

Questions About Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is one of the most wide-spread and laudable attempts today to introduce people to the life of prayer and dispose them for contemplative prayer.

But it is precisely because Centering Prayer is doing such important work that we would like to address these open questions to the world-wide Centering Prayer community in a spirit of gentle inquiry with the hope that any dialogue that results will only strengthen this movement.

1. Should people be introduced rather indiscriminately to Centering Prayer, as seems to happen, without an assessment of their experience of more discursive forms of meditation? Could they not benefit from exercising themselves in forms of meditation where they use their senses, imagination, intellect, memory and will in a more active fashion, and only later turn to Centering Prayer? If Centering Prayer is a preparation for contemplation, isn't meditation a valuable preparation, as well?

2. What kind of prayer is Centering Prayer? St. John of the Cross describes two fundamental kinds of prayer: meditation, which is the use of our natural faculties of sense, imagination, intellect, memory and will, and contemplation, by which he means infused contemplation, which is a gift of God and which we cannot do at will. According to this distinction, Centering Prayer is a simplified form of meditation, and not contemplative prayer according to St. John of the Cross. It is also, therefore, an active form of prayer rather than a passive reception, and it makes use

of our natural faculties in what St. John of the Cross would call a discursive fashion. But would Centering Prayer practitioners agree with this description?

3. In the practice of Centering Prayer there appears to be a deliberate and conscious reduction of the discursive activity of the faculties, but according to the psychology of Jung, the psyche, which embraces the conscious and unconscious, is a closed energy system. If energy disappears from one place it will appear in another. Energy, therefore, excluded from consciousness by the deliberate process of simplification that takes place in Centering Prayer, should appear in the unconscious. Would the process of Centering Prayer, therefore lead to an activation of the unconscious? Will this activation show itself, for example, in kundalini-like symptoms - that is, currents of energy, the appearance of lights and sounds, etc. - or show itself in the three temptations described by St. John of the Cross, that is, scrupulosity, sexual obsessions and temptations to blasphemy, or in other manifestations? How does the Centering Prayer movement deal with these kinds of things when they happen?

4. The Centering Prayer movement talks about the Divine therapist, that is, God as therapist, and the unloading of the unconscious, and thus leaves the impression that certain psychological effects are an integral part of the Centering Prayer process. But is such psychological work really a direct part of the life of prayer? Couldn't something like the unloading of the unconscious be an effect due to the exclusion of conscious psychic energy as described in the previous question? Shouldn't we make a clear distinction between the goal of psychological work and the goal of spiritual work? In short, isn't it possible that some of the

psychological dimension of Centering Prayer practice is actually "provoked" by the Centering Prayer method, itself?

5. The Centering Prayer movement seems to have been significantly influenced by Eastern forms of meditation, especially Zen. It has, for example, intensive prayer retreats which appear to be modeled on Zen sesshins. But does Christian prayer lend itself to intensive retreats like Zen does? Are the two really aiming at the same goals? Can the reduction of discursive activity in Christian prayer be subject to the means used in a Zen sesshin?

6. What is the relationship between Centering Prayer and infused contemplation? Centering Prayer has often been described as a preparation for infused contemplation, which is how St. John of the Cross described what he calls meditation. But the Centering Prayer movement sometimes leaves the impression that many of its habitual practitioners have moved from Centering Prayer as a preparation for contemplation to infused contemplation, itself, even though they are still calling it Centering Prayer. Is this what the Centering Prayer movement actually believes? How does it square this view of Centering Prayer with what St. John of the Cross teaches about the nature of infused contemplation?

In the spirit of Christian dialogue we invite your responses.

To learn about Centering Prayer, visit: www.centeringprayer.com and see our video [**A Centering Prayer Retreat with Basil M. Pennington.**](#)

Now it is your turn to contribute to this discussion. Send us your questions and comments: arraj@innerexplorations.com

The following response was composed by Bonnie J. Shimizu and approved by Fr. Thomas Keating:

1. Most people who come to a Centering Prayer Workshop already have an established prayer life even though the forms of prayer may vary greatly from one person to another. Any of the practices mentioned could be a helpful preparation but we assume that the Holy Spirit has directed people to us and if this is something they are called to, they will bring a practice. We are here only to teach the method to those who come to us and help support their practice if they ask us.

2. Centering Prayer goes beyond words, thoughts, and feelings and in that sense is not what John of the Cross calls "meditation." Infused contemplation as I understand it, even if defined strictly as gift, goes beyond words, thoughts, and feelings. Centering Prayer aids in this movement beyond the faculties and fosters the disposition of openness and surrender to God. It also could be noted that the gift of contemplation is one which is already given (the divine indwelling) and Centering Prayer simply cultivates our receptivity to the gift and helps to remove the obstacles to our awareness of it. It is basically similar to acquired contemplation. Fr. Ernest Larkin, O.Carm., has an interesting article on the nature of Centering Prayer as halfway between discursive meditation and infused contemplation in the January/February 1998 issue of **Review for Religious**.

3. I am not familiar with this particular Jungian model of the inner life. The simplification that occurs in Centering Prayer is not sought but is allowed to happen as it will. There is no manipulation of the content or process of the mind. However the attitude of receptivity does allow the contents of the unconscious to arise in the form of thoughts, images, and sometimes physical

movement such as twitches or itches. Very rarely do Kundalini symptoms appear even in the Intensive Retreats. Exercises are provided to balance the energies of the unconscious that may be released by the length of the periods of silent prayer. In ordinary life the short sessions of Centering Prayer provide a gentle and gradual release of unconscious material or other energies. The teaching of Centering Prayer is that we do not analyze the thoughts, feelings, images, etc., but we allow them to come and go. What is learned over time is an attitude of non-attachment to the contents of the mind and a deeper trust in the wisdom of God in moving through the difficult experiences that can sometimes arise during prayer. All models of reality are simply that - models. Even the best models cannot describe all of reality. Our attitude is to be faithful to the prayer and let God reveal reality in his own good time.

4. There is no clear division between the psychological and the spiritual except those created by the models of reality that we need in order to enlarge our understanding of certain phenomena. What happens on one level of our own personal reality has effects on every other level. The psychological experience of Centering Prayer is what happens or what we tell ourselves is happening in this growing relationship. It would be easier to deal with questions like this if the questioner had a practice of Centering Prayer to draw experience from. Purely theoretical questions about CP cannot adequately be answered.

5. CP Intensive retreats are not modeled on Zen sesshins. In terms of the number of hours each day devoted to practice, Zen sesshins sit for 10 to 12 hours or longer. In Intensive and Post-Intensive Centering Prayer retreats the participants practice Centering Prayer from 4 to 6 hours only. The antecedents of

Centering Prayer are thoroughly Christian and include the "Prayer of the Cloud" as described by a 14th century English author, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis DeSales, St. Therese of Lisieux, and many others.

6. There is no way to accurately judge when a person has moved from Centering Prayer with its minimal effort towards consent and surrender to God's presence, to a state of infused contemplation where the Holy Spirit is fully directing the prayer or "praying us." There are some signs, but no distinct states discernable to ordinary human discrimination. Those who are faithful to the practice of CP gradually give up the need to know "where they are" and learn to surrender more and more to what God wants to have happen.

Fr. Larkin responds:

1. Concerning #1: The Western Christian tradition seems to presuppose some experience in discursive prayer before encouraging the practice of contemplative prayer. Christians with no previous prayer experience are not likely to be attracted to centering prayer. If they are attracted, I would think they need to be taught *lectio divina* as well as centering prayer.

2. Concerning #2: I think your description of centering prayer and contemplation in the context of the terminology of St. John of the Cross is accurate. Centering prayer is very simplified meditation, in John's perspective; it is not sanjuanist contemplation, which is purely infused knowledge and love. My own article in the **Review for Religious**, January, 1998, does take centering prayer as a bridge between discursive prayer ("meditation") and infused contemplation, but in the dichotomy of John of the Cross between meditation and contemplation it belongs in the category of

meditation. In this view there is no room for "acquired contemplation," unless one defines the latter as a form of simplified meditation.

He writes in his **Review for Religious** article called, "Today's Contemplative Prayer Forms: Are They Contemplation?":

"John (of the Cross) has no transitional form between meditation and contemplation; the pray-er is praying one or the other. He does counsel simple attention or loving awareness at the onset of the dark night. While it is tempting to identify this practice with our contemplative prayer, the advice applies to a different situation. The simple attention presupposes the presence of God's special action infusing light and love in a subtle way, at times so subtle that the divine action may go unrecognized. We are dealing with the beginning of infused contemplation in the strict sense. The three signs will validate its presence, and the person gives a loving attention that is passive, "without efforts... as a person who opens his eyes with loving attention." For John of the Cross, contemplation is pure gift and simply received; there is no room for active collaboration. John's contemplation is not the immediate horizon of contemporary contemplative prayer forms."

"I have been practicing Centering Prayer for 2 1/2 years. I can only offer my personal experiences and am not an expert. I offer these experiences in order to facilitate the discussion with the hopes of arriving at a deeper mutual understanding, if possible.

I began experiencing kundalini-like symptoms three months after beginning the practice. They were quite intense at first. They have

continued in various forms since then. Lately, I only experience them at the very beginning of prayer. I am not aware of any other moral manifestations. Father Keating advised me personally to ignore them if I could, and if they were too bothersome to "balance the energy" with physical exercise or a yoga practice. He also recommended an encouraging book by Philip St. Romain, entitled **Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality.**" Gary Horn

"I have read two of Keating's books in which he speaks of the unloading of the unconscious, and I strongly disagree that this is wise without a very good therapist in addition. He makes it sound so simple and easy, which, where there have been no real traumas, it may, in fact, be. Of course, God **can** heal even deep emotional scars. But that isn't His ordinary way, and to expect Him to do so when a good therapist is available seems rather like expecting Him to heal cancer without consulting an M.D., as well.

In a good therapeutic relationship, psychotherapy and a spiritual pilgrimage can be harmonious - the goal of emotional health is not at all at odds with that of total surrender to God, since grace builds on nature. But unless one's spiritual director is **also** a fully qualified and experienced therapist, it is far safer, and better, to make a clear distinction between psychological and spiritual work." New York

Response to Bonnie Shimizu

The relationship of centering prayer to the doctrine of St. John of the Cross is a critical issue since Fr. Keating has made his dependence on John of the Cross, especially his **Living Flame of Love**, clear. To say that centering prayer is not to be equated with St. John's meditation, that is, the normal working of the faculties of intellect, will and memory, seems to claim for it a passivity that St. John reserves for infused contemplation. Further, to say that centering prayer is basically similar to acquired contemplation is to further accentuate this problem because John of the Cross knew nothing about an acquired contemplation between meditation and infused contemplation. The doctrine of acquired contemplation developed after his death, and is a misunderstanding of what he was saying. See, also, the remarks of Fr. Larkin above, which I think are well founded.

The gift of contemplation should not be identified without qualification with the indwelling of the Trinity. Infused contemplation is, indeed, intimately connected to this indwelling, but it is an actual experience of it that takes place through the activation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Everyone in the state of grace has the Trinity dwelling in his or her heart, for that is the central reality of sanctifying grace. But not everyone has a proximate call to infused contemplation, and thus has the gifts activated in the manner necessary for contemplation, and can therefore take up an attitude of passivity in relationship to this indwelling. Further, infused contemplation, when it grows past its delicate beginnings, is a state that is often discernable to the one who receives it.

I think it would be valuable if the centering prayer movement could show what the relationship actually is between centering prayer and the doctrine of St. John of the Cross. **The Editors**

Fr. M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, responds:

1. Should people be introduced rather indiscriminately to Centering Prayer, as seems to happen, without an assessment of their experience of more discursive forms of meditation?

We do not judge people. We presume they come seeking a deeper union with God. This is a thing of grace. We don't want to bind God's action to our conceptions of steps and stages.

Could they not benefit from exercising themselves in forms of meditation where they use their senses, imagination, intellect, memory and will in a more active fashion...

Yes, this is why Fr. Thomas and I regularly insist on lectio and share it at most prayershops.

and only later turn to Centering Prayer?

Why only later?

If Centering Prayer is a preparation for contemplation, isn't meditation a valuable preparation, as well?

Centering Prayer is not only an opening to contemplative prayer but it is often contemplative prayer.

2. What kind of prayer is Centering Prayer? St. John of the Cross describes two fundamental kinds of prayer:

Are we bound to accept John of the Cross (a great mystic but a man of his times -- post-reformation rationalist period in the Church) as the norm for all our philosophical and theological thinking about prayer? There were fifteen centuries of tradition before him. He belongs to a particular school or tradition, the Carmelite. Centering Prayer comes from the Benedictine-Cistercian tradition, a more ancient, beautiful and simpler tradition.

meditation, which is the use of our natural faculties of sense, imagination, intellect, memory and will, and contemplation, by which he means infused contemplation, which is a gift of God and which we cannot do at will. According to this distinction, Centering Prayer is a simplified form of meditation,

This does not reflect an adequate understanding of Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer does not cease in those times within those twenty minutes when God takes over more completely. To tell someone that he is doing Centering Prayer when he begins, then when the Lord begins to move him by the gifts he is now doing contemplative prayer, then when some thought or sound or something comes along and he uses his prayer word again he is back in Centering Prayer and then when he again is moved by the Spirit he is in contemplative prayer, etc.... is really not helpful. Let the scholars play with their distinctions if they want but leave pray-ers at peace.

and not contemplative prayer according to St. John of the Cross. It is also, therefore, an active form of prayer rather than a passive reception,

Centering Prayer is a totally active prayer - we give ourselves as fully as we can to God in love -- and it is totally passive -- we are wide open to whatever God wants to do with us during the prayer.

and it makes use of our natural faculties in what St. John of the Cross would call a discursive fashion. But would Centering Prayer practitioners agree with this description?

Not if they are truly practicing CP and understand what they are doing.

3. In the practice of Centering Prayer there appears to be a deliberate and conscious reduction of the discursive activity of the faculties, but according to the psychology of Jung, the psyche, which embraces the conscious and unconscious, is a closed energy system. If energy disappears from one place it will appear in another. Energy, therefore, excluded from consciousness by the deliberate process of simplification that takes place in Centering Prayer, should appear in the unconscious. Would the process of Centering Prayer, therefore lead to an activation of the unconscious? Will this activation show itself, for example, in kundalini-like symptoms - that is, currents of energy, the appearance of lights and sounds, etc. - or show itself in the three temptations described by St. John of the Cross, that is, scrupulosity, sexual obsessions and temptations to blasphemy, or in other manifestations? How does the Centering Prayer movement deal with these kinds of things when they happen?

The third point: Whenever we become aware of anything we very

simply, very gently return to God by use of our word.

4. The Centering Prayer movement talks about the Divine therapist, that is, God as therapist, and the unloading of the unconscious, and thus leaves the impression that certain psychological effects are an integral part of the Centering Prayer process.

CP is not properly a process, it is rather a state of being with natural effects as well as supernatural which are not an integral part of the prayer but something that can result from it.

But is such psychological work really a direct part of the life of prayer? Couldn't something like the unloading of the unconscious be an effect due to the exclusion of conscious psychic energy as described in the previous question? Shouldn't we make a clear distinction between the goal of psychological work and the goal of spiritual work?

Yes --the essence of CP is to give oneself in love to God -- if one is seeking anything else it is not CP and will not have the same effects.

In short, isn't it possible that some of the psychological dimension of Centering Prayer practice is actually "provoked" by the Centering Prayer method, itself?

5. The "Centering Prayer movement "

It is not clear just what this expression includes. CP itself is an ancient Christian form of prayer which was in no wise influenced by Zen.

seems to have been significantly influenced by Eastern forms of meditation, especially Zen. It has, for example, intensive prayer retreats which appear to be modeled on Zen sesshins. But does Christian prayer lend itself to intensive retreats like Zen does?

Yes -- the whole Christian tradition, beginning with our Lord, of going apart for prayer.

Are the two really aiming at the same goals?

Concretely, no. CP aims at and enters into union with God in love. Zen cannot conceive of such a reality.

Can the reduction of discursive activity in Christian prayer be subject to the means used in a Zen sesshin?

Christian Zen masters believe so.

6. What is the relationship between Centering Prayer and infused contemplation?

Centering Prayer includes infused contemplation if God wants to give it.

Centering Prayer has often been described as a preparation for infused contemplation,

By whom? This reflects an incomplete understanding of CP.

which is how St. John of the Cross described what he calls meditation. But the Centering Prayer movement sometimes

leaves the impression that many of its habitual practitioners have moved from Centering Prayer as a preparation for contemplation to infused contemplation, itself, even though they are still calling it Centering Prayer. Is this what the Centering Prayer movement actually believes? How does it square this view of Centering Prayer with what St. John of the Cross teaches about the nature of infused contemplation?

Is everyone to be burdened with squaring with John of the Cross? Let the scholars of John of the Cross worry about this and let us contemplate in peace.

A RESPONSE TO FR. BASIL

There is certainly more to the Christian mystical tradition than John of the Cross. But looking at centering prayer from his perspective is worth while because of the tremendous influence that both he and Teresa of Avila have had on the Western Christian mystical tradition over the last 400 years, and because Thomas Keating has stated that John of the Cross, especially in his **Living Flame of Love**, where he talks about the transition from meditation to contemplation, had an important influence on his development of centering prayer.

If our memories serve us right, you, yourself, once wrote an essay called "Centering Prayer - Prayer of Quiet" in which you tried to clarify the relationship between them. That is just what we would like to do. Is centering prayer a simplified form of affective prayer, or something like Teresa's active recollection, so that it is a prayer we can do whenever we desire? If so, then it is fair to call it a preparation for contemplation. But if we identify centering

prayer with the prayer of quiet, that is, with the beginning of infused contemplation, then it is hard to see how we can call it a method, or recommend it to all sorts of people. Do many practitioners of centering prayer actually receive graces of infused contemplation? Do they realize that they are receiving these graces? These points are not purely theoretical, but very practical because they help determine whether we should try to be active in prayer, or passive. **The Editors**

Bob Gravlin responds:

I think a closer comparison of CP may be to transcendental meditation.

Despite the differing philosophies of TM and CP the psychological process of both is "effortless" meditation as opposed to the force used to attain stillness used in some forms of Zen. Also the retreats are similar to some TM extended retreats. For some of the dangers of TM we could use as comparisons for honest ??

Check out: <http://www.trancenet.org/groups/tm.shtml>

God Bless, Bob.

Bob & Betty Gravlin

<mailto:rbg@tetranet.net>

St. Louis, MO

An Anonymous Pray-er

Since I have experienced the grace of infused contemplation, you asked for my comments. I would like to comment on numbers 1 and 6.

1. Regarding different prayer forms, I would say that the more the entire personality is engaged in prayer, the closer the prayer is to infused contemplation, because in infused contemplation, it is the whole person that is raised up to God. By prayer, I am referring to what occurs in our formal prayer/meditation times, along with the intention of our will towards God throughout the day as we are engaged in our various activities. The greater the recollection in God, Scripture, and Church teaching throughout the day, the deeper the prayer life.

I believe there is much confusion regarding detachment in general and the senses in particular with respect to infused contemplation. From one perspective, it is true that we do not have the ability to experience God with our senses. However, in infused contemplation, God is experienced in a concrete and tangible way. How can this be? The answer is simply this: While we ourselves do not have the ability to perceive God, he has the ability to communicate himself to us in a way that we can directly experience. In infused contemplation, this direct experience of God "spills over" into the entire personality, the senses, and the body itself and impacts them in tangible ways that are almost impossible to describe. For myself, once I had received the grace of infused contemplation, I found that the following activities and prayers were conducive to infused contemplation. In other words, these activities seemed to open the flood gate, once the inflow of infused contemplation had begun:

The Mass.

The Liturgy of the Hours.

Meditation on Scripture.

Genuine expression of sorrow for faults and failings, along with

regular
participation in the sacrament of reconciliation.

This makes sense, since God is directly present in the Mass, in the Word, and in the sacrament of reconciliation. That being said, I would add that there is no type of prayer or meditation that specifically leads to infused contemplation. It is a sheer gift, given for reasons that are known by God alone. Rather, I would say that someone who receives the grace of infused contemplation will generally pass through the various stages of infused prayer described by St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. All Christians are called to a life of prayer. Some people experience infused contemplation. Others experience the same growth in faith, hope, and charity without experiencing infused contemplation. I would like to stress that the holiness of the latter may well be greater than the holiness of the former. "Blessed are they who have not seen, but have believed."

6. When someone receives the grace of infused contemplation, that person knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that he or she has been touched by God. With respect to centering prayer, in all fairness I must say that my experience is limited. For me, it is not conducive to infused contemplation. As I understand centering prayer, it involves an attempt to transcend all thought and emotion in an effort to rest in the "ground of our being." In me, the method of centering prayer leads to a natural state of blankness that is quite different from infused contemplation. In infused contemplation, the personality is transcended, but in an entirely different way, and not by a process of elimination. Rather, the entire person is "raised up" and absorbed into God. Every part of the person is divinized -- sometimes in a highly accelerated way, as in a rapture; sometimes

to a lesser degree in an ecstasy; and also gradually over time, as infused contemplation is experienced during prayer and outside of prayer as one continues through the purgation process that plays itself out in everyday life.

Gradually, the more intense experiences of infused contemplation level out into a peaceful resting in God. This may be where the confusion arises between infused contemplation and the experience of centering prayer. While I can speak of my own experience, I can't speak to the experience of anyone else. No one knows for sure what someone else experiences in prayer. Words are so inadequate. In Christ, An Anonymous Pray-er

Robert Hannon

The response of the editors to Fr. Pennington seems to miss his point. The questions you pose may have theoretical value to academics or theologians but add little to the actual process of drawing closer to God. Trying to push C.P. into categories established by St. John of the Cross seems misguided. Having read a good many Fr. Keating's works he, by far, refers more to the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" than to St. John, and as Pennington states C.P.'s roots lie more firmly in a different Cistercian soil.

I respectfully ask if a process draws us closer to God, opens us to the Divine and stirs us to take up Christ's cross and follow Him to what ends does it serve to pursue your questions? God's ways are beyond our ken.

Another Perspective

I would like to comment on the use of the Divine Name (Sacred word, Christian mantra) in contemplative prayer. When I sit to pray I begin easily thinking the Divine Name. This is how I show my intention to be praying. This easy prayer starts a psycho-physical process that comes up my body and flows into my head. Once the process is started it can do many things (it has been going on for over 30 years) but the best is being raptured up into Divine Light or Divine Awareness or the Face of Christ. If I sit and think the Divine Name a few times and then stop, "and wait on the Lord," nothing happens, I am waiting like I wait for a bus. But if I start and continue thinking the Divine Name then the process starts and I am rapt up into Light. God seems to have to be there for me to wait on Him. I use the Divine Name to knock on the Door, when it is opened I am rapt through, and both me and the Divine Name are outshined by the Light. If the Door doesn't open then I continue knocking. "Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened."

The Editors: In light of what you have said, what do you think of the practice in centering prayer where they only use the Sacred Word when they become conscious of becoming distracted? It seems that otherwise they are relying on their intention to keep them in the presence of God.

Response: I have formally learned Center prayer. I have been on retreat with Fr. Keating and read three of his books. It was only in rereading one of his books that I noticed he was advocating a slightly different practice than I was doing. I started T.M. in 1966 and I probably still do it but now with a Christian intention and Divine Name.

Centering prayer seems to teach that the Sacred word is to be

used to state your intention to be open to the presense and action of God. It is also used, when distracted, to refresh your intention. They seem to feel that the ideal would be a silent intentive waiting. This just doesn't work for me. And I have talked to others who have had the same experience. For me the thinking of the Divine Name is the intention. This thinking makes it prayer. The Divine Name is the Vehicle(Ark) that is taking me on the spiritual journey.

Their system must work for other people, and it is all grace given, but in my practice there is something I must do and that is pray the Divine Name. I hope this answered your question.

Response

I think some of the confusion which leads to the debates in your column may come from the difficulty of speaking of such matters in words that anyone else can understand. For instance, the Anonymous prayer feels that cntering prayer is trying to lead to blankness, as opposed to the absorbtion in thoughts and visualizations in more affective or discursive meditation. Unlike the Prayer, I find that, far from encouraging a "blankness" that in a session of Centering Prayer I find myself resting in the fullness of a loving God, not in any spectacular ecstasy, but as if feeding deeply on a living food. For me, discursive meditation and many other similar prayer forms leave me cold and frustrated.

I think it is important that people realize that the call to prayer is deeply personal. Traditional Christian meditations like the Ignatian Exercises leave me cold and unsatisfied, but they may works beautifully for another. The deep rest in god that I find

incentering prayer may just be a source of boredom or frustration for another. What is important is that we all pray, whether vocally, discursively, affectively or in contemplation. Anything that brings us closer to God is a reflection of the divine life.

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Another Response

Dear James,

Have been browsing through the pages of "From St. John of the Cross to Us". I have found Chapter 13 particularly interesting. For the last 13 years, at least, I have pondered often how it was that the Christian Church, and particularly the Catholic Church, lost touch with the sacred tradition which had been handed down to her from the Apostles, and particularly from St. Paul. There is no doubt in my mind that a huge dichotomy exists in what people mean when they use the word Contemplation. The vast majority of those who read Scripture understand it only in the literal sense, they do not perceive the spiritual sense which only reveals itself to deep intuitive understanding. As Cardinal Newman liked to quote, "Heart speaks to heart, the tongue only to ears". So it is with prayer. No matter how much a person may "centre" his prayer it will remain purely "juridical contemplation", as Merton referred to it. What makes the difference, and moves prayer into the realms of Contemplation, is when that prayer is truly inspired by Charity. Charity which gives unstintingly of itself to others. Only those who humble themselves to the very depths of their beings will "find" Christ in their prayer. If only Our Lord's "New Commandment" were taken quite literally, "To love God with all your mind, all your heart and all your strength", AND to love your neighbour as yourself". In practice, most people concentrate

almost exclusively on the first part of that commandment and conveniently pass over the second part. I am utterly convinced that it is only when we adhere to the whole commandment that prayer ceases to be something which we do and becomes something which we receive through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and is then truly Contemplative, i.e., infused prayer.

Questions about Centering Prayer II

The discussion about centering prayer, *Questions about Centering Prayer*, has covered a lot of good ground, and so it is time to start a new page to pursue the theme further.

Infused contemplation & Centering prayer

By God's kindness, in the last three years I been given the gift of infused contemplation, apparently as preparation to unexpectedly becoming formation director for a lay-Carmelite community in my parish. My experience is much like the "anonymous pray-er" who notes that with this gift comes a dynamic mutual re-inforcement of divine union in Liturgy and every moment of daily "ordinary" life. 20 years ago I had 1 year as a hermit, then 5 years in a Discalced Carmelite Monastery (but did not take vows) This early training has "flavoured" the rest of my life and subsequent relations with God, although my life did not permit much reading of anything beyond old spiritual classics available free from libraries. God took care of my formation, for I was unable to find spiritual direction relevant to my journey.

I had heard about Centering prayer, but as I was secure on the way God had chosen for me, I felt no urge to try it. A holy woman in my parish involved in prison ministry however, said it was wonderful; she has been doing it some years. But this same woman a year ago said that she now has to pray for protection from the Devil before engaging in her centering prayer. She was having "unpleasant" experiences during prayer, which obviously disturbed her. She did not seem to have good guidance to help her deal with this. Why should a person with a healthy prayer life, and supposedly a good spiritual director, need a therapist? This sounded odd to me--!

Then I went to the Carmelite Conference in San Antonio in July 2001. There were Carmelites of both branches and all stripes there, priests and cloistered nuns, a few hermits, and many laymen, --including some third-order novices who, in conversation, revealed that they barely had a notion of what contemplative prayer really was. One of the general assembly sessions, to hundreds of people, was an explanation of and an experience of Centering prayer. I was openminded, obeyed all the instructions, and experienced an altered state of consciousness which, while impressive with what is I suppose is termed "kundalini" energy, ending with an amazing image of a shining Monstrance, it was nothing like the "real thing" which is the profoundly powerful imageless, and peaceful gift of God I was already familiar with. Discernment over the next few days told me this experience was a desolation, not a consolation--it disturbed my interior peace and was not of God. Though no neurophysiologist, I did study biology, (I am a retired ornithologist) and came to the conclusion that centering prayer --in me at least-- was moving my brain waves from an alpha to a theta state; this was in fact a kind of self-manipulation of the mind-

consciousness. Even if done with the intention of pleasing God, Centering Prayer could present serious problems for mentally or emotionally stressed or potentially unstable individuals. I found it disturbing therefore, that this technique was taught to a huge crowd, without knowing if it was suitable for all in the audience, especially at a Carmelite conference; it was presenting Centering Prayer as endorsed by the Carmelite Order. This bothers without upsetting me; God and Our Lady protect and guide the superiors of the Carmelite Order without regard to my opinions, which are entirely insignificant.

Now it so happens that I am formation director of a third order O.Carm. community at my parish; the question of whether I recommend Centering Prayer to beginners on the way of perfection is an important one. I think Centering Prayer may do no harm to those long past the purgative way, and this of course includes its teachers. However, after much prayer and discernment, I am emphatically not recommending it if any novice in my group asks me about it, recommending instead the classic Carmelite ways. wenner@pdq.net

Editor's Comments

Let me comment, in turn, on a couple of points. First, the woman who has to pray for protection from the devil. This seems to indicate some real activation of the psyche, and it points in the same direction as the experience you relate which you liken to an awakening of kundalini energy. I have touched on some of these issues in my book, "From St. John of the Cross to Us" when talking about Thomas Keating's work. It is online at <http://www.innerexplorations.com/catchspmys/fromst1.htm>

I really have to wonder whether the Carmelites are turning to various alternatives to Teresa and St. John's understanding of contemplation because they are simply not attuned to it. If there is a vacuum it will tend to be filled by things like centering prayer, or even Eastern forms of meditation like Vipassana that some Carmelites are promoting. In the book I just mentioned I try to look at the historical reasons - the why and how - this took place. Clearly it seems to be that most people do not go by the way of manifest contemplation, but equally clearly, this is what the great Carmelite mystics were talking about, so this is a practical issue that needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, centering prayer seems to side-step this problem by acting as if what it does is equivalent or identical to St. John's contemplation.

Richard Parker on Centering Prayer and Kundalini

I am a 54 year old Catholic professor in Educational Psychology.

I began Centering Prayer two months ago after reading three of Fr. Keating's books and attending a 1-day introduction by him. I began 20 minutes twice a day, but found the practice rewarding, and so expanded to 40 minutes, usually three times per day (when schedule permits).

I used my sacred word to pull myself back from distractions, as advised, though these distractions were few after a few weeks. After about a week, I had the odd sensation of splitting awareness, with half of my awareness resting in loving euphoria, and unable to even recall the sacred word. This reoccured only a few times.

After two weeks another interesting event occurred; I was simply removed from time, and my 40-minute buzzer seemed to sound

only shortly after I clicked it on. Leaving and re-entering a sense of time were marked by a faint click or pop about the brain.

At that same time, I began to feel energy or electrical current rushes through my body, and some stomach muscle cramping. For the next few weeks, these sensations intensified, and bodily shaking/twitching began, lasting from several seconds to perhaps 5 or 10 minutes. A mild euphoria accompanied.

I could willfully stop these sensations, but instead prayed fervently to Christ to help lead me away from them if they were not efficacious to his will. I offered them up to him, and strived to remove any ego involvement in them. My more fervent focus on loving Christ tended to accelerate these symptoms.

Presently, my physical sensations are intensifying both during Centering Prayer and beginning to show during the rest of my waking and sleeping hours as well. My first goal has always been to become personally transformed to a better moral, social and spiritual being, and maybe there is some progress there, but not great. The major change has been my enthrallment with the liturgy and with Christian mystical writing generally. I give a much more "interior, mystical" and experiential reading to scripture. This is probably the first Lenten season where I am actually living the liturgical calendar, and I love it!

1. What kind of prayer or meditation do you practice?

Centering Prayer

A. What do you do?

40 minutes of prayer, usually 3 times per day

B. Do you have regular times for it?

Yes; AM, PM, mid-day when possible.

C. A special place?

Corner of bedroom before a large cross.

D. What are its effects on you?

Very positive; keeps me focused on spiritual universe. Reduces importance of the mundane. May make me a better social being, but I am not certain yet about that.

E. What happens if you skip it?

I long for it--has become an addiction.

2. What got you started in your life of prayer or meditation?

Divorce and depression.

3. How has your prayer or meditation changed over time?

It's only 2 months old, but changes every week. Seems to be developmental.

4. What expectations do you have for the future? What would you like to see happen?

Infused prayer, and a personal social transformation.

5. Do you belong to a particular religious tradition?

Yes, returned Catholic.

A. How has it helped your life of prayer or meditation?

Provided me with a Liturgy, much writing, and a fine history of mystics.

B. How has it hindered?

Would hinder only if I took the structure and certain teachings too seriously.

C. How much have you looked outside your own tradition?

I am doing increased reading in all other faiths, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.

D. What hopes and fears do other traditions inspire in you?

Eastern religions offer much wisdom on meditation techniques. Layayoga may help explain some of the strange physical symptoms I am experiencing in prayer.

E. Have you ever switched your tradition and why?

In the past, I was Protestant for 4 years, some Pentacostal

experience. But found that much narrower than what the Catholic church, at its best, can offer.

F. What are the good and bad points of your own tradition?

I believe one of the Berrigan brothers brothers said the Catholic church is part angel and part whore. How can you not love and hate her, given her history?

6. What effectively taught you about the life of prayer or meditation?

A. Reading?

Books by Fr. Thomas Keating.

B. Spiritual friends? No.

C. Your own experience? Yes, after reading.

D. Going to your place of worship or meditation? No.

E. A spiritual teacher or spiritual director? No.

7. How has your spiritual teacher helped or hindered you? N/A

8. How does your life of prayer or meditation effect your emotions? Am not sure.

9. Have you ever had out of the ordinary experiences connected with your prayer or meditation?

A. Energy movements or inner lights or sounds? Yes -- strong and chronic--building.

B. Visions or revelations or communications from beyond? No, not recently. In early years, however I did have a visual and auditory experience of Christ, which told me to shape up and follow him. I chose not to shape up at that time.

C. What importance did you give to these experiences?

Kundalini-like experiences are strong. I am just going for the ride, trying to stay Christ-centered, and hoping for the best.

10. What lifestyle issues effect your life of prayer or meditation?

To meditate, I am finding a need to clean up my life. Have made good progress, but more subtle areas still need attention.

A. Time or the lack of it?

Have lots of independent time to pursue Centering Prayer.

B. Single or married life; children?

Recently divorced, and live alone, so I can blame nobody for my failings.

C. Work?

Am a professor with very flexible hours.

D. Diet, sleep, sexual activities, etc.?

Diet and sleep are quite good / well regulated. I do not yet know the affect of sex on my contemplative journey.

Editor's Comments

I have no doubt that the awakening of kundalini-like symptoms in the context of trying to lead a more contemplative life would be quite exciting, but since we have heard from a considerable number of people with analogous experiences I would have one cautionary note to sound. It is not at all clear, in fact, I doubt that kundalini phenomena, per se, can be identified with the Christian contemplative path. If this is true, then you have to be careful about pursuing the kundalini dimension of the experience, not only because it might make the attainment of your ultimate goal more difficult, but because the activation of kundalini can take on a life of its own and be difficult to control. Clearly this is a very complex issue, i.e., the interface between the kundalini experience and the Christian contemplative one, and it is just being worked out in our own times. Perhaps you are familiar with the book of Philip St. Romain, Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality which is very helpful in this regard. I hope this does not sound too negative to you, but as you will see from some of the comments on the website, some people have had a hard time with kundalini.

Richard Parker

Your comments sound sensible. I don't mistake these experiences to be movement of the holy spirit; they feel too much part of a psycho-physical agenda. Though they do clearly interact with my more traditionally religious sensibilities, they are different. I am self-monitoring daily to see if they could be serving as obstacles or diversions to my Christian path. So far, the answer is no, except for occasional odd mood swings, concentration problems and headaches. It is clear that this force is emerging, accelerating, and has a life of its own, so it could probably only be stopped if I quit my Centering Prayer practice altogether. I did just the other day read Philip St. Romain's book--enough to give anyone pause. I also did quick-reads on two books specifically on Kundalini, and the non-spiritual manipulations of energy are really not attractive to me at my age.

I look back and can now see a developmental sequence in my Centering Prayer:

1. Week One: learning to quiet my thoughts and emotions.
2. Week One and Two: learning where to put my attention, how to handle breathing, and how much to say my sacred word. I decided to focus my attention on my heart, instead of out into space or some uncertain space. It is natural to match the saying of the word with breathing, so I decided to say my word on the out-breath. I also determined to transform the word to a sentiment or "heart-urge" of devotion to God through Christ. Trying out various prayer stools--eventually made my own. Tried John Main's 'Maranatha', but it seemed ridiculous; the less I say, the better.

3. Weeks 3-4: I learned how to accept the "out of normal consciousness" or "splitting of awareness" experiences without thinking "oh-my-gosh; what is happening?" or dwelling on them. Strong electricity-like energy currents and pressures through body. Spontaneous crying with gratitude after each session.

4. Week 7-8: First energy currents noted during the day when I am simply introspecting and relaxed, causing me to pray--very pleasant experience. Awakening interest in church liturgy, sacred music. Copious crying after Centering Prayer and at various times during the day. Some unpleasant cottony headaches begin, lasting all day. I learn how to partially control the energy flow through a "sub-breath" (allied to breathing, but more subtle in nature).

5. Weeks 9-10 (current): Each session is composed of 4 different activities, with me having little say about the order or duration of each. There may be some iteration.

A. Adoring attention to Christ from my heart, with shallow breathing of love into the heart. I am planful and active in this activity. This tends to result in "B" and or "C" below.

B. Self-propelled currents of warm, euphoric electric-like energy emanating from my torso, heart, head, etc. I must be completely passive and devotional for this. If I think about it or try to direct it, it dries up, but then will restart on its own.

C. Trembling/shaking from minor to major throughout the body, emanating from the spinal area. May be a few seconds or several minutes. I am not at all in control; could stop it if I wished, but it seems wise not to. Not unpleasant sensations, but can become a little alarming when excessive.

D. Prolonged muscle contractions/cramping in orderly succession from tailbone area, to stomach, to chest, to throat (mouth is flung and locked open). Energy eventually seems to settle/rest in crown of head. I am, of course, completely out of control, and amazed at my contortions (and glad no one is around watching).

In the last few weeks, I have also become aware during the day, at times of repose, of the energy flowing or radiating through my body. If I focus on it too tightly, my muscles can begin to spasm, so I just regard it lovingly but more distantly.

The net result so far on me as a social being is difficult for me to judge, but these seem pronounced effects:

1. My first real desire for Mass and the Eucharist, and to delve into the liturgy.
2. My first real interest in sacred music, both the worship and the deep lyrics.
3. My first real understanding of new testament passages, more subtle, interior meanings.
4. Strong interest in mystical, worshipful writing--nothing too analytical.
5. Sadness and self-upbraiding when I catch myself in mean-spirited or ego-inflating thoughts.

"What a long, strange trip it's been" (Grateful Dead)

Richard Parker, rparker@tamu.edu

A further report from Richard

I am now at day 127 meditating daily twice per day, at 40-80 minutes per sitting. The time is variable, because I stop when I am fatigued or when there is a break in the process. The process is one of strong energy flows up and down my spine, usually up, down, and then up again, "buzzing" euphoria, spine-twisting or face contorting, etc. Although I am able to find little written on this experience in Christian writing (contrary to Hindu and Buddhist), I pray that Christ will be Lord over these experiences and use them to deepen my Christian journey.

After meditation, I am left with a tingly face and neck (sometimes arms) and a full or pressured feeling inside my crown. In recent weeks, I am getting more release as the energy eventually gently fizzles out of the top of my head. Sometimes I walk around with my "attention center" bobbing above my head by 5 or 10 inches. Also, euphoric energy flows come more or less continuously during the day when I am at rest, intruding on reading and school work.

Other new effects over the past month:

*My body frequently seems to be vibrating.

*My hands are emanating focussed energy: Energy from my fingers or palms can be felt on my face, arm or leg, out at about 2 feet away--a buzzing cool/warm focussed breeze. This energy can be felt by some other people, and not by others.

*I can "hear" differences between different colors with my hands at about 8 inches away.

*I can feel energy ridges around my body with my hand as far away as I

stretch my arm.

*When people are close to me--even my back--as when shopping, I get a sense of a different energy field entering mine, and they all feel different.

*Bringing a palm within a foot from my heart chakra is like physically squeezing it, and can actually make me cry.

*My diet is changing substantially. I eat much less, and meat makes me nauseous.

I know your website has discussed whether this sort of energy is the holy spirit. From my limited experience with both, I would say yes and no. This energy is conscious, benign and pervasive, but otherwise rather neutral and organic. My sense is that this energy can be molded and directed by other spiritual entities, and even given unique characteristics. My sense also is that the holy spirit partakes of and transforms this energy into a special case. Of course, I could be wrong.

A recently-developed goal is to develop healing which I can integrate into my work within the Catholic Church and/or within my professional work with children with disabilities. Regards,
Richard

Editor's Response

Thanks for the update. We hear periodically from people who have experienced some kind of kundalini awakening, which then has become a problem for them in their daily lives. Do you have any concerns like this for yourself, and would you actively recommend to people that they seek a kundalini awakening?

Richard Parker's response

Yes, the saga does continue, with marked changes almost weekly (today being day 170 of intensive Centering Prayer--approx. 2 hrs per day). I think of the effects more as Pranic or Chi energy release, rather than Kundalini, because descriptions I've read of the latter seem so violent. Mine, on the contrary, is insistent but courteous to my need to maintain a somewhat normal professional life. Sometimes awkward and uncomfortable, yes, but not for long. I feel consciously cared or or looked after in this process. I need to make some small adjustments: short time-outs during the day to sit and let the euphoric flows run their course, and let the crown of my head to "lift" or open to release the pressure. Also, I cannot read as much. But if I am prayerful and seek His guidance, it is all do-able.

I can state with certainty that the energy flows and emanations and sensitivity in my hands are quite real, and verifiable, but I can only intuit their source. As the flows were initiated by, and accelerate with, Christ-centered prayer, I surmise they are not incompatible with the Christian faith. This energy does feel like the Holy Spirit, but more automatic and routine (I say "organic") than experiences I've had in the past which were more intense,

personal and communicative. This feels more like a gradual cleansing operation which is often euphoric, and can rarely even be ecstatic, but all within what feels like an organized, routine program.

You asked whether I thought seeking a Kundalini awakening is wise (assuming this is Kundalini). My answer is that if you have a fruitful prayer life, and it includes meditational prayer and other times of dedicated tranquility, mindfulness, some fasting, and that prayer life is pervading your normal waking life, then Kundalini would be only a technique to accelerate, bringing an unanticipatable mixture of annoyances and benefits. My energy flow is making me very sensitive to what and how much I eat, what I think, how I spend my recreational time, etc. Yet I could and should have shaped myself up in these areas prior to now. Using breathing and posture techniques etc. to bring on Kundalini seems hazardous to me, because you are taking personal ego control. How then (and at what point) would you hand it over to God, and ask him to drive the rest of the distance? I could foresee problems.

I did not seek these experiences, so can offer them up to Christ to either mold for his will, or to help get rid of. I think what matters most is what entity or spirit you will to guide your life--in its mundane and otherworldly aspects. By middle age, most of us know that taking the wheel ourselves for too long almost guarantees a wrong turn or a car wreck. Richard Parker