

# THE MONASTIC PERSONALITY

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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## Session 5: Freedom

THE GREATEST THING you can do for yourself—your friends, your parents, whomever you're in a relationship with—is to foster an expression of truth. I don't mean that in an aggressive sense. We have to be respectful of other peoples' spaces and what they are able to handle. We respect each other's difference, and we hold it at a deeper level in honoring the other person. It's one of the most difficult things in people who have a contemplative personality - they're not very good at doing that - they expect their partners and their friends to live up to their ideal. I've seen many people in marriages and spiritual relationships, and they're kind of tyrants about this. They want the other person to be on the same spiritual path with them. But your spiritual paths may be different. You may both be on a spiritual path together, but the definition of that path may be very different. Can we honor and respect each other's path? And I think that it is not an easy thing to do, but it's part of why there is often difficulty in relationships with people of this type of personality. We are very sensitive, we see things very deeply, but it is hard to give the other person the space to be different. Not because your personality is more assertive than others, but simply because it feels painful not to have a connection. That's where practice and the development of the soul come in.

Of course, there are some relationships that are not meant to be. I'm not saying that you have to give in, buck up and do this with everybody, because it may not be right. But that's another piece of the picture. You have to realize that this can be happening. Because at the same time that it is incumbent upon you to give the other person the space for their life in God, however God is calling them, we also have to be a fierce warrior to preserve the holy interiority in ourselves. And so it's a balancing act between being a fierce warrior for yourself and learning to negotiate with your friends and family and partners about what is overwhelming for them or uncomfortable for them in a given situation.

We also have to be a fierce warrior to preserve the holy interiority because this is where we find happiness. You find happiness in the center when you're alone. How many times have you said, "I am home alone and I feel great. I finally have some time without anyone bugging me." This is a form of happiness because you're moving toward where you truly belong. And yet you also live in the world, so it is incumbent upon us to learn balance.

These issues stack up on each other. When you get to the end of this talk, you'll be thinking, "I'm surprised I'm still functioning!" Another thing about the monastic personality is that this person has an intense need for freedom. What I mean by freedom is not necessarily physical freedom, though that may be part of it, but an inner integrity of the self that is free to not be co-opted or possessed or owned. This intense need for freedom is a kind of contradiction to the part of us that is very open and sensitive and available, because people are attracted to this type of personality. People are drawn like a flame to the person who is open and sensitive, because you like to talk, you want to speak truth, and you want to have a nice relationship. And at the same time, you want them to stay away from you; you want to be free.

This personality is a contradictory personality in a way. It is open, sensitive, it wants to share, and at the same time it is saying: "Don't fence me in! Don't think I'm going to follow your edict about anything." This can be difficult in relationships, but a true relationship has to be non-possessive, I think of the Book of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible where Holy Wisdom says, "I cannot be possessed." The Divine Feminine says, "I cannot be possessed."

This type of person needs to go its own way, make its own mistakes. The fierce need for freedom in this personality is challenging for relationships. But once this is accepted and integrated into your personality you will be able to recognize, and you will attract to you, people who value freedom and solitude, who have their own needs. The artistic temperament is similar to this - the poet, the writer, the artist who needs time alone, a place apart.

Another characteristic that goes along with this is freedom from definitions, freedom from the roles that people want you to be in. Freedom from social conventions that are oppressive to the interior life. I think that many people have entered monasteries because they are freed from social obligations. They're not married, they don't have children, somebody cooks their meals every day. They have to deal with each other, but community is part of their growth.

To be a monk in the world you have to take up your sword every day, you have to evaluate whether you're going to do many things during the day, or you're going to take time during the day to attend events. You have to really start to ask these questions. Otherwise, you're just constantly diverted and pulled apart by all these attractions and digressions, and then what happens is that the permeability of the soul gets more and more invaded until the outer soul gets clogged up with everybody else's thinking and ideas and you can't do anything. You're a wreck. You have to go home and regroup.

This can happen frequently. It can happen when you're around lots of people, such as a museum or mall. A contemplative personality may not be able to sustain that.

This need for freedom often runs counter to the wishes of family, friends, colleagues, husbands, wives, and even monastic companions who don't understand or ridicule you. I have contemplative friends in monasteries that have been called "navel gazers," or in some cases made to feel as outcasts in their own monastic communities because they are mystics. They don't want to be busy doing the million things that being in a monastery can often involve. So your need for freedom will often run counter to the wishes of others. But happiness comes from following, often blindly, where you are being called.

The monastic person has to be a very strong person who is simultaneously very open. You have to be a determined person. If you get pushed down, you hop up. If someone tells you no, you tell yourself yes. And you are going to pursue where you're being called, not of your own will but with the Divine will that can teach you how to preserve the inner integrity of being that is your inherent spiritual right. I think that is an important term: your inherent spiritual right. You have the spiritual right to be open and solitary, free and committed. This is very important. We have human rights, but we also have spiritual rights.

The monastic person also has the ability to stand alone, to stand away from the crowd. People might say you're a maverick, or an anti-cultural personality if this isn't integrated. But as Merton said, the monastic is in protest to the world of violence and busyness and war and superficiality. The monastic person knows how to stand alone and not be deterred or pulled away because it is this intrinsic longing to be loved and to be accepted that pulls us out of our center. We were talking about this yesterday: you want to be loved, you want to belong, you want people to understand you, to admit that you're a good person or applaud you for your gifts or whatever. All of those things weigh on your ability to stand in your own place. Your inner personal weaknesses—however they arrive—are deterrents and detriments to maintaining that strong center. And this is where prayer and meditation and practices come in.

Traditional monks who live in monasteries and wear robes have an easier time of this because their robes signify that they're of a different type. The monastery signifies a place apart. But for the contemporary monk in the world, you have to be even more of a fierce advocate for your solitude.



## REFLECTION

- Consider a person who is important to you. Think of their life in terms of their own spiritual path. How has their life experiences, as far as you can see it, taught them and guided them in their spiritual development?
- Now think of your own life. How it has developed to teach you and direct you in your spiritual development? Have you been able to allow the person who is important to you to have their own path? Do you feel as though you have been allowed yours? Have you ever considered your “inherent spiritual rights”?



## PRACTICE

Find a time to walk in nature, or to meditate in silence and wonder about to what or where you are being called right now. What can you see about your path? Can you focus on what is calling to you, what your heart is yearning for? Think about what a moment of true happiness is for you. How is your spiritual life reaching out to you, to bring you more deeply into this place of fulfillment and peace? Imagine total spiritual freedom. Write about it in as much detail as you can.



## PRAYER

May I be drawn to the quiet of my heart, to the still voice, to the silence and solitude in which all is well and in which I feel the spark of the divine spirit calling me. May I have the courage to be simple and the strength of openness to be aware of that one thing necessary that is drawing me home. Amen.

—Beverly Lanzetta



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