

# Learn to Meditate

A Four-week Introductory Course

*A Handbook  
for Presenters*

LAURENCE FREEMAN OSB



WCCM

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The World Community for Christian Meditation

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A dark horizontal band with a vertical yellow line and a white diagonal line. The yellow line is vertical and positioned towards the right side of the band. A white diagonal line starts from the bottom of the yellow line and extends towards the bottom right corner of the band. The word "PREFACE" is written in yellow capital letters on the left side of the band.

# PREFACE

## PREFACE

Guagán Barra is a sacred, almost secret, corner of West Cork near my own Irish roots of Bere Island. The Irish word *guaig* means a ‘cleft’ – a crack or fissure in a rock. Combined with Barra the name translates to the ‘little rock-cleft of Finbar’.

St Finbar is the patron saint of Cork. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century he retreated to this sheltered space of great silence, peace and beauty and settled in a hermitage on a small island in the lake which is surrounded by a steep mountain on three sides. It is the source of the great River Lee which flows from a small crack in the immense rock. Finbar lived here in deep solitude until, inevitably, others came to join him. A community developed and it eventually became a centre of contemplation and learning enriching the whole country for many generations.

I visited Guagán Barra recently and meditated in the small chapel on the island. The door was closed and it was dark, but when I stood up to leave I saw that an intense beam of light was entering the chapel through the crack – the *guaig* – between the two closed doors and even through the keyhole and all around the perimeter of the doorframe.

It took Leonard Cohen ten years to finish his song Anthem with its famous line ‘there is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in’. But it is an ancient insight that the Sufi poet Rumi expressed when he wrote the ‘wound is the place where the light enters you’. The rock-cleft at Guagán Barra is a crack in the rock through which the great river begins to flow. In Exodus, God places Moses in a cleft in the rock to

protect him from the revelation of his overwhelming glory. It is a symbol both of vulnerability and separation, and of the creation of a sacred space in which healing happens and deeper wholeness emerges.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery. It uses gold or silver lacquer to heal the crack and does not try to hide the history of brokenness. The repair is part of its history and brokenness. When it happened, the crack caused pain and disappointment, but it is now beautiful.

Before I left I took a photo of the door, closed but channelling light inside the darkened church. The photo is used for the cover and banner in this little book to help explain in a single image what the many words here try to convey. What is that? Simply, that meditation is not about becoming perfect nor do we have to be perfect to begin. The feeling of failure that we all have when we try to ‘say the word’ with complete attention *is* our crack. We should learn from the very beginning of our practice that it is a sacred crack, a happy fault. Otherwise, we would be truly blocked, locked in complete darkness, if we felt we were perfect or developed a damaging low self-esteem merely because we are imperfect.

Jesus assured us that he was not a judge but a healer:

*If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I will not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. (Jn 12:47)*

The word ‘save’ means to bring someone out of danger and restore them to an even greater health than they had before. Delivering us from the fear of judgment – even from self-judgment is to make us whole without any need to disguise that we are all a bit cracked. The repair job that Jesus offers makes us more beautiful than we were.

Meditation is a universal wisdom found in all the great traditions. It is therefore a great hope in our polarised and divided world to help expose the great unity and common ground of humanity. In the Christian understanding, it is facing our own cracked imperfection with acceptance and realism and allowing the light of the consciousness of Christ, which we may feel is 'outside' us behind the closed door of our ego, to enter and flood our entire being, our inner and outer lives.

The light that comes in even through the closed door is like the appearance of the risen Jesus on the great Sunday to the disciples huddled in fear in the room in which they had locked themselves (Jn 20:19-23). He was simply there. They were incredulous. He showed them his hands and feet with their sacred wounds, identifying himself and dissolving their fear. His first words were 'peace be with you'.

Meditation is far more than stress reduction or 'me-time'. Once it has reduced stress and anxiety, however, its real work begins, which is to flood the space of the crack in us with unlimited grace. Grace really exists. It is not there despite the crack but because of it.

This little book and the talks of the four-week introduction that reached a, for us, record number of people is meant to help you, as a meditator who wants to share this gift with others, and to do so confidently and calmly. Meditation is the greatest gift we have to share with our darkened, violent, fearful times where injustice seems to prevail and the most vulnerable are continuously re-harmed as the collateral damage of the great powers of the world. To meditate and to share the gift quietly affirms that there is a greater, universal power. It repairs the damage and flows through the crack with light. As soon as we begin to meditate, we start to recognise the light touches us even in the darkness. Eventually, we hope, the day will come when the light dispels the darkness forever.

For now, we can do our little bit by sharing the gift of meditation with others. We only need to be practising ourselves and to step forward and share the gift.

St Finbar knew this when he entered into solitude in Guágan Barra and discovered that in solitude we find the embodied community we need to work with Christ for the healing of the world.

Laurence Freeman OSB  
Bonnevaux



# PREPARATION

# 1 About the Course

*We have only to begin the journey, and to remain faithful to our beginning.* John Main

This course was first presented as an online series in April and September 2024. The response to the course was overwhelming with more than 4000 participants. This reflects the great hunger of our time to learn and share a contemplative practice in the Christian tradition that speaks to new generations. About one third of the participants had never meditated before, the others were members of our national communities keen to learn a new language for introducing meditation in our changing times.

The talks offer a pathway to deepen our personal journey and are an outreach to people of all faiths and no faith. People who have become disillusioned or disconnected from the institutional churches can find new connection and meaning for their lives in this course.

It is based on the same simple approach outlined in [A Pearl of Great Price](#) and first set out in the [Six Week Introductory Course](#). It does not replace the [Six Week Introductory Course](#) which remains an important resource. This four-week course expands the WCCM library of resources.

The themes for each of the four weeks take participants on a gradual journey of understanding the practice of meditation within the Christian tradition. Participants are invited into a contemplative experience of knowing God and are invited to explore how this can give meaning and purpose to their life.

Our guiding principle comes from the contemplative tradition that tells us 'experience is the teacher'. The course is designed to create the best conditions and support for people to learn from their own experience. The focal point of each session is the period of meditation. The preparation, teaching and sharing should simply support this.

## 2 Promoting the Course

*The journey to our own heart is a journey into every heart.* John Main

We don't need to sell meditation or market it. On the other hand, it is a light to be placed on a lampstand. So let people know when the course is starting and where it will be, and make it welcoming.

Notices, flyers, and short talks can be used to promote the course in your parish or local community. On the following pages you will find some examples to help you choose the best way of advertising the course. It is important to include the correct WCCM logo in promotion material. Electronic copies of the sample posters are available through the links and instructions provided. You only have to insert your own particulars where indicated. Logos and examples of publicity materials are also provided in the webpage for the [four-week introductory course](#).

# LEARN TO MEDITATE

A Four-week Introductory Course



*Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and  
I will give you rest. (Mt 11:28)*

Meditation is as natural to the spirit as breathing is to the body. It opens and renews our humanity and teaches what fullness of life truly means. And it is simple. Join this practical course and learn more about peace and your true self – and meet friends for the journey.

\*St Luke's, 2 Smith Road, Applecross  
4-11 June 2026, 7.30 - 8.30 pm



\*For more information contact: Jennifer Jones  
jennifer@service.com

*\*Change particulars as appropriate. An electronic copy of this poster and instructions can be found on the webpage for the [four-week course](#)*

# LEARN TO MEDITATE

## A Four-week Introductory Course

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## LOGOS TO USE IN YOUR PUBLICITY



WCCM



WCCM  
MEDITATION & COMMUNITY



WCCM



WCCM  
MEDITATION & COMMUNITY

Logos and publicity material can be downloaded from the webpage for the [four-week course](#).

## **Notes for a Short Talk Promoting the Course**

The following notes provide an outline for a short talk about the course that could, for example, be given in church after worship or at other gatherings.

Have you ever wondered about meditation? You have probably heard of it just as a way of de-stressing or lowering your blood pressure. But meditation is also an ancient form of contemplative prayer, found throughout the ages of the Christian tradition, and today it is widely recognised as a form of prayer that is relevant and much needed for modern people. More and more schools teach it to young children. You can begin at any age.

It is a prayer of silence, stillness, and attention. It is often referred to as the prayer of the heart. In meditation, we allow the mind and body to become still and silent so we can be in the presence of 'Christ in us' (Col 1:27). We learn in this way to become less distracted and more present to God and ourselves and to those we live and work with. Meditation is simple.

It is also very peaceful and transformative. Of course, it doesn't replace other forms of prayer. On the contrary it can help to deepen your experience of all other prayer practices.

Each week for the next four weeks, we will be holding introductory sessions. If you cannot come to all, come to those you can. In this course you will learn about the tradition of Christian meditation, and above all you will learn by experience how to practise it. Each session will consist of a talk, a meditation period together, and a time for questions and discussion. Some books and CDs will be available. The session will last about one hour.

This group is part of The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) that was founded by John Main, the Benedictine monk who did so much to recover this tradition of prayer for people like us. He once wrote:

*When we meditate, we are still in body, soul, and spirit, entirely open to the presence of God and knowing that presence to be pure love, pure gentleness, pure forgiveness. In that presence, we become who we truly are: created by God, redeemed by the love of Jesus, temples of the Holy Spirit. In that experience, we are made utterly free, free to be ourselves, free to love ourselves, our neighbour and God.*

Meditation takes us into the heart of Christian faith. We hope this introduction to Christian Meditation will enrich the lives of many of you and of the parish as a whole.

# 3 Formats for Presenting the Course

*The journey to our own heart is a journey into every heart.* John Main

The materials for this course are videos of talks (given by Laurence Freeman) when he presented it in 2024. There are also transcripts of the talks. In the following section, The Four Talks, there are live links to the videos and the transcripts. The videos are subtitled in the following languages: English, Chinese, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, German, French and Portuguese, (Any translation of this material must be approved by a WCCM National Coordinator or by contacting [meditatio@wccm.org](mailto:meditatio@wccm.org).)

## **Format 1: In a weekly meditation group**

This version fits the format of a weekly meditation group. It could well be used to start a new group or as an introductory course open to newcomers by an existing group. In this way a new group has started with the right pattern. A half-day session at the end of the four weeks could be offered for Q&A and getting to know each other.

### Weekly meditation group format:

- Welcome, introductions
- **Talk:** Videos and transcripts are provided for this four-week course. If the group continues after the four weeks, audio and video talks and transcripts are available from the WCCM website ([www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)), and the WCCM meditation app [Silentium](#). Here is

a link to the material on the webpage <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>.

- **Meditation:** The final section of each of the four talks goes straight into meditation. It is recommended that the meditation period minutes for the first two weeks should be 20 and the last two weeks lengthened to 25 minutes.
- The timed meditation period is included in the video.
- **After meditation** there could be a short gospel reading.
- Invite sharing and questions.
- Conclude with the WCCM Community Prayer (Page 78). The group could recite the prayer together as this can build it's sense of community.

At each session:

- Explain the format of the session and the simplicity of the practice.
- Explain that goal of integrating meditation into a twice-daily practice and that it will take time to build this.
- Remind the participants about the transcript of the talk each week with reading suggestions linked to its theme that are provided in each chapter.
- Offer information on local, national and world community events.
- Refer to the website of The World Community for Christian Meditation ([www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)), the WCCM meditation app Silentium (<https://wccm.org/app/>) and suggest they subscribe to Daily Wisdom and the Weekly Readings (<https://wccm.org/mailings/>).
- Questions should be encouraged during the closing part of each

session. At the end of each session mention the theme for the following week.

## **Format 2: As a four-week course presented as four full-day or half-day sessions**

In this version the course is presented once a week for four weeks.

In this version each video and transcript has been divided into chapters. The chapter sections are viewed over the course of the full day or half day. It is important to ensure that the full talk is heard over the course of the day.

### SAMPLE Programme

- 09.00 Tea and coffee on arrival
- 09.30 Welcome, introductions, and overview of the day
- 10.00 Talk: Chapter 1
- 10.15 Personal reflection, quiet time
- 10.30 Talk: Chapter 2
- 10.45 Personal reflection, quiet time
- 11.00 Tea/coffee break
- 11.30 Leading into meditation and meditation
- 12.00 Whole of group sharing on the morning
- 12.30 Lunch
- 01.30 Reflection questions, sharing in small groups
- 02.00 Closing liturgy with meditation

### Weekly meditation group format:

- Welcome, introductions
- **Talk:** Videos and transcripts are provided for this four-week course. If the group continues after the four weeks, audio and video talks and transcripts are available from the WCCM website ([www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)) and the WCCM meditation app [Silentium](#). Here is a link to the material on the webpage <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>.
- **Meditation:** The final section of each of the four talks goes straight into meditation. It is recommended that the meditation period minutes for the first two weeks should be 20 and the last two weeks lengthened to 25 minutes.
- The timed meditation period is included in the video.
- **After meditation** there could be a short gospel reading.
- Invite sharing and questions.
- Conclude with the WCCM Community Prayer (Page 78). The group could recite the prayer together as this can build it's sense of community.

### At each session:

- Explain the format of the session and the simplicity of the practice.
- Explain that goal of integrating meditation into a twice-daily practice and that it will take time to build this.
- Remind the participants about the transcript of the talk each week with reading suggestions linked to its theme that are provided in each chapter.

- Offer information on local, national and world community events.
- Refer to the website of The World Community for Christian Meditation ([www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)), the WCCM meditation app Silentium (<https://wccm.org/app/>) and suggest they subscribe to Daily Wisdom and the Weekly Readings (<https://wccm.org/mailings/>).
- Questions should be encouraged during the closing part of each session. At the end of each session mention the theme for the following week.

### **Format 3: As an online course for individual use to view in their own time or view in a small group**

Each video contains an approximately 30-minute talk that leads into a 20/25- minute meditation.

#### **The following explanation is provided also.**

Each of the four videos explains aspects of the simple practice of meditation within the Christian tradition and provides insights on how the ancient practice has deep relevance for modern people. At the end of each talk participants are led into a 20/25-minute period of meditation.

Reflection questions, additional material, further reading and how to connect with a national community or online course are also included.

As you journey through this course you will discover the utter simplicity of the meditation. We recommend that you listen to one talk per week allowing time to reflect on the talk, and to have a short period of meditation each day in between. Transcripts of each talk are provided.

For meditation to take root in your life it is recommended that you meditate twice a day for 20 to 30 minutes. It will take time to build up to this. We recommend that you proceed gently and faithfully to gradually integrate the practice in your life.

We invite you to explore our website [www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org) (The World Community for Christian Meditation) and our meditation app [Silentium](#). You will find more talks and news of upcoming WCCM events, plus links to our national communities around the world. You might like to subscribe to one of our regular mailings including Daily Wisdom and the Weekly Readings. The subscription link is <https://wccm.org/mailings/>. The link to the material on the webpage <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>

# 4 How to Meditate

## THE PRACTICE

Sit down. Relax physically, releasing tension in your face muscles, forehead or shoulders. Breathe peacefully. Be aware of your incoming, outgoing breath for a few times. Close your eyes lightly.

Begin to say your mantra. An ideal word is maranatha. Say it as four equal syllables (ma-ra-na-tha). Don't visualise it. Sound it interiorly, in mind and heart, silently, simply. Articulate the word clearly but gently and listen to the word as you say it.

Don't be discouraged by distractions. Just drop the thought or fantasy and return to the word. Learning the art of meditation is not getting rid of distractions but returning faithfully to the word.

Meditate for between 20 and 30 minutes each morning and evening. Give yourself as long as you need to build this routine into your daily rhythm of life.

Meditate with others. If you stop, start again. There is no success or failure, only being simply faithful. 'Experience is the teacher' but trust the tradition of wisdom behind what you are doing.

## THE MANTRA AND THE BREATH

It is natural to say the mantra with the breath. For example, you can say the four syllables on the in-breath and breathe out in silence. Or, many

find it easier to say the first two syllables (ma-ra) breathing in and the next two (na-tha) on the outbreath. The breath is like a wheel, so you can rest the mantra lightly on the wheel of the breath. But give your whole attention to the mantra, listening to it as you say it. As the breath slows down naturally, let the mantra be released and find its own rhythm.

## CHOOSING THE MANTRA AND HOW TO SAY IT

The word recommended here – maranatha – is an Aramaic word meaning ‘come Lord’. As meditation is not what you think, don’t think of its meaning but say it simply and listen to it and the silence it leads us into. It also contains primal seed sounds associated with mantras in many traditions. If you choose another word or would like to say one in your own faith tradition, you can seek guidance from an experienced teacher. Generally, it is recommended to choose a word that is not in your own language so it does not stimulate thought or imagination.

Above all, though, say the word faithfully from beginning to end of the meditation session. Start saying the word again as soon as you become distracted. Say the word until you can no longer say it because then it has led you into a silence deeper than thought or self-consciousness. This takes time. How long depends on your practice and grace itself. We don’t choose when to stop saying the mantra but will say it more gently and subtly over time.



# THE FOUR TALKS

## **WEEK 1: WE START FROM WHERE WE ARE**

VIDEO Full Session	45.57 mins
Chapter 1 A Journey Within a Journey	12.46 mins
Chapter 2 The Mantra	8.49 mins
Leading into meditation	4.47 mins
Meditation	20.00 mins

### **VIDEO AND TRANSCRIPT LINK**

The video and transcript can be downloaded from the webpage of the four-week course: <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>. The transcript can also be found on page 29.

## **WEEK 2: THE POWER OF THE MANTRA**

VIDEO Full session	54.53 mins
Chapter 1 A Journey to Our Centre	13.03 mins
Chapter 2 Healthy Exercise for the Whole Person	18.10 mins
Leading into Meditation	2.27 mins
Meditation	20.00 mins

### **VIDEO AND TRANSCRIPT LINK**

The video and transcript can be downloaded from the webpage of the four-week course: <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>. The transcript can also be found on page 38.

### **WEEK 3: THE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY**

VIDEO Full session	56.44 mins
Chapter 1 Immersion in a Deep Inner Truth	19.05 mins
Chapter 2 The Stages of the Journey	14.21 mins
Leading into Meditation	3.18 mins
Meditation	20.00 mins

#### **VIDEO AND TRANSCRIPT LINK**

The video and transcript can be downloaded from the webpage of the four-week course: <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>. The transcript can also be found on page 49.

### **WEEK 4: AN INTERIOR DISCIPLINE**

VIDEO Full session	56.44 mins
Chapter 1 The Goal of Life	16.35 mins
Chapter 2 Levels of Consciousness	15.17 mins
Leading into Meditation	2.05 mins
Meditation	20.00 mins

#### **VIDEO AND TRANSCRIPT LINK**

The video and transcript can be downloaded from the webpage of the four-week course: <https://wccm.org/teaching-resources/introductory-four-week-course/>. The transcript can also be found on page 61.

# THE TRANSCRIPTS

## **WEEK 1. WE START FROM WHERE WE ARE**

### **Chapter 1. A Journey Within a Journey**

When we start anything, and starting to meditate, we start from where we are. After 45 years of meditating, I can say with great authority that I am still a beginner. The meditator is always returning to his or her beginning. But why begin in the first place? Even if you have only a superficial kind of curiosity about meditation, it's a sign to take seriously. Try, take the first step. We have nothing to lose except our limitations and our fears about our limitations. It might just be a milestone in your life's journey, as it was for me when I began, when I was introduced to it unexpectedly by John Main.

Simply to try with an open mind and heart may itself therefore be a life changing decision. In fact, you are opening yourself to something new, some dimension of yourself that you want and need to know better. You are looking ahead into a new part of yourself when you begin to meditate. It's a journey within a journey; within the ever-mysterious journey of your life. Life becomes more mysterious the longer we live, and you are responding by beginning to meditate. You are responding to a call from deep within yourself, beyond thought or explanation. If nothing else, meditation will give you new depth, and help you to live more fully from that depth.

You may be thinking, everyone is talking about how great meditation is and all these famous people are meditating – football players and big

executives and TV stars. Some see meditation as prayer and part of the religious traditions of wisdom, others may do it just for mental or physical health reasons, and it has the scientific seal of approval for that. So it's interesting, spiritual wisdom traditions and modern science agree that meditation is worthwhile. John Main put it a slightly different way when he said, 'we are made to meditate'. This is why we are here – to learn to meditate. It is as natural to the spirit as breathing is to the body. Whatever motivates you to begin, it's more than just curiosity or even just perhaps because you are feeling lost or desperate, or you are suffering and you are reaching out in meditation for something to help.

The inner force or the inner energy that draws us to meditation is faith. Human beings grow through faith. By faith I mean relationship, integrity, being true to yourself – that's faith. And experience will teach you the difference between faith and belief. In meditation as in all important things, experience is the teacher. So, if you are beginning this evening, you are beginning a journey to deepen your way of living faithfully, which means with meaning, hope, and love. It is a practice and a journey of human faithfulness. St Irenaeus said the beginning is faith, the end is love, and the union of the two is God.

If you are not religious and you don't have a belief about God, that may even be an advantage at first, because our ideas about God can be a problem when it comes to reality. But be warned, meditation is not about being focused on ourselves. There is even a real danger that you may discover something called 'God'. If you are religious, also be warned, meditation will almost certainly change your image and beliefs about God. Most people have faith in someone else's faith, and so it just becomes belief. Meditation brings you to firsthand faith. Or perhaps you had an early religious education but it failed you. It failed to prepare you

maturely for adult life, and so you left. It became superficial with shallow explanations, guilt drives, and infantile fears. Religion can also become a form of consumerism or even oppression that fails to deliver what it preaches, and leaving that kind of religion behind calls for pure faith.

So the main motivation for beginning I think is realising that reality – your life, the world, everything that is or you think is – is more than it first seems. You will discover a new invisible, yet real dimension by going below the surface of things, which means going beyond what you think and imagine, and even believe.

We all get stuck on surface things, what we are to eat, what we are to wear, problem solving, filling out unnecessary forms, surviving in our complex and hectic world. Our social environment is more than a little mad with its materialistic values and same-day-delivery culture that promises what it cannot deliver. What is advertised by our present values – leisure, time to be ourselves, a beautiful complexion, happiness, fulfilment, relationships, freedom – is not what we get. What we get instead is stress – a feeling of futility and boredom. We are conditioned in our world, in our culture, by a lie, and to live inside a lie is like being sedated. It is an increasingly depressing existence. It creates frustrated and self-destructive anger. That anger and the sadness behind it is expressed even in the way we drive a car or stand in a queue or how we treat those we love.

Meditation is our first step in getting out of that sedated state and waking up. What will we find? Depth, authenticity, a way of being that is beyond words. At first, it may feel like going underwater, but don't panic. You quickly realise that you can breathe underwater. There is more to life than the surface, and there is more life in the depth. So, to begin to

meditate is to put your faith in your own intuition that there is something more to life. Starting to meditate is doing something, doing something about finding it in a way that you could never just by reading, watching YouTube, or listening to talks. Meditation is pure action. I can't meditate for you, you can't meditate for me. But we can meditate together. In fact, as we will discuss next week, meditating with others is one of the best ways to help you to begin.

Another way of putting this is maybe to say that meditation is learning to 'be' rather than just do or think. 'Being' is pure action. We don't have to do anything to 'be'. Just be. And we really can, once we stop clinging to the surface of things, the ways of the mind, and our ever-changing feelings.

How can we meditate? Well, that is a bit like asking someone how to get from Bonnevaux to Paris. The directions you will get will depend on who you ask. But because people are basically good, whoever you stop and ask will give you the best answer they can, and you are free to trust them or not, of course. So, I will give you the best answer I can.

There are many ways to meditate. I will share with you what I have learnt, not because I'm claiming that this is the only way or even the best way (meditators don't need to compete with each other) or talking about their differences. There are, however, some universal elements like silence, stillness, simplicity, and especially paying attention. One other universal truth is consistency, another form of faith. If you are looking for a spring of water, it is better to dig deep in one hole rather than starting a new hole each time you dig. So, I am going to suggest that as we begin to meditate this week we stay with the same practice and do it consistently. Put your faith in it, give it a try.

Beginners need open minds and hearts, but also a relaxed and alert body. Meditation is not headspace, it is not what you think; it is embodied and we discover this as we see how much more we are than our thoughts, desires, fears, and fantasies. And the body can teach us this if we have forgotten it by becoming stuck in our headspace. The body is a spiritual friend, a best friend, even when it may be sick or not as beautiful as you would like it to be. And the body never lies, because it is always in the now, present.

How often are our minds really present? They fly from past to future, and the rest of the time they sit in the transit lounge of fantasy. Meditation is the journey into the eternal present, the now. And we discover that it is without boundaries. And the body anchors us in the present moment so that we can sail on this ocean of being.

## **WEEK 1. WE START FROM WHERE WE ARE**

### **Chapter 2. The Mantra**

The first step is to sit. Sitting is halfway between standing and lying down, between resting and working. So your physical posture should be relaxed and alert. If you are on a chair, place your feet on the ground, your back straight, or if you are sitting on a cushion on the floor, give yourself enough support from underneath to sit upright. However you sit, don't slouch or be too rigid either. You don't have to look like a meditator, just be alert and comfortable. Meditation is a middle path, sometimes a razor's edge between extremes. That is why the world, which is oscillating between such extremes at the moment, needs meditation.

Then close your eyes lightly and notice your breath coming in and leaving your body, uniting you to everyone else in this world who needs to breathe, and with the planet and all the miraculous processes of nature that produce the air we need to breathe. Pay attention to that flow, in and out. We are receiving the gift of life as we breathe in, and we are letting go, we are not clinging anymore, not clinging to our problems, to our thoughts, to our fantasies and daydreams as we breathe out. And we do all of this as we breathe without thinking, like breathing underwater without even trying too hard. And this, just being aware of your breath for a few moments each time before you meditate, is a little preparation but a very helpful preparation for meditation itself. It prepares the body and the mind.

Then the second step, we really start the journey. We deepen the work of attention we have begun. And we do this by starting to repeat interiorly a single word, a mantra. I will suggest a little later, just before we meditate, a mantra that we can say. Say it interiorly, silently, attentively.

We all know how difficult it is to pay attention. We are conditioned to very short attention spans. It is going to be a challenge for us to pay attention. So in this phase of the journey, right at the beginning especially, be prepared for frequent, even constant distraction. You may end the meditation and say, 'oh my God, that was a complete waste of time, I was just planning my day tomorrow,' or 'I was just daydreaming or drowsing and....' It doesn't matter. You are starting the work and every time you sit to meditate, you are making progress. And this is something really important if you want to learn to meditate. Most people give up because they become discouraged, because they're distracted – oh I can't meditate, my mind is too busy, I want to do something easier.

Well, look at it this way: every time you become distracted it is teaching you something. It is teaching you because you are returning to the word – that is the deepening of your faithful repetition of the word. So don't be upset by being distracted, you are just human, you are like everybody else living in this world at this time. But learn from the feeling of failure how to deepen your attention, don't be discouraged. You may find, after a few seconds that you are not paying attention to the mantra. You are doing all these other things or being caught up in negative thoughts. As soon as you are aware of this drop the thought, drop it unfinished, unsolved, and return to the word as soon as you are aware.

The word 'awareness' is an important word for the new meditator, because meditation is about becoming aware, becoming awake, and it will lead you to become more conscious, and therefore more accepting and more human. So, becoming aware of the fact that you have stopped saying the mantra is something to feel good about. It's not bad, it's not failure. Start saying the mantra again as soon as you become aware of it, and then you gain ground on the journey. It is a journey of faith, and you make it by saying the mantra faithfully. Be humble, the ego is not in charge of your meditation. That's why you will feel more free as you meditate more. The ego will put up a fight, but you don't have to be worried about that. Essential freedom, liberty of spirit is freedom from being controlled by the ego. Say the mantra gently without force, peacefully with a light and faithful touch. The mantra is taking the attention off yourself, off the ego. And that is why it feels liberating, even if it isn't easy.

So we're beginning a journey, and I hope it is a lifelong journey for you. Every meditation, every time we say the mantra is a new beginning. We are not gaining mileage points, but we are restoring the beginner's mind,

the attitude of a child and the innocence of a child who has this wonderful sense of wonder. Meditation is simple. It's radically simple, refreshingly simple, and liberatingly simple.

So, just to repeat, sit down, close your eyes lightly, and begin to say your mantra. Listen to the word as you say it. Don't visualise it, but listen to it. Articulate it clearly in your mind and keep returning to the mantra. Preferably, meditate at least twice a day for between 20 and 30 minutes. How long will it take? How long will it take for what? To achieve what? Enlightenment? We are enlightened, but we don't have enough faith to know it.

Choosing your word is important because you will stay with the same word during the meditation and for each meditation, morning and evening. Your mantra is your little path through the jungle of your thoughts and out into the open space of your heart, and it always keeps you on the path even if you become distracted for most of the meditation period and then you realise, you become aware that you've stopped saying the word. It is very helpful to meditate at the same time every day if you can. That helps to establish rhythm and pattern. If you can if you are at home, meditate at the same place.

## **WEEK 1. WE START FROM WHERE WE ARE**

### **Leading into Meditation**

Let's begin. The mantra takes us into silence. So during meditation, try to be as silent as you can. And be still, as physically still as you can. Physical stillness will help us come to stillness of the mind. Silence is what our world needs desperately. Silence is healing, restoring, and after all the

noise in and around ourselves what an amazing relief it is to be silent. You will come to look forward to your meditation time, like a shower after a noisy sweaty day. It is an immersion, a cleansing immersion in a non-egocentric world.

So, the word I would recommend is the word maranatha. Four syllables, ma-ra-na-tha, maranatha. It is an Aramaic word. The meaning is ‘the Lord comes’ or ‘come Lord’. But you are not thinking of its meaning. Meditation is not what you think. Maranatha is the oldest Christian prayer, but you don’t have to be a believer to say it. In fact, this word is very suitable because it is not in our own language, because the rhythm of the four syllables make it easier to say it rhythmically, and the sound of the word, the sound syllables in this word can be found in many of the traditions. So this is why I would recommend the word and to stay with it. Stay with the same word. Articulate the word clearly in your mind as you say it – maranatha. And listen to the word as you say it rather than visualising it. Listen to it as a sound. Say it gently, say it faithfully. And allow it to lead you simply into stillness and silence.

We will meditate now for about 15 to 20 minutes and then we have some time for questions.

So again, very briefly, sit with your back straight. Sit on a chair, put your hands on your lap or on your knees. Relax your shoulders, relax the muscles of your face. Close your eyes lightly and then silently, in your mind, in your heart, begin to say your word. Repeat your word gently, faithfully. And the word I suggest is maranatha, ma-ra-na-tha.

**MEDITATION** – 20 minutes

## **WEEK 2. THE POWER OF THE MANTRA**

### **Chapter 1. A Journey to Our Centre**

Today is our Desert Day at Bonnevaux, which is a good day to prepare a talk as it is a very, very silent day here. I like silence. I find it clarifies emotional complexities like fear, anger, or sadness. It resets us, or me to 'factory settings' so we feel we can start again fresh, and learn from our mistakes without having to trudge through all the aftermath.

But I like words very much as well, and I especially like the mantra which we began last week and which I hope you are becoming friends with. If not yet, don't worry, it takes time, and with meditation you always have a second chance. No one is grading you or judging you, and therefore there's no need for you to evaluate yourselves.

To understand what any word means, I usually go to an etymological dictionary to find its most ancient roots. Every word has a long history, and it probably has changed its meaning hugely over the millennia. The word 'individual', for example, originally meant undivided from. So, if you were an individual, it meant you were undivided from something. Today, when we use the word individual, it means the opposite. It means standing out or separate from the whole. Which is right? Wrong question. Of course, they are both right, because this is how the word is, or has been used. But it helps us to see how it has changed to really understand the meaning of the word. For example, is meditation an individualistic practice, my 'me time' as someone once called it, and if so, in what sense? Or is it about removing the barriers that separate us from each other to expose the reality that is so much bigger than our individual isolated ego self?

In a way, it's both. We meditate as unique beings, and so we do separate from the crowd, from the masses, from nationalities, from parties, and all the statistical and categorical labels that so often dehumanise us, put us into a box or into an algorithm. So it is a solitary work. Solitude is about uniqueness, not about isolation. It is a solitary work, therefore, and a bit of a desert experience. But what it reveals is our place and the way we belong to the whole. And this is clear whenever you begin to see the primary effect that meditation has on all your relationships – beginning with the relationship with yourself, of course, but expanding ever outwards beyond the ego, your separate identity, to your relationship with others, to the world and beyond.

Every word has its roots in a primal sound, for example, the sound *moo* and *mue* which is the core of many words like myth or music. The root word sound emerges from a pre-conscious silence before humans became aware of space and time when we lived in an undifferentiated kind of consciousness and made these primal sounds to each other to communicate. We were like newborn babies.

Then, as we became more conscious, it seems that by inflection, that means by subtle differences in pronunciation, these sounds became words. And they became words that are often opposite in meaning to each other but still have the same parent root, root sound. And I find this fascinating and something that reveals the nature of consciousness. Unity, the source, always underlies division. However separated, however divided we may feel or become, there is always unity there between us.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God. All things were made through the Word, and without the Word, nothing came into

existence.’ That’s from the beginning of the gospel of John (Jn 1:1-4). So, we could say the ‘Word’ here is like the original primal sound that is always present, and the original primal sound is always present in all the words, all the diverse words that it produces later.

Our word *maranatha*, for example, contains very primal sounds. *Ma* is a very early sound in baby talk, some say it's like the sound of a baby sucking. *Ra* evokes the first word we know of for the sun (the sun in the sky). *Na* seems linked to the root sound in *hosanna* meaning salvation. *Tha* is perhaps linked to a Sanskrit word meaning dark or mysterious.

Now, the whole word *maranatha*, is of course an Aramaic word, which was the first language that Jesus spoke, and used by early Christians as a prayer or perhaps as a greeting to each other. It’s meaning depends on where you put the stress as you pronounce it. It can either mean ‘Lord comes’ or ‘come Lord’. These are distinct, almost opposite meanings, but they're unified at root.

Now, you may say, ‘but you said that we're not supposed to be thinking of the meaning of it as we say it’, and you are right. Meditation is not what you think. And we don't think about the meaning of the mantra as we repeat it because, as I explained last week, saying it faithfully leads us from words and thoughts and imagination to a full, fully meaningful, and unifying silence. Not a pre-conscious silence, but a fully conscious silence. And, just to remind you of its purpose as a mantra, we recommend saying the four syllables with equal stress. So we pronounce it *ma-ra-na-tha*.

I raise all this not to be esoteric but to suggest why meditation, especially in a way as simple as the mantra, is so powerful. It is surprising, if not

actually mysterious, that the simple faithful repetition of a word should lead us into the sacred. And that is important, because nothing is more urgent today, as we drown in our modern sludge of materialistic values which deny the sacred or don't even know what it means, that this loss of the sacred causes climate change ultimately and causes the mega crisis itself. So nothing is more important than that we remember the sacred, or you could say we are remembered to it, we are reconnected to it. And that is the experience of wholeness, to be whole – God in everything and everything in God. ‘God is all in all’ St Paul says (1 Cor 15:28). And, and the *Isha Upanishad* says, ‘He it is who holds the whole cosmos together.’

Every mantra is a sacred word because of this interiority, and because it connects us to wholeness. It then helps us to experience the unity of inner and outer. So meditation, although it is very much an interior journey, it has a definite effect upon the external aspects of our lives – how we live, how we make or break or deal with relationships. Our work, everything in our external world is related and touched by this inner work of meditation. That actually is why I cringe when after a retreat or something like that I hear the mantra being used as a joke. For example, when a group photo is being taken and somebody says, ‘say cheese’, and then some wit in the group shouts out the mantra, ‘say the mantra’. No harm done, but I always find it sad because it seems to not get the sacred quality of it at all.

Anyway, I hope this has helped suggest why what we are doing when we meditate is something universally sacred. First, it awakens us to the deeper mystery of our own being. And then as that opens up for us the inner and the outer dimensions, we can't help but fall into the mystery of God, of wholeness.

## WEEK 2. THE POWER OF THE MANTRA

### Chapter 2. Healthy Exercise for the Whole Person

Meditation is the journey to the root, to our centre, to our deepest roots. And this is expressed beautifully in the *Tao Te Ching*, in chapter 16.

*Returning to the root brings peace, a peace that recognises no difference between self and other, and appreciates awareness as completely perfect just as it is. Without this recognition, perceptions are deluded and confusion rules. With this complete realisation of awareness, openhearted compassion dawns and brings life without limits.*

In this original source that we are calling the root, we touch wholeness. And we come to unlimited wholeness through the reconciliation of opposites, of contradictions, of things that we think or feel are irreconcilable. It may be to do with ourselves or it may be between ourselves and other people – ‘I can never agree with/ I can never feel any sympathy or any empathy for that person because they are a Republican or they are a Democrat.’ So, if we seriously seek the lasting peace, the unconditional joy that is not dependent on good or bad fortune, if we are seriously seeking the liberty to love and to be loved, then we need to be healed of all division and to be one, which means simply being fully human, fully alive. I'm not talking about this just as some kind of ecstatic experience just before the beatific vision. I am speaking about it as something that unfolds in daily life, thanks to the daily practice of meditation.

Meditation is an ancient wisdom of humanity that advances human integration and wholeness. ‘Wholeheartedness’ means we can put our

whole self into something. The great spiritual wisdom traditions have taught it as the root, the core spiritual practice. Other practices are precious as well, of course, but they derive their value ultimately from meditation. Now, as the conventional religious sources failed to deliver and we became infatuated with technoscience, that's what we worship. But then the practical need for the wisdom of meditation, that is satisfying our thirst for wholeness, did not diminish. It didn't go away, because it's rooted in us. In fact, it has increased. There has never been so much popular grassroots interest in meditation, usually through secular channels, as there is today.

This is very hopeful, but it often lacks depth. Without good soil, it is difficult to put down roots. This is true of anyone starting to meditate. Jesus, told a parable, a meaningful story called the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3–9): A sower goes out to sow seed and the seed falls on different kinds of ground and produces different results. And he speaks about the seed that falls on rocky ground and he describes it as referring to someone who hears the Word (the seed is the Word), and at once receives it with joy: 'Ah this is great. Oh this is fantastic. This is what I've been waiting for.' But since they have no root, he says, they last only a short time. So, we need to be prepared as we begin to meditate, to begin, to give up, to start again, and to do this as long as it takes.

There's an old rabbi story that says we are not expected to succeed but we are not allowed to give up. And perhaps the future of the planet, as well as our own personal happiness depends on how we understand this. If we fail to reconcile the contradictions, the opposing forces in ourselves, then we will also forget how to agree to disagree with other people. We will become polarised, and then the seeds of violence and hatred will soon grow. American society, but many others too, illustrate this graphically and increasingly.

The human being is an amalgam of contradictions, all of which have to be harmonised by connecting them to their underlying unity. This unity exists. Interiorised, polarised conflicts lead to self-harm in innumerable ways: stress, addiction, drugs, alcohol, overwork, sleep deprivation, lack of reverence for our own bodies. In our families and societies, polarised conflicts lead to a breakdown of trust and shared values of truth, communication, and mental health. In earlier, more moderate ages, the main human problems were probably exactly the same as we face now, but the surrounding culture itself provided natural checks and balances to help deal with them. There were even rules for war, which were enforced by the church. And Sundays and many major religious feasts were truly days of rest with family and friends. Sounds quaint to us today, doesn't it? Rules for war in Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon? Sabbaths are for shopping, aren't they? People in the past got plenty of exercise without gym membership, and they slept a full night rather than staying up late watching movies. The ingredients of the inbuilt element of contemplation are stillness, silence, and simplicity, which we have lost in our world of processed lifestyle spiritualities.

I don't think it's too pessimistic to say that we are a sick and rather delusional world with a serious contemplation deficiency. Electronic digitalised distraction, deliberate self-induced folly and senseless activity have made life and work for countless people feel hectic, chaotic, meaningless. Overactivity creates a chronic imbalance between the two different kinds of attention that our twin brain hemispheres generate and need to integrate. This has made us activists, hyperactivists – we have got to do something, and we've got to do it now. We have even forgotten what contemplation feels like. The first casualty of this, apart from our health, is the quality of the work we do. Whereas when we restore the contemplative element, and we do that by beginning to

meditate, we find that we are more energised, and the more you do it, it has greater value.

Because of this imbalance, when many people first meditate, they panic, they jump up after a few minutes, and they run off to do something, anything, rather than be still and 'be'. Saying the mantra gently, faithfully, simply, regularly, allows us to drop the activist compulsiveness that we are all touched by. And we find that we enjoy the spaciousness, and joy of being. This is what the Buddhists see as the joy of emptiness, freedom from the ego. The Desert Fathers in early Christianity spoke of the grand poverty of the mantra, which takes us into the happiness of the first beatitude: 'Happy and blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God (Mt 5:3).' This poverty is like the Buddhist emptiness. It is freedom from possessiveness, from attachment. It is robust receptivity, not a passivity that's always complaining of what we don't have. St Francis of Assisi was positively blissful in being married to 'lady poverty'. We understand why, and when we see that, when we lose this essential spiritual value, the experience of non-clinging, it causes greed to grow, whereas poverty of spirit transforms greed into generosity. Through the joy of poverty, contemplation leads to good work and so to socially responsible action. St Benedict understood poverty not so much as a deprivation of something but rather as a selfless sharing of all we have with others.

If you want to experience this poverty, say the mantra. The work of the mantra is good work, healthy exercise for the whole person. Don't take my word for it, remember experience is the teacher. At the beginning, it helps to understand how the mantra is good work, a worthwhile use of your time. Think of it as like tuning up an orchestra. Before a concert begins the oboe plays the A note. This is the standard tuning note, like a

primal sound, and all the other instruments then play an A. And then when they're all in tune they are ready to make music together in harmony. And before we meditate in a few minutes, I'm going to give you audible experience of that tuning up. It somehow sounds very much like what the mind is doing when we prepare for meditation. Saying the mantra attunes all the instruments of our ensemble of our humanity to a common purpose with unity and in a joyful diversity.

Think of the mantra as a signal that brings a plane to land in thick fog. Sometimes in our meditation we feel like that, we don't know where we're going, we are just in a fog. The plane uses its automated systems to interact with the airport's landing system, which is a lot of poles I suppose at the end of the runway that send a radio beam for the plane to catch and follow, and guides it in. No one can see anything. But you are on course, you are in safe hands. And that's a wonderful gift of the mantra, even when you are in thick fog. All that we do in the time of meditation is in fact a work that is done in us just by virtue of our being there, turning up for work and doing, 'being' as best we can.

The first step is to establish meditation as a habitual practice so that it becomes part of your daily routine. Until then, something always pulls you in another direction when the time to meditate comes. How long all this takes is a matter of environment and temperament. But once established, the fruits of regular practice will be self-evident, and I'll speak about these fruits next week.

Remember, meditating with others is a very powerful way of supporting and developing your own personal daily practice. Last week, I spoke of the resistance we can feel towards meditating, meditating deeply, simply because we feel it's like going under the surface of water and feeling

anxious we won't be able to breathe. In fact, we'd soon learn, if we try, that with the snorkel or the oxygen tank, or the mantra, we are quite capable of breathing underwater.

We could also compare it to jumping into the swimming pool or off a diving board. There's often a moment of resistance: is it going to be too cold, or is it too high? And we all, or many will have a strong fear of falling because we are letting go of control when we say the mantra. And it can feel just like the loss of control we experience when we fall, when we trip and stumble. Like all fears, including the root fear of death, this fear of falling diminishes and eventually dissolves through meditation. When we find the place in ourself where we are already gloriously free from fear, we can freefall. In physics this means that the only force operating on us is gravity. In the inner journey, this gravity is our natural attraction to our root, to the ground of being, to God. The most repeated verse in the bible is 'do not fear'. Richard Rohr counted and said there are 365 citations of this verse. So it's definitely a daily practice.

St John of the Cross said that the way down is the way up. Opposites arise from the same source of unity, remember. And this paradox reveals the place without fear within us. In all wisdom traditions this is called the heart. The spiritual symbol of the heart doesn't refer to emotions but to a knowledge born from a freely chosen unknowing, discovered as we let go of all other kinds of knowledge, thought, and imagination. The mantra allows us to do all this and to be open to the grace that accompanies us without having to try. We just comply.

This week I'd like to also talk about the kingdom, which is a name given to this heart – this origin, this unity that exists before contraries appear, before there is opposition – to return to which restores us to wholeness.

The mantra is a wonderful, simple gift present in the human wisdom traditions everywhere. And the simple, faithful, regular repetition of this word leads us into the sacred, the sacredness of our own self and into the meaning of the sacred, our source. And that's the wonder of learning to meditate, and why we can and should always come back to it, which we will do now.

## **WEEK 2. THE POWER OF THE MANTRA**

### **Leading into meditation**

So, as I said, I'd like to lead into the meditation with a little music, just over a minute, which is the sound of an orchestra. Actually, it's from Leonardo's city of Port Alegre in Brazil. It's just the sound of many instruments tuning up, out of discordance and hyper individualism into a beautiful harmony. And that will lead us into our time of meditation together.

### **ORCHESTRA TUNING UP**

Let us sit upright, relaxed, relax our shoulders, sit with our feet on the ground, hands on our lap or on our knees. Close your eyes lightly. And then silently, interiorly, begin to say your word, your mantra. Maranatha. Ma-ra-na-tha.

**MEDITATION** – 20 minutes

## **WEEK 3: THE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY**

### **Chapter 1. Immersion in a Deep Inner Truth**

The most important thing to get clear when you are beginning to meditate is how, like boiling an egg or riding a bike and other similar complicated things. You only learn how by doing it with practice. Twice a day, morning and evening may seem a big commitment, but in a surprisingly short time, you will discover that it adds time to your day rather than taking it away. You become mentally and emotionally clearer and calmer, and because you're wasting less time you become more decisive. So any time you spend developing this practice, a life-changing enriching habit, is a good investment. It takes discipline, of course, but meditating with others regularly will make it easier to develop that discipline.

After the how comes the why. When the first climber to scale Mount Everest was asked, why did you climb it? He said, because it was there. John Main said when we meditate, we meditate because we are designed to meditate, it is natural to us. Today and next week I'd like to explore that question a little further from the perspective of what happens, what are the stages we pass through as we start the journey, and of course keep starting.

There is a story, of how four fishermen began to be disciples (Lk 5:1–11). They were washing their nets as Jesus was talking to a large crowd on the lakeshore. He asked Peter if he could get into Peter's boat and push out a little so that he could be heard better by the crowd. After he had finished speaking, he told Peter to put out your nets, put out into deep water and throw out your nets. Peter replied that they had been fishing all night and it had been a bad night and they had caught nothing, but

anyway, he did as Jesus asked. When they pulled in the nets, their nets were filled with so many fish the nets almost broke.

This might seem a magical way that Jesus remunerated them for the loan of the boat, but it also tells us something about life as a spiritual journey, and about meditation as a journey within the journey that reveals what life is really about and for.

The fishermen must have been depressed by the failure of their long night's work. They caught nothing, but because they trusted in the connection they felt with, at that time, this unknown teacher on the lake shore, their fortunes turned around dramatically. So, we see success in failure or failure in success. This is the wheel of fortune, good and bad luck, good and bad days. But is this alternation of opposites all that life is about? Are we at the mercy of this wheel of fortune? At what depth can success and failure, good and bad meditations be united?

If we were just at the mercy of the wheel of fortune, struggling to be lucky, then meditation could be reduced to just some good and some bad meditations. The important word in the story of the fishermen is 'put out into deep water'. As I've been saying in these talks, meditation is about depth, seeing behind the surface, living from an authentic depth of consciousness within. But because it is about beginning a life journey, meditation for the rest of one's life, and a steady daily journey, of course there will be ups and downs. How do we understand how to deal with the ups and ups and downs of life, and of meditation?

I once met with a group of teenage Australian boys in a school. They had been meditating for a few years and had been taught to meditate by a teacher that they greatly respected and loved. They told me how grateful

they were that he had introduced them to meditation early in their life journey because they said they could see that friends of their age who did not meditate, seemed much less capable of handling the extreme swings, the ups and downs of life, so intense especially in adolescence. And so they used to introduce meditation to their mates, who thought it was cool, and they weren't in the least embarrassed to meditate openly during the lunch break in school or when they hung out at each other's homes. They had also learnt that to keep meditating whether they felt that a particular session went well or felt like a waste of time, the steadiness had an impact on how they handled every aspect of their lives, their inner moods and the outer events, swings of fortune.

The practice itself teaches us that it is a direct way of self-transcendence. We come to be less mastered by our volatile reactions to disappointments or betrayals. And this is a basic lesson in learning to be happy and peaceful in the face of the slings and arrows that life can throw at us. It is a discovery of our potential, a journey into self-knowledge and self-acceptance, also known as humility. Every time we meditate, we begin again from where we are. And this means that meditation never becomes a mere habit or routine. It cuts down on the amount of time that we spend in life on automatic pilot or generally sleepwalking through life. To keep the practice of meditation fresh, I suggest that you refresh it regularly, for example, with a retreat. Meditating with others, listening to some teaching, or sharing the gift of meditation with others are very good ways of refreshing it for yourself. And this will help you to continue to go out into deep water while keeping faithful to the simplicity of the mantra.

In that way, God becomes less of an idea and more of an experience. With inner freedom, peace, creativity, stability, and hope, there comes a

sense of indescribable goodness and benevolence, and this replaces the anxiety and suspiciousness that are so prevalent in today's stressful, polarised, and divided culture. The grip that the concepts of failure and success have over us also diminishes. We don't see life just in terms of success and failure because we learn through meditation that what seems like failure does not need to oppress us with shame or self-rejection, but that when it is simply humbly accepted, failure leads to growth, inner growth and expansion outwards, and no obsession with success or approval can match that.

And this means we have to be very careful not to bring the virus of perfectionism, which is so prevalent in our culture of success, into our practice of meditation; we don't want to bring this perfectionism into our practice of meditation. This is another way of describing the faith that I've been talking about, and saying the mantra faithfully will teach us through our own experience. Life for a meditator is not only less stressed and fearful, it is also more interesting and surprising. Soren Kierkegaard called faith 'a leap into paradox'. What seems like the contradictory and sterile habit of living in an either/or world as we more and more are impelled to do, this either/or living, this divided world is changed into living in the primal energy of wholeness. That's what we find at the heart of a paradox. Not taking polarised positions, but uniting opposites. I was talking about that last week in terms of language, that we can go to the root sound at the heart of words that seem to be, are contradictory to themselves.

St Paul is an inspiring man of faith, but he may not have been the best person to go on holiday with. When he arrived in Athens, he was so revolted at the idolatry of the people that he didn't go and see the sites, he went straight to the places where philosophical and religious debates

were held – and the Athenians loved to argue about things. He went straight for the Areopagus and amid the religious supermarket of gods, much like our own world, spirituality, markets, and marketing. Paul told them that he had seen on the way an altar to the ‘unknown God’, and he said, ‘this is the God I am going to speak to you about (Acts 17:23)’.

With meditation, God becomes a living mystery, a loving mystery, always beyond our comprehension. Many that I meet today struggle with commitment of all kinds. Commitment, for example, to a partner for life whom they can look in the eye in front of others and say, ‘I take you to be my wedded wife or husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or worse, for richer or poorer in sickness and in health, till death do us part’ – quite a major act of commitment.

People, all of us today, are conditioned to want to be free, to keep their options open, in case things go wrong. Yet they feel incomplete in this, in their loneliness or conditional relationships, and continue hoping and looking for the faithfulness that allows love to survive their ups and downs. Meditation can help with that. It's a way of faith. And every time we meditate, whether it's a good or a bad meditation, in other words, whether it's one that we say, ‘oh, that was wonderful, I'm always going to meditate,’ or whether you feel tempted to stop the meditation because it doesn't feel good. Every time we meditate, we are doing something loving. Even if it's a bad meditation, you're still loving. Beginning to meditate is not about willpower, like sticking to a diet or keeping to an exercise schedule. It's more like an immersion in a deep inner truth and a reality where you realise that you are free, free from fantasy, free from fear, free from contradictions. And so meditation makes us feel increasingly more real because it is a discovery of authenticity, and that changes us. The signs of this become visible fairly soon if you meditate regularly, and

they become visible in the most important aspect of our lives, which is relationships.

Relationships are the sacred ground of our life, the most important part of our life. Why does meditation influence all these relationships? Because it works first on our relationship with ourselves. This is the most personal and transforming fruit of meditation. In our relationships we begin to see other fruits falling into our lap: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). And these are the signs that we experience, signs of the Unknown God.

So all of this, of course, is a very personal experience, but it calls for verification and interpretation. What does this mean? Why is meditation making me feel more at peace with myself? Or why is it making me easier with other people? Why do they find me easier to live with? And this is where the wisdom tradition comes in. Tradition is a community.

Tradition is a community of the dead and the living and those yet to be born. And in this community, experience, this deep experience is transmitted. It unites us to others as we learn to understand ourselves. It does what social media was invented to do but fails to do, to connect us not just in audio visual communication but in communion. Without a connecting experience to tradition, we are likely to feel like orphans. Children who have lost or never knew their parents and families, lacking a sense of their origin and the security of home. Tradition is a living transmission of spiritual intelligence. It is greater than our individual isolated selves. It helps us to grow from childish arrogance, or adolescent 'know-it-allness', to a mature selflessness.

God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Until we find a point of

connection and union, we are stuck in restlessness, anxiety, and rootlessness, a sense of homelessness. Until then, we are locked into *chronos*, that's the word for chronological time (keeping my eye on my chronometer, measuring time). Time is always running out or dragging us along in boredom.

There's another word for time, *kairos*, which is time transparent to eternity, to the light of eternity, to the perpetual present. Chronos is about quantity – how much time do I have – is always about how long. Kairos is about depth, infinite depth, boundless opportunity. So that's why meditation helps us to avoid living our lives but missing the meaning, missing the depth. We can bring chronos and kairos together simply by integrating meditation into our daily routines. The moment we intersect kairos and chronos in daily life, it reveals life's true colours.

### **WEEK 3. THE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY**

#### **Chapter 2. The Stages of the Journey**

I'd like to look at some of the ups and downs of the meditation journey so that the so-called 'bad meditations' don't make us want to give up, give up the dive into depth and swim back to the surface to superficial living. In fact, I think if we see the whole journey, we won't make the mistake of calling them good and bad meditations at all. People talk about good and bad trips when they've had drug experiences, but meditation is not a trip, it's a pilgrimage.

The wisdom tradition of meditation prepares us for the stages of the journey. The Christian mystical tradition, for example, speaks of *kenosis* which means emptying, the first stage; *henosis* or unifying, integrating

the second stage; and *theosis* or divinisation, the ultimate stage. You could translate that today maybe as, the first stage is detox, then we come into healthier living, and then finally we reach our full potential.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century poet, Dante, wrote *The Divine Comedy* one of the world's greatest long poems, and he did it in three parts called Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Every human being eventually discovers what these words signify. Meditators have the advantage of living with that understanding throughout their lives. Dante treats hell as an experience of the eternal punishment, merited by our own karma, by our sins. This doesn't need to be and shouldn't really be taken literally. But when you are in hell, and perhaps all of us have been in hell for hopefully a short time, anyone who has been in hell, certainly feels like it's forever and that the mercy of God or any mercy will never ever touch us again. If you don't feel that, it's not hell yet, it's just a bad day.

The difference with purgatory is not the degree of pain but that in purgatory we already know that we are going through something. And that makes a huge difference – it will come to an end, I'm not incarcerated in this forever, which would be despair, hell. In purgatory we sense that the pain is healing and preparing us for the next stage, health of body, mind, and spirit.

So, we can see meditation as a conscious journey through these stages. But because it is in the spiritual dimension of reality, it is cyclical, not linear. There's no reason for us to fear it because it is natural, it is real, it's unavoidable, and it's universal. When you begin to meditate, right at the very beginning, and I think I had this when I first began, you can have a glimpse of paradise and you think, 'oh I'm lucky, I've got a short direct flight to paradise'. But unless we are already very pure, we all need some

detox. Dante describes it graphically in his nine circles of hell, nine – again, don't panic yet! He describes the kind of poisons or impurities that we have ingested or been conditioned by, and which have affected us and that we have to come to terms with so that they can be flushed out. I won't go into too much graphic detail but will just run through them very quickly.

The first is limbo. We are not in pain in limbo, but we feel we will never reach heaven. We're safe and secure, but we'll never get there. Then there's lust, which he says is like being buffeted by strong, endless, fierce gales. There's gluttony, which he says is like being out and the excrement is raining upon you; or greed which is like pushing great weights against others that you are in competition with; anger, endless fighting; heresy, perversion of the truth, fake news, conspiracy theories; violence against others or against our environment, fraud, deception, scams, lies, corruption, sexual manipulation; and finally, treachery to family, to your homeland, to your community or to guests or to teachers. Judas is there, and that's also in the ninth circle of hell, that's where Satan is embedded in ice. So, it's a very graphic image of hell. Of course, when we sit to meditate we won't always be struggling with these torments, but it's good to know about them. Monks of the Christian desert called them the great obstacles or principal faults. The Buddhists call them negative afflictions – Ignorance, attachment, and aggression are the three main poisons in Buddhist philosophy. However, the seeds of anger, lust, or greed, the memory of deceptions or betrayals can be in us and present, even repressed in our memory banks.

Next week, I'll offer another map of the journey, which takes us through the levels of consciousness. And I'll try to show there that most of the work of purification and liberation is not traumatic. It's done quietly in

the unconscious. Sometimes it bubbles up to the surface, but the time of meditation is not a time for analysing all of this. But sometimes meditation brings things out of the shadows. Jesus said, 'there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed and nothing concealed that will not be known (Mt 10:26). Meditation is purifying, liberating, and illuminating. It restores us to what the Desert Fathers called *apatheia* or health of soul. And it is within the process of self-knowledge, which brings us inevitably to the knowledge of God.

Meditation is deeply therapeutic, but it's not a talking therapy or an analytical therapy. The time of meditation is not the time for us to be looking through the photograph albums of our lives. It's the time for this deeper healing and integration that is achieved in the power of silence. In his ascent from hell into purgatory, Dante's imagination of sufferings and karmic burdens is very creative and shocking. But we'll pass over purgatory and move to the goal of life, the ultimate aim of meditation, which Dante describes in his vision of the journey through paradise towards the beatific vision, the vision of God, the union of human beings with God, and of all the cosmos in love. In his sublime poem, we see the human being as a pilgrim being led from an encounter with the shadow side of reality and ourselves, through illusion we might say, through all our hardened egotistical layers and complexities, finally, to our own essential goodness. In his vision of paradise, there are also nine concentric spheres bursting with an ever more intense and beautiful cosmic harmony, the great shalom.

Each degree of paradise is another stage of knowing God. Each has an infinitely gentle life of its own, but then it opens to the next. Dante is the pilgrim who is now being led through paradise by his beloved and beautiful Beatrice with whom he had fallen in love when they were

children, who died young but became his lifelong muse. Her beauty is a manifestation of the divine. His love for her is a manifestation of divine love. She radiates more beauty at each step they take, but when they reach almost the highest level, Beatrice tells him that she can no longer smile at him because he would not be able to endure the beauty that it would release. He would be burned to dust like a tree struck by lightning.

What I think we can learn from this is that the journey of meditation is this spiritual journey, which in fact has no end because it is a journey into the eternal mystery of God. It is the human journey bringing us to human fullness by leading us home. At the threshold of the divine, Dante understands that every wish comes true because it is ripe and whole, and each part is where it always was. Beatrice leaves him at this point, and he's now free to fix his gaze, undistractedly on the eternal light, and he sees how it contains within its depth all things bound in a single book by love. And this gaze begins the final stage of his preparation and the end of the poem. And I'd like to just read it to you before we finish, and we meditate.

'As I learned to see more, and the power of vision grew in me,' he wondered, 'How could our image, fit into this circle of the divine? How could we conform with God?' But he says, 'Already, my desire and will were being turned like a wheel all at one speed.' So it was as if he was being perfectly coordinated by the love that moves the sun and other stars.

Now, that's quite a long way from hell, but we need to see that meditation takes us through, in a cyclical way perhaps, these experiences. But we don't want to get stuck on thinking of good and bad meditation.

Meditators often say they meditate day by day because it releases in them an experience of the meaning and purpose of their lives, the ultimate meaning of their lives. We might not express it in the way Dante did, but the essential elements are the same. Meditation teaches us the primacy of love. It harmonises us with our true self as it purifies us of our attachments and illusions. And it makes us feel the harmony of each of us, with all of us, and with the All. All that is necessary is that we start from where we are, and that is true of every meditation; and now in this one too, which we are going to enter into. That's the beginning, and the experience at the end, except the end is endless. The experience is one and universal. Everything, as Dante said beautifully is bound in the book of love. Everything is in one book, and the book is love.

So there are no good and bad meditations in that sense once we see the whole picture. Even the process of simplification, integration, purification, detox, can be painful and confusing, but it has a purpose. And that purpose brings fruits. So daily meditation will teach us what this means and can give us even now, a taste of it.

### **Week 3. THE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY**

#### **Leading into Meditation**

Let's take our time to meditate now. Remember again, the basic checklist. First of all, your physical posture. We meditate as a whole person, so begin with your physical posture – it's an embodied prayer, embodied spirituality – feet on the ground if you're sitting in a chair, your back straight. So rather than just sort of sitting back in the chair let yourself sit forward a bit. Relax your shoulders, the muscles of your face, be aware of your breathing. And then closing your eyes lightly, silently,

interiorly begin to repeat your mantra, your companion, your guide. Dante had Beatrice, we have the mantra. We have the Spirit as well, but the mantra is our guide into that.

So say the mantra faithfully. The word I suggest is maranatha, Ma ra na tha. Articulate the word clearly in your mind, but listen to it as a sound. Ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-na-tha. Say it gently, say it simply like a child. Say it faithfully, giving up any idea of failure or success, and returning to the mantra when you get distracted. So we'll meditate now.

**MEDITATION** – 20 minutes

## **Week 4. AN INTERIOR DISCIPLINE**

### **Chapter 1. The Goal of Life**

This week I'd like to look at two things: the journey that we have started now that we have begun to meditate, and the big picture of what changes in us as we make the journey. Remember, meditation is always a learning process. And to learn anything we need to be open and to be ready to change because whenever we really learn something we do become a different person if we let the new knowledge in.

Meditation is not what you think in both senses of that phrase, which is a deceptively simple phrase. One, it is not what we think about while we meditate; two, meditation is never exactly what we think it is. It is always more, it is always surprising. (Anyway, that's been my experience and I'm generally a slow learner over the last 40 or so years.) For example, you have probably realised by now, you have recognised that meditation is a discipline in two ways. Interiorly, we undertake the

discipline of the mantra. That means letting go of thoughts of all kinds and returning to the word continuously. It is the discipline of attention. And the word attention contains the Indo-European root *ten*, and that means to stretch. It gives us the English word tendon, the muscle that connects the bone to the muscle or what connects the muscle to the bone, and it means to stretch. When we do physical exercise, we stretch and build our muscles. When we meditate, we stretch and strengthen the very muscle of attention. And we use this muscle in every waking conscious moment of our lives. Even when we are asleep and dreaming, we pay attention to our dreams. There are different kinds of attention.

So, to meditate makes us more attentive, more attentional in our relationship to ourselves, with other people and our relationships to other people, to our work, to the planet we inhabit, and to God. And all this flows from the interior discipline of the mantra, but it is also the fruit of the exterior discipline of learning to build the habit of meditation into daily life, morning and evening, ideally every day for between 20 and 30 minutes. But, as I've been saying, we start from where we are and we do what and as much as we can, and we grow. But we need to do it regularly. So we are learning a discipline. Unless perhaps you say I don't like discipline, I'm just going to meditate as a tool. I want to meditate for nothing much more than to relax, to de-stress, to sleep better, to cope with life better. Many people do forms of meditation, like mindfulness, precisely for that reason and understandably. But in learning a discipline, something different is involved; we are changing.

The word discipline comes from the Latin word *discere* which means to learn. And it created the word disciple. If we are really learning – a language, a musical instrument, or we are learning; a new computer programme, how to drive a car, anything we are learning – we only learn

if we can accept the discipline. And in more deep and serious learning, we become a disciple. But a disciple of what? There is more to meditation than we think. That's because there's more to being alive than we were told or we are trained to believe.

I have spoken about going deeper than the surface triviality and compulsiveness of our present culture, but we could equally well describe it as not so much going deeper as expanding, stretching, opening our minds and hearts to important centres of consciousness in the human person that need to be in harmony, need to be integrated. Opening our minds and hearts, and discovering at some point that there is no limit to this expansion of being. On this journey we go through levels of consciousness, and I'll conclude this session by looking at that.

We go through levels of consciousness, the first of which is still programmed by cultural values. We live by those cultural values but we didn't choose them. And probably, we would like to be free from them. Then, after that first level, we travel through deeper levels of what some people call the collective unconscious, where we share in responses and awareness that go beyond time and geography as we understand it. Jung said that this collective unconscious does not derive from personal experience and it's not a personal acquisition but is inborn. It's not individual, but universal.

So after we've encountered these levels of consciousness. However we may explain them, we might ask, 'Well, where is the unique, authentic level of consciousness which is me, my true self?' We're all hearing about my true self, so where is my true self? It is there to be found, but it will not be what we imagine or expect, because the closer we come to it the less 'me' there is. And it can almost seem that I am going to disappear altogether before I can find my true self. That is the nature of

this journey. So the better question, or the better koan, is perhaps not 'what is my true self?' but 'who finds my true self? For the response to this question, I would suggest not going to brain or neurological research on meditation but rather to the wisdom traditions. Meditation is essentially a spiritual journey.

Jesus' teaching is squarely in this wisdom when he says, 'Anyone who wishes to find himself will lose himself (Mt 16:24).' The Desert Fathers who put that teaching into practice said, 'The monk who knows that he is praying is not truly praying. The monk who does not know that he is praying is truly praying.'

As I've said before, we need wisdom, but sadly, many of our religious institutions are not delivering it as they should. Religion itself is in transition. It is often violently polarised. Islamic extremists, Christian fundamentalists reject everyone who is not in their camp. Not surprisingly, there is spiritual confusion, and a new language is needed for religion to communicate wisdom again. Meditation is part of the working of that new language.

Is meditation prayer? Many Christians ask this, and I respond with the words of a second-century Christian teacher, Origen, who said, 'Prayer in itself is good.' It means you don't have to justify it, it's good in itself. Do you have to justify loving your children or your grandchildren or your husband or your wife or your dear ones, your wonderful friend? No, you don't justify it, it is good in itself. He then says 'It calms the mind, it reduces sin, and it produces good deeds.' This is prayer as Jesus used the term, as does the mystical tradition. We learn this first of all, through experience. And meditation will lead us into this experience of prayer. And if we learn it, then art, music, poetry, science, all become available again for the building of a new community, for the creation of a new

language and of a new consciousness and a new life. Wittgenstein said, 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world.' The result of this is seeing that everything is sacred because everything, even my enemies, everything, everyone is participating in a self-transcending whole. This is why meditation is important.

Human life has been compared to the course of a single day. In the morning, in the first part of our life, we create our persona and our way of acting. At noon, we have a crisis, the acedia of the desert, or a dark night of depression or feeling meaningless. And we might say, 'Why do I feel like this? I am coping, I have enough or maybe even too much, I'm luckier than most people, even my marriage and my family are blessings to me.' But by or soon after 35 we should be questioning in this way. 'Okay, but what's it all for?' And then you start a spiritual search, probably for most people outside of religion as such. And maybe you start meditating.

This model is fairly good, but I think it's not very good. It's not complete, because in our community we know that meditation can be introduced at a very young age. You don't have to wait till you're in your midlife crisis. Instead of giving your infant or toddler, your child or grandchild, a screen, an iPad, or a phone to pacify them for hours at a time (two-year-old children now are spending hours or most of the day in front of a screen, and this is producing children who don't speak or don't learn language skills until much later) you could teach them to meditate.

It's a lifelong practice of ever-increasing depth and wonder. And meditation itself develops as we pass through the stages of our own development. It grows with us and it helps us to grow and to cope. So don't wait until your child starts using drugs and don't wait till you burn out.

The goal of life is not success but wholeness. Unlearning the cultural values can prove difficult when your middle-age heart has become stony and stubborn. But meditation makes sense of Psalm 103:5, which says, 'God fills my life with good things. My youth is renewed by the eagles.' I remember when I used to serve mass as a young child, and the responses in Latin at the foot of the altar, '*Introibo ad altare Dei. Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.*' It meant 'I would go on to the altar of the Lord, to the Lord who restores the joy of my youth.' After our midlife crisis, we should be getting younger even as our poor old body wears out. This is youthfulness that brings us to play with God who is always younger than we are, because God has not lost the appetite of a child for life.

Meditation helps us to shed the baggage that we don't need anymore, that we've already got tired of: anxiety, cynicism, fear, hypochondria, selfishness, selfish obsession – the to control or to acquire and preserve, to keep on developing our individuality. Individualism is the trap that meditation helps to free us from.

Recently, UNESCO sent a questionnaire to the world's leading thinkers and asked what they thought would be the most important topic of thought and consideration and research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The majority replied, 'religion'. Not religion as we have today, locked into hierarchy and structures and intellectual aggression, but religion in its essential sense, which is again hidden in the word itself, to relink. Religion relinks or helps us to reread. And in this renewed religion, God is experience, not concept, prayer is not the magic to change the external world according to our own wishes. It changes the one who prays. And this combo of the experience of God and pure prayer creates community and the world begins to appear in its true colours.

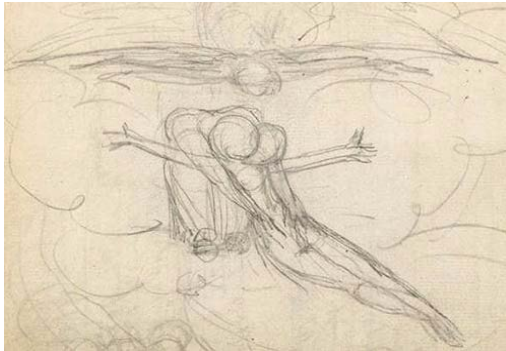
## Week 4. AN INTERIOR DISCIPLINE

### Chapter 2. Levels of Consciousness

I'd like to show you some pictures of God. The first is by Thomas Merton, who was an accomplished photographer. He calls it the only known photo of God. So this is the only known photo of God, just as described by one of the most important spiritual figures of the last 100 years. Why do you think he said this? Is it about moving huge weights? Is it about getting hooked on God?



Here is another picture of God, a drawing by William Blake, the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystical poet and artist. He called it A Sketch of the Trinity. It's a very simple, amazing picture. I won't prejudge it for you, but it's unusual, it's a genderless image. He calls it a sketch of the Trinity. Let's look at it for a moment.



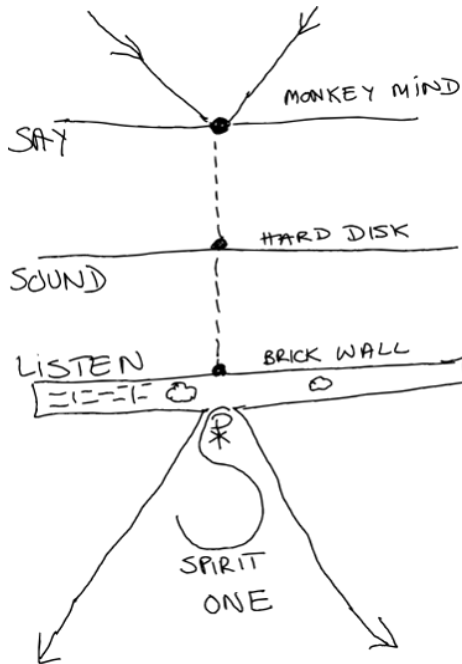
What I'm trying to get at is how we can see, understand God differently. And I think what you see here is the first figure in the foreground is the second person of the Trinity, his arms outstretched, reminding us of the cross and being embraced by a genderless Father, and the Holy Spirit extending its wings over them both. It's a very beautiful, genderless image of great passion and compassion. And it seems to bring us much closer to the living God of revelation of the gospels than what we are used to.

Then finally, this one. Who do you think is the figure in the middle of it?



At the heart, the inmost heart of the Trinity is a human figure. It's Jesus. Well, there's the incarnation, it's the incarnate Word, the human incarnation of the Word, but it's at the very heart of God, in the life of God, which is why we can share in the very being of God. So you see the concentric circles of the divine life, you see how energetic they are, and at the core of it is this human figure. You could say that the outside, or even the blue background (I'm not sure how this is interpreted or whether she interpreted it) but you could say that the outside is the mystery of the Father, and then the Spirit, and then the Incarnation there in the middle. I think it's one of those pictures that is difficult to define too much.

Anyway, that leads me now to a less beautiful Work of art by the famous artist, Laurence Freeman. He drew this sketch of the journey of meditation.



So this contains the consciousness that we pass through and that we integrate constantly, and it also expresses the deepening way in which we relate to the mantra and to the goal of meditation itself. So let me go through this.

We begin at the first level of consciousness which I call the monkey mind. It's full of distractions – worrying about what you forgot to buy at the supermarket, you've got to renew your car license, all sorts of trivial things, and the arguments you've had that day or the good meal you've had that day, all the stuff you've absorbed through media saturation. So this is the monkey mind when you first begin to meditate. But you see the two arrows that brought you to the point where you begin. But you begin where you are, as I've been saying. And we start to say the mantra, and we say the mantra for a few moments, and then we get distracted for many moments, and then we come back to the mantra. And the art of meditation is returning to the mantra faithfully. As I said also, meditation, saying the mantra, will teach us what faith really means.

That's the first level of consciousness, and many people give up at that first level because 'I think I can't do it. I want to meditate, I want to feel peaceful, I want to feel blessed, I want to feel relaxed, and I can't, so I'm not going to do it.' But that's why it's so important to understand as best we can what meditation really is.

So, with the help of our friends, we start again and maybe we stop and start and stop and start many times. Then we begin to learn the discipline of the mantra; and that takes us to the next level which is the hard disk of our consciousness, our psyche. This is everything that has ever happened to us, all our memories, all the things that happened or

things we think might have happened to us, projections we've made, and also betrayals we've experienced, or betrayals we have done. So this is the whole of our life. And much of it just gets recycled. Of course, we move on, but not everything does. There are some experiences, especially experiences of loss, or betrayal, sadness, fear, trauma which can be buried while it seems as if we're getting on with life. But actually these are quite deeply buried in our psyche and they can control us from this repressed or hidden home that they have taken up inside of us. They control us, and we think, 'Oh, well, I'm never going to change. That's just what I'm like.' But meditation shows us that metanoia is real. We can change. And this work of the mantra continues its healing work and integrating work at this level as well.

That doesn't mean we spend the whole of the meditation thinking about our history or our past but it happens sometimes. Memories or feelings of the past may surface and we have to deal with them. But most of the time this work is done interiorly and out of sight. That's why a regular practice is so important. Regular practice means we don't start to self-dramatize. Some people love to self-dramatize; we all do to some extent. But a regular practice means we don't have to become a drama queen.

Then the next level of consciousness is the brick wall. It's the brick wall of the ego *The Cloud of Unknowing* says that we come at some point to this naked awareness of ourselves. Naked awareness of ourselves – it's really the ego block. It's my sense of separation, my sense of 'me' that always takes up space between you and me, meaning that you and I are not able to really experience union and full flow of identity and love.

So the brick wall of the ego which has been built up, perhaps to protect ourselves, eventually can become a prison. But we continue this work of

the mantra even as we're sitting on this side of the wall. And then a brick falls out of the wall, and that means maybe you lose fear that's controlled you for years, or you suddenly notice you're more patient with certain types of people who really pressed your buttons before. It doesn't mean you become perfect by any means, but it means you can see that you're changing and you can see through the wall; there's something on the other side of this big ego block.

And then more bricks fall out of the wall, and with this opening comes our opening into the dimension of the spirit. This is not something we're going to be able to observe because the ego is now not operating, it's not taking a selfie, it's not recording a memory. So what do we find here? John Main said that at the frontier of our identity we meet a guide, and this guide is Jesus, the risen Jesus, the mind of Christ. We encounter this within ourselves. We begin to recognise it if we have had any kind of relationship with it before, but now recognition becomes more intense. And this encounter, with the mind of Christ occurs in the Spirit, in oneness. You see the direction; you see the two arrows at the top of this diagram that bring you to the starting point. Well as on the other side of the brick wall, the direction of travel opens up into infinity because in the Christian understanding of this journey, we are going with Christ in the Spirit to the Father. And that is at the heart of the gospel teaching, in the mystery of Jesus' self-understanding.

Now, maybe this is a little way of understanding how the practice of meditation takes us on this inner journey and opens us to this truth, this reality, this dimension. But that doesn't mean that one level of consciousness shuts down when the other one opens. It means that they do begin to open, but they begin to be harmonised. So they all stay open and sometimes we seem to bubble back to the surface and our

meditation seems as bad as it was the very first time we tried, full of distractions. Of course the healing work continues in the hard disk for as long as long as we are alive. And the brick wall is still there – there's an ego as long as we are alive, and we need an ego to function. You couldn't drive in a modern city without an ego. But it is no longer the old ego, the old self that was locked into its fears, compulsiveness, and anger, and sadness. It now becomes a medium of communication and a medium of service to others. That's not to say everybody is going to like it; but at least, it's less of a cross for you to carry. Still not perfect, but a harmony is developing, and that means peace between these different levels of consciousness.

Can you put in the three ways of saying the mantra? Yes, at the first level we're saying the mantra with a lot of interruptions, as we know. As we go deeper, by the time we get to the hard-disk work, it's more as if we are sounding the mantra, we are using less effort to say it. Then by the time we get to the brick wall, the mantra is rooted in our heart. And it's more as if we are listening to it, and listening to it with greater subtlety and gentleness, and sometimes it is very fine, sometimes it almost seems to disappear. And in God's own time it does disappear, and leaves you in this oneness. So we say, we sound and we listen to the mantra through this dynamic process. This isn't just a linear process of course; there is a cyclical process of growth taking place in this image of the journey.

So I hope that's helpful as a kind of way of just getting a sense of it. It gives us a sense of how we begin and what the ultimate goal is, how maybe we could understand that.

## **Week 4. AN INTERIOR DISCIPLINE**

### **Leading into Meditation**

So let's take our time for meditation now. Sorry I went over time but it's a long journey to describe. Let's meditate for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Let's take a moment to take a few deep breaths, just to get rid of all these words. Breathe in deeply, breathe out slowly, breathe in again, hold it for a second and release it again.

Sit with your back straight, your hands on your lap or on your knees. Close your eyes lightly. If you find you are falling asleep a lot, it could help if you just could keep your eyes open a little, very, very slightly. Not looking at anything outside of yourself but just keep the eyelids very slightly open. That may help to keep you more awake, and generally it's a good idea when you are beginning. So close your eyes lightly and then silently, interiorly and gently and faithfully begin to say your word. And the word again I recommend is maranatha. Ma-ra-na-tha , ma-ra-na-tha

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### **Meditation – 20 Minutes**

A dark horizontal band with a vertical yellow line and a blue light beam.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

# HOW TO MEDITATE

Laurence Freeman OSB

## THE PRACTICE

*Sit down. Relax physically, releasing tension in your face muscles, forehead, or shoulders. Breathe peacefully. Be aware of your incoming, outgoing breath for a few times. Close your eyes lightly.*

*Begin to say your mantra. An ideal word is maranatha. Say it as four equal syllables (ma-ra-na-tha). Don't visualise it. Sound it interiorly, in mind and heart, silently, simply. Articulate the word clearly but gently and listen to the word as you say it.*

*Don't be discouraged by distractions. Just drop the thought or fantasy and return to the word. Learning the art of meditation is not about getting rid of distractions but returning faithfully to the word.*

*Meditate for between 20 and 30 minutes each morning and evening. Give yourself as long as you need to build this routine into your daily rhythm of life. Meditate with others. If you stop, start again. There is no success or failure, only being simply faithful. 'Experience is the teacher' but trust the tradition of wisdom behind what you are doing.*

## THE MANTRA AND THE BREATH

*It is natural to say the mantra with the breath. For example, you can say the four syllables on the in-breath and breathe out in silence. Or, many find it easier to say the first two syllables (ma-ra) breathing in and the next two (na-tha) on the outbreath. The breath is like a wheel, so you can rest the mantra lightly on the wheel of the breath. But give your whole*

*attention to the mantra, listening to it as you say it. As the breath slows down naturally, let the mantra be released and find its own rhythm.*

## CHOOSING THE MANTRA AND HOW TO SAY IT

*The word we recommend is maranatha. It is an Aramaic word, an early Christian sacred word, maybe a greeting they shared with each other, meaning both 'Come Lord' or 'The Lord has come' (depending on how it is pronounced in the original language).*

*As meditation is not what you think, we don't think about the word's meaning and we say it in four equal syllables (ma-ra-na-tha) with open vowel sounds). Say it simply, gently and faithfully and listen to it as you say it and allow it in faith to lead you into silence. The 'work of silence' means letting go of thought.*

*This sacred word contains primal 'seed-sounds' associated with mantras in many traditions helpful for calming the mind. For example, in Indian tradition: Om Namah Shivaya; in Buddhism: Mani Padme Hum; in Islam: Allah hu. If you choose another word or would like to say one in your own faith tradition, you can seek guidance from a teacher. Generally, it is recommended to choose a word that is not in your own language so that it does not stimulate thought or imagination.*

*Above all, say the word faithfully from beginning to end of the meditation session. Start saying the word again as soon as you become distracted. This takes time. How long depends on the regularity of your practice and grace itself. Over time we say it more gently and subtly.*

# PRAYERS

## OPENING PRAYER

*Heavenly Father, open our hearts to the silent presence of the Spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.*

## PRAYER OF THE WORLD COMMUNITY FOR CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

*May this Community be a true spiritual home for the seeker, a friend for the lonely, a guide for the confused.*

*May those who pray here be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to serve all who come, and to receive them as Christ himself.*

*In the silence of this place may all the suffering, violence, and confusion of the world encounter the Power that will console, renew, and uplift the human spirit.*

*May this silence be a power to open the hearts of men and women to the vision of God, and so to each other, in love and peace, justice and human dignity.*

*May the beauty of the Divine life fill this Community and the hearts of all who pray here with joyful hope.*

*May all who come here weighed down by the problems of humanity leave giving thanks for the wonder of human life.*

*We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen*

# RESOURCES

## Online Resources

### The WCCM website

Our website offers a wide range of resources. These include links to the Community's

- Online bookstore ([www.mediomedia.com](http://www.mediomedia.com))
- The WCCM Journal (<https://wccm.org/mailings/>)  
Archives and subscription
- Regular Mailings (<https://wccm.org/mailings/>)  
These teaching mailings include:
  - Daily Wisdom (a short text by Laurence Freeman with one of his photos)
  - Weekly Readings (readings useful for meditation groups)
  - Weekly Teachings (a one-page a week journey through the Christian contemplative tradition over three years)

### The WCCM meditation app [Silentium](#)

This new app includes features like a timer, a personal journal of your meditation practice, opening and closing prayers, seasonal reflections, WCCM news, WCCM events, registration for events, WCCM+, audio talks by John Main and Laurence Freeman and podcasts). The app [Silentium](#) can be downloaded from the App Store (for Apple devices) and from Google Play (for android devices).

## Suggested Resources for New Meditators

### BOOKS

John Main. *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*. 2007. ISBN 9781933182865

John Main. *Moment of Christ*. Canterbury Press, UK, 2010. ISBN 9781848250208

John Main. *Radical Simplicity: Meditation for Everyone*. Meditatio, UK, 2013. ISBN 9780957576179 (also available on CD ISBN 9780957576162)

John Main, ed. Paul Harris. *Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main*. ISBN 9789810855437

Laurence Freeman. *A Simple Way: The Path of Christian Meditation.*, 2014. ISBN 9789810911669

Laurence Freeman. *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice*. ISBN 9789810817107

Laurence Freeman. *The Inner Pilgrimage*. ISBN 9781933182544

Laurence Freeman. *Tasting Wisdom*, Canterbury Press, London 2025, ISBN 9781786226532

### AUDIO and VIDEO TALKS

An extensive collection of video and audio talks can be found on the

- WCCM website [www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)
- WCCM+ <https://wccmplus.org/catalog>
- Meditatio Talks – <https://meditatio.wccm.org/>
- John Main. *Collected Talks*. ISBN 9789810748586

## Suggested Resources for Teachers and Group Leaders

### BOOKS

John Main ed. Peter Ng. *The Hunger for Depth and Meaning*. ISBN 9781933182636

John Main. *Moment of Christ*. Canterbury Press, UK, 2010. ISBN 9781848250208

John Main. *Word into Silence*. Canterbury Press, UK, 2006. ISBN 9781853117541

Paul Harris, ed. *Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main*. ISBN 9789810855437

Laurence Freeman. *A Pearl of Great Price* ISBN 978980756215

Kim Nataraja ed. *Sharing the Gift*.

Kim Nataraja ed. *Food for the Journey*.

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The World Community for Christian Meditation