

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING?

Life is a spiritual journey. Contemplative living is a way of responding to our everyday experiences by consciously attending to our relationships. It deepens our awareness of our connectedness and communion with others, becomes a positive force of change in our lives, and provides meaningful direction to our journey. Ultimately, contemplative living leads us to a sense of well-being, profound gratitude, and a clearer understanding of our purpose in life.

Living contemplatively begins with ourselves but leads us in the end to embrace deeply not only our truest self, but God, neighbor, and all of creation. By reflecting on our everyday experiences, we seek the depths of our inner truth. By exploring our beliefs, illusions, attitudes, and assumptions, we find our true self and discover how we relate to the larger community. Contemplative living directs our minds and hearts to the truly important issues of human existence, making us less likely to be captivated by the superficial distractions that so easily occupy our time.

WHO WAS THOMAS MERTON?

For over sixty years, the thought and writings of Thomas Merton have guided spiritual seekers across the world. His writings offer important insights into four essential relationships—with self, with God, with other people, and with all of creation. While the Christian tradition is the foundation of his perspective, he is open and inclusive in his examination of other

religious traditions, recognizing the important contribution of all faith traditions to the history of civilization. He drew from their strengths to enhance the spiritual growth of individuals and communities.



Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, in 1915. His mother was from the United States and his father from New Zealand. Educated in France, England, and the United States, he received a master's degree in English from Columbia University. In 1938 he was baptized into the Catholic Church. He taught at St. Bonaventure University for a year and then in 1941 entered the Cistercian Order as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Directed by his Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, Merton wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which was published in 1948.

For fifteen years he served as Master of Scholastics and Novices while writing many books and articles on the spiritual life, interreligious understanding, peace, and social justice issues. In December of 1968, he journeyed to Asia to attend a conference of contemplatives near Bangkok, Thailand. While there he was accidentally electrocuted and died at the age of fifty-three.

Interest in Merton has grown steadily since his death. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which appears on lists of the one hundred most important books of the last century, has been in print ever since its first edition and has sold millions of copies. The volume of printed work by and about him attests to Merton's popularity.

His works have been translated into thirty-five languages and new foreign language editions continue to be printed. The International Thomas Merton Society currently has thirty chapters in the United States and fourteen in other countries.

Thomas Merton is distinguished among contemporary spiritual writers by the depth and substance of his thinking. Merton was a scholar who distilled the best thinking of the best theologians, philosophers, and poets throughout the centuries, from both the West and the East, and presented their ideas in the context of the Christian worldview. His remarkable and enduring popularity indicates that his work continues to speak to the minds and hearts of people searching for answers to life's important questions. For many he is a spiritual guide, and for others he offers a place to retreat to in difficult times. His writings take people into deep places within themselves and offer insight into the paradoxes of life. Merton struggled to be contemplative in a world of action, yet he offered no quick fix or "Ten Easy Steps" to a successful spiritual life.

CONCLUDING MEDITATIONS

A

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton
Thoughts in Solitude, p. 83

B

Grant us Prudence in proportion to our power, Wisdom in proportion to our science and Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might. Bless our earnest will to help all races and people to travel in friendship along the road to justice, liberty and lasting peace.

Grant us above all to see that our ways are not necessarily Your ways, that we cannot fully penetrate the mystery of Your designs and that the very storm of power now raging on this earth reveals Your hidden will and Your inscrutable decision. Grant us to see Your face in the lightning of this cosmic storm, O

God of holiness, merciful to all. Grant us to seek peace where it is truly found!

In Your will, O God, is our peace!

Amen.

Thomas Merton
The Nonviolent Alternative, pp. 269–270

C

O God we are one with You.

You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious.

Amen.

Thomas Merton
The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton, pp. 318–319