

## What is Christian Meditation? An Experience with Contemplative Prayer

Christian Meditation is a form of contemplative prayer taught by Dom John Main, OSB, who describes its method in the following words:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase >maranatha'. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything B spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts or images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.<sup>1</sup>

This Spartan description underlines the basic mechanics of the prayer. The mantra is repeated throughout in focused attention; thoughts and images are not engaged. What is the dynamic behind this method? How does it work? The mantra empties the mind and invites silence and stillness and one or other experiences of God. The present paper is an attempt to describe the inner experience of this prayer. It is one practitioner's account of his subjective experience over the past several years and in particular during an intensive practice in a five week period at the Camaldolese Hermitage, Big Sur, CA in the fall of 2000. This article is one person's interpretation of the mechanics and the dynamics of the prayer, and it is presented for corroboration and/or correction by other practitioners of this method and tradition.

### Dynamics of Christian Meditation

Christian Meditation has been practiced successfully by people in all walks of life all over the globe. Whence does its power come to empty the soul and encounter

the divine presence? It would be magic to attribute the effectiveness to the word maranatha. This is the Hindu, not the Christian philosophy of the mantra. Something more is needed than a mere physical sounding or a purely mechanical recitation of the word. John Main saw the mantra as a way of faith. The mantra in Christian usage is an aspiration of the heart, to borrow a phrase from St Thérèse of Lisieux.<sup>2</sup> The mantra is spoken by the mind, but it is expressive of the heart, i.e., of the whole person. The heart is the deepest part of ourselves and it holds our whole being, much as the point of an inverted cone supports that structure. This is the biblical meaning of the word heart.

The mantra creates emptiness and fullness within ourselves to the extent that it comes from an undivided heart. This means that the mantra's effectiveness is in direct proportion to the degree of personal integration and the intensity of engagement and attention in the prayer. The mantra expresses the surrender of one's whole being to God in intent. But of course we surrender only as much of ourselves as we possess in freedom. The saints invest their whole being, because they enjoy real poverty of spirit. Beginners do the best they can. They cultivate Christian Meditation as an act of renunciation of their own thinking and preferences to create the hollowness for God to fill. This is the dynamic of emptiness and fullness in mantric prayer.

"Maran-atha" is a Scriptural greeting (1 Cor 16.22 and Rev 22.20), which means ACome, Lord.@ As a mantra it is not an explicit petition but a gathering of one's attention and a statement of intent to dwell in God's presence in utter poverty. It

articulates a single-pointed, non-discursive attention through the mantra to the Gracious Mystery who is God. Discursive thoughts or images or sentiments are unwelcome distractions. The repetition of the mantra represents the desire to let go of everything except the mantra itself and to open one's whole being to God. The mantra is an inner sacrament of the love of God.

Human openness and the divine presence stand in direct ratio. God comes wherever there is an opening.<sup>3</sup> The mantra is a prayer to let go of everything but itself, thus moving the person beyond the lesser things of the heart and into the region of the spirit. God is spirit and dwells in our spirit beyond the imagination or reason in the center of our souls. The journey to God, therefore, is inward leaving all else behind and moving by the feet of faith and love to God.<sup>4</sup> The passage is ultimately nothing less than leaving everything for the Everything that is God. The mantra is an instrument for appropriating the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is theirs." The mantra is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom. John Main insisted that it is more a discipline than a technique.

Detachment is the key in this process.

In the monastic tradition detachment is more often called purity of heart, a biblical word that is less open to misinterpretation than detachment, which in ordinary parlance means apathy or not caring. Spiritual detachment is caring that is just right, that chooses the right things, in the right measure, and for the right reasons. Detached people are free, integrated, and rooted in God in all their loves. They are open to the truth because the word of God is the basis for their every decision. They act out of their true selves and are not slaves of their false selves.

Biblical faith is the best synonym for detachment.

## **Silence as the Way to Poverty and Presence**

The language of Christian Meditation is silence; the mantra is only a vehicle to enter the silence. Shortly before she died St Thérèse of Lisieux lay in the convent infirmary unable to sleep. Her sister Celine looked in on her and asked her what she was doing. "I am praying," she responded. "And what are you saying to God?" Celine asked. "I am saying nothing. I am loving him." Christian Meditation uses the mantra to create that kind of stillness and to express silent love.

Prayer is conversation with God: God speaks first, we respond. In Christian Meditation the language on both sides is silence. John of the Cross tells us that "the language of God is the effects he produces in our souls."<sup>5</sup> These "effects" are given and received in silence. Our response can be in words, but again according to St John of the Cross, "the language God best hears is silent love."<sup>6</sup> Meister Eckhart offers a similar adage: "There is nothing so much like God as silence."<sup>7</sup>

The mantra is said from beginning to end to cultivate silence; it is interrupted only when one is reduced to silence, and it is resumed when one notices the silence is being broken by a reflection.<sup>8</sup> The mantra is said with "selfless attention." This is more than the half-awareness of ordinary, discursive consciousness. It is non-discursive, one-pointed attention to the exclusion of everything else.<sup>9</sup> The energies of one's mind and heart are concentrated on the mantra as a path to God.

The goal of Christian Meditation is "the other side of silence," or "pure prayer," which is contact with God. This is the obverse side of detachment or purity of

heart, a disposition that is intrinsic to the contemplative experience. In John of the Cross poverty of spirit and contemplation are practically the same thing.<sup>10</sup> So are purity of heart and the fullness of the Christian life in John Cassian, who sees these two related as the way and the term: the objective (*skopos*) and the goal (*telos*) of the spiritual life, and the two are one movement under God's grace.<sup>11</sup>

The recitation of the mantra is the instrument for poverty of spirit and purity of heart. It is a confession of weakness, a gesture of dependence, a confession of lack of personal resources to effect a relationship with God. It is a mere signal to God. I do not unpack its meaning; I do not theologize about it. I say it almost blindly, because it is a gesture from the whole person and not a superficial word. The mantra seeks a person-to-person contact, which is more than just thinking about God or one's self. This is the level of contemplative, not discursive activity.

Ordinarily Christian Meditation does not end in an empirical or sensorial experience of the Divine Indwelling. Such mystical gifts are possible, but not the immediate intent of the prayer. Meditators settle for silence; they accept in faith that they are moving into a deeper level of relationship with God. They believe they are in touch with God though there is seldom proof of this in their own estimation. Later in this paper we shall see that silence encloses a special mode of God's presence within us. Discernment of spirits will help one interpret the affective moods that accompany the prayer. In truth only the aftermath of good works is certain evidence of the validity of any prayer.

### The Practice Itself: Mode One

In reflecting on my practice of Christian Meditation I distinguish three modes or types of experience. The first corresponds exactly to the directive from John Main quoted at the beginning of this paper. It is simply saying the mantra with no other supports. No other stratagem or devices enter the picture. There is only the mantra, nothing else. This approach can be exaggerated, as happened to me when I first started this form of meditation. The mantra was my exclusive concern, and it came across as wooden, mechanical, and artificial. I was exaggerating the one-point meditation to the exclusion of God himself. All prayer is contact with God, and even mantric prayer must keep God as the ultimate horizon. I now interpret the mantra to be the direct focus, and God the oblique focus of the prayer, something like central and peripheral vision. With this caveat I have found the simple recitation of the mantra effective, especially if I am centered when I begin. I experience its gentle power to free me up and bring me to a deeper place. In the prayer I do not advert to the purpose of self-emptying and/or presence. I simply engage the mantra, which starves other interests and moves me to be quiet and at home with the Lord.

I take this experience as normative for Christian Meditation. I began with it and I have returned to it after something of a detour in the form of several experiments during my long retreat. I will describe these experiments in the next section of this paper. I consider the first mode the classical form of the prayer; here is one example from my journal of November 8, 2001:

My second meditation this morning was again a consolation. I just said the mantra. I experienced it, not just as clearing the decks, as it were, and brushing away all thoughts and preoccupations, [a reference to the experiments mentioned above], but boring inward deeper and deeper into the

fathomless depths of the God who is totally other, beyond any and all thoughts about him. I was carried to that center, which was never reached, and I dwelt there happy to be in touch with God in the emptiness. He is the emptiness and I touch him in faith (and not in a communicable experience) when I say the mantra. Alleluia.

This enthusiastic and optimistic account will be clearer to the reader after the discussion about the third mode of my experience. There was no engagement of the imagination and thought in the above prayer, though there was a sense of moving inward. I did have moments of imagining Christ in the next example taken from October 20, but the prayer was primarily saying the mantra:

In my Christian Meditation this afternoon I concentrated on the mantra and moved on, trusting that this prayer for deeper union with Christ was being prayed in me by Christ himself. I imagined Christ coming or being asked to come; mostly I just said the mantra. It is very simple this way, but it takes faith. Is the implicit deeper meaning happening by my simply saying the mantra?

In a similar way I sometimes thought of the Spirit praying within me, as in the following account:

This morning [November 1] after a wonderful sleep of eight hours, I rose at 4:45 A.M., made a fire, then immediately did my meditation. It was wonderful. I stayed put till I looked at the clock and found I had spent a full half hour with my prayer and a sense of God's presence. I had a sense that the Spirit was praying Christ's prayer within me. The Spirit was saying "Maranatha" and opening my heart to the divine presence.

The images in the above accounts were a help to me early in the retreat. So was the sensation of praying with my whole being and not just my voice or mind. The following reflection (November 1) illustrates this approach:

Contemplative prayer is person-to-person, whole-to-whole. So I try to create

an attitude or atmosphere of bringing my whole self to the gracious Mystery. I don't think of Father or Jesus (unless as the Christ, the Spirit, who fills the world). I bring myself to the Lord, standing before him, asking entry, wanting union. I try to keep this in a non-discursive mode. Sometimes I think of listening instead of being present. I listen with my whole being in an intuitive stance.

I believe now that the deliberate imaginings I engaged in are a foreign element in Christian Meditation, especially if they are extended, as happened in the next day's experience, according to my journal:

At 3:00 P.M. today my meditation was a combination of the mantra and a sense that I was clearing my consciousness for the inbreaking of God. I experienced in some imaginative way making contact with my God in the spirit. I inverted the cone [symbol of myself] and knocked at the gate between sense [where I was] and spirit [where I wanted to be]. I felt I was experiencing God in some inchoate way.

I justified the intrusion of the imagination by telling myself that I was not working the images, only recalling them; they provided a "sense" or a "feel" or a background for my saying the mantra. I knew I should stay with the mantra alone. Eventually I was able to dispense with these imaginative structures. My typical practice is recorded in the following entries on November 3:

My first meditation this morning after getting up was from 5:30 to 6:00 A.M. I simply said the mantra slowly, attentively, synchronized with my breathing (which was not very deep). I was aware that I was praying and, therefore, in the presence of God. I experienced the poverty of the whole procedure, namely, that I was a beggar with no thoughts or feelings and in the presence of God. I felt my emptiness was the under-side of fullness.... There was no particular experience of God, just a sense of love and gratitude.

In my second attempt, after returning to my room from Lauds and a detour for muffins in the kitchen, I started the mantra and did not advert to "the other side" or "upper level," which is the place of spirit where God dwells. I thought that the emptying consciousness via the mantra brought the experience of God, not in some psychological sense but ontologically: the Spirit is there in the darkness, apophatically. I do not expect any sensation about God. I know in faith God is present. I can express love, surrender, and other theological virtues.

### Mode Two: Moving through the Soul

I recall several experiments during the retreat the second mode of my practice. In these experiments I paid special attention to posture and breathing and I worked out of a sense of the geography of the soul. I found it helpful to locate myself in the upper level of my inner space and to think of the prayer as moving me downward into deeper levels. This imagery is based on the distinction between psyche and spirit, ego and Self, the outer and inner levels of the soul. The application of the division in my prayer was not pointed or well-defined, but provided a "sense" or "feel" as mentioned above. As such the addition seemed compatible with the theory of Christian Meditation as image-less, concept-less prayer. I consider this second mode now to be an imperfect form that may be useful as a transition into the more perfect practice of simply saying the mantra without any additions. In the present example the *terminus a quo* of the movement was ordinary consciousness, unfocused and inattentive, and the *terminus ad quem* was the silence of God's presence.

The two levels as well as posture and breathing have continued to be the horizon or mind-set of much of my contemplative prayer. Sitting erect in a chair with my back

straight prepares me to get into a pattern of deep breathing, which is a sign of the life force within. In the East this life force or energy is called "ki" or "chi," and, as William Johnston says, correct posture allows it "to flow freely through the body [and] ... through the top of the head to the outermost reaches of the universe and down through the spine and the anus to the inmost depths of the earth."<sup>12</sup> A simple recall of these factors seems to facilitate my prayer.

I connect my posture and breathing with the mantra and all three together express the movement into the depths. I synchronize my breathing with the four syllables of the mantra, breathing in with "Ma-" and out with "ra-," in with "na-" and out with "tha." John Main does not regard control of the breathing as essential to his method. I have found it helpful. Sometimes I think of the aspiration of the syllables as part of the prayer, a breathing forth of love along the lines of the aspirative prayer of the Carmelite writers of 17<sup>th</sup> century France.<sup>13</sup>

In this acting out of the twofold movement of Christian Meditation I thought of my prayer as erasing obstacles in the upper part of my soul and freeing me for the region of the spirit, where I can receive God. I even deployed the breathed mantra in a sweeping motion as if to wipe the slate clean and let the spirit shine through. More often I thought of the breathing as a zigzag journey downward in four segments. In both these cases the physical action expressed the intent of the mantra. The imagery gave a sense of movement to the four syllables of the mantra.

The mantra was always the main engine to move me from many-mindedness to quiet and stillness. Since the retreat it has become almost my exclusive concern in the practice and I no longer call upon the support systems described in this section. The

devices were helpful in leading me into a more pure practice of the mantra.

Equally or more important in becoming comfortable with the simple recitation of the mantra was my appropriation of a non-dualistic theology about the contemplative experience. My faith had always told me that the life of grace was a participation in the life of God. My faith and my theology told me that God was not an object separated from me, but that I lived in God and God lived in me. I did not realize until the retreat and reading some of the work of one of the Camaldolese monks, Bruno Barnhart<sup>14</sup>, that the experience of this participation was a different experience from objective cognition. In Christian Meditation one truly experienced the reality of God, but by way of communion. This is the third mode of my experience, which I shall presently describe.

### **Mode Three: Unitive Experience of God**

The third mode joins hands with the first one considered above. It is both the pure use of the mantra and the way of silence. It is considered a third way because silence is the direct object of the prayer. The silence is pursued for its own sake because it contains knowledge and love that are unitive and participative

John Main writes beautifully on the theology of the Divine Indwelling; he describes the dynamic life of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, going on within us. When we meditate, he says, we are participants in that life. We are not outside observers; we are caught up in the divine processions and are experiencing God. The Spirit is praying within us and the prayer is the one prayer of Jesus, in which all authentic prayer participates. Our prayer

places us in the stream of love between Father and Son.

Do we recognize the persons and the divine mysteries when we do Christian Meditation? No, not in objective, communicable concepts. The consciousness here is different. It is unitive and participative, present because we are one with God and participating in God's very life.

The knowledge is like the indirect knowledge we have of ourselves: it is subjective and non-communicable. This original knowledge is pre-reflexive; it accompanies our intentional activity. We know ourselves in our rational functioning, i.e., we are "co-known" in and through our acts of knowledge and love. We cannot formulate that self-knowledge, we cannot put it into words except by pausing and reflecting back on the original experience. This involves "objectifying" the original self-knowledge, i.e., making ourselves the object of a thinking process. This puts our self-awareness in the objective order. It is knowledge once removed from experience.<sup>15</sup>

It is the kind of knowledge we have when we think *about* God and use words for God. It is not knowing God or ourselves, but knowing *about* God and *about* ourselves.

In participative or unitive knowledge we experience the divine mysteries as part of ourselves; they are incarnate in us by the "continuous Incarnation" of the life of grace. This is the kind of knowledge St Paul refers to when he prays that we might "know God and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering." (Phil 3.10) This experiential knowledge is ineffable, a word which means beyond words and speech. If we talk about it at all, we do so in metaphors and analogies taken from our experience of creation. This experience of God is apophatic, i.e., without light, dark and wordless. When we use words like Father,

Son and Holy Spirit for God, we are talking about God in human concepts. The knowledge is true but reduced to a human, rational level of discourse. The experience of God in Christian Meditation is the original apophatic and ineffable experience; it is the awesome experience of the reality of God. But we cannot communicate it even to ourselves without domesticating it. It is a unique knowledge and love that are possible, because God has gifted us with oneness with himself.

The mystery of God is present in us beyond all names, metaphors, analogies. We touch God as God is in his transcendent self, dwelling in inaccessible light, and shared with us in our status as a new creation. This is an incredible gift; it is rightly called mystery. Grace transforms me into Christ, so that "the life I live is not my own; Christ is living in me." (Gal 2.20) God himself is outside our ken and beyond language. The mystics put this in strong language by saying that God is *Nada*, Nothing, nothing in the language of creation, nothing in ordinary human experience. But by grace and love this God has become one of us in Jesus Christ and one with us in the Body of the Risen Lord. This reality we can and do experience, immediately, subjectively, but incommunicably, just like the experience of ourselves. It is the experience of our new selves. Language fails here; silence is its only expression. The third mode of Christian Meditation is utter silence and stillness before the Lord.

The mantra is language in the service of silence. It is the outside of the experience. It is the rind and the fruit is within. The mantra points; the silence experiences God within. God dwells in the silence of the prayer, as he dwells in a "kataphatic" of concepts and words in the recitation of the psalms. The experience of God in

contemplative prayer is silence. I see nothing, I touch nothing, I understand nothing, except myself who lives "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2.20)

In Christian Meditation I do not permit the imagination or the discursive reason to intrude. I note, but I do not stop in thoughts or sentiments, even pious affections. I do not enter into them, because my task is silent love. I proceed with the mantra, which allows me to be one-pointed, to empty my soul and give silent attention to God. The mantra is the whole prayer, the humble rind enclosing the sweet fruit. The fruit is purity of heart and contemplation in some form. The mantra incarnates the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

This beatitude is the guiding principle of the monastic life according to John Cassian. The monastic life is structured to develop purity of heart, and its goal is the fullness of the Christian life. The beatitude is the shibboleth of Christian Meditation. It expresses the way, purity of heart, and the goal, seeing God. Seeing God is not from the outside, as if I am watching God as an object outside myself. The meditator looks at God from within, in subjective communion with the Spirit, who is the soul of her soul, the life of her life. The seeing is participation and communion. The East understands this kind of knowledge more easily than the West, because the East is expert in the principle of *advaita* or non-dualism. The knower becomes "one same thing" with the knowee, to borrow Teresa of Avila's strong definition of union. The meditator is absorbed in Christ, but without losing her own identity. It is the way of silence and stillness.

Here is one description of perceived silence from November 5:

I am happy that I am able to go beyond the twenty minutes. Part of the reason is saying the mantra in a relaxed manner, like deep breathing that is not struggling to breathe deeply. The breath is soft and it merges into the effect of the mantra, namely, the still place where God dwells. There is no sensation of the Presence. The mantra occupies the attention, keeps the mind busy in a most simple way, and the intuitive self, the region of the spirit, is activated, comes to life, and is happy just being there with the Lord, saying nothing, expressing no sentiments, just silent and still. The time goes more quickly than when one is trying to control the whole thing from the outside. In the latter case the mantra is a distraction, and it bears no organic connection with the contemplative presence.

The following is another similar account two days later:

I feel my Christian Meditation is stabilized now. I enter into myself, drop down to the lowest level in the cone of my being, and I stay there. That is all. It is so simple. The mantra leads me there by eliminating other concerns, all thoughts, feelings and preoccupations. I enter within and keep going back to the mantra, all the time cultivating a sense of surrender, of playful love for my God. Praised be God and Our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to describe my experience of Christian Meditation in terms of three modes that are distinct from one another only by a distinction of reason. All three have the same one goal of silence before God; the first is the simple mantra, the second the mantra with some imaginative helps, the third the direct pursuit of silence. All three come under the one umbrella described by Laurence Freeman in these eloquent words:

For the desert monks the first goal of life seen as a spiritual process was to reach purity of heart. This gospel term and Beatitude of Jesus is echoed in all traditions. It empowers us to "see God," not as an object of perception or as an abstract concept or as a fantasy projection of wish fulfillment, but in and as reality. Seeing God, according to the Christian tradition, is the true meaning of life and to reach this goal is to find the happiness that lies at the spiritual core of every human act and desire. The vision of God is an experience of communion rather than observation.<sup>16</sup>

Christian Meditation is organized to carry out the tradition of purity of heart and seeing God, the promise of the beatitude and the goal of all Christian life. May its practice continue to renew the Christian world.



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<sup>1</sup> *The Inner Christ* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987) v.

<sup>2</sup> *Story of a Soul* (tr. John Clarke, OCD, Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1975), 242.

<sup>3</sup> St John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 1.9; 3.46.

<sup>4</sup> St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 1.11.

<sup>5</sup> *Living Flame*, 1.7.

<sup>6</sup> *Spiritual Sentences and Maxims in The Works of St John of the Cross* (tr. E. Allison Peers, Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1953 III, 232, n.53.d.

<sup>7</sup> Reference in Eckhart's works not known to the writer.

<sup>8</sup> John Main, *The Inner Christ*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Novak, "The Dynamics of Attention: Core of the Contemplative Way," in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, 5 (1984) 65-80.

<sup>10</sup> *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, 2.15.4; *Spiritual Canticle*, 10.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Conferences*, 1.4-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Arise, My Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 5.

<sup>13</sup> This form of prayer was promoted by the blind brother, the Venerable John of St Samson, O.Carm., a leader in the Touraine Reform in the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance in 17<sup>th</sup> century France. For a description, see *The Carmelite Directory of the Spiritual Life* (Chicago: Carmelite Press, 1940) 471-474; also Venard Poslusney, O.Carm., *Prayer, Aspiration, and Contemplation* (Asbury, N.J. 08802-0737).

<sup>14</sup> My contact with Father Bruno was in discussions about non-dualistic thinking and reading his unpublished paper, entitled "Christian Self-Understanding in the Light of the East: New Birth and Unitive Consciousness."

<sup>15</sup> Denys Turner, in *The Darkness of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 87-89, analyses this teaching of St. Augustine.

<sup>16</sup> *Christian Meditation International Newsletter*, September, 2000, page 3.