Series: **Ecospirituality and Interbeing**

2. The Human and Animal Contemplatives

An exploration of contemplation as shared presence, shaped by human and animal life within a living world.

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Introduction:

Why speak of contemplation beyond the human?

The word contemplation has travelled a long way. It has moved from monasteries into psychology, from religious practice into everyday language, from silence into strategy. Along the way, it has narrowed as much as it has expanded. What once named a way of attending has come to suggest something deliberately undertaken, cultivated, and owned – an inward activity set apart from ordinary life.

The article series *"Ecospirituality and Interbeing"* explores how spiritual outlooks, practices, and understanding, as well and everyday tenderness can reshape our relationship with the wider web of reality to which we belong. It weaves Christian and interfaith wisdom into a shift of consciousness.

This second episode of the series, The Human and Animal Contemplatives, turns attention outward and alongside nature. It asks what changes when contemplation is no longer assumed to belong to humans alone. It asks how accepting animals' own presence may quietly re-form humility, kinship, and the way we share a world already alive with awareness.

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Yet this human-centred framing is historically recent. For much of our species' story, attentiveness was not a specialised activity but a condition of survival. To be alive was already to be listening, sensing, waiting. Long before contemplation became a word, it was a stance, an openness, a quiet readiness.

In recent years, environmental thought has begun to recover something of this older intuition. The language of interbeing, kinship, and more-than-human life gestures toward a reality in which humans are not the sole bearers of meaning or awareness. Still, even here, contemplation often remains implicitly anthropocentric. We ask how humans might contemplate nature, rather than whether contemplation itself might be wider than the human frame.

We begin with a modest proposal: that what we call contemplation may not be an exclusively human achievement, nor even primarily a spiritual one. It may be a mode of presence that life itself knows, in diverse forms, long before it is named or cultivated.

To say this is not to claim that animals practise spirituality, or that human contemplative traditions are redundant. It is to question whether our categories are sometimes too small for the reality they attempt to de-

scribe. Animals do not reflect on their experience in the way humans do. They do not seek insight or transcendence. And yet, when one watches an animal at rest – alert, unhurried, unselfconscious – it is difficult to deny that something whole is occurring.

Scientific caution rightly restrains us from attributing interior states we cannot verify. But caution need not collapse into dismissal. There is a difference between refusing to speculate and refusing to notice. Contemporary ethology, neuroscience, and ecology increasingly point to forms of animal presence that are neither mechanical nor merely reactive. They suggest lives lived from within, even if that interiority does not resemble our own.

The question, then, is not whether animals contemplate as humans do, but whether human contemplation might be a particular inflection of a more widespread phenomenon – a way of returning, with self-awareness, to a mode of presence that life already inhabits.

Such a question has consequences. It unsettles human-centric spiritual exceptionalism. It invites humility into environmental ethics. It asks whether the deepest ecological crisis may not only be one of behaviour or policy, but of attention – how humans inhabit the world, and how they imagine themselves within the wider community of life.

Let us stay with this question patiently. We will need careful observation at first, borrowing language from science and philosophy where it helps us see more clearly. But there are points at which explanation can only take us so far. At those edges, attention must do what concepts cannot – remain present without rushing to closure. Because when we speak of contemplation beyond the human, we are not merely extending a concept. We are standing at the edge of our own habits of thought, learning how to look without immediately reaching for possession.

There are moments when a human pauses, unoccupied, and something in them quietens without instruction. Nearby, an animal stands or rests, not pausing because it has decided to, but because this is how life sometimes holds itself.

Nothing announces these moments as significant. They do not ask to be framed or compared. They do not invite admiration.

They simply occur.

And in their quiet, they raise a question that is less about definition than about orientation: whether contemplation is something humans invent – or something they occasionally remember how to share.

1. What we mean by contemplation – presence before reflection

Before going further, it helps to steady our language. Contemplation is often taken to mean a refined form of thinking, or an inward practice set apart from ordinary perception. Yet across psychology, philosophy, and long-standing spiritual traditions, the word points less to thought itself than to a particular quality of attention – one that remains with experience before it is organised, evaluated, or turned into story.

Research on attention distinguishes between focused, goal-directed awareness and more open, receptive modes. The latter involve fewer rapid shifts, reduced self-referential processing, and a greater sensitivity to sensory and bodily signals. Phenomenologists have described similar states as pre-reflective awareness – experience before it is named, judged, or folded into narrative. These descriptions vary, but they converge on a simple insight: awareness does not always arrive already shaped as thought.

In contemplative practice, this distinction becomes experiential rather than theoretical. Attention learns how to remain with what is present without immediately organising it around preference, memory, or outcome. This does not eliminate thought. It changes the role thought plays. Instead of directing experience, thought becomes one event among others.

Such states are often quieter than expected. There is no necessary sense of insight or depth. What changes first is pace. Perception slows enough to register details that are usually passed over – posture, breath, ambient sound, the simple fact of being situated somewhere rather than elsewhere.

From this perspective, contemplation appears less as a specialised skill and more as a redistribution of attention. It involves fewer internal demands and a greater availability to what is already occurring. This helps explain why contemplative states can feel familiar even on first encounter. They do not introduce something new so much

as uncover something overlooked.

Crucially, this mode of awareness does not require reflexive self-observation. One does not need to watch oneself being aware. In fact, such watching often pulls attention back into commentary. Contemplative presence rests closer to sensation than to interpretation. It remains alert without becoming self-conscious.

At this point, the boundary between description and experience begins to blur. The language that served us well enough here, a few paragraphs earlier, now starts to feel a bit heavy.

Attention settles. The body is here before any thought about the body arises. Breathing continues without instruction. Sounds arrive without being sorted or named. Nothing needs to be held together by effort.

Awareness does not lean forward toward meaning. It waits without waiting for anything in particular. There is a sense of being present that does not look back at itself to confirm its presence. Experience unfolds without asking what it is for. One simply finds oneself here.

And that, perhaps, is the simplest place from which everything else can begin.

2. Animal presence and the discipline of not knowing

Let us borrow, briefly and carefully, the language of observation again. When humans attend to animals, we do so with habits of interpretation shaped by our own interior life. We notice intention, meaning, and response through categories learned from self-awareness. Contemporary animal research has learned to slow this impulse, cultivating a form of attentiveness that stays close to what can be observed while remaining wary of premature conclusions.

This restraint has sharpened, rather than diminished, what can be seen. Animals demonstrate memory, social attunement, responsiveness to subtle environmental cues, and extended periods of stillness that are neither sleep nor distraction. Field stud-

ies repeatedly note moments when animals pause in ways that appear settled, alert, and unhurried. These moments are not framed by effort or decision. They arise as part of ordinary life.

Neuroscience offers some cautious vocabulary here. Many animals appear to move fluidly between states of rest and readiness, regulated through balanced autonomic functioning rather than through sustained cognitive control. Attention remains distributed rather than narrowly focused. The body is neither braced nor withdrawn. Sensitivity persists without agitation.

What remains inaccessible is the animal's own point of view. Researchers increasingly acknowledge this limit, not as a problem to be solved, but as a boundary to be respected. To insist on crossing it would be to replace attentiveness with appropriation.

From a contemplative angle, this boundary carries its own instruction. Animals invite observation without commentary. Their presence does not seek interpretation. It does not ask to be translated into human categories of awareness or spirituality. Something complete is already taking place.

A bird stands at the water's edge for a long while. Its posture is stable. Its head moves slightly, then becomes still again. The world arrives as sound, vibration, movement, light. There is no sign of withdrawal from this field, nor of reflection upon it. Life seems to be meeting itself directly.

This manner of presence unsettles human habits of thought. We are accustomed to awareness that refers back to itself, checking its own state, assigning significance. Animal presence appears to unfold without this inward loop. Experience does not fold back into explanation. It remains open, responsive, sufficient.

Language grows tentative here, and that tentativeness matters. The point is not to elevate animal life into a romantic ideal, nor to strip it down into mechanism. It is to stay close to what can be noticed without forcing it into a familiar frame.

At some point, description has done enough.

The animal remains.

There is no announcement of stillness. No moment of arrival. The body stands or rests as it is. Muscles hold without strain. Breath moves without direction. The surrounding world does not become an object of attention; it is simply what is happening.

Nothing in this presence points back to itself. Nothing asks to be understood.

Time does not gather into sequence. It loosens. Sound passes through. Light shifts. A scent appears, fades. The body waits without waiting for anything.

The animal does not instruct. It offers something quieter – a reminder that awareness can rest without owning what it rests upon, and that presence does not require a witness to itself in order to be whole.

Nearby, a human stands or watches, aware of trying not to intrude. Attention softens. The need to explain loosens its grip.

Nothing has been learned in the usual sense, and nothing has been taken away.

Yet something has shifted. Awareness lingers where interpretation pauses, and for a moment, it becomes possible to remain with what is given, without asking it to become anything else.

3. The human return – from self-consciousness to participation

Let us remain with presence, now from within human experience. Like other animals, humans sense, perceive, and respond within a living field of sound, movement, and touch. Breath adjusts, posture shifts, attention turns. Alongside this immediacy, human awareness carries an added capacity: experience is accompanied by memory, anticipation, and the ability to notice itself unfolding.

Psychology describes this layering in terms such as metacognition and narrative identity. These processes allow humans to learn, reflect, and imagine beyond the present moment. At the same time, they draw attention away from immediacy. Awareness becomes busy with evaluation and rehearsal. Even when the body pauses, the mind often continues to move.

From this angle, contemplative practice appears as a rebalancing rather than a refinement. It offers ways of loosening the constant self-referencing loop so that attention can settle more fully into sensation, breath, and embodied presence. Research on meditation and related practices consistently

shows shifts toward calmer autonomic regulation and reduced mental rumination. Attention becomes less driven, more receptive. Thought continues to arise, but it no longer organises the whole field.

What distinguishes human presence from animal presence is therefore not depth or intensity, but direction. Animals do not need to return to awareness; they inhabit it continuously in forms shaped by their bodies and environments. Humans, by contrast, tend to move away and back again. Presence, for us, often involves remembering how to arrive where we already are.

This return rarely announces itself. It does not depend on insight or emotional intensity. More often it is marked by a subtle change in tone: urgency softens, perception widens, the need to comment on experience eases. Awareness shifts from managing life to participating in it.

Here, animals offer neither a model to imitate nor an ideal to recover. They remind us that presence does not require constant self-observation. Human contemplation does not dissolve self-awareness; it learns how to carry it lightly. Thought becomes part of the landscape rather than its organising centre.

As attention settles, effort gives way to something quieter. The body registers its own weight. Breathing resumes its ordinary rhythm. Perception opens without searching.

One becomes aware of being situated – on the ground, among other lives, within weather and sound. Boundaries remain, but they no longer dominate attention. The sense of separation loosens through familiarity rather than through fusion.

A person sits. Nothing in particular needs to happen. Sensation comes and goes. Thought moves through the field of awareness without insisting on centre stage.

Nearby, an animal pauses, then settles.

For a moment, difference recedes without disappearing. Distinct forms of awareness share the same unfolding scene, not by merging, but by resting within it.

The human does not abandon self-awareness. Its urgency eases.

Presence no longer feels like something to be achieved. It becomes something that can be joined.

And in that joining, the long labour of return – again and again, without drama – begins to feel less like a task and more like a quiet belonging that had been waiting for attention to arrive.

4. Kinship, humility, and ecological consequence

As presence widens, it begins to carry consequence. Attention that has learned how to rest without grasping does not remain confined to interior life. It alters how humans stand among other beings, how they approach land, animals, and the shared conditions of life. Without announcing itself as ethics, contemplation begins to reshape posture – how one listens, how one takes, how one leaves room.

Across cultures and religious traditions, this sensibility has surfaced repeatedly, often at the edges rather than the centres of doctrine. Many faiths have preserved, alongside more anthropocentric strands, an awareness that the human is neither solitary nor unconditionally supreme.

Within Jewish tradition, the land is not a neutral backdrop but a covenantal partner, subject to rest and restraint. The sabbath of the land interrupts endless use and reminds its inhabitants that productivity does not exhaust meaning.

In the teaching of Jesus, attention to the natural world becomes a way of loosening human anxiety and reordering desire. Birds and grasses are named not as moral examples to be copied, but as lives already held within divine care, free from the burden of self-justification. Their existence does not depend on accumulation or foresight. They are noticed, valued, and sustained as they are. This way of seeing runs quietly through later Christian monastic and Franciscan currents, where creation is approached as kin rather than resource, addressed in familial language that resists ownership.

In Islamic teaching, the natural world is understood as a community of creatures entrusted to human care rather than placed at human disposal. The Qur’an repeatedly describes animals, plants, and even mountains

as signs that disclose divine order and generosity, each praising God in its own manner. Human beings are named as stewards within this living order, accountable for how they attend to what has been entrusted to them.

Within Sufi reflection, this attentiveness deepens into intimacy. Creation is encountered as continuously responsive to the divine presence, alive with remembrance beyond human speech. The contemplative does not stand over the world as interpreter, but listens within it, learning to recognise praise already underway in wind, water, and living bodies. Awareness ripens into courtesy toward all that exists.

In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the interdependence of all life is woven into the structure of reality itself. Insight into this interrelation shapes ethical restraint and compassion, not as imposed duties, but as natural responses to seeing more clearly how lives are bound together.These perspectives differ profoundly in theology and practice. What they share is a refusal to isolate human awareness from the wider field of life. Contemplation, in these settings, does not terminate in private insight. It ripens into relationship.

This is where humility becomes more than a virtue. It becomes a perceptual shift. To recognise that animals inhabit forms of presence without reference to human meaning loosens the assumption that awareness exists primarily for human use. To sense that one's own contemplative

depth arises within a shared ecology of life tempers spiritual ambition.

Environmental ethics often falter when they rely solely on urgency or fear. They exhaust attention rather than renew it. A contemplative orientation offers a different ground. Care emerges less from alarm than from familiarity. What is known intimately is approached with restraint. What is recognised as kin is treated with patience.

Such an orientation does not prescribe policy. It shapes posture. It encourages ways of living that make room for other rhythms – seasonal, animal, ecological – without demanding that they justify themselves in human terms. It fosters practices of limits: taking less, waiting longer, leaving space.

At this point, argument grows thin again.

The language of obligation reaches its edge. What remains persuasive is not instruction, but atmosphere.

A human walks through a landscape without claiming it. Sound, movement, and distance register without being sorted for use. Other lives move within the same field of attention, neither foreground nor backdrop.

An animal pauses. The human pauses too, not in imitation, but in recognition. Both are held by the same weather, the same ground, the same passing light. Nothing in the moment asks to be justified.

From such moments, ways of living begin to change. Not all at once. Not by instruction. But through a quiet adjustment of belonging, in which care feels less like obligation and more like fidelity to a world already alive with presence.

Conclusion - The contemplative without credentials

At some point, the need to define contemplation loosens.

What remains is a way of standing in the world that does not rush to justify itself. Attention has learned how to pause without explanation. Presence no longer feels like an achievement or a stance to be maintained. It becomes a manner of inhabiting what is already here.

Animals have accompanied this reflection without asking to be elevated or explained. They have not offered lessons so much as occasions for restraint. Their presence has quietly exposed how much human awareness labours under commentary, comparison, and urgency. In noticing them, humans begin to notice their own habits of distance.

The contemplative life, seen from this angle, does not belong to a spiritual elite. It has no credentials to defend. It does not require withdrawal from the living world. It unfolds wherever attention rests long enough for participation to replace control.

In this light, the old gospel invitation to attend to birds and grasses sounds less like reassurance and more like reorientation. These lives are not anxious about their sufficiency. They are not preoccupied with securing their place. They are simply present within a care that precedes calculation. To notice them is already to step out of a certain kind of striving.

Such noticing does not solve ecological crisis. It does something quieter and more difficult. It reshapes how humans imagine themselves among other lives. From that reshaping, choices begin to alter, not because they are commanded, but because they feel more fitting.

A person stands still. Nearby, an animal rests or moves on. Neither claims the moment. Weather passes. Light changes. The world continues to be itself. Nothing in this scene announces contemplation. And yet, something whole is taking place.

Perhaps this is where human contemplation finally belongs – not as a practice set apart from life, but as a way of re-entering it with fewer demands, greater courtesy, and a renewed capacity to stand among other beings without needing to be at the centre.

Attention settles.

And in settling, it remembers how to share a world already alive with presence.

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