

CENTERING PRAYER — *GUIDELINES*

Transcript of Talk by

Thomas Keating ocso

Video clips of this talk has been posted on YouTube in URLs such as the following: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTxIZNAYGAs> which is entitled Centering Prayer - Centering Meditation & Prayer

[And so let's look at the guidelines from that perspective.] In this talk we're emphasizing the method, and so you could easily get stuck on well, how to do the method just right. But it's always a relationship. And that means - unlike certain other disciplines - that if you don't do it correctly, it doesn't matter. It's a help if you do it correctly, but it doesn't matter because it's your intention that counts, and the relationship is with God and God sees that you're trying hard to do a nice job, the best you can, however much you're stumbling. He's not going to hold your mistakes against you. He's looking at your love, and through another person or book eventually, or through the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, you'll correct whatever mistakes you're doing. The main thing to do is to do it. The principal method of Centering Prayer is to sit down! Now that isn't too hard for most people.

Once you sit down, then the Spirit has sort of got you, especially if you are determined to sit there for the 20, 25 minutes that you have agreed upon. If you do that every day, then your mistakes and misconceptions will gradually evaporate. Doing it is the primary discipline! But there are ways of doing it that facilitate this sitting. And so, let's look at the Guidelines.

Now the **First Guideline** is "choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you"



Guideline 1

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of Your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you.

Notice, please, "God's presence and action" - so we're working with a dynamic relationship, back and forth exchange, a conversation which has moved toward communion, or is moving in that direction.

The **Second Guideline** is: Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly - like I'm settling in this nice chair, breathing easily and so on - and then - after a few moments of not doing anything, just sort of settling, pausing maybe 10 or 15 seconds of quiet - you introduce, very gently, very casually, almost informally, the sacred word, that you had chosen in the first guideline, that symbolises the consent of your will to God's presence and action within. They (presence and action) always go together. God is not a statue, He's not a static force within us. It's a loving relationship in faith, and hence God can do all kinds of things, and suggest all kinds of things, and He does.

The **Third Guideline** is "When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."

Well, this is just to say, or acknowledge the fact that there are going to be various thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, noise in the room - people coughing - memories, imaginations, visualisations - sort of dreaming.

All of this "psychological material" you might say, is going to be flowing down the stream of consciousness as you sit there. And we say that it's inevitable, integral, and normal. So this is a terribly important thing to get through our heads if we've been trained in the doctrine of distractions, that distractions somehow are harmful or interfere with your prayer. Now if you're doing discursive meditation and are supposed to be thinking about something in particular, then other thoughts are distractions, and do interrupt your reflections and your prayer. But the Centering Prayer moves beyond that level of awareness. And it is designed to disregard the ordinary thoughts and activities of our psychological day-to-day awareness. So you're not on the same level that you usually are in discursive meditation. And hence you just disregard these thoughts, which

Guideline 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.

Guideline 3

When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

are more like noise in the streets or background music in the supermarkets that you put up with but pay no attention to.

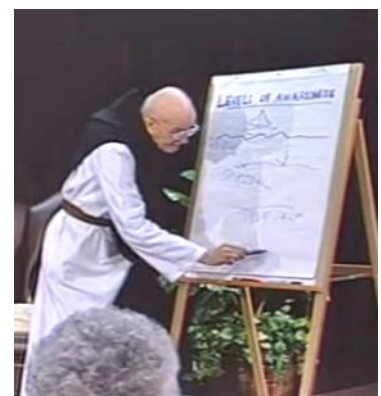
But it's important not to resist these thoughts. In other words, it's important to have a joyful attitude towards the thought. A friendly attitude towards the most dreadful thoughts. Not that you linger over them or act them out, but it's important that we expect them, and they're normal, and they're integral. And so you see them all with a smile, a sort of inward smile, so to speak. A jolly attitude is recommended. "Here they go again" - that kind of thing. "Ha-ha-ha". the reason for that is that any emotional frustration, or annoyance, or distress, or grief, is not appropriate, because that is another kind of thought. And because it's emotionally charged, it's more of a hindrance to entering into interior silence, which is the proximate goal of this prayer, than any number of casual thoughts that go by. so as soon as you're annoyed, you have a second thought which is much more disturbing than the first one.

And so there is great wisdom in taking for granted that there is going to be lots of thoughts, and endless thoughts, and that with practice you can disregard most of them. finally - there wouldn't be time in an introductory workshop to do this - it's crucial to have some kind of follow-up. You can only say so much in a 6-hour workshop, and all that the ordinary person can get is barely to get the four principles.

So it's very helpful to have some kind of a follow-up, like a 6-week programme to follow it up, using either the first six papers (?) - you've got those - or to read the first 6 Chapters out of the book *Open Mind and Heart* (by Fr Thomas Keating), and study them together.

Now let's look at the third one, which is perhaps the most crucial one for most of us. "When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word."

We said that thoughts are inevitable, we said they were integral - in other words they are part of the prayer - and as far as we can tell from our present level of experience, they are integral because they may be coming from the unconscious, and may be part of the

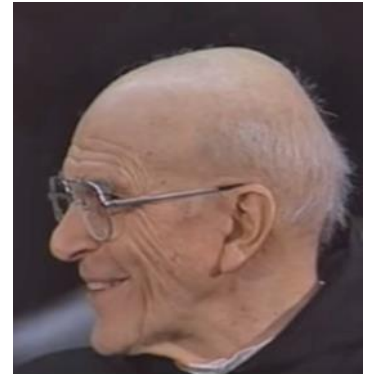


process of healing that I'll come to later in my next lecture. The Spirit works as a kind of divine therapist.

And one of the ways that He heals the unconscious is by allowing its feelings and its thoughts to surface especially during prayer, and then later sometimes outside the times of prayer. But it is precisely the programs in the unconscious - or what psychology calls the *dynamics of the unconscious* - that hinders the free flow of grace and hence need to be addressed by the Spirit, brought to our attention. And we have to let go of them both in our prayer and the consequences of them in our daily life. So you can see how Centering Prayer involves the whole of life; and the activity by which we bring about its fruits in daily life is almost as important a factor in the project as the actual time that we faithfully spend each day in the Prayer itself.

It works somewhat like this: Suppose you were in deep conversation with someone you love, high up in an apartment house, and the windows are open and the traffic is going by, and the noise you can't stop. but all of a sudden there's a crash in the street, and the noise decibels go up, and you naturally feel a curiosity to go see what happened. Well, this is what happens when interesting thoughts - or, boats - come down in the stream of consciousness. We want to look at them: what *are* we going to have for supper? And so on. and then, as your mind begins to look at this thing, or, that is to say: when the young man begins to go to the window to see what the accident was, he suddenly remembers: oh, what am I doing?! I'm in this deep cheek-to-jowl conversation, a heart to heart conversation. I'm not interested in - and it's not time to go looking to see - what's happening outside, or to judge what we're really going to have for dinner.

And so you want to reinforce, or reaffirm the original tête-à-tête that you were having. And so what would you do? You would turn your eyes back toward the Beloved, your friend, as a gesture of renewing the conversation from where it got somewhat disturbed. Or you might say, "Excuse me". Or you would say, "As I was saying... ." Well, that's what the sacred word does to you. It's when



you are lifted out of your basic intention and start watching thoughts that you are attached to, or have an aversion to, that you need to do something to return to the sacred word. But if the thoughts are going by like noise in the supermarket and you're not paying any attention to it and you're just dimly aware that it's happening, then there isn't a necessity to go back to the sacred word, because you're already at a place which the sacred word is meant to facilitate your reaching. (This place is) the abiding, turning, and resting in the presence of God within you, at the deepest level.

So let me just sum up very briefly in this modest diagram here, what I'm trying to say.



Suppose that this is our ordinary awareness, the stream of consciousness that we are experiencing during our time of prayer. And there are a few boats going by - the boats representing thoughts, feelings, images, and so on.



There's usually a fleet of them. Sometimes there's the whole United States Navy going down, with all the guns banging and so on.

So, whatever your experience, you're having thoughts going by at this level. Let's call the surface level the "ordinary level" of our awareness.

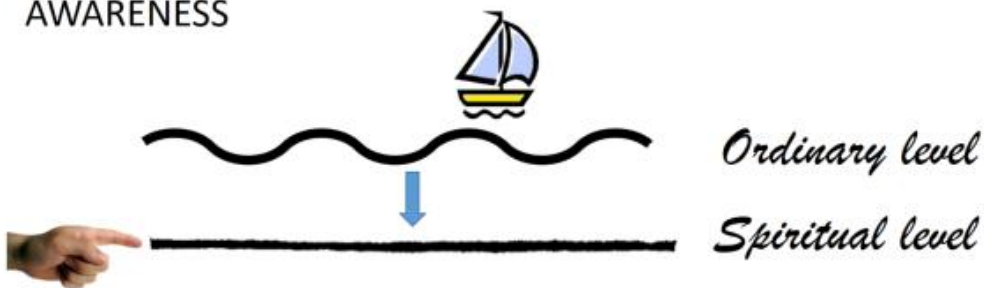
LEVELS OF AWARENESS



Ordinary level

At a deeper level that deeper level is called the "spiritual level" of our awareness, which you are not aware of most of the time except for the peak experiences or when life, tragedy or something brings you to that place. So we're mostly unaware of what might

LEVELS OF AWARENESS



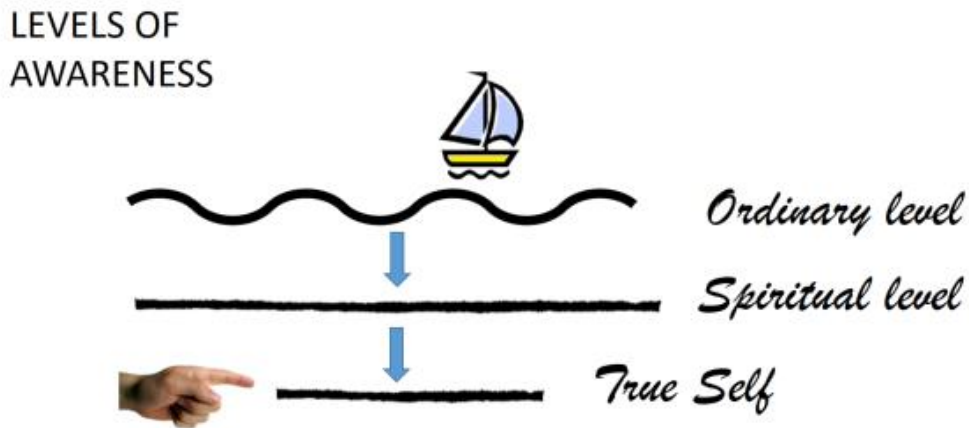
Ordinary level

Spiritual level

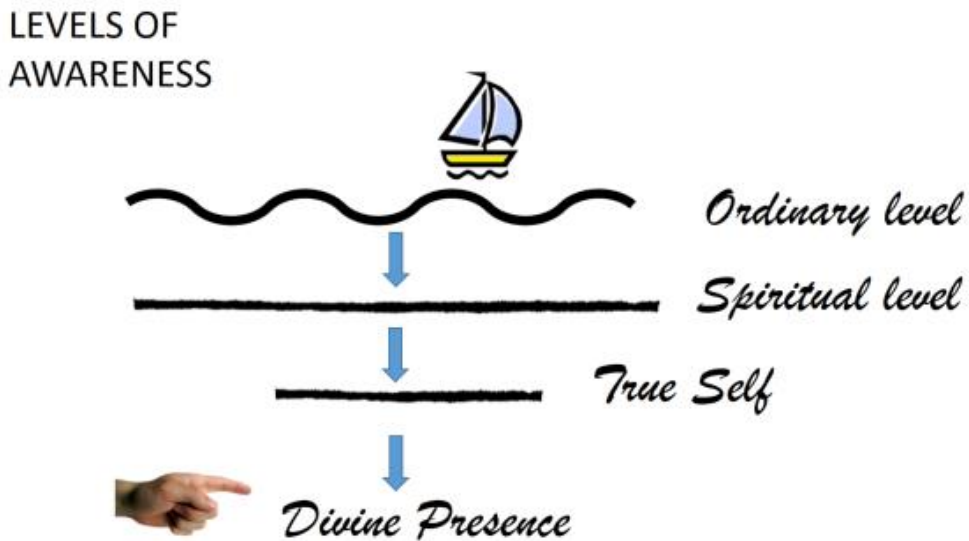
be called the river itself on which all our thoughts and faculties are resting. So we are kind of absorbed, or dominated, in our ordinary psychological life, by the objects of events or people, and our emotional reactions to them.

The purpose, then, of the Centering Prayer is to move from this (surface) level to this (deeper) level; and indeed not to stop there because the human being has greater depths than that, but to

move even deeper to the level of the True Self, which is our participation in the divine life.



And to the Divine Presence itself, as the Source of our being at every level.



And it is accepting, or awakening, our awareness to this Presence that is the ultimate goal or purpose of contemplative prayer or Centering Prayer. But to reach it we have to go through the Spiritual Level, and to awaken the True Self, and whatever of God's ul-

timate Divine Presence He may want to share with us - which is a whole new life. This is a transformed life, which it seems to me the Gospel invites us to, especially in St John where Jesus speaks of inviting us into the same union *and unity* that he experiences with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Hence this is so important again from the perspective of "prayer as relationship." Now there are so many prayers at this (1st or ordinary) level - our vocal prayers, our reflections, and our divine office, and the Sacraments. But each of these things, especially the Sacraments, have this mystical depth, or this "mystagogic" teaching which helps us to understand the symbols of the Church from this (2nd or spiritual) level, in which they are transformed, and their meaning becomes immensely more powerful, more attractive, and more personal - as well as, at the same time, "bonding" us with everyone else who is having a similar experience in grace.

And you might say that the Centering Prayer is primarily involved in awakening this particular (2nd or spiritual) level - as a preparation for going deeper still, which is the work of the various stages of contemplative prayer and mystical life.

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Useful addresses:

International Office
Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.
10 Park Place, 2nd Floor Suite B
Butler, NJ 07405

For additional information
Including a leaflet about the
method of Centering Prayer
call 973-838-3384
or visit the website

Of Contemplative Outreach:
www.contemplativeoutreach.org

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