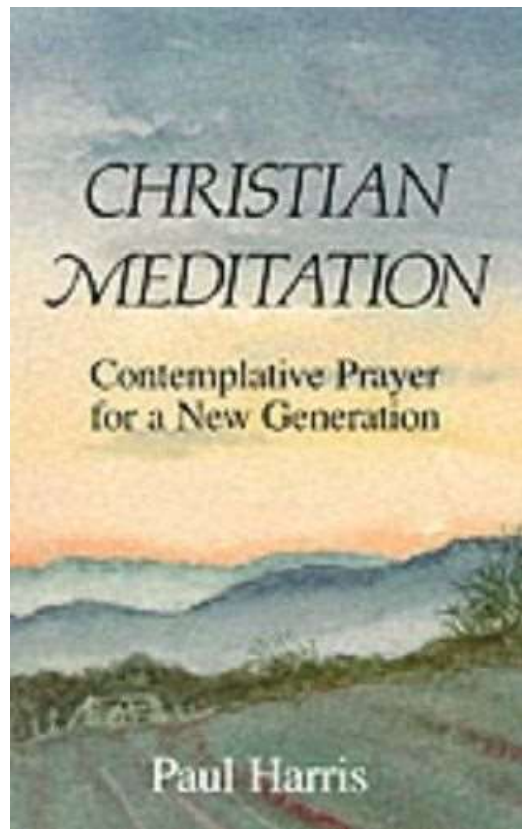


**Spiritual Reading Group with Peter Thomas Wed 16
February 10.30am – 12 midday**



Ch 4 – The Hunger for Silence

Ch 15 – Christian Meditation & Unity with Other Faiths

Ch 16 – Meditation & Action, Both sides of same coin

cess and noise. We are losing the contemplative dimension of life and we are paying the price. Noise is drowning out the voice of God. Like Jesus and the apostles, who often withdrew to a solitary place, we must also withdraw into the inner silence of our own soul. In this respect silence is both a psychological as well as a spiritual need.

John of the Cross in a letter to a Carmelite nun wrote: "Our most important task consists in remaining silent before this great God. . . . He understands only one language that of silent love." And another great spiritual teacher of India, Meher Baba (1895-1935) once said:

A Mind that is fast is sick
A Mind that is slow is sound
A Mind that is still is divine.

This stillness was also so aptly described by the poet St John of the Cross when he wrote:

One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- oh the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now stilled.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-54) the Danish philosopher echoed this need for silence when he wrote in *The Sickness unto Death*:

The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should reply: Create Silence! Bring men to silence. The Word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of today. And even if it were blazoned forth with all the panoply of noise so that it could be heard in the midst of all the other noise, then it would no longer be the Word of God. Therefore, create silence.

In the many times Jesus slipped away from the apostles, he would have spent the night in silent communication with his Father. We even find a reflection of this in human love. Two people in love often prefer to sit silently side by side, because talking would only disturb their loving union. Love unites with a bond that needs neither words or thoughts. That is what meditation is all about, and that is why silence is so important.

In *The World of Silence*, Max Picard (1888-1965) amplifies upon this point:

The words of lovers increase the silence. They only serve to make the silence audible. Only love can increase the silence. . . . Lovers are conspirators of silence. When a man speaks to his

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inner life of Westerners. In addition he also felt that the Eastern stress on non-duality would be a reminder that in every religious tradition when you get to the deepest level, there is non-duality, no division, but union with the transcendent. Another interesting aspect of meditation, said Father Bede, would be the problem of how to get beyond the ego, a problem common to every religious tradition including Christianity, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Judaism.

Ken Wilber in *Grace and Grit* in speaking about meditation echoes this unifying aspect of disciplined silence when he points out that it is part of the universal culture of all humankind. He says:

Because when you can find a truth that the Hindus and Christians and Buddhists and Taoists and Sufis all agree on, then you have probably found something that is profoundly important, something that tells you about universal truths and ultimate meanings, something that touches the very core of the human condition.

Thomas Merton also felt it important for Christians to acknowledge the genuine tradition of contemplative prayer in other faiths. In *The Inner Experience*, he says:

Supernatural and mystical contemplation is certainly possible outside the visible church, since God is the master of his gifts and wherever there is sincerity and an earnest desire for truth, He will not deny the gifts of his grace. As we grow in knowledge and appreciation of oriental religion we will come to realize the depth and richness of its varied forms of contemplation.

Perhaps another Benedictine in India, Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux OSB, 1910-1973) put it most succinctly when referring to the unity of those who meditate from different traditions; he said, 'we meet in the Cave of the Bear'.

Beyond East and West

Meditation as a way of prayer bridges both East and West. Orthodox and Latin churches too. John Cassian, who passed on this spiritual tradition of prayer, was a Western monk born in what is today Croatia and ended his life in Marseilles, France (Gaul) after establishing a monastery there. (See Chapter 8 on John Cassian.)

However, we can learn much from Eastern spirituality. Traditionally in the West we have prayed with the head. But the Jewish Eastern approach has taught us to encounter God within our own heart. It has been said that if you ask a Western child where God

is, he will point to the sky. If you ask an Eastern child where God lives, he will point to his own heart. Eastern spirituality has always had an in-depth understanding of John's gospel of the 'dwelling Christ'.

In the West we have tended to separate soul and body, matter and spirit. The Eastern approach is to integrate the faculties into a harmonious whole. In Hindu scriptures, the Upanishads, we find that leading 'to the cave of the heart'.

The great gift of Eastern Christian spirituality is the understanding that we cannot reach God conceptually or through a discursive approach of the mind, but only by a loving surrender to God in the depths of our own being. This in effect is a good definition of the path of Christian Meditation.

Bede Griffiths and the spiritual bridge between the world's religions

Fr Bede Griffiths died 13 May 1993 at the ashram of Shantivanam in southern India at the age of 87. He was an internationally respected spiritual teacher who devoted his life to the integration of Christian, Hindu and Buddhist spiritual traditions and to the development of the path of contemplative prayer. In his introduction to the book, *The Inner Christ*, he made the statement that 'in my experience John Main is the best spiritual guide in the church today'. I am grateful to Father Laurence Freeman for his reflections on Father Bede's life which follow:

In his autobiography *The Golden String*, published at the midpoint of his life, Bede Griffiths described his attempt to live a life of radical simplicity with two companions in a Cotswolds cottage in England after they left Oxford in 1929. It led him to a spiritual and psychological crisis which in turn led from a worship of Romanticism and Reason to an experience of God, to becoming a Catholic and in 1933 to entering Prinknash Abbey as a Benedictine monk.

The last years of his long life were lived in a simple hut beside the River Kaveri, the sacred river of South India, in his Benedictine ashram of Shantivanam. In a way his life had come full circle. The ideal of a small self-sufficient contemplative community had been realised but it had also become one of the world's great centres of inter-faith dialogue and prayer. It drew thousands of visitors each year, including many meditators.

Through extensive travels in America, Europe and Australia in his later years, Fr Bede developed the vision of modern life and religion which is his abiding legacy. He saw the modern

Meditation and action – both sides of the same coin

It often seems to many people that prayer is an introspective state and that the meditator is someone going into oneself to the exclusion of people and creation around them. Nothing could be further from the truth... Because meditation leads us into the actual experience of love at the centre of our being, it necessarily makes us more loving people in our ordinary lives and relationships.

(JOHN MAIN, *Letters From the Heart*)

If our life is rooted in Christ, rooted in his love and the conscious knowledge of his love, then we need have no anxiety about regulating our action. Our action will always spring from and be informed and shaped by that love. Indeed, the more active we are, the more important it is that our action springs from and is grounded in contemplation. And contemplation means deep, silent, communion: knowing who we are. Knowing who we are by being who we are. That we are rooted and founded in Christ, the Resurrection of God, is Christian self-knowledge.

(JOHN MAIN, *The Way of Unknowing*)

The inner eye of love

One woman recently said to a meditator, 'I just don't trust that meditation business. All you meditators do is sit in a cave and contemplate your belly button while the rest of the world goes hungry.' All of us who are meditating one time or another, usually have to face those who are often suspicious and mistrustful of what is happening to us on the meditative journey. People often look to see if we are using prayer as an escape from our life and responsibilities.

John Main was quite adamant that meditation, far from being an escape from life, actually propels one into life and to love and compassion for others. Another teacher, the Jesuit Father William Johnston in *Silent Music* also faces this problem head on when he says:

In the final analysis meditation is a love affair. And love is the most powerful energy in the universe. The great irony of meditation is that we become *more* immersed in the here-and-now. When we are liberated from our false egos, we begin to know and love others at a deeper level of awareness. We reach out with a new found compassion to our family, friends, the less fortunate.

The personal fruits of prayer that St Paul talks about can also include a call to action. As Father Johnston points out, the flame of love that springs from prayer can suddenly burst forth. Like the prophets of old, the person who meditates often has an inner eye awakened to suffering and injustice in the world and suddenly discovers that he or she cannot refuse the call to action. The path of meditation often leads to a compassion for the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the weak, the underprivileged, the needy.

We see this in Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier who are involved in the conflicts, suffering, the anguish of the world in which they live and yet are committed to this affirmation of silence in prayer. And apart from these great spiritual witnesses there are a host of meditators around the world who integrate their daily meditation with love, commitment and service to family and community.

Our prayer life and our actions cannot be separated for they are of the same fabric. Prayer and action are both sides of the same coin. This mixed life of prayer and action was chosen by Jesus himself who taught and preached and healed while at the same time devoting so much time to prayer.

For all of us who are meditating it is important to remember that we cannot enjoy the silence and stillness while ignoring our worldly or family affairs and responsibilities. That would simply be a delusion. On the other hand meditation will give us the spiritual energy to change the world. The great seventeenth-century spiritual guide, Father Louis Lallemant said that a person of prayer will accomplish more in one year than another person who does not pray will accomplish in an entire lifetime.

In meditation there is an awakening of the inner eye, the eye of the heart, the inner eye of love. This is the *metanoia* or conversion that is beautifully described in Ezekiel (36:26, 27). 'A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone . . . and I will put my spirit within you.' This is the gospel cry of Jesus: 'change your hearts for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 3:2). On the journey of meditation the inner eye of love transforms our hearts and we are led into a life of fruitful action. For without prayer our actions can often be very sterile. Perhaps St Teresa of Avila said it most suc-