

What Contemplative Prayer Is

Most prayer speaks: it thanks, asks and intercedes. Contemplative prayer beholds: it sits in God's presence and lets him do what he wills, whether or not anything is felt.

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Five kinds of prayer

Daily

The rhythm of ordinary days.

Requesting

Asking for what we need.

Interceding

Asking on behalf of others.

Wholeness

Bringing wounds for healing.

Listening

Waiting to hear what God would say.

Beholding, not doing

To contemplate is to look at, study, and stay in the presence of someone. Contemplative prayer brings no list. Its one task is to be: there are many things to do, but only one thing to be, his child.

Not mystical

Nothing here is secret or exotic. It is ordinary attention, turned toward God, practiced daily for years and often borne of dryness and pain.

Not a technique

Martin Laird says silence can't be reduced to a method. Practice works by surrendering long-held resistances; it doesn't produce an outcome.

Not acquiring God

Union with God is realized, not acquired. The God we seek has already found us; our desire for him is his doing.

The map these pages follow

1. **Four sittings** the practice, one minute at a time
2. **Who you imagine, who he is** praying past our pictures of God
3. **The wandering mind** what to do when attention drifts
4. **When nothing happens** dryness and divine silence
5. **A daily practice** Word, breath prayer, stillness
6. **Where it fits** how stillness forms a life

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

Psalms 46:10 (WEB)

Four Sittings

Learn it by doing it: set a timer, close your eyes, and sit for one minute. Each sitting adds one thing.

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1 Just be

Sit wordlessly in God's presence. Don't ask. Don't listen for anything. Be there, as his child.

Watch for: assuming you failed because nothing happened.

TRY · 1 MINUTE

Eyes closed. No words. If you feel nothing, he is still here.

2 Don't imagine

If you were carried into a scene with him, notice that you probably built it. Turn from what you picture to the cloud between you, which only he can pierce.

Watch for: a picture of God replacing God.

TRY · 1 MINUTE

Sit facing the unknown. It is all right not to know. Nearly all of him we never will. Wait on him.

3 Use one word

The mind wanders. When you notice it, don't judge it. Use a single word to bring your attention back to God.

Watch for: turning the word into a mantra, or scolding yourself for drifting.

TRY · 1 MINUTE

Choose one short word, such as *Abba*, *Jesus* or *Father*. Say it inwardly each time you drift, then let it go.

4 Open yourself

God can work below what we notice, in the subconscious, the body and the mind's habits. Offer him that access.

Watch for: asking for a feeling as proof that he came.

TRY · 1 MINUTE

Inwardly say: *I am here. I want whatever you would reveal. Plant what you will.* Then sit.

Afterwards, any of these is normal

- You felt something.
- You wonder whether it was your imagination.
- You felt nothing at all. On many days, that is the norm for practised people too.

“God does not know how to be absent.”

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*

The four sittings follow a group exercise on contemplative prayer; times can grow from one minute to five.

Who You Imagine, Who He Is

Much of our praying is addressed to who we imagine God to be.
Contemplation asks to move toward who he knows himself to be.

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What I imagine you to be

Pictures, scenes, past
experience: true in part, ours
in the making.

What you know yourself to be

Infinite, known to us only as
far as you reveal yourself.

We know only what he reveals

God is infinite and we are finite. What he chooses to show of himself says as much about his character as the content itself. Most of him remains unknown.

Imagination can shield

Picturing God reminds us of what he has already shown, which is good. It can also keep the unknown at a safe distance. Contemplation says, *I want to know you more than this.*

The cloud of unknowing

A 14th-century English guide names the gap between us and God a "cloud of unknowing." Thought cannot cross it. Its counsel is to beat on the cloud "with a sharp dart of longing love," because God can be reached by love, never by thinking.

The negative way

Pseudo-Dionysius taught that every word for God falls short. God is good; God is not good as we mean it; God is not even "not good." Each denial clears room for the real God.

The guardrail

Unknowing is not a licence to invent. We cannot know anything of him he has not revealed, so whatever surfaces in silence is tested by Scripture. Silence humbles our pictures of God; it does not replace the Word.

"God is your being, and what you are, you are in God; but you are not God's being."

The Cloud of Unknowing, quoted by Martin Laird

Screwtape saw the danger

C. S. Lewis's senior devil warns that if the man ever prays "Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be," their "situation is, for the moment, desperate." His comfort: humans want this "real nakedness of the soul in prayer" less than they suppose.

The Wandering Mind

The mind pattern-matches, drifts and chatters, and a phone has shortened most of our attention spans. That is where the practice starts, not proof that it failed.

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The heart is the mind

"The heart is deceitful above all things ... Who can know it?" (Jer 17:9). In Hebrew the heart is the seat of thought, reason and will; feelings sit lower, in the gut. The verse warns about our thinking, not only our moods.

Most of it is below the surface

A thought bubbles up and we ask: was that God, or me? Much of the mind works where we can't see it, and God can meet us there as well as in what we notice.

The default loop

At rest, the brain's default mode network replays the self: rumination, rehearsal, daydreams. Stillness and awe interrupt that loop and turn attention outward.

Attention is formed by love

We attend to what we love, and what we attend to shapes what we love. James K. A. Smith calls for attention to be sanctified: trained, by practice, to come back to God.

We are not the weather

Laird pictures thoughts and feelings as weather moving over a mountain. For a lifetime we have taken the weather to be ourselves. Stillness shows a steadier ground beneath it: the awareness in which the weather appears, which Paul calls a life "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

So, when you drift

- Notice it, without judging.
- Say your one word.
- Return, as many times as it takes. The returning is the prayer.

"The marvelous world of thoughts, sensation, emotions ... are all patterns of stunning weather on the holy mountain of God. But we are not the weather."

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*

When Nothing Happens

Silence from God is not proof of hidden sin or weak faith. Scripture is full of faithful people who waited years, and silence can form us as deeply as a sign.

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WHERE SCRIPTURE IS SILENT	WHAT THE SILENCE ASKED OF THEM
Jesus asleep in the boat	The disciples woke him: "Don't you care?" He asked why they had so little faith. He was present the whole time.
Job	The reader is told the cause of his suffering; Job never is. When God speaks at last, he speaks of himself, not of the reasons.
Four hundred years, twice	Before the Exodus and before Christ, generations lived and died without a new word.

It strengthens trust
Faith as loyalty (*pistis*) grows when we keep faith without sight. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed" (Jn 20:29).

It resists the vending machine
By withholding quick answers, God refuses to become a dispenser of results. He is a person, not a puzzle.

It deepens longing
Unmet desire can narrow to one: if I can't have all these things, I still want you more.

Watch for pride in either direction
Hearing from God is not a rank, and neither is enduring his silence. Neither "he speaks to me" nor "my dryness is deeper" makes anyone better. His presence is promised, felt or not.

“Just because God is silent doesn't mean He is absent.”
Micah Fries

A Daily Practice

Three movements, about fifteen minutes in all: hear the Word, pray it back with your breath, then sit in his presence.

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1

Receive the Word

Read a short passage slowly, in a close, literal translation. Just listen. Don't question it or study it yet. Let it soak in.

Watch for: turning the reading into Bible study.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

5 minutes · one passage

Read it twice, the second time more slowly.

2

Pray it back

Walk back through the passage as breath prayers: breathe in a phrase, breathe out a response. Remember the breath of life God breathed into us.

Watch for: rushing to cover the whole passage.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

5 minutes · 3–4 phrases

Eyes closed; one phrase per few breaths.

3

Sit in stillness

Five minutes. Don't imagine; just be. When you drift, say your word and return. Let the Word, your prayers and his Spirit do what they will.

Watch for: judging the session by how it felt.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

5 minutes · a timer

Grow toward twenty minutes over months.

Example: 1 John 1 as breath prayers (WEB)	
BREATHE IN God is light,	BREATHE OUT and in him is no darkness at all. (1:5)
BREATHE IN If we walk in the light,	BREATHE OUT we have fellowship with one another. (1:7)
BREATHE IN He is faithful and righteous	BREATHE OUT to forgive us and cleanse us. (1:9)
BREATHE IN Our fellowship is with the Father	BREATHE OUT and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1:3)

Kin to lectio divina

The ancient pattern of reading, meditating, praying and resting in God follows the same arc: from the text to his presence.

Kin to hesychia

The Eastern word for stillness. The desert fathers paired it with watchfulness; the later hesychasts timed the Jesus Prayer to the breath.

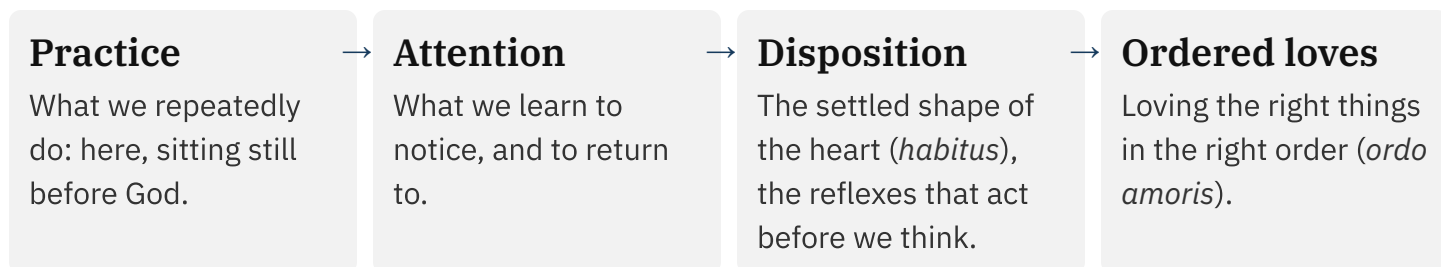
Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks* (c. 1150), on lectio; *The Philokalia* (Nikephoros, Gregory of Sinai), on hesychia.

Where It Fits

Stillness is not an escape from the Christian life. It is one of the practices through which God reshapes what we notice, how we are disposed, and finally what we love.

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How practice becomes character



Hebrews 5:14 (WEB): the mature are those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil."

Being before doing

In sonship, who we are and what we do converge. Stillness doesn't compete with work; it secures the belonging that obedience flows from.

The sponge in the ocean

Laird's image: a sponge looks without and sees ocean, looks within and sees ocean. We are immersed in God and he flows through us, yet the sponge never becomes the sea.

Freedom takes time

Laird tells of dogs let into an open field. Three ran free; the fourth, raised in a cage, ran in tight circles. Years of noise train us the same way; it takes practice to run.

Why it's worth the minutes

Augustine said God is "closer to me than I am to myself." The practice doesn't bring him near. It quietens us enough to notice he already is.

"I have a friend who says, 'You're not really praying until you forget that you are.'"

Steffany Gretzinger