

True prayer

Officially, Buddhists do not pray. Where other religious people pray, a Buddhist would probably either do it noisily with chants and percussions, or they would meditate in total silence, often in solitude. If we take “prayer” as referring to sacred moments we do ourselves, then the early Buddhists, including the Buddha, would spend totally silent moments with themselves.

Such silent solitary moments are neither silent nor solitary in the higher sense of the words. First, there are the “silent” moments that the early Buddhists enjoy doing breath meditation. Then, there are the “solitary” moments when they radiate loving-kindness. These are the two most important “prayers” if we really want to relive what the historical Buddha has himself experienced and taught.

The breath meditation is the most remarkable of spiritual states – it truly brings us into the spirit or meaning of what we really are. We would be sadly empty and lifeless if we do not really know ourselves. One key episode in the Bodhisattva’s last life is that when he, as a child of 7, steals away from the ploughing festival, one of the central rituals of his tribe, and meditates by himself under a jambul tree.

The English poet, Edwin Arnold, sings of this great event in his poem, *The Light of Asia* (1st book, 1903), thus:

But, looking deep, he saw
The thorns which grow upon this rose of life
How the swart peasant sweated for his wage,
Toiling for leave to live; and how he urged
The great-eyed oxen through the flaming hours,
Goading their velvet flanks: then marked he, too,
How lizard fed on ant, and snake on him,
And kite on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed
The fish-tiger of that which it had seized;
The shrike chasing the bulbul, which did chase
The jewelled butterflies; till everywhere
Each slew a slayer and in turn was slain,
Life living upon death.¹

Sitting all alone under the jambul tree, the child Siddhattha goes into deep meditation. He reaches a state called the “first dhyana,” where only the subtlest thoughts remain, just enough to fully notice the breath as a most radiant light seen with closed eyes. It is an inner light that shines away the darkness of the mind. In its place is a spaciousness that embraces the whole universe. We are that space. This is one way of speaking about the joy of this silent Buddhist prayer of profound joy.

We have ancient Buddhist accounts of how the child Siddhattha goes into the “first dhyana.” This is the first stage in deep meditation when the mind, as it were, frees itself fully from the body, so that it does not have to process any data from the 5 senses. The first dhyana is historically important because the child Siddhattha attains it

¹ For Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*: http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/lightasia.pdf.

by watching his breath,² and this experience would later point the way to the Buddha's awakening. **The Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) records this remarkable event in the Buddha's words, thus:

"I thought thus, 'I recall that (during the first ploughing) when my father the Sakya was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a jambul tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and dwelt in the first dhyana that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, zest and joy born of solitude. Could that be the path to awakening?' Then, following on that memory,³ I realized, 'That is the path to awakening!'"⁴

The Introduction to the Jātaka Commentary retells this important event with mythical significance. When the child Siddhattha's nurses realize that he is missing, they at once search for him. They find him sitting cross-legged, deep in meditation, in full grasp of his in-and-out breaths: he has attained the first dhyana.⁵

By the time the nurses informed king Suddhodana, the sun has well passed noon. The shadows of the other trees have moved away, but the the shade of the tree under which Siddhattha is sitting remains still, spread out in a circle around him.⁶

The story's mythical language is to impress us, especially those who do not meditate. Those who meditate or know about meditation would understand account of the sun's shadow remaining still under the jambul tree around Siddhattha as referring to the timeless nature of meditation. When we are in the dhyanas, time and space, as it were, cease to exist. This is another way of describing how peaceful and joyful we feel in dhyana. It is as if, we have neither body nor mind: we only feel the fullness of all space and time which seem to live in the eternal now.

This is the most profound of Buddhist prayers – indeed, the most silent, the most blissful, moment in religious experience. It is a prayer without words, beyond words. This is the purest of prayers, that asks for nothing, but offers up everything. Since it transcends both body and mind, it is more spiritual than even the divine. It is the peace out of which all meaning of life becomes fully clear.

There is yet a second kind of Buddhist prayer – one that moves from words of truth to the truth of words; from the beauty of truth to the truth of beauty. It is the most beautiful of prayerful words we can imagine, free of all worldliness – radiant with love even to those who hate or harm us. For, the hateful and harmful are truly suffering, and crying for succour in the only way they know. Only such a prayer is capable of embracing such pain.

This prayer begins with accepting oneself fully and unconditionally. *I free myself from all sins! I fear no evil but shine the light of love! I completely forgive myself whatever wrong I have done, and whatever that I have undone! I accept myself just as I am! With this embrace of lovingkindness, I start my journey into the light of truth, with-*

² The first-ploughing, that is, the rite of the first sowing, *vappa,maṅgala* (MA 2:290; J 1:57). On this 1st dhyana episode (M 36,31 f/1:246 f), cf Chinese version, T1428.781a4-11.

³ That is, regarding the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breathing (MA 2:291).

⁴ M 36,31 (SD 49.4). See **Dhyana**, [SD 8.4 \(2\)](#): The Buddha discovered dhyana.

⁵ *Uṭṭhāya pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ānāpāne pariggahetvā paṭhama-jjhānaṃ nibbatesi.*

⁶ JA 1:58.

out fear, with neither lack nor want. Let me brighten the world like the living sun by day, and light the darkest night like the cloud-free moon. This **lovingkindness** is like the true love of a mother for her one and only child.

Now I feel my pains, how they cut, sharper than the sharpest knives. As my pains are, so are those of others; yet, even more so because they lack the love to see. Let me give my love – there is none till I give it. Let me show my love even to those who do not deserve it – especially to those who do not deserve it. For, they need it more than those who love others. **Compassion** always looks down on all, but with love and care. For, all are children at play in the world, and we must be like a parent with a heart to mind them.

Let me rejoice in those who truly love, who see the loving truth. In their happiness, I feel great happiness. **Gladness** is joy in the good of others, a joy that breeds joy: a parent's proud and glad eyes to see his children growing in strength and wisdom.

When a child has grown and goes on his own, a mother's care is well done. Like fledglings our children fly or fall from the nest. Fly or fall, fall and fly, they must, just we have done. We must look on with **equanimity** – it is time for the growing to grow and be free.

All must grow in the winds of gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and obscurity, joy and sorrow. Death is the full stop to the sentence of life. But it's no prison if we just smile on – for, everything starts anew. Looking on, we better learn – we need the lessons for our own times to come.

These are the most divine of prayers – lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. These are the four faces of God himself,⁷ as he looks in the four quarters with love, ruth, joy and peace. These are the abodes of the gods themselves. These divine abodes are all within us, for all who truly love. For, love has no religion. This love is beauty and truth in the highest. Love is the only true prayer, and the highest.

R452 Simple Joys 300

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⁷ The language here is for the benefit of those who, for any reason, still hold on to some kind of God-belief but have an inclination for Buddhist practice. Historically, "God" is a free translation for *Brahmā* of early Buddhism.