

Living on Light

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Parvati playfully closed Shiva's eyes and the world was plunged into darkness! Immediately a third eye appeared on Shiva's forehead and light poured forth to sustain the universe dependent on him.

Light, on Earth, defines our time, marked by alternating periods of day and night. For much of India, engaged in agriculture and deprived of free access to electricity, light is the single greatest natural resource, infusing plants with its energy, gifting sight to receptive eyes and dictating the rhythm of human life through all the crop seasons. Work is accomplished from dawn to dusk and when night falls, the world takes on the mystery of the unknown for space acquires a different dimension. Work must cease, and beneath the blanket of darkness human beings must yield to leisure and slumber.

The Sun then is god in the truest sense of divinity, for it is he who in his omnipresence brings things to light and life at dawn, and it is his rays that are benevolently just the right distance away so as to neither burn Earth nor leave it perpetually frozen. He is described very simply as *prabha-kara* or light-maker. The first metaphor for life is this unending cycle of light yielding to darkness before asserting itself again. Some of the most beautiful of hymns from the Rig Veda are in praise of Ushas or Dawn, the daughter of the Sky, who represents awakening to consciousness.

It is the power of the Sun to illumine, to reveal, to expose, to teach, to nurture, to feed, to sustain, it is the radiant splendour of the Sun, that is extolled in the Gayatri Mantra. The single most revered chant across all of India reveres that effulgence of the supreme being

who, as creator of the universe, inspires our prayers for enlightenment. The Gayatri Mantra is linked inextricably with the junctions of dawn and dusk, noon and midnight, each bearing the promise of the other to follow.

Three brief lines of a length of eight syllables each, in the Gayatri metre, is all it takes to make the powerful connection between the light-source that sustains life on earth *and* the clarity of truth that reveals to human beings their essential divinity. At once it is a prayer both for sustenance of the outer body and the inner soul.

While Surya the Sun is most obviously connected with light, it is actually Shiva who is light himself in his undifferentiated form. Aeons ago, on a dark new-moon night, Shiva manifested himself in the form of a blazing pillar of light that had no beginning nor end, that soared beyond the heavens and plunged into the netherworlds. Brahma and Vishnu both claiming supremacy were challenged to find the source or end of this fiery pillar. Brahma searched the celestial regions in the form of a swan while Vishnu assumed the shape of a boar and dug his way down. Thousands of god-years passed when tiring of the search, Brahma cheated by producing a ketaki flower as proof of having reached Shiva's head and was punished instantly.

The story has several metaphors at its heart. First the unquantifiable nature of Shiva that is beyond Time, second the immanence of Shiva who is all pervasive in the universe in the form of light and third the supremacy of Shiva over Brahma and Vishnu. Prakasa or light is a defining attribute of Shiva who abides within the 12 sacred jyotirlinga-s, or visible forms of this subtle light-essence, spread across the country.

The most sacred of these is the jyotirlinga at Varanasi or Kashi, the City of Light. It is believed that the unborn, unending pillar of light

pierced the earth at Kashi and therefore the city itself is one with this light. A place of pilgrimage, a tirtha, is a place where celestial and terrestrial planes meet, a geographical spot charged with the energy of the divine. Just as the fall of the Ganga into Shiva's matted hair bridges sky and earth, so also the linga of light that is Shiva connects many planes. The most moving sight at the ghats of Varanasi, is the worship of the rising sun and the setting golden orb with offerings of water, floating lamps and the chant of the Gayatri.

The Sun and Moon had tattled on a crafty asura when he stealthily drank the nectar of immortality with the result that his head was separated from his body by Vishnu's whirring discus. Rahu and Ketu, the separated immortal halves of the asura, are forever chasing the Sun and the Moon in order to swallow them. When Rahu and Ketu, the names given to the points where the orbits of the Sun and the Moon intersect, succeed in catching the luminaries an eclipse takes place.

No wonder then that an eclipse is a deeply unsettling phenomenon for if the Sun and the Moon can disappear for brief periods, is it not possible that they could disappear forever? Again, strong metaphors nestle within this vivid story that explains scientific fact: the eclipsing of the soul (sun) and the mind (moon), the consequences of greed and the polarities of response to never-ending desires: insatiability (rahu) and abnegation (ketu).

Vedic astrology, misunderstood by many and ill-served by charlatans and fake astrologers, is known as jyotir vidya, or the wisdom that sheds light on life. A good astrologer always looks for where Rahu and Ketu are positioned in a person's horoscope for they have the maximum potential to create havoc and eclipse human life. The remedy in such cases is to appeal to kind-hearted Jupiter as Guru, or one who dispels darkness.

It is an interesting paradox that the most auspicious of Indian festivals, Diwali, falls on the most inauspicious of nights, that of the new moon. When evening falls and no moon is visible in the sky, millions of clay lamps are lit all over the country and their tiny wavering flames magically transform the facades of even the poorest of homes. Legend has it that on a night such as this Lakshmi the goddess of wealth will only visit those homes that are clean and well-lit. People light lamps in the hope of ushering fortune and prosperity into their homes.

Light, so essential to life, helps it grow incrementally towards well-being, health, fortune, prosperity, power, and liberating truth. Light and food are intimately connected for without the sun we would have no food. Similarly light and the soul are intimately connected in the body. In the Taittiriya Upanishad we find the exuberant chant sung by our inner selves through many ages: '*Aham annam, aham annam, ...*' *I am food, I am food, I am the eater of food. I am the link.* When one can no longer distinguish between food and the eater, between subject and object, in that blissful state one shines brilliant as the Sun. For sheer poetry of expression, we turn to the Chandogya Upanishad where the Sun is called the honey of the gods.

The Taittiriya Upanishad reveals that there are five sheaths relating to the human body and the soul within it. The first sheath, tactile and visible, is called the food-suffused sheath, making up the body. This is the sheath that we identify most with. While its chief function is to clothe the soul, the food one eats has a direct effect on the soul within which is why ayurveda warns about the different flaws that might taint food.

Contiguous and receding inwards are three sheaths suffused with breath, mind, intellect which make up the subtle body. It is no

coincidence that this is also known as the *linga sarira*, one with the essence of Shiva. The One Reality is immanent within us and the true nature of our soul, *atman*, is that of bliss radiating outward from this inner and most subtle of all the sheaths.

Therefore, spiritual experiences are often described in terms of light, just as divine beings themselves appear as figures of light. Among the many names of each of the Hindu gods and goddesses, there are always several that relate to their brightness, effulgence, brilliance or lustre. Ganesha, for example, is described as having the radiance of ten million suns.

Many Christian mystics such as Therese Neumann are reported to have lived, without food, on “God’s light” for decades. Paramahansa Yogananda records meeting in 1936 an Indian yogini named Giri Bala who, stung by her mother-in-law’s criticism that she ate too much, vowed to stop eating fifty-six years before. A spiritual master helped her out by giving her a mantra and teaching her strenuous breathing exercises by which she lived on the energy of sunlight bypassing human dependence on solar-energy-trapping chlorophyll. Having understood the connection between the ethereal light of the causal body, and the sun-ripened food that sustains the gross human body, we can see for ourselves how it might be possible for a rare mystic to live on light alone.