

## Centering Prayer

There are different types of silence we experience in meditation and different styles of prayer to practice entering the silence but focused on intentional silence, which is what we are practicing in centering prayer. This is a deliberate effort to restrain the wandering of the mind, either by slowing down the thought process itself or by developing a means of detaching oneself from it. Intentional silence almost always feels like work. It doesn't come naturally. To most people, there is considerable resistance raised from the mind itself.

All other religions have a practice that affirms that intentional silence is essential to spiritual awakening.

This awakening or transformation is what Jesus talks about when he says:

"You must be born from above" or "Unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" John 12:24

Or perhaps most pointedly: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it".(Matt 16:24-25)

Jesus was talking from the conviction that we humans tend to live out of a mistaken identity. We believe that we are the busy, anxious, little self, preoccupied with its goals, fears, desires and issues. This part of ourselves is often referred to as the False Self. It is not the bad self. A better name could be the Performing Self. It develops to help us survive in the world, but it swings between over inflation and diminishment. It identifies us with what we do, what we have and what others think of us. It is the source of our unhappiness.

But this false self is never even remotely the whole of who I am. To seek fulfillment of life at this level means to miss out on the bigger life. This is why Jesus says that the one who tries to keep his life (ie the small one) will lose it, and the one who is willing to lose it will find the real thing. Beneath the surface there is a deeper and vastly more authentic self, or true self, but its presence is usually veiled by the clamour of the smaller, false self, with its insatiable needs and demands.

This true self is who we were created to be. It is within us from birth.

To live life abundantly, we need to move out of the false self and allow our God self to grow. This awareness of the inner self is an essential part of the whole understanding of contemplation. Recognition and acknowledgement of the false self, and the desire for the true self, is an important basic component of contemplative prayer and inner transformation.

Thomas Merton, a contemporary contemplative who first used the term True Self and False Self, says:

"The inner self is precisely that self which cannot be tricked or manipulated by anyone. It is like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand and comes out only when all is peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone. He cannot be lured by anyone or anything, because he responds to no lure except that of divine freedom."

Merton would have us realize that the birth of the true self is as secret as the birth of a fawn. It takes place in hiding. The secret birth is God's action and therefore no action of our own can force God into revealing himself to us. Nor can we force God to reveal his most precious treasure, which is our true self.

So, like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in his hidden action within us.

Centering Prayer gives us a way of entering this intentional silence that provides space for our True Self to emerge and allows God to do his good work in us.

– Margaret Loftus