

# “It Takes Practice”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I remember saying to my parents as a child, “I’m bored.  
I don’t know what to do.”

I say “child,” but I think I must have been a young teenager at the time.  
Perhaps 12 or 13 years old.

When I complained about not having enough to do at that age,  
my Dad sometimes answered with a tongue-in-cheek response.

I remember him saying, “You could meditate.”

Needless to say, as an adolescent I did not appreciate this answer very much.  
In any case I did not put his suggestion into practice.

I thought he was kidding...and, at that age, I didn’t have a very high regard for  
my Dad’s sense of humour.

It was only within the past ten years or so, when I started to meditate regularly  
myself, that it occurred to me my Dad might not have been kidding at all.

In fact I think he might have been completely serious.

My father was always interested in psychology and religion, and like many of  
his peers, he became interested in meditation starting in the Sixties.

While ancient Hindu, Buddhist, Judeo-Christian and Islamic meditations were  
aimed at bringing the practitioner closer to the Divine through the repetition of  
sacred words or phrases,

Popular new forms such as Transcendental Meditation and mindfulness practice based on Zen Buddhism seemed to promote both spiritual deepening and personal growth.

Meditation was said to reduce stress and anxiety.

In fact, meditation might have even reduced the anxiety of a certain thirteen-year old girl in 1976, if she had actually tried it.

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Today, meditation is much more widely understood and accepted.

And thanks to modern science, we're gaining a much better understanding of why it has been so valuable to human beings for so long.

Matthieu Ricard is a molecular geneticist who became a Zen Buddhist monk. Today he is one of the Dalai Lama's closest colleagues.

In 2009 he addressed the World Economic Forum, advising world leaders to turn away from greed toward what he calls "enlightened altruism."<sup>1</sup>

Studies of Ricard's brain have revealed that when meditating on compassion, he had the highest levels of gamma waves ever recorded.

Gamma waves are associated with consciousness, attention, learning and memory.

Scientists also noted "an abnormally high capacity for happiness"—not only in Matthieu Ricard, but in a study group of more than 250 monks who have spent over 10,000 hours in meditation.

Even when they were not actively practicing, the monks' brain activity indicated an optimistic, goal-oriented outlook.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Bates, "Is This The World's Happiest Man? Brain Scans Reveal French Monk Has 'Abnormally High Capacity' for Joy—Thanks to Meditation," Mail Online, 31 October 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/cf4zfzr> Accessed 1 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 72.

And if you're concerned that you don't have 10,000 hours to spare, don't worry.

The study found that people who meditated only 20 minutes a day for six to eight weeks were found to have a decrease in feelings of anxiety and anger, and an increase in feelings of general well-being.<sup>3</sup>

So it seems my Dad was onto something.

Not only would meditating have given me something to do—it would help me not feel bored in the first place.

A simple discipline of focusing attention on the breath, or on loving-kindness, actually increases our capacity for well-being. It literally changes us.

It's not surprising then that Matthieu Ricard begins his book "The Art of Meditation" with the familiar quote from Gandhi:

"We must *be* the change we want to see in the world."

I'd venture to say that for most of us, being that change doesn't come automatically.

We cannot simply *will* that change to occur within us, just as we cannot simply make up our minds to master a sport or a musical instrument.

To become more peaceful, joyful, compassionate...takes practice.



Jon Kabat-Zinn is another highly respected teacher of mindfulness meditation.

He defines spiritual discipline as "Any intentional and regular activity that gets us back in touch with what is deepest and best in our selves."

Formal sitting meditation has been scientifically shown to elicit changes in the brain...and many other activities can also bring about reverent and sustained attention.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthieu Ricard, *The Art of Meditation* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), 1-3.

Here's a short list of activities I have heard approached as spiritual practice.

- Throwing clay bowls
- Playing the flute
- Practicing yoga
- Reciting poetry
- Building a shed
- Drawing
- Saying daily prayers
- Walking
- Eating mindfully
- Learning Tai Chi...
- Knitting.

The Sufi teacher Rumi wrote, "there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground"...that is to say, there are hundreds of spiritual practices.

Some of you might have heard that quote before...but you might not know the lines that lead up to it in the Coleman Barks translation.

It starts out, "Every day we wake up lonely and frightened. Don't go to the study...take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."<sup>4</sup>

I find it reassuring to know that even a wise poet like Rumi sometimes woke up in a dark mood.

And I also appreciate his reminder that the way to transform experience is not necessarily to study more or talk more.

But rather to "do the beauty" that we love.

When Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests that spiritual discipline is about getting in touch with the deepest and best part of ourselves...it seems to me that's what he means.

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<sup>4</sup> Rumi, "Great Wagon," *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 36.

We might describe this essential core of us as love or beauty or peace or kindness.

Perhaps it is simply “original goodness”...or in the words of our UU First Principle, “inherent worth.”

Whenever we focus our attention on the inherent worth of life, and turn away from the “non-essentials,” we engage in spiritual practice.

And when we continue with any spiritual practice over time, it is bound to transform us.

We begin to “do the beauty.” We begin to “be the change.”

Like any form of mastery or growth, there is no end to it, and things get really interesting as you keep going.

As a result, I wonder whether sometimes we resist spiritual practice, because we correctly suspect that it will lead us into uncharted territory and away from our familiar patterns of dividing and conquering, judging, and clinging.

T. S. Eliot was a poet who seemed to understand the transformative element of spiritual growth. In his poem “Little Gidding” he wrote:

“We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.”

That is, to arrive back at that original goodness, that inherent worth.

He also captured the paradoxical nature of spiritual practice in a poem called “Ash Wednesday,” which includes the lines:

“Teach me to care, and not to care. Teach me to sit still.”

“Teach me to sit still,” from a poem written in 1927, could be the request of any student today in a meditation circle...

And “teach me to care, and not to care” sounds like a prayer, seeking guidance on how to live in a world full of contradictions and paradox, where we are both powerful and powerless at the same time.

How do we get to that place, where we can live in such a world?  
It takes practice.

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So far today I've talked mostly about meditation, and not so much about prayer.

I've noticed that sometimes Unitarians feel uncomfortable even using the word "prayer," as if it expressed tacit approval for certain doctrines that were never part of Jesus' original teachings.

In fact, prayer need not reflect a belief in an authoritarian judging deity.

Many teachers, both ancient and modern, see prayer instead as a way to deepen our connection with any "greater good" beyond our own personalities, that can assist us in the work we are called to do.

For example, millions of people around the world follow the 12 Steps. They were originally developed to help alcoholics get sober, but now more than 200 similar programs address a range of life issues.

When AA began in 1938, its founder Bill Wilson understood that the practice of prayer or meditation could be an essential part of transforming a life.

As a result, the 11<sup>th</sup> Step reads, "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God."

While some members of 12 Step programs see God as a personal deity, others use the acronym "Good Orderly Direction" (there's "discipline" again!) or personal understandings of Ultimate Wisdom or Love.

Prayer can be seen as the opening up to life's essence, to the unified whole, to the interdependent web itself.

Writing in the Buddhist magazine Shambhala Sun, Norman Fischer says, "Whether we imagine a deity or a God or not, we can reach out beyond ourselves and beyond anything we can objectively depict for assistance and strength for our spiritual work."

We can do this in meditation, with silent words, or out loud, vocalizing our hopes and wishes.”

He goes on to say, “We are not asking to be absolved of the need to act.

We are asking for help and for strength to do what we know we must do, with the understanding that though we must do our best, whatever goodness comes our way is not our accomplishment, our personal production.

It comes from a wider sphere than we can control.”

“It is counter-productive to think of spiritual practice as a task that we are going to accomplish on our own. We are training, after all, in spiritual practice, not personal self-help.”<sup>5</sup>

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Meditation and prayer offer the opportunity to return again and again to one’s essence. To connect with the unified Whole.

Just as modern science is helping us understand the benefits of meditation, so it is offering a new perspective on prayer—a perspective that supports a very rational and grounded understanding of this ancient spiritual practice.

Larry Dossey is a medical doctor who has done extensive research into the positive effects of prayer, including “non-local” connections between people that take place during times of prayerful attention.

He writes: “We have for so long defined ourselves as separate personalities that we have fallen into the hypnotic spell of believing that separation, not unity, is the underlying reality.

But [it may be that] unity, not separation, is fundamental. If this is so, the connections we feel with others during prayer are “nothing special.”

Prayer is...a process of remembering who we really are and how we are related.

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Fischer, “*Life is Tough: Six Ways to Deal with It*,” in *Shambhala Sun*, March 2013, 47.

From this point of view, there is good reason to rid prayer of its aura that it is some rare state we enter only on certain occasions. If the unity it connotes is not the exception but the rule, there should be no celestial halo surrounding prayer.”<sup>6</sup>

When he suggests that prayer can be an ordinary thing we do all the time,

He brings to mind the words of Paul, the early Christian, who advised the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing.”<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps this means simply to be aware, always, of our connection to all things. To cultivate a continual awareness of our connection to Being itself.

This “praying without ceasing” can take place in mindfulness practice, walking in the woods, playing a musical instrument, drawing, deep listening...or holding one’s hands in prayer and speaking aloud to the Presence.

As I was researching this sermon, I came upon two readings that lined up coincidentally. One was from Rumi, the Sufi poet I mentioned earlier. As a Muslim, he would have prayed five times a day.

He wrote: “Don’t do daily prayers like a bird pecking, moving its head up and down. Prayer is an egg. Hatch out the total helplessness inside.”<sup>8</sup>

Hundreds of years later, the contemporary poet Jeanne Lohmann wrote this:

“The arc of an egg  
bends hands,  
to shape prayer,

The shell  
unbroken,  
The heavy yolk  
floating.

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Dossey, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 114.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:17, NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> Rumi, “Prayer is an Egg,” *The Soul of Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks (2001).

Our fingers  
curving always  
inward, become a cup  
an open bowl.

Prayer is  
circumference  
we may not  
reach around,

space for all we cannot hold,  
the rim of Love toward which we lean.”<sup>9</sup>

I was struck by that image of a bowl because it reminds me of our chalice.

A container that holds so much that might otherwise seem contradictory.  
A structure that holds so many who might otherwise feel separate.

Both of these poets seem to suggest that prayer—and by extension  
meditation—can form a kind of structure or discipline to hold the “heavy yolk”  
of life.

Rumi suggests that we then “hatch out,” transformed.  
Jeanne Lohmann calls prayer “the rim of Love to which we lean.”

Perhaps spiritual practice, however we approach it, can create a structure  
—a “rim of Love”—within which we can grow.



When I said, “I’m bored! I don’t know what to do!” I was a child.

But I admit that I still say that from time to time.

I say, “I’m bored,” or, “I’m dissatisfied,” or “That person really bugs me,” or “I  
wish I didn’t have this problem.”

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<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Lohmann, “Nothing So Wise,” *Jeanne Lohmann Greatest Hits 1956-2000*  
(Johnstown, Pudding House Publications, 2001), 16.

I complain that, “I don’t know what to do.”

In those times, the answer, “meditate” or “pray” would still be good advice.

For in the practice of letting a spiritual discipline shape my life,  
I might find myself living differently.

Seeing that I can sit with discomfort.  
Finding that I can cope with uncertainty.  
Learning that I can be peaceful in the whirlwind  
and courageous in days of challenge.

Through spiritual practice, I may grow to become  
more fully engaged in all that is Life

More able to respond with loving Presence  
When I am called to be the change  
that is needed in this world.

This I pray.

Amen.