

Contemplative Outreach

Spiritual Journey with Thomas Keating

Part 4 Tape 22(b)



What is the Essence of Contemplative Prayer?

Within the Christian tradition, contemplative prayer has, at times, been equated to, **“the interior unfolding of the spiritual senses and the interior unfolding of deeper levels of absorption that one experiences or feels.”**

This is the kind of “exuberant mysticism” described by Teresa of Avila, for example. However, this view raises questions around who can really be described as a contemplative and what of those who dedicate their lives to prayer and seem not to experience this exuberance, or, this felt presence of God. **Cannot, contemplative prayer also be described in terms of pure faith?**

The Secret Staircase

Teresa, may also be interpreted as saying that what she describes is a shortcut to divine union, however, and John of the Cross suggests that contemplation is already present in the Night of Sense, when the programmes for happiness begin to loosen their grip to be gradually and painfully replaced by an unlimited need for truth and love which only God can satisfy. This is John’s secret staircase, the narrow way.

It is a great freedom to be rid of the effort to extract absolute happiness from things outside God.

A Ray of Darkness

Based upon the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, John sees contemplative prayer as a ray of darkness and “the radiance of God’s action in us.”

“What we see as light is only the reflection of energy, And what we perceive as spiritual light is only the reflection of the divine energy. And what we feel in our spirit, even, is only a reflection. It’s pure faith that accesses the whole of God, provided you consent, and providing you don’t demand of it some experience which would be localizing.”

We consent to knowing God in the darkness of faith. We are utterly convinced of his presence during our prayer and in this darkness of faith arises the transforming union and the restructuring of consciousness. A grasp of this insight could free many spiritual searchers from the suffering of unfulfilled expectations. The only danger is that taking this slower elevator to the top, as it were, we can become absorbed by the view from one of the floors along the way.

It is commitment to the journey and fidelity to the practice that leads to transforming union, not experiences.