

The Way of Contemplation

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The other day a directee described to me a new experience in prayer. She said, she first went to prayer as she typically does. Then...

"It was during one of my 3 or 4 a.m. awakenings. I went to my office and turned on the ceiling fan and my desk light. I read a few lines of scripture and a devotional. I then prayed a very intimate prayer--nothing like I would say out loud. At that point, I next slid into my meditation. I find that Psalms 46:10 works perfectly for me. 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.' I often sing it to God in His honor one time. That night I repeated the verse several times in my mind, and without any effort of my own, it changed to 'Be still and know'. Then it changed to, 'Be still'. Finally the word came simply, 'Be....' At this time I then listened for the voice of God."

The new experience that came was this. "First, I became aware of feeling cool from the air (wind) of the fan. Deep from inside I heard the gentle whisper, 'Be.' Exactly at that moment, there was a profound silence. No voice, no thoughts. There was nothing, and yet to my amazement there was *everything*. If I can explain it, it is as if the window of my soul opened. It is nothing I tried to obtain. It was a gift from God. What is contemplation? Don't ask me. I didn't find it. It found me."

The prayer experience thus described was an utter surprise for this lady. She had been used to times of stillness, but before, they had always seemed initiated and maintained mostly by herself. This time was different. A force like a wind carried her into a deeper, more profound sense of wonder. It was a little frightening at first since no one had previously described such a thing to her. Yet it certainly felt blessed. So she went with it and learned later its name.

Contemplation --The practice of prayer in which imageless awareness of God's presence is the focus.

Eventually, this may progress to a sense of union that transcends consciousness such that awareness is not present, yet God does an invisible work of conforming the soul to His likeness outside of our consciousness. This is reputedly the highest form of prayer development and characteristic of the unitive way. It is also present in the later stages of the illuminative way. *Theoria*. 12th century theologian Hugh of St. Victor described it as "the alertness of the understanding which, finding everything plain, grasps it clearly with entire apprehension." According to Gerald May, "This 'finding everything plain' implies and unfocused openness in which nothing captures attention because nothing is special or everything is equally special. To use Teresa's words, 'The Presence, whom the soul has at its side, makes it attentive to everything.'" It is the experience of God that feels more a gift rather than an ego-directed effort toward God. Classical descriptions frequently include two psychological qualities. First, the awareness is *open*, not focused on one thing to the exclusion of others. This is unlike meditation in which the attention focuses intently and effort is made in that focus. The second psychological quality is *centeredness in the present moment*. There is a sense of timelessness and/or "eternal now." Distractions are not a problem because such thoughts are included in the eternal now experience and equally received and let go.

"But these psychological qualities are not all there is to contemplation. The one essential quality of contemplation that all the mystics affirm, and that must come as sheer gift, is love... We encounter true, unattached love only by falling into it or waking up to discover it, often by being surprised by it. Much as we might long for it, we cannot make it happen. The freely loving quality of contemplation must be kindled, prompted, drawn forth, or, if you will, infused within us by God." Gerald May from *The Dark Night of the Soul* p. 111.

I, like this directee, had never been taught about the experience of contemplation when it came to me. I knew that I often ran out of things to say to God when I prayed. I knew that I would ultimately not want to leave the mental experience I was having after I did meditation on scripture, dream work, or other more active devotional tasks. But gradually, it was as if I was drawn deeper and deeper into the wordless, imageless presence. It was a Love greater than my own. I thought of what I had read in C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* some years earlier. He had spoken about a

longing for something which one did not know. Yet the longing itself seemed to become its own fulfillment. "The longing which was its own fulfillment", Lewis described as "joy". My desire to stay in the quiet after the more active interaction of devotions was done, I called "hangin' out with Jesus." Only after God awakened me to this experience did I learn the ancient name of "contemplation."

Indeed, contemplation is the central experience for an entire approach and attitude toward life. "**Contemplative life**" is a term used in Western Christianity paralleling the term "mystical life" in the Eastern Orthodox. It emphasizes the human dimension of apophatic (imageless) relatedness to God. The God-initiated part of contemplation, like what my directee experienced, is connoted more by the Eastern phrase "mystical life". In either case, it is an approach to life and prayer emphasizing simple consciousness of the reality of God's presence accompanied by love. This love and mindfulness of God's presence is then sought throughout the believer's daily affairs moment to moment in a "prayer without ceasing." In this, it parallels Buddhist "mindfulness."

Evelyn Underhill in her book *Mysticism* describes the contemplative life as having three phases: 1) contemplation of the natural world of becoming, 2) contemplation of the metaphysical world of being, 3) Contemplation of divine reality within which the opposites are found as one. These are sometimes called the natural world, the essential world, and the superessential world. (See St. Bonaventure for a thorough explanation of each of these.) We seek to experience God respectively: 1) In His creatures. 2) Through disciplined and recollected attention directed to a plane of existence in which bodily senses have no attachments and away from every image, every notion, every 'thing' and toward the night of sense (St. John of the Cross). This stage is sometimes called speculation. 3) Through dying to our own will by means of the Dark Night of Spirit to the experience of absolute love.

These experiences, according to Richard of St. Victor, result in 1) enlargement of the mind, 2) elevation of the mind, 3) ecstasy of the mind.

Delacroix says when contemplation appears, it produces 1) a general condition of indifference (ie. having let go of inordinate attachments), liberty, peace, elevation above the world, and beatitude. Multiplicity and division of consciousness cease to be perceived. One is raised above him/herself and a deeper, purer self substitutes for the Ego-self. 2) One becomes conscious of being in immediate relation to God who installs a method of being and knowing which become one. The Eastern Orthodox tradition often describes a pleasant warmth or burning and longing of love in the heart region of the chest that can accompany the growth of this state.

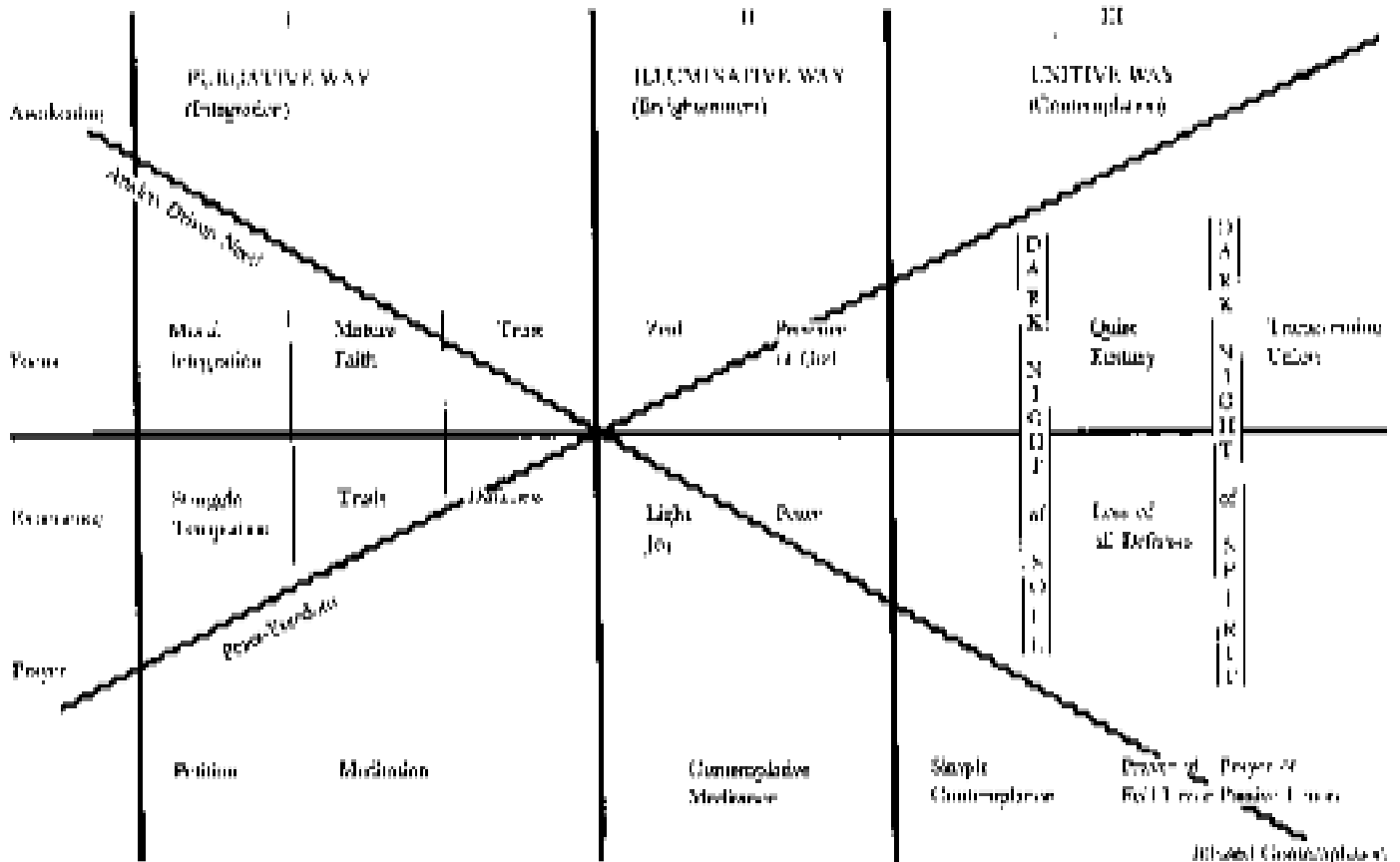
Perhaps the most famous classical work promoting the experience and discipline of contemplation is *The Cloud of Unknowing* by the anonymous 16th century English monk. In his book, he points out that this form of prayer is not necessarily for everyone. One must feel a call to it. It is often misunderstood by those with a more activist bent. Indeed, often those who are inclined to activity may be blessed by God in their 'doing' of spiritual service more than in this practice of intangible 'being'. To say that it is a high form of prayer is not to say those who are called to a more active life are lesser disciples. But to those who are called to the contemplative life and into which God infuses His Spirit in this manner, the author recommends how to proceed. He suggests that we promote the experience through the simple practice of directing our naked, unadorned longings into the indistinct image of a cloud above us. This is the "cloud of unknowing". As distractions come during that activity, when once we notice them, we can let the distractions fall beneath the "cloud of forgetting" over which we hover. We then redirect our attention to the Cloud of Unknowing in a gentle manner. Thus, suspended between these clouds, we linger in God's presence and orient our souls to His transformation of our lives.

The author and workshop speaker, Father Thomas Keating (*Open Heart; Open Mind*) likes to use the example of a pail of mud and water. Our consciousness is typically like the pail with the mud shaken up and suspended in an opaque mix. Busyness troubles the waters, keeping them opaque. When we enter into God's stillness, we find the bucket of our soul is placed at rest. The mud then gradually leaves its suspension and settles to the bottom. We can then distinguish the

clarified soul like unclouded water over the ground of our being. The ultimate ground, of course, is God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28).

Another oft quoted modern book promoting contemplative life is Basil Pennington’s *Centering Prayer*. Using the tried and true Eastern Orthodox method of the Jesus Prayer, Pennington simplifies it even further so that the sacred words of scripture repeated becomes a sacred word like my directee’s word “be”. With the single word then substituting for the image of “The Cloud of Unknowing”, one enters into the Holy Presence to rest and be renewed and transformed.

A developmental view of contemplation to the broader experience of prayer generally can be seen in the following diagram from Groschel’s book, *Spiritual Passages*. Here he places some



of the most common spiritual terminology about the spiritual life on a continuum of development with various stages of contemplation seen in the Illuminative and Unitive Ways. His term “infused contemplation” is what my directee noticed when God swept her into a deeper more profound silence than she had previously known. Prayer is “infused” when God does it, and not our own selves.

Although the scriptures do not use the word “contemplation”, the church’s teaching on contemplation has been nearly unanimous throughout the centuries. Though it became a forgotten discipline in the last generations of Protestantism, its resurgence has been an Orthodox, Protestant, and Independent church phenomena. Perhaps the scriptures most alluding to contemplation is Hebrews chapters 3 & 4. Here we see the author arguing that the children of God have been called to rest. We are to leave the turmoil caused by unbelief, and follow Christ into the rest of God.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore,

make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. (4:9-11)

Surely if contemplation is anything, it is profound rest. It is also faith profound and the waiting for God and God alone to act. And, happily, He does. We often do not see His acts, but He acts nonetheless. We can, however, witness the transformation of our souls over time as we practice this holy work. Blessed is the One who has given us such a wonderful gift.

O Divine Hart!

Clad in the hunter's greed of selfish desires, I pursued Thee in the forest of consciousness,
O Divine Hart!

The sound of my loud prayers startled Thee; Thou didst swiftly flee. I raced after Thee;
but my erratic chase, the hue and cry of my restlessness, caused Thee to retreat still farther.

Stealthily I crept toward Thee with my spear of concentration, but my aim was unsteady.
As Thou didst bound away I heard in secret echoes of Thy footfalls: "Without devotion
thou art a poor, poor marksman!"

Even when I held firmly my meditation missile, Thine echo resounded:
"I am beyond thy mental dart; I am beyond!"

At last, in submissive wisdom I entered the silent cave of selfless love.
Lo! Thou, the Hart of Heaven camest willingly within.

From "Whispers of Eternity"
By Paramanhansa Yogananda