

APPENDIX 6

Presentation Notes on The Essential Teaching

## The Essential Teaching

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John Main said that every time we meditate we enter into a great tradition. It is important for us to see that when we meditate we are part of a Christian tradition of prayer that John Main himself rediscovered and has transmitted to us, adapting it in some ways and rephrasing it in some ways but presenting it to us as people of a modern era. So I'd like to speak about John Main's contribution to this tradition and the way he handed it on, and also to look at the essential elements of his passing on of this tradition. The word tradition itself of course means a handing on, a transmission.

### JOHN MAIN'S LIFE

Perhaps it helps just to reflect on John Main's life itself because in some ways that's a parable of the spiritual journey that he himself taught. He was born in England in 1926 into an Irish Catholic family. His Catholic tradition was a very living one and very important to him. He served briefly at the end of the Second World War. Then he studied law at Trinity College in Dublin and then he joined the British diplomatic service, studied Chinese, and was sent out to Malaya as it was then known. When he was working in

Malaya, at a time of great social upheaval and violence, he met an Indian monk who was well known and very well respected among his compatriots as a bringer of peace and as a social activist between the different religious traditions. He met this Indian monk and was immediately impressed by the interiority of this very socially active man.

They began to speak about the inner life, about spirituality and about prayer. Eventually the monk asked him, 'Are you a religious man, Mr Main? Do you pray?' and John Main replied 'Yes'. He prayed daily and often went to mass every day. His prayer practice was central to his life. The monk listened to this and said, 'Well, that's wonderful – to find a man of the world who is committed to a spiritual practice. He then began to speak about his own understanding of prayer and described it as the prayer of the heart, or meditation. As he described this way of meditation, John Main was intrigued and moved. The monk said to him that when we meditate, we believe that we are entering into the heart where the spirit of the One who creates the Universe dwells within us and in silence is loving to all. For John Main this was an intuition about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

As they talked more about meditation, the monk described how you make this journey from the mind to the heart by taking a mantra, a sacred word, and repeating this word or phrase continually in the mind and heart until it opens the heart and quietens the mind. So again John Main was intrigued and recognised some elements of his own teaching, his own tradition. He asked the monk, 'Could you teach me, as a Christian, to meditate in this way?' The monk said, 'Well, of course. It will make you a better Christian.'

So John Main began to meditate under the guidance of this monk. He took a Christian word as his mantra and integrated, morning and evening, about half an hour of meditation into his other ways of prayer and his daily life.

When he returned to Europe, he became a professor of International Law at Trinity College again, and eventually after a few more years, became a Benedictine monk. When he became a monk, he was looking forward to being able to talk about this way of prayer which he had integrated into his life, which had led him even to becoming a monk. He was disappointed when his novice master heard about it and told him that, 'Well, really this isn't a Christian way of prayer. You should give this up.' In those days monks were still obedient, so he gave up this way of prayer. Of course he continued to pray in the other monastic forms that he was being trained in, studied theology, and eventually came back and became headmaster of a Benedictine school in Washington DC.

It was at this time, at a very busy time in his monastic life dealing with the problems of a large institution at a difficult period in history in the late 60s, that a young American student came to visit the monastery and asked to be taught something about Christian mysticism. He had spent some time with a Hindu teacher but was now looking for the Christian standpoint. John Main gave him Augustine Baker's *Holy Wisdom* as his first book of study. When the young man responded with enthusiasm, John Main decided to read the book again himself. Baker's writing led John Main to study the works of John Cassian, a great teacher of St Benedict, and it was there that John Main recognised, rediscovered the teaching of meditation as a way of

Christian prayer, as part of his own historical, theological, spiritual tradition. In *Conference Ten* of Cassian in particular, he found the teaching on the mantra or the *formula* as Cassian calls it in Latin. And he recognised this as essentially the same teaching as the Jesus Prayer of hesychasm in the Orthodox Church. So this was the great awakening or coming home of John Main to his practice of meditation. Within quite a short time, he began to realise that this was an essential aspect of the Christian way of prayer not only for monks, not only for specialists, but for everyone.

He recognised the growing spiritual hunger among people in our time for deeper inner experience. So he began to teach meditation and it became his mission. It became the heart and soul of his monastic service to the world. So in a way he delivered this ancient tradition, which he first discovered through its universal form but later found at home, as it were, in his own Christian tradition. He delivered this to meet the needs, the spiritual needs, of the men and women of our time.

An essential element of his teaching on this tradition of prayer is its simplicity. When he speaks about simplicity, he warns us that it isn't easy. So simple does not mean easy. On the other hand because it is simple, it is available to everybody. Everybody who wishes to enter into it can do so. Let's just take a moment to look at the meaning of this word 'simple'. It comes from the Latin, *simplex*, which was a word used by tailors to describe the way rolls of cloth were folded. If you folded a cloth many times, it became complex. If you unfolded it so that it had no folds and was completely open then it becomes simplex. That, I think, is a nice image for us

to understand what is happening in the simplifying process in meditation. For John Main meditation is simple and the practice of it simplifies us. This of course is one of the reasons why children respond to meditation so immediately and so beautifully – because they are more simple than we are. Most of us, when we come to meditation, carry a lot of baggage with us. We have a lot of complexity, emotional, psychological, intellectual baggage, and it's difficult for us to meditate at first, simply because it is simple. But if we can be reassured, and of course encouraged to understand what simplicity means, then I think it is quite possible for any of us to meditate.

#### THE PRACTICE

The simple practice of meditation in John Main's teaching, he said, could be written on the back of a postage stamp. He was exaggerating a little, maybe, but he believed very much that it is the practice, the simple practice which is our teacher, which opens us to a depth of experience through which the Spirit is quite obviously forming us, shaping us, and instructing us.

This was his essential teaching. To meditate, we sit down, close our eyes, and we sit still. He suggested the basic rule of posture is to keep your back straight, and then silently, interiorly to repeat your word, your prayer word, your sacred word, your mantra, and to repeat this word, faithfully. This means we keep returning to it when the mind becomes distracted. We repeat it attentively, which means we give it our wholehearted attention, we are not giving any attention to any other thoughts or ideas. We say the word gently without using force, because if we use force, then the

ego is trying to take over the process again. And above all, as he said, we say it simply. And this means we are not analysing what is happening. We are not watching ourselves as we meditate. We are not evaluating our progress. This is one of his key points in his teaching, really. When we meditate, we should not try to experience the experience but to enter into the experience wholeheartedly.

Some time ago, I was talking to a small group of people who were interested in starting a meditation group and most of them had never meditated before. After the talk and the meditation, I asked them if they had any questions and comments. One of them, a businessman who had just come from work that day, asked me how long the meditation was. I said about twenty minutes. He said, 'Well, that's amazing. It could have been twenty seconds or twenty hours.' He said, 'I had no sense of time.' And he said, 'This is the first time I've meditated and, amazingly, I went to a place I can't describe. Words really fail me, but I can just say it was a place I've never been to before, a place of immense peace and joy.' Then he said, 'What is even more amazing, I've had a day which was so bad. I felt so soiled by it because I was in a rage all day. I couldn't control my temper. I was a really horrible person all day. And so I come here in the evening. I meditate for the first time and this is what I discover.' So I talked about it for a little while, and what it taught me is something that John Main emphasises – that meditation is not a technique. It's not a way of twisting God's arm or getting something out of God. Contemplation in the Christian tradition is a grace. It's a gift, something we don't earn, something we don't buy. It's not the result of an expert mastery of a technique.

Meditation is our way of receiving that gift, opening ourselves to the grace of contemplation. And nothing showed me more clearly than the story of that stressed-out businessman that this gift of contemplation comes to us unexpectedly and unpredictably. Actually, just to finish that story, a few months later I asked the person who started the group if this particular man was still meditating with them and he said, 'Yes, he is coming every week. He's really very grateful to have found this practice, which he's been very faithful to.' I thought that was a wonderful end to the story, because I'm sure he doesn't have that same experience every time he meditates, but he's discovering the fruits of the Spirit in his life and hopefully finding life can be less stressful and more joyful.

This brings us to another aspect of John Main's teaching which is about experience. He says that it is a way of experience, not a way of theory. And by this he means that we shouldn't be looking for something to happen during the meditation period. We are not looking for an experience of God, or a message, a kind of a text message from God. We are not looking for something to happen. In fact, he even says in meditation nothing happens and if anything does happen, ignore it. Which is a little challenging I think to us at first because we think well, if I'm doing this practice, surely something should be happening. Our initial questions are questions like, 'Am I doing it right? What am I getting out of this? Am I wasting my time?' And it does take time before these questions begin to calm down, even to disappear at some point and we realise that, as John Main says, it is in our life as a whole that we see the experience unfolding. So we are not looking for experiences specifically

but we are opening ourselves to an inclusive experience that eventually touches every corner, every fibre, every atom, of our life and our being, and we see the fruits of the Spirit emerging through this faithful, gentle discipline of silence.

For John Main, this practice of meditation is ultimately mysterious. We know in recent years, the last few decades since John Main first began teaching meditation, a great deal of medical and scientific research has been done which shows that meditation is good for you. Psychologically it reduces stress, helps you with depression, helps you with anxiety, helps you to sleep better at night, and physically it helps you deal with chronic pain. It helps your cholesterol and your blood pressure. So we know that all these benefits of meditation are well tried and tested. John Main's emphasis was, of course, on the spiritual fruits, and for him it was an opening to the mystery of our own being, the mystery of our being within the being of God. So we can call meditation, as he does, the Prayer of Being. In meditation we're not thinking about God, we're not speaking to God, we're not asking God for favours or interventions on our behalf. Those are valid forms of prayer at times, of course, but in meditation we are simply being who we are. We are not playing a role. We are not pretending to be better than we are. We're not playing up our sinfulness in order to get God's mercy. We are simply being who we are.

That's why meditation is a shortcut in a sense, or certainly a direct path, to self-knowledge. John Main is very much in this tradition of understanding prayer as a way to self-knowledge because self-knowledge is the basis of our knowledge of God. We cannot know God without knowing



ourselves. This mystery that we enter into is this mystery of knowledge. 'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps 46:10) This mystery of knowledge arises from a way of *unknowing*, not by using our mind, our memories, our analysis, our thoughts or our imagination. All that is valid but at another time. This is a way of unknowing, letting go of our familiar horizons, and our familiar filters, and our familiar preconceptions about reality. John Main was very much in the tradition that understood the mantra as a way to poverty of spirit. This is exactly how John Cassian describes it, that by the renunciation of all the riches of thought and imagination we come directly, he says, to the first of the Beatitudes, to poverty of spirit.

That's why in John Main's teaching there is such an emphasis upon the fidelity to the mantra and the continuous repetition of the word. In recommending us to say the word continuously during the meditation he's very much in the tradition of Cassian, of the Hesychastic tradition of the Jesus Prayer, of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The reason we say the word continuously is because the word is designed through this discipline not only to calm the mind and to lead us to peace. That man I was telling you about had certainly experienced that, but ultimately the mantra, the daily practice of meditation, is to lead us beyond ourselves, ultimately beyond our self-consciousness. The final step, of course, is grace. We can't make that final step by ourselves, but saying the mantra continuously prepares us. It allows us to lay aside our thoughts.

This is another way of understanding prayer in the spirit of the Desert Fathers and others. By laying aside our thoughts we eventually can lay aside our self. So in medita-

tion we are very much putting into practice the teaching of Jesus on prayer when he tells us to leave self behind or no one can be a follower of mine unless he leaves all his possessions (Mt 16:24). This is something we can experience in the mystery of meditation itself.

For John Main the mystery is really also the mystery of Christ. For John Main, all of prayer cannot be reduced to a technique or even a method, he says, because the essential meaning of prayer in the Christian understanding is the prayer of Jesus that is flowing continuously in our hearts. So when we speak about prayer in the Christian understanding, it's not *my* prayer that we're speaking about or *my* experience of prayer. It's more than that. It's about our going beyond ourselves, transcending the ego identity which would keep us thinking all the time about my experience or my prayer or what I am getting out of it. We go beyond that ego formula and we move into the prayer of Jesus himself. This is the heart of John Main's teaching on meditation as a Christian way of prayer, that we go beyond ourselves with the union with the prayer of Christ, and we go through his humanity with him, in him, and through him, to the Father, in the Spirit. And this echoes beautifully the teaching of St Paul on prayer when he says, for example, 'we do not know how to pray' (Rom 8:26). A strange statement when you think of all the different forms of prayer we have: 'We do not even know how to pray, but the spirit prays within us with sighs too deep for words.' (Rom 8:26) So it's this Christocentric, Christ-centred understanding of prayer and of the purpose of meditation that is really at the heart of John Main's understanding of meditation. It is for this reason that he understands that it is a way of love.

In the Christian tradition we understand contemplation as the work of love. This is exactly how the *Cloud of Unknowing* refers to it, the work of love. And we can understand this perhaps very simply by thinking of the work we have to do to say the word, to say the mantra. The work is that of paying attention, because our mind is constantly moving around, jumping from the past to the future or ending up in long fantastic conversations or daydreams. So when we say the word, we are paying attention to the word and laying aside all of those other thoughts. It isn't very long before we realise that this work of attention is essentially the work of love.

It's not surprising therefore that in John Main's teaching we see two great metaphors for understanding meditation. One is the metaphor of relationship, especially relationships of love in which we expand our awareness and our being beyond our egocentricity so that we can turn wholeheartedly towards another and give ourselves to the other. We can also understand meditation as a journey not something that we just achieve overnight or something that we can reduce to an effective technique, but a human journey that actually integrates the whole of our life's journey from birth to death and integrates every part of our being in the process – body, mind, and spirit.

So let me just end by describing the central teaching in terms of the practice as John Main taught it. For him there are two aspects to the discipline. He liked the word discipline because although it may be a bit challenging for us today, many people today are perhaps looking for a discipline, a spiritual practice that they can trust and commit themselves to. For John Main the word discipline was a

good word to describe meditation because, as he says, it is a learning process and the word 'discipline' means learning. It comes from the Latin *discere* – to learn. So we need discipline to learn anything. But the practice of a discipline also teaches us something deeply and experientially through commitment, through overcoming our resistance, and through fidelity.

So there are two aspects to this discipline. One is the external discipline to find a quiet time, a quiet place every day, early morning, early evening. Ideally the same time, the same place, although it might take time to develop this rhythm of daily meditation. Of course, given the instability of modern life, we have to be very flexible about when and how we meditate and where we meditate, sometimes. But basically our aim is to see the day as balanced between and with these two moments of silence and stillness and simplicity. John Main recommended that we commit ourselves to this practice even if it takes us 10 years before we develop this rhythm. The weekly group, the sense of belonging to a community of fellow pilgrims is immensely helpful for developing this daily discipline that is so transformative of our daily lives. So that's the external discipline: the daily practice – sitting still, sitting silently. He emphasises quite strongly the importance of sitting still, of not scratching your ear or your nose, and really learning to let go of those physical fidgets and distractions as well.

Then of course there is the interior discipline, the discipline of repeating, reciting the word faithfully, attentively, gently and simply, letting go of thoughts as they arise, letting go of our self-analysis. These two aspects of the discipline are very liberating. For John Main, discipline was a way to liberty of

the spirit. To discover that, to discover the fruitfulness and the liberating power of the discipline was one of the great discoveries of my own life and I think the great discovery of anyone who just begins this journey. John Main often encourages us by saying all you have to do is to begin and keep on beginning, and everything you need to complete the journey will be given to you. And I can only say that has been my experience over the years.