

The Eight Flowers That Please God

Talk by Dr. Narendranath Reddy on New Year's Eve, 2014.

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I offer myself at the divine lotus feet of our dearest, omnipresent, loving Lord Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Greetings of loving *Sai Ram* to everyone.

I am grateful to Swami for giving us this opportunity to welcome the New Year by singing His glories and sharing His message. I wish all of you a happy, holy, and peaceful New Year. As part of our New Year festivities, we customarily spend time with friends and family and send New Year's greetings. E-greetings are now very popular. They are elaborate and festive with text and graphics of bright colors and with singing and dancing figures. Such e-greetings, in this day and age, are an additional way to express our joy.

Two words commonly used in New Year's greetings are "happiness" and "love." Swami says that although these words are commonly used, most people do not understand their true meaning. He took a human form to show us the true meaning. In fact, people all over the world, celebrating the New Year, are seeking happiness and love. But what is happiness? Swami has repeatedly stated, "Happiness is union with God." Until we are one with God, we cannot be truly happy. Most people celebrate the New Year with song, dance, and drink hoping to be merry and happy. But such celebrations produce only temporary pleasure, an interval between two pains. For example, people experience the pleasure of drink and they get a hang-over or a car accident or some other trouble and then they regret. Celebrating the New Year at places of worship, on the other hand, such as at a church, a temple or a Sai Center, offering love to God and communing with Him, contributes to real happiness.

How do we attain happiness? Swami has said that the royal road to happiness is the path of love. We can express this love by singing and sharing the glories of God, by communicating His message through stories, and by practicing His teachings. We also can make offerings of love to God. Offerings are an ancient tradition. When Jesus was born, the three wise men offered gold, frankincense (incense), and myrrh as tokens of their love. When Lord Rama was born, the Celestials showered flowers of worship as offerings of their love. Devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba offered many different types of gifts. Even after His *Mahasamadhi* in Shirdi, devotees offered a throne and a crown made of gold. In the past devotees made offerings of gold also to Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, including a large garland of gold coins and a gold crown. I have seen Swami decline such offerings. He declined the garland of gold coins and immediately declared, "This should be sold right away and the proceeds should be used to serve the needy." God does not want worldly gifts. Swami has repeatedly said, "I want only your love and not these expensive gifts." Wealthy devotees compete with each other to donate more and people who do not have the ability to donate feel badly.

We know that God does not measure His devotee's love by the value of material gifts. For example, Kuchela, the boyhood friend of Sri Krishna could not afford to give an expensive gift to his friend, the king of Dwaraka (and of course the Lord of the universe). All he could offer was parched rice. But Sri Krishna was touched by the sincerity and love of His poor friend and He ate the parched rice. Sri Krishna even washed the feet of Kuchela who then returned home to find that the Lord had given him tremendous wealth and a palace.

Lord Krishna simplified the tradition of making offerings for His devotees. He said that devotees need not offer valuable gifts. He would be pleased if devotees offered Him a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water (*Patram, pushpam, phalam, toyam*) with love and humility. Anything we give to Him with love, He will accept happily. Flower, fruit, leaf, and water are available to all. They are easy to offer to the Lord. Rukmini, the great devotee of Lord Krishna, offered just a *tulsi* leaf to Him and Lord Krishna was pleased. This simple offering of a *tulsi* leaf with love weighed more than all the gold and wealth that Sathyabhama offered to Lord Krishna. Similarly, Sabari, the great devotee of Lord Rama, offered a fruit to her Lord. Though she tasted it first, she offered it with great love and Lord Rama was pleased. He gave her liberation. The lesson of these stories is that anything we offer to the Lord should be given with love.

Sri Sathya Sai Baba has simplified for His devotees, to an even greater degree, the tradition of making offerings. We do not need to buy flowers or fruits. Swami tells us the real flower we should offer God is the flower of our pure heart. The fruit we should offer is the fruit of our good deeds. The water we should offer is the blissful tears of devotion that flow when we pine intensely for God. The leaf that we should offer—is a body utilized for selfless service. Leaves from a plant will dry with time and flowers from a garden will fade, losing their fragrance and shriveling within days. Water and fruits may spoil with time. But the offerings that please God do not fade or lose their fragrance. They do not shrivel or spoil with time. The true offerings are our good deeds, our pure hearts, our tears of joy flowing from intense longing for God, and a body sanctified by selfless service. If we offer these He is pleased.

On New Year's Day and on many other holidays, we send flowers to family or friends as an expression of love. We send flowers for Mother's Day and Valentine's Day; for weddings, memorial services, and festivals. In fact, we spend hundreds of dollars every year on flowers. Tomorrow, the Tournament of Roses parade will be held in Pasadena, California. Millions of roses are utilized for this parade and millions of dollars are spent. But expensive expressions of love do not please God. Swami says that God is pleased when you offer the real flowers of worship to Him. He says it beautifully in Telugu: "*Poovulenne thechi pujalu chesina metsukonadu tanu putsukonadu, Hridaya Pushpamivva sadayudai grahinchuu Sathya Sai santhi prema, dayi.*" "You may bring any number and any variety of flowers. Neither will I accept nor am I pleased. But I will happily accept the pure flower of your heart and grant you peace and love."

On a number of occasions in discourses, Swami has described beautifully the flowers of worship that God likes.¹ He has emphasized eight flowers of devotion that we can offer to Him. The first flower is *ahimsa*, non-violence; the second flower is *indriya nigraham*, sense control; the third flower is *sarva bhoota dayapushpam*, compassion for all beings; the fourth flower is *kshamapushpam*, forbearance; the fifth flower is *santhipushpam*, peace; the sixth flower is *thapopushpam*, penance and austerity; the seventh flower is *dhyanaushpam*, meditation; and finally, the eighth flower is *sathyapushpam*, truth.

The first flower to offer to God is *ahimsapushpam*, the flower of non-violence. Lord Buddha has said, “*Ahimsa paramo dharma.*” The highest *dharma* is *ahimsa*. Non-violence is much more than simply not participating in physical violence. Of course we should not physically assault another being. Physical violence is demonic. In addition, we should never hurt another being with words. The damage done by words is more powerful and more lasting than physical violence. Swami says that the scars from physical violence heal but the scars from verbal abuse linger, perhaps for years and sometimes for generations. We should therefore be careful with our choice of words. We should never use hurtful, critical words or find fault with others. Jesus said, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.”² Swami has said that when a person finds fault and points one finger at someone else, three fingers are pointing back at the critic. Therefore finding fault is the greatest *himsa*, the greatest violence. Swami once told the students, “You are all terrorists.” We were surprised since we knew they are such good boys. Swami was referring to the most subtle level of violence, the level of thought. Swami says even having a negative thought is violence. Thus, whenever we think negatively about others, we are exhibiting a form of violence. An example of a good Sai devotee, who truly passed the test given by Swami, was Mr. Gopal Rao. He lived for one-hundred years. He was the chairman of Andhra Bank for many years and he was an exemplary devotee of Swami.

Swami celebrated Mr. Gopal Rao’s one-hundredth birthday in Sai Kulwant Hall on a grand scale. Gopal Rao was close to Swami. He was not only dear to Swami but he was also near to Swami. He used to travel with Swami in His car. On one such occasion, Gopal Rao was with Swami in His car and Swami was describing the bad behavior of a devotee who was living in the ashram. Swami told Gopal Rao, “Tell him to behave properly and correct his defects.” Gopal Rao replied, “Swami, that man is a senior devotee. I am here for only fifteen years. He has been here thirty years. How can I tell him?” Swami smiled. Gopal Rao continued, “He has also sacrificed more than me. He is a big business man. He gave up his business and money and came to live in the *ashram*. And thirdly, I have so many faults of my own, Swami. How can I correct that man?” Finally he said, “Swami, if he didn’t listen to You, God, why will he listen to me?” Swami replied, “I wanted to test you and see what you would say.” Gopal Rao said, “Swami, I got out on the right side of my bed today. By Your grace I was able to pass the test and answer

¹ For example, see: *Dharmakshetra* 5-12-1981, *Sathya Sai Speaks* 15.9; *Prasanthi Nilayam* 22-8-00, *Sathya Sai Speaks* 33.12

² Luke 6:42.

You properly today. Without Your grace I would have failed.” This story is an example of how the Lord tests us regarding criticism. Hence, the first flower, non-violence, includes not criticizing others. So, let us not criticize others.

The second flower to offer to God is *indriya nigraham*, sense control. Swami says that real joy comes from controlling the senses, not from transitory worldly pleasures like partying, drinking alcohol, and other indulgences. He says, “Bend the body, mend the senses, and end the mind.”³ Control of the senses is important. If you really want to be happy, see good. You do not need to suppress the senses. Swami says that suppression of the senses is difficult and the senses will revolt. The solution is to direct the senses toward good activities. If you have a desire to see movies, watch good, inspiring movies with morals. If you want to listen to music, listen to inspiring music that calms you and soothes you, divine music such as *bhajans*. If you wish to speak, narrate stories of God or inspiring stories instead of gossiping. Thus Swami says, “Do good, see good, hear good, and be good.”⁴ This is the way to God. Sense control is very important.

Swami Karunyananda, a revered monk from South India used to go and see Swami Sivananda in the Himalayas. Swami Karunyananda had a habit of using snuff. Whenever Swami Karunyananda went to the Himalayas he took his snuff box also with him. When he went to Swami Sivananda’s ashram, he shared the snuff and many monks gathered around him to partake. Then Swami Karunyananda met Swami Sivananda and asked him for *upadesh*, spiritual advice. Swami Sivananda replied, “No, no. You have your own following. You became a Swami and renounced possessions but people actually like you because of your snuff!” Swami Karunyananda realized his folly and immediately threw his snuff box into the Ganges. One time Bhagawan Baba Himself scolded a monk who was using snuff. He told him, “You are a monk and gave up everything for God. So, give up this snuff which is not good for you.”

In the old days Swami used to chew betel nut and betel leaves frequently. This would give His lips a beautiful red color, like lipstick. Once Swami was wiping His mouth after chewing betel leaves and noticed a red stain on His handkerchief. Swami immediately stopped chewing betel leaves. This is an example of mastery over the senses. Swami practices what He preaches.

The third flower to offer God is *sarva bhotha dayapushpam*, compassion for all beings. Swami says we should have compassion for all, not just for human beings. Jesus has said that when we serve the least of our brethren, we are serving the Lord. Swami has said that service to man is service to God. Our love should be for all beings, including animals and plants, for everything is permeated by God. For example, Sri Ramana Maharshi, the saint from Arunachala, felt one with all. Once when somebody was cutting the branch of a tree, Sri Ramana stated, “Oh, somebody is cutting my arm...” because he could identify himself with the tree. Similarly, when

³ Kodaikanal, 6-5-88, *Sathya Sai Speaks* 21.13.

⁴ *Vijayadashami* 27-10-82, *Sathya Sai Speaks* 15.53

someone was walking on a grass lawn, Sri Ramakrishna, the nineteenth century Bengali saint, said, “Somebody is walking on my chest.” He could identify himself even with the grass.

Swami has respect not only for animals and plants, but for all creation. About thirty years ago walls were being built around the ashram. After building the cement walls, the custom is to spray water on the cement and a worker was spraying water with a lot of force. Bhagawan Baba, the Avatar of this age, was on the balcony watching the man and sent a message, “Tell him not to water with so much force.” Everything has consciousness including the inanimate objects. Swami says that when we walk we have to respect the earth and walk gently. Swami has said that everything is permeated with divine consciousness. So we need to have love and respect for everything in creation.

The fourth and most important flower to offer to God is *kshamapushpam*, the flower of forbearance, fortitude. This is an extremely important quality for the spiritual seeker. Lord Buddha is an example of fortitude. Lord Jesus was also an example. When He was being crucified, instead of cursing his antagonists, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.” When Bhagawan Baba had a hip fracture, despite the pain and inability to walk, He maintained His routine as if He had no problem. He gave *darshan*, read letters from thousands of devotees, blessed innumerable people, and granted their boons. Swami is an exemplar of divine love and forbearance.

Swami also talks about the following incident in the *Mahabharata*, involving Draupadi. Draupadi’s sons were all killed by Aswatthama. Naturally, being a mother she was grief stricken and was not happy that Aswatthama killed her sons. But, when Aswatthama was brought before Draupadi for justice, instead of punishing him or giving orders to kill him, she forgave him, saying “I know how much pain your mother will feel at your death.” Swami says that is the greatest example of *kshama*, forbearance and forgiveness. I have heard of a similar example in our time. The only son of Althea, a devotee of Swami and mother-in-law of Charles Penn, was murdered. Althea went to the prison to meet the man who killed her son. People were concerned about this meeting but, to everyone’s surprise, she did not condemn the man. Instead she forgave him. She said, “I don’t know why you did this. May the Lord bless you and forgive you.” So, even in this age, examples of incredible forgiveness and forbearance occur.

Another flower to offer God is *santhipushpam*, the flower of peace. Swami has said, “Everybody wants peace.” Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi mentions the “peace that passeth all understanding.”⁵ Swami refers to a higher level of peace than most of us know. He talks about *prasanthi* not *santhi*. *Santhi* is peace. *Prasanthi* is supreme peace, the “peace that passeth all understanding.” We tell Swami, “I want peace.” In response, Swami tells us the simple way to achieve peace. He says “Remove the ‘I’ and remove the ‘want’.” Then all that remains is peace. The reason we don’t have peace is because of our ego—the “I”—and our desire—the “want.” When we have too many desires, we are inevitably agitated. The whole purpose of spiritual practice (*sadhana*) is to minimize our ego and to minimize our desires.

⁵ Philippians 4:7.

Swami says that man minus ego and man minus desire is God. As soon as the ego leaves, one realizes the inner divinity.

Another flower to offer God is *thapopushpam*, the flower of penance. A spiritual seeker should do some penance and austerity. Every tradition knows this. For example, during Ramadan, Muslims fast for 30 days. Catholic Christians observe Lent for 40 days. Hindus observe Shivarathri with vigil and fasting. But the real penance for this age, Swami says, is practicing unity of “thought, word, and deed,” *trikarana suddhi*. What we think, what we say, and what we do should be harmonious. However, the opposite is true today. Harmony in thought, word, and deed is rare to non-existent. That is why peace is lacking these days. Swami gave the example of a home in which the family members are not in harmony: the father is doing one thing; the mother is doing something different; and the son is doing something else. Each one is going a different way and unity is absent. Harmony will not come to such a home. The same problem exists in us, as individuals. If we have harmony of thought, word, and deed, we will have peace. This *trikarana suddhi* is the real penance for this age rather than mere physical penance. The physical austerities such as fasting or doing vigil are fine but we should all practice harmony in our thoughts, words, and deeds. That is true penance.

The seventh flower is the *pushpam* of *dhyanam*, meditation. *Dhyanam* is a good spiritual practice. Every spiritual path describes some type of meditation. However, rarely does anyone practice true meditation. Swami says that, in real meditation, if we think about God even for eleven seconds with concentration He will appear before us. Most people think that they are practicing meditation but their practice is not true meditation. Swami says, “Real *dharana* lasts only twelve seconds.” *Dharana* is twelve seconds, a unit of concentration. One unit of meditation is twelve *dharanas*, one-hundred-and-forty-four seconds. If we meditate truly for two minutes and twenty-four seconds, we complete one unit of meditation. We sit trying to meditate for two hours but we are not truly meditating. Twelve units of meditation become *samadhi*. If we meditate truly for twenty-eight minutes and forty-eight seconds then we attain *samadhi*. Meditation is not an easy discipline. But Swami says that every act we do in life—drinking, eating, sleeping, talking, walking, driving, and working—becomes meditation if we offer it to God. Therefore, we should offer everything to God as a flower of our worship.

The eighth and final flower of our worship is the flower of truth because truth is God. God is truth. We all know the story of Lord Rama. In order to honor His parents and to follow the path of truth, He gave up His kingdom and went to the forest. Similarly, Emperor Harishchandra, for the sake of truth, gave away his kingdom and his family. He gave up every worldly thing for the sake of truth. Of course our dear Swami is the very embodiment of truth. His very name is Sathya Sai Baba. Swami says that for Him truth is most important. In the past, Swami had many kings and other royalty as devotees. They wanted Swami to come and live in one of the cities near them. Swami’s mother, Easwamma started crying on hearing this and prayed that Swami would never leave her and Puttaparthi. Then Swami gave His word, “I will never leave Puttaparthi and this will become a place of pilgrimage. This is the *punyakshetra*. (the holy pilgrim center).” He kept His word and made *Prasanthi Nilayam* the holy land for all

Sathya Sai devotees. Another example of how Swami kept His word was His promise to Karnam Subamma. Swami told her, “I will be there at the time of your death.” When Subamma was on her death bed, Swami was physically a few hundred miles away. Some people said, “Swami gave His word to be present at the time of Subamma’s death, but He is not here to fulfill the boon He promised to Subamma.” Swami came back finally and everyone told Swami that Subamma had already passed away. Swami went straight to the place where Subamma’s body was kept. Swami then said, “Subamma, look at Me.” Lo and behold! Subamma opened her eyes and Swami poured the water in her mouth just as He had promised her. Subamma then left her body peacefully.

In summary, we should offer these eight flowers of worship to God. This should be our New Year’s resolution. Instead, people make all sorts of resolutions that they do not keep. I see this problem frequently in my medical practice. I treat people with obesity. Many of them make a resolution to lose weight. They often lose twenty pounds in one year and gain forty pounds in the subsequent year. We must have determination. We must make good resolutions and follow them. Swami tells a nice story that reminds us how our negative qualities are always ready to return.

A husband and wife, a generous couple, were good hosts. When guests came to their home they treated them well. A guest came to stay with this couple and told them he would stay with them for three days. As usual, they treated their guest well. They gave him breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks in between. But this guest didn’t leave after three days. He was still there after one week. Subsequently, the couple became concerned and thought about how to make him leave. They cut out the snacks and served only breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But the guest still didn’t leave. He stayed for yet another week. The hosts cut back from three meals to two meals a day, lunch and dinner. The guest still did not leave. Yet another week passed and the hosts decided to give him only one meal, dinner. The guest still did not leave.

The guest had become a pest. So the husband and wife played a drama. They pretended to fight and made a big scene. The guest became scared, packed up his stuff, and left. The husband and wife celebrated his departure and congratulated each other on their great acting. Then they heard a knock at the door. To their surprise, the unwanted guest had returned, saying that he acted even better and he was coming back to stay. Similarly, our negative tendencies—anger, jealousy, and greed—are deep rooted and lurk in our subconscious mind. We may think that we have controlled them but they are ever ready to return any time. So, we must be vigilant.

Swami cautions us, “Always be vigilant. Always be careful.” We need to constantly do a self-audit so that we maintain the good qualities that please the Lord. In this New Year, let us all strive to offer our Lord the real flowers of worship and let us be determined to always please Him.

Samastha Lokah Sukhino Bhavantu (May all the worlds be happy).

Thank you.

Jai Sai Ram.