

Chapter 9

Nourishing Your Spirit

Topics in this Chapter:

- * Entering the holy space of spiritual union
- * Praying for yourself and others
- * Honoring sacred images
- * Singing with devotion

You are an emanation of spirit that has descended as you into the events and circumstances of your physical, mental, and emotional life. Because of your divine heritage, the material things of this world can never fully satisfy the longings and aspirations of your soul. Only spiritual nourishment will fill the deepest parts of your being.

Be Careful

Don't spend your entire lifetime collecting baubles of this earth that can dissolve and disappear with the slightest gust of karmic winds. Take time to connect with that eternal, loving, divine spirit that exists inside of you and behind the appearances of this world.

If all you do after reading this book is to add a one-minute pause somewhere in your daily schedule for connecting with spirit, then you'll have gotten your money's worth. With a combination of self-effort and divine grace, may you be fortunate enough to enter the holy experience of union with spirit.

Think about spirit. Relate to spirit. Speak to spirit. Listen to spirit. Remember spirit. Feel spirit. Love spirit. Enjoy spirit. Entertain spirit. Receive blessings from spirit. Learn to trust spirit. Learn to see spirit. Learn to be spirit.

Understanding Spiritual Communion

Spiritual Wisdom

I Am That I Am.

— God, Exodus 3:14

Spiritual communion is the experience of being united with the divine. Spiritual communion involves absorbing your limited self-identification into the divine spirit that exists beyond your mind. You move beyond the limitations of your mind and enter into the awareness of your greater self — which just so happens to be one in essence with the great Universal Soul.

Here, the word *communion* is not referring to the Catholic sacramental ritual, but to an experience of spiritual union that arises inside your awareness like a blissful, shining, spiritual sun. This sun of divine presence has always existed inside you in its full effulgence, but for most people, it is hidden by many clouds of restless thoughts, self preoccupations, and worldly concerns.

Once you've cleared the clutter of restless thoughts through contemplation and turned your attention inside yourself through meditative practices, the light of divine presence becomes naturally revealed in your awareness. Of course, getting those pesky clouds of restless thoughts to clear may require quite a few efforts and practices! (See Chapter 8 for tips on clearing the clutter of restless thoughts.)

Here are some ways that spiritual communion can manifest:

- Your heart becomes unfettered by day-to-day worries and tribulations as your self-identification shifts from focusing on the limited details of your life and expands into greater fields of universal awareness (while you still take good care of the necessities and responsibilities of your life.)
- You feel the presence of the divine with and within you – as you sit quietly for meditation and even as you travel through all the twists and turns of life.
- Your sense of being separate from everything else is dissolved as you experience the state of union with the same spirit that pervades everything.
- You take care of the responsibilities at hand while savoring the delicious streams of love and eternal awareness that flow through your heart and soul.

Think of how good it feels to be holding and hugging someone you love very much, with the warmth of love throbbing in your heart. With spiritual communion, you're not only hugging and holding someone you love, but you are hugging and holding love itself.

When you first touch the space of communion with inner spirit, you may have a sense of familiarity, a sense of “Oh, yes, I remember this!” After all, according to the spiritual sages, you've always been one with divine spirit — but like the lion cub described in Chapter 2, you've forgotten your divine heritage.

Spirituality in Action

Create a space to welcome this experience of union with the divine. Open the door of your heart and absorb yourself in prayer and devotional meditation. Sing a song to honor the divine; give thanks as you light a candle; set up an altar; play uplifting music; offer flowers; or burn some fragrant incense. Nourish your connection with spirit through devotional practices, and experience the great blessings of spiritual communion and divine love.

Spiritual Wisdom

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

— 1 Corinthians 13-1-2

Prayer: Touching the Sacred

Think of prayer as a way for you to plug the “laptop computer” of your individual self into the big universal “computer mainframe” of Divine Grace. Prayer is an active communication with God through whatever form or formlessness you relate to on your personal journey.

People pray for different reasons, including:

- Asking for something you want for yourself
- Asking for something that will benefit others
- Giving loving thanks to God for what you’ve already received
- Asking and listening for divine guidance on what steps you should take
- Offering your mind, heart, life, and soul into the sacred presence of spirit

Prayers are declarations to God and yourself that powerfully affirm the connection of your individual soul with the divine soul, and your individual will with the divine will. After all, if you didn’t think your prayers had any impact, you probably wouldn’t pray, right? If you didn’t think your blessings were actually going to help someone, why would you bother to give them?

God does respond to your prayers

A fellow was climbing a tree when suddenly he slipped and grabbed at a branch that caught him and held him out so he was hanging over a huge cliff. Soon the man felt himself getting exhausted and unable to hold on. He looked up to the heavens and cried out: “God, help me, please, help me.”

All of a sudden, the clouds parted, and a voice boomed out from on high. “Let go!” said the voice.

The guy paused, looked up at heaven once more, and asked: “Is there anyone else up there?”

Spiritual Wisdom

As long as you believe that God is only in heaven and does not fill the earth — let your words be few. Only when you come to know that you too contain His presence — only then can you begin to pray.

—Hasidic prayer

Spiritually aware prayers are kind of a “Thy will be done,” plus a little extra. You enter into an active state of open communication with your image or sense of God and speak to that image or sense of the divine in words and feelings. You may have a special request — for yourself, for a friend, or for the entire world: “O Lord, please help my friend, please heal this world, please protect me, please guide me to find the right career, please take away my sadness, please help me to gain a spiritual vision, please take care of this person who has just died, please let things go smoothly and in accordance with everyone’s best interests.”

When you pray, always remember that God knows best, and that what you ultimately want is whatever is best. In true prayer, you’ll find beneath every request the whisper of “Thy will be done.” By keeping your prayers centered in faith and surrender to “Thy will be done,” you’re allowing the universal will to use your positive thoughts, intentions, and energies in the best way.

Connecting through prayer

Asking God for the needs of life is one more way to connect with the divine. Even if you have a surrender and trust that God’s will is done regardless of whether you ask for anything specific, you can still communicate your needs and ask for blessings with a spirit of faith and surrender. Communicating with the great universal creative Consciousness is a good thing to do, whether you’re asking for help or giving thanks.

Regardless of the specific words and thoughts you use in prayer, taking time to connect with the divine presence is likely to bring good energy and positive effects into whatever situations you’re praying for.

Consider

Don’t just pray for some limited concept of what you think is available in your life. Give spirit a chance to surprise you and outshine your expectations.

After all, how can anybody really know exactly what to pray for? (See Chapter 3 for details on knowing what you don’t know.) What if you pray and ask that you or someone else gets a particular job when there’s a much better career opportunity for you or the other person just around the corner? With hindsight, you would thank God for not answering that prayer. (Well, technically, the prayer was answered, but the answer was “No.”)

Therefore, the best way to improve someone’s lot in life, including your own, is to send positive blessings while trusting the divine universal perfection to use your blessings in the best way.

Spiritual Wisdom

That prayer has great power, which a person makes with all his might. It makes a sour heart sweet, a sad heart merry, a poor heart rich, a foolish heart wise, a timid heart brave, a sick heart well, a blind heart full of sight, a cold heart ardent. It draws down the great God into the little heart, it drives the hungry soul up into the fullness of God, it brings together two lovers, God and the soul, in a wondrous place where they speak much of love.

— Mechthild of Magdeburg

Do you pray for the world?

When you hear about an earthquake or other disaster around the world, do you pray for the people involved? When you hear that a hurricane may hit the coast and cause devastation, do you pray for nature to be gentle?

There's no need to feel guilty if you don't pray to keep disasters away, but it gives a good chance for self-examination to contemplate why you don't.

- Do you choose not to pray because you don't realize your own power of prayer?
- Or do you choose not to pray because you trust God completely and feel no need to petition to change His will?

Giving blessings to others

Spiritual Wisdom

It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Scientists have spent millions of dollars to research whether prayer has a statistical, measurable effect upon those who are ill. Although these kinds of experiments are tricky due to uncontrollable variables, many of them do indicate some beneficial effect of prayer upon an ill person, even if that person doesn't know whether they're in the group being prayed for or the group not being prayed for. Of course, one can assume that even patients who were in the group *not* being officially prayed for by research assistants probably still had loved ones praying for them — this variable is one example of the uncontrollable elements that can throw a cog into scientific studies of spiritual phenomena.

Nevertheless, the generally positive data on the efficacy of prayer suggests that you have a lot more power to give blessings than you may realize. Even if you don't have enough money or medical knowledge to help someone in need, you can still give blessings through your power of prayer. You can even give blessings to others in the secret, sacred space of your heart — without anyone knowing.

Now, if you were to realize your own power and give prayers and blessings to the world, and if every other person did the same, just imagine what a paradise this world would be!

Spirituality in Action

This exercise can help you explore your ideas about bestowing blessings: Practice walking around town or a shopping mall for an hour, imagining that you have the power to give blessings to anyone you choose. Who do you bless? Why? Because they look happy? Because they look troubled? Because they smile at you? This exercise is an opportunity to explore your concepts about who you believe deserves blessings and also to consider whether some of those concepts may be blocking you from receiving all the blessings you deserve. A good way to go is to bless everyone (including yourself!).

Be your own house of worship

Religious priests, pastors, ministers, and monks often perform rituals and ceremonies to bless the events and milestones in the lives of their congregations. But you don't have to wait for a priest to bless the events and actions of your life. Bless yourself and the world right now and anytime.

Spiritual Wisdom

Here's a Buddhist blessing that is also a prayer for peace:

May all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illnesses.

May those frightened cease to be afraid, and may those bound be free.

May the powerless find power, and may people think of befriending one another.

May those who find themselves in trackless, fearful wildernesses — the children, the aged, the unprotected — be guarded by beneficent celestials, and may they quickly attain Buddhahood.

Bring the power of blessing to all of your daily activities. Before you send a resume for an important job possibility, or make an offer on a house, or mail your proposal to that book agent, or e-mail someone you'd really like to get to know, first pause and bless what you are sending. Invoke spirit and ask that whatever happens be best for you and all concerned.

Worshipping God in Form

Ultimately, God is beyond this physical world. Yet, here you are in it. How can a person who is in a physical form relate to the nonphysical nature of divine spirit?

People who have physical forms are used to relating to things that have form, and are not so used to contemplating something as nebulous as divine spirit. Therefore, spiritual seekers throughout time have worshipped God through forms. Some have worshipped God as the sun or mountains or through archetypal, symbol-laden forms and figures such as the Hindu and Greek pantheons of gods and goddesses. Some worship the cross that represents the sacrifice of Jesus, and some worship people who have attained great spiritual stature.

Consider

Worshipping images and figures that represent Divine Spirit can help teach you how to relate to and communicate with the sometimes-elusive Divine Spirit that exists within and beyond everything.

Creating a sacred space

Not only can you add touches of spirit to your home atmosphere by including artwork, candles, rituals, incense, devotional music, and natural elements, but you can also set up an altar or mini-temple that can represent the sacred space of your devotional heart. This sacred space can be a shelf or table of any size, perhaps covered with some decorative cloth.

Place on your altar objects that carry spiritual meaning for you. These items may be statues, paintings, icons, photos, candles, holy water, sacred oils, bells, crystals, gems, flowers, and whatever other personal or symbolic objects help to open your heart and focus your mind on spirit.

Consider

One great way to begin each day is to stand or sit before your altar and to fold your hands, bow your head, or otherwise honor the forms and representations of divinity you've chosen to include. Some like to wave a flame clockwise around each image – a common tradition in Indian temples. Offer the day to grace, ask for a specific blessing, or just give thanks for all the blessings you already have.

You may also want to set up a meditation space right in front of your altar so that you can sit in front of these representations of spirit while turning your attention inward toward the spirit that also exists inside of your own divine form.

A potential downside to worshipping divine forms

The ashram I used to live in was filled with representations of the divine in form. Its beautiful gardens included statues from many different spiritual and religious traditions, and inside the buildings and temples, you'd find reminders of the divine around every corner, with photos, statues, candles, and other representations of gods, gurus, saints and sages.

After leaving the ashram and moving to Los Angeles, I continued this practice of worshipping the divine in form by covering the walls and shelves of my apartment with photos and statues of divine forms. I also placed a photo of my guru in my car, in an elegant metal frame that I superglued to the dashboard. For several years, this photo was a natural part of my daily drive.

One day, I took my car to a car wash and was surprised to have it returned with my guru's photo frame broken off the dashboard. As I drove away, my mind was racing, thinking about how I would have to get a new frame as soon as possible.

At that point, I remembered to center myself and looked at my thoughts with a more objective view. I saw that I was feeling less protected in that moment than I had felt just a few minutes earlier when my guru's photo was still glued to the dashboard. At that moment, I decided that if I was basing my trust in the divine on whether or not a photo was on the dashboard of my car, then I shouldn't have one there at all.

Therefore, if you do choose to practice worshipping forms, be sure not to get into the same trap that I was in. Don't allow worship to become just one more way to get attached and snared by the expectations and fears of this world. Use a divine image to bring out the best, the greatest, and the most sublime in yourself. Feel devotion for the greatness of God through whatever form you worship; and understand that the divinity you see in any form is always your own divinity shining forth and reflecting back through the many mirrors of this world.

Singing to the Divine

Just think of the blissful, peaceful harmony that comes from good spiritual music. When you sing to the divine, you're using your voice as an instrument to make a beautiful offering from spirit into spirit. The divine universe has given you this instrument of your body and voice, and you play it to express love and respect for that divine presence of God.

Even if you don't think you have a great singing voice — perhaps certain talent judges might critique your tone or call your singing “pitchy” — don't worry about their real or imagined assessments. Sing to spirit with openhearted love and enthusiasm. In “Devotional Idol” singing, the most important points are given for your sincerity, devotion, love, focus, and surrender into the blissfulness of spirit.

Traditions around the world have sung their scriptures, from the Koran to the Torah to Psalms, the Bhagavad Gita, and many other texts. Whether you prefer to sing Latin hymns, Native American chants, Sanskrit mantras, Gregorian chants, or gospel songs, the practice of devotional singing opens your heart and mind to divine and joyful experiences.

Why I love devotional singing

When I lived in an Indian-based ashram, many hours of our daily schedule were devoted to singing to God — with fast chants, slow chants, and elaborate texts scattered throughout each day, from early morning until bedtime.

While following this schedule for many years, the transformational power of chanting became evident to me. I could feel the mantra power tangibly during each chant and could also see beneficial long-term effects that chanting and devotional singing had brought in soothing, invigorating, and empowering my mind, heart, and soul.

During those years and since, I've found devotional singing of various kinds to be a great way to connect with spirit, and an amazing bridge to achieving spiritual happiness.

What's more beautiful than hearing a mother sing a lullaby to her child? What's more potent than a group of men singing together in strong deep voices filled with conviction? What is more heart opening than singing from your soul to the omnipotent and omnipresent God?

When you sing to God, you're loving God. You're making a statement that with all the other things you could be doing with that time — working on your career, cleaning your house, going out with friends, or watching television — you're choosing to spend time to offer a devotional song to the Divine.

Singing with a group

Spiritual Wisdom

Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

— *Matthew 18:20*

Inspiring words about the power of divine song

Singing is a universal way to praise and connect with God. Here are some examples of the importance of spiritual singing from several traditions, beginning with a message for those of you who think you can't sing:

- If you can walk, you can dance. If you can talk, you can sing.
— Traditional African saying
- There are halls in the heavens above that open but to the voice of song.
— The Zohar
- I will sing thy name, I will drink thy name, and get all drunk, oh, with thy name.
— Yogananda Paramahansa
- O God, I will sing a new song to you; with a ten-stringed lyre I will chant your praise.
— Psalms 144:9

Group devotional singing or chanting is a powerful practice to support and nourish your spiritual quest. You can find devotional singing in various church and temple programs, from singing Latin vespers at Catholic churches and monasteries to the ever-growing popularity of Indian kirtan chanting in yoga studios.

The group dynamic is especially helpful for releasing the joyful spirit of spiritual singing and chanting. There is something about group singing that creates a uniquely sweet power. When you have a group singing or chanting together with devotion, the entire room becomes filled with a great spiritual energy.

Singing and your breath

Another side benefit of chanting is that it gives you a natural *pranayama*, or breath control exercise (see Chapter 7). When you sing devotional texts, phrases, or stanzas, your breathing becomes naturally deep and harmonious as you regulate your breaths to support the singing.

Try group chanting at least once, in whatever traditions appeal to you. Singing together with love to honor the Divine — what could nourish your spirit better than that?