

The Little
BOOK OF

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES



Contemplative Light

“

I am convinced that
contemplation is the
most radical thing that
we can teach and live. ”

Fr. Richard Rohr O.F.M.

Getting started

So, you're tired. You're deeply in need of rest, and not just a nap.

It's the deep rest that comes from integrating spiritual practices into our daily lives, but we keep putting off.



Maybe we're not quite sure how to get started. Or maybe we've had a spiritual practice in the past and know the value of contemplation or mystical spirituality, but only in fits and starts, or during periods of great difficulty.

We may even understand that it's life-changing, but also requires a commitment of time and energy we don't feel capable of just now. The practices outlined in this eBook are intended for people in just this situation and can give you a running start.

The spiritual practices of the contemplative path has something to do with facing ourselves, and most of the time, it's easier to leave well enough alone.

As Franciscan monk [Richard Rohr](#) puts it: “The primary addiction for all humans is addiction to our own way of thinking.”

Trapped in these thought patterns, we are unable to see reality as it is, unfiltered by our limiting ego lens.



The contemplative path has to do with letting go of our attachments at the deepest level, which requires the practice of interrupting that constant stream of thought, then gradually realizing *we are not our thoughts or emotions*.

In so doing we create a little space inside. Over time, as we attend to this path, this inner space grows. We identify less and less with our small self, or what many spiritual teachers call the False Self, our bundle of desire, attachment, pain, and the habitual thought patterns they give rise to and begin to taste balance, peace, and freedom.

Trappist monk Father Thomas Keating calls it “the neutral zone:” complete acceptance of the present moment without evaluation and resistance that give rise to negativity and violence. The biblical word for this is *shalom*.



In the Christian tradition, the contemplative path stretches back at least to [Pseudo-Dionysius](#), a 6th century Syrian mystic, and probably even further back to [St. Anthony of Egypt](#), a 3rd century saint, who taught a four-fold path of contemplative life: solitude, silence, simplicity, and discipline in both prayer and action.

Though much of what contemplatives across the centuries describe also sounds an awful lot like what Christ himself taught and practiced.

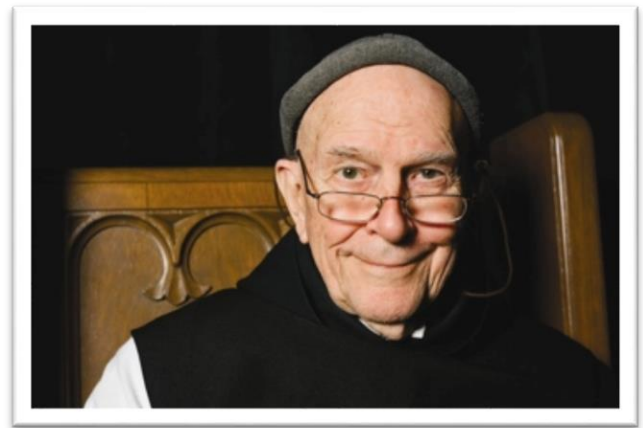
So, essentially, contemplation is the greatest thing since way before sliced bread (the ancients ate mostly pita!). And it's still readily available.

The Practices

Centering Prayer

So, long story short, in the 60s two Trappist monks, [Thomas Keating](#) and [Basil Pennington](#), looked around and saw a lot of people leaving Christianity for Eastern religions that seemed to have a little more to offer than concepts, bells, and smells when it came to dealing with some of the problems caused by our schizoid modern lives.

So they dusted off their copy of the 13th century spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* and called the practice [Centering Prayer](#), determined to bring centuries of contemplative Christian tradition outside the walls of the monasteries, transmitting the teaching in books like [Open Mind, Open Heart](#).



Fr. Thomas Keating

According to Keating, Centering Prayer is a technique that provides a means of moving toward deep communion with God on the level of our inmost Being.

Solid, right? Here's how to begin:

Each of the following is also built into the *Centering Prayer app* by Contemplative Outreach, available for Android and iOS platforms, or for more detailed instructions on Centering Prayer straight from Contemplative Outreach, click [here](#)

Timing: Set a timer for twenty minutes first thing in the morning and at some point in the afternoon at least an hour after lunch. If your day is calendar-driven, literally put it in your calendar.

Positioning: Get yourself a relatively quiet space and sit on a chair in a comfortable position with arms, shoulders, and legs relaxed.



Sacred Word: Select a sacred word or phrase to serve as a symbol of the consent to transformative grace, ideally no more than one or two syllables. This serves as a signal to your mind to let go of thought and return to the transformative silence, to presence, to pure being. In [The Cloud of Unknowing](#), the word is “God.” Others could be “love,” “joy,” “grace,” “peace,” “Christ,” and so on.

Optional reading: As an inner invitation to this calm space, select a simple prayer, Psalm, or spiritual reading, such as the Lord’s Prayer, or even [Lectio Divina](#), a method of listening to Scripture developed by the 6th century monastic [Benedict of Nursia](#). I’ve included selections below for daily Lectio over a 10 day period.

Optional transition: Direct your attention two inches above your navel for two full breaths. Then direct your attention to the space between your upper lip and your nose for two full breaths. Lastly, direct your attention two inches behind your eyes for two full breaths. Then release.



Breathing: Breathe normally. As thoughts arise (any mental image, activity, emotion, sound, or stimulus your mind clings to), ever-so-gently return to the sacred word and

release the thought. (Time commitment: 20 min twice a day)

Cadence: This practice is intended to be done as close to first thing out of bed as possible (or in my case, still in bed!), and again in the early afternoon. If you can't do both on a given day, notice the difference in your frame of mind in the morning and the evening.

A Warning! This simple practice releases the energies of the unconscious, which in Keating's words have two effects: spiritual consolation on the one hand, and humiliating self-knowledge on the other. In the long-term, seeing ourselves as we truly are is essential for growing, but it's hard at first since we're not used to it. Our ego likes to run the show and here we are engaged in a practice that exposes it. There is usually a certain amount of inner resistance early on. Push on through!

Ongoing Practices

Morning

The 20 Second Smile: This simple practice changes your outlook and your neurology first thing in the morning. Simply smile as close to a genuine smile as you can and count to twenty.

The Gratitude Pages: Write down three things from the day before you're grateful for. This could be as simple as a cool wind, a meal, or a conversation.



Lectio Divina: In the Christian tradition, this is a four-fold practice of *reading*, *reflecting*, *responding*, and *resting* in a particular short passage of Scripture. This doesn't need to be in linear sequence, though often lectio involves three successive readings of the passage to move from one phase to another. I've included selections below for each of the 10 days. Recommended Passages:

Genesis 16:5-15

Exodus 3:1-4

Psalms 13

Psalms 22

Isaiah 55:9-12

Matthew 4:1-11

Matthew 17:1-13

Luke 7:36-50

John 3:1-15

All day practices

The Sacred Word: Take the same technique from your Centering Prayer into the rest of your day. When you notice negative thought patterns, or fixation, or spiraling, introduce the sacred word and ever-so-gently let go of your thoughts.



The Breath of the Moment:

From the Eastern traditions, this technique is also called **Ujayii breath**. When you feel overwhelmed, breathe in deeper than normal into your diaphragm. Breathe out through

your nose but constrict your throat muscles until you hear a distinct rasp as you exhale.

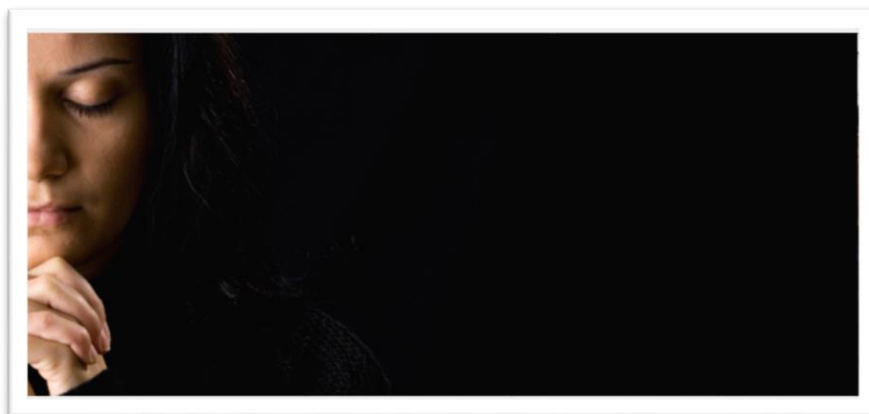
The Three Breaths: When you catch yourself getting caught up in a negative emotion, simply focus on your breathing for three breaths. This manifests present awareness. We can't focus on both our breath *and* on our negative thought patterns.

The Acceptance Prayer: Speaking acceptance into our situations helps increase our internal awareness. If we feel tense, anxious, or angry, speak into the situation: “I accept this situation.” Commit to learning from it. Watch the tension melt.

Evening Reflection: I’ve included quotes from different mystics ancient and modern. I recommend journaling responses to them to process each one.

Examen: A Staple of Ignatian spirituality, the examen is an evening reflection in a relaxed state about our emotions, thoughts, and actions throughout the day, expressing gratitude and apology to God where appropriate. Finally, we pray for strength and light to skillfully navigate the challenges of tomorrow.

Optional practice - The Body Scan: Most of us spend time focusing on past and future, rather than the present. One component of returning to the present is fully inhabiting the body. At night in bed, focus on the energy in your body parts, starting with your feet. Take 2 deep breaths and move up, focusing on inner space.

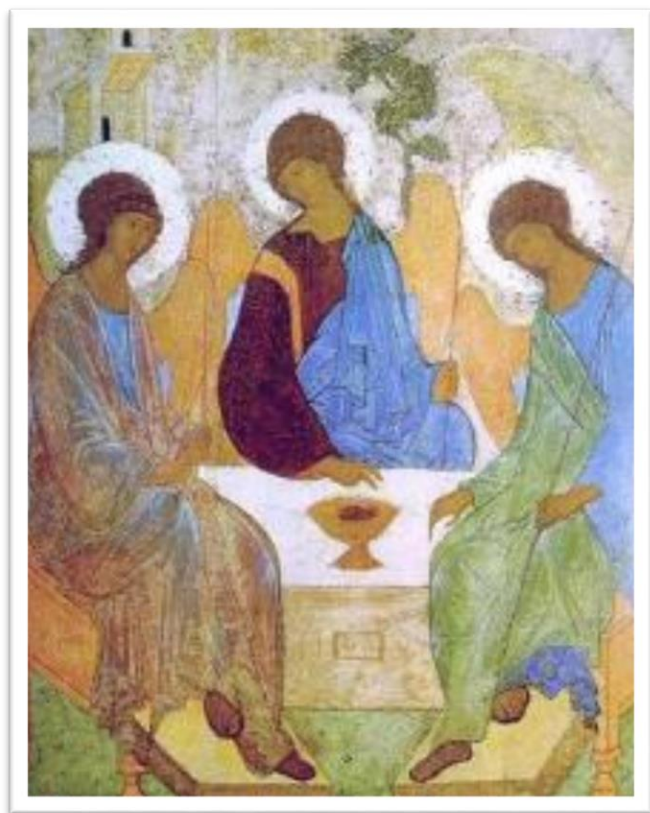


Quotes for Daily Contemplation

“Since silence is God’s first language, everything else is a poor translation.” ~ Thomas Keating

*“In all religious systems the danger is that the logical structure and rational doctrine will obscure the mystical vision.”
~Bede Griffiths*

*“Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive.”
~Thomas Merton*



*“Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”
~Jesus of Nazareth*

“The present moment is the only moment available to us, and it is the door to all moments.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

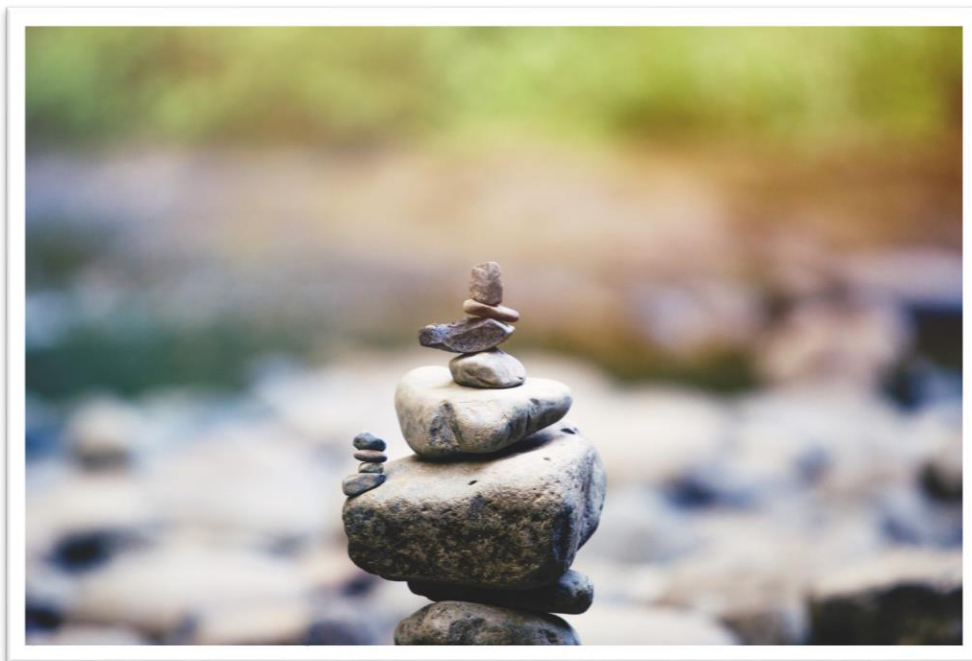
"God may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought, never." ~The Cloud of Unknowing

"Mystics have plumbed the depths of suffering and love and emerged with compassion for the world." ~ Richard Rohr

"Strictly speaking we don't find God in our suffering, we find God in the surrender to our suffering. In the Christian tradition this is also called 'The Way of the Cross.'" ~Eckhart Tolle

"You are made whole again in silence, which is not the absence of sound, but the absence of self." ~Anthony De Mello

"Realize deeply that the present moment is all you ever have." ~Eckhart Tolle



Sample Day

For the first day, focus on repeating The Sacred Word you use in the morning session of Centering Prayer when you notice negative emotions arise throughout the day.

First thing in the morning after waking up, 20 min of Centering Prayer. Immediately after, practice *Lectio Divina: Genesis 16:5-15*. Read the passage slowly. Then read the text again, reflecting on the aspects of the passage that resonate with you most strongly, whether an image, a set of images, a word, or a particular phrase. Now, read the passage again, mentally conversing directly with God about the elements that struck you, being open to listening and receiving insight or inner movement as well. Finally, simple rest in the divine presence in the space cultivated by the practice of the attentive reading.

Wait a good hour after lunch, and then practice 20 min of Centering Prayer again in the afternoon. This second session expands the spacious inner peace throughout the latter half of the day.

Practice evening Examen. Relax and become aware of the divine presence. Then, reflect on one experience from the day. What graces did you experience during the day? What emotions are leading you closer to God. Express gratitude to God for these. Then, what missteps did you make today in attitude, thought, word, or deed? What emotions are leading you away from God? Pray for growth and light in the areas of need. Finally, pray for strength and light for the challenges of tomorrow.

Prayer

God,

May I have compassion, even for the uncompassionate.

May I love, even those who do not love.

May I see myself fully, even in the moment of my mistakes

May I move beyond judgment and see through fear.

May I see through the conditioning of my culture.

May I dwell beyond the conditioning of family.

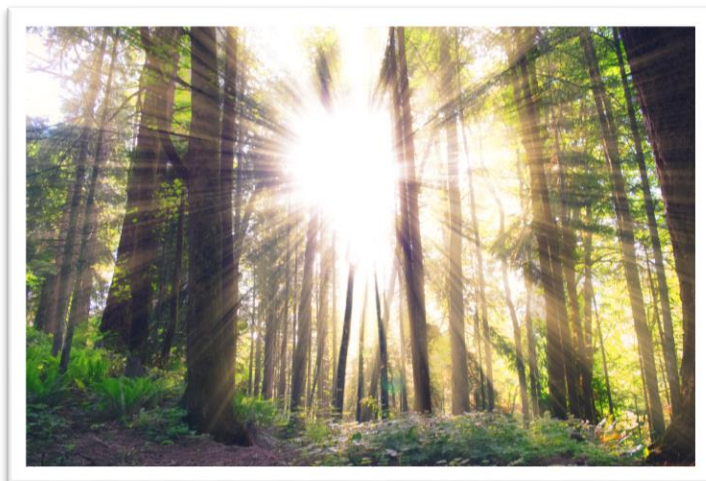
May I become aware my unskillful ego

and let go of anger and resentment.

*May I surrender to my suffering, rather than create more,
and may you transform that suffering.*

May I manifest your presence in the here and now,

And grow in grace.





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