



# Meditatio

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Talk to group leaders in Singapore on 18 Oct 2009 on the theme Being Faithful, Staying Fresh

## The Virus of PERFECTIONISM

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Laurence Freeman, Benedictine monk, Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation and author of many books, challenges conventional thinking when he says his greatest success was to learn that failure is more important than success. Perfectionism is a danger on any spiritual path because it condemns you to a permanent sense of failure and leads to despair or to hypocrisy. To understand perfection in this way is to miss the point of the Christian teaching. Our call is to be perfect “as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). God’s perfection is in the wholeness and inclusiveness of his love that makes the sun shine on the good and the bad alike. Imperfection, when embraced in humility and in love, allows the power of God to lead us and heal us. So perfection can be found in imperfection: “When I am weak then I am strong”. (2 Cor 12:10)

# The Virus of Perfectionism

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Transcript of Talk by Laurence Freeman OSB to meditation group leaders in Singapore on the theme: “Being Faithful, Staying Fresh”  
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## The Virus of Perfectionism

I made my solemn profession as a monk thirty years ago today. My immediate inspiration for joining the community that Father John was forming was his vision of a community of love. When he spoke about it to me, it touched something very deep in my heart and vision; it seemed to me to be an ideal worth dedicating my life to.

Those of you who are married and have families, I'm sure you understand what that dedication to building relationships of love means where you feel most fulfilled and most alive when you see the family growing in love, and dealing with problems in a spirit of love, and forgiving each other in love, and being generous in love.

This was my great inspiration and, as with everybody in life, you have your ups and downs, you have failures and successes, in fact, more failures than successes. I think my greatest success has been to learn that failure is more important than success because if you can understand that, you can turn things around and move on, and learn from your mistakes.

Success is something that doesn't last very long. It's there; it's wonderful when it happens, when everything comes together, but it doesn't *last* very long, so we have to accept it but not cling to it.

Failure is something that we have to live with probably on a more regular basis, but we can learn through failure to grow. That's one of the things I'd like to speak with you about today.

I was introduced recently at some event by a cardinal. He stayed for the talk and for the meditation and has always been very supportive to our work. When I was walking back with him

after the evening, I was talking with him about our community which he knows and supports and asked him if he would like to be a patron of our community.

He looked at it, all serious, and he said, 'Well, I don't know if I'm really up to it.'

So I said, 'What do you mean?'

He said, 'Well, I meditate six days a week but usually only once a day. I don't really think I'm good enough to be a patron.'

And I was very touched by his genuineness. He wasn't pretending; he was speaking from a very simple, childlike, humble place in himself. I said, 'Well, I think that is a very good qualification for being a patron.'

What I'd like to speak about today in this context of a community of love is how we can continue to grow in this pilgrimage of meditation, and keep it fresh. When you are beginning anything, you can be enthusiastic; you make great promises, great resolutions like we do on New Year's Day. Inevitably, after a certain amount of time, the novelty wears off; we discover difficulties in our life, our routines change, and maybe we hit a period in our meditation which is dry, which is difficult to go through. Nothing seems to be happening, and it's very easy, very common that we miss a step or we give up meditation altogether. We lose that original sense of dedication and purpose.

So, what I'd like to speak about today is how we can keep this freshness. We have to keep our motivation strong and clear with any work in life. And especially a spiritual work, the spiritual dimension of our life, has to be continuously recharged and reenergized. I'd like to speak about it in terms of the practice of meditation and of the other spiritual practices of our lives.

One of the big dangers in life generally is perfectionism. We try to be perfect. We take it for granted perhaps that we should be perfect. Maybe our parents want us to be perfect; they want us to

do very well at school, get the best jobs, make the best marriages, have the best kind of house. We feel that we ought to be continually coming up to a high standard of success or achievement or perfection.

This is an area we have to look at very carefully and understand very carefully because, if we get it wrong, we miss the whole purpose of the Christian life. Is it about being perfect? That's the question I'd like to ask you because one of the reasons that we get discouraged or we give up a spiritual journey, a spiritual discipline like meditation is, perhaps, that we feel that we are not perfect enough – we are not good enough; we are not getting good results. And so we have to look very carefully at this idea of perfection. Does God want us to be perfect?

That's the question to think about: Does God want us to be perfect?

Well, let's just look at the human instinct to perfection. It's quite deep in us that we want things to be right; we want things to be good. If you go into a room and you see there's a picture hanging on the wall and the picture is crooked, your instinct is that it's imperfect, so you straighten it, don't you? And many examples of that like, that we just naturally like things to be in symmetry, we like things to be balanced; we have an idea of physical perfection.

So this idea of perfection, if that is the right word to use, is deep in us and it's an instinct. And maybe it's an instinct that arises from the fact that we are sharing, in our very nature, in the divine nature because we are created in the image of God. We can only know God because we are like God in this way. Our essential nature, in the Christian vision, is good. It is in fact divine: God has breathed his spirit into us.

So this is perhaps where this deep sense of rightness and perfection, of goodness, comes from. Human nature is basically good. Sometimes you might question that when you see the news

or you see the way people behave, but that's a fundamental element of our faith and, perhaps, a fundamental human belief too. If you don't have that belief that human nature is basically good despite everything, it's very difficult to focus yourself in your work, in your relationships, in the right way. You become a pessimist or you become a cynic very easily.

So, it's right and good that we should have this sense of perfection, but let's come back to that question again. Does God want us to be perfect?

Well, in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the translations of Jesus' words has Him say this-:, 'You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.'

What is He speaking about there? He's speaking about the way we love. He says God is boundless love; God knows no boundaries in love. God has no favourites, St Paul tells us. God loves all his children equally and uniquely, and God is like the sun that shines on good and bad alike and is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

So, this is what perfection in this context means: it is the fullness or the wholeness and the total inclusiveness of Love. So when Jesus says you must be perfect like God, that might be quite intimidating to us until we understand what the kind of perfection is he is speaking about. It's the fullness or the wholeness of Love.

And this points us to something I think that we need to understand as Christians, and perhaps especially as Catholics, that God does not want us to be perfect in the ordinary sense of the word. We are never going to be perfect.

If you look at the lives of the saints, the *real* lives of the saints, not the official lives of the saints, you see that they were very human people, had many imperfections, but they had, at the same time, an overpowering, overwhelming, experience of love: of God's love, and of the mission that that love was giving them in

their lives. And that's true of us. We are never going to be perfect, but we can experience a growing wholeness in love. So it's wholeness rather than perfection that we should be concerned about.

Wholeness is the goal, not perfection. But wholeness is potential at the moment. We know we don't have it all together; we have our good days and bad days and we have conflicts and divisions within ourselves still. But, the wholeness is potentially present and the deeper we go to the centre of our being – that's the contemplative journey, that's the daily practice of meditation – every day we take a step further into that deep centre, we find that the wholeness is God himself; it's not *my* wholeness really, ultimately.

That's what Jesus, I think, has opened up for us – this understanding. It's not my prayer in that sense either, not my meditation even. It's his prayer in me which I can join in with fully.

We are this unity of body, mind and spirit. Because it is a unity, you can't separate them. So we have to try to keep them in harmony. We do that imperfectly but we know that it's better when we are in harmony. What we discover then is that the work you do at one level has repercussions on the other two levels as well. Because we are a whole person, something physical will affect us mentally and spiritually, or something that happens to us spiritually will be imprinted in some way on our minds and on our bodies.

So, any kind of particular experience, whether it's an illness or great physical joy or beauty, or whether it is in prayer, in meditation, or whether it's your study, your reading, opening of your mind to new meanings or new knowledge, any of those kind of experiences are part of our journey to God, part of our wholeness, part of our growth.

What does it mean to glorify God? We sometimes think, I

suppose, that that means we have to sing hymns glorifying God or telling God how great he is or telling God how great you are. But really in the Christian understanding, the glorifying of God is human growth. This is why the glory of God is manifested when each one of us becomes more alive, more human, more whole, and that means more loving, more generous, more real, and so on.

St Irenaeus said in the second century, 'the glory of God is the human being fully alive' and then he went on, 'and the life of the human being is the vision of God'. So this ties in – the way we grow in daily life at each or any of these levels, body, mind or spirit – with our contemplative journey, the vision of God. I think that's what we mean by Christian spirituality.

So, perfectionism – getting it all right, keeping all the rules – and feeling self-righteous because you kept all the rules, that's got no place, has it? That doesn't fit in to that kind of spirituality at all.

## A Thorn in the Flesh

'A thorn in the flesh': these words of St Paul from the second letter to the Corinthians speak about the problem. We don't know what it was but some 'thorn in the flesh' he calls it which he asks God to free him from.

He didn't get his prayer answered or at least he didn't get what he wanted. Instead, he was given an insight, the insight I've been trying to share with you, that it isn't about being perfect; it's about being ourselves. And this is where the real power of God is experienced, in the *acceptance* of our imperfection. If we can not reject ourselves because we are imperfect, but accept ourselves in our imperfections, that's what opens us to God.

This is how St Paul describes it: 'I will not boast on my own account except of my weaknesses. To keep me from being unduly elated by the magnificence of such revelations, I was given a thorn in the flesh to buffet me and this was to save me from being unduly elated. Three times I begged the Lord to rid me of it but His answer was, "My grace is all you need." Power is most fully seen in weakness. I am therefore happy to boast of my weaknesses because then the power of Christ will rest upon me. So, I'm content with a life of weakness, insult, hardship, persecution and distress, all for Christ's sake, because when I am weak, then I am strong.' (2 Cor 12:7-10)

That is the gospel; that's Christian faith. Our meditation gives us a direct and very personal, very humble way into that truth to experience that for ourselves. In other words, when we respond to our weaknesses, our imperfections, by feeling self-rejecting, or in despair or depression, or we give up because we are not perfect,

that is missing the point entirely of the Christian life. and we can very easily flip that around, very simply flip it around, if we understand what the heart of the gospel is.

Accepting ourselves as we are, that's humility, That opens us in our weakness. Even our weaknesses then become our strengths, because it's through our weaknesses that we experience the power of God touching us or, as he says, 'the power of Christ resting upon us'.

If you rely only upon your successes and your strengths where you think you are perfect, then actually we block the power of God from touching us. We just rely upon our own resources.

So, meditation is a very direct and personal experience of verifying the truth of this gospel message.

## Is Meditation All You Need?

Is meditation all you need? What about all the other ways of prayer? Do I need them? Could I just give all my time to meditation?

It's a good question, actually, because it makes us think of something that the Christian tradition tells us very clearly, which is that contemplation is the goal of life and the goal of all prayer. All our different forms of prayer, we know there are many forms of prayer and all the forms of prayer are good, but what they have in common is that they are leading us into and towards what we call contemplation which you could also say is the vision of God – knowing God not from the outside, not as an idea, not as an object of our imagination, but knowing God intimately and personally by participation in the divine love.

That's what we mean by contemplation: knowing God from the inside, like being from the inside of the family, not just a visitor to the family, the 'community of love' idea again. You are part of that divine community of love, and you know God by participating in the life of that divine community that we call the Trinity, and seeing that. And *seeing* it doesn't just mean thinking about it. It means knowing it with all our powers of perception, mental, physical and spiritual.

That's why St Augustine said the whole purpose of the Christian life – the reason why we celebrate the mass, the reason why we read the scriptures, all are forms of prayer – is 'to open the eye of the heart by which God can be seen'.

So that question – is meditation all you need – we should sit with that question too, a little bit, because at the end of the

journey, there will only be this contemplation experience, this experience of living the divine life from the inside.

This is why in the Book of Revelation, it says something quite interesting about the heavenly Jerusalem. 'I saw no temple in the city,' St John says, 'because there was the sovereign Lord God and the Lamb. The city did not need the sun or the moon to shine on it because the glory of God gave it light and its lamp was the Lamb.'

So this is a symbolic way of describing the goal of our life, the meaning of our life and what it tells us is, not just that heaven will be solar-powered, that all the energy, all the light of heaven will be the direct radiance of God, but there is no temple in the city which means there is no religion in heaven.

Does that please you or not? No religion in heaven. No temple, no mosque, no cathedrals, because the temple is the Lord God. And that is a way of describing this contemplative understanding of the Christian life. This is the goal. The reason that we practise the other forms of prayer, the reason we meditate, the reason we celebrate the Eucharist, all of these is geared towards this as the goal.

Now, we are not there yet; we are on pilgrimage. We are on a journey and when you are on a journey, you need companions. You need other members of the community to walk with, support you, encourage you, pick you up when you fall down and you pick others up when they fall down. And to share, as members of the body of Christ coming together and meditating together, as a beautiful experience every week as is the Eucharist itself, of sharing in the mystical body of Christ, here and now, in our ordinary lives.

That's why there is a physical dimension to our spiritual journey. It's not just in the head; it's not abstract. When we meditate, we take a few minutes to prepare our bodies. It's

something that we, as Christians, need to think a little more about.

We are a religion of the incarnation; we believe that God took a body like ours. Because God took a body, the fathers of the Church used to say, the angels were a little jealous of human beings, when God took a body. So, we are embodied beings. If you think about any aspect of your life, your relationships with your family, your work, every aspect of your life is lived out in this embodied way. We are in the body.

So, our meditation has this physical dimension. It's part of the holiness of the Christian vision. So, when we come together to meditate each week, we are bodies in the chair or on the cushion. That's why we physically come together.

So this physical dimension is essential to our spiritual journey. This is why the more I have thought about my experience over the last thirty years, it has seemed to me that a very simple theology has been deepening about what makes meditation Christian. For me, it is expressed in the relationship to the Eucharist. Meditation and the mass are, to me, two sides of the same reality. They are, in a sense, the same thing.

The mass is of course a sign, a sacrament; it's an outward sign of an inward reality. What is the reality that it is signifying? It's the reality of *presence*, of real presence, not imaginary presence but real, full, embodied human presence and meditation is in the same way, exactly the same way, the experience of the real presence of the same person of Christ in our hearts. So, we have the inner and the outer dimensions of this reality of real presence.

That's why the longer I've been meditating, the more I have come to love the mystical reality of the mass. It has changed the way I celebrate the mass and the way I like to celebrate it with others. And this, I think, gives us another insight into how we keep the journey fresh.

Perfectionism is the kiss of death to anything, because

perfectionism doesn't allow you to fail or to get it wrong. And if you do get it wrong, you feel guilty, and you often become discouraged or you become dishonest. Sometimes we want to hide our imperfections, our faults and weaknesses; we don't want other people to see them, and sometimes we don't even want to think about them ourselves. So we deny them; we push them into the unconscious, under the carpet.

So, perfectionism is very dangerous, and we can bring this perfectionism into anything. For example, Catholics sometimes bring this into their celebration of the mass or the idea that the practice of the mass, my going to mass, has to be so perfect.

When I was growing up as a child, when I was very young, I was told, I don't know if I fortunately understood it, that if you didn't go to mass on Sunday, you would be in a state of mortal sin. And we all know what mortal sin means. It's a one-way street, no coming back.

I must say I never took that very seriously because I couldn't understand how the God of love could send me to hell for all eternity because I slept in on a Sunday morning. So, that is an example of perfectionism in religion, and it gets it all wrong. It misses the point.

This is what I'm trying to say. If we want to keep it fresh, if we want to keep growing, then we have to watch out for this sort of virus of perfectionism, like we have virus checks on our computers. We should have a virus check on our religious consciousness, and whenever a perfectionism virus comes in, we should catch it and isolate it because it can destroy a person. It can really cripple you interiorly and mentally. It can lead sometimes to psychological illness as well.

Is meditation all you need?

Well, meditation gives us, and it's a great grace, when it comes into your life at the right moment and you recognize it and

you try to practise it; you try to follow the basic teaching – meditate twice a day, every day. Like the cardinal I mentioned, you may not do it perfectly, but that is the path that you are following and you don't have to follow it perfectly, but we do need to follow it faithfully.

Remember the old rabbi who said: 'God does not want us to succeed, but we are not allowed to give up.'

That's a very beautiful expression of our attitude to our spiritual practice, to be faithful and not to be concerned with perfectional success.

Meditation gives us a taste of this goal of life just as the Eucharist is described as a foretaste of eternal life, a taste of first fruits, as it is so often described. So, meditation, in exactly the same way, gives us a taste, here and now, of what the goal is going to be like and that's what makes the difference – the difference that Christianity has made to humanity. It has opened up for us, in a conscious way, the ability to taste and experience now, in our ordinary day-to-day life, what the ultimate goal and meaning of our life is.

And it's a great mystery that we can sit down, in meditation, or approach the mass in a spirit of reverence and devotion, and we can be open to this experience of the heavenly Jerusalem. We can experience, touch and taste, be nourished by, the life of the spirit *now*.

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## The Joy and Peace of Christ Within Us

The two words that continually appear in the New Testament describe the experience of the early Christians, what got the Church off the ground, against all the odds and got the Word spreading throughout the world.

The experience that was the fuel of that event was joy and peace. We use these words so much that they become a little tired, probably. We don't really think of what they mean. But, I think in the experience of meditation, we do discover what they mean and we discover experientially and personally, and as a real surprise, that joy and the peace that every human being is looking for – happiness and peace.

Is there any human being who would not like to be happy? Is there any human being who would not like to be peaceful? That joy and peace that we are looking for is within us. In other words, it is already present within us as a reality, as something of our true nature. Not something that we have to make happen. Not something that we construct as a kind of a business project or an external work. In other words, we can experience joy and peace by discovering them within us.

I mean we don't find them by constructing things on the outside and getting everything perfect in our life, which is what our normal reaction is: I like to have everything perfect in my life. You meet somebody and you say, 'How are things?' Well, usually they say, 'Okay' or 'Not so bad.' The English are always very understated, so the English usually will say: 'So, how are things?' 'Oh, can't complain.' That's about as much as you get out of the English.

But, we're always trying to fix things in our lives. Problems are always arising, conflicts are arising, and disappointments are happening, or things don't work out, or you miss a plane, or all sorts of little things go wrong. But the difference that meditation makes to your life is that when you have discovered that the peace and joy are to be found within you, it enables you to deal with the imperfections of life in a much better way.

I'll give you a practical example of that. At the beginning of this trip that I'm on now, I was in Italy and I had to fly to London, change planes at Heathrow and go to another terminal, and then flew to Singapore and Australia.

Those of you who have been to London may know that there is a train that goes from Heathrow to Paddington. It's called the Heathrow Express – fifteen-minute train journey – and I'd never been on that train. But when I got to Terminal 5 I had to transfer to Terminal 3, and they said to take the express train. It'll stop at Terminal 3, on the way to London. So I got on the train.

We stopped at the first terminal and I said to somebody, 'Is this Terminal 3?' And he said, 'No, it's Terminal 1.' So I assumed that there would be two more stops, Terminal 2 and Terminal 3. So then the doors closed and the ticket collector came and wanted my ticket.

I said, 'I don't have a ticket.'

So he said, 'Well you've got to buy one.'

And I said, 'No, I'm just going to Terminal 3.'

He said, 'You've missed it.'

He said, "Terminal 1, 2 and 3 is one stop.'

So, I had to go all the way to London, get onto another train, come all the way back, repeat my arguments to the next ticket collector – not exactly perfect, was it? Not a perfect trip; not a perfect journey. I was angry with myself; I was angry with everybody else I could blame, but basically, I had to blame myself.

Now, what difference does meditation make to dealing with that kind of practical, daily imperfection? Well, it could make you feel very angry, depressed. It could make you feel a failure, a stupid person for doing something as stupid as that. I would say I had little tinges of all of those feelings, but I'm sure I reacted very differently to that little setback than I would have done thirty years ago, or ten years ago.

And I think the difference that meditation makes in your life, in one important sense, is that it makes you realize that when things go wrong in your life, maybe through no fault of your own, it doesn't invalidate or it doesn't disconnect you from that experience of joy and peace in your heart. And, if you can do it, if you are present enough, if you are in the real presence enough, you can actually use those setbacks, those disappointments, those imperfect things that happen; you can actually use them and take the opportunity to go deeper into that experience of joy and peace within you.

Meditation is essential to our pilgrimage because it is the work of preparing us for this gift, for this grace of contemplation. In Christian tradition, this presence of the joy and peace of Christ in our hearts, this vision of God that it leads us to is gift, grace, not the product of a technique, not because we are being perfect people in our outward lives or because we obey all the rules. It is a pure and gracious gift of God, inherent in our own nature. In fact, it's a gift that has already been given, but we have to wake up to it; we have to receive it; we have to prepare ourselves for the full flowering of this gift.

Like the Eucharist – with which, for the Christian, meditation cannot be separated because they are both the prayer of pure presence – meditation is a taste or an anticipation here and now, like a peek into the future, a preview in a sense, of the heavenly Jerusalem. But it's not really the future, because, in this

experience, everything is *now*. The real presence is always *present*.

That is something that is difficult for our minds to understand: how we can experience here and now, what is coming. What is our goal at the end of life, but we experience it now. We can't really understand that because we think the past is the past; the present is the present; the future is the future. But in God, there is no past and future; there is only presence.

Everything is new, fresh and *now* when we are in touch with this presence

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## The Essential Elements of Spiritual Practice

Our community puts a strong emphasis on the twice-daily practice of meditation and we see the weekly group and the regular retreat or community day as helping us to develop and consolidate this practice of meditation, the twice-daily.

Don't forget Father John spoke about this practice of meditation every day as a challenging discipline. He said it may take you twenty years to get into it, twice a day, but the important thing is that we don't give up. That's what keeps it fresh. But we can only keep it fresh if we are approaching it in the right way.

Motivation is everything in life. You know, why do you want to do something? If you understand your motivation, it will determine the outcome of the project or the work. If your motivation is selfish success, well, that will be the kind of outcome you will get, with all the limitations of selfishness. If your motivation is to do the best you can and bring benefit to other people in the process, then it will be a very different outcome.

So, we should be prepared to see that meditation is a challenging discipline, and also that prayer is the essential asceticism of the Christian life. The word 'asceticism' means literally in Greek 'exercise'. Working out, doing your morning walk, going to the gym, making sure you eat well and get enough exercise, get enough sleep at night – that's what the word 'asceticism' means. It means a programme, a health programme in a sense, but seen in a spiritual sense. But it's work, just like exercise or looking after yourself physically and mentally is a kind of exercise.

So, we could say, as Father John understood, that prayer is

the essential exercise or ascesis of the Christian life when we see it as a practice of poverty of spirit, renunciation of self and purity of heart. We understand all the other practices of prayer in a new light when we have started this practice of meditation.

Our priorities become clearer. We see there are many ways of prayer; they are all good. But perhaps, we can prioritize better. In the light of meditation, we can see the essential expressions of prayer practice in our life. These are the three I would identify.

First of all, we need a contemplative practice such as meditation. In other words, we need some practice of prayer, some time of prayer where we move from thoughts and word and planning and remembering and imagination, where we get out of our heads and make this pilgrimage to our heart where the joy and peace are waiting for us. So the journey from mind to heart: Meditation is not what you think. Meditation, in the early Church they said, it is the laying aside of thoughts. This is what we essentially mean by contemplative prayer. Meditation is a form of contemplative prayer; meditation is a contemplative practice.

The second essential aspect of the practice of Christian life is the Eucharist. Meditation and the mass are to me two sides of the same reality. The mass is of course a sign, a sacrament; it's an outward sign of an inward reality and what is the reality that it is signifying? It's the reality of presence, of real presence, not imaginary presence but real, full, embodied human presence. And meditation is in the same way, exactly the same way, the experience of the real presence of the same person of Christ in our hearts. So we have the inner and the outer dimensions of this *reality* of real presence.

And the third aspect, I would say, is *lectio*, the reading of scripture, discovering that the Word of God is something alive and active. It's not just words on a page; it is an encounter, an encounter with the person of Jesus in the spirit.

In many of the stories of the gospel, we don't know what happens next. We don't know what happened to the rich young man; we don't know what happened to the characters in the Good Samaritan story; we don't know how Martha reacted to Jesus' trying to calm her down. So many stories in the Gospel seem to leave us hanging in the air almost. It's like a television programme or soap opera; we want to see what happens next week.

Well, we don't know what happens to those characters in the gospel stories. It's part of the intention of the scriptures that we shouldn't know what happened next to them. It's what happens to us, that's what matters. And so what happens next is us, and our interaction with the spirit of wisdom that is embedded in these texts and communicating itself through our *lectio*, through our reading of the sacred scriptures. This is a life-giving, nourishing, vitalizing, mind-opening nutrition for our spiritual journey, and I think most meditators develop a taste for the Word of God which, perhaps, they didn't have before.

These three essential elements of our spiritual practice – meditation, Eucharist and scripture – this triad goes well with the particular other practices that you may find useful. You may like to pray as a charismatic; you might prefer Ignatian spirituality; you might say the Rosary; you like devotion, prayer to Mary; you might like to go on pilgrimage. All of these other styles of prayer are perfectly compatible with these three essential elements of Christian spiritual practice.

Once we've got the foundation established, the priorities clear, then there is no competitiveness. Arguing with each other about ways of prayer, which is better – if you do this you can't do that anymore more – it's ridiculous! It's like saying you can have chicken fried rice but you can't eat noodles.

One does not exclude the other and that is why what I've been saying is that meditation doesn't replace other forms of

prayer, but it gives you a new insight into what prayer is. The early Christians spoke about meditation as pure prayer, pure prayer like the essence of prayer, the distillation of prayer, the very pure, concentrated form of prayer.

It doesn't replace other forms of prayer but it does show us what prayer is, really is. It shows us first of all that we shouldn't bring this perfectionism to any kind of prayer. Prayer is more than perfectionism or technique or obligation. All of these are distortions of the spiritual life that have crept into our Christian spirituality and are also found in some new age kinds of spirituality today as well.

We don't meditate as a technique. If you were a perfectionist, you might approach meditation as a technique. You might think you have to have a perfect posture or you might think that you have to have even a perfect practice, but that doesn't always happen; or you might think that you are not a good meditator because you are very distracted and therefore maybe it's not really worthwhile your meditating because you are not good at it, because your mind is wandering all over the place all the time.

Well, all of those are symptoms of perfectionism. That's the virus of perfectionism that has got into your attitude towards meditation, if that's how you evaluate it.

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## Small Acts of Kindness

When Father John once was asked 'what is the best way to prepare for meditation', he gave an answer which I, at the time, was not expecting. I thought he would say 'the best way is to read some scripture, listen to some contemplative music, prepare yourself with a few moments of stretching, physical preparation', or as he often said, 'silence is the best preparation for meditation'.

But on this occasion, he said: 'The best way to prepare for meditation is small acts of kindness.' Small acts of kindness – I don't think that needs too much explanation.

Life is full of opportunities to be nice to each other, to be thoughtful, to be kind, to be gracious, to extend yourself a little towards another person to show you respect them and care for them, especially if you see that they are in need or upset or need something.

Small acts of kindness are available to us as spiritual practice continuously, so you can be constantly preparing for the next meditation, constantly keeping in mind that this is the goal of your life. That small act of kindness – where you take the time to say a word to someone or to help someone, or maybe just by a look or a gesture when they are feeling lonely or upset or when they feel a failure so that they realize that they still have some value and worth in your eyes – that small act of kindness is itself a sharing in the real presence.

If we don't understand that, then I think our understanding of the real presence in the mass or the tabernacle or in our own heart is inadequate.

It's the way that we share a space together, do a work

together, the way we drive even, or the way we respond to a stranger's request for directions in the street, small acts of kindness, that may change a person's mind, may help them get out of sadness or depression or ....

Under the stressful conditions of modern urban living, these niceties of social interaction easily get lost. We don't have time to be nice to each other, and it takes a real commitment to mindfulness to resurrect these opportunities.

A good way to try to understand this is the story of the Good Samaritan. It was a very dramatic story at the time; when Jesus told it, it was very controversial because the good Samaritan was helping a Jew and these were two groups that not only didn't get on; they hated each other. They each said the other was a traitor and betraying the Covenant. They hated each other. The Samaritan stops and helps the Jew who had been attacked by robbers.

The story has great and beautiful meaning if we spend time with it. The early Church fathers had a beautiful understanding of this parable. The man who is attacked by robbers is Adam, us, the human being. The Good Samaritan is Jesus. The Jerusalem from which the man is travelling is paradise from which we have been on pilgrimage, and Jericho where he was travelling is the world.

The robbers were the hostile passions or the hostile powers of life, things that go wrong, the negative forces in life. The priest symbolized the law, the Levite the prophets. The wounds of the man who had been attacked by robbers are the wounds of sin, the wounds of disobedience. The donkey on which the Samaritan put the wounded man is the body of the Lord. The inn where he took this wounded man is the Church. The manager of the inn is the head of the Church and the promise of the Good Samaritan to come back on his way home is the promise of the second coming.

It's a beautiful story when you interpret it in this way, but it

shouldn't make us forget that what is at the centre of this is an incident in daily life. He is walking down the street and he sees a man lying on the road who had been beaten up by robbers. He interrupts his daily life for this small, or we might say great, act of kindness.

So, spiritual practice is not about perfectionism. It's about responding in the present moment from the deepest experience of the joy and peace that we can find in our own hearts. It is not about trying to be better than we are, but in fact about being *who* we are.

Thomas Merton said at the end of his life, he had spent a lot of time thinking about holiness, and he said: 'For me, holiness is simply being who I am.'

This way, it seems spirituality makes us look again at the way we divide the world into us and them. The Christian life, if it is practised in this way, with a sense of wholeness and kindness rather than of perfectionism, the Christian life then becomes a catalyst for a unified consciousness, for a sense of friendship, unity, collaboration, the breaking down of barriers.

That's the natural effect of living and seeing and acting in this way, and our meditation is an essential aspect and element of that practice.

## The Tip of an Iceberg

I give lots of talks, sometimes to large groups of people, sometimes to small groups of people. I don't imagine that everyone that I may be speaking to about meditation and who is hearing it for the first time, I don't imagine they are all going to jump up and go off and meditate twice a day for the rest of their lives. Some of them may not have understood a word I was saying; they weren't listening or they just weren't in the right place. Others may have heard it, understood it, appreciated it but, they forget it quickly, and others may start and try it but give up.

So it's like the parable of the sower and the seed. We're often ourselves not always responding as fully as we might to the opportunities we have. One way I have to console myself with that is that at least it's better that they hear about it, that they hear that this dimension of prayer exists in our tradition because, then, it's as if you are giving them a new horizon. You are extending their vision. They've heard about it now and, even if they don't fully understand it or practise it, at least they know about it, and it changes the way they see everything, I think.

Basically, our work in the Christian vocation is that we are all called in some way to communicate the Word of Christ. That's our mission. It's what gives a privilege and a special excitement, in a sense to our life, that even we, very imperfect Christians and imperfect disciples as we are, have a share in this mission of Christ.

But our job is to communicate the Word; it isn't to convert. The Holy Spirit does the work of conversion. That's very important, I think, for the Church, for us as the Church, to remember,

because if you look back at the history of the Church, there were times when the Church actually forced people into conversion, by force. That was the mentality of the time.

We've grown deeper; we have a deeper, broader understanding of what a conversion means, now. It's not just about baptism; it's not just about some external ritual. It's about the heart opening.

So in the same way, when you speak about meditation, all we can do is to put the message there as clearly as we can, as skilfully as we can. We should use skills, develop whatever skills we have. Some people will have different skills from others. Some people will do better with a big group; some people do better with a small group, but whatever skill you have, develop that; that's your talent. We have to develop our talents, and do the best we can with it. Then you don't have to worry anymore. Whether it's two or three, or two or three hundred, it doesn't matter – that's the market, the ups and downs of the market. We have to be faithful.

That has been our policy, and our attitude over the last thirty years, and our community has grown in many parts of the world.

I could give a talk about how many countries meditation is in, how many meditation groups we have, how many centres, how many books we are producing. If I was doing fund-raising, I would emphasize all those positive things. But there is another side to it, which is that the groups are fragile and the community is made up of people like us, who are imperfect but also have been touched deeply by this message. Sometimes, groups don't flourish.

I think if you take a long-term perspective on it though, it's better. I've noticed over the years that sometimes a country will sort of dip in one of our national communities. They will lose some good leadership or something goes wrong and the groups just kind of lose vitality. They hang in there but it's pretty low dividends,

as it were. But then, after a couple of years or a few years maybe, a new leadership forms or young people come in or new blood comes in or something happens and it lifts up again.

That's a very important aspect to see. It's the life of the community; it's like the life of the Church. So I think in your groups, the group leader should have that perspective, have that wisdom, really, and that long-term approach. Also remember, that people may come to your group for two or three sessions and then you may not see them again, and you think, 'Oh, what have I done wrong? I didn't wear the right perfume today, or something ....'

But, you don't know. I've met group leaders who said they've met people, who have stopped coming to their group, a year or so later and they discovered that they were meditating on their own every day. They said, 'I just can't come to the group anymore. I'm too busy; I've got too many things in my life. But meditation has entered into my life and I'm very grateful to you for it.' So we should always remember that.

The group is like the tip of an iceberg; nine-tenths of it is under the water.

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## States and Stages

How do you know you are making progress, not just going round and round like a hamster in a cage or something?

I think, at the beginning, you have to take it on trust. And you don't trust the individuals who teach you to meditate or speak about it, but you have to trust the whole tradition. That's why we teach within a tradition, with the authority and the wisdom of that tradition. And tradition has many ways of describing the journey and the stages of the journey.

It's good to learn a little bit about that tradition so that your own personal experience becomes more understandable and more meaningful because it is within a tradition and because that tradition can illuminate it and interpret it for you. Then it is also easier for you to accept your own experience.

You don't have to compare or compete with anybody else. It's your journey. It's different from anybody else's and yet your unique journey can be interpreted and given meaning within a universal frame of reference. One way that might be helpful, in practical terms, is to see the difference between states and stages.

States of mind are constantly changing. We all felt a little fresher an hour and a half ago. Now we need a bit of fresh air and we move location. So our states of mind, which are affected by our physical environment of course, are constantly changing.

So, one day you may sit to meditate and you feel it's all come together beautifully. You are very calm and clear, and the meditation is beautiful, and you have very few distractions, and

you seem to break through and you know what meditation is about. But, the next time you sit to meditate, you've lost it. Your mind is in a completely distracted state; you had some bad news or you have a presentation you've got to make and you're worrying about it, or you've had a fight with somebody, so your mind is turbulent.

Now, those are states of mind, so don't make any ultimate judgment just on the basis of those states of mind. You wouldn't do that in business; you wouldn't do it in law; you wouldn't do it in the medical profession, so why should we do it in terms of our spiritual journey? So, don't evaluate your work on the basis of these varying states of mind.

Now, there are also, what we might call stages of the spiritual journey, and these stages are turning points, tipping points. It's like a birthday or an anniversary. It's a stage; there's no going back from that. If you have celebrated your thirtieth anniversary, that's it; the next one is thirty-one, not twenty-nine.

Now, these stages of the spiritual journey are subtle. You don't measure them easily, but you recognize them after they've happened or as they are unfolding. It's a recognition. It's like falling in love – you realize you are in love; or when you have a difficult decision to make and it becomes clear – that's what I should do. It's a subtle shifting of your consciousness into another stage.

One way you could measure it or describe the progress that happens through the states and the stages is through the description of the fruits of the spirit. St Paul says that there are the gifts of the spirit which are quite obvious signs, outward signs, of changes taking place in you. But then, the next thing he describes is the fruits of the spirit, and these are interior and often relational: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Now, just reflect on all those qualities, that we would all like to see growing in ourselves. Those are definitely the fruits of meditation. Because meditation is a deeper entry into the life of the spirit, it accelerates or, I don't know what the word is, maybe it accelerates or intensifies, the development of these fruits of the spirit quite naturally. The more in the spirit you are, the more these things happen. But when they happen, you don't necessarily measure them or see them in the same way that you could measure your exam results or your investment portfolio. You don't measure it in the same way.

On the other hand, you can be very aware of it, maybe through other people at first. Somebody that you are living with or working with, lets you know that you're easier to live with. Or maybe somebody says to you one day: 'Thank you very much for listening to me. That was very helpful. I'm very grateful for the attention you have given me.'

And that may take you by surprise because you weren't even trying to do it or pretending to do it. But then you realize that actually you were able, better able than in the past, to give your attention wholeheartedly to that person, and that that helped them and was beneficial for them.

So, these are the ways in which you change; nobody would meditate unless you change. But you've got to look for the change in the right place, and look for it in the right way, and, of course, the process takes time.

Now the changes that take place as a result of the regular practice of meditation are deep-level, deep-structured changes. It's not just on the surface and, in that process of change, as with any deep change, sometimes it can be a bit turbulent. You begin to see things differently and your mental furniture is re-arranged. You may need to throw out some of your old furniture that you should have got rid of a long time ago.

For example, one of the ways that you would experience the changes of your growth through meditation is that you have become less fearful. We are often controlled by fears at all sorts of levels. Maybe psychological fears which we have inherited from our childhood, from our upbringing, from our conditioning. This kind of perfectionism I was talking about – that can be cultural – succeed! succeed! succeed! And then the fear of failure, the fear of not competing as well as other people – that’s a fear. And then there are even, deeper fears like the fear of death. They say it’s our deepest repression, the fear of death.

What you will notice through the regular practice, and regular practice of course makes a big difference, you’ll notice that those levels of fear will decrease. That means that you operate in the world and in your relationships and within yourself differently. So you feel a change happening. You may not know at first why it’s happening, but you are less controlled by these old fears and fearful reactions and fearful habits.

As those reduce, what happens is that energy that has been tied up with fear has now been liberated to love. You become a more loving, nicer, open, more spontaneous, more real person, less locked into yourself by the prison of your fears. That’s how change happens. We have to be clear about this if we are speaking about it as a spiritual journey.

If you want a little bit more hard science – how does meditation work – you can be reassured as well from medical research that meditation reduces your blood pressure, helps with hypertension, improves your cholesterol, deals with depression and anxiety and stress-related diseases, will enable you to sleep better at night, and so on and so on. All of that is proven and tabulated and the research is going on even now.

So, you may go to your psychologist or your physician and he’ll say, ‘Well, you know, I can give you some pills, but probably

meditation will be good for you too.’ More and more are saying that. So, medication and meditation, and one does not invalidate the other.

I went to the doctor and had my medical check-up recently, and when he took my blood pressure, he said, ‘You don’t meditate, do you?’

So, in those areas you can measure it, but what we’re doing is approaching meditation as a spiritual practice with the ancient wisdom behind it. In exactly the same way, there are changes that happen as a result of meditation. It makes a difference, but the way we interpret the changes and see them is more integrated.

