Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
36th Anniversary Souvenir
August 14, 2022

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरुपेन संस्थिता
(That Devi, who is the parināma kāraṇa, the transformational cause, is the one who undergoes change to create the world. She therefore manifests in the whole creation in the form of Śakti, the Primodial energy. )
ॐ नमः शिवाय

om namaḥ śivāya

च्छयेदेवम् सस्मितं स्वन्दनस्यं देव्या सार्थं तेजसा दीप्यमानम्।

dhyāyedevam sasmitām syandanastham devyā sārdham tejasā dīpyamānam।

May one meditate upon the smiling Lord, seated in a chariot, whose other half is devī
न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते
na hi jñānena sadṛśam pavitramiha vidyate
Bhagavad Gītā 4.38

In this world, there is no purifier equivalent to knowledge
The concept of the Lord, Īśvara, is such that it is two-fold, maker and material. The material cause is looked upon as the female aspect and the maker, the efficient cause, is looked upon as the male aspect. In fact there is no male, female in the Lord. It is only for the sake of prayers that there are Gods and Goddesses. They are one and the same. You can invoke the Lord as power. When you look at the Lord as all-mighty, then it becomes Goddess. So all-knowledge is Sarasvatī, all-wealth is Lakṣmī purely from standpoint of the power that the Lord enjoys.

We have a particular depiction of the Lord, in form of Ardhanārīśvara. In the idol, the right half is male and the left half is female. It is a vision of the Lord with the power to create that is looked upon as female, Jagadambā, the Mother of the Universe. While īśvara, is looked upon as the father of the Universe. Jagataḥ pitarau vande parvatīparameśvarauparameśvarauparameśvarauparameśvarauparameśvarauparameśvarau, means I worship Parvatī and Parameśvara, the parents of the Universes, who are inseparable.
Anniversary Message by
Swami Viditatmananda

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says that there exists a relationship among all the various entities making up this universe. And that relationship is one of mutual helpfulness, meaning that every sentient and insentient entity contributes to the scheme of things and is in turn helped by the rest of the universe. This is so because there is an inherent unity that binds the universe into one harmonious whole. That unity is Īśvara or Brahman.

The purpose of the human life is first to create harmony with this unity and then to discover it as one’s own self, to discover oneself as whole, all-inclusive. One becomes free from all lack or want and discovers true freedom or happiness.

This is ārṣavidyā, the knowledge coming from the ṛṣis. To disseminate this knowledge is the primary purpose of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam. You are all invited to freely benefit from this treasure that is made available at the Gurukulam.
Our yearly souvenir is a work of art, which has been conceptualized and creatively assembled based on a theme. This year’s theme is “Jagata Jananī, Mā Ādiśaktī,” the Mother of the Universe. This refers to Iśvara’s energy, which has transformed itself to manifest as this whole universe.

The cover depicts Mā Ādiśaktī against the backdrop of a galaxy and the Trinity appearing within her caring folds: Lord Brahmā the creator, Lord Viṣṇu the sustainer, and Lord Śiva the resolver. The back cover depicts their three respective śaktis – Mahākāli, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī. The colored gradient background, which is an extract of a tiny portion of the Orion nebula, is bold yet silent without any activity. This symbolizes anāhata, the un-manifest, which becomes āhata, the active universe around Devī and then the creation within her folds. The color scheme of orange, white, and green is also suggestive of our tricolor, representing our Bhārata Mātā, which has blessed us with this beautiful culture of Sanātana Dharma and self-knowledge.

The articles by our ācāryas are a treasure of knowledge and vividly unfold the nature and glories of Jagata Jananī. Each article starts with the same nebula background and a graphic illustration of the aspect of Devī expounded upon in that article. The write-up on “Devī Mahiṣāsura-mardini stotram” appears against a golden gradient background with Devī’s face holding her trident with the Śrī Yantra as her kuṇḍalas, personifying all her attributes and the meter used by Śrī Ādi Śankarācārya to compose the stotram. The series of articles end with a kṣamā-yācana, asking pardon from Devī for all our shortcomings and misdemeanors. The prayer for forgiveness appears on a background of our very own familiar and visible solar system, where Devī appears over the sun, symbolizing her as the bhāti, that which truly shines, and everything else as anubhāti, that which reflects this light. By her light alone everything else shines, including the sun and the moon. The nine planets are like mere gems of the garland adorning the Mother of the Universe.

Please enjoy and treasure our souvenir, and be blessed by Jagata Janani - Mā Ādiśaktī, “Jai Mā!”

Ms. Samata Chaitanya – (Visualizer, Copy-writer & Artist)
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On the occasion of the 36th Anniversary, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam thanks its Board of Directors and Board Members for their continued support.
An Overview of *Devī-māhātmyam*

Samata Chaitanya

Durgā-devī, the invincible warrior Goddess, is one of the fierce manifestations of Devī Ādiśakti, the primordial energy responsible for both creation at large and the functioning of life within us. Durgā-saptaśatī, which simply means ‘700 verses on Durgā,’ is a series of 700 ślokas from Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, which describes her victory in battles with the asuras or demons. These *asuras* symbolize the *manovikāras*, psychoses or mental and emotional negativities that are harboring within us.

As with all the stories of the Purāṇas, these are highly symbolic depictions. The *asuras* that Devī fights and vanquishes represent various unethical or immoral qualities within us that we wish to overcome. In her different forms, Devī symbolizes the life force, the discriminative power, the willingness to act, and the courage within each one of us to vanquish our own shortcomings, mental and emotional deformities, and stresses that impede our spiritual pursuit.

These 700 ślokas are also known by various other names, such as Devī-māhātmyam, which means ‘the glories of the Goddess,’ or Caṇḍī-pāṭha, which means ‘the chant of the fierce one.’ As with all the texts of Sanātana Dharma, Devī-māhātmyam starts with a question posed within an ākhyāyikā, a story. Here, a king named Suratha and a trader named Samādhi, both of whom are dejected by some unpleasant life situations, start questioning the very nature of life itself and approach Rṣi Medhas with their queries.

The story behind how this question came about and how it got answered is narrated by Rṣi Mārkaṇḍeya to his disciple Rṣi Krauṣṭuki Bhaguri, in Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, from chapter 74 to 86. These 13 chapters describe the glory of Devī Ādiśakti, who is responsible for all functioning of life and the varied life situations one faces. While these 13 chapters are in the format of symbolic stories that impart life lessons, they also have powerful *bīja-mantras* embedded in them. This makes them conducive chants for sādhanā, to tap the divine grace.

These 13 chapters are further classified into three segments, known as *caritras*. The *prathama-caritra*, which comprises the first chapter, corresponds to the Goddess Mahākālī. The *madhyama-caritra*, which comprises chapters 2–4, corresponds to the Goddess Mahālakṣmī, and the *uttara-caritra*, which comprises chapters, 5–13, corresponds to the Goddess Mahāsarasvatī. Each of these segments also has its specific *viniyoga*, a statement declaring its associated *ṛṣi* and *bīja-mantras*.

The first chapter, called Madhu-kaṭabha-vadha, consists of 104 ślokas. This chapter explains how Devī, in the form of Mahākālī, vanquished the *asuras* Madhu and Kaṭabha. The word *madhu* means ‘sweet,’ and the asura Madhu represents sweetness, addiction, and likes; i.e., attraction. The *asura* Kaṭabha represents bitterness, avoidance, dislikes; i.e., aversion. Victory over our likes and dislikes establishes balance and equanimity, which are the stepping stones to the higher pursuits of life.

The second chapter, called Mahiṣāsura-saṇhya-vadha, consists of 69 ślokas. In this chapter, we see how Devī in the form of Mahālakṣmī destroys the forces of Mahiṣāsura, representing stubbornness and inertia, through the various kinds of weapons she wields.

In the next chapter, called Mahiṣāsura-vadha, Devī in the form of Mahālakṣmī destroys through the various kinds of weapons she wields. Mahiṣāsura himself. Mahiṣāsura represents the gross negative aspect of *tamas*, which obstructs and thwarts spiritual progress. This is depicted in a series of 44 ślokas.
The fourth chapter is called Śakrādi-stuti. This chapter consists of 42 ślokas containing the words of praise and gratefulness that Indra and the other devatās showered upon the Goddess.

The fifth chapter of Devī-māhātmyam is called Dūta-samvāda. This extends over 129 ślokas and is in the form of a conversation between the Goddess and an arrogant representative sent to her with a marriage proposal from an asura named Śumbha. Śumbha represents conceit and a dull-witted personality. When the Devī puts the messenger in his place and sends him back, Śumbha becomes enraged. He then sends his commander-in-chief, Dhumralocana, who represents unclear or distorted perception, to do battle with Devī.

The sixth chapter has 24 ślokas and describes how Devī in the form of Mahāsarasvatī slays Dhumralocana in the battle. When Śumbha hears of Dhumralocana’s death, he flies into a rage and sends his commanders Caṇḍa, representing anger or rage, and Muṇḍa, representing senselessness or foolishness. The aspect of Devī who emerges victorious over both Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa is worshipped by the name of Cāmuṇḍā.

Śumbha, who is now completely burning with rage, mobilizes his entire army along with Raktabīja, who represents the unquenchable source of desire, and his brother Niśumbha, who represents self-pity, self-doubt, and therefore doubting others.

The next three chapters are called Raktabīja-vadha, Niśumbha-vadha, and Śumbha-vadha. These chapters describe how Devī in form of Mahāsarasvatī, the manifestation of knowledge, is the only one who can vanquish each of these asuras and emerge victorious over all our negative tendencies.

The eleventh chapter, called Nārāyaṇī-stuti, consists of 55 ślokas and describes the praise of the goddess as Devī Nārāyaṇī, the refuge of all naras, human beings. The twelfth chapter, called Bhagavati-vākya, captures the blessings conferred by Devī in a set of 41 ślokas.

Finally, in the thirteenth chapter, which is called Suratha-vaiśyorvara-pradāna, Sage Mārkaṇḍeya completes his narration of how King Suratha (a person with a perfect body-mind-sense complex) and the trader Samādhi (a person who has achieved an intense meditative state of mind) – both sādhakas, endowed with sādhana catuṣṭaya sampattīḥ, and are on their spiritual pursuits, facing many internal conflicts and turmoil due to untamed emotional and psychological issues – got their questions answered by Rṣi Medhas, representing one’s own cognitive and reasoning abilities.

Thus ends the narration of Devī-māhātmyam, which is a representation of a sādhaka’s spiritual journey – a journey that is fraught with impediments created by one’s own stunted mental and emotional state – and how it is vanquished by a self-disciplined, value-based life, and one’s own cognitive and reasoning abilities. Sādhanā of these potent mantras of the Devī-māhātmyam is indeed a way to tap that divine grace and blessings of Devī Ādiśaktī, which will transform every yearning heart into a bhakta with compassion, devotion, and complete submission to the all-mighty, Jagadambā Ādiśaktī.

॥ ॐ ऐं ह्रीं क्लीं चामुण्डायै विचे ॥
om aîṁ hṛīṁ klīṁ cāmuṇḍāyai viece
Devatās, deities singing the glory of the Devī, say, “O Durgā, your very remembrance destroys the fear of all beings. When your devotees remember you, you bestow upon them an intellect that leads them toward auspiciousness. O Mother, who other than you can destroy poverty, sorrow, and fear? Your heart always melts to shower grace upon your children.”

The worship of Īśvara in the form of mother has been well-known since time immemorial. Īśvara can be worshipped in any form because whatever exists, is nothing but Īśvara. Mother, father, brother, and friend are nothing but Īśvara, but the child has a special relationship with the mother. The child can go wrong, but never the mother. Regardless of how the child behaves, the mother forgives all wrongdoings, loves and embraces the child. The child may turn away from the mother, but when the mother sees the child suffering from hunger and thirst, she runs and takes that child in her loving lap. Where in all the three worlds will the child receive such love and care except from the mother? It is for this reason that worshipping Īśvara in the form of mother is very natural.

Mother has two sides to her personality: on one side, she has abundant love, care, and compassion for her child. This aspect of her personality opens up for devotees who have taken refuge in her. On the other side, the same mother shows her ferocious and ruthless side toward evil and wicked ones in order to protect her child from them. When it is a question of protecting her child, the mother becomes so aggressive that nobody dares to defy her. Thus, she has these two aspects of showering blessing and also being punitive when needed. Brahmāji appropriately glorifies her by saying, “O Mother! You wield a sword and a trident; you are indeed ruthless. O Mother! You are indeed the most delicate and beautiful among all delicate and beautiful women.”

Mother is the embodiment of śakti, which is power or divine energy. The power of knowledge, the power to will, and the power to act are the three manifestations of śakti. It is for this reason that she is worshipped as Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā, respectively. This same śakti also expresses in the form of sattva, rajas, and tamas. It sustains in the form of sattva, creates in the form of rajas, and destroys in the form of tamas. It is indeed through this śakti that Brahmāji creates, Viṣṇu sustains, and Śiva destroys. Śrī Śaṅkarācāryaji glorifies the mother by saying, “O Mother! Śiva, who smears his body with the ashes of the cremation ground, partakes of poison as food, has the four directions as his clothing, wears a crown of matted locks and snakes as his garland, who is Paśupati, the master of all the beings, who eats from a skull as his plate and who is always surrounded by ghosts and goblins – this Lord Śiva, who is poor in every way, is still known as the lord of creation precisely because you have accepted him as your husband and he basks in your glory.”

Even Brahmāji says, “O Devī, it is indeed you who has induced Lord Viṣṇu – the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the creation – to sleep. It is again you, O Devī, who has enabled me, Śaṅkara, and Viṣṇu to take up an embodiment.”

The three forms of Devī – Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā – are primarily worshipped during navarātri, the nine days of Devī worship. Durgā is worshipped on the first three days. She is called Durgā because she removes the durgas, obstacles, of her devotees. These are primarily the obstacles that reside in our hearts. The battle talked about in the Purāṇas is symbolic of the inner battle raging between our divine and demoniac tendencies. Asuras, demons such as passion, anger, etc., constantly bother us and act as obstacles in the journey of self-growth. When their harassment becomes unbearable, an aspirant takes refuge in the mother. Mother manifests her fierce form and destroys this demon. In this manner, Durgā destroys all inner durgas, enemies.
On the following three days, Lākṣmī is worshipped. Lākṣmī is the epitome of beauty, splendor, and sweetness. Divine tendencies fill up our heart as a result of her blessings. With impurities removed and with the fragrance of purity filling up the heart, it has now become a fit place for Īśvara to reside. So now Sarasvatī, the presiding deity of knowledge, is worshipped. Her blessings destroy the darkness of ignorance and the light of knowledge permeates the heart. The ninth day is known as the day of sleep for Sarasvatī. On this day she is worshipped in the form of the scriptural texts. Study of the scriptures is not done on this day. On the following day, called vijayadaśamī, study of the scriptures is begun. It is symbolic of the victory over the army of asuras, who are in the form of ignorance, and establishment of the reign of devatās, who are in the form of knowledge.

Mother is known as Durgā because she removes all the obstacles. She has the name Kālī because she swallows the universe at the time of dissolution, and also because she removes the fears of her devotees. She receives the designation Bhadrakālī because she imparts happiness and auspiciousness to her devotees, and freedom from the evil and wicked elements. She is called Svāhā because she partakes of the yajña, the Vedic ritual performed for nourishing the devatās. She is called Svadhā because she accepts the śrāddha and tarpaṇa, rituals performed for the wellbeing of the pīṭha, ancestors.

Devī – who has created this world and pervades it; whose limitless power and prowess is indescribable even by Śeṣanāga, the serpent with a thousand mouths; who is beyond reach of both Hari and Hara – has taken a vow to always sustain and protect this creation. She is the only boat that can ferry us across this unfathomable ocean of samsāra. She indeed is brahmavidyā, which destroys the darkness of ignorance permeating the heart of the devotees and leads them to liberation. Remembering Durgā is enough to overcome fear. Her heart melts at the sight of pain in her devotees. Durgā is ever ready and keen to remove the pain, poverty, and panic of her devotees.

Although she may appear cruel and ruthless while destroying demons in battle, in her heart there is nothing but compassion for the demons. She is capable of killing the demons merely by her will, and yet she kills them in battle so that the touch of her divine weapons can purify them and lead them to better embodiments. These opposite qualities – compassion in the heart and ruthlessness in battle – can be found only in the mother. As the sole refuge, the auspiciousness of the auspicious, and the bestower of all desires, Nārāyaṇī protects the humble ones who have surrendered unto her and removes all of their impediments.

Om tat sat

——

Mahiṣāsuramardinī-stotram
Swamini Paraprajnananda

One of the most loveable, beautiful, soothing, and incomparable words – and the being that the word stands for – is jananī, mother. When this is true for the mother, who is herself created, then what to speak of the mother of creation, jagataḥ jananī! Where is the creation, śakti, unconditional love, compassion, beauty, divinity, and even chastisement, without her?

Śrī Saṅkarācāryaji brings out these myriad hues and divine qualities of Bhagavati, the mother of the universe in his most famous hymn, the Mahiṣāsuramardanī-stotram. It is one of the most captivating, bewitching, mesmerizing, delightful, and rhythmical stotrams ever written. It means “the one who killed the demon called Mahiṣāsura” and refers to Goddess Durgā. The stotra consists of 20 verses replete with alliterations and rhymes, which makes the hymn delightful to sing and hear, in addition to invoking devotion.

Here Śrī Saṅkarācāryaji addresses Pārvatī, the daughter of the Himālaya, with different names and hails her victory at the end of each verse. All the various names which the poet uses for her evince her divine power and unparalleled beauty, along with her equally beautiful mind, outstanding feats, masterly skills, her impact on the entire universe, and so on. Her slaying of countless demons such as Mahiṣāsura, Madhu, Kaiṭabha, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Śumbha, Niśumbha, etc. shows her keenness to evict evil from the universe. Mother, who is extremely fierce and ruthless in quelling and destroying the demons, is all mercy when it comes to her devotees, who are pursuing righteousness and have surrendered unto her.

The poet is confident of her mercy and relies on her unbounding grace to uplift him, for nothing is impossible with her grace. With this trust he surrenders unto her, saying, “O slayer of Mahiṣāsura, O divine mother with long and beautiful hair, victory to thee, victory to thee!”
Sarasvatī-vandanā

(Praise of Goddess Sarasvatī)
Swami Dayananda Saraswati

She who wears a garland of white lilies and is adorned with white clothing; whose hands are adorned by a vīṇā and making the gesture of protection (varadaṇḍa); the one who is seated on a white lotus; she who is always worshipped by Brahmāji, Acyuta, Šaṅkara, and the other devatās, and who completely removes ignorance; may that Goddess Sarasvatī protect me.

Yā sarasvatī sā māṁ pātu. May Sarasvatī, the Goddess of knowledge who is going to be described, protect me. Pātu means rakṣatu, to protect. Who is she? Yā kunda-indu-tuṣāra-hāra-dhavalā, the one who is adorned with a garland of lilies as white as snow. Yā śubhra-vastra-āvṛtā, the one who wears śubhra-vastra, clothes that are also white in color. Yā brahmā-acyuta-šaṅkara-prabhṛtibhir-devaiḥ sadā vanditā. She is the one who is vanditā, meaning pūjitā, always worshipped and sought after, even by the trinity of devas – Brahmāji, Acyuta (Lord Viṣṇu), and Šaṅkara (Lord Śiva). All three of the trinity worship her, meaning they revel in this knowledge. Prabhṛti, which means ‘et cetera,’ includes all the other devatās as well. Either they revel in that knowledge or they seek that knowledge. Lesser Gods seek that knowledge and these three revel in that knowledge.

Finally, she is niḥśeṣa-jāḍya-āpahā. Āpahā is the one who destroys or removes. What does she remove? Jāḍya. Jaḍa means inert, so jāḍya means tamas in the sense of ignorance or dullness. She is the one who removes this dullness that covers everything. She removes ignorance and confusion, and brings clarity. She removes all distortion with reference to the reality about oneself and the world. There is always a distorted vision or perception, and she removes this distorted vision. How much does she remove? Niḥśeṣa. Śeṣa means left over, so niḥśeṣa means without anything left over. Therefore, she totally removes jāḍya. May that Goddess Sarasvatī protect me.

The navarātri festival is held for nine nights in September-October. Sarasvatī-pūjā is on the ninth day, and vijaya-daśamī on the tenth day, so it is for ten days. It is a huge thing and very popular in India. The worship of Goddess Sarasvatī is something amazing. When the sarasvatī-pūjā is done, they put not only books, but in India you will find all the musical instruments will also be on the altar. Any instrument – vīṇā, flute, mṛdaṅgam – and all tools as well. Even if you go to a blacksmith’s shop, you will see. A blacksmith’s shop is a place which no one likes. But if you want to visit a blacksmith’s shop, you should go on vijaya-daśamī day, the day after sarasvatī-pūjā. It will be absolutely clean, and everywhere you will find sandal paste and garlands. The bellows and fire pit will be all cleaned up; there will be no ashes. They clean it and put flowers, sandal paste, and kumkum, so there is no work that day. They will use all the tools only on the following day. So sarasvatī-pūjā day is for books and musical instruments, and vijaya-daśamī is for all other tools, including kitchen tools and other tools; the carpenter and the goldsmith put their tools too. Also, you will see all the buses in India having a lot of kumkum, sandal paste, garlands, and all these festivities. The drivers do that in Bombay and all the places. First thing in the morning, they do this pūjā and afterwards they start. Even in the government enterprises, which are secular, the fellows do this pūjā.
Any sādhana, tool, is worshipped – even wrenches and typewriters! When I used to work in an office, all the typewriters would get kumkum, candana, and all that. After all, they do the job and there is jñāna, knowledge, involved. In every tool so much knowledge is involved; whether it is a simple wrench or any kind of tool like a hammer, there is a technology. All technology started with simple hammers and axes, and this involves so much knowledge. Therefore, the sarasvatī-pājā day is a day of technology, a day of applied knowledge. You can keep books there, create an altar, and worship. Such worship takes a certain heart, a certain way of looking at things. For example, you cannot worship your car because it does not give you good mileage, etc. But you can worship it if you have this understanding of Īśvara from which nothing is separate. Therefore all śaktis are worshipped.

In Tamil Nadu, during these nine days of navarātri they make what they call golu. I do not know whether there is an equivalent in Hindi. They build a huge set of nine steps. On these steps they keep all these idols made of clay, or even of china or other materials. There are a variety of figurines representing the whole world – different types of people and so on. As a boy in my village, I wondered, how does an Englishman look? You will see a figure there, an English man, a black man, all these idols they make out of clay and paint. It is excellent. It is just for those nine days. Next to my village was a place where they manufactured these idols, and I think even today it is there. It was a cottage industry; every house used to make idols and sell them.

Each of the nine steps in the golu has different kinds of beings. At the top, first there are devatās such as Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Then afterwards there are other devatās, Gaṇeśa and so on. Then you will find, step by step, yakṣas, kinnaras, angels, and so on, which are described in the books and given those forms. Below that, you will find all types of human beings: people from different cultures, different countries, and all kinds of dress also. Then down below that, you will find all animals, all trees, all fruits, etc. The whole jagat is there – jagat-rūpam śaktiḥ. The jagat is śakti, and that is what they call golu.

Golu can also include modern technology – they will set up a big toy train track or make fountains where water is coming down all the time. This is all done by men, but it is a festival for women. So what do the women do? They call on each other. In the villages, even today, they will call on each other. They will invite each other to come to their house for kumkum and make the house sacred. The unmarried girls and married women all come in their best dress, in silk sarees and with all their ornaments. They go there and then they sing in front of golu in praise of the Lord. They sing various songs invoking the Goddess or the Lord in any form. There will be a lot of singing; people who come are asked to sing. Those who can sing will sing, and even those who cannot sing will try.

This is only for the girls and women. We boys also used to just go behind them, which is allowed up to a certain age. If you are young, you can go behind them and wait for the singing to be over. Then they distribute some prasāda and we would be ready for that. We would receive the prasāda and then go to the next house. If the prasāda was no good in one house, we would go to the other house with better prasāda. And if it was really good in one house, we would tail another group of people and go there a second time!

This navarātri festival shows how the Goddess is māyā, jagat-rūpinī. She is śakti because she is the pariṇāma-kāraṇa, the transformational cause. When we say Brahma is jagat-kāraṇa, the cause of the world, it is not only the adiḥśīthāna, locus. Like the rope is the cause for the snake, Brahma is the cause for the world. But the real kāraṇa, cause, which undergoes a change to create the world – ākāśa, space, vāyu, air, etc. – is only māyā, the śakti, power, that abides in Brahma. That Īśvara-śakti, bhagavatī, is the one who undergoes all the change; she is the jagat, the world. That is why māyā-śakti is invoked.

All our vṛttis, thoughts, are also māyā. Māyā includes even the knowledge that you gather by vṛtti, the vṛtti that destroys the ignorance of the reality. It is a māyā-vṛtti and therefore also mithyā, has no existence independent of Brahma. But that vṛtti is capable of destroying ignorance, so it is worshipped in the form of Goddess there. Even if you are worshiping Īśvara, only Īśvara-śakti is worshipped, not Brahma. When you are invoking Īśvara as sarvaḥṣāna, all-knowledge, you are not invoking satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma, Brahma that is limitless existence consciousness; you are invoking sarvaḥṣāna in order to know satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma. Similarly, the all-knowing Lord is invoked in various aspects. On ganeśa-caturthi day, the Lord is invoked as Ganeśa,
the one who removes obstacles, and on sarasvatī-pūjā day, the Lord is invoked again as all knowledge.

Thus, all we require is some symbol of knowledge. A book has knowledge, even if it contains mistakes. Those mistakes also imply jñāna, knowledge, because to understand a mistake as a mistake is jñāna. To see what is true, you must know a thing as it is and see the truth in it. If you take what is untrue as the truth, that is a mistake. But if what is untrue is understood as untrue, that is knowledge. This is why we say any book is jñāna. All mistakes are also jñāna; you have to know that they are mistakes. Therefore, we do not bother about who is the author and what is written here because the book itself is a symbol of knowledge. That is why we can make an altar of books and pray; it is a different attitude, which is based on the śāstra, the sacred texts.

What you call the Hindu religion is just prayer based upon the Vedic vision. Unless your concept of Īśvāra is straight, these types of worship – like worshipping a tool – are not possible. People might think that a tool is just a dumb object, but there is nothing dumb about it because it is all jñāna. There is an order to all of it. For example, if a nut is too big then the wrench will not work. There is law, jñāna, order, involved; it is all Bhagavān.

In this way, the whole life is a process of sanctification. From childhood you learn to appreciate and look upon things as sacred. It is not an ordinary thing. This is how you are built up from childhood; you build up a certain vision. You may not know anything about Vedānta. Many people do not know Vedānta, but they know that everything is sacred – that much they do know. They will say sab bhagavān hai, everything is Bhagavān. They may not know how that is so, but the attitude is different.

There are so many festivals. I consider some of these things very relevant to our life, outlook, attitude, and values. You bring that out only in a particular situation, so you create the situation. You yourself demonstrate your attitude, like when you send a birthday card or a gift; it is an expression of your attitude and care. If all these customs are removed, what kind of life would it be? In every culture there are some beautiful things and if you remove them, there is nothing; life becomes all robotic. Thus, these things demonstrate certain attitudes. They reconfirm and reestablish a certain camaraderie and friendship, a certain care. Such actions bring these out. It is a physical act.

Here, in a ritual way, you bring out that sanctity by looking at knowledge itself as something very sacred. Very often we are told na hi jñānena sādṛṣaṁ pavitram iha vidyate (Bhagavad Gītā, 4.38). Iha, in this world, na vidyate, is not there, sādṛṣaṁ, equal to, jñānam. There is nothing equal to knowledge.

Knowledge is pavitra, a purifying or sanctifying agent. What is it that really purifies? Fire purifies, detergents purify, a variety of things purify, but only jñāna can purify your heart. It does this by removing saṁsāra. All other things purify only within saṁsāra, but jñāna purifies you from saṁsāra. Saṁsāra itself is a mala, impurity, and it is only within saṁsāra that you are trying to purify, which is just some patchwork. The whole body is stinking and you just clean it, put on eau de cologne, nicely powder it, and make yourself presentable. This putting on eau de cologne and so on is purifying within saṁsāra. But saṁsāra itself is dirt and you have to remove that. For that, you need jñāna.

In the Gītā, just before “na hi jñānena sādṛṣaṁ pavitram iha vidyate,” Bhagavān says, “jñānāgniḥ sarvakarmāṇi bhasmasāt kurute tathā,” the fire of knowledge reduces all karma to ashes (Bhagavad Gītā, 4.37). Agni, fire, is a purifier; it can purify a number of things. Gold comes out of the ground mixed with other ore, etc. If you put it in fire, you can get the gold out. So fire is a purifier and a great sterilizer. The ṛṣis knew agni as a great pāvaka, purifier. The name agni itself is a purifier, and that jñāna-agni purifies the original mala, impurity, which is saṁsāra.

Śāra is also jñāna. So śāradā means jñānam dadāti, it gives knowledge. Generally, however, śāradā is considered a name, another name for Sarasvatī. In fact, I belong to Śāradā-pīṭha. The title Sarasvatī belongs to Śāradā-pīṭha. Bhārati is another name for Sarasvatī. All of these are titles, like āranya in the name Vidyāranya and bhāratī in Candraśekhara Bhārati. Aranya means forest, gīri means hill, sarasvatī means the Goddess of knowledge, but these are also titles. Bhārati also means the Goddess of knowledge, but it too is a title. These all belong to the Śāradā-pīṭha. There is a pīṭha in Śṛṅgeri called Śāradā-pīṭha. Those who have these titles belong to that particular pīṭha.
There may be nothing difficult to understand there, but you will find that these (mûrtis) have one hand held up with the palm outward. It means protection, and is called vara-daṇḍa-maṇḍita. Thus, she gives protection to the fellow who is sansāra-agninā taptaha, burned by the fire of sansāra, feeling the afflictions of life, and seeking protection. Where will he go? The only refuge is jñāna, which is śrutī, revealed knowledge. Śrutī is šāradā. Therefore jñāna is only Sarasvatī. Šāradā is the only refuge; there is no other refuge.

Therefore, varadāṁ vande'ham śāradāṁ, I salute the one who is śuddha-sattva-svarūpiṇī. Śuddha-sattva means there is no malinaya, impurity. There is no problem and so all there is, is all-knowledge. This is called sattva-svarūpiṇī and the Goddess, who is knowledge, is always available only when the mind is clear. Any piece of knowledge is the same. Even if you are reading a newspaper, sometimes you have to read the column twice to understand it because the mind was elsewhere. You read it again and again, as though it is a piece of literature like Shakespeare or something! There may be nothing difficult to understand there, but the mind was elsewhere.

Therefore, Sarasvatī is present only when the mind is clean. That is why when we say ‘all-white,’ it means śuddha-sattva. Sattva represents the color white. There is a white mālā, white saree, white lotus, white swan – all of these are pure white. White means jñāna, knowledge, or svaccha, clarity. She is svaccha-hṛdaya-nivāsinī, the one who abides in a mind that is clean: clean for the time being or clean for good. It means one who is not in the hands of rāga-dveṣa, attachments and aversions. That kind of mind is called svaccha. Even if it is clean only for the time being, it is a beautiful thing that the mind can drop all its ideas and be clean for some time; that is why you can understand me. And if it can abide in that kind of condition because of its freedom from the hold of rāga-dveṣa, then we say it is a clean mind. One has to work for it.

She is also svapракāśa-rūpiṇī, self-effulgent. Without ātmā, the self who is a conscious being, there is no Sarasvatī. Cidānanda-ātmā, the self that is limitless consciousness, is the basis and therefore she is svapракāśa-rūpiṇī, in the form of svapракāśa-ātmā, the self-revealing self, which is myself.

Parāparā-vidyā-bhūṣitā. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad it is said, dve vidyās veditavye parā ca aparā ca, there are two vidyās, (kinds of) knowledge, we have to learn (Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 1.4). One is parā-vidyā and the other is aparā-vidyā. That is all; there is no other vidyā. If there is any knowledge at all, what is knowledge? Parā-vidyā is knowledge of oneself, and aparā-vidyā is knowledge of everything else. Parā and aparā – these two forms are what they call ‘all knowledge.’ There is no third discipline of knowledge. Therefore, the Goddess of all knowledge is both parā-vidyā and aparā-vidyā.
When we want to worship her in a particular form, we visualize her in that form. This is another privilege. Suppose someone does not think that God should have a particular form: if I ask him to think of God, what will he think of? Nothing! He cannot think of anything, but for us it is not a problem. It is good to have a form. It is not that the form is God, but at least you can think of it. When I say, “Think of the Goddess of knowledge,” and you can immediately think of a form, that is a privilege. We give a form for the Lord, but we worship the Lord, not the form. Then you can create an altar and do puja and various things. That is a privilege you get when you are born in a particular culture. We have to create or receive that privilege.

If she is worshiped as Goddess, then she is adorned with ornaments – like necklace, bangles, earrings, etc. Here she is parāparā-vidyā-bhūṣitā – the one who is bhūṣitā, adorned, with these two forms of knowledge. It is also bhūṣana, an adornment, only if you are not under the spell of this knowledge, and instead you wield it. If you come under the spell of knowledge, you become proud, but if you wield the knowledge, then knowledge is always light. It is something like a person who is trying to cover up her face with some makeup; it is a problem. You have to look at the face in the mirror all the time. But if a person who is self-confident puts on makeup, there is no problem. She does not have any problem because she has nothing to cover. Because she accepts herself, any ornamentation becomes bhūṣana. If you accept yourself, you can spend a lot of time in cosmetics because it does not matter; it is all Bhagavān’s glory anyway. But if you do not accept yourself, any makeup is a burden and a matter for anxiety because it will come off under the sweat. That is why she is bhūṣitā. Any knowledge just stays light because it is all knowledge, and she wields that knowledge.

Suravara-sujana-sevitām. She is sevitā, worshipped, even by the suravaras, the foremost among the devatās. Even Indra and others seek that knowledge, as we see in Kena Upaniṣad. The suravaras seek that knowledge, without which they will be simple devatās, comparing themselves with other devatās.

She is also worshipped by the sujanas, thinking people who may not deliberately seek knowledge as such. Everyone wants to know, but they do not have the enthusiasm and so they barter knowledge for the sake of wealth. That is why Lakṣmī becomes more important.

There are people who sacrifice to Lakṣmī and those people are all thinking people, sujanas. But Sarasvatī is sulabham, the easiest to get. Why? Because jñāna is already there, whereas lakṣmī is karma-phala – you have to produce that and it requires effort. Money is karma-phala. Even if you win a million dollars in a lottery, it is karma-phala. You may think that “I did not do anything,” but you have done enough before, and that is why you got it rather than anybody else. You have earned it. Perhaps you have earned it, but you did not get everything, because in between you made a lot of mistakes, and therefore you settled for only one million. Otherwise, if you had been prayerful, you might have made ten million; you don’t know. Karma-phala means you get what you work for. Lakṣmī is always karma-phala, you have to work for it, in this birth or in another one.

Jñāna is different from karma because when the pramāna, means of knowledge is available and the mind is available, it takes place. The knowledge that one plus one equals two does not require any money. It is not karma; it is a fact, but you will not know it until you are ready for it. Therefore, karma is necessary to make yourself ready, but jñāna is always sulabha, easy to acquire.

Śubhadām, she is the one who gives śubha, that which puts a grand finale to your whole undertaking. There is no beginning for the jīva, but there is a finale, which is called śubha. Śubha means anything that ends well – “all’s well that ends well.” Anything that ends well is called śubha, and śubha is mokṣa. Until then, the journey is on, the fight is on, the struggle is on until that freedom, that jñāna is gained. Therefore, śubhaṁ dadāti iti śubhadā, that which gives śubha is called śubhadā.

She is invoked in any place where there is attunement. In your mind, when the senses are all attuned properly, you find the pramāna. When the mind and everything are all attuned properly, the meaning of the śāstra clicks. You have to look at what it says, what came before, what came later, and then it just clicks. When you see that there is no other meaning for it, that also clicks. All the time it clicks; that is jñāna – it keeps clicking all the time. When things are attuned well, it always clicks, like a note played on a musical instrument. When it is tuned well, you get the notes in harmony. Otherwise, there is discord.
Saptaślokī Durgā is a hymn of seven verses selected from the sacred text known as Durgā-saptaśatī or Devī-māhātmyam or Caṇḍī. This text describes the triumphs of Durgā, the divine mother of the universe. The text consists of 700 verses divided into 13 chapters. The chapters are further divided into three caritras, or the accounts of the adventures of Durgā. The first chapter comprises the first caritra and describes the tāmasika incarnation of the Goddess as Mahāmāyā or Mahākālī. In this incarnation, the demons Madhu and Kaīṭabha were slain. The second caritra is described in the next three chapters (2–4). This relates the rājasika incarnation of Durgā as Mahālakṣmī, who destroyed the demon Mahiṣāsura. The third caritra describes the sāttvika incarnation as Mahāsarasvatī, who slays the demons Dhūmralocana, Caṇḍa, Munda, Raktabīja, Niśumbha, and Śumbha. Chapter 11 is mainly in praise of Devī by the devatās. It is from this chapter that most of the verses of Saptaślokī Durgā are chosen. The first verse of the hymn is from the first chapter, the second verse from the fourth chapter, and the remaining verses are from the eleventh chapter.

The first verse describes the nature of Mahāmāyā. The context is that a powerful king named Suratha has to leave his kingdom when he is not only defeated in battle by his enemies, but also robbed of his treasury and his army by his own vicious and evil-disposed ministers. On the pretext of hunting, the king comes to a forest where he sees the hermitage of the sage Medhas. There he meets a merchant named Samādhi, who was also driven away from his home by his wicked and greedy sons and wife. Despite being treated in such a cruel manner by their near and dear ones, each one was nevertheless unable to forget their family and possessions, and was preoccupied with thoughts of attachment to them. Both of them approach the sage Medhas with the question: “How is it that we are attached to and unable to forget the very people who were cruel to us?” In reply, the sage says (verse 1-55):

ॐ ज्ञानिनामपि चेतानि देवी भगवती हि सा ।
बलादक्र्ष्यं मोहियां महामाया प्रयच्छति ॥ ॥

Om! Bhagavatī, who is Mahāmāyā, forcibly drawing the minds of even the learned, verily throws them into delusion. (I)

The sage seems to say that the Goddess of indestructible power causes the minds of not only the worldly people like you, but even people possessed of knowledge, to turn away from viveka or discrimination and makes them inclined to attachment and possessiveness. The Purāṇas are full of stories of men of power and even great sages falling prey to the enchantment of lust and greed. What to speak of you, the ordinary worldly people, who find themselves attached even to those entities that finally cause us only sorrow?

This statement is followed by the story of the demons Madhu and Kaīṭabha, who sprang from the dirt of the ears of Lord Viṣṇu while he was in slumber during dissolution of the world. They sought to slay Lord Brahmā, the Lord of creation, who was sitting in the lotus that emerged from the navel of Lord Viṣṇu. Brahmā prayed to Mahāmāyā to quickly awaken Lord Viṣṇu from sleep and make him slay these two demons. Lord Viṣṇu was awakened and then engaged in a long battle with the two demons. Frenzied with their exceeding power and deluded by Mahāmāyā, the two demons exclaimed to Lord Viṣṇu, “Ask a boon from
Thus bewitched by Mahāmāyā, the demons granted the boon to Lord Viṣṇu, who slew them. This is the power of Mahāmāyā, who deludes even the most powerful. This episode also reveals how even the position of Brahmā, the creator, is not free from fear and misery. That is the power of Mahāmāyā or Mahākālī, the tāmasika manifestation of Devī.

The second verse of Saptaślokī Durgā is taken from the second caritra and describes the rājasika incarnation of the Devī as Mahālakṣmī. This caritra shows how even the devatās are not above misery.

The demon Mahiṣāsura routed the devatās in the battle, occupied the throne of Indra, drove away all the devatās from their respective positions, and began wielding their power and privilege himself. Then Mahālakṣmī was born from the collective luster of all the devatās, who also presented her with their respective weapons. Mahālakṣmī challenged Mahiṣāsura to a battle and destroyed the wicked demon along with his army. The devatās then praised the mother Goddess. That hymn forms the fourth chapter of the text.

The second verse of Saptaślokī Durgā is taken from this chapter (verse 4-17):

दुर्गे स्मृताः हरि स्वस्त्य स्वस्तिः स्वस्तिः मतिमतीव शुभं ददासि ।
दारिंद्रस्वर्णपकारकरिञाय सदार्द्रिनचत्ताः ॥२॥

durge smṛtā hariś hariśi bhūtimaśeṣajantoḥ
svasthaiḥ smṛtā matimatiśvā bhūm daddāsi
dāridryadukhabhayahārini kā tvadanyā sarvopakārakaranāya sadārdracitā ॥२॥

durge smṛtā would mean “when she is remembered during calamities.” Alternatively, durge can be understood as the vocative case of Durgā, meaning that one is addressing the Goddess directly.

Then the meaning of durge smṛtā would be “O Durgā, you are remembered.” Both meanings are legitimate and the phrase can even encompass both meanings simultaneously, i.e., “O Goddess, when you are remembered by those who are caught in calamities.” The Goddess is called Durgā because she removes the adversities or calamities of her devotees.

O Durgā, when you are remembered or called upon by the afflicted, you rescue them from fear, adversities, or calamities. When you are remembered or called upon by those possessing a pure mind, meaning those who are free from selfish motives, you provide them with extremely auspicious knowledge or understanding, which is the means to attain any puruṣārtha, human end, particularly mokṣa. In the context of bhakti, the sentence can also mean that you give them devotion, affinity, or commitment to reciting your mantra, meditating upon you, or worshipping you.

O Devī, you are the one who removes the poverty, misery, and fear of those who take refuge in you. Poverty brings misery, which creates fear. It is your nature to remove these from anyone who seeks your help. Since there is tremendous compassion in you, your heart melts at the thought of the pain of others and you are ready to render help to them whether they are your devotees, your enemies, or those who are indifferent to you. This verse is chanted as a mantra to become free from poverty and misery.

The remaining five verses of this hymn are selected from the 11th chapter of the text. Most of this chapter is in the form of praise of the Goddess in her sāttvika incarnation as Mahāsaravatī after she slew the terrible demons Niśumbha and Śumbha, along with their powerful army. That hymn is also called Nārāyaṇī-stuti.

The next verse is the tenth verse of chapter 11:

सर्वमहत्माङ्गलस्वस्तिः प्रियस्वर्णाञ्जलिः
शरणे त्र्यम्बके स्वर्णार्तारुणिः सेवयानी नमोऽस्तु ते ॥३॥

sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalye śive sarvārthasādhike
śarane tryambake gauri nārāyaṇī namo' stu te ॥३॥

Salutations to you, O Nārāyaṇī (consort of Lord Nārāyaṇa), who is the auspiciousness of the auspicious, who brings good fortune, who accomplishes the four human ends (dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa), the refuge of all, the three-eyed, the consort of Lord Siva. (3)
Devī is the auspiciousness of the auspicious. From the Vedāntic point of view, happiness is auspicious in the true sense. Hence, the means of happiness (self-knowledge) and the means of knowledge (śruti) are all auspicious. Devī is the source and the content of śruti. She is also of the nature of happiness and therefore truly the one that imparts auspiciousness, even to śruti. Similarly, the sounds om and atha are also considered auspicious because Brahmā, the creator, commenced the act of creation with utterance of the sound atha. Such things as svastika, pūrṇa-kumbha, etc., which are symbols of auspiciousness, also derive that quality from the divine Mother. Therefore, she is Śivā, one who brings good fortune. You are always bounteous to those with whom you are well pleased. Those fortunate ones are indeed objects of esteem in the country – theirs are riches, theirs are glories, and their acts of righteousness perish not. They are indeed blessed and possessed of devoted children, servants, and spouses.

Śivā also means the consort of the Lord Śiva. The word can be further explained to mean Nārāyaṇī, the consort of Lord Nārāyaṇa and also Sarasvatī, consort of Lord Brahmā. She therefore possesses the powers to create, preserve, and destroy. She is omnipotent and therefore Saranyā, fit to be the refuge where devotees become free from sorrow and fear. She grants boons to her devotees, who can fulfill any desires they have: worldly desires like dharma (heaven), artha (material prosperity), or kāma (pleasures). To the discriminative, she grants mokṣa (liberation) because she is the karma-adhyakṣā (presiding over karma) and the karma-phala-dātrī, dispenser of the results of actions.

She is Tryambakā, the one possessed of three ambakas. Ambaka means eye. She is possessed of three eyes in the form of sun, moon, and fire because she is the cosmic person. Ambaka also means a father, one who is a protector. Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Maheśa, who are protectors, are the retinue or attendants of Devī and therefore she is called Tryambakā (Tryambake is the vocative case). She is Gaurī, which means one of fair complexion. The word also means Parvatī, the consort of Lord Śiva. She is Nārāyaṇī, the consort of Lord Nārāyaṇa or Viṣṇu, and therefore māyā. This verse can be recited for gaining prosperity and auspiciousness.

The next verse says:

O Nārāyaṇī, you are intent on saving the dejected and the distressed who take refuge in you, and you remove the suffering of all. Salutations to you. (4)

Goddess Durgā is parāyaṇā, solely committed to helping and saving those who take refuge in her. That is why she came to the rescue of the devatās whenever they took refuge in her, appearing in a suitable form to protect them from the danger caused by the demons. The devatās were dīna, dejected, because they were robbed of their power and luster by the demons and were helpless. They were ārta, distressed, because they were harassed by the demons. The Goddess came to their rescue, killed the demons, and reinstated the devatās to their own abode and their original luster.

What is true for the devatās is of course true for all living beings because Durgā is the universal mother who nurtures and nourishes all her children. In daily life, we human beings are dejected because of the three-fold afflictions. The first one is ādhyātmika, arising from physical suffering such as diseases, etc., and mental suffering such as sorrow, etc. The second is ādhibhautika, arising from the surroundings (the elemental world), such as insects, wild animals, thieves, etc. The third source of suffering is ādhidaivika, caused by devatās manifesting as the natural forces such as heat, cold, flood, earthquakes, etc. Human beings seek succor from these afflictions, and the mother provides that succor in response to their prayers. Repetition of this verse is prescribed for removing distress and dejection.

O Devī, you are in the form of all (or: all is in the form of you). You are the ruler of all, possessed of all powers. Please protect us from all the fears (or dangers). O Devī Durgā, salutations to you (verse 11-24) (5)

Durgā, the mother Goddess, exists in the form of the whole universe made up of animate and inanimate
beings because she is the *upādana-kāraṇa*, material cause, of the universe. She is the self or essential nature of all the beings. She is the omnipotent creator and she rules the entire universe. That is why we find an order in the universe. Even the *devatās*, the mighty forces such as wind, fire, etc. all function according to the rule set by the divine mother as though they are obedient servants. Kathopaniṣad describes the ruler as a master with an uplifted thunderbolt – *mahadbhayāṁ vajramudhyatam*.

The whole universe is ruled by the mother Goddess. It is under her control, and therefore we can appeal to her for making even the cosmic forces favorable to us. All of the powers possessed by the *devatās*, cosmic forces, are the powers of Devī. She alone acts through them or manifests as *devatās*. O Devī, please protect us from the dangers of the demons, the inimical influences in our life. Repetition of this śloka is prescribed when seeking freedom from fear.

रोगानशेषानपहांसी तुष्टा
रुष्टा तु कामान सकलानभीष्टान।
त्वामाश्रितां न विपन्नराणां
त्वामाश्रिता ह्याश्रयतां प्रयान्ति ॥६॥

rogānāšeṣānapahaṁsi tuṣṭā
ruṣṭā tu kāmān sakalānabhīṣṭān
tvāmāśrītāṁ na vipannarāṇāṁ
tvāmāśrītā hyāśrayatāṁ prayānti

You remove all illness when you are pleased, but destroy all longed-for desires (desirable objects) when you are wrathful. No calamity befalls those who take refuge in you. (Not only that but), those who have taken refuge in you verily themselves become a refuge for others. (6)

When the Devī is pleased by the worship of her devotees, she removes all their illness, which may be at the level of the body or the mind. She removes *ādhi*, mental pain or anguish, *vyādhi*, physical ailments or diseases, and *upādhi*, suffering or calamity caused by others. This was demonstrated in the case of the *devatās*, whose impediments were all removed by the divine mother when she was pleased with their devotion and prayers. When she became angry with the demons, on the other hand, she destroyed them all, including all their possessions.

Should we conclude from this that Devī is partial to *devatās* and cruel to the demons? That cannot be, since she is the embodiment of compassion. Therefore, the punishment rendered to the demons is also for their ultimate welfare. Like any loving mother, she as though becomes cruel to the children only to be kind to them. When a mother administers bitter medicine, any child resists, but it is for the child’s own good. She is the ruler of the world and to maintain harmony, it is necessary for her to protect the good and destroy the wicked. That is the way to establish *dharma*, the moral and social order. The outward-looking anger is accompanied by grace in her mind.

When the devotees take refuge in her and place complete trust in her, there can be no calamities for them. In fact, a time comes when they themselves become a refuge for others. Repetition of this verse is prescribed for gaining freedom from illness.

The last verse of this hymn says:

सर्वावधाप्रशमानं त्रैयोक्ष्याविलेघ्यरि
एवमेव त्वयासा कार्यमस्द्वैरिनविनाशनम् ॥७॥

sarvābhāpāraśamanāṁ trailokyasyākhiśvarir
evameva tvayā kāryamasadvaṁcināśanam

O supreme ruler of the entire universe, please remove the miseries of all the three worlds. Also, as you have just done (by slaying the demons Niśumbha and Śumbha), may you please destroy our enemies in the future also. (7)

The word *sarvābhāḥ* is explained as *sarvāḥ ābādhāḥ*, meaning all the miseries in every way. The *devatās* are asking Devī to remove the miseries of all whenever the occasion arises in future, as she has just done in the case of the demons Niśumbha and Śumbha.

The *devatās* want the assurance of protection at all times in the future also. Devī also describes to them her future manifestations when she will destroy Niśumbha and Śumbha (in their new *avatāras* in the 28th *yuga* during the reign of Vaivasvata Manu, and will also kill the demon Vaipracittas. She will be born as Sākambhari and will cause a rain of life-giving herbs and vegetables when there will be a long famine. She will be born as Durgā and will destroy the demon Durgama. She will be born as Bhimadevi and swallow the demons who are
harassing the sage in the Himalaya mountains. She will take the form of Bhrāmarī and kill the demon named Aruṇa. Thus, whenever calamity befalls the world, Devī says, “I shall take the necessary embodiment and destroy the enemies of the world.” Recital of this verse is prescribed for removing miseries.

Saptaślokī Durgā concludes with this verse. Most of the verses of this hymn are prescribed for freedom from miseries or the attainment of happiness. The mere recital of these verses will therefore grant peace and serenity. When recited with understanding and contemplation upon the meaning, they will certainly bring grace and the blessing of the divine mother, leading to the knowledge of her true nature.

The last three verses of this hymn were selected as a prayer to mother Goddess for protection from fear, freedom from illness, and removal of miseries for mankind during the pandemic. Hundreds of devotees in many countries chanted these prayer verses during the months of the pandemic. Each verse was to be chanted 21 times. Many have continued to chant these prayers, and anyone else can do it for the grace of mother Goddess and protection from fear, disease, and calamities.

भवाव्यावपारे महादुःखभीरुः पपात प्रकामी प्रलोभी प्रमत्तः।
कुसंसारपाशप्रबद्धुः सदाहं गतिस्तं गतिस्तं त्वमेका भवानि।।

bhavābdhāvapāre mahāduḥkhabhīruḥ papāta prakāmī pralobhī pramattah|
kusamsārapāśaprabaddhaḥ sadāhaṁ gatistvaṁ gatistam tvamekā bhavāni||

Engulfed by the ocean of this saṁsāra, O Maa, I am extremely petrified, full of desires, greed and attachments. I am perpetually noosed by the clutches of this saṁsāra! Amidst this feeling of strangulation, O Maa Bhavāni you alone are my path to freedom, you indeed are my path to freedom.
Overview of the sūktas

Sūkta means su ukta or suṣṭhu ukta, very well said. There is no better way of expressing the thrill of relating to the wisdom contained in any statement other than by exclaiming, “Well said!” A sūkta is a set of mantras praising the glory of a god or goddess. The dictionary meaning of the word sūkta is ‘hymn’ or ‘word of praise.’

The Rgveda consists of a large number of sūktas, like the Indra sūkta, the Agni sūkta, the Śraddhā sūkta, the Śrī sūkta, etc. The Yajurveda also contains a few sūktas, like the Oṣadhi sūkta, the Puruṣa sūkta, etc. The Medhā sūkta is one of them.

Every sūkta is an encomium to a specific manifestation of Īśvara, through which we wish to appreciate His glory. For instance, let us consider the element of fire. It is an object of common experience and occurrence, yet what a wonderful thing it is! We cannot imagine the world without fire. When heat, which is all-pervading, is highly concentrated in a small volume of space, it becomes fire. With its brilliance and power, fire is seen to be an aspect of the cosmic glory of Īśvara. Thus, when a ‘seer of hymns’ invokes Īśvara at the altar of fire and praises this aspect of His glory, we have the Agni sūkta.

Let us now examine the Medhā sūkta in detail.

Medhā

The buddhi, the faculty of knowing or the intellect, is an important manifestation of Īśvara. Every living being has an intellect, although the intellect in other life forms has not evolved to the same degree as in humans. The glory of the intellect is present in every human being in some form or the other. As the saying goes, mukhe mukhe Sarasvatī, meaning that the Goddess of knowledge is present in every head. This power of intellection is considered an important vibhūti or aspect of the magnificence of Īśvara. The buddhi plays a pivotal role in one’s life, and the entire focus of Vedanta is therefore on buddhi-nirmāna or the creation of suitable mind-stuff in the individual.

Purification of the mind

In our worldly lives, we constantly hear about any number of sense pleasures that abound in the world. The scriptures add their share by describing the pleasures of the heavens. Upon hearing all this, we develop attachment to the sense objects and aversion to that which we do not like. The mind is thus flooded with likes and dislikes and becomes fickle, making the realisation of ātmā, the infinite source of happiness, impossible. We take all that we see to be real, just because we see a form and a name. If, on the other hand, the mind rises above the impressions created by one’s interaction with the world of sensory pleasures and abides steadfast in its source, ātmā, one achieves union with Īśvara.

The many emotions of anger, hurt, or guilt in the mind function as secondary circuits for the loss of energy. A large amount of energy is continuously dissipated in these mutually conflicting emotions and wrong tendencies. At the level of the mind, there exists only the phenomenal world, which is mithyā, unreal. The human being is essentially condemned to this unreal existence as long as he identifies with the mind. Therefore, our effort in Vedanta is to extricate the mind from the quagmire of desires and fears and render it conducive to assimilating the truth.

The Medhā sūkta occurs in the Mahānārayana Upaniṣad, a part of the last chapter of the Yajurveda. The logic of this set of hymns is that we seek Īśvara’s grace through the celebration of the mind, which is His manifestation. It is not a prayer to yet another god in the Hindu pantheon of gods. Traditionally, it is recited before commencing the study of Vedanta. One needs all the grace of Īśvara to receive and assimilate the knowledge of ātmā. Reciting this sūkta induces an elevated state of mind and also creates the appropriate environment required to assimilate the sacred teaching of Vedanta.
May the all-knowing, all-auspicious Goddess Medhā (the intellect personified) have pleasing thoughts about us (be pleased with us). May She come to us and bless us. O Goddess, may we give up vile speech and, by your grace, be blessed with good offspring. May we gain the knowledge (with your blessings) and extol Brahman.

This hymn is an invocation to goddess Medhā to come and bestow her grace upon the seeker in the form of a good intellect—an intellect that is not deluded by the unreal names and forms of the world. Īśvara’s grace takes many forms, like good offspring, material wealth, etc. It takes Īśvara’s grace to appreciate how much grace there already is in one’s life, even as we go about feeling dissatisfied with our lot!

The state of happiness is the direct result of right thinking and right understanding; it is not the property of external objects or of a given situation. The Self alone is the locus of happiness and one derives happiness only as one’s mind abides in the Self. We become happy in the waking state (which is taken as real) as well as the dream state (which is obviously unreal). The reality or lack of it does not contribute to these experiences of relative happiness, since happiness is always derived from the Self. A pure mind taps the happiness from the Self. The grace of Goddess Medhā manifests as both absolute happiness and relative happiness.

Ignorance is bondage and knowledge alone is liberation. An ignorant mind projects an imperfection centered on the individual self, the ‘me,’ giving rise to a binding desire. The pleasure resulting from its fulfillment is transitory. When we recognize this truth, the bondage of desires ends and the joy of the freedom from desires stays with us.

The bondage of saṁsāra, the life of continuous becoming, is not caused by external objects. Saṁsāra is the result of our attachment to those objects and lies entirely within the mind. Whatever is outside is Īśvara’s creation or, if we know better, Brahman. We need the grace of Īśvara to know this truth.

All auspiciousness arises from right understanding. It begins at the level of the intellect and blesses everything and everybody around. Self-knowledge is the most auspicious; the knowledge that the world of names and forms is unreal and the Self alone is real is the greatest blessing and happiness. The prayer is that God may grant such a mind as is fit to gain this knowledge.

It is interesting to note that the prayer is in the plural—naḥ, to us. Vedic hymns are generally community prayers. The famous Gāyatrī mantra is also a community prayer. It is usually chanted by the individual, but the prayer is for the welfare of the entire family or entire community. The scope of the meaning of the phrase ‘to us’ depends upon the person’s inner maturity and may even include every living being on the planet.
Bṛhad means the Reality, which transcends the limitations of space-time, namely, Īśvara. Only by the grace of Medhā devī can we even understand and talk about Īśvara. When someone takes it upon himself to talk about Īśvara without really knowing Īśvara, he only does a disservice to listeners by handing over a set of beliefs. There are those who have a set of non-verifiable beliefs and travel to other countries seeking to convert everybody to their system of beliefs. Vidathe means having gained the knowledge. The implication is that we become qualified to speak about Brahma only upon gaining the knowledge. Vadema, may we speak. Speech is a wonderful expression of the inner intelligence and life. The organ of speech is special among all the organs. We have two sets of organs, namely, the organs of action and the sense organs. Though speech is considered to be an organ of action, it is something more than an organ of action; it is a direct expression of the knowledge of a person. We should not use the faculty of speech for uttering inauspicious or harsh and hurtful words. It should be an expression of the inner harmony creating harmony all around. Even in the face of dire provocation, we should maintain control over speech. That becomes possible by the grace of Goddess Medhā.

Suvīrāḥ is an interesting word. It also occurs in the well-known prayer, śataṁ jīvema śaradassuvīrāḥ. It means may we live a hundred autumns or years together with our children and other members of the family and relatives, in the best of health.

Tvayā juṣṭaḥ ṛṣirbhavati devi tvayā brahmā gataśrīrūta tvayā

O Goddess Medhā, the one blessed by you becomes a seer, a scholar of the Vedas, and gains splendor. The one blessed by you gains a variety of riches. Being such a Goddess, may you bless us with wealth.

Ṛṣirbhavati, the one blessed by the Goddess becomes a seer. Ṛṣiḥ darśanāt, one who sees the truth is a ṛṣi. Ṛsi does not mean a person with a long white beard sitting in a cave. A person is a ṛṣi by virtue of his wisdom and not his appearance. Anyone who has gained wisdom is a ṛṣi. Some people believe that at present there are no ṛṣis; this is not correct. There are a few ṛṣis in all societies at all times. Viśvāmitta, Āryabhatta, Varāhamihira, Sir Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, etc. are all ṛṣis.

O Medhā devi, whoever you bless with wisdom becomes a ṛṣi. A person blessed by you with wisdom becomes Brahmā, meaning a Brahmin. One should claim the status of being a Brahmin on the basis of knowledge, not birth. Brahmā can also mean the Creator, who is not only the author of this creation, but also the originator of knowledge in the form of the Vedas. Lord Viṣṇu bestowed the knowledge of the Vedas to the first born, Brahmāji, who subsequently created the universe based on that knowledge. Thus, the knowledge of the Vedas is the basis of this creation.

The mantra can also be explained differently. The moment any person knows
the truth of his own innermost Reality, he becomes one with Brahman. As declared in
the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (3–2–9): brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati, the knower of Brahman
becomes Brahman.
Ātmā, namely, the essential nature of a human being, is Brahman, the cause of the
universe. This truth is unknown to the individual. The moment a person comes to
know this truth, his apparent isolation from the Whole ends. This Self-knowledge,
which liberates the person from the thralldom of ignorance, is gained by the
blessings of Goddess Medhā. Therefore, students of Vedanta regularly recite this
sūkta.

Knowledge is virtue, according to Socrates. The modern world, a knowledge-based
economy, proves that knowledge is also wealth. While some people inherit wealth, a
person of knowledge creates his own wealth. Knowledge not only brings wealth to a
person, but also helps the person enjoy that wealth, while riches without knowledge may
even ruin a person. Knowledge is particularly necessary for the wealthy, so that they
can use their wealth judiciously.

Citram vasu, a variety of riches. Wealth is not economic prosperity alone. Good
understanding and love between different members of the family, well-behaved
children, good health, and peace of mind are all part of the spectrum of wealth. The
Sanskrit word citram means spectrum. The word draviṇona means draviṇena, with riches.

मेधं म इन्द्रो ददातु मेधाम देवी सरस्वती ॥
मेधाम मे अद्वश्वनावुभावाधित् आदित्यानामहां विष्णुḥ ॥ ३
medhām ma indro dadātu medhāṁ devī sarasvatī
medhām me aśvināvubhāvādhattāṁ puṣkarasrajā (3)
the planetary system as the manifestation of Īśvara, the Sun obviously represents Īśvara and the planets represent the gods. In the vision of the Vedas, praying to the Sun at sunrise and sunset is part of one’s nitya-karma, a mandatory ritual, which bestows good health upon the devotee. Intellectual excellence is not possible without good physical health. This could be the symbolism associated with the Aśvins being the divine physicians.

Puṣkarasrajā. The Aśvins are supposed to wear a garland of lotuses or lillies. Each devatā, being the personification of a natural phenomenon, is visualized in distinctive attire. The āgama-śāstra describes the form and attire of the different gods and these descriptions are incorporated in temple sculptures and architecture. These forms and the attire of the gods could be very significant. For example, Goddess Sarasvatī wears white, whereas Goddess Lakṣmī wears red. White traditionally stands for knowledge and red for rāga, the fulfillment of desires, which is possible only through wealth. Indra, the god of strength and rains, is depicted as vajrahasta, holding a thunderbolt as a weapon.

The beautiful lotus is very popular in Vedic and Puranic literature as the symbol of purity and prosperity. It is the national flower of India, and is, indeed, synonymous with the Hindu culture. In Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, there is a tonic, called vasanta kusumākara, which is recommended for general health. It is prepared from the juices of all kinds of spring flowers, including the lotus and the lily. This could be the connection between the lotus and the divine physicians, the Aśvins. Interestingly, all gods and goddesses are associated with the lotus, either in holding it, or sitting or standing in it. Lotuses are also offered in worship at the altar in addition to other flowers. The lotus is a symbol of purity because it remains untainted by the murky waters in which it grows.

अप्सरासु च या मेघा गन्धर्वेशु च यन्मन: ।
देवी मेघा सरस्वती च सा मां मेघा सुषुम्नृज्वलाः स्वाहा ॥ ४

apsarāsu ca yā medhā gandharvesu ca yanmanah
daivīṁ medhā sarasvati sā māṁ medhā surabhirjuṣatāgni svāhā (4)

yā – which; medhā – intelligence; apsarāsu ca – in the divine damsels; ca – and; yat – which; manah – mind (intelligence); gandharvesu – in the divine musicians; daivī(m) – present in the gods; medhā – intelligence; sā – that; sarasvati – Goddess Sarasvati; surabhiḥ – the celestial cow; mām – me; juṣatāṁ – may bless; svāhā – I offer.

There is intelligence in (the dance of) the celestial damsels, in (the music of) the divine musicians, and in the gods themselves. May That (well known in the scriptures) Goddess Sarasvati bless me with that intelligence. She fulfills the aspirations (of the devotees) like the divine cow. I offer (my prostrations).

Apsarās are celestial damsels and the gandharvas are celestial musicians. Music and dance are very important art forms, each an expression of the power of life and knowledge. It seems that these art forms are popular among the celestials as well. As the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (2–1–10) says, yadeveha tadamutra yadamutra tadanviha, as is here, so is there; as is there, so is here too! The gods also need the blessings of Sarasvatī, the goddess of knowledge. In the Vedas and Purāṇas, we come across many gods who have the knowledge of Brahman. Lord Yama is a teacher of Self-knowledge, as we see in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad. Similarly, in the Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad, Lord Indra imparts the knowledge of Brahman to King Pratardana.
This mantra describes the Goddess Sarasvati as Surabhi, the celestial cow, also known as Kāmadhenu, since it grants all the aspirations of the seeker. There is a well-known story in the Rāmāyaṇa about Surabhi. Surabhi belonged to sage Vasiṣṭha and lived in his hermitage. According to the story, one day, King Viśvāmitra visited Vasiṣṭha, who offered him and his entourage a grand feast with the help of this wish-yielding cow. Seeing this, Viśvāmitra became very jealous and wanted to grab the cow for himself. Vasiṣṭha resisted, and there followed a duel, in which Viśvāmitra was vanquished. Here Surabhi, the celestial cow, symbolically represents Self-knowledge. Knowledge is a unique wealth that nobody can plunder. One can steal another’s material wealth, but it is not possible to steal knowledge. Viśvāmitra realised his mistake and, in time, also gained the knowledge by performing severe penance.

The Goddess of intelligence is, by nature, benedictory and pleasing, like the wish-yielding cow (to the devotees). She is present in all living beings (in varying degrees) and helps the devotees that gain Her grace to understand the different aspects of the universe. May That Goddess come into my life, gain strength in me, make me begin auspicious things, and bless me by showering me with milk-like boons.

The Goddess of wisdom helps us understand various things and situations as they really are, so that we do not fall prey to delusion, enticed by the nāma-rūpa, names and forms. Along with the knowledge of the sciences and humanities, a discriminating intellect is also to be acquired so as not to waste life in the blind pursuit of material possessions and sense pleasures. This is the viśvarūpā medhā.

Hiranyavarṇā literally means having the luster of gold. Just as gold is bright and glitters, so also, a brilliant intellect shines perceptibly. This brilliance is particularly visible when a person can remember and say the most appropriate things at the proper time. Here the devotee seeks an intellect that is ever fresh and creative. Vidyāranya, the master commentator on the Vedas, provides another interesting meaning to the word hiranya. He interprets it, almost in the manner of an abbreviation, as hitaṁ ca tat
ramaṇīyam. Hita is that which offers benefit in the long run and ramaṇīya means attractive. Generally speaking, most attractive things will not do any good in the long run, while whatever is good is seldom attractive. This rule would seem to apply to food straightaway! A food item that is very delicious and presented in a very attractive way may not necessarily be good for health, whereas a dish like bitter gourd may not be kind to the taste buds, but is very good for health. So also, in this world of names and forms, hita and ramaṇiya are generally not compatible; whatever is hita is not ramaṇiya, and whatever is ramaṇiya is not hita. Medhā is the one thing in which both of them are available simultaneously. Therefore, the prayer is that one may acquire that kind of intellect, which not only provides aesthetic enjoyment, but also helps overcome the thralldom of saṁsāra.

Jagamyā means worth gaining. There is only one thing truly worth possessing in this universe, and that is wisdom. This sole absolute of knowledge is jagatī, present everywhere. For instance, it can be found in a bird. A bird knows its role and also as much of the sciences of acoustics, meteorology, aerodynamics, and geography as it needs to know in order to survive. Parameśvara is present in all living beings as the Awareness that illuminates their individual intellects. Thus, medhā obtains in all the life forms.

The metaphor of the cow symbolizing wisdom continues in this hymn. It is uṛjasvatī, a strong and healthy cow that yields copious milk. Medhā is compared to the cow that makes us strong and healthy with its milk.

Supratīkā; pratīkā means beginning and su means auspicious. The desire expressed in this prayer is that one may make an auspicious beginning in the study of the śāstra. These hymns are typically recited at the beginning of a Vedanta class, so that the ensuing teaching culminates in the knowledge that liberates. This recitation helps overcome all the obstacles that may arise during the course of study.

Mayi medhāṁ mayi prajāṁ mayyagnistejo dadhātū
mayi medhāṁ mayi prajāṁ mayīndra indriyam dadhātū
mayi medhāṁ mayi prajāṁ mayi sūryo bhrājo dadhātū (6)

agnih – the god of fire; mayi – on me;
medhāṁ – intelligence; prajāṁ – progeny; 
tejah – bright appearance of the body (or courage); dadhātū – may bestow; indraḥ – the god of the heavens; indriyam – virility; 
sūryaḥ – the sun god; bhrājaḥ – brilliance

May the god of fire bestow upon me intelligence, progeny, and the bright appearance of the body (or courage), the god of heavens, virility, and the Sun god, brilliance.

In the Vedic hymns, we encounter many devatās, each devatā being an aspect of Īśvara who manifests as this universe. Of these, three are most important; they are Agni, Indra, and Sūrya. Agni is not only present in the form of the digestive fire, but also presides over the faculty of speech. Indra is the devatā responsible for physical strength and is the presiding deity of the faculty of the hands. Sūrya is the devatā of the faculty of vision and also the one who inspires our thoughts and the intellect. We seek the blessings of all the three devatās, because good digestion, good speech, good vision, and good physical strength are indispensable in the process of a seeker’s
growth. Everything culminates in the faculty of the intellect.

*Tejah* is brilliance. Brilliance can be of two kinds; brilliance of the body and brilliance of the mind. The prayer is that, by the blessing of *Agni*, one may have the courage of one’s convictions and the ability to face the vicissitudes of life. It seeks His help in emerging victorious in all pursuits.

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

*Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ*

Śānti means quietude of mind. That is what we are really seeking in life, a total freedom from all manner of disturbance. The troubles of life that come in the way of our gaining the knowledge are three–fold: ādhyātmika, ādhibhautika, and ādhidaivika. Hence, we repeat the word śānti thrice. Ādhyātmika problems are disturbances that are associated with the health of the physical body, like a fever or a headache etc. Ādhibhautika problems are associated with the environment around us, like individuals we interact with, noise disturbances, burglaries, etc. over which we have little control. And, finally, ādhidaivika problems are calamities caused by the will of the gods, such as a flood or a tsunami, hurricanes, earth quakes etc. We seek the grace of the Lord to help us overcome the three–fold calamities, so that we can pursue the knowledge of the Self in peace.

May we all enjoy the grace and blessing of Goddess *Medhā* and proceed to gain the knowledge.

हरि: अ तस्सतुः श्रीकृष्णापणमस्तु

*hariḥ om tatsat śrīkṛṣṇārpaṇamastu*

(Abridged from the book *Vaidika Sūkta Mañjarī* by Swami Tattvavidananda)
Prayer means recognizing the presence of Īśvara. The ability to pray comes from the basic person, the devotee, who has either belief in or understanding of Īśvara and also of the efficacy of the prayer. Any form of prayer produces merit, unseen results in different degrees. Prayer also produces an immediately seen result, such as freedom from helplessness and frustration. This is so because one has acted upon the desire to control hidden variables, thus avoiding helplessness. If I don’t seek help, I am helpless. If I seek help, I am not helpless. The satisfaction that comes from praying is a visible result. There are means to get satisfaction other than prayer. Cooking and eating give satisfaction, for example. But when what is cooked is offered to then Lord and then consumed, it produces a different result, namely merit, a result that is not seen now.

Prayer is a karma, action, and it is three-fold based upon the means that are employed: kāyika, physical; vācika, verbal; and mānasa, mental. Kāyika-karma is a ritualistic act, such as puja, sacrificial ritual, etc., in which the limbs of the body are employed. Vācika-karma is oral prayer such as recitation, chanting sūktas, stotras, and singing bhajans. In mānasa-karma, there is directed mental activity. When an object of mental activity is Īśvara, it is called meditation. It could be mental worship or japa, repetition of a chant.

**What is Īśvara?**

The one who is both the intelligent and the material cause for the whole creation is known as Īśvara, the Lord. One generally uses the pronoun ‘He’ for Īśvara. This is only a convention and does not imply that Īśvara has a gender. One sees both the masculine and feminine genders in the creation. Looking at the world comprising all three genders, one cannot attribute only one gender to Īśvara. One can only say that Īśvara is not male, female, or neuter; or one can say that Īśvara is male, female, or neuter, being the cause of everything.

The intelligent aspect of Īśvara is called puruṣa, which is masculine, and the material aspect is called prakṛti or māyā, which is feminine. From the aspect of intelligence, it is ‘He’ or Īśvara and from material aspect, it is ‘She’ or Īśvarī. Thus, the whole creation is nothing but Īśvarī from the material standpoint. She is immanent in the creation; there is nothing in the creation that is apart from Īśvarī. That is what is meant when one says that Īśvara is all-pervasive or omnipresent, like the dreamer pervades the dream. Even though the dreamer pervades the dream, the dreamer is not the dream. It is the dream world that resolves into the dreamer. In other words, the dreamer is the one who pervades the dream and at the same time transcends it.

In the same manner, Īśvarī pervades the creation and transcends it. Therefore, to find Īśvarī one does not need to look for a distinct individual being because the creation does not exist apart from Īśvarī. Everything is a manifestation of Īśvarī. She is worshipped in the form of Mother from beginningless time. If we accept the motherhood of Īśvara called Īśvarī, and think that we are the children of that Mother, this will help us attain Īśvara very easily. Mother will not reject her children in any way. A bad child may be there, but never a bad mother, says Ādī Śaṅkarācārya.

The text known as Devī-māhātmyam or Sapta-śatī describes the glories of Īśvara as Mother. This text is found in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, which is in the form of a dialogue between Sage Mārkaṇḍeya and Kroṣṭukī. It is said that the basis of the text is found in the Veda. The Devī-sūktam in Rgveda (X, 125), whose seer is Vāk, daughter of Ambhṛṇa Rṣi, is the basis for the Devī-māhātmyam. In this sūkta, she describes herself in the form of everything in the universe as well as the reality of everything.

In the Devī-māhātmyam, the Goddess is glorified in three forms – Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī. The first chapter contains the glory of Mahākālī. The second, third, and fourth chapters glorify Mahālakṣmī, and the last nine chapters (5 to 13) glorify Mahāsarasvatī.

The main obstructions for attaining the goal of human life, mokṣa, are the impurities in our mind, namely lust, anger, greed, delusion, ego, jealousy, etc. They are to be removed first. When Mahākālī is worshipped, she consumes them like a person consumes a morsel of food. Once our minds are devoid of impurities, as Mahālakṣmī she bestows divine wealth such as truth, non-violence, forgiveness, humility, generosity, dition, etc. She makes our mind fit to receive self-knowledge. Then, as Mahāsarasvatī, she blesses us with self-knowledge, so we gain mokṣa. That is the meaning of Devī worship in the Devī-māhātmyam.

In chapters 5 to 13, Devī is glorified as the one who kills the two demons Śumbha and Niśumbha. By their strength and pride, these two demons took away from Indra his
ereignty over the three worlds as well as the oblations of rituals due to him. Both of them together took over the offices of the Sun, the Moon, Kubera, Yama and Varuna. Since the gods now had no authority, they were easily defeated by the two and driven away without even a fight. They thought of taking help from the invincible Devi who had given them a boon – “whenever you remember me in great dangers, I will at once ward off all the calamities and protect you.” The devas then went to Himavān, the Lord of mountains. There they praised Devi in order to please her. This is known as the Devī-sūktam, which means the glories of Devī sung by the gods:

devā ūcuḥ
namo devyai mahādevyai śīvāyai satataṁ namaḥ
namah prakṛtyai bhadrāyai niyatāh pranatāh sma tām
(1)

The devas said:
Salutations to Devī, Salutations to the Goddess of all gods, who is ever auspicious, who is the primordial cause and the sustaining power of the universe. We bow to her wholeheartedly.

raudrāyai namo nityāyai gauryai dhātryai namo namaḥ
jyotsnāyai cendurupīnayi sukhāyai satataṁ namaḥ (2)
Salutations always to her, the one who has the power to resolve the universe. She herself is eternal. Salutations to Gaurī, who sustains everything in the form of the earth. Our salutations to her who is in the form of the moon and moonlight and who is of the nature of happiness.

kalyāṇyai praṇatāṁ vṛddhyai siddhyai kurmo namo namaḥ
nairṛtyai bhūbhṛtāṁ lakṣmyai śarvāṇyai te namo namaḥ (3)
We bow to her, the one who is welfare, the one who is prosperity for the surrendered, the one who is in the form of eight-fold miraculous powers. Salutations to the consort of Śiva, who is herself the good fortune and misfortune of kings.

durgāyai durgāpyāyai sārāyai sarvakārīnyai
khyāyai tathaiva kṛṣṇāyai dhūmrāyai satataṁ namaḥ (4)
Salutations always to Durgā, who protects us in difficulties, who takes one across the ocean of saṁsāra, who is the essence of everything, who is the author of everything, who is of the nature of discriminative knowledge, the one who is blue-black and also smoke-like in complexion.

[The last portion of the verse can also be interpreted as: She alone is in the form of ignorance (blue-black). When she is changed to discriminative knowledge and when darkness is changed to light, the intermediate stage which is hazy, is denoted by Dhūmra, the smoky one. She is counted among the ten mahāvidyās.]

atisaumyātiraudrāyai natāstasayai namo namāḥ
namo jagatpratiṣṭhāyai devyai kṛtyai namo namāḥ (5)
We bow to her, the one who is at once most gentle (for the worshippers) and most fierce (for non-worshippers). Salutations to her, the one who is the ultimate reality, who is of the form of volition. To her our salutations always.

yā devī sarva bhutesu viṣṇumāyetai saṁbhitā
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (6)
Salutations again and again to that Devī, who is called Viśvamāyī in all beings. Again and again our salutations.
[Sincere salutations can be done at the physical, verbal, and mental level. Therefore the word salutation has been repeated thrice in this verse as well as the following verses. Alternatively, since māyā is in the form of sattva, rajas, and tamas, the Goddess is saluted thrice in this verse in the form of the three guṇas.]

yā devī sarvabhūtesu cetanāyabhidhīyate
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (7)
Our prostrations again and again to that Devī, who is called the consciousness in all beings. Again and again our salutations.
[Consciousness alone is the truth of all beings.]

yā devī sarvabhūtesu buddhirūpeṇa saṁsthita
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (8)
Our constant salutations to that Devī, who resides in all beings in the form of intelligence. Again and again our salutations.

yā devī sarvabhūtesu nītrārūpeṇa saṁsthita
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (9)
We bow again and again to that Devī, who exists as sleep or ignorance in all beings.

yā devī sarvabhūtesu kṣudhārūpeṇa saṁsthita
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (10)
Our salutations always to that Devī, who dwells in all beings in the form of hunger.

yā devī sarvabhūtesu chāyārūpeṇa saṁsthita
namastasayai namastasayai namastasayai namo namāḥ (11)
Our repeated prostrations to that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of reflection (of consciousness).
yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śaktirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (12)

Our constant salutations to that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of strength or enthusiasm.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu trṣṇārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (13)

Salutations always to that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of thirst or greed.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu kṣāṇtirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (14)

We bow again and again to that Devī, who abides in all beings as forgiveness or forbearance.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu jātirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (15)

Prostrations always to that Devī, who exists in all beings as the origin or genus of everything.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu lajjārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (16)

Constant salutations to that Devī, who abides in all beings as modesty or shame.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śāntirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (17)

Prostrations always to that Devī, who abides in all beings as the resolution of the mind.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śāntirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (18)

Salutations always to that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of trust.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu kāntirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (19)

To that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of beauty, again and again our salutations.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu lakṣmīrūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (20)

To that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of good fortune, our constant salutations.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu vṛttirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (21)

To that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of livelihood or activity, again and again our prostrations.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu smṛtirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (22)

To that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of memory, salutations to her always.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu dayārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (23)

Salutations again and again to that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of compassion.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu tuṣṭirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (24)

We bow again and again to that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of contentment.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu mātṛrūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (25)

To that Devī, who exists in all beings in the form of mother or knower, our constant salutations.

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu bhrāntirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (26)

Prostrations always to that Devī, who abides in all beings in the form of error.

indriyāṇāmadhiṣṭhātrī bhūtānām cākhileṣu yā
bhūteṣu satataṁ tasyai vyāptidevyai namo namaḥ (27)

Salutations always to that Devī, who pervades the entire world in the form of consciousness (just as water pervades all waves or gold pervades all ornaments), our constant salutations.

stutā suraiḥ pūrvamabhīṣṭasaṁśrayāttathā surendreṇa
dineṣu sevitā
citirūpeṇa yā kṛtsnametadyāpya sthitā jagat
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (28)

To that Devī, who pervades the entire world in the form of consciousness (just as water pervades all waves or gold pervades all ornaments), our constant salutations.

stutā suraiḥ pūrvamabhīṣṭasaṁśrayāttathā surendreṇa
dineṣu sevitā
karotu sā naḥ śubhahetūṣvārī śubhāni
bhadrānyaḥbhīhantu cāpadah (29)

That Devī, who was invoked by the devās and propitiated by the lord of the devās every day to get their desires fulfilled, may she, the Īśvarī, the source of all good, accomplish for us all auspicious things and put an end to our calamities.

yā sāmpratam coddhatadaityatāpitairasmābhīrśa ca
suraīnamsasyate
The Vedāntic Import of Śrī Lalitāsahasranāma

Swami Tattvavidananda Saraswati

(Acknowledgement: Dr. Sri V. Swaminathan)

Śrī Lalitā-sahasra-nāma-stotram is recited by many people; not only in India, but everywhere in the world wherever there are even a few Hindus. There are a thousand names in every sahasra-nāma. The reality called Īśvara is nirākāra, formless, and also nirguṇa, attributeless, hence you cannot name the reality in any nāma. To name anything, you need to have some form or attribute or both. But for the purpose of understanding, we appreciate the guṇa-traya attribute of Īśvara manifesting as the form of the entire universe, and we worship Īśvara in a given form.

In this context, the name becomes relevant. An individual has one name. He cannot have more names, except in some situations: in India, for example, we have an ‘alias’ or alternate name. There is no such restriction when it comes to Bhagavān, however, so you may have any number of names. You may have hundred names or a thousand names. In fact, you may have infinite names because any name is nothing but an expression of the Parabrahman. As the Parabrahman expresses in the form of this universe, there are infinite facets to that expression. Based on each one of the facets, you can have a name. Therefore, Īśvara or Bhagavān can have infinite names. In fact, words such as sahasra, thousand, and śata, hundred, have the meaning of ‘infinite.’ This is how we have to understand the word sahasra-nāma. In a given context, however, sahasra-nāma or aṣṭottara-sata-nāma means 1000 or 108 names, respectively.

Among the thousand names, or even 108 names, some of the names are related to mythology. In the context of worship, devotees need three aspects: ritual, mythology, and philosophy. These three aspects put together constitute a devotee’s worship. If the worship has the ritual part of it intact and the mythology is also there (more or less), but the philosophy part is lost or we don’t pay attention to it, that is a big loss. We have to take care that our rituals and devotion based on mythological names and forms are not divorced from doctrinal philosophy. Without the philosophy, the rituals tend to become mechanical and repetitive, and mythological descriptions tend to become superstitious. Therefore, rituals and mythology should always be blessed by the doctrinal philosophy. That is the glory of the Hindu Dharma, in which all three aspects are very nicely synthesized. One can see the beautiful samanvaya, connection, of all the three aspects in the Lalitā-sahasra-nāma.

If you look at the Lalitā-sahasra-nāma, some of the names reflect the rituals that we perform as a part of worshipping Īśvara in the form of the Universal Mother. Many of the nāmas refer to the mythological description of that particular form, namely Lalitā Devī. The Universal Mother has many incarnations as described in Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa, Devī Bhāgavatam, etc. In some of these incarnations, the Mother has punished many demons like Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa etc., and therefore you will find names based on those descriptions. For example, in the Lalitā-sahasra-nāma there is the name Caṇḍa-muṇḍa-asura-niṣūdinī – the one who has totally dispelled or destroyed the two asuras called Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa.

The word asura has to be correctly understood. Generally, we tend to assume that an asura is a rāksasa. These words are used synonymously, although they have different connotations. We assume that there are some people called asuras, a particular group of people living in some part of the universe, and that they are very cruel and dangerous people. This is a simple assumption. But in reality, we are the asuras – asuṣu ramante iti asurāḥ, those who indulge in sense pleasures are known as asuras. Asuṣu means viṣaya-bhogeṣu, relating to sense pleasures. If we indulge in sense pleasures, in that context we are the asuras. We need not search for the asuras Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa.

Once you start indulging in sense pleasures, there is a situation which is favorable and you get attached...
to that, which is *rāga*. Now the opposite will automatically be there because the universe cannot exist without the opposites. It necessarily consists of opposites and therefore, once you have a situation that is favorable to you, the opposite situation will be just waiting. You will have another situation that is unfavorable, and you are averse to that unfavorable situation, which is *dveṣa*.

*Rāga* and *dveṣa*, attachment and aversion, are described variously in the mythological stories – as Canḍa and Muṇḍa in one case, and as Madhu and Kaiṭabha in another. In the context of the philosophy, the meaning is like this: by the grace of the Universal Mother, the *rāga-dveṣa* in my heart is dispelled and the *asura* within the heart is gone, so that the *deva* aspect of me is seen. I am potentially divine, but that divinity is covered by the *asura* qualities. These qualities are the *āsurī-sampat* mentioned in the Bhagavad Gītā. The *asura* qualities cover up the divinity. By the grace of the Mother, the *asura* qualities are dispelled and the *daivī-sampat*, divine qualities, are seen; hence the *nāma* Canḍa-muṇḍa-asura-niṣūdinī.

In this way, many names are based on mythological stories. Every story without exception has doctrinal or philosophical significance. Some names are related to rituals, some are related to mythology, and quite a few names are based on philosophy – *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna*, respectively. Thus, three kinds of names will be found in the *sahasra-nāma*, which contains a thousand names.

OM TAT SAT
In the Mahālakṣmī-aṣṭakam, the Goddess Mahālakṣmī is visualized as the ādi-śakti or māyā-śakti, who is the cause of this universe. She is the one who manifests all three forms of the devī that we generally know – Durgā, Lakṣmī, and Saraswatī. This mahā-śakti is trigunātmikā, endowed with sattva, rajas, and tamas.

As Saraswatī she is jiṅga-śakti-rūpiṇī and represents the sattva-guṇa. As Lakṣmī she is the icchā-śakti-rūpiṇī and represents the rajo-guṇa. As Durgā she is kriyā-śakti-rūpiṇī and represents the tamo-guṇa. As māyā-śakti she is the śakti of Parameśvara and is wielded by him to create this universe, sustain it, break it, and resolve it back into himself. Therefore, as Saraswatī she is the śakti of Brahmā, the creator; as Lakṣmī she is the śakti of Viṣṇu, the sustainer; and as Durgā she is the śakti of Śiva, the destroyer. In the Devī-māhātmyam she is described as the one who destroys all the asuras who threaten the jagat and who brings peace and happiness to the people.

She is worshipped popularly in eight forms as Aṣṭalakṣmī, looking at her through the different forms of wealth. As māyā-śakti, she is the cause of the jagat, and thus everything in this universe is her manifest form.

The eight forms are: Ādilakṣmī, the ādi-śakti; Dhanalakṣmī, the one who is in the form of wealth; Dhānyalakṣmī, the one who is in the form of all food; Gajalakṣmī, the embodiment of power and strength; Santānalakṣmī, the one who is in the form of progeny, children; Vīralakṣmī, the one who is in the form of courage and valour; Vījaya, the one who is in the form of victory; Vidyā, the one who is in the form of all knowledge. In short, everything in this universe is a manifest form of this ādi-śakti. Therefore, we look at the entire world with this reverence.

This Mahālakṣmī-aṣṭakam is the stuti of devī by Lord Indra. Now we shall look into the salient features of the stotra.

As an appendix, here is the text in Sanskrit:

नमस्तेःस्तु महामायं श्रीपीठ सुपूजिते ।
शब्दचक्रवाहस्ते महालक्ष्मिः नमोऽस्तु ते॥ १॥

namaste' stu mahāmāye śrīpīṭhe surapūjijite
dhānakravahāhaste mahālakṣmī namo' stu te

O Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you who are māyā, the illusory power of the universe, the basis for all wealth, the one worshipped by divine beings, the one who carries the śaṅkha (conch), cakra (discus), and gadā (mace) in your hands. (1)

Here she is referred to as mahā-māyā and as the repository of all wealth, and the one who is worshipped by all the devas.

नमस्ते गरुडारूढे कोलासुरभयंकर ।
सर्वायांस्ते देवी महालक्ष्मिः नमोऽस्तु ते॥ २॥

namaste garudāruḍhe kolāsurabhayākari
sarvāyānāhāte devī mahālakṣmī namo' stu te

O! Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the one who is seated on Garuḍa, who destroyed the asura named Kolāsura, and who is the remover of all pāpa from your devotees. (2)

She is described as the one who destroyed the asura known as Kolāsura near modern-day Kolhapur in Maharashtra, India. The city has a very famous shrine of Mahālakṣmī and is called Kolhapur based on this event. It is said that Kolāsura prayed to the Goddess, asking her to permanently reside there in that city and for the city to be given his name.

नमस्ते सर्ववर्षैर्सर्वदुःखमयं भ्रम ।
सर्वदुःखानिः देवी महालक्ष्मिः नमोऽस्तु ते॥ ३॥

namaste sarvavarāhāre sarvaduḥkhamayāṁ
sarvaduḥkhaṁhare devī mahālakṣmī namo' stu te

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the all-knowing, the one who grants every boon for the devotees, who creates fear in all the wicked; who is the remover of all sorrow. (3)
siddhibuddhiprade devi bhuktimuktipradāyini
mantramūrte sadā devi mahālakṣmī namo' stu te

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the giver
of every kind of accomplishment and knowledge com-
pletely, the one who generously gives enjoyment and
mokṣa, who is in the form of all mantras always. (4)

आद्यन्रनिते देनव आद्यशनतिमिेश्वनर ।
योगजे योगसम्भूते मीोऽस्ु तेन्ते ॥ ५॥

ādyantarahite devi ādyaśaktimaheśvari
yogaje yogasambhūte mahālakṣmi namo' stu te

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the begin-
ingless and endless Goddess, the supreme Goddess of
the universe, the ādi-śakti born of yoga (the power of
Īśvara), the one who is in the form of that yoga-śakti
itself. (5)

Here she is called yoga-jā because she is born of yoga-
śakti, the power of Parameśvara. She herself is the
very yoga-śakti of Īśvara, which he wields to manifest
the universe. Therefore, she is called yoga-sambhūtā.
She is in the form of all yoga, the pursuits of all living
beings to achieve the fourfold puṇuṣārthas.

sthūlasūkṣmamahāraudre mahāśakti mahodare
mahāpāpahare devi mahālakṣmi namo' stu te

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the one
who is the great terror of gross and subtle (wicked be-
ings), the supreme power, the cause of the universe, the
one who removes the great sins. (6)

पद्मासनस्थिते देवी परत्वपरकुण्डरिणी
परमेशविष्णुर्महालक्ष्मिनिमोऽसु

padmāsanasthite devi parabhāsvarūpini
parameśi jaganmātā mahālakṣmi namo' stu te

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the one
seated on a lotus, the Goddess, whose svarūpa is
parambrahma, the absolute ruler of this world, and the
mother of the world. (7)

श्वेताम्बरिरे देनव नानालाङ्करभूषी
जगन्थिते जगन्नतमहालक्ष्मिनिमोऽसु

śvetāmbaradhare devi nānālaṅkārabhūṣite
jagatsthite jaganmātarmahālakṣmi namo' stu te

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In memory of Late Dr. Lilaben Patel,
Principal of A. G. teacher’s College,
Ahmedabad

Best Regards,
Rajesh Patel (Nephew)
35th Anniversary
Gurukulam Family

Suddhatma Chaitanya
Gary Suresh
Suresh Ramamurthy

Priest Ravichandran
Priest Ganesan
Vimala Sadasivam

Shubha Ravichandran
Kalpathy Ramachandran
Sahdev Pool
Our Teachers at the Gurukulam

Swami Jnanananda
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Swamini Ramadhavananda
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Our Visiting Acharyas

Swamini Svatmavidyananda
Swami Advayatmananda
Swamini Pararaprajnananda
The end of childhood spells the end of the easy life of enjoyment and absolute freedom from worries. From then on, one’s experience of the true realities of life begins. Life presents its share of frustrations, obstacles, and adversities, and ill health can add to the difficulties. Such is the nature of life.

Facing the many challenges posed by life and overcoming them proves daunting and requires immense reserves of strength and endurance. Our thresholds of tolerance and abilities are often inadequate and the energy that we require to overcome the challenges often insufficient. It is like climbing a steep mountain and being completely exhausted midway or towards the end of the climb; the only other option being to fall backwards into the abyss, one cannot even give up at that stage. This kind of situation is called a durga. This is when one is most frustrated and looking for some recourse. At this juncture, only Īśvara can help revive our flagging energy and provide that final burst of strength to go on. A fort is also called a durga; it literally presents a formidable front and proves quite insurmountable. There are many durgas that we encounter time and again in life and we need Īśvara’s grace in those situations. Pray to Īśvara and surrender to Him; trust that He will come to your aid, and relax.

Īśvara helps us find and tap our own hidden reserves of endurance and fortitude to overcome our difficulties. When Īśvara is understood through this particular aspect of His glory, namely, the power to overcome difficult situations, and we relate to Him as such, He gains the epithet Durgā. Visualized as the female aspect of Īśvara, Durgā is the Infinite Power of Īśvara and is worshipped as the universal Mother.

The recitation of a set of hymns praising the glory of Īśvara in any particular aspect is an important method of verbal prayer, called pārāyaṇa. The Durgā sūktam is one such prayer. Its recitation bestows that final degree of strength upon us, which helps us prevail in the most distressing of situations. Let us now examine this prayer.

ॐ जञातवेदिे िुिवञाम िोममरञातीयतो निदिञानत वेदोः ।
ि िोः िषद्रदनत दुगञाद्रनि नवश्वञा िञावेव निन्ुं दुनरतञाऽत्यन्निोः ॥१

We extract the juice of the soma creeper for (to offer as an oblation in the fire to) the Omniscient Īśvara. The all-knowing Īśvara destroys without a trace our (internal) enemies. May the Lord at the altar of fire (the God of fire), who is the forerunner of the universe, help us cross the obstacles, like a ship helps us cross the ocean. May he destroy, and thus make us rise above, all our wrong deeds. (1)

Durgā Sūktam
Swami Tattavidananda

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In a soma ritual, the soma creeper or its substitute is pounded in a mortar to a pulp, which is then squeezed to extract the juice. This juice is offered as an obligation to the gods at the altar of fire. All the devatās are but different aspects of Īśvara, and therefore we worship Īśvara alone through the worship of any of these devatās. There are many devatās without implying a division or plurality in Īśvara. Thus, the names and forms of the devatās are different, but there is no separation between them.

Īśvara is called jātaveda because He is jāta vedah yasmāt saḥ, ‘the One from whom the knowledge of the Vedas has originated.’ In the Hindu culture, Īśvara is understood to be the source of all knowledge, tīṣānassarvavidyānām (Mahānārāyanopaniṣat, 21). In the Purāṇas, every branch of knowledge, music or dance, etc. is presented as having been revealed by Lord Śiva to His consort, Goddess Pārvatī. Īśvara is all-knowledge, satyaṁ jñānamanantāṁ brahma (Taittirīyopaniṣat, 2.1).

Hindu dharma does not sanction the division of knowledge into the secular and the spiritual. All the sciences, such as psychology, physics, chemistry, etc., are understood to originate from Īśvara. Knowledge Absolute alone manifests in the form of this universe. For example, a tree is a manifestation of knowledge. Each part of the tree, its bark, branches, flowers and, indeed, every cell, exhibits knowledge. Science is nothing but this knowledge. There is no tree other than the knowledge of the tree. We cannot disconnect knowledge from the ‘being.’

The Vedic name for Īśvara is Hiranyagarbha, the combination of both the power of life and knowledge. As individuals, we also combine both these powers in ourselves. The five sense organs correspond to the power of knowledge, and the five organs of action to that of life. Hiranyagarbha is also called Agni, agre nayati, the foremost cause of the universe, and is worshipped at the altars of agni, fire, and the Sun. Anyone who is not satisfied with offering worship at these altars is welcome to have a mūrti, idol, but in the Vedic vision, fire is the primary altar of worship. Therefore, Agni is the altar and symbol of Īśvara and the soma juice is offered to Agni.

Īśvara destroys one’s enemies. These are the ‘inner’ enemies. If we do not keep the body disciplined and in check, it becomes an enemy. Similarly, if we do not know how to control the mind, it becomes a tormentor sitting within. There are the other internal enemies also, like desire, fear, jealousy, anger, greed, arrogance, etc. One may get rid of these enemies by earning the grace of the Lord in abundance through prayer.

A dūrga is an insurmountable difficulty. Whenever we are faced with such a difficulty, we remember Goddess Durgā. The difficulties we face in life are the result of our own past actions. If a person in distress is able to pray, he will gain strength of mind. If we create some space between ourselves and our troubles and attempt to pray, particularly in times of distress, the battle will certainly be won. Īśvara’s grace materializes in some form or the other, and a new avenue will present itself to the person. Hence, Īśvara’s grace is likened to the saving sight of a ship to the person drowning in the ocean.

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tāmagnivānāṁ tapasā jvalantīṁ vairocanīṁ karmaphaleṣu juṣṭāṁ
durgāṁ devīṁ śaraṇamahāṁ pragadaye sutarasi tarase namah (2)
aṅgivānāṁ – shining like fire; tapasā – with penance;
jvalantīṁ – brilliant; vairocanīṁ – the consort of the Lord, who manifests as a variety of forms; karmaphaleṣu – in actions and in their results; juṣṭāṁ – propitiated and loved; tām – that; durgāṁ devīṁ – the Goddess Durgā; ahāṁ – I; śaraṇamahāṁ pragadaye – surrender myself to; tarase – O Goddess that helps to cross; su – well; tarasi – make me cross; namah – prostration.

I surrender myself to (take refuge in) the Goddess Durgā, who is shining brilliantly like the fire. The Lord, with Her as His consort, could manifest as a variety of forms (the universe). The devotees propitiate Her through prayer and enjoy the results of their actions, granted by Her. O Durgā, may You help me cross (the ocean of saṁsāra). My prostration unto you. Kindly take me across (the ocean of saṁsāra). (2)

At this point of the sūkta, the Lord is praised in the form of the female aspect called Durgā, the personification of His creative power. Thus, the Lord is worshipped both as knowledge and as power. In addition to having the knowledge of what is required to be done, we need the energy, resilience, and the sheer physical ability to perform our duties and prevail over difficult situations.

Agnivānāṁ. If we enquire into the nature of fire, we
see that it is truly a glory of Īśvara. When the all-pervading heat energy condenses in a small volume of space, the air molecules in that space become incandescent upon reaching a particular high temperature and then begin to emit radiation, which appears as fire. The energy of the universe has its origin in the creative power of Īśvara, and, as such, fire is the altar at which Īśvara is worshipped. Here the Goddess Durgā is described as being as effulgent as fire. The Goddess is the incarnation of the power of the universe, and She is depicted as seated on a lion or a tiger.

According to Hindu cosmogony, the Lord Himself manifested as the universe through His power of creation. Hence, the entire plurality and diversity of the universe has its material cause in the Lord. For this reason, the Lord is called Vīra, meaning vividham rājate, shining in countless forms. For the same reason, the Lord is also called Virāt, vividham rājate.

Karmaphaleṣu jujṭām. When conditioned by the māyā śakti, Brahman is the doer-enjoyer with reference to the creation, sustenance, and annihilation of the universe. Māyā śakti, the power of creation, is none other than Goddess Durgā. In the individual, She appears as avidyā, nescience, because of which ātmā is mistaken to be the doer of various actions and the enjoyer of their results. This nescience itself can be overcome by the grace of Durgā, the Mother of the universe, which helps the seeker cross the ocean of saṁsāra.

अग्रे त्वं पारया नव्यो अस्मान स्वस्तिभिःति दुर्गाणि विश्वा ।
पूर्व पुष्पी बहुः न उर्वी भवाः तोकाय तनाययां सांयोः ॥ ३ ॥

agnē tvam pārayā navyo asmān svastibhirati durgāṇi viśvā
puśca prthvī bahulā na urvī bhavā tokāya tanayāya śaṁyoḥ (3)

agnē – O Lord; navyo – ever young; svastibhiḥ – with benedictions (to confer); tvam – You; asmān – us; viśvā – all; durgāṇi – obstacles; ati – having crossed; pārayā – take to the other side; naḥ – for us; puḥ – the city of residence; ca – and; prthvī – land; urvī – agricultural fields; bahulā – may be spacious; tokāya – for one’s offspring; tanayāya – for their progeny; śaṁyoḥ – the one who brings prosperity and drives away adversity; bhavā – kindly be.

O ageless Lord, kindly confer benedictions upon us and help us cross all the obstacles and reach the goal (of life). Kindly grant us spacious residence, lands, and agricultural holdings. Kindly grant prosperity to our children and to their children as well, and drive away all adversity. (3)

Prayer is the foundation of spirituality. There are many reasons for praying. An ārta, a person in distress, prays. An arthārthī, a person who wants to accomplish something and wants the blessings of Īśvara to secure the hidden factors, also prays. A jijñāsu, a person who yearns for self-knowledge, prays that he may overcome the difficulties in the way of gaining the wisdom, for acquiring the knowledge does not equal assimilating the knowledge. He needs all the grace of Īśvara to overcome the difficulties posed by the mind. Then there is the prayer of a jñāni. A jñāni also prays, but for the sheer joy of it and also to set an example for the people. There is no difference between the jñāni and Īśvara. This is the reason for using the epithet Bhagavān while referring to a jñāni.

Here the verse reflects the prayer of a person in bondage seeking help in crossing the river of saṁsāra. The glory of Īśvara is described as navya, meaning nityanūtana, ever fresh in the mind of the devotee. We are attached to our possessions for as long as they hold our interest. With time, their appeal wears thin and our attachment to them diminishes. On the other hand, one can never be fed up with happiness. The experience of ānanda is nityanūtana, ever new or fresh. Īśvara is present in the experience as its substratum.

The prefix ati is read together with the verb pārayā to arrive at the meaning, ‘help us cross’ or surmount the innumerable travails of life. There is always repetition in prayer because the mind is always anxious to overcome obstacles and gain a few auspicious and essential things, such as place for a dwelling or some fertile land to raise crops for food, etc. The word puḥ, meaning pura, city, can also mean the physical body, which is described in Vedānta as a city of nine (Bhagavad Gītā, 5.13) or eleven gates (Kaṭha Upaniṣad, 2.2.1). The prayer is for a healthy body.

Śāmyoh is purely a Vedic term; it does not occur in conventional Sanskrit. It means śaṁ ca yoṣca. Śaṁ, sukha, is happiness; yoh, duḥkha-viyoga, is dissociation from pain and suffering. ‘Let there not be inauspicious things in our lives. May there not be occasions when we suffer from pain.’
Viśvānī no durghā jātavedassindhum na nāvā duritā tiparsi
agnē atrivanmanasā grṇāno’smākāṁ bodhyavitā
tanūnām (4)

jaṭavedāḥ – O Lord; durgāḥ – one who drives away obstacles; naḥ – our; viśvāni – all; duritā – blemishes; sindhum – the ocean; nāvā – like the ship; ati – having taken out of; parśi – protect; agne – O Lord; atrivat – like the sage Atri; manasā – with the mind; grṇānah – chanting; asmākām – our; tanūnām – of bodies; avitā – protector; bodhi – be alert.

O Lord, kindly drive away the obstacles in our path and eliminate all of our blemishes. You are like the ship that can take us across the ocean of saṁsāra. Like the noble sage Atri, I would constantly chant Thy hymns in my mind. Kindly be alert in protecting our bodies (health). Jātaveda means jātāni vetti, the Lord who is omniscient, knowing all that is created out of Himself. (4)

The Sanskrit word na has many meanings. The simple meaning of na is, of course, ‘no.’ It can also mean ‘other than,’ as in the word anāśva, meaning a vehicle other than the horse. Another meaning is iva, similar to. This is the meaning that applies here: na nāvā, similar to a ship.

Agne atrivat. It is said that the great sage Atri incessantly praised the glory of the Lord mentally. ‘May I do the same’ is the aspiration of the devotee. The word atrivat may also be understood as an epithet of the Lord. The tri in atrivat refers to the three guṇas of prakṛti, the primordial cause of the universe: sattva (intelligence), rajas (activity/energy), and tamas (inertia/matter). These three factors can be appreciated by us in ourselves, as being the body, life, and the intelligence of life pervading the entire body.

The three-fold prakṛti is the Māyā-śakti of Īśvara. This is the Vedāntic view of creation. There can be no śakti, power, without the śaktimān, the one wielding the power. Svabhāva, one’s characteristic trait, cannot be independent of the individual who has it. Similarly, Māyā-śakti, the creative power, is the svabhāva of Īśvara. He is the śaktimān; śakti cannot stand apart from Īśvara as a distinct entity. Even while manifesting through His śakti, however, Īśvara transcends it and is therefore atrivat.

In prayer, it is better to seek the health of the body, peace of mind, and wisdom of the intellect rather than material possessions, which are at best transient and superficial. ‘O Lord, kindly protect us by bestowing upon us good health, peace of mind, and the knowledge of the Self.’
senānāyaka, the chief of the army of the gods, to conquer and vanquish the armies of the demons in the never-ending battle between good and evil. In doing so, he did not become bound by His actions, as He abides as the Supreme Reality. This battle is also symbolic of the two opposing proclivities in the heart of the devotee, and the devotee aspires to win the battle by the grace of Īśvara.

The sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā describes the two types of qualities present in us, known as the divine and the demonic. There could be a conflict between them at any time. We need the strength of mind derived from prayer to overcome our demonic tendencies.

Paramāt sadhasthāt, the supreme abode. Īśvara's supreme abode is described in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad (1.3.10-11):

इन्रियेभ्योः िरञा ह्र्ञाद्र अर्गेभ्यश्च िरं मिोः।
मििस्ु िरञा बुनधिबुद्रधिेरञात्ञा मिञाि ् िरोः॥

The sense objects are superior to the sense organs, as is the mind, in turn, to the sense objects. The intellect is superior to the mind, whereas, the cosmic intelligence is superior to the individual intellect. The unmanifest power of creation of Brahman is superior to the manifest cosmic intelligence. Ultimately, the Infinite Brahman is superior to the unmanifest power of creation. There is none else superior to the Brahman; It is the ultimate, and It is the highest goal (of the seekers).

Īśvara is the destroyer of the demons, but we are not sure that we do not have any demonic qualities in us. Therefore, we pray that we may be forgiven for our omissions and commissions. Īśvara is benevolent towards his devotees. Even demons like Rāvana performed great penance and achieved unparalleled powers though, ultimately, they became victims of their own misdeeds. Then there is Hanumān, the foremost of all devotees. He used his prowess in the service of Lord Rāma. Whatever we may gain in life is entirely due to the grace of Īśvara. The prayer here is, ‘Oh forgiving Lord, overlook my misdeeds and protect me.’
He is not only the priest of the gods; the priest who conducts the ritual performed by us is also a form of Īśvara alone. Therefore, it is customary for us to touch the feet of the priest at the conclusion of any ritual or worship.

Svām tanuvaṁ piprayasva. ‘O Lord, cherish your form.’ What is the body of the Lord and where is it? This is a glorious vision with no parallel in any other culture or religion of the world. To begin with, the individual is a ‘person,’ identified with a body constituted of the five gross elements and a mind constituted of their subtle counterparts. The power of life, the power of intelligence, expresses through this body-mind. This vyaṣṭi at the micro-level is a replica of the samaṣṭi at the macro-level. Therefore, the brahmāṇḍa, the entire physical universe, is the form of the Lord. In fact, the samaṣṭi is the Reality and the individual is an appearance in that reality. There is a need for prayer until this truth is recognized.

There are infinite living beings within the Lord, the Cosmic Person. The Lord’s body, the universe, includes the bodies of all the living beings. The Lord’s mind, the universal intelligence, includes the minds of all the living beings. Therefore, we all happen to be part of this Cosmic Person. The following hymn (Taittirīya samhitā, 4.6.2.9) reflects this vision:

![Hymn text](https://example.com/hymn.png)

O Lord, You pervade all and yet You are untainted by any (blemish or sorrow). We will worship You and follow in your footsteps (so that we too will not be tainted). You abide happily above the heavens. We are your people, living and serving You in this world. Kindly bestow upon us cattle wealth, so that there will be plenty of milk (in our homes) and happiness (in our hearts). (7)

Īśvara, who is addressed as Agni in the earlier hymn, is now addressed as Indra. We generally tend to be misled by the variety of names of gods and goddesses because it is the nature of the mind to divide and oppose. For example, there are people who believe that there are two different gods called Śiva and Viṣṇu, and one of them is superior to the other. However, we find a mention of Viṣṇu in the one thousand names of Śiva, and vice versa. Division is untrue and serves only to bind. Unity is the only truth and it alone liberates. Gravitational attraction is a reflection of this unity in the diversity that obtains in the world of the lifeless. This unity reflects as love in the world of living beings. We have the famous Vedic statement:

![Vedic statement](https://example.com/vedic-statement.png)

The wise describe the One Existence in many ways. Indra here means Īśvara. The Aitareya Upaniṣad (1.3.13,14) explains the word beautifully as follows:

![Aitareya Upaniṣad](https://example.com/aitareya-upanisad.png)

He realized this (Brahman) and hence idandra (one who has realized this) is indeed his name. Yet He is called Indra and the real name is thus hidden.

# End of excerpt

indra – O Lord; ayujah – untainted (by blemish and sorrow); viṣṇoh – pervading all; tava – your; anasaṅcarema – we follow and serve; gobhīh – by the cows; juṣṭam – served; niṣiktam – flooded; nākasya – of the heavens; prṣṭham – top; abhisaṅvasānah – dwelling with enthusiasm; iha – in this; loke – world; vaiṣṇavīm – serving the all-pervasive Lord; mādayantām – may bestow happiness.

O Lord, You pervade all and yet You are untainted by any (blemish or sorrow). We will worship You and follow in your footsteps (so that we too will not be tainted). You abide happily above the heavens. We are your people, living and serving You in this world. Kindly bestow upon us cattle wealth, so that there will be plenty of milk (in our homes) and happiness (in our hearts). (7)
without any likes and dislikes of His own. This description becomes necessary or meaningful in association with the epithet viṣṇoḥ. Īśvara is like space, which contains everything and yet is not tainted or conditioned by anything. The entire teaching of Vedānta revolves around this vision of non-attachment.

Gobhiḥ juṣṭam. Go means ‘cow’ as well as ‘speech.’ Speech is the expression of knowledge. ‘O Lord, kindly accept our prayers and worship, and bless us with cattle-wealth and knowledge.’

Nākasya prṣṭham abhi saṁvasānaḥ. ‘The Lord abides in the high heavens, whereas I am of this world. May the all-pervading Lord grant me, His devotee, lasting happiness.’ The word nāka has an interesting etymology:

कं  िुखं ि कं  अकं  दुोःखं ि नवद्यते अकं  यनस्ि ् िोः िञाकोः
kaṁ sukhaṁ na kaṁ akaṁ duḥkhaṁ na vidyate akaṁ yasmin saḥ nākaḥ

The place (or state) in which there is no pain or suffering is called nāka.

It could as well be the sat-cit-ānanda ātmā or ‘the heaven within,’ in which case it can be attained now and here instead of waiting until one’s death. Normally, we connect ānanda, happiness, with an external cause. Viewed from that conditioning, heaven is somewhere high above. However, when a person discovers the ‘heaven within,’ he slowly finds heaven all around him; heaven on earth.

There is also nothing illogical about a heaven above. Today, scientists are searching for extra-terrestrial intelligence using very sophisticated radio telescopes, with a budget running into billions of dollars. When this level of existence on earth can be there, why not another level of existence called heaven? The universe is full of possibilities and potentialities. Therefore, when the śāstra talks about heaven, we do not have a problem accepting it. We have to understand, ultimately, that this apparent universe is unreal.

We know and meditate upon the Goddess Durgā, the offspring of Katya. May the Goddess, in the form of Umā, the young daughter of Himavān, inspire us in that meditation.

This is the Durgā-gāyatrī, a hymn dedicated to the Goddess Durgā, the Māyā-śakti, the creative faculty of Īśvara, in the famous gāyatrī meter. This meter has three lines of eight syllables each and a total of twenty-four syllables. It is an all-important meter, in which many of the Vedic hymns are set. The Rgveda begins with this meter and the well-known Gāyatrī mantra is in this meter. Indeed, there is at least one hymn in praise of the glory of every devatā that is set in this meter.

The Goddess Durgā is the offspring of the sage Katya, in one of Her incarnations. She is also Kanyākumāri, the young Umā, daughter of Himavān, in another incarnation. As Umā, she performed a long and arduous penance to gain the hand of Lord Śiva, the all-auspicious Lord, in marriage. She is within us in the form of life and consciousness. Hence, She alone inspires our thoughts. This is the truth contemplated upon while chanting this hymn.

Nāḥ pracodayāt. ‘May She inspire us.’ Īśvara alone can grant us the wisdom required to understand difficult situations, so that we may take appropriate remedial steps to overcome them. The Lord alone can bestow self-confidence upon us, so that we may prevail over all the issues of life. May the Lord inspire our thoughts in the proper direction.

ॐ शञानन्ोः शञानन्ोः शञानन्ोः
Oṁ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

(Abridged from the book Vaidika Sūkta Mañjarī by Swami Tattvavidananda)
Anna, food, is central to the survival of all beings. Unlike the longing for cable television or the wish to go on vacation, the desire for food is an uncultivated desire. Along with air and water, the desire for food is īśvara-

śrṣṭi; it comprises the vast and infallible order, which is the manifestation of Īśvara, the Lord. In this order, we find that every uncultivated desire is fulfilled here and now. Food, a primal need, is available for all beings upon birth.

Animals do not have uninhibited free will. Therefore, unlike human beings, animals are largely incapable of violating Īśvara’s laws. They eat only when hungry and instinctively fast when their stomachs are upset. We do not hear of tigers in the jungle suffering from eating disorders or a hippo in the wild craving “comfort food” because it feels lonely. For human beings, on the other hand, the search for food – a basic necessity for sustaining the body-mind complex – is quickly conflated with the frantic pursuit of love, culture, community, connection, and comfort. How does something that is objectively meant to sustain the body and mind get turned into a subjective yearning for a sense of belonging? This is because, due to self-ignorance, the wholeness one yearns for is not understood as already gained, as the truth of one’s nature.

The relationship between self-ignorance and food

When one does not know oneself, and when one is endowed with free will, it is easy to take oneself for all that one is not. This is why one takes oneself to be the body, the states of the mind, or the senses. Without knowing the glorious and limitless self as pūrṇa, wholeness, and as the adhisthāna, basis, of everything, one mistakes oneself to be the insecure wanting person, fearful and tearful, alienated from oneself and others, and from Īśvara, the source of the universe. Therefore, the desire to belong, the yearning for oneness morphs into seeking to “fill” oneself up with anything imaginable. In this regard, food becomes an easy target. It is both a necessity and a potential source of dependency.

Due to the prevalent mix-up between food as a source of sustenance and using food as a way of suppressing or “filling up” the emptiness that one feels, it is very difficult to be objective about food. Addictions to cultivated desires such as drugs or alcohol can be overcome by totally giving up the substances in question, but one cannot give up eating altogether to overcome food issues. This point is well-illustrated in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, where Śvetaketu was asked to keep a fast for fifteen days, and then was asked to chant the Sāmaveda. Until he had a meal, Śvetaketu was unable to recall any of the chants he had studied. There is an imminent need to forge a right relationship with food, especially if one is serious about being a student of Vedānta.

The Vision of Vedānta

The wholeness one seeks is the wholeness that one is. In revealing the nature of the self as pūrṇa, limitless, which is exactly what one wants to be, the study of Vedānta corrects erroneous conclusions of oneself as finite, as subject to saṁsāra, a life of endless “becoming” – becoming acceptable, becoming immortal, becoming limitless. When one does not understand that one is seeking the truth of oneself, the yearning for wholeness gets morphed into eternally seeking time-bound objects. There is the urgent need to latch on to things for comfort and well-being, and the desire to avoid a sense of emptiness at all costs. Instead of knowing that one is wholeness incarnate, one seeks to “become” whole by getting addicted to things such as food. Therefore, instead of being the seeker of the infinite, one becomes an infinite seeker. When one seeks the infinite, the quest is finite and one gains the self; however, when one seeks the finite infinitely, one loses oneself in the maze of finite objects. The loss of the self is indeed an infinite loss.

The inner child as a “hungry ghost”

In Eastern Asia, there is a term for people with voracious desires. They are called “hungry ghosts.” While alive, such people are solely preoccupied trying to fulfill their longings, even at the cost of inflicting great suffering on others. After death, it is believed that these individuals take on a ghostly form that has an enormous belly but a thin, pencil-like throat and neck. No matter how much they try to eat, they are always hungry. In Vedic astrology also, we have the persona of Rahu, who is depicted as having only a head. He is always ahead in thinking about all his wants, but although he is desire incarnate, he can neither ingest anything nor experience fullness through his endless desires. Rahu symbolizes the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind is the nursery of subjectivity. It is here that inner children in the form of intractable desires, anger, hurt, guilt, and deprivation are reared and then set free to project their subjective perceptions on the jagat, leading to a distorted perception of oneself, others, and Īśvara.
When a child is born, it is totally helpless. It needs to be fully looked after, as it is unable to speak or move independently. The complete helplessness of the child is compensated by total trust in the primary caregivers. The child projects onto the caregivers a subjective awe. This kind of a positive projection of seeing the parents as superman or superwoman is known as \textit{sobhana-adhyaśa}. As the child grows up, it senses certain discrepancies and inconsistencies in the parents’ caregiving. The father, for instance, is unavailable, while the mother is inconsistent. Being subject to these kinds of omissions and commissions in its care, the child experiences a loss of trust in those whom it totally trusted. This kind of a negative projection, by which the primary caregivers are converted into “primary scaregivers” in the eyes of the child is known as \textit{aśobhana-adhyaśa}. This is how the unconscious mind develops. The presence of the unconscious mind is behind many distorted perceptions, including those related to food. Food often becomes a way to overcome a sense of deprivation. From childhood itself, the tendency to use food to fill up whatever is perceived as lacking develops, and manifests as unhealthy eating practices, addictive behaviors, and the inability to know when the stomach is full. As the child grows into an adult, memories of early neglect and/or abuse are hidden from the conscious mind, only to resurface in adulthood, when these issues can be safely and objectively dealt with. Until such issues are resolved, the inner child holds the adult hostage – manifesting in the form of distrust, deprivation and disconnection.

**Vedānta and vairāgya**

The study of Vedānta effectively helps one re-parent the inner child and integrate it into the adult. Through Vedānta one gains objectivity and develops a sound relationship with food. What does it mean to be in right relationship with food? In the sixth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.8.3), the word for hunger actually means the water that helps to digest the food. \textit{Aśanāya} means hunger. This word is ingeniously defined as \textit{aśitam nayati}, that which leads what is eaten through the process of digestion. Here the immediate meaning of the word \textit{aśanāya} is water, which liquifies all that has been eaten and conveys the essence of the food to various body parts to form bones, muscles, blood, etc. When this happens, one is hungry again and therefore has the desire to eat. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad gives an objective definition of hunger as the state where all that was previously eaten has been fully assimilated. Only then is one ready to eat again. The Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (4.4.22) says \textit{brāhmaṇaḥ vividiśanti yajñena dānena tapasā nāsakena}, the committed ones desire to know (the self) through (purificatory means such as) the performance of rituals, and the practice of austerities, including the selective absti

nence from food. The Bhagavad Gītā also speaks about the importance of practicing moderation with regard to one’s diet, movement, sleeping, and waking. This yoga of moderation leads to a life free of conflict and sorrow: \textit{yuktāhāravīhārasya, yuktaceṣṭasya karmasau, yuktasvapnāvabodhasyacyo bhavati duḥkhahā} (6.17).

**The journey from āśraddhā to śraddhā**

Although the study of Vedānta effectively helps one to reformulate one’s relationship with food, there is a bit of a catch-22. Until one resolves the unconscious, one cannot relate objectively to food; and until one gains some knowledge of Vedānta, one is often unaware that one has a dysfunctional relationship to food.

The most effective way to get out of this conundrum is to retrace one’s journey from a place of distrust back to āśraddhā, trust. One regains the trust that was initially betrayed by the care-givers by discovering the infallible as the mother and father of the universe, and redirecting the trust towards them. Only then will healing take place. A hymn of the Sāmaveda affirms this fact: \textit{setuṁstara dustarān setuṁstara śraddhayā āśraddhāṁstara}. “Cross the bridge that is difficult to cross,” the chant urges, “cross distrust by building a bridge of trust.” Why is āśraddhā essential? Śraddhā is one’s nature. Nursing distrust is burdensome because it is contrary to oneself. By holding one hostage, distrust demands an enormous ransom in the form of alienation from oneself, from others, from the world, and from Īśvara. It is an insufferable way to live. In everyday life, the distrust is lived through frantic attempts to control one’s surroundings and others. In letting go of distrust, one naturally discovers śraddhā. The willingness to trust again comes as a great relief. One can relax in the order that is Īśvara.

As a practical way to cultivate śraddhā, the \textit{śāstra} recommends learning to have the attitude of bhikṣa with regard to food. The word \textit{bhikṣa} means alms, the food that is gathered through begging. This is an integral part of a \textit{sannyāsin’s} lifestyle. Although one may not be a \textit{sannyāsin}, it is nonetheless healthy to learn to look upon food as bhikṣa, alms from the Goddess Annapūrṇā, the presiding deity of food. When one begs for food, one cannot afford to be choosy. One learns to accept whatever is given. Furthermore, bhikṣa is an effective way of overcoming one’s \textit{rāga-dveṣa} in relation to food. This is an important step in gaining dispas-

sion and objectivity with regard to one’s priorities. One learns to eat to live, and not live in order to eat. Finally, seeing food as bhikṣa makes one humble. Pride and ar-
The knowledge of Vedānta will not sit in the hearts of those who wish to be constantly validated for their accomplishments, real or perceived. One learns to look upon food as a gift of Goddess Annapūrṇā, the presiding deity of food. Ādi Śaṅkara’s Annapūrṇā-stotram depicts the Goddess as a resplendent incarnation of abundance, carrying a big vessel of food and serving it with a ladle.

The cultivation of dispassion towards food has the effect of being objective with regards to other things in life. The final verse of the Annapūrṇā-stotram affirms the need for gaining objectivity with regard to food:

annapūrṇe sadāpūrṇe śaṅkaraprāṇavallabhe,

jñānavairāgyasiddhyartham bhikṣāṁ dehi ca pārvati

Meaning:

Goddess Mīnākṣī, sweet Mother of the universe
You adorn the city of Madhura

Goddess of eloquence sweet
You are sage Mataṅga’s daughter
Bedecked with emeralds
You abide in my heart
Mother, remover of pain
Bless me

Goddess, Lord Sundareśvara’s beloved half
From heaven to the earth
You are the ruler of all
From saṃsāra’s depths, you liberate us
Abiding, hidden in our hearts
Of limitless Brahman
You are the creative power, O Māye

Composed by Swami Dayananda Saraswati
An Overview of Mahiṣāsura-mardini Stotram

Samata Chaitanya

On the tenth day after Navarātrī (festival of nine nights, celebrating the feats of Devī Śakti), sādhakas culminate their sādhanā by celebrating vijaya, the victory of light over darkness, of knowledge over ignorance, of exuberance over inertia, of Devī Mahiṣāsura-mardini over Mahiṣāsura. This victory embodies the emergence of finer and subtler aspects of nature, in which the universe and the creatures in it start becoming more graceful, gentle, and compassionate. The feminine aspects of existence start becoming more prominent. The best way to get in tune with this shift of nature is to invoke the attributes of Devī Mahiṣāsura-mardini as described in 21 verses of a vibrant and powerful, yet subtle and musical stotram, a hymn, called Mahiṣāsura- mardini Stotram. This stotram is based on the Devī- māhātmyam in which Devī takes the forms of Durgā and Caṇḍikā to slay the demons like Mahiṣāsura, Caṇḍa, and Muṇḍa.

The stotram is composed in a poetic meter called “Śravanābharaṇam”, which simply means earring. Each śloka in this meter has 92 syllables with a repeating pattern of 23 syllables in each line, eg. “da da da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da, da dā da”. There are three short syllables in the beginning followed by a repeating phrase with a long syllable sandwiched between those two short syllables, to create a magical sound. True to its name, the “Śravanābharaṇam” meter, is so ornate that it is like a fine crafted jewelry, a feast for the ears! The emanating sound is a mix of smoothly flowing, jingling and tingling sounds of Devī’s moves and her ornaments, while harsh, clamoring sounds of swords and cymbals are also heard through the use of sequential, rhythmic words in alliteration.

It has been written and composed in the most captivating, mesmerizing, and rhythmical format. Chanting this stotram creates a charged, vibrant and energetic environment as if one is actually witnessing the war. The meter, rhyme, prosody, phonetics, grammar, and the wordplay to create puns is displayed to such perfection that its creation can only be attributed to Śrī Ādi Śankarācārya.

Each word of every verse has a deep meaning and describes in detail Devī’s beauty, power, emotions, skill, compassion and her several attributes. The verses describe her divine nature and her warrior skills in the battle with the demons Madhu, Kaīṭabha, Dhumralocana, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Raktabīja, Śumbha, Niśumbha, and Mahiṣāsura. The ācārya concludes every verse in praise of the Devī by addressing her with different names such as, “the destroyer of Mahiṣāsura”, “the one with beautiful-braided hair” and Pārvati - daughter of Parvata Rāja, King of the Himālaya Mountains; victory be to you, victory be to you!
The first five ślokas are in praise of various forms and guṇās of Devī, her divine acts, and her preferential residence. There is an elaborate description of the warrior skills she displays in asura-samhāra, destroying the demons, and the events that happened before slaying the demons Śumbha, and Niśumbha. The next five verses, 6 to 10, sing of her merciful nature and her warrior acts while slaying the demons Dhumra-locana, Raktabija, Śumbha and Niśumbha. There is also praise of Devī’s appearance, war skills, and the manifestation of her various Śaktis in war. The ācārya describes the state of joy of all the devatās after the completion of the war and how they are all singing the praises of the Goddess over and over again. The next five verses, 11 to 15, elaborately praise the divine appearance of the Goddess and her vaibhava, splendor and her attributes. Devī’s appearance in the forms of Mātangī, Lakṣmī, and Lalitā is praised. There is a vivid description of her overlordship over nāda, sound, and her euphonious, pleasant, and mellifluous voice. The ācārya again sings in awe of the appearance of the Mother Goddess, her śobhā, enchanting beauty and luster, her vaibhava, splendor and pomp. In the next five verses, from 16 to 20, he sings about the greatness of the Goddess herself and the glories of her son Kārtikeya. The ācārya expresses his desire to achieve that fulfilling peace by submitting himself at the feet of the Mother, and he reconfirms that meditating on Devī’s beautiful face alone will free a sādhaka of all heavenly and worldly, lustful desires. The ācārya addresses Devī as janani, Mother, and pleads to her to uplift him from fallen virtues and bless him with all that she thinks is suitable for him.

Finally, the ācārya ends the twenty first and the final verse in śaraṇāgati, surrendering himself at the feet of the Divine Mother, in submission with a trust in her unbounded grace. He hails the Divine Mother singing thus, “jaya jaya he Mahiṣāsura-mardinī ramya kapardini śaīlasute”, O slayer of Mahiṣāsura, O Divine Mother with beautiful long hair, the daughter of the mountains- Himālayas, Pārvatī, victory be to thee, victory be to thee.

The stotram is said to bring peace to the devotees and removes all fears and sadness. It drives away negative emotions such as doubt, anger, ego, inertia, and stresses that impede our spiritual pursuit. Anuṣṭhānam, (spiritual practice and discipline in accordance with the scriptures followed with utmost determination and devotion), of this stotram removes all the obstacles from the path of our sādhanā, and instills courage, discriminative power, and the willingness to act within each one of us to vanquish our own shortcomings, and our mental and emotional deformities. One can listen to this magical Mahiṣāsura-mardini Stotram, although reciting the chants is considered to be more powerful and part of a very deep Devī sādhanā during Navarātrī.
O Mātā, I know neither your mantra, yantra, stuti, dhyānam, nor any mudrās. I don't even know how to cry and reach out to you. But one thing I know for certain – however imperfect is my pursuit of devotion towards you, it will free me of all my afflictions.

Engulfed by miseries, I seek your refuge, O Durgā, ocean of compassion. May you please not take my plea as a deceit or pretense, since it is natural for a craving, hungry child to remember the Mother!

O Jagadamba, Mother of the Universe, how is it even a matter of surprise that you are always overflowing with grace and compassion? O Mātā, you never abandon your child, in spite of the child’s persistent misdemeanors and mistakes!

O Mātā, there is no one as fallen from virtues as I, while there is no one as uplifting and liberating as you! Knowing thus, O Mahādevī, please bless me with whatever is appropriate and best suited for me, whatever you think I am worthy of.
Our Ācāryāḥ
ॐ श्री महाकालीमहालक्ष्मीमहासरस्वतीम्‌

नमः

om śrī mahākālīmahālakṣmīmahāsarasvatībhya namah

नमस्तस्ये नमस्तस्ये नमस्तस्ये नमो नमः

namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namah

Unto that form of Devi, I bow in obeisance, I bow in obeisance, I bow in obeisance, over and over again!

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