



EXPLORATION

Prayer & Meditation

Readings



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Bad at Meditation

by Rev. Taryn Strauss

Meditation is not about perfection. It is not about perfect silence, or perfect focus, or the perfect amount of light. You do not have to be good. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves, says the poet Mary Oliver.

...The practice of meditation is not arrival. Do you know what nirvana literally translates to? It means “blowing out, and becoming extinguished.” The time has not come for us to be extinguished, or emptied.

It's the struggle, the intention, the discipline—that's the practice. Not escaping from the world, or from yourself. Rather, let it in. Welcome the stranger into your meditation. You do not have to be someone who is naturally unbothered. It's okay to struggle, the struggle is the the point.

In so many parts of our lives, not just meditation, we want to be good. We want to do the right thing, say the right thing always.

Minister and mystic Rev. Howard Thurman joins us in our inner struggle to be someone who is good. His is a meditation of desire, and returning to remember what he desires most.

He writes, “I want to be better than I am in the responsibilities that are mine: I am conscious of many petty resentments. I am conscious of increasing hostility toward certain people. I want to develop an honest and clear prayer life. I want to be better than I am.”

Source: <https://www.uuca.org/bad-at-meditation-by-taryn-strauss/>

Please Remember Me

by Rev. John A. Taylor

It was a plain and earnest request: “Please remember me in your prayers.” And we answered, “Of course.” But what does this mean? Her need was clear, and her adversary deadly. The march of natural process was inevitable.

We children of such a scientific and sophisticated age can hardly believe that prayer is a device which will cause the forces of nature to reverse themselves. Could we argue with the Almighty or lay claim to some unique persuasion? Of course not.

Prayer is neither superstition nor magic. It is an act by which we place another's burden in the center of our consciousness. Prayer, in whatever context, is always a deliberate function of personal involvement. It is to gather the myriad needs and fears of another into our active reflection, and in some quiet space consider and respond. It may be that to pray for another reflects the religious tradition of the one who prays, but even those who claim no tradition, by accepting the request to pray, convey a feeling of love and respect which cannot be denied.

To say to one in great need, “I will remember you in my prayers,” is to convey notice that their difficulty will be our constant concern, and we will remember them until resolution and peace finally arrive. It remains true, even in our age, that to be remembered in prayer is a precious gift.

Source: Notes on an Unhurried Journey by John Taylor

***Seeking Stillness* by Karen Morgan**

Meditation is a technique that creates a stillness which brings us into the present moment so that we can find and face ourselves. It's a way to unlock your full potential in all areas of your life. There are many different ways to meditate ...however the common thread amongst all of the methods is concentration. Each method involves a way to focus your concentration so that you become present to your deeper self. Getting connected with your deeper self will allow you to find answers to the questions you face in life. We have all had instances in our lives of this type of connection and stillness—think of a time when you looked into

a newborn baby's eyes, or looked at the night sky and felt the wonder of the vastness, or sat by a river and allowed the sound of the flow move you into a state of stillness. These were spontaneous experiences. Meditation is about having these experiences purposefully.

Source: <https://harmonyyuu.org/the-sermons/meditation/>

The Paradox of Prayer

by Rev. Jacob Trapp

Love wants that a turn for the better shall come, and from its own depths sends that prayer up to the conscious mind of the person who loves. It was in this sense that François Fénelon said that true love prays unceasingly. And in this sense prayer is one of the most natural or universal things in the world.

...An involuntary turning for help, a sense of awe and wonder before the sublime and mysterious—these are both... pre-theological experiences. They are a natural and primary kind of prayer.

There are other kinds as well.

...There is a human prayer ...springing up spontaneously from the heart. You walk forth some morning under a blue sky, and something within you says, “How wonderful!” ...Such, I would say, is a beautiful, a natural, a pre-theological prayer of praise.

The prayer of thankfulness is also a quite natural and inevitable response in certain circumstances, when human good, or human mercy, or human generosity, or human love is made known to us. ...The prayer of gratitude is thus a simple and natural response of the human heart.

The prayer of anguish, since the human being is subject at times to severe anxieties, is also natural. In the *Psalms* ...you find

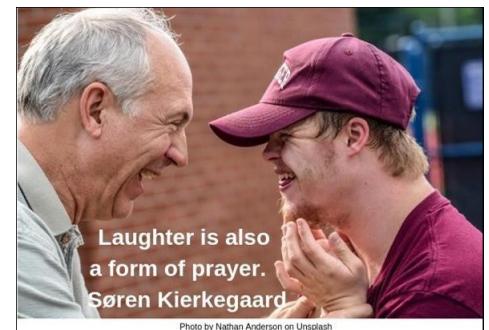
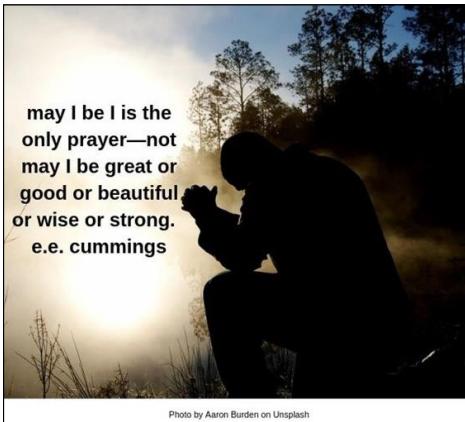


Photo by Nathan Anderson on Unsplash



may I be I is the
only prayer—not
may I be great or
good or beautiful
or wise or strong.
e.e. cummings

Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

these prayers of human anguish poignantly and vividly expressed.

...The quieter prayer of self-searching and self-examination is also natural; and since conscience is not self-made but social, it is natural also that human beings should have directed prayer outward.... And so, too, the prayer of contrition ...[when we] have fallen short of living at ...levels of one's possible best.

...A paradox arises when we make formal, and sometimes threadbare and conventional, what is natural and spontaneous and utterly real. Then we have the paradox of prayer as a hollow shell—the words are there, but the feelings are absent.

...The power ...we address in prayer is not a Somebody outside, but the very Power of Being by which we live; closer than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.

Source: Return to the Springs by Jacob Trapp

Ways to Deepen Your Lovingkindness Practice

by Sharon Salzberg

1. Think of kindness as a strength, not as a weakness. Kindness is...an ally of wisdom and courage.

2. Look for the good in yourself [and others]—not as a way to deny your difficulties or problems but as a way to broaden your outlook so it's more truthful and balanced. ...

3. Remember that everyone wants to be happy. ...This urge toward happiness is often twisted and distorted by ignorance, by not knowing where happiness is actually to be found. Remembering ...inspires us toward kindness.

4. Recollect those who have helped or inspired us. Cultivating gratitude is a way of honoring ...people, and ...lifting our spirits and reminding us of the power of good-heartedness.

5. Practice at least one act of generosity a day. ...Any act of generosity ...is a meaningful expression of kindness.

6. Do lovingkindness meditation. Each day we can take the time to hold others in our hearts quietly and wish them well. ...

7. Listen. Listening is a powerful gesture of kindness, one that allows fresh responses and transformed relationships.

8. Include those who seem left out. In a conversation with a group of people, there may be those too shy to speak. ...Be the one who opens the circle.

9. Refrain from speaking ill of others. ...There are ways to talk about wrong behavior without derision or condemnation.

10. Walk a mile in another person's shoes before you pass judgment ...A sense of empathy and understanding ...will allow us to act more compassionately and creatively.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/20745>

Here. Now. You. by Kat Liu

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “Breathing in, there is only the present moment. Breathing out, it is a wonderful moment.”

When I heard the Venerable’s robes rustle at what I estimated to be about forty minutes and yet she did not give the signal that our sitting meditation had ended, that’s when I knew she would take us to the full hour. But my knees were complaining and my mind was bored with counting breaths. What to do in the time remaining? Suddenly a stray thought entered: *What if this were your last breath?*

Funny thing, I immediately began to breathe slower. Drawing in the air to fill every crevice of my lungs and then slowly pushing it out until there was nothing left to expel. “Well,” I thought, “I must want to live.”

Of course, when I got to the end of that “last” breath I was still there. So I began another breath, still asking, *What if this were your last breath?* There were flashes of regret—unfinished projects, loved ones grieving—but one breath isn’t enough time to do anything about regrets. There was only enough time to experience the moment, to know that I was there, breathing.

Inhalation. Exhalation. When the moment passed, there was the next moment, and the next. In this way, I spent the remaining twenty minutes entirely in the present.

Outside of the meditation hall, we still plan for the future and think of the past. But so often we replay past regrets and worry about future events to the point where we’re no longer present in the present. As the Venerable says, “We forget that we are breathing.”

Source: <https://www.uua.org;braverwiser/here-now-you>

Prayer by Rev. Jack Mendelsohn

Suppose we think of prayer ...as an approach to the deepest truths about ourselves. Suppose we think of it as a way of shedding new light on our relationships with others.... Suppose we think of it as an essential religious striving to touch truth and touch resources within and beyond ourselves.

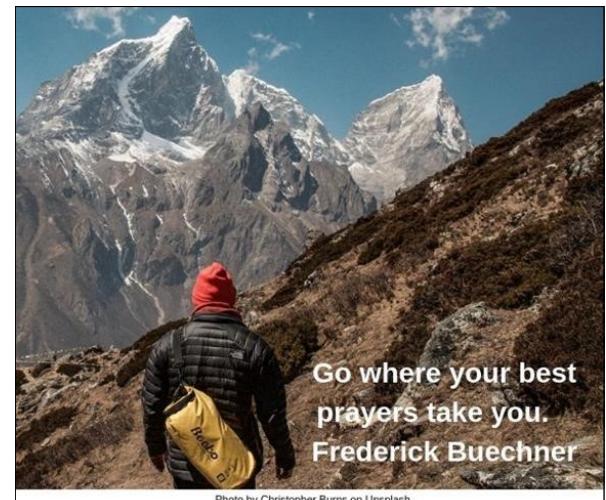
There are many means for getting what we think we want in this world. Money is one. Prestige, power, and privilege are others. ...Prayer is not like these. Rather, it is an effort to reach deep and to reach out and to become what we would like to be, and need to be, and ought to be. Proper prayer is not a petition to escape realities. It is an effort to face up to realities, to understand them, to deal with them. It is an expression of the desire to grow in spiritual stature, in courage, in strength, and in faith. The purpose of prayer is to transform those doing the praying, to lift them out of fear and selfishness into serenity, patience, determination, belonging. If we begin to approach prayer in this manner, it assumes an entirely new significance.

...We make an effort to find out what our lives should mean, what they do mean, and what they could mean.

...In this process of self-examination, the sifting and judging of our desires go on. ...We can slowly learn ...that the requirements of love, justice, peace-making, and truth may well run contrary to some of our personal desires and inclinations. ...

Prayer based on self-examination, on an honest ordering of our minds, and on the ability to wait in expectation and appreciation of untapped and unrevealed spiritual resources, is, to me, prayer at its best.

Source: Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age by Jack Mendelsohn



Go where your best
prayers take you.
Frederick Buechner

Photo by Christopher Burns on Unsplash



Wisdom Story

Fill the Sieve with Water, unattributed, told by Marci Shimoff

A wise teacher, instructing his students to meditate, told them, "The process is like filling a sieve with water." All of the students were confused by this statement. How was it possible to fill a sieve with water? Some thought it meant meditation was very difficult, and others thought it meant they could only expect temporary gains from their practice. Discouraged, they stopped meditating. One student, however, approached the teacher and asked him to explain.

The teacher took the student to the edge of the ocean, gave him a sieve, and told him to try to fill it with water. The student scooped the water into the sieve, but it immediately ran out. The teacher took the sieve from the student and said, "I will show you how." The teacher threw the sieve into the water, where it sank almost immediately. He told the student, "The sieve is full of water now and will stay that way forever. Meditation works the same way. It's not about scooping small amounts of Spirit into your individual life, but about dropping yourself into the ocean of Spirit and merging with that Spirit more and more each day."

Source: <http://www.livinglifefully.com/meditation.htm>

Snippets

Prayer

"Prayer is an opening of the human heart." Daniel Budd

"What's prayer? It's shooting shafts into the dark. What mark they strike, if any, who's to say? It's reaching for a hand you cannot touch. The silence is so fathomless that prayers ...vanish into the sea."

Frederick Buechner

"Love is the only prayer I know."

Marion Zimmer Bradley

"'Thank you' is the best prayer that anyone could say. I say that one a lot. Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, understanding." Alice Walker

"Prayer doesn't change thing, but it changes people and people change things." Lon Ray Call

Meditation

"Meditation is a microcosm, a model, a mirror. The skills we practice when we sit are transferable to the rest of our lives." Sharon Salzberg

"The real meditation practice is how we live our lives from moment to moment to moment." Jon Kabat-Zinn

"Gardening is a working meditation for me. It helps me remember process, and it helps me remember patience." Lizz Wright

"The goal of meditation is not to get rid of thoughts or emotions. The goal is to become more aware of your thoughts and emotions and learn how to move through them without getting stuck." Dr. P. Goldin

"Meditation is an essential travel partner on your journey of personal transformation. Meditation connects you with your soul, and this connection gives you access to your intuition, your heartfelt desires, your integrity, and the inspiration to create a life you love." Sarah McLean

Mindfulness

"Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet." Thích Nhât Hạnh

"Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won't)." James Baraz

"The best way to capture moments is to pay attention. This is how we cultivate mindfulness. Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing." Jon Kabat-Zinn,

"You have to remember one life, one death –this one! To enter fully the day, the hour, the moment whether it appears as life or death, whether we catch it on the inbreath or outbreath, requires only a moment, this moment. And along with it all the mindfulness we can muster.... Stephen Levine

"Mindfulness meditation doesn't change life. Life remains as fragile and unpredictable as ever. Meditation changes the heart's capacity to accept life as it is. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating, not by beating it into submission, but by making it clear that accommodation is a gratifying choice." Sylvia Boorstein

Questions

1. Who do you pray to if you believe in prayer, but do not believe in God?
2. Rev. Taryn Strauss quotes Howard Thurman who wrote, "I want to be better than I am." Do you share that goal? Why or why not? How can prayer or meditation contribute to our goodness?
3. Per Rev. John Taylor, has anyone asked you, "Please remember me in your prayers." What did you think about the request? Have you ever asked the same of another person? Why? Is prayer the important thing here, or is it the act of holding another person in our heart or mind? If you do not pray, what could you do to respond authentically to the request?
4. Per Karen Morgan, do you value stillness, silence, or both? Why or why not? Do these nurture you? How?
5. Rev. Jacob Trapp suggests that, at a fundamental level, authentic prayer is an involuntary response. In this respect, he cites turning for help and sensing awe & wonder as examples. Do you agree that prayer could be an involuntary response? Why or why not? Have you ever prayed in response to the above or involuntarily offered prayers of praise, thankfulness, anguish, self-searching & self-examination or contrition?





6. Trapp's assertion is novel. He suggests that this kind of prayer is pre-theological. It is more the emotional response than any verbal formulation. Prayer without words. Does this change your understanding of prayer? Why or why not?
7. Trapp suggests that the paradox of prayer happens when the deep involuntary impetus for prayer is replaced by words that are a hollow shell. Have you ever been moved by prayer at some times and put off by it at others? What was the difference in prayer that provoked these very different responses?
8. Lovingkindness practice is a specific form of meditation in which we send love to our self and others. It is known as Metta. Sharon Salzberg shares ten ways of deepening this practice, however, many of these do not depend on meditation. Which of her suggestions would help you, per Howard Thurman's desire, to be better? Why?
9. Kat Liu writes about the primacy of breathing in meditation and in life. There is only ever this moment. To what extent are you preoccupied with the past or the future? Why? What can you do to be "present in the present?"
10. The wisdom story shared by Marci Shimoff calls into question our clinging to individuality, suggesting that it blocks us from really connecting with life in deep ways, which is a goal of meditation and prayer. Have you ever felt a deep connection with the ocean of Spirit? What prompted that? Was it valuable? Why?
11. Marion Zimmer Bradley suggests that love is prayer. Alice Walker values gratitude as prayer. What kind of prayer do you value most? Why?
12. Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests that "the real meditation practice is how we live our lives from moment to moment." Going back to Sharon Salzberg's list, which of her suggestions would radically change how you live your life?
13. Dr. P. Goldin notes that meditation changes our relationship to our thoughts and emotions so that we don't get stuck. In this regard, when did you get stuck in your life? How did you get unstuck?
14. Sylvia Boorstein suggests that mindfulness helps us accept life as it is. How is doing this helpful? Since there are some things that are not acceptable, how do we reconcile this with a bias toward acceptance?
15. Like Rev. Trapp, Rev. Jack Mendelsohn reframes prayer in significant ways. He suggested that proper prayer "is an effort to face up to realities, to understand them, to deal with them." How does this change your understanding of prayer? He also noted that the purpose of prayer is transformation and self-examination. Does this make sense? Why or why not?

