

THE HOW AND WHY AND  
WHAT OF PRAYER

Laurence Freeman OSB

The disciples asked Jesus, so Luke tells us, 'Master, teach us to pray.' It is a question we should never stop asking. And this perennial freshness of the mystery of prayer is no doubt why St Paul says that 'we do not even know how to pray but the Spirit prays within us.' Every practitioner of the spiritual path – anyone who dedicates time purely and regularly to prayer – grows in the sense that the beginning is always where we start from. I once met a remarkable Indian diplomat, a man of high culture, professional acumen and deep spirituality, who told me that every year he returned to his guru for a time of retreat. As soon as he arrived his first question was always, 'teach me how to meditate.'

The Christian is interested in how Jesus replies to his disciples' request. It sets the tone and direction for the whole spiritual journey of the Christian life. Of course, Jesus teaches what became (and very early on already was) the liturgical formula of the Our Father. Commentaries on the Lord's Prayer have been a favourite way for teachers in the later tradition to expound on the mystery of prayer. Jesus' reply (slightly different in Matthew and in Luke) hardly means only pray in these words and in no other way. There are as many ways of praying as there are of eating. But it summarises the fundamental attitudes and orientation of the person who prays in Christ or, we might say, who allows Christ to pray in him: Humility, praise, trust, forgiveness.

In the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of his promised spirit, prayer has been radically recast. No longer do we have to see prayer as petitioning a transcendent power to intervene on our behalf (at the expense

of others) or to manipulate the supernatural to achieve our natural desires. In the experience of the indwelling spirit prayer is no longer restricted to communication. It has achieved the state of communion.

If, that is, we are prepared to do the work necessary to realise this in our own experience. The Christian is invited to move to a radically new and deeper level of spiritual experience once she realises that prayer is not limited to 'my prayer' but is really constituted by the prayer of Jesus himself. My prayer, then, becomes my entering into his prayer and completing my journey by sharing in his. He, not my ego, is the way. This is why we can say that Jesus is a teacher of contemplation. In Matthew 6 he teaches interiority (go into your inner room), quiet (don't go babbling on), trust (your father knows your needs before you ask), freedom from anxiety (do not worry), mindfulness (set your mind on God's kingdom) and living in the present moment (do not worry about tomorrow). Jesus is as much a teacher of contemplation as he is of non-violence. All of these: the essential elements of contemplation.

And yet there are still many ways of prayer. It is as if prayer were a wheel and the spokes of the wheel the different forms of prayer. Nor should we argue about which is better than others. Some forms may not even look particularly religious. The hiker, the artist, the person listening to music, the cook may be doing their thing prayerfully. As the early church said, the way you pray is the way you live. We pray, as the Christian masters tell us, in different ways at different times, according to mood, situation and our own temperament.

And yet we keep needing to ask, how do I pray? This is because prayer is ever deepening and bringing us ever closer to that condition of complete simplicity, of union, in which everything we are is "oned" in God. In the late 4th century a young monk of the Christian desert in Egypt, John Cassian, asked this question of one of his elders, Abba Isaac. Isaac congratulated him on asking the right question because 'you are next door to understanding if you know what question to ask.' His reply was a practical response about how to deal with the perennial and universal problem of mental distraction. It is notoriously, shamefully difficult to pay attention. Today we call it attention deficit and see it as a disorder we can control with medication. In a wiser time and place, we see, as the desert fathers said, that it is almost synonymous with original sin. It is the human condition and it is treatable with meditation.

Abba Isaac recommended Cassian to take a single verse of scripture (a 'formula' or mantra) and to repeat it continuously in the heart and mind. Whenever he became distracted he should faithfully return to the verse. In time, the mantra would take root in the heart. It would develop poverty of spirit and purity of heart and eventually open up the treasure of continual prayer, deep conscious union with the prayer of the spirit that flows, a river of divine love, at the core of the human person and of the universe. This became the 'Jesus Prayer' of the Orthodox Church, the 'prayer of the heart' and the contemplative 'work' of the Cloud of Unknowing.

It is a simple and universal answer to the question how. John Main discovered it at first through its universal tradition in an encounter with an Indian monk in the East. Deeply impressed by the goodness and energy of this teacher he asked him how he prayed and was taught the mantra which he began to practice, in Christian faith, on a daily basis. It was a number of years later and after having become a Benedictine monk himself that he found and properly understood the teaching of Cassian. When he did make this connection he realised what a treasure lay hidden

here for the contemporary Christian seeking a deeper prayer and richer personal verification of the truths of his faith.

By transmitting this ancient tradition to the church today John Main has helped many Christian people, young and old, conventionally practising as well as those on the margins, to discover, for themselves, how to pray and what prayer really means. He taught it as a personal discipline, a spirituality of daily life, by recommending two periods of meditation a day, morning and evening, to be integrated with other forms of prayer. One of his most potent insights, born of his life as a monk, is that meditation creates community. It is a deeply Christian understanding of contemplation as a realisation of the mystical nature of the Body of Christ. A sign of this is the growth, through 115 countries today, of The World Community for Christian Meditation. This is a contemplative community embracing all kinds of people and involved in inter-religious dialogue as well as the contemplative renewal of the church and informing many social projects and ministries. Weekly meditation groups meet in parishes, homes, prisons, schools and places of work as a way of supporting the daily practice. A website ([www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)) serves this community and brings many people from a hopeful search on Google into touch with a community and a tradition that is seeking and finding every day a simple answer to that unfathomable and timeless cry of the spirit: 'Teach us to pray.'

Laurence Freeman

May 2004

---

Laurence Freeman OSB is a Benedictine monk of the monastery of Christ the King, Cockfosters and the Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation. His most recent book is 'Jesus: The Teacher Within'. For further information on the work of the community you may write to The World Community for Christian Meditation, St. Mark's, Myddelton Square, London EC1R 1XX