

but it's also small. A very sharp needle cannot touch this mind, because this mind is smaller than the tip of the needle. But our mind is also bigger than the whole universe. Sometimes our mind is very bright, sometimes very dark. If you make "my path," you also make "my mind." But if you let go of "my mind," you become a Buddha. Then any path will lead you to the mountaintop.

If you control your mind, you control everything. But if you say, "I control my mind," then what is this that controls the mind? Is it some other mind that controls the mind or is it no mind? Also, how do you control your mind? Where is your mind? Are you and your mind two things or one? Same or different? Big problem! That's all thinking. POW! Put it all down, OK? Don't think!

The Diamond Sutra says "All things are impermanent. A pure view is to see all appearances as non-appearances. When all appearances and non-appearances disappear, that's complete stillness. Then you can see Buddha-nature." But if everything is impermanent, I am also impermanent; Buddha is also impermanent. Then how can I see Buddha? How can impermanence see impermanence?

If you check the words in the Bible or in the Diamond Sutra, then it's all checking, all opposites thinking. But truth means there are no opposites. No opposites means the absolute. If you are checking, then everything is not correct. If you are not checking, everything is correct. That is Zen. The Diamond Sutra teaches that silence is better than holiness. And the Bible says "Be still and know that I am God." This silent mind is very important. How do we transmit this silent mind from me to you? Buddha picked up a flower, and only Mahakashyapa smiled. Then Buddha said, "My true dharma, I transmit to you." But that was a big mistake on Buddha's part. If I was Mahakashyapa at that time, I would have said, "No, thank you, Buddha, I already have dharma." Then Buddha would have a problem!!

So, already everybody has dharma, already everybody has truth, already everybody has the correct way and correct life. Already everybody has, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." So why does anyone need transmission from someone else? Open your mouth and it's already a mistake. But our job is to help all beings. So, we only use this mouth to teach the dharma and help all beings. That, we say, is "tongue formula."

If you only keep a try mind, a don't-know mind, then your center becomes stronger, stronger, stronger. Then everything you hear, smell, see, taste, touch is better than the Buddha's speech, better than the Bible's speech. That's enlightenment. Then you can save all beings from suffering.

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Centering prayer Or, Teachings From the Hotel California

Father Robert Morin, OMI

Adapted from a talk at a Christian-Buddhist workshop at Providence Zen Center in January, 1991.

I'd like to address the practice of centering prayer as a form of contemplative prayer. I'll begin with something that Zen Master Seung Sahn said, that the basis of all religion is the phrase contained in Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God." Sounds very simple; actually, it's a lifetime project.

When we hear the phrase "centering prayer," people naturally think, "find your center." But *where* is your center?

It's not something you can find, so to speak. It's more intuitive than that. I know, afterwards, when I've been acting in a centered way, when I've been behaving out of that center. Other times I know very well I'm acting like a perfect airhead, when the internal chatter is covering over all of reality. In the West we tend to practice religion from the ears up: very cerebral, sort of like the rock group Talking Heads. We have a lot of words about God and relatively little experience of God. In the words of one old priest, who used to smoke regular cigarettes and was offered a filtered cigarette, "Bah! That's like kissing a girl through a plate glass window. You get the idea, but not the effect." Ideas-about and experience-of are two entirely different realms.

When we live from up here, the rest of the body dangles from that center of consciousness and gets ignored. We don't have that much of a body consciousness until you sit down to practice and your legs say, "Guess who's here?" A certain wisdom comes right back up from the body. The Orthodox Christians locate the spirit in the top third of the heart. While practicing the Jesus prayer they stare down at the heart, the top third, the part we fill in with cholesterol. That's where they'd say your soul is. In Oriental tradition, the center is the nerve-knot about two inches below your navel; literally, your physical center. If you were to stand me up, measure me, and find the halfway point, you'd see that's just about where it is. But if I were to say, "My center is right here in my head," you'd say, "You don't know how to measure too well." I wouldn't know how to live too well, either!

Finding one's center in centering prayer is done in God. It's not just a project we do. Otherwise, it's simply narcissism, navel-gazing. I'm reminded of the parakeet

we had in the monastery laundry room. It spent a considerable amount of time chattering away at a mirror, thinking it was another parakeet. Unfortunately, I suspect that a number of people pray that way, too: a long dialogue with oneself. "Be still, and know that I am God." It's very easy mistakenly to think, "Oh, if I'm still, then I'll know God." God is unknowable. We can have an experience, but not conceptual knowledge.

Where did this all come from, this kind of practice that has come to be called "centering prayer"? A monk named John Cassian travelled to various monasteries in the East, talking to people about their spiritual practice, gaining bits of wisdom. When he returned to his monastery, he taught what is sometimes called "monologistic prayer," from two Greek words meaning "one word." What he did was simply teach a phrase from the Psalms: "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me." Repeat that continually, he said, and you will be in the presence of God.

As a matter of fact, in Christian tradition, there is nowhere you can be that you are *not* in the presence of God. I remember a voice in the back of a chapel where I was a seminarian that would say, "Let us place ourselves in the presence of God and adore him." And I'd think "Where in the heck do you think you're going to go?" As the Book of Jonah points out, you can't run away from God, you can only run around in God. We are already enfolded. It's like the song from the Eagles, *Hotel California*: "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

It's a little distance from the Eagles to John Cassian, but I return to John. He taught his monks what we call "mantra prayer," which frightens some people. They think a mantra is something very exotic, a magical word. It's simply a phrase, repeated, that helps to induce calm:

In Zen, "clear mind, clear mind, clear mind: don't know." In Christianity, "O God, come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me."

From the fourth century and John Cassian, we jump to the fourteenth century and England, with the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It's more a letter, a very lengthy letter written from a priest or a monk to a young disciple. The point that he makes is this: God cannot be grasped by our concepts. Between ourselves and God is a cloud of unknowing. "Anything you think you know, forget it." The only way to break through the cloud of unknowing and know God is through love, and love is expressed in that prayer word.

That's the basis for centering prayer. It came to us through various routes. In the eyes of some people, centering prayer is simply baptized transcendental meditation—"the Catholics did it again!" Much more than that, I think, centering prayer is an attempt to regain something that's always been there in the tradition that got lost, ignored. At any given point in the history of any religion, people have to move often and rapidly. We throw stuff in boxes and put it in the attic. Later we wonder, "Where is that?" So you go back to the attic and fish around until you find it—"I need this, this is valuable." The tradition has always been there, but it went underground.

In the eyes of a lot of people, if you're going to do this kind of prayer and quiet, well, sock yourself away in a monastery. Double-lock the doors, stay there, and do it. The fact is, it's our common heritage. A contemplative dimension is part of everyone's life. When we stop long enough, when we stop grasping, wanting, objecting to the world, we can discover something within us, another dimension of ourselves that wants to be still.

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