

The Rules of Prayer

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Vedanta and Prayer

We appreciate the value of Vedanta because of our good *karma*. Vedanta is the greatest opportunity that life can offer. Without it life is merely a mechanical process. With it we can grow to our full spiritual potential. It is not important how fast we grow. Some plants grow several inches a day, others a centimeter or two. The rate at which we grow is built into our program by *Isvara* so there is no need to worry about how quickly we are becoming free, nor is there any reason for us to compare our growth rate to that of others. We need not develop a complex and feel guilty or develop a sense of inferiority because we are not getting “there” fast enough. Everything happens in its own sweet time according to the will of *Isvara*.

We all benefit from God’s grace. In fact the life that we value so much is God’s grace. It is all God’s grace but this does absolve us of the responsibility to work on ourselves. Nor should we arrogantly believe that we can accomplish everything on our own. Pride goes before a fall. We should appreciate our role and the role of *Isvara* by taking responsibility and seeking *Isvara*’s grace through prayer.

The Rules of Prayer

Know what to ask for. It is important to understand that while *Isvara*, the Creator, is omnipotent, It is not going to suspend the fundamental rules of existence to satisfy a frivolous desire. Omnipotence is not the capacity to do anything. It is the capacity to do everything that is possible in a given context. In the Pauranic scriptures we repeatedly come across stories of bad people who did serious spiritual practice and received a boon from the Lord. Usually, they ask to be free of death.

In one such story the devotee, an ascetic who did long and rigorous penance, says “O Lord, Best of Givers, please do not let me die from any of the living entities created by you. I do not want to die within any residence or outside any residence, during the daytime or at night, nor on the ground or in the sky. I should not die by any weapon, human being or animal. Grant me that I not die at the hands of any entity, living or non-living. Grant me, further, that I not be killed by any demigod or demon or by any great snake from the lower planets. Since no one can kill you, you have no rival. Therefore I too wish to have no rival. Give me sole lordship over all the living entities and presiding deities, and give me all the glories obtained by that position. Furthermore, give me all the mystic powers attained by long austerities and the practice of *yoga*, for these cannot be lost at any time.”

This devotee is a clever, ambitious, power-hungry person, a real demon. He carefully thinks out every possible circumstance in which death could happen and wants to enjoy the same status as God. He thinks he has covered all contingencies but he does not know that death is non-negotiable.

Narasima Avatar

One day at twilight (neither day nor night) as he is standing on the threshold (neither inside nor outside) of his house he becomes furious and with his mace he strikes a stone pillar that is supporting the doorway. He does not know that the pillar is the Lord (a pillar is not a “being” created by God). Out of the pillar the Lord appears in the form of a strange creature named Narasima, who is neither a human, god or animal. It grabs the ascetic and puts him in its lap (neither on earth or in space) and with its nails (neither animate or inanimate) he disembowels the demon.

Everything living dies, one way or the other. *Pray for what is possible.*

Useless Prayers

1. *As long as we live, we have to be physically and mentally active, so asking to be relieved of the responsibility to act is useless.* Neglect is a sin. If you have children, you must look after them. Escapism is a sin. If you drop out of society to become a wandering monk, you will never have a moment's rest. But you can pray for freedom from subjective problems, like boredom, the scourge of our age. Here is a good prayer: “O Lord, let me act every moment with a cheerful mind. Give me the inspiration to do what I need to do.”

2. *The future is never under our control, so any prayer that involves an attempt to control the future will fail miserably.* You cannot make your children achieve what you want them to achieve, only God can. But you can enthusiastically contribute to their growth so that they will find success in accordance with their natures. Even Krishna, another *avatar*, could not prevent the *Mahabharata* war, but he made a great contribution. When *avatars* cannot control the future, what can mere mortals do? “O Lord, let me contribute my best. Let me enjoy what I do. Let me be cheerful and enthusiastic.”

3. *Wanting people to be different is an impossible prayer.* Even God cannot change you. Every person follows his or her own nature without fail, what use is control? Praying for individuals and the world to conform to your idea is useless and frustrating. Encouraging others to follow their God-given natures and grow into the light is a useful prayer. “O Lord, let me live in such a way that my life is an inspiration to others” is a reasonable prayer. “O Lord, make me aware of my judgmental thoughts and grant me the ability to accommodate others. Let me speak with kindness” is another.

4. *None of us are satisfied with ourselves but wanting ourselves to be different is also an impossible prayer.* We are what we are. There is no other option in the present. It is useless to judge ourselves and refuse to accommodate to what we are at any given moment. We can only grow according to God's idea. So the prayer should be, “Grant me the dispassion to accept myself as I am and the discrimination to do what is right in every moment, irrespective of how I feel.”

4. *Life is a set-up.* We can never get total satisfaction and security through any set-up. Praying for an ideal situation is a pipe dream. Even ideal set-ups become upsets. “O Lord, let me discover security and satisfaction in myself whatever my circumstances.”

It is natural to complain. Even *Isvara's* complaints are justified. It created the world, created all beings and gave us a set of rules called *dharma* that we are expected to follow. And what do we do? We violate every rule in the book! But complaining gets us nothing but bad feelings. Praying for the right things in the right spirit is uplifting.

You feel good about yourself when you pray. It is the best vehicle for growth.

An Excellent Fulfillable Prayer

“O Lord,

“Let me be cheerfully and enthusiastically active. Let me enjoy whatever I do.

“Let me contribute to the future; let me not try to control the future.

“Let me influence others positively through my life and language; let me not try to change others.

“Let me have the wisdom to discover satisfaction and security within myself, whatever be the set-up.”

If we pray in this way, God will certainly cooperate.