The Method and Practice of **Centering Prayer**

Developed in the 1970s by three Trappist monks, Fathers William Meninger, Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating. The practice method draws upon the contemplative heritage found within biblical scripture and Christian mystical writings such as the medieval classic The Cloud of Unknowing

Where Centering Prayer is distinct and differs from most other mediation approaches is instead of relying on the power of focused attention (such as concentrating on the flow of one’s breath or repeating a mantra) the energy of one’s intention becomes the primary source for engaging the practice. In broad terms, that intention can be described as being totally open and available to God, all the way down the innermost point of your being and deeper than your usual sense of self. Through aligning with that intention, the simple method of Centering Prayer consists of learning to withdraw attention from our limitless stream of thoughts. As we practice this inner releasing, we provide the opportunity to rest in a gentle, open attentiveness to divine reality itself.

What grows as practitioners develop a regular practice of Centering Prayer is a greater “attention of the heart” and a subtle “objectless awareness” that unlocks and broadens a more unitive field of perceptivity.

A brief overview of how the method is practiced:

Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you will be undisturbed for 20 minutes. You can still practice even if the environment and conditions are not ideal.

The prescribed daily practice is a minimum of two 20-minute sits. If at all possible this amount is most recommended to start and maintain a dedicated practice.

An aid to help in returning to the essence of the practice is to select and use a sacred word or short phrase that can act as a placeholder or symbol for your intention.

Aiming to stay relaxed but attentive, close your eyes, and start your practice period rooting in your basic intention of open availability to God.

Each time you notice yourself becoming absorbed in a thought, and without making a problem of your distraction, gently release your attention from the thought and inwardly say your sacred word. Your sacred word is not constantly repeated like a mantra, but only used as much as required to bring yourself back into alignment with your original intention.

In the context of this practice, a thought is defined as anything that brings your attention to a focal point. This could be an idea, vision, memory, emotion, or dwelling upon a physical sensation. If it captures your attention, it’s considered a thought, and by letting go you are renewing your intention and consent for “God’s presence and action within.”

As you continue in the prayer period and thoughts inevitably arise, use your sacred word to gently and quickly clear your mental debris, and to return to open awareness and availability.

When the allotted time is up, slowly open your eyes. Without rushing, take a few minutes to allow yourself to come back to your usual state of consciousness.

If planning longer periods of sitting, many find a very slow meditative walk after each 20 minutes or so helps to keep the body more comfortable and alert.

“… your aim is to be deeply available to God—that is, available at the depths of your being, deeper than words, memories, emotions, sensations; deeper even than your felt sense of “I am here.” You are simply asked to attend, to give yourself, completely to that deeper, mysterious presence.” ~ Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening

**Welcoming Prayer**

“In the Welcoming Prayer the energy normally bound up in identification is suddenly vitally freed—sometimes so dramatically you almost hear a “whoosh”— and the influx of this new energy is immediately experienced as a deepening and vitalization of your innermost being.”– Cynthia Bourgeault

Cynthia recommends and affirms the Welcoming Practice as a vibrant energetic, embodied witnessing practice, and an essential tool for inner transformation. She describes the practice as “Centering Prayer’s powerful companion piece for turning daily life into a virtually limitless field for inner awakening.” When used fully and consistently it has the capacity to quickly and effectively dislodge us from our habitual reactions, emotional programming, and limiting comfort zones. Using it can help move us through challenging or painful experiences, times of disturbed emotion or anguish, and even moments where unhelpful control tendencies and self-inflation takes us over. Through the process of using the practice we benefit by recapturing essential spiritual energy that otherwise would have been lost in a state of resistance or reactivity.

The ideal time to use the practice is as close as possible to the upsetting situation. Even if this is not possible due to the particular circumstances in that moment, turn to the practice as soon afterward as you can. Initially you may find that methodically working through the three steps will take some time and concentrated effort, but as your conscious awareness increases the practice can be employed almost simultaneously while in the midst of challenging or troubling times.

The Welcome Practice has three steps:

Focus or ‘sink in’ to become aware and physically present to the particular experience or upset. Bring your attention to what is happening as sensation in your body. Without analyzing or judging yourself or your state, inwardly tune into what is happening as the physical embodiment of the experience. Don’t try to change anything at this stage – just stay present. This will help to avoid drawing mental-cognitive conclusions, and will also ground you in the body’s experience rather than repressing what’s arising. By engaging with this awareness to sensation over time it can help us become more attentive to moments of constriction and unconscious reactivity.

Welcome and lightly name the response that is being triggered by the difficult situation (such as “fear” or “anger” or “pain”). Acknowledge the response as sensation, and recognize that in this moment, if the experience is not being rejected or repressed, it can be endured. Ever so gently, begin to say ‘welcome’ (such as “welcome fear”, etc…) Though this step is counter-intuitive and the impulse is most likely to try to push away the unpleasant emotion, Cynthia explains

“…by welcoming it instead, you create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. By embracing the thing you once defended yourself against or ran from, you are actually disarming it, removing it’s power to hurt you or chase you back into your smaller self.”

The flow of energy shifts almost immediately, becoming more spacious, and defenses can relax sufficiently to allow new perspectives or more positive responses to emerge.

Transition to a ‘letting go’, whereby the intensity of the situation can recede. This enables the natural fluidity of sensation to come and then go. In the classic welcoming practice methodology there are then four statements that you can employ and recite to yourself at this stage:

I let go of my desire for security and survival.

I let go of my desire for esteem and affection.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire to change the situation.

As Cynthia puts it, “This is not a final, forever renunciation of your anger or fear; it’s simply a way of gently waving farewell as the emotion starts to recede.”

**Of That of Which I am Certain:**

The things that I use to be certain of, I am no longer certain of.  
The things that I use to be certain of, that I am still certain of, I am no longer certain of in the way I use to be certain of them and although I can't be certain, I can be fairly certain that this is not going to stop. ~Macrina Wiederkehr