

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam 36th Anniversary Souvenir August 14, 2022



या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता

yā devī sarvabhūteṣu śaktirūpeṇa saṁsthitā

That Devī, who is the *pariṇāma 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 Primordial energy.

ॐ नमः शिवाय
om namaḥ śivāya



ध्यायेदेवं सस्मितं स्यन्दनस्थं देव्या सार्धं तेजसा दीप्यमानम्।

dhyāyedevarṁ sasmitaṁ syandanasthaṁ devyā sārḍhaṁ tejasā dīpyamānam|

May one meditate upon the smiling Lord, seated in a chariot, whose other half is *devī*

Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
36th Anniversary Souvenir
August 14, 2022
Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania



न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते
na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitramiha vidyate
Bhagavad Gītā 4.38

In this world, there is no purifier equivalent to knowledge



ॐ

Pujya SwamiJi says.....

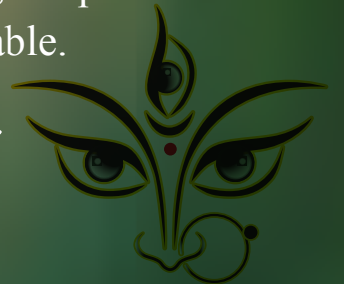
The concept of the Lord, *Īśvara*, is such that it is two-fold, maker and material. The material cause is looked upon as the female aspect and the maker, the efficient cause, is looked upon as the male aspect. In fact there is no male, female in the Lord. It is only for the sake of prayers that there 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 parvatīparamēśvarau, means I worship Parvatī and Paramēśvara, the parents of the Universes, who are inseparable.

Om Namo Bhagavate





ॐ

Anniversary Message by Swami Veditatmananda

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.

Veditatmananda



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 Ādiśakti," the Mother of the Universe. This refers to Īśvara's energy, which has transformed itself to manifest as this whole universe.

The cover depicts Mā Ādiśakti 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 – Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsaraswatī. 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 Ādiśakti, "Jai Mā!"

Ms. Samata Chaitanya – (Visualizer, Copy-writer & Artist)

*We extend our sincere gratitude & appreciation to
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Samata Chaitanya

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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-saptasatī, 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 Ṛṣi Medhas with their queries.

The story behind how this question came about and how it got answered is narrated by Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya to his disciple Ṛṣi 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 *sādhana*, 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 *vinīyoga*, 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-saīnya-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-vaśīṣayorvara-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 saṃpattīḥ*, and are on their spiritual pursuits, facing many internal conflicts and turmoil due to untamed emotional and psychological issues – got their questions answered by Ṛṣi 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. *Sāadhanā* of these potent mantras of the Devī-māhātmyam is indeed a way to tap that divine grace and blessings of Devī Ādiśakti, 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 विच्चे ॥

om aiṃ hrīm kṛīm cāmuṇḍāyai vicee



Devī, the Universal Mother

Swami Vidadatmananda

(Translated by Swamini Paraprajnananda)

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 is, 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, Lakṣmī is worshipped. Lakṣmī 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 *viṣayadaśamī*, 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 *pitṛs*, 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 Sankarācāryaji brings out these myriad hues and divine qualities of Bhagavatī, 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 Sankarācāryaji 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



या कुन्देन्दुतुषारहारधवला या शुभ्रवस्त्रावृता
या वीणावरदण्डमण्डितकरा या श्वेतपद्मासना ■
या ब्रह्माच्युतशङ्करप्रभृतिभिर्देवैः सदा वन्दिता
सा मां पातु सरस्वती भगवती निःशेषजाड्यापहा ■

*yā kundendutuṣārahāradhavalā yā śubhravastrāvṛtā
yā vīṇavaradaṇḍamaṇḍitakarā yā śvetapadmāsana
yā brahmācyutaśaṅkaraprabhṛtibhirdevaiḥ sadā vanditā
sā mām pātu sarasvatī bhagavatī niḥśeṣajāḍyāpahā* - (Sarasvatī-stotram, vs. 1)

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, Śaṅkara, and the other *devatās*, and who completely removes ignorance; may that Goddess Sarasvatī protect me (by giving me knowledge).

Yā sarasvatī sā mām 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-śaṅkara-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 Śaṅkara (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 festoons. 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-pūjā* 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 *golus* 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-rūpiṇī*. She is *śakti* because she is the *pariṇāma-kāraṇa*, the transformational cause. When we say *Brahman* is *jagat-kāraṇa*, the cause of the world, it is not only the *adhiṣṭhāna*, locus. Like the rope is the cause for the snake, *Brahman* 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 *Brahman*. 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 Brahman. But that *vṛtti* is capable of destroying ignorance, so it is worshipped in the form of Goddess there. Even if you are worshipping *Īśvara*, only *īśvara-śakti* is worshipped, not *Brahman*. When you are invoking *Īśvara* as *sarvajña*, all-knowledge, you are not invoking *satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma*, Brahman that is limitless existence consciousness; you are invoking *sarvajña* in order to know *satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma*. Similarly, the all-knowing Lord is invoked in various aspects. On *gaṇeśa-caturthī* day, the Lord is invoked as Gaṇeśa,

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 *Īśvara* is straight, these types of worship – like worshiping 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 sadṛśam pavitram iha vidyate* (Bhagavad Gītā, 4.38). *Iha*, in this world, *na vidyate*, is not there, *sadṛśam*, 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 *saṃsāra*. All other things purify only within *saṃsāra*, but *jñāna* purifies you from *saṃsāra*. *Saṃsāra* itself is a *mala*, impurity, and it is only within *saṃsāra* 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 *saṃsāra*. But *saṃsāra* itself is dirt and you have to remove that. For that, you need *jñāna*.

In the Gītā, just before “*na hi jñānena sadṛśam 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 *ṛṣi* 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 *saṃsāra*.

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 Vidyāraṇya and *bhārati* in Candraśekhara Bhārati. *Āraṇya* means forest, *giri* 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 Śringeri called *Śāradā-pīṭha*. Those who have these titles belong to that particular *pīṭha*.

वन्देऽहं शारदाम्
विशारदां ज्ञानदां वरदाम्
शुद्ध-सत्त्व-स्वरूपिणीम्
स्वच्छ-हृदय-निवासिनीम्
स्वप्रकाश-रूपिणीम्
परापर-विद्या-भूषिताम्
सुरवर-सुजन-सेविताम्
शुभदां सुलभाम्
सुस्वर-वाद्य-निरताम्

vande 'ham śāradām
viśāradām jñānadām varadām
śuddha-sattva-svarūpiṇīm
svaccha-hṛdaya-nivāsiniṁ
svaprakāśa-rūpiṇīm
parāpara-vidyā-bhūṣitām
suravara-sujana-sevitām
śubhadām sulabhām
susvara-vādyā-niratām
— (Composed by Swami Dayananda)

Vande 'ham śāradām viśāradām, I salute Śāradā. If you bring in the prefix *vi* to make it *viśāradā*, it means 'an expert,' so that *śāradā* becomes an expert in everything. *Viśāradā* means *jñānadā* – *jñānaṁ dadāti iti jñānadā*, the one who gives knowledge. Similarly, *varadā* means *varam dadāti*, the one who gives you protection. What you ask for, she gives you. She is *vara-daṇḍa-maṇḍita-karā*, the one who protects you, and *śveta-padma-āsanā*, the one who is seated on a white lotus.

You will find that these (*mūrtis*) 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 *saṁsāra-agninā taptah*, burned by the fire of *saṁsāra*, feeling the afflictions of life, and seeking protection. Where will he go? The only refuge is *jñāna*, which is *śruti*, revealed knowledge. *Śruti* is *śāradā*. Therefore *jñāna* is only Sarasvatī. *Śārada* is the only refuge; there is no other refuge.

Therefore, *varadām vande 'ham śāradām*, I salute the one who is *śuddha-sattva-svarūpiṇī*. *Śuddha-sattva* means there is no *malinya*, 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-nivāsini*, 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 *svaprakāśa-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 *svaprakāśa-rūpiṇī*, in the form of *svaprakāśa-ātmā*, the self-revealing self, which is myself.

Parāparā-vidyā-bhūṣitā. In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad it is said, *dve vidye 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 *pūjā* 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 *bhūṣaṇa*, 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 *bhūṣaṇa*. 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 *pramāṇa*, 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, *śubham 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 *pramāṇa*. 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

(Seven Verses in Praise of Durgā)

Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati

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 Kaiṭabha 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 Mahiṣasura. The third caritra describes the *sāttvika* incarnation as Mahāsarasvatī, who slays the demons Dhūmrilocana, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, 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 चेतांसि देवी भगवती हि सा ।
बलादाकृष्य मोहाय महामाया प्रयच्छति ॥ १ ॥

*om jñānināmapī cetāṁsi devī bhagavatī hi sā
balādākṛṣya mohāya mahāmāyā prayacchati*

Om! Bhagavatī, who is Mahāmāyā, forcibly drawing the minds of even the learned, verily throws them into delusion. (1)

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 Kaiṭabha, 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 Saptasloki 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 Saptasloki Durgā is taken from this chapter (verse 4-17):

दुर्गे स्मृता हरसि भीतिमशेषजन्तोः
स्वस्थैः स्मृता मतिमतीव शुभं ददासि ।
दारिद्र्यदुःखभयहारिणि का त्वदन्या
सर्वोपकारकरणाय सदाद्र्चिता ॥ २ ॥

*durge smṛtā harasi bhītimāśeṣajantoḥ
svasthaiḥ smṛtā matimatīva śubhām dadāsi
dāridryaduḥkhabhayahāriṇi kā tvadanya
sarvopakāraḥkaraṇāya sadārdracittā*

When people who are caught in calamities remember you, O Durgā, you rescue them all and remove their fear. O Durgā, when remembered by people of pure mind, you grant them auspicious knowledge (leading to *mokṣa*). O remover of poverty, misery, and fear, who is there other than you, whose heart melts to help everyone? (2)

The word *durga* means adversity, calamity, and distress. In this verse, it takes the form *durge*, which is a grammar-based pun in Sanskrit. If understood in the locative case, *durge* is translated as ‘during calamities.’ *Durge smṛtā* would therefore 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 *sātvika* incarnation as Mahāsarasvatī 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:

सर्वमङ्गलमाङ्गल्ये शिवे सर्वार्थसाधिके ।
शरण्ये त्र्यम्बके गौरी नारायणि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ३ ॥

*sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalye śive sarvārthasādhike
śaraṇye tryambake gaurī nārāyaṇi namo śtu te*

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 Śaranyā, 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-dātṛī*, 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:

शरणागतदीनार्तपरित्राणपरायणे ।
सर्वस्यार्तिहरे देवि नारायणि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥४॥

*śaraṇāgatadīnārtaparitrāṇaparāyaṇe
sarvasyārtihare devi nārāyaṇi namo 'stu te*

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.

सर्वस्वरूपे सर्वेशे सर्वशक्तिसमन्विते ।
भयेभ्यस्त्राहि नो देवि दुर्गे देवि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥५॥

*sarvasvarūpe sarveṣe sarvaśaktisamanvite
bhayebhyastrāhi no devi durgē devi namo 'stu te*

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 *upādāna-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. Kāthopaniṣad describes the ruler as a master with an uplifted thunderbolt – *mahadbhayaṃ 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.

रोगानशेषानपहंसि तुष्टा
रुष्टा तु कामान् सकलानभीष्टान् ।
त्वामाश्रितानां न विपन्नराणां
त्वामाश्रिता ह्याश्रयतां प्रयान्ति ॥६॥

*rogānaśeṣānapahaṃsi tuṣṭā
ruṣṭā tu kāmān sakalānabhiṣṭān
tvāmāśritānām na vipannarāṇām
tvāmāśritā hyāśrayatām 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:

सर्वाबाधाप्रशमनं त्रैलोक्यस्याखिलेश्वरि ।
एवमेव त्वया कार्यमस्मद्वैरिविनाशनम् ॥७॥

*sarvābādhāpraśamanam trailokyasyākhileśvari
evameva tvayā kāryamasmadvairivinaśanam*

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 *sarvābādhāḥ* 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 Sākambharī 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 Bhīmādevī and swallow the demons who are

harassing the sage in the Himālaya 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 ।

कुसंसारपाशप्रबद्धः सदाहं गतिस्त्वं गतिस्तं त्वमेका भवानी । ।

*bhavābdhāvapāre mahāduḥkhabhīruḥ papāta prakāmī pralobhī
pramattaḥ* |

*kusaṁsārapāśaprabaddhaḥ sadāhaṁ gatistvaṁ gatistaṁ
tvamekā bhavānī* |

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 Bhavānī you alone are my path to freedom, you indeed are my path to freedom.

Overview of the *sūktas*

Sūкта 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 *sūкта* is a set of *mantras* praising the glory of a god or goddess. The dictionary meaning of the word *sūкта* is ‘hymn’ or ‘word of praise.’

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

Every *sūкта* 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 sūкта*.

Let us now examine the *Medhā sūкта* 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 Vedānta 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 Vedānta is to extricate the mind from the quagmire of desires and fears and render it conducive to assimilating the truth.

The *Medhā sūкта* occurs in the *Mahānārāyaṇa 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 Vedānta. One needs all the grace of *Īśvara* to receive and assimilate the knowledge of *ātmā*. Reciting this *sūкта* induces an elevated state of mind and also creates the appropriate environment required to assimilate the sacred teaching of Vedānta.

मेधा देवी जुषमाणा न आगाद्विश्वाची भद्रा सुमनस्यमाना
त्वया जुष्टा नुदमाना दुरुक्तान् बृहद्वदेम विदधे सुवीराः ॥ १

*medhā devī juṣamāṇā na āgādvīśvācī
bhadrā sumanasyamānā
tvayā juṣṭā nudamānā duruktān
bṛhadvadema vidathe suvīrāḥ. (1)*

viśvācī – all-knowing; *bhadrā* – all auspicious (the source of welfare); *sumanasyamānā* – with a mind that is pleased with us; *medhā devī* – the Goddess *Medhā*; *juṣamāṇā* – blessing; *naḥ* – us; *āgāt* – may come; *duruktān* – vile words; *nudamānāḥ* – rejecting; *tvayā* – by you; *juṣṭāḥ* – blessed; *suvīrāḥ* – having good offspring; *vidathe* – having gained knowledge; *bṛhat* – about *Brahman*; *vadema* – may we speak.

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 *samsāra*, the life of continuous becoming, is not caused by external objects. *Samsāra* 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 *Brahman* 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, *śatam 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.

त्वया जुष्ट ऋषिर्भवति देवि त्वया ब्रह्माऽगतश्रीरुत त्वया ।

त्वया जुष्टश्चित्रं विन्दते वसु सा नो जुषस्व द्रविणो न मेधे ॥ २

*tvayā juṣṭa ṛṣirbhavati devi tvayā
brahmā''gataśrīruta tvayā*

*tvayā juṣṭaścitram vindate vasu sā no
juṣasva draviṇona medhe (2)*

devi medhe – o Goddess *Medhā*; *tvayā* – by you; *juṣṭaḥ* – blessed; *ṛṣiḥ* – seer; *bhavati* – becomes; *tvayā* – by you; *brahmā* – scholar of the Vedas; *uta* – and; *tvayā* – by you; *āgataśrīḥ* – one embraced by lustre; *tvayā* – by you; *juṣṭaḥ* – blessed; *citram* – a variety of; *vasu* – wealth; *vindate* – gains; *sā* – that you; *naḥ* – us; *draviṇona* – with wealth; *juṣasva* – bless.

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*. *Ṛṣi* 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. *Viśvāmitra*, *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.

Citrām 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 *citrām* means spectrum. The word *draviṇona* means *draviṇena*, with riches.

मेघं म इन्द्रो ददातु मेघां देवी सरस्वती ।

मेघां मे अश्विनावुभावाधत्तां पुष्करस्त्रजा ॥ ३

medham ma indro dadātu medhām devī sarasvatī

medhām me aśvināvubhāvādhattām puṣkarasrajā (3)

indrah – lord *Indra*; *me* – for me; *medhām* – wisdom; *dadātu* – may give; *devī* – goddess; *sarasvatī* – *Sarasvatī*; *medhām* – wisdom; *ubhau* – the twin gods; *aśvinau* – *Aśvins*; *puṣkarasrajā* – with a garland of lotuses; *me* – for me; *medhām* – wisdom; *ādhattām* – may impart.

May the Lord *Indra* and Goddess *Sarasvatī* impart wisdom to me. May the twin gods, the *Aśvins*, wearing garlands of lotuses, infuse me with wisdom.

In this prayer, we seek to receive intelligence and wisdom from the Lord of the heavens or the Lord (*Indra* also means the Lord) and from the Goddess of knowledge. In the vision of the Vedas, the seeker has to initially perform certain rituals, then gradually progress to meditation, and finally gain Self-knowledge. In the rituals section of the Vedas, a number of deities are propitiated, each deity symbolizing a certain cosmic aspect of *Īśvara*. The presiding deity of physical strength and of the hands as an organ of action is *Indra*. There is a presiding deity for every faculty. For the eyes it is the Sun, while for the mind, it is the Moon. In this manner, the individual is connected to the Whole.

‘May *Sarasvatī*, the Goddess of knowledge, bless me with *medhā*, the capacity to retain and assimilate what I learn.’ The twin gods, the *Aśvins*, are the celestial physicians. In fact, there is an astrophysical symbolism connected to the *Aśvins*. The *Viṣṇu* of the Vedas is the Sun. The Bhagavad Gītā (10–21) also says: *ādityānāmahaṃ viṣṇuḥ*, I am *Viṣṇu* (the Sun) among the offspring of *Aditi* (the goddess representing the Cosmic Power of Life).

The *Aśvins* correspond to the twin planets Mercury and Venus of the zodiac, which can be seen in the eastern sky before sunrise as the morning stars, or in the western sky after sunset as the evening stars. When we look at

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 kuṣumākara*, 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 गन्धर्वेषु च यन्मनः ।

दैवी मेघा सरस्वती सा मां मेघा सुरभिर्जुषतां स्वाहा ॥ ४

*apsarāsu ca yā medhā gandharveṣu ca
yanmanah
daivīm medhā sarasvatī sā mām medhā
surabhirjuṣatāgm svāhā* (4)

yā – which; *medhā* – intelligence; *apsarāsu ca* – in the divine damsels; *ca* – and; *yat* – which; *manah* – mind (intelligence); *gandharveṣu* – in the divine musicians; *daivī(m)* – present in the gods; *medhā* – intelligence; *sā* – that; *sarasvatī* – Goddess *Sarasvatī*; *surabhiḥ* – the celestial cow; *mām* – me; *juṣatām* – 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 *Sarasvatī* 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 tadamviha*, 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 *Sarasvatī* 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.

This *mantra* ends with *svāhā*, which means offering. In a ritual, whenever an oblation is offered to a god with a *mantra*, it ends with *svāhā*. The word *svāhā* itself has an interesting etymology. It is *su* plus *āhā*, meaning, well said or well uttered. It also means 'may the oblation be well offered.' When the devotee recites the *mantra* ending it with *svāhā* and offers the oblation, the deity's response of immediate acknowledgement and blessing is contained in the word *svāhā*. The word *svāhā* is a compliment from the *devatā* to the seeker, uttered by the seeker on behalf of the deity.

आ मां मेधा सुरभिर्विश्वरूपा हिरण्यवर्णा जगती जगम्या
ऊर्जस्वती पयसा पिन्वमाना सा मां मेधा सुप्रतीका जुषन्ताम्
॥ ५

*ā mām medhā surabhirviśvarūpā
hiraṇyavarṇā jagatī jagamyā
ūrjasvatī payasā pinvamānā sā mām medhā
supratīkā juṣantām* (5)

surabhiḥ – the wish-yielding cow; *viśvarūpā* – helping to understand a variety of things or the universe; *hiraṇyavarṇā* – by nature benedictory and pleasing; *jagatī* – present in all the life-forms; *jagamyā* – attainable by the seekers; *medhā* – goddess of intelligence; *mām* – towards me; *ā* – having come; *ūrjasvatī* – strong ; *payasā* – (heavy) with milk (milk-like boons); *pinvamānā* – showering me; *sā* – that; *medhā* – goddess of intelligence; *supratīkā* – with auspicious beginnings; *mām* – me; *juṣantām* – may bless.

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*.

Hiraṇyavarṇā 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 *hiraṇya*. He interprets it, almost in the manner of an abbreviation, as *hitam 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 *ramaṇīya* are generally not compatible; whatever is *hita* is not *ramaṇīya*, and whatever is *ramaṇīya* 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 *samsāra*.

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 *ūrjasvatī*, 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.

मयि मेधां मयि प्रजां मय्यग्निस्तेजो दधातु

मयि मेधां मयि प्रजां मयीन्द्र इन्द्रियं दधातु

मयि मेधां मयि प्रजां मयि सूर्यो भ्राजो दधातु ॥ ६

Mayi medhām mayi prajāṁ mayyagnistejo dadhātu
mayi medhām mayi prajāṁ mayīndra indriyaṁ dadhātu
mayi medhām mayi prajāṁ mayi sūryo bhrājo dadhātu (6)

agniḥ – the god of fire; *mayi* – on me; *medhām* – intelligence; *prajāṁ* – progeny; *tejaḥ* – bright appearance of the body (or courage); *dadhātu* – may bestow; *indraḥ* – the god of the heavens; *indriyaṁ* – 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.

हरिः ॐ तत्सत् श्रीकृष्णार्पणमस्तु

hariḥ om tatsat śrīkṛṣṇārpaṇamastu

(Abridged from the book Vaidika Sūta Mañjarī by Swami Tattvavidananda)





Tantroktam Devī-sūktam

Swami Muktatmananda

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 *pūjā*, 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 Ādi 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 *Ambhr̥ṇa R̥si*, 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 *Mahāśarasvatī*. 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 *Mahāśarasvatī*.

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, dispassion, etc. She makes our mind fit to receive self-knowledge. Then, as *Mahāśarasvatī*, 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

reignty 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 Varuṇa. 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 Devī 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 Devī 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 śivāyai satataṁ namaḥ
namaḥ prakṛtyai bhadrāyai nityatāḥ praṇatāḥ 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 cendurupīṇyai 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 praṇatām vṛddhyai siddhyai kurmo namo
namaḥ*

*nairṛtyai bhūbhṛtām 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 durgapārāyai sārāyai sarvakāriṇyai
khyātyai tathaiva kṣṇāyai dhūmrāyai satataṁ namaḥ (4)*

Salutations always to Durgā, who protects us in difficulties, who takes one across the ocean of *samsāra*, 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*.]

*atīsaumyātīraudrāyai natāstasyai namo namaḥ
namo jagatpratiṣṭhāyai devyai kṛtyai namo namaḥ (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 bhuteṣu viṣṇumāyeti śabdītā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (6)*

Salutations again and again to that Devī, who is called Viśvamāyā 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 sarvabhūteṣu cetanetyabhidhīyate
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (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 sarvabhūteṣu buddhirūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (8)*

Our constant salutations to that Devī, who resides in all beings in the form of intelligence. Again and again our salutations.

*yā devī sarvabhūteṣu nidrārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (9)*

We bow again and again to that Devī, who exists as sleep or ignorance in all beings.

*yā devī sarvabhūteṣu kṣudhārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (10)*

Our salutations always to that Devī, who dwells in all beings in the form of hunger.

*yā devī sarvabhūteṣu chāyārūpeṇa saṁsthitā
namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ (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 tṛṣṇārūpeṇa 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 kṣāntirūpeṇa 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 śraddhārūpeṇa 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 live-

lihood 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 cākḥileṣu yā
bhūteṣu satataṁ tasyai vyāptidevyai namo namaḥ (27)*

Salutations always to that Devī, who is all-pervading, who constantly presides over the senses of all beings and who governs all the elements.

*citirūpeṇa yā kṛtsnametadvyāpya 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 pūrvamabhīṣṭasamśrayāttathā surendreṇa
dīneṣu sevītā
karotu sā naḥ śubhaheturīśvarī śubhāni
bhadraṇyabhihantu cāpadaḥ (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 coddhatadaityatāpitairasmābhirīśā ca
surairnamasyate*

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-śata-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-niṣūḍinī* – 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 *rākṣasa*. 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 *viśaya-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 Caṇḍa 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* Caṇḍa-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



Best Wishes On 36th Anniversary Of Gurukulam

From

Vishay, Kubershini, Yazmika and Ashkerin Dunraj

Toronto, Canada

Mahālakṣmī-aṣṭakam

Swamini Brahmaprakashananda



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 *triṣṇātmikā*, endowed with *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

As Saraswatī she is *jñāna-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; *Vijayalakṣmī*, the one who is in the form of victory; *Vidyalakṣmī*, 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*.

नमस्तेऽस्तु महामाये श्रीपीठे सुरपूजिते ।

शङ्खचक्रगदाहस्ते महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ १ ॥

namaste 'stu mahāmāye śrīpīṭhe surapūjite
śaṅkhacakraḡadāhaste 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 कोलासुरभयङ्करि ।

सर्वपापहरे देवि महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ २ ॥

namaste garuḡārūḡhe kolāsuraḡbhayaṅkari
sarvapaḡhare devi mahālakṣmī namo 'stu te

O! Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the one who is seated on *Garuḡa*, who destroyed the demon 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.

सर्वज्ञे सर्ववरदे सर्वदुष्टभयङ्करि ।

सर्वदुःखहरे देवि महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ३ ॥

sarvajñe sarvavarade sarvaduṣṡabhayaṅkari
sarvaduḡkhahare devi 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)

सिद्धिबुद्धिप्रदे देवि भुक्तिमुक्तिप्रदायिनि ।

*siddhibuddhiprade devi bhuktimuktipradāyini
mantramūrte sadā devi mahālakṣmi namo 'stu te*

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

आद्यन्तरहिते देवि आद्यशक्तिमहेश्वरि ।

योगजे योगसम्भूते महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ५॥

*ādyantarahite devi ādyaśaktimaheśvari
yogaje yogasambhūte mahālakṣmi namo 'stu te*

O Goddess Mahālakṣmī, salutations to you, the beginningless 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 *yogajā* because she is born of *yoga-śakti*, the power of *Paramēśvara*. 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 *puruṣārthas*.



*Happy 36th Anniversary to
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
In Saporsburg, PA*

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स्थूलसूक्ष्महारौद्रे महाशक्ति महोदरे ।

महापापहरे देवि महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ६ ॥

*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 beings), the supreme power, the cause of the universe, the one who removes the great sins. (6)

पद्मासनस्थिते देवि परब्रह्मस्वरूपिणि ।

परमेशि जगन्माता महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ७ ॥

*padmāsanasthite devi parabrahmasvarūpiṇi
paramēśi 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)

श्वेताम्बरधरे देवि नानालङ्कारभूषिते ।

जगत्स्थिते जगन्मातर्महालक्ष्मि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥ ८ ॥

*śvetāmbaradhare devi nānalāṅkārabhūṣite
jagatsthite jaganmātarmahālakṣmi namo 'stu te*



*Thank you and Best Wishes to
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
For spreading the light of
Vaidika-Knowledge
around the world.*

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

Best Regards,
Rajesh Patel (Nephew)



35th Anniversary





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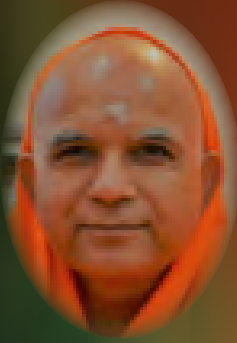


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Durgā Sūktam

Swami Tattavidananda

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 जातवेदसे सुनवाम सोममरातीयतो निदहाति वेदः ।

स नः पर्षदति दुर्गाणि विश्वा नावेव सिन्धुं दुरिताऽत्यग्निः ॥ १

स नः पर्षदति दुर्गाणि विश्वा नावेव सिन्धुं दुरिताऽत्यग्निः ॥

om jātavedase sunavāma somamarāṭīyato nidahāti vedah

sa naḥ parṣadati durgāṇi viśvā nāveva sindhum dūrītā 'tyagniḥ (1)

jātavedase – for the Omniscient; *somam* – the juice of the soma creeper; *sunavāma* – (we) extract; *vedah* – the Omniscient; *arāṭīyataḥ* – enemies; *nidahāti* – destroys without a trace; *saḥ* – that; *agniḥ* - Fire god (forerunner of the creation); *nāvā* – by the ship; *sindhum ati iva* – like crossing the ocean; *naḥ* – our; *dūrītā* – wrong deeds; *ati* – having crossed; *viśvā* – all; *durgāṇi* – obstacles; *parṣat* – may destroy.

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)



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 oblation 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 *jāta-veda* because He is *jātaḥ vedāḥ 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, *īśānassarvavidyānām* (*Mahānārāyaṇopaniṣat*, 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 jñānāmanantam 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 *durga* 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.

तामग्निवर्णां तपसा ज्वलन्तीं वैरोचनीं कर्मफलेषु जुष्टाम् ।

दुर्गां देवीं शरणमहं प्रपद्ये सुतर सितरसे नमः ॥ २ ॥

tāagnivarnām tapasā jvalantīm vairocānīm karmaphaleṣu juṣṭām durgām devīm śaraṇamaham prapadye sutarasi tarase namaḥ (2)

agnivarnām – shining like fire; *tapasā* – with penance; *jvalantīm* – brilliant; *vairocānīm* – the consort of the Lord, who manifests as a variety of forms; *karmaphaleṣu* – in actions and in their results; *juṣṭām* – propitiated and loved; *tām* – that; *durgām devīm* – the Goddess *Durgā*; *aham* – I; *śaraṇam prapadye* – surrender myself to; *tarase* – O Goddess that helps to cross; *su* – well; *tarasi* – make me cross; *namaḥ* – 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 *samsāra*). My prostration unto you. Kindly take me across (the ocean of *samsāra*). (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.

Agnivarnām. If we enquire into the nature of fire, we

see that it is truly a glory of *Īśvara*. When the all-per-vading 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 *Vīrocana*, meaning *vividhaṁ rocate*, shining in countless forms. For the same reason, the Lord is also called *Virāṭ*, *vividhaṁ rājate*.

Karmaphaleṣu juṣṭām. 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*.

अग्ने त्वं पारया नव्यो अस्मान् स्वस्तिभिरति दुर्गाणि विश्वा ।

पृथ्वी बहुला न उर्वी भवा तोकाय तनयाय शंयोः ॥ ३ ॥

agne tvam pārayā navyo asmān svastibhirati durgāṇi viśvā

pūṣca prthvī bahulā na urvī bhavā tokāya tanayāya śamyoh (3)

agne – O Lord; *navyah* – 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; *pūḥ* – the city of residence; *ca* – and; *prthvī* – land; *urvī* – agricultural fields; *bahulā* – may be spacious; *tokāya* – for one’s offspring; *tanayāya* – for their progeny; *śamyoh* – 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 *jñānī*. A *jñānī* also prays, but for the sheer joy of it and also to set an example for the people. There is no difference between the *jñānī* and *Īśvara*. This is the reason for using the epithet *Bhagavān* while referring to a *jñānī*.

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 *nitya-nūdana*, 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 *nitya-nūdana*, 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 *pūḥ*, 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.

Śamyoh is purely a Vedic term; it does not occur in conventional Sanskrit. It means *śam ca yośca*. *Śam*, *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.’

विश्वानि नो दुर्गहा जातवेदस्सिन्धुं न नावा दुरिताऽतिपर्षि ।

अग्ने अत्रिवन्मनसा गृणानोऽस्माकं बोध्यविता तनूनाम् ॥ ४ ॥

*viśvāni no durgahā jātavedassindhum na nāvā
duritā 'tiparṣi
agne atrivanmanasā gṛṇāno 'smākaṁ bodhyavitā
tanūnām (4)*

jātavedaḥ – O Lord; *durgahā* – one who drives away obstacles; *naḥ* – our; *viśvāni* – all; *duritā* – blemishes; *sindhum* – the ocean; *nāvā na* – like the ship; *ati* – having taken out of; *parṣi* – protect; *agne* – O Lord; *atrivat* – like the sage *Atri*; *manasā* – with the mind; *gṛṇānaḥ* – chanting; *asmākaṁ* – 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 *anaśva*, 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.'

पृतनाजितगं सहमानमुग्रमग्निगं हुवेम परमात्सधस्थत् ।

स नः पर्षदतिदुर्गाणि विश्वा क्षामदेवो अति दुरिताऽत्यग्निः ॥ ५ ॥

*pṛtanājitaḥ saḥamānamugramagnim huvema
paramātsadhassthāt
sa naḥ parṣadatidurgāṇi viśvā kṣāmaddevo ati
duritā 'tyagniḥ (5)*

paramāt – supreme; *sadhassthāt* – from the abode; *pṛtanājitaḥ* – one who conquers armies; *saḥamānam* – destroyer of enemies; *ugram* – ferocious; *agnim* – *Īśvara*; *huvema* – invoke; *saḥ* – that; *devaḥ* – brilliant; *agniḥ* – *Īśvara*; *naḥ* – our; *viśvā* – all; *durgāṇi* – obstacles; *ati* – having taken out of; *kṣāmat* – the transient (the one who forgives); *ati* – having taken out of; *duritā* – deficiencies; *ati* – having taken out of; *parṣat* – may protect.

We invoke *Īśvara*, the forerunner of the universe (worshipped at the altar of fire), who conquers and destroys the armies of the enemies from His supreme abode. May He, the brilliant One, help us overcome all the obstacles (in the path of righteousness), and rise above the transient (world of objects). May He forgive our misdeeds and protect us by helping us rise above committing misdeeds. (5)

There are two sides to *Īśvara*: one is *aghora*, benevolent, and the other *ghora*, malevolent. The latter is ferocious and frightening and reserved for wrong-doers. As the *karmaphaladātā*, the dispenser of the results of actions, *Īśvara* is not only the benefactor of the righteous, but also the opposite to others. Fire also has both a good aspect and a bad aspect to it. In one form, it helps us cook food, as in the form of the kitchen fire, and also obtains within our bodies in the form of the digestive fire. In its other form, the destructive power of fire is unimaginable. In his prayer, the devotee invokes both aspects of *Īśvara*.

As *Ṣaṇmukha*, *Īśvara* assumed the role of the

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):

इन्द्रियेभ्यः परा ह्यर्था अर्थेभ्यश्च परं मनः ।
मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्बुद्धेरात्मा महान् परः ॥

महतः परमव्यक्तमव्यक्तात्पुरुषः परः ।
पुरुषान्न परं किञ्चित्सा काष्ठा सा परा गतिः ॥

*indriyebhyaḥ parā hyarthā arthebhyas̥ca param manah, manasastu parā buddhirbuddherātmā mahān paraḥ
mahataḥ paramavyaktamavyaktātpuruṣaḥ paraḥ, purṣanna paraṁ kiñcit s̥a kāṣṭhā s̥a parā gatiḥ*

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 *Rāvaṇa* 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.’

प्रतोषि कमीड्यो अध्वरेषु सन्नाच्च होता नव्यश्च सत्ति ।
स्वां चाऽग्ने तनुवं पिप्रयस्वास्मभ्यं च सौभगमायजस्व ॥ ६ ॥

pratnoṣi kamīḍyo adhvareṣu sannācca hotā navyaśca satsi svām cā'gne tanuvaṁ piprayasvāsmabhyam̐ ca saubhagamāyajasva (6)

adhvareṣu – in the Vedic rituals; *sanāt ca* – from times immemorial; *īḍyaḥ* – extolled; *navyaḥ ca* – one who showers blessings constantly; *kam* – happiness; *pratnoṣi* – spread; *sanāt* – ancient; *ca* – as well as; *navyaḥ ca* – recent too; *hotā* – priest; *satsi* – abide; *agne* – O *Īśvara*; *svām* – your own; *tanuvam* – body; *piprayasva* – satiate; *ca* – and; *asmabhyam̐ ca* – for us also; *saubhagam* – welfare; *āyajasva* – give totally.

O *Īśvara*, You bestow happiness all around. You are extolled in the Vedic rituals (by the priest, called the *hotā*); and you alone are present in the form of that priest in the most ancient rituals of the gods, as well as in the present rituals of the humans. (Or you are extolled from time immemorial, and you continually shower blessings on the devotees). Please cherish your form (as fire with the oblations, as the universe, with grace) and satiate that form. At the same time, also bestow welfare on us. (6)

Pratnoṣi kam. You bestow happiness (on the devotees). How? We offer oblations, which the god of fire carries to the different gods, like *Indra*, *Candra*, etc., and they are pleased. In the process, we gain the grace of the gods in the form of various auspicious things that make us happy. *Īśvara* is the embodiment of happiness, and therefore it is not surprising that He showers happiness upon us. He is *īḍya*, worthy of praise.

This hymn is also found in the *R̥gveda*, which begins with the following hymn on a similar note:

अग्निमीडे पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम् । होतारं रत्नधातमम् ॥

agnimīde purohitam̐ yajñasya devam̐rtvijam̐ hotāraṁ ratnadhātamaṁ

I extol the glory of *Īśvara*, who is present before me in the altar of fire to the east of the ritual-place. He was in the form of the invoker-priest in the Vedic ritual performed by the gods, and He bestows the most valuable gifts on the devotees.

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 *vyāṣṭi* 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:

विस्वतश्चक्षुरुत विस्वतोमुखो विश्वतोहस्त उत विश्वतस्यात्

visvataścakṣuruta visvatomukho viśvatohasta uta viśvataspāt

All eyes are the Lord’s, all mouths are the Lord’s, all hands are the Lord’s, and all feet are the Lord’s.

Thus, the Lord cherishes all of us in cherishing His own form.

गोभिर्जुष्टमयुजो निषिक्तं तवेन्द्र विष्णोरनुसञ्चरेम ।
नाकस्य पृष्ठमभिसंवासानो वैष्णवीम् लोक इह मादयन्ताम् ॥ ७

gobhirjuṣṭamayujo niṣikṭaṁ tavendra viṣṇoranusañcarema nākasya prṣṭhamabhisamvasāno vaiṣṇavīm loka iha mādayantām (7)

indra – O Lord; *ayujah* – untainted (by blemish and sorrow); *viṣṇoḥ* – pervading all; *tava* – your; *anusañcarema* – we follow and serve; *gobhiḥ* – by the cows; *juṣṭam* – served; *niṣikṭam* – flooded; *nākasya* – of the heavens; *prṣṭham* – top; *abhisamvasānaḥ* – 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)

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:

एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

ekam sadviprā bahudhā vadanti (Ṛgveda, 1.164.46).

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:

इदमदर्शमिति तस्मादिदन्द्रो नामेदन्द्रो ह वै नाम
तमिदन्द्रं सन्तमिन्द्र इत्याचक्षते परोक्षेण

idamadarśamiti tasmādidandro nāmedandro ha vai nāma tamidandram santamindra ityācakṣate parokṣeṇa

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.

Ayujah. The Lord is unattached to and untainted by the universe that He sustains and pervades; He is *asaṅga*. He creates the universe without the sense of doership and bestows the results of actions on the individuals,

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 सुखं न कं अकं दुःखं न विद्यते अकं यस्मिन् सः नाकः

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.

कात्यायनाय विद्महे कन्यकुमारि धीमहि तन्नो दुर्गिः प्रचोदयात् ॥ ८

kātyāyanāya vidmahe kanyakumārī dhīmahi tanno durgīḥ pracodayāt (8)

kātyāyanāya - the offspring of *Katya*; *vidmahe* - we

know; *kanyakumārī* - O *Umā*, young daughter of *Himavān*; *dhīmahi* – contemplate; *tat* - in that; *durgīḥ* - the Goddess *Durgā*; *naḥ* – us; *pracodayāt* - may inspire.

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 *Kanyākumārī*, 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.

Naḥ 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 शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

Oṃ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

(Abridged from the book *Vaidika Sūkta Mañjarī* by Swami Tattvavidananda)



Bhikṣā for Mokṣa – Mastering Food for Assimilating Vedānta

Swamini Svratmavidyananda

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-sṛṣṭi*; 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 *adhiṣṭhāna*, 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 *saṃsāra*, 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 on to the caregivers a subjective awe. This kind of a positive projection of seeing the parents as superman or superwoman is known as *śobhana-adhyāsa*. 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 *asobhana-adhyāsa*. 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. *Aśanāya* means hunger. This word is ingeniously defined as *aśitam nayati*, that which leads what is eaten through the process of digestion. Here the immediate meaning of the word *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 Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (4.4.22) says *brāhmaṇāḥ vividiṣanti yajñena dānena tapasā'nāśakena*, 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 abstinence 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: *yuktāhāravihārasya, yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu, yuktaśvapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkhaḥ* (6.17).

The journey from *āsraddhā* 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 *śraddhā*, 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: *setuṃstara dustarān setuṃstara śraddhayā āsraddhāmstara*. "Cross the bridge that is difficult to cross," the chant urges, "cross distrust by building a bridge of trust." Why is *śraddhā* 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 *śāstra* recommends learning to have the attitude of *bhikṣā* with regard to food. The word *bhikṣā* means alms, the food that is gathered through begging. This is an integral part of a *sannyāsin's* lifestyle. Although one may not be a *sannyāsin*, it is nonetheless healthy to learn to look upon food as *bhikṣā*, 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, *bhikṣā* is an effective way of overcoming one's *rāga-dveṣa* in relation to food. This is an important step in gaining dispassion 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 *bhikṣā* makes one humble. Pride and ar-

rogance are never Vedānta-friendly. 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:

अन्नपूर्णे सदापूर्णे शङ्करप्राणवल्लभे ज्ञानवैराग्यसिद्ध्यर्थं भिक्षां
देहि च पार्वति ।
माता च पार्वतीदेवी पितदेवो महेश्वरः बान्धवाः शिवभक्ताश्च
स्वदेशो भुवनत्रयम् ॥

*annapūrṇe sadāpūrṇe śaṅkaraprāṇavallabhe,
jñānavairāgyasiddhyartham bhikṣām dehi ca pārvati*

*mātā ca pārvatīdevī pitadevo maheśvaraḥ, bāndhavāḥ
śivabhaktāśca svadeśo bhuvanatrāyam*

O Goddess Annapūrṇā, who is always limitless, the delight of Lord Śaṅkara, give me *bhikṣā* for cultivating dispassion (which is necessary) for the sake of knowledge. (May I look upon) the mother as an incarnation of you, the father as an incarnation of Lord Śiva, the relatives as his devotees, and my abode as the three worlds.

It is often said that the way to a loved one's heart is through the stomach. Who could ever imagine that self-knowledge also travels through the stomach, before finding its resting place in the heart?

Om tat sat

॥ मधुर-मधुर-मीनाक्षी ॥

रागम् - भागेश्री	तालम् रूपकम्	Meaning:
पल्लवी	मधुर-मधुर-मीनाक्षी मधुरापुरि-निलये अम्ब अम्ब जगदम्ब (मधुर-मधुर)	Goddess Mīnākṣī, sweet Mother 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
अनुपल्लवी	मधुर-मधुर-वाग्विलासिनि मातङ्गि मरकताङ्गि मातर्मम हृदय-निवासिनि मां पाहि सन्ताप-हारिणि (मधुर-मधुर)	Goddess, Lord Sundarēśvara's beloved half From heaven to the earth You are the ruler of all From <i>saṃsāra</i> 's depths, you liberate us Abiding, hidden in our hearts Of limitless Brahman You are the creative power, O Māye
चरणम्	सुन्दरेश्वर-भागेश्वरि सुवरादि-जगदिश्वरि छाये पतितात्म-परितारिणि माये परमगुह्य-परब्रह्म-सहाये (मधुर मधुर)	Composed by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

An Overview of Maḥiṣāsura-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 Maḥiṣāsura-mardini over Maḥiṣāsura. 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 Maḥiṣāsura-mardini as described in 21 verses of a vibrant and powerful, yet subtle and musical stotram, a hymn, called Maḥiṣāsura- mardini Stotram. This *stotram* is based on the Devī- mātṛmyam in which Devī takes the forms of Durgā and Caṇḍikā to slay the demons like Maḥiṣāsura, Caṇḍa, and Muṇḍa.

The *stotram* is composed in a poetic meter called “*Śṛavanābharaṇam*”, 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*”. 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 “*Śṛavanābharaṇam*” 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 Śaṅkarācārya.

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, Kaṭabha, Dhumra-locana, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Raktabīja, Śumbha, Niśumbha, and Maḥiṣāsura. The *ācārya* concludes every verse in praise of the Devī by addressing her with different names such as, “the destroyer of Maḥiṣāsura”, “the one with beautiful-braided hair” and Pārvatī - 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, Raktabīja, 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 Mātāṅgī, 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 sādha of all heavenly and worldly, lustful desires. The *ācārya* addresses Devī as *jananī*, 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 Maḥiṣāsura-mardinī ramya kapardini śāīlasute*”, O slayer of Maḥiṣāsura, 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 *sādhana*, 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 Maḥiṣāsura-mardini Stotram, although reciting the chants is considered to be more powerful and part of a very deep Devī *sādhana* during Navarātri.

देव्यपराधक्षमापनम्

न मन्त्रं नो यन्त्रं तदपि च न जाने स्तुतिमहो
न चाह्वानं ध्यानं तदपि च न जाने स्तुतिकथाः।
न जाने मुद्रास्ते तदपि च न जाने विलपनं
परं जाने मातस्त्वदनुसरणं क्लेशहरणम् ॥ १ ॥

*O Mātā, I know neither your mantra, yantra, stuti, dhyānam,
nor any muḍrās. 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.*

आपत्सु मग्नः स्मरणं त्वदीयं करोमि दुर्गे करुणार्णविशि।

नैतच्छठत्वं मम भावयेथाः क्षुधातृषार्ता जननीं स्मरन्ति ॥ १० ॥

*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!*

जगदम्ब विचित्रमत्र किं परिपूर्णां करुणस्ति चेन्मयि।

अपराधपरम्परावृतं न हि माता समुपेक्षते सुतम् ॥ ११ ॥

*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!*

मत्समः पातकी नास्ति पापघ्नी त्वत्समा न हि।

एवं ज्ञात्वा महादेवि यथा योग्यं तथा कुरु ॥ १२ ॥

*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.*

ॐ



Our Ācāryāḥ



ॐ श्री महाकालीमहालक्ष्मीमहासरस्वतीभ्यो नमः

om śrī mahākālīmahālakṣmīmahāsarasvatībhyo namaḥ



नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः

namastasyai namastasyai namastasyai namo namaḥ

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

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