

Meditatio Talks

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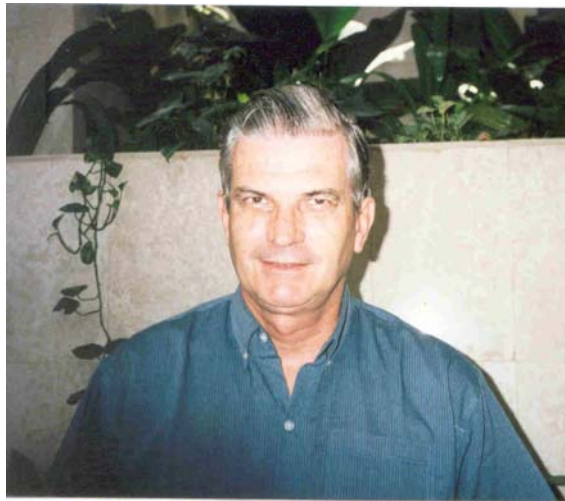
The Prayer that Jesus Taught

FR GERRY PIERSE CSsR

Talks given in Singapore and the Philippines

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FR GERRY PIERSE (1940-1999) was a Redemptorist priest who came from County Kerry in Ireland. He went to the Philippines in 1961 as a seminarian at the age of 21 and was ordained there in 1964. In the early years of his ministry, he served mainly in the rural missions. Later he was parish priest in three Redemptorist city parishes before he became prefect of the major seminary.

In later years, he specialised in giving retreats. This apostolate coincided with his moving deeper into contemplative prayer. He was greatly inspired by the teaching of Benedictine monk John Main, a fellow Irishman. From his own experience in the practice of Christian Meditation, he formed and led meditation groups in his parishes and in the provincial prison.

Gerry Pierse had a gift with words that made his teaching always simple, clear and effective. In a short period of time, he produced five books to help others tread and persevere on the path of Christian Meditation. When he gave talks on meditation, he had the extraordinary gift of illuminating the teaching with engaging stories, amusing anecdotes, and self-deprecating humour. The meditation communities in the Philippines, Ireland, Singapore, Australia, Malaysia and Mauritius benefited greatly from his teaching. This series of the *Meditatio Talks* is compiled from recordings of his talks to meditation groups in those regions.

Gerry Pierse died on 12 July 1999 from a swimming accident in Queensland, Australia. His body was found on the rocks of the Gold Coast. There is something that inspires awe in the way he returned to the Lord. For Gerry, the Sea and the Rock was home. The sea and the rocks were the place where the Celtic monks of old found silence and God. This was particularly true of those living near Skelligs in the South of Kerry. We pray that he rests now with God, his Rock and his strength.

11. The Humility Of Meditation

From time to time in the parish we appeal for volunteer catechists. A whole range of people, from those who have just completed grade school to retired principals with PhDs in education, apply. By and large, the former are more satisfactory than the latter. The student is receptive, full of wonder, willing to learn, empty and ready to be filled. The PhDs knows it all, does not see the point of the briefings: "After all I've been teaching all my life!" They abhor the simplicity of the procedure and of the presentation.

When we come to prayer we have the same difficulty. If we feel that we are good at it or know all about it we are in great danger. If we feel empty, that we are beginners, there is a good prognosis for us. It was only when Peter said, "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man", that Jesus called him to follow him. (Luke 5:8)

The call to follow Christ is a call to discipleship, to being a beginner, to accepting simplicity, to bowing to a discipline. Any notions that we may have about ourselves spiritually are great blocks to a true spirituality. St Paul tells the Corinthians, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). A sense of our own poverty of our own weakness and sinfulness is an essential prerequisite for true prayer.

God is calling each of us to the fullness of life, to a great expansiveness of our potential. The first and main obstacle to our response is our own conceit, our ego's unwillingness to admit that we need a simple path to discover the fullness of life that is within us. The ego is the big block to true prayer, to true spiritual freedom.

True prayer is getting into the stream of prayer that is happening in our hearts where the Spirit of Christ is ever crying "Abba, Father".

Presence in silence to this prayer within us is true prayer and true prayer is transforming. You cannot be silent with the Spirit and continue to be destructively angry, fearful, jealous, revengeful, lustful. Either prayer will stop or these feelings will undergo purification. There is a wonderful line in Graham Greene's book *The Power and the Glory*. Of the whiskey priest he says: "He wanted to pray, but he knew that to pray is to act and he was not ready to act." True prayer leads to the elimination of what is inconsistent with it. St Augustine put this in another way when he said, "Love God and do what you will."

To pray, then, we need to leave self behind. Each time we come to prayer we are beginners. We need to be humble. We need to be child-like in accepting a discipline that is simple and effective. There are many paths of prayer but I have come to be convinced, through my own experience and the experience of others that I have journeyed with, that praying that mantra has a pre-eminence that cannot be denied.

Golf is a simple game that can be played by amateurs or professionals. It is a simple game yet one in which you can always improve. There is no score that cannot be beaten. Every stroke is a new beginning. The amateur can get a hole-in-one, the professional can miss a six-inch putt. So too with meditation. It is a prayer form for all. Every moment needs attention. One may become more proficient in it but one can never rest on one's laurels. Every stroke needs attention as if it was the first time one had ever held a club. Every meditation period and every moment of meditation is a new beginning.

Meditation is a way of prayer for all. There is no one so uneducated that he or she cannot meditate. There is no one so far advanced that the discipline of meditation will not help him or her on the way. Just remember the heights of spiritual growth to which St Paul challenged his listeners. And who were his listeners? They were the butchers, the bakers, the ordinary folk of his time.

What we need is the courage to begin to meditate. When we have begun we will experience a rightness about it and then we will not need to be convinced anymore. We will discover that the mantra has the merit of displacing the ego, of unhooking our illusions.

It is simple beyond words, but that does not mean that it is easy. Our failure in doing something so simple will bring us to a great humility, a great sense of poverty. It demands great courage and humility to begin to pray it, to begin each day, to begin again each time we become distracted, and to be always a beginner.

12. From Fear To Freedom

Some years ago, I noticed that I had a pain in my shoulder. I went to our doctor who said that it might be a sprain and advised me to rest it and gave me some aspirins. As it got worse, I went to a local healer. He said that there was wind in my shoulder and that he would massage it out through my finger tips and my toes! He tried, but to no avail. I had the feeling that neither of them really had a clue as to what was wrong with me. I listlessly followed their instructions but my condition continued to deteriorate.

Eventually, I went to an orthopaedics doctor who, after a few minutes of careful examination, told me that I had a frozen shoulder. I knew at once that he knew what was wrong, and set out confidently on the course of treatment he mapped out for me.

This story mirrors the feeling of authority and confidence that I got when I came into contact with the teaching of the Benedictine John Main on prayer. I got the feeling that he knew what he was talking about, and that if I followed him, I would get somewhere.

For me the power of meditation is that it opens one up to love – of self, God and neighbour. The dictum of St. Augustine often quoted by John Main is very apt: "If we are to be restored to God we must first be restored to our own selves, and then make of ourselves as it were a stepping stone by which to step to God." To be restored to ourselves is to go beyond fear.

Recently, I visited an old friend we used to call uncle Mickey and said to him, "Mickey, you are saying the rosary." "I am," he said "and it makes me very content." I think Mickey had gone a way beyond saying the rosary as talking to or listening to God. He was saying the rosary as a mantra, just as a way of being there with God. Then he said a very striking thing: "You know, if you're close to God, nobody can insult you." It just came out of him like that. And I think it was the fruit of contemplation, because it's really true: if you are close to God nobody can insult you. If someone says something negative about you, you get so upset, you get fearful. But if you are close to God, if somebody says something negative about you, it's either true, and therefore it's valuable feedback, or it's false. If the person is telling a lie, or expressing jealousy, then *that* person has a problem. So why should *I* get upset?

The hub of love is in relationships. As I meditate, I begin to discover that the great obstacle to relationship on all levels is fear. We are afraid of what is going on inside ourselves. We are afraid of the scrutiny of others. We are afraid of God. So many people are in a spin of activity precisely because they do not want to sit with the doubts or fears that are within them. They are like doughnuts – a spinning periphery with an empty centre.

Whenever I feel like telling a lie, I know that I am afraid of something. If I am grasping or over-powering, either physically or emotionally, I am acting out of fear. Because of this, we go into little areas of our own, little fiefdoms where we can be boss. Or we present others with *fait accompli*, no-option situations where our wills will have to be done. I know from experience that this happens in religious groups, in marriage and in any group that works together.

If we have so much fear of ourselves and of others, it is inevitable that we will have a lot of fear of God. The whole Catholic education system of a generation ago was based on fear. It was a list of do's and don'ts that constituted sin; sin that brought God's eternal damnation. The main reason we gave people for joining the community in Eucharistic celebration was that, if they did not participate, they would commit a mortal sin and go to hell. How awful to motivate people in this way! Reverence for the human body and sexuality was similarly motivated. This led to a lot of unnecessary guilt, fear and scrupulosity.

There is no use in trying to talk a person out of fear; it is something that comes from deep within oneself. The only way of reversing fear is to experience that there is no need for it.

Many people when they begin to meditate expect great peace. I remember this in my first years of meditation. But it was not what happened. I had a lot of sexual turmoil, authority turmoil, anger, and so on. I think what was happening was this. I grew up in a very confined seminary, the seminaries of the fifties. I suppose the two issues of adolescence, authority and sexuality, hadn't really been dealt with; I had repressed them. But as I began to meditate, and I was over forty at this time, these things came up gently but persistently. I just let them be there, and I let them go. And eventually a certain serenity – at-homeness – came. There was a whole lot of garbage in there that needed to be faced and allowed to come out. And it came out, and I just let it out and that was it.

I have experienced that this is what meditation does. As I continue the effort to be still within myself, I discover from experience that it is an okay place to be. It is okay to just be who I am, and to let thoughts come and go. As I continue to meditate, I spot myself being afraid. There is just that little space which develops between me and the ego in which I can decide whether or not I will let it continue to bully me. I also begin to see myself bullying others and have that split second in which to decide whether or not I will act out the compulsive desire to dominate or manipulate.

Then I find that my whole attitude to prayer has changed. It is no longer a way of trying to get this God, this Father that secretly I am deeply afraid of, to fulfil my desires. I find that after the stillness of meditation, I can be content to present my concerns to a God that I know is loving. I can trust him to further my better interests, no matter how hard it is at times for me to see that he is actually doing so.

13. Is The Mantra Prayer?

The question is often asked, “Is the mantra really prayer?” My first answer is a story.

There was a village by a lake that had a beautiful church and bell tower. However, during a geological movement of the earth the whole village got buried in the water. Later, a tradition grew up in the place that sometimes the ringing of the church bells could be heard from the shore.

whole month on the shore listening intently for the bells but he never heard them. He decided to abandon his quest. As he could not hear the sound of the bells, he decided, on his last day, just to listen to the sound of the waves. And as he listened to the sound of the waves, it was then he heard the sound of the bells.

When we seek the transcendent, we do not find it. When we listen to the immediate, what is around us, we hear the transcendent, what is beyond us.

I think this is what happens when we say the mantra. We are present to the present moment in the here-and-now, and then we are also present to God, reality itself. But when we try to grasp this moment and this reality for itself we lose it.

This truth is borne out by many New Testament stories. At the transfiguration Peter wanted to build tabernacles to retain the moment of transfiguration, to grasp the moment of the presence of God, but Mark tells us it was foolish talk, “He did not know what he was saying” (Mark 9:6).

The presence of the risen Lord, the Mystical Christ, is never known at the time of his presence. This is shown clearly in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus joins the depressed disciples but they do not recognise him. He explains the scriptures to them and again they do not recognise him. It is only in the breaking of the bread that they recognise him, and then he is gone. It is only at this point, in retrospect, that they see that he has been with them all the time: “Were not our hearts filled with ardent yearning when he was talking to us on the road and explaining the scriptures?” (Luke 24:32) In praying the mantra we are not aware of Christ, we are only present to the mantra.

In retrospect we can see that being present to the mantra we are present at our own centre, and when we are present there we are where the Spirit of Christ is. And Christ is in the Father, so we are present to God, in a sense, without knowing it. The only way we can be present to God is “without knowing it”; we are praying “without knowing it”. So it is true to say that when we know that we are praying we cease to pray, just as a saint ceases to be a saint when he knows that he is a saint.

Praying the mantra, being present without knowing it, tells us also about how Christ is present when we serve others. There is a spirituality that says that we should love Christ in others, and that we should see Christ in others. The problem about this is that we may be using others to get to Christ. So, we do not love others for their own sakes but only because they bring us to Christ. We make them into “things” that bring us to Christ. It seems to me to be much more true and wholesome to love others, period. When we love others we look at the human face, we see the brokenness, we respond to the person, and we find Christ. I think this is what St Augustine meant when he said: “When you minister to the sick it is Christ ministering to Christ.” Christ in you ministers to the sick, and Christ in the sick ministers to you. Efforts to be “religious”, when what we are called to be is “human”, can make our whole presence to others quite phoney.

The mantra then is prayer because it makes us present to the transcendent while not grasping it. Praying the mantra prepares us to minister to Christ, a Christ who is present in all human situations, but whose presence can best be seen in retrospect.

14. Crude But Efficient

When I was growing up in the south of Ireland we used to fish by dragging a weighted spinner after our canvas boat. One day we were joined by an American bishop on an angling holiday. He came decked out with all the paraphernalia that consumerist genius could invent. He had fishing boots, fishing pants, a fishing jacket and a special fisherman's hat in which an assortment of flies were set. He had a variety of fishing rods. He had boxes of bait of different kinds, gut and line, weights and swivels. He looked disparagingly on our lines and spinners and said, "You don't catch fish with those crude things, do you?" Well, the whole afternoon he made his cast as the book told him to do, but he caught nothing. Every time we landed a mackerel or a pollack, my uncle would hold it up and say, "Crude but efficient, my Lord!"

When we talk about praying the mantra I feel like saying the same. It is crude but efficient. It is an efficiency proved by the tradition. The supermarket of prayer has many sophisticated theories and methods to offer, but to my mind none is as simple and as efficient as the mantra.

Navigation is another area that has become very sophisticated. But the ordinary fisherman has his own very simple but effective method. When he is going somewhere he takes a point towards which he fixes the bow of his boat. The winds and the waves and the currents may ceaselessly try to knock him off course. But if he keeps coming back to the point he will make progress towards his destination. If he allows himself to drift with the current or be side-tracked by the wind he may end up going around in circles or going in the wrong direction.

The mantra is the point on which the meditator sets his bow. He or she is attracted toward it and everything else is a distraction. It is the sure way, no matter how long it takes, to bring us to our destination.

If you have a pond that is overgrown it is good to rake out the weeds and the rubbish, but a point comes where the raking must stop and the water be allowed to settle if you are to see its purity and beauty. If there is a wound that has not healed because of hidden dirt within, it may be necessary to open the wound and wash it out, but a time quickly comes when tinkering with it is counterproductive. We have to stop picking at it and let it heal by itself.

So too with our "selves". A certain amount of processing may be of value but healing takes place in silence and cannot be pressured. It is when we stop picking at the self, when we take our attention off ourselves, that healing takes place. This is what happens when we pray the mantra. We stop picking at ourselves and allow healing to take place. It is an unsophisticated method, simple but effective.

Being before the Lord in silence, one experiences integration and a healing activity that is often far more effective than a lot of our sophisticated therapy.

15. The Silence Needed For Meditation

There is a growing lack of silence and fear of silence in today's world. There is so much noise and bustle and rushing that people do not know what to do with silence. Or maybe they are afraid of what silence would do with them! They are afraid of what would happen if they let what is inside themselves speak. Yet, if we are to know God we must know ourselves first, St Augustine tells us. And there is no way of being present to what is inside ourselves other than the way of silence.

To be silent we need silence of the body, silence of the mind and silence of the emotions.

We are growing more conscious nowadays of the connection between the physical and the psychological. If we are to be silent within, we need to be physically silent. When we begin to meditate we will often experience a restlessness, a wanting to get away from it. Sometimes we will almost feel our feet walking out the door, or that the body had gotten up and left, before we realise that this has happened. There is a need then to tie down the body. It is good to have a definite time and place in which to be silent. We need this at least twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, for twenty to thirty minutes.

The second silence is silence of the mind. As we try to be still we find that we have several theatres within our heads all showing their own internal movies. We can be reliving the past or enjoying fantasies about the future. One Indian writer said that the mind is like a tree inhabited by monkeys. They keep jumping from branch to branch and chattering at each other. It takes great patience with ourselves to calm down this turmoil and to stop the movies and the monkeys.

The third kind of silence is an emotional one. As we try to be still we may become aware of tensions or unrest within. Very often this is due to anger or resentment which we may or may not be able to name. Psychological processing would say that these feelings should be brought out into the open and faced. This is often very helpful. Flight from them, or repression on the other hand, is not helpful. By the silence of meditation we deal with these emotions in another way. We just stand our ground. We are not intimidated by them, we just sit still. Bit by bit this tenacity bears fruit in integration and calmness.

If there are three levels of silence needed to meditate, there are also three great obstacles to silence, namely, distraction, sleep and the *pax perniciosa*.

Attention or attraction is to be pulled in a definite direction. Distraction is to be pulled in other directions. When we try to meditate, to be still, we find ourselves being distracted. Our desires, our regrets for the past, our plans for the future, all pull us in different directions. The ego is ever seeking to be the Lord of the Manor. The mantra tradition gives us a remedy for this. We focus on it, are drawn to it. When we get distracted we know exactly what to do to come back into traction – we just begin again to say the mantra.

Sleep is the second enemy of meditation. If you feel sleepy when you start meditating, the first reason for it may be just that you are too tired. Then perhaps the best thing for you to do is to go and sleep first. In fact, one of the best times for meditation is often after restful sleep. This is true especially at night. There is stillness, no telephone, no television, no children playing. This too can be the answer for the people who say that they have no time to meditate. Meditate during the night. After some hours of sleep the body tends to wake naturally. Get out of bed and meditate. Then go back to sleep again. If you develop this rhythm you will find that your night has been more restful than if you had slept the whole night through without interruption.

But what if tiredness is not the reason for your sleepiness? Then it is very probable that it is avoidance. This is related to the third level of silence that I mentioned above – emotional silence. There may be something in your life – anger, resentment, an unforgiven hurt, a decision to be made – which you want to avoid. When we sit and be still these things come up to challenge us. One way of avoiding the challenge it is to fall asleep. Here is where fidelity will give you the courage to stand your ground. Experts on dogs tell us that if you look a dog in the eye, no matter how fierce he is, he will not bite you. Saying the mantra is like standing your ground and looking the anxiety straight in the eye. You are not fighting with it, or reasoning with it, or digging into its roots; but sooner or later as you continue to stand your ground in the face of it, whatever is disturbing you loses its power over you.

The last enemy of silence is the *pax perniciosa*, pernicious peace, and it is very subtle. It is a state of mental vacuity or absorption during the time of prayer that could easily be mistaken for prayer. It could be a pious absorption or an absorption in one of our fantasies, and it is discovered almost with regret. You have formed a way of living with the distraction or almost come into friendship with it. The lazy part within you has enjoyed a break from the discipline of the mantra. But the tradition is very clear: as soon as this state is recovered, whether it is a state of genuine contemplative silence or mental vacuity or absorbing distraction, step firmly on it by saying the mantra.

Silence is necessary to meditate, to realise the presence of Christ praying within us. This is a total silence of body and mind and emotions. Silence will be difficult to achieve because of distractions, sleep or pernicious peace. In achieving this silence the little prayer word, the mantra, is the means that the tradition gives us. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* tells us:

“Fasten this word to your heart so that it never leaves you, come what may. This word is to be your shield and your spear, whether in peace or in war. With this word you are to beat upon the cloud and the darkness above you. With it you are to smite down every manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting. So much so that if any thought should press upon you to ask you what you would have, answer it with no other words but this little word [the mantra].”

16. What Is A Good Meditation?

Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.” (Mt. 5:8). What does a pure heart mean? Does it mean somebody who has never experienced temptation, someone who lives in an antiseptic, isolated, trouble-free world? I do not think so. The Spanish writer Unamuno put it this way:

*Those who believe they believe in God
But without passion in their heart,
Without anguish of mind,
Without uncertainty
Without doubt
Even at times without despair
Believe only in the idea of God
Not in God himself.*

Purity of heart and the seeing of God are rooted in daily reality. They are not found in ecstasy but in struggle. The pure of heart are seldom aware that they are pure of heart. They are just trying to be faithful and the words “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner” are much more likely to be on their lips than the words “Thank you, God, that I am not as the rest of people.” Sanity has been defined as having the same sickness as everyone else. Insanity, living outside of reality, is thinking that we are unique. To have a pure heart, then, is to be struggling to be faithful in a jungle of impurity.

To ask who is pure in heart is, in a sense, to ask a wrong question. Purity of heart is a direction rather than an achievement. To ask what is a good meditation is to ask the same kind of wrong question. To meditate is to be going in a direction, to be casting off all the baggage that will delay one or distract one on the journey. Meditation is not to be luxuriating in a successful achievement and stroking the Ego but to be struggling along a rocky road on which there are all sorts of obstacles and distractions. Meditation is faithfulness in going in the same direction, not the achievement of the end. If God gives moments of special joy or awareness of himself they are to be accepted gracefully, but, when these moments are sought for themselves, they become an obstacle to meditation.

There was a man who died and was told that he would have to walk a million miles before he could enter heaven. He said that this was impossible and so he lay down where he was. After a million years he realised that if he had walked even one mile a year he would now be in heaven. So he began to walk. As he began to walk he found himself carried along by a joy that made the miles seem shorter and made him discount any difficulty experienced on the way.

What we need is to set out on the road of meditation each day with courage and fidelity and not to be self-consciously asking ourselves whether or not our meditation is a good one.

17. The Widow's Mite

I would like to end this series of talks with something of my own story and struggle, rather than with theoretical explanations.

I was about seventeen years a priest before I came to know in my being that prayer was essential for me. Up to then I had done what I was told, fulfilled my obligations, but my prayer really did little to purify my life. For about five years after coming to the awareness that prayer was *relationship rather than obligation*, I searched for better ways of prayer and was led through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola to an appreciation of the value of listening to Scripture and letting its attitudes and values challenge the conventional wisdom that modern society imposes on us. Ignatius leads one from active reflection to joyful being, to his other way of prayer. This is prayer by reciting a single word or verse.

At this point I came into contact with the simple teaching of John Main on meditation, and began to practice it. Very soon I found myself seeing where I had been blind, seeing my own selfishness and insensitivity. I found myself hearing where I had been deaf, especially where there was scrutiny or negative feedback. I found myself walking more freely where I had been impeded by my big ego or my wretched self image. I learned the wisdom of the teaching of John Main that you cannot learn meditation from books or tapes. Practise it and the experience will convince you of its value.

Like all meditators I have been plagued with our culture's obsession with success. In all endeavours we are being pushed to succeed. But prayer is not about success, it is rather about faithfulness in following the Lord. We tend to believe that distraction-free prayer is successful prayer. As I have said earlier the word "distraction" should be deleted from our vocabularies because of the negative connotation that it has and the aggressive response it may produce. Better replace the word "distraction" with "other thoughts".

Some images and stories have liberated me from the obsession with success. But it keeps coming back and I have to keep going back to the images and stories to help me cope. One image has been that of washing socks. When one washes socks, one is not disappointed if the water becomes dirty. Indeed, it is a sign that the washing is being successful. The dirt in the water must have been dislodged from the socks and so the socks are becoming cleaner. Similarly, if when we meditate "other thoughts" – what we used to call distractions emerge – whether they be just mental wanderings or strong feelings, they indicate that there was unprocessed, repressed material within. The secret is to let them go, like the dirt from the socks. Their presence is a sign, not of failure, but of the fact that the meditation process is setting one free and clearing out internal garbage.

Many stories float to my consciousness when I feel tempted to be depressed by the presence of other thoughts but the most powerful is that of the Widows Mite found in Luke 21:1-4.

“Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury box; he also saw a widow dropping in two small coins. And he said, ‘Truly, I tell you this poor widow put in more than all of them. For all gave an offering from their plenty, but she instead, out of her poverty, gave everything she had to live on.’ ”

God has a different way of measuring to the one we have. He does not look at what is given, as we do, but rather at what is left behind. The rich people gave only a decimal of a percentage of their belongings. But when the woman gave her two coins, she gave 100 per cent of what she owned.

I like this story and I need it to sustain me in meditation. There is the instinctive need to want to be able to give an impressive gift, to be able to meditate without the invasion of other thoughts for 100 per cent of the allotted time. But most of the time I find myself realising at the end of the period that I have been involved with other thoughts for 99 per cent of the time.

The thing then is to patiently and humbly offer the one per cent. It is giving all that I have to give. The Lord is delighted because that is all that I, his creature whom he made with a monkey-chasing mind, can realistically do. And the Lord in his love has made sure that I will not feel proud or boastful about the tiny one per cent that is my 100 per cent gift.

18. COMMITMENT

One time I was planning to explore a cave with a friend. I asked him how far in we would go. He answered: “Just far enough that we can say that we were there.”

I think his answer is indicative of a great problem of our times and particularly a great problem in meditation.

Life today offers so many opportunities and challenges that it is hard for young people to make a commitment to any one of them. This is true in marriage, religious life and in work. People want to keep their options open and not to give their all to any one thing. It is a far cry from the man in the Gospel who on finding a pearl of great price in a field went and sold all that he had and bought the field.

This hesitation about making a commitment takes a severe toll on our lives. When we do not make a commitment we are free, but free too to be alienated, to be without roots or a “something” or a “someone” to anchor our hearts. This is the root of shallowness and boredom.

Christ the Lord seemed to have a special regard for the committed, for passionate whole-hearted people. He was so much more compassionate towards the woman taken in adultery and towards prostitutes than he was towards the legalistic Pharisees. He chose the hot-headed Peter to be his first pope in spite of the fact that he had denied him three times. Paul was a man of total commitment, whether to persecuting Christ or to preaching him.

We need to be earnest about it, reproving and chastising our dear ego and this is what we do in meditation. We need to be earnest enough to start and then we need to be earnest enough to persevere. Saying the mantra is like weeding a garden. As we say it we push back the frontiers of the ego. But the forces of the ego, like the weeds, quickly recover and make another onslaught. That is why we have to meditate everyday for the rest of our lives. The weeds, the energy of the ego, keep reforming. This is a fact of gardening and a fact of life. We must just accept it and deal with it. We should not be discouraged by our apparent failure to say the mantra and keep out distraction. We say the mantra not to be successful but to be faithful. Our obsession with success, which the world in which we live teaches us, is one of our greatest obstacles to perseverance in prayer. Yet “spiritual success”, if we had it, would be an almost insurmountable obstacle to spiritual growth!

Put it this way. After a thirty-minute period of meditation you have to say to the Lord: “Sorry Lord, I goofed that one again, was I even a minute saying the mantra? Help me to do better the next time.” You certainly will not leave with a bloated ego. On the other hand, supposing you could say to the Lord, “Well that was a smashing meditation. I was bulls-eye on the mantra from start to finish. I pity those people who do not find saying the mantra dead easy.” Do I hear echoes of the Gospel story in Luke 18 of the two men who went up to the temple to pray the one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector?

So, apparent failure is no excuse for not continuing to meditate every day twice a day, and to starting again every time you become aware of distraction.

The discovery then comes through the experience that being restricted to the mantra leads to depth and breadth in all dimensions of life. As we become committed to the mantra we become deeper people, we become more absorbed and committed to everything that we do, solitude replaces loneliness, depth replaces shallowness, joy replaces listlessness.

19. Sticking To One Way

Sometimes, people ask: “Should I change my mantra?” or “Should I change my method of prayer?”

I think prayer may be compared to courtship. A boy or girl may court anyone they wish, but the time will come when they must choose a special person. That relationship must grow by concentrating on it. So too with meditation. We must concentrate on it once we have decided to go into it.

Again prayer may be compared to digging a well. If we give up after ten or twenty feet and start again somewhere else we will never get to any depth.

Praying the mantra is like lighting a fire with a magnifying glass. We must focus on one method and say one mantra. Playing around with different mantras or different ways or prayer prevents conflagration and delays the journey.

20. The Journey Of Meditation

The mandala, a drawing used in many traditions of meditation, can be a fascinating way to help us understand what happens when we pray the mantra. It does this on three levels:

- What is happening in our meditation
- What is happening to ourselves in our daily lives
- What is happening in the meditation group itself.

First let us look at the mandala. Look at the colours. On the outside there is blue, in fact this is the predominant colour, then there is white and then jagged turbulent red. The red then fades into blue, and then there is some nice white again. This reoccurrence goes on all the way to the centre. Around the centre there is a very jagged piece of red, and then the central circle is blue with a pin prick of white.

The colours are symbolic. The blue is ordinary life, it basically symbolises smooth going accompanied by pleasant daydreams and distractions. In the blue everything is manageable. Meditation is pretty easy: “Why all the fuss about it?”

The red is the time of turbulence, when there is nothing but distraction, when everything seems to be going wrong.

Then there is white. This is when there is great joy and even euphoria.

Moses was a good man, living in the blue. Then he had his experience of God in the Burning Bush, a great joyful white moment. But then he had to lead the people. He was in the red often as he did so, coming in conflict with them, with the Pharaoh.

Meditation gets more difficult as we go along. After a happy blue period we may find ourselves getting angry and ill at ease for all sorts of reasons. We want to run away from it. Why invest in something that is getting us nowhere? But if we persevere, the blue returns and it may even give way to white.

This happens in the process of meditation. There are times when it is easy, times when it is sweet, and times when it is deadly difficult. So too with the life of a meditator. One’s life may go on in a routine way, then one experiences high moments of fervour and joy which give way to times of turmoil and distress.

The prayer group too may begin with a certain joyousness but an uncertainty about one another in the group can develop. After a retreat or a good sharing, the members may experience a great feeling of closeness. But then irritation, jealousy, anger appears and the group seems ready to rip apart again. Then the cycle begins all over.

Whether we are talking of the journey of meditation itself, or of our personal life journeys, or the journey of the meditation group, there is only one thing necessary – to keep on saying the mantra. The journey leads inward. Some may drop off along the way but faith will be growing among those who persevere. With each progressive cycle there will be more confidence in the presence of the Spirit deep within us and we will be less rattled by the transient and the external.

In the mandala the circles get smaller as they go inward. As we go inward we may not be conscious of coming nearer to the centre but we really are. The important thing is the direction in which we are travelling. It is the mantra that assures us of that direction.
