

The Spiritual Significance of Navaratri

by Swami Tejomayananda

Ratri means “night” and *Nava* means “nine”. At Navaratri (“nine nights”), the Lord in the form of the Mother Goddess is worshipped in Her various forms as *Durga*, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*. Though the Goddess is one, She is represented and worshipped in three different aspects. On the first three nights of the festival, *Durga* is worshipped. On the following three, *Lakshmi* and then *Saraswati Devi* on the last three nights. The following tenth day is called *Vijayadasami*. *Vijaya* means “victory”, the victory over our own minds that can come only when we have worshipped these three: *Durga*, *Lakshmi*, and *Saraswati*.

Durga

To gain noble virtues, all evil tendencies in the mind must be destroyed. This destruction is represented by the Goddess *Durga*. *Durga* is *durgati harini*: “She who removes our evil tendencies.” This is why she is called *Mahishasura Mardini*, the destroyer of *Mahishaasura* (demon), *mahisha* meaning “buffalo.” Isn’t there a buffalo in our minds as well?

The buffalo stands for *tamoguna*, the quality of laziness, darkness, ignorance and inertia. We have these qualities too. We love to sleep. Although we may have a lot of energy and potential inside us, we prefer to do nothing - just like the buffalo that likes to lie in pools of water. In the *Puraanic* story, *Durga Devi*’s killing of the *Mahisha* demon is, symbolically, the destruction of the *tamoguna* within us that is very difficult to destroy. In the *Durga Devi Havana* (sacrifice), we invoke that Divine Power within us to destroy our animalistic tendencies.

Lakshmi

For knowledge to dawn within us, we have to prepare our minds. The mind must be pure, concentrated, and single-pointed; this purification of the mind is obtained through the worship of Lakshmi Devi.

In our society today, however, when we think of *Lakshmi*, we think only of money - counting gold and dollar bills! This is why if one goes to a Lakshmi temple, one will find a crowd. Everybody likes *Lakshmi Puja* (Lakshmi worship) because they think she represents material wealth. But what is real wealth? Even if we have material wealth but no self-discipline or self-control, nor the values of love, kindness, respect and sincerity, all our material wealth will be lost or destroyed. The real wealth is the inner wealth of spiritual values that we practice in our lives, by which our minds become purified. Only when we have these noble values will we be able to preserve our material wealth and make good use of it. Otherwise money itself becomes a problem.

In the *Upanishads*, the *Rishis* never asked for material wealth only. In the mantras of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, they first asked to have all the noble virtues fully developed in them. “Having gained the noble virtues, thereafter Lord please bring wealth to us”. The *Rishis* express here that in the absence of right values and good qualities, all our money will be wasted, and there are countless examples of this in the world around us.

Our wealth of virtues is our true Lakshmi. Its importance is shown by the fact that *Adi Shankaracharya* himself, in *Vivekachudamani*, describes that *sat sampati*, or six forms of wealth (calmness of mind, self-control, self-withdrawal, forbearance, faith and single-pointedness) that are to be cultivated to attain wisdom. These virtues are important because our goal is victory over the mind - a victory such that we do not get disturbed by every change that takes place in our lives. This victory comes only when the mind is prepared, and this mental preparation is the symbolism of the *Lakshmi Puja*.

Saraswati

Victory over the mind can be gained only through knowledge, through understanding; and it is Goddess *Saraswati* who represents this highest knowledge of the Self.

Although there are many kinds of knowledge in the *Vedas* - phonetics astronomy, archery, architecture, economics and so on - the real knowledge is in the spiritual knowledge. Lord *Krishna* himself says in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "The knowledge of the Self is the knowledge"; and He adds, "It is my *vibhuti*, my glory." In other words, we may have knowledge of many other subjects and sciences but if we do not know our own Self, then that is the greatest loss. Therefore the supreme knowledge is the knowledge of the Self that is represented by Goddess *Saraswati*.

Navaratri

Thus, at *Navaratri*, Goddess *Durga* is invoked first to remove impurities from the mind. The Goddess *Lakshmi* is invoked to cultivate the noble values and qualities. Finally, *Saraswati* is invoked for gaining the highest knowledge of the Self. This is the significance of the three sets of three nights when all these three are gained subjectively, and then there will be *Vijayadasami*, the day of true victory!

At *Navaratri* time, the *Rasa* dance (dance of joy) of *Sri Krishna* and the *gopis* is also performed. As the mind becomes purer, calmer quieter, and more cheerful and greater understanding is gained, do we not feel happier? Similarly, the *Rasa* dance is the dance of joy and realization. But, nowadays, the theme of *Sri Krishna* and the *gopis* dancing around the *Rasa* seems to have been lost in our society. The true meaning and purpose of the ritual is often forgotten, as more importance is given to other types of dancing.

Why is the *Navaratri* festival celebrated at night rather than in the daytime? This is another interesting question. Night-time is generally the time when we go to sleep, so the spiritual message is, "You have lived long enough in the sleepy ignorance of tamoguna. It is time to wake up now. Please wake up!"

For a puja, unfortunately, we are never willing to stay up late and so we ask, "What time will it end?" For a party, we never ask this question. If the party ends at 10.00pm, we say "What! The party is finished?! What kind of a party is that?!" Yet we find it difficult to stay awake for a puja!

The Importance of Ritual

Not everyone, it is true, will be of the intellectual type to appreciate everything philosophically. Therefore, philosophy or spiritual truth must be demonstrated visually in some ritualistic form. In this way, when children are first introduced to it, they enjoy a dance or a festival, and then later begin to question, "What is this dance? Why are we doing this *Puja*? What is the meaning of *Navaratri*?" So the purpose of the concretized ritual is fulfilled when these questions begin to arise in the children's minds.

Unfortunately, when we take our children to functions at the temples and they begin to ask questions about what they see, we cannot answer them. Yet when the children revolt later as teenagers, we say, "What happened to the children? These kids are terrible. We never used to question our religion!"

We take pride in the fact that we never used to question anything, but it would have been better if we had asked questions and found out. Why did we not ask? Because of intellectual inertia. Inertia is of different kinds. Physical inertia is not as bad because it is usually temporary. There are also mental or emotional stupors that some people remain in, but the intellectual inertia is the worst kind because under its influence, we do not want to think at all. It is said that people can live without air for two minutes, without water for a few days, without food for a month or so, and without thinking for generations! Some people just do not want to think. This is our inner *Mahisha* (the lazy buffalo), and our spiritual *Mahisha* is that we do not want to wake up from this sleep of ignorance.

As we can see, the theme of the entire *Vedas* is reflected in the *Navaratri* festival: Purify the mind and remove all negativities; cultivate positive virtues; gain spiritual knowledge and transcend limitations. This is the real victory - the dance of joy - ritualistically performed at night, as it is also on *Shivaratri* (auspicious night), to signify our spiritual awakening.