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# **“So You’re Praying Now”**

by Paul M. Wishart, PhD, MA

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## **Introduction**

This article is a follow-up from a previous article in *Synchronicity* “On The Nature Of Ego-Attachment And Separation”. These two articles emerged from two dharma talks I attended given by the Venerable Amchok Rinpoche. In this article I will present a role for prayer in cultivating healthy relationships and bridging the gap of separation that our ego-attachments often foster. A story about practicing prayer, as well as the benefits and precautions of prayer are also included.

## **A Story About Practicing Prayer**

I would like to share a story from my experience with prayer, which gave rise to the title “So You’re Praying Now”. I began practicing prayer early in the morning before my family got up. I was like a construction site, walled off from view, with a message that must have indicated “Stand clear!”.

One early morning I heard my three year old son getting up. Hearing him, I felt I had better hurry up to get my prayer time in before he disturbed me. As this thought went through my mind, I responded; what would happen if I just continued as I was and keeping open to see what happened? (As you can see there are some pretty involved conversations going on in some peoples’ prayers.) I heard him come downstairs. I heard him coming toward my chair. He crawled up into my lap and hugged me. I hugged him back. Something opened up inside me that I felt must be unconditional love. The feeling I felt was love, love just for being there because we were there. I felt quite humbled when I realized I might have missed this in my haste to have prayer “over and done with”.

## **Conceptualizing Prayer**

“What is prayer?” might be a question to consider. Prayer is a complicated concept to reference and define, and is beyond the scope of this article. However, I will present my preferred conceptualization of prayer. Prayer is practice. “Prayer is not a petition for results but a position from which to see. It must begin patiently” (Prensky, 1979). To this aspect of prayer I would add that it is a process of opening. “If I see life as a problem, I’ve closed the door. If I see life as an opportunity, I’ve closed the door. If I say, ‘Let’s see’, I’ve opened the door” a paraphrase of Krishnamurti (1999). My relationship with prayer and its practice emerges from a conceptual coupling of these two perspectives above: “Prayer is a position from which to see life, not so much the problems or opportunities of life, but moving along with life unfolding, to ‘let’s see’ what happens.” Thus prayer provides a means of bridging our ego-attachments (which often lead to separation) through cultivating and nurturing a “let’s see” attitude; in life, with life.

## **Benefits Of Prayer**

Research on prayer has demonstrated that certain forms can lead to reduced anxiety, relief from chronic pain, decreased depression, enhanced mood and self-esteem, decreased stress, general

improvement in clinical symptoms as well as reduced use of health care resources (Bonadonna, 2003). As specific examples, the following reductions in symptomatology were achieved through prayer; high blood pressure (hypertension) - a 43% reduction, anxiety and stress – a 31% reduction, and chronic pain – a 25% reduction (Pintak, 1999).

## **(Pre)Cautions**

Despite such an inspiring picture, there can be side effects of prayer as for any practice one might engage in. Too much of anything can lead to an imbalance, and is not good.

Self-medication is common in many medical circumstances of patient illness and suffering. The patient tries to medicate themselves well on their own. Self-medication parallels a concept I have identified, that of self-meditation. Instead of “fixing” oneself at the physical level, the practice of prayer becomes an attempt at “fixing” one “self” at the psychic or egoic level, for instance.

Contemporary psychology has come to the realization that prayer practice can go awry. Prayer that is being practiced for the purpose of fixing oneself, such efforts go “only skin-deep, and in fact can cause serious damage if used for repression and denial of unconscious impulses” (Bourgeault, 1995).

“Qi-gong psychotic reaction” is a specific example of an imbalanced practice. This illness is associated with those “individuals who become overly involved in the practice of Qi Gong” (Cohen, 1997), p. 276. The focus in this example is not the practice of Qi Gong from which the unhealthy situation emerged. The point here is that any practice in excess can lead to an imbalance and illness.

Ken Cohen has an important consideration for any sort of prayer practice, or any endeavor with which we might become engaged; “More is not always better. Powerful medicines can be harmful if the dosage is excessive.” (Cohen, 1997). This caution “more is not always better” is as important in the practice and study of “prescribing and practicing” prayer as it is in the context of prescribing medication or other forms of therapy as well. One must pay attention to the intent and the outcome of the practice.

## **Ego-Attachments, The False Self And “Losing Face”**

In a previous article in *Synchronicity*, “On The Nature Of Ego-Attachments And Separation”, I made the connection between ego and attachments as a single construct, ego-attachments. This concept of ego-attachments connects well with a construct of the False Self encountered in Centering Prayer (Keating, 1994; Bourgeault, 1995). The practice of Centering Prayer is a means of cultivating surrender, of consenting to resting in God, beyond word, thought, or emotion.

Our False Self or our Ego-Attachments can be viewed as the “face” we construct to represent ourselves to the world, and how the world is represented to us. This “face” construct can be a narrow filter through which we live our lives.

As the Rinpoche suggested, there are many, such as The Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, who, through our being in their presence, can lead to our “losing face”. We feel instantly and deeply connected, with them and with ourselves. Our separation or brokenness is bridged. We are spontaneously connected with Great Compassion. We can be healed, made whole.

## Where Prayer Plugs In: Cultivating Healthy Relationships

Perhaps prayer could be viewed as a practice of “dropping” or “letting go” of the False Self we have constructed, and becoming aware of our Ego-Attachments. Such practice can lead to the cultivation of Great Compassion as I heard in the Rinpoche’s presentations.

With regard to various prayer forms such as meditation or contemplation, they are essential in cultivating and nurturing awareness, and healthy relationship with our ego-attachments. Prayer contributes to healthy individuals and communities, because awareness and sensitivity are cultivated in compassion, rather than rejection of the ego and its attachments.

Recognition is a means of shifting escalation from a reactive cycle to a responsive cycle, into a healthy relationship with the ego. Cultivating and nurturing a healthy relationship with our egos leads to an opening of our lens on the world, and our relationship with the world.

## Conclusion

The emphasis of this article is on the practice of prayer. Prayer is a means of cultivating, nurturing, and maintaining healthy relationships with one-self and with others. A story was included to illustrate the essential ingredients of prayer; being open, balancing, a sense of humor, and the relationships we cultivate through prayer. The benefits and precautions of prayer have been included to emphasize the importance of balancing one’s prayer practice. Thank-you.

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