
bilvAShTakam with meaning

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सार्थं बिल्वाष्टकम्

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Translated by : N.Balasubramanian bbalu@satyam.net.in

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bilvAShTakam with meaning



सार्थं बिल्वाष्टकम्



by N. Balasubramanian bbalu at satyam.net.in

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 क्लृप्तश्रुतिः ।

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.”

अनित्यमसुखं लोकाभिमं प्राप्य भजस्व माम् । 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 : मामुपेत्य तु कौन्तेय पुनर्जन्म न विद्यते । BG(8-16). “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. अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः । BG(10-20). 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 ज्ञानम्) as this alone will help us to understand our true nature and become free from misery and death. द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये षति ७ स्म यद्ब्रह्मविद्यो वदन्ति परा शैवापरा च । ... अथ परा यथा तद्दक्षरमधिगम्यते

॥ (Mundakopanishad 1-1-5). This says that there are two vidyas worth knowing: Para (the superior) and Apra (the inferior). Para is that through which the

imperishable Brahman is known. All other learning is Aparā or inferior. The question, then, is how can one get the right knowledge? This is a long process, says vedānta and involves several steps. One has to perform the duties prescribed by the śāstras. These include worship of the Lord. Regular worship will slowly clear away the dust that covers the intellect and show our true nature. The śāstras say that God is without form and attributes. अशब्दमस्पर्शमिन्द्रियमयं तथारसं नित्यमगन्धवच्च । अनादिनन्तं मूढतः परं ध्रुवं निधाय तन्मृत्युमुपात्

प्रमृष्यते ॥ (Kathopanishad-1-3-15). 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 (jīva)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. अनुग्रहाय भक्तानां स्वेच्छया गृह्णते तनुम् ।

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.

सगुणो सम्यगब्यस्ते निर्गुणो पर्यवस्यति ।

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. यो यो यां यां तन्नु भक्तः श्रद्धयाऽर्चितुमिच्छति । तस्य तस्यायत्नां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् ॥

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. स तथा श्रद्धया युक्तस्तस्याराधनमीडते । लभते च ततः कामान्भयैव विडितान्डितान् ॥ Thus in this poem the Supreme Being, in the form of Shiva, is identified with the bilva leaves and praised.

(2) The internally performed puja- (मानस) puja where the flowers etc., are offered mentally. A devotee recognises the fact that the Lord installed in the image is available in his own heart also. 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 Shankaracharya. 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 maerial 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 ऋषिक पूजा । . 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 वाचिकं पूजा ।

(3) The puja wherein the mind plays a major role and the participation of the body is still less. This is

मानसं पूजा । 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. कायिकाद्वाचिकं श्रेष्ठं वाचिकादपि मानसम् ॥ 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.

आराधयामि भक्षिसन्निभमात्मविद्गं
मायापुरीवृद्धयपङ्कजसन्निविष्टम् । श्रद्धानदीविमलचित्तं जलाभिषेकैः नित्यं समादिकुसुमैः

अपुनर्बवाय ॥ 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 constitute 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. Lalitasaahasranamam says that the

Lord is most easily pleased by this kind of worship and not by the

other methods. अन्तर्भुजं समाश्रया बहिर्भुजसुदुर्लभा ॥ 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): सभं कायशिरोशीवं धारयन्नथलं स्थिरः । सम्प्रेक्ष्य

नासिकाग्रं स्वं दिशश्चानवलोकयन् ॥ 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 भूत्वा शिवं भजेत् । One should become Shiva and then worship Him.

The Mahabharata makes a similar statement: न विष्णुः

कीर्तयेत्विष्णुं न विष्णु-विष्णुमर्चयेत् । 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! तथेत्यमविरतपुरुषपरिचर्याया भगवति

प्रवर्धमानानुरागभरद्भुतदृढयशैथिल्यः प्रहर्षवेगेन आत्मन्युद्भिद्यमानरोमपुलककुलक

औत्कण्ठ्यप्रवृत्तप्रणयबाष्पनिरुद्धावलोकनयनमेवं

निजरमणारुण-यराणारविन्दानुधानपरिचितभक्तियोगेन

परिप्लुतपरमाह्लादगंभीरदृढयद्गदावगाढधिषण्णस्तामपि डियमाणां भगवत्सपर्या न सस्मार ॥ (5-7-12)

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, Ramayanam, 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) शृण्वतः श्रद्धया नित्यं गृणतश्च स्वयंछितम् । कालेन नातिदीर्घेण भगवान् विशते दृढि ॥ ४ ॥ प्रविष्टः कर्णरन्ध्रेण स्वानां भावसरोरुडम् । धुनोति शमलं कृष्णः सलिलस्य यथा शरत् ॥ ५ ॥ 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.

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 Shankaracharys says

this in his Shivamanasa puja. He says: आत्मा त्वं गिरिजा मतिः सद्यराः प्राणाः शरीरं गृहं, पूजा ते विषयोपभोगस्थना निद्रा समाधिस्थितिः । सञ्चारः पदयोः प्रदक्षिणविधिः स्तोत्राणि सर्वा गिरः, यद्यत्कर्म करोमि तत्तद्विजलं शम्भो तवाराधनम् ॥ You are the Atman, the self. My mind is Parvati.

All my sense organs
are your attendants.

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
वर्षोष्वर्ग्ययतुर्थेषु देवतातिपूजकाः । .

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. श्रवणं कीर्तनं विष्णोः स्मरणं पादसेवनम् ।
सप्यमात्मनिवेदनम् ॥

अर्थनं वन्दनं दास्यं

(Bhagavatham 7-5-23).

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. स्नानं सन्ध्या जपो होमः देवतानां च पूजनम् । आतिथ्यं वैश्वदेवं च षट्कर्माणि दिने दिने ॥

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.

त्रिदलं त्रिगुणाकारं त्रिनेत्रं त्रियायुधम् । त्रिजम्भापापसंहारं ऐकबिल्वं शिवार्पणम् ॥ १ ॥ त्रिदलम्

= having three petals. त्रिगुणाकारं = constituted of

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

गुणत्रयस्वरूपः । He is the cause behind the creation. त्रिनेत्रम् = having three eyes. Shiva has
three eyes. They are the

sun, the moon and Agni or fire. So He is known as त्रिषेत्रः,

सोमसूर्याग्निवीर्यः, त्र्यम्बकः and त्रिलोचनः । . The third

eye stands for His infinite wisdom. He is the embodiment of knowledge

and knows all says the upanishad. यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद्यस्य ज्ञानमयं तपः । More about this is said in the explanation to verse No:8. त्रियायुधम् = 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 :शूलहस्तः, वज्र, धन्वी, षड्गी,

परशुधारी, कुठरायुधपाणिः, पिनाकी etc.

त्रिजन्मपापसंहारम् = 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.स्मृति मात्रेण

पावयन् शिवः । For this reason He is also known as अर्गः । अेक बिल्वम् = one cluster of bilva leaves शिवार्पणम् = 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.” पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति । तदहं

भक्ष्युपहृतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मनः ॥ The words अेक बिल्वं शिवार्पणम् 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.”

ત્રિશાખૈઃ બિલ્વપત્રૈશ્ચ હ્યચ્છિદ્રૈઃ કોમલૈઃ શુભૈઃ । શિવપૂજાં કરિષ્યામિ હ્યેકબિલ્વં શિવાર્પણમ્ ॥
 ૨ ॥ ત્રિશાખૈઃ = with three branches. અચ્છિદ્રૈઃ = not damaged,
 not having holes and other defects. કોમલૈઃ = tender, soft.
 શુભૈઃ = auspicious, good. બિલ્વપત્રૈઃ with bilva leaves
 (as described here) કરિષ્યામિ = I perform. શિવપૂજાં =
 puja to Lord Shiva. એક બિલ્વં શિવાર્પણમ્ to be translated as
 before. Meaning of the verse: I perform puja to Lord Shiva with bunch of bilva
 leaves that are auspicious,
 soft and tender, have three leaves, which are not damaged or
 defective in any manner.

અખણ્ડ બિલ્વપત્રેણ પૂજિતે નન્દિકેશ્વરે । શુદ્ધ્યન્તિ સર્વપાપેભ્યો હ્યેકબિલ્વં શિવાર્પણમ્ ॥ ૩ ॥
 અખણ્ડ = unbroken, whole. બિલ્વપત્રેણ = with the bilva leaf.
 નન્દિકેશ્વરે = Shiva, the Lord of Nandi. પૂજિતે = if
 worshipped. સર્વપાપેભ્યો = from all sins શુદ્ધ્યન્તિ ==
 purified. નન્દિકેશ્વરઃ = the Lord of Nandi. Nandi's story is
 mentioned in Kurma Purana. He was a great devotee of Shiva and was
 blessed by Him with a form similar to His and also a prominent
 position among His retinue. 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.

શાલિગ્રામ શિલામેકાં વિપ્રાણાં જાતુ ચાર્પયેત્ । સોમયજ્ઞ મહાપુણ્યં એકબિલ્વં શિવાર્પણમ્ ॥
 ૪ ॥ એકાં = one. શાલિગ્રામશિલાં = saligrama stone.
 વિપ્રાણાં = a brahmin equipped with the knowledge of Self.
 Knowledge that leads to liberation is called vidya વિદ્યા- સા વિદ્યા
 ચા વિમુક્તયે । Thus it is said:
 વિદ્યા યાતિ વિપ્રત્વમ્ । જાતુ = at any time. અર્પયેત્ = if one
 gives. સોમયજ્ઞ મહાપુણ્યં = (acquires) the great merit of performing a Soma Yaga.
 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. दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेऽनुपकारिणे । देशे काले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम् ॥ (Gita -17-20).

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 विप्रः (as mentioned in this verse), his worth increases thousands of times. He is the most suitable person for offering a gift. The reason is that a person with the knowledge of the Self is extremely difficult to come across. Such a person is as good as the Lord Himself. Krishna says, in Gita, that such a person is not different from Him. ज्ञानी त्वत्सैव मे मतम् । 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.

दन्तिकोटि सडस्राणि वाजपेय शतानि च । कोटिकन्या मडादानं अडकबिल्वं शिवार्पणम् ॥ ५ ॥
दन्ति = elephant. कोटिः = a crore or ten millions. सडस्रं =

a thousand. सडस्राणि is plural and means many thousands or a large number. So, दन्तिकोटि सडस्राणि means thousands of crores of elephants.

वाजपेय = name of a sacrifice. शतानि = hundreds or again a large number. Thus वाजपेय शतानि means a large number of Vajapeya sacrifices. कोटिकन्या = millions of unmarried girls.

मडा = great or large. दानं = giving or presenting.

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 ॐयं सीता मम सुता सडधर्मयरी तव । (1-63-26). "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 यद् यद् वटो वाञ्छसि तत् प्रतीञ्च मे त्वामर्थिनं विप्रसुतानुतर्कये । गां काञ्चनं गुणवद् धाम मृष्टे तथात्रपेयमुत्त वा विप्र कन्यम् । ग्रामान् समृद्धांस्तुरगान् गजान् वा रथांस्तथार्द्धत्तम

सम्प्रतीञ्च ॥ (8-18-32). 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) आभ्रञ्जमभुवनाल्लोकः पुनरावर्तिनोऽर्जुन । मामुपेत्य तु कौन्तेय पुनर्जन्म न विधेते ॥ 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 द्रव्यमयाद्यज्ञात् ज्ञानयज्ञः परन्तप । सर्वं कर्माभिलं पार्थ ज्ञाने 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.

द्रव्यमयः छि यज्ञः कृलस्य आरम्भकः, न ज्ञानयज्ञः

कृलस्य आरम्भकः, अतः श्रेयान् प्रशस्यतरः । 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.

लक्ष्म्यास्तनुत उत्पन्नं महादेवस्य च प्रियम् । बिल्ववृक्षं प्रयच्छामि ज्येष्ठबिल्वं शिवार्पणम् ॥
६ ॥ लक्ष्म्यास्तनुत = from the body of Lakshmi. उत्पन्नं = born or originated. महादेवस्य प्रियं = dear to Mahadeva (Shiva).

बिल्ववृक्ष = a bilva tree. प्रयच्छामि = I give or offer.

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 वनस्पतिः. The fruit indicates wisdom born of the ripeness of the mind. This wisdom annihilates ignorance of the self (अज्ञानम्) 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 (श्रीवृक्षः) 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: आदित्यवर्णे तपसोधिजातो वनस्पतिस्तव वृक्षोऽथ बिल्वः । तस्यकुलानि तपसानुदन्तु मायान्तरायाश्च बाह्या अलक्ष्मीः ॥ 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 बिल्वनिलया 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.

दर्शनं बिल्ववृक्षस्य स्पर्शनं पापनाशनम् । अघोरपापसंडारं ऐकबिल्वं शिवर्पणम् ॥ ७ ॥ दर्शनं = seeing or looking at. बिल्ववृक्षस्य = bilva tree. स्पर्शनं = touching. पापनाशनं = destroy the sins. अघोरपापसंडारं = destroys most horrible sins. The word अघोरे normally means not terrific or fearful - नास्ति घोरो यस्मात् षति । . But in this context this word means most horrible न विद्यते घोरे यस्मात् तत् अत्यन्त घोरे षत्यर्थः । While any type of sin is bad, Manu names five as महापातकानि or most heinous. They are ब्रह्महत्या सुरापानं स्तेयं गुर्वगनागमः । मडांति पातकान्याहुस्तत्संसर्गश्च पंचमः ॥ 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.

काशीक्षेत्रनिवासं च कालभैरवदर्शनम् । प्रयागमाधवं दृष्ट्वा ङ्येकबिल्वं शिवर्पणम् ॥ ८ ॥ काशीक्षेत्रनिवासं = residing in the holy city of Kasi. कालभैरवदर्शनम् = having the darsan of Shri Kalabhairava. प्रयागमाधवं दृष्ट्वा = and seeing Shri Madhava at Prayag. 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 अत्र स्नानं जपो ङोमो मरणं देवपूजनम् । श्राद्धं दानं निवासश्च यद्यत् स्यात् भुक्तिमुक्तिदृत् ॥ It is specifically said that one who dies at Kasi is not reborn. काश्यां ङि मरणान्भुक्तिः । This is because the Lord Shiva at Kasi - known as Kalabhairava grants them liberation. Shri Shankaracharya states this in his Kalabhairavashtakam. भानुकोटिभास्वरं भवाब्धितारकं परं नीलकण्ठमीसितार्थदायकं त्रिलोचनम् । कालकालमम्भुजाक्षमस्तशूच्यमक्षरं काशिकापुराधिनाथकालभैरवं भजे ॥ 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 काशीक्षेत्रनिवासं च

कालभैरवदर्शनम् is mentioned here.

Prayaga is known as तीर्थराज as all the holy rivers and streams

are said to be present there. दशतीर्थसुखस्राणि षष्टिकोट्यस्तथापराः । तेषां

सान्निध्यमत्रैव प्रयागं पश्यतः ॥ गवां कोटिप्रदानात् यत् खडं स्नानस्य तद्वलम् । प्रयागे

माघमासे तु अेवमाडुर्मनीषिणः ॥ It is the confluence of the three sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna

and the

mythical Saraswathi and is known as Triveni त्रिवेणिः ।

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 -

Muladhara Chakra situated near the tail end of the back bone, 2 -

Svadhishthana 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 Triveni 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)

माधवः- मायाः श्रियाः धवः पतिः माधवः ।

He creates the universe, sustains it and also dissolves it at the time of pralaya. He is beyond time and space. Mundaka Upanishad says He is effulgent and omniscient. यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद्यस्य ज्ञानमयं तपः । तस्माद्वैतब्रह्म नाम उपमन्त्रं च ज्ञायते ॥ 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). प्रयागशकाले मनसाऽथलेन भक्त्या युक्तो योगबलेन चैव । ह्रुदोर्मध्ये प्राणमावेश्य सम्यक् स तं परं पुरुषमुपैति दिव्यम् ॥ 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 तृप्यन्ति सेवया य गुणैः य । तस्य भागीरथीस्नानमध्वन्युत्तमं वर्तते

॥ The one whose parents are satisfied by his services and qualities has bath in Ganga everyday.

This one is from Padma Purana. अगाधसलिले शुद्धे सत्यतीर्ते क्षमाद्धे । स्नात्वा पापविनिर्मुक्तः प्रयाति परमां गतिम् ॥ 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 दया तीर्थं तीर्थमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः । वर्णाश्रमाणां गेहेऽपि तीर्थं शम उदाहृतम् ॥ Truthfulness, kindliness and control of sense organs all constitute tirtham. नोदकक्लिन्नगात्रस्तु स्नात एत्यभिधीयते । स स्नातो यो दमस्नातः स आख्यान्तरः शुचिः ॥ (Maha Bharatha).

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. निगृहीतेन्द्रियग्रामः यत्र यत्र वसेन्नरः । तत्र तत्र कुरुक्षेत्रं नैमिशं पुष्कराणि च ॥ (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 यद्यस्ति तीर्थेन किम् । 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 Kasipanachakam: काशीक्षेत्रं शरीरे त्रिभुवनजननी व्यापिनी ज्ञानगङ्गा भक्तिश्रद्धा गयेयं निजगुरुचरणार्थानयोगः प्रयागः । विश्वेशोऽयं तुरीयः सकलजनमनः साक्षिभूतोऽन्तरात्मा देहे सर्वं मदीये यद्वि वसति पुनस्तीर्थमन्यद्विमस्ति ॥ 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? तीर्थानि तोयद्रुपाणि देवान्पाषाणमृत्प्रयान् । योगिनो न प्रपद्यन्ते आत्मदानपरायणाः ॥ (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. तत्रोपजग्मुर्भुवनं पुनाना मडानुभावा मुनयः सशिष्याः । प्रायेण तीर्थाभिगमापदेशैः स्वयं छि तीर्थानि पुनन्ति सन्तः ॥ (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.” भवद्विधा भागवतास्तीर्थीभूताः स्वयं विभो । तीर्थीकुर्वन्ति तीर्थानि स्वान्तःस्थेन गदाभूता ॥ (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 अेष क्रोध अेष रजोगुणसमुद्भवः । मडाशनो मडापाप्मा विद्ध्येनमिड वैशिएम् ॥ (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. त्रिविधं नरकस्येदं द्वारं नाशनमात्मनः । कामः क्रोधस्तथा लोभस्तस्मादेतत्रयं त्यजेत् ॥ अतैर्विमुक्तः कौन्तेय तमोद्धारैस्त्रिभिर्नरः । आथरत्यात्मनः श्रेयस्ततो याति 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 Uddhava Gita. (Bhagavatam -11-16-42,43). वाचं यश्च मनो यश्च प्राणान्यश्चेन्द्रियाणि य । आत्मानमात्मना

यश्च न भूयः कल्पसोऽध्वने ॥ यो वै वाङ्मनशी सभ्यगसंयश्चन्धिया यतिः । तस्य व्रतं तपो दानं श्रवत्यामघटाभ्युवत् ॥ 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.

मूलतो ब्रह्मरूपाय मध्यतो विष्णुरुपिणो । अग्रतः शिवरूपाय त्र्येकबिल्वं शिवार्पणम् ॥ ८ ॥

मूलतः = at the root level. ब्रह्मरूपाय = having the form of

Brahma the creator. मध्यतः = in the middle portion.

विष्णुरुपिणो = having the form of Vishnu, the sustainer.

अग्रतः = at the top portion. शिवरूपाय = having the form of Shiva the destroyer.

The bilva tree is conceived as the supreme being who takes the forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva for creating, sustaining and finally resolves what is created. The vedic hymn Shri Rudram salutes the Lord saying नमो वृक्षेभ्यो हरिकेशेभ्यः । 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 अनूदि - 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 or अचिन्त्याः सदैव ते । . 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.

बिल्वाष्टकमिदं पुण्यं यः पठेत् शिवसन्निधौ । सर्वपाप विनिर्मुक्तः शिवलोकमवाप्नुयात् ॥ १० ॥

बिल्वाष्टकं = Bilvashtakam stotram. ष्टकं = this.

पुण्यं = meritorious, sacred. यः = whosoever. पठेत् = reads.

शिवसन्निधौ = in the proximity or presence of Shiva.

सर्वपाप विनिर्मुक्तः = absolved or emancipated from all sins.

शिवलोकं = the world of Shiva. आप्नुयात् = will reach.

This verse is called the कृत्वश्रुतिः 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 in 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 recipient 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 तत्सत् ॥

Written and encoded by N. Balasubramanian bbalu at satyam.net.in

bilvAShTakam with meaning

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Please send corrections to sanskrit@cheerful.com

