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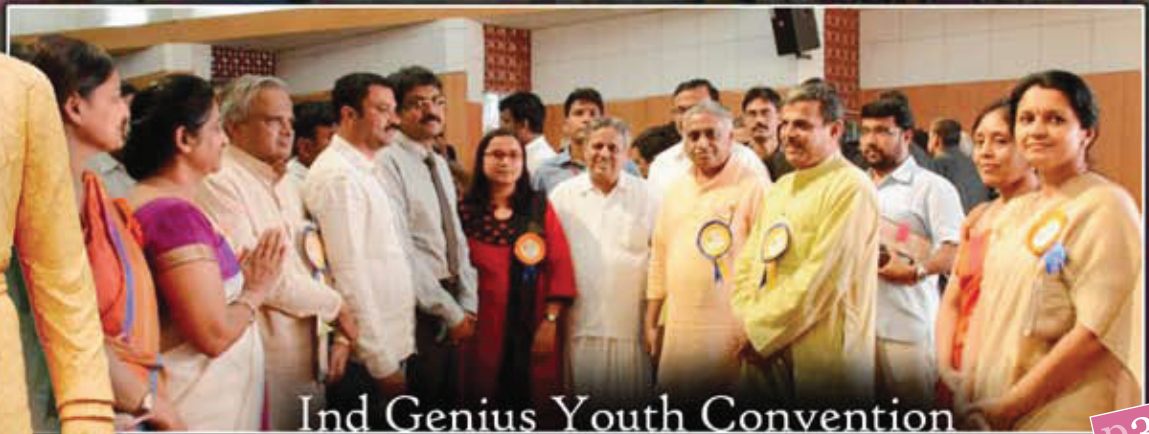
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VEDIC WORDS AND YOGIC DEEDS

Reflections on the Yogic Import of the first four lines of the Vedic Śānti-Mantra “Śānno mitra...”



INTRODUCTION

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः¹

Vedic Chanting, Study of the upaniṣads and practice of Yoga commence and culminate with these three elevating and popular utterances. These sacred sounds form part of śānti-mantra-s (chants for peace).

There are many śānti-mantra-s in Vedic tradition. The mantra śānno mitra that forms part of Taittirīya upaniṣad is one among them. The entire chant is pregnant with profound ideas. Still, the *first four lines* of this śānti-mantra merit our attention for their completeness, uniqueness and practicable wisdom.

Sureśvarācārya beautifully collects the thoughts of Ācārya Śaṅkara and brings out the utility and importance of understanding and practicing the ideas presented in these four lines. He states –

श्रवणं धारणं चैवमुपयोगश्च सिद्ध्यति ।
ज्ञानस्याप्रतिबन्धेन प्रार्थनीयमतो भवेत् ॥²

1 om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

2 śravaṇam dhāraṇam caivamupayogaśca siddhyati ।
jñānasyāpratibandhena prārthanīyamato bhavet ॥

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The process of Hearing (and other means of gaining knowledge), retaining knowledge and application of the knowledge thus attained, can progress without hindrance by making (this) prārthanā (prayer, found in the first four lines). Hence one should practice this.

THE FOUR LINES

शन्नो मित्रः शं वरुणः । शन्नो भवत्वयमा ।
शन्न इन्द्रो बृहस्पतिः । शन्नो विष्णुरुक्रमः ॥³

FIRST TWO WORDS

Let us, at the outset, focus on the two words that are repeated in the four lines above. ‘शं (śam)’ and

Taittirīya Upaniṣadbhāṣyavārtikā,
Verse 41 for Anuvāka 1)

3 śanno mitraḥ śam varuṇaḥ । śanno bhavatvayamā ।
śanna indro bṛhaspatiḥ । śanno viṣṇururukramaḥ ।



‘नः (naḥ)’. śam – is happiness and comfort. This word also forms part of familiar compound words such as Śambhu, Śaṅkara etc. (Śambhu, Śaṅkara – the providers of happiness and comfort).

Happiness and comfort to whom? Naḥ – to us. Us here, in the context of the upaniṣad, refers to those who are involved in the pursuit of attaining the knowledge of self.

SOURCE OF HAPPINESS AND COMFORT

From whom do we seek happiness and comfort? From Mitra, Varuṇa, Aryaman, Indra, Bṛhaspati and Viṣṇu. These are six popular Vedic deities.

Who are these Gods? What kind of welfare can they bestow upon us? Answers to these two questions bring out the essence of these four sacred Vedic sentences.⁴

GODS (GUARDS) OF THE BODY (अध्यात्म-देवताः⁵)

To the first question, Sureśvarācārya summarily states –

अध्यात्मदेवताश्चैताः मित्राद्याः शं भवन्तु नः ।⁶

Mitra and others are deities relating to our body (Adhyātma). May we be bestowed with comfort by them.

From this statement it becomes evident that these six are the presiding deities of various functions and faculties of the human existence centred on the body, breath and mind. Hence the prayer addressed to them will lead us, to this most sought after comfort.

⁴ The views presented here are based on the commentaries by Śaṅkarācārya and Śāyaṇācārya composed many centuries ago.

⁵ Adhyātmadevatāḥ

⁶ Adhyātmadevatāścaitāḥ mitrādyāḥ śam bhavantu naḥ ।
(Taittiriya Upaniṣat Bhāṣyavārtikā, Verse 40, Anuvāka 1)

MITRA AND VARUṆA

प्राणवृत्तेरहश्च अभिमानी देवतात्मा मित्रः ।⁷

Mitra is the presiding deity of Day time and prāṇa. (prāṇa - inhalation of breath).

अपानवृत्ते रात्रेश्चाभिमानी देवतात्मा वरुणः ।⁸

Varuṇa is the presiding deity of night time and apāna. (Apāna - exhalation). In the context of this mantra, this would then mean

“Let Mitra and Varuṇa make our days active and night times peaceful. And let them bless our breathing.”

THE YOGIC CONNECTION

For the students of Yoga there is something more to explore and unravel from this mantra.

Is there a connection between Day time and prāṇa? Is there a connection between night time and Apāna?

It is an accepted therapeutic yogic practice that to overcome drowsiness, dullness, inactivity and other associated problems prāṇāyāma practices that are focussed on enhancing inhalation is advised. Similarly for sleeplessness, restlessness and other such conditions prāṇāyāma practices that enable deeper exhalation are imparted.

Is the yogic connection now clear? If no, read on.

The first line of the mantra addressed to Mitra and Varuṇa in essence – seeks the appropriate enhancement of inhalation and exhalation capacities to invigorate our daytimes and bestow peace and rest at night times.

The worthy attains Grace. How do we become worthy to receive the blessing of Mitra and Varuṇa? The words of Vasiṣṭha to Rāma are worth remembering in this context –

यो यमर्थं प्रार्थयते तदर्थं चेहते क्रमात् ।

⁷ prāṇavṛtterahnaśca abhimānī devatātmā mitraḥ ।

(Śaṅkarabhāṣya - commentary of śaṅkara)

⁸ apānavṛtte rātreścābhimānī devatātmā varuṇaḥ ।

(Śaṅkarabhāṣya - commentary of śaṅkara)



अवश्यं स तमाप्नोति न चेदधर्मान्निवर्तते ॥⁹

Whoever has a prayer or desire certainly attains the results, if he/she systematically works towards it and does not give up work halfway-through.

Thus, by systematic and regular practice of appropriate prāṇāyāma during day break and at the end of the day (Sandhyā – temporal junctions) we pray to Mitra and Varuṇa to make our days cheerful and nights peaceful.

ARYAMAN

The second line is addressed to Aryaman.

चक्षुष्यादित्ये च अभिमानी अर्यमा¹⁰

Aryaman is the presiding deity of Eyes and Sun.

Light and sight are essential for perception through eyes. If we rephrase the prayer to Aryaman in the pattern stated above, then, it would read thus – “Oh! Aryaman! Shower your benevolent rays upon the earth to make it bountiful and prosperous. We make ourselves worthy to receive your grace by performing yogic practices like sūryanamaskāra¹¹, trāṭaka etc.”

INDRA

बाहोर्बलस्य च अभिमानी इन्द्रः ।¹²

Indra is the presiding deity of Shoulders and Strength.

As light and sight are essential to see, similarly shoulder and might are essential for physical health. By performing various vyāyāma-s (physical exercises in line with the practice of Yoga) prescribed in Āyurvedic texts.¹³ We make

9 yo yamarthaṁ prārthayate tadarthaṁ cehate kramāt |
avaśyaṁ sa tamāpnoti na cedardhānnivartate | |

(Vāsiṣṭharāmāyaṇa 2.4.12)

10 cakṣuṣyāditye ca abhimānī aryamā
(śaṅkarabhāṣya - commentary of śaṅkara)

11 Sūryanamaskāra here can be taken as the set of twelve postures popularly practiced by the Yoga fraternity or the traditional Namaskāra to the Sun accompanied by the Chanting of Aruṇa praśna
(First section of Taittirīya Āraṇyaka)

12 bāhvorbalasya ca abhimānī indraḥ |
(Sāyaṇabhāṣya - commentary of Sāyaṇa)

13 lāghavaṁ karmasāmartha yaṁ dīpto'gnirmedasaḥ

ourselves ‘fit’ to receive the blessing of Indra, who is also the lord of the mighty thunderous rain cloud (parjanya). To use the words of Swami Vivekananda - thus we become endowed with ‘muscles of iron and nerves of steel’.

BRHASPATI

वाचि बुद्धौ बृहस्पतिः ।¹⁴

Bṛhaspati is the lord of speech and intellect.

Words indeed are the medium of expression of thoughts. Words are hollow without thoughts. Speech and intellect are essential in teaching-learning process. By applying ourselves whole heartedly to Svādhyāya¹⁵-pravacana (study and teaching) we become worthy recipients of grace of Bṛhaspati. Svādhyāya and pravacana together have been hailed as the greatest purificatory activity (Tapas)¹⁶ by the upaniṣads.

VIṢṆU

पादयोरभिमानी विष्णुः ...

अवयविनि कृत्स्नदेहेऽभिमानी... ।¹⁷

Viṣṇu is the presiding deity of legs and also the whole body.

Viṣṇu is praised as Urukrama (the lord with long strides) in Vedic mantras. There is a Vedic mythology which states that Lord Viṣṇu covered the entire universe with just three strides. Hence his blessings are essential to make our legs stronger. Further, it is the legs that support the entire body.

kṣayaḥ |
vibhaktaghanagātratvaṁ vyāyāmādupajāyate | |
The practice of Vyayama leads to lightness of the body, efficiency in work, better digestive capacity, reduction of Medas, supple and sturdy body.
Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdayasaṁhitā (2.10)

14 vāci buddhau bṛhaspatiḥ |
(commentary of Sāyaṇa)

15 Svādhyāya is a constituent of Kriyāyoga and also Niyama mentioned in the Yogasutras.

16 svādhyāyappravacane eveti nāko maudgalyaḥ |
taddhi tapastaddhi tapaḥ
(Taittirīya upaniṣad 1.9.1)

17 pādayorabhimānī viṣṇuḥ ...
avayavini kṛtsnadehe'bhimānī ... |
(commentary of sāyaṇa)



Hence the lord of the legs is the lord of the whole body too. Let us seek the blessing of Lord Vishnu by using our legs to move around in search of the holy and the good (Satsaṅga¹⁸).

Table*

| | Deity | Presiding aspect | (Yogic) Actions |
|---|------------|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Mitra | Daytime and prāṇa | Inhalation-intensive-prāṇāyāma |
| 2 | Varuṇa | Night time and Apāna | Exhalation-intensive-prāṇāyāma |
| 3 | Aryaman | Sun and Eyes | Suryanamaskara |
| 4 | Indra | Shoulder and Strength | vyāyāma (Physical exercises) |
| 5 | Br̥haspati | Speech and intellect | svādhyāya and pravacana |
| 6 | Viṣṇu | Two legs and whole body | satsaṅga (vitarāgaviśayaṁ... cittam) |

* Tabulated representation of ideas presented above

SUMMARY: This quote from Swami Vivekananda aptly summarizes the message of these four Upaniṣadic Śānti Mantra -

*Let me tell you that we want strength, strength, and every time strength. And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energised through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the downtrodden of all races, all creeds, and all sects to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads.*¹⁹

As rightly observed by Swamiji, these aphoristic four lines are sources of strength and welfare for our physical existence that comprises of the body, breath and the mind. These prayers accompanied

18 Keeping the company of the good is indicated in the yogasūtra vitarāgaviśayaṁ vā cittam (1.37)

19 The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 3/Lectures from Colombo to Almora/Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_3/Lectures_from_Colombo_to_Almora/Vedanta_in_its_Application_to_Indian_Life.

by corresponding actions such as prāṇāyāma, vyāyāma, svādhyāya and satsaṅga are effective tools for holistic human empowerment.

CONCLUSION: On deeper reflection the above discussion also provides two vital insights –

1. The mīmāṃsakas (Mīmāṃsā is a school of orthodox Indian philosophy) state “आन्नायस्य क्रियार्थत्वात्...²⁰” the vedas are for action. Hence Vedic mantras are not to be considered as mere verbal utterances. But they need to be backed by action to reap intended benefits.
2. Further, as illustrated above with Yogic parallels, the actions presented in the Vedas, are yogic in nature.

Thus, this not only establishes a beneficial connection between the Vedas and the Yogic practices but also hints at the approach that has to be adopted to understand and utilize the Vedic wisdom, handed down to us in day to day life.

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20 āmnāyasya kriyārthattvāt...

jaimiṇīya- mīmāṃsā -sūtra 1.2.1