

PRAYER IN HINDU AND BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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1. Introduction

The term *Prayer* is used with a wide variety of meanings. The prototype of all prayers is the free, spontaneous petitionary prayer of the natural man.¹ So the most common understanding of prayer is that of a request addressed to a personal deity. Though it appears to be simple, prayer, even as a request has several implications. A request indirectly acknowledges dependence and the awareness that the person requested is able to and be persuaded to grant the favour.²

Prayer is also an expression of religious experience.³ Insight, life-changing illumination, gift of love that transforms from within, and disclosures of reality to certain persons are also designated by the term prayer.⁴ Inter-religious prayer becomes more complex in the context of religious traditions like Buddhism and Jainism, which do not believe in a personal God but accepts prayer. So we need a more common and broader understanding of prayer which is open-ended in an inter-religious context. It seems to me that a common open-ended definition is possible: prayer is an expression of needs, the deepest sentiments, inner-most longings,

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¹Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. & ed. Samuel Mc Comb, London: Oxford University Press, 1937, 1.

²Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry*, London: SCM Press, 1984, 29.

³Heiler, *Prayer*, xvii.

⁴Denis Lardner Carmody and John July Carmody, *Prayer in World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990, 2-3.

aspirations, search for reality and experience of the human person.⁵ With this understanding, it is possible to examine the dynamics of prayer in various religious traditions no matter whether they believe in God or not.

2. Prayer in Hindu Religious Tradition

There are several terms used to express prayer from Vedic times. A short survey of these terms shall be undertaken to unveil the specific nature of prayer in Hinduism.

a. *Brahman*

The original word for prayer used in the *Rgveda* was Brahman. This term seems to have been derived from the root *bṛh* meaning to grow or to burst forth; "brahman as prayer is what manifests itself in audible speech."⁶ It came to mean vedic hymns addressed to the deities and the inherent power of hymns. Finally, it came to mean the absolute, the transcendent Reality which pervades the whole universe, the ground of being.⁷ This change of meaning made it necessary to look for other terms.

b. *Mantra*

The term *mantra* is derived from the root *man* meaning to think. It means "instrument of thought, speech, sacred text, a prayer or song of praise, a sacred formula addressed to any deity, a mystic verse or mystical formula. It means also incantation, charm."⁸ It refers also to a specific secret word, phrase or sacred text communicated to a disciple by the Guru which is to be constantly repeated to gain realization.⁹ There is another word for prayer which also implies repetition.

⁵Such a definition is necessary since Hinduism accepts God while Buddhism does not. Theistic religious traditions can easily add to the definition something relevant for them like "about a personal Supreme God."

⁶M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, 54.

⁷For the development of the term Brahman, see Antony Mookenthottam, *Towards a Theology in the Indian Context*, Bangalore: ATC, 1980, 4-6.

⁸Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. "Mantra."

⁹For a detailed study of *mantra*, see *Understanding Mantras*, ed., Harvey P. Alper, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

c. *Japa*

The word *japa* is derived from the root *jap*, meaning to utter in a low voice, to whisper, to mutter, to pray to anyone. *Japa* means muttering prayers, whispering.¹⁰ It refers also to the constant repetition of the name of a deity. There is yet another word not so commonly used.

d. *Prārthana*

This term is derived from *prārth* meaning to wish or long for, to ask a person. *Prārthana* expresses a wish, desire, entreaty or petition.

The etymological sense of the word *brahman*, burst forth, seems to indicate praises of the Gods and desires and longings for riches and prosperity bursting forth from the human heart. This expresses well the content and dispositions of a vast number of ṛgvedic hymns. When the word *brahman* assumed an entirely different meaning in the course of time, terms like *mantra* meaning songs of praise, aspirations with mystic connotations, *japa* indicating recital and *prārthana* expressing petitions began to be used for prayer.

We have already defined prayer as the expression of human needs, longings and so forth. Now we shall follow prayer in Hindu religious tradition from the very ordinary yearnings to the most sublime.

e. **Prayer as an expression of human needs**

The Vedic people prayed for riches, wealth, and prosperity:

Agni, beheld by us in nearest neighbourhood, accordant with the Gods, brings us, with gracious love, great riches with thy gracious love (RV 1.127.11).¹¹

Human needs are of various kinds: material, physical, psychological and spiritual. The following prayer expresses physical and psychological needs:

Thou art energy, give me energy;
thou are manliness, give me manliness;

¹⁰Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.

¹¹Translations from *The Hymns of the Rgveda*, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith, ed. J. L. Shastri, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, 88. There are numerous hymns which express human needs. Here the awareness of "gracious love" is worth noting. Prayer is not mere fulfilment of needs. But relationship is implied.

thou art strength, give me strength;
 thou art vigour, give me vigour;
 thou art wrath, give me wrath;
 thou art conquering power, give me conquering power.¹²

In the *R̥gveda*, it is rarely that requests alone are made. Often they are accompanied by praise and friendship.

f. Prayer as praise

Praise bursts forth from the admiration of gods, of their benevolence and goodness:

O Agni, King and Lord of wealth and treasures, in thee is my delight and sacrifices...

Agni, Eternal Father, offering bearer, fair to behold, far-reaching, far-refulgent... (RV 5.4.1-2).¹³

Praise and admiration in prayer can be born of love and vice-versa. The words used for love are revelatory.

g. Prayer as friendship

The terms *pria* – dear, beloved, *sakha* – companion, and *sakhya* – friendship are¹⁴ used in the *R̥gveda* to express the intimate relationship and communication between gods and the vedic people. There is familiarity and deep respect:

Dear is the pious, the devout; to Indra; dear is the zealous, dear the Soma-bringer – *priya sukt̥, priya indre manyuh, priya supravih priya asya sami* (RV 4.25.5)¹⁵

The gods are friends, companions – *Sakha*:

¹²The text of the prayer is from *Yajurveda* verses 19.9. Translation from *Hymns from the Vedas*, original text and trans. Abinash Chandra Bose, London: Asia Publishing House, 1966, 107.

¹³Griffith, *The Hymns*, 239; see also RV 4.26.1ff. The vast majority of the hymns of the *R̥gveda* contain praise, admiration.

¹⁴For an analysis of the terms, see Antony Mookenthottam, *An Introduction to Indian Spirituality*, IV: "The Highest Mystery," in *Indian Journal of Spirituality*, 10,4 (December 1997), 409-418.

¹⁵Griffith, *The Hymns*, 218. For the Sanskrit text see, *R̥gvedam Bhaṣabhaṣyam*, Sanskrit text and trans. into Malayalam, O. M. C. Narayanan Namboodiripad, Vol. 1-8, Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1995.

Do thou, O Friend, turn hither him who is our friend... (RV 4.1.3)

Be thou, O Agni, nearest us with succour; our closest friend... (RV 4.1.5).¹⁶

Any rupture in this relationship was a sin. It called for reconciliation.

h. Prayer for forgiveness

Panikkar writes on sin and forgiveness: Varuṇa scrutinizes Men's deeds, good and bad alike. His piercing eye sees everything, and he, the all-powerful ruler of the universe who combines justice and mercy, knows how to punish the recalcitrant and forgive the penitent:

If your true friend has sinned against you, O Varuṇa,
he yet remains your friend, the one you love.
Not as sinners, O living One,
may we come before you! Grant protection to him
who hymns you, as to a sage!¹⁷

It is not only from Varuṇa but also from other gods like Agni, Soma, Vedic people sought forgiveness.¹⁸

From these ways of relating themselves to the gods, the sages, tuned to different forms of prayer and experience. At times they felt inspired by what they saw in the universe. Sometimes, they received deeper insight – *dhi*, into reality. More and more, they became aware of the mystery which surrounded them and in which they lived. This made them seek enlightenment, insight – *dhi*, into reality.

This is at the origin of the most famous *mantra* of the *Ṛgveda*, *Gāyatrī*. The Sanskrit text runs as follows:

Tat savitur vareṇyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi
Dhīyo yo nāḥ pracodayāt
(RV 3.62.10)

We meditate upon the glorious splendour
of the vivifier divine

¹⁶Griffith, *The Hymns*, 199.

¹⁷Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjari*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979, 485-486.

¹⁸Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 485-489.

May he himself illumine our minds!¹⁹

The text as it is recited today begins with

*Om, bhur bhuvah svah
tat savitur...*(as above).

Om is the monosyllabic symbol of the Absolute, the Supreme, the Divine. *Bhur bhuvah svah* referring to earth, heaven and ether is taken from the *Yajurveda*.²⁰

The *Gāyatrī*, also called *Sāvitrī*, is the most known of all the prayers of the Samhitās:

It is addressed to the divine life-giver as supreme God, symbolized in Savitṛ, the Sun. for this reason this prayer is also called *Śāvitrī*. It is recited daily at sunrise and at sunset, usually at the moment of the ritual bath. This *mantra* derives its name from the meter in which it is written, the *Gāyatrī* being a Vedic poetic meter of twenty-four syllables, of which the author, according to tradition, was the sage Viśvamitra.²¹

In this hymn, *Savitṛ* does not refer to any concrete, material aspect of the sun. *Savitṛ* is used symbolically and the hymn is addressed to the divine splendour of the Supreme Divinity. Hence, any believer may pray the hymn. Some use it as a *mantra*.²²

i. Prayer as *mantra*

Common people consider *mantra* as a charm with hidden powers to do good or especially harm. This is not correct. Panikkar explains the true meaning of the term *mantra*: "*Mantras* are not magical formulas, nor are they merely logical sequences; they connect, in a very special way, the objective and subjective aspects of reality.

The *mantra* is a prayer that is very personal. Often it is given by a guru. It is constantly repeated to deepen awareness. It brings about a union of the mind with the word. Panikkar affirms that living words have meaning and "a power that transcends the purely mental plane." The

¹⁹Text and translation, Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 38.

²⁰See Ref. No. 3 in A. C. Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas*, 67.

²¹Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 38-39.

²²Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 39.

repetition is meant to grasp the meaning, the energy and vibrations of the word. The essentials for an authentic *mantra* are "faith, understanding, and physical utterance as well as physical continuity"²³ Such an understanding of the *mantra* enables us to penetrate the meaning of *Gāyatrī*.

j. The symbolic meaning of *Gāyatrī*

We shall take this prayer phrase-by-phrase to have a better understanding of it.

i) "*We meditate on the glorious splendour*":

This part of the prayer refers to the brilliance of the uncreated light unceasingly emanating from the divinity beyond all descriptions. We can only contemplate it.

ii) "*Of the vivifier divine*":

Just as the light of the sun vivifies and energizes the whole creation so too the uncreated divine light vivifies, inspires, illumines, strengthens and penetrates the whole creation with its brilliance.

iii) "*May he himself illumine our minds*":

May the glorious splendour and brilliance of the uncreated divine light may be communicated to us. May it illumine our minds and hearts, chasing away darkness, ignorance and sin. May we be transformed into transparent mediums of this light.²⁴

It seems to me that another famous Upaniṣadic prayer draws inspiration from *Gāyatrī*:

asato mā sat gamaya

tamaso mā jyotir gamaya

mṛtyor mā amṛtam gamaya

From the unreal lead me to the real!

From darkness lead me to the light!

From death lead me to immortality! (BU 1.3.28)²⁵

²³Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 39: we may recall here that similar principles are involved in Jesus Prayer, too.

²⁴See also Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 43.

²⁵Sanskrit text from *The Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. & trans. S. Radhakrishnan, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968. 162. Translation from *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. & ed. R. C. Zaehner, London: Dent, 1972, 34.

The *Gāyatrī* and the prayer quoted above – *asato mā* – indicate another form of prayer, namely, meditation. The *Nāsadiya sūkta* affirms that the sages searching within their hearts can discover what even the gods may not know (RV 10.129.4). This searching within the heart is certainly meditation which leads to realisation, contemplation.

k. Meditation

The word meditation is derived from *dhyai*, *dhyāyati* meaning to think of, imagine, contemplate, meditate. It's noun form *dhyāna* means meditation, thought, reflection especially profound and abstract religious meditation.²⁶ Another term which express meditation is *upāsate* and *upāsana*. The Word is derived from *upa* 'toward' and *ās* 'to sit'. *Upās*, *Upāsate* means to sit by the side of, to approach respectfully, honour, worship. *Ūpa* shows direction, and to sit toward is static rather than active. The purpose of *upāsate* is to realize that "Truly I am this whole universe...Truly the Self is this whole universe" (CU 7.25.1-2). *Upāsate* seems to mean worshipful or respectful contemplation to realize in one-self that toward which one is sitting, that on which attention is concentrated.

Upāsate is a process of progressive realization. Sanatkumāra repeatedly uses the verb *upāsate* from CU 7.1.4 to 7.14.1 till he leads Nārada to the meditation on life, *prāṇa*, the realization of *brahman* as *prāṇa* or conscious self. From the conscious self, he passes on to *satyam*, truth. Once Sanatkumāra begins his instruction on *satyam*, there is no mention of *upāsate* but *satyam tva eva vijñāsitavyam iti; satyam bhagavah vijjñāsa iti* (CU 7.16.1), meaning "then [you] should really want to understand the truth... Sir, I do want to understand the truth." The verb *upāsate* used so far is left out showing that a change has already taken place. *Vijjñāsa*, understanding, takes the place of *upāsate*.

Finally, Nārada is led to the Infinite. The mode understanding ceases, rather is sublimated:

*nānyat paśyati, nānyac śṛṇoti,
nānyad vijñānati sa bhūmā –*

²⁶Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v. "Dhyana."

"Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, knows nothing else, that is the Infinite" (CU 7.24.1).²⁷

The *Maitri Upaniṣad* gives a method of meditation which it calls yoga. In it, yoga technique and valuable elements of traditional meditation are integrated.

I. The *maitri* method

The *Maitri Upaniṣad* follows a practical method of meditation (MaiU 6.18). The principal components are:

- i. Breath Control (*prāṇāyāmah*).
- ii. Withdrawal of the senses (*pratyāhāra*): This withdrawal of the senses from external objects is as in a dream (MaiU 6.25).
- iii. Meditation (*dhyāna*), concentration: The mind is withdrawn from the external. The one who meditates stands mentally still forming no conceptions (MaiU 6.19).
- iv. Concentration (*dhāraṇa*) pure, simple and deeper concentration of the mind. Even the function of the mind is completely stopped (MaiU 6.20).
- v. Analytic discrimination (*tarka*): Discerning the changeless, eternal from the changing, the transient, the contingent.
- vi. Ecstasy (*samādhi*): *Samādhi* is experienced and expressed in many ways as the experience of oneness with *brahman*, of its omnipresence and even of identity.²⁸

We are already in mysticism with *samādhi*²⁹ which is beyond our scope of analysis, though it comes under prayer in a very large sense. Now we shall pass on to prayer in Buddhism.

²⁷See Antony Mookenthottam, "Meditation in The Hindu Scriptures," in *Indian Journal of Spirituality* 5,2 (June 1992), 185-186.

²⁸Mookenthottam, "Meditation in The Hindu Scriptures," 192.

²⁹For more details on various forms of prayer and meditation, see Francis Vineeth, "Theology of *Adiśabda* and *Om*" in *Indian Christian Spirituality*, ed. D. S. Amalorpavadass, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1982, 125-131; T. M. Manickam, *Theological Schools of the Acharyas and the Spirituality of Schools of Išvaranubhava /Atmanubhava*, in *Indian Christian Spirituality*, 142-150; T. M. Manickam, *Yoga: A Sādhana for Hamony of Life*, in *Indian Christian Spirituality*, 178-182.

3. Prayer in Buddhism

The meaning of the word 'Prayer' in Buddhism is not the same as in theistic religions as mentioned earlier. Buddhism does not believe in God. It spread all over Asia, took various forms adapted to the culture and local traditions of the people. It has also made changes in doctrine and practice. So, it is rather difficult to describe what is prayer in Buddhism. Basing on the Inter-religious definition of prayer given earlier, we may try to understand Buddhist prayer.

a. Prayer as self-expression

The expression of human aspirations, struggles and fulfilment is a form of Buddhist prayer:

'Upward from sole of foot, O mother dear,
Downward from crown of hair this body see.
Is't not impure, the evil-smelling thing?'
This have I pondered, meditating still,
Till every throb of lust is rooted out.
Expunged is all the fever of desire.
Cool am I now and calm – *Nibbana's* peace.³⁰

This prayer expresses meditation on the disgusting aspects of the body to create an aversion for lust, to root it out and win everlasting calm – *Nibbana's* peace.

Prayer is also taking refuge in Buddha, the order and the Rule and the realization of Arhantship. Ubbiri lost her daughter. She was wailing. After receiving instruction from Buddha, she describes her experience:

Lo! From my heart the hidden shaft is gone!
The shaft that nestled there hath he removed.
And that consuming grief for my dead child
Which poisoned all the life of me is dead.
To-day my heart is healed, my yearning stayed,
And all within is purity and peace.
Lo! I for refuge to the Buddha go –
The only wise – the Order and the Norm.³¹

³⁰*Sacred Writings of the Buddhists, Psalms of the Sisters*, ed. David R., vol. 16(1), New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1987, 30.

³¹*Sacred Writings of the Buddhists*, 39-40.

The above text expresses to some extent at least what Anasake wrote about Buddhist prayer:

... When prayer is understood in a broader way, there is the Buddhist prayer as an expression of earnest faith, determined intention as a means of self-perfection in Buddhist ideals. Moreover, the Buddhist religion developed, after the death of its founder, in the direction of adoring him not only as a perfect personality but as an embodiment of universal truth, i.e., in the conception of the *dharmakāyā*.³²

Those who sought liberation from suffering turn to Buddha as their refuge. Buddha instructs them. This relationship between Buddha and the seeker is one of Guru and the disciple. It is in this sense that is to be understood. It is a form of prayer, an expression of devotion to the Guru as well as exultation in the law:

Then the venerable Sāriputra, pleased, glad, charmed, cheerful, thrilling with delight and joy, stretched his joined hands towards the Lord, and, looking up to the Lord with a steady gaze, addressed him in this strain: I am astonished, amazed, O Lord! I am in ecstasy to hear such a call from the Lord. For when, before I had heard of this law from the Lord, I saw other Bodhisattvas, and heard that the Bodhisattvas would in future get the name of Buddhas, I felt extremely sorry, extremely vexed to be deprived from so grand a sight as the Tathāgata-knowledge. And whenever, O Lord, for my daily recreation I was visiting the caves of rocks or mountains, wood thickets, lovely gardens, rivers, and roots of trees, I always was occupied with the same and ever-recurring thought: 'Whereas the entrance into the fixed points of the law is nominally equal, we have been dismissed by the Lord with the inferior vehicle.' Instantly, however, O Lord, I felt that it was our own fault, not the Lord's... (But) today, O Lord, I have reached complete extinction; today, O Lord, I have become calm; today, O Lord, I am wholly come to rest; today, O Lord, I have reached Arhatship; today, O Lord, I am the Lord's eldest son, born from his law, sprung into existence by the

³²*The Buddhist Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, ed. Suboth Kapoor, vol. 4, s.v. "Prayer (Buddhist)" by M. Anasake.

law, made by the law, inheriting from the law, accomplished by the law.³³

Buddhists devotion to the law is at the source of the harmony of prayer, ethical life and practice of virtues in Buddhism.³⁴

b. The middle path

The middle path is a set of ethical principles. It consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.³⁵ The last two play a very significant role in attaining calm, peace and enlightenment.

c. Buddhist meditation

The ethical principles of the eightfold middle path are divided into three main categories: *sīla* (conduct), *jñāna* (knowledge) and *dhyaṇa* (meditation). Of these, two deserve special attention:

They are *samāsati* (right mindfulness) and *sammāsamādhi* (deep meditation). *Samāsati* is a constant awareness of what occurs in oneself, and through this awareness one is purified. It produces indifference to the world. *Sammāsamādhi* is the deep and most intense stage of meditation following the purification of the mind, culminating in total indifference. Buddha strongly recommended meditation; through meditation things are known as they really are, and the extinction of suffering is achieved.³⁶

Buddhist meditation is very analytic. The following stages illustrate it:

- i. Mindfulness (*sati*), i.e., to be aware and mindful in all activities and movements both physical and mental.
- ii. Investigation and research into the various problems of doctrine (*dhammavicaya*). Included here are all our religious, ethical and

³³*The Saddharma-Pundarika or the Lotus of the True Law*, trans. H. Kern, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, 60-61.

³⁴In this aspect, there is certainly similarity to Christianity which also considers prayer and meditation without a corresponding moral life as hypocrisy.

³⁵Antony Mookenthottam, *Towards a Theology in the Indian Context*, Bangalore: ATC, 1980, 92-93.

³⁶Mookenthottam, *Towards a Theology in the Indian Context*, 97-98.

philosophical studies, reading, researches, discussions, conversation, even attending lectures relating to such doctrinal subjects.³⁷

There are four states on which meditation is specially recommended. These four sublime states are:

(*Brahma-vihāra*): (1) extending unlimited, universal love and goodwill (*metta*) to all living beings without any kind of discrimination, 'Just as a mother loves her only child'; (2) compassion (*karuṇā*) for all living beings who are suffering, in trouble and affliction; (3) sympathetic joy (*mudita*) in others' success, welfare and happiness; and (4) equanimity (*upekkha*) in all vicissitudes of life.³⁸

In this case, it is more contemplation than meditation.

4. Conclusion

Prayer is understood differently in different religious traditions. All the same, prayer understood as the expression of the deepest human aspirations, search for reality and experience is common to all religions.

There are various forms of prayer, like hymns in praise of gods and requests for benefits in Vedic tradition. *R̥gveda* is marked by prayers which express deep friendship with gods, a sense of sin and seeking forgiveness from the gods. As the human heart longs for touch with and experience of reality, prayers take the form of seeking enlightenment and the Real. This leads to meditation. The Upaniṣads give various forms of meditation which, finally, leads to profound experience of God or the ultimate Reality.

Buddhism, though it does not believe in God, longs for liberation from suffering and the calm and peace of *Nibbana*. What is striking in Buddhist prayer is the harmony of prayer, meditation and moral life and concern for universal love, harmony and compassion. An essential dimension of prayer is concern for the other.

Universal love, harmony and compassion most relevant today are common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. May I, therefore,

³⁷Walpola Rahula Thera, *The Setting of Mindfulness in Vipāśana: A Universal Buddhist Meditation Technique*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1999, 48.

³⁸Thera, *The Setting of Mindfulness in Vipāśana*, 49.

conclude with a prayer of Hindu ancient sages that reiterate the yearning for the realization of unity at every level of being:

May we meet together, speak together
May our minds be of one accord...
Let our aims be common,
and our hearts be one accord,
and all of us be of one mind,
so may we live well-together (RV 10.91.2,4).