



# The Purpose of Prayer

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*Free will finds its total expression in prayer.  
That I can pray is itself a blessing  
and how I pray makes prayer meaningful to me.*

**P**rayer 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 Maharshi, in *Upadesha Saram*, describes prayer as three different forms of action (*karma*): physical (*kayika*), oral (*vacika*), and mental (*manasa*). Ritual is a physical form of prayer. Singing in praise of the Lord is an oral form of prayer. Chanting a *mantra* silently is a mental form of prayer.

Prayer always has a purpose, as does any action. You pray 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 book," you want Him to glance at you now and then. 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.

It may look as though you cannot pray for another person, just as you cannot eat for another person. Even though prayer is an action, it is not like eating; it is more like bathing. Not only can you bathe your own body, you can also bathe a child's body. I can pray either for the sake of achieving something for myself or for the sake of someone else. Yet, 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 I want to be happy. Therefore, a prayer for others is also for the sake of my own happiness.



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 gets affected all the time. In the same way, one need not be an American 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.

## The Two Results of Prayer

Prayer is effective, whether it is a prayer for one's own sake or another's sake. To see how such a prayer is effective and how it produces results, we have to analyze the nature of prayer itself.

One result of your prayer is immediate (*drstaphala*). By praying for something, such as mental clarity, you are recognizing another power, a power higher than yourself. You are also accepting the limitation of your own power and knowledge. This is simple pragmatism. To be objective, a person must know his or her limitations. Even when we know our limitations, often we do not want to accept them.

That you can pray is a great thing, because it implies an acceptance on your part, not only of your limitations but also of a limitless source. This acceptance is a very beautiful thing and is what is meant by the immediate result of prayer. You may call it psychological, or whatever, but the result is visible. It is not easy to sit and pray. But when you do, a kind of melting happens; otherwise, the ego would not let you sit and pray.

There is also an unseen result (*adrstaphala*) 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 desire 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.

## The Law of Karma

If you accept the law of *karma*, you can come to appreciate that most problems are brought about by the results of actions done in this life and in past lives. A stomach problem or cancer, for instance, can be understood as the result of past *karma*. Or you may 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 one step 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 a biologist these questions, he or she will give up and say, “Go 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 the soul surviving death, there must be laws that govern the huge network of possible combinations which determine the soul’s next birth. Many aspects have to be arranged: time and place of birth, parentage, social position and culture, economic situation, and so on—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 of laws that operate purely mechanically. From the standpoint of *karma*, your stomach may be a result of either past *karma* done, long ago or more recently. 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 remote past.

If you worry about it, you just add more to your misery. Therefore, worrying is useless. The past has 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 our past *karma*. We only know that when something occurs, it may be due to past *karma*. When extraordinary events take place and we cannot immediately account for the causes, we fall back on some past *karma* to explain them. Perhaps you win a lottery and call it good luck, or you lose something and call it bad luck. All of this may be past *karma* at work. In spite of all your efforts and plans, situations that we call “bad luck” keep happening. *Karma* may be unfolding every day. What you are doing right now may be due to past *karma*. You just cannot see it.

Even a heavily indoctrinated atheist may explain events in terms of luck. Whenever he catches a bus, for instance, and is the last person before the bus starts off, he says, “How wonderful! What luck!” Similarly, when he misses the bus, he calls it “bad luck.”

People do miss busses in life—and there are a lot of busses. No matter how carefully we plan, at the last minute something can happen that we think of as bad luck. When such events happen, they indicate the existence of something subtle 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 can only know that it keeps happening and there is some pattern to it. That “something” is explained by the law of *karma*.





## Karma and Prayer

How can I neutralize the effects from 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, recourses, and the readiness and capacity to face obstacles. And even with all of these, I still can “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.

There is a story about two boys who were traveling to a neighboring village. On the way they happened to see a Ganesha temple. One Hindu custom is that you do not pass a temple without offering prayers. One of the boys went into the temple, but the other walked on, saying, “I won’t go to the temple because I don’t believe in all that.”

While leaving the temple, after having the *darshan* of the Lord, the first boy stepped on a scorpion on the temple doorstep and got stung. He held his toe and shouted and screamed for his friend.

As the second boy was walking, he saw something lying on the ground. He picked it up and found it to be a gold coin. Hearing his friend yelling, he ran back to find out what happened. The boy said, “I have been stung by a scorpion. Please help me.” The second boy said, “This is *prasad*, gift, from your Lord. You went into the temple and got a scorpion sting. Do you know what I got for not going in the temple? He showed him the gold coin. “For going in the temple you got a scorpion sting; I didn’t go to the temple and look what I got. Why do you go to temples? It is all useless.” The boy was already stung by the scorpion, but his friend’s words stung him much more. He felt what had happened to him was unfair and became very sad.

At that time a *sadhu* happened to come their way. The boy called him and requested his help, saying that he had a scorpion sting that was burning. The *sadhu* gave him some medicine to relieve the pain. The boy then asked him, “Maharaj, I went to the temple according to our custom, I have real devotion. As I was coming back, I got this scorpion sting. My friend just walked by the temple and found a gold coin on the road. What justice is this?”

The *sadhu* was an astrologer. He asked for the dates and times of birth of both the boys. He calculated everything and told the boys all that had happened in their lives. He described past events, their parents, and at what age the parents died, and how many brothers and sisters each had. As what he said was true, both of the boys had to believe him.



Then the *sadhu* said to the boy who had a scorpion sting, “You should have had a very poisonous bite of a cobra, or perhaps an accident of some kind, but you got away with a scorpion sting.” To the other boy he said, “You should have gotten a huge treasure, but instead you have to settle for one gold coin.”

The purpose of prayer is to eliminate or neutralize one’s daily wrongdoings, and the Lord extends His help to us when we pray. That is why prayer is prescribed throughout the day: at sunrise, at noon, and again at sunset. Even though you may have committed no wrongdoings that day, there is always past *karma* unfolding each day. Every person’s *karma* is a mixture of the results of good deeds (*punya*) and wrongdoings (*papa*). *Punya* means that conducive or pleasant situations will unfold, and *papa* means that painful or unpleasant situations will unfold.

To deal with the *papa* that is unfolding daily, minute by minute, you have to keep gathering *punya* that will neutralize it. Prayer does this. Prayer is not just for gaining mental clarity. By producing unseen results, it can also take care of previous wrongdoings.

Life is nothing but a mixture of *punya* and *papa*. Therefore, we find both the pleasant and the unpleasant happening all the time. We know only too well that we do not dictate all life’s terms, and we may even develop our own personal philosophies to help us deal with this fact.

Sometimes you may 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 a given day, you will find there is always a combination of the two. The morning may have been wonderful and, because the sun was shining, you went out to play tennis—but you sprained your ankle on the court and for five days you could not do anything.

Sometimes everything may be going well, but the car will not start. Or the car starts, but stops in the middle of the freeway in the dead of night, six miles from a 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 *papa*, which you want to neutralize or tone down. One unseen result can be counteracted by another unseen result. This is the purpose of the unseen result of prayer.

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



dream. To buy a Coke, you need dream money. So also, to neutralize the unseen results gathered from previous wrong actions, you need the unseen result of prayer.

## The Efficacy of Prayer

Prayer is efficacious. You might say, "I have been praying, but nothing happens." But I would say, "If you did not pray, a lot of other things may have happened."

There was an old woman who recited her beads (*mantra japa*) all day long. Even though she did this faithfully, still she created problems for her daughter-in-law. She would stop just long enough to order the girl to do one thing or another. The poor girl, who was a new arrival in the household, had a difficult life.

After several years of living in the same house, the daughter-in-law said 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 seen only 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."

But suppose the mother-in-law had not been doing *japa*. Just imagine how she might have behaved. It could have been much worse, or perhaps even impossible to live in the same house with her. The old woman's prayer, in the form of *japa*, did produce results, however small.

Prayer definitely produces some result according to the law of *karma*. All we have to do is pray. Thus prayer is a part of an intelligent person's efforts, an intelligent person being one who takes all the factors into account before doing something. When we take our limitations into account and offer a prayer, the law takes care of the results.