

## 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 aware-ness 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 our-selves, 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 ourselves 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.