

*A Gift from Guru Nitya on His Birthday:*

On a clear night when we look at our sky we see far-off stars shimmering like gold dust. Some of them are only barely visible. Amongst the stars we can also see the moon. If we are pleased with such a sight, our enjoyment of the shimmering stars and the moonshine is not that of an astrophysicist. It is more natural for a poet to feel inspired when they see the night skies bedecked with jewel-like stars. There is nothing we can actually do with the stars and moon and yet they fill our heart with great cheer.

In the morning when we come out of our sleeping apartment and see fresh blossoms in our garden, we are overwhelmed. We feel like going near to have a good look at each flower. We may even touch their dainty petals affectionately. When the toddlers of the house come crawling to us with their toothless smiles our bosom is filled with delight and we instinctively pick them up to cuddle and kiss. The chiming of temple bells or peals of bells from a nearby church bring a special solemnity to that hour. We attribute something sacred to such caressing sounds that greet us in the peaceful hour of daybreak or a quiet evening. All these things that delight us can be represented symbolically by the night sky with the stars and moon. When we speak to an astronomer, he may point out an almost invisible star and tell us that it takes two to three thousand years for light to reach us from its far-off position. Yet that does not excite our interest. We are pleased because the star twinkles.

(This meditation was inspired by mantra III.7.11 of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*: “The one who inhabits the moon and stars, yet is within the moon and stars, whom the moon and stars do not know, whose body is the moon and stars, who controls the moon and stars from within, that is your Self, the inner controller, the immortal.”)

In this mantra our attention is called to the innumerable brilliant specks of joyful interest with which our world is strewn. If you go for a walk in the morning you will find dewdrops hanging on the tip of every blade of grass. The first beams of sunlight which fall on these dewdrops transform them into pearls of priceless worth. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore said that God does not expect us to thank him for creating the sun, moon and stars; but he certainly

expects us to look at the little violet, which he thoughtfully put in our garden to smile at us. It is heart-touching that the ancient rishis of the Upanishads wanted to tell us that we should not miss these little details that make our life on earth truly meaningful, so that the passing moments can be eternalized in our memory as moments that we have really lived. Of course, most people have no time to see how carefully our world is decorated with innumerable items of beauty and gaiety that can be heard, touched, seen, tasted and smelled.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus asks us to pray to God to give us this day our daily bread. At the same time he does not forget that the same God who gives us food and drink also gives us the most heart-warming songs of birds which come fearlessly to our garden to sing for us. Jesus did notice how beautiful is a lily that grows in the field. Even though it remains there for only for a few days and then withers away, the Creator has taken so much care to decorate it with garments more regal than those of Solomon. When Jesus reminds us that God gives us our daily bread, he does not forget to say that the same God cares for the birds in the sky who do not sow, reap, or gather grains in barns, but will always have enough to eat each day.

In our terrible haste in a world that we have made competitive, we miss the elegance of each leaf and the creepers that go twining in the nearby tree and decorate it with pretty flowers. The ugliness of a drab, monotonous, and competitive world, where people are bound by obligations and necessity, is more than balanced and complemented with beauty, daintiness, suppleness and the promise of the future. Even in very old trees we see new sprouts coming from the tip of their branches to assure us that the trees are not too old to enrich another spring.

To get into the spirit of this mantra we should leave aside all our heavy-duty assignments and sit back so that we can ponder over what we have achieved by our own effort, and how much more is given to us by Providence without our even asking for it. Sunlight is given to us without our reaching for it; the summer cloud showers in our garden for no return; day after day, week after week, we are surprised by new clusters of buds coming on plants in our garden. It is this joyous experience of living with the bounty of life on earth that we should look into to understand what the moon and stars, which in this mantra

are used symbolically, mean to this world. What the great God is doing for us, we can also do in our own life. Instead of a dingy mind filled with misery, we can make it as vast and brilliant as the starry sky.

A long time back, far away from us, on another beautiful night, Vincent Van Gogh saw not only the moon, but every star dancing in the sky, with a circular ring around it. He painted this scene as the backdrop to a cypress tree. The cypress tree with its conical shape looks like a cathedral spiraling into the starry sky. It symbolizes the human aspiration to go from here to the beyond where one can be free, and where one can befriend a star. Afterwards that painting became so inspiring to every connoisseur of art that it is still being marveled at. Years after Vincent Van Gogh's death, a poet could not resist the beauty of that starry night and wrote a poem dedicated to Vincent. Today we can still hear romantic singers singing "Starry, Starry Night."

To experience this, one has to be away from Wall Street and the profit-loss lamentations of the industrialists and commercial entrepreneurs. God, the inner controller, does not expect from us nuclear bombs and the arsenals we fill with deadly weapons, but that we make festivals of light instead. A bunch of colored balloons given to a child can be more useful than sending a battalion of killers with monstrous weapons to some border area. Upanishad itself means to sit near. Its message is also to ask every one of us to go near where love and beauty are; where music and friendship are. Thus the mantra under consideration is a meditation in itself. Like some great lovers of humanity, such as William Blake, Lewis Carroll or Walt Disney, we are asked to look at the lighter side of life, which can save humanity from the grotesque calamities brought to our world through industrial revolution and war mongering. We experience a little of this joy or peace when we stand before an altar or gather to listen to a concert or sit around a table with no serious business to deliberate but to sip a cup of tea amidst an exchange of pleasantries. Even this has a place in spiritual life. In the Kena Upanishad the most striking definition given to God is the exclamation "ha!"

However light this mantra may sound, it gives crowning glory to the science of the Absolute, *brahmavidya*, because that is arranged by the loving God who is the indwelling immortal in the heart of our hearts.