

Contemplative spirituality is a way of seeing. The English word “contemplation” comes from the Latin *contemplatio*, which means to look at, to gaze attentively, to mark out a space for observation. Contemplative practices are those that create margin to pay attention to and observe our life. This assumes we have determined to take responsibility for ourselves. It involves some introspection – not for the sake of inner knowledge, but for the sake of living a more skillful life. With self-awareness comes greater understanding of our pain and the way we cause suffering. Contemplative prayer offers an antidote. Through contemplation we find alleviation of our personal suffering, and we discover how to minimize our infliction of suffering on others.

This requires effort and patience. So, we take up a contemplative practice to make regular time for this critical observation of reality. Contemplative practices are held by postures of solitude, silence, and stillness. In solitude, we develop the capacity to be present. In silence, we cultivate the ability to listen. And in stillness we acquire the skill of restraint or self-control.

Christian mystics have always held that silence is God’s first language. It’s unfortunate we are not more acquainted with this language. Silence is consciousness itself, the Source of all that is. The heart of Christian contemplation beats with silence and expands our consciousness.

Life happens. It’s out of our control. What *is* in our control is how we respond. A commitment to contemplation is an agreement to take responsibility for actions and relationships. Religious teaching tries to awaken us to such accountability.

One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Father Thomas Keating (hereafter referred to as Father Thomas). He introduced me to the Christian contemplative tradition many years ago, and my life has never been the same. I’ll never forget how he said, “If you stay on the spiritual journey long enough, the practices that sustained your faith will fall short. When this happens, it can be very disillusioning. But if we stay on the journey, we find out that this is actually an invitation to go deeper with God.”

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