

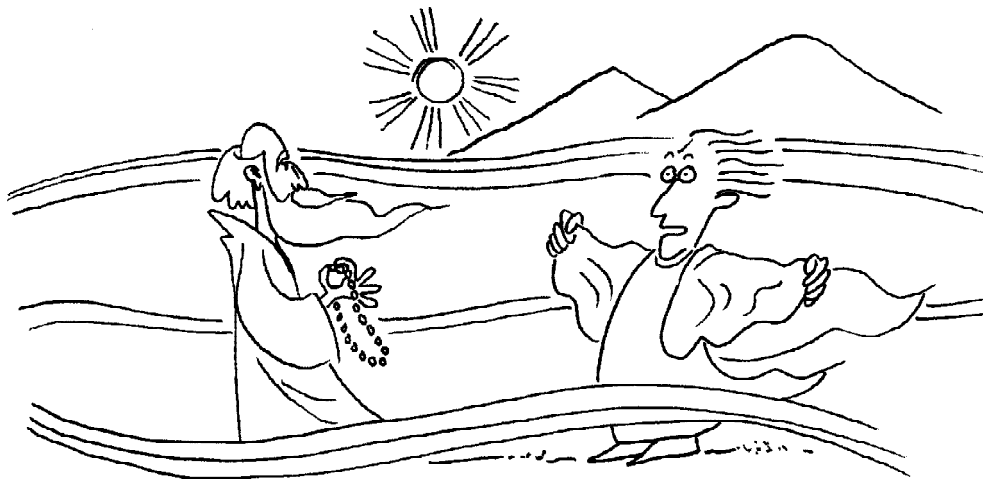


Conferences IX & X - On Prayer

John Cassian

Summary of main points

- **The main virtues: unceasing prayer and purity of heart:** “The end of every monk and the perfection of his heart incline him to constant and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer: and, as much as human frailty allows, it strives after an unchanging and continual tranquility of mind and perpetual purity.” (II.1.p.329)
- **Abandon anxiety and purify the emotions:** “First anxiety about fleshly matters should be completely cut off. Then, not only the concern for but in fact even the memory of affairs and business should be refused all entry whatsoever; detraction, idle speech, talkativeness, and buffoonery should also be done away with; the disturbance of anger, in particular, and of sadness should be entirely torn out; and the harmful shoot of fleshly lust and of avarice should be uprooted.” (III,1 p.330)
- **How to prepare for prayer:** “For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray as a result of the operation of the memory. Hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be. For the mind in prayer is shaped by the state that it was previously in, and when we sink into prayer, the image of the same deeds, words and thoughts plays itself out before our eyes. ...Therefore before we pray we should make an effort to cast out from the innermost parts of our heart whatever we do not wish to steal upon us as we pray, so that in this way we can fulfill the apostolic words: ‘Pray without ceasing.’ And: ‘In every place lifting up pure hands without anger and dissension.’” (III,3 p.331)
- **Simplify your life:** “The elders....understood that whatever exceeds the minimum of daily food and the unavoidable requirements of the flesh contributes to worldly concern and anxiety... If working for one solidus were able to provide for the needs of our body, but we wished to exhaust ourselves by more effort and labor for the sake of earning two or three solidi; and if two tunics were enough clothing for day and night, but we succeeded in becoming the owners of three or four; and if a dwelling of one or two rooms were enough, but we were moved by worldly ambition and a desire for spaciousness to build four or five rooms, exquisitely furnished and larger than required by utility...we would be displaying the passion of worldly lust wherever we could.” (V,4/5 p.333)
- **Distractions are inevitable:** “If only we were able to enjoy uninterruptedly these spiritual thoughts in the same way and with the same ease that we usually conceive their beginnings... the mind has no constancy of its own.” (VII.1/2 p.334)



A brother came to Abbot Pastor and said: Many distracting thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger because of them. Then the elder thrust him out into the open air and said: Open up the garments about your chest and catch the wind in them. But he replied: This I cannot do. So the elder said to him: If you cannot catch the wind, neither can you prevent distracting thoughts from coming into your head. Your job is to say “No” to them.



The ultimate way to pray is "wordless prayer"
(XXV.1 p.345)

- **All types of prayer are important:** "I urge first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made." (IX p.335) "Thus it is clear that all these kinds which we have spoken about appear helpful and necessary to everyone, so that in one and the same man a changing disposition will send forth pure and fervent prayers of supplication at one time, prayer at another, and intercessions at another (XV.1 p.338)... Yet sometimes the mind which advances to that true disposition of purity and has already begun to be rooted in it... pours out to God wordless prayers of the purest vigor (XV.2 p.339) ... Hence, in whatever state a person is, he sometimes finds himself making pure and intense prayers." (XV.3 p.339)
- **The ultimate way to pray is 'wordless prayer':** "This prayer (The Lord's Prayer), although it seems to contain the utter fullness of perfection inasmuch as it was instituted and established on the authority of the Lord himself, nonetheless raises his familiars to that condition which we characterized previously as more sublime. It leads them by a higher stage to that fiery and, indeed, more properly speaking, wordless prayer which is known and experienced by very few." (XXV.1 p.345)
- **Different experiences may occur in prayer:** "... an ineffable joy and gladness of spirit... profound speechlessness... outpouring of tears (XXVII p.346/7)... 'That is not a perfect prayer,' (St Anthony) said, 'wherein a monk understands himself or what he is praying.'" (XXXI p.349)
- **The importance of interiority:** "Before anything else, we must carefully observe the gospel command which says that we should go into our room and pray to our Father with the door shut. We shall fulfill this in the following way. We pray in our room when we withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern and disclose our prayers to the Lord in secret and, as it were, intimately. We pray with the door shut when, with closed lips and in total silence, we pray to the searcher not of voices but of hearts. We pray in secret when, intent in heart and mind alone, we offer our petitions to God alone... prayer should be made frequently, but briefly..." (XXXVI.1 p.353)
- **There is an inherent danger in images:** "It is against the error of ..people that the text is well directed: 'The changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of an image of a corruptible man.(Conference X V.1)
- **Solitude is important:** "But they alone see his Godhead with purest eyes who, mounting from humble and earthly tasks and thoughts, go off with him to the lofty mountain of the desert.....our Lord...taught us by the example of his withdrawal that, if we too wish to address God with purity and integrity of heart, we should likewise draw apart from all the turbulence and confusion of the crowd." (VI.4 p.375)

• **Unity is the ultimate aim of prayer:** “For then will be brought to fruition in us that prayer of our Savior which he prayed to his Father on his disciples’ behalf when he said: ‘That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and they in us.’ And again: ‘That all may be one, as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us....also be made perfect in unity.’ (VII.1 p.375)

• **The mantra should be repeated constantly - ceaseless prayer:** “The formula for this discipline and prayer that you are seeking, then shall be presented to you. Every monk who longs for the continual awareness of God should be in the habit of meditating on it ceaselessly in his heart, after having driven out every kind of thought, because he will be unable to hold fast to it in any other way than by being freed from all bodily cares and concerns... This is then the devotional formula proposed to you as absolutely necessary for possessing the perpetual awareness of God: ‘O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord make haste to help me.’ (IX.2 p.379) “You should, I say, meditate constantly on this verse in your heart. You should not stop repeating it when you are doing any kind of work or performing some service or are on a journey. Meditate on it while sleeping and eating and attending to the least needs of nature.” (IX.14 p.382)

• **The mantra is a defense against distractions:** “This verse is an unassailable wall, an impenetrable breastplate, and a very strong shield for all those who labor under the attacks of demons. It does not permit those troubled by acedia and anxiety of mind or those depressed by sadness or different kinds of thoughts to despair of a saving remedy.... This verse, I say, is necessary and useful for each one of us in whatever condition we may live.” (IX.4/5 p.379) “If I am boiling over with a multitude of different distractions of soul and with a fickle heart and am unable to control my wandering thoughts”. (IX.10 p.381)

• **The mantra leads to Poverty of spirit:** “Let the mind hold ceaselessly to this formula above all until it has been strengthened by constantly using and continually meditating upon it, and until it renounces and rejects the whole wealth and abundance of thoughts. Thus straitened by the poverty of this verse, it will easily attain to that gospel beatitude which holds the first place among the other beatitudes. For, it says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ (XI.1 p.383)



Say the “formula” “in prosperity and adversity”.
(John Cassian)

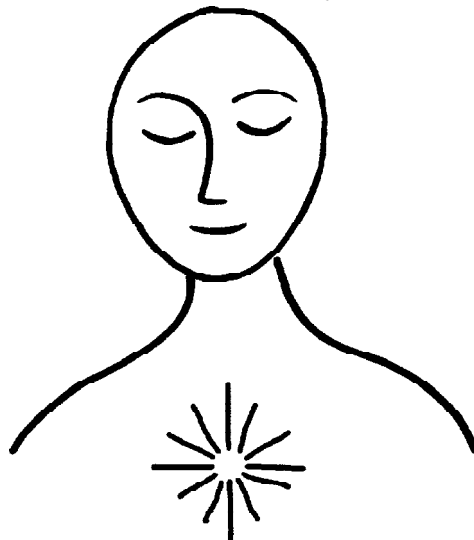


Word into Silence

John Main

Summary of main points

- ***The Christian Vision of life, unity, is the idea underlying the discipline of meditation:*** “It sees that all mankind has been unified in the One who is in union with the Father. All matter, all creation, too, is drawn into the cosmic movement towards unity that will be the realization of the Divine harmony... In union we become who we are called to be. Only in union do we know fully who we are.” (Preface, vii)
- ***There should be no polarization of the active and the contemplative life:*** “The most harmful effect has been to alienate the majority of Christians from that same deep prayer which transcends complexity and restores unity.” “The call to sanctity is universal.” (Preface, viii)
- ***The call to unity has wider implications:*** “Unity amongst Christians as well as, in the long term, unity among different races and creeds rests upon our finding the inner principle of unity as a personal experience within our own hearts.” (Preface, ix)
- ***Christian prayer places absolute faith in the Power of Christ:*** “The Christian, in his prayer, renounces his own power. He leaves self behind. In so doing he places absolute faith in the power of Christ as the only power that increases the unity among men because it is the power of love, the power of union itself.” (Preface, ix)
- ***Our prayer is the entry into the prayer experience of Jesus:*** “The Christian has been given freedom from all problematic questions about prayer by the revelation that what he calls ‘his prayer’ is nothing less than an entry into the prayer-experience of Jesus himself, the Spirit, the bond of union with the Father... The ultimate secret has been revealed: “the secret is this - Christ in you”... “we possess the mind of Christ”. (Preface, x) “There is only one prayer, the stream of love between the Spirit of the risen Jesus and His Father, in which we are incorporate.” (p.39)
- ***Meditation is responding to your own nature:*** “Learning to meditate is not just a matter of mastering a technique. It is much more learning to appreciate and respond directly to the depths of your own nature, not human nature in general but your own in particular.” (p.1)
- ***Being in relationship is the essential context of meditation:*** “The essential context of meditation is to be found in the fundamental relationship of our lives, the relationship that we have as creatures with God, our Creator.” (p.1)
- ***Self-knowledge is the first step:*** “Most of us have to get into touch with ourselves first, to get into a full relationship with God.” (p.1) “Meditation is thus a process of self-discovery.” (p.20) “who we are and why we are” (p.4)

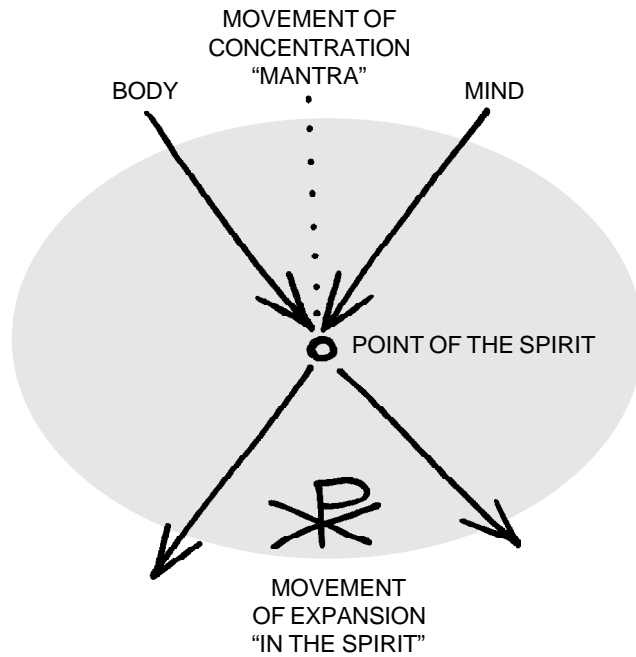


- **Christian Meditation is about becoming aware of our divine origin:** “as we become more and more relaxed in ourselves, and the longer we meditate, the more we become aware that the source of our new-found calm in our daily lives is precisely the life of God within us.” (p.2) *We become aware of our divine origin: we are to* “turn to our own nature with total concentration, to experience our own creation first-hand and, above all, to turn to and experience the living Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts.” (p.5) (see also p.16/18) *and* “we seek not just to think about God, but to be with God, to experience Him as the ground of our being.” (p.5) (See also p.24 –29)

- **Our consciousness has been transformed by Jesus:** “Jesus by giving us His Spirit has dramatically transformed the fabric of human consciousness. Our redemption by Jesus Christ has opened up for us levels of consciousness that can be described by St Paul only in terms of a totally new creation.” (p.2) *leading to* “life... in all its fullness”. (p.19)

- **The Spirit of God dwelling within us is the central reality of Christian faith:** “The living Spirit of God dwells within us, giving new life to our mortal bodies. The all-important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God’s mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality in our lives; to let it become that reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are.” (p.3)

- **Meditation is paying attention:** *It is* “concentration, the focusing of our whole being, all our energies and faculties upon a single point.” (p.44) *It is* “selfless attention” (p.3), “we turn the searchlight of consciousness off ourselves and that means off a self-centred analysis of our own unworthiness.” (p.51)



- **Leaving thoughts behind leads to silence:** “Leaving all these thoughts and imaginations, we seek to follow Him in the purity of our heart.” (p.16) “In a deep creative silence we meet God in a way that transcends all our powers of intellect and language” ... “a silence where we have to listen, to concentrate, to attend rather than to think.” (p.7)

- **Be relaxed, but alert:** “in meditation we come to experience ourselves as at one and the same time totally relaxed and totally alert. This stillness is not the stillness of sleep but rather of total awakened concentration.” (p.8)

- **The mantra helps to still the mind:** “The task of meditation is to bring all of this mobile and distracted mind to stillness, silence and concentration”. *To achieve this*, “Cassian recommended anyone who wanted to learn to pray, and to pray continually, to take a single short verse and just to repeat this verse over and over again.” (p.9)

- **Maranatha is recommended as a mantra:** “The mantra I recommend is the Aramaic word ‘maranatha’, which means, ‘Come Lord. Come Lord Jesus.’” “I prefer the Aramaic form because it has no associations for most of us and

it helps us into a meditation that will be quite free of all images.” (p.9) (See also p.52/53)

- **How to say the mantra:** “Repeat the word calmly, serenely, and above all faithfully for the full time of your meditation.” “We begin by saying the mantra in the mind. But as we progress with simple fidelity, the mantra begins to sound not so much in our head as in our heart. That is, it seems to become rooted in the very depths of our being.” (p.14)

- **Stay with the same mantra:** “If you chop and change your mantra you are postponing your progress in meditation.” (p.11)

- **Mantra restores us to unity and harmony:** “to restore... unity to man with the mind and heart integrated through prayer. The mantra provides this integrating power.” (p.15) “With this growing sense of wonder at God’s power within us there comes an ever-deepening awareness of the harmony, the creative wholeness that we possess, and we begin to feel that we know ourselves for the first time...we do not begin to appreciate our own personal harmony alone, but we begin to experience it as a new capacity for true empathy, a capacity to be at peace with others, and



indeed at peace with the whole creation.” (p.13)

- **Be aware of the danger of “pax pernicioosa”:** “When we start to meditate we can often come quite quickly into realms of peacefulness and experience a sense of pleasant well being, even euphoria; saying the mantra can then be made to appear a distraction...many people do not make the progress they should in prayer, simply because they opt for this destructive lethargy... they abandon the constant saying of the mantra.” (p.56)

- **How to sit and breathe:** “posture... comfortable and relaxed”... back should be as as straight possible with the spine in an upright position... your breathing should be calm and regular. Allow every muscle in your body to relax. And then, put the mind in tune with the body.” (p.8/9)

- **How long and where to meditate:** “In order to experience its benefits, it is necessary to meditate twice a day and every day without fail. Twenty minutes is the minimum time for meditation, twenty-five or thirty minutes is about the average time. It is also helpful to meditate regularly in the same place and at the same time every day because this helps a creative rhythm in our life to grow, with meditation as a kind of pulse-beat sounding the rhythm.” (p.12)

• **There are different stages of saying the mantra:** “The first is simply to say the mantra for the full duration of the meditation... The second aim is to say the mantra throughout the meditation without interruption, while remaining quite calm in the face of all distractions... And the third of these preliminary aims is to say the mantra for the entire time of the meditation, quite free of all distractions.” (p.15)

• **Learn to live in the present moment and abandon anxieties:** “Learning to pray is learning to live as fully as possible in the present moment... we are not thinking about the past... nor are we thinking about the future... In meditation we are wholly inserted into the present, and there to live to the fullness of our capability, our consciousness expanding as we entertain the Lord of Life. (p.22) “Meditation is our way of leaving behind all the illusions about ourselves, about others, and about God, which we have either created for ourselves or received from the past.” (p.23) “I bid you put away anxious thoughts..Jesus ..is urging us to develop a spirit of trust.” (p.65)

• **Be aware of the stages of the Journey:** “First, we must confront with some shame the chaotic din of a mind ravaged by so much exposure to trivia and distraction...we then encounter a darker level of consciousness, of repressed fears and anxieties... the next,... our own silence, we risk everything, for we risk our very being... we see with wonder the light of our own spirit, and to know that light as something beyond our spirit and yet the source of it... We are led from depth to depth of purifying simplification... we are in fact not being destroyed but awakened to the eternally fresh source of our being... But even if we know intellectually that this is the purpose of the silence, at the time our actual experience is of the void.” (p.31/32)

• **The fruits of meditation are the Fruits of the Spirit:** “The authentic Christian qualities, the fruits of the Spirit, are given with and grow out of the experience of the Spirit of Jesus, flooding our hearts with God’s personal love and summoning us to the fullness of our personhood.”(p.41)

