

Satsanga with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

PRĀYAŚCITTA-KARMA, PENANCE

प्रायश्चित्तानि - पापक्षयसाधनानि चान्द्रायणादीनि ॥

prāyaścittāni - pāpakṣayasādhanāni cāndrāyaṇādīni.

Rites, such as the Cāndrāyaṇa, which are instrumental in the expiation of *pāpa*, are *prāyaścitta* or penances [Vedāntasāra, 11].

Prāyaścitta is translated as penance or expiatory rites. Penance means austerities or deliberate self-denial that enables us to apply ourselves to prayers and worship. Therefore, it is advised that there should be penance in our lives.

A penance called Cāndrāyaṇa is mentioned, which involves a certain vow. The word '*cāndrāyaṇa*' comes from *candra* or moon and the penance is connected to the cycle of lunar waxing and waning. On the day of the new moon, the moon is not visible at all, and then, in the 'white' half of the month, it increases in size every day until the day of the full moon after which it proceeds to wane during the 'black' half of the month; this is the monthly lunar cycle. During the observation of the Cāndrāyaṇa, a complete fast is observed on the day of the new moon. On the next day, which is the first day of the lunar month, the person eats one mouthful of food; on the second day of the lunar month, the person eats two mouthfuls of food, and three on the third day, and so on, with the quantity of food consumed increasing each day until the fifteenth day on which fifteen mouthfuls are eaten. Beginning with the sixteenth day, the consumption of food is decreased by one mouthful each day, until the day of the new moon, which is again a day of complete fasting.

Penance helps us exhaust pāpa

The Vedic culture is full of different kind of penances because it is thought that penance, austerities, or a program of deliberate self-denial should be a part of our lives. What is the purpose of *prāyaścitta-karma*? It is *pāpakṣaya*, the exhaustion or expiation of *pāpa* or sin. Here sin is understood to mean a failure to do what should be done. For example, we are often unable to conform to all our daily obligatory duties; we may have failed to do what was needed to be done in a given situation and thus incurred *pāpa*. There are also occasions when we commit *pratiśedaḥ*, prohibited actions. In short, there are always errors of commission and omission in our doing what we should not do or failing to do what we have to do. When we make such errors, we violate the rules and accumulate sin or negativity, which will cause harm to us. This happens to everyone. As a general rule, *prāyaścitta* is the penance that is performed to expiate these errors¹.

¹ Based on Vedāntasāra lectures. Transcribed and edited by Malini, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.