

contemplative prayer by thomas merton

The Profound Depths of Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton: A Journey of Silence and Union

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, writer, and mystic, remains one of the most influential voices in 20th-century spirituality. His exploration of contemplative prayer, particularly as detailed in his extensive writings, offers a profound pathway for individuals seeking deeper connection with the divine. This article delves into the essence of contemplative prayer as understood and articulated by Thomas Merton, exploring its core principles, practices, and transformative potential. We will examine how Merton's teachings illuminate the journey from active, discursive prayer to the silent, loving gaze of contemplation, and how this path leads to a greater understanding of self, God, and the interconnectedness of all creation. Prepare to embark on a rich exploration of Merton's insights into the practice that defines his spiritual legacy.

- Understanding Contemplative Prayer: Merton's Definition
- The Foundations of Contemplative Prayer in Merton's Thought
- Distinguishing Contemplative Prayer from Other Forms of Prayer
- Key Practices and Approaches in Thomas Merton's Contemplative Prayer
- The Role of Silence and Stillness in Merton's Contemplation
- Encountering God in Contemplative Prayer: Merton's Theology
- The Transformative Effects of Contemplative Prayer on the Individual
- Contemplative Prayer in Daily Life: Merton's Practical Wisdom
- Challenges and Obstacles on the Path of Contemplation
- Conclusion: Embracing the Contemplative Life as Taught by Thomas Merton

Understanding Contemplative Prayer by Thomas Merton: A Definition and Its Essence

At its heart, contemplative prayer, as understood by Thomas Merton, is not merely a technique or a method to achieve a certain spiritual state, but rather a profound encounter with the divine

presence. It is a passive reception of God's love and truth, a movement beyond words, thoughts, and even feelings. Merton often described it as a "simple gaze of love" upon God, a state of pure awareness where the soul rests in God's infinite being. This form of prayer is characterized by its simplicity, its reliance on God's initiative, and its ultimate goal: union with the divine.

Merton's understanding is rooted in the Christian mystical tradition, drawing heavily from figures like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. He emphasized that contemplative prayer is not something one does in an active sense, but rather something that is done to the soul by God's grace. It is a gratuitous gift, an opening of the soul to the divine indwelling that is already present. This distinction is crucial, as it shifts the focus from human effort to divine action, from striving to surrender.

The Core Nature of Contemplative Prayer According to Merton

Thomas Merton's perspective on contemplative prayer centers on its capacity to transcend the limitations of human intellect and imagination. It is a prayer of pure faith and love, where the soul is receptive to God's presence without the need for specific thoughts, images, or formulated prayers. This is a state of "no-mind," not in the Buddhist sense, but in the sense of emptying the mind of its usual preoccupies to make room for God's all-encompassing reality. Merton believed that this profound receptivity allows for a direct, unmediated experience of divine love.

He often used metaphors of silence, stillness, and emptiness to describe this state. It is a letting go of self, a dissolving of ego boundaries, and an immersion into the boundless ocean of God's being. This is not a nihilistic emptiness but a fertile void, pregnant with divine possibility and love. The essence of contemplative prayer, therefore, lies in this radical openness and trust in God's overwhelming presence and action within the soul.

The Foundations of Contemplative Prayer in Thomas Merton's Spiritual Philosophy

Thomas Merton's deep exploration of contemplative prayer is built upon a robust foundation of theological and philosophical principles. He saw contemplation not as an extraordinary or rare spiritual gift reserved for a select few, but as a natural culmination of a life lived in faith and obedience. His understanding is deeply rooted in the contemplative tradition of the Church, particularly its emphasis on the indwelling Trinity and the inherent capacity of the human soul to experience God's presence.

Merton's early writings, influenced by his conversion and entry into the Trappist order, laid the groundwork for his mature theological insights. He emphasized the importance of humility, obedience, and detachment as essential prerequisites for the contemplative life. Without these virtues, the soul remains too encumbered by self-interest and worldly attachments to be truly receptive to God's transforming grace.

Merton's Emphasis on Divine Grace and Human Surrender

A cornerstone of Merton's teaching on contemplative prayer is his unwavering emphasis on the primacy of divine grace. He consistently maintained that contemplation is not a human achievement, but a gift bestowed by God. While human effort in cultivating virtues and engaging in prayer practices is important, it is ultimately God who initiates and sustains the contemplative experience. This understanding fosters a spirit of humble dependence on God's mercy and a willingness to surrender one's own will and desires.

Merton's writings often highlight the paradox of divine action and human passivity. In contemplative prayer, the soul ceases its active striving and instead becomes receptive, allowing God to work within it. This surrender is not passive resignation but an active, loving yielding of oneself to God's loving will. It is a conscious choice to be present to God, to allow God to be God in the soul, even in the absence of discernible spiritual consolations.

The Contemplative Life as a Unified Whole

For Thomas Merton, contemplative prayer was not an isolated activity but an integral part of a unified contemplative life. This life embraces all aspects of existence, transforming everyday experiences into opportunities for encountering God. It involves a constant awareness of God's presence in the world, in other people, and within the deepest recesses of the self. The monastic life, with its emphasis on silence, solitude, and communal worship, provided Merton with an ideal framework for cultivating this unified vision.

However, Merton was equally adamant that the contemplative life is accessible to all, regardless of their vocation or external circumstances. He encouraged laypeople to cultivate a contemplative attitude in their daily lives, finding God in the midst of their responsibilities and relationships. This holistic approach underscores his belief that the divine presence permeates all of creation and that a contemplative heart can perceive it everywhere.

Distinguishing Contemplative Prayer from Other Forms of Prayer in Merton's View

Thomas Merton was meticulous in differentiating contemplative prayer from other, more common forms of prayer. While he affirmed the value and necessity of these other forms, he also clearly articulated what sets contemplation apart. This distinction is vital for understanding the unique nature of the "prayer of silence" that he so eloquently championed.

Merton categorized prayer along a spectrum, moving from more discursive and vocal forms to the pure, direct experience of contemplation. Understanding these differences helps to clarify the specific characteristics and progression of the contemplative path as he presented it.

Vocal Prayer and Meditative Prayer

Vocal prayer, for Merton, includes reciting traditional prayers, litanies, or prayers composed by oneself. While essential for fostering devotion and expressing praise, it remains a more active form, engaging the intellect and will in a structured way. Meditative prayer, or discursive prayer, involves reflecting on scripture, theological concepts, or the life of Christ. This form uses the intellect to deepen understanding and to stir the affections toward God. Merton saw these as crucial stages in spiritual development, building a foundation of faith and love.

He recognized that these forms of prayer engage the mind and heart in active work. They involve "thinking about God," or "thinking about God's works," or even "asking God for things." While valuable, they are preparatory steps that can eventually lead to a state where such active engagement gives way to a more passive, receptive communion.

The Transition to Affective Prayer

Affective prayer, also known as prayer of the heart, is a stage where reflection gives way to a more immediate outpouring of love and desire for God. Here, the intellect has done its work, and the will, now stirred by love, simply turns toward God with longing. Merton saw this as a crucial bridge, moving away from intellectual analysis towards a more direct, emotional connection. It is less about what one is thinking and more about the disposition of the heart, a simple turning toward the beloved.

While affective prayer still involves an object of love and a certain awareness of that object, it begins to transcend the need for precise concepts or clear mental images. It is a burgeoning of love that can spontaneously arise from meditation, but it is not yet the pure gaze of contemplation.

Contemplation: The Prayer of Pure Being

Contemplative prayer, in Merton's schema, represents a further development beyond affective prayer. It is a state of pure awareness, a direct and immediate union with God that transcends all conceptualization, all striving, and all personal effort. It is a prayer of "no-thought," a state of deep stillness and receptivity where the soul is simply present to God's presence. This is not an absence of consciousness but a profound, unified consciousness in God.

Merton described this as the "prayer of God praying in us," a passive reception of God's own prayer. It is a letting go of all that is self, allowing the divine presence to fill the entire being. In this state, there are no specific thoughts or feelings in the usual sense; there is only the luminous, loving presence of God. It is a surrender into the divine mystery, a union of love that transcends all description.

Key Practices and Approaches in Thomas Merton's Contemplative Prayer

Thomas Merton's writings offer a rich tapestry of practices and approaches that facilitate the journey into contemplative prayer. While he emphasized that contemplation is ultimately a gift from God, he also provided guidance on how to cultivate the inner disposition that makes one receptive to this divine action. These practices are not designed to force contemplation, but rather to prepare the ground of the soul for God's sowing.

His emphasis was consistently on interiority, on cultivating a deep awareness of God's presence in the midst of life. This involved not only formal prayer times but also a transformation of one's entire way of being in the world.

The Importance of the Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer, a simple invocation such as "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," held a special place in Merton's understanding of contemplative practice. He saw it as a powerful tool for interiorization and for centering the mind and heart on Christ. Its repetitive nature helps to quiet the incessant chatter of the mind, gradually leading to a state of prayerful awareness.

Merton recommended the Jesus Prayer not as a mechanical repetition, but as a loving invocation that can become a constant, underlying rhythm of the soul. As one becomes more absorbed in the prayer, it can lead to a state of deep, unitive prayer, where the words themselves become less important than the loving disposition they foster.

Cultivating Solitude and Silence

Merton was a profound advocate for solitude and silence as essential elements for nurturing contemplative prayer. He believed that in the quiet of solitude, away from the distractions of the external world, the soul can better hear the subtle voice of God. Silence is not merely the absence of noise, but a deep inner stillness that allows for the perception of divine presence.

He saw the monastic life as providing an ideal environment for this, but he also stressed that solitude and silence could be cultivated in any life. This might involve setting aside specific times for quiet reflection, minimizing unnecessary noise and distractions, and fostering an inner landscape of peace. This inner silence is the fertile ground where contemplation can blossom.

Lectio Divina and Contemplation

Lectio Divina, or sacred reading, is a traditional monastic practice that Merton saw as a natural progression towards contemplation. It involves a slow, prayerful reading of scripture, moving

through stages of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. The goal is not academic study but a dialogue with God through His Word, allowing the text to penetrate the heart and mind.

Merton's approach to Lectio Divina emphasized a receptive listening, a willingness to allow the Word to speak directly to the soul. As the reader progresses from meditation (thinking about the text) to prayer (responding to God), they may eventually arrive at a state of contemplation, where the Word itself becomes a point of direct, loving encounter with God's presence.

- Reading: Slow, prayerful engagement with scripture.
- Meditation: Reflecting on the meaning and implications of the text.
- Prayer: Responding to God with words of praise, petition, or adoration.
- Contemplation: A direct, loving gaze upon God's presence evoked by the text.

The Role of Silence and Stillness in Thomas Merton's Contemplative Prayer

Silence and stillness are not mere accessories to contemplative prayer in Thomas Merton's teachings; they are foundational pillars. For Merton, these internal states are the very environment in which the soul can become aware of and receptive to the subtle movements of God's grace. He viewed the relentless noise and busyness of the modern world as significant obstacles to the contemplative life, and thus advocated for a deliberate cultivation of inner quiet.

His writings are replete with reflections on the power of silence to disarm the ego, to still the restless mind, and to open the soul to the divine presence that is ever-present but often unheard amidst the clamor of ordinary existence.

Silence as an Opening to God's Presence

Merton understood silence not as an emptiness to be feared, but as a sacred space that makes room for God. In the absence of self-generated thoughts, words, and distractions, the soul becomes more attuned to the divine whisper. He often spoke of silence as the language of God, a medium through which God reveals Himself most intimately. This silence is not passive resignation but an active turning away from the superficial to embrace the profound.

He saw this inner silence as a necessary precursor to true communion. By quieting the inner dialogue, the ego's constant commentary on reality, the soul is freed to experience a deeper, more unmediated reality—the reality of God's overwhelming love and presence. This is a silence that speaks volumes, a stillness that is vibrant with divine life.

Stillness as a Means of Receptivity

Complementing silence is stillness, which Merton viewed as the bodily and mental posture of receptivity. It involves a letting go of anxious striving, of trying to force spiritual experiences. Instead, it is a peaceful, patient waiting, a surrender to God's timing and God's way of working in the soul. This stillness allows the soul to be present to God without demanding specific outcomes or consolations.

Merton's own monastic practice, with its emphasis on communal prayer in silence and periods of solitary contemplation, exemplified this principle. He recognized that physical stillness can facilitate mental and spiritual stillness, creating an atmosphere where the soul can be truly present to the divine mystery. This practice is not about inactivity but about a profound, active waiting, a vigilant openness.

Overcoming the Distractions of the Modern World

In his critiques of modern society, Merton frequently highlighted how the constant barrage of information, entertainment, and social demands creates a profound spiritual deficit. This external noise makes it exceedingly difficult for individuals to cultivate the inner silence and stillness necessary for contemplative prayer. He argued that the relentless pursuit of novelty and external stimulation breeds a superficiality that hinders deep spiritual engagement.

Merton encouraged individuals to consciously create pockets of silence and stillness in their lives, even amidst demanding schedules. This might involve disciplines such as mindful breathing, choosing to limit media consumption, or creating quiet spaces for reflection. By actively pushing back against the pervasive noise, individuals can begin to reclaim the inner stillness that is essential for hearing God's voice and experiencing contemplative union.

Encountering God in Contemplative Prayer: Merton's Theological Perspective

Thomas Merton's understanding of contemplative prayer is deeply theological, grounded in the Christian belief in God's immanence and transcendence. He taught that in contemplative prayer, the soul does not seek a distant deity, but rather encounters the God who is already intimately present within the depths of one's own being. This encounter is characterized by love, transformation, and a profound sense of unity.

Merton's theological framework provided a rich context for understanding the nature of this divine encounter, moving beyond mere intellectual assent to a lived experience of God's reality.

The Indwelling Trinity: God Within Us

A central tenet of Merton's theology of prayer is the doctrine of the Indwelling Trinity. He firmly believed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are already present within the soul of every believer, not as abstract concepts, but as living, active participants in our existence. Contemplative prayer, therefore, is an awareness of this already-present divine reality, a conscious turning towards the God who dwells within.

Merton's profound insight was that this divine indwelling is not something to be achieved or earned, but something to be recognized and embraced. Contemplation is the unveiling of this hidden presence, a moment when the soul awakens to the fact that it is already in God and God is in it. This understanding shifts the focus from seeking to finding, from striving to resting in what is already given.

The "Cloud of Unknowing" and Divine Darkness

Merton frequently referenced the anonymous medieval classic, "The Cloud of Unknowing," which speaks of God being encountered in a "cloud of unknowing" or divine darkness. He saw this "unknowing" not as ignorance, but as a transcendence of all that the human mind can grasp or define. In contemplation, the intellect is emptied of its usual concepts and categories, allowing for a direct, unmediated experience of God who is beyond all conceptualization.

This "divine darkness" is not an absence of light, but a blinding fullness of divine light that the human eye cannot comprehend. It is a darkness that reveals, a silence that speaks, an unknowing that leads to ultimate knowledge through love. Merton embraced this paradoxical language to convey the ineffable nature of the divine encounter in contemplative prayer.

Love as the Ultimate Language of Contemplation

For Merton, love is the ultimate language and the most profound aspect of the contemplative encounter. Contemplative prayer is ultimately a "gaze of love" upon God, a direct experience of God's own self-giving love. It is a mutual exchange, where the soul, awakened by grace, responds to God's love with its own deepest love.

This love is not an emotion that comes and goes but a profound, transformative union. It is a love that recognizes the divine image in oneself and in all of creation. Merton believed that in contemplation, one experiences God's love not as an abstract concept but as a living, dynamic force that transforms the very core of one's being, leading to a deep sense of unity and peace.

The Transformative Effects of Contemplative Prayer on

the Individual

Thomas Merton consistently taught that contemplative prayer is not merely a spiritual exercise but a deeply transformative process that impacts every dimension of a person's life. The encounter with divine love and truth in contemplation leads to profound shifts in perception, behavior, and one's understanding of self and the world. This transformative power is a hallmark of the contemplative path as illuminated by Merton.

These changes are not superficial but affect the very core of one's identity, fostering a deeper peace, a greater compassion, and a more authentic way of living.

Cultivating Inner Peace and Stillness

One of the most significant effects of contemplative prayer, as described by Merton, is the cultivation of profound inner peace and stillness. By regularly turning to God in the silence of contemplation, individuals begin to shed the anxieties, worries, and mental clutter that often plague them. This process allows the soul to find its true center in God, leading to a deep and abiding tranquility that is not dependent on external circumstances.

Merton believed that this inner peace is not an absence of challenges, but a deep abiding calm that can be maintained even amidst life's storms. It is a peace that flows from a settled trust in God's providence and a detachment from the need to control every aspect of life.

Developing Compassion and Universal Love

As the soul becomes more deeply united with God through contemplation, it naturally begins to reflect God's own boundless love and compassion for all of creation. Merton, particularly in his later writings, emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings and the role of contemplation in fostering a universal love that extends beyond personal preferences or group affiliations. The encounter with divine love breaks down artificial barriers and fosters a sense of solidarity with all of humanity and indeed all of creation.

This development of compassion is not an intellectual exercise but a lived reality, a heartfelt response to the suffering and needs of others. Contemplation awakens a deep empathy and a desire to serve, recognizing the divine spark in every individual.

Achieving Self-Knowledge and Humility

Contemplative prayer, in its stripping away of illusions and ego-driven perceptions, leads to a profound and often humbling self-knowledge. In the light of God's truth, individuals can begin to see themselves more clearly, recognizing their limitations, their imperfections, and their dependence on God. This is not a process of self-condemnation but of honest recognition that fosters humility and

authenticity.

Merton understood humility as a state of recognizing one's true place in relation to God and to others. It is the opposite of pride and arrogance, and it is a crucial virtue for continued spiritual growth. The self-knowledge gained in contemplation helps to dismantle the ego, allowing the true self, created in the image of God, to emerge.

Living an Integrated and Authentic Life

Ultimately, the transformative power of contemplative prayer as taught by Merton leads to a more integrated and authentic way of living. When the inner life is centered on God, this presence begins to permeate all aspects of one's outer life. Actions become more aligned with one's deepest values, and the distinction between the sacred and the secular begins to dissolve.

Merton's own life, moving from the cloistered walls of a monastery to becoming a voice for social justice and interfaith dialogue, exemplifies this integration. He showed that a deep contemplative life can lead to a more engaged and compassionate engagement with the world, transforming not only the individual but also contributing to a more just and peaceful society.

Contemplative Prayer in Daily Life: Thomas Merton's Practical Wisdom

Thomas Merton's teachings on contemplative prayer are not confined to the monastic cloister or formal prayer times. He was a fervent advocate for integrating this profound spiritual practice into the fabric of everyday life. For Merton, the deepest contemplative experiences could be found not only in silent retreats but also in the midst of ordinary activities, relationships, and challenges. His practical wisdom offers accessible pathways for anyone seeking to cultivate a more contemplative awareness.

This integration requires a shift in perspective, viewing the mundane as sacred and finding God in the midst of daily responsibilities.

The Monastic Discipline in Lay Life

While Merton was a monk, he consistently stressed that the core principles of monastic discipline—including prayer, silence, and detachment—can and should be adapted for laypeople. He encouraged individuals to carve out sacred moments within their busy schedules, moments of intentional stillness and turning towards God. This might involve dedicating a specific time each day for quiet reflection, or cultivating a habit of prayerful attention throughout the day.

Merton's message was that the monastic life is not about escaping the world, but about living in the world with a transformed consciousness. This transformation begins with intentionally creating

spaces for God in one's daily routine, much like a monk observes canonical hours or periods of silent prayer.

Finding God in the Ordinary and the Mundane

A hallmark of Merton's practical advice is his emphasis on finding God in the ordinary, the mundane, and even the tedious aspects of life. He believed that God is present everywhere, and that the soul's task is to learn to perceive this presence even in the most commonplace experiences. This might involve finding moments of prayerful awareness while doing chores, commuting, or interacting with others.

Merton's own life demonstrated this commitment, finding deep spiritual meaning in his work as a gardener, a printer, and even in his interactions with the outside world. His advice encourages readers to see their daily tasks not as distractions from spirituality, but as opportunities to deepen their connection with God. The key is to bring a contemplative attitude to whatever one is doing.

The Practice of Mindful Awareness

While Merton may not have used the term "mindfulness" in the modern, secular sense, his teachings strongly align with its principles. He advocated for a state of vigilant, loving awareness of the present moment, free from excessive rumination on the past or anxious anticipation of the future. This mindful attention allows the soul to be fully present to God, who is always present in the here and now.

Cultivating this kind of awareness involves intentionally bringing one's attention back to the present moment, to the task at hand, or to the subtle promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is a practice of gentle redirection, of constantly returning to God's presence amidst the inevitable distractions of life.

- Dedicate specific times for quiet reflection.
- Practice mindful attention during daily activities.
- Minimize unnecessary noise and distractions.
- Cultivate a prayerful attitude towards all of life's experiences.
- Embrace solitude and silence whenever possible.

Challenges and Obstacles on the Path of Contemplative

Prayer

Thomas Merton, in his characteristic honesty and depth, did not shy away from discussing the difficulties and obstacles that often arise on the path of contemplative prayer. He understood that the journey towards deeper union with God is rarely a smooth or effortless one. Acknowledging these challenges is crucial for perseverance and for navigating the spiritual life with realism and hope.

These obstacles can manifest in various forms, testing the soul's resolve and deepening its reliance on God's grace.

The Dryness of the Spiritual Life

One of the most common challenges Merton identified is spiritual dryness, often referred to as the "dark night of the senses" or "dark night of the soul." This is a period where the usual consolations and spiritual affections seem to disappear, leaving the soul feeling barren and uninspired. It can be a time of doubt, discouragement, and a sense that God has withdrawn His presence.

Merton viewed these periods not as a sign of failure, but as a necessary purification. They serve to detach the soul from its reliance on emotional highs and to deepen its trust in God's hidden presence. Perseverance through these dry spells is a testament to a faith that is rooted in commitment rather than in fluctuating feelings.

The Resistance of the Ego

The ego, with its inherent self-centeredness, fears and resists the dissolution of self that is central to contemplative prayer. The ego is invested in its own identity, its own desires, and its own way of perceiving reality. Contemplation, which calls for a letting go of self and an immersion in God, naturally challenges the ego's dominion. This resistance can manifest as pride, defensiveness, or a subtle clinging to spiritual achievements.

Merton understood that the ego's grip is powerful, and its transformation is a gradual process. He emphasized that awareness of this resistance, coupled with a commitment to humility, is essential for moving beyond its limitations. The contemplative journey involves a continuous, often subtle, struggle against the ego's tendency to reassert itself.

Distractions and the Wandering Mind

Despite efforts to cultivate silence and stillness, the mind often remains prone to wandering, easily distracted by thoughts, memories, and external stimuli. This constant mental chatter can be a significant hurdle in contemplative prayer, making it difficult to maintain a focused or receptive state. The sheer volume and pervasiveness of these distractions can be disheartening.

Merton's counsel here is one of gentle persistence. He advised not to become overly frustrated with the wandering mind, but rather to acknowledge the distraction with kindness and gently redirect attention back to God. This repeated act of returning, again and again, is itself a form of contemplative practice, fostering patience and deepening trust.

The Illusion of Progress and Spiritual Aridity

Another subtle obstacle is the illusion of spiritual progress or the feeling of spiritual aridity. Individuals may feel they are not "making progress" or that their prayer life is stagnant, leading to discouragement. This often stems from a misunderstanding of contemplative prayer as a linear progression with predictable milestones. In reality, the contemplative path is often characterized by cycles of dryness and spiritual insight.

Merton's perspective encourages a focus on faithfulness rather than on perceived spiritual advancement. He urged individuals to remain committed to the practice of prayer, trusting that God is working in ways that may not always be evident to the individual. The key is to remain present to God, regardless of whether one feels spiritual "progress."

Conclusion: Embracing the Contemplative Life as Taught by Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton's enduring legacy in the realm of contemplative prayer offers a profound and accessible guide for contemporary seekers. His teachings illuminate a path that moves beyond mere intellectual assent to a direct, transformative encounter with the divine presence. By emphasizing the primacy of God's grace, the importance of silence and stillness, and the potential for integrating contemplation into the very fabric of daily life, Merton provides a comprehensive framework for spiritual deepening. The journey he outlines, though often marked by challenges such as spiritual dryness and the resistance of the ego, ultimately leads to an authentic peace, a boundless compassion, and a life lived in profound union with God.

Ultimately, Thomas Merton's insights into contemplative prayer encourage us to embrace a life of constant attentiveness, a loving gaze upon the God who dwells within and all around us. It is a call to move beyond the superficial and to discover the infinite richness of the present moment, transformed by the silent, all-encompassing love that is the essence of true contemplation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core essence of Thomas Merton's approach to contemplative prayer?

Merton's contemplative prayer emphasizes a radical surrender of the self to God, moving beyond conceptual thought and emotional highs to a silent, direct experience of divine presence. It's about 'being' rather than 'doing' in prayer.

How does Merton distinguish contemplative prayer from other forms of prayer?

He differentiates it from vocal prayer (reciting words) and meditation (structured thinking) by highlighting its passive, receptive nature. Contemplation, for Merton, is God's action within us, where we are simply open to receiving it.

What role does silence play in Merton's contemplative practice?

Silence is paramount. Merton sees silence not as an absence of noise, but as a presence of God. It's the space where the inner chatter ceases, allowing us to hear God's quiet voice and experience His presence.

Can beginners engage in contemplative prayer according to Merton?

Yes, Merton believed that the capacity for contemplation is inherent in everyone. However, it requires a gradual unlearning of reliance on techniques and a willingness to enter into deeper silence and trust in God's grace.

What are the obstacles to contemplative prayer that Merton identifies?

Merton highlights ego-centricity, intellectual pride, attachment to feelings, distractions, and the desire for spiritual experiences as common obstacles. Overcoming these requires humility and a constant turning back to God.

How does Merton connect contemplative prayer with social justice and action?

For Merton, true contemplation is not escapist. It leads to a deeper love for humanity and a transformed awareness that naturally impels one to act justly and compassionately in the world, seeing Christ in the marginalized.

What is the significance of 'emptying oneself' in Merton's contemplative path?

This 'emptying' refers to shedding self-will, ego attachments, and preconceived notions about God.

It's a process of 'kenosis,' like Christ emptying himself, to make space for God's fullness within.

What is Merton's view on the role of the senses and the imagination in contemplative prayer?

While contemplative prayer transcends sensory experience, Merton acknowledges that the journey may begin with using the senses or imagination as starting points. However, the ultimate goal is to move beyond these to a direct, non-imaginal encounter with God.

How does Merton's concept of 'pure prayer' relate to his understanding of contemplation?

Merton speaks of 'pure prayer' as prayer stripped of all attachments and ego-driven motives, a prayer of pure love and simple presence. Contemplative prayer, in its mature form, is akin to this pure prayer.

What contemporary relevance does Merton's teaching on contemplative prayer hold today?

In our fast-paced, technologically saturated world, Merton's emphasis on silence, stillness, and direct experience offers a vital antidote to spiritual superficiality, fostering a deeper, more authentic relationship with the divine and a more integrated life.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to contemplative prayer and Thomas Merton, with descriptions:

1. The Seven Storey Mountain

This autobiographical work chronicles Thomas Merton's journey from a bohemian youth to his profound conversion and eventual entry into a Trappist monastery. It offers a powerful testament to the search for meaning and spiritual awakening. Through his vivid prose, Merton articulates the universal yearning for transcendence and the transformative power of surrender to a higher calling.

2. New Seeds of Contemplation

A foundational text in contemplative spirituality, this book expands upon Merton's earlier *Seeds of Contemplation*. It delves into the nature of God, the self, and the path to union with the divine through quiet stillness. Merton emphasizes the importance of silence, love, and the realization of our innate divine potential as the core of contemplative practice.

3. The Waters of Silence

This collection presents Merton's reflections on the monastic life and the practice of prayer within its context. He explores the discipline of silence not as an absence of sound, but as a fertile ground for encountering God. Merton highlights how the structured life of a monk, with its emphasis on contemplation, can lead to a deeper understanding of the spiritual life for all seekers.

4. Contemplation in a World of Action

In this work, Merton bridges the gap between the contemplative life and the demands of the modern

world. He argues that true contemplation is not an escape from reality but a deeper engagement with it, informed by divine love and wisdom. Merton challenges readers to find spiritual depth amidst their daily responsibilities and social concerns.

5. The Sign of Jonas

This journal offers an intimate glimpse into Merton's life at the Gethsemani Abbey, revealing his internal struggles, spiritual insights, and the challenges of maintaining a contemplative life in isolation. It provides a candid account of his search for God and his evolving understanding of the monastic vocation. The book's honesty resonates with anyone grappling

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