

Coming

HOME

A Guide to

Teaching Christian Meditation to Children

ERNIE CHRISTIE



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foreword

Be still and know that I am God. Ps 46:10

27 July 2005

One of the most significant developments in the world of Christian Meditation is the way in which children and young people are embracing this form of prayer.

Young children have a great openness to the presence of God in their lives and a real readiness for prayer. If they are taught when they are young to be still so that their hearts can be opened to the movement of the Spirit, the presence of Jesus, and the embrace of God the Father, they will have a gift which will continue to bring them great blessings throughout their lives.



It is important that even the smallest children learn to be still and not just to be quiet. Being still is very different from being quiet. It is in their stillness that God can speak to their hearts and they can discover the love of God for each of them personally.

Teaching them is a precious responsibility and a wonderful opportunity. This book provides many of the resources teachers will need.

May it bring many blessings upon all who use it. May children throughout the world discover the joy of being still before the Lord.

Michael E Putney

MOST REV MICHAEL E PUTNEY (1946-2014)

(Rev Michael Putney was Bishop of Townsville from 2001-2014)

Help your students not to suffocate but rather to nourish their innate amazement in the face of creation and to reflect on it in order to grasp its perfection. To educate to this attitude, it is indispensable that the child be led to a real and profound interior silence which is the first requisite for listening. (Pope John Paul II, 6 December 1984)

preface

You cannot tell by observation when the Kingdom of God comes. There will be no saying, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' for, in fact, the Kingdom of God is within you. Lk 17: 20-21

In 2004 I was fortunate to attend the John Main seminar in Burlington, Vermont, USA. I have been a meditator for many years and it was a wonderful opportunity for me to meet Fr Laurence Freeman once again and to be part of the vitality, joy and peacefulness of such a gathering of like-minded people. During the John Main seminar a number of fellow meditators under the guidance of Fr Laurence met and discussed the educational side of Christian Meditation. It was the inspiration from this simple meeting that generated this instructional book, *Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children*.

In my capacity as Director of Religious Education and Curriculum for the Catholic Education Office of the Diocese of Townsville at the time, I was able to put into place a Diocesan-wide programme to teach meditation to children from Preschool to Year 12. With the support of then Bishop, Michael Putney (who was himself a Patron of The World Community for Christian Meditation), the Director of Catholic Education in the Townsville Diocese Dr Cathy Day, and the 31 Principals of our schools in the Townsville Diocese, we started a concentrated, coordinated approach to teaching Christian Meditation. The year 2005 was a trial year for the programme, and Fr Laurence Freeman with Bishop Michael Putney launched this Diocesan-wide initiative in 2006.

This book offers tangible support to teachers. The seeds of Christian Meditation have been sown and as these seeds take root we hope to see a rich harvest of young people and adults begin to blossom into contemplative people who are fully aware of the truth that is contained in the words: "Be still and know that I am God."

Peace and Joy,

Ernie Christie

ERNIE CHRISTIE

2016



introduction

PARADOX

Sitting, silent, still
So profoundly active though
Paradox prevails.

Ernie Christie

PARADOX

In order to have pleasure in everything
Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
In order to arrive at possessing everything
Desire to possess nothing.
In order to arrive at knowing everything
Desire to know nothing.

The Collected Works of John of the Cross



It may seem a paradox to many that children can be still and silent and enjoy it, but like adults, children also yearn for the experience of meeting God.

In some cultures, including our own, respecting children as human individuals in their own right is still a novel idea. The idea that children may have deep spiritual awareness before they are taught a religious faith is only now starting to be acknowledged. At times we underestimate children.

Christianity has displayed a curious attitude to children. The notion of original sin, however enlightened the interpretations of theologians, has encouraged parents round the globe to believe that their babies are somehow innately and irredeemably tainted until they are baptised. The *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church (CCC) reminds us that in all baptised children or adults faith must continue to grow after baptism. The sheer gratuitousness of the Grace of Salvation is particularly manifest in infant baptism. A contrasting tradition, equally rooted in our culture, endows children with a simplistic innocence not borne out by psychological insights into child development. Fatally tainted or naively pure and innocent, neither image fosters the idea in adults that children might have something worthwhile to say for themselves about experiencing God, something from which even adults might learn. After just six weeks of meditating using the method taught by John Main, a class of twenty-six Pre-school children (age 5) was asked: “What does meditation mean to you?” Their responses were beautifully simple.

TAYSIA	Looking after Jesus and our prayer bear.	BRANDON	We say Ma ra na tha to Jesus in our hearts.
SOPHIE	Caring for God.	JAMES B	Being good.
EMILY	Sharing with God.	HUNTER	Talking to God.
RILEY	Sitting and closing our eyes.	JOSEPH	Have to close eyes.
MARTIKA	About taking care of people.	TIM	Letting God into our hearts.
DOMONIQUE	We say our special word.	JAMES	Thinking about God.
KAYA	Listening to Jesus.	MACKENZIE	It helps us to love people.
ISABELLA	Caring for others, being like Jesus.	HEATH	We sit and be still.
SAHARNA	Praying every day.	KIERAN	Close our eyes to pray.
TIARNA	We sit in a circle and look at the candle.	LIAM	God gives me food, we close our eyes and sit still.
TIA	Close our eyes and be still.	JACK	Praying to God.
KIARA	It helps us to be nice to our friends.	DALE	Helps us look after our friends.
MAYA	Giving love to God.	NATHAN	Be silent and still.

The children meditate every day for five minutes in a circle. The picture on the next page shows the children meditating with their ‘prayer bear’ and candle focus.

Often children have been regarded as the empty vessels into which adult religious wisdom is poured: the virtual channels for ‘handing on the faith’. Children are usually written about as objects of faith, rather than subjects. Many traditional approaches to the

spiritual development of children thus miss the point.

The real challenge is to build on the ‘spiritual competence’ each child is endowed with; then the development of faith is made possible. As teachers of Christian Meditation to children we must accept the assumptions about the spiritual development of children that underlie the guidelines below if we are to effectively teach them meditation:



- Recognise that each child is born as a spiritual being
- Be prepared to work with and alongside the child
- Listen to what the child has to offer
- Honour each child's relationship with the divine
- Always try to make the experiences of meditation positive
- Never judge the child's meditation

Children do come ready equipped for their spiritual journey; they have awareness and openness, which all too often can get pushed aside as the child grows older. When teaching Christian Meditation, words are not everything. By allowing communication through stillness, silence, and the senses, we can trust in God to do the work of God and talk to children in the silence.

In my Diocese we have introduced Christian Meditation to children in all grade levels in our schools. The experience thus far has been very exciting. After the first six months of our 'trial' period all the teachers (fifteen of them) came together to share their

initial experiences. One teacher who was teaching Grade One students (6 years of age) told me the story of Jacob.

Jacob had been diagnosed with ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder. Young Jacob was a noisy, fidgety, over-active student. He just couldn't keep still in class. The teacher really didn't think Jacob could 'do' meditation for one minute let alone six minutes which the programme was aiming for. Jacob tried very hard however and he did try to sit still and silent. After three weeks of slowly building up to six minutes of silence the teacher noticed that Jacob would sit on his hands when meditation began. The teacher asked Jacob after one of the meditation sessions why he was sitting on his hands. The teacher tried not to make a judgement about Jacob's unusual method of meditating but she was intrigued as to why he would sit on his hands. Jacob's response was beautiful: "I am sitting on my hands because I want to be still for Jesus." I am not suggesting a miracle happened but Jacob can sit for six minutes, still and silent, and he loves his meditation times.

origins of christian meditation

Stillness is much misunderstood in our hyperactive and fast-speed world. It seems like missing out on something, giving up or dropping out, something to do when there's nothing else to do or you are too tired to do it. This condemns us to a world of burnout and compounded distraction – a state of mind that begins ever earlier in our life-cycle. It is tragic to see children infected by it so young. In fact, the wisdom tradition sees stillness as balance and harmony at the true, quick centre of all the forces and processes that make us human and that keep us moving towards our ultimate goal. It is a dynamic state that not only re-energises us but allows us to penetrate the mystery of God more fully. 'Be still and know that I am God' is a verse that needs to be understood and taught if we are not to lose and forget what is most distinct about being human.

The inspiration for this book comes from the current work of Laurence Freeman OSB, Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM). The basis of Fr Laurence's work and that of the WCCM is the work of Fr John Main (1926-1982), an Irish Benedictine monk who devoted his life

to teaching people how to meditate. The following information comes from Laurence Freeman's *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice*, and provides a simple, fundamental understanding of the tenets of Christian Meditation.

Introduction to Meditation

John Main was born in London in 1926 into a Catholic Irish family. After leaving school he served in the front line in the closing stages of war. He then joined a religious order for about two years but left it to study law at Trinity College, Dublin. After graduation he entered the British Foreign Service and was posted to Malaya where he joined the Governor's staff and studied Chinese.

One day he was sent to visit a local Indian Hindu monk who ran an orphanage and ashram on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

After his official business was done, he fell into conversation on spiritual matters and soon sensed he was in the presence of a holy and enlightened man whose deep inner experience was the direct source of energy and inspiration for his works of compassion and reconciliation. From this monk, John Main learned a simple way of meditation: the faithful recitation of a mantra, chosen from his own Christian tradition, during two periods of meditation, before and after his day's work. Each week he would return to his teacher,

meditate with him and be reinforced in his commitment to this discipline of silence, stillness, and simplicity.

After returning to Europe to teach International Law for a number of years, John

Main himself became a Benedictine monk in London. To his dismay, his novice master instructed him to give up his meditation because it was not a 'Christian way of prayer'. In his *Gethsemani Talks*, John Main writes:

In retrospect I regard this period of my life as a great grace. Unwittingly, my novice master had set out to teach me detachment at the very centre of my life. I learned to become detached from the practice that was most sacred to me and on which I was seeking to build my life. The next few years were bleak years in terms of spiritual development, but I think too there was a faith somewhere deep inside me that God would not leave me forever wandering in the wilderness and would lead me back on to the path. What was important was that one should come back on his terms and not on my own. John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*, p15

Some years later through his reading of the teachings of the early Christian monks, the Desert Mothers and Fathers, and in particular in the Conferences of John Cassian, he was led back on to the path of meditation. He

discovered the Christian tradition of the mantra and went on to teach it from within the rich context of Christian Scripture and theology.



A Modern Tradition

John Main realised that in this simple and ancient tradition of prayer, modern people of all walks of life could find a spiritual daily discipline adaptable to their ordinary lives. He sensed that the meeting of the great world religions could only be fulfilled if members of each faith approached each other from this depth of spiritual experience taught in their own tradition.

John Main's way of teaching reminds us of the oral tradition in which this way of

contemplative wisdom has always been transmitted. His recorded talks continue to guide meditation groups each week around the world. He was a teacher who wished to lead others into their own experience, and he believed one could teach meditation only by meditating with people. The movement from thought to experience, theory to reality, mind to heart, is central to his vision of spiritual growth.



According to John Main, the greatest challenge of meditation for modern people is simplicity. We are trained to respect complexity. Yet simplicity is not easy to learn and, therefore, it requires discipline. Although he was insistent on the need to practise meditation as an interior and daily discipline, not just as a technique of self-enhancement, he also stressed the need for patience and gentleness in learning the discipline.

The Essential Teaching

Meditation, he taught, is a way of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. This is the indispensable first step towards any knowledge of God. But it is not primarily an intellectual knowledge, for it is reached through a profound harmony of stillness in body and mind. The body itself is part of the journey to God. Nor is it an isolated or lonely journey. The solitude of meditation awakens us to our deep interdependence with other people and so 'meditation creates community'.

Community is how John Main saw the Church of the future. The spiritual renewal of

Christianity is the next great step in its movement from mediaeval to modern identity. With this, there will come a new appreciation of the basic Christian understanding of prayer itself. Prayer is not talking or thinking about God but being with God. My prayer is not essentially mine at all if I am transcending my narrow egocentric view of reality. The essence of Christian prayer, he said, is the human consciousness of Jesus worshipping God in the Spirit at the centre of the human person. He was not claiming that the mantra was the only way to this centre

I do not wish to imply that meditation is the only way, but rather that it is the only way that I have found. In my own experience it is the way of pure simplicity that enables us to become fully, integrally aware of the Spirit Jesus has sent into our heart; and this is the recorded experience of the mainstream of the Christian tradition from Apostolic times down to our own day. John Main, Word into Silence, p42

John Main died in 1982 in a small community in Canada from which his teaching had begun to spread to many parts of the world. His work is now continued by The World Community for Christian Meditation, which is a network

of over 2500 meditation groups in more than 60 countries throughout the world, with its International Centre in London.

Laurence Freeman, *Christian Meditation: Your Daily Practice*, p27-33