



the Heart *of*
Centering
Prayer

Nondual Christianity
in Theory and Practice

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Overview

As I mentioned in the introduction, this first section of my book began as a monthlong online e-course offered on the Spirituality and Practice website in fall 2011. In its original format the course consisted of a short lesson, an accompanying spiritual practice, additional written and audio resource materials, and an online forum where students could exchange observations and questions. This present, somewhat condensed, version consists of the eight original lessons only, slightly modified to remove specific references to the e-course and to connect more directly with the material under exploration in this book. I have decided to retain the somewhat informal and conversational tone, as it is an essential ingredient in the overall impact of the presentation.

For those of you who know Centering Prayer only by hearsay, I hope you will take the time to familiarize yourself with this section—and most important, actually try out the practice! As will most likely become apparent, Centering Prayer is a good deal more nuanced than it at first appears, and many of the misconceptions that continue to circulate about this practice are caused by a too hasty assumption that Centering Prayer is simply a Christianized version of some generic mindfulness practice. It manifestly is not, and it's precisely in these

divergences that its real integrity as a method shines through—and the material which will make up this book is to be located. If you think that Centering Prayer is like any other method of meditation, you won't have a clue where I'm coming from when I start to talk about objectless awareness and attention of the heart. So take the time to work with these eight lessons, assimilate Centering Prayer's somewhat unique methodology, and see what the practice actually feels like from the meditation cushion. I guarantee that the time so invested will make everything clearer.

Even if you're an old hand at Centering Prayer, I still encourage you not to skip over these lessons. While my understanding of Centering Prayer predominantly follows the main course of the teaching developed by Contemplative Outreach over these past three decades, there are places where my emphasis is distinctly different, particularly around the understanding of the sacred word, *kenosis* as key to everything, and attention of the heart, which is close but not identical to the "heartfulness" teaching presently promulgated throughout the Centering Prayer network. In general, my approach is probably more phenomenological than you're used to (tied to what is actually happening in the moment rather than theological constructs) and more interspiritually oriented than the normal instructional format, as I am seeking specifically to dialogue with an audience larger than just practicing Christians. So even if you're familiar with the standard presentation (and perhaps have taught it yourself hundreds of times!), it's still worth checking out the subtly different flavor of my take on Centering Prayer. And once again, this is where many of the new insights emerge from.

The material is intended to be basic and user-friendly, so enjoy the ride! But I trust you'll see quickly that the concepts being introduced here are anything but elementary. Rather, they are the core building blocks of a whole new mode of per-

ception, nowadays widely known as "the nondual," which has been lying there right beneath our noses, largely unsuspected, since the earliest days of Centering Prayer. Simple though these lessons may be, I have tried to arrange the contents so that these building blocks become clearer, because they are what this book is really all about.

LESSON 1

Getting (Re)oriented

Learning Centering Prayer begins with *unlearning* most of what you think meditation is all about:

- Centering Prayer is not about attaining a state of bliss, peace, or stillness.
- It's not about developing "single-pointed concentration."
- It's not about establishing a steady "I am" or witnessing presence.
- It's not about reducing stress or improving physical or emotional wellness (although these are indeed common side effects).
- It's not about receiving messages from God.

What *is* it about, then?

Basically, the method of Centering Prayer consists in learning to withdraw attention from our thoughts—those incessant creations of our busy minds—in order to rest in a gentle, open attentiveness to divine reality itself. This gentle releasing of thoughts is known in Centering Prayer teaching as "consenting to the presence and action of God." It is not hard to do, but it's hard—at first—to value.

In Centering Prayer, a thought is defined as *anything that brings your attention to a focal point*. It can be an idea, but it can also be a vision, a memory, an emotion, or even an itch on

your nose. If it captures your attention, it's a thought, and the basic instruction is simply to let it go, gently releasing it from the grip of your attention. If another thought pops right back up to take its place, that's quite all right; let it go, too.

So am I 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 of this prayer in a story now quite famous in the annals of Centering Prayer. In one of the very earliest training workshops led by Father Thomas 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 state of 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 author of the fourteenth-century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* may have had in mind when he said, "God can be held fast and loved by means of love, but by thought never." "Love" is this author's pet word for that open, diffuse awareness, which gradually allows another and deeper way of knowing to suffuse one's entire being. (We will be meeting *The Cloud of Unknowing* in far greater depth in part three of this book.)

It's a little bit like learning to see in the dark. Our normal daytime vision relies primarily on the cones: photoreceptors in the eye that are highly attuned to light, to sharp focus, and

to acute differentiation. As the daylight fades, we rely more and more on our rods, which perceive peripherally, taking in the whole pattern through the gloom and subtle presence of the landscape. I have always considered it a fine piece of synchronicity that the normal length of time required for our day vision to give way to night vision—twenty minutes—is exactly the length of time recommended for a period of Centering Prayer.

In the language of Contemplative Outreach, the membership network founded by Thomas Keating to promote the practice of Centering Prayer, this 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 on the night before his crucifixion. Every time we're willing to let go of our engagement with a thought, no matter how captivating, and return to that simple, open-ended awareness, we are in spirit participating—in solidarity with Christ—in that great gesture of self-surrender through which the world was redeemed. This traditional devotional understanding may or may not appeal to you, but there is also some very interesting confirmation emerging from recent neuroscience to suggest that learning to let go of what we're clinging to, mentally as well as emotionally, does indeed catalyze some revolutionary—and evolutionary—changes in our neural wiring. We'll be looking at some of that fascinating research a bit later in this series of lessons.

When I've talked with people who report difficulty in getting a practice of Centering Prayer off the ground, in virtually every case the problem turns out to be that they're overcomplicating it. The challenge in Centering Prayer is not because it's difficult but because it's so very, very simple. "Ten thousand opportunities to return to God": if you can just keep that in your head, the rest of the picture will gradually fill in.

The immediate implications of this simplicity are as follows: *First*, as you sit down to do this practice, you don't need to focus on pushing away thoughts or keeping them from emerging in the first place. The work of Centering Prayer is not done on the "front end": in your ability to access and sustain a state of openness or stillness. The work is done on the "back end," in the exact moment when you realize that you've gotten engaged with a thought and are willing to let the thought go. It's your willingness, plus the subtle but real shift in the energy field of your attention when you release it from its object, that does the trick.

Second, this means that Centering Prayer is a total "win-win" practice. Whatever happens to you during a meditation period is just fine. If you settle down on your chair or prayer stool and immediately fall into twenty minutes of deep stillness, great! You've had a profound spiritual rest. If you sit there and every minute of the twenty minutes feels like twenty minutes, your mind dogged with thoughts, but you're still doing the best you can to let them go, that's fine, too! You've gotten a great aerobic workout for your "muscle" of consent.

Later on in these lessons you'll see that I am not just speaking figuratively here. For now, I'd simply like to plant the idea that the real work of Centering Prayer is to lay the inner foundations for an entirely different kind of spiritual attentiveness. It doesn't work with that sharp clarity of the mind prized in so many meditational paths, nor with a forceful single-pointedness of the will. Later we will see why it is indeed appropriate to name this pathway of perception that Centering opens up "attention of the heart." It will gradually lead you into a whole new reality, which some have likened to "putting on the mind of Christ."

In the next lesson, we'll fine-tune the distinction between attention and intention and begin to work through the specific

steps in the method itself. But as you embark on this new learning curve, it's important to keep the big picture in mind, so that you don't waste a lot of time working against yourself or looking for results in the wrong places. You will come to deeper spiritual attentiveness, certainly, but by Centering Prayer's own unique route.

LESSON 2

Intention Is Everything

"Centering Prayer is done not with attention but with *intention*," Keating repeatedly reminds his aspiring practitioners. Unlike other methods of meditation, Centering Prayer does not furnish an object for your attention—whether it be by repeating a mantra, following your breath, or watching your thoughts as they arise. Rather, you simply withdraw your attention from anything that brings it to a focal point and return again and again to your underlying intention—what *The Cloud of Unknowing* calls your "naked intent direct to God."

In Centering Prayer, then, everything begins with and keeps returning to intention. What am I really up to in this prayer? What is my aim as I sit down on my chair or prayer stool and set this practice in motion?

It's difficult, admittedly, to put words around an experience that is deeply personal and intuitive. But in general, you're in the right ballpark if your intention is "to be totally open to God": totally available, all the way down to that innermost point of your being; deeper than your thinking, deeper than your feelings, deeper than your memories and desires, deeper than your usual psychological sense of yourself. Ultimately, what will go on in this prayer is "in secret" (the words that Jesus used in his instructions on prayer in Matthew 6:6):

hidden even from yourself, in that innermost sanctuary of your being—where, in the words of that well-loved Christian monastic formula, your life is “hidden with Christ in God.”

PUTTING TEETH IN YOUR INTENTION

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This familiar aphorism aptly describes the experience of nearly everyone who begins to work with Centering Prayer. You’ll sit down on your cushion or prayer stool with the lofty intention of making yourself totally available to God, and not twenty seconds later you’ll find yourself deeply embroiled in some mental or emotional scenario: replaying that argument you had with your boss yesterday or wondering what to cook for dinner tonight. Ah, monkey mind, as the Buddhists call it! And you’ll wonder what ever became of that “naked intent direct to God.”

The method of Centering Prayer begins with the reassurance that this is all perfectly normal. Rather than trying to access or maintain a steady state of concentration, Centering Prayer proposes a simple and elegant solution to the problem of monkey mind. You might think of it in terms of a little “deal” that you make with yourself. The deal is this: *if you catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go.*

It’s as simple as that. You’re not responsible for the thoughts you don’t catch (at least not at first—I’ll offer some refinements to this instruction a bit later). And you don’t need to torment yourself with the question of “Who or what ‘catches itself’ thinking?” Just deal with what’s on your plate, which will be more than enough to keep you busy. If you find yourself tangled up with a thought—no matter what kind of thought—you simply, gently let that thought go. You release it, thus bringing yourself back into alignment with your original intention, which was to maintain that bare, formless openness to God.

Of course, the next thought may be right back, reducing the duration of your bare, formless openness to a nanosecond. No problem—just let that thought go, as well. The essence of this method lies in the prompt *releasing* of thoughts, not in stopping them from arising in the first place. Remember, “Ten thousand opportunities to return to God!”

LESSON 3

Choosing a Sacred Word

If you’ve made it this far in the instructions, you’ve basically learned the method of Centering Prayer. But to make the method a bit easier to apply, a finishing touch is added. In Centering Prayer, this release of a thought is normally accomplished with the help of something known as a *sacred word*.

Oh, you mean a mantra? No. A mantra is a word you repeat constantly throughout the meditation as a touchstone for your attention. A sacred word merely serves as a placeholder for your intention. It’s the spiritual equivalent of a little piece of red string tied around your finger to remind yourself of your willingness to “do the deal.” Unlike a mantra, you don’t repeat it constantly; you only use it when you realize you’ve gotten tangled up in a thought. Then it helps gently and quickly to clear the mental debris and return you to that bare, open awareness. In Centering Prayer, this gentle release of your thoughts is seen as “consenting to God’s presence and action within.”

When you’re first learning Centering Prayer, the distinction may appear academic—it may seem that you’re mostly dropping one thought after another, so the sacred word might *as well* be a mantra. But in fact, even in your earliest attempts at this prayer, there will be “gaps”: places where thinking drops out and the word drops out, and you’re simply there—traveling at

the speed of love, as I like to picture it. It's in these gaps that Centering Prayer does its real transformative work.

The basic strategy behind the sacred word goes all the way back to the origin of Centering Prayer in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There, in chapter 7, its anonymous author writes:

For this reason, whenever you feel yourself drawn to devote yourself to this work [of contemplative prayer] . . . a naked intent direct to God is sufficient without anything else.

And if you desire to have this aim concentrated and expressed in one word in order that you may be better able to grasp it, take but one short word of a single syllable. This is better than two, for the shorter it is the better it accords with the spirit. Such a word is the word GOD or the word LOVE. Choose whichever one you prefer, or, if you like, choose another that suits your taste, provided that it is one syllable. And clasp this word tightly in your heart so that it never leaves it no matter what may happen.¹

Note that despite the *Cloud* author's firm insistence that the word in question must be no more than one syllable, it has always been perfectly permissible in Centering Prayer teaching to use a two- or three-syllable word, or even a short phrase, provided that it is *very* short—like “Let go” or “Be still.” Anything more elaborate tends to stimulate conceptual thinking; exactly the opposite of what you're trying to do.

In many meditation paths a mantra is simply given to you by your spiritual teacher. But in Centering Prayer you get to choose, for as the instructions emphasize, it's your *intention* that makes your sacred word sacred, rather than any inherent devotional or vibrational content. As you make your choice, here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

- Some people are more comfortable with traditional religious words—like “God” or “Abba” or “Jesus” or “Spirit” or short phrases like “Come, Lord.” Others prefer what I call “state” words that remind you of that open availability you want to keep returning to: words like “peace,” “open,” “let go,” “yes.” Either kind is perfectly fine.

- Your word should be as emotionally neutral as possible. Remember, it serves only as a placeholder for your intention. If you make it too special—“my precious love word for God!”—it may have too much emotional or conceptual weight on it, which will tend to stimulate thinking rather than reduce it.

- Most people “shop around” for a word quite a bit during their early days of learning Centering Prayer. That's perfectly normal. Often when the right word comes, it's with a force and resonance so strong that one can hardly avoid suspecting the Holy Spirit as the chief operative. One woman I know went back and forth for several sessions between “trust” and “love.” Finally, she watched in astonishment as they fused themselves into a short phrase, “trust love,” which has been her sacred word ever since.

- The only unbreakable rule is this: don't shop for your word within the prayer period itself. The reason is pretty obvious: then you'd be thinking!

- Once your word arrives, it's good to consider it a long-term engagement. I've had mine for more than twenty years now. Over time your word imprints itself deeply in your unconscious, the place from which it really does its work. Not only will it help jog your memory during the meditation period itself, it will even begin to show up out of the meditation time when you're poised on the edge of reactivity or stress, gently reminding you that “the presence and action of God within” is not something that disappears when you get up from your meditation cushion.

• Your sacred word is not secret, but nor is it a subject for chatter and gossip. It is, after all, the symbol of your “intention to consent to God’s presence and action within,” and that gives it a serious and sacred intentionality. Be respectful of it and the work it does.

DOES IT HAVE TO BE A WORD?

Centering Prayer teaching allows people, if they’re so inclined, to substitute a “sacred glance” or a “sacred breath” for the sacred word. I admit that I have always been slightly uncomfortable with this suggestion, however. The risk in using a sacred glance (which used to be called a “sacred image,” a visual symbol instead of a word) is that you start visualizing. The risk in using the breath is that it will pull you into *following* the breath, using it like a mantra as a touchstone for your attention. Visualization and following the breath are both classic methods of meditation, but they are not Centering Prayer. If you do opt for either of these alternatives, remember that your “sacred glance” or “sacred breath” must be used exactly like the sacred word: merely as a placeholder for your intention.

LESSON 4

The Mechanics of Sitting

Despite first appearances, meditation is not an out-of-body experience. You are not escaping from your physicality to enter some formless spiritual world. Everything that happens to you in meditation actually happens in and through your body; in some ways this is even truer in Centering Prayer than on other meditation paths. So it is important to give the body its due and to treat it with respect and dignity as you sit, both inwardly and outwardly.

In Centering Prayer the goal is to keep the body relaxed

but alert. You want to keep it as neutral as possible so that it doesn’t get in the way, either by calling attention to itself or by falling asleep.

As in all meditation, it’s good to have your back as straight as possible and your head balanced on your shoulders, neither drooping down nor scrunched up. (Those are great ways to give yourself a splitting headache!) Basically, this is the same position you’d be aiming for if you were singing in a choir. It allows the best conditions for staying present and attentive and for allowing your energy to circulate freely within you.

This being said, “relaxed but alert” is always measured against the yardstick of your own physical capacity. If you need to prop yourself up to support your back or sit in an overstuffed chair to cushion aching muscles, by all means do so. I’ve seen many people with back problems do Centering Prayer lying flat on their backs.

It doesn’t matter whether you sit in a chair or on a cushion or prayer stool; it’s your choice. Unless you’re accustomed to sitting in lotus position, don’t cross your legs: it impedes the circulation of energy within you (and is often connected to an attitude as well!). If you’re short and have opted for the chair, a small stool or pillow under your feet helps you keep your knees comfortably horizontal. If you’ve opted for the floor, a good way to keep your legs from falling asleep is to make sure that your buttocks are always higher than your knees. Your hands rest comfortably on your knees, either palms down or palms up.

Typically your eyes are closed. In Centering Prayer teaching this is understood as part of the “consent to the presence and action of God” by letting go of what is going on around and within you. But common sense prevails here; if you find yourself falling asleep, open your eyes and bring them to a soft focus; it will bring you right back.

AH, "BROTHER ASS!"

"Brother Ass" is how Saint Francis often humorously referred to his body. And during the course of the prayer period, it's not at all uncommon for Brother Ass to kick back at you. Suddenly there will be an itch on your nose or a throat tickle or cough; sometimes a leg goes to sleep, or there may even be a sudden ache or cramp. Some of this (particularly any muscle tightness around the neck or upper back) can be caused by trying too hard—*Relax!*—but part of it is simply the way that Centering Prayer does its work. During our busy outer lives we often hold ourselves in overly tense or strained positions, and our inner parts take up the slack. In the deep relaxation of Centering Prayer (which Thomas Keating likens to "taking a brief vacation from yourself"), the overly tensed parts have a chance to unkink. Knots of pain or tension we carry unconsciously in our bodies can all of a sudden loosen up. This is good news for the body, but often uncomfortable and even embarrassing in the prayer, particularly if you're doing it in a group.

People often wonder how best to deal with these physical intrusions. Should I treat this itch or cough like a thought and try to let it go? Should I bring my attention directly to it for a few moments until it subsides? Or should I just cough or shift my body posture and be done with it? Avowed hedonist that I am, I usually opt for this third route. Why spend a whole prayer period in agony trying to not think about needing to cough when a few seconds of coughing will put the whole episode behind you? Admittedly, when you're meditating in a group, there needs to be some external consideration here. For the sake of the overall silence, it's important to try not to fidget or to engage in prolonged physical behaviors (coughing, weeping, heavy breathing) that might disturb others around you. It's perfectly all right to simply leave the room quietly and go settle yourself down.

BECOMING AN ICON OF PRAYER

Yes, *of course*, Centering Prayer is an inward experience, not an outer performance. But there is still a certain yoga to it that has been consistently underemphasized in the teaching to date. When you sit in meditation, you are actually presenting yourself as an icon of one of the most archetypal and noble of human activities: communion with the infinite. Being aware of the natural dignity and beauty of this archetype will help your own body find its place more easily, and it will also be of substantial help to everybody else when you meditate in a group.

LESSON 5

Putting It All Together

So what does a period of Centering Prayer actually look like? Now that we've worked through the most important details individually, it's time to put the whole package together.

If you're an old hand at Centering Prayer, of course, this will all be familiar territory; you've probably done this drill hundreds, maybe even thousands, of times! But there are always those nuances to be fine-tuned, and hearing even familiar instructions from a new perspective can sometimes lead to unexpected insights. So let's do a brief walk-through.

You begin by sitting down in your chair or on your prayer stool or cushion: eyes closed, body relaxed but alert. If you wish, you can collect yourself around your intention with a short prayer such as "Into your hands I commend my spirit," or "O God, I am here; O God, you are here," or by taking a couple of intentional breaths. But Centering Prayer actually begins when you start to "say" your sacred word, offering it silently, gently, and at first steadily as a symbol of your willingness to consent to the presence and action of God during this prayer time.

The next step is the most important in the practice, and also the most difficult to explain. For a time, during the early days of Centering Prayer teaching, the instruction used to go something like this: "When you notice you're no longer being attracted to thinking, it's okay to let your sacred word go . . ."

But of course, these instructions are self-canceling and have been the bane of many practitioners attempting to get the hang of this prayer. How can you "notice" without thinking? How can you "decide" to let the word go without that itself being a thought?

In reality, however, there is a simple magic here, again dependent on that wonderful operative we already touched on in our earlier discussion of the sacred word: the participation of your unconscious. The easiest way to describe what happens might be through a kind of butchered French, "*il se droppe*"—the word simply drops itself out. It's very similar to the process of falling asleep. You can't see the moment you actually drift off to sleep. It simply happens.

It's essentially the same in Centering Prayer. The crucial moment is taken care of. You don't have to "do" it; it happens on its own, programmed right into your original intention to be deeply open to God. You won't notice the moment you stop thinking; what you'll notice is the moment you *start* thinking again. You find yourself in the midst of a thought and return to your sacred word as a way of returning to that openness. And then another thought comes, and with it, another return to the sacred word—"ten thousand opportunities to return to God."

And on and on it goes, for the twenty minutes or so that you do this prayer. It has sort of a sine-wave pattern: rhythmically up and down. Subjectively, the only parts you'll directly remember are the times of wrestling with your thoughts. But in point of fact, these relatively more agitated, "surface of yourself" times have been counterbalanced by times of deep resting

at your depths. You won't be able to perceive these directly of course; the moment you start thinking about them, they're gone. But you'll retain some residual memory of them in an inexplicable sense of refreshment, and sometimes a vivid sense of having been tugged down deep into your own heart, or having sat at the edge of an incredible intimacy and tenderness.

Both of which are true, incidentally. During those nano-second gaps in the stream of consciousness, you have been resting in the river of "pure awareness," and it floods through your being like autumn rains after a long drought. Later, as your practice becomes more stable and you imprint deeply on your heart the know-how that the way to get there is to let go of what you're clinging to so that your attention relaxes from its default subject/object trajectory, then, bit by bit you'll discover that this inner spaciousness is no longer "a place you go to" but "a place you *come from*." It begins to offer itself as a new home for your deepest sense of selfhood.

These are very important observations, which are rarely mentioned in the main body of Centering Prayer teaching, and which, as you'll soon see, furnish the experiential foundation for most of what I will be up to in the rest of this book.

So that's about it for our walk-through: except to remind you once again to come out of Centering Prayer gently, allowing some time for your eyes to come from closed to a soft focus and to linger there in that soft focus for a minute or two before resuming the sharp-edged focus of the mind's usual way of paying attention. That way, you'll get to "keep" more of the interior spaciousness you've touched in Centering Prayer as you move about your day.

A FEW TIMEKEEPING ISSUES

The standard time prescription for establishing a Centering Prayer practice is "twenty minutes, twice a day." This has been the entry-level commitment recommended by Thomas Keating

and Contemplative Outreach for more than thirty years, and it has successfully launched tens of thousands of people on their journeys. I am sometimes asked whether it is all right to do just one prayer period a day, and while this is a definite “no-no” in the official teachings of Centering Prayer, I myself prefer to err on the side of leniency. Two is definitely preferable, but if one is all you can see your way clear to at the start, I’d rather see you get one up and running than abandon the whole project because you can’t fit in two.

An obvious question: how do I know when the twenty minutes of meditation is over? You can certainly set a watch or a timer. (There are now some lovely chime ring tones available that won’t drive you straight to the ceiling when the timer goes off.) For myself, however, I simply glance occasionally at my watch. The attentional pattern in Centering Prayer is up and down anyway, and if you do happen to get caught in rapt attentiveness and stay a little beyond the appointed twenty minutes, what harm is done?

In general, however, it’s best to stick to the appointed twenty minutes, ending at the designated time. This maintains a certain objectivity in the practice that cuts through the temptation to lengthen or shorten the prayer period according to your subjective experience of how it is going. The “I feel really gathered and deep; I think I’ll sit for longer today” can easily be counterbalanced by the “I’m really restless today; I think I’ll stop sooner”—and it’s precisely in the pushing through that restlessness that the most important inner work is often done.

CENTERING PRAYER:

THE “OFFICIAL” GUIDELINES

For nearly thirty years now, these same basic points have been covered in Centering Prayer teaching in the form of four guidelines, which have successfully introduced tens of thousands

of people worldwide to the practice. Old hands to Centering Prayer will already know these guidelines well, but if you’re learning it here for the first time, you’ll see that they furnish a concise summary of the ground we’ve covered so far from a slightly different angle of approach. Read over them carefully, and reflect on how they fit together with the material as I’ve presented it—and also with your own experience of this prayer now that you’ve had a chance to practice it straight through:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your willingness 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, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

LESSON 6

Handling Thoughts during Centering Prayer

Now that you’ve all had your first “official” walk-through of Centering Prayer, it’s time to return to the question of handling thoughts during the prayer period, since you now have a lot more data to work with. While “ten thousand opportunities to return to God” continues to be a familiar refrain, it’s important to keep reminding yourself that thoughts are not an obstacle in Centering Prayer, but an *opportunity*. Each new thought gives you chance to exercise that “muscle” of letting go.

In this lesson I’d like to review some of the standard teaching in Centering Prayer circles about handling thoughts during prayer time, and then add a couple of insights of my own.

The first and most important thing to keep in mind is that the goal in Centering Prayer is not to stop thoughts altogether,

but to develop a detached attitude toward them. Fighting your thoughts is useless; releasing them is blessed.

In one of his most colorful teachings, Thomas Keating describes this process using the metaphor of boats on a river. The river, as he depicts it, is your consciousness—which is in fact a constantly moving stream. Down it float boats—that is, your thoughts. They may be innocent little “kayaks,” like a sudden wondering whether you left the keys in the car or if tomorrow is the day to put out the trash. Or they may be huge battleships of raw emotion and contentiousness, like reliving the fight you had with your boss last week. Or they may be half-sunken, waterlogged hulls barely above the surface: old hurts and memories from the past. On and on down the river they float.

According to this metaphor, the ideal way to position yourself during Centering Prayer is to imagine yourself as a scuba diver seated on a rock at the bottom of the riverbed. From your watery perch you can look up and see the boat hulls passing overhead. As long as they’re passing by, that’s fine. You don’t have to do anything to prevent their coming and going.

The temptation, however, is to get interested in a particular boat, swim up to the surface, and climb on board. In other words, you get caught up in a particular thought. In place of that relaxed, detached attitude that lets the boats come and go, you are now being carried downstream yourself!

In Centering Prayer, you recall, a thought is not just an idea; it’s anything that draws your attention to a focal point. It can be an emotion, a memory, an interior dialogue, a vision, or, just as easily, some physical distraction like the buzz of a fluorescent light overhead or a sudden pain in your back. *It’s the configuration of your attention, not the content of the thought, that is the determining factor.*

This is an important distinction to keep in mind, for otherwise it’s hard to avoid falling into the trap of judging

your thoughts, chasing away the ones that seem random, negative, or “unspiritual,” but lingering on those that seem holy or inspirational. The entire Judeo-Christian tradition predisposes us to viewing silence as the place par excellence for receiving messages from God, and it’s very hard to break this well-engrained habit.

So here’s a tough one: suppose, going back to that metaphor of boats on the river, you were suddenly to see amid the flotilla Jesus Christ himself calmly walking toward you on the water, smiling as he reaches forth his hand. The mystical brass ring! What do you do now? Put Centering Prayer on pause and grab it, right?

Wrong. The instructions remain the same. “If you catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go.”

Ouch!

Centering Prayer teaching is quite correct in sticking to its guns here, however, and once you see the real rationale behind this teaching, it may be easier to get with the program. Basically, it all comes down to your attention again. The moment you take the bait and grab onto one of those juicy insights or tantalizing visions, your attention goes right back into subject/object mode, the default position of your mental-egoic mind. It’s business as usual, the mind simply doing its thing, handing you reality through its built-in bifocal lens.

In those deeper waters of Centering Prayer, you are slowly acclimating to a whole new operating system: one that does not need to split the perceptual field in order to perceive. Think of it as an upgrade for your brain, if you like, but one way or another it will gradually help lay the physiological foundations for what’s known as nondual (or unitive) consciousness. Being able to hold your attention as a tensile field of awareness (I love a Rumi metaphor for this: “quivering like a drop of mercury”) is a key piece of this “rewiring” of consciousness, and in Centering Prayer, that’s exactly what you’re practicing!

So not taking the bait, even if the bait is overwhelmingly tempting, is way more important than it looks. Mystical visions, spiritual consolations, and tantalizing insights all come and go regularly on the spiritual path. But once you have learned to rest in that undivided sphere of perception, your whole life, both inner and outer, begins to shift subtly but irreversibly. Radiance and grace are no longer extraordinary events, but simply the ordinary atmosphere of the love you are beginning to indwell.

That's why Keating can say (with that signature twinkle in his eye), "If the Blessed Virgin herself should come up to you during meditation and offer to pluck a thorn from your flesh, the answer is 'Not now, dearie, I'm doing my Centering Prayer.'"

"THE FOUR R'S"

In introductory Centering Prayer workshops, this gentle, laissez-faire attitude toward thoughts is reinforced through a simple formula called "the four R's":

Resist no thought.

Retain no thought.

React to no thought.

Return ever so gently to the sacred word.

As you continue with your Centering Prayer practice, see if this formula helps you to release your thoughts more promptly and gently, and remembering always: "ten thousand opportunities to return to God!"

LESSON 7

Putting on the Mind of Christ

I have worked in interspiritual circles long enough to know that authentic spiritual practices are pretty much universal. For

almost any practice in any tradition, you'll find its counterpart in another tradition if you know where to look. That's because the recipe for spiritual transformation is basically the same all over: surrender, attention, compassion. One way or another, you will pass through the same eye of the needle no matter what path you're on.

Yet Centering Prayer does have aspects that link it closely to its Christian roots and milieu. I won't say that comparable practices don't exist in other traditions; they do. But with Christianity there is a special affinity. I've come to believe that Centering Prayer's unusual methodology makes complete sense only within a Christian theological frame of reference. And vice versa: its simple but powerful pathway of transformation illumines better than any other practice I've ever tried what it means to "put on the mind of Christ."

It was ten years into my practice before I realized that the theological basis for Centering Prayer lies in the principle of kenosis, Jesus's self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice. (Why didn't anyone ever tell me that?) Saint Paul explains this principle by way of his beautiful hymn in Philippians 2:6-11, prefacing his comments by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus":

Though his state was that of God,
yet he did not deem equality with God
something he should cling to.

Rather he emptied himself,
and assuming the state of a slave,
he was born in human likeness . . .

The phrase "emptied himself" in line 4 is the English translation of the Greek verb *kenosein*, which is where the word *kenosis* comes from. In context, you'll see exactly what

it means: it's the opposite of the word "cling" in line 3. Jesus is practicing gentle release. And he continues to practice it in every moment of his life, as the next verse of the hymn (Philippians 2:8) makes clear:

He being known as one of us
humbled himself obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.

How beautifully simple—the path of Jesus hidden right there in plain sight! While some Christians are still reluctant to think of Jesus as teaching a path (isn't it enough simply to be the Son of God?), in fact, the gospels themselves make clear that he is specifically inviting us to this journey and modeling how to do it. Once you see this, it's the touchstone throughout all his teaching: Let go! Don't cling! Don't hoard! Don't assert your importance! Don't fret. "Do not be afraid, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" (Luke 12:32). And it's this same core gesture we practice in Centering Prayer: thought by thought by thought. You could really summarize Centering Prayer as *kenosis in meditation form*.

This is why the unique and somewhat counterintuitive methodology of Centering Prayer unlocks the heart of Christianity so well. Do you remember that very first lesson, where I said the most important thing in learning Centering Prayer is to forget everything you think you know about meditation? Centering Prayer is not about developing concentration, attaining clear mind, conscious presence, a strong witnessing "I," some desired state. In Centering Prayer you merely practice and practice the core kenotic motion: "let go, make space, unclench"—thought by thought by thought.

Apart from this kenotic ground, the practice of Centering Prayer may not make full sense. In fact, criticism is sometimes

leveled at it by those used to more concentrative methods of meditation, questioning the advisability of letting go of everything, including the "I am" presence and the sacred word. But when this instruction is understood not as the deliberate cultivation of an interior vacuum ("sinking mind," as it's sometimes called), but rather, as a willing divestment of all possessions even up to and including personal consciousness, its appropriateness becomes clear—and its ability to inform the Christian life, dazzling. Slowly, steadily, Centering Prayer patterns into its practitioners what I would call the quintessential Jesus response: the meeting of any and all life situations by the complete, free giving of oneself.

Fascinating confirmation that kenosis is indeed an evolutionary human pathway is emerging from—of all places—recent discoveries in neuroscience. From fMRI data collected primarily by the California-based HeartMath Institute, you can now verify chapter and verse that how you respond to a stimulus in the outer world determines which neural pathways will be activated in your brain, and between your brain and your heart. If you respond with any form of initial negativity (which translates physiologically as constriction)—freezing, bracing, clinging, clenching, and so on—the pathway illumined leads to your amygdala (or "reptilian brain," as it's familiarly known): that most primitive part of your hindbrain, which controls a repertory of highly energized fight-or-flight responses. If you can relax *into* a stimulus—opening, softening, yielding, releasing—the neural pathway leads through the more evolutionarily advanced parts of your forebrain and, surprisingly, brings brain and heart rhythms into entrainment.

So when I talked about exercising that "muscle" of letting go, you can see now that I wasn't simply using a metaphor. Every time we manage to let go of a thought in Centering

Prayer, “consenting to the presence and action of God within,” the gesture is actually *physically embodied*. It’s not just an attitude; something actually “drops and releases” in the solar plexus region of your body, a subtle but distinct form of interior relaxation. Your nerves and muscles are doing the same thing on a miniature scale as you did on a larger, outer scale when you practiced that “gentle release motion.” And in time, this gentle and persistent “inner aerobics,” undertaken under the specific banner of Centering Prayer and in solidarity with Jesus’s own kenotic path, will gradually establish that “mind of Christ” within you as your own authentic self.

The word *metanoia*, frequently translated as “repent” (or “change the direction you’re looking for happiness!”), literally means “go beyond the mind,” or “go into the larger mind.” Centering Prayer invites you to do just that.

LESSON 8

The Fruits of Centering Prayer

“The fruits of Centering Prayer are found in daily life.” This well-worn refrain has been part of Centering Prayer introductory workshops from the beginning, and it’s still one of the most valuable pieces of advice around. Over and over people are reminded not to look for signs that this prayer is working for them in their subjective experiences during the prayer period themselves (for of course, these would be thoughts, and you’d have to let go of them!). The place to look for results is in what happens *after* you get up from your meditation cushion.

As that gentle releasing motion you’ve practiced in Centering Prayer gradually works its way into your system, most people will typically begin to notice a greater spaciousness and flexibility in their daily life, and along with this an improvement in their personal relationships. (Often it’s the people closest to you who pick up on these changes first.)

I still chuckle at the story shared by one of our original e-course participants when, one week into the course, she suddenly noticed a huge sculpture of an eagle in flight not fifty yards from the orthodontist’s office where she’d been regularly taking her sons for several months. “Has that sculpture always been there?” she asked. Her younger son replied, “Mom, you haven’t seen it because you’re usually in a big hurry to get us here on time.” A Centering Prayer classic—and after just a week of sitting!

Time does slow down as we stop trying to push the river. Another of my favorite “fruits of Centering Prayer” stories was shared by a fellow trainee in my own first Centering Prayer formation retreat more than a quarter century ago. A highly organized, “type A” professor of psychology, recently retired as department chair at a local university, she recounted how she had found an outlet for her energy by volunteering at the local homeless shelter. “Before starting Centering Prayer, I could process five clients an hour,” she reported. “Now I can only process two.”

“Slow down, smell the roses, take time to be with life!” That’s the inner transformation Centering Prayer is supporting in you, not only emotionally but physiologically as well. The very fact that Centering Prayer sets no goals—other than deep, open availability to God’s presence—and renews that availability simply through a gentle release of whatever you happen to be clinging onto at the moment gradually imprints the realization that this might just be a good way to do life, too!

HEALING THE UNCONSCIOUS

I don’t mean to imply it’s all a bed of roses however. Through the action of this same gentle releasing motion, it sometimes happens that painful material buried tightly in your unconscious can begin to respond to that invitation as well and

surface into your consciousness during the time of the prayer in the form of painful memories, tears, or sudden emotional and physical pain.

Thomas Keating was one of the first contemporary spiritual teachers to name this process for what it is—a purification, or *healing*, of the unconscious—and the teachings he has built around this under the title “the divine therapy” are justly famous and have helped thousands of people weather the process. (Around the Centering Prayer network, this purification is often referred to more unceremoniously as “the unloading of the unconscious.”)

Typically this won’t happen to you until you’re well established in your Centering Prayer practice, and even then, it usually only becomes really noticeable during immersion retreats, where you’re doing three hours or more of Centering Prayer a day. At the recommended “dosage” of twenty minutes twice a day, this purification is more like a gentle scrubbing and does most of its work without your even noticing. Still, should this “unloading” happen to you, rest assured that it’s all perfectly normal and try to treat it like any other thought that occurs during the prayer time: just let it go. There are plenty of resources available within the Contemplative Outreach network to help you understand this process better and work with it constructively. Remember, the end result is a markedly increased interior freedom and joy.

ATTENTION OF THE HEART

Perhaps the subtlest fruit of the practice (and the most delicious!) is a gradually deepening capacity to abide in the state of “attention of the heart,” as it’s known in the Christianity of the East. You might describe this as a stable state of mindfulness or “witnessing presence,” but emanating from the heart, not the head, and thus free of intrusion from that heavy-handed mental “inner observer” who seems to separate

us from the immediacy of our lives. The essence of this kind of attentiveness is perhaps best summed up in those words from the Song of Songs: “I sleep, but my heart is awake.” Once you get the hang of it, attention of the heart allows you to be fully present to God, but at the same time fully present to the situation at hand, giving and taking from the spontaneity of your own authentic, surrendered presence.

Again, this kind of presence is a capacity that has been developing in you as you gradually learn in Centering Prayer to withdraw your attention from its default subject/object positioning and rest in that diffuse, objectless awareness. As this capacity grows in you, it gradually takes shape as a felt center of gravity within you, the place where the pendulum of your being naturally comes to rest. It’s not so much a place you pay attention *to* as a place you pay attention *from*. But as you come to dwell there, life becomes seamlessly whole.

As I see it, the purpose of Centering Prayer is to deepen your relationship with God (and at the same time your own deepest self) in that bandwidth of formless, objectless awareness that is the foundation of nondual consciousness. There you discover that you, God, and the world “out there” are not separate entities, but flow together seamlessly in an unbreakable dynamism of self-giving love, which is the true nature of reality and the ground of everything. In that space you discover the meaning of Keating’s famous statement “The notion that God is absent is the fundamental illusion of the human condition.” And it is this track—Centering Prayer as both a foundation and an access route to the stabilization of nondual consciousness—that this book will now proceed to explore.