

A Seminary Student Silent Retreat 2007

Facilitator: Dr Alex Tang

Theme: Walking the Spiritual Paths of Perceiving, Listening, and Being

Retreat Desired Outcome:

1. To conduct a retreat at the end at the end of their final year.
2. To guide the participants through a silent retreat experience.
3. To allow time for rest, prayers, reflection, and spiritual encounter with God.
4. To reflect on their lived experience with God through centering prayer, imaginative prayer, and *lectio divina*.
5. To think about their calling/vocation.

Retreat Schedule

Time	Day 1	Day 2
7.00-9.00 am		Silent Breakfast & Silent Retreat
9.00-11.00 am		Sharing & The Spiritual Path of Being
		Silent Retreat
1.00-1.30 pm	Settling in & Contemplative worship	Silent Lunch
1.30-3.00 pm	Quieting Down & The Spiritual Path of Perceiving	Silent Retreat
3.00-4.30 pm	Silent Retreat	Sharing & The Threefold Paths of Being Missional
4.30-5.30 pm		Announcement & End Retreat
6.30-7.30 pm	Silent Dinner	
7.30-8.00 pm	Silent Retreat	
8.00-10.00 pm	Sharing & The Spiritual Path of Listening	
10.00-12 midnite	Silent Retreat	

What do you want to receive/achieve in this retreat?

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)
- (4)

What are some of the shared commitment in this retreat?

- (1) Silent means NO TALKING
- (2) No handphone usage, NO SMS
- (3) No homework, letter writing
- (4) Read only Bible and spiritual books, no novels
- (5) No computer games on laptop
- (6) No iPod or background music

I. Quietening Down (Centering Prayer)

THE CENTRING(CENTERING) PRAYER

1. Contemplative Prayer

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Contemplative prayer is the opening of mind and heart – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions. We open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing – closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.

2. The Method of Centering Prayer

Centering prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship with Christ and to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift. It is an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., The Cloud of Unknowing) in an updated form and put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else.

3. The Guidelines

3.1 Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.

3.2 Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

3.3 When you are aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

3.4 At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

4. Explanation of the Guidelines

4.1 "Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within."

4.1.1 The sacred word expresses our intention to be in God's presence and to yield to divine action.

4.1.2 The sacred word should be chosen during a brief period of prayer asking the Holy Spirit to inspire us with one that is especially suitable for us.

a. Examples: Lord, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother

b. Other possibilities: Love, Peace, Shalom, Silence.

4.1.3 Having chosen a sacred word, we do not change it during the prayer period, for that will be to start thinking again.

4.1.4 A simple inward gaze upon God may be more suitable for some persons than the sacred word. In this case, one consents to God's presence and action by turning inwardly towards God as if gazing upon him. The same guidelines apply to the sacred gaze as to the sacred word.

4.2 "Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within."

4.2.1 By "sitting comfortably" is meant relatively comfortably; not so comfortably that we encourage sleep, but sitting comfortably enough to avoid thinking about the discomfort of our bodies during this time of prayer.

4.2.2 Whatever sitting position we choose, we keep the back straight.

4.2.3 If we fall asleep, we continue the prayer for a few minutes upon waking if we can spare the time.

4.2.4 Praying in this way after a main meal encourages drowsiness. Better to wait an hour at least before centering prayer. Praying this way just before retiring may disturb one's sleep pattern.

4.2.5 We close our eyes to let go of what is going on around and within us.

4.2.6 We introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

4.3 "When you are aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word."

4.3.1 "Thoughts" is an umbrella term for every perception including perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries.

4.3.2 Thoughts are a normal part of centering prayer.

4.3.3 By “returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word,” a minimum of effort is indicated. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of centering prayer.

4.3.4 During the course of our prayer, the sacred word may become vague and even disappear.

4.4 “At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.”

4.4.1 If this prayer is done in a group, the leader may slowly recite the Our Father during the additional two or three minutes while the other listen.

4.4.2 The additional two or three minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external senses and enable us to bring the atmosphere of silence into daily life.

5. Some Practical Points

5.1 The minimum time for this prayer is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.

5.2 The end of the prayer period can be indicated by a timer, provided it does not have an audible tick or loud sound when it goes off.

5.3 The principal effects of centering prayer are experienced in the daily life, not in the period of centering prayer itself.

5.4 Physical symptom:

- a. We may notice slight pains, itches, or twitches in various parts of the body, or a generalized restlessness. These are usually due to emotional knots in the body.
- b. We may also notice heaviness or lightness in the extremities. This is usually due to a deep level of spiritual attentiveness.
- c. In either case, we pay no attention, or we allow the mind to rest briefly in the sensation and then return to the sacred word.

5.5 Lectio divina provides the conceptual background for the development of centering prayer.

5.6 A support group praying and sharing together once a week helps maintain one’s commitment to the prayer.

6. Points for Further Development

6.1 During this prayer, we avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming to some specific goals such as the following:

- a. Repeating the sacred word continuously.
- b. Having no thoughts.
- c. Making the mind blank.
- d. Feeling peaceful or consoled.
- e. Achieving a spiritual experience.

6.2 What centering prayer is not:

- a. It is not a technique.
- b. It is not a relaxation exercise.
- c. It is not a form of self-hypnosis.
- d. It is not a charismatic gift.

- e. It is not a parapsychological phenomenon.
- f. It is not limited to the “felt” presence of God.
- g. It is not discursive meditation of affective prayer.

6.3 What centering prayer is:

- a. It is at the same time a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.
- b. It is an exercise of faith, hope and love.
- c. It is a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion.
- d. It habituates us to the language of God which is silence.

A Meditation

We begin our prayer by disposing our body. Let it be relaxed and calm, but ever inwardly alert.

The root of prayer is interior silence. We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Deep prayer is the laying aside of thoughts. It is the opening of mind and heart, body and feelings – our whole being – to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, and emotions. We do not resist them or suppress them. We accept them as they are and go beyond them, not by effort, but by letting them all go by. We open our awareness to the Ultimate Mystery whom we know by faith is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing – closer than consciousness itself. The Ultimate Mystery is the ground in which our being is rooted, the Source from whom our life emerges at every moment.

We are totally present now, with the whole of our being, in complete openness, in deep prayer. The past and future – time itself – are forgotten. We are here in the presence of the Ultimate Mystery. Like the air we breathe, this divine Presence is all around us and within us, distinct from us, but never separate from us. We may sense this Presence drawing us from within, as if touching our spirit and embracing it, or carrying us beyond ourselves into pure awareness.

We surrender to the attraction of interior silence, tranquility, and peace. We do not try to feel anything, reflect about anything. Without effort, without trying, we sink into this Presence, letting everything else go. Let love alone speak: the simple desire to be one with the Presence, to forget self, and to rest in the Ultimate Mystery.

This Presence is immense, yet so humbling; awe-inspiring, yet so gentle; limitless, yet so intimate, tender and personal. I know that I am known. Everything in my life is transparent in this Presence. It knows everything about me – all my weaknesses, brokenness, sinfulness – and still loves me infinitely. This Presence is healing, strengthening, refreshing – just by its Presence. It is non-judgemental, self-giving, seeking no reward, boundless in compassion. It is like coming home to a place I should never have left, to an awareness that was somehow always there, but which I did not recognize. I cannot force this awareness, or bring it

about. A door opens within me, but from the other side. I seem to have tasted before the mysterious sweetness of this enveloping, permeating Presence. It is both emptiness and fullness at once.

We wait patiently; in silence, openness, and quiet attentiveness; motionless within and without. We surrender to the attraction to be still, to be loved, just to be.

How shallow are all the things that upset and discourage me! I resolve to give up the desires that trigger my tormenting emotions. Having tasted true peace, I can let them all go by. Of course, I shall stumble and fall, for I know my weakness. But I will rise at once, for I know my goal. I know where my home is.

(adapted Thomas Keating)

II. The Spiritual Path of Perceiving (Imaginative prayer)

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS ABOUT SEEING THE BIBLE IS ABOUT SEEING AND PERCEIVING

A new way of seeing. Read John 8

^{JN 8:1} But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

^{JN 8:9} At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

^{JN 8:11} "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Run the story as a movie in your mind

Woman caught in adultery, picture yourself seeing through the woman's eyes

- What are you seeing?
- What are you feeling?
- Why is the teacher sitting and not standing?
- Who is this teacher?
- Why doesn't he answer?
- What is he writing in the dirt?
- What are you thinking as the people walk away?
- What are you thinking about what Jesus said?
- How do you see God at the end of this experience?

The woman has a voice.

[Shares your impressions in small groups]

See the event through the Pharisees' viewpoint

- What are you seeing?
- What are you trying to do?
- What are you feeling?
- Why is the teacher sitting and not standing?
- Who is this teacher? * position of power
- Why doesn't he answer?
- What is he writing in the dirt?
- What are you thinking as you hold the stone?
- What are you thinking as you walk away?
- How do you see God at the end of this experience?

[share your impressions in small groups]

Imagine you are Jesus, looking at the woman wrapped in sheet and her accusers and the Pharisees surrounding you

- What do you feel about the woman?
- What do you feel about the Pharisee?
- What do you feel about the situation?

Picture yourself as God looking at the whole incident

- What do you feel about the woman?
- What do you feel about the Pharisee?
- What do you as the Father think about Jesus the son?

The Bible is about seeing. How has this exercise affected you seeing, your perception?

v.12 Jesus talks about the light of the world.

Next chapter he heals a man born blind.

The Pharisees think they see. If they are born blind, at least they have an excuse.

We all have eyes. Do we see? There is seeing and there is seeing.

Retreat Journal:

Read about Jesus and the Samaritan Woman John 4:1-42

Read slowly and meditatively. Journal down your perceptions.

- (1) Perceive through the eyes of the Samaritan woman
 - a. what do you see?
 - b. how do you feel?
 - c. what are you thinking?
 - d. what are your hopes?
 - e. what are your fears?
- (2) Perceive through the eyes of a disciple
- (3) Perceive through the eyes of a Pharisee (v.1)

- (4) Perceive through the eyes of a town folk whom the woman shared with
- (5) Perceive through the eyes of Jesus
- (6) Perceive through the eyes of God

Meditate on this:

A Woman of Samaria

It was a hot dusty afternoon,
a woman stole quietly to draw water from the well in a small city in Samaria,
safe from the gossips and disdainful looks of other women in the city of Sychar.
A woman of Samaria who was just trying to survive, to have a roof over her head,
being driven from home after home erodes one's pride slowly but surely.

It was a hot dusky afternoon,
an afternoon like any other afternoon, a man asked a woman of Samaria for a drink,
a Jew, whom she thought was teasing her, a lone woman at the well.
She looked at him and he offered her living water, water that form a spring in those
who drank and will never be thirsty again.
The woman considered the hours of backbreaking labour carrying water and this man
who offered water so easily: another nutcase.
Humouring him, she compared him to Jacob and asked for his living water.

It was a hot dusky afternoon,
the Jew looked at her and tell of her own secret social dilemma. A soft breeze stirred
the hot dust.
This man is either a nutcase or a prophet, the woman thought and changed the topic,
where do we worship God, Jerusalem or Mt.Gerizim, she asked the Jew.
One day, he said, we shall worship anywhere as long as we worship in spirit and in
truth.
The woman blinked and again changed the topic,
we are waiting for a Messiah who will tell us of these things.

It was a hot dusky afternoon,
the Jew said to the woman of Samaria, "I am" the Messiah you are waiting for. A
gentle breeze cooled the hot dust.
His followers came back and she ran away in fear. No harsh words were said.
She blinked as she ran, could it be true that he is the Messiah, this stranger who knew
of my secret life. She ran to the people in the city to tell them of this strange Jewish
man.

It was a hot dusky afternoon,
the world was never the same again.

Meditation notes:

III. The Spiritual Path of Listening

The Bible is important in the formation of our life. However most people read the Bible for information. How do we read the Bible formationally?

Holy Reading (Lectio divina)

Four stages of Holy Reading (Lectio divina)

1. Lectio: reading/listening
 - i. begin with prayer
 - ii. ask
 - iii. remember
 - iv. avoid

2. Meditate: meditation
 - i. Take time
 - ii. Ruminare
 - iii. Write reflections
 - iv. Recall passage
 - v. Engage senses
 - vi. Deal with distraction/quietening down

3. Oratio: prayer
 - i. Beware of techniques
 - ii. Pray
 - iii. Pray as God has spoken
 - iv. Be open to the Holy Spirit
 - v. Deal with distraction

4. Contemplatio: contemplation
 - i. Be silent/receptive
 - ii. Not easy

Lectio divina (pronounced lex-ee-oh di-vee-nuh) has been used for over 1,500 years. Literally, it means “divine reading”, ‘spiritual reading’ or ‘sacred reading’. The primary source of what is read in lectio is the Bible. It is gaining popularity as more and more people are finding it a powerful way to nurture their spiritual lives. As evangelicals, we have concentrated on the study of the Bible. We have come to know a lot about the Bible. But we have not been very good at applying the Bible, much less hearing God through the Bible. Lectio divina is an approach that builds on serious Bible study but moves to new depths as we open ourselves to God through the Bible.

1. The history of Lectio Divina

The early monks and nuns approached the Bible by means of lectio divina. In the daily routine of the monasteries and convent, there is specific time set aside for study, prayer and work. One of the leaders to commend lectio divina as a spiritual exercise

was Benedict, an Italian monk who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries (about 480-550).

During the time set aside for study, a monk (or a nun) would go to a quiet place and begin to repeat aloud a passage from the Bible. Often this is taken from the Psalms or Gospels. The monk would speak the passage out loud until a particular word or phrase strikes him. Then he would stop and ponder this word or phrase, understanding it to be a word from God for him. In *lectio divina*, the practitioner looks for direct message from God. This meditation (which is what he is doing) will lead naturally into prayer as the monk seeks to communicate with the Lord. As he moved further and further into prayer, he will come to a place where he rested in the presence of the Lord. This is the state of contemplation.

2. **The process of Lectio Divina**

In the twelfth century, Guigo II. A French Carthusian monk developed *lectio* into a four step exercise:

2.1 Reading/Listening (*lectio*)

Read out a short passage of Scripture. When we read aloud, we become both proclaimer and hearer of the Word of God. As you read, listen for the word or phrase that speaks to you. What is the Spirit drawing your attention to?

2.2 Meditating (*meditatio*)

Repeat aloud the word or phrase that attracts you. Make connections between it and your life. What is God saying to you by means of this word or phrase?

2.3 Praying (*oratio*)

Now, take these thoughts and offer them back to God in prayer, giving thanks, asking for guidance, asking for forgiveness, and resting in God's love. What is God leading you to pray?

2.4 Contemplating (*contemplatio*)

Move from the activity of prayer to the stillness of contemplation. Simply rest in God's presence. Stay open to God. Listen to God. Remain in peace and silence before God. How is God revealing Himself to you?

3. Entering into Lectio Divina

3.1 Select a passage, which you have read and perhaps studied previously so that text and context are familiar to you.

3.2 As you come to the text you need to slow down. You are coming to wait before God, a waiting upon Him.

3.3 Posture – are you sitting well? Kneel if you desire. Sit if you need to. Be comfortable. Create space – secure and peaceful. The environment –flowers, music, special place, outdoor etc. Mark of block of time – 10-30 minutes a day. Make it regular.

3.4 Centring(Centering) – integrating yourself – mind, body and spirit. Breathing exercise – palms up (to give up to God); palms down (to receive from God). Recall a gift; sing hymn; recite a creed, etc.

3.5 Initial prayer – invoke God's presence. Announcing that you are 'waiting upon God'. You are seeking His presence.

3.6 Turn to the passage – this is the passage for me; savor the words; appreciate its inner and hidden meaning for me; carefully and tenderly hold the words.

3.7 Read it aloud, slowly and softly. Notice the punctuation. Slow down and breathe more slowly. Watch for the commas and periods. Taste the flavor of the Word; hear the gracious Word of God; see the content of the Word.

3.8 Read it again (or a third time). Gently dwell on each word, each phrase, each sentence. Read slower.

3.9 If distractions come, recognize them and tell them that you will come back to them later.

3.10 Attitude – patiently abiding in God’s presence and care of listening and looking in humble expectancy.

3.11 You can intersperse the reading with prayer, praise, petition, confession, or whatever comes into your heart.

3.12 Times of barrenness and darkness are also times of spiritual transformation. Do not depend on our feedings.

3.13 Stay with your impressions that come. Concentrate on one or two. Ask God to show you what they mean. Connect them with your present life issue/ problem/ circumstance, etc. Do you need assurance? Does it reveal your present situation? Are you in some need? Is it some issue you do not want to face at present?

3.14 At the end of the meditation, write down your impressions in your journal. Speak to your mentor or your close Christian friends or your spouse about them. Connect them to your life. This is important because some other person can help you make sense of what has been given to you. You can also check on God’s message to you.

‘For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart’

Hebrews 4:12 KJV

Recommended reading

Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Sacred Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1985)

M.Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina* (New York: Crossroad, 1998)

Richard Peace, *Contemplative Bible Study* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1998)

Practising Lectio Divina:

Exodus 3

- (1) How do I feel about what I am reading? (lectio)
- (2) Why do I have this feeling? (meditate)
- (3) What is going on deep inside of me? (prayer)
- (4) What shall I do about it? Be specific. Write down what you need to do. (contemplate)

Retreat Journal:

Do lectio divina with John 7: 1-52. Read, meditate, pray, and contemplate.

Questions to help you:

- (5) How do I feel about what I am reading?
- (6) Why do I have this feeling?
- (7) What is going on deep inside of me?
- (8) What shall I do about it? Be specific. Write down what you need to do.

Retreat reflection

Divide a page into two columns; in the left column list out all the things you think God likes about you. In the column on the right, list down all the things you think God dislike about you. Then grade them in order, from the most severe to the most mild.

Reflect about who you are.

IV. The Spiritual Path of Being

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-31)

LK 15:11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

LK 15:13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

LK 15:17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

LK 15:21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

LK 15:22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

LK 15:25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

LK 15:28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

LK 15:31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

View through the eyes of

- (1) the younger son

- (2) the older son
- (3) the villagers
- (4) the father

Each time asking;

- (1) How do I feel about what I am reading?
- (2) Why do I have this feeling?
- (3) What is going on deep inside of me?
- (4) What shall I do about it? Be specific. Write down what you need to do.

Retreat Reflection:

- 1. Who are you?
- 2. What have you learn during the years you are in this seminar?
- 3. What next?

After lunch, write a one page summary of what you have discovered about the above in this retreat for sharing in the final session.

Retreat Journal:

Matthew 6:19-7:28

Combine perceiving with lectio divina.

Questions to help you:

- (5) How do I feel about what I am reading?
- (6) Why do I have this feeling?
- (7) What is going on deep inside of me?
- (8) What shall I do about it? Be specific. Write down what you need to do.

V. Conclusion: The Threefold Path of Being Missional

Correct perceiving, listening, and be-ing helps us to be missional in our vocation and life.

- 1. The spiritual life is not about you. It is about God.
- 2. You cannot serve God if you insist on doing thing your own way.
- 3. Relax, have a cup of coffee. God is in control

Soli Dei Gloria