**A Month of Breathing Prayer**

# **Background**

Being present in the moment with our whole being is the core of mindful living.

For most of us, our minds flit about. Our minds outpace the balance between mind and body which is necessary for us to approach life with our whole being. We need to take time to slow our mental racing to a pace which our bodies can cope with. Much has been written about the physiological and mental wellbeing benefits of doing so (see Beischel’s book).

Concentrating on our breathing is an important part of centring our attention on our whole being. It stops us remaining in a superficial, purely mental state. The key to meditative and contemplative prayer is to commune with the Divine Presence with your whole being. Centring ourselves through breathing techniques enables this. It is a prelude to what has become known as ‘Centring Prayer’.

Posture is important if you are not to ache or fidget. Think right angles (90o). If you are able-bodied, try sitting in a comfortable chair that allows you to make a right angle at your knees and at your hips; and sit up straight with your hands on your lap. Otherwise, just make yourself comfortable. Check your body for tensions and actively relax any tension. This takes practice, but now you are ready to begin.

# **Week 1**

This week we will concentrate on basic breathing techniques as you begin to practice; you probably will feel weird doing these exercises!

In your first session, get your posture sorted and then control your breathing on a 4 count; count 4 seconds as you breathe in and 4s as you breathe out; 4s to completely fill your lungs and 4s for a complete exhalation. Concentrate your mind on the counting. If you begin to feel light-headed, reduce the cycle to 3s, but don’t gasp! Everyone is different, so you may find a breathing rhythm which works better for you. The key is slow, rhythmical breathing with your mind fully engaged in the breathing process. Start with 5 min and work up to 15 min in a comfortable number of sessions.

When you have practiced this in enough sessions for it to become simple for you, concentrate your attention on your forehead for one breathing cycle, then your mouth for the next cycle, then (in the same way) your throat, your lungs and finally your diaphragm, allowing your attention to remain there for 3 breathing cycles. Your attention is like an elevator going down deeper into your breathing and deeper into your consciousness. Repeat the process for a while, perhaps for 5 min and working up in later sessions. If your mind wanders, just restart the elevator from the top floor, the forehead. Be patient. Practice for several sessions until it becomes automatic.

Many people find that their mind is particularly dominant and uncontrollable, so now try using a simple word like ‘Peace’ (or ‘Love’ or ‘Rest’) to gather your attention, mentally repeating it as you breathe out. This is often called a ‘prayer word’; it is simply a focus for your wandering attention.

# **Week 2**

*“*To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever present, all-seeing within you*”*St Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894).

Now try this for a couple of sessions. One of the Jewish names for God, YHWH, is the sound of breathing; in (yah) and out (weh). Vocalise these sounds as you slowly breathe in and out. It focusses your attention on the breath itself. It is often very effective as a ‘prayer word’. Allow yourself to feel the deep peace of the moment with God, with your attention and breathing united. This is what St Theophan was getting at!

The next breathing practice is to extend your breathing cycle to 4s holding your breath in, and 4s pausing at full exhalation. This is four-fold breathing: 4s breathing in, hold for 4s, 4s breathing out, hold for 4s. Some people find this cycle particularly effective in achieving mindful concentration. Try it and see. Again, reduce the cycling time of you feel light-headed.

The Jesus Prayer beloved of Orthodox Christians is also particularly effective when combined with a four-fold breathing pattern. In this way, the Jesus Prayer becomes:

“Jesus Christ” while breathing in for 4s

“Son of God” while holding for 4s

“Have mercy upon me” while breathing out for 4s

“a sinner” while remaining exhaled for 4s

This form of praying is very calming. It can be used on its own (try 5min building to 15min) or as preparation (3 to 5 min) for meditation on another theme.

Practice these techniques for the rest of this week.

# **Week 3**

Now you are in a good position to approach Meditation and Contemplation this week. There is a difference between the two. In meditation, you concentrate on a word or phrase; in contemplation you concentrate on God’s Being alone. Before beginning either meditation or contemplation, you should centre yourself as above.

Many people find that contemplation arises spontaneously from meditation; it simply happens during a meditation session. Thomas Keating comments:

*“*In discussion with others who practice centring prayer, I have found that they stop saying the sacred word [meditation], as soon as some type of [mental] silence appears. They stay silent for a few minutes; then thoughts arise and they return to the [prayer] word. They make another descent into quietness and drop the word; then thoughts arise and they return to it again*”.* (Keating p41).

Probably this is the best approach we could take.

Bishop John Pritchard advises:

*“*In a time of meditation, take the phrase from Psalm 46, ‘Be still and know that I am God’. Repeat it slowly [in your mind] and prayerfully and be still. Then drop off the last word so that you say simply ‘Be still and know that I am’. Taste all the goodness I that phrase. Enjoy the silence and simplicity of that moment. Take time. Then drop off the last words again: ‘Be still and know’. Repeat the process. Then reduce the phrase to ‘Be still’. Repeat. Don’t be hurried. Finally, reduce the phrase to its core: ’Be…*’”*.

Try this for a couple of sessions.

On other occasions this week, meditate on

* “I am in Christ… and Christ is in me” (from John’s Gospel)
* “All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (Dame Julian of Norwich)

# **Week 4**

Continue this week to practice using these techniques and a simple prayer word.

In one or more sessions, when you are centred, imagine the face of someone for whom you wish to pray – no words, just their image – effectively lifting them into God’s presence: One person per session.

Review your experiences of this month. Are you calmer? Do you feel more enabled to rest in God’s Presence? Are you generally more content or less so? Do you wish to follow this up further? If so, try developing your own rhythm of ‘Centring Prayer’ using firstly the video by Cynthia Bourgeault and then the follow-up references.

# **Follow Up Resources**

* Thomas Keating (2019) *Open Mind, Open Heart* 20th Anniversary Edition. Bloomsbury
* Beischel M (2017) *Calming the Brain through Mindfulness and Christian Meditation* Legaia Books
* Stead T (2016) *Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality: Making Space for God.* SPCK
* Ramsey M (1982) *Be Still and Know* Collins
* Merton T (1961, 2007Edn) *New Seeds of Contemplation* New Directions Paperbacks
* Pritchard J (2000) *Beginning Again on the Christian Journey* SPCK
* Cynthia Bourgeault ‘Centring Prayer’ introduction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aQmQu4lufo>
* Bourgeault C (2004) *Centring Prayer and Inner Awakening* Cowley Press
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FWvxwfN_CE>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aQmQu4lufo>

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