



# Contemplative Spirituality

## A Shalem Senior Staff Monograph

A generation ago, most people were uncomfortable talking about their personal spirituality. Now, however, people speak of it so freely that the term itself has become confused; it is difficult to know what people mean when they say it.

For example, some people consider spirituality to be primarily about ethics and morality. Others see it as theological reflection. Still others think it involves communication with spirits. Many associate it with prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices. It is often associated with healing and psychological growth.

Given this variety of interpretations, it is helpful to go back to the original understandings of spirituality as revealed in the traditions of spiritual pilgrims who have gone before us. Their teachings and writings through the centuries are priceless resources in helping us clarify our own experience. It is upon this gathered wisdom that we base the following discussion.

## What Is Spirituality?

In many traditions, the word "spirit" refers to life-force, the basic energy of being. Symbolically, spirit is the breath of life. The Hebrew ruah, Greek pneuma, Latin spiritus, and Sanskrit prajna all mean both "breath" and "spirit." Traditionally, this life force is seen as manifest in our love--in the passions and inspirations that motivate us and connect us with the world and with one another.

In this view, spirituality has to do with the fundamental propelling forces of our lives, our most profound loves, passions and concerns. It is the wellspring of our sense of meaning and of our will to live, the source of our deepest desires, values and dreams. Spirituality, then, is not a thing apart from our daily lives, but rather the fundamental energy source that fuels all our emotions, relationships, work, and everything else we consider meaningful.

Contrary to popular belief, spirituality is not something special or extraordinary. It is instead absolutely ordinary and completely natural. Everyone has a spiritual life. We express it in many different ways: not only in places of worship but also in work, community and family, in all our creativity and commitments.

The spiritual life is like a deep ocean current, often unseen, but flowing through all our experience, moving us to seek fulfillment and connectedness, impelling us towards truth,

goodness and beauty. As William Wordsworth said, it is something "deeply interfused" that "rolls through all things."<sup>1</sup>

Spirituality is the living heart of all the great world religions, and each faith tradition in its own way proclaims that the essence of spirituality is love. The Christian expression is in the two great commandments: to love God with one's whole self and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Thus spirituality is the heart of our desire for fulfillment of those commandments. It is our participation in the love that created us "so that we might seek God" (Acts 17:27).

In a sense, then, spirituality can be considered synonymous with love--not necessarily the *feeling* of love, nor the good works that spring from love, but the energy of love itself, before it is given any attributes or commentary. As we grope towards finding fulfillment, the fundamental motivating force of spirituality expresses itself in many ways, some simple and creative, and some distorted and destructive.

## Paths and Phases

People express their spirituality, their fundamental loves, in a variety of ways. For example, an ancient understanding in both western and eastern thought says that spirituality expresses itself in the three main ways of *knowing*, *acting* and *feeling*. Christian philosophy associates these ways with attributes of God. God is ultimate Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and these qualities of the Divine draw people along the Way of the True, the Way of the Good, and the Way of the Beautiful. Each of the ways find some expression in everyone, but at any given time an individual is likely to be more attracted to one than to the others.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these ways can be an authentic expression of love. The Way of the True, for example, seeks to deepen love through understanding: "...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). For people drawn toward this quality, loving God and neighbor involves intimate knowing and clear understanding. They are interested in theology, philosophy and psychology. They enjoy thought-provoking sermons and are interested in discerning the accurate meanings of scripture. While this path often relies heavily on intellectual understanding, it also includes openness to intuitive insight and inspired realization.

The Way of the Good expresses love through action, doing the righteous thing, seeking to be of service and to promote justice: "...just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). People attracted to this quality express their love of God and neighbor by helping the poor, visiting the sick, peacemaking and social action. They have a strong concern for morality, though they may differ widely in the values they hold. In church they are drawn to mission groups and other volunteer services. In scripture, they tend to look for moral guidelines and calls to action.

The Way of the Beautiful experiences love in the form of feelings and devotion: "As a deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps 42:1). People drawn to this way are especially responsive to the sensory and emotional dimensions of the spiritual life. For them, love of God and neighbor is associated with passion, empathy and intimacy. They are concerned with direct, sensed experience of relationship with God and others and are drawn to praise, thanksgiving, and adoration. They especially appreciate the aesthetic and inspirational aspects of worship and the moving, heartfelt passages of scripture.

It is assumed that as a person grows in the spiritual life, these paths come together in an integrated whole. Even then, though, a person is likely to be more drawn to one way than to the others. Further, the expressions of a person's love are likely to change with deepening life experience. One way of understanding the process of growth in love was proposed by the twelfth-century monk Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>3</sup>

According to Bernard, many people begin with the "Love of Self for One's Own Sake." Here we try to overcome problems and gain satisfaction in life through our own efforts. Bernard maintains that sooner or later we find this doesn't work. We are unable to control things enough to get what we want and avoid what we don't want.

This leads most people into the second phase, which Bernard calls the "Love of God for One's Own Sake." Recognizing that we cannot manage life on our own, we turn toward the Divine for help. For many people, this marks the beginning of a conscious, intentional spiritual life. Bernard maintains that one way or another, our prayers for help are answered. It may not happen in the way we expect, but we do recognize God's grace active in our lives. Then, Bernard says, at some point our focus shifts from the gifts we are receiving to the Giver of the gifts.

Our love becomes more for God's self than for what God can do for us. This is the third phase, "The Love of God for God's Sake." Finally, in Bernard's thinking, this love births a new and profound realization. Deeply impressed with God's goodness and deeply feeling the flow of love, people may begin to recognize how essentially good and loveable they themselves are. This is the beginning of Bernard's fourth phase: "Love of One's Self for God's Sake." One begins to see one's own being with fresh eyes, revealing a new beauty and worthiness.

Not everyone experiences the spiritual life as Bernard described it, nor can everyone locate themselves clearly among the three classical paths. If there is a "one right way" for a given individual, it is a matter of God's unique guidance in that person's soul. It cannot be prescribed by referring to a model of spiritual growth. Still, such models can lend a certain clarity to the process of the spiritual life and, more important, affirm that a variety of experiences and attitudes can be authentic.

Further, although most spiritual models seem to indicate a stepwise progression, people's actual experience is far less linear. "Beginners" frequently have experiences of later stages, and "advanced" people often experience the early stages. "No one," says Teresa of Avila, "is so advanced in prayer that they do not often have to return to the beginning."<sup>4</sup>

## Contemplation

Although the spiritual life may take many forms, it is always and foremost about love. Perhaps the most profound and pure experience of this love occurs in what the traditions refer to as *contemplation*.

In popular usage, to contemplate something is to think about it, considering it from a variety of angles. This is not at all the understanding of the classical authors of spirituality. Classically, contemplation is a particular kind of experience, usually occurring in the context of prayer. It is a sheer experience of loving presence, and it comes as pure gift, given when and as God chooses.

The Latin roots of the word, *cum* ("with") and *templum* ("temple") connote the sacredness of the experience. In its original meaning, contemplation is always a gift, and cannot be achieved by any method or practice. It is thus held in contrast to *meditation*, which includes all the practices and disciplines we may intentionally undertake in the course of our spiritual lives. Put simply, we can do meditation, but we cannot do contemplation because it only happens as a gift.

A simple definition of contemplation is "loving presence to what is." In a Christian context, because we "live and move and have our being" in God (Acts 17:28), being present to things as they are involves encountering the Christ who "fills the whole creation" (Eph. 1:23). In other words, Christian contemplation means finding God in all things and all things in God. Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite friar, called it "the loving gaze that finds God everywhere."<sup>5</sup>

Because people use "contemplation" to describe especially profound qualities of prayer, we often associate it with silence and stillness—perhaps even withdrawal from the world. Classically, however, it means immediate open presence in the world, directly perceiving and lovingly responding to things as they really are. Thus contemplation is not necessarily quiet and still. It may just as well be very active and noisy.

In this sense, contemplation is an all-embracing quality of presence, including not only our own inner experience but also directly perceiving and responding to the situation and needs of the world around us. Rather than trying to balance contemplation and action, it is more accurate to see contemplation in action, undergirding and embracing everything. In this

way, all our thoughts and actions can be joined together in prayerful openness and loving responsiveness.

It is contemplation-or at least a contemplative attitude-that grounds our presence in the real world. For example, in the three paths mentioned above, the direct seeing-and-responding of contemplation keeps each centered in direct responsiveness to real situations.

Without this grounding in things-as-they-are, the way of knowing can lose itself in intellectual abstraction, the way of acting can succumb to blind missionary zeal or burnout, and the way of feeling can give way to self-absorbed sentimentality.

Psychologically, contemplation is traditionally seen as *immediate*, grounded in the here-and-now. Plans for the future and memories of the past can happen in contemplation, but they don't take one's attention away from one's desire for God or the needs of the situation at hand. Plans and memories, like thoughts, feelings and sense perceptions, are simply parts of what is happening in the moment.

In contemplation, awareness is *open*, not focused on one thing to the exclusion of others. Most of us have been taught to concentrate (focus attention) on one thing at a time. The contemplative experience however, shows that we function more lovingly-and can be more in touch with our desire for God's guidance-when we're more widely open to what is going on. Thus many contemplatively oriented practices involve an "unlearning" of one's habits of focusing attention. In their place, one hopes to nurture a simple willingness to be open to God's movements, leadings, and invitations--a contemplative *attitude*.

## Contemplative Living

Contemplation is an experience that is given to us from time to time. It is usually short-lived, but it can have profound effects on us. Among other things, such experiences of contemplation encourage us to develop a *contemplative attitude* in the rest of life. Also called *contemplative living*, this attitude attempts to integrate the incomprehensible wisdom of momentary experiences of contemplation into life as a whole.

For example, contemplative living involves an acknowledgment that the deepest currents of our lives are "God's business," not ours. This implies a willingness to let God do the leading in our choices and decisions. Further, contemplative living honors the mystery of God's actions; we hope for God's guidance, but recognize that we may not understand it or have any particular knowledge of what that guidance may be.

## Trust

Implicit in contemplative living is a deep and radical trust in God's presence and mercy. Theologically, the trust involves living into the following assumptions:

1. The spiritual life is completely about love. God is love, and we are created in and for love. Every person has at their core a desire to grow in love with God and others. This desire may become severely distorted, as in inordinate attachments to power or violence, but it is never absent. As St. Paul proclaimed to the Athenians, "God created us to seek (feel for) God" (Acts 17:26-27). This is the purpose of our being. Contemplatives of all generations have echoed St. Augustine's famous prayer, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."<sup>6</sup>

2. Though we may not feel it, God is indeed present everywhere and at all times. There is nowhere that God is not present (Ps 139). Not only do we "live and move and have our being in God," (Acts 17:28), but also God resides within each of us, and in all of creation, closer than our breath, closer to us than we are to ourselves. The contemplative life then, may not be a journey in which one actually gets closer to God, but rather a gradual realization of the incomprehensible union that has always existed.<sup>7</sup>

3. This divine presence in and with us is not static or inactive. Instead, it is a dynamic, continually moving flow that continually seeks goodness, truth, beauty, peace and justice. God is willing for and desiring of our co-participation in this movement, and stands ready at all times to guide us, to lead us in the dance of life. This co-participation is an endless invitation. There is no time or occasion, ever, where God leaves us to act on our own.<sup>8</sup>

4. God's true being and movements are essentially incomprehensible to our human faculties. Thus much of the contemplative life is girded with mystery. Although one naturally makes every attempt to be open and responsive to God's guidance, we usually do not completely comprehend where God is leading us or what God is guiding us to do at any particular time. In the absence of such certainty, we humbly honor the Divine Mystery and pray that what we are doing is indeed in harmony with God's desire.

The trust involved in contemplative living is indeed radical. In many ways, choosing to live contemplatively is a risky undertaking. For one thing, our culture indoctrinates us to act as if we were on our own. "The Lord helps those who help themselves," we are told. We are taught to identify our goals, and to know how to accomplish them. We are expected to explain why we did what we have done, and to justify what we are planning to do. None of these attitudes are compatible with contemplative living. Instead, we do not want to "help ourselves" when God stands ready and willing to give us all the help we need at any time. We often don't even have goals and strategies that we're aware of, and there is no logical way to justify or rationalize our actions, to ourselves or to anyone else.

This makes contemplative living a great challenge in the practical world. It runs counter to the prevailing cultural values-and our own habits-of self-determination and autonomous control. Attempts to talk about it or explain it often sound unacceptably passive, even irresponsible: "I'm putting this in God's hands," or "I'll pray about this and see what happens." And when some action does come, we cannot even say, "I'm doing this because I discerned that it is what God wants." Although there can be moments of bright clarity, more often we simply do not know for sure whether we are following God's desire; we can only hope and pray that we are.

## Support

Standing so far outside the cultural norms, contemplative living needs all the support it can receive. Spiritual practices and disciplines such as regular prayer and meditation, journaling, worship and sabbath support us by reminding us of who we really are and what we really desire. Different forms of spiritual community, from spiritual direction to ongoing contemplative prayer groups encourage us and assist us in discernment. Support comes in many other ways as well, including spiritual readings, retreats and times of solitude, attention to body and movement, and so on. Most of all, we need God's grace to guide, sustain and empower us.

The Christian contemplative approach always winds up putting primary emphasis on God's initiative and action in life. We will not finally come to love God, our neighbors, our planet or ourselves by means of what we learn to do or accomplish on our own. Instead, we must *receive* the truth that will set us free, *be guided* in the good actions that truly serve our neighbors and world, and *be given* an appreciation of the beauty within and around us. Only as this happens, only as we are empowered to let God lead the divine dance, can we more fully participate in God's loving presence in and for our world. This is the ongoing hope of contemplative living.

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March, 2004

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[Quotations About Contemplation](#)

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## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, William, Lines:Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey, 1798

<sup>2</sup> The original Hindu sources are lost in history, but we do know that by the time of Christ, the great Hindu philosopher Patanjali had compiled sutras that organized these ways coherently. Hindu systems also often include a fourth path, Raja Yoga, which focuses mainly on meditation and other spiritual practices. In Christian philosophy, similar paths can be identified in Anselm, Aquinas, and earlier in Augustine.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Treatise On the Love of God or On Loving God. Ch. 8-10.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Avila, Life, Chapter 13.

<sup>5</sup> Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, The Practice of the Presence of God. Spiritual Maxims, Chapter 6, para. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Saint. Confessions, Book 3, Chapter 6

<sup>7</sup> John of the Cross. Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 2, Chapter 5: "...know that God is present in substance in each soul, even that of the greatest sinner in the world. And this kind of union with God always exists, in all creatures."

<sup>8</sup> Ps 139:9-10: "If I take the wings of morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, there also Thy hand leads me, and Thy right hand holds me."