



# Monte Oliveto Meditation Retreat

(23 June – 1 July, 2001)

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## The Place

Ten meditators from Singapore joined 55 other meditators from around the world to participate in this year's weeklong annual retreat at Monte Oliveto, Italy, led by Father Laurence Freeman OSB.

The great Benedictine abbey of Monte Oliveto some 33 km from Sienna is a spiritual haven. Sitting on a wild and solitary hill, itself set in a 215-acre park of cliffs and valleys, the 14<sup>th</sup> century abbey rises above a plunging ravine in the heart of the Siennese *crete* or moors.

Everything here speaks of aspiration, of rootedness, and of reaching beyond – from the peaked Church campanile crafted of rosy Siennese terracotta tiles to the resident swallows soaring over elegant cypresses.

The great cloister of the abbey with its huge wrought iron windows is a wonder. Its walls bear exquisite frescoes depicting events in the adult life of St Benedict painted by two 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century masters, Signorelli and Sodoma, at the invitation of the Abbot General Airoldi.

## The Routine

Our daily programme was structured to nurture and balance body, mind and spirit. Four periods of meditation sandwiched Giovanni Felicioni's humorous and healing yoga sessions, Fr Laurence's conferences on Forgiving, and Harvard Literature Professor Robert Kiely's lectio sessions on James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Evenings saw us at Mass in the cool crypt of the Church.

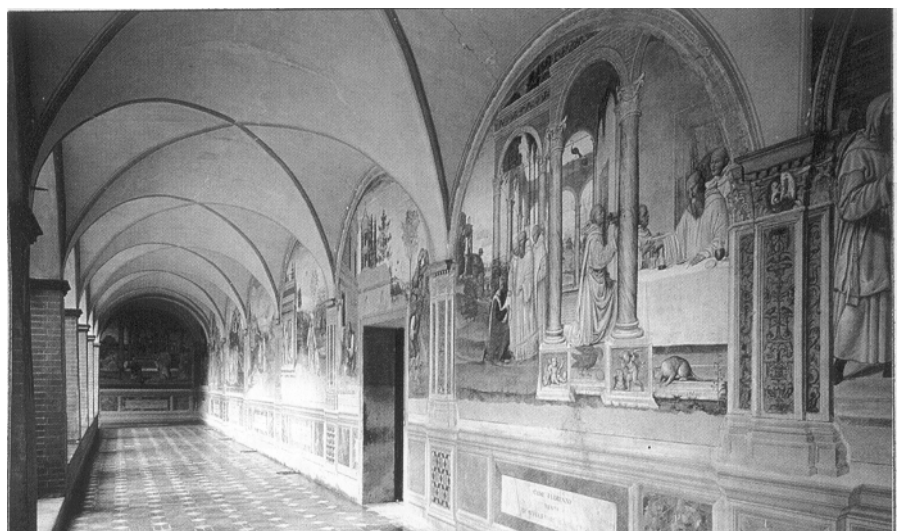
Meals were varied. Pastry breakfasts with home-made honey, light salad and fruit lunches, and surprisingly sumptuous Tuscan dinners delighted us at a cosy restaurant in what was once the monastery's gatehouse and where a terracotta Madonna watches over the lowered drawbridge.

But most memorable were the 30-minute meditation periods in the upper hall overlooking the Tuscan landscape. Each session opened and closed with readings carefully selected from sources ranging from John Main to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Quiet music from Bach, Beethoven, Arvo Part, Olivier Messiaen and others led us into and out of meditation.

Music again uplifted and transported us as we joined the community of monks for Compline in the abbey's Church at 9.00pm. This usually sent us to bed in the night's Great Silence.

Fr Laurence encouraged silence during the day, in the spirit of the abbey and the retreat. At dinner, we unleashed our social instincts over red wine and good food. Moderation was to be the motto by which our week unfolded. "There is a time to speak, a time to listen and a time to meditate. Respect those times," advised Fr Laurence at the outset.

As he put it, "silence is a good way to listen". It means we are totally attentive and natural. He quoted St Ignatius of Antioch: "If you can't understand the silence of Christ, you can't understand His words." And so we listened to his daily morning conferences on forgiving.



## The Message

With insight and sensitivity, Fr Laurence cleared misconceptions, removed doubts, offered insights and reinforced the familiar as he explored the many aspects of forgiveness, its role in the spiritual journey, and its particular relevance for meditators.

Forgiving, we learned, is the shortest, simplest route to heaven – an invitingly simple but absolutely demanding message. Yet, forgiveness is readily available to us, for it is the heart of our divine nature.

He equates forgiving with compassion. It is not a one-off thing condescendingly granted to an offender but an ongoing act, an unconditional embracing of the other, a state of union, of love. It is a part of the dynamics of human relationship that flows or is clogged. Meditation helps the flow. As we experience the unconditional and unconditioned in meditation, we begin to express it in our relationships.

Quoting Matthew: “forgive us as we have forgiven...,” Fr Laurence shared the insight that there is balance in forgiveness. It is a quid pro quo. We are forgiven only if we have *already* forgiven.

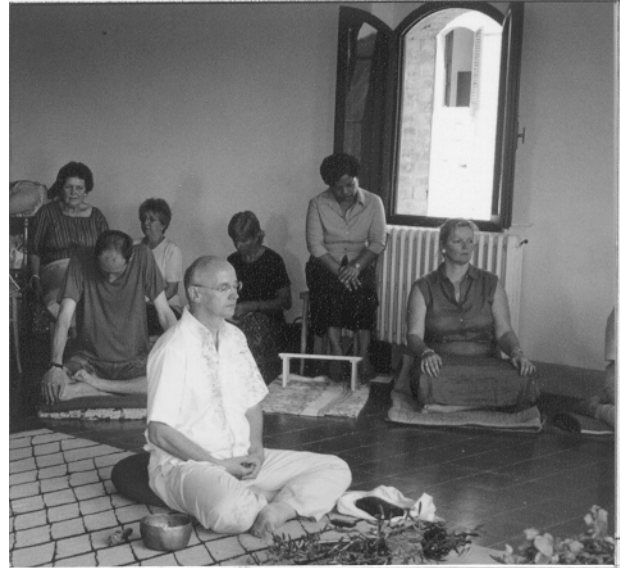
What then keeps us from compassion? What prevents us from forgiving? It is our judgmental nature. We claim rights and seek revenge in the name of justice. Revenge, however, will not break the cycle. Love breaks the cycle of cause and effect setting free and healing both parties.

Justice is in fact at the heart of Christianity and of humanity. It is found not in revenge but in recognising our own need for forgiveness. This need is the basis for justice. The root of sin, Fr Laurence said, is anger against God for making us finite. The answer is humility to accept our finiteness. We cannot love or forgive others or God unless we have forgiven ourselves.

Referring to apartheid South Africa, he cited the bloodless resolution of differences there as a reflection of the Gospel message. It was a case of Amnesia vs Amnesty, he said, that the public commission only required the accused to admit their wrong, not even to ask for forgiveness, for amnesty to be granted. Such “confessions” usually lead to repentance and a breaking down of barriers resulting in justice being done. Facing the victim humbly sets the offender free from guilt in a healing process. Justice is not found when seeking it. It flows from forgiveness. When reconciliation replaces pain and blame, there is joy and peace and God’s Kingdom is realised.

Fr Laurence also said forgiving is paying attention. If we do this we will realise as Jesus did: “they know not what they do.” Human beings are innocent and only expect good to be done to them. We cause hurt because we do not hear the cries of the victim. We feel hurt because we do not hear the cries of the offender. A good question to ask ourselves when hurt is: “What have I been loving?”

Forgiving is difficult. But the difficulty is a challenge that must be taken up if we are to make the spiritual journey into the fullness of humanity, the realisation of our divine nature.



### *Useful Reminder from Scripture*

...  
*Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who wrong you, and  
pray for those who use you  
spitefully.*