

All Life us Prayer

Plants, Animals, and Stars participate in a symphony of devotion, each yearning toward its Source. The daily activity of butterflies and ants, sea urchins and manatees, wolves and deer are distinctly prayer forms. A family gathering for a festive meal becomes a collective prayer, celebrating the bounty of the fall harvest. The sheer variety and magnificence of the prayers of sentient beings alter whatever narrow view of prayer we hold. Realizing that every life form is a cadence of prayer underscores the value of all possible utterance.

All life is prayer. From the moment of birth, until death stills our breath, each human heart, each soul, recites a ceaseless prayer, the very existence of our spirit in physical form an invocation toward the divine.

Prayer is the language of the spirit. It is our first language. In a sense, prayer precedes language. It certainly precedes theology. Much of the world's scripture are written as prayer forms, such as this passage from the Katha Upanishad, on the nature of the true self:

Heaven, formless is the Person. He is without and within, unborn, Breathless, pure, Higher than the high Imperishable . . . Fire is His head; His eyes, the moon and sun; The region of space, His ears; His voice, the revealed Vedas; Wind, His breath; His heart, the whole World. Out of His Feet, The earth. Truly, He is the inner Self (Atman) of all.

The language of prayer, which is often desiccated in contemporary culture, yearns for resuscitation, to become again the speech from within. Prayer is not merely linguistic or intellectual, but is a living river of devotion bringing divine energies into the world. All forms of speech and types of action have the potential to be a prayer. A Hassidic story asks, "How does

All Life us Prayer

one study with a Rabbi?" Well, you watch him tie his shoes. Because if he is a true Rabbi—a true master—then there is going to be some form of prayer in his tying of shoes. In each act, however small, a prayer.

The commitments that guide monastic life—vows, rules, rituals, divine sweetness to permeate our entire being. The monk's desire to be close to God creates a spontaneous eruption of longing, a dynamic communion of love. Thus, prayer is not only the culmination of a lifetime spent in its practice, but also the natural outcome of the soul's wish.

As the pure overflow of grace, prayer arises from humility, which transforms mere material renunciation. Physical pleasures are renounced not because they are inherently wrong, but because they are so compelling and distracting. The seeker hones and forges his or her life in the direction of the one deepest desire. To put it another way, we renounce material things in order to devote our whole being to divine desire. It is a practical decision. How many things can we do at once? Can we really commune with God if we are so busy that there is no time to pray or meditate?

The practice of prayer is important because it trains us to carry the sacred into everything we do. In the midst of tumultuous day, it is still possible to yoke our being to the Divine being. It is often through trials that we are tested and turn to prayer. For many people, especially when they suffer through difficult times, the correlation between what is going on in their lives and their ability to pray is little understood, as if prayer and life events are two separate categories. It is here that our spiritual traditions can provide guidance and techniques to reconnect us with the soul's need.

The monk reminds us that daily existence is a form of prayer, and if our lives are disruptive or disassociated, our well-being on every level is

All Life us Prayer

affected. Awareness of the harmony or disharmony between one's prayer life and one's daily action is an important tool of discernment, If we live in such a way that our actions are out of sync with the deep self, we should realize that behavior is not separate from prayer, Life and prayer are integrated, and that is the great wisdom of the monastic traditions.

Ceaseless Prayer

FOR THE MONK. The entire occupation of each day is prayer. Prayer is not an activity that competes with other activities; it is the basis of every activity. Work is prayer. Writing is prayer. Gardening is prayer.

Since the intention of prayer or meditation practice is to come face to face with Mystery, the unity of prayer and action is essential. Prayer purifies intentions. With prayer, no other teacher is needed. Prayer is your teacher. The inner monastery of the heart protects the silence and solitude necessary to listen for God's direct speech. This is prayer: being led into the silence, where God speaks, filling you with love, unfiltered.

The monk advocates various forms of ceaseless prayer and meditation as necessary to the mystical growth of the soul. The order of the monastic day is built to harness the monk's divergent interest into an outpouring of devotion. The main purpose for living this way is to allow one's whole being to be transfigured by the Divine. Prayer can be thought of as the method the monk uses to consent to be transfigured, because prayer becomes, in essence, a vow: "I vow to be with you, always, I consent to be transfigured in you."

In prayer, your self is offered; your words are offered to God. Each syllable has power, as your being transfigures into the divine being and you become wholly engulfed, possessed, and impressed with prayer. An inner

All Life us Prayer

correlation between your words and your deep self takes place. Vocal or silent prayer raises the vibration of the cells of the body, and the entire mind-body-spirit complex, literally transforming structure of consciousness. In these special moments of divine communion, it is not just emotional and physical levels that are altered, but also the energy frequency of the whole person.

Across religious traditions, the vibratory changes that lead to inner transformation are intrinsic to meditation and prayer practice. The Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia (1240-12-91), for example, is renowned in Kabbalistic circles for his precise meditative techniques, "When your consciousness," writes Abulafia, "cleaves to His consciousness . . . according to His honorable and awesome Name," the recitation of the vowels of the Divine Name in particular sequence can induce mystical experience and raise consciousness to an ecstatic level. Similarly, Athanasius of Alexandria, a fourth-century Christian theologian, said, "God became man (or women) so that man [or woman] could become God." Athanasius' theological insight is the foundation of *theosis*, to become divine-like, and the impetus behind the Jesus (Hesychast) Prayer. The Eastern Orthodox monk is exhorted to ceaseless pray: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," until every inhalation and exhalation is a spontaneous participation in divine unity.

The goal of monastic prayer is not to seek extraordinary experiences, but to bring you closer to the full experience of divine indwelling. In ceaseless prayer, your being is infused with radiant light. For the monk who submits to prayer throughout a lifetime, prayer itself is a divine teaching. The monk is transfigured into a living prayer.

All Life us Prayer

The spiritual power of prayer does not guarantee that you will achieve the outcome you desire, because Mystery is more comprehensive than the human mind can grasp. Nonetheless, prayer has the potential to lift the soul to higher levels. The result of prayer may not be what you wanted, but it will be what the Spirit gives, something that touches your heart and soul, and something that would not have happened without your prayer reaching out to the cosmos. Prayer and the outcome of one's prayers are not causative. If you don't pray, that doesn't mean bad things will happen and if you do pray, that doesn't mean things will go as you hope.

Prayer is the soul's mirror, reflecting inner harmony or disquiet. For example, in certain stages of spiritual growth, old prayer forms may be non-existent or weak, and you can feel abandoned and lost. Thus, your relationship to prayer can be a guide for understanding your inner experience. What is the quality of your life at this moment? Is praying easy for you, or do you struggle in prayer? Does your prayer feel fractured? Are you working frenetically, are you scattered, do you have little time for quiet? If you feel selfish, angry, rebellious, or irritable, each of these emotions relates to your capacity to release prayer from your heart.

The idea of releasing prayer is important. Prayer is not an ideal outside the self; nor is it one more obligation that must be added to the pile of commitments already on your calendar. Prayer is released, uncovered from within. Each person, when given time for silence, or the peace of a retreat, at some point finds prayer spontaneously flowing from the heart. The release may happen immediately or it can take weeks, but prayer will overflow, whether it is heartfelt thanks for the day, an expression of wonder at a sunset, or long-held grief.

All Life us Prayer

If you are dissatisfied with your prayer life, use these feelings to uncover some of the conditions behind this present state. Monastic communities structure the day to create time and place for peace, so the monk performs a daily rhythm that fosters the flow of prayer. Follow their wisdom and structure your day in such a way that you also cultivate periods of silence and solitude, honoring your need to follow a holy pattern of prayer.

In all this, it is important to recognize that another's life should never be judged by the quality of prayer in a particular moment. Without the context of a person's entire life is little understanding. One person might have ecstatic visions, while another might be experiencing a period of no prayer. Yet the person struggling with prayer may be further along his or her spiritual path than the person with visions. You have to question the whole life. What is happening in this life? What is the movement of the prayer life? Why is prayer now barren or not fertile?

Creating a structured prayer schedule can be difficult for new monks in the world. Life intervenes, and it is easy to become tired or in the wrong mood. I suggest that you counter your resistance by imaging a scene. Let's you have a child at home. Imagine how much your child would prefer to have even a minute of your time and attention than none. As your child runs out the door to school, you hug and kiss your child goodbye. These moments mean everything.

This is how you can approach prayer: even one moment of communion or silence is meaningful. Commitment to prayer is designed to support love and intimacy with divinity. It is not supposed to be an external imposition. People tend to think of monastic commitment to prayer as conscription, even punishment: you must pray five times a day, or sit zazen (simply sitting)

The Last Chapter (27) of "The Monk Within: Embracing a Sacred Way of Life" by Beverly Lanzetta

All Life us Prayer

eight hours a day. But, there is the possibility that if you commit yourself to a schedule of prayer, you will be happier, you will have permission to alter your life in positive ways. The contemporary monastic lifestyle is not about imposing prayer into a prayer-less life, but to give you permission to release the prayer that is already within you.

How to Pray

A QUESTION I am frequently asked: How am I to pray? This is a common concern and one that frustrates and weighs on those who pursue a spiritual practice. People tend to associate prayer with rote recitation of formal and authorized prayer forms taught in churches, synagogues, sanghas, or other religious practices—reciting the rosary, vipassana meditation, contemplative prayer, etc.—others are confused about what constitutes a prayer life on a practical level. It is as if a link is missing that can take a person from distress with formalized prayers to the discovery of rich prayers that exist within his or her heart.

Teresa of Avila describes mental (contemplative) prayer as “nothing else than an intimate share between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” We can imagine God as our intimate friend, with whom we share everything. We can talk to the Divine about our needs, complaints, and difficulties. We can ask for advice, offer thanks giving, and make acts of faith or reparation for our sins. We can seek guidance for our children, or shed tears about illness and death.

Quite frequently, the most efficacious pray is found in darkness, emptiness. When we find ourselves simply open to the vast mystery surrounding us, when we center our hearts on an obscure faith, and are absorbed into the divine Presence. This is the contemplation of the night

All Life us Prayer

when darkness quiets the soul, and we surrender to unknowing. Thomas Merton prays:

Your brightness is my darkness. I know nothing of You and by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing You. If I imagine You, I am mistaken. If I understand You I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain I know You, I am crazy. The darkness is enough.

Prayer also is advanced by arranging a place, and a set amount of time, each day. An hour or more is best, but even ten minutes spent in prayer of meditation is beneficial. The daily repetition of an established prayer schedule will develop into a visceral rhythm that will compel you to cherish those moments apart from the world. Should you be the type of person who finds switching gears difficult, reading passages from a spiritual book can be a prompt that leads to contemplation. If sitting quietly agitates, prayer can be active: walking prayer, bicycling prayer, carpentry or pottery prayer.

How do I pray? I find the simple contemplation of silence is the best. This is a state of offering myself to the One who is without image, who is unnamed, and who is beyond my mind or comprehension. In the prayer that is no-prayer, subject and object dissolve, liberating my longing.

When I do pray with words, I use those that are direct and honest: love you, Holy One. Please help me to overcome anger. Please teach forgiveness. I want to be made empty. O, Divine Mystery, I long to be on with you.

Prayer is my language, the way I speak when I say what I truly feel. It gives permission for passion—to prostrate on the Earth and ask for

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All Life us Prayer

guidance, to kneel in front of an icon or a majestic mountain and allow grace to work in the soul, to cry out in anguish, and to plead for the ability to remember God's gift. I believe that our prayers are heard, the cosmos listens to our vibrations, and God's ears are receptive to our words. At night, when I am falling asleep, words from a prayer I wrote slip into my mind: *O, Mother of Compassion, Blessed is Your Heart of Pure Love.*

Walking in the hills I hear quail whispering peace prayers. I watch nature praying: the falcon making circles in the air, a heron strolling through a vineyard, and the song of the Blue Oak's leaves rustling in the wind. Prayer is everywhere. And, I bring it everywhere with me. Sometimes, I voice it; sometimes, I am content to watch it be. It is an energy that flows into and out of my soul with each breath, curling and somersaulting in spirals, until letters settle in my mind, and then, caught up in the torrential waters of spirit soon become a rain of words, I cling to these lofty sounds, riding the wave of awe, straight back into the Divine Heart.

So, Lie down on the Earth, feel the soul pulsing, the ants humming, the gophers digging. Are these not prayers? So, too, are the kettle on the stove and the casserole in the oven, the dishes being washed, and the dog being fed.

Give us all your prayers, *O Holy Life!!* We want to absorb them into our souls, to unite with creation's extreme audacity of devotion. Even when we do know we are praying, the universe is praying in us.