

# A monk for all seasons

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I'd agreed a date to meet the Anglo-Irish mystic Laurence Freeman. But where, I wondered, would a Benedictine monk have lunch? "How about the community?" Freeman suggested, mentioning the house in Kensington that is his London base. "We can meditate first, and then join the others at table. I only ask that you make a contribution."

Freeman wants to reinsert contemplation into the melancholy heart of organised western religion. Twenty years ago he helped to found the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), and is the director of its global community of 2,000 meditation groups in 114 countries. Freeman's work is supported by the Dalai Lama and Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Among his pupils is Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding father.

I duly arrive at Meditatio, a stuccoed townhouse now a Benedictine ashram and base for Freeman's global "monastery without walls". Among Meditatio's board members, advising on financial and strategic aspects of its programme, are business leaders such as Sean Hagan, general legal counsel of the International Monetary Fund; Peter Ng Kok Sung, managing director of Singapore's Investment Corporation; and [John Studzinski](#), head of mergers and acquisitions at private equity group Blackstone.

There is nothing fuzzy about that high-powered list, nor in Freeman's books and the recorded talks that I download from the community's website ([wccm.org](http://wccm.org)) in which Freeman argues with great eloquence that all religions have a mystic tradition, allowing them to find common ground while respecting their differences.

As a lazy Roman Catholic who never quite made it to confirmation, the generosity of this approach strikes me as a good thing. Furthermore, almost everyone seems to agree that meditation is beneficial – even proud atheists such as Richard Dawkins.

I ring the bell and am let in by an oblate, or lay monk, who introduces himself as Leonardo and takes me up to a first-floor study. Tall and solidly built, Freeman, 60, is working at a laptop but leaps up to greet me. He looks only vaguely monk-like, wearing a loose black smock, dark trousers and sensible shoes. We have met before and embrace warmly, hands slapping across each others' backs.

*Laurence Freeman, head of an international 'monastery without walls', says all religions share a mystic tradition. At his London base, he tells how meditation can benefit everyone from children to business people.*



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For the half-hour midday meditation we go downstairs. “Buddhist meditation is seen as cool but Christian meditation is not: the church has a terrible PR problem,” Freeman jokes as we make our way down.

We sit cross-legged on bean bags in a carpeted room overlooking a rear garden. On the mantelpiece there is an icon and some flowers. The impression is of stillness and simplicity, with religiosity pared back. Leonardo reads a psalm, rings a gong, and we close our eyes. Mundane thoughts whirr through my mind, and my left leg goes numb. Occasionally, the mental babble subsides and I drop into myself in the room’s shared silence. When the gong sounds, we rise, stretch and head to the basement kitchen. There Leonardo opens a bottle of red wine, and I ask if it has been laid on for me.

“Well, it might mellow you but then St Benedict did recommend that monks drink a *hemina* of wine a day,” says Freeman, as the cork pops. “Nobody knows what a *hemina* is. It was a Benedict joke – like saying it is ‘as long as a piece of string’.”

Freeman brims with relish in this donnish parsing of a word made up 1,500 years ago. It is also a nod at the theology he can deploy to support Christianity’s almost hidden meditative tradition. The practice dates back almost 2,000 years to the Desert Fathers and Mothers, a fairly anarchic monastic movement that flourished in northern Egypt and Palestine, and through to modern Christian contemplatives such as Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author of the bestselling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), and Benedictine sages such as John Main (1926-1982), who reinvigorated the meditative tradition now carried on by his mentee, Freeman.

Freeman was born in London in 1951 and his upbringing was Roman Catholic in faith and culture – although “nothing fanatical”, he says. The school he attended, St Benedict’s in Ealing, was also “only conventionally and superficially religious”. Main, then a monk at Ealing Abbey, was one of Freeman’s schoolteachers.

Sunlight streams across the table from the bay window. We are joined by Rachel, who has cooked the meal. Grace is said, and a thick minestrone soup is served.

I am curious why an Asian statesman such as Lee Kuan Yew should have turned to Christian mediation, and ask Freeman why he thought Lee did not adopt a more eastern approach. “He said he’d tried Buddhism and failed, whereas this approach worked for him as he had a western-trained mind,” Lawrence replies, adding that a hunger for inner stillness rarely emerges quite so deliberately as it did in Singapore’s former prime minister.

“One meditator I know, who made a fortune from strip clubs and who-knows-what-else in Russia, told me the need [for stillness] came upon him while romping in Europe’s most expensive brothel, listening to a muzak version of ‘Amazing Grace’.”

I ask how Freeman realised his own vocation. After reading English literature at Oxford, “my future thrillingly insecure”, he says he thought of becoming an academic or a spy. “But several charming rounds of conversation with MI6 in an elegant house just off the Mall eventually came to naught.”

Two years followed as an investment banker, working at the now forgotten UDT International. “It wasn’t that I wanted to make money, it was more that I was curious to see how money was made. What I also saw was the quiet heroism of some people who were clearly unhappy in their work but endured it as a way to support their families.”

But banking did not suit Freeman, and in 1976 he went on a Christian retreat with his former schoolteacher, John Main, “a great and wise man, so open to the vast economy of the church and its relation to other spiritual traditions. Without him, I might well not be here.”

During the retreat, Freeman learnt how to meditate, gave up smoking, tussled with his soul, and realised how easy it is “to waste your life thinking you are doing what you really want to do”. Six months later, having lost his “competitive egomania” though still “ambitious to succeed, whatever success meant”, he left the retreat. He briefly considered journalism (he now writes a column for the Tablet, a Roman Catholic weekly) but in 1979 took his monastic vows.

A vegetarian lasagne, bubbling with cheese, is whipped out of the oven. Conducting our conversation across a communal table feels a bit awkward, and I am relieved when Freeman and I go off to finish lunch on our own.

Clutching plates, glasses, cutlery, and the bottle of wine, we move into a formal dining room, with a gas fire lit in the hearth. As we settle, I ask if his global itinerancy detracts from his interior life and vocation as a monk. Freeman is nominally London-based; his “mother monastery”, Monte Oliveto Maggiore, is in Italy.

“I hate leaving – I’m more of a monk than I think. But I love travel. Once I’m off, I’m OK. I’ve learnt to be present where I am.” That includes aeroplanes – however cramped the seating in economy. “The efficiency of global air travel is incredible. But like so much in modern life, you are told you are special, a valued customer, but more often treated like offal. I’ve learnt to complain judiciously: it’s a good spiritual practice, telling the truth.”

The lasagne is delicious. But when Leonardo comes in with a tray of coffee and dark chocolate biscuits, I notice I’ve hardly touched my plate. I wolf down my helping while Freeman talks of two of his latest initiatives.

The first is bringing meditation into Australian primary schools: some 12,000 children now participate, most, but not all, at church schools. “Children have a natural appetite for stillness,” Freeman says. “That is where the big change will take place in the 21st century or”, he adds after a pause for thought, “however long it takes.”

The second project, the “Business of Spirit”, is to introduce the benefits of meditation to business people. It kicked off with an October seminar at the John Main Centre for Meditation and Inter-religious Dialogue at Georgetown University in Washington DC. I ask how the attendees, who included policymakers and high priests of finance, could find time to meditate when their lives are so busy. “Sean Hagan, the IMF’s legal counsel, was asked just that. His answer was straightforward. Time is not the issue. As with work, when you are told to do something, or want to do it, you just do.

“What people really mean when they say they can’t find time to meditate is that they can’t manage their time or good intentions. It’s a bit like New Year resolutions. But the biggest barrier is perfectionism.”

Freeman warms to this theme. “Perfectionism is like a virus. In religion, it can lead to fundamentalism and self-loathing. The secular equivalent is success. If you only judge yourself by success – of your job, your marriage, your children, even – you are setting yourself up for failure or a sense of inadequacy. Learning to meditate, you have to unlearn perfection and the need for success.”

Given the economic crisis, unlearning success, or rather rediscovering failure, seems especially relevant today. I ask what he makes of it all.

“Clearly, the crisis is hurting those at the bottom most,” he says. “But even at the top there is anxiety, a sense of failure and, perhaps, shame. Clearly, we have to deal with the surface turbulence and strive for the best solutions to minimise suffering and preserve justice. However, the depths of these forces of change come close to, or actually participate in, humanity’s spiritual stratum. This means we cannot manipulate or exploit them but must strive to understand and go with them. This requires

a subtlety of wisdom. It also makes one wonder if the crisis is symptomatic of broader change, a new axial age in which old assumptions and ways of living are breaking down.”

Like the sit-in movements in Zuccotti Park and outside St Paul’s? I ask, adding that what’s also notable is how unfocused these demands are.

“That’s understandable,” Freeman responds. “They are protesting against fat cats, sure. But the movements’ deeper value is to witness what is happening – even if it’s not yet clear what the meaning is. Still, we have time to think about it: how long will this crisis last, five or 10 years? We must think about limits. We have become so inebriated with success.”

I feel goaded by this. What kinds of limits is he thinking of? And on what? Consumption? Anyway, how do you legislate for limits? As I ask this question, I realise I am reaching for a fourth chocolate biscuit and let my hand drop.

“You can put ethics courses in business schools but you can’t legislate for ethics. What people need is an experience of goodness, which has to come from within. That’s where meditation comes in. If you are too neurotic and inebriated with success to give yourself time to take care of your interior life, you are going to spin out of control. Of course, there are many approaches ... ” Freeman lets the thought hang.

We have drunk a *hemina* of wine, and now I can feel the usual benevolent Christmas miasma wrapping itself around me. I tell him this interview will be published on Christmas Eve, and ask for his thoughts about Christmas. “You want an *Urbi et Orbi*?” Freeman chuckles, referring to the Pope’s traditional Christmas message.

“Christmas lacks religious significance for many,” he says. “But that does not mean it lacks spiritual significance; mystery lives in its silence and stillness. Then there is Christmas’s moral aspect, the giving – including the giving of oneself, which has a mystic aspect too, of giving without expecting recognition or anything in return, of letting go.”

Freeman looks at his watch: he has to go. I have visited a cash machine on my way to lunch, and offer what I have in my wallet as a contribution for the meal. “That’s a lot,” says Freeman. “Are you sure?”

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