



Prayer at Gethsemane by Del Parson

*What is Meditation ?*

All of us pray in different ways at different times. There are times when, feeling overwhelmed by the troubles of life, unable to find solutions for the problems facing us, we prostrate ourselves in Supplicatory Prayer. The Memorare is a beautiful expression of the anguish, humility and need with which we pray in this manner.

There are other times when our hearts are suddenly opened to the wonder of life. The birth of a child, a glorious sunset, the first realisation of love : such experiences fill us with joy almost to bursting. All that we had earlier regarded as mundane appear to be wonderful. At these times, we spontaneously lift our hearts in Praise and Thankfulness. When St. Francis of Assisi prays to thank the Lord for the gracious sun, for the air and clouds, cherished water and hearty fire, he is expressing this soaring uplift of his being .

In both forms of prayer, we are speaking to God. In supplication we confess and beseech for help ; in praise we acknowledge and thank. There is another form of prayer where we do not groan in pain or sing with joy but remain silent and listen. It is called Meditation or Contemplative Prayer.

In contemplative prayer, we do not ask for anything. We do not articulate our thoughts, even in our minds, as that articulation itself creates disturbance instead of silence. We are not thinking of others and things that we need to do or want to do but become absorbed within ourselves. For once, we deny the compulsion for movement : we are not speaking,

asking, praising, thinking, planning, imagining, remembering. Instead, we become wholly passive : to listen, to receive, to accept and, ultimately, to surrender.

*Why do we meditate ?*

There is no compulsion to meditate. You do it because you need to . Many people come to Contemplative Prayer through Supplicatory and Joyful prayer. Many people, nowadays, regard Meditation as a way to handle the stresses of life.

Modern life, especially in large cities, is very demanding. We all need to be multi-tasking ie doing one thing while thinking of another and planning the third. We are required to achieve certain things by certain deadlines, with more and more tasks to be completed by deadlines stretching before us as far as we can see. We imagine ourselves to be self-motivated initiators of action, but actually, we are reacting to external expectations. We call it “ the Daily Grind”, “ the Rat Race” but we willingly participate in it.

Our ego-mind, of course, revels in this because it loves movement , it enjoys having things to do , it wants to be in command all the time. But there is something else in us that feels that it is on a treadmill, running faster and faster to stay on the same spot. There is a lot of frenetic movement in our lives but no real action, no real progress. The inner person longs for a bit of peace.

The gap between the needs of the inner being and the activities of the ego-mind expresses itself physically in blood pressure, heart problems, insomnia and other ailments. Emotionally it causes a constant state of impatience, irritation, anger, dissatisfaction. Psychologically one feels a sense of ennui even alienation. All these are lumped under the term “ Stress”.

It does not matter which road you take to reach meditation, so long as you come to it. For meditation addresses the same Mystery ( “ I am Who I am” ) that you bend to in supplication or raise yourself to in praise. But instead of you talking to the Mystery, you open yourself and allow the Mystery to speak to you.

*What happens when you meditate ?*

When you set aside time every day for contemplative prayer ; when you do not allow your preoccupations to turn you away from it ; when you gently silence the clamorous ego-mind and meditate with faith in the Mystery – in other words, when you meditate sincerely – you will first reach a state of poise , balance and stability. You will no longer feel agitated, pulled in different directions. When you continue to meditate, you will touch an area of calm and peace within you. That area was always within you. It’s just that you didn’t know about it or recognise it. Finally you will attain a sense of joy, of completeness, that all is well.

These states are not always progressive or sequential. There will be times when there is a flash of joy but it is not there the next time you reach for it. There will be many times when you struggle to even balance yourself. It is most important to understand that it is not *you* that is reaching these states, it is *they* that are coming to you. In meditation ( or, for that matter, in any form of prayer ) you cannot force the pace, you cannot make things happen. The receipt of grace is not controlled by us but by the giver of grace.

Modern man lives by the belief that what is real must be capable of measurement. We measure our happiness by what we own and possess. We measure success by our position and prestige and so forth. When we are in Contemplative Prayer our bodies will show measureable changes in our breathing, blood pressure, pulse rate and brain functions.

But the changes meditation brings about in our spirit cannot be planned, plotted and measured. To put it another way, you cannot achieve anything by meditation except meditation itself.

### *What is Christian Meditation ?*

Through history, there have been a few great souls who have had the grace, courage and fortitude to reach the Mystery on their own. The vast majority of us need the help of a mediator, an intercessor, a guide, a teacher, someone who has walked that path and can show us the way. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ, in all his qualities, is the fundamental characteristic of a Christian. When the centrality of that relationship infuses and guides Meditation it is Christian Meditation. It is as simple ( or as complex ) as that.

The vast majority of us also need a word, a “mantra” , to focus our mind in meditation. In one way, the mantra is like the stick the mahout places in the trunk of the elephant to prevent the trunk from restlessly moving around all the time. But the mantra is much more than a placatory toy. It is the key that unlocks the door in you that leads to the sacred. The key to each person’s spirit is different but the one common feature that all mantras have is that they resonate within. The syllables and the sound have a meaning that is personal to you. Generally in Christian Meditation the word used is Ma-Ra-Na-Tha, Aramaic for “Come Lord Jesus”. Each syllable is silently intoned to first coincide, then merge with the incoming breath of blessing and the outgoing breath of surrender.

### *How do I practise Christian Meditation ?*

There is no one perfect way to meditate but there are some methods that most people find useful to stabilise and concentrate. Start the session with a sacred reading. This could be from the Scriptures. It could be a commentary on the Scriptures. It is any writing that seeks an understanding of God. Use the reading as a base for your reflection. This does not mean thinking and analysing what you have read but allowing the words and ideas to sink into you, to apply to you. Then begin your meditation. Many people meditate alone. But when you begin, it is better to do it in a group so that the silence of the others reinforces your own silence. There will be moments when you get distracted. Don’t get upset at this. Recognise your distraction, observe your distraction and gently bring yourself back to meditation.