



Welcome to week **four** of our Lenten journey of contemplation for 2021

This week, we are looking at the third chapter of the book, called 'The Body's Call to Prayer.' You are invited to read the excerpts, ponder and perhaps journal with the reflection questions, and try the practice.

Our plans to gather and discuss our experience of this material have been disrupted by Covid. If you would like to meet up over a shared meal to discuss your Lenten journey of contemplation, please let me (Brenda) know. If there's enough interest we may gather after the SGM for a shared lunch at Christina's house this Sunday 14th.

The St John's Centering Prayer group meets for a short contemplative service at 8.30am on the 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month. Next one is this Sunday 14th. All are welcome to participate.

Covid willing, we will go ahead with our retreat day to gather up the Lenten journey on Saturday March 27 at the church. More info to follow but it's looking increasingly likely this will be an afternoon retreat beginning with lunch.

Excerpts from *Into the Silent Land*, Chapter 3: 'The Body's Call to Prayer'

This chapter will describe three components of contemplative practice: posture, the use of a prayer word, and the breath.

...The body has two important contributions to contemplative practice: the body's physical stillness and the breath itself.

...Though not especially well developed, there is an ancient Christian awareness that physical stillness facilitates interior stillness.

...While it is important to remember that we can pray in any position, certain positions are more suited to still prayer, and many Christian contemplatives have come to see the benefits of an erect and stable sitting posture.

...If you sit in a chair, better to use a simple flat-seated desk or kitchen chair rather than an arm chair more suited to knitting, reading, or nodding off. The idea is that the knees and the buttocks form a tripod that serves as a solid support for the body. Because most of us are so accustomed to slouching, this takes some attention.

Sit on the front portion of the seat. Don't lean back. Instead, keep the back straight; shoulders back but not rigid. Depending on your height, a lot of desk chairs leave your knees about even with your hips. If possible place a cushion under you to elevate the buttocks so that the hips are slightly above the knees. The elevation of the hips above the knees opens up the abdomen for proper breathing. Feet are flat on the floor. There should be a sense of being solid, a sense of not having to expend energy to sit up. Many people never know what to do with their hands. Just lay them palms down on the knees or gently cupped in the lap. Some find they struggle less with distractions if they keep their eyes closed. Others find that closed eyes increase distractions and so keep them slightly open but without focusing on any particular object. With time you discover which is better for you.

...It takes less than a minute of attempting to practice inner stillness to realize that however fidgety the body may be the real obstacle to inner silence is the mind.

...At times the mind flits like a finch from branch to branch and at other times it is like the three-headed dog, Cerberus, unable to decide from which bowl which of its heads should feed at any given moment. Then again, and more often than we may like to admit, the mind is as uninspired and limp as a mildewed dish doth. The mind has countless faces. For centuries the advice of the contemplative tradition has been: well, then, give the mind something to do. If it can't be still, give it a short phrase or a word to repeat silently. And so when we sit, we give our attention wholly to the gentle repetition of the prayer word. We will find that our attention is forever being stolen. As soon as we become aware that our attention has been stolen by some thought, we gently bring ourselves back to the prayer word.

...Perhaps the most well known prayer word is in fact a sentence, taken here and there from scripture, known as the Jesus Prayer. It has various forms, but the most well known is perhaps, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." There is a slightly longer version: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Many simply use the essential component of the Jesus Prayer, "Jesus." Whatever prayer word we take up, we give our attention wholly to it during the time we set aside for prayer, as well as whenever we don't need to be using the mind's reasoning faculty. We don't reflect upon the meaning of the prayer word. We simply repeat it.

At the beginning, this may seem a somewhat artificial and laborious practice, but with time it becomes second nature to us. We find a home and refuge in it. Throughout all of this, the basic practice remains the same: whenever we find that our attention has been stolen by a thought—and they are as innumerable as they are subtle—we gently bring our attention back to the silent repetition of the prayer word. Our contemplative practice will be considerably deepened if we unite the practice of the prayer word with the breath.

...From early on Christians have seen breath as a potent metaphor of divine presence and somehow a fertile divine-human delta. "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the

breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). The inflow of God's breath quickened life in the human, and ... some Christian contemplatives have seen that attention to breath leads back to God.

...Maximus the Confessor puts it quite simply, "God is breath." Theophilus of Antioch says, "God has given to the earth the breath which feeds it. It is his breath that gives life to all things. And if he were to withhold his breath, everything would be annihilated. His breath vibrates in yours, in your voice. It is the breath of God that you breathe—and you are unaware of it." One of the most moving uses of this metaphor comes from St. John of the Cross. "The soul that is united and transformed in God breathes God in God with the same divine breathing with which God, while in her, breathes her in himself." Example after example bears witness to this tradition that uses breath as a metaphor of divine-human intimacy. But there is also a very practical aspect of this tradition: the use of one's own breath as a way to experience this divine-human intimacy, as an aid to dispel the illusion of separation from God.

We have seen that the Christian tradition of using the breath as an aid to contemplation developed in the context of the Jesus Prayer tradition. But it can be used profitably with any prayer word or simply on its own. How then to make use of the breath during periods of prayer?

1. After assuming a stable posture, it is a good idea to take three or four very deep breaths. Breathe in deeply using the abdomen and exhale deeply. You don't want to be dramatic but this does help clear the head and establish a firm grounding in the present moment. The exhalation should be longer than the inhalation...

2. With the "breath held like a cap in the hand," now combine the prayer word with your breathing. If it is a single word, either on the inhale or the exhale. Some people say the word out loud, but most say it to themselves. If the prayer word is a phrase, such as the Jesus Prayer, recite half the phrase on the inhale and half on the exhale. The important thing is that the prayer word and the breath become one.

3. Let your attention rest gently but steadily on the breath as you breathe the prayer word. Eventually the attention, the breath, and the prayer word will form a unity. This will be your anchor in the present moment, a place of refuge and engaged vigilance.

4. Whenever you find that your attention has been stolen by thoughts, simply bring your attention back to the breathing of the prayer word. This is the simple practice...

5. People often find that when they try to focus their attention on the breath they become uncomfortably self-conscious and begin to trip over themselves or feel that their breathing is forced. This is quite common, and it doesn't last too long; the self-consciousness is due to the newness of the practice. It is well worth putting up with this initial awkwardness. It will be gone in a matter of days...

6. The wisdom of the breath is powerful. While there is no hard-and-fast rule that says attention to the breath must be worked into contemplative practice, it clearly adds depth to one's practice. From time to time I come across people with a real resistance to working with the breath. You need to be brutally honest with yourself regarding the nature of this resistance. Not infrequently I have found that those who could profit most by it have the strongest resistance to simply letting the attention rest on the breath... More often than not there are control issues here that tighten an egoic clamp on issues that are being kept from moving into consciousness.

...The body is a great reservoir of wisdom. Something as simple as bodily stillness and breathing make a contribution of untold value to discovering the unfathomable silence deep within us. This silence, as R. S. Thomas tells us, "is when we live best, within listening distance of the silence we call God."

Questions for reflection

- + How do you respond (both in your thinking and feeling) to the recommendations in this chapter to use bodily stillness, a prayer word/phrase, and the breath, to deepen your meditation?
- + What has been your experience of trying to stay physically still in prayer – is this something that comes easily to you, or is it challenging?
- + How have you found the use of a prayer word/phrase over the past couple of weeks? Are you content with the one you chose earlier, or might you like to try the ancient ‘Jesus prayer’ of the Eastern tradition that Laird introduces here? What in this prayer attracts or repels you?
- + Laird builds a case in this chapter that attending to the breath in prayer has a strong foundation in Christian practice and theology – it is not an imported idea from other religions. How do you resonate with the idea of God being intimately connected to us through our breathing?
- + What draws you, or creates discomfort for you, in the prospect of using the breath in prayer or meditation? If you experience resistance, why do you think this might be?
- + The practice of repeating the prayer word continuously and attending to the breath is subtly different from the practice of Centering Prayer that some of us have been learning or are more intimately familiar with. Reflect on the differences and perhaps discuss them with someone experienced in different forms of meditation. Which of these practices seems most inviting or suitable for you?

You may wish to keep a notebook and journal your responses to these questions and your ‘field notes’ from your practice of silence as the weeks of Lent pass.

Invitation to practice

Continue, as far as is possible for you, to work toward a daily practice of sitting in stillness and silence. If last week you managed 2-3 minutes of sitting at a time, try to take that to 5 minutes. If 10 minutes, try building to 15, or 20. If you missed one or several days, try to avoid negative blame and judgement, simply begin again. Some people find it helpful to tag their silence to something that is already a habit, like teeth-brushing, meals, or sleep.

This week, think about your posture, as described in the excerpts above. Also, try adding in attention to the breath, and using the breath to carry your prayer word. Follow through the numbered steps 1-5 in the excerpts from the book each time you sit this week.

If you want help with time-keeping, or find it easier to be silent if your eyes are focused on an image, you can [click on this link](#) to play a 10 minute video of silence, bracketed at beginning and end by a bell, and with an icon and candle to meditate with. If you want to practice 20 minutes of silence, simply press 'replay' on the video when it ends.