Steps into Silence

A workshop prepared for the Greenbelt Festival

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By

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Steps into silence

Good afternoon and welcome to this workshop ....we are representing the WCCM - the World Community for Christian Meditation, hopefully some of you know us?

As members of that community we believe the most important journey in life is the journey inward, to the depths of our being. It is a journey we are all invited to make. It takes us beyond words and images, beyond thoughts and beliefs and into silence. The silence allows the restless mind to become still and in the stillness we enter a new world. A world in which we find the space that our spirit needs to breathe, the space to be ourselves. A world in which we don’t need to apologise for ourselves; where you don’t need to justify yourself. Where we find the courage to be who we are!

“Be as you are”

It is our aim today to share that silence with you and to help prepare for our meditation we would like to invite you to take seven steps with us, steps that will lead us into that mysterious silence.

So if you are ready are first step is:

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Step 1: Orientation

In this first step let’s consider for a moment the context in which we find ourselves today. We live in world that faces many challenges: the crisis of the environment, global warming, population growth, globalisation and urbanisation, loss of biodiversity, shortage of resources and so on, and our own personal narratives are entwined and unfolding within this context which makes our lives unique as we, people of faith, live and seek to enter into the mystery of God. We face many personal challenges too; employment, health, relationships and so on.

Reflect for a few moments on your personal journey, that has brought you here today; your personal narrative; your pilgrimage. What challenges have you faced, who has inspired and helped you?

(Opportunity to share if time allows)

We live in a noisy world and we fill our lives with activity and noise, the last thing we normally want is silence - that would be scary! And yet in the words of the 14th century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart - “there is nothing so much like God as silence”

The loss of this wisdom has plunged modern humanity into crisis. We have lost touch with this reality and urgently need to re-connect with it.

Learn to be silent and love silence. Trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

“Meditation and the constant return to it, every day of your life, is like cutting a pathway through to reality. Once we know our place, we begin to see everything in a new light because we have become who we really are.” John Main Heart of Creation

(Allow a few minutes silence)
Step 2: “The Kingdom of God is within you”

In this step we recognise that the kingdom of God is with us:

We know from the gospel writer St Luke and in St Paul’s words to the ordinary people of Ephesus that the spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts. But, we are called to not only know this in theory by reading about it or being told about it, but to experience it and come to know it ourselves - beyond words and beyond understanding.

And how can we do this? All the main religions have a tradition of contemplative prayer.

In Christianity we can trace the roots of our tradition back to the 4th century desert Fathers and Mothers in the wilderness of Egypt and Palestine; to John Cassian who imported the desert wisdom to the West in the early 5th Century; to the development of western monasticism through Cassian’s foremost pupil St Benedict and his rule spread widely in the 6th century; to the author of the Cloud of Unknowing in the late 14th century. But the practice has largely been forgotten until its re discovery in our present day. And now we are seeing a great interest in it in schools hospitals and prisons.

“The wonderful revelation is there for all of us to discover, if only we will set out on the path with discipline, is that our spirit is rooted in God and that each of us has an eternal destiny and an eternal significance and importance. That is a primary discovery for each of us to make, that the nature we possess has this infinite potential for development and that development can only come if we undertake this pilgrimage to our own centre... It is only there, in the depths of our own being, that we discover ourselves rooted in God. Meditation is just this way of making contact with our spirit and in that contact finding the way of integration, of finding everything in our experience coming into harmony, everything in our experience judged and aligned in God.”

*John Main, Moment in Christ*

*(Allow a few minutes silence)*
Step 3: Stillness and the mantra

First we need to learn to be still, stillness of body leads to stillness of mind. Our posture is important. We sit with a straight back so that we can breathe properly. In this stillness we gather our body and senses together in harmony. So take a moment to sit comfortably become aware of your posture...

To help keep our mind still we say our prayer word or mantra silently and interiorly throughout our meditation. This seems odd at first but gradually as we become familiar with our word it takes root and becomes more natural. This is a bit like learning to ride a bike, it seems impossible at first but after a bit of practice we can suddenly do it.

We start by saying the word then we gradually hear it within us, sounding within our heart. You can choose a word that is holy to you or we recommend the Aramaic word “Maranatha” – “Come Lord, come Lord Jesus” say it in four syllables: “Ma-ra-na-tha”

Practice saying that silently and lovingly, interiorly yourself: ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-n- tha, ma-ra –na-tha...

Also before meditation it’s good to sing too:

“Bless the Lord”… (Taize chant or similar)

(Allow a few minutes silence)
Step 4: The Discipline

We have started on a path of spiritual discovery and this way requires discipline.

We practice meditation twice daily in the morning and evening. We know it’s not always easy but we make the time and soon we don’t want to miss it.

Ignore the distractions and pray like a child- keep returning to the mantra.

We approach our meditation with humility- do not try and unravel the mystery but rather allow it to be unravelled in you,

“The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as the opening of a flower. To let a flower open and bloom, it is only necessary to let it be: so if we simply are, if we become and remain silent, our heart cannot but be open, the Spirit cannot but pour into our whole being. It is for this we have been created.” John Main

(Allow a few minutes silence)

Step 5: Letting go- Become a living sacrifice

Perhaps we need to let go of some of our baggage, to un-learn some of our complexity, to become dispossessed.

The purification is gentle- but demands all, we cannot hold anything back. God demands an empty heart so that it can be filled with love.

You may be aware of some of the metaphors; of polishing the mirror so that the internal light can be reflected to illustrate the gentle cleansing purifying of meditation; or the image of the plough straightening the furrows and breaking the clods of earth; or of the sculptor chipping away at the stone to reveal the form within.

We need to pray with the simplicity of a child.

May all that is unforgiven in you,
Be released.
May your fears yield
Their deepest tranquilities.
May all that is unliv en in you,
Blossom into a future,
Graced with love.

John O’Donohue

(Allow a few minutes silence)
Step 6: Communion and community

Silent prayer does not lead to isolation but to communion. Meditation builds community. There is something profound about sharing silence. A silence between friends who are comfortable in each other’s presence, silence that is not awkward, but a silence rooted in love, - and Jesus prayed:

“May they all be one”.

Silence brings together people of different backgrounds and different beliefs. We may be Methodist, Anglican, Catholic, Muslim or of another faith tradition or of none - in silent prayer we go beyond words and thought, in that silence we are one.

“May they all be one”

“The ultimate end of meditation is communion. Not only do we discover our own “oneness” but we discover our “oneness with “the All” and with all.” John Main

(Allow a few minutes silence)
Step 7: Awareness

In prayer we do not analyse but learn simply to be... to be alert, attentive, peaceful.

Here is an exercise in awareness that can help prepare for meditation:

Listen for a few moments to all the sounds around us....... Now turn your attention to the sounds within you, concentrate entirely on this and listen to your breathing, and gently allow your breathe to deepen. It sometimes helps to pause and hold the breathe for a moment at the end of each inhalation and exhalation, so breathe in -and hold- and breathe out -and hold. Try yourself for a few cycles. Now breathe normally and just pay attention to the sound of your breath as it flows over the pallet.

Now direct your attention to different parts of the body- let’s start with the head and scalp- there our messages being sent back from our skin all the time. We normally ignore them but see if you can feel them , now move down your face , your forehead and eyebrows and mouth , now your neck, now move your attention to your shoulders and arms, to your upper body and abdomen, feel your stomach area and now your arms and hands and to the very tips of your fingers. Now turn your attention to your legs, feet and toes.

Now go back again and go around yourself sensing each area and then moving on, feel the energy in each part and move around with it.

“This is simply what our meditation is about; being open - wholly, attentively and wakefully- to this great gift we are given, the human consciousness of Christ alive in our heart”

John Main: The Heart of Creation

Père de Caussade called this the sacrament of the present moment, and this is what the mantra leads us into: into a full awareness of the divine splendour of the eternal present. The mantra is our sacrament of the present moment.

(JOHN MAIN)

So now we are ready: let’s meditate together-
The prayers are on the book mark so if you have one please join in

**Prayer before meditation**

“Heavenly Father, open our hearts to the silent presence of the spirit of your Son. Lead us into that mysterious silence where your love is revealed to all who call. Maranatha... Come Lord Jesus”

**Prayer after meditation**

In the silence of this room may all the suffering violence and confusion of the world encounter the power that will console, renew and uplift the human spirit.

May this silence be a power to open the hearts of men and women to the vision of God, and so to each other in love and peace, justice and human dignity.

May all who come here weighed down by the problems of humanity leave giving thanks for the wonder of human life.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

**Or - A Blessing of Solitude**

May you recognise in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.

May you realise that you are never alone and that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.

May you realise that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful, good and eternal happening.

May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride and expectation with which God see you in every moment.

*John O’Donohue*