

## How to do Centering Prayer

1. Before you begin, choose a sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to the presence and action of God within you.
2. Sit comfortably, close your eyes and begin to settle down. Take a few deep, slow breaths to help you relax and stay loose. Recall your intention to consent to the presence and action of God within you and then silently introduce your sacred word.
3. When you get caught up in your thoughts,\* return ever-so-gently to your sacred word. Thoughts are normal. Let them come, accept them and let them go. Do this every time thoughts come to grab your attention. Don't give up if this is hard at first. It will get easier with practice.
4. At the end of your prayer time, remain relaxed for a couple of minutes while you come back into ordinary consciousness. Don't rush to evaluate your prayer time. The sense of peace and restfulness comes in a short time.

\*Thoughts refer to any idea, feeling, emotion, memory, physical sensation, image, reflection, plan, opinion, or spiritual experience that comes to awareness, even ideas about God or Jesus, anything that kicks in a narrative that takes us away from our intention to be silent.

## Effects of Centering Prayer

AS WE START THIS INWARD journey, sometimes during Centering Prayer, we may find ourselves getting discouraged as we get in touch with buried feelings of anger, grief, lust, fear, maybe even remembering traumas we forgot about long ago. This kind of emotional “dumping” is actually a sign that the process is working. It helps us recognize hidden motives that influenced our decisions. Most of the time these complicated emotions and memories come outside of prayer time. This is simply the deep transformation of our spiritual journey taking place.

*Centering Prayer allows me to deal with all those events and memories that I have chosen to avoid, especially the painful and shameful ones. I find as I deal with them, little by little, they lose their power over me.*  
**D.D., Folsom Prison**

AT OTHER TIMES THE EFFECTS of Centering Prayer are barely seen. Eventually we widen our perceptions, allowing us to not take personally the actions of people around us. A sense of peace will begin to come. We will learn how to let go and let others be themselves and accept others for who they are and as they are.

SOON WE WILL BEGIN to sense changes in the ordinary activities we do every day. Our outlooks, attitudes and reactions become more like the ones we would prefer. We're all different. The growth that occurs can't be set by any time table. There is no way to change or repair the damage of a lifetime easily or quickly, but the results encourage us to keep going. Remember our own best thinking and planning ended us up in prison. Centering Prayer could be the practice needed to bring change.

*Centering Prayer has given me an experience of freedom. I will forever be changed. I have found who I am and am blessed to have a Centering Prayer group available to me.*  
**N.B., Folsom Women's Prison**

THROUGHOUT THE AGES, countless truth seekers have found peace, serenity and spiritual enlightenment by exploring the Silence within. For those of us who are incarcerated, this practice truly allows us to become “Locked Up and Free.”

For more information, including the book *Finding God Within: Contemplative Prayer For Prisoners*, and other materials, free of any cost to prisoners, write to:

**Prison Contemplative Fellowship**  
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office@uspcf.org

**LOCKED UP  
AND  
FREE**

THIS LITTLE BOOKLET was put together to help those incarcerated find strength and purpose during a time of trial and tribulation. Many sincere and experienced people, in prisons and jails around the country, helped write this booklet. It has roots in the writings of wise and holy people, from all faith traditions, east and west, from the earliest times to today.

IF YOU START to think this booklet is useless or not for you, please don't throw it out. Put it away or give it to someone else. There may be a time when you want to take another look into what it offers. It just may help to move out of the hole you've dug for yourself. It's your choice.

### Starting Over

MANY OF US who have been in prison for a long time recognize that we have a lot of angry, frustrated, and conflicted feelings about people, about life, and about the choices we've made. We're told that it is understandable and natural to have **those** feelings. But we're rarely told how to deal with these feelings in any honest and constructive way. For many of us, we've tried some religious practices, but they're not working for us. We're told that we have to work through these feelings to find liberation, in or outside prison walls. Rarely have we found a way that works.

THIS LITTLE BOOKLET can help. It describes an ancient type of silent prayer called meditation (sometimes called contemplation) that helps us access the anger, pain, and frustration that are locked deep inside, and actually transform them into something more useful and liberating. This type of meditation, called Centering Prayer, can change our perspective on life and allow us peace of mind. It can be used as the eleventh step in

a traditional Twelve-Step program. For many, it gives deeper self-knowledge that helps when we go before the Parole Board.

### How is this meditation any different from usual prayers?

NO MATTER WHAT we have done or who we think we are now, we have the opportunity and the capacity to change. We might think that we have sunk so low that nothing we do now can help or change us. We may believe we've already said all the prayers we were supposed to say and that didn't help us. But Centering Prayer is a different type of prayer. This silent meditative prayer, prayer without words, allows us to deal with our deepest thoughts and judgements about ourselves, especially our sense of self-loathing. It works whether we have a relationship with God or no relation at all. We don't have to have a religious background, or call God Jesus, Allah, Father, Brahman, another name or no name. It works for anyone who is willing to put forth the effort to practice it.

*Don't let the silence scare you. It's an experience that will fill your life with warmth and Godly love as you recognize your true self.  
H.L., California Health Care Facility*

### How can sitting around, with my eyes closed and looking foolish, help me survive this prison life?

AFTER DECADES OF being tossed up in the mix of prison hustles, getting into conflicts with Correctional Officers, and being constantly tested by the predatory and dehumanizing nature of prison, we have found that by practicing meditation daily, we have gained the ability to stay focused and relaxed when the place gets

hectic. Instead of rising to the bait and winding up in the hole, we now have the ability to slow down our natural reactions in any situation and choose our actions according to what is in our best interest. In this practice we not only survive but we flourish. We understand that silent prayer surprisingly gives us a wider perspective of who we really are and what is actually going on around us.

### What is Centering Prayer?

WE SHOULDN'T LET the term "Centering Prayer" fool us. It doesn't matter what religious beliefs we have, or if we've never been religious at all. This method of meditation can work in our life and help us to change.

*As a man who has been incarcerated for nearly 24 years, I can say that Centering Prayer has allowed me to build a closer relationship with God in a setting of peace, trust, support, and fellowship among my fellow inmates.  
M.B., Deuel Vocational Institute*

PEOPLE HAVE BEEN doing Centering Prayer for centuries, but it is different from what we may think of as prayer. It is not the type of prayer we are used to, like praying out loud or asking for something or even giving thanks. It is moving deep within ourselves, in silence, saying nothing, asking nothing, just intending to be in the presence of the Ultimate Ground of being and allowing it to be with us.

### My mind is always going: how can I possibly stop my mind from thinking?

IN CENTERING PRAYER our goal is to let go of thoughts and just be in the silence, way deep within us -- not using words and not actively thinking about anything. When we close our eyes to meditate, it is natural and normal for all kinds of thoughts and feelings to fill our minds. We can't stop these thoughts, we can only NOT PAY ATTENTION TO THEM. We let them come and let them go. We don't resist them and we don't hang onto them. It's like cars passing by, we see them, but we don't get in! Or like watching TV in our cell and someone comes to talk to us. The volume on the TV stays the same, but we don't hear it because our attention has changed. We have thoughts, but we are not paying attention to them. We try to let go of all thoughts, not think about them or analyze them.

HERE IS THE SECRET to being able to do this: Before we begin, we choose a word, a simple word of one or two syllables, that reminds us of our intention not to get attached to our thoughts. Words like peace, love, joy, trust, listen are good; or one might prefer breath, life, yes, mercy, or any word that helps us to let go of our thoughts. Then when thoughts begin to come we just repeat our sacred word silently a few times and let them go by. We call this our sacred word, not in a religious way, or like a mantra, but sacred in its meaning to us.