**Introduction to Christian Contemplative Practices**

Rev. Matt Carriker

What does “contemplation” mean? When we “contemplate” an idea, contemplation implies something deeper than thinking only. For centuries society has had a dysfunctional relationship to thinking, building off Descartes affirmation, “I think, therefore I am.”

Descartes statement is the opposite of spiritual truth. We are, therefore we think! Our origin point is in being, not thinking. Being is one word for the deeper spiritual dimension we could also call consciousness. Consciousness is beyond our brain, our minds, and our intellect.

In contemplation, we start from a place of mystery. For centuries, the authoritative approach of Christianity has been rooted in having and teaching the answers. A contemplative approach begins from a place of not knowing. That is why it’s called the “mystical” dimension of faith. Mystical comes from the same root as the word “mystery.”

Spiritual truths often begin as a mystery because there is much we must spiritually unlearn. Many beliefs no longer serve us. As we release fear’s grip and open our minds and hearts, new revelations are revealed to us.

Wonder is a good place to begin with contemplation. “Godly Play” children’s activities close with wondering questions. “I wonder what the disciples were thinking when…” Wonder activates another side of our intelligence beyond the intellect. To access spiritual wisdom, we don’t want to discard our intellect, but we also don’t want to limit ourselves to the intellect. Jesus’ great commandment was to love God with all our heart (feelings), mind (intellect), soul, and strength (energy). To dive into contemplation is to engage in practices that stimulate the whole of who we are- feelings, intellect, soul, and energy.

There are many ways to enter contemplation. That is one reason I like the “Tree of Contemplative Practices.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Tree shows different branches and sub-branches through which we access contemplation. Many people only associate contemplation with stillness and silence. Silence-based practices are an important branch in contemplation that we cannot do without. At the same time, others will feel called to begin their contemplative journey from the movement branch, the relational branch, the creative branch, the activist branch, or the generative branch.

At the root of all contemplative practices is communion and attention/awareness. Awareness has many layers- of ourselves, internally and externally, including thoughts, feelings, our five senses, those around us. That is a starting point, but not an exhaustive list. It moves into awareness of the sacred in our midst, known by many names. Some of have called this sacred presence God. We could also call it Consciousness, Life, or Love. As many have been turned off by a limiting view of what God is, we could even call this presence “Oneness.” Oneness points to the communion roots of contemplative practice. When we deepen our awareness, we realize that we are interconnected and interdependent with everyone and everything. At the deepest level, we are all One.

Another term to clarify is “practice.” As a runner and basketball player, I have always resonated with the idea of practice as it relates to our spiritual life. When I was training for a marathon, I gradually built up my distance running to 8 miles, then 10 miles, and eventually 15 miles. I finally worked up to a 20 mile run before the marathon!

What is true in physical exercise is also true spiritual exercise. We should start with the practices that resonate with us. If you don’t enjoy dance, then you don’t have to dance to stay physically healthy. There are many sports and physical exercises to choose from. Likewise with spiritual or contemplative practices. Choose what resonates for you now! That may change over time. Simply be present to what is life-giving in the present moment. Start with the stillness branch, or the relational branch, or the movement branch. It is less important which branch you start with as it is that you start with something!

The second metaphor with practice is to take your time. Just like with a marathon, you won’t do it overnight. It takes practice to obtain our goals. Don’t feel guilty if you can’t practice as much as you’d like! Honor and celebrate the time you get in and build off that! With disciplined and patient practice, you will grow in your capacity to go deeper in whatever practices you choose, just as you grow in your ability to run, dance, or play whatever sport you choose.

Rev. Matt Carriker is an ordained United Church of Christ pastor at a new UCC church in Waltham called Agape Spiritual Community, <http://www.agapewaltham.org>. The title of his newly released book is “Giving Christianity back to Agape Love.” More info about Matt, his book and meditation work can be found here: <https://www.achristianyogi.com/>

1. <https://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)