

PURIFYING INTENTION AND PRAYER

Purifying our intention is something that all of us do, even if we aren't aware of it. Think of a time when you were upset with someone close to you, and an impulse came from deep within to want to strike out. Instead, you decided, or unconsciously something stopped you, from just blindly acting out. What happened was that you had a change of response. You had a purer intention, either consciously or unconsciously, that didn't want to create harm. Many of us don't realize that this significant part of us can create a different reality in our present day world.

There are many of us that are aware of this part of ourselves, and likely an equal amount that are just at that point of awareness where we see that our ordinary life and desires and the way we were conditioned isn't leading us to a feeling of fulfillment or greater peace. This frequently results in a keener interest in looking inside ourselves for answers or guidance.

What often happens to those of us that recognize that our desires don't satisfy something deeper inside us? We are frequently left with an empty feeling. Worse, we also might have discovered that making these desires our central focus leaves us frustrated too, as it rarely delivers the satisfaction we seek. Many continue on the path of wanting more wealth or success or lovers or children or houses or cars or vacations or playthings. But sometimes it is at such moments in our lives when we start sensing

a deep longing for a life of greater heart, which requires us to purify our intention. For many the answer comes through prayer

When I speak of prayer I mean a practice that is potentially available to everyone—the religious of any creed, the non-religious, the spiritual, the godly, the godless and the irreverent. Many belief systems would not accept this intention to define prayer in such an all- inclusive way. Humanistic Spirituality is a natural human response to purify intention for a life of greater heart, God, or for the qualities of love, peace, grace, tenderness, faith, empathy, intuition, generosity, warmth, and more. The meaning underlying prayer is essentially reaching for something from a source beyond our own ego. Generally we understand that source to be God (however you understand the word), or universal intelligence, a higher power or wisdom, or simply a mystery. When we speak about yearning and prayer, it is important to trust our own most sincere practice. Many people with a non-religious view have a tendency to criticize the concept of praying to a God somewhere above us in heaven. This idea may be judged as childish by the non-religious while the devout may feel sorry for those who lack faith and believe that they, “the believers,” are uniquely aligned with a higher connection and purpose. These perspectives tend to limit the capacity for all to unite.

Purifying Intention and Prayer

It is important to stay open to the meaning and essence underneath the words we use. Words such as “religion, spiritual, God or Godless” can all act as triggers that largely project black and white images. Most of us have a tendency to judge something

as right or wrong, good or bad, constructive or destructive, if that is how our minds have been programmed to perceive these images.

In Humanistic Spirituality we place an emphasis on prayer, and allowing flexibility in the methods and words that we use to represent a form of purifying intention. Some Buddhists and spiritual teachers use the word “intention,” which can potentially describe opening to our essential heart, in order to move beyond ordinary self-centered desires. When our intentions encourage us to reach for this essential nature or heart purity, there is little difference in purpose from prayer

Of course, there is the question about to whom we are praying and sending our intention. Regardless of our beliefs, we can envision that we are sending our prayers or intentions to a source far greater than our ordinary sense of self. It hardly seems to matter whether we envision “God” as being inside of us, outside of us, or as a universal kind of intelligence. It does matter in the deepest sense, however, that we cultivate enough purity of motive to expand beyond the desires and defenses that make up most of our ordinary lives and create our sense of self.

Do you want to move closer to your own heart?

In simple terms, we use the words purifying intention, to mean a sincere asking to represent the same opening that exists in prayer. We want to expand the instinct to open our hearts to more of life. Our intention is to support greater flexibility for anyone’s choice of path to represent this sacred and creative impulse that miraculously exists in the human spirit. What’s not to love about the purity of motive, regardless of the beliefs we hold about the source? What matters is that we are sincere when we

ask for a purer motive and intention that will benefit ourselves and others. It also matters that we include as much of life as possible in our request.

I generally pre-qualify a question that I inevitably ask my clients, with the following statement. “Please forgive me for asking you a question that is so obvious, but do you really want to be closer to your heart or soul?”

This is my way of inquiring as to how much they want to pray, or set an intention rooted in the heart, when they are feeling alienated, afraid or separate. Most of my clients are clear that they want this kind of prayer to happen, but they don’t seem to realize that this is a path in itself. I explain to them that pure intention and praying can be used whenever they remember to do so. It can apply to every moment, and most particularly when we feel lost - - one of the times when we usually forget to utilize our resources. It might seem strange to ask yourself if you want to be as close to your heart as possible, when you are shut down emotionally. Yet this is the time when we most need the encouragement to deepen our practice.

Have you noticed how easy it is to ask for help when you feel good? It is much more challenging to do so when you feel sad, lost, depressed or disappointed. Our intention needs to be sincere to be effective, which requires truly wanting that which is beneficial in the moment. It also requires us to stop reinforcing our defensive reactions and attitudes that we normally lug around with us. I am not suggesting that we will be free from defensive reactions and self-centered desires. These things are inevitable.

The question is, can we get in touch with a part of us that wants something more inspiring and fulfilling?

SHARON (SHIFTING ATTENTION FROM FEELINGS TO INTENTION)

Sharon felt inadequate as a mom. She always seemed to be battling her two kids, screaming at them when she was uptight, or they were too loud or fighting with each other. She had a well-developed prayer practice already established in her life, but the contentious pattern of interaction with her children seemed separate and unmovable. Although she was clear that stopping this pattern was “as important as it gets” and even shared that her sense of well being at the end of her life would largely depend upon the quality of contact that she might develop with her children. She was unable to move closer to her heart in these interactions. It was easy to see that she needed to move closer to the wisdom of her heart and find a way not to move away when she felt these overwhelming emotions. The challenge was that she was dominantly feeling oriented. When she felt inadequate or ashamed about her interaction with her kids, it seemed like a permanent indictment laid down by the Supreme Court. She could not stand feeling this. In her estimation, if she felt bad, she was bad.

This very feeling state led to a thorough clarification of how prayer works and how it could work in those times when she really needed it. I asked her to take a moment and ask this question from a deeply reflective place, “How important is your prayer compared to your feelings of inadequacy and impatience?” She laughed and saw the tragic absurdity of how much she was dominated by her feelings. Gradually she was able to learn that what she felt, even those powerful, overwhelming feelings of badness, were relatively unimportant when facing the sincerity of her prayer. Finding a purer place in her heart was what mattered. Normally she unconsciously thought she

could and should control her feelings while they happened in the moment, so she kept going back to them. But she found it incredibly helpful to see again and again that trying to pressure herself in the middle of her emotional storm was like adding oxygen to a burning fire. The guilt and judgments created an inescapable trap. One Sharon had been caught in for years. Every tense effort she made to change her feelings only reinforced them. By saying to herself, "Its intolerable that I'm feeling miserable. I am committing to symbolically go down on my knees and ask for the patience, tenderness and kindness that I don't feel right now. I'm changing my focus from what I feel, to what I ask or pray for. It doesn't matter what I feel, my sincerity is enough to change my intention and focus. The rest will follow."

Sharon wasn't sure she could do it, as her emotions were amazingly strong. She struggled with changing her focus to discover finally that her heartfelt intention to love her kids and herself was gaining strength over her feelings. At key moments she learned to tell herself that it was okay to feel agitated or angry or anxious, or empty or whatever else there was. She would rededicate herself to kneel in prayer, and ask for help especially at these moments. She was relieved to see a path that allowed her to be real. The shift was in learning to feed the prayer, not her feelings. Her identity had been locked on to those feelings, but gradually shifted to the part of her that asked for tenderness and kindness both toward herself, and the kids. The point is that the real Sharon was the one she longed for, and she was the one doing the praying, the asking, and the wanting to open her heart in the way that was needed. Now she could see a path that allowed her to be real. She just needed to feed the prayer, not her feelings.

“I can’t be reminded too much,” she said. “It’s as if my identity is feeling those feelings. Not me.”

“That’s the point,” I agreed. “The real ‘you’ whom you long for is the one asking, praying, wanting to open your heart in the way that is needed. This state of recognizing your need for help and asking for it, can cause the shift you’re looking for. Even if no new feelings come into your heart, humbling yourself allows you to be more harmless. That is an enormous act of moving towards the compassion heart.”

I told Sharon a personal story. “When I was a kid,” I said, “my front tooth was knocked out in a basketball game, and the raw nerve was exposed. I unconsciously believed I could make the pain go away so I kept wiggling my tongue on the raw nerve, hoping it wasn’t going to hurt. After I did this maybe twenty-five to thirty times, I asked myself, ‘what are you doing? How can you be so stupid?’

“I was actually in a form of denial, believing I could make my pain change by doing something directly with it. That led me to understand how this part of our unconscious works, when we want to control how we’re feeling in the moment by an act of demand, it acts like magical thinking of a two-year-old.

“I realized that the only thing I could do was to be sincere, give my totality as much as I was capable, and accept my human state. I asked for support in a prayer that went something like, ‘May I have the courage to accept this very difficult feeling! May I tolerate this pain with as much grace as possible.’”

I explained to Sharon that my prayer created a shift from a narcissistic demand (our normal reaction to severe suffering) to a sincere plea for help. I reminded her that when we cultivate this practice, we are changing the quality of our lives. “Can you

sense any part of you that wants to ask for help to tolerate where you are, and open toward your heart, regardless of how far you have to reach?" She smiled. "I don't see what else I could ever want more. It just requires so much honesty and dedication, but I do realize that nothing else matters." As she spoke those words, I could sense her heart melting as she supported her own pure intention.