

## Prefaces to Meditation 2010. David Wood

### 1. Greenness

And it came to pass one day, when we were on holiday with family, Jim, it would have to be Jim of course – knowing our daily priorities, said to Sheila and I – “Are you to going off then to marinate?” And so it has become, whenever we are with them we don't meditate anymore, we marinate.

Actually marinate is not such a bad word at all for meditation, you could say that we seem to be immersed in the dark flavours, the mysterious spices of the Spirit. And Hildegarde of Bingen, one of the bright women stars of 12 century Christian life, talks of prayer as the ‘moisture of reconciliation,’ bringing life to what is dry and withered. In her mystical explorations she talks constantly of the greenness of things, of our need to recover our greenness, the moisture that is within and really saturates all our moments, all our living if only we will learn to dwell there.

It is our innermost being, because our innermost being is the greenness of Christ. The greenness of Christ. The eternal refreshment of the green Christ. ‘God’ says Hildegarde ‘is the one who greens the world.’

In the huge array of magnificent stained glass in Chartres Cathedral there are six windows of Christ crucified on a green cross (and one of the challenges of a visit is to find them!)

And Hildegarde seeks to root us down, down into our Mother, who is also God, so that we may fully honour the sacredness of Earth which nourishes all our greenness: to recover the sacredness of Mother Earth as central to our existence is her constant teaching, and today of course more vibrant than ever. We cannot survive without being aware of our greenness within, the greenness of all things. The sacredness of all living organisms.

Meditating, marinating if you will, in the presence of God, leads us down into those dark moist depths to recover, in often such shallow and sad contemporary times, our eternal freshness – not just for ourselves, you and me, but for all humankind, the living universe. Contrary to what many outside meditation regard as introverted and self-centred navel-gazing, we increasingly discover, learn and know, to our surprise and delight, expand and deepen. Horizons open up where we never saw them before and they continue, they continue to expand and expand.

### 2. Love Your Wounds.

You know how thoughts, ideas appear in you, out of the blue, it seems out of nowhere; and then somehow will not leave you. A little time ago I heard this single sentence deep within me, it just arrived:- ‘I trust you. Why do you not trust me?’ That's all. More than enough! ‘I trust you’ – immense.

Here is a story that goes to the heart of meditation, the depth of God's Presence, and how our meditation is transforming us through our own daily faithfulness. Such an ordinary day by day discipline. Trust your own faithfulness. Trust God's

faithfulness. Don't be put off or dismayed by those wearisome, repetitive distractions. We are being transformed.

There was once a King who had a wondrous, magnificent ruby. It was a joy, the source of all his wealth and power. Every day he would gaze on its lustre. Then one day he noticed to his horror that it had become scarred by a scratch. All the palace jewellers were summoned but their judgment was that nothing could be done without causing further damage. The King was devastated. He offered a great reward and jewellers came from far and wide, but all woefully said the same thing. Nothing could be done. Then a servant came forward in fear and trembling and said she had heard of an old retired expert in jewels far away in the hills who was supposed to be uniquely gifted at working with damaged gems. He was sent for and due course a shabby old man shambled into the palace. The whole court glared with scorn at this nondescript – 'You're wasting your time majesty'.

Even so the King in his distress showed him the great ruby and the old jeweller said 'I cannot repair it. But if you wish I can make it more beautiful'. More contempt, more laughter. The King though, was desperate so the old jeweller took the ruby away. A few days later he returned and placed the precious jewel gently into the King's hands. Carved upon it was the most delicate rose, the scratch transformed into the stem.

Love your wounds, we are being transformed – as the hymn says – changed from glory into glory.

### 3. My Friend. the Ego.

In Christian Meditation we seem to do a lot of ego-bashing – this bad lad within, this wicked woman within, always leading us astray. The distractions, which arise, constantly, confront us with our lurking ego, almost like a playful puppy grown into a monstrous hound, forever tugging on the leash, seeking to pull us away from the way we know we need to go, to follow its own snuffs and snuffles. Oh dear, time and time and time again.....

But hang on. We need to reinstate our ego, and some actual neurological evidence may help us here. Brain research shows that our ego operates in the left-hand side of the brain and is essential to our development, for it is how we learn to control, measure, evaluate – what adds up for us, what doesn't, what is useful or not, the shoulds and the shouldn'ts; the words, the calculations that help our daily living

The other, the right-hand side of the brain, is the intuitive, the creative, poetic, the place where hunches arrive out of the blue. Brain activity measurement shows that the left-hand side of the brain uses beta waves, the right-hand brain uses alpha/gamma waves. Up to the age of 5 a child is totally immersed in right-hand brain/alpha wave activity, absorbing everything, which makes it very open and vulnerable. So we have needed our left-hand brain, our ego bit, to guide us out from our babyhood into our early worlds. The left-hand brain sets boundaries and has been our defence and shield, and the way we have learnt to measure ourselves in relation to the vast world of people and places we constantly find ourselves in. It has helped to differentiate our self from other selves, and to set in motion the discovery of our own uniqueness.

Then as we grow up we are supposed to dance freely from left-hand brain to right-hand brain activity, the one to balance the other. But what has happened, down the ages, is that we have become, every time, caught up in the culture in which we live and respond to and ape, so that it has come to dominate us, and we have become lopsided left-hand brain active (hyperactive) with the consequence that our right-hand brain gifts have become dormant, underused, infertile.

This, world-wide, we can identify as original sin. It sweeps us up and we become quite unbalanced, so much so that some wise contemporaries will say that now, we are, bordering on world-madness, spinning left-hand brain out of control – the ego forever playing those haunting games of success and failure, of measuring me over against you, us over against them that sadly we know so well.

But the research also shows that meditation blanks out beta waves (left-hand brain activity) and enables the wide open mysterious, intuitive territory of right-hand brain alpha waves to gain strength and flourish; and we can start to rebalance and discover our true self.

So it is important not to moan and groan or give up as the circus of our distractions with its clowns and performing artists and ringmasters comes parading down the street yet again. Rather welcome them, salute them as friends, but during the time of meditation as dodgy friends, and simply wave them on their way, and stay with your own true way, your contemplative practice, your sacred word, your mantra.

Our faith is, that through all the recurring razamataz, we are made in the image of God and in meditation we have been given the most beautiful gift of faith, with does not, will not fail us.

#### 4. Becoming Real

You remember perhaps the story of the Velveteen Rabbit. It's about becoming real. Here is its:-

"What is REAL?" asked the rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the skin horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you come Real".

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once" said the skin horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby".

Meditation is about becoming Real, as God is Real. It's about letting God happen to you. Much of our life and our religion and the world we encounter is not like

that because after a bit it says, and we say, "Hands off God. That's near enough God thank you very much."

There's a title of a book by James Alison called 'Undergoing God.' That's it. Meditation is undergoing God. Surrendering to the Presence you yet don't recognise as Presence. Letting go and letting God. One of our grandchildren says 'Love you to bits.' Well?

Meditation is an invitation to become more and more shabby – that is to allow ourselves to be loved, and to love more daringly than we ever thought possible. That's real. Shabby becomes beautiful. Such deep deep loving, utterly held, utterly treasured. Starting to recognise everywhere, within ourselves and beyond ourselves, the gifts of the Spirit that are already there/here – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, self-control – and that are possible. That's Real. That's God.

## 5. You – it's personal.

They say don't they, when you pray, be careful what you ask for – you may get it.

Since I was called – for that's what it feels like – into Christian Meditation and its more focused way of praying and being in my life, I have certainly received far more than I bargained for (note the phrase I bargained for'). And how can I say this? – I am forever invited more deeply into 'the mystery' of everything, not as an onlooker but as a participant. Everything becomes more intensely personal, everything – not just the next terrible act of violence, but even the faded rose or the gloppy translucent slug who greets me at the kitchen door. The Youness of Everything. I belong to everything and everything belongs to me, is part of me – the seagulls who screech so much at 3.30 a.m. on a summer morning that you shut your windows if you want to sleep, to the simple joy of watching a child suddenly start to skip. You.

Hear again Jesus in St. John's Gospel, Chapter 17 – 'I in them and you in me, may they be perfectly one. I want them to be with me where I am. I want them to see the glory'.

This is what monks and nuns living in enclosed communities know increasingly all the time, and we, beset with our daily distractions, discover only more slowly – that The Universe is Personal, out there and in here all at the same time. It's not just an abstract evolving apart from us with all those brave, mind-boggling astronomical calculations around billions of light years, black holes, big bangs – It is Personal. It is You. It is Me. We are somehow involved/evolved in whatever is being created. Our part, our glimpses of glory, being revealed to each of us, uniquely: many non-religious people, vigorous humanists, experience this also in their own way. It's Personal – and it's what we call the Presence, of God. You. God. We are being Godded every instant.

Meditation within its gentle gift, especially, seems to me to be full of breath-taking surprises, many quite uncomfortable.

Listen to this all embracing, universal pray of Gautma, the Buddha, four centuries before Christ:-

May my heart lend its ear to every cry of pain  
 Like as the lotus bares its heart  
 To drink the morning sun.  
 Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain  
 Before I have wiped it from the sufferer's eye.  
 But let each burning human tear  
 Drop on my heart and there remain  
 Nor ever be brushed off  
 Until the pain that caused it is removed.

Often our daily bits/scraps almost, of meditation feel like dry autumn leaves swirled up and away into a great void, a nothing. But not a word, not a break of your prayer, my prayer, our prayer is lost, this precious time, this precious ordinary time – each moment we are adding to the making up of God's purpose.

## 6. A Jewish Story. Rabbi Israel of Rizhin

This Jewish story came my way via a bishop recently. For me it illustrates what meditation is all about. Your one fragile word, your small phrase, your mantra is more than enough. It contains all the grace of God's Presence that you need and that will, if not now, then later, delight you.

When the great Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch had occasion for the same reason to intercede with Heaven he would go to the same place in the forest and say 'Master of the Universe listen! I do not know how to light the fire but I am still able to say the prayer'. And again, the miracle would be accomplished

Still later Mosh-leib of Sassov in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say 'I do not know the prayer but I know the place and this must be sufficient'. It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God 'I am unable to light the fire; I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest – all I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient'. And it was sufficient.

To set ourselves deliberately, constantly in the Presence, in God, is sufficient.

## 7. The Secret Silence – Absence becomes Presence.

This amazing quotation which traces right back to one Dionysius the Aeropagite, a Syrian monk writing in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century – 'the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence outshining all brilliance with the intensity of its darkness'. Hear it again. 'The dazzling obscurity of the secret silence outshining all brilliance with the intensity of its darkness'.

Meditation teaches us to be not afraid of the dark, without and within. Dark means absence – we cannot see where we are, we've lost our bearings: as a

friend said: "It's a bit like when the computer goes down and try as you might, words, everything, pictures, everything has gone". Empty. Absent. Nothing.

Meditation is the practice of Absence, of shutting down all our internal computers, of seeking quietly to clear away everything in our human condition, in the whole human condition which might shield God's Presence. Love's Real Presence, from us. In the time of meditation we simply keep on putting aside everything that comes up, creating an emptiness, an absence of all that day by day moment by moment, we think and say and do.

Absence is darkness. What people discover who persevere in meditation is that Absence, oh so silently, so imperceptibly, starts to become Presence. The Real Presence. We are making Absence Presence – a quotation – 'the abyss of the heart opens out onto the abyss of God.'

The gift of The Secret Silence is this – everything is taken away that we may be given more. Learning little by little that when we unclench our hand and let fall all that is in it, all that we are clinging onto, unclench ourselves, we are filled with new gifts. Absence becomes Presence and Presence starts to be revealed everywhere in everything, all the time.

At the crucifixion St. Mark's Gospel says, 'darkness fell over the whole land'. All consuming darkness. The Cross. Absence of everything we recognise as human.

Meditation can assist us, strengthen us to see and know that the cross of a tsunami, of the last murder, explosion, earthquake, flood – and the next one – that Absence is at the same time also Presence.

'Where is God?' said one Jew to another at Auschwitz as they watched and an 11 year old boy hang and take a long time to die. 'There' said his companion, 'there'. 'There is nothing lost that God cannot find again', (Thomas Merton)

In meditation our faithfulness makes, we make Absence Presence, not just for ourselves but for our brave world. Not in any glib, slick, cheap way, but in the ongoing daily work of meditation – we are releasing the mercy within the mercy within the mercy, God is all mercy. And God's Presence, living in our hearts, never ceases to praise and bless us for what we so haltingly seek to do.

The Secret Silence – 'the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence outshining all brilliance with the intensity of its darkness.'

8. 'I learn at every moment therein to be content'.

'I learn at every moment therein to be content'. This one line came to me very early in my Christian life. It is one of the saintly sayings and like so many good things I have no idea where it came from. All through my life it has appeared and vanished (or rather, I have vanished it) for long periods; and it would return to slow me, haunt me, tease me, challenge me, console me, and then disappear again.

Now it is a main guideline and I like to nurture it, I need to, for these are clearly my end times however long or short they may be as I am increasingly confined these days.

A saying from the Desert Fathers also has new meanings! 'Stay in your cell and I will teach you all you need to know'. A friend sent me a book recently by a favourite contemporary which I was delighted to receive – it felt as if a looked-for visitor had arrived at the door of my cell and come to stay!

Content to be content – at every moment. You know as well as I do that that is what Christian Meditation is all about – taking the sting out of things, the measly gripes, the moaning complaints, the 'if only', the 'ah buts', the 'why mes', taking these away so that we can more truly see, be watchman, deep, deep into the night. And to discover that as we gaze, we are being gazed upon – not only from without but from within.

So stay content in the cell of your mantra, your sacred word, learn to live inside it and 'I will teach you all you need to know'.

A prayer from St. Isaac of Syria, Bishop of Nineveh around the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century:

'Be at peace with your own soul, then heaven and earth will be at peace with you.

Enter eagerly into the treasure house that is within you.

And you will see the things that are in heaven, for there is but one single entry to them both.

The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within your soul.

Dive into yourself and in your soul and you will discover the stairs by which to ascend'.

## 9. A Greeting – Hiya! Hiya!

I once had a lovely time with a large school assembly. I asked what do you say when a pal, a friend comes up and says 'Hiya'? Hands went up – 'yer say Hiya' I kept saying 'Hiya' and they all started shouting back 'Hiya! Hiya!': I think some staff thought the revelation had come.

Then, I said 'what do you say to a God who says 'Hiya'? Some hesitations, then a tentative here and there – 'Hiya' – 'Hiya'. Soon they were all roaring out 'Hiya'.

James Alison has written a book called 'On being Liked'. I lent it to a friend who was shortly to retire from being a vicar. He said it opened his eyes wide – 'all my years' he said' I have been teaching in various ways that God loves you, which after a bit becomes a bit meaningless, but that God actually likes you – wow!' The friendship that God has towards us. The poet Thomas Traherne says 'to remember that one is a friend of God. That one has so great a friend as God'.

Some ten years after I had been ordained I went to communion early one weekday morning and as the priest put the wafer into my hand, I simply heard the word within me 'Friend'. It seems now I was being offered an intimacy I knew very little about, even after all that time. And some years later when my life was in real emotional turmoil, in the middle of the night, the word 'compain' which in French means 'mate', 'buddy'. Out of the blue, my blue, a God who says Hiya.

Christian Meditation opens us out into a breath-taking, ever-deepening intimacy with God, and so with Jesus – the child's prayer – closer is God than breathing, nearer than hands and feet'.

Hiya! might be for some a necessary and perfectly good mantra. And to remember that the more we continue faithfully to meditate, the more does our mantra become our 'best friend', because it deepens all the time, ever penetrates, becomes one with our every breath, every heartbeat, so that wherever we find ourselves in life, in perplexities, at seemingly dead ends, when we are lost for words, don't know how to manage or express our anger, pain, the joy and the sorrow, the mantra is always ready to be immediately present to us, calling us from deep within our own depths; hearing in our own language the marvellous presence of God. Our mantra, Our sacred word. Our best friend. Hiya.

## 10. Contradictions.

Listen to Thomas Merton:- "I have become convinced that the contradictions in my life are in some way signs of God's mercy to me".

Contradictions, Paradox – we need again and again to return here together, for meditation increasingly exposes them in us and around us. And this is healthy and right. Buddhists constantly remind us that everything is passing away, foundations are bound to shake sooner or later – and there's a lot of shaking going on far and wide in our present world. Increasing uncertainty in so many directions. The pressure to steamroller, to squeeze everything into flat certainties which has prevailed in our culture for most of my lifetime seems these days to work less and less. Things are unravelling more and more rapidly. The ego-mind loves to have clear-cut answers, to tidy things up, solutions, and gets panicky when one set of solutions starts to unravel into another. This does not make for an easy, well-ordered life. And one of the things that has happened is that most of the pictures of God have unravelled, don't ring all that true anymore.

Living with meditation as a constant dimension in our inner life helps us to be content to live with paradox, that contradictions, and all the uncertainty they sometimes explode us into. They were there all the time of course, as the doctor on TV once reminded us when he said quite cheerfully 'We are all born with an incurable condition – we are all going to die!'

Content to live with uncertainty. Part of that uncertainty is that every human being is called to be much more than we know ourselves to be. We are always being called 'beyond', 'beyond' is part of who we are.

Meditation steadies us all the time. Meditation encourages us to embrace the opposites as they contradict the ego, hold them close. In the tension of holding them together, God is to be found.

Meditation (Thomas Merton again) "is a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible which cannot be found unless we become lost". Meditation encourages us to lose all the landmarks, signposts, all that gives us any sense of direction in the minutiae of daily living – and get lost, be nowhere except in the company of the



Invisible. This is a complete paradox, contradiction to everything we normally do. We are called to know that which cannot be known.

Thomas Merton once more:- "There is a country whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by standing still.....this nothing is infinitely more than our ego".

Such emptiness is complete exposure to the Present Moment and no matter how fragmentary that is during meditation, this 'tiny immediacy' (Merton) of the present moment is the voice of Eternal Life calling us with its complete and final and glorious gift.

## 11. Cool, Cool!

I have a daughter who lives in Dubai. During the summer heat when it may well be 45 – 50 degrees centigrade and with humidity at 80%, I will text her with some news to which she will often reply just 'cool'. I love the irony. It's like the splendid wheelchair I often use now as I get more ancient – its trade name is Karma – my destiny. Now I think that's cool.

Living so frequently feels far from cool and we can arrive at our times of meditation with lives that are full of bits of this and bits of that. Preoccupations – hard to shake off fidgety things like 'did I lock the car door, the front door, I think I left my shopping list'; or family issues; sometimes good news that we can't wait to share – all this through the way our politicians are behaving on the national and international stage; or our being overwhelmed by some latest uncontrollable human tragedy when we feel so small and helpless and the world seems so big. All this: and at the same time our aches and pains which accompany us and keep nudging us for our attention.

So we arrive at meditation the hapless juggler of the skittles of living with all the things that hot and bother us. And we can feel so helpless – helplessness – all our energy being leached out of us by what's going on within and beyond. Helpless; I keep saying that and it's necessary to say, that it's O.K., we are meant to feel this growing sense of helplessness from time to time, and face it – it's part of growing up but growing in wisdom, the growing recognition that we need to surrender more fully into the whole energy of Life, of God, coursing in us and through us, bearing us along in the great mystery – compassion fatigue? Stop the world I want to get off? Yes, of course.

Meditation is there to cool us, to calm us in daily life though we may not notice it at the time of meditation. In meditation we are truly handing over. It is a sacrifice, sacrificial living – to 'do nothing' in meditation for two periods a day as John Main constantly teaches, when there is so much to occupy us, is really quite important, if in our heart of hearts we nurture this recurring desire to live in God, with God, for God.

Meditation is a rebalancing time. Perhaps very basically it keeps on telling us to stop judging ourselves since this is only to put ourselves at the centre again; it's another way of ego infiltration if you like. Stop judging yourself. Stop being so harsh. Hand over – stay cool. It is a constant return to the baseline so well held in the words of St. Julian of Norwich – 'all shall be well'.

St. Paul perhaps has it so 'we are in difficulties on all sides but never cornered: we see no answer to our problems, but never despair'. (2 Corinthians Ch.4 v. 8)

Listen again to the coolness, the calming of what Julian says, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'.

## 12. Simplicity.

John Main says again and again that the way of meditation using a mantra, a sacred word, is a way of complete simplicity.

'The path to follow is a path of almost incredible simplicity.' He talks of child-like trust in learning to use and stay with your mantra. He says, 'I suggest that you forget most of what I have said to you except the two words 'simplicity' and 'faith.' He also repeats: 'To enter into the simplicity of meditation demands courage.' A simplicity which ultimately costs not less than everything.

But the strength of the silence of meditation starts to offer is the antidote we need to live in the increasing complexities of our world. We have to learn to listen to the sound of silence which otherwise we will never hear, because within that sound is carried the vital clue to our individual existences.

And at their heart other religions say just the same – coming into silence is the only way to uncover and be surprised and delighted by, our personal uniqueness, always in grave danger of getting overwhelmed by the worlds bombarding egoisms which perpetually assail us and seek only to inflate our own. This silence is the energy of the universe. And this energy is there in our hearts. Our uniqueness is part of the energy of the universe.

When we begin to understand the expanding scale of everything, all the giving and receiving which the unerring prayer of meditation requires, the generosity and the mercy which is already there in our hearts but which we have hardly begun to unearth or practise, we begin to get nervous.

Courage. Simplicity. Child-like trust. And the simplicity of meditation is also a resting. It teaches us patience which is part of the evolutionary/creative patience of the universe. New dimensions of patience forever helping us to take our foot off the accelerator of our own distorted ego-mind and become what we are called to become, disciples of truth and which we say is at heart the Christlife, dwelling in us.

Meditation teaches humility – so from the Psalms – 'Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him and He will give you your heart's desire.'

