

## **Laurence Freeman OSB: extracts from *Health of the Soul***

**The link between meditation and medicine** is an ancient one, explored and understood long before the arrival of the scientific method. The prefix ‘med’ suggests care and attention – relevant both to the work of the professional healer and of the meditator.

**I’d like to make my contribution** in and through the Christian mystical tradition, particularly that of the desert monks of the fourth and fifth centuries. They were skilled and experienced physicians of the soul and they understood the meaning of wholeness.

**A spiritual dimension** is part of the meaning of health.

**At first** we might approach meditation just in order to deal with our problems. You are more likely to be told about the benefits of meditation by a psychiatrist, therapist or by a physician concerned about your cardiac condition or your levels of stress, than you are by a religious person. And as the Desert Fathers saw, with their psychological awareness of the process of healing, this is a perfectly good place to start from, where most people indeed may start. But it is not the end of the road; it is the beginning.

**We take time** in the morning and evening and sit for half an hour in silence and stillness. That is solitude, regardless of your way of life.

**The first stage of practice is hard work**, just as we discover in the first stages of meditation. The distractions that we battle with are the result of an inner struggle. And so the Desert Fathers and Mothers recommend perseverance, patience and a non-judgemental attitude to the practice. *Don’t give up*, is what they were basically saying to each other. Or if you do give up, as we all do, then start again as quickly as possible.

**Perseverance** leads to self-understanding and then to an effective way of dealing with the inner demons with which we have to struggle. Gradually, through practice, the mind becomes its own physician and learns to recognise what we might call the healing command that is embedded deep within itself, which heals the forces that have blocked the pathways to health.

**The first stage of healing** for the desert therapists was *praktike* – practice. It involves a struggle, a struggle with the inner demons of the psyche, gaining the strength to resist temptations and backsliding, the art of subduing a passion.

**The term ‘passion’** refers specifically to a disordered or dysfunctional state of mind, similar to what we would call, neurosis, compulsion, addiction or phobia. The desert therapists were intent on getting to the root of these problems and for them prayer was the most direct and effective way. By prayer they meant pure prayer or contemplation, but what we would call meditation.

**Many students come** to our centre in Georgetown because they want to be better at paying attention. They realise how distracted they are. But it also reflects a deepening self-knowledge, not only at the obvious psychological level of consciousness, but a self-knowledge touching into a much deeper level of being, the level of *who I am*.

**Most physicians and psychologists** would recommend that you meditate in order to be more healthy. The 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* is saying *stay healthy so you can meditate*.

**What more can we get from meditation** that both looks and takes us beyond the measurable physical and psychological benefits? In other words, are there spiritual fruits that may be less measurable, but are even more significant for what we mean by health and wholeness and wellbeing, even for meaning itself?

**In calling this approach to meditation prayer**, I don't think we should be scared of the word *prayer*. We shouldn't assume that it means a dogmatic or even imaginative attachment to the idea of God. In fact, when you read the wisdom of these desert teachers, the reverse is true. Rather surprisingly, and to come Christians maybe even shockingly, Evagrius says that if you wish to pray, you have no need of God. But then he says that this is because God gives prayer to the one who prays.

**In the lower level**, the mind remains in a state of multiplicity. In the higher state it experiences unity or one-ness. And here, too, the soul realises itself as pure mind and knows that it belongs to the great company of minds. Again, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the desert tradition says the mind is what it contemplates because the known and the knower are one. And, they add, this is true theology.

**Seen in this way**, meditation has gone a long way beyond just focusing on the benefits: lowering blood pressure, cholesterol levels, reducing stress and anxiety. But wherever and why ever we begin to meditate, the continuum of the practice moves us from benefits to fruits, from technique to spiritual discipline and human health begins to flourish as human wholeness.

**If we keep the ultimate goal of human wholeness** in clear view, and meditation as a way of going towards it, then we see something. We see the essential and self-evident truth that underlies all human happiness. It is that what matters most in the human journey, what matters most when coming to healing, health and wholeness, is love.

**This is what we are most focused on** when, dying, we reflect on our lives. This, if we are in touch with our deepest desire, is what we are all looking for.

**What is the point** of going for therapy or doing the hard work of regaining health, battling with our demons, trying to be healthy in an unhealthy world, trying to be sane in an insane world, if we are not trying to protect and expand our capacity for love?

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