

Gayatri Mantra

by

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Gayatri is one of the most potent mantras in the Hindu religious tradition. It is found in the Rgveda, the most revered ancient texts available to date in India. It is said that the Vedic hymns, of which the Gayatri is the most celebrated one, were not written by humans. These hymns, instead, were to have divine origins. They were revealed to sages and were, subsequently, preserved and transmitted through oral tradition. The hymns of the Rgveda are in meters such as tristup, etc. The meter in which the Gayatri was revealed to the sage Visvamitra is itself called gayatri. It is a meter of twenty four syllables (aksaras):

tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah pracodayat//

'Let us meditate upon that most excellent splendor of god Savitr 'Sun' who shall inspire our consciousness'

This mantra of three quarters can be paraphrased as follows:

yo no dhayah pracodayat, 'may he inspire our intellect,
(tasya) devasya savituh 'of that god Savitr's,
tad varenyam bhargo dhimahi 'that most excellent splendor, let us meditate upon'

Notice that this hymn can hardly be called a prayer. For, structure of a prayer includes invocations by means of which one praises the form or function of a particular divinity. Prayers also become a means of seeking personal favors of a particular deity. Gayatri simply praises the splendor of Savitr who, as aditya 'Sun', gives and sustains life throughout the cosmos. Savitr is thus all splendor. Praising this splendor of his may result also in the enhancement of human consciousness. It is thus not a coincidence that light is related to consciousness. This, in turn, logically forms the basis for viveka, the faculty or intellect (buddhi) capable of deciding what is right from wrong. Savitr 'Sun' then symbolizes splendor, source of light, and of life.

Indian tradition has always emphasized this aspect of intellect symbolized as light. Consider, for example, the Vedic prayer: tamaso ma jyotir gamaya 'from darkness lead me to light'. Krsna also emphasizes in the Bhagavadgita:

sanggat sanyjayate kamah, kamat krodho' bhijayate/

krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smrtivibhramah//
smrtibhrams'ad buddhinas'o buddhinas'at
pranas'yati//

'attachment leads to desire which, when (unfulfilled), leads to anger/
anger leads to confusion which, in turn, leads to destruction of memory//
destruction of memory leads to destruction of intellect; the
destruction of this last one leads to total destruction'

Our divinity Savitr in his splendor, which the gayatri hymn praises, is also interpreted as the manifestation of the Supreme Person, the brahman. It is the Brahman who is responsible for creating this universe or cosmos comprising earth (bhuh), heaven (bhuvah) and the world in-between (svah). If Brahman created the three worlds and Savitr is the manifestation of that supreme, then why is the praise of this hymn intended for Savitr? That is, why should it not be dedicated to the supreme? Because Savitr has the splendor which, in turn, is responsible for sustaining the creation. Savitr becomes the focus of the hymn because he serves as source of sustenance. Additionally, Savitr makes this creation of the supreme manifest. It is for this reason that Savitr is considered as omnipresent, just the way the brahman is. Savitr not only sustains the creation, he also makes it manifest.

Gayatri is thus a hymn praising the most excellent splendor of Savitr, a manifestation of the Supreme, who, in turn, makes manifest the three worlds of earth, heaven and the world in-between. What does the word gayatri itself mean? It has been explained as one by whom life-breath (prana or gaya) is nurtured, protected and preserved (gayan trayate). As a mantra, gayatri is the most potent one can find. Observe this:

mulam tu sarvasiddhinam gayatri sadhanam param/
tadasiddhau vrtha sarvam tatsiddhau ca vrtha' khilam//
'Gayatri is the means par excellence, the source, of all accomplishments (siddhis);
accomplishing anything else is useless if it remains unaccomplished; all other things are
indeed useless if one has it accomplished'

The gayatri has been chanted as part of daily prayers (sandhya). The word sandhya simply means 'a prayer offered to Savitr at the temporal junctions of day and night'. One thus gets: dawn (prabhata), noon (madhyahna), dusk (sandhya), night (ratri) and midnight (ardharatri), five times when one should offer sandhya. A sandhya combining all five can alternately also be offered in three steps, at dawn, noon and dusk, where with the prayer at dawn one can also combine the sandhya of the preceding midnight. One can also similarly combine the sandhya of the night with one offered at dusk. Gayatri in general is considered as the most effective mantra for destroying (accrued) sins (gayatri papanas'ini).

Gayatri is chanted prefaced with four words: om bhur bhuvah svah, where om is the famous pranava, the seed of all mantras, the symbol of the supreme brahman. It is also interpreted as a combination of a, u and m, where a, u and m represent the individual

divinities Vishnu, S'iva and Prajapati, i.e., Brahman, of the trinity. The tradition also recognizes om as the manifest sound of the supreme, in this context the supreme word (s'abdabrahman). There are seven manifestations of this supreme word, generally referred to as its vyahrtis 'utterances, manifestations'. They are: bhuh, bhuvah, svah, mahah, janah, tapah and satyam. The gayatri is generally chanted beginning with om followed by the first three vyahrtis, and of course the mantra. Regular chanting is done with invocation (viniyoga) which includes reverent mentions of the presiding sage (rsi; in this case Visvamitra), the presiding divinity (deva; in this case Savitr) and the meter (chandas; in this case gayatri).

The tradition has developed many structures and methods of meditating upon, and chanting, the Gayatri. I shall here not discuss those aspects of the mantra. People interested in chanting the mantra must get proper initiation and instructions about it. For believers it is a very powerful mantra and its benefits are enormous---that is, if the mantra is made accomplished (siddha). It may backfire if not done properly.

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