



*The New Zealand Community for Christian Meditation*

# **Meditator's Stories**



## Signposts along the way

Between 1973 and 1977 I had a wonderful BIG OE in Europe. I travelled, studied, made many friends and met my wife. In August 1974 I spent two days at the French Marian Shrine at Lourdes. I took to the grotto a problem that had been weighing on me and quickly received a message from deep within that this was but a minor issue, that all would be well; but the most important thing I had to do in life was to pray.

I took this message seriously but as the years went by I entered a spiritual desert. I studied scripture, read Merton and even composed a prayer to him asking for guidance. A priest recommended *Letters from the Desert* by Carlo Carretto. I couldn't grasp the theme of the book but on the inside back cover wrote Deitrich Bonhoeffer's famous prayer, "Oh God, early in the morning I cry to you. Help me to pray."

Lourdes in 1974 is the first of four significant signposts in my adult faith journey and discovering the Enneagram in 1993 is the second. The Enneagram is an instrument for gauging differences in personality and is used as a means of spiritual direction. I used the Enneagram to find my way out of a mid-life crisis and took seriously the process of integration / redemption that is central to its wisdom. I had cut myself off from the world and in so doing had succumbed to the sin of avarice. I journaled my horror at finding what a mess I was in and decided that as I had got myself into this mess only I could get myself out of it. Ironically, most of this work was done at a time when I ceased to be active in matters of faith and regular church attendance.

Looking back, I see that this was part of the process of becoming 'redeemed'. Being a type 5 thinker / observer personality my approach to matters of faith and spirituality had become overly intellectualised and was not grounded in human experience let alone Gospel values. By actively seeking to connect with my direction of psychic and spiritual health (the process of integration / redemption) I took myself in what can only be described as an adventure.

I became chairman of a charitable trust supporting children with special needs while also becoming a very experienced leader in a rapidly growing outdoor sport. Through the act of leadership I was learning a new, and for me, entirely appropriate way of connecting with people. My map was the Enneagram and in hindsight I see that my guide was the Holy Spirit. I was being prepared for that third signpost along *The Way*, meditation in the Christian tradition. I had long been interested in meditation and investigated other forms but was uncomfortable with them not being Christian.

In the early 90s I heard of the existence of a group of Christian meditators in Auckland but was unable to track them down. In 2004 I reconnected with my local parish at a time of a parish renewal. During the session on prayer a lady sitting in front of me mentioned meditation, John Main and Maranatha. That evening I googled these words, discovered the WCCM website and then, much to my joy, found that during my absence, a meditation group had started in my local church. I immediately joined, discovered that pearl of great price and experienced a sense of homecoming that remains to this day. Recently I read a quote from the famed English Benedictine Dom John Chapman (1865-1933) "Pray as you can and don't try to pray as you can't".

My experience as described above is common to many people who come to meditation after wandering like thirsty pilgrims lost in the desert, struggling with forms of prayer that for them are dry

and therefore meaningless. Another significant thing happened too; on discovering this wonderful way of prayer I found I had absolutely no urge to read any books on Christian Meditation. Other than Christian Meditation – Your Daily Practice by Laurence Freeman OSB I read virtually nothing. This was incredibly liberating! My previous method of functioning was to seek and devour any literature I could find on the topic of the moment. It would at be least four years before I started to investigate further, and was greatly encouraged to discover that John Main had recommended no serious reading on Christian Meditation until at least three years after taking up the practice.

To begin with it took three to four years to develop the discipline of the twice-daily meditation. For the first year or so it was all stop-start with the morning meditation but by year three I was beginning to include the evening meditation. Somewhere in 2008 I found my stride so to speak and developed the practice of a twice-daily meditation, extended it out to 25-minutes and in 2009 moved to the recommended 30 minutes. I mention this not to boast but to demonstrate the wisdom of what John Main refers to as 'being gentle with yourself'. Start out slow and don't set yourself up for failure. It really is a discipline and that simple phrase, "just say your mantra" is the best advice in the entire canon.

Meditation has changed my concept of God. The idea that God is an elderly chap 'up there' has gone and in its place is God as spirit, Christ-centeredness, Cosmic Christ. Even these phrases seem inadequate to describe something that is beyond words yet waiting to be experienced. I finally began to understand what the indwelling Christ means; that Jesus lives in our hearts and all we must do is to be aware of this and actively seek to nurture the relationship.

Through meditation these concepts ceased to be intellectual propositions but a living, moment-by-moment reality. I experienced a gentle form of healing that continues to this day. The healing has taken two forms; one is being healed of the idea that I was unworthy in God's eyes and the other is that my daily practice continually heals me of negative feelings about myself. I became more compassionate towards others. In fact, when you start feeling compassion for people you would ordinarily have dismissed, you are experiencing the fruits of meditation. I devoted less time to trivia. Media consumption declined significantly, TV programmes that included violence became distasteful and my overall outlook on life became more positive.

After a few months of meditation I discovered that previously held ideas about people and events in my life had changed. It wasn't revelation but realisation; somehow, in a small but important way, meditation was making me a little wiser.

In 2006 I had the very good fortune to write an article for Taonga, a magazine published by the Anglican community. I interviewed four meditators including Fr Michael Watson, an Anglican priest and Wellington hospital chaplain. He had this to say about his experience of meditation. "Meditation makes the soul grow bigger. If you keep it up, it gradually shrinks the ego allowing the soul to expand into the space left behind." Now that is a truly profound statement.

Meditation shows just how problematic an unchecked ego is for so many of us. Indeed, you really have no true understanding of the shadow side of your personality until you form your life around a spiritual practice like meditation.

Fr John referred to this as 'smashing the mirror'. That moment in our spiritual growth when we are united with God as our Supreme Power Source; when we break through the screen of 'hyper self-consciousness of egoism' – when we smash the mirror! Meditation does this, and it smashes that mirror over and over again.

I relate to this idea in the following way. In my early stop-start days I soon discovered that after a few days of not saying my mantra I seemed out of sorts. Groundless fears would invade my psyche, stress levels would rise and I would retreat back into a cave of negative thinking. But once I re-connected with my mantra I was able to contain these tendencies and in so doing began to understand what it means to live mindfully.

I was also being prepared spiritually for the fourth signpost on The Way. In July 2009 I placed myself under the loving guidance of a spiritual director, a very wise and humble man who is very experienced in these matters, and a fellow meditator. To begin with Andrew showed me how to read scripture in a prayerful way. He called this the 'thinking person's way' and it suits Enneagram type five thinker / observers like me.

I started with the Gospel of John and was astonished at what emerged. Each chapter spoke to me. In chapter 9 where Jesus heals the man born blind I discovered that while I had not been blind to Jesus, for some reason I had spent most of my adult life avoiding eye contact with him. In chapter 11 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and on reading this I understood why, 30-years after my experience at Lourdes, I finally learnt how to pray. Jesus works at his timetable, not ours. They begged him to return to Judea to cure Lazarus but Jesus lingered and Lazarus was dead three days already. Three days, three decades – what is that to Jesus? He works at his timetable and raises us on his terms. Above all, Andrew introduced me to the concept of brothering, of inviting Jesus to be my brother. I wrote in my journal: I must not consider Jesus as a purveyor of miracles, but as a brother who moment-by-moment walks with me along the road less travelled.

In the latter months of 2009 small but significant differences began to happen in my life. Andrew asked me to note them when they occurred, but I found this hard to do for no other reason than at the time they seemed almost insignificant, and only on reflection did I understand their importance. Something else happened too. I sensed a change happening deep within me, which was difficult to articulate. I re-read many of my Enneagram books, especially those that treat the Enneagram as a tool for spiritual direction. I started reading John Main including commentators on his writings. One of these, the Canadian Protestant theologian Francois C Gerard, has this to say on the spiritual journey. Fr John invites us to explore the nature of our human self as a precondition to wholeness, serenity, and harmony. He is convinced that unless we have a healthy relationship with ourselves we cannot expect our religious pilgrimage to lead us anywhere. To be relevant and effective, an authentic relationship with God must be rooted in self-discovery, self-reconciliation and true self-love. The knowledge of our self, or better, the searching for our true self, is already a sign of divine grace and the right place to begin.

In The Way of Unknowing John Main writes: What all of us have to discover is that the only way we can talk in any meaningful way about God is if we discover him ourselves; if we set out on the road of self-discovery which is the pilgrimage to our own essential being. The dictum of Augustine, often quoted by John Main is very apt: If we are to be restored to God, we must first be restored to our own selves and then make ourselves, as it were, a stepping stone by which we step to God. I was discovering God, I was discovering my true self. It also felt as if I had my foot hard down on the accelerator, as my journey along The Way seemed to speed up. Over Labour Weekend I responded to an intuitive feeling that I had to journal what was going on. I was astonished at what emerged. The Enneagram, my map for self-discovery, plus twice-daily meditation had fused into a single pathway to God. Overlay Andrew's spiritual guidance and I was experiencing a feeling of Divine Presence that is near impossible to articulate. John Main and St Paul both lament the inability of words

to describe such an experience. I too have been left speechless by what has occurred. The very best I can come up with is 'aliveness'! John Main has a lovely term; 'changes that occur in the minutia of life'. I couldn't have put it better myself. These are not dramatic changes; indeed 'change' is too simple a word to describe what is occurring. But something has happened; it is authentic and comes from deep within. I am responding to Jesus and Jesus is responding to me. And this is why I must continue to meditate. It is an act of giving and receiving and this giving and receiving is life changing. Before starting my twice-daily meditation I read from Silence and Stillness in every Season, daily readings with John Main. I cannot praise this book enough as it combines wisdom with common sense. It is an excellent guide to all aspects of this wonderful prayer of the heart and a superb introduction to the writings of Fr John Main. Participation in community days, retreats and attending the Essential Teaching Workshop in Wellington in 2008 are also part of the experience. New friendships have been made and it has been a pleasure to introduce others to this ancient tradition of Christian prayer.

And I cannot praise enough my weekly meditation group. We spend just 40 minutes together every Wednesday and jointly 'recharge our spiritual batteries'. We listen to a CD then meditate for 20 minutes. There is just six to eight of us and this seems a typical number for most meditation groups. We encourage each other in what some may consider a lonely road. But it isn't. It is a road to our own heart where we find ourselves being nurtured by the Holy Spirit, which is the love that flows between Jesus and his Father. Meditation in the Christian Tradition is the authentic Trinitarian experience. Maranatha – Come, Lord Jesus.

**Vincent – Hibiscus Coast**



## A gentle thing

'Under the Huang Jiao Tree: Two Journeys in China', writing as Jane Carswell, I describe the inner and outer journeys of a year teaching English in China. The inner journey proves to be the last stage in my journey toward Christian Meditation. In the passages from it below, I tell of my first encounter with Christian Meditation, why I was drawn to it, and why I hope that meditation will—by grace—be my lifelong companion.

'Two years after I returned [from China], the monks arrived – three of them, standing on each other's shoulders you might say. I heard a Benedictine monk, Laurence Freeman, speak in the Christchurch Catholic Cathedral one evening. He told us he'd been the student and friend of another Benedictine monk, John Main, who'd recognised an extraordinary deposit of light in the 4th century writings of yet another Christian monk, John Cassian. The light was a simple discipline of contemplative prayer, prayer of the heart, prayer of being. First he talked about it. I was surprised to have no issue with what he said. Why wasn't I, as usual, spoiling for a theological argument, or feeling guiltily at odds with what he outlined? Why wasn't I re-running my usual internal growl that the answer had to be bigger than this?

He proposed a principle of union. The only problem with this practice, this discipline, apparently, was its simplicity. I could understand that; I knew that I complicated almost anything I touched. Anyone could do it, monk number three insisted calmly, and so we did. This discipline was called Christian Meditation, which at first baffled me. My idea of meditation was of thinking about something, and that was just what we weren't doing.

It's always hard to get a word that wraps right around a mystery, and the practice itself wasn't at all confusing. It felt right – no special feelings, no special experiences – just a feeling of rightness and an awareness, that grew over time, of a dimension of being that just ... just was. I wasn't expecting to find anything that evening in the Cathedral. Nor was I looking for anything; I didn't know there was anything to find. I'd only gone to the talk because someone I liked had told me about it. I came away wondering if I'd at last found a way of prayer that made sense to me.

The only prayers I'd ever known were variations on the theme of batting words hopefully in the direction of the boundary. Having sent the messages, I always wondered if they'd got there – wherever that was – and if so, could whoever was there understand them, and were they acceptable? It seemed an extraordinarily uncertain way to approach a supreme being, a surprisingly distant way to address a spirit that claimed to be indwelling as well as beyond, and such a chilly way to address your father. But I didn't know any other way, and I did, desperately, want to make the connection.

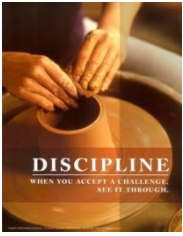
I'd read about people who quite definitely had found a line-in; I could tell because it made such a difference to them. And why would Love deny us that connection? But where was the socket? John Cassian, John Main, Laurence Freeman ... what did they have in common? I was reassured that they all pointed consistently and firmly beyond themselves: none had any interest in being a magnetic guru. And, strikingly, all these monks had asked someone to teach them how to pray. So, now, was I. I continued to meditate twice each day – the monks said this was best.

I found the quietest place I could, sat down, closed my eyes lightly, and for about half an hour I sat as still as I could and let the internal voice of a mantra gradually bring my mind to stillness. For that half-hour, I let fall away from me, as best I could, all my thoughts and words; in time, I came to trust the mantra to contain them all – and all the impulses of my heart. I wanted to learn to let go of all that my hands held, to let even the mantra fly free, and allow my attention to follow its sound with the ear of a child, as it led me deeper into silence.

Gradually, threads of being that seemed to have no belonging in my patterning found their proper place in me. These were threads, familiar over a lifetime, whose disorder had troubled me ... And my inner room? I'd always known that I had one, deep inside, and that it was a good place to be. I remembered living there much of my childhood, but I couldn't find my way back ... As silence and stillness reclaimed their rightful place in my days, the door inside me quietly swung open. The discipline of meditation proved to be, not easy, but simple. As the months went by, an awareness of something that already was, of a reality complete, accessible to all and embracing all life, crept in upon me.

This reality, too, was simple; union is simple ... I was surprised that reality turned out to be a gentle thing.'

**Jane – Christchurch**



## A discipline, not a technique

I was always interested in meditation as I enjoy peace and quiet, and reasoned that if I could pray as well, it would be an awesome experience. So I went to an evening with Fr Peter at the Panmure church. There was a short video presentation which explained everything about meditation, adding that after some months you may experience something. Well, I've been doing it for some years now, but have been unable to experience anything. In fact I feel as though I have made no progress after about nine years of twice daily twenty-five minute meditations.

I suppose I do feel as though I am more tolerant as the years go by—but I doubt if my dear wife would agree! So, why do I keep on with it? I now understand why things are not progressing as to what I had hoped! I can't recall the meditation teacher's name, but on one of the CD's he said and I quote "Meditation is a discipline to be followed, NOT A TECHNIQUE TO BE MASTERED!" So I shall keep on plodding morning and night hopefully until the day I die.

**George – Panmure**



## The words of everlasting life

I had for a long time been interested in meditation, though never done a lot about it, partly because I'm a reflective kind of person. I noticed, some years ago now, an article in the WECOM paper about a visit from Fr Laurence and a talk he was giving about Christian Meditation. I recall a photo of his beaming face and thought, there is a happy man! I went to the talk and knew it was the way forward for me, the word of God within.

I have attended occasional meditation gatherings and persevered for quite some time now, not as part of a group, just a solitary effort. I would say a somewhat faltering effort at that. But I know I will continue because in the word attributed to St Peter, " Lord where would I turn, you alone have the words of everlasting life."

**Patrick – Masterton**





## Sitting with the Trinity twice daily

I'd like to say I'd been thrown off a horse, found the Lord, and could not find a better way to get to know Him. Not true. I can't remember when I didn't know the Lord, and His Father. My friendship with the Holy Spirit came as I matured a little. I'd like to say that meditation has changed my life, made me a wonderful person whom everyone loves, can do no wrong, and is a saint waiting to be canonised. Not true!

Something stirred within me many years ago as I read of meditation of the Christian variety. I read every book I could find on the subject, listened to a couple of John Main's tapes, attended a talk which didn't impress me a great deal, signed up for the WCCM newsletter, and did not much else.

Finally, one day the Holy Spirit must have nudged me and I realised that I was supposed to put into practice all that I had been reading about. So about 18 years ago I began – occasionally. I guess you could say I dabbled, a little bit here and a little bit there. Six years ago I realised what a fool I was, the Holy Spirit again no doubt. At the same time that I decided to meditate seriously and regularly the Holy Spirit arranged for a group to start in our Parish. And so it began. I sat in the recommended position for two sessions of meditation each day without fail, repeating my mantra throughout.

Over the intervening years I have made four retreats with Fr Laurence Freeman and attended most of the Community Days and Retreats organised in Auckland. Am I a changed person? Only God really knows I guess but I wouldn't withdraw from Meditation for anything. I find it right for me. I look forward to sitting with the Trinity twice daily. My mind still wanders all over the place until I return to my mantra. I put all these thoughts in God's care before I begin and pay no attention to them. I trust that I am becoming the person that God meant me to be when I was created. I am able to be objective about things and accepting of situations over which I have no control. The only hard thing about Meditation is being disciplined enough to make two set times each day and to stick to it.

Occasionally I do miss out but there's always a genuine reason and Fr Laurence tells us never to take any guilt on board. Just get on with it the following day. One thing I am certain of. Meditation can only do me good. It improves me and my little world. The talks that Fr Laurence gives as he visits groups in every area of the world help not just the people he meets, but the whole world. Our world is a better place for the tens of thousands of Christians of every denomination who meditate twice daily. Come join us.

**Jacqui – Orewa**



# To learn to meditate is to meditate

Reading and reflecting has been a major habit of mine to meet a hunger for depth and meaning and also a longing and ache I constantly and periodically experienced. In my younger years life to me was scary, daunting, unappealing. Yet from my reading and also listening to stories there was presented various ways a person could follow to live a fulfilled life. My reading became more and more focused upon the stories and writings of the mystics and saints.

Also nourishment was gained from literature, film, theatre and listening to particular people. With a big diet of reading and listening, I began to get a sense of the difference between what I was reflecting upon (and the excitement and exhilaration of that) and the way I was in myself. There seemed to be an enormous gap. A great tension came and went within me. For many years these states were vague, predominantly an unconscious turmoil, with an inability to articulate. Yet I kept returning to the reading and reflecting to feed my soul, so to speak – this gave me some sustenance. Yet the split between the reflection upon life and living life was at times intolerable. There was a hunger for (I can name it now in hindsight, but not at the time) a hunger for wholeness, integration, transformation.

I had gathered that the way towards this integration would involve prayer, deep prayer. And over the years, due to my background, I prayed in many different ways: for example communal worship (Mass, Benediction, Stations of the Cross etc), vocal prayer (Rosary, Litanies); there was a period of charismatic prayer, Ignatian meditation practice, just sitting in church, chanting of Office etc. But my reading of the writings of mystics was pointing to a deeper, experiential, more engaging prayer, hinting at transformative dimensions. My being knew this was how it was meant to be. All the mystical writings I came upon wrote about this from their own experience and knowing – and yet there was a difficulty in applying this knowledge for me in a living, practical way.

The question arises, Why is it so difficult for us today to pray in this way? Then in my life I began to get hints of a path, of a way, a praxis. These hints came to me largely through persons who personally shared their gift of knowing and experience: I remember a series of evenings back in the late '70's presented by Father Eugene O'Sullivan OP on the fourteenth century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The essentials of what I was looking for were there in that writing.

Then in 1983 while attending a conference on Inculturation, led by an Indian Jesuit Fr Amalorpavadass, he guided us attendees (about a hundred people) into a meditation. When I experienced those twenty-odd minutes I knew this was what I had been looking for, for a long time. The following year, journeying to India, I spent several months at Fr Bede Griffiths' ashram, Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu. I was exposed to two periods of meditation time slotted into the routine of the ashram timetable. Bede's constant advice to me personally was – Meditate, meditate, meditate. From the excellent library there he directed my way particular writings on meditation. The first such book was *Word into Silence* by John Main OSB; followed later by Basil Pennington OSB *Centering Prayer*. Then an autobiography of a Hindu mystic, Swami Ramdas, and the writings of Swami Abhishikananda (Henri LeSaux OSB), particularly *On Prayer*. Also for the first time I was attending yoga classes, becoming more aware of the importance of the incarnational aspect of prayer – that is, we pray within the body which houses the Spirit.

Then later on in my stay at the ashram we were visited briefly by a Jesuit priest, resident in Japan – Fr Hugo La Salle – a man in his eighties who sat in lotus posture and gave us a discourse on Zen meditation for an hour. This was followed by another hour of answering questions. After which he had to leave for another area in India. During those two hours I was rapt. This period in India was also a time to have exposure to other traditions outside Christianity. There was a period of time spent in two different Hindu ashrams following forms of meditation from the Wisdom tradition and the Devotional tradition. Also near the end of my stay at Shantivanam we were visited by a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka who gave us eight days of Vipassana retreat. Such a time was devoted almost completely to intense meditation practice.

This exposure to other traditions that had a praxis of meditation made me realise what had been missing for so long within our own tradition. This contemplative, mystical element had been shunted and pushed aside with indifference, suspicion and even hostility for the sake of a more rational approach – losing much in the process of vitality and experience of a living faith. These experiences in India were foundational for my continuing meditation practice on my return to New Zealand.

I continue to meditate daily now – in fact, those times I didn't I felt something vital was missing in my day. Although I had read books on meditation within Christianity – for example, Anthony de Mello, John Main, Basil Pennington, Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Henri Le Saux – it wasn't really until being with persons handing on the tradition and communicating this from their own knowing and experience that I began to catch this learning and to begin in earnest a path of praxis.

The turning point for me in becoming a Christian Meditation practitioner came with the visit of Paul Harris to Auckland in 1995. It was through Paul that the grace came to me to catch the truth in the teaching of Christian Meditation and also the desire and will to practice on a daily basis. The reading and reflection, you might say, provided a map for the inner journey. It was the personal encounters with those who had been travelling that gave guidance and encouragement to set on the journey itself.

As John Main says To learn to meditate is to meditate. It is as simple as that.

This is what I have grown more and more to appreciate. The wisdom of that: the simplicity and the joy that this wisdom taps into the mystical and contemplative teachings of the saints, mystics within the Christian tradition. In fact Christian Meditation is the natural outgrowth of this tradition, recovered in no small measure by John Main, among others. We who meditate today are benefiting from and standing on the shoulders of those through the centuries who with their graced wisdom have walked this inner path of simple being.

**Michael – Whangarei**



## A gentle, gradual and guided unfolding

Occasionally, special things certainly do happen in seemingly mysterious ways. My journey to Christian meditation, for example, unfolded for me in ways that I could have neither predicted nor planned. Concepts, perceptions and insights that previously I had only read and experienced through a number of years of 'mainstream' health and well-being style meditative methods were now being presented to me and discussed in a Catholic Church! Presented with an all-important difference, and discussed from the Christian perspective that I had been hoping for.

So there I was, on a midweek evening sitting in Saint Francis Church (Hibiscus Coast Parish) listening to an 'Introduction to Christian Meditation' presented by Vincent Maire. Up till then I had not been aware that meditation was active in the Christian perspective. Sure, I had heard about Mystics in the early years of the Church, but could find little information on that period. I had always enjoyed listening to inspirational and spiritual visionaries, like for example, the charismatic Fr Thomas Keating, ([globalonenessproject.com](http://globalonenessproject.com)). So a pragmatist would no doubt conclude, that I was predisposed to find contemplative prayer. Maybe I was. Eastern thought would most probably assert that what I was sub-consciously focusing on, I would eventually attract into my life. Maybe that is so, I do not know. But for now it didn't matter, this was great, Catholicism and meditation, alive and well, right here 'on the coast'.

Only months earlier, I had asked. Why can't this happen in Catholicism? I was. It seemed to me, at that very moment, being handed the answer. So, one year on, I sense that for me, the journey toward the Christian meditative path was, and still continues to be, a gentle, gradual and guided unfolding. Like from the helping hand of a mentor.

Guiding and deepening, through my earlier meditative years. It had all started quite simply for me when I started using various entrainment programs and other meditative practices to help discover much needed health benefits, 'stress' relief, and deeper levels of relaxation. This was and still is important to me. As I believe, like many others whom I have met, that we are all linked in mind, body and soul. We all know how our busy day-to-day lives can be somewhat stressful at times. But the good news is that meditative 'silence' can be transformative, both physically and mentally, if you make the time to let it be.

Christian focused meditation adds the deeper dimension of mind, body and soul for me. Perhaps it's the letting go of attachments to 'things' that really, are not that important. Gradually, I found that negative thinking, illusions of control, and many of life's annoying fears and regrets no longer served me; they began to become very distracting. They were just getting in the way. Getting in the way of what? I hear you ask. Well, I didn't know and still don't know much more.

However it did become easier to witness how the ways in which I thought and acted each moment, affected the various 'love' outcomes in my life. To then learn to take full and total responsibility for all the outcomes in my life. Maybe I felt it was my time to seek a new 'personal and spiritual growth? Yes I believe it was and is. But I sensed that what I had heard being presented, and what I experienced on that Introduction course in Christian mediation that I had so hoped for, was indeed 'a path' I needed to start to travel along. 'A path' that I chose initially, has now become more like the time one

would choose to spend with a loved one. Sometimes simple silence, sometimes focused communication, sometimes active listening. A peaceful time.

**Richard – Albany**



## The group keeps me faithful

I had always enjoyed a certain amount of solitude and even before being aware of meditation I used to sit with scripture. My first experience of meditation came when I attended a talk given by Fr. Laurence Freeman in Hamilton in 1988. Following that talk I received newsletters from time to time and practised meditation on and off for some time. I had just started a Bachelor of Social Sciences and as part of a university paper called Psychology East and West we were required to take part in tutorials which included meditation and creative visualisation.

A practical aspect of my Counselling Theory paper enabled me to lead a tutorial in which I shared a period of meditation which was well received. By this time I was meditating regularly and did a course with the Self Realisation Fellowship which I found very useful. It was extremely disciplined, so much so that a weekend retreat at the Tauhara centre nearly killed me! We were expected to meditate seemingly for hours on an empty stomach. This sent me scuttling back to the Catholics. I joined a meditation/sharing group that had just begun in Huntly at the Anglican church and this group eventually became the seed group for the Huntly, Pauanui and Thames groups.

While by this time I was using the WCCM tapes and books the others in the group weren't quite ready. When I moved to Pauanui eight years ago I started the group and this continues to meet weekly. I rely heavily on the group to keep me faithful to my daily practise to which as an Oblate I have committed myself. My husband is also a faithful supporter and meditates with me each morning. I would like to attend the community days more regularly but find travelling a problem. On one occasion Trish Pantou the Oblate coordinator in Sydney, included me in their cell day so I took the day to read and reflect on their programme for the day and found that most helpful.

I have twice made retreats at Monte Olivetto, a retreat in Ballarat and the John Main seminar in Penang. I have also attended the School and several retreat in NZ. All help to keep the momentum and being with likeminded people is essential. We have no ordained person in Pauanui of any denomination so everything we do is of an ecumenical nature by lay people.

**Barbara – Pauanui**



# The Eleventh Step

During the late 1950's and early 60's the roll at the primary school I attended was rapidly dropping, and with this situation came a succession of Headmasters. Finally the school attracted an unusual and forward thinking Principal who was able to stay. He introduced yoga, relaxation, creative writing, Spanish and Italic writing into our daily routine. Every morning we would sit with our arms outstretched, palms up on the desks in front of us. The Principal would call out the Yoga breathing sequences in Spanish over the P A system for about five minutes. Then he would instruct us to relax and listen to piped classical and romantic music. We were encouraged to relax deeply and let our thoughts drift with the music.

This was my introduction to meditation. I found it beneficial at the time and it helped me over the years. Eventually I neglected my meditation practice. Many years passed and a crisis led me to seek advice from my parish priest. He recommended I take up the discipline of meditation. I asked God for guidance and a few days later a pamphlet arrived in the mail advertising free Sri Chimnoy mediation classes. These sessions were helpful and familiar as they were similar to the yoga practise of my youth. I became uncomfortable with them however, as I sensed a seductive quality to the meditations. I stopped.

Another door opened when I attended a series of talks on meditation at my local church. There I met June Meyer who kindly took me under her wing and introduced me to the John Maine and Lawrence Freeman method of meditation. I felt comfortable straight away with this form of meditation because for me it was spiritually safe. It was heartening to find there is a long tradition of meditation in Christianity. I felt at home immediately with this practice. June was a wonderful and patient teacher. After our sessions we would often talk. This time with June, enabled me to detach from what to me, was an abyss of terror that surrounded my personal life.

Later, I came to realise that the problems I was experiencing were due to my husband's addiction to gambling and alcohol. His addictions seemed to invade every part of my personal life wrecking financial, spiritual and physical havoc. What I feared most was that my integrity seemed to be breaking down and I feared for my future and sanity. Because of the meditation practise with June and her kindness, patience and understanding I was able to reveal to her some of what was happening at home. This freed me from my shame-based isolation.

June and the meditation brought enough healing and peace into my heart that I was able to accept and escape the situation. This happened throughout the course of the year in which June and I practised meditation together in her home once a week. Not long after we finished meditating together I felt led to join an Al Anon family group. This is a fellowship of people who follow the twelve steps of AA. This fellowship helped me to deal with the effects of alcoholism which were deep rooted and destructive. I certainly needed the programme. It took courage to join and perseverance to stay, but I'm sure I was sustained by the practice of meditation.

Three years later, June contacted me to say Lawrence Freeman was coming to New Zealand for the first time. She sent me a registration form for the retreat and I took a friend from Al Anon with me. We have been attending NZCCM gatherings ever since.

Interestingly, the eleventh step of AA and Al Anon is all about meditation and it is as follows: Step 11 "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." John Maine has said that seeking is a response to a summons by God.

Part of Lawrence Freeman's closing prayer for our CM groups talks about the seeker. The eleventh step of AA and Al Anon starts with seeking. I find so many parallels between the Christian Community mediation and the aims of the eleventh step. I feel I am doing God's will by being a member of both fellowships and it is heartening for me to hear of Fr Lawrence Freeman's work with alcoholics. Today I feel it is God's will for me to share with you how I became a meditator and what led me to seek this form of prayer.

**Mary – Waikowhai**



## The group is a little like Heaven on Earth

Elisabeth Herriot, a calm woman of inner beauty in our parish, asked me one morning in the 1980's as I walked the beach in Eastbourne whether I was interested in contemplative prayer. And thus began my pilgrimage.

Later she obeyed God's whisper to offer a weekly meditation and so a small group of meditators began, encouraged by Elisabeth's deep knowledge of John Main, The Cloud of Unknowing, The Desert Fathers and her long practice of Christian Meditation. Resources were expanded through visits to the Island Bay Home of Compassion for retreats and use of its extensive library, NZCCM and World Community of Christian Meditation newsletters, Margaret Rizza tapes, Laurence Freeman visits, Lester Reid's wisdom, day retreats and a wide-range of contemplative music including Arvo Part. A void was filled in my life and my faith energised...

Twenty years later the group is as strong as ever. Drawn from Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Buddhist and non-church goers, it has expanded to two groups. Two Catholic Sisters, Clement and Katharine, who took pivotal roles, both returned to Ireland and it is the words of Katharine which remain with me as I too have moved away. "The group is a little like Heaven on earth and it would make the heart of God glad." Yes, here is a true community of believers where man-made barriers and traditions are meaningless in the light of the journey alongside fellow pilgrims. And their model? Jesus, who embodies Agape love.

Meister Eckhart said in the thirteenth century "God lies in wait for us with nothing so much as love. Now love is like a fishhook... the more you are caught, the more you will be liberated." And it is the silence of morning and evening, when the water is calm, that induces the best fishing!

**Mary – Wellington**





# The Water of Life

I am 79 years old so my journey is a long one, but I will condense it as much as I can! Neither my parents nor their family were church goers, so I grew up a non-Christian, but I knew God; and He enabled me to learn the Lords Prayer, Away in a Manger from children's books, and John 3:16 – this from a roadside billboard. I quickly scanned it and memorised it as we passed it, two or three times a year in a train from Lower Hutt to Wellington.

In my mid-twenties I joined a philosophical group in Wellington and learnt to meditate. This made me more aware of God. Then I married and moved away and began a regular attendance at the Presbyterian Church. I lived in Whakatane for 27 years, where I became an elder and was very active, participating fully in the church and community groups including Prisoners' Aid Emergency House, and started the Food Bank. The Anglican Church there owns Titoki, a retreat house and healing centre. I sometimes went on two-day retreats and would begin to meditate, but life stayed busy and I soon gave up.

My real experience in meditation began last year when I took over the church library here at St James Presbyterian Church Waihi and donated some of my Christian books, including some on meditation/contemplation – finding God in silence. This brought me in touch with three ladies in the congregation with the same yearnings. I was reborn in the Spirit 31 years ago and was given the gift not of tongues but of silence. For a long time I did not know what to do with it.

In May this year, two of us went to a two-day retreat at an Anglican centre in Hamilton. I was eager to go, I was a dry riverbed, thirsty, and in my first minutes there the water of life began to flow! It has not stopped since. We four, plus one husband, now attend an Anglican contemplative service in Tauranga once a month and have joined the weekly meditation group at St Josephs Catholic church. The first thing I learnt was that meditation is a discipline and I now eagerly practice it every morning and some afternoons. I have found that saying the mantra Maranatha helps to focus my mind and to block out the stray thoughts that continually intrude. My inner life is so much richer and deeper. I thank the Lord for bringing me to this.

**Joan – Waihi**





## The Divine works in mysterious ways

Husband Jeff and I have been meditating for some years now, having been part of one meditation group or another for most of the 24 years we have been together. We were initially taught to meditate through the TM movement.

It was a movement that seemingly caused Christians deep concern for a variety of reasons, however, not being a churchgoer at that time by any stretch of the imagination, it was of no concern. Also, I knew myself well enough to discern that if I paid good money to learn something I was more likely to stick to it. Jeff also learnt to mediate with the TM movement, just after he met me. The draw card for me had been my questioning of a woman I worked with, having witnessing a dramatic positive transformation in her.

At that point I had never even heard of meditation, nor did I think I was dissatisfied with my life as it was, which incidentally was a far cry from where it is now! Her response was enough for me to investigate, and after obtaining assurance that it was 'nothing to do with religion' I learnt how to meditate. It changed my outlook and my life completely within a few short months, and since then I have been an avid advocate for the practice, and, might I add, whatever discipline it comes through. My changes took me initially through everything the 'new age' had to offer, vehemently avoiding anything to do with religion, especially the Christian religion, having had plenty of encounters with several 'born again Christians' I had worked with. I was not impressed, and assumed that that was the full sum of the Christian religion. How wrong I was! At some point in my seeking, about 15 years ago, by chance I began reading Christian based mystical material and obtained an entirely different perspective on the word 'mystic', and indeed the Christian teachings. Two books had a dramatic effect on my journey around that time, Kathleen Norris' 'Cloister Walk' and Carol Flinder's 'Enduring Grace'. It wasn't until I did a course with an Anglican priest who ran several different classes through Theology House in Christchurch, that I began to truly realise that there was a different aspect of Christianity not normally offered, not readily apparent, and was alive and well in our wee country! Father Phil Dyer became a light in our lives. Amongst other things of a Christian mystical nature, he taught Christian meditation and introduced us to AngloCatholicism. He also baptised me. Then through the Labyrinth, set up monthly at St. Luke's in the city, which Phil helped to initially set up, we were introduced to the wondrous Anglo-Catholic tradition which has never failed to draw us, week after week since then.

Jeff and I had been trying different churches, carefully avoiding the modern offshoots that we knew were not our scene, even though we didn't know at that point what exactly our scene was. We have now long been regular attendees of St. Michaels, also in the city. We have meditated with various Christian based groups over the years, mainly changing only to fit in with what else was happening in our lives at the time. We both have elderly parents which take up a great deal of our time and energy. Health problems, mainly theirs, plus a few other difficulties, make it difficult for us to have a group of our own as yet.

Of two things I feel sure. Firstly, knowing my initial abhorrence for anything religious as such, in retrospect, every single place my journey has led me has been acutely NZCCM – © June 2012 9 (and sneakily at times I feel!) instrumental in getting me to where I am right now, and for this I am deeply grateful. Thank you Lord. Secondly, I feel sure that meditation and the contemplative way, have given

me a deep respect and tolerance for all pathways. Even the ones that are seemingly ridiculous and often downright dangerous to us looking on.

The Divine certainly does work in mysterious ways, ways I have learnt we can never really place judgement on, because our view of reality is so limited.

**Yvonne & Jeff – Christchurch**



## The Opening of a flower

I went along to an introductory talk on Christian meditation about five years ago. I had read and studied scripture for years and become a secular Franciscan, but still couldn't find what I was searching for; the how to do it, or how to find what St. Francis had found; freedom, peace and joy. I began the practice of meditation but it was a struggle to find the right times because I was always so busy 'doing' and I had my office and other prayers to say and things to do, so consequently meditation was a bit of a hit and a miss. I never gave up going to the weekly group meditation and told my self each week the next one will be better.

Three years ago I made a three-day silent meditation retreat with Fr Laurence Freeman and the experience of living those three days in a bubble of Love~~ God's love present in each person, and present in all of creation, and all around us, changed my life forever. This experience was God's kingdom on earth this was what I had been searching for. The morning and evening practice became instantly built into my day and it is this that takes first priority to anything else I do. My meditation times are mostly desert experiences and always hard work, but the solitude peace and trust and the joy of living in the present moment that follows are signs of God's spirit at work within.

I am aware of many changes taking place; Scripture has new meaning particularly the gospels and St. Paul. The beauty of nature is enhanced and I no longer have the same expectations of others or myself that I once had, and I see my family members—all of them—beautiful just as they are. John Main tells us that the best way to prepare for meditation is to do small acts of kindness to others. The practice of meditation is simple but not easy, for me it is the outward expression of my inward commitment to the presence of God's spirit dwelling in my heart. I have a long way to go yet. The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of our heart is as natural as an opening of a flower, and to let a flower open and bloom it is only necessary to let it be ~~ and if we remain still and silent, we cannot but be open and the spirit cannot but pour through our whole being ~~ and is this not what we were created for?

**Jackie – Orewa**



## Nothing Changed but Everything Changed

I came into meditation about five years ago during one of the lowest points of my life. For a number of years my husband had had health problems and my daughter, a solo mother with two children, wasn't coping at all well. I remember sitting in a counsellor's office crying and trying to explain how I felt. I was totally overwhelmed by the unmet needs of my family and I felt squeezed of all my life juice, energy and colour and I no longer knew who I was or where I was going.

My counsellor was a wise man, a Catholic, and as I later found out – a meditator. After quietly listening to me I remember him repeating back what I had said but with a more positive spin. He referred to the roles I played in my family's lives and used terms like 'caregiver' whereas I was probably feeling more like a slave. He used far more noble terms than what I deserved and by using those positive terms about these roles I was able to see things through a different perspective. He put a far more 'sacred' slant on what could be – if only I had eyes to see – thus began the long journey back from a truly horrible place. I continued to see this counsellor for some months and in the meantime he was quietly feeding me information about meditation. Funnily enough this same counsellor had introduced me to meditation when I had been to see him nine years previously but obviously I wasn't ready for it. This time I grasped all the information in my two hands and in desperation 'ran with it'.

Slowly over the months my world changed. The only way I can put it is that 'nothing changed' but everything changed – it was a strange paradox. I seemed to draw water from a well within, colour and laughter came back into my life and yet the problems that had drawn me to counselling hadn't changed – they were still with me. As time progressed so did my journey into meditation; my counsellor encouraged me to start my own group in the parish.

I felt a bit out of my depth at first – I had never started anything and didn't really know where to begin. I spoke to a friend who unbeknown to me had already been to the meditation group at Massey and was finding herself drawn to it also. I can remember the two of us getting together and being very excited at what seemed a new path in our lives. We approached one of the priests in our parish; he was very encouraging and suggested that we come under the umbrella of the WCCM. This made it easier for us to access any readings and help that we needed for our group. We had got together with Fr. Peter in Massey which encouraged us further, so began Holy Cross Meditation Group about four years ago in the Friary meeting room. Our group of about 6-10 people is really fortunate that we are so close to Massey and can access help at any time – also we have our Community days at St Paul's Parish at least four times a year and Retreat weekends. I try to be available at least once a year for time out and was lucky enough to get to Fr Laurence's retreat in Hamilton earlier this year. Last year I attended Ruth Fowler's Essential Teaching Workshop and personally found it a marvellous source of growth. It gave me much needed confidence and leadership skills. It seems to me that it is essential to be in touch with other meditators – that being part 'of the Body of Christ' helps me to keep centred and to know that there are 'others out there' with me having the same difficulties but still hanging in. In our group we encourage all our meditators to take a turn at leading. This usually consists of an opening prayer, an approved reading from Fr John Main or Fr Laurence, music and our 20 minutes

meditation. Sometimes we have been known to have some quite lively discussions afterwards and because we have shared our deepest selves we have in the process become much-loved friends. Earlier this year I put my meditation life in jeopardy. I took on the care of my granddaughter because her mother wasn't coping well. Because of my husband's health problems and mine it was a difficult time, made doubly so with my granddaughter's own unique behaviour problems. Slowly my meditation times slipped, my prayer times lessened and I found myself into my old worrying ways of trying to go it alone without the Lord. Sometimes a seemingly good thing can divert our pathways and send us into a tailspin. I only became aware of what it was doing shortly before my stay in hospital for spinal surgery. Since then we have been fortunate to access some other help for my granddaughter which has relieved me of a responsibility which I now realise was not mine to take up – if I had only listened quietly within my heart.

After my surgery I felt most vulnerable and fragile – in a way I have never felt before. My 'Maranatha' became almost the only prayer I could say because I felt so sick – there was little energy for anything else. Heavy medication and a painful back are not that conducive to meditation but it was a timely reminder that I am not God and that I have to solely rely on Him who loves me dearly. It also gave me a compassion for the sick and dying who are unable to pray for themselves so I have added them to my daily prayers. Three weeks along and I am feeling much better, I am 'back on the road again' rested and refreshed and eager to continue my own unique journey.

**Margaret – Henderson**



## Simplicity, Silence and Stillness

Twenty years ago, 1989, I was a Presbyterian parish minister in Auckland. I knew how to do most things except pray. The church expected us to have what was usually called “a spiritual life”, but they wanted to know nothing about it. Certainly there was no help in our training, no awareness of the wider church’s vast treasury of teaching and experience in prayer and spiritual life over the centuries. I remember how as students back in the late 1950s we had sometimes talked about that lack. But in 1989 I was pretty desperate and “running on empty”. There was at that time something called the Religious Book Club, I think run by the SCM Press. Each month you received a paperback book on some aspect of Christian studies – they selected it for you, and it simply arrived in the mail. This month the book was John Main’s “Letters From The Heart” 1 . I had never heard of John Main. I read the book while riding my exercycle, and found it riveting. This was it, for me – a pathway of prayer without the problems and superstitions and superficialities of what normally passed for prayer in parishes. John Main was describing a life of prayer based on stillness and silence, and on setting aside the voracious ego.

I was due some study leave. I phoned the monastery in Montreal and asked if I could come and stay for a month. No problem. Nobody told me John Main wasn’t there any more, and in the circumstances of a Benedictine monastery you don’t really run around asking questions. It wasn’t until I found a memorial plaque in the garden that I realised he had died. Fr Laurence Freeman was the Prior. Those few weeks were a crash course in the daily office and in the practice of Christian Meditation – we had four half-hour meditations each day. There was one small miracle when I returned to my parish some three months later after a lot of travelling. A few of the parishioners had been curious about why I would go to a monastery, and had made it their business to find out. When I returned it was to discover that they had already started their own meditation group meeting each week. All I had to do was join it. So began the journey, which has been typically unsmooth in some ways. Just as the monks say that their life consists in falling and getting up again, and as the rhythm of the mantra means constantly losing it and then gently returning to it in the silence, so I can look back over those 20 years and see how the trail has gone on. I was hugely helped by Archbishop Rowan Williams at the 2001 John Main Seminar in Sydney, who talked about how prosaic faith really is – a matter mostly of putting one foot in front of the other. Simplicity, silence and stillness have come to be what I most value in life. It has become inconceivable to me that I could now live any other way.

**Ross – Snells Beach**