



## **An Introduction to Centering Prayer (a form of Christian meditation)**

**By Rebecca Cain**

I've been asked to write a short introduction to a form of Christian meditation called Centering Prayer. I've been practising Centering Prayer for over a year now and wrote my dissertation on the topic. I'd always felt that a meditation practise could be a useful thing (for some it's a life-saver). I'd also read that this form of meditation can give you an experience of God, and I know that I'm someone who needs to experience things rather than them be a mental concept. In other words, what's my felt experience of God as opposed to having to make some sense of God/ Christianity/ faith from church services and books (head stuff)? So, if you've ever thought of trying out a simple meditation practice, and have some time to spare (!) – then this could be for you...

### **A bit of background**

Christian meditation made its appearance in the post-modern Christian world in the 1970s. The three names most widely associated with the recent popularisation of these practices in the Christian West are Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and John Main – all Trappist monks. Latterly Laurence Freeman, a disciple of John Main, and Richard Rohr and his Centre for Action and Contemplation team advocate Centering Prayer as a central and vital part of their own spiritual practices and those of their institutions.

## How to do it

The method itself is well-described in many of Keating's writings and follows four simple steps during a silent meditation:

1. **Choose a sacred word as a 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 you become aware of 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.**

Keating (1994, p.16)

Keating recommends a twice daily practice of Centering Prayer, with a minimum of 20 minutes of silence for each prayer time. Examples of the sacred word practitioners may use include *Kyrie, Love, Abba, Jesus, God, Peace, Be Here* etc.

Choose a sacred word which feels right for you and stick to it during the 20 mins. I've used **Love** and **Peace** at different times. Your aim is to clear your thoughts and open yourself up to the divine presence. You may want to imagine yourself at the bottom of a river, sitting on a rock, and imagine your thoughts are like pieces of driftwood or leaves floating at the surface of the river above your head. Let them (the thoughts) float by. When you have a sense of yourself being caught up by a thought – and floating off with it, then gently let it go. Do this by returning to your sacred word and repeat this gently to yourself. **DO NOT WORRY** if your mind continually wanders – this is **TOTALLY NORMAL**.

There's a wonderful story of a nun describing her frustration as she tries to 'crack' this method, and saying to Thomas Keating, "Oh, Father Thomas, I'm such a failure at this prayer. In twenty minutes, I've had ten thousand thoughts". "How lovely," responded Thomas Keating without missing a beat. "Ten thousand opportunities to return to God!"

The overall intention of your meditation is to maintain 'an open receptivity to God' – this isn't a thought but a state. Your mind will try and pull you away from it. It takes practice, and then some...

The effectiveness of this method is not measured by your ability to maintain your mind in a steady state of clarity, openness and stillness. It is measured by

your willingness, when you find yourself “caught out” by a thought, to return again and again – ten thousand times if necessary – to that state of open receptivity.

Many people, on practicing Christian meditation report feeling calmer; report an increased feeling of centredness in their lives; describe feeling more connected with people and share an experience of being with God as a more intimate companion.

There are many books and YouTube clips about Centering Prayer, and in Richard Rohr’s daily meditations. An episcopal priest called Cynthia Bourgeault has written some great and accessible books on the topic, in addition to YouTube tutorials on the subject. Also check out Laurence Freeman and the World Community for Christian Meditation website.

### **Some things I can share with you from my own experience**

1. It requires discipline to sit down every morning for 20 minutes. I don’t always manage it. I sit in the same chair and sit upright and place both feet flat on the floor. I bring the intention to be open hearted to God. Sometimes I resist the practice. Sometimes I want to take coffee in with me, or a bun. I usually resist. Sometimes I don’t. Be kind to yourself. Allow grace (and buns occasionally).
2. It helps if I start off with reading a passage, and I tend to use Richard Rohr’s daily reflection – you can get them via email. Visit [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org) and go on their mailing list if you’re interested.
3. I set a clock for 20 mins; read the passage; and then close my eyes and settle in. If there’s some busy thoughts and feelings going on, I allow them to rage for a couple of minutes rather than try and ignore them. The act of allowing them in and ‘burning them up’ in a crucible (an image that was shared with me by a fellow meditator), somehow enables me to settle better.
4. I then sit for the remainder of the 20 mins. I say the sacred word in my mind; when my mind wanders for the 10, 000<sup>th</sup> time, I return to the word.
5. Sometimes I get caught up in a juicy thought, sometimes it’s just too tempting and you want to stay with it. When you catch yourself; then let it go and say the sacred word and hold your intention again.
6. Do NOT beat yourself up. Just doing the above is all that’s required. It’s not a competition or a race. If you find it hard ... do it anyway. Just notice that you find it hard.

7. Keating really recommends 2 x 20 mins per day. I've never managed this, but you might want to give it a try.

## **Benefits**

So, what have I noticed since doing this?

I think I'm less reactive than I was as a person. Don't hold me to this, and I dread to think how I was before if this is the case!!

The act of 'going in' somehow makes the natural world seem more vivid. I've literally been overcome with joy sometimes at the colour of the leaves or a beautiful sunrise. Maybe I'm experiencing being 'more present'.

Some of the benefits feel like they can't be put into words – literally like an expansion in my heart, or a sense of deeper knowing – whatever those words mean. A different 'felt sense', of my way of being in the world. As I said at the beginning, I'm an 'experiencer' and not such a heady person. I want to 'feel faith' in my body and heart; and this practice has enabled this.

Give it a go if it grabs your fancy. I'd be happy to share more if anyone is interested and wants to discuss it further.

I'd love to know how you get on. So please share at:

[rebeccaacain@outlook.com](mailto:rebeccaacain@outlook.com) (yes it has 2 letter 'a's in the middle).

## **Some further reading on Centering Prayer**

Bourgeault, C. (2004) *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. Cambridge, Mass. Cowley Publications.

Bourgeault, C. (2008) *The Wisdom Jesus*. Boston, Massachusetts. Shambhala Publications Inc.

Bourgeault, C. (2016) *The Heart of Centering Prayer*. Boulder, Colorado. Shambhala Publications Inc.

Gendlin, E. T. (1981) *Focusing*. New York, NY: Bantam Dell.

Keating T. (1994) *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer*. Colorado. The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Keating T., and Clarke T.E. (2002) *Finding grace at the center: The beginning of centering prayer*. Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing.