

## **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.

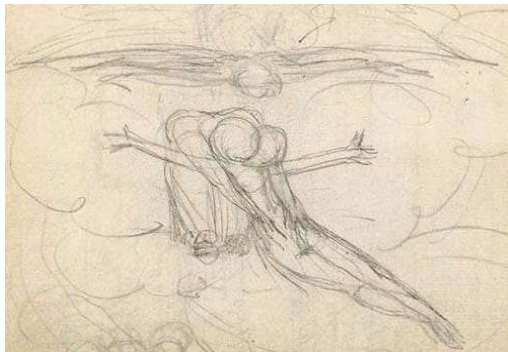
## **Week 4. AN INTERIOR DISCIPLINE**

### **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

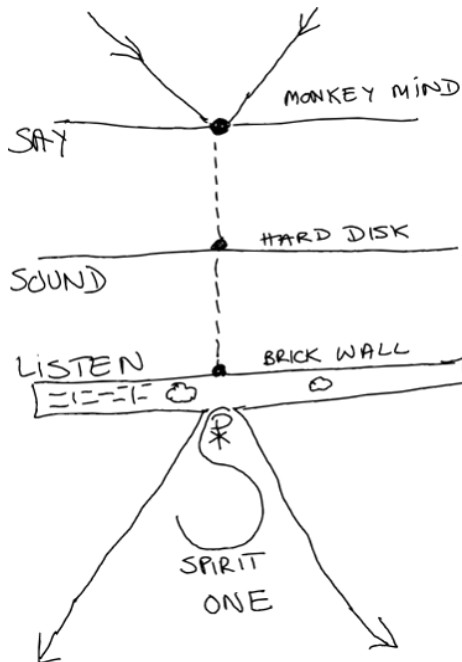
cross and being embraced by a genderless Father, and the Holy Spirit extending its wings over them both. It's a very beautiful, genderless image of great passion and compassion. And it seems to bring us much closer to the living God of revelation of the gospels than what we are used to.

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're sounding the mantra, we're 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're 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

**Meditation – 20 Minutes**