My way of focusing on God has usually been through an image. If I remove that image, I have trouble understanding what it is that I should focus on. Is my attention simply on the word that I am repeating?

Your attention should not be directed to any particular thought, including the sacred word. The sacred word is only a means of re-establishing your intention of opening to the true Self and to God, who is at the center of it. It is not necessary to keep repeating the sacred word. Interior silence is something that one naturally likes to experience. You don't have to force anything. By forcing, you introduce another thought, and any thought is enough to prevent you from going where you want to go.

Some people find it easier to transcend with a visual image rather than with a word. If you prefer some kind of visual image, choose one that is general and not detailed; for example, turn your inward gaze toward God as if you are looking at someone you love.

As you were speaking, it occurred to me that I use images to stop myself from a free fall.

Some people, when they are quiet, feel themselves on the edge of a cliff. But don't worry. There is no danger of falling. The imagination is perplexed by the unknown. It is so used to images, so plugged into them, that to disengage it from its habitual way of thinking is quite a job. It will take practice to feel comfortable with this prayer.

The Sacred Word as Symbol

The sacred word, whatever one you may choose, is sacred not because of its meaning, but because of its intent. It expresses your intention to open yourself to God, the Ultimate Mystery, who dwells within you. It is a focal point to return to when you notice you are becoming interested in the thoughts that are going by.

Stick to the same word once you feel comfortable with it. If you are moved to choose another word, go ahead and try it, but do not shop around during the same period of prayer. The sacred word is a sign or arrow pointing in the direction you want to take. It is a way of renewing your intention to open yourself to God and to accept Him as He is. While this does not prevent anyone from praying in other forms at other times, the period of centering prayer is not the time to pray specifically for others. By opening yourself to God, you are implicitly praying for everyone past, present, and future. You are embracing the whole of creation. You are accepting all reality, beginning with God and with that part of your own reality of which you may not be generally aware, namely, the spiritual level of your being.

The sacred word enables you to sink into your Source. Human beings were made for boundless happiness and peace, and when we see that we

1. Examples of what the sacred word might be: God, Jesus, Spirit, Abba, amen, peace, silence, open, glory, love, presence, trust, etc.
are starting to move in that direction, we don't have to push ourselves. The difficulty is that we are going in the opposite direction most of the time. We tend to identify ourselves with our false self and its concerns and with the world that stimulates and reinforces that false self.

The sacred word is not a vehicle or means to go from the surface of the river to the depths. It is rather a condition for going there. If I hold a ball in my hand and let go, it will fall to the floor; I don't have to throw it.

In similar fashion, the sacred word is a way of letting go of all thoughts. This makes it possible for our spiritual faculties, which are attracted to interior silence, to move spontaneously in that direction. Such a movement does not require effort. It only requires the willingness to let go of our ordinary preoccupations.

Since the will is designed for infinite love and the mind for infinite truth, if there is nothing to stop them, they tend to move in that direction. It is because they are all wrapped up in other directions that their freedom to go where they are naturally inclined is limited. During the time of centering prayer these faculties regain that freedom.

Thus the sacred word is a way of reducing the number of thoughts and of dissolving them into the single thought of opening to God. It is not the means by which we go from a noisy imagination to silence, but a condition that enables us to move into the spiritual realm to which the force of grace is drawing us.

The chief thing that separates us from God is the thought that we are separated from Him. If we get rid of that thought, our troubles will be greatly reduced. We fail to believe that we are always with God and that He is part of every reality. The present moment, every object we see, our inmost nature are all rooted in Him. But we hesitate to believe this until personal experience gives us the confidence to believe it. This involves the gradual development of intimacy with God. God constantly speaks to us through each other as well as from within. The interior experience of God's presence activates our capacity to perceive Him in everything else—in people, in events, in nature. We may enjoy union with God in any experience of the external senses as well as in prayer.

Contemplative prayer is a way of awakening to the reality in which we are immersed. We rarely think of the air we breathe, yet it is in us and around us all the time. In similar fashion, the presence of God penetrates us, is all around us, is always embracing us. Our awareness, unfortunately, is not awake to that dimension of reality. The purpose of prayer, the sacraments, and spiritual disciplines is to awaken us.

God's presence is available at every moment, but we have a giant obstacle in ourselves—our world view. It needs to be exchanged for the mind of Christ, for His world view. The mind of Christ is ours through faith and baptism, according to Paul, but to take possession of it requires a discipline that develops the sensitivity to hear Christ's invitation: "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone opens I will come in and sup with him and he with me." (Revelations 3:20) It is not a big effort to open a door.

Our ordinary preoccupations involve unconscious value systems. Some thoughts are attractive to us because we have an attachment to them springing from the emotional programming of early childhood. When such thoughts go by, all our lights start flashing because of our heavy emotional investment in the values that they stimulate or threaten. By training ourselves to let go of every thought and thought pattern, we gradually develop freedom from our attachments and compulsions.

In contemplative prayer the Spirit places us in a position where we are at rest and disinclined to fight. By his secret anointings the Spirit heals the wounds of our fragile human nature at a level beyond our psychological perception, just as a person who is anesthetized has no idea of how the operation is going until after it is over. Interior silence is the perfect seed bed for divine love to take root. In the Gospel the Lord speaks about a mustard seed as a symbol of divine love. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it has an enormous capacity for growth. Divine love has the power to grow and to transform us. The purpose of contemplative prayer is to facilitate the process of inner transformation.

It is easier for most people to let go of their thoughts with a word of one or two syllables. But if you find that a visual image is more helpful, use it, provided, of course, that you introduce it on the level of the imagination and return to it whenever you notice you are thinking some other thought. The visual image should be general, not clear and precise. Some people find it especially helpful to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. They usually keep their eyes closed and are simply aware of the presence in which they are praying.

Following one's breathing is another method of quieting the mind. There is a distinction, however, that should be carefully noted. In centering prayer the object is not simply to let go of all thoughts but to deepen
our contact with the ground of our being. The intentionality of faith is fundamental. Centering prayer is not just sustained attention to a special word or image or to one's breathing, but the surrender of one's whole being to God. It is not just an experience of our spiritual nature, which can be gained by concentrating on a particular posture, mantra, or mandala. It presupposes a personal relationship; there must be a movement of self-surrender. If, as a Christian, you use some physical or psychological method that is geared to quieting the mind, I suggest that you put it in the context of prayer. For instance, if you follow your exercises as a means of calming your thoughts, do so with the motive of drawing closer to God. Centering prayer is not a relaxation exercise although it may bring relaxation. It is the exercise of our personal relationship with God.

How does the sacred word actually work?

The sacred word is a simple thought that you are thinking at ever deepening levels. That is why you accept it in whatever form it arises within you. The word on your lips is exterior and has no part in this form of prayer; the thought in your imagination is interior; the word as an impulse of your will is more interior still. Only when you pass beyond the word into pure awareness is the process of interiorization complete. That is what Mary of Bethany was doing at the feet of Jesus. She was going beyond the words she was hearing to the Person who was speaking and entering into union with Him. This is what we are doing as we sit in centering prayer interiorizing the sacred word. We are going beyond the sacred word into union with that to which it points—the Ultimate Mystery, the Presence of God beyond any conception that we can form of Him.

The desire to go to God, to open to His presence within us, does not come from our initiative. We do not have to go anywhere to find God because He is already drawing us in every conceivable way into union with Himself. It is rather a question of opening to an action that is already happening in us. To consent to God's presence is His Presence. The sacred word points us beyond our psychic awareness to our Source, the Trinity dwelling in our inmost being. Moreover, God dwells there not as a photograph or statue, but as a dynamic presence. The purpose of this prayer is to get in touch with the activity that God is constantly initiating in our inmost center.

If you keep up this practice every day for several months, you will know whether or not it is right for you. There is no substitute for the experience of doing it. It is like getting to know a new friend; if you meet and converse regularly, you get to know each other faster. That's why we recommend two periods of prayer each day, preferably the first thing in the morning and before supper. Sometimes the "conversation" is engrossing and you experience a certain peace and refreshment. At other times the conversation is like talking about baseball scores when you have no interest in the game; you put up with it because you are interested in a particular person and in whatever interests him or her. An uninspiring period of prayer won't bother you very much if your long-range goal is the cultivation of friendship. The essential discipline is to do it every day.

What do you do when the entire prayer period consists of wave after wave of thoughts?

When you start to quiet down, you may become aware that your head is full of thoughts coming from both outside and inside. The imagination is a perpetual-motion faculty; it is always grinding out images. So you must expect that on the level of your memory and imagination, thoughts will just keep coming. The main thing is to accept the fact that this is going to happen. No one is going to fall instantly into an ocean of peace where there are no distractions. You have to accept yourself as you are and God as He is, and trust that He will lead you in a way that may not always feel comfortable but that is best for you.

In the case of unwanted thoughts, just let them go without being upset. If you make up your mind that there are going to be a lot of thoughts, you are less likely to get upset when thoughts arrive. If, on the other hand, you feel that the goal of centering prayer is to be free of all thoughts, you will be continually disappointed. When you feel disappointed, that is a thought with an emotional charge to it. It shatters whatever interior silence you may have been enjoying.

Must one say the sacred word constantly?

So long as thoughts are going by of their own accord, you don't have to think the sacred word. In the beginning it is helpful to keep returning to it in order to introduce it into your subconscious and thus to make it
easier to recall when you need it during prayer. The basic rule is to let all thoughts on the river go by. As long as they are going by, you don't need to do anything about them. But when you want to look on board one of the boats to see what is hidden in the hold, think the sacred word. Do so gently, however, and without effort.

If you have just had an argument with someone or received bad news, you will need a little preparation for prayer. Reading scripture, walking or jogging around the block, or doing yoga exercises may help to calm your emotional turmoil. One reason to pray early in the day is that events haven't had a chance to upset you yet.

Does the sacred word disappear permanently or just from time to time during a particular prayer time?

The experience of interior peace is the sacred word at its deepest level. You are experiencing the end of the journey toward which the sacred word is pointing. But this is generally not a permanent state. You keep getting bounced out and have to return again to the sacred word.

You said that it is not so much repetition of the sacred word that counts but the intention. I was wondering how to hang onto the intention without repeating the word. It seems as if they go together.

In the beginning it is hard to hang on to your intention without continually returning to the sacred word. But this does not mean that you have to keep repeating it. There are forms of Christian prayer similar to mantric practice in the Hindu tradition that consist of repeating the sacred word continuously. This is not the method of centering prayer. In this practice, you only return to the sacred word when you notice you are thinking some other thought. As you become more comfortable with this prayer, you begin to find yourself beyond the word in a place of interior peace. Then you see that there is a level of attention that is beyond the sacred word. The sacred word is a pointer and you have reached that to which it is pointing. Until you have that experience, you must continue to go back to the sacred word in order to reaffirm your intention when you notice you are thinking of something else.

It seems that a word has a certain emotional quality to it, some kind of atmosphere about it. I was wondering if there was a distinction between trying to stay with the word to see what the feeling quality of that word becomes in centering prayer, and trying to allow everything to drop away, including the feeling quality of that word, in the hope that there is something coming from God's direction.

The meaning of the sacred word or its resonances should not be pursued. It is better to choose a word that does not stir up other associations in your mind or cause you to consider its particular emotional qualities. The sacred word is only a gesture, an expression of your intent; it has no meaning other than your intent. You should choose your word as a simple expression of that intent, not as a source of meaning or emotional attraction. The less the word means to you, the better off you are. It is not a way of going to God or a way into interior silence. Rather, it establishes an interior climate that facilitates the movement of faith. The movement of pure faith is the heart of contemplative prayer. Only God can put content into that kind of faith.

You may reach a point where you no longer think of the sacred word at all. When you sit down for prayer, your whole psyche gathers itself together and melts into God. Interior silence is the sacred word at its deepest level. For example, if you take a trip to New York, you buy a ticket at your starting point. But when you get to New York, you don't go to the ticket office to buy another ticket; you are already there. In the same way, use the sacred word to move into interior silence. So long as you experience the undifferentiated, general, and loving presence of God beyond any thought, don't go back to the sacred word. You are already at your destination.

Sometimes I think that I have reached the tranquility before I really have. I've tasted the real thing once in a while, but sometimes I think it is there before it really is, and I don't want to go back to the word. Yet I feel that I have to.

Well, don't be too sure. Stay there a few more moments. God is much more intimate and accessible than we think. If the Lord reaches up and pulls you down, great! But since He does not generally do so, there may
be something you can do to make it easier for Him. Centering prayer is a method of doing precisely that.

To what exactly is our attention directed in centering prayer? Is it to the sacred word? To the meaning of the word? To the sound of the word? To a vague sense of God being present?

None of them. We do not try to fix our attention on the sacred word during centering prayer. We do not keep repeating it or think of its meaning. Its sound is of no significance. The sacred word is only a symbol. It is an arrow pointing in the direction intended by our will. It is a gesture or sign of accepting God as He is. Exactly what that is, we don’t know. Again, the sacred word is like the needle of a ship’s compass pointing out the course in a storm. It is not a means, still less an infallible means, of getting to our destination. It is not within our power to bring about a vague sense of God’s being present. What, then, is our principal focus in centering prayer? It is to deepen our relationship with Jesus Christ, the Divine-Human Being.

In discussions with others who practice centering prayer, I have found that they stop saying the sacred word as soon as some type of silence appears. They stay silent for about five minutes; then thoughts arise and they return to the word. They make another descent into quietness and drop the word; then thoughts arise and they return to it again. What do you think about this dropping and returning, dropping and returning to the word?

Your description sounds as if they know how to do it. Some teachers of prayer are convinced from their experience that contemporary Western minds are so active that they need to repeat a Christian mantra over and over, at least in the beginning. People leading very active lives can certainly benefit from that sort of concentration to hold their attention. The method of centering prayer, however, is not concentrative, but receptive. While both methods are excellent and aim at the same goal, they are not the same and produce different effects in the psyche. In centering prayer, the use of the sacred word is designed to foster the receptive attitude. The interior movement toward God without any word is often enough. You may sink into interior silence as soon as you sit down simply by opening yourself to the presence of God. His presence is already there, but you may not have noticed it because of other duties or occupations.

Contemplative prayer is an incredibly simple kind of attention. It is more intention than attention. As the Spirit gradually takes more and more charge of your prayer, you may move into pure consciousness, which is an intuition into your true Self. There is no way of knowing God directly in this life except by means of pure faith, which is darkness to all the faculties. This darkness is to be understood not as a blanking out of the faculties, but as a transcendence of their activity. Pure faith, according to John of the Cross, is the proximate means of union with God.

Contemplative prayer may open up into various kinds of inner experiences or nonexperiences. In either case, it is a training in being content with God as He is and as He acts. There is tremendous freedom when that disposition is finally established because then you will not look for any form of consolation from God. Spiritual consolations can be as distracting as sensible ones. God gives consolation to heal the emotional problems I was referring to previously. Someone who has been deprived of love needs a lot of affection. The Spirit knows that as well as any psychiatrist. It may be for this reason that the Spirit fills certain people with waves of love and various marks of affection. It doesn’t mean that they are holier than others or that the Spirit loves them more. It means that they have more need of love. So he gives them what they need—always, however, with a view to strengthening them so that they may receive more substantial communications, which are beyond the range of psychological awareness.