

Centering Prayer and Thoughts

By Cynthia Bourgeault

This third talk was called in the days when I did my training in this, "Handling Thoughts During Prayer Time." It's now called "The Use of the Sacred Word," but it basically amounts to the same thing. And now that you've had a little bit of a time to experience the slippery turf that happens when we begin to actually have a period of this prayer under our belts, we're in a better state now to actually begin to talk a little bit about the rather in some points counterintuitive and even difficult instructions that this prayer form, that this teaching, gives about the handling of thoughts during prayer time. And the bottom line, of course, is to let them go.

But to begin with I think it needs to be said over and over and over again, that in Centering Prayer the goal is not to stop thoughts but rather to develop a detached attitude toward them. Thoughts come and go of their own and there's an awful lot of evidence that they actually seem to be connected with the *in* breath, and you know you breathe again and you start to think, and particularly in societies where our minds are overstimulated all the time, it takes a long time until thoughts slow down – if they ever do. But we can develop a detached attitude to them that lets them come and go without our needing to be engaged about them or worried about them. And that's what we're really aiming for in Centering Prayer, that detached attitude.

It's a great mistake in the prayer and a kind of typical beginner's mistake to think that the goal of this is to stop all thoughts from coming in. Cause it's not gonna happen. And if you set that up as your expectation, you're just going to get frustrated, and you're going to say that even this meditation practice doesn't work for you. When in point of fact if you just let go of that goal, you'll find you're actually doing a lot better than you thought you were.

Anyway just as a kind of quickie aside – what's the difference between letting go of a thought and getting rid of a thought? When you get rid of a thought, what are you doing? Your thinking about it – there's effort, isn't it? What kind of motion would you make with your hands and your body if you're getting rid of something? Just do it – one, two, three. See, look at that, look around the room. You know, it's a sort of, it's got a kind of aggressive look to it. And when you think it's getting rid of thoughts, you're gonna get in trouble because that much effort and that much outcome orientation is gonna just lead you to chasing your own tail.

What does a motion look like for letting go? It's gentler, isn't it? It's process oriented and believe me it doesn't matter if thoughts come right back in again. It may feel that that this letting go of thoughts is like trying to bail out the ocean with a thimble but if you can just stick with your part of the bargain, when you catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go. The rest will be taken care of.

So it's really, really important to play with that subtle nuance and if you want, just take that exploration out into your life and see if you can find when you're in life, "What's the difference between getting rid of something and letting go of it?" It's a whole introduction to a new kind of way of being spiritually for many people, and it fits right into the prayer.

In Centering Prayer we use the word "thought" in the widest spectrum of ways to cover sort of anything that brings our attention to a point. It's not just cerebral thinking. I remember once doing an introductory workshop in Centering Prayer and a young mother came up to me with three preschool kids and she heard this instruction and said, "Oh, I'm going to be a natural at this prayer. I haven't had a thought for years."

But we are just thinking about pieces of consistent work. A thought can be an itch on your nose; it can be an emotion; it can be an inner prompting of some kind or another while looking at them; it can be a memory; it can be as in your case earlier on today a sudden unexplained spike of feeling or sensation; it can even often be a twitch in your body, a sudden pain, or your stomach rumbling – "What's that all about?" – anything that causes your attention to a point.

In the Centering Prayer teachings of old, there's a classic metaphor that Thomas Keating likes to use – the metaphor of boats on the river. And you can't take this metaphor too far but if you take it just as far as it goes, it's a good one. He says imagine that your consciousness is a river - flowing, flowing, flowing. And down it float boats, you know, and these boats are your thoughts. And let's assume that you are a little diver sitting down here on a stone at the bottom of the river. So as the boats go by, they can be all sorts of boats. They could be a nice little sailboat of a dream of this nice thing that's going to happen next weekend, your great trip into the mountains. It can be a great big, naval battleship filled with anger at an undigested fight you have, or it could be just a sliver of a little kayak of a daydream. Whatever they are, there's something funny about our thoughts that they all come broadcasting "think me, think me, think me" and, as Thomas does his metaphor, he says, "Our temptation is to come up from our rock and climb into the hold of each boat and examine its content." And that's what it means to get caught by a thought.

So, this one, you know, just because this battleship appears, we think – well, we have to go into it now and maybe psychoanalyze what happened to us when we had that terrible thing. What you begin to learn in this prayer is to just, when you find you've gotten tangled up and you're caught in the hold of a boat, just jump off, swim back down to your rock again.

Okay, so that basically is the drill of Centering Prayer. And there's "training" – and it's actually kind of shocking training if you put it that way – that without special attention the usual human mind can't stay connected to a single thought for more than two minutes, absolute max! I tried that once and it's astonishing. You know I tried, I said, "Well for two minutes I'm going to notice everything red that comes up along the roadside." Well I did fine for maybe the first thirty seconds and then there was a Dairy Queen, this sort of soft ice cream thing along the side of the road and you know when I woke up five miles later I'd been lost in a fantasy of Dairy Queen – "How'd that happen?!"

So the good news in all this is that by the time a thought surfaces, it's already on the way out. And if you don't artificially prolong it by tangling with it and fueling it with your attention and your interest and your emotions, it'll just go by, go on by. So centering prayer says just don't grab for the boats, just stay down there on your little rock, and if by some chance you do go up there and get caught on the hold of a boat, which is quite natural in this prayer, we all get caught, and just jump off, swim back down to your rock again. And that's what letting go means in that sort of a way. And remember again and again and again that the real strength of the work you're doing in this prayer practice occurs at that moment, where you're willing to jump back off that boat and go back down to your rock. That "letting go" - that is where we're going to really be doing the transformational work in this prayer practice.

So don't buy the lines and the kind of images that come from other meditation disciplines that have different goals. Our goal here is not to have a steady state of consciousness or to engender states of bliss or anything like that. Our goal is to learn to become prompt at "letting go" and as we do that we're gradually going to see that that is the language of prayer at its most bare-bones form and that is the life of transformation.

For Week 3, Session 2 of Centering Prayer with Cynthia Bourgeault, an Online Retreat at SpiritualityandPractice.com – transcribed from the recording of a live retreat titled "An Introduction to Centering Prayer," in Auckland, New Zealand, in October 2009. To purchase a full set of the live audio recordings please visit The Contemplative Society website at <http://www.contemplative.org/>.