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Anthropology of Prayer

We have tried to explain the nature of prayer by saying that "prayer is the breathing of the soul," comparing it with an essential act of physical life. Yet in essence this physical factor is not just a simple metaphor but encompasses the reality of prayer.

Prayer is an activity of the heart, it is true, but not of the heart alone. On the one hand it is true that prayer is basically "the breathing of the soul," "the breathing of love," or "the aspiration of the Holy Spirit living and loving within us." But if we wish to consider the diverse dimensions of prayer, we must take into account the ontological and psychosomatic aspects of the human person. In a word, we must consider the "anthropology" of prayer and not rely on spiritual theology alone.

Many erroneous or confused ideas about prayer concerning "prayer and life," for example, or "action and contemplation" arise when theology tries to go beyond its own limits into the field of anthropology and explain everything by its own principles. Although the expression "anthropology of prayer" may sound profound, the reality is quite simple: that we are composed of body and soul, but united in one substance. This simple, commonsense fact will help us with the real issues of prayer, because the most sublime realities often lie veiled in the simplicity of ordinary life.

"Pray Without Ceasing" (The Way of a Pilgrim)

Long ago I read *The Way of a Pilgrim*.⁽¹⁹⁾ Translated into numerous languages, this book has moved many readers. It narrates the prayer experience of an Orthodox Russian of nearly a century ago. Day and night he struggled interiorly, pondering how to follow the teaching of St. Paul to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). Then he encountered a hermit during a pilgrimage and was shown a book entitled the *Philokalia* ("Love of Beauty") and received guidance on its method, called "hesychasm," a way of prayer handed down in the Orthodox Church from ancient times. The word *hesychasm* is derived from the Greek verb *hesychasein*, which means "to be quiet." According to this way of prayer one can attain union with God by repeating with every breath "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." This has been called the Jesus Prayer. To those familiar with Buddhism, it suggests *Senshu-Nembutsu* and *Shomyo-Nembutsu* (the repeated invocation of the name of "Amida-Buddha") of the Pure Land sect of Buddhism. This ascetic practice of the Orthodox Church can also be compared to the Buddhist practice of counting repetitions of the name of Buddha by the number of times one walks round a specified stele or pagoda.⁽²⁰⁾ The unknown pilgrim devoted all his energy to repeating the Jesus Prayer. At first he managed to repeat it orally 3,000 times a day. Greater application soon enabled him to repeat it 6,000 times, and finally as many as 12,000 times a day. This prayer, prayed breath by breath, gradually becomes more and more interiorized, more and more part of one's physical make-up, until it beats with the rhythm of one's very heart: "Lord" is uttered with one heartbeat, "Jesus" with the second, "Christ" with the third, and so on, the words pulsing with each beat of the heart. In this way the Jesus Prayer keeps time with the beating of the heart. The pilgrim in the book learned the discipline and was able to pray in a way that went beyond the reach of his own natural ability. "With each beat of the heart": This does not mean placing the hand on the chest or feeling the pulse. Rather, one visualizes one's heart and its beating and repeats with each breath, "Lord...Jesus...Christ...have mercy...on me...a sinner." Then, the pilgrim tells us, the Jesus Prayer, breathed in with each inhalation and out with each exhalation, seems to enter and leave the heart. Thanks to this

seemingly rudimentary method of prayer, the unknown pilgrim continued to experience profound prayer.

I commenced this practice for the length of one or two hours at a time but, with progress, I gradually prolonged the duration until, eventually, I became able to absorb myself in this exercise throughout almost the whole day. When fatigued or overtaken by sluggishness or doubts, I lost no time in opening *Philokalia* and, by reading the passage referring to the discipline of the heart, zeal and exhilaration in prayer again welled up. After the space of about three weeks, I began to feel a kind of pain in my heart, but this was later transformed into a very pleasant warmth and serenity. Encouraged by this experience, I became further absorbed in the practice of this prayer. I directed my all efforts toward this practice and made it my great delight. From that moment on, I began to perceive varied sorts of feelings in my mind and heart. In addition, a sweet warmth pervaded my whole body and I experienced sometimes the presence of God within me. As the result of the unspeakable joy felt in the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ, I was able to understand profoundly the implications of our Lord Christ's own words: The kingdom of God is within you.' **(21)**

This bears a certain similarity to familiar Catholic prayers like aspirations, the rosary, and so forth. In fact, the unknown pilgrim always carried a rosary with him and used it to continue his Jesus Prayer. We find a close resemblance to this in the practice of the "presence of God" handed down within the Catholic Church from ancient times, especially within religious orders. Nor is it necessary to search the ancient past to find such customs as briefly interrupting conversation every quarter of an hour to recite the Hail Mary in an undertone, or ringing the bell or sounding clappers as a reminder of the presence of God. When I entered the monastery in 1951, this practice was still retained in some places. However, the task of giving the signal every fifteen minutes proved to be needlessly nerve-racking and was soon abolished. Nevertheless, in Spain one can still find young students from convent schools who faithfully tuck a short prayer into conversations, an act that provokes ridicule from some and admiration from others. "Embodied prayer," the "corporality of prayer," and "to pray with the body" are current expressions that relate to Oriental yoga or Zen. Even Christianity, as we have seen, has not ignored the role of the body in prayer. Whether it is yoga or Zen in the East, or Christian prayer in the West, it is the prayer of human beings, and without the body there is no human prayer. Still, we must say that the role of the body is far more significant in the Asian tradition than in European (and especially Latin) Christianity. It is worth noting that the anonymous pilgrim of *The Way of the Pilgrim* was an Orthodox Christian, formed by a prayer method outside the Latin Church.

East and West differ in mentality and temperament. Also, while Christianity has a theocentric character, Oriental religions have an ascetical character centering on "self-realization." **(22)** The intellectual tendency in the spirituality of Western Christianity and the tendency toward an experiential basis in Oriental religions each presents significant advantages and disadvantages. I would like to clarify these problems as far as I can and, I hope, deepen our understanding of the fundamentals of prayer.

Oneness of Mind and Body

We humans are composed of body and spirit, and the two elements form one being. Physically we do not differ from the other animals. Yet even though we are comparatively weak and puny in physical terms, we are endowed with a spirit that lifts us above everything in the universe. As Pascal put it, the human person is the mysterious "thinking reed" **(23)** Body and spirit: to place these in opposition is to assent to the Platonic concept of the body as imprisoning the mind or spirit on earth. The mystery of human nature consists not only in our intellectual superiority or in the infinite vastness and depth of our heart. We possess a noble soul that leads us to soar to shores beyond our present existence, making us ask such questions as "What is eternity?" or "Does God exist?" On the one hand, we sometimes feel joy and sometimes sadness over trivial matters. At times we writhe in anguish and are even tempted by the thought of suicide.

What is the "mystery of human existence"? From what does the "inexplicable," the "riddle of life," arise? A Japanese poem says:

From cradle to grave,

from beginning to end

the life of human beings

is nothing but an enigma.

The answer is simple: leaving aside complicated explanations, we can say that the paradox of human existence comes from the inexplicable metaphysical fact that the two opposing poles (antipodes) of body and spirit form in us a single being.

This synthesis of two contraries characterizes all human activity, including prayer we might even say, *particularly* prayer. Indeed, if we look at such activities as eating and sleeping, the paradox doesn't arise, since these involve only the simplest physical activities, opening our mouths or lying down. On the other hand, cultural, scientific, or artistic activities are the fruit of our intelligence, that is, manifestations of the spirit.

Prayer, however, cannot be reduced simply and easily to one or the other of these categories. According to our previously considered definitions, if prayer is "conversing with God," "a lifting up of the heart to God," an "intimate conversation between persons who love each other," then prayer could be considered a purely spiritual activity. But then the anonymous Russian pilgrim's "practice of continual prayer" constantly repeating the Sacred Name would lose its sense.

In his adolescence the Zen master Dôgen⁽²⁴⁾ is said to have criticized the *nembutsu* (the Buddhist invocation to Amida Buddha) as a futile practice similar to the aimless croaking of frogs in a spring paddy field;⁽²⁵⁾ but Dôgen was far from unaware of the bodiliness of prayer. On the contrary, more than any other Japanese master, it was he who held such prayer in highest esteem, through his dedication to *zazen* (i.e., zen sitting). "Not trying to possess or seeking to understand, but simply practicing *zazen*," he said. To disregard all human acts and unite oneself wholly with the activity of *zazen* is considered an act of the Buddha himself, and corresponds to Blondel's "pure act"⁽²⁶⁾ in the philosophical sense. "To expect nothing, to understand nothing, merely to sit," says Dôgen. The simple fact of sitting brings about union of heart and body without any voluntary act of the faculties. Even Shinran, who attained the summit of Buddhist perfection by the different route of invoking the name of Amida (an exercise known as *Shomyo Nembutsu*) insisted on understanding the relationship between *Myogo Fushigi* and *Seigan Fushigi*, that is, between the repeated invocation of Amida's name and Amida's vow to help humanity. Some of the learned priests of his day would ask the illiterate faithful, "Do you make the invocations because you trust in the mystery of Amida's vow to save humankind, or because you rely on the invocations themselves?" On hearing of this, Shinran, in the *Tan-i-Sho*, reproached the scholarly priests for playing intellectual games that would only confuse the simple. In terms of Western philosophy, Shinran rejected the idea of placing the spiritual (the doctrine of Buddha's vow) and the material (the mere oral repetition of the name) in opposition. In his thought the two are complementary and inseparable, like the two sides of a sheet of paper: the mystery of Amida's vow gives power to the invocation and the invocation applies the power to our lives. The root of the relationship is, again, the unity of body and soul in the human person.

St. **Teresa** of Avila, the eminent teacher of mental prayer, dwells on this subject in her *Way of Perfection*: "Once [an elderly nun] came to me very afflicted because she didn't know how to practice mental prayer nor could she contemplate; she could only pray vocally. I asked her how she was praying, and I saw that though she was tied to the Our Father she experienced pure contemplation."⁽²⁷⁾ Pascal also pointed out the close interrelation between body and soul in prayer: "Try'to convince yourself, not by piling up proofs of God, but by subduing your passions. You desire to attain faith.' Follow the way by which [other believers] set out, acting as if they already believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally cause you to believe'."⁽²⁸⁾ Body and soul, posture and prayer mutually influence each other. It is true that the praying heart leads to prayerful posture. However, Pascal sought to teach that the prayerful posture induces faith and prayer.

I know not if God or Buddha really exist.

But I wonder; whence comes this calm that flows over me when I join my hands? The sorrow of the right hand is shared by the left;

The resolution of the left hand is sustained by the right.

Over them time passes in peace.

I wonder who it is who taught me to join my hands.

Toshiko Takada

In Japan letters are sometimes concluded with the word *gassho* (joining hands). Both the word and the action signify respect and adoration, just as the act of kneeling spontaneously arouses humility and deference. It would be an idealistic error to reduce prayer to an interior act of the intellect or will sufficient to establish contact with God or Buddha. Even distractions, often regarded as troublesome problems, are phenomena issuing from the very fact of the presence of the body. There is no way for distractions to occur in pure spirits like the angels, the saints in heaven, and God himself.

Indeed, the "corporeity of prayer" is an important subject in relation to human prayer. Not long ago a French Carmelite priest wrote a book on Eastern methods of prayer, entitled *Prier avec le Corps* (Praying with the Body). He pointed out that prayer methods in the church, especially in the Latin Church, have long overlooked the mutual influence between spirit and body. Visible Water and Invisible Water

According to an old philosophical axiom, *agere sequitur esse* (acting follows being, i.e., everything acts according to the kind of thing it is). Being and acting are likewise intimately linked in a cause-effect relationship within the human person. In other words, whether we like it or not, we human beings are composed of two inseparable parts, body and spirit, and our actions are marked by the same dual character. Even prayer, though considered a purely spiritual act, is in reality rooted in the bodily element. This is the essential difference between human prayer and what we might imagine concerning the prayer of incorporeal beings, such as the saints in heaven, the angels, and God. That the body plays a large role in human prayer, particularly in prayer as an ascetical exercise, can be clearly understood from the examples of *zazen*, the *nembutsu* invocation [of the Amida Buddha], or the Jesus Prayer of the anonymous pilgrim. If the substantial role of the body is thus emphasized, then we can see that the allusions made to the body for the understanding of prayer are not merely metaphors but expressions of reality. Let us therefore use the example of the relationship between the body and water, and apply our findings to the understanding of prayer. It goes without saying that water is necessary to physical life. The human body is composed of as much as 70% contained in food, and drinking water. The first two forms are invisible and hence could be called "invisible water," and the third form is "visible water." We would perish instantly if humidity were totally absent, since even in dry climates we can suffer from abnormal dehydration. The vital necessity of this invisible air moisture to us, who even inhale it while sleeping, may be applied to God, without whom we would instantly die. Prayer, compared to this humidity, is the ceaseless breathing of God and the soul, or what is termed "the presence of God." "Indeed [God] is not far from each one of us. For in him we live, and move, and have our being' " (Acts 17:27-28).

Our awareness that we are well sustained by that presence of God who does not fail us even for a moment is the foundation of unceasing prayer. The next type of invisible water is that contained in food. This water might be compared to love, whereas the food would be the everyday events of life that ought to be vivified by love, the heart of prayer. This is what we call the "prayer of life" or "life as prayer."

To sustain bodily life, however, these two types of formless water humidity and the water content of food are insufficient. We also need to drink a quantity of water everyday. Similarly, we need to have a prayer life or to provide a special time for prayer. We must take these three forms into account to understand the nature of prayer. In fact, St. Paul's exhortation to "pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17) gives various ways of understanding prayer, according to ways of understanding the presence of God. The anonymous pilgrim strove to *assimilate* the ceaseless presence of God, as the body assimilates humidity, in his practice of the Jesus Prayer with each breath, or by matching a short ejaculatory prayer with each heartbeat. Others accept

St. Paul's exhortation to "pray constantly" as analogous to the second form of prayer, that of the invisible water in food. Louis Evely remarks in his *Prayer of Modern Man*: "Modern spirituality has to take account of the fact that men now have less and less time to devote to prayer' and cannot pray at set times. We absolutely must have a spirituality of action' if we are to learn to pray ceaselessly'."

We ought to be able to ask St. Paul in person what exactly he meant by saying "pray constantly"! Surely he was not recommending that we repeat the Jesus Prayer 12,000 times a day, or advocating the idea that "living daily life becomes a prayer." Nor do I think that he meant only for us to interweave short prayers into pauses between activities. In this connection Louis Evely continues: "If you must talk, wait a second and consult the Holy Spirit; be like someone receiving a visit or listening; without your knowing it, grace will be your guide. When you are questioned, swallow your reply and wait a second to hear what you should say; it is particularly when you talk that you must know how to listen. If you are going to see someone, pause for a moment so that you can take Another with you."**(29)**

How to pray in the course of busy modern life is an important problem. It would be highly dangerous, however, to endorse the cheap solution of thinking indiscriminately that "every activity itself is a prayer." As far as incorporeal beings such as angels, the heavenly saints, and God are concerned, we can say that every activity or every facet of life becomes a prayer for them. Assuredly, they do not need the two hours of mental prayer as prescribed in the Carmelite Rule, nor the long hours of *zazen*, nor 10,000 *nembutsu* invocations. However, we humans on earth are not angels. We have bodies. To forget this common fact is to confuse the intimate essence of prayer with the elements that compose it. When we put excessive emphasis on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of prayer, prayer itself may be neglected or even lost. To quote Evely further: "Christianity leaves the famous and false distinction between action and contemplation far behind: it is participation; its prayer is love in action and its action is inspired by love."**(30)** Here is a dazzlingly beautiful theory of prayer, but unfortunately not a very realistic one. It is a great error to dilute the issue of prayer versus activity by the ideological prescription that the essence of Christianity is love. The celebrated Carlyle also insisted vehemently that "essentially, all true labor is prayer" and "all prayer that is not labor had better find refuge with the Brahmins, the antimoralists, the dancing dervishes, or wherever else."**(31)** Joseph Pieper, in his well-known book *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*,**(32)** severely denounces the theory that labor itself is prayer. On the one hand, we find the anonymous pilgrim, Zen-practicing ascetics, or the contemplatives of religious orders for whom "continual prayer is their life"; on the other hand are those, like Carlyle and Evely, who persist in their theory that "life itself is a continual prayer." Even some religious who are active and involved in modern society share this latter opinion.

How are we to reconcile these two apparently opposite interpretations of prayer? This represents a basic problem for all spirituality and especially for religious life. When there is a long monastic tradition, as in the Catholic Church, we need to face this problem seriously in light of the important contemporary phenomena of modernity and inculturation. We can no longer accept the simplistic idea that "prayer as one's whole life" is for contemplative religious orders and "one's whole life as prayer" is for the active orders.

Carlyle's words, "My life, as it is, is wholly prayer," sound far removed from the humility of true prayer. On the other hand, it would be wrong to persuade ourselves and others that prayer consists solely in observance of the daily prayer routine of religious life, without any serious engagement in life itself.

Since this problem goes beyond the scope of this book and pertains to the theology of the religious life, it will not be developed here. Here I am limiting myself to problems pertaining directly to prayer.

Concentration on Prayer

Whatever its definition or form, whether it be "raising of the heart to God," an "intimate conversation with God," or "remaining silent before God," the common feature of all kinds of prayer should be its essential nature, which is the ceaseless deepening of our oneness with God. The definition of prayer as "the breath of the soul" expresses this well: whether awake or asleep, prayer (like breathing) continues without ceasing. The anonymous Russian pilgrim applied this definition literally, and tried to harmonize his prayer with his physical breathing. Kuya shōnin's famous sculpture represents the *odori-nembutsu* (the dancing *nembutsu*) in the form of six small figures of Buddha issuing forth from the mouth and poised in a row like

birds on a branch; this was the sculptor's way of translating the *Namu Amida Butsu* psalmody into the rhythm of breathing. Both pilgrim and sculptor desired ardently to bathe life's entirety in the water of prayer. Thus "ceaseless prayer," or the notion that "all life is prayer," expresses how the "blood" of prayer animates each of life's various daily acts.

In an everyday context, the prayers before and after meals, morning and night prayers, and even the entire range of daily expressions we use, such as "Thank you," "Pardon me," "Good morning," "Good day," "Goodbye," and so forth, become beautiful words charged with prayer. Also, by raising our souls to God in such daily acts as conversation and work indeed, in everything we prevent our daily actions from becoming stale. Let us thus take care to raise our hearts to God, completely and always, in our actions as well as our words! No one denies that we should pray without ceasing. The problem is how to achieve this. And here opinions are divided.

Anyone Can Pray

At this point it is necessary to point out that prayer is not merely "unceasing" but belongs to everyone. All of us, whatever our individual circumstances, social status, or work, have the obligation to "pray without ceasing." So it follows that each of us can and must find a form of prayer that best suits us individually, a form better represented by "0" (zero) than by the numbers "1," "2," and so forth (which would refer to the infinitely varied particular forms of prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer, *nembutsu*, *zazen*, and so on).

In searching for such a prayer form, our own spirituality would determine whether we should concentrate our efforts on one practice alone, or settle on a combination of a variety of forms. For example, in Buddhism, the Obaku sect combines *zazen* with *nembutsu* (the invocation of the name Amida), a practice accepted by the Zen master Hôtô. Even today there are so-called Zen Christians who practice zen while reciting the name of Christ in place of the name of Amida. During the Meiji era there were outstanding Christians who recited the Our Father while striking the *mokugyo* (a wooden block that marks the rhythm in Buddhist prayers). There were also people who, at times, to the invocation "*Namu Amida-Butsu*" added the Christian word "Amen." To those who strive to retain the integrity of their own spirituality, these crossbreeds may appear very strange or even disagreeable. Yet this shows that the form of prayer is relative to the person's individual spirituality. Though each individual may be justified in choosing his or her own spirituality, it does not follow that this choice will be applicable to everyone. What is essential and universal is the common element of "total concentration in prayer." Deviations in Prayer

We must not forget that prayer practices are subject to various "maladies."

First there is the approach that assumes that more is always better (*melius abundare quam deficere*), increasing the number of prayers from 100 to 1,000, then from 1,000 to 10,000, or in prolonging the time of prayer from one hour to two, from two to ten hours and from ten to twenty hours until finally the goal becomes a whole day of prayer. Such unusually severe asceticism, in which will power and physical endurance are emphasized, is conspicuous in the history of Buddhism. In these practices austerity and the pleasure of achievement are pursued intently as ends in themselves. This can lead to an idolization of asceticism for its own sake and the creation of a class of religious elite. It is easy to succumb to the illusion that the sweet calm that *nembutsu* produces, or the unexpected enlightenment that *zazen* offers, or the simple fact of meditating or entering religious life, automatically confirms one in holiness (or makes one a saint). No sooner do we detect our error than we tend toward the opposite extreme of abandoning all ascetical forms and embracing secularism. In the bargain a subtle "reverse snobbery" arises out of the pretext of wanting not to appear holy. On this subject there is a story about the celebrated Chinese monk Ma-tzu Tao-i, who in his youth was a disciple of the Zen master Huai-jang. **(33)**

Discerning his great qualities, Huai-jang one day asked Ma-tzu Tao-i in the midst of a *zazen* practice, "What do you seek in the practice of *zazen*?" Ma-tzu Tao-i unhesitatingly replied, "*Jôbutsu*" (holiness, to become a Buddha). Huai-jang then picked up a tile beside him and began to polish it with a stone in front of the hermitage. Astonished by this strange action, Ma-tzu Tao-i asked, "What are you doing, Master?" "Polishing it to make a mirror." To his master's composed answer Ma-tzu Tao-i retorted in half amazement, "A tile will never become a mirror no matter how hard you polish it!" Huai-jang then replied quietly, "Is it possible to

become Buddha by practising *zazen*?" This is the origin of the celebrated story, "*masen*" ("Polishing a Tile"). Needless to say, the anecdote does not mean that the practice of *zazen* is futile. Rather, it is a warning against excessive emphasis on self-will and the absolutizing of *zazen* as an ascetical practice. Unless it is lucid and liberating, Ma-tzu Tao-i teaches, it is not authentic *zazen*. For those interested in prayer and religious life, it is impossible to exaggerate how this problem of religious formalism empty of all content subtly infiltrates all religions and all spiritualities; and how often this leads to the opposite extreme, of rejecting the value of all religious exercises.

To sum up, in prayer there is the danger of falling into one of two opposite extremes. The first is "mythologizing" (or making into an idol) the external forms, when prayer is reduced to the mechanical following of a rule or a method of praying. The second is the rejection of and allergic reaction toward all forms of prayer and asceticism. Those fall into this sad situation who do not know how to combine the external forms with sincerity of heart.

But this danger is avoided when the prayer pours out from a prayerful heart, as in the case of the anonymous Russian pilgrim, Dôgen, and Shinran; nor is there a problem when we believe that the "form shapes the heart," so that we humbly and fervently pursue prayer and ascetical practices. The problem comes when one assumes that external observance alone can change the heart. This sort of formalism eventually empties prayer of all dynamism and relation to life. One can recite a prayer for conversion hundreds of times, but that by itself will not lead to true conversion. Putting it in physical terms, body and soul comprise only one being, just as skin and pulp make up one apple. The skin takes the form of the fruit and shares a common life with it. So too a prayer form that clothes a living, vital inner life of prayer will be a truly living form of prayer.

In summary, what matters here is the spirit: to be completely devoted to prayer. St. Paul's "praying without ceasing" is universal and unchangeable, but the form that prayer takes is relative and individual.

The choice of form will differ according to one's religion, personality, and spirituality, but any chosen form should become one with the body like the apple skin. Thus, as long as form depends on the body, a long apprenticeship will normally be necessary. This is the asceticism of prayer. Further, we must have faith or confidence in the form, be convinced that we can attain genuine prayer by means of the form chosen. Without this conviction, we will achieve nothing. This is *Dai-shin-kon* (the principal root of faith) in Zen terms. "Not to become attached to the form, but to believe in it" this is the important attitude that gives life to a prayer form. Overemphasis on form will result in falling into formalism or magic; lack of confidence in the form will render it ineffective and powerless to mold the heart. Belief in the prayer-form is the key to the most basic of prayers, self-effacement or "forgetfulness of self." It is not enough to trust in the form, thinking that little by little one will automatically achieve a new heart. One must abandon all self-seeking, even unconscious. Only then will the method become truly effective.

Zazen, as an ascetical practice, has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it is a means of purification; that is, a means of freeing one from all physical and spiritual chains (*satori* = enlightenment). On the other hand, it serves a constructive purpose, that is, to permit one to attain in this life the liberty of the Buddha (the "Enlightened One"). The ascetical exercise (form) and the goal sought (enlightenment) should always go together. This is expressed in a famous old saying: "Enter into the form and come out of it." Only in this way will prayer become living and life-giving, like the peel of an apple. Let us add, too, that we need not only *Dai-shin-kon* (absolute confidence in the form) but also *Dai-fun-shi* (an iron will). To submerge ourselves in the form without being able to emerge from it without reaching the "life" to which the form should bring us would be a pure formalism. But on the other hand, how can we exit the form without having first entered into it? It is a vain pretension to defend "all life as a prayer" (*Seikatsu = Inori*), prayer without any form, if that means leaving without first entering. This fatal mistake can lead to the death of prayer. An Existential Understanding of Prayer

Nevertheless, the theory that "everyday life itself is prayer" contains an important truth different from that of the exaggerated emphasis on form, which is that prayer must be considered not only in its psychological or ontological levels, but also on the existential.

To say that prayer is the raising of the heart and mind to God, or that it is an intimate loving communication with God, is explaining prayer in psychological terms, just as to call prayer the mystical experience of union with God or "transforming union with God" is to identify it ontologically. Both ways of understanding prayer are correct, but they fail to arrive at the true core of Christian prayer. In fact, if we were to substitute "Buddha" for "God," the Christian prayer thus defined would not be substantially different from Buddhist prayer. True Christian prayer is not limited to the psychological and ontological dimensions, but should *do* something: it must include the desire to accomplish God's will and an unremitting effort to do this, a kind of "spirituality of action." We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21); and again, in John, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn 4:34); and a mystic wrote in the Middle Ages: "Those who will be in the kingdom with Christ will not be those who do great acts or the great contemplatives, but those who have been crucified with him."

The Christian who prays does not seek like the Buddhist solely to leave behind the "impure world" that Buddhism calls *edo*, in order to become immersed in a perfume of heavenly incense. Since Christ is the Light of the world, the Christian must, in turn, become light in the world, a flame capable of purifying the world by fighting evil. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled" (Lk 12:49). "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). The same Christ has us say again in the prayer he himself gave us: "Your will be done, on earth as in heaven" (Mt 6:10). This universal "fiat" for the fulfillment of his will joins our personal "fiat" following Mary's example when she replied to the angel, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).**(34)**

It is this "spirituality of action" (seeking to do God's will) that provides the basis for the idea that "everyday life itself is prayer" (*Seikatsu = Inori*) and that we might call the "existential" dimension of prayer. The words of St. Paul aptly summarize this existential dimension of prayer, rooted in an onto-psychological unity: "Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ...If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord" (Rom 14:6, 8). To reach the point that all life becomes uninterrupted prayer is undoubtedly the apex of Christian prayer. However, life teaches us that the difference between the ideal and illusion is often very subtle. If to arrive at this ideal we content ourselves with "merely living," we will miss the point of those who say we must "pray without ceasing." If, as Dôgen says, *nembutsu* can become the vain croaking of frogs in a rice paddy, the same could be said of the Jesus Prayer practiced by the Russian pilgrim; the practice of *zazen* could simply transform us into plants or, better, something as senseless and inanimate as a cloud. Prayer Like Water

The image of prayer as water, mentioned previously, will help us understand. As we noted before, the moisture found in air and food is not enough to maintain physical life. Unless we also drink a sufficient quantity of water, we will perish. The same is true of prayer, the respiration of the soul: it is not enough simply to breathe in God as we breathe in the humidity in the air, or to live off the love animating our daily activities like the water found in food. We also need special time set aside for prayer.

The necessity of special "time for prayer" stems from the corporality of prayer. If prayer were something purely spiritual, and if "unceasing prayer" simply consisted of an attitude of openness to God in order to discern God's will in each moment of the day, then we would not need special time for prayer. It would be sufficient to practice this attitude daily until it became habitual. However, Christ's practice of occasionally retiring to the mountain to pray (e.g., Mt 14:23) shows us differently. Let us not fall into the superficial explanation that, although Christ was God and did not need to take a break for prayer, he did so in order to set us an example! No, Christ retired to pray in solitude because his own human nature required it.

The necessity of setting aside "special time" for prayer is sometimes explained as the need to pray with more fervor or to spend time in more intense union with God. This again, in light of psychology, is ambiguous. When are we really praying with greater fervor? Indeed, we may enter the chapel with the intention of praying well, and undoubtedly this pleases God. However, if in reality we end up distracted, dozing off, or daydreaming, would this "time of intense prayer" instead become a time of feeble prayer? If

our intense moments of prayer refer to that perfect situation in which the absence of distractions leaves the heart tranquil and the mind is not bothered with fatigue, then when, if ever, can we be said to be praying? Or again, aren't we praying more intensely when we do so in such existential circumstances as when faced with death, catastrophe, life's various difficulties, or in a state of panic?

No, the reason for "times of prayer" has to do not only with our spiritual but our physical nature. The need for this time of prayer is based on the fact that the life of the soul is essentially conditioned by our physical life, which is divided by three meals and one or two periods of sleep within a 24-hour day. Just as the human body cannot amass a year's quantity of nutrition or a month's sleep, so is it impossible to accumulate prayer.

To visit the temple each New Year's, as is customary in Japan, to practice *zazen* when in the mood, or to pray during leisure moments may not be so bad, after all. To turn to God in distress is better than not appealing to God at all. Even if we remember God but once in a lifetime, this would be precious time; but such prayer is not an integral part of one's life and will never become the strong impetus capable of transforming life from its very roots. Indeed, for a prayer life to grow in which prayer is truly the source of God's strength in us, the body itself must "become prayer." This is "human" prayer. We each need to consider how much time we ought to devote to attaining this goal: whether we need several hours a day, a few days a month, or a time of prolonged prayer, such as a retreat. The decision will be made according to our individual circumstances, our age, temperament, health, and degree of initiation into prayer. For members of contemplative or active religious orders, the traditions, customs, and specific vocation of the order must be taken into account. Those living in community will find it necessary to make time for both common and personal prayer.

Returning to our tripartite analogy, we should note that, just as with the first approach to prayer, (i.e., "prayer is all life"), this third approach runs the risk of a certain formalism, making the special "time of prayer" into another idol. There is less danger, however, of falling into the excessive "activism" to which the second approach (i.e., "everyday life itself is prayer") is vulnerable, because of the insistence on "prayer time."

In the first approach to prayer, there is the danger of multiplying ascetical practices for their own sake and seeking one's own satisfaction in them. In the third approach, however, there is the risk of lukewarmness in the absence of the first's incentive to "total dedication to prayer."

Contrary to the first approach, in which the persistent and prolonged repetition of one simple formula (e.g., the name of Jesus, the rosary, *zazen*, *nembutsu*) usually has efficacious results, the third approach can fill up the "prayer time" with a great variety of forms Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office), Benediction, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, and so forth, without experiencing spiritual or psychological fatigue, until one attains a certain feeling of fulfillment. But the superabundance of different prayer forms can begin to weaken our dedication to purity of heart and surrender to the Lord; the many forms can drown spiritual vitality. Without doubt, many traditional forms of devotion, especially within the Catholic Church, and many complicated liturgical rubrics (now simplified, to be sure) have become for some an obstacle to deeper and more dynamic prayer. Contemporary movements seek to discover the dynamism of the Holy Spirit in the profound simplicity of Zen meditation or in the unrestrained prayer of the charismatic movement. What is important for contemporary Christians is not so much to argue over whether or not these new forms of prayer are acceptable, but to become aware of the problems that afflict prayer today and to remedy them.

There is a great difference between *adapting* something and simply *adopting* it uncritically (i.e., introducing something new, but without adaptation). The essential nature of Christian prayer and its constitutive elements are constant, and should not be changed. Adaptation means that something foreign is taken in and transformed by assimilation. Thus, to adapt Asian spirituality, and the prayer methods that have arisen from it, means to assimilate these without losing the true essence of the Christian faith. The same holds true when Buddhism and other Asian spiritualities adapt Christianity. The day that both meet on the top of the mountain (rather than at the base), then from humanity's religious spirit will arise the most beautiful symphony of praise. The Artificial Lake

Torrents often gush down the mountain slope, raging and foaming as they descend. In order to use these torrents to make an artificial lake, a dam must be built to block the flow. The water then becomes calm and deep until such time as its power is released to be converted into electricity. This visible water transformed into invisible energy builds up and becomes capable of penetrating every corner and recess of life. The artificial lake symbolizes the visible act of praying (using a particular form of prayer), and the electricity represents invisible prayer, "prayer beyond prayer," which transcends any fixed form but gives form to everything else, and is capable of recreating the world. This is the fourth approach to prayer.

Here lies the difference between prayer seen as an *act* and the *state* of prayer. The first develops in mental prayer and involves activity on our part. The second, developing into a "state" of mental prayer when perfected, truly corresponds to the unceasing prayer of which St. Paul speaks in his letter to the Romans: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:8). In short, the "state" of prayer involves arriving at that transforming union or identification with Christ of which St. **Teresa** of Avila speaks when she says that "Martha and Mary must join together." (35)

In Zen language one would say that in this state, in which the body and the heart exist no longer as separate elements, one forgets oneself and becomes Buddha. If we desire the Holy Spirit to continue maintaining the current in our heart, the lake of our soul must be kept deep and abundant. Likewise in *zazen*, one does not cease to practice under the pretext of having already attained *satori* (enlightenment). Indeed, without the ongoing exercises of *zazen*, *satori* loses all its power; it cannot be considered as a diploma that completes one's studies! Pure *satori* consists above all in self-perfection; *zazen* and *satori* are then one. Nevertheless, post-*satori* asceticism does not pretend to ascend from degree to degree! "We must not fix a beginning and an end, either in *satori* or in asceticism," affirmed Dôgen, for *satori* is precisely a continual returning to the original source: to be able to marvel at every instant. To seek to know the degree we have attained, to ask ourselves, "Have I done half the journey? Have I reached the summit?" is false Zen: "*Yako zen*, a Zen for the fox." "You have given yourself to the asceticism of Zen," says the contemporary Zen master Sawaki; "whether or not *satori* comes, are you going to exchange it for *satori*?" Neither is there a final point in the Christian religion. A good number of conversions resemble *satori*, and each time the demands of prayer become more and more urgent, until little by little prayer becomes the only life support. Let us return to the artificial lake from which we drew our comparison. It is composed of two elements: the dam that holds back the water, and the lake water itself. Regardless of whichever mountain it has for its source, this water will not become a lake unless it is held back. It is the same with the water of prayer, Buddhist or Christian; it must be interrupted by a dam. In other words and this is common to all spiritualities prayer must "interrupt" the flow of everyday life.

Obviously it is a precious thing to pray well and to have the desire for it. Here again, however, true prayer must know how to rid itself of the ambition to "pray well," since prayer is, before all else, a gratuitous gift from our Father in heaven; he does not need our strength, only our gratitude. It is especially important to learn *to die*, that is, to open our eyes to the depths of our own nothingness; to recognize ourselves as ephemeral creatures before God who is eternal and without limitation; even in spontaneous prayer, learning to die to self so as to live "to God"; then the feeling of "having" to pray and the ambition to pray "well" disappear. It is at this moment that one truly prays! The Zen master Bunan Shido composed this *waka* (a short poem) one day:

Although living, I am dead;
and having arrived at the extreme point of death,
everything I do becomes good.

The Bamboo Joints

Bamboo joints give us an even better image of the "prayer that cuts" (i.e., that interrupts the course of life) than does the artificial lake. With the arrival of the month of May, the delicately green bamboos thrust themselves straight up into the clear blue sky. In the space of a few months, the plant grows several meters,

and no matter how violent the hurricanes that assail it, the bamboo never breaks. Its entire strength is in its joints, the many joints that divide it into short horizontal sections.

The part of the bamboo that stretches upward symbolizes the course of life, and the joints could represent the "prayer that cuts." In the example of the artificial lake, the electrical force is comparable to the dynamism that makes the bamboo grow upward, and the joints are like the dam.

Let us spend a little more time on this comparison. Firmly welded to the trunk, the bamboo joints encircle it on the outside like a cord, thus symbolizing that prayer, too, is one with life. Prayer is that divine seed whose roots draw food from earthly existence. Like the lotus flower that does not bloom in arable ground but in marshes, prayer thrusts its roots into human misery as if into mud. But the lotus flower does not show any trace of the muddy water from which it drew life; turned toward the sky, it blooms.

Seen from the inside, the bamboo joint is but a thin horizontal division, never oblique, and herein lies the secret of its strength. If the joint were vertical, like the trunk, we would have a bamboo without joints. To say "Everyday life itself is prayer" too readily is like having a bamboo without joints. The important thing in prayer is not the duration (whether five minutes or a half-hour), but to interrupt what one is doing. That is what it means to say that to pray is "to die," that is, to interrupt the course of life. Despite ourselves, the cares of daily life will certainly find their way into our prayer, but there is quite a difference between "bringing in" and "finding," "inviting distractions" and having them "intrude." The first is a voluntary act for which we are responsible; the second, something unavoidable we must live with in order to have peace.

One day in the Zen temple Ryutaku-ji of Mishima, I was conversing with the master, Sôen Nakagawa. "In the exercise of *zazen* what should I do when I am troubled by the imagination and by distractions?" I asked him. The master crossed his hands on his knees, and with eyes still half closed he replied, "Such things? Be prepared to say to them, 'Whether you are there or not matters little to me.' And that is sufficient." If we imagine that in order to pray we must think only of the transcendent God, then we spend our time trying to get rid of all the little worries of the day or of life that come to our consciousness and obsess us. It is in fact a waste of time to chase them; these thoughts come back more strongly than ever, the mind becomes tired, and the thought of prayer becomes repugnant (just as when we have insomnia, the more we think "I want to sleep, let me sleep, let me sleep," the more sleep escapes us). For example, if during prayer we feel a certain resentment against someone, since antipathy is opposed to love, this sentiment becomes a deadly poison. But if, at this moment, we regret our own misery and our inability to love, and we ask God for the strength to love, this mortal poison is changed into a divine remedy mingled with love.

If we compare a bamboo plant to a typical day we will see clearly that the most urgent need in our modern life, hectic and difficult as it is, is to divide it into segments as the bamboo is divided into joints. "A 24-hour day is not sufficient," we will say. "If there were 25, I could devote one hour to prayer." But no, we must not lie, nor must we deceive ourselves. With a 26-hour day the problem would be the same! The reality is that to divide our days according to times for prayer gives them an eternal value! And this cannot be done for only one or two days, for if the bamboo had only one joint, it would not be of much use! When we begin to practice prayer, even in religious life, it is very important to provide ourselves with numerous segments.

In religious life the main segments are generally Mass, Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office), and private prayer, to which may be added prayers before and after meals, the Angelus, the rosary, and so forth. Others can be freely added to these. Yet we must understand that it is not a matter of multiplying pious exercises or of trying to keep prayer and activity in balance with each other. What constitutes the common essence of all prayer is this state of death to self that, according to the words of St. Paul to the Romans, renders us "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rm 6:11).

As we have said, the bamboo joints sharply cut the branch at right angles. This is also the fundamental role of prayer. Only a sharp break will allow the whole of life to "become" prayer because life itself is not of itself a prayer! Thus the invisible power of the bamboo joint that acts on the trunk and creates a tree so sturdy that no tempest can break it symbolizes the life of prayer. Nevertheless, however important the joints, they do not constitute the whole bamboo. In human life, also, the many occupations of the day are to be found between its prayer "breaks."

A theory satisfied merely with "realizing" a prayerful attitude through exterior acts could not totally resolve the problems it creates. In fact, even the prayer practiced by the Russian pilgrim would not be sufficient.

Just as the human person is both body and soul but one being at the same time, so should active and passive prayer ultimately form one and the same thing: That is the key.

Time to Pray Together

Philosophically speaking, the notion of time has always been something beyond the understanding of human intelligence. We experience the existence of a past, a present, and a future, but what precise meaning, for example, can be given to the adverb "now"? This very moment cannot be grasped. The minute one thinks "now," already this "now" is gone! And yet, if the present moment did not exist, neither would time. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine is himself troubled by the problem: "If I am not questioned on this subject, I know what it is, but if I am questioned, I no longer know!" **(36)**

In Buddhism also, we are told, the "three minds" of the past, the present, and the future cannot be grasped. The emptiness of time cannot be explained; indeed, human intelligence falters when faced with such an enigma.

Beyond all metaphysical and philosophical analysis of time, however, we must remember the integral role of "corporality" in prayer, for to pray is to live fully; it is to have *body and soul* in communion with God. We live in time and space; God exists *beyond* time and space. Prayer can best help us toward an in-depth understanding of this mystery of the alliance between the temporal and the timeless. When we pray, we are in time that goes beyond time, and without leaving the space we occupy, we go beyond it. We are in this world, but not of it. All true prayer, whatever its form, admits us to the paschal mystery of Christ who dies and rises again each day in this world. But how much time must be given to prayer? To what degree will prayer vivify time to the fullest?

In Dôgen's *zazen* one finds the expression: "*Zazen* is nothing more than sitting," in the sense of "devoting oneself totally to *zazen*." The Prayer of the Church, still recited in our day under the name of the Liturgy of the Hours or the Divine Office, comes to us from an old medieval tradition that divides prayer into seven periods or canonical "hours" each day. Actually, the renewal of this tradition, which has been adapted without loss of its rich meaning, is a real joy for the soul.

The duration of prayer influences its quality, because a longer period of time helps the body assume a deeper prayer stance. In addition to this irreplaceable prolonged prayer, it is important during the day to consecrate the present moment by reciting a few invocations. One of them, the Angelus, has a long tradition in the Church. In his famous painting *The Angelus*, Millet illustrated magnificently the life that unfolds from this prayer. Now one rarely hears the Angelus bells ring and, unfortunately, its recitation is dying out. And yet the concise words of the Angelus give marvelous expression to the mysteries of Christ and Mary. In our modern life, in which time is so limited, we should cultivate these short prayers that all people at some time, in the train, on the bus or subway, at work or while walking, can make their own.

Moreover, even in very different places, knowing that at that precise moment all are praying with the same formula strengthens our awareness of being interdependent in Christ. And what a marvelous ideal it would be if these short prayers could be thus recited by all of humanity!

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