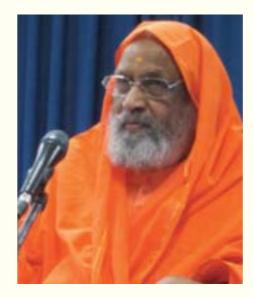
## The Significance of the Śãnti Mantra from the Sãma Veda for a Seeker of Self-Knowledge

## by Julie Carpenter



The current three-year course at AVG, Anaikatti, is well into its second year. What can one say about the blessings of Pujya Swamiji given to the students of these threeyear-courses? To participate in the course is a gift for which there is no measure. To obtain a human birth is a rare event. To have the desire for moksa during that human birth is also not an ordinary thing. What to speak then of finding oneself studying Vedanta at the feet of Pujya Swamiji, whose abidance in and clarity of the knowledge, makes him the greatest teacher of Vedanta and Sanskrit alive today. It requires grace – a lot of grace.

This grace is like an underground spring. It is there, but has to be tapped into through prayer. As Swamiji has himself said, he is absolutely certain that every student of the three-year-courses must have prayed, either in this life or a previous life, for without seeking the grace for this knowledge one does not come to the pursuit. How can one arrive at such a conclusion? Perhaps the question is better said by asking, how can one not arrive at such a conclusion? The phalam from prayer



can be anything. One may pray for family, for wealth, health and even things for after one leaves the body, such as going to heaven. In fact, the first portion of the Vedas will help one to focus prayers and actions to gain specific ends. What if the desired end is moksa?

Prayer is needed to gain the grace for antahkãrana šuddhi, along with emotional maturity for the knowledge to be assimilated. Therefore, if one has come to the teacher prior to being fully prepared, one is going to require grace for the preparation as well as the study. One cannot know what is in one's prãrabhda karma. There are many obstacles that may arise in the form of sickness, rãgadvesa, or numerous distractions that might manifest, and take one away from the teacher and the teaching. For this reason, one prays. Prayer is the only antidote to prārabhdha karma. While that prayer might not be able to fully alter what manifests, it will give one the requisite physical and



mental strength to overcome the obstacles without getting discouraged or distracted.

It is by İšvara's grace alone that anything occurs - there is not a single nanosecond that is without Isvara's grace - the so-called obstacle is also *lšvara's* grace. How to bring that grace into focus? One can say a general prayer, a "sprayer" as Pujya Swamiji calls it, but as a student of Vedanta one has to use discrimination, to be clear about what it is one is seeking, what one is really wanting. The prayer found at the beginning of each Upanisad known as śãnti mantra help students gain clarity, not only to see what they are really seeking, but also in terms of what is needed to prepare the mind for the knowledge. As Sadhviji often tells us, when the mind is prepared, the knowledge just walks in, sits down and has a cup of tea! Where is the grace most needed for students of Vedanta? The śãnti mantra of the Sãma Veda, beautifully answers this question for the student.

Om ãpyãyantu mamãṇgãni vãkprãṇaścaksuh śrotramatho balamindriyãṇi ca sarvãṇi sarvaṁ brahmaupanicṣadaṁ mãham brahma nirãkuryãṁ mã mã brahma nirãkarot anirãkaraṇamastvanirãkaraṇaṁ me astu tadãtmani nirate ya upaniṣatsu dharmãste mayi santu, te mayi santu

om śāntih, śāntih, śāntih Om may my limbs, speech, pr na, eyes, ears, gain strength, and my senses develop fully All that is, is Brahman, revealed by the Upanic ads May I never abandon Brahman May Brahman never reject me Let there no disowning, let there be no disowning for me *May all the qualifications (of the student) extolled* by the Upanic ads abide in me, the one committed to knowing the self. May they reside in me. Let there be freedom from disturbance from acts of God, from the five elements and elementals, and from myself.

om ãpyãyantu mamāngāni vākprānaścaksuh śrotramato balamindriyāni ca sarvāni: The student invokes the grace of Bhagavan with the word of blessing, "om," and then begins the prayer. "O Lord, bless my limbs, speech, eyes and ears, along with all other organs, including memory, so that they not only function well, but also gain the strength necessary for this pursuit of moksa." For the student of Vedanta there can be no study without a healthy body. All the sense organs, including the mind, must be functioning, along with the body. If one cannot hear, how can one do 'sravanam'? Additionally, if the body is in discomfort, one's focus may be compromised. Pujya Swamiji has often commented how he has seen students do 'yoga' during Vedanta classes -moving their heads from side to side, stretching this limb or that limb trying to find a comfortable position. If the body is uncomfortable, even as one is in the process of recognizing that one is not the body-mindsense complex, the mind continues to be obsessed with the area of the physical discomfort. Or, it could be that the digestive tract is actively rebelling against having had one too many idlis at breakfast.

The idlis, making their presence felt throughout the class, compete strongly to be

heard alongside the instruction of "tattvamsi," thereby threatening to compromise the learning process. Having asked for grace to have the physical preparedness, the second sentence focuses on what the student is seeking to understand.

sarvam brahmopanişadam. Everything is Brahman as revealed in the sastra. That Brahman is everything cannot be understood without the sastra - it is why sastra is pramana the means of knowledge for understanding the truth of oneself. What does everything mean? One way the sastra reveals this is by using pairs of words that have the opposite meaning of each other. Thus if one says that Brahman is all that is known and unknown, manifest and unmanifest, nothing is left unaccounted for - including one's self. One must come to know this truth, without doubt, vagueness, or error, in order to know that one is indeed complete just as one is and is not the samsari that due to ignorance one thought oneself to be. In one small sentence, the prayer captures the entire teaching of the sastra, reconnecting the student immediately to the focus of the study.

māham brahma nirākuryām. Let me not negate this pursuit for knowledge. Let me not negate the object of study –Brahman, which is really the subject —the truth of myself. Negating Brahman is indeed total self-denial. With Pujya Swamiji's grace, the full-time students in Anaikatti have an opportunity to immerse themselves completely in the study, without day-to-day duties such as working, raising children, providing food for a family, all of which can interfere with the primary focus of the seeker. The students here are indeed free to pursue the teaching, but we are not absolved from having to face the obstacles within. Most of these blocks are centered on the core issue that brings one to the study in the first place – a sense of self-inadequacy. This inadequacy can manifest in many ways around the teaching and the ashram life, and no matter what the trigger that sets the perpetuating cycle of self-doubt into motion, it takes grace to continually be committed to owning and resolving the source of the triggers within, which is the key to staying focused on the path.

mâ mâ brahma nirâkarot: May Îġvara never reject me.



Considering that the self is Isvara, how can one be abandoned by Isvara? We have to read this line to mean, "May I always be a receptacle for Bhagavân's grace." The grace of Isvara may be pouring into one's life, but occluded by one's desires or fears, one might be unable to recognize it. This is exemplified well by Arjuna at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gîta. Having discovered that the war for dharma is to be waged against his relatives, including his elders and teachers, Arjuna -overwhelmed by the love for "his people" and unable to make a choice between what is right and wrongcries out to Lord Krishna, "Na hi prapaœyâmi mamâpanudyâd yacchokam ucchoshanam indriyânam" (Gîta 2.8) He says, "I don't see anything that will take away this sorrow that scorches my senses." All this, while Arjuna is sitting right behind the Lord, who is leading the way by driving his chariot!

Pujya Swamiji says that while we all accept without question what the sensory organs perceive and the mind concludes, there is ample evidence to note that the information that senses bring, and the conclusion one draws based on the information, are frequently lacking any sambandha connection. For instance, what do we see when the sun "rises" or "sets"? We may know that it is in fact the earth's orbit around



the sun that causes this apparent rising and setting - and yet daily the eves report that the sun makes an arc across the sky from East to West. Until the knowledge settles, one's subjective perceptions

might make one miss the grace that sustains everything, including all the opportunities provided for one to study. Therefore, we pray for the reduction in subjectivity, so that we can pursue the knowledge without becoming discouraged.

1. anirakaranmastu anirakaranam me'stu: This request for the grace to sustain the pursuit is important as it is repeated again in the next sentence. Once started, one must study for a period of time. A question

that is routinely asked by students is, "How long is a period of time?" Pujya Swamiji usually says, "Some time," and at other times will say that there is nothing to reach, no where to go, that one is already that whole - therefore one can just relax and enjoy the journey. One may come to the study with gusto, much like a soda can that bubbles wildly that when first opened. After a while one can lose enthusiasm for any number of reasons, and like the once-fizzy drink, become "flat" with regard to the study. Being a student often brings this up. If one is not alert, the pressure to perform as a student starts to compete with the desire to know Brahman, which can distract one from what must always be the focus of study -freedom from saA s ra, characterized by sorrow and fear. One, therefore, prays for the grace to sustain the pursuit of the knowledge so that the desire to study is protected from disenchantment until the truth of oneself is fully assimilated. No matter how long it takes, the mumukc u requires Bhagavan's grace to stay committed to the pursuit.

tadâtmani nirate ya upanishadatsu dharmâste mayi santu, te mayi santu: Finally, a



student of brahmavidya needs to be prepared to receive this teaching. The final line of the prayer is for the qualities needed to gain the knowledge, as stated in the Upanishads, abide in the student, the one who is committed to this pursuit. The word *dharmâh*, refers to the qualities of *sama*, a resolved mind, *dama*, discipline over the organs of actions and sense organs, *uparati*, letting go of external crutches, *titiksha*, dropping complaining, *sraddhâ*, trust in the teacher and the ability of the ġâstra, as the pramâna, to deliver the knowledge, and *samâdhâna*, single-minded focus.

*om sântih, sântih, sântih*: With everything that the student needs having been asked for, the mantra, as every prayer, ends with a final request to be free from the three sources of obstacles. May there be freedom from disturbances to the study in the form of *âdhidaivika*, situations over which there is no control, *âdhibhautika*, from distractions in the immediate surroundings, and *âdhyâtmika*, from blocks within oneself. For all of us on this pursuit of moksa, I pray this mantra bestows the grace that is required for success.