

# WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION? THE OPENING OF A DIALOGUE

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## **Abstract**

*A collection of contemplative musings on contemplation, in word and image.*

*Keywords:* contemplation, meditation, awareness

## **What is Contemplation? The Opening of a Dialogue**

### **What is Contemplation? (Be)holding**

Beholding attentively.

holding devotedly, devoutly.

Loving contemplation

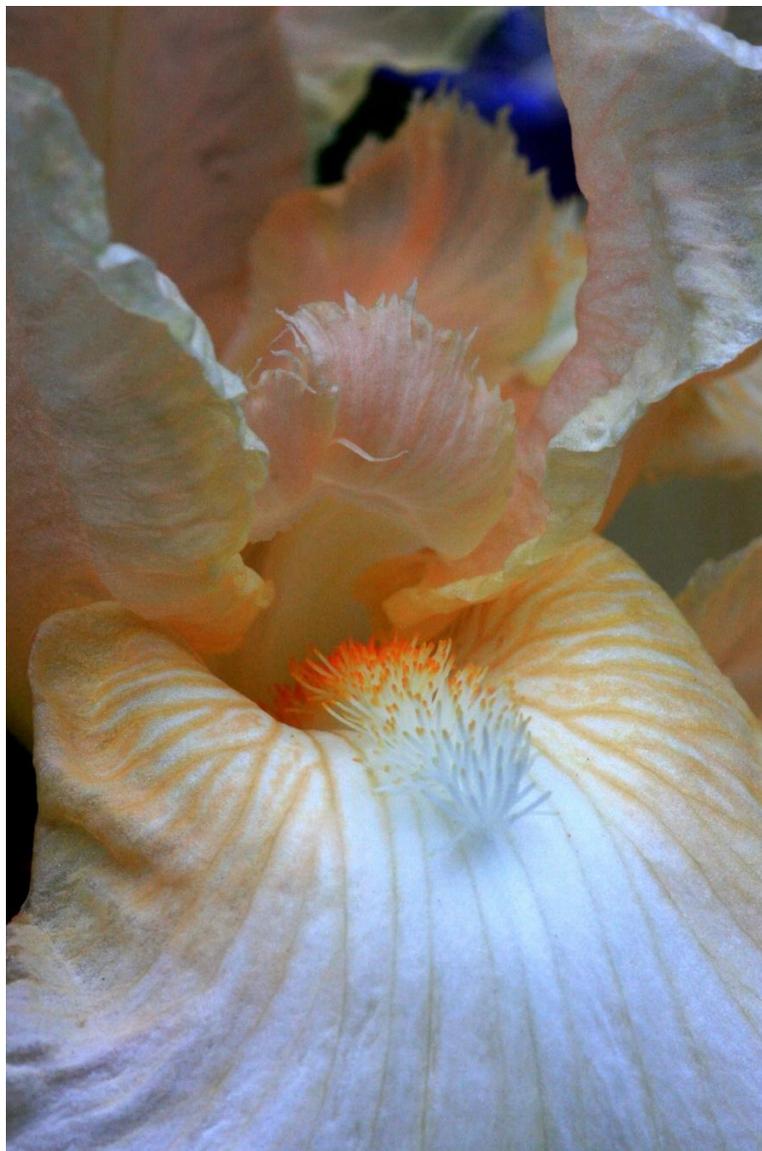
Sand. Flower. Infinity. Eternity.

Auguring down, down, down,

up,

all around.

Into All.



## What is Contemplation? *Contemplatio*

This is not just *theōria*.

No deep speculation

Or wandering, meandering.

Rather, absolute stillness.

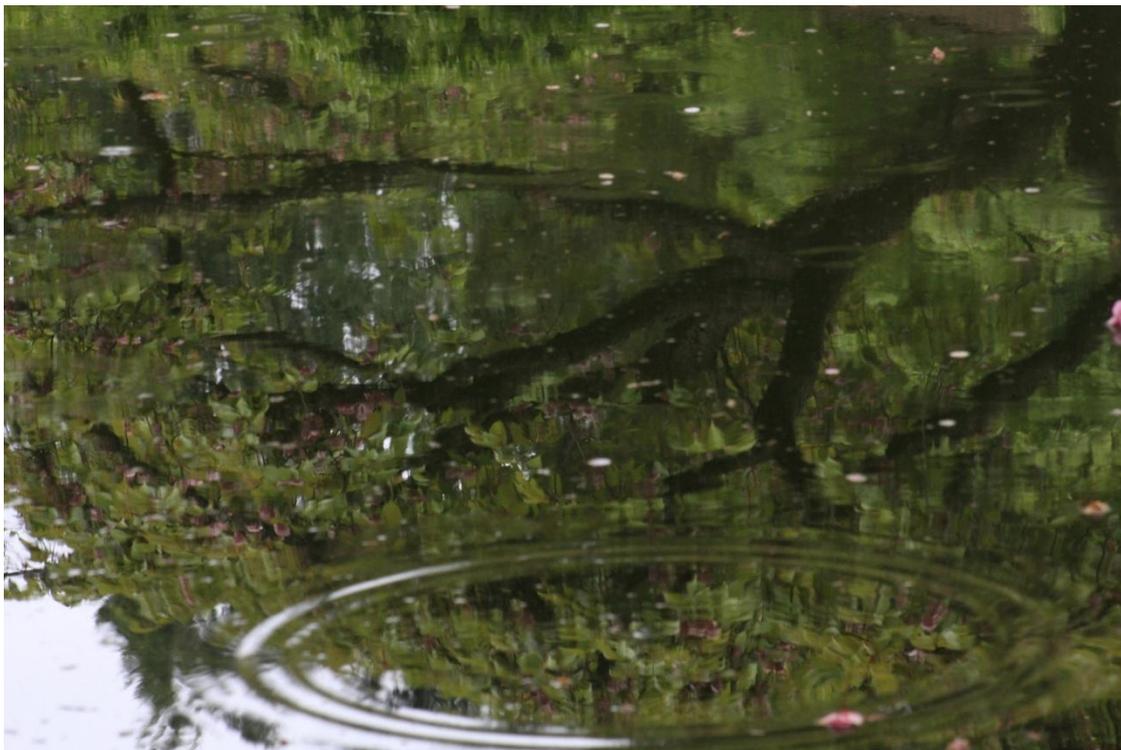
*Contemplatio*.

One ... without a second.



## **What is Contemplation? Templed**

In the *templum*,  
Marked out in that space,  
Oriented, situated, contextualized.  
Spheres of connection radiating, expanding outward.



## **What is Contemplation? Immersion**

Immersed in a boundless sea.  
More than mind and limb  
Yet a child of both. And heart.  
Wordless, thoughtless, imageless,  
resting  
    in awareness



## **What is Contemplation? Infusion**

Infused awareness  
(Of) Who I am.

Inspiration.



## What is Contemplation? Ineffable

A dawning of the full attentive:

“spiritual awareness of the ineffable Absolute”

*Dhyāna.*

Transcendent but fully immanent

I integrate and am Integrated

I contain (and am contained in) worlds.



## **What is Contemplation? Resting**

Coming to rest in my own nature

*Tat Tvam Asi*

Abiding in flowing Awareness: *ekatanata*.

*Tada drashtuh svarupevasthanami.*

*Purusa.*



### **The Conversation Begins: Responses to My Reviewers and the Editorial Team**

The reviewers and editor requested some additional background and context:

“... the editors concur that the piece will need to be accompanied by a reflective piece to give the poem more context. We request the author to provide a 1000 - 1500 word written reflection with some reference to literature to provide the reader a little bit of background.”

I am delighted to respond and welcome their opening of the dialogue. My responses here will likely be more explanatory than reflective, and I will proceed stanza by stanza. The poems initially had a few footnotes offering additional information about specific words, but I have changed that now so that all my comments are contained in this essay. Of course, I recognize that readers will bring their own lived experiences and understandings to the poems so that any number possible meanings will be found in “a multi-dimensional space” (Barthes, 2006, p. 44) that exist in the spheres of between. I am also mindful that poetic expression usually does not come accompanied by explanations from the author, although I am happy to provide some explanatory context. Might I suggest that the reader pause and hang out with the poems before plunging ahead into these explanations. David Whyte (2016, 19:38) suggests we need to be “cultivating a relationship with the unknown.... We have to understand that half of life is meant to be hidden from you at any one time.... Half the time you’re not supposed to understand what is going on until it makes itself fully known, until it comes to fruition. We’re constantly naming things too early.”

The field of contemplative inquiry in postsecondary education has been growing dramatically in the past 15 years or so. In 2006, the editors of *Teachers College Record* published a special edition on contemplative practices and education. Membership in the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education has grown significantly since the mid-1990s; the Association has published its own journal since 2014. In that same year, a Master of Education program (Contemplative Inquiry and Approaches in Education--CIAE) designed by Drs. Heesoon Bai and Laurie Anderson began in the Faculty of Education at SFU (Johnson, 2014; SFU Faculty of Education, 2019; Todd, 2013).

Contemplation itself has been a vehicle for spiritual inquiry in the wisdom traditions of east and west for thousands of years. There are a variety of contemplative and meditative approaches extolled within these traditions. Today, meditative approaches are widely practiced. Komjathy (2015) provides a wonderful sourcebook on contemplative literature across traditions. A key question, I think, in this rapidly expanding field of contemplative inquiry is simply this: what is contemplation? (This is an assignment given to students in the CIAE program.) I have been doing research on this question since 2014 and have temporarily abandoned my essay-format attempts at an answer in favor of a more poetic response; poetic expression, not surprisingly to some, seems to be a better vehicle. The wisdom traditions are filled with poetic expressions of contemplative experience and insight.

## What is Contemplation? (Be)holding

This stanza points to the relationship of attention and devotion in contemplation. Attention is obviously a key element of contemplative practice, and Oliver (2004, p. 56) and Scott and Bai, (2017) have focused on the significance of devotion in developing a one-pointed consciousness. One might also refer to pages 84–85 and 130–133 of Hadot (1995).

The phrase ‘loving contemplation’ comes from the work of Gregory of Nyssa, who, along with other Greek Fathers, developed a Christian conception of contemplation out of the Greek concept of *theōria*, St. Paul’s use of *gnosis*, and the Hebrew concept of *da’ath* that combined experiential knowing and love. See Keating (2006, pp. 19 ff) and Mateo-Seco and Maspero (2010, p. 528) for discussions of this concept.

The following line is a nod to William Blake’s (2019, p. 77) poem, “The Auguries of Innocence,” which the next line picks up. That line is both a play on words with the word ‘auger’ and an allusion to drilling down into the depths of consciousness. I chose the word “auguring” intentionally. The Latin *templum* refers to the temples of the oracles, the “area for the taking of auguries” (Contemplation, n.d.).

The remaining lines, and the last word of the title bring us to the consideration of contemplation as both a practice and a state of being. In that state of being, consciousness has slipped the boundaries of narrow confinement to find itself spreading expansively in all directions, uniting itself with all.

## What is Contemplation? *Contemplatio*

I struggled with the first line here for months and still do. An earlier version read “This is not *theōria*”; it now reads “This is not just *theōria*.” I jettisoned and hauled back ‘just’ several times, but for now I have once again hauled it in, although part of me still wants to toss ‘just.’

Kowalzig (2006), among many others, points to *theōria* (θεωρία) as referring, in the pre-Socratic era, to attending a religious festival or the enactment of a state religion or the interaction between oneself and what one views (spectating), a concept that preceded and partially informed later Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagorus. *Theōria* is discussed by several ancient Greek philosophers, most notably Plato and Aristotle, who held it to be a primarily intellectual endeavor (Bénatouil & Bonazzi, 2012).

In Books V to VII of the *Republic*, Plato (2000) outlines *theōria* as the prime activity of the philosopher. Drawing from the earlier conception of *theōria* relating to travel to festivals and beholding the spectacles there, Plato argues that the philosopher “journeys to and looks upon Beauty itself” (476b–c).

In the allegory of the cave in Book VII, Plato depicts the philosopher’s journey from the darkness of limited terrestrial knowledge to the light of the Forms. The journey is made possible through the development of the intellect and reason.

In *Symposium*, however, Diotima presents *theōria* as a sacred revelation, a theme that is also present in *Phaedrus*. There, in Socrates’ second speech, he says:

Those that are immortal, when they get to the top, pass outside it and take their stand on the outer surface of the heaven; the revolution of the cosmos carries them around as they stand there and they theorize the things outside the heaven. (Plato, 1993, 247b–c).

The sights here are “blessed,” “holy”; the Forms are seen as divine; it is what Nightingale (2006) refers to as “a sort of religious revelation” (p. 177). This revelation is the sense that I wish to capture in my use of the word ‘contemplation,’ as opposed to it consisting of the operations of intellect and reason. While reason has a place in perhaps confirming any revelations brought on through non-rational means, it is also not enough in the arts of contemplation, just as Virgil, representing reason, has to leave his role as guide to Dante when it comes time to visit *Paradiso*, with Beatrice taking on the role, representing the grace of Divine Love:

Virgil fixed his eyes on me  
and said: "The temporal fire and the eternal  
have you seen, my son, and you have come to a  
place where I by myself discern no further. (Alighieri, 2003, p. 463)

Aristotle (1976), in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, sees *theōria* as the highest activity: it is “both the highest [and most continuous] form of activity ... since the intellect [or *nous*] is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known” (p. 328). It is *theōria* that will lead to the highest happiness and human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Those dedicated to it “live in conformity with the highest” that lies within them (p. 331). Robert Bellah (2011) suggests that that there are indeed two models of that can be said to emerge from Aristotle’s work: pure contemplation “of the divine” (p. 594) and intellectual understanding of various subjects. It seems, however, that the intellect plays a central role in both models. It is this conception of *theōria* as contemplation that gives me pause.

Hadot (1995) argues that in the ‘spiritual exercises’ of the Greek schools, “‘meditation’ [was] the ‘exercise’ of reason .... Greco-Roman meditation ... is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take extremely varied forms” (p. 59). It is also this notion of the reason, imagination, and intuition that gives me encouragement to keep *theōria* in the vessel. (See Keator, 2018 for an extended discussion of *contemplatio* and *theōria* in the context of contemporary contemplative inquiry in higher education.)

Rodowick (2014) points to *theōria* as viewing, speculating, and contemplating. He adds that, for example, while Pythagoras promoted *theōria* as an intellectual study of phenomena, there was also the understanding that through *theōria* “one attained active assimilation to the divine Intellect or *nous* present in all of us” (p. 9). Heidegger (1977) provides an etymology of *theōria*, writing that “... for the Greeks, *bios theōrētikos* the life of beholding, is, especially in its purest form as thinking, the highest doing” (pp. 163–164).

Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists develop the Platonic move toward *theōria* as a spiritual endeavor. It is their work that inspires the Greek Fathers to transform the concept to the Latin *contemplatio*, infusing it with the element of devotion; *contemplatio* now becomes a spiritual practiced focused on awareness of God (Keating, 2006). Among the Latin Fathers who

were informed primarily by Plato's work, Augustine bridged reason and the process of 'divine illumination.' Shand (2004) points out that

He was not concerned then with theoretical philosophizing as an end in itself, but with the way in which truth in philosophy would lead one down the path to the attainment of religious goodness and closeness to God.... Unlike for Plato, such eternal truths would not be accessible to our limited temporal intellect or reason operating alone were it not for God assisting us with divine illumination.... In the contemplation of eternal truth we satisfy a condition for moving nearer to God, but the conditions will not be complete unless we also go through a moral and spiritual purification.  
(p. 13)

The key element for me here is the process of moral and spiritual purification. If *theōria* includes these elements, then I will gladly include it in my conceptualization. If not, then I jettison it; currently, it is still on board, although a bit tenuously. I am reminded of Thomas Aquinas' experience during a Mass near the end of his life when he experienced a prolonged spiritual ecstasy. He had not yet completed his masterpiece the *Summa Theologica*. When asked by his secretary to return to the theological work, he refused: "Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me" (Davis, 1993, p. 9).

The last line in this stanza honours the non-dualist positions found in the contemplative traditions of east and west: Plotinus; the Advaita Vedantists (my own contemplative practice rests in the Raja/Ashtanga yoga tradition); the mystical union present in the works of Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and other Christian mystics; the emptiness of Buddhism; *Fana* of the Sufis. See the first two chapters of Huxley's (1944) *The Perennial Philosophy* for a fascinating anthology of source material on this topic).

### What is Contemplation? Templed

The word 'temple' has its origins not only in the Latin *templum*, but stems from a PIE root *tem*, meaning to cut out a space; the Greek *temenos* refers to a "sacred area around a temple" and was applied later to "any place regarded as occupied by divine presence" (Temple, n.d.). As Heidegger (1977) notes: "The Latin *templum* means originally a sector carved out of the heavens and on earth, the cardinal point, the region of the heavens marked out by the path of the sun. It is within the region that diviners make their observations ..." (p. 165).

The third line is an acknowledgement of what might be seen as a critical or poststructuralist perspective, seeing contemplation, not as divorced from context and place, but situated. The last line is a recognition of the inner experience of expansion of consciousness. Yogananda (1969) expressed his experience of *samadhi* as follows:

My body became immovably rooted; breath was drawn out of my lungs as if by some huge magnet. Soul and mind instantly lost their physical bondage, and streamed out like a fluid piercing light from my every pore. The flesh was as though dead, yet in my intense awareness I knew that never before had I been fully alive. My sense of identity was no longer narrowly confined to a body, but embraced the circumambient atoms. People on distant streets seemed to be moving gently over my own remote periphery. ... (p. 149)

### What is Contemplation? Immersion

This stanza continues the theme of expansion of the previous one. It also acknowledges the role of embodied knowing. Snowber (2017) writes:

Wherever I danced, it emerged out of my relationship to God or as I like to now call, the Beloved, where all my cells were vibrating. Dance was akin to lovemaking with Creator. The women mystics became my mentors, and here I still take inspiration. St. Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, speaks of our bodies as the leaves of God and she says, «How does the soul make love to God? The heart has divine instincts — it just needs to be turned loose in the sky». (p. 129)

The stanza also reprises the theme of transcendence alluded to in the first two stanzas, again focusing on the centrality of awareness.

### What is Contemplation? Infusion

The word ‘infusion’ is an acknowledgement of the Christian concept of infused contemplation. Merton (2003) writes of it as contemplation “...infused by [God] into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with Him” (p. 73). This is an utterly transcendent experience, going beyond thought, and characterized by “... a quality of light in darkness, knowing in unknowing. *It is beyond feeling, even beyond concepts*” (p. 72). It is, I suggest, this experience that gives rise to a deeper life breath that infuses our blood, cells, and being.

### What is Contemplation? Ineffable

Carrying on from the previous stanza, one might appreciate that such experiences are ineffable; I acknowledge by quotation the words of Louis Dupré’s (2005) entry on “Mysticism” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. The Sanskrit word *dhyāna* means meditation; it is the seventh step of the eightfold path of Patañjali, as outlined in his *Yoga Sutras*. The sutra (verse) reads “Meditation is the one-pointed attention of the mind on one image.” Bryant (2009), in his commentaries, writes: “... when the mind can focus exclusively on [an] object without any other distraction, *dhyāna* has been achieved” (p. 303). The following line takes a panentheistic position that the ineffable Absolute is both transcendent and immanent; the contemplative movement here is one of integration. The final line is a somewhat indirect acknowledgment of Whitman’s (2007) line, in his poem “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass* that “I am large—I contain multitudes” (p. 104).

### What is Contemplation? Resting

This stanza draws exclusively from the nondualist Yoga-Vedānta tradition. *Tat Tvam Asi* is a Sanskrit sloka from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, translating as “Thou art that” or “That Thou art” or “That art Thou.” It is perhaps the most well-known Hindu expression of the unity of the individual (or the individual soul, *atman*) with the Absolute (*Brahman*). The Sanskrit word

*ekatanata* refers to the continuous flow of uninterrupted attention mentioned above. Patañjali's Yoga Sutra 1.3 states, *Tada drashtuh svarupevasthanam*: "Then [after stilling the changing states of consciousness] the seer abides in itself, resting in its true nature" Bryant, 2009, p. 22; see subsequent pages for detailed commentary). *Purusa* refers to the Self or a transcendental identity; it is a central concept in the Yoga, Vedānta, and Sāṃkhya schools of Indian philosophy. Feuerstein (1996) writes: "... the concept of the Self (*purusa*) is not purely a hypothetical-deductive postulate. It is best understood as circumscribing a particular yogic experience of the numinous" (p. 15); he adds "It is sheer awareness as opposed to consciousness-of ..." (p. 19). *Purusa* can be said to be a 'witness,' 'seer,' and as 'inactive'; realization of the Self is the state "in which there is the nonseparation of knower, knowing, and known (Chapple, 2008, pp. 28, 27). It is the Ground of Being; it is there one rests.

Contemplation as both doing and being go hand in hand: one gives rise to the other. In my experience contemplation as being realized through contemplative practice requires just that: practice. Regular, disciplined, devoted practice over an extended period of time. Tim Lilburn (1999) writes:

Poetry gestures to contemplation and contemplation feeds the poetry, modifying language by letting awe undermine it, pare it back, lending the poems a thinness, compunction. This is a land to wait in, watching. Bring anonymity; namelessness has a place here; the land worn to the bone hints into you an interior mimesis of nameless. Bring sorrow. (p. 11)

*Note: The photographs are compositions of the author.*

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