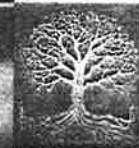


HOW I PRAY

PEOPLE OF
DIFFERENT RELIGIONS
SHARE WITH US
THAT MOST SACRED
AND INTIMATE ACT OF
FAITH...

EDITED BY
JIM CASTELLI



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RAJSHRI GOPAL



Rajshri Gopal is a Sunday school teacher, tour guide, and member of the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, the oldest Hindu temple in the United States. She and her husband have lived in Pittsburgh for more than thirty years and were founding members of the temple. They have three daughters and a grandson.

Prayer is a communication with God. Sometimes it is no words at all; it's just thoughts. Sometimes it involves words, and then I might use prayers that I already know—some of the Sanskrit prayers which are so well thought out, so meaningful.

Every morning after the shower I walk into the place in the house where there's a shrine. In the previous house it was just a little closet; in the present house we have a little room. It's very, very nice, and quiet. I go in there. I always burn an oil lamp; it's traditional. There are pictures of Hindu gods and some statues that are very artistic metal icons. The pictures of the deities are about two feet by eighteen inches. I have both gods, Shiva and Vishnu. A lot of households, if they're very traditional, have one sect, either Shiva or Vishnu.

In Hinduism there is the trinity. The Creator God is one of them. Brahma is the creator. After creation He remains the foundation for all living things. He is looked on as the father of the universe. As the protector, the preserver, he is Vishnu, the second part of the trinity. And then again, He is the dissolver, known as Shiva.

In Hinduism, God alone is eternal, so all creation will have an end. That means that there are many creations, one after the other. Each of these creations lasts for many, many millions of years. But when the time comes and that creation has to end, the stage is set for a re-creation, so God dissolves the present. If you think of a person's death, for instance, what happens is the body deteriorates, but the soul lives on. In the Hindu religion the soul is everlasting. So the material things deteriorate and change form, but the soul lives on. On a very large scale the entire universe is dissolved, but the spiritual things live on. Only the material things are separated from the spiritual. That is what is called the last dissolution, *Samhara*. The stage is set for re-creation, and this goes on for many cycles. These cycles are known as *yugas*.

So God plays different roles. Subconsciously you remember that God is one. But if you want to make it easier, to make things come closer to this big, abstract thing, to attributes of God, such as eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, you are allowed (and actually encouraged) to have personal gods, to pray to any one of the roles at any time. So I might call the name of Shiva in the morning and then Vishnu in the afternoon.

I light incense—not every day, but occasionally. Daily I light the lamp. I sit there and I meditate. I pray for different lengths of time on different days. Sometimes I'm praying and a phone call comes, so I get up and I might not go back. Other times it's very quiet and I don't have anything to do right away. I never look at the clock, but I'd say I spend twenty, twenty-five minutes in meditation—as much as possible. Then when I come out of meditation, I'm very calm. I sit for a few minutes and then I do the ritualistic, not kneeling exactly, but bowing down with your forehead touching the ground. I finish off like that.

I'm fifty-four years old, so this is the time, according to the Hindus, for religion. The first twenty-five years you devote to student life. The next twenty-five you are a householder; that is when you contribute the most to society, give for all the good causes, take a spouse and have a household, and responsibly raise children. And then when you settle the children down and see them married, it's "forest-dweller stage," the time for philosophy and religion and those things. Literally, back in those days they went off to the forest. The wife went along with the husband and later, when he renounces the world and becomes the *sanyasi*, the wife returns to the son's house.

I have these crystal beads I bought in India in one of the temples. There are 108 beads. One hundred and eight is a very holy number. I use this to repeat some attributes of God. Some of the chantings, the prayers, are very nice because you say the name of God; for instance if I'm praying to Ganesha, who is one of the deities, I would use various names of Ganesha. It helps your mind remember the attributes. For instance, to Vishnu we pray, "Thou art the father of the universe, Thou art the form of light, You are an ocean of mercy," and so forth. When you are chanting these things, you remember what the deity is. Sometimes I think (this is from the Scriptures), "All the souls are like different pearls or beads and you are the thread that runs through all of them. You are the cause of the universe. You are the cause that maintains the universe."

I get answers to prayer when my suffering goes away, when there's a solution. This happens even with the smaller things I pray for. For instance if I lose something, I pray, "Ganesha, every time I have troubled you, you found it for me. Please do it again." And then I might find my precious thing that I left somewhere, anywhere

at all. With prayer sometimes I feel that everything is going to be all right; I've surrendered my problems. Even when I go to the temple, no matter how hard things are, I feel, "Oh, God is watching, so everything is going to be all right." It's very strange that I might be so worried, but then when I go there, I feel okay.

Ganesha is the personification of the Sanskrit letter OM that looks like the number three with a little tail in the middle. This is a very sacred sound. A lot of times in Scriptures they say, "There was the sound in the beginning." That is what the OM is. Every day before you say the name of God, you say OM. For instance, if I say, "OM, Shiva," that means that I'm invoking Shiva. OM starts every prayer, every sacred name. In meditation yogis use it. Red, blue, and yellow are the primary colors. If you have these three, you can mix them in different proportions and you can get any color you want. OM has the three important sounds all inside of it. It is *ahh* and *oo* and *mm*. *Ah* and *oo* become *o* in OM. When you say OM in meditation, you're supposed to get your mind filled; you get control of your mental and physical and intellectual self. That's why you say OM in the beginning of meditation.

There's a very beautiful concept about Ganesha. Ganesha is also worshiped as the son of Shiva and is the primary deity even before we worship other deities. At a music concert the first song will be offered to Ganesha. In a dance concert the first item will be about Ganesha. In a wedding Ganesha's name always comes first. He is known as the troubleshooter. Once you have used His name, the whole event will go well. He is the remover of hindrances, obstacles.

Mostly Hindu prayer is individualistic, but for functions like a new year or some holiday we all assemble at the temple in the big hall, on the carpet in the lotus pos-

ture. There are no shoes. In the center of the hall will be the portable icons that come out of the shrine. The hall will be decorated with flowers and jewelry and silk, and incense will be burned and lights will be shone. Then people might sing together or a few people might sing one after the other. Then there will be a prayer offered, and when everyone stands up, it's all finished. This is an example of a group prayer, but most of the time when we go to the temple, it's only the family or maybe a few friends who come along with you—a handful. It's all done individually. The priest offers the light and does the chanting, and then you close your eyes and you have your quiet moments. Before you return, they give you some *prasad*—it literally means “tranquillity that you receive by coming here.” Usually the *prasad* is a little bit of raisins mixed with cashews, or it might be a fruit. Whatever its form, they always give you something.

If somebody has really done something bad to me, during ordinary times I will say, “I don't understand what's going on.” But during prayers, when I pray for everybody—for my mother, for my mother-in-law, for my children—I might even think of this person and say, “Bless her.” But not too often, even though I know it does help your forgiveness and you grow spiritually to a higher plane.

The Hindu outlook is very broad. We teach the little children at the temple one prayer that says that all living beings should be happy. That means that we are praying for the entire universe, all the people of the universe. It's a way of emphasizing the universal brotherhood. Hinduism is a very liberal kind of religion; they accept all religions as true, as different paths to the same goal, as different chapters of the same book. This sublime view comes forth from the *Upanishads*.

The Vedas are the four books that Hindus receive all

their beliefs from. The *Upanishads* are the end part and the most philosophical and secular part of the Vedas. There are hymns, and there are rituals. But the last part is very, very philosophical, very secular in nature. When I talk about secular, I mean emphasizing the oneness of God and no names: “The one without a second, the one who is true, who is conscious, who is blissful in nature.” They never mention Vishnu or Shiva or anything like that. They say, “The One.”