



Monthly Online Meditation

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Good evening, Fr Vaz, and brothers and sisters of our meditation community.

Christian Meditation: The Essential Teaching

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WHAT IS MEDITATION?

I thought it would be good tonight to repeat the essential teaching of how we meditate. Quite often newcomers ask me, 'Am I doing it correctly?' So, people are concerned whether they have learnt it properly. Tonight, I want to put the emphasis on the practical aspects of how we meditate.

I think it's useful for us to realise that the word 'meditation' has two possible meanings. The first meaning, especially in the Western World, in Western society (and I'm afraid most of us having gone to English schools, tend to inherit more the Western meaning of meditation) the Western meaning of meditation is to think, to imagine, to analyse. So when you use the word 'meditation', people say, 'Meditate on what; what are we thinking about? Are we thinking about God?' That is one possible meaning of meditation – am I thinking of some scene in the gospel? am I imagining myself at some scene in the gospel? Yes, this is meditation and it is good, it is equally valid.

But the way of meditation that we teach is inherited more from the East, particularly when we understand meditation as coming to a stillness of body and a stillness of mind. In other words, instead of stimulating the imagination we silence the imagination. Now, that is a way of meditation and meaning of meditation which is better understood, for example, in Eastern religions, Buddhism, Hinduism for example. Our way of meditating is more the way of silencing the imagination.

THE WAY OF SILENCE AND STILLNESS

The best way to describe our way of meditation is that we want to come to stillness of body and stillness of mind. Stillness of body and stillness of mind is the way that John Main described our way of meditating. I think a good way of understanding this is to say that when we meditate, we sit still and we bring the mind to stillness by the faithful repetition of the mantra. We are not talking to God. We are not thinking about God. We are doing something which is immeasurably greater. We are learning to *be* with God. The emphasis is to be with God. And to be with God, it means that we try to give our total attention to God. And to give our total attention to God, we have to reduce the distractions. And the distractions that we face are the distractions of the body, and the distractions of the mind. So, in our way of meditation, in our striving to give all our attention to God, who is present to us in the Spirit of Jesus within us, we bring the body to stillness and we bring our mind to stillness. This is very important for you all to understand.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE PRACTICE

Let me now go into the main points on how we meditate. I would like to bring up scriptural quotations which may help you to understand better when I speak about the stillness of the body and the stillness of the mind.

BRINGING THE BODY TO PRAYER

The first quotation is taken from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where St Paul says:

Do you not know that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God's gift to you? (1 Cor 6:19)

So here, we talk about the sacredness of the human body. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are shrines of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So our body is a very important aspect of prayer, of meditation. Our body should participate in the act of praying. And the way we do that, to bring our body to participate in our prayer, is stillness of body. So that's the rationale.

OFFERING A LIVING SACRIFICE

The second quotation is taken from St Paul's Letter to the Romans. St Paul says:

I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him, a living sacrifice dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world and let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

So the key phrase in regard to our way of meditating, St Paul says, is to 'offer your very selves to him, the living sacrifice dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart'. Notice that Paul talks about us in our prayer as offering ourselves as a sacrifice, a living sacrifice. So when you sit down to meditate, when we sit down in stillness of body, we

are offering ourselves as a sacrifice. What we are doing is that we are offering our consciousness to God. And our consciousness to God is perhaps the best gift that we can offer to God. Our total consciousness, our attention of body and mind, we are offering that to God. So that's why it's important for us to sit properly, to sit in a dignified way so that we are offering ourselves as a sacrifice.

Let me now go through the various components of our method of meditation.

POSTURE

The first thing is to sit still. The stillness of body is the first thing that we should attend to when we meditate. You might say sitting still is actually quite easy. It is actually quite easy, but it's good to know the various ways in which we can really come to a stillness of body.

1. The first point is to sit with your back straight, with your spine upright. Rest the frame of your body on the front edge of your buttock bone. When you are sitting on your chair (all of us have a buttock bone) we are actually resting on our buttock bone or our resting bone. Now you notice that when you rest the frame of your body on the front edge of the buttock bone, it straightens up your spine and your back. So that helps you to keep your spine upright. But if you rest the frame of your body on the back edge of the buttock bone, then you're leaning backwards. That is not the right posture for meditation. The key point here is to sit with your spine upright.

Some people ask me, 'Should I sit on the floor in the lotus position?' That is not essential. In fact, for most of us, older generation, it is very difficult to sit on the floor with legs crossed. So remember, it is not essential. If you can do it, it's a very good posture, but the key point is to sit in whichever way is comfortable for you, but keep your spine upright.

2. The second point is, when you're sitting on the chair, rest your feet on the floor. Don't let your feet be dangling in the air. Because if your feet are dangling in the air, then you will have to move because you cannot keep them dangling for too long. You get tired. So find a chair of the right height so that when you sit on it, your feet are resting on the floor. If the chair is too high and your feet are dangling in the air, then what you could do is to put some cushions on the floor and rest your feet on the cushions or if the chair is too low, then put the cushions on the seat of the chair so that you are raised up on the chair and your feet can rest nicely on the floor.
3. The third point is, where do you put your hands? Put your hands on your lap or on your knees or just put one palm on top of the other.
4. The fourth point is to close our eyes lightly. We do that so that we are less likely to be distracted, we are not disturbed, distracted by external happenings.
5. The fifth point, relax the muscles of your body, especially your facial muscles. Many people come to meditation with a lot of tension in their body, tension in the face especially in the evening after the day's work. So we have to try to relax the muscles of our face, and a good way of relaxing the muscles of the face is just to have a slight smile.

When you have a slight smile on your face, that means you are relaxed. I often describe this as the Mona Lisa smile.

6. And then the sixth point is to be aware of your breath. Now, most of the time throughout the day we don't pay attention to our breathing. Our breath is so important. Our breath is going on all the time, but we don't pay attention to it. So what we should do is that as we're beginning our meditation, it is good to be aware of our breath coming in and your breath going out. Our breath is very sacred. Our breath is the gift of life. So when we breathe in, we are really breathing in the gift of our life, and when we breathe out we are actually returning the gift to God. So the breath is a very sacred act which is constantly going on. So, before you begin your meditation, just take a few moments to have a few deep breaths to be aware of your breath, and then you will find that during the meditation the breath will go on smoothly as you say, the mantra.

So these are the six points which are helpful for you to practise in regard to how we should be sitting for meditation.

SAYING THE MANTRA

Now, the second aspect of the method of meditation is, how do we bring our mind to stillness?

We all know that the biggest challenge that we face when we want to pray is the monkey mind. With the best of intentions we say, 'I'm going to pray now; I'm going to give all my attention to God; I will not be distracted.' After one minute your mind goes somewhere. So the distracted mind, the monkey mind is the biggest challenge that we face in meditation. And a lot of people give up meditating saying, 'I'm too distracted, I cannot meditate.' They don't realise that everybody has the same problem. But what we can do is to practise so that gradually the distractions will not bother us so much. And this is where the importance of the mantra comes in.

Fr John Main recommended that the way to bring the mind to stillness, the way to deal with all the distracting thoughts constantly challenging us, is to ignore the distractions. Ignore the distracting thoughts. But how do we do that?

The way we do that is to shift our attention to something else and that something else that we shift our attention to is the prayer word, the mantra, the word 'maranatha' that we say in our meditation. So, you start your meditation by saying the mantra but very soon, maybe after 30 seconds or 1 minute, even as you're saying the mantra, your mind goes somewhere else. Now the moment you realise that your mind is thinking about something else and you're not really saying the mantra with attention, just drop the distraction and humbly return to sounding the mantra again.

So the mantra is the way in which we give our attention to the Lord. We shift our attention away from all the distracting thoughts, and through the mantra we give our attention to the Lord who is present within us. So, try to understand that the mantra is our way of expressing

our faith in Jesus in the Spirit present within us. And therefore, the faithful recitation of the mantra is an act of attention, an act of love if you can learn to stay it faithfully. So it's important when you're first beginning to meditate to learn how to say the mantra properly.

1. Now the first thing you should do is to sound the mantra clearly and continuously, 'ma-ra-na-tha. You notice I used the word 'sound' – sound the mantra. In other words, you are sounding the mantra. You might think I'm saying it, but you're really sounding it because it's going on quietly within you. You're not using your lips; you're generating the sound deep within you, ma-ra-na-tha. Now, it's important to learn to say the word clearly; don't mumble the word. Four syllables, ma-ra-na-tha. And when you sound this mantra, learn to sound it continuously. What I mean to say is, you don't stop, because the moment you stop, some distracting thoughts will enter and you get distracted. So the moment when you finish the fourth syllable 'tha', you begin again 'ma'. So the mantra is said clearly and continuously
2. The next point is very important. It is not sufficient to sound of the mantra clearly and continuously. In order for your attention to be riveted, for you to be able to hold on to the mantra so that you are not easily distracted, you must listen to the mantra as you sound it. So what I mean to say is that you're sounding the mantra ma-ra-na-tha and it's as though the mantra is echoing away in your heart. As it's echoing away in your heart, you give your hearing attention to it. That way we become even more absorbed in sounding the mantra. So thta helps you to hold on to the mantra better.
3. The last point is, resting the mantra on your breath. Now, what do I mean by this? Just now I spoke about the significance of the breath. The breath is very important for living, it's very important for vitality of life. The breath is going on all the time. So, one good way for us to sustain the saying of the mantra is to combine our sounding of the mantra with our breathing. So, for example, for me, I've been meditating for a long time, so I now have developed very naturally, a certain rhythm of sounding the mantra. When I breathe in, I breathe in the first two syllables 'ma-ra'. And as I breathe out, I breathe out 'na-tha'. So it's as though I'm resting the mantra on my breath. So since we are breathing all the time, if you can rest the mantra on your breath, that means you are better able to continue saying the mantra throughout the meditation. Now, this business of combining the mantra with the breath requires practice. It's like swimming. When we learn swimming, for example, we have to combine, the movement of the hands with the movement of or legs, and we have to combine it with our breathing. We cannot do that in the first two lessons; it requires practice. First you practise with your hands, then you practise with your legs, and then one day you will find that you are able to combine it in a smooth and rhythmic way. So when you first begin to meditate don't get too worried about not combining it. Never mind. When you first start, just continue breathing and sound the mantra. As you get more comfortable and you are able to say the mantra faithfully, you will find that your breath will naturally come into some form of rhythm

with the mantra. And then once you are able to develop that, once that happens naturally, you'll be able to say the mantra in synchronicity with the breath.

So those are the three points: to sound the mantra clearly and continuously; to listen to the mantra as you sound it; and then to be able to combine the mantra with your breathing. If you can practise that, you will find that your recitation becomes much more smooth and there's a certain rhythm to your recitation of the mantra.

COMMITMENT

Now the third area of how to meditate is very important. If you are serious about meditating, you have to meditate every morning and every evening. Some people say, 'Why so rigid – every morning, every evening? Why not once a day? And you have to meditate preferably for 20 minutes, why 20 minutes? Why not 10 minutes?' So I think the important thing here is to understand that the real goal of our meditation is what St Paul says – to pray unceasingly. St Paul in his First Letter, to the Thessalonians, in chapter 5, says:

Rejoice always, pray, without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess 5:16-18)

Pray without ceasing. What St Paul means is that our goal is that every moment of the day we want to live every moment of the day in awareness, in awareness of the presence of God within us, in the world around us. That is the goal. In fact, one of the earliest Desert monks says, 'Breathe Christ every moment.' So every breath that we take, we are aware of the gift of life, we are aware that the spirit of Christ is within us. So it's not a matter of just saying, 'I sit down every morning and every evening; the rest of the day, I don't have to think about Jesus.' I think what we really want to come to is that at every moment of the day we can live in constant awareness. Some monks describe this as practising the continuous presence of God in our life. But, how do we do that? In order to do that we have to practise. So, the morning and evening meditation, starting our day with meditation and ending our day with meditation are, you might call, the practice sessions.

What's the goal? The goal is to be aware of God, every moment of our life and the morning and evening meditation are just the practice sessions. This why it's good, if you have the time, to even have a third period of meditation midway through the day. So these two pillars of meditation are really strengthening our ability to give our attention to God in every moment of the day so that we come to this state of oneness with God, so that everything we do becomes an act of prayer because everything we do we do it with the consciousness of God, we do it with this awareness of God everywhere, in every circumstance of our life as St Paul says. And so what you will find is that if you're able to meditate regularly, then outside your times of meditation you will find that the mantra begins to sound very naturally when you're doing something else. So for example, when you go for a walk, when you go jogging, while you are sitting in a bus, instead of being distracted or listening to music you close your eyes, and then the mantra begins to sound within you. So that awakens you to the presence of God.

The next point, I want make is, the best time to meditate is early morning and early evening. The reason for that is that early morning we are not sleepy. We are likely to be awake and we are alert. And similarly, early evening before dinner, because after dinner after you've taken a meal, you might feel a bit lethargic. So it's good to meditate when you are fresh, when you are likely to be able to be alert and not feel sleepy. So, early morning and early evening are the best times. There's a tradition of prayer, that the best times to pray are during sunrise and sunset. Sunrise when darkness gives way to light, and sunset when light gives way to darkness. So those are actually sacred times of the day. But those are just guidelines and Fr John says sometimes people cannot meditate early in the morning and early in the evening for various reasons. So you just have to adapt your times of meditation to suit the circumstances of your life.

So those are the points that I want to make to you. Don't think that these are all techniques, that all these are technical things. It is not technical if you understand what is our goal in meditation. If we go back to the scripture verses that I quoted, we are talking about our body as a 'shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit'. That is the reason why we sit in a dignified position so that our body looks like a temple of the Spirit. So you don't want to sit sloppily. That's the reason why we sit still with our back straight. And then, secondly, in Paul's Letter to the Romans, he talks about offering ourselves to God as a 'living sacrifice the worship offered by mind and heart' (Rom 12:1). So we are worshipping God in mind and heart. Mind and heart means with our attention focused on God, forgetting about ourselves, forgetting about our thoughts, our plans, our problems. We leave them all aside and we give all our attention to God by devotedly, faithfully sounding the mantra. So understand that all these points that I've shared with you, the underlying rationale, these are not technical issues. It is to express the way we wish to pray.

Thank you. Let us now put into practice what I've shared with you and I hope that it has been helpful to most of you.

Meditation

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, open my heart to the silent presence of the spirit of your Son. Lead me into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call. Maranatha, maranatha, come Lord Jesus.



Scripture Reading and Reflection

A reading from St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every family, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name:

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and build on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. (Eph 3:14-19)

OUR CALL AS CHRISTIANS - Fr Eugene Vaz

I think this is a really very beautiful passage for Christian meditators. This passage helps us to see the importance of meditation, the importance of Christian meditation, and the importance of putting meditation into action in our life. The passage is from Chapter 3 of Ephesians verses 14 to 19. Actually, the whole prayer ends in verse 21 with a doxology to the Father. But what is important, dear friends, to appreciate this passage really fully, is to take the verses that go before this passage, chapter 3 verses 7-13. In verses 7-13, Paul is speaking about the importance of the Christian mission to the gentiles. He is talking about how God is calling us in our Christian faith and commissioning us to be proclaimers of God's plan of salvation in Christ. So, I think that's important, dear friends. And when you look at the prayer, it begins with the words, 'this then is what I pray kneeling before the Father'. This then is what I pray – Paul is praying so that the people he is addressing. Today, you and me in this meditation session on Zoom, we are being addressed by these words. Paul is praying this prayer so that we may be conscious of our commission by virtue of our baptism to proclaim, to preach, to make known, to witness God's plan of salvation for the whole world. And that is why what Paul is really praying for is that every one of us before we can go and preach to people outside, we ourselves must be convinced of this, that we ourselves must have the experience of God's plan of saving the whole world in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, in order that we be filled with this conviction, I personally think dear friends. Christian meditation helps us to focus on that loving plan of God for universal salvation in Christ. So the more we meditate the more and more we come to that stillness of mind and body, the more and more we can focus on God, the more and more we come to appreciate what living

with God is like, the more and more, we come to realise this God we know as Father, he has a design for the world. He wants the whole world to be saved.

Now, we have an important part in that work of God. And that's why we are baptised. That's why we are disciples of Jesus, because we believe in him, we believe in his message, but we are weak human beings and sometimes we can grow complacent, we can become complacent, we can get distracted, or we can start living some other way than that of Jesus. So, Christian meditation brings us together in that focus. Ma-ra-na-tha, come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus. Come into my whole life. Come into the life of my family, come into the life of my Christian community, come into the life of the church. Maranatha come Lord Jesus, because the more and more you come to us the more and more you are one with us, Lord Jesus, then we can proclaim you, and the work you have done to fulfil the will of your Father to bring salvation to the whole world.

So, Christian meditation, dear friends, really helps us to become focused. What is the meaning of that? St. Paul puts it very beautifully: 'Out of his infinite glory, may he (that is the Father) give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self.' Another translation could be 'for your inner self' – that's our inner being That must grow strong. Because if we don't have that inner being that is strong, the outer being becomes very weak. Because the outer being, that's our outward life, is directed by our inner life, and the more and more we meditate, the more and more we contemplate the awesomeness of God, the more and more we enjoy living with God, being with God, that inner self becomes stronger, because Christ will live in our hearts. That is the prayer of Paul. Because we cannot go, proclaiming, we cannot go preaching, we cannot go witnessing, we cannot be examples of Christian life unless deep within us Christ is living in our hearts. So Christian meditation helps us to consider: Is our inner life growing stronger? Are we having that discipline? Are we making that effort? Are we really along that track that Christ is living in our hearts?

And then the other important point for that inner self to grow strong is faith. Christian meditation helps us to come to grips with our faith, our whole way of letting Jesus rule and direct and guide. And therefore, in Christian meditation, we are totally lost in him so that it's not what our mind is saying. We begin to see how he is leading us and guiding us and directing us so that when the moments of strict meditation are over, then it flows into our daily life, into our witnessing in the family, in the work place, in society, in the Neighbourhood Christian Community, wherever we may be, whatever we may be doing. What is happening? Our inner self that has grown in faith. The inner self, that is planted in love, the inner self that is built on love – that is a very powerful inner self. That's the kind of inner self all of us meditators want to have. That's why we are meditating, so that our inner life is so Christ-centred, is so Christ-rooted. Then our faith and our love makes us to show the wonderful design of the Father to save the whole world in the person and witness and example of his Son, Jesus.

That's why with that inner self so strong in faith and love, we will be able to appreciate that the Father's design is universal. That's the meaning of 'breadth and length, height, and

depth'. That means if you want to know Christ's love, if you want to measure Christ's love, then you've got to take the breadth and the length, the height and the depth that is the universality. Christ's love is for every man and woman, because every man and woman is made by God, is a son and daughter, is a child of God. And no Father wants his child to be lost. And God, our father doesn't want us to be lost. So in Christian meditation, we are given the opportunity to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth of Christ's love. And so at the end of our Christian meditation every day in the morning, and in the evening, we should be growing until we know the love of Christ. This my dear friends never ends, and therefore we have to meditate faithfully morning and evening, or morning and night. Because it helps us to know the love of Christ, not intellectually but deep within in the inner self, the love of Christ which becomes the basis of our faith, that faith which is the expression in love of the love of Christ. It's beyond all knowledge, it's not intellectual, is not academic. It's an experience of the inner being.

And finally, we do Christian meditation because at the end of it all, through the process, we want to be filled with the utter fullness of God. Of course, the utter fullness of God will only be utterly fulfilled in the end time glory. We will never get that fullness here on earth but you know, dear friends, every time we do Christian meditation, we are getting deeper into that utter fullness of God because every meditation session should help us to be filled more and more with that utter fullness of God, because every meditation should help our hidden self, our inner self to be strong, to be living in faith. And so, in the universality of Christ's love we find our place in helping all men and women to experience the wonder of God's love in Christ Jesus. And thank God for giving us this opportunity to meditate. And I pray, dear friends, all of us meditators will really experience that transformation in our own life so that we don't become people who say one thing and do another thing. Meditation shouldn't make us be like that. Meditation should help us to be the way of him on whom we meditate, Christ, our Lord, our Saviour.

Thank you.
