

# How people pray around the world

**A Higher Power**, in one form or another, is an elemental part of life for billions of people around the world. We thank, send wishes to, celebrate or simply reflect on our Higher Power in a variety of ways from East to West.

Here are some ways that people pray using ritual, books, and adornments to connect to something greater than themselves:



## Prayer Flags

Traditional woodblock-printed Buddhist **prayer flags**. As the wind passes over the **suktas** (*Sanskrit for "thread", originally the sermons of the Buddha*) written on them, it becomes sanctified, carrying the blessings to the countryside. Though the flags are replaced annually on the Tibetan New Year, their prayers are believed to remain in the wind, becoming a part of the universe.

Photo by: [Knottyboy](#)



## Meditation

**Meditation** is one of the most widely-known and adopted practices of Buddhist tradition. Though there is wide variation in its practice between various schools, meditation is generally intended to **promote mindfulness and awareness** in practitioners as a path to insight into oneself. People worldwide have adopted this practice, using it as a form of contemplation to better connect with both themselves and God. Often, sacred texts (the Bible, the Torah, the Qur'an, the Talmud, the Bhagavad Gita, the Holy Aqdas, etc.) are used for the message of contemplation. **Chanting a mantra** can be one way of gaining focus for some; for others, like those of the Quaker tradition, it is in **remaining silent** that they feel they gain focus. **Walking the labyrinth** is an alternate form of meditation: first journeying inward to see what is at the heart of your concerns, then journeying back outward as you decide what you can actively do about it, and what must be left to God or your Higher Power.

*Photo by: Marc oh!*



## Using Beads

A Japa mala, or simply 'mala' are a **set of beads** commonly used by Hindus and Buddhists to keep track of repeated prayers. The number of beads on an individual mala are always divisible by nine, with 108 beads being the most common configuration. During prayer, the beads are counted clockwise around the mala until the head bead at the top is reached, marking a full set of prayers. In the Catholic tradition, **the Rosary** is used: a form of devotion in which beads are counted off in sets of five decades of the prayer *Hail Mary*, with each decade preceded by the *Lord's Prayer* and followed by the *Glory Be*. Using beads is a helpful way to, in effect, meditate with and about God.

*Photo by Wonderlane*





## Making Offerings

Devotees worship by **lighting lamps and incense**, as well as **offering foodstuffs** before images of God or deities. Some traditions include money as an offering, which is intended to be used as aid for those less fortunate. **Incense** appeals to our sense of smell - -the most direct path to the brain out of all of our five senses. Because it is the most likely sense to be tied to memory, it can immediately transport us back to previous times of reverence and contemplation.

*Photo by Claude Renault*



## Lighting Candles

Janmashtami, the birthday of Lord Krishna, is celebrated across Bangladesh by its Hindu community. They seek the love of God and pray to fulfill wishes with practices that can take a range of forms, from **lighting candles to reading texts**. The practice of reading spiritual texts and lighting candles is repeated in differing faith traditions all over the world. In Judaism, this is evidenced in the prayers and candle-lighting of the Menorah; for Catholics, it is demonstrated in the Advent wreath.

*Photo by Mashroor Nitol*



## Ritual Prayer

In the Islamic tradition, the *salah*, or **ritual prayer**, is required to be performed by all Muslims five times each day. Verses are taken from the Qur'an and are said in Arabic. The salah is intended to be a time of individual focus on God for those praying, given over to thanksgiving and worship. Many traditions have adopted their own ritual prayers to varying degrees, from Orthodox Christianity and Judaism (which are highly ritualized) to the Quaker tradition (which is very simply structured). Ritualized prayer can **give us the words** we need when we feel at a loss for an adequate expression of gratitude, or penitence, or adoration.

*Photo by Quinn Ryan Mattingly*





## Spiritual Props

Props may be used as something that offers support of a moral or spiritual nature. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, **Tefillin** are a set of small, black-painted boxes containing verses from the Torah and worn on the forehead during prayer. A hand-tefillin, or shel yad, may also be placed on the upper arm, with the strap wrapped around the arm and hand. In Tibet, **prayer wheels** contain scores of prayers on a parchment tucked inside, and are believed to release these prayers when they are spun. Christians often wear **crosses** or **holy medals**, a physical reminder of their beliefs and aspirations to live a better life. **Icons** - pictures or depictions of saints, may also be used as a focal point in prayer.

*Photo by hoyasmeg*



## Veneration

To demonstrate a feeling of profound respect for someone or something is an act of **veneration**. For nature-centered spiritual traditions, such as those of many indigenous tribes and the druids, this could be demonstrating reverence and appreciation for the ancestors and for the earth itself. Catholics often venerate the saints: people they've deemed having led exemplary lives. Veneration can be witnessed by physical actions: genuflecting, raising hands upward, bowing your head, making the sign of the cross, and even through music and dance.

*Photo by Murky1*





## Petitions

To attract the attention of a kami, or spirit, at a shrine, Shinto devotees will put coins into the shrine's collection box, clap their hands or ring a bell before **contemplating their wish or request silently**. A wish may also be **written down** and left at the shrine for the kami to consider. If granted, many will return to the shrine to leave further messages of thanks. Many churches offer **prayer lists**, in which congregants write a petition that they ask the other members of their community to join them in. Frequently, these would be changes in fortune or for the improved health of a loved one. In the Native American tradition, a **prayer hoop** holds onto the prayer until an eagle grabs it and carries it skyward to the Great Spirit.

*Photo by Jesslee Cuizon*

**Various spiritual traditions offer a wide variety of devotional acts.** There are morning and evening prayers, graces said over meals, and reverent physical gestures. Some Christians bow their heads and fold their hands. Some Native Americans regard dancing as a form of prayer. Some Sufis whirl. Hindus chant mantras. Orthodox Jews sway their bodies back and forth, plus at some point of prayer all Jewish communities partially kneel and bow their bodies and Salah for Muslims includes kneeling and prostrating. Quakers keep silent.<sup>1</sup> Some pray according to standardized rituals and liturgies, while others prefer extemporaneous prayers. Still others combine the two.

These methods show a variety of understandings to prayer, which are led by underlying beliefs.

These beliefs may be that

- we can communicate with God
- God is interested in communicating with us
- prayer is intended to inculcate certain attitudes in the one who prays, rather than to influence the recipient
- prayer is intended to train a person to focus on the recipient through philosophy and intellectual contemplation
- prayer is intended to enable a person to gain a direct experience of the recipient
- prayer is intended to affect the very fabric of reality as we perceive it
- prayer is a catalyst for change in oneself and/or one's circumstances, or likewise those of third party beneficiaries
- the recipient desires and appreciates prayer
- or any combination of these.