The Movement of Devotion (Part 2)

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Now, all this is related to prayer and prayerfulness. What does that mean? Often people, especially those who are suspicious of religion—or even some religious people—think of prayer as really asking for something. I'm asking God for a favor or to help me out in some situation: what we could call supplication. And that's fine, you know, that's a style or stance of prayer, and it really is fine.

But we need some care here, because supplication or asking an imaginal other—divinity or angel or whatever—for something can be a little too much on the reified, self-serving side of things, as we've talked about. But actually the very asking itself can come out of, and also support or bind in place, a sense of the self that's actually quite contracted and small and hard in the moment. In other words, the very asking itself—the way that we're asking, the relationship with that asking, the whole way that we're seeing it—is keeping a contracted, small, hard sense of self in place at that time.

That's different from a kind of humble opening out of the being to receive something bigger. It's the opposite of contracted, small, and hard. There's a softening and opening out of the being to this something, some other, some autonomous other that we sense is something bigger than us. So one is contracting and one is opening. One has humility and one has a kind of tight smallness to it.

Again, without making too many problems out of this, it's just the sort of thing we want to be interested in. Of course it's going to go one way or another at times. It's just recognizing these movements, discerning what's happening. Ah, okay, can I open it differently? Can I see it differently? Can I shift something?

Prayer or supplication is fine, but prayer doesn't necessarily mean supplication at all—or rather can mean a lot more than just asking. Prayer as praise of the divine or of the divinity of all things. Prayer as blessing—our blessing of someone or something, or our sense of receiving blessing from someone, from something, or from the divine in general, the universe, the cosmos.

Blessing can be something articulable, like "may you be well," or a specific wish. But in their depths, there are also dimensions of praise and blessing that it's almost impossible to put into words. We can't actually translate them into words. The words crumble or dissolve into something that's still very alive, very deep, still involving the divine, involving images wrapped up in it. It's not just a euphemism for "oh, it's pretty in the garden" or "isn't nature amazing." It actually involves a sense of divinity and the imaginal, but while I'm still using words like praise and blessing, and they're palpable, if someone said "what do you mean exactly," it would be hard to articulate. It's something beyond the verbal.

The experiences of this level of prayer—prayer as praise or blessing rather than as supplication—have a

huge range, both in terms of how close they are to obvious praise or blessing or the more conventional meanings of those words, and also in their potential loci or reference or focuses: this thing or that thing or wider or this element of experience or whatever.

These experiences of prayer are always imaginal. They always involve the imaginal. They involve image and a sense of divinity, even if that sense and the images involved are subtle or even vague. But they can extend from being associated with one object to an all-inclusive, all-pervasive, cosmopoetic perception of praise, blessing, prayer.

It may start with one thing or one aspect of experience being perceived and felt in the soul and the heart as a blessing—perceived as a blessing or as emanating blessings. For instance, the materiality of the body. The materiality of one's body and its form. Sometimes there's a shift in the psyche, in the consciousness, in the perception. We perceive this materiality, this form, as a mode of divine blessing. It is imminent, and as form, the materiality and the form is an emanation of a blessing—both a blessing from the divine and itself as blessing.

Not just because it's a miracle of biophysical evolutionary processes—which it is—but not just that. In this sense, in this mystical sense, in this sense of prayerfulness, there are intimations, senses, conceptions—often faint—of other dimensions, of divinity. So there is blessing there in the knowing of body in this way, and the felt experience of body in this way.

And then, as is so often the case, it can extend—a cosmopoiesis extends from one object or thing or person, perceived in this sense as a theophany. In this case, as praise, as blessing, it starts to extend to the materiality and the forms around us, around this body in this moment. There's a natural, organic extension into a wider cosmopoiesis.

So from this body as blessing, or this body as praising, there's an extension to matter—the matter that I perceive in this moment as blessing, as praise. And then also an extension from that, potentially, to the knowing. The knowing of the praise, the blessing, the knowing of the materiality. So knowing it as blessing, and the knowing too is blessing. The knowing too is a blessing.

You can see it starts with one thing, there's an extension—as I said, a natural organic extension. Not always, but often, with these processes, these mystical unfoldments, there's a natural organic extension, a wider cosmopoiesis. And it's possible at times, in practice, to sense all things—all things or beings or objects or elements or aspects of experience—to sense that they are all praising, they are all blessing. They are the praise and the blessing of the divine. They receive the praise and the blessing of the divine and they emanate the praise and blessing.

But always what's involved in this kind of cosmopoetic perception of the imaginal is that this praise and this blessing, if that's what we're talking about right now, is felt and known through the senses somehow. For example, in the realm of materiality, the sense of the warmth of the sun—you could say in a certain

language the fire element—the sense of the warmth of the sun on the body is somehow praising, is somehow divine blessing, or the divine blessing existence. Or through the sensations of touch of the feet, legs, body with the earth on which I'm standing, the sense of connection, of rootedness there—this somehow is divine blessing. This experience of touch, these sensations of touch, are emanating blessing, are praising. Or through the sense of smell and fragrance—and not necessarily only pleasant sensations, pleasant smells or pleasant touches, whatever.

And certainly, as I've said in other talks, and I said earlier, these words praise and blessing are not euphemisms for just "oh, how pleasant, how aesthetically pleasing." They don't restrict themselves to the pleasant. There's involved in all this the potential for a kind of liberation from the whole duality of pleasant and unpleasant in experience, and the directives—the constraints and compulsions of consciousness, of experience—that come out of that duality. So we can perceive praise and blessing more and more widely.

But always, what's involved here is the imaginal, is the heart, the receptivity, the openness of heart. Conception is involved, even if subtly and vaguely, and the senses are involved. So it's felt and known somehow through the senses in ways that—we're really talking about ways of knowing, different ways of knowing that are not conventionally acknowledged or recognized.

The possibilities here for this level of prayer—prayer as praise, as blessing—there are manifold possibilities in all kinds of directions and multiple kinds of ranges involved. Possibilities are infinite, in fact. Infinite.

And similarly with all that, there are flavors and intensities of the feelings of prayerfulness, of devotion, of surrender, of love and compassion. All of these qualities, there's a huge range to them, both in their possible intensities and also the possible flavors that they have.

So, for example, compassion. Compassion can be very tearful, quivering with the resonance, with the suffering of whoever we're feeling compassion for. And it can also be very sweet and lovely and very buoyant, light, healing energy streaming forth, and there isn't so much of the tears. It feels very bright, very sustainable, very light. It can be in the middle, a mixture of those two. Compassion can be very spacious or really quite cool. And all of these are flavors of compassion. There's no hierarchy there. Again, they're just flavors that are available to us, and also intensities.

All of these qualities that I was mentioning before—prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, compassion, metta—they're actually composites. In other words, love or metta or compassion or prayerfulness is never just one thing. It's a mix of different elements.

This is not just an intellectual point at all. As practice grows and we develop our practice, we can absolutely—and it's there for us to know and to really experience—all the ranges of all these qualities and be able to discern these qualities and the flavors and the subtle differences and actually tune the mix. I

want the compassion to be a little more buoyant right now, a little more light and less heavy and tearful. I want it to be more spacious, or whatever it is.

So we're really talking about what's possible in practice. What ranges can we traverse and what can we know and what can we sense and what can become really just part of our lives? I'm not even talking just about formal meditation practices—also in our lives, in our relationships, in the moments in the day.

So again, no hierarchy here. We're not insisting on intensity for prayerfulness or surrender or devotion. I mean, intensity is fine and great and can be wonderful, but it's not that it's always better or deeper or more helpful. Yes, in the course of practice, in the course of years of practice for most people, our capacity grows. We learn how to accommodate.

Our heart grows. Our psychic space expands to accommodate truly intense, profound emotions—whether difficult ones or the deeply beautiful ones. We learn to hold such forces of sacredness, praise, blessing, beauty, compassion, or love. We discover how to allow these experiences, how to create room for them without being overwhelmed. This capacity to hold intensity without it becoming problematic is part of deepening in practice.

So yes, there is a place for intensity and vastness. But echoing what I said earlier, the movement toward subtlety is equally important. Sometimes these qualities of prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, or compassion are far more subtle and less intense—and sometimes this subtlety is actually more helpful. The mind may want and be nourished by this gentleness. We want to allow this movement toward subtlety and fully experience it, not become hooked on intensity, afraid of it, or dismissive of the subtle.

Again, no hierarchy exists here. What this asks of us is open-mindedness, sensitive discernment, careful attunement, experimentation, and flexibility—but always with discernment, with tuning, and with genuine interest.

The heart and its central importance, along with those four interrelated aspects that open the door to imaginal practice and cosmic dimensions—these we've explored. But I want to draw out something implicit in all this: the relationship between body, energy body, and consciousness.

Let me say something about this, as it's crucial for practice. Our physical body, our sense of the energy body, and our state of consciousness—what's happening in the psyche and soul at any moment—are deeply interrelated. One affects the other in continuous mutual influence. Some of this interaction is obvious and gross; some extremely subtle. Here again we find this range from gross to subtle, and this interrelationship becomes an increasingly important thread to notice in practice.

Consider *pīti* in samādhi. Some of you know this well-being that wells up in or fills the body—this Pali term the Buddha used and emphasized in the progression of samādhi. When this pleasant factor is present, often the head naturally tilts slightly backward. This happens because the movement of *pīti*, especially initially, tends to flow upward through the body like a current or fountain of pleasant feeling.

What's felt in the energy body can actually cause this physical tilting—sometimes a little, sometimes dramatically. Here we see consciousness gathered in joy affecting the energy body, which then affects the physical body.

Please don't make a big deal of this at all. I mention it simply in the spirit of experimenting with these interrelationships—not to achieve anything particular, but from curiosity about this connection and sensitivity to the energy body. Sometimes in practice, you might become aware of the energy body's uprightness. Notice this uprightness and allow it as if the energetic axis of the body were unfurling, reaching upward, straightening, filling out, extending slightly. I'm speaking of something very subtle—an inner, imaginal encouragement or allowing.

How does this feel when you do it? Let the physical body be straight and allow that energetic sense, the energy line running through the body's center, to straighten out. Notice how this feels in the whole energy body's space. Then observe what happens, very subtly, if you begin tilting the chin up so slightly that someone watching would not notice or would barely notice. I'm not suggesting jerking or yanking—not even significant movement. Just experiment.

Feel the whole energy body, sensitive to that entire space. Sense this line of energy up the body's center, perhaps extending below and above, and allow it to unfurl, straighten, extend. Then tilt the head back so subtly, so slightly. How does this feel? How does the energy body respond?

You may find that attending to the energy body or allowing it to open in certain ways—or even adjusting the physical body—actually encourages particular feelings. When certain feelings arise, they affect the body, and playing very subtly with the body affects the feeling. There's a genuine interrelationship here.

I offer this as example, but also because we're interested in noticing these dynamics. More generally—and this is what I want to emphasize—when we're aware of the energy body or dwelling in that awareness, especially when there's some well-being, pleasantness, or harmonization present (some degree of samādhi, though not only then), we may begin noticing something remarkable. At times—definitely not always, but at times—the energy body wants to move, or actually is moving imaginatively or energetically, while the physical body remains absolutely still.

Someone observing from outside sees nothing happening at all—you're sitting perfectly still in meditation. Yet inside, you feel the energy body wanting to make certain movements or actually making them. Inside, you might feel like you're dancing, or that your hands are in a particular posture, or that the body has adopted a certain position.

This is entirely different from restlessness—that "I want to move, I want to scratch, I want to shift, I want to open my eyes, I want to leave this meditation." I'm not speaking of the unsettled mind, boredom, or agitation.

This is actually something else entirely. It comes when we're really with the energy body. It tends to arise

when we're genuinely present with the energy body and when something is opening and harmonizing in the citta, in the psyche, in the energy body.

So this can happen, and really the encouragement when that occurs is to let yourself feel into that, to actually allow it and sense this either imaginal movement or imaginal posture, or the impulse toward that imaginal posture. Really explore it. Let it be there and feel how it feels in the energy body.

Now, sometimes you might actually explore physical enactment or allowing the physical body to actually adopt a certain posture or move in a certain way. Usually, that would take the form of spontaneous movements. Usually, they will be quite slow. There's actually no fixed rule, but usually they'll look something like a kind of tai chi or spontaneous moving between yoga postures, or holding of this pose, or some kind of slow dancing or something. But actually anything's possible.

Maybe sometimes it's just in the hands. Just the hands feel like they want to move in a certain way or change into what's called a mudra, a hand posture. One of the meanings of mudra is a deliberate ritual hand posture in some traditions, especially in the Tibetan tradition, though actually quite a few traditions use them. You might have seen pictures of different mudras where the hands and fingers are arranged in different postures—there are many possibilities.

And again, you can allow that movement or the adoption of a certain hand posture, a certain mudra, and notice and feel it. Feel yourself actually doing that, but feel its effects in the energy body, feel its effects on the emotion, if there are any, or on the sense of soul-making or whatever. So you actually let your hands do that, let them adopt a certain posture, let them move a certain way, but you're really tuning to how it feels in the energy body, in the soul, in the emotions, and so forth. Or, again, you can just let it be an imaginal movement of the energy body, where the physical hands are absolutely still.

All this can be extremely subtle. And for example, with the hands, there's a lot of possibility for subtle and sensitive experimenting. Consider the Anjali, the bowing posture of the hands, or the prayer posture, or the posture of devotion with the palms and fingers pressed together—a very common gesture in Asian countries especially. How does that feel different?

Sometimes you can let yourself experiment, if it feels helpful, if it feels fruitful. Because sometimes this can be just a complete waste of time, or it's not really helpful, it's not really the thing that's most beneficial at that moment. But how is it different? It's very, very subtle. The hands in Anjali, pressed together palm to palm, fingers together, and placed at the heart center, or placed at the mouth, or even slightly higher than the heart center or the mouth, slightly lower—little increments can actually make quite a big difference in the rest of the feeling of the psyche and the energy body and the emotions.

What about the angle of the hands? If they're tilted forward or if they're straight up? If the fingers and palms are pressed flat together or if the fingers are interlaced? What about if the hands in this Anjali posture are touching the forehead? I mean actually touching as opposed to just nearby or not. How does it

feel? Can you notice?

So if you're experimenting with this at times, there's an immense subtlety that's possible here. What is noticeable in the effects on the feeling of the emotions, the energy body, and so forth?

Consider the touching the earth mudra—the famous picture of the Buddha sitting with one hand touching the earth. And that can go in all kinds of directions. It's not formulaic, this, necessarily, or the way we're teaching it is not formulaic, as I said before. But touching the earth, and what does that do? Or the head pressed to the earth, bowing, and the head, the forehead touching the earth—all of this affects the emotions, affects the energy body.

Sometimes in meditation, we feel stuck—the energy's stuck, or the emotion's stuck, or the attitude's stuck. And just sometimes—I'm not saying this as a sort of fix-it formula, but sometimes, again, from the spirit of exploring all this—sometimes just a shift in the mudra, in the hand posture, just a subtle shift, maybe even in which fingertips are touching. Maybe the thumb and the second finger of each hand start to touch, or there's the Anjali prayer posture of the hands, and the first fingers bend to touch each other, fold inward to touch each other, and the thumbs come to rest on those two first fingers.

There are many, many, almost infinite possibilities, really, of different kinds of mudras. But just subtle shifts in the mudra can shift the direction of meditation. They can open the emotions, open the energy body, shift the view even, or shift the sense of possibility and what is actually possible, shift the attitude. And even very subtle changes, as I said, in the hand posture, in the mudra, can allow something to shift just a little bit and then something opens.

This is also helpful, again, if we're interested in why these things are beneficial—one of the things that's helpful here is just the very subtilizing and sensitizing of the awareness and the attention to try and pay attention to how these shifts in mudra affect the emotions.

Just that sensitizing and subtling actually energizes the awareness. It infuses more energy into awareness itself. And when awareness has more energy than whatever emotion we're stuck in—whether depression or irritation or anything else—it can handle that emotion more skillfully. When we're trapped in an emotion, there's a certain amount of energy locked within it. By sensitizing and subtilizing awareness, we give it more energy, more power.

When awareness possesses more energy than the emotion, then that emotion becomes much more manageable. Awareness can encompass it, accommodate it. The emotion no longer dominates. We're not sinking into it or being pulled around by it. Sometimes the emotion can soften and heal, becoming more subtle or simply changing its character. Regardless, it becomes less problematic because the energy of awareness is greater than the energy of the emotion, rather than the other way around. When the emotion's energy exceeds that of awareness, we're essentially drowning in that emotional state.

There are many possibilities to explore here. Take your time, don't become overwhelmed, experiment, be

playful.

In walking meditation, we continue maintaining this connection to sensitivity, to mindfulness of the energy body. What we can add now, given everything we've discussed today, is the possibility of exploring movement and posture. You might stand still during walking meditation and explore hand postures, or remain in one place and dance a little rather than walking back and forth. It might involve feeling the energy body and sensing that it wants to move in certain ways—to dance—perhaps allowing just a part of the body to move and letting yourself follow that impulse.

This could manifest as actual physical embodiment, a physical enactment of those impulses toward movement, certain postures, dance, or whatever arises. Or it might remain as imaginal movement of the energy body. Outwardly you appear to be standing still or walking slowly, and you can feel both realities—your physical presence, of course, but also the energy body. And this energy body might be doing all manner of things: dancing, somersaults, floating in the air. What matters is maintaining awareness and staying in touch with the space of the energy body.

If you wish, you can move between classical walking meditation up and down with energy body awareness, or you can explore some of this movement—either in actual action or simply letting the energy body move while tuning into that feeling.

Whether the movement manifests in actual physical motion or remains imaginal within the energy body, such movement or posture can open up images, cosmophases, or ways of looking, as I mentioned earlier. Sometimes the process works in reverse—a certain way of looking, a particular cosmophasis, or a specific image will affect the energy body so that it wants to move, either actually or in imagination.

Again, there's mutual dependence here. But the encouragement for practice, as we play with this—if you choose to—is really to notice the energy body, the emotions, the feelings, and the shifts in perception. Notice how the sense of things changes, how our way of looking shifts. Observe perception, sense, and perspective regarding the body, the self, and the world—what's around you, your environment.

I realize this isn't typical for this kind of meditative culture. Such practices are quite normal in other spiritual traditions, but for some of you, allowing yourself to engage this way will involve navigating self-consciousness and similar concerns. Please have care with that too. But really notice this interplay between perception more widely and the energy body, flowing both ways.

And to reiterate what we've already implied: sometimes the actual movement of prostration, the actual shift in hand posture, the actual dancing or change in posture will shift things and bring something alive. The being comes into heightened sensitivity, openness, and soul-making. It's genuinely helpful to move. But sometimes it's not, though we might assume it should be. We might perform our ritual prostrations, yet what actually happens is the body acts while the soul turns off. This is fascinating. Why does this occur? How does it happen? Do we even notice it's happening?

Sometimes what's more helpful is the inner prostration, the inner attitude of bowing, the inner devotion, the inner sense of the energy body and surrender. At such times, the mind wants more subtlety. That becomes more beneficial. Awareness comes alive and sensitive not through physical enactment but through this inner movement.

At other times, aliveness, sensitivity, and soul-making arise through actual action. Even discerning between these possibilities asks quite a lot of us as practitioners—to notice what's happening, to recognize what will be helpful right now, and to remain truly open to both possibilities, both avenues.

There's much to play with here.

Thank you for listening.

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