

# THE MONASTIC PERSONALITY

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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## Session 8: Contemplation as Inflow from the Divine

*A question asked at the end of the talk:*

*"Last night you talked about practices, and about meditation, solitude and silence, and apparently silence is not what I think it is. You said that contemplation and meditation can lead to silence. Can you talk about that a bit more?"*

IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION, meditation and contemplation are different, or at least the way they are understood. Christian meditation can lead to contemplation, but meditation is seen as more of an active practice. You might repeat a holy word and you sit in that place until you achieve that place of contemplation, which is the absence of self will. And what I'm calling contemplation is what the Asian traditions would call meditation. In either case, when we are talking about contemplation and silence, we are talking about something passive.

I love the way Teresa of Avila explains it when she says that active prayer is my working toward God. I want to be closer to God, so I pray and meditate. But the action is coming from me. Contemplation is God working in me. The activity is coming from God. And that reciprocity is something that is happening all the time, but we're not attuned to it. As I said to you yesterday, the fact that you're seeking this is because it's already sought you. You've already been touched by the inner spark. Oftentimes in contemplation, you might start out in a meditative place, you might start out in active prayer, but at some point when you're sitting, all that you're doing goes away and you have a moment of experience that is not coming from you. You're not doing it. That inflow from the Divine is called contemplation. It's that moment of gift. And in that moment of gift is silence. Silence is part of the gift. You can have silence in the room, but the silence is the cessation of all activity. And it's in contemplation where we can hear the truth or we are shown the way that is often wordless. It could be a voice, but normally it is not. Normally it's just—all of a sudden—we know what we need to be and do.

The practice of meditation or prayer is to deepen the capacity to dwell in the Divine, to experience the Divine inflow like the tree or the flower or the water. To make our heart surrendered. This is where the monastic life becomes very arduous, not necessarily in the prayer time, though it could be that you have all those thoughts in your head and other distractions. But at some point, if you stay at it long enough, there will be that break. And the Divine Presence is going to come to you.

What becomes most difficult in the contemplative life is that ninety-nine percent of what we do is self-willed. We're trained that way. That's life. When we talk in religions about emptying the self, going to zero, what are we talking about? We're talking about letting the Divine work in us. We're talking about being accepted and surrendered to that inflow that is calling us to something that we may only dimly hear. We may not know yet what it is. Because we're always demanding an answer, and we're not silent; we can't hear it.

Contemplation and monasticism are reversals of the ordinary way we do things. Mahatma Gandhi said, "If I didn't pray every day, I would have been crazy long ago." Everything he did in his campaign for truth was preceded by intense prayer. Where was God calling him? What was God asking him to do? It's really surrendering and opening oneself to the activity of the Divine in your own soul. Not my will, but Your will. One of the prayers I've said for years is "Make me empty. Please make me empty, may my nothingness be your All. Let my small self recede so that You may dwell in me and guide me." In our language it sounds dichotomous, like God's out there and I'm in here. But it's not really that way. What you're really saying is, "dwell in me so that your Self in me can manifest your grace in the world". It is not the God "out there" that's directing you and telling you what to do. But it's your higher self, co-participating in the greatest good in this world. And that greatest good may be something as simple as smiling at someone on the street. Taking someone's hand. Being loving to your friend or your partner. It's not necessarily an esoteric gesture. It has to do with where the movement is coming from in your life. Where are you moving from? And the more you follow the path, and the more you are pulled into solitude, which is happening sometimes against your own will—the inner self is pulling you toward freedom, and you're saying, "No, no, I have to go this other way." But the more you're pulled into solitude, the more erratic and disjunctive you're going to feel because you're not following your true path. And it's not that your path is some particular thing, as yet, but your path is simply to accept and be surrendered. This is where faith and devotion come in. As many prayers will say, "May I be a devotee, may I be a disciple. May I surrender myself."

Listen to those words and notice how they make you feel. Do they make you feel embarrassed? Do they make you feel fearful? Or do they make you feel, Yes! I want to be a devotee or a disciple. Merton has a really nice quote where he contrasts the genius with the apostle. The apostle is one who surrenders the self to be in the light of the knowledge and wisdom that is greater than the world. And the genius is one who uses that knowledge to actualize her or his will. Not that the genius is bad, but he's comparing these in the world. We look at the apostles and we could think that they were pushovers, dependent. And look at the genius that is put on a pedestal. The person who has given up their life for what they were called to is not honored and respected. Merton points out the sacramentality of apostleship, of discipleship, of the pilgrimage that is not a loss of self but an expansion of the true self because you've given your heart to something that is greater than you. And you have to learn to trust and pray and ask for help about what that means. Sometimes we can fool ourselves about what's really in our best interests.



## REFLECTION

Can you identify times when your practice is moving towards God, and times when God is working in you? Have there been times in your own contemplative practice when all activity ceased, and you allowed the silence to simply be?

How does it feel to know and believe that you are seeking the spiritual life because it has already been sought in you? What arises for you when you consider that “contemplation is the reversal of the ordinary?” What role have faith, devotion, and surrender played in your own spiritual journey up to this point?



## PRACTICE

Sit comfortably somewhere where you won't be disturbed. When you feel your energy is settled, begin to silently say: Here I am, God. I'm listening.

Notice what happens. When you are done, write about it in your journal.



## PRAYER

Make me empty.  
May my nothingness be Your all.  
Let my self recede so You may dwell in me and guide me,  
so that your Self in me can manifest Your grace in the world.

—Beverly Lanzetta



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