

Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
More on Prayer

Question

Why do most of our prayers describe the attributes of God?

Answer

One purpose of prayer is to praise the Lord and seek His blessings or grace. We are very needy people, and wish to get our needs fulfilled by the grace of the Lord. Hence, we need a lot of grace in our life.

We chant hymns to deities such as Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Lord Śiva, or Goddess Lakṣmī. These hymns are *stutis* or poems of praise. For example, we chant the 108 names of Goddess Lakṣmī in the Lakṣmī *aṣṭottaranāmāvali* describing her beautiful eyes, her beautiful ornaments, and her lotus feet. There is a statement in Hindi, '*khushamad khuda ko bhi pyari lagthi hai*', even God loves flattery. But it is not really flattery because Lakṣmī *devī* will not get flattered. Regardless of what words we use to flatter her, it can never sufficiently depict her beauty.

How does this description praise become a prayer? Prayer is not as much flattery as it is a description of the glories of the Lord and, through that description, we express our devotion and reverence. A *stuti* or composition is an attempt to describe the greatness of the Lord even though His infinite glories can never be adequately described. We praise God to express our adoration and reverence and, in praising God, we become the recipient of His grace. Prayer is one way to secure the grace of the Lord.

Typically, we offer flowers with the chanting of these names during *archana*, one of the steps of the *pūjā*. These hymns usually describe the many attributes and names of the Lord at the beginning, and the benefits of chanting the hymn are enumerated towards the end. Many benefits of interest to us are typically cited in these hymns.

You can perform prayers seeking the grace of God for material or spiritual benefits. Unfortunately, God will give us whatever we ask for. Lord Krishna says, [Bhagavad Gita, 4-11], '*ye yathā māṁ prapadyante tāmstathaiva bhajāmyaham*', I bless the people in the way in which they approach me. I give them whatever they want from me. We should be very clear in what it is that we ask of the Lord. We may even have to repent for having asked for certain things.

Therefore, you had better leave it up to him, “O Lord, please give me what you think is right.” Or, ask for knowledge, purity of heart and devotion.

Performing prayer is an act, and you seek a favor through this act. Even if you don’t seek a favor, you still get some benefit. We can perform prayers either in seeking specific material benefits, or simply desiring inner purification. It is better that we perform prayer without seeking any material benefits or making a deal with God, as in ‘I am doing this and you must do that in return’, etc. It is such a prayer that will help in spiritual growth and inner purification.

In the Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti *mūla* mantra we chant,

*Om namo bhagavate dakṣiṇāmūrtaye
mahyam medhām prajñām prayacca svāhā,*

Om. Salutations to *bhagavān* Dakṣiṇāmūrti. Please bless me with *medhā*, memory and the capacity to think properly, and *prajñā*, clarity and wisdom.

O Lord, give me the emotional maturity, give me purity of heart, and give me the vision. Thus, a Vedāntin also performs a prayer. He does not seek any material benefit, knowing fully well that such benefits are but transitory. He is seeking the spiritual benefit of inner purification in terms of devotion, *śraddhā*, and knowledge.

As Tulsidasji says, ‘Hey Rama, there is no other desire at all in my heart other than to have devotion for you.’ You are *bhagavān*, the *athirantha-ātman*, he says. You know what there is in my mind and you know that what I am telling you is true. O Rama, the greatest in the lineage of Raghu, Tulsidasji prays, please grant me the *bhakti*, which is whole and complete. Free my heart from the evil forces of lust, anger, and greed so that there is only place for you in it. Such is the nature of total devotion to the Lord. Thus, you can perform a prayer simply seeking devotion and knowledge. When you ask for the inner wealth, you can never go wrong¹.

¹ Transcribed by Jaya Kannan. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey, and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.