

The Four Guidelines of Centering Prayer

By Cynthia Bourgeault

Coming at the heart of this are the four guidelines for how you do the practice which come from twenty-five years of centering prayer teaching. As I told you this is a very old workshop. And I'm going to read the guidelines to you and then talk about each one a little bit. They're very, very practical. Okay?

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

Okay? So that's the guidelines. Let me go back and just pick up questions in each one of them.

We've talked about the "choose the sacred word" as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. In other words to bring you back into that open availability, that space in which God can work, often in hidden ways. So that's the first thing . . .

Two, sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word. "Sitting comfortably" – in centering prayer practice you can sit either in a chair or if any of you prefer, you can spread out when we do this, borrow a cushion from around the room or there are a few prayer stools. It doesn't matter how you sit. You should be comfortable but alert, sit as straight as you can without causing yourself physical distress. It helps if your back is straight even if the only way you can get your back straight is to lie on the floor.

And typically eyes are closed because we want to decrease the stimulus from the outer world. Certainly we're not trying to encourage thinking, although we're not afraid of it. So typically eyes are closed. If you find yourself sleeping and nodding off, open your eyes and go to a gentle focus, soft focus, and it'll bring you back.

And settle briefly means do whatever you need to do yourself to get here. Some people just need a quick check in with your body to make sure you are unkinked. Some people like to say a little prayer or verse of a psalm or something or begin with a short prayer – whatever you like to get yourself *here*. Some people actually like to sit down and say, "Am I really willing to do this deal." I find that often works for me. I say, "Okay, well here I am. The drill is to catch yourself thinking, you let the thought go. Can I do that for twenty minutes?" And when I hear myself say "Yes," I'm good to go. Okay.

But whatever you do to settle briefly, whatever that means to you, the prayer actually begins when you very silently and gently began to say your sacred word. Under your breath, you're not saying it out loud. But you begin to repeat it – at first rhythmically, very gently – it doesn't matter whether it's on your breath or not. Most people will find that, most people who've been trained in breath meditation will naturally put it on their breath but if you haven't, don't worry, just say it. It isn't an improvement to say it on the breath; it's just an alternative way of doing it. So anyway, you're starting at first using it like a mantra, consistently. And remember that it stands for that willingness to be open and available to God. So that's what's in guideline two.

For Week 3, Session 1 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/>.