LISTENING IN WITH ...

GREGG BRADEN

The Science Behind Affirmative Prayer

GREGG BRADEN has long been known for his expert ability to bridge science and spirituality. He’s a degreed geologist who’s also spent decades learning from spiritual leaders in cultures all over the world. Braden’s most recent book, *The Wisdom Codes* (Hay House, 2020), outlines the science behind how the language of ancient prayers and chants—from the Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Native American, and many other traditions—can affect our physical health as well as determine our worldview. Here, he talks with *Unity Magazine* editor KATY KOONTZ about the elegant way our hearts and our minds work together.
KATY KOONTZ: You’ve written about how the words we use to think and speak have a direct influence on the chemistry in our bodies. How are they connected and what does that mean for us?

GREGG BRADEN: Let me back up to say that in my journeys as a scientist to understand our past through archeology and the legacy of what ancient civilizations left to us, I’ve had the opportunity to get to know many indigenous people on a very human level. I’ve been with them in intimate circumstances, such as when their parents die, babies are born, weddings happen, and even when revolutions break out. I’ve seen how they’ve been taught to deal with challenges, and there’s a common theme among cultures: We humans have always turned to words—including prayers, hymns, mantras, and chants—to give us comfort in times of loss and to find strength in times of need.

In writing *The Wisdom Codes*, I brought together the essence of many of those traditions. I thought that if they worked for our global family over the past four or five thousand years, they’d probably work for us today as well.

One of the scientific findings I share in the book is that the words we choose determine not only how we think about ourselves and our relationship to the world, but also what we are even capable of conceiving. This is because our words direct how our neurons fire and wire together to create neural networks.

The Hopi language is a beautiful example. The Hopi cannot identify the past and the future—for them, everything is happening in the present moment. They also don’t have words for “over there” or “over here.” Everything is part of the whole, and it’s alive. That thinking is reflected in their worldview: They see themselves as part of the world around them, not as separate from each other and from nature. That’s why they cherish the natural world and work to preserve it.

We had a magnificent lightning storm last week where I live in Northern New Mexico, and people were saying, “Look at that bolt of lightning!” A Hopi could never say that because it would be isolating one bolt of lightning from all the others and also separating themselves from the lightning. What they would say is the equivalent of “It is lightning-ing.” Using that language directs their neurons to fire and wire in such a way that they see unity.

Our English language, on the other hand, allows for separation. That makes it good for concepts like engineering and technology. We don’t have to always identify with that separation, of course, but that’s how we’re conditioned, and this is reflected in our worldview. We feel separate from nature, from one another, and often from ourselves and our own power. This isn’t right or wrong, good or bad; it’s a consequence from the perspective of the new sciences known as neurolinguistics (what happens in our brains when we use language) and neurocardiology (how the neurons in our hearts communicate with the neurons in our brains).

KK: Can you elaborate on these neurons in our hearts?

GB: In 1991, scientists made a discovery that caught them off guard. The study was published in the journal *Neurocardiology*. Researchers identified approximately 40,000 specialized cells in the human heart that they called *sensory neurites*—essentially brain-like cells located in the heart. This means the heart can think, remember, make decisions, feel, and sense independently of the brain. That opens the door to a very different way of thinking about the human body and our experiences. Ancient spiritual traditions teach us there’s a way to harmonize the heart and the brain. Today science recognizes that when we create what is called *coherence* between those two organs, they become a single, potent system. There are three steps in creating this coherence. It involves a shift in focus to the heart, a shift in breath, and a shift in emotion—specifically creating positive, life-affirming emotions like gratitude. This sends a frequency of 0.1 hertz from the heart to the brain that creates optimum coherence between them so they can work together.

KK: What if you’re saying a prayer or mantra in a language that’s not the same as the one it was written in? Is it the vibration of the original words themselves or giving voice to the concepts those words represent that has the strongest effect?

GB: These are new and evolving sciences, but to the best of my current understanding, it’s the significance that we give to the words and the emotion it creates that shift our body chemistry. But people sometimes report feeling differently when they listen to certain prayers or mantras in the language they were written in because some languages are better suited to describe the most intimate aspects of our relationship with ourselves and with the universe, with God, and even with time.

For example, the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, is more suited to
the concept of unity than English is. There's no direct way to translate Aramaic into English because there's no one-to-one correspondence. But consider that in English, the “Lord's Prayer” starts, “Our Father who art in heaven.” Those are ideas of separation. We're here; heaven is somewhere else. But in Aramaic, the same prayer begins, “Abwoon d’bwashmaya,” which means “mother/father God,” or “birther of the cosmos.” That's a very different feeling.

**KK:** That's so intriguing, thinking of words as having a vibrational effect, not just being symbols for things.

**GB:** When we speak a word or utter a sound, something very complex happens behind the scenes. We inhale the breath of life from the world around us in one of the most intimate experiences possible. We invite that breath into the deepest recesses inside of our bodies, and then we compress that air with our diaphragm, forcing it to reverse course. On the way back out, it passes over the vocal cords, which we vibrate in a very precise manner to reflect the emotion, the intent, and the thought we are conceiving. As we flutter our vocal cords, we are creating ripples in that breath that we emit as acoustic patterns that reverberate on the eardrums of another living being to communicate an idea. We do all that so well that we take it for granted.

**KK:** You have a story about a Tibetan monk explaining how they pray that illustrates these ideas further. Can you share that again?

**GB:** When I was leading groups into Tibet back in the ’90s, I met with the abbot of one of the Tibetan monasteries we were visiting. I asked him, “When we see your prayers on the outside—the mantras, the bells, the gongs, and the incense—what are you doing on the inside of your body? What's happening there for you?”

“Your never seen our prayers,” he responded. “You've seen the things we do to create the feeling. The feeling is the prayer.” In other words, the magic isn't in the words themselves. You can say any prayer until you're blue in the face, but it's what those words mean to you and the changes they elicit in the body that is the real power of the prayer.

Then the abbot turned the question around and asked, “How do you do this in your culture?” That's when I realized very clearly that for the most part, we are taught that the words are the prayers. So we say certain words at dinnertime and others at bedtime, and we expect something to happen. Then if nothing does, we feel we've lost our ability to communicate with God.

**KK:** But what we've really lost was the emotion the words were meant to create.

**GB:** In traditional modes of prayer, we are taught to feel powerless and separate from God. We're saying, “Hey, I need some help here.” We've all been there. I've done that too. There's a toolbox of prayers that people apply in certain circumstances.

But there's another mode of prayer that most of us are seldom taught, and that's what the abbot was describing. With this kind of prayer, we are not trying to convince God to make something happen. We are recognizing that we can participate in the creation of the outcome, and that we're actually a part of that outcome.

The science for this comes together in a very beautiful way. We know that when we have certain feelings, we elicit certain chemical changes in our bodies. We create what's called a neuropeptide, a chemical equivalent of that emotion. Those neuropeptides elicit changes on the genetic level. They actually up regulate (switch on) or down regulate (switch off) genes, which communicate in a nonphysical way with our environment. In the laboratory, we've seen human emotion influence DNA, and then DNA influence the stuff matter is made of.

So changing our emotion changes our DNA and influences what's happening in the world around us, which is how we become part of the solution to the healing we are asking for. This is where the science is now supporting the principles of prayer.

**KK:** That's a great explanation for how affirmative prayer works—participating in the outcome.

**GB:** Back in the ’80s, when people first jumped on the affirmation bandwagon, I’d see people say an affirmation and then expect miraculous things to happen. For some it worked, but for others it didn’t. If you're saying the words but your underlying emotion doesn’t support those words, you won't create what you want. The words are important, but it's the feeling, the significance we give to those words that sets into motion the cascade of chemical events that allows the alignment of circumstances that can meet that affirmative prayer.

**KK:** So the words are just a vehicle for the emotions?
GB: The words are the code. This goes back to what the abbot said: The feeling is the prayer, the feeling is the affirmation. When we say the affirmation enough times, we are conditioning not just our conscious world but also our subconscious world to embrace the possibility of what the affirmation is identifying. But we have to feel that feeling, and in present time.

For example, let’s say you are repeating the affirmation: *I am ready for my healing*. The universe is very literal, so it will say, “Okay, I support you in being ready to receive healing. But when do you want this healing to happen?” If you don’t specify it in the affirmation, if you don’t feel the emotion of actually receiving the healing, the universe will have a hard time honoring your expectation because you haven’t shared it clearly.

KK: This gets back to how the neurons in our hearts work, yes? How does that benefit us?

GB: Research published in peer-reviewed scientific journals shows that through the neural network we have in our hearts, we have access to a field of energy and information that transcends the laws of physics as we know them today. This is the reason that a Unity prayer—a heart-based, affirmative prayer—can be so powerful.

For example, when people in the hospital have others praying for them, they bleed less, they bruise less, and they recover faster—this is very well-documented. Scientists aren’t sure exactly why the mechanism works, but experiences like this push science to do the experiments to understand our true relationship to our world, one another, the cosmos, and God. Where we often get stuck is the language because if you talk about this in religious terms, you’re going to turn some people off, and if you talk about it in scientific terms, some people will say it’s too complex.

For me, this is where spirituality comes in because in its truest form, spirituality is about understanding the relationship we have to ourselves and everything else, even to the past and future. Those are the deep spiritual principles that have been in place from the most ancient records of the first humans. Religion, on the other hand, came along relatively recently, wrapping its rules and dogma around those spiritual principles. So religion can divide people, but spiritual principles will unify people.

KK: You also teach about the earth-heart connection. Can you explain what that is and what it means for us?

GB: Geology tells us that the fundamental spike in the magnetic resonance of the earth, what’s called the *geomagnetic field line resonance*, is 0.1 hertz. That’s the same frequency I spoke about earlier that we use to create coherence between our hearts and brains. So when we harmonize our heart with our brain—and ultimately with our entire body—we are also harmonizing our body with the fundamental magnetic field of the planet. That’s where we find our highest levels of mastery. We are the only form of life that we currently know of that has the ability to self-regulate, to create this state of coherence at will.

Again, these techniques parallel the techniques of prayer and meditation in several ancient spiritual traditions. People didn’t know the science back then, but they understood what worked. So when we create this state of harmony in our bodies, that becomes the fertile ground into which we drop our prayers and our affirmations for our own healing and for creating peace in our communities and around the world.

Weaving together these two great ways of knowing—the wisdom of 5,000 years of recorded human history and the best science of the modern world—gives us the evolutionary edge not just to survive but also to thrive and transcend whatever life brings to our doorstep. That’s how we can create the best possible world, which ultimately is what we all want for ourselves and for our children.

Gregg Braden is the author of 12 books (including five *New York Times* best sellers) published in more than 40 languages. An international teacher, speaker, and consultant, Braden has been invited to speak to the United Nations, the U.S. military, and many Fortune 500 companies. He’s been nominated for the prestigious Templeton Prize (which recognizes those who “harness the power of the sciences to explore the deepest questions of the universe and humankind’s place and purpose within it”). He’s also a 2019 New Thought Walden Award honoree. Visit greggbraden.com.