

19. Prayer

The relation between worldly and spiritual karmas has also to be examined. We plough the field deep and make it fit for the seeds to grow. We select good seeds and sow them in the furrows. We foster the saplings with care. We remove the weeds that hamper and harm them. We water the plants when they need. We protect the crop by the erection of fences. We keep vigilant watch and save the plants from pests. Take it that each of these crucial steps are carried out by us diligently and without delay, as and when required. But how can we be certain, in spite of all these, that the fruit of our labours will reach our homes and can be stored by us for our use? The irrigation canal might go dry any day. The sky might pour down too much rain or withhold it altogether. Pests might prove too powerful to be eliminated. They might destroy the crop just when harvest is in sight. But man should not, even when such disaster faces him, collapse, as if he has lost everything.

If one does not get rain in time for his crop, he can venture to fly into the clouds and scatter chemicals in order to induce showers, by artificial means. But what guarantee is there that the rain thus produced will fall on one's own land? Artificial means cannot affect the mood of gods. They help or hinder according to their will. When all paths are closed and when, at last, one decides to pray to God for rain; how is the prayer to be framed, in what form should it be uttered, these problems confront one. The disaster is evident. The only refuge is prayer—"Oh God! The growing crop in my field is fast drying up on account of unbearable thirst for rain. The canal has not even a drop of water to slake the thirst of men and cattle. Therefore, have pity on us. Give us rain, in plenty, soon."

Meanwhile, another problem has risen, let us say. One's neighbour has arranged for the celebration of some festival and since rain will ruin the festival he has planned, and cause great inconvenience to the participants, he prays equally fervently, "Oh God, keep off the rains until this celebration is over."

Both these applicants are intense devotees of God, the one who clamours for rain and the one who opposes the rain. What is God to do, under these conditions? Whose prayer is He to fulfil? Of course, answering prayers saturated with sincerity is the characteristic of the Divine. When the prayers of devotees clash, how is He to shape His Grace? God is free, His Will is Law. But He is bound in some sense by His own Love and Compassion.

The monarch of a realm cannot satisfy the desire of every one of his subjects. He cannot claim the power of fulfilling all their needs. Why? He is unable to fulfil for himself all that he desires. If he attempts to satisfy every wish that arises in him, the subjects are certain to rise up against him and pull him down from the seat of power. There is that danger always dangling over him. Because, however mighty the monarch, he has to obey certain rules and honour some limitations laid down to ensure a just rule. These might have been laid down by the very monarch; but once promulgated, he too is bound by them and had to honour them. If he casts them aside or transcends them or oversteps them, chaos will be the consequence. For, the subjects too will exercise their freedom to cast them aside or override them. “As the King, so the subjects.” “*Yatha raja, thatha praja.*”

The person who is the author of the law must himself obey the law. He cannot stay away. The monarch must always hold as his ideal the welfare and happiness of his subjects. Their welfare and happiness are essential for his own welfare and happiness. They are so closely interrelated.

To satisfy the proper and praiseworthy desires of his subjects is the inescapable duty of the monarch. It is for this reason that the monarch, in order to carry out his duties effectively and smoothly, has assigned the task to many subordinate authorities, instead of himself attending to all matters concerning the kingdom and the subjects.

The rulers of worldly states have perforce to lay down hard and fast limitations and conditions, disciplines and duties in order to ensure welfare, prosperity and progress. Imagine then how many more such have to be imposed by the Lord who holds Himself responsible for the entire Cosmos! For the smooth and safe working of the various facets of Nature, He has to prescribe flawless rules. Just contemplate how numerous and universal they have to be! These affect every activity and inactivity in nature. Each unit must have (and has) its own peculiar restrictions and regulations. It is more or less, itself, within the larger framework. It has a separate Head with limbs of government, co-ordinating duties and responsibilities and co-operating with others.

The prayers of the afflicted for timely help or useful guidance are attended to by the appropriate units only. Therefore, if through ignorance or want of care, the pleading is addressed to the wrong Head, what can he do? He can only cast it aside, remarking that it does not concern Him since it has been wrongly addressed to Him. So, prayers for specific benefits and bounties have to be directed to the departments with which they are related. The divinity concerned with rain is Varuna. So, prayers for rain or about rain have to be directed to Him, for, He alone is authorised to deal with such. Similarly, Surya is the Head of the Realms of Health and Splendour. Ganapathi is the Head of the department that deals with prevention of difficulties that hamper good works. Bhudevi is the goddess in charge of

vegetation. Cultivated crops and medicinal plants are fostered by Chandra. Thus, each group of Divine manifestations and expressions has a lesser divine authority empowered to supervise and manage it. They are referred to as Deities. There are Deities supervising, guarding and guiding each one of the senses of man.

It may be asked, “God is One. Why then can He not listen to and fulfil our prayers Himself?” This question is based on a mistake, it is a sign of weakened faith. Of course, there is only one God. But in the governance of the Cosmos, there must needs be different fields of activity to rule and regulate. These have subordinate deities. If you write a letter to me and address it to another, it will reach only the addressee! It cannot be *presented* before the person whom you desire to approach. So too, you have to address the Deity in charge, concerned with the fulfilment or denial of the desire you have entertained. Then, that Deity would interest himself in your problem and initiate whatever steps he can to solve it.

It is essential to inquire into the credentials one has before one formulates the prayer. That inquiry will reveal whether one’s thoughts and resolutions, hopes and desires arise from firm Faith or not. How to test and discover the truth? People take a piece of gold and draw with it a line on a slice of stone. Then they examine that streak and assess the quality. The test which will reveal the quality of your Faith is whether you are practising sincerely the injunctions

laid down by God. Your beliefs and actions must be expressions of Faith. They must have holiness as their core. They must be so full of love and compassion that they attract on you the Grace of God.

Activity emanating from such sacred belief and faith is the goal of the Karma segment of Vedic scriptures. It is the tap root of human progress. It is the very breath of happy human existence. It is the food that can alone allay the hunger of man. It is the life-sustaining water that can cure his thirst. Activity or Karma is as essentially bound with man as his need to discover and realise his own Reality. Therefore, the first and continuing duty of man is to engage himself in activities that are taught in the Vedas, or approved therein.

Three types of activity reach God and earn His Grace: (1) activity not prompted by personal desire, (2) activity emanating from unselfish Love and (3) prayer arising from pure hearts. These are the items to which the Lord pays heed. They reach God direct. The rest are the concern of deities who preside over their disposal. Therefore, prayers have to be unselfish, saturated with Love, and free from the taint of “attachment to the gift that the prayer would bring.”

The word Sastra that is frequently used to indicate scriptures means “that which commands, orders, directs with authority.” “Before eating food, cook it well. Before sowing seeds, prepare the soil through ploughing”—the Sastras need not contain such orders. Who commands and where is that command laid down that the new-born calf

shall seek food at the udder of the mother cow where it is already stored to appease its hunger pangs? Birth takes place along with sustenance for the being born.

As a matter of fact, the sustenance is ready first and the birth of the individual to be sustained takes place later. The individual's food and standard of living are dependent on the merit or demerit accumulated in previous lives while struggling for these two. He uses his intelligence to overcome the obstacles and cultivate the skills needed to succeed in this struggle. But the really valuable guidelines for human progress are beyond the understanding of man and even the capacities of his intelligence. Nevertheless, the characteristics of his conduct and behaviour, his attitudes and aptitudes are delineated in the Vedas, and demarcated in the Sastras. Activity is as essential on Vedic and Sastric lines as they are for humans in the worldly level. The learned should realise that activities recommended in the scriptures promote the best interests of man here and lead to peace and harmony in the hereafter.

In the art of beneficial activity, the goal of "Service to mankind" occupies the foremost place. Of course, the individual pursuing the goal is also a beneficiary, since he is part of the living community which he serves. He is the co-sharer in the magnificent adventure. Knowing this and being aware of this truth when engaged in the service are themselves the highest urges for service.

Today, we hear everywhere, slogans like, "*Manava seva is Madhava seva*" (Service to man is service to God), "*Loka seva is Lokesa seva*" (Service to the world is the service rendered to the Lord of the universe), "*Jana seva is Janardhana seva*" (Service to the people is the service to the Lord of the people), "*Jiva seva is Deva seva*" (Service to the embodied is the service to the Divine)—each one highlighting the idea that the service rendered to man is worship offered to God. This idea is very true, and very valid. But the method of service is not being well-thought out by many. The call for service to mankind is heard and welcomed. But how and where that service is to be practised is not reasoned out and decided. Each one follows his own inclination and impulse. The most powerful impulse is self-aggrandisement, which is camouflaged as service. In the name of "service," neither worldly prosperity nor spiritual advance is furthered. More destruction than construction is achieved. Helping one, co-operating with another, sympathising with others when they suffer defeat, disease or distress—all these must cater not merely for the individual, but also for the harmony and happiness of the world.

The organisation of the urge to serve and the directions into which these were channelled had prevailed since ages as laid down by the sages who were the forefathers. The forefathers believed that the very observance of Dharma (righteousness and justice) by the individual contributed to the welfare of the world and could be evaluated as "service." The broad circular heavy footprint of the elephant can include

and even obliterate the footprints of many an animal. So too, the imprint of Dharma includes service to society and to mankind. This was the faith of the Sages.

High ideals are inspired by Dharma. The forefathers imbibed them along with the breast milk of their mothers. Therefore, their practice of Dharma was pure, praiseworthy and productive of the highest good. It was believed in those ancient days that the festive feeding of the hungry, provision of houses for those without shelter, the construction of temples, the digging of tanks and wells, were all conducive to the happiness of man. Good men who propagated such ideals were discovered and gathered, fostered and fended. Entire villages were earmarked for them and cultivable land allotted for their upkeep. The cool comforting moonlight of the fame of these leaders and guides has lasted even unto this day, providing unshakeable examples of love, compassion and wisdom in the service of humanity.

