Some Practical Points

1. The minimum time for this prayer is 20 minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning and the other in the afternoon or early evening. With practice the time may be extended to 30 minutes or longer.
2. The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer which does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.
3. Possible physical symptoms during the prayer:
   a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body or a generalized sense of restlessness. These are usually due to the untying of emotional knots in the body.
   b. We may notice heaviness or lightness in our extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
   c. In all cases we pay no attention and ever-so-gently return to the sacred word.
4. The principal fruits of centering prayer are experienced in daily life and not during the prayer period.
5. Centering Prayer familiarizes us with God's first language which is silence.

Points for Further Development

1. During the prayer period, various kinds of thoughts may arise:
   a. Ordinary wanderings of the imagination or memory.
   b. Thoughts and feelings that give rise to attractions or aversions.
   c. Insights and psychological breakthroughs.
   d. Self-reflections such as, "How am I doing?" or, "This peace is just great!"
   e. Thoughts and feelings that arise from the unloading of the unconscious.
   f. When engaged with any of these thoughts return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
2. During this prayer we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as:
   a. Repeating the sacred word continuously.
   b. Having no thoughts.
   c. Making the mind a blank.
   d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
   e. Achieving a spiritual experience.
   (*Open Mind, Open Heart*)

Ways to Deepen Our Relationship with God

1. Practice two 20-30 minute periods of Centering Prayer daily.
2. Listen to the Word of God in Scripture and study *Open Mind, Open Heart.*
3. Select one or two of the specific practices for everyday life as suggested in *Open Mind, Open Heart*.
4. Join a weekly Centering Prayer Group.
   a. It encourages the members of the group to persevere in their individual practices.
   b. It provides an opportunity for further input on a regular basis through tapes, readings, and discussion.
   c. It offers an opportunity to support and share the spiritual journey.

What Centering Prayer Is and Is Not

a. It is not a technique but a way of cultivating a deeper relationship with God.
b. It is not a relaxation exercise but it may be quite refreshing.
c. It is not a form of self-hypnosis but a way to quiet the mind while maintaining its alertness.
d. It is not a charismatic gift but a path of transformation.
e. It is not a para-psychological experience but an exercise of faith, hope and selfless love.
f. It is not limited to the "felt" presence of God but is rather a deepening of faith in God's abiding presence.
g. It is not reflective or spontaneous prayer, but simply resting in God beyond thoughts, words, and emotions.

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The Method of CENTERING PRAYER

THE PRAYER OF CONSENT
BY THOMAS KEATING

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

Contemplative Prayer

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. In the Christian tradition Contemplative Prayer is considered to be the pure gift of God. It is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. Through grace we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing - closer than con-sciousness itself.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of Contemplative Prayer by preparing our faculties to receive this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times in an updated form. Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; rather it casts a new light and depth of meaning on them. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. This method of prayer is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him.

Theological Background

The source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to Contemplative Prayer, is the indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. It tends to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.

The Root of Centering Prayer

Listening to the word of God in Scripture (Lectio Divina) is a traditional way of cultivating friendship with Christ. It is a way of listening to the texts of Scripture as if we were in conversation with Christ and He were suggesting the topics of conversation. The daily encounter with Christ and reflection on His word leads beyond mere acquaintanceship to an attitude of friendship, trust, and love. Conversation simplifies and gives way to communing. Gregory the Great (6th century) in summarizing the Christian contemplative tradition expressed it as "resting in God." This was the classical meaning of Contemplative Prayer in the Christian tradition for the first sixteen centuries.

Wisdom Saying of Jesus

Centering Prayer is based on the wisdom saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount :

> *"...But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you"* MT 6:6

It is also inspired by writings of major contributors to the Christian contemplative heritage including John Cassian, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing,* Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Thomas Merton.

Centering Prayer Guidelines

I. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. (*Open Mind, Open Heart*, Thomas Keating)

1. The sacred word expresses our intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. The sacred word is chosen during a brief period of prayer to the Holy Spirit. Use a word of one or two syllables, such as: God, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother, Mary, Amen. Other possibilities include: Love, Listen, Peace, Mercy, Let Go, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust.

The Guidelines

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts*, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

*thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections

3. Instead of a sacred word, a simple inward glance toward the Divine Presence, or noticing one's breath may be more suitable for some persons. The same guidelines apply to these symbols as to the sacred word.
4. The sacred word is sacred not because of its inherent meaning, but because of the meaning we give it as the expression of our intention to consent.
5. Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period because that would be engaging thoughts.

II. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

1. "Sitting comfortably" means relatively comfortably so as not to encourage sleep during the time of prayer.
2. Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.
3. We close our eyes as a symbol of letting go of what is going on around and within us.
4. We introduce the sacred word inwardly as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.
5. Should we fall asleep upon awakening we continue the prayer.

III. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

1. "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception, including body senstations, sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, plans, reflections, concepts, commentaries, and spiritual experiences.
2. Thoughts are an inevitable, integral and normal part of Centering Prayer.
3. By "returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word" a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
4. During the course of Centering Prayer, the sacred word may become vague or disappear.

IV. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

1. The additional 2 minutes enables us to bring the atmosphere of silence into everyday life.
2. If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer, while the others listen.