

Chapter XIX. Prayer

Relation between worldly and spiritual work

The relation between worldly and spiritual work (*karma*) 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 it. We protect the crop by erecting 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 fruits 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 the harvest is in sight. But people should not, even when such disaster faces them, collapse, as if they had lost everything.

If rain doesn't come in time for the crop, one can venture to fly into the clouds and scatter chemicals, 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, and the only refuge is prayer. "O God! The crop growing in my field is fast drying up on account of unbearable thirst for rain. The canal doesn't have even a drop of water to slake the thirst of people and cattle. Therefore, have pity on us. Give us rain, in plenty, soon."

Meanwhile, another problem has arisen, let us say. A neighbour has arranged for the celebration of some festival. Since rain will ruin the festival and cause great inconvenience to the participants, he prays equally fervently. "O God, keep the rains off until this celebration is over."

Harmonizing individual prayers

Both applicants are intense devotees of God, the one who clamours for rain and the one who opposes it. 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, but 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 all subjects; he cannot claim the power to fulfill all their needs. Why? He is unable to fulfill 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. That danger is always dangling over him. 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 has to honour them. If he casts them aside, transcends them, or oversteps them, chaos will result, for the subjects will also exercise their freedom to cast them aside or override them. "As the king, so

the subjects (*Yatha raja, thatha praja*).”

Author of a law must obey the law

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

The inescapable duty of the monarch is to satisfy the proper and praiseworthy desires of his subjects. For this reason, in order to carry out his duties effectively and smoothly, the monarch assigns 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, 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! They affect every activity and inactivity in nature. Each unit must have (and has) its own peculiar restrictions and regulations. Each unit is, more or less, itself within the larger framework. It has a separate head, with limbs of government for coordinating duties and responsibilities and cooperating with others.

Functional division of deities

Prayers for timely help or useful guidance are attended to only by the appropriate units. Therefore, if, through ignorance or want of care, the pleading is addressed to the wrong head, what can the head do? Only cast it aside, remarking that it is not of concern because it was wrongly addressed. 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. He alone is authorized 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. Deities supervise, guard, and guide each one of the senses of people.

It may be asked, “God is One. Why can’t He listen to and fulfil our prayers Himself?” This question is based on mistake; it is a sign of weakened faith. Of course, there is only one God. But, in the governance of the cosmos, different fields of activity have to be ruled and regulated. 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, the one concerned with the fulfilment or denial of your desire. Then, that deity would be interested in your problem and initiate whatever steps possible to solve it.

Credentials for proper prayer

It is essential to inquire into the credentials one has before formulating the prayer. That inquiry will reveal whether or not one’s thoughts and resolutions, hopes, and desires rise from firm faith. How do we test and discov-

er 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 that 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 to 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 taproot of human progress; it is the very breath of happy human existence; it is the food that can alone allay the hunger of people; it is the life-sustaining water that can cure their thirst. Activity (*karma*) is as essentially bound with people as their need to discover and realize their own reality. Therefore, the first and continuing duty is to engage oneself 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.

Science of spiritual activity

The word *sastra*, used frequently to indicate scriptures, means “that which commands, orders, directs with authority”. The *sastras* need not contain orders like “Before eating food, cook it well; before sowing seeds, prepare the soil through ploughing.” Who commands and where is that command laid down that the newborn 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 those 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. One uses one’s 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 people and even the capacities of their intelligence.

Nevertheless, the characteristics of one’s conduct and behaviour, one’s 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 realize that activities recommended in the scriptures promote the best interests of people here and lead to peace and harmony in the hereafter.

Service to fellow beings is service to God

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 that 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:

Service to humanity is service to God (*Manava seva is Madhava seva*),

Service to the world is service to the Lord of the world (*Loka seva is Lokeshha seva*).

Service to human beings is service to God (*Jana seva is Janardhana seva*).

Service to the individual is service to God (*Jiva seva is Deva seva*).

Each one highlights the idea that service rendered to a person 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 their inclination and impulse. The most powerful impulse is self-aggrandizement camouflaged as service. In the name of service, neither worldly prosperity nor spiritual advance is furthered. More destruction than construction is achieved. Helping one, cooperating with another, sympathizing 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 organization of the urge to serve and the directions into which these were channeled have prevailed for ages, as laid down by the sages who were the forefathers. The forefathers believed that the very observance of righteousness and justice (*dharma*) 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 people. Good people 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 unshakable examples of love, compassion and wisdom in the service of humanity.