

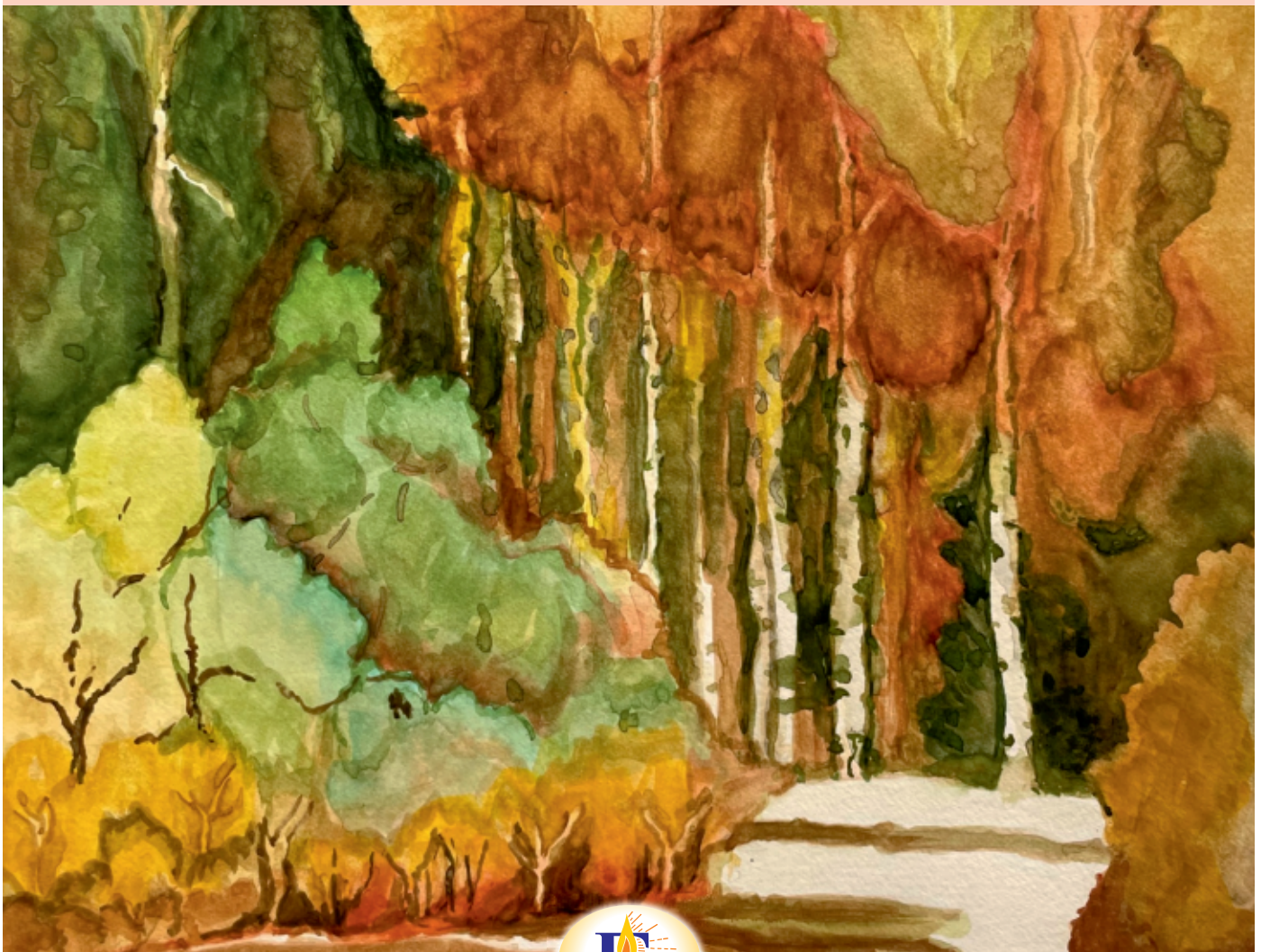
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# Inner Flame

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

While the world is ravaged by pandemic, war and economic strife, only the lofty spiritual truths have universal relevance and have the potential to unify people across religions and faiths. After an inordinately long wait, it gives us great happiness to bring out yet another issue of 'Inner Flame' with uplifting spiritual intimations.

Rivers have always played a pivotal role in the development of great civilizations on the face of this earth. This has been acknowledged by the fact that this country has been called Hindustan after the river Sindh. The river Gangā who destroys the sins committed by mortals over many lives has an elevated stature as one of the demigoddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Similarly, the river Kāveri is sacred to the people of South India and is worshipped as a Goddess who sustains life. The Kāveri River basin has been a cradle of vibrant civilization, culture and spiritual attainment over many centuries. All the great Hindu seers including the great Sankara and Rāmānuja have traversed this holy land and left their imprints on the sands of time. We carry the sacred story of another great saint who lived in this area in more recent times, Shri Shridhara Venkatesha Ayyāvāl. Like all great beings, he lived a noble life marching to a drum beat of divine rhythm all his own, with his head held high in the clouds of contemplation of the divine. One can only conclude that these are verily gods in disguise walking the earth to lead ignorant men towards salvation.

The great power that sounds wield over the elements of this material creation is seen by the influence of music over the masses that are swayed by the 'Sur' and 'Taal' in the musical tradition of India. Swāmi Chidānandaji brings out the greatness of the primordial sound 'Aum' in the Hindu spiritual tradition in his article under the series '*Perceiving Phoenix*'.

Under 'Places that beckon', we are visiting Māngādu Kāmākshi Amman, a lesser-known temple dedicated to the Goddess Pārvati, located near Chennai.

Hope you will get carried away by these waves of pure bliss onto a plane of effortless living full of celebration of the beauty and excellence that is on display all around us.

***Cdr HC Guruprasad (IN, Retd)***  
***For Swāmi Chidānanda***

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High Praise For OM

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सर्वभूतेषु संव्याप्तं वासुदेवं सनातनम् ।  
यः पश्येत् प्रेमभावेन स हि भागवतोत्तमः ॥

(Vaishnava Samhitaa of  
Sri Krishnapremi Swamigal,  
Chap 13, Shloka 1)

It is accepted that the most remarkable alloy of *jnāna*, *bhakti* and *vairāgya mārgas* is one “...who beholds with affection the eternal Lord *vāsudeva*, pervading all living beings, is the best among *bhāgavatas*”

This Holy land of India has witnessed the incarnation of countless saints. Srimad Bhāgavatam proclaims that the Lord would incarnate in this land in this Age of Kali in the form of saints. True to the text, saints have blessed this land with the touch of their feet every now and then. Each of them lived to prove the greatness of singing the Divine Names of the Lord. Not stopping with just immersing themselves in this bliss of chanting the divine names, these selfless souls strove to take this simple and sweet message to the masses. One such great saint Mother India gave birth to and nourished in her lap, was **Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl**, who was an epitome of compassion and love. Sridhara Venkatesha Ayyāvāl was a true *bhāgavatottama* in every sense, and saw the presence of the Lord everywhere. Even frogs croaking 'kar,



*kar, kar, kar*' in the rain, it seemed to him, were chanting the name of the Lord as '*hara, hara, hara, hara.*' Immersed always in thoughts of his Lord, he knew nothing else. To him, the whole creation was nothing but the immeasurable love of his Lord.

Shridhara Venkatesa '*Ayyāvāl*' (deeply respected person) was the son of a great scholar Sri Lingārya, whose scholarship so impressed the King of Mysore that he rewarded him with a high post in the court, giving him tremendous wealth. As the only child of Sri Lingārya, Sri Shridhara Venkatesa was the sole inheritor of all these riches, never to be concerned with mundane finances. From childhood Shridhara displayed great devotion towards Lord Shiva, spending most of his time in chanting the Divine Names. He learnt all the



scriptures and became an expert at them at a very young age. As was the custom, at an appropriate age Shridhara's father found a bride for him who herself was from a good and devout family; she proved to be a fitting match for Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and his devotion.

After his father's passing away, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was offered the post of 'Divān' in the Kingdom of Mysore. A personification of dispassion that Sri Sridhara Ayyāvāl was, he declined the offer as he considered any material comfort trifling compared to the wealth of the bliss attained in worshipping Lord Shiva, in whose loving worship Shridhara passed whole days. But his restless mind compelled him to spread the message of true devotion through *nāma kirtana* and after consulting with this wife and mother, they decided to leave Mysore even though it meant quitting all creature comforts there. The King, saddened at heart, pleaded with him to stay back even if he did not want to accept any post in the court. But who can stop the one who is guided by a Divine force to move on? Addressing the loving crowd, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl said, **"These riches belong to me no more! Anyone can walk in and take whatever he/she wants without any restriction. Everybody has a right on this wealth from now!"** Saying so, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl walked out of his mansion followed by his devoted wife and loving mother, while the King and the people watched in awe.

Subsequently, Shridhara, who had taken

to '*unchchavritti*' way of life wherein one goes on the streets singing the Divine Names of the Lord accepting whatever is offered as alms and partaking of the same after offering it to the Lord; he would stop for a day or two in each village, teaching the essence of the scriptures, chant the Divine Names of the Lord and speak of Its glory and ease of chanting it. After winning the hearts of the people there and hearing them chant with devotion, he would continue on his journey.

Thus moving about, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl reached the town of Tirichirapalli in Tamil Nadu, South India where he continued spreading his message of *nāma kirtana* by discoursing in a simple language which helped people comprehend the profound truth with ease. His discourses emphasized devotion towards both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva without bias. Every evening he visited the temple of Lord Shiva and spent the afternoons in chanting divine names and reading scripture.

The king of Tirichirapalli was a devout *Vaishnavite* (devotee of Lord Vishnu). A few people, who had heard the discourses of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl felt that he had more leaning towards Lord Shiva than Lord Vishnu. They voiced their opinion to the king and wanted him to test the devotion of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl towards Lord Vishnu. Though the king, a great devotee himself had misgivings about testing a saint, fearing a downfall to him and his kingdom, the desire to know the heart of this saint

sprouted in him; he decided to test Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl without malice and hit upon a plan. He ordered the priests to dress up Sri Mathrubhuteshwara, Lord Shiva in Tirichirapalli as Lord Krishna and take Him in procession, thinking that Sri Sridhara Ayyāvāl's reaction would indicate his bias, should he have any. When the procession passed through the home of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, he was meditating on Lord Shiva. Awakened from his trance, he hurriedly came out of his home and finding Lord Krishna there spontaneously prayed to Lord Krishna **"Oh! Lord Krishna! When will I spend every moment of my life in meditating on your Lotus Feet by reminding myself of the transitory nature of this world, being humble, knowing my deficiencies, turning blind to other's faults, being compassionate towards all living beings, being a servant of the devotees of the Lord and eyeing both joy and sorrow alike?"**

He thus composed 12 verses known as '**Krishna Dvādasa Manjari**' in which he did not hesitate to sing that Lord Krishna's vision was not easy for Lord Shiva Himself! Hearing this, the king was relieved and the people who had induced him to test fell at Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl's feet and apologized for their ignorance and arrogance. Knowing Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl to be a great saint of uncommon devotion and glory, the king wanted him to stay in his city forever. But when Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl came to know of this, he decided to leave the city that very

night. He knew that if he chose to stay in one place forever, then his mission of spreading the divine message to the world would not materialize. The king could not console himself when he came to know of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl's departure. Perplexed and worried, the restless king felt he had offended the saint with his request. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl appeared in the king's dream that night in the form of Lord Shiva and said, **"Oh! King! Do not worry yourself. I have incarnated to spread the Divine Name in this world. I have left the city with this very purpose in mind."** It was only then that the king realized Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl to be Lord Shiva Himself. Recounting the rare fortune of having been in the Lord's presence all this while, he considered himself blessed.

By the time Shridhara reached the city of Tanjavur his beloved mother attained the Feet of the Lord. Even though visited by Shahaji, the King of Tanjavur who had heard of his scholarship and devotion, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl could not stand the bustle of city life for long. Wishing to reside in a more serene and peaceful atmosphere he reached the village of Tiruvisainallur, where he decided to reside, realising that he had found the place he desired. Among all the great scholars who lived there, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was the most accomplished and revered.

King Shahaji visited quite often because he had tremendous sincere devotion and love for Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl which was

reciprocated. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl did not hesitate to give proper counselling to the King whenever it was essential. He had such deep affection for the king that he even accepted the seat of 'Divān' in his court. During this period, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl wrote many great literary works. However, as time passed, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, who was naturally inclined towards a simple and devout life, felt the need to give up the association with the king and his worldly affairs. But the king would not permit this. One day, while Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was pondering over this, a messenger from the king arrived. The messenger asked, "Oh Bhagavata (Devotee of the Lord)! Is the Divān in?" As soon as Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl heard this question, his face bloomed with joy and he sent a reply in writing stating—"The Divān is dead. Only the Bhagavata remains." Not understanding the depth of the message, when Shahaji saw the reply he thought Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl to be dead and could not contain his sorrow. Weeping, he reached the hut of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl only to find him alive and happy. He enquired as to why Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl had written 'The Divān is dead'. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl said, "Since I got the epithet of 'Bhagavata', which is a higher post in the kingdom of God than that of Divān in your kingdom, I replied so!" Now Shahaji understood the heart of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and did not compel him to continue as the Divān. His respect for Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl grew more than

ever before.

An embodiment of humility, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, composed many works for the sake of uplifting man. *Bhagavan Nāma Bhooshanam, Ākhya Shashti, Dayāshatakam, Stuti Paddhathi, Shiva Bhakti Kalpalathā, Shiva Bhakta Lakshanam, Achyutāshtakam, Dola Navaratna Mālikā.* are but a few to name. Though titled differently, all these works were primarily about the greatness and glory of the Divine Names of the Lord.

Sri Bhagavan Nāma Bodendra Swāmigal, who had great reverence for him, was a contemporary of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl. They used to meet often and enjoy the bliss of talking about the glory of the Lord. Though Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl saw no difference in the prowess of the names of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, he loved chanting the names of Lord Shiva. Similarly, Sri Bodendra loved the name of Rāma more than anything. When Sri Bodendra Swāmigal read the work of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl named '*Ākhya Shashti*', which primarily talked only about the greatness of Lord Shiva's names in sixty verses, he said, "You could have named this work as '*Shivākyashashti*' instead of '*Ākhya Shashti*'! Though all the names of the Lord are equally sweet and powerful, you have chosen to sing the greatness of only one of them! Why is it so? Don't you like singing the divine Name of Lord Rāma?" The moment Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl heard this from the great saint, he replied in a beautiful verse emphasizing the greatness of the Divine

Name of Lord Rāma. **“While Lord Shiva, the glory of whose name I have sung in these sixty verses, himself does not cease to chant the Divine Name Rāma even for a moment out of such taste and love for that name, how can I dare to describe the beauty and glory of the Divine Name of Rāma?”** Sri Bodendra Swāmigal shed tears of joy hearing this verse. He and Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl spent many such wonderful moments of divine bliss. Sri Sadāshiva Brahmendra, another great Saint of the same time, also used to join Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and Sri Bodendra Swāmigal in their discussions.

A few learned scholars of the city envied Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl for the place he had found in the heart of the king. Once, they had arranged for the celebration of *Janmāshtami* festival with much pomp and show. Because Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl did not relish the worship that was devoid of devotion he did not participate in the function. The people who conducted the function carried a picture of Lord Krishna in procession. When Lord Krishna’s procession came to the door of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, the priests and scholars refused to accept the offerings of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl. Reprimanding him for not taking part in the festival because of pride, they said, “Why feign devotion when you totally lack it? Keep away. Our Lord Krishna hardly needs your worship.” Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl smilingly replied, “Lord Krishna knows who His devotees are!” Cut to the quick by these words, the

priests and scholars said, “In that case, why don’t you call Lord Krishna? If you are indeed a great devotee, let us see if Lord Krishna accepts your invitation!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl composed and sweetly sang the names of Lord Krishna in a beautiful verse. The procession carried on quietly while Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl went inside his humble home.

When the procession reached the next house, the priests and scholars found the image of Lord Krishna missing in the photograph! Trembling with fear, they ran to the house of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl to beg his pardon. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was putting Lord Krishna to sleep. He composed the ‘*Dola Navaratna Mālikā*’ on Lord Krishna that night. The priests and scholars, who had offended him out of ignorance, now understood the glory of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and his steadfast devotion and love for the Lord. To absolve the sin incurred by offending a great devotee and with a hope to develop the kind of love for the Lord which Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl had, they too spent the entire night with him singing the Divine Names of the Lord.

Come rain or shine, Shridhara Ayyāvāl always visited the temple of Lord Shiva, Mahā Linga, in the nearby town of Madhyarjuna, preferring to go early in the morning to avoid the crowds. It is said that once Lord Shiva intended to test his love and devotion. As usual, that day too he had to cross the river Kāveri in order to reach the temple. On reaching the banks of Kāveri he found the river



flooded and the boatmen refused to ferry the boat across. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl could not bring himself to return home without seeing His Lord in the temple. Gazing at the tower of the temple on the other shore, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl stood with tear-filled eyes. He felt he must have offended the Lord in some way and that sin acted as a block to the *darshana* of His Lord. He composed a soulful prayer called '*Ārthihara stotra*' in which he prayed,

**“Oh Lord! Please bestow your loving and compassionate glance on me, who is suffering from the pangs of separation from you! You have the untarnished fame of relieving the one who merely chants your Divine name from the clutches of sorrow! How is it that though I have sought refuge in You, I am agonized? Did you not bestow your grace on the hunter who, on his death bed, chanted your divine name ‘hara hara hara’ unintentionally, while teaching his son the way to hunt- ‘prahara, āhara, samhara’ (attack, bring, kill)? Such being your compassion, how can you turn your face away from me who am piteously praying- ‘Save me Lord Shiva!’**

While Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was thus lamenting, a priest of the Shiva Temple, who was known to him, came to him and gave *vibhooti prasāda* (Sacred ashes). He said to Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, “I did not find you in the temple today. Knowing that you would be saddened at not being able to cross the river and have the vision of the Lord, I decided to come and give

you the sacred ashes.” Transported into bliss, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl prostrated before the priest and accepted the sacred ashes with reverence.

While Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl moved towards his home, shedding tears of joy thinking of the love of the Lord towards His devotees, the question ‘how did the priest manage to cross the flooded river?’ arose in him. From his memory, he recalled that the priest was not a bit wet and the sacred ashes smeared on his body were not smudged! He wondered if it was Lord Shiva himself who had come in the garb of the priest. Next day, when the flood had subsided, he went to the temple and found the same priest there. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl thanked the priest for his kindness and said that his mind was at peace only after receiving the sacred ashes from him the previous day. The priest was utterly confused hearing this. He said, “Sir! I never came to the other shore! Indeed, who could have dared to cross the flooding river?”

On hearing this, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was moved beyond words. He realized it was Lord Shiva himself who had taken pity on him and come to give the sacred ashes. With a grateful heart, he sang the glory of the compassion of the Lord in the hymn '*Dayāshatakam*'. In this hymn, he sings, **“Oh! The Compassion of the Lord! One is cleansed of all his sins the moment you cast your glance on him! When will you bless me so that I will always be immersed in the bliss of chanting the Divine names like**

**'mādhava', 'murāri', 'kāmārey', 'Shiva', 'mahādeva', 'govinda' and 'purahara'! Be pleased to bestow two boons on me! That my mind may always be established in the Divine Form of Lord Shiva and that my tongue may always chant the Divine Names! In my last breath, let me chant the Divine Name 'Shiva'!"**

Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, who composed 100 such verses glorifying the compassion of the Lord, was none other than Lord Shiva himself! Needless to say, he was an epitome of compassion! He could not bear to see anyone suffer. He considered even liberation a trifling matter, as compared to compassion to all beings.

One day, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was on his way to River Kāveri for a bath. It was a day of '*shrāddha*' (annual death rites for ancestors) in his home and all food offerings were ready. On the way, he found a poor man belonging to a low caste, fallen down in an unconscious state, due to hunger. Unable to bear the sight of the suffering of the poor man, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl rushed back to his home and returned with the food prepared for the ceremony. He gave it to the man. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, who saw the Lord in all, had neither a second thought about doing this, nor was he bothered about the sin he might incur. He knew that by appeasing the hunger of this man, he would be pleasing the Lord. After giving him food, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl went back home and cleaned the entire place. He cooked fresh food for

the priests and invited them for performing the ceremony. The priests, who were to perform the ceremony, were a jealous lot, who envied Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, and chose this as the right moment to create trouble for him. They picked up an argument with him on this matter. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl quoted scriptures to show the greatness of timely help and said it was in no way sinful to feed a hungry man. However, the priests were adamant and refused to accept any explanation. They all walked out of the house and proclaimed Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl as an outcaste. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl accepted this too as the divine will of Lord and continued the ceremony without the help of the priests. The Trinity — Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahma — themselves appeared at the home of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and participated in the ceremony! They partook of the food cooked by Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl with pleasure. What will the Lord not do for His loving devotee?



*H.H. Pujya Shri Shankaracharya Swāmīgal visiting the house of Saint Sridhara Ayyāvāl*

The following year, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl, very compassionate, requested the same priests to participate in the ceremony. They bluntly and arrogantly refused the invitation. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl pleaded with them to accept his invitation, and said that he would carry out any atonement that they prescribed for the sin incurred. The priests then said, "Take a dip in the Holy Gangā. That is the only atonement for the terrible sin incurred." Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl replied, "The Holy Gangā is up in north and I am already old. I do not think I can travel that far. Instead, I shall bring the Holy Gangā to me in the well here in my backyard." Hearing this, the priests said, "How preposterous of you to speak so! Of course, there are some verses in the scriptures which exalt the Holy Name of Gangā by saying that if one takes a dip in any water chanting the name of Gangā, he would gain the merit of having taken a dip the Holy River Gangā. But these are nothing but exaggerations! Just as you exaggerate the glory of Divine Names!" and laughing out, they said "Don't even imagine that you can trick us and become one among us again!" Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl humbly replied, "I do not intend to cheat anybody. I shall bring the Holy Gangā right here." Saying this, he prayed to Holy Gangā through eight verses of *Gangāshatakam* composed by him then. And lo! The Holy River Gangā gushed out of the well in the backyard of Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl's home! The priests were terrified to witness this miracle. Further alarmed to

see the river gush out to the roads, they ran and fell at Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl's feet and begged his pardon, requesting him to send the river back! Instead, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl invited all of them to take a dip in the river. The panicked mass insisted he send it back and refused to take a dip. Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl then prayed to Mother Ganga to stay in his well in the backyard of his home for ever.

भगीरथमनोभीष्टसिद्धये भुवनाश्रिते ।

ब्राह्मणानां मनःपूर्त्यै मम कूपे स्थिरा भव ॥

The Holy River Gangā paid heed to his prayer and subsided into the well. This incident occurred on the new moon day in the month of 'Kāṛthika'. Every year, till this day, many pilgrims travel to Tiruvisainallur to take a dip in this well on the new moon day of the Kāṛthika month.

Together, Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl and Sri Bodendra Swāmigal had spread the message of chanting the Divine Names as the easiest means to gain both material and spiritual benefits. Due to their efforts, the tradition of *nāma-sankeertanam* was, and still is, firmly established in the South. One day, while Sri Shridhara Ayyāvāl was on his way to visit the temple of Lord Shiva, he discoursed to his devotees emphasizing the glory of divine names and love for the Lord. That day, he looked unusually bright and lustrous. In the sanctum sanctorum of the Lord, with tears in his eyes, he prayed to the Lord through many verses. His last prayer to his Lord was thus –

संसाराख्य-विशाल-नाटक-गृहे सर्वाणि रूपाण्यहो धृत्वाधोमुख-योनिकां यवनिकां निर्हृत्य निर्गत्य च ।  
सर्वज्ञस्य दयापरस्य तव देवाग्रे चिरं नृत्यतः श्रान्तस्यापि ममालमित्युचित वागेवास्तु विश्राणनम् ॥

**"Oh Lord! In this big stage of worldly life, I have raised the curtains, donned various roles, and have been dancing before you for long. Oh Omniscient Compassionate Lord! I am tired now, and may your words, saying 'Enough', be my rest."**

Sources:

<https://shaivam.org/scripture/Marathi/474/artihara-stotra>

<https://namadwaar.org>



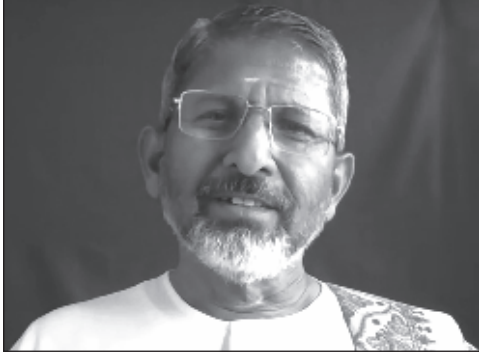
"If we find ourselves unworkable and give up on ourselves, then we'll find others unworkable and give up on them. What we hate in ourselves, we'll hate in others. To the degree that we have compassion for ourselves, we will also have compassion for others. Having compassion starts and ends with having compassion for all those unwanted parts of ourselves, all those imperfections that we don't even want to look at. Compassion isn't some kind of self-improvement project or ideal that we're trying to live up to. "

**Pema Chodron**





- Swāmi Chidānanda



There is hardly any scripture in the Sanātana Dharma, which does not extol the merits of Om, referred to as '*pranava*' at a lot of places. The traditional practice in the study of books of wisdom has been to recite Om at the beginning and at the end, even if the body of the text makes no mention of Om. The versatility of Om is simply great. This monosyllabic sacred sound is uttered in numerous settings and contexts, which may be religious or spiritual. This article highlights some of the applications of Om, the *pranava*.

### **The meaning of *pranava***

*'prakarshena nooyate, stooyate, iti pranavah'* goes the definition of *pranava*. It means Om is that, with which the Supreme Truth of our life and the Ultimate Reality of this universe is best expressed and praised. 'God has countless names and Om is the best of them,' said a thinker, who thereby simplified the etymological explanation of *pranava*. Why is Om the best of all the names? Why is Om the most sacred of

all sounds? The answer to such questions requires faith in the tradition that is several thousands of years old. Sages and saints on the soil of India have stood by various spiritual practices having Om at their centre. The Vedas, which are believed to be revelations of divine origin and not creations of the human mind, have given Om the pride of place by mentioning it at numerous places in the body of their sacred chants. The basis for Om to be sacred and powerful is to be found in mysticism that does not run against reason.

As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observed, 'Religion is not against reason but is (often) beyond reason'.

### ***Om has great significance***

Two masters of very great eminence – Sri Rāmakrishna of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Sri Ramana Maharshi of the 20<sup>th</sup> – have both said, "All the Vedas are contained in the Gāyatri mantra; the Gāyatri is contained in Om". Empowered by their exalted mystical insights, these two towering figures – one a champion of *bhakti* (devotion) and the second a trailblazer of *jnāna* (knowledge) – presumably had intimate experience of the efficacy of the *pranava*. We have reason to believe that they saw, in the recitation of Om, what ordinary mortals could not. I would imagine that the sound of Om was the key to unlock spiritual



*Om Parvat mountain on Indo Nepal border*

intelligence in their hearts.

The mystery of Om has much to do with the traditional belief that 'sound' is at the roots of this Creation. The Taittiriya Upanishad, for example, says that the first thing to emerge from the non-dual reality, Brahman, was space (*ākāsha*). We know that 'sound' (*shabda*) is the attribute of *ākāsha*. Following space, there came air, fire, water and earth. They have the attributes of touch (*sparsha*), form (*roopa*), taste (*rasa*) and smell (*gandha*). Om is essentially a sound. It is possible that it is a certain primordial sound (*ādi-shabda*), which is the seed of all sounds that would come later. Those who, through their devoted practices, resonate with Om, can go to depths of their own being, where they tap the source of hidden intelligence.

### ***Resonance in physics and metaphysics***

Perhaps a century (or more) ago, a bridge collapsed when a battalion of soldiers walked on it in great rhythm. The bridge had the capacity to bear much more than the weight of the bunch of

soldiers. It was, therefore, a puzzle for physicists to understand why the bridge gave in. Then they found out that the fundamental frequency of the sound generated by the soldiers, as they walked 'left-right-left-right' upon the bridge, by sheer coincidence, had matched with the fundamental frequency of the bridge. The result was resonance, and the bridge vibrated so much that it just broke!

Is it possible, in a manner of analogy, that a mantra like Om causes some sort of resonance in the deepest realms of our being, making the hardest conditionings in us to break down, and thereby unleashing spiritual intelligence? No wonder, the word 'mantra' is explained<sup>1</sup> as 'that which protects us upon being chanted and pondered'. Repeating a mantra and reflecting upon its sacred meanings can do something to us, whereby our weaknesses leave us and we discover our strengths. All mechanical thinking can depart, giving way to creativity. It is sheer misunderstanding to think '*mantra-japa*' makes one mechanical. On the contrary, it releases us from being mechanical.

While there are many mantras in Sanātana Dharma (Hinduism) and in almost all other great religions of the world, Om is on top of the pyramid. It is interesting to note that the most popular mantra of Buddhism – *Om Mani Padme Hum* – includes Om in it. The mantra means, 'I meditate on the shining jewel in the lotus of my heart, Om'.

### **Geetā extols Om**

'I am pranava among all Vedic mantras', says<sup>2</sup> Shri Krishna. He also talks of how a spiritual seeker should meditate on Om at the time of dying<sup>3</sup>. And, in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter, he calls<sup>4</sup> three sounds (or names) as the most exalted ones with regard to pointing out the Supreme Reality (Brahman). They are Om, Tat and Sat. These are, no doubt, components of Hindu mysticism.

Geetā is everybody's scripture. Utter beginners may get inspired by the human values and the vision of *karma-yoga* (service-minded living). As we advance spiritually, we realize that there are a lot more 'higher stages' to be reached in our practices. That is when we take the support (*ālambana*) of a mantra like Om.

Devoted practice should be combined with better understanding of the spiritual meaning of Om. Om is, at once, an indirect symbol (*prateeka*) of the highest truth and the direct name (*vāchaka*) of Brahman. Where we capture Om

depends on how mature we are. It is like going to a lake with pots of different sizes. Those with bigger pots can collect much more water than others carrying smaller pots. Study (*adhyayana*) and practice (*abhyāsa*) need to go hand in hand for us to reach higher levels of spiritual maturity. Study helps us get better informed of the secrets of spiritual tools. Practice helps us stabilize ourselves at higher and higher levels of spiritual preparedness, as we advance.

We will see more on the charm of Om in a second part of this article.

~

Notes:

- 1 *mananāt trāyate iti mantrah.*
- 2 *pranavah sarva-vedeshu* [Geetā 7.8]
- 3 *om-iti-ekāksharam .. anusmaran* [Geetā 8.13]
- 4 *Om-Tat-Sat iti nirdeshah,* [Geetā 17.23]



We have to achieve peace and happiness not by renouncing the world,  
but by remaining fixed in the thought of the Supreme Self,  
by possessing unbreakable faith.

**Swāmi Tapovanji Mahārāj**



Once, finding it difficult to reconcile the contradictory doctrines of man's free will and god's grace, two disciples of the Master went to him for a solution of the same. The Master said. "Why do you talk of free will? Everything is dependent upon the Lord's will. Our will is tied to the Lord's, like the cow to its tether. No doubt we have a certain amount of freedom even as the cow has, within a prescribed circle. So man thinks that his will is free. But know that his will is dependent on the Lord's".

Disciples: "Is there then no necessity of practicing penance, meditation and the rest? For one can as well sit quiet and say, "It is all God's will; whatever is done, is done at His will."

Sri Ramakrishna: Oh! To what effect, if you simply say that in so many words? Any amount of your verbal denial of thorns can never save you from their painful prick when you place your hand on them. Had it been entirely with man to do spiritual practices according to his will, everybody would have done so. But no, everyone can't do it, and why? But there is one thing. If you don't utilize properly the amount of strength He has given you, He never gives more. That is why self-exertion is necessary. And so everyone has to struggle hard even to become fit for the grace of God. By such

endeavour, and through His grace, the sufferings of many lives can be worked out in one life. But some self-effort is absolutely necessary. Let me tell you a story:

Once Vishnu, the Lord of Goloka, cursed Narada, saying that he would be thrown into hell. At this Narada was greatly disturbed in mind; and he prayed to the Lord, singing songs of devotion, and begging Him to show where hell is and how one can go there. Vishnu then drew the map of the universe on the ground with a piece of chalk, representing the exact position of heaven and hell. Then Narada said, pointing the part marked 'hell', "Is it like this? This is hell then!" So saying he rolled himself on the spot and exclaimed he had undergone all the sufferings of hell. Vishnu smilingly asked, "How is that?" and Narada replied: "Why, Lord, are not heaven and hell Your creation? When You didst draw the map of universe Yourself and point out to me the hell in the plan, then that place became a real hell; and as I rolled myself there, my sufferings were intense. So, I do say that I have undergone the punishments of hell." Narada said all this sincerely and so Vishnu was satisfied with the explanation.





- Compiled by Vatsala Ravikrishnan



Mother Pārvati is looked upon as a benevolent, softer, beautiful and yet a strong aspect of *shakti*. She is the goddess of love, fertility, devotion, fearlessness and is wish-granting. She has many attributes and aspects; each of her aspects is expressed in different names, thus giving her 108 names in the Hindu mythology. In her ferocious form, she is revered as Durgā or Kālī, with eight to ten hands, riding on a tiger or lion. In her benevolent manifestation, she is revered as Meenākshi or Kāmākshi with a parrot on her shoulder symbolizing cheerful love talks, seeds and fertility. Along with Goddess Lakshmi and Saraswati, she forms the trinity of Hindu Goddesses.

The important temples dedicated to Goddess Pārvati in south includes Meenākshi temple in Madurai, Kāmākshi temple in Kānchipuram, Akilāndeshwari in Thanjur and Attukal temple in Thiruvananthapuram. While the Kanchi Kāmākshi temple is a well-known religious place, a lesser known temple which is connected with the history of Kanchi Kāmākshi is Māngādu Kāmākshi Amman temple located 24kms away from Chennai. She is known as the 'Tapas Kāmākshi' or Goddess Kāmākshi who is performing penance in fire. This article is about this temple town and how Paramācharya revived the relevance of this holy place..

In Tamil, 'Māngādu' means 'a forest of mango trees, or a mango grove', and the term implies that this must have been a thickly wooded mango grove in ancient times.

Legend has it that once Goddess Pārvati in a playful mood closed the eyes of Shiva with both her hands. Since his two eyes represent the sun and the moon, through which he governs the physical activities of the world, the whole world fell into eternal darkness. This angered Shiva and he cursed her to be born on earth. In order to propitiate his grace back, the lord ordained her to do penance. He promised her that he would marry her at an appropriate time.

The goddess came to this mango grove, popularly known as Māngādu, to perform her *tapasyā*. She was praying under a mango tree with a Shiva Linga made of sand. Initially, her penance was not yielding her any fruit. She increased the intensity of her penance. She lit fire on all sides, in five *homa kundas* and stood in the *kunda* at the center, stood on the leaping tongue of flame, on her left toe with her right leg folded and went into a divine trance for ages. In this pose, Goddess is known as Tapas Kāmākshi Amman. Eventually, her patience paid off. Lord Natarāja's benevolent grace fell on the maiden Kāmākshi.

Though Eashwara wanted to meet the beautiful maiden, he could not meet her immediately, as Shukrācharya, guru of the *asuras*, a staunch devotee of Parameshwara, was doing Shiva-*pujā* in this place. It is believed that when Mahābali was about to offer the three feet boon to Lord Vāmana, the planet Shukra wanted to stop Mahābali from the offering. He blocked the *jala pātra*- the water bowl. Lord Vāmana used a *darbha* grass to remove the block and thus made Shukra go blind in one eye. To get back his eyes, Shukra did penance to Shiva in this place when Kāmākshi was doing penance. Lord Shiva appeared before Shukra first and granted his eye.

So, first Lord Shiva appears before his devotee and he sends a message to Kāmākshi through his sixth sense (telepathy) that she should wait for him in Kānceepuram. Goddess Kāmākshi is now extremely pleased and she

proceeds to Kānceepuram where she creates a sand idol of Lord Shiva and starts worshipping him. Pleased by her love and devotion, Lord Natarāja descends on Kānceepuram and marries Goddess Kāmākshi. In Kānceepuram, the Goddess is called as "Kalyāna Kāmākshi" because it is in Kānceepuram that she married her Lord, the inimitable Lord Neelakanta Siva.

In her haste to reach Kānceepuram, Goddess forgot to douse the fire that she had created for the *yajna*. The intense heat from the *yajna* destroyed the water tables in adjoining lands. All human beings, cattle and aquatic animals started suffering the adverse effects of the heat. It is said that it was Ādi Shankara, during his visit to this place, identified the cause for the suffering through his divine vision. He wished to take immediate corrective action to alleviate the sufferings of the people in the region. He immediately installed – 'Shree Chakra' / 'Ashta Gandham' / 'Artha Meru' in the place. This Shree chakra was made of 8 herbs.

The Shree chakra is called "*rāja chakra*". The basic foundation of the Shree chakra is in the form of a *kurma* (tortoise) on which three steps are constructed. On top of these steps is placed a Lotus with 16 petals and on top of it, the Shree chakra *yantra* was installed. It has 43 triangles that represent the different aspects of life in general such as prosperity, wealth, health, bliss etc. It is said that the power of Kāmākshi has

been instilled in the Shree Chakra. This Chakra is considered to be a Tantric form of the Goddess herself and hence Māngādu also finds a unique place amongst worshippers of the Tantric sect as well.

Over a period of time, after the Arthameru was installed, the intensity of the fire kept on reducing. Despite this, there was fear amongst the devotees to enter the sanctum sanctorum. It was Shri Kānchi Paramāchārya ( Mahā periavar) who understood the reason for this. The revered guru visited the place and understood the reason behind the hesitation of people to enter the shrine. Fear had to be thrown away. He reinstalled the idol of Goddess Kāmākshi on the left-hand side. In the main sanctum sanctorum, the Āchārya installed an idol of Goddess Kāmākshi with a sugarcane on one hand and a parrot on the other hand with a crescent moon on her head. The Goddess now glowed with a rare radiance and peace in her demeanor.

Hence in the sanctum sanctorum, one can have the *darshana* of Shri Chakra and the Shri Adhi Kāmākshi while on the left is the shrine of the Tapas Kāmākshi. The Shri Chakram is the chief deity of this temple. Only *kumkuma archanā* is performed and no *abhishekam* is done for Sri Chakram, as it is made up of herbs.- *abhishekam* is performed on the Kāmākshi idol made of *panchaloha*.

The temple sports the Chola style of architecture and construction. The Raja Gopuram or the Main entrance faces

South and is 7 tiered with great sculptures on it. Important festivals include the 10-day festival during Chitirai in April- May, Navarātri in September-October festivals and Shivaratri.

Close to the main temple is the Vaikunta Perumal temple. Here Lord Vishnu can be seen in a seated posture along with his 2 consorts Sridevi and Bhoodevi holding a ring in his palm that he has brought for the marriage of his sister Kāmākshi. This is a small temple with separate shrines for Goddess Lakshmi, Sri Āndāl and Lord Hanumān. A little away from Māngādu is the Velleśhwarar temple, dedicated to planet Shukra.

The Māngādu temple is famous for the 6-week worship which the devotees offer. Devotees choose any day in a week to begin the worship with lime fruit and continue the same for six weeks on the same day of the week to realize their wish. Every time fresh lemon fruits are to be offered and they have to get back one lemon and the same has to be kept in the *poojā*. When they come next week, they have to bring the old, which was kept in *poojā*, with two other fresh lemons. They would get back two limes which is again worshipped through the week at home. After the six weeks, special offering is made to the goddess and the ritual is completed. Unmarried girls pray to Mother with a yellow thread in the belief that they too will get a suitable match as Mother performed penance here and got wedded to Lord in Kānceepuram. This prayer applies to men also.

In Lalithāsahasranāma, Kāmākshi is

described as one whose eyes awaken desire, whose eyes are beautiful. With such eyes, she is said to have enchanted Shiva, the hermit God and ensured participation in worldly life. In a similar manner, in our worldly lives too, let her blessing be bestowed on us with knowledge and prosperity.

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Compassion is the awareness of a deep bond between yourself and all creatures. On the one hand, since you are still here as a physical body, you share the vulnerability and mortality of your physical form with every other human and with every living being. On the level of form, you share mortality and the precariousness of existence.

**The Power of Now - Eckhart Tolle**





Once in a physics class, the teacher asked the students, "Why do we have brakes in a car?"

A student got up and answered, "Sir, to help stop the car."

Another student replied, "To reduce and control the speed".

Yet another said, "To avoid a collision".

Soon, the answers started repeating. Hence, the teacher decided to answer the question himself.

With a smile on his face, he said, "I appreciate all of you trying to answer the question. However, I believe it's all a matter of perception! The way I see it, we have brakes in a car to enable us to drive faster!".

There was deep silence in the classroom. No one could have imagined this answer.

The teacher continued, "For a moment, let's assume that we have no brakes in our car. How fast are we willing to drive our car now?"

He further said, "It is because of the brakes that we can dare to accelerate, dare to go fast and reach the destinations we desire!"

All the students in the class were left thinking. They had never looked at

'brakes' that way before.

Let's give it a thought!

In life, we come across so many brakes that frustrate us. Our parents, teachers, mentors and friends question us and our progress, direction or decisions in life.

We see their questions as well as the difficult life situations we go through, as 'brakes' hampering our speed.

But what if we looked at them, instead, as enablers or catalysts? As tools that enable us to take risks, while at the same time ensuring that we protect ourselves.

Because, sometimes we have to pause, or even take a step back so that we can leap several steps forward! It's because of such questions & situations (periodical brakes) that we have managed to reach where we are today.

Without these 'brakes' in life, we could have skidded, lost direction or met with an unfortunate accident.

Brakes are not meant to hold us back or tie us up in knots. They exist, instead, to help us go faster than before. So that we can reach our destination safely and quickly!

So, are we grateful for the brakes in our life, or do we only see them as an obstruction to our work?



**What do we learn from  
the Upanishads?**

**We Can Rise to a State Of Mind,  
Totally Free of Partiality!**

- *Swāmi Chidānanda*

Attachment to and identification with the personality - appearing as I, me and my - cause various forms of partiality in us. Hardly any area of human relationship is found to be free from some bias, preference or favor.

It requires subtle observation on our part where we can distinguish between preference based on objective merit and that arising from subjective likes and dislikes.

In intense observation and awareness, the likes and dislikes emerging from egoism get exposed and make an exit.

The inner silence then is marked by bliss. Attachments and aversions are after all a burden that strains us. Renounce and rejoice!

~

Basis:

One attains then the 'truth that is devoid of any partiality'.

*"pakshapāta-vinirmuktam brahma sampadyate tadā"*

Amrita Bindu Upanishad, mantra 6



"Little acts of kindness, little virtuous deeds, little silent victories over temptations will have the way for attaining eternal bliss, perennial joy, everlasting peace and immortality."

**Swāmi Shivānanda**



- by Eknath Easwaran

"The miracle here, as all the world's great religions testify, is that you and I can break out of this cycle of birth and death once and for all. My spiritual teacher, my grandmother, had her own ways of teaching me this when I was still quite small. I was always an enthusiastic student in school, and because I loved my Granny very much, I used to run home every day to tell her what we had learned. And every day she would be waiting for me right by the front gate. Once, however, I must have come home with gloom showing all over my face, because Granny immediately asked what was the matter. "Bad news, Granny," I said. "Today in geography our teacher told us that compared to the universe, you and I are no more than insignificant specks of dust."

Granny was a simple village woman, but she was never one to be intimidated by book learning. She laughed and took me by the hand. "Look," she said, pointing up at the sky. "Even that sun is going to burn out someday and pass away. But you and I, because the Lord lives in us, can never die."

I don't think there is any superstition with more disastrous consequences than this universal belief that we are the body. This one fatal error is the source of all our suffering from birth to death. Of course, the body must wear out and fall away someday; no one would deny it.

But you and I are not the body. As the Sufi mystic Al-Ghazzali puts it in a little poem composed on his deathbed:

*When my friends weep over my dead body,  
Ask them, "Do you mistake him to be this?"  
Tell them I swear in the name of the Lord  
That this dead body is not I.  
It was My garment while I lived on earth;  
I wore it during my stay there.*

Today, after I have learned through many years of meditation and its allied disciplines not to identify myself with what is changing, this is very much my attitude too. I have a brown jacket with a Nehru collar, made in India, of which I take very good care. I expect it to last me for several more years, but when it is no longer presentable, I am going to give it away without any feelings of regret. It has served me well, but it is in the nature of a jacket to wear out. Similarly, this body of mine is another brown jacket made in India – it has the label of its Maker right inside. I take good care of it too, because I expect it to give me many more years of service, but when the time comes, I will be able to take it off without any break in consciousness.

[From "How to Understand Death" (Easwaran Inspirations, Book 2), an essay excerpted from *The Undiscovered Country: Exploring the Promise of Death* by Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri Press, 1996). Used with permission.]



गृहीतवाक्यो नयविद् वदान्यः  
 शेषान्नभोक्ता ह्यविहिंसकश्च ।  
 नानर्थकृत्याकुलितः कृतज्ञः  
 सत्यो मूढुः स्वर्गमुपैति विद्वान् ॥ विदुरनीति 5.14 ॥

He who accepts the teachings and orders of the wise, he who is acquainted with the rules of morality, he who is liberal, he who eats after performing *agnihotra*, he who is envious to none, he who abstains from wicked deeds, he who is grateful, truthful, humble and learned, succeeds in attaining the heaven-- the means to happiness. (Vidura Neeti 5.14)



#### DECLARATION

#### INNER FLAME

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31/3/2022



- by Vivek Asrani

The Eagle and the Butterfly both have wings to fly. And yet they are so different in the way nature has made them. Hatched from an egg, the eagle soars high and can fly at great speed with its wide wing span. The butterfly, struggling from the chrysalis, with its colorful wings, flies in a limited range moving from one plant to another.

Neither can the eagle achieve what the butterfly does nor can the butterfly like the eagle. Not only do they both have their own roles, nature would be incomplete without either of them. And yet neither feels inadequate because of the other.

Each one of us is also born to play a role and fulfil a purpose, for ourselves and the world. Sometimes when we see others soaring high and moving fast, we wonder why we too cannot do that and even start doubting ourselves. Some, managing a lot, feeling the weight of their responsibility, wonder if they have missed something when they look at those content in their limited lives. This

doubt can leave us confused, compromising our effectiveness.

Understanding ourselves and discovering our role in life is what matters. And having done that, feeling comfortable in that role and playing it to the best of our ability as also adapting to our changing roles.

Not everyone can be a butterfly, neither are there only eagles in the world. One is not superior to the other. Life is about being secure within and playing the role gifted to us to the best of our ability, better than it was done before, and leaving behind something of value to others.

That's when we develop the wings of love, joy and freedom.

*(excerpt from  
One Day at a Time)  
by Vivek Asrani*



- by Anjalie Sharma

The heartthrob of the school is a man grim and somber,  
That lanky little girl, is now a weightlifter,  
The topper of the class, is a happy homemaker,  
Back bencher of the lot, is a serial entrepreneur,  
The flamboyant fashionista, became a dreaded lawyer.  
Oft ignored average Joe, turned a well known writer,  
The one who failed Math paper, is a fashion designer,  
And one who often got suspension, is a respected army officer.  
Reunions taught me how, people come in many layers,  
And tell me why should we never judge a book by its cover.



You have the choice to change your mind and your mind has the power  
to change you.

**Swāmi Chinmayānandaji**



## ETERNAL VIBRATIONS

### High Praise For OM



एतदालम्बनं श्रेष्ठं      *etad-ālambanam shrestham*  
एतदालम्बनं परम् ।      *etad-ālambanam param*  
एतदालम्बनं ज्ञात्वा      *etad-ālambanam jnātvā*  
ब्रह्मलोके महीयते ॥      *brahmaloke maheeyate*

***This support (of Om) is the best; this support (of Om) is the highest. One who knows this support (of Om) (goes to and) is adored in the world of Brahmā.***

**(Kathopanishad 1.2.17)**

Om (also written as AUM) is the monosyllable that is regarded as the most sacred sound. Found across Vedas, Upanishads, Geetā and numerous other scriptures, this holy sound is on the high plateau of Eastern mysticism. Without even knowing its meaning, its recitation can bless people with spiritual benefits. Reciting it while knowing its far reaching impact, can lead to much higher benefits. – Editors



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## **FOWAI FORUM**

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### **F.O.W.A.I. = Flame Of Who Am I?**

“Who am I?” is the most basic question of life. The understanding of the self, the ‘me’, can cause radical change in the quality of life. This requires turning (the flame of) attention towards thoughts and emotions. When likes and dislikes fall away, pure perception takes place. That heralds freedom.

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