

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN MEDITATION AND HOW TO HANDLE DISTRACTIONS

"I want now to address a particular question that we all encounter. It is the question of distractions. What should you do when you begin to meditate and distracting thoughts come into your mind? The advice that the tradition has to give us is to ignore the distractions and to say your word and to keep on saying your word. Don't waste any energy in trying to furrow your brow and say, 'I will not think of what I'm going to have for dinner', or 'who I'm going to see today', or where am I going tomorrow', or whatever the distraction may be. Don't try to use any energy to dispel the distraction. Simply ignore it and the way to ignore it is to say your word." (John Main, Moment of Christ)

The role of the mantra in dealing with distractions

The problem all of us have in coming to an inner silence in meditation is that our minds are full of thoughts, images, sensations, emotions, insights, hopes, regrets, a never ending array of distractions.

St. Teresa of Avila once said the human mind is like a boat where mutinous sailors have tied up the captain. The sailors all take a turn at steering the boat and of course the boat goes around in circles and eventually crashes on the rocks. That is our mind, says Teresa, full of thoughts taking us off in every direction. She also says "Distractions and the wandering mind are part of the human condition and can no more be avoided than eating and sleeping".

An Indian sage, Sri Ramakrishna, once said the human mind is like a great tree with monkeys jumping from branch to branch chattering away. Laurence Freeman in commenting on this story says there is a path that leads through this forest of chattering monkeys and it is the practice of reciting a mantra in our daily periods of meditation.

There is another wonderful story, which illustrates the capricious human mind. In India the mind is often compared to the trunk of an elephant, restless, inquisitive and always straying.

In India if you watch an elephant in a parade you will see how apt the comparison is. In Indian towns and villages, elephants are often taken in religious processions through the streets to the temple. The streets are crooked and narrow, lined on either side with fruit stalls and vegetable stalls. Along comes the elephant with his restless trunk, and in one quick motion it grabs a bunch of bananas.

Eknath Easwaran, a teacher of meditation, says,

"you can almost see him asking. 'What else do you expect me to do? Here is my trunk and there are the bananas.'" He just doesn't know what else to do with his trunk. He doesn't pause to peel the bananas, either, or to observe all the other niceties that masters of etiquette say should be observed in eating a banana. He takes the whole bunch, opens his wide mouth, and tosses the bananas in stalk and all. Then from the next stall he picks up a coconut and tosses it in after the bananas. There is a loud crack and the elephant moves on to the next stall. No threat can make this restless trunk settle down. But the wise trainer, if he knows the elephant well, will simply give that trunk a short bamboo stick to hold on to before the procession starts. Then the elephant will walk along proudly with his head high, holding the bamboo stick

in front of him like a drum major with a baton. He is not interested in bananas or coconuts any more, his trunk has something to hold on to.

The human mind is very much like this trunk of an elephant. Most of the time it has nothing to hold on to. But it can be kept from straying into the world of thoughts, imagination and fantasy by simply giving it something to hold on to – a mantra.

The mantra is a help towards concentration, enabling us to go beyond distractions, including words, thoughts, even holy thoughts. We say the mantra slowly, steadily with attentiveness. When we find our mind has wandered we simply come back to our mantra. We cannot force this way of prayer through sheer will power. Do not try too hard. Let go, relax. There is no need to fight or struggle with distractions. Simply return to the repetition of the mantra.

John Main also reminds us that we cannot attempt to force the elimination of distractions. In fact we must let go of goals and trying to achieve anything. The mantra will become rooted in our consciousness through the simple fidelity of returning to the mantra each morning and each evening. Meditation is centering ourselves on our inner core and allowing God to pray within us.

But a word of caution. The repetition of a mantra does not bring instant peace, harmony, the absence of distractions or silence. We must accept where we are on the pilgrimage of meditation. We should not get upset at continual distractions. Our aim is not to be free of *all* thoughts. Again, this would be a goal and we do not want to have goals. John Main constantly advises us not to come to meditation with *any* expectations. So do not struggle and fret over distractions. The mantra simply expresses our *openness* to God and his indwelling presence.

Simone Weil, the French author, who died in 1943 at the age of 33, was an apostle of the spiritual life and defined prayer as *attention*. The mantra leads us to this attention. another French spiritual writer, Pascal, felt the greatest *enemy* of prayer was the "Gethsemani sleep" – when the apostles slept instead of watching with Jesus. Pascal felt that inattention and drowsiness were the enemies of prayer. Again the mantra helps us with this problem by bringing us to attention.

Do not get mad at distractions. This is a non-violent way of prayer. Ignore distractions by continually returning to the mantra. If one is distracted with thoughts 50 times in a period of meditation, when one returns to the mantra that is 50 times we have chosen God over the distractions.

A problem often observed by those meditating is that the thinking process continues even while saying the mantra. There is even a term for this. It is called *double tracking*. Again this is nothing to be concerned about. with perseverance the mantra will become stronger and our thoughts will diminish as the pilgrimage of meditation continues.

It is important to remember that when we are bombarded with thoughts and images at our time of meditation our will is still tuned in to the presence of God. To handle distractions we do require gentleness and patience. We have to wait, like the wise virgins, in patience and hope. Gentleness and patience indicate the Spirit is working silently within us. While we are aware of distractions we should never let them disturb us. We can even see the good in distractions; they keep us awake and on the journey. They come in one door and leave by another.

Despite all our efforts thoughts will come. Good thoughts, bad thoughts, "urgent" reminders. Ignore them all. We just keep saying our word silently. We try to let go of thinking. We try to keep saying your word. We repeat the mantra silently and continuously in our hearts. The mantra will lead us to discipline, to concentration, to silence, to God.

From the book *Christian Meditation: Contemplative Prayer for a New Generation* by Paul Harris