

CENTERING PRAYER AND ATTENTION OF THE HEART

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In the thirty years now since Centering Prayer first moved beyond the walls of St. Joseph's Abbey in Massachusetts and became a lay groundswell, it has certainly implanted itself deeply and (one hopes) permanently in the canon of Christian contemplative practice. Yet it still jostles somewhat uneasily against the walls of received tradition. I am not speaking here of fundamentalist-generated fear ("The devil will get you if you make your mind a blank"), but rather, of serious reservations on the part of some deeply formed in the Christian contemplative tradition that this prayer is somehow "breaking the rules." In its classic presentations, Christian prayer is "progressive"; it passes through stages. And the contemplative stage is traditionally regarded as the highest, or most subtle. In the concluding words of a recent, thoughtful article by a well-prepared commentator, "One does not take the kingdom by force."¹ Contemplation is approached by a gradual path leading from purgative to illuminative to unitive; from cataphatic to apophatic. The "ladder" of spiritual ascent is so deeply engrained on the Christian religious imagination that it seems virtually impossible to conceive of the journey in any other way. Contemplative prayer is "higher," and it is approached only gradually through a long journey of purification and inner preparation.

But is this in fact really so?

"You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it's not there," said Thomas Merton at a conference given to the nuns of the Redwoods shortly before boarding the plane to Asia on the last leg of his

human journey. “Don’t consider dualistic prayer on a lower level. The lower is higher. There are no levels. At any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God’s gift in Christ. In the end, Praise praises. Thanksgiving gives thanks. Jesus prays. Openness is all.”²

Certainly, these words of unitive, realized mastery make it clear that Merton “got there.” But how? Was this breakthrough insight the result of his long tread up the traditional ladder of ascent—in other words, is he “exhibit A” of the assertion that the classic monastic model works? Or is his unitive awakening something more akin to Dorothy in the final scene of *The Wizard of Oz*, when she realizes that all along the shoes that would carry her home have been right there on her feet?

This is, of course, an impossible question to answer, and I do not intend to do so directly; only to use it as a kind of leverage. In the words of the poet Philip Booth, “How you get there is where you arrive,” and Merton’s journey could only have been Merton’s. And yet the door, once he found it, can only be seen as the timeless and universal gate. Like a few others before him and a few significant monastic others following in his wake (Thomas Keating most prominently), he simply, in my estimate, came upon that hidden back door or “wormhole” within the Christian path that transports one out of the “progressive” journey in linear time into the instantaneous, seamless fullness from which prayer is always emerging.

And he found it in the same way that all who find it do so: in the gathering awareness that the cave of the heart is entered not only or even primarily through purification and concentration, but through surrender and release. This is this hidden, backdoor path that I wish to explore in the following essay. My thesis is that there has always been an alternative within Christian spiritual practice to the “ladder of ascent”: perhaps not as well known, but fully orthodox and in the end even more reliable, since it derives, ultimately, from the direct teaching and self-understanding of Jesus himself. It is from this alternative pathway that Centering Prayer derives its legitimacy and its powerful capacity to heal and unify.

Centering prayer as self-emptying love

First, let me give a quick summary of Centering Prayer, for those unfamiliar with its somewhat unusual methodology. As a method of meditation situated within the Christian contemplative tradition, Centering

Prayer is founded entirely on the gesture of surrender, or letting go. The theological basis for this prayer lies in the principle of *kenosis* (Philippians 2:6–11), Jesus’s self-emptying love that forms the core of his own self-understanding and life practice. During the prayer time itself, surrender is practiced through the letting go of thoughts as they arise. Unlike other forms of meditation, neither a focused awareness nor a steady witnessing presence is required. There is no need to “follow” the thoughts as they arise; merely to promptly let them go as soon as one realizes he or she is engaged in thinking (a “Sacred Word” is typically used to facilitate this prompt release).

With committed practice, this well-rehearsed gesture of release is inwardly imprinted and begins to coalesce as a distinct “magnetic center” within a person; it can actually be experienced on a subtle physical level as a “drop and release” in the solar plexus region of the body and as a tug to center. Of its own accord it begins to hold a person at that place of deeper spiritual attentiveness during prayer time. Not long after this initial “tethering of the heart” has set in, most experienced practitioners begin to feel the tug even outside their times of prayer, in the midst of their daily rounds, reminding them of the deepening river of prayer that has begun to flow in them beneath the surface of their ordinary lives. The intent of Centering Prayer is not to “access” God through contemplative stillness or mystical experience, but to teach its practitioners how to align spontaneously with Jesus’s own continuously creative and enfolding presence through emulating his kenotic practice in all life situations.

Thus, the real measure of this prayer is not found during the prayer time itself; Centering Prayer neither seeks nor accepts³ what is commonly known as “mystical experience.” Instead, it is found in the gradual but steady capacity to conform a person to “the mind of Christ,” and the life attitudes of compassion, generosity, and freedom that flow from this gesture.

“God should be with you like a toothache!” proclaimed the nineteenth-century mystic Theophan the Recluse.⁴ And while most of us might have preferred a different metaphor, it does speak forcefully to the fact that our concept of God is *sensate*. Remembrance of God is not a mental concept; it exists deeply embodied as a vibration, a homing frequency to which we can become increasingly sensitively attuned.

This growing experiential awareness of magnetic center is very important, not only for one's spiritual development but because of the new light it sheds on the ancient and venerable *desideratum* of the Western spiritual path: the goal of "putting the mind in the heart." As I hope to show, it is against this backdrop that Centering Prayer's powerful and innovative contribution to the received wisdom of Western spirituality becomes fully visible. But let us return to Merton.

The way of the heart

It is by now established that during the final decade of his life Merton was deeply drawn not only to Buddhism, but equally to Sufism, that mystical arm of Islam in which so much of the original heart and flavor of Jesus's Near-Eastern kenotic spirituality came to reside.⁵ In particular, during those years, he had come upon Louis Massignon's commentary on a treatise on the heart by al-Hallâj, a ninth century Sufi saint. Merton refers to this writing both in his journals and throughout his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and Massignon's vision of the "point vierge," that mysterious liminal ground equally shared between creator and created, forms the basis for those stirring final paragraphs of "A Member of the Human Race":

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality...Again that expression, *le point vierge* (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.⁶

Merton's intuitive mystical grasp of this teaching contexts it faultlessly, it seems, within the lineage of the Christian *via negativa*. But so seamless and evocative is his transposition that one may overlook the fact that the passage also has a context within its own Islamic frame of reference. This "point of nothingness and of absolute poverty" within al-Hallāj's treatise is in fact the *sirr*, the final veil covering the heart.⁷ What looks like a mystical metaphor within Merton's prose-poetry actually belongs to a rigorous anatomy of the heart as a spiritual instrument of perception—or, as Massignon puts it, "the Quranic notion that the heart is the organ prepared by God for contemplation."⁸ And it is just here that the point becomes interesting. For as one conceives the heart, so one conceives the transformative journey.

With regard to this "Quranic notion of the heart," perhaps the clearest elucidation comes from a modern Sufi master, Kabir Helminski. In his *Living Presence* Helminski writes:

We have subtle subconscious faculties we are not using. Beyond the limited analytic intellect is a vast realm of mind that includes psychic and extrasensory abilities, intuition; wisdom; a sense of unity; aesthetic, qualitative, and symbolic capacities. Though these faculties are many, we give them a single name with some justification because they are operating best when they are in concert. They comprise a mind, moreover, in spontaneous connection with the cosmic mind. This total mind we call "heart."⁹

The heart's job is to look deeper than the surface of things, deeper than the jumbled, reactive landscape of our ordinary awareness, and to beam in on the deeper, ensheltering spiritual world in which our being is truly rooted (Jesus calls it "the Kingdom of Heaven"). As the heart becomes clearer and stronger, we are able to come into alignment with divine being and are able to live authentically the dance of divine self-disclosure which is our true self. Helminski goes on to explain:

The heart is that antenna that receives the emanations of subtler levels of existence. The human heart has its proper field of functioning beyond the reactive, superficial ego-self. Awakening the heart, or the Spiritualized mind, is an unlimited process of making

the mind more sensitive, focused, energized, subtle and refined, of joining it to its cosmic milieu, the infinity of love.¹⁰

It is clear that Merton absorbed this basic concept of the heart as an organ of spiritual perception—the whole “antenna” aspect—and was deeply impressed with it. In his marvelous lectures on Sufism to the novices of Gethsemani, he speaks over and over of that “little kernel of gold” (Massignon’s *le point vierge*, al-Hallaj’s *sirr*), which is not only our deepest reality, but also a kind of homing signal through which we can stay aligned with that reality. As he sees it,

The real freedom is to be able to come and go from that center, and to be able to do without anything that is not connected to that center. Because when you die, that is all that is left. When we die, everything is destroyed except this one thing, which is our reality that God preserves forever. He will not permit its final destruction.

And the thing is, that we know this. This is built into that particular little grain of gold, this spark of the soul, or whatever it is. It knows this. And the freedom that matters is the capacity to be in contact with that center. For it is from that center that everything else comes.¹¹

But make no mistake: Merton is not embracing an Islamic anthropology; rather, in the mirror of Sufism he is able to recognize the heart he has already come to know intimately through his years of Christian contemplative practice. And in that same moment of recognition, he also understands intuitively that the way to remain in contact with “that little grain of gold, this spark of the soul” is simply to be able to let go of whatever it is that jams its signal.

Surmounting love by love

For most Western Christians, the heart would more readily be associated with the capacity to *feel*. Its genius is emotional empathy. Even that old pop psychology cliché, “being in the heart” versus “being in the head,” rests on our staunch conviction that the heart mirrors the real person

through its capacity to feel, to love, to empathize. If it has a capacity for spiritual perception, it is exercised through love. Hence the immortal instructions in the *Cloud of Unknowing*: “God may be reached and held fast by means of love, but by means of thought never.”¹²

It is not surprising, then, that overwhelmingly in the Western tradition, the core methodology for “putting the mind in the heart” can be described as *the concentration of affectivity*. In both the Christian East and the Christian West, the basic strategy for spiritual transformation begins by engaging the heart’s natural capacity to feel. Once the heart has been stirred by strong emotions, it is a surprisingly short step to concentrate and purify these emotions through spiritual practice and harness their vibrant energy for spiritual awakening.

You can see the strategy already at work in John Cassian in the fifth century, particularly in his Tenth Conference, where he urges the continuous use of the prayer sentence from Psalm 70, “O Lord, come to my assistance, Oh God make speed to save me.” Cassian goes on to explain: “It is not without good reason that this verse has been chosen from the whole of Scripture as a device. It carries within it all the feelings of which human nature is capable.”¹³ By embracing the full intensity of these feelings, an ardor is generated that catapults the heart free and clear of its egocentric orbit and straight into the heart of God.

In fact, as Christian contemplative masters have consistently observed from the Desert times right down into our own, without that critical intensity of ardor, it is all but impossible to escape the centrifugal force of human egotism. It takes gold to make gold; a heart that burns, even with carnal love, can be directed toward contemplation of higher things, but a heart of stone travels nowhere. As St. John Climacus observed with keen insight:

I have seen impure souls who threw themselves headlong into physical *eros* to a frenzied degree. It was their very experience of that *eros* that led them to interior conversion. They concentrated their *eros* on the Lord. Rising above fear, they tried to love God with insatiable desire. That is why when Christ spoke to the woman who had been a sinner he did not say that she had been afraid, but that she had loved much, and had easily been able to surmount love by love.¹⁴

This goal of “surmounting love by love,” or in other words, uniting the devotional and perceptive aspects of the heart in a single mystical flame, reveals the secret of why Christianity has always embraced affectivity as the gateway to inner awakening. We see this same predilection at work in *lectio divina*, where the third stage, *oratio*, is intended to take the concentrated attention of a mind that has gathered itself through *meditatio* and fan it to a level of emotional intensity wherein the boundaries of egoic consciousness are essentially melted, at least for the duration of the prayer. We see it again in the Jesus Prayer, classically understood, which while superficially resembling a mantra, in fact gains its force through the concentration of affective love.

This is also the underlying reason, I believe, that Christian tradition has never taken easily to meditation, and has never rested entirely comfortably with a methodology that seems to go against the grain of one of its most basic presuppositions: that it is not possible to reach the apophatic without first going through the cataphatic—i.e., via the concentration of affectivity. Working with *eros* as its transformational quicksilver, the journey necessarily entails a long, tough slog through the gristmills of purification and inner preparation before the soul is ready to “bear the beams of love” (in the words of William Blake) in pure contemplation. By an overwhelming majority, the pedagogy of both the Christian West and the Christian East has favored this developmental trajectory.

Attention of the heart

But majority is not the same thing as exclusive. While “concentration of affectivity” clearly dominates the field in Christian spirituality, there is also a different pathway to center, and one who was onto it was Simeon the New Theologian. His curiously little known essay, “Three Methods of Attention and Prayer,” is one of the most important resources available for locating Centering Prayer within the wider tradition of Christian interior prayer and for validating its innovative yet entirely orthodox starting points.¹⁵

I have spoken of Simeon extensively in my book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, but let me briefly recap some of the essential points. Simeon was one of the most brilliant spiritual theologians of his day, or of any day. His lifespan (949–1022) places him almost exactly a thousand years ago, but the issues he was grappling with in the eleventh century

are still cutting edge in our own times. Essentially, Simeon insisted on the dimension of *conscious presence* in our human relationship with the divine—or as he called it, “attention of the heart.”

Developing this kind of attention is all-important, Simeon maintains, for otherwise, it is impossible to have purity of heart; impossible to fulfill the Beatitudes.¹⁶ Only when the mind is “in the heart,” grounded and tethered in that deeper wellspring of spiritual awareness, is it possible to live the teachings of Jesus without hypocrisy or burnout. The gospel requires a radical openness and compassion that is beyond the capacity of the anxious, fear-ridden ego.

But how to swim down to these deeper waters? Simeon lays out three possibilities. The first is the classic path of “concentration of affectivity” as we have just described it:

If a man stands at prayer and, raising his hands, his eyes, and his mind to heaven, keeps in mind Divine thoughts, imagines celestial blessings, hierarchies of angels and dwellings of the saints, assembles briefly in his mind all he has learnt from the Holy Spirit and ponders over all this while at prayer, gazing up to heaven and thus inciting his soul to longing and love of God, at times even shedding tears and weeping, this will be the first method of prayer.¹⁷

The problem with this traditional method, Simeon asserts, is that it relies on a high level of excitement of the external faculties, which is ultimately self-delusional and can become addictive, leading one to depend on lights, sweet scents, and “other like phenomena” as evidence of the presence of God. “If then such a man give himself up to silence,” Simeon adds bluntly, “he can scarcely avoid going out of his mind.”¹⁸

The second method he explores is self-examination and the collecting of thoughts “so that they cease to wander”—the classic methodology of a practice based on awareness. This approach relies heavily on the practices of inner attention, self-remembering, and the examination of consciousness. But the fatal flaw in this methodology, Simeon observes, is that such a practitioner “remains in the head, whereas evil thoughts are generated in the heart.”¹⁹ In other words, the aspiring seeker is likely to be blindsided by the strength of his unconscious impulses.

Simeon designates the third method as *attention of the heart* and describes it as follows:

You should observe three things before all else: freedom from all cares, not only cares about bad and vain but even about good things...your conscience should be clear so that it denounces you in nothing, and you should have a complete absence of passionate attachment, so that your thought inclines to nothing worldly.²⁰

The importance of Simeon's observation here is extraordinary, for he has essentially described the practice of kenotic surrender. That greatest *desideratum* of the spiritual life, attention of the heart, is achieved, he feels, not so much by concentration of affectivity as by the simple release of all that one is clinging to, the good things as well as the bad things. He proposes that we start with that bare gesture of letting go. Attention of the heart can certainly be engaged through concentrated affectivity. But it can also, just as well, be engaged through relinquishing the passions and relaxing the will.

While Simeon is clearly describing an integrated practice combining both prayer and daily life, it is uncanny how closely his words dovetail with the basic methodology of Centering Prayer. As a person sits in Centering Prayer attempting to "resist no thought, retain no thought, react to no thought" (the instructional formula offered in all introductory training sessions), he or she is actually progressing in small but utterly real increments toward "freedom from all cares" and "the absence of passionate attachments." This is Simeon's "attention of the heart," which he states is inseparable from true prayer and true conversion. In fact, the case can be made that what Thomas Keating has really succeeded in doing is to give meditational form to Simeon's attention of the heart, thereby providing a powerful new access point to the traditional wisdom of the Christian inner path. His approach, like Simeon's, is innovative but entirely orthodox once you understand where he is coming from. The tie-in between Centering Prayer and Simeon's attention of the heart is simply another link in the chain situating Centering Prayer firmly within the lineage of Christian kenosis understood as spiritual path.

Finding the way to the heart

“Keep your mind there [in the heart]” remarks Simeon, “trying by every possible means to find the place where the heart is.” In his *Lost Christianity*, Jacob Needleman immediately picks up on the irony of this: that as we begin, we do not know where the heart is. We must learn, through the process of repeated tuning in.²¹

My hunch is that this describes the actual journey of both Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating—and undoubtedly Simeon as well. During their respective monastic novitiates “the first method of attention and prayer” was what was available, and they each practiced it to its fullness. (And even in the early days of Centering Prayer teaching, the Sacred Word was initially described as a “love word”: affectivity in capsule form, or in other words, an intense, concentrated version of “all those feelings known to man.”²² It was ultimately through the experience of contemplation itself that these spiritual masters came to their realization that all along it has been the surrender carrying them home.

In his inimitable way, Merton puts words to the barebones truth of this timeless moment: the “aha” realization that solves Simeon’s (and Needleman’s) koan of “the Way to the Heart:”

This act of total surrender is not simply a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious: it is an act of love for this unseen Person Who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to His reality, also makes Himself present to us.²³

If what he glimpses in this remarkable insight is true, then the response to those overly concerned that Centering Prayer is violating the traditional pedagogy can only be a gentle “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” For ultimately, as this “unseen person” becomes present, the knee of the heart will instinctively bow—and the rest will somehow work itself out.

It is indeed true that ego-driven spiritual ambitiousness can wind up in very bad places. But it is important never to lose sight of the fact that *spiritual ambitiousness and attention of the heart are mutually exclusive categories*. The proud may fall, but it will not be through following the Way of the Heart, for the heart has its inbuilt safeguard: it perceives only in the

modality of surrender (which means, literally, to “hand oneself over,” to entrust oneself entirely). In other words, the heart can fulfill its function as organ of spiritual perception only to the degree that it is able to bring itself into moral alignment with “the infinity of love” (in Helminski’s words); to the extent that it is willing and able to coincide with love, to become love itself. For love is the ultimate, and ultimately the *only*, purification. But this “Love which moves the sun and the stars” (as Dante calls it) is not a feeling, an *eros*-fixated-upon-God; it is rather the alchemical *agape* which comes into being when *eros* becomes whole in the act of giving itself away. Whenever and wherever along the pathway of prayer this great secret is learned, it instantaneously reorganizes the playing field.

Notes

1. Feldmeier, Peter, “Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Tradition,” *Spiritual Life* (Winter 2003), p. 239.
2. Steindl-Rast, David, “Man or Prayer,” in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton, Monk* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 90.
3. For more on this point, see my *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), Chapter 5: “Spiritual Non-Possessiveness.”
4. Amis, Robin, ed., *Theophan the Recluse: Writings on Prayer of the Heart* (Newburyport, MA: Praxis Press, 1992), p. xx.
5. The word Islam itself means “submission”—i.e., the complete kenosis of self-emptying before God. For a brilliant and comprehensive study of Merton’s late-life immersion in Sufism, see Baker, Rob and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).
6. Merton, Thomas, “A Member of the Human Race,” *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966, p. 158. Quoted from *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), pp. 346–7.
7. See Griffith, Sidney H., “Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam,” in *Merton and Sufism*, pp. 64–5.
8. *Merton and Sufism*, p. 65.
9. Helminski, Kabir, *Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), p. 157.
10. *Living Presence*, pp. 157–8.
11. Merton, Thomas, “True Freedom,” transcribed by the author from the cassette series *Sufism: Longing for God* (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1995).
12. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Ira Progoff (New York: Delta Books, 1957), p. 72.
13. Cassian, John, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 133. Cassian’s full explanation is as follows: “It carries within it a cry to God in the face of every danger. It expresses the humility of a pious confession. It conveys the watchfulness

born of unending worry and fear. It conveys sense of our frailty, the assurance of being heard, the confidence in help that is always and everywhere present.”

14. Quoted from Cong, Joseph Chu, OCSO, *The Contemplative Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. 27. This goal, in fact, comprises the basic pedagogy of monastic love mysticism, which has flowed like a great underground river through the spirituality of the Christian West, reaching its culmination in the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Chu Cong’s book is a profound yet accessible introduction to this great tradition.

15. This essay is found in Kadloubovsky, E. and G. E. H. Palmer, eds., *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1951, 1992), pp. 152–61.

16. *Philokalia*, p. 158.

17. *Philokalia*, p. 153.

18. *Philokalia*, p. 153.

19. *Philokalia*, p. 154. In this context the word “heart” obviously refers to what we would today call “the unconscious,” a nuance unavailable to Simeon.

20. *Philokalia*, p. 158.

21. Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. x. The quotation from Simeon is from the *Philokalia*, p. 158.

22. This aspect of the Sacred Word has been consistently emphasized in the teachings of Father Basil Pennington. For further comments, see my Preface to Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, *Finding Grace at the Center* (Woodstock VT: Skylight Paths, 2007).

23. Merton, Thomas, *The Inner Experience*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 2003), p. 44. The work was originally published as a series in several successive issues of *Cistercian Studies* in 1984 (vols. 18–19). My original introduction to this quotation was through a photocopy of one of these articles loaned to me by a monk of St. Benedict’s Abbey, Snowmass, Colorado, in 1995; the quotation is found in the third article: 18: 3 (1983), p. 209.

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