

# What is Meditation?

---

Meditation leads to contemplative prayer by the faithful repetition of a prayer phrase or 'mantra' as John Main called it. John Main rediscovered this way of prayer in the writings of the early Christians, the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who in the fourth century C.E. retired to the desert of Egypt to live an authentic Christian life based on the teaching of Jesus. Their whole life revolved around prayer: *"He prays unceasingly who combines prayer with necessary duties and necessary duties with prayer. Only in this way can we find it practicable to fulfil the commandment to pray always. It consists in regarding the whole of Christian existence as a single great prayer. What we are accustomed to call prayer is only a part of it."* (Origen – On Prayer)

The phrase, the 'formula' John Cassian recommended was: 'O God, come to our aid. O Lord make haste to help us', which is now used in the Daily Office. John Main simplified it to a single word: 'Maranatha'. He chose that, because it is the oldest Christian prayer in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. Moreover, the word has no associations for us, so it won't give any fuel to our mind eager to go on thinking.

The faithful and loving repetition of this prayer word leads us to stillness of body and mind and helps us to enter the silence that dwells in the centre of our being. The famous 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart said: *'Nothing describes God as well as silence.'* There in the true centre of our being dwells Christ, and there we enter the prayer of Jesus. John Main said in *'Moment of Christ'*: *"It is our conviction that the central message of the New Testament is that there is really only one prayer and that this prayer is the prayer of Christ. It is a prayer that continues in our hearts day and night. I can describe it only as the stream of love that flows constantly between Jesus and his Father. This stream of love is the Holy Spirit."*

Our first aim is to be able to keep our mind on the mantra during the meditation period. This is quite difficult in itself, as thoughts keep coming in. Our mind just loves going off on flights of fancies, down memory lane, or listing all the tasks we have to do after meditation. We just need to be patient and gentle with ourselves. When you realize you have got lost in your thoughts, don't judge or criticize yourself, but gently steer your mind back to your prayer word. Just accept that this is natural and to be expected. Your mind is like a playful puppy, always willing to run off rather than stay near you. Just gently and lovingly encourage it to come back.

As long as you therefore do this without any sense of forcing yourself, slowly you will be able to stay the mantra without being aware of any distractions. Your thoughts may still be

there in the background, but more like music in the supermarket – you don't really notice it much. The more you practice the easier it gets and soon instead of saying the word, you seem to be listening to it and finally it will sound by itself in your heart. Then your body and your mind become like the centre of your being harmonious and at peace: *“The surface areas of the mind are now in tune with the deep peacefulness at the core of our being. The same harmonic sounds throughout our being. In this state we have passed beyond thought, beyond imagination, and beyond all images. We simply rest with the Reality, the realized presence of God Himself dwelling within our hearts.”* (John Main 'Word into Silence' )  
[download printable version](#)