



Dear Meditators

In this newsletter, Fr Laurence Freeman writes about his participation in the Wisdom 2.0 conference in Singapore in June. I have heard that his presentation on meditation was very well received by what was essentially a secular audience. Quite a number of the participants were interested to find out more about the Christian tradition of meditation, and came to the introductory group meetings that I lead on Tuesday evenings at Holy Family parish.

Fr Laurence attracted attention at the Wisdom 2.0 conference as the Benedictine monk who had helped Mr Lee Kuan Yew with his meditation practice. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his eulogy on Mr Lee, had mentioned a Benedictine monk that I had introduced to Mr Lee.

From his interaction with Singaporeans at the Wisdom 2.0 conference, Fr Laurence feels that Mr Lee Kuan Yew's practice of meditation, which he was willing to share publicly, may develop into his spiritual legacy for Singapore. Fr Laurence expanded on this theme in the monthly column that he writes for the Tablet in the UK. I have attached the article to this letter.

Update of Newsletter Circulation List

We need our Group Leaders and recipients of the newsletter to help us update and refresh our email and our postal mailing lists.

This quarterly newsletter is a tradition of our global meditation community going back to the time when John Main began writing it from his monastery in Montreal in the 1970s. It has become a useful and important medium of communication for the community. Fr Laurence Freeman, as John Main did, gives a spiritual teaching related to meditation. The letter includes also feature articles and news about the community around the world. We in Singapore report on and announce events in the local community. The newsletter connects meditators and friends to WCCM and encourages meditators to persevere in their practice. If they have stopped meditating, it might nudge them to restart.

The existing circulation list is several years out of date. So we need to update it as recipients' particulars might have changed and many new meditators should be included. Please help Daulet and her helpers with this updating.

Sharing by Maria and Catherine about Monte Oliveto

Most of you are aware of the retreats and seminars that WCCM organises regularly for the global community. The events are described on the WCCM website www.wccm.org. Among these are the annual John Main Seminar and Retreat, the Holy Week Retreat on Bere Island, and the Monte Oliveto Retreat in Italy.

Two of our Singapore meditators, Maria and Catherine, were at this year's Monte Oliveto Retreat. Fr Laurence commented to me that Maria and Catherine gave an inspiring account of their journey of meditation. I asked Daulet to request them to share their stories with our Singapore community. We thank Maria and Catherine for their sharing.

Until the next newsletter, I thank you for your participation, silent or active, in the life of our community. May you experience more and more the joy and peace that meditation reveals to us in the indwelling presence of our Lord.

PETER NG



JUNE 2015

Lee Kuan Yew

There is a moving film clip of Lee Kuan Yew weeping during a press conference after Singapore had been expelled from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. His grand strategy lay in ruins. Singapore's future looked bleak and vulnerable. People saw the personal impact of his failure, the hard politician at his weakest point.

Fifty years later and after his death in March this year at ninety-one, LKY's Singapore is the third richest country in the world, the hub of east-west commerce and finance, a hi-tech, efficient green city state, a country that constantly improves itself. No one doubts that this is essentially the work of one man, a leader who never backed down from a course he had decided on, who modelled and demanded the highest personal integrity and never shrank from hard decisions or from stating uncomfortable truths. When he travelled the world's statesman, retired or in office, lined up to consult him.

His death evoked an unexpectedly intense emotional response from this materialistic and pragmatic culture. Even though he had stepped down from power while he was alive his authority was unquestioned. The public mourning revealed how this 'founding father' was indeed a father figure in the collective psyche, a tough-love parent who gave everything to his children and demanded compliance in return.

Late in life, faithful to his agnosticism, dealing with painful personal situations, he wanted to learn to meditate. Ironically he said he found it easier to learn from a Christian tradition than from an eastern one. He thought that perhaps this was because he was western-trained. I was intrigued to meet him and to see the practical, serious, rational mind he brought to his task as he developed his personal discipline. He listened intently and I was even more surprised to realise what a humble man he was – taking humility to mean self-knowledge, honesty and openness to change.

Few would have known that he was learning to meditate if he had not mentioned it, in some detail, in a New York Times interview. When he did, the news flashed around the Singaporean news media and before long our meditation groups there were inundated by enquiries and new members. I continued to meet with Mr Lee when I was in Singapore with Peter Ng, our national coordinator whom he had first approached and who helped him maintain his practice.

Shortly before his physical condition deteriorated LKY willingly agreed to Peter's suggestion that, at our next meeting, we would film a conversation. I raised a number of questions with him outside the kind he was used to answering but he responded directly with his intense eye contact and intellectual transparency.

When I asked him whether he had felt any spiritual insights as a result of his meditation he smiled slightly and said I was asking the wrong person, as he was not a religious man. When I countered that I had used the word 'spiritual' not 'religious' he stopped, thought, and said he had never considered that distinction before. He said simply that he had seen that the self he was 'within', which his meditation had revealed, was different from the outer public self – an unusual insight and admission for any politician. When I asked him if he would recommend world leaders to meditate together at summit meetings he smiled at what he thought was my naïveté and said he thought it would be unlikely. I replied that so did I, but I had asked if he would recommend it. He took the point and said seriously after some moments that, yes he would; and in fact if there were any chance of violence as an outcome he would recommend they meditated a lot.

Mr Lee and his family approved the film and it was put online. Last week I spoke at a conference in Singapore on the place of wisdom in business and technology. I was astonished at the numbers of young Singaporeans approaching me who had seen the film and been deeply affected by it. They had discovered another and more sensitive side to their national father figure as he spoke about his inner life and the importance that he felt meditation had for the future.

It was then I realised that Mr Lee had been deliberately leaving another and very different legacy to the people and country he had given his life to developing economically. He could not legislate for this spiritual legacy however. He could only speak of it from his own experience. But, as I talked and responded to the questions of the younger generation of affluent Singaporeans seeking meaning in their lives, I saw that LKY knew what he was doing when he spoke about his meditation. And I think it may be about to have the effect he intended.

♦



Success & Failure by MARIA TAN

*Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk*



The Place

The retreat was held at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore in Tuscany, Italy. The Benedictine monastery was founded in the early 14th century by St Bernado Tolomei of Siena. The Olivetian Congregation follows the Rule of St Benedict, and has a special devotion to our lady.

The monastery sits on a cliff surrounded by woodlands. At the entrance, a tower with drawbridge stands open and welcoming. Step in, and an avenue of venerable cypress trees leads you to the Abbey courtyard. Each tree, still and silent, tells me that I am in the right place.

The Retreat

The theme of the retreat was *Love and the Gift of Failure*. Fr Laurence opened fresh and challenging insights. Although we welcome success, he said, failure is inevitable. Both are built into life. Thomas Edison encountered failure after failure before he invented the light bulb. Each time he failed, he did not despair but was encouraged that he had discovered one more thing not to do. Just like the Chinese saying: Failure is the mother of success. failure gives birth to success (失败为成功之母.).

Fr Laurence explained that our response to failure depends on our perception of truth. Things change according to how we look at them. If success and failure are seen through a dualistic viewpoint they become two mutually exclusive outcomes, and failure is to be avoided. Seen in a unified view, success and failure are simply aspects of the whole, and failure does not really matter.

In order to go through the cycles of success and failure with a degree of equanimity, we need to know the meaning of our lives. And the meaning, Fr Laurence emphasised, is love. However, love is demanding. Love is relentless in bringing down the ego and challenging the yardstick of how things should or should not be. Success and failure, both are gifts. As we practise dying to the ego in our daily meditations, we begin to experience what we are destined for. Resurrection comes and we see failure and success without judgement. Success is success; failure is failure. Both have a place and both are gifts.

My Journey

*Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk*

That was the haiku Fr Laurence gave us at the start of the retreat. Did the monk fail? Probably not. He had grown in self-awareness.

Going to Monte Oliveto for a retreat is the closest I have come to realising an almost forgotten childhood dream of living in a monastery high up in the mountains. From the time I was young, I was attracted to silence and the non-dualistic teachings of Tao and Zen. At that age, I sometimes felt guilty that I was reading these 'pagan' texts. There was a constant tension between the Catholic faith I learnt through catechism classes and the belief and attitude of 'being' which I read about and was attracted to in Tao and Zen. All these struggles came to an end when I chanced upon Christian meditation while trying to make sense of a failure. I have been meditating faithfully since then.

Meditating in our fast-paced Singapore presents many distractions. Many at time during meditation, I side-tracked into planning for a project I was working on or scanned through the to-do list to check what I had missed. When my sister Catherine signed me up for the Monte Oliveto retreat and made all the arrangements, I thought this would be a great chance to meditate with NO distractions.

How wrong I was! I probably had equal or more distractions during the four daily meditations at the retreat. My mind went on explorations of the cypress trees around the monastery, had conversations with the ideas that Fr Laurence presented, and savoured the interesting encounters with newly-made friends from the international Community. An ill feeling about having 'bad' meditations tormented me for four days. On day five, light dawned. I had just walked uphill to the gate of the monastery to the restaurant where our meals were served. The place was crowded with tourists and cyclists; it was a busy day. Lunch in hand, I found a quiet corner at the front yard. Immediately, the warm noonday sun embraced me as a light breeze passed by. I closed my eyes, and a thought surfaced: 'God is not found just in silence, nor is he just in the whisper of the breeze. God is also in the noisy market place; he is also in the scorching Singapore sun.'

The retreat ended sooner than I realised, but with the new insight I was ready to return as a monk in the world. Little did I know that the test would come so early. We were at Rome airport waiting for our flight home. Our scheduled flight was delayed by two hours but we were told that we could still catch our connecting flight in London. With so much time to kill, my sister and I started to write our reflections. It was only when we sensed people moving that we hurried to the counter only to be told that we had been waiting at the wrong gate and that our flight had taken off half an hour ago. They could try to find us a flight to London, without luggage, but the next available flight from London to Singapore would be three days later. A traveller's worst nightmare! So did we get back? As Julien of Norwich assured: "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Indeed all was well. Perhaps we passed the test.

Yesterday, a monk
Today, a foolish monk
Tomorrow, a monk

No judgement. No expectation. All is well.



My Journey

in Christian Meditation



CATHERINE TAN

'There's a seminar on meditation for children; are you interested?' An invitation from my sister Maria opens the door. I embark on the journey of Christian meditation after attending the seminar in July 2012, led by Fr Laurence and other teachers. The seminar title is 'The Gift of Love' and I'm fascinated by videos showing young children sitting still in meditation. I work with children with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), and am constantly exploring ways to calm these exuberant children. After the seminar, I'm very grateful to Ms Terry Theseira, principal of the Canossian School for inviting me and my colleagues to observe how her students practise Quiet Time in school. After the visit, I incorporate Quiet Time in my therapy sessions. At this point, meditation is just another kind of 'mindfulness exercise' for my patients. The first stage of my meditation journey: Meditation **FOR MY PATIENTS**.

I enter the second stage of my journey after attending Fr Laurence's retreat in Singapore at the end of last year on the theme of the Eight Big Problems of Life. During the retreat, we are introduced to a useful WCCM App for the hand-phone. Now the 'Meditation Timer' and 'Daily Wisdom' are part of my daily routine. I try to meditate twice a day (morning and night) and read the 'daily wisdom' on the train on my way to the clinic. Slowly, I begin to realise that meditation is not only for my patients, meditation is also *for me!* I notice that I am calmer, even when I have to administer four hours of assessment with children with ADHD. In the past, I felt exhausted and breathless after observing and testing super hyperactive children in my clinic. In the small space of the room, they jump around, touch things, and ask random questions as I struggle to complete a battery of tests. It is essential for me to stay calm and alert, and not be distracted. I notice also that I am more compassionate towards the patients' parents. They are overwhelmed and exhausted handling their children; my place is to remain calm in order to hold the screams and cries of these devastated parents during the session. I find I can surf the turbulent waves without drowning in the chaos of working in a mental hospital. And I know meditation has brought me to this equanimity. The second stage of my meditation journey: Meditation **FOR ME**.

The retreat at Monte Oliveto in June this year marks the third stage of my meditation journey. As the retreat progresses I realise that meditation is not just meditating alone in my bedroom; it is also sharing in the love of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Meditation is about community. I meet many wonderful people



from different parts of the world, all on the same quest, and am filled with gratitude for the gift of spiritual friendship. As we meditate together four times a day, I'm amazed how everyone responds to the chime. By the strike of the third chime, everyone is still and silent – in harmony. The third stage of my meditation journey: Meditation **WITH THE COMMUNITY**.

Back home in Singapore now, I feel ready to step into the fourth stage of my meditation journey. Meditation has been such a gift for me, I am convinced that the patients (and staff) at my hospital also will benefit from it. We need to remain in God's love if we are to find the strength to fight our battles, and the monthly lunchtime mass that I



organise may not be sufficient. It would help the healing process immensely if these wounded lambs could spend more time with the Shepherd. As I recall the chimes during meditation at Monte Oliveto, psychologist Pavlov's Classical Conditioning¹ comes to mind. Perhaps I can apply that theory simply by ringing a bell? This will be a real breakthrough in the treatment for ADHD! But I'm not sure if it is safe to conduct meditation for the patients in my hospital. Will patients with OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) insist that the chime be struck a certain number of times, as they can be obsessed with counting? Can patients with autism sit still without rocking? What happens if patients with depression burst into cries during meditation? Or if aggressive patients assault others when everyone's eyes are closed? All these are my concerns. But I am learning to surrender all uncertainties into the hands of our Lord, and simply trust.

Lord, if this is your call, let me be your instrument.

Show me the way as I enter the next stage of this journey:

SHARING THE GIFT of Meditation.

¹Classical Conditioning is a learning process that occurs through association between an environmental stimulus and a naturally occurring stimulus. In Pavlov's classic experiment with dogs, the neutral stimulus is a sound of a bell, and the naturally occurring reflex is salivating in response to food. By associating neutral stimulus (bell) with environmental stimulus (food) several times (i.e. ringing the bell before presenting food), eventually conditioning occurs - the dog salivates just to the bell alone.

