Centering Prayer is not contemplation in the strict sense of the word but a method of practice to facilitate the beginning of contemplation. Contemplation is basically the predominance of the Gifts of the Spirit over our own activity during the time of prayer. At the same time, it gradually works itself into daily life through the active gifts of the Spirit: counsel, prudence, fortitude and knowledge.

In the Centering Prayer practice our activity has a part but it is a very disciplined one. It begins by being minimal, and finishes by being almost imperceptible. Centering Prayer is probably the most receptive of the practices designed to facilitate the growth of contemplation.

Think of a continuum in which our activity at one end consists of a practice such as Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is not a concentrative practice. It is not an exercise of attention. It is an exercise of intention. It is our will, our faculty of choice, that we are cultivating. The will is also our faculty of spiritual love, which is a choice. It may be accompanied by sentiments of love but does not require them. Divine love is not a feeling. It is a disposition or attitude of on-going self-surrender and concern, as God has for us and every living thing.

In our practice we begin by choosing an activity which is a traditional practice to access the spiritual level of our being. This movement takes place under the influence of the Holy Spirit who is present to us all the time through the Divine Indwelling. As the influence of the Spirit increases, we might imagine it as coming toward us on the continuum. It might be better to say that we are awakening to this Divine presence and action within us and consenting to it.

Note that Centering Prayer is an acceptance not only of God’s presence, but also of God’s action. What we are experiencing needs to be understood in the context of this movement of the Spirit which is primarily therapeutic. Why? Because we are sick! If we think we are well, and experience this activity which is definitely medicinal, it may cause great surprise. Some medications can be painful, not because that is the desire of the doctor, but because our illness is such that it needs a serious remedy.

During this prayer, the will is developing the habit of surrender to God’s presence and action. Meanwhile the Spirit’s influence is also increasing and at some point, one enters a no-man’s or a no-woman’s land where one doesn’t know which activity is predominating.

All prayer is a gift of the Spirit but in the beginning the Spirit works through our ordinary faculties which we exercise through discursive meditation and affective prayer, spiritual reading, the sacraments, other devotions, and the practice of virtue. All of these practices are increasing our capacity to respond with sensitivity to the movements of the Spirit. At some point there is an interaction in which sometimes one’s own gentle activity predominates, and at other times the Spirit’s activity predominates.

In this latter experience we may encounter what St. Teresa of Avila describes in The Interior Castle as the states of prayer, which she calls the prayer of quiet, union, and full union. They are levels of absorption of the faculties that are perceived by the one who receives them as the activity of the Divine presence. In those situations we are more or less aware of God’s action. The Divine action can be just as present, however, at an even more intimate level which the various faculties cannot interpret.

Just because one receives the spiritual consolation of the prayer of quiet or is completely absorbed in God in the prayer of union, doesn’t mean one is a saint. It may mean that we are so sick that we need special attention. So don’t get puffed up by such things! On the other hand, we don’t resist them either because we may need them. In deep therapy, the first thing one has to do in order to be healed is to experience transference with the therapist. This is a mysterious emotional process in which one identifies with the therapist and transfers to that person one’s relationship with authority figures from early life. Then the therapist can reflect back the acceptance one might not have felt as a child. It can heal the emotional privation of thinking of oneself as unlovable. We need the experience of another person fully accepting us on the emotional level. Otherwise it is difficult to have a full self-identity or as the psychologists call it, a strong ego, a valuable asset for the spiritual journey. It is this fully developed self, with all the wounds still remaining from early childhood, that we offer to God. Some people have been so deprived that they have an emotional conviction not only of being unlovable but even of being a mistake. This is the source of the
disease of self-hatred that is epidemic in our culture. This has to be healed in some degree for the spiritual journey to develop because the spiritual journey is the surrender of a self, a self-identity. If we don’t have a sense of a self or self-identity, we don’t know what to give.

The affirmation of spiritual consolations and periods of peace of refreshment, are a kind of transference with God. God then reflects back the acceptance and affirmation that our parents may have denied us in early childhood because of their own wounds from early life. If we can get over our self-hatred and the wounds of early childhood, we will make a tremendous contribution to the next generation. Unfortunately parents don’t usually find this out until the children are grown up. But please don’t have guilt feelings on this point because the same thing as been going on since Adam and Eve. That is the human condition. It is accepting our failures, working with them, and trying to grow out of them, that is important. This down-to-Earth process is an important aspect of the spiritual journey. Modern psychological discoveries can be helpful in our understanding of what the human condition really is from a diagnostic perspective. It is a pathology.

As the Spirit becomes predominant in our prayer, the use of the sacred word or sacred symbol (object of attention: the breath) during the time of Centering Prayer becomes less and less necessary. However, as long as we find that we are attracted to thoughts or feeling going by on the level of our memory or imagination during prayer, we freely make use of the sacred word (the breath), not to push the thoughts away, but to reaffirm our original intention of consenting to the presence of God.

The sacred word (the breath) is something like the focusing apparatus on a video camera. If I were panning an audience, I would have to adjust the lens a bit for those up front but those in the middle would then get fuzzy. For those in the middle I would have to adjust the lens again to get them in focus, and once again for those in the rear. In the above simile we are talking about physical clarity. I am using it in another context there. The focusing process that the sacred word (the breath) serves is not to bring a particular face, object or symbol into focus in the imagination, but to focus our intention when it gets fuzzy. Intention is the most important factor in any contemplative prayer practice, but especially in Centering Prayer in which our only activity consists in maintaining our intention to consent to God’s presence and action during the time of prayer.

The intention becomes fuzzy when stimulated by one of the emotional programs for happiness. Even after one has consciously rejected it for the sake of the values of the gospel, it may still be present in the unconscious. For example, one may have a great emotional investment in the security symbols of a particular culture. The pain of one’s insecurity may have been so painful in early childhood that one repressed into the unconscious the very memory of the privation. But the unconscious remembers. The emotions are energy and they don’t go away if repressed. They get stored in the body. The body is the storehouse of emotional energy that was not adequately processed. As a result, one develops blockages to the healthy flow of energies in the body and nervous system. This only reinforces the need for compensatory activity to hide the pain. Addictions are the ultimate way of distracting oneself from pain one is unwilling to face.

The spiritual journey from this aspect is a course in growing up and becoming liberated from childhood fixations at emotional levels that have become disruptive of our adult life and that interfere with our relationships. The journey is a form of divine psychotherapy in which God tries to heal us on every level, beginning with the body and the emotions.

For each level of emotional intensity there is a corresponding set of almost endless commentaries that are prerecorded. When a strong emotion goes off, one is instantly besieged by a surge of commentaries, all of which take one farther and farther out of the peace, calm, and detachment that contemplation requires. That is why we need to have a focusing apparatus when our intention, our consent to God’s presence and action, begins to get fuzzy because of boats (thoughts) going by on the surface of our awareness that attract or stimulate the programs in the unconscious.

It is not our attention that needs adjusting, because attention is secondary in Centering Prayer. We are not attending to a particular thought or object, or even to the sacred word (the breath) as we would be the case in a mantric kid of prayer. Our attention is a general and loving awareness of the presence of God. The actual work of Centering Prayer is ever-so-gently, without effort, consenting to God and letting go of the present moment with its psychological content. If some other thought or feeling causes the unconscious programs to get stimulated along with their commentaries, then before one gets on the boat, one returns to the sacred word (the breath). In this way, one develops with time, patience, and may failures, the habit of letting go of thought promptly, not by thinking about the fact that
one is thinking, but simply by returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word (the breath). If you find yourself on a boat, just get off. There should be no self-recriminations, no sighs, no annoyance that you have had a distraction. Any such reflection is another thought, another boat.

This prayer recommends itself as a prayer of great simplicity, a simplicity that is characteristic of childhood, which is to be present to the present moment and to forget what happened before. That is why the mood changes of the child are so striking. They go from tears to laughter. Just the consent to return to the sacred word (the breath) is all the activity that is required in Centering Prayer. Any analyzing, commentaries, guilt feelings, or recriminations are more distracting than the original thought. The original thought may simply have been a plan for the future or a memory. It is not nearly as effective in taking you out of interior silence as a feeling or an emotionally charged thought such as shame or guilt.

In this prayer we need to develop a certain jolly acceptance of our thoughts. We can’t avoid them all. If we could avoid them all, we would already be perfect in contemplation. I presume if that were the case, you would not now be reading this paper. If you are like 99.9% of the human race, this is a process that is going to take some time and may not even be completed in this lifetime. But cheer up. Every bit of progress is a bonus for the next life.

Contemplative prayer is a kind of purgatory. Purgatory is a state in which we complete the contemplative journey in the next life if we may not have quite finished it here. Every bit of progress means an enormous benefit for us and for everyone else in the human race. To be on this journey is really the greatest contribution one can make to the human family. This journey does not just involve what happens in prayer, but what happens in prayer enables one to live daily life as a continuation of the purification process. The ups and downs of daily life, including its very everydayness, is the arena in which the Christian journey takes place. God is in solidarity with our lives and deaths, just as they are. Perfection does not consist in feeling perfect or being perfect, but in doing what we are supposed to do without noticing it: loving people without taking any credit. Just doing it.

To sum up, we use the sacred word (the breath) only as a focusing apparatus to bring our intention into full clarity, whenever, because of the weakness of human nature and the fact that the emotional programs for happiness in the unconscious are still active, we need some means of returning to our original intention, that is, consent to God’s presence and action within us. With regular practice, we develop a certain ease in letting go. We then enter into the cloud of unknowing which develops through repeated small acts of consent. This means that we have dismantled the emotional programs sufficiently that we are alert to when they go off and can return to our original intention much more promptly and indeed, without necessarily returning to the sacred word or sacred symbol (the breath).

The movement established by introducing the sacred word (the breath) as the symbol of our intention to be open to God’s presence and action brings us to the spiritual level of our being, or to use another analogy, to a general attentiveness to the river of consciousness itself rather than to what is passing along the surface of the river. The sacred word (the breath) is simply the symbol of our intentionality. There is no special word therefore, that is better than another except that some words set off an association of ideas and the tendency to think about other matters. In this prayer we are developing the capacity to wait upon God with loving attentiveness. The loving character is expressed by fidelity to the practice and patience when doing it.