



How did John Main learn about meditation?

by Kim Nataraja

John Main was introduced to meditation when he was serving in the British Colonial Service in Malaya. During the course of his duties there he met Swami Satyananda, founder of the 'Pure Life Society', who lived a spiritual life dedicated to serving others. John Main was very impressed by the serenity and the holiness of this monk and when the official business was over they started talking about prayer, especially about the Swami's way of repeating a mantra during the whole period of his meditation. Soon John Main found himself asking the Swami whether he as a Christian could learn to pray in this way. The Swami told him laughingly that it could only make him a better Christian!

In his book 'Christian Meditation - The Gethsemani Talks' John Main recounts how the Swami stressed the importance of meditating each morning and each evening for half an hour, saying: "If you are serious and if you want to root this mantra in your heart then this is the minimum undertaking.....During the time of your meditation there must be in your mind no thoughts, no words, no imaginations. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra, your word. It is like a harmonic. And as we sound this harmonic within ourselves we begin to build up a resonance. That resonance then leads us forward to our own wholeness...We begin to experience the deep unity we all possess in our own being. And then the harmonics begins to build up a resonance between you and all creatures and all creation and a unity between you and your Creator."

This was the start of John Main's journey of meditation. Meditation leads into the silence conducive to contemplative prayer, deep silent prayer, and it became the mainstay of his prayer life and his whole existence, and finally led him to become a monk. At that time meditation was not accepted as a valid Christian way of prayer and he had to relinquish it on becoming a novice, which he did in the spirit of Benedictine obedience. He sorely missed it though, but saw it as being taught a form of detachment: "I learned to become detached from the practice that was most sacred to me to me and on which I was seeking to build my life. Instead I learned to build my life on God himself."

Many years later he was overjoyed to discover the practice he had been taught by the Swami in the writing of John Cassian, a Christian monk, a Desert Father of the 4th century CE. There he read of "the practice of using a single short phrase to achieve the stillness necessary for prayer". He felt he had "arrived home once more and returned to the practice of the mantra."

He was a pioneer in sharing this way of prayer through meditation groups, books and retreats, not just with monastics but with ordinary people, young and old. After his death Laurence Freeman OSB took over this task and became the Community's spiritual guide, and in 1991 he founded 'The World Community for Christian Meditation'.