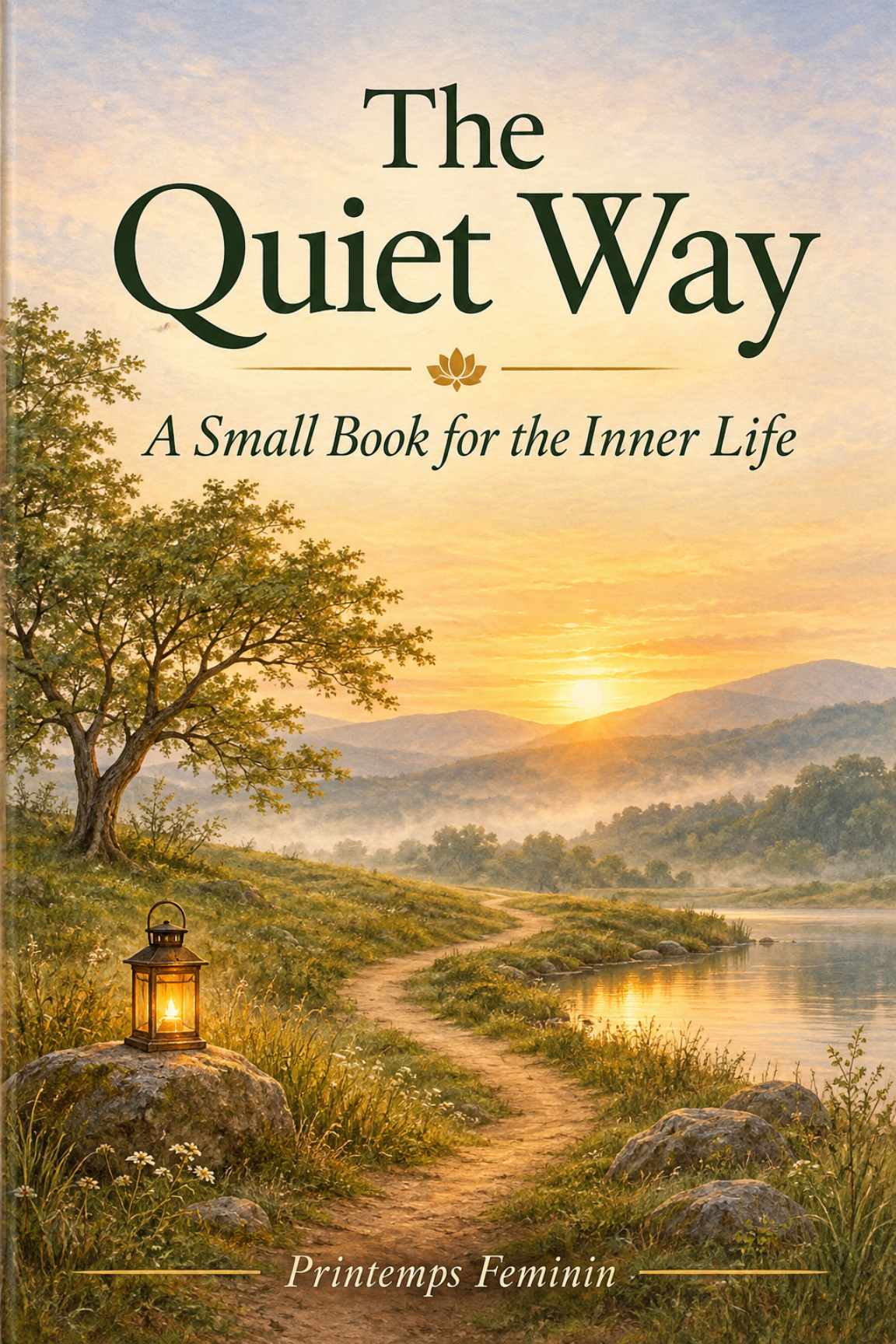
The Quiet Way

A Small Book for the Inner Life



Printemps Feminin



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The Quiet Way: A Small Book for the Inner Life

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This book offers reflections and simple practices for the inner life. It is not a substitute for medical, psychological or other professional care. If you are struggling, please reach out to someone you trust or to a qualified professional.

First edition, 2026.

“Listen… with the ear of your heart.”

— The Rule of Saint Benedict

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A Note Before You Begin

This is a small book, meant to be read slowly. It belongs to no single tradition, though it borrows gratefully from many: the desert monks and the Zen teachers, the Psalms and the Upanishads, the Sufi poets and the quiet Quakers sitting in a plain room waiting for the light.

You do not need to believe anything in particular to read it. You only need to be willing to stop for a moment and pay attention to your own life. That willingness is the beginning of every spiritual path there has ever been.

Perhaps you picked up this book because something in you is tired. Not the tiredness that a night of sleep can mend, but a deeper weariness: the sense of living at a speed that is not your own, of being busy all day and still feeling that the important thing has been left undone. Perhaps you are grieving, or searching, or simply curious. Perhaps you once had a faith and lost it, or never had one and wonder what you have missed. All of these are good places to begin. There is no wrong door into the quiet.

The old teachers rarely began with doctrine. They began with practice. A young man went to an elder in the Egyptian desert and asked for a word to live by. The elder did not hand him a system. He told him to go and sit in his cell, and his cell would teach him everything. That is the spirit of these pages. They are not here to tell you what to think about the universe. They are here to help you notice what is already in front of you.

Each chapter is short. Each ends with a practice. Read one chapter, then live with its practice for a week before you turn the

page. A book like this is not finished by reading it to the end. It is finished, if ever, by becoming the way you walk through an ordinary Tuesday.

If a sentence helps you, keep it. If one does not, leave it by the road. The path is yours. These are only lanterns along the way.

How to Use This Book

The book has twelve chapters, gathered into three parts. The first part, Arriving, is about coming back to the present: stopping, breathing, paying attention, resting in silence. The second part, Softening, is about the heart: how we meet pain, how we hold on and let go, how we give thanks and forgive. The third part, Opening, turns outward: to love, to service, to the plain fact of our mortality, and finally to the long road home.

You can read the whole book in an afternoon. Please do not. Or, if you must, read it once quickly to see the shape of the road, and then begin again, slowly.

The suggested rhythm is one chapter a week. On the first day, read the chapter, perhaps twice. Then begin its practice, and keep it for seven days. Each practice is small on purpose. A practice you can keep for a week is worth more than a grand resolution you abandon by Wednesday.

Each chapter is followed by a few companions. “Going deeper” takes the theme a little further. “When it is hard” answers the questions people most often ask when they try the practice. “Words to carry” offers three short lines from the old traditions to keep in your pocket for the week. After each practice you will find questions for reflection, a page for your own notes, and “Seven days with the practice”: one small question for each day of the week, with room to write. Use them however you like. Some people write a few lines each evening. Some write nothing at all and simply let the questions sit in them like stones in a pocket. Both are fine.

As you move on to a new chapter, try to keep the earlier practices going lightly. Do not worry about doing them perfectly. By the end of twelve weeks you will not have become a saint, but you may find that your days have a different texture: a little slower, a little kinder, a little more awake. At the back of the book you will find practices for mornings, evenings, quiet days and harder days; thirty small practices for the month after; a guide for reading the book with others; and an appendix with a twelve-week plan, a simple check-in for each week, a page on which to write your own Rule of Life, seasonal reviews and a year of gifts.

A few gentle suggestions. Keep the book somewhere you will see it. Read in the same place and at the same time if you can; small rituals carry us when willpower fails. Be honest in your notes, since no one else needs to read them. And if a week goes badly, if you forget the practice entirely, do not start over and do not give up. Simply begin again where you are. As you will read more than once in these pages: the returning is the path.

FOR YOU TO WRITE

A Letter to Myself at the Beginning

Before you turn to the first chapter, write a few lines to the person you are today. Why did you pick up this book? What are you tired of, hoping for, searching for? You will read this letter again at the end of the twelve weeks.



PART ONE

Arriving

Before anything else can happen, we have to arrive. Most of us spend our days slightly ahead of ourselves, leaning into the next task, or slightly behind, replaying the last conversation. The four chapters of this first part are about coming home to the only moment we ever actually live in.

They begin with the simplest acts there are: stopping, breathing, looking, listening. None of them requires belief or talent. All of them require a little patience.

CHAPTER ONE

Stopping

To stop is not to quit. It is to step out of the current for a breath.

Every spiritual life begins with a single act: stopping.

We are carried along by a current of tasks, worries and screens. The current is not evil. It is simply fast, and it rarely asks where it is taking us. Most of us can go weeks without one unhurried moment in which we are simply here, alive, aware of being alive.

Think about the shape of an ordinary day. The alarm sounds and the mind is already running before the feet touch the floor. There is the message to answer, the bus to catch, the meeting, the shopping, the meal, the news, the bills, the children, the parents, the screen that glows in the hand until the eyes close. None of these things is wrong. Many of them are good. But taken together, without a pause between them, they form a river so swift that we forget we ever stood on the bank.

The old traditions all knew this. The Hebrew scriptures gave the world the Sabbath, a day when even the fields rest. It was not offered as a reward for hard work but as a commandment, as if to say: you will not stop on your own, so I am asking you to. Monastic communities ring a bell at intervals so that everyone pauses, mid-sentence or mid-step. In some monasteries, when the bell sounds, the monks simply stand still where they are, a spoon halfway to the mouth, a broom resting on the floor, until the sound has faded. A Zen teacher, asked for the secret of the way, is said to have answered: “When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep.” The secret is not elsewhere. It is in noticing what is already happening.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, in a line that is often quoted, that much of our unhappiness comes from not knowing how to sit quietly in a room. He was not speaking against work or company. He was observing that we flee from stillness because, in stillness, we meet ourselves. Stopping is uncomfortable precisely because it is honest.

To stop is not to quit. It is to step out of the current for a breath, so that when you step back in, you choose to. There is a world of

difference between a life that is lived and a life that merely happens. The difference is often no more than a few seconds of attention, repeated many times a day.

You will find that stopping is difficult. The mind protests. It insists there is something urgent waiting. Let it protest. Very little in a life is truly so urgent that it cannot wait sixty seconds while you remember who you are.

You may also find that stopping brings up feelings you have been outrunning. Sadness may arrive, or restlessness, or an odd tenderness you cannot name. This is not a sign that you are doing it wrong. It is a sign that you have stopped long enough for your own heart to catch up with you. Welcome whatever comes, the way you would welcome a friend who has walked a long way to find you.

Stopping does not need a retreat or a mountain. It needs only a threshold: a moment that already exists in your day, which you decide to treat as a doorway. The kettle coming to the boil. The car engine turning off. The hand on the handle of a door. These small edges of time are everywhere, and they ask for nothing except that you notice them.

The first practice of this book is the smallest of all. It may seem too small to matter. Try it anyway. A great deal of the spiritual life is made of things that seem too small to matter, done faithfully, until one day you notice that they have changed you.

GOING DEEPER

The Bell in the Monastery

There is a story told in many forms about a traveller who arrived at a monastery late in the afternoon. He was shown to a bench in the courtyard and asked to wait. As he sat there, a bell rang somewhere in the building. At once, everything stopped. A monk carrying a basket of bread stood still in the doorway. Another, who had been sweeping the steps, rested his broom against his shoulder. A third, halfway through a sentence, simply let the sentence wait. For the length of the bell's sound, nobody moved. Then, as the last note faded, the bread went on its way, the broom went back to the steps, and the sentence was finished.

The traveller later asked one of the monks why they did this. Was the bell a call to prayer? The monk thought for a moment and said: "The bell is the prayer. It reminds us that we are here. Without it, we would spend the whole day somewhere else."

Most of us do not live within the sound of a monastery bell. But we can choose our own bells. The ring of a telephone, before we answer it. The red light at a crossing. The moment the computer starts up. The child calling from the next room. Any sound or moment that recurs can become a bell, if we decide that it is one.

It helps to understand why stopping matters so much. When we are carried by the current, we act from habit. Habit is useful; it lets us drive a car and tie our shoes without thinking. But habit also decides a great many things we would never choose if we were awake: the harsh word, the extra hour of scrolling, the evening spent in a mood that started with a small annoyance at nine in the morning. A pause interrupts habit. It opens a small space in which something new can happen. In that space, we can choose.

There is an old teaching that between what happens to us and how we respond, there is a gap, and in that gap lies our freedom. Most of the time the gap is so narrow we do not notice it. Stopping widens it. Three breaths are not much, but they are enough to change the direction of a conversation, a day, sometimes a life.

Stopping also teaches us something about time. When we are hurried, time feels like an enemy, always running out. When we stop, even briefly, time loosens. A minute of stillness can feel surprisingly long and surprisingly full. We begin to suspect that we have more time than we thought, and that what we lacked was not time but presence.

Finally, stopping is a quiet act of trust. Each time you pause, you are saying that the world can manage without your frantic effort for a moment. This is humbling, and it is also a relief. You are not holding up the sky. You are allowed to rest.

WHEN IT IS HARD

Questions People Ask

“I keep forgetting.” Of course you do. Forgetting is how a practice begins. For the first days, you may remember only once, in the evening, that you meant to pause at the door. That evening remembering is itself a pause. Some people put a small mark on the door handle, a dot of paint or a piece of thread, to help. After a week or two, the body begins to remember on its own.

“Three breaths feels too small to matter.” It is small on purpose. Large resolutions tend to collapse under their own weight. A small practice can be kept on a bad day, and it is the bad days that decide whether a practice survives. Trust the smallness. Seeds are small too.

“When I stop, I feel worse.” Sometimes stopping lets us feel what we have been outrunning: tiredness, sadness, worry. That is not a sign of failure. It is information. Be gentle with what you find. If the feelings are heavy and do not lift, it may be wise to talk with someone you trust or with a professional. Stopping is not meant to be endured alone.

“I do not have time.” Three pauses of three breaths each take less than a minute a day. If even that feels impossible, it may be the clearest sign that you need it.

WORDS TO CARRY

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

— Exodus 20:8

While we are postponing, life speeds by.

— Seneca, Letters to Lucilius

Be still, and know.

— Psalm 46:10

COPY OUT THE LINE YOU WANT TO KEEP

PRACTICE

The Three Pauses

Choose three moments in your day that already happen: waking, the first sip of a drink, opening a door. At each one, stop for the length of three breaths. Do nothing else. Just notice that you are here.

1. On waking, before you reach for your phone, lie still and take three slow breaths. Feel the weight of your body on the bed.
2. At your first drink of the day, hold the cup in both hands. Feel its warmth or coolness. Take three breaths before the first sip.
3. Choose one door you pass through every day, at home or at work. Each time you touch its handle, pause for three breaths.

If you forget, do not scold yourself. The moment you remember is itself a pause. Begin again there.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

— *When during this week did stopping feel easiest? When did it feel hardest?*

— *What did the mind say to you when you tried to pause?*

— *Did anything surprise you in the few seconds of stillness?*

— *Where else in your day is there a threshold you could use?*

NOTES

SEVEN DAYS WITH THE PRACTICE

The Three Pauses

One short question for each day of the week. Write a few lines in the evening, or simply carry the question with you.

DAY ONE

Today, which pause came most easily? Which one did you forget?

DAY TWO

What did you notice in your body when you lay still on waking?