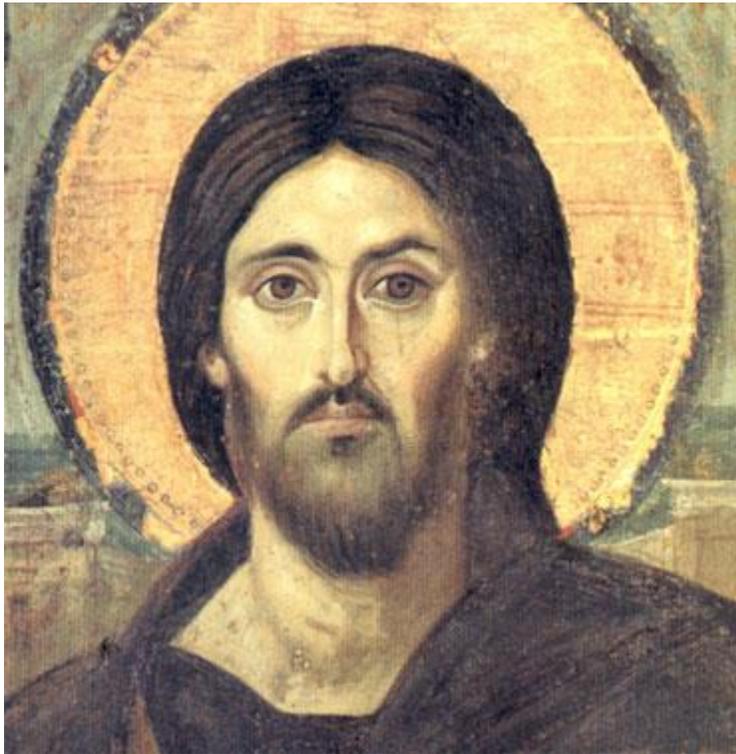


The Practice of Prayer of the Heart

In the Christian tradition this practice of uniting ourselves with the inner Life of Christ in prayer word and breath comes to us from the desert fathers and mothers of early Christianity. We know this practice as the Prayer of the Heart. Over time for many in Eastern Christianity the form of the Prayer of the



Heart most commonly known was the Jesus Prayer. Various forms of the Jesus prayer have been used through the centuries, but the simplest and most easily aligned with the breath is the holy name of Jesus or Yeshua. To breathe Yeshua is to continually say "yes" to receive Him, and to say "yes" to our self-gift of Love in the offering to Him of our own life and humanity. ***I breathe in Yeshua; I breathe out Yeshua. I breathe in the gift of God's Life; I breathe out in offering the gift of my own life in God. In my breath I sink into and abide in***

communion in the Heart of Christ.

The Guidelines of Formal Prayer of the Heart Practice:

1. **Setting-** Set aside a sacred space where you are not likely to be interrupted, a place consecrated to your desire for communion with Christ.
2. **Time-** Choose a time which is most conducive to silent prayer, when you are alert and not likely to be interrupted. For most that is early morning and early evening.

3. **Body Posture-** Sit with a straight back, where minimal effort is required to sit straight and be alert. For some a chair is best, for others, a prayer bench or cushion. Let the hands be folded in your lap, or resting on the thighs upward or facing down.

4. **Breath-** Breathing should be relaxed not forced. We should let it be deep and abdominal, relaxing the tensions in the chest and abdomen. Let the out-breath be released slowly.

5. **Preparation-** Choose a short prayer phrase of consecration to prepare for your entry into silence: "O Christ, I give myself completely to you." "O Yeshua, You are my Refuge."

6. **Length of Prayer Session-** 25-30 minutes is best with walking contemplation in between more than one session. Allow for a gentle transition from the prayer session, usually with a spoken vow of practice and devotional prayers or lectio divina.

The Method:

1. **Prayer Word-** Choose a word, which touches you and which expresses best your desire to be one with Christ. It may be a word or phrase. For many the fitting prayer word is the name of **Jesus, Yeshua**, or a form of the Jesus prayer ("Lord Jesus, have mercy"). Repeat it continuously, returning to the prayer word synchronized with your breath. If it is more than one syllable or word, then synchronize the repeating of the word or phrase with the in-breath and out-breath. Let this prayer word or phrase be the anchor of returning to your single desire for communion with Christ.
2. **Observing the Mind- Abiding in the Heart of Christ-** Observe the arising of thoughts, and release from all the traffic of the mind, thoughts, desires, commentaries, judgments. Observe them arise and release them while you return to abiding in the Heart in your prayer word and breath. Continually release from involvement with thoughts and return to your holy word. Continually "release and return," to be present to Yeshua in loving attention and self-offering, through the anchor of your word or phrase. It is an ongoing process of "release and return" in the natural rhythm of your breathing. In this process we become increasingly absorbed in the Heart of Christ in our own heart, in the interior movements of presence and self-offering in love.

Summary of Guidelines and Method:

Over time we cultivate a capacity, not to stop thought and emotion, but to release from them, and abide in an interior communion in the Heart of Christ that is beneath and beyond the mind and its activity. We come to experience that we have thoughts, but we are not our thoughts. We have a freedom to find our refuge in the Heart of Christ alone, whether in our silent prayer practice, or whether in the ceaseless prayer of daily life and activity. We come to know that our true home is the Heart of Christ, the Kingdom of God within us.

Delving Deeply Into the Jesus Prayer

by Bill Ryan



Theophan the Recluse says: "Delve deeply into the Jesus Prayer." Martin Laird has been speaking of the use of the Prayer word as a doorway into the communion realm of Christ in every day life as well as formal silence. He advises us not to think of this as magic or as something mechanical, and he is right. I have written in my book, *Breathing Yeshua*, I write in the opening of the first chapter, "***Our inner spiritual work turns on the tension of the mind's compulsion for control and the freedom of the heart's willingness to open and surrender in love.***" This interior opening then, of the heart, the center of our being, to surrender to and in Christ's Love is this doorway. The Jesus Prayer, as we delve the depths of it, leads us not into magical thinking, but into the very Heart of Christ, who is mercy. What arises in the mind as we try to approach this limitless Mercy that we know as the Christ experience, are all our resistances to surrender, to releasing from the mind's compulsions for control. If we think about our "mental obsessions" sometimes called demons in the desert tradition, they are all about the compulsion for control in some form or other. And we live in a universe where we have no control ultimately over external things, we only have the choice to give ourselves in love to God in life, and in each moment. What allows us to make this

surrender is trust in the Realm of Mercy that we know as Christ. And the root word for Faith, Fidare, or Fides (Latin), is trust or to trust in, to be entrusted to. We leap then, in this praxis of Faith. We leap in longing for our true heart's desire. The Heart knows what we frequently do not know, in our souls too often dominated by culture and the ego-mind, that our heart's desire is Christ, our Beginning and our End, our Life's completion, our true Beloved. Our Heart knows that the false refuges of the mind offer no true solace or home, no strategy for control, and that there is only one true Refuge, to Abide in Yeshua's Love, as he has invited.

These are words of love, but what do they have to do with everyday, every moment existence, our practice of the prayer word? The prayer word, and most especially when our prayer word is the name of the Beloved of our Heart, is the homing pigeon, the anchor in what is real and true. It is the reminder of our continual bowing to our Beloved and the offering of our soul, our life, and all human existence as we know it, all of Creation's suffering to the Realm of Mercy. This is the only medicine for the healing of our obsessions for control. It is an every-moment practice.

I have a clear recollection pointing to this Realm of Mercy, coming to me from my earliest days in school. I grew up much of the time attending Roman Catholic parochial schools in a pre-Vatican II era. This was an expectation of all dutiful Catholic parents of that time, even for a single parent mother, as was my mother. I remember one of the prayer gestures given to me by nuns who taught me was this: *-When you are in distress, or when you hear of another soul in distress, when you hear an ambulance pass by, when you find yourself disappointed in life, when you find yourself discouraged, no matter what is happening to you or to another, when you think of the tragic things happening to people in the world, think of Jesus and "offer up" whatever it is, to that greater Mercy that is Him, because it matters, for oneself and for all.*

Now at the time I don't pretend to have understood what precisely all that meant, but intuitively it seemed "right". It fit. No doubt there were some nuns, or some students who incorporated that practice as a form of magical thinking. But I did not pretend, even then, that my prayerful practice would necessarily change events or remove suffering from the world. Yet, it always gave me somewhere to go, and it fed the trust in the Greater Life, the Greater Mercy, the Greater Healing that encompasses us all. It was a true practice of Faith, then as a first, second, or third grader, and it is today.

Therefore it is important for us to look upon our practice of the prayer word in this way. It is a meeting of a contemplative prayer of union and a contemplative prayer of mercy (what we call intercessory prayer), for ourselves and for all God's creatures, all beings who inhabit our universe. When we truly let go of the mind's compulsion for control, and bow and offer our life and existence and everything in it, in love and givenness, in self-surrender and self-relinquishment, we become accessible to the God

of Infinite Mercy who is total Self-Gift in Christ to us. There are practical teachings to be learned, yet this is not a mental technique. It is our lifetime of home-coming, and our Prayer Word is our calling out in love to the One who is our Home, as love beacon, and it will last until we draw our last breath and open to a finality of healing in the welcoming arms of the Divine Beloved who is the Source and Goal of our prayer. What was taught to me as a first grader has not changed. What I can do always is "offer it up." The "It" I am offering, I have learned, is everything in life. And I have come to know that there is a Greater who Offers and Receives in me. Our souls are the medium of this Eucharistic banquet of Life of God's Gift of Self to us and our self-giving to God. We are the consecrated bread and wine, lifted up in Christ, each moment of life and given, joined in the eternal wedding banquet and with the Bridegroom.

To me this what it means to delve deeply into the Jesus Prayer, or the true meaning of our prayer word.