



The MEANING *of the* MANTRA
OM NAMAḤ ŚIVĀYA



SARVAMANGALA FOUNDATION

Explanation by Āchārya Vidyābhāskar

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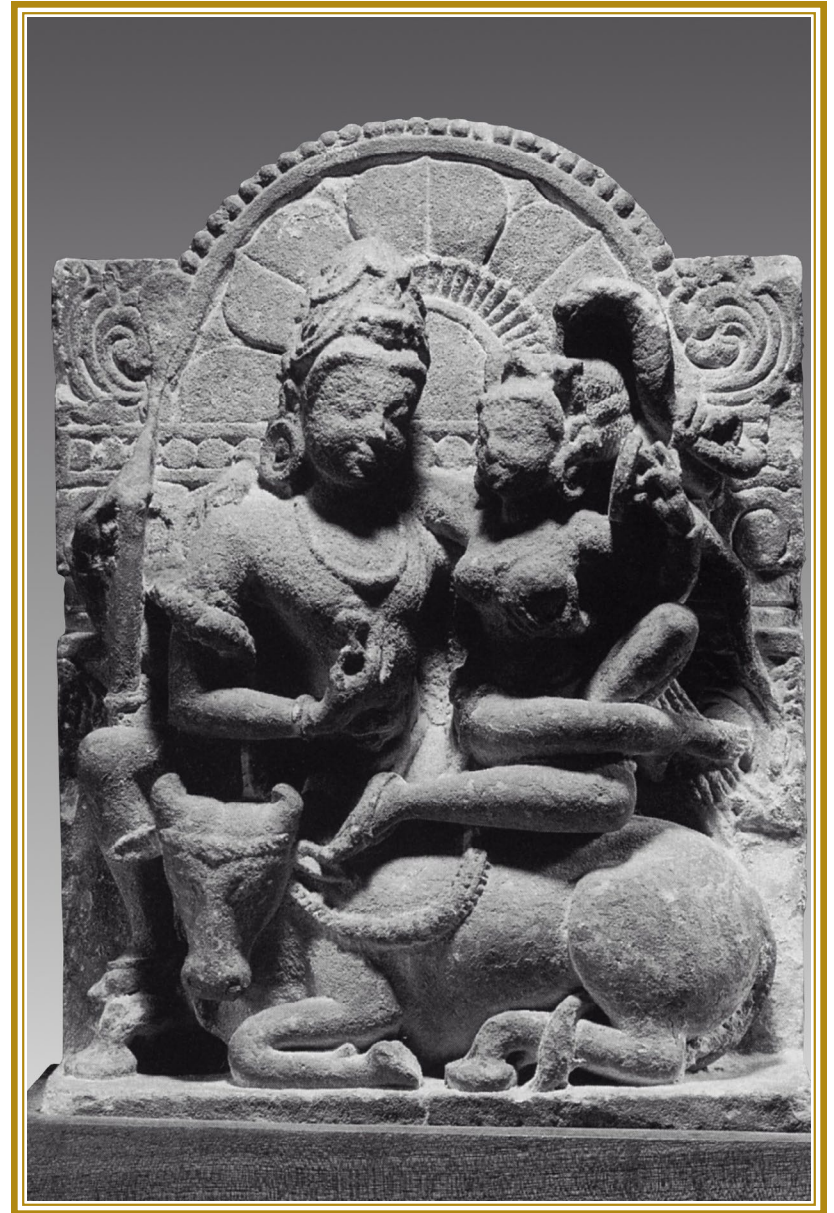
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SARVAMANGALA

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OM NAMAḤ ŚIVĀYA



ŚIVA WITH PĀRVATĪ AND NANDĪ

The union of Absolute Awareness and Energy.

Indian Statue, ca. 1400-1499, in Private Collection @ Himalayan Art Resources

The MEANING of the MANTRA
OM NAMAḤ ŚIVĀYA

THE MEANING OF ॐ नमः शिवाय, OM NAMAḤ ŚIVĀYA

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1 **The Original Context of the Mantra**

The original context of the mantra is Taittirīya-Saṁhitā 4.5.8.1 of the Kṛṣṇa-Yajurveda and the Rudrāṣṭādhyāyī of the Śukla-Yajurveda; it is elaborated upon in countless Āgamas and is also explained in the important Tamil scripture Tirumantiram.

2 **The Basic Meaning**

The basic meaning of *Om̐ Namaḥ Śivāya* is:

Om̐ Obeisance to Śiva, the Peaceful or Auspicious One

The more detailed meaning of *Om̐ Namaḥ Śivāya* is:

Om̐ Obeisance [with body, speech and mind] to the Auspicious, Peaceful, Joy-Bringing, Beneficial [Absolute Consciousness].

3 **A Detailed Explanation of Om̐ Namaḥ Śivāya**

3.1. OM

Om̐ has innumerable meanings – up to 84 distinct meanings are listed in the scriptures.

Its primary meaning, derived from Māṇḍūkya-Upaniṣad 1, is that it represents totality or wholeness: *sarvam*.

In verses 7-12, the Upaniṣad explains that the letters in Om – A, U, M and the fourth aspect which has no letters – represent the four aspects of Consciousness or *Caitanya*:

A = the waking state

U = the dream world

M = the total absence of any experiences in deep sleep

That which has no letters (amātra) = the transcendent fourth aspect or Caturtha/Turīya: Absolute Consciousness which is Śānta, peaceful, Śiva, auspicious, Advaita, nondual.

3.2. Namaḥ - Obeisance, Homage, Prostration

‘namaḥ’ is sometimes found as a neuter gender word but most often as an indeclinable or *avyaya*. ‘namaḥ’ is formed with √nam + asun in the sense of *bhāva*, with Uṇādisūtra 4.188 *sarvadhātubhyo’sun*.

The root √nam has several meanings:

- Nati: To bow, to prostrate, to make obeisance, to pay homage (with body, speech and mind)
- Śabda: To make a sound
- Prahva: To incline, to slant towards

Namaḥ has these two primary meanings:

- Nati: Bow, prostration, obeisance, homage (with body, speech and mind)
- Stotra: Praise

Secondary meanings of Namaḥ are:

- Ruta: the sound of a bird, a bee or a horse (as per Uṇādikoṣa)
- Anna: Food (as per Nighaṇṭu)
- Vajra: Thunderbolt (as per Nighaṇṭu)
- Tyāga: renunciation

In the context of the mantra, Namaḥ means ‘obeisance with body, speech and mind’.

3.3. Śivāya – to Śiva

4th or dative case of the a-ending noun ‘Śiva’. The dative case expresses the sense of ‘to whom?’

To whom is the obeisance made? To Śiva. Śivāya thus expresses that Śiva is the recipient of the obeisance ‘namaḥ’.

The word Śiva can be derived in various ways. It is mainly derived from the root √śī(ñ) svapne , → śete: to rest, to sleep, to repose, to be at peace, to recline with ease – with the suffix ‘van’ in accordance with Uṇādisūtra 1.151 *sarva-nīghṛṣv-ariṣv-alaṣvaśivapaṭvaprabhveṣvā asvatantre*

Other roots from which Śiva can be legitimately derived are:

√śo tanūkarāṇe → śyati: to reduce, to minimise (Pāṇinisūtras 3.1.69 *divādibhyaḥ śyan*, 7.3.71 *otaḥ śyani*, and so forth)

√śi(ñ) niśāne → śisāti: to bestow (dāna, Nighaṇṭu 5.23), to perceive, to sharpen, to make keen, to refine (kratum... prajñānam vareṇyam śisāti... tikṣṇīkaroti, Sāyaṇa on RV 8.15.7)

Ujjvala Datta in his Vṛtti on Uṇādisūtra 1.151 states: śete asmin sarvam iti śivaḥ, ‘śiva is he in whom everything rests or reclines with ease’.

Bharata in his Ṭīkā on the Amarakośa gives three vyutpattis or derivations:

- 1) śivam kalyāṇam vidyate asmin: He in whom the auspicious is present
- 2) śyati aśubham: He who reduces inauspicious [mental states, actions and consequences]
- 3) śerate avatiṣṭhante aṇimādayo’ṣṭau guṇā asmin: He in whom the eight qualities of Aṇimā and so forth recline or dwell.

Thus, the most common grammatically accepted meanings of Śiva are:

- The peaceful one
- He in whom everything rests or reclines with ease
- He in whom the auspicious is present
- He who reduces the inauspicious [mental states, actions, consequences]
- He in whom the eight qualities of Aṇimā and so forth dwell

The eight qualities are:

Aṇimā: the ability to become smaller than the smallest, reducing.

Mahimā: the ability to become infinitely large.

Laghimā: the ability to become weightless or extremely light.

Prāpti: the ability to instantaneously travel, or be anywhere at will.

Prākāmya: the ability to achieve or realise whatever one desires.

Īśitva: the ability to control the minds and thoughts of beings.

Vaśitva: the ability to control all the elements or natural forces.

Further grammatical meanings of Śiva that can be validly derived:

- He who bestows [happiness etc.], the generous one
- He who sharpens [one’s insight]
- The good or splendid (śobhana, Sāyaṇa on RV 1.31.1)

3.4. Śiva as Kalyāṇakara

Many traditional commentators gloss ‘śiva’ als ‘kalyāṇakara’, ‘he who brings about kalyāṇa’: auspiciousness, fortune, bliss’. Thus, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at some of the meanings of ‘kalyāṇa’:

Kalya (from √kal) + āṇa (śabda):

- agreeable sound made in the morning, the auspicious sound [of nature, the birds etc.] of the early morning
- to speak in agreement
- to express oneself beautifully
- to express oneself artfully, artistically

3.5. Śiva as Maṅgala

Amarasimha considers ‘śiva’ a synonym of ‘kalyāṇa’, ‘maṅgala’ and ten other words having similar meanings related to ‘auspiciousness’, ‘benefit’:

‘maṅgala’ is derived from the root √mag in the sense of ‘gati’ (to move) with the suffix ac (a) in accordance with Uṇādi-Sūtra 5.70 *maṅgeralac*.

The basic meaning is defined in two ways:

- ‘maṅgati hitārtham iti’, ‘to move for the benefit (of others)’
- ‘maṅgati dur-adṛṣṭam anena asmād iti’, ‘through this – through auspiciousness – negative adṛṣṭa or the invisible, delayed karmic consequences are moved away, i.e. they recede or dissolve.’ In this

sense it is a synonym of puṇya or merit.

3.6. Śiva as explained by Śaṅkarācārya

Parts of the well-known Rudrasūkta of the Yajurveda are repeated in the Śvetāśvatara-Upaniṣad. A commentary on the Upaniṣad is attributed to Śaṅkarācārya. We thus have a direct explanation of the word ‘śiva’ by the great commentator himself.

He explains ‘śivā tanūḥ’, ‘the auspicious aspect’ to mean:

avidyā-tatkārya-vinirmuktā sac-cid-ānandādvaya-brahma-rūpā
[The aspect of Consciousness] free from ignorance and its consequences, whose nature is the nondual *Brahman* or Absolute Reality of Being, Consciousness and Bliss.

Furthermore, in his commentary on Māṅḍūkya-Upaniṣad 7, Śaṅkarācārya explains ‘śiva’ as:

‘bheda-vikalpa-rahita’
‘free of any notions of difference or duality’

in reference to the fourth or all-transcending state of Absolute Consciousness.



ŚIVA WITH FAMILY

Śiva with Pārvatī, Gaṇapati and Kumāra.

Ancient Nepali Statue in Private Collection @ Himalayan Art Resources

4 Śiva in the Vedas

The way 'śiva' is used in the Vedas is always in the sense of 'auspicious, good', often as an adjective of 'sakhā', 'friend'.

Ṛgveda 1.31.1a-b:

त्वमग्ने प्रथमो अंगिरा ऋषिर्देवो देवानामभवः शिवः सखा ।

tvám agne prathamó áṅgirā ṛṣir devó devānām abhavaḥ śivāḥ sakhā ।

You, O Agni, were the earliest Aṅgiras, a Ṛṣi; a Deva yourself, you became the Devas' good Friend.

Ṛgveda 1.53.11a:

य उदृचीन्द्र देवगोपाः सखायस्ते शिवतमा असाम ।

yá udṛcīndra devágopāḥ sakhāyaste śivatamā ásāma ।

May we protected by the Devas hereafter remain your very best (śivatama) friends, O Indra.

These are all the Ṛgvedic passages where 'śiva' is used as an adjective for 'sakhā', friend: Ṛgveda 1.53.11a; 1.31.1a-b; 1.108.5; 3.58.6; 4.10.8; 5.12.5; 6.45.17; 7.22.9; 8.93.3; 10.3.4; 10.23.7; 10.25.9; 10.34.2; 10.95.15; 10.124.2.

Ṛgveda 1.79.2c-d:

शिवाभिर्न स्मयमानाभिरागात्पतन्ति मिहः स्तनयन्त्यभ्रा ॥

śivābhir ná smáyamānābhir āgāt pátanti míhaḥ stanáyanty abhrā ॥

With auspicious, smiling drops he comes: the waters fall, the clouds utter their thunder.

In Ṛgveda 1.117.3, the expression ‘aśivasya māyāḥ’, ‘the deceptions of the inauspicious one’ is used. Here Sāyaṇa glosses ‘aśiva’ as ‘duḥkha-kārin’, ‘one who causes suffering’.

Ṛgveda 1.141.2 addressed to Agni:

पृक्षो वपुः पितुमान्नित्य आ शये द्वितीयमा सप्तशिवासु मातृषु ।

prkṣó vápuḥ pitumānnítya ā śaye dvitīyamā saptásivāsu mātṛṣu ।

Wonderful, rich in nourishment, he dwells in nourishment; secondly, in the seven auspicious Mothers is his home.

Ṛgveda 1.187.3 addressed to divine Nourishment:

उप नः पितवा चर शिवः शिवाभिरूतिभिः ।

m̐yobhūr̐advīṣeṇyaḥ sakhā suśevo ādvayāḥ ॥

úpa naḥ pitavā́ cara śiváḥ śivā́bhirūtíbhīḥ ।

mayobhūr̐ advīṣeṇyāḥ sákhā suśévo ādvayāḥ ॥

Come hitherward to us, O Nourishment, auspicious with auspicious help, bringing joy, free of aversion, a dear friend without duplicity.

Here Sāyaṇa glosses ‘śiva’ as ‘maṅgala’.

5 **Śiva-Ṣaḍakṣara-Stotra:**

The Praise of Śiva’s Six-Syllable (Mantra)

ॐकारं बिन्दुसंयुक्तं नित्यं ध्यायन्ति योगिनः ।

कामदं मोक्षदं चैव ॐकाराय नमो नमः ॥ १॥

oṃkāraṃ bindu-saṃyuktaṃ nityaṃ dhyāyanti yoginaḥ

kāmadaṃ mokṣadaṃ caiva oṃkāraya namo namaḥ

The syllable OM with the bindu: Ever do the Yogīs meditate upon this, which grants *the fulfilment of* desires as well as liberation – homage upon homage to the syllable OM.

नमन्ति ऋषयो देवा नमन्त्यप्सरसां गणाः ।

नरा नमन्ति देवेशं नकाराय नमो नमः ॥ २ ॥

namanti ṛṣayo devā namanty apsarasāṃ gaṇāḥ

narā namanti deveśaṃ nakārāya namo namaḥ

The syllable NA: The Ṛṣis, the Devas, the hosts of Apsaras, and humans bow to the Lord of the Gods – homage upon homage to the syllable NA.

महादेवं महात्मानं महाध्यानं परायणम् ।

महापापहरं देवं मकाराय नमो नमः ॥ ३ ॥

mahādevaṃ mahātmānaṃ mahādhyānaṃ parāyaṇam

mahāpāpaharaṃ devaṃ makārāya namo namaḥ

The syllable MA: [They bow to] the Great Deva, of Great Nature, whose Meditation is Great, the supreme goal, the Deva who removes

even the greatest of evils – homage upon homage to the syllable MA.

शिवं शान्तं जगन्नाथं लोकानुग्रहकारकम् ।

शिवमेकपदं नित्यं शिकाराय नमो नमः ॥ ४ ॥

śivaṃ śāntaṃ jagannāthaṃ lokānugrahakāraḥ

śivam ekapadaṃ nityaṃ śikārāya namo namaḥ

The syllable ŚI: Śiva, the peaceful, the Lord of the world, who grants his grace to the world, the peaceful nondual state, the eternal – homage upon homage to the syllable ŚI.

वाहनं वृषभो यस्य वासुकिः कण्ठभूषणम् ।

वामे शक्तिधरं देवं वकाराय नमो नमः ॥ ५ ॥

vāhanaṃ vṛṣabho yasya vāsukiḥ kaṇṭhabhūṣaṇam

vāme śaktidharaṃ devaṃ vakārāya namo namaḥ

The syllable VA: He whose vehicle is the Bull, he whose throat is adorned by [the great serpent] Vāsuki, the Deva on whose left [side] abides the Feminine Energy – homage upon homage to the syllable VA.

यत्र यत्र स्थितो देवः सर्वव्यापी महेश्वरः ।

यो गुरुः सर्वदेवानां यकाराय नमो नमः ॥ ६ ॥

yatra yatra sthito devaḥ sarvavyāpī maheśvaraḥ

yo guruḥ sarvadevānāṃ yakārāya namo namaḥ

The syllable YA: Wherever the Deva is present, the all-pervading Great Lord, he who is the Teacher of all the Gods – homage upon homage to the syllable YA.

षडक्षरमिदं स्तोत्रं यः पठेच्छिवसंनिधौ ।

शिवलोकमवाप्नोति शिवेन सह मोदते ॥ ७ ॥

ṣaḍakṣaram idaṃ stotraṃ yaḥ paṭhecchiva-saṃnidhau

śiva-lokam avāpnoti śivena saha modate

One who recites this Praise of the Six-Syllable [Mantra] in the presence of Śiva attains the realm of Śiva and delights in union with Śiva [Absolute Consciousness].

6 *Om Namaḥ Śivāya* in the Tirumantiram

The Tirumantiram, an important Tamil scripture, explains that:

“His feet are the letter Na. His navel is the letter Ma. His shoulders are the letter Śi. His mouth, the letter Vā. His radiant cranial center aloft is Ya. Thus is the five-lettered form of Śiva.”

-Tirumantiram 941



PRAYER to GODDESS SARASVATĪ to
INCREASE *our* INTELLIGENCE

FIVE-HEADED ŚIVA

The five heads of Śiva reveal the many different paths to realising the nature of Consciousness.

Nepali Artwork, ca. 1400-1499, Rubin Museum @ Himalayan Art Resources

PRAYER to GODDESS SARASVATĪ to
INCREASE *our* INTELLIGENCE



ॐ नमस्ते शारदे देवि काश्मीरपुरवासिनि ।
त्वामहं प्रार्थये नित्यं विद्यादानं च देहि मे ॥

oṃ namaste śārade devi kāśmīra-pura-vāsini |
tvām ahaṃ prārthaye nityaṃ vidyā-dānaṃ ca dehi me ||

Om Obeisance to you, O Goddess Śāradā,
You who are like the Full-Moon in Autumn,
You who dwell in the Region of Kaśmīr!
I ever beseech you: Grant me the gift of knowledge!

GODDESS SARASVATĪ, THE SANSKRIT LANGUAGE PERSONIFIED

Ancient Nepali Painting of Goddess Sarasvatī © Himalayan Art Resources

