

The Effect Church

# CONTEMPLATIVE EBOOK PART I



# The Contemplative Experience

By the time most of us are ready to engage in contemplative practice, a certain amount of water has usually gone under the bridge. It's much less likely that someone in their twenties or even thirties would engage contemplative practice unless something significantly traumatic or life altering has occurred by then.

For most of us, life has to catch up with us, pile up the losses, show us our age in the mirror, and ask insistently enough whether there is more to life than we've experienced so far.

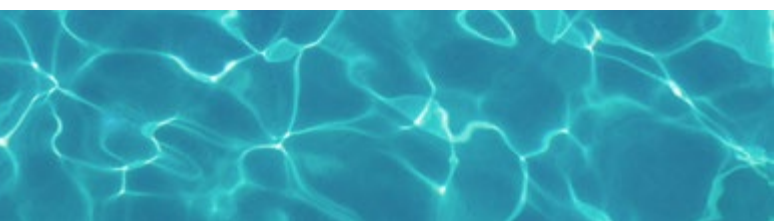
## First Half

There are essentially two halves of life. Not necessarily chronological but tending to correspond with age, they are more a matter of focus, and it takes time or intensity to change our focus.

The first half of life focuses outward. We set off in our teens and twenties building our physical lives—work, career, family, fortune—and by our mid to late thirties, questions of meaning and purpose begin rising to the surface. Usually experienced not as questions but a loss of interest, joy, or enthusiasm, they are felt more as burnout, anxiety, depression, fatigue, an unscratchable irritation or frustration.



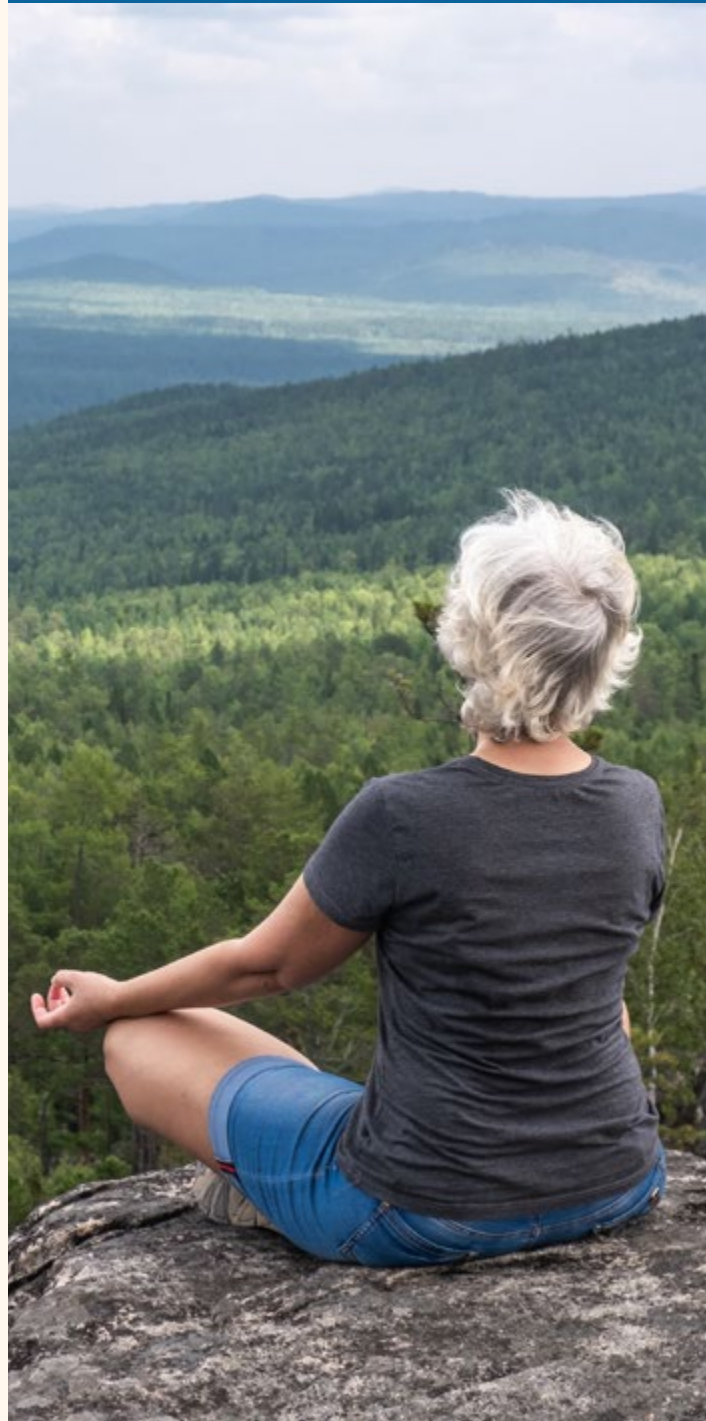
It's the culturally misunderstood mid-life crisis: the unconscious sense that all we've been doing is not why we're here on this planet. This crisis is not the escapist return to adolescent behavior—the red sports cars, plastic surgery, and affairs of our forties or fifties—but a crisis of meaning and purpose that if not answered in our thirties, leads to cars and affairs later that represent the last time we felt meaningful and purposeful.



## The Second Half

The mid-life crisis is a call to the second half of life where the focus turns inward, looking for ultimate meaning, purpose, and identity in the only place it exists: within us. But what stands between us and this experience of true meaning in life is our conscious minds. Sometimes called the egoic mind, it is the constant stream of thoughts, calculations, categorizing, planning, catastrophizing that is the byproduct of self-awareness and a human being's greatest tool for survival and material success. Our minds can think abstractly, unrestrained by time and space. They remember the past and imagine the future, position us against our competition, all in the attempt to maximize our advantage in the material world.

As necessary as this is to live our physical lives, the constant thoughtstreams of our egoic minds also separate us from the moment we're in, and everything and everyone who shares it with us. We identify with our thoughts. We think those thoughts are who we are, and we let them separate us from the world and others as subject and object, keep us outside looking in or not present at all. Most of the feelings of loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression don't come from our moments, but from our minds, which color the experience of our moments--make us believe they are lacking in some way, when they are really just enough for us if we let them.



## Contemplative Practice

The antidote to all this can loosely be called contemplative practice, a set of practical techniques for stepping away from the content of our minds in order to create a balance between exterior and interior awareness, our first and second half focus. Contemplative practice works in both directions from inside and outside, helping with both the external stress and internal search for meaning at the same time.





That's the beauty of it: just one thing to do—keep practicing presence, which includes developing awareness in a quieter mind, choosing the opposite of what your normal triggers would cause you to do, and see what happens. Add to that some reading and thinking to create a new paradigm for your life that allows you to accept life on life's terms and live with sense of hope and gratitude, and that will fundamentally change your experience of life.

To contemplate can mean to think deeply about something, but the way we are using it here, it means the exact opposite. Contemplative practice, is an approach to ultimate reality, which we often call God, that is experiential rather than intellectual (philosophical/theological/doctrinal) in its approach. So we're talking about creating a portable experience that is all about awareness: developing awareness and presence as the ticket in the door to the way of seeing how everything in life and relationship fits together beneath surface difference and diversity. Awareness is the key, since meaningful experience depends on our ability to be aware, present in real time in the moment—intentionally connected to circumstances and each other.

The only way we can rise above the programming of our past—negative thought and behavior patterns, emotional triggers, unconscious core beliefs, and even physical pain—is to be aware enough to identify them as they are happening.

Because only then can we see them in relation to present circumstances and choose other than the programming would choose for us. Only when we are aware in our moments can we choose the next steps or words that will create the greatest good for everyone and everything affected.

Awareness and contrary action: these are our tools, but awareness is the egg before the chicken.



# The Details

Contemplative practice is all about building awareness, so the rest of this ebook has information and links to books and videos that can give you ideas for building your own contemplative program. It is more than you need, but read through and see what bits and pieces seem interesting, even fun to start with. Experiment with some, kiss some frogs, and see what works and what doesn't. If some things look interesting, begin with those, set a schedule, and hold to the schedule regardless of how you feel at the time. The biggest part of life is just showing up at the same time day after day to do what you do and see what happens.

Consider this a sampler of contemplative practice, a look at what may seem most useful as you start practicing presence and creating a structured program for yourself to regularly practice stepping away from the internal noise of constant thoughts and emotions and stripping away any external distractions that keep you from the present moment. Practicing presence begins with taking notice of our thoughts, and when we realize they have wandered from the present moment, immerse back in the present moment, displacing the wandering thoughts.

## Offline & Online

We do this in two ways: Offline and Online. Offline being meditative techniques practiced in set-aside quiet time, while Online is mindful practice throughout the day where our only thought is on the task at hand.



These two are not done one at a time in a series, but together work hand in glove with the same goal: to spend as much time as we can away from the constant stream of thoughts that keeps us from the content of our moments and the sense of who we really are.

The best you will ever feel, the most effective, efficient, and productive you'll ever be—not to mention the most loving and relational—is when the only thought in your head is focused only on what is right in front of you. Yet on average, we spend 50% of our time not thinking about what we're doing at the moment. And when stressed, anxious, depressed, that number goes up to between 80% and 90%, and almost all the content of those thoughts is negative. Are we stressed because



we're not present, or not present because we're stressed? Either way, mind wandering and stress go hand in hand, and while stopping stress directly is pretty much impossible, practicing presence is not.

If you can dedicate just 20 to 30 minutes in the morning or some other set time for silence and stillness either practicing some of the meditative or centering prayer techniques or just being still and coming back to stillness every time you realize your mind is wandering, you can get started and see how it begins affecting things. Ideally, if you can do this twice or three times a day, all the better. Once as morning routine, once as nighttime cool down before bed, and maybe once in middle of day or late afternoon. At the same time, start working mindfully during the day, coming back to the task at hand every time you realized your mind has wandered off. Creating a seamless life of presence as your baseline, interspersed with time for abstract thought, reflection, and planning for future creates the balance for a life of meaning and purpose.

## What Meditation and Centering Prayer are Not

There are many techniques related to meditation and mindfulness, some of which we think we know, but we need to be specific because we're using meditation in a specific way. First, meditation is often understood as spiritual or religious—but meditative techniques are physical processes. They

can lead to spiritual experience if that is your intent, but they will reflect the attitude and intent you bring to them. If you don't consider yourself religious or even spiritual, this work is still just as important.

When we speak of Vipassana meditation, which comes from the Buddhist tradition or Centering Prayer from the Christian tradition, they are still physical techniques that can be used outside of any religious tradition to arrive at the same meditative state. It's about finding the technique that works best for you.





Before detailing the techniques, it is important to familiarize ourselves with any practices and beliefs which are often considered meditation but are not meditation in the way we are using the term. For instance, many people who say they are meditating are using meditative phone apps that typically use guided imagery, affirmations, music, environmental sounds and other techniques that can be good as aids for mindfulness and relaxation. But as they tend to keep the conscious mind active, they are working against contemplative meditation, which is training us not to bring our thoughts to a focus on any concept, issue, emotion, or sensation. Just the opposite: it's a stepping away from conscious thought, establishing interior silence, stillness. Apps can be a good start, but like training wheels on a bike, need to be removed as we graduate toward silence and stillness.

## Here are a few more useful distinctions.

**Meditation is not concentration:** One misconception we usually have is that meditation is just another form of concentration. When you concentrate, you constantly project your attention towards a particular thought, emotion, task, or activity whereas in contemplative meditation you remain aware of the moment and all its contents without choosing anything to concentrate upon—sometimes called “choiceless awareness,” choosing not to focus or think about your thoughts. Especially in the initial phase, concentration is important for learning meditation and being dedicated to the structure of your personal program, but it is not meditation itself, and during a session is redirected.

**Meditation is not relaxation:** What does relaxation do? It makes you calm, gives a sense of serenity and rejuvenates you. Meditation also makes you relaxed. But meditation is not relaxation. When you meditate, its natural outcome or byproduct is relaxation, but not its main goal.

**Meditation is not a serious religious practice:** Meditation is not a specific ritual demanding sitting in a particular posture, chanting specific mantras (powerful words having phonetic significance), saying prayers, or burning incense. Neither does it mean doing a particular exercise in a particular pose. Meditation is a quality of our existence. When you are aware of your “true self,” the self beneath thoughts, emotions, sensations, and perform anything (yes, anything) with this quality of awareness, it becomes meditation.

It is true that it takes some time and requires genuine effort on the part of the seeker to learn meditation, but it does not mean that meditation is connected with any specific religion or ritual. However, once all the distractions of our conscious minds are displaced, our true self can connect seamlessly with true reality, which a person of faith calls God, and it becomes a spiritual encounter, a prayer. But anyone, regardless of background, religion, caste, creed or nationality can do it.

**Meditation is not even a serious thing:** One you understand it, it will be a pure fun to meditate.

**Meditation is not a state of mind:** It is a state of no mind or choiceless awareness. Many electronic products are available in the market that promise to take us into a meditative state (often known as the alpha state of mind). Scientists have observed that there are basically four states of mind depending upon the frequency of brain waves. These states are alpha, beta, gamma and theta. Beta is the state in which we live and perform all our day-to-day activities. Alpha is the state just below Beta, is the lightest stage of sleep, and also the state that can be reached in meditation. Gamma and Theta are deeper states in the sleep cycle.

Electronics can take us into the state of alpha in which a person becomes still, tranquil, and calm—there is no perceived tension or stress and the inner being becomes peaceful. But the alpha state itself is not meditation. Alpha is the state of mind in meditation, but meditation is the awareness of our deeper, “true self” in the alpha state when we choose not to focus (choiceless awareness) on the thoughts, emotions, and sensory input of our conscious mind or “egoic self.”

You are in meditation if you remain awake and aware of the present moment in the alpha state of mind—in a state of absolute calm. No mechanical device can create awareness. It can only create the right condition for us to realize what “true awareness” really is.

**Meditation is not self-hypnosis:** In both self-hypnosis and some meditative techniques, an initial period of concentration on an object is required. However in meditation, the meditator maintains an awareness of here-and-now and stays conscious of the meditative process, but chooses not to bring his or her attention to a point of focus on any thought or sensation. In hypnosis the person enters into a state of semi-conscious trance and becomes unaware of the moment, where in meditation, the person remains fully aware but intentionally unattached to his or her conscious mind.

**Meditation is not thinking:** Rather it is a technique for transcending the thought process. Our mind is a non-stop chatterbox that continues to create all sorts of good/bad, relevant/irrelevant thoughts incessantly. In meditation, we realize that we are not just our body and mind. There exists in us an awareness independent of all thought. Knowing this awareness is what meditation is all about. From a meditator's point of view the saying of Descartes: "I think, therefore I am" is not true. A meditator will say, "I am, therefore I think."





# More Resources

## Videos

Here are couple of good videos dealing with mindwandering and mindfulness. The first one is especially on point since it focuses on how mind wandering is almost always negative in content, so we'll always be happier when focused on the present moment. The second is a presentation from a juggling ex-Buddhist monk on mindfulness. These two can help set the need and benefits for expending the energy for this work.



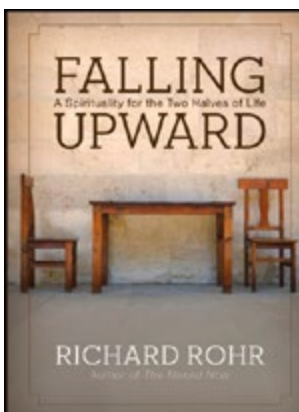
[Want to be happier - Stay in the moment](#)



[All it takes is 10 mindful minutes](#)

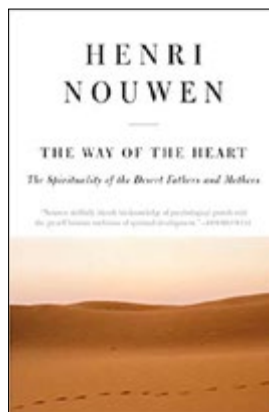
## Books

For a deeper dive, here are some great book titles to look at. You don't need this level of detail to build a personal contemplative program or engage in meditation, centering prayer, mindful practice or any of the other techniques we'll detail in our second ebook. But if you want to dig in deeper and get more of a sense of the scope and nature of the second half of life journey, these can help. Click on the link for more information and ordering.



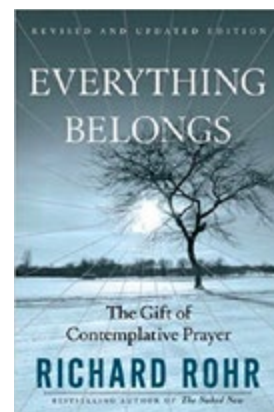
[Falling Upward,](#)  
[Richard Rohr](#)

A look at the transition between the first and second halves of life.



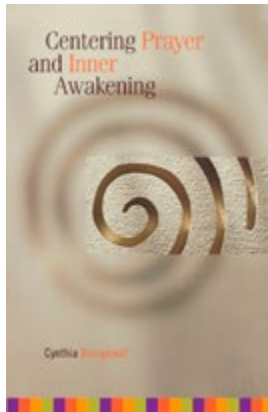
[The Way of the Heart,](#)  
[Henri Nouwen](#)

Contrasting ancient desert spirituality of the heart with modern, intellectual religious practice.



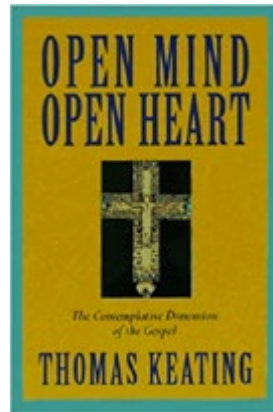
[Everything Belongs,](#)  
[Richard Rohr](#)

Finding the oneness of everything beneath the surface diversity of life.



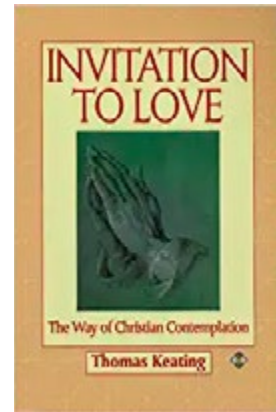
**Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening,  
Cynthia Bourgeault**

Guidebook for the practice of centering prayer.



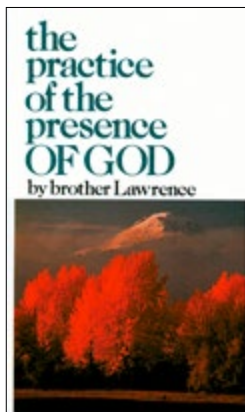
**Open Mind, Open Heart,  
Thomas Keating**

Understanding the practice of Centering Prayer and the psychological effects of mediational practice.



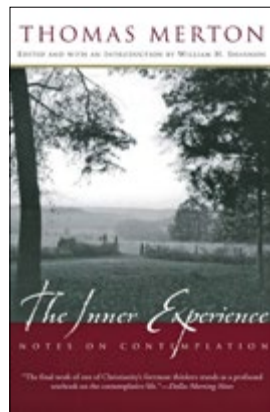
**Invitation to Love,  
Thomas Keating**

Understanding the practice of Centering Prayer and the psychological effects of mediational practice.



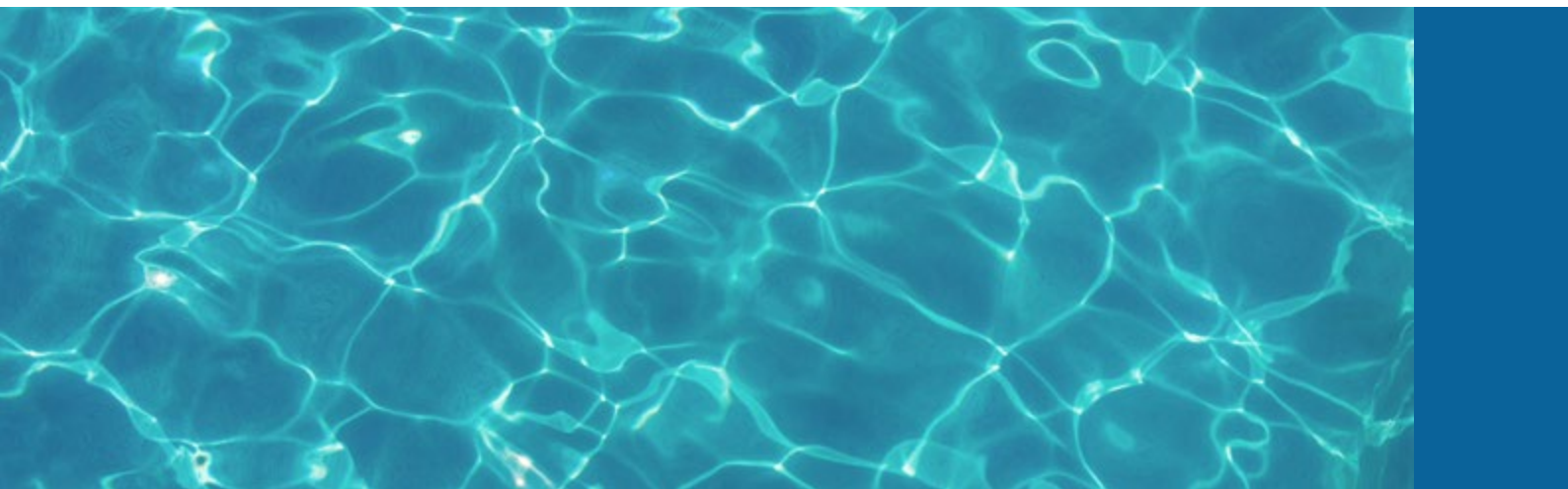
**The Practice of the Presence of God,  
Br. Lawrence**

The practice of a seamless awareness of God's presence in all aspects of daily life.



**The Inner Experience,  
Thomas Merton**

A deep look at contemplative practice as true spiritual formation.





## Next Steps

Hopefully the information in this first ebook has intrigued you enough to want to look further into contemplative practice as the life changing work of the second half of life. Of course, the work of the first half of your life will continue for the rest of your life—the second half doesn't replace the first half. It completes and balances it.

If you are in that midlife crisis state, at whatever age you are, consciously or unconsciously asking the deepest questions of life: who am I and why am I here? If a loss of meaning and purpose in the work you've been doing for decades has left you with feelings of burnout, fatigue, loss of enthusiasm for activities you used to love, anxiety, depression—engaging the second half journey through contemplative practice can reinfuse true interior meaning into your exterior life.

Engaging the second half brings the first half back to life when it has run its course in giving you any sense of meaning. By leading you to those two central questions—who am I, why am I here—and with the first insight into your own answers, you realize that you can begin to accept life on its own terms, as it presents every moment—the good, bad, ugly, beautiful—and learn to live with a sense of hope and gratitude.

Our next ebook will dive into the details of contemplative practice, the how-to of specific techniques and exercises as well as how to build your own, personal contemplative program that will take you where you really want to go in life, whether you realize it or not.

