

Surrender and Prayer



Satsang

with

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Swamiji is traditional in his teaching and preserves the entirety of the age-old wisdom of the Upanishads. He takes a contemporary approach in his lectures, which enables the student to relate to his teaching and imbibe this knowledge without effort.

Swami Veditatmananda is the resident teacher at *Tattvatirtha*, which is situated in the western outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. As the name suggests, it is a center for learning the *tattva*, or truth, as revealed in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Apart from English, Swamiji teaches and writes in Gujarati as well. He also conducts management seminars with a view to illustrate the relevance of Vedānta in modern management.

Swamiji visits the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam at Saylorsburg, PA, every year, to conduct Vedānta classes and camps from spring through summer. At this time, he also travels all over the US and Canada delivering lectures.

Contents

Śaraṇāgati.....	1
Prayer	13
God.....	23

Śaraṇāgati

Question

Can you expand on *śaraṇāgati* especially from the perspective of a wise person?

Answer

The wise person¹ and his wisdom represent the ultimate in *śaraṇāgati* or surrender. Who is a wise person? He is one who does not exercise his free will. We are given free will, as well as the privilege to exercise it when there is a need or a desire to be fulfilled. The wise person is one who has become free from this need to exercise free will. This is *mokṣa* or liberation. *Mokṣa* is the freedom from the need to exercise free will.

When do we exercise our free will? We use our free will to perform deliberate actions. What does an action represent? An action originates from some desire, and therefore represents desire. What does a desire represent? A desire implies that things are not all right as they are and therefore some change is necessary. Or there could be a desire to bring about a change in ourselves because we are not all right as we are. In either case, desire represents our perception that things are not all right. Every action brings about a change and therefore, action is a means of bringing about change.

Whether things are all right or not is a subjective perception, which determines whether a change is necessary. This is evidence of a non-acceptance or resistance; a non-acceptance of the way things are and a resistance, in our minds, to the realities. This implies that things become acceptable only when some change is brought about. Therefore the need to exercise free will arises from the need for bringing about change.

What does it mean when we say that a wise person is free from the need to exercise his free will? It means that in his perception, there is no need for change. Things are all right as they are and everything, including himself, is in order. Therefore, he has surrendered his free will to destiny and his life takes its own course. He has discovered the fact that he is comfortable, regardless of how things are, because everything is acceptable as it is. He has a non-demanding relationship with himself as

¹ The last 18 verses of the 2nd chapter of *Bhagavad Gītā* describe the characteristics of *sthitaprajña*, a wise person.

well as with the world. The exercise of free will represents a demand. Surrender, on the other hand, means that there is no demand.

Surrender to God means not making demands of God. What does being non-demanding mean? It means that you accept things as they are. When we perform an action, we want God to give us a certain result and do not leave it up to Him to do what He wants to do. In making this specific demand, we are, in fact, disregarding His freedom to do things in a certain way. We always keep Him on His toes!

There is a story about the two great saints, Tulsidas and Surdas. It seems that they happened to be together at a *satsang* in *Vrindāvan*. At that time, someone suddenly shouted, “Run, run! A mad elephant is coming this way!” Everybody ran away. Even Surdasji quietly went and hid himself. But Tulsidasji kept sitting where he was. When it turned out that there was no mad elephant, everyone, including Surdasji, came back to their seats. Tulsidasji then taunted Surdasji, “So, is this all the trust you have in God? Did you not trust that He would protect you? Look at me. I trusted that God would protect me.” Surdasji replied, “Well. When I can do something by myself, I do not want to give God the trouble!” This is a characteristic of a true *bhakta*.

A devotee is one who does not want to be a burden to the Lord. *Śaraṇāgati* arises from the feeling that I do not want to make any demands upon God. I give Him the benefit of the doubt. He is omniscient and omnipotent, and knows what He is doing. I am not the only one in this creation. He has to deal with a lot of things. Therefore let me give Him the freedom to do what He thinks is proper.

It is my will by which I distinguish myself from others. It is my will by which I always claim that I am different from others. It is this will, which is called the ego or sense of individuality. The ego exercises its will to assert itself. Thus, surrender, is the freedom from the need to assert myself. Submitting our free will at the feet of the Lord in this manner, is *śaraṇāgati*.

All this seems to go against the instruction we are given in this world, that if we do not assert ourselves, everybody will take us for granted, and, that we cannot achieve what we want to, unless we are assertive. Apparently, the wise person does not see the need to assert himself. He does not mind being taken for granted. He does not mind

being used. He does not mind being treated as a doormat. It does not matter what they do to him. Can you imagine this? This is true freedom.

If there were anything that could add to what I have, or anything that could take away from what I have, there would be a need to be alert and make sure that no one takes anything away, and always see that something is added to. When you discover the fact that the Self or the 'I' is that to which nothing can be added or that from which nothing can be taken away, you are free. In describing a wise person, Lord Krishna says:

*āpūryamāṇamacalapratiṣṭhaṃ samudramāpaḥ praviśanti
yadvat*

Just as the waters flow into the ocean that is brimful and still...[BG² 2-70]

He cites the example of the ocean, which is filled from all sides and abides in its own fullness. It does not make any demands on anybody. The rivers come of their own accord to bring water to the ocean. The ocean does not send out any invitation or demand that the rivers come to it. This is the nature of freedom. This is the nature of ultimate surrender, the surrender of free will and the surrender of demand. Surrender is acceptance. Surrender is non-resistance.

We all want freedom. Each of us wants to be free, not recognizing that the freedom is to be obtained from within ourselves! The resistance that we show to the realities of life is a resistance to God. The non-acceptance that we show is the non-acceptance of God. The demands that we make are demands we make of God. The whole universe is a manifestation of God and whatever is happening, is nothing but a manifestation of God. Whenever we resist a reality, we are resisting Him. The wise person does not resist. There is a total acceptance of God. A total acceptance of God requires the total departure of the ego. It means a total departure of free will. Thus to the extent that we can bring about the surrender of our will, there is *śaraṇāgati*.

Lord Krishna asks us to accept the realities of life gracefully. This is what the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches us all along. Before we accept the entire creation as it is, which will take some time, Lord Krishna wants us to accept at least a few things. What are these? He says, "Accept me as the *karmaphaladātā*, the giver of the results of action.

² BG = *Bhagavad Gītā*

When the result comes, do not resist me. Accept the result of action as it is. Accept me to that extent.”

karmaṇyev ’ādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana

mā karmaphalaheturbhūh

Your choice is in action only, never in the results thereof. Do not be the author of the results of action. [BG 2-47]

“You have the free will to perform action. Let me determine the results. Accept the result, whatever it may be.” This surrender calls for a tremendous amount of *śraddhā* or faith pending discovery. Some day I will understand, but until that time I give Him the benefit of the doubt that the result must be meant for my benefit.

The 1st level of surrender, thus, is a graceful acceptance of the result of the action. The 2nd level of surrender is the performing of all action, not for the sake of oneself, but as an offering to the Lord, in the spirit of service to the Lord. Lord Krishna says, “Perform action for my sake rather than for yours. Surrender your comfort to my comfort.” The 3rd level of surrender is recognizing that nothing belongs to us. “Everything belongs to me,” the Lord says, “Therefore, become an instrument in my hand.” Further, Lord Krishna says, “Stop performing action. Be totally dedicated to knowing me.” The 4th level of surrender would then be, to dedicate yourself to the pursuit of knowledge through *śravaṇam* or listening to the scriptures, *mananam* or reasoning and *nididhyāsanam* or contemplation. This is a form of surrender because you give up all other agenda. Your agenda now is commitment to knowledge. When your pursuit of knowledge culminates in knowledge, your agenda is fulfilled. You then discover yourself to be one with the Lord, one with the order.

The wise person is compared to a dry leaf falling from a tree. The leaf has no agenda. It goes wherever the wind takes it! Thus, the wise person goes wherever the wind of *prārabdha* takes him. *Śrī Śaṅkarā* says, “*prārabdhāya samarpitaṁ svavapuḥ*” [*Manīṣā Pañcakam*, 3], to mean that the wise person is one who has surrendered his *vapuḥ*, body, to *prārabdha*, destiny. He abandons his free will and personal agenda, and identifies with the agenda of the Lord. Thus, surrender is the process of identification with the Lord. To the extent that I identify with Him, my individual agenda is

surrendered. This culminates in becoming one with Him. This is freedom from the need to have an agenda; freedom from the need to exercise free will; freedom from the need to bring about a change; freedom from the need to do anything at all!

Thus, *śaraṇāgati* or surrender begins with us reducing our resistance to reality in accepting *karmaphala*. It culminates in our knowledge of God as the very self.

Question

How do we practice *śaraṇāgati* in our day-to-day life?

Answer

Surrender begins when we reduce our resistance to reality. Begin to accept *karmaphala* and it will slowly culminate in accepting the whole world, ultimately leading to total non-resistance.

We can practice non-resistance in meditation. “I accept life as it has been given to me. I have not created anything. I recognize that nothing is complete and nothing is perfect. Everything has some virtues and everything has some limitations. I have been given these parents. I accept them with their limitations and virtues. I have been given this family. I accept it with its limitations and virtues. The Lord has created them all. I accept them as they are. Then I accept myself as I am. I accept the body as it is. It is a gift given to me by the Lord. It has its limitations and it has its virtues. I accept my sense organs. My eyes are a beautiful gift even with their limitations. My ears are another beautiful gift even with their limitations. I accept them.”

Acceptance means non-resistance! My mind keeps ruminating, “Why are my eyes like this? Why are my ears like this? Why is my height like this?” Stop complaining! Stop blaming! You can do this at least during meditation, if not in real life!

“I know that I have to go through pleasant and painful experiences in my life. I recognize that some people caused me pain. I recognize that they are just instruments and so I have nothing against them. The pain was something that I had to go through because of my *prārabdha* or destiny. I recognize that I have an immense share in my *prārabdha*, because what is destiny today was my free will in the past. I accept my body

the way it is.” How about the mind? It has wonderful virtues and also limitations. Accept it for what it is. “It is miserable with all its impulses.” Ok, accept that. Accepting the reality is surrender. “I accept gracefully things that I cannot change. God, please give me the serenity to accept gracefully what I cannot change!” This is surrender.

There are many things that I cannot change in life. What is the use of complaining? “*Tasmād aparihārye’rthe na tvam śocitum arhasi*” [BG 2-27], there is no point in grieving about things that are inevitable. “*Jātasaya hi dhruvo mrtyuh dhruvam janma mrtasya ca*” [BG 2-27], death is certain for the one who is born and birth is certain for the one who dies. Therefore there is no point in resisting it, denying it or grieving about it. This is the reality and I accept it gracefully. This is surrender: no complaints; no blaming; no resistance! We can certainly practice this at least in meditation.

If you have problems with someone, accept that person. ‘He or she is all right’. Bless them that they may be happy. Bless everybody. God has created them. He must have a reason for it. Surrender is wishing them well, not complaining and not blaming them. Try to do this in your interactions. You don’t have to say it to the other person, but just accept him in your mind. The other person may not have the maturity to appreciate it and stating this may have adverse effects if the person is not mature. It is very difficult for people to accept that somebody can be good. Therefore, if you present yourself as a good person, he may suspect your motives and not accept you. So entertain the attitude of surrender in your mind. If it is there in your attitude, it will reflect in your actions. People can understand actions better than words. Giving people the freedom to be what they are is the way for you to be free. It implies having large-heartedness, accommodation and *kṣamā*, forgiveness.

A non-demanding attitude will bring about a certain sympathetic approach to any situation and you will become a helping person, rather than a demanding person. When we accept God, we are accepting whatever God has created, which means that we are tolerant of all people. A person has no choice in being what he or she is. This is how that person is created! “Why are you like this?” “But this is how my mind is!” “Why do you look like this?” “That is how my face is! What can I do?” “Why do you talk like this?” “This is the language I know!”

You should accommodate yourself as well. You also have limitations and problems. I am not saying that you should be complacent or indifferent about your limitations or problems. Always take responsibility to correct yourself. But don't blame yourself or reject yourself. Surrender thus includes a non-rejecting attitude, both towards the world as well towards my self.

Question

But accepting my self as I am, will not help me achieve excellence and will not help me advance in life!

Answer

Accepting myself means being sympathetic to myself. I understand that I have these limitations. I take responsibility and try to correct the limitations. But I don't blame myself for my limitations. Acceptance implies a non-blaming and non-rejecting attitude. This is the proper attitude because I will then be objective towards my limitations. I will know what to do about them. If I dismiss myself, I lose the very capacity to change myself. Similarly when I dismiss others, I make them incapable of doing something.

With reference to your children, understand and help them when you find some limitation in them. Pushing is one thing; pulling is another. Try to pull, rather than push them.

Having ambitions is all right. If you are sufficiently convinced that it is the only way of life, driving yourself towards that is also all right. This is possible in the light of self-acceptance. Driving means recognizing what needs to be changed and trying to change that. There is nothing wrong in getting ahead in life. There is nothing wrong in excellence. It can become a very stressful process though, when rejection or non-acceptance is involved. It can be a process of self-growth, when acceptance is involved.

Question

Don't I have to be ruthless towards my team to get things done?

Answer

Being ruthless towards people means not caring for people's sentiments. "Pushing my agenda! Being a bulldozer! My way or the highway!" I don't think being

ruthless is productive. You become insensitive to others when you are ruthless. The idea seems to be to make others work hard by creating fear, stress and insecurity in them.

A fearful and insecure person cannot be efficient. Such a person will not apply his mind whole-heartedly. I don't think ruthlessness is a good idea. Being firm is all right. You can be clear and firm about your goals, "This is what has to be done. This is what is expected of us. This is what we are here for. Therefore we need to do it."

Disciplining by creating fear is one way of doing it. Your team member will always look to get out of the situation. If there is a better opportunity, he is going to get out. I am not saying that we should let people be as they are. What I am saying is that our requirements or objectives should be made clear and their goals given to them. If there is a genuine difficulty, be sympathetic and help them meet their goals, rather than being ruthless. Being sympathetic rather than insensitive is what we are talking about. By being sympathetic, you give the other person confidence, and trust is created. Then, even if you become demanding sometimes, he will have an incentive to fulfill your demand. But if he feels that he does not count or matter, he feels very wretched. It is not conducive to his self-respect. On the other hand, if you respect him for what he is, rather than for what he does, he will be more inclined to perform well.

People are more important than what they do. If a person is with you, then, on his own, he will give you the best that he can give you. If the person is not with you, he can, at the most, try his best out of fear. But he won't be loyal to you. When circumstances change, you will have to pay for it. People and their sentiments are very important.

Any system that becomes very performance-oriented, suffers. No one is loyal to anybody. The employer is not loyal to the employee because all that matters is performance. The employee is not loyal to the employer because all that counts is remuneration. People are ruthless and justify their ruthlessness. I don't think management teaches you to be ruthless. When you act without loyalty, how far can that relationship go? How can you trust a person who is not loyal to you? Thus we can't establish a conducive or congenial atmosphere for the person to feel at home. Ideally a person should feel that he (or she) is wanted and that he counts. "This is my

organization. I am working for myself in a way”. If this kind of atmosphere is created, that will be the best management.

Question

How do we become an instrument in *īśvara*'s hands?

Answer

Perform action for the sake of *īśvara*. Perform action based on the universal values. Or join the agenda of *īśvara*. Ask yourself what He would do if He were in your place? Before making a decision, if every employee thinks, “What would the owner or the boss do if he were in my place?”, it is going to be the right decision. If an employee identifies with the owner and merges his agenda with that of the owner, whatever the employee does is done for the owner.

Similarly, when you want to please *īśvara*, you need to transform your agenda. What would He want? He would want the welfare of everybody, because everybody is His. To what extent can you do that? This would mean becoming other-centered. Or self-less! You begin to perform actions for the well-being of others. You perform actions out of a spirit of giving, of offering. Everywhere in the creation, we find that everything is giving itself away for the harmony of the whole universe. This spirit of participating in the scheme of things, this joining in the order and harmony, is the spirit of worshipping *īśvara* or doing something for *īśvara*.

Finally, recognize that He alone does. Indeed, you are not the doer, though you think that you are. All the instruments of doing, this body with the sense organs, the mind and the intellect, are given by Him. He provides even the opportunity and inspiration, and the power and capability to work. He is doing it through you. You are really an instrument in His hands. This is surrender.

You are like a *sitār* in the hands of a musician. The *sitār* has no agenda. It allows the musician to do whatever he wants to do. He takes the *sitār* and tightens the strings. I am sure the poor *sitār* feels the pain. It has the trust that the tightening is for its well being, for tuning it up! It has the satisfaction of being an instrument.

Right now, you have satisfaction when you achieve something. Suppose in your own mind, that you get satisfaction for becoming an instrument for your boss, to achieve something. His agenda is yours and he gets the credit. Suppose you enjoy the fact that he gets the credit, then you can never be fired! He will always accept you, want you and do the right thing by you.

This process of surrender is one of discovering the grace of *īśvara*, His favor. It is a very rewarding process. By becoming favorable to the order, we are making the order favorable to us. This is a great gain. This is what becoming an instrument of *īśvara* means. “Look, the battle is already fought by me. You just have to get the credit.” exhibited Lord Krishna in his cosmic form, to Arjuna. This is becoming an instrument in the Lord’s hands.

In accepting the *karmaphala* and doing work to please Him, you become *sāttvic*³. When you recognize that you are His instrument, you become even more *sāttvic*. The ego shrinks, as it becomes more and more *sāttvic*. You can then surrender your ego. A *rājasa* or *tāmasa*⁴ ego cannot be given up because you do not have the freedom to do so. Only when the ego becomes *sāttvic*, do you get the freedom to drop it. The mind has to become progressively more *sāttvic*, so as to enable you to have the freedom to give up *karma* as well.

Question

How do I perform an action in keeping with *īśvara*’s wishes?

Answer

When you have a choice between *dharma* and *adharmā*, making the choice according to *dharma* is making the choice according to *īśvara*. *Dharma* is always in keeping with the order. If the order is recognized as the will of *īśvara* and an action is performed in keeping with the order, it becomes an action in keeping with *īśvara*’s will. Therefore all our *adharmic* propensities, such as our tendency to take shortcuts or our

³ *Sattva* is a disposition in which the mind is calm, tranquil, contemplative and learning.

⁴ *Rajas*, is a disposition in which the mind is agitated, projecting and seeking gratification. *Tamas* is a disposition in which the mind has no initiative, is dull and does not want to do anything.

tendency to violate laws, are to be subdued in order for us to perform an action that is in keeping with *dharma*. This is surrender.

Question

But I do not always get the desired results, even when I perform an action in keeping with *dharma*!

Answer

Even if you perform an action according to *dharma*, the result can be different from what you expected. There is nothing wrong in *dharma*. But you can say that your knowledge is limited. You don't have the knowledge of all the parameters to predict what the outcome will be. You predicted the outcome based on the information that you had. Maybe the information you had was not enough! Give Him the benefit of the doubt. Even if you had the information and you predicted the outcome correctly, your effort may not have been quite adequate because of limitations in your capability! *Jñāna śakti*, the capacity to know, is limited. *Kriyā śakti*, the capacity to implement, is also limited. If the outcome is not in keeping with your expectation, you need to analyze the fact. Was the limitation in your prediction? Was your information limited? Was your input not appropriate? If on analysis, everything was all right, maybe it is *īśvara*'s wish that you received the undesirable result.

Every action has two kinds of results, tangible and intangible. Even when you perform an action, there is a tangible element as well as an intangible element. The effort is the tangible element. But the intention, with which you do it, is the intangible element. Good intention also has a reward in intangible terms.

In our lives we take only the tangible into account. Sometimes the intangible is more important than the tangible. It is called the spiritual aspect. This is what Lord Krishna wants us to work with. The tangible aspect is dependent on the laws and we have limited freedom. But as far as the intention or motivation is concerned, we have full freedom.

Question

Are all actions prompted by *rājasic* tendencies?

Answer

Performing action does not imply *rajas*. It is the motivation behind the action that determines whether it is *sāttvic* or *rājasic*. You can perform an action with a desire to do some good to others. If you have a family, you are responsible to support it and that is not necessarily *rājasic*. It is your role and you have to perform it. One has to go out and interact with others in the world. When this interaction violates *dharma*, it is *rājasic*.

An individualistic attitude implies that your personal agenda is important. You do have the freedom to have an agenda and also to fulfill it. Only, recognize that others also have an agenda and you do not have the right to trample upon another's agenda. Sometimes we become insensitive to others' needs and sentiments. In having the freedom to pursue our agenda, we should not rob the freedom of others to pursue their agenda. Let us make a commitment to do things as best as we can. Let us respect others' rights and be sensitive to their needs. Let us not compromise means for the sake of the end.

Prayer

Question

How can parents explain the significance of prayer to their children?

Answer

By explaining to children that we need the grace of God in our lives. We can explain to our children that for the completion of any endeavor, two factors are needed; personal effort and the grace of God. In life, we have to make our children aware of something called grace, by pointing out to them a number of events where things happened without their having worked for them, where we find situations favorable. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and something just happened that was beneficial to me. We can bring to the attention of our children that there is something called grace using actual, concrete examples in the life of the children.

Everybody has a number of these experiences. In India, for instance, a student may be heard saying, “I prepared ten questions, six of which were asked in the examination. I was lucky.” Students sometimes do not study fifty percent of the syllabus because there is not enough time to do so before the examination. Therefore, they say, “Okay, this much is what I will study.” If you are lucky, all or most of the questions in the test will be from the material you studied. If you are not lucky, you find there is not even one question from the material you studied. And with mixed luck, you will get something in between. There is something called luck, which is what we can bring to the attention of the child. “Look, you enjoy certain privileges. See, that boy doesn’t have this. See, that child doesn’t have this. And you do.” You can show that there are certain privileges that the child enjoys without having made an effort, which means there is something called grace.

We require the Lord’s grace and favor for the successful completion of any endeavor. There are unknown factors or factors not within our control that can be made favorable by prayer. Prayer is that by which we can make these factors favorable to us. Our children are certainly interested in success. Success requires not only self-effort; it also requires grace. Prayer is a means to win this grace.

Question

Can you please explain how prayer works?

Answer

Prayer is a deliberate action. It can be performed for different reasons. For example, I pray when I want the favor of the Lord or when I want His grace. In life I find that there are many obstacles that I encounter and I need help to overcome these obstacles. In every situation there are always factors, which are not in my control. Sometimes, I don't even know the factors that are not in my control. Only when some of them become favorable to me, can I be successful. Hence, I appeal to the Lord seeking help that the factors, which I do not control, become favorable to me, so that I can achieve the success that I am seeking. Thus the prayer is in the spirit of seeking, in that, I discover that I need help and I seek help from the Lord. Prayer can be for worldly things, such as wanting a certain job, a promotion, money and so on.

Prayer can also be for spiritual growth, such as the purification of my mind. You can also pray to the Lord asking for devotion, seeking faith, purity of heart or knowledge. So prayer can be for a worldly end, which is acceptable, or prayer can be for my spiritual growth, which is better. In both cases, we are deliberate at the time of prayer. I deliberately make a choice and perform a prayer.

We talked about prayer with reference to the achievement of something that is desirable to us. But, the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that you should perform actions without desires, for material ends. You can still perform prayer. You could pray, "Oh Lord, please give me the strength to perform actions without desire. Give me the trust that I can accept gracefully whatever you give me as the result. Give me the strength so that my trust in you remains steadfast even when conditions are unfavorable." Everybody, depending upon what it is that we want, can perform prayer. We always want something. A person who has some desires wants the fulfillment of these desires. Even the *karma yogi* desires to perform *karma* in the spirit of *yoga*.

There are a lot of obstacles in any path. Even our own tendencies can be obstacles. We seek the help of the Lord to remove the obstacles, whether from within or

without. So, prayer is a way of invoking the Lord's grace to remove any obstacles in the way of my reaching the end that I seek.

Question

Could you please talk about the power of prayer?

Answer

We find very often, that we are helpless either on account of conditions outside of ourselves or on account of our own impulses, which we cannot control. At those times we need help. Prayer is a way of seeking help from one who can help. Who is it that can help? Only someone who does not require help can help us. There is only one who can do that, and He is God. We could doubtless seek help from others around us but everybody else is also in need of help in some way or the other. Prayer to the Lord is a way of seeking His help, His grace and His favor.

Prayer is very powerful. When we pray, there is an acceptance that we need help, and recognition that there is a God who can and who does help. This recognition itself is significant. It is implemented in the form of prayer, which results in the form of the grace of God. Therefore prayer is a very powerful weapon or tool to overcome our difficulties, whether internal or external.

Question

If we don't need any help, then should we pray?

Answer

You place a condition, 'if' in your query. This is something that we have to question. Who can say that he does not need any help? A *sthitaprajña* or wise person can say that. Someone who has become free from all his needs can say that he does not need help. As long as you have some needs, you need help.

You can say that you don't need somebody's help. You are strong enough to fulfill all your needs. Ok, that is fine. But you should recognize that this strength is given to you too. Prayer presupposes humility on your part, a humility that arises on account of recognizing the realities of life. You realize that you are a limited being. You need a lot of favor, even to breathe! You need favor to do anything in life.

Question

Suppose my needs are met and I am happy. Should I pray and bother God? Would he not think that I am bothering him for nothing?

Answer

Then you can pray to the Lord in the form of thanking him. Prayer need not be always asking for something. Prayer can be expressing our sense of gratitude. Prayer can be in the form of expressing our pleasure, thanking God and singing his glories.

Question

What to ask and what not to ask God?

Answer

Ask God to give me this wisdom of what to ask and what not to ask.

Question

Does prayer always go along with devotion?

Answer

When I pray to the Lord, I accept in my mind that the Lord is all-powerful and merciful. He can give me what I need and is kind enough to give it to me. I cannot pray if I don't have this kind of trust. I cannot perform a prayer unless I am convinced that my prayer is going to be answered, or at least going to be heard, with a sympathetic ear. I do not want to say something to deaf ears! If God does not listen to me at all, then I do not want to pray to him. So when I perform the prayer, I know that He listens and cares. There is at least that understanding or acceptance on my part! This is devotion. This kind of *śraddha* or trust is involved in prayer.

Question

How does prayer influence destiny?

Answer

Prayer is an expression of free will. The human being has been given free will and, therefore, the capacity to perform a deliberate action, which is what we call

puruṣārtha. *Puruṣārtha* means a deliberate action that is performed, using free will. Then there is destiny, *prārabdha*. There are many forces in life, which are not in my control. My own action, however, is in my control. In every situation, there are two factors, *prārabdha* and *puruṣārtha* or destiny and free will.

In explaining this, a certain example is sometimes given. Let us say that I have a boat and it is floating in the river. Destiny is like the river that is flowing and my free will is like the boat. I have a certain freedom with reference to my own sail with which I can guide my boat whichever way I wish, even as the river is flowing. Similarly, there is a flow of destiny in life, but I do have a limited amount of freedom to navigate my boat to my destination. In life, there are many things and situations that are not under our control. How we respond to each situation is something that is within our control. This is where free will, *puruṣārtha* or self-effort, comes in.

Prayer is an expression of my free will. Although there is destiny, with the help of my prayer, I can bring about some change in my destiny. If my destiny is very strong, I may not be able to change it significantly, but if my destiny is weak, I can change it. So prayer can definitely influence destiny. In praying, we are performing a deliberate action that we call *punya*, meaning that we are worshipping the Lord and thus creating a positive influence. The positive influence created by prayer can counteract any negative influence that may be in my destiny. In that sense, I can bring about some change in the effect of destiny. How much change, however, will depend upon how powerful my destiny is and how powerful my prayers are. But any positive thing that I do will definitely counteract something negative, which may be there in my destiny.

Question

According to the *karma* theory, I will get what I deserve. If that is so, what is the role of and need for prayer? Is it redundant and contradictory?

Answer

Well, if you were willing to accept what comes to you, perhaps then, there would be no need for prayer. All creatures, other than human beings, are totally dependent on the scheme of things, seemingly accept it totally, and are satisfied with what they are

provided with. It appears that they do not need any prayer! In general, we human beings are not satisfied with what nature gives us. We have our own agenda and we have our own conclusions about what we need and what we want. We are complex beings endowed with sensitivity, creativity, imagination and other such wonderful gifts. In fact, but for these gifts, we would have still been living in the primitive conditions of the Stone Age! The need for prayer arises because we human beings have free will and consequently, our own agenda. In addition to putting in our effort, we pray that the factors beyond our control may be in our favor in order to achieve the desired results. It is a fact that every action gives rise to a corresponding result; it is not a belief. Prayer, such as going to the temple, or even making an offering to the Lord, is an action that has its own result.

Question

Since God is omniscient, He should be fulfilling my needs without my having to tell him. Why do I have to let the omniscient God know what I want?

Answer

Merely entertaining a desire is not going to fulfill the desire. An appropriate action is required to fulfill a desire. He understands your desire and expects you to do something about it. Among other required actions, one action is that of praying. But why talk only of the action of prayer? You may ask, “I want to be a doctor. He knows it. Why does He not make me a doctor? Why do I have to go to school for such a long time?” This is because, to become a doctor or to fulfill any other desires, requires personal effort as well. You are given faculties with which to work, create and achieve. We have to make an effort on our part.

Question

Isn't it a belief that a particular prayer is going to give me a particular result?

Answer

Yes. That prayer can bring about a result stands to reason. That a specific prayer will give you a specific result is a matter of belief. As a doctor, you give medication to a

patient based on some prior research and experience. But there is some faith and belief involved in how the patient's physiology is going to respond to the medication. Similarly, whenever you perform any *karma*, it is a matter of belief that it will give you a specific result. This is true of prayer too. As God is the *karmaphaladātā*, the dispenser of the results of your efforts, you are pleasing Him by doing an action! Why single out prayer?

Question

You are saying that prayer is like any other action that we do in our life.

Answer

Yes, and that there is a belief attached to any *karma* or action.

Question

There seems to be a time lag between prayer and its result. I don't know when the prayer will become effective.

Answer

I perform the prayer now, and the result may come later. This is true. Actually, we do not even know in what manner the prayer will be answered. Sometimes the question is "Swamiji, I have been praying constantly, but still nothing happens." It is possible. But prayer, being a deliberate action, has to bear a result although I may not be able to say in what manner the prayer is answered. I may not get the reward for my prayer at the time that I want it or in the manner that I wish. But since prayer is a positive action, it has to bring its own reward or result. The ultimate prayer will be, to be content with whatever the result is. For a student of Vedānta, the best prayer is: "Give me the strength to be able to accept gracefully whatever comes to me." This means, make me free from the need for prayer.

Question

Is there any difference between doing *japa* by chanting a Sanskrit *mantra*, and doing it in our own language? Is it true that you need to recite specific *mantras* for

specific purposes? Even if you don't know the meaning of the *mantra*, you are supposed to get the benefit by reciting it. How does that work?

Answer

Let us understand the purpose of doing *japa*. *Japa* means reciting the names of the Lord or a *mantra* of the Lord. So, one aspect of *japa* is the repeating of a given name in remembering the Lord. The idea is that when I remember the Lord, the remembrance is meant to invoke the devotee in me and evoke a spirit of devotion, *bhāvanā*, in me. This is the second aspect of *japa*. This is very important. If I find that instead of chanting a Sanskrit *mantra*, chanting a *mantra* in my own language invokes devotion in me, I would consider it to be better. A *mantra* is not for its own sake; it is meant to invoke devotion. It is the spirit of devotion that ultimately heals or purifies my mind.

It is true that in itself, a Sanskrit *mantra* also has an effect. This is why we are told to repeat the Vedic *mantras* even if we do not understand their meaning. Any *mantra*, recited properly, exerts a positive influence upon us. Thus, when we recite a simple, "Rama, Rama, Rama" or any other name of the Lord, it does have an influence upon us. This is because when we utter a word or even a sound, the air originates from our navel or the region of the heart, slowly travels upwards, strikes our skull, comes down through the various regions and ultimately emerges from our lips. Whenever we utter a name this process takes place, impacting even the skull. This is the reason why the names or *mantras*, which are prescribed by the scriptures or our teachers, have a positive effect that influences our personality, when we recite them.

If you do not know the meaning of the *mantra*, it is a good idea to chant the Sanskrit *mantra* with the proper intonations. But knowing the meaning is always better than not knowing the meaning. A *mantra* that creates a feeling of devotion in me would be more effective than a *mantra* that does not. But, to answer the question, reciting a *mantra* in the Sanskrit language definitely has an effect because it does influence one's personality. Sometimes we hear priests chanting Vedic *mantras* and you can feel the effect.

They say that by reciting the Vedic *mantras*, you get *brahmavarchas*. This is the spiritual glow, which you can see in some people because they have been chanting the

Vedic *mantras* for many years with devotion and commitment. The very vibrations that those *mantras* create have an impact upon our body and then our mind. Thus, a *mantra* has an effect independent of whether or not we understand the meaning of what it is that we recite, but an understanding of it will evoke a spirit of devotion in us. To that extent, whatever is chanted in that spirit of devotion is definitely more effective than chanting without devotion.

Question

Is that true of silent repetition, also?

Answer

This goes for silent repetition, also. In silent repetition also, the mind acquires a certain *bhāvanā*, a certain attitude or spirit. Silent repetition affects the mind more than anything else does, whereas, chanting aloud has more of a physical impact.

Certain *mantras* have been chanted over the millennia by millions of people. Therefore, the *mantras* themselves gather a certain power from having been chanted for so long by so many people, and with so much commitment. Certain *mantras*, such as the *Gāyatrī mantra*, have become very powerful. This is why they say that some *mantras* are more powerful than others. Also, when many people chant a *mantra* in unison, it becomes much more powerful.

There is however, no ‘best *mantra*’, as it were. Simply because a *mantra* is good, it doesn’t mean that it is apt for everybody, just as every medicine is not appropriate for everybody or every food suitable for everybody. The whole idea is that any form of prayer has to be done with an attitude of devotion and in my opinion the best *mantra* is that which invokes the devotee in you.

Question

If I am the self, how do I offer myself to myself?

Answer

When we talk of offering our self, we are not talking about offering the *saccidānanda* self. The self that is being offered is called the “ego”. When we talk of

offering ourselves, it is offering our ego, which is a bundle of *rāga-dveṣas* (likes and dislikes). Therefore, offering my self is really offering my *rāga-dveṣas*.

If I am not yet ready for the absolute reality, I take the relative reality. There is a certain order in the relative reality. We describe that order as co-operation. Therefore, when I am functioning in the relative reality, I take into account the relative reality in terms of co-operation and function accordingly. This will enable me to prepare for the absolute reality.

Lord Krishna first starts teaching absolute reality in the 2nd Chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. If Arjuna had been able to grasp it, Lord Krishna would not have taught him any further. But it definitely requires a lot of preparation. Therefore we function in relative reality, accepting the duality that is experienced. We function in such a way that this interaction with duality ultimately prepares us for knowing the non-duality.

God

Question

If God is everywhere, why should I restrict worship to icons and *mūrtis*? Why can I not worship God in tables and chairs?

Answer

It is true that we can worship Lord in any form. But the form should be such that it invokes the devotee in me, because it is the devotee that worships the God. The most important thing is that when I worship the Lord, the devotee in me should be invoked. So you can take a table or a chair and look upon it as God, if you can.

When can I call a person a *guru*? When the disciple in me is invoked! Then alone is he a *guru*. When can I look upon somebody as a father? When the son in me is invoked. Otherwise, saying “father” is paying lip service to the word. In this manner, if a chair invokes the devotee in me, then alone can I look upon that chair as God, otherwise I cannot. It is merely paying lip service to say that I look upon the chair as God.

We can also worship God in any name. But we select a name that invokes the devotee in us. For instance, when we say “Krishna”, it has a certain impact on us. The impact can be caused either by words or forms. Each name and form will have a different impact on different people, depending upon their emotional makeup, their upbringing, their culture, and their needs. While the name Rama or Meera or Radha may not do anything to a person from Australia, the name Mary may mean something to that person. Therefore, every culture or tradition worships God according to the names and forms that they have derived.

This is why we have the concept of the *iṣṭa devatā*. This is a particular form of the Lord that invokes the devotee in me, and for which I have reverence and love. This is why, just as the *mantras* have come down to us from the sages, so also, the various forms such as Rama, Krishna and other forms of the Lord have also come down to us from the sages. They have great significance, and carry a certain ‘power’, if you will.

When a given *mantra* is recited by many people and chanted over a long period of time, it gains its own power. This is the appeal and fascination of the *Gāyatrī mantra*.

Everybody wants to know if they can chant it. For example, it is asked if women can chant the *Gāyatrī mantra*. This is because, over centuries, it has been recited by millions of people and in itself has acquired a certain amount of strength, just as even a temple deity would. The devotion that is expressed by the devotees in a temple, like the *Tirupati* temple where millions of people go to worship, empowers the deity. As a result, when you go there, you can draw from the power of the deity. That is why some deities are more powerful than others.

God is everywhere, but the manifestation of God will depend upon the name and form that we choose to worship. When it comes to worship, the power of the deity and the *mantra* become important. In knowledge, these things are not important, but when it comes to worship all these things must be there, because I must experience the positive impact. This is how the special forms, names and methods of worship become relevant.

Question

Can you please explain the concept of *avatāras*?

Answer

In the overall scheme of things the creation, by design, is self-maintaining, self-sustaining, and self-correcting. The universe is created to exist. It can only continue to exist if there is harmony. When abuse of free will creates disharmony, the potential of the self-correcting mechanism throws up a force to bring the harmony back. This is how scriptures talk about *avatāras*, and we also observe that happening from time to time. It may be difficult for us to determine whether a given manifestation is an *avatāra* or not, but we can understand it in principle.

Question

How do we develop love towards *īśvara*?

Answer

Love is something that happens when you create the right atmosphere. You cannot will to love. Love happens!! What you can will to do is to create an environment so that love can manifest. Love, which is stifled inside, is waiting to manifest. Therefore

we need to create an atmosphere, quite like merging agendas. Suppose you love a person, what do you do? You try to please that person, try to do what would make him or her happy. You set aside your own agenda and identify with the agenda of that person. By doing this, you are creating an atmosphere for the love in you, to manifest. Similarly if you wish to develop love or devotion towards the Lord, you perform acts of worship, chant His name, sing His glories. In course of time, the devotee in you will be invoked.

Question

How can we bring *īśvara* into our lives?

Answer

īśvara is brought into our lives first by recognizing that there is *īśvara*, by recognizing that He is the creator, sustainer and dissolver, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. I recognize that I need the grace of *īśvara* in my life, that I always need His favor. No doubt, I have some capacity or capabilities given to me. The three powers of *icchāśakti* the power to will, *kriyāśakti* the power to act and *jñānaśakti* the power to know, are indeed given to me, and it is my privilege and my responsibility to use them judiciously. But then these powers are limited and therefore I find that I always need help. That is how *īśvara* comes in; by way of prayers, by way of worship and also by recognizing that not only do I need His grace, but that I am already enjoying His grace. I am what I am on account of this grace. I live, I can walk, I can talk, I can eat and drink, I do whatever I do is all due to His grace. All that I have, such as the capacity I have in my sense organs or the capacity I have in my intellect, is given to me. Hence, I am enjoying His grace every moment. The recognition of this fact will result in actions such as prayer or worship, and also in terms of making my life, a form of worship of the Lord. Thus, bringing *īśvara* into our life means making our lives, as best as we can, a worship of the Lord. It also means prayer for seeking His grace where more grace is needed.

Ultimately even knowledge comes by the grace of God. All qualifications also come by the grace of God. So recognize *īśvara* by way of the grace that you are already enjoying and appeal to *īśvara* for the grace that you need. When we say *īśvara*, we always mean the '*saguṇa* Brahman', bringing the *saguṇa* Brahman into our lives because

the *nirguṇa* Brahman⁵ is my own self. *Saguṇa* Brahman is the creator and sustainer, omnipresent and omniscient and He cares. And so we invoke the benevolence of the Lord in our favor. This is how we can bring *īśvara* into our lives.

Question

I feel it is purely our subjective need and projection as to how God should be. There is so much pain and evil in the world. Life is a mixture of good and bad events. We conceptualize a God who is compassionate, loving etc. When we do not find the world to be all loving and all compassionate, which is what we need and want, do we justify things and give God the benefit of the doubt? How are we to explain all this?

Answer

Well, I do not want to justify any pain or evil in the world. But, when you say “evil”, is that not a projection? When we look at an event, a painful happening, we look at it within a narrow window of time and space. We do not know all of what has gone by and all of what is yet to come. If you look upon life as a process of growth and maturity, perhaps pain is a contributing factor in its own way. So, in this regard, we do not know whether a painful event is necessarily bad.

You say that justifying something, or giving God the benefit of the doubt, is a projection. When you label things as good or bad, it is in a way, giving your own intellect the benefit of the doubt too, which is also a projection. So, both are projections. Looking at the general creation of the universe, we definitely find that there is some provision made for every living being in the universe. The human being has been given some free will, which can be used to grow, but at the same time, be abused too. It is a fact. So, whatever good and bad you find in the human society is due to the abuse of this free will or freedom. You do not find this kind of imbalance anywhere else in the universe. So, to draw a conclusion based on the human society, which is a very small part of this vast creation, and that too based on a certain limited event and a limited time frame, may not be a proper thing to do. But if you look at the universe as a whole, it gives us a reason to believe that everything is in order. All things are in order and in

⁵ *Nirguṇa Brahman* refers to the Lord free of all attributes.

balance. Harmony obtains and there is goodness. When there is goodness there is happiness and when there is happiness there is harmony. Therefore, it is reasonable to accept that there is goodness behind this whole creation.

Question

But again, if I just accept what “is”, leaving good or bad aside, then I am not projecting my own ideas as to what this “is” should be.

Answer

It is not a matter of projecting. It is a matter of observing. Yes, basically, as far as we are concerned, the human intellect is not the *pramāṇam* or the means to establish God. We look upon the scriptures as the source or *pramāṇam*. The scriptures, the Upanishads, state that God is kind and loving. At first, this is how we accept it. It is not taken as a projection of the human mind. It is taken as knowledge pending discovery. This is because what the scriptures reveal is something very logical and sensible. Therefore, we are not giving proving logic here, but are giving supporting logic. Leave aside the human society and you find a harmony in the whole universe. Every creature is provided for and the whole universe at large is in order.

Next we raise the question of the human “free will”, which is given to the human being to grow. The human being can abuse it also. But in course of time, humanity learns its lessons and this is how it progresses. Therefore, in the time frame that we are talking about, which is infinity, these few years here and there, are not of much consequence. Therefore, we say that there is essentially goodness everywhere. If you look at human beings, everyone is inherently good. Evil is there, all right; but the evil is superficial or incidental. It is not the inherent nature of human beings. Inherently, nobody is evil, nobody is bad. Give them the right environment and their goodness will become evident. Goodness can never be given up. Evil, on the other hand, can be given up. You can always educate a person. The person will grow in maturity. Gradually the evil tendencies will go and the goodness will prevail. One is always comfortable with being good and never comfortable with being evil. This also shows that goodness and not evil, is our nature. Nobody wants evil from somebody else. If I have a choice, I will never become evil. Evil action arises out of helplessness and not out of choice. It is never

a deliberate action. Evil is not a product of wisdom or knowledge. It is only a product of ignorance.

Question

But there is starvation in the world. How is a starving man to think of God as an all-loving, benevolent God?

Answer

Starvation is due to human society's abuse of the free will. The universe has enough for mankind. If the starving man ascribes God to be the inflictor of pain, in his case, starvation, of course he cannot look upon God as benevolent. It may depend on how the starving man would use his thinking power. Suppose, the starving man is aware that the cause of his starvation is not God, but human society's greed, perhaps then, the course of his thinking would be different. As I said, love is the basic truth and the basic nature of everybody. Hatred is not the basic truth; it is an incidental thing. It is a learnt behavior. Is it not true that a child does not hate? All I am saying is for you to look at the basic nature of anybody, even of a person whom we call an evil man. So one can abuse one's free will and inflict pain on another. Starvation is due to mankind's abuse of free will and greed. Wherever we look, we see the universe moving in the direction of peace. It is not moving in direction of war. There is awareness on the part of human beings, that we are guarding our nature. We do experience humanity slowly growing in wisdom and enlightenment.

God is not a mere concept based on human needs. God, the very principle of truth, is the reality. He is not an entity. God, meaning love and goodness, is the very basis of life. It is the very essence and content of life. It is the underlying and all-pervading principle of our being, the world and creation. What it means is that goodness, love and truth always prevail. Even if you find that for a moment, goodness is subdued or subjugated, it will ultimately prevail. It may take its own time and place but prevail it will! So, God is not a matter of belief. It is not a convenient projection and a desirable concept for human solace. Each one of us loves that reality because each one of us is comfortable with being good. Everybody is comfortable with being 'loving' and loves to

'be loved'. Goodness is always benevolent. It is never neutral and is never indifferent. It is the essence and the truth. This is God. It is a different matter that some events may or may not be comprehensible to our limited human intellect. In the long run, good triumphs and prevails; even though there are events, such as wars, when it appears that evil alone is prevailing. As a rule, history witnesses that evil does not last that long. It gets subdued sooner or later. Therefore, God is not a matter of belief or a need-based conceptualized projection. There is absolutely no doubt that we need God. We need His grace, favor and blessings. But, it is not that we have a need and therefore we have conceptualized the idea of a benevolent, loving God. God *is*, regardless of our doubt or our need or our acceptance of him.

Acknowledgements

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Swamiji answers these questions, however diverse or repetitive, with great patience and deliberation, and provides clarification in his characteristic style of undemanding simplicity. His responses illustrate how discerning he is, of the workings of the modern mind, as he guides us with compassion through the process of reconciling the ancient wisdom of our scriptures, with the realities of modern life. This booklet is a compilation of all the weekly emails in an effort to synthesize them so that all seekers can benefit from Swamiji's pragmatic answers.

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