

Aberdeen Unitarian Church

THE CHALICE SCHOOL OF CONTEMPLATIVE MEDITATION



SESSION No. 4

THE MANTRA METHOD (Choosing your own Mantra)

Introduction

In this forth session we will be concentrating on a method of meditation that seems to be growing in popularity. It is a well-known method that goes back thousands of years - to the Hindu Upanishads (one of the Hindu sacred writings), but sadly it is a method that is still little understood. Most people have come to know this method through the teachings of TM (Transcendental Meditation). TM as we know became popular in the West during the nineteen-sixties when certain celebrities went off to India to sit at the feet of the Hindu Guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. - The Beatles, Mia Farrow and others. Since then there have been a constant growth in numbers - even within the business world and on the political front, indeed, from every walk of life. It has been mainly taken up to reduce stress, and maintain health. No religion need enter into this. However this method is said to have a holistic effect, in this sense can appeal to both the religionist and the non- religionist alike. The method is of course is the **Mantra**.

According to the dictionary the Mantra is: 'a Vedic hymn: a sacred text used as an incantation: extended to music having mystical effect: a word, etc, chanted or repeated inwardly in meditation.' The word "Incantation" however can be misleading. This might be due to the fact that in Hindu and Buddhist mythology certain mantras were said to have special powers of healing or for bringing rain, somewhat like the American Indian rain dance and incantations. The word comes from the ancient Sanskrit meaning 'instrument of thought.'

So, it has its roots in the Vedic hymns - it is also a word chanted or repeated inwardly. And the word comes from the Sanskrit meaning 'instrument of thought'. But this is interesting, because the idea of a sacred sound or word as an 'instrument of thought' has also found its way into many other writings. For example, The Cloud of Unknowing (a well known Christian Mystical writing) speaks about the repetition of a sacred word, which can help in ones devotions. And interestingly enough reference is often made to the Prologue to the Gospel of John: ' In the beginning was the Word.' So clearly the idea of the 'word' is important - or perhaps we should say the actual *sound* of the word. There are a number of other definitions that we have come across, all very similar. For example it is:

- a sacred sound
- a sacred word or words
- letters arranged in a definite sequence of sounds
- a sentence containing a spiritual truth
- a sort of peg or focal point upon which to hang dominant ideas
- a way of polarizing the mind so that it becomes fixed on a predominant idea or ideal
- it is also said to mean 'that which protects' - to protect one from physical, moral and spiritual dangers
- an inner sound given an audible expression

For many exponents of the Mantra method however, it is a sound, or words which express God in some way - or an attribute of God or the idea of enlightenment. It is essentially a holy name that represents or symbolizes Divine Reality. Many of the mystics, from the differing religious traditions, have claimed that through the systematic repetition of the mantra, over several years, can actually transform the entire personality, and hence raise it to a higher level of consciousness - a level of transcendence, and divine immanence.

In the East, the importance is given mainly to the **actual sound** - And very often this is a sacred word handed down by a spiritual teacher. As we know this is the method of TM. And as far as we understand Transcendental Meditation it does not claim to be a religion or a philosophy, and the technique, as was said, can be used with or without any religion. No intellectual meaning is necessary for this type of mantra - but the claim is that it can raise the consciousness to a higher level. It is also said that it has the effect of creating inner vibrations through the repetition of a certain sound to bring about a deep psychological and inner transformation. F.C. Happold wrote that: "Sounds may have this effect will be obvious if one considers the effect some particular grouping of words in a poem, or a passage of music, can have on one. It awakens something latent in consciousness in a way in which one cannot perhaps fully understand, and has a profound inner impact." (The Journey Inwards p72)

In agreement with Happold, and we are of the opinion that, to the Western mind, sometimes the understanding of what the mantra means may be necessary before the mantra can have its full effect. That is not to say however that the 'sound' is less valuable, because although a mantra can be repeated at first with meaning, it can quickly turn into a sacred sound that finds its way into the fibre and heart of ones being. However to repeat a mantra, first with some meaning, may be the best way forward for us.

(And just a by the way, the repetition of certain prayers and sacred sentences can also have the same effect as the mantra. And like the mantra - they first sink into the subconscious and then gradually quicken the consciousness to something higher.).

Before we go on to some of the most popular mantras, I think it is wise to become familiar with some of the mantras, or sacred sentences, that have developed in the

Christian Church.

First, the Jesus prayer which originally came from the Greek Orthodox Church is '*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us*'. And second we have the well know '*Kyrie Eleison, Christie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison*', which is found in the Eucharist. (Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.). "The spiritual direction of the Eastern Orthodox Church gave precise direction on the way the Jesus prayer should be carried out. First, in silence and solitude, it is repeated aloud a specific number of times. Then, throughout the day and night, it is repeated silently, and at length it is taken down into the heart..." (Happold - Journey Inwards p74). And thirdly in the Catholic tradition we have *Hail Mary* - the idea of the Divine Mother. These are but some that can be found in the Main Stream Christian Churches.

According to some spiritual directors, the mantra can have a profound psychological effect and should be used with discretion. It is said they are in effect words of power - and as such must be used with care, simply because of the changes that can take place in ones life. However, we are of the opinion that they can be used safely when used for not too long a period.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS?

So what is the process? What happens when we use the mantra?

1. First we choose, or we are given, a word, a sound, or a sentence that we feel comfortable with - one that suits our temperament, our inclination. (it is important that when we do find one we try to keep with it until it becomes a part of us. But it is also important that we find one that we feel in harmony with.)
2. It is first thought, and then spoken.
3. We then repeat it silently into ourselves so that it gradually sinks down into a deeper level of the mind where it is no longer 'thought' or 'thinking' - it begins to live and act.

In choosing a mantra then we should keep in mind the following points:

1. What is our particular belief system?
2. Our personal ideals - our goals and aspirations.
3. Our religious background - if we have one.
4. What kind of response does it evoke? i.e.
 - (i) Does it feel right?
 - (ii) Does it sound right when we say it to ourselves?
 - (iii) Again, it must have a resonance with something inside: us - it must vibrate, as it were, in sympathy with our aspirations.
5. And is the meaning of it in harmony with our ideals?

How do we choose a mantra?

There are certain words that can evoke a certain response from us - words say from a poem, or words from a hymn that we particularly like. We can choose a word, a sentence, or a short passage from one of the many religious writings. Indeed there are many sources that we can draw upon to find the right word for ourselves. It may take a little time but the effort is well worth it. If all fails we can choose one that has already

been handed down, and reputed to have a definite effect. Also it might well be that the mantra method is not for us. In this case we can go back to our breathing exercise, and the words 'Peace - be still'. The whole point of these sessions is to give us a better understanding of what meditation is all about - and hopefully to find something that we personally can feel comfortable with. When we do find something it is good to keep it as simple as possible. And where the mantra is concerned, the shorter the passage or the meditation the better it will be for us to get to the actual meaning. It may only be one, perhaps two or three words. But keep it simple and to the point.

SOME WELL KNOWN MANTRAS

Let us now look more closely at some of the well-known mantras. We will also outline some of the more popular Christian mantras again so as to get a clearer idea of what is involved. With some of these mantras, it is the sound that seems to be more predominant rather than the actual meaning.

OM or Aum - First, we begin with the great Hindu Mantra - the *OM* (or *Aum*) pronounced as a single syllable. The name of Brahman. - Often referred to as 'the hidden name of God', 'the sound above all other sounds', or 'the sound of all creation'. Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita says: 'Of the great sages, I am the Master; and of words, the syllable OM'. This is a mantra that is often-repeated on its own, however it is also used at the beginning or at the end, of longer mantras.

OM MANI PADME HUM - The great mantra of Buddhism is *Om mani padme hum* - meaning 'hail to the jewel in the lotus'. *OM* as we said was the hidden aspect of God. *Mani padme* is the Radiant Jewel (*mani*) in the Lotus (*padme*). It expresses the enlightened mind - the mind as it rises up to the surface of illumination.

OM NAMO NARAYANA - Another great Hindu mantra is *Om namo Narayana*. *Om* is the inexpressible God - the unknowable One; *namo*, is the approach to this attribute of the Godhead through the manifested world; *nara* means 'man'; *ayana* 'the coming'. *Narayana* is therefore 'the coming man', the Archetypal Man, or man as he shall one day become - The Divine potential of man. Also called The Son of Man, a title used by Jesus. It also expressed the idea of the incarnation of a Divine Being, such as we find both in Hinduism and Christianity.

SOME SACRED SENTENCES FROM THE DIFFERENT SCRIPTURES - One of our definitions of the mantra is that it is a sacred sentence or saying, and there are many such sayings, which can be found from the different sacred scriptures. From the **New Testament** we find '**I am the Light of the world**', '**peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you**', and '**I am the bread of life**', '**renew a right spirit within me**'. From the **Bhagavad-Gita** we also find the following sentences: '**I am the Self, seated deep in the heart**', '**I am the First born Light**', '**I am the sacred word OM**', '**I am the way**', '**I am the eternal seed of all beings**'. And from the **Toa Teh Canon**: '**(I am) 'the Mother- Deep**', '**(I am) 'the Universal Mother**', '**(I am) 'the everlasting supreme Tao**', '**(I am) 'the Universal chalice**', '**(I)press towards the Inner Life**'. Although these sentences or sayings can be used as mantras in their own right, they can also be used as subjects of meditations.

MARANATHA - A popular mantra within certain sections of Christianity is Maranatha, pronounced Ma-ra-na-tha. Four equally stressed syllables. It is also called a prayer word. (Its meaning is 'come Lord come'). This mantra has been brought to our attention through the work and writings of John Main. (Died 1982) He is said to have

brought the idea of the Eastern mantra to main stream Christianity.

RAMA-This is one of the more popular of the Hindu mantras. Rama means 'full of joy'. It is also reputed to be one of the most simple and also one of most powerful of mantras. Many people have claimed to its effectiveness. Mahatma Gandhi had used this as his own personal mantra. Its root Ram comes from the Sanskrit meaning 'to rejoice'. So Rama means 'abiding joy'. There are variations of this when the main word of the mantra is used at the beginning or the end. - For example Om Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram. (May joy prevail.).

HARI KRISHNA, HARI RAMA - This is the well-known mantra of the Krishna Consciousness Movement. The meaning of the word Rama, as we said was, 'full of joy'; Krishna. means 'he who draws us to him', and the word Hari means 'he who steals our heart'. The Hari Krishna Movement follows more of the Bhakti tradition - that is the path of devotion. And by the constant repetition of this mantra they believe that they will enter into closer devotional union with their Lord. (The Christian path is very similar to the Hindu Bhakti movement in this sense i.e. being the path of devotion.)

OM NAMO SHIVAYA - This is a mantra that is popular in South India - it means supplication to the Lord Shiva'. Shiva in Hindu mythology is said to be the destroyer, but what he really destroys are those aspects of our nature that hold us back from attaining enlightenment. He clears away all the dross in order to build up something new and better. So this is what the destroyer does.

BARUKH ATTAH ADONAI - For the Jewish tradition Barukh Attah Adonai. It's meaning is 'Blessed art thou, O Lord', that is, the Lord as the source of strength, courage, joy and love.

BISMILLAH IR-RAHMAN IR-RARIM - Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim is the well-known Muslim prayer of mantra. 'In the name of Allah, the Merciful. the Compassionate'. As we know the Muslims pray five times a day using this well-known prayer.

WORDS FROM THE DICTIONARY - If we cannot find a suitable religious word or sentence, it is possible to consult our dictionary for simple words that we can perhaps relate to as possible mantras or words that can help us relax and unwind - words that reflect some aspect of peace and calm. For example: 'tranquility', 'serenity', 'contentment', 'stillness' or just the word 'peace' and 'calm'. Or perhaps the word 'peace' from another tradition - like Shalom (Jewish) or Shanti, Shanti, Shanti (Hinduism).

I AM - There is another great mantra that we would like to bring to your attention and that is the great '**I am**'. This mantra is found both in Hinduism and Christianity, as well as in other religious traditions. We find it in the Old Testament where God, in reply to Moses about what he shall say regarding His name, speaks '**AM THAT I AM**'. 'And He said, 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, **I AM** hath sent me unto you...' The '**I AM**' mantra is also used to mean the Universal Self - or Ground of existence as found in the teachings of the Perennial Philosophy. The great Hindu Saint of South India Ramana Maharshi also used it as part of his method of meditation of self-enquiry. That is by asking oneself 'who am I?' saying to oneself 'I am not this' and 'I am not that', 'I am not the body', 'I am not the emotions, the thoughts, the feelings', basically stripping away everything that is not our real selves. And then one asks 'if I am not all these things, then who am I?' Only the Self (with a capital 'S') remains - the '**I am**'.

These then are but some well know mantras. However the whole idea behind the mantra is that it eventually becomes rooted and firmly established as part of ones essential nature. Sri Ramakrishna once said that when one is established in the mantrani, it is like receiving a pension after many years of faithful service. ('The Mantram Handbook' p. 241). It is said that when we start to hear the mantra in our sleep it is then beginning to work at a deeper transforming level of our minds.

If you wish we can try this method during our guided meditation. However if you feel that it is too early to try this method then we can simply use 'Peace- be still'. If you think of it that in itself can also be used as a mantra.

GUIDED MEDITATION - USING THE MANTRA

- 1. We begin as usual by breathing slowly - by paying attention to our breath.**
- 2. Now as we breathe in, mentally say 'peace', and as you breathe out, mentally say 'be still'. Again, don't force it. Keep it steady and easy. 'Peace-be still', 'peace- be still'.**
- 3. As our breathing begins to get deeper, with each breath in we extend it and say, 'peace', 'peace', and 'peace'. And as we breath out, we say 'be-still', 'be-still', 'be-still'**
- 4. Keep breathing this way for a few minutes to help us wind down and become move relaxed**

PAUSE

- 5. Still breathing slowly and easily.**

Now, at this point, if we wish we could choose a simple word as a mantra - something that we feel comfortable with. Or if we wish we can continue to repeat the phrase 'peace-be still'. Don't worry if the mind wanders - just gradually bring it back to the mantra. Continue to repeat the mantra for a few more minutes.

PAUSE

- 6. As we repeat the mantra, and we feel conformable with it, try to feel it within the area of the heart. So we repeat the word or sound - and we try to feel the meaning of it vibrating at the heart center. Try to feel its warmth and love.**

PAUSE

- 7. We now focus on our breathing again - take a few deep breaths. Think of where you are. Take your time and start becoming aware of your surroundings.**

When we are ready we open our eyes. Do this in your own time.

IN CONCLUSION

As was pointed out, the mantra method is probably the best known of all the different kinds of meditation, and yet it was little understood at one time. The method is very simple, however care must be taken in choosing a personal mantra for oneself. If we do find one that we can relate to it is best if we stick to it. There is a tendency these days to

change too quickly when results are not forthcoming as quickly as we would like them to. There is no real benefit from doing this. It may be of course that we have not found the right one. In that case it is best to wait until we feel drawn to a particular one. It is also possible that this particular meditation method is not right one for you. The mantra is one of those methods that have to take root in the depths of ones psyche - of ones being if you like. It's a method that gradually makes one aware of something deeper inside one. It seems to touch, what some would claim, a greater reality. And as was said. it need not have any religious overtones. But the results can be the same. The benefits however are many. It can have the effect of reducing stress, of bringing peace of mind, quietness, also healing some would claim (certainly this would happen when we feel more at peace with ourselves.) And as was mentioned in the last session, it has been recorded that at certain levels there has been a noted change in brain wave activity. Basically there have been seen to be an all round improvement of self esteem, of feeling more in tune with life, of being able to achieve things that previously may have caused difficulty. And for those with a religious belief there is also a feeling of becoming closer, or uniting with the object of ones love. For example, in the case of repeating the mantra 'Rama', there comes a deep sense of inner joy. And for those who have an affinity with such a mantra, there is the belief, or perhaps one would say, an inner knowing, of the object of ones devotions. For some devotees, there is the belief that the mantra is God, the Spirit. the Mind of God in us, the Nous, The Divine Mind - The Word - albeit the Word within us. These are some of the ideas or beliefs about the mantra. However, try finding a sound, a word for yourselves, and give it a try. Put aside a certain time each day for meditation - either the morning or just before retiring. Try to keep to the same time and place every day. If you can get two sessions in, even better - say twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes at night. Some may find that the actual discipline of sitting for twenty minutes to be more difficult than the meditation itself. Sometimes there is the feeling that we must be up and doing something. But give it a chance before dismissing it. After a while you will want to do it and you will miss it when you don't.
