with a mantra. We are indebted to-day to Cassian and his monk companion Germanus for describing this prayer practice of the de-sert monks.

Abba Isaac and his pupils

In this 10th Conference Cassian gives a lengthy account of a conversation between Germanus and himself as pupils and a great spiritual leader in the desert, Abbot Isaac, as
teacher.

On their first visit Abba Isaac had told them that those who prayed must keep their minds in silence and stillness. On their second visit, having tried to pray in silence, Germanus put their problem to Isaac. They wanted to pray like this, he said, but they found that their minds went travelling far and wide, from one idea or image to another, from one distraction to another. Germanus said "I believe this happens because we haven't got any point to focus on. We need something to stop the wandering of our thoughts".

On hearing this Isaac was happy. Such an insight, he said, showed that the two young men were halfway to the solution. "With God's guidance", he said, "I think it will be easy to bring you to the heart of true prayer". Then he taught them to pray by means of a mantra or prayer verse or as previously mentioned what Cassian in his day called a "formula". He urged them to repeat a verse of Psalm 69 "come to my help, O God; Lord hurry to my rescue". He also urged them to say this verse over and over until it became rooted in their very being. They should go on repeating this verse, said Isaac, "Until it casts away the multiplicity of other thoughts". Restrict yourself, said Isaac, to the poverty of this simple verse, and reject all the abundant riches of thought and words. This verse must always be in your heart. However, it was not until the fifth century that a 'formula' or 'mantra' using the name of Jesus became a widespread spiritual practice. (See question 34 on the Jesus Prayer.)

Isaac tied in the poverty of this simple verse to the beauti-tude "blessed are the poor
in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God". Isaac also told Cassian and Germanus to repeat this verse both in prosperity and adversity. This is where John Main inherited the tradition of the continuous recitation of the mantra in our daily times of meditation.

The desert tradition and the mantra

It can be seen from the practice of the "formula" and later the Jesus Prayer that the practice of Christian Meditation came from the same spiritual roots and the same desert tradition. The tradition of the "formula", the Jesus prayer and the mantra marana-tha came out of the identical same tradition of silent, unceasing prayer practised by the early desert monks. All mantras are re-peated to keep the mind and heart attentive to God's presence. The Jesus Prayer is centred in the heart. The early monks said, "we must stand before God with the mind in the heart". John Main also recommends that the mantra maranatha be sounded and rooted in the heart. This practice lays stress on the important involvement of the whole person, body, mind and spirit.

The mantra leads to poverty of spirit

Cassian describes, in Christian terms and with scriptural sup-port, a universal spiritual discipline that leads to unity and integration of all levels of consciousness. The continual recitation of the mantra roots the verse or word in the heart thus gradually leading to the state of continuous prayer enjoyed by Christ (Lk. 18:1) and by St. Paul (1 Th. 5:17). By leaving
behind "the riches of thought and imagination" (Cassian) the mantra leads to poverty of spirit, the condition of letting go, of radical non-possessive-ness which applies eventually, not only to what we have or what we do but even to what we are: a reminder of the Lord's command to his disciples to 'leave self behind' (Lk. 9:23, 14:33).

Thanks to Cassian and the "formula"

In all aspects, with the exception of the mantra itself, the similarities between Cassian's "formula", the Jesus Prayer and Christian Meditation are expressions of the deeper practice of prayer in the Christian tradition. John Main always felt indebted to Cassian for his teaching on prayer so perhaps it is best to end with a quotation by Fr. John in his book Letters From the Heart:

Throughout Christian history, men and women of prayer have fulfilled a special mission in bringing their contemporaries, and even succeeding genera-tions, to the same enlightenment, the same rebirth in Spirit that Jesus preached.

One of these teachers was John Cassian, in the fourth century, who has a claim to be one of the most influential teachers of the spiritual life in the West. His special importance as the teacher and inspirer of St. Benedict and so of the whole of Western monasticism, derives from the part he play-ed in bringing the spiritual tradition of the East into the living experience of the West.
QUESTION 33

Q. What is the link between John Cassian's prayer of the desert monks, the Jesus Prayer of Eastern spirituality, and the practice of Christian Meditation as taught by John Main?

A. The early Christian Egyptian desert monks of the 4th century sought God in prayer through the repetition of a "formula" (to-day we would call it a mantra) with the aim of unceasing prayer leading to inner silence and the indwelling presence of God. (See question 32 on John Cassian.)

The choice of a sacred phrase

In the days of the desert monks there was a great deal of flexibility in the choice of a sacred phrase. Abbot Isaac suggested to Cassian the phrase "Come to my help, O God. Lord hurry to my rescue". The name of Jesus was often used in short mantric phrases but seems to have had no special preference and there was no desert spirituality specifically centred upon the name of Jesus.92

However from the sixth century onwards the practice of this way of prayer came to
centre on the name of Jesus and in the East ern Orthodox tradition on a set formula "Jesus
son of God have mercy on me (a sinner)", or sometimes just "Lord Jesus have mercy" or even
the single word "Jesus".
The Jesus Prayer and maranatha from the same source

However John Main in the 20th century went back to the desert tradition of Cassian
and chose an alternative mantra to a biblical phrase with the name of Jesus. For Western
head-centred people, suggested Fr. John, the word Jesus can immediately start us to pic-turing
Jesus, and limiting our relationship to Him by merely think-ing about Christ. This is why
John Main recommended the mantra Ma-ranatha in Aramaic, a language that would not
conjure up any thoughts or images. Maranatha in English means "Come Lord Jesus". It
should be noted however that the Jesus Prayer mantra and Fr. John's mantra both spring
from the same source, the spirituality of the 4th century desert monks. Both mantras are
repeated to keep the mind and heart attuned to God's presence.

J.D. Salinger's Fanny and Zooey

Many people have become aware of the Jesus Prayer through J.D. Salinger's novel
Fanny and Zooey and also through the Russian book The Way of the Pilgrim. (See question 36
on The Way of the Pil-grim.)

Salinger's story concerns Fanny, a modern co-ed who has become fed up with the
excessive materialism of her boy-friend and of her generation. She picks up the Russian spiritual classic *The Way of the Pilgrim* which relates the story of a simple peasant, who upon the death of his wife and child, wanders throughout Russia reciting the Jesus Prayer "Lord Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me a sin-ner". She also reads from the *Philokalia*, an 18th century collection of writings on the spirituality of the Jesus Prayer. In *Fanny and Zooey* she says to her brother Zooey:

If you keep saying that prayer over and over again, you only have to do it with your lips at first -- then eventually what happens the prayer becomes self-active... I don't know what, but something happens and the words get synchronized with the person's heartbeats and then you're actually praying without ceasing.\(^\text{93}\)

Fanny in this novel represents the growing number of people who seek Christ-consciousness through the simple repetition of a mantra in times of prayer.

There are a large number of books and articles published on the Jesus Prayer and this way of prayer is particularly associated with the Eastern Orthodox tradition of spirituality and particularly with the monks of Mt. Athos, off the coast of Greece.

Kallistos Ware, a Bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church has written beautifully about the Jesus Prayer and echoes the teaching of John Main on the path of contemplative silence
in prayer. Says Bishop Ware:

Silence and listening

To achieve silence is of all things the hardest and the most decisive in the art of prayer. Silence is not merely negative, a pause between words, a temporary cessation of speech, but properly understood it is highly positive; an attitude of attentive alertness, of vigilance, and above all of listen-ing. The person who has attained inward stillness or silence, is par excellence the one who listens. One listens to the voice of prayer in one's own heart and understands that voice is not one's own but that of Another speaking within.\(^\text{94}\)

God's grace is a free gift

Bishop Ware also reminds us of the famous saying of Bishop Theophan The Recluse (1815-1894) regarding the Jesus Prayer. "The principal thing is to stand before God with the mind in the heart and to go on standing before him unceasingly day and night until the end of life".\(^\text{95}\) He also reminds us that "there is no mechanical technique, whether physical or mental, which can compel God to man-ifest His presence. His grace is conferred always as a free gift and cannot be gained automatically by any method of prayer."
The Bishop offers these prayer hints which also reflect John Main's teaching on this subject.

Kallistos Ware on prayer

* The purpose of prayer can be summarized in the phrase *become what you are.* Listen to him who never ceases to speak within you; possess Him who even now possesses you. Such is God's message to anyone who wants to pray: "You would not seek me unless you had already found me" (Romans 10:20).

Let the prayer speak, more precisely let God speak

* Prayer .... is not something which I initiate but in which I share; it is not primarily something which I do but which God is doing within me (Gal. 2:20). The path of inner prayer is exactly indicated in St. John the Baptist's words about the Messiah: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). It is in this sense that to pray is to be silent. You your-self must be silent, let the prayer speak, more precisely let God speak.

* True inner prayer is to stop talking and to listen to the wordless voice of God within our heart; it is to cease doing things on our own and to enter into the action of God. Such strenuous prayer is never easy in the initial stages
and is described by the Fathers as a hidden martyrdom.

To be present in the *here* and *now* 

* To contemplate means, first of all, to be present where one is, to be *here* and *now*. But usually we find ourselves unable to restrain our mind from wandering at random over time and space. We recall the past, we anticipate the future, we plan what to do next. We lack the power to gather ourselves into the one place where we should be -- *here* in the presence of God. Instead of fighting our thoughts directly, it is wiser to turn aside and fix our attention elsewhere. We should look to the Lord Jesus and entrust ourselves into His hands, laying before him our own powerlessness. 

Thoughts keep filling our minds with ceaseless chatter 

* Thoughts and images inevitably occur to us during prayer. We cannot stop their flow by a simple exertion of our will. It is of little or no value to say to ourselves, "stop thinking"; we might as well say, "stop breathing". "The rational mind cannot rest idle" says St. Mark the Monk; thoughts keep fill-ing it with ceaseless chatter, as in the dawn chorus of birds. But while we cannot make this chatter suddenly disappear, what we can do is detach ourselves from it by bending our ever-ac-tive mind with.... the name of Jesus.
* According to Evagrius of Pontus "Prayer is a laying aside of thoughts. A laying aside: not a savage conflict, not a furious repression, but a gentle yet persistent act of detachment.

To stand before God with the mind in the heart

It is not difficult to see how all the great teachers of silent prayer converge on their teaching. The Jesus Prayer is part of this great historical tradition and is joined with the present day practice of Christian Meditation and other forms of contemplative prayer in leading so many contemporary Christians to "stand before God with the mind in the heart".

QUESTION 34

Q. John Main in one of his talks speaks about the importance of The Cloud of Un-knowing, its teaching on contemplative prayer and particularly its emphasis on the use of a mantra to bring one to inner silence. Could you elaborate on the Cloud?

A. The spiritual classic The Cloud of Unknowing was written by an anonymous author in the latter half of the 14th century in the Central East midlands of England. He was a priest, perhaps an English country parson or perhaps a monk. The Cloud's final paragraph reveals
him as a priest dispensing "God's blessing and mine".

The book was widely read in the 14th century, judged by the number of manuscripts still available, but was not published in a modernized English version until 1912 by Evelyn Underhill (see question 40 on Evelyn Underhill). Many of those who practice Christian Meditation feel it is almost as though it were written for the 21st century. It is finely attuned to human psychology, common sense, and even some humor.

Written in a time of upheaval and change

The surprising thing about this great work is that it was written in a time of such great upheaval and a transitional era. Western Europe was in the throes of the hundred years war; the black plague was decimating every country it entered including England; social unrest was prevalent in the English peasant's revolt; the Pope was a captive in Avignon; religious heresy was be-ginning its influence and medieval Christendom was passing away.

In the midst of all this there was a great flowering of inter-est in contemplative prayer, by teachers and writers like Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian or Norwich (see question 36 on Julian of Norwich) and the author of The Cloud. In many ways the latter part of the 14th century reminds us of our present age with its upheavals, unrest, our own version of the plague, and our age of tremendous change and transition.
God hides in a cloud

_The Cloud of Unknowing_ is important because we see continuity in the teaching on silent prayer of John Cassian (fourth century), the _Cloud of Unknowing_ (fourteenth century) and John Main (twentieth century). All three teachers offer the same essential teaching but couched in the language of their day.

The central theme of _The Cloud of Unknowing_ is that God cannot be reached by the human intellect but only by a silent prayer of love that can pierce 'the cloud of unknowing'. The author of this book says that God hides in the cloud of unknowing. He takes this image from the book of Exodus where the Israelites are led through the desert, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Also at the transfiguration God appears in a cloud and says 'this is my be-loved son' (2 Peter 1:15-18). In addition Psalm 97 says "The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice... Clouds and thick darkness are all around him". And in the Book of Kings, Solomon says "The Lord has chosen to dwell in the thick cloud" (Kings 8:1-7, 9-13).

The use of a mantra

The author of _The Cloud_ talks very clearly about the recita-tion of a mantra which can be used to pierce this cloud of unknow-ing where God hides. He says 'we must pray in the height, depth, length and breath of our spirit, not in many words but in a little word. And he urges us to set aside our thoughts, words and imagi-nation and consign everything to what he
calls the 'cloud of for-getting'. He says we must give up all our thoughts and ideas of God, for 'God can be touched, embraced and loved, but never by thought'. *The Cloud* says this about the use of a mantra in prayer.

Take a short word, preferably of one syllable...the shorter the word the better. A word like God or love. Choose which you like, or perhaps some other, so long as it is of one syllable. And fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there come what may. This short word pierces hea-ven. This word is to be your shield and your spear, whether in peace or in war, with this word beat upon the cloud.

Lift up your heart to God with humble love: desire God but not what you can get out of him. Don't think of anything so that nothing occupies your mind or will but only God. Try to forget all created things. Let them go and pay no attention to them. Do not give up but work away. When you begin you find only darkness and a cloud of unknow-ing. Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but go on longing after him you love. Strike that thick cloud of unknow-ing with your word, that dart of longing love, and on no account think of giving up. You are to reach out with a naked intention directed towards God and him alone.\(^6\)

**Summary of *The Cloud***

Here are some other points the author of *The Cloud* makes about this prayer of repeating a short word, the prayer of seeking God in silence and stillness.

* He warns us that we should come to prayer with no expecta-
tions, not seeking to receive any special experiences, vi-sions, to hear voices and so on. *The Cloud* says that essen-tial union with God is beyond all experiences.

* *The Cloud* stresses that God does the primary work in this 
prayer. Our work, says the author, is to become silent but even this cannot be done without the help of grace. To be si-lent in prayer, he says, far from being a mere 
technique, is in fact a distinct call from God.

Satan cannot enter this inner chamber of your heart

* Another point *The Cloud* makes is that we should not be carried 
away by superficial feelings of any kind, be they feelings of joy or sadness, elation or depression. The author says in this prayer remain poised at a deep point of recollection and in the ground of your being. Even Satan, he says, cannot en-ter this inner chamber of your heart in this prayer. In this silence one can only be open to the voice of the Spirit.
* _The Cloud_ insists that by remaining silent in prayer, we are in fact helping the whole human race. While we do not think explicitly of anybody, we in fact are helping everybody.

The prayer of silence burns out the roots of sin

* _The Cloud_ points out that this prayer burns out the roots of sin and performs a function that cannot be accomplished by fasting, self-denial or self-inflicted penances. This flame of love that burns in prayer, says _The Cloud_, penetrates to a level of the personality upon which those penances and prac-tices have no effect.

* _The Cloud_ even inserts a little bit of humour. Perhaps with tongue in cheek the author says contemplative silence even changes one's appearance, giving serenity to one's demeanour, unifying the personality and making one attractive to others. He says 'even those who are not highly endowed by nature are rendered beautiful by this prayer'. Unfortunately, he does not say anything about losing weight or wrinkles disappearing.

* _The Cloud_ also talks about the cost involved in this prayer. The author says 'it is hard work, very hard work indeed'.
God is beyond anything we can imagine

* The Cloud says one must empty the mind of all images and thoughts and simply rest in darkness, in the darkness of the cloud of unknowing. The author says that out of this darkness of faith will come a stirring of ardent love. The purpose of emptying the mind of images and concepts, says The Cloud is to make one capable of receiving God's gift of love. He empha-sizes that human conceptual knowledge is totally inadequate and imperfect. God, he says, is beyond anything we can ima-gine.

Silent prayer: a normal development of the ordi-nary Christian life

* The author of The Cloud writes that this way of silent prayer is simplicity itself and that even the most unlearned person can attain to this silence. He says this spiritual discipline is uncomplicated, and simply a normal development of the ordi-nary Christian life. Two other great medieval spiritual tea-chers, Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) reflect a similar teaching that the heights of contem-plative prayer are offered to ordinary people.

One can see the great influence The Cloud of Unknowing had on the prayer teaching of John Main. The Cloud is still one of the great spiritual classics of our time. It is available in a paper-back edition with an introduction by the Jesuit William Johnston. Another
recommended book is the *Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* by the same William Johnston.97

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**QUESTION 35**

Q. In the book *Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main*, the entry of July 19 indicates John Main was quite familiar with the teaching of the English medieval anchor-ess Julian of Norwich. I also under-stand John Main asked to hear readings by Julian as he lay dying. Can you tell me about Julian's life and what she had to say about this contemplative way of prayer?

A. Yes, first a little about Julian's life, although her bio-graphical details are sparse. The dates of her birth and death are not certain but probably would be close to 1342-1415. She lived in a special anchorite cell attached to the parish church of St. Juli-an's in Norwich, which probably accounts for her name. Her contem-plative cell was a small room built outside the church with a win-dow that opened into the interior of the church enabling her to participate in the Eucharist. Another window gave access to those seeking counsel; a listening ear or what in modern times we would call spiritual guidance.

Her writings also indicate that a disciplined life of silence and stillness in prayer were
the basis for her deep spirituality. An anchoress was traditionally walled in to spend the rest of her life in prayer and contemplation. Scholars also point out her lively prose writing and the fact that she is the first woman to have written a book in the English language. She was also well trained in scripture, especially St. Paul, despite the fact that she describes herself as "an unlettered woman".

Julian's origins

It is remotely possible she belonged to a community of Bene-dictine nuns at Carrow Priory only a half mile from Norwich. She may have gone to school there as a young girl, later became a tea-cher and perhaps a lay sister with the community. It is unlikely she was a full choir sister. There are numerous references to the Benedictine Rule and to Gregory the Great's writing on St. Benedict in Julian's texts. However she is not mentioned in any existing records of Carrow Priory and she never refers to any specific Bene-dictine community of sisters in her writings. In addition the presence of her parish priest at her death-bed, rather than a Bene-dictine chaplain, could suggest she was a lay woman at the time. Others speculate she was a lay woman because of her beautiful un-derstanding of the motherhood of God and the possibility she was a widow with her husband and children killed by the black plague which swept Norwich in 1361. However because of a lack of records and opposing arguments we cannot hold with certainty Julian's ori-gins.
The revelations of Divine Love

What we do know is that at the age of 30 years in May of 1373 she became gravely ill, possibly of the black plague, and close to death. A parish priest was called to administer the last rites, and it is recorded that her mother closed her eyelids in anticipa-tion of her imminent death. In this near death state she experi-enced a series of sixteen visions gazing at a crucifix held up by the priest. She subsequently wrote a short text about her unex-pected recovery and what she called the showings. For the follow-ing 20 years she prayed and savored her experience of these show-ings and eventually in 1393 wrote what we know as the long text. It is known to-day as the Revelations of Divine Love and contains 86 chapters. 99

The warmth, closeness and tenderness of God

Why does Julian appeal to us to-day? One of the reasons is that in her writings she brings refreshing optimism, new insights into the nature of God, and particularly the warmth, closeness and tenderness of God. More importantly Julian is one of the few medi-eval spiritual writers who states it as impossible that God could ever be angry at us, for, as she says, anger and friendship are two opposites. God, says Julian, is loving, gentle and kind which is the opposite of anger. She states, "For I saw full surely that whenever our Lord appears, peace reigns and anger has no place. For I saw no whit of anger in God, in short or in long term". She goes on to say that God's love is compassionate and never wrathful.
Thomas Merton on Julian

So inspiring are her insights that the American Cistercian monk Thomas Merton made this astonishing statement about her:

Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him for Julian if you gave me the world, and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is, with Newman, the great-est English theologian.100

A message of joyful optimism and hope

Again why does Julian speak to the hearts of so many contem-porary Christians? Perhaps because in her 14th century world of social unrest and the black plague, a world not unlike our own, Julian speaks of a God of tenderness, a God of compassion and love. As the dominican Conrad Pepler OP has said, we need her message of joyful optimism and hope when "we are in danger of being crushed under a lethal pessimism".101 God's love rings down through the cen-turies in her revelations when the Lord says to her, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well". Her revelations encompass a wide range of topics and por-tray and unquenchable optimism regarding God's power to bring good out
The Revelations of Divine Love contains one of the clearest expositions in all of spiritual literature on the feminine aspect of God and that God is also our mother. In chapter 52 Julian writes:

"God rejoices that he is our Father and God rejoices that he is our mother." She also says specifically that Christ is "our mother, brother and Saviour" and again "Jesus is our true mother in nature by our first creation and he is our true mother in grace by his taking on created nature".

She goes on to say that as "the mother can give her child to suck of her milk, so our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself and does most courteously and most tenderly with the bless-ed sacrament." And finally she adds "As truly as God is our fath-er, so just as truly is he our mother". 102

In Revelations of Divine Love Julian unfolds a clear account of divine love, in which she states that God is our divine mother, that we were created in the image of God, to love; that our purpose in life is to enjoy all that God has made, and to enjoy God by growing in love.
The meaning of the visions

In chapter 86 Julian summarizes what she had learned in her years of prayerfully discovering the meaning of the visions. She says: "What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love."

Fr. John Main and Julian

But back to your question about what Julian has to say about contemplative prayer? In one of her revelations Julian says "for in the human soul is God's true dwelling" and adds "utterly at home he lives in us for ever". Again she says "God is the still point at my center". John Main picked up on this saying of Julian's and in one of his talks says "Meditation is a daily pilgrimage to our own center".

Once in a time of prayer Julian heard the words of the Lord "I am the ground of your praying", words that were a great consolation to her in her practice of contemplative prayer. Is it any wonder that Polly Schofield, a meditator in Montreal who helped care for John Main in his dying days, reminds us that Fr. John constantly asked to be read from Julian's Revelations as he lay dying.

"All believing prayer is precious to me"
Finally as one might expect God speaks to Julian about desolation and helplessness in our daily life of prayer and the need for perseverance. She says:

Our prayer brings great joy and gladness to our Lord. He wants it and awaits it. By his grace he can make us as him in inward being as we are in outward form. This is his blessed will. So he says this: "Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayer pleases me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious to me".103

No wonder John Main loved Julian, studied her revelations, and chose to listen to her writing of optimism and hope as he approached death.

Question 36

Q. I've heard there is a Russian spiritual classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, that speaks about the Prayer of the Heart? Please comment.

A. *The Way of the Pilgrim* was first published in 1884 and tells the story of an anonymous
Russian pilgrim who walks through Russia (and Siberia) reciting the Jesus prayer. He has lost his wife, his home, his material possessions and has a physical handicap which prevents him from making a living. The prayer of the heart keeps him company through his many adventures and hardships as a wander-ing pilgrim.

Pray Without Ceasing

The story starts off when the pilgrim hears a reading in church from Thessalonians (5:17), "pray without ceasing". Ponder-ing how to pray without ceasing he visits various churches and preachers but no one is able to explain how to pray this way. Fin-ally he meets a holy monk who introduces him to The Philokalia, "the love of spiritual beauty", a book of writings on prayer by the Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church written over a period of eleven centuries.

The monk then teaches the pilgrim to recite the mantra "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me" and to bring Jesus in Spirit from the mind to the heart. The monk predicts that eventually the mantra will say itself of its own accord. This indeed happens, when at one point on his journey the pilgrim discovers the prayer "says itself" and he hears it spontaneously arising and sounding within himself.

Sit Down, Alone and in Silence
The monk, called in Russia a Staret, is known for his holiness and experience in spiritual direction, and reads to the pilgrim ad-vice from Saint Symeon the New Theologian:

Sit down, alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. Carry... your thoughts from your head to your heart. As you breathe out, say 'Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me'. Say it moving your lips gently or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient, and repeat this pro-cess very frequently. 104

The rest of the story tells of the pilgrim's wandering with his only possession a copy of the Bible and The Philokalia; and contains many charming anecdotes, miraculous cures and conversions attributed to the recitation of the Jesus Prayer. A further book The Pilgrim Continues His Way, by the same author, recounts further travels in Russia and a trip to Jerusalem, again emphasizing the benefits of reciting the Jesus mantra in prayer.

...Leading it to Union with God

Perhaps the best defence of this way of prayer comes when the anonymous author states:

Many so called enlightened people regard the fre-quent offering of one and the same prayer as use-less and even trifling, calling it mechanical
and a thoughtless occupation of simple people. But un-fortunately they
do not know how this frequent ser-vice of the lips imperceptibly becomes
a genuine appeal of the heart, sinks down into the inner life, becomes a
delight, becomes as it were, natur-al to the soul, bringing ti light and
nourishment and leading it on to union with God.\textsuperscript{105}

\textbf{Fr. Henri Le Saux and the soul of India}

\underline{By Paul T Harris}

\textbf{A. Fr. Henri Le Saux, later known as Swami Abhishiktananda, was
born in Brittany, France, August 30, 1910 and at the age of 19 en-
tered a Benedictine monastery and was ordained a priest in 1935.
In 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War he was conscripted
from his monastery and taken prisoner in 1940 along with his whole
regiment. He succeeded in escaping by hiding in a field of tall
corn and subsequently rejoined his monastery.}

"I have discovered a new melody"

The subjects of his earliest monastic writings and interests
were the practice of silent meditation, Gregorian chant, the liturgy and the mystery of the Trinity. In regard to meditation he wrote to his sister a Benedictine nun at this time "you know I love Gregorian Chant more than anything else, but now I have discovered a melody which is more perfect than any other melody; I lose myself in the silence of the OM" (traditional Indian meditation mantra).

A yearning for India

In 1934 at 24 years of age he had a desire to start a contemplative monastery in India but it was not until 1945 that his Abbot gave him permission to contact another French priest in India, Fr. Jules Monachanin. Fr. Monachanin had already lived for some years in South India where he led "a life devoted to the understanding and service of India, guided by a single desire; to incarnate Christianity in the ways of life, prayer and contemplative characteristic of Indian civilization". Henri Le Saux's contact with Monachanin led to permission to leave for India.

The soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul
Fr. Henri reached India in August 1948 and was never again to leave his adopted country. In January 1949, six months after his arrival, both Le Saux and Monachanin visited Tiruvananalai at the foot of the sacred mountain Arunachala, and met one of India's greatest spiritual guides and sages, Ramana Maharshi. This was a turning point in Le Saux's life and he was deeply influenced by the Indian Swami. In his diary he wrote:

My mind was carried off as if to an unknown world. ....the invisible halo of this sage was received by something in me deeper than words. Unknown harmony awoke in my heart.... it was as if the very soul of India penetrated to the very depths of my own soul and held mysterious communion with it. It was a call which pierced through everything, rent it to pieces and opened a mighty abyss.... The ashram of Ramana helps me to understand the Gospel; there is in the Gospel much more than Christian piety has ever discovered\textsuperscript{107}

The founding of Shantivanum
In 1950 along with Jules Monachanin, Le Saux founded the Ashram of Saccidananda, also called Shantivanum "forest of peace" on the banks of the sacred Kavery River in Tamil Nadu, Southern India. Benedictine monk Fr. Bede Griffiths was to later in 1968 take over the running of this ashram. Both Le Saux and Monachanin took on the simple dress, simple customs and lifestyle of India. They also both wore the saffron kavi of the Sannyasa, "the monk who has renounced all". Fr. Henri took on the name of Swami Abhishiktananda, translated as the "bliss of the anointed one" or "the bliss of Christ".

Towards the North of India

After the death of Fr. Monachanin in 1957, Abhishiktananda felt more and more drawn to Northern India, especially to the source of the sacred Ganges River in the Himalayas and during 1957 spent seven months touring the area. He subsequently returned in the following years to meditate and spend time in a small hermitage and after 1968 settled down to spend the last five years of his life there. During his life in India he gave retreats, conferences, seminars, met with Hindus for dialogue and was involved in discussions and ways to implement the spirit of the Second Vatican
Council in India.

Also during this time (1948-73) he wrote many books including *Saccidanada: A Christian Approach to Advaita; Prayer; The Further Shore;*, *The Secret of Arunachala; Hindu-Christian Meeting Point*, and kept up his daily diaries, later published as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*. In addition his correspondence has now been published, *Swami Abhishiktananda: His Life Told Through His Letters*  

The Further Shore

On July 14, 1973 at the age of 63 while running to catch a bus in Rishikesh, Abhishiktananda suffered a massive heart attack and never recovered his health. He died in the evening of December 7 and was buried in the cemetery of the Divine Word Fathers in Indore. His gravestone reflects the simplicity of his life. It reads "Swami Abhishiktananda OSB, born 1910, ordained 1935, died December 7, 1973".

The great contribution of Swami Abhishiktananda's life to contemplative spirituality is his invaluable teaching on silent
meditation that so impressed the late teacher of Christian Meditation Benedictine John Main. From the fruit of his experience, a faith that was tested, deepened and enriched by the spiritual tradition of India, we have been given a deep understanding of contemplative practice.

A selection of readings by Abhishiktananda

* People are on the lookout for ideas, and I should like to make them feel that what they need is to keep silence. The Spirit only makes himself heard by those who humbly abide in silence.\(^{109}\)

* The fundamental step in salvation, or conversion, is taken at the level of the human heart, that is to say, at the deepest centre of our being. This conversion, this metanoia of the Gospel, is the abandoning of all self-centredness, of all egoism; it is a total turning back of the whole being to God. In other words it is to place oneself in the presence of the Saviour.\(^{110}\)

The Gospel is an uprooting....of the ego
* Jesus himself taught that a person has to abandon everything, to put everything at risk, if they are to enter the kingdom. The Gospel is essentially a renunciation of and an uprooting of the self, of the ego, leaving it behind and following in the footsteps of the Master.\textsuperscript{111}

* In June 1952 he noted in his journal: It is not a question of attaining to the knowledge of God or to the Presence of God, but of recognizing, realizing that this presence is.\textsuperscript{112}

* I abide in this secret place in the depth of my heart, there-where all alive before God I am, where all alone with God I am, where all alone from God I am, where alone is He who Is.\textsuperscript{113}

The creche is just a sign

* December 1956. The joy of Christmas, you know, is not only the creche. The creche is just a sign. It is into the cave
within the heart that we should go to hide ourselves, lose ourselves, forget ourselves. This is the true cave where Jesus is born in us, and being born in us makes us into himself. This cave is the bosom of the eternal Father, where the Word is born and comes to be from all eternity.

Live in this cave in the depth of your heart

* It is not only monks or cloistered nuns who are called to live face to face with this Presence, the Presence of God. All the baptized, indeed every child of God who lives on earth, has his dwelling in the bosom of that glory. Each and every one is called to withdraw to the secret place of their heart.\(^{114}\)

Silence is the highest and truest praise to the Lord
The aim of silent prayer is to quiet the mind, to free it from its instability and its innate tendency to dispersion, to gather it, as it were, at its very centre, to lead it, beyond all its activities, to the stillness of pure self-awareness. It is simply the preparation for the ultimate encounter with oneself, and for the ultimate encounter with the Father in the oneness of the Holy Spirit. Silence is the highest and truest praise to the Lord.115

(Adapted from the book "Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Meditation: The Path of Contemplative Prayer" by Paul T Harris: Novalis Publishers)

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QUESTION 38

Q. I have heard that a young Jewish girl Etty Hillesum, who was killed at Auschwitz in 1943 is regarded as a Christian saint and actually practised meditation on her spiritual journey. Could you comment and give some details about her life?

A. In regard to the first part of your question Etty did indeed meditate. In the book An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943, her entry for June 8, 1941 reads as follows:
SUNDAY MORNING, 9.30. I think that I'll do it any-way: I'll 'turn inwards' for half an hour each morning before work, and listen to my inner voice. Lose myself. You could also call it meditation. I am still a bit wary of that word. But anyway, why not? A quiet half-hour within yourself. It's not enough just to move your arms and legs and all the other muscles about in the bathroom each morning. We are body and spirit. And half an hour of exer-cises combined with half an hour of meditation can set the tone for the whole day.

But it's not so simple, that sort of 'quiet hour'. It has to be learnt. A lot of unimportant inner litter and bits and pieces have to be swept out first. Even a small head can be piled high in-side with irrelevant distractions. True, there may be edifying emotions and thoughts, too, but the clutter is ever present. So let this be the aim of the meditation: to turn one's innermost being into a vast empty plain, with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view. So that something of God can enter you, and something of 'Love' too.116

Yes, both Jews and Christians claim her as their own and her story is one of the greatest personal spiritual testimonies to emerge from the 20th century.

Etty's story
Briefly in capsule form her story is this. As a young 27 year old Jewish woman and gifted writer, Etty Hillesum decided to write a diary during the German occupation of Holland. Into this diary she poured out her inner thoughts and feelings that reveal the gradual transformation of an independent woman preoccupied with worldly pleasures into a vibrant person of great spiritual depth and wisdom. The diaries chronicle Etty's inner maturation of the Spirit.

In 1942 she voluntarily went to the German internment camp at Westerbork in Holland to serve those who were under arrest and detained. Her correspondence entitled *Letters from Westerbork* was published in 1986. However on Sept. 8, 1943 her entire family were transported to Auschwitz. A letter written by an eyewitness describes her final moments on Dutch soil. This person says that as she stepped up to and into the dark car of the cattle train, crowded with men, women and children, "she walked lightly, bearing the burden of these her people, yet caught in an inner calm. She had not been deserted by her God".

"We left the camp singing"

Another friend, who survived, saw her get on the train to Auschwitz and relates she was "talking happily, a kind word for everyone she met...full of sparkling humour. Then the shrill whistle when the train with a thousand victims moved out". She managed to throw a postcard out of the train, which a farmer found and mailed: "We left the camp singing," she said in the card. On November 30 she died at Auschwitz.
Her friends treasured her memory and after the war they tried to find a publisher for her 400 page manuscript which had been hidden for safe keeping. She had left careful plans for the survi-val of her diaries and letters but unaware that future generations would be able to read her testimony. It took many years to deci-pher her almost illegible handwriting.

Diaries published in 1981

Finally her diaries were published in 1981 and to-day are re-garded as an extraordinary document of spiritual growth that for readers invariably revives one's faith in humanity. Her diaries are now generally regarded as one of the great classics of our time and an authentic voice of the spiritual life. Next to Thomas Mer-ton's Seven Storey Mountain I feel this is one of the most moving spiritual books I have ever read.

What do the diaries tell us? They begin on March 9, 1941 when Etty, a secular Jew, lives in Amsterdam and is going through a time of personal turmoi and emotional upheaval and feels she is in need of psychotherapy. She consults a psychologist, a Jewish refugee from Germany named Julius Spier. Under the influence of Carl Jung, Spier believed that human well being and healing called for a spir-itual dimension in one's life and to be healed one needed the cour-age to say "I believe in God".
From spirituality to social action

Etty falls in love with Spier and has an intense emotional and sexual relationship. However in the process of her relationship she develops a religious sensibility which gives her daily diary entries an enormous spiritual dimension. The word "God" appears often in her entries and she develops an intense dialogue with the divine. But her spiritual development did not lead her into a so-litary withdrawal from life but into the thick of the world of ac-tion (See Question 49 on prayer and action). She throws herself into concern for social justice, service to the poor and oppressed and this continues until her death.

There is a deep well inside me

Etty soon feels the need to free herself from the obsessive attachment to Spier. Spier dies suddenly in 1942 but Etty has al-ready come to love the message more than the messenger. Eventually God becomes the most vital aspect of her life. In one of her diary entries she writes:

There is a deep well inside me, and in it God dwells ... There are people who pray with their eyes turned to Heaven, they seek God outside them-selves. And there are those who bow their heads and bury their faces in their hands. I think they seek God inside.

Etty is one of the latter seeking God inside and she contin-u-es, "All that is left is the will
to yield myself up to God ... a desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body or rather my body seems made and meant for the act of kneeling".

The Jewish girl who loved Jesus

Some months before her death, Etty was speaking to an old friend who was a Communist activist: "a dogged old class fighter" as she describes him in her diary. She argues against the class struggle and then says "I see no alternative: each of us must turn inward and destroy in oneself all that we think we ought to destroy in others and remember that every action of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable". Her Communist friend is astonished and dismayed. "But that", he says, "is nothing but Christianity". Etty replies "yes, Christianity, and why not?" Ob-servers point out that Etty lived and died a Jew but her insights into Jesus are deep and incisive and played a major role in her spiritual development.

Here are a few excerpts from Etty's diaries to whet one's ap-petite to read what Canadian theologian Gregory Baum says "are rare documents of religious faith and reflect a deep level of mysti-cism".
Etty's insights on prayer and spirituality

* The misery here is quite terrible and yet, late at night when
the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step
beside the barbed wire, and then time and again it soars straight from my heart. I can't
help it, that's just the way it is, like some elemental force, the feeling that life is glorious
and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against
every new outrage and every fresh horror we shall put up one more piece of love and
goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not
succumb.

And I rest from time to time in prayer

* But I refresh myself from day to day at the original source,
life itself, and I rest from time to time in prayer. And what those who say, 'you live too
intensely,' do not know, is that one can withdraw into prayer as into a convent cell and
leave again with renewed strength and with peace regained.

* Truly, my life is a long listening to myself and, to others
and to God. And if I say that I listen, it is really God who listens inside me, the most
essential and the deepest in me listening to the most essential and deepest in others.
God to God.
In every human being I love something of You

* And talking to you, God. Is that all right? I feel a growing need to speak to You alone. I love people so terribly, be-cause in every human being I love something of You. And I seek You everywhere in them and often do find something of You.

* And I know for certain that there will be a continuity between the life I have led and the life about to begin. Because my life is increasingly an inner one and the outer setting mat-ters less and less.

There is a vast silence in me that continues to grow

* I keep following my own inner voice even in this madhouse, with a hundred people chattering. There is a vast silence in me that continues to grow.

* That's how it went, more or less, my prayer this morning. I suddenly had to kneel down on the hard coconut matting in the bathroom and the tears poured down my face. And that prayer gave me enough strength for the rest of the day.
There is a deep well inside me

* There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God.

  Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again.

* One ought to be able to live without books, without anything.

  There will always be a small patch of sky above, and there will always be enough space to fold two hands in prayer.

All of life becomes one long stroll

* For once you have begun to walk with God, you need only keep on walking with Him and all of life becomes one long stroll.

* This much I know: you have to forget your own worries for the sake of others, for the sake of those whom you love. All the strength and love and faith in God which one possesses, and which have grown so miraculously in me of late, must be there for everyone who chances to cross my path and who needs it.

* I draw prayer round me like a dark protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step out-side again, calmer and
stronger and more collected again.

The drop of water into the ocean of infinity

On November 30, 1943, Etty died in a swirl of Zyklon B gas at Auschwitz. The drop of water that had been Etty Hillesum fell into the ocean of infinity ... returned to her God.

QUESTION 39

Q. John Main in a number of his talks refers to the French writer Simone Weil. Could you comment on her life and what she has to say that relates to the spiritual journey and the practice of contemplative prayer?

A. Simone Weil (1909-1943) was born of non-observant Jewish parents in Paris, France and in her teens sympathized with Pacifism, Marxism, the trade union movement and especially the working class. In her short lifetime she became a political activist, teacher, social critic, philosopher, writer and spiritual seeker.

Jesus and Charlie Chaplin
Concerned in 1934 with modern industrialism and the cult of production for its own sake, she took a year off from teaching to work in a Renault factory to understand better the pain of the conveyer belt and its detrimental effect upon the soul of workers. She once wrote "Only Jesus and Charlie Chaplin understand the work-ing class". Her references to Chaplin is his portrayal in his films as the "common man" and his identification with the underdog in society. Weil joined in a non combatative role on the Republi-can side in the Spanish Civil War and ended her career working in London for the Free French during the Second World War.

A prophet of our times

In London she lived in great simplicity and died in 1943 at 34 years of age, because despite illness, she refused to eat more than the food rations to which her fellow French compatriots were limit-ed to eating in France. Very few people attended her funeral and she was buried in Kent in a pauper's grave. However since her death she has enjoyed a growing posthumous reputation as one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of 20th century France. Many people regard her as a prophet in the purest Old Testament tradi-tion.

Simone Weil devoted herself to a lifetime spiritual pilgrimage in search of truth and God. she said that her search for truth made her live "at the intersection of Christianity and all that is non-Christian". T.S. Eliot said that she lived her life "with a genius akin to that of
the saints". From about 1935 until her death she pursued a Christ-centered spiritual life of study and deep prayer.

To become one of His saints

Robert Coles in his biography of Weil Simone Weil  A Modern Pilgrimage writes:

Once Simone Weil met Christ, her life began anew, a slave, now to a particular master. I think it is fair to say she fell in love with Jesus; that he became her beloved, that she kept him on her mind and in her heart. She spent the last five years of her life thinking about Jesus, writing about him, praying to him....She was an ambitious, dedicated follower, anxious to meet him, maybe become one of his saints

Conversion experiences

She had three major religious conversion experiences: one in Assisi, Italy, one at Solesmes Benedictine monastery in France during Holy Week 1938 and one when she first read George Herbert's poem "Love Bade me Welcome". In savoring the poem she said "Christ came down and took possession of me". She further explains in a letter "in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my sen-ses nor imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love. God in his mercy had prevented me
from reading the mystics so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact".

Love in the midst of affliction

Her visit to Solesmes coincided with a severe migraine headache. She succeeded in attending a session of the Gregorian chant in spite of the pain and wrote:

An extreme effort of attention enabled me to get outside this miserable flesh, leaving it to suffer by itself, heaped up in its corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unspeakable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to understand better the possibility of loving the divine love in the midst of affliction.\(^{119}\)

The experience of the beauty of Gregorian chant at Solesmes in the midst of suffering opened Weil to her deepest convictions that the cross is the central reality at all times and in all places. In her essay "The Love of God and Affliction" she wrote:

The Trinity and the cross are the two poles of Christianity, the two essential truths: the first perfect joy; the second perfect affliction. It is necessary to know both the one and the other and their mysterious unity, but the human condition in this world places us infinitely far from the
Tri-nity at the very foot of the cross. Our country is the cross.\textsuperscript{120}

At Solesmes she had experientially realized "the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction", and she came more and more to understand, to appreciate and perhaps even share the passion of Christ.

On the brink of baptism

In spite of the fact she was powerfully attracted to the Cath-olic Church and even had a spiritual director in a blind Dominican priest, Fr. Jean-Marie Perrin, she never was received into the church. She seemed to hover on the brink of Baptism most of her life. She loved the Catholic faith but the authoritarianism of the institutional church was quite another matter. Many observers feel she had the "Baptism of Desire" because she was already a Chris-tian. She once wrote "I love God, Christ, and the Catholic faith, but I have not the slightest love for the (institutional) church".

When it became clear that the Nazi occupation of France would endanger the lives of Jews, Simone Weil and her parents fled to Casablanca in North Africa and then in 1942 to the United States.

In the same pew with Thomas Merton
During this time she attended Mass at Corpus Christi church near Columbia University in New York City. Observers have pointed out this is the same church to which Thomas Merton belonged at this time and the irony that two of the most influential spiritual writers of our times might have been sitting in the same pew without knowing each other.

Prayer consists of attention

Her voluminous writings on the spiritual life and prayer seem to have had an effect on John Main's teaching. Time and time again she encourages us to pray from where we are, not from where we would like to be. Her book *Waiting on God*, composed of letters to her spiritual director Fr. Perrin, reveal her deep insights about silence in prayer and the need for attention and avoiding the Geth-semani sleep in our prayer (see Question 19 on the Gethsemani Sleep). In *Waiting on God* she writes:

Prayer consists of attention. It is the orienta-tion of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of the attention counts for much....Warmth of heart cannot make up for it. The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God when prayer is intense and pure enough....There are degrees of silence. There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is like a noise when compared with the silence of God.
One day the soul belongs to God

Finally in a very beautiful piece on prayer Simone Weil writes:

From the infinity of space and time the infinite .... love of God comes to court us. He comes at his own time. We can only choose to accept and welcome him or to reject him. If we are willing, God plants a little seed in us and goes away. From that moment God has nothing more to do, nor we either, except to wait. we must only never regret saying yes to him, our nuptial yes.

This is not as simple as it sounds, because the growth of the seed within us is painful. In-deed in order to allow it to grow, we cannot but destroy whatever puts obstacles in its way; that is, pluck up the undergrowth and the weeds...the gardening to be done has to be violent. Still the seed, independent of the gardening, does grow by itself. One day the time will come when the soul belongs to God.122

Hurrying home to be with Jesus

In the last paragraph of his biography, Robert Coles writes about the death of Simone Weil:

She looked upward, affirmed unflinchingly her last hope, the hope of
heaven — and died, one suspects, glad at last, glad to be hurrying home, to be with God...with Jesus.123

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QUESTION 40

Q. Many people feel that the great spiritual writer, scholar and teacher Evelyn Underhill paved the way for the renewal of contemplative prayer in the 1970's by John Main and other teachers of prayer. Could you comment and tell us a little about her life?

A. There is no doubt that Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was one of the most widely respected authors and teachers of prayer and the spiritual life in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. To-day she is recognized as one of the few voices in this period to bring contemplative prayer and spirituality, from the cloistered life of the monastery and academic treatises, to the everyday lives of ordinary people. In this respect she indeed served as a beacon and guide and gave impetus to John Main and others in the later years of the century. She is widely regarded to-day as a bridge between her spiritual times and ours, and as the principal spokes-person on contemplative prayer for her generation.

Her early life

Evelyn Underhill was born December 6th, 1875 in Wolverhampton, England, of well-to-
do parents in which there was no particular emphasis on religion although she was baptized as an Anglican. Her childhood was comfortable and happy and included travel abroad as well as attendance at Kings College, London. Later in 1938 she received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Aberdeen University.

A voracious reader, especially of medieval saints and the mystical life, she early in life at the age of 32 seriously con-sidered becoming a Roman Catholic. She put this off because of the opposition of her husband-to-be as well as the subsequent condemna- tion of modernism by the Vatican which she could not accept. Only many years later did she become a committed Anglican, the church in which she had been baptized and confirmed.

Marriage and living in Kensington, London

Evelyn married Hubert Stuart Moore, a barrister, in 1932 and for most of their lives lived at 50 Campden Hill Square in the Ken-sington area of London not far from the Christian Meditation Centre which for a number of years was located on Campden Hill Rd. I have made a number of pilgrimages to her home over the years and there is now a historical plaque there with an inscription which reads "Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941, Christian philosopher and teacher lived here".

A teacher of contemplative prayer
Over the years Evelyn Underhill wrote or edited thirty-nine major books on mystical theology and spirituality, produced over four hundred book reviews and articles and was in great demand as a retreat giver and lecturer and became a leading Christian teacher of contemplative prayer. She conducted retreats for ten years at Pleshy Retreat House in Chelmsford, Essex. Her interests also included Eastern religions and deep respect for the psychological aspects of the spiritual pilgrimage. In her personal life she enjoyed travel, gardening and sailing.

In 1911 she published an historical and analytical account of the mystical spiritual life entitled *Mysticism*\textsuperscript{124} which has become a twentieth century religious classic and has been published in numerous editions up to the present day. Her material for the book is drawn from the Desert Monks, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Walter Hilton, The Cloud of Un-knowing, William Blake, Jacques Maritain and a host of others.

World War I and Baron Von Hugel

During World War I she worked in British Naval Intelligence but was not a militarist and her war experiences resulted in her becoming a committed Pacifist for the rest of her life. Pacifism she felt was simply the logical and specific application of what she termed "the universal law of charity".
In 1921 she sought spiritual direction from a lay Roman Catholic theologian, Baron Friedrich von Hugel and he served as her spiritual director until his death in 1925. Her friends included two well known Benedictine monks Abbot John Chapman (1865-1933) and Cuthbert Butler (1858-1934).

Prayer is a humble surrender

On the subject of prayer she tried to demythologize the subject and teach it in terms of both psychology and grace. "Prayer", she said,"was not a willed struggle but a humble surrender". She also stated "prayer is caught, not taught". And she once said "a lot of the road to heaven has to be taken at 30 mph".

Evelyn Underhill loved sailing, the outdoors, and often related the life of prayer to the life of nature as in the following excerpt from a talk she delivered in 1930:

Nothing in all nature is so lovely and so vigorous, so perfectly at home in its environment, as a fish in the sea. Its surroundings give to it a beauty, quality, and power which is not its own. We take it out, and at once a poor, limp, dull thing, fit for nothing, is gasping away its life. So the soul sunk in God, living the life of prayer, is supported, filled, transformed in beauty, by a vitality and a power which are not its own.125
Be supple in His hands

She gave advice once to a worried friend:

Don't strain after more light than you've got yet; just wait quietly. God holds you when you cannot hold him, and when the time comes to jump He will see to it that you jump -- and you will find you are not frightened then. But probably that is a long way ahead still. So just be supple in his hands and let him mold you (as he is doing) for his own purposes, responding with very simple acts of trust and love.126

The serene quiet within

Another of Evelyn's gems is this poem.

It is God's will for us that
we should possess
an Interior Castle,
against which the storms of life may beat without being able to disturb
the serene quiet within.127
As you point out Evelyn Underhill is a great transitional figure of the twentieth century. She saw all life as infused with the Spirit and her legacy on the teaching of contemplative prayer and the inner life have been passed on not only to John Main but to all of us who can profit from her gifts of understanding, knowledge and love.

QUESTION 41

Q. Thomas Merton, the great American Cistercian monk seems to have paved the way for the teaching of John Main on contemplative prayer. Did in fact they ever meet? Could you discuss Merton's life as it relates to John Main?

A. First of all who was Thomas Merton? Merton was born of an American mother and a New Zealand artist father in the town of Prades near the French-Spanish border, January 31, 1915. A younger brother John Paul was born three years later. During the Second World War this younger brother joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1941 and was killed in action over Germany in 1943.

His mother died when Merton was 3 years old and he was raised by his father, his godfather and American relatives. He learned French, attended school in France and England, travelled widely and eventually in the 1930's attended Cambridge University in
England and then Columbia University in the United States. His father died when Merton was fifteen.

In the summer of 1941 Merton worked as a volunteer in Harlem at Friendship House, founded by the Baroness Catherine De Hueck Doherty, whose community of lay people and priests called Madonna House still continues, a two hour drive north west of Ottawa in Combermere, Ontario.

On the 15th of December 1941 at the age of 27 Merton made the momentous decision that was to change his life forever. He entered the Cistercian monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, also known as the Trappists. In 1947 his famous biography *Seven Storey Mountain* was published and has become an all time religious best seller with over a million copies sold.

**Merton's groundwork for John Main's teaching**

During his 27 years as a monk he became an eloquent spiritual writer on contemplative prayer and has had a tremendous literary, social and spiritual impact on the 20th century. In the 1960's Merton became a hermit on the property of his monastic religious community and before his death wrote some 60 books of prose and poetry. There have been over 100 books published by or about Mer-ton since his death.

It is no exaggeration to say that contemplation was the expli-cit theme of everything
Merton wrote. And we must give Merton much credit for the explosion of interest in contemplative prayer in our day. And in fact in many respects Merton laid the groundwork for John Main's great success in handing on the tradition of contemplative prayer from the 1970's to the present day.

Merton was deeply serious about silence and stillness in prayer and the contemplative life as well as social issues of his day including the Vietnam war, the nuclear arms build-up and racism. He died of accidental electrocution, December 7, 1968 at the age of 53 after delivering a talk at a religious conference in Bangkok, Thailand.

Merton's personal influence on John Main

John Main and Thomas Merton never met. But in November 1976, Main was invited to address Merton's Cistercian community at Gethsemani Abbey on the subject of Christian Meditation/Contemplative Prayer. In effect John Main's public teaching on meditation began in the three now famous conferences given to the monks and published as *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*. But it was in the silent period spent in Thomas Merton's hermitage (Merton had died 8 years earlier) that the Spirit moved deeply in his heart and called him to the work of teaching meditation. John Main wrote a letter from the hermitage, November 13, 1976, to a close friend, Lady Lovat:

I hope you are well. I am staying in Merton's hermitage out in the
woods beyond Gethsemani. It is quite extraordinary how solitude brings everyone so close. I have just celebrated the most loving mass of my life in Merton's little chapel. You were all very close to me as I prayed for you and all your family... My purpose in coming here was to talk to the community about prayer, but in fact I have learnt so much myself while I have been here.\textsuperscript{128}

He told the monks at Gethsemani:

...As I understand it, all Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus and for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistraction, to a state of attention and concentration -- that is, to a state of awareness. And as far as I have been able to determine in the limitations of my own life, the only way that I have been able to find to come to that quiet, to that undistractedness, to that concentration, is the way of the mantra.\textsuperscript{129}

Merton had blazed a path to the East

Neil McKenty in his biography of John Main, \textit{In the Stillness Dancing}, comments:

Is it any wonder Father John was so moved by his experience there? He
knew Thomas Merton had done so much, in his life and in his writings, to make so many people think about contemplative prayer, so many people want to pray. Father John also knew that Merton, more than any other, had blazed a path to the East, a path that had helped John Main's own pilgrimage. There can be little doubt that, when Father John stood in silence at the altar of Mer-ton's hermitage, he understood the other pilgrim who had arrived with the Master. And the experience of talking with the monks at Gethsemani became a turning point for John Main. It offered him a compelling motive to pursue his own journey, to clarify his own teaching on contemplative prayer and to speak about it to anyone who wanted to lis-ten.130

**Gregory Ryan on Merton and Main**

Other authors have remarked on the key role played by both Merton and Main in the contemporary revival of Christian prayer. In an article written on the influence of Merton and Main, author Gregory Ryan says:

It should be noted from the outset that neither Thomas Merton nor John Main lived at the theoretical level. Each one lived from the depths of his own heart and it is precisely this characteristic which presents a model for all women and men of our time. It is for this reason that Merton's
influence and popularity continues to rise. It is for this reason that John Main's teaching on meditation has spread around the world.

Both monks would agree that the sickness which afflicts our world today is a morally bankrupt materialism gone mad, a kind of societal "heart disease". They would agree too, that the cure is to be found through a rediscovery of what it is that makes us human. The prescription for this recovery is silent prayer.¹³¹

On leaving Gethsemani, John Main told the monks, "I shall always remember with great affection these days among you." He had learned his teaching on the way of prayer must be pursued more urgently than ever. He had also learned beyond any doubt, this was the work for the kingdom to which he was called to give the rest of his life, no matter how long or short it might be.

Merton and Main: spiritual giants of the 20th century

How close were Thomas Merton and John Main in their spiritual pilgrimage? It would seem very close. These are the remarkable words of Merton in Calcutta a few days before his death: "...the deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words and it is beyond concepts." That's a wonderful definition of John Main's teaching on meditation.
While Merton and Main were both close in their thinking on prayer, there were differences in their emphasis and approach.

Neil McKenty comments in the book *In the Stillness Dancing* that Merton wrote a great deal *about* prayer; he wrote rather little about how in fact he prayed himself. On the other hand John Main was writing constantly about his own way of prayer. Merton was more of a writer; Main more of a teacher. Main's writings, almost exclusively stressing Christian Meditation, seemed to transcend his personality and John Main left a formal teaching about *how to pray*. Thomas Merton did not.

Meditation: a call to everyone

It is a credit to the genius of John Main that he synthesized the prayer teaching of John Cassian and the desert fathers, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the spiritual teachings of Asia, and left a formal teaching on prayer for those of us in the twentieth and twenty-first century. John Main was also unique in emphasizing that meditation or contemplation was a call to everyone. Even Thomas Merton in his earlier writings felt the practice of contemplation was the spiritual prerogative of professional religious in contemplative orders like the Cistercians. He however changed his views in later years. A few years before he died Merton had turned 180 degrees. "Who can desire the gift of contemplation" he asked. "Everyone".

Merton and the Jesus mantra
It is very interesting that eleven years before his death in 1968 Merton in a letter to a friend indicated that he had come to use a mantra, the Jesus prayer of the Eastern Christian tradition. So in the final analysis both Main and Merton had come to the spi-ritual insight that the practice of the mantra was the primary way to arrive at stillness and contemplative silence.

Merton's quotes on contemplative prayer

Contemplative prayer for Merton was a finding of one's true identity, one's true self, and he often emphasized in his writing that meditation roots us in reality, leads one to an "awakened heart" and in the final analysis is all about St. Paul's cry "we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit prays within us" (Romans 8: 26). Here are some addition thoughts by Merton on prayer:

* Sometimes meditation is nothing but an unsuccessful struggle to turn ourselves to God, to seek his face by faith. Any number of things beyond our control may make it impossible for one to meditate effic-tively. In that case faith and good will is suffi-cient. If one has made a really sincere and honest effort to turn oneself to God and cannot seem to get one's wits together at all, then the attempt will count as a meditation. This means that God, in His mercy, accepts our unsuccessful efforts.... Sometimes it happens that this interior helpless-ness is a sign
of real progress in the interior life, for it makes us depend more completely and peacefully on the mercy of God.\textsuperscript{132}

The seeds of contemplation are planted in every Christian soul

* The seeds of contemplation are planted in every Christian soul at baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing. The seeds of contemplation have been planted in these souls, but they merely lie dormant. They do not germinate.\textsuperscript{133}

* May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh if I forget contemplation.\textsuperscript{134}

Mary slept in the infinite tranquillity of God

* And far beneath the movement of this silent cataclysm Mary slept in the infinite tranquillity of God, and God was a child curled up who slept in her and her veins were flooded with His wisdom which is night, which is starlight, which is \textit{silence}. And her whole being was embraced in Him whom she embraced and they became
tremendous silence.\textsuperscript{135}

If you have never had distractions you don't know how to pray

* If you have never had any distractions you don't know how to pray...that is why it is useless to get upset when you cannot shake off distractions. In the first place you must realize that they are often unavoidable in the life of prayer. The necessity of...suffering submersion under a tidal wave of wild and inane images is one of the standard trials of the contemplative life... If you are wise you will not pay any attention to these things: remain in simple attention to God.\textsuperscript{136}

* For contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self.\textsuperscript{137}

We will never be anything else but beginners

* In the spiritual life there are no tricks and no short cuts.... One cannot begin to face the real difficulties in the life of prayer and meditation unless one is first perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience oneself as one who knows little or nothing,
and has a desperate need to learn the bare rudiments. Those who think they "know" from the beginning never, in fact, come to know anything.... We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life.138

QUESTION 42

Q. Could you give me a brief account of the life of John Main?

A. The life of John Main spanned a short fifty-six years (1926-1982), but embraced his becoming a journalist, soldier, lawyer, diplomat, university lecturer, Benedictine monk and finally one of the great contemporary teachers of contemplative prayer.

His journeys took him from London, England, to Ballinskelligs, Ireland, to Dublin, Rome, Malaysia, back to Dublin, Rome, to Wash-ington D.C., back to London and finally to Montreal, Canada. But John Main's greatest journey was a journey within towards his own centre. He understood finally the words of Jesus: "The kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say 'look here it is' or 'there it is', because the kingdom of God is within you."139
This became John Main's final journey leading thousands of people around the world to the discovery of this 'kingdom within' through the daily disciplined practice of Christian Meditation and the path of contemplative prayer.

John Main's parents

Douglas Victor (John) Main was born in London, England, January 21, 1926, the fourth child of David and Eileen Main. John was the religious name assumed with the Benedictines many years later. The other children included Kitty born in 1920, Ian (1922), Yvonne (1924), Diane (1928) and Alan Patrick (1929).

John's father David Main was born in 1893 in Ballinskelligs, Co. Kerry, Ireland in the family owned hotel now known as the "Bal-linskelligs Inn". His (David's) father in turn had come from Fal-kirk, Scotland as superintendent of the newly established trans-atlantic cable station from Ireland to the USA. He and his wife founded the hotel still owned and run by the Main family in Ballin-skelligs.

Eileen (Hurley) Main was born in County Meath, Ireland, in 1887. She received her early education in Belgium and became a nurse. In the great influenza epidemic of 1919 Eileen, at the age of 32, met her future husband David in Ballinskelligs, and they were married in Cork, February 7, 1920. After the birth of their first daughter Kitty, David Main was transferred by Western Union from Ballinskelligs to London.
Early family life

John Main once said "we were very happy in our home life and as well as being brothers and sisters we were all great friends". In fact it was in the heart of the family that John Main first experienced the warmth of human love, a love that would give him such psychological stability in his later life. Sunday night was always family night in the Main family for neighbours as well as friends and usually included singing and games. In one game the participants wrote down the subject for a one minute speech. Ian, the eldest child, was once outraged when he drew a subject suggested by his brother Douglas, "Early Byzantine Architecture".  

This kind of humour was a key element in the Main family life. In the book John Main by Those Who Knew Him, Yvonne, his older sister, recounts that "a few times as young children Douglas would celebrate mass with an altar on top of a chest of drawers. I was encouraged to be an altar girl but was frequently dismissed because I either started to laugh or rang the bell at the wrong time."

The Main home was one of deep, Catholic faith and grounded in St. Paul's injunction to honour the spirit rather than the letter of the law. If good food was going to spoil, Eileen Main would have no hesitation in overlooking the rule of Friday abstinence from meat. St. Benedict's injunction in his rule to "receive any guest as Christ" was enthusiastically followed in the Main family. Unwed mothers, alcoholics, abandoned wives, waifs and strays were
welcomed into their home on numerous occasions.

"Ballinskelligs was always with him"

In 1932 at the age of six, John was not in robust health, suffered ear infections and his parents felt he should be sent to Ballinskelligs, County Kerry, Ireland to build up his health through better food and air. He stayed there for part of the year, attend-ed school and lived with his father's older brother, uncle William and his aunt Nell in the family hotel. "The influence of Ballin-seklligs was always with him", a friend later said and in fact John Main fell in love with this remote part of Ireland and always felt Ballinskelligs to be his ancestral home.

Ballinskelligs had a mysterious but hidden influence on John Main's future life. Close to Ballinskelligs is the famous island site of Skellig Michael, rising 700 feet, seven miles out in the Atlantic off the Ballinskelligs coast. Irish monks built a monas-tic settlement at the summit of Skellig Michael in the sixth cen-tury and monastic life continued there between Viking raids for over 700 years.

His relatives recount stories of Douglas asking fishermen to take him out to nearby islands so it is possible he hitched a ride at this time with a fishing trawler to Skellig Michael. We do know that later in life he visited the Skellig and its monastic ruins with fellow students from Trinity College, Dublin. He was also deeply moved by the opening scene in the television program Civili-zation, where Sir Kenneth Clarke opens the series at the monastic enclosure
on these Skellig rocks.

A deep conjecture about Skellig Michael

There is an even deeper question and more intriguing conjecture about Skellig Michael. To Benedictine monk John Main is given the credit for rediscovering and recognizing the teaching of John Cassian (365-435) and the early Egyptian desert monks of repeating a short, sacred phrase in prayer to bring one to an interior silence in the presence of God. Cassian called it a "formula". John Main called it a "mantra". (See question 33 on John Cassian.)

The mantra from Egypt to Gaul to Skellig Michael

Cassian spent the last years of his life in Provence and brought the spirituality of the early Christian monks of the Egyptian desert to Gaul with the aim of reforming Gallic monasticism. It was by way of Gaul that monasticism spread to settlements such as Skellig Michael off the west coast of Ireland. Cassian's teaching on prayer was popular in the early Celtic church. In later centuries it would be Celtic monks who would bring Christianity back to Europe.

It is interesting to note that the teaching of the mantra came from Egypt via Gaul to Ireland's Skellig Michael and that John Main, who spent part of his youth in sight of Skellig
Michael, re-discovered this ancient prayer. What we can also surmise is that this direct contact with ancient Celtic monasticism was the impetus for his own eventual attraction to the Benedictine monastic life.

The war years

In 1937 at eleven years of age John Main entered London's prestigious Westminster Cathedral Choir School, and in 1939 at the beginning of the war he and brother Ian were evacuated to a Jesuit school north of London. In 1942 at 17 years of age he became a student journalist at a suburban London newspaper and the following year he enlisted in the Royal Corps of Signals and saw service in Belgium and Germany. Following the war he spent a few years with a religious congregation, the Canons Regular, followed by a law degree at Trinity College, Dublin.

In the direction of the East

John Main's next adventure in the direction of the East had friends bemused by his career choice. However this was a pivotal decision and its consequence was forever to change John Main's life as well as the lives of thousands of people around the world. In the spring of 1954 he applied to join the British Colonial Service. John Main was appointed to serve in Malaya (Malaysia) and his first assignment was to study Chinese in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies. In one of his books he recalled the school's motto "Knowledge
is power". John Main came to reject that motto. Years later he wrote "the only real power is love".

In 1955 after taking up duties in Kuala Lumpur he continued with his study of Chinese. One day John Main was sent on an ap-parently routine assignment to deliver a good will message from the Governor to Swami Satyananda; a Hindu monk who as a child was educated in a Catholic Mission and was founder of an orphanage school and ashram in Kuala Lumpur.

The day that changed his life

John Main thought he would quickly dispatch this rather rou-tine assignment and be free for the rest of the day. But this visit changed his life and set in motion a gradual understanding of his true vocation. His good will mission accomplished, John Main asked the Swami to discuss the spiritual base of the many good works carried out at the orphanage and school. The Swami replied that the spiritual base of the ashram was the daily practice of meditation.

John Main realized that he was in the presence of a holy man, a teacher, a man of the spirit, whose faith was alive in love and service to others. Here is what John Main subsequently wrote many years later: "...I was deeply impressed by his peacefulness and calm wisdom. For the Swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the spirit who dwells in our hearts... who en folds the whole universe, and in silence is loving to all."
You must repeat this word faithfully, lovingly and continually.

John Main was so moved by this passage from the ancient Indian scriptures, the Upanishads, and the Swami's spiritual intensity that he asked to be taught to meditate. The Swami agreed and invited him to come to visit him once a week. On his first visit the Swami spoke about how to meditate:

To meditate you must become silent. You must be still. And you must concentrate. In our tradition we know one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that concentration. We use a word that we call a mantra. To meditate, what you must do is to choose this word and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you. And now we will meditate.¹⁴⁴

For eighteen months John Main meditated with the Swami and it was this encounter that led John Main to the pilgrimage of meditation and eventually to discover the Christian tradition of the mantra in the practice of the early desert fathers.
Becoming a Benedictine

In the summer of 1956, John Main returned to Dublin and obtained a post teaching Administrative, Roman and International Law at Trinity College. Then in 1959 at age 33, John Main entered the Benedictine Abbey of Ealing in London. After his novitiate in 1962 he was sent to Rome to study theology at the International Benedictine College of San Anselmo. From there he visited monasteries in Italy, France and Germany, took hiking trips, summer holidays with his family in Ireland and was swept up in the exhilarating opening of the Second Vatican Council.

Discovering John Cassian

Eleven years later, John Main accepted an invitation to become headmaster at St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington, DC. While at St. Anselm's, he suggested one day to a young man that he read the book *Holy Wisdom* by a seventeenth-century Benedictine contemplative, Augustine Baker. The young man's response was so unexpectedly enthusiastic that John Main was moved to reread this spiritual classic. In this book he discovered the writings of the fourth-century desert monk -- John Cassian.

In the writings of Cassian, John Main found the link he had often wondered about. What Cassian had learned in the deserts of Egypt was what John Main had learned from a Hindu monk three years before becoming a Benedictine monk. What they both had in
common was the teaching of the repetition of a word or short verse to bring one to an interior silence in prayer.

The first Christian Meditation Centre

In 1974, John Main started his first Christian Meditation group at the Ealing Abbey Prayer Centre in London. Then in 1977 at the invitation of Bishop Leonard Crowley of Montreal, John Main founded a Benedictine Monastery in Montreal dedicated to the teaching and the passing on of this tradition of Christian Meditation to others. This work has now become a 'monastery without walls' and is carried on around the world by the World Community of Christian Meditation based in London. (See question 56 on the role of the World Community for Christian Meditation.)

The work is finished

He had always felt he would not live to an old age. Father John died of cancer on the morning of 30 December 1982, radiating a sense of presence and peace and surrounded by his Benedictine monastic community and Montreal meditators. But his work was done. He had left a full teaching on meditation for future generations.

Since his death, John Main's teaching on Christian Meditation has spread from the Benedictine Monastery he founded in Montreal to 60 countries around the world. Regarded
as one of the twentieth century's most important spiritual guides, his teaching on this path of contemplative prayer has transformed thousands of lives and his influence continues to grow.145

QUESTION 43

Q. I understand that the Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, once said "In my experience John Main is the best spiritual guide in the church to-day". Can you tell me more about Fr. Bede and his teaching on prayer?

A. I had the opportunity and privilege of meeting Bede Griffiths, twice at his ashram in India and once at the John Main Seminar in New Harmony, Indiana, USA in 1991, so I am delighted to respond to your question.

His early life

Bede Griffiths (his family name was Alan) was born Dec. 17, 1906 into an English middle class family of Anglican background, educated at Christ's Hospital School and later at Magdalen College, Oxford where he studied English and philosophy. While at Oxford he rebelled against an education system which in his opinion served to over emphasize the
academic at the expense of the imaginative and intuitive. At Oxford though, he became a lifetime friend and con-fidant of his tutor C.S. Lewis.

The golden string

In his autobiography The Golden String, he describes his at-tempt to live a life of radical simplicity, close to nature, with two companions in a Cotswold cottage after they left Oxford in 1929. Griffiths leaned towards Agnostic and none of the three were practising Christians. Following the Cotswold experiment in community living, a personal crisis led to a spiritual experience of God, to becoming a Catholic and in 1933 entering Prinknash Benedictine Abbey. For the next 20 years he was a monk at Prinknish and was ordained a priest in 1940.

"To find the other half of my soul"

At Prinknish a visiting Indian priest one day asked whether anyone would be willing to come to India and help found a religious community. Griffiths was eager to go. He had not only studied In-dian and Chinese scripture but a Jewish woman, Toni Sussmann, who had taught him yoga, had kindled in him an interest in Eastern re-ligions and spirituality. She herself directed a Yoga and Medita-tion Center in London. On departing for India in 1955 he predicted that he was leaving "to find the other half of my soul".
In 1958 in India he joined the Cistercian Abbey of Kurisumala and in 1968 took leadership of the ashram of Socciadananda (hermitage of the Holy Trinity) or as it is more commonly called to-day Shantivanum (Forest of Peace) in Tamil Nadu, southern India. It was here that Bede Griffiths sought to "inculcate" Christianity and Benedictine monastic life into an Indian context by adopting the simple life style (in food and dress) of India's rural population.

He himself dressed as a sannyasa with his kavi (orange robe) and walked barefoot. Fr. Bede also felt that an ashram should em-phazise the practice of meditation/contemplative prayer and also be open to all religions. As a pioneer in interreligious dialogue he opened Shantivanum to interfaith meetings and he himself was a key-note speaker at these conferences around the world. The ashram eventually drew thousands of visitors each year, including medita-tors and many young people especially from Western countries. Like many others I found Bede open, humble, with a warm and radiant heart and a disarming innocence.

Fr. Bede on meditation

In his prayer life Fr. Bede practised meditation using the Jesus mantra or what is termed the Jesus Prayer (see Question 33 on the Jesus Prayer). He wrote:

Personally, I find that meditation, morning and evening, every day, is the best and most direct method of getting in touch with reality. In medi-
tation, I try to let go of everything of the outer world of the senses, of the inner world of thoughts, and listen to the inner voice, the voice of the Word, which comes in the silence, in the stillness when all activity of body and mind cease. Then, in the silence, I become aware of the presence of God, and I try to keep that awareness during the day. In a bus or a train or travelling by air, in work or study or talking and relating to others, I try to be aware of this presence in everyone and in everything. And the Jesus prayer is what keeps me aware of the presence.

So prayer for me is the practice of the presence of God in all situations, in the midst of noise and distractions of all sorts, of pain and suffering and death, as in times of peace and quiet, of joy and friendship, of prayer and silence, the presence is always there. For me, the Jesus prayer is just a way of keeping in the presence of God.\textsuperscript{147}

His views on the feminine

An enduring legacy of Fr. Bede are his views on the feminine and his criticism of the overwhelming masculinity of Western Christianitv. He sided with Julian of Norwich (see Question 35 on Juli-an of Norwich) on the concept of God as mother and he believed the acceptance of this understanding of the feminine aspect of God would eventually lead to
women gaining their rightful place in the church. He bemoaned the fact that "we have nothing but male images of God".

Early on the morning of January 25, 1990 as he was sitting on the veranda of his hut at Shantivanum meditating, he had a severe stroke and his life was in the balance for a week as he lay motion-less and speechless. In reality he regarded the stroke as a mysti-cal experience since the right side of the brain not paralysed by the stroke opened him up to a breakthrough to the feminine. He subsequently wrote "I was very masculine and patriarchal and had been developing the left brain all this time. Now the right brain, the feminine came and hit me".

This profound inner experience took his spiritual or psyche energy from his head to his heart and he now saw love as the basic principle of the entire universe. He wrote "I find myself in the void, but the void is totally saturated with love". He summed up this fusing of the masculine and feminine in saying "God is not simply in the light, in the intelligible world, in the rational order. God is in the darkness, in the womb, in the mother....the darkness is the womb of life. He had finally found the other half of his soul that he had hoped to find on coming to India.

To the "further shore" at 87
Fr. Bede passed to the "further shore" on May 13, 1993 at Shantivanum at the age of 87. Fr. Laurence Freeman who gave the homily at the "Mass in Thanksgiving for the Life and Teaching of Bede Griffiths" on June 15, 1993, in Westminster Cathedral, London, has summed up Bede's life very succinctly: "through extensive tra-vels in America, Europe and Australia in his later years, Fr. Bede developed the vision of modern life and religion which is his abid-ing legacy. He saw the modern world at a crossroads comparable to only two or three such epochs in human history. And he saw the re-covery of a spiritual vision as an essential means for its survi-val."

The sometimes exclusive claims and dualistic thinking of the Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which had been responsible for so many wars and so much hatred, needed, he believed, to be touched by the advaita or non-dualism and the con-temporative priority of experience of the Asian religions. This idea was developed brilliantly in his 1982 book The Marriage of East and West.148

The mantra as a bridge between East and West

As mentioned the deepest source of his vision was his own spi-ritual path of meditation. From the 1940s he had practised the Jesus Prayer, a form of the interior and non-discursive prayer of the heart which he saw as an essential complement to all the forms of external worship. In the teaching of the Christian tradition of meditation by his fellow Benedictine
John Main (1926-1982) he dis-covered meditation and the way of the mantra as an essential bridge between East and West.

At the John Main Seminar which he led at New Harmony, Indiana in 1991 he used John Main's thought to crystallise his own vision of prayer and contemporary spiritual needs, particularly the need for community. These Seminar talks were published as The New Creation in Christ and describe his profound sense of the crisis facing modern humanity, but also his sense of hope and faith.149

A religious prophet of modern times

Bede Griffiths is one of the great religious prophets of modern times. His influence will continue to be felt not only in those he has inspired but through the writings he left to be published after his death. He testifies to the possibility, rarely achieved in a sceptical age, of uniting intellect with spirit and of their integration in a human nature of great gentleness and profound compassion for others, through all the adventures of a long life of seeking and sharing God.150

Question 44
Q. I am reading the author Carlo Carr-etto and he seems to echo Fr. John Main's teaching on silence in prayer. Could you comment on his life and teaching?

A. Carlo Carretto was born in 1910 and from 1946-1952 was President of Catholic Action in Italy. In 1954 he went into the Sahara Desert to join the Little Brothers of Jesus, inspired by the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld. For 24 years until his death in 1988 at the age of 78, he wrote 15 books which are estimated to have reached millions of readers worldwide and he is regarded as one of the great spiritual writers of our time.

Flight to the Desert

Robert Kiely, former Director of the Guiding Board, World Community for Christian Meditation, has written, "Carlo Carretto speaks to us from the desert, in a warm Italian voice filled with the hope, forgiveness and joy of the Gospels. To read his words is to share in the wisdom and peace of his life in Christ".

Carretto spent 20 years as a leader of the Italian youth movement of Catholic action and his flight to the desert shocked his friends and fellow workers. He himself explained that he felt it was a call from God; "leave everything and come with me into the desert. It is not your acts and deeds that I want: I want your prayer, your love".

For the next 10 years Carretto lived as a desert hermit but then in 1972 his classic
*Letters From the Desert* was published and clearly established him as one of the great spiritual voices of the 20th century.\(^{151}\) His writing was also responsible for popularizing the life of another desert monk, Charles de Foucauld. Foucauld spent 15 years in the desert, and was killed in 1916 by Tuareg rebels. In 1933, long after Foucauld's death, Rene Voillaime and four companions left France for the Sahara and founded the Little Brothers of Jesus. This was followed by the founding of the Little Sisters of Jesus, and both fraternities have spread around the world.

His early life

Born in 1910 in Northern Piedmont, Italy, Carlo was the third of six children, four of whom entered the religious life. One of his younger brothers became a bishop in Thailand. Educated at a Salesian Oratory, Carretto became a primary school teacher and went on to take a degree in history and philosophy. However it was in Catholic action that he found a new outlet for his creative energies. Catholic action was a lay movement of students and young people, aimed at making the Gospel relevant to the working and student environment. He always spoke with enthusiasm about the effect on his life of the Catholic Action Movement: "It took me by the hand and walked with me, it fed me with the word, it offered one friendship, it taught me how to fight, it helped me to know Christ, it inserted me alive into a living reality".

On seeking prayer and silence
However the next step in his life is outlined by Robert Ellsberg in an introduction to the Selected Writings of Carlo Carret-to.\textsuperscript{152} Says Ellsberg: "On a deeper level he had become disillusioned with big movements, loud rallies and activism, even on behalf of the church, that were not sustained by an attitude of prayer and an openness to silence". (See Question 49 on Prayer and Action.)

Carlo was now ready to serve God in a new way. His arrival in the Sahara in 1954 opened up a completely different life of daily menial labor, solitude and a time for prayer and silence. Soon after his arrival an improperly administered injection in one of his legs left him crippled for life. However out of his desert experience came an understanding that in fact he still must seek God in his fellow human beings.

Back to the Umbrian Hills

In 1965 he joined an experiential community near Assisi in the Umbrian Hills in Italy, an offshoot of the Little Brothers, that sought spiritual renewal for the laity. It was here that he began to give retreats, seminars and wrote most of his books. He remained a lay brother all his life and constantly affirmed "the dignity of the laity".

In his later years he demonstrated a commitment to poverty and non-violence, a continued suspicion of large structures and institutions, yet always exhibiting a spirit of hope
and love, a joyous spirituality, especially as he neared death.

Contemplative life in the midst of the world

In summing up his life Robert Ellsberg writes:

Carretto represented an ascetic, yet joy-filled spirituality available to lay people, even in the midst of pressing obligations, even amidst the din of city noise, even in the midst of poverty and suffering. He showed that a life of prayer need not, indeed must not, relieve us of a passion for social justice and a spirit of solidarity with the least of our brothers and sisters.

At the same time he reminded social activists that in the midst of their good works they must preserve a place of stillness, a place where they can listen to the word of God, and find renewal. Essentially Carretto showed that it was possible to live a contemplative life in the midst of the world — the desert, after all, is really everywhere. The heart of the Gospel is to make of ourselves an oasis of love in whatever desert we might find ourselves. That was the challenge of his life. 153

Quotations from Carlo Carretto's books

A recurring theme in Carlo Carretto's books is his dying to the world of power, of
politics, and his pilgrimage to the empti-ness of the desert, the desert of the Spirit. There is a saying that he burnt his address book and went into the desert to learn to pray. Here are some of his more important quotations about the de-sert and prayer, selected from among his 15 published books:

* I've done a lot of work for the church, I'm aware of it. It has been my only thought, my only care. I have raced hard and covered as many miles as the most committed missionary. At a certain point it occurred to me that what the church lacked was not work, activity, the building of projects or a com-mitment to bring in souls. What was missing, or at least was scarce, was the element of prayer, medita- tion, self-giving, intimacy with God, fidelity to the Holy Spirit and the conviction that He was the real builder of the church: in a word the super-natural element. Let me make myself clear: people of action are needed in the church but we have to be very careful that their action does not smother the more delicate but much more important element of prayer.\textsuperscript{154}

Only with the deepest silence can we hear God's call

* God's call is mysterious; it comes in the darkness of faith. It is so fine, so subtle, that it is only with the deepest silence
within us that we can hear it.\textsuperscript{155}

* "Come into the desert". There is something much greater than human action: \textit{prayer}; and it has a power much stronger than human words.\textsuperscript{156}

* The closer you come to God as you ascend the slopes of contemplation, the greater grows your craving to love human beings on the level of \textit{action}.\textsuperscript{157}

The body too has its part to play in prayer

* With a little imagination, even a hole under the stairs, even a garret, can become our poustinia, our desert where we can recollect ourselves and savour silence and prayer...The body too has its part to play in prayer...the external posture some-times becomes a testimony to our faith.\textsuperscript{158}

To be children in God's arms, silent, loving, rejoicing

* This is the highest state of prayer: to be children in God's arms, silent, loving, rejoicing...choose one little word or a little
phrase which well ex-presses your love for him; and then go on repeating it in peace, without trying to form thoughts, mo-tionless in love before God who is love. And with this word or this phrase, transformed into an arrow of steel, a symbol of your love, beat again and again against God's thick cloud of unknowing.159

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QUESTION 45

Q. I have seen a photo of Fr. Laurence Freeman speaking to over 100 of Mother Teresa's novices in Calcutta. Was Mother Teresa supportive of Christian Meditation/contemplative prayer? Did she write on this subject?

A. Fr. Laurence and meditators from other parts of the world visited Mother Teresa on numerous occasions before her death. I myself had the opportunity of visiting and talking to her in Janu-ary 1991 in Bombay and Calcutta and can attest to her great commit-ment to contemplative spirituality.

As foundress of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa had a lifetime commitment to silence and stillness in prayer combined with extraordinary service and compassion to the most needy of this world. She had a deep understanding of the relationship between contemplative prayer and action and has ensured that twice-daily times of silent prayer are
an integral part of the morning and evening schedule of her sisters.

Mother Teresa and Contemplative Prayer

Meditators are aware that the flame of love that springs from prayer can suddenly burst forth. Like the prophets of old, the person who meditates often has an inner eye awakened to suffering and injustice in the world. We see this in Mother Teresa who was involved in the suffering and anguish of the world around her and yet deeply committed to the power source, the presence of Christ she found in the silence of prayer. Here are a few of her quotes on the importance of this prayerful silence and the relationship between prayer and action:

We need silence to be able to touch souls

* We need to find God, and He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. See how nature, the trees, the flowers, and the grass grow in perfect silence. See the stars, the moon, and the sun, how they move in silence. The Apostle said, "We will give our-selves continually at prayer and to the ministry of the Word." For the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us.160
We (Missionaries of Charity) are called to be contemplatives in the world.161

God is the friend of silence

"God is the friend of silence. His language is silence." Be still and know that I am God. He requires us to be silent to discover Him. In the silence of the heart, He speaks to us.

Jesus spent forty days before beginning his public life in silence. He often retired alone, spent the night on the mountain in silence and prayer. He who spoke with authority spent his early life in silence.

We need silence to be alone with God..., to listen to him, to ponder his words deep in our hearts. We need to be alone with God in silence to be renewed and to be transformed. Silence gives us a new outlook on life. In it we are filled with the energy of God Himself, which makes us do all things with joy.162

Prayer is oneness with Christ

In reality, there is only one prayer, only one substantial prayer: Christ himself. There is only one voice which rises
above the face of the earth: the voice of Christ. Prayer is oneness with Christ.

When times come when we can't pray, it is very simple: if Jesus is in my heart, let Him pray, let Him talk to His Father in the silence of my heart. Since I cannot speak, He will speak; since I cannot pray, He will pray.\textsuperscript{163}

Contemplatives in the heart of the world

* Prayer is nothing but that complete surrender, complete oneness with Christ. And this is what makes us contemplatives in the heart of the world; for we are twenty-four hours then in His presence: in the hungry, in the naked, in the homeless, in the un-wanted, unloved, uncared for. For Jesus said, "Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it to me."\textsuperscript{164}

Jesus is always waiting for us in silence

* Jesus is always waiting for us in silence. In this silence He listens to us; it is there that He speaks to our souls. And there, we hear His voice. Interior silence is very difficult, but we must make the effort to pray. In this silence we find a new energy and a real unity.
God's energy becomes ours, allowing us to perform things well.\textsuperscript{165}

* A soul of prayer can make progress without recourse to words, by learning to listen, to be present to Christ, and to look toward Him.\textsuperscript{166}

If you want to learn to pray keep silence

* If we neglect prayer and if the branch is not connected with the vine, it will die. That connecting of the branch to the vine is prayer. If that con-nection is there then love is there, then joy is there, and we will be the sunshine of God's love, the hope of eternal happiness, the flame of burning love. Why? Because we are one with Jesus. If you sincerely want to learn to pray: keep silence.\textsuperscript{167}

* You should spend at least half an hour in the morn-ing, and an hour at night in prayer. You can pray while you work. Work doesn't stop prayer, and prayer doesn't stop work.\textsuperscript{168}

My secret is quite simple. I pray.

* Interviewer: "Mother Teresa, you love people whom
others regard as human debris. What is your secret?"

Mother Teresa: "My secret is quite simple. I pray."\textsuperscript{169}

* Let us adore Jesus in our hearts, who spent thirty

years out of thirty-three in silence; who began his public life by spending

forty days in silence; who often retired alone to spend the night on a

moun-tain in silence.\textsuperscript{170}

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QUESTION 46

Q. I attended the John Main Seminar in England in 1992 featuring Jean Vanier, founder of
the L'Arche Community for the mentally challenged. Can you bring me up to date about the
life of Jean Vanier and his views on the Christian Medita-tion tradition of prayer?

A. Having attended that 1992 seminar myself I was deeply and pro-foundly moved not only
by his great love and compassion for the vulnerability and weakness of people with
developmental disabili-ties but also his conviction expressed at the seminar that this love and
compassion offered at L'Arche must flow increasingly from prayer. Jean also offered his
advice and expertise at the seminar in the development of the Constitution of the World
Community for Christian Meditation.
The great awakening

In August 1964 when Jean Vanier was 34 years of age and a philosophy teacher at the University of Toronto he visited a Dominican priest, Father Thomas Philippe in the small French village of Trosly-Breuil. Fr. Thomas was a chaplain at an institution for 30 men with mental disabilities and invited Jean to meet some of the men. This experience was to change Jean's life forever. He was deeply moved by the vulnerability of the men and wrote "up to that time I knew only about Aristotle and warships". (He was previously an officer in the Canadian as well as the British Navy.) He continues:

I saw in the faces of these men anger and violence and tenderness. Here was something terrifying and yet profoundly of God. I sensed in all their flesh and their being a primal cry. "Do you love me?"

Jean Vanier writes that he bought a cottage in Trosly-Breuil and invited two mentally disabled men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux to join him in a community of three. He says:

I had no idea where it would lead but I knew that Jesus wanted me to do this and that I had taken an irreversible step; and while I had taken this step out of a desire to serve the poor, I gradually learned that Raphael and Philippe were indeed helping me to discover my own poverty.171

God chooses the weak to confound the strong
Later he came to understand that God's special presence in the weak and outcast echoed St. Paul's teaching that God has "chosen the weak to confound the strong". Jean Vanier came to a strong belief that God reveals his presence in weakness and littleness. In one of his talks he muses on the littleness of the Resurrection. "Christ did not appear on the rooftops saying 'I'm back, I've won'. He appeared quietly as a workman in a cemetery".

From the small house at Trosly-Breuil, Vanier started L'Arche (the ark) named after Noah's ark in the bible. The L'Arche Community has now mushroomed to over 100 houses in 29 countries around the world. Jean has given over the active leadership to others but as an elder statesman continues to guide the Community and travels the world visiting L'Arche houses and giving retreats and seminars.172

The Vanier family and meditation

Jean Vanier and his family have had a long commitment to the path of Christian meditation. In the biography of Jean's mother entitled One woman's Journey173, the authors Deborah Cowley and George Cowley recount the weekly Christian meditation group led by Pauline Vanier at the L'Arche Community in France. Pauline Vanier played John Main tapes and attracted L'Arche assistants from around the world to her weekly group meetings.

As mentioned the activity in L'Arche Communities flows increasing from prayer. Jean Vanier has indicated he would be happy to see Christian Meditation groups started in
L'Arche houses. Two such communities in Kerala, India and Edmonton, Canada, subsequently started Christian Meditation groups.

Jean Vanier on contemplative prayer

Like Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier recognizes that faith lies at the core of all his work. He speaks of prayer as his oxygen and like Mother Teresa sees it as the religious base for his work and the work of L'Arche. Here are a few thoughts by Jean Vanier on the importance of silence in prayer.

* Prayer is to be in contact with our own Centre. It is to let Jesus make his home in us and to make our home in him.

* A spiritual life...is especially necessary for the weak...the mentally handicapped...in love, fraternity, prayer and silence. Their religious life will not primarily be one of action but rather that of contemplation, that is the life of one...who receives peace and radiates it and who lives a life nourished by prayer.

* When we live in community and everyday life is busy and difficult, it is absolutely essential for us to have moments alone to pray and meet God in silence and quietness.

* Prayer is like a secret garden made up of silence and rest and inwardness.
* For prayer is the opening of our being to the call of love, letting ourselves be opened to peace, to open ourselves to the reality of the word and of our Father, to enter into silence, to become conscious of love, to retreat from over activity, to rest and have periods of quiet.

* We all agree that to be still is important from all points of view, humanly, spiritually, psychologically, for it brings equilibrium, peace and can, in fact, increase our ability to be active.\(^{174}\)

QUESTION 47

Q. What is the role of Mary on the contemplative journey?

A. John Main felt so strongly about Mary's role in our spiritual journey that he wrote a beautiful treatise entitled *The Other-Centredness of Mary*. It is contained in the book *Community of Love*.\(^{175}\) In this treatise John Main points out that Mary is really the model and mother of the contemplative life for Christians because she is essentially described in the gospel as a person of prayer. He goes on to say that the secret of Mary's universal appeal in our day is her interiority and her other-centredness. In expanding this understanding of Mary, John Main says:
The essential Christian insight which Mary exemplifies in Luke's Gospel is poverty of spirit. This is purity of heart because it is unsullied by the intrusion of the egotistic will seeking for experience, desiring holiness, objectifying the Spirit or creating God in its own image. Mary reveals the basic simplicity of the Christian response in a poverty of spirit that consists in turning wholly to God, wholly away from self.\(^{176}\)

This poverty of spirit and turning away from self is, of course, the heart of our Christian Meditation practice. Like Mary we must continually seek to project our consciousness away from self. John Main points out that it was her other-centredness that makes Mary our model as meditators.

Mary and the Prayer of the Heart

Christian Meditation is often referred to as 'Prayer of the Heart' (see question 26 on the prayer of the heart). Mary's entire life was lived in her heart. St. Luke mentions Mary's heart twice in his gospel. At the nativity Mary reflects on the words of the shepherds 'As for Mary, she treasured these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19). At the finding of the child Jesus in the temple, 'His mother stored up all these things in her heart' (Luke 2:51). Mary knew the power of the Spirit at work in her heart. It is little wonder her life was one of contemplation.
Father Patrick Eastman, editor of the spiritual journal Monos, comments that in her *surrender* at the Annunciation,

Mary is still and silent, she hears the spoken word and gives consent for that spoken word to be en-fleshed within her and God breathes upon her and it is done. The word is made flesh and comes to bring healing into a broken world and the Church as Body of Christ is born. Now let us move to our times of prayer. Is not the same process at work? We are invited by God's grace to be still and silent that we may hear the word spoken to us. Prayer then be-comes a silence and stillness where we surrender to God.177

Mary's role to give birth to Jesus in our hearts

Mary is often termed the 'listening heart of Israel' and 'the woman wrapped in silence'. But to listen does require silence. In her listening, Mary's silence was one of deep joy as she rejoiced in God her saviour (Luke 1:47).

In our final view of Mary in the Acts of the Apostles we see her still at prayer with the apostles in the upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for the coming of the Spirit (1:14). Perhaps that is ultimately her role with those who meditate: to bring that Spirit to us in the silence; to give birth to Jesus in our hearts. Our role in meditation is to wait in silence and faith for the
utter-ance of his word within us.

Mary's famous fiat, 'Let it be done unto me according to your word' (Luke 1:38) is the same fiat we must express on the path of Christian Meditation. In meditation we must be open to whatever happens, whether it is the sense of God's presence or absence, distractions or silence, everything must be totally accepted in the spirit of Mary's fiat.

Mary: Flooded with Contemplative Love

Mary spoke few words in her humble, hidden life. Flooded with contemplative love she enjoyed for the most part being silent before the Lord. In that respect she becomes the fully conscious, integrated human being worthy of imitation by all meditators.

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QUESTION 48

Q. What is the desert experience or the dark night of the soul as it relates to meditation?

A. As we start off on the journey of meditation we often experience peace, calmness, joy, sweetness and what are termed consola-tions. Unfortunately many of us become attached to these gifts and fail to see that a predictable part of each person's spiritual journey will be the desert experience.
In our spiritual journey this can be a period of aridity, of turbulence, of distractions, of nothingness where God seems to have disappeared. We cannot find Him. He seems to have left us. This stage of the journey is our time in the desert or wilderness.

St. John of the Cross calls it the 'dark night of the soul'. He says it is a time where there is no consolation of any kind, where we feel deserted by God. He terms it a sensory dark night of purgation. In the *Dark Night* he writes: 'when God sees that they (souls) have grown a little, he weans them from the sweet breast so that they might be strengthened, lays aside their swaddling bands, and puts them down from his arms that they may grow accustomed to walking by themselves'.

God is in the desert. Don't be afraid to enter there.

Both the Old and New Testaments and many contemporary writers on spirituality speak of the importance of the desert experience on one's spiritual journey. They all point to the desert as a time of "waiting upon God", but also a time of purification, of loneliness, isolation, dryness, anguish and yet paradoxically a time of inner joy. The desert seems to be a necessary condition of the soul prior to union with God.

There are four short quotations that are so pertinent to the desert. The first is from the New Testament. St. Luke says (5:16) referring to Jesus, 'but He Himself retired to the desert
and pray-ed there'. The second is from Hosea in the Old Testament. Hosea (2: 16), God says 'I will lead you to the desert and speak to your heart'. The third quotation is from Thomas Merton who said, 'Con-templative prayer is simply the preference for the desert, for emptiness, for poverty'. And the final quotation is by Father Robert Wild, who has written in the Post-Charismatic Experience: 'God is in the desert. don't be afraid to enter there. He really cannot be found anywhere else...He loves you and awaits in the desert to embrace you and lead you home'.

God seems a billion light years away

The desert experience is generally a time of cleansing and pruning. The desert experience means an emptying of our self-centredness. For those on the path of meditation the desert experience often means aridity and dryness, the feeling of boredom, and even the sense of being abandoned by God. We are no longer aware of God's loving presence in our daily times of meditation.

It especially can be a time of endless distractions in medita-tion when interior silence seems very far away. One contemporary meditator has put the desert experience in modern terms: 'God seems a billion light years away. He has simply disappeared. He is inexplicably absent'. There is certainly an absence of consola-tions in the desert.

Thomas Merton in talking about the desert says:
The prospect of this wilderness is something that so appals most people that they refuse to enter upon its burning sands and travel amongst its rocks. They cannot believe that contemplation and sanctity are to be found in a desolation where there is no food and no shelter and no refreshment for their imagination and intellect and the desires of their nature.\textsuperscript{180}

In our personal life the desert experience can be a time of trauma, loss of a loved one, sickness, emotional or physical suffering, loneliness, separation, divorce, difficulties in our work situation, the physical problems of old age. Personal difficulties can lead us into the desert.

The desert: a time of spiritual testing

As Jesus was tempted in the desert so we will also be tempted. Again the desert is a time of spiritual testing. In the desert of emptiness and dryness and the feeling that God is absent, we can be tempted to skip our meditation periods. We can rationalise that we will make it up later, that we are not in the right mood for meditation...that we need to devote ourselves to some apostolic action or 'good works'. Behind our rationalisation lies a feeling of re-sentment. We are hurt. God seems to have let us down. We ration-alise and say to ourselves 'If I am generous enough to give God two half hours of my time in meditation each day, He could at least give me a little encouragement'. This is the self-analysis and self-
questioning of our meditation that John Main begs us to avoid. This is the self concern we are meant to leave behind in medita-tion.

Becoming a desert traveller

What is happening in the desert experience is echoed in St. Paul's words to the Corinthians: "I fed you with milk, and did not give you solid food because you were not ready for it" (1 Cor. 3: 2). In the desert the Lord is giving us more substantial food and weaning us from the milk of our earlier days on the path of medita-tion. This is the time He teaches us to detach ourselves from con-solations, spiritual delights, and become a desert traveller. We must learn to live in the desert, where the path seems often ob-scure and God seems to have disappeared. The desert requires faith when we appear to be lost and when fear enters the recesses of our hearts. The secret of surviving and even of flourishing in the desert is a loving trust and faith in the Lord. As meditators in the desert experience we all discover a special intimacy and near-ness to God.

God follows His own timetable in the desert experience

In our own desert experience and in the poverty and emptiness of meditation, we too have to learn to accept our state of help-lessness so that God can fill us with Himself. Thomas Merton puts this paradox so well. He says "Only when we are able to let go of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the consolation of God, only then
are we truly able to experience that presence". Jesus says, "The one who will lose their life will save it" (Matt. 10:39).

In meditation the desert experience tells us that we have to trust that God is present and that he loves us even when he seems permanently absent. Until he comes to deliver us we have to go on persevering in our periods of meditation. God follows his own timetable in the desert experience.

Meditation and the desert experience

The desert experience challenges us to overcome our self-centeredness. Can we meditate without concern for where God is leading us? Can we meditate faithfully when distractions bombard us? Can we meditate when nothing "happens" in meditation? Can we give up our desire to possess God and shed all desire for spiritual consolation in meditation? Can we meditate with ever deepening generosity? If we can't, our faith will never be pure. And so the desert purifies our motives. The desert challenges us to forget about ourselves in prayer. The desert eats away at our self-centeredness. Again, the desert is a place where we are tempted and tested, brought to self-knowledge, purified and strengthened through faith.¹⁸¹

God lives in the desert and leads us

But there is a great paradox about the desert experience. The desert can also be a place
of beauty, of rest, of peace, a place where we can hear God in the silence of our own heart, where at times we can remotely sense his presence, where our eyes are begin-ning to open. With our fidelity to meditation we will come to love the desert.

God looked after the Israelites in the desert and fed them with food from heaven. The desert is not a place of sadness. It can be a place of great joy. There are flowers between the sand and rocks, there are living things, there is beauty. God lives in the desert and leads us on.

The desert experience may seem like it lasts for a long time, but salvation history assures us the desert does not last forever.

God guides us through the desert. He will never permit us to be tried beyond our strength, or to experience His absence beyond the limits of our endurance. It is by the power of God's grace and His holy Spirit present in us that we can say "yes" to his apparent absence in our desert experience.

In the desert life goes on

The paradox is this: our feelings of loneliness and inner emptiness in the desert can simultaneously coexist in our hearts along with a deep peace, joy and even a sense of humour. In the desert we can have a compassionate love and a transforming hope and joy in the risen
Christ dwelling within us. In the desert, life goes on.

The song of the desert should be "alleluia"

And finally, in closing, a reminder that the Promised Land that comes after the desert experience is brimming with delights and is the scriptural equivalent to union with God. God continually draws us through the desert of this life, to Himself. He stands at the far side of the desert waiting for us. Thomas Merton has written that the song of the desert should be "Alleluia!" The desert experience opens us to the joy of our emptiness in the face of God's infinite, loving goodness. The path that leads through the desert leads to peace, love and joy.

God waits at the far side of the desert

Here are Isaiah's inspiring and consoling words about life in the desert. And remember: our journey of meditation will indeed include life in the desert:

Let the wilderness and the dry lands exult, let the wasteland rejoice and bloom, let it bring forth flowers...let it rejoice and sing for joy. Strengthen then all weary hands, steady all trembling knees and say to all faint hearts, courage! Do not be afraid. Look, your God is coming; He is coming to save you. Water gushes in the desert, streams in the wasteland, the scorched earth becomes a lake, and the parched land
springs of water. And through it will run a highway undefiled which shall be called the sacred way; the unclean may not travel by it, nor fools stray along it. They will come... shouting for joy, everlasting joy on their faces, joy and gladness will go with them and sorrow and lament be ended. (Isaiah 35:6-10)

And, on the far side of the desert, waiting, is the Promised Land.

Question 49

Q. As a newcomer I felt that meditation would lead me to self-fulfilment, inner healing, peace, and tranquillity. Now I seem to be getting a bigger picture, that in fact meditation is leading me to become more involved with my family, my community and the world around me. Can you clarify this relationship between prayer and action?

A. I believe that one day Jesus gave us the perfect example of this balanced integration of prayer and action. This is beautifully described in the Gospel of Mark 1:35-38.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out
to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you'.

He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'.

Mark points out that Jesus gets up early in the morning to pray and yet is responsive later to his disciples when they suggest there is some work to do that day in sharing the "good news". Here is that balanced relationship between prayer and action, a time for prayer and a time for action.

Is meditation an escape from life

However, unfortunately many people do see meditation as an escape from life and from the world of reality. A woman in the city where I live once said to a meditator, "I just don't trust that meditation business. All you meditators do is sit in a cave and contemplate your belly button while the rest of the world goes hungry". All of us who are meditating one time or another, usually have to face those who are often suspicious and mistrustful of what is happening to us on the meditative journey. People often look to see if we are using prayer as an escape from our everyday life and responsibilities.

John Main was quite adamant that meditation, far from being an escape from life,
actually propels one into life and to love and compassion for others. Another teacher, the Jesuit Father William Johnston in *Silent Music* also faces this problem head on when he says:

In the final analysis meditation is a love affair. And love is the most powerful energy in the uni-verse. The great irony of meditation is that we become more immersed in the here-and-now. When we are liberated from our false egos, we begin to know and love others at a deeper level of awareness. We reach out with a new found compassion to our family, friends, the less fortunate.\(^\text{182}\)

The personal fruits of prayer that St. Paul talks about can also include a call to action. As Father Johnston points out, the flame of love that springs from prayer can suddenly burst forth. Like the prophets of old, the person who meditates often has an in-ner eye awakened to suffering and injustice in the world and sud-denly discovers that he or she cannot refuse the call to action. The path of meditation often leads to a compassion for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the weak, the underprivileged, the needy.

Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier

We see this in the life of Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier (see question 45 on Mother Teresa and question 46 on Jean Vanier). Both have been involved in the conflicts, suffering and anguish of oth-ers and yet both had the commitment to silence in prayer. Apart from
these great spiritual witnesses there are a host of meditators around the world who integrate their daily meditation with love, commitment and service to family and community. The late Fr. Henri Nouwen who worked at one of Jean Vanier's houses in Ontario, Canada says contemplatives are not the ones who withdraw from the world to save their own soul, but rather the ones who enter into the centre of the world and pray there.

Prayer must lead us outward to others

Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the American Cistercian monk who devoted his life to spreading the message of contemplative prayer, did not withdraw from the world in his Kentucky hermitage. Merton became publicly involved in both the Civil Rights and Peace Move-ments and saw social concerns and justice issues as an integral part of his contemplative journey. Merton felt strongly that the unmasking of illusion belonged to the essence of the contemplative life, and that one must live out the life of contemplation among one's fellow human beings.

Merton is quoted in *Thomas Merton on Prayer* as saying "all prayer must lead us outwards to others". He emphasizes this when he says that if we experience God in silent prayer, we experience him not for ourselves alone but also for others. As Merton saw it, contemplation, at its highest intensity, becomes a reservoir of spiritual vitality that pours itself out in the most varied kinds of social involvement.
Meditation results in a well spring of compassion

Buddhists also see clearly the connection between meditation and compassion for others. Joseph Goldstein, a Buddhist teacher of meditation in *Insight Meditation, the Practice of Freedom* says: "Over a period of time, meditation develops a tremendous tenderness of heart...a softening of the mind and heart takes place that transforms the way we relate to ourselves and to others. We begin to feel more deeply and this depth of feeling becomes the well-spring of compassion." And Ken Wilber the American Buddhist and writer in speaking about meditation in his book *Grace and Grit*, says that *selfless service, social concern and mercy and compassion to others are the fruits of the practice of meditation.*

Contemplation and *lived prayer*

Richard J. Foster in his book *Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home*, writes:

Each activity of daily life in which we stretch ourselves on behalf of others is *prayer in action* -- the times when we scrimp and save in order to get the children something special; the times when we share our car with others on rainy mornings, leaving early to get them to work on time; the times when we keep up correspondence with friends or answer one last telephone call when we are dead tired at night. These times and many more like them are *lived prayer.*
James Douglass a Pacifist writer once described the essential unity of contemplation and action in terms of the great Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang. An ancient Chinese character for yin was a cloud (contemplative prayer) and the symbol for yang was a banner waving in the breeze (action).

There is always a balance between meditation and action

A life of meditation presupposes justice and compassion for others. And in fact our social concern for justice and compassion will inevitably keep us on the path of meditation. However there is the temptation for some social activists to neglect the interior life and thus open themselves to frustration and burn-out. There is always a balance needed between meditation and action.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) the great medieval teacher of prayer also warns meditators about divorcing themselves from the world around them. He says that once we find silence we must not ignore our day-to-day affairs and responsibilities. Eckhart re-minds us that the external world also is real and has its rights.

John Main on prayer and action

John Main also felt quite strongly about the close connection between meditation and
action in our lives. The first quotation that follows is in *Letters From the Heart*:

> It often seems to many people that prayer is an in-trospective state and that the meditator is someone going into oneself to the exclusion of people and creation around them. Nothing could be further from the truth...Because meditation leads us into the actual experience of love at the centre of our being, it necessarily makes us more loving people in our ordinary lives and relationships.

Action springs from and is grounded in contemplation

In the 250 taped cassette talks on the subject of contemplative prayer, John Main has a recurring theme that the daily practice of meditation necessarily makes us more loving people in our every-day life and relationships. He knew that the teaching and experience through the ages of those who pray in silence is that this way of prayer is the springboard that launches us into fruitful action. In the book *The Way of Unknowing* he says:

> If our life is rooted in Christ, rooted in his love and the conscious knowledge of his love, then we need have no anxiety about regulating our action. Our action will always spring from and be informed and shaped by that love. Indeed, the more active we are, the more important it is that our action springs from and is grounded in contemplation. And
contemplation means deep, silent, communion: knowing who we are.

Knowing who we are by being who we are; that we are rooted and founded in Christ. 188

Prayer and action: both sides of the same coin

In the final analysis our prayer life and our actions cannot be separated for they are of the same fabric. Prayer and action are both sides of the same coin. This mixed life of prayer and action as we have seen was chosen by Jesus himself who taught and preached and healed while at the same time devoting so much time to prayer.

For all of us who are meditating it is important to remember that we cannot enjoy the silence and stillness while ignoring our worldly or family affairs and responsibilities. That would simply be a delusion. On the other hand meditation will give us the spiritual energy to change the world. The great seventeenth-century spiritual guide, Father Louis Lallemant said that a person of prayer will accomplish more in one year than another person who does not pray will accomplish in an entire lifetime.

Henri Nouwen on Social Activism

The late Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest, writer and social critic believed passionately
in social issues and he himself was particularly involved in liberation theology in South America. Born in Holland, he taught at a number of prestigious American universities, including Yale, Harvard and Notre Dame. He was the author of over twenty-five books and from 1986 spent the last years of his life at Daybreak, a L'Arche home for those with developmental dis-abilities in Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada.

Nouwen, despite his own active life, did point out that we must beware of being carried away by frenetic activism. He emphasizes that grounding ourselves in God's love and a disciplined life of prayer is a necessary prerequisite before jumping into every new cause and issue. He writes that "dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness" and I would add burnout."

The Inner Eye of Love

In meditation there is an awakening of the inner eye, the eye of the heart, the inner eye of love. This is the metanoia or con-version that is beautifully described in Ezekiel (36:26, 27). 'A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone...and I will put my spirit within you.' This is the gospel cry of Jesus: 'change your hearts for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 3:2). On the journey of meditation the inner eye of love trans-forms our hearts and we are led into a life of fruitful action. For without prayer our actions can often be very sterile. Perhaps St. Teresa of Avila said it most succinctly: 'this is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the birth always of good
works, good works.' Meditation will never lead us into a selfish preoccupation with ourselves.

QUESTION 50

Q. I've been deeply wounded emotionally from childhood trauma. Is there such a thing as "inner healing" on the path of Christian Meditation? How does this work? How does one achieve closure? Is it the same as going to a psychotherapist?

A. Perhaps I should start off with a beautiful quotation from St. John of the Cross.

Interior silence, the inner stillness to which meditation leads, is where
the Spirit secretly anoints the soul and heals our deepest wounds.189

Yes we realize today, through the social sciences and a better psychological understanding of what makes us tick, that many of us are emotionally wounded to some extent, that many of us have re-pressed feelings that often go back to infancy.

Where do crippling feelings come from

In fact, psychologists speculate today that some of these repressed feelings can go right back to the womb. Even before birth we are subject to the emotional stress of our mother,
especially her fears and anxieties.

In early childhood many of us were deprived of the warm affection and acceptance of parents and siblings. We bury this painful memory and anger in our unconscious. Childhood abuse by parents and others is another serious wound that is often repressed into the unconscious. We may not remember some of these events of childhood but the emotions do remember. Later in life, we often wonder where the force of these crippling feelings is coming from.

Emotional junk from early childhood

Most of us have a heavy burden of "emotional junk" accumulated from early childhood. The body and the unconscious mind are the storehouse for this undigested emotional garbage. These often times crushing, painful memories can cripple us in body, mind and spirit unless they are somehow released to the conscious level.

We now know that people can grow up intellectually and physically while their emotional lives remain at the level of infancy. This happens because they have never been able to integrate their repressed childhood emotions with their adult selves. Unless there is a healing and they have made peace with their past they are not able to relate in a healthy way in their current and future relationships.
On meeting dependency needs

Children who are deprived of affection, for instance, may later when grown up choose spouses who they think can meet this dependency need. A marriage is usually headed for serious trouble if a man chooses a mother instead of a wife, or a woman chooses a father instead of a husband. They can also find themselves in a marriage where they desire closeness but are still emotionally unavailable and distant to their partner.

Wounds in the psyche must be released from our unconscious

Some people have a deep hatred of their mother or father. They harbour deep resentment arising from neglect, maltreatment and sometimes sexual abuse. These are wounds in the psyche and they continue to afflict us unless they are released from our unconscious. People who came from an abused, neglected or emotionally bankrupt family often in their adult lives suffer depression, anxiety and fear of trusting others. They often have low self esteem, and frequently view themselves as unlovable. They desire closeness but often keep people at a distance. Today we are recognizing more and more some of the terrible effects of emotional or physical abuse that children suffer in infancy and early childhood.

Well, what is the relationship between this kind of wounded-ness I'm referring to and the silence and stillness of Christian meditation? I'd like to tell you a story that dramatically makes the connection.
Galilee House in Ireland

A few years ago I had the opportunity of visiting a rehabilitation centre called Galilee House in County Kildare, Ireland, run by a Catholic priest, Father Pat Murray. Fr. Pat spent seven months with John Main at the Montreal Benedictine Priory in 1981-82. Galilee House is a House of Prayer and a Home for Growth.

The aim of Galilee House is to rehabilitate the most wounded people in Ireland, drug addicts, alcoholics, people with severe depression, victims of childhood abuse and many who have simply buried anger, anxiety, and resentment in their unconscious. Galilee House is having wonderful success in the healing process of returning these men and women back into the normal life of Irish society.

Psychotherapy and meditation

Participants in this intensive program are offered a group session of psychotherapy each day, but in addition they meditate in silence twice daily and listen to two talks each day (14 talks a week) by John Main. At the house I visited in County Kildare, there is a meditation room with 40 meditation stools and on the wall engraved in copper John Main's advice on how to meditate.
While visiting I asked Father Pat the reason for the great success rate of the Galilee House program. He pointed out that most of the people referred to Galilee House have suppressed anger, or buried resentment and often have suffered a lack of forgiveness in their lives; all neuroses and hurts said Pat, which have gener-ally existed in their unconscious since early childhood. Many have suffered childhood abuse.

Quite often, he pointed out, these wounds go back to a neuro-tic relationship with one's parents that, unfortunately, can crip-ple us emotionally.

Saying the mantra and healing

Now what is the process that leads to this inner healing, the healing of the wounded sensibility, the healing of hurts? As Fr. pat points out it is simply the saying of our mantra in meditation which opens us to the healing of love. In the silence of medita-tion God reaches down into the depths and liberates us little by little from the emotional damage of a lifetime. There is an organ-ic unfolding in their own time of our buried neuroses.

Fr. Pat was very unequivocal that while the psycho-therapy is somewhat helpful, the real reason why patients heal in the Galilee program is meditation. He put it succinctly: "When people come into contact with the hea ler they begin to heal". And he explained further that "In the silence of meditation, God who is love, pene-trates to the buried unconscious, allowing the suppressed anger and fear to surface and to be healed". "Exposed to the light",...
he said, "Neuroses begin to melt away". The healing power of Christ, he says, drains the poisoned memories away.

The first great key to healing

He also pointed out that meditation doesn't wipe out the memory. But the memory loses its power over us. Once these memories have been identified and brought to the light, said Fr. Pat, Christ frees us from the crippling effects of what we had buried in our unconscious and we begin an inner healing. He added that "In meditation, we come to accept ourselves as we are. And this self-acceptance is the first great key to healing".

In meditation, he continued, we come to an experiential conviction that we are loved by another person, profoundly loved. We understand deeply that it is not that I love but that I am loved.

God puts His finger on our wounds

Through this acceptance of the gift of love, we grow from childhood to adulthood. In this healing process of meditation, he reiterated, our pain is identified and brought into the light and neuroses and hangups of all kinds melt away. In meditation our conscious level is swept clean. With incredible accuracy God puts his finger on exactly the spot, the wound, the unconscious memory that needs attention.
It's interesting that the word "meditation" and the word "medicine" come from the same root. Medicine means that which heals the physical; and meditation means that which heals the spiritual. Both have healing power. To be healed simply means to be made whole.

The great healer is love

In this healing we face up to truth about ourselves and the truth will make us free. We are also coming to understand our-selves. And psychologists agree that understanding is immensely healing. When I come to understand myself, my childhood relation-ship with my parents or with my family environment, a great measure of healing is already accomplished. The next step is forgiveness.

The need to forgive

The other great key to healing, says Fr. Pat is forgiveness. In meditation we seem to be given the grace and strength to forgive those who have hurt us. However forgiveness is also a gift we have to give ourselves. There is a story of a former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp visiting a friend who shared the ordeal with him.

"Have you forgiven the Nazis?", he asked his friend.

"Yes".

"Well I haven't. I'm still consumed with hatred for them", the other man declared.

"In that case" said his friend gently, "they still have you in prison".
This story points out a vital point. Bitterness and anger imprison us emotionally. Forgiveness sets us free.\textsuperscript{191}

But forgiveness is not enough in itself to accomplish healing. The great healer is love. Ultimately healing comes through faith in Christ.

Don't fight the process

When the fears and anxieties, hurts and pains that we repressed since childhood start to come up in meditation, what do we do? The answer is "We do nothing, just be". We simply let the debris from the unconscious come to the surface. Don't fight this process. Accept it. Let the process take place. At the time of meditation, these repressed feelings and memories are distractions and the universal way to handle distractions is to return to the recitation of the mantra.

As mentioned in the normal course of events, God's presence in our daily practice of meditation will heal our childhood memories. However, in answer to your question, in some cases, a friend, or a counsellor, a member of a meditation group, or perhaps a psychotherapist, may be needed to assist one through a particular crisis during the healing process.

Our shadow side begins to heal
To sum up, in the regular daily practice of Christian meditation, the deep rest and silence created by our mantra in addition to God's action loosens up the emotional memories of childhood. The shadow side of the psyche begins to heal. None of us come to meditation with a clean slate. So for all of us one aspect of our spiritual journey is this struggle with the buried unconscious. We are all wounded in one way or another. We all need healing. In meditation we come from brokenness to wholeness.

Meditation propels us into greater wholeness

In the book *The Present Christ*, John Main points out however that the healing aspects of meditation go beyond our woundedness. Say Fr. John:

Meditation does restore us to a deeper harmony of body and spirit, but it always remains an essentially spiritual growth. All growth is a form of healing. Not just a retrospective healing of past wounds but it propels the whole person we are now into greater wholeness, the health we are created for. And so we can say that meditation is a growth beyond limitations.\(^{192}\)

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QUESTION 51
Q. What is the role of the weekly Christian Meditation group? Why should meditators meet to-gether? Where do they meet? What happens at the weekly meetings? How would one start a new group?

A. It has been said that in each age God raises up prophets and teachers to ensure His work is carried on. John Main is certainly regarded as one of these great spiritual teachers of the 20th century, but he was also in a real sense a prophet. John Main had a deep insight and prophetic vision that his teaching on silence and stillness in prayer would be primarily handed down in small groups. It was his hope that this teaching and practice would be shared in an organic way through support groups of men and women meeting on a weekly basis in homes, churches, schools and work places. He had a profound understanding of the ancient tradition of Christians gathering to-gether to pray.

Meditation groups: communities of faith

As Laurence Freeman has pointed out, "John Main saw this modern development of contemplation as originating in the communities of faith and the liturgy of the heart of the early church. These early Christians also gathered in small groups in one another's houses. This coming together in prayer formed the "koinonia", or the social interaction and communion, that was the distinguishing mark and power of the early church". These small groups met to pray and offer support and encouragement to each other in their common faith.
Support on the common pilgrimage

There is no doubt that the teaching of spirituality is historically rooted in the tradition of the small group. The Israelites were divided up into small tribes and close family units, particularly during their sojourn in the wilderness. Jesus chose a small group of twelve to form the heart of his ministry. Throughout the last 2,000 years small groups of men and women have banded together in the monastic life to live in community and support each other on the spiritual journey. It seems only natural that people who are praying contemplatively in the 21st century should also come together in groups to support each other on their common pilgrim-age.

Small groups are redefining spirituality

A recent book *Sharing the Journey* by Robert Wuthnow\textsuperscript{193} documents the growing popularity and influence of small groups in creating community and teaching spirituality. Wuthnow maintains small groups "may be redefining spirituality" and that the church is once again becoming alive in the humble homes of those on the spiritual path. The author also confirms through research that small groups have emerged in response to the impersonalization of society and the weakening of family and community ties.

What has experience taught us over the years since John Main started the first Christian Meditation group at Ealing Abbey in London in 1975? Here is what we have
learned about the role of the weekly meditation group.

Why meditators meet in groups

* The heart of the meditation group is the sharing of silence to-gether. This is the primary reason why, spontaneously, people around the world are starting small groups to meditate weekly to-gether. The power and strength of meditating together comes from the words of Jesus, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). This is the foremost reason for getting together once a week. It is as if meditators instinctively realize that this is a journey that is difficult to make alone; it is a journey that is so much easier if we make it with others. It is true that no one else can meditate for us, that we meditate by ourselves each day, but at the same time, we realize that we need the support of others if we are to persevere on this journey.

A spiritual bond develops amongst members

* Meeting in a group promotes a spiritual bond amongst the members and a mutual concern between those who have set out on a common pilgrimage. The meditation group is really a community of faith, much as the early Christians experienced community in St. Paul's time.

* The group setting enables beginners to learn how to meditate. Newcomers can be integrated into a group at any point in time. Experience has shown that when a group starts in a new
geographic area, people who have never meditated before will join the group. New groups introduce new meditators to the teaching.

Support and encouragement on the path

* The weekly group meeting provides support and encouragement to those who might be discouraged or experiencing difficulties "on the path". All of us need, from time to time, the encouragement of seeing others faithful and committed to the discipline.

* We also need to absorb the teaching more deeply and we do so at the weekly meeting with the playing of a taped talk by John Main on some aspect of Christian Meditation. There are now 250 talks by Father John and additional talks by Laurence Freeman available on various aspects of meditation. These talks give instruction, deepen our motivation, and help us to persevere on the path. They give us a spiritual boost each week: part of the food we need for the journey.

* The question and answer period at the end of the meeting often helps immeasurably in clarifying situations, not only for the questioner but also for other members of the group. Discussion allows members to express their doubts, fears and misunderstandings of the teaching.194

Where do groups meet?
Groups meet in diverse locations and at various hours throughout the day and evening. There are now over 1,200 groups worldwide meeting in 60 countries of the world 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.

Lists of groups and times of meetings are available from Christian Meditation group leaders in various countries. An international list of groups is available from The International Centre, The World Community for Christian Meditation, 23 Kensington Sq., London W8 5HN England.

What happens at the weekly meeting?

The typical weekly group meeting lasts about one hour and includes an opening welcome to the members by the group leader. Some groups light a candle symbolic of the presence of Christ. This is followed by the playing of a cassette tape by John Main on some aspect of the practice and teaching of meditation, followed by the heart of the meeting, 25 minutes of silent meditation. At the conclusion of meditation any announcements can be made and newcomers given a chance to ask any questions pertaining to the teaching. In some groups the meditation group leader may give a short five minute talk relating to John Main's talk that evening.
On starting a group

How do groups start? The most important ingredient in start-ing a new group is the commitment of a leader to the time and ef-fort required to set up and guide a group. A decision must be made about the time and evening 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. A letter can be sent to all churches in the area asking for pulpit and bulletin announce-ments about the establishment of the group. Posters can also be produced for church bulletin boards. Notices can be sent to reli-gious/daily/weekly or community newspapers. An announcement can be sent to local cablevision TV stations and radio stations. Notices can be pinned on shopping plaza bulletin boards.

The role of the 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 growth and suc-cess of the group will depend on God. Numbers are unimportant in a group. Our Lord said "where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst of them". Where two meditators are gather-ed there is a meditation group. Once a group starts, others will join in time.

A leader will require a tape recorder, some of John Main's cassette tapes on meditation,
and a timer. Many group leaders uti-lize a pre-programmed cassette timing tape with a few moments of music, 25 minutes of silence and music that signals the end of the meditation period. But more than these material items the medita-tion leader will require faith and commitment. Faith to "wait on the Lord" not only in meditation but also for the increase in new members. But God works through the instrumentality of human be-ings. 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.

What are the advantages of small groups?

* Small Christian Meditation groups have a great advantage in adapting to their environment. They require virtually no resour-ces, other than the time their members devote to them each week, and they can be started with relative ease.

* The small group provides a sense of community for people who feel the loss and breakdown of neighbourhoods and personal family ties. The need for encouragement, support and sharing are addi-tional reasons for joining a group.

* We all need the affirmation of others and thus our faith can be strengthened through the bonds of love, caring and fellowship that develop in the small group. Basic spiritual and human values are shared in a group setting and subsequent friendships develop.
* We are not, contrary to public perception, a society of rugged individualists, who wish to go it entirely alone, but rather we are a communal people, capable of banding to-gether in bands of mutual support. ¹⁹⁵

The spiritual revolution taking place to-day

While these findings will be of interest to anyone participat-ing in Christian Meditation groups, either as members or leaders, it should be pointed out that the period of meditation itself will provide a strong bond of unity within the group. Because it is the prayer of Jesus Himself, it necessarily follows that a spirit of love and friendship should develop within the group.

As Laurence Freeman has written: "The early Christians ex-perienced this inner reality of prayer and knew the strong bond of unity it gave. But as the church grew older, its emphasis fell more and more upon formal prayer and external observance. Its in-teriority weakened, and wherever it weakened, the church's influ-ence diminished and her spiritual life grew more sterile". To-day in the small group setting we are recapturing a prayer that leads us from the head to the heart, from fragmentation to unity, from isolation to caring. This is the spiritual revolution taking place around the world to-day.
Q. What is the relationship between Lectio Divina and contemplative prayer?

A. Lectio Divina was originally a Benedictine monastic spiritual practice which literally means "divine reading". It has often been interpreted to mean "the slow, prayerful and loving reading of scripture". It's a spiritual practice of reflecting on the word of God, giving it our attention and using our faculties to give deep consideration to the text. Some authors say "we chew on the word of God" or "mull on the word of God".

Lectio the door to contemplation

However this practice of Lectio, in which one ponders the "heart" of the text, frequently leads to a state of consciousness where we simply remain silent in the presence of God beyond words and thoughts and reading. It often leads to a "resting in God". It has also been called listening with the heart. So Lectio can be an ideal preparation for the silence and stillness of contemplative prayer. The two go hand in hand. The early monks felt Lectio was the door that opened a monk to the contemplative experience.

From the written word to resting in the Lord

In the monastic tradition lectio divina or the reflective reading, listening to and digesting of Scripture was seen as an in-tegral part of the monk's spiritual development. Lectio
*Lectio Divina* was meant to lead a monk from the written word to *resting* in the Lord. To some extent this tradition has been lost in monastic communities. That is why John Main felt a return to the prayerful reading of Scripture was a necessary complement to the mantra in preparation for bringing one to the interior silence of meditation.

To let ourselves be read by God

The late priest and author Henri Nouwen, expanded the definition of *Lectio Divina* to include any spiritual reading that "is read with a desire to let God come closer to us". The purpose of this kind of spiritual reading, says Nouwen, is not to master knowledge or information, but to let God's spirit master us. Strange as it may sound, he says, this kind of spiritual reading means to let ourselves be read by God. So this is Nouwen's updated interpretation of *Lectio Divina*.

**QUESTION 53**

Q. Is there a special call to this way of prayer or is everybody invited?

A. I suggest the answer is "yes" to both of these questions. Karl Rahner, the great twentieth century theologian, was quite adamant that contemplative prayer "is not confined to a privileged few" but is a universal call to each and every Christian. He also added that this way of prayer "occurs within the framework of normal graces".¹⁹⁶
The contemplative call originates with our baptism

Thomas Merton (1915-68), the American Cistercian monk and writer, was adamant that the fall from paradise in Genesis was a fall from the contemplative state and a loss of the original unity with God. For that reason Merton came to realize that contemplation was not a call to a chosen few but a universal call to everyone. And he also understood the contemplative call for Christians originated with our baptism. He did however express sorrow that so few Christ-tians answer this call from God to contemplative prayer. In *What is Contemplation* Merton writes:

> The seeds of contemplation are planted in every Christian soul at Baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing. The seeds of contemplation have been planted in these souls, but they merely lie dormant. They do not germi-nate.\textsuperscript{197}

The seeds of contemplation

Regarding those who reject the contemplative call, Merton ela-borates on the gospel story of the sower who scatters the seeds; some seeds fall in the path and are eaten up by the birds of the air, other seeds fall in shallow ground, do not take root, wither and die, but other
seeds fall on fertile ground and bear fruit in due season. Merton points out that excessive activity, cares and concerns of the world often drown out the voice of God calling us to this way of prayer. In our excessive busyness, the seeds, (God's call) are eaten up by the birds of the air or fall on infer-tile ground.

The heights of contemplation are offered to ordinary people

We must also remember that the *Cloud of Unknowing* says that this way of silent prayer is open to even the most unlearned person and the author adds this prayer is simply a *normal* development of the ordinary Christian life. Two other great medieval spiritual teachers, Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) also reflect a similar teaching that the heights of contemplative prayer are offered to ordinary people. (See question 34 on the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

The hound of heaven chases us

However I do believe that while the invitation to the spirit-u-al path and this way of prayer is open to every Christian, never-theless we do seem to also receive an individual invitation. Per-haps this is best reflected in the poem 'The Hound of Heaven' by Francis Thompson (1859-1907) with the Lord portrayed as a blood-hound on the trail of each one of us (our special invitation). We do everything to block the invitation but the Hound keeps chasing us.
I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
....

Still with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
Came on the following feet,
And a voice above their beat -
"Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter me".

Then Francis Thompson at the end of the poem talks about how the Hound of Heaven has finally caught up with him. God speaks:

All which I took from thee I did but take
Not for thy harms,
But that thou might'st seek it in my arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home.
If to-day you hear His voice, harden not your hearts

As the poem illustrates so well it is Jesus who takes the ini-tiative in our spiritual conversion and it is Jesus who issues the invitation to a deeper way of prayer. In fact many people who are now meditating talk about receiving a double invitation. There seem to be two knocks on the door for many people: "Behold I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20). It would seem that for some people God does issue a double invitation to this path of Christian Meditation.

So again the call to contemplative prayer is a general call to everyone through our baptism. The seeds of contemplation are plan- ted deeply with us. However God also issues a unique call to each one of us. Thomas Merton has put it so well: 'we become contem-plative when God discovers Himself in us.' We must always remember that the call to meditation is a gift and a grace from God: 'If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts' (Psalm 95:8).

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QUESTION 54

Q. What is meant by discursive medita-tion? How does it relate to the contem-plative
tradition of meditation?

A. Discursive meditation is a component of the Spiritual Exercises of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). It is a form of analytical mental prayer employing the use of the memory, imagination, intellect and will and the use of one's powers of reflection. An

While the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) wrote the Spiritual Exercises, the practice of discursive meditation only developed in the Jesuits in the years after the death of Ignatius. In the last two centuries this form of prayer was consistent with the rationalistic worldview which formed the content of Western civilization as well as the content of the Roman Catholic Church. It was advocated by spiritual writers like Tan-query whose teachings on asceticism and spirituality were part of almost every seminary formation program.

Discursive meditation a preliminary step

Many experts, including the Jesuit author and teacher of prayer, Fr. William Johnston, insist that Ignatius was in fact a contemplative. Fr. Johnston feels that the later development in the Jesuits of discursive meditation was a practice meant to be preparatory to silence and stillness in contemplative prayer. He feels that eventually prayer must proceed from the head to the heart and beyond words, memory and imagination.
A sure sign that one is meant to pray contemplatively is when discursive meditation forces a person to throw up one's hands in despair, when this head centred approach to prayer simply causes frustration and one is convinced they can no longer pray at all. This is a sure sign that one is called to "resting in God" in silence and stillness and to heed the guidance of the Spirit leading one to a deeper way of prayer. Discursive meditation is generally thought of as a preliminary step to contemplative prayer.

Going beyond images, concepts and reasoning

We simply cannot grasp God through images, concepts or discursive reasoning. In Buddhism there is a saying "if you see the Bud-dha kill him". What this means is that whatever image or idea one has of Buddha it is false. Christians realize that our finite minds cannot grasp the infinity of God. Hindus when referring to the absolute say God is not this (neti) and not that (neti).

In contemplative prayer one goes beyond discursive images, concepts and thoughts in order to be united to God at a deeper level of one's being. It's not that images and concepts are false but in contemplative prayer we descend to a deeper level of our psyche that opens us up to direct contact with God, to his knowl-edge and to his love.

QUESTION 55
Q. What if one falls asleep during meditation?

A. Firstly don't feel guilty about falling asleep. God loves us asleep or awake. The very fact that we are sitting to meditate is a sign that we are at least open to silence and God's presence. The problem of sleep can be bothersome to a small minority of medi-tators but it can also be reassuring. It tells us that our nervous system and the chattering monkeys in our mind have begun to slow down.

How to deal with the problem

Let's deal with the problem: in meditation we are trying to do two very opposite things, be alert and yet at the same time be relaxed. When we doze off the relaxation aspect of meditation has taken over from our alertness and concentration. Usually this happens when we are beginning the path of meditation. As we persevere in the discipline and grow in attention to the saying of the man-tra, and listening to the sound of the mantra, wakefulness deepens with the silence and there is less of a tendency to doze off.

Causes of sleepiness

Sleeping during meditation can have several causes. Have we had enough sleep the previous night? Are we meditating late in the evening when we can be extremely tired? Are we meditating after consuming alcohol? Are we meditating soon after a heavy meal?
digestion of food slows down our brain waves and metabolism. This leads to a lack of wakeful attention to the mantra and dozing off. It is best to meditate before a meal but if this is not possible wait at least one hour after a meal before meditating.

What about posture and breathing? (See questions 10 and 12 on posture and breathing.)

One way to counteract sleepiness or tiredness is to try splashing cold water on your face before meditation or even consider taking a bath or shower. At times though it will be necessary to dispel drowsiness and make a real effort at being alert. So when you feel a 'doze' coming on check your posture and breathing and make a conscious effort to deal with the problem.

However one must not feel guilty about falling asleep. Again God is present in sleep as in waking. Our role is simply to make the effort to stay awake; a reminder of the words of Jesus to his disciples 'Could you not watch one hour with me?' (Mark 14:37).

QUESTION 56

Q. Is there an International Centre co-ordinating Christian Meditation groups around the world? Is there a Canadian Centre? Is there a Christian Meditation website?
A. Yes, there is an International Centre in London, England, part of the World Community for Christian Meditation. There are now over 1,200 Christian Meditation groups in 60 countries of the world associated with the W.C.C.M. An international directory of the groups is maintained at the London Centre. A Guiding Board over-sees the direction of the Community, a quarterly newsletter, an annual John Main Seminar and a School for Teachers program.

The address of the London Centre is:

Christian Meditation International Centre
23 Kensington Sq
London W85HN
U.K.
Tel: 020-7937-4679
Fax: 020-7937-6790
E Mail: wccm@compuserve.com

In Canada Christian Meditation books/tapes and resource material can be obtained from:

Christian Meditation Community

Canadian National Resource Centre
7211 Somerled Ave.
Montreal, QC H4V 1W9
Tel: 514-487-5569
Fax: 514-489-9899

Information that will assist people in learning to meditate and to continue to meditate can be obtained from:

The John Main Centre
Box 56131
Ottawa, ON K1R 7Z0
Tel: 613-236-9437
Fax: 613-236-2821

One can visit an extensive Christian Meditation website at www.wccm.org. The website includes the latest worldwide Christian Meditation news, coming events, availability of books, tapes and a chat line.

NAME INDEX

Abhishiktananda, Swami
(Henri Le Saux) 30, 150-151, 161, 194-198
Agatho, Abba 102
Aquinas, St. Thomas 163
Aristotle 272
Augustine, St. 112, 120, 123, 137
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Augustine</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baum, Gregory</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benedict, St.</td>
<td>89, 162, 167, 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benson, Dr. Herbert</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernanos, George</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake, William</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowe, Fr. Paul</td>
<td>155, 157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha</td>
<td>96, 149, 326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler, Abbot Cuthbert</td>
<td>162-163, 223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carretto, Carlo</td>
<td>17, 29, 258-262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassian, John</td>
<td>29, 86, 112, 162-168, 176, 198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>232, 242, 246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaduc, Mark</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain, Charlie</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapman, Fr. John</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ching, Hua Hu</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysostom, St. John</td>
<td>88, 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, Sir Kenneth</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climacus, St. John</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coles, Robert</td>
<td>213, 218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowley, Deborah</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowley, Bishop Leonard</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David, King</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doherty, Baroness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine De Hueck</td>
<td>132, 226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominic, St.</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglass, James</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easwaran, Eknath</td>
<td>54, 55, 72, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastman, Fr. Patrick</td>
<td>159, 277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eckhart, Meister</td>
<td>16, 92, 120, 131, 181, 222, 294, 322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliot, T.S.</td>
<td>131, 213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellsberg, Robert</td>
<td>260-261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evagrius, of Pontus</td>
<td>69, 89, 112, 174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>88, 90, 135, 297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Richard J.</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foucauld, Charles De</td>
<td>258-259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankel, Victor E.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, Fr. Laurence</td>
<td>11, 152, 255, 265, 309, 312, 316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germanus</td>
<td>162, 164-165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldstein, Joseph</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory, St. of Sinai</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griffiths, Bede</td>
<td>196, 250-256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris, Paul</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedberg, Dr. John</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert, George</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillesum, Etty</td>
<td>203-211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilton, Walter</td>
<td>176, 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosea</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignatius, St.</td>
<td>89, 163, 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>104, 287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac, Abba</td>
<td>164-165, 168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac, the Syrian</td>
<td>90, 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, St.</td>
<td>21, 119, 153, 158, 172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, St. of the Cross</td>
<td>70, 85-87, 101, 114, 126, 130, 136, 141, 222, 280, 299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, the Baptist</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnston, Fr. William</td>
<td>145, 181, 185-186, 290-291, 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph, Abbot</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judas</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian, of Norwich</td>
<td>17, 71, 114, 176, 183-189, 222, 253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazantzakis, Nikos</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiely, Robert</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kierkegaard, Soren</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lallemant, Fr. Louis</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law, William</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Saux, Henri</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(See Abhishiktananda)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis, C.S.</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lot, Abbot</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovat, Lady Rosie</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke, St.</td>
<td>158, 166, 277-278, 281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharshi, Ramana</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Alan Patrick</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, David</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Diane</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Eileen</td>
<td>238-240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Ian</td>
<td>239, 243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Fr. John</td>
<td>20-22, 26-28, 31-32, 38, 40, 49, 56-57, 70-72, 77, 83-84, 92, 103, 105, 114-118, 121, 126-127, 132, 139, 141, 144,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Kitty</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main, Yvonne</td>
<td>239-240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritain, Jacques</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark, St.</td>
<td>121, 122, 129, 289, 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark, St. the Monk</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, mother of God</td>
<td>125, 276-279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew, St.</td>
<td>85, 92, 94, 103, 109-110, 135, 145, 158, 160, 163, 284, 311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merton, John Paul</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monachanin, Fr. Jules</td>
<td>195-196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore, Hubert Stuart</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray, Fr. Pat</td>
<td>302-303, 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAleese, Mary</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenty, Neil</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman, Cardinal</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nietzsche, Frederick William</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitsch, Twylah</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris, Gunilla</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouwen, Fr. Henri</td>
<td>291, 296, 319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pascal, Blaise</td>
<td>57-58, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor, Abbot</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul, St.</td>
<td>12, 21, 31, 33, 35, 63, 67-68, 73, 80, 89-90, 104-105, 116, 135, 154, 158, 166, 184, 272, 283, 291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Page(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepler, Fr. Conrad</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perrin, Fr. Jean-Marie</td>
<td>216-217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter, St. Simon</td>
<td>158, 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippe, Fr. Thomas</td>
<td>51, 271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picard, Max</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po, Li</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahner, Karl</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramakrishna, Sri</td>
<td>42, 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolle, Richard</td>
<td>63, 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossetti, Stephen J.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan, Greg</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Exupery, Antoine De</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales, St. Francis De</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salinger, J.D.</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarapion, St.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satyananda, Swami</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schofield, Polly</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seux, Philippe</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shannon, Fr. William H. 140
Simi, Raphael 272
Simon, Sr. Madeleine 15, 107-109
Solomon 177
Spier, Julius 206-207

Sullivan, Jean 129
Sussman, Toni 251
Symeon, St. 192

Tauler, Johannes 181, 322
Teresa, Mother 17, 99, 132, 265, 269, 291
Teresa, St. of Avila 52, 54, 64, 163, 220, 297
Theophane, St. the Recluse 37, 52, 113, 171
Thompson, Francis 322-323
Truslow, James 97
Tzu, Chuang 83, 87
Tzu, Lao 102

Underhill, Evelyn 17, 78, 98, 175, 220-221, 224
Vanier, Jean 17, 271-272, 291
Vanier, Pauline 273
Voillaime, Rene 259
Von Hugel, Baron 222

Wagner, Mary Anthony 47
Ware, Bishop Kallistos 170-171
Weil, Simone 17, 57, 212-213, 215, 217-218
Wiederskehr, Macrina 62, 81
Wilber, Ken 123, 152, 293
Wild, Fr. Robert 281
Wuthnow, Robert 310

Zechariah 128

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BACK COVER
(TITLE AND AUTHOR OF BOOK)

A fascinating aspect of this book is that questions on indivi-duals range from John Cassian and the early 4th century desert monks to the American Cistercian monk Thomas Merton; from the medi-eval anchoress Julian of Norwich to Etty Hillesum, who died at Aus-chwitz in 1943; from the author of The Cloud of Unknowing to Simone Weil who wrote Waiting on God; from the Anglican spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill to the best selling Italian author Carlo Carretto; from John of the Cross to Jean Vanier, Mother Teresa and John Main.

A quick glance at the lives and teaching of these individuals shows that no religious tradition, no particular age, no particular culture or gender, has a monopoly on the spiritual wisdom of sil-ence in prayer. In these men and women we come to realize that the inner spiritual experience of contemplative prayer is in all ages the same; a longing for the Spirit deep at the centre of one's heart.

Caught up in the immediate, the temporal and the passing of our computerized world, we often forget the eternal verities and the spiritual vision of a gifted teacher such as John Main and other great teachers of contemplative prayer. This book will do much to bring a fresh perspective to John Main's teaching on medi-tation, as well as inform us about fellow travellers in their work of the Spirit.

Sr. Madeleine Simon RSCJ
London, England
Paul Harris is a Canadian author, lecturer and journalist and lives in Ottawa. He is a former Director of the Christian Meditation Centre, London, England. He lectures around the world on contemplative spirituality and is the author of eight books on this subject.

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