



Let Us Begin by Meditating

Josep F. Mària i Serrano SJ





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1. Introduction

We live in societies that simultaneously spread us thin and overexert us. Byung Chul Han¹ argues that our societies allow us to be hyper-connected and, at the same time, put pressure on us to be highly productive. Dispersion precipitates superficial relationships, and overexertion leads to unhealthy and damaging relationships.

¹ HAN, Byung-Chul (2017), *La sociedad del cansancio*, Barcelona: Herder. [The Burnout Society (2015)].

In this booklet we present meditation as a spiritual practice that helps us to focus on the present, lessening dispersion and enabling more profound relationships, reducing overexertion and engendering healthier relationships.

In recent years I have been practicing a type of meditation that has helped me in both ways. I learned it through moments of meditation guided by Franz Jalics SJ's book, *Ejercicios de contemplación* ['Exercises in Contemplation'] (Sigueme, 2017), and consolidated it during a series of Spiritual Exercises at the Cova de Manresa in August 2019, with the help of Xavier Melloni SJ. I have aimed to make a habit of it, and have shared it in the context of university teaching and recreational education. I have also reflected upon it with reference to readings by authors and spiritual masters. The following pages lay out the substance of my work.

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Now, we understand *meditation* as a practice that consists of adopting a healthy posture, becoming aware of one's own body and breathing, and repeating (rhythmically with one's breathing) an expression (mantra) for a certain period of time. Ideally, this should become a habit – a practice repeated regularly and with increasing ease.

The term *meditate* comes from the Greek *mederein* – 'to take care', 'to take measures', the same root from which we get the word 'medicine'. From *mederein* comes the Latin *meditari*, which is the frequentative or iterative form of *medeor* – 'to cure'. Thus, etymologically, to meditate means 'to go to be healed regularly'. Since repetition generates depth, in the etymological definition of meditation we have the two remedies to dispersion-superficialness and damaging overexertion: depth and healing.



Nevertheless, as we describe it here, meditation is not the only spiritual practice we need, because like any human activity it has a specific focus: namely, it centres us on the present. It cannot therefore adequately cover our needs as human beings to delve into the past through conscious acts of memory or to imagine and dream the future. In any case, first of all, we must seek the depth and wholeness of each moment, of each experience. Then, through other practices, we will remember the past or dream the future on the basis of what we have experienced in each present moment. This is why our approach to meditation here is an invitation: *Let us begin by meditation.*

This invitation starts with a description of the practice of meditation, and this is followed by a series of explanations that reveal how this practice can enrich our lives. Finally, we offer an interpretation from the Christian tradition and conclude with an invitation to meditate.

Hopefully practices such as the one presented here become habitual throughout today's societies, and lead to fuller lives and more cordial relationships with the human family, the rest of all creation, and the Ultimate Mystery of the world.

2. The Practice of Meditation

The Five Pillars

The type of meditation proposed by Franz Jolics and Xavier Mello-ni is based on five pillars or instruments of meditation: the body, the breathing, the hands, the mantra, and the community. When medi-tating, these are incorporated progressively: firstly, focussing on the body; secondly, concentrating on the breathing; then, broadening the attention to the hands, and finally, uttering the mantra. The community is the fifth pillar, in the sense that our practise becomes defined and reinforced when we experience it as part of a meditating group or spe-cific environment in which we meditate.

The Body

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The position of the body can be sitting like a yogi, kneeling on a low stool or just sitting on a chair. With the back upright and the rest of the body relaxed, the aim is to focus the attention on the different parts of the body, starting with the feet and moving up to the head.

As the minutes pass, the body position may change unintentionally, which could lead to a sense of pain. But the pain is not always physical: it can come from psychological resistance to entering into meditation.

When one begins to practise za-zen, the body is not used to the position, it is used to the comfort of modern life. It is essential to return to the primitive position, which will later become natural, and the beginner's aches and pains will disappear.²

In any case, being attentive to body position is about more than just adjusting the posture; it is about listening to the body and accepting it:

We accept ourselves as we have become. This means accepting ourselves as a bodily being, earth-bound and situated in a specific virtual context.³

2 DESHIMARU, Taisen (2000), *La práctica del zen*, Barcelona: Kairós, p. 40. *¿Za-Zen - The Practice of Zen*.

3 PAINADATH, Se-bastian (2019), *The Power of Silence*, Delhi: ISPCK, p. 26.



The Hands

Jalics and Melloni suggest raising the forearms laterally and opening the hands, so that the palms are facing each other at chest height. It is then a matter of being attentive to the sensitivity of the two palms. And keeping the attention focussed on the palms of the hands when distractions inevitably arise.

Why focus our attention on the hands? Because they are powerful instruments of communication and expression.⁴ In this sense, as the meditation goes on, the shape or position of the fingers of the hands may change if we allow the deep states of mind that we are experiencing to be expressed or embodied in them.

The Breathing

The breathing has four specific moments: inhalation, apnoea (full lungs), exhalation, and apnoea (empty lungs). The amount of time awarded to each of these four moments varies according to the master. Some will suggest simply perceiving these four moments, without trying to influence their rhythm, although it will probably slow down during the meditation. Others advise making the exhalations longer than the inhalations, as the former reduce the tension derived from the drive for control.

Absorption and expulsion are always in balance, but the conditions of modern civilisation destroy this balance. There is a constant desire for objects, for power, for others..., one hardly ever thinks in terms of being. When one is ill, weak, sad or concentrated on one's insignificant self, inhalation is accentuated and this weakens the organism even more. By practising the opposite, one can receive true energy. If the exhalation is right, the inhalation happens automatically, unconsciously. This method of breathing is the basis of health and the secret of longevity.⁵

The Mantra

This Sanskrit word means 'vehicle/control' (*tra*) of the 'mind' (*man*). In the type of meditation proposed here, it is a word or a short phrase that is repeated rhythmically with the breathing. Jalics suggests repeating the name of Jesus: on the inhale, utter 'Jesus'; on the exhale, 'Christ'. Melloni suggests that each person should find their own mantra over time, e.g., 'Kyrie Eleison', 'Mara-natha', 'Abba', 'Aum', etc. The mantra is

4 "When we work with our hands, a lot of power flows through them. This is even more true when interacting with other people. When we assist a dying person, we touch them with our hands. Through this bodily contact the life force flows to them. We caress children [...] Jesus Christ also achieved much through the touch of his hands. He often performed his miracles by means of bodily contact or the laying on of hands" (JALICS, Franz (2017), *Ejercicios de contemplación* [Exercises in Contemplation], Salamanca: Sigüeme, p. 85).

5 DESHIMARU (2003), *Op. cit.* p. 35.



uttered (to oneself, without breaking the external silence) as a spoken word, not with the aim of reflecting on its meaning, but as a way of expressing feelings that nestle in the depths of our unconscious.

Essentially, the word is an expression of meanings, but also of feelings – especially when it is spoken rather than written. The spoken word projects the feelings of the speaker outwards. With it we express – more or less consciously, as with the position of the hands – the feelings of joy or pain that we have stored in our memory. And this expression (without necessarily specifying to Whom/whom it is directed) draws us out of loneliness. The psychiatrist Carl Jung said:

Loneliness does not come from having no people around you, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to you.⁶

6 BAILEY, Christopher. "Conviértete en el héroe de tu propia historia" [Become the hero of your own story], *La Vanguardia*, 7 March 2023.

7 DESHIMARU (2003). *Op. cit.* p. 40.

8 DESHIMARU (2003). *Op. cit.* p. 43.

Ultimately, we express ourselves because we sense, desire or implore from outside ourselves the expansion of our joy or the healing of our wounds.

The Community

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We can meditate alone; but meditating with others makes it easier to overcome our resistance and consolidates the habit of meditating. Deshimaru wisely explains the influence of community:

One cannot practise za-zen alone [...]. What counts in the *dojo* [the place where zen meditation is practised] is the atmosphere produced by the interdependence of all the practitioners. Everyone influences each other unconsciously. Being you and me alone or all of us together results in two very different atmospheres (a fire does not burn equally with only one log as with several). Above all, it is not necessary to consciously think: 'I have to give, I want to receive this influence'. You receive it, you give it, in an unconscious, natural way.⁷

Finally, beyond the influence – also more or less unconscious – of the meditating community, meditation connects us with the whole universe in a healthy and harmonious way:

Give way to the unconscious; this is true meditation. Emphasise the exhalation; as you exhale slowly and powerfully, conscious thought stops and the unconscious can awaken. Harmonise with your surroundings, with the whole universe. By letting go of everything, true life is created.⁸



Similarly, one of St. Augustine's rules connects us simultaneously, as we meditate, with the community/universe and with the Divine: *ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab interiore ad superiora*,⁹ or, 'from the external to the internal, from the internal to the higher'.

The Dynamics

The dynamic articulation of the five pillars or instruments is not an intellectual exercise, a mental framework or an image to visualise. It consists in keeping one's attention on the four individual pillars, in the context of the community. Through this attentiveness, the life of the one meditating manifests and is received in a unique way in each moment. This is why thoughts and feelings that take us back to the past or into the future are distractions. Thus, when a distraction arises, we are invited neither to blame ourselves (the distraction comes from the unconscious, which we do not control) nor to reject it, but to imagine briefly that this distraction is like a cloud passing through the sky or an object floating down the river: we watch it go and then bring our attention back to the hands.¹⁰

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The amount of time one should devote to meditation depends on previous practice and age. To start with, five minutes is enough, and this can be gradually increased. In terms of age, children are also invited to meditate. Lawrence Freeman OSB, head of the World Community for Christian Meditation, suggests that a child can meditate for as many minutes as their age.

The frequency of meditation depends on the kind of life we lead. It could be anything from several times a day to once a week. On a retreat, blocks of 20-30 minutes may be repeated a few times and combined with other spiritual exercises. In any case, it is essential that the practice becomes a habit.

9 ESPADA, Antonio (1974). "El mundo como vestigio de Dios Uno y Trino según San Agustín" ['The world as a vestige of the Triune God according to St. Augustine'], *Estudio Agustiniño*, Valladolid, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 398.

10 "[...] in za-zen, perceptions and emotions are allowed to flow, to glide gently like clouds, or the water of the river" (DESHIMARU (2003), *Op. cit.* p. 34).

3. The Habit of Meditating

We Need to Get Into the Habit

From the etymological definition of 'meditate' given in the introduction ('to go frequently, iteratively, to be healed'), four main reasons emerge for why it is difficult to make it a habit in contemporary society.

- a) Because I don't think I am sick. I don't need to be cured: I'm fine, living 'life as it comes'.

But there is an issue with 'life as it comes': it necessarily encompasses psychological wounds that remain in our unconscious even if we try to forget them. It is not entirely true that 'time heals all'. The wounds remain there inside, accumulating. And they act silently and constantly on our relationships with reality and with people.¹¹

11 X. Melloni says that meditation as a habit becomes a descent into the depths of our unconscious. As we descend, the 'remains of past shipwrecks' appear, which we must observe and accept because they shape the way we are and the way we situate ourselves in the present. A lack of acceptance and reconciliation with these shipwrecks generates internal and external conflicts that consume energy and draw us away from vital harmony.

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- b) Because I think I am sick and in need of inner peace, but only sometimes: when I feel that 'I'm not well'.

If I only meditate when I am not well, I am acting *sporadically*: not *frequently* or *iteratively*. In this case, I am only treating the symptoms of my wounds, ignoring their causes. These causes are found in the depths of my personal history, where I hold fixed attitudes to life and relationships that can always be improved. I have to continue to work on them (modifying, adapting, refining...) *frequently, iteratively*.

- c) Because I think I am sick, but I am afraid that meditating will bring the wounds or the ills within me to the surface.

Certainly, we have to be cautious when we go into our heart: it is 'sensitive material'. So, if accessing my inner wounds is self-imposed in a way that makes me feel guilty, or with the illusion that I will be able to heal them instantly, then my discomfort may grow. But the meditation proposed here does not consist of being directly aware of our wounds; it guides us to pay attention to the body,



the hands, the breathing, the mantra and the community. And then, little by little, without the intention of trying to make it effective in this way, the wounds will be alleviated.

- d) Because I realise that meditating would be good for me, but I am too lazy to practise *frequently* or *iteratively*.

When an action becomes a habit, we carry it out repeatedly with little to no effort. Psychologists say that it takes three weeks to create a daily habit. In any case, however habituated we may become, meditation is always a challenge, and it is necessary to continually renew the habit with the effort of willpower. Day by day, however, we find that through meditation we experience greater inner peace and harmony with other human beings and with nature. In this way we strengthen our motivation to keep developing the habit.

Forming the Habit

A good habit is, therefore, a beneficial practice repeated regularly without too much effort.

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James Clear argues that there are four stages to habits that teach the brain what to repeat: signal, craving, response, reward.

Seeing the cookies on the kitchen table is a signal that urges us to eat them. The craving is the story that explains the meaning of the sign: 'Cookies, good, I like them'... The response is to eat the cookie; it tastes delicious [reward]; the prediction was correct and our brain says: 'I want to repeat this action'.¹²

¹² CLEAR, James, "Obtienes lo que repites" ['You get what you repeat'], *La Vanguardia*, 14 May 2021.

Clear offers valuable advice on the formation and reinforcement of habits:

- a) Have patience and start with small actions. "The most important thing is whether we get 1% better or 1% worse on a daily basis. What is needed is patience." To meditate or practise yoga, start with one minute a day, and don't expect to get into a thirty-minute daily habit from the very beginning.
- b) Rely less on self-motivation and more on environments that facilitate practise. "There is a lot of emphasis on willpower and ambition,



but I think it is the opposite, I think we should optimise our environment so that motivation and willpower are less needed." "If you think you watch too much TV, it's better to have it in a cupboard than in front of the sofa..."

- c) Get together with people who want to form the same habits. "You have to join tribes that exhibit the behaviour you want to develop... Belonging is a human feeling that we all desire at a very deep level. If you're in a group where you have to go against the grain, it's going to be very difficult."
 - d) Build the habit before trying to improve. "It is important to move away from perfectionism, we are too 'all or nothing', but the greatest friction is when you start, that is what takes the most effort."
 - e) Focus on habits and not on results. "Habits we have been following for at least six months produce results... This is one of the great ironies of life: we want to improve results, but the results are not what we need to change, we have to focus on the habits and then the results will come. You get what you repeat."
- 13
- f) Change your beliefs and identity to change a bad habit. "We repeat bad habits because they provide some benefit, there is a positive story about that habit in our mind... Real changes in behaviour are changes in identity, and to create a new habit we have to think about the kind of person we want to be, but most of us think first about the result: I want to lose weight, I want to earn more money, I want to reduce stress."
 - g) Make identity change a reality by practising the habit. "How can I become a person who meditates? By being that person, by practising even just one minute a day; this is committing to this identity change and, in doing so, we will start to believe in ourselves. If we start with identity, what we are doing is shifting our focus from results to practice and process."
 - h) Connect a difficult habit with a pleasant activity: for example, listening to pleasant music when I am getting into the habit of sweeping the floor. Or associating meditation with getting up each morning (if waking up is pleasant), or doing it before dinner (if I enjoy eating dinner).



The habit of meditation has two features that make it particularly difficult. Firstly, our environment does not always facilitate the practice: if you don't go to a meeting, you will be called to attend; but if you don't meditate, no one will call you to do so (Josep M. Rambla SJ). Secondly, the response/reward of the action of meditating comes later, after some time of practise: not like the sweetness of a cookie, which we taste as soon as we eat it.

On the other hand, two experiences can encourage the habit. Firstly, feeling the sense of peace and bliss we radiate when we meditate. And secondly, feeling the lack of peace and bliss in us when we don't. These experiences have to do with identity: the kind of person I want to be, and the kind of person I do not want to be.

4. Meditation As a School

The dispersion and overexertion mentioned above in the introduction are symptoms of a culture that does not encourage meditation. In fact, it generates resistance to meditation in the sense that it is perceived as passive, wasteful, boring, repetitive and a loss of control.

However, the opposites of these five aspects leads us to deeper relationships, to which meditation gives us access. Thus, passivity opens the door to listening; wastefulness, to gratitude; boredom, to attentiveness; repetition, to newness; and a loss of control, to trust. Meditation can therefore be seen as a school of these five fundamental attitudes.

1. *School of listening.* To meditate, we have to be *passive*: stop doing things, stop talking to people, stop being productive, to stop. But to meditate is to move towards listening. During meditation, we do not consciously focus on our own desires and projects because they are distractions that draw us away from radical listening, from the capacity to welcome without barriers. Because true listening means setting aside projects for action regarding others and regarding things. Only then will they reveal something of their deepest reality.
2. *School of gratitude.* There is no profit to meditation: after meditating, you have *wasted* your time. But meditation allows us to feel gratitude: being in the moment and patiently welcoming distractions, letting them pass and turning our attention to the body, the mantra and the hands. This attitude teaches us not to use people or things as means to our own ends; not to profit from them, and not to depend on their admiration or approval. By being freely before them, we invite them to be freely before us, thus allowing the great richness they embody and can share to unfold.
3. *School of attentiveness.* In meditation we only do one thing... Isn't it boring to do only one thing and enriching to do many? But to meditate is to move towards attentiveness. When we meditate with the whole person (body, hands, breath, mantra) and put aside memories of the past and desires for the future, we learn to be attentive to the present with the fullness of our being. In this way, we learn

to both identify and distance ourselves from our moods, so that we are not imprisoned by them: attentiveness detaches us from moods triggered by memories of past activities or by imaginations tied to future activities. And so we learn to focus our attention only on what we are experiencing in each moment, which brings depth and fullness to our life. Thus, for example, we learn to welcome a person not only based on what they say, but on the whole person, including their posture, their gestures, the way they look or the tone of their voice. Or we learn to take in specific situations by paying more attention to the complexity of the actors and circumstances from which it is comprised.

4. *School of newness.* Meditating consists of repeating the same things over and over again: posture, hands, breathing, mantra... But to meditate is also to move towards newness. When we are fully attentive in repeating an activity, we realise that it can be done in different ways and not only in the way we initially practised it. Thus, we get better at it each time, and eventually a new way of doing things appears. In French, rehearsing a piece of music or theatre (in all forms and modalities) is called *répéter*. And it is after much *répéter* that a truly new interpretation emerges. In this sense, Byung-Chul Han argues that true novelty appears not in hasty dispersion, but through deep and repeated attention. Han illustrates this idea by comparing two altered forms of walking: running and dancing. Running is repeating the same step faster over and over again. Dancing is to create a new and beautiful step, as a result of deep and repeated attention to walking.¹³ This attention breaks the automatism of repetition and opens the way to variation, to novelty, to newness.
5. *School of trust.* In the type of meditation proposed here, there is a 'loss of control' of a part of our consciousness. The consciousness is used to devote attention to the body, the hands, the mantra, and nothing else. What could possibly come from this loss of control? But meditation is learning to trust: 'Let the unconscious work'.¹⁴ I trust that, deep in my unconscious, in the depths of the reality beyond my consciousness, there is a Spirit of life that can return me to peace if I give it space, if I give it trust. There is a story – which some associate with the Cherokee people – that within us we have two wolves: one good and one bad. Which one will win? The one we feed. To meditate is to trust that we are feeding the good wolf when we stop controlling, stop burdening ourselves with images and desires, stop trying to consciously direct all our feelings and purposes. We trust the good wolf and feed it by ceasing all intentional activity so that we can perceive the present.

13 HAN (2015). *Op. cit.*

14 DESHIMARU (2003). *Op. cit.* p. 40.

5. Meditation and Healing

In the introduction we mentioned that meditation helps counteract scattered attention with a concentrated focus that leads to depth, and that it also heals the wounds caused by overexertion. We also presented the etymology of the term 'meditate': to go repeatedly *to be healed*.

In this section, we explore the healing significance of meditation, and we do so by considering meditation in relation to stress, medication, and impulse.

Meditation and Stress

Meditation is praised by a wide range of experts as a way of promoting physical and psychological health, and especially as a way of alleviating stress.

17

Byung-Chul Han explains that hyperconnectivity means that we are aware of the people, objects and natural settings we *inhabit*, as well as the people, objects and settings *we are connected to* through computers, phones and social networks. In addition, an economy based on productivity and efficiency pushes us into *multitasking* and quick responses. These excesses "radically alter the structure and economy of attention".¹⁵ In this state of consciousness, a person may believe they are in control and exercising creativity, while in fact they are merely repeating previous or standardised responses in an accelerated manner. And then forms of stress harmful to physical and mental health appear: so-called *toxic stress*, which has consequences in various aspects of life and attention. Neurologist David Bueno describes how toxic stress affects brain function:

15 HAN (2015),
Op. cit. 33.

Stress, which when triggered in a timely manner is useful for survival (so-called *good stress*), can become chronic, reaching moderate or acute levels (*tolerable* or *toxic stress*, depending on the level). Toxic stress impairs physiological functions by keeping the body in a state of unnecessary tension and alertness. The thalamus focuses on the source of the potential



threat, impeding a complete view of the whole picture. And the striatum makes it difficult for us to be motivated by what we do, as it ceases to anticipate possible future rewards. It also affects brain structures such as the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex.¹⁶

In short: when we enter into a state of acute or toxic stress, we are constantly perceiving risks from all sides, and sustained attention in a complex situation becomes very difficult. Thus, the brain rapidly jumps from (narrow) focus on one danger to (narrow) focus on another, unable to grasp the complexity of reality and responding instantaneously to risks, which are assessed according to “predetermined and constant patterns of thought or behaviour, even if the results are not adequate” (Bueno 2023). The consequences of this type of stress are, firstly, the malfunctioning of our body, as toxic stress can alter metabolic processes, the cardiovascular system, the immune system and the nervous system; and secondly, behaviours¹⁷ that cause conflictive relationships with other human beings and with nature, since we perceive them as potential sources of risk or discomfort, when in fact they can be sources of peace and well-being.

18

To shut down sources of stress, our spontaneous reaction as mammals is to go to sleep... at the price of increasing our survival risk: while we are asleep, we may be attacked or robbed, without being able to confront these risks. But it is only during sleep that the brain can perform functions essential to our survival: primarily, creating new neural connections, linking daily experiences with prior knowledge, and restoring the myelin sheaths around neurons, which allow for accelerated information exchange within the brain. If we don't sleep, “Memory is less efficient and more fragmented”.¹⁸

Meditation also helps to reduce toxic stress. Firstly, because it connects us with only the here and now, and not with other places or times that may plague us with distraction. Secondly, because it consigns responses to any stimuli to the future: we are in the present *to be*, not to act or solve problems.¹⁹ In a way, meditation can be even more pacifying than sleep, because during sleep fears and guilt emerge in the form of nightmares from which we cannot consciously detach ourselves because we are asleep.²⁰

19 Pablo d'Ors points out three attitudes that increase stress: he relates them to time and compares them to forms of cancer. He states that guilt is the cancer of the past; attachment, the cancer of the present; and fear, the cancer of the future. During meditation, we are freed from guilt, attachment and fear because these feelings are let go like a cloud passing through the sky.

20 In any case, you cannot meditate properly when you are too tired. Franz Jalics used to advise: 'If you are meditating and you fall asleep, go to bed, because you sleep better in bed'. This advice recalls the saying that, according to Pablo d'Ors, summarises the wisdom of the Zen tradition: 'When I sleep, I sleep; when I eat, I eat'.

16 BUENO, D., “Com actua l'estrès al cervell?” [How does stress act on the brain?] (Dossier), *Ara*, 4 February 2023, p. 8. [Author's translation].

17 Some of the behaviours associated with stress are sisyphemia, productivity dysmorphia, burn-out, anxiety, depression at work or *stresslaxing* (CANTABRANA, Koro, “Pàrate a pensar qué estás pensando” [Stop and think about what you're thinking!], *La Vanguardia*, 6 Feb 2024, p. 48). Sisyphemia (derived from Sisyphus) is when professional commitment leads to not resting, until it causes exhaustion and illness. Productivity dysmorphia is the disconnection between what we have objectively achieved and how we feel about the outcomes. Burn-out is what happens to someone when they perceive the gap between their own ideals and the reality of their working life. Anxiety is a natural mechanism of the body activated when faced with internal or external stimuli that the person perceives as threatening or dangerous. Work depression is a feeling of deep sadness, ongoing dejection and a general lethargy and demotivation associated with a job. *Stresslaxing* is the inability to switch off from work to relax, to sleep, or to carry out other activities on days off.

18 BUENO, David, “Què li passa al nostre cervell quan no dormim prou?” [What happens to the brain when we don't get enough sleep?], *Ara*, 18 March 2023, p. 9

Meditation and Medication

To cure stress, an alternative to sleep or meditation is medication: taking pills. But the healing we get from meditation is different from the kind of healing offered by medication. This is evident in at least three respects.

Firstly, anxiolytics cure the symptoms, but not the causes. So it is possible that they contribute to perpetuating causes of stress, because they don't affect the underlying behavioural aspects.

Secondly, meditation does not operate in a quantifiable way. Medication works according to specific doses and time periods by which they will take effect. But with meditation, the time needed to bring about healing is unknown; just as the number of moments of meditation required to feel the effects is unknown. In this sense, being in a hurry for healing or trying to quantitatively monitor the healing process can cancel out or delay the healing potential of meditation. This is humorously explained in a short Zen story: "A disciple asks his master how long it will take to reach enlightenment. The master replies that it might take ten years. The disciple replies, 'What if I try very hard?' The master concludes: 'Twenty years then'".²¹

Finally, healing by medication follows a different logic than the healing offered by meditation. Medication works on the principle of opposites: a body that secretes stressful substances is given substances that generate opposite effects, nullifying the substances that cause stress. With meditation, on the other hand, healing comes because harmony grows within us. Because, as St. John of the Cross says, the root of all evils is "the ailment of love", which can only be cured by love – not its opposite:

See that the ailment
of love, which cannot be cured
but by presence and body²²

The reason why the disease of love has no other cure but the presence and body of the Beloved, as it says here, is because just as the ailment of love is different from other diseases, so its medicine is also different. For in other diseases, to follow good philosophy, contraries are cured by contraries, but love is cured only by things conformable to love.²³

- 21 BARNES, Michael (2021), *Ignatian Spirituality and Interreligious Dialogue. Reading Love's Mystery*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, p. 89.
- 22 "Spiritual Canticle" v. 11. DE LA CRUZ, San Juan, *Obras completas* ['Complete works'], (1990), Burgos: Monte Carmelo, p. 637.
- 23 DE LA CRUZ, San Juan, *Obras completas* ['Complete works'], (1990), Burgos: Monte Carmelo, p. 698.



Thus, meditation heals the body and mind, but it also reaches the greatest depths of the person: what some call the *spiritual*, where the illness ("the ailment") ultimately has to do with a lack of love received or given.

Meditation and Impulse

In describing the mantra as a pillar of meditation in section 2, "The practice of meditation", we pointed out that the purpose of uttering the mantra is not to reflect on the meaning of the words spoken, but to express feelings that lie deep in our unconscious mind. And this expression of feelings gradually leads to their transformation/healing. Effectively, when faced with a certain feeling that comes over us, we can choose between three paths of action:

- a) Repress the impulse that generates the feeling. Not accepting it, fighting it, leads to *somatisation*: "A process by which psychic processes, when dealing with distress, are experienced physically so as not to experience them mentally".²⁴ In fact, stress is already a form of somatisation.
- b) Give in to the impulse. Giving in to the feeling through behaviour linked to the use of an object (tobacco, alcohol, another person as a sexual object...) leads to addiction: "Pathological dependence in relation to an object of which one cannot deprive oneself without great discomfort, to which one has to return repeatedly and sometimes, when not satisfied, attempts to increase the intensity of possession of the object to appease the anxiety experienced at being deprived of it".²⁵ There are chemical addictions (alcohol, tobacco, drugs...), and psychological addictions (compulsive gambling, sexual perversions...).
- c) Transform the impulse. Letting the feelings go by like an object floating down the river or a cloud passing through the sky while repeating the mantra is a way of transforming the impulse held in each feeling. It is a way of preventing the impulse from dominating us and becoming integrated into our unconscious, thus avoiding both somatisation and addiction. Then, the expression of the feeling that the mantra is conveying brings about its transformation or *sublimation*: "the displacement of the original object towards which the impulse is directed to another object which is richer and which

24 FONT, Jordi (1999). *Religió, psicopatologia i salut mental*, l'Religion, Psychopathology and Mental Health]. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, p. 217.

25 FONT (1999). *Op. cit.*, p. 202.



encompasses the first one".²⁶ Sublimation connects the meditating person to a recipient that is 'richer' than an object – or richer than a degradation to an object of people or God. And it prevents the somatising or addictive potential of the feeling.²⁷

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ For a more extensive explanation of the three possible pathways of feelings, cf. Mària, Josep F., "La reconciliación del deseo" ['The reconciliation of desire'], *Razón y fe*, no. 1427, 2017, pp. 149-159.

6. Meditation and Full Attention

Meditation is not only an activity that cures illness or prevents disease. In a *positive* sense, it is also a way of perceiving the infinite richness of all that is revealed to us in every moment.²⁸

In fact, according to F. Jalics, the type of meditation described in section 2, "The practice of meditation", leads to a form of relationship with God characterised as "loving contemplation of God":

When we pray, we talk with God freely about our problems and confide our innermost thoughts to Him. This includes defiance and dissatisfaction before God, as well as thankfulness and love. All the ups and downs of the inner life are expressed in prayer. If this exchange evolves, there will come a time when the various feelings will be unified, thus creating a single, permanent affective state. Some call it *surrender*, others *love* or *faith*... Several authors call it *simple prayer* or *active contemplation*, and define it as "the loving contemplation of God" [Tanqueray].²⁹

Full attention is precisely the exercise that allows us to achieve this rich form of perception. Thus, when you deploy all of your 'instruments of perception' in meditation, an immense reality opens up before you, which exceeds all expectations and creates experiences of full perception. Below are three examples.

The first experience is described in a short story by Eduardo Galeano, included in *The Book of Embraces*. In this story, a boy goes to see the sea for the first time:

Diego did not know the sea. His father, Santiago Kovadloff, took him to discover it.
They travelled south.
She, the sea, was beyond the high sand dunes, waiting.
When the boy and his father finally reached those sandy peaks, after a long walk, the sea exploded before their eyes. And such was the immensity of the sea, and such was its brilliance, that the boy was struck dumb with beauty.

²⁸ Indeed, the WHO's definition of 'health' is this: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". (Cf. www.who.int).

²⁹ JALICS, Franz (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 289.



And when he finally managed to speak, trembling, stammering, he asked his father:

"Help me to look!"³⁰

The second experience appears in a scene from Sam Mendes' film *American Beauty* (1999). In this scene, Rick Fitts, a young high school student, shows his girlfriend Jane a video recording of a dirty plastic bag being blown about by the wind at a street corner:

Want to see the most beautiful thing I've ever filmed?

It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it, right? And this bag was like, dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I knew there was this entire life behind things, and ... this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever.

Video's a poor excuse. But it helps me remember... and I need to remember. Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it [...]

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The third is an experience of my own, observing from a hilltop on the Costa Brava:

One summer evening a few years ago, I was strolling along the top of Sa Palomera, a rocky hill that juts out into the sea, closing off the southern end of the bay of Blanes at the start of the Costa Brava. As I looked down at the people milling back and forth along the town's seafront promenade, I realised that the spectacle I was contemplating could not be captured in a photograph. Because each one of those people moving across that stage had a story: born however long ago, they had been growing up for some years already (a few or many) and were now on their way to an unknown future. It was as if the flow of time pierced through the picture my mind was taking, extended forwards and backwards for each of the people I could see. I also perceived that the scenery where the people were moving and where I was standing, and the gentle nature of the summer night, were similarly traversed by time: by the evolution of the cosmos and the evolution of the biosphere. It seemed to me that all of us together – humans and nature – came from far away and were heading towards a future far beyond.³¹

A saying from the Jesuit tradition links divinity with this full perception that goes beyond the infinitely large (the ocean, nature, humanity), but

30 GALEANO, Eduardo (1993), *El Libro de los Abrazos*, Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, p. 149. [*The Book of Embraces* (1989)].

31 MÀRIA, Josep F. (2024), <https://www.facebook.com/pep.marias/>, 04/04/2024. (Last accessed: 22/09/2024).



that is also fully present in the smallest things (a plastic bag dancing in the wind). Effectively, "It is divine not to be bound by the greatest and yet wholly contained in the smallest of things".³²

³² In the work *Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu* (1640) a symbolic epitaph is dedicated to St. Ignatius of Loyola: "Non coereri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est", (<https://espiritualidadignaciana.org/non-coereri-maximo-contineri-tamen-a-minimo-divinum-est/>) (Last accessed: 22/09/2024).

7. Meditation As an Action

Those who have discovered the importance of meditation sometimes have the idea that meditation and action are complementary activities. That meditation is passivity and the rest of life is activity, and that a balance must be found between the two. But this is only partly true.

In a deeper interpretation, meditation can be understood as a special form of action that helps us to experience any kind of action more deeply. Because all action combines activity and passivity. I realised this one summer when I was swimming in the sea.

In autumn, winter and spring, I swim in a pool. Usually for about thirty minutes, doing a mix of breaststroke, backstroke and crawl. In summer, I prefer to swim in the sea. That one summer, after I had been swimming, I realised that when there were waves, my movements had been more imperfect and I ended up much more tired than when the sea was calm. When the sea was calm, I could concentrate better on the movements of my arms and legs, on my body position and on my breathing. But when the sea was choppy, maintaining my sense of balance took up so much energy that I lost focus on my movements, my position and my breathing.

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This observation led me to understand that any human action entails more than just the conscious activity of the person; paradoxically, it is a combination of activity and passivity. Swimming in the sea shows that every action combines the activity of conscious movement and passivity with respect to the context (the state of the sea), which we cannot control, but which has an important influence on the quality and the outcome of the action.

Sometimes it is difficult to be aware of the context and the dimension of passivity of an action; like when I was swimming in the pool, where 'the state of the sea' was imperceptible. Being aware of the 'context', of the passivity that is present in every action, can help us to stop doing things the same way we always have done in order to discover new possibilities within the context of our action. Because at every moment,



if I stop and become passive/receptive an infinitely rich reality opens up before me, full of possibilities that I couldn't even see when I was hurriedly repeating the same thing over and over again.

This combination of activity and passivity is equally present in all our actions: for example, when I get together with a team to solve a certain problem. I have to make a decision (activity), while taking into account a context (passivity) that is independent of me, and very rich in possibilities and alternatives: what the other team members are thinking, the current political and economic environment, the financial status of our organisation, and so on.

Passivity translates into perceiving a context much richer and broader than I had previously imagined. It offers choice between a wide range of possibilities that are revealed to me because I have perceived a much richer context. *Wise action* consists in connecting the two facets, as the *Bhagavad Gita* says: "One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men, and he is in the transcendental position, although engaged in all sorts of activities" (4:18).³³ Because it is wise to be aware that before undertaking any action one must broaden one's view, the horizon, the range of possibilities (the context). As in swimming, it is a matter of being attentive to both activity (conscious movement) and passivity (context, waves), and patiently seeking how to articulate them on each occasion.

33 MARTIN, Consuelo (ed.), 2009, *Bhagavad Gita*, Madrid: Trotta, p. 103, <https://vedabase.io/es/library/bg/4/18/>

This patient seeking is only possible if we distance ourselves from our own impulses and self-demand, which lead us to make decisions without looking/listening enough. Because impulses and self-demand blind us to the context – which is always immensely rich.

Meditation helps to distance oneself from impulses and self-demand. It is not a 'completely passive action' that compensates for the other 'completely active actions'. Rather, it is a kind of action in which activity and passivity are equally at play – as they are in all human actions. But with meditation, the activity – the decision – is especially simple and tranquil: breathing calmly, being aware of the still body, repeating the mantra, and letting go of impulses and self-demand as distractions. This simplicity opens our senses to discover an infinitely rich context which allows us to make better decisions.

8. Meditation and Dance

In the previous section we discussed how meditation – although it may not seem like it – is a form of action. A paradoxical, liminal form of action. In this section we are going to consider how meditation – although it may not seem like it – is a form of dance; also paradoxical, at the limits.

Why should we compare meditation and dance? Because the comparison reveals that meditation and dance both involve and awaken the immense wealth of potentialities and relationships that define us as humans. They are two activities (or perhaps one) of infinite richness. Which is why it is worth practising them, and making them a habit.

First we will draw the connection between meditation and dance, as they may seem to be opposites: silence and stillness versus music and movement... We will then explore the comparison based mainly on the anthropological analysis of dance by the Indian theologian Michael Amaladoss SJ.

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Meditation at the Limits of Dance

Silence and stillness versus music and movement? If we take a closer look at both meditation and dance, we realise that meditation is also a form at the limits of dance.

Is meditation really still? Maybe not entirely. In fact, we have to move our body to get into the right position at the start, and again at the end when we leave that position. But, indeed, even while meditating, the heart beats, vibrating the body from head to toe, and breathing moves the rib cage and, with it, the rest of the body: we can perceive our breathing by the slight movements it induces in many parts of the body – for example, the belly.

Is meditation really silent? Not completely, as the practitioner repeats the mantra softly, alternating and connecting silence and voice/music.

Effectively, the voice/music emerges from the silence of apnoea, is uttered/sung on the inhalations and exhalations, and sinks into the silence of the next apnoea. Indeed, the mantra is music: the vocal chords are the strings of an instrument whose sounding board is the whole body.

One who meditates is both the instrument of a 'silent music' (St. John of the Cross) and the dancer of an almost motionless dance.

Thus, meditation represents a form at the limits of dance. John Cage and Merce Cunningham composed and designed, respectively, a silent music and a still choreography. In 1952, Cage devised a totally silent piece entitled *4'33"*. It has three movements, without the sound of even a single note. In the piano performance, the pianist comes on stage, greets the audience, sits in front of the piano and does not touch a key at any moment during the piece, simply opening and closing the keyboard cover to signal the passage from one movement to the next. At the end of *4'33"*, the pianist stands up, acknowledges the audience, and leaves.³⁴ In 1954, the dancer Merce Cunningham choreographed *4'33"* with a motionless dance, in which the dancer comes on stage and remains still for the whole time.³⁵

The Richness of Meditation and Dance

According to Michael Amaladoss SJ, the dancer consciously displays a variety of potentialities and relationships that other actions are unlikely to cover.³⁶ Specifically, dance a) reveals diverse human emotions; b) has no purpose and is not done out of necessity; c) implies the action of the whole person, and d) constitutes an experience of community. All these characteristics of dance also unfold when we meditate.

a) *Reveals diverse human emotions.* Music and dance express diverse and deep emotions:

Music and even language as poetry must have had their origin in dance before they developed on their own. In language, of course, poetry precedes prose, and poetry must have been chanted [...]. The music channels the various emotions according to the circumstances and sets the mood.³⁷

Dance is an expression of joy and freedom. The image of a person without freedom is one who is tied down by something – care, force, fear or

34 Apparently Cage was inspired to compose *4'33"* in an art gallery; he saw a blank painting and realised that painting had surpassed music in the expression of an important concept: the blank canvas also represents the limit of tension between form and formlessness.

35 On this form at the limits: "[It is] a silent work for any instrument or combination of instruments, which Cunningham linked to dance without movement". CAMPBELL, Joseph (2017). *The Ecstasy of Being. Mythology and Dance*. Novato, CA: New World Library, p. 161.

36 Similarly, Campbell refers to the dance of the Shiva Nataraja as a symbol of extraordinary richness: "Perhaps the most complete and eloquent symbol of all is that of the Lord of the Dance, the Hindu deity Shiva, as depicted in certain bronze sculptures from the south of India" CAMPBELL (2017). *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

37 AMALADOSS, Michael (2006). *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

responsibility. We speak of a free bird as one that is flying around(...). But one can express sorrow or pain in dance. One of the important sentiments conveyed by dance in India is the sorrow of separation from the lover.³⁸

When we meditate we also reveal diverse and deep emotions. They come from the memory and are revealed more and more deeply with the consolidation of the habit.

b) *Has no purpose and is not done out of necessity.* There are forms of dance without purpose, and they are not done to meet any specific need:

Dance is purposeless action. Normally, when we do something, we have a goal to achieve. We walk to a place. We work in the fields to make things grow [...]. Action meets a need. But dancing has no purpose. We don't dance to impress others. When the whole community is dancing, there are no spectators. It is simply the sign of exuberance. It is self-expressive. In spirituality, we speak about *nishkama karma*, or desireless action. Every action is associated with a fruit or a goal or a purpose. We act because we desire the fruit. In doing so, we become caught up in the cycle of karma. The way of escaping from the karmic cycle is to act without desire for the fruit... Dancing is acting without attachment, without purpose, without the urge to achieve anything.³⁹

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Meditation is also an action without purpose. We do not meditate for the purpose of becoming less distracted or to effect planned and controlled healing. Moreover, meditation brings into play the five pillars, which – like in dance – combine without prior plans or rationalised schemes.

c) *Implies the integrative action of the whole person.* All the dimensions of the person are involved in the action and, importantly, these dimensions are interconnected.

The rhythm involves the body in movement. Since the dance involves the whole body, it can lead to integration and ecstasy.⁴⁰

Dance is integral action. It integrates the whole body to enable it to move harmoniously. It integrates body and mind, intention and execution. When a Bharatanayam dancer performs, her whole posture suggests and supports the gesture with the hands. Her head and eye movement also follow the gesture. This is how the harmony of effect is achieved.⁴¹

38 AMALADOSS (2006), *Op. cit.*, p. 149

39 In this sense, Amaladoss relates the divine action to a dance or a game. "God's actions are often called *lila* or play in the Indian tradition. They may seem meaningless or purposeless. Having no external purpose. The action is its own purpose [...]. The creation of the cosmos is God's play. Creation exists because God continues to play. In the Hindu tradition, Shiva dances the cosmos into being. In the same spirit, what we may experience as destruction and death are also the play and dance of God. What we see as destruction is transformation in an ongoing dynamic movement from another point of view. Death brings new life". AMALADOSS (2006), *op. cit.*

40 AMALADOSS, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

41 AMALADOSS (2006), *op. cit.* p. 150.



Also, in meditation we bring our whole being into play: the body, the mind, and the feelings that arise and are offered up in the uttering of the mantra. The mantra vibrates the whole body with the vocal chords, expressing feelings that move through the whole body and can change the shape of the our hands, like the Bharatanayam dancer.

- d) *Constitutes an experience of community.* Dance not only integrates the various dimensions of our person, but also integrates us with the human community and with the rest of the cosmos.

When humans came together as a group, dance was probably their first means of collective self-expression.⁴²

42 AMALADOSS (2006),
op. cit. p. 147.

43 AMALADOSS (2006),
op. cit. p. 148.

Experiencing integration and wholeness in dance, people imagine the whole cosmos as dancing. The movements of the stars and the planets are in rhythmic and dynamic tension. The harmonious movement of the *yin* and the *yang* in the Chinese and East Asian traditions is symbolic of the dance of the cosmos. The complementarity of the two principles lends rhythm and dynamism to ongoing movement. It may seem cyclical to a superficial observer. It is actually a spiral, indicating an evolution. We can see these dancing movements in the drifting clouds, the dancing streams, and the waving bamboos in Chinese paintings.⁴³

When we meditate we also connect with the community as the fifth pillar of meditation. In any case, depending on the context in which one meditates, the community changes. At a retreat, it is comprised by all the people meditating. On the beach, we meditate/dance with the waves and the seagulls flying overhead; a curious dog that approaches, stays close for a while and then leaves. In the mountains, we meditate/dance with the clouds and the trees swaying in the wind or the rain. In the city, we meditate/dance with the singing of vehicle engines, the clinking of the neighbour stirring a cup of coffee, or a couple strolling noisily down a silent street. In a church, we meditate/dance with the presence of Christ in the sacramental bread hidden in the tabernacle.

Finally, our own bodies integrate us with a very broad and very ancient community. They are inhabited by millions of bacteria and viruses, in relationships of symbiosis or predation. Nutrients also circulate in our blood derived from minerals, plants and animals that we have ingested. And the genetic code of each cell is the result of millions of years of unfolding of the universe and thousands of years of evolution of the biosphere.

9. A Christian Interpretation of Meditation

So far we have presented the practice of meditation and various ways it can be understood that are compatible with different types of beliefs. In this section, we explore an interpretation from the Christian tradition, relating the practice of meditation to central beliefs of Christianity: the prayer of Jesus, Trinitarian communion, and the path of creation towards plenitude.

The Prayer of Jesus

In the synoptic Gospels there are references to various moments when Jesus prays. For example, in the desert, the place of temptation (Mk 1:12-13; Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13); and before choosing the disciples (Lk 6:12). Also at the end of his life: in Gethsemane (Mk 14:32-42; Mt 26:36-46; Lk 22:39-46), and on the cross (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46; Lk 23:46). In Gethsemane and on the cross his prayer is addressed directly to God the Father, whom he calls *Abba* according to the Gospel of Mark:

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"Abba," he prayed, "my Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want". (*Mark* 14:36).

Particularly significant is the account of his morning prayer at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark:

Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed. But Simon and his companions went out searching for him, and when they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you". But Jesus answered, "We must go on to the other villages around here. I have to preach in them also, because that is why I came". So he traveled all over Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons. (*Mark* 1:35-39).

This account is interesting, firstly, because the evangelist does not say how or about what Jesus prayed: only that he prayed. And secondly,

because it explains the result of his prayer: the freedom he gains not to stay in one place, 'stuck' with the people he has helped, but to go to other places to continue living and preaching the Kingdom of God.

Trinitarian Communion

In the fourth Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth is designated as "the Word" (Jn 1:1), through whom "all things were made" (Jn 1:3) and who becomes "flesh" to dwell among us (Jn 1:14). Moreover, at the beginning of the Last Supper, Jesus was aware that "he had come from God and was returning to God" (Jn 13:3): he felt that he had been offered by God to the world, and was offering himself anew to God.

In the meditation presented in this booklet, the *Word made flesh* is embodied in the mantra, which resounds in the whole body of the one meditating. Indeed, in the image of Jesus, we humans are *flesh* (body united with all that has come into existence, its wounds and its joys) and *word*, which through the mantra expresses its wounds and joys – *with* and *in* the different communities in which we meditate. All of us who are flesh and word sing into the beyond: into the silence of words and flesh. We cry out as we offer ourselves. Because we feel that we come from silence, just as the mantra emerges from the silence of apnoea when we utter it and resonates throughout the whole body during inhalation and exhalation.

In this sense, the silence of words and flesh is identified with God as the Origin of all that exists – as the Father/Silence that begets the Son/Word-Flesh:

If we can perceive the silent dimension of things, we can become aware of the Divine, not only because the Divine is hidden in Silence, but because the Divine is Silence [...]. Silence is not the negation of Being; it is not Non-Being. Silence is the absence of everything and, ultimately, an absence of Being. It is prior, before Being [...]. In a word, to be conscious of the silence of Being and of the absence of the word is close to the discovery of the divine dimension.⁴⁴

In fact, we often perceive God through our wounds: we project the shortcomings of our humanity onto Him, as shown by the "masters of suspicion" (Feuerbach, Marx and Freud). On the other hand, in attentiveness to the body and in the sensitive utterance of the mantra, we

44 PANIKKAR, Raimon (2010). *The Rhythm of Being*. Maryknoll: Orbis Press, p. 324. Pablo d'Ors affirms: "Silence is God. The God in whom all things resonate". YLLA, Lluís (ed.) (2019). *Itineraris interiors*. Barcelona: Fragmenta, p. 25. [Author's translation].



unite ourselves with the Son/Word-Flesh, on the way to the Father/Silence. Thus, we gradually transform our human shortcomings into a more humane life. We feel that *we are offered up* by the Silence and we *offer ourselves* to Him in a more and more human way. A similar offering takes place at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer in the Christian liturgy: the priest, in the name of the community, raises to Heaven the bread and wine (fruits of the earth and the vine, transformed by the Spirit into the body and blood of Christ), while speaking/chanting: "Through Him, with Him and in Him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, for ever and ever". The community responds speaking/chanting: "Amen".

The one who activates this self-offering in us is the Spirit. Indeed, in the farewell discourse at the last supper, the Jesus of the fourth Gospel says: "When, however, the Spirit comes... he will lead you into all the truth [...]" (Jn 16:13). In the meditation proposed here, this Spirit-wind ("The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going [...]"; Jn 3:8) manifests itself in the breath that brings energy to the utterance of the mantra and to the offering of one's life in imitation of Jesus.

Towards Plenitude

Trinitarian communion connects us at the same time with other humans and with the rest of all creation. Indeed, in the Letter to the Romans, Paul presents the movement of the *created universe* as a journey towards plenitude. It is a path traversed by suffering that makes him lament. But these sufferings are like the pains of childbirth, because the Spirit inspires the groans that lead to the full sonship of all humans and of creation.

For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free. For it was by hope that we were saved; but if we see what we hope for, then it is not really hope. For who of us hopes for something we see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the



thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will. (*Romans 8:22-27*).

As we have suggested from the beginning, the mantra is something of an inexpressible groan. In this Letter, St. Paul suggests that this ineffable groaning is the work of the Spirit, who assists us with a prayer we are incapable of speaking. It is a prayer of hope: a prayer which declares the joy of being children of God, but expresses the desire/hope to be more fully so.

The same Spirit dispels the fear of slaves (self-demanding and stressed) and nourishes the confidence of children, joining with our spirit so that we cry out, "Abba, Father!".

Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead, the Spirit makes you God's children, and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God, "Abba! My Father!" God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children. Since we are his children, we will possess the blessings he keeps for his people, and we will also possess with Christ what God has kept for him; for if we share Christ's suffering, we will also share his glory. (*Romans 8:14-17*).

Thus, this text suggests a name for the mantra. The inexpressible groaning of the Spirit can become the cry of a name of God: "Abba" or "Father". Just as Jesus called intimately to God (Mk 14:36). Then we are united in Jesus by the inspiration of the Spirit (Gal 4:6) and become – individually and collectively – children of God.

10. Invitation

We stated at the beginning of this booklet that we live in societies that promote scattered attention and overexertion. And we have proposed meditation as a practice that helps focus our attention and heal the wounds of this overexertion. Beyond healing, we have also shown how meditation opens us to the fullness of life.

Meditation is not the only spiritual practice that exists for healing wounds and experiencing fullness, but it is one of the most fundamental. It is instrumental in developing fundamental attitudes such as listening, gratitude, attentiveness, newness, trust (section 4), integral action and community with creation (section 7). Living fully in the present helps those who meditate to develop profound relationships with themselves, with the human community, with creation and, ultimately, with God. Which is why we end this booklet with an invitation: *Let us begin by meditating.*

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Let us begin by meditating because it is a form of *spiritual poverty* that opens us to immense richness. Spiritual poverty is not using images or texts to pray: only the body, the breath, and a cry/chant/mantra. We are a breathing body – God himself wished to assume a physical body in Jesus. And in the body we must offer ourselves – from the tips of our toes to the top of our head. We are a body that laments, cries out from the depths of its memory, from its history linked to the history of creation.

Spiritual poverty means accepting that the best I can do is to give up trying to control my life with my intelligence, my willpower or my memory; and, instead, to offer it completely to a Silence that is infinitely welcoming and pacifying.

Spiritual poverty is meditating without expecting results in terms of minimising distractions, or in terms of control or healing of personal wounds. It means not pretending that my wounds will be healed with a moment's meditation, but accepting the poverty of repetition transformed into habit.

And thus, in this poverty, the whole person opens to wonder and to relationships of communion with their personal history, with other humans, the rest of all creation and the mysterious God beyond all. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew* 5:3).

Let us begin by meditating. *Let us begin our moments* meditating. Let us begin the day by meditating. The first action of the day can be this mixture of activity and passivity that makes us aware of ourselves through the offering of our whole life. Let us begin each daily activity with a moment of meditation: to reconnect with our inner self and open up to an infinitely rich context that will help us make new and better choices. In this way, the routine of the actions we have performed will not interfere with the newness that seeks to manifest itself in every moment, but which requires our full attention and our action.

Let us begin by meditating, but let us go on to practise *other forms of spiritual life*, other forms of contemplation. Lawrence Freeman OSB uses a suggestive image to refer to the various forms of spiritual life:

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The purpose of a wheel is to move a cart. Prayer is the wheel that moves our spiritual life towards God. To turn, the wheel must come into contact with the ground. If the wheel does not touch the ground, it cannot move the cart; the wheel will only spin. Therefore, there must be a real time and place in our daily life that we dedicate to prayer. The spokes of the wheel are like the different forms of prayer. All forms of prayer are valid and effective. We have the Eucharist, intercessory prayer, the sacraments, scripture reading and personal devotions. What holds the spokes together and makes the wheel turn is the axle. We can consider the axle to be the Prayer of Christ dwelling in our hearts. At the hub of the wheel, there is stillness. Without the still point at the centre, the wheel cannot turn.⁴⁵

45 FREEMAN, Laurence (2011), *First Sight*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 136-137.

Let us begin by meditating, because it will help raise the quality of the *other actions* that fill our day. Actions that are equally composed of activity and passivity (section 6). Thus we renew a way of acting that is aware of the context, of listening and of passivity. This way of acting can be expressed in actions such as decision-making (individual or collective) or simply by giving our full attention to daily tasks: cooking, washing, cleaning, walking, visiting a person who is lonely... Also, perhaps, in the free, profound and communal action of dancing (section 8). If we perform these actions with the attitudes of meditation, then we are living out St. Ignatius of Loyola's lesson: "Seek and find God in all things".



Let us begin by meditating, if necessary *regardless of religious beliefs*. Certainly, meditation is the legacy of various religious traditions, but doubts about religions or faith should not deprive us of the practice. Let us begin by meditating, and we will expand our perception of ourselves and our relationships. Then we will live a higher quality of life. And we will come to appreciate religious and wisdom traditions, insofar as they help us to live more humanely, and the possibility and reality of God will appear on the horizon.

Let us begin by meditating and let meditation activate the *renewal of our religious beliefs*. The ever-new experience of meditation gradually draws us into the mystery of God, renewing our relationships with ourselves, with other human beings and with creation. And so it enables us to give a reason for our hope: "But have reverence for Christ in your hearts, and honour him as Lord. Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Let us begin by meditating, and make meditation *a place of interfaith dialogue*. Indeed, the form of meditation presented in section 2 is shared by many of the different religious and non-believing traditions that seek various forms of healing. According to the Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (no. 42), interfaith dialogue should be developed on four levels: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of the works, the dialogue of theological exchange, and the dialogue of religious experience. The presentation of meditation in this booklet is primarily an example of the dialogue of religious experience, which *Dialogue and Proclamation* defines as that "in which people rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual riches, for example in prayer and contemplation, faith and the ways of seeking God and the Absolute".

Finally, let us begin to *meditate*. The reflections contained in this booklet do not explain the richness of the practise of meditation. They are merely words about an ultimately ineffable experience. We are aiming towards the greatness of this spiritual experience if we begin, persist and make it a habit. "Come and see" (*John* 1:39).



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