

Should I attempt to shutdown or quiet my mind during prayer?

Q: Dear Saint Teresa, I have read a number of books on prayer that advocate *methods* of suppressing, shutting down, or eliminating thinking all together during prayer. Do you recommend this approach?

A: I cannot understand how the mind can be stopped. There is no way of doing so without bringing about more harm than good. For my part, those in favor of stopping the mind have never given me an adequate argument for submitting to what they say.



Here are my reasons:

First, in this work of the spirit the one who thinks less and has less desire to act (in suppressing their thoughts) does more. What we must do is beg like the needy poor before a rich and great emperor, and then lower our eyes and wait with humility. When through His secret paths it seems we understand that He hears us, then it is good to be silent since He has allowed us to remain near Him; and it will not be wrong to avoid working with the intellect. *But*, if we don't yet know whether this King has heard or seen us, we mustn't become fools. The soul does become quite a fool when it tries to *induce* this prayer, and it is left much drier; and the imagination perhaps becomes more restless through the effort made not to think of anything. But the Lord desires that we beseech Him and call to mind that we are in His presence; He knows what is suitable for us. I cannot persuade myself to use human diligence in a matter in which it seems His Majesty has placed a limit, and I want to leave the diligence to Him. What He did not reserve to Himself are many other efforts we can make with His help, such as: penance, good deeds, and prayer – insofar as our wretchedness can do these things.

Second, is that these interior works are all gentle and peaceful; doing something arduous would cause more harm than good. I call any force that we might want to use “something arduous.” Leave the soul in God's hands, let Him do whatever He wants with it, with the greatest disinterest about your own benefit as is possible and the greatest resignation to the will of God.

Third, the very care used not to think of anything will perhaps rouse the mind to think very much.

Fourth, what is most essential and pleasing to God is that we be mindful of His honor and glory and forget ourselves and our own profit and comfort and delight. How is a person forgetful of self if he is so careful not to stir or even to allow his intellect or desires to be stirred to a longing for the greater glory of God? When His Majesty desires the intellect to stop, He occupies it in another way and gives it a light so far above what we can attain that it remains absorbed. Then, without knowing how, the intellect is much better instructed than it was through all the soul's effort not to make use of it. Since God gave us our faculties that we might work with them and in this work they find their reward, there is no reason to charm them; we should let them perform their task until God appoints them to another greater one.

Without *any* effort or noise, the soul should strive to cut down the *rambling* of the intellect – *but not suspend either it or the mind*; it is good to be aware that one is in God's presence and of who God is when in prayer.

St. Teresa of Avila

Adapted from The Interior Castle, 4:3