

The Essence of the Prayer of the Heart

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Prayer of the Heart is at the core of the best-kept secrets of western esotericism. Due to its all-encompassing nature, affirming the human self, it does not easily mesh with the popular non-self spiritual sensibilities. Prayer of the Heart is dual and non-dual, a self-enquiry and worship, a particular spiritual practice and a whole wisdom tradition in one. It is rooted in an understanding of the Godliness of men, and the humanness of God. Its focus is on what it really means to be a human person, rather than on how to transcend the human person.

Formally, Prayer of the Heart is a part of Hesychasm (from *Hesychia*, inner stillness, Greek), an early Christian mysticism later absorbed by the Orthodox Church. But in reality, the history of the Prayer of the Heart goes back long before Hesychasm. This non-denominational practice exceeds the frames of Christianity, and can be used by seekers of any orientation. Hermetic mysteries, teachings of God-Man in early Egypt, visions of God in ancient Judaism, and artifacts of earlier cults of the Mediterranean region all contain references to a prayerful navigation of the heart. The same enquiry flourished in the Tantrik practice of Sri Yantra, and danced in the wild Sufi *dhikr* of Divine Names. Due to its dimension of bodily awareness, Prayer of the Heart is sometimes called Christian Yoga. It is close to the *atma-vichara* (self-enquiry, Sanskrit) of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and to Tantrik meditations on the self in the heart in the Kashmiri Shaivism of Abhinavagupta.

Prayer of the Heart was transmitted from the early Desert Fathers to Byzantine monks, and was preserved until our day by Russian, Romanian and Greek hermits and pilgrims. Its resonance with similar practices in India can be explained either by its further transmission Eastward or by Eastern influence Westward, or by the necessary emergence of this practice in all traditions acknowledging the presence of Divine Person. In any event, a prayerful enquiry into the self, associated with the worship of Divine Names, is deeply engraved in the spirituality of ancient Caucasus, Persia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India.

In essence, the Prayer of the Heart consists of the repetition of Divine Names associated with the direct intuition of the self. It is our good fortune that Hesychasts through the ages recorded the accounts of the living practitioners of Prayer. Due to the epic effort of the writers of the *Philokalia* (Love of God, Greek), we can learn from practitioners spanning the 4th through the 15th centuries. These accounts rarely give direct instructions, but they do share some of the experience, and emphasize the need for sincere personal practice. Full instructions to the Prayer of the Heart can be difficult to record because Prayer is very complex, and works differently with different people. Its unfoldment never repeats itself, being unique in each person's life. Prayer of the Heart develops and evolves with the practitioner, matures, and then gives rise to new and unpredictable forms. It is, implicitly, an oral tradition. Because of this inseparability from the dynamics of the individual psyche, it is a condensed spiritual psychology, and an individualized meditative system. It involves all of the faculties of the practitioner, and becomes a love affair, a quest for knowledge, and a source of empowerment.

In the Prayer of the Heart, the interior contents of one's consciousness/being has to be brought into awareness, understood and transformed. It is a hermeneutic, dialogical cycle, involving the individual and God, with the transcendence of individuality into different forms of Union, and a transcendence of Union into enlightened forms of duality. The dialectical complexity of this journey can take a lifetime, and, as the 12th century saint Marguerite Porete tells us, continues beyond the life of the body. In the developed

forms of the prayer, the individual self turns into a locus of Divine Self-Encounter. The famous hadith given through the prophet Mohammed says, “Heavens and earth contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me.” In the mystery of the heart, the individual “I” surrenders, direct intuition of God opens, and the devotee says: “I am not, but He is, and in that somehow I am”¹.

The history of Hesychasm is marked by disputes about the safety of this practice. Prayer of the Heart is considered among the spiritual exercises that are esoteric, complex, and require caution. It is esoteric because the self is esoteric to itself, covered by veils. In this long term practice of Prayer, the notions of time and space, real and unreal, myself and other, good and bad, life and death turn inside out and upside down. As in the commonplace Vedantic dictum, what is day for the knower, is night for the ignorant, and vice versa. Prayer is complex because it involves all the levels of one’s being, including one’s perceptions, emotions, character structure, and core identity. The Prayer’s “danger” is in the ruthlessness of the inner transformation, confrontations with subconscious, and the activation of latent impulses and desires. Throughout one’s life, Prayer of the Heart can be mediated by different teachers, each one adequate for the current stage. Faithfully followed, the Prayer can be a complete sadhana leading, via Self-Realization, to the establishment in the Self, and to God-Realization, i.e., God’s knowledge of Himself.

As a teacher of the Prayer of the Heart, I have observed the Prayer at work in other people. Prayer of the Heart is, above all, a search for the living self. Life only truly begins after the self is found. Before that, nobody is. What seems alive, walks around, pretends to make sense, love, and history, is just an inert mechanism, a cluster of forms and names. At times, there may be a descent of longing, faith, or hope. Love and beauty may flash like momentary lightning, disturbing the deadlock of individuality. While one may have a sharp intuition of existence, this does not last long; it is so easy to forget. Life before self-recognition is nothing but a continuous exile from the real.

This exile may be shattered by luck — or is it grace? — in the form of boredom, heart-breaking conflicts, abandonment, misery, fear, violence, a nonsensical job and the like. One becomes a seeker, a prey for Mother Kundalini to feed on. For many practitioners, Prayer begins spontaneously in the process of their Kundalini awakening. Mother Kundalini takes care of circumstances so that the luck can continue.

Kundalini is the evolutionary energy, which becomes active in human maturity and provides the developmental movement towards Self-Realization. Deep teachings of Tantra say that Kundalini awakens in different situations. It can be immigration, midlife crisis, intense physical effort or meditation, death of a close one – any disruption of identity. The best possible luck is in the loss of identity. In the darkness of nothingness, after the ghostly individuality has been shattered, luck turns into grace. The suffering of the loss of the conceptual quasi-self makes one look for the real self, living through the body.

The Kundalini process takes different forms. Sometimes it opens the spiritual centers of subtle energy in the chest, associated with our sense of embodied self. Prayer of the Heart opens and harmonizes the functioning of these centers.

Initiation into the Prayer can happen either from another person, or spontaneously through the interior unfoldment of Kundalini. One type of Kundalini rising specifically stations the energy in the spiritual centers of the chest. The common knowledge indicates that chest has the heart chakra, *anahata*. But in fact, there are at least three subtle centers, which are the structures different from chakras. The center on the left is connected with the experiences of cosmic consciousness, the center on the right – with the individual I, and the memories of individual history, and the center in the core of the chest – with the formless consciousness beyond the body, and with the experience of the Oneness with Divine Person. Kundalini may activate the centers in different orders of succession depending on the individual, and the process varies from practically unnoticeable to very rapid and emotionally intense. It changes

¹ Sri Ranjit Maharaj, personal communication, Encinitas, 1997.

perception, so that one can see beyond the surface of things. In self-initiation into the Prayer of the Heart, the growing change in perception directs attention to the interior contents of the self-sense.

Practice of the Prayer of the Heart

Focusing attention on the sense of self in the chest, the practitioner engages in an uninterrupted repetition of the name of the deity paced with the breath. As practice matures over the years, there are the shifts such as a) progression from the verbal prayer to internal and silent prayer; b) an inward deepening of the focus in the chest; c) a shift from the volitional repetition of the name to a state where the name spontaneously emerges from within the very being of the practitioner — as Kallistos Ware² says, God begins to pray to Himself; d) dissolution of the name into wordless prayer of sustained presence; and e) degrees of Union. As concentration is more and more absorbed inward, one perceives the essence of the self.

Direct intuition of God

The gradual increase of inward seeing, a.k.a. knowledge by presence, opens the gestalt of God-Self. This is at the core of Hesychasm, the Islamic philosophy of Illumination of Suhrawardi, teachings of Ibn-Arabi, Sufism, Shakta and Advaita Vedanta. While the theoretical stances of these systems differ, all of them request the whole-being engagement in the direct intuition of identity. Prayer of the Heart accomplishes this through disciplined self-enquiry and embodied worship, which collects the self, transcends the self, annihilates the self, and annihilates the annihilation. Then, Prayer of the Heart changes its character: instead of being a spiritual discipline, it manifests as a way of life, in which the integration and stabilization in the non-dual vision/understanding/experience happens quite naturally and strengthens over the course of years.

To start the practice³, search for the embodied sense of self on the right side of the chest. This is the external expression of the subtle center of individuation. Ramana calls this sense “*aham-sphurana*” (Sanskrit), the radiance of the I. St. Simeon the New Theologian, a 10th century Hesychast, calls it “the place where all the powers of the soul reside”. To work with this center, one has to have a developed capacity to locate one’s concentration “in”, not “on.” One has to keep the focus from slipping away into the lower centers of consciousness in the body, or from jumping into the head. Concentration on locations other than this center will cause the practitioner to recycle the lower domains of the ego, or to be stuck in discursive thought. The journey is through the Gnostic “mind of the heart,” not the rationality of the head. One also has to have developed skills of mindfulness, with the capacity to differentiate the modalities of awareness such as sensing, feeling, imagining and thinking. The Christian analogue of mindfulness is called “wakefulness”, “guarding the senses”, “guarding of the heart”, and is characterized by the capacity to bounce back from the object of awareness onto the witnessing subjectivity. Other necessary beginning skills include the ethics of relatedness with oneself, others, and life at large – everything that allows a successful focus on spiritual matters, and receptivity to one’s own interior contents.

Name of God

Then, one begins associating the breath-paced repetition of the Divine name (the name of Jesus in the case of the Jesus Prayer) with this somatic sense of self in the chest. The choice of the name is important. The challenge of the Prayer of the Heart is to know/love God directly, rather than through a Divine Image, human beloved or Guru. In this relatedness a finite form, a human mind, establishes a link of love with the formless inconceivable deity. This is very difficult for the mind, and it needs an intermediate support, a name. As the practice strengthens, the form is dropped and the mind opens into the presence of infinite potentiality embracing both formless and form, the whole universe. For the majority of people, this has to be a gradual process. The Name serves as an intermediate support for the mind in this transformation.

The Name can be one of the names of God or God’s attributes, which are at the same time the qualities of the character of the aspirant. In Sufism, the experienced guide will suggest a name that either enhances or weakens these qualities, according to his sense of the student’s dynamics. Christians use the

² Ware, K. (1974). *The Power of the Name*. Oxford: SLG Press.

³ These instructions are from the contemporary oral tradition.

name of Jesus, a summum bonum of the highest good and the token of indivisibility between the human and Divine Person.

Moving inward with every breath, the Name flows through the sense of self to the phenomenological origins of the self-awareness in pure consciousness. Ibn-Arabi calls this reverse flow of self-awareness back to its source “the river of Jesus.” It flows into the spiritual heart, the innermost core of the self. The experience of Union can be accessed through this “river” only. Sri Ramana calls it the secret passage of the Heart.

Sense of the Self

The experience of personhood, which rises in fixing attention on the sense of self on the right side of the chest in the process of Prayer of the Heart, brings to consciousness hidden desires, emotions, motivations, as well as past memories and traumas within one’s individual history. Cultivating and integrating this self-sense makes one more completed and whole. The esoteric experiences (only briefly mentioned here) include inward regression into the interiority of consciousness, and meditation on the “I am” principle (*Mahat* principle of Yoga), resolving into the consciousness of pure subjectivity. This absorption in pure being/awareness has to be carefully differentiated from the replicas manufactured by the mind. The ability to be able to discriminate between these subjective states only arises through practice. As St. Simeon the New Theologian says, “Sit in your cell, and it will teach you everything”.

The Journey

In Prayer of the Heart, one is one-on-one with God, eternally bound and exalted by the impossibility of reducing Him/Her to a form. Blessed are the times when the image of the teacher inhabits the heart. But when the heart becomes empty of image, one faces the *mysterium tremendous*, and it eats one up. As St. John the Baptist says, “He must increase, and I must decrease” (John 3:30). This process has countless variations of experience depending on the succession in which the centers of the chest are opened and purified.

“Seeing” the interior operations and contents of consciousness, which otherwise happen “behind the veils”, leads to transformations on all the levels of the self — from the ways one sees things, to relationships, decision making, life choices and finally, one’s understanding of oneself. In this process, as mentioned before, the hidden and latent contents of the psyche become available to awareness, including traces of past trauma, early forms of psychological self-identity and adaptive mechanisms. The rise of the subconscious in Prayer makes for a slow and psychologically challenging process with long periods of integration. The opening of the center on the left side of the chest can be especially difficult because of the cosmic scale of perceptual patterns that arise. Negative or positive, these patterns are perceived as characterizing the universe as a whole. The term known in psychology as the “shadow,” is but a pale reflection of the demons contained by the human heart. The challenge is to own them as one’s own qualities, which usually clashes with one’s moral code and one’s self-image. However, attributing imperfections to oneself is the prerequisite to Union.

As the prayerful repetition of the Name in the current of self-awareness continues, one observes the spontaneously rising changing meanings against the background of an unchanging awareness of self. Mental chatter, emotions, states, imaginings, silence, darkness, deep meanings, arise in succession. One learns to focus attention on the Name, counteracting the thoughts. One also learns to direct emotions to the unknown God within, and the emotions get transmuted and refined. The relationship within the duo of awareness and mind is paradoxical – while mind is in constant flux, the awareness is unchanging. Yet, though we can mentally differentiate one from the other, there is no “spatial gap” between pure awareness and phenomenal awareness. They bask in the indivisibility of existence, are inseparable from one another and distinguished only for the sake of analysis. To understand the unity in diversity in the nature of the mind is the other important foundation for Union. Eventually, attention is reduced into the focus in Spiritual Heart, a psychospiritual center of embodied consciousness in the interior space of the chest.

Spiritual Heart is a junction of self-transcendence, where the individual I-Thou eternally falls into and emerges from I-I. Forceful initially, maturing focused awareness in Spiritual Heart becomes spontaneous. Later, the individual effort is replaced by the “pull” from within. In Indian Tantra, the reverse flow of awareness back to its source is personified as one of the forms of Goddess Kundalini, and

the “pull” inward as Goddess Uma. Both at different times are the consorts of Lord Shiva, the personification of the principle of pure consciousness. While in the beginning navigation towards the source of self-awareness is volitional, by the time of the actualization of the “pull,” this movement is recognized as coming from beyond the individual will. Sufism says that the rise of the intuition of God happens “by invitation [from within, from Deity] only.” This is the invitation to Theosis, partaking in Oneness, or Union.

The Worship

The internal field of the Prayer of the Heart is different from the kind of self-enquiry practiced by many seekers of non-duality. The latter locks the person into the infinitely regressive monolog of an I trying to grasp its own origin within itself. Prayer of the Heart is implicitly a dialog. It is relational, always I-Thou. In the beginning, both individual and God are present, individual as an actuality, God as a potentiality. Then, individual I dissolves, and God only remains. In the flawed self-enquiry the individual I never cancels its existence, but tries to “stretch” itself to encompass God. By contrast, the practitioner of the Prayer consciously intends, invites, and opens to the presence of the Other, the great prototype of all others. S/He releases the claim to individual ownership of consciousness, creating the space to receive. In so doing, awareness opens to receive the cosmic Christ, Ram, Lord, Ishwara, Maha Devi, to comprehend the whole of manifestation. The ascent to the origins of self happens in the contexts of increasing intimacy between the two affectively animated principles, ascending (known, owned, individual, concrete) and descending (transcendental, unknown, disowned, Divine).

Our love is what brings us closer to ourselves. In Prayer, one dares to love beyond the object, to conceive an open-ended feeling directed into the Unknown, to cultivate an opening into pure potentiality. The mood of worshipful receptivity to the Unknown contains the inward motion, which continues in the direction of an increasing sense of intimacy, in which consciousness opens into an ongoing self-transcendence to which Self - Realization is but the door.

“...Search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all the powers of the soul reside. To start with you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later...you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds it entirely luminous and full of discrimination. From then on, from whatever side a distractive thought may appear, before it has come to a completion and assumed a form, the intellect immediately drives it away and destroys it with the invocation of Jesus Christ...the rest you will learn for yourself.”⁴

Repetition of the Name continuously removes distracting thoughts, suspends preconceived ideas and explanations, and purifies experience in its primordial givenness. At the same time, there is a strengthening intention to see the core, the center, the Unknown. The interior content of consciousness becomes discrete and intelligible to awareness. Analogous to the dark fertile ground, sprouting under water and sunlight, the dark internal ground, “fertilized” by focused self-awareness, bursts forth with interior meanings and forms. The practitioner is observing how consciousness produces phenomena from within itself and engages in temporal weaving of the networks of the mind.

The very process of the arising of meaning is witnessed, initially as the impenetrable darkness deploying thoughts and images, and in its mature form – as the immediate arising of phenomena on the divide of pure subject-consciousness and mind. The transition of the pure consciousness into phenomenal consciousness is observed as a triad: “awareness is – awareness is aware of itself – awareness is aware of the meanings rising from awareness”. This opens, beyond contents or meaning, the intuition of the sheer

⁴ St. Simeon the New Theologian. (1782/1995). The three methods of prayer. In G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K.

dynamic creative force, the presence of Holy Spirit, a.k.a. Shakti in Hinduism. This creative force comes from beyond the individual I. It inhabits the trans-spatial and trans-temporal interior vistas, the unqualified and indescribable potentiality, constantly nourishing and supporting our sense of self.

Beatitudes

Says Theophanis the Monk, the Hesychast ascetic of the 8th century:

“...The first step is that of purest prayer,
From this there comes warmth of heart,
And then a strange, a holy energy,
Then tears wrung from the heart, God-given.
Then peace from thoughts of every kind.
From this arises purging of the intellect,
And next the vision of heavenly mysteries.
Unheard of light is born from this ineffably,
And thence, beyond all telling, the heart’s illumination.
Last comes – a step that has no limit
Though compassed in a single line –
Perfection that is endless... “⁵

The Beatitudes of non-dual Prayer include the Oneness of existence and awareness, perfection of Knowing, exaltation of Love, communion with Power, witnessing the flow of Divine creativity, understanding of the inner workings of the Names and many others. Prayer of the Heart, then, is an essential activity of the self, presencing the heart. In this open-ended worship, Union is but a station in the overflowing fecundity of the Real, and non-duality is but a condition for true Prayer.

This essential structure of the Prayer, described by Theophanis, manifests both for somebody who practices over a period of several decades, and can open within a single session of introspection. In a single session of introspection, these are temporary states, and over decades of practice, these may become “stations,” a technical term within Sufism for a stabilized (and repeatable) state, pertinent to the internal architecture of self-awareness in the Spiritual Heart. These are the “secret chambers” of interior space, described by Gnostics and Yogis, to visit or to live in. The analogous structures are present in the introspective phenomenological philosophy of Vedanta as interior “bodies” or “coverings of the Self.” The description of the self as consisting of layers is shared between Eastern and Western spiritual systems acknowledging selfhood.

The Traps

In navigating the internal space through the current of reverse self-awareness, several landmarks are important. First, the archetypes, or the experiences of pure Goodness, Love, Beauty can open. These ecstatic experiences are enticing and captivating, so the practitioner may be stuck in them. However, they do not lead to Union with the Supreme. These are unions, or captivity, by the Names. The practice should continue inward, with the focus on the essential self-awareness, towards the ultimate core of transcendental selfhood. To this end, the Names related to qualities have to be replaced by the Name of the Divine Person, such as Jesus, Ram or Allah.

The other trap consists in following self-awareness back to the source, but forgetting to pray. In such a case, the internal field is defined and filled by the individual I, not by the I-Thou. Thought moves on the level of the mundane world rather than within the area prescribed by Prayer. The process culminates in a regression into a transcendental ego or I, abstracted from the world. There is nothing concrete left, pure consciousness remains, abstracted from spatial forms and temporal flow. This is the existential “cul-de-sac” – the practitioner ends up in the “nothing,” and can become depressed. At the

⁵ Theophanis The Monk (1782/1984). The ladder of divine graces. In G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware

(Trans. and Eds.), *The Philokalia* (V. 3, p.67). Boston: Faber and Faber.

same time, one intuits the simultaneity and sameness of awareness and being, and sees that self exists beyond the body. Because of these two insights, the practitioner may mistakenly think that s/he has “arrived” and may be disappointed by the empty quality of this experience, which is mistaken for “realization.” The Samadhi — absorption of consciousness — of this sort, is known in the oral tradition of Vedanta as “inert”, because it does not render the insight of the living Oneness.

The death of an I

Repetition of the Name of Divine Person lifts the practitioner out of the trap of being caught within one’s individual ego, which is the mistake frequently made by individualistic westerners. For the ultimate uncovering of the living God within, one needs to use the Name that points directly to the Deity, not to the Attributes. This is the stage beyond that of engineering one’s character by using Names related to the qualities of the Divine. Here, the objective is Union. The Name neutralizes the logical chain of thought, and brackets (makes seen and moves aside) the expectations of some particular experience. This continuous bracketing, accompanied by the inward flow of worship in the direction of intimacy with the unknown Other, open the focus on the origins of Being. In the depth of this meditation, one has to pause and internally “give greetings.” This engagement with the unknown God-Other is the pivotal moment, where the emotion of love loses its willed direction and instead becomes a continuum, a field. This is the epiphany of internal I-Thou, where the shift of identification happens. Awareness/existence suddenly slip out of the possession of the individual I, and the separate I becomes nonexistent, a ghostly shadow as it always truly has been. Awareness/existence is directly seen as God’s only. The otherness disappears, and the former Other becomes the only One that Is, the One only exalted Being.

Once again, the individual self does not exist, as it used to be before the practice of Prayer. However, it is not voided, but becomes a locus of manifestation of the Larger Life.

When the individual I ceases to exist, the fullness of life is augmented, expanded and absorbed into the prior God-Other, now God-Self. One is intuited directly by the direct intuition of Itself. The display of consciousness, however, is not blank or homogenous; all things are cognized within the field of this Divine Awareness; the perception continues to function; and the practitioner becomes aware of the innermost mystery of the ontopoietic (self-manifesting) process. The interior meanings of things become available and dynamically unfold, things are seen “as they are,” and the practitioner witnesses the “light” or presence of things emerging from the “darkness” of the sacred indescribable field of one presence of a Divine Person.

Fluctuations

This gestalt develops, states fluctuate, and the intoxication of Union shifts to the “sobriety” of separateness. Consciousness fluctuates back and forth. In each instance of Union, there is a deepening and a wonder. In each instance of Union, there is a momentary ego-death and release of the interior contents of consciousness. Each dissolution of the ego accelerates individual evolution and the sprouting of latent karmas to be exhausted and relinquished. These changes in perception happen against the foundational understanding that there is nothing but the Self. So, the evolving and untangling ego continues, against, in and through the non-dual Self.

The Non-Dual Prayer

Sometimes seekers new to Self-Realization are confused by the following dilemma: if there is nothing but the Self, who prays, and to whom? When the Self is found, there is nothing but the Self. However, since the ego keeps functioning until the death of the body, Prayer remains, but changes its character. It becomes more intimate, involves the complex states of proximity, and then becomes a non-dual prayer. The non-dual prayer deepens non-dual insight. It is the means of establishment in the Self, a pure devotion, and a Self-creating activity of God praying to Himself. Prayer of the Heart — a combination of self-enquiry, Samadhi, and worship — is at its best after the non-dual God-Self is known. It helps to relinquish the remnants of individual identity, and deepen the direct intuition of One Being. Paraphrasing the great Sufi al-Junayd: when praying, the one who knows bows as a human person and gets up as God. One can say with Marguerite Porete “there is nothing but God himself who is, from whom all the things are;” or with Ibn al-Arabi observe the inner workings of God “who created the creation in order to be known.” This is a non-dual Prayer of the Heart.

Homage to Yogi Ramsuratkumar. Salutations to Divine Names – to Sri Dakshinamurti, the first Teacher; the Blessed Mother Kundalini. Prostrations to human teachers and masters, and to the mystery of how they call us. Georgi Gurdjieff. Papaji, Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Radha, Adi Shankara. The perfect master, Sri Ranjit Maharaj. Always abiding as the heart of the universe, may they bestow on us their grace. The sheer goodness is there's. The errors and flaws are only mine.