

# TOGETHER

An introduction to meditation,  
edited and introduced by James Roose-Evans

## INTRODUCTION

In 2006 the London Centre for Psychoanalysis presented a year of lectures under the title Psychoanalysis and Spirituality. I was invited to give a talk on 'What is Spirituality?' Celia Read, the chairperson, realizing my lecture had stirred and moved people, had the idea that if I were to start a meditation group, a number of her colleagues from the Centre would be interested. And so the group came together, meeting in my home once a month for a short talk and a thirty-minute silent meditation.

Over the years the group has changed, not only is the age range varied from those in their early thirties to those in their nineties, but it is now a very varied group. There are two retired psychoanalysts, one music critic, one author, one teacher of the Alexander Technique, two artists, one guitar maker, one staff nurse, a journalist, a civil servant, three actors, plus a DJ.

It was one of our meditation group members, Piers Plowright, who suggested we make a small book of some of the talks given by members as a way of encouraging others to form similar groups in their homes. Sadly, he died in 2021 and so this booklet is published in his memory.

When the group first began, I would give a five-minute talk before the Silence. I am not a teacher of meditation, but sharing something of my own experience seemed to help. Today, however, we take it in turns to give the talks and the result has been very enriching. What follows is a short selection of some of these talks.

Increasingly in our society, we are in danger of losing a sense of community. I am convinced that it is through small groups meeting regularly in one another's homes that we re-discover this sense of community. We live at a time when loneliness has become a major problem, not just for the elderly, but for those in their thirties and forties.

As the Sufi master, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee has written, "The path to the beyond is unique to each seeker. There are as many ways to God as there are human beings."

Meditating in a group is easier, of course, than on our own when we are often assailed by swarms of bluebottle thoughts! All we can do is persevere until the deeper Silence enters into the very centre of our being, as we learn, in the words of St. Benedict, to "Listen with the ear of the heart." All the wisdom we need is there within us. As Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you."

One final observation: we live in times when institutional religion is in decline and yet a hunger for an authentic spirituality is more keenly felt than ever. It is here that a young Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, speaks across the boundaries of religion. She had no religious background, no interest in institutional religion, never went near a rabbi or a synagogue. Solely through the practice of meditation she began to discover her spiritual depths. What was to become her faith was from the start rooted in her own immediate and personal experience.

As she wrote, "Not thinking but listening to what is going on inside you. If you do that for a while every morning you acquire a kind of calm that illumines the whole day. Thinking gets you nowhere. There is really a deep well inside me and in it dwells God. God is our greatest and most continuing adventure." She went on to explore and develop an inner life of such richness and depth that not only was she sustained through the hell of a transit camp, but she became a luminous figure to those who knew her for whom she cared in the camp. She died in Auschwitz, aged 29. The practice of meditation is like planting seeds deep in the earth, and allowing them to germinate.



PIERS PLOWRIGHT  
by Michael White

People are commonly described as saints when all it means is that they have a sympathetic smile. But Piers was more: his smile came from the soul. And everything about him said it was a truly *good* soul. Radiant, kind, generous, impressive.

I first knew him as a neighbour. He was living at the end of my street (or more accurately I was at the end of his, since he was there long before me), and we recognised each other through involvements with the BBC. He was retired from making endless radio programmes through the years, with award-laden distinction; I presented them, as best I could.

He took an interest in me and what I did – but then he took an interest in everyone and what they did, from newspaper proprietors to people selling the Big Issue. He knew everybody's name and seemed to be their best friend. Which may well have been the case.

He was undoubtedly a friend to me when I had problems in my life. We met in cafes. We had outings to museums. He was an unfailing source of good, wise, practical advice. And best of all, he brokered some

encounters that brought light into a lot of darkness – one of them with James Roose-Evans that resulted in an invitation to join James's Sunday meditation group. The source of the reflections in this little book.

More broadly, Piers was a familiar presence on the streets of Hampstead, almost permanently based at one or other of its pavement cafes; at the Heath ponds, where he swam regardless of the temperature; in the small Roman Catholic church at Holly Place, where he devoutly went to Mass; in places like Burgh House, where he presented public talks with public figures, most of them his friends; and not least, in the pages of the local newspaper, the Camden New Journal, where he reviewed books. Kindly.

But then Piers was born in Hampstead, growing up in Church Row as the son of a well-loved GP. And though he subsequently lived and worked abroad, the pull of NW3 proved strong. It's no surprise that one of his creations at the BBC had been a daily soap opera based loosely but identifiably on Flask Walk in the centre of the village.

In retirement he remained a legendary name in public service broadcasting, asked back to reminisce about what happened in the days when it was better funded, better thought of, and perhaps more principled. And when he wasn't doing that, he painted pictures (with exuberant panache), wrote poetry, and did good works. It would be tempting to add 'settled into sainthood' if that didn't sound comedic or extravagant, and something Piers himself would have dismissed as nonsense. But in many ways it wasn't nonsense. To have known him was to think that it might just be true.



## A SELECTION OF TALKS BY MEMBERS OF THE GROUP

### ONE

One of the first lessons most people learn on their meditation path is the basic premise that we are not the engine-shed of our thoughts. We are merely the observer and the watcher.

For most, the first time we hear that and really investigate what it means, our tiny little engine-shed is blown. We've spent years, often decades, thinking we were our thoughts.

And the game is up.

We now have a choice. As my friend put it, you can either stay inside and watch the TV – or get up and realize you can turn it off and not pay attention to the rubbish on the screen.

James asked me to talk a little on meditation practice whilst raising young children. My experience of the last few years is...that it's very difficult:

The TV comes on often and the engine-shed starts up again. And again. And again.

There's little to no time for the peace and quiet, or the stillness for a deeper connection that meditation brings. The nervous system, soothing as the breath rises and falls, is a rare occurrence in all honesty.

I see it as my job to remember and repeat in these current stretched times, one of two mantras. The first is a very basic line that is "I am not my thoughts." The second is borrowed from, *A Course in Miracles*.

"I am not a victim of the world I see."

The world becomes more and more hostile the less I meditate. Friction, argument and hostility seem to occur much more regularly without meditation practice.

I know it's time to get out those mantras and pause when I'm feeling like I've been gone over with a rolling pin. Flaky filo pastry always becomes golden and crunchy when the heat is turned up.

### TWO

I was washing the dishes tonight thinking of how washing up can be an opportunity for meditation. I felt grounded through doing the dishes in the quiet. It is fascinating to me how a small shift in orientation to life can bring such immediate peace and joy and well-

being. In fact, the world can change for me when it doesn't change at all, but I change inside. Instead of being anxious about things happening outside of me – at work, for example, doing the dishes meditatively I felt connected to a deeper human place where work is something I relate to, and the 'me' is centered in me, not in some circumstance that defines me and how I feel about life.

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## THREE

Before a performance, dancers always limber up, singers and actors do vocal exercises and musicians tune their instruments, yet many who meditate do no preparation at all. Suddenly they will look at their watch and say "Crikey! It's time for my meditation", dash to a chair, sit and the twenty or thirty minutes later look at their watch and say, now I must dash to the laundry, collect the children from school, or start preparing lunch – dashing from one thing to another like the White Rabbit in Alice: 'No time to say Hello! Goodbye!'

All the schools of meditation stress the importance of taking time and also of posture, so that when we sit, we need to check that we are not slumping but sit with erect back, and head up. For those who use a mantra it can be helpful to spend the first four minutes or so simply following the breath: counting one on breathing in, pause; counting one on breathing out, pause; then counting two on breathing in and so on for eight breaths. And repeat. Then we can begin to say our mantra. At the end, instead of getting immediately it is good to open the eyes and look at what is ahead of and around u, to look in a way that we do not normally do. What happens as Joyce Carey observed in an essay is how when you give a child the name of a bird it no longer sees a sparrow, a thrush or a swan, but the label. In the same way in life we often cease looking at one another, we don't really observe the other person. So we pause for a minute or two in case an image or a

thought arises which we can carry with us through the day as a simple meditation. Only then do we get up and calmly go about our next task in the same spirit as our meditation.

The Carmelite lay brother, Brother Lawrence, wrote in a small book "The time of business does not matter with me from the time of prayer and in the noisy clatter of my kitchen while several persons are all at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees. I turn my little omelet in the pan for the love of God"

When I was a teenager I used to spend many hours bird watching. You have to keep very still so as not to scare the bird from alighting on its nest, in a sense, meditation is like bird watching as we wait for the coming of the Wondrous Bird! And now, as I sound the Tibetan singing bowl, let us spend the next thirty minutes watching for that Wondrous Bird!

#### FOUR

I have been rather obsessed with the weather, so before I get into talking about the darkness of recent months...I'd like to salute and celebrate the early signs of Spring that are all around, the lengthening days, buds emerging on the branches and shoots pushing up from the soil...and then there's the general spirit of great cheer that is tangible on the sunny and bright days.

In the middle of one of the recent and very long dark cold and wet winter's nights, unable to sleep, I found myself agitating about one difficult thing or another that life had thrown up, extremely restless and in kind of a soupy malaise. Furious with the darkness of winter and all that entails, feeling resentment about some of life's tougher surprises, and experiencing great intolerance of myself and of course, feeling even more intolerant of certain significant others.

The words of a favourite writer, Pema Chodron, came to mind – "Patience is not learned in safety, or when things are harmonious and going well. It is the antidote to anger, a way to learn to love and care for whatever we meet on the Path".

Having had recently a rather sketchy approach to meditation, shaken by the previous night's restlessness and resistance to life on life's terms...when I woke, I went straight to my meditation cushion, to sit down and to put patience into practice in the most immediate way I knew how...what a clear reminder to try to stay put with whatever comes up, not to DO anything but to let go ...of a lot!



That important act of remembering to stay patiently with what is...which is such an effective way of restoring perspective.

(to breathe, to watch out for being caught in reactivity or excessively bogged down with the weight of winter blues.)

## FIVE

I cannot talk today about the unspeakable terror that war unleashes, so this will really only be about our own, more private fears. Fear, often linked with rage, seems to be the deepest, most primitive and most enduring emotion. It is a condition linked to a perceived threat to our self-preservation, self-esteem, and ability to do our work or live our lives coherently. In many cases it is a totally appropriate emotion.

Being frightened produces physical reactions– trembling, a raised heartbeat, change in blood pressure and facial colour, ‘butterflies’ in the stomach, holding the breath or increased rate of respiration, evacuation of bowels and bladder, etc. etc. These manifestations are the signs of the well known ‘fight or flight reflexes’, and there may also be partial or complete paralysis.

The perception of danger leads to an instinctive automatic response of fear. Fear is appropriate when the danger is real and apparent. There is a quote by FM Alexander to the effect that “if you go on using yourself like that, young man, you should be very frightened!” If you are not frightened by the realization of the state you’re in, then you are in grave danger.

I am an Alexander Technique practitioner and teacher and some years ago I had a client who was dying of cancer. He lay on my table, quite quiet although his body was rigid with fear. Finally I said to him, “Aren’t you absolutely furious about what’s happening to you?” Then he exploded – shouting, sobbing and screwing his whole being into spasm. When he calmed down he said, “Nobody has ever allowed me to do that before.”, and he thanked me. His manifestation of fear and rage was totally appropriate, but hard to handle.

Sometimes it is difficult to recognize or acknowledge our fears. A year after I had recovered from breast cancer, I went down to the Bristol Cancer Help Centre and, after a day of talk about diet, personalities, exercises and so on, ended up in a psychotherapeutic group. People were talking about what they found helpful when suddenly I felt the room go very cold, I started to shake and I heard my voice coming from somewhere unknown – very deep and hollow sounding – saying “But what do we do about the fear?”. At that moment I realized how very frightened I had been. I had refused to admit I had a possibly life–

threatening condition, but was too busy telling people I was fine and being irritatingly gung-ho.

There must be times when it is more practical not to react in a fearful way – until there is time to deal with a situation once the immediate danger is past.

Why do we fear change so much? So often, after the causes of fear have been removed, the sufferer remains stuck in their physical state and does not improve. The old state, the known, becomes preferable to the unknown– so how can we learn to go into the unknown with caution but without paralyzing fear?

I am intrigued by legends of people who apparently are born without fear and what happens to them – like Wagner's Siegfried. Somewhere I read that psychopaths don't feel fear –or other emotions, that matter. Often they find it difficult to 'read' a face or a body accurately, and thus appear not to relate to others. Recognizing m own fears becomes a way of engaging with other people and helps me to empathize with them.

I have found my meditation practice helpful in quieting my body, slowing down the breath and giving myself space, allowing m to stay in the present moment – and I can only deal with fear in the present moment – it's not something that you can find a formula for, such as, "How to deal with fear!" Alexander work and meditating prepares me for living in the present and opens my eyes to fearful situations so that, maybe, I can react appropriately....

So, the rest is silence

## SIX

In some ways one of the most important aspects of meditation is the way that, during our silence, all sorts of filth rises to the surface, hidden angers, jealousies, resentments. When things go wrong all too often we say 'Why me?' Why have I been sacked? Why has my partner walked out on me?" It is all me, me me! It takes two, not one, to form a relationship with another human being, and if it runs into problems, or even hits the rocks, it is important to look at one's own role in that relationship.

Let me repeat: we should not be surprised at what comes to the surface once we start to meditate. We have to learn how to accept all these negative things inside us. Prospero, in *The Tempest*, in the beginning refers to Caliban part human, part animal, as 'this demi-demi-devil...' clearly Caliban represents his shadow side but,

significantly, when towards the end of the play Prospero says “This thing of darkness I acknowledge as my own,” Caliban replies, “Henceforth I’ll seek for grace.” It is only when we confront and acknowledge our own inner darkness that then we can begin to harness its power for good, for transformation.

There are two stories about St. Francis of Assisi that are very relevant here. They may be actual incidents in his life, but each also has an archetypal quality about it. In the first, he meets a leper and instead of turning away he embraces the leper, if you like – his shadow side. The other story is how he tames the wolf of Gubbio who is molesting the villagers and causing havoc. Again, it carries archetypal overtones of how we each need to tame the beast within ourselves.

We have to acknowledge all the dark stuff, passions, desires, anger, and jealousy. Rather like a person in analysis, we have to confront and accept all these negative things. If we are patient enough to sift through all this rubbish, and study it thoroughly, then we shall be able to use it. In this way we gain a complete understanding of who we really are.

The bottom line is that we each have to take responsibility for ourselves. The only person we can change is our self. And the silence of meditation enables us to see ourselves clearly as in a mirror.

## SEVEN

I worried about this talk because what I wanted to express about the experience of silence seemed outside words. But when I got to think further, I realized that this strange period has, for me, opened up all sorts of possibilities in perception. The London air is fresher and clearer, there is less traffic, and one can hear the birdsong, the trees rustling in the morning. It feels like a time in suspension.

I have found myself looking at things with far more care and attention. On the whole, these haven’t been new things, but old things looked at anew – appear to me during tiny moments that at other times I was probably too busy to notice. This morning, for example, there was a bee-fly in my front garden hovering over the forget-me-nots. And this morning, because I have to be in the place where I am and can’t be anywhere else, for the first time I could look at it properly, at its fuzzy brown body and whirring wings. It halted me exactly where I was – there was nothing to rush off to, nothing to stop me simply looking.

Over the course of the last month I feel I’ve looked at all sorts of things that have always been there –but I am giving them due

attention and therefore it feels as though I am seeing them for the first time: lilac, jasmine, wood sorrel creeping between the paving stones, the particularly weird blue eyes of my neighbor's Siamese cat. And like a lot of people in lockdown, I've been doing more cooking and tidying. I've been sorting drawers and found things I'd forgotten: a beautiful scarf, for example, or a photograph that fell down the back of a cupboard. I've experimented with some odd recipes that involved kitchen implements that I hardly ever use for lack of time to faff with complicated dishes. I think I have a new awareness of usefulness, of deep satisfaction of making or mending things.

A friend sent me a book she had loved, *The Summer Book*, by Tove Jansson, which more than anything I've read recently seemed perfectly attuned to this time of heightened perceptions. For those who haven't read it, it's a wonderful unsentimental novel about a grandmother and Granddaughter spending their summer on a remote island in the Gulf of Finland. Each chapter is really an episode in to look and looking in order to learn. The old woman and the child share an instinctive wisdom – the old woman has come to it through life and experience and the child has not yet lost it. These following passages particularly struck me; they near the conclusion of the book as both characters think of packing for their return home:

*"...Grandmother liked being surrounded by practical, commonplace things, and before she went to sleep, she studied everything around her: nets, nail kegs, coils of steel wire and rope, sacks full of Peat, and other important items. With an odd kind of tenderness, she examined the nameplates of boats long since broken up, some storm indications that had been written on the wall, penciled data about dead seals they had found and a mink they had shot, and she dwelled particularly on a pretty picture of the hermit in his open tent against a sea of desert sand with his guardian lion in the background. How can I ever leave this room?" she thought.*

Here is the grand daughter, Sophie, examining a piece of bark:

*"...If you looked at it for a long time it grew and became a very ancient mountain. The upper side had craters and excavations that looked like whirlpools. The scrap of bark was beautiful and dramatic. It rested above its shadow on a single point of contact, and the grains of sand were coarse, clean, almost grey in the morning light, and the sky was completely clear, as was the sea."*

So I suppose what I've been musing on here when thinking about *The Silence*, is how these small habits of attention slowly bring deep, resting, observant qualities of silence into everyday life – into its physicality and its practicality as well as its spirit.

## EIGHT

In Jungian analysis, which I was fortunate to have, it is customary when encountering a problem to sit at a table with a piece of paper and either draw or paint whatever images come to mind. It is a simple exercise that I have found helpful a number of times in my life, and I want to recall one in particular. It was in the early 1970s and my career in the theatre seemed to have ground to a halt, there was little work, I was often on the dole, sometimes even refused it! And deeply frustrated at the lack of any opening for my creativity, I felt dried up, and I had also stopped meditating. One day I sat down with a piece of paper and pen and waited. Then my pen began to draw a deep well, with no water. Quite dried up. And at the bottom, the tiny figure of myself, trapped, unable to get out. I gazed at this image for sometime and then my pen began to draw a small opening at the bottom of the well through which I was able to crawl and, as the pen went on drawing, I then found myself in an underground cave in which was a stone altar and on it a single seed. I gazed at this until I realized that this was the seed of meditation which I was to water daily and which then would grow into a sturdy tree offering shelter to others and where birds could build their nests. And so from that moment onwards I returned to the practice of meditation, of daily watering the seed.

For it is as the oracle at Delphos proclaimed, "Look within thyself and thou shalt find therein a spring of Truth forever bubbling up." We have but to make a start and continue faithfully, in season and out of season.

## NINE

I've been holding off the questionable privilege of sitting in this chair because I didn't think I had anything to say. I still think this. But it occurred to me that there's an honorable tradition of talking about nothing that doesn't belong entirely to windbags. And an eminent practitioner was John Cage – nominally a composer but more productively a man of ideas based in the paradoxes of Zen Buddhism.

He used to give what he called a Lecture on Nothing that involved him declaring, in his giggle, high-pitched, high-camp American voice: "I have nothing to say, and I'm saying it". There was of course an element of mischief there, but meaning too: its point being that nothing could be something – and by the same token, emptiness could be fullness, silence could be sound. It wasn't just a void, an absence, but a rich and fertile phenomenon.

His most famous practical application of that idea came in a piece called *4'33"*, which was four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. Charmingly, there was a printed score for the piece, which proclaimed

it as written for any instrument or combination of instruments. But usually it's a pianist who comes onstage, sits at the keyboard, lifts the lid...and sits there until 4'33" have passed, whereupon he closes the lid, takes a bow, and leaves. For some while this left audiences gob-smacked, until its fame meant that they knew what to expect. And it was another example of meaningful mischief. Not completely unlike what we do here. Or what Buddhists do everywhere.

I don't know why I didn't get involved in Buddhism ages ago because I was always interested in Cage and in fact knew him slightly. The first time I went to America it was to visit him – on a stifling hot day when the windows of his apartment were necessarily open and the din of New York street life – traffic, sirens, hooters, whistles – was near deafening. Being young and innocent I asked him how he coped with so much noise? Which was the cue for him to say (because he said it all the time, like a mantra) “You call it noise, I call it music’.

I was engaged by the idea of this, of drawing something out of nothing – though I'm bound to say I didn't really GET it. And I didn't get it until recently – thanks largely to James, who gave me some books that put the idea in my head of exploring Buddhism. I found I like it, which was unexpected. Having spent my life steeped in the Church of England, doing choral evensong and gossiping in sacristies with gin-soaked clergy, Buddhism was culturally alien – especially in its more exotic visual aspects: the blue-faced monsters with too many arms and legs you get in some traditions. But I find it offers answers to big questions that I've never had from the Church of England. And a lot of them feed through the practice of silence. A practice that recognizes the degree to which we spend our lives trying to explain things in words even when they're beyond words – as they often are because, at the crucial moments in life, words tend to fail.

The Buddhist-leaning Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, described all religious sensibility as a “...raid on the unspeakable.” It's a good phrase. And I often think that if only more theologians reached this understanding, the church would serve the world better than it does. (I don't much care for theologians, who it seems to me devote their lives to codifying speculation).

But there IS a tradition of Christian thought which both accepts and embraces the notion that words fail. And it's exemplified by Teresa of Avila, the Spanish saint who wrote something that should be tattooed on the tongue of many a loquacious preacher. To paraphrase slightly, what she wrote is this:

“All a soul needs is to be still: no rushing around to find expressions of gratitude or words of praise, avoiding the impulse of mind to catalogue transgressions and the commotion the faculties create, turning images into memories. These faculties wear me out. I may

have a poor memory but sometimes I seem incapable of suppressing it'.

I read that and think 'Yes'. I remember too much and tend to live in the past – which makes the present empty and the future terrifying. It's why I value meditation, which puts the focus on now – not yesterday or tomorrow. And I value structured silence: the thing we have here, and that Buddhists prosaically call 'sitting'. It's a hard thing for a journalist like me to admit, because words are my business, but words do ultimately fail. There are times when the most productive, most meaningful thing is to be like John Cage and have nothing to say. And like Cage, I'm saying it.

## TEN

A man is sitting in a room meditating. His wife enters the room looking for something. The man explodes and says, "For God's sake, can't you see I am trying to meditate!"

Perhaps the key word in that little story is 'trying'. When one tries too hard there is tension, and the ego, too, is caught up in the effort. If one is truly meditating then one can simply open one's eyes, smile, and say, "Are you looking for something? Can I help?" and then go back into the meditation – although, in fact, if one is truly meditating, then one has never left that state.

Most people are taught to meditate at least once a day, preferably twice: in the morning and in the evening. For very busy people such times set aside are essential. In the Gospels we read how frequently Jesus escaped to a quiet place to pray, because of the pressure of the crowds.

This quality of inner listening throughout the day enables one to hear the sub-text in conversations, to intuit what is unsaid by another, and to respond to another's need at a deeper level. True meditation makes one more aware of others, and deepens one's compassion for all sentient beings, as the Buddha taught, recognizing that even a cat, a dog, a bird, a flower, can speak to one. We become more aware of our oneness in all nature. We become like instrumentalists in a great orchestra.

## ELEVEN

James first put this very moving bronze sculpture made by Johanna in the centre of our circle at a meeting early on in the life of our group: we see a man carrying a very large burden on his back and we can sense its weight because he is doubled up beneath it, but the sculpture shows us he is able to bear it because of the way he has it

positioned, the poise and balance he has found. We can see it is the nature of his relationship with his burden that enables him to continue on his way.

On that occasion, as I remember it, we identified ourselves with the figure; alone and so heavily weighed down by his burden that he is now on his knees, but not relinquishing it.

We thought about how to find different ways of dealing with our own burdens, how to change our relationship with them, transform their meaning in our lives – and thereby lighten our load.

Breaking and dislocating my wrist a month ago put me in touch, not for the first time, with the experience of *being* a burden.

It happens to us all in invisible as well as obvious ways, that we simply cannot manage without being carried by others.

It is an experience that is, quite simply, part of being human.

## TWELVE

The artist, Paul Klee, who taught at the Bauhaus in Germany before it was shut down by the Nazis, likened the artist to a tree and wrote:

“From the root the sap rises up in the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye...standing as the trunk of the tree, he does nothing other than gather and pass on what rises from the depths. His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own, it has merely passed through him.”

It helps to be reminded that there is something far bigger than ourselves that we are asked to serve.

Many years ago I was introduced to the Tibetan Uama Chime Rinpoche who became my teacher until three years later when I began to follow a Sufi path. He said that when we search for a spiritual path, it's like going shopping. First you try one shop, then another until you find the one that is right for you: just don't take too long about it because then you have to make a commitment.

I sometimes wonder why I persist in coming to the meditation group year after year, when I still have such a strong resistance to sitting still and clearing my mind? I felt relieved when others admitted that they found meditating difficult. It helped to know that I wasn't the only one struggling.



There is also another reason why I haven't given up. I have a tiny scrap of torn paper that I've carried around in my wallet since 201. An American woman I had only just met at a swimming pool gave it to me. After chatting for a while, we both agreed that we loved the poems written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Jelaluddin Rumi. This woman then wrote down the following quote;

*"Look around and see the luminosity of souls."*

How can we find ways to lighten the burden we have become?

I think this means dealing with our anxieties, including the very powerful childhood fears that dependency stirs up from deep within us – and, most likely, also our frustration, anger and guilt about being dependent, a nuisance, someone who is making demands. A burden on others.

The loss of independence forces us to face some of our fantasies of our own omnipotence. A humbling experience which may well bring with it a certain sense of relief!

We will help ourselves greatly if we can understand and accept our envy of the strengths, abilities and kindness of those who carry us in our times of need, because this opens our eyes and our hearts to recognizing and truly appreciating their generosity.

Seeing those who are carrying us as individuals, not just as objects that fulfill functions to meet needs we resent possessing, plays an important role too.

As we are able to manage these internal acts, so we, whose turn it is to be the burden, play our own part in changing the nature of the relationship into one of mutual exchange and enrichment.

Because we are able to receive with gratitude and generosity, we discover we have something to give. That this has become a mutual exchange – a gift relationship, not equal, but mutual.

A relationship that is healing in itself, that we may be able to relax into, and even enjoy together.

But as we enter into THE SILENCE, we put aside these and all other conscious thoughts.

We each of us bring our hopes and fears and burdens to this group, where they are shared without being spoken of, and somehow their meaning may become changed within the mysterious state of being that we THE SILENCE...

## THIRTEEN

There are many times when we become so engulfed by negative thoughts that, try as we may, the buzzing swarm of resentments, jealousies, or angers threatens to engulf us. We go over and over the same ground. So what can we do?

It is here that the repetition of a mantra, or even a sequence of mantras, can act as the life belt we need. The mantra, or the 'dikhr' as it is called by Sufis, calls for the repetition of a sacred word or phrase. For the Sufi who aspires to remember God in every moment, with each and every breath, it can be a phrase such as, "There is no God but God", or, as in Hinduism, one of the names or attributes of God. In Islam it is said that God has 99 names but foremost is that of 'Allah'.

The mantra, or dhikr, can be repeated vocally or silently. In some Sufi orders, as also in certain Buddhist practices, it is chanted at group meetings and is a very powerful experience. But many prefer a silent invocation. As one Sufi master wrote, "God is silence and is most easily reached in silence."

Some time ago, at one of the gatherings, you may recall one of our woman members told us how, when she learned that her husband had Parkinson's, she found herself regularly repeating the Buddhist mantra, "That I may be filled with loving kindness".

It is said that what you fix your mind on, you become. It is by continually repeating the sacred word or phrase; it will begin to resonate of its own accord like a tolling bell.

Through this repetition, the mantra begins to work in the unconscious, slowly transforming our mental, psychological selves. Through repetition we begin to alter the grooves of our mental conditioning. At a deep psychological level, the mantra is a powerful agent of transformation. In Islam there is the practice of repeating the name of 'Allah', in Hinduism that of 'Ram', or one of the other names of God, in the Kabbalah tradition of Judaism that of "Jahveh", while in Christianity, that of 'Jesus'. And here it is intriguing to conjecture that Jesus' own mantra may well have been the Aramaic word "Abba". All Aramaic words carry several meanings, rather as Chinese ideograms do. In his book, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditation on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*, Neil Douglas-Klotz explains how in Aramaic;

"words are organized and defined based on a poetic root-and-pattern system, so that each word may have several meanings, at first seemingly unrelated, but upon contemplation revealing an inner connection".

And so the word 'Abba' can mean an earthly or a spiritual father, parentage both mother and father, and then divine parentage, source and origin of all creation.

As we allow the mantra, or sequence of mantras, to repeat themselves throughout the day or on waking in the night, so this practice will deepen in us an awareness of that other dimension which we may choose to call God – the label itself is unimportant. Like St. Paul, we become aware that it is in this dimension that '*...we live and move and have our being*'. The ocean of Love is all around us and all we have to do is swim in it. But first we have to learn how to swim and that is why we practice these simple techniques, which have been proved and tested across the centuries by all the major religions. As St. Augustine hauntingly wrote,

"Thou, O Lord, hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

#### FOURTEEN

I'd like to begin with a few lines from Mary Oliver's, *When I am Among the Trees*:

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
And call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.  
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and  
to shine"

Last month I went to India for a holiday, I picked up a book by a Bengali writer, Sumana Roy, entitled, '*How I Became a Tree*'. Increasingly disturbed by the violence, hate, insincerity, greed and selfishness of her kind, the author is drawn to the idea of becoming a tree. "I was tired of speed", she writes, "I wanted to live to tree time." Besides wanting to emulate the spacious, relaxed rhythm of trees, she is drawn to their non-violent way of being, how they tread lightly upon the earth, their ability to cope with loneliness and pain, the unselfishness with which they give freely of themselves.

I grew up in a forest and for the first 18 years of my life I was surrounded by trees. One of my favourite sounds still is that of the wind travelling through the treetops. I found two words that attempt to describe this sound and feeling. Psithurism which comes from the Greek word 'psithuros', and means whispering, and the German word, Waldeinsamkeit, which literally means 'forest loneliness', the feeling of

solitude, being joyfully alone in the woods and feeling deeply connected to nature. I remember lying in bed as a child and feeling the rush of excitement of being safe inside while a storm raged in the forest outside my window. They were so majestic, powerful and strong. When I created my first piece of solo work last year, the opening short film was me travelling through that same forest.

It is unsurprising that I was drawn to Roy's book but I don't think I was aware of that when I bought it. Since beginning to read Roy's book, my awareness of all the trees in my life has been awoken. They are a constant theme in my life. And so now, when I walk my daughter, Margie, in the park I have started to spend more time gazing up into their heights, closely noticing their strengths and fragilities and I have started to appreciate them in a brand new way. I suppose I have started to give them the respect they truly deserve. They have become a real inspiration to me, an encouragement, in them I have begun to find peace, safety and solace.

For me there is something most enviable about a tree's consistent ability to be present no matter the season, no matter what is happening on the news. Its roots grow deep and its branches reach ever upwards.

Eckhart Tolle says, "Look at a tree, a flower, a plant. Let your awareness rest upon it. How still they are, how deeply rooted in 'just being'. Allow nature to teach you stillness. When you look at a tree and perceive its stillness, you become still yourself."

I think this is what Roy is talking about in her book. And I also think these same ideas are what have drawn me to meditation and keep me coming back. A deep craving for stillness, for letting go of the internal and external noise, and a deep need for connection to a source within us, a presence within which we can just 'be'.

Before we move into our meditation, I would like to finish with an excerpt from an essay written by the German poet and novelist, Herman Hesse.

Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.

A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life. The attempt and the risk that the eternal mother took with me is unique, unique the form and veins of my skin, unique the smallest play of leaves in my branches and the smallest scar on my bark. I was made to form and reveal the eternal in my smallest special detail.

A tree says: My strength is trust. I know nothing about my fathers, I know nothing about the thousand children that every year spring out of me. I live out the secret of my seed to the very end, and I care for nothing else. I trust that God is in me. I trust that my labor is holy. Out of this trust I live.

When we are stricken and cannot bear our lives any longer, then a tree has something to say to us: Be still! Be still! Look at me! Life is not easy, life is not difficult. Those are childish thoughts. Let God speak within you, and your thoughts will grow silent. You are anxious because your path leads away from mother and home. But every step and every day lead you back again to the mother. Home is neither here nor there. Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all.

...when we have learned how to listen to trees, then the brevity and the quickness and the childlike hastiness of our thoughts achieve an incomparable joy. Whoever has learned how to listen to trees no longer wants to be a tree. He wants to be nothing except what he is. That is home. That is happiness."

— *Herman Hesse, Bäume. Betrachtungen und Gedichte*

## FIFTEEN

At our last gathering, after the meditation, one group member spoke of the images that had arisen in her while meditating. First, she found herself thinking of meditating as listening with the ears just as one listens to someone talking. Then, more and more, she became aware of the whole body listening, a total concentration.

One has only to watch animals to observe this. In Wales, early in the morning, looking out from my bedroom window, I would see the hare coming up from the woods, on the track past Waterloo Lodge, then pause before crossing the lane to enter the field opposite. The hare would freeze, its long ears up, its entire body quivering, waiting, listening.

And it is the same when I watch a black bird or thrush in my garden. It stands quite still, its head cocked, listening and then suddenly the beak descends and comes up with a worm that it has heard beneath the surface. In the stories of the Desert Fathers, there is one of a younger monk asking of a revered old monk where he got his concentration from, and the old monk replied, "From my cat seated patiently before a mouse hole, waiting for the mouse to appear!"

In Katherine Swift's book, *The Morville Hours*, she describes the village clock striking the quarters, and goes on to reflect how the medieval world was when time was accounted for: each second was precious. "Instead of hearing," she writes, "one listened. Instead of seeing, one looked. Instead of tasting, one savored."

As St. Benedict says, "Listen with the ear of the heart." And so, Katherine Swift, listening to the church clock striking the quarters, comments, "Unlike a watch which marks off how much time has gone, how much remains; the sound of the bells sounding the quarters had seem to say, "Stop! Think! This is here±! This is now!"

The Sufi master, Llewellyn Vaughan Lee, has written, "Every moment is new. The present moment is not a progression of past moments, but is alive in its own way, and it is the moment that demands our attention."

That is all we have: NOW!

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that the philosopher's aim is the contemplation of divine things that are beyond opinion, which is to say, beyond the grasp of words. As he is dying he commends his followers to silence, since it is in silence that someone has the best chance of discovering the things that are of heaven.

## SIXTEEN

I find it helpful when others share something of where they are, so here is my contribution as a fellow wayfarer.

My childhood indoctrination as a Roman Catholic put me off the word 'God', and it has been a recurring stumbling block on my pathway. When it became clear to me that I believe in 'His' attributes, I sought a way to hold them together in my inner world. Meditation increased my awareness of 'a' or 'The Presence'. And thanks in part to a particular translation of Rilke's "The Book of Hours" (1) poems which 'came to him' when he was in his twenties, I started to seek and value a more reciprocal relationship. I am not put off when Rilke or James use the word 'God'. But I cannot use it myself. The roots of my aversion are too deep to be dug out. The lack of a name became a stumbling block itself and prevented two-way communication. 'The Other', 'Om', the Sufi use of 'The Beloved' did not suit me. But recently, 'Love', has come to feel right.

When I was/am fortunate enough to experience words and whole sentences 'coming to me' in meditation (and at other times) I yearned to enter more fully into a dialogue, but how to address 'The Presence', 'The Eternal', or any of the names beyond number that humans have

created? 'Thou' felt stiff and uncomfortable. I love abstract art and allow it to penetrate me in a way that I respond to deeply, without any need to name a painting or sculpture, and it is the same with music. So why the need for a name, for that which is beyond words? Because this is a dynamic relationship, because Rilke has put into words and images something I feel is true: that I am waited for and needed, just as I wait and need. So I have chosen, 'You'.

There is a Presence that I know, but is there what I recently heard Rowan Williams describe as 'intentionality', 'agency', 'an initiator' behind the 'Presence'? I remind myself this sort of questioning does not open up new horizons. I think of Keats and the concept of 'Negative Capability' that 'came to him' when he was walking home from a pantomime with his brothers: the capacity to live with uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason, the power to bury consciousness of the self, and to dwell in a state of openness to all experience.

My meditation practice, which felt so rich during the first lockdown, is somewhat in doldrums at present. But my image is of a spiral: I am back in a place I would prefer not to return to, but with the benefit of learning from experience, I can find my way through it from a different perspective. When the going is tough, and it is a matter of just hanging on, doing my best to stick with the practice, and also when it is more rewarding, I always feel aware of the benefit of being a member of our group. 'You' give me strength and focus and belief in the power of the practice. Thank you for your invisible presence in my life. I do not need to keep making stumbling blocks, walking eyes to the ground as if to ensure my feet are safely on it. Here is a quote:

“Never look down to the ground before taking your next step.  
Only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find the  
right road.”

*Dag Hammarskjöld*  
*The Book of Hours – Love Poems to God, Rainer Maria Rilke,*

## SEVENTEEN

Last Christmas I was given a second-hand copy of a book, *An Open Life*, interviews with Joseph Campbell. Now I love second-hand books, for they have often been annotated by their previous owners – as indeed this one had. A page fell open – a comment by the Dalai Lama:

“Keep up your practice. The results do not happen fast; this is no instant realization. And as you practice, you will become aware of a change of consciousness. Do not become attached to

your method, for when your consciousness changes, you will recognize that all methods are intending the one goal."

I am reminded of one of my Alexander pupils many years ago, when he was on a retreat in the Himalayas. As he sat meditating, he heard a couple walking past him talking about the Alexander Technique. One said, "My back is terribly painful." "Have you tried the Alexander Technique?" questioned the other. "No, because you don't have to believe in it." said the first one. "I don't believe in it," said the other, "I simply practice it."

I have always had difficulty with faith or belief – it seems to me that one either 'knows' or one does not 'know'. And if one does not 'know' we have to find out what it is one does not know, because learning anything is impossible if you do not know what you don't know.

But there is always a starting point – the point at which we make a decision to try something, drawing, playing an instrument, meditation or the Alexander Technique. I suppose that is the moment faith, or curiosity, kicks in. There is something, an idea or a saying that resonates or draws one in to, perhaps, the possibility of a different way of being. Excitement follows, a new awareness is born, alas often succeeded by boredom, or the sense that something is not happening, or it wasn't what we wanted anyway. This is the point at which 'keeping up one's practice' is all important – because doing the practice will guide us through the doldrums and, without needing faith, belief or anything other than making a decision to practice, inevitably our consciousness alters and we regain our path.

## EIGHTEEN

I have a friend, a daily practitioner of meditation, who uses the mantra, "breathe in the light, breathe out the dark". I find this useful when my mind is fretful and negative.

But something about that phrase has always bothered me because shadows are necessary to create nuance and appreciation of light. Another friend, an artist and poet, wrote the following poem when he was dying. And this has become more of a reference point for me both for meditation and for contemplation:

You cannot take away from me  
The time I spent here,  
Thinking: it's my time  
and the early hours,  
the wind, the rain, dark and  
doom have been a  
visitation



fit for a king.

*Clifford Myerson, (1916–1995)*

This poem makes me glad to be alive, to be aware of time, to celebrate the dark as well as the light.

I see this poem as gratitude for the universe of particles, atoms, and mysterious waves that have produced our world and our selves, no matter whether there are gods in plural or one god in singular.

And meditation seems to have so much to do with gratitude once the fussiness of personal ego and discomfort fades.

## NINETEEN

Reflecting on the previous talk there is no doubt that countless numbers have ceased to believe in God simply because of the centuries old anthropomorphic image of God as an old man with a long beard, whereas, as Meister Eckhart, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century mystic, wrote, “God is no thing”. God is not a person, neither male nor female. A number of leading physicists are convinced that behind the universe is a Cosmic Intelligence. As David Bohm wrote in *The Implicate Order*, everything is inter-related which, of course, lies behind the Eastern belief in synchronicity, that apparently unexpected meetings and events are part of a predestined pattern. As Hamlet says, “There is a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will.” In other words, not a god but a god-like energy. For myself, God is like an ocean in which we live and move and have our being – but first we have to learn how to swim!

## FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER MEDITATED AND ARE UNSURE

Most of us today hurtle from one moment to the next and there seems no respite as we try to cram as much as possible into each day, so that we are in danger of becoming like the White Rabbit in *Alice*, "I'm late! I'm late for a very important date! No time to say Hello! Goodbye!" We are all rushing places, caught up in a whirl of activity, afraid to stand still for a moment and, most of all, afraid of silence, so that we surround ourselves with mobiles, I-Pads, TV.

Much of this busyness is due to increasing loneliness. In the UK, recent research has shown that a quarter of us, of all ages, feel emotionally unconnected with others. In addition, the majority of young people, from their mid twenties onwards, suffer from loneliness. Added to this is the dark prospect of over-population, environmental catastrophe, mineral exhaustion, global pollution, all leading to the destruction of this planet, means that we face the most critical moment in the history of our specie. The question therefore arises, "What are we to do?" As Carl Jung observed in the famous television interview with John Freeman, "Man cannot stand a meaningless life." He knew that the answer lay, not in the form of some creed or organization, but within each individual. In a novel by Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, the hero visits a magic theatre, which he wishes to enter. The owner of the theatre says to him, "It is the world of your own soul that you seek. Only within yourself exists the other reality for which you long. I can give you nothing that has not already its being within yourself." As one teacher expresses it, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you!"

The practice of meditation is centuries old and is found in all cultures as a way of integrating the opposing forces within each of us. Yet many approaching it for the first time, can find the whole process threatening. What follows are some very simple exercises.

### Day 1

The first exercise is simply to sit before a window for five to ten minutes and focus on the immensity of the sky, knowing that there is a vast universe with thousands of other planets. Because we often think of ourselves as the centre of the universe, it is salutary to realize that we are not. That is enough for the first day!

### Day 2

If the weather permits, wander to a nearby park or square, sit in front of a tree, noting how its roots go deep into the ground while the main body of the tree reaches upwards, spreading its branches to provide

shade. Past generations learned great wisdom simply from contemplating trees, yielding up such maxims as:

What is well rooted survives.  
As the twig bends so the tree will grow.  
The whole tree is hidden in the acorn.  
Every tree is known by its fruit; a rotten tree bears rotten fruit

A great saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote, "I have had no other masters than the beeches and the oaks. You will learn more in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you more than you can acquire from the mouth of a teacher."

#### Days 3,4,5 and 6

Take just one of the maxims above and, seated on a chair with eyes closed, spend ten minutes reflecting on the words and how they relate to your life.

#### Days 7 – 11

Try sitting still for ten minutes with your eyes open, observing whatever is in front of you. As Eckhart Tolle writes in *The Power of Now*, "The Plant that you have in your house, have you ever truly looked at it? Have allowed the familiar yet mysterious being called 'plant' to teach you its secret? Have you noticed how it is surrounded by a sea of stillness? The moment you become aware of a plant's emanation of stillness and peace, that plant becomes your teacher."

By sitting still and being quiet we are led into deeper awareness of all things and of each other. In *The Way of the Sufi*, Idries Shah tells the story of the great Shibli who visited the illustrious Thauri. The master was sitting so still that not a hair of his head moved. Shibli asked him, "Where did you learn such stillness?" Thauri replied, "From my cat. He was watching a mouse hole with even greater concentration than you have seen in me." When I was a teenager living in the country, I used to spend hours bird watching. You have to keep very still, waiting for the bird to alight on its nest lest a sudden movement startle it. Learning to meditate is like waiting with bated breath for the coming of a Wondrous Bird!

Meditation is a way to the centre within each of us and where we can find answers to the key questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?

Having now practiced these short simple exercises, you may like to explore the breath which is the key to all meditation techniques. The first thing is to sit erect, not to slump! Close your eyes and

concentrate on breathing through the nostrils and as you do this, mentally count "One". Pause briefly and then breathe out, still on the count of 'One'. Pause briefly and then as you breathe in, mentally count "Two", and so on for eight breaths. In no time at all your mind will wander! And when that happens you simply go back to 'One' and start all over again. In the first week it may be enough just to do this for five minutes until you feel ready to extend it to ten and then to twenty minutes, but never forcing yourself. Learning to meditate is very much like training a puppy!

In the third week, try to sit quietly for fifteen minutes, not counting the breaths but simply concentrating on the breath coming in and going out like the tide... Random thoughts will arise like flotsam to the surface, or like a swarm of blue bottles! – resentments, angers, jealousies, memories of old wounds, lusts, which if we try to suppress will only redouble their strength. Patiently we acknowledge each one and then let it go. Patience is the keyword. Not expecting success. It is like a garden, only when it has been weeded will anything grow. "Begin", said Buddha, "and continue!" And so, day in and day out, whether we feel like it or not we continue with our practice. Meditation is not a quick fix! But has to be worked at patiently.

I will end with a poem by the Sufi Master, Rumi, entitled *The Guest House*.

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival,  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be cleaning you out  
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice  
meet them all at the door  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

*Acknowledgement.*  
*Photos of Piers by Alan Hall*