

Text from the Tradition: Prayer by Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) (text drawn from pp. 51-58)

The Prayer of the Name Lands in the Heart

Of all the *mantras* and prayers, the invocation of the Name is the most efficient. Psychologically it concentrates and deepens the mind. Furthermore, by the very power it enfolds within itself, it leads the soul towards the very center, the origin, the unique source.

In India this is called *namajapa*, the Prayer of the Name. The best counterpart in Christianity is the Jesus prayer. It is the endless repetition of the holy name of the Savior. The most common formula in recent centuries, is the following: “Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a Sinner.” In India, as well as in the Christian near East, the Prayer of the Name may be uttered either by the lips, or in the mind, or in the heart. No one of these ways excludes the others.

The first step is to pray with the lips, to repeat the name of the Lord loudly, or at least audibly. The mind may be distracted and may move at its own pace; the heart may be full of desires, which are far from consistent with the prayer uttered by the tongue. It does not matter. The utterance of the holy name will do its work by itself in its own time. The only important thing is that the devotee should repeat the name with respect and a real longing for the grace of the Lord. In the second step the lips remain closed. It is in the mind that the prayer is whispered. The prayer has now become an intellectual attention to the name which is being repeated. However, it is not so much a mental consideration of the meaning of the name as a simple awareness of it. Then there is the third stage, when the Name is placed in the heart. There is no longer any movement of the lips or of the vocal cords, or even, at best, of the mind. The prayer is lodged there in the very center of the being. Not only is the mind now completely quiet, but all desires have been transformed and have passed into the sole desire for the Lord. Saints who have practiced it recommend it be uttered, though inaudibly, according to the rhythm of the respiration or of the beating of the heart. Thus it is the whole being—body and soul, senses and mind—which is taken up into the prayer, and through the body, the whole universe also, of which the body is a part.

The Prayer of the Name gives the mind just the kind of food it needs and keeps it busy enough not to look for other outlets, without at the same time impeding the quest within. By repeating the name, the mind becomes more and more one-pointed. Distractions vanish, or if images keep on recurring in our thoughts, they are rather like passing dreams with little effect on our actual concentration. Thus, to direct the attention towards the heart, even in a physical way, is symbolically to turn all our activities towards the very center of ourselves. The center is really the point of which we can form no image, in which the soul is, as it were, coming from the hands of God and waking up to itself.

India too, from the beginning of her spiritual meditations, has been alive to the mystery of the heart, the *guha*, the cave within, as it is called in her scriptures. That *guha* is what is beyond the reach of sense or thought. It is the Life from which has issued every manifestation of life. It is the Fire from which all things get warmth and are kindled. In it is the Light by which everything shines and becomes visible.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

The Prayer of the Name is a helpful antidote to the limiting mental activity of compartmentalization. Most who are influenced by the culture and beliefs of Western mindsets and cultures are prone to the temptation of compartmentalization. To compartmentalize is to categorize for the sake of ease and assurance. Yes, it is helpful to know the difference between food that is poisonous and food that is not. In this case, compartmentalization serves our safety. However, in most cases, compartmentalization is less helpful in our spiritual endeavors and efforts at growth and transformation. For example, one of the more insidious tendencies toward compartmentalization is to divide the times and places of holiness apart from ordinary times and places. Many of us grew up thinking that we had to be good for that one hour on Sunday, but that the rest of the week could be up for grabs; or more subtly, we might have claimed an encounter with God if it took place in Church or on retreat, but not if it happened in nature. Similarly, Western frameworks have taught many of us to divide up our own selves, often prioritizing our cognitive faculties well-above our affective, sensual, or spiritual abilities, and resulting in diligent efforts to re-member and reclaim our emotions and our bodies as valid vehicles for knowledge and connecting to others.

Given the baggage of compartmentalization, it might help to note that the “one-pointed” or “single-mindedness” at which the Prayer of the Name transforms its devotees is not a limiting singleness, as in a narrow sense of mind or heart. Rather, is an expansive singleness that taps into and draws from the Unity of the Ground of Being that underlies all of Creation and the cosmos. In this latter sense, the Prayer of the Name encourages us to attend to its power both in formal prayer activity and in the midst of daily living activity; it encourages us to integrate our lips, minds, and hearts into a single flow of Action and Presence. It helps us to overcome the tragedy of the illusion of the God-gap, in which God is out-there and separate rather than in-here and intimate. The power of the Prayer of the Name might also empower us to overcome our cultural and political divisions. May the power of the Name be with us and act through us.

Questions for Reflection:

- If you currently or in the past have used a mantra or sacred word of the Name, what phrase were you gifted with? How did you come to receive that particular phrase?
- Consider the connection between your prayer life and your use of power to act upon important beliefs or values.
- How or when do you recognize your heart at work or in prayer?