**Dimensions of Contemplative Prayer**
From *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating, Continuum, 2006

Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities. Our private, self made worlds come to an end; a new world appears within and around us and the impossible becomes an everyday experience. Yet the world that prayer reveals is barely noticeable in the ordinary course of events.

Christian life and growth are founded on faith in our own basic goodness, in the being that God has given us with its transcendent potential. This gift of being is our true Self. Through our consent by faith, Christ is born in us and He and our true Self become one. Our awakening to the presence and action of the Spirit is the unfolding of Christ's resurrection in us.

All true prayer is based on the conviction of the presence of the Spirit in us and of His unfailing and continual inspiration. Every prayer in this sense is prayer in the Spirit. Still, it seems more accurate to reserve the term *prayer in the Spirit*, for that prayer in which the inspiration of the Spirit is given directly to our spirit without the intermediary of our own reflections or acts of the will. In other words, the Spirit prays in us and we consent. The traditional term for this kind of prayer is *contemplation*.

*Contemplative prayer* is a process within *contemplative life*. The former is an experience or series of experiences leading to the abiding state of union with God. The term *contemplative life* is the abiding state of divine union itself, in which one is habitually and continually moved both in prayer and action by the Spirit. Centering prayer is an entrance into the process that leads to divine union.

The root of prayer is interior silence. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words, but this is only one of its forms. 'Prayer,' according to Evagrius, 'is the laying aside of thoughts.' This definition presupposes that there are thoughts. 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 – beyond, in other words, the psychological content of the present moment. In centering prayer we do not deny or repress what is in our consciousness. We simply
accept the fact of whatever is there and go beyond it, not by effort, but by letting go of whatever is there.

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. In prayer inspired by the Spirit we let ourselves flow with the lifting movement and drop all reflection. Reflection is an important preliminary to prayer, but it is not prayer. Prayer is not only the offering of interior acts to God: it is the offering of ourselves, of who we are just as we are.

The action of the Spirit might be compared to a skilful nurse teaching the adopted children of a wealthy household how to behave in their new home. Like waifs pulled in off the street and seated at the banquet table in the elegant dining hall, we require a lot of time to learn and practice the proper table manners. Because of our earthy background, we tend to put our muddy feet on the table, break the chinaware, and spill the soup in our laps. To assimilate the values of our new home, profound changes in our attitudes and behavioural patterns are required. For this reason we may experience our nurse as constraining in the beginning and heavy on the ‘don’ts.’ And yet she always seems to be encouraging in the midst of correction; never condemnatory, never judgmental, always inviting us to amendment of life. Centering prayer is an education imparted by the Spirit.

Our participation in this educational process is what Christian tradition calls self-denial. Jesus said, ‘Unless you deny your inmost self and take up the cross, you cannot be my disciple’ (Mark 8:34). Denial of our inmost self includes detachment from the habitual functioning of our intellect and will, which are our inmost faculties. This may require letting go not only of ordinary thoughts during prayer, but also of our inmost devout reflections and aspirations insofar as we treat them as necessary means of going to God.

The nature of the rational mind is to simplify what it thinks about. Thus a single thought can sum up an immense wealth of reflection. Then the thought itself becomes a presence, as act of attentiveness rather than of understanding. If we apply this principle to the person of Jesus, we can see that this kind of attentiveness does not in any way exclude His humanity. Our attention is simply given to the presence of Jesus, the divine-human being, without adverting to any particular details of his person.
Centering prayer is part of a dynamic process that evolves through personal relationship rather than by strategy. At the same time a reasonable amount of organization in one's prayer and lifestyle advances the process, just as wholesome food and exercise help youngsters grow to physical maturity.

One of the first effects of centering prayer is the release of the energies of the unconscious. This process gives rise to two different psychological states: the experience of personal development in the form of spiritual consolation and the experience of human weakness through humiliating self knowledge. Self knowledge is the traditional term for the coming to consciousness of the dark side of one’s personality. The release of these two kinds of unconscious energies needs to be safeguarded by well established habits of dedication to God and concern for others. Otherwise, if one enjoys some form of spiritual consolation, one may inflate with pride; or if one feels crushed by the realization of one’s spiritual impoverishment, one may collapse into discouragement or even despair. The cultivation of habits of dedication to God and of service to others is the indispensable means of stabilizing the mind in the face of emotionally charged thoughts, whether of self-exultation or of self-depreciation.

Dedication to God is developed by commitment to one's spiritual practices for the love of God. Service to others is the outgoing movement of the heart prompted by compassion. It neutralizes the deep rooted tendency to become preoccupied with our own spiritual journey and how we are doing. The habit of service to others is developed by trying to please God in what we do and by exercising compassion beginning with those with whom we live. To accept everyone unconditionally is to fulfil the commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:31). It is a practical way of bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Refusing to judge even in the face of persecution is to fulfil the commandment to love one another 'as I have loved you' (John 13:34) and to lay down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13).

Habits of dedication to God and service to others form the two sides of a channel through which the energies of the unconscious can be released without submerging the psyche in the floodwaters of chaotic emotions. When these energies flow in orderly fashion between the banks of dedication and service, they will raise us to higher levels of spiritual perception, understanding and selfless love. These two stabilizing dispositions prepare the nervous system and body to receive the purifying and sanctifying light of the Spirit. They enable us to discern thoughts and emotions as they arise before they reach the stage of attachment or quasi-compulsion. As
freedom from the thralldom of habitual thoughts and desires grows, we are able to enter into interior prayer with a quiet mind.

Detachment is the goal of self-denial. It is the nonpossessive attitude toward all reality, a disposition that strikes at the root of the false self system. The false self is a monumental illusion, a load of habitual thinking patterns and emotional routines that are stored in the brain and nervous system. Like programs in a computer, they tend to reactivate every time a particular life situation pushes the appropriate button. The false self even insinuates that its subtle purposes are religiously motivated. Genuine religious attitudes come from God, not from the false self. The Spirit heals the roots of self-centredness and becomes the source of our conscious activity. To act spontaneously under the Spirit's influence rather than under the influence of the false self, the emotional programming of the past has to be erased and replaced. The *prayer of virtue* is the traditional term for erasing the old programs and writing new programs based on the values of the Gospel.

Jesus in His divinity is the source of contemplation. Anything that we perceive of God can only be a radiance of His presence and not God as He is. When the divine light strikes the human mind, it breaks down into many aspects just as a ray of ordinary light, when it strikes a prism, breaks down into the varied colours of the spectrum. There is nothing wrong with distinguishing different aspects of the Ultimate Mystery, but it would be a mistake to identify them with the inaccessible Light.

The Spirit speaks to our conscience through scripture and the events of daily life. Reflection on these two sources of personal encounter and the dismantling of the emotional programs for happiness prepare the psyche to listen at more refined levels of sensitivity. The Spirit then begins to address our conscience from that deep source within us which is our true Self. This is contemplation properly so-called.

This pattern is exemplified in the Transfiguration. Jesus took with Him the three disciples who were best prepared to awaken to the grace of contemplation; that is, the ones who had made the most headway in changing their hearts. God approached them through their senses by means of the vision on the mountain. At first they were overawed and delighted. Peter wanted to remain there forever. Suddenly a cloud covered them, hiding the vision and leaving their senses empty and quiet, yet attentive and alert. The gesture of falling on their faces accurately expressed their state of mind. It was a posture of adoration, gratitude, and love all rolled into one. The voice from heaven awakened their consciousness to the pr
essence of the Spirit who had always been speaking within them, but whom until then they had never been able to hear. Their interior openness was filled with the luminous presence of the divine. As Jesus' touch they returned to their ordinary perceptions and saw Him as he was before but with the transformed consciousness of faith. They no longer saw Him as a mere human being. Their receptive and active faculties had been unified by the Spirit; the interior and exterior word of God had become one. For those who have attained this consciousness, daily life is continual revelation of God. The words they hear in scripture and in the liturgy confirm what they have learned through the prayer that is contemplation.