



# Why Do Buddhists Pray?

Who are we praying to? What are we asking for?  
Three Buddhist teachers explore what prayer means in a nontheistic  
tradition and the best way to approach it in your practice.

## An Invitation

It doesn't matter if you don't know whom you're praying to, says **Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel**. The very act of asking for help allows the heart to open and invite the world in.

**B**UDDHISTS TEND TO DISMISS prayer, which perhaps isn't surprising. After all, aren't we trying to get away from putting the responsibility for our spiritual development on something outside of us? And if we were to pray, whom would we pray to anyway? In this day and age, prayer is often seen as superstitious and embarrassing. We forget that we function in dualism most of the time and that there are benefits to knowing what we want and asking for it on the spiritual path. Prayer can help us do that.

Prayer is like riding a bike—our steering will always naturally follow our gaze. The direction we go in is up to us. If we direct the mind toward making money, we have a better chance of earning money. If we don't, it's doubtful we'll have enough to pay the rent. The same is true with our spiritual life. Spiritual progress—human progress—requires clear intention.

So how do you pray? You can recite a particular prayer or pray in a spontaneous way, using your own words. Whichever way you choose, it's important to make the prayer personal. You can do that by making the supplication specific so the practice doesn't get abstract. You might begin by focusing on a friend who is suffering from illness or on a mistreated animal. Or you might supplicate for a way out of an unhelpful habit or addiction. At times praying will naturally segue into resting, beyond words or ideas, into the fathomless nature of being.

Often we supplicate because we don't know what to do. Praying can be a way of giving over to the mystery and movement of life. It expresses an acceptance that we don't know everything and never will—that we only ever see a little piece of things. We don't see the infinite web of interconnected relationships. Still, we have our part to play in that bigger picture,

and everything we do in life matters. It takes a big mind to live in the heart of this paradox—to be awake and responsive while accepting the indeterminate nature of things. This is the spirit of prayer.

We can pray for anything. But what we pray for influences the direction we go in and the transformative nature of the practice. Praying for happiness and to get rid of our suffering keeps us within the boundaries of ordinary mind. Prayers don't have the same poignancy and liberation when we are trying to avoid life and not feel the world around us. If we move out of our individual desire to be free from suffering and into the bigger view where we acknowledge that suffering is part of living in this body and world, we experience the profundity of prayer.

So what does it mean to pray without the limitations of our individual preferences? It means we're praying for a deep unconditional wakefulness not based upon the preferences of the ego. Just in *asking* we experience a mind full of awe and humility. We allow life to touch us and feel the longing to move forward with compassion and love.

Twice a year, my community gathers for a group retreat called *drupcho*, where we recite a hundred thousand prayers by the renowned meditation master of our lineage, Kunchyen Jigme Lingpa. Because this is a group practice, and we recite the prayer aloud again and again, it demands a lot of energy and focus. When we don't pay attention, our practice becomes rote and the energy in the room sags. Other times prayers flow effortlessly. When that happens in a group, the whole atmosphere comes alive and the power of prayer is palpable and strong.

In our retreats, we invite prayer requests. People send them via email and once a day we read them aloud while everyone listens attentively. It always surprises me how many requests we

receive, how personal they are, and how much courage people have in asking. When we listen to the requests, we feel the presence of all those people as if they sat gathered among us. Their prayers touch us and *open up our practice*, generating an atmosphere of healing.

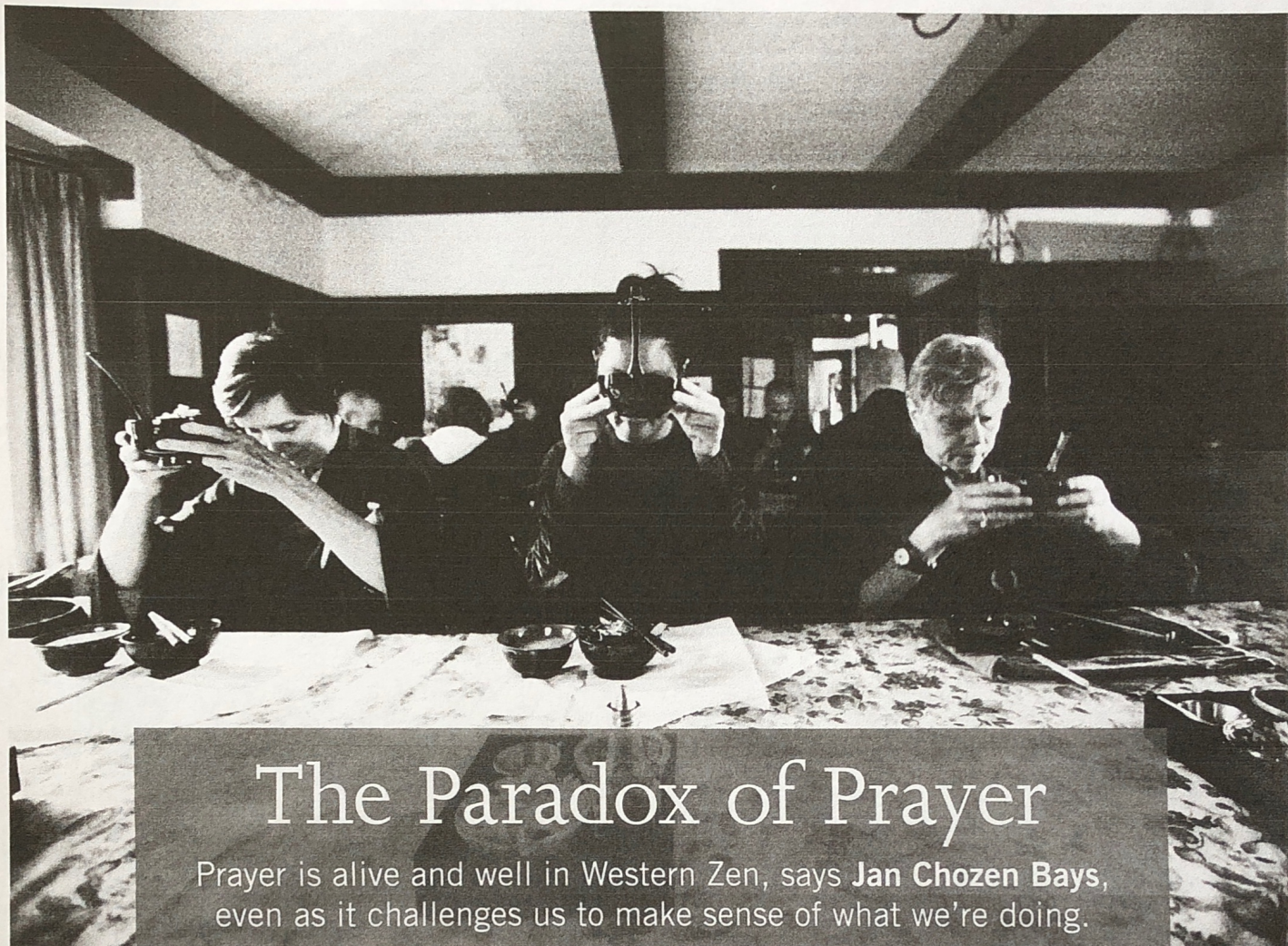
When you pray, it might be to an image of the Buddha or your teacher. Or you could pray to the nature of your own mind, as inseparable from the nature of the deity. Sometimes you might not even know to whom you are praying, but the asking itself has its own power. In fact, if you think about it, do you really have to know? And can you? The nature of the Buddha, the teacher, or *anything in this world is fathomless, mysterious, and doesn't lend itself to being known in a conclusive way.*

This is particularly important to reflect upon, because in the modern world, praying to an object often seems contrived. We might want to believe in a deity or the Buddha, but it feels artificial. One of the most essential and unique aspects of this tradition is the understanding that nothing possesses intrinsic existence. Often we assume that we—the real one—are praying to an imaginary deity. But in fact, even that which we call “self” manifests from an infinite complex of relationships arising and falling away each moment. Everything is imaginary, in that it resists definition and is dynamic and open to interpretation—or in Buddhist terms, everything is empty.

Prayer is a means to help us move forward with some sanity—a practice that helps us utilize the world to wake up. We can pray to our teacher or the Buddha as a way to move forward on our path. We don't necessarily have to see this dualism as a problem. In fact, to see dualism as a problem *is* dualistic. What we call *path* is a way of navigating dualism by engaging our life and experience in a positive way. And prayer helps us do that. **BD**



ELIZABETH MATTIS-NAMGYEL is a teacher in the Vajrayana tradition and spent six years in solitary retreat. She is the author of *The Power of an Open Question*.



## The Paradox of Prayer

Prayer is alive and well in Western Zen, says **Jan Chozen Bays**, even as it challenges us to make sense of what we're doing.

**D**O ZEN BUDDHISTS PRAY? This question was raised recently among Zen teachers online when someone in a drought-affected area requested that others join in a collective effort “beseeching the blessing of rain in any way that speaks to you.” The ensuing online conversation made it clear that there is no “party line” regarding prayer. One teacher called prayer “well-meaning superstition,” akin to rubbing crystals or sacrificing goats; however, the same person later confessed to praying hard when his child was critically ill. Another teacher worried that if we pray for a resource like rain to fall in one dry area, we might effectively be asking for the rain to be diverted from another area. It turns out that’s not the case, but it would entail more water evaporating from oceans and lakes, which could then result in violent storms and flooding. Cause and effect are complicated. A scientist whom I consulted on the question advised, “Be careful what you pray for.”

Many teachers answered that they do pray. But in a nontheistic religion, this raises some questions: to whom? To what? In daily Zen practice, it seems that often we are praying to our self—both our individual-limited-lifespan self and our larger self of boundless-interbeing. We aren’t praying for personal material gain; rather, we are praying in order to turn our hearts and minds toward the positive qualities of compassion and clarity. We are voicing an aspiration that we become able to extend compassion and wisdom to ourselves and others.

We also know that there are invisible presences all around us. There are comedies, tragedies, soap operas, rap music, and 911 calls in the room, but we can't hear them if we don't have the right receiver, such as a radio, computer, cell phone, or TV. The range of light and sound that our human bodies are able to perceive is quite narrow. It seems entirely possible that there are many unseen forms of existence surrounding us. Perhaps they dwell in other dimensions of space-time. Why not be humble and ask them for assistance? Our asking makes us a receiver, a vehicle through which they may be able to move and act.

If our practice at Great Vow Monastery is any indication, prayer is alive and well in Western Zen. We hold chanting services four times a day in which the word "pray" comes up again and again. We pray for the well-being of a list of people who are ill and for serene transitions for those who have recently died. We pray that the world be free from violence, war, and disasters. We pray for assistance from all the enlightened and holy beings who have come before us. We express our deep gratitude to our dharma ancestors and pray that their vows will be fulfilled through us. We pray to maintain steady practice up until the time of death and beyond. One chant begins, "Our deepest prayer is to be firm in our determination to give ourselves completely to the Buddha's Way so that no doubts arise, however long the road seems to be" and ends with "Our further prayer is not to be extremely ill or to be suffering at the time of departure... so that we can quiet the mind to abandon the body and merge infinitely into the whole universe."

We pray with meals. We reflect with gratitude on all the beings whose life energy has flowed into the food in our bowls, sacrificed so that we might have more abundant life, and we pray that all beings will be as well nourished as we are. We pray to be able to turn obstacles into fuel for enlightenment. We pray to cultivate a mind like a lotus, growing pure and upright out of the muddy water of delusion.

Before beginning our work, we pray that our labor will purify our hearts, benefit the earth, and help free all beings from suffering. We pray that we will cultivate, accomplish, and manifest the enlightened way together.

We do not pray to a person or god named Buddha. We pray to the whole that gives rise to, and has agency through, the many. We pray

that enlightened qualities become our continual way of living, bringing benefit to us and all we encounter. We direct metta toward our self, silently asking, "May I be free from fear and anxiety. May I be at ease. May I be happy." Once we are replete, we turn those prayers toward others. We also recite vows, which are a kind of prayer-wrapped intention. "Beings are numberless, I vow to free them... The Buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it."

In that act of vow we find humility, and in humility, we again enter prayer. Dainin Katagiri Roshi, in *Returning to Silence*, wrote,

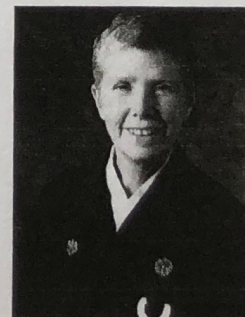
[F]inally you say, "Please." Please make me simple. Please make me free. The moment that you call, saying "please," is called Avalokiteshvara. There is no subject who is calling and there is no object you are calling upon. Because the one who is calling upon something is simultaneously what one is looking for. That is Avalokiteshvara.

The prayer is not directed at ourselves, yet we are the place where the prayer is answered.

Our purest form of daily prayer is zazen. In zazen, the restless activity that separates us from everything-that-is settles. Boundaries dissolve and we become light and transparent, completely receptive. Heart and mind become clear and open. Then each breath is the sacred, original breath, moving across the face of the earth. Sound, light, and touch are the play of existence arising endlessly out of emptiness. There is nothing lacking, nothing to ask for—except that everyone else be able to experience this perfect ease.

When everything becomes a unified whole, how can there be anyone to pray to? Living in awareness of the continual gift, of the outpouring of all that exists, from the bottomless font of the unknowable—is that not a quiet and delicate form of prayer?

Zen practice continually asks us to find ease in the tension of paradox. We have nothing to pray for or to, and we pray continuously—at the same time. We pray to no one, and we pray to and for everything. There is no sense to it, but this is our practice. As an elder teacher said recently after performing a long rain ritual dedicated to the well-being of plants, animals, and all living beings suffering from drought, fires, and famine, "This is like wise, foolish men filling a well with snow. It is meaningless, but we have to do it." **BD**



JAN CHOZEN BAYS ROSHI is co-abbot of Great Vow Zen Monastery in Clatskanie, Oregon. She is the author of *Mindful Eating and How to Train a Wild Elephant*.



## If It Sounds Too Good to Be True...

When we pray, says **Mark Unno**, it's important not to get caught up in magical thinking or to become attached to specific outcomes. Just praying is enough.

**W**HEN WE THINK about prayer in a Buddhist context, we find there are at least two major types: prayers *for* and prayers *of*. Prayers *for* are directed to future fulfillment of specific goals. These might include prayers for peace, prayers for health and well-being, or prayers for the fulfillment of the bodhisattva vows. Prayers *of* are the prayers of buddhas and bodhisattvas—that is, prayers arising out of the awakened mind.

The prayers *for* may or may not come to fruition. You might pray for a family member's health to recover, or for the success of a fellow practitioner's efforts at a particular stage of practice, or for yourself. Your family member may recover from illness, or she may not. The practitioner may attain the next stage of practice, or he may not. However, the prayer of the Buddha, be it Shakyamuni or Amida or some other expression of the ultimate oneness of the dharmakaya, is already fully present, unailing.

Buddhist practice involves a transformation of one's whole being; thus, it is sometimes referred to as a mind-body practice. When practiced communally, such as in a sesshin or dharma gathering, one's own practice is supported by the mind-body energy of the entire group. There are palpable physical effects of practice that seem to be transferrable from one person to another—from master to disciple, teacher to student, and within a group-practice setting—so it makes a certain amount of sense

that the mind-body energy of such practice is also transferable through Buddhist prayer. This is the power of *parinamana*, or the transfer of the merit of practice from one being to another. However, whenever we pray for something or someone, there are potential pitfalls, namely attachment to specific outcomes and magical thinking. Ultimately, these are two sides of the same coin.

One can pray for something, but outcomes are always unpredictable. This doesn't mean that prayer is useless, since the karmic power of true practice will inevitably come to fruition. But we can't know what shape or form it will take. This is not unlike my work as a college professor. I might do something in an effort to positively impact students and their learning, but I can't know exactly how and when these efforts might come to fruition. Sometimes a student who was very difficult in class will come back to me years later and out of the blue express deep appreciation. But in most cases, we will never know the full effects of our efforts.

The same is true of Buddhist practice, including prayer. There may be positive effects, but karmically it is difficult to know when and how something shifts. Sometimes a practice is presented as especially powerful, with a suggestion that outcomes will be known sooner rather than later. However, any experienced, sincere, and wise teacher will not make grand promises. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Buddhist practitioners, especially those who are new to the practice, are also susceptible to magical thinking. A practitioner may say, "I just spent ten continuous days praying for my brother and now his doctors have told him his cancer is in remission." Or "I did two months of Buddhist prayers for my mother's heart condition, but my practice wasn't strong enough and she died last week." These are examples of deluded magical thinking and unrealistic expectations.


In Western culture, the notion of prayer *for* is more prevalent, as in prayer for a cure or for success, whereas in key strands of Buddhism, and in the Mahayana in particular, there's more emphasis on the prayer *of* the Buddha as an expression of buddhanature, bodhi mind, and oneness. Because of the potential confusion caused by the popular use of the term "prayer," some Buddhist traditions avoid the word

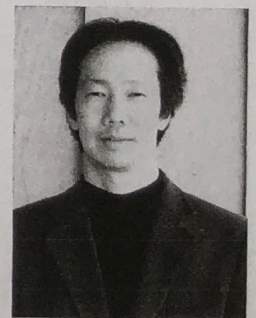
altogether. Rather than say "pray for," one might speak of holding another in one's thoughts. And instead of talking about the "prayer of," one might speak of realization or awakening. Therefore, when you are concerned for another's well-being, you might simply say, "I'm holding her in my thoughts" or "I'm holding you in my heart." And instead of referring to the power of the Buddha's prayer of awakening, you might refer to the power of the Buddha's realization or simply awakening itself.

This is true of Shin Buddhism, where the central practice is invoking the power and name of Amida Buddha in the six-syllable phrase *Namu Amida Butsu*. It corresponds to the Sanskrit *Namo amitabha buddha*, which is a dynamic expression of the all-oneness of reality, meaning "I bow and entrust myself to the awakening of infinite light."

At the end of last year, I received an urgent message from a former student, Emily, who called for me from her deathbed. By the time I arrived, she had already begun her journey through the Great Transition. Yet as I looked straight into her eyes, it was as if there was no separation between us. She could no longer speak, but as her family and I chanted *Namu Amida Butsu* with our palms together, we were pulled deep into the awareness of boundless compassion and the ocean of oneness, and Emily was clearly present. Although we shed tears of deep sorrow, it was also an incredibly beautiful moment, because the power of great compassion completely enveloped our sorrow and transformed it into an even greater moment of boundless love.

It's easy to forget that the ultimate realization is boundless compassion and oneness. When we put our palms together, it is not just one pair of hands meeting palm to palm. Paying close attention, it is as if we can feel the gentle touch of our teacher or the Buddha herself, her palms gently caressing the back of our hands, helping bring our palms together, teaching us the feeling of boundless compassion and wisdom. In that moment, whether we live or die, achieve health or not, become "enlightened" or not becomes secondary to knowing the power of buddhanature is fully present—that everything we need is between our palms as we bow, that the working of great compassion is already unfolding, here and now.

We can call that prayer if we like. 



MARK UNNO is an ordained priest in the Shin Buddhist tradition and an associate professor of Buddhism at the University of Oregon.