

Centering/Contemplative Prayer

By Bob Waldrep

Founder: Trappist Monks William Meninger, Thomas Keating, and Basil Pennington are generally recognized as the founders of the modern Centering Prayer movement though they would point to it as being a rediscovery of practices dating to the 14th to 15th centuries and to the earlier 20th Century writings of another monk, Thomas Merton.

Date: Early to mid 1970s.

Publications: *The Cloud of Unknowing* (unknown), *Open Mind, Open Heart* (Thomas Keating), *The Loving Search For God* (William Meninger), *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* and *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer* (Basil Pennington), numerous other books and booklets and a number of websites are devoted to this practice.

Unique Terms: Lectio Divino, contemplation/contemplative, center/centering, sacred word, relax/relaxation, meditation, detachment, Divine Presence, Divine Union, interior silence, pure consciousness, transformation/transforming union, unloading the unconscious.

HISTORY

Centering or contemplative prayer was popularized in the mid 1970s at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer Massachusetts as a result of the studies and practices of Trappist Monks: William Meninger, Thomas Keating, and Basil Pennington. According to Meninger, Keating, the Abbott at St. Joseph's (1961-1981), and Pennington were "...looking for a teachable form of Christian contemplative meditation to offset the movement of young Catholics toward Eastern meditation techniques."¹ This led to Keating's study of many eastern teachings and practices and to his inviting eastern teachers, such as, "the great Zen master Roshi Sasaki"² and "a former Trappist monk who had become a Transcendental Meditation teacher"³ to provide retreats and training sessions for the Monks at the Abbey. About these retreats Keating wrote:

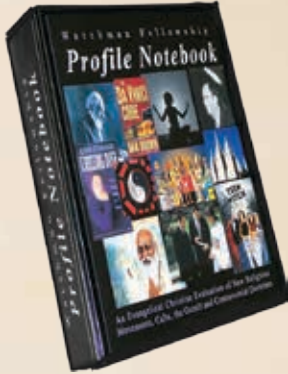
Exposure to these traditions, as well as conversations with visitors to our monastery who had benefited from them, naturally raised many questions in my mind as I tried to harmonize the wisdom of the East with the contemplative tradition of Christianity that I had been studying and trying to practice for thirty years.⁴

During this same timeframe, in 1974, Meninger discovered *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the Abbey library. "As he read it he was delighted to discover that this anonymous 14th century book presented contemplative meditation as a teachable, spiritual process enabling the ordinary person to enter and receive a direct experience of union with God."⁵ A *Newsweek* article on "spirituality" noted: "Drawing on that work, as well as the writings of the contemplatives Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, the two monks [Meninger and Keating] began teaching a form of Christian meditation that grew into the worldwide phenomenon known as centering prayer."⁶

Critics of Centering often point to its roots in or similarities with the practices of Eastern religions. Proponents generally claim it is as old as the Church. For example, Keating writes: "A positive attitude toward contemplation characterized the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era. Unfortunately, a negative attitude has prevailed from the sixteenth century."⁷ Pennington adds: "Centering Prayer is a gift of our Christian Heritage. It comes to us from the earliest times and has always found a place among us albeit with different names and manners of presentation."⁸

Despite such attestations to its roots in the Church, Centering Prayer, as it is presently practiced, cannot be disassociated from Eastern religious practice. Even Keating notes, "Is there something that we can do to prepare ourselves for the gift of contemplation instead of waiting for God to do everything? My acquaintance with Eastern methods of meditation has convinced me that there is. There are ways of calming the mind in the spiritual disciplines of both East and West that can help to lay the groundwork for contemplative prayer."⁹

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Prior to becoming Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, addressed some of the problems presented by such a view in a doctrinal letter issued in 1989:

With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, 'to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian'...Some use eastern methods solely as a psycho-physical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation; others go further and, using different techniques, try to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Catholic mystics (Ratzinger's endnotes cites *The Cloud of Unknowing* as an example)...These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thorough-going examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism.¹⁰

Concerning erroneous ways of praying, Ratzinger addressed the concept of emptying one's mind during prayer, (or as he put it those who, "try as far as possible to put aside everything that is worldly, sense perceptible or conceptually limited"¹¹) and the appeal to Teresa of Avila for support of this practice stating, "... [She] perceptively observed that 'the very care taken not to think about anything will arouse the mind to think a great deal...'"¹²

Quoting a homily given by Pope John Paul II on November I, 1982, Ratzinger continued, "he [Pope John Paul II] said that the call of Teresa of Jesus advocating a prayer completely centered on Christ 'is valid, even in our day, against some methods of prayer which are not inspired by the Gospel and which in practice tend to set Christ aside in preference for a mental void which makes no sense in Christianity.'"¹³

Though the Centering Prayer movement began within Roman Catholicism, it is not without non-Catholic devotees such as popular authors Brennan Manning (a former Roman Catholic monk) and Richard Foster who promote Centering/Contemplative Prayer in their writings.

Interestingly, Foster not only embraces and promotes contemplative prayer he, at the same time, considers it dangerous to the uninitiated: "I need to give a word of warning...[it] is not for the novice...we are not all equally ready to listen to 'God's speech in His wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all-embracing silence'."¹⁴

He adds this further precaution: "In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance."¹⁵ It should be noted Foster considers the danger to be such that he encourages "verbal" prayers of protection prior to "a time of [nonverbal] contemplation"¹⁶ – the supposedly higher form of prayer.

This "other" supernatural guidance that Foster warns of is commonly attested to as coming from the "Divine" among practitioners of New Age and Eastern Religions.

CENTERING PRAYER AND EASTERN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

One of the primary concerns raised about Centering Prayer is its basis in Eastern meditation practices. Proponents argue against this and maintain it is rooted in Roman Catholic or Church tradition. However, as Keating and others have acknowledged, prior to developing the practice of Centering he was extensively involved in researching Eastern religions and their practices – particularly Transcendental Meditation (TM), Hinduism and Buddhism – for the purpose of advocating and incorporating them into the Roman Catholic Church.

For example, Keating wrote, "...in the mid-1970s, I raised the following question...to our monastic community: 'Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people in the active ministry today and to young people who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?'"¹⁷ Similarly, Pennington wrote, "...those in ministry or preparing for ministry should seek some experiential knowledge of...some of our traditional ways...They should also know experientially...other traditions, such as yoga, Zen, and insight meditation".¹⁸

Meditation techniques practiced and taught by adherents of Eastern Religions tend to have basic elements in common with one another and Centering Prayer, as illustrated in the following comparison of TM (as taught by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), Hinduism (as taught by Sri Swami Rama, founder of the Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy), and Buddhism:

	TM	Hinduism	Buddhism
Sit	"[TM] is a specific method of allowing the activity of the mind to settle down while one sits comfortably with eyes closed." ¹⁹	"...it is important to train oneself to sit still and follow the meditational discipline." ²³	"It is important to keep the back straight during meditation, whether you are sitting on the floor or in a chair. Energy flows up the spine, so we try to create a straight pathway for it." ²⁷
Mantra	"Mantras are specifically selected for each individual...and... used for only one purpose, to effect the spontaneous process of reducing mental activity during the process of TM." ²⁰	"Meditating on the sound of a mantra can lead one to the soundless state ...Focus ing the mind on a... chakra (spiritual center) hastens the process..." ²⁴	"Mantras are sacred words or phrases which, when repeated in meditation, bring the individual into a higher state of consciousness...Each time your mind is diverted from pure concentration, bring it back to your meditation by focusing on the mantra..." ²⁸
Turn Inward	"...TM consists of giving the attention an inward turn by easily thinking a single thought...the mind remains active but is left undirected." ²¹	"The purpose of meditation is to be constantly aware of the center of consciousness within." ²⁵	"Chanting a mantra repeatedly for the duration of your meditation session will, over time, develop your powers of concentration to a high degree, and you will experience great inner peace and clarity of mind..." ²⁹
Length	"...practiced for only fifteen to twenty minutes each morning and evening." ²²	"Meditation increases the ability to concentrate and enhance memory power...Time Required: 10-30 minutes." ²⁶	"If the meditator has progressed to the fourth and fifth stage...he will be able to concentrate on an object for about twenty minutes at a stretch without experiencing the slightest disturbance. This is the beginning of the achievement of steadiness of mind." ³⁰

Centering Prayer contains the common elements above of: sitting, emptying one's mind of directed thoughts (or mental activity), looking inward, and utilizing a mantra (or focused thought) to keep the mind from thinking or wandering. The following four components offered by Keating,³¹ attest to this, as do the teachings of other Centering proponents.

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

Comparable to "mantra", noted Centering promoter Brennan Manning proposes, "What masters of the interior life recommend is the discipline of centering down throughout the day – a quiet persistent turning to God..."³² His description of how this is done is very much like that in the chart above: "The frequent repetition of the name 'Jesus' or 'Abba, Father' throughout the day will prove helpful. Even a mechanical recitation of the name will suffice – eventually, it gets into your subconscious and a transformation of mind and heart takes place."³³

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.

Posture is very important as many Eastern practitioners believe the body contains energy spheres or chakras that, if, properly aligned bring one in touch with the divine consciousness or one's own divinity. This is similar to teachings by noted Centering Prayer instructors: Jesuit Priest Anthony De Mello recommends the "lotus posture...of yoga" or keeping the "back straight" which he acknowledges is important in Zen meditation.³⁴ On this same point, Pennington states, "...when they [the backbones] are all lined up, the energy is freed."³⁵

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.

Manning also recommends these four steps and notes, "Contemporary spiritual masters recommend two twenty-minute periods of contemplative prayer each day."³⁶ As the above chart indicates, it is not just "Christian" contemplatives that recommend this.

The ultimate goal of each of these steps is to achieve and maintain the *turn inward*. Eastern religions teach that the "turn inward" is for the purpose of reaching enlightenment, or illumination – the realization that "self" as one perceives it really doesn't exist; there is only the nothingness taught by some schools of Buddhism or the divine consciousness of all taught in many schools of Hinduism. Sri Swami Rama refers to this as a person realizing his, "essential nature and he abides in that state of pure Consciousness."³⁷

Conclusion: In light of the background of the Centering Prayer Movement, there should be little wonder that concerns are raised when advocates use terms like interior silence, pure consciousness, transformation/transforming union, unloading the unconscious, etc. This concern is compounded by how these terms are used. For example, Keating defines "Transformation" as: "...a restructuring of consciousness in which the divine reality is perceived to be present in oneself and in all that is".³⁸ Despite the protestations otherwise, it is difficult to believe that what he means by this is not more

Eastern than Christian, especially when he states that, "God and our true self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing."³⁹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Those involved in Centering Prayer seek to support it with Scripture; however, their references are vague allusions, at best, leaving them to appeal to tradition or the practices of other religions to substantiate their claims. As Ankerberg and Weldon note regarding so-called Christian meditation that utilizes Eastern methodologies: "...we do not see Jesus in the New Testament sitting in yoga positions, or encouraging people to 'practice yoga t'ai chi, and aikido' or to study the pagan *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, Lao Tzu, or the teachings of Confucius and Buddha."⁴⁰

The purpose of Biblical meditation is not to empty one's mind of thought. Instead, Biblical meditation seeks to focus the mind on God's revealed word. God told Joshua to "meditate on [the book of the law] day and night" (Josh. 1:8). In the Psalms, David spoke of his meditation on God's word (1:2, 119:23, 48, 148). Meditation is not always focused on God's word however. David meditated on the character and works of God: his precepts (Ps. 119:15), His wonders (Ps. 119:27), works of His hands (Ps. 143:5) and "glorious splendor of [His] majesty" (Ps. 145:5). These beautiful truths filled David's mind as he meditated.

On the one occasion, recorded in Scripture, when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, (Luke 11:1-4, Mt. 6:7-13) he gave very specific instructions: Acknowledge the Father, recognize your needs, your sins and your need to forgive others, and be alert to the temptations that come to you (such things cannot be found through emptying one's mind of all thoughts). Interestingly, he also warns to avoid "vain repetitions" in prayer (Mt 6:7).

RECOMMENDED READING

Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs, Ankerberg & Weldon. Addresses numerous New Age issues, including Christian meditation and Eastern meditation techniques. 670 pages.

Notes

- ¹ "Be Still and Know That I am God," <http://www.contemplativeprayer.net>, (accessed October 2005).
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- ³ John D. Dreher, "The Danger of Centering Prayer," *This Rock*, November 1997, 13.
- ⁴ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God*, (Crossroad Classic: 1996) <http://www.centeringprayer.com/intimacy/intimacy01a.htm> (accessed October 2005).
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- ⁷ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 19.
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- ¹⁰ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church On Some Aspects Of Christian Meditation," http://ratzinger.it/documenti/orationisforma_engl.htm (accessed October 2005).
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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Richard J Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 156.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 157.
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- ¹⁸ *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer*, 7
- ¹⁹ Harold Bloomfield, Michael Peter Cain & Dennis Jaffe, *TM: Discovering Inner Energy and Overcoming Stress*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975), 11.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 18.
- ²¹ Ibid., 17.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Sri Swami Rama, *Choosing A Path*, (Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy, 1983), 141.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 140.
- ²⁶ "Subhamoy Dos., "Hinduism, How to Meditate," <http://hinduism.about.com/library/howto/ht-meditate.htm> (accessed October 2005).
- ²⁷ "What is Meditation," Zen Mind International, <http://zenmind.com/meditation.html> (accessed October 2005).
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Samdhong Rinpoche, "Buddhist Meditation," (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1988), http://sss.vn.ua/buddhist_meditation.htm (accessed October 2005). Note: Buddhist meditation varies in length but many recommend an initial period of twenty minutes of sitting meditation.
- ³¹ *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.
- ³² Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1996), 89.
- ³³ Ibid., 90.
- ³⁴ Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God*, (New York: Image Books, 1984) 24.
- ³⁵ M. Basil Pennington, "A Centering Prayer Retreat," Inner Explorations <http://innerexplorations.com/catchspmys/a.htm> (accessed October 2005).
- ³⁶ *The Signature of Jesus*, 204.
- ³⁷ *Choosing A Path*, 182.
- ³⁸ *Open Mind, Open Heart* 147.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 127.
- ⁴⁰ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 1996), 384-385.



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