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Selected talks from

The Hunger for Depth and Meaning

Learning to meditate with JOHN MAIN

Edited by Peter Ng



This Meditatio CD commemorates the 25th Anniversary of the life of John Main (1926-1982) His life and his teaching on contemplative prayer inspire The World Community for Christian Meditation. John Main was a Benedictine monk. He recovered the Christian tradition of meditation as practised by the early Desert monks and taught it as a spiritual discipline for people from all walks of life.

The complete set of 10 CDs and the book containing the transcripts are available from Medio Media.

*These talks are drawn from a set of 10 CDs under the same title.
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The Hunger for Depth and Meaning

Learning to Meditate with
John Main

Ed Peter Ng

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How to Meditate

To meditate, you must learn to be still. Meditation is perfect stillness of body and spirit. The stillness of body, we achieve by being still. So when you begin to meditate, take a couple of moments to assume a comfortable posture. The only essential rule is to have your spine as upright as possible. And so the first thing to learn is to sit completely still. Your eyes should be lightly closed.

Then the stillness of spirit. The way to that stillness is to say silently, in the depth of your spirit, a word or a short phrase, to repeat that word over and over again. The word I recommend you to use is the Aramaic word *maranatha*. Say it in four equally-stressed syllables: ma-ra-na-tha. Say it silently; don't move your lips but recite it interiorly. Recite your word from beginning to end. Let go of your thoughts, of your ideas, of your imagination. Don't think. Don't use any words other than your one word. Just sound, say, the word in the depth of your spirit, and listen to it. Concentrate upon it with all your attention: Ma-ra-na-tha. That's all you have to do.

Leaving the Ego Behind

What is the essence of meditation? What is it really about?

It's learning to stand back and to allow God to come into the forefront of your life. So often in our experience, we find that we are the centre of our world. So many of us see reality revolving around us. We think quite naturally of situations and of people primarily in terms of "how is this going to affect me?" Now that's all right as far as it goes. But if we really imagine that we are at the centre of the world, then we are never going to see any situation, or any person, or ourselves, as we really are. Because, of course, we are not at the centre of the world. God is at the centre.

Now, meditation is trying to take that step away from self-centredness to God-centredness. The result is that we find our own place in the world. We find where we should be. We find our relationships in the right order – our relationships with one another, our relationship with creation, and our relationship with God. What we discover, and what is very important for each of us to discover, is that we do have an essential place in God's plan, each of us responding uniquely to the unique gift of our own creation. Perhaps that is the most important thing for people in our society to discover: their own dignity, their own unique gift, the gift of their own creation.

How can we set about this? Meditation is a discipline, and it is the discipline of learning to stand back, learning to focus our attention or, perhaps even better, focus our whole being on God. We have to begin somewhere. We have to begin with ourselves. We have to begin by learning to be silent ourselves. We have to really begin by learning to *be*, to be ourselves, not to be as it were defining ourselves by some activity, whether that activity is some work or some thinking process, but simply to be.

Now this is the purpose of the practice and the art of meditation in learning to say our word, our mantra. To meditate, what we have to learn to do is to sit down, to be still, to be as still as possible physically, and then to begin to recite in our heart, in our mind, in our being, our word or our mantra. The word I recommend you to recite is the word *maranatha*. That's four equally-stressed syllables. You sound those syllables interiorly, silently, without moving your lips. As you sound them, you listen to them: ma-ra-na-tha.

The purpose of sounding them, the purpose of saying or sounding your mantra, is that that becomes the focus of your attention, of your concentration. You are not thinking about anything. You are not, as it were, pursuing any insights that are coming to you, any thoughts that are coming to you. You leave those. You let them, as it were, fall away. What you do is come to a greater and greater silence, where the only sound in your mind is the word, the mantra.

You have to learn, and the recitation of the mantra will teach you this, to be patient, to be extremely patient. You have to learn to be humble. In meditating, we are not seeking, as it were, to possess God. We are not seeking to come to some profound insights about God. We are seeking simply to be the person we are called to be. We are seeking simply to accept as fully as possible, and to respond to as fully as possible, the gift of our own creation. To do that, we have to learn to be still, to be silent, to be truly humble.

You are all familiar with the word 'egoism'. The word 'ego' is used a great deal in modern parlance or jargon. Basically, in meditation, we are leaving the ego

behind. We are not trying to see with the ego, as it were, but we are trying to be ourself, our true self. The curious paradox is that, once we give up trying to see, once we give up trying to possess, we see all and all things are ours.

When you are beginning, you need to understand the simplicity of it. The simplicity is just this: that every morning and every evening, you give yourself the opportunity to be, to be in utter simplicity, to be in humility, not asking yourself, “What is happening to me now?” not trying to analyse yourself, “Am I enjoying this? Am I getting anything out of this?” During this time of being, you put your self-reflective ego entirely aside. And this you do every morning and every evening. And during the time of your meditation, just say your word, from the beginning to the end: ma-ra-na-tha. That’s how to begin.

You have to begin on faith. There is no way that you can, as it were, evaluate what is happening when you begin. You have to begin in faith. But beginning will lead you into faith. You can’t, as it were, have a stab at meditating – you say your word for three minutes and then stop to see how you are getting on. You have to learn, and you require patience to learn, to say your word from the beginning to the end, every day.

Where does this tie in, in Christian terms? In Christian terms, we know that God has sent his Spirit to dwell in our hearts. In other words, his being is within us, and meditating is simply being open to his being. Listen to St Paul writing to the Corinthians:

For the same God who said, ‘Out of darkness, let light shine’, has caused his light to shine within us, to give us the light of revelation – the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

That light and that glory are to be found in our hearts if only we will learn to be still, to be silent, to be humble. That is the exact purpose of the mantra – to lead us to that silence, stillness and humility.

The Theology of Prayer

This evening, I want to put before you what is the essential theology of prayer.

We know from the doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the fullness of God is to be found in our own hearts. We know that the full life of the Trinity is lived in our hearts. This means that Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts. His human consciousness is to be found within each one of us. The journey of prayer is simply to find the way to open our human consciousness to his human consciousness.

The reason why in the Christian tradition we meditate is that we believe that Jesus has sent his Spirit to dwell in our hearts. In other words, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Creator of the universe, dwells in our hearts, and in silence is loving to all. In the Christian tradition, meditating is simply being open to this Spirit of Love, the Spirit of God.

Listen to St Paul writing to the Colossians:

Therefore since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord, live your lives in union with him. Be rooted in him; be built in him ... For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied. And in him, you have been brought to completion. (Col 2:6-7, 9)

This is what the essential message of Christianity is about, that our call and our potential is to enter into the life of God through Jesus, through his Spirit present in our hearts.

We do this, not by analysing God or analysing Jesus, not by thinking about God or thinking about Jesus, but by being silent and still, and in his presence opening our hearts to his love, and doing so in the steady rhythm of our daily meditation.

This is the wonder of the doctrine of the Incarnation, because Jesus, being man and possessing a human consciousness, is our way to the Father; because it is possible for us to open our human consciousness to his. That is the marvel, the perfection, of the Christian revelation – that he is *the* Way, and he is the *only* Way. He is the universal Redeemer and the universal Sanctifier. He is so for us because his human consciousness is fully open to the Father in love. When in the silence of prayer, in the concentration of our meditation, we open our human consciousness to him, we go beyond him, to the Father. We go beyond him by his power of self-transcending love.

The Grand Poverty of the Mantra

The essential task for the Christian is to understand poverty as the condition of spiritual development, to see prayer as the deepening of our conversion, of our turning from self to God in faith.

The monastic tradition has always emphasized, since Cassian and St Benedict, that poverty is the condition for prayer.

The monastic teaching and tradition of prayer tells us in every generation, all Christians, not just monks, that our prayer is our declaration of poverty, our experience of poverty. And so its teaching on how to pray tells us how to let ourselves be led by the Spirit into a totally generous poverty of spirit. From Cassian until the present day, the monastic tradition has taught what Cassian's Tenth Conference on Prayer calls 'the poverty of the single verse'. We are led to this other-centredness of love, into the prayer of Christ which is the Spirit praying in our hearts, by the simplicity, the humility, the openness, of committing ourselves wholly in our meditation to the recitation of a single word.

John Cassian speaks of the purpose of meditation as that of restricting the mind to the poverty of the single verse. Cassian writes:

The mind should unceasingly cling to the [mantra], until strengthened by continual use of it, it casts off and rejects the rich and ample matter of all kinds of thought and restricts itself to the poverty of the single verse... Those who realize this poverty arrive with ready ease at the first of the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are they who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. [Matt 5:3]' (Conference 10:11)

Cassian talks about becoming 'grandly poor'. Prayer is both the acknowledgement and experience of our own poverty, our own utter dependence on God, who is the source of our being. But it is also the experience of our redemption, our enrichment by the love of God in Jesus. This twin aspect of prayer, of poverty and redemption, leads Cassian to call the condition we enjoy in prayer a 'grand poverty'.

Meditation will certainly give you new insights into poverty. As you persevere with the mantra, you will begin to understand more and more deeply, out of your own experience, what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matt 5:3). You will also learn in a very concrete way the meaning of faithfulness as you persevere in fidelity to the repetition of the mantra. In meditation, then, we declare our own poverty. We renounce words, thoughts, imaginations and we do so by restricting the mind to the poverty of the one word. The mantra is the sacrament of our poverty in prayer.

As Cassian puts it, the mantra contains all the human mind can express and all the human heart can feel. That one little word conveys and leads us into the silence which is the silence of creative energy.

Cassian wrote: "The Christian has as his principal aim the realization of the Kingdom of God, the power of the Spirit of Jesus in his heart." But we cannot get this

by our own efforts or think our way into it. So we have a simpler, more immediate goal which he calls 'purity of heart'. And this is all we should concern ourselves with, he teaches; the rest will be given to you. And the way to purity of heart, to clear awareness, is the way of poverty, the grand poverty of the mantra.

What the Tradition Tells Us

We speak to you as Benedictine monks. Our message to you is that we are the inheritors, you and I, in this time, of a long and rich spiritual tradition. It's a tradition that has been passed on and has survived for hundreds of years despite many attacks on it, despite many misunderstandings of it, and despite simple neglect.

The tradition that we speak out of is the tradition of the prayer of John Cassian in the Desert and the Benedictine tradition, for example as enshrined in *The Cloud of Unknowing* written in the fourteenth century in England, in the writings of Abbot Chapman in the twentieth century in England. All that tradition over the centuries says to us that the supreme task for every life that would be fully alive, fully human, is to be as open as we can be to that life of Jesus within us.

Consider for a moment what the tradition tells us. The tradition tells us that Jesus lives in our hearts. We have all read that in the scriptures. We all know it at one level. Listen to St Paul here:

Continually, while still alive, we are being surrendered into the hands of death, for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in this mortal body of ours. (2 Cor 4:11)

That is the conviction of the early Church: that the life of Jesus is being progressively and more profoundly revealed within each one of us. That we have to keep absolutely clear, because Christianity isn't in essence a theory or a theology. It is in essence openness to the person of Jesus Christ. In that openness, we are taken by him to the Father. Christianity is the religion of transcendence – transcending our own limited life and entering into the limitless life of God.

Now that being the essential theology, what is our response to that? What does the tradition tell us about the way? The tradition tells us that we must learn to be disciplined. We must learn to leave self behind, which is another way of saying that we must learn to leave the limitations of self behind and we must be open to the being of God. Make no mistake about it. Christianity proclaims an astonishing doctrine. St Paul writes:

Indeed, it is for your sake that all things are ordered, so that, as the abounding grace of God is shared by more and more, the greater may be the chorus of thanksgiving that ascends to the glory of God. (2 Cor 4:15)

This is the doctrine that we have to be open to. This is the person that we have to be open to. The tradition tells us that we must learn discipline, and we must learn simplicity. Hence the need for our daily meditation, every morning and every evening, and during the time of our meditation to learn to be profoundly silent. That we do by reciting our word.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* says confine the whole activity of your being to the recital of one little word. The recitation of the word will teach you many things. It will teach you humility. It will teach you poverty, that you surrender all the richness of words, all your ideas, to be open to the supreme reality, the infinity of God

that cannot be captured in any concept, in any idea, in any intellectual formula, but that can be encountered in your own heart, in the depth of your being, where you are open to the being of God.

Meditating is not thinking about God, not thinking about theology or thinking about religion. Meditating is something much greater than that. It's *being* with God. When you begin you have to take that on faith. You take it on the faith of godly men and women throughout the ages who have confronted the basic theology that Jesus lives, and that he lives in our hearts. They have confronted it and sought to make the truth of it the main thrust of their lives. That's their tradition.

When we sit down to meditate, we put ourselves in touch with a great and glorious tradition of men and women who throughout the ages have understood that the greatest wisdom is to leave self behind; men and women who have understood the words of Jesus "unless you leave yourself behind, you cannot be my disciple"; men and women who have set out on this path whereby we leave behind all our own limitations and enter into the infinite generosity of God's love.

Self-Transcendence

The essence of the Gospel message, and the essence of the experience of meditation, is not self-analysis but self-transcendence. As Jesus puts it, “If anyone would be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind.” (Matt 16:24)

A great deal of the interest in the spiritual life in our time has a psychological origin. People are often interested in what prayer, in what meditation, can teach them about themselves. It’s very easy for people of our generation to see everything in terms of self-improvement, self-understanding, and so forth. In fact, of course, this fascination that we have for looking at ourselves can be disastrous for the spiritual journey. There is a real danger that, if we take up meditation and do begin to see that we are understanding ourselves better and then begin to follow this line of discovery, we quickly find that we have left the pilgrimage of meditation, which is a pilgrimage into unlimited knowledge and wisdom. We find that we end up stuck in the limited knowledge of isolation, our own isolation. There is a very real danger that we become as it were entranced by ourselves, by our own mental operations, so entranced that we forget that we are on a pilgrimage into the mystery of God. As Jesus puts it, “If anyone would be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind.” (Matt 16:24)

There is no doubt that there is something arduous and demanding about the journey. It requires nerve to take the attention off yourself, to let go of your ideas, and to gaze wholeheartedly ahead. The person meditating is like the eye that can see but cannot see itself. So this is a journey that requires faith, that is commitment. The commitment is to what is beyond yourself, what is greater than yourself. So the journey requires humility, the humility to stop thinking about yourself. What this means is that, as we advance on the journey, we must continually let go of what we think we have achieved. The problem is, when we start, we are always concerned with our progress, with how perfectly we are fulfilling the techniques, and so forth. We must learn that we have to let go. This is the challenge, and it’s the challenge that in practical terms requires us to keep saying the mantra from the beginning of our meditation until the end. That’s something that you must understand absolutely clearly. If you want to learn to meditate, it is necessary to meditate every day, every morning and every evening and it’s necessary, while you are meditating, to say the mantra from the beginning until the end. Whatever thoughts come into your mind, whether they are good thoughts or religious thoughts, holy thoughts or bad thoughts, let them go and say the mantra. That means we avoid all the business of rating ourselves in terms of success or failure, in terms of progression or regression. Meditation is the way of learning just to *be*. To be who you are in the presence of God; to be who you are in complete simplicity. And that’s what the mantra leads us to when we learn to be faithful to it.

Growing in Love

Everyone who perseveres in meditation discovers that although during our time of meditation it might appear that nothing happens, yet gradually the whole of our life is changed. We have to be patient; we might like it to be changed more rapidly. Our thought becomes clarified, relationships become more loving. This is because, in the process of meditation, we are made free to love by Love. The reason for all this is really very simple. When we meditate, not only do we stand back from the individual operations of our being, but we begin to learn to find a wholly new ground to stand on. We discover a rootedness of being. The rootedness is not just in ourselves, but we discover ourselves rooted in God. Rooted in God who is Love.

The peace, the stillness and the harmony that we experience in meditation becomes the basis for all our action. All our judgments are now illumined, inspired by love, because we know that that love is the very ground of our being. All this happens because we learn the courage to take the attention off ourselves. We learn to stop thinking about ourselves. We allow ourselves to *be* – to be still, to be silent. And in that stillness and silence we find ourselves in God, in love.

What you will find is that the experience itself is self-authenticating. You will find that the more you meditate, the more your day seems to come into shape and the more purpose you have in your life. Then, the more you begin to see the meaning in everything and the more you will find that love grows in your heart. Now it may be that there is a good deal of meanness there as well, but the love is growing. That is the real test of meditation. But you cannot put any sort of materialistic test to meditation, like “Do I get fantastic visions when I meditate?” The real test is the love growing in your heart.

A couple of years ago, a man came to our Monday evening group. Each Monday evening, he would ask the same question. He would say: “How long do I have to keep this up for? I have been meditating for three, four months every morning and every evening, and absolutely nothing is happening. It’s all very well for you to sit there and say that I’ve got to have no expectations, that I’ve got to accept the discipline of it, that I’ve got to have faith. But, surely to God, something has got to happen one day.”

Now that went on until one evening he wasn’t there. As everyone was leaving, at about half past nine, he turned up. I could see that something had happened to him. There were smiles all over his face. “An extraordinary thing has just happened,” he said. “As I was turning the corner at the bottom of the hill to come up here, a young kid pushed his bike in front of my car. I could see that he did it deliberately. I just tapped it and stopped immediately. Three kids surrounded the car and demanded, ‘You’ve got to pay me compensation; you’ve wrecked my bike.’ I was amazed how calm I was. I said, ‘Let’s get the bike into the car and we’ll drive round to the police station.’” He had some job persuading them but eventually he got them around and took them in. He said that throughout the whole thing he was simply amazed at his calm attitude towards this experience.

What he said to me was: “Well, you know I don’t suppose anything is ever going to happen in my meditation. But, I do see that it’s going to change my life!”

Now, that’s the experience of all of us who meditate. The great test as to whether your meditation is working, or whether you are making progress (I don’t advise you to rate yourselves) is: Are you growing in love; are you growing in patience; are you growing in understanding and compassion? That is the effect of our

meditation. With some of us, it takes longer. With some of us, the end of egoism requires a big struggle. Sometimes, we are carried more or less kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the important thing is not to bother how long it takes. It doesn't matter how long it takes. The only thing that matters – and the thing that I wish I could communicate to everyone here this evening – the only thing that matters is that we are on the journey. The journey is a journey away from self, away from egoism, away from selfishness, away from isolation. It's a journey into the infinite love of God.



The Way of Silence

Silence is the essential human response to the mystery of God, to the infinity of God.

It is as though the mystery of God is a wonderful multi-faceted diamond. When we talk about God or we think about God, it is as though we are responding to one or other of his facets. But when we are silent in his presence, we respond to the mystery which we call God as a whole, and that, omni-dimensionally. The wonder of it is that it is the whole of us that responds to the entirety of the mystery of God. It is not just our intellect, not just our emotions, not just the religious side of us or the secular side of us. Everything that we are responds to everything that he is, in absolute harmony, in absolute love. That is what the experience of Christian prayer is – our union with the one who is One.

How is this possible? It is possible through the Incarnate Reality that is Jesus. God is fully revealed in Jesus, fully present in Jesus, and the love of Jesus has made us one with him. By becoming open in silence to his reality, we become open in wonder to the reality of God. We learn to be silent by being content to say our mantra in humble fidelity.

To tread the spiritual path, we must learn to be silent. What is required of us is a journey into profound silence. Part of the problem of the weakening of religion in our times is that religion uses words for its prayers and rituals, but those words have to be charged with meaning. And they can only be charged with meaning sufficient to move our hearts, to set us out in new directions, to change our lives, if they spring from spirit. And spirit requires silence. We all need to use words, but to use them with power, we all need to be silent. Meditation is the way to silence, the way of silence. It is the way of the mantra, the word that leads us to such a silence that ultimately charges all words with meaning.

Silence is really absolutely necessary for the human spirit if it really is to thrive. Not only just to thrive, but to be creative, to have a creative response to life, to our environment, to our friends. Because the silence gives our spirit room to breathe, room to *be*. In silence, you don't have to be justifying yourself, apologizing for yourself, trying to impress anyone. You just have to be. It's a most marvellous experience when you come to it. The wonder of it is that, in that experience, you are completely free. You are not trying to play any role; you are not trying to fulfil anyone's expectations.

To learn to meditate, you have to learn to be silent, and not to be afraid of silence. One of the great problems for modern people is that we are so unused to silence. Many people live with a constant background of radio, or television, or some sort of noise going on. Now in meditation, you are, as it were, crossing over the threshold from the background noise into silence. Now let me just try to explain to you the reaction you must try to have to the silence. What happens is this. You begin to recite your word and you begin to feel more peaceful, more silent. Then you become aware that you are on the threshold of silence. This is sort of a critical moment for many people, because you are leaving the familiar world of your sounds, your ideas, your thoughts, and your words. You are crossing over into silence, and you don't know what's in store for you. That's why it is so important,

so useful, to meditate in a group. That's why it is so important and so useful to meditate in a tradition that says to you, "Fear not, don't be afraid." The purpose of our meditation is to be in the presence of love, the love that, as Jesus tells us, casts out all fear. But it is a critical moment. Because if you go back to your thoughts, to your ideas, even perhaps to your prayers, you've turned away from the entry into silence, into prayer, into love.

I think what all of us have to learn is not so much that we have to create silence. The silence is there, within us. What we have to do is to enter into it, to become silent, to become the silence. The purpose of meditation and the challenge of meditation is to allow ourselves to become silent enough to allow this interior silence to emerge. Silence is the language of the spirit.

Learning to say your mantra, learning to say your word, leaving behind all other words, ideas, imaginations and fantasies, is learning to enter into the presence of the Spirit who dwells in our inner heart, who dwells there in love. The Spirit of God dwells in our hearts in silence. In humility and in faith, we must enter into that silent presence.

