To find oneself is to find oneself other-centred – concerned, in empathy, in sympathy, and in compassion for others.
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The purpose of finding oneself is to move from a world in which we think we are the centre of reality to the real world which is God, which is truly boundless.
Finding Oneself

Finding oneself is not a self-centred activity. To find oneself is to find oneself other-centred, but it can only happen if we are ready to begin to lose ourselves.

Our being here is about finding oneself more deeply, more truly, through the silence, through the regular times of meditation. But finding oneself is not a self-centred activity. To find oneself is to find oneself other-centred – concerned and in empathy and in sympathy and in compassion for others. Not that it’s a choice that we make to feel that or to have that attitude towards others; that’s how we find ourselves becoming, maybe to our own surprise. Maybe we think of ourselves as rather self-centred and ego-centric people, and then we discover little by little over time that actually something is changing in us, that we are empathising and sympathising and entering into a compassionate awareness of others.

Let’s begin with this teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 16 which sets the theme for us.

Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would follow me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me because whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. What will it profit anyone if you gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul? And what can you give in exchange for your soul? For the Son of Man will come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will repay each one according to what he has done.’ (Mt 16:24-27)

We need to keep that last bit in the section because I think it is relevant to what he is telling us here about finding oneself. This idea of finding oneself needs to be very carefully understood. Of course we do need to find ourselves; it’s the essential work of life. If we understand correctly what finding self means, we could say it is the purpose of life.

I met a man once who’d had a near-death experience; he almost
drowned. He was very happy going down the tunnel of light into the great embrace of love that he perceived to be drawing him. Presumably he was thrashing around in the water physically trying to survive, but actually in the depths of his consciousness he was having a great time. Anyway, he got the message that it wasn’t his time so he came back. He came back first of all without a fear of death, and that changed his life, but also with a conviction that he had a work to do, he had something to complete. And he was a bit anxious about what he should do with his life now. I think he was thinking primarily in terms of what kind of job he should do or where he should live, various external aspects of the work he should do, but I think what he needed to find was the interior meaning of that work. What he needed, what we all need, is to find ourselves. That is the essential work of life.

We do need to find ourselves but we need to understand that it can only happen if we are ready to begin to lose ourselves. To find our true self is a driving force in human development. At all the stages of our life’s journey – psychological, sexual, emotional, physical development – finding oneself is the great force I think, the deeper push that keeps us going and pushes us through difficult times, if we can get through them, into the next phase of our life. That’s why we don’t feel satisfied for long even when we get what we want, when we fulfil our ambitions. We’ve got what we’ve longed for and worked for, maybe for a long time, even then we are still not satisfied. Status, qualification, or even emotional security is not enough.

I met a couple recently who are interested in coming to live with us in Bonnevaux, our new centre in France. When they came up to me they said, ‘We’d just like to speak to you about what you spoke about last week, about Bonnevaux.’ And they said, ‘But before we say it, we’d just like you to know that we are happily married, we are not in midlife crisis (they are quite young actually), we are financially not in a crisis. But although we are happy with our lives, for some time now we’ve been wondering about what is missing. There’s something more that we need, that we should address; we couldn’t define it, we couldn’t name it.’ And what they felt was that Bonnevaux offered them an opportunity to serve. What they’d come to realise was that that was what they needed, a way of serving. Whatever form it might take, what they needed was a way to serve. And I think that was a beautiful expression of how, together as a
couple and as individuals within a relationship, they were finding themselves.

By serving we are turning the attention off ourselves, escaping from the lock of self-fixation. The discovery that however much we have, however much we may have achieved, we have not yet fulfilled or finished our work is a great moment of discovery. It’s very disturbing as well, because it really is difficult to name what it is you are looking for and what is the work you’ve got to do. That’s where a lot of people don’t have the opportunity or good fortune to be with other people who can help them or give examples to them or help them to understand what is happening, what is emerging in them, what is pushing them to the next stage of their life. It can happen at any stage in your life, or happen at every significant phase in your life. To be able to understand and name this work is a great grace.

All of these pleasant things that we like to acquire and to have to give us a sense of security and status, respectability, health, all these pleasant things fail eventually to convince us that they constitute our true self. They are not who we are. And therefore, at that moment, whatever it is we see is our next step – of course it would be different for different people in different circumstances – but as soon as we begin to see what our next step should be we begin to simplify our life.

To simplify means to focus. It means to decide for something and not just to keep your options open. You can spend your whole life skilfully keeping your options open, and you could have quite a lot of success keeping your options open. Especially in the working environment of today where nobody is expected to stay in a job for more than a couple of years, you can keep your options open all the time. This of course has a major impact upon the level of commitment, the level of relationship that you may have in your life, because to go deeper means that you don’t keep your options open. It means you make commitments, you make decisions. Every time we say the mantra, we are making a decision, we are focusing, we are making a commitment.

So, we have to penetrate through our obvious and also our not so obvious secondary layers of self-recognition. The ways in which we recognise ourselves, describe ourselves, fill out forms, present ourselves to others by the way we dress or by the way we act or by the cars we drive or by the house we live in, by the conversations we have or the company we keep, all these ways in which we express
ourselves and recognise ourselves and feel comfortable, all of that has to be penetrated through. We have to see through it. That’s the work of finding oneself. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to stop everything you are doing and go off to the desert or Bonnevaux, or change the external forms of your life at all. But it does mean that what you have to view is in the secondary levels of self-recognition; that’s self-knowledge, that is humility, and it’s clarity, and it is also liberation. That is, I think, what Jesus means by ‘losing your life’. It means to be detached from what we can possess of ourselves. Anything that we have or are, that could be possessed – status, money, identity, social identity, religious identity – anything that can be seen as a possession has to be let go of. Just how radical that is in the end is clear from this teaching of Jesus we just heard:

> Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever who loses his life for my sake will find it. What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and yet forfeit your soul. What can you give in exchange for yourself.

Then he adds this apocalyptic phrase reminding us of the last judgement: ‘For the Son of Man will come in his Father’s glory with his angels and then he will repay each one according to what he has done.’ In other words, we shape our own lives. We have the ultimate responsibility for being and for finding who we are. That’s not meant to be frightening. I think it is meant to be awakening. It’s meant to say to us: Life is serious and it is wonderful and don’t waste it, don’t waste a moment of it. ■
Jesus’s teaching on this question of finding oneself doesn’t put it just in terms of finding oneself but in following him. To follow means to pay attention, to be faithful, to stay connected, to keep going in the spirit of trust or faith. And it means to take the attention off ourselves. That is what it means to leave self behind.

This is the challenge of meditation for people in our culture; it seems as if meditation is just one more thing we’ve got to do. We may like to do it, think we like to do it, but we don’t have time for it. But actually when we do make the time for it and meditate, we discover that our whole sense of time and the meaning of our experience in daily life changes. We begin to see everything in a new light. It’s quite surprising and unexpected how the time we give to silence, stillness and simplicity changes the way we live here and now, and not only in terms of improving our blood pressure or our panic attacks or our anxiety levels or sleep patterns. We may meditate just for these reasons at first, but it isn’t long before we discover that the time we’re giving to meditation is having a profound and pervasive influence on every aspect of our life, including the most important aspects of our life, which are those we cannot measure.

Jesus’s teaching on this question of finding oneself doesn’t put it just in terms of finding oneself but in following him. This puts a different spin on it. To follow him means what? Say you are driving in two cars somewhere and the first car knows where he is going, you don’t. So they’ll say ‘Just follow me.’ What does that mean? It means there’s trust, trust that they know where they are going. It also means you have to be very careful that you don’t lose the other person; you have to make sure that another car doesn’t come in between you and the car you are following. It’s a small example of what it might mean to follow: to pay attention, to be faithful, to stay connected, to keep going in the spirit of trust or faith. And it means to take the attention off ourselves: ‘Whoever wants to follow me must deny himself’. It sounds very negative, but we can see it in a
better light if we see it in the light of meditation – taking the attention off ourselves. That is what it means to leave self behind.

We have to enter into that in order to follow; and to find ourself we must follow. We have to accept the inescapable suffering of our lives and follow him, to take up our cross, as he says, each day, to not take our attention off him, which means to keep a space open in ourselves which is his space only – ‘Parking Space Reserved’ – space reserved for the one we are following. It is into that space that we enter most fully when we meditate, and we open up, expand that space where he can teach us. If we want to flourish, to be fully alive, which is what ‘happy’ really means, or to save our lives which is what it means as well I think, then we need to lose this life.

There is a negative connotation in losing. If you say somebody ‘lost it’ it means they lost control, they lost the thread. It’s the opposite of ‘succeeding’ in our culture. to fail, to lose. Losing is the ultimate disaster; losing is the great shame; it’s the way in which we lose our self-respect. But in this wisdom, we see something different. We see that we have to lose in order to find. And thus we find our life and we find ourselves.

We’ll try to understand the importance of silence. And understanding the meaning of the nature of silence, gift of silence, work of silence in meditation, we’ll see hopefully how this discovery of silence is related to the work of finding ourselves – being our true self.

Somebody asked me, ‘Where did Jesus ever say we have to meditate twice a day, morning and evening? I don’t see that in the gospel.’ It’s true, we don’t. What Jesus tells us is to follow him, to lose self and to find ourself, our true self, in the losing. How we do it, he leaves that up to us, I suppose. In the same way that we should eat regularly and sleep regularly, how we actually do it, what we eat and how we sleep, I suppose depends upon ourselves. But there are certain universal laws in which we fulfil those natural requirements of a healthy, balanced and integrated life. Meditating twice a day is a simple way to begin. John Main said it’s a minimum. And this is what Ramana Maharshi says:

Setting apart time for meditation is only for the merest novices. Someone who is advancing will begin to enjoy a deeper beatitude whether he or she is at work or not. While his hands are in society, he keeps his head in solitude.

In other words, meditation doesn’t mean only what you do at the
times of meditation. It is not just a technique. It is not an isolated lifestyle practice. It is something that eventually integrally embraces the whole of one’s life. It is one’s life. ‘Praise God in all things,’ St Paul says; ‘Pray at all times.’ (1 Thess 5:17, 18)

Thirty minutes is an average amount of time in many traditions because it’s about that amount of time that we need both to get into the practice, and we may find that we are really in a pure state of attention for maybe a short part of that half hour and to extend it too much we just can’t do it, just can’t keep it up at that same level, that same degree. That’s just our human nature; it’s just the way our minds are.

John Main says those times of meditation are the most important times of the day. That doesn’t make sense to us I think at first, maybe not for a few years until you have come to the point where you feel and know that meditation has just come into your life as a regular practice and it’s something that you would be incomplete without. The day would feel incomplete just as if you didn’t have time for breakfast or didn’t have time to eat all day or you couldn’t sleep properly for the last few days; you would feel incomplete. It is not a matter of will power. There’s a point where you come to realise that meditation has simply, as a practice, entered into and pervades your life. But there are particular times of meditation that are necessary for that; they are valuable for that.

Let me remind you again of the very simple central practice that we teach, that we recommend. That is the way of meditation. Meditation is a practice rather than a theory.

To meditate we sit still. Physical stillness helps to come to stillness of mind. We sit because St Bernard said sitting is the ideal posture for prayer because it is halfway between standing up and lying down. If you are standing up you are going to be doing something, going to be busy. If you are lying down of course you are relaxing and the next step is falling asleep. You’ll want to sit in a way that is both relaxed and alert. So sit with your back straight, your feet on the ground, your hands on your lap or on your knees, so that your physical posture feels you are not just relaxing, sitting back in the chair watching the TV, drowsing off. You are awake and yet relaxed.

Then it is helpful just before you meditate perhaps to turn your attention towards your breath, to watch your breath, to feel the breath coming in and leaving the body. Become aware of that natural
rhythm. Meditation becomes a natural rhythm in your life as well. Relax the muscles of your face, your forehead, your jaw, your shoulders, wherever you feel any tension. Close your eyes lightly and then silently, interiorly, in your mind and in your heart, gently and faithfully begin to say our word, your mantra.

The art of meditation is to say the word faithfully from the beginning to the end of the meditation. We don’t have to blank out our mind and get rid of all thoughts. But what we do is to lay aside the constant stream of thought, the waves of thought passing through our minds – thoughts about the past, or the future, or fantasy, thoughts of sadness, thoughts of happiness. We have to simply lay aside every thought and feeling associated with the thought gently without force, patiently and faithfully. This is the work of attention. It’s the work of silence to do this. When the mind wanders from your word and you come back to your thoughts, and when you realise that, you drop the thought, you stop solving the problem, and you pick up and start saying your mantra again.

That’s why it’s important to stay with the same word from the beginning to the end of the meditation and from day to day. You could take the name Jesus or the word Abba. The word I would recommend is the word maranatha. Maranatha is the oldest Christian prayer; it means ‘Come Lord’. St Paul ends the First Letter to the Corinthians with it. It’s in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. So it’s a sacred word in our tradition, a mantra in our tradition. If you choose this word, say it as four syllables – ma-ra-na-tha, ma-ra-na-tha. Articulate it clearly in your mind and heart, and listen to the word as you say it. Listen to the word as you say it. Don’t use too much force. Keep returning to the word when you become distracted.

That’s the practice. That’s the art of meditation whether you’ve been meditating for 30 years or whether you are just starting tonight. That’s a beautiful work to do. You will come to love that work more and more and to see the meaning and the gift of it.
A New Value System

When we find our life, our self, in and through this process of losing it, everything else in the world acquires a different meaning, a different value.

I said that if we want to flourish, to be fully alive, to discover what happiness really means, what Jesus calls ‘save our lives’ then, he tells us, we need to lose it. We need to see the positive meaning of ‘losing’, letting go. He tells us that we must lose or let go of ourselves, our lives, for his sake, which means keeping our attention in him, on him.

It doesn’t mean continually thinking about him. Think of the people you love in your life; you aren’t necessarily thinking about them all the time, though there will be times when you think about them, when you are missing them, or when you are concerned for their well-being. But thinking about them is not the same as keeping your attention on them; it’s not the same as loving them. If you think about them it’s because you love them. Thinking about them isn’t the same as loving them. And if you love them – talking about individuals in your life, your grandchildren or your lovers or your friends – if you love them, then you have this awareness that you are with them, that they are in you at all times. During stressful times or difficult times or painful times or joyful times or times when you are really concentrating on something else – your work, filling out a form, even at other times when you thoughts are engaged with something else – you don’t love them any the less. You can be aware of their presence without thinking about them.

This means that losing ourself is not such a bad thing. It can be interpreted in rather negative terms as punishing oneself, or denying oneself pleasures, or crucifying oneself in some way, or seeking hardships. The danger of that of course is that it creates a negative spirituality. It also creates a negative attitude towards oneself. You begin to objectify yourself in the same way as people do when they go to the gym and work out and develop very good bodies. The body becomes an object they are rather proud of and like other people to
admire as well. That isn’t really what the spiritual path is about. The danger of losing oneself in that negative way, or trying to lose oneself in that negative way, is that we collapse into pride. The desert teachers were very conscious of the danger of pride. You could be a very good desert mother or desert father in the sense of being very disciplined, very controlled having mastered many of your passions, and yet you collapse into pride because you are rather pleased with yourself for being such a good teacher. So pride was the big pitfall.

The other extreme of that of course is that if you go into this negative attitude about losing yourself, you just end up in self-pity. You just concentrate on the pain you are suffering – ‘poor me’ and ‘why me’ – concentrating upon the negative side of it.

When we find our life, our self, in and through this process of losing it, everything else in the world acquires a different meaning, a different value. This process of finding oneself is a re-evaluation of everything. There are times, crises, in our life where we need to do a re-evaluation of things – have we lost something; what has gone wrong? We’ve dropped the ball somewhere. So there are times when we need to re-evaluate. If this process of finding ourselves in the way that Jesus describes it is truly going on in our life – it’s simply part of our daily existence, we’re aware of it on good days and bad days, and we’re faithful to it, we’re true to it – then this process of evaluation, re-evaluation of everything else in our life is continuous; we don’t have to wait for a crisis. You are continually being aware of or being confronted with the value of the activities in your life. The things you spend your time, or your money on, is it worth it? How much time you spend doing this or that, what you’re doing, all of these things become thrown into a new value system.

The value of this self-discovery is the highest value. Isn’t this what he means when he says ‘What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but lose yourself?’ (Mt 16:26) The cost of your true self, what value is that? You’ve achieved all your ambitions and goals or you’ve built a nice little tower of financial or emotional security for yourself, but what is the value of that if this essential human work is not being done in you? What can anyone give in exchange for self? This I think is what we find in some of those passages of St Paul where he becomes most powerful and most explicit about the way of Christ as he calls it. This is what St Paul says:

Whatever was an asset to me I now count as loss. Everything that I regarded as an asset I now regard as rubbish for the
sake of Christ. More than that, I count everything as less compared to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness from the law but that righteousness which comes through faith in Christ’. (Phil 3:7-9)

Here is a very powerful statement of specifically Christian values, that in comparison to the excellence of knowing Christ whom I have come to know by losing everything, everything I have lost which means let go of is rubbish. You may still have the job that you had, you may still have the security that you had, although you will probably be more aware that it is not as secure as it looked or as permanent as it seemed, but what you have learnt to do through the practice over time is to let go of these as primary values in your life. They are no longer your primary focus and object of concentration. If you have them, it is great; you don’t throw them away. On the other hand, you recognise that like everything else in life they are impermanent, and you are prepared to let them go.

So in the light of this experience of finding Christ by letting go of my attachment or my over valuation of these other things, I now can see that they are really rubbish compared with this excellence of knowing myself in Christ and Christ in me. So faith in Christ.
What Faith in Christ Means

Faith is about making a commitment, and growing in that commitment through good times and bad. It introduces us to the process of self-transcendence, and out of that comes a different kind of love, a deeper quality of love.

Faith in Christ doesn’t mean how I believe in Christ, or how I will define who Christ is. Christianity, probably more than any other religion in the world, has shed millions of gallons of blood in battlefields and torture chambers over what and how people described Christ, how they defined him or defined their theological belief system. All religions of course have belief systems and all religions have more or less healthy debate about how those belief systems can be expressed. In Tibetan Buddhism there are four very distinct philosophical schools. In Christianity right from the very beginning, as you can see from the New Testament, there were many different ways of expressing and understanding, verbalising, conceptualising the meaning of Christ. So faith in Christ doesn’t mean what is your particular denomination or theological position regarding how we define him.

Part of the reason for that is that it’s a little absurd that some Christians are confronting contemporary problems – moral problems, ethical problems – that didn’t exist in the time of Jesus and were unthinkable in his time. We now say: How are we as Christians meant to deal with these issues or these problems? What would Jesus do? What would Jesus do about stem cell research? What would be Jesus’s view of gay marriage? Who would Jesus vote for in the next elections? It’s really rather missing the mark, like turning Jesus into a fictional character. That’s not what faith in Christ means; I don’t think so.

He is not only a historical character. As a historical character it is very important that he existed historically, but he died. He was historical in the sense that he belonged in a particular culture, a particular religion, a religious view of the world. We know him in a different way. St Paul says we know him ‘no longer after the manner
of the flesh’ (2 Cor 5:16). We don’t know him in this historical way anymore. It can be helpful and useful and enriching to reflect on and learn about the historical context in which Jesus lived and taught; it can throw some light onto some of the words he used in the passages of his teaching and so on. But that isn’t the essence of what Christian faith means.

Faith is about relationship. You talk about having faith in someone, how powerful it is when you feel that someone has faith in you, and how important it is to a relationship, and what a gift it is when you put your faith in someone. It is different from being able to define them or control them. So faith is about relationship in this way.

It is about being faithful, faithfully related to someone. That means making a commitment, growing in that commitment over time, going through good times and bad times, staying with it as much as you humanly can, or starting again if you stopped. It means eventually realising that that relationship is taking you beyond yourself, beyond the ego; beyond the ego’s attachment to good times rather than bad times; beyond the ego that says, when it runs into a difficult period, ‘I don’t want this; I don’t need this; this isn’t what I signed up for’.

Transcending that natural impulse to run away when things get hard, shapes character, deepens our own personality, integrates our personality. It matures us, and it allows us to make sense or to enter into relationship with the suffering in our lives, and it introduces us to the process of self-transcendence. And then out of that comes a different kind of love, a deeper quality of love, a different experience of love than that which we knew at the beginning of the journey of that relationship.

A violinist told me once that there was a quality, a dimension to his relationship to his repertoire, to the works that he played and replayed and practised all his career, works that he was identified with and famous for, works that he’d ‘married’ in a sense. But, he said, ‘There is a dimension of my relationship to these works and to the composers of these great works that only time could give, could only come with time.’ He’d mastered them technically, studied their history, knew them by heart, was deeply familiar with them, was married to them, but only time could open up certain dimensions of their meaning, of their beauty, of their power, to him.

So this I think is what we mean by faith. And faith in Christ illuminates what we mean by finding ourself.
5
Narcissism and Self-fixation

Finding oneself happens not when it is our conscious aim but when we lose ourselves and are found, as St Paul says, in Christ.

The great pitfall of ‘finding oneself’ is the pitfall of narcissism and self-centredness – the danger of seeing it all revolving around yourself and for yourself. If we can understand the real meaning of finding oneself, we see that finding oneself happens not when it is our conscious aim but when we lose ourselves and are found, as St Paul says, in Christ. There are two aspects of finding oneself – losing oneself and finding that we are found; realising, feeling that we are found in something greater and more expansive than we could ever call ‘myself’. The whole idea of ‘self’ changes when self-knowledge really begins to happen.

This gospel insight is of great importance and urgency for our time, when we have sunk so deep into a culture of narcissism and self-fixation, an exaggerated self-importance linked at the same time to a very low self-esteem and insecurity. In that narcissistic state, we are constantly having to assert and to convince ourselves and others (it becomes embarrassingly transparent if you are a public figure) that I am legitimate, that I am great, that I am the best person in this room.

This self-absorption is an absorption in a kind of personality or in a kind of self that is tragically weak, fragile and volatile. Culturally it begins to form a new kind of barbarism because it absorbs so much of our psychic energy. It involves eventually losing the historical perspective of our own lives or of the culture, and a fear, a loss of belief in the continuity of our lives or our work or our families – the terror of living in the moment in the wrong way.

There are two ways that you can live in the moment, what we call the present moment. One is the contemplative way – you are touching into and living in this continuum of being, this continuum of consciousness in the Spirit, in God in every moment going up or down. Whether things are good or bad on the surface, you know
that you are held in the Spirit, held in God, in Christ, you would say. But there is another kind of false, cheap and dangerous being in the present, which is an episodic consciousness – you just jump, flit from one frame of reality to the next. If you played them all at the right speed, it looked like one continuous movement, but actually they were made up of individual snapshots where we just flit or jump from one to the other but we lack the feeling of the flow. In this narcissistic state, we also lose our boundaries, because the narcissistic self wants to absorb everything and to be the centre of everything.

To want to be the centre of everything is a great human delusion – the delusion of Lucifer to want to be like God. Only God has no boundaries; only God is the centre of everything. God is that whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. But if we think of ourselves or feel ourselves like this, we are deluded and dangerous. It’s a pathological state, a mental illness. You might end up in a psychiatric ward, or you might end up as a serial killer or mass murderer, or you might end up as a dictator of a society. We need boundaries in order to move beyond them into the boundless. The purpose of finding oneself is to move from a world in which we are the centre of reality, think we are the centre of reality, to the real world, which is God, which is truly boundless.

In this narcissistic state crisis is continuous; we are always in crisis, we know no peace. That’s a characteristic of our time. Crisis is the new normal. It’s almost becoming boring – what’s the latest crisis? The media of course works it up, but it’s the mentality of our time. It’s partly caused by the fact that the rate of change is accelerating and we don’t know how to keep up with it, and we can’t control it. So there is a real crisis. But there is no human generated crisis that we cannot solve. It’s a human problem; human beings can solve it. But if we get caught up in this crisis mentality, then we end up losing our peace, losing our clarity, losing our ability to deal with real situations that demand our attention.

Another aspect of the narcissistic personality – finding oneself for the wrong reason or finding oneself, looking for oneself in the wrong way – is that the purpose of life gets lost, and increasingly the purpose of life becomes survival. Just survive; live as long as you can regardless of the quality of your life. The majority of the costs of health care are devoted to the very last stages of life; that’s when you become really expensive. A lot of people are making money out of it, of course. Pharmaceutical companies and medical professions
and medical institutions, they make a lot of money out of this. But it becomes increasingly unsustainable and unjust, because that money could be given, could be spread out. Imbalance of the way we allocate our resources is what is being exposed here. And behind that loss of values and inverted values is the loss of a sense of the goal of life, both for the individual and for the species. It becomes just about survival, if you can afford it, rather than about living one’s term of life to the full. So this is something of what I think the general context of what finding ourself might mean.

We can’t look for it as if it were something or someone other than ourselves. Just as we cannot know God as if God were an object, so we cannot know ourselves, look at ourselves, think about ourselves as if we were an object of our own perception. So finding ourselves begins with de-objectifying ourselves. And how do we de-objectify ourselves? Very simply; when we stop thinking about ourselves, we take the attention off ourselves. That’s why meditation is so simple, so radical, and why the moment you sit down to meditate, you have started the journey of self-knowledge, and you’re beginning to make this work of self-discovery, of finding oneself, a true value in your life and therefore all the other values in your life will begin to be reset, reframed, repositioned, reprioritised.

That is why you’ll begin to realise that things are changing in your life, changing in your life in the sense that there are things you want to do more of and there are things you want to do less of. That will set up some tensions in you because you may have been doing some of these wasteful, time-wasting things for thirty years; they have become very ingrained habits. So you have to decide, struggle maybe with whether that is what you really want. No one’s telling you; you are telling yourself. You’re listening to the truth of your own self surging up in you and saying: ‘This is actually how things are; you are wasting a lot of your time on this or that; and your values are a little bit inverted, a little bit distorted.’

Actually you have an opportunity now, if you want to take it, to start straightening things out, whatever age you may be. So all we have to do is to begin the journey. Of course then you have to keep on beginning. But even to begin is introducing into the picture of your life a new source of light, a new perspective or a new element.

We can’t look for ourselves as if we were something other than ourselves. When we come close, if you like, to ourself – it’s much more simple than it sounds – as we become who we are, it isn’t that
we gain anything, we actually lose a lot of things. We lose our self-consciousness, we lose our sense of duality, of separation which brings with it loneliness, alienation, and conflict. We lose these things. We lose the sense of distance between ourselves and the world, the distance between ourself and others. The Buddha was asked at the end of his life, ‘What did you get out of meditation?’ And he said, ‘Nothing.’ But then he said, ‘But I lost a lot.’ This is what Jesus means, I think, by poverty of spirit.

If we think of meditation as something we are doing, some consumer product that we are buying – people like to buy meditation – then it is a product they own. When we were teaching meditation, I went with Fr John back in the 70s to visit a quite well known secular meditation teacher in London who invited us over. He said, ‘Oh I am really delighted to hear that the church is teaching meditation now. How are you doing it?’ So we described it and then he said, ‘Well that’s fantastic. That’s exactly what it is. But you’ve made a big mistake. First of all, you’re making it sound as simple as it is, and people will never believe it. So you have to complicate it. Complicate it and then introduce the simple truth at the right moment.’ And he said, ‘In order to do that you’ve got to get people hooked; and the way to get them hooked is to charge them. The more they pay the more they will be engaged, committed.’ It wasn’t John Main’s way of teaching meditation so it hasn’t become ours. But one can see the reasoning behind that approach. I think it is deeply flawed because it is using the wrong means – the means have to be consistent with the end – so these means eventually become self-defeating, self-contradictory.
The False Self

Our ego or our false self is false only if we are deluded by it or mastered by it. Otherwise it is simply there. It serves a function; it is the vehicle, for delivering the true self until we are more mature. We have to see ourselves as a work of maturation in progress.

To lose self means to lay aside those layers of identity which we call false, because they are impermanent. They are false only if we attribute permanence to them or we attach ourselves to them – I’ve got my rights; I’ve got my identity; I’ve got my position; treat me with more respect. That often comes out of the false self, a sense of self we are trying to defend or assert. That is part of our human, psychological development.

The ego appears at a very young age, at two years old, and causes the parents tremendous suffering, and joy, until adolescence when it causes mere suffering. It has to be tolerated, and it can be tolerated because we can see it as part of an evolutionary emergent process. Where it cannot be tolerated is if this two-year-old ego self is still operating at the age of 70, as it can be, or at any stage in between. Then it is no longer charming.

So you have to be able to recognise when and in what circumstances it’s our ego or, if you like, our false self. It is only false if we take it to be true, if we are deluded by it or mastered by it. Otherwise it is simply there. It serves a function. The ego serves a function – it’s a vehicle. In Sanskrit the word closely related to ego is ahamkara which comes from two words or two senses, one of which is ‘I am’ aham, and the other is kara which gives us the word ‘carriage’ or ‘car’ or ‘vehicle’. So the ego you could say is the vehicle, the carrier, the platform for delivering the true self until we are ready, until we are more mature. We have to see ourselves as a work of maturation in progress. So the ego has a function.

It allows us to differentiate, separate from our parents, from the womb, from our mother’s love; and separates us from the institutions that would otherwise control us and create us as nationalists.
or bigots or prejudiced people. So the ego allows us to detach from what we have become attached, and in that process we suffer pain.

All separation causes pain, but at the same time it sets us free. When a child separates from its parents and leaves home, it is very painful. When parents drive the child to the university and drop the child, they know they have lost the child in a way forever. At the same time, they are happy for that; and of course the relationship continues because the child comes home. But that separation is necessary for a proper relationship, just as detachment is necessary in the new relationships that we build, because we now have a sense of self, a sense of who I am. We still have to be careful that we don’t fall back into the childish patterns of attachment – marry our father, marry our mother – and just want to create that kind of womb-like security again. So all this is human psychology, isn’t it? This is the self that we are trying to lose, it’s the attachment to temporary or transitional manifestations of our identity.

As we learn to lay them aside – the most efficient way of doing that I think is meditation – life presents us with innumerable opportunities to do it. Meditation is our choice to do this. And of course, once we have got used to doing it in meditation, it becomes easier to do it in daily life. We are able, for example, just to recognise what is taking over, what is controlling us with fear, with anger, with jealousy with bitterness, with whatever, the desire to control or possess. So we notice that and we say, ‘Ah I see that going on in my mind; I have to control it, I have to recognise it, and I have to bite my tongue, or I have to not send that email immediately, or I have to wait before I have that discussion.’ That’s self-control, which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, fruits of meditation. If we can’t control the ego, then the ego will control us.
Demolition of the False Self

The one thing we can give to God is the demolition of this false self, which is at times difficult. And this is the central importance of meditation in the process of finding ourselves.

Silence is necessary for our selfhood to emerge; for our own true self to emerge out of the chaos – out of the turbulence of feeling the history of pain, loss and fantasy, of memory, the whole chaos, the jungle of our mind. And the older we get, the more of the jungle there may be. Before we can even begin to appreciate what one’s true self means, we have to enter into a deeper commitment to this work of silence, and then we begin to discover what silence does.

Silence is a very powerful force, true silence. Not the negative silence of ‘I’m not going to speak to her ever again’, or the negative silence of brushing under the carpet just in case people get upset, or deceiving the world about it because it is too dangerous to let out. Not that negative silence of repression or deception, but the true silence in which we experience an expansion of our minds and opening of our hearts, and we experience a new kind of communication and communion with other people. This is the test of silence, that it brings us to peace with ourselves and with others. And in this work of silence, our true self emerges.

It isn’t constructed. It emerges subtly, gently; it emerges through the dismantling of illusion. It’s the gentlest way and the most effective way of subversion of the powers of illusion and deception. You could argue until you are blue in the face with someone or with yourself, but in the end what really demolishes the structures of illusion and deception and self-deception is silence.

Simone Weil said that we have been given the very gift of our being by God, so everything that comes to us, everything is God’s gift, including our very being. So what can we give God in return, she says. She says what happens, for whatever reason, is that we construct a false self, a false I, a false ego. False because we become attached to it, we defend it; we attribute too much reality to it. We
think it’s an end in itself rather than a means, a medium of communication, or a way of service. So the ego begins to predominate in our minds, our feelings, our relationships – in that whole complex business – and that takes years sometimes to unravel. She says the one thing we can give to God is the demolition of this false self, this false I. She uses the word ‘destruction’ which is rather a violent word but sometimes it does feel like destruction. At times when you struggle with your ego, it feels there is a certain interior violence going on.

It isn’t really about doing harm to oneself, but there is a real, serious work to do which is at times difficult in the transcendence, or the deconstruction, or the demolition of our false self. And this is the central importance of meditation in the process of finding ourselves.
Renunciation

Giving up the false self is renunciation. Saying the mantra is simply a way in which we can start to put that renunciation into practice at the centre of ourselves, and if we keep it going it will become the centre of our lives.

Ramana Maharshi was an Indian sage and teacher. He died in 1950 I think, at about 14. He had a sort of death experience in which he went beyond the dualistic mind and no longer identified himself with the body, and experienced what we might call unity of consciousness or whatever you want to call it. In itself it wasn’t so unusual; what was unusual was that he stayed in that state for the rest of his life. Of course it rather changed his career prospects. Shortly after he had this experience, he stole a few pennies from his mother’s purse, and got on a train and went to a temple in Tamil Nadu. He came to this famous shrine and sat in the temple and meditated. He went into a very long period of silence, about 10 years. Eventually after some years, I think 10 years or more, he began to speak and answer people’s questions. He clearly integrated his over-whelming experience and emerged into this blissful state in which he was perfectly in touch with the world around him at the same time.

Then around him there grew an ashram. It became a very famous ashram; people from all over the world came to sit with him. He didn’t set up an organisation but he kept an eye on the ashram. If he saw that guests were not being looked after, he would express concern for them, and so on. So he was fully present and normal in that way, but wasn’t involved in the business of it in any way. Now it is run by Brahmins.

Ramana basically had a very simple routine. He didn’t travel. So don’t trust spiritual teachers who travel too much! They asked him once, ‘Swamiji, why don’t you travel and bring this beautiful peace that you have to the world? The world is in such a terrible state, and you could travel and bring it to people.’ He looked at them and he smiled and said, ‘How do you know that I don’t?’ But he had his routine and he would sit for hours every day in a meditative state.
People would ask him questions. Sometimes he would just look at them and smile; sometimes he did answer the questions. But his teaching was very simple: Find yourself. Be yourself. This is an illustration of the teaching of Jesus that we are exploring.

This is what Ramana said: ‘The ego is really a ghost with no form of its own, but feeding on any form it holds.’ Just think about that. Your ego is a bit of a ghost, and it feeds on whatever form or situation or set of circumstances it may find itself in. It will use any situation; that’s why the ego can get into anything, into any relationship, into any good work that you are doing. The ego will be like a hungry ghost feeding on whatever circumstances it finds itself in. And the ego he says is really a ghost with no form of its own, but feeding on any form it holds which, ‘when sought for, takes flight’. So when you try to find the ego, it just disappears, dissipates.

‘Since with the rise of the ego all else rises and with its subsidence all else subsides, to destroy the ego through self-inquiry is alone true renunciation.’ So it’s the ego that gives rise to the appearances of things that we take to be real. Think how many times we’ve made mistakes – misjudging people, misjudging situations, misjudging ourselves. With the ego all of this arises, but when the ego subsides and eventually just disappears like a puff of smoke, then all of this false reality, construction of the false self – all of the misjudgements, the misinterpretations, the misreadings that give rise to conflict, anger, lust and all this false world – disappears as well along with the ego. It’s this which is the real meaning of renunciation.

This is what we renounce. You don’t renounce the good things in life. What we actually renounce are the false things. But we cannot know the good things if we are attached to the false things. So we have to renounce the false things, and the whole ego game that keeps them going, in order to discover what is the true value, what is my true self, who I really am. And, in that, we see the world as it really is.

‘We should surrender,’ he says, ‘the personal selfishness which binds us to the world.’ That’s what we should surrender, the personal, egocentric selfishness which binds us to this false world. Giving up the false self is renunciation. Saying the mantra is simply, the key word is ‘simply’, a way in which we can start to put that renunciation into practice at the centre of ourselves; and if we keep it going, it will become the centre of our lives.
Finding ourselves begins when we take the attention off ourselves. That is why the moment you sit down to meditate you have started the journey of self-knowledge and you are making this work of finding oneself a true value in your life. Therefore, all the other values in your life will begin to be reset, and you begin to realise that things are changing in your life.

– Laurence Freeman

Laurence Freeman OSB is a Benedictine monk of the Monastery of Christ our Saviour, Turvey, England. He is Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation, and the spiritual guide for the community. He has published many books, CDs and DVDs.

In these talks Fr Laurence explains how meditation can help us realise the essential message of Jesus: ‘Whoever wants to save their life must lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.’ (Mt 16:25) To discover our true self is the goal of life; but finding our true self requires first laying aside all those familiar superficial layers of personal identity which are illusory and therefore false. Meditation is a way of transcending or demolishing the false self. This is a transforming experience that changes our view of meaning and value. It changes our life.