

The Body in Centering Prayer

Despite first appearances, meditation is not an out-of-body experience. Everything that happens to you in meditation actually happens in and through your body. 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. 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. It allows the best conditions for staying present and attentive and for allowing your energy to circulate freely within you. 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. Unless you're accustomed to sitting in Lotus position don't cross your legs: it impedes the circulation of energy within you. 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. If you find yourself falling asleep, open your eyes and bring them to a soft focus; it will bring you right back.

Suddenly there will be an itch on your nose or throat tickle or cough; sometimes a leg goes to sleep or there may even be a sudden ache or cramp. Some of this can be caused by trying too hard. Relax! 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, 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.

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? Or should I just shift my body posture and be done with it? I usually opt for this last route. Why spend a whole prayer period in agony trying not to 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 alright to simply leave the room quietly and go settle yourself down.

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.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Most people who are influenced by mainline Christian communities are more accustomed to using the body in public worship and less-so in private prayer. Especially in “high-church” communities, such as Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches, public worship regularly engages the body through sitting, standing, kneeling, embracing, walking, bowing, smelling, seeing, and even consuming through the mouth. On the contrary, while private prayer might sometimes involve kneeling or bowing, it is most often taught as primarily a mind activity, heavily dependent on the use of words. If you were taught to also draw upon your heart in prayer, you are among a lucky group of those formed in private prayer by Christian teachers.

Given the wide dearth of exposure to using the body in private prayer, it surprises me how quickly most of us who have learned Centering Prayer pass quickly from the second of the four instructions, “sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred words as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within,” and presumably move on to the third instruction in order to get to the good stuff, or the heart of the prayer form. In my experience, I often stay in that second step for quite some time before I can even “think about” the thoughts of the third instruction. Admittedly, according to the teaching, the body sensations that often seem to linger well beyond step two, are technically considered as the “thoughts” of the third instruction. Nonetheless, I wonder, “what might the Divine Therapy of Centering Prayer look like when I presume that God speaks and heals equally through my body as well as my mind and my heart?”

Interestingly, the etymological roots of the word “contemplate” are made up of *com*, to mark out a space for seeing, and *templum*, or temple, the presumed space from which one has carved out space. Most of us associate temples with the large buildings suited to public worship such as cathedrals or mosques. We think of a temple as a place to go in order to pray; however, a temple is a temple not because it is a place, but because God dwells within. Contemplative prayer forms also presume that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians, 6: 19), a place where the Holy One dwells. It is important to remember that worship and adoration happen from within a temple; they are not directed at the temple itself. Similarly, the body as a temple, is not an object to be worshipped (such as our pop culture might lead us to believe); rather, it is already a place within which the Holy One dwells. When we offer our attention to the presence and action of the Holy One within during Centering Prayer, noticing the “thoughts” that arise gives us an opportunity to clear out space for seeing that they are not the same as God, yet they are within God. All of the thoughts provide the same service—heady concepts, hearty feelings, and yes, even and especially fleshy sensations. In the continuous “not seeing” of God through the rise and fall of so many thoughts, may we each hold more and more empty space for Divine Presence to occupy.

Questions for Reflection:

- What physical sensations are the “thoughts” that most confront you in your prayer?
- What concepts about the body do you hold outside of prayer? How do they show up in prayer?