

CENTERING PRAYER: THE VERY BASICS

Most faith traditions have some form of meditation or contemplation. Virtually all methods of meditation have a goal of expanding, or deepening, the consciousness of the practitioner. The details vary. The Contemplative Society focuses on Centering Prayer, a surrender method of meditation, or contemplative prayer, that reaches back to the early days of Christianity.

In her book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, Cynthia Bourgeault writes that even though we can perhaps find ways to stop “outer noise” it is much more difficult to still the “inner noise”(p.5). She says Centering Prayer “...is a very simple method for reconnecting us with that natural aptitude for the inner life...(p.6) which, over time, of its own accord, leads to personal self-emptying and a more unitive outer life.”

HOW TO “DO” CENTERING PRAYER:

- Find a quiet space where you are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed in body and alert in mind. Use a chair, meditation cushion or prayer rug, according to your own physical needs and preferences.
- Gently close your eyes.
- “Allow your heart to open toward that invisible but always present Origin of all that exists ” (p. 6)
- Whenever you become aware of a thought, no matter what its nature, let it go.
- Use a “sacred word”.

This is a word or short phrase that helps you to let go of thoughts. It is a reminder of your intention to remain open to the silence. Generally sacred words fall into one of two categories: “God” words/phrases such as “Abba”, “Jesu”, “Mary”, “Reality”, “Come Lord” or “state of being” words/phrases such as “love”, “peace”, “be still”. Sacred words are not used as mantras, as in constantly repeating them, but as a reminder of your intention to remain open.

- Continue this practice for 20 minutes. At the end of the time get up and go about your business, leaving the practice behind, in the same way you let go of your thoughts.
- People who are just beginning, and are particularly restless in mind and body, may find it easier to start off with shorter prayer periods, perhaps only 5 minutes per sit to start. Then after a few days extend the time to 10 minutes and so on until you are able to sit for 20 minutes. Give the practice at least 2 weeks before you decide if it is right for you.
- Two 20- minute sits per day are considered ideal.

SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON CENTERING PRAYER

Your sacred word: Some people try out a few sacred words until they settle on one that feels right. Once you start a sit using a particular word, continue using it during that sit. As much as possible let your word or phrase find you. In other words, don’t try to control this process.

Timing sits: Set a vibrating or very quiet timer of some sort to tell you when your sit is over without startling you. For those with smart phones there are some good apps available.

Starting the sit: Make sure you as comfortable as possible; sitting upright is best, but if your particular physical needs demand do what you need to do to be comfortable. Close your eyes. Some practitioners like to preface their Centering Prayer session with a very short invocation, chant or prayer that reminds them of their intention to be fully open and present to the Divine. Some like to take 2-3 deep breaths, or use some simple movements or body prayer to ground your awareness in your body. Keep in mind that Centering Prayer is never about deliberately trying to change or control your body or mind.

Physical sensations during a sit: As much as possible treat physical sensations in the same way as you do thoughts; let them go by simply and gently returning to your sacred word. If a sensation becomes unbearable gently allow yourself to return to outer awareness, make necessary adjustments, and return to your sit.

Thoughts during your sit: It is common to have thoughts of various kinds during a sit. They might involve your plans for the day, or give you some psychological insight into your behavior, or be about the nature of the Divine; you may find yourself with pleasant thoughts, or angry feelings, or notice yourself trying to create a particular mood in your practice. You may even be aware of being 'blissed out'. No matter the type or nature of thoughts and feelings the response is the same: gently return to your sacred word, which is the symbol of your "intention to consent to the presence and action of God within" (p. 24), and then let go. Do not analyze, label or judge your thoughts and feelings. Simply, gently, let them go. Over and over and over and.....

To end a sit: Many like to end a sit by bowing in place, thus stretching out their backs. Some may say a very short prayer of thanks. It is then time to return to your daily routine without dwelling on the experience of your sit.

*All quotes on these pages are from Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. (Cambridge, MASS: Cowley Press, 2004).

Richard Rohr offers a reflection on deepening one's Centering Prayer practice:

I have had many experiences of what the mystics call "dryness" in my prayer life. Like many people, when it first happened in my early journey, I thought I must be doing something wrong, which was very hard for me since I like to do everything right! With time, persistence, and helpful techniques like the ones David Frenette shares below, we come to realize that our feelings are far less important than the ever-deepening commitment we make to God through our practice.

Here are three possible ways that renewing your intention in centering prayer might take shape for you, depending on the way your contemplative prayer is developing:

- *Before the time of centering prayer*, you reflect on who or what God is for you at this time of your spiritual journey. Then, with this sense of meaning in your conscious mind, you let your sacred word come to you as a nonreflective way of consenting to this more personal sense of God's presence.
- Your reflections may show you that at this time God is a mystery whom you do not or cannot consciously know. That's not a problem for practice. As you realize or remember that God is an unknowable mystery and join this realization in your mind with your sacred word, you infuse your practice with an intention that expresses the truth of your relationship with God. Your intention becomes opening to mystery itself.
- Perhaps when you reflect on who or what God is, you find that you are spiritually dry and resistant even to opening to a mystery you no longer can conceive of. This is still not necessarily a problem when your intention is vast and nuanced. For in these situations, your intention can be to simply surrender yourself to the unknown. Remember, in centering prayer you are saying yes both to God's presence and God's action. God's action includes the purification and transformation of your idea of who God is, your felt ability to say yes to God, and sometimes even your capacity to pray. In the unknowing, the pure consent and the surrender of your ability to pray, you are brought to deep receptivity, so that the Spirit prays in you.

David Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God* (Sounds True: 2012), 13-14.