

Thomas Keating's Call to Wisdom

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“ May the next years see the increase of Centering Prayer, and the creative addition of other Wisdom aspects that might enhance what we are doing, or at least help us to do what we have learned out of our tradition, with complete commitment.”
– Thomas Keating, *A Life Surrendered to Love*

Jesus as Wisdom teacher

Thomas Keating often wrote of Wisdom and our need for it within the Centering Prayer community and in our greater world. He reminds us that Jesus, the great Wisdom teacher, emphasized transformation of human beings, to the full potential of the Divine Indwelling inherent within us. In *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus*, Keating said, “When rightly understood, the parables help us to see how extraordinary a wisdom teacher Jesus really was, and how revolutionary, in the best sense of the word, was the content of what he taught and to which he bore witness by his life and death.”

As a Wisdom teacher Jesus was teaching a path, or spiritual discipline, for transformation. In his saying “my yoke is easy” the word for yoke in Aramaic, *nira*, was colloquially known in the Aramaic-speaking world he lived in as the way or path of a teacher. Jesus encouraged dying to the small egoic self and all its desires (which in Keating’s framework may be called the emotional programs for happiness: safety and security, esteem and affection, power and control), to rely instead on the living water of the Spirit. And he encouraged us to open up to the Kingdom of Heaven, which he assured us was within us and all around us, rather than in some remote place we might earn the right to go to some day.

The Wisdom practices taught over millennia help to train us from our tendency to focus on our egoic selves, directed by our emotional programs for happiness, to letting go, as Keating invites us in the 2018 film *A Life Surrendered to Love*, to “accept God’s unconditional love for us.” When we learn to live from that love and to fully embody it in a conscious way, our world is transformed along with us.

Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and long-time student of Thomas Keating’s, has revived the Christian Wisdom tradition in a very practical sense. She lays this out, for example, in *The Wisdom Jesus*, in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, and in *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*. In the latter she writes,

“When I use the term Wisdom, I am designating a precise and comprehensive science of spiritual transformation that has existed since the headwaters of the great world religions and is in fact their common ground. This science includes both theory and practice. The theory part consists of a unified cosmology – in other words, a comprehensive vision of our human purpose and destiny. The practice involves a systematic training for growing into that purpose.”

Three-Centered Knowing

Both Bourgeault and Keating emphasize an integrated, experiential, full-bodied experience of God in contemplative practices. As Father Thomas wrote in *Open Mind Open Heart*, “The word contemplation is an ambiguous term because over the centuries it has acquired several different meanings. To emphasize the experiential knowledge of God, the Greek Bible used the word *gnosis* to translate the Hebrew *da’ath*, a much stronger term that implies an intimate kind of knowledge involving the whole person, not just the mind.” Cynthia puts it another way in *The Wisdom Jesus*: “Wisdom isn’t knowing more, it’s knowing with *more of you*.”

When we talk about knowing with the whole person, not just the mind, one way to frame it is as three-centered knowing. Our three centers can be designated as the moving, emotional, and intellectual centers. The emotional center takes in signals from the environment around us, including other people, in an intuitive way in which our mirror neurons and other unconscious processes help us to assess the emotional timbre of a situation much more rapidly than we could with mental processing. It is also highly active in our appreciation and participation in the creative arts. The moving center includes the knowledge of the body with its inner rhythms and outer movements, including its facility for fluid movement such as riding a bicycle, or the mechanics of learning a new language. This center is not quite as rapid as the emotional center, but also can process information more quickly than our mental center. Our intellectual center engages in mental processing, thought, and planning. With highly attuned mental centers we can plan cities, design technology, and research medical health, among many other things. All three centers are highly useful and important, yet we tend to reside mainly in one of them. For Western society the main emphasis is usually on the mental center, although you also likely know people whose main focus is on emotionality, or physicality.

What are Wisdom practices, and how are they complementary to Centering Prayer?

Centering Prayer retreats, including the intensive and post intensive retreats, are powerful containers in which to sink into one of the primary Wisdom practices, Centering Prayer. With this practice, as we return over and over to our sacred word or breath, we build up what Cynthia Bourgeault calls a “muscle of release,” of consent to God’s presence and action. This practice is one of surrender, sometimes also called by the Greek word *kenosis*, or self-emptying, in which we let go of our usual thoughts, emotions, etc and offer ourselves to the Divine Indwelling.

Our Centering Prayer practice can deepen as we move to include more of our whole personhood, including all three centers. Our human nature is seen as holy and is fully offered to God in our practice. As Keating wrote in *Open Mind Open Heart*, “Centering Prayer is not so much the absence of thoughts as detachment from them. It is the opening of mind and heart, body and emotions—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions ... According to the Baltimore catechism, ‘Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God.’ In using this ancient formula it is important to keep in mind that it is not we who do the lifting. In every kind of prayer the raising of the mind and heart to God can only be the work of the Spirit.”

As a balanced complement to the surrendered stance of Centering Prayer, there are additional Wisdom practices that can help with the skill of focused attention, and integration of our three centers. These include chanting, sacred movements and body prayers, witnessing presence, conscious work, and some other explicit practices of attention. All of

these practices are done as prayer, as part of building and acknowledging our relationship with the Divine Indwelling. Contemplative Outreach has always endorsed practices of awareness and devotion in addition to Centering Prayer, such as Welcoming Prayer, Lectio Divina, and an active prayer sentence. These can also be done in a way that emphasizes participation of our full, embodied being. As Father Thomas reminded us in *Open Mind Open Heart*, “We should communicate with God on every level of our being: with our lips, our bodies, our imaginations, our emotions, our minds, our intuitive faculties, and our silence. Centering Prayer is only one rung of the ladder.”

Father Thomas’ words invite us to participate in prayer with all of our being. This is in resonance with three-centered presence, in which we are awake and aware not just in our intellectual, moving, or emotional center, but in all three. This integrated, three-centered awareness becomes an awake, present state from which we can offer our full consent: body, emotions and mind, to the Ultimate Mystery. The additional Wisdom practices also help to ground our Centering Prayer – when we are grounded in three-centered being, we have a more present, awake place to let go from; otherwise Centering Prayer can become a bit dreamy and diffuse.

This synchronicity of Wisdom practices and Centering Prayer works the other way as well: the muscle of letting go that is built up in Centering Prayer as we return over and over again to our intention to consent to the presence and action of God becomes the kenotic basis of these other practices of attention. For example, the muscle of release that is strengthened as we practice Centering Prayer helps us to see through our tendency to pay attention with just our minds, often unconsciously swayed by our emotional programs for happiness. In the case of Welcoming Prayer, for example, this tendency to lead from our head can lead to a form of spiritual bypass where we try to jump to a welcoming of what we may not yet have integrated. But with the foundation of kenosis cultivated in our Centering Prayer, our sense of physical embodiment, and the “focus and sink in” part of the Welcoming Prayer and some of the other embodiment practices comes from a deeper place. It is not our ordinary self but the deeper awareness within, the spiritual awareness and the Divine Indwelling, that do this work for us and with us. This is at play also in chanting, when we feel the tones resounding within the moving and emotional centers. It’s not about singing out or beautifully, but *heartfully*, offering our full being to God. Body prayers undertaken with a kenotic stance can become a beautiful offering of our full incarnational being in service to the Holy.

How do we incorporate Wisdom practices into our Centering Prayer retreats?

Practices from the Christian Wisdom tradition are included in Centering Prayer retreats throughout the Contemplative Outreach network. In a Centering Prayer Wisdom retreat we have the option to explore topics and core tenets of the Christian Wisdom tradition, drawing from mystics such as Saint Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, Beatrice Bruteau, and many others. These teachings are surrounded with times for Centering Prayer, and can include chanting, body prayers and other sacred movement, and practices of attention. On many retreats, these practices are all permeated with Silence, a time to go more deeply within. Contemplative sharing and free time provide additional opportunities to integrate these contemplative practices with the rest of our daily activities, preparing us to integrate them with the rest of our lives as we return to our homes: our inner life, our families and living environments, our work, and service.

In *Open Mind Open Heart*, Father Thomas reminds us of the need for integration of presence into all of our tasks:

“The Divine Presence is very close and immediate when we are doing the most ordinary actions . . . As God brings the ‘new man’ to life in interior silence with the world view that Christ shares with you in the silence, God’s view of things becomes more important to you than your own. Then, God asks you to live that new life in the circumstances of everyday life, in your daily routine, contradicted by noise, opposition and anxieties. The alternation between deep silence and action gradually brings the two together. You become fully integrated, a contemplative and yet fully capable of action at the same time. You are Mary and Martha at once . . . established in the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, which is a new and transformed state of consciousness.”

The rhythm offered at a Centering Prayer Wisdom retreat can cultivate this type of integration.

In a Wisdom retreat there is also more emphasis on what we do together as a group, in addition to what is going on within us. It may follow the Benedictine rhythm of *ora et labora*, or prayer and work, both alone and together. Centering Prayer hones the prayer part of this: the prayer alone and together. A Wisdom School may explicitly include the *labora* part: work alone and together. In conscious work we are present with our task, be it tending to plants, washing windows, or whatever else needs tending to, and we are also aware of and respectful of those around us. Doing a task slightly differently, e.g. with the non-dominant hand etc. helps to keep us aware of the present moment, and regular bells call us to mindfulness of our intention. But the work together is experienced in other practices as well. In our chanting we may harmonize, blending our voices with others to form a synergetic whole. In sacred movement we are encouraged to broaden our awareness of others and what the group is doing as a whole. All of these practices are done as an integration of our three centers, honoring the sacredness of this human vessel.

The Need for Wisdom in Our World

The mystics and visionaries have often reminded us that as humans, we are an integral part of the universe, and we have a role to fulfill. Our contemplative practice is not just for ourselves or our own betterment, but we are intimately related with all others and with all the cosmos. And this lends a beautiful hope that what we offer in our prayer, and in our full-bodied lives arising out of the core of contemplative Wisdom practices, does make a difference. Modern physics echoes this, as I have described in my latest book, *The Cosmic Web: Hope for Our World Through Spirituality and Science*:

“We are indeed all interconnected: your suffering is my suffering and your joy is my joy. We are responsible to one another, and to our planet. And the more we learn about opening to the vast, interwoven luminous field that shines throughout the cosmos, the more we can become a light. Our smallest actions can shine and reverberate and effect powerful change starting from within, tapping into a great cosmic heart, honoring our ultimate connection.”

Our planet and social systems are in a deep state of flux, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. But in this greater context we know that we are not alone. As we offer our consent in Centering Prayer, as we offer our devotion and joy in embodied chanting and sacred movement, as we turn in any given moment and embrace and welcome what is happening within us, there is an alchemical effect: the world is changed. Our own moves toward integration help to integrate our world, and every little bit we do in the direction of wholeness makes a difference. There is an echo of support from the communion of saints, and from the entire cosmos with which we are connected. This is so deeply needed in our world right now.

Wisdom Resources

There are many resources to help you integrate Wisdom practices in Centering Prayer retreats, and in your own practice. One place where a lot of this is gathered is the Wisdom Waypoints web site (<https://wisdomwaypoints.org/>) which has many resources including links to online courses, videos, podcasts etc, and offers book groups led by experienced leaders. The Center for Action and Contemplation has multiple Wisdom Schools online (<https://cac.org/online-education/>). Other places offering Wisdom teachings within the Contemplative Outreach network are the Church of Conscious Harmony in Austin Texas (<https://consciousharmony.org/>), and branches such as Contemplative Outreach of Chicago (<https://www.centeringprayerchicago.org/>) and many others. Mercy Center in Burlingame offers Wisdom retreats and training (<https://mercy-center.org/programs/centering-prayer/>), and many other retreat centers do as well. And of course, the Contemplative Outreach site has excellent resources on Centering Prayer and other Wisdom practices such as the Welcoming Prayer, Lectio Divina, etc. (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>).

In *A Life Surrendered to Love*, Thomas Keating said: “What I’m leaving to my followers (if that’s what you call them): I would hope that they would find ways and means of providing more and more opportunities for spiritual growth; more and more sharing of Wisdom teachers, more and more partnership with other spiritual traditions.” Father Thomas was pointing the way for us to broaden our practices and our viewpoints, all in the spirit of consenting to God’s presence and action in our world, which is in such deep need of this.

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