

## **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.