

Prayer is not a “technique” to be adopted; it is a loving relationship with the centre of our being which is God. We discover that we are both already immersed in the love that we seek and that the door at which we push is already opened for us. The great anonymous medieval text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, sums up well the desire of our prayer which is a passing not into dogma or formula but a communing with the unknowable divine.

A couple celebrating 35 years of marriage, might well say they know and love each other at a very deep and profound level but that they are still surprised by the other and that there are still more depths of beauty and understanding to be explored. Love never ends, it continues to grow and develop the more it is explored often the more is revealed to be explored. So it is with God.

A relationship breaks down when communication ceases, and with time spent apart it becomes more and more difficult to engage in a meaningful connection with the other. The practice of contemplative prayer is a way of gazing into that love, allowing the love itself to perfuse and pervade our soul and our whole being.

Posture is the first of three key elements in our practice of contemplative prayer. The physical stillness of the body makes a significant contribution to the stillness of the mind. An erect and stable sitting posture allows us to focus, to breathe and to be comfortable. Some use the lotus or half lotus position, others a low prayer stool or a kitchen chair. The secret is to use a chair which does not lead us to nod off, the knees and buttocks along with the chair form a tripod providing a solid support for the body. Most of us are accustomed to slouching, so this way of sitting does take some effort at first. Sit on the front of the seat, not leaning back but keeping the spine straight, shoulders back but not rigid. Use a cushion if necessary, to make sure the hips are slightly above the knees; this opens up the abdomen for proper breathing. The feet should be flat on the floor giving a sense of being solid, of not having to expend energy to sit up. Hands can be laid palms down on the knees or gently cupped in the lap. Eyes can be opened or closed, whichever is found to be more helpful in avoiding distraction. With time and practice you will find what works best for you.

The second essential part of contemplative prayer is the use of a prayer word. It takes less than a minute of attempting to sit still to realise that the most pressing difficulty is the cocktail party going on in the mind. Sometimes the mind is like a bird jumping from branch to branch, at other times it is like a multi-screen cinema with all the films playing at once. Sometimes the mind is uninspired and limp like half whipped egg white! We should try to tame this multi-faceted, insatiable whirring; and the tradition of centuries has been to give it something to do. Choose a word or a short phrase that the mind can

repeat, silently; give your attention entirely to the gentle repetition of that prayer word. That attention will be continually stolen but as soon as you become aware of that, gently bring yourself back to the prayer word. Choose a word or short phrase that is easily repeated, that does not have too many syllables and reflects the attitude of prayer. *Raspberry Pavlova* has too many beats to it and it does not reflect what we are trying to achieve: *Come Holy Spirit*, or *My Lord and my God*, or *Jesus Saviour*, might be more suitable. As you start it might seem slightly laborious or artificial, but with time it will become second nature and a real refuge from the chattering of the mind.

Thirdly, we need to recognise and address the importance of breathing during contemplative prayer. If you have ever had to thread a needle, repair a necklace, rewire a plug; focussing on a task has a slowing effect on the breathing. As we concentrate our breaths slow and calm and we find ourselves breathing more deeply and quietly. It is a knack adopted by singers, swimmers and those who suffer from panic attacks. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, breath is seen as an important metaphor of divine presence. God breathed life into the nostrils of Adam, Jesus breathed on the Apostles as he bestowed the Holy Spirit. Many of the early monastic desert fathers and mothers saw the importance of focussing on the breath as a way of experiencing divine - human intimacy and dispelling the illusion of separation from God. As you begin to pray, allow yourself to become aware of your breathing, in and out; combine your prayer word with your breath saying it slowly and silently in your head accompanying each breath in and each breath out. The aim is to “breathe” the prayer word, letting it rhythmically come into and out of your body. When distractions come, again just gently return to the breathing and the prayer word. What is being cultivated is a gentle return to the present moment, away from the distractions and interruptions; with practice you will find a stillness and a peace which will quieten your mind and heart.

Initially in contemplative prayer there is some uncomfortable self-consciousness; whilst you might feel a little awkward, this is common and will soon disappear with practice. Discovering the wisdom of breath can be a great refuge and source of mental calm and there are acknowledged benefits of abdominal breathing which contribute to health and wholeness.

Contemplative prayer tries to involve our whole bodies and being in prayer; it is well worth persevering with even if, at the start, it seems a little artificial or contrived. Give yourself plenty of time to develop the habit, maybe 15 to 20 minutes to start with; once you feel confident lengthen the amount of time to suit you and your lifestyle.