

PRAYER (*)

Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – September 1963; Vol. 50; page 330

With all the pride of civilization and with all the scientific advancement man still, sometimes, finds himself in situations in which neither of these could help him. Why is it so? What then is the purpose of a civilization that cannot stand us in good stead when we are in dire need of help? What is wanting in our civilization that makes it impotent in the face of calamities? Again it has been observed that an inordinate tension exists, specially, in the minds of people who do not lack luxuries nor are in dearth of variety in entertainments. If material benefits and wealth alone could have been the source of illimitable happiness, then why do we find misery in the lap of luxury? These are questions that are engaging the minds of the intelligentsia today. One modern thinker aptly asks, 'Has civilization been able to end poverty, starvation and war?' The very fact that these questions are making headway and demand immediate attention is in itself an indication that all is not well with our civilization; something is lacking, wanting. The causes are to be analysed and treated with utmost deliberation and speed.

Our analysis would be that humanity has been fed, for over three centuries now, with doctrines which teach elimination of the spiritual aspect in man. Man has been asked to subsist on the dry bones of logic, with the consequence that a maladjusted and malformed stratum has emerged in society. There is a mythical story in the Indian epics, the conclusion of which may bear a striking resemblance to this stratum. Let us state it briefly: There was a king named Trishanku. By his misbehaviour he earned the wrath of his spiritual preceptor. However, when he desired to go to heaven in his physical frame he approached the latter to help him. The preceptor would not agree to perform any such sacrilegious sacrifice. He plainly told him that it was impossible for a human being to reach heaven in a mortal body. Dissatisfied with his answer the king went to the preceptor's sons and craved their help. Coming to know of his audacity to approach them when their respected father had refused help, they cursed him that he may be dull in mind, lose lustre and be of uncouth appearance. Sorely disappointed but not still cowed down, he approached a teacher, who had lived in antagonism to his family guru, and poured out to him his tale of woe. That preceptor did indeed help him to go to heaven; but the gods looking at his ugly mien banished him and thrust him out. He fell head downwards from there to the earth. As he fell he cried out to his benefactor to save him. The preceptor, who was no

doubt a man of great powers, asked him to stay where he was. The story tells us that he stayed, but in a place neither here nor there and certainly not in an enviable state. It is said that he still continues to hang with his head down in between the heaven and the earth. That is the precarious condition in which the above mentioned strata of society finds itself today. But fortunately the disease has not yet touched the common man. He has still not lost his moorings. He has belief in a higher Being, to whom he can unload his worries. He has faith that the Lord will answer his prayers if he but truly calls on Him.

There are three things in man which clamour for satisfaction, the body, the mind and the spirit. But the basis of all is the spirit. It is the neglect of the spirit that makes any civilization lame and uncertain about its future. It may for a time appear to thrive but then when it fails, it does so miserably, leaving only broken ramparts and moss-tiled moats to display its onetime vain glory in all its sadness. Yet no one questions one's right to serve one's body or mind. None can deny the value of a healthy body, nor of a sharp intellect; both are necessary. But what is hinted at is that they should not be made exclusive pursuits. The other side (the spirit) also is to be cultivated.

Several paths to the cultivation of the spirit

And this cultivation of the spirit can be done in several ways, viz. by control of the *Prana* (vital force), by doing work unattached to results, by knowledge of the Self, and by devotion or love of God. Our subject brings us to the last path in particular but it also includes others in a general way. We all know the path of devotion or love of God is meant for persons whose nature is predominantly emotional in character. But let us not be carried away by the thought that we can be exclusively emotional or exclusively rationalistic. It is not possible. A human being is a conglomeration of many faculties. Even the murderous dacoit who is supposed to be cruelty personified, has a soft side to his nature. Perhaps he murders and loots for the maintenance of a loving family at home. So is the case with every other faculty. All the faculties are present in man, only the degree of manifestation of each varies in different persons. According to the degree of manifestation of a particular faculty, one's nature is said to be emotional, rationalistic or active. A man without feelings would be inert, like wood or stone. And a mere emotional man without strength to work, nor intellect to discriminate can only be a nervous wreck. And certainly religion does not propose to turn men into wood or stone nor into nincompoops. To an emotional nature, however, worship singing of devotional songs, and prayer appeal most. He can make rapid progress in spiritual life by having recourse to these.

What is prayer

Prayer is a supplication to a higher power, invoking blessings or forgiveness for transgressions, trespasses and errors committed. Used in the religious sense however, it has been branded as superstition. But why? Do not men when they are in tribulations or when they want to obtain the grace of a great person, wait on him? Do they not supplicate in the most abject fashion? Prayer, entreaty, supplication are therefore not unknown to man. But the idea seems to be that it is all right if they do it for material gains but it is bad when people do it for spiritual upliftment! Is this not a perverted way of viewing at things? If such an attitude is kept up, we can never arrive at the true perspective of things. First, therefore, be bold enough to apply the same standard of judgment to yourself as you would like to apply it to others. Ponder over it, study it and you will find that in what terms the man of the world prays for worldly things, in the very same terms or even more honourable, the man of the spirit prays for enlightenment. Why then should it be called superstition?

Universal prayers

It now remains to be discerned whether prayers universal in character exist or can be evolved ? What type of prayers can be universal? Hinduism consists of so many sects but there are some fundamentals which are common to all of them. Every sect believes in the authority of the Vedas. The Vedas, which include the Vedanta or the Upanishads, have given us some of the most wonderful prayers which can be chanted by anyone, living anywhere without the least fear of losing their affinity to their own religion. Here for instance, we have the peace incantation which a student offers everyday before he begins his studies: 'Om. Lead me from the unreal unto the real, from darkness unto light, from death unto immortality.' The student prays for enlightenment, to walk in the path of god, to endear himself to Him. God being the only reality he wants Him. God being the only light of all lights he wants to walk in His light. There being no mortality in God he wants to live in Him. A doubt may arise: Where do we live now? Do not the scriptures say we live, move and have our being in Him? True. But are we conscious of it? Not being conscious of it, is darkness. Not being conscious of it, again, is unreality. Do not the scriptures say, 'All this is Brahman'? So this prayer is only to make us conscious of it, at all times and under all circumstances. When man is conscious in this way, consistently and constantly, he is said to have realized God. Then he sees God inside and outside of himself. Thus did our ancient culture lay the basis of our education. From a very early period children were taught to think rightly, as can be seen from this prayer. The peace that the student invokes again, is not for himself alone, it is for the whole society.

Did not then the student ask anything for himself? Yes, he did ask. He even asks for health to enjoy life — only in the righteous way, not at the cost of others, nor in a beastly fashion. He prays: 'O gods, may we hear with our ears, only what is auspicious; may we see what is only auspicious with our eyes O ye worshipful ones; may we sing praises to ye, and by our strong body and limbs may we enjoy the life allotted to us by the gods. May there be peace.' Again: 'Let my speech be established in my mind and mind be established in speech. O self-manifested One do Thou manifest Thyself unto me. May my mind and speech be efficient to reveal the highest knowledge. May I not forget what I have heard. By what I have learnt I shall support myself by day and by night. I will speak the right. I will speak the truth. May That Divinity protect me. May it protect the preceptor.' Here are two of the many Vedic prayers which are of the most general character. There is nothing debasing in them nor covetousness of any sort. The desire to enjoy also is circumscribed and conditioned. He wants protection only if and when he walks in the righteous path. The aim, however, is realization of God. The saints and sages of a later period too have sung paeans of a similar nature, one of which, because of its all-embracing character, we can hardly resist the temptation to quote: 'May all be blissful, may all be free from diseases, may all see what is auspicious, may not any one be miserable.' What a grand conception! Does it not make us—at least for the short time that we will be repeating it or dwelling on it—feel one with the universe, feel the affinity to every creature that is in the creation? Is it wrong to wish for the welfare of the whole universe? If not, how can such prayers be called superstitions?

There are, of course, other prayers by worshippers of different aspects of God in praise of the particular forms of the Deity. In all of them the same inner current of love of God and a desire to open out, to expand beyond one's own self can be seen.

Is prayer necessary for all types of aspirants?

We shall now revert to our proposition that prayer is necessary and forms an important element of spiritual life. From the universal character of the prayers, above quoted, it is clear that there can be no gainsaying the fact that they are beneficial to all types of aspirants. If a man is of active temperament his desiring to do good will receive added strength from wishing well to every being. A question may arise in our minds as to the necessity of prayer for a man devoted to the path of knowledge. But we forget that it is he who studies the scriptures most and these scriptures enjoin the chanting of the peace incantations before they are studied. Again, it is by repeating the texts which speak of the evanescence of the world and by reminding oneself of them constantly that one discriminates between the real and the unreal. There are a myriad of them — the hymns that speak of the glory of the Self. We shall

give here only one instance of it. It is a morning prayer which runs as follows: 'I meditate at dawn within my heart on the Self-effulgent Atman, the Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute, the goal of the supreme ascetics, transcendental and eternal, who is beyond the states of waking, dream and deep sleep. That Brahman I am, not a combination of material elements.'

Then comes the prayer to the preceptor, who is the manifest form of God on earth. He it is who ferries us across the ocean of *samsara* and therefore we are in duty bound to express our gratitude and adoration to him.

Prayers exist in every language and in every part of the world, maybe in poetical form, maybe in plain prose. Even the illiterate have them, handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation in the form of folk songs. Sri Ramakrishna set great store by prayer as a spiritual discipline. He emphasized its necessity and efficacy time and again. He has taught us how to pray, by himself setting an example. As to the form of address he was not particular. He said, 'God like a benevolent father would understand in whatever way you call on Him, and in whichever way you address Him.' Only thing he insisted on was sincerity in our prayer. When someone had suggested that people should be taught how to look upon God, Sri Ramakrishna's characteristic remark had been, 'Who can truly know God? He is One, He is many; again, He is beyond both. One glass of water is enough to slake my thirst, why should I want to know how many gallons of water is in the reservoir? So call upon God in any way you like and even if you do not know what He is, do not despair, pray to Him, "O Lord I know not whether you are with form or formless, please condescend to reveal yourself to me."' This form of prayer would appeal to everyone; even unbelievers saw nothing objectionable in this. They prayed. Their prayers were answered. Thus were they converted and won over to God by Sri Ramakrishna. 'O Lord, I have attributed forms to Thee, who art formless, in my meditation. By my praise O Thou Teacher of the Universe I have denied Thy indescribability. By going on pilgrimage and such other things, I have repudiated Thy omnipresence. These three trespasses of mine, O Lord, pray forgive me,' sings a devotee bringing to the fore the incomprehensibility of God. Therefore instead of trying to know what God is, let us try to gain admittance to His presence.

What should we pray for

People pray no doubt, but what do they pray for? Usually most of the people want something from God and that is why they pray. Progeny, wealth and the like are some of their positive wants. Getting rid of diseases, overcoming tribulations are some of the negative wants that they desire God to fulfil. But is that what we should pray for? Definitely not. Sri Ramakrishna's prayer in this respect is an eye-opener. He prays

to the Divine Mother: 'Mother here is Thy virtue, here is Thy vice, take them both and give me pure love for Thee.' He did not want anything except devotion for the Mother's feet. Swami Vivekananda prayed for discrimination, renunciation, knowledge and love of God, even when the billows of domestic calamities were closing over his head. That is the proper type of prayer — to want nothing except God, desire nothing except His presence.

Efficacy of Prayer

What is the science behind this prayer, that is, how does it actually act? First of all it is to be remembered that God is not someone who is far, far away, that He is very close to us.¹ Much of the difficulty we experience now to comprehend the efficacy of prayer will be got over if we recall this. He is the Soul of our souls. He dwells in our hearts.² Who else can then be more aware of our thoughts, our desires, our intentions and our resolutions than He? Will He then, when He hears our call, not respond? As a loving father He will. So those who trust in God carry their load lightly. A tranquillity spreads over their souls. They neither seek nor avoid company. Human sympathy, they do not desire. For it is so volatile that at the first whiff of the winds of misfortune it all evaporates. But we can depend upon the Lord's succour. He never deserts. He remains constant. We may even make our demands on Him as does a son for his patrimony says Sri Ramakrishna. This however, can be done only if we get to know Him intimately. So through prayer and other disciplines we have to make our way to His citadel, and then everything will be all right.

The Lord finds Himself bound by the ties of love when the devotee prays to Him. Nay, He finds that He owes to the devotee a deep debt and finds Himself entangled in a bond that is indissoluble. Speaking about His love for the Pandavas Sri Krishna says: 'The obligations on My part have ever grown and they can never be repaid, the gratitude can never be taken away from My heart.' Draupadi prayed in anguish to Him for help knowing full well that Krishna was far away at that time. But her prayer was answered. The love of the Pandavas to the Lord even in their direst of calamities has very few parallels. That is why Krishna later says to Duryodhana: 'The Pandavas whom you hate O king are my life breath.'

Earnestness in Prayer

Generally people want to gain much with little effort, so when they find their prayers—which are naturally half-hearted and endowed with little faith—are not answered, they give up and turn agnostics. They say: 'Oh this prayer and all such things are mere superstition! I have done it all without any result.' But actually had they been earnest in their prayer they would have had a different story to tell. No considerations of wealth or personal gain would have crept into their minds then. An instance of

the type of love that asks nothing except for God Himself is that of the gopis, the cowherdesses of Vrindavana —theirs was not trading in love as Swami Vivekananda beautifully puts it. It was a dedication. And when such dedication comes the prayer that comes to one's lips is a spontaneous one, it wells up as it were from the heart. It is untainted by selfish consideration. The lives of the saints and seers are instances to show what prayer—which is natural to man —can do. Let not false pride stand in our way of prayer, nor let us pray for the sake of ostentatiousness. May we in true faith take to prayer.

NOTE: Some notes and references present in the original are absents in this paper because they are in the Sanskrit script.

¹ Isa Up. 5.

² Gita, 18.61.