



## The Contemplative Dimension of the 12 Steps

By Thomas Keating

### Session 5: Thoughts are Integral

*Introduction: Fr. Thomas shows us how thoughts are integral to Centering Prayer by introducing us to the unloading of the unconscious and the divine therapy which leads us to experiencing healing and the fruits of Centering Prayer.*

Once in a while there are some thoughts that come from the unconscious. Usually this does not occur in the first few months or year that you might be doing this, but some people do experience it right away, so it's useful to realize that this too is an integral part of the prayer. The reason is that the rest that one experiences in Centering Prayer when it's going well, even in spite of thoughts and the constant return to the sacred word (ever-so-gently please)—every now and then some bombardment of thoughts arises that don't bear any relationship to the immediate past or even some primitive emotions or raw emotions like anger or grief or fear arise that you don't know where this came from, or why. And what indicates that it's coming from the unconscious and a process of releasing emotional material that were repressed there, perhaps from a very early age, and that now because of that rest are emerging to awareness, this is actually part of the healing process.

And so, sometimes they're so intense that you don't feel that you can find the sacred word. It seems to be buried like a buoy in a hurricane under the waves. And so, if you find yourself occasionally distressed that way, again, it's no reason to be concerned, it's just part of the divine therapy in which the deep rest of prayer has reduced our ordinary defenses and the emotional material that we never dealt with, which might be called undigested emotional material, it begins to evacuate. The body is designed for health, has an extraordinary capacity to heal itself if we give it a chance and you give it a maximum chance when one is resting deeply. And so, our psychological tummy, so to speak, feels permission to disgorge or, to put it bluntly, vomit up, so to speak, the undigested psychological material of a lifetime and usually the intensity of it indicates that it may be coming from a very early place in one's life which one has completely forgotten, repressed, or buried under various compensatory strategies that human nature seems good at. So, what we suggest then is, if you're just deluged with thoughts or these raw emotions, to finish the time that you've set aside to listen to God, and to remember that God is also in the

storms. Remember where Jesus appears out of the storm to rescue Peter and the other apostles from the storm in the lake (Matthew 14)? Well, if he emerged out of the storm, he must be in the storm. And this is a signal to us that in every event, even the most unpleasant, at the deepest level, the Father—the Abba—the source of everything, is present there and is manifesting himself to us in a certain way, and is not going to take away, right away, all our difficulties, but is trying through difficulties and suffering and even pain sometimes to enable us to change our attitude towards our problems, which is a much greater grace and much more profound healing than simply taking them away. So that's why God doesn't always answer our prayers. The present situation hasn't quite completed the healing process that he has in mind and hence to trust God in these difficulties is important and it grows with experience. Going through it a few times you realize that the result is so valuable, the fruit of evacuating emotional trauma is so valuable, that you're filled with astonishment and also experience inner freedom that is significant.

Other thoughts that may concern us is just the endlessness of the procession and the boredom that sometimes arises from constantly having to return to the sacred word. This is just another thought. Feelings, remember, are thoughts, impressions are thoughts in the terminology of this prayer, and so every time you return to the sacred word, you're making a very real and firm act of love for God, and so maybe you don't like the prayer, but God is very pleased with your patience and waiting it out and putting up with the medication that the divine therapy sometimes requires, which doesn't taste too good, but accomplishes the necessary healing.

Another thought that needs a little more attention is that of an attractive thought or one that causes a deep aversion. Our thoughts really are an extraordinary device to conceal the material in the unconscious. So that as thoughts go by, and without our being aware of it, some of them that we feel as attractive or unattractive are stimulating one of those programs in the unconscious: security needs, approval needs, power needs. And so, it's the fact that at the deepest part of our being is this attachment, or this energy to find happiness in one of those instinctual needs that causes us to go after an attractive thought that seems to, or seems to deny (it can work either way) the satisfaction that we're looking for. So, we'll always have thoughts that are attractive and that pull us out of interior silence, until the false self and the emotional programs for happiness which lies at the heart of it have been dismantled and laid to rest.

That doesn't mean that the prayer is not good; it means that this movement into the inner room to be with God is a process not unlike that of setting up an agreement with a noted psychiatrist for therapy. This therapy seems to require daily visits with the therapist; as Jesus calls it visiting the inner room. He might have said visit the therapist's office. And so, what the therapist expects us to do, of course, is to show up. And that's why we suggest doing this prayer twice a day for about twenty minutes to half an hour. Our condition is fairly serious. Hence, we need to take the full program of healing. It's like an antibiotic or if the doctor prescribes two pills and you only take one you have a maintenance dosage. You won't die but you won't get well. To get the full healing you have to take the prescription. And so, it is extremely central and important to the divine therapy that we faithfully, if we

engage in this method do it every day and, if possible, twice a day and this requires of course some creativity to carve the time out of a busy life.

And one of the signs that this prayer has taken hold on us is our commitment to that practice. So much so that if you don't do it, you feel a certain loss, or something is missing. Actually this is a sign that you're already becoming or moving into a contemplative state because it's the Spirit that communicates to us how important this is for us, and with a little experience this is confirmed by your own developing inner freedom and the more peacefulness of daily life because as we experience the presence of God and experience the direction in which true happiness lies, the energy that we used to put into these programs for happiness, to find satisfaction, relativizes. And the more they relativize the more abiding is the peace and the deeper you normally go in the process of Centering Prayer and the more fruit one draws from it.

The fruits of Centering Prayer are basically the same as the fruits of the Spirit described by Paul in Galatians 5: charity, in the sense of selfless love; joy, just not necessarily exuberant but is very profound. The fathers of the church used to call it sober intoxication, meaning (maybe not a good term for those in AA) but all proportion guarded, it means that there's an enthusiasm and yet it's banked by the realization that it's fragile and that one has to keep filling in the need for practice and be faithful to it in order to maintain that fragile peace especially throughout the day.

Later in our retreat, we'll speak about practices that help to bring the fruits of Centering Prayer into daily life. Besides charity, joy, and peace—peace being the fruit of a diminishing of the conflictual situations that used to arise when our emotional programs were triggered by some event and we fell into frustration and then off go the afflictive emotions of grief, anger, fear, annoyance, jealousy, envy, greed and all the rest of them. And incidentally, when they continue to go off they stimulate the commentaries in the unconscious and you get into an emotional binge in which there's a dialogue between the feelings and the indignation that the imagination provides from pre-recorded tapes such as, "How can they do this to me?" and "I'll get even" and all the other signals that we're into an uncontrolled binge of the false self and the emotional programs. It's not necessary to live that way. This is a program for human misery and hence the need for a therapy, be it a 12-step program, but it might be that with the Centering Prayer, the 12-step program would be better understood, and its wisdom perceived from the level of experience, and its effectiveness increased by confidence in God, the source of the therapy.

Twice a day, then, seems like a big chunk at first, and so it's a good idea to give it a 90-day trial at least. Some commitment to get over the initial difficulties of it is wise, and it has such great benefits that can be attested to by so many people now in the past 25 years, that it's worth a serious effort to get into it. If it doesn't work after 90 days then try something else or take a vacation. But I don't think you'll be able to do that too readily once you taste the fruits of it.

Among the other fruits are gentleness, meekness, self-control, patience, gentleness, if I didn't say that already, and goodness. Goodness is the capacity to see creation as good,

beginning with oneself. So what God is infusing in us as a result of the Spirit's action in the private room is our own basic goodness, and the goodness of everyone else at the deepest level, and the goodness of all creation, and the goodness even contained in events or problems or difficulties. Hence it provides us with the opportunity to change our whole attitude towards life and instead of running away from difficulties and pain to see them as an invitation to find God in a new way or to allow God to heal within us some deep craving or attachment that is the source of hinderance to all our relationships.