

## **Peace: The Virtue of PRAYER**

**by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD**

Prayer, like faith, is a powerful daily sanctuary in an unpredictable world. It can be a means to balance our individual lives with the rhythm of the world or cosmos. In other words, prayer can help deepen our sense of compassion in light of many things we cannot control. “Prayer,” as Mother Teresa says, “enlarges the heart.”

Prayer appears to be a universal human activity, dating to the earliest days of our species. Discovering a sense of powerlessness before nature’s forces and one’s day-to-day struggles and mortality, humans began to express feelings of petition, praise or thanksgiving toward nature or some unseen and powerful “force.” Indeed, it could be said that religion grew from prayer, taking unique forms mirroring the sentiment and act of a group or culture’s prayerful expressions.

The Refuge Prayer of Buddhism, the Lord’s Prayer of Christianity, the Fatiha of Islam, the Gayatri Mantra of Hinduism, or the Shema of Judaism — these are but a few examples of prayers that rally the specific faith of believers in a Compassionate God, Creator, or Universe.

“Prayer,” states American theologian Jonathan Edwards, “is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” And no doubt you have found this to be true in your life. From your own experience you have probably realized that prayer is not a substitute for reasoning, witnessing, suffering, or giving; prayer is a welcome support for all your efforts. This is why the humble Carmelite monk of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Brother Lawrence, saw prayer as a means of practicing the presence of God, even while sweeping the floors or washing the dishes. It is what allowed St. Theresa of Avila to believe that “Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.”

Friendship with some Force greater than our self allows for spontaneous personal reflection; it is also a catalyst for inner change — what Buddhists call “burning the firewood” of one’s desires and sufferings. When we are able to solemnly and humbly focus our expression of yearning, commitment, appreciation, and faith through prayer, then God becomes a force recognizable both within and without. Subsequently, our prayer becomes a process by which our intensely felt desires and sufferings are eventually transformed into compassion, wisdom, and acceptance. We cease to pray by pleading or begging, but by surrendering to a greater will we may not entirely understand but accept on faith nevertheless.

Try not to pass through a day without prayer. Prayer can give you a small island of grace in a hectic day and a chaotic world. Let your prayerful expression pour out of your heart as a natural part of your day: a wakeful state of breathing, loving, honoring and revering the wonder of life in spite of life’s unpredictability.

Mahatma Gandhi suggested: “Let everyone try and find that as a result of daily prayer he adds something new to his life, something with which nothing can be compared.” When

prayer is integrated with the actions and behavior of daily life it becomes more genuine. Prayers, therefore, have power when they are specific, concrete, and focused on real-life problems, hopes and concerns; or, when they are used as “comfort food” at times when we simply want to pour out our heart in an inner dialogue with our self or God. Perhaps the ultimate form of prayer is that of a vow to contribute to the happiness of others and to strive to create a peaceful human society.

For some people, it may be more comfortable to disassociate prayer with any religious doctrine or belief system. This does not make one a disbeliever in the power of prayer if it is conducted from a sincere heart. Because prayer is personal, we have the comfort in not being judged by others. Thus, our prayers are free to go where they may. If they add to a personal sense of peace because they were given unconditionally, then we can rightfully stand before a mirror and see the reflection of our own goodness.

An effective prayer that transcends all faiths is the Wind Horse prayer of the Tibetan culture:

*As Wind carries our prayers for Earth and All Life, may respect and love light our way.  
May our hearts be filled with compassion for others and for ourselves.  
May peace increase on Earth. May it begin with me.*

### **The Power of Prayer & Affirmation**

A growing body of research is demonstrating that prayer is beneficial to the body and mind. Studies in medical settings also show that prayer or affirmation’s effectiveness in healing oneself or another person does not depend on either one having religious or spiritual faith. Researchers cannot fully explain why prayer helps in the healing process, but this should not diminish the fact that, as a practical matter, it has proven to be effective.

Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jew who died in Auschwitz in 1943, a victim of the Nazi Holocaust during World War II, wrote in her diary: “Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes.” Her intuitive observations have been proven by researchers to have merit: there is a connection between breathing and praying.

Slow, rhythmic breathing — about six breaths per minute seems optimal — decreases breath rate, metabolism, blood pressure, heart rate and brain wave activity, all of which are beneficent to bodily and mental wellness. Researchers have determined that this form of breathing — as a result of the practice of repetition in prayer and meditation (including the use of beads to count repetitions) — is widespread in faith traditions worldwide. For example, the reciting of the Latin *Ave Maria* prayer (in the Roman Catholic tradition), or the yoga mantra “om mani padme om” (a mantra is a repeated phrase) used by several Eastern traditions, have been shown to slow the breath to the healthful six-per-minute rate.

As powerful as prayer, in many respects, is that of affirmation. An affirmation, either as a few words or phrase that is inwardly or outwardly spoken, concentrates the will of our thoughts toward a desired condition. The key to an effective affirmation is that it is positive, free of doubt, short enough as to be easily repetitive, and visualized in the present as if it were already obtained. Because of these characteristics, an affirmation can be expressed anywhere at any time: while driving to work, sitting on a subway, standing in line, taking a walk, lying in bed upon waking, washing the dishes or raking leaves.

Following are but a few examples of affirmations.

“I feel positive about my life conditions.”

“I am a happy and good person no matter what.”

“I am well and healed of my illness.”

“I am worthy of advancing in my work.”

“I feel the presence of God in all that I do.”

“I am prepared to pass this test.”

“I am peace. I am peaceful. I am an instrument of peace.”

In your daily life, prayer and affirmation can be your silent portable sanctuary. They can give you confidence, faith, humility and gratitude. One of the five rituals of Islam is that of repetitively reciting five times daily a prayer/affirmation to Allah (God) and the prophet Mohammed. Whereas a mosque is the ideal location, the truth is that the demonstration of devotion can be anywhere for a Muslim. Your own sense of prayer or affirmation is similarly capable of demonstrating your devotion to living a peaceful life wherever you may be.

If you ever doubt the usefulness of prayer/affirmation, perhaps these words from the mystic philosopher Meister Eckhart can help: “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was ‘Thank you,’ that would suffice.”

### **Remember:**

Prayer is a worthy daily sanctuary for gratitude, hope, faith and peace. Prayer can awaken your inner capacities of strength, courage and wisdom. You can practice daily giving of unconditional and generous prayer so that others and Earth can live in peace. This affirmation may be very helpful in your efforts: *I will reason, will and act to do the right things for peace.*

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