

Meaning of the Ashrama's Daily Prayer

(translation into English of the series that is being published in the Bhakti Mala magazine in Telugu, written by Sri Datta Vijayananda Teertha Swamiji)

In everything that our Sadgurudeva Sri Swamiji undertakes as a part of His Universal plan for uplifting devotees, one can clearly see something novel.

A magnificent structure was built in the Avadhoota Datta Peetham in Mysore where people without any distinction of caste, religion, race, or gender can come together under one roof to offer prayers. This was named the "Universal Prayer Hall".

This gesture reveals Sri Swamiji's belief in the equality of all. The prayer that is rendered daily in unison by thousands of voices in the Universal Prayer Hall is called "Universal Prayer". This prayer transcends selfishness. This is offered for the welfare of the world. Through Bhakti Mala which is the life breath of devotees, let us make an attempt to know about the verses composed by Sri Swamiji in the 1970s about Universal Prayer.

The daily activities in the ashram begin with prayer. Prayer goes beyond the differentiation of caste, religion, race, gender, and color. The term prayer is justified only when it transcends these differences. Thirty years ago Sri Swamiji composed nine verses that would be beneficial to people of all nations. Since then, not only Datta devotees, but all

devotees are chanting these daily. The oneness of God is established in these verses.

When oneness is understood, one becomes broadminded. Broad mindedness strengthens society. With that in view, let us try to understand the meaning of these nine verses.

In Indian tradition one comes across a multitude of deities and divine names. Once oneness is perceived all these names and forms merge into the one Supreme Reality, Paramatman.

One who is afraid of water cannot suddenly plunge into the ocean and swim. The same way not every one can perceive unity in a world that appears to have such diversity.

Based on the level of one's spiritual pursuit, their inclinations is different. Each one finds a certain form attractive at a certain time. To accommodate to such affinities our seers have arranged for different forms of deities, and their different names.

Do these names and forms really exist? This is an unnecessary question. What is important is to discover what benefit is derived by us by seeing those forms, and uttering those names.

Although countless names and forms have been created by the seers, only some names and forms have become prominent by virtue of being worshipped by many.

These deities are five in number. They are known as the Panchayatana Devatas. By adding Subrahmanya Swami to this group, Adi Sankara has established the system of six religious sects.

1. I seek refuge in that Supreme God who is worshipped by the people of the world, especially Indians, as Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Skanda, Mother Goddess Sri Mata, or Soorya the Sun.

This verse states that all the deities are but the different forms of the one Supreme God, Paramatman. If this is well understood and practiced, all differences and problems will get resolved.

2. In the second verse, the five elements are discussed. Following the sentiment expressed in the Vedas, this verse says that we seek refuge in that one Supreme God, by whose command the Sun shines in the sky, Fire burns everything, and the Wind blows.

Many hold the view that the five elements are independent. But the Vedas say otherwise. The Vedas proclaim that it is only by the power of the Supreme Consciousness of Paramatman that they even exist.

Speaking of the Sun, the Veda tells us to consider the three separate aspects of the Sun (heat, light, and movement). When considered that way the Sun ceases to even exist in

the sky. When each one questions himself as to who brought these three aspects together, who is making the Sun shine, the inevitable answer is, Paramatman.

It is important to always maintain the understanding in the mind that the attribute-less Paramatman Himself has assumed the different attributes. He Himself is appearing as the Sun and the Moon.

The first verse describes the worship of deities with attributes. The second verse discusses a form that is in between - being with and without attributes.

The orb of the Sun is neither completely with attributes nor completely without attributes. Fire and Air are also like that. Fire exists in wood in an invisible attribute-less state. Once lit, fire burns with attributes. Fire has no form. But in some instances, one can see certain forms in Fire.

Air is similar. Everyone knows that Air is there. But Air is not visible. This is the state that is in between.

In Kenopanishad there is a nice story that explains how by the command of Paramatman alone the Sun, the Moon, Fire, and Air become active.

Once suddenly a huge indefinable Form (Yaksha) appears. Indra sends Vayu (Air) to find out what it is. The Form places a blade of grass and challenges Air to move it if it has the power to do so.

Air failed in its attempt to move it and returned. Indra sent Agni (Fire). Fire also failed. Indra now went himself and prayed to the Form to reveal its identity.

The Form – Yaksha appeared in the form of the Mother Goddess and explained the principle of Paramatman.

By this story it is known that Fire and Air are not independent.

3. I seek refuge in that Paramatma who is of the form of Water, Fire, Earth, Air, and Sky.

In the previous verse it was stated that the five elements are not independent. This verse introduces us to the first step in the worship of the Five Elements which are the manifestation of Paramatman.

Worshiping the Five Elements means being able to perceive the Paramatman in the entire world. This worship indirectly protects Nature as well. Just as we safeguard a thing that is very dear to our heart, as a true worshiper, we would protect the five elements as forms of the Paramatman.

Without the five elements, we have no existence. Our world has no existence. We all know how we would struggle for breath if there is no air. Yet we do not care to safeguard it.

It is only a few environmentalists who attempt to protect Nature. But the rest of the population is not concerned. Since the world consists more of devout people than atheists, our seers thought that through devotees if Nature could be protected, then the world would be safe and comfortable. They described the five elements as different forms of the Paramatman, with the wellbeing of the planet in view. Since our body consists mostly of Water, this verse begins by mentioning Water first.

The Veda described the Sky first. That is the Universal view. Here we are talking about the bodily view. In the body after water, the second most important element is Fire. If the digestive fire does not digest the food, regardless of how nutritious the food intake is, it would be useless.

Next, it is the Earth element. This principle is so important that Lord Vishnu gave Earth a form and seated Earth on His lap.

The Earth is the support for all activity. It is like the platform. That is why Ganapati is referred to as the deity of Mooladhara, the basic support. Without the earth there is no Karma. To be able to perform actions, to reap the benefit of actions, earth is essential. That is why it is said that Earth is a form of Paramatman.

Now Air. It is not necessary to describe air. Because it is air that sustains the Life Energy in us, Air is described as a form of Paramatman.

Next is Sky. Gagana is Sky or Space. Space gives all the other elements an opportunity to reveal their existence.

Space is all-pervading. It is also referred to as “Viyat” and “Vishnu Padam”. It is space that clearly shows that God is all pervading. In the Dakshinamurthy stotram, Dakshinamurthy who is the presiding deity of spiritual knowledge, extols God as being all pervading being the Lord, the Guru, and the Soul.

If the Space principle is well understood, then it means that you have understood Paramatman! That is why this verse concludes with the term “gagana svaroopam” mentioning the Space element.

May you all understand and worship Paramatman who takes the form of the five elements.

4. I seek refuge in the one Paramatman who is worshipped in the middle of the forest, on the mountain peaks, on the river bank, in the middle of a lake, or inside a home.

This verse was composed with many stories in mind. This speaks about the Lord who is worshipped in many places.

Now let us learn who worshipped Him where.

Once there was a king names Dhruvasandhi who ruled the city of Ayodhya. He had two wives. When the king died,

the sons of both the wives fought for the throne. In the battle those on the side of Sudarshana lost. Sudarshana had to leave the kingdom and retire to the forest. While roaming in the forest along with his mother, he was accosted by Sage Bharadwaja who initiated him into the worship of Mother Goddess. By the power of the mantra that he was initiated into, Sudarshana became powerful and regained his kingdom. This is an important story in the Devi Bhagavatam. I have summarized it.

History tells us that Anjana Devi performed penance on the present Tirumala hills desiring a child. Pleased with her penance the Wind god daily supplied her with a fruit for nourishment.

By the power of the fruit, Lord Anjaneya was born to her. Because of Anjana Devi's penance, the hill in the Tirumala range acquired the name Anjanadri. When there is true devotion, God appears even among hills.

We remember Sage Agastya when we think of a river bank. While performing penance on the banks of the river Kaveri, he built many temples for Lord Siva. He also has made it known that Lord Siva is pleased when He is offered oblations with Kaveri waters during worship.

Middle of the pond ought to remind us of the Raft Festival. This is a festival that ought to be performed by every one at all times.

Some North Indians claim that King Pareekshit listened to the discourse on Bhagavatam seated in a mansion built on a single pillar in the middle of water. Akroora praised Lord Krishna while in the water.

The Marathi devotee Sakkubai was tied up inside her home by her husband who wanted to prevent her from going to Lord Panduranga. She imagined her home to be Pandaripuram and carried on her worship. Panduranga gave her darshan in her own home. Not stopping with that, he took the form of Sakkubai and got Himself tied up with ropes, and sent Sakkubai to Pandaripuram.

A devotee named Pundareeka considered his service to his parents as being equivalent to service to Paramatman. One day Lord Panduranga Himself came to observe his devotion to his parents.

“I cannot come out until I have finished serving my parents. You please wait at the door”, Pundareeka said, and tossed a brick.

Lord Panduranga was impressed with his devotion to his parents, and stood permanently on that brick. Pundareeka’s home became a temple.

Like this many noble souls worshipped God in many places, in many forms and were blessed. Please seek refuge in that One Paramatman.

5. I seek refuge in that one God who alone is the Maker of the world, the one who withdraws it, and protects it, who is Truth, and who is of the form of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva.

Sage Atri performed penance wanting progeny, and wished that Paramatman who is the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer should be born as his child. The three Lords appeared before him at the same time.

Sage Atri asked, “Among the three of you, whom did I invoke?”

The three Lords said, “The Paramatman you contemplated upon, is of our three forms. Hence we will be born to you as your child.”

The Moon, Datta, and Durvasa were the three sons born to Atri. The Moon had the aspect of Brahma, Datta had the aspect of Vishnu, and Durvasa had the aspect of Siva. From this incident we can understand that the three Lords are really one.

In this prayer the word, “puranaha” has been used. The same meaning for the word “satyam” in the Vedic statement “Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahma,” may be applied here to the word “puranaha”.

What is most ancient, and yet is ever new at all times, is called “puranaha”. God is also Purana. For eons people have been trying to understand Him.

Even in the coming eons they will continue to do so. That is why God is called Purana Purusha. There is absolutely no difference between the Trimurtis – the three gods.

Kalidasa has composed a beautiful sloka, a Sanskrit verse. This is what it means: The One divided itself into three. It is natural for noble souls to trade places and be superior or inferior to each other at different times.

The puranas describe Siva to be superior to Vishnu at one time, or at another time that Vishnu and Brahma are superior to Siva, or at another time that Brahma is greater than Siva and Vishnu.

These circumstances should be properly understood and it should be recognized that in truth there is absolutely no difference between the three.

6. I seek refuge in that one God whom the muslims call Allah, the jains call Jina, the buddhists call Buddha, and the English speaking call God.

Although religious conflicts have always existed, lately they have become more rampant. As a result this prayer is very essential in modern day. Those who think that because people and religions are different, that God is different, will never be able to realize Paramatman.

To see God merely in the temple, and to hate God's children in the outside world is very wrong.

This world will flourish with peace and joy if the earth is considered the Mother, the Sky the Father, and all the beings of the Earth as siblings, and loved as such. People of all religions proclaim that God is one, yet no one is willing to accept the existence of the Gods of other religions.

This reflects their narrow mindedness. It is important to broaden the perspective. Then God's omnipresence will become evident.

To the one without any desire, God is everywhere. He is everything.

Sanatkumara was performing penance once. Siva and Parvati arrived there. They said, "We are very happy with you. Please ask for any boon."

To that he said, "Since I have no desires at all, I am able to see you everywhere. Hence I have no need to even see your manifested forms. Please go away from here."

It is Sri Swamiji's sankalpa or determination that everyone should become as spiritually wise as Sanatkumara. That is why He composed this prayer.

Sadgurudeva is not saying that gods are not necessary. He is telling us not restrict God to the premises of a temple.

Jaya Guru Datta