

Follow-up to Chapter 4 of Listening Spirituality: Sufi Practices which Prepare Us to Listen to God

Chapter 4 of Vol. I by Patricia Loring is subtitled “Prayer Intermediate between Active and Listening Prayer”. Below we provide an outline of this chapter and describe examples from Sufism which fall into three categories described by Loring. In this forum the intention is to focus on the following: 1) remembering God by reciting a Name of the Divine (usually “Allah”); 2) chanting the core belief of Islam; and 3) invoking one of God’s Qualities.

A. Prayer Grounded in Visualization

1. Extending Projection or transposition
2. Praying with Images or Visual Symbols

B. Icons and Idols

C. Prayer of the Heart

Loring teaches that all Prayers of the Heart “begin with a repetition of some kind, usually deeply associated with breathing and carrying the prayer on the breath...(These prayers share ) the intention of expressing, supporting and reorienting the deepest longing of the heart toward God” (p. 79)

Sufism is a heart-centered spiritual tradition. Sufis use a variety of practices to cultivate a stronger, deeper, and more intimate connection between the beloved (spiritual seeker, practitioner, pilgrim, wayfarer, traveler, etc.) and the Beloved (God, the Divine, the Lord, the Source of Light and Love, etc.). The heart can be described in terms of four layers which vary in terms of their depth and their proximity to the Absolute and Infinite Reality of the Divine. According to Sufism, the spiritual journey (back) to God takes place primarily in these levels of the (spiritual) heart.

Sufi prayers can have a variety of temporary and long-term outcomes, including the following: 1) **opening** the beloved’s heart so that s/he is more receptive to divine realities; 2) **purifying** the personality and soul of the one who prays; 3) **deepening** the spiritual center of the Sufi so that there are fewer veils between the seeker and the One Who is sought; and 4) **increasing** the willingness and ability of the wayfarer to **trust in and surrender** to God.

1. Prayer that Opens from Chanting

One of the most common forms of group Sufi practice is called a *dhikr* (sometimes spelled *zikr*) in which a group of beloveds form one or more concentric circles, holding hands as they chant various prayers in Arabic. Sometimes this practice includes specific forms of breathing (with no words)

A chant which is often used is the most fundamental belief of Islam. The (transliterated) Arabic phrase is as follows:

*La ilaha ill-Allah.*

This prayer means that “there is no god but God”. An alternative translation is “there is no divinity if it be not ‘The Divinity’”. Emphasis is place on “*ill*” as the phrase is chanted. The implicit intention of this prayer of the heart is to remind the Sufi of the (unique) Oneness of God as well the necessity of resisting the worship of anything else. Although this practice is done out loud in group worship, it can also be repeated silently, most often in solitude.

2. Prayer Involving Mantras

Loring borrows the “word ‘mantra’... from Hindu tradition where it names a phrase or sentence addressed to or describing divinity, which has particular significance for the person who uses or carries it...Unlike chant, the mantra does not need to be vocalized, although it may be, when you are just beginning to use it, or at special times of devotion” (p. 80).

Although it is problematic to view the Sufi practice of **remembrance** as a mantra, it serves a similar function in that it helps to keep the practitioner focused on the Divine rather than on all the things which can distract us from the One and Only. Remembrance is a practice which is quite simple. It involves repeating, usually silently, a Name which points to the Sacred or the Holy. Sufis recommend using the Arabic word for God – *Allah* – but it is permissible to use other Names such as God, Elohim, Love, Peace, Truth, Spirit, etc. The most important criterion for selecting a Name is that it have the capacity to elicit devotion to THAT which is greater, higher, and/or deeper than one’s ego.

Although Sufi tradition does not pay attention to coordinating the reciting of the Name with one’s breathing, many Sufis have found it helpful to repeat the Name with each inhale and exhale. For a good description of this sort of conscious breathing, see pages 14-22 in [The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual of Meditation](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh.

### 3. The Jesus Prayer

### 4. Prayer Using a Word

Loring points out that another “major direction has been to use names or qualities of God repetitively...as an invocation or expression of longing for God” (p. 83). In Sufism this prayer of the heart has focused on the 99 beautiful Names of Allah which serve to describe God’s Qualities or attributes. Sufis use this practice to experience gnosis – to know God more deeply and fully – as well as to cultivate godly qualities which exist in our souls as beings created in God’s image.

This practice is closely related to remembrance. Instead of using a global name for the Divine, the invocation involves a repetition of one of the 99 Names. It is often coordinated with the breath in the following way: With the inhale, one silently says “*Ya Allah*” (Oh God) and with the exhale, the Name is recited, e.g., “*Ya Rahman*” (Oh Compassionate One).

Although Sufis invoke the (99) Arabic Names, affirmations in English can also be effective. Examples are as follows: “My Beloved Lord, Thou are the Perfectly Trustworthy One”; “Oh Great Spirit, You are the All-Merciful”; and “Oh God, Thy peace is beyond understanding”. As with other spiritual practices, trial-and-error is encouraged. The heart knows what is best given its condition in the here-and-now.

## D. Active Meditation in Eastern Styles

### 1. Some Uses of the Word “Meditation”

### 2. The Assistance of the Body in Preparing for Meditation

### 3. Quieting or Stilling Meditatio

## E. Centering Prayer

It should be noted that on September 6, an entire forum will be devoted to this particular spiritual practice. It will be taught by June Jeffers, a long-time practitioner of Centering Prayer and a member of the Church of Conscious Harmony.