

Centering Prayer

The Method

Monday, February 13, 2017

Guest writer Cynthia Bourgeault continues exploring the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer.

For nearly thirty years now, the following four guidelines have successfully introduced tens of thousands of people worldwide to Centering Prayer

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts [including body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections], return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a

Father Thomas Keating suggests praying for twenty minutes twice a day.

So are we really saying that in Centering Prayer you meditate by simply letting go of one thought after another? That can certainly be our subjective experience of the practice, and this is exactly the frustration expressed by an early practitioner. In one of the very earliest training workshops led by Keating himself, a nun tried out her first twenty-minute taste of Centering Prayer and then lamented, "Oh, Father Thomas, I'm such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes I've had ten thousand thoughts!"

"How lovely," responded Keating, without missing a beat. "Ten thousand opportunities to return to God."

This simple story captures the essence of Centering Prayer. It is quintessentially a *pathway of return* in which every time the mind is released from engagement with a specific idea or impression, we move from a smaller and more constricted consciousness into that open, diffuse awareness in which our presence to divine reality makes itself known along a whole different pathway of perception.

That's what the anonymous author of the fourteenth century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* may have had in mind when he wrote, "God can be held fast and loved by means of love, but by thought never." [2] "Love" is this author's pet word for that open, diffuse awareness which gradually allows another and deeper way of knowing to pervade one's entire being.

Out of my own three decades of experience in Centering Prayer, I believe that this "love" indeed has nothing to do with emotions or feelings in the usual sense of the word. It is rather the author's nearest equivalent term to describe what we would nowadays call *nondual perception anchored in the heart*.

And he is indeed correct in calling it “love” because the energetic bandwidth in which the heart works is *intimacy*, the capacity to perceive things from the inside by coming into sympathetic resonance with them. Imagine! Centuries ahead of his time, the author is groping for metaphors to describe an entirely different mode of perceptivity.

Gateway to Silence:

Return to God.

In Centering Prayer, the letting go of thoughts is seen as “consenting to the presence and action of God.” It carries that core sense of “Not my will but thine be done, O Lord,” the words uttered by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Recent neuroscience suggests that learning to let go of what we’re clinging to, mentally as well as emotionally, actually catalyzes some revolutionary—and evolutionary—changes in our neural wiring.

The usual explanations given for why we let go of all thoughts in Centering Prayer have to do with “making yourself empty so that you can be filled with God” or reminders that a cluttered, preoccupied mind is hardly likely to be fully present—true enough. In my own teaching, I prefer to come at it from a slightly different angle, gently but firmly insisting that one does not release a thought in order to achieve some desired result; the releasing itself is the full meaning of the prayer.

I have attempted to explain this theologically on the basis of kenosis, or “letting go,” which Saint Paul specifies in Philippians 2:5-11, as the very essence of “putting on the mind of Christ.” Each time you manage to disengage from a thought, you are doing so in solidarity with Jesus’ own kenotic stance and in the process patterning that stance more and more deeply into your being until it eventually becomes your default response to all life’s situations.

Have you ever watched really closely what happens when you release a thought? Yes, in most cases more thoughts come rushing back in. But notice how there is a slight gap between them; if only for a nanosecond, there occurs a moment when you are present and alert, but in which your attention is focused on no particular thing. You are briefly in a state of *objectless awareness*.

This fleeting taste, in the gap between thoughts, of a whole different bandwidth of consciousness is commented on extensively in the Eastern meditation traditions and in some small pockets of inner work in the Western esoteric tradition. If you stay with these moments of objectless spaciousness, they will open up a whole new approach not only to your own spiritual evolution, but also to understanding some of those more formidable masterpieces of our own Western spiritual tradition, such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. **Gateway to Silence: Return to God.**

Practice: Examen of Consciousness

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus or Jesuits, proposed a daily exercise which he called the Examen of Consciousness or the Daily Examen—a simple exercise in discernment. Rather than focusing on what went right or wrong, how you failed or succeeded throughout the day, this exercise encourages you to reflect on moments when you were aware of God—when you were present to Love—and those times when you were forgetful or distracted.

Center yourself in silence and an awareness of God's presence.

Ask God to help you walk through your day. Recall the events of the day, the people you met, etc. day with an open spirit.

Notice the emotions, sensations, and thoughts that arise as you review recent events. You may wish to journal about these.

Let your attention settle on one of these instances and look for God's presence within it, whether you were aware at the time or not.

Pray from this memory and within this present moment.

Release the day with gratitude and rest in God's love.

Gateway to Silence (This can be used as a mantra to be repeated over and over to quiet and center yourself.)

Be the change you wish to see in the world. —Gandhi

Reference:

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations* (CAC: 2016), 103.

Basic, Daily Gratefulness Practice



Just because a practice is simple does not mean it has simple results.

If, each day, we could engage in a “basic daily gratefulness practice,” it would be enough to positively impact our lives and the world around us. Just because a practice is simple does not mean it has simple results. Even though you might choose to try this practice in a more formal way at the same time each day, it can be done anytime, anywhere, and as often as you want.

Stop whatever you are doing and devote your full attention to being still or slowing down. Become conscious of your breath breathing itself.

If it helps, you can close your eyes. Follow a complete inhale-exhale cycle with your awareness. Bring your attention to the gift of the present moment and allow yourself to soften into it...

Look at what life is offering you right now. Become awake to your surroundings. Recognize opportunities available to you. Consider the invitation to feel grateful for what you already have and what is already true in your life. Ask yourself one of these questions:

- What am I grateful for right now? or What can I be grateful for right now?
- What opportunity is life presenting me, for which I can be grateful?

Your answers do not have to be grand or complicated. Some of the most meaningful things to acknowledge are those we commonly take for granted. Examples include: our senses, weather, the ability to learn, love or grow, a pet, food, a friend, our bodies, or a part of nature.

Try thinking of each of these things as a gift as opposed to a given. We can elevate aspects of our lives – especially the most routine and common – by receiving them with the same kind of gratitude that we would receive an unexpected gift, taking nothing for granted.