

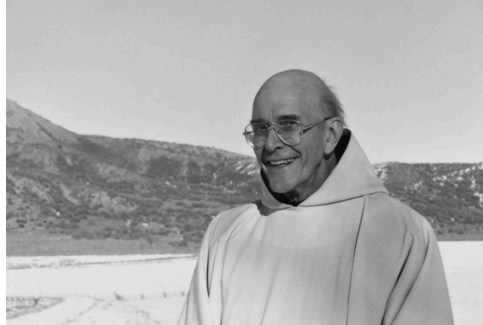
The Method of Centering Prayer

The Spiritual Journey with Fr. Thomas Keating

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The thing that you have to remember here is that centering prayer as a method is two things at the same time, and you must never forget either one. It's a relationship with God. And that's why in the first lecture that usually precedes the imparting of the method, we try to fix the centering prayer method in the Christian contemplative tradition; and more specifically, in the Lectio Divina tradition, in which it has a part *without* being identified with the four stages of Lectio. It facilitates the movement from the discursive meditation, and reflective, and visualization aspect of Lectio, to the ***Resting in God***, the movement beyond thoughts and concepts; to simply be in the presence of God and engulfed in that divine sense, whether felt or unfelt.

So this is a mistake that is easily made or a confusion: unless you firmly emphasize the relationship as prayer, then the discipline doesn't make too much sense, because it's not a mental discipline. It's not designed to fix your mind or your blood pressure or help you to grow hair or other things. It's a relationship, first and foremost, and the method is totally in the service of that relationship. So let's look at the guidelines then, from that perspective.

In this talk, we are emphasizing the method. So you could easily get stuck on, 'Well, I gotta do the method just right,' but it's always a relationship. And that means that, unlike certain other disciplines, if you don't do it correctly, it doesn't matter. It's a help if you do it correctly, but it doesn't matter because it's your intention that counts; and the relationship is with God. God sees that you're trying hard to do a nice job, the best you can, however much you're stumbling. He's not going to hold your mistakes against you. He's looking at your love, and through another person or a book, or eventually, or through the aspirations of the Holy Spirit, you will correct whatever mistakes you're doing. ***The main thing to do is to do it.*** The principal method of centering prayer really is to sit down. Now that isn't too hard for most people. Once you sit down, then the Spirit has sort of got you, especially if you're determined to sit there for the 20, 25 minutes that you have agreed upon. And if you do that every day, then your mistakes or misconceptions will gradually evaporate. Doing it is the primary discipline. But there's ways of doing it that could facilitate this sitting there. So let's look at the guidelines.

Now, the first guideline is, 'choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you.' ***Notice, please, God's presence and action.*** So we're working with a dynamic relationship. A back-and-forth, an exchange. A conversation which has moved towards ***communion*** or is moving in that direction. The second little guideline is that sitting comfortably, and with eyes closed, we settle briefly, like I'm settling in this

nice chair, breathing easily, and so on. And then, after a few moments of not doing anything, just sort of settling, pausing, maybe 10 or 15 seconds of quiet, you introduce very gently, very casually, almost informally, the sacred word that you had chosen in the first guideline, that *symbolizes the consent of your will to God's presence, and action within*. They always go together. God is not a statue. He is not a static force within us. It's a loving relationship in faith, and hence, God's Spirit can do all kinds of things and suggests all kinds of things; and he does. The third guideline is, 'when engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.' Well, this is just to say, or acknowledge the fact, that there are going to be various thoughts, feelings, sense perceptions, noise in the room, people coughing, memories, imaginations, visualizations, sort of dreaming.

All of this psychological material, you might say, is going to be flowing down the stream of consciousness as you sit there. And we say that it's inevitable, integral, and normal. So this is a terribly important point to get through our heads if we've been trained in the doctrine of distractions; that distractions somehow are harmful or interfere with your prayer. Now, if you're doing discursive meditation, and you're supposed to be thinking about something in particular, then other thoughts or distractions do interrupt your reflection in your prayer. But the centering prayer moves beyond that level of awareness, and *it's designed to disregard the ordinary thoughts or activities of our psychological day-to-day awareness*. So you're not on the level that you're usually on in discursive meditation, and hence, *we just disregard this thought or these thoughts*, which are more like noise in the street or background music at the supermarket that you put up with but pay no attention to. *But it's important not to resist these thoughts*. In other words, it's important to have a joyful attitude towards the thoughts. A friendly attitude towards the most dreadful thoughts. Not that you linger over them or act them out, but it's important that we expect them, and they're normal, and they're integral. So we receive them all with a smile, sort of an inward smile, so to speak. *A jolly attitude is recommended*. 'Here they go again.' That sort of thing. 'Ha, ha, ha.'

The reason for that is that any emotional frustration, or annoyance, or distress, or grief, is not appropriate because that is another kind of thought. Because it's emotionally charged, it's more of a hindrance to entering into interior silence — which is the proximate goal of this prayer — than any number of casual thoughts that go by. So as soon as you're annoyed, you have a second thought which is much more disturbing than the first one. So there really is great wisdom in taking for granted there's going to be lots of thoughts, and endless thoughts, and that with practice you can disregard most of them.

Now, the term 'thoughts' is a technical term in our centering prayer practice, and it's an umbrella term — we could've used another term, but this one kind of got stuck — in which any perception whatsoever is referred to; that is, inner and outer sense sensations, memories, feelings, emotions, plans, commentaries. *Any perception at all is a thought in the context of the centering prayer practice*. That means that every time you are engaged with any perception whatsoever, according to this third guideline, you ever so gently return to the sacred word. Not because the sacred word has some inherent, miraculous power of stopping the thoughts; it doesn't. And it's a mistake to use it as a bulldozer or a baseball bat to knock the various thoughts out of the ballpark. *This prayer is totally nonviolent*. And in fact, it's as effortless as possible, so that the very term 'ever so gently' means you return to the sacred word with a minimum of activity. Not only that, but this return is the only activity you initiate in the centering prayer. In other words, *you do nothing except to return to the sacred word when it's challenged by some attractive or repulsive thought that begins to take you out of the disregard of thoughts*. And out of the developing peace or interior silence that is gradually being insinuated through the Holy Spirit into the spiritual level of your being.

Now, the final guideline is very simple. At the end of the prayer period, we remain in silence for a couple of minutes. Now, when this is being done in a group, we sometimes suggest that leaders say the 'Our Father' ever so slowly so that it takes two minutes to say it. But obviously, the others don't say it with the leader because they'd get all mixed up. Because the leader, whoever he or she is, follows their own pace. But you just say it ever so slowly, and in fact, we'll give an example of what I mean when we bring you into this prayer shortly. So there are the four guidelines. Let's take just a minute to look at them a little more in particular.

Guideline One: Choosing Your Word or Allowing it to Choose You

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence, and to surrender to this dynamic divine action. ***It is a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you.*** We yield to it so that it's an opening, first of all, to the action of God. And a letting go, at least in our intention, of the obstacles to allowing God to impress upon us those attitudes, which the Spirit may wish to present. But we have to take a moment, then, to choose a word. So in any group that is just hearing this for the first time, we say, 'Well, now we're going to take a minute or two, perhaps two minutes of silence.'

I invite you to close your eyes, and I invite you to look inwardly, and to ask the Holy Spirit to suggest a sacred word of one or two syllables that you feel comfortable with, and that would express as a symbol or gesture your intention to be with God during this time, and totally open to the divine action. So we then might suggest, after they've closed their eyes, several words. Normally, we suggest one of the sacred names; of God, or Jesus or even Mary. We just say them slowly and let people sift through that choice and come up with one at the end of a minute or two. What are some examples? Well, I suppose; Lord, Jesus, Abba, father, mother, Grace, Amen, or the word "Yes," even. It could be certain words that are hallowed by tradition.

You might think of choosing one of those words from another language that might be a little more musical or that might appeal to you, especially if you know the other language. Like, for instance, Kyrie. Now, although I said we take a word of one or two syllables, I exercise a certain liberty with regard to the word myself, and if the third syllable is just one letter I don't think it will interfere with the principle too much. So Kyrie is an incredibly loaded and profound word. It's been used for centuries, and it means 'Lord.' Kyrie, okay? Or instead of Jesus, it might be Jesu, which is the Latin. Or what is perhaps even more attractive, it could be the sound that Jesus actually responded to as a child or as a man, which is Yeshua. Notice, Yeshua is kind of a more peaceful way of saying Jesus. Jesus is a little powerful, but this all depends on how comfortable you feel with the word; what is most congenial to you, what is most built into your physiognomy, you might say, at this time in your life. Because holy words get into the body after a while, and say themselves. You might like the term 'Amen' instead of yes.

Now, it has to be acknowledged that some people who come to us are in rebellion against the Christian religion or all religions, so words that we would find sacred are buzzwords for them, so they will not be attracted to Jesu, or Christe, or God, or something else. That's fine, because in choosing a word, ***it is the meaning that we invest in the word that is more important, rather than the inherent meaning of the word itself.*** So if you choose a word like peace, or its Hebrew form, shalom, as the expression of your intent to be with God, that is what makes it a sacred word. The word, then, is not sacred because of its inherent meaning, or its hallowed place in Christian tradition, but it's the meaning that you give it that makes it sacred. And that is to say, your will has made it sacred, or your intention has sacralized this particular sound as the appropriate expression of your intention. So that when it's challenged by thoughts going by, you can easily and gently return to it, ***and the word reestablishes your original***

intention just to be with God. That's all the sacred word does. It has no surprise meanings, no trick effects on your psyche, no profound stirring of the subconscious, or the unconscious. It simply means what you want it to mean.

Well now let's suppose the two or three minutes are over, and everyone has quietly come upon the word that they're going to use, it's important then to tell them, '**You must stay with that word during the whole time of this prayer,** because otherwise you'll start thinking again, 'Shall I turn to Amen instead of Amore and so on.' **So the whole thrust of the prayer is to stop thinking.** Now this doesn't mean you're not going to have thoughts, but notice this delicate distinction. We're not going to think about the thought. So you can have all the thoughts in the world go by, and they won't interfere with the prayer. It's only when you start thinking about the thoughts, feelings, that you interrupt your original intention of just being totally open to God, and that calls for some response to reaffirm your original intention and to get back to where you started.

So you can see that this practice is constantly cultivating your spiritual awareness, the spiritual level of your being, the spiritual level of the intellect, which is intuitive, and the spiritual level of the will, which is the will to God, the will to open to infinite truth, infinite love, infinite happiness. So perhaps that's a good word to sum up this first stage of learning the centering prayer, is opening, opening, opening.

Now, after a while, this opening is going to be transformed into a letting go of oneself into God. The idea is important. The Divine love is total gift of self, and this is the stream of charity that **we are being invited to immerse ourselves in, gradually, through the process of non-conceptual prayer, especially one that is as receptive as the centering prayer is.** So I've spoken now, enough I think about the sacred word, the first guideline.

Guideline Two: Sitting Comfortable with Eyes Closed

Just a few words about the second guideline, which is this: **sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within you.** We sit comfortably so that we won't have to think about how uncomfortable the body is. Because all forms of thought or impressions we're trying to let go during this prayer. Secondly, we close our eyes to let go of our external environment, and also of our interior world that may be thinking about this or that when we sit down. So closing the eyes is also closing the inner eyes to whatever is going on in our interior world. **We don't cease to bond with those we may be with.** Actually, this whole movement implies an **immersing ourselves in the redemptive attitude** of Jesus, into the Paschal mystery, which is sharing the pain, and the joy, and the needs of the world, so that our prayer is an implicit prayer for everything God wills, an implicit prayer for everybody without mentioning any names.

There's another time when we may be called to pray specifically for certain events, but since we only ask for half an hour or so twice a day, you have the whole 23 hours of the rest of the day to pray as much as you like for other people, or do whatever you like. Or do other forms of prayer. This centering prayer does not bring other forms of prayer to an end, but it does put them into a new perspective, a deeper meaning, and one sees them from a kind of unified perspective, in which they're all moving, each in their own way towards this deeper awareness of the divine presence, both in ourselves, and everyone else, and throughout the cosmos.

So having chosen the sacred word, we don't change it. Now, it's true the first few days you might try one other word, but it's important to settle on one and to stick to it, because eventually it gets sewn into the psyche ever deeper, and deeper, and deeper. Now let's look at the third one, which is perhaps the most crucial one for most of us.

Guideline Three: Gently Return Attention back to the Sacred Word

When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word. We said that thoughts are inevitable. We said they were integral. In other words, they're a part of the prayer. And as far as we can tell from our present level of experience, they're integral because your thoughts may be coming from the unconscious, and may be part of the process of healing that I'll come to later in my next lecture. *The Spirit works as a kind of divine therapist. And one of the ways that he heals the unconscious is by allowing its feelings and its thoughts to surface, especially during prayer,* and then later, sometimes outside the time of prayer. But it is precisely the programs in the unconscious — or what psychology calls the dynamics of the unconscious — that hinder the free flow of grace, and hence need to be addressed by the Spirit, brought to our attention, and we have to let go of them both in our prayer, and the consequences of them in daily life. So, you can see right away that the centering prayer involves the whole of life, and the activity by which we bring its fruits into daily life, is almost as important a factor in the project as the actual time that we faithfully spend each day in the prayer itself. *Thoughts are a normal part of centering prayer, yet not thinking about them or getting involved with them; merely disregard them. As I already mentioned, a jolly attitude helps very much.*

So it works somewhat like this. Suppose you were in deep conversation with someone you loved, and you're high up in an apartment house, and the windows are open, and the traffic is going by, and the noise you can't stop. But all of a sudden, there's a crash in the street, and the decibels go up, and you naturally feel a curiosity to go see what happens. This is what happens when interesting thoughts or boats come down the stream of consciousness. We want to look at them, or 'What are we going to have for supper?' And so on. And then, as your mind begins to look at this thing, or, let us say the young man begins to go to the window to see what the accident was, he suddenly remembers, 'Oh, what am I doing? I'm in this deep, cheek-to-jowl conversation, heart-to-heart conversation. I'm not interested in this. It's not a time to go look and see what's happening outside, or to judge what we're really going to have for dinner.' So you want to reinforce, or reaffirm the original tête-à-tête that you were having. So what would you do? You would turn your eyes back towards the beloved, your friend, as a gesture of renewing the conversation from where it got somewhat disturbed. Or you might say, 'Excuse me.'

Or you might say, 'As I was saying.' Well, that's what the sacred word does for you. It's when you are lifted out of your basic intention, and start watching thoughts that you're attached to or have an aversion to, that you need to do something to return to the sacred word. But if the thoughts are just going by like noise in the supermarket, and you're not paying any attention to it, you're just dimly aware that it's happening, then there isn't a necessity to go back to the sacred word. Because *you're already at the place that the sacred word is meant to facilitate your reaching, which is the abiding, turning, and resting in the presence of God within you at the deepest level.*

Guideline Four: Abide in Silence - Stillness for a Few Minutes

Now, the final guideline is very simple. *At the end of the prayer period, we remain in silence for a couple of minutes.*

Summary

So let me just sum up very briefly in this modest diagram here what I'm trying to say. That supposes that this is our ordinary awareness, the stream of consciousness that we are experiencing during the time of prayer. And here are a few boats that are going by; boats representing thoughts, feelings, images, and so on. And there's usually a fleet of them. Sometimes the whole United States Navy seems to be going down, with all the guns banging. So whatever your experience, you're having thoughts going by at this level. At a deeper level... Let's call this the ordinary level of

our awareness, and let's call this the spiritual level of our awareness, which you're really not aware of most of the time except at the peak experience, or when life, or tragedy, or something brings you to that place.

So we're mostly unaware of what might be called the river itself, on which all our thoughts and faculties are resting. So we're kind of absorbed, or dominated, in our ordinary psychological life, by the objects of events and people, and our emotional reactions to them. The purpose then, of the centering prayer, is to move from this level to this level. And indeed, not to stop there — because the human being has greater depths than that — ***but to move even deeper, to the level of the true self, which is our participation in the divine life, and the divine presence itself as the source of our being at every level.*** And it's accessing or awakening our awareness to this presence that is the ultimate goal of contemplative prayer or centering prayer.

But to reach it, we have to pass through the spiritual level, and to awaken the true self, and whatever of God's ultimate divine presence he may want to share with us, which is a whole new life, which is a transformed life. And which it seems to be is what the gospel invites us to, especially in St. John, where Jesus speaks of inviting us into the same union and unity that he experiences with the father in the Holy Spirit. Hence, this is so important, again, from the perspective of prayer as a relationship.

Now, there are lots of prayers at this level: our vocal prayers, our reflections, our divine office, and the sacraments. But each of these things, especially the sacraments, has this mystical depth, or this mystagogic teaching, which helps us to understand the symbols of the church from this level, in which they are transformed, and their meaning becomes immensely more powerful, more attractive, and more personal, as well as at the same time, bonding us with everyone else who is having a similar experience in grace. And that, we might say that the centering prayer is primarily involved in awakening this particular level, as a preparation for going deeper still, which is the work of the various stages of contemplative prayer and mystical life.