

from God. They undermine our sense of God's absence. Instead, they strengthen our consciousness of God's dynamic loving presence in life. And they prepare us, perhaps, for the gift of contemplation.

In a wonderful passage, Thomas Keating describes contemplative prayer as follows:

“Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure. It is to be open to the infinite and hence to infinite possibilities. Our private self-made worlds come to an end; a new world appears within and around us and the impossible becomes an everyday experience.”

(Open Mind, Open Heart. p13)

Silence in our developed world is counter-cultural. There is a lot of noise and sound. Even when we are on our own, we tend to have music, the radio, or a television on in the background. Youngsters will even maintain that they study better with a set of headphones on. So, we have to cultivate our appreciation of silence and as this grows, so too does our capacity to listen. As well as having a practice of centering prayer, cultivation of silence can begin with simple choices such as not putting on the radio when we are driving.

Silence is, of course, related to solitude. As our daily routine of centering becomes established, therefore, we may find that we seek out times of solitude, or that we become more tolerant of our own company. Our desire for silence and our tolerance for solitude are directly related to our experience in prayer of God deep within us. And our experience of God indwelling within us, in turn, heightens our experience of God who is all around us. We sense God's presence in those we meet, in nature and, as we look back upon the day, in the unfolding of the events of our lives. Silence leads us to solitude and solitude leads us not to withdraw from life but to become more sensitive to life and to more intimately embrace it.

(DG) Accompanying silence and solitude will be simplicity. Simplicity is the ability to let go of physical, intellectual and spiritual clutter in our lives. It involves an acceptance of ourselves and our circumstances in life, not in resignation, but as a honest acceptance of where we are. Honesty and simplicity before God clear the way for our spiritual growth. They make space for the Divine Presence to resonate within us.

The effects of centering prayer, therefore, are to clear away the obstacles between ourselves and God. They undermine our sense of being separate

as it were - is to be experienced not during to centering prayer session itself but in our daily lives. So, how can that effectiveness be described?

(DG) Well, personal transformation is the first of the fruits of centering prayer. We may begin to notice subtle changes in ourselves, or others may point out to us that we seem to have changed. We may appear to be more calm, more relaxed, somehow more accepting of life. Whatever the case, we sense change within ourselves. We know that a year ago, or two years ago, we would have reacted differently to the circumstances we are now facing. We will also know that this change, is not a personal achievement, but is due to our practice of centering twice-daily.

We may find in addition that our core goodness begins to express itself in a greater sensitivity to, and understanding of, the needs of other people. We become, in other words, more compassionate. We are more easily moved by the needs of those around us and of humanity in general. Jesus said: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did for me.” (Mt: 25.40)

Following on quite naturally from this, we may find that we desire to be of service to others. We begin to reach out to others and a non-judgmental, practical caring begins to manifest itself. We gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of the social dimension of the gospel and its call to work for justice. We begin to appreciate that God’s love for us, is a love that can communicate itself to others through us and we are more willing to allow this to happen.

(FQ) We may find that our centering prayer has given rise to contemplative values within ourselves. Such contemplative values could include silence, solitude and simplicity:

intellect, have really very little to do with it. This is baggage that we carry in the body itself, not just in the mind, or intellect.

(FQ) Then, there are the culturally conditioned attitudes we have towards God, life, society, religion and the spiritual. These are the results of our upbringing, our education, our social circumstances and all of the cultural influences that surrounded us as we grew up. They still surround us. As with our personal baggage, we may not even have much awareness of the cultural attitudes with which we operate. The world is just the way it is, and all we can do is get on with it. Is not that what everyone else does?

Ultimately, of course, we are responsible for ourselves, for what we do and for the consequences of our actions and our attitudes. So, a further thing that can separate us from God, or gives rise to a feeling of separation from God, is our own lack of spiritual growth. We are responsible for any lack of development and understanding within ourselves. We are responsible for our spiritual state of health just as we are responsible for our physical state of health. We are responsible for our choice to allow God or not to allow God into our lives.

Even though we know this, it may also be the case that life has not offered us much opportunity to develop ourselves. Whatever may have been our circumstances, it is important not to blame ourselves, or to beat ourselves up. We are where we are in life, and our fundamental goodness has always been proclaimed by Christianity. God saw everything that he, or she, had made, Genesis tells us, and indeed it was very good.

Acceptance of our core goodness is essential to spiritual growth. Our core is our true self and our true self is our potential for growth in Christ.

Centering prayer is a spiritual practice which can help to unlock that potential. The effectiveness of centering prayer - where nothing happens,

Track 5: Deepening Our Relationship with God

(DG) As we have seen centering prayer is a non-vocal non-conceptual prayer. It is a prayer of silence. However, this raises a number of questions. What happens in the silence? How do we know that anything happens at all? How do you know that our time spent in centering is worthwhile? What we experience during the centering prayer session itself is likely to change little. There is always be the ebb and flow of thoughts. There will be moments of profound quiet and moments of total distraction. This is natural. It is just the way things are. So, let us look at the question of how we know that our prayer is worthwhile.

To begin to our consideration of this, I think we have to go back to the words of Thomas Keating: “The chief thing that separates us from God is the thought that we are separated from God.” Where does the thought of our separation from God come from? Part of the problem, I think, is our necessary preoccupation with daily life. We have to earn a living. We have to take care of our loved ones. We have to take care of ourselves and keep ourselves healthy. At home we have to wash and clean and tidy and do an endless series of routine tasks. It actually does not have to be the case, but all of this can push any thoughts of God into the background and give rise to a sense of separation from God.

Add to this, the baggage that we have accumulated over the years, where God, religion and Church are concerned. There can be all kinds of feelings such as anger, fear, guilt, hurt and all of the attitudes that are behind those feelings. We may or may not be aware of the baggage that we do carry, but it is there to a greater or lesser extent. Reason and the