

Does God answer Prayer? A Hindu Perspective.

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We need to approach this question by first analyzing:—

- (a) what we mean by “God”,
- (b) who is the individual who “prays” and
- (c) what is the meaning of “prayer”.

Starting with the third term let us consider what we mean by “prayer”.

The dictionary definition is:

“a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship.”
ORIGIN Middle English : from Old French *preiere*, based on Latin *precarius* ‘obtained by entreaty,’ from *prex, prec-* ‘prayer.’

In Sanskrit there are a number of terms used which are all often translated as ‘prayer’ but have different shades of meaning, many of which are not applicable to the western concepts of prayer.

- *prārthana* — a formal request for service, help, favour or protection.
- *japa* — recitation of mantras
- *stotra, stava, stuti* — hymns or poems of praise or expressions of gratitude which may or may not contain requests for assistance and intervention.
- *abhivandana* — statements of praise and salutation.

Prayer of the intercessory type requires (a) a supplicant, (b) an all powerful being who can and wants to respond, (c) a means of eliciting that assistance i.e. a proper and formal method of praying with the required mental attitude of submission and devotion.

Hindu theology is extremely complex in general and each sect has variations on the same theme. The Hindu concept of the Godhead differs radically from the Abrahamic concept and the terms are really not interchangeable. So I’m going to attempt to simplify the subject as much as possible.

There are 2 perspectives in Hinduism to investigate the matter:

1. The philosophical perspective i.e. *jñāna khāṇḍa* i.e. Vedānta
2. The religious perspective i.e. *karma khāṇḍa*

1.The Philosophical Perspective.

Vedānta is grounded upon 4 great declarations of the Veda known as the *mahāvākyas*:—

- *sarvam khalvidam brahma* — the universe in its totality is Brahman. Brahman being the material as well as the efficient cause of all phenomena. Matter = energy = Brahman.
- *ayam ātma brahman* — the individual is also Brahman

- *tat tvam asi* — you, as a microcosm are in fact non-different from the macrocosm which is Brahman
- *ātma-prajñānam* — the Self is consciousness.

Furthermore Brahman is defined as *sat-cit-ānanda* = Being-Consciousness-Bliss.

As such we can summarize what we mean by “God” or rather the “Godhead” i.e. Brahman.

God is the totality of Being.

God is omnipotency, omnipresence and omniscience.

God is absolute Bliss/Love/Compassion.

..... and we as individuals are parts/rays/modes/sparks of THAT Divine nature and essential Being. We are never separate from IT as the sun-rays are never separate from the Sun.

Another metaphor would be - we are waves within the vast ocean or we are thoughts in the cosmic mind.

So from a strict Vedānta perspective we are never in reality or essence separate from God, so there is no supplicant nor autocrat. No ruler and no subject. So any form of intercession or requesting of service and assistance in this case is an exhibition of ignorance (*avidya*) of our true nature and the nature of the Divine.

2.The Religious Perspective.

The afore mentioned *Brahman* or Absolute of philosophy through the prism of religion takes on a myriad of different forms known as Devas (beings of light) these are more manageable and personable limited forms of the Divine. Embodiments and personifications of some of the natural and subtle energies of the cosmos. These Devas are invoked in Vedic ceremonies and their favour is sought for achieving the goals of human life which are *Dharma* — right living, *Artha* — prosperity and power, *Kāma* — fulfillment of desires and *Mokṣa* — liberation from suffering and ultimately liberation from rebirth itself.

But there is a major and striking difference between the Abrahamic prayers and the Vedic Yajñas (sacrifices) in which these goals are pursued. In the Vedic system of thought it is the yajña itself which produces the results, and the favour or grace of the Devas is irrelevant. In other words the Devas are ‘compelled’ through the magical power of the yajña to accede to the desires of the host (*yajamāna*) through the mediation of the priests. The priests accomplish the act through the mantras which they recite. Any defect in pronunciation or inattention to detail of the ceremony renders the rite fruitless.

The priests have the mantras which control the Devas, and the power of actualization resides in the mantras.

There are according to Hindu cosmology another class of Devas which are administrative posts. These celestial positions can be attained by human beings through their spiritual practice and striving. So they are greatly evolved jivas that have a certain degree of power to assist lesser evolved jivas. In this class there are many exalted and saintly beings who sincerely desire to help others — much like celestial doctors, nurses, social workers and therapists. These beings (guardian angels) can and do respond to prayer and supplication but can act only to the degree that one’s karma permits.

Types of Hindu ‘Prayers’

Hindu prayers are best regarded from a psychological perspective

1. **Prārthana** — this is a poem paying obeisance to a particular Devatā and enumerating the stuff we would like to have such as longevity, progeny, wealth, power, health, etc.

The actual dynamic is “positive affirmation” — acknowledgement of higher powers than ourselves and affirming our goals.

2. **Stotra** or **Stuti** — a hymn of praise mentioning the lineage, qualities and exploits of a particular Devatā — at the end there is a *phala-śruti* — a statement of the material and spiritual benefits and results of reciting the stotra. The recitation of this *phala-śruti* is optional and dependent upon the reason for recitation which can either be simply to show gratitude to the Devatā (*niṣkāma kairikaryam*) or in order to achieve a specific goal (*kāmya karma*).

3. **Japa** — this takes the form of simply reciting either mantras or the names of the Devatā which are descriptive of qualities, philosophical ideas and ethical values. The latter take the form of the 108 or 1000 names of the Devatā — with or without a *phala-śruti* appended.

This simple recitation of the mantra or names of the Devatā without any requests for service is considered the highest form of “prayer”.

4. **Darśan** — a form of devotion which is peculiar to Hinduism. *Darśan* literally means “sight” or “vision”. The devotee visits a temple, shrine, sacred place or a holy personage and simply sees and is seen by the deity or saint. There is no prayer or intercession — simply visual communion.

Types of Devotees or Supplicants.

The Gita 7:16 declares that there are four types of good people that take recourse to religion:—

- **‘The distressed’** — are those who are suffering through having lost status and prosperity, and who wish to regain them.
- **‘The ambitious’** — are those who aspire for prosperity and power which they have never had. Between them the difference is only nominal, as both of them seek prosperity & power alone.
- **‘The seekers after knowledge’** — are those one who wish to know the real nature of the Self [in its pure state] as an entity different from the Material. They are called ‘the seekers after knowledge,’ because they seek to realise the essential nature of the Self.
- **‘The wise’** — are those who have attained Self-realization and their goal is only to attain the Lord — considering that the Lord alone is the highest goal.

Krishna further goes on to state that the wise is most dear to him as He is most dear to the wise. Stating that the rewards which the others seek are but paltry and impermanent compared to the pure love of God alone.

Tantra and Prayer

In the Tantras there are many rituals and mantras given for the accomplishment of personal desires. How do they work?

According to the philosophy of Tantra, the gods and goddesses are nothing but projections of our own minds and aspects of our subconscious. They are non-different to us. Praying to them is a form of positive affirmation in that we are addressing our higher selves and connecting with our own higher consciousness not importuning a deity that is external and subject to bribery and coercion!

According to Tantra all people can be divided into 3 categories:

1. The *pashus* — or vast majority of common people who are basically insecure, fearful and undisciplined who crave the fulfilment of desires and assurances of safety and security. They are easily manipulated and controlled by secular as well as religious authority figures.
2. The *viras* — the heroic, pathfinders, explorers and adventurers. People who are intelligent, self assured and have a burning desire to find out and to achieve goals for themselves. They are the intelligentsia, the scientists and the explorers.
3. The *siddhas* — the enlightened beings.

For each of these a different form of spiritual practice is prescribed. For the *pashus* there are rituals, pilgrimages, disciplines, gifts, and a host of other methods of supplicating higher powers to achieve their goals — all are forms of positive self-affirmation.

For the *viras* no celestial help is required as they achieve their goals through their own efforts, and deal with their failures themselves.

The *siddhas* have no need for prayer but are engaged only in contemplation of the Divine nature and the chanting of the holy names. They have no personal desires to fulfil as they have realised the futility and impermanence of all material aspirations and goals.

Does Prayer Work?

First of all let's consider scales of magnitude.

- During the 2nd World War 6,000,000 Jews; men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis through slow starvation and gassing. Not many of their prayers were answered.
- The total estimated number of deaths in WW2 was 48,231,700. We can be sure that the majority of them prayer fervently to survive. Heaven remained silent and indifferent.
- In 1994 during the Rwandan civil war about 2000 Tutsis were murdered in the Church in the town of Kibuya by Hutu Christians. Most were women and children. The fact that they were sheltering in a Church hoping and praying for the protection of God didn't move the Lord to prevent the horrific genocide!
- In the 2004 Tsunami 155,000 people are estimated to have died. Many prayers would have been offered but few would have been answered.

- Everyday people all over the world are dying from cancer and other horrible diseases. Millions of children are suffering from congenital conditions which cause them immense suffering.
- One of the greatest pilgrimage sites for Christian healing is Lourdes. It is estimated that in recent years about 5 million pilgrims a year visit the shrine at Lourdes. Over the past 150 years, some 200 million people have made the pilgrimage, but only 67 miracles have been confirmed. For those who care, that's a success rate of .0000335% or 1 out of every 3 million. Furthermore, since 1947 anyone claiming a miraculous cure has to go before a medical board. From 1947 to 1990, only 1,000 cures were claimed and only 56 were recognized in that time, averaging 1.3 cures a year, against 57 a year before 1914. Since 1978, there have been only four validated cures. So, if you're thinking of going to Lourdes for a miracle cure, the odds are not very high that your prayers will be answered! Yet still people go! Each and every one arrogantly thinking that the Lord may be moved to hear his/her prayer above and before all the others.

Scientific studies done show that prayer *does not work*. (See accompanying article)

But how do we explain that so many people anecdotally have an extremely positive outcome from prayer and ceremonies performed on their behalf? (Acknowledging of course that there are also millions out there that have prayed their hardest in innumerable ways to no avail as illustrated above!)

I believe that answer lies in the *placebo effect*. The mind is extremely powerful and plays the major role in everything. The world we inhabit is the world that we ourselves project into being.

Gita 6:5 One should raise one's Self by one's own mind and not allow one's Self to sink; for the mind alone is the friend of the Self, and the mind alone is the adversary of the Self.

Prayer does indeed help the individual '*subjectively*'. It acts to empower one through the conviction that help is being given by "God". One's attitude becomes more positive and benevolent and one feels strength which one didn't know one had. One's self-esteem is fortified. So for those who need a crutch or a "hand-up" prayer is always beneficial. If people are convinced that a certain ceremony or prayer will help them then it is their conviction which accomplishes the task and not necessarily some external cosmic Emergency Services Response Group.

There is a beautiful verse from the scriptures which says:—

“The gods don't protect those who invoke them by taking up staves like cow-herders, rather they bestow upon them intelligence to make the right decisions!”

What do we pray for?

There are a number of things one may pray for — health, wealth, power, success, freedom from various afflictions and sufferings, children etc. But we need to bear in mind that all these are self-centred, limited, impermanent and transitory — and what's more they all depend on human effort!

The outcome of every endeavour is based upon 5 factors:—

1. Self-effort
2. The effort of others
3. Circumstances

4. Karma
5. Grace of the gods.

The only *one* of these factors over which we have any control is the first — *Self-effort*. Therefore we should rely on Self-effort alone — acting with full focus and dedication but surrendering to the outcome whether agreeable or disagreeable.

The Higher Hindu Attitude to Prayers.

At the end of every ceremony we chant the universal prayers:—

Sarveshaam mangalam bhavatu | May all beings enjoy happy occasions
Sarveshaam svastir bhavatu | May all beings enjoy wellbeing
Sarveshaam shantir bhavatu | May all beings enjoy peace
Sarveshaam poornam bhavatu | May all beings enjoy wholeness
Sarveshaam mangalam bhavatu | May all beings enjoy good things
Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha | May all beings be happy
Sarve santu niraamayaaha | May all beings be free from sickness
Sarve bhadraani pashyant | May all beings get what is good for them
maa kashchid dukha bhaag bhavet | May no living being experience sorrow
om asato maa sad gamaya — From untruth lead us to truth
taamaso maa jyotir gamaya — From ignorance lead us to wisdom
mrutyor maa amritam gamaya — From death lead us to immortality
om shanti shanti shantihi

Does the world become a better place through our prayers? Maybe and maybe not - but what it *does do* is orientate us to a more positive attitude towards others. The principle effect of prayer is upon ourselves and our attitudes towards other beings — both sentient and insentient.

The Scriptures declare that the highest form of spiritual practice is meditation — *dhyāna*.

dhyānam eva paro dharmo dhyānam eva param tapaḥ |
dhyānam eva param śaucaṁ tasmāt dhyāna-paro bhavet ||

Meditation is the greatest virtue, meditation is the greatest penance, meditation is the greatest purificatory rite, hence one shall be devoted to meditation. (Garuda Purana 1:230:10)

It forms the *antaranga sādhana* or “inner spiritual practice” of Patañjali’s 8 Limbs of Yoga.

The 6th Chapter of the Gita is dedicated to Yoga of meditation, and in Chapter 2 (61 — 63) Krishna says:—

Having controlled all the senses, one should abide in the state of meditation, having Me as Supreme [goal]; for, one who has controlled his senses, wisdom is firmly established.

When one deliberates upon sense-objects, attachment to them arises; from attachment is born desire, from desire arises anger;

From anger arises delusion; from delusion, the loss of memory; from the loss of memory, the destruction of discrimination; and with the destruction of discrimination, one is lost.

Rather than praying for the fulfilment of petty material desires of an impermanent and transient nature one should rather be focussing on the enjoyment of the Divine and unification with Brahman.

Fulfilment of desires through either proactivity or prayer never results in peace of mind but only further entrenchment in the cycle of craving, clutching, grasping and suffering!

Is it ethical to pray for stuff?

According to Srivaiṣṇava philosophy the highest and most requisite form of spiritual practice is *prapatti* — surrender to Krishna/Nārāyaṇa.

An aspect of *prapatti* is the recognition and acceptance that everything that we experience — both good and bad is the result of our own actions previously done (karma). We have “done the crime and therefore should do the time.” We should accept full responsibility for our actions and their results and should therefore willingly and joyfully reap what we have sown.

Is it ethical to make full use of utilities and then try to avoid paying for them? Is it acceptable to eat lavishly at a restaurant and then try to get out of paying the bill? What would the gentle reader think of a person who booked into a five star hotel — made full use of all the facilities and then made every attempt to reduce or avoid the bill?

Everything that we experience is the result of some previous actions intentionally committed. We should therefore welcome the outcome — whatever it may be, and bear the consequences with grace and dignity.

All our actions should be performed as service to Krishna and for his pleasure only. All rituals and spiritual practices should be done with the idea of the relinquishment of self-interest. When Srivaishnavas are initiated they are given the title *dāsa* or *dāsī* which means ‘servant’. Through the act of surrender we become servants of the Lord and like cattle, are branded with the symbols of conch and wheel since we now ‘belong’ to Lord Vishnu. After initiation our required vocation is to serve the Lord and not to issue instructions to Him as if we were ordering room-service!

The greatest of all Hindu prayers is the Gayatri mantra which is nothing but a prayer that the Divine Effulgence of the Universe should enlighten our intellects. Praying for enlightenment and at the same time striving for that is the only legitimate prayer!

A delightful story is told about the Alvar Bhaktisara who was one day stitching his torn garment. Lord Siva appeared and told him that he was so impressed with his spiritual practice he wanted to reward him — he could ask for whatever he wanted. Bhaktisara without looking up asked him if he could give him liberation (*mokṣa*) Lord Siva retorted that only Narayana could do that but he could fulfil whatever material desire the Alvar cherished. The Alvar retorted — “In that case please make the thread follow the needle!”

There is a unique form of prayer in the Srivaishnava tradition called *Mangalāsāsanam* in which the poet, impressed by the delicate and exquisite beauty of the Lord blesses Him and prays for His well-being and safety!!

In the Bhagavatam Skanda 9 Chapter 21 we have the story of Ranti Deva and his compassion for all beings. He prayed:—

I do not pray to the Lord for Liberation from the cycle of birth and death, nor for the achievement of the 8 mystical powers (that accomplish all desires). I desire only to abide with all beings and vicariously experience the sufferings that accrue to them. By my taking over their sufferings, they will be free from misery. (verse 12)

Self-development is the Highest of Spiritual pursuits.

In the 12th Chapter of the Gita Krishna enumerates the goals of personal development of a serious practitioner:—

12. Wisdom is far better than the practice [of mindfulness of the Lord]. Meditation is esteemed to be better than wisdom; and the renunciation of fruits of action is better than meditation — from such renunciation, peace ensues.

13 — 14. Not prejudiced towards any living being, friendly and compassionate to all, free from the notions of 'I' and 'mine', and regarding all pain and pleasure with equanimity, and forbearing; contented, constantly contemplating, self-restrained and firm in one's convictions, dedicating the mind and intellect to Me — such a devotee is dear to Me.

15. He by whom the world is not disturbed, and who is not disturbed by the world, who is free from joy and jealousy, fear and repulsion — he is dear to me.

16. One who is free from expectations, who is uncontaminated, skilled, impartial and free from anxiety, who has renounced every undertaking— is dear to Me.

17. One who is full of devotion to Me, who rejoices not, nor hates, nor grieves, nor desires, and who renounces both merit and demerit — such a devotee is dear to me.

18. He who is impartial to both foe and friend, honour and dishonour, who is indifferent to both cold and heat, pleasure and pain and who is free from all attachments;

19. to whom both censure and praise are equal, who is silent [when praised or abused] and content with any condition, who has no home (is not attached to home), who is steady of mind, and who is devoted to Me — dear to Me is such a person.

20. But those devotees who adopt this ambrosial virtuous conduct (*dharma*) as taught above, who are full of devotion and who regard Me as the Supreme — they are exceedingly dear to Me.

Philosophical, Theological & Moral Problems posed by Supplicatory Prayer.

1. If we consider God to be omniscient (all-knowing) then He already knows what we want or need before we do. If He does not automatically do the needful then His compassion and duty of care are compromised.
2. If God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and compassionate then He'd ensure that the negative situation of need or want did not arise in the first place. Since there is suffering, need and want, His compassion and omnipotency are compromised.
3. If we are justly deserving and God does *not* reward us timely and accordingly without us asking, then He is either unmindful of the situation or unjust — His omniscience and sense of fairness is compromised.

4. If we are *not* deserving and God *did* respond to our supplications it would mean that He Himself is acting unjustly and favouring the undeserving.
5. It is noted that not all prayers are answered; some are and some aren't. This means that God is capricious and partial. (A rich sportsman prays for victory in a golf tournament and thanks God for his success. Hundreds of poor african women and children pray to God to spare them from being massacred and God ignores their pleas!)
6. If God does not spontaneously grant us our desires but does so only after the making of offerings, sacrifices, pilgrimages, prayers, prostrations and austerities it means that God can be *bribed* to do what He normally wouldn't do. His ethical perfection is compromised.
7. One of the foundational doctrines of Hinduism is the law of Karma. The law of Karma is the doctrine that all our actions have reactions, both on the practical level and on the moral level. All our happiness and sorrow are due to the actions which we have previously committed and the effect of actions is based upon the intent behind them. The only time we pray for help is when bad times are upon us. This is akin to a consumer wastefully consuming a product and then trying in every way to avoid paying the bill! Is this not immoral?
8. There are millions of people who are sick and suffering in innumerable ways, all supplicating and praying to God who whimsically helps some but not others. Is it not selfish and self-serving for us to think that God should take time out from his extremely busy schedule to help us? As ethical beings shouldn't we rather give up our places in the queue for those who are more in need?
9. When we consider the vastness of the Universe with billions of Galaxies and a vast array of life forms, our planet earth becomes as insignificant as a grain of sand on a beach. Is it not obscene hubris to think that we and our petty wants are supremely important and warrant the omnipresent and omniscient Lord's immediate attention?

The offences inherent in Supplicatory Prayer for Srivaishnavas

As Srivaishnavas we consider ourselves quintessentially as *Servants of the Lord*. By praying for stuff we are actually committing a number of offences.

1. The mere act of requesting service from the master reverses our roles and we have become the masters and expect the Lord to be at our beck and call and to fulfil our desires and to serve us! We offer Him bananas, coconuts and pumpkins and expect Him to give us gold and diamonds!
2. By asking the Lord's intervention in our petty daily lives we acknowledging His omnipotence to be able to assist us, but we are negating His omniscience. We are stating that He doesn't know what our needs are even though He dwells within our very hearts as inner-controller!
3. If we accept that Lord Nārāyaṇa is the supreme controller then He has been managing this universe which is His own expansion, for billions of years, and by now should know how it all works. By us requesting His intervention we are categorically stating that He doesn't know how to run the universe and that we know better!
4. The act of surrender requires faith that He will fulfil His promise to liberate us from Samsāra, and we should invite His liberating Grace (*gopitṛva*). The requesting of Grace is not for something that previously we did not have and the Lord needs to be reminded of it. The Grace of Sriman Nārāyaṇa is raining down on all perpetually — but we are like upturned vessels — unreceptive to it. So the act of “inviting Grace” is merely for us to attune ourselves to it's influx, the removal of the ego which was previously barring it's entry. Having surrendered ourselves

and all that we possess to Lord Nārāyaṇa it would be a breach of contract and an act of theft to re-assert proprietary rights over its management through intercessory prayer.

What should form of prayer should we engage in?

The only acceptable forms of prayer or devotional practice that is in keeping with the philosophy and our ontological position are:—

1. *Meditation* upon the form of the Lord, the contemplation of His goodness, beauty and compassion
2. The chanting of His sacred names ceaselessly and the singing of His praises. These include the chanting of the Hymns of the Alvārs — Divya Prabandham and chanting of Vedic Sūktas etc.¹
3. Performing *Bhagavad Ārādhana* which is the offering of services (*upacāras*) — bathing, dressing, decorating, feeding, entertaining the arca-avatāra etc.
4. Visiting temples for the purpose of *Darśana* only, not for seeking rewards and gaining merit.
5. Feeding and clothing the needy and performing social and environmental service, recognising that all creatures and the environment are the diversified forms of the omnipresent Lord Vishnu. All forms are His forms and service of what is His constitutes service to Him alone. Service to society is divine service.
6. Continuing to perform all the prescribed Vedic rituals but not for the rewards they offer but only as a form of service and entertainment for the Lord.



¹ Although the Vedic hymns do often contain long lists of requests for progeny, cattle, raiment etc. The hymns are to be chanted with the understanding that the act itself is divine service and we relinquish all personal interest in the rewards.