**Contemplative Experience**

Writers in almost every recognized worldview have written about their experiences with contemplation and meditation. In general popular and often academic language, we often call these experiences “mystical,” insofar as they don’t come about in everyday society and its form of life.

In this presentation, we’ll read a few examples of “Varieties of Religious Experience” and offer several reflections on the nature of these types of experiences.

**Christianity**
1. Dostoyevsky’s Fr. Zosima
2. Teresa of Avila

**Islam**
1. Jalal al-din Rumi

**Judaism**
1. Martin Buber
2. Kabbalah School

**Zen Buddhism**
1. Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind
2. Dogen Zenji

**Daoism**
1. Louis Komjathy
2. Zhuangzi

**Secular People**
1. Jordan Peterson
2. Sam Harris

**Some Questions**

1. Can we do anything of our own initiative to bring these states about?
2. What roles do our own attitudes, theories, and thinking play in modifying our experience of reality?
   a. Of course, the aim in many university studies is to learn to develop our cognitive abilities.
   b. Some religious studies scholars would argue that this is an inherent barrier to certain forms of religious experience
3. Are these experiences more likely to emerge among a group of people or are they largely individual? Or both? How do withdraws from community/daily society affect our experience of reality?
4. If we can’t do anything to bring these states about on our own, can states such as depression and despair be a precursor to such experiences? Do states of severe illness and near death experiences create these states?
   a. These are generally things that we try to avoid, but this may make us question to what extent accepting these experiences as they emerge could be part of living a fully human life. There is a term in Roman Catholic spirituality called *The Dark Night of the Soul*, that describes an extended feeling of desolation or withdrawing of a person’s sense of aliveness that must be passed through in an individual’s spiritual journey and the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard states that “despair is the worst sickness NOT to have had.”

4. How should one study or interpret these experiences? There are several approaches.
   a. Neuro-scientific or biological reductionists might say something along the lines of “these are just physiological responses to abnormal environmental stressors; the brain is trying to cope with death anxiety.”
   b. Contemplative studies has recently emerged as an interdisciplinary field of study that attempts to incorporate perspectives and methods from philosophy, neuroscience, religious studies, and psychology into their inquiry
   c. Phenomenologists (a school of philosophers) would respond to this first group and say that we need to suspend all of our theories and presuppositions to approach this phenomenon clearly and experientially
and describe the appearances as they occur to our
subjective first person perspective

Suggested Readings


