
bilvAShTakam with meaning

సార్థ బిల్వష్టకమ్

Document Information



Text title : bilvAShTakaM with meaning

File name : bilva8mean.itx

Category : aShTaka, shiva

Location : doc_shiva

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

Latest update : August 15, 2004

Send corrections to : sanskrit@cheerful.com

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August 30, 2023

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సార్థ బిల్వాష్టకమ్



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 ఫలశ్రుతిః ।

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.”

అనిత్యమసుఖం లోకమిమం ప్రాప్య భజస్వ మామ్ । 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 : మామపేత్య తు కౌన్తేయ పునర్జన్మ న విద్యతే । 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. అహమాత్మా గుడాకేశ సర్వభూతాశయస్థితః । 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 prescence 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 జ్ఞానమ్) as this alone will help us to understand our true nature and become free from misery and death. ద్వే విద్యే వేదితవ్యే ఇతి హ స్మ యద్బ్రహ్మవిదో వదంతి పరా వైవాపరా చ ।... అథ పరా యయా తదక్షరమధిగమ్యతే ॥ (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. అశబ్దమస్పర్శమరూపమవ్యయం తథారసం నిత్యమగ్రన్థవచ్ఛ । అనాద్యనన్తం మహతః పరం ద్రువం నిచాయ్య తస్మై త్యుముఖాత్ ప్రముచ్యతే ॥ (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. అనుగ్రహాయ భక్తానాం స్వేచ్ఛయా గృహ్లాతే తనుమ్ । 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.

సగుణే సమ్యగభ్యస్తే నిర్గుణే పర్యవస్యతి ।

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.

యో యో యాం యాం తనం భక్తః శ్రద్ధయాఽర్చితుమిచ్ఛతి । తస్య తస్మాచలాం శ్రద్ధాం తామేవ విదధామ్యహమ్ ॥ 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. స తయా శ్రద్ధయా యుక్తస్తస్యారాధనమీహతే । లభతే చ తతః కామాన్మయైవ విహితాన్వితాన్ ॥ 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- (మానస) 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 కాయక పూజా । . 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 వాచికం పూజా ।

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

మానసం పూజా । 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. కాయకాద్వాచికం శ్రేష్ఠం వాచికాదపి మానసమ్ ॥

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.

ఆరాధయామి మణీసన్నిభమాత్మలింగం
మాయాపురీహృదయపఙ్కజసన్నివిష్టమ్ । శ్రద్ధానదీవిమలచిత్త జలాభిషేకైః
నిత్యం సమాదికుసుమైః అపునర్భవాయ ॥ 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. Lalitasahasranamam says that the

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

other methods. అన్తర్ముఖ సమారాధ్యా బహిర్ముఖసదుర్లభా ॥ 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): సమం కాయశిరోగ్రీవం ధారయన్నవలం స్థిరః । సమప్రేక్ష్య నాసికాగ్రం స్వం దిశశ్చానవతోకయన్ ॥ 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: శివో భూత్వా శివం భజేత్ । One should become Shiva and then worship Him.

The Mahabharata makes a similar statement: నా విష్ణుః

కీర్తయేత్విష్ణుం నావిష్ణు-ర్విష్ణుమర్చయేత్ । 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! తయేత్థమవిరతపురుషపరిచర్యయా భగవతి

ప్రవర్ధమానానురాగభరద్రుతహృదయశైథిల్యః ప్రహర్షవేగేన ఆత్మన్యుద్భిద్యమానరోమపులకకులక
 ఔత్కణ్యప్రవృత్తప్రణయబాష్పనిరుద్ధావలోకనయన ఏవం
 నిజరమణారుణ- చరాణారవిన్దానుధ్యానపరిచితభక్తియోగేన
 పరిప్లుతపరమాహ్లాదగంభీరహృదయప్రదావగాఢధీషణస్తామపి క్రియమాణాం భగవత్సపర్యాం
 న సస్మార ॥ (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) శృణ్వతః శ్రద్ధయా నిత్యం గృణతశ్చ స్వచ్ఛేతమ్ । కాలేన నాతిదీర్ఘేణ భగవాన్ విశతే హృది ॥ ౪॥ ప్రవిష్టః కర్ణరస్థేణ స్వానాం భావసరోరుహమ్ । ధునోతి శమలం కృష్ణః సలిలస్య యథా శరత్ ॥ ౫॥ 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 Shankaracharyas says

this in his Shivamanasa puja. He says: ఆత్మా త్వం గిరిజా మతిః సహచరాః ప్రాణాః శరీరం గృహం, పూజా తే విషయోపభోగరచనా నిద్రా సమాధిస్థితిః । సజ్జ్వరః పదయోః ప్రదక్షిణవిధిః స్తోత్రాణి సర్వా గిరః, యద్యత్కర్మ కరోమి తత్తదఖిలం శంభో తవారాధనమ్ ॥ 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

వర్ణేష్వర్గ్యచతుర్థేషు దేవతాతిపూజకాః । .

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. శ్రవణం కీర్తనం విష్ణోః స్మరణం పాదసేవనమ్ । అర్చనం

వందనం దాస్యం సఖ్యమాత్మనివేదనమ్ ॥

(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. స్నానం సన్ధ్యా జపో హోమః దేవతానాం చ పూజనమ్ । ఆతిథ్యం వైశ్వదేవం

చ షట్కర్మాణి దినే దినే ॥ 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.

త్రిదలం త్రిగుణాకారం త్రినేత్రం త్రియాయుధమ్ । త్రిజన్మపాపసంహారం ఏకబిల్వం
శివార్పణ్యే ॥ ౧॥ త్రిదలమ్ = having three petals. త్రిగుణాకారం = 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 గుణత్రయస్వరూపః । He is the cause behind the creation. త్రినేత్రమ్ = having three eyes. Shiva has three eyes. They are the sun, the moon and Agni or fire. So He is known as త్రిణేత్రః, సోమసూర్యాగ్నితోచనః, త్ర్యంబకః and త్రితోచనః । . The third eye stands for His infinite wisdom. He is the embodiment of knowledge and knows all says the upanishad. యః సర్వజ్ఞః సర్వవిద్యస్య జ్ఞానమయం తపః । More about this is said in the explanation to verse No:8. త్రియాయుధమ్ = 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 : శూలహస్తః, వజ్రీ, ధన్వీ, ఖడ్గీ, పరశుధారీ, కుఠరాయుధపాణిః, పినాకీ etc. త్రిజన్మపాపసంహారమ్ = 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. స్మృతి మాత్రేణ పావయన్ శివః । For this reason He is also known as భర్తః । ఏక బిల్వమ్ = one cluster of bilva leaves శివార్పణమ్ = 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.” పత్రం పుష్పం ఫలం తోయం యో మే భక్త్యా ప్రయచ్ఛతి । తదహం భక్యపహృతమశ్నామి ప్రయతాత్మనః ॥ The words ఏక బిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ 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.”

త్రిశాఖైః బిల్వపత్రైశ్చ హ్యచ్ఛిద్రైః కోమలైః శుభైః । శివపూజాం కరిష్యామి హ్యేకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ ॥ ౨॥ త్రిశాఖైః = with three branches. అచ్ఛిద్రైః = not damaged, not having holes and other defects. కోమలైః = tender, soft. శుభైః = auspicious, good. బిల్వపత్రైః with bilva leaves (as described here) కరిష్యామి = I perform. శివపూజాం = puja to Lord Shiva. ఏక బిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ 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.

అఖణ్డ బిల్వపత్రేణ పూజితే నన్దికేశ్వరే । శుద్ధ్యన్తి సర్వపాపేభ్యో హ్యేకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ ॥ ౩॥ అఖణ్డ = unbroken, whole. బిల్వపత్రేణ = with the bilva leaf. నన్దికేశ్వరే = Shiva, the Lord of Nandi. పూజితే = if worshipped. సర్వపాపేభ్యో = from all sins శుద్ధ్యన్తి == purified. నన్దికేశ్వరః = 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.

శాలిగ్రామ శిలామేకాం విప్రాణాం జాతు చార్పయేత్ | సోమయజ్ఞ మహాపుణ్యం
ఏకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ || ౪ || ఏకాం = one. శాలిగ్రామశిలాం = saligrama stone.

విప్రాణాం = a brahmin equipped with the knowledge of Self.

Knowledge that leads to liberation is called vidya విద్యా- సా విద్యా

యా విముక్తయే | Thus it is said:

విద్యయా యాతి విప్రత్వమ్ | జాతు = at any time. అర్పయేత్ = if one
gives. సోమయజ్ఞ మహాపుణ్యః = (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. దాతవ్యమితి యద్దానం దీయతేన సపకారిణే | దేశే కాలే చ పాత్రే చ తద్దానం సాత్వికం స్మృతమ్ || (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 విప్రః (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. జ్ఞానీ త్వాత్మైవ మే మతమ్ । 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.

దన్నికోటి సహస్రాణి వాజపేయ శతాని చ । కోటికన్యా మహాదానం ఏకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ ॥ ౫॥ దన్ని = elephant. కోటిః = a crore or ten millions. సహస్రం = a thousand. సహస్రాణి is plural and means many thousands or a large number. So, దన్నికోటి సహస్రాణి means thousands of crores of elephants.

వాజపేయ = name of a sacrifice. శతాని = hundreds or again a large number. Thus వాజపేయ శతాని means a large number of Vajapeya sacrifices. కోటికన్యా = millions of unmarried girls. మహా = great or large. దానం = 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 ఇయం సీతా మమ సుతా సహధర్మచరీ తవ । (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 యద్ యద్ వబో వాఞ్చసి తత్ ప్రతీచ్ఛ మే త్వామర్థినం విప్రసుతానుతర్కయే । గాం కాఞ్చనం గుణవద్ ధామ మృష్టం తథాన్నపేయముత వా విప్ర కన్యమ్ । గ్రామాన్ సమృద్ధాన్స్తరగాన్ గజాన్ వా రథాన్స్తథార్హత్తమ్

సమృప్తీచ్ఛ ॥ (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) ఆబ్రహ్మభువనాల్లోకాః పునరావర్తినోఽర్జున । మాముపేత్య తు కౌన్తేయ పునర్రన్మ న విద్యతే ॥ 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). శ్రేయాన్ ద్రవ్యమయాద్యజ్ఞాత్

జ్ఞానయజ్ఞః పరస్తప । సర్వం కర్మాఖిలం పార్థ జ్ఞానే పరిసమాప్యతే ॥ 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.

ద్రవ్యమయః హి యజ్ఞః ఫలస్య ఆరమ్భకః, న జ్ఞానయజ్ఞః
ఫలస్య ఆరమ్భకః, అతః శ్రేయాన్ ప్రశస్యతరః । 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.

లక్ష్మ్యాస్తనుత ఉత్పన్నం మహాదేవస్య చ ప్రియమ్ । బిల్వవృక్షం ప్రయచ్ఛామి
హ్యేకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ ॥ ౬ ॥ లక్ష్మ్యాస్తనుత = from the body of LakShmi. ఉత్పన్నం
= born or

originated. మహాదేవస్య ప్రియం = dear to Mahadeva (Shiva).

బిల్వవృక్షం = a bilva tree. ప్రయచ్ఛామి = 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
వనస్పతిః. The fruit indicates wisdom born of the ripeness of
the mind. This wisdom annihilates ignorance of the self
(అజ్ఞానమ్) 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 (శ్రీవృక్షః) 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: ఆదిత్యవర్ణే తపసోధిజాతో వనస్పతిస్తవ వృక్షోఽథ బిల్వః । తస్యఫలాని
తపసానుదన్తు మాయాన్తరాయాశ్చ బాహ్యో అలక్ష్యేః ॥ 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 బిల్వనిలయా 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.

దర్శనం బిల్వవృక్షస్య స్పర్శనం పాపనాశనమ్ । అఘోరపాపసంహారం
ఏకబిల్వం శివర్పణమ్ ॥ ౯॥ దర్శనం = seeing or looking at. బిల్వవృక్షస్య = bilva
tree.

స్పర్శనం = touching. పాపనాశనం = destroy the sins.
అఘోరపాపసంహారం = destroys most horrible sins. The word
అఘోర normally means not terrific or fearful - నాస్తి
ఘోరో యస్మాత్ ఇతి । . But in this context this word means most
horrible న విద్యతే ఘోరం యస్మాత్ తత్ అత్యంత ఘోరం ఇత్యర్థః ।
While any type of sin is bad, Manu names five as మహాపాతకాని or
most heinous. They are బ్రహ్మహత్యా సురాపానం స్త్రీయం గుర్వంగనాగమః । మహంతి
పాతకాన్యాహుస్తత్సంసర్గశ్చ పంచమః ॥ 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.

కాశీక్షేత్రనివాసం చ కాలభైరవదర్శనమ్ । ప్రయాగుమాధవం దృష్ట్వా
హ్యేకబిల్వం శివార్పణమ్ ॥ ౧౦॥ కాశీక్షేత్రనివాసం = residing in the holy city of Kasi.
కాలభైరవదర్శనమ్ = having the darsan of Shri Kalabhairava.
ప్రయాగుమాధవం దృష్ట్వా = 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 అత్ర స్నానం జపో హోమో మరణం దేవపూజనమ్ । శ్రాద్ధం దానం నివాసశ్చ యద్యత్ స్యాత్ భుక్తిముక్తికృత్ ॥ It is specifically said that one who dies at Kasi is not reborn.

కాశ్యాం హి మరణాన్ముక్తిః । This is because the Lord Shiva at Kasi - known as Kalabhairava grants

them liberation. Shri Shankaracharya states this in his

Kalabhairavashtakam. భానుకోటిభాస్వరం భవాభితారకం పరం

నీలకణ్ఠమిప్పితార్థదాయకం త్రిలోచనమ్ । కాలకాలమమ్బుజాక్షమస్తశూన్యమక్షరం

కాశికాపురాధిపాథకాలభైరవం భజే ॥ 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 కాశీక్షేత్రనివాసం చ

కాలభైరవదర్శనమ్ is mentioned here.

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

are said to be present there. దశతీర్థసహస్రాణి షష్టికోట్యస్తథాపరాః । తేషాం

సాన్నిధ్యమత్రైవ ప్రయాగం పరమం తతః ॥ గవాం కోటిప్రదానాత్ యత్ త్ర్యహం

స్నానస్య తత్ఫలమ్ । ప్రయాగే

మాఘమాసే తు ఏవమాహుర్మనీషిణః ॥ It is the confluence of the three sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the

mythical Saraswathi and is known as Triveni త్రివేణిః ।

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)

మాధవః- మాయాః శ్రియాః ధవః పతిః మాధవః ।

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. యః సర్వజ్ఞః సర్వవిద్యస్య జ్ఞానమయం తపః ।

తస్మాదేతబ్రహ్మ నామ

రూపమన్నం చ జాయతే ॥ 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). ప్రయాణకాలే మనసాఽచలీన భక్త్యా యుక్తో యోగబలీనః చైవ । భ్రువోర్మధ్యే ప్రాణమావేశ్య సమ్యక్ స తం పరం పురుషముపైతి దివ్యమ్

|| 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 తీర్థం (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. పితరో యస్య తృప్యంతి సేవయా చ గుణేన చ । తస్య భాగీరథీస్నానమహాన్యహని వర్తతే || The one whose parents are satisfied by his services and qualities has bath in Ganga everyday.

This one is from Padma Purana. అగాధసలిలే శుద్ధే సత్యతీర్థే షమాహ్రదే । స్నాత్వా పాపవినిర్మూక్తః ప్రయాతి పరమాం గతిమ్ || 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. సత్యం తీర్థం దయా తీర్థం తీర్థమిన్ద్రియనిగ్రహః ।
వర్ణశ్రమాణాం గేహఽపి తీర్థం శమ ఉదాహృతమ్ ॥ Truthfulness, kindliness and
control of sense organs all constitute
tirtham. నోదకక్లిన్నగాత్రస్తు స్నాత ఇత్యభిధీయతే । స స్నాతో యో దమస్నాతః స
బాహ్యోన్నరః శుచిః ॥ (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. నిగృహీతేన్ద్రియగ్రామః
యత్ర యత్ర వసేన్నరః । తత్ర తత్ర కురుక్షేత్రం వైమిశం పుష్కరాణి చ ॥ (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: శుచి

మనో యద్యస్తి తీర్థేన కిమ్ । 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: కాశీక్షేత్రం శరీరం త్రిభువనజననీ వ్యాపినీ జ్ఞానగణ్ఠా
భక్తిశ్రద్ధా గయేయం నిజగురుచరణధ్యానయోగః ప్రయాగః । విశ్వేశోఽయం తురీయః
సకలజనమనః సాక్షిభూతోఽస్తరాత్మా దేహ సర్వం మదీయే యది వసతి
పునస్తీర్థమన్యత్క్రిమన్తి ॥ 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? తీర్థాని తోయరూపాణి దేవాన్వాషాణమృణ్మయాన్ ।

యోగినో న ప్రపద్యంతే ఆత్మధ్యానపరాయణాః ॥ (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. తత్రోపజగ్ముర్భువనం పునానా మహానుభావా మునయః సశిష్యాః । ప్రాయేణ తీర్థాభిగమాపదేక్షైః స్వయం హి తీర్థాని పునన్తి
సన్తః ॥ (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 prescence of Lord Vishnu in their hearts.” భవద్విధా భాగవతాస్తీర్థీభూతాః స్వయం విభో
। తీర్థీకుర్వన్తి తీర్థాని స్వాన్తఃస్థేన గదాభృతా ॥ (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. కామ ఏష క్రోధ ఏష రజోగుణసముద్భవః । మహాశనో మహాపాపా విధ్వేనమిహ వైరేణమ్ ॥ (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. త్రివిధం సరకస్యేదం ద్వారం నాశనమాత్మనః । కామః క్రోధస్తథా లోభస్తస్మాదేతత్రయం త్యజేత్ ॥ ఏతైర్విముక్తః కౌన్తేయ తమోద్వారైస్త్రిభిర్నరః । ఆచరత్యాత్మనః శ్రేయస్తతో యాతి పరాం గతిమ్ ॥ (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). వాచం యచ్ఛ మనో యచ్ఛ ప్రాణాన్యచ్ఛేన్ద్రియాణి చ । ఆత్మానమాత్మనా

యచ్చ న భూయః కల్పనేఽధ్వనే || యో వై వాఙ్మనసీ సమ్యగసంయచ్ఛన్ధియా యతిః
| తస్య వ్రతం తపో

దానం స్రవత్యామఘటామ్బవత్ || 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.

మూలతో బ్రహ్మరూపాయ మధ్యతో విష్ణురూపిణే | అగ్రతః శివరూపాయ
హ్యేకబిల్వం శివార్చణమ్ || ౯ || మూలతః = at the root level. బ్రహ్మరూపాయ =
having the form of

Brahma the creator. మధ్యతః = in the middle portion.

విష్ణురూపిణే = having the form of Vishnu, the sustainer.

అగ్రతః = at the top portion. శివరూపాయ = 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 ahat is created. The vedic hymn Shri Rudram salutes the Lord
saying నమో వృక్షేభ్యో హరికేశేభ్యః | 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 అనాది - 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 అచిన్త్యాః సదైవ తే । . 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.


బిల్వాష్టకమిదం పుణ్యం యః పఠేత్ శివసన్నిధౌ । సర్వపాప వినిర్మూక్తః
శివలోకమవాప్నుయాత్ ॥ ౧౦॥ బిల్వాష్టకం = Bilvashtakam stotram. ఇదం = this.
పుణ్యం = meritorious, sacred. యః = whosoever. పఠేత్ = reads.
శివసన్నిధౌ = in the proximity or prescence of Shiva.
సర్వపాప వినిర్మూక్తః = absolved or emancipated from all sins.
శివలోకం = the world of Shiva. ఆప్నుయాత్ = will reach.

This verse is called the ఫలశ్రుతిః 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. ॥ ఓం తత్సత్ ॥

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

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bilvAShTakam with meaning
pdf was typeset on August 30, 2023

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Please send corrections to sanskrit@cheerful.com

