



## **The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps**

**By Thomas Keating**

### **Session 3: The Method of Centering Prayer**

*Introduction: Fr. Thomas leads us into the practice of Centering Prayer through choosing a sacred word and then into a guided meditation to quiet us down leading into 20 minutes of silent prayer.*

So, to enter into this practice, it's a method and a practice and it's simply a practical way of carrying out this wisdom saying. So we found that some means of expressing our intention to be open and to consent to God's presence and action within us, is a way of helping us in the beginning to stay in the private room and not just get up and leave or start thinking about something that would occupy our intention and perhaps relieve some of the sometimes distressing and unending procession of thoughts that goes down the stream of consciousness when we try to be silent.

So, the first thing I would ask you to do is to choose a sacred symbol of your intention to open and consent to God's presence within. And this could be any word at all, but most people choose a word that has a certain significance to them. But you don't think of that significance during the prayer. You simply think the symbol as a gesture of your consent to God's presence and action. I invite you now just to close your eyes for a moment and to ask the Holy Spirit, higher power if such is your faith, to help you to suggest a word that would express your intention and with which you feel comfortable. And I'll suggest a few and if in the course of that in the next few moments one of them appeals to you then let's settle on that one at least for the purposes of this first experience.

So, it could be Lord. Could be God. Those of you with already a deep faith in the Christian religion, it could be Abba, which is God's word for the experience, his experience of the ultimate reality, and as Christians we're trying to enter into that extraordinary relationship. It could be Father. It could be Mother. It could be Listen, which is a wonderful word that describes the basic attitude that we're trying to establish in this practice, an alert attentiveness. When one is listening one is all ears, so to speak, or sometimes all heart. What are you doing when you listen? Nothing, just being totally present to the beautiful

music or the voice of someone you love or the presence of someone you know. Could be Calm or Stillness. Doesn't have to be the sacred name of God.

And so, having chosen one I will invite you in the next few minutes just to relax your bodies and to prepare them for this experience. This is not something you would necessarily do every time but when one is under great stress or tension or has just had bad news and you just can't handle the thoughts of distress that are going through your mind, some vestibule like this might be helpful, a kind of passage from the street or the tumult of the moment into the sanctuary of inner silence and the place where God dwells.

And so, let's just see if we can allow ourselves to relax completely. Let's begin with our eyelids. Let go of any tension or nervousness or muscle tension in that area. Let it extend to our lips and mouth so that we're not tightening our teeth or our lips but allow them to go slack, so that our whole face and scalp is at rest. Let go of any tension in your neck or the organs inside of it. If you need to swallow, for instance, don't hesitate to do so. Let go of any tension as we move to the shoulders and the back and the chest. Notice your breathing. Just breathe easily, normally, a little more deeply than ordinarily but with a certain rhythm. Breathing in so to speak the presence of God, the spirit of God which means breath. This God who breathed into our first parents, we're told, the breath of life. And as you exhale let go of any tension or strain, anything that's uptight, or any concern. Take a vacation from any problem that you're dealing with, because it will always have a counterpart in the body, and any tightness hinders this access, this letting go that facilitates our silence and our capacity to listen with the whole of our being. And now let our arms and hands and fingers relax. And as you breathe, let each breath help you to relax even more, but without effort. Let go of any tension in the legs and feet and the toes.

For a moment, slowly open your eyes without looking around, and now slowly close them again, letting go of this room and this environment and everything external to yourself. Let all of your nerves and every part of the body relax and grow in ease and relaxation and rest. And once again, slowly open your eyes without noticing anything and again, please close them and this time as you close them introduce ever-so-gently the sacred word you've chosen, the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you.

Let us pray in this way for these few moments. And as we rest, we normally will notice the imagination and perpetual motion faculty suggesting various perceptions or thoughts from outside or from inside. Let them come, let them go. And whenever you notice you're thinking about anything, or aware of any perception, return to the sacred word you've chosen. The sacred word is not something we concentrate on. It's something we simply return to as a gesture of our will, the spiritual will, which is love, our choice to be in God's presence and action, or to use the phrase of Jesus, to be in our inner room, our spiritual level of our being.

The thoughts are going by at an exterior place, the psychological awareness, but through our attention we're moved to a deeper level of our being and are turned towards the presence in an attitude of total listening, alert but passive. Receptive. No commentaries. No

reflection on self. The sacred word is not an object of attention or concentration, it is simply a gesture of our intention to open, surrender to God within us.

And now, please slowly close your eyes, introducing once again the sacred word as you do so, the symbol of your intention to listen and to be open, to consent to God's presence within you. We do not think of the content or psychological experience of our prayer. We do not think of anything deliberately. And when we notice we're attracted or absorbed by any perception, thought, memory, plan, external sound, just return ever-so-gently to the sacred word you've chosen. Resist no thought. Retain no thought. React emotionally to no impression, feeling, perception. Just continue to pray and enter into an ever-deeper rest and peace in this place within us where God is waiting for us and embracing us. And to move to a deep place, we will spend the next twenty minutes in the inner room.