

30. The Kerala Onam

It is the bounden duty of *bhakthas* (devotees) to preserve and protect the rich culture and heritage of this country which has been the birth place of many great spiritual leaders, and whose past is resplendent with the glory of prowess in music, arts and science.

Alas, this glorious land of *Bhaarath* (Mother India) is now bedevilled with problems which are mostly the result of ego, jealousy, hatred and selfishness. Only by removing such traits can the glorious past of this great land again be brought back to life.

The story of the festival Onam, is that of Bali Chakravarthi, who was an embodiment of *thyaaga* (sacrifice), but who suffered from traces of *ahamkaara* (egoism). However due to the predominance of other virtues, Bali was even able to overcome the ill-effects of *ahamkaara* and bury it deep in hell through the grace of Lord Vishnu, who appeared before him in the form of a *vatu* (Brahmin ascetic) named Vaamana.

Bali proved himself far superior to Indhra

Bali was dedicated to rule his subjects by the observance of and strict adherence to the principles of *dharma*. He was the son of Virochana and the grandson of Prahlada. So it is not surprising that Bali possessed rich traditional qualities of *bhakthi*. Once after obtaining the permission of his *Guru* Shukraacharya, Bali wanted to perform a great *yaaga* (sacrifice) called *Vishwajith*. *Vishwam* means the totality of *pancha bhuthas* (five elements), *pancha indhriyas* (five senses) and *pancha koshas* (five regions or sheaths) of the human body. It is the victory over such a *vishwam* which the word *Vishwajith* symbolizes.

Indhra is so called because he is ruler of the *indhriyaas* (senses), and the ruler of the *indhriyaas* in man is the *manas* (mind). The nature of the interplay of *indhriyaas* is such that it is possible to gain as well as to lose through it. Indhra wanted to rule Heaven, but Bali wanted nothing of the sort. Indhra used to propitiate and beg Vishnu in order to achieve what he desired, but Vishnu Himself descended in the form of Vaamana to beg from Bali. Thus Bali proved himself to be far superior to Indhra.

Vaamana belonged to the famous Sidhaashram which was founded by *Kashyapa* (representing *purusha* or man) and *Adhithi* (representing the feminine *Prakrithi* or Nature). It is through the union of this *Purusha* and *Prakrithi* that the progeny known as *Siddhi* (in the form of *Vatu*), the embodiment of *Vishnu thathwa*, was born. The Sidhaashram was located on the banks of a sacred river called Pavithra, which represents life. *Siddhi* will always be found on the banks of flowing life whenever the *bhaava shuddhi* (purity of mind) and *chiththa shuddhi* (purity of heart) predominate in man. It is due to the fact that all *sankalpas* (resolutions) could be realised at this sacred *aashram* that it has come to be known as Sidhaashram. Vishwaamithra, after the successful completion of his *yaaga* with the help of Raama and Lakshmana, brought them to reside at this *aashram* for some time. It was at this *aashram*, too, that Bali attained *moksha* (liberation).

The spreading of *Vishnu thathwam* (nature of Vishnu) is known as *Thrivikrama thathwam* (nature of Vishnu expanding to the three worlds). The aspect of *Thrivikrama thathwam* is represented by the *Gaayathri manthra*: '*Bhur Bhuvaha.*' The *Bhuuloka* *Bhuvarloka* and *Suvarloka* constitute the *Thrivikrama thathwam*. It is wrong to conceive of these three *lokas* (worlds) as existing one on top of the other and thus capable of being reached by climbing a

ladder, as it were. In fact the three *lokas* are intertwined with each other and one exists within the other.

Real meaning of the 'three worlds'

The real meaning of this kind of geometrical configuration of the three *lokas* is that the *pancha indhriya*, *pancha bhuuthas* and *pancha koshas* (five senses, elements and sheaths) aspects of man's *dheha* (body), is *Bhuuloka*; the aspect of *praana shakthi* or *manas thathwam* is *Bhuvarloka*; and the microscopic state of Aanandham (bliss) represents *Suvarloka*. So it can be said that the three worlds, *Bhuuloka*, *Bhuvarloka* and *Suvarloka*, are nothing but the *dheha thathwa*, *manas thathwa* and *Aanandha thathwa* (essential nature of body, mind and bliss) respectively and the totality of these three represents the *Thrivikrama thathwa*.

Again, these three aspects of *Thrivikrama thathwa* can be understood in terms of the three states of an individual, viz., the one you think you are, the one others think you are and the one you really are. Hence only by proper *saadhana* can one transcend from *Bhuuloka* through *Bhuvarloka* to *Suvarloka*. The attainment of *Suvarloka* is known as *moksha* (liberation), and it represents the stage of complete mergence with the Lord. Since it is a state where the aspect of *moha* (attachment) is made to disintegrate, it is known as *moksha* (*moha+kshyaam*, *mokshyam*).

Remember Bali by practising his ideals

Bali was an embodiment of *thyaaga* (renunciation) and he personified the aspects of *dhathru thathwam* (principle of charity) and *dharma thathwam* (righteousness). Since Onam is a festival day to be celebrated in memory of the re-appearance of Bali in his *suukshma ruupa* (microscopic subtle form), it is imperative for everyone to remember and practise the ideals for which he stood when he was alive. It should be remembered that Bali, as portrayed above, should be visiting us every day and not just once a year. But we forget this because in our daily life we leave ample room for the cultivation of undesirable traits such as greediness, selfishness and egoism, which in present-day man are reaching gigantic proportions. It is precisely due to this kind of a situation that the world periodically gets plunged into wars. Bali's life-message is that the above mentioned traits in man should be eliminated at all costs, thus rendering the heart pure for the Lord to reside in it.

Another important aspect of Bali's life is his demonstration of the fact that the quality of *thyaaga* (selfless sacrifice) should be an integral part of one's *karma* (actions). All beings perform actions, but only man, if he so desires, can act, making sacrifice an integral component of his actions. Again, the existence of this trait in man is possible because of his ability to think and reflect. Unfortunately man uses these God-given faculties to enunciate theories and to preach, but never to practise what is preached.

Sacrifice everything and attain liberation

Thousands of Onams have come and gone and people have been preaching for years as to what Onam signifies. Yet the heart of man remains impure. Bali practised what he preached, whereas his revered *Guru*, Shukraachaarya, did not, as was evident when he intervened to stop Bali from giving away everything that he possessed to Vaamana. Preaching and practising are like the two eyes. Since Shukraachaarya only preached and did not practise, his one eye was symbolically made ineffective. A man with a dual mind is half blind. In our lives we must be Balls and not

Shukraachaaryas. We should realise that in order to get one thing, something else must be sacrificed.

Bali demonstrated through his *thyaaga swabhaava* (sacrificing nature) that if one sacrifices everything, one will attain *moksha* (liberation). The real sacrifice involves two things: First, to realise the cause of our bondage in this life, and second, to sever this bondage. Man mistakenly thinks that wealth, a family etc., are his bondages, and that by severing connections with them he will be able to sacrifice everything and become eligible to attain *Moksha*. But these are not the real bondage of man. His real bondage is his ignorance in identifying himself with his body. He who cuts off this bondage as Bali did, will attain *moksha*. For cutting off this bondage a purification of the heart is very necessary. Purification of the body with soap and water and by applying perfume does not result in the purification of the mind.

In this *Kaliyuga, naamasmarana* (constant remembrance of God) is the easiest way to purify one's mind; and surrendering to God with a pure mind is the surest way to attain *moksha*. Bali offered two of his three aspects, namely, *aadhi bhowthikam* (his body) and *aadhi dhaivikam* (his life), for two feet of space demanded by Vaamana. As for the third foot of space required by Vaamana, Bali offered his *aadhyaathmika* (soul) aspect to the Lord, thus surrendering to Him completely. That is why the Lord placed His third step on the heart of Bali and pushed him into Hell, thus completely pushing all trace of Bali's ego into the bottom-most layers of the Universe. Bali was thus delivered from the bondage of birth and death.

The essence of the message of Onam

The word *Bali* has another meaning, which is, charge for service rendered, or tax. We pay money to the department which supplies water, knowing fully well that it is not responsible for the creation of the water. But what charges are we paying to the Creator of water? Nothing. Yet we wish to get His Grace. How is it possible to get His Grace without giving *bali* or *sulkam* (tax)? The tax which the Lord expects is devotion and purity of heart. This is the essence of the message of Onam. Onam is not to be treated as a festival which comes once a year, but as an event, the message of which should become a way of life for everyone. The three events which Onam symbolizes should always be kept clear in one's mind: (i) The Incarnation of Lord Vishnu as the *Vatu* (ii) The attainment of *moksha* by Bali and, (iii) The *Anthardhanam* (mergence) of Bali with the Lord.

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Every man is engaged in searching for something lost. Life is the chance afforded to him to recover the peace and the joy that he had lost, when last he was here. If he recovers them now, he need not come again. But, he loses them through ignorance of their value and of the means of retaining them.

If only he would stay. in the consciousness of Shivoam--- "I am Shiva; I am immortal, I am the source and spring of Bliss"---he would be supremely content; but, instead of this correct evaluation of himself, this recognition of his innate reality, man goes about weeping at his helplessness, his inadequacy, his poverty, his evanescence.

This is the tragic fate from which man has to be rescued.

Sri Sathya Sai