

# The Silent Answer

by The Good Life

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Peter and Patricia Ng do not believe that things happen by chance. Looking back, they certainly do not think it was by chance alone that Patricia one day stumbled on "Light Within".

This is a book about meditation. Well, scores of books have been written on the subject, but this was one of the few to discuss it in Christian terms. It suited Peter and Patricia, who are Catholics. The book transformed their lives. As a result, it changed the lives of more than a hundred other people in Singapore.

Patricia found the book in late 1986, at a time when she and her husband were quite dissatisfied with their religion. Like Catholics should, they attend mass every Sunday. But they found it rather meaningless.

"If you go to church," Peter says, "you want to pray. And if you find that the way of praying is inadequate, then you say, 'Why do I go to church?'. Still, we wanted to go to church. A lot of parents go to church for the children's sake. You want the children to have a spiritual anchor in their lives. Never mind about us."

From their friends who were Buddhists, Hindus or in other religions, Peter and Patricia could see the value of meditation in deepening one's spiritual life. But being Christians, they hesitated to join their friends. "I found that it's a bit alien because they would be using the names of their own deities," Patricia explains.

"So I had no where to turn to. I couldn't go into another religion to practise meditation because I would then have to reconcile a lot of things. I was searching a lot for a number of years for a Christian style of meditation. I wanted something like what the other people were doing, but didn't know where to find it. Adds Peter: "Somehow, when your yearning is there, for a closer relationship with the Creator the answer is given. That's why we stumbled on the book by Fr Laurence Freeman. It was a moment of joy."

Patricia remembers that day well. "I walked into the bookshop and I saw this book just staring at me. It was just facing the doorway and I could see the title, Light Within. It sounded great. "I picked it up and there is a sub-heading which says, 'The inner path of meditation'. And on the very first page, there is already a method." Patricia bought the book without browsing further. Every chapter she read encouraged her to start meditating. By the time she finished reading Chapter 2, she got started.

"It was really terrible. . . the first time I did it. It was sort of strange, you know, sitting in darkness. It was a frightening feeling. You concentrate - maybe it's tension - and you feel as though a gloom is coming over you. And in less than five minutes, I had to open my eyes.

"I sort of felt fearful; I sort of wondered whether I would blank out. But they say it is quite a common thing because you have never really faced yourself before and this is an encounter with yourself."

At first, she did it on and off. The encouragement to persevere came just a month later. Peter had to go to London and the couple took the opportunity to visit a Christian meditation centre whose address was given in the book. There, Patricia met nuns who meditated daily. It reassured her because she always considered nuns to be conservative people. After about four months, Patricia was meditating quite regularly, twice a day. After a year, she felt so good about meditation that she wanted to share it with others in church.

But she did not know how to begin. Being a "Sunday Catholic", she did not know many people in church. She did not know the priests well. In any case, what would the priests think? Hadn't she started meditating because she was unhappy with the Prayers which they led? Again, probably not just by chance, Fr Laurence happened to pass by Singapore on his way to Australia. Peter and Patricia Ng told a priest about him, they lent the priest their copy of Light Within and the priest agreed to have Fr Laurence give a talk on meditation.

Later, Fr Laurence suggested that Peter and Patricia lead a meditation group. And that put Peter in a fix. All this while, he had only been observing his wife meditate. He had noticed that she became a calmer person. But he never joined her. His work kept him busy. "I wrestled with the dilemma for three weeks," Peter recalls. "How could I tell people to meditate twice a day when I don't do it myself?" Finally, he decided to give it a try. To

his surprise, he found that he could sit still in meditation - for between 20 and 30 minutes each time, twice a day, every day.

So one meditation group was formed at the Holy Family Church in Katong. Then another, and another. Today, there are six meditation groups there. A seventh group was started in March this year at the Church of Christ the King in Ang Mo Kio. The Holy Family Church is now listed in books on Christian meditation as one of only six Christian meditation centres in the world.

Peter and Patricia strongly advocate doing meditation within a spiritual context, though not necessarily in the context of Christianity. "Meditation is commonly practised in Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions," Peter notes. "Non-Christians should look into their own religious traditions. The method is universal."

Secular meditation has, of late, become popular. People do it for health reasons, to alleviate stress, to develop their creativity and so on. The couple does not encourage that. Patricia tried it about seven years ago. She had read the book, *The Relaxation Response*, which also talked about repeating a word, thinking of the word, and blanking the mind. "After I read that, whenever I had a headache, I would do it for 20 minutes. I would say the word 'Love'. And I found that it worked very well. But it didn't give me the stimulus to carry on. It is just like you stop jogging after a while."

Moreover, Peter explains, the teachings of meditation in any spiritual context - Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or others - always emphasise a diminishing of the ego as well as a diminishing of desire. All the great spiritual traditions teach that people should not meditate for selfish reasons, to improve themselves. Nor is the meditators suppose to desire anything, not even noble goals like good health or a closer relationship with God.

The meditator sits down to meditate. That is all. The more a person tries to achieve something through meditation, the less likely he or she will succeed. But if the person meditates solely for the sake of meditating, the fruits of meditation will come about naturally. "You must understand that the peace of mind, the love, the patience, the compassion.. . these are gifts of the spirit. I think there must be that understanding. It makes your whole meditation a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage, that you are seeking God within you.

"When people pay for meditation," Peter adds, "it becomes a monetary relationship. You say, 'I am paying you five hundred bucks, what am I getting out of it?' When You think that way, it's all gone. It is no longer a matter of the spirit." All the talk about spirituality may give the impression that Peter is a highly spiritual person who spends most of his time in meditation. Not so. He is an ordinary person with a job that deals in very ordinary, very materialistic things - money.

Peter is deputy managing director of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. He is responsible for investing Singapore's national reserves. Such a job can be exceedingly stressful. Meditation keeps him calm. He believes it helps him perform his job better and he is quick to dispel misconceptions that people who pay attention to spiritual matters lack the drive for a successful career.

"There is this problem in the minds of people," Peter says, "that when they know you are rather spiritually inclined, and you discuss this matter of meaning in life. . . they take it to mean that 'this guy has got no fire in him'. "But I ask, is it true? Is that really true?"

"I think that if we are able to have peace of mind, if we are able to have a good mental make-up, if you are also able to live your life in a spiritual way, it actually energises the physical side and the material side."

He cites the case of Sir John Templeton. "He is almost 80 years old. But he is probably the most outstanding global investor. He manages, I think, more than US\$10 billion worth of funds accumulated from individuals. "He is a man of great serenity. When you speak to him, you know that this man is at peace with himself, even though his work is such that he has got to be very astute in the business world.

Sir John feels strongly that there are not enough people of stature in the spiritual realm and so he started an annual Templeton Award, the "Nobel Prize" for such people. "I am very encouraged, very glad," Peter says, "to look at an example of success - of corporate success, economics success - and to be able to find that, at the root of it all, is a very balanced person with a spiritual view of things."

**Peter Ng is chief investment officer of the Singapore Investment Corporation. Peter and Patricia Ng found the first Christian meditation group in Singapore.**