

MY GOD AND ME – Perspectives on Prayer

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A cross-section of Zarathushtis share their stories, experiences, thoughts and feelings on the topic of “Prayer”.

Prayer is personal. Personal and individual prayers, rather than congregational prayers and worship services, are the norm in the Zarathushtrian mode of praying, which facilitates intimate contact with God. By prayer, we are encouraged to seek and emulate God in this world and emphasize His presence. Unless we talk to God, it is meaningless to talk about God. Studies show that people begin to pray seriously after the age of 30 or 40 when life becomes increasingly complex and God remains the only true, absolute and the only one to turn to for unconditional love. We all pray in our own way, whether we know it or not. But few pray because it is a must for a *spenta* existence, for a spiritually blessed life.

Even those faiths that emphasize congregational worship now maintain that, how often you pray on your own is a better indication of religious commitment, because it is truly your choice and not influenced by social or other pressures. Thus a Rabbi is quoted as saying: “When people come to my temple, they expect a spiritual experience. But I say that if they have not prayed on their own before they step into a sacred place, that place is going to be no more sacred than a library or a movie theater.”

Psychology and prayer. The power of prayer is being studied in psychology and medicine. A decade ago, for instance, outsiders were urged to pray for cardiac patients in San Francisco General Hospital, as reported in the *Southern Medical Journal*. Even though the patients were not aware of it, they recovered faster than those that were not prayed for. Psychologists no longer look down on religion, but see God as a close companion (*hamkar*). One psychiatrist, Arthur Komhaber, even added prayer to his therapeutic repertoire for troubled teenagers and maintained: “To exclude God from psychiatric consultation is a form of malpractice.”

Prayer is no shortcut. Some people tend to pray only at moments of crisis and finding it hard to pray, they try to strike a bargain with God: “I’ll follow God, if He makes me well,” instead of saying, even as Zarathushtra says in Yasna 29: “Only that which God wills, will prevail.” Prayer is no shortcut against misfortunes. It cannot bring back a deceased loved one, but it can provide some soothing relief and inner peace.

¹ First published in *FEZANA JOURNAL*, FALL 1999, pp. 60-61.

We discover God as we become vulnerable and helpless and try to reach beyond ourselves for some invisible, divine help, which is more often than not, available to us, just for the asking. It even elevates us as we ask, for it brings us in His presence and influence.

Love of prayer. I for one, found it rather hard to be brought up as a full-fledged priest 50 years ago, whose main hobby even to this day, is the study of religion in all its variegated aspects and enjoying praying for self and others; and yet practice as a psychologist in private practice, rather than as a priest (on account of economic reasons). But I liked to pray, and even as a 13-year old *navaria*, I was so surprised when other mobeds vehemently urged my priestly uncle to advise me not to strain my young self by waking up in the Ushahin Gah to pray, but take it easy instead. I did so only because of my enormous respect for my saintly uncle.

About that time, I also studied Hormazd Yasht and its meaning, and began to practice its injunction to recite its various names of God when undertaking any activity, including entering any town. Can you imagine one doing it religiously while traveling from Bombay to Surat, from dawn to dusk, by local train which stops at each and every railway station! But I did, and in the process forgot all about the hardship we experienced, because somehow my brother and I had ended up on the train with not a penny in our pockets.

I now continue to pray to God with every breath when I can, but I consider myself blessed insofar as I am also able to rehabilitate others by helping them use their own Vohu Mana, Good Mind. I may not now recite the names of God by rote, but I enjoy helping others and that is also prayer to me; I forget my own troubles by trying to help solve others' troubles, which imparts an unflinching sense of Asha and Armaiti.

Whatever insight psychology will offer us on the power of prayer in coming years, should only strengthen our resolve to pray, though God is not to be confused with Santa Claus.

Healing the body with prayer. Research indicates that one can lower his blood pressure, metabolic rate, stress level, heart rate, pain thresholds, etc. by praying and meditating. However, those who are already attuned to God are more likely to feel his presence and get close to Him, thereby achieving a proper body-mind balance that can heal the body. The secret lies not in trying to control God but heeding Him as Sraosha does, and letting Him be our friend and guide so we never feel lonely and lost, without a compass in life.

Prayer and breath. Asho Zarathushtra prayerfully dedicates his own breath to Mazda [Ys. 33.14]. Breath had a great religious significance among Indo-Iranians, which led me to inquire more about it. I found that following every breath prayerfully and peacefully a few times a day, can lead to a very blissful union of body-mind-spirit.

Even greater benefits can be had by saying *Vohu* as one breathes in and *Mana* as one breathes out – breathing out and banishing all bad thoughts from one’s psyche. I often find myself doing it even in my sleep. Much to my surprise my Hindu cardiologist noticed it. When my heart rate would not accelerate even when running on a stress mill, he angrily shouted: “Stop it.”. Another cardiologist told me and my wife after exhausting all cardiac tests that my heart was as good as a 16-year old’s and he wished he had one like that, though my cholesterol level is always above 300, and I do not take any medications for it.

I attribute it all to a life of prayer in its very broad sense and pray it will inspire others to a prayerful life of their own in their own way.

Atha Jamyal Yatha Afrinami!