



The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

Session 9: The Energy Centers: “Our Lives Had Become Unmanageable”

Introduction: The Energy Centers are part of the false-self system, what Fr. Thomas calls our emotional programs for happiness on the unconscious level (that can't possibly work) and these are what lead to our lives becoming unmanageable. Fr. Thomas explores how working the 12-Step program, along with the divine therapy a practice of Centering Prayer offers, shows us how turning our lives over to God starts the divine action of dismantling the emotional programs so we can experience inner freedom.

The understanding of these first three energy centers—security and survival, affection and esteem, power and control—are really so basic that it would be worth taking a little time to try to grasp their implications because when we do find out that our lives are unmanageable the next question is why? And it'd be a help to know specifically what the diagnosis is. If we know the diagnosis, then we have a better chance of applying the medication or we'll go to a doctor who is suitable to apply that medication. And perhaps this is the reason why Jesus identifies himself as a physician who is come not to call the virtuous (I think he's speaking with his tongue in his cheek), but sinners to repent. Again, repent means change the false self—the homemade self—with its value system, its programs for happiness, and its overidentifications because only then can you open yourself to the values of the Gospel and experience the fruits of the Spirit and the Beatitudes and the interior freedom of the children of God.

So, in Jesus' view it seems that the first step on the spiritual journey might be put this way, “Won't you please grow up?” That is to say, to leave behind the motivation of the false self. In Christianity, motivation is everything in the sense that it's this mixed motivation that hinders our transformation, our movement into grace. And so that explains some of the severe sayings of Jesus. For instance, “if your hand scandalizes you, cut it off” or “if your eye scandalizes you, pull it out.” Well, this is obviously meant to be a wisdom instruction, not to be taken literally because it would be immoral to maim yourself. But what he means is if one of your energy centers—if your desire or craving for security, control, or approval—is as dear to you as hand or foot cut it off because you can't go into life—into eternal life—with this misguided chunk of values or drives with their consequent frustrations and the

afflictive emotions that then go off, and they're reinforcement of the whole process by just going through it again. In other words, we must not reincarnate into our programs every time we have a frustration but oppose them head on.

And this is the basic focus, it seemed to me, of any practice for daily life or any practice to bring into our daily activity the fruits of our prayer in the inner room—the private room with the door closed in which we're experiencing the presence of the Father and the divine therapy. The divine therapy will bring us step-by-step to the kind of self-knowledge that's expressed as unmanageable in AA language, but I venture to say at an ever-increasing level of what that means. In other words, an ever-increasing humility which is a capacity to accept the truth about ourselves, God, and everybody else.

So, what Jesus then proposes is to dismantle the programs for happiness. Everyone is entitled and needs some security, some approval, some inner freedom. But the true security is in God's protection. The true love is in the experience of the Father's love, and the true control, or freedom, is the inner freedom of not being dominated by the emotional programs and being free to follow God's will, which is the call to manifest his goodness and tenderness in our lives where we are, to those we love, et cetera.

Let me just read to you a few passages here from this interesting book. It's called *The Soul of Sponsorship*. And it's the friendship between Bill W and Father Ed Dowling who was a Jesuit who inspired and who mentored Bill W at certain points without unduly influencing him, I'm sure, but who gave him a lot to think about. But Bill's experience exactly exemplifies what I'm talking about. Now, this is a man who's already been in AA and experienced some success in the 12 steps, but in 1944 he fell into a depression which lasted until 1955. What does he say about this? Why this depression?

To one old-timer he wrote: "Many in recovery were going through the same difficulties with depression." So, it was not just a personal experience.

To Ollie, suffering from depression, Bill wrote in a letter in '56, "I suppose about half the old-timers have neurotic hangovers of one sort or another. Certainly, I can number myself among them."

To another, Harry James, he wrote, "Your personality pattern is ever so much like mine. Maybe we will find how the 12 steps can work in depth." Maybe we can find how the 12 steps can work in depth. That suggests to me that they weren't working in depth yet. What would help them work in depth? The 11th step. That's my suggestion anyway.

Bill continues in a letter to another guy, "Believe me, I know what you have suffered and share your joy in getting well. Among older AAs, there's a great deal of this nervous breakdown business. I certainly share your view that glandular (unclear?) health plays a part in many of them. I also believe that the withdrawal of alcohol is likely to accentuate the neuroses in many of us. Our neurosis may break out in a very aggravated form after a few years of sobriety." So, his personal experience, though he's the founder of AA, one of them,

is that there's a lot of problems that are not met by AA, at least as it was constituted at that period.

In 1958 in the Grapevine, the AA journal, he writes, "I asked myself, why can't the 12 steps work to release me from this unbearable depression?" Good questions for some dialogue here. "Suddenly I realized, what the answer might be. My basic flaw had always been"—here it comes—"dependence on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and confidence. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionistic dreams and specifications,"—his number on the Enneagram—"I fought for them and when defeat came, so did my depression." The more we fight for those things, the more we lose it, the more you reinforce the unconscious energy that is put in those programs.

What Jesus has done in his Gospel is to try to make conscious the problem. When you try to change your life or direction, it doesn't work. Why? Because the real problem is in the unconscious, and that's where the energy is, and that's what has to be faced, and the programs have to be dismantled there, and there's no way to get there except through deep meditation, contemplation, the dark nights, and the experience of life in the context of the divine therapy. That is, in the context that God is working on us, not only in the private room, but throughout the totality of our life, to bring to our awareness our problems. So that the least kind of upsetting emotion—someone steps on your toe—is not a sign that there's a problem with other people. There may be, certainly probably is. You've got a problem, and however they change will not solve it.

So, you have an unbearable person at work and an unbearable person in the monastery, on the teaching staff, your parents, your relatives are always fighting. Even at the gravesite they're fighting over the inheritance. A priest goes off the deep end, a minister embezzles this. Why be surprised? Each of us is capable of all those things as long as you've got any one of those programs in the unconscious that has not been totally dismantled. Then you experience what true security is, then you can be interiorly free, then you can have the approval and esteem that is appropriate. It's the fantastic demand for these things that is the problem, the exaggerated demand. Each of them are stepping stones to the experience of God. When they're exaggerated, they become substitutes for God, you're into idolatry, and hence all the difficulties that occur when hiding from God in the woods.

But it was fascinating to me to read those problems that were occurring in AA, and I can just share what it says to me. What it says is that AA addresses the major conscious problem of the false-self system, manifested in obvious symptoms of "life is unmanageable." When you become sober, to your great credit, you have achieved a level of virtue or self-control on the conscious level which is an enormous achievement, but you have not touched yet the emotional investment in the programs for happiness on the unconscious level. And so, in daily life the basic reality of (thinking psychologically now), always the basic reality is God's presence. You have the basic goodness of life covered over by layers and layers of projects for happiness that can't work but which we're highly invested in and can't even imagine losing, even to the point of repressing into the unconscious our attachment for them. So, we're not even aware that they exist, at least not in that intensity.

And so, here comes an incident in daily life. We set out, let us say, to do some service for somebody. Okay? We're going to, you know, at a party among friends, or maybe for the homeless, to provide meals or something. And all of a sudden from nowhere, up comes this feeling of annoyance. Somebody has changed the pots that we had laid out from one place to another, and that mixes up our plan of serving the soup, and so on. And a feeling of anger. Well, sure enough, who did this? It was someone we didn't like anyway. And so, the commentary goes off. "Surely, they could find somebody else better to serve the soup than this person. I think I'll speak to the head honcho here and see if I can get this person fired. We no longer need your services." So now this person is in a series of false-self feelings and commentaries and is gradually working herself into a binge. If one other thing happens that out of, off center here, she'll probably going into a rage and stamp off and decide never to serve in this kitchen again. It could happen. Could be any incident like that, even in the best of charitable operations. Off goes an afflictive emotion.

Now, the emotions are friends. They're very valuable things and one of the things they teach us is what our value system really is. If we're upset, it always means that something we believe has to be a certain way has been either challenged or stepped upon or rejected. And since with us, that is something very deeply personal, it doesn't occur to us to ask the question, where is that feeling coming from? What is frustrated? These are the questions that arise with the sensitivity to our true self that is being engaged in Centering Prayer or any serious process of meditation.

If we had a practice that deliberately affirms our letting go and rejecting the program methodically, step by step, we would begin to change and loosen up the energy, or at least the amount of energy that is supporting those systems. But here is where the divine therapy becomes more profound, and that is that God then sends into our lives certain emotional or spiritual privations that enable us to see how the false self is at work in our religious or spiritual path or, I venture to say, in our 12-step program. And it's the divine action that heals the unconscious. We can't do it. We don't even know it's there. It's the Spirit that casts this penetrating light that helps us to see that all our efforts for virtue or sobriety are not going to work under our own strength. Hence, we have to turn our life over totally to the higher power. And the more you're aware of your weakness and fragility and the domination and intensity of these unconscious desires and cravings, the more honestly, thoroughly, completely you turn yourself over to the higher power and God will heal you.

He will not heal the false self because the only cure for it is death. The story of Lazarus in St. John (John 11) is a parable of Christian awakening. When he got very sick the sisters sent a note to Jesus saying Lazarus your dear friend is ill. Jesus remained exactly where he was. Imagine what Lazarus thought. Here was Jesus, had healed a lot of other people, he did not come. And he died and, according to the text, corruption had set in. He arrived four days later. The spiritual meaning is God doesn't want to heal the false self. The only cure is its death. Then comes resurrection of the true self, and next we see Lazarus at the banquet, and Simon and the lepers help a symbol of a celebration of the divine nuptials and souls that have finally been freed from the straitjacket of the homemade self, from the values that

are basically infantile that we still carry with us, whether we know it or not, into adult life and into our decision making.

Take a couple of other examples here, for the moment. Here's someone who's been brought up in an orphanage. At the deepest level, they want love. They want affection. They want parental affection. So, they hear about a community that's family-like, like religious life, so they think this will be the solution. So, they enter into religious life with perhaps a real vocation, but with the hidden motive of finding there the family they never had. Religious life isn't that kind of family. No one is going to take you on their lap and pat you and so on, change your diapers. It's unreal, and so they either leave or they cause the community no end of trouble if they stay because they never will find what they're looking for unless they're on the spiritual journey and are enlightened to see what their dynamics of their unconscious really are.

Many marriages, people enter them hoping to find the mother they never had or to continue the mother they always had or to find, in the case of women, the father who never was what he should have been. This marriage isn't going to work. As soon as the spouse finds out you married them because you wanted a daddy, well, that's not what marriage is all about.

So, these are just examples of how serious this is. It's more serious in leadership roles. You've seen these dictators; this is the power center gone wild. They translate that into serving the people or in some great ideal national socialism. But in actual fact, these are the most desperately sick people there are, and they do incredible damage on others.

Spiritual teachers, spiritual directors, who haven't been through the night of sense which brings the false self to an end, will squabble over their candidates. You may yourself have experienced some of the little footwork in regard to who's sponsor you felt may be hurt if the one you were sponsoring chooses someone else. "Well, what was the matter with me?" That's the first thought, at least for some people, maybe not in this venerable community gathering.

I've certainly seen it happen in religious life. Or some people get into a religious organization, and they did wonders when they were climbing the corporate ladder and they've given all that up. They never want to see another advertisement, but what they haven't given up is the false self itself. The false self is extremely subtle. You can change your clothes, your hairdo, your address, your name, everything, as long as you don't try to change *it*. And so, the guy who was climbing the corporate ladder, unless he goes through the purification process of the inner room with its accompanying dark nights, is going to start climbing the ecclesiastical ladder and soon you're asking, "What's the matter with me? I was so successful outside; I should be abbot here. Or bishop, or archbishop, or the pope for that matter." The false self has no boundaries.

And so, all the programs are unlimited. That's why they're unreal and cannot possibly work. You must know people who are under the influence of the control center. They may not know it. They want to control everything, even what you eat at a restaurant, everything

that you have to pack in order to go on your trip. They have to take care of all the accounts. They have to be the final word about everything that happens. And so, everybody has to adjust to them. If they don't, then these people go into a tizzy. "Nobody loves me. People don't respect me." No one is going to respect someone who wants unlimited power over you, and so this is another problem.

In a marriage, here's some real difficulties for you, I mean, should a wife put up with a dominating husband? Should she, for the sake of the children, agree to be oppressed for the next 20 years and so on by this individual? Hard decisions. I don't know what the answer is but sometimes, as a result of Centering Prayer, I've noticed that women begin to feel their own inner freedom, authenticity, and they no longer agree to be stepped on or trampled like a doormat anymore. The husband doesn't know what to do with it. He married someone who was a doormat or that's what he wanted. Now she's become self-actuating. He doesn't know what to do with that. It could end in a divorce, and maybe it should. Hopefully, if both parents get interested—and I think this is what marriage could be the most marvelous way of perfection there is, if both spouses were on the journey, and both were willing to help each other work through the pain and humility and the embarrassment of revealing their false selves to each other, and patiently guiding, helping, each other over the rough spots. To me, it's a great way of perfection, not to mention what this would do for the children. The only way you can ever teach the spiritual journey to a child, I think, is if the parents really love each other and prove it. Then the emotions of the child are going to be substantially healthier. If the parents are always fighting, at odds, if the emotional projections are tension, aggravation, the child picks this up on the emotional level, feels insecure. They have to find processes to feel secure. They're out on the street finding a peer group, somebody who understands them, and all the rest of the unfortunate things that can happen to young children as they enter into adult life, can happen.

Take the sexual energy, just as valuable as the anger of energy...anger of energy is supposed to enable us to pursue the difficult good and nothing is more difficult than the spiritual journey when you have the false self to deal with. So, you need this energy, but it was not intended to hit people over the head with a two-by-four. It's meant to be transmuted into the kind of energy that Jesus calls gentleness, meekness. Meekness as a fruit of the spirit is no energy for outbursts of anger or revenge. It just is dissipated by the experience of God's goodness. So, the sexual energy is that power that enables us to relate to others, to have a certain warmth in relationships, but it has to be integrated into the whole personality, and for some people it becomes a tool to express power or the need for security. So, some people go from one liaison to another, hoping to be affirmed because inside they're not a person and they're not an entity and this is the only way they think they can get one. It will not happen that way. So, we were looking at Bill W's experience of the false self, active in his life even after his sobriety. So, sobriety isn't going to heal everything, that's for sure.