

# THE ENERGY OF PRAYER

HOW TO DEEPEN YOUR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

A photograph of a person, likely a Buddhist monk, seen from the back. They are wearing a dark, possibly black, robe. Their hands are clasped together in front of their chest in a traditional prayer position. The person's head is bowed, and their hair is dark and short. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

## THICH NHAT HANH

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INTRODUCTION BY LARRY DOSSEY, M.D.

## *Two Elements of Effective Prayer*

Effective prayer is made up of many elements, but there are two that seem the most important. The first is to establish a relationship between ourselves and the one we are praying to. It is the equivalent of connecting the electrical wire when we want to communicate by telephone.

Earlier, I asked the question: To whom do we pray? And I answered, the one who prays and the one prayed to are two realities that cannot be separated from each other. This is basic

in Buddhism, and I'm quite sure that in every religion there are those who have practiced for a long time and have this understanding. They can see that God is in our heart. God is us and we are God. The entire visualization gatha goes like this:

The one who bows and the one who is bowed to  
are both, by nature, empty.  
Therefore the communication between us  
is inexpressibly perfect.

The first element of an effective method of prayer is the communication between ourselves and the one we are praying to. Because we and the one we are praying to are interconnected, our communication is not

dependent on time or space. When we meditate on this, communication is realized straight away and we are linked. At that point, there is electricity in the wire.

We know that when a television station sends its signal up to the telecommunications satellite and it is beamed back down to our television set, a certain amount of time is necessary for the waves to be transmitted through space. But the communication of prayer lies completely outside of space and time. We don't need a satellite. We do not have to wait one or two days for there to be a result; the result is instant. When you make instant coffee, although you call it instant, you have to boil the water, you

need time to make your coffee. Only then can you drink the coffee. But in prayer, we do not need to wait any time at all, even an instant.

The second element we need for prayer is energy. We have connected the telephone wire, now we need to send an electric current through it.

In prayer, the electric current is love, mindfulness, and right concentration. Mindfulness is the real presence of our body and our mind. Our body and our mind are directed toward one point, the present moment. If this is lacking, we are not able to pray, no matter what our faith. If you are not present, who is praying?

To pray effectively, our body and mind must dwell peacefully in the present moment. When you have mindfulness, then you have concentration. This is the condition that will lead to *prajña*, the Sanskrit word for insight and transcendent wisdom. Without that, our prayer is just superstition.

## ***The Collective Consciousness***

When we begin to pray, we may not yet be good at it, but we will already be able to generate some energy. Gradually, as we continue to practice the precepts, concentration, and insight, our prayers will have more force, more power.

How can we have wisdom in our prayers? When the energies of compassion, understanding, and mindfulness are present, wisdom is more likely to arise. We do not change ourselves alone, but we change the collective consciousness. That collect-

ive consciousness is the key to all change. Larry Dossey, an American doctor and author of *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, has said that our collective consciousness is not like telecommunications satellite. We don't need to *send* prayers anywhere, because God is omnipresent. There is no need to convert God into some divine telecommunications satellite in the sky. Prayer is unlimited by space or time. What Dossey calls the omnipresent God, Buddhism calls the collective consciousness or the "one mind." This is the store consciousness in which Buddha and we are one.

If there is a change in the individual consciousness, then a change in

the collective consciousness will also take place. When there is a change in the collective consciousness, then the situation of the individual can change; the situation of our loved one who is the object of our prayer can change. This is why Buddhists say that everything arises from the mind. Our mind is a creation of the collective consciousness. If we want to have change, we have to return to our mind. Our mind is a center that produces energy. From this powerhouse we call mind, we can change the world. We change it by means of a real energy that we ourselves have created. This is the most effective way of prayer.

In the Buddhist tradition, we know that praying as a community, a Sangha, is stronger than praying as an individual. One of the Buddha's main disciples, Mahamaudgalyayana, knew that his mother was suffering and this caused him great anguish. Buddha taught him how to take refuge in the strength of the prayers of the Sangha. We have the strength of our own aspiration. We too can send our energy to the heart of the Buddha. But with a Sangha, whether of two or five or one hundred people like us, when we simultaneously practice sending spiritual energy, then that energy is magnified and much more effective.

We pray, but sometimes we may have a situation that is very difficult and we need a stronger energy. The individual energy we can send is already something, but if we have a Sangha that is free and solid then the energy we can send together will certainly be greater. When the whole community prays with us, it can be a significant moment in our lives. We are one of the Sangha who is praying. Our own undivided attention is a key to open the door of the ultimate reality and the undivided attention of our friends in the practice is an even greater key. When a Sangha of one hundred or one thousand people practices purifying the actions of body, speech, and mind, and unifying

body and mind to send energy, the energy generated will be very powerful, and will be able to change the situation which we call karma, the causes and effects of our actions.

## ***Meditation's Three Sources of Energy***

Meditation produces three sources of energy: mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Mindfulness is a source of energy that helps us to be aware of what is happening in the present moment—in our body, in our mind, and in our environment. The full term is Right Mindfulness (*samyak smṛti*). What is happening in the present moment in the field of our body, our mind, and our environment is diverse and vast. We cannot possibly recognize all of it in one moment. But we

are able to recognize what stands out in relief and that which we need to recognize most of all. When we give our attention to our breathing, and we recognize an in-breath as an in-breath or an out-breath as an out-breath, this is called the practice of mindfulness of breathing. If we give our attention to our steps and can recognize each step that we place on the floor of our house or on the earth, this is called mindfulness of making steps.

If we are angry and we are aware that we are angry, that is called mindfulness of anger. When we are practicing mindfulness of anger, there are two kinds of energy manifesting in us. The first energy is that of anger.

The second energy is that of right mindfulness, produced by our mindful meditation. The second energy recognizes and embraces the first energy. If we can practice for five or seven minutes, then the energy of right mindfulness will penetrate the energy of anger and some of the energy of anger will be transformed.

The energy of mindfulness carries with it the energy of concentration. Concentration gives rise to the energy of insight, and insight is able to transform anger into understanding, acceptance, compassion, and reconciliation. In our daily life, our mind has the tendency to think about the past or worry about the future. Our body is present, but our mind is not

present. Right mindfulness is the energy that helps us bring our mind back to our body, so that we can be authentically present here and now. If we are present in that way, we can be in touch with what is wonderful in life inside us and around us.

In the spirit of meditation, life is only really present in the here and the now. The Buddha taught, “The past is already gone. The future has not yet come. Life can only be touched in the present moment.”<sup>9</sup> When we can be in touch with what is wonderful in the present moment, we are nourished and healed. When our energy of right mindfulness has become solid, we can use it to recognize and embrace our suffering and pain,

our anger and hatred, our greed, violence, jealousy, and despair. Then we can transform these things bit by bit. Dwelling peacefully in the present moment can bring about wonderful healing, and we can take ourselves out of the clutches of regret about and attachment to the past, and of our worries and fear about the future.

## ***The Four Fields of Mindfulness***

Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something; mindfulness always has to have an object. The four categories of objects of mindfulness are: our body, our feelings, our mind, and the objects of our mind. These four fields

are called the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. When the energy of mindfulness recognizes the body, it helps us return and care for the body, allowing our body to relax. In Buddhism this is called “pacifying the body formation.” This is a very effective practice for dealing with the stress in our body and nervous system. We can practice this when we are lying down or sitting. This practice helps our body to heal itself in a natural way. If we are healing ourselves with prescriptions or medicine, then this method of relaxing our body can help us recover much more quickly.

Practicing mindfulness of the body keeps us from consuming toxins. It helps us to walk, stand, work, and be-

have in a free way, and raises the quality of our daily life. The practice of mindfulness of our feelings helps us recognize our feeling in the moment, whether it is a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling. By “recognize,” I mean we are able to come to the source of those mental formations and to know clearly their essence and transform them. For example, if with the energy of mindfulness we are able to recognize the symptoms of depression, we have the opportunity to look deeply into the nature and root of the depression in order to know the near and distant causes that have brought it about. Using mindfulness to look after the depression and to bring our mind into contact with refreshing

phenomena that have the capacity to nourish and heal, we can alleviate the depression. And with mindfulness we can keep ourselves from consuming or being in touch with items, images, sounds, and thoughts which bring us into a state of tension, anxiety, and melancholy. In this way, we do not allow our depression to continue and be nourished by these poisons.

According to Buddhist psychology, we have fifty-one kinds of mental phenomena, called mental formations, that include positive states of mind, like love and inclusiveness; negative states of mind, like anger and despair; and undetermined states of mind, such as thoughtful-

ness and regret. Whatever the mental formation, mindfulness helps us understand why and from where it has arisen and what lasting effect it will have on our body and mind. With concentration and insight, we will be able to notice and be pleased by pleasant emotions and transform negative and unpleasant emotions. If the feeling is neutral, then with mindfulness it can become a pleasant feeling. For example, when we have a toothache, we have an unpleasant feeling. We think that if our toothache went away, we would have a pleasant feeling. But generally when we don't have a toothache, we just have a neutral feeling; we do not feel happy because we do not have a toothache. When

we are aware of the non-toothache, it will help us change the neutral feeling into a feeling of well-being.

More and more places in the West use the practice of mindfulness to heal physical pain, depression, and relieve stress in the body and mind. At the University of Massachusetts Medical School, for example, Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn conducts a program of healing based on mindfulness meditation called the Stress Reduction Clinic. Through this program, practitioners are able to heal physical pain, stress, and disease quite effectively. At large university medical schools such as Harvard and the University of California at Los Angeles, there are departments doing research on the

role of meditation in helping heal mental and physical illness.

The Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard University was created and directed by Professor Herbert Benson. This institute is doing research, teaching meditation, and applying it in healing. The institute has worked without interruption for the past thirty-five years. According to Professor Benson, many scientists, doctors, psychologists, educators, and nurses have been trained to a high level at the institute, and then have gone on to guide research programs and make discoveries in various fields. They have seen that meditation can bring about a great deal of healing. A number of medical programs have been

developed that offer effective ways of reducing symptoms and healing illness by relieving tension in the mind.

In the past thirty years, the laboratories of the medical faculty at Harvard have, in a systematic way, researched the benefits brought about by the influence of body and mind on each other. The research programs have proven that when people repeat a phrase from a sacred scripture or the words of a guided meditation, or even a single sacred sound, it stops the dispersed state of the mind from intervening, and positive physical changes can take place, changes contrary to those that brought about the mental tension to begin with. The research programs have demon-

strated the beneficial nature of the changes brought about by meditation practice and have shown that they can have an effect on such medical conditions as high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, chronic pain, insomnia, and impotence.

The fourth and final field of mindfulness is mindfulness of the objects of our perception, such as mountains, rivers, trees, plants, people, things, society. When the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight is powerful, we are able to arrive at a deep insight into reality, and we are able to realize great freedom. We are no longer attached to our feelings of worry, craving, hatred, and despair. Buddha and the holy ones achieved

this insight and have the great freedom called liberation. When we practice meditation, we also arrive at freedom, and although our freedom may not yet be great, we still can undo many wrong perceptions and prejudices, and we do not suffer nearly as much as we did before. In fact, we have a great deal of peace and joy in our life in the present moment.

## ***Tangled Knots***

Meditation is particularly able to help us with what Buddhism calls internal knots and identity complexes. These fetters keep us from being able to be in the present moment.