

Vedic Way of Understanding Shiva

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Based on the discourses of Aachaarya Saanand ji

Almost all Hindus revere Shiva and worship him in different ways. All over the world, temples as well as homes, are laden with Shiva's statues, images and linga. The devotees mostly pour water and milk over these; ignite lamps, burn incense sticks in front of them; and then offer flowers, fruits, sweets etc. Various stories are recited during discourses harping on the miracles performed by Shiva.

Is this the correct way of worshipping Shiva? Or is there a deeper meaning to the various symbols and features displayed in Shiva's statue? Let's try to find answers to these intriguing questions. In order to do that let's first look at the meaning of the word Shiva which has been used abundantly in the Vedas.

In the Vedas the meaning and context in which the word Shiva has been used is invariably benevolent, well-wisher, positive, righteous, according to dharma, pure, virtuous etc. The Vedas repeatedly teach us to keep our thoughts Shiva, to make our actions Shiva and to become Shiva ourselves. In order to understand the way in which we can become Shiva, we first need to understand the character of Shiva and the deep symbolism hidden in the various features displayed in his statues.

Legend has it that a king named Shiva ruled the Himalayan kingdom of Kailash. Shiva, the master yogi, was well trained in various aspects of not just yoga but music, dance, medicine, politics, armory and multitude of other arts and sciences. By virtue of his deep knowledge, he had acquired a sense of humility and benevolence which made him widely revered all over the land. He made significant contributions to the science of Ayurveda and ancient treaties documenting it. Throughout his life, the king practiced benevolence. His life, lead on the Vedic principles of kindness to man and nature alike, rightfully earned him the name "Shiva". All of us have to aspire to become like him. When we do so we truly live the Vedic message "*Shivo bhava*" i.e. become benevolent.

Let's now try to understand the symbolism in Shiva's statue so that we can learn and emulate those in our life. The various noticeable features are:

- 1. River Ganges is held over Shiva's head trapped in the coils of his hairs.**

The Ganges represents purity. Its water carries the medicinal values of Himalayan herbs and distributes it all over the plains of India. It brings happiness and joy all over the land. Such is the pious nature of Ganges and all other rivers. It is hard to imagine any civilization without its rivers.

Numerous hairs on Shiva's head represent numerous thoughts in the mind. The proximity of the head and hairs with Ganges represent their purity and benevolence. Just as the Ganges brings happiness and prosperity to masses, so do Shiva



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thoughts. Shiva thoughts bring peace and happiness to the one practicing them and everyone around as well. In order to become Shiva, we need to attain a positive frame of mind.

The first six mantras of Yajurveda's chapter 34 repeatedly recite *tanme manah shiva saikalpam astu*. These mantras from the Vedic wisdom, are the World's first treaties on the positive mental attitude, given to us by God through our sages. These mantras teach us to develop a mental fortitude, controlling our thoughts and only letting pure and benevolent thoughts in our minds. Once we control our thoughts, we can control our actions and hence our destiny. A similar message has been conveyed repeatedly in different Vedic Mantras.

As per the Vedas, it is only through controlling and purifying our thoughts that we can start the process of becoming Shiva. This would be our real tribute to the great personality of Shiva.

2. Moon on his forehead

The moon on Shiva's forehead symbolizes the calmness of a stable mind. Just like the moon bathes the Earth in its soothing light, illuminating it and filling it up with a sense of calm and coolness at the same time; a stable mind, undisturbed by the happenings of its surroundings, frees the being of any turmoil and fills one with a sense of peace and calm. Thus, paving the way for one to be Shiva.

3. Third eye in the middle of the forehead

Shiva's portrait shows a third eye right in the middle of his forehead. Legend has it that he incinerated *kaama* (desire) by the energy emitted from this third eye. There is a popular belief that whenever this third eye opens there is destruction all over. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we closely look at the symbolism of the third eye, it represents the *jñāna* (knowledge and wisdom). Shiva completely controlled and decimated his desires by learning about the traps and bondages of desire. We can also acquire Vedic knowledge and free ourselves from the bondages of the material world. Activating the third eye of wisdom would be our next step in becoming Shiva.

4. Throat turned blue due to poison held there

Legend has it that the great churning of the oceans released a great amount of poison which Shiva ingested and held in his throat. This caused his throat to turn blue and he acquired the name *Neelakanṭha*. This story or feature also has deeper symbolism. Even when we personally get closer to becoming Shiva, other people or creatures will hurl abuses at us. At that time we have to act as Shiva and not take those abuses seriously by not letting them get to our heart. And if at anytime we have an urge to speak or do something malicious or destructive, we have to hold that urge and not go further with that speech or action. When all of our actions, including our speech are benevolent, then we are on the path to becoming Shiva.

5. Snake wrapped around neck.

Shiva has a serpent around his neck symbolizing the harmony between man and the animal kingdom. Humans have to maintain that harmony even with the most venomous of creatures. The first mantra from Yajurveda advises us that God has created animals for our benefit and it is our duty to protect them. Under no condition are we allowed to harm animals. Vedas also propagate the message that humans are to remain vegetarians and that animals are not meant for human consumption.

We also have to respect the Mother Nature and not encroach upon it. When we respect Mother Nature and are in harmony with all animals in the animal kingdom, we have taken the next step towards becoming Shiva.

6. Drum in one hand

The drum in Shiva's hand signifies the rhythm of this Universe. Just as the universe goes through cycles of creation and destruction; everything in this universe, including the human body, goes through similar

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cycles as well. When we understand the continuity of the soul and the frailty of the mortal body, we become mentally detached from the mortal world. This understanding helps us in fulfilling the purpose of our lives, which is the performance of benevolent deeds and our spiritual upliftment. By detaching ourselves from the mortal world and the fruits of our deeds, we take the next step towards becoming Shiva.

7. Trident in another hand

The trident in Shiva's other hand signifies three things. It represents the three sources of all happiness and sorrows, *aadhyaatmika* (things that directly serve or act on behalf of the soul), *aadhibhautika* (other beings) and *aadhidaivika* (divine forces of nature). These three segments are also the root cause of all of our pleasures and sorrows. *Aadhyaatmika* pleasures and sorrows can be both physical and mental; physical pleasures come from a strong body devoid of any illness and sorrows from the lack of health; mental pleasures come from peace and benevolent thoughts and sorrows from the contrary. *Aadhibhautika* pleasures come from benevolent beings like cows, horses etc. The venomous creatures like snake, scorpion etc. are the source of the sorrows. Forces of nature when favorable provide *aadhidaivika* pleasures, like sunlight, proper and timely rain etc. However, if they become overactive, they bring sorrows and destruction as hurricanes, floods etc. do.

It also signifies the trinity i.e. the existence of three entities that form the universe, *paramaatmaa* (Supreme Being), *jeevaatmaa* (souls occupying mortal bodies) and *prakṛiti* (matter). These three entities always exist through the cycles of creation and destruction. This philosophy of *traitavaada* helps us understand the reality and act accordingly. Other philosophies like *advaitavaada* do not represent the Vedic wisdom and hence are not true.

It also signifies the three basic qualities of nature *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The conscious element i.e. the soul and the supreme are beyond these three qualities. However, rest of the elements / aspects have all of these three qualities in different proportions. Dominance of *tamas* causes inactivity, weighed down by ignorance and darkness. *Rajas* dominates when there is activity and effort towards the emergence out of ignorance. Finally when the illumination from knowledge is prominent, *sattva* dominates.

Understanding these well and acting accordingly helps us on our journey to become Shiva.

8. Meditative pose

Shiva is invariably shown sitting in the yogic posture of Samadhi i.e. deep meditation. Meditation is the only way to connect the soul with the supreme. That is one of the five yajña (form of worship) prescribed in the Vedas. In order to become Shiva we need to meditate regularly.

Now besides admiring various qualities of Shiva, we can also admire the intelligence of the original designer(s) of this statue. By building deep symbolism into this image they have provided us a rubric for living and measuring our life. We have to think rationally and strive to become Shiva. The statues of Shiva need to be there everywhere in order to consistently remind us of these symbols.

Our efforts towards becoming Shiva are our true tribute and worship to one of the greatest hero of our history. Our current ways of worshiping him by offering water, milk, lamps, fruits, sweets etc. are mere hypocrisies and contribute nothing towards our spiritual upliftment. On the contrary, these hypocrisies propel us into the abyss of ignorance.

It is up to us to truly worship Shiva by trying to become one.