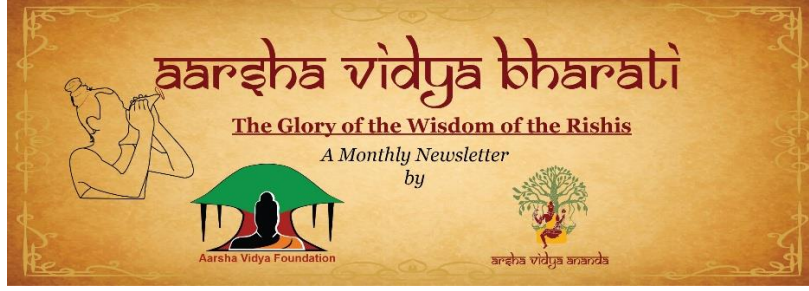

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Living Our Traditions – Mahashivaratri and How to celebrate it

By Swamini Brahmajnananda

Shiva is the one that mortals and even *devatā*-s worship.

Shiva is the Lord of Yogis known as *Ādi Yogi*. Shiva is the Lord of Dance as *Natarāja*. Shiva is also *Dakṣiṇāmūrti* - the Lord as a Teacher of self-knowledge. Shiva is both a yogi and a *gṛhastha* (householder).

Shiva is both *śambhu*, the bestower of happiness and *bhairava*, the one who is fierce.

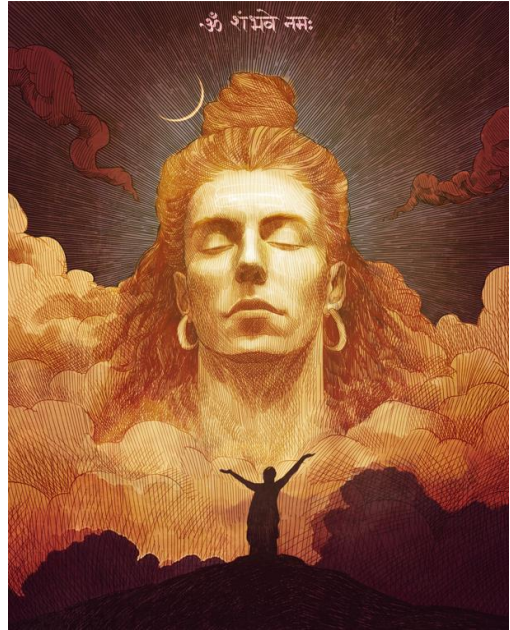
Shiva is both *karuṇāvatāram* and is *Rudra*, fierce. It is this paradox with which he is presented that makes him all-inclusive as *Bhagavān*, as *Īśvara*.

When you relate to your partner or your child or your colleague, you are relating to a particular personality, at a given time and place and there is an exclusivity about it.

On the other hand when you relate to *Īśvara*, you relate to the whole world. Because the whole world has come from *Īśvara*. When you relate to *Īśvara* as Shiva you are not relating to a limited being. You relate to *Brahman* that is limitless in the form of Shiva.

We worship *Īśvara* as Shiva. Shivaratri (*Śivarātri*) is the festival associated with Lord Shiva. It is also called as Mahashivaratri (*Mahāśivarātri*). Shivaratri falls on the fourteenth day of the Krishna *pakṣa* during the month of *Phalguna* (between Feb and March). Actually, the 14th day of every Krishna *pakṣa* is called Shivaratri as per the Hindu Calendar, but Shivaratri of the month of *Phalguna* is special and is celebrated as Mahashivaratri.

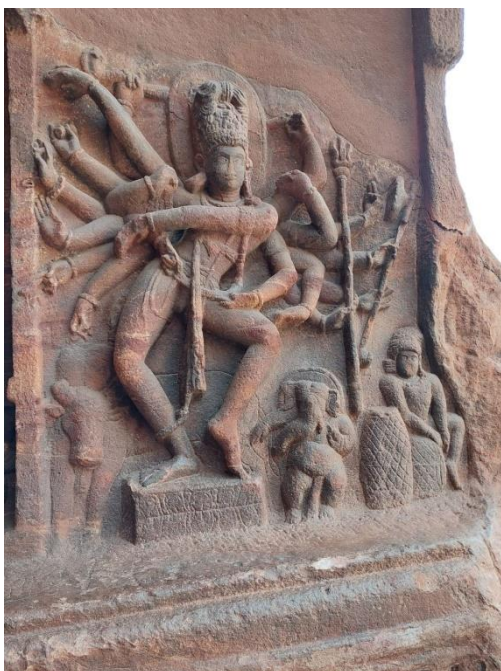
Based upon the planetary positions, this auspicious day every year is looked upon as a day of initiation, religious and spiritual. This is the day when spiritual seekers get *mantra dīkṣa* and *sannyāsa*. People who have already been initiated potentise their mantras by



chanting them through the day and night. There are various stories regarding the significance of this day.

1. After the dissolution of the earlier creation, when there was nothing but the primordial matter. Then it is said that Lord Shiva did the **Tāṇḍava Dance**. At this time he played his *Ḍamaru* whose sound reverberated the whole world and also pervaded all with the seeds of knowledge. This knowledge was revealed to the Rishis who had very pure hearts. The Lord is said to reveal his nature to his devotees on this day. Thus all the devotees withdraw their minds from all worldly activities and worship and meditate upon on the Lord.
2. The *Īsāna Samhita* says that Lord Shiva first manifested on this day as the **Jyotirlinga** a column of light, to bless the sages who worshipped him. In Shiva temples, this is represented by a form known as *Lingodbhava* on the western tower of the sanctum.
3. It was on this day that Lord Shiva married **Goddess Parvati**.
4. Another story also emphasizes the auspiciousness of Shivaratri:
 - On the day of Shivaratri, a hunter, who had killed many birds in a forest, was chased by a hungry lion. The hunter climbed a Bilva tree to save himself from the lion's attack. The lion waited throughout the entire night at the bottom of the tree for its prey. In order to stay awake to avoid falling from the tree, the hunter kept plucking the leaves of the Bilva tree and dropping them below. The leaves fell on a Shiva Linga that happened to be located at the bottom of the tree. Lord Shiva was pleased by the **offering of the Bilva leaves** by the hunter, although inadvertently, and saved the hunter in spite of all the papa the hunter had committed by killing the birds. This story emphasizes the auspiciousness of worshipping Shiva with Bilva leaves on Shivaratri. The idea is that if somebody consciously offers Bilva leaves they will be blessed!

The one thing that is common to all stories is that, this day and night is very special to the life and form of Lord Shiva. On this day all devotees, irrespective of the fact whether they are



enlightened or not, are guided to fast and worship Lord Shiva, so that they may receive the abundant grace which flows.

When we look at creation we find that whatever is born, is sustained for a while, and then is no more there in the same form. There is no real destruction of matter or energy in the universe, much less the conscious being.

The capacity of the Lord to change from one form to another is represented by Lord Shiva. Truly we cannot give the label 'destroyer' to Lord Shiva, because there is no real destruction of anything in the Universe. All that happens is things manifest from the unmanifest and again go into unmanifest form, to manifest again.

Lord Shiva is also the Lord who means auspiciousness who grants boons, bestows grace and awakens wisdom in His devotees.

Lord Shiva is depicted as a symbol of *tyāga* or renunciation. He is represented as an ascetic. He is depicted as covered with ashes, with matted locks, carrying Ganga on his head, wearing the crescent moon as an ornament on his head, having three eyes which, his eyes are half-open, wearing two earrings, with a snake round his neck and curled three times round his head, wearing the *Rudrākṣa mālā*, holding his right hand in the *Varada Mudrā*, with a trident (*triśūla*), carrying a *ḍamaru* in one hand and a *kamandalu* in another, with Nandi the bull as his vehicle, seated on a tiger-skin, in the cremation-ground, effortlessly happy in himself as an ascetic sometimes, with Goddess Paravati sometimes. The meaning of some of the symbolism is described in the Meaning of [Shivashtakam](#)

How can we celebrate Mahashivaratri?

1. Fast on this day and night. Since Mahashivaratri is on 18th Feb 2023, you will fast the whole day and night of 18th and break your fast only on 19th Feb morning after sunrise. Fasting is a deliberate religious practice to master the discomfort of pangs of hunger and to use the time for cooking and eating in prayer, instead. Since fasting is a karma, there are many alternatives – only water fast, only fruits fast, a combination of lemon water, tea/coffee and avoidance of all other food, etc. You decide what you can do and stick to it!
2. Do the Japa of the extremely beautiful & powerful mantra 'ॐ नमः शिवाय ॥' (*Om Namaḥ Śivāya*) as many times as possible on this day. Shiva is the ultimate goal as *mokṣa svarūpa*. Unto that Shiva I offer my *namaskāra*-s. This is suggested even if you have been given some other mantra for your *sādhana* which you can chant of course.
3. Witness the silence between every chant and for some time, sit in silence with no effort, no chant. Allow your mind to go wherever it needs to. Wherever it goes, it is Shiva.
4. A few days or weeks before Shivaratri you can also take vow to do the 'Om Namaḥ Śivāya' mantra every day a certain number of times. I recommend at least one mala (108 times) which can be multiplied an x number of times. You take a *saṅkalpa* (state your resolve and intention) and start your japa today which you can complete on Shivaratri day.
5. Perform yoga *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* as an offering to Lord Shiva.
6. Perform any form of dance as an offering to Lord Shiva.
7. Perform worship of Shivalingam, and do 'abhiṣekam' with *pañcāmṛit* (yogurt, cow's milk, honey, sugar and ghee), Ganga jal, water from other *tīrtha*-s, & simple plain water. Later drink all that with which you gave Lord the bath, and also give it to others. The Lord is worshipped as the Shivalingam by offering *abhiṣekam* during each three hour period of the night, generally starting at 7 pm and going into the night.



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8. While doing the *abhiṣekam*, chant 'Rudram' or any 'Shiva *Stotram*'. If you cannot chant these yourself then play recordings which are freely available or continue chanting 'Om Namaḥ Śivāya' while doing the *abhiṣekam*.
 9. Do archana of the beautifully decorated Shiv Linga, with the Shiva *Sahasranāma* (Thousand Names) or even 108 names of Lord, with Bilva leaves and other flowers.
 10. Sing or listen to bhajans ([Shivashtakam](#), [Shivohum](#), [Lingashtakam](#)) and fill your mind with love & gratitude for all that the Lord has blessed you with.
 11. Remain awake in the night too, for as long as possible, and either do [Japa](#) or meditation.
 12. Plant a Bilva tree in your vicinity.
 13. Visit a Shiva temple or one of the 12 Jyotirlinga-s. According to Shiva *Mahāpurāṇa*, once Brahma, and Vishnu had an argument over the the supremacy of creation. To settle the debate, Lord Shiva pierced the three worlds appearing as a huge Infinite Pillar of Light, the Jyotirlinga. Vishnu and Brahma decided to investigate the end of light in either direction. And one traveled upwards while the other downwards to find out where the light ended. The column of light seemed endless. Brahma lied that he found out the end, while Vishnu conceded his defeat. This lie of Brahma angered Shiva making him curse Brahma that even though he is the creator of the universe he would not be worshipped. The jyotirlinga is a manifestation of brilliant reality, out of which Shiva appeared in another Form, *Lingodbhava*. The jyotirlinga shrines are Temples where Shiva appeared as a brilliant column of light.
 14. Wish & Pray for the well being of all.



॥ ॐ नमः शिवाय ॥

Om Namaḥ Śivāya