

The foundation of our tradition

wccm.org/weekly-teachings/the-foundation-of-our-tradition

12 February 2021

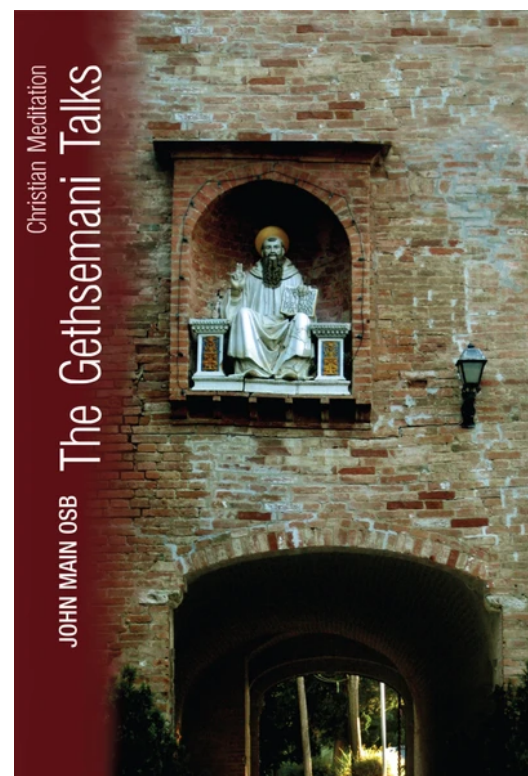
Kim Nataraja

12 February, 2021

In this series of 'Weekly Teaching' I will be focusing on some of the core texts of John Main and Laurence Freeman, which I would recommend to anyone serious about meditation in our tradition.

I would like to start with John Main's book *Christian Meditation – The Gethsemani Talks*. In it John Main narrates how he discovered the simple practice of meditation, when he was serving in the British Colonial Service in Malaya (now Malaysia) from 1954 onwards. In the course of his work there he met with a Hindu monk, Swami Satyananda, who directed an ashram and an orphanage school and "was impressed by his peacefulness and calm wisdom". After the business side of the meeting was concluded, they started talking about religion and how they each prayed. For the Swami this was meditation but the only meditation John Main was familiar with up to then was the Ignatian way of meditation, a discursive way of prayer, which involves using all your senses and imagination to visualize a particular incident from Scripture. The Swami explained that his way of meditating was quite different: "Meditation is very simple...all you have to do is 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." The Swami explained that unlike the Ignatian meditation that John Main was used to "there must be in your mind no thoughts, no words, and no imaginations. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra."

The Swami continued saying that the resonance of that sound would lead to the integration of our whole being and the discovery of the deep unity we possess with all creatures, the whole of Creation and God. In his words meditation would ultimately lead



to an awareness “of the Spirit of the universe who dwells in our hearts.” That saying resonated with John Main, as he too as a Christian believed essentially the same: the loving Spirit of Christ dwells in our heart. Because of John Main being a Catholic the Swami helped him to choose a Christian mantra, because the essence was deepening one’s own faith. How true this was, we can see from the fact that five years later he became a monk by joining a Benedictine Abbey in Ealing.

I have met people over the years, who have seen this introduction of John Main to meditation in Malaysia as proof that he had imported this way of prayer from the East and therefore it was based on Hindu Advaita, non-duality, and to them it was therefore not authentically Christian. But that is a misunderstanding – the essence of their meeting was the actual practice of meditation not the discussion of the beliefs of the Hindu faith. Moreover, this way of prayer is universal; we find this discipline in all the main religions and wisdom traditions. It is not dependant on belief and dogma but on practical experience. Only many years later in 1970 did John Main discover this way of prayer in the Christian tradition in the writings of John Cassian, as we will see next week.