

## **THE LIFE WORLD OF A SPIRITUAL PERSON**

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Prayer in all religions has a central role to play in so far as it is the preeminent means through which a devotee relates himself to his divine being. And the purpose for which a devotee engages in any form of prayer is to draw himself closer to the divine being in whom he places his faith and trust which in turn is assumed to provide him with an assurance of protection and preservation of his life. Prayer therefore has always been promoted by all religions across the world. In this article an attempt is made to understand the dynamics of prayer as practiced by some major religious groups and its effect on believers. In probing into the effects of prayer I shall draw insights from William James, Rudolf Otto, and Gerardus van der Leeuw who have described religious /prayer experiences from the phenomenological perspective.

### **Definitions of prayer:**

There are as many definitions of prayer as there are different forms of prayer. It is not my intention therefore to exhaustively present such definitions of prayer; suffice to say that a few representative definitions of prayer shall be presented here so as to get a glimpse of some views on prayer.

Meister Eckhart a Christian mystic of the thirteenth century, said about prayer as, "... the one which can virtually gain all things and which is the worthiest work of all, is that which flows from a free mind. The freer the mind is the more powerful and worthy, the more useful, praiseworthy and perfect the prayer and the work become. A free mind can achieve all things. But what is a free mind?"<sup>[1]</sup>

Another important Christian theologian, Thomas Aquinas says that "we pray in order to make ourselves realise that we need to have recourse to his help.... By praying we offer God reverence, inasmuch

as we subject ourselves to him and profess, by praying that we need him as the author of all that is good for us.”<sup>iii</sup>

A Christian mystic of the sixteenth century says, “Prayer is to realize how much it means to you to have God’s friendship and how much he loves you.” (St. Theresa of Avila)

Similarly another Christian saint from the nineteenth century offers this beautiful explanation about prayer: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look, turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.” (St. Therese of Lisieux)

There are also quite significant definitions of prayer found in other religious traditions. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna of Hinduism views spiritual *practice* as: “The human mind is like a pack of mustard seeds. As it is very difficult to gather the seeds that escape out of a torn package and are scattered in all directions, so when the human mind runs in diverse directions and is occupied with many worldly things, it is not a very easy task to collect and concentrate it. The mind of a youth, not running in diverse directions, can be easily fixed on anything, but the mind of an old man being totally occupied with worldly things, it is very hard for him to draw it away from them and fix it on God”.<sup>iiii</sup> In other words, Ramakrishna emphasizes the need for a devotee to have purity of intention in prayer and spiritual exercises.

For a Buddhist prayer is integral to religious practice. The Tibetan Buddhists recite mantras to invite help from various deities, and millions of Buddhists in the East Asian countries recite the name of Amitabha Buddha in the hope of being reborn in the Pure Land. The Buddha himself promoted the practice of *buddhanussati*, recollection of the Buddha, sometimes as a means of comfort: “If you think of me, any fear, terror, or standing of hair on end that may arise in you will pass away” (*Samyutta Nikaya* 11.3). Even the most basic Buddhist practices—metta meditation (“May all beings be happy and well”), the

bodhisattva vow (“May I attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings”), and the vows of refuge (“I take refuge in the Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*”)—contain a spirit of invocation.<sup>[iv]</sup>

### **Bodily Disposition for Prayer:**

Prayer as a spiritual exercise has to follow certain parameters laid down by each religious tradition or spiritual leadership. One cannot indulge in spiritual exercise with a laissez-faire attitude; it would be considered non acceptable to the community that protects and preserves certain spiritual traditions. As for instance, in the prayer practice of the early Church, various poses, gestures, and bodily positions were used. People prayed standing, or kneeling following the example of Prophet Elias – that is, standing on one’s knees with one’s head bowed to the ground – or lying on the floor with outstretched hands, or standing with raised hands. Prostrations were used in prayer: both full prostrations and bows from the waist, as well as the sign of the cross. Among all the various traditional positions of the body in prayer, only a few have been retained in current practice.

A question may be asked: why is the body so important in prayer? Why can’t one simply pray in spirit while lying in bed or sitting on an armchair? In principle, one can pray both lying down and sitting: in special circumstances, such as in illness or when traveling, it may be done. But under normal circumstances it is necessary while praying to make use of the dispositions of the body that have been preserved in the tradition of the Church. The fact is that body and spirit are inextricably linked in man, and the spirit cannot act completely autonomous from the body. It was no accident that the ancient Fathers said: “If the body does not labor in prayer, then prayer will remain fruitless.”<sup>[v]</sup>

The bodily aspect is quite prominent in Buddhist tradition as well. They focus more on meditation and as a preparation for it, they keep chanting mantras. Theravada adherents chant parts of Buddhist scriptures. Often, while chanting or meditating, adherents kneel with their palms

together and fingers pointing up, and then raise their head and then lower their head and body so their forearms touch the ground. This gesture is used to greet, show gratitude, or make a request. In meditation, it symbolizes veneration and the giving of respect. Theravada Buddhists repeat this three times while reciting different parts of the Pali Canon, the Buddhist Scriptures. Worshipers bow their head to end the chant or meditation.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Hinduism is also quite specific when it comes to the bodily disposition while offering prayer or worship. The Hindus pray at a temple on a regular basis. When they arrive at a temple, they must be barefooted to enter it. Shoes are considered soiled and are removed even when entering your own home, so how much more so for a temple that is considered holy. Another commonly quoted reason is that “the more pain you have before god, the happier he is.” This belief prompts many Hindus to crawl on their hands and knees or pull themselves on their bellies through the temple, or to walk barefoot for hours or days in order to placate their gods.<sup>[viii]</sup>

### **Psychological disposition for prayer**

If bodily disposition is so crucial to offering worship to God or deities as understood in different religions, there is another disposition that is equally if not more important and that is the psychological disposition of the devotee. Although it is acknowledged by several modern psychologists and religious thinkers that religious practices and experiences can and do have an influence on the psychological state of a person, the two are not identical. They are separate in the sense that their orientations are distinct: the psychological experience influences one’s behavioral pattern while the religious experiences shapes one’s values towards the very mystery of life. The problem arises when the two are not delineated; they are often viewed together creating a confusion regarding the validity of both. That is to say when a genuine religious experience is mistakenly identified as a

psychological phenomenon and a mere psychological condition is taken for religious experience one is bound to meet with problems related to both. It is therefore important to view each one as valid and having its own place and significance in a person's well being. A sound psychological disposition is necessary for a healthy religious experience. As for instance Carl Jung often associated the psychological with the mystical experience. Citing his own early experience of visions he finds a credible link between the two for which he was criticized by many other psychologists including Sigmund Freud. Although initially Jung was quite impressed by Freud's understanding of human consciousness he later turned critical of him especially his obsession with neurosis. "Apparently neither Freud nor his disciples could understand what it meant for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis if not even the master could deal with his own neurosis. When, then, Freud announced his intention of identifying theory and method and making them into some kind of dogma, I could no longer collaborate with him; there remained no choice for me but to withdraw."<sup>[viii]</sup>

Carl Jung however did not want to limit his psychoanalysis to any one dogma but rather he wanted to understand his fantasies and dreams from his unconscious mind. The more he studied these phenomena, the more he realized they were **not from his own memories, but from the collective unconscious**. He was particularly curious about *mandala* drawings, which date back thousands of years in all cultures. He studied Christian Gnosticism, alchemy, and the *I Ching* and other eastern traditions that gave him more insight into the collective unconscious. Jung therefore was convinced of the fact that right psychological disposition will eventually help one to connect to a higher power, that is spiritual in nature. In other words, religious experience—according to Jung cannot be identified with what is psychological. Psychological factors could only be carriers of religious content.

William James, the well known American Psychologist and philosopher has also recognised the interdependence of religious experience and psychology. He is of the opinion that personal religious experience can benefit one's psychological status, so much so that one can even experience healing. Changing of beliefs can and does affect the psychological disposition of a person, because human beings are not passive objects, rather they are active participants in affecting reality. All one needs to do is unleash the force for change within through belief. Once you introduce faith to your life, religious or not, anything becomes possible. <sup>[ix]</sup>

### **Types of Prayer:**

#### **a. *Vocal Prayer***

Once a person is physically and psychologically well disposed one can hope to enter into an experience of prayer. And there are many ways of entering into this experience of prayer. One of the most common ways of prayer is the vocal prayer where the devotee recites prayers either relying on an external source or from his own memory. Reciting prayers involves the bodily functions, particularly of its voice generating capability. Most religions promote this way of experiencing prayer not just for individuals but more so in common worship. Just as speech is necessary to human survival and thriving, vocal prayer is necessary to spiritual growth and holiness. While prayer is defined by the inner movement of the heart toward God, as bodily beings, with voices and ears, it's fitting that the content of our hearts should be expressed outwardly in words. In this way, we pray with our whole being—body and spirit—and we also are able to pray with others. In doing so, we follow the example of Jesus, who prayed vocally in the synagogue with friends, family, and strangers, and in private by himself <sup>[xi]</sup>

#### **b. *Mental Prayer:***

As vocal prayer is natural to humanity, so too is the non-verbal means of communication with God. This can be better understood if we recall an experience of being with a close family member or friend and being able to communicate with him or her with a look or body language, or even knowing what he or she was going to say intuitively? We are used to communicating silently because of our deep knowledge of those close to us. This gives us a glimpse into internal or mental prayer: meditation and contemplation.

**c. *Meditation:***

Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ." <sup>[xi]</sup> Meditation requires concentration and commitment that can be difficult to sustain, but there are many things that can help us. First among these are the Scriptures and other spiritual books. Engaging the drama of Scripture or a spiritual work with our minds, imagination, and emotions allows us to enter into the scene as a character. We get a chance to react to the situations and engage the other characters. In this way we get to learn about ourselves in evaluating our reactions, and we open ourselves up to God's presence in his Word<sup>[xiii]</sup>

In addition to the Scriptures and writings of spiritual authors, we can also find inspiration for meditation in icons and other sacred art, or in God's work in creation, history, and our own lives. If we are humble and faithful, all these things can move our hearts to thoughtful reflection so that we can discover how God might be speaking to us through them and what he wants us to do in response.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

#### *d. Contemplation*

Prayer can go beyond meditation where we actively engage our thought, imagination, emotion, and desire to union with God himself and the experience of his love in contemplation.

St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), describes contemplative prayer as “a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.” This type of prayer goes beyond words to let us simply be in God’s presence. It means that contemplation is to make ourselves quiet, “gather up” our hearts, and sit in silence and spend time with God. It’s a time of profound communion and rest.

Just like a human relationship where we only grow through the process of building trust and openness, contemplative prayer is only possible if we make ourselves vulnerable to God. In doing so, we allow God into our souls in a deeper and more profound way. This involves effort on our part, but ultimately, contemplation is a grace that God gives. <sup>[xiv]</sup>

#### **Experience of Prayer:**

In all forms of prayer there is an effort on the part of human beings as well as divine grace. Both have to go hand in hand in order to experience the depth of true prayer. What kind of experience do human beings go through while praying? There are a number of descriptions given by various authors who dealt with the human experience of prayer. We shall consider a few of them in order to understand this dynamics better.

William James, a psychologist and Philosopher in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*<sup>[xv]</sup> described four characteristics of mystical or religious experience. According to him, such an experience is: (a) transient – the experience is temporary; the individual soon returns to a "normal" frame of mind. Feels outside normal perception of space and time, (b) ineffable – the experience cannot be



adequately put into words, (c) noetic – the individual feels that he or she has learned something valuable from the experience. Feels to have gained knowledge that is normally hidden from human understanding, (d) passive – the experience happens to the individual, largely without conscious control. In the spiritual experience therefore there is a distinct consciousness where a person is in contact with a higher power; it cannot be equated with mere psychological experience though it is effected in and through one's psychic faculty. It is in other words, as Schleiermacher would state it even more clearly in the first edition of *On Religion*: Religion neither seeks metaphysics to determine and explain the nature of the universe, nor like morals to advance and perfect the universe... It is neither thinking nor acting but intuition and feeling... It is reverent attention and submission in child-like passivity to be stirred and filled by the Universe's immediate influences<sup>[xvii]</sup>. It is therefore primarily an experience of feeling and intuition of the human consciousness that leads one to a distinctive level of divine experience.

### **Numinous Experience**

Rudolf Otto in describing the religious experience equates it with mystical or the numinous experience that is the feeling of being in the presence of something greater - the *numen*. He introduced his readers to the term '*numinous*' in his seminal book, *The Idea of the Holy*.<sup>[xviii]</sup> His purpose was to draw their attention to the distinctive features of religious experience, which he regarded as in danger of being confused with other, non-religious, experiences. This, he believed, was particularly well illustrated by the practice of reducing the experience of holiness to a moral experience, thus ensuring that what was uniquely religious about the holy was ignored. To combat this spiritual malaise and intellectual confusion, Otto proposed that the experience of the holy be understood as a complex one, which is the result of the uniting of a rational experience with a non-rational, irreducibly religious, numinous experience. The burden of the argument which followed was to provide an account of the non-rational aspect of the experience of the

holy, which was sufficiently detailed to justify Otto's use of the term 'numinous'.<sup>[xviii]</sup>

Testimonies from those claiming to have had a religious experience refer to a sense of being in the presence of a tremendous power, yet feeling distinctly separate from it. And this experience of the holy for Otto is not on the rational level, but pre-eminently in the 'non-rational' or 'supra-rational' elements or moments. As Otto puts it, "I have ventured to write of that which may be called 'non-rational' or 'supra-rational' in the depth of the divine."<sup>[xix]</sup> Elaborating on the numinous experience Otto speaks of three moments or aspects of numinous experience, the *mysterium*, the *tremendum* and the *fascinatum*, and suggests that they may appear either in isolation or in conjunction with one another. The *mysterium* is described as the ineffable, absolute Other, incomprehensible and enigmatic. Otto says, 'Whatever has loomed upon the world of his ordinary concerns as something terrifying and baffling to the intellect; whatever among natural occurrences or events in the human, animal or vegetable kingdom has something astir in wonder and astonishment – such things have ever aroused in man and became endued with the 'daemonic dread' and 'numinous' feeling, so as to become 'portents', 'prodigies' and 'marvels.'<sup>[xx]</sup> The adjective *tremendum* has three predominant features, namely 'awfulness', 'overpoweringness' and 'energy' or 'urgency.'

In Otto's explication of the numinous experience he draws some insights from Schleiermacher's view of religious experience as 'feeling of absolute dependence.' Here Schleiermacher claims that religious experience occurs not at the conceptual level but at the feeling level. That is why he makes a distinction between religious consciousness and the metaphysical and morals. And this religious consciousness leads one to a total dependence on the infinite and it is immediately experienced which can be deciphered through intuition. Otto further says that the religious experience deciphered through intuition is *sui generis* and irreducible to any other. It cannot be

conceptualized; it can however be described through analogies. Otto has therefore been drawing analogies from the realm of natural feeling as they serve as foundation for understanding of numinous feelings that are distinct and yet analogues to it. He does so because human experiences are complex and it is not possible to compartmentalise them into neatly demarcated areas.

Otto also describes the numinous experience in terms of ‘ideograms’. These ideograms have less than a ‘genuine intellectual concept’ and he uses them because they point to some established meanings that are intersubjectively shared. These ideograms are mostly found in the myths and religious rituals.

### **Experience of Power.**

If prayer is one of numinous experience for Rudolf Otto, it is an experience of ‘power’ according to Gerardus van der Leeuw. Van der Leeuw through his investigations into religious experience wants to decipher the essence of religion as lived by the believers themselves. He does not pass any value judgment on the religious experience of people but certainly probes into their claims in order to understand their essence. It is ‘power’ - the essence of religious experience – that is manifested everywhere, and it is this man who seeks to appropriate to himself in order to enhance his life. Van der Leeuw says, “Man does not accept life as given to him; he seeks power in life, something that is superior, and he tries to find meaning in life and to arrange this into a significant whole.”<sup>[xxi]</sup>

This experience of power begins with his man’s encounter with something mysterious and vague ‘something Other’ that is highly exceptional and extremely impressive. This need not immediately be equated with God as we usually understand but it could be ‘the purely practical recognition that this Object is a departure from all that is usual and familiar.’<sup>[xxii]</sup> Man recognises that this exceptional ‘Other’ has

consequences in his life since it generates power. Therefore he begins to either pay obeisance or control it for his own benefits.

Van der Leeuw corroborates his claims with the experiential evidence found in a wide range of literature and religions from around the world. As for instance he equates power with concepts such as *mana* (Melanesian name for the infinite) *orenda* (name for power in Iroquois) and *wakanda* (word for the originator according to the Sioux Indians), *manitu* (word for power in Algonquins of North West America), *petara* (word for power among the Dyaks of Borneo) found in diverse religious traditions. All these concepts point to the experience of power that is manifested in anything impressive or exceptional.

In experiencing this power present in the world, van der Leeuw opines that the ‘primitive man’ in contrast to the ‘modern man’ possesses a different attitude towards all objects around him. The primitive attitude that van der Leeuw refers to is not to be taken as a characteristic of a specified period of time in history, or as a definite stage of development in religious consciousness. It is rather a ‘structure of mind’ where the primitive man views the world not in terms of subject – object dichotomy but as an undifferentiated whole. And man encounters this unitary world in order to experience Power and to obtain it for improving his life. <sup>[xxiii]</sup>

Because of the primitive man’s undifferentiated attitude towards his environment he views it as sacred and powerful. And he knows that power manifests itself in everything in the environment, and therefore he considers all of them worthy of worship. Van der Leeuw suggests that for the primitive man, “a thing is the bearer of Power; it can effect something, it has its own life which reveals itself, and once again wholly practically.” <sup>[xxiv]</sup> This power however is manifested not only in material objects, but also present in the animate beings albeit in an impersonal manner. When it comes to human beings this power is pre-

eminently manifested in their exceptionally impressive nature: in the case of woman she is compared with the earth that is powerful and creative; a man can also be viewed as a savior who has exceptional and miraculous character. His birth, epiphany, deeds of salvation, death and resurrection are therefore exceptional and most impressive in nature.

Van der Leeuw also refers in his writings to a strange source of power that is the dead. The primitive man does not treat the dead as totally annihilated but still as potent. The cult of the dead in many cultures according to van der Leeuw arose not out of any primitive psychology but the result of the actual experience of the dead.<sup>[xxv]</sup> When one encounters the dead there is an eerie feeling within him, and that feeling usually connects him to the world of the dead.

Man therefore experiences power manifesting itself in various forms, and it is his constant endeavor to either possess or control it for his own benefit and advancement in life. Spiritual advancement occurs in man when he is able to harness this experience of power in his every day contact with the environment. By experiencing this power, man shares in it and that is manifested in his relation to the divine and world around him. In other words the power that man tries to possess or control is also drawn in by him. Isn't this akin to the Vedantic understanding of *aham brahmasmi* – I am Brahman – that is the self or the *Atman* is identical with *Brahman* which is the ultimate realization or unitary experience? This unitary experience is possible only when man breaks the bonds of ignorance borne out by his false identification with the material existence in the world. In other words man's experience of power presents him with a possibility to transcend the material existence and assume a spiritual identity.

### **Conclusion:**

Man's quest for the divine forms the rationale behind his prayers and rituals. In most religious traditions these prayers and rituals are prescribed and are to be adhered to in their smallest details; violation of

them usually amounts to disloyalty to the religions and their long established traditions. However these prayers and rituals in addition to their communal significance also become a means for individuals to experience the divine presence in a variety of ways as described by a couple of authors that we have discussed in the paper. The finality of all prayers and rituals is to quench the thirst in man for the divine and that can be achieved in and through his encounter with it in ways that are most familiar as well as entirely bizarre – all valid for the one who experiences it.

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<sup>[ii]</sup>As quoted in Talks given at the Eckhart Society One Day Conference at Newcastle on 18 March 2000 by John Orme Mills OP, *Meister Eckhart and Prayer*, ref. July 16, 2020

<sup>[iii]</sup>As quoted in in Prayer and contemplation /by John Walsh OP, ref. July 16, 2020.

<sup>[iiii]</sup>Ramakrishna Mission, Delhi, Website, Some teachings of Ramakrishna. May 17, 2021

<sup>[v]</sup>The Buddhist Review, TRICYCLE, Henna Tennant Moore, Buddhism's Higher Power, Spring 2016

<sup>[vi]</sup>Pravmir.com, Orthodox Christianity and the world. On prayer IX: The disposition of the body at prayer. May 18, 2021)

<sup>[vii]</sup>Caroline Anderson, The Posture of Prayer: A Look at how Buddhists Pray, IMB, People & Places, August 9, 2019,

<sup>[viii]</sup>Madison Strauder, The Posture of Prayer: A Look at how Hindus pray, IMB, People & Places, June 28, 2019

<sup>[ix]</sup>Aniela Jaffe and Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Fontana Press Edition, 1961, p. 167

<sup>[x]</sup>Luke Rowley, *The Varieties of Religious Experience Summary*, Culture, Mindfulness, Self-improvement, Society, Spirituality,

<sup>[xi]</sup>As quoted in Louis St Hilaire: *An Introduction to the Types of Prayer*, September 11, 2019 (St Paul Centre for Biblical Theology)

<sup>[xii]</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2708

<sup>[xiii]</sup>Ibid, 2705.

<sup>[xiv]</sup>Ibid, 2706

<sup>[xv]</sup>Ibid, 2713

<sup>[xvi]</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, The Modern Library New York, 2002.

- [xvi] Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 1799, p. 277
- [xvii] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W Harvey, (London: Oxford University Press, 1958)
- [xviii] Leon Schlamm, *The Holy: The Meeting Point Between Analytical Psychology and Religion*, in Joel- Munuhin (ed) *Jung and the Monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Routledge, London, 1994. P.22
- [xix] *Ibid*, p. vii
- [xx] Rudolf Otto, *op.cit*, p.66
- [xxi] Jacques Waardenburg, “Leeuw, Gerardus van der,” in Mircea Eliade (ed) *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol. 8, (New York: Macmillian, 1987), p. 494
- [xxii] G van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A study in Phenomenology*, trans. J.E. Turner, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 23
- [xxiii] *Ibid*, p.37
- [xxiv] *Ibid*, p. 37
- [xxv] *Ibid*,p. 129

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