

# Resting in God's Presence

by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO

Centering Prayer as taught by Contemplative Outreach is a fairly nuanced practice. You can't always rely on what people say about the instruction they received. I have found that even after several years, people may not have fully understood how to do Centering Prayer. This becomes apparent during the Intensive Retreats or the Formation Workshops in which there is a careful review of the method itself.

One objection to Centering Prayer is as follows: "One is advised to let go of the sacred word just to rest in God's presence." That advice has to be taken in its proper context and depends on certain steps going before.

First of all, letting go of the sacred word in Centering Prayer is not a deliberate choice. Still less is it a permanent disposition. The whole thrust of Centering Prayer is to encourage us to let go of all thoughts. A "thought" in Contemplative Outreach terminology is any perception whatsoever including memories, plans, visualizations, external or internal sensations, feelings, and self reflections. Any kind of reflecting, even to make a choice, is a "thought," and hence, an invitation to return to the sacred word.

In the beginning our advice is: Resist no thought, retain no thought, react emotionally to no thought, and when you notice you are thinking about some thought, return ever so gently to the sacred word. One does not think about whether to return to the sacred word or not. One simply returns to it when thoughts are attracting one's awareness to a particular object.

We recommend the "discrete" use of the sacred word rather than its constant repetition. By this we mean using it as much as one needs it. This may be continuously at first. Beginners need it whenever they notice they are thinking about some other thought. In following this advice, we note the fact that the sacred word may become indistinct or even disappear for a limited period of time. When thoughts again engage our attention, we return to the sacred word as before. Thus, a disposition of alert receptivity is gradually formed.

Later we suggest returning to the sacred word or symbol only when we notice that we are attracted to some other thought. The meaning of this advice is that with time and regular daily practice one can discern intuitively whether one is disinterested in the thoughts that are coming down the stream of consciousness. Disregard of the thoughts is the sign that the consent of the will is becoming habitual. The will can be directed to God at a very delicate level without having to express its intention in a sacred symbol. Thus, from our perspective, the sacred symbol is not a means of going some place like an elevator. Still less is it a means of bulldozing other thoughts out of awareness. It is rather, a question of cultivating the spiritual level of awareness, which is real awareness, but without particular content.

This brings me to the chief difference between Centering Prayer, Vipassana and Hindu mantric practice. Centering Prayer comes out of the Christian Contemplative Heritage, inspired in the first instance by the Desert Mothers and Fathers and the Hesychastic tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, both of which cultivate interior silence and purity of heart. In the methods of meditation in the Eastern religions, the emphasis is on concentration for the sake of developing clarity of mind. By concentrative practices, I understand the use of the rational faculties and the imagination, physical movements and postures, and continued repetition of a word or phrase.

Centering Prayer is a passage from concentrative practices to alert receptivity through consenting to God's presence and action within us, which places the emphasis on purity of intention. Effort refers to the future, consent to the present moment where God, in fact, is. According to St. John of the Cross, purity of intention manifests itself during prayer as "a general loving attentiveness toward God." This is attentiveness not of the mind but of the heart. Its source is pure faith in God's presence leading to surrender to the interior action of the Holy Spirit in the here and now.

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