

CUL101: CULTURAL EDUCATION

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Section I: Introduction

1. THE NECESSITY OF CULTURAL EDUCATION

Education for Livelihood and Life

There are two types of education: education for livelihood and education for life. When we study in college, it helps us to get a job so that we can earn a living. We can become a doctor, a scientist, an engineer or whatever we want. We may go on to attain wealth, possession and fame. All of this comes from education for livelihood. But this alone will never make our life full and complete. Education is not only to help us live a comfortable life of plenty. When our plans fall apart, when we face failure and loss, when we are knocked down, education should help us get back on our feet. Education should help us regain our mental equipoise, self-confidence and positive attitude, so that we can continue forward. This is why education for life is as important as education for livelihood. Education for life is spirituality. It helps us to gain a deeper understanding of the world, our mind and our emotions, as well as those of others.

Missing factor of modern education system

The situation today is such that we have to specify a school as being one that provides a “values-based education.” This implies that values are not an integral part of education itself. But the term “values-based education” should, in fact, be considered redundant because in real education values are inherent. Unfortunately, values and education have been dichotomized. The factor stringing together life, individuals, society and nature is missing from today’s educational system. That factor is spiritual values.

Currently modern education only has goal; Worldly success. “Success has become the mantra of our youth. “Whatever path you choose in life you must succeed!” This is the motto of the modern education system. Our education system has been reduced to a tool for obtaining material success. But will such success last? Will it help our children obtain love and respect from society? Will it provide them the strength needed to stand firm during trials and tribulations of life? It may bring them some temporary gains, but eventually they will collapse.

The essence of true success is what you make of yourself, it is the conduct of life that you develop, it is the character that you cultivate and it is type of person you become. Youth should be made aware of importance of Love, selfless service, humility and the necessity of repaying society for its contribution to their success. Whether one is a householder, a CEO or even a political leader the first thing we need to know is ourselves. This is the true strength. We need to know and accept our own faults, shortcomings and limitations and then try to overcome them. This is when a true leader is born. True leaders are those who can lead others to the path of dharma with self confidence, sincerity and self awareness. Today’s youth will become tomorrow’s leaders; therefore they should understand the source of true strength.

Spirituality is the core of Indian culture

Spirituality is the core of Indian Culture, if we imbibe our Culture properly, we will find that it contains solutions to all of our problems as individuals as a society. In Sanatana Dharma there is no contradiction between spirituality and worldly Life. It doesn’t reject worldly life in the name of spirituality. Instead, it teaches that through spirituality your life becomes richer and more meaningful.

The Rishis also built the material sciences and the arts on the foundation of spirituality. They viewed the arts and sciences as steps that lead to Supreme Truth and formulated them in a way that will ultimately lead to God. In India, countless scientific disciplines developed in this way- Linguistics, Architecture, Vastu, Astronomy, Mathematics, the Health Sciences, Diplomacy and Economics, Natya Shastra, Musicology, Logic and Nadi sastra, to name a few of these areas. Sanatana Dharma doesn't deny or reject any sphere of human life or culture. The tradition that existed in India was one that encouraged all arts and sciences.

Adopt good from others, but don't lose your cultural roots

There is one thing that each Indian citizen should remember. Our heritage is incomparable. We should adopt the good from other countries while remaining firmly rooted in love for our own country and Spiritual Culture. It is said, "Our birth mother and our mother land are even greater than heaven itself."

After his first tour of the US, when Swami Vivekananda reached Chennai, it is said that he rolled in the sand and proclaimed through Tears, "Even after visiting so many countries, I have never found a Mother like mine." When he stayed in a five-star hotel, instead of Sleeping on the fancy bed, he lay down on the bare floor and shed tears remembering India's poor & starving. Such love and respect for one's own country and culture should be an example for all of us, especially our youth. We should remember, "Our birth mother's rice gruel is tastier than our step mother's sweet pudding."

Our ignorance of our traditions & culture is a curse

The curse upon our society is ignorance regarding our traditions and the basic principle of spirituality. This needs to change. Amma has visited so many countries around the world and personally met so many people there. All of them-including the indigenous people of Australia, Africa and America take pride in their heritage. But here in India many among us neither have understanding nor pride. In fact some of us even ridicule our culture. Only if we first lay a strong foundation can we erect a tall building. Similarly, only if we have knowledge and pride in our forefathers and history, we can create lustrous present and future.

Scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom should flow together

It is Amma's prayer that we develop the expansive-mindedness to embrace both scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom. We can no longer afford to see these two streams of knowledge as flowing in opposite directions. In truth, they complement one another. If we merge these streams, we will find that we are able to create a mighty river—a river whose waters can remove suffering and spread life to all of humanity.

2. KNOW YOUR UNIVERSITY

Mission & Vision

Amrita University has the mission to provide value-based education and mould the character of the younger generation through a system of wholesome learning, so that their earnest endeavour to achieve progress and prosperity in life is matched by an ardent desire to extend selfless service to society, one complementing the other. Thus, the university's activities are based upon a deep understanding of our values and culture. This is in alignment with the educational outlook of our Chancellor, namely, - "Education for life, not just education for a living."

Swami Vivekananda had once remarked, "We want that education by which character is formed and strength of mind is increased."

Motto of Amrita University

Amma has chosen the divine words of Lord Krishna revealed to us through Bhagavad Gita as the motto for Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham.

"Shraddhavan labhate Jnanam" - "Seekers endowed with Sraddha alone can obtain Knowledge"

Sraddha is actions with attention, awareness and alertness born out of loving trust. One who lives with sraddha, from moment to moment, is sraddhavan. Labhate is to gain, acquire, to profit. Jnanam is wholistic knowledge, knowledge about all aspects, of the knower, known and the process of knowing. The ultimate meaning of jnanam is God Realization or Self Realization, having which everything is known. Arjuna, Dhruva, Nachiketa, Ekalavya, Satyakama jabala, Suka, Lauva and Kuasa were the inspiring young students of our Indian epics, who had manifested absolute Shraddha, while seeking Knowledge from their Gurus.

What is Shraddha?

Adi Sankara defines "Shraddha" as "Astikya abuddhi", meaning intense interest, towards the subject and positive mindset endowed with love and faith.

Amma says, "Shraddha entails both love and faith. When you have love and faith, alertness in all your actions will automatically follow. Life brings unexpected experiences. Unless we are alert and vigilant at every moment, we cannot overcome those experiences and face them boldly. An individual's situation in life is like that of a soldier in a battlefield. You can imagine how alert and watchful a soldier has to be in the midst of a battle. An attack could come from any direction. If he isn't extremely alert and constantly on the watch, he could be killed. In the same way, life can bring you any kind of experience at any given time. You need a great deal of shraddha to be able to welcome those experiences and to stay unperturbed in all circumstances. This is what spirituality teaches us."

What prominent visitors say about our institution

"Amrita university has a major role to play in transforming our society into a knowledge society through its unique value-added education system."- **Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam** former President of India and scientist

“This is not just another university, but a very high-quality, world-class university, focusing on technology and research, dealing with very concrete issues which have immediate applications” - **Muhammad Yunus** Nobel Laureate

“It is extraordinary what Amrita has been able to accomplish in its short history. To have developed in the space of only 15 years a first class research institution with the highest accreditation rating from the national accrediting agency is remarkable. I know of no other institution in India with a comparable record of achievement”. -- **Dr. Satish K. Tripathi**, President, University at Buffalo, State University of New York (USA)

“When I look at what Amrita is, its mission, the hospitals, the various campuses, there is a close synergy between what Princeton wants to do and what Amrita is doing. Our faculty will be interested in collaborative research with Amrita for the possibility of working on a real life problem”. -- **Dr. Maria Klawe**, Dean of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Princeton University

Making a difference in using technology benefiting humanity:-

The following questions and answers are selected from Careers360's interview with Dr. P. Venkat Rangan, Vice Chancellor, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University. Careers360 is India Largest Student Community and Career Counselling Platform.

Q.How can we inspire Indian youth to stand at par with western counterparts?

A.India has a great potential as we have enormous amount of youth power. People are naturally intelligent, talented and extremely versatile. If you channelize their energy, you will see fast learners with creative spark. From the beginning of the college you must enable them to feel the pulse of the society. They need an experience to touch the society. So eventually their own problems will become insignificant. Youth energies should be utilized to solve developmental issues. This will reduce brain drain from our country. We must try to create a culture within the university.

Q. What ails India's research? At what extent we can learn from world class universities?

A. We cannot simply replicate or duplicate the western system. We should learn from that and then give a more practical focus to our research. We cannot afford to invest billions and billions dollars on open sky research. Even western universities feel that they have to change their approach, especially to focus on real world problems (energy, water, environment, waste management). Western style of research is largely directed by funding and the funding agency can quite bit influence direction of research. Funding is very essential but at the same time, but you cannot overlook what benefits society. The research fraternity must bring in pragmatic impact factor, as opposed to paper and intellectual impact factor.

Amma's answer on Science and Spirituality.

Invited speakers and guests at Amrita Bio-quest 2013, an international conference on bio technology, had the opportunity to meet with Chancellor Amma during the conference. They posed many questions and received thoughtful replies. An edited excerpt from the question-answer session follows.

Invited speaker to Amma: Being here is a special experience for me. It is amazing to see the science projects going on here at Amrita University. Everybody is very dedicated and focused. There seems to be the perfect blend of science and spirituality. Here people are praying and doing research.

Amma: Research is one part of the activities of the ashram. Amma has good children who form a good team. They go hand-in-hand with a feeling of oneness. It is their goodness that is reflected in all the actions. For Amma, even the so-called bad people have good qualities in them; Amma accepts everyone. When someone comes to her, she tries to see how the person can be transformed so that they may serve.

Amma became interested in research after observing the people here in this coastal village. Here fishermen did not have bank balances ... if they had a good catch, they ate, otherwise they starved. In a hundred families, one person might have had a government job. Many had heart diseases but were either unaware of this or did not have the money for treatment. People who could have otherwise lived upto 80 died at 40, because they could not afford to buy a stent. Seeing this, Amma felt that if a cost-effective stent could be produced as a result of research and development, many people could be helped. That is how the research activities began here.

3. MEANING OF COLLEGE PRAYER

First prayer

**Aum Sahana Vavatu Sahana Bhunaktu
Sahaveeryam Karavavahai
Tejasvinavatitamastu ma vidhwishavahai
Aum Shanti Shanti Shantihi**

[May He protect both of us. May He nourish both of us. May we both acquire the capacity (to study and understand the scriptures). May our study make us brilliant. May we not hate each other.]

This mantra highlights the nature of the teacher-student relationship that produces ideal results for the student. The transference of mental, spiritual and intellectual energies from the teacher to the student can be achieved through a mutually nourishing relationship which is based on (mutual) respect, joy (of giving and receiving), and absence of malice or negative thoughts. Therefore this prayer is important for both the teacher and the student.

Second Prayer

**Asato ma sadgamaya
tamaso ma jyotirgamaya
mrtyorma amrtam gamaya
Om Shanti Shanti Shantihi**

Lead me from untruth to truth.

Lead me from darkness to light.

Lead me from death to immortality. (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad — I.iii.28)]

The first line—asato ma sadgamaya—means, “Lead me from the untruth to the truth.” The seeker giving voice to this prayer has come to understand the finite nature of all the objects of the world, and he wants the Guru to guide him from the asat to the sat. He is fed up with depending on things that are not real. Why? Because just as the sandcastle is always washed away by the tide, dependence on the asat always ends in pain. Sat is our True Self—the blissful consciousness that ever was, is and ever will be. Being beyond time, this consciousness can never be washed away by the time’s tides. In fact, sat is there as the essential part of all of the asat objects.

The second line—tamaso ma jyotirgamaya—means “Lead me from darkness to light.”

When the Vedas refer to darkness and light, they mean ignorance and knowledge, respectfully. This is so because ignorance, like darkness, obscures true understanding. And in the same way that the only remedy for darkness is light, the only remedy for ignorance is knowledge. The knowledge spoken of here is again the knowledge of one’s true nature.

The final line—mrtyorma amrtam gamaya—means: “Lead me from death to immortality.”

This should not be taken as a prayer to live endless years in heaven or on earth. It is a prayer to the Guru for assistance in realizing the truth that “I was never born, nor can ever die, as I am not the body, mind

and intellect, but the eternal, blissful consciousness that serves as the substratum of all creation.”

It is important to remember that, with all these mantras, the leading is not a physical leading. The Atma is not something far away that we have to make a pilgrimage to, nor is it something we need to transform ourselves into. Atma means “self.” We don’t need to transform our self into our self. Nor do we need to travel to it. We are it. The journey is a journey of knowledge. It is journey from what we misunderstand to be our self to what truly is our self. What the mantras really means is “Lead me to the understanding that I am not the limited body, mind and intellect, but am, was and always will be that eternal, absolute, blissful consciousness that serves as their substratum.”

Third Prayer

Praying for everyone to be happy, healthy and peaceful

Sarveshaam svastir bhavatu, sarveshaam shaantir bhavatu

Sarveshaam poornam bhavatu, sarveshaam mangalam bhavatu

Aum Shanti Shanti Shantihi

Let it be so ordained bhavatu, that all the people sarveshaam, experience wellbeing svastir; let all the people experience peace or tranquility shaantir. Let all the people experience wholeness and completeness poornam; let them experience prosperity and auspiciousness mangalam.

Fourth Prayer

This is a ‘Universal Prayer’.

Lokah samastha sukhino bhavanthu - May all beings of all worlds be happy

This mantra is often recited in every ceremony and rituals of India, since time immemorial. Praying for the welfare of all sentient beings--all humans, all animals, all plants—our mind becomes more expansive. Through such prayer we slowly can go beyond our limited egocentric concepts of self to identify with the entire creation, recognising its true nature to be none other than our own.

The most important aspect of the mantra is that the sage does not pray only for his clan or nation but for the whole creation. While chanting Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu next time, let us try to feel deeply for all living beings, and make a resolve to live in this selfless spirit.

Fifth prayer

Aum Purnamadah Purnamidam, Purnath Purnamudachyate.

Purnasya Purnamadaya, Purnamevavashishyate

(Brahman is complete; creation is complete; from the cause Brahman, which is complete, the effect creation, which is also complete, is emanating.)

The last prayer reveals the highest truth of the Universe that “Everything is One We are all One. The whole Creation is One. Everything has come from Perfection. (The Infinite Brahman or God). Everything remains within the Perfection. Perfection alone remains forever. So nothing is separate. We are all like infinite waves of Infinite Ocean of consciousness. Like a wave, we rise up, move forward and merge again in the Ocean .of Consciousness which is always Purnam. Many modern Scientists and many modern Mathematicians are fascinated by this Vedic Verse; through this prayer we remember the ultimate truth every day.

Meaning of the Shanti Mantras

The mantras chanted during college prayer are called shanti mantras. Therefore to conclude each prayer, “shanti,” which means “peace,” is chanted three times. As a Vidyarthi –Knowledge seeker, one chants shanti in desire for the occurrence of circumstances conducive to education. Shanti is chanted thrice not for emphasis but because disturbances are of three distinct categories. In Sanskrit, these are referred to as adhidaivikam, adhibhautikam and adhyatmikam.

Adhidaivikam literally means “disturbances that come from God”—i.e. things that are utterly beyond our control: hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tsunamis, etc. We have no control over these types of disturbances. So when we say the first shanti, we are praying, “O God, may we be protected from these obstacles that are beyond our control.”

Adhibhautikam literally means “disturbances that come from the world.” That means anything stemming from the world around us—mosquitoes, noisy neighbours, barking dogs, the phone ringing, family arguments. As opposed to the first category, we have some control over this second category of disturbances. We can use mosquito repellent, we can call the police on our neighbours, we can turn off the phone, we can leave the place altogether, etc. So this shanti means, “O God, may we be protected from the people and surroundings.”

Adhyatmikam means “disturbances stemming from the self.” The third type of disturbance is the most powerful and, at the same time, the only one over which we have total control. For one who is still identified with the ego, the people, places and things of this world stimulate one of two reactions in the mind—attachment or aversion. Whether we physical see someone we consider our enemy as we walk down the street or remember him during meditation, the mental turbulence that results is the same. Lust, jealousy, anger, sorrow, hatred destroy our peace. This third shanti is therefore the most important one, because even if we are free from outside disturbances, if the inner realm is not calm we will never know peace. Conversely, once we have found inner peace, no external force can ever disturb us. So chanting this third shanti is akin to praying, “O God, please remove all the inner obstacles”.

Aum Shanthi Shanthi Shanthi

4. INTRODUCTION TO AMMA

Objectives

To know about Amma, the chancellor of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham

To understand about the philosophy of education, in Amma's view.

Amma is the guiding light of Amrita University. Amma's words for the youth, her thoughts and values for education and research, has helped shape the university's mission and vision.

Amma's Dream

"Everyone in the world should be able to sleep without fear, at least for one night. Everyone should be able to eat to his fill, at least for one day. There should be at least one day when hospitals see no one admitted due to violence. By doing selfless service for at least one day, everyone should help the poor and needy. It is Amma's prayer that at least this small dream be realized." –Amma

About Amma

Mata Amritanandamayi devi - (born Sudhamani Idamannel; 27 September 1953), is known throughout the world as Amma, or Mother, for her selfless love and compassion toward all beings. Her entire life has been dedicated to alleviating the pain of the poor, and those suffering physically and emotionally. Amma was deeply affected by the profound suffering she witnessed. According to Hinduism, the suffering of the individual is due to his or her own karma — the results of actions performed in the past. Amma accepted this concept, but she refused to accept it as a justification for inaction. Amma contemplated the principle of karma until she revealed an even more profound truth, asking a question she continues to ask each of us today. "If it is one man's karma to suffer, isn't it our dharma (duty) to help ease his suffering and pain?"

My religion is Love

Regarding her embracing of others, Amma commented, "I don't see if it is a man or a woman. I don't see anyone different from my own self. A continuous stream of love flows from me to all of creation. This is my inborn nature. The duty of a doctor is to treat patients. In the same way, my duty is to console those who are suffering." She has never asked anyone to change their religion, does not ask anyone to believe in God or to change their faith, but only to contemplate the essential principles of their own faith and to try to live accordingly and also to inquire into their own real nature, and to believe in themselves. Amma's teachings are universal. Whenever she is asked about her religion, she replies that her religion is Love.

"Love is our true essence. Love has no limitations of caste, religion, race or nationality. We are all beads strung together on the same thread of love." —Amma

"Experiencing her oneness with all of creation, Amma realized that her purpose in life was to uplift ailing humanity. It was then that Amma started this spiritual mission, spreading this message of Truth, love and compassion throughout the world, by receiving one and all." —Amma

Today, Amma spends most of the year travelling throughout India and the world in order to uplift suffering humanity through her words and the comfort of her embrace. Her ashram is home to around 3,000 people, and thousands more visit every day from all over India and the world. Ashram residents and visitors alike are inspired by Amma's example and dedicate themselves to serving the world. Through Amma's vast network of charitable projects, they build homes for the homeless, give pensions to the

destitute and provide medical care for the sick. Countless people all over the world are contributing to this loving endeavor.

Amma's Darshan

Amma has been giving darshan since her late teenage years. As to how this began, Amma says, "People used to come and tell me their troubles. They would cry and I would wipe their tears. When they fell weeping into my lap, I used to hug them. Then the next person too wanted it. And so the habit picked up." Amma has embraced more than 34 million people throughout the world for over 30 years. When asked, in 2002, to what extent she thought her embraces helped the ills of the world, Amma replied, "I don't say I can do it 100 percent. Attempting to change the world [completely] is like trying to straighten the curly tail of a dog. But society takes birth from people. So by affecting individuals, you can make changes in the society and, through it, in the world. You cannot change it, but you can make changes. The fight in individual minds is responsible for the wars. So if you can touch people, you can touch the world." Sometimes Amma gives darshan continuously for more than 20 hours. When asked where she gets the energy to help so many people, she answers: "Where there is true love, anything is effortless."

Bhajans

In today's world, it is often difficult for people to get one-pointed concentration in meditation, but this concentration can be attained much easier through devotional singing. It is beneficial for the singer, the listeners, and nature as well. Later when the listeners reflect on the songs, they will try to live in accordance with the lessons enunciated therein. Amma has recorded more than 1,000 bhajans in 35 languages. She has also composed dozens of bhajans and set them to traditional ragas.

Amma's Teachings

Amma accepts the various spiritual practices and prayers of all religions as but various systems for the single goal of purifying the mind. She stresses the importance of meditation, performing actions as karma yoga (selfless service) and cultivating divine qualities such as compassion, patience, forgiveness, self-control, etc. Amma says, "Karma (action), jnana (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion) are all essential. If the two wings of a bird are devotion and action, knowledge is its tail. Only with the help of all three can the bird soar into the heights". In the book *The Timeless Path*, Swami Ramakrishnananda Puri, one of Amma's senior disciples, writes: "The spiritual path inculcated by Amma is the same as the one presented in the Vedas and recapitulated in subsequent traditional scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita."

Educational activities-Amrita Educational Institutions, the temples of learning

"Youngsters need to understand the purpose of life. They need courage and wisdom to face the challenges of life. With that understanding they become the light of the world. If we care for them responsibly, molding their whole character with love, then the future of the world will be safe." – Amma

Education for Everyone

Amma has established a vast network of educational institutions that provide the most modern educations while imparting the traditional values of Indian culture. Amma set up her first educational facility in 1987-the Amrita Vidyalayam primary school in Kodungallur, Kerala. Since then, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math has established more than 60 education facilities throughout India, including engineering, management, journalism, IT and medical schools. Today, the majority of these are part of

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (Amrita University). Math has founded and manages a wide range of educational institutions for the under privileged and disadvantaged sections of society also.

Furthermore, Math is providing 32,000 scholarships to disadvantaged children, many of whom have lost a parent due to suicide or have a parent suffering from AIDS. Vidyamritam, the scholarship program is currently running in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. It was originally started as part of campaign to control India's problem of farmer suicide, by providing children of agricultural families a means to education. The stated goal is to eventually provide 100,000 such scholarships throughout India.

Research for a Better World

Research and development of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, is in disciplines including nano technology, biotechnology, robotics and satellite-enabled software solutions. The stated goal behind the research is: "To harness the power of modern technology to provide effective, targeted aid to communities and individuals in crisis." Projects include a sensor network system for landslide detection, a high-quality low-cost insulin pump for diabetics, a system for early-cancer detection and stem-cell research. Sakshat Amrita Vocational Education (SAVE) - provide vocational training to remote and impoverished areas through haptic devices. Amrita Virtual Interactive E-learning World (AVIEW) -a teacher at one location to connect with students at another place, using Internet and satellite connectivity. Lectures are recorded and can be viewed later.

Amma's Philosophy on Education

The age-old values always sustained and nourished our society and life on this planet earth and these values serve as the very foundation of a harmonious existence between humans and all of nature, including the plant and animal kingdom. Everyone knows the goal of education is not to create a generation only capable of understanding the language of machines. Education should help us attain samskara, the spiritual culture. If "culture" merely denotes a refined sense of judgment regarding fashion and cuisine, we don't need education to cultivate it. Even the so-called "uncivilized" are proud of their food and clothing.

Spirituality is not something which is separate from life. By thinking, spirituality as not part of life we disconnect the external from the internal. The majority of the problems we see in today's world are due to this unhealthy attitude. It is important to create a balance between the external and the internal, the body and the soul. Just as we need our right and left legs to walk properly, spiritual understanding and material knowledge should go hand in hand. While striving to acquire education, a degree and the qualifications to earn a good living, we should understand that education for life is an entirely different thing. Education for life is spirituality-practicing values such as love, compassion, patience, forgiveness, etc. This alone will create a deep sense of responsibility towards our fellow human beings, nature and the world as a whole.

Amma's vision for Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham

"While aiming academic excellence and opening new avenues for students to perform in the world using their full potential and talents, the institute should also be able to help students to have a better understanding about life from a spiritual point of view. Contrary to the common belief that the only purpose of education is to gain material achievements and prosperity, the institute should create an atmosphere to help students understand that serving the society with a selfless attitude is also of prime importance. The world should

know that a life of material prosperity well-supported by spiritual goals is very much possible, and that this kind of life alone will enable humanity to realize the dream of peace and happiness while living in the modern-day atmosphere of cut-throat competition and selfishness. Further Amma would like the institute to give prime importance to research activities in all areas of science and technology and thereby work for the uplift of society as a whole. Amma says, if the institute moves ahead upholding these principles, it will become a center of excellence and a model for the entire world”.

Excerpts from an article on Amma by Dr Venkat Rangan, Vice Chancellor, Amrita University

As the chancellor of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amma is our source of inspiration, guidance, energy and nourishment. As a student here, each one of you is extremely fortunate. At what other university does every student have direct access to the chancellor? In Amma, not only do we have a chancellor with whom we can discuss our educational concerns, but also a loving mother ever ready to listen to our personal problems and difficulties.

Furthermore, Amma's embrace has the potential to transform us from ordinary to extraordinary. You may ask, "What could possibly happen during the few seconds of Amma's embrace?" We all know two computers can connect via a high-speed network. These days, we speak of information transfer in terms of gigabytes-i.e., one-billion bytes per second. At this speed, a 1,000-page encyclopaedia (with 20 lines per page, eight words per line, eight characters per word, and eight bytes per character) can be transmitted in less than a 100th of a second! Computer programmers know that, regardless of how powerful a computer might be, it is really just a high-speed idiot. If two such 'idiots' can exchange an entire encyclopaedia in a few milliseconds, imagine how much more Amma, who is one with the Universal Intelligence, can bestow upon us during her embrace!

I am reminded of an observation made by a distinguished scientist who once visited our university. He remarked that, ostensibly, no one's life could present more obstacles than Amma's. She was born into a family of meagre income---economic barrier. She was born into the fisherman community--- caste barrier. Instead of a metropolis like New York or Mumbai, she was born in a remote Kerala village--regional barrier. She only studied up to the fourth standard--educational barrier. She speaks only Malayalam--language barrier. Her skin is dark---colour barrier. And finally, being a woman, she faced gender barrier. Despite all these barriers and obstacles, Amma was still able to 'conquer' the world through her divine and selfless love. Can one ask for a more inspiring role model?

Section II: Indian Philosophy and Practice

5. PURUSHARTHAS (GOALS OF LIFE)

“Purushartha,” in Sanskrit, means what we desire or pray for. Thus, the word signifies all goals of human endeavour. The word is also commonly used to mean “self-effort,” namely, what people strive for. In Sanatana Dharma this word is used specifically to indicate the set of four goals, namely, dharma, artha, kama and moksha, under which all human desires can be classified.

There is a mistaken notion among many that the Vedic Culture or Sanatana Dharma is against worldly success or wealth or fulfilling one’s desires. This is far from being true. Sanatana Dharma promotes excellence in all spheres of life- in one’s education, in one’s earning of wealth, in one’s fulfillment of desires- provided these are done ethically and with wisdom.

Sanatana Dharma appreciates the fact that man is a complex being – he needs intellectual satisfaction to quench his thirst for knowledge, he needs emotional support and peace of mind, he needs to find creative outlets for his talents, and he needs means of physical sustenance and conveniences for his bodily existence, and above all he needs spiritual upliftment and a means to find the Ultimate Truth. Thus, in order to satisfy such various needs, Sanatana Dharma lays down four legitimate aims for Man that all men can rightfully seek, that all humans can strive for as a birthright- These four aims are what are known as the “Purusharthas” – Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. These four are responsible for balance in human life and make life a rich and rewarding experience.

Dharma

The first of the goals is dharma, a word which is difficult to translate in English. It has been variously translated as virtue, duty, faith, religion, righteousness, sacred law justice, and ethics and so on. Dharma, as a purushartha, means a way of life, enjoined by our scriptures and governed by a set of values and virtues, which, if followed by all, can make everyone’s life happy and beautiful. The pursuit of dharma is not opposed to the pursuit of artha and kama. Desire for wealth to fulfil one’s legitimate needs, and efforts to earn such wealth by righteous means are sanctioned by dharma. Dharma is defined as the one which upholds and regulates (dharayathi ithi dharma). In a wider sense dharma is a binding force which upholds and regulates the entire creation just as the gravitational force controls and holds the material universe as one piece. It is the divine constitution that defines our roles and responsibilities, our social and moral order, our purpose and goals and the rewards and the results those are appropriate for our actions.

Sanatana Dharma emphasizes the relative nature of Dharma, and does not recognize absolute good or evil; evil may be described as what is less good. One cannot stipulate what is absolutely good or evil for all men at all times. The attempts to do so, and to judge all people by a single concept of Dharma or impose upon all a single idea of righteousness, has been the cause of much injustice to humanity. A soldier unsheathes his sword to vindicate law and justice, whereas a saint lays down his own life for the same purpose.

Pursuit of dharma not only disciplines a person’s pursuit of artha and kama, but also purifies his or her inner being, thus making it fit for moksha.

Manusmriti says, “Dharma eva hato hanti / Dharmo rakshati rakshitah” (One who destroys Dharma is destroyed by Dharma / One who protects Dharma is protected by Dharma). If we choose to live a life guided by the principles of Dharma, then we are assured of that protection.

Artha

Artha is the pursuit of material wealth, which brings material comforts to a person. Artha is legitimate; money is indispensable in the present state of society. Voluntary poverty, as practised by religious mendicants, is something quite different; pious householders provide for the monks’ few necessities in recognition of their efforts to keep alive the highest spiritual ideal. But a man of the world without money is a failure; he cannot keep body and soul together. Furthermore, money is needed to build hospitals, schools, museums, and educational institutions, which distinguish a civilized from a primitive society. Money gives leisure, which is an important factor in the creation of culture. But money must be earned according to Dharma; otherwise it debases a man by making him greedy and cruel.

Acquiring wealth for the family and for oneself is not sin but taking what does not belong to oneself, is. The important thing to remember is not to be attached to the possession or attainment of wealth. It can be either transcended or sought with detachment, and with awareness.

Kama

Kama in a broad sense means desire. We are expected to fulfill our desires by performing our obligatory duties in the right manner and not by neglecting them. The way of dharma also becomes the way of fulfilment of desires. In Sanatana Dharma there is provision for that, so long as it is not in conflict with the principles of Dharma and used for the family and social order, within the boundaries established by tradition, social norms and scriptures.

Generally, most people seek artha and kama all the time, without limit, never satisfied with what they have. Such is greed. The greed of some results in deprivation of others and consequent hardship, injustice and conflict in society. It is said that wealth in society is like blood in the body. It must circulate everywhere. If not, the starved part gets diseased and endangers the whole. Hence the need for controlling or regulating people’s pursuit of artha and kama. Sanatana Dharma advocates moderation and balance in the pursuit of material and spiritual goals.

Moksha

Moksha, in Sanskrit, signifies absolute freedom (liberation) from all misery, and the attainment of eternal bliss – i.e. pure, unfragmented happiness and peace.

Man, who in essence is Divine, cannot be permanently satisfied with worldly experiences. The enjoyment of desires cannot be satisfied by enjoyment, any more than fire can be quenched by pouring butter into it; the more they are fulfilled, the more they flare up. Nor can man attain his divine stature through correct social behaviour, economic security, political success, or artistic creation. Charity for the needy may be a corrective for selfishness, but cannot be the ultimate goal of his soul’s craving. Even patriotism is not enough: as history shows, undue emphasis on patriotism was a major cause of the downfall of the Greek citystates. After fulfilling all his worldly desires and responsibilities a man still wants to know how he can suppress his inner restlessness and attain peace. So at last he gives up attachment to the world and seeks freedom through the knowledge of the self.

Dependence on anything is bondage. We, in general, are dependent on so many things in life. For example, an invalid person is physically dependent, an unemployed person is economically dependent, one desiring love and appreciation from others is emotionally dependent, one who is unable to think and decide for oneself is intellectually dependent, and the populace is politically dependent on government.

There is hardly anyone who does not want to be free from sorrow. Mukthi however is not freedom from ordinary sorrow but from the very possibility of being reborn. Mukthi is an absolute value. The lower three values may be regarded as instrumental values.

When we follow Dharma, in our performance of duties and seek Artha and Kama in a proper manner, our minds are purified and we learn that there is something more to life than these. We learn the limitations of Artha and Kama, and we get ready to seek the highest of all values -Moksha, which is the ultimate or supreme goal of all of us – paramapurushartha.

Need for Satguru to attain liberation

For most of us, whether we want to learn to speak, read, write, play a musical instrument, learn a trade or new skill teacher is essential. Similarly in spirituality, the great ones that have walked the path before us and have realised themselves, are essential to help us along our paths to Self-realisation.

6.VARNASRAMA DHARMA

(Excerpts from the works of Swami Sivananda Saraswati, The Divine Life Society)

The Four Varnas

In Purusha-Sukta of the Rig-Veda, there is reference to the division of society into four classes- Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and the Sudras. This division is according to the Guna and Karma. Guna (quality) and Karma (kind of work) determine the caste of a man.

The Law of Spiritual Economics

The underlying principle in caste system or Varna Dharma is division of labour. Rishis studied human nature carefully. They came to the conclusion that all men were not equally fit for all kinds of work. Hence, they found it necessary to allocate different kinds of duties to different classes of people, according to their aptitude, capacity or quality. The Brahmanas were in charge of spiritual and intellectual affairs. The work of political administration and defence was given to the Kshatriyas. The Vaisyas were entrusted with the duty of supplying food for the nation and administering its economic welfare. The Sudras did menial work. The Rishis felt all these needs of the nation and started the system of Varnas and Asramas.

This division of labour began in Vedic times. The Vedas taught that the Brahmana was the brain of the society, the Kshatriya its arms, the Vaisya its stomach, and the Sudra its feet.

There was a quarrel between the senses, the mind and the Prana as to who was superior. There was a quarrel amongst the different organs and the stomach. If the hands quarrel with the stomach; the entire body will suffer. When Prana departed from the body, all the organs suffered. The head or stomach cannot claim its superiority over the feet and hands. The hands and feet are as much important as the stomach or head. If there is quarrel between the different castes as to which is superior, then the entire social fabric will suffer. There will be disharmony, rupture and discord. A scavenger and a barber are as much important as a minister for the running of the society. The social edifice is built on the law of spiritual economics. It has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. Each class contributes its best to the common weal or world-solidarity. There is no question of higher and lower here.

Three Gunas

Vedanta elaborates the existence of three types of gunas which are typically the predisposed mental tendencies that exist in all beings in various combinations and proportions. Typically all the three gunas are present in every individual in different concentrations however the general disposition of an individual is governed by the domineering force- in other words a person is classified as belonging to one of the three categories based on his or her predominant guna.

Their influence on a being is profound and the general characteristic of the person is determined by the relative strength of these gunas.

The three gunas are as follows:

Sattva - purity, goodness, virtue

Rajas - passion, ambition, activity

Tamas -inertia, laziness and ignorance

Sattva or the satvic guna denotes purity. It is psychologically experienced clarity, understanding and detachment. When sattva predominates, an individual is characterized by vivacity, illumination, mental

clarity, and serenity with a compassionate and an unselfish attitude.

Rajas or the rajasic guna is psychologically experienced as suffering, craving and attachment. When this form of guna dominates the individual is characterized by rigorous activity and refers to a person who is energetic, tense, full of desire, and willful.

The third form of guna tamas or the tamasic guna represents darkness. It is psychologically experienced as delusion, depression, ignorance, and dullness. It lacks the energy of the rajas guna and the brightness of the sattva guna. When tamas dominates, the individual is inert and plunged into a state of repose and torpor with insensitivity and irresponsibility dominating the individual's character. It is also associated with aimless wandering, lacking the ability to think progressively and logically, affliction with laziness and with cheating tendencies.

The Four Asramas

Asrama means 'Way of Living'. There are four Asramas or stages in life, viz., Brahmacharya or the period of studentship, Grihastha or the stage of the householder, Vanaprastha or the stage of the forest-dweller or hermit, and Sannyasa or the life of renunciation or asceticism. Each stage has its own duties. These stages help the evolution of man. The four Asramas take man to perfection by successive stages. The practice of the four Asramas regulates the life from the beginning to the end

Towards Orderly Spiritual Evolution

Life is very systematically and orderly arranged in Sanatana Dharma. There is opportunity for the development of the different sides of human activity. Due occupations and training are assigned to each period of life. Life is a great school in which the powers, capacities and faculties of man are to be evolved gradually.

Every man should pass through the different Asramas regularly. He should not enter any stage of life prematurely. He can enter the next stage, only when each has been completed. In nature, evolution is gradual. It is not revolutionary.

In extraordinary cases, however, some of the stages may be omitted. Suka was a born Sannyasin. Sankara took Sannyasa without entering the stage of a householder. In rare and exceptional cases, a student is allowed to become a Sannyasin, his debts to the world having been fully paid in a previous birth.

1. The Brahmacharin or the Student

The first stage, Brahmacharya, is the period of study and discipline. He stays in the house of his preceptor and studies the Vedas and the sciences. The teachers in ancient India usually lived in forest hermitages. These hermitages were the Gurukulas or forest universities. The children of the rich and poor lived together. The student regarded his teacher as his spiritual father and served him with faith, devotion and reverence.

The life of the student begins with the Upanayana ceremony, his second birth. He must be simple in his habits. He rises early, bathes and does Sandhya and Gayatri Japa. He studies scriptures. He takes simple food in moderation and takes plenty of exercise. He is humble and obedient. He serves and respects elders. He attempts to be chaste in thought, word and deed. After the end of his student career, he gives a present to his preceptor according to his ability and returns home to enter the household life. The

preceptor gives the final instruction and sends the student home. The teacher delivers a convocation address to the students at the conclusion of their studentship:

“Speak the truth. Do your duty. Never swerve from the study of the Veda. Do not cut off the line of progeny. Never swerve away from truth. Never swerve from duty. Never neglect your welfare. Never neglect your prosperity. Never neglect the study and the teaching of the Vedas.

“Never swerve from the duties to the gods and the forefathers. Regard your mother as a god (Matridevo Bhava). Regard your father as a god (Pitridevo Bhava). Regard your teacher as a god (Acharyadevo Bhava). Regard your guest as god (Atithidevo Bhava). Let only those actions that are free from blemishes be done and not others.

2. The Grihastha or the Householder

The second stage is that of the Grihastha or householder. The household stage is entered at marriage, when the student has completed his studentship and is ready to take up the duties and responsibilities of householder life. Of all the Asramas, this is the most important, because it supports all the others. As all creatures live supported by the air, so the other Orders exist supported by the householder.

A householder should earn money by honest means and distribute it in the proper manner. He should spend one-tenth of his income in charity. He should enjoy sensual pleasures within the limits of the moral law.

The householder should perform the Pancha Maha Yajnas. The five Yajnas are:

1. Deva-yajna-offering oblations unto Devas, with recitation of Vedic Mantras.
2. Rishi-yajna-study of Vedas and teaching of Vedas to students, and offering of oblations to Rishis.
3. Pitri-yajna-Tarpana or ablutions to departed souls and Sraaddha or annual religious rites performed for departed souls.
4. Bhuta-yajna-distribution of food to cows, crows and animals in general.
5. Atithi-yajna-giving food to guests and honouring them.

When the householder sees that his sons are able to bear the burden of his duties, when his grandsons are around him, he should know that the time has come for him and his wife to retire from the world and spend their time in study and meditation.

Indian Family Value System

Our family values touch all the four stages of life – how to raise children during the Brahmacharya stage; how to fulfill one's duty towards family, society and adopted nation in the Grihstha stage; how to fulfill one's duty towards parents and parent-in-laws as they enter the Vanaprastha stage, and how to prepare the family for the Sanyasa stage of our lives!

The basic family values are:

1. Respect our elders
2. Take care of our parents in their old age
3. Respect our Guru or spiritual teacher
4. Contribute to society and humankind through selfless seva
5. Pass on our cultural, spiritual and ancient heritage to our children

Some other values that are part of India's cultural heritage are:

- Living peacefully and respecting each other's rights.
- Never ever compromising on integrity for the purpose of prosperity.
- Maintain strong bonds with the family members as well as relatives.
- Being hospitable to everyone who comes to your home, irrespective of his caste, creed, financial position or status.
- Remembering and bowing to God first thing in the morning.
- Practicing yoga and meditation.
- Always taking the advice of elders in case of any important decision.

3.The Vanaprastha or the Recluse

The next stage is that of the Vanaprastha. Vanaprastha is a preparation for the final stage of Sannyasa. After discharging all the duties of a householder, he should retire to the forest or a solitary country place and begin to meditate in solitude on higher spiritual things. He is now free from social bonds and the responsibilities of life. He has ample time for study of scriptures.

4.The Sannyasin or the Renunciate

The next stage is that of a Sannyasin. When a man becomes a Sannyasin, he renounces all possessions, all distinctions of caste, all rites and ceremonies and all attachments to any particular country, nation, or religion. Thus a Sannyasi is a person who has renounced all worldly desires and works for the benefit of the world. The aim of Sannyasa is "Atmano mokshartham, Jagat hitaya cha" which means "for the liberation of the soul and for the good of the world." The term Sannyasi is applicable to both men and women. Generally a male Sannyasi is referred to as "Swami" and a female Sannyasi is referred to as "Swamini".

Sannyasa implies cutting off all personal ties to family, business and social life. One no longer lives as an individual but as an instrument of God. A Sannyasi accepts the whole world as his family. He belongs to and is related to all living beings.

The Sannyasa ceremony therefore involves fasting and a series of ritual steps which symbolize the cutting of all relations and the final performance of all the obligatory duties of an individual. These include giving up of the sacred thread which symbolizes one's status or role in society, offering food to the departed souls of the ancestors for the last time and also performing one's own 'sraadha' (funeral rites) ceremony thereby indicating the death of the selfish individuality.

When he attains the sublime state of deep meditation he rejoices in his own Self. He is quite indifferent to sensual pleasures. He is free from likes and dislikes, desires, egoism, lust, anger, greed and pride. He has equal vision and balanced mind. He loves all. He roams about happily and disseminates Brahma Jnana or Knowledge of the Self. He is the same in honour and dishonour, praise and censure, success and failure. He is now Ativarnasrami, i.e., above Varna and Asrama. He is quite a free man. He is not bound by any social customs and conventions.

Such a Sannyasin is an ideal man. He has attained perfection and freedom.

Amma says "A Sannyasi is a real servant of the world. In fact, he or she is the only one who serves and

loves the world without receiving anything in return. For a genuine Sannyasi, the whole world is a garden and each individual is a flower therein. Such a person belongs to the whole world and has no particular caste, creed, sect or religion. Everyone has equal rights to the Sannyasi”

In many ways, Sankara was India’s first monastic organizer. He empowered the sannyasa tradition by revitalizing the dasanami structure, wherein monks were organized under 10 titles. And to protect and propagate Sanatana Dharma, he established ashrams throughout India, including four primary such institutions: one in Sringeri, Karnataka (southern India); one in Dvaraka, Gujarat (western India); one in Puri, Orissa (eastern India); and one in Jyotirmath, Uttarakhand (northern India), putting each one in charge of preserving a particular Veda.

Dashanami Sampradaya or Dasanami, is the monastic Tradition of Ten Names (Dasa meaning ten and Naama meaning name in Sanskrit). It is generally associated with the Advaita Vedanta tradition. One who take up sanyasa, take up one of the ten names associated with this sampradaya.

1. Saraswati
2. Tirtha
3. Aranya
4. Bharati
5. Ashrama
6. Giri
7. Parvata
8. Sagara
9. Vana
10. Puri

- Saraswati, Puri and Bharati are associated with the Sringeri Sharada Peetham.
- Tirtha and Ashrama are associated with the Dwaraka Pitha.
- Giri, Parvata and Sagara are associated with Jyotirmath.
- Vana and Aranya are associated with the Govardhana matha at Puri.

Asrama Dharma under Modern Conditions

At the present moment, the Asramas cannot be exactly lived according to the details of the ancient rules, as the conditions have changed very much; but, they may be revived in their spirit, to the great improvement of modern life.

The students of schools, and colleges should lead a life of purity and simple living. The householder should lead the life of an ideal Grihastha. He should practice self-restraint, mercy, tolerance, non-injury, truthfulness and moderation in everything. Those who find it difficult to lead the life of the third and the fourth Asramas should, remaining in either of the other two Asramas, gradually withdraw themselves from worldly life and practice selfless service, study and meditation.

Further reading

1. Ethics: An Essay on Hindu Ethics By Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna – Vivekananda Center, New York
2. Swami Chinmayananda on Dharma, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust , Mumbai.

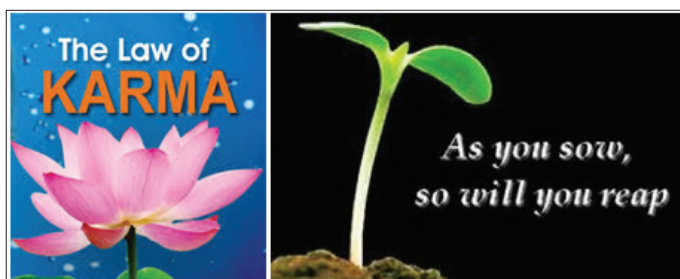
7. DOCTRINE OF KARMA

Objective:

To provide an understanding of the doctrine of Karma as a universal, fair, impartial and rational principle that regulates and governs life. Topics discussed include components of Karma, classification of Karma, concept of reincarnation and the cycle of birth and death. The reasons for reincarnation and practical ways of dealing with past negative Karma are also discussed. The concepts are further illustrated with a short story and excerpts from an interview with Amma.

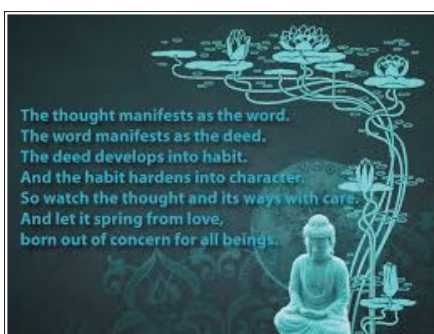
Basic Definitions:

Karma is the Sanskrit word for 'action'. Any physical or mental action is considered as Karma. The results of actions are called 'Karma Phala' (fruit of Karma). **The Law of Karma** states that: '**As you sow, so shall you reap**'. The Law of Karma is also called the Law of Cause and Effect or the Law of Action and Reaction.



There are three ways by which an individual performs Karma:

- 1) Manasa – by thought
- 2) Vaachaa – by word
- 3) Karmana – by deed



All of these actions produce results (Karma Phala) in accordance with the Law of Karma.

Understanding Positive and Negative Karma:

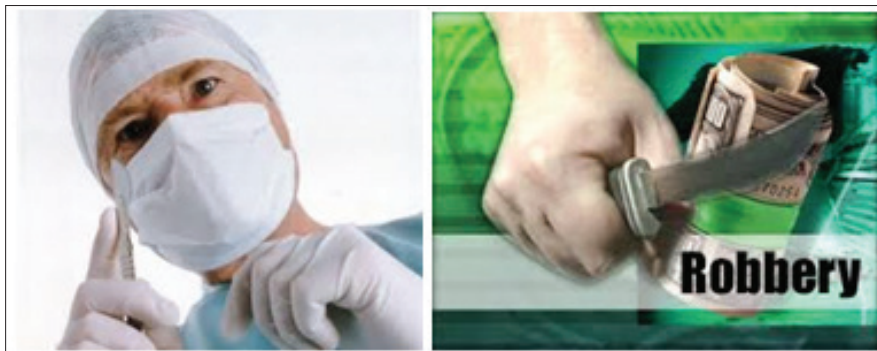
Actions that are motivated by kindness and compassion, that are helpful to others are positive Karma. Actions such as acquiring a good education that will enable one to contribute to society and family are also positive Karma. Actions that are motivated by negative emotions such as jealousy, hatred, anger etc are negative Karma. Actions cause hurt and pain to others are negative Karma. Both positive and

negative Karma eventually return to the doer, like an echo.



Intention of the Doer is the Critical Factor:

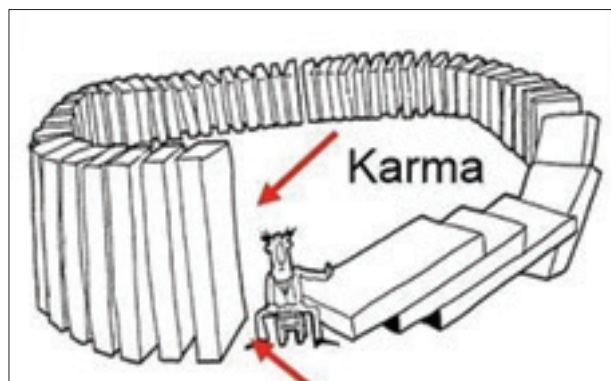
The intention of the doer is the critical factor that affects the quality of Karma. Consider an example: A surgeon cuts open the chest of his patient while performing a heart operation that is essential to save the life of a patient. Let us assume despite his best efforts, the patient dies. A robber inflicts a fatal wound with his knife on his victim's chest, resulting in the victim's death. In both cases, a knife has been used to cut another person's chest. In both cases, a person has died. However, the intention of the surgeon and the motive of the robber were totally different. Therefore, the surgeon's actions are positive Karma while the robber's actions are negative Karma.



Classification of Karma based on Individual's Role:

Karma can be classified into three categories based on the individual's role in life.

- 1) **Nishidha Karma:** These are actions which are prohibited because they have severe negative consequences. For example, theft, murder, rape etc would fall in this category.



- 2) **Kamya Karma:** These are desire-prompted actions. Such actions are not wrong or immoral, and provide some temporary happiness. For example, enjoying an ice-cream, playing cricket etc would fall in this category. It is important to use one's discrimination (viveka) before indulging in Kamya Karma, to ensure that it is not against dharma.
- 3) **Kartavya Karma:** These actions are duties. These are obligatory actions that need to be performed in accordance with one's role in life. For example, to defend the nation is the Kartavya Karma of a soldier.



Concept of Reincarnation:

Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be. As one continuously passes, in this body, from childhood to youth to old age, one similarly passes into another body at death. A wise person is not disturbed by such a change.

- *Bhagavad Gita 2:12-13*

The average lifetime of cells in our body is only seven years, yet there is a continuity of existence for the individual from childhood to old age. In the progress of growth, childhood goes away and youth appears. Thus youthfulness is born, when childhood dies. And yet, none of us is disturbed by this change. Death is also a similar change, when one discards an old body to take up a new one. This is called reincarnation or rebirth. The principle of reincarnation is stated not only by Sanatana Dharma but also by Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Taoism. The Kabbalah, a revered scripture of Judaism also supports the theory of reincarnation. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Socrates also supported the principle of reincarnation. The principle of reincarnation is supported by almost all major religions except Christianity and Islam. However, reincarnation is also supported by Gnostic sect of Christianity, and the Sufi sect of Islam. In addition, between 20 and 30 percent of persons in western countries who may be Christians also believe in reincarnation. Recent scientific investigations, such as the work of Dr. Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, USA have discovered considerable evidence that point towards the concept of reincarnation.



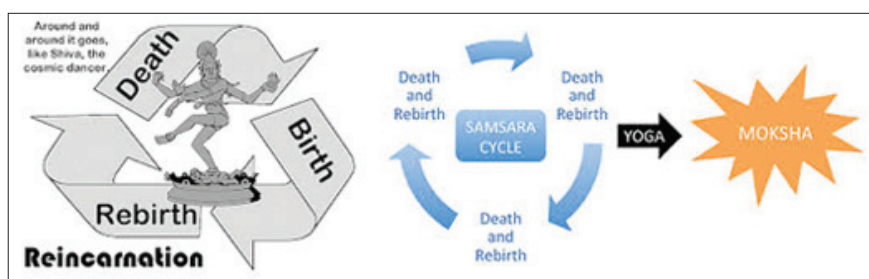
The Cycle of Birth and Death (*Samsara*):

The individual being is called 'jiva' in Santhana Dharma. Just as a person removes old clothes and wears fresh ones every day, the jiva changes the body when the Karma for which the body was given is exhausted.

Worn-out garments are shed by the body; Worn-out bodies are shed by the jiva. New bodies are donned by the jiva, like garments.

- *Bhagavad Gita* 2:22

Death is a part of the natural cycle of an individual, which includes birth, childhood, youth, middle-age, old age, death and rebirth. Even at the moment of death, there is no extinction of the individual. The mental tendencies (vasanas) and karmic account are carried forward. After the death of the body, the jiva goes to heaven/hell to reap some of the results of past actions. However, heaven and hell are only temporary states. The rebirth of the jiva is based on the mental tendencies (vasanas) and Karma of past lives. An individual with noble vasanas and positive Karma generally takes birth in a family with good culture and prosperity.



Reasons for Reincarnation:

The following are some of the reasons why the jiva (individual soul) takes on various physical bodies:

1. To satisfy one's desires and experience the fruits of one's Karma:

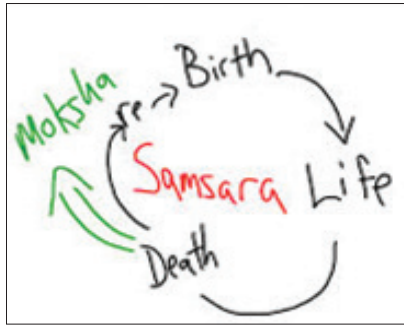
When a person indulges in material pleasures, he or she subsequently develops the mental tendencies to enjoy more of such pleasures (vasanas). The craving to satisfy one's desires causes the jiva to assume new physical bodies. Also, the results of past actions are experienced by the process of reincarnation.

2. To continue one's unfinished spiritual efforts:

When an aspirant making spiritual efforts for liberation dies without attaining his or her goal, the jiva gets another human body to continue its spiritual efforts towards the goal of moksha.

3. To attain Moksha

By the grace and compassion of God or a God-realized guru, a jiva uses a human body to attain Moksha, the ultimate purpose of life. With rare exceptions, attainment of Moksha is possible only for a human being. The cycle of birth and death, called samsara, ends when the jiva attains moksha (liberation), the ultimate goal of merging with the Divine.



Classification of Karma based on Time:

Karma can be classified into three categories based on the time of action and result:

- 1) **Sanchita Karma:** All actions do not produce their results all at once. The accumulated result of all actions from all past lifetimes that are yet to be experienced is called Sanchita Karma. This is the total Karmic account.
- 2) **Prarabdha Karma:** All of the results in the Karmic account cannot be experienced in a single lifetime. Only some portion of this can be experienced in the present lifetime. The portion of result of past actions allotted to the present lifetime is called Prarabdha Karma.
- 3) **Agami Karma:** The actions that are being done in the present lifetime which will give their results in the future are called Agami Karma. Some of these actions will bear fruit in the current life; others are stored for future births by adding to Sanchita Karma.



Operation of Karmic Account: Deposit and Loan Illustration

Every day we are adding to the Karmic account by performing positive or negative Karma. When we perform good actions, it is like making a deposit in a bank. When we perform negative actions, it is like taking a loan from the bank, which has to be settled later. The Jiva faces the consequences of his actions through the cycle of several births and deaths. Deposits are used to provide favourable situations, while the loans will cause unfavourable situations, in the chain of lives that jiva will go through in the future.



Law of Karma is Universal:

There is an intelligence that regulates the universe. Science has proved beyond doubt that everything in the manifested, material universe happens in accordance with definite and precise laws. These laws have always existed; they were not created by scientists, but only discovered by them. The law of cause and effect is a universal law which governs all phenomena. For example, both the revolution of the earth around the sun and the falling of an apple is the effect of the invisible law of gravitation. The Law of Karma, like the law of gravitation, works regardless of one's belief in this law.



Law of Karma is Rational:

The law of Karma states that every action must be followed by a reaction of similar nature which is directed back to the doer. Similarly, all mental actions produce similar reactions. Motives, desires, thoughts and other mental functions being subject to the same law, produce results according to the nature of these mental activities. It is our own Karma that produces its results in the form of joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, happiness or unhappiness. The Law of Karma is the philosophical equivalent of Newton's third law of motion.



Law of Karma is Fair:

A cause must always produce an effect of similar nature both in quality and quantity. Electricity may be generated in a hydro-electric plant. However, energy is neither created nor destroyed, but only transformed from one form to another. There is neither loss nor profit anywhere but perfect compensation. Similarly, what we wish to get, we have to pay for it first, in thought, word and deed. The result of Karma is not punishment or reward but simply the consequence of our own actions, and is meant for our learning. Some people think that life is unfair. Actually, life is fair!



Law of Karma is Impartial:

The Law of Karma operates impartially on all regardless of differences of nationality, religion, caste, gender, language, educational qualifications and economic status. Law of Karma is perfectly fair.



Law of Karma is not Fatalism:

Some people misunderstand the idea of Karma and blame 'fate' for their problems. This is not the correct understanding of the Law of Karma. If we correctly understand the Law of Karma, we will gain the strength to accept difficult situations, and deal with them appropriately. We will not blame anyone else for our difficulties. We will learn from difficult experiences, and convert them into opportunities for our growth.



Secret of Success:

“Our present is the result of our past actions, and our future will be the result of our present actions.”

The Law of Karma emphasizes personal responsibility. What one sows is what one reaps and is dispensed

by the Divine at appropriate time. We create our own destiny, and design our life by our thoughts, words and deeds.



For any effort to succeed, three things are essential:

- 1) Effort on the part of the doer;
- 2) Time duration, the period from the performance of action to its fruition;
- 3) God's grace.

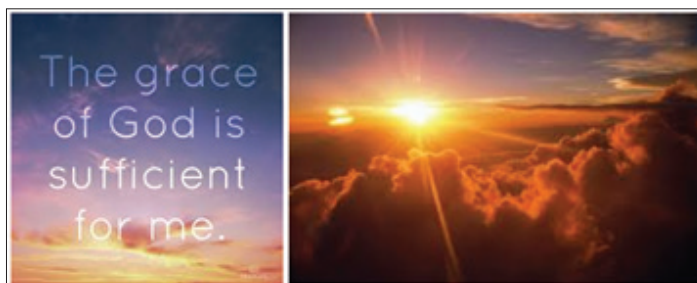
Importance of Compassion:

Understanding Law of Karma should go hand in hand with compassion for those who are suffering. If we correctly understand the Law of Karma, we will not be critical about others. Instead, we will become loving, compassionate and kind.



Ways of Dealing with the effects of Negative Karma:

The best way to deal with the effects of our own past negative actions is by invoking God's grace at present. God's grace can be invoked by performing positive actions to benefit society, sincere prayers and doing spiritual practices such as japa and meditation.



The effects of past negative actions are of three types:

- 1) **Negative effects that can be fully overcome:** We become eliminate these negative effects. This is like

a benign, harmless tumor that can be removed permanently through simple surgery.

- 2) **Negative effects that can be reduced or partially removed:** This is like a malignant cancer that can be removed but has a chance of returning.
- 3) **Negative effects which have to be endured:** These negative will have to be experienced. This can be compared to incurable cancer. Even in this case, positive actions, prayers and spiritual practices are useful. God's grace will give the inner strength to endure the pain or loss.

The Story of a Rich Miser:

In absence of the knowledge of Law of Karma, man becomes a slave of his desires. He is tossed around here and there helplessly by various currents in his present life. Various hostile forces generated because of his past actions drag him in different directions. He drifts like a wooden log in a river. He always leads a miserable and unhappy life even if he has all the wealth and possessions in this world. Here is a short story:

Once there was a rich man in a village. He was a great miser. He loved his money a lot. He never spent the money, nor gave anything to anyone. Suddenly one day he realized that he will die eventually. He did not want to part with his money when he died. He went to the priest of the temple and asked him, "Sir, when I die can I take my money with me?" The priest told him, "What a foolish man you are! Has anyone taken their wealth with him when he died? When a man dies, his children fight over his wealth. Strangers cheat the children and take a part of the wealth for themselves. A man spends all his life earning wealth only to find that either the wealth leaves him or he has to leave the wealth at the time of his death." The miser cried out aloud and ran back to his money in his house. He could not bear the idea that he had to part away from his wealth. Whenever any pundit visited the village, he went and asked him the same question. The pundits pitied him and explained to him that he cannot take even a broken needle with him. The miser spent sleepless nights in great agony.

One day, a great sage came to the village during his travels. The miser asked the great sage, "Oh Holy Sir, I have spent all my life in earning wealth. I understand that I will die one day. I want to take my wealth with me when I die. Everyone says that I cannot do so. Is there any way by which I can take my wealth with me?" The sage looked at the miser with great love and replied, "Oh dear, you have worked hard all your life to earn this wealth. Surely it is yours. You can take it with you when you die." The miser jumped with joy. Finally he had found a sage who had spoken words of nectar. He fell at the feet of the sage and asked, "Oh great Sir, your words have brought me great joy. Please tell me how I can take my wealth with me when I die. No one whom I have met so far seems to know that it can be done."

The sage asked the miser, "Have you travelled to foreign countries?" The miser said, "Oh yes, several times. I have travelled to several countries to do business. That is how I have earned all my wealth." The sage asked, "Is the local currency useful in the foreign countries?" The miser replied, "No. They all have different currencies. But I can buy gold and gems for the local currency here and take them with me. Gold and gems are valued in all countries." The sage said, "Yes. So, you have to do the same with your wealth. The local currency, and even gold and gems are not valued in the world after death. You need to convert all your wealth into a form that is valued across death." The miser replied, "Yes. You are right. Please tell me into which form should I convert all my wealth into?"



The sage replied, “*Punya* is the only currency that is valued even after death. Spend your wealth for the good of the society by building schools, hospitals and temples. Help people in distress using your wealth. This way, you can convert your wealth into *punya*. Whatever you have converted into *punya* by such activities can be taken with you when you die. Whatever you have still left as currency, gold, gems, land, houses, etc have to be left back here. You cannot take them with you when you die.” The rich man was very happy. He did not remain a miser any longer. He lived a simple life, and used his wealth for the good of the society.

What Law of Karma answers:

With the Law of Karma, *Sanathana Dharma* answers questions like:

- When a person dies, what will happen to all the good and bad things done by a person?
- Why should we be good?
- What is wrong in cheating others and harming others?

This explains only the current link in the chain. Questions like “How did the whole process start?” are not answered by the Law of Karma. To answer that, one needs to go deeper into philosophical enquiry. However, the Law of Karma is a good and adequate working model for all day-to-day activities.

An interview with Amma:

The following excerpt is taken from an interview conducted by Linda Johnson with Amma for Yoga Journal.

Question: Some of us wonder whether the doctrine of reincarnation, which Sanatana Dharma upholds is true.

Amma: Our past is not confined to just what took place before this point in our lives; it includes our past lives also. Just as waves in the sea assume various shapes and characteristics, a jiva (individual soul) assumes different bodies, both in the past and future, according to its accumulated vasanas (latent mental tendencies). This understanding leads us to the doctrine of Karma (action). We can see how some unrighteous people prosper and enjoy happy lives. Conversely, we can also see someone who has done many good deeds in this life experiencing sorrow for no apparent reason. If we take only the present life into account, the doctrine of Karma might seem totally invalid. In order to understand the subtle connection between cause and effect, we should approach the doctrine of Karma with more subtle insight.

A jiva takes on different bodies as a result of actions performed in the past. Every individual experiences happiness and sorrow according to actions done in previous lives. As the wheel of life turns, past actions

start bearing fruit. One cannot say exactly when or how they will bear fruit, or what they will be. That is a secret known only to God. Children, whether or not you believe this, the rules of Karma will continue to operate. Only actions performed with a sense of doer-ship will bear fruit later. Actually, only actions done egoistically can be considered Karma. Although it is difficult to trace the origins of Karma, it has an end. Karma ceases to be when the ego dies and one realizes his true nature – the Self. However, it is not easy to get rid of the feeling, “I am doing”. It is possible only after one has crossed many lives and become detached from happiness and sorrow. God is moulding us through happiness and sorrow. This is a very slow and gradual process. Much sculpting, polishing and demolishing work is involved. Even so, it is not possible to understand fully the divine power at work behind this mysterious process; one must just believe. When our mind becomes pure and subtle through spiritual disciplines, we will be able to remember our own previous lives.



There is no point grieving over our past actions. It is a closed chapter. What is done is done. Let it be. What is important is the present moment, because our whole future depends on what we do today. At every moment, we should manifest the light of divine presence through our life. If we can do so, nothing will be able to bind us. Live in the present moment – in God, in one’s true nature. Doing so will eliminate the influence that the wheel of life has on us. It will destroy the fear of death.

Nothing in this universe is accidental, not even creation. If it were, the whole universe would be chaotic. But the inherent order in nature and its extraordinary beauty indicate that behind the workings of the universe are an expansive heart and intellectual power that the human mind can never fathom. The very moment we realize God, we transcend the laws of Karma. Even when experiencing intense pain caused by illness, mahatmas gave up their bodies with a smile on their faces. They embraced life with a beaming smile. Whether happiness or sorrow, they accepted everything in creation equally. That is why they were able to welcome even death with a smile. One who receives whatever comes his way with gratitude greets even death in the same way, for death is not the end of anything. Death is not an enemy of our Self. It is just the beginning of a new life.

References:

1. Amma’s message, Matruvani, May 2014.
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8. PRACTICES FOR HAPPINESS

Objective:

To introduce some ancient Indian practices that will help us live happy lives.

Introduction:

“Get ahead of everyone, be attractive, be the best – do everything possible to achieve these.” We are constantly urged to follow this message that we hear around us from all directions today. However, countless lives are testimony that a life in spite of many achievements may yet be lacking in happiness. Indian culture teaches us a much better way of life, a way of life in which people orient all their energies and practices towards the Universal Consciousness and thus to one another. So for ages Indians have lived lives that are good for themselves, for others, and for all of creation. Indians have understood that living in harmony with their Self and with everything in Creation requires deliberate and attentive practices and that these practices make lives better and happier.

Let's discuss some of these practices. But first let us be clear about what these practices are NOT:

- Practices are NOT ways of showing ourselves, other people or God, how good we are. God already loves us, and we don't have to make any extra efforts to make ourselves more lovable by anxiously sticking to the practices all the time. Instead, we believe that God is trying to care for us through these practices, urging us to live a more free and happy life.
- Practices are NOT rules or formulas to master. Though practices involve skill, they often require creativity to figure out how to use these skills well in a given situation.
- Practices are NOT the monopoly of any religion. Though these practices are rooted in Indian culture, no particular community has exclusive claim on these practices.
- Practices do NOT require the use of any code language and do not have some hidden agenda. Practices can be described, interpreted, and lived in a variety of ways.

1. HEALTHY EATING

Why should we develop a healthy eating habit?

Everything in nature, including our food, is composed of the three gunas, the three qualities of nature. The sattva guna, the quality of peace and harmony, helps calm down the mind; the rajo guna, the quality of agitation and activity, makes the mind restless; and the tamo guna, the quality of darkness, inertia, mistakes and forgetfulness, makes the mind dull and makes it difficult or even impossible to concentrate.

A **Sattvic diet** is pure vegetarian nourishment and includes fresh fruit and vegetables, fruit and vegetable juices, wholemeal bread, pulses, grains and sprouts, nuts, seeds, honey, herbs, milk and dairy products which are free of animal rennet. These foods will raise our consciousness, inspire us to positive action, deeper meditation and unleash our hidden potential and creativity. Sattvic food is cooked with love and eaten with full awareness and gratitude.

Why pray before we eat?

Praying before we eat serves many purposes. One, it helps in purification of the food. Two, it connects us

not only with a higher power, but with each other. Three it helps in easy digestion of the food.

Whether we bow our heads over idli or pasta let us remember to express gratitude for our food. Let us thank god, mother earth, the sun, the soil, the rain, all the people and beings that were part of the effort of bringing our food to the table.

The prayer before eating:

Brahmarpanam Brahma Havir
Brahmagnau Brahmanaahutam
Brahmaiva Tena Ghantavyam
Brahmakarma Samadhina

Apart from the mind, our body also benefits from a pause to pray: “Taking a moment of gratitude before you start eating,” says chef and nutritionist Rebecca Katz, author of *The Cancer-Fighting Kitchen*, “gives you the opportunity to breathe and fully take in the sight and smell of your food.” That pause, she says, puts our body in a parasympathetic state, taking us out of our default “fight or flight” state and making food easier to digest.

2. MANTRA CHANTING (Compiled from Amma’s teachings)

What are mantras?

“Mantras are the purest form of universal vibrations, or shakti (divine energy), the profundity of which was experienced by the Rishis in deep meditation. Mantra is the power of the universe in seed form. That is why they are known as *bijaksharas* (seed letters). Having gone through that experience, they offered these pure sounds to humanity. However, verbally encapsulating an experience, particularly the most profound of all experiences, is not so easy. So, the mantras we have are the closest sounds to the universal sound that the compassionate Rishis could verbally create for the benefit of the world. However, the fact still remains that the fullness of a mantra can only be experienced when your mind attains perfect purity.”

Why chant mantras?

“Our mind pulls us in all directions. Through the mantra we try to focus the mind and through that we gain energy. Like a magnifying glass causes the rays of the sun to converge at a point to such intensity that it can produce fire, through practices like mantra chanting we can save a lot of energy and use the same to do good for the world.

When we germinate beans, their nutritional quality and vitamin content also increase. Chanting a mantra is a similar process that awakens our latent spiritual power. Chanting a mantra decreases the number of thoughts in the mind, it reduces the impurities in the mind without our even being aware of it, and it increases our concentration. Moreover, the vibrations from the chanting purify the atmosphere.

By repeating a mantra, we not only get mental peace but also material benefit. We gain not only God, but God’s glories as well. As soon we begin to repeat a mantra, we will get the benefit from it. It is like a fixed deposit in the bank. As soon as the deposit is made, our interest starts accruing.”

How to chant mantras?

“It is always advisable to obtain a mantra from a Self-realized master. Until then we may use one of the mantras of our beloved deity like ‘Om Namah Shivaya’, ‘Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya’, ‘Om

Namo Narayanaya, ‘Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare’, ‘Hari Om’, ‘Om Parashaktyai Namaha’, ‘Om Shivashaktyaikya Rupinyai Namaha’ or the names of Christ, Allah or Buddha.

“The mantra should be chanted with great attention. Focus either on the sound of the mantra or on the meaning; or you can visualise each syllable of the mantra as you chant. You can also visualise the form of your beloved deity while chanting.

3. MEDITATION (Compiled from Amma’s teachings)

What is meditation?

“True meditation is not an action; it is an intense longing of the heart to be one with the Self, or God. In that process, the deeper we go, the less ego we have and the lighter we feel. Don’t think that meditation means only sitting with your eyes closed. A smiling face, a kind word, a compassionate glance, all this is part of meditation.”

Why meditate?

“There was a time when contemplation and meditation were part and parcel of life. That is why so much could be achieved then even though science and technology were not as developed as they are today. The findings of those days continue to be the basis for what we do in modern times.

Meditation is good for worldly prosperity and for peace and liberation. It is the silence that we acquire through prayer and meditation that really helps us find peace and true happiness in this noisy world of conflicting differences and competition. Through meditation and mantra repetition, we can certainly change our prarabdha, at least ninety percent of it, but not 100 percent, because it is the law of nature.

Through meditation, our hearts should become compassionate. It is meaningless to light a sacred oil lamp or to make an offering to God without bringing some light into the lives of the poor. We have to go down to the world of the poor. We should love them and serve them. Without doing this, however much we meditate, we won’t be able to taste the sweetness of that meditation. The help given to others is what imparts the sweetness to our meditation.

Meditation is as valuable as gold. Meditation is ideal for both spiritual and material progress. The currency of a specific country is accepted only within that country; it has no value in any other country. Even within its own country a currency note won’t have any value if its serial number is missing. But a gold coin is different. Even if the engraving on the coin is missing, it will still be valuable in any country. This is what meditation is like. The time spent in meditation can never be a loss. Think of how valuable gold would be if it also had a wonderful fragrance! That is what it is like when we meditate and also have compassion. Then, all the obstacles in the path of God’s grace flowing towards us will disappear.

It is sometimes said that our lives should be like our eyes, because our eyes will adjust their focus, depending on whether an object is near or far. This is how we are able to see things. Similarly, we should develop a mind that can adjust itself to any situation in life. This becomes possible through spirituality. We need peace in our hearts so that we can adjust to different situations. Only through meditation can we find true peace.”

“Whenever you feel like it and have the time, sit in solitude and try to visualize everything as pure light.

Look at the vast sky and try to merge in that expansiveness. Look within and observe the thoughts and trace them back to their source. Give instructions to the mind such as, “Oh mind, why do you crave for unnecessary things? You think that this will give you happiness and satisfy you. But it is not so. Know that this will only drain your energy and give you nothing but restlessness and unending tension. Oh mind, stop this wandering. Return to your source and rest in peace.”

4. PRAYER (Compiled from Amma's teachings)

What is prayer?

“Prayer is a dialogue with the Beloved within ourselves—our true Self. Prayer is an expression of humility; it is a way to eliminate the ego. Prayer is not a way of weakness; it is a powerful step toward God. My children, prayer is not just chanting a mantra. A kind word, a smiling face, compassion – this is all part of prayer”

“To remember God, you have to forget. To be really focused on God is to be fully and absolutely in the present moment, forgetting the past and the future. That alone is real prayer.”

Why pray?

“Through our prayers we are trying to imbibe divine qualities; we are trying to realize the Absolute. You are that Self, the atman. You are not meant to be unhappy, ever. You are not the individual soul. You are the Supreme Being. Your nature is bliss. This is the purpose of prayer. Real prayer is not just empty words. Through our devotion, we are not seeking a God who sits somewhere beyond the sky; rather, we learn to see God in everything. The purpose of prayer is to realize this state.

Our prayers are expressions of our bond with God. During each moment of our prayers, we experience nothing but bliss. Whether the lover talks to his beloved or she talks to him, it gives them joy. They won't feel any discontentment. They won't feel bored even after hours of talking to each other. We experience a similar enjoyment when we pray.

Everyone has the innate capacity to swim, but only if we get into the water and practice will we learn how to swim. Devotion and prayer are the means by which we awaken the Divinity within us.

Remember God in Happiness and Sorrow: “Children, now that you are happy and joyful, do not forget God. Remember God and pray to God even in times of happiness. Usually people remember God and pray only when they are in pain, as if God were only a painkiller. Do not be that way. Let prayer and remembrance of God become part of your daily life. If you pray to God in times of both happiness and sadness, you will no longer have to experience any suffering. Even if some suffering should come to you, it won't appear as suffering. God will look after you.”

5. SATSANG (Compiled from Amma's teachings)

What is satsang?

“Sat = truth, being; sanga = association with. So satsang means being in the company of a great soul or the wise; reading spiritual books and also listening to spiritual discourses by a sage or scholar.”

Why Satsang?

“A tonic will improve your health, provided you follow the directions written on the bottle and take the right dosage. Satsang is like learning those directions, and spiritual practice is like drinking the tonic.

Satsang teaches us about the eternal and the transitory, but only through spiritual practice will we be able to experience and realize what we have learned.

These activities will help develop your power of discrimination and bring you peace. Personal effort is also necessary. Haven't even some of those who were living in evil ways come to the right path through *satsang*? Valmiki was a forest dweller who robbed and murdered people. Through *satsang* and his subsequent effort, he became a great sage and our first poet. *Satsang* also had a great effect on Prahlada, who became the foremost of devotees, despite being born from a lineage of *asuras* (demons).

If you don't tune a radio properly, it will only cause a disturbance. When you tune it in the right way, the music will give you pleasure and a sense of satisfaction. Similarly, people suffer because they fail to grasp the most important points in life. It is by grasping the key points in life that we can find happiness, and those principles can be learned through *satsang*. Listening to spiritual discourses can help us remove many problems. But if you live close to a spiritual master who abides in the ultimate Truth, and follow his or her instructions, your life will be ever joyful; you will never fall into danger.

Satsang and spiritual books have the power to turn our minds towards good thoughts. That alone, however, will not enable us to go forward with steady steps. Ordinary physicians will examine the patient and prescribe medicines. But if an operation is required, one has to see a surgeon. Likewise, to rid our minds of all the dirt, and to progress towards the ultimate goal, we have to take refuge in a Guru."

6. SVADYAYA

What is Svadyaya?

Svadyaya means both "*studying the sacred spiritual texts*" and "*studying one's self*." Both connotations apply to the traditional practice of scriptural learning. Studying the wisdom found in the sacred texts, we learn about ourselves. Svadyaya represents an ongoing process through which we can assess where we are at a given moment. It is like attuning our inner navigator and finding meaningful answers to questions: Where am I now and where am I going? What is my direction, and what are my aspirations? What are my responsibilities? What are my priorities?

Why svadyaya?

Svadyaya brings several benefits; the ultimate aim of Svadyaya being to bring the experience of the Universal Consciousness, the Self, to our awareness.

Through the sincere and dedicated study of spiritual texts our faulty reasoning and perception can be purified and through an introspective self-study we know ourselves better.

The better we know ourselves, the better we are able to choose circumstances that are most harmonious and productive for us, including lifestyle, social interactions, ways of learning and growing. Ultimately, this allows us to not only experience more joy but also to find ways of contributing to the world that fit our disposition and therefore are more powerful and beneficial to all.

But just like a meal gulped down, containing incompatible elements, will almost inevitably lead to indigestion and over a period of time to other problems and imbalances, reading can be healthy or harmful depending on what we read and how we read. Both the 'how' and the 'what' need to be considered.

What to read?

It is suggested that in Svadyaya we study the works of great sages. There are in fact literally thousands of traditional texts that can be considered for the practice. These texts come from all across India, written in a variety of languages and styles, by different saints and scholars. However Amma says, “Indiscriminately listening to whoever claims to be a Master and reading books without being selective, adds to the confusion.” Therefore, it is important to look for inspirational scriptures, readings, poems, or lectures delivered by those who have acquired the inner knowledge. Then choose from among these the ones that resonate with you and allow the words to penetrate your heart and carry their energetic transmission into your very cells to elevate and enlighten you.

Svadyaya is about letting the reading take root in one’s heart and mind. Do not insist that you comprehend everything upon first reading. Keep a notebook and pause to write in it those passages that one finds particularly helpful and meaningful. This will help us to internalize and integrate the truths we have found.

This can also become our private collection of sayings, a source of personal inspiration.

Svadyaya focuses on comprehending transcendent wisdom. The cultivation of that wisdom often takes years; it is a path, an unfolding. The full moon does not just appear in the sky in an instant; it rises slowly over the horizon. Similarly, wisdom does not just appear in a blink; it slowly blossoms in our heart. For this reason, in svadyaya, when we encounter passages we do not understand, we simply hold them for later consideration, we simply pause, mentally take a breath, confident that as the svadyaya unfolds, and our understanding deepens and broadens, the meaning will become clear.

Such reading will also require us to question our motives, observe our behaviours and responses to life. Svadyaya helps develop the courage and confidence to make better choices based on seeing ourselves more clearly.

Practice every day: This is best achieved by setting aside a time of the day in which to practice Svadyaya. Most people find that either early morning or just before going to sleep are the best times. But this will vary with individual circumstances. The important thing is to set aside a time for this practice and stick to it. Next consider the duration of the contemplation; how long should we engage in the reading? 20 to 40 minutes seems to be a good, rough, guideline.

Next, consider how to keep one’s mind. The object of focus is the book. If the mind wanders, simply bring the mind back to the words on the page. The mind likes to wander, so this will happen while engaging in svadyaya. When one notices that the mind has wandered, simply return to the reading, to the words on the page, without comment or criticism.

Most importantly, Amma says, “When we read sacred books such as the *Puranas*, we shouldn’t simply accept the stories at face value. We should go deeper than the surface and try to understand the underlying principles.”

7. YOGASANA

What is yogasana?

Yogasana is the term for the postures that comprise the branch of yoga that focuses on the physical body. This branch is called Hatha yoga. It is important to realize, though, that there is more to Hatha yoga than

just the postures. Maintaining proper breathing and meditation practices also are crucial to most forms of yoga.

Why yogasana?

The body and mind are interdependent instruments that help us lead happy lives. A healthy mind and body are equally vital for holistic living.

Yoga works at multiple levels — physiological, emotional, mental, intellectual and spiritual. The benefits of Yogasana practice are immense.

Regular yogasana practice significantly enhances the immune systems, the muscular systems and the functioning of various organs and internal systems of the body. A major proportion of ailments are psychosomatic and Yoga helps us address them at the root cause. Yoga relieves stress and promotes a deeper relaxation while still providing physical exercise. Through its practice we expand our awareness, gain equanimity of mind and access the full potential that lies within us all.

8. SEVA

What is seva?

Seva is a Sanskrit word meaning 'selfless service'. Amma says, "It is pure love and selfless service that sustains this universe. Lending a helping hand to a neglected soul, feeding the hungry, a compassionate smile towards the sad and dejected, this, is the real service, a manifestation of true love. "

Why do seva?

Amma says, "In this age of selfishness, selfless service (Seva) is the only soap that truly purifies. As you perform good actions selflessly, true love will blossom, which will purify our emotional mind."

"It is not enough that you excel in your profession. Set aside a few hours a week for serving the poor or set aside some money from your earnings. Try to work an extra hour with the intention of directing that money to the poor."

"There is a higher purpose in life other than just being born, growing up, getting married, retiring and dying. One who lives like that is really not much different from a worm living in excreta. If we don't spend some time in life helping others, all our achievements become just like a list of zeros. But when we help others, it is like putting a "1" at the head of that trail of zeros. Helping others is what gives value to life."

"When a turtle crawls it leaves a trail. We should also leave a trail. Our trail should be our good deeds. When we look back in reflection on what we have accomplished in life, we should see the tracks of our good deeds."

"It is through selfless actions that one becomes qualified to receive God's grace. Those who perform selfless actions don't have to tire themselves looking for God anywhere, for God's true shrine is the heart of the person who performs selfless service."

Section III: Indian Culture and Ethos

9. Symbols of Indian Culture

Symbols are a distinguishing feature of every civilization. They represent the central spiritual and cultural ideas of the people. In order to help the common man to gain an understanding of spiritual insights and thereby benefit from them, the sages of India took great efforts to present these spiritual insights in the form of symbols. The concept of symbolism is present everywhere in Indian culture – in our traditional forms of dance and music, in the deities we worship, in the way we celebrate festivals, in our stories and literature, in paintings and art, in the rituals associated with various life events such as birth, beginning of education, marriage etc, and even in the way we dress up!

Symbols are not only visual symbols, but include all the varied forms of representing a concept symbolically. This can include a sound symbol, an image, a gesture, an object, a certain behaviour, etc. Let us discuss some of the popular Symbols of Indian Culture.

Significance of lighting a lamp



In almost every Indian home a lamp is lit daily before the altar of the Lord. All auspicious functions commence with the lighting of the lamp. Light symbolizes knowledge, and darkness, ignorance. The Lord is the Chaitanya, the illuminator of all knowledge. Hence light is worshiped as the Lord himself. Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness. Also knowledge is a lasting inner wealth by which all outer achievement can be accomplished. Hence we light the lamp to bow down to knowledge as the greatest of all forms of wealth.

Why not light a bulb or tube light? That too would remove darkness. But the traditional oil lamp has a further spiritual significance. The oil or ghee in the lamp symbolizes our vaasanas or negative tendencies and the wick, the ego. When lit by spiritual knowledge, the vaasanas get slowly exhausted and the ego too finally perishes. The flame of a lamp always burns upwards. Similarly we should acquire such knowledge as to take us towards higher ideals.

Significance of saying ‘Namah Shivaya’



We greet each other with ‘**Namah Shivaya**’. The two palms are placed together in front of the chest and the head bows whilst saying ‘**Namah Shivaya**’. The real meeting between people is the meeting of their minds. When we greet another with folded palms and bowing down of the head, it is a gracious form of extending friendship in love and humility. The spiritual meaning is even deeper. The life force, the divinity, the Self in me is the same in all. Recognizing this oneness with the meeting of the palms, we salute the Divinity in the person we meet. So ‘**Namah Shivaya**’ means “I bow to the divine in you!” indicating the recognition of God in each being. When we know this significance, our greeting does not remain just a superficial gesture or word but paves the way for a deeper communion with another in an atmosphere of love and respect. ‘**Shiva**’ also means auspicious.

Amma says, “Why do we say “Om Namah Shivaya” when we greet people? “Om Namah Shivaya” means

“Salutations to Shiva (the Auspicious One).” Every human being in this world is a part of God. So when we say “Om Namah Shivaya” to someone, we are saying to that person, “I greet the Divinity within you, and I want you to know that I love and respect that Divinity.”

Significance of Tilakam



Tilakamis a symbol of spiritual wisdom. It is worn after taking bath. After the bath the individual gains external purity and spiritual knowledge is the one which creates inner purity. So tilakam actually links the external purity with internal purity. The three substances used for tilakam are sacred ash, sandal paste and saffron powder. Sacred ash represents the presence and protection of Shiva, sandal paste represents that of Vishnu and saffron (kumkum) that of Devi. The tilakamis applied on the spot between the eyebrows, which is the seat of memory and thinking. The tilakamis applied with the prayer - “May I remember the Lord. May this pious feeling pervade all my activities. May I be righteous in my deeds.” Even when we temporarily forget this prayerful attitude the mark on another reminds us of our resolve. The tilakamis thus a blessing of the Lord and a protection against wrong tendencies and forces.

Significance of offering food to the Lord before eating



Our ancestors prescribed the offering of food to God before partaking. Food so partaken becomes Prasad (consecrated offering). Prayer cleanses the food of the three impurities caused by the absence of cleanliness of the vessel, cleanliness of the food stuff, and cleanliness in the process of cooking. It is necessary to get rid of these three impurities to purify the food, for pure food goes into the making of a pure mind. It is not possible to ensure the purity of the cooking process because we do not know what thoughts rage in the mind of the man who prepares the food. Similarly, we cannot ensure the cleanliness of the food ingredients because we do not know whether it was acquired in a righteous way by the person who sold it to us. Hence, it is essential on our part to offer food to God in the form of prayer so that these three impurities do not afflict our mind.

This is the reason for chanting the following mantra from Bhagavad Gita:

Brahmaarpanam Brahma Havir -Brahmaagnau Brahmanaa Hutam

Brahmaiva Tena Gantavyam- Brahma Karma Samaadhinaha

The whole creation being the projection of Brahman (the Supreme), the food too is Brahman, the process of offering it is Brahman, it is being offered in the fire of Brahman. He who thus sees Brahman in all action, reaches Brahman alone.

Significance of Aarati



Towards the end of every pooja or bhajan of the Lord or to welcome an honored guest or saint, we perform the aarati. This is usually accompanied by the ringing of the bell and singing, playing of musical instruments and clapping. The flame of the aarati is waved in a clockwise circling movement to light the entire form of the Lord. Each part is revealed individually and also the entire form of the Lord. Our minds are focused on each limb of

the Lord as the lamp lights it up. It is akin to silent open-eyed meditation on His beauty. The singing, clapping, ringing of the bell etc. denote the joy and auspiciousness, which accompanies the vision of the Lord. Aarati is often performed with camphor. This holds a telling spiritual significance. Camphor when lit, burns itself out completely without leaving a trace of it. It represents our inherent tendencies (vaasanas). At the end of the aarati, we place our hands over the flame and then touch our eyes and the top of the head. It means - “May the light that illuminated the Lord light up my vision; may my vision be divine and my thoughts noble and beautiful”.

Common symbols of India

Indian philosophy extensively uses symbols to denote deeper truths of life. Without a proper appreciation of the symbolism contained in Indian philosophy, we will not be able to appreciate the deeper spiritual ideas that permeate every aspect of Indian life. Here we have listed simple meaning of common symbols that we come across in our daily life.

Omkara or Pranava

Omkara or Pranava is the root mantra and primal sound from which all creation issues forth. Its three syllables stand at the beginning and end of every sacred verse, every human act. It is associated with Lord Ganesha.



Omkara is an important and popular symbol of Indian Culture. It consists of three syllables – ‘A’ kara, ‘U’ kara and ‘M’ kara. The Vedas and other central scriptures of Hinduism attach great significance to the Omkara. The Vedas declare that all mantras condense into the Gayatri mantra, the most powerful of all mantras and in turn the Gayatri mantra condenses into the Omkara and finally the Omkara merges into Brahman. It represents the condensed essence of all sound vibrations of the universe and hence also called as ‘Sabda Brahman’ or ‘Nada Brahman’ (sound form of Brahman).

Modern Science today is corroborating the vision of Vedic Rishis. Big Bang theorists suggest that the primordial sound which was emanated from the big bang explosion was a booming, humming sound like the Omkara. Let us meditate on the profound meaning of the Omkara.

Swastika



The Swastika is another popular symbol of Indian culture which has travelled all over the world and become a part of many cultures. It has a rich and profound history behind it. The Swastika symbol is also very helpful in demonstrating how a symbol can be misinterpreted or hijacked if symbols are not safeguarded and respected.

The definition of Swastika is Su astika – that which is associated with well-being (or auspiciousness). It is an ancient 5,000 yr old symbol found in many of the seals of the Indus-Saraswati Civilization. It symbolizes Samsara (wheel) & Brahman (unchanging centre). It is commonly used even today in Hindu homes during ceremonies, in rangolis, on door hangings etc., as a symbol of luck and to ward off evil.

Shiva Lingam



Shivalinga is the ancient mark or symbol of God. This elliptical stone is a formless form representing Parasiva, That which can never be described or portrayed. The pitha, pedestal, represents Siva's manifest Parashakti.

Amma has described the significance of Shiva linga in the following words: the meaning of word linga is the place of dissolution. The universe arises out of the linga and finally dissolves into it. The word Shiva means 'auspiciousness'. Auspiciousness does not have a form. By worshipping

Shiva Lingam, a symbol of auspiciousness, the worshipper receives auspiciousness.

The Shiva is the motionless principle underlying every movement in the universe, while Shakti is the power that is cause of all movement. The Shivalinga is the symbol of unity of 'Shiva' and 'Shakti'. The 'Shivalinga' illustrates that 'Shiva' and 'Shakti' are not two, but one and the same. This is relevant in family life as well. The husband and wife should be of one mind. If the man is the support of the family, the woman is the Shakti, the strength of family. There is probably no other symbol of equality and love between a man and woman.

We should consider why the 'Shivalinga' was given its form. Today scientists say that the universe is egg shaped. In India, for thousands of years, the universe was referred to as 'Brahmandam', meaning great egg. The 'Shivalinga' is a microcosm of that vast cosmic egg. When we worship the 'Shivalinga', we are in fact worshipping the entire universe as auspicious form and as the divine consciousness.

Nataraja

One of the most beautiful of our symbols is Nataraja. Nataraja is one of the forms of Lord Shiva, he represents mastery over all art forms, particularly music and dance. Every part of the Nataraja form is suffused with symbolism:

- Upper Right Hand Damaru – Nada, Creation etc.
- Upper Left Hand – Flame of Destruction
- Lower Right Hand – Abhaya Hasta -Boon of Protection & Fearlessness
- Lower Left Hand – Gaja Hasta – Viveka or Discrimination
- Right Foot – Jnana – placed on ApasmaraPurusha (Ignorance, Slipping of awareness)
- Elevated Left Foot – Moksha.



The famous Nuclear Scientist Fritj of Capra in his book "The Tao of Physics", describes the Nataraja as the dance of sub atomic particles, the ever changing cosmic rhythm.

Significance of Sankha (conch)

The significance of conch in our tradition is evident from the following facts:

When the conch is blown, the primordial sound of Om emanates. All knowledge enshrined in the Vedas is an elaboration of Om.

Lord Vishnu holds it one of his hands symbolizing dharma (righteousness) that is one of the four goals



(purusharthas) of life. The sound of the conch (Sankhanaada) is therefore considered auspicious elevate people's minds to a prayerful attitude.

The conch blown by Lord Krishna is called Paanchajanya. The sound of the conch is thus also the victory call of good over evil.

The conch is placed at the altar in temples and homes next to the Lord as a symbol of Naada Brahma (God in the form of Sound), Om, the Vedas, dharma, victory and auspiciousness.

Significance of lotus



The lotus is the symbol of truth, auspiciousness and beauty (**satyam, shivam, sundaram**). In Indian thought, various aspects God are compared to a lotus (i.e. lotus eyes, lotus feet, lotus hands, the lotus of the heart etc.). The lotus blooms with the rising sun. Similarly, our minds open up and expand with the light of knowledge. Lotus remains beautiful and untainted despite its slushy surroundings, reminding us that we too should strive to remain pure within, under all circumstances. The lotus leaf never gets wet even though it is always in water. It symbolizes the man of wisdom (**gyaani**) who remains ever joyous, unaffected by the world of sorrow and change.

10. FESTIVALS OF INDIA

Objective:

- To understand the true meaning and significance of four major festivals of India
- To understand the traditional rituals associated with the festivals.

Introduction:

India abounds with festivals. They are the fabric that binds its society together creating a happy and harmonious ambience. All the festivals are imbued with social, religious and spiritual messages. In India, apart from the festivals associated with temples found in every village, there are national festivals such as Deepavali, Dussera/Navaratri, Ganesh Chaturthi, Holi, Krishnashtami, Ramanavami, and Rakshabandhan. The stories behind and observances specific to each festival are meant to foster virtues such as self-control, purity and devotion.

Amma says, “Children, India is a country of festivals. The true intention of these festivals is to reorient the human mind, which is currently immersed in material aims, towards remembrance of God.”

“During festivals, the minds of the celebrators are attuned; they are thinking the same holy thoughts. Everyone is immersed in remembering God together. They sing devotional songs and enjoy together. In this way, festivals awaken joy and remembrance of God.”

Let us understand the true meaning and significance of some of these festivals and the traditional rituals associated with them.

1. DEEPAVALI

Deepavali (or Diwali) which means “rows of lamps” celebrates the attainment of prosperity. The traditional name of India is Bharata and Indians are Bharatias – or ‘those who revel in light’. During the night of Deepavali the myriad little clay lamps (diyas) seem to silently send forth the message of Deepavali: “Come, let us remove darkness from the face of the earth.” .

Houses are adorned with lighted oil lamps and streamers. People wear new clothes, eat sweets and burn firecrackers and sparklers (now due to growing awareness about environmental pollution, their use has reduced) — all expressions of prosperity. In this is the principle that when dharma (righteousness) prevails over adharma (unrighteousness) there will be prosperity.

The day before Diwali, women observe a fast in order to evoke the grace of God. It is not that God wants you to go hungry or takes pleasure in your suffering – the principle is that you gain only by giving up. That evening, devotees worship Gomata (the cow) and her calf and feed them special food. Women pray for the welfare of the entire family. This holy day is called Vasubaras.

The first day of Diwali falls on the 13th of Kartik. People set about cleaning houses and shops, and decorating doorsteps and courtyards with rangoli or multi-coloured designs. Devotees arise before sunrise and take oil baths. If possible, they wear new clothes. In the evening, people worship coins representing wealth. Families decorate houses and courtyards with lanterns giving a warm glow to the night. This day of celebration is called Dhantrayodashi or Dhanteras.

The second day is called Naraka Chaturdashi. People take an oil bath in the early morning and then in the night they light lamps and burn firecrackers.

On the third day, people worship Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. They decorate their houses with lit lamps and lanterns to welcome Lakshmi to their home and hearts. On this day businessmen close old accounts and open new ones.

The message of Deepavali

Amma says, “Deepavali is a festival of lights and radiance. We light lamps as a symbol of awakening knowledge within us and radiance symbolises goodness and knowledge. Even after lighting a thousand other lamps, the original lamp is not depleted. This demonstrates that knowledge is never exhausted, even if we share it with many people. That is the greatness of knowledge. Similarly, good thoughts and good actions influence others.”

The dharma of fire is the same wherever it is: in a poor man’s house, in a rich man’s house, in America, in Antarctica, or in the Himalayas. It gives light and heat. The flame always points upwards. Even if we keep the lamp upside down, the flame will burn upwards. The message is that our mind should be focused on the Atman, the Self wherever we are. The lamps remind us of our dharma to realise our divine nature. Amma reminds us that the luminous inner light of the Self is ever shining steadily in the chamber of the heart and that the very goal is to seek that Self.

The rows of lamps teach yet another important lesson of unity. The light that shines forth from the Sun, the moon, the stars, and fire is all the same. To see and recognise that one light, the light of consciousness, which is manifesting and pulsating in and through all of creation is the goal of life. Thus, recognising all of creation to be an expression of your true Self, spread the light of love and compassion.

The lights of Deepavali are displayed at the entrance doors, by the walls of houses, in the streets and lanes. This means that the inner spiritual light of the individual must be reflected outside. It should benefit society. Passers-by may thereby be prevented from stumbling on their way to reach their destination.

Feeding empty stomachs, lighting blown-out diyas and bringing light to those whose lives are in darkness is the true spirit of Deepavali. This is true prayer.

The Legends

Legends associated with Deepavali say that Dhanvantari, who revealed the science of Ayurveda, first manifested on this day. Narakasura, a powerful king who misused power to harass his subjects was destroyed by Sri Krishna on this day. Deepavali is also associated with the Divine Mother’s victory, whose grace can remove the darkness of ignorance. Sri Rama is said to have returned to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana, the asura king of Lanka, on Deepavali day. The Puranas say that it was on this day that Goddess Lakshmi, who emerged from the churning of the ocean of milk (Ksheera Sagara), married Lord Vishnu, the repository of all divine qualities.

2.NAVARATRI

The different stages of spiritual progress are reflected in the sequence of Navaratri celebrations. During the first three days, Durga is worshipped. She personifies that aspect of shakti which destroys our negative tendencies. The process of trying to control our senses is akin to a war for the mind which resists all

attempts at control. So the stories in the Puranas symbolically depict Devi in the form of Durga as waging war and destroying the asuras.

However, getting temporary relief from the clutches of vasanas does not guarantee permanent liberation from them. The seeds of the vasanas will remain within in latent form. Therefore, we should supplant them with positive qualities. The Bhagavad Gita refers to these qualities as daivi-sampat, literally “Divine wealth”. Correspondingly, we worship Lakshmi during the next three days. Lakshmi is not just the giver of gross wealth or prosperity; She is the Mother who gives according to the needs of Her children.

Only one endowed with daivi-sampat is fit to receive the knowledge of the Supreme. Accordingly, the last three days of Navaratri are dedicated to worshipping Saraswati, the embodiment of Knowledge. She is depicted as wearing a pure-white sari, which symbolises the illumination of the Supreme Truth.

The tenth day is Vijaya Dashami, or the festival of victory, symbolising the moment when Truth dawns within. Vijaya Dashami is considered auspicious for mantra initiation; advanced spiritual aspirants are also initiated into Sannyasa (vow of renunciation) on this day.

Navaratri is not only significant for spiritual aspirants; it has a message for those who lead a worldly life as well. They should invoke Durga’s help to surmount obstacles, pray to Lakshmi to bestow peace and prosperity, and contemplate upon Saraswati in order to gain knowledge. These three ingredients are just as necessary for a full and complete worldly life. In reality, when we pray like this, we are but invoking the Shakti that is within ourselves.

Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati are not different entities, but different facets of the singular Divinity.

Some of the practices associated with Navaratri include fruit and milk fasts, japa (mantra chanting), chanting of hymns dedicated to Devi in Her different forms, prayer, meditation and recitation of sacred texts including the Devi Mahatmya, Sri Lalita Sahasranama and the Durga Saptashati.

Ayudha Puja

The ninth day is also the day of the Ayudha Puja. The Ayudha Puja is a worship of whatever implements one may use in one’s livelihood. On the preceding evening, it is traditional to place these implements on an altar to the Divine. If one can make a conscious effort to see the divine in the tools and objects one uses each day, it will help one to see one’s work as an offering to God. It will also help one to maintain constant remembrance of the divine.

Children traditionally place their study books and writing implements on the altar. On this day, no work or study is done, that one might spend the day in contemplation of the Divine.

Saraswati Puja and Vidyarambham

The tenth day is called Vijaya Dashami. Devotees perform a Saraswati Puja to invoke the blessings of Saraswati. Some devotees also perform pujas dedicated to Durga to mark Her victory over the demon, Mahishasura.

Vidyarambham literally means to begin the acquisition of knowledge, and for the very young, it is just that: an initiation into learning. For those who have already begun to acquire knowledge, it is a reminder that only one who can maintain a beginner’s mind will be able to learn. As Amma says, “We should always have the attitude of a beginner.”

The ceremony involves tracing each letter of the alphabet of a mantra (*Hari Sree Ganapataye Namah*) in a plate of rice or even in sand on the ground. Traditionally, It is a good day to start first lessons on scriptures, music and instruments like tabla, harmonium, veena, violin etc.

At another level, Navaratri also highlights the principles elucidated by the Ramayana. This is hinted at in the other name by which Vijayadashami is known in India, Dussehra. Dussehra is derived from “Dasha-hara”, which means “victory over the ten-faced one”. This ten-faced being (Dashamukha) is none other than Ravana, Lord Rama’s adversary. His ten heads symbolise the ten senses (five of perception and five of action). Ravana’s extrovertedness stands in stark contrast to Dasharatha, Lord Rama’s father, whose name can be taken to mean “one who has controlled his ten senses.” That he is father to a Divine Incarnation suggests that only when one is able to subdue all ten senses can one realise the divinity within.

3.GANESH CHATURTHI

Sri Ganesha Chaturthi is dedicated to the beloved elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Worshipped throughout the world wherever large Indian populations are found, the fervent devotion and colorful celebrations which attend this festival reveal just how vital Ganesha is to the spiritual heartbeat of India.

Lord Ganesha is said to be the remover of obstacles and a bringer of good fortune. Traditionally held to be Ganesha’s birthday, Vinayaka Chaturthi, or the Ganesh festival, is celebrated on the fourth day after the full moon in the month of Sravana (August – September). Then it is proceeded over a week of pujas, bhajans and cultural programs. A clay idol of Ganesha is made and worshipped on all of the festival days with prayers and devotional songs. The festivities culminate with the Ganesha Visarjan, where the idol is carried in a procession to the sea, river, or other large body of water, to be ceremonially immersed.

The immersion ceremony symbolises the form (physical existence) returning to the Formless (spiritual existence). Its purpose is to teach that all forms of God, including human beings, have both their beginning and end in the one Formless Absolute. In this light, the worship of God’s form actually serves as a bridge, helping us to reach that state of Infinite Awareness. Just as Ganesha today merges with Mother Ocean, so too is our consciousness destined to merge into the Ocean of Supreme Consciousness.

4.HOLI

Holi is an extremely popular festival common to all sections of society, all over India for millennia. The day, Phalgun Krishna pratipada, is observed as a day of revelry during which people throw gulal or coloured water or perfumed coloured powder on each other. In the olden days the colours used were natural and organic thus being healthy for the body as well as healing our psyche.

Worship of fire is also an important part of Holi, symbolic of offering our vasanas to Agni in order to transcend them eventually. Worshipping the fire during Holi also ushers in the warm season ahead as we move to the New Year, marking the end of winter and the abundance of the upcoming spring harvest season.

Amma says, “Holi is a symbol of joy and celebration. May your life be filled with the colour of bliss. Once you apply the paints, everything looks the same. Similarly when you apply the paint of love to the mind, all differences disappear, we become one and we will be able to move ahead in unity. Holi reminds us about the greatness of faith. Prahlada was sitting on the lap of Holika, but the fire couldn’t harm him. That was due to the unshakeable faith Prahlada had in the Lord. May my children’s faith be similarly formed.”

Prahlada was a devotee of Lord Vishnu. Prahlada’s father, the Demon King Hiranyakasipu, wanted Prahlada to worship him, not Lord Vishnu. When Prahlada refused, Hiranyakasipu tried to kill him in many ways. One such way was by putting him on the lap of his aunt Holika. Holika had a boon that made her impervious to fire. With Prahlada on her lap, she then jumped into a fire. But due to his unshakeable faith in Lord Vishnu, Prahlada was not burned, and Holika was destroyed.

11. Living in Harmony with Nature

Introduction

The original inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent worshipped natural phenomena, heavenly bodies and nature in all her manifestations. They lived in perfect harmony with nature because they considered themselves part of nature and understood their interdependence with the vegetation, the fauna, the rivers, the hills and the mountains for their well being and survival. They respected nature. As yet, our history can be traced back only to the Vedic period. Vedic Indians understood the need to respect, worship and conserve the bounties of nature. Today as humanity faces an environmental disaster for reasons such as climatic change due to global warming, the situation demands a return to our ancestors' attitude towards nature, if not for the same reasons, for our very survival.

Vedic veneration of Mother Nature:

Sanathana Dharma puts forward the concept that all matter, animate and inanimate, is a manifestation of Divinity, Cosmic Consciousness or Brahman and is, therefore, worthy of worship. This is not merely a theoretical concept but the actual experience of Self-realized sages and saints. Thus, while God is One, He can be worshiped in and through a variety of forms (the various deities) and in all of nature. Sanskrit literature, both scriptural and classical is full of passages describing the bounties of nature and their sacredness. India's link with nature is an ancient one. In the Rig Veda the whole cosmos is seen as a thousand branched tree. The Bhagavad Gita gives a symbolic image of the cosmos as an inverted ashwatta (pipal) tree, with its roots pointing towards the sky (Brahman) and the branches towards the earth (the diversity of the universe) and, therefore, one who worships the ashawatta worships the universe. In ayurveda, all medical plants are treated with great reverence. The Vedas and classical Sanskrit literature also give evidence of the existence of large sacred groves and wild life sanctuaries. Mountains were considered to be the abode of gods. Rivers are the gift of gods and some important ones are associated with gods and goddesses. E.g. the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Saraswati, the Krishna. Amma says, "By worshipping Mount Govardhana, Lord Krishna taught us a great lesson: to make Nature worship part of our daily life. He asked his people to worship Mount Govardhana because it protected them. Similarly Lord Rama, before building the bridge across the sea, did three days of severe penance to please the ocean. Even Mahatmas give so much respect and regard for Nature and seek her blessings prior to commencing any action. In India, there are temples for birds, animals, trees and even for lizards and poisonous snakes. This is to emphasize the great significance of the connection between humans and Nature."

Sacred Animals:

By recognizing the divinity in animals, Indian tradition has considered animals as sacred. Even as little children, we grow up with stories of Ganesha, the elephant headed god and Hanuman the monkey god. Several animals have also been chosen as vahanas (vehicles) of various deities.

e.g. Garuda (the eagle) the vahana of Vishnu, Nandi (the bull) the vahana of Shiva, the lion the vahana of Durga. This association of animals with Gods and Goddesses fosters a sense of reverence towards all life.

Sacred Gardens:

Sacred Gardens were the cultivated and aesthetically landscaped gardens used for meditation and other spiritual practices and also for celebrating festivals. Indian scriptures and literature give detailed

description of elaborately designed gardens with their variety of flowers, lotus ponds, fruit trees, creepers and many shade giving trees. Some types of sacred Gardens are Nandavanam (for eg, the Tirunandavanam attached to the Ranganathar temple at Srirangam), Bagh (Bagicha) in North India with a separate area is earmarked for a temple of the village deity, and Buddhist Garden, meant for meditation and other spiritual practices.

Sacred Groves:

Sacred Groves were patches of natural vegetation. They consisted of either a few trees or forests of a few acres. These groves were generally dedicated to the local deities, (eg. Ayyanar and Amman) or tree spirits (Vanadevatas). These groves were protected and preserved by local communities from generation to generation because of their religious significance and traditional rituals that were performed there. The ecological significance of sacred groves was that they helped in conservation of biodiversity, renewal of aquifers (ponds, streams, springs etc) and prevented soil erosion.

Sacred Trees and plants:

Trees and plants have been traditionally considered sacred. In most temples, there is a sacred tree and devotees circumambulate the tree with reverence, just as they go around the diety of the temple. Some trees are closely associated with the forms of God. For eg, the Bilva tree and Rudraksha tree with Lord Shiva, the Neem tree with Mariamman and the Tulsi with Lord Vishnu. In many Hindu homes, there can be a tulsi plant, which is considered sacred. Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment under Peepal tree, and hence it is revered. In modern society, due to the lack of such regard and respect for trees, there is a widespread felling of trees, leading to deforestation and associated environmental problems. Clearly, there is a need to protect the trees, for they nourish and support all humanity by providing oxygen, the very breath of life. Soil conservation, prevention of floods, and securing rainfall are some of the benefits of forests and trees. Rainforests in tropical countries are home to an amazing number of species, and are vital for preserving bio-diversity. Ancient Indians had a deep understanding of the intricate web of life, and of how all life is interdependent. It is time to go back to our roots!

Sacred Mountains:

Like some of the most dramatic and breath taking natural features of the landscape, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke spirituality. There are a number of important temples throughout India that have been constructed on mountain peaks. Bhadrinath, Amarnath, Palani, Tirupathi, Sabarimala, the list is endless. Mount Kailash in the Himalayas is regarded as the abode of Lord Shiva, while Arunachala (Tiruvannamalai) is revered as the very form of Lord Shiva. Tiruvannamalai was also the abode of the great sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Sacred Rivers and Tanks:

In India, rivers have been worshiped from time immemorial. Since water is indispensable to all creatures and rivers in particular have an important part to play in sustaining life, they are considered sacred and are associated with gods and goddesses. For example, the Ganga is considered as emanating from the matted locks of Lord Shiva, and is a symbol of wisdom and purity. To foster the feeling of sanctity towards water, it is common for many temples to have a sacred tank, and an annual festival is conducted in the temple tank. Today, there is so much pollution of our rivers and other water bodies, and industrial wastes containing harmful chemicals are dumped into them. It is time to value the importance of water.

Places of pilgrimage:

There are many sacred pilgrimage sites in India, located in scenic places of astonishing natural beauty.

Right from the very top (Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath, Badhrinath, Rishikesh, Haridwar), to the very tip (Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram), India is blessed with such holy places that the face of God is revealed through the beauty of nature! The Matts established by Adi Sankaracharya at Kanchipuram (Kamakshipita), Sringeri (Saradha Math), Puri (Govardhana Math), Dwaraka (Kalika Math) and Badhrinath (Jyothir Math) served to unite the nation culturally, and are even today vibrant centres of our rich and ancient spiritual tradition. The confluence of three rivers, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswathi (triveni sangamam) at Prayaga and the Kashi Vishwanatha temple of Varanasi are examples of natural beauty serving as a reminder to our divine heritage.

12. RELEVANCE OF OUR EPICS IN THIS SCIENTIFIC AGE

Introduction

The two great epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have influenced Indian culture more than any other work of literature. Even today they have, consciously or unconsciously, a central place in the lives of every Indian. The characters of both epics are household names in India and have defined the value system of our culture over several millennia. Everything in our national inheritance we owe to these two great works. Our names of people and places, rivers, mountains, pilgrimages, rituals and pujas, ideals and purpose of life, and Gods, are all inextricably linked to stories from the epics. It is amazing how these two works have completely swayed the minds and imagination of the people of a whole sub-continent, and their appeal remain as fresh as ever. In this context, we have to understand that our epics also reflect our true history.

India is the most ancient ‘living civilization’ in the world

Unlike most other nations of the world, the written history of India dates back to several thousands of years. Today India has the distinction of having the most ancient ‘living’ civilization in the world. ‘Living’ means that even today our lives take sustenance from and are based on the teachings and practices of our ancient Vedic civilization. We worship the same Gods our ancestors prayed to, chant the same mantras and do rituals exactly the way our forefathers did. Even our sense of right and wrong is dictated by what the ancient Rishis taught. On the other hand all other ancient cultures such as the Incas, Mayan, Babylonian, Egyptian and even the Greek (on which modern Western culture is based), are all dead and forgotten. Evidence of their existence can only be found in museums. This reposes on us the tremendous responsibility to preserve it and pass it on to posterity.

The importance of preserving Indian culture

It is pertinent to ask, “What is so important in our ancient culture that needs to be preserved? Why don’t we just move with the times instead of carrying this baggage from the past?” While it is true that everything from our past need not be preserved and the old has to give way to the new, there are certain truths of life discovered by our great sages at the onset of our civilization which forms the foundation of our culture. The vast edifice of knowledge existing in the Vedas finds their root in two great Truths. These are firstly, everything that exists, the whole universe, is a manifestation of Brahman and secondly, every living creature has to live according to a ‘code of conduct’ specifically programmed for it by nature. We call it Dharma. The first truth formed the basis of our religion and the second the formation of our socio-political institutions. These crucial life giving truths are valid for all times and need to be preserved at any cost if the human race and this planet are to survive.

India developed ‘Dharma’ precepts and shared them with the rest of the world

All living creatures, other than human beings, follow their way of life by instinct. Any attempt to break this way of life will be at their peril. However, in the case of human beings, this way of life is determined not by his instincts, but by the faculty of discrimination. Among all created beings, man alone has been gifted the faculty of discrimination. If this capacity is not developed adequately well, man loses the capacity to decide between right and wrong and makes mistakes in life. We can be proud that, among all nations, it was left to India to develop the precepts of ‘Dharma’ fully and share it with rest of the world through the ages.

The true inheritance of every Indian is our Culture

A culture will survive only as long as its own children take pride in the greatness of its past, relive it every moment and find nourishment from its core values. Our ancestors have passed on the priceless wisdom of the sages from one generation to the next and considered this knowledge as our true inheritance. Unfortunately, our foreign rulers, for almost a thousand years, spared no effort to denigrate and destroy our culture. They dismantled the ancient gurukul system and many other institutions, thereby depriving us of the opportunity to drink the nectar of the life giving knowledge contained in our scriptures.

The wisdom of our civilization is hidden in our Vedas, Epics and Puranas and we are completely ignorant of it. When we lose touch with our past, we also lose the knowledge that allowed our nation to survive through all adversities. We are unaware that our ancestors have wonderful things to share with us that can make our lives beautiful, rich and peaceful. When we fail to imbue this knowledge, with no cultural inheritance, we become a nameless people; lose direction in life and without anchor, end up like dry leaves, tossed about in wind.

The Ramayana is one of the two epics that have sustained Indian life through centuries and the ideals of its characters are enshrined in the minds of each Indian. We will briefly discuss in this section what makes these two works relevant to us even today.

Reward from reading our Scriptures and Epics

We find the Epics relevant even today because of the very high ideals in the characters portrayed in them. In our ordinary lives, it is our experience that it is difficult to uphold higher ideals. Because of this inability, we compromise on several occasions. But in our Epics, we find characters willing to forsake their lives for the sake of keeping their word. The epics are full of such examples and the lives of Rama, Krishna and Yudhishtira and several others are testimony to this. Today, far removed from our past, it is very difficult to believe that such personalities really lived.

We also see in the Epics, great men and women personalities responding to extremely challenging situations in a very noble and courageous manner. Rama, Sita, Yudhishtira, Bhishma, Kunti, Karna, Abhimanyu and several others are still remembered today for the glorious examples they set through their lives. We need to understand that it is the high ideals the characters in the epics uphold in their lives, under all circumstances, that make them relevant even today. It is hoped that familiarity with stories and personalities from our scriptures shall inspire us to be better human beings, equip us better to face challenges with equanimity and poise and help us to achieve higher goals in life. This is the greatest reward from undertaking a reading of the Epics.

Epic stories and characters a great source of inspiration for all generations

Let us see which human values are glorified and enshrined. If we take the life of Sri Rama we will see that there is no other person in our history with such high ideals: he is an ideal son, ideal King, ideal husband, ideal friend, ideal brother and even an ideal enemy, all in one. Similarly, humanity is yet to see another woman like Sita. Sita is the ideal for every Indian woman and represents all the qualities of a devoted wife. A character of such matchless purity, courage, love and renunciations not seen in any literature elsewhere.

Brotherly love of Lakshmana and Bharata, devotion and super human strength of Hanuman, the goodness of Vibheeshana and the sacrifice of Jatayu are all great values. Children and grown up alike learn lessons

in behavior and higher ideals from the lives of these great personalities. Epics also tell us what 'not right' behavior is and should be avoided: the pride and ego of Ravana, the villainy of Mandara and Kaikeyi and so on. The list is endless.

The story of the two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, since their time, with all twists and turns, has inspired every form of Indian art - whether it is sculpture, drama, poem, painting, dance, music or performing arts. These art forms in turn have influenced the popular culture and values of Indian society for millennia, thereby imparting a strong sense of Dharma in every aspect of its life and continues to guide its destiny to this day.

Scientific advances alone does not lead to lasting happiness

Everyone is enthusiastically extolling the achievements of science. It is true that scientific advances have greatly contributed to the progress of humanity. They have helped increase our material comforts and sense of well-being. Traveling from one place to another is much easier today than it was in the past. A journey that used to take several days can now be completed in a few minutes. The time saved can be utilized for other purposes. One person using computers can now perform certain tasks which once took a hundred people to complete. It is true that we have made great progress on the material level. But at the same time, people's minds have become weaker. How many people who fully enjoy technological advances are able to sleep peacefully at night? Mother has met countless people who live in air-conditioned rooms, and yet who cannot sleep without sleeping pills. Doesn't this prove that scientific advances alone cannot give you peace of mind? Look at how many millionaires commit suicide. Do they lack anything from a material point of view? Surely, if they had peace of mind, they wouldn't commit suicide. These days many people have everything on the material level, but they don't have what they really need-peace and happiness.

Overdependence on comforts weaken the human mind

In olden times people didn't have sleeping problems even though there were no such luxuries as air-conditioning. Today those who are used to fans and air-conditioners cannot do without them. If the electricity goes off one night so that those devices do not work, people won't get any sleep. The cells of those who spend all their time in air-conditioned rooms, without breathing any fresh air, are gradually damaged by that atmosphere. It also destroys the natural powers of the body. Some people have to drink tea in the morning; otherwise they'll get a headache. We have developed many bad habits. The mind is the sole cause of this. Our minds and bodies, which once were strong because we lived in harmony with nature, have become weak. Long ago, people lived in perfect harmony with nature. They were not disturbed by climatic changes or by any other changes in nature. But these days people isolate themselves from their natural surroundings; they live in separate, artificial, self-centered worlds, not realizing that their constant search for temporary pleasures causes them to sink into endless sorrow.

Our ancestors lived much happier lives

Our ancestors experienced much greater contentment and happiness in life. They were healthier and lived longer than people do today. Huge, magnificent stone structures, including temple towers, stand to this day, as proof of the physical strength of the people of old. There weren't many machines in those days and people knew how to live in harmony with nature.

Seek happiness within

Mother is not in any way criticizing or belittling scientific discoveries, but they shouldn't dry up the wellspring of love within us. We have improved the external world, but the inner world is withering away. In the past, people received the training they needed to keep their minds under control in all circumstances. They didn't have to go through life weakened by insignificant things. **If you fall into deep water, you won't survive if you don't know how to swim, regardless of what else you may have learned. Likewise, however much you increase your material comforts, you cannot enjoy peace of mind without having trained your mind.**

Courageous are those who find peace within their own minds under all circumstances, not those who depend on other people or material objects for happiness. This is what Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and other divine incarnations teach us.

Rama's equanimity towards palace and forest life

As a prince, Lord Rama was the darling of His parents, His teachers, and the people of His country. He was living in the midst of regal splendor, when suddenly one morning He was sent into exile in the forest, forced to leave everything behind. The comforts of the palace were no longer available. There was no delicious food, no silken bed to sleep on, no attendants to fan Him. Yet He lived in the forest with the same peace of mind as He'd had in the palace. In His mind, which was in perfect harmony with nature, His kingdom and the forest were the same. Because His mind was fully under His control, Lord Rama found no difficulty in adapting to circumstances as they changed. Being an atmarama [one who delights in the Self], He found bliss within Himself alone.

Practice spiritual principles to bring about changes in the world

Viewing the situation from all angles, we can clearly see that putting spiritual principles to work in our daily life is the only way to bring about fundamental changes in today's world. Our intellects have expanded, but our hearts are drying up. Lord Krishna's life gives us an ideal example to follow in order to escape our present condition, to soothe our burning hearts and minds, and to mend the broken thread of love.

Spirituality teaches us to face life's challenges

Spiritual science teaches us how to face every situation with a smile. A real yogi maintains his or her peace of mind in the midst of any crisis. Those who wish to achieve this state need only observe Lord Krishna's life, the perfect model.

The flame of a lantern burns steadily within a glass chimney, protected from the wind. There is nothing commendable in that. A real spiritual person should be like an open flame, bright as the sun, burning steadily even through a raging storm. Lord Rama or Lord Krishna should be our role model if we wish to attain that state. They show us the way to harmonize the two aspects of the mind- the spiritual and the material- and to progress toward perfection.

13. LESSONS FROM RAMAYANA

Ramayana is just not a mythological story; it is one of the two “Itihasas” most widely read in India. Itihas means “thus happened”. The Ramayana is considered the true story of Rama, the king of Ayodhya. The great sage poet Valmiki, who wrote the magnum opus Ramayana, was the care-taker of Sita, Rama’s wife, at the turbulent and concluding period of her life.

The historic period or Yuga in which Rama lived is known as the Treta Yuga, when dharma (righteousness) and moral standards of people were generally of high order. In the subsequent yuga (*Dwapar Yuga*), when the story of *Mahabharata* took place and the present Kali yuga in which we live, dharma and morality keep steadily declining. Thus the story of Ramayana, whenever read, gives us a great insight into the very high moral and ethical standards of the period. At times of mental turmoil, we get peace of mind by reading Ramayana.

The greatest contribution of Ramayana to our national culture is that it has given us the concept of an ideal family. We find several ideal characters in it including that of an ideal son, ideal brother, ideal wife, and ideal mother and so on. Rama is the central character of Ramayana. We find in him a confluence of several perfect values.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Ramayana. However, many of us are not fully conscious of the several lessons that we can imbibe from a reading of this Epic which has been the guiding light of our countrymen for thousands of years. Listed below are some of the key insights among several others that we can gain from Ramayana:

1. Concept of an ideal son

Rama was to be crowned as the next King of Ayodhya and was getting ready for the coronation ceremony. It was at this time he was informed that he had to leave for the forest for 14 years. Totally unruffled, without batting an eye lid, Rama was ready to obey his father’s wish. Forest life would be very hard on the princes who had got used to the life of royalty. In Rama, we can see the example of an ideal son who accepts his father’s wish irrespective of his own likes and dislikes. Rama’s perfect equanimity towards life in the palace and in the forest, his unquestioning acceptance of his father’s words, willingness to leave behind all his dear ones and embrace the uncertain life in the forest with all its hardships, and finally consideration for upholding dharma even under the most trying circumstances makes Rama a role model for all of humanity for all times.

2. Concept of an ideal wife

Not caring for her won comforts, Sita also decides to follow Rama. Rama tries in several ways to dissuade Sita from accompanying him. But finally he had to give in to Sita’s persistent request and allow her to follow him to the forest. Sita knew she was embracing the hardship of forest life and forsaking the secure and comfortable life in the palace of Ayodhya. In olden days, it was a wife’s duty to be with the husband, sharing with him both pleasure and pain. The dangers of undertaking a risky adventure in the forests did not deter Sita from accompanying Rama.

Lakshmana decides to accompany them to the forest, and comes to his chamber to inform his wife Urmila about this. Urmila does not insist that she would come to the forest along with him, like Sita did.

Instead, she asks him to take good care of Ram and Sita and not to think about her. She foresaw that if she went along with Him, He would not be able to devote himself completely to the service of Ram and Sita. Such is the great sacrifice of Urmila. Lakshmana could become the ideal brother only because of Urmila's sacrifices.

3. Concept of an ideal brother

There was no need for Lakshmana to join Rama to the forest. But he could not even think of parting with his beloved brother in the hour of crisis. For the next fourteen years, he follows his brother like a shadow completely ignoring his own personal comforts. In fact, he leaves behind his wife Urmila to take care of his ageing parents. Like Lakshmana, Bharata also exhibits all qualities of an ideal brother. He was away at Kekaya, his maternal uncle's kingdom when Rama is sent to the forest. Dasaratha dies and Bharata is sent for to return to Ayodhya immediately and assume the responsibilities of the King. Returning to Ayodhya and learning about the developments, Bharata is not able to reconcile with the turn of events. He is not able to forgive his own mother Kaikeyi for usurping the throne for him from its rightful owner, Rama. He severely scolds his mother and proceeds to the forests to return the kingdom to Rama and convince him to return to Ayodhya. When Rama doesn't heed to his request, he returns to Ayodhya to rule the kingdom only as a representative of Rama till his return, worshipping Rama's paduka. Where else in the entire history of mankind do we see such love and devotion for one's brother? We can see several instances of such high values in several characters throughout Ramayana.

4. Mother's advice to her son leaving for exiled life in the forest

It is worth recalling the advice given by Sumitra to Lakshmana before his departure to the forest. Instead of dissuading her own son from accompanying Rama to the forest she instructs her son to serve Rama as his father, Sita as his mother and look upon the forest as Ayodhya. This is one of the noblest piece of advice we see in the whole of Ramayana. We wonder if we can find another glowing illustration of such supreme sacrifice and high ideal anywhere else.

5. Adherence to truth at any cost

Ramayana also teaches us a great lesson about the importance of giving a word and honouring it. Dasaratha's love for his son Rama was unparalleled. He was waiting for the day when he would anoint his eldest son Rama as the future King. All arrangements were made in the palace for the coronation ceremony and the whole of Ayodhya was celebrating the occasion. It is at this moment his third wife Kaikeyi wanted the throne of Ayodhya for her own son Bharata and wanted Rama to be exiled to the forest. It was nothing short of a deathly blow to Dasarata. But still, he never used his kingly authority to decline her request, because of the promise he had made long ago to Kaikeyi, to grant her two boons whenever she chose to ask for them. He

could have easily dismissed Kaikeyi's request, severed his relation with her and still crowned Rama as King. The pain of separation of Rama eventually takes Dasaratha's own life, but the idea never crossed his mind even once that he could take lightly the promise given once.

We can safely assume that in olden days a word given could not be taken back. What a far cry from our own times!

6. The fickleness of the mind

Kaikeyi, an essentially good natured woman, allowed her maid servant, Mandara, to persuade her into extracting the two devastating boons from Dasarata. Though she was not enthusiastic in the beginning, she gradually allowed Mandara's words to poison her mind. Did she gain anything finally by asking these boons? No. She lost her husband, Dasarata, who died soon after the departure of Rama to the forest, due the pain of separation from his beloved son. Bharata, Kaikeyi's son, for whom she obtained the very kingdom, scolded her for her evil act and even refused to assume kingship, when Rama was away in exile. Now see a contrast: Upon hearing the developments, Lakshmana, the most beloved brother of Rama, who was by nature short tempered, got instantly flared up. He could not just tolerate the injustice meted out to Rama. He wanted Rama to fight for his rights; he wanted to proceed and fight with his father and imprison Kaikeyi. But the ever sober Rama, never heeded to his counsel. He pacified Lakshmana with soothing words, pointing out the need for adhering to dharma. The effect of Rama's counseling not only pacified Lakshmana, but also gave him a steely resolve to relinquish his own comforts of the palace in order to accompany Rama to the forest, despite Rama's objections.

7. Refusal to accept unjust reward

Bharata's life is also illustrative of another ideal: refusal to accept anything that is not truly yours. The throne of Ayodhya belonged to Rama. He could not forgive his mother for her misdeed. Bharat goes to the forest to bring his brother and request him to return to rule the kingdom. As Rama declines the request, he carries back on his head Rama's footwear and places it on the throne of Ayodhya and rules as a representative of Rama. He waits for fourteen years for Rama's return, resolving that he will not live if Rama doesn't return in the stipulated time.

8. The danger of getting trapped by illusory attractions

Sita, in the forest, got madly attracted by a beautiful golden deer. She refused to heed to her husband's counsel that such a deer could not be a natural one and it could be a demon in disguise. It is her obsession to acquire the deer that forced Rama to go after it. It paved the way for her getting separated from him and getting abducted by the rakshasa king, Ravana.

9. Giving up one's life fighting injustice

Jatayu, the aged and once powerful bird, who noticed Ravana abducting Sita forcibly and flying with her in his vehicle towards his country Lanka, fought valiantly to obstruct Ravana and release Sita, but could not succeed in its effort. The bird sacrificed its life in such a noble effort. Before breathing its last, Jatayu managed to convey the news to Rama, who, moved to tears by the courage of the old bird, performed the last rites at its funeral, as though he was the son of Jatayu.

10. Divine love transcends all barriers of caste and creed

Guha, a devoted boatman, helped Rama, Lakshmana and Sita to cross Ganga river on his boat. He was accepted as a brother by Rama even though he belonged to the supposedly lower caste fishermen community.

Likewise, Rama treats Sabari, a devotee from a lower caste, like his own mother when he reaches her hut during his wanderings in the forest in search of Sita. Sabari, who was very devoted to Rama, offers

fruits to him after biting into each one of them first, to ensure that she did not offer any sour fruits. Rama instead of being offended gladly accepts them, acknowledging her genuine devotion.

11. Importance of humility as a virtue

Hanuman, the minister of the Vanar King, Sugriva, is one of the great characters of Ramayana. Hanuman had several great qualities: he was very strong physically, was a great diplomat, was very erudite in speech and was very wise. Yet his humility was unsurpassed. The moment he met Rama, he was attracted by Rama's divinity and charm and he committed himself to be a life-long devotee of Rama. The great feats he could accomplish in the service of Rama were unmatched and the humility he displayed, despite his greatness, was truly humbling.

12. Showing mercy to the enemy

Ravana's younger brother Vibhishana was a righteous person who was bold enough to warn and advice Ravana against his act of immorality in abducting the wife of another person. When the furious Ravana threw him out of Lanka, Vibhishana approached Rama and surrendered at his feet. Despite reservations from Sugriva and others, Rama accepted Vibhishana and gave him refuge.

On the occasion of the first fiery combat between Rama and Ravana, Rama destroyed all the weapons and armor of Ravana; Ravana stood on the war field, unprotected. Rama, who could have easily killed Ravana at that moment, in one of the greatest acts of graciousness, asked Ravana to retire for the day and return to the battle field the next day, fully re-armed, as it was against dharma to kill an un-armed person.

We can come across any number of lessons in dharma by reading Ramayana in depth. It is no wonder that the Ramayana as a source book of wonderful stories for children and elders alike, as a piece of literature and as a source book for guidance in righteous living has stood the test of time. It continues to inspire millions of people, cutting across all religious and linguistic barriers.

14. MAHATMAS

Objective: Understand who is a mahatma and how important is Mahatma's role in uplifting the individual to eternal state.

Mahatma, is a Sanskrit word means "Great soul" or "great self" (maha, "great"; atman, "self"). Guru is a Sanskrit term for "teacher" or "master", especially in Indian religions. The guru-shishya tradition is the oral tradition or religious doctrine or experiential wisdom transmitted from teacher to student. The dialogue between guru and disciple is a fundamental component of Sanatana dharma. Mahatma or Guru can impart transcendental knowledge (vidyā) to his or her disciples.

Brief biography of few Mahatmas

Shri Adi Shankaracharya

Shri Adi Shankaracharya advocated the greatness of the Vedas and was the most famous Advaita philosopher who restored the Vedic Dharma and Advaita Vedanta to its pristine purity and glory.

Shri Adi Shankaracharya, known as Bhagavatpada Acharya (the guru at the feet of Lord), apart from refurbishing the scriptures, cleansed the Vedic religious practices of ritualistic excesses and ushered in the core teaching of Vedanta, which is Advaita or non-dualism for the mankind. Shankara restructured various forms of desultory religious practices into acceptable norms and stressed on the ways of worship as laid down in the Vedas.

Sri Shankara's Childhood

Adi Shankara was born in a Brahmin family circa 788 AD in a village named Kaladi on the banks of the river Purna (now Periyar) in the Southern Indian coastal state Kerala. His parents, Sivaguru and Aryamba, had been childless for a long time and the birth of Shankara was a joyous and blessed occasion for the couple. Legend has it that Aryamba had a vision of Lord Shiva and promised her that he would incarnate in the form of her first-born child.

Shankara was a prodigious child and was hailed as 'Eka-Sruti-Dara', one who can retain anything that has been read just once. Shankara mastered all the Vedas and the six Vedangas from the local gurukul and recited extensively from the epics and Puranas. Shankara also studied the philosophies of diverse sects and was a storehouse of philosophical knowledge.

Philosophy of Adi Shankara

Sri Shankara spread the tenets of Advaita Vedanta, the supreme philosophy of monism to the four corners of India with his 'digvijaya' (the conquest of the quarters). The quintessence of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) is to reiterate the truth of reality of one's essential divine identity and to reject one's thought of being a finite human being with a name and form subject to earthly changes. According to the Advaita maxim, the True Self is Brahman (Divine Creator). Brahman is the 'I' of 'Who Am I?' The Advaita doctrine propagated by Shankara, views that the bodies are manifold but the separate bodies have the One Divine in them.

The phenomenal world of beings and non-beings is not apart from the Brahman but ultimately become one with Brahman. The crux of Advaita is that Brahman alone is real, and the phenomenal world is

unreal or an illusion. Through intense practice of the concept of Advaita, ego and ideas of duality can be removed from the mind of man. The comprehensive philosophy of Shankara is inimitable for the fact that the doctrine of Advaita includes both worldly and transcendental experience

One should learn to distinguish knowledge (*jnana*) from avidya (*Ignorance*) to realize the True Self or Brahman. He taught the rules of Bhakti yoga and Karma to enlighten the intellect and purify the heart as Advaita is the awareness of the 'Divine'.

Shankara developed his philosophy through commentaries on the various scriptures. It is believed that the revered saint completed these works before the age of sixteen. His major works fall into three distinct categories - commentaries on the *Upanishads*, the *Brahmasutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Shankaracharya's Seminal Works

The most important of Shankaracharya's works are his commentaries on the Brahmasutras - Brahmasutrabhashya - considered the core of Shankara's perspective on Advaita, and BhajaGovindam written in praise of Govinda or Lord Krishna - a Sanskrit devotional poem that forms the center of the Bhakti movement and also epitomizes his Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

Shankaracharya's Monastic Centers

Shri Shankaracharya established four 'mutts' or monastic centers in four corners of India and put his four main disciples to head them and serve the spiritual needs of the ascetic community within the Vedantic tradition. Each mutt was assigned one Veda. The mutts are Jyothir Mutt at Badrinath in northern India with Atharva Veda; Sarada Mutt at Sringeri in southern India with Yajur Veda; Govardhan Mutt at JaganathPuri in eastern India with Rig Veda and Kalika Mutt at Dwarka in western India with Sama Veda. It is believed that Shankara attained heavenly abode in Kedarnath and was only 32 years old when he gave up his physical body.

Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna was born on 18 February 1836 in the village of Kamarpukur about sixty miles northwest of Kolkata. His parents, Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya and Chandramani Devi, were poor but very pious and virtuous. As a child, Ramakrishna (his childhood name was Gadadhar) was dearly loved by the villagers. From early days, he was disinclined towards formal education and worldly affairs. He was, however, a talented boy, and could sing and paint well. He was fond of serving holy men and listening to their discourses. He was also very often found to be absorbed in spiritual moods. At the age of six, he experienced the first ecstasy while watching a flight of white cranes moving against the background of black clouds. This tendency to enter into ecstasy intensified with age. His father's death when he was seven years old served only to deepen his introspection and increase his detachment from the world.

As a Priest at Dakshineswar Temple

When Sri Ramakrishna was sixteen, his brother Ramkumar took him to Kolkata to assist him in his priestly profession. In 1855 the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar built by Rani Rasmani was consecrated and Ramkumar became the chief priest in that temple. When he died a few months later, Ramakrishna was appointed the priest. Ramakrishna developed intense devotion to Mother Kali and spent hours in loving adoration of her image, forgetting the rituals of priestly duties. His intense longing culminated in the vision of Mother Kali as boundless effulgence engulfing everything around him.

Intense Spiritual Practices

Sri Ramakrishna's God-intoxicated state alarmed his relatives in Kamarpukur and they got him married to Saradamani, a girl from the neighbouring village of Jayrambati. Unaffected by the marriage, Sri Ramakrishna plunged into even more intense spiritual practices. Impelled by a strong inner urge to experience different aspects of God, he followed the various paths described in the scriptures, with the help of a series of Gurus, and realized God through each of them. The first teacher to appear at Dakshineswar (in 1861) was a remarkable woman known as Bhairavi Brahmani who was an advanced spiritual adept, well versed in scriptures. With her help Sri Ramakrishna practised various difficult disciplines of the Tantrik path, and attained success in all of them. Three years later came a wandering monk by name Totapuri, under whose guidance Sri Ramakrishna attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the highest spiritual experience mentioned in the scriptures. He remained in that state of non-dual existence for six months without the least awareness of even his own body.

Following Other Faiths

With his unquenchable thirst for God, Sri Ramakrishna glided through the paths of Islam and Christianity also, and attained the highest realization through each of them in a short span of time. He looked upon Jesus and Buddha as incarnations of God, and venerated the ten Sikh Gurus. He expressed the quintessence of his twelve-year-long spiritual realizations in a simple dictum: Yato mat, tato path "As many faiths, so many paths." He now habitually lived in an exalted state of consciousness in which he saw God in all beings.

Worshipping His Wife

In 1872, his wife Sarada, now nineteen years old, came from the village to meet him. He received her cordially, and taught her how to attend to household duties and at the same time lead an intensely spiritual life. One night he worshipped her as the Divine Mother in his room at the Dakshineswar temple. Although Sarada continued to stay with him, they lived immaculately pure lives, and their marital relationship was purely spiritual. It should be mentioned here that Sri Ramakrishna had been ordained a Sannyasin (Monk), and he observed the basic vows of a monk to perfection. But outwardly he lived like a lay man, humble, loving and with childlike simplicity.

Contact with Some Notables

Sri Ramakrishna's name as an illumined saint began to spread. Mathur once convened an assembly of scholars, and they declared him to be not an ordinary human being but the Avatar of the Modern Age. In those days the socio-religious movement known as BrahmoSamaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was at the height of popularity in Bengal. Sri Ramakrishna came into contact with several leaders and members of BrahmoSamaj and exerted much influence on them. His teaching on harmony of religions attracted people belonging to different denominations, and Dakshineswar became a veritable Parliament of Religions.

Coming of the Devotees

As bees swarm around a fully blossomed flower, devotees now started coming to Sri Ramakrishna. He divided them into two categories. The first one consisted of householders. He taught them how to realize God while living in the world and discharging their family duties. The other more important category

was a band of educated youths, mostly from the middle class families of Bengal, whom he trained to become monks and to be the torchbearers of his message to mankind. The foremost among them was Narendranath, who years later, as Swami Vivekananda, carried the universal message of Vedanta to different parts of the world, revitalized Sanatana Dharma, and awakened the soul of India.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna did not write any book, nor did he deliver public lectures. Instead, he chose to speak in a simple language using parables and metaphors by way of illustration, drawn from the observation of nature and ordinary things of daily use. His conversations were noted down by his disciple Mahendranath Gupta who published them in the form of a book, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita in Bengali. Its English rendering, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, was released in 1942; it continues to be increasingly popular to this day on account of its universal appeal and relevance.

Last Days

The intensity of his spiritual life and untiring spiritual ministration to the endless stream of seekers told on Sri Ramakrishna's health. He developed cancer of the throat in 1885. He was shifted to a spacious suburban villa where his young disciples nursed him day and night. He instilled in them love for one another, and thus laid the foundation for the future monastic brotherhood known as Ramakrishna Math. In the small hours of 16 August 1886 Sri Ramakrishna gave up his physical body, uttering the name of the Divine Mother, and passed into Eternity.

Sri Ramana Maharishi

Early Life

ArudraDarshanam, a festival that commemorates the manifestation of Lord Siva as Nataraja, the Lord of Cosmic Dance, was being celebrated with great ardor in the Bhuminatha temple in Tiruchuzhi, South India, on December 29, 1879. The decorated icon of Lord Siva was ceremoniously carried in procession through the streets during the day and late into the night. Just as the Deity re-entered the temple past midnight on December 30th at 1:00AM, the first cry of a baby boy was heard in a house adjacent to the temple. The fortunate parents were SundaramIyer and his wife Alagammal. The newborn child received the name Venkataraman and was later known as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. As the child was being born, the new born was enveloped in light.

Venkataraman's early childhood was quite normal. He joined others of his age in fun and frolic. When Venkataraman was about six years old he made boats out of old legal papers belonging to his father and floated them in water. When his father reprimanded him, the boy left home. After a long search the priest of the temple found the boy hiding behind the statue of the Divine Mother. Even as a child he sought solace in the Divine Presence when troubled by the world.

Venkataraman completed elementary school in Tiruchuzhi and moved to Dindigul for further schooling. In February 1892, his father died and the family was broken up. Venkataraman and his elder brother went to live with their paternal uncle Subbier in Madurai, while the two younger children remained with the mother. Initially Venkataraman attended Scott's Middle School and later joined American Mission High school. The boy preferred playing sports with his friends over his schoolwork. He had an amazingly retentive memory which enabled him to repeat a lesson after reading it once. When he read for the

first time the *Periyapuranam*, the life stories of the sixty-three saints, he was overwhelmed with ecstatic wonder that such love, faith, and divine fervor was possible.

Death Experience

The turning point in Venkataraman's life came spontaneously in mid-July 1896. One afternoon, the youth for no apparent reason was overwhelmed by a sudden, violent fear of death. The shock of the fear of death drove his mind inwards and he asked himself 'Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies.' Then he dramatized the occurrence of death and said himself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body 'I'? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it. So I am spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. This means I am the deathless Spirit. 'I' is something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body is centered on that 'I'. All this was not dull thought; it flashed through him vividly as living truth which he perceived directly, almost without thought-process. From that moment onwards he focused attention on this 'I' by a powerful fascination. Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time on.

Journey Home

On August 29th while working on a grammar assignment, Venkataraman suddenly realized the futility of it all, pushed the papers away and sitting cross legged entered into deep meditation. His brother Nagaswami who was observing him, remarked caustically, "What use is all this to such a one?" Recognizing the truth of his brother's criticism, Venkataraman resolved to secretly leave home. Three days after leaving home, September 1st 1896 morning Venkataraman arrived at Tiruvannamalai station. With quick steps his heart throbbing with joy, he hastened straight to the great temple. In mute sign of welcome, the gates of the three high compound walls and all the doors, even that of the inner shrine, stood open. There was no one else inside, so he entered the inner shrine alone and stood overcome before His father Arunachala. *"I have come at your call, Lord. Accept me and do with me as you will."*

At Arunachala

From the day he arrived in 1896 until his Mahanirvana, Ramana never left his beloved Arunachala. He shifted to an underground vault known as Patala Lingam, where the sunlight never penetrated. Without moving he sat deeply absorbed in the Self and was unaware of being bitten up by the ants and vermin living there. The youth was so absorbed in the Effulgence of Bliss that he didn't even realize when some devotees finally came, lifted him out of the pit and brought him to the nearby Subrahmanya shrine

For about two months he stayed in that shrine paying no attention to his bodily needs. To make him eat, food had to be forcefully put into his mouth. Fortunately someone was always there to take care of him.

Ramana lived in different caves on the slopes of Arunachala. The cave where Ramana stayed longest (17 years), Virupaksha Cave, is on the south-east slope. During the early years on the Hill, Ramana was mostly silent. His radiance had already drawn a group of devotees around him. Not only seekers of Truth were drawn to him but also simple people, children, and even animals. Young children from the town would climb up the hill to Virupaksha Cave, sit near him, play around him, and then go back feeling happy. Squirrels and monkeys would come up to him and eat out of his hand.

Ramana's mother visited him several times. On one occasion she fell ill and suffered for a few weeks with symptoms of typhoid. Ramana composed a hymn in Tamil beseeching Lord Arunachala to cure her of her disease. He also showed great solicitude in nursing her back to health. Alagammal recovered and went back to Manamadurai. In the beginning of 1916 Alagammal came back to Tiruvannamalai determined to spend the rest of her life with Ramana. A little later her youngest son, Nagasundaram followed her. Soon after his mother's arrival, Ramana moved from Virupaksha to Skandasramam, a little higher up the Hill. Here, Mother received intense training in spiritual life. She started to cook for the small group of devotees who were staying there. Nagasundaram became a sannyasin, assuming the name Niranjanananda Swami. In 1922 Alagammal attained liberation at the moment of death, through the effort and grace of her son. As tradition demands in the case of a liberated being, Alagammal's body was not cremated but buried. Since no burial is allowed on the Hill she was interred at its foot on the southern side. It was less than an hour's walk down from Skandasramam, and Ramana would go there frequently, until one day he settled for good. Thus Sri Ramanasramam came into being. He said: "Not of my own accord I moved from Skandasramam. Something placed me here and I obeyed."

In 1949 it was detected that Ramana had sarcoma in his left arm. In spite of intense medical care, on April 14, 1950 it was apparent that his physical end was near. In the evening, as the devotees sat on the verandah outside the room which had been specially built for Bhagavan's convenience during his illness, they spontaneously began singing "Arunachala Siva" (The Marital Garland of Letters). On hearing it Ramana's eyes opened and shone. He gave a brief smile of indescribable tenderness. From the outer corners of his eyes tears of bliss rolled down. One more deep breath and no more. At that very moment 8:47 p.m. what appeared to be an enormous star trailed slowly across the sky passing to the north-east towards the peak of Arunachala. Many saw this luminous body in the sky, even as far away as Bombay and struck by its peculiar appearance and behavior, they ascribed this phenomenon to the passing of their Master.