

The Selfless Self

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The Selfless Self

*Meditation and the
Opening of the Heart*

LAURENCE FREEMAN

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Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | ix |
| Experience, Knowledge and Love | 1 |
| The Sun | 6 |
| Wisdom For All | 11 |
| The Good and the Happy | 16 |
| Remaining Free | 22 |
| The Joy of Wanting Nothing | 27 |
| The Power of Attention | 31 |
| The Now of Loving | 36 |
| The Race Where All Win | 40 |
| Patterns and Identities | 45 |
| The Music of Being | 50 |
| A Way of Life | 55 |
| The Union of Opposites | 60 |
| Gift | 65 |
| The Gift of Fullness | 70 |
| Traction and Distraction | 75 |
| The Way and Its Ways | 79 |
| The Abstraction of Materialism | 84 |
| The Joy of Disillusionment | 89 |

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| The Use of Detail | 94 |
| The Success of Failure | 99 |
| The Cycle of Love | 104 |
| The Face of Christ | 109 |
| The Word | 114 |
| Stages of Happiness | 119 |
| The Need for Future | 124 |
| The Fear of Death | 128 |
| The Cross | 132 |
| When to Let Go | 136 |
| Spiritual Art | 140 |
| Ignorance or Unknowing | 145 |
| Hope | 150 |
| The Necessity for Solitude | 155 |

Introduction

In this book I am talking about silence: an inherently contradictory activity. In fact an absurd enterprise, unless the words point to an experience of silence and encourage us to enter silence for ourselves rather than just thinking or talking about it.

The emphasis on the priority of experience lies at the heart of John Main's teaching and the growing influence that teaching has had around the world since his death in 1982. Only a few years earlier, in 1977, John Main had founded the Benedictine Priory of Montreal, a community of monks and lay-people centred on the practice of meditation in the Christian tradition and committed to sharing it with Christians and those of other faiths or of no faith.

An essential feature of this community was the meditation groups that came to meet at the priory on certain evenings for a talk on meditation and then to meditate together. That practice has continued, and the chapters of this book are drawn from talks given to people who have come to the monastery after their day's work. Immediately after each talk we enter the experience of meditation together. The words point to silence.

Many modern people have a spiritual thirst and hunger for silence, for interiority, and for prayer that is as urgent in its way as the material needs of the developing nations. Indeed, unless the spiritual health of the affluent is restored through spiritual experience they will be unable to feel the true compassion from which the love of peace and justice springs. Modern people need a way to return to this health, a way that must be new and old: a traditional way that meets people where they are.

John Main's rediscovery and development of the Christian tradition of meditation, and his insight into the simplicity and

Introduction

poverty of the mantra, have shown such a way to innumerable people. It is a way that excludes no other ways. But it can unite the infinite variety of human ways of being in the Spirit. To sit down in silence and stillness, to repeat the mantra in simple faith throughout the meditation period each morning and evening: this is a discipline and a way to liberty. It is not a panacea. It is a way to live the mystery of life, its griefs and joys, in faith and with the power of faith that heals and raises the human being to love of God and neighbour. It is practical. It is absolutely simple. It unites generations, races and creeds.

The message of these talks is simple: choose a quiet place each morning and evening to step aside from the activities of life. Sit still and simply be. Do not follow your thoughts but 'set your mind on the kingdom before everything else'. The faithful repetition of a word sacred in your tradition, throughout these periods of stillness, will lead you to silence. An ideal Christian word, which John Main warmly recommended, is '*Maranatha*', spoken slowly and rhythmically, 'ma-ra-na-tha'. It is an ancient Christian prayer, in Aramaic, meaning 'Come, Lord'.

In the depth of recited prayer we soon come to experience the real nature of silence. It is not merely the absence of sound-waves. It is the simple, unpretentious nature of things and people as they are in themselves. Nature is silent because it is not pretending to be anything but what it is, nor is it even trying to communicate. A cliff, a tree, the sea is untranslatable. By being what it is, it establishes communion; and by our accepting it and respecting it, we come to the contemplation of nature that leads us to reverence it as created by God. In silence, in being ourselves in the present moment, we move from the contemplation of nature to the contemplation of God and we realise a harmony with God, humanity and nature.

When we are simply ourselves, we are silent. Meditation is the path of silence because it leads us to accept and revere our essential nature. We are not pretending or posing or communicating. If we can come to this silence, we discover that we share human nature in common with every person on the planet.

Our world, our cities, our places of education, of debate, of healing, of administration and manufacturing, need silence: not to escape the realities of our problems, but to encounter the

Introduction

common reality of human nature and communion with what it reflects and seeks to worship.

This is the message of religion before it loses contact with silence and the contemplative experience. When religions become like advertisements for themselves, humanity loses its main hope for the peace that is inseparable from unity.

The tradition that John Main revived is being lived today by men and women around the world. The people who listened to his words came from a broad spectrum of modern urban living. They knew that their lives lacked the integrating experience of prayer. With that experience restored to our daily lives, we can all be open to the power of compassion that flows from it as we walk down the busiest streets or struggle for air in the noisiest subway.

This book is also about the experience of unity: the unity of all men and women in their essential human nature regardless of race, creed or social position; and the unity of all religions in believing – however much individuals may fail that conviction – that there is an ultimate and benevolent truth, dwelling with us and beyond us, and that love and compassion are its signs as well as the way to find it.

The Christian faith of this book is accordingly placed at the feet of all other religions, at their disposal. Christianity is most itself when it seeks the lowest place at the banquet of world religions rather than the presiding role. The Lord Jesus' kingdom is not of this world; the centre is God not Man. Christ is the patient servant of unity and has made himself one with all.

Wherever there is truth the Word of God is present, because the Word is the sole manifestation of God. If Christ is not in all truth and if all truth is not in Christ, then Christian faith is a dream rather than the prayer that answers itself, that 'they may all be one'.

Meditation realises the hope for unity through silence and by a transformation of human nature. But it is the work of the Spirit in human experience that accomplishes this, and so no technique or method can pull the switch of divinisation or claim supremacy over others. Here is a way of meditation that is ancient, perhaps as ancient as Man's religious consciousness, one that spans East and West and one that has a particular

Introduction

relevance for the people of our complex and volatile world. The mantra leads to silence. In silence all roads join to become the Way, and in the transcendent power of the Spirit the human self becomes selfless.

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November 1988

Experience, Knowledge and Love

The image of a journey or pilgrimage is a natural one to employ when we think about meditation or about the whole of life. It is a very apt image because reflection on experience reveals constant change and often unpredictable development within something that itself remains the same. The journey is a constant, but within the journey there is continual change.

The real journey is the creation of the person we are. And the person we are becoming is unique but also in union with all others. Here is the mystery of creation – that everything within creation is both unique and united. None of us will ever, can ever, be repeated. Our oneness is an aspect of our Godlikeness and a reason why we must reverence each other, and our own selves, so deeply. Yet there also is the most extraordinary unity in the oneness between ourselves and the human family, and between humanity and all creation. All this infinite uniqueness is somehow ordered, centred and purposeful. The more we live out the journey and discover ourselves, the more we allow life to realise us, the more clearly we contemplate the underlying unity within the whole grand design of creation.

One might, for the sake of understanding, identify three stages of awakening along this journey. Whether these are stages of human development or whether they are parts of the structure of any particular event or period in life does not really matter. At the beginning of the journey it seems that the most important thing for us is to *experience*. We need to experience as much as possible and we go exploring in search of experience, hungry for it, eager for it. At first it is not so important what we experience, so long as we feel that the contents of consciousness are being augmented. The *meaning* will come later. What matters now is that we get the material together. At this stage it is a primarily sensory or material dimension of

The Selfless Self

consciousness that is being awakened and used to awaken the next stage. It is not *bad* but incomplete. The great problem we face at this stage is how can we experience enough. How can we pack everything in? As we begin to realise that we cannot achieve omniscience or be and do everything within the range of human potential, acquisitiveness seems to be the wrong approach. We sense that our hopes for plenitude are doomed to failure at that level and, in reaction, anxiety or depression (a characteristic of this stage of adolescence) can set in.

Gradually, and at the painful cost of our illusions and desires, another dimension of consciousness begins to dawn. We begin to see things from a greater height of detachment and the focus of attention begins to shift from raw experience to integrated *knowledge*. We begin to live more in the mind and to discover the mind's amazing powers as riches. It appears wonderfully as a better tool for mastering reality with greater range and subtlety. So we begin to try to absorb as much knowledge as we can. We become self-conscious learners, students of understanding the data. If we do not try to acquire all the information we can possibly cram in, an amassing of trivia, then we seek the key ideas. We ask what are the master-key ideas that will fit any lock, that will open all the doors to understanding, to truth. With the advent of mutual consciousness in relationship, we are more aware of the nature of reality but we are still susceptible to a lust for ideas, the desire to possess what we love.

Gradually the realisation dawns that the scope of mental knowledge is endless. It is as endless as a circle or as infinite as the reflections of two mirrors facing each other. But the mind's infinity is not eternity, only an image of reality. By encountering our own nature as image, we touch the hem of the cloak of transcendence. We could, if we chose to, remain within this mental consciousness for a lifetime, always discovering new reflections and connections, new points at which to begin the circle until we begin to realise that this is not a satisfying dimension. If we so choose, and yet are also aware of the incompleteness of that dimension of consciousness, the danger is that we become cynical, deniers of absolute truth. If we know this and do not go further we will almost certainly become cynical. The problem for us, knowing the limitations

of the mental life, is to know where we go from here? What do we *do*?

If we do not become cynical, the danger is that we withdraw from the impassioned pursuit of truth altogether. We lose heart. We compromise. We say, well, life is about enduring things and getting through and waiting for something to happen. The absolute is a romance. We give up being real pilgrims. We allow ourselves to be carried along, not by the spirit of truth, but by the crowd and social conventions.

This is why it is such a moment of grace, at whatever stage of life it may happen, to discover a spiritual path. For many people it is only at this cooling point that they do recognise the spiritual path beside them. The discovery itself occurs within a mysterious dimension. The very way in which we recognise the spiritual as the culmination of both the sensory and the mental, seems to be the way we have to follow. The door we step through on to this spiritual path is the door we have been seeking the whole time; the threshold is one we may have been lingering on a long time. However that encounter with a living spiritual tradition may take place, it always remains the turning point of life. It remains in consciousness as a kind of timeless moment in personal history, not just another event among others, but a central point, wherever it occurred, whether at the beginning or at the end. It becomes the pivotal point around which all other events gradually constellate. By the grace of the Spirit working within the raw experience and the questioning of experience we find the spiritual path. We have the sense at long last of really beginning. And indeed it is a new beginning.

We have begun to discover that other dimension of consciousness, spirit, which is genuinely infinite. It is not merely endless because of reflecting itself the whole time. It is authentically eternal because it is the dimension of God. There is never boredom, depression, or cynicism when we are pivoted in this dynamic dimension. Instead, we begin to discover not only the truth-relations between the world of the senses and the world of mind but the universe of the heart, the spiritual world where experience and knowledge are brought together. Here, to know something is to experience it, and to experience it is to know it with absolute truth – *love*.

Here too we face a challenge that is not the finitude of the endless or the sadness of the finite, but an opportunity, soon

The Selfless Self

sensed to be an invitation to fullness of experience and to complete understanding. The challenge is not to try to experience everything or to know everything. It is to love everything. There is a great human dilemma, until we are firmly rooted in the heart, and knowledge and experience are integrated, and we are finally unified. It is the dilemma of the tension, even at times the violent conflict, between the general and the particular, between me and the world, between me and other people. Until we are rooted in the moving pilgrimage, until we have fully stepped through the door which begins the spiritual journey, then the universal will always seem threatening. The particular will respond as if it is going to be swamped or overwhelmed. But once we have stepped across the threshold of the survival instinct – that is the work of faith expressed in commitment and daily perseverance to the spiritual path – then the universal and the particular are no longer felt to be a threat or tension, but are united in a relationship of love.

If we see only the universal we enter abstraction. We become estranged from our own ordinariness and the ordinariness of the world. The world of particularity, ordinary daily events, our fluctuating emotional life, and day-to-day relationships, seem to be too much, too irritating, too distracting. They seem to be 'getting in the way'. If we see only the particular, though, we become coarsened. Lost in multiplicity, we fail to see the pattern and the design that gives meaning. We need to see both, not separately, but in the unifying vision of the 'sound eye' that Jesus talks about – with the healthy, unified eye of the heart. The whole purpose of meditation is to open this single eye by bringing the mind, and the experience it works on, into the heart: to become one. The way is the simple way of commitment. We commit ourselves to something as simple as the mantra which is the supreme unifier, the single path, the great harmoniser. To commit ourselves to the mantra means to commit ourselves to a vision of life as a single reality experienced, known and loved as a journey into God. To commit ourselves to the mantra means to commit ourselves to the discipline of faith and to love that discipline selflessly. To commit ourselves to the mantra within the priceless gift of faith we have received, will lead to a more enlightened seeing of Jesus and a more complete union with him.

We can only see the Risen Jesus with the vision of faith

Experience, Knowledge and Love

which is the property of the eye of the heart. We can only see Jesus when we love him. He sees us, each and all of us, only because he loves us. The great hope we have on this journey, that has already brought us so far and will take us all the way, is that his love is unifying our mind and heart. It is bringing knowledge and experience together. The sign of this change taking place in the person we are is that gradually, step by step, we are learning to love, to love every particular with the universal love of God.

Anyone who loves me will heed what I say. Then my Father will love him and will come to him and make our dwelling with him. But he who does not love me does not heed what I say. And the word you hear is not mine. It is the word of the Father who sent me. I have told you all this while I am still here with you, but your advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything. If you love me you will obey my commands. (John 14:15–23, *paraphrased*)

When Jesus asks us to love him he is inviting us to see him. We see him with that power of vision that is the power of love and which he gives us through the Holy Spirit. The great mystery of the journey is that the beginning, the middle and the end are all known to God because they are all unified in his love.