

Life of Purpose in Monastery without Walls

Lee Siew Hua

Senior Writer

SUNDAY TIMES

Think Section

1516 Words

24 April 2011



© 2011 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Globetrotting monk sees meditation as a way to unite followers of different faiths

Benedictine monk Laurence Freeman once meditated under a bodhi tree in India with the Dalai Lama.

The Catholic had also invited the Buddhist leader to comment on Gospel texts, including the Sermon on the Mount preached by Jesus Christ, during a seminar in the 1990s.

'The Dalai Lama said the sermon is very close to Buddhist thinking on non-violence, and cause and effect,' Father Laurence, 59, recalled.

Interfaith moments like these are transcendent and reveal truth from another person's eyes, he observed.

And meditation, he told The Sunday Times in a recent interview, is one key to such discovery.

'Meditation is universal, so it has tremendous potential to create unity within diversity,' said the British priest who has advised Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew on meditation, and heads the World Community for Christian Meditation in London.

Inter-religious exchange has existed since ancient times. 'I imagine, at campfires along the Silk Route, travellers were also talking about beliefs. In modern times, this has taken on a new momentum just like everything else, moving more quickly and globally,' he said.

'We now need to do this dialogue more consciously and mindfully.'

Father Laurence sees himself as a traveller operating in a 'monastery without walls'. He presides over meditation centres in 70 countries, including Singapore, which he has visited often since 1988.

That year, he met Mr Ng Kok Song, group chief investment officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation.

In an interview with The New York Times last year, MM Lee named Mr Ng as the 'Christian friend' who taught him a meditation mantra. Mr Lee revealed that he repeated 'maranatha' which means

'Come, Lord' in his innermost heart at night to quell the day's pressures and help him sleep, especially when he heard sounds of his ailing wife's discomfort in the next room. Madam Kwa Geok Choo died last October, after a series of strokes.

Through Mr Ng - now a trustee and national director of the World Community for Christian Meditation - Father Laurence met Mr Lee in London and Singapore last year. He was impressed by the Minister Mentor's focus during meditation.

'Mr Lee had come to the decision about meditation through a very clear and rational process,' Father Laurence said. 'He has a very open mind. In that sense, he is very humble.'

The tech-savvy priest from the Congregation of Monte Oliveto, a 13th-century monastery in Tuscany, also has great affection for Singapore.

'It's a microcosm of the modern world. It's a fascinating, multi-cultural, secular state where people are religious and spiritual and love shopping too.'

'I got my iPad here too,' said the gadget-loving monk and former merchant banker 'in the days before the big bonuses', who also uses a BlackBerry, laptop and iPod. His taste in music runs liberally from Bach to Sting, and the English literature graduate from Oxford University loves reading and photography too.

He became a monk at 27, after joining a six-month retreat to master Christian meditation with the late Benedictine monk John Main. He had planned to return to his job, this time as a freelance book and arts reviewer for the BBC and other outfits. 'But at the end of six months, I realised with a shock that I had lost worldly ambition.'

In the religious sphere, Singapore is an inspiration for the world, he said. It defends religious freedom, for starters.

'There is also a social and political emphasis on harmony without interfering in the organisation of religious groups,' he added.

He believes that it is in small and intensely interconnected spaces like Singapore that interfaith dialogue can best flourish.

'What I like about Singapore is that when I am at the airport, I don't know if my passport will be stamped by a Muslim in a headscarf, or a Hindu, or a Singaporean named Thomas,' he said.

There is a vibrant sense that in the public spaces here - whether corporate offices or entertainment venues or the heartland coffee shops - opportunities for dialogue are constant and many, he said.

He hopes Singapore can develop this foundation with meditation which will 'pave the way for deeper dialogues'. That is because meditation is a natural bridge for faiths with contemplative traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, he said.

He recounts how Christian teachers in Bangkok started meditation in schools. Before long, their Buddhist colleagues had joined in and started outnumbering the Christians.

Meditation can also connect followers of faiths with the secular world, where meditation is a popular practice, he added.

It also bonds the generations, and he has found that children find it natural to meditate.

His organisation is now working with a broad swathe of society - children, mental patients, prisoners, alcoholics, drug addicts, and the dying - through the Meditatio outreach programme.

Explaining its role in palliative care, he said: 'Meditation prepares us for death, because every time we meditate, we die to self.'

The strong, distorting ego is a distraction for many human beings, who also do battle with a multitude of stress factors in urban life.

So in his chosen role, and also through books he has penned such as *The Inner Pilgrimage*, he presents meditation as an antidote to these tendencies.

And as a Catholic, he firmly believes that meditation restores the contemplative life as a vital dimension of Christian spirituality.

Easter, he said, is a perfect time for contemplation. Every year, he goes to a Holy Week retreat in Bere Island in the south of Ireland, where his mother came from.

Reflectively, he unwraps Easter into three days with universal significance for the modern man:

Good Friday, when Jesus died, represents the need to die to self, release the past, and embrace suffering as a facet of being human.

Holy Saturday is when the disciples of Jesus found his tomb empty. This signifies that we live through seasons of emptiness and tedium.

Easter Sunday, when Jesus is resurrected, symbolises hope and fullness of life.

Quoting his favourite St Irenaeus, a second-century church father and thinker, he said: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.' This, he declared, is the destination of human endeavours.

Glowingly recounting his past Easter highlights, he said: 'There is a moment on Easter Sunday morning when we go to a little hill in the centre of the island. There is a standing stone, thousands of years old, where we wait for sunrise.

'The light is getting stronger, and we are waiting for the sun to tip up over the horizon. It's a moment of absolute wonder. It's a sacred moment, deeply enriching and renewing.

'It's very much like meditation.'

siewhua@sph.com.sg

RELIGION IN AN AGE OF ATHEISTIC IDEOLOGIES

Why is it that religion still flourishes despite the advent of science and atheistic ideologies?

The 20th century saw experiments in Russia and China to destroy religion as something irrational and harmful. Those experiments failed because it would be the same as trying to destroy art. It's part of human nature to be religious, just as it is human to create works of beauty.

Science was presented as an alternative to religion, with science explaining religious experience as myths. We are now achieving a balance between science and religion. The biblical story of creation at a deeper level explains our relationship to the environment.

Does interfaith dialogue have any power to resolve international conflicts?

Inter-religious dialogue may not solve problems but it creates an atmosphere and energy that can be directed towards centres of conflict where reasonable behaviour has broken down.

The Dalai Lama has said that if Buddhists and Christians can be friends, why not the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland?

Barack Obama has tried and failed to resolve the Palestinian issue. Maybe it's American optimism running up against old world cynicism. Positions are so entrenched. There is such a high level of resentment and raw hurt.

We need to take a long-term approach in which religion is an element. If inter-religious dialogue at a deep level can be promoted between Israeli and Palestinian neighbours, I think you will see a gradual shift in attitudes.

I think political leaders don't want to touch religion, but maybe the spiritual dimension of peacemaking is something they should discuss. It's not their expertise but outside their political club, they can find religious leaders who can initiate that. Meditation in this scenario would be a weapon of mass reconstruction.

Father Laurence Freeman, a British Benedictine monk, believes that it is in small and intensely interconnected spaces like Singapore that interfaith dialogue can best flourish. He says there is a vibrant sense that in the public spaces, opportunities for dialogue are constant and many. He hopes Singapore can develop this foundation with meditation which will 'pave the way for deeper dialogues'.

– ST PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK