



Third Sunday of Advent December 14, 2014 B

Thoughts on Christian Meditation

The following piece on Christian Meditation appeared in the September 2014 issue of *Reality*, an Irish religious magazine produced by Redemptorists priests. In the article, Margaret Lee writes:

When Josie died some people wondered if she had left me anything in her will. I lived beside her for over twenty years and we were close friends.

Josie left me a great gift but it wasn't the sort of thing that wills normally concern themselves with; it was something more precious. About two or three years before she died she introduced me to John Main and to the practice of meditation. She was a strong woman who did not easily take 'no' for an answer, and when she announced one day that we were going to a meditation session that a local Sister of Mercy organized during Lent, I knew that the easiest thing was just to go along. When the course was completed I did not continue to practice the meditation with any degree of regularity. However, from time to time, Josie would announce that 'we' were going to go on a meditation weekend or a meditation day. Such outings brought me to a six-day retreat in Kerry, to a weekend in some part of West Cork, to Bere Island and to Dún Laoghaire. I usually came home with good intentions of doing the daily meditation but it mostly turned out to be a stop-start effort.

Josie died in May 2012 and I was privileged to be with her during her last moments, before she passed into the eternal life that surrounds our limited life span on this earth. Shortly afterwards the notification of a meditation day in Dublin came in my door and I attended the day that was led by Benedictine priest, Lawrence Freeman, who learned the method from fellow Benedictine, John Main. Something happened that day to strengthen my resolve, and when I came home I began to meditate every day—well, most days! It has helped me enormously.

Meditation is Simple

According to John Main, meditation is simple. It just means taking fifteen to twenty minutes every

morning and every evening, sitting still, keeping your back as straight as possible and inwardly repeating the mantra. (The word 'maranatha,' the ancient Aramaic prayer which means 'Come Lord Jesus,' is the one he particularly favours). During this time, you try not to follow any thoughts that might come into your mind even if they are 'holy' ones, you just concentrate on the mantra. You don't ask yourself if you are making progress. No matter what difficulties people brought to John Main about meditation he just told them: "Say the mantra." He saw the repetition of, and attention to, the mantra as a leaving behind of the ego and becoming open to God.

I try to put aside time each morning and evening to practice sitting still and saying the mantra. It is not always easy; especially when Jess decides that she wants to come in or go out and brooks no denial of her canine needs. Of course I go off into daydreams and thoughts about the most mundane things but when I catch myself doing that I just come back to the mantra. Every now and again I am tempted to think "this is not really prayer, I am just sitting here." I don't see myself as an expert on meditation or indeed on prayer of any type, but I do believe that when we pray we enter into the mystery of God. So when the doubts come I remind myself of two fundamental things. Firstly, God is within us and when we enter into inner silence, we enter into the life of God. Secondly, Jesus himself told us that when we pray, it is the spirit who is praying in us.

Fruits of Meditation

What are the fruits of this practice of meditation? I'm not sure because John Main warns us against looking for results. When we begin to measure outcomes, we are acting as if we are in charge of our spiritual journey, as if it all depends on our efforts, whereas it is a free gift from God. It is God who is leading us. In meditation we let go of control and we allow God to take charge and we learn to attend to the present moment by repeating the mantra. After a while the mantra takes root within us and we find ourselves repeating it quietly at moments throughout the day, leading us to an awareness of the presence of God.

The practice of meditation just demands two things. The first is discipline—the discipline to put aside the time every day for the exercise. The second is faith—the willingness to believe that this exercise is an encounter with God even if we don't feel any thunderbolts. Even if we spend the whole time struggling to attend to the mantra.

In her very interesting book called ***Thrive—Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being and Wisdom***, Ariana Huffington writes:

One of the best—and most easily available—ways we can become healthier and happier is through mindfulness and meditation. Every element of well-being is enhanced by the practice of meditation and, indeed, studies have shown that mindfulness and meditation have a measurable positive impact on the other three pillars of the Third Metric—wisdom, wonder, and giving.

A little later Ariana writes:

Meditation may be a wonder drug, but it does need to be regularly refilled. To get all these benefits, we need to make it a part of our everyday lives. Happiness and well-being are not just magical traits that some are blessed with and others not. Richard Davidson has come to view “happiness not as a trait but as a skill, like tennis.... If you want to be a good tennis player, you can't just pick up a racket—you have to practice,” he said. “We can actually practice to enhance our well-being. Every strand of scientific evidence points in that direction. It's no different than learning to play the violin or play golf. When you practice, you get better at it.” And trust me, it's much easier than mastering the violin or becoming a golf pro. Davidson found “remarkable results with practitioners who did fifty thousand rounds of meditation, but also with three weeks of twenty minutes a day, which, of course, is more applicable to our modern time.”

While meditation may be a solitary activity that involves a certain inward focus, it also increases our ability to connect with others, actually making us more compassionate. Scientists from Harvard and Northeastern Universities found that meditation “made people willing to act virtuous—to help another who was suffering—even in the face of a norm not to do so.”

*And meditation boosts our creativity. “Ideas are like fish,” wrote director and longtime meditator David Lynch in his book *Catching the Big Fish*. “If you want to catch little fish, you can stay in the shallow water. But if you want to catch the big fish, you've got to go deeper. Down deep, the fish are more powerful and more pure. They're huge and abstract. And they're very beautiful.”*

Steve Jobs, a lifelong practitioner of meditation, affirmed the connection between meditation and creativity: “If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is. If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does there's room to hear more subtle things—that's when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before.” (pp 46-47)

Prayer before Meditation

**Give me a candle of your Spirit,
O God, as I go down into the deep
of my own being.**

Show me the hidden things.

**Take me down to the spring of my life,
and tell me my nature and my name.**

**Give me freedom to grow so that I
may become my true self—
the fulfillment of the seed which you
planted in me at my making.**

Out of the deep I cry unto thee,

O God.

Amen.

George Appleton

Have a blessed week,

