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As Buddhists we really do not have prayer if prayer is defined to be solicitation or evocation of divine favors. We do not pray to anyone or anything. Buddhists have the Buddha of course, who can be interpreted in any number of ways. But generally speaking, Buddhists believe that Sakyamuni (ca. 563–463 B.C.E.), the historical Buddha, and even the celestial Buddhas, symbolize and synthesize the highest ideals and aspirations that we have as human beings. We Buddhists are optimists. We believe that humanity is intrinsically good, pure, and replete with virtues. Compassion is the greatest virtue.

In lieu of prayer all Buddhists practice some kind of meditation. Some, of course, engage in meditation more seriously than others. Meditation is mindfulness. Mindfulness in its ultimate sense means to be fully aware of the reality of the world and the human condition. It

means to see that all things and all beings are mutually related and interdependent. Sakyamuni realized his truth and became the Buddha, "The Enlightened One." The goal of all Buddhists is to attain the same realization as Sakyamuni. All beings are to become the Buddha.

Enlightenment is achieved when the mind is calmed and ultimately stilled. When the mind is undisturbed, when the mind becomes mirrorlike, we are able to apprehend all things without prejudice, with equanimity, and with absolute clarity. The mirrorlike mind allows us to apprehend true reality. More importantly, enlightenment allows us to perceive the sufferings of others, feel their sufferings, and move to relieve them.

When we enter into meditation, we resonate to the rhythm of forces that we believe to be greater than ourselves. These forces that resonate within us and throughout the universe support us and give meaning to our lives. The Buddhists call this the *Dharma*, or Truth. The realization of this Dharma is spiritually transforming. It breaks our self-centeredness, because we come to understand that we are part of a greater reality and that we live in an interdependent world. This spiritual transformation quickens two virtues: wisdom and compassion. Wisdom means simply to see things as they really are, to see things in their purity, to see things in the interdependence of their relationships, to see things in their absolute quiescence. The corollary to wisdom is compassion. Compassion is to identify with the suffering of others, to make their suffering ours, and to move to remove their sufferings.

There is a third virtue, which in actuality is probably more important than wisdom and compassion. We call this virtue *upaya*, or "skill-in-means." *Upaya* is the implementation of wisdom in concrete and compassionate action. Wisdom gives us the ability to know how much to

help, how not to help, and when to help. Wisdom and compassion are acted out in *upaya*. *Upaya* is a very profound virtue in Buddhism.

Meditation is done every day. Mindfulness should be practiced daily. Some people practice meditation more rigorously than others. Some people enter into prolonged periods of regular meditation. Others may do it when they have a quiet moment to calm the mind and enter into reflection. Quiet fills the mind and the self.

In a sense, meditation is withdrawing from the world. But by withdrawing from the world we are able to fortify ourselves to face it with confidence and vision and purpose. Based on this experience, on introspection and calming, we are thus better able to go out and meet the challenges of the world and engage ourselves in the work of relieving the suffering of others.

Some Buddhists enter into mindfulness through Buddhist chants. Chanting is nothing more than the recitation of the Buddhist sutra, the Buddhist documents that are the direct words of the Buddha. By chanting the sutra we hear the teachings of the Buddha once more, again and for the first time. Chanting focuses the mind, stills the emotions. The mind therefore becomes mindful of the Buddha and his virtues and his teachings. In both of these—meditation and chanting—we become more receptive to forces that guide us and support us. In so doing, as we calm our minds, we are able to see people and things with more heartfelt objectivity.

Chanting for Buddhists is done at home. We do not only go to the temple to do this. Most Buddhists have a little personal or family shrine at home. The observance or meditation is done every morning. As soon as we are awake, we greet the Buddha. Every evening we bid the Buddha good night. This is a very important function in our spiritual lives because it means the Buddhist religion

is not separate from ourselves, or from our homes, or from our families. We do not have to go to church or temple to commune with the Buddha. We have no special day that is important. Every day is a good day, every day is a special day, every day deserves mindfulness and appreciation. Every day also gives us an opportunity to work out our karmic destiny and is an opportunity to develop our spiritual lives.

Normally, in the Japanese Buddhist tradition, our chants are in Sino-Japanese—Chinese writing with Japanese pronunciation. These chants, because we've done them for so many years, have a soothing effect, a quieting effect. Tradition is very important to us, so we chant every day. I try to do it at least once a day in the morning for about ten minutes. Care of the shrine is also important: making sure the shrine is clean, making sure there are fresh flowers. Normally there's an image of the Buddha there; that's essential. We have offerings by means of flowers, candles, and incense. These three are fundamental. Sometimes we offer fruit or things of that nature to the Buddha. Oftentimes we report to the Buddha when something wonderful happens. We articulate this in front of the shrine. Next to the shrine would be reminders of our ancestors, and we sort of report to them about some of the accomplishments we may have done today, or some of the sad things that may have happened.

Recently I lost my mother, and usually in Buddhist homes we place a picture or some kind of a reminder of the deceased next to the shrine. Near our shrine we have pictures of my mother and my father-in-law and my grandfather. When we greet the shrine of the Buddha every morning and every evening, it reminds us of our past. It serves to instill a sense of gratitude for the people who have gone before us and for their sacrifices. It reaffirms our ties with our family and with our community.

Life passes on, and we must establish that somehow we are products of the larger rhythm of life that will continue. When I die, I will live on in the memories of my children and hopefully in their work.

When my mother passed away, the first thing I did was go to my family shrine and offer all the things that needed to be offered to the Buddha and to chant. This had a way of centering me, of calming me, and, in a sense, of putting things in perspective. It's also a time for personal reflection, and a time to fortify family unity. Because my wife and my daughter were there, we honored the moment with a short service. This was a way to remember my mother, to remember ourselves as a family and our connections to her, our humanity, and our relations to the Buddha.

The Japanese Buddhists have an elaborate memorial ritual. We have an elaborate funeral service and what we call memorial observances every seven days. We used to do this in the past—we don't do this too often now—and it happened every seventh day until the forty-ninth day, seven services in all. When I was a priest, I found this to be very helpful, especially the forty-ninth-day service, the last service, because usually about this time, which is five or six weeks after the funeral, people get very depressed because they are no longer busy making arrangements for the funeral or sending out thank-you notes. Others don't call or come anymore to visit them. Somehow life goes on, but at this time people tend to be very depressed because they have time to themselves, time to reflect and time to think about what has happened. The forty-ninth-day service is usually a large service, an important service. Usually the family all comes together with very close friends. It's a time to remember, a time to reaffirm family ties, and a time to honor the deceased.

Buddhists also have annual memorial services. The

first, third, seventh, thirteenth, twenty-fifth, and thirty-third are especially important. On anniversaries—weddings, birthdays, deaths—we recall the events quietly. The memorial service makes public our grief. It gives us permission to mourn.

Services are not only meant for memorials but also for congratulatory things. On these occasions the spirit is more a sense of gratitude. We Buddhists believe that all things are interdependent, that what I am and how I came to be was not done by my own power alone but with the support and the help of the karmic forces of all beings.

Buddhists touch this karmic force through deep meditation. Essentially what happens in deep meditation is that the mind is still so that there are no extraneous thoughts that enter into the mind, no uncontrolled thoughts that arise from the mind. When the mind is very still, what happens, the Buddhist documents say, is that there's a kind of focus, a kind of mindfulness. When mindfulness happens, there's a feeling of zest, a feeling of joy, a feeling of oneness with all things. Technically what happens is that when the mind is very still, it becomes like a great mirror. This mirror is able to reflect all things and all beings with fidelity and without any prejudice. The meditative state is not a condition that can be maintained for a period of time; one must descend from this high, rarified meditative state. But one emerges from this condition with this feeling of zest, of joy, of oneness. These feelings help. The world is a pretty hard place to make our way through.

After meditation we become less judgmental. The meditative state teaches us to look at people quietly and without prejudice. We are more accepting of people and their faults, and I think this helps in our relationships with other people.

I like to think meditation also affects my work. After meditation not only do I relate to people better, I'm able to work better. I'm more nonjudgmental. Meditation also teaches us to see people and their needs more clearly, so we're able to help people in a much more objective and beneficial way. I'm able to read people better, and if I'm able to read people better, I'm able to help them better.

Meditation leads to wisdom, wisdom leads to clarity and seeing justice. Wisdom is also very positive; we must use this wisdom to relieve the sufferings of others. This is what we call engaged Buddhism. In conjunction with that, there is also the idea that meditation is not a quiescent state but a very dynamic state. The act of compassion, whatever it may be, is itself an act of great meditation. For myself personally I take this to be the highest form of meditation. Here we have a focus of mind on being what will uplift humanity. That is the activity of wisdom and the implementation of wisdom. Wisdom and compassion—*upaya*. It is actually the highest form of enlightenment. Meditation in action. The stillness and the movement are one.

For Buddhists the important thing is to try. We know that ideals, becoming the Buddha, are difficult if not impossible to achieve. But these ideals are our vision of what humanity should be. There was a Vietnamese monk, Thieh Nhat Hanh, who said, "When I want to go to the North Star, it doesn't mean that I will ever get there. What is important is that I move in that direction." It is important that we move in the direction of compassion.