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Prayer at the Heart of Peace

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Dear Universal Sisters and Brothers

I congratulate the organizers of this meeting. There couldn't have been a more apt and desperately needed opportunity than the present times. Just have a look at the global scenario. After the shock of the two world wars, we find a universal consensus on the need for peace, for avoidance of conflicts, for resolving discord through dialogue. We have even evolved mechanisms like UNO for this purpose. With what outcome?

There has been hardly a year without strife in any corner of the world, an ongoing arms race, a piling up of weapons of mass destruction, an ever growing resistance to the appeals of reason and consequently an ever looming specter of a third (and perhaps last) world war.

If we are thus seeking peace but moving constantly away from it, is there something fundamentally wrong in the first place? Here I remember Lord Buddha who said, 'Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.' In other words, are we at peace with ourselves as individuals? If not, isn't it absurd to expect a society, a country and humanity as a whole to be at peace when the building blocks are not at peace with themselves? We need to address this issue.

Another cardinal fallacy in our thinking in this context is to treat peace as the goal or the supreme end. Naturally, we tend to achieve it by any means, including war. Nobody till date has waged a war for its own sake. It's always for a higher goal- peace, justice and so on. We are simply oblivious to the fact that peace is the most fundamental pre-condition of all other goals- Development, Stability, Happiness. Let's remember that

'There are small ways to Peace, but Peace is The Highway to all real developments.'

It is strange but true that the key to universal peace through peaceful individuals was provided to us by our ancestors. We just forgot it. I believe, we are here to recover it, realize it and re-establish it. That key is PRAYER!

Prayer is it that is something common and unique to all humanity, across the barriers of time and space, caste and creed. Prayer was the spontaneous response of human spirit when the *Homo sapiens* became aware of themselves and the universe around, in the immortal words of Immanuel Kant- 'The starry heavens above and the moral law within' - evoking apprehension, anxiety, awe. There was a natural need for assurance, consolation and freedom from tension. Anxiety, tension, fears are our instinctive responses to the 'other', to 'stranger'. We perk up and ask 'Friend or foe? And the moment we know it's a friend, those responses vanish.

Prayer began out of the need to bridge the gap between 'me' and the 'other'. It might have begun to appease or to make a petty gain, but, as humanity evolved, prayer too evolved as a communion, a dialogue with the 'other' and went on to realize that the 'other' is but one's own cosmic, sublime manifestation and thus resulting into upliftment or refinement of our own self. As Kierkegaard has put it, 'The function of prayer is not to influence God but to change the nature of the one who prays.'

I represent Bharat, the land of Vedic Wisdom, where the Vedic Seers 'saw' the essential oneness, 'Advaita' of the whole existence and asked in the words of Ishavasya Upanishad- 'When you realize that you are one with the whole existence, whom will you hate, fear, despise or lust?' These are the vices that arise out of our petty selfish nature. Genuine prayer enables us to transcend these and thus to transform ourselves. You will find a recurring chant of 'Om shanti, shanti, shanti' at

the end of all Vedic prayers and hymns. Prayer is thus core of religiosity and hence of all religions.

When the Vedic Tradition utters peace, peace, peace, thrice, it indicates peace within, peace in the surroundings & peace everywhere. Peace has been given the utmost importance in learning & a hymn for peace (शांति मंत्र) is compulsory in the beginning and at the end of every study class & ritual. It's notable how Vedic seers pray long for peace as -

द्यौः, शान्तिः, अंतरिक्षं शान्तिः, पृथिवी शान्तिः,
आपः शान्तिः, ओषधयः शान्तिः।
वनस्पतयः शान्तिः विश्वेदेवाः शान्तिः
ब्रह्म शान्तिः, सर्वं शान्तिः, शांतिरेव शान्तिः
सा मा शान्तिरेधि (yajurveda 36:7)

Meaning - May there be peace in the Heavens, Peace to the sky & peace in the atmosphere. May there be peace on the Earth and peace in the waters. May there be peace to the forests and peace to the plants, animals and creatures Peace in all divine beings & the all pervading ultimate universal God. May all this peace come to me. Let me experience that peace perpetually. This is the dream and expectation of the Vedic Rishis.

Even today the world is in search of peace in the family, community, country and the whole world. The Vedic Rishis, all Hindu Acharyas and the saints from all the faiths are thus praying for peace because the root of the multifarious peace is the peace within the hearts and the definite solution to bring peace within is Prayer & Meditation. The most important & famous Gayatri Mantra is meditation & prayer combined together as it says- we meditate upon the luster of the creator & pray that all faculties of our intellect may be on the way of righteousness. Such meditative prayers change the person from within. Meditation is the best medication for all agitation. Therefore, if you want to be totally undisturbed in your life, have a spiritual corner in your heart & your home. We must also remember the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama that "Although

attempting to bring world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the ONLY way."

The word peace also should be understood in the positive sense of the term. Peace is not merely a state of freedom from war or violence. It is not only preventing people from fighting, quarrelling or making disturbance or an agreement to end war. Peace is living in harmony within ourselves and with all those with whom we share the earth - the humans, the animals, the plants and also the five elements - earth, water, air, fire & sky. According to Hindu view of life, Dharma is the balance amongst the person, the society, the nature and the ultimate source God. This balance naturally results in pleasant harmonious tranquility that is Peace.

If this peace is to be established the human mind must be trained or transformed. That is possible only if value education is encouraged or spirituality enhanced. The overdose of Aristotalian approach has made the modern world rational, logical, exploitative, mechanistic, materialistic and self centered. This makes the nations expansionist & aggressive the society fanatically agitative & the individuals hedonistic. The cut-throat competition on these levels disturbs the harmony and peace is threatened.

The spiritual approach through the prayers & meditation tame the human psyche and prepare it for caring & sharing with others as the Holy Bible says, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' The seeds of this love are sown in the heart through prayers.

Prayers are solemn humble requests to God. They express gratitude & thank the object of worship. They make the mind mild, sober, serene tranquil & receptive. In such a soil only, the seeds of peace can sprout, grow & flourish. The subtle thought of Universal love naturally springs there. The brotherhood of man stems from the fatherhood of God! There dawns the Peace. The Bible itself begins with a compelling vision of the Garden of Eden. It ends with the hope and possibility of having heaven once again on Earth, provided we make the necessary changes. Prayer is

not magic. It's applied consciousness. You cannot expect God to fulfill your request unless there is an intimate connection with the spirit.

Be alert at all times praying that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34)

The one thing that can make the Lord's Prayer real is focused Devotion & enlightenment rather than mechanical repetition.

Prayers become strongest & most effective when they are done whole heartedly & the our lives are lived in accordance with the spirit of the prayer. In Sanskrit it is customary to say कर्मणा-मनसा-वाचा! Uttering of the words must be accompanied by likewise emotions as well as matching deeds in everyday life. So, we should not only pray in words but also take inspiration from the words of prayer and work for universal love & peace.

Therefore, only we people who have gathered here for this noble meet and who are feeling like this are expected to work for peace. Jesus said - God is love, fear not, be still, know the truth, Love your neighbor as thyself. Love one another as I have loved you. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Sermon on the Mount, Mathew 5:9) Peace shall shower when there shall be aspiration from below & the Grace form above.

The Vedas pray as -

असतो मा सद्गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय । मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ।

O Lord - lead me from unreal to the Real, from darkness to the Light & from death to immortality. The philosopher, mystic Saint Shri Jnaneshwar Maharaj made the Universal prayer seven centuries ago as -

जे खळांची व्यंकटी सांडो । तथा सत्कर्मि रति वाढो
भूतां परस्परे जडो । मैत्र जीवाचे ॥
दुरिताचे तिमिर जावो । विश्व स्वधर्मसूर्ये पाहो ।
जो जे बांछील तो ते लाहो । प्राणिजात ॥

Meaning - Let Evil people shed their evilness completely & develop liking for good deeds and let all beings develop amongst themselves intimate fellowship. Darkness of the sins should vanish from the world and Sun of righteousness should dawn and all beings receive whatever they desire or want.

The pithy & complete prayer sung all over Bharat from times unknown is most expressive -

सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः ।
सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चित् दुःखभाग् भवेत् ॥

May all beings be happy, may all be without disease, may all perceive auspicious sights, and may no one have to undergo sufferings.

What else does the mankind require? I believe all our faiths have got such noble philanthropic prayers. Let all of us make up our minds for the actualization of them. Let us all preach for spiritual qualities such as love, forgiveness, creativity, self-sacrifice & control of baser animalistic instincts. Let us walk together, talk together and think alike. Let there be no conflict amongst faiths. Let all faiths unite and accept all noble thoughts from each other. Let Universal Brotherhood & Love take place amongst us. Let the world be one family. Let us join our hands for it whole heartedly and say with St. Francis of Assise 'Lord, make me the instrument of thy Peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love' & then I am sure our prayers shall make God shower peace upon all and bring the heaven to Earth.

ॐ Shanti Shanti Shanti