

Ask the Friend for Love

~ a talk by Tara Brach, PhD, presented on December 8, 2010

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I'll begin by sharing a brief story of my own. Three weeks before 9/11, I was invited to speak at a Buddhist conference in the Twin Towers . . . a very poignant memory. The theme of the conference was how we heal and awaken—what really helps us to heal and awaken and find freedom. There were five of us opening the conference and we were each asked to give a ten-minute talk on what we felt was the essence of the path. What helps us be free? The other four speakers were elders in the Buddhist tradition. I was a real newbie, but I was a female and I think they needed a woman. I was second in the line-up, which felt just right. When you are second, you have the first ten minutes to just kind of arrive, but then you don't have to wait. The first speaker, Richard Baker Roshi, very well-known disciple of Suzuki Roshi, got up to do his sharing and he looked around and said, "Transformation and awakening comes down to two things: intention and attention." And then he bowed and sat down. And I was on. So I got up there and everything in me wanted to say: *What he said.*

To be honest, I have no idea what I said, but what he said really stuck with me. It's one of the pithiest and most profound summations of how everything we are doing is a training in how to pay *attention* in a way that frees our heart. And what guides how we pay *attention* is our *intention*—what matters to us. If we know that what matters to us is presence or love or truth, how we pay attention is going to be energized by that.

The Buddha said that the entire world comes out of the tip of intention—our reality, our actions, our behaviors, our thoughts, our words—everything. It all begins with our intention, what is mattering to us, what feels important to us. And there are many levels to intention. At any given time, we might be holding a certain level of intention. We may have a very unconscious kind of intention where we want to be more comfortable, so we kind of shift how we are sitting, and that is one level. We aren't really aware that the intention is there, but it is driving our behavior. Then there are the most enlightened moments where something in us knows that, more than anything in the world, what matters to us is to realize the truth of who we are and live from that. In those moments, our intention is very, very present and clear.

So, this is what we will explore tonight and the language I would like to use for intention is that of aspiration and prayer. Because when our intention gets very deep and very sincere, it has a heart-quality—just this whole-heartedness where we get incredibly sincere. It is not a “sappy” sincerity. There is a truthfulness there, a real clarity. Prayer, when it is very awake, has that.

I will be speaking about prayer—kind of the heart’s passion—and the way the heart can direct our path. You wouldn’t be here tonight without intention, without some quality or some longing in your heart to wake up. You wouldn’t choose to spend time with loved ones—to really show up—without some quality of intention. You wouldn’t be drawn to creative expression without intention. It is really what creates our life. Of course, our intention can also get very tight and narrow and deluded, and then we get into activities and behaviors that aren’t so wholesome. So we will explore that too.

When I am teaching, I always begin the class with a reflection on what matters. And I ask the question: What is it that really matters? I sometimes ask people to share what came to mind, just to get an idea of what is in the room. And, most often, the responses are centered on a quality of reconnecting—coming home to ourselves, peace, loving as hard as we can. We long to come back to what is here, to belong to what is here, to be here. If we start investigating our intention, in some way, we want to come back to belonging, to love, to peace, to presence. This is sometimes described as the *backward step*—coming back to what is here and precious but, perhaps, we have forgotten.

So, then the question is: What if we remembered our intention many, many, many times a day? What if you said to yourself over and over throughout the day: *I want to love as hard as I can. Or: I want to touch peace. Or: I want to be here.* What would happen to your life? One of the phrases that comes to mind for me, is from the poet Hafiz, who writes:

Ask the friend for love.
Ask him again.
For I have learned that every heart will get
What it prays for

Most. ¹

Doesn't that ring of truth? When you are inhabiting your prayer, you are just available. What you really pray for the most, it comes.

I don't speak that often about prayer, but it is very much a part of the Buddhist tradition—and all of the wisdom and spiritual traditions—because prayer happens in our hearts. It just happens. And the possibility is that we can become very conscious of it. William James wrote that the beginning of every religion is the cry *help*. That is the primal prayer. We arrive here, and it is difficult and confusing and scary. We were merged with the maternal surround and, all of a sudden we feel separate . . . blaring lights, loud voices, the whole deal. And, immediately, we cry for help.

One friend of mine recently described a time where she was really distressed. She was on a street corner in the city at nighttime, and she found herself crying, “I want my mother! I want my mother!” Her mother had been gone for a handful of years. What was interesting to her was that she and her mother had a very complex relationship, not one where her mother really was that kind of nurturing maternal surround. Still, there was some very deep longing: *I want my mother*. And that is very much in us, especially when we are in trouble. Who amongst us has not instinctively turned our thoughts upward during a crisis and said: *Just no matter what, whatever is out there, whatever that intelligence or benevolence in this universe, please help*. A lot of us. Because there is some sense that there is something beyond this fearful egoic-self. When we are caught in that egoic-self, we intuit that and we reach towards it. And there *is* something beyond this egoic-self.

I grew up Unitarian, and one of my favorite lines from the Unitarians is, when they are saying a prayer to God, the address is: *To whom it may concern*. I always liked that. By the way, the Unitarians also say that Moses received the *Ten Suggestions*. Very Unitarian.

Many people get introduced to prayer early. This is one three-year old's prayer: “Our Father who does art in heaven, Harold is his name...” I love that.

¹ Hafiz. (1996). A Potted Plant (D. Ladinsky, Trans.) In *The Subject Tonight is Love: 60 Wild and Sweet Poems of Hafiz* (p.65). New York, NY: Penguin Group.

Here is another: “At Sunday school, they were teaching how one should pray to God because God created everything, including human beings. So, little Johnny seemed especially attentive when they told him how Eve was created out of one of Adam’s ribs. Later in the week, his mother noticed him lying down as though he were ill. He had his palms together and she said, ‘Johnny, what is the matter?’ Little Johnny responded, ‘I have a pain in my side. I think I am going to have a wife.’”

When we are in trouble, we reach towards what we perceive as a source of help. It is an inclination towards belonging to something larger. What I call mindful prayer, or living prayer, is the very deliberate practice of making this conscious. In reaching out, we discover what is really here. As we explore this tonight, we will be looking at mature prayer—which is that kind of consciousness. Mature prayer has two expressions. One happens when there is some feeling of separation and we start touching the longing that is there—much like the times when I ask you: “Well, what are you longing for?” It’s when we sense what really matters to us and reach out from our longing: *Please may I pray as hard as I can. May I love as hard as I can.* It is that kind of prayer. The second expression of mature prayer comes from a sense of fullness; we are already in love and it is the overflow. It is that expression of gratitude—gratitude in helping others, wanting that love for others.

We will spend most of the time on the first kind of prayer and how we cultivate this when we are feeling a sense of yearning and separation. How can we empower that prayer and make it very conscious? In most Buddhist ceremonies or rituals, both prayers are there. We start with the prayer of longing—where we ask for refuge in truth, refuge in presence, refuge in love, refuge in awareness. And then after we practice, at the end, we offer our blessings from that fullness. We say: “May all beings be filled with loving kindness. May there be peace on earth, peace everywhere.” It is that overflowing of love and gratitude. So, these are the two kinds of prayers.

Let me ask here: When you face difficulty, how many of you pray in some way, some form? How many pray as a regular part of your meditation? How many of you find that, when you do pray, it helps?

We have a range of experience with prayer. I sometimes find that those with a religious background or a very strong doctrine in the family—including atheists—actually shy away from prayer. When it has been very religious, there are sometimes very limiting associations—like with a judgmental god or some superior god. There is often a notion of being an inferior being and some guilt or fear that goes with it. There are projections of a certain kind of god to which we are praying that make us pull away. Even more so, I’ve found that people turn to Buddhism because they want to get more clarity and truth and they feel that prayer, in some way, has been merged with desires and wants—like it is reinforcing the wanting, selfish self and it is reinforcing separateness. “If I am praying, then I am feeling like there is a ‘me’ that is praying to a something out there!” So, there are some that come to Buddhism and are drawn to a more a non-dual experience who think prayer is, somewhat, a lower form of spiritual practice.

When prayer is not awake, when it is not mindful, it actually can play into the ego and a sense of separateness. We all yearn for belonging in a deep way. It is a very wise longing; it is actually awareness calling us home. But, for all of us, it gets fixated in narrow ways. We have a deep yearning to wake up to all that we can be; and yet, that yearning—that wanting to belong to wholeness—narrows and fixates in very small ways like: *Please may I get everything done on my list today, because then I will feel better and I will feel more belonging. Or: Please help me win this lottery ticket. Make this ticket the winner! Or: May I get this parking space! Or: May my team win! Or: May my favorite restaurant be open!*

I heard one story of a woman who approaches her priest and says, “Father, I have a problem. I have two female talking parrots but they only know how to say one thing.”

“What do they say?” the priest inquired.

“They only know how to say, ‘Hi, we are prostitutes, want to have some fun?’”

“That’s terrible!” the priest exclaimed. “But I have a solution to your problem. Bring your two female parrots over to my house. I will put them with my two male parrots that have learned to pray and read the Bible. My parrots will teach your female parrots to stop saying that and your parrots will learn to praise and worship.”

“Oh, thank you,” the woman responded.

The next day, the woman took her female parrots to the priest’s house. His two male parrots were holding rosary beads and praying in their cage. So, the lady put her two female parrots in with the male parrots and, immediately, the female parrots said, “Hi, we are prostitutes, want to have some fun?” And one male parrot looked over to the other male parrot and exclaimed, “Put the beads away! Our prayers have been answered!”

Prayer can become fixated. We can see it in the very daily ways that we get fixated on trying to get favorable attention: *Please, may I get this job.* Or: *Please, may my teen get into the college of their choice.* Or: *Please, save this marriage.* Our prayers become very focused. It is very natural that we fixate on whatever will soothe or make us feel better for the time being. But the truth is, if we pay attention to any of the places where we have really strong desires, we will start to sense what is underneath.

I worked with a woman who had struggled with a life-long eating disorder. During one meeting, she remembered a pivotal moment when, after running away from her home being returned by the police, she asked her mother if she loved her. And the response was, “How could anyone ever love you?” This wasn’t new. Throughout this woman’s childhood, her mother had filled her mind with ugly critiques and messages of her badness. Those messages were deeply rooted and it took decades for her to heal. In writing about her youth, she described the following bedtime ritual:

“From the age of five or six until I was well into my teens, whenever I had trouble sleeping I would slip out of from under my covers and steal into the kitchen for a bit of bread or cheese, which I would carry back to bed with me. Then I would pretend my hands belonged to someone else—a comforting, reassuring being without a name, an angel perhaps. The right hand would feed me little bites of cheese or bread and the left hand stroked my cheeks and hair. My eyes closed, I would whisper softly to myself, ‘There, there. Go to sleep. You are safe now. Everything will be all right. I love you.’”

D. H. Lawrence writes: “Men are not free doing just what they like. [...] Men are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes. And there is getting down to the deepest self! It takes some diving.”²

What allows us to dive? What allows us to go under our habitual fixations to really get to the deepest part of our being and what that part really longs for—not as a thought, but to actually feel the longing? That is what energizes us. “Ask the friend for love. Ask him again. For I have found that every heart will get what it prays for most.” If we get in touch with what matters, our life begins to align with that. So, how do we drop in?

Sometimes the dropping in happens spontaneously. There are times—often when we get backed up against the wall and everything collapses in our life—that we are so raw and so in touch with what matters that, from that place, we just reach out. From that depth of that, we reach out and we discover something that we had not touched before, because we had not been very attuned. That is what happened to Ram Dass when he had a stroke.

Many of you know Ram Dass, his given name was Richard Alpert, major spiritual teacher of my generation. He had been exposed to many types of spiritual training. But at the moment of his stroke, he lay on this gurney, looking at the pipes in the ceiling, and no uplifting thoughts or inspiration come to him. None of the training—not mantra, not mindfulness, not thoughts of compassion—nothing worked. Looking back at that crucial moment, he said: “I flunked the test.” It was like, having done decades of practice in concentration and mindfulness, and then, at the crucial moments, nothing worked. “I flunked the test.”

Then, over the next days, in physical anguish and powerlessness and despair, he said he began to pray to Maharaji, his guru that had died decades before. That had been the place of his deepest experience of unconditional love. He said: “I talked to my guru’s picture and he spoke to me and he was all around me. He was there as fully as ever.” Ram Dass felt completely surrounded by and filled with loving presence. It

² Lawrence, D. H. (2003). *The Spirit of Place*. In E. Greenspan, L. Vasey, & J. Worthen (Eds.), *Studies in Classic American Literature: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D.H. Lawrence* (p. 18). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

was from then on that he had a way to then deal with the fact that his life was utterly different because of the stroke.³ In that moment of fear and separation, he had to reach out to what I call an *enlarged belonging*—to something he intuited as love, but that was not, in that moment, accessible inside him.

When I talk about this, I am often asked: *But isn't that dualistic to be reaching out?* We spend many moments living in a dualistic reality. If we are honest with ourselves, in many moments, there is a sense of “Me” in here and a world out there. And so our starting place is to, when we feel the fear and loneliness, reach towards what we think can be of help and, in that reaching, we come home to the love that was here, but was hidden. Something else I frequently hear is: *But I am not always up against the wall. How do I start getting in touch with that tenderness when it is just the habitual “wants” that drive my daily life?* Even when we are not necessarily struck by stroke, how do we start opening to that authentic heart that really is the power on the spiritual path? We always start right where we are.

This is an example from my own life of a time when I got caught in a very narrow fixation:

When my son was in junior high school and then high school, he, like many of his friends, loved violent video games. He also loved rap music with violent lyrics, paintball, and violent action movies. Sometimes, I would think: *What did I do wrong?* I was very, very aversive and I just wanted him to be different. So, my wanting was fixated on really wanting him to have different tastes and to be into other kinds of things.

When I started investigating, I started where I was, listening to that want. There was a sense of wanting him to be different because then I would feel less guilty or ashamed of having, in some way, brought him up wrong. Then I also wanted him to be different because I was afraid for his happiness, that he wouldn't be happy if this was how he spent his time. So, there was that piece. But then, as I went deeper, I realized that underneath all of it, I wanted him to be different so that we could be closer. Because as long as he was into these activities and I wasn't, there was a distance. And

³ Dass, R. (2001). *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

I wanted him to be more like me, so we could be closer. I felt distanced. So, I started paying attention to that and realized I had this longing just to feel more of our loving connection. The more I paid attention to that, just feeling that longing to have a more loving connection, the more my heart relaxed. And this part of asking the friend for love. I was able to set the boundaries that I needed to as a parent, but I stopped making him wrong for his tastes.

You see, I was actually making him feel bad about himself for just what he was into. He was into it because he was a male living in this culture, and that is what he was into. And, he is still into video games that I can't stand. He drags me in to look at them and says, "Look! You'll appreciate the graphics! They are incredibly sophisticated and beautiful!" And I will look, and I will see blood spurting and people like, creaming each other, and still not like it. But it is different. Because now his tastes have broadened and he likes some of the things I like, and it is not an issue in that way.

My point is that, whenever we have a really charged want, if we listen, we will find, underneath that charged want, something very pure and powerful and important. But we have to take the time to dive deeply.

Reflection:

I invite you to take a moment and do a brief reflection:

Sense something that is happening in your life where you have a strong desire, something compelling. You may want to change your partner in some way. You might be wanting for financial security or to make it in some job or business venture. Or for a certain person to return your affections. Or to change the appearance of your body. Maybe you want someone's approval.

Whatever it is that you are wanting, see if you can trace back a little to what is underneath it. You might ask yourself: *If I got that—if this person changed or I succeeded in this venture or had more financial security or got this approval—what would I really get?* Maybe what you are wanting is to get rid of a fear of something. *What would I get if I didn't have that fear, or if this person changed?* In other words:

what are you *really* wanting? Are you wanting some peace so you can relax and enjoy your moments—belong to your moments? Or are you wanting somebody to change so you can feel your connection more? Your love more? As I did? Are you wanting to change yourself so that you can be more at home in your being? So that you can just relax and enjoy your life?

You can peel the onion by just continuing to sense, with your heart: *What would that really give me? What do I really want?* Usually, we find there is some kind of homecoming we are yearning for—to be at home in our lives and in our heart. You can continue this process on your own.

Indian teacher, Sri Nisargadatta, says: “The problem with you is not that you have wants or desires, but that you desire so little. Why not desire it all? Why not want complete fulfillment, joy, freedom?”

Ask the friend for love. Ask him again. For I have learned that every heart will get what it prays for most.

We have talked about how we arrive a little more to longing when we are just in our daily fixations—and so now the inquiry becomes: What about when we are really up against the wall, afraid and feeling alone, and it just doesn’t happen as easily as it happened for Ram Dass? What about the times we are really, really stuck and we need help?

One friend, Francie, had metastatic breast cancer. She had been on the spiritual path for a very long time and had an idea about how to go through this process in a spiritual way. Her idea was about being brave and having faith and strength. And her way of going through it meant that she couldn’t really show her friends when she was scared. So, she got to feeling very isolated. When we spoke, she started telling me how much fear was there because it was clear that she didn’t have long. In fact, her doctors had told her she had no more than three months. So she was asking how to work with that fear. I am giving you this example because this is a really important one. Every one of us is going to lose all the beings we love, including this body. How do we turn to the friend and ask for love and ask for some sort of peace when we are really, really scared?

So, I asked her to get in touch with the fear and what it was saying. And the fear was saying “Help!” And that is usually what happens when we are really scared. There is something in us that is just crying out for help—a very big “Help!!” And then I asked her to deepen her attention and then asked her: “What does that fear most want? If there was help, what does it want?” She took some time with that. What does that fear want? What does it most need? And if it could say it in words, what would it say? The words were very simple, three words: *Please love me. Please love me.* And I asked her: “Who do you want to address that to? What is the source of it? Who do you most want to love you?” And it was her mother, who had passed away a while before. And I had her say it out loud: *Please love me.* And I invited her to sense what it would be like to feel that love? And she said, “If I felt it, it would be like I was in my mother’s arms.” So she said it out loud and imagined feeling that love. And then I said: “Who else?” And so she went through a process, we took probably fifteen or twenty minutes, where she was thinking of all the different people, and it included her dog, to whom she just wanted to say “Please love me” and feel embraced by their love. And she said it to all her friends, her dog . . . she said “Please love me” to the trees that she loved the most on her property. *Please love me. Please love me.*

At first she was whispering it, and then she was saying it out loud, and then it was slower and slower, sobbing. But then, she got very quiet: *Please love me.* And there would be a period of silence, and you could just feel the wash of being held and embraced. Finally, she said: “The world is loving me. Now there is just love.” It wasn’t three months. It really turned out to be more like one month. But for that last month, she let her friends hold her. In letting her friends hold her, she had a heart as wide as the world and she was holding them. She found a refuge of great peace. But it started with letting that longing of her heart—*Please love me*—be spoken.

This is Rumi:

“Cry out! Don’t be stolid and silent! Cry out! Cry out with your pain! Lament! And let the milk of loving flow into you.”⁴

⁴ Rūmī, J. A. (2004). Cry Out in Your Weakness. In C. Barks (Trans.), *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition* (p. 276-278). New York: Harper Collins.

There is a power to prayer when we feel the longing and we reach out from that longing. In those moments, there is a profound receptivity. John O’Donohue—catholic, poet, writer, passed away some years ago—has taught me more than anyone else about prayer. He says: “Prayer is the voice of longing. It reaches outwards and inwards to unearth our ancient belonging.”⁵

We can sense how Francie reached inward to feel her longing, to inhabit it: *Please love me! Please love me!* And we also see how she reached outward, sensing the source—what she was longing for—and unearthed that ancient belonging that is the bridge. Prayer is the bridge from longing to belonging.

When you want something, you can only manifest what you already have. You can’t pray for something unless you already know it from the inside. You can’t pray for love unless something in you intuitively loves. You have to know about it. You can’t pray for peace unless there is something in you that knows about peace and knows to pray for it. Does that make sense? That there has to be an intuition of what you are praying for? And so, when you are feeling a longing, you trace it back to its source and come back to that place in you that knows that the gem is already embedded in the longing.

Jesus says: “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.”⁶

Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it. In other words: Feel the longing. Imagine receiving it. Imagine it. *Image-in.* And it will already be there because it always was there. You just forgot.

A Dominican nun who had been practicing for many, many years writes: “As a nun I made up this question, especially as I learned more about prayer.” And her question was: *Where is Jesus now?* In any moment: *Where is Jesus now?* She continues, “Jesus would come to me at night as a strong comforting spirit. On many occasions, a spiritual ecstasy rushed through every part of my body. I couldn’t really talk about it, though I felt radiant and profoundly fulfilled. He flooded my heart with such love. To

⁵ O’Donohue, J. (1999). *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

⁶ *The Holy Bible*. Matthew 11:24. New International Version.

some, it might sound like heresy, but Jesus is here among us in every human, in every stone, in our deeds, in our successes, in our errors. What a beautiful kingdom to awaken to. The divine presence in the world.”

So it is really a practice of mindfulness. *Where is Jesus now?* Asking that question. This moment, what we are longing for, isn't it really already here?

What we are exploring is really *living prayer*. It is not a mechanical prayer. It is not a habitual ritual from a formal religion. It is an experiment and in the last several years, it has become an increasingly central part of my practice. Sometimes I will practice paying attention, but at other times, my practice is really getting in touch with that longing and expressing it and living from it. What I've found is that, the deeper the longing, the more powerful the prayer and the more powerful the experience that comes out of it. And so part of it is an experiment about how to get in touch with that longing.

The times that I most turn towards prayer are usually times when I am feeling physically sick. I have often shared that I have had a lot of chronic sickness and it sometimes reaches the point that there is a profound uncertainty about what will I be able to do. Will I ever get better? Can I count on being well enough to do certain things I have planned to do? When I hit real uncertainty, there is a lot of fear and a lot of aloneness in that.

At the times when I practice prayer, it is a very deliberate and intense practice. Just as I described with Francie, I will ask myself: *Okay, that afraid, alone place . . . what does it most want? What does it most need?* And, in some way, it is the same. It needs to feel belonging. What I've found is that, more than anything in the world, when I am feeling scared and alone, I want to trust that this body, this heart, this being, belongs to loving awareness—that this is what I am. I want to trust that. I sometimes think of it this way: If I had just a few minutes to live and I knew I was going to die, what would it be that, more than anything, if I could remember, would hold everything for me? It would be to realize and trust that what I am is loving presence. That is what I belong to, that is what I am. So, in those times that I am scared, I will feel that longing to trust and remember that, and then I will call on loving presence. For me, that is kind of an imagining of a field of light and warmth and love that

surrounds me and is absolutely bathing me. I will call on that and feel that sense of being bathed and surrounded and held and then, as if I had two hands offering out—offering the pain, the fear, the longing, the loneliness into that field.

The more there is a sense of being bathed and the more there is a sense of surrendering into that field, there is no longer a separation. There is no longer loving presence *out there*. It is not like a deity that is distant. There is just a sense of belonging to love, that that is what I am. But I share this with you because it doesn't start there. It starts with prayer. It starts with this sense of separation and longing and reaching towards that and imagining that sense of something larger.

Rilke writes: “I yearn to be held in the great hands of your heart. Oh let them take me now. Into them I place these fragments, my life. And you, God, spend them however you want.”⁷

We began with the context of intention and attention. If we have a deep intention—whether it is to belong to loving presence, or to touch peace, or to fulfill the complete potential of this being human—if we have a longing . . . and if it is a passion of the heart and we remember it regularly . . . that is what will happen. It drives and directs our attention. When we are in trouble or when it is difficult—as I have described in a few stories—when there is deep loneliness or fear, sense what that place wants, and really inhabit the wanting. “Cry out!” as Rumi says, “Lament!” Stay awake as you do it, imagine the loving pouring in. Imagine it. If you can imagine it, it happens.

So, there is this dimension of prayer where we are reaching out, and then there is a dimension of prayer where we feel that fullness and it is overflowing...where we see the beauty of a sunset or the gleam in a child's eye, and just deeply experience gratitude and praise.

I love the story of Kabir, a shoemaker who, as he works, is always repeating the mantra “Ram, Ram, Ram.” Ram is God or the Divine. Day in and day, out for twenty years, he does this. And one day, Ram appears. Kabir sees Ram and he asks, “Who

⁷ Rilke, R. M. (1996). II,2 (A. Barrows & J. Macy, Trans.). In *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (p. 139). New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

are you?” And Ram replies, “I am Ram.” And then Kabir says, “Why are you here?” And Ram says, “Why am I here? You have been calling me for years. Now I have come. What do you want?” And Kabir says, “Well, I don’t want anything.” And Ram asks, “Well, why have you been repeating my name?” And Kabir replies, “I just love repeating your name.” And so, for the years to come, wherever Kabir would go, he would be followed by Ram and the sound: “Kabir, Kabir, Kabir.”

So, there is just this prayerfulness that comes from appreciating life and celebrating what is here. And with that, there is a quality of really offering the benefits of our practice—offering our blessings outward. A friend’s mother, who is ninety-four, prays for an hour each day. And in her prayer, she includes everyone in her circle—hundreds—and she just offers blessings: *Feel love. Feel happy. Be healthy. Love, love, love.* She just offers it out. She is in hospice care now, and is an incredibly peaceful, happy, person. There is a sense that there is no loneliness when our hearts are generous. This is the other aspect of prayer. They are very related. We ask and we open ourselves to receive the blessings, and then we offer out the blessings—like breathing in and breathing out.

Reflection:

We will close, on that note, with a brief reflection where I will take some of the elements that we have talked about and give you a chance to see how it feels for you. You might find a comfortable way of sitting while we explore a bit of this living prayer. If prayer is not something that is a familiar part of your life, I would like to invite you to just bring your wise and open curiosity to this little meditation. It is all an experiment.

Just letting yourself arrive. You might feel your breath and, as you connect with the inflow and outflow, just relax a little bit. Let the parts of your body that might have tightened relax. And, as we often do, just to invite whatever might be challenging in your life to come into consciousness—some difficulty that you would like to have more freedom around. It might be something that brings up fear, or something that makes you feel a sense of failure or great sorrow that you are struggling with. Anger, perhaps. And you might sense what is most difficult about this. What are you afraid is going to happen? How does this take away from your life? See if you can contact it a

bit in your body—your throat, your chest, your belly. Where it is living in you, the sense of maybe tightness or fear or hurt or upset?

In this meditation, it might be that you can't fully contact it right now. But this will give you a sense of how to practice. Just to feel into where it is difficult and sense from the inside: *What does this place in me really most need or want? What does this place in me want to trust or to experience?* Perhaps, it is the sense of just being cared about or loved, being safe, being connected, being at home in yourself, trusting your own goodness. What do you need to trust or know or feel or experience?

You might, for a moment, visualize that you are moving up a mountain path and you are feeling these difficulties in your heart. You are aware of it. You are on a trail. If you are not visual, just to get a sense of this. You are kind of winding up through the trees, maybe there is a stream. You are moving up a mountain. And then you arrive at a clearing and whatever you perceive as the source of what you need will be there. It may be that what is there is a formless sense of presence, intelligence, love. Or it might be a form, it might be that there is a being there that can be a source for you of what you need—Buddha or Jesus, Mother Mary, the Divine Mother—some embodiment. It maybe that what is there is a part of nature or an animal . . . a dog, perhaps. Maybe what is there is a being on this earth like the Dalai Lama or could be Mother Theresa . . . a being that has passed. So, just sense coming into a clearing where there is some form or formless being, or quality of being that could be a source for you of what you need. This being is welcoming you. This being sees you, cares about you. If there's a form, and you come close, you can see the eyes of this being filled with love.

Imagine coming into stillness. Imagine receiving what you most need. Imagine receiving the reassurance, the light, the love, the peace, the clarity. Give yourself the gift, right now, of imagining what you need and receiving it—feeling it pour into you, bathe you. If it is love, let it wash through every cell and the spaces between the cells. You might feel that you can surrender into loving presence, merge with loving presence or with peace.

When it feels difficult and you feel separate, simply ask to experience what you want to experience with the sincerity of your heart and just keep asking—tonight,

tomorrow, the next day... Because this is a life practice. Prayer gets deeper and stronger over time.

“Ask the friend for love. Ask him again. For I have learned that every heart will get what it prays for most.”

And together, we offer our aspiration that all beings everywhere might awaken to the goodness and love that is their very nature . . . that all beings awaken to the intelligence, awaken to the freedom that is, innately, our birthright . . .that all beings everywhere touch great peace . . . that there will be peace on earth and peace everywhere.

May all beings realize their potential and be free. Namaste.
