



How do we prepare for meditation?

by Kim Nataraja

John Main rediscovered meditation, the faithful repetition of a prayer phrase to lead us into the silence of 'pure' prayer. He found it to his utter joy in the writing of an early Christian monk from the 4th century CE, John Cassian, who had sat at the feet of many Christian hermits in the desert of Egypt in that time to learn about prayer and about leading an authentic Christian life. Cassian stressed that this practice led to the silence of 'pure' prayer, contemplative prayer, without words and images. "The mind thus casts out and represses the rich and ample matter of all thoughts and restricts itself to the poverty of a single verse." He continued by stressing the importance of the mantra: "This mantra must always be in your heart. When you go to sleep let it be by saying this verse, till having been moulded by it you grow accustomed to repeat it even in your sleep."

The faithful repetition of a prayer phrase, just saying our word is, however, not as easy as it sounds. We need to prepare for this period; we can't expect to become fully focussed on our prayer without preparation. When John Main was asked, how we should prepare for meditation, he said "by many kind acts". We have to be in the right frame of mind; trying to meditate after a heated argument with someone is not really going to work, is it? Our ordinary life and our prayer life are not separate: "As you live, so you pray" was a very common saying amongst the early Christians.

In the world, in which we live, our lives tend to be busy and stressful. If we find that we are really very tired, it may well be advisable to have a short nap before we come to our meditation group. Doing a few Yoga stretching exercises, a Tai Chi movement or two will also help to get the energy flowing. Otherwise all we will be doing is 'holy dozing', and that is alright too, but often it is accompanied by the sweet sound of snoring! Snoring and other noises that occur during meditation, however, can actually be excellent practice in detaching ourselves from extraneous matters and gently coming back and focussing on our word. Noises on the whole do not really disturb us, as long as we do not get irritated by them. We just need to accept that that is the way it is. No judging, no criticizing.

The reason we sit with our backs straight and our shoulders back and relaxed, is that this position also helps us to stay awake: our chest is free and open, so that we can breathe well and oxygen can flow freely round our body keeping us alert. Relaxing and falling asleep – however much needed – is of course not really the point of meditation; the focussed attention needed for meditation is in fact a way to alertness and being energised. It may help to start our session with a few really deep breaths right into the abdomen, which both relax and energize us.

The essential task in meditation is 'to say your word'. That is our focus. The word John Main recommended is 'maranatha'. It is the oldest Christian prayer in Aramaic the language Jesus spoke. We say it as four equally stressed syllables – ma-ra-na-tha. It does not really matter, whether you say it with an English 'th' or with a 't' sound. The pronunciation is not that important. You just need to remember that in praying to Jesus, we pronounce His name differently in all the languages of our world, but it does not change the effectiveness of prayer. Moreover in Aramaic his friends and family would have called Him Yeshua. What is important is that you say it with full attention, lovingly and faithfully. Whenever your thoughts have distracted you, just gently bring your mind back to the word. Some people find it helps them to let the word float on the breath, but if that causes distractions just focus on your word and say it at the speed that suits your being.