

Practical Guidance on the Contemplative Way

Review of
The Contemplative Heart
 By James Finley
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Reviewed by **Fr. Patrick Eastman, OSB obl.**

There is ample evidence that the ancient apophatic way of praying is once again becoming prominent in the West. In the Christian tradition such a way of prayer is usually termed contemplation whereas the non-Christian traditions of the East called it meditation. This increased popularity has given rise to a vast number of books on the subject, each making its contribution but some being more useful than others. A significant influence in the recapturing of this ancient way of prayer has been Thomas Merton, so it is fitting that James Finley, who spent time as a monk with Merton, should draw on this background in his own writing on the contemplative life. Many if not most readers of the *Seasonal* will have read and no doubt, like the reviewer, been enriched by Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*. In this new work we find the further development of the teaching that Finley received from Merton, enriched by a life-long experience of practicing it.

The book is divided into four main sections. Each draws on the author's awareness of the Christian tradition and the teaching of Merton and Father Thomas Keating, the riches of a Zen practice, his observation of the world and insights gained from his work as a clinical psychologist. Weaving so many threads together into a fabric of encouragement for those drawn to this path is one of the strengths of this book.

The opening section of the book provides a description of contemplative living. The point is aptly made that being a contemplative is not confined to the way we spend a short time each day in prayer. As the author writes, it is "to recognize and move with the divinity manifested in the primordial rhythms of the day-to-day life we are living." For this we are to awaken to the very closeness of this mystery in the dance of life and encouraged to live "mindfully in the present moment."

The second part of the book is a down-to-earth guide to help readers discover their own contemplative practice and to remain faithful to it in all circumstances. Step by step, the reader is taken encouragingly through the body posture of contemplative sitting and walking meditation. Based on the sources previously mentioned, this section will be most helpful to those drawn to the practice of silent, wordless and imageless prayer. It constitutes the largest section of the book and will probably prove to be the most useful, especially to those who do not have the benefit of a personal teacher. Perhaps one can say that meditation practice is a bit like having an exercise program. One can learn much from a book but how much better it is to have a "personal trainer"!

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Part Three is entitled “Find your contemplative community and enter it.” Finley suggests here that as humans we are naturally contemplative. Instances of occasions and experiences occurring in ordinary life that give a glimpse of one’s contemplative connectedness are brought to the attention of the reader. It is in life itself that “is born a radical and profound experience of finding one’s contemplative community in being contemplatively awakened to one’s ineffable communion with the all-encompassing totality the present moment manifests.” Drawing surely on his experience as a psychotherapist, Finley addresses the ways in which the addictions, woundedness, abuse and negative influences in our life can limit our contemplative freedom. The contemplative practice cannot be used as a means of avoiding the reality about oneself. It is a way of facing with compassion all aspects of oneself.

The fourth and final section deals with discerning what helps and what hinders the practice. In this section the whole issue of death and dying is addressed. That which keeps us from love is fear and the greatest fear is that of death and annihilation. Finley suggests that “we seek to live a more contemplative way of life so that we will not have to wait until we are dying to learn how to live.” A consideration of prime importance, the reader is informed, is the fact of our own powerlessness and the necessity of growing in acceptance of, and compassion towards that powerlessness.

In meditation practice we experience directly how suffering is inexorably woven into life for the simple reason that desire inexorably overshoots its mark. We sit in meditation given over to the desire to be present, open, and awake, neither clinging to nor rejecting anything, only to discover that we are unable to be as present, open and awake as we desire to be. Seeing this is so, we desire to be compassionate toward ourselves in our powerlessness only to discover that we are powerless to be as compassionate toward ourselves as we desire to be. And so it is with each aspect of meditation practice. Each embodies a direct encounter with ourselves as we really are, which when seen and accepted, embodies an encounter with our powerlessness to accept ourselves as we really are. As our sitting practice carries us into ever deeper, more expansive levels of acceptance, the opacity of the ego gradually disperses, giving way to an intimate awareness of ourselves as being the aperture through which the divine light eternally shines.

The reviewer considers this paragraph to be one of immense importance, to be read at least once a day by all who desire to live contemplatively.

It is only in the final chapter of this section that Finley addresses the nature of the ego or “false self.” It is this part of one’s consciousness that divides and separates, thereby setting up an illusory dualism. It is this which hinders most profoundly one’s ability to live in contemplative awareness of one’s connectedness with the entire cosmos. Finley recounts a great true story, from the time when he was at Gethsemani, about “getting a pig through the gate.” Finley uses the story to great advantage in pointing out that “a great deal of life can be likened to getting the pig through the gate . . . teaching high school religion is getting the pig through the gate . . . a great deal of psychotherapy is getting the pig through the gate . . . [and] . . . meditation is getting the pig through the gate.”

All in all this is a practical and encouraging book. The one drawback, in this reviewer’s opinion, is that it is overly wordy and stylistically repetitive in many places. Although some readers may find the style lyrical or even poetic, the reviewer considers it a pity that standing as he does in the Merton tradition, the author has not captured something of the concise and incisive language of his mentor.