

## ***The Way of silent meditation***

***By Fr Gordon Williams (Roshi: Empty Bowl School of Christian Zen)***

I have for many years now practiced the art of meditation. It is my practice to meditate twice daily, morning and evening. I have been greatly influenced by eastern practices such as yoga, Transcendental meditation and particularly Zen. Zen originally came from China and travelled to Korea and then to Japan where it was more finely cultivated. I often meet suspicion when people discover that I as a Catholic priest practicing Zen. Surely, they say this belongs to Buddhism! Maybe it's true that Zen Buddhism belongs to Buddhism, but Zen is universal. Universal Zen is how we live our life, or how we relate to this mystery we call 'life'. It's true there is a style of Zen meditation, but the practice of meditation is a universal wisdom and a practice that we find in all the great religions of the world. It is a practice of inner transformation of mind and heart. It offers a way of simplicity, silence and stillness that are essential to anyone seeking to deepen their spiritual life. It can be practiced by anyone of any religion, and even by those of no religion!

It is often not realised that the Christian faith has a long and ancient tradition of meditation, though for many centuries it has been lost and forgotten. But in recent times there has emerged a new discovery of the contemplative dimension of Christianity, and central is the rediscovery of silent meditation.. The Christian tradition has its roots in the ancient Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt.

The ancient way of meditation taught by the Desert Fathers and Mothers is simple, but strangely difficult and needs practice. It is the basis of all contemplative meditation.

### **Here are some easy points for practice:**

Sit still with your back straight. Close or lower your eyes lightly. Become aware of your body sitting there quietly. Wait for your breath to settle down, then simply observe the flow of your breathing. Breathe normally and gently, do not take big deep breaths. When distractions come, and they will, simply return to the breath. It does not matter how many times you return to the breath. Meditation is about awareness of you body and your mind as it is, not how you would like it to be. Try not to be carried away by thoughts and plans or memories or worries about the future. If you are a complete beginner, start with five minutes, then you may be able to stretch to ten minutes. Remember meditation is a commitment, you have to practice daily to allow it to penetrate your heart and mind. Some traditions suggest the use of a mantra, a word to repeat with your breathing. This should be a short phrase such as *Come Lord, or Jesus, or any short word or phrase from the Scriptures*. As the mind and body become silent and still you can let go of the word and simply sit. The Japanese call this *Shikantaza* or 'just sitting.'. That might sound easy, but in fact it's very difficult to just sit silently with your breathing.

It's important to practice everyday, preferably twice a day, morning and evening. A daily practice may take time to develop, be patient with yourself. If you give up, simply start again.

Finally, we meditate to empty ourselves, to take attention off ourselves and be more open to others. In the Christian tradition it is a work of love. Hopefully in time we become more loving people, more centred and calm. It is a way to awaken to your spiritual life, to connect with yourself and with others.

I find the best time for silent meditation is first thing in the morning, when all is quiet and peaceful. (though that may not be your circumstances!) and in the evening, either before bed or in the early evening. If you can't do either of these times, find what is best for you. What is important is daily practice. Anyone can do this, and it can bring about great changes in your life. To those who wish to embark on this journey I wish you happy and sitting!