

***This is an informational guide created to assist those leading small groups. The purpose is to use the practices of the Wisdom lineage to awaken the Heart and facilitate an opportunity for practice, support, and community-building.***

In *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, Cynthia Bourgeault frames her introduction of the Wisdom path by describing the rhythm of one of her first Wisdom Schools in Maine. Within the simple daily schedule are the elements that prepare our hearts to know Wisdom and perceive wholeness.

These elements are:

1. Meditation/Centering Prayer
2. Three Centered Knowing/Presence
3. Sacred Chanting
4. *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading)
5. *Ora et Labora* (founded in the Benedictine rhythm of prayer and work)
6. Mindful, conscious work combined with attentional practices that cultivate present moment awareness

As a support for those who are creating or facilitating small groups, this document will focus on the first four elements. The last two elements are regular and vital components of the daily rhythm at Cynthia's Wisdom Schools.

### **Meditation/Centering Prayer**

**Meditation** is one of the most ancient and universal spiritual practices. The immediate purpose of meditation is to break the bonds of our usual mind with its constant thought stream and attention-grabbing habits. The long term and more powerful purpose is creating space for open receptivity and availability to divine presence and a direct experience of God. Meditation is a practice that keeps us in touch with our inner wellspring, fully conscious and present in daily life.

**Centering Prayer** is a practice of *intention*, where we set aside a time (usually 20-30 minute periods) to be still enough to open to the reality of God's presence. We start with being present in the here and now, in our bodies, and in physical sensation. (\*see simple embodiment practice below)

Centering Prayer patterns into our body and being the *gesture of surrender*, which is the most powerful and direct way known to awaken the Heart.

Our intention is a commitment to ourselves and to God to gently release thoughts, emotions, plans (whatever is clamoring for our attention) into the Silence, the deep mystery of God. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, "It's like putting a stick in the spoke of thinking, so that the whole closed circuit of ordinary thinking gets derailed." As we consent and surrender our 'small mind' and yield ourselves into the infinite field of presence, we exercise the 'muscle' of letting



go, and letting be, again and again. In that repeated process over time we are practicing a shift to seeing and perceiving with our spiritual awareness, from another place inside ourselves where we know that all is held in Divine Mercy.

The core of the practice that Cynthia suggests in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* is:

- As soon as a thought emerges into consciousness, one simply lets it go, removing attention from the thought. The power of this method is in the gesture of release itself.
- **Resist** no thought
- **Retain** no thought
- **React** to no thought
- **Return** 10,000 times if that is what it takes, to your intention to be open to God

**Resources:**

- *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *Into the Silent Land* by Martin Laird
- *The Path of Centering Prayer* by David Frenette
- Method of Centering Prayer brochure from Contemplative Outreach
- An Introduction to Centering Prayer (audio) by Cynthia Bourgeault found at [contemplative.org](http://contemplative.org)
- Apps for your phone that include timer bells and guided meditations: Insight Timer or the Centering Prayer app from Contemplative Outreach

**Three-Centered Knowing** (see Chapter 3 of *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* for a more detailed introduction)

Wisdom makes use of an ancient body of knowledge about the *physiology* of spiritual transformation and a *methodology* for increasing our “receptivity to higher meaning”.

The human being can be considered “three-centered” or “three-brained.” The centers include:

**The Moving Center**, which has 2 subsets: *instinctive* (like a ‘hard drive’) which regulates operational systems of the body; and *moving center proper* (more like ‘software’) which concerns outward and voluntary interactions with the physical world through our five senses, as well as movement and rhythm.

**The Emotional Center:** (*centered in the heart and solar plexus*) This is not the seat or center of our personal affective life or our personal identity as some contemporary thinking would imply. In fact as Cynthia explains with regard to our attunement to our feelings,

*“The real mark of personal authenticity is not how intensely we can express our feelings but how honestly we can look at where we are coming from and spot the elements of clinging, manipulation, and personal agendas that make up so much of what we experience as our emotional life today.”*



Furthermore, ‘passions’ in the conventional sense of the word, actually divide the Heart (for example, over-clinging). The Heart, as the center of the emotional center, is for divine perception, serving as a bridge between our mind and body. It has the capacity to perceive *paradox*, the both/and.

**The Intellectual/Cognitive Center** has a natural aptitude for reasoning, doubting, and making fine discriminations—all legitimate and necessary. But as Cynthia describes, this center has a limited capacity in spiritual life:

*“In terms of the spiritual journey, trying to find faith with the intellectual center is something like trying to play a violin with a saw; it’s simply the wrong tool for the job.”*

The path of Wisdom embraces the whole person: mind, heart, and body. The three centers working in harmony is the prerequisite for Wisdom knowing. In fact the notion of ‘sleep’ as opposed to conscious aware awakening, is an indication of finding yourself in one center only.

When we are alive, balanced, and present in all three centers a higher consciousness and **Presence** is available.

These three centers of intelligence can serve as foundational elements around which individual or small group practices and experience is built. Paying attention to each center and weaving in opportunities to connect with each center helps cultivate three-centered awareness.

## **Practicing Three-Centered Knowing**

### **Moving Center Practices**

- A simple **body centered exercise** to practice in pairs, for noticing sensation and experiencing the resonate field of Presence:
  - With a practice group or practice partners, take turns noticing and naming sensations in your body, each of you naming three sensations (ex: I am noticing my feet making contact with the floor, I feel tightness in my chest, there is ease in my belly). As one partner is speaking, the other is witnessing. See if you notice an energetic shift as you become more embodied.
- **Notice times of bracing:**
  - Notice when you are in a state of bracing or grasping. Can you pause and reconnect with your heartbeat, your breath, your feet , your torso, and then return to the simple hand gestures of opening and closing, giving and receiving, being with what is.



- **Incorporate gestures and body prayers:**

- Try opening and closing your hands, feeling the sensations of grasping and letting go, or even try a full body prostration (as described in *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, chapter 3).

### **Emotional Center Practices**

**Sacred Chanting** wakes up the emotional center with sound, and can deepen the connectivity of the group. Try familiar Taize chants—freely available to listen and follow online. There is also a growing body of Wisdom chants pioneered by Darlene Franz, which can also be accessed online (see references and resource list below).

**Lectio Divina:** can be practiced with any short piece of sacred text or passage. There are a variety of ways to approach this practice. Here is one suggestion:

1. Start slowly reading a passage aloud, and allow yourself to be drawn to a sentence, a phrase, or even a single word that seems to attract your attention.
2. Read the passage again slowly, quietly allowing your faculties (your reason, your imagination, or emotions) to begin to work with this passage. This is about a “heart to heart” encounter with the text...it will be different every time.
3. Read a final time, resting in the sacred presence, and in deep receptivity with the experience. (Some groups may decide to include a period of centering prayer at this stage, as an alternative to meditating before or after the lectio.)
4. As you feel complete with the first three steps, take turns sharing what you noticed or what became alive for you or impacted you from the passage.

Many Wisdom groups begin by using *The Gospel of Thomas* in a *Lectio Divina* format.

### **Intellectual/Cognitive Center Practices**

Whether as a personal individual practice, or in a small group, consider what material or area of interest might provide fruitful exploration. Some suggestions are:

- Discussing parts or chapters from Cynthia’s books, or books or readings from other Wisdom writers
- Taking one or a few Gospel of Thomas logions (passages) for discussion

### **References and Resources:**

Books by Cynthia Bourgeault (Cynthia has many published books, and the following provide some specific references to Wisdom practices including those mentioned above):

*The Wisdom Way of Knowing*  
*The Wisdom Jesus*  
*Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*  
*Chanting the Psalms*

*The Gospel of Thomas* by Lynn Bauman



*The Gospel of Thomas* or other e-courses at:  
spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/teachers/cynthia-bourgeault/e-courses

Chant resources by Darlene Franz at: [wisdomchant.bandcamp.com](http://wisdomchant.bandcamp.com)

## **Planning and Gathering a Wisdom Group**

Gathering into a group for Wisdom learning and practice can work well with as few or many participants as you would like, and may depend on how many can be comfortably accommodated in your selected specific meeting space. For starting groups a good target is 6-8 members. Find a suitable and quiet meeting space and determine a regular meeting time (could be every week, every other week, or once a month). Most groups find allotting 1 ½ to 2 hours for each meeting works well. One person can be designated as the group leader or convener, or you can rotate leadership for each meeting or for periods of time. Many groups collectively discuss and consider which structure/format, location, meeting time, and regularity would best suit their group.

A simple meeting format:

- You may find that having a candle and/or simple altar will help set the sacred space
- Ground in your body with a simple “body scan” meditation or one of the moving center practices suggested above
- Open with a short poem or reading
- Chant together (a great opportunity to begin to learn some chants as a group)
- Practice 20 minutes of Centering Prayer
- Include a period of time for *Lectio Divina* with *The Gospel of Thomas* or with some other sacred text, poetry, or Wisdom passage
- Open the group for discussion using these mindfulness skills:
  - Practice conscious listening: *instead of thinking about what you might say in advance or in response to another member’s sharing, look into the eyes of the person speaking and really listen deeply to what they are sharing and communicating. Our presence offered to another with a receptive, open heart and mind is a gift to our group.*
  - Speak mindfully: *Take your time, and avoid quickly responding or reacting to something anything member has shared. Allow a few moments to pause, and speak slowly as you begin. Be aware and attentive not only what you will say, but also your tone of voice, your gestures, and mannerisms. Notice how your words and your presence are being received. Notice if there is a difference between your intention and the impact upon others to what you are sharing.*
- Close with a chant or body prayer



(This meeting format does not include a time for a personal check in. Your group can decide if you would like to include that in your time together. If you choose to include time for personal sharing, make it brief and allow for a slower pace (silence in between). You may also choose to experiment with allowing the personal sharing to arise organically as a part of the *Lectio Divina* or discussions.)

### **Some general group guidelines and recommendations:**

- Aim to create a safe, supportive, friendly, and confidential environment (what is talked about in the group stays in the group).
- Take time to settle into the sacred space and the collective intention of your group, and to open to the Divine Presence.
- If you are using listening and speaking guidelines, you may find it helpful to read these each time at the beginning of the meeting or before a discussion period.
- Encourage people to remain open and light-hearted, and maintain a sense of humor.
- Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, and rational faculties).
- Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experience.
- Avoid veering into overly theoretical or intellectual conversation.
- Do not challenge what others say if you're not in agreement, but instead expand or build on what has already been spoken.
- Speak from your heart as your thoughts and words emerge in the moment, as opposed to 'rehearsing' in your mind what you plan to say.
- Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said, and do not interrupt another speaker.
- Listen to the group as a whole, to those who have not spoken verbally as well as to those who have; generally, if you have already spoken, leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time.
- Leaders and group participants can increase the interaction and meaningful conversation in the group by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions.

### **Group Dynamics**

All groups take on their own personality and energy. As a leader and as a group participant try to attune to the group and align with its energy, building rapport and trust. You can do this by:

- Warmly greeting each person when they enter the room.
- Calling on everyone by name.
- Remembering key issues and concerns as they are shared and referring back to them throughout the time together. This helps group members know they are being listened to with an open heart and mind.



- Using feedback appropriately. For example, if it feels natural in your group, then thank each person for their sharing. You can also acknowledge a speaker for their insight or vulnerability or authenticity after a powerful sharing, or ask a participant if they would repeat something important that he or she just shared for even greater emphasis.
- Actively listening by focusing completely on what the participant is saying, and as seems appropriate repeat back what was heard for clarity.

### **Suggestions for handling special situations**

#### **The overly chatty person**

- Affirm that you “hear” them and are listening by reflecting back or summarizing what they are saying and then move on.
- Don’t look at this person when asking an open question to the group.
- Thank the person for their positive contribution, and then ask for others to share.

#### **The quiet person**

- Watch for signs that the person wants to participate, and engage them at that time.
- Respect their desire to not share much, but trust they may be benefiting from the group and the sessions despite their silence.
- Connect with them before or after the meeting to help them feel welcome and included. Perhaps engaging them in one-on-one conversation will help build their comfort or confidence to speak more freely in the group.

This guide has been adapted from prior versions created by Jeanine Siler Jones and Robbin Whittington, as resource information for student interns to lead small group discussions at Wisdom School, November 2015. Thank you Jeanine and Robbin!

If you have a particular experience leading or participating in a small group that you would like to share with the Wisdom community, please send to [info@wisdomwayofknowing.org](mailto:info@wisdomwayofknowing.org)

