

# ***The Wisdom School – Part 3: The Prayer of the Heart***

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal February 2016

In a recent article in *Contemplative Journal*, Matthew Wright points out that the early desert Christians—the first to wander off into the wilderness to form alternative communities of spiritual practice—spoke about “drawing the mind into the heart” or “seeing with the eye of the heart.” The heart was considered the seat of wisdom.



Today, we habitually differentiate between the mind and the heart as separate parts of ourselves. Increasingly people use the term “heartfulness” to describe what they are trying to achieve in Christian contemplative practice. For example, Centering Prayer cultivates a heart-centered awakening. It offers an alternative perspective to our assumption that our center of self is our thinking mind.

Along with heartfulness, humility is another distinctive aspect of the Christian contemplative journey, one that we encounter again and again in the writings of the early desert Christian contemplatives and the mystic saints throughout the ages. The modern thinking mind may view humility as placing ourselves in a lesser state of being. But humility can also be viewed as not attaching to something attractive or, more powerfully, not even attaching to the thought of the attraction and its perceived benefit to us. When this happens we shift the nature of our relationships from thinking about them to experiencing our sensation of connection.

Ingeniously, the Christian path focuses on cultivating the qualities of the heart that allow us to live in a place of connection, and not only an experience of contemplation. The Christian way tends to focus not so much on a goal, such as ‘enlightenment’, as the process, leading us quietly and almost unexpectedly into awakening and oneness.

Each day, as a Centering Prayer practitioner strives to draw the mind into the heart, slowly the eye of the heart begins to open, moving one into the place of unitive seeing. Humility, gentleness, mercy, and love are moving us away from the dualistic mind and into the oneness of the awakened heart.

When asked about heart awareness in Centering Prayer as a means dissipating a thought by moving it into the vast space of the heart, Thomas Keating said: “This is a safe place to go habitually in your formal prayer time, but also in everyday life when assaulted by temptations or negative thoughts and scenarios.”

As Matthew Wright puts it: “The brilliance in this approach is precisely in its relational, rather than goal oriented, process. As one ‘gets to know’ the qualities of the heart by repeatedly drawing the mind into their energy and influence, they gradually become your primary vibration...Without fail, the Christians who write about the ‘prayer of the heart’ speak of warmth, quiet, and sweetness as its signature essence. To get to know it, you simply turn in its direction. You might try touching this dimension of yourself right now by imagining breathing through your heart. Use your breath as an anchor to hold your awareness in the center of your chest, rather than in the busy mental faculties where we usually stake our sense of self. Sit with this for a few minutes. Do you begin to feel the warmth and quiet that Christianity has traditionally associated with this center?”

To a large extent the Christian spirituality has in many ways devolved in recent centuries. We experience our thinking mind and our heart as separate parts of ourselves. We forget that we ever walked a path of awakening the heart. With guidance of modern contemplatives such as Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, and Cynthia Bourgeault, we are rediscovering and recovering the precious gifts of Christian contemplation and wisdom.

If you feel drawn to participate in a Contemplative Outreach Wisdom practice group, please feel free to email me at [alkrema@gmail.com](mailto:alkrema@gmail.com).