

# **John Main and the Practice of Christian Meditation**

One of the greatest challenges that Christianity faces today is the practical rediscovery of its age-old traditions of prayer and contemplation, and one of the principal ways to do this in recent times was begun by the Benedictine priest, John Main. Inspired by a Hindu teacher he developed a way of Christian meditation, and the Christian meditation movement that he founded has spread around the world.

We are going to visit Lawrence Freeman, its current director, and members of the World Community for Christian Meditation in London, and then talk to Thomas Ryan from Montreal in order to find out what this Christian meditation movement is all about.

Laurence Freeman: Meditation is a universal spiritual tradition. We find it, of course, in all the great religions, and Christianity has its own tradition of meditation. It is the tradition of silence, stillness and simplicity, and it is basically about coming to a stillness of mind and of one's whole being. Be still and know that I am God, as one of the psalms puts it. And to come to this stillness in the tradition that John Main recovered from the early Christian writers, Christian monks, you take a single word or short phrase, and you repeat this word or phrase continually over and over again in your mind and heart. John Cassian, a Christian monk in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, called this phrase, a formula. John Main calls it a mantra. The mantra is a word or phrase which is sacred in your own tradition, so we recommend a very sacred prayer in the Christian tradition the word maranatha. The important thing

is that you stay with the same word or phrase, repeating it continually in the face of all your distractions, and returning to it when you find that you have got distracted and you stop saying it. This very simple practice of the mantra helps to still the mind and bring the mind and the heart into unity.

I think the influence of Eastern religion in Western society has led in this century to a rediscovery of the Christian contemplative tradition, and a good example of this, I think, is in the life of John Main, himself. A long time before he became a monk John Main was working as a diplomat in the Far East, and while he was there, he met an Indian monk who became his spiritual teacher and guide. John Main was a Christian, a Catholic, but in this Indian monk he found a wisdom, a practical wisdom of prayer that led him to meditation with a mantra, and he laid this very simple way of contemplative prayer the foundation of his Christian prayer and Christian life. Then John Main returned to the West, he became a professor of law at Trinity College in Dublin, and he told me that he wasn't able to find at that time any friend or priest who was able to understand the meditation that he was practicing. Then he became a Benedictine monk in London, and he was looking forward to being able to describe his way of prayer to a monk, but he was disappointed to be told that this was not the Christian way of prayer. He should therefore give it up and return to basically the discursive mental forms of prayer that he was of course practicing before. In obedience he did this. He said this was the beginning of a long spiritual desert. He was very busy in this desert. He studied theology, he made his monastic profession, he was ordained, and then he entered the work of the monastery and became headmaster. It was at the busiest period of his monastic career as a teacher that he came across in a much deeper way than ever before the teachings of the

desert fathers, and in particular, John Cassian, and in Conferences 9 and 10 of Cassian on prayer, John Main found the teaching on the mantra essentially that he had been taught many years before by his Eastern teacher, but he now found it embedded in a Christian tradition historically, he found it described in terms of Christian scripture, Cassian says the recitation of the mantra leads you to poverty of spirit by the renunciation of the riches of thought and imagination, and so here John Main found his way of meditation described in terms of Christian theology and Christian tradition, and he began to meditate again.

Having begun to meditate again in his own life, John Main was led very quickly and very deeply to a sense not only of his own vocation to prayer and to a deep experience of the indwelling Christ, but he was also led, I think, to a deep reevaluation of what the monastic life was about in the modern church, and he was increasingly convinced that the monastery should be a place of contemplation for the world, for the world to be enriched and nourished by its tradition. So he opened a small lay community in his monastery which would allow a small group of laymen – I was one of the early group – who would live in the monastery learning to meditate, practicing meditation 3 or 4 times a day, and then return to their ordinary life after six months. We started this lay community, but within a very few weeks people from around the monastery and different parts of London came and knocked on the door and said, "We can't give up our life and our jobs for six months, but we would like to learn to meditate as Christians. Do we have to go to TM, or do we have to go to the Buddhists or the Hindus? If it is part of this tradition, why not make it available to us as well?" So we started the first weekly meditation groups. They would come, receive a talk by John Main, meditate together, ask their questions, and then go home and start

meditating morning and evening on their own. Within a very short time these groups had multiplied, and they began to spread around the country. One of the very first impulses that took it out of Britain was a number of missionaries home on leave, and were coming regularly to the monastery, and then took this teaching with them back to Africa and Asia. In 1977 John Main was invited by the Archbishop of Montreal to establish a small Benedictine community in the city dedicated to the practice and the teaching of meditation, and I was there with him for 5 years until John Main died in 1982. At the time of his death his teaching had begun to spread in North America and other parts of the world. It was after his death that a great expansion took place, as I think he foresaw, and the expansion took place through the commitment and the inspiration of a great number of lay people living in families and pursuing their lives in the world all over the world, and these people began to share the teaching, to tell other people about meditation, to start small groups, and it was in this way that a network began to form at a grassroots level, and to this day I see this community, we call it the World Community for Christian Meditation – it really is a community, not an organization – I have just returned from Belgium, for example, where in the last 4 years about 25 groups have started through the inspiration of a small team of married people working, raising families, some of them young families, and these groups have formed and been nourished by this little team in the center in Brussels, and the teaching is now spreading through books and tapes and retreats and visits and so on, to Holland, for example. So it is in these ways I think that that original insight of John Main that this form of meditation is of great relevance and practical help to people today. That's how we see that insight being proven.

I think the appeal or the strength of this teaching that John Main has passed on is its simplicity, and it is very difficult to keep simple. Once you start speaking about something simple it is very easy to start complicating it, but I think it has remained simple. I think the challenge of meditation in this tradition is its simplicity. It doesn't require a lot of theory. You don't have to have a great deal of psychological theory, or a great deal of theological theory. You need a basic understanding of what you are doing, but you don't need to be heavily analytical of your experience, and I think that simplicity is what enables it to be passed on by ordinary people from one to another. So you ask me what my hope is for the future. I would hope that we could keep true to that basic simplicity, and see it, therefore, enriching the lives of the greatest range and diversity of people. That's one of the wonderful things for me in this community and in this work is to see such a wide range of people united by something so simple.

I would like to feel also that this community and all the meditators around the world can contribute through this teaching to the renewal of the Church, to the evolution of Christianity into the next era, and also, for example, to contribute to the dialogue between Christianity and the other religions. That's a very important way for Christianity to discover itself anew in the next thousand years. I think in some small way we can contribute to that by deepening, helping to deepen, the spiritual life of Christianity and Christians. And I am perfectly aware that this is one small wave in the great ocean of the spirit, but I think it's a wave that can touch and enrich a very wide range of people. I would hope the simplicity can be maintained, the spiritual maturity and deepening of people can continue, and that the outreach beyond Christianity can be maintained, as well.

There is an advertisement for a pair of running shoes that says, "Just do it." I think that's a good way to begin. I meet many people who have begun to meditate very much on their own with very little support. They have a book, maybe some tapes, and that's what one of the things our publishing company tries to do, which is to make tapes and books of John Main and others easily available. They are very powerful resources, I think, for giving you a sense of guidance and direction in your meditation, but I think it is very helpful if you can meet and meditate with others in the same way. That's why meditation groups form, and if you want to find out where a group is meeting near you, the easiest thing would be to contact one of the Christian meditation centers. There are about 28 centers in different parts of the world – quite a few in different parts of the States. All you would have to do is contact one of those centers and just say where you would like to go from here. If you would like to contact a group they will put you in touch with the nearest group, and they will give you any personal guidance or help that you need, I think.

I think the real test of any spiritual work are the fruits of that work. "By the fruits you will know them." If this is the work of God, it will continue. I think that the fruits of meditation in an individual's life must be the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. I would only have to look a little objectively perhaps at one's own development over a period of time, learn from what other people see in you, to see whether there is growth in any one of those qualities. I think for the community as a whole, and for individual meditation groups, the same applies. I think one has to look at the fruit. I meet many groups who express concern, for example, about being small. They say there are only 6 or 7 of us, or only 3 or 4 of us that meet every week, and it is helpful for them to know

that there are hundreds of other groups, increasing in numbers, who also say we are small in numbers, and I think that it is important for us to remember that the strength of the contemplative community does not consist in its size, but in its faith. Understanding that, the fruits will appear in generosity, in self-giving to others. I think that I would feel if we could stay in touch with that sense of modesty as a community, a sense of vocation, yes, there is a sense of the work to be done, work to be shared, but it is humble, it is modest. In our weakness is our strength, and God's power comes to perfection in human weakness. I think remembering that is the best way to make decisions and allow a community to develop.

A few years ago John Danier gave us the John Main seminar, and it was very moving because he was speaking of his experience of working with the handicapped, and of his deep Christian insight into the relationship between God's power and human weakness. I think we were all touched deeply by that. Many of the leaders, or the people trying to give leadership to the Christian meditation community were deeply impressed by that. I certainly was, and it has been an inspiration to me ever since, really. As I look at our community I realize that in many ways it is very fragile, we are not a big organization, but there is a power there, a power of God rather than any human power by itself. I think if we can remember that I feel quite confident we can grow and follow the direction that the Spirit is leading us.

A community member (young man): I was in college, and I was very busy and very happy doing my graduate studies in acting at

UCSD in California, and I was reading a lot of Buddhists, especially Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. At some point I felt this very strong need to reconnect with my own tradition, which is Christian based. So I began looking, and eventually I came across this tradition which John Main has been teaching. I graduated, and I went in search of a community that was teaching this, and I found it. I have been living and working and praying with that community for 5 years now.

I love art. I am passionate about making beautiful things and being involved with things that are beautiful and reflect what is possibly beautiful about being alive. But I was, am still, but much more so before, so uncompromising about that. Sometimes I found the process of trying to make something beautiful become ugly, really, or difficult. I found a lot of that in graduate school and then professionally when I was working as an actor. Since then I've found that the practice of meditation goes to the very heart of a creative act that a human could make, not only artistically, but business-wise and family-wise, whatever – gardening, because there are times of silence, there are times in which you are learning to listen and to see what is beautiful. When you go to try to actually make something beautiful, you've been going to these special evening classes, you've been going to the special school in which you have been learning, which is meditation. In that sense it has made my life richer. It is also, on an even more important level, I think, opened me up to friendship, to relationship, opened me up in a much deeper way to my family, given me courage in professional situations where I have to be much more mature than I was even willing to be, or knew that I could be.



Well, there's a great need. I think that's the most amazing thing. I meet so many people of my generation who have jobs, like I have a job. I run the publishing company for this venture, and they have jobs in banks, or whatever, and quite often they come home and they are not sure of how well they are connecting into the need for whatever the job it is that they are doing, but there is such a great need for this. We all need to be loved, we all need to know that we are known and that we are OK, and that there is some kind of order which makes sense of the chaos, and that there is meaning. There is this deep need, and the Christians find this need, the Buddhists find this need, the Hindus find this need, and other groups, other philosophical groups, whatever, plug into this need and provide for it. So there is a need, and it is very creative, not to share in promoting it, because I don't think we promote this. We live it simply as a little team here, but really we live it in homes. Meditators are hidden all over the world, contemplatives who go to work every day and garden and have lots of children and go on holidays and have crises and are very happy also. They meditate, and they live it, and maybe they pass it on. I don't think we here at the Center do anything much more different from what other meditators might do in their own homes and their own work places except that we are more visible and we help to network. I find it, and I think the others in the community find it, very energizing to be able to participate in living something where others come to you to plug into. We don't actually go out to sort of share. People are writing in. It is so beautiful. People write in and phone in, but mostly write and say, "Listen, I've been to a talk someone has given, and I really want to start a group. What can I do, or could you come out?" We just started some groups in Italy, and it was actually a friend of mine from college. She had been meditating, and she went to a couple of retreats, and one day she called up and said, "I really want to

start a group. Can we organize you coming over?" We did, and now there are some groups in Florence, and some groups in Rome, publishers are wanting to translate the books already. It just goes like that.

I think what is so radical about these meditation groups goes back to something John Main was deeply convinced about, and that was that ordinary people in their busy lives would be able to teach about their contemplative tradition from their own experience, and the group is nothing other than that. People who are rooted in a practice which they follow every day twice a day – they meditate – in their busy lives, and from the strength of that, the knowledge of that, they feel very relaxed, really, to invite a small group of people to their homes or their parish or their work place or a prison or something like that, and to share that teaching with them, and then essentially to sit in silence with them. From this being able to teach from your own experience has developed a very simple skeleton which is simply this, that most meditation groups have a short introduction or talk about meditation or the inner journey, specifically what you do when you sit down to meditate, and then the essential part of the group is the meditation period, which is 30 minutes, and then there is always time if people have questions. Sometimes there aren't any questions after a period of meditation, and the group leader at that time doesn't have to feel any great responsibility to be able to answer these questions, but usually the answers are given either by the leader or someone in the group, and then everyone goes home. That takes usually less than an hour. From there groups do things like have a speaker come in to give a talk, or they play a tape, or they read from Scripture or John Main or Laurence Freeman or Bede Griffiths. The group never travels away from the essential reason why they are together, which is to sit in silence.

Within that the essential nature, what it is they are doing, which is saying the mantra, which is a form of meditation, and the group leader teaches only what he or she is practicing. We don't do visualization or go into all sorts of other things because that is not what the purpose is. The group leader is simply to be there to share something they have been doing every day, which I think is very beautiful, not that it should be very safe, but it is very solid.

Ria Weyens: When I was 18 I started studying meditation. That's already a long time ago. I discovered Zen meditation in a Trappist monastery in Holland. I am from Belgium. I did it for 3 years, and then spontaneously I used the koan in Zen meditation, and my koan very spontaneously became the name of Jesus. Without knowing, I was somehow also practicing the Jesus prayer, which is similar to meditation and to what we teach here in the sense that by repeating the name of Jesus, we come to a still point. I was practicing the Jesus prayer, repeating the name of Jesus in silence, and then I was very fascinated by the contemplative life and the monastic life, and I entered the Trappist monastery when I was 24. What I experienced in the Trappist monastery was there was a lot of vocal prayer, but there was not really a teaching on contemplative prayer in the sense of what happens when we go inside. There was not really a teaching on it. There was a little bit of a question of it is between you and the Holy Spirit, so it was very difficult to talk about these things. It was true, also, but I was really hungry for teaching on what happens when you go inside and when you go into that inner desert. I was reading the desert Fathers, and so I got an answer, or I got some answers to my questions, and then after 5 years in a Trappist monastery in

Belgium I went to India to help in a foundation in India. Still I was practicing my Jesus prayer, and then I read a book by Fr. Laurence Freeman of the light within, and I really really thrilled by it because it was the first time I discovered a modern language, somebody talking in a modern language, about the contemplative adventure of going inside, being in the presence. So I wrote to Fr. Laurence, and it just happened that he was coming to India 2 or 3 months after that, so I met him in India. That's how I came in contact with the Christian Meditation movement, or community in 1987. In 1991 I left India. I corresponded with Fr. Laurence, and was fascinated by his vision of bringing contemplative prayer out into the world, which was also my search. I came to London in '91 and I'm still here. It is a very hopeful work. There is a real hunger for inner depth, inner life. At the moment I am doing a study in psychotherapy because in my own search I find it is quite important to also introduce the psychological knowledge within the contemplative knowledge, so that's my search at the moment.

The inner light is within us. The light is within us like the sun, and when there are clouds before the sun we can't see the sun. We still believe in the sun. The sun is there. For me the clouds which hide the light within are my worries and my ideas – maybe not so much my worries, or my ideas. I would say it is the grasping of my worries and my ideas because worries and ideas will be always there. The clouds will always be there. I think it is when I am grasping this inner world, the light can shine. And in meditation I just relieve that grasping attitude of my ego. I allow the inner light to well up which is a healing light, so the more it can penetrate my being, the more it can transform me. So that's how I see it. Or you can say it is like a well. The well is full of stones, and the stones are our grasping attitude. It is not my ego, but the attitude of my ego to grasp which are there. The stones are

in the well and the water cannot come out. That is what meditation is for me, which is a moment of relieving that inner attitude of my ego grasping, and in surrendering everything so the spirit can penetrate my whole being, and the healing process will happen without us knowing that it will happen. The transformation will happen if we just allow it to happen. If we give God freedom to be God, the divine mystery is inside.

The main question within this approach of psychotherapy is not so much why are you angry, or why are you depressed, the why question, but the main question within this approach is how, how are you angry, or how are you depressed, so how is your relationship to your anger? How is your relationship to your jealousy, to your depression? The aim of this psychotherapeutic approach is to change our relationship to it. Most of the time we avoid it. We run away from it. In Christian terms you could say we run away from the cross. We don't take up the cross. In this approach the aim is to change the relationship to it, and to cultivate a kind of loving kindness towards ourselves. It is very important. It is first of all bringing people to the awareness that they have to just face what is, just to see what is, standing in the pains, standing in the wounds, realizing that my pain is a universal pain. In Christian language again, we all share in the body of Christ and the wounds of Christ. What I am talking about the aim of psychotherapy is bringing people to this realization, that their pain is a universal pain. It is a pain we all share. If I can befriend my pain, then the healing process will happen. What I find is that it is in meditation that I learn to be with what is. In meditation I am with myself. I am not running away from things. I am with myself. So when we bring this attitude to psychotherapy, being with what is, and also in meditation we say that we have to open up to the consciousness of Christ. The

consciousness of Christ is compassion. The consciousness of Christ is loving kindness. If we focus that consciousness to our life, if I have loving kindness towards my depression, loving kindness towards my anger, then transformation can happen. So I think it is very deeply embedded in the Christian message and how we can translate the Christian message today into a new language. Because that is what we do in meditation. We try to open up to the consciousness of Christ, which is compassion.

Fr. Tom Ryan: I am presently serving as director of a new ecumenical center for spirituality and Christian meditation, which is called Unitas, which is Latin for unity. Unitas was founded as such in September of 1994. From 1981 to 1991 it was the Benedictine priory of Montreal founded by Dom John Main. It was what became the original mother house from which this renewal of Christian contemplative prayer moved out to several continents, and is today flourishing and is known as the World Christian Meditation Community. Prior to my coming to Unitas, I served 14 years as director at the Canadian center for ecumenism, a national education resource center for promoting Christian unity and interfaith understanding. We worked on a national level in Canada between Christians, and Christians and members of other living faiths. Two passions have motored me through the years. One has been the passion for Christian unity and interfaith encounter, and the other for spirituality, for going deeper in my own life of the spirit and journeying with others who share that common appetite for God.

There is a sense in which I find Unitas as a place where both those passions are wed. It is presently cosponsored by seven different denominations in Montreal: Anglican, Presbyterian, United, Lutheran, Orthodox, Armenian, Roman Catholic, and the John Main prayer association. Part of the curiosity of how this history has evolved is that in 1977 John Main and Laurence Freeman and I all arrived in Montreal at the same time. John and Laurence had been invited by the bishop of Montreal to open a house of prayer in the heart of the city, and I had been invited to come as director of the Newman Center of McGill University in Montreal. I had begun meditating a couple of years earlier, and I was seeking a spiritual director in my new place of assignment, and went to the Ignatian Center, a place run by the Jesuits in Montreal. After two meetings with the director of the center there, when he learned how I was praying he said, "You know, I really think you should be talking to someone else. Have you visited John Main yet in the new house of prayer that he has just opened in the city? This is the form of prayer that he is teaching." That was my connection with John Main, and from that time on he was to whom I turned for guidance in this way of prayer, and served as my spiritual guide. When John died in 1982 Laurence then succeeded him as prior of the community, and when the international center shifted from Montreal to London, basically the house was sitting there looking for a new vocation, and the archbishop of Montreal was trying to find a new vocation for it – one in continuity with the past, a place where lay people could continue to come and find instruction in the Christian contemplative tradition. So a very dedicated group of Benedictine oblates kept the house going, continued the teachings on Monday and Tuesday nights, as has been the Benedictine tradition, and basically kept a modicum of program going until this new project, which came to be Unitas, took shape and form.

When Unitas came into being it basically wanted to simply build on the foundation of what was already there as a Christian meditation center, and it wanted to simply bring together with that rich vein of a Christian contemplative tradition the gifts from other Christian traditions, pathways to God that the Spirit has raised up and uniquely preserved in the various Christian traditions. But the path of meditation has continued to represent the heart beat of the life of the house. Three times a day, in the morning when people are on their way to work, at noontime during the lunch hour, and at the end of the afternoon, there is a half hour period of quiet sitting in meditation, and then on Monday and Tuesday evenings, that tradition of teaching the tradition is carried on. The kind of people who come represent a very broad spectrum. One of the things that is most striking is that this is a movement of contemplative renewal that appears to be spreading like a prairie fire across Canada, across the United States where it is more known under the title of centering prayer, but it is recovering the same tradition, and it really seems to be responding to something very deep in people's hearts. Part of what we do at Unitas, and I know part of what the World Christian Meditation Community is doing, as well, as is represented in the Dalai Lama having been invited as the speaker for the John Main seminars in London a year ago, is interfaith dialogue, as well. One of things, I think, that our dialogue with other religions is making us more aware of as Christians is that the first business of religion is to open up for people a pathway to direct experience of God. When we look at the other religions and the place that ritual or membership rites, or dogmas or doctrines have, we see they have a much more secondary place in the lives of members of other living faiths than they tend to have for us as Christians. What takes the ascendancy in a very clear way for the proponents of other faiths is this preoccupation with this



experience of God, a direct experience of the Absolute. I think this is a very beneficial emphasis for us to be exposed to as Christians because it reminds us that really, at the heart of Christianity is a mystical experience. It is the experience of the indwelling Trinity. It is taking seriously Jesus' words that if you love Me and keep my commandments, the Father and I will come to you and we will make our home in you. It is learning to have confidence in our ability to what our tradition calls the mystical heart, our capacity to access that reality at the deepest level of our being, and to go there regularly like hungry and thirsty people go to the well, or go to the refrigerator for food, for well-being. This is what, I think, the New Age movement is also saying to us as Christians, that people have a hunger for the transcendent, for the beyond, for the Absolute, for the mysterious, for the numinous, and if they can't find it in the Church, they will not stop looking. They will find it in crystals, they will find it in channeling, they will find it in all kinds of ways and different manifestations, but they will find it. Or they will continue to look until something responds to that hunger. By and large, I think that what we are doing in just providing a place where people can come and be still and know that God is God is perhaps a unique offering the heart of a large metropolitan area of 3 million people. Perhaps the only thing that people cannot find in downtown Montreal, but which we offer, is peace and stillness, a place where people can sit, go quietly within, and touch the dimension of spirit.

I knew that in what we were doing at Unitas that the ecumenical would be in fairly high profile. It was already ecumenical even under the Benedictine presence. There was an Anglican bishop who lived as part of the community there and prayed daily with them for a couple of years, and there were members of other churches who came at that time. So in a sense what we have done

is just build that base more broadly, and it is in higher profile, and I knew that that would be there. One of the things that has surprised me in a sense is how often I find myself in conversations with people either at supper table who have come for personal retreats, or who are participating in our programs, or I am talking with them after a group sessions, what has been a little more surprising for me is how frequently I am engaged in conversations that could only be described in terms of reevangelization, or reconciliation of people who have been wounded, or alienated from church participation, and who are interested in the spiritual journey but very wary of pursuing that journey within the construct of organized religion. We seem to be providing for people a middle ground that doesn't appear too churchy because it is just a big, beautiful mansion, and yet there is this umbrella of spirituality over everything we are doing which leaves people feeling a broader berth for exploration. Very clearly I think there is a difference between spirituality and religion. I see spirituality as really addressing the deep human questions, the search for love, for belonging, for forgiveness, for acceptance, and that is a journey we are all embarked on and must pursue for our own human fulfillment. But it seems to me that that journey will ultimately lead one, if it is operating the way it should, to some kind of affiliation with religion because religion basically celebrates those moments of belonging, or of commitment, or of forgiveness, and because we are incarnate beings who have a need to ritualize interior realities in an outward way, our own humanness seeks ways of giving external manifestation to something powerful and deep and meaningful that is happening inside of us, and that's what religion offers. It seems to be religion uniquely offers a way for people to bring into the public forum and to give expression to, in a community of like-minded travelers and believers, of what is happening inside me in my life

now. I am increasingly seeing us playing a kind of bridge role in that respect, meeting people who are embarked on a spiritual journey, and introducing in a graduated kind of way to healthy religion that enables them to give ritual expression and to celebrate in a community of gathered believers what it is they are experiencing within.

When the bishop of Montreal invited the Benedictines to the city, he didn't want them to found a house outside the city limits somewhere. He wanted this to be a heart beat right in the middle of the city where ordinary Christians could discover the possibility of living a deep integrated life of faith in the midst of all this urban hustle and bustle and noise, and this is one of the primary questions that anyone who comes to the practice of meditation often has in the back of their minds. How am I ever going to fit this into my life? How am I ever going to make time for this amongst all the other demands upon me? My sister and her husband who live in California have given me a very inspiring answer to this. They, in the midst of raising a couple of children, designated a particular room in their home just as a meditation room, and they only go there for that purpose. Any number of people have done a similar kind of thing, or have a little prayer corner in their room, what in their instance strikes me as inspirational is that they took to getting up at 4:30 in the morning in order to have time to meditate before raising the children, and then getting them ready for school, and then getting ready to go off to work for their commute themselves. One time my sister was sharing this practice of theirs with my brother who also has three children, and he just looked at her dumbfounded, and said, "How can you afford the time for this?" And she looked back at him without blinking an eye and said, "Kevin, we can't

afford not to take this time. This is what keeps our life on the rails. This is what keeps us sane."

"We will find time," John Main said to me when I came to him as a young priest, trying to look for his approval that I drop the second meditation each day because in my life as a busy university chaplain, I was making a case that things are just too busy here. They are out of my control. The students are walking into my office, we've got a late afternoon church service, in the evening I have to be in the dormitories, and he listened to me very carefully, and nodded his head, and said, "Yes, you are quite right. Our life here in the monastery is structured to enable us to observe this rhythm of prayer. You are quite right. Your life has a different rhythm to it." And I thought I could see an approval coming for why I should be let off the hook while they should stay on the hook, but just when I thought I was going to get the blessing for meditating in the morning, but then not again at the end of the day, up came like a stiff upper cut to the jaw, and he said, "But, if you are really serious about experiencing the full fruits of this way of prayer, you must be faithful to your time, not just at the beginning of the day, but at the end of the day. Meditating at the beginning of the day is like hopping on one foot. Meditating at both beginning and end is like walking with grace and balance." So he challenged me to really take a hard look at what I was living, and to see whether everything that I was making out to be as very important and unmovable was, in fact, so, saying we find time for what is important to us. "Go back and look at your life. Look at all these things you are saying are so important and can't moved, and nothing can take precedence over them, and just see whether they are more important than this value you are professing, and see if you can't find some other formula to enable yourself to live more closely to the values that

you are aspiring to live." I went back. I took a hard look at things, and not surprisingly, I found that they were more movable than I was making them out to be, and with some flexibility and some shifting around, I granted that yes, we do find time for the things that are important to us.

## John Main's Christian Meditation

The Christian Meditation movement, begun by John Main, OSB, is spreading around the world and doing great good by introducing people to the life of prayer. In the spirit of gentle inquiry, however, it is possible to address some questions to its practitioners in the hope that any ensuing dialogue would only strengthen this movement.

1. John Main learned to meditate using a mantra from his Hindu teacher, but what goal was his teacher aiming at? Was it the same goal as that of the Christian life of prayer? If not, does this mantra meditation become Christian just because a Christian uses it? Did John Main consider this mantra meditation of his teacher identical with the teaching of John Cassian, and **The Cloud of Unknowing**?

2. In the terminology of John of the Cross, is this mantra meditation meditation or contemplation? If it is meditation, why does John Main seem to insist that we must continue using the mantra? What happens when we reach a point when meditation begins to fail? Can this insistence on the mantra be reconciled with the teaching of centering prayer? If this mantra prayer is a very simple form of meditation, should beginners be introduced

to it indiscriminately before they have gained experience in more discursive forms of meditation? If it is contemplation in the sense of John of the Cross, how can it be recommended to everyone?

3. It would seem that the deliberate simplification of discursive activity that takes place in this kind of meditation would have the psychological result of excluding energy from consciousness, and thus activating the unconscious. Does the Christian meditation movement make any provision for this activation?

Visit the [World Community for Christian Meditation](#) website and the [Unitas](#) website.

Now it is your turn to contribute to this discussion. Send us your questions and comments: [arraj@innerexplorations.com](mailto:arraj@innerexplorations.com)

In response to the questions posted here concerning John Main's Christian meditation teaching, sixteen people met at Unitas and spent a day in discussion and reflection. Unitas is an ecumenical centre for spirituality and Christian meditation, formerly the Benedictine Priory of Montreal founded by John Main. The sixteen people referred to are those who continue at Unitas John Main's practice of giving short talks to meditators on Monday and Tuesday evenings throughout the year. The questions provided a stimulating framework for our sharing, and we are grateful to the editor of the Christian Prayer and Contemplation Forum for his invitation to respond to the questions below. We do not purport to speak for the worldwide network of Christian meditation groups and practitioners, only to offer the fruit of our own discussion and reflection in the interest of understanding through dialogue. The discussion is an organic one, and we welcome its continuance.

*John Main learned to meditate using a mantra from his Hindu teacher, but what goal was his teacher aiming at? Was it the same goal as the Christian life of prayer?*

In *Christian Meditation* (published by the Benedictine Priory of Montreal, 1977) John Main explains the following concerning his teacher, Swami Satyananda: For the swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the universe who dwells in our hearts, and he recited these verses from the Upanishads: "He contains all things, all works and desires and all perfumes and tastes. And he enfolds the whole universe and, in silence, is loving to all. This is the Spirit that is in my heart. This is Brahman." (p. 11)

It should be noted that while Swami Satyananda was a Hindu monk, he was educated at a Roman Catholic school and had considered becoming a Christian. Although he studied Raja yoga, Sanskrit and Eastern disciplines, his awareness of and love for the Christian tradition should not be overlooked. Perhaps the fact of speaking to a Christian audience determined both the swami's choice of Hindu Scripture above, and John Main's reiteration of the same, placing emphasis on a concept that is comprehensible in Christian terms. It is clear, whatever the case may be, that Swami Satyananda's understanding of the goal of meditation coincides with the Christian concept of the aim of contemplative prayer as conscious union with the Indwelling Spirit of God. The parallel deepens when the Swami explains the general goal of his life as the restoration of the consciousness of the Kingdom of God among his fellow men (Neil McKenty. *In The Stillness Dancing*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986. p. 50).

*If not, does this mantra meditation become Christian just because a Christian uses it?*

While in the case of Swami Satyananda and John Main obvious parallels may be drawn between mantra meditation and the Christian goal of prayer, the fact remains that at the time the Swami transmitted the teaching to John Main, the technique involved was one of Hindu meditation, not Christian prayer. Only later did John Main discover similar practices within the history of the Christian tradition. Therefore, the question remains valid: what makes mantra meditation - a practice transmitted out of the Hindu tradition - specifically "Christian"?

The "Christian-ness" of the prayer is contained in the intention of the meditator. This intention of opening oneself to the triune God revealed to us in Jesus may also be reiterated at the beginning of each period of meditation. This intention, while not consciously dwelt upon during the period of meditation itself, is formulated in the meditator's daily life which grows out of lived awareness of the Christian tradition and its fruits. It is a question of context, wherein the Christian's whole life, through intention, becomes "Christian" and this necessarily extends to whatever mode of prayer the meditator practices, including mantra meditation.

*Did John Main consider this mantra meditation of his teacher identical with the teaching of John Cassian, and The Cloud of Unknowing?*

Having discarded mantra meditation on the advice of his novice master when he entered the Benedictine order, John Main resumed the practice when he found in the *Conferences of John Cassian* what he took to be a definite Christian parallel with mantra meditation. It might be argued that John Main placed undue emphasis on those aspects of Cassian's writings that synchronized with his understanding of mantra meditation - the suppression of thought and image, the repetition of a short phrase to facilitate this letting go, the concept of the poverty of spirit of



this type of prayer - while not dwelling on aspects that differ: Cassian's understanding that the *meaning* of the phrase is of great import, for instance. Whether or not John Main's choice of emphasis constitutes putting his own "spin" on Cassian, he clearly understood his own interpretation of Cassian as coinciding with mantra meditation: "In reading these words of Cassian and Chapter X of the same [10<sup>th</sup>] Conference on the method of continual prayer, I was arrived home once more and returned to the practice of the mantra." (*Christian Meditation*, p. 17)

While John Main reclaimed mantra meditation for himself (and for Christians as a whole) via the writings of John Cassian, he also cited the 14<sup>th</sup> century *The Cloud of Unknowing* as corresponding in form and intention to mantra meditation. He pointed out (see his *Word into Silence*. NY: Paulist Press, 1980) the *Cloud's* use of a single repeated word to overcome thought (p. 51), the concept of prayer as listening and being rather than speaking and thinking (p. 10), and the fixing of the word in the heart (p. 52). In fact he characterizes *The Cloud's* teaching on the use of the prayer-word as "say your mantra" (p. 52). However, John Main chose not to underline *The Cloud's* cautioning that the practice was not for everyone or even for many (see *The Cloud's* "Forward"), offering the teaching of mantra meditation to all. Further, his insistence on staying with the mantra faithfully throughout the prayer period does not dovetail with *The Cloud's* "If you do not feel inclined to pray with words, then forget even these words [recommended by *The Cloud's* author]. (Ch. 39).

Whether or not John Main understood mantra meditation to be *identical* to prayer as taught in the writings of Cassian and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, he certainly interpreted both works to be congruent in form and intention: imageless prayer through

repetition of a word or short phrase with the aim of union with/ awareness of the Indwelling Spirit was to be found not only in the spiritual disciplines of the East but also in the Christian tradition. He did also apparently feel that the similarities were enough to justify his own experience with mantra meditation and his return to the practice, as well as his passing the practice on to others, all within the Christian context. Distinctions are not hard to find among the various teachings, and John Main did not dwell on the distinctions. However it might be over-scrupulous to allow these differences to overshadow the deep correspondence that also exists among Eastern mantra meditation, Cassian's prayer, and the teachings of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The intuiting of this correspondence and the handing back to Christians of a valuable but neglected practice not foreign to their tradition was a gift of great genius on the part of John Main.

*In the terminology of John of the Cross, is this mantra meditation meditation or contemplation?*

Among Carmelites, meditation usually means all that we do to establish communion with God in interior prayer. Contemplation is what God does in us, the inflow of divine loving knowledge into our very being.

Meditation, however, can be either discursive or non-discursive. Discursive meditation involves thinking, reasoning, imagining, remembering, and feeling. St. John of the Cross calls this discursive process "meditation".

Ernest Larkin, O.Carm., recognizes in his article in Review for Religious (January/February 1998) that there can be an unnamed middle step or bridge between discursive meditation and infused contemplation. Infused contemplation, defined strictly as gift,

goes beyond words, thoughts, feelings. This "middle step" aids in the movement beyond the faculties and fosters the disposition of openness and surrender.

This middle-step is appropriately named non-discursive meditation. It seeks to quiet these mental activities in order to be silent and passive before God, receptive to whatever God wishes to communicate to us. Non-discursive meditation usually involves four basic elements: a suitable place, a proper posture, a mental instrument or object of focus, and a receptive attitude.

In the terminology of John of the Cross, the word "contemplation" would be used only to refer to God's direct self-communication to a person disposed through self-emptying in faith and love to receive this intimate revelation. It is not our activity, but God's. It is not something we do to ourselves, but something that God does in us. We dispose ourselves in non-discursive meditation to receive this grace, but ultimately contemplation is God's free gift to us.

Meditation as practiced in the tradition of John Main would fall into this middle-step category of non-discursive meditation.

*If it is meditation, why does John Main seem to insist that we must continue using the mantra?*

The greatest problem in meditation is the wandering mind. It takes years of practice before the mind will respond obediently to the commands of the will. Providing the mind with an object of focus is very helpful in developing concentration. Thus John Main's constant counsel was to "say your mantra" and not to let go of it too soon. "Too soon" is if you can still repeat it or be with it.

For example, when concentration is focused and there is a pleasing experience, there can be a temptation to let go of the mantra because it seems to put some distance between oneself and the delight. One may want to let oneself become absorbed in the agreeable feelings with a resultant lulling of mental clarity. While unclear absorption may feel very good, one is no longer meditating when sharp clarity of mind is lost. Meditation requires keeping high clarity in deep concentration. Repetition of the prayer word keeps attention bright and alert.

*What happens when we reach a point where meditation begins to fail?*

If "fail" means no longer be able to say the mantra, then we are describing an experience in which God's activity has overtaken our own, i.e. contemplation. As this is what non-discursive meditation is oriented to, it could hardly be described as failure. John Main spoke out of the tradition of Cassian in which the emphasis is on the absolute simplicity of ceaselessly revolving the prayer formula in one's heart as a way of ridding oneself of all kinds of other thoughts and keeping one's mind fixed on the continual recollection of God. One says the mantra until one can no longer say it. And one does not choose when to stop saying it. As soon as one realizes one has stopped saying it, one starts again.

*Can this insistence on the mantra be reconciled with the teaching of Centering prayer?*

There is a difference in the two schools in that Centering prayer puts less emphasis upon the continual recitation of the word. People in both schools of practice experience the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives as a result of their practice. In every tradition

of spirituality there is an understanding that it is best to find your path and remain with it.

What the two schools of teaching clearly share is the work of restoring the contemplative dimension of faith and prayer to the life of ordinary Christians, common ground in the roots of Christian contemplative prayer in the monastic tradition, and the conviction that the monastic tradition has relevance to the whole church today.

*If this mantra prayer is a very simple form of meditation, should beginners be introduced to it indiscriminately before they have gained experience in more discursive forms of meditation?*

John of the Cross counsels discursive meditation for beginners to deepen their knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. John maintains that leaving discursive meditation before this knowledge and love is established in their souls can be as detrimental as continuing discursive meditation when God clearly is leading them into contemplation.

However, many Christians report never being able to pray discursively. They indicate that from the very beginning of their spiritual journey, they have practiced some form of non-discursive meditation. As their meditation has deepened, their knowledge and love of God has also grown.

It would seem that Christians can begin interior prayer with non-discursive meditation, provided their knowledge and love of God is being nourished through other sources, such as spiritual reading or liturgical worship. When knowledge and love of God deepen through other sources, insisting on discursive prayer is not necessary. Simply doing the meditation practice, continually

opening oneself to God's purifying action, is itself an ongoing act of love for God.

*If it is contemplation in the sense of John of the Cross, how can it be recommended to everyone?*

Christian meditation in the tradition of John Main is not understood as contemplation in the sense of John of the Cross. However, as a way of disposing oneself to receive the gift of loving communion that God wants to give, it can be recommended to all.

*It would seem that the deliberate simplification of discursive activity that takes place in this kind of meditation would have the psychological result of excluding energy from consciousness, and thus activating the unconscious. Does the Christian meditation movement make any provision for this activation?*

John Main obtained permission from his abbot late in 1974 to establish a small lay community in a former novitiate house at Ealing Abbey in England, primarily devoted to the practice of meditation. The tradition out of which he would teach was that of Western monasticism from its beginnings. He gradually developed, from his opening talks, a theology of meditation based on the "secret" of St. Paul's letters: the real presence of the risen Christ in the human heart. John Main's understanding of prayer was simple, basic, and deeply grounded in Scripture and tradition (*In The Stillness Dancing: The Journey of John Main*, pp. 82-84).

In 1977 he moved to Montreal to open a house of prayer. He died in 1982. In those few intervening years, his teaching consisted of talks given to lay meditators or monastics, which talks were later transcribed and published as books. He never wrote a book as

such on meditation. One might say he never had the time. He found himself on the front end of a burgeoning renewal of Christian meditative prayer and much taken up with the founding of a new Benedictine Priory in Montreal which soon began to receive novices, guests and retreatants from around the world.

There is very little in his teaching that addresses the psychological effects of meditation. Several things might be said about this. It could be said that neither the format of his teaching – fifteen minute talks to beginning meditators – nor the fact that, in those days, most everyone was a beginner, favoured delving into that subject. It could be said that he would have been content to stay within the framework of the bible and the history of Christian spirituality in speaking about meditation. It could be said that had he been given more than 56 years to live he would have been invited to address this aspect of the meditative experience as the renewal movement developed, and to enter into dialogue on this point with its leaders in other places. In the end, however, it is a moot point. The fact is his teaching does not address it at any length.

With the help of others doing work on questions relating to the psychological effects of meditation, those of us engaged in handing on the practice of Christian meditation are in the process of developing our appreciation of these dynamics in the practice of meditative prayer. While not being our central preoccupation, we recognize that it is something we should be aware of both in our own practice and in our efforts to serve as guides to other meditators.

On behalf of those giving talks on Christian meditation at Unitas,

Thomas Ryan, csp, and Sara Terreault  
Visit the [Unitas website](#).

### **Response from the Editor:**

I was impressed with the thoughtfulness and lack of defensiveness with which the Unitas meditation teachers approached these questions. I would like to try to respond in the same spirit.

I don't deny that there is a theistic dimension to Hinduism and other Eastern religions, or further, that supernatural mystical graces might not be found among Hindu meditators. At the same time, Hindu meditation is often geared to a nondual religious experience which is then expressed in some sort of nondual philosophy. Both the experience and the post-experience reflection can be difficult to reconcile with Christianity as witnessed, for example, by the struggles of Henri Le Saux (Abishiktananda). So the issue that I am trying to get at here is whether the same exercise of mantra meditation can serve as a vehicle for either nondual experience such as is found among the Hindu Advaitans, and for loving union with God, which is the goal of Christian prayer. The answer given is that the intention of the meditator is paramount. I agree that this is a vital consideration. But doesn't the meditation exercise, itself, have some kind of interior finality by which it aims at a particular goal? Does intention totally transform the nature and finality of the kind of meditation we are using? Let me use an example from another tradition without claiming that it forms an exact parallel with mantra meditation. Suppose as a Christian I decide to do zazen, and I have the intention that it will somehow bring me closer to God. Does this transform zazen into Christian prayer, or does zazen still maintain its interior goal of enlightenment?



It is certainly not my intention to claim that the manifold spiritual traditions of the Church need to be expressed in the terminology of John of the Cross. However, I do find that John of the Cross has played a critical role in the formation of the modern Western Christian mystical tradition, and he gives us the basic principles by which we can focus on the nature of contemplation and its relationship to meditation.

I am afraid that I would have to disagree with the Unitas meditation teachers when they call mantra meditation a nondiscursive meditation between meditation and contemplation. For John of the Cross there is no such state. Either we work with the faculties, or God works in us in a special way by giving us contemplation in the depths of the soul. I leave it to Fr. Larkin to respond, himself, as to whether he believes there is such a middle state in John of the Cross, but I refer you to his remarks in the discussion of centering prayer in this same section of the website. There are certainly simplified forms of meditation or what could be called affective prayer, or exercises in the practice of the presence of God. And it is fair to distinguish these states from formal discursive meditation, if we mean by that imagining a scene from the Gospels, making considerations following through affective dialogue, etc., etc. But when John of the Cross is talking about meditation, he means all the kinds of prayer that we can do by our own effort by using the faculties of the soul. Thus, the various forms of affective prayer and John Main's mantra meditation would fall under St. John's heading of meditation, and it is entirely possible that someone beginning the life of prayer might derive more benefit from these kinds of meditation than from formal discursive meditation in the narrow sense of the term. These kinds of meditation can dispose one to the graces of infused contemplation.

The key here, however, is that we are still using our faculties in these kinds of prayer, however simplified this activity is. I am not sure we should say that we are silent and passive before God without qualifying that statement. We need to clearly distinguish between any disagreements which are only rooted in terminology, and the deeper issue of whether it is correct to talk about a nondiscursive state of prayer that transcends the faculties and yet is not infused contemplation. This brings us back to my original consideration because various forms of Eastern meditation are aiming to go beyond the discursive activity of the intellect, and yet they are not aiming at infused contemplation. I am not sure, either, how valid it is to say that such a nondiscursive kind of meditation is what is found in Cassian and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing.

Is it wrong to call John Main's Christian meditation a form of meditation that we can do whenever we desire and which makes use of the faculties in a very simplified fashion and which can dispose us for infused contemplation? James Arraj

### **A Response from Paul Harris**

Meditation, known also as contemplative prayer, is the prayer of silence, the place where direct contact with Christ can occur, once the never-ceasing activity of the mind has been stilled. In meditation we go beyond words, thoughts and images into the presence of God within.

The goal of meditation, as Swami Satayanda expressed it, was to "restore the consciousness of the kingdom of God among his fellow men (women)". It seems to me this was also the purpose of the teaching of Jesus. For the swami the aim of meditation "was the coming to

awareness of the Spirit of the Universe who dwells in our hearts and in silence is loving to all" (a verse from the Upanishads).

The swami insisted it was necessary to meditate twice a day, morning and evening, and being very enlightened he gave John Main a Christian mantra. He said to John Main "and during the time of your meditation there must be in your mind, no thoughts, no words, no images. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra, your word. The mantra is like a harmonic. And as we sound the harmonic within ourselves we begin to build up a resonance. That resonance then leads us forward to our own wholeness ... We begin to experience the deep unity we all possess in our own being. And then the harmonic begins to build up a resonance between you and all creatures and all creation and unity between you and your Creator."

This was the teaching, a way to an authentic interior life, to 'the cave of the heart' that John Main had long been seeking.

What makes this teaching a path of contemplative prayer for us is simply the Christian faith we bring to the practice of this daily spiritual discipline.

If one reads the teaching of John Main on Cassian and the **Cloud of Unknowing** one comes to the realization that John Main is simply reiterating the exact same teaching but putting the teaching in 20th century contemporary language.

In #2 John Main teaches that one says the mantra until one cannot say it, in other words, until one has come to complete stillness of body, mind and spirit, the contemplative moment. However once one is aware of the silence, the silence is lost and one must come back to the recitation of the mantra.

Regarding Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, both are in the apophatic tradition of prayer.

Experience shows us that God leads many people to contemplative prayer without any prior knowledge or practice of discursive meditation. I have personally seen this many times myself. God often gives a person the gift of this prayer at a time of crisis or a time of personal illness and pain in an individual's life. The idea that contemplative prayer is not for everyone was beautifully answered by Thomas Merton who says every Christian is called to the heights of Christian prayer simply because of their Baptism. The **Cloud** says contemplative prayer is simply the development of the ordinary Christian life. No big deal!

The release of the unconscious through the practice of Christian Meditation does start a healing process in the practitioner. **Paul Harris**

Paul Harris is the editor of **John Main by Those Who Knew Him**, which is available from: John Main Centre, PO Box 56131, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7ZO, Canada. He also edited **Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings** with John Main. Continuum, 1998.

### **A Response from Tom**

First of all, I'd like to thank you for this site. It's the only place I've found where John of the Cross, John Cassian, Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer come together...kind of the "Super Bowl of Silence"

I have been practicing Christian Meditation for a year...thirty minutes , twice a day, saying the mantra from beginning to end. All I have to offer is my own experience. I'll try to keep my opinions out of it and I hope this adds to rather than subtracts from the spirit of this site.

As a Catholic, at the outset, I had many questions and fears...

My biggest question:"Should I practice a discipline that in part, stems from a non-Christian tradition...even though it comes from a man (John Main) whose teachings speak simply and eloquently of a Christ I've always sought but could never find?".

My biggest fear:" What if I free fall into this silence and I land in the arms of the Buddha instead of Christ..or even scarier, into the arms of my own illusions?"(this is where I was starting from but didn't know it at the time) I was in the middle of a contradiction that I could not resolve. The courage to proceed came from the words of a Catholic priest and a Yogi.

The Catholic priest: Fr. Lewis a.k.a. Thomas Merton

"Contradictions have always existed in the soul of man. But it is only when we prefer analysis to silence that they become a constant and insoluble problem. We are not meant to resolve all contradictions but to live with them and rise above them..."

The Yogi: Yogi Berra (ex-catcher for the NY Yankees.) "If you come to a fork in the road, take it"

In a sense, I had nothing to loose. I was at the point in my Christianity where I had to REALLY seek Christ or go crazy, and I figured I'd either find Him everywhere or nowhere at all. So I began. It's been quite an experience so far... I seem to live in this constant state of being lost and found at the same time...but truly Loved through it all. I would have to say that while the actual times of meditation so far have been mostly distractions, the fruits have been amazing. The most pronounced has been compassion, both for others and myself. Out of this compassion somehow, came more freedom, freedom to look for Christ in the most "taboo" and threatening places..i.e., in the depths of my own humanity. Thomas Merton in a letter to the lay community said

(of his solitude) " ...I have been summoned to explore a desert area of man's heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one finds that only experience counts, and arid, rocky, dark land of the soul, sometimes illuminated by strange fires which men fear and peopled by specters which men studiously avoid except in their nightmares" Fr. Freeman, in one of the archive writings at wccm, said "His descent into hell and His ascent into heaven means that there is no shadow we can encounter that has not been graced by His Light...in the worst shadows we meet the crucified and risen one" This dovetails with Jung's findings that we need discover, explore and incorporate our shadows so that we might become whole. Wholeness is what Christ is about to me...to recognize me in Him and Him in me in the fullness of His humanity and divinity. Being free to explore and incorporate Carl Jung's wisdom was another fruit of my meditation. Jung helped me find Sophia, God's feminine nature. As a man, I was able to feel truly loved by God for real and for the first time. Perhaps more importantly, I was able to stop demanding from others (my wife in particular) a love they were incapable of giving, and became humble and receptive enough to be content to live each day in reverential hope...which I believe is the attitude I must have in meditation. I can't tell you what an unexpected joy it has been, though sometimes it scares the pants off me, to have found the freedom to simply "let myself be", in whatever season of the heart God grants. And the freedom to look where ever I need to look to see the Truth . Where ever I go and in whoever I "meet" along this silent journey...be they Christians, non -Christians, believers, non-believers ...wherever the Truth or seeking of truth is evident, I find Christ, with His arms around us all. God bless!..pax, Tom at [tom@c-zone.net](mailto:tom@c-zone.net)

**A Response from San Murray, Derby, U.K.,**  
[majiksam@zerocave.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:majiksam@zerocave.fsnet.co.uk)

**Here are some thoughts about John Mains Christian Meditation..**

In *Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation*, Paul Harris states:

**In all essential aspects, with the exception of the Mantra itself, the similarities between Cassian's 'formula', the Jesus prayer, and the 'mantra' of John Main are expressions of the deeper practice of prayer in the Christian tradition.**

**The anonymous English classic The Cloud of Unknowing is important because we see continuity in the teaching on silent prayer of John Cassian (4th cent), the Cloud of Unknowing (14th cent) and John Main (20th cent). All three teachers offer the same essential teaching. (Harris 1996:31).**

I believe that these the types of apophatic prayer techniques cited by Harris above are unique in a number of significant ways.

**The Formula of John Cassian.**

John Cassian, a 4th century spiritual seeker with one of the early desert fathers Abbot Isaac, who instructed him on a method of continuous prayer. The Abbot states:

**And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banish all other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold on to it unless he breaks completely**

**free from all bodily concerns and cares. This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very small number of the souls eager to know it: To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: 'Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue' (Luibheid. 1985, Conference 10:10.p132).**

Here we see that the old Abbot recommends his prayer method as a constant practice, breaking free from all bodily concerns and cares. It was considered to be such a powerful practice that it was only handed on to a 'very small number of souls eager to know it'. The aim of the formula was to bring the practitioner to a point where they think continuously about God.

In contrast, the WCCM recommend meditation for 20-30 minutes a day, rather than constant prayer. They often combine meditation with such practices as Rolfing and Hatha Yoga, rather than abandoning all bodily concerns and cares. And rather than teaching only a very small number of eager souls the WCCM very publicly recommend their practice to anyone who comes across their literature or attends their meetings.

Abbot Isaac continues:

**It is not without good reason that this verse-(Psalm 69:2) has been chosen from the whole of scripture as a device. It carries within it all the feelings of which human nature is capable. It can be adapted to every condition and can be usefully deployed against every temptation. It carries within it a cry of help to God in the face of every danger. It expresses the humility of a pious confession. It conveys a sense of our frailty, the assurance of**



**being heard, the confidence in help that is always and everywhere present. (Lubheid,1985.Conference 10:10. p133).**

Clearly the meaning of the formula is a very important part of saying the formula in contrast to the attitude of WCCM meditators. It is hard to escape from the feeling that what the Abbot is recommending is an ejaculatory prayer, rather than a Mantra, where the meaning of the phrase is unimportant. For example Paul Harris states:

**In meditation we are attempting to enter a silence, beyond thinking about Jesus; a silence where our union with Jesus can be fully realised. This is why Father John recommended the mantra *Maranatha* in Aramaic, a language that would not conjure up any thoughts or images. (Harris. 1996:30).**

### **The Cloud of Unknowing.**

The 14th century spiritual Classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* is cited by the WCCM as recommending the same essential practice as John Main's mantra meditation. Lawrence Freeman writes in the introduction to Evelyn Underhill's translation of the work that "John Cassian's formula and John Main's Mantra, is the 'one little word' of the *Cloud*." (Underhill 1997:19). Yet the author of the *Cloud* gives a different impression:

**A man or woman with any sudden chance of fire or of man's death or what else that it be, suddenly in the height of his spirit, he is driven upon haste and upon need for to cry or for to pray after help. Yea how? Surely, not in many words, nor yet in one word of two syllables. And why is that? For him thinketh it over long tarrying for to declare the need and work of the spirit. And therefore he bursteth up hideously with a great spirit, and**

**cryeth a little word, but of one syllable: as is this word 'fire', or this word 'out'. (Underhill 1997:121).**

Here we have a specific recommendation to use only one syllable not four as in the word Maranatha. There is the same ejaculatory sense of urgency we get with Abbot Isaacs teachings. The analogy is of a person who is in great danger who needs to pray for help, rather than the calm gentle repetition that the WCCM recommends. There is also the sense in the *Cloud* that this technique is not for everyone:

**Fleshly janglers, open praisers and blamers of themselves or of any other, tellers of trifles, ronnors and tattlers of tales, and all manner of pinchers, cared I never that they saw this book. (Underhill 1997:34).**

The author is clear that it is not a practice for everyone but only for those with a high degree of purity and maturity in the Christian life. Again specific words are used and close attention is paid to their meaning. One of the aims of the practice is to get good and remove evil and to obtain forgiveness of sins.

It is understandable that in the face of an intolerant religious heirarchy, John Main prefered to emphasise the similarity of his mantra meditation to forms of prayer in the Christian tradition rather than the South Asian mantra meditation of his original teacher, Swami Satyananda. I feel it is important for the WCCM to acknowledge that its methods have much more in common with Eastern techniques than traditional Christian ones. Given the degree of involvement that the Community has in the process of Inter-Religious dialogue, particularly with the diaspora Tibetan tradition, I think it is important that the WCCM fully acknowledges that it practices a hybrid of Hindu and Christian

meditation techniques, rather than meditation in the Christian tradition.

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# **Silence and Stillness in Prayer:**

## **The Message of Dom John Main by Paul Harris**

Since his death on Dec. 30, 1982, Dom John Main's teaching on Christian meditation has spread from the Benedictine monastery he founded in Montreal to embrace a worldwide fellowship of meditators. People of all faiths and occupations, from executives to housewives, from professionals to taxi drivers, have felt the call to follow the path of silence, stillness, simplicity, and the use of a mantra in prayer. 125 Christian Meditation groups are now flourishing in the U.S. and 1,000 groups around the world.

As a lay person Main joined the British Colonial Service in 1954 and was assigned to Malaya. One day in Kuala Lumpur he was sent on an apparently routine assignment to deliver a good will message and a photograph to a Hindu monk, Swami Satyananda, director of an ashram and orphanage/school. John Main thought he would quickly dispatch the assignment and be free for the rest of the day.

In fact, this visit was to dramatically change his life. His good will mission accomplished, John Main sat down for a cup of tea and asked the Swami to discuss the spiritual base of the many good works carried out at the orphanage and school.

Within a few moments John Main knew he was in the presence of a holy man, a teacher, a man of the Spirit, whose faith was alive in love and service to others. As John Main wrote many years later, "...I was deeply impressed by his peacefulness and calm wisdom. He asked me if I meditated. I told him I tried to and, at his bidding, described what we have come to know as a discursive method of meditation... using thoughts and images. He was silent for a short time and then gently remarked that his own tradition of meditation was quite different. For the Swami, the aim of meditation was the coming to awareness of the Spirit of the Universe who dwells in our hearts... in silence."

John Main was so awed by his intensity and devotion that he asked the Swami to teach him to meditate his way. The Swami agreed and invited him to come to a meditation centre once a week. On his first visit the Swami spoke about how to meditate:

"To meditate you must become silent. You must be still and you must concentrate. In our tradition we know only one way in which you can arrive at that stillness, that concentration. We use a word called a mantra. To begin you must relax and then repeat it, faithfully, lovingly, and continually. That is all there is to meditation. I really have nothing else to tell you. And now we will meditate."

But first the Swami pointed out that since the young western visitor was a Christian, he must meditate as a Christian and he gave him a Christian mantra. He also insisted it was necessary to meditate twice a day, morning and evening. For 18 months John Main meditated with the Swami and it was this encounter that led John to the pilgrimage of meditation. In fact, it led to Main eventually becoming a Benedictine monk.

Years later while a member of the Benedictine community in Washington, DC, Main made an incredible discovery. One day in reading the writings of a fourth century desert father, John Cassian, Main discovered Cassian in his tenth conference on prayer clearly outlining the use of a short verse or mantra in prayer.

Cassian also pointed out this form of prayer was in widespread use by the early Christian desert fathers. Main was thrilled to find the use of a mantra in prayer was an ancient Christian tradition. He was also overjoyed by the fact that John Cassian was the spiritual teacher of St. Benedict, founder of Main's own monastic tradition. Now the circle was complete. Main had discovered that use of a mantra in prayer was not only an ancient Hindu tradition but was also an early Christian one.

A crucial turning point in John Main's life took place during a few days at the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, in 1976. In effect his public teaching on meditation began in the three now famous conferences given to the monks and published as *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*. But it was the time of silence spent in Thomas Merton's hermitage (Merton died in 1968) that the Spirit moved deeply in his heart and called him to the work of teaching meditation.

He told the monks at Gethsemani, "...as I understand it, all Christian prayer is a growing awareness of God in Jesus and for that growing awareness we need to come to a state of undistractedness, to a state of attention and concentration - that is, to a state of awareness. And as far as I have been able to determine in the limitations of my own life, the only way that I have been able to come to that quest, to that undistractedness, to that concentration, is the way of the mantra."

On leaving Gethsemani Dom John told the monks, "I shall always remember with great affection these days among you." John Main had learned that his teaching on the way of prayer must be pursued more urgently than ever. He had also learned, beyond any doubt, that this was the work for the kingdom to which he was called to give the rest of his life, no matter how long or short it might be.

How close were Thomas Merton and John Main in their spiritual pilgrimage? It would seem very close. These are the words of Merton in Calcutta a few days before his death: talking about prayer Merton said, it ... the deepest level of communication is not talking, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words and it is beyond concept."

It is the genius of John Main that he synthesized the prayer teaching of John Cassian and the desert fathers (fourth century), the spiritual classic, the Cloud of Unknowing (fourteenth century), and the spiritual teachings of the East. Unlike Merton, John Main left us a formal teaching about how to pray.

Today Main's teaching, passed down from John Cassian, has spread around the world and continues with each passing month to lead more and more people to "the spirit in their own heart."

The teaching Christian meditation has taken the form of "small" meditation groups that meet weekly to enter into the meditation experience itself and provide a means for newcomers to learn this type of prayer.

Taking a cue from the growth of Christianity in the early days of the church, John Main envisioned small groups spreading the teaching of meditation in an organic way, meeting in various

locations once a week and offering motivational support and encouragement to those on the meditative pilgrimage. He did not live to see today's worldwide growth of groups of meditators in cities, villages and towns in 50 countries of the world.

Fr. John Main died on the morning of Dec. 30, 1982, radiating a sense of presence and peace.

In summing up John Main's life and teaching, Francois Gerard, a Minister of the United Church of Canada, wrote in the publication *Monastic Studies* that "if one were to characterize the spiritual pilgrimage and teaching of John Main in one sentence or phrase, one could suggest that he had rediscovered and lived the simplicity of the Gospel."

Paul Harris lives in Ottawa, Canada and is author of the recently published book **Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation** (Novalis). For further information on Christian Meditation in the United States contact Sr. Marian McCarthy, 1080 West Irving Park Rd., Roselle, IL 60172, phone (708) 351-2613.



