



# Prayer With Full Understanding

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AsatOmA sadgamaya |  
tamasOmA jyotirgamaya |  
mRityOrmA amRitaM gamaya |

*Lead us from the unreal to the real.  
Lead us from ignorance to knowledge.  
Lead us from mortality to immortality.*

These mantras, which we all chant at the end of our prayers, are from the Brihadarnyaka Upanishad. By the chanting of these mantras, we are requesting certain specific things

from the Lord. But we need to understand clearly (1) what exactly it is we are asking the Lord to do (that is, the goals we are seeking), and (2) how we expect Him to accomplish these tasks (that is, the means for accomplishing these goals).

A good initial question is whether the Real, Knowledge and Immortality – the three things that we are requesting – are really separate goals (since we are making three separate petitions), or actually one and the same goal – and only appearing different when viewed from three different angles. If they are all the same, then why request them in three different ways – unless we are confused, not knowing exactly what we want? Or is it that we want to insure that the Lord hears our prayers, one way or the other?



Another important question at the outset is we want these three particular goals – instead of, say, moksa (liberation) or freedom from samsara (suffering)? What is the use of having these three boons and still suffering due to samsara? Why not pray directly for moksa?

In other words, we need to have a clear understanding of what our prayer really means. So let us examine the Vedic mantras more closely.

### · The Real: AsatOma sadgamaya |

The first prayer says, “Lead us from asat to sat – that is, from the unreal to the real.” In fact, the terms asat and sat are normally translated as nonexistence and existence, respectively. So we are asking the Lord to lead us from nonexistence to existence.

Closer examination of this meaning reveals an inherent contradiction: If we are nonexistent to begin with, then our request for existence has some validity. However, since we must exist if we are reciting the prayer, does not the prayer itself presuppose our existence? And if that is so, doesn’t that make it a useless prayer – since we are asking Him to do that which is already an accomplished fact?

It will be a waste of His time and ours unless asat has some other meaning than non-existence. Some darshanikas argue that the terms are mutually exclusive; i.e., that which is not asat must be sat, and that which is not sat must be asat. If so, then we are asking the Lord to do something impossible. Lord Krishna declared thousands of years ago in the Bhagavad Gita that, “naasato vidyate bhaavo naabhaavo vidyate sataH” (2-16) – “nonexistence can never come into existence and existence can never become nonexistent.” It is an absolute Law of Conservation that applies not only to matter and energy, but to subtler entities like jivas (individual souls). Krishna says:

natvevAhum jAtu nAsam, na tvam nEmE janAdhipAH |  
na caiva nabhavshAmah sarvE yayaH mataH param | |

“There was never a time when I was not; there was never a time you were not, nor all these kings arrayed before us. There will never be a time when they are absent. Hence, that which exists can never cease to exist.”

Based on this, the first part of our prayer appears to be in vain.

### · Knowledge: tamasOma jyotirgamaya |

Now let us examine the second prayer, “Lead us from ignorance to knowledge.” We do not specify here exactly what ignorance we are referring to – is it ignorance of chemistry, physics, biology, the world; or ignorance of everything? In the Mundakopanishad the student approaches his teacher and asks:

kasminno bhaghavo vijnaate sarvam idam vijnaatam bhavati

“Ha! Bhagavan, please teach me that, by knowing which I will have knowledge of everything!” Now that is really a pretty tall request. Is that what we are requesting in our prayer, tamasOma jyotirgamaya?

When we say “I have knowledge,” or “He is a knowledgeable person,” we only mean “knowledge of x.” That is, “knowledge” always refers to a particular area or object – it is objective knowledge; it is qualified knowledge. Epistemologically, knowledge without qualification is indefinable. So in asking the Lord to lead us from ignorance to knowledge, we are using two unqualified and therefore indefinable terms. We are requesting something that we ourselves are unable to properly define.

### · Immortality: mRityOrma amRitaM gamaya |

The third part of the prayer says, “Lead us from mortality to immortality.” And there is a problem here too. The very request assumes that we are mortal, since we were born at such and such a time and place. The whole Gitopadesham started because of Arjuna’s apprehension that he was going to kill his own teachers and grandsires, in whose lap he grew up:

gurUnahatvA hi mahAnubhAvaan shreyobhOktum bhaixya  
maplha loke |

“It would be better to beg alms and live, rather than kill these great teachers and noble souls.”

Hence, like us, Arjuna is aware of our mortality. Krishna confirms this by stating the Law of Eternal Recycle, which follows from the Law of Conservation: That which is born has to die, and that which dies has to be reborn:

### jAtasyahi dRivo mRituH, dRivam janma mRitasya ca |

Hence, if one considers himself as mortal, he can never be immortal. On the other hand, if he knows he is immortal – because of the above statement of Krishana (na tve vaaham ...) – then the request to “lead us from mortality to immortality” is either impossible, since anything that is born has to die; or useless, since it is already an accomplished fact – existence can never cease to exist.

Based on this analysis, the third part of the prayer, “mRityOrma amRitaM gamaya,” also appears to be in vain. In the scriptures, a sage calls us shRinvantu vishve amRitasya putrAH – the sons of immortality. Immortality is our birthright.

Thus, all three requests that we’ve made in our prayer appear to be in vain. If we just repeat the mantras without understanding, like a parrot, then we have no way of knowing even if the Lord grants us our request – because we have no idea what we asked for!



In addition, we are making these requests without even knowing whether we are qualified to receive that which we are asking for. It's as if a child were to go to a university professor and asking him for knowledge of quantum mechanics, without knowing even what the term means, and without knowing whether he is qualified to receive that knowledge or not.

But since these are Upanishadic mantras, there must be a deeper meaning involved.

### The Nature of Knowledge

Knowledge, prama, can be known through pramaana (a means of knowledge) when there is a pramaata (knower) and prameya (object of knowledge). Normally, I can only have objective knowledge. The means of knowledge are basically three: (1) pratyaxa (perceptual); (2) anumaana (inferential); and shabda (scriptural). The first two are related to lokika prameyas (worldly objective knowledge), while the third is shruti praamaana (revelatory knowledge) – that is, it is for aloukika prameyas (the knowledge of dharma, swarga, naraka, etc.).

Any prameya, or object of knowledge, can be known only through its attributes or qualities. In fact, the definition of an object is based on its attributes, which differ from those of other objects in the Universe. The senses can only measure these attributes and feed that data to the mind. The mind, in turn, integrates the inputs from the senses and provides an image – superimposing on that image the gathered attributes. The result is expressed as a thought in the mind.

Thus, a chair “out there” is recognized by its form, color, and other properties as perceived by the senses; and the image of that chair is formed in the mind with these attributes. So the cognitive process involves perception, volition and cognition. The cognized image with the perceived attributes is next compared with the images stored in our memory. When there is a reasonable match, we “recognize” that this thing out there is a chair. In reality, however – from the mind's point of view – the chair out there is only a “chair-thought” in the mind. So if there is no mind (i.e., if we are asleep or lost in our dreams, etc.), there is no chair out there. Out of mind is out of sight!

In fact, very existence of a chair – or any object for that matter; even the entire world “out there” – cannot be established without the mind, supported by the conscious entity present. The existence of the world has to be proved or established by a conscious entity, since it is jadam, or inert;

whereas a conscious entity exists independently of the world. The world “out there” is a dependent, whereas “I,” i.e., the conscious entity, is an independent entity. In fact, the self-conscious entity alone is a self-existent entity, while the inert entity must always depend on a self-conscious entity for its existence.

The most important point to note here is that the senses can grasp only the attributes of an object, but not its substantive essence. Hence, knowledge of all objects “out there” is only attributive knowledge; never substantive knowledge. The reason is that the substantive for all objects is nothing but Brahman, since according to our scriptures Brahman is the material cause for the Universe. The Taittiriya Upanishad says “yatova imaani bhuutani jaayante ...” – “That from which the whole Universe arose, by which it is sustained and into which it returns is Brahman.”



Brahman cannot be known by the senses. From the above analysis too, we cannot independently establish that there is a chair materialy “out there.” For if we look at, say, a wooden chair closely, we find that there is no such essentially substantive thing as a “chair” – it is only a name given to a certain form of wood. What is actually “there” is only wood. Moreover, if we then examine the wood closely, we find that there is really no wood there. It is just an assemblage of organic fibers, which are in turn are made up of molecular chains, which are in turn but assemblages of various atoms.

And we can keep going: Atoms are themselves an assemblage of electrons, protons and neutrons, which are in turn an assemblage of more fundamental matter. We soon come to a quantum level where we cannot precisely analyze the system, since the very act of examining the fundamental matter affects the system observed. So we cannot say with certainty what is “out there” at the fundamental level. We can only say that, at each relative level (vyavahaara), that “a chair is out there,” or “wood is out there” or organic fibers, or molecules or atoms, and so on. The knowledge changes as we shift our reference.

### The Real and the Apparent

In short, the knowledge of any object is only relative knowledge and not absolute knowledge. The scriptures correctly point out that what is there is only Brahman, with different names and forms. Bhagavan Shankara says in Drikdrisya Viveka:

asti bhaati priyam ruupam naamam chaityanca pancakam |  
adhyatrayam brahma ruupam, jagat ruupam tathaa dvayam



Every object has as its five aspects Existence, illumination, desirability, form and name. Of these five, the first three belong to Brahman while the other two, name and form, belong to the world. This means that the manifest world we live in is nothing but an assemblage of objects with names and forms (all are attributive), which are superficial since they do not have any substantiality of their own. – the underlying substance of everything is Brahman alone. Hence the Upanishads declare,

*sarvam khalvidam brahma; neha naanaasti kincana*

All of 'this' is nothing but Brahman; there is nothing other than Brahman.

What there is, is only Brahman – and we cannot gain substantive experience of Brahman by any means of knowledge alone. It is like a ring, a bangle, a bracelet, and a necklace made of gold. Each one is different, with their own attributes (guna) and purpose, each differing from that of others. Yet those attributes (such as i.d. or o.d., or thickness, size, shape, etc.) do not belong to the gold, the substance of all these ornaments.

Although we say, from the point of vyavahaara, that the ring, or the bangle, etc., arises from gold, is sustained by gold and returns into gold – the truth is they are all just gold in different forms and names. The process of gold becoming jewelry or ornamentation is a "transformation-less transformation," since the gold remains gold throughout the transformation. In the same vein, the Ch. Upanishad declares:

*vaachaarambhanam vikaaro naama dheyam*

"Creation is nothing but an apparent transformation" – just like gold becoming ornaments. Is the ring, bangle, bracelet, etc., real or unreal? They appear to be real, but in reality they are nothing but gold and gold alone. What must I do to see the gold in the ring? I don't have to destroy the ring. Rather, like a goldsmith, I must learn to see gold in and through the ring – by paying more attention, not to the object's superficial name and form but to its substance.

That which appears to be real, but can be negated, is called *mithya*, which Shankara defines as *sat asat vilaxanam*. One cannot say that the ring does not exist, since one can obviously decorate oneself with it. But at the same time one cannot say the ring really exists either, since what actually exists "out there" is only gold. Hence, it is called *mithya*.

### Accessing the Deeper Meaning

Scripture sometimes uses the word "asat" for *mithya*. Hence the first prayer – "Lead me from the unreal to the real" – is essentially a request for the discriminative power to see Brahman, the substantive of the world.

Here "seeing" means understanding, since Brahman cannot be an object by any *pramaana* (*aprameyam*). The *Mandukya Upanishad* starts with the declaration that "Om" is nothing but all "this"; that all "this" is nothing but Brahman; and that

Brahman is nothing but the Self that I am. Hence, in the prayer "astOma sadgamaya," we are asking the Lord to lead us to the realization that "I am that Brahman" – the real entity. That is liberation, or *moksha*, since the realization that "I am Brahman" means becoming that Brahman – the limitless "That I am." *Brahma vit brahmaiva bhavati* – the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman, say the scriptures.

A finite "I" cannot become the infinite Brahman; that would be mathematically illogical. However, if I am already infinite and only think that I am finite – and thus suffer the consequences of that thinking – then I am simply ignorant of my true Self. All I need is a convincing teaching that I am not what I think I am; that, rather, I am the totality, the substantive essence and being of the entire Universe. Hence, in the prayer "tamasoma jyotirgamaya," I am asking the Lord to help me to know myself.

This self-knowledge is not the kind of objective or attributive knowledge that we discussed above; the knowledge of one's own self cannot be objectified and therefore cannot be defined. It is recognition of one's self, with Vedanta as *pramaana*, as expounded by the teacher. Here Vedanta acts like a mirror, a *darashana*, in the hands of a teacher – reflecting my true nature in contrast to what I think I am. Hence, the prayer, "Oh Lord, lead me from ignorance to knowledge." Here, the process is one of knowing the identity of the self with Brahman (*ayam aatma brahma*); and that is *moksa*, or liberation, too. Bondage is only notional; it is not real – and therefore it can be removed by knowledge.

Finally, once I recognize that I am that eternal, all-pervading Brahman – which is of the nature of *sat*, existence that never ceases to exist – I recognize myself as eternal and immortal. Death is only notional, since there is neither birth nor death; as when a ring is destroyed to form a bangle, the gold itself remains unaffected. Hence, in the prayer "mRityormaa amRitam gamaya," I am only praying for the knowledge to recognize myself as the immortal entity that I already am.

So now we can understand that all three of these prayers are for the realization of our own true nature – a realization that can happen only when we drop the notions that "I am this body-mind-intellect complex." By identifying with the body, I consider myself to be mortal – hence the prayer, "Lead me from mortality to immortality." By identifying with limited intellect, I consider myself to be ignorant – hence the prayer, "Lead me from ignorance to knowledge." By identifying myself as this *jiiva* with its limited body-mind complex, I consider the unreal world to be real, and I suffer the consequences of this misunderstanding. And so I pray, "Lead me from unreality to reality."

All three prayers involve seeking the knowledge that "I am that *Satyam-Jnaanam-Anantan*;" that I am Brahman, from which the whole world arises, by which it is sustained, and into which it is finally reabsorbed.

So let us now pray with full understanding:

