

NITHYAKARMAS SPUR REFINEMENT & EVOLUTION

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अभयं सत्त्वसंभुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः । दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् ॥
अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् । दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम् ॥
तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहो नातिमानिता । भवन्ति संपदं दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत ॥

(Bhagavadgeetha chapter 16 – 1,2,3)

These attributes, the Lord proclaims, are divine. In a more detailed and fascinating account (chapter 14), He elucidates that of the three sets of qualities ('raajasa', 'thaamasa' and 'saathvika') every human being is born with, saathvik' traits are supreme. He also makes it known that these are the qualities that are dazzling, enlightening and the ones that lead to judiciousness, refinement, progression, peace, contentment and delight. There are repeated references to such qualities in other scriptures as well – chapter 11, volume 7 of Shreemadbhaagawatha, Ramayana, preaching of several saints like Manu, Vasista, Kanva, Athri and Patanjali.

One who imbibes these becomes a 'purushottama' (a word most often associated with Lord Rama) – noble and admirable. These are human values, ideals to be cherished. They form the corner stone of our emotive personality, distinguish a man from the animal, make us 'cultured' or 'civilized' and lay the foundation of a progressive society.

These attributes are all related to our sense organs, head and heart. But, they often flicker, vacillate, swing, dither and are hardly ever controllable. It takes tremendous effort, determination, skill and assiduous practice to master them. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the revered sages presented us with a unique bundle of activities after careful deliberation marshalling years of exceptional experience and wisdom. Described as 'aahnika vidhi' or 'nithyakarma', these are simple, inexpensive practices that can be effortlessly and seamlessly integrated into our daily routine as an instrument of self-evolution and progression. Over a period, they would be part of our habits and a mark of our personality.

Every day we transact with several people both at home and outside and in appreciation of good work done by others and help received by us we keep saying 'thank you', 'I am grateful', 'I am obliged', 'much appreciate' etc.- just as a matter

of fact. Now, for a moment, imagine a life without sun, fire, light, water, air and vegetation. It is impossible. This is the experience of every one of us. Their importance needs no further enumeration or testimony. This is universally true – regardless of region, space, time, language or religion. Would it not seem appropriate to recount their numerous services, acts of kindness and the charities they extend to us day in day out? Should we not express our gratitude and thank them? Will a desire to reciprocate look out of place? Will nursing feelings of respect and gratitude towards those who are ever vigilant, ever willing to help us (and importantly without expecting anything in return) not look more meaningful? The object of ‘sandhyavandanam’ is to nurture such feelings and practice owning them as a part of our personality.

We offer ‘**arghya**’ i.e. water to Sun in the morning & Varuna in the evening. This is a form of worship and expression of gratitude and tribute. When even water is not readily available, it is an acceptable practice to offer fistful of soil or sand and feel a sense of fulfillment and serenity. What else can we offer to Him? This simple act – much like saying ‘thanks’ - can make big impact to our spirits. ‘**Agnikarya**’, where easily accessible fuel sticks, rice grains etc. are offered to ‘Agni’, is such act prompted by our reverence to Him. Like-wise, it is a time-honored practice to respectfully mention the name of the ‘**Rishi**’ i.e. sage who unfolded the mysteries of each ‘manthra’ every time it is recited. We remain grateful to them for their singular contribution to the fund of knowledge. We also do ‘**Abhivaadan**’ i.e. offer our salutations to all our elders and teachers for their invaluable gift.

Once we develop respect, there is a natural urge to get closer to them through ‘**Upasthana**’. This is the act of remaining in close proximity, recounting goodness, expressing gratitude, singing praises and opening our heart to place before Him all our difficulties, desires and well intended wishes. A discernible and very decisive by- product of acknowledging the goodness of air, water, fire, vegetation etc. would be a transformation in our attitude towards them –we will seldom waste, misuse or pollute them. This will be our prized contribution to the next generation. In our daily life these manifest in selflessness, mercy, compassion, sympathy and forbearance in dealing with other animate or inanimate objects. Our ‘shanti-manthraas’ is a case in point. We beseech the safety and welfare of not just our family but, the entire universe! An expression of this concern for our co-habitants on this planet can be found in ‘**chitraahuti**’, ‘**go-graasa**’ i.e. a part of cooked food is offered to others before partaking it.

The practice of expressing obeisance both at dawn & dusk (sandhyavandanam) once again draws us closer to the nature. We get to experience impact of the rising and setting Sun on the light, breeze, temperatures, life of every human being and animal (both at physical and psychological level) plants and flower etc. This

invisible hand is revered as '**Sandhya Shakti**'. Besides turning to nature to meet our needs and find pleasure in life, it adds to our inquisitiveness and encourages us discover more.

'**Manthraachama**' presents a wonderful opportunity to do some serious introspection more than once. Our ignorance, anger, jealousy, arrogance, ego, selfishness and hatred mask our wisdom committing our body, mind and speech to recklessness and gross errors like physical violence, cruelty towards animals, prohibitive sexual acts, consuming undesirable food, lust, lies, deceit, reproach and envy. Here is an admission of guilt, repentance, apology and a resolve to amend, recompense, if possible, and a commitment to ensure their non-recurrence. This is a '**jnana yajna**'. This is a process of evolution and refinement. It is buttressed by '**Aghamarshana**' i.e. destroying the 'demon' in us and uprooting offensive, corruptive, wrongdoing tendencies. Our criminal behavior which may have its' root in our past circumstances, feelings and understandings is thrashed and overpowered by nurturing pious thoughts, deeds, beliefs, virtuous objects, worthy companionship and pleasing disposition and speech.

'**Sankalpa**', a formal proposal made at the very beginning of sandhyavandam is intended to draw sketch or a design of what is intended to be done, evaluate the pros & cons, make an assessment of the resources required, think of a strategy to execute and orchestrate its' implementation. Accordingly the purpose of every activity is mentioned, an action plan is described and, name of the sage, metrical format of the manthraas employed are declared. Such a practice adds to clarity of thought, marginalizes chances of error, strengthens our resolve and will to perform. This is a habit that is sure to significantly improve our effectiveness even in our student or professional life.

There is a unique and an impact making practice to intersperse each set of activity with an 'aachamanaa' in the course of 'sandhyaavandam'. This act pulls back our wavering mind into action, recharge our spirits and more importantly reconfirms that we are conscious of what we are doing, we know what we are doing, we are on the right track and what we are doing is (swaha = 'su' 'aha') pious and desirable.

'Dhyana' (meditation) is what improves our concentration, focus, tenacity and determination. We often spot people with strong will relentlessly engaged in study, search and research regardless of wind, rain, heat, hunger or sleep. This is what we call 'will-power', tenacity, fortitude or determination. This can be secured only through disciplined effort and regular practice. Seeking 'knowledge' is its' goal. Discovery of 'truth' and experiencing the resultant 'joy' is the upshot. Every scientific discoveries (these are discoveries of truth) the world over, are products of such ceaseless efforts backed by strong determination and perseverance. Although

'dhyana' is quite often associated with spiritual pursuits, its' value can be found in every activity we are engaged in. It is this will power that can enrich our intellect, knowledge and skill sets and vastly enhance our professional competence and effectiveness. It is in this context that '**swadhyaaya**' i.e. self-study is prescribed as a daily routine.

Since sandhyavandanam is an intellectual exercise, one has to choose a clean, quiet and peaceful place. A bath is essential to keep the body clean as also to set the mood right. Aachamana, manthraachamana, pranayama and marjanam are for internal cleansing i.e. to ensure that all negativities are driven away and both head and heart are filled with divine vibes. Again through '**digbandhana**' all the 10 corporeal and cerebral doors of our body are closed – lest external events might distract. Perhaps, it is for this reason, forests and hills were the choice of our sages for their learning and experimentation. Physical health is not disregarded either. Atharva Veda contains extensive treatise on the subject. Since the emphasis is on purity of body & mind, even in our daily routine there is emphasis on 'sathvik' food for nurturing 'sathvik' qualities. The process of partaking food is considered a 'yajna'. At the start of every meal there is a reconfirmation that it is earned through respectable means (sathyam / ritham)

'**Abhivadan**' (salutations to the Guru) and **surrendering the fruits** of the nithyakarma to the Lord are practices that serve a body blow to our pride, arrogance, ego and overconfidence and foster humility, gratefulness, mental equilibrium (to take both success and failures in our stride). There is also a practice of **seeking pardon** for inadvertent errors, lapses, omissions etc. once again striking at the root of our arrogance. We will also come to terms with the reality that we are not perfect, not complete and are prone to misjudge, mix-up and falter. Manthraachamana confronts situations where we are overpowered by evil, anger, greed and arrogance and underscores the need for sustained efforts to maul them. Aghamarshana mantras draw our attention to the expanse and diversity of this universe and help us figure out how short our life is and limited are our resources. Likewise hymns of praise prod us see eminence and goodness in others. These should goad us to utilize the limited time and resources we are gifted with, for virtuous thoughts and deeds and cheer us to imbibe virtues that we cherish.

We must figure out and appreciate that nithyakarmas are not performed with an eye on any mortal or material benefits. In 'praanaayama', for instance, the emphasis is more on strengthening moral fiber i.e. qualities of head and heart than on building physical attributes. Therefore, it is not sufficient to engage merely in physical drill. Self evolution, refinement, internalizing virtuous qualities necessitates infusion of pious feelings and chaste reflections. It is, perhaps, for this reason that our sages introduced appropriate mantra to go with every action. Viewed in this context,

identifying the purpose of every action, comprehending import every such hymn and getting absorbed in activities that articulate our feelings becomes critical to our experiencing the wholesomeness in all such actions.

As we proceed, perhaps, we may encounter newer implications, newer consequences, newer connotations, newer values and know-how, newer ways of expression that impart finality and beget supreme joy and ecstasy.

