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structure of the seven step prayers

4.21.13

My seven step prayers served multiple functions. One was the obvious role of step seven, allowing me to release my character flaws in the 12 step program. A second function is psychological. It allowed me to work with my habit patterns letting go of unhealthy patterns and strengthening healthy ones. Then a third function is spiritual. The unhealthy patterns are tied to my attachment to a defective self. By letting go of a unhealthy self, I can allow qualities of my natural(true?) self to arise: awareness, compassion, and equanimity.

Take a look at a couple of the prayers:

When I feel the tug to lie
Entrusting myself to the way, I vow
To let go of the story
and trust in the truth of the moment.

What became clear as I was writing these prayers is that my bad habits (lies and greed) were outward expressions of some underlying beliefs about myself: that I was flawed and need to manipulate the story or grab what was not mine in order to make up for these deficiencies. So while the first line states a particular behavior, what I needed to let go of was not so much the lying or the greediness, but my underlying view of my self. My lying would stop when I see the stories that I create as just that fictions. My belief that I am deficient and in need of change is the fiction. My true self can handle the truth of what ever the moment has for me to see and feel. My deficient self says that I cannot handle the real. Reality is too scary or threatening or too overwhelming, I need to hide from it by creating a lie to hide behind. A barrier to keep me safe behind.

Instead of the defensive acts to protect the deficient self (lines 1 and 3 - or suffering), I welcome in an openness to the underlying truth of reality (lines 2 and 4 - or the way). The truth that within is my true self is my observer self who is aware of the comings and goings of feelings, thoughts and emotions that are not me, but temporary states that arise and pass from my consciousness. The truth that without are people, places and things that are as equally ephemeral as my passing thoughts. My trouble comes when I protect me from life, because I might feel something I cannot handle. I resist my experience to protect myself. The result are behavior that hurts me and others and causing me suffering. The wisdom comes from letting go of both my illusions about my deformed self that needs protecting from the overwhelming world. I do this by trusting that by being aware of what is happening within me and without in the world I live in the way of awareness, the way of freedom, the way of compassion, the way of an open heart.

The first stumbling block is my initial resistance to my bad habits. I resist these aspects of myself. I want to push them away or deny them, not opening my heart and awareness. I resist and deny because I do not believe I can face them. I fear my own destructiveness. So the first line I must acknowledge my shadow side as a part of me. As something that has a long history. What helps is to see that the intention is usually to protect me. I am trying to help "me." So once it my habit energy is framed as intending to help, it becomes easier to say "yes" to this part of me. To look at the behavior in an open and compassionate way. I lie not to hurt someone, but to protect myself.

After saying yes - acknowledging the truth of my shadow behavior, I then move to affirm what I rely upon as what is true: the freedom promised by the way of awareness. I remind myself of the flow of energy that is available to me at any moment. Simply observing what is now in the this moment, experiencing what this moment has to give fully is all that is needed. I don't need to resist anything in me, or change anything in my world, just be here, now. So by using the prayers, I remind myself of those situations when I am not living in the way of freedom but of the way of suffering. I use my character flaws as cues to remind me of the freedom that is present right now, if I will only allow it to arise. Stop resisting myself or the situation and allow both my awareness and the situation just be.