

Discourses/Articles

by

Swami Krishnananda

The Divine Life Society

Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

PRAYER FOR DEPARTED SOULS

ITS PURPOSE AND PREREQUISITES

(Forest University Lecture given on All-Soul's Day, 1952)

Our salutations, adorations and prostrations to all those who have gone ahead of us, who have gained more experience and who are before us as ideal beacon lights in life. Today we offer our adorations to all those who are not visible to our physical eyes, but who lived on this earth-plane and who now experience a different state of consciousness. We offer our gratitude to all those who have gone before us and shown us the path.

By the remembrance of all souls, we mean the remembrance of everything that is created. It does not necessarily mean those who exist in a *preta* condition, in the astral body; but those who have abandoned their physical body and who have taken another physical body also receive our prayers. Those who exist in *Swarga-loka* receive our prayers, those who live in *Gandharva-loka*, and all those who experience pain and suffering also receive our prayers. Our prayers reach up to *Brahma-loka* and the *Surya-mandala*, because our prayers are the expressions of our soul-consciousness.

You know there are various kinds of human beings. Similarly, there are various kinds of departed souls. There are some people who feel that it is very difficult to understand how the efforts of a person in this world can influence the conditions and experiences of a person in the other world. This doubt arises on account of lack of understanding and lack of knowledge. We must know that the universe is an organic whole. It is not a dead matter. It is vibrating with energy, life and consciousness. The universe is one whole. If anything happens to any part of my body, the whole body feels it. So is the case with everything in this universe. Every atom of this universe is connected with every other atom in this universe. Planes are only relative; they are not absolute values. They are valid only to individuals. Hence an act or a thought or a feeling which is originated at any particular part of the universe shall influence others also with that degree of intensity with which it is generated. If the prayer is intense, it will be felt there in a corresponding degree of intensity.

The act of *sraddha* is an example. When we offer foodstuff or other articles which are all used in the name of the departed soul, we mean they should be received by the person 'there'. In this world of materialism, people who have no belief in the higher values doubt the validity of this act. How does a physical act in this world influence a subtle body that is in another world?

This may be explained by a modern analogy. Take, for example, telegraphic conveyance of money. If a person wants to send a money order, he just pays the required amount to the Post Office in his own town and wishes that this amount should be

received by the person concerned at some other distant place. Now, that same money is not received by the other person. It is here itself. The Post Office in the other town receives the intelligence of the sender's wish. Only the feeling, the understanding, is conveyed, and that works wonders. The intelligence causes a corresponding action to take place there. The person receives the amount at that distant place.

The same is the case with *sraddha*. It is the symbol of an internal feeling, of a *bhava*. *Sraddha* is something more than mechanical action. It is an act of prayer with *bhava* and feeling. We must not underrate our thoughts and feelings. Our thoughts are omnipotent. Every thought will fructify, today or tomorrow, in this form or another form. When we do charity in the name of a departed soul, this intelligence is conveyed to him through the planes of consciousness. The *pitris* receive there what we give here, because we transmit an intelligence to those who are in charge of the person concerned that such and such a thing should be given to the person there. That great selfless act of sacrifice in the name of the departed soul gives wonderful benefit to him. This is possible on account of the unity of the universe, because of the omnipotence of God, because He is the Sovereign of the universe, because He is the dispenser of justice with His Supreme Wisdom.

Just as there are various kinds of men, there are various kinds of departed souls; so various prayers of different intensities are offered. Take the human beings alone. All human beings are not in the same stage of evolution. We have 'animal men' - those who have human bodies but animal qualities. Then we have men superior to them, ordinary men, who are not bad, but are not good either. That is the second stage. Thirdly, we have good men; they are virtuous. Superior to them we have saintly men; they are not merely good, they have started to unfold the divine consciousness. Lastly we have divine men or Godmen. These various kinds of people reach different conditions and have different experiences when they leave the physical body. Of course, those who are Self-realised are not in need of our prayers. They themselves are very powerful. Their Self-experience and Knowledge are so powerful, so great and so valuable, that they will help themselves. But all are not saints, all are not God-men. Those who have not reached this stage require the help of others.

Soul's Journey after Death

Our Puranas and Itihasas say that the soul after death passes through different experiences. It is said that an ordinary person in whom there is a mixture of good and evil, when he dies, is taken to *Yama-loka* in the beginning. If his evil traits preponderate, he will be taken to *Yama-oka*. Scriptures further say that an ordinary person does not remember his past experiences. He is in a state of swoon the moment he casts off the physical body. Our prayers give him consciousness. They give him fresh energy and solace. Because he is not a virtuous man, he is suffering; our acts of sacrifice shall be beneficial to him. Even when the person goes to *Yama-loka* he will be helped there by our acts of sacrifice. But a person who has read the Vedas, who has led a virtuous life, remembers his past experiences; others do not. In the latter case, the Puranas say that a *danda* called the *Yama-danda* is kept on the head of such a person so that he may remember his past life. It is described as a burning iron rod. At once, he remembers all his past life on earth. Then the Dispenser of Justice puts the question: "You have done so many evil deeds. What do you intend to do about them?" Then, it is

said, the soul gives the reply: "I have got my relatives. They are capable of doing what is good for me. They will perform all the expiations on my behalf, and then I shall free myself from all these experiences of pain." Then it is said that the soul is sent back to the earth. It takes about 12 days. That is why we perform the ceremony on the eleventh and twelfth days here. The soul is brought back to the earth and it is made to watch what is happening there. Before that time the body should be buried or burnt. Because attachment to the body is so much that the very perception of the corpse will create a desire in the soul to enter it once again; but those who are in charge of it will not allow this—and this would be a condition of great suffering. And, so, on the 11th and 12th days we should offer prayers, perform *havanas*, do charity etc.

Generally, we perform a *yagna* for the peace of the soul and for the satisfaction of all those who are in charge of the soul. Otherwise, it will not be able to experience the things that are sent from here. First of all, a certain *bali* (an offering of boiled rice, etc.) is offered, which is for the satisfaction of Yama. It is said that this act will satisfy Yama and He will free it from bondage. It is necessary that the soul should be purged of the evil deeds it has done. So *Bhagavata-saptaha*, and such sacrifices and *yagnas* are performed. Then we are told that the soul is released from *Yama-loka* and it goes to *Rudra-loka* and there it becomes one of the *Ganas* of *Rudra-loka*. In order that it may be released from that place, we have to perform the *Rudra-yagna*. Then Rudra releases it from the state of *gana* and it shines in a lustrous body and goes to *Brahma-loka*. It is initiated into the divine mysteries by Brahma Himself and it attains *moksha*.

So gradually the soul which is not very virtuous, which has not done any good deeds on earth is also enabled to reach the higher planes of consciousness through our acts of prayers and sacrifice.

Weep Not for the Dead

In this connection we must remember that the pains which are experienced by the departed souls are intensified by the sufferings and the grief expressed by those who are on earth. The scriptures emphatically say that, after the death of a person, no teardrop of grief should fall to the ground from anybody's eyes. It does not in any way help the departed soul. On the other hand, even a soul which is about to enter heaven will be brought back if his people are crying here. No one should, therefore, weep or cry; but everyone must pray for the peace of the departed soul. The person who has left the body can be given whatever he needs from here. Study of scriptures is a great help, offering of prayers, performing *havanas* and doing charitable deeds, and even contemplation on God for his sake—all these are of great use. When a person meditates on God, for the sake of the peace of the departed soul, it is said that it will be enabled even to attain *moksha*. The knowledge of the Guru is powerful enough to enter the heart of the disciple to dispel his ignorance; even so is the relation between the person existing here and the departed soul. For the sake of the departed soul we can meditate. It is possible to send our powerful currents of concentration and meditation to enable it to reach higher states of consciousness. For this sake, we must bear in mind that we are part and parcel of the universe, even as the departed souls are; and there is not much difference between the person who exists in a physical body and one who exists in an astral or some other kind of body.

Glory of Prayer for All Souls

Our prayers are capable of producing an effect immediately. Our prayers are expressions of soul-consciousness. The prayers should be absolutely selfless. It is necessary that the idea of personal relationship should be removed when such prayers are offered. When such relationship is kept up, the prayer becomes slightly tinged with selfishness and loses its value. We must offer prayers for all souls with an impartial attitude. Only then will it be extremely powerful and bring the desired result. We offer prayers not because we want anything in return for the prayers, but because we wish to radiate peace in the universe. When collective Sadhana is done, when all people sit together and pray for the sake of the departed souls, it brings peace to everyone in this world, even the person who has departed and taken birth again—in fact, all living people will be benefited. Everyone's life will become peaceful and everyone will lead a happy life, on account of our charitable acts. It is really praying for the peace of the whole universe. So, this offering of prayers on this sacred All-Souls' Day is our attempt to bring peace to the universe and to realise in our practical life the oneness that is at the background of all phenomena. We are all one, whether we are in the physical body or astral body; each should be grateful to the other; each should pray for the other; each should wish the good and happiness of the other, so that the whole universe will be a heaven of peace, a resting place of divine consciousness.