

## 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