

1. God, the source of good

SHIVARAATHRI is a very auspicious day for all. It is the fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight, when the Moon is waning and the Sun is in the sign of Aquaries. The festival is, however, related to the Moon rather than the Sun. That is the reason why it is called *Shivaraathri* (the night of Shiva). Unlike other nights, this particular night is the night consecration, of dedication, of illumination.

The mind is intimately associated with the Moon. *Chandhra* (the deity of the Moon), is the presiding deity of the mind. He loses one sixteenth of his brilliance every day after the Full Moon day and continues waning until on this night he is left with just one sixteenth of his power. The waned Moon may be taken to stand for the mind with all its vagaries and waywardness reduced after it has been conquered by *saadhana* (spiritual discipline). On this night there is just a minute part of the mind left to be conquered and that can be done by keeping vigil and dwelling on the Glow of God. The vigil that is prescribed is symbolic of the eternal vigil one has to observe, while the rite of fasting is symbolic of divesting the senses of the pleasures they crave for. The night-long *bhajan* (congregational singing of devotional songs) is significant of the life-long consciousness of the Divine Presence that every one should cultivate. The rites and vows laid down for *Shivaraathri* being absent on other nights of the year, their observance on this day comes as a reminder that they are useful.

The thoughts we indulge in, shape our nature

There are three types of men—the multi-centred, the uni-centred and the non-centred. The first group, who allow their senses, mind and intelligence to wander where they will, is a very populous group. So also is the third group, which comprises people who flit from one object to another, hop around from one thing to another in listless flippancy. For earning the concentration and single-centredness characteristic of the second group, the festival of *Shivaraathri* is very propitious. The *bhajans* and the ceaseless flow of *keerthans* (songs) and *naamasmaran* (remembering God's name) on this occasion help in the attainment of single-centredness.

You must realise that *bhajan*, *naamasmaran* and puja (ritualistic worship) are not for pleasing or propitiating God, but for our own spiritual progress. Frequently people flatter the rich and the powerful—especially when they are in their employment or are beholden to them for some precious help—in order to induce them to shower gifts on them. But God does not shower Grace on people because they sing His praises. Nor does He come down upon them because they do not deify Him. Recitation of the Divine attributes only enables us to dwell on elevating ideals and approximate ourselves more and more to the Divinity that is our nature.

We become what we contemplate. By constant thought an ideal gets imprinted on our heart. When we fix our thoughts all the time on the evil that others do, our mind gets polluted by the evil. When, on the contrary, we fix our mind on the virtues or well-being of others, our mind is cleansed of wrong and entertains only good thoughts. No evil thought can penetrate the mind of a person wholly given to love and compassion. The thoughts we indulge in, shape our nature; along with others, they affect us too. For example when a flash is released to photograph someone, his face is lit; but so, too, to a certain extent, is the face of the photographer.

Effect of thought on mind cannot be avoided

When a municipal truck full of refuse passes by, you are affected by the bad smell even though you may be standing afar. Similarly, a thought may be momentary, it may be trivial, yet its effect on the mind cannot be avoided. It was because the ancient sages knew this important truth that: they declared: "He who knows *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*." The only way to become *Brahman* is to be ever immersed in contemplation of *Brahman*. With a lump of salt; on one's tongue, how can any one relish the sweetness of honey or fruits? With a lump of candy on the tongue, how can the taste of salt and savoury be known?

Immerse your mind in good thoughts and world will be good; soak it in bad thoughts and the world will be bad for you. So, recollect only good, think, plan and do only good, speak and act only good. Then as a result you will approximate God, the source of all good. This is the message of *Shivaraathri*.

Significance of Cosmic dance of Lord Shiva

According to numerology, the first three syllables of the word *Shivaraathri*---*shi*, *va* and *ra*---connote the numbers 5, 4 and 2, and the fourth syllable, *thri*, means 'three.' 5, 4 and 2 make one whole, one composite picture of the eleven *rudhras*. *Rudhra* means, "the one who makes man weep." The eleven *rudhras* are: the five senses of perception, the five senses of action, and the mind. These, by leading him astray in pursuit of trivial and transitory pleasures, ruin him and make him weep. But the *Aathman*, if it is sought and relied upon, sheds its rays on the eleven and makes them meaningful partners in the progress of man towards self-realisation. The rays from the *Aathman* illumine the intelligence, the illumined intelligence alerts the mind and the alerted mind gets control of the senses, making the path clear for the person to proceed through knowledge to wisdom.

Another significance of *Shivaraathri* is this: Shiva, or the *Paramapurusha* (the Eternal Absolute Person), in His desire to attract *prakrithi* (objective world), engages Himself in the *thaandava* (the Cosmic dance). The dance is a divine plan to attract the material creation, for all divine miracles like those of *Raama* (He who pleases and delights) and *Krishna* (He who attracts), are for drawing people to the Divine Presence for the purpose of correcting or cleansing them, or for confirming their faith and then leading them on to the *saadhana* (spiritual effort) of service so that they may merge in ecstasy, in the source of all *ecstasy*---*chamathkaar* (miracle) resulting in *samskaar* (transformation), leading to *paropakaar* (helping others) and finally conferring *saakshaathkaar* (direct vision of truth).

The *thaandava* dance is so fast that fire emanates from Shiva's body because of the heat generated by activity. In order to cool Shiva and comfort him, Paarvathi, his consort, places the Ganga on his head, makes the crescent Moon rest amidst the coils, of his hair, applies cold sandalwood paste all over his body, winds round the joints of his hands and feet cold-blooded snakes, and finally, being herself the daughter of the Himaalayas (the mountains with eternal snow), she sits on his lap and becomes a part of Him. At this Shiva rises, and both *Purusha* and *Prakrithi* dance together to the immense delight of the Gods and of all creation. This happens, according to the *Puraanas* (mythological legends), on the *Shivaraathri* day.

There are no shortcuts on the spiritual path

The significance of this myth lies in the secret taught by it of pleasing the Lord and winning His Grace. What a pity that a day of such sanctifying significance is being celebrated through a routine of meaningless and even harmful pastimes. Since a vigil is laid down, some people spend the night in witnessing a series of films or in playing cards. Can a person, rolling in bed because he does not get sleep, claim that he is observing the vow of vigil? Can a stork, standing on one foot on the bank of a stream to pick up a fish and gulp it, claim that it is practising meditation? Can a person who refuses to eat his lunch because he has had a quarrel with his wife claim that he is observing a fast? There are no short cuts or tricks possible on the spiritual path.

A story of *Shivaraathri* festival at Shrishailam

Shivaraathri is celebrated in all Shiva temples, Shrishailam is a particularly famous temple of Shiva. There is a fine story told about this festival at Shrishailam. At the foot of the Shrishailam range of hills there is a village, where a boy of nine years named Baala Raamanna, attended primary school. He learned from his friends at school that their sisters and brothers-in-law were coming to their homes in order to attend the *Shivaraathri* celebrations on the Shrishailam Hills.

Raamanna came home and wanted that his mother should send his sister and brother-in-law too to the festival. His mother told him that he had no sister and, therefore, no brother-in-law. But he would not listen. He said he must have a sister and a brother-in-law like his friends. So his mother just to quieten him, said, "You have a sister and a brother-in-law, but they are in the temple on the Shrishailam. Their names are Bhramaraamba and Mallikaarjuna." She gave him the names by which Shiva and His consort are known---Bhramaraamba meaning 'bee' and Mallikaarjuna meaning the 'white jasmine.' These names are very apt, because the consort draws inspiration, instruction and wisdom from the Lord even as the bee draws its sustenance from the jasmine flowers.

When he was told that his sister was in the temple on the Shrishailam, Raamanna insisted that he would go and invite his sister and brother-in-law to come home and stay there for some time. He wanted to take some presents for them, but his mother said that they were far too rich and that younger members of the family should not present anything to the elders. The mother sent the boy with a neighbour who was going to the temple to see the festival. She gave him some money so that he could get presents for the boy.

Raamanna hastened up the hill and rushed into the temple, crying "Sister...Brother-in-law," and fell at the feet of the idol of Bhramaraamba. He held the idol in embrace and began dragging it, wanting it to accompany him. He clasped the idol of Mallikaarjuna and would not leave it. At last the priests in the temple drove him away as a mad boy.

Shiva and His consort appear before Raamanna

Then in despair, he climbed a high rock and threatened to jump from that height unless his sister and her husband came with him. Just then he heard a loud voice from the temple "Brother-in-law!...Raamanna! Don't jump! We are coming with you..." and soon Lord Shiva and His consort presented themselves before him and accompanied him to his cottage in the valley below. The mother and son were so overwhelmed with Divine Bliss that they merged in the Divine phenomenon and were seen no more. This story has added to the sanctity of the shrine of Bhramaraamba and Mallikaarjuna at Shrishailam.

Children in those days, and elders too, had innocent minds, simple hearts, and high ideals. Nowadays cynicism and disbelief have become rampant. There is a wave of negligence and sloth sweeping over our people. For one word uttered they ascribe ten meanings to it and not one of them is correct. When a subject is mentioned, they start a series of arguments and counter arguments and in the dust that is raised, the truth is ignored. Their life is largely artificial and ideals shallow, so Divinity is beyond their reach.

Baala Raamanna had unadulterated faith, so he was able to dedicate his pure self to the Lord and reach the Goal. You must always exalt low things to a higher level by infusing them with higher meaning. Raamanna believed the stone image to be God; he did not bring God down to the level of a stone image. You may worship a picture as God, but you should not posit God as a picture. Wood, stone or mud may be assumed to be Divine, but Divinity should not be limited to wood, stone or mud.

Dual attitude must be given up

Have high ideals. Strive to elevate yourselves. Make for the Highest Goal, God. Whatever the obstacle or opposition, do not be disheartened. Give up the animal in you, stabilise yourselves in human virtues and proceed boldly towards the achievements, of Divinity. Do not waver, going today to *bhakthi* (devotion), tomorrow to sensual gratification and the day after again to *bhakthi*. When everything is successful you are all for devotion; when something goes wrong you are filled with despair; when discipline is enforced you start, holding back and when love is showered, you are foremost. This dual attitude must be given up.

The very Divine Principle which seekers strive to visualize by means of years of asceticism-and *renunciation*, *japa* (recitation of holy names) and *thapa* (penance), is before you here and now; realise the good fortune you are endowed with. I have this day, the holy day of *Shivaraathri*, granted pardon for all the errors you have fallen into knowingly or unknowingly up to this time. Have auspicious thoughts, speak auspicious words and do auspicious deeds. And as a result of this, attain the Embodiment of *Mangala* (auspiciousness), Shiva Himself.

Mahaashivaraathri, Brindhaavan, 7-3-1978

Just as there are four stages in the life of everyone---boyhood, youth, middle age and old age---there are four stages in his acquisition of jnaana (knowledge of Supreme Being), contemporaneous with these stages. Jnaana is the ripeness of the fruit; which is the consummation of a long process, from the first appearance of the flower in the tree.

The first stage is the apprentice stage: being trained by parents, teachers, elders; being led, guided, regulated, warned, reprimanded.

The second stage is the junior craftsman stage: eager to establish happiness and justice in society, eager to know the world and its worth and values.

The third is the craftsman stage: pouring out energies to reform, reconstruct, remake the human community.

The fourth stage is the master stage: realisation that the world is beyond redemption by human effort, that one can at best save oneself by trying to reform the world, that it is all His Will, His Handiwork, His World, Himself.

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