

“Cyprian Consiglio is a very contemporary monk, who believes that the call to contemplation is universal and sees the current interest in Eastern spirituality as an incentive to seek the way of interiority within the Christian tradition. This approach must be greeted with delight, particularly as he brings with him the words of such as Origen, Bede Griffiths, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Abhishiktananda, and Simone Weil, and supports his arguments with wisdom from the Fourth Gospel, the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Taoism. A cornucopia of richness and delight and a fitting book for our time.”

—Shirley du Boulay

Author of *Beyond the Darkness*:

*A Biography of Bede Griffiths and The Cave of the Heart:*

*The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda*

“It’s not easy to talk about the Christian mystical tradition in universal terms without resorting to syncretism, but in *Prayer in the Cave of the Heart*, Camaldolese monk Cyprian Consiglio takes on the challenge with great love and shining integrity. *Prayer in the Cave of the Heart* is clearly the fruit of serious scholarly inquiry, courageous pilgrimage, and a humble, disciplined life of unceasing prayer. In this invitingly simple but richly packed guide to the Christian via negativa, Consiglio holds out the hope that we, too, can find our way through the narrow gate that leads to contemplation.”

—Paula Huston

Author of *Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving*



# PRAYER IN THE CAVE OF THE HEART

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO CONTEMPLATION

Cyprian Consiglio



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by David Manahan, OSB.  
Illustration courtesy of photos.com.

Unless otherwise noted, the scripture citations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition Copyright © 1989 and 1993, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2010 by The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321. Printed in the United States of America.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Consiglio, Cyprian.

Prayer in the cave of the heart : the universal call to contemplation  
/ Cyprian Consiglio.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3276-5

1. Prayer—Christianity. I. Title.

BV210.3.C655 2009

248.3'2—dc22

2009024453

# CONTENTS

Preface vii

1. The Universal Call to Contemplation 1

2. Jesus on Prayer 19

3. St. Paul on Prayer 30

4. Continual Prayer—The Desert 43

5. Pure Prayer 55

6. The Soul's Ascent to God 69

7. Put Your Mind in Your Heart 83

8. *Lectio Divina* and the Beautiful Names of God 94

Postscript 105

Glossary 108

Bibliography 110

Notes 115



## PREFACE

*The most important thing is to find peace and share it with others.*

—Thich Nhat Hahn

**I**t is important for me to say right at the beginning that I write this for you perhaps as a teacher, or even better as a fellow student, but not as any kind of guru or master. (Actually, I like to think of myself as someone who took really good notes in class and is sharing them with all his friends!)

During the first few years of my monastic life, from time to time I would go home to Arizona, where I had been living for some years before joining the monastery, and tell people that I felt as if I had “finally discovered the Good News!” I remember giving a conference once to young people and trying to explain to them what I thought I had learned, but my words fell flat. I had no way of being able to articulate what I thought I had learned, and the fact was that I had made only my own first baby steps in the way myself. Now, after some years of monastic life and regular practice, and after having written my master’s thesis on contemplative anthropology and devouring as many books as possible from as many different traditions as possible, I am beginning to have a little bit of a vocabulary. And it is from that that I share these thoughts with you.

We sometimes speak of the monastery and particularly of the monastic cell as a laboratory, a place where some people are granted the luxury of making the interior journey, of living the contemplative life. More and more, however, monks are coming to understand that it is their obligation to share the fruits of that journey with others. It was at one time thought—and often still is today—that what monasticism really has to offer is a type of learning that is rooted in a wisdom tradition; or a certain style of liturgical celebration that is formal and interior in style; or a certain

way of living that is simpler, more sober, and more focused than that found outside the monastery. But we must understand that this type of learning, this type of prayer, and this style of life *come from* the contemplative life as much as they are meant to lead to it; they *come from* an experience of the God of love as the center of one's being as much as they are meant to lead to it.

In other words, none of these “monastic” elements is an end in itself. I myself, for example, have engaged in teaching liturgy, preaching, and giving missions, in addition to the work that I have done and still do in music—composing, recording, and giving concerts. But, since entering monastic life, I have come to realize that none of these things, important though they may be, is at the heart of what I am about. If I start to feel myself getting too caught up in liturgy for the sake of liturgy, or music for the sake of music, or preaching for the sake of preaching, I know that I am not living my essential vocation. Liturgy, music, preaching—other people can do these things. I am a monk, and I am called to spread the Good News in whatever work I do. My expertise is not in social justice; it is not really in academics and certainly not in parish administration. Anything I say, teach, write, or do must be, essentially and ultimately, about trying to convey and lead people to an experience of interiority, an experience of the indwelling presence of God. To paraphrase Abhishiktananda:

If monks open their mouths  
it will normally only be to speak about the inner Mystery  
and how to discover it hidden as it is in the depths of the heart.  
They will steadfastly avoid all purely intellectual discussions;  
not for them are the conferences and seminars of the learned,  
or even the gathering of sages.  
But they will never refuse to help humble and genuine seekers,  
those who are truly eager to know God,  
and will show them the way to the cave of the heart.<sup>1</sup>

It has become more and more clear that, aside from their very presence, silent as it may be, monks and contemplatives are called to share with the world and the church today the way of contemplative prayer, the way of meditation. It is the main gift that they

have to offer. This is what I have learned from monks such as Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, John Main, and Laurence Freeman, along with Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington. I have also been influenced by many others, Carmelites such as Ruth Burrows and William MacNamara, and Jesuits such as William Johnson and Heinrich Dumoulin. My insights have perhaps been most deeply shaped by the desert monastics: Antony the Great, who heard the Gospel proclaimed, “Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and come and follow me,” and took that as a call to go into the wilderness, to live in tombs and battle the demons and seek purity of heart; and Evagrius of Pontus, who turned that same biblical injunction around to say, “Go sell everything you have and give it to the poor so that you may *pray without ceasing*.”

And so, what I aim to do for and with you in the pages that follow is to share something of what I have learned through the monastic tradition and practice about meditation and contemplative prayer, and to give you the opportunity to pursue the practice yourself.

### **Where This Began**

In 2004, toward the beginning of this particular phase in my own life, when I was given permission to live on my own away from my monastic community and engage in apostolic work, I filled in at a parish for a classmate of mine in Santa Cruz, California, while he was on sabbatical. During that time some of the parishioners asked me to lead a series on prayer and meditation. I could hardly refuse, though I felt daunted by the task of once again trying to articulate what I had begun to learn. My conditions for agreeing to do the series were that it be open to people of all faiths; that we hold the conferences in the hall, which would make it easier for people who might not feel comfortable inside a church to attend; and that I be allowed to draw from the various traditions I had studied outside of Judeo-Christianity so that I could share with others what I myself was beginning to discover: that the call to contemplation is universal, that there are resonances between

the mystical traditions of the East and the Christian mystical tradition—a tradition of which many people are unaware and which is accessible to all.

I set myself to the task in a sort of flow, beginning with the very basics—the “what” and “why”—and then naturally moving on to follow a somewhat historical approach to the Christian contemplative experience as I understood it: prayer of the heart in the teachings of Jesus, in the writings of St. Paul, in the desert monastic tradition, in the Carmelite tradition, in the Eastern Christian and Orthodox tradition. While preparing the original talks, I was amazed both at what pleasure I was taking in writing them and at how, quite often, I would remember a quote or some kernel of wisdom from a book I had read a decade or so earlier in the hope of being able to share it with someone someday, and at how I could often go right back to that book and find the reference with little trouble. It was as if I had been granted the luxury of space and time to read all those books solely for the purpose of being able to distill the teaching contained in them, practice what they taught, and then pass it on to others.

Happily, the series on prayer and meditation was a great success, drawing more than a hundred people each week. It culminated in an inter-religious meditation vigil for peace on New Year’s Eve. It also spawned a number of smaller groups determined to continue and deepen the learning and practice. In the years since then I have been asked to present the same series or give talks on the subject in many different locations.

The chapters of this book are modeled on the sessions in the original series, compiled and edited after much urging that I put down something in writing. My hope, of course, is that this book may have the same effect on you that the original sessions had on those who participated in them, that it may stimulate in you a desire to pray and meditate, to grow closer to the Divine through the interior way, both for the healing of your own body, soul, and spirit and for that of others in this world most in need of this mercy.

One final word: all of this is mere verbiage without a commitment to daily practice. I have come to know that spirituality is

---

eminently a practical science—it concerns what we do when we get up in the morning, how we spend our day, how we go to bed at night—and specifically how much time and energy we are willing to dedicate to the practice of prayer and meditation. So, although each chapter in this book addresses some aspect of the way of meditation, making use of sources from both the Western and Eastern traditions, each chapter also includes practical considerations regarding questions of method.

The most basic practice of all is simply that of making time to pray. It is commonly recommended that one dedicate to the practice of meditation two periods of the day, hopefully in roughly the same place and at the same time—once in the morning and once in the evening. Probably a realistic goal for most people is twenty minutes at each sitting, but even that length of time can be a daunting goal at first. So, if it begins as a matter of five minutes, increasing slowly to six, ten, fifteen, let it be so. As the old monastic adage states, “Pray as you can, not as you can’t!”

With this as our starting point, let us begin our journey into the cave of the heart.



---

## THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO CONTEMPLATION

*The wise withdrew the senses from the world of change  
and, seeking immortality,  
looked within and beheld the deathless Self.*

—Katha Upanishad

*Do you not know that you are God's temple,  
and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

—1 Corinthians 3:16

**T**here is such a hunger for interiority in our world, in our culture. I am convinced that this is why ashrams and *zendos* and yoga centers are full, because people—often Christians—are finding there a way of interiority and a sense of their own selves as vessels of divinity. These are things that Christian preachers and teachers have apparently not been able to convey, perhaps that Christian preachers and teachers have not yet understood themselves.

The way of meditation and contemplation is necessarily an interior way, and the interior way goes against our grain as human beings. I often like to think of it as swimming upstream. The *Katha Upanishad* of the Indian tradition says

The self-existent Lord pierced the senses to turn outward.  
Thus we look to the world outside  
and see not the Self [or “spirit”; literally “*atman*”] within us.  
The wise withdrew the senses from the world of change  
and, seeking immortality,  
looked within and beheld the deathless Self.<sup>1</sup>

God made us human beings so that our senses turn outward. This is why, at least through our first years of life (and for some people through all of their lives), we tend to spend most of our time looking outward at the world of sense objects and never even think to look into ourselves. Now and then some daring souls who are unsatisfied, who are longing for that which survives death and decay and change, venture to look inside, and when they do they find themselves, their real selves, the true self, which, as St. Paul says, is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

There are a few monks I will refer to with some frequency in the pages ahead; one of them, whose words I quoted in the preface, is Abhishiktananda. This was his Indian name; his given name was Henri le Saux and he was a French Benedictine monk who moved to India in 1945 after having spent eighteen years at the Abbey of St. Anne de Kergonan in France. With another Frenchman, a priest named Jules Monchanin, le Saux founded Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, in southern India. He would later move to an area near the source of the Ganges in northern India and become an itinerant monk, a deep contemplative, a Hindu-Christian *sannyasi*, or renunciant.<sup>2</sup> Abhishiktananda wrote many books—including a famous book called *Prayer*—that incorporate what he learned from the experience of having immersed himself in Indian thought and practice. The essence of his personal journey is reflected in the title of his published diaries, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*. To arrive at the Ganges, the source, one must climb high into the Himalayas. This pilgrimage is an apt metaphor for the interior way: we go up to the source, which is really the fount that flows from within. We ascend to the depths or, as Gregory of Nyssa put it in his writings on humility, we “descend to the heights.”<sup>3</sup>

### **An Interior Way: The Gift of the East**

Often I have heard it said that the difference between an Asian and a Westerner is shown most clearly by the answer to a simple question. Ask Westerners where God is and they will point to the sky, or all around them, or to some specific place outside them. I remember once visiting a seminary where a young deacon was

giving the homily at Vespers, which also included Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The young man was preaching with great intensity. "You ask where God is? Do you want to know where God is? I'll tell you where God is! God is right there!" he said, pointing to the tabernacle. "That's where God is!"

Now, I would never deny that God is in the tabernacle, because I believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. But if you were to ask an Asian where God is, chances are that the person would first of all point to his or her own heart. While pondering such a response, we might also want to consider this: a good Catholic, after having participated in the eucharistic celebration and having received the sacrament, could just as easily point to his or her own belly as to the tabernacle and say, "Here is where God is!" Or any Christian could quote St. Paul or St. Peter, who in their letters speak of the believer as being "God's dwelling" or "a living temple." Still, looking inward would generally not be our first response as Westerners.

Carl Jung wrote that the strange antithesis between East and West is expressed most clearly in religious practice. We Westerners, he says, "speak of religious uplift and exaltation; for us God is the Lord of the universe, we have a religion of brotherly love, and in our heaven-aspiring churches there is a *high altar*." On the other hand, the Indian, for example, "speaks of *dhyana*, of self-immersion, and of *sinking* into meditation; God is within all things" and especially within the human person. There is a certain turning away from the outer world to the inner world. Jung offers as an example the old Indian temples in which the altar is sunk six to eight feet deep in the earth. "We believe in doing," he writes, while "the Indian in passive *being*. Our religious exercises consist of prayer, worship, and singing hymns. The Indian's most important exercise is yoga, an immersion in what we would call an unconscious state, but which [an Indian] praises as the highest consciousness." He goes on to note that "yoga is the most eloquent expression of the Indian mind and at the same time the instrument continually used to produce this particular attitude of mind."<sup>4</sup>

Just as we distinguish between the interior way and the exterior way, God experienced outside as opposed to God experienced

within, we also distinguish between the prophetic religions, those that meet God in history, and the mystical ones, in which the path to union with God is through interiority. There is, to be sure, actually even a kind of suspicion—perhaps a healthy one!—in the Christian West about terms such as “mystical,” just as there is a criticism leveled against Westerners at times for being too focused on externals.

At this point I would like to introduce another monk whom I will be quoting frequently, Bede Griffiths, an Oxford-educated English Benedictine monk who went to India in 1955. After a short-lived monastic experiment in Bangalore and helping to found another Christian monastic community in Kerala named Kurisamala, he went on to assume responsibility for Shantivanam from Abhishiktananda and turned it into an important place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world, while he himself became a prominent figure in the area of inter-religious dialogue.

Here is how Bede Griffiths explains the difference—and the relationship—between the Western and Eastern approaches:

The Semitic religions, Judaism and Islam, reveal the transcendent aspect of the divine Mystery with incomparable power. The oriental religions reveal the divine Immanence with immeasurable depth. Yet in each the opposite aspect is contained, though in a more hidden way. We have to discover the inner relationship between these different aspects of Truth and unite them in ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Carl Jung similarly wrote that “the Holy Spirit’s task and charge” is to “reconcile and reunite the opposites in the human individual through a special development of the human soul.”<sup>6</sup> Could not this gift of interiority from the East help us reconcile and reunite the opposites within each of us and further develop our souls?

I want to make clear that I am suggesting not that Christians need to be Buddhists or Hindus, but that we may have reached a point in our spiritual evolution when our own gifts might need to be complemented by the contemplative gifts of these cultures. William Johnston, who is perhaps the *grandpère* of all these things, quotes “the saintly Jewish mystic” Simone Weil, who, he says, spoke “prophetically of Europe’s need” for Eastern spirituality:

It seems that Europe requires genuine contacts with the East in order to remain spiritually alive. It is also true that there is something in Europe which opposes the Oriental spirit, something specifically Western . . . and we are in danger of being devoured by it.

And then Johnston goes on to ask,

What is this specifically Western thing that opposes the East and could devour the European soul? Is it rationalism, materialism, legalism, intolerance, arrogance, and all those vices that Paul attributes to the ungodly in the Epistle to the Romans? Be that as it may, the world today needs the spirituality of Asia. Western Christianity is not enough. We need Eastern mysticism to help us penetrate more deeply into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now more than ever the world cries out for wise men and women from the East, people who will follow the star bringing gifts of gold, incense and myrrh to the child who has been born.<sup>7</sup>

Jung himself once pointed out that life seems to have gone out of the churches in the West, and as its next dwelling place the Holy Spirit appears to have selected the human individual. This should come as no surprise to us Christians. "Destroy this temple," said Jesus, "and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). John tells us that Jesus was talking about the temple of his own body. But by extension he was also speaking about the temples of our own bodies. St. Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16) and then goes on to state unequivocally, "For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Cor 3:17).

Over the past few decades we in the West have seriously begun to appreciate the "other half of our soul" as it has been revealed to us by Asia. This is not to say that we have not had our own gifts to offer as well. It has been Western Christians who, spurred on by the message of the Gospel, have consistently and reliably responded to natural disasters in foreign countries, who have built missionary hospitals and orphanages and have fought for political and social advances throughout the world. I know of Buddhists and Hindus who see this—a commitment to social engagement and a talent for organizational genius—as the gift of Christianity to their traditions.

The structure of Western monasticism was undoubtedly influential in the Hindu monastic revival of the nineteenth century; Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by the Beatitudes in his involvement with the plight of his people; Buddhists speak openly about “socially engaged Buddhism” and credit this to the influence of Western Christianity. Ours is an age of complementarity, of reciprocity, a coming together of East and West in many ways.

### **The Universal Call to Contemplation**

The one and only time that I personally met Fr. Bede Griffiths and heard him speak, the title of the talk he gave was “The Universal Call to Contemplation.” This was the underlying theme of all of his teaching. It has become a central core of my own teaching as well, and is foundational to everything that follows.

I understand this “universal call” first of all to mean that everyone is called to share in the grace of the contemplative life. It is for people in all walks of life, not just for monks and nuns and “professional religious.” This, as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is something that people are discovering through immersing themselves in other traditions. It is the reason why *zendos* and ashrams and yoga centers are full.

Some years ago, for example, I had a suspicion that there were many Christians who had left Christianity for a non-Christian Eastern tradition, having found in that tradition something really valuable, namely, a way of meditation and interiority in general. It was not that they had wanted to leave their religion of birth behind; it was that they simply could not find their way home again. Having discovered a profound sense of contemplative presence through the practice of Zen meditation or yoga, they might then have experienced Christian liturgies and homilies as banal and any practical application of spirituality to daily life—through diet, ecology, care of the body, healthy interpersonal skills—as sadly lacking in their Christian community. Perhaps they had tried to speak with their parish priest or religious education coordinator of what they had discovered, only to be dismissed with a look of utter incomprehension or with rolled eyes. Conversely, I sensed

that there might be Christians who had entered the church after a history with one of these other traditions, people who had never been able to find a way to reconcile these things with their new-found Christianity and assumed that they had to be left behind. Many of these people seemed to have no idea that there was also a Christian contemplative tradition that was accessible to all.

My suspicion was confirmed when I began giving talks and leading programs on prayer and meditation. In preparing my presentations, I specifically decided to follow the line of thinking used by Bede Griffiths, to teach about the Christian contemplative tradition while always keeping an eye on the universal contemplative tradition, drawing as many analogies and comparisons (negative and positive) as possible from other traditions. The result was that, again and again, people would respond by expressing the same sentiment: "I have studied yoga (or *zazen* or TM or *vipassana*) for years and I never knew how to tie it in with my Christianity; I never knew that I could do it as a Christian, that there could be any connection between it and Christianity."

The call to contemplation is universal. People all over are hearing it, sensing it, receiving it, yearning for "something more," longing to go deeper, and looking for a new language with which to rearticulate ancient truths. The exodus to the East and Eastern practices has become for us a spur, an incentive to uncover our own contemplative tradition, to seek the way of interiority within our own tradition.

I stress this because there was a time in the church when the way of contemplative prayer was considered so esoteric that it belonged only to a certain elite few. I was told more than one story of how, in certain religious formation houses and monasteries, the writings of St. John of the Cross, for example, were kept under lock and key. Even monks and other religious were discouraged from seeking the way of pure prayer. And if one did get to crack open those books, one could easily get a sense that it was a pathway that was very ascetical and individualistic, a pathway that seemed to exclude ordinary people from contemplation.

The second meaning of this "universal call to contemplation" is that we discover in our own contemplative tradition a commonality

with many other spiritual traditions that are not Judeo-Christian. Why? Simply put, because the source and the summit of all authentic spiritual traditions is the experience of union with God. When we stay close to this experience—both before and after it has been expressed and defined in ritual, dogma, or doctrine—we find much more in common than we might have anticipated. An openness to these other traditions might be able to help us rediscover or rearticulate our own truths in a way that might never have occurred to us. This openness could help us illuminate and appreciate in a new way some aspect of our own tradition that has not yet been fully formed in our own awareness or for which we have until now lacked an adequate vocabulary.

### Universal Wisdom: The Bridge

There is such a sense of relief when people who have left Christianity for another contemplative tradition discover not only that Christianity has its own mystical tradition and its own mystical understanding of the Gospel but also that they can integrate into their Christianity the treasure they have found in the other tradition.

One of the most significant contributions that Bede Griffiths made to monastic spirituality was introducing the practice of doing *lectio divina*—holy reading—with texts from sacred traditions other than our own. Toward the end of his life he even compiled an anthology of those texts under the title *Universal Wisdom*. He believed, as I have come to believe, that there is much to be gleaned from reading others' descriptions of their experience of the Divine. It just could be that someone from another tradition will be able to express some aspect of the interior journey in a way that might not occur to us and that could spark in us either a sense of connection with or a thirst for that same experience.

As my brothers and sisters at Shantivanam Benedictine Ashram and many other ashrams in India do, my friends and I always begin our sessions with a reading from universal wisdom. In the same spirit, we will begin each chapter of this book with a brief quotation from the sacred texts of one of the great Eastern traditions as

well as with a quotation from the Judeo-Christian scriptures. In addition to setting the theme of each chapter, these epigraphs are meant to serve as bridges—and we all know that bridges go two ways. They not only can help us understand someone else's tradition in a new light; they may also be able to help those from another tradition understand Christianity in a new light as they find in the Christian tradition resonances of their own spiritual theology.

We would do well to keep in mind that we Christians have our own Eastern tradition, the tradition of Byzantine Christianity, which stretches from the Fathers of the early Church and the desert monks all the way to the inspired teachers of today, such as Kallistos Ware and Antony Bloom, a tradition that has produced such classic texts as the *Philokalia* and *The Way of the Pilgrim*. In recent decades many Western Christians have begun to uncover the riches that are hidden in Byzantine Christianity, through music and liturgy, through iconography and literature, and, most important, through the contemplative tradition and the practice of the Jesus Prayer.

### **The Issue of Language**

While space does not permit detailed treatment of the subject here, the issue of using terminology other than that rooted in Greek philosophical and Roman legal language is quite apropos of our discussion, especially with regard to authors such as Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, William Johnson, John Main and some of the others I will cite in the pages ahead.

The original inspiration for Christianity is Jesus, who articulated his experience according to his own background—that of a Palestinian Jew steeped in the Torah, the Law and the Prophets, and the language of the psalms—and the background of his listeners. By the time the *kerygma* (i.e., the “proclamation” of the Good News) first began to be set down in writing, some thirty years had passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus. The story was the same, but the form of its telling was to a certain degree being shaped by the author, his circumstances, and his community. Certainly each of the Gospel writers had a particular audience in mind—Matthew's community was made up largely of Jewish

converts, for example, while Luke was writing mainly for Gentiles. St. Paul borrowed from many sources to try to articulate the Gospel, particularly to people who had been steeped in Hellenistic thought, both Gentiles and Jews of the diaspora. This added another level of interpretation, a new set of terms for trying to describe the initial Gospel experience. And certainly by the second and third centuries, from the Neoplatonic period onward, yet another philosophical and epistemological layer was being added to the Gospel *kerygma* in an attempt to convey the mystical heart of the experience to a whole new generation of thinkers. Greek philosophical language (just like Roman law!) was to become so wedded to Christian theology that we could tend to think of it as canonical, inspired at the same level of authority as scripture itself. But many scholars have argued that it is not, and that such language is not essential to the inner meaning of the Gospel or to the experience of adoption that Jesus offers.

Now, what thinkers such as Abhishiktananda and Bede Griffiths asked was: what if Christianity were to be interpreted and passed on using the language of the Vedanta (an orthodox system of Hindu philosophy), the language of Mahayana Buddhism, or the language of Taoism or Confucian philosophy? Is it possible to take our experience of the Gospel and the Christian tradition and try to articulate it using non-Western philosophical or mystical language? The fact that we have not done this may perhaps account for the failure of missionary efforts in the Orient, Bede Griffiths says, especially in India, where we have used a philosophical language that makes little sense to the Indian mind. We have so often tried to pass on Greek terms and Roman culture (hence the Roman Rite of the Mass and Gregorian chant) instead of allowing the seed of the *kerygma* to take root in native philosophical and cultural soil, recognizing that the spark of the Divine and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have been at work in other traditions as well.

At the same time, I think we have learned not to expect, much less desire, any easy kind of agreement, what one of my teachers called a "soggy syncretism," so as to say, "See, we are all the same." No, we are not all the same, and we disagree on some very fundamental things. I, for example, do not believe in reincarnation. It is

not that I do not understand it; I think I do understand it. It is simply that I do not think that that is the way the universe operates. I also do not agree with what many of my Buddhist friends mean when they say that “there is no self.”

For all of his searching into the common truth that underlies all religion, Bede Griffiths was the first to admit this.

The Buddhist *nirvana* and the Hindu *moksha* are not the same, nor are they the same as the Christian vision of God. So the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian are all experiencing the ultimate Reality but experiencing it in different ways through their own love and through their own traditions of faith and knowledge. . . . There is a tendency to say that when one reaches the supreme state everything is the same and that there are no differences any more, but I do not think that is true.<sup>8</sup>

He goes on to say that, in a sense, “the experience of ultimate truth is different for each person, since each person is a unique image of God, a unique reflection of the one eternal light and love.”<sup>9</sup>

And yet, in spite of these differences, there is still something that unites us—and it is not simply our quest for answers to the ultimate questions. More often than not it is some kind of an experience of the Divine, Ultimate Reality, the Source of Being, that has inspired the original movement. It seems to me undeniable that the ancient *rishis* (divinely inspired Hindu poets or sages; seers) and yogis of India, and the Buddha himself after sitting in meditation under the *bodhi* tree, and many of his followers, and the Sufi mystics, had very real and profound mystical experiences. When we read what they had to say—we who have had some experience of meditation and contemplation, some experience of the love of God poured into our hearts—we recognize in their words something of what we ourselves have known and perhaps have not been able to articulate.

### Concerning Techniques

Many of the techniques that I will be discussing in the pages that follow have been drawn from other traditions, especially the traditions of Asia. In the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church

on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1989, we find the following statement in chapter 5 on “Questions of Method”: “The majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it.”<sup>10</sup> The document then goes on to quote *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on relations with other religions:

Just as “the Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,”<sup>11</sup> neither should these ways be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured. It is within the context of all of this that these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew.<sup>12</sup>

Our aim here is to learn from other traditions “what is useful,” while remaining faithful to and exploring ever more deeply the “Christian conception of prayer,” which may actually appear clearer to us as we explore some of these techniques.

At the same time, the West has always had a suspicion with regard to technique—and perhaps with good reason. It is possible to become obsessed with technique and lose sight of the working of grace, of God’s initiative. Prayer is not “magic.” Awareness of this is inherent in and fundamental to the Christian concept of prayer. (It is not totally absent in other traditions either.) In other words, we do not conjure up God, we do not bring God down from heaven, and we do not make ourselves holy. We dispose ourselves, we stop, we listen, we wait, we watch, we make ourselves available, and we put ourselves in situations and environments that are conducive to prayer and meditation. And then we wait for the working of grace, like the bride awaiting the bridegroom.

### **Spirit, Soul, and Body: An Anthropology**

Before we begin to address the topic of meditation proper, there is one other element I would like to introduce, and that is my understanding of the make-up of the human person, an under-

standing that will undergird all the reflections that follow. Like Bede Griffiths, I assume that the human person is made up not just of body and soul, but of body, soul, and spirit. You may think that this sounds more like an introduction to Christian anthropology than to Christian meditation, and you would not be far from the truth in thinking so. The famous maxim that dictates liturgical thought applies here as well: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. Translated simply, this means, “The law of prayer is the law of belief.” Translated even more colloquially, it means “How we pray is how we believe”—and vice versa! The fact is that all of our theological questions are also anthropological questions. Who we think we are, who we think God is, and what we think of the relationship between ourselves and God—each of these is crucial to our prayer life.

Generally in the West, and certainly in Western Christianity, we speak of the human person as being composed of either body and soul or body and spirit, though sometimes we do speak of the “spiritual soul.”<sup>13</sup> Bede Griffiths, among others, found this anthropology lacking, and insisted that the human person is made up of body, soul, and spirit. Here is how he put it:

We have a body, a physical organism, which is part of the physical organism of nature, and we have a soul, a psyche, which is a psychological organism, with its different faculties. But beyond both body and soul we are spirit, *pneuma* in Greek [*ruah* in Hebrew], *atman* in Sanskrit, and this is our point of union with the divine spirit. St. Francis de Sales calls this spirit the “fine point” of the soul. It is the point at which the human spirit is in touch with the Spirit of God. . . . Most people think of the human being as a body-soul, a psychological-physical organism, and have lost sight of the spirit, the point of human transcendence, which opens us both to God, the eternal Spirit, and to our fellow human beings. For it is at this depth of our being that we are in communion with one another. In our bodies and our souls we are all different and divided, but at this point of the spirit we are in communion with God and with one another.<sup>14</sup>

The Italian scholar Marco Vannini speaks beautifully of the human person thus:

*Sarx, psyche, pneuma*: body, soul, spirit. This was the ancient anthropology, and also the Christian anthropology. Having forgotten it means to have lost the experience of the spirit. Only when Christianity grew rigid in a dogmatic synthesis did it lose—of necessity—the spirit (or indeed confined it to the “supernatural”) and create a body-soul bi-partite anthropology.<sup>15</sup>

In one of the last presentations of his life, Bede Griffiths said, “The body, mind, and spirit are the main focus of all my thinking presently; we have to integrate these three levels of reality that exist at every moment.”<sup>16</sup> This view is echoed in the work of a writer greatly admired by Fr. Bede, Ken Wilber, who refers to an “integral spirituality.” It is also a view that shaped the thought of the great Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo, whose teachings on integral yoga had an important influence on Fr. Bede.

What is integral spirituality? Ken Wilber offers a concrete example in suggesting that a contemplative monk might perhaps have to supplement his practice with *hatha* yoga, weight training, therapy, and some kind of community service, so that he has a well-rounded life.<sup>17</sup> This applies not just to religious, but also to “church folks” in general who often have such a mistrust of the body and physicality. Actually, it applies to everyone, especially in our “information age,” when so many of us find ourselves stuck behind computer screens and cut off from nature, eating food out of little plastic boxes and constantly bombarded with stimuli from TV, radio, and the Internet. Perhaps in a more so-called primitive era, integral spirituality could be relatively spontaneous, but in our day and age, we need to be intentional about it.

I am always of several minds as to where to begin—with spirit, soul, or body. All three are obviously essential. While studying theology I was taught that we should always respect the inherent hierarchy in the way we order things; hence one of my advisors counseled me to change the references in my thesis to “spirit, soul, and body,” instead of “body, soul, and spirit,” because the spirit (and the Spirit) is obviously the most important element.

On the other hand, Marco Vannini quotes Meister Eckhart as saying that, “The spirit cannot be perfect if the body and the soul

are not perfect first; and therefore it is necessary to have full experience of body and soul, if one wants to have that of the spirit.”<sup>18</sup> In the same vein, Benedetto Calati, one of the former priors general of my monastic congregation, the Camaldolese Benedictines, had a famous dictum regarding the foundation of monastic life and formation. “Before you can be a monk,” he would often say, “you must be a Christian; and before being a Christian you must be a human being.”

I think Don Benedetto was right. However, when I repeated his words to one of my friends who is a fine theologian, he did not agree, noting that in order to be fully human we *need* to be Christian, that Christianity and spirituality in general are what bring us to the fullness of our humanity. I think he was right, too! And apparently so does Vannini who, after quoting Meister Eckhart, says that “the contrary is also true: one does not even have true knowledge of soul and body without experience of the spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Both views are important, and we must keep them in mind as we proceed.

Having said this, let me sum up my own position. We are not angels; we may never deny our humanity. As much as we may think of it as our burden, our humanity is our gift and our treasure. It is so precious that Jesus chose to take it on so that it could be raised up to the right hand of the Father in glory. At the same time, the spiritual dimension of being human cannot be denied. If we deny our spiritual dimension, we are in some way not fully human! So what I will argue from the very start is that our spirituality is not something we add onto ourselves, not something we cover ourselves with, not even something “supernatural”: it is the very center and source of our being. It is what holds us together, body and soul.

## Questions of Method

As I noted in the preface, each chapter of this book includes practical considerations regarding questions of method. Let us conclude this first chapter with an overview of the actual process of meditation, laying out some techniques that can help lead us to greater

interiority. Here is a summary from the famous Indian Swami Muktananda that I have used for many years:

There are four factors involved in meditation: *the object of meditation*, which is the inner self; *mantra*, which is the vibration of the self; *asana*, the posture in which we can sit comfortably for a long time; and natural *pranayama* [control of the breath], which arises when we repeat the mantra with love and reverence. These four factors are interrelated, and when they come together, meditation occurs in a very natural manner.<sup>20</sup>

I tend to re-order these a bit: object, posture, breath, and mantra.

We will obviously spend a good deal of time discussing the object of our meditation, and in a sense each of the chapters in this book directly addresses a specific aspect of the object of meditation.

With regard to the actual practice of meditation, let us start out very simply. If you already have a practice that works for you, please feel free to stay with it. As the ancient monks used to say, “A tree that gets uprooted too often doesn’t grow deep roots.” If, however, you are new to the practice of meditation, I suggest the following:

- Sit as upright as possible, letting the vertebrae of your spine rest comfortably one on top of the other. Let your shoulders drop and raise the crown of the head directly up toward the ceiling. If you are sitting on the floor, make yourself a solid foundation, with your knees and buttocks on the floor (or the latter on a cushion), offering the rest of your body as much support as possible. The various *asanas* (body positions) assumed in yogic exercises of *hatha* yoga are invaluable here: lotus, half-lotus, or the perfect pose. If you are sitting in a chair, plant both feet firmly but gently on the ground. Whether you are sitting on the floor or in a chair, place your hands gently in your lap or on your legs in a way that will remain comfortable for you during the entire time of sitting. Lower your eyelids gently until they are in a position that is neither open nor closed, as if sleeping—but do not sleep!
- Breathe gently, normally, quietly, through your nose, paying close attention to each breath to make you aware of your own body and the life force that runs through you. Perhaps it will be neces-

sary for you to begin by taking several deep breaths to fill you up and calm your body down, but from then on, your lungs can function quite well without your permission. Your job is simply to be aware.

- Like Muktananda and many Hindus and some Buddhists, I too—and many Christians I know—have found great benefit in prayer from the use of a word, what is referred to by the Sanskrit term *mantra*. We will deal more with mantra in the next chapter. But for now, instead of using a mantra, I would like to recommend an exercise that I often find helpful to center myself, to focus on praying “the way in.” It is the Zen exercise of merely counting our breaths, from one to ten, being aware, being aware, being aware of every breath. This exercise is not only a good beginning; for some Zen practitioners it is a practice that suffices for many years. Here is how Philip Kapleau records Yasutani Roshi’s teaching in *The Three Pillars of Zen*:

- When you have established a correct posture, take a deep breath, hold it momentarily, then exhale slowly and quietly. Repeat this two or three times, always breathing through the nose. After that, breathe naturally. When you have accustomed yourself to this routine, one deep breath at the beginning will suffice. After that, breathe naturally, without trying to manipulate your breath . . .
- The easiest [method for concentration] for beginners is counting incoming and outgoing breaths. The value of this particular exercise lies in the fact that all the reasoning is excluded and the discriminative mind put at rest. Thus the waves of thought are stilled and a gradual one-pointedness of mind achieved. To start with, count both inhalations and exhalations. When you inhale, concentrate on “one”; when you exhale, on “two”; and so on up to “ten.” Then you return to “one” and once more count up to “ten,” continuing as before.<sup>21</sup>

Should you go on to “eleven” or “twelve” or “twenty-three,” then this is a sign that you have lost awareness, so gently return to “one”

and start all over again. If you prefer, or perhaps later, you may adapt this exercise in the way the late Jesuit priest and Zen master Enomiya-Lassalle taught: if you are distracted, just count the inhalations, and if you need to counteract drowsiness, just count the exhalations.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, of course, we concentrate on the breath only long enough to slow ourselves down and make ourselves aware of the fact that we are breathing. From then on, we need to let the word, or mantra, set the pace and frequency of the breath.

If you are worried that this is not enough prayer for you in some way, don't worry! The real prayer is your intention of quieting yourself and being available. Real prayer is being present to the Spirit who is already present to us, though we are usually unaware; your prayer will be longing for conscious contact with the Lord of Love.