

Meditation – a talk by Father Bede

Meditation was central to Father Bede's life; his quiet times were the dawn and dusk pillars of his day. Though his own mediation was firmly based in the Christian tradition, he felt that the Christian churches did not give it enough attention, not did they teach a practical method of prayer. In this area they had, he was convinced, much to learn from the eastern religions.

The following is a talk he gave in 1985 when visiting Perth, Western Australia. We are grateful to Shirley du Boulay for making it available to us.

What people today are seeking above everything else is a practical method of prayer and meditation. That's why thousands and thousands of people come to India every year in search of meditation, a way to God you could say. One of the distressing facts that we find day by day that I would say almost 60% of the people who come to our ashram are Catholics or other Christians who have left the Church. They leave the Church to find God. It's a paradox today. Somehow the way the faith that is presented to them in their schools and parish churches and so on doesn't answer their need. Again and again they tell me 'Until I was 15 or 16 I went to Mass regularly and to confession - I did all the right things, then I gave the whole thing up'. Not for any solid reason, but dissatisfaction. It didn't answer the need of the growing person.

What people today seek is something beyond the reason and the will. I put it like this: the palm of the hand - fingers represent the faculties, the senses, the feelings, the imagination, reason and will, and we are exercising all the faculties day by day in work, and in prayer. But meditation in the Indian sense is as the fingers spring from the palm of the hand, all the faculties spring from the centre of the soul, and meditation is to find your centre, your inner person, and that's what appeals to people today, and appeals to people who have lost their religion or who never had any religion. The word God is very suspect for many people today. And Christ also, there's so much controversy around, so many different views, that people get disillusioned. But everybody wants to find his real self, to find his identity.

The method of meditation is to teach you 'Who Am I?' That is the great Hindu method. As Christians we have to be aware of this. They're not so much interested in talking. Sometimes they do talk, quite a lot, but really they teach by silence. People think 'I am this body' but then you reflect a little on it, and you realise that this is not the real 'I'. You've got your inner person, your psyche, your desires and fears and for most people that is all there is, there is the body and the psyche. For the Hindu, beyond the body and the psyche, is the spirit or the *atman* or the *pneuma* of St Paul. St Paul says the *soma* is body, the *psyche* is soul and the *pneuma* is spirit, and the spirit is the point where you go beyond your body and your mind and thoughts and you're open to the spirit of God - and that is meditation and that is what people come to India for.

There are so many methods, but I would say that almost every valid method is to bring you from your faculties, your thoughts, your feelings, your desires, your will into your centre to experience the reality within. They call it *Brahman* or *Atman*. It cannot be named. You go beyond words. You encounter the spirit of God. I always quote St Paul - 'the spirit of God bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God.' At that point our spirit, which is the fine point of the soul, where the soul comes to a point, a still point. And at that point the Holy Spirit meets our spirit and we encounter God.

I think today people are seeking that encounter, external ritual doesn't mean very much to them. And a great deal of the doctrine doesn't mean very much - of course ritual can mean everything and so can doctrine. But for so many people it doesn't strike them and they want to experience the reality - something which changes you from within. We get wonderful experiences at the ashram. People come and are totally transformed. Once they open themselves to this kind of prayer and meditation. I've seen total transformation and they come right back to the faith, to the mass, to the bible - and to a genuine spiritual life. I think there's a world hunger. People come from all 5 continents and at least 50 different countries, all seeking the same thing. It's a wave. It's going all over the world. People seeking this experience of God, self-realisation, God-realisation. Some are simply vaguely seeking, they don't know what, but sometimes they begin to see a direction in their lives. They begin to see there's a guidance in their lives. There's an awakening to the spiritual life, where there's no longer accidents, but you realise everything has meaning. It's universal. First it was the young people, but now it's all ages. Something is awakening all over the world, leading people to this deeper experience of God. That is what people are looking for.

And now you have to teach them a method. There are several centres now where they are teaching. Many of you will know Father Basis Pennington at Spencer Abbey, Massachusetts. Interestingly, they took a course on Transcendental Meditation and developed that into Centering Prayer, as they call it. Another one that's not so well known is Father John Main. He was a Benedictine monk of Ealing. They he began Christian meditation using a mantra - his mantra is *maranatha*. 'Lord, Come' in Aramaic. He built at whole meditative process round the mantra. It's extremely effective. He writes from very deep experience.

In our ashram we practice Christian yogic meditation. To simplify it very much, traditional yoga has three aspects. The first is *asana*, that is sitting. This is a revolution for most Christians, we don't know how to sit. The position of the body. But for a Hindu, or for almost any Oriental, sitting is the main thing. If you

can sit properly, you will meditate properly, they say, because the body affects the mind. If your body is in tension your mind will be in tension; if your body is relaxed and is physically in harmony, it will help the mind be relaxed and in harmony. So first of all they teach a method of sitting. The position should be relaxed and firm - they always emphasis relaxation. One of the best *asanas* is simply to lie on the floor and consciously relax every muscle of the body. That is very effective. Yoga is a wonderful discipline of the body. You never force anything. It's very sustained, quiet, rhythmical movement. The minimum of effort, the maximum effect - gradually, you can relax all the muscles. Yoga exercise can help you get a good position for prayer and meditation. Sitting upright on a chair is perfectly alright; you don't have to sit on the floor.

The next thing is the breathing, the *pranayama*. There are two ways of dealing with breathing. The yogic method is to control the breathing. Most people don't breathe properly - they breathe from the chest and you breathe from the abdomen, the lower lung. You can test it by putting the hand and breathing out and you feel it expanding. The whole lung has to be filled. Physically it's very healthy, but psychologically it opens up the whole rhythm of the body. Many people do five minutes *pranayama* before they meditate - it's part of meditation.

The Buddhist method, which many people do, *Vipassana*, particularly is simply to observe your breathing. You just watch your breathing. It sounds rather foolish, but it has wonderful effects. There's a Burmese who gives *Vipassana* courses and I think it's 60,000 people he has trained, many priests and sisters and brothers have been and found it very helpful. It's very strenuous. You have 10 days, 10 hours meditation a day, and you mustn't smoke or drink or read or write, or do anything else but meditate. But everybody says gradually, it calms the body and stops the mind. For all Orientals it is stopping the mind that is so important. Yoga is the cessation of the movements of the mind. Your mind wanders all over the place and you keep coming back to your breathing until everything gets still and quiet. And everyone says you get a wonderful inner peace, it's a psychological thing really. Very profound in its way. So the second thing is breathing.

Now the third thing, which is the key to the whole, is the mantra, the sacred word. We use the Jesus Prayer, the traditional Christian prayer of the Orthodox Church, which is now spreading everywhere. In its traditional form it is *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*. Some people find it too long and you can adjust it, but it's really raising the heart and mind to God. Father Amaldas has developed his own mantra, which is *Jesu Abba - Jesu* and you breathe in, *Abba - Father* - as you breathe out. You breathe in everybody and everything and all the pains and troubles then you surrender it all the Father. So you sit, you breathe and you quietly repeat the mantra. Your thoughts begin to wander, then you come back to the mantra; they wander again, and you come back to the mantra, until gradually the stillness comes, the mind becomes still. And when the mind is still the deepest centre emerges. You can't produce it. This is contemplation really. You can't prepare yourself, but you have to get to the point of the spirit, when you are open to God. So you stop your thoughts, and stop your ego. The centre of the psyche is the ego. We organise our whole life from childhood onwards from the ego. You have to do so, but then you have to go beyond it. But most people don't, they stop with the ego. All the conflicts arise from the

conflict of egos. Contemplation is to go beyond the ego, to let the ego die, if you like. It opens up to the Holy Spirit, to God.

I am not fully human, I am not what I'm called to be, except in God, in Christ. It's an illusion that a human being is just a body-soul. The body and the soul are instruments totally under the guidance of the spirit within. It is in meditation and genuine prayer that we come to that inner person, that inner reality, and are open to the transcendent. Many people come to our ashram. Some are agnostic, I think, some even atheist, but they are all looking for a deeper meaning in life, and they discover it when they discover this centre. This has a universal message, how to discover your deep inner reality, the 'I' which is beyond the ego.

So we sit, we breathe, we repeat the mantra, till the mind becomes still and we become aware of the presence of God. I call this practice of the presence of God and the value of it particularly is this; that you can't be praying with words all day, and you can't be thinking specifically about God all day, but you can be aware of the presence of God whatever you're doing. It's not *easy* in every situation, but it's *possible* in every situation, so this is a fundamental for Christian life.

As we open ourselves to this inner reality, we open ourselves to God - and this is where I see the difference. A Hindu will enter into that inner centre and he will discover his *atman*, his spirit within. It's a very deep experience. He may call it *Brahman*, where he realises that the spirit in you is one with the spirit which is in the whole universe, that's the great insight of the Upanishads, this spirit in man is one with the spirit in the universe. My 'I' in the deepest depth of my being is one with the Brahman, the reality behind the whole universe, so it's an experience of God in that sense. A Buddhist won't use the name God, or the soul. The Buddha didn't want to talk about God, he thought once you begin to talk you begin to argue and to discuss, and you miss the reality, and you are all involved in talk. And so he said 'Follow the 8-fold noble path, this way of right knowledge and right action and right thought and right livelihood and right meditation and right contemplation and this takes you the whole way. Follow that and you'll know then from within, without talking about it. He simply calls it Nirvana. The later Buddhists call it the void, the *Sunyata*, the emptiness, the beyond.

In Christian meditation we enter that point of the spirit, and we encounter the Holy Spirit, and that is rather different. As St Paul says, 'The love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given us.' The Holy Spirit is poured into the heart and it is the spirit of love, that is rather distinctive. It is not that love is absent from the Hindu or the Buddhist; they vary in their different schools. But the Christian experience is essentially this experience of *agape*, of love in the depths of the heart: not an emotional love or any external form, but the love rising in the inner depths, beyond your ego in the depths of your being. That love and the Holy Spirit come to us through Christ, so as you awake to the presence of the Holy Spirit you wake to the whole mystery of Christ, your membership of the body of Christ, and your relation with others.

Now this is important. Some people think that it is all very selfish to go away and meditate alone or to an ashram and leave everybody behind, and you're trying to get your own peace. The fact is, of course, the more

you discover your own inner depth, the more you open to the depths in others. You begin to relate to others in a new way - instead of on the surface, as we often do, physically, externally, psychologically, may be with friendship or affection. It's all wonderful in its way, but you go beyond that, you relate to the depth of the other person - you awaken to the depth in them. That is the secret, hidden in everybody - that if you have opened it in yourself, you can help others to discover it for themselves. So you awaken to the presence of the Holy Spirit and you awake to the whole mystery of Christ, and your relationship with others, and your membership of the body of Christ, and I like to think also that the body of Christ extends to all humanity.

Love is relationship; you cannot have love in a pure identity. It leads us into the depth of the Godhead and to that communion of love. And that's the last thing I want to point out. As we go into meditation in the spirit through Christ to the Father, the more you become open to humanity as a whole. Authentic meditation and contemplation does not separate you. And Jesus himself is the model. He is totally open to the Father, totally surrendered. The Son does nothing but what he sees the Father doing, but at the same time he is totally open to humanity, he gave his life for the world. And that is the model, the total openness to the beyond, total giving, so this kind of contemplation can lead you to your deepest centre into daily life and into what you have to do. And the Church should have that message to help anybody, an atheist, agnostic, to help open himself, to discover his true being. And once you have got to that depth, you can't avoid God, you are just exposed to the reality of God.