

WHAT DO PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE MEAN TO ME? February 2013

The Transformational Theme for February is Prayer and Spiritual Practice. Meditation teacher Shinzen Young says that spiritual practice at its most comprehensive should do three jobs; appreciate self and world; transcend self and world; improve self and world. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive categories. Some spiritual practices address more than one. Let's look at each of these in turn and consider some spiritual practices that UUs do that further each of these jobs.

Appreciate self and world. These practices are about paying attention to the present moment. There are many forms of meditation that do this. In popular Buddhism in the U.S. these practices often come under the heading of Mindfulness Meditation, which are adapted from techniques that come from Asian Buddhist traditions. This category allows us to find a calm mind and look deeply at our experiences of hearing, seeing, touching, feeling and thinking. Some Christian practices, such as Centering Prayer, have the same effects. Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism and Earth Centered religions all have similar practices.

Transcend self and world. Deeper states of meditation and/or most spiritual practices pursued consistently over time, lead to insights into deeper perceptions of reality. In Buddhism this is expressed as insight into the impermanence of everything, especially that which we think is a "permanent self". We come to see deeply into our experience and find that everything that exists only exists as a set of ever changing conditions. Nothing is stable. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the term "inter-being" to describe this reality. Everything that we perceive as having a separate existence is really the result of its interaction with everything else. For instance, a piece of paper could not exist without a tree, which could not exist without sun, rain and soil, or a logger, or a logger's grandmother.

At the deepest level, we can have experiences where we feel much less separated from life and nature, or even not separated at all. Experiences like this are unforgettable and can change us forever.

Improve self and world. Learning to appreciate self and world and having experiences of transcending our normal experience creates a natural compassion for other people—and even other beings—including ourselves. We feel a deep desire to live from this deeper awareness and to let go of habits that inhibit our freedom and create suffering for ourselves and others. We find ourselves wanting to serve others and offer the world our time, gifts and talents.

Some spiritual practices that accomplish this are prayer, loving-kindness meditation, 12 step spirituality and awakened service.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE: A WEEK OF PRAYER

Our spiritual exercise for one week this month is to do one of these two practice options for a short time every day for one week.

Option 1: “Yes, I’m open to trying a prayer practice.” Find a quiet place away from other people, distractions, and noise, and get comfortably seated. Take a few deep breaths. You don’t have to have any kind of concept of a God to make this work. In fact, it would be better to leave any concepts aside. With fearless honesty, get in touch with your inner being at this moment. Especially get in touch with your deepest longing. These are most likely to be for you, but they can also be for others. Let yourself feel that longing. And then, if words come, let them come without hindrance or self-consciousness. They can be address to God, Goddess, or to no one at all. At the end of your time, notice any change of consciousness from when you began.

Option 2: “Get me away from all this God stuff!” There is a non-theistic, Buddhist practice similar to the one above. It is called *metta* or loving-kindness practice. Here is a link to a guided metta meditation. You can use it to guide you the first time—or every time—you do this practice. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3uLqt69Vyl>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you have a prayer or meditation practice? What is it? How has it transformed your life?

Do you have a way of addressing any or all of the 3 jobs of spiritual practice? Are there any that are missing that you feel drawn to?

Are there any spiritual practices in your life that don’t fit neatly into the categories of prayer or meditation? What are they?

WORDS OF WISDOM

We could say that meditation doesn't have a reason or doesn't have a purpose. In this respect it's unlike almost all other things we do except perhaps making music and dancing. When we make music we don't do it in order to reach a certain point, such as the end of the composition. If that were the purpose of music then obviously the fastest players would be the best. Also, when we are dancing we are not aiming to arrive at a particular place on the floor as in a journey. When we dance, the journey itself is the point, as when we play music the playing itself is the point. And exactly the same thing is true in meditation. Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment.

Alan Watts

“Pray, and let God worry”

Martin Luther

Everything is based on mind; is led by mind; is fashioned by mind. If you speak and act with a polluted mind, suffering will follow you, as the wheels of the oxcart follow the footsteps of the ox. Everything is based on mind; is led by mind; is fashioned by mind. If you speak and act with a pure mind, happiness will follow you, as a shadow clings to a form.

Buddha

“Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

Mahatma Gandhi

What's encouraging about meditation is that even if we shut down, we can no longer shut down in ignorance. We see very clearly that we're closing off. That in itself begins to illuminate the darkness of ignorance.

Pema Chodron

“Prayer is when you talk to God; meditation is when you listen to God.”

Diana Robinson

All prayers are answered if we are willing to admit that sometimes the answer is "no". Prayer doesn't change things. But prayer changes people. And people change things. Let us pray.

Lon Ray Call

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

There is an ancient Christian form of meditation recently re-discovered called centering prayer.

Here is a video telling how it's done by one Fr. Thomas Keating, one of its re-creators.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTxIzNAYGAs>

Here is the complete book, Mindfulness in Plain English, one of the best manuals for mindfulness meditation, available free for download

<http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma4/mpe.html>

Shinzen Young has some interesting things on his site www.shinzen.org

He also offer home based, phone meditation retreats every month. To find out more

www.basicmindfulness.org

An 13th Christian book about wordless prayer by an anonymous author is [The Cloud of Unknowing](#). Sounds like Zen, doesn't it.

Of course there is St. Theresa of Avila's famous meditation manual [The Interior Castle](#).