॥ सार्व बिल्वास्तकम् ॥

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Introduction: This is a short poem consisting of ten verses. The first nine verses speak of the glory of the bilva leaves. The leaves are considered sacred and are particularly suited for offering to Shiva. They are to be offered in cluster of three leaves and are said to have features that identify them with the Lord Himself. The tenth verse gives the benefit of reading the poem and is known as the ફલથુિતઃ.

These verses are chanted during the puja before offering the leaves to Shiva by way of archana. Let us say a few words about puja.

PUJA. Why should one do puja?

Lord Krishna says in Gita (9-33) “Having reached this transient and joyless world, do thou worship Me.”

Why should He brand this world as transient and joyless?

We find that everything in this world keeps on changing and ultimately perishes. This includes our friends, relatives and everything we hold on to as dear including our own body. The same truth applies to the “joys” we encounter in our lifetime. They are also short-lived only. They are mere flashes that give happiness for a few minutes or hours. Then they are followed by grief or they make us hanker for more and thus leave us unhappy.

THE REMEDY. What then is the remedy? The remedy, Krishna says, is to worship Him. While the world is ephemeral and joyless as said above, His nature is the opposite. He is eternal - not subject to change or decay - and He is the very embodiment of bliss. So, if we think over the truth behind these statements we will accept them as facts. This is known as viveka or discrimination. Thus by reaching out to Him we should be able to get out of our present condition that is full of sorrow and strife (this is known as samsara).

He had said this earlier: મામુપે તુ કૌનટેય પુનજ્ઞભ ન
“On reaching Me there is no rebirth.” How then to reach Him, is the next logical question that follows. Vedanta says that there is no question of “reaching” Him as He is our own inner Self. BG(8-16). We need not go anywhere in search of Him or do anything to reach Him as He is our own nature. If so, we too should be eternal, not subject to change or decay and be the very embodiment of bliss. Yes, says Vedanta. But this idea looks preposterous and no one will be able to accept the idea that we are essentially divine. His presence in us is not evident to us. Vedanta says this is because our true nature is covered by ignorance. This is like one being not able to see his image in a mirror that is covered by a thick coat of dust. The covering had been there for such a long time, meaning so many births, that it had formed itself into a thick crust. The ignorance makes us to wrongly identify ourselves with the body-mind complex. The body subject to decay and is perishable. The mind is subject to joys and sorrows. We superimpose these qualities on us and feel we are subject to decay, death, sorrow etc., whereas our nature is just the opposite. Just as darkness is removed by light, ignorance can be removed by right knowledge. Our shastras term this right knowledge alone as true knowledge (called jnanam) as this alone will help us to understand our true nature and become free from misery and death. This says that there are two vidyas worth knowing: Para (the superior) and Apara (the inferior). Para is that through which the imperishable Brahman is known. All other learning is Apara or inferior. The question, then, is how can one get the right knowledge? This is a long process, says Vedanta and involves several steps. One has to perform the duties prescribed by the shastras. These include worship of the Lord. Regular worship will slowly clear away the dust that covers the intellect and show our true nature. The shastras say that God is without form and attributes. This says that God is without form and attributes. The shastras say that God is without form and attributes.
That which is; beyond sound; beyond touch; beyond form; beyond taste; beyond smell; beyond mutation; eternal; beginningless; endless (limitless); beyond and superior to the great (jiva)tma even; knowing that supreme Lord; the striver is released from the jaws of death. We find, thus, there is a great distance between our faculties with very limited capabilities and such a God. We will not be able even to comprehend such a God. God, in His infinite mercy, to help His devotees to worship Him, takes on various forms. One who is a beginner and wants to take the first step in worship will find worship of the God with form to be convenient. He can relate with Him, communicate his sorrows and problems to Him and seek remedies. Krishna says in Gita that He welcomes even those devotees who worship Him to get relief from their problems and those who seek material benefits. It is clear then that a devotee, whatever be His motive will be blessed and will progress further spiritually. In course of time he will gain knowledge and will progress to the worship of God without form.

TYPES OF PUJA. There are two types of pujas of the Lord: (1) the externally performed one in which an idol or saligrama and is offered puja with water for bathing, flowers, camphor and other materials. Since God is present in every thing and all the time, He may be invoked in any object and worshipped. We may see this being done in Shri Rudram - the popular vedic hymn. The seer of Rudram saw the Lord in everything. The hymn contains three hundred salutations. These include salutations to both the animate beings and the inanimate objects. The animate beings saluted include horses, dogs, vultures, people of all varieties that include hunters, charioteers, potters, metal craftsmen, thieves, confidence tricksters and even robbers! The inanimate objects that are saluted include leaves (both green and the dry ones), trees, ponds, lakes, streams, clouds, lightening etc. Because of this the recitation of the hymn before or during the puja is bound to put one in an exalted frame of mind that is conducive to the performance of worship. Thus we have the practice of offering
worship to stones, trees, animals like the cows, and even snakes. It is like saying we are touching a person whether we contact his head, thumb or toe. The symbols that are used serve as the medium of worship only and the actual worship goes to the Lord present in and out of every thing in this universe. Krishna had said in Bhagavat Gita (7-21)that He accepts the worship offered by a devotee in any form. It is like saying we are touching a person whether we contact his head, thumb or toe. The symbols that are used serve as the medium of worship only and the actual worship goes to the Lord present in and out of every thing in this universe. Krishna had said in Bhagavat Gita (7-21)that He accepts the worship offered by a devotee in any form.

He then adds (in the next verse) that by such a worship of the Lord in that form chosen by him, the devotee obtains his desires. These desires are indeed ordained by Him, the Supreme Lord, alone. In addition, since everything in this universe is His creation only, they belong to Him alone. So there is nothing that we can offer Him. The devotee recognises this limitation. So he creates items required for the worship with his mind and performs the puja. In this worship every thing starting from the seat for seating the Lord and other materials are offered mentally. Such a puja may superficially appear to be trivial and unsubstantial, since no materials are involved. But to be effective this kind of puja requires total involvement and sincerity. The wandering mind has to be controlled and focussed on the image of the Lord seated in our heart. This is not an easy task at all. This is stated in detail in the Sivsmanasa Puja. As one reads the verses one will be moved by the devotion of the composer Shri Shankaracharyya. For this reason, it is advisable to recite this poem before beginning the regular, usual kind of puja. There is an advantage in offering this type of puja which the external type cannot offer. In the externally performed puja one is limited by his resources. That is, he can offer flowers, dress material etc., only as he can afford. His purse may not allow him to
offer very costly dress, jewels, many types of fruits etc., the Lord even though he may very much wish to do. But in the manasa puja he faces no such restrictions. He can give free rein to his imagination and conceive of the best and finest items in this or even from the other worlds. He may offer the costliest of dresses, numerous items of fruits, sweets, drinks etc., for the Lord to taste, the best of music accompanied by many instruments, dance etc. all limited only by his imagination. We may see this also in the Shivamanasa Puja. The poet offers a seat made of precious stones, numerous items like ghee, payasam, curd in vessels made of gold studded with precious stones, ornaments for the Lord to wear and so on.

So far we have seen three types of worship:

1- worship offered to an idol or some object representing the Lord. This is an essential first step. In the early stages one requires an idol or some object for the mind to hold on. This is known as કાયકાદચકં. We use flowers, camphor, incense and other materials as is prescribed in the shastras. In addition our body is involved to a great extent in such puja. This constitutes the first grade in worship.

2- worship through recitation of (hymns) stotras and reading of sacred books like Ramayana, Gita etc. Herein there is less of physical work but more of vocal and possibly mental activity to some extent. This is known as વાચકાદિપ.

(3) The puja wherein the mind plays a major role and the participation of the body is still less. This is માનસં. Devibhagavatam says that the puja offered mentally is superior to the one offered vocally which in turn is better than the one involving large amount of physical activity. કાયકાદચકં શ્રીચ વાચકાદિપ માનસં. There is another type of manasa puja. This is of a highest type and is to be preferred, but also not easy to practise. Herein the water, flowers and other materials used assume a different connotation. This is explained in the following verse. આરામધાય મભૃષભૃમભામભાધ માયાપુરીક પહ્લાસલિષ્ટમ । શ્રિમાંદીવિમલઠિંત જલાભષેક નિવં સમાદિકિરુમ અપુનલકાય ॥ The effulgent Lord, shining brightly like a gem, in the form of a
Lingam is seated in the lotus of the heart. Faith is the river. The pure mind, free of blemishes like greed, anger etc., is the water used to bathe the Lord. Deep meditation on Him constitutes the flowers that are offered to Him in puja. Such a worship yields quick results: the result being that the worshipper attains liberation and escapes from the cycle of births and deaths. Lalitasahasranamam says that the Lord is most easily pleased by this kind of worship and not by the other methods. Our scriptures insist that a worshipper should have the right frame of mind before he starts offering a puja. This means that he should purge his mind of all extraneous thoughts and charge it with one thought - that of the Lord. In Chapter 6 of Bhagavat Gita, Krishna gives detailed instructions for the budding yogi. Talking about the posture and concentration He says (Gita-6-13): The practising yogi should sit holding the body, the head, and the neck erect and still, firm, gazing on the tip of his nose, without looking around. Shri Shankaracharya, in his commentary, while explaining the implication of the words “gazing on the tip of his nose” says: “He is to gaze - as it were - on the tip of his nose. Here we have to understand the words “as it were”; for the Lord means to prescribe not the very act of gazing on the tip of the nose, but fixing of the eye-sight within (by withdrawing from external objects).” That is, he is to concentrate on the Self. The bilva leaf with its stalk represents the closed eyelid. When the eyes are closed the external world is shut off and the mind withdraws from them. In this way the meditator becomes - in a way - one with the worshipped. Thus it is said: शिवो भूवाँ शिवं अजेत्। One should become Shiva and then worship Him.

The Mahabharata makes a similar statement: न विषुः कैत्येविषुः नविषुः विषुमयेत्। None but the bhakta who partakes of the divinity of Vishnu should sing His glory nor offer worship to Him. Shri Bhagavatha gives a stirring description of the manner in which the sage Bharatha performed puja. It says that by incessant worship of the Supreme
Person his love for the Lord was increasing, his heart melted and was benumbed (as it were) at the time of worship. The hair stood on their end all over his body as a result of intense delight: his eyes were blinded by tears of love proceeding from an ardent longing (to meet the Lord): and his consciousness was drowned in the depth of his heart that was brimming over with supreme devotion - which was enriched by constant thought of the feet of his beloved Lord, red as a lotus, - with the result he forgot even the worship that he was doing! The question then is how to get this right frame of mind? This may be done by chanting His names or saying prayers like Vishnu or Shiva Sahasranamam that talk of His glories. As one keeps on reading and listening to the holy books like Gita, Ramayanan, Bhagavatam that describe His endearing qualities, the mind gets attracted to Him. The mind gets saturated with the thought of the Lord and there is no room for any other thought. It is said in Bhagavata (2-8-4 and 5) that even as autumn turns the waters (of rivers etc.) clear. Of course, in the case of one who has realised his identity with the Lord, the question of worshipping Him does not arise. The distinction between the worshipper and the worshipped God goes. Whatever he does constitutes a puja. Shri Shankaracharyas says this in his Shivamanasa puja. He says: 

The Lord enters before long the heart of the person who daily listens with reverence to His stories and also narrates His doings. Reaching the lotus of His devotees’ heart through the passage of their ears, Shri Krishna rids it of all impurities even as autumn turns the waters (of rivers etc.) clear.
You are the Atman, the self. My mind is Parvati. All my sense organs are your attendents.

This body is Your temple. Every sense experience is a form of worship to You. My sleep is samadhi, where I unite with You. Whenever I walk, it is pradakShina around You. All my words are hymns in Your praise. Whatever action I perform, O Sambho, is only Your worship.

Puja is being done from time immemorial. It is mentioned in epics like Ramayana and Mahabharatha and in puranas also. Even Rama and Krishna, born as humans, performed puja regularly and with great devotion in order to set an example to us. Valmiki says that the people of Ayodhya belonging to all castes performed puja regularly.

The great devotee Prahlada accords a high place to worship of the Lord by archana. He enumerates nine types of devotion and places archana the fifth place.

Krishna talks at some length about puja in His advice to Uddhava (in book 11 of Bhagavatham). He discusses about the worship done at home and also at the temples. The puja done at home using vedic mantras is for the welfare of the family. This is prescribed by the smritis as one of the duties to be done daily by a householder just like taking bath.

These verses in this poem Bilvashtakam highlight some of Shiva’s glories and draw one’s mind to Him. Thus it will help a devotee’s mind in getting involved in the puja.

Let us go to the verses proper. Each verse is a couplet (i.e.) has two lines. The verses are identified with numbers 1 through 10.

The first verse identifies some features of Lord Shiva with the cluster consisting of three leaves of bilva and offers prayer to it.
having three petals.  

three gunas. Satva guna (characterised by knowledge), rajo guna (which is of the nature of activity) and tamo guna which implies inertia. The three qualities constitute Maya. Maya is the creative power of Ishvara. These three qualities become the cause of the creation and pervade the creation. One of Shiva’s names is त्रिवेद्यस्वरूपः; He is the cause behind the creation. त्रिलेखः = having three eyes. Shiva has three eyes. They are the sun, the moon and Agni or fire. So He is known as श्रीमूर्तिः, सोमसूद्दिलोचनः, चंद्रः and त्रिलोचनः; He is the embodiment of knowledge and knows all says the upanishad. य: सर्वेऽः सर्वविद्यस्य ज्ञानमयं तपः।

More about this is said in the explanation to verse No:8. त्रियायुघः = having three weapons. The weapons are said to be of three kinds: 1) those which can be used for hitting at the enemy, like the sword and mace. 2) those which can be aimed at the enemy like the disc, spear, trident and 3) those which are released using another instrument like the arrow from the bow. Shiva has all the three (viz.) mace, trident and the bow (called Pinaka) and the arrow. The weapons are gods by themselves and are in the service of the Lord. Shiva bearing these weapons show He is ready to come to the rescue of any devotee who may seek His help. Some of His names are: श्रीवल्हरसः, वषोः, धनोः, भुजः, यशुधारी, कुरआयुधपलिः, पिनाळी etc.

who destroys the sins accumulated from past three births. Three is just indicative and indicates many. Thinking of Him or uttering His auspicious names destroys one’s sins. भगवः एकः वित्तमः = who destroys the sins accumulated from past three births. 

For this reason He is also known as भर्गः। एकः वित्तमः = one cluster of bilva leaves शिवार्पणः = offered to Lord Shiva. In this manner, one bilva leaf offered to the Lord with devotion is of great merit. This reminds us of what Krishna said in Gita: (9-26). “When one, with pure mind, offers to Me with devotion a
leaf, a flower, a fruit, water, - that I accept.” The words एक बिल्वं शिवापः शिवाप्यते occur as a refrain in all the verses. So the translation is not being repeated. This verse may be translated as:

“I offer to Lord Shiva cluster of three bila leaves which stand for three gunas that make up His Maya shakti, which represent His three eyes, the three kinds of weapons He bears and whose very thought or uttering of names destroys one’s accumulated sins.”

Meaning of the verse: I perform puja to Lord Shiva with bunch of bila leaves that are auspicious, soft and tender, have three leaves, which are not damaged or defective in any manner.

Meaning of the verse: By offering puja to Shiva - Lord of Nandi - with bilva leaf that is whole and without defects one is freed from all sins.
Saligrama is a stone like pebble. It is spherical or ellipsoidal in shape. It is considered sacred in the worship. The Lord, we saw, is available for worship in His two aspects: - with form and without form. The saligrama stone because of its shape can be viewed as being with form and also without a form (as an icon having limbs). It, like the Lord, has no beginning and end. The Lord is difficult to comprehend in His formless aspect; but with form an icon may prevent one from visualising His formless aspect. The saligrama is a via media solution. Thus it is considered similar to worship the Lord in a Lingam and is superior to worship of an icon.

The gifting of a saligrama to a deserving person helps him in his spiritual progress by performing puja and is thus a meritorious act. Krishna says that the gift which is given to one who does no service (one who cannot return the good, or to one from whom no return is expected) in a holy place (like KurukShetra), and in proper time (like samkranti) and to a worthy person is of superior type of gift. Thus it is said: 

Shankaracharya defines a “worthy person” to be one who has studied the vedas with all its six branches. If in addition to mere studies he had acquired the knowledge of the Self, and is fit to be called 

The shastras say that if one can find such a person one should not wait for a proper
time or place for giving the gift. One should be alert and seize such a rare opportunity that presents itself and make the gift. It will earn immense merit for the giver. Meaning of the verse: If one gifts a sacred saligrama piece to a brahmin who has acquired the knowledge of Self, he earns great merit equal to that of performing a sacrifice.

The preceding lines list three gifts which confer great deal of merit on the giver. The first one, namely the gifting of elephant may be taken to imply gifting it to a temple for taking part in the temple rituals which indeed will bring in a great deal of merit to the donor. The performing of a sacrifice that involves lot of effort and materials is also a commendable act. The third one, is gifting of a girl in marriage to enable a young man who had completed his studies under a guru to settle down as a householder. He, with her help, will then be able to discharge his social and religious obligations of grihastashrama as prescribed in the shastras. King Janaka specifically said this to Rama at the time of giving Sita in marriage to Him. He said "This Sita, my daughter, is going to be your helpmate in discharging your sacred obligations." Thus, gifting a girl in marriage is considered to be specially sacred and meritorious.

We find King Bali making a grand offer to Lord Vamana after receiving
Him in the horse sacrifice he conducted. He said "Please take from me whatever you desire, O Brahmachari: I infer you to be seeking something. Therefore accept from me, a cow, gold, a house provided with all luxuries and comforts, as well as delicious food and drinks, or even a maid, prosperous villages, horses or elephants and chariots." These acts by themselves are great but the merit they can produce are finite in nature and so will exhaust themselves in course of time. Even if one gets to stay in heavens for long years it will be a temporary stay only as all worlds, including the one of Indra and the creator Brahma himself are perishable. One who goes there will be reborn. Krishna says this in Gita and warns one to be wise and not to aspire for these worlds, but to seek Him. He says: (Gita- 7-16) आब्राह्मकुश्यायकोद्वितीय पुनरावसिनोद्वितीय। मामुपेत्य तु वैसेतिष्य पुनर्जनम न विद्यते। But worshipping the Lord Shiva by offering bilva leaves with proper understanding of the act of puja will confer wisdom that will confer liberation and eternal bliss. Thus there can be no comparison with any other act, gifts etc. Gita says this specifically: (4-33). श्रेयान् द्रव्यां यद्यायाय ध्वंसानां तान्यत: परस्तप्। सर्वं कमथिलं पार्थ दाने परिसमाप्यते॥ The sacrifices, gifts etc., that involve materials, though meritorious is inferior to sacrifice of knowledge. Shri Shankaracharya, in his commentary, explains that a material sacrifice engenders fruit: not so the sacrifice of knowledge. Hence its superiority. All works are included in knowledge that leads to liberation. द्रव्यमेव हि यदय: क्षत्रय आरम्भक: न ज्ञानय:। क्षत्रय आरम्भक: अतं: श्रेयान् पुरस्वत्वस:॥ Meaning of the verse: Gifting of thousands of elephants or performing great sacrifices like the Vajapeya or gifting of young unmarried girls in marriage cannot be compared with the offering of a cluster of bilva leaves to Lord Shiva.
The bilva tree is unique in that it bears fruits without apparently flowering earlier as is normally the case. So it is considered as superior to and master of other trees. Thus it is known as \textit{વન્સપતઃ}. The fruit indicates wisdom born of the ripeness of the mind. This wisdom annihilates ignorance of the self (અનાચાન) and confers liberation. The ignorance makes the mind extrovert and indulge in worldly pleasures. This is the cause of many problems and leads to rebirth. The wisdom dispels the ignorance, makes the mind introvert and look for the source of happiness that is inside everyone. Gita describes the holy fig tree as representing samsara. But the bilva tree destroys samsara and confers liberation. So the scriptures ask everyone to worship the Lord with the bilva leaves and get the supreme benefit. The Skanda Purana talks in detail about the genesis and glory of the bilva tree. It sprung out of the right hand of LakShmi Devi. Vishnu worshipped Lord Shiva with the leaves of the tree. Shiva was pleased with the worship and said the tree will be known as ShrivrikSha (શ્રીવૃક્ષ: ) after Shri Devi or LakShmi and will stand as the embodiment of the three vedas. It will be dear to the gods. The Shri Suktam prays to LakShmi referring to this: \textit{આદિલિયવણ્ણ તપસોધતહું વન્સ્થવિસ્તવ પૂજોદ્યા બિલ્વ:}. This says that may the bilva fruit (wisdom or jnanam) that appeared from your hand dispel ignorance and its cause maya. With maya gone may the miseries arising from various causes like external forces etc., also go. Bilva leaf is also one of the places where LakShmi is said to reside. Thus \textit{વિલ્વનિકતયા} is one of Her names. So, worshipping the Lord with the bilva leaves will bless the worshipper with wisdom and incidentally dispel poverty, sickness etc. Meaning of the verse: I offer the bilva tree that sprung from the body of LakShmi Devi and is dear to Lord Mahadeva.
seeing or looking at.  

Seeing or looking at a bilva tree (bilvāśtam) destroys the most horrible sins one might have committed. The word "अघोर" normally means not terrific or fearful - नाघोर, घोरो; यस्मात् इत. But in this context, this word means most horrible - निवेदन घोरं यस्मात् तत् अवयं घोरं चत्वर्यः. 

While any type of sin is bad, Manu names five as महापातकाः - most heinous. They are अघोरपापसंहारं:  अघोरपापसंहारं यस्मात्  अघोरपापसंहारं यस्मात्. The reason for saying why seeing or touching the bilva tree is so purifying is because it represents all the gods. This is said in the verse No.9 that follows. Meaning of the verse: Even having a look at the bilva tree or touching it destroys the most horrible sins one might have committed.

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Though our country is dotted all over with holy places and waters the triad Prayag, Kasi and Gaya are considered to be the most important ones. Kasi is said to be one of the “mokShapuri”s - meaning it can confer mokSha or liberation. The Agni Puranam says अंत्र स्तनं जपो होमो मरूं तेवपूजनम्:  अंत्र स्तनं जपो होमो मरूं तेवपूजनम्. It is specifically said that one who dies at Kasi is not reborn. 

Because of these reasons, many believers prefer to live in Kasi, or spend their last days there so that they can breathe their last there
and escape rebirth. So शैलेश्वरनिवासं य कालवैवर्तशंनम् is mentioned here.

Prayaga is known as तीर्थराज as all the holy rivers and streams are said to be present there. दशतीर्थसहसालि पश्चिमवस्तद्वारसः। तेषा सत्यवान्त्रय पुष्यां परमेपतः। गयं कोटप्रकाशनत ् दत् गयं स्नानस्य तदद्वारे।

Prayaga is the confluence of the three sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswathi and is known as Triveni त्रिवेणि।

Prayag is said to be the perennial city that is not submerged even during the deluge that submerges the earth at the end of the aeons. The city remains in tact and Lord Vishnu remains here as Yogamurthy. He is known as Veni Madhava: hence having the darsan of the most glorious Lord Madhava is sanctifying and is mentioned here.

Prayaga has another connotation. According to the Yoga Shastra there are six chakras or centres of energy in the body. They are: 1 - Muladhrana Chakra situated near the tail end of the back bone, 2 - Svadhishtana Chakra situated four fingers above the tail end of the back bone, 3 - Manipura Chakra situated opposite the naval, 5 - Anahata Chakra situated in the middle of the chest and 6 - Ajna chakra situated on the forehead between the two eyebrows. Some texts talk of more chakras, but that is not relevant here. The Yoga Shastra says there are three nadis (channels or streams through which the energy is directed to and from the chakras). They are known as: 1 - Sushumna Nadi. This is the central channel that runs through the spinal column starting from the base or Muladhara chakra. 2 - Ida Nadi also called the Chandra (moon) Nadi. It also starts from the Muladhara Chakra and ascends along the left side of the spinal column, criss-crossing each chakra and finally passes through the left nostril to reach the sixth or Ajna Chakra where it unites with the Pingala Nadi. 3 - Pingala Nadi also called the Surya (sun) Nadi. It also starts from the Muladhara Chakra, ascends along the right side of the spinal column criss-crossing the different chakras. It passes through the right nostril to end at the Ajna Chakra by joining the Ida Nadi. The Ida and Pingala nadis are likened to the rivers Yamuna and Ganga.
Thus the sixth or the Ajna Chakra situated behind the junction of the eye brows is the confluence of the three nadis and is also called Trivena and the sixth chakra itself is, for this reason, called Prayaga. Lord Mahesvara is the deity presiding in this chakra along with His consort who represents the maya shakti. Since He is with His maya He is also known as Madhava. (Vishnu Sahasranamam.72)

He creates the universe, sustains it and also dissolves it at the time of pralaya. He is beyond time and space. Mundaka Upanishad says

Yogis who, by intense practice, ascend to the sixth chakra are said to acquire similar omniscience. Their sins get washed off with the wisdom or jnanam they gain and they become pure. This is the idea of visiting Prayaga and having darsan of Madhava at Prayaga.

Yogis are advised to meditate on this chakra particularly in their last moments. Krishna says this in Gita (8-10).

At the time of death, the yogi, with steady mind, and with devotion and the power of yoga fixing the life-force between the eye-brows reaches the supreme Spirit, divine.

So, if one stays in Kasi, performs the religious rites there as is customary, has the darsan of Lord Kalabhairava who can confer liberation on His devotees and also visits holy city of Prayaga, has a dip at the confluence of the three holy rivers, has the darsan of Lord Madhava and on the top of all also worships Lord Shiva with bilva leaves can one ask for anything more? He is assured of Lord’s grace.

TIRTHAM. Now, let us pause for a moment and see what our puranas and saints say about Kasi and other holy places.

The word तीर्थ (tirtham) is defined as a holy place, place of pilgrimage, etc., dedicated to some holy object (especially on or near the bank of a sacred river). Kasi, Prayag, Gaya all come under this category. So people have been visiting these places, taking bath and performing all prescribed rituals with great deal of sincerity.
A different definition of tirtham is to be seen in our puranas. Rough translations are given. पितरो यस्य तृप्तिः सेवया य गुणेन यथा। तस्य भागीरथीसनेन महर्षीन् वर्तते।। The one whose parents are satisfied by his services and qualities has bath in Ganga everyday.

This one is from Padma Purana. अगाधसलिले शुद्ध सत्यतीत्रेष्वमाहेत। स्वात्ता पापविनिकृतो प्रौढः परमः गतिः।। Taking a bath in the deep and clean waters of the virtue of truth and in the large pool known as forbearance or forgiveness one is rid of his sins and gets emancipated. सत्यं तीर्थं दयं तीर्थं कात्यमिनिति गुणाः। वांश्चमापूर्वं गैंधक्यं तीर्थं शम उदाहरतम्।। Truthfulness, kindliness and control of sense organs all constitute tirtham.

The one who has merely got his body wet by taking a dip in the water is not considered to have taken a bath - but only the one who has got his passions under control can be really said to have had a bath. मनो यथा स्तिः। तत्त्र तत्र कुरुक्षेत्रं नैमिषं पुष्कराणिः।। (Shri Vedanta Desika in Sankalpa Suryodayam). Wherever one may live, in full control of his senses, those very places are KurukShetram, Naimisham and Pushkaram.

Bhartruhari has similar idea. In his Nitisatakam he asks: शुचि मनो यथा स्तिः। तत्त्र तत्र कुरुक्षेत्रं नैमिषं पुष्कराणिः।। If one has pure mind (free from passions) what use is of tirthams like Prayaga?

Shri Shankaracharya says he has no need to go after thirtas. He gives the reason in his Kasipanchakam: काशिक्षेत्रं शरीरं त्रिसुरुवनजननं व्यापिनि चालाणी। अक्षिश्रृंखला गंगेयं निजगुरुवर्षुध्यानं योगं योगः। विशेषदेवं तुरिः। सकलजनमनं साक्षीवृत्तवंतरात्मा। ते हे सर्व भूर्धी यद्य वसति पुनःसूर्यमंथनावलि।। The body is Kasi, the place of pilgrimage; the Ganges of knowledge is the mother of the three worlds, pervading all; faith combined with devotion is Gaya; the yoga of meditating on the feet of one’s spiritual master is Prayaga; the Self, the witness of the minds of all is Visveswara. If then all this is in my own body, where else is
any other sacred bathing place? तीर्थोति तोयुपपालि देवनास्पालसृश्यतान्‌। योगिनो न प्रयत्ने अत्मद्वामपरास्यासः॥ (Uttara Gita).
The yogis who are ever absorbed in meditation of their Self do not seek tirthas in the form of water and gods made of stone and mud. Shri Bhagavata goes one step further and says it is the holy men who lend sanctity to tirthas.

When King Parikshit took a vow to fast unto death, many great men came to see him. This is how their arrival is described. तत्रोपज्यमुखुंचनं पुनः वल्लभना महानुभावः मनः सत्यः। प्राच्य तीर्थालिगामापेशः स्वयं हि तीर्थालिगि पुनःति सेनतः॥ (1-19-8).

Their arrived with their pupils sages of great spiritual power, who brought sanctity to the whole world. Under the pretext of visiting holy places the saints generally consecrate the places of pilgrimage themselves.

The reason for saying so is said by Yudhistira in his address to Vidhura: “devotees like you are not only consecrated themselves; but it is they who revive the sanctity of sacred places by the living presence of Lord Vishnu in their hearts.” भवदन्त्यं भागवतास्तीर्थावृत्तः। स्वयं विको। तीर्थालिगि तीर्थोति स्वामस्तेन गदायतृतः॥ (1-13-10).

The message then is clear. One may travel all over the country, visit many holy places and take bath in sacred rivers. This may serve a limited purpose only. What will really help is obtaining control over one’s senses and shedding tendencies like desire, anger and jealousy. Krishna describes desire and anger as the twin enemies one should be wary of. काम अथ श्रीध अथ श्रीरोगुप्तस्मुद्र्यः। महाननि महापापमा विद्धेनमिद वैरिश्म्॥ (3-37). He puts it again more forcefully later on and describes them as door ways to hell. He wants us to avoid them. By avoiding them one will be doing good to self and will be fit for liberation. त्रिविंद मनवस्ते द्वारं नाशतांमातम्यः। कामु काधस्तथा लोकस्मापेत्त्रयं तपस्तः॥ अतेमविभुक्तः। बौद्धेऽय तमोप्रेतस्थिरंरं। आयत्यामत्मः श्रेयस्ततो यथाति परां गतिम्॥ (16-21 and 22). Only a mind free from passions can develop devotion to God. But a mind polluted with passions will render all spiritual practices to become waste. Krishna points this out to his friend Uddhava in
Control speech, control the mind, control the pranas and organs; control also the impure intellect by the purified intellect. Then you will no more return to the world.

For the seeker who has not fully controlled his speech, mind and intellect, vows, austerities and charity leak out likewater from an unbaked pot. Thus the first step in spiritual practice should be the control of passions. Only devotion born in a pure mind devoid of passions will remove sins and help in gaining knowledge of the Self which in turn will result in liberation. Meaning of the verse: if one stays at the holy city of Kasi, then has darsan of the Lord Kalabhairava there, visits Prayag and has darsan of Lord Madhava there and also offers worship to Lord Shiva with bilva leaf he is assured of Lord’s grace.

The bilva tree is conceived as the supreme being who takes the forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva for creating, sustaining and finally resolves ahat is created. The vedic hymn Shri Rudram salutes the Lord saying नमो वृक्षेऽऽहृदिकेश्वरः। The commentator says that the Lord who can take any form, assumes the form of Bilva, Peepal and other holy trees which can be used in worship and sacrifices for gaining His grace. Worshipping the tree with this concept in the mind will purge one of the sins, as mentioned in verse No. 7 and confer supreme benefit.

The root is under the ground and thus hidden from our eyes. Similarly the creation is shrouded in mystery. One cannot satisfactorily
explain the origin, the cause and so many other facts relating to creation. So it is said to be अनादि - its origin cannot be determined. Shri Gaudapada in his Karika on Mandukya Upanishad discusses this topic at great length and concludes these are beyond our comprehension. So the creator Brahma is represented at the root level of the tree. The stem or the middle portion is visible just as the world. We see beings being born and sustained. There is also an orderliness in the world. So the middle portion represents Vishnu. Meaning of the verse: worshipping Lord Shiva with a leaf from the bilva tree which represents Brahma, the creator in the root portion, Vishnu, the sustainer in the middle portion and Shiva, the destroyer in the top portion one can derive the supreme benefit.

This verse is called the ફુલશ્રુતી and gives the benefit one will gain by reciting this hymn. This says that one who reads these verses in the proximity of the Lord, either in a temple or in one’s puja room will get absolved of the sins. It goes without saying that the reading should be done with faith and devotion. We may see this point being stressed in the VishnuSahasranamam and all other hymns. Mere recitation by rote will be least effective. Also, it is necessary that one should not doubt the least the fact stated here and ask whether mere recitation can absolve one of the sins? It is to be understood that these verses are in vogue for a long time and should have been composed by a saint, a mahatma who had done the worship of Shiva with bilva leaves and actually enjoyed the results.

So he is putting his experience in these verses for the benefit of others and the future generations. We may see similar statements about the benefits in all stotras. On one hand they induce one to
read the verses and in addition they plant the seed of devotion in
the reader’s mind and thus make one the receipient of Lord’s grace in
due course of time. Meaning of the verse: whoever reads these sacred verses
of
Bilvashtakam in the proximity of Lord Shiva will be freed of all sins
and attain the abode of Lord Shiva.॥ॐ ॐ ॐ ॥

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.. bilvAshTakam with meaning ..
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Please send corrections to sanskrit@cheerful.com