

Text from the Tradition: Centering Prayer by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. (text drawn from pp. 70-77)

The Sacred Word in Centering Prayer

To facilitate a state of loving attention we have...the use of the prayer word, the word of love. In the first place, beginners often sense a great concern about just what word to use...In actual fact, we can almost say it doesn't matter what word we use...When we choose our prayer word, our word of love, quite instinctively we choose a quieting word, a gentle word, a soft word that quiets the mind and allows the heart space.

It is not infrequent that for a Christian the prayer word is the holy name Jesus...We can be quite free in choosing a prayer word that is meaningful to us. Here is perhaps something of the difference between Eastern techniques and Christian prayer...[In the Eastern approach the] word is to be repeated constantly during the time of prayer. This approach is quite different from that of Centering Prayer...The typical Eastern technique, seeking to achieve something in itself by the very activity of the one performing it, demands absolute fidelity to the technique until the end is attained. For the Christian, prayer is always a response. God initiates the activity and indeed is the source of our response. We, the pray-ers, move with the Spirit of God...We can and do use methods. But we can use them with the greatest of freedom. And the use of a prayer word is a method most suitable for...Christians. God has spoken to us. We have received the Revelation. We have received the Word...

Whenever in the course of Prayer we become aware of anything else we simply gently return to the Presence by the use of the prayer word. We do not use the prayer word constantly. It sort of hovers in our mind, somewhat like white sound, it is there to block out or blur other sound so we can be more free to attend to our errand. And so the prayer word, recalled at the beginning of our meditation, lies quietly in our consciousness, leaving us free simply to attend to the Lord of our love. We do not make any effort to repeat the prayer word. We certainly do not turn it into an affective ejaculation. Nor do we make an effort not to repeat the prayer word. We certainly do not judge the perfection of our prayer either by the frequency or the infrequency with which we use the word. We do not make it the aim of our prayer to decrease the frequency with which we use the word. We simply seek to be wholly present in love to God present to us, and whenever something draws us away from that Presence, we very gently employ the word to return fully to the Holy Presence.

We may indeed find that some days we seem to have to use the word constantly. No matter. This should cause us no distress. We just repeat the prayer word as gently as possible. To begin to get distressed, or to try to use the word forcefully to eliminate thoughts will only take us more out of the Prayer. The gentle repetition of the word will, on the other hand, place us ever more deeply and totally in the prayer, the movement into God that goes on underneath the thoughts and surface activity...

In Centering Prayer, we sink down into the quiet depths, where there is only a simple, peaceful flow from our Source into the Ocean of Infinite Love. What serenity, what tranquility, what peace; what vitality, what power, what refreshment! But, on the surface, a lot of activity is still going on. Thoughts are still careening along, feelings are being evoked, sounds are hitting our eardrums. And every once in a while, a flashy vessel or

a particularly interesting one arrests our attention and we find ourselves surfacing—or perhaps we have fully surfaced and all but climbed aboard the enticing boat before we are *aware* of having left the peaceful depths.

It is at this point that we use our prayer word. We do not so much turn from the thought or feeling. We do not think (another thought) of letting it go. We simply—with the gentlest repetition of our prayer word, maybe only the faintest recollection of it—return to the Presence...It is as gentle and effortless as that: a sinking down into the depths. If we but let ourselves go, we have a natural propensity to rest quietly in our Source. And so, throughout our prayer time, the thoughts, the feelings, the sounds, the images continue. We just let them flow along. Our attention is elsewhere.

We use the prayer word when we need it and to the extent we need it, and always gently. The thoughts and feelings and images will always be there. But it is only when we become *aware* of them, when they have drawn our attention away from the depths, from the Beloved, to themselves, that we need to deliberately—but always gently—employ our prayer word to return to the Presence...If thoughts and images and feelings careen around in our head and our heart, little matter. We pay no attention to them. We do not seek to get rid of them anymore than we seek to entertain them. As we give ourselves in our loving attention to God, we also give [our thoughts, and we allow God to do with them what God wants to do with them.]

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

In my early exposure to teaching on Centering Prayer, I was left with two mis-impressions: first, that the Sacred Word was to be used constantly like a battle-axe, cutting out those crazy-in-the-clouds thoughts; which leads to the second, that thoughts would somehow disappear in the clouds if I worked hard enough at just letting them drift across the sky. Certainly, it was my beginner's mind, and not the actual teaching presented to me, that received these production-and-effort-based interpretations of Centering Prayer. I would be in good company to approach Centering Prayer in this way, given the dominant capitalist and consumer quality of Western culture. Precisely for this reason, Basil Pennington's gentle insistence on the proper orientation of the sacred word and the appropriate expectation about the existence of thoughts is so important. In this approach, the sacred word serves as a symbol of intention to be in relationship with the Holy One, and therefore, should be tended to like a fine garment. Like all beautiful clothes, it should speak for itself...no glitter or sparkles necessary. At the same time that the sacred word has its proper use, thoughts also have a proper place. It is simply inhumane to suggest that the human mind will be free of thought. Rather, Pennington teaches us to let them be in their proper place on the surface of the mind, even as the treasure of our attention is placed in its true resting place, the inner depths of our heart. Rather than a sign of novitiate, the recognition that thoughts simultaneously preside on the surface and in the depths is an ongoing invitation to maturity when we appropriately use the sacred word to retain surface-thoughts in their proper place.

Questions for Reflection: in general, what do you notice in your head, heart, and senses from the text/teaching

- If you use a sacred word or image, how has your relationship to the word developed over time?
- What are your thoughts on thoughts?