

Satsang with Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Prayers ¹

Question

Swamiji, can you talk about how prayer works and how the prayer of someone can affect the circumstances of another person?

Answer

Just as you cannot eat for another person, it may look as though prayer can not be for another person. But prayer is not like eating. It is not like hunger that has to be satisfied. Prayer is an action, a *karma*, like taking a shower. Not only can you shower your own body, but you can also shower your child's body. Prayer, then, is not like eating; it is more like bathing.

Prayer is a process of thinking, a particular type of thinking. In a prayer, there is someone who prays and an altar to which the person offers his or her prayer. There is also a mode of prayer involved, which differs from person to person.

A prayer can be said in simple words or it can be an elaborate ritual, highly traditional and scripturally sanctioned. It can be purely oral or purely mental. Ramana Maharishi, in *Upadesa Saram*, describes prayer as a three-fold action or *karma*: physical (*kayikam*), oral (*vacikam*), and mental (*manasam*). Ritual is a physical form of prayer. Singing in praise of the Lord (*bhajans*) is an oral form of prayer and chanting a mantra mentally is a mental form of prayer.

Along with a subject who prays and an altar, prayer always has a purpose, as does any action. You pray always because you want something. Without an object of desire, there is no prayer. You may want something specific or you may want

mental clarity (*antahkarana suddhi*). Or you may pray, “Let the Lord be pleased with my prayer,” because you want to be in the Lord’s good books. You want him to glance at you now and then. Even though the Lord has all-scanning eyes, you may feel that somehow you are always overlooked. He seems to look upon others all the time, but when it comes to you, something happens-He blinks or He closes His eyes altogether. You may not be asking for a full look, just a cursory glance.

Either I pray for the sake of achieving something for myself or for the sake of some one else. Even when I pray for the sake of another person, the prayer is still my prayer. When I see someone who is unhappy, who is suffering, I also suffer-because I am human. I am affected by the condition of that other person and I can’t stand it. I want the person to be happy, which really means that I want to be happy. Therefore, a prayer for others is also for the sake of my own happiness.

Everything is centered on me alone. I am not such a dull, insensitive person that I can be happy when someone around me is unhappy. Therefore, every time I pray for someone else, I am praying for my own happiness. Even when I am culturally mature enough to pray, “Let the whole world be happy,” it is because I cannot happily sit in a world which is unhappy. I am speaking here, of course, on the empirical level.

I like to see others happy so that I can be happy. All prayer, then, is only for my sake. When I pray for my wife or child, when I say, “Let my family be protected,” there is an extended me, a me that I edit all the time. One need not be an American, for instance, to be affected by an American being taken hostage. Any human being will be affected, once he or she knows the possible consequences of such an action. Prayer for others is effective, but the prayer is for yourself alone. To see how such a prayer is effective, how it produces results, we have to analyze the nature of prayer itself. Two things happen when you pray. That you can pray

itself is significant. It is not easy to sit and pray. But when you do, a kind of melting happens. Otherwise, you could not sit and pray. The ego would not let you.

Some people pray because they believe that God will become angry otherwise. They are simple people who have no understanding of themselves or the Lord, but they pray. There are others who cannot pray or who find it very difficult to pray. That you can pray produces a result that is immediate (*drstaphalam*). Therefore, you have already accomplished something.

When a prayer is for mental clarity, “Let my mind be clean,” the prayer itself is an auto-suggestion. And by asking for something, you are accepting another power, a power higher than yourself, a power that is absolute. You are also accepting the limitation of your own knowledge. This is simple pragmatism. Generally, you tend to forget the limitations of your own power and knowledge and thus the prayer itself reminds you of them.

If a person has to be objective, he or she must know his or her limitations. Not being able to accept defeat, for example, means that we do not know our limit - and that is the problem. Even when they are known, we do not want to accept our limitations. In fact, there are no defeats, because given our limitations, we find that we have been successful.

In every area of life, we find some success. Every time we cross the road, we are successful – if we make it! When we drive a car and reach our destination, we are successful. These successes require a lot of grace. That you can pray is a great thing because it implies an acceptance on your part, not only of your limitations, but also the acceptance of a limitless source, which can bring about some changes. This itself is a very beautiful, and is what is meant by immediate result (*drstaphalam*) of prayer. You may call it psychological or whatever, but the result is visible.

There is also an unseen result (*adrstaphalam*) of prayer, which is where faith comes in. The doer, the agent of the action of prayer, says “This is what I want.” The action and the expressed bring about a result which is purely subtle in nature, unseen. This unseen result will manifest in time and is what we call grace. It is produced by the action and accrues to the doer of the action, the one who prays.

If you accept a law of *karma*, you can come to appreciate that most problems are brought about by past *karma*, in this life and in past lives. A stomach problem or cancer, for instance, may be the result of past *karma*; or you say the problem is hereditary or genetic, which is just using a different model to explain it. Either way, it is the same thing.

Going once further, you might ask why you were born with these particular genes. Why should you be in this situation? Why do you not have a different set of parents? If you ask these questions of a biologist, he or she will give up and say “Go and ask a Swami, this is not my field!” We say that there is a natural selection of parents that takes place in accordance with certain laws. If there is such a thing as a soul surviving death, there must be laws that govern the huge networks of possible combinations. Many aspects have to be arranged – time, place, parentage, the position of the parents, meaning the conditions which under which they are married – all of which affect, in some way, the child who is born. In this way, each person has a particular type of *karma*.

Karma is a huge network and is purely mechanical. From the standpoint of *Karma*, your stomachache may be a result of either past *karma* or present *karma*. It may be due to any number of reasons-overeating, alcohol, or the condition of your mind-all of which can be viewed in terms of either the immediate or the remote past. If you worry about it, you just add more to your past. Therefore, worrying is useless. The past is already happened and cannot be changed. I accept

it and then I pray. Certain damage may have been done to my stomach because of past events. If so, is there anything I can do about it now? Yes, I can pray, "Let this prayer produce results that will neutralize the past *karma*."

The law of *karma* is subtle. We do not know what past *karma* is. We only know that when something occurs, it may be due to past *karma*. Perhaps you win a lottery-and call it luck-or you lose something and call it bad luck. All of this may be past *karma*. In spite of all your efforts and plans, situations that we call bad luck keep happening. Not only extraordinary events are accounted for by *karma*. *Karma* may be unfolding everyday. What are you doing right now may be due to past *karma*. You just cannot see it.

When extraordinary events take place, and we cannot immediately account for that causes, we fall back on some past *karma* to explain them. If the result is favorable, you call it luck. Even a heavily indoctrinated atheist explains such events in terms of luck-whenver he or she catches a bus, for instance. The bus starts off as soon as the person gets on leaving other people behind. Looking back, he or she says, "How wonderful! What luck!" Similarly, when the person misses the bus, he or she calls it bad luck.

People do miss buses in life-and there are a lot of buses. No matter how carefully we plan, at the last minute something can happen which we think of as bad luck. These events are purely subtle, indicators of an existence of something that we are not able to put our finger on. We do not know where it exists, what it is, or how it unfolds. We only know that it keeps happening and there is some pattern to it. How can I neutralize the past, both the immediate and the remote past? There are certain things that I can do. What I have to do, I do, using my effort. Along with effort I require enthusiasm, courage, knowledge, resources, readiness and capacity to face obstacles. And, even with all of this, I can still miss the bus, which is why I

require prayer. If these six qualities are present, the Lord can help-if I pray. All six must be there. I cannot simply sit and pray.

The Lord extends His help to us when we pray. That is why, prayer is prescribed three times daily-at sunrise, at noon, and again at sunset. The purpose of the prayer is to please the Lord and to eliminate or to neutralize one's daily wrong doings.

Even though you may have committed no wrongdoings that day, there is always a dangling past that is unfolding each day. Every human being is a mixture of good deeds (*punya*) and wrongdoings (*papa*). There are no exceptions. *Punya* means, that conducive situation will unfold and *papa* means that non-conducive or painful situation will unfold.

Sometimes, you will find either *punya* or *papa* coming in waves for a period of time-a few years, a few months or a few weeks, one after the other. There may be nothing but *papa* for a period of time and then, afterwards, you find that everything goes well, generally speaking. But within any given day, you will find there is always a combination of the two, *punya* and *papa*. The morning may be wonderful. But, because the sun was shining, you went out to play tennis and sprained your ankle. For four days you cannot do anything. That is how it is.

Life is nothing but a mixture of *punya* and *papa* because the body is born of these. Therefore, we find both the pleasant and the unpleasant happening all the time. We all know this. WE know only too well that we do not dictate all life's terms. We even have a personal philosophy to cope up with it, such as, "That's the way life is! Good and bad are bound to happen." We need a personal philosophy to handle the pleasant and the unpleasant situations that are always there. Every thing may be going well, but the car will not start. Or the car starts, but stops in the

middle of the free-way, in the dead of night, six miles from gas station. It would have been better if it had not started in the first place.

Such situations may be due to omissions and commissions in the immediate past or may be due to old *papas* which you have to neutralize, or tone down. That is what is meant by the unseen result of prayer. One unseen result is counteracted by another unseen result.

Suppose while you are sleeping, your pockets stuffed with cash and credit cards, you dream that you are starving, that you have had nothing to eat for three days, and you have no money. What use is the money in your pocket? It cannot even buy you a coke in the dream. To buy a dream coke you need dream money.

Similarly, to meet the *punya* and *papa* that is unfolding daily, minute by minute, you have to keep gathering neutralizing anti-bodies. Prayer does this. Prayer is not for just mental clarity. By producing unseen results, it can also take care of the previous wrong doings.

Therefore, prayer is efficacious. You may say, “I have been praying, but nothing happens.” To which I would say, “If you did not pray, a lot other things may have happened.” How do we know they would not have? There was an old woman who recited her beads (*mantra-japa*) all day long. Even though she did this religiously, still, she created problems for her daughter-in-law. She would stop just long enough to tell her, “The milk is boiling,” or “Do this, do that.” She took all the life out of the poor girl who was the new arrival in the household. After several years of living in the same house the daughter-in-law told me that even though her mother-in-law had done so much *japa*, she did not notice any change in her. “For the past ten years, I have only seen her beads change. They have become soft, while her mind and behavior are as rough as they were before. Only the beads have lost their roughness.” My response was, “Suppose she had not

being *japa*, just imagine what she might have been doing instead. It would have been impossible to live in the same house with her. How do you know, it would not have been much worse?”

The old woman’s prayer in the form of *japa* did produce results- perhaps not much, because there was such a long way to go. But, definitely, it produced some result. There are laws that take care of all of this. All we have to do is pray.

Prayer is a part of an intelligent person’s efforts, an intelligent person being one who takes a lot of factors into account before doing something. We take our limitations into account and offer a prayer, as well. Then the laws take care of the results.

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