

Prefaces to Meditation 2011 - David Wood

Preface to Meditation 13: More on the Mantra - the Way of Simplicity p1

To follow the teaching of John Main is to choose using the mantra as a way of prayer. John Main referring to John Cassian, the 4th century teacher of prayer, says:- 'the mantra contains all the human mind can express and all the human heart can feel. That one little word conveys and leads us into the silence which is the silence of creative energy'.

'The mantra contains all that the human mind can express and all the human heart can feel'. That one little word...

This is huge, is it not. If we will allow it, it will take us far, far out into the realms of the spirit, beyond anything we can presently know or conceive. The universe! Billions of light years before and after us. Vast realms of consciousness of which we know nothing.

'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways' says the Lord (through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah 55).

John Main again:- 'Say your word like a child and it will be personal, unique unravelling which makes a unique contribution to the universe as a whole and to the whole design of creation'.

With our one little word we are both ushering in and being ushered into vast dimensions of what we can call God's space. Our hearts and minds cannot conceive what God has prepared for those who seek to love Him.

To our little moment of time, the ancient, Isaac the Syrian, has this to say:- 'We have been appointed to ask mercy for the world, to keep vigil for the salvation of all, and to partake in every man's suffering, both the just and sinners - on account of the great compassion infused without measure in our hearts, after the likeness of God'.

Offering our little word in our little corner, is to offer ourselves, as St. Paul says, as 'a living sacrifice'.

'The mantra contains all that the human mind can express and all that the human heart can feel'.
The way of simplicity.

Preface to Meditation 14: Coddling (p3/4)

Grace was a sturdy, solid, country woman who lived in one of our mining villages. Just 5ft. tall she would bundle into one of our meditation groups and invariably proclaim with a smile of complete friendship "I've only come for a coddle", and then proceed to go round harvesting her coddles, cuddles, especially from the men, before she settled down. I used to wonder what sort of life she'd had, what storms did she come in out of, into the reassurance, the comfort of the group.

For comfort is one of the things it provides. Those faces. To be with others with whom, without saying a word, you 'know' you are sharing a common journey. John Main and Laurence Freeman talk frequently about 'pilgrimage' - and so it is, a silent yet 'knowing' pilgrimage. You don't have to find words for things you can't explain. You don't have to defend your faith. Nobody, though they may be

good Christian people, are going to jump out at you with words. And words, yours or somebody else's, are not going to fall short, let you down - again.

It's living in a different dimension for a while. And you can sit there on a bad day knowing that the silence of others is holding you in, leading you in. They are not making any judgements, they're not going to let you down.

After a meditation once, a young man exclaimed "Well! that was a waste of time" and roared with laughter, and everyone else joined in - they knew exactly what he meant.

However, we also know this. The ego, someone has said, has 'a repressive tenderness'. The ego is the great coddler, it will always seek to lure us into static comfort zones, places of superficial reassurance, so that we emerge as hero or O.K. person, the one with very valid excuses or at least is not really to blame; the ego, always separating us out from others, declaring apartheid. If one coddler fails to comfort us, the ego will quickly move us on to another coddling zone, or even more insidiously, conjure up a new one. The ego is infinitely resourceful and mischievous: it will not leave us alone and will hug us to death.

Christian Meditation reminds us first and always that we have to know ourselves to be accepted and loved just as we think we are. The huge space of gathered silence enables that. But then it helps us to see that we cannot allow ourselves to stay as we think we are if our lives are going to be more truly fulfilled in the ways and purposes of love. In the ways of God we learn that we can be more robust, don't need all that coddling, molly coddling, can move out from oases of our own making where actually quite a lot of the palms are potted and plastic, into the desert. The wilderness, the wildness of love.

All the great lovers of humanity before us have discovered that it is stripped down in the bare landscapes of the soul, that we learn what love is all about. Because there we never know what to expect, everything comes as gift, it is full of surprises. Abandoned, but only by the false gods that we set up in the first place, the prayer of meditation leaves us with nothing save for an ever-expanding certainty that come what may we are filled, always have been and always will be, with the utter fullness of God.

[Preface to Meditation 15: Jade \(p5/6\)](#)

One of my favourite stories illustrating something that happens in meditation goes like this:-

A man wanted to learn about jade. He mentioned it to a friend who said he knew just the person - an expert in jade. So he fixed up a series of lessons, agreed a fee and went along.

The jade expert greeted him with gentle courtesy and showed him into a room which was completely white, even the floor, with just a white chair in the middle. He invited his student to sit down, put a piece of jade into his hands and said that he would leave and return in a short while, half an hour. Then he came back, took the piece of jade, and arranged for them to meet the next week.

The man thought it was a bit of an odd way to start a series of lessons but recognised that this was only an opening session - doubtless the teaching would begin the next time.

Anyway the following week the same thing happened. He was shown into the white room, with the white chair, a piece of jade was put into his hands and he was left on his own in silence yet again for

about half an hour. And so it continued for several weeks as he got more frustrated. One day he met his friend who had made the recommendation. He asked how he was getting on. "How am I getting on?" he replied angrily. "Here am I paying good money and he never says a word - all that happens is he shows me into this white room with its one white chair, puts a piece of jade into my hands, and leaves me there alone in silence for half an hour. And do you know last week he gave me a fake!
(long pause)

In meditation, it may well be a shock when this first happens, the penny drops, and we begin to see in and through our distractions, all our ego-fakery. The pictures of our self which we thought were real and base a lot of our lives on start to appear to be not so. They are fake, not the real me at all. The presence of God which starts to be more clearly available in the silence, gently and it also appears kindly, begins to disturb us at levels in our inner self we have never seen.

When the penny continues to drop what a relief it can be to see that we no longer need to be like this, like that, that if we will continue to trust that the silence is of a God who loves us more than we can ever dare to hope, we are like prisoners, being set free from prisons that have held us captive for long, long years. We are being set free - truth is setting us free. All by virtue of a constant discipline attached to one little word or sacred phrase. So we recall the constantly repeated teaching about letting go of all things, thoughts, holy notions, etc. as they arrive, in this time of prayer they are all falsehoods. The master asked the disciple "What have you got in your hand?" "Nothing" was the reply. "Well drop it."

Welcome to meditation!

[Preface to Meditation 16: On Being Vulnerable \(p7\)](#)

You know how it is sometimes - you come in from doing the shopping, or a day's hard work, or travelling, and you just go flopping, into a chair, glad to be home. No more keeping going, keeping up, compromises, going along with it, queuing, being pushed and jostled amongst the crowds. You sag with relief into home, all defences down: for a little while, you let go, you sort of collapse into just being there.

The first thing some of the young women in our family do when they get home is to change into their pyjamas and dressing gown - dropping off as it were, all the dressing up, the charades of the day.

In the same way we are invited to collapse into the prayer of meditation, to collapse into God, let go of it all and just be there. Be here.

Here it is O.K. to be vulnerable, defenceless, you don't have to play the games here anymore, meditation invites us to learn and relearn this. This is the safe place, no tick lists, no exams, no judgements. Just the voice deep within, the quiet Christ-spirit who is also your spirit:- "Come to me... and I will give you rest".

And because it is the utter vulnerability of God deep in the heart of our heart absorbing all our preoccupations, the dismays and betrayals, false starts and flimsy triumphs which each day may bring, we can just let them go without thinking about them anymore for now.

Then, eventually, what this letting go and resting does, one of the gifts, is invisibly to strengthen us when we move out into our daily life, to be more ready ourselves to take it, to absorb, to be hurt and misunderstood, to be without retaliation if that what some situations require.

God does not leave us comfortless out there, our divine life within, increasingly shrugs off the ego-games that surround us, absorbs them when they threaten to invade us, because we are quite simply growing into God. To be more as God is in this world.

We are called to be increasingly vulnerable, to take it, that's what love does, all the time. It is what meditation enables - "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", St. Paul says.

Home. The homeland of meditation. In the gospel of John, Jesus invites us to make our home in him. "Make your home in me as I make my home in you". (15/4) There he says, "you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free". (8.31/32)

[Preface to Meditation 17: It's Meaningless! \(p8\)](#)

One writer says that what the ego does is to grade absolutely everything and so degrade, poison all life with false values. The work of Christian meditation is of course about dismantling the ego; and when the ego starts to lose its power over us, the scenery starts to change.

T.S. Eliot in the poem East Coker has it like this:- 'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre, The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness, And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away -'

We start then to live in a world we do not recognise so well. Things that meant something before become meaningless, and though this is experienced as loss or weakness (oh dear, my fault, again!), it is a rite of passage in our drawing ever closer to God. Some things become meaningless because everything starts to become more full of meaning. Charles Williams says:- 'However we may feel it and the ego may experience it as being rather dull, even boring, it is because we are living more and more the life of glory': we are living it.

The ego will of course endure all sorts of agonies rather than let go of things it has been holding onto for so long. And eternity is different from any sort of meaning we might give it now. This is the darkness of God. So in meditation we may well feel a bit lost and it doesn't matter, it's O.K: the signboards may be down but the vertical sign-post on which they were hanging - our faith - will be as deep and sturdy as ever.

T.S. Eliot, in the poem, says 'It's not what one expected'. And goes on, 'In order to possess what you do not possess You must go by the way of dispossession'. This the darkness of God.

Wisdom, prayer is about discerning what really has meaning, what really matters, what in this life is eternal, what is not. Eliot again:- 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire, Is the wisdom of humility; humility is endless'.

And again, he calls us explorers. 'Here and there' he says, 'does not matter. We must be still and still moving into a further union, a deeper communion'.

[Preface to Meditation 18: The Gift \(p9/10\)](#)

Three old men met together a little while ago, I know because I was one of them. It was a reunion lasting just a few hours. We had not met as a threesome for a lot of years; when we had lived nearer one another we used to meet regularly every 6 to 8 weeks - to support each other in our lives and

work; for mutual spiritual guidance; for our survival and encouragement in the life of the Church; and to laugh at it all. Oh! how we laughed.

Our reunion was a brief and marvellous time. Because of our close friendship and some obvious infirmities and ageing bits and pieces, it was inevitable that we talked a bit about death and what comes after. When you try to look through death, what do you see? Anything? Do you have any idea? Do you know what you are looking forward to? Are you looking forward?

We sat around this quietly with our beer, and then it was illuminated by the reading for that day from Taize that one of us receives (this from the prophet Isaiah) "Lord, we set our hope in you... your name and your memory are all our soul desires".

As we parted, one of us shouted a farewell across the street - or was it a greeting? - remembering Sir Thomas More's famous words to his family as he was taken away a prisoner, knowing he was going to die - "May we meet merrily in heaven".

We need constantly to be reminded of our bug, for that is what we have been given and what we bring as people of faith, to the place called Death. Hope. Look at death and see Hope. Meditation says to us look at death and see hope. This is one of its great gifts we bring to the lives of all the others around us, and beyond. Far beyond. All the time - Hope.

In Christian meditation as we persevere day by day, it is revealed to us and evermore deeply that we are the people of Hope. Meditation, we know, is in the first instances about loss because it is about recognising, and then letting go, little by little, of the huge ego trips on which we have based a lot of our lives and frequently still cling to feverishly. Each letting go, big or small, each meditation is a little dying - remember St. Benedict in his rule, his word on prayer - 'keep death daily before your eyes' - that's what meditation does. John Main reminds us often enough. But these wrenching, painful farewells to the power of the ego, leaving a dark space, are at the same time a greeting to the ever-enlarging dimension of our Hope. Meditation is the abundant cradling of our hope. The Hope.

St. Paul has it so. "May the God of Hope bring you such joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope". (Romans 5 VI 3). Our meditation at its heart, removes all bounds, all limits, to hope.

[Preface to Meditation 19: The Dark \(p2\)](#)

Come then into the dark. Gently, firmly, deliberately in meditation, we lead one another in. Here, now - or anywhere. Together or alone. Leading and being led. It is the same.

Rowan Williams says:- 'The Christian God is a ray of darkness indeed, in the lives of individuals and in the story of humanity as a whole... The ray of darkness is not different from the dart of love!'

And I love this definition of prayer, 'the practice of prayer is keeping one's mind awake in the dark' - which describes meditation exactly.

Thomas Merton has this prayer:- 'and your brightness is my darkness. I know nothing of you, and, by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing you. If I imagine you I am mistaken. If I understand you, I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain I know you, I am crazy. The darkness is enough"

It is true. I do not know in meditation where I am going. I hardly know what's going on most of the time and that's just as it should be. In meditation we can be confident that a sense of being lost, in

freefall, is somehow going in the right direction. And being led with and through each other down, along the dark silences, we shall be increasingly patient with the unfolding uncertainties, sometimes catastrophic, of ordinary daily life in us and around us until our dark practice, our Christian meditation, becomes mysteriously, the one certain anchor place.

As meditation increasingly reveals to us the Christ in our broken hearts, our divided self, and at the same time the intensity of suffering through all the world, we grow to know that the Dark is the Mercy, God's Mercy, which constantly will refresh us, renew us, restore us as we open ourselves to embrace all that is. That nothing can separate us from the darkness of God's loving presence.

So, as Thomas Merton says, and in the simple way of prayer we have been taught and are making our own, 'let the silence soak into our bones'.

[Preface to Meditation 20: Multiple Overwhelmings \(p11\)](#)

Kevin, sitting comfortably at home in Dubai, can tell me sitting comfortably at home in Northern England, in almost less time than it takes to tell you this, where my nearest fish and chip shop is. And I have just been offered free access to 2 million wi-fi hotspots - goodness! (or as they say in Yorkshire, Northern England -ecky thump!)

At a recent annual conference of U.K. meditators, Meditation and Multiple Overwhelmings occurred together in the title. It fits me very well because I can feel increasingly in danger of being multiply overwhelmed. I know I'm a bit ancient and a sort of cave dweller ("He hasn't even got email") but everything seems to be coming at me faster and faster. New tools for living. Offers of new knowledge multiply week by week, my mind, it feels is being asked to expand too quickly. Someone once said 'God invented time to prevent everything happening at one'; it sometimes feels as if God has forgotten the first bit!

Multiple Overwhelmings. Nothing stays the same for long, so little is constant, everything is much more fluid, open to new considerations, fresh analysis. Everything less certain.

Multiple Overwhelmings. Except I am not multiply overwhelmed. Perhaps I could be but my Christian Meditation, Christian Meditation certainly guides me more and more surely these days. My sacred word constantly returns me through to my inmost depths where the divine presence, The One, God, the meaning of the whole of creation forever dwells. (Jesus in St. John's Gospel ch. 16 v. 12) "I have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. The Spirit of truth will come and teach you all things".

In our times, when the ego conglomerates seem often to be hurtling us towards a precipice of world insanity, our meditation can show us how to hang on, hang in with increasing serenity and know that our work of meditation makes present in our world, more and more, in the mysterious ways of God, the eternal wisdom.

I have always liked the image of the great jet liner, loaded with passengers, being guided through cloud and darkest night with the simple yet constant bleep of the radar, repeat and repeat and repeat, its middle eye leading down to safety.

The old Irish song:- 'I know where I'm going, and I know who's going with me'.

Preface to Meditation 21: The Gospel Way 'The End of War is in Sight' (p12)

Just as we are all wounded people, we are all violent people. I say this first to me, also to you.

Meditation starts to reveal this to us ever more clearly as we grow in awareness, awakens. The ego-drenching rottenness of violence all around, and, horror of horrors, in ourselves. How, in much of our lives we have put up the barricades of our anger, our contempts, our condescensions; used the small arms fire of our body language on the unsuspecting victims.

Meditation shows us how to disarm ourselves and others. Non-violence is the gospel way. It is in our hearts from the beginning waiting to be released into our common days; Christ is hidden in the heart of all things.

So meditation also shows us that the end of war is in sight. We already see a growing world-wide awareness that war, violence of any kind is abhorrent, no answer to anything, but that can get easily submerged by a new wave of tribe against tribe, religion against religion, nation against nation, the latest wave of terror.

Eckhart Tolle calls people who meditate 'frequency holders'. I like the picture of the early users of radio tuning in, trying to get the right frequency. All that glooping and crackling, all that interference, all that constant retuning - sounds just like meditation to me.

But in meditation, holding the frequency is our work. St. Paul's name for us is 'co-creators with Christ'. Faithfully tuning and re-tuning into Christ's Passion for Peace - swords into ploughshares, AK47s' into flagpoles and bicycles. The end of war is in sight. Not in our lifetimes or even say our great-great-great grandchildren who will all be living till 100! - perhaps. But we know it is peeping over the horizon, we can see it and hear it. What a gift through our meditation to hold in trust, to bring on, for our descendants and the whole world that is coming.

Here's a story for those times when you get discouraged:-

He was busy and prosperous, and popped into see the wise one who spent many hours in meditation. "What's your work then" he asked "What do you do?" "Nothing" was the reply. The businessman scoffed at this "What laziness!" "Not at all" said the wise one quietly, "Laziness is usually the vice of very active people". He paused, "Doing nothing actually takes quite a lot of doing".

John Main:- 'Meditation is the activity of total peace in an all-encompassing silence'.

Preface to Meditation 22: Aspects of Maturity

In a recent edition of our National Christian meditation newsletter I came across these words from Matthias Weissinger(?) in Germany: *'The path of silence - a path which took me further into the depths of my faith & closer to my own self than I ever expected it to be possible'*. I think that's beautiful, and certainly something we can hold on to for ourselves... Closer to my self than I ever expected it to be possible.

I find even trying to use the word 'maturity' makes me feel quite awkward, because I know myself spiritually, even after all this time, to be just at the beginning. Such a beginner, as if I'm only just starting to open up. Yet all the great spiritual teachers down the ages say it's a

feeling increasingly that you are just at the beginning. It's a sign of spiritual growth. That's just how it's supposed to be. Knowing, more & more, about less & less.

John Main talks of maturity from time to time. In *The Way of Unknowing* he says this: '*one of the things we learn through meditation as we mature, as we go further along the path, is to be equally content with either form of silence: With the infinite sense of His presence, or with the finite sense of His absence*'.

It's harder for us at the beginning as when we start to meditate we haven't learnt much detachment. We haven't reached the stage where we can be as equally content with absence as with presence, and anyway, we are always looking for our meditation to satisfy us. We are always looking to prove to ourselves that it works. That now we know God. Well, that maturity is a *sort* of dawning, an awakening.

Anyway, here's a story that will always bring me sharply to myself if I'm in any danger of getting too big for my spiritual boots:

The disciples were gathered round the Holy One, & he asked them this question '*When does the day begin?*'

One replied 'the day begins with the first sliver of light on the horizon.

No.

Another said 'when the shadows begin to disappear & you can start to pick out details'

No

A third: 'when the first bird sings'

Wrong again!

'When the sun comes up'

No said the Holy One. The day begins when you can see in every face you meet, the face of God, otherwise it is still night.

John Main says most simply: '*If in meditation we can make ourselves available, if we can be there, everything else is given. Leave the rest to the mystery of God*

[Preface to Meditation 23: Choosing Joy](#)

Peace I leave with you, my own peace, my joy, I give you. Not as the world gives, give I to you. Jesus speaking in our hearts in St John's Gospel.

Meditation is an invitation to enter right in to the joy of God. In to the really big scene. The joy of God which is at the heart of all creation. The sheer overwhelming, explosive, wasteful abundance of it all. The joy of the gift of life itself.

Not as the world gives, give I to you.

There's a lovely blessing which begins: *The peace of God which passes all understanding.* Passes all understanding. All understanding. .The peace of God, the joy of God, it is the same.

During apartheid in South Africa, twelve black men in a village in the Eastern Transvaal were massacred as a reprisal for some thefts. A reporter went out to the village just after the funerals and was dumbstruck to find the women dancing & singing together. 'How can you be like this after what's happened?' They replied – 'you have to go on & celebrate life, find the joy, that's what living is all about, no matter what's happens, otherwise there is nothing'.

They chose joy...

Choosing to meditate is to choose to pass all understanding, which is the way deep into God's joy – in you, yes, in you; in me; in it all. Because it invites us to let go of all the little scenes which seek to dominate our lives. In meditation, to let go of all our struggling, to understand, all the ego's evermore cunning attempts to frame & freeze us into a series of smaller pictures: all self-portraits, still lives. The African women knew very well that though their future without their men was unknown, a still life is a dead life: so they chose joy...

Choosing joy, come what may, is a hard choice. A young American at Taize said recently 'we can either be mind-less or mind-full, come what may' ...Mindful, always to choose joy...

The recurring mindfulness of meditation, choosing nothing except our mantra, our sacred word, & learning to let go everything else, leads us quietly & firmly into the big scene... which passes all understanding.

Each of us has to enter it for ourselves, & then tell others, not by words, not at all of course, but by the deep joy we live.

St Paul: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say rejoice; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*

[Preface to Meditation 24: Trust the Silence \(p15\)](#)

'Trust the Silence' says, Brenda Meakin, one of the teachers of Christian Meditation from Canada.

An Orthodox Christian called Bulgarov, says that to go into contemplative prayer, into the silence, is to see the other side of the mountain, the side that has never been photographed, 'the only side worth seeing, and it's a picture of the way the world looks, after the ego has disappeared'.

I love the story of the nun who went into the mountain to live a 3 year silent retreat. When eventually she re-emerged, they wanted to know how she had been, what it was like. All she would say was 'Well it wasn't boring'. Trust the Silence. The Silence is the Presence of God.

Laurence Freeman reminds us that the fuel for our inner journey is the power of silence. Just to meditate regularly as a discipline, 'a work' (or as an activity if you want to describe it so), repeating our mantra to bring us to stillness and silence, is progress. The only thing is that all our customary ways of measuring progress, all ego-measures to be sure, are suspended, banished. What we start to discover in the stillness is that we are moving, John Main would say, through spheres of silence, into

deeper silence. The gift is that we are being changed, we are sloughing off the old life to reveal what has always been within - the butterfly of a true Christ-self, multi-coloured, beautiful, very fragile and exposed: many days we may long to hide, go back into our chrysalis, but that is not possible.

Thomas Merton has it this way:- 'We cannot tell what is happening, indeed we do not need to know', and we cannot describe what is happening or really tell it to others. 'Other good people' he says 'will not understand'. Some we find may even think it a bit weird and occasionally become antagonistic or scornful - (you meditating! good heavens what do you get out of it I wonder?) 'But' he says, 'deep in our inmost being we keep getting glimpses, that's all they are, glimpses of life as communion, as thanksgiving, as praise, life as festival, life as glory'.

Trust the Silence. The Silence is the Presence of God.