

Contemplation

The emphasis in contemplation is on feeling rather than thinking, and on intuition rather than logic. Instead of a consciously directed sequence of thought, it is the effortless “prayer of quiet,” an open waiting before God. “Be still, and know...” (Psalm 46:10).

In its later stages, contemplation tends to become an experience of simple awareness, beyond words as well as thought. Along with such a heightened emotional response, contemplation can also contribute to deeper understanding.

Practice

Contemplation involves quietness and openness before God. We move from compulsive frenzy to relaxed receptivity. We turn conscious attention from miscellaneous demands and activities in simple, alert awareness before God as the basic unifying reality.

Along with this fundamental attitude, two general approaches have been used to prepare the way for contemplative experience.

One is to empty the mind, insofar as possible, leaving only a deep, quiet openness. If thoughts occur they are gently laid aside. A frequent suggestion is counting one’s breaths, since this is one concentration that will not trigger our usual distracting thoughts. One may count to ten and then start over, or start over whenever one loses track of the count. Think “one” for each breath. Another way to concentrate on the breath is to fix the attention just outside the tip of the nose and to be continuously aware of the movement of each breath in and out of the nostrils. Or some prefer to concentrate on the movement of the diaphragm in breathing.

A second approach to contemplation also involves relaxation and receptivity. Instead of emptying the mind, however, it narrowly focuses the mind, restricting awareness to a single object or word. For example, a word or brief phrase (often called a mantra) is silently repeated over and over, like the rhythmic chiming of a clock or swinging of a pendulum. A mantra can be used to open awareness to religious meaning. Such a mantra could be a single word like God, peace, joy, power, or love. Or the mantra could be a phrase like “*God is love,*” “*the peace of God,*” or “*Use me.*”

Through the centuries, especially in Eastern Orthodox churches, the so-called “Jesus Prayer” has been used as a mantra. In its long form this is, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” In one of its shorter versions it becomes, “Lord, have mercy (Kyrie Eleison).” Francis of Assisi is said to have repeated through an entire night, “*My God and my All! What am I and What art Thou!*” After a period of repetition the mantra may fade while simple awareness or feeling takes over.