

Holding A Word

This is the approach that most people seem to think is the 'proper' way to use silence: it isn't any more 'proper' than any other way, of course, but it is a very old way, and it was brought back into fashion half a century ago with the interest in non-Christian forms of 'meditation'.

Because it is so well known, mentally we are more ready to accept it, and to work at it; so it tends to be the approach that is most likely to succeed, at least with beginners.

Start this approach as you should start any of these approaches – by sitting quietly and comfortably, with your mobile phone switched off, and every other alarm or annoyance out of hearing.

Choose a word: a word that means something to you. A name maybe – like 'Jesus' – or the word for an idea – like 'Love'. Some people even use a 'nonsense' word – it doesn't work for me, but it may do for you. Whatever it is, whatever word you choose, say it to yourself, aloud but softly and gently, over and over. Slowly, then quickly, then slowly.

Be aware of the word. Be aware of your body through it – aware of how you are sitting, breathing, moving. Control, deepen and slow your breath, relax your muscles, and keep saying the word to yourself, more and more slowly and gently. Let your voice drift into silence, leaving the word still echoing in your mind. Think the word, very gently, very softly, slowly and quickly and slowly again.

Be aware of the word. Be aware of your mind through it – aware of how you are feeling, thinking, sensing. Don't try to reject or suppress your thoughts – just put them well behind you. Allow the word to float over your thoughts, allow the word to accept your thoughts in the silence. Keep thinking the word to yourself, more and more slowly and gently, as your mind settles down.

Now let the word open out. Let it open you out and upwards to God. Let it speak to you of God – and then let it lead you into the silence of God's presence.

Let go of the word. Let go of your body. Let go of yourself. Just be open, listening, silent in the presence of God's love.

Holding A Cup

This isn't really a separate approach, but it can be more attractive to people who avoid anything "religious".

Again, sit quietly and comfortably, with your mobile phone switched off, and every other alarm or annoyance out of hearing.

Choose a "cup". No, not a real one. This can be anything you can easily visualise, but which doesn't carry any baggage: nothing religious, or emotional or sentimental, just something very simple. Patches of colour, perhaps, gently moving over and through each other, or an imagined object – a feather, a bread roll, a mouse, even a cup – imagined cradled in your two hands. Anything can be your cup, as long as it's empty – and of course, as long as it isn't real – you will inevitably drop it if it is!

Be aware of the cup. Be aware of your body through it – aware of how you are seeing it, aware of how you are holding it, aware of sitting, breathing, moving. Control, deepen and slow your breath, relax your muscles, and keep holding the cup to yourself, more and more slowly and gently. Let the cup drift into lightness, into light, but still present in you like an echo, a footprint, a shadow on the wall. Awaken the cup, bring it back to you, very gently, very softly, moving it slowly and quickly and slowly as you accept it again.

Be aware of the cup. Be aware of your mind through it – aware of how you are feeling, thinking, sensing. Don't try to reject or suppress your thoughts – just put them well behind you. Allow the cup to float through your thoughts, allow the cup to accept your thoughts in the silence, to hold them safe. Keep holding the cup in gentleness, offering it again and again to yourself, more and more slowly and gently, as your mind settles down.

Now let the cup open out. Let it open you out and upwards. Let it speak to you – and then let it lead you into the silence.

Let go of the cup, freeing it, so that it drifts, slowly, away. Let go of your body. Let go of yourself. Just be open, listening, silent in the presence, present in the silence.

Holding A Touch

Start this approach as you should start any of these approaches – by sitting quietly and comfortably, with your mobile phone switched off, and every other alarm or annoyance out of hearing.

Close your eyes. I don't usually say this, by the way, because I don't think it's always right – and it depends on the person and on what they are doing. This one, though, I find benefits from closed eyes, at least at the start.

Now relax; let those shoulders sink, that neck soften, that back straighten.

Next, hold up your left hand, fingers pointing upwards and slightly straightened. Keep it – indeed, keep the whole arm as relaxed as you can.

Point your right index finger, and touch your left thumb, tip to tip. No, you can't see – that is the point; you have to be aware of your left hand, aware of your right finger, if you are going to have them touch.

Now touch the tip of your left index finger. Then the tip of the left middle finger, left ring finger, left little finger. Little pause. Now touch the tip of your little finger again, then ring finger, middle finger, index finger and back to the tip of the left thumb. Again, slight – very slight – pause, and start again by touching the tip of your left thumb.

And so on. Don't forget to pause very slightly at either end of the hand.

At first you will fumble the touches, but as you do it it becomes easier – you can almost see your left hand in your mind. And as you do it, you will become slower and slower; at first the touches might be about a second apart, but eventually they will be five seconds, ten seconds, thirty seconds apart, without any conscious decision on your part. Let this happen.

Let yourself become ever more aware of yourself, of your body, of your hands, of the touches. Let each touch become an event in itself, a step forward, an opening out, an opening down, an opening up – eventually an opening upwards.

And yes, you will find your mind wandering. That isn't a problem – as long as you don't try to reject or suppress your thoughts. Just put them well behind you and carry on.

No, it doesn't have to be the right hand index finger touching the left hand – you may not have two hands, or you may have other reasons for not touching this way, or you may just want to try it differently. That's all good. All it needs are a standard, natural sequence of touches – and I mean touch-and-separate, just touching-and-resting-against isn't anywhere near so strong – a natural sequence that you can do almost without thinking, but which is long enough to be a moving forward.

But having said all that, I have found this works very well for me, and I do suggest that, if you can, you at least start with the finger touches.

And that goes for all the things in this booklet; it doesn't fit you? Go ahead and change it to fit. You want to try it a bit different? Great. Try it. I'm just saying what I find works best for me, and you aren't me.

Coming In

So Holding approaches are the fashionable ways to use silence, at least at the moment – and as I say, they’re probably the most likely to work; but they won’t work for everyone, and they don’t work every time.

So I want to look at alternative ways – and I repeat, they aren’t better or worse, just different.

The approach I’m suggesting next is a very conventional one, even old-fashioned, and is likely to be very familiar to many of us, but I’m not apologising for that. It is so easy for Christians nowadays to overlook just what riches we have inherited – what riches are available to us all.

Begin as before by sitting comfortably and quietly settling down. You may want to close your eyes, but you don’t have to – it’s whatever suits you. After a few moments, when you’ve relaxed a little, imagine you are outside the room, looking at the world. See the grass in the meadows and on the hills; the deer scudding along the woodland edges; the buzzard floating across the dale, and the jackdaws mobbing her; the hills themselves, ever changing, ever the same; the clouds; the houses and streets, gardens and garages and patios; the parents driving off to work or family or dropping the children at the sports field; the people cleaning their cars, chatting in the street, shopping for lunch, going about their business; the factories with the strange lights and noises inside; the shops, the city centres, buzzing with life; the motorways, the railway stations, the airports; the hospitals, the churches, the graveyards. Accept it. Lift everything outside this room to God.

Please don’t rush this step. It is easy to think of it as ‘just a preparation’ for the ‘real prayer’ – nothing could be further from the truth. What we are doing is obeying Jesus’ command: ‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’ – remembering that everything is God’s, everything in Creation is God’s, and every human soul is God’s, bought back by Him at a great price. So take your time.

Now imagine that you are outside the door into this room. Pause a moment, then open it and come in. But don’t shut the door behind you! You aren’t excluding the outside world, of course – how could you? It’s the same light, the same air, the same world. But keep anything that wanders in well behind you, so that you concentrate on what is here, in this room, around you. See the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, the floor. Look at the colours, the textures on the walls, the carpets, maybe, or the wooden floor. Listen to the little

sounds, and little echoes. Smell the polish, the floor-cleaner. Taste the air. Absorb the surfaces, the play of light, the feel of the place. If you're in Church, maybe there are other people, also sitting quietly like you; be aware of their clothes, their breathing, their warmth. Accept it all. Lift this place to God.

Again, take your time.

Now open the door into your body, and step inside. Feel the chair you are sitting on, the clothes touching your skin, your breathing, your muscles; the little sensations of warmth and coolness, of moving air, maybe of aches and pains. Again, don't shut the door behind you – don't exclude the room, just keep it well behind you, as you concentrate on all your body is telling you. Feel it all, deliberately, from top to toe. Feel your breathing, as it moves from your nose and mouth to your throat to your lungs, and back to your throat to your mouth and nose to the outer room. Your heart, your pulse, the little movements in your stomach, in your guts. Accept your body. All your body: good bits and bad bits, working bits and problem bits, clean bits and dirty bits, healthy bits and hurting bits. Lift it all to God.

Now open the door of your thoughts and come in – but yet again, don't close the door behind you. Your real thoughts probably aren't the thoughts you believe you should be having – that isn't important: what is important is concentrating on what they actually are. Yes, I know you're not supposed to be thinking about the gas bill; or did you lock the car; or that gorgeous [again, fill in as appropriate]. That is not the point; if they are important enough to you that you are thinking about them, then they are important to God as well. Don't try to change them, or suppress them, or force them: just accept them. Let them settle down; then lift them to God as they are.

The next door takes time to find. It won't show itself until your thoughts have been fully accepted and offered – you might know it's there earlier, but you won't be able to go through it – and there are occasions when it just doesn't seem to be there at all. This isn't your fault; it's just the way you are being led this time – it will almost certainly be there next time. The door to who you really are, behind all that you wrap yourself in. The door of the soul.

Of all the doors this is the one which you will be most tempted to close – and the one above all that must stay open.

You may ask whether there are more doors to go through? Well, sometimes no but often yes, so it's worth looking. If you find a door, accept it, go through it and lift what you find to God.

Praying on the Hand

‘Praying on the hand’ is a tricky one.

For a start, it’s really digging into the archives, to the point where to most people younger than me it is likely to seem new.

Then again, it is not from my tradition; but we’re ecumenical nowadays, aren’t we?

And finally, it may sound merely mechanical, not really prayer at all. If you feel that, then please, persevere; the point of it is to get past the point of being merely mechanical, to where the repetitions open out to enable you to look through them.

OK.

Sit quietly and comfortably. With your hands hidden in your lap, so that no one can see what you are doing, relax your left hand palm up.

Always, keep both hands as relaxed as possible - you need to be aware of movement and touch, not distracted by muscle tension. You may want to pause just here, to make certain of that deep relaxation in your hands, your arms, in the whole of your body.

When you are ready, with your right index finger touch the tip of your left thumb. Then say inside yourself, deliberately and silently, “In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen”

When I say ‘touch’, I mean a positive, deliberate movement – not a drifting or a vague gesture, but a definite tap that you can feel. If you get the finger movement right it will give you the ‘beat’ for the whole prayer, so that you automatically give each phrase plenty of room to breathe, but without pausing: “<touch> / In the náme / of Gód / Fáther / Són / and Hóly / Spírit / Amén”. Don’t say it broken into words, though, say it deliberately but continuously. And again: say it *silently*. Don’t even move your lips. Don’t even *not* move your lips.

Now touch the middle joint, the knuckle, of your thumb, and say the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”.

Touch the base of your thumb: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.”

Now do the same for each finger of your left hand – saying the Jesus Prayer twice because there are two middle joints on a finger.

Now touch the centre of your palm and say the Lord’s Prayer as far as “deliver us from evil”.

Finally touch your palm at the wrist: “For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen”.

Always pray very deliberately and silently, reaching through the words as far as you can.

If you’re doing this in private and there’s time, then pray on the right hand as well; but it is quite a slow process even for one hand; you should simply accept that. Don’t rush just to fit everything in!

This approach is perhaps a little uncomfortable for those of us accustomed to being warned to ‘use not vain repetitions as the heathen do’. The intention, as I understand it, is that by repeating these prayers purposefully in your heart and not in your mouth, the repetition will not be ‘vain’, that is, empty, but instead will allow you to reach out through the well-known words to God in your heart, and to fill the words with God’s presence.

You can, obviously, use different prayers – indeed, it’s so long since I was taught this that I am no longer sure that these are the prayers I was taught to use!

Listening For The Word

This time, I want to look at using the Bible for prayer.

So: choose a Bible passage. You might, for example, look at your church's website, or your denomination's, if they give the passage for today, or there's the Book Of Common Prayer, or you might have your own way of choosing – it really doesn't matter, as long as you don't just go round a handful of familiar passages.

Next: read through the passage three times slowly, and see which verse the Spirit is pointing out to you today. It may well not be the obvious one – there's a lot more in John 3 than just John 3:16! – which is why you read it slowly three times: the first time you will say to yourself "Oh, it's that passage!", the second time you will remember what you've been told about the passage; only the third time will you truly be listening to the Spirit, listening to what the Word Of God is telling you now, here.

As I say, it may well not be the obvious one – indeed, I will go further: if it is the obvious one, then you should be suspicious. Have you genuinely listened to God's leading? Or have you simply seen the obvious verse and taken it for granted – taken for granted that this must be the verse that God is leading you to? Look at the passage again; and read it again; ask God whether you should be looking at a different verse; read each verse carefully as though you already knew it was the chosen verse; only if God still seems to be insisting on the obvious verse should you accept and obey.

Hold your Bible open at the passage: now you are prepared.

Now still yourself in the presence of God. Don't reject or suppress – just quietly accept where you are and what you are feeling – even the weight of the Bible in your hands should be gently accepted and offered to God.

Quietly look at your Bible, and read the verse you have been led to. Read it slowly, read it over and over again, praying as you read it, asking the Spirit to show you what God is saying to you today. If a particular word stands out then accept that leading – even though the word itself might be an unexpected one – and chew that word over in your heart, so that it becomes part of you.

But be suspicious if it seems to trigger thoughts or ideas or theology; you should expect the verse to open out so that it becomes part of your experience of the Bible, of the words, of the Word. As one writer puts it:

“Don’t stand outside the Word and examine it – enter into the Word and live it.”

For example, if you read John 14:27 – “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” and are given the word ‘peace’, don’t start thinking “What is peace?” or “How did Jesus give us peace?” – instead, let the peace of Jesus into your heart, into your life.

When did I ever say this was easy?

This is of course one of many modern spin-offs from the ancient Benedictine practice of Lectio Divina – which despite its Latin name isn’t specifically Catholic; both John Calvin and John Wesley advocated it. It fell out of sight in Protestant circles until the end of the last century, but many forms of Lectio are now being taught and encouraged – this is just one of them, a very short one. Do try some of the others; the extra time they need is worth it, especially if you share with someone else.

Opening an Idea

Choose an idea that is important to you – like Justice – or even a name or title of God – like King.

Before we go any further, let me make it clear that you should take plenty of time to do this particular approach; plenty of time to really absorb it. Ten minutes is the absolute minimum – but the first time you try this, you will not believe how long ten minutes is; thank God for the clock app on your phone.

Now you are ready, and happy about carrying on, pick the idea up again in your mind. Think about it. Repeat it. Consider it. Chew it. Dig into it: what does it mean? What does it really mean to me? Why did I choose it?

Pick out the ideas behind it. Spin them out. Why are they part of it? What do they bring? Hold each one out in your mind: value it, welcome it, reach into it. Imagine them laid out before you, fitting together into the whole, but each with its unique contribution.

Put them together again. Hold the idea as a whole – what does it mean now? How much more does it mean than before?

Bring the idea in front of you – imagine it in the palms of your hands. Let it open out, let it shine with your new understanding. Can you see through it? Can you see the greater thing that your idea is just a part of?

Now pick up the original idea into your mind, but so enriched with what you have achieved. Go round the cycle again; or maybe do it differently; let the idea itself lead you deeper into itself. Keep holding it in your mind, widening and deepening, until you begin to glimpse God within it.

This is superficially similar to Holding A Word, but it is very different in practice – and really it needs a lot more time: as I said before, ten minutes' silence or more is the minimum even for beginners, and much more for those who want to pursue this further. Even so, perhaps it may be a start for you?

Using a Prayer

This seems so obvious that you might be wondering why I've bothered including it – praying using a prayer! – but it is still a valuable idea in itself, and the way it works out may not be quite what you expect; it certainly isn't just saying your prayers!

Choose a very short prayer that you know very well indeed, and say it to yourself, word by word – or almost – with many seconds between them, so that you have time to consider each word fully: what it means, how it tastes, bringing that word into yourself. Say it to yourself: I mean that: don't say it aloud – don't even move your lips; keep it completely within you so that you can focus on it. Think about what each word means, what each word means to you, what it reminds you of, why it matters, why you need to hear it.

There are no right ways of thinking – your thoughts will be very different each time, even with the same prayer. The point, though, is to allow your thoughts to lead you beyond thinking; for your thoughts to be a road and a guide, not an end. That is why it is important to give plenty of time for each word: time to think about the word, to complete your thinking, to see where your thoughts have left you, to see the road stretching forward to the throne of God – otherwise there is a real danger of just thinking, of letting intellect and memory take over.

For example: suppose I choose the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. Here it is, word by word, (with a very brief summary of my thoughts today in parentheses – your thoughts will certainly be very different, just as mine will be very different tomorrow.) But don't forget – several seconds for each word.

Lord – (What does 'Lord' mean? Why does it touch me? What does it make me?)

Jesus – (Jesus' birth – we celebrate it every year – why does the date matter?)

Christ – (A baby, a teacher, a captive, a corpse, a risen and glorious friend)

Son – (I am a son – I remember my father so well...)

Of God – (True God of True God, Light of Light eternal, as the carol says)

Have mercy – (After what He did on the Cross, what else will He do! Just a moment – not ‘do mercy’, it’s ‘have mercy’...)

On me – (On me, on here, on now, despite what the time is, despite where I am, despite what I am)

When you first try this you will probably think I’m asking you to spin it out unnecessarily, and you may want to go through the prayer just doing the thinking – and at the very beginning, even that may seem longwinded. That’s fine at the start – you mustn’t try too hard. As you get used to it you will slow down naturally and soon any length of time will feel too short.

So the prayer you choose has to be very short, even for beginners, and very short indeed as you get used to it. For example, the ‘Holy Holy Holy’ might work in full when you first start, but later, as you slow down, you will need to cut it to “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might!”

Similarly, the Grace is too long except perhaps for beginners, and the Lord’s Prayer is far too long for anyone. You could choose just one phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, though, and pray that through.

But whatever you choose, you do need to know it absolutely by heart.

Silent Intercession

So, if we admit that intercession is not only traditional, but a necessary and effective part of Christian prayer, how does it work in silence?

There will be people, situations, issues you want to bring before God. You may have them written down or you may have them in your head; the list will be there.

Sit down quietly, then, with the list in front of you. Once you have relaxed, go through the list, quietly, slowly, taking up each item and remembering the particular reason why that item is there. Feel again the emotional response that made it important to you.

This may spin your thoughts off on ‘sidetracks’, but they will not truly be sidetracks, they will be directions in which the subject of the prayer matters – certainly nothing to feel guilty about! When you feel it has gone far enough, quietly return to the subject itself.

Go on to the next item when you are ready to – don’t feel ‘you must move on because the next thing is more important’ and equally don’t feel ‘I’ve not given this the time it deserves’ – these are not judgements for you to make. Trust the Spirit to lead you on, and always remember there will be plenty of time later.

When you reach the end of the list, it might feel right to go through the list again – some people even a third time. Whatever feels right at the time. But at the end of this stage, you will have felt that God is pointing out just one or two particular items for you this time – and they almost certainly won’t be the items he pointed out last time, and very very often they are not the items that you think are the most important!

Accept the leading; focus on those one or two items. Take each in turn; chew it over – I know you’ve done this before, but now *really* chew into it! Lift it, gently and quietly, holding it in ‘the palm of your hand’, lifting it up to God as an offering, in all its complexity, all the bits you don’t know the details, all the bits where you worry you’ve got something wrong, all the pain and grief both that you’ve felt and that you’ve seen in others – all the complications, lift them to God.

It is often in this sort of prayer that God seems at his darkest, at his least responsive – he seems like a cloud of unknowing. That is not a bad sign, or a

sign of failure; it is a sign that God is trusting you, not pushing you or forcing you, but letting you choose and letting you act. Other times you get a clear ‘word’ – though it is rarely a voice speaking, but much more like reading something that was hidden – as if someone has scraped off that silver paint from a parking tag or a lottery ticket – or like the sun coming out as you are looking through a window.

Whatever happens or doesn’t happen, you will know when to stop, and maybe move on to the next item, or simply to lifting everything you have prayed for, everything you have received – or not – to God in quiet, in acceptance, in commitment.

In peace.