

I. Introduction

Centering Prayer is one of the meditative practices that helps us quiet the outer layers of human consciousness

- (body-consciousness, ego-consciousness)
- It helps us quiet ourselves into our deepest, truest, and most real layer of consciousness...
- Spirit-consciousness, Divine-Union consciousness, One-With-God consciousness

It is a practice beyond thought or feeling, so it's not about "getting something" from the practice.

- In fact, most who faithfully practice Centering Prayer report little or no experience during the moments set aside for this kind of prayer. The benefits accrue in the life that emanates from the practice later on.
- The fruit of Centering Prayer is experienced in daily life, not during the prayer period.

2. The Steps

a. we sit still

It is notable how difficult it is for us in our go-go society for our bodies to relax. We fill them with tension and constant movement to simply keep up with our quick-moving culture. Consequently, sitting still is a challenge. We have to unlearn the always-moving habits in our bodies, unclench muscles that we habitually keep tightened. The first step of Centering Prayer, is the discipline of sitting still.

i. We sit comfortably

- We find a sitting posture that keeps our backs straight and our limbs as vertical as possible, so our weight rests on our bones rather than being kept in place using muscles.

ii. We close our eyes

- We signal our intention to let go of what is around us when we allow our eyes to close.

iii. We are relaxed, but not asleep

- Should we fall asleep, upon awakening, we simply continue the prayer practice.
- Falling asleep during Centering Prayer is often an indication we are not allowing our bodies adequate time for sleep.

iv. On itches and twitches

- It is common to notice slight pains, itches, and a generalized sense of restlessness when we begin the practice.
- These are usually due to the untying of mental and emotional knots in the body.
- We carry stress in our bodies. Training ourselves to sit still begins to unpack this stress and especially at first, it manifests in many of these physical reactions.
- So don't fret over these manifestations. Over time, they diminish.
- When they are present, as with all distractions, simply return to the prayer of intent (see 2.b. below).

b. we use a prayer of intent

If relaxing our bodies is challenging, relaxing our minds and emotions is doubly so.

- However, “monkey-mind” is a habit.
 - (*monkey-mind: swinging on a thought like a monkey on a branch, only to let it go, and move right on to the next thought, never quieted, never stilled, thoughts churning all day long*)
 - But since habits are formed, habits can be re-formed by practice.
 - A tool that helps us quiet our minds, quiet the noisy ego-consciousness is the use of a simple one or two word “prayer of intent.” In another tradition this would be called a “mantra.”
- a. The prayer of intent (or some call it, “the sacred word”) is a symbol of our intention to give our focus to the indwelling Divine presence.
- Uttering one’s prayer of intent in rhythm with one’s breathing is a way we signal our intent to give ourselves to the quieting of our minds, and give ourselves to the Divine presence within.
- b. Thoughts and feelings return with regularity
- They range from ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory to important insights or breakthroughs.
 - For the whole spectrum of thoughts or feelings, Centering Prayer teaches us not to focus on them during the prayer time, but to pick them up later. Good thoughts, yes. But not for now.
 - Often during the practice, one’s thoughts turn to self-reflection: “how am I doing?” or, “I’m feeling peaceful,” or “this is going just terribly!”
 - Again, we simply let these thoughts go as we return to our 1-2 word prayer of intent.
 - Like our bodies, when we quiet our thoughts and feelings, our unconsciousness minds often upload all the unprocessed, undigested stuff there. Again, all very good, but not for now.
 - With regular practice, this upload of unprocessed, undigested thought diminishes.
 - When we become aware that our minds have engaged with a thought, a feeling, all we do is gently return ourselves to rhythmic breathing, and the repetition of our prayer of intent.
- c. Ask for Divine Guidance about the selection of a prayer of intent that is especially suitable to you, and then stay with it thereafter.
- Examples: God, Jesus, Abba, Love, Peace, Mercy, Presence, Trust, Yes
 - Others have found that focused attentiveness to their breathing renders the prayer of intent unnecessary.
- d. Some notes...
1. *The prayer of intent is valuable not because of its inherent meaning but because of the meaning we give it as the expression of our intention to center on the Divine Union within us.*
 2. *Having chosen this 1-2 word prayer, we do not change it during the prayer period. This tends to cause thoughts to begin churning again.*

c. we return

Bringing a mindset of “accomplishing” to Centering Prayer is counter-productive.

- We are not trying to achieve some level of competence or expertise. We are simply trying to be faithful to the practice in the belief that our truest self is our Divine-Union center.
- Thoughts will come to our minds. Feelings will come to our hearts. It is inevitable. It is how we are made.
- The intention of Centering Prayer is not to make our minds blank, or to find some state of thoughtless peace. No, it isn't about achieving at all.
- It's simply the practice of returning, whenever a thought or feeling should arise, to the quiet, the stillness of the Divine Center

In Centering practice, we do not fight thoughts and feelings, nor are we discouraged by their ever-presence.

- No, we recognize that practice itself is made up of many gentle turnings from these very active layers of our human consciousness, and deliberately giving them second place.
- Each time we turn away from a thought or feeling, perhaps 100 times in a 20 minute sitting, we strengthen our attachment to the Divine within, awaken ourselves to Divine Union beyond thought and feeling.
- This itself is powerful in our lives, for when we are in traffic and an impulse to curse a careless driver bubbles up, we have trained ourselves in the art of returning... returning to our Divine centers.

When we become aware that our prayer time has been focused on a thought or feeling, we simply observe it, gently return to the sacred word, and let it move on of its own accord.

d. we finish

At the end of the prayer time (perhaps 20 minutes) we remain in silence with eyes closed for a minute or two more. This helps us transition the silent focus on the Indwelling Divine into our daily lives.

Some recite The Lord's Prayer slowly during this time. Others set a timer that ends the prayer time, and begins to play quiet music for that minute or two.

e. sitting still: not as easy as it sounds

Because we are so unaccustomed to sitting quietly without external stimuli, it is not easy and requires a rather steep learning (or un-learning) curve. However, like all habits, the ability to sit still can be developed.

When we sit still... When we quiet our outer layer of body-consciousness...

- Our breathing becomes quiet and regular.
- Our muscles unclench their tension.
- Our nervous system stops firing off as many electrical charges, and relaxes.
- Our endocrine and digestion systems relax themselves.
- Our bodies cease their agitation and excitement.
- We find a point of balance between relaxation and alertness.

Be encouraged to persevere. Sitting still is not as easy as it sounds! (You've probably already discovered this.)

- It often requires steadfast practice over months.
- It certainly requires a disposition not to be angry at ourselves for our failures.
- It also requires we not excuse ourselves from the practice, nor give up in discouragement.
- Great benefits await those who will persevere.

f. being silent: even harder!

Those who practice Centering Prayer find themselves relaxing their compulsion to talk as much during their days.

- The practice challenges that place within ourselves from whence our urgency to speak arises.
- Perhaps we chatter so much because we are insecure about our worth.
- Those steadfast in the practice often see the insecurity from which chatter arises slowly disappear.
- Others use many words to gain a false sense of connection; a reassuring sense that we are not isolated, that we live in a common world.
- For others still, we use words to draw attention of other people or to ourselves, in the effort to be distracted from the fundamentally unknown mystery of our existence.

if silence is a problem for you, pay attention to the place from which your propensity for noise arises.

- What do you feel you are lacking? What are you afraid of?
- Take notice of the sub-text and reasons behind your noisiness.

The practice of remaining silent during the Centering Prayer time...

The practice of speaking less frequently during our days...

- These can be tranquillizing, liberating, even exhilarating.
- If this is not your experience, one of the fruits of the practice, is to highlight for us what point of our false-self we are medicating through noisy lives, noisy thoughts, and noisy speech.
- Be watchful!

g. is “not talking” still prayer?

Religious practice in general, and prayer practices in particular, are often noisy affairs.

- Western religion over the last 500 year has left us a legacy of religious forms that emphasize saying, doing, thinking, and feeling.
- As such, we often relate to God like a replacement for other human beings to talk to.

Many, when deprived of noise and distractions, feel an submerged sense of panic or distress begin to surface.

- The reason we feel so comfortable turning on the TV, picking up a book, calling a friend, or listening to music, is that it pushes out the silence.
- Silence demands we come to a settled place within ourselves;
 - ...comfortable in our own skin,
 - ...comfortable with our unique mixture of “image-of-God-ness,” and weakness,
 - ...comfortable that we are loved, safe, and accepted in this Universe.

Absent this internal comfort, we find silence extraordinarily uncomfortable.

- “Existential isolation,” that’s how some spiritual teachers refer to this condition.
- It is a horrible feeling of aloneness, disconnectedness, and emptiness.

But the fruit of Centering Prayer, of meditation, is not to have a Divine talking-partner...

- No, it is to call upon the Spirit of the Divine within us, to dismantle the state from which existential isolation comes.

Prattling, even prayer-prattling, can work as a cover-up and avoidance strategy that keeps us from the discomfort of silence, but also from the healing properties of centering on the Divine Union self within us.

- So yes, being silent can be a form of prayer.
- Being vividly present to God, but not saying anything is indeed a way of praying.
- To “not-talk” to God can be a form of prayer that unhinges our dependence on noise.
- To be silent is to experience the Divine in a way beyond our coping strategies.

So embrace the silence.

- Be present to God, but don’t speak.
- Neither conjure up images, feelings, or imaginings of God talking to you.

Thomas Keating:

- *“God’s primary language is silence. Everything else is a poor translation.”*