

CENTERING PRAYER



SILENCE TEACHES US WHO WE ARE

BY

RICH LEWIS

CENTERING PRAYER QUESTIONS

I thought it would be fun to jot down a bunch of questions related to centering prayer. Over the next few pages I will provide my answers to the below questions.

As you think about your centering prayer practice, how will you answer these questions?

If you practice another form of meditation, go ahead and answer them as related to your particular practice.

A brief note to the reader. Some of my quotations use male pronouns for God. I have not changed the pronouns, but we can safely assume that God is ultimately beyond gender.

Here are the questions:

- Why do I practice centering prayer?
- When do I practice centering prayer?
- How long do I center?
- Is it difficult to find time for a second sit?
- Do I have a special centering prayer space?
- How do I transition from my sit?
- What are the fruits of my practice?
- What is my method?
- What is the role of retreats in centering prayer practice?
- How do I begin?

In case you are not familiar with centering prayer, let me describe the steps as taught by Fr. Thomas Keating and Contemplative Outreach. Centering Prayer has four simple guidelines:

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

Centering prayer is a practice that opens us to the gift of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is sitting with God. Contemplative prayer is considered the pure presence of God. We open our mind, heart and body to God who is beyond thoughts, words and emotions.

Contemplative prayer is like when I sit with my beloved wife. No words need to be said. Centering prayer does not replace other forms of prayer. It complements them. It is both a discipline and a relationship with God.

Centering prayer was developed in the 1970's by three Trappist monks at the St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, William Meninger, Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating.

WHY DO I PRACTICE CENTERING PRAYER?

As indicated in the title, my practice is centering prayer... I have often asked myself "why do I practice?" My answers follow, which I hope are insightful, no matter your contemplative practice.

Why do I practice centering prayer?

- Because I love God.
- To forget me.
- To let go of my worries, anxieties, fears, and things that bother me.
- To connect with God at the deepest level possible.
- To understand who this God is.
- I want this God to teach me how to live.
- I want my life to be an outpouring of this God.
- If I want to get to know God, I will need to spend time with God, who according to John of the Cross is best revealed in silence.
- If I want to get to know God at the deepest level, I will need to quiet myself and let God speak to me.
- The best way I can know God is to quietly sit in God's presence with my entire being.
- During centering prayer, I open to God's presence.
- I remove barriers to God's presence.
- I give God the best opportunity to act within me.
- I get out of the way and let God act within me.
- Because I love God, I trust God.
- I know God fills me with what I need for the rest of the day.
- I want to arise from my silent prayer ready to take action.
- Silent prayer teaches me how to live.
- I am not complete without my silent prayer practice.
- It makes me whole.
- The God I meet in silent prayer continues to be a presence throughout the day.
- Silent prayer teaches me when to be silent and when to take action.

WHEN DO I PRACTICE CENTERING PRAYER?

Centering prayer is the first thing I do before I start my day. I set my alarm twenty minutes earlier. This means I sit with God at 5:50 am. I would not have it any other way. I love it! It gets me ready for the day. It refreshes me - fills me with God. God and I meet, partner and take on this day. On the weekends it's the first thing I do. I just don't set an alarm. I simply center after I wake.

My second sit will vary. At work, if the weather permits, I will leave my desk any time between 2:00 and 3:00 pm. I walk to my car, sit in the driver's seat, roll down the windows. No matter how busy I am at work I stop. I make myself stop to sit with God. After each sit I am amazed by how much prayer time with God relaxes me. I feel full of energy and ready to finish my work day. I am always surprised by how productive I am for the remainder of the day. I highly recommend the afternoon sit!

If I am not able to do my second sit in my car during the work day, I will do it in the evening at home. I feel better with a mid-afternoon sit. On the weekends, as much as possible, I also sit in the mid-afternoon. I have three children - my oldest daughter will often join me for evening and weekend sits. If you have children and they are curious, encourage them to join you.

If you sit once that is great. Congratulations! I highly encourage you to schedule in a second sit. From experience, I do not think you will regret it. I know some who sit three or more times per day. This time is well invested. It is your invaluable time with God. It refills your reservoir!

HOW LONG DO I CENTER?

I always try to sit for twenty minutes. Occasionally there are times when I am not able to sit twenty minutes. Sometimes I sit ten or fifteen. It can take me at least five to ten minutes to slow down so ten minutes is my minimum. If I can only sit for ten minutes, often I make certain to sit again for another ten.

I encourage five minute sits before key events. I will often get anxious, worried and nervous before doctor appointments or important work meetings, so I will center for five minutes beforehand. I am always much calmer after each sit. After a sit I enter an appointment calm, energized and well prepared.

IS IT DIFFICULT TO FIND TIME FOR A SECOND SIT?

Is it difficult to find time for a second sit? My answer is no. Yet, I realize that for many a second sit is difficult. Let me offer some suggestions...

Your first centering prayer sit should take place in the morning. Try to sit before you start your day. You won't regret it! It will become part of your routine. It is you and God beginning each day together.

It's extremely important to make a second sit happen each day. This sit will reconnect you and recharge your batteries. It will ground you in God. It will re-center you and help you continue to perform your daily tasks with even more vigor than before. You will find that initially it slows you down, but paradoxically you become more productive. You will calmly item by item work your way through the rest of the day's tasks.

I suggest that you do your second sit in the mid-afternoon. Try to find a private place with little or no distractions. For example, during the work day I'm able to leave my desk and escape to my car and center there. If I am not able to do an afternoon sit, I escape to the basement and sit on my couch at home (notice I didn't say lay on the couch.) You will find out what evening time works best for you if an afternoon sit is not doable.

Do not underestimate the power of a second sit. It refills your reservoir. It's a terrific way to split up your day. Most importantly you take the time to slow down and reconnect with God. You let God pray and act in you. You let yourself become more and more the person God wants you to be.

Please do make time for the second sit. In time you will be amazed.

DO I HAVE A SPECIAL CENTERING PRAYER SPACE?

In the morning, I make my way to the basement and sit on a couch. Here I center at the genesis of my day. It's nothing fancy. As the weather gets cooler I cover myself with a blanket and light a candle prior to my sit.

I mentioned on a prior page that during the work day my second sit is in my car. For this afternoon sit. If I am not able to sit in the afternoon, I will again make my way to the basement couch.

Even if I have done my afternoon sit my daughter and I sit in the evening too. Together we center and then we just chill with each other. If you have a child I encourage you to share your practice with them. Often you will find they are curious. They want to know what you're doing sitting there in silence? My eight-year old son recently joined me. He proudly says, "Dad, do you want to CP with me?" Then together we do a one-minute sit.

I also suggest that you vary where you sit. Once in a while I do my evening sit in my backyard on a lawn chair. If I take a bike ride, I sit on a bench by the bike trail. I find that it easy to find a private spot. I highly encourage you to mix it up. This might mean in a park, in your backyard, in your car, or even in a different room in your home. If you are traveling you will not have a choice. While I travel I sometimes center in a moving car, in a hotel room, or in a pool area. God will meet you wherever you are.

HOW DO I TRANSITION FROM MY SIT?

After the closing bell rings, I recite a version of the Jesus Prayer. I recite aloud, “Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me/us/John/Cynthia... I will say a name, my wife’s name, my children’s names, my mother, my sisters, friends, my name. I simply pray that God be a strong presence in that person’s life today.

Next I like to read for five to ten minutes. I read books via kindle. I might read one or two pages of the New Testament or a few pages of a book that I’m reading. After I am done reading I get up and begin the day.

If my afternoon sit is done in my car during work, I recite the Jesus Prayer immediately afterward. I then walk back to my desk and finish the workday. If I sit in the evening, I follow the same process. This is where I am at now. I will leave it to the Spirit to guide me in the future.

I encourage you to create your own transition from centering prayer to your daily activities. Here are a few ideas: verbal prayer, read a book, take a walk, write, listen to music. You will find what works best for you. Be open to the Spirit.

WHAT ARE THE FRUITS OF MY PRACTICE?

We sit with God, our beloved. We do not sit with God for what we will obtain. We do not sit and expect a gift in return.

“Lift your heart up to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love, desiring Him for His own sake and not for His gifts.” This is a teaching from the classic contemplative book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

We enter centering prayer with no expectations to receive the gift of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is prayer in which we experience God’s presence within. We sit naked before God. It is God and us. Our whole being, body, mind and soul is in the pure presence of God. There is nothing between God and us. Contemplative prayer is a prayer of love without any ulterior motives. We pray because we love God. If and when God’s presence becomes known is not our business. Our business is simple to wait in silence and stillness, which are God’s first languages (John of the Cross).

Fruits of centering prayer... We do not enter this prayer for them. Each time we sit with God, we give God another opportunity to act in us. (I believe God also acts within us during our non-centering times.) We say, “Here I am God. Do with me whatever you want.” This time is unique for each person. God will do whatever God wants to do within you.

The actions that arise from my centering prayer practice are the fruits.

What actions has God prayed in me that will be revealed in my world?

I notice I have more patience. I am more willing to listen to my child, my friend, a co-worker without judgment. I am willing to see and hear things from a different perspective.

I notice that I react more calmly to situations when things do not go as I had hoped. I let the situation be. What can I learn from the situation? Many times I do not need to take any action. It resolves itself.

I notice I do not seem to panic when I have multiple tasks that need to get completed in a short period. Some of the tasks do not need to be done. Some of the tasks are simpler than I originally thought.

Lastly, I have more compassion, excitement for life, inner peace and wisdom for daily tasks.

Again, I did not enter this time for these fruits. They were freely given to me by God as I waited in silence and opened myself. As you continue your practice, you too will notice how you have been blessed with fruits as a result of your daily sits.

WHAT IS MY METHOD?

When I first practiced centering prayer, my thoughts often wandered. When this happened I utilized a sacred word. I recommend a one or two syllable word that is used throughout your silent sit.

One day I read a Richard Rohr daily meditation and saw a Jesus icon, which resonated with me. I had heard that an internal image can also be used in lieu of a sacred word. I began to mentally picture this icon during as my gentle prompt when centering. I continue to use this icon to open to God when my mind plans the remainder of the day or daydreams.

There is no right or wrong method to re-center yourself when your mind wanders. A word, an internal image, or you breath can be used.

Those that center with their eyes open might glance at a spot around six feet ahead of you on the floor. My daughter centers with me in the evening and utilizes the “sacred glance.” She does this to help her stay awake.

You might change how you choose to re-center yourself over time. Best not to change it during the sit!

Let me remind you of the four centering prayer steps in my words.

1. Select a sacred word as the symbol of your intent to open yourself to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes and internally repeat the sacred word slowly and silently.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, return ever so gently to your sacred word.
4. At the end of the centering prayer session, remain in silence for a minute or two before you resume your daily activities.

Silence is difficult. Don’t become discouraged. Start small and take baby steps. Perhaps initially you will only be able to handle five minutes. Gradually increase the time of your session to fifteen or twenty minutes. Slowly incorporate a second centering prayer time into your day.

I encourage you to find a local centering prayer group. They usually meet weekly.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RETREATS IN CENTERING PRAYER PRACTICE?

I have taken some mini centering prayer retreats where I meditate more often and for longer periods each day. I have found this time focused on centering prayer refreshing.

My friend Amos Smith swears by his yearly extended centering prayer retreats. He says that this yearly retreat deepens his practice so he is motivated to go back to his meditation cushion at home. He has mentioned that after a while the daily centering prayer practice can begin to feel dull or monotonous. A yearly extended centering prayer retreat allows one to go deeper and generates vigor and passion for one's daily practice. It is like stepping back and sharpening your favorite knife, so the daily cuts on the kitchen island are more efficient and effective.

I strongly recommend that you do a yearly extended centering prayer retreat. Here is a link for some centering prayer retreats. Search for a retreat offered in your area: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/calendar/listing> . You will also want to check nearby retreat centers to find their retreat offerings. Many centering prayer retreats are not listed on the Contemplative Outreach link above.

HOW DO I BEGIN?

Make a decision to try centering prayer for one month. At the end of the month re-evaluate if this practice is for you.

Start small. Take baby steps. Silence for many is difficult. I needed to start with silence in one minute bursts, then gradually increase the time.

Schedule your sits. Make your first sit the first thing you do before you start your day. Schedule the second sit in the afternoon or in the evening. Place it on your calendar. Put reminders in your cell phone that prompt you that it is time for your sit.

Read one of the books mentioned in the Resources section of this e-book.

Check out the web sites mentioned in the Resources section of this e-book.

Find a support group. Google centering prayer groups in your area. You might also want to check the Contemplative Outreach site for centering prayer groups in your area: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/contacts-usa> .

Use the Contemplative Outreach Centering Prayer App that can be found on iTunes.

Don't become discouraged. God is delighted that you want to sit with Him no matter how long your sit is. If you miss a scheduled sit, God infinitely loves you and looks forward to your next sit.

THANK YOU

I hope you have enjoyed my short e-book on centering prayer.

Centering prayer is not a race. It's a marathon. Centering prayer practiced on a daily basis will transform you. If you are faithful to your practice, your practice will be faithful to you.

Please email me or contact me on Facebook or Twitter and let me know how your practice is going.

Thanks for taking the time to read this short book!



Resources

I highly recommend the following books and web sites to learn more about centering prayer:

Books:

Arico, Carl J. *A Taste of Silence: Centering Prayer and the Contemplative Journey*.

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*.

Frenette, David. *The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God*.

Jelenek, Frank (Author), Boyajian Ann (Illustrator). *Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children*.

Smith, Amos. *Healing the Divide: Recovering Christianity's Mystic Roots*.

Web sites:

www.contemplativeoutreach.org

www.gravitycenter.com

www.RCMR5.org

www.SilenceTeaches.com/

*I also recommend the Centering Prayer app by Contemplative Outreach. It can be found on iTunes. I use it for my practice.