

# Prayer in the Life of a Sikh®

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@ Recommended reading: *Ardas Shakti (Punjabi)* by Raghbir Singh Bir (Pub: Atam Science Trust, A-1, Kalindi Colony, New Delhi 110 065)

A SACRED SPACE FOR PRAYER is found in every culture and civilization as far back in history as we can search. Indeed human beings of all ages seem to be born with an innate urge to pray in order to connect with a higher source of love and energy whenever they need comfort or direction.

The power of prayer in the life of a Sikh is particularly noticeable universally. Sikhs recite a formal prayer as a part of their religious services jointly with the congregation. They join the congregation in melodious recitation along with other worshippers. Further, the Sikhs recite silent prayers more often as a part of their daily life and continue to do so in their quieter moments. I do not imply that Sikhism is the only religion stressing on prayer. Prayer is a spiritual practice that occurs millions of times each hour worldwide. It is estimated that 3-4 billion prayers are said each day intended for God or some other higher Entity.

## **Invocation:**

Although religions are diverse, we can feel the sense of a common experience among them whenever we visit the prayer recitations from any religion, be it Sikhism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam. We may visit them in diverse cultural milieu such as in Africa, China, India, Egypt, or North America. Everywhere we go we will discover a hundred feelings and longings in prayer. Thus, prayer is a common denominator among all religions.

Many times, the prayer is simply a thanksgiving and gratitude. Other times, it is a concern for self and for family. Often, it is seeking of an assistance in anticipation or healing, a longing for peace or a wish for greater wisdom, or some time for salvation and delivery.

In ancient cultures the prayer was usually practiced as a way to ask for specific goals or special favors. Guru Nanak tells us that this type of prayer may or may not be effective. Among his followers, there is emphasis to put aside all selfish desires so they can experience communion with God without hindrance from worldly egos.

At this point, the basic wish of Sikhs who pray is that God's Will be done and they be blessed with strength to accept that Will when the tests are given. There is no better way to open up to the universal, loving, and creative energy that is available to human species. As far as we know, lower species have not yet developed enough consciousness to pray. To a human practitioner, this is a special gift. To them the resulting awe is far greater than any one could imagine. This awe is the source of faith and unconditional love that seem to perform miracles.

Prayer, then, becomes more than a means to an end; it becomes a state of both humility and awe at the same time. It manifests those virtues irrespective of whether we are engaged in washing the floor, distributing the food, or composing a prayer.

### **Miracle of Prayer:**

There are many examples of personal lives that are positively affected by prayer. My long time friend, Manmohan Singh Kohli, is a born Sikh and was raised a Sikh. As the Sikh tradition goes, Mohan's father imprinted the value of prayer in Mohan's mind right from the beginning during his growing up. His recent book, *Miracles of Ardaas* (prayer in the Western vocabulary), describes his story of how he made use of our traditional prayer as his spiritual tool to soothe his nerves during the ups and downs of his life. Mohan's autobiography brings together an inspirational collection of events in the life of a Sikh friend with whom I spent my childhood and similar intimate moments in adult life. He describes events from his childhood ranging from his expeditions to Himalayas, his rise in his professional pursuits, and all other ups and downs in his family.

His experiences tell a personal story of miracles wrought by his prayers, the personal experiences that make a prayer desirable for all circumstances, ages and traditions. In addition, it offers an insight on the nature of prayer that will be meaningful for a serious seeker of any religion and philosophy. Mohan's experiences are corroborated by many scientific experiments.

### **Gift of God:**

Prayer of my parents for my birth was the first clue given to me for my task in my spiritual life. On their own, they felt unproductive in having a child, which took them to the famous Sikh place of pilgrimage, Gurdwara Sri Panja Sahib, located in North West Pakistan. They prayed for a child who would advance Guru's mission in his mortal life and their wish was rewarded. My second clue came later from their prayer at the same holy place for healing of their first born child whom the physician had declared doomed to a terminal illness.

Many years ago, researchers in USA designed experiments to verify whether prayer had any efficacy in healing of the sick. They enrolled seriously ill patients in hospitals and divided them into experimental groups. While being medically treated for a variety of illness, some were scheduled to be prayed for while others were not. The same best medical care was continued for patients of all groups during the experiment.

At the end of this experiment, it became evident that the patients in the prayed-for group made better recovery than those not prayed for. This result was all the more astonishing when it was discovered that the person doing the praying didn't have to know the patient personally, or even to know their names. Similarly, the patients were not told that they were being prayed for. The researchers reported that recovery of surgery patients could be improved 50-100% by some one's prayer.

The reality of prayer in Mohan's life, in my own life, and life of many others is a striking illustration that there is a reachable place beyond every day life. It unfolds spirit of those mysteries that begin to make an impact. It strengthens a declared guiding principle of the John Templeton Foundation that what we know is vastly exceeded by what we do not know. Here, one can not help surrender to the notion sung in the hymns of Guru Granth that there is a constant participation of the higher powers in life. Then, the guardianship of that power gives you a feeling of immeasurable strength.

As the famous doctor, Deepak Chopra says: "Of all the clues God left for us to find Him, the greatest is the prayer. Here your brain and your deity are fused in order to invoke strength to see God's Will happen. Thus, prayer is communion with the Divine, a universal and loving creative force (*Karta Purakh* in Sikh vocabulary) that prevails in a variety of ways for people around the world.

Thus, every experience of prayer seems to have a clue about the working of Divine; it is left to us to be on the lookout for those clues. Teachings of prayer in the Sikhs' holy gospel, Guru Granth, challenge us to be keen observers of mysteries encircling our lives.

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## **Uplifting Power of Ardas**

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THE WORD *ARDAS* IS DERIVED from the Persian word *ARZ DASHT* (Petition) meaning a request to a superior authority. *Ardas* is not a part of Guru Granth Sahib but has evolved over a period of time as the community struggled and won victories and got into a thanksgiving mode.

In *Sikh Ardas* we start by evoking the timeless one, the Ten Gurus and the living guru, the Guru Granth Sahib. It is followed by the mentioning of the Sikh deeds of bravery and the brave Sikhs who were involved in them. The Sikh role models, the martyrs and heroes are given due respect and the community expresses its gratitude to them for helping the community under difficult circumstances. In short, *Sikh Ardas* is not only a humble request but has mind/soul uplifting echoes.

### **Internationalise the Divine:**

*Ardas* also points to the importance Sikhs give to Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar, India, along with other places of worship and their banners. *Sikh Ardas* helps Sikhs to internalize the aspirations of the Sikh community as the Sikhs changed from Saints to Saint-soldiers. It also points to the Sikh belief system "where faith becomes assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen but attainable." Sikh prayer is a delightful uplifting spiritual experience in which the heart outpours its requests to Sat Guru as possibilities and begs for the blessing of faith and goodwill to all humanity.

Through *Ardas* the individual or *Sangat* can seek gifts such as humility, wisdom, purity, and protection through Divine Power. A request to empower in controlling the evil aspects of the mind, such as lust, wrath, greed or attachment is also made. From time to time, salutations to "Wondrous Lord" are made and Sikhs are reminded that Khalsa (pure) belongs to the Lord to whom the victory belongs; Sikhs are reminded that True Timeless Lord will fulfill all those who say PRAYERS in this manner by connecting their MIND/SOUL, to the Divine.

It is however important that *Sikh Ardas* be examined from the psycho-spiritual dimension. As a student of psychology, I feel that *Ardas* and saying it (verbalizing and visualizing it with deep conviction) while reaching the "Alpha State" of consciousness has a significant effect on the personality-functioning and mental health of the Sikhs. As the Sikhs emerged as an assertive nation, it could be that the

daily internalizing of ARDAS became part of their cognitive psyche. Their mounting enthusiasm to lead an assuring spiritual life filled with health, creative work, desire for civic action, and mastering the environment may have roots in their daily ARDAS. ARDAS helps them to whole-heartedly pursue their goals by developing autonomy and self-reliance without losing social sensitivity and self-actualization.

By remembering historical experiences of the community in Ardas, Sikhs stay in touch with their “collective unconscious”. Through ARDAS they develop an aptitude for capitalizing on their past struggles, self control, ability to envisage ideals, social reliability, predictability, capacity to act independently while acknowledging SAT GURU’S Grace and Hukam.

### **Power to Heal:**

It has been empirically established that ARDAS as a prayer produces FAITH which leads to healing. Famous Yale University Surgeon-Bernie Siegel, Dr. H. Benson, Harvard Medical School, Dr. David-Larson Director National Institute of Healthcare Research, U.S.A., Father Andrew M. Greely (noted Catholic researcher), Dr. Larry Dossey (heart specialist), Dr. Randolph Byrd - Cardiologist San Francisco General Hospital, Dr. Scott Walker - University of New Mexico, Dr. Kenneth Ferraro - Medical Sociologist, Purdue University, Thomas Onman - Psychiatrist Dartmouth University, U.S.A., Dr. Jared Kass - Harvard Psychologist, Dr. Bernard Grad - Biologist McGill University Montreal, Dr. Elizabeth McSherry Veteran’s Hospital Brockton MA, Rev. Billy Graham, Rev. Robert Schuller, Rabbi David Wolpe, Prof. Margaret Poloma - Sociologist, University of Akron, U.S.A. Dr. Andrew Weil Harvard, M.D. Director, California-based Institute of Noetic Science, Saint Thomas Aquinas 15<sup>th</sup> century Christian thinker, Dr. Richard Michael - Boston Psychologist, Dr. Jerome Frank - John Hopkins School of Medicine and many other academic leaders from the East and West endorse the power of prayer (ARDAS) in healing. They feel that prayer could be colloquial, petitionary, ritualistic and meditative. In the opinion of the present writer *Sikh Ardas* has components of all of the above methods of prayer.

During the *Sikh Ardas*, the whole *Sangat* experiences stillness, connectivity, and Wholeness and goes into meditative aspects, contemplative mode of consciousness. In the petitionary form of *Ardas*, the Sikhs tell Sat-Guru their concerns and gratitudes and petition Him for specific wishes. They also actively “listen” and aks Sat-Guru for directions. In meditative *Ardas*, the *Sangat* collectively “listens” to Sat-Guru through *SHABADS* and *NAAM Simran* which makes them experience His presence in the most intimate way. They become a partner in *Divine Hukam* and wait for His directions and blessings. After *Naam Simran*, the Sikhs wait for his “WAK: (from the Holy Granth), His words of wisdom. The prayer (*Ardas*) becomes a two-way street of *Nam Simran* and waiting for His *Hukam*. It leads them to unquestionable faith in Him.

Can *Ardas* reach those who are living away from home? Dr. R. Byrd Cardiologist San Fransciso General Hospital, Dr. Larry Dossey Heart Specialist Dallas Hospital, Dr. Jeff Levin Eastern Virginia Medical School, Dr. David Larson Director National Institute of Health Care Research, Dr. Scott Walker University of New Mexico, Thomas Onman Psychiatrist Dartmouth University, feel that the answer is yes.

I would end this discussion on the healing power of *Ardas* with a quote taken from a book written by Dr. H. Benson of Harvard University, Boston, entitled

*Timeless Healing, the Power & Biology of Belief* (1996, Page 305, Scibner, New York).

**“Our bodies are nourished and healed by prayer and other exercises of belief. To me this capacity does not seem to be a fluke, and the design does not seem haphazard. There is a “deliberate supernatural design”, a potency of faith which gets proven over and over again in my research.”**

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