



The MEANING of the
MAHĀ-MṚTYUÑJAYA-MANTRA



SARVAMANGALA FOUNDATION

Explanation by Āchārya Vidyābhāskar

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SARVAMANGALA

महामृत्युञ्जयमन्त्रव्याख्यानम्

Mahā-Mṛtyuñjaya-Mantra-Vyākhyānam

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MANY-HEADED AND MANY-EYED ŚIVA

A Nepali illustration of Śiva in accordance with the Kashmiri Śaiva scriptures.

Illustration © Himalayan Art Resources

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MAHĀ-MṚTYUÑJAYA-MANTRA

The Mahā-Mṛtyuñjaya-Mantra

The Great Mantra to Conquer Death

ॐ त्र्यम्बकं यजामहे सुगन्धिं पुष्टिवर्धनम् ।

उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय मामृतात् ॥

oṃ tryambakaṃ yajāmahe sugandhiṃ puṣṭi-varadhanam |

urvārukam iva bandhanān mṛtyor mukṣīya mā'mṛtāt ||

We venerate the Three-Eyed *Śiva* of wonderful fragrance, who increases well-being. Like a cucumber from its stalk, may I be released from death so as to *attain* immortality.

The original source of the Mantra is Ṛgveda 7.59.12. The Mantra is addressed to Tryambaka, “The Three-eyed One”, an epithet of Śiva. The Mantra also recurs in the Yajurveda (TS 1.8.6.i; VS 3.60) and Atharvaveda 14.1.17.

The Story behind the Mantra

One legend relates the story of how Śiva protected Mārkaṇḍeya from the clutches of death, personified as Mṛtyu or Yama.

The great sage Mṛkaṇḍu and his wife Marudmatī worshipped Śiva and sought from him the boon of begetting a child. They were given the choice of either a righteous and realised son with a short life span of 16 years on earth or a son of mediocre intelligence but with a long and good life filled with pleasures, luxuries, a good job, a good wife, happy children, etc.

Mṛkaṇḍu chose the former – a son who would become enlightened, a meditative genius and teacher of others. In due course, they were blessed with Mārkaṇḍeya, an exemplary son who was destined to die at the age of 16.

Mārkaṇḍeya grew up to be a great devotee of Śiva – the representation of Infinite Consciousness or Awareness. On the day of his destined death, he continued his hold on to Śiva in the form of the Śivaliṅga, a stone representing the Pillar of Infinite Light. The messengers of Yama, the god of death were unable to take away his life because of his great devotion and continuous adherence to Śiva. Yama then came in person to take away Mārkaṇḍeya's life, and sprung his noose around the young sage's neck.

By accident, the noose mistakenly also landed around the Śivaliṅga. Śiva emerged from the sacred stone and destroyed Yama with his

trident. After completely annihilating the god of death, Śiva then revived him under the condition that the devout youth would live forever. For this act, Śiva was thereafter also known as Kālāntaka or Yamāntaka ('Ender of Death').

This event, it is said, took place on the bank of river Gomati in Kaithi, Varanasi. An ancient temple, the Mārkaṇḍeya Mahādeva Temple, stands at this site. It is the place where the river Ganga and the river Gomati merge. It is thus a Sangam area, a place of confluence or nonduality.

Grammatical note on the word 'Mṛtyuñjaya'

√mṛñ prāṇatyāge

+ tyuk, Uṇādi-Sūtra 3.21 *bhujī-mṛñbhyām yuk-tyukau*. Mriyate asmād iti, Mṛtyu is "that on account of whom one dies", i.e. Death.

√ji, to conquer + khac + mum = jaya, that which conquers

mṛtyuñjaya thus means 'that which or he who conquers death'

Tryambakam – the Three-Eyed (accusative, 2.1)

trīṇi candra-sūrya-agni-rūpāṇi ambakāni netrāṇi yasya

"He who has three eyes in the form of the moon, the sun and fire."

Candra, the moon – this also represents the Iḍā or Vāmā, the left energy channel in the subtle body, which is linked to intuitive thought or emotion, bliss and the energy of desire (wanting)

Sūrya, the sun – this also represents the Piṅgalā or right-side energy channel in the subtle body, which is linked to conceptual analytical thought, clarity and the energy of aversion (not-wanting)

Agni, fire – this also represents the Suṣumnā or Madhya (middle) energy channel in the subtle body, which is linked to nondual wisdom and the Third Eye or Jñānacakṣu, the Eye of Awareness.

“We venerate Absolute Consciousness manifesting as intuitive thought and emotion, as bliss and the energy of wanting or desiring; we venerate Absolute Consciousness manifesting as conceptual thought, clarity and the energy of not-wanting or aversion; We venerate Absolute Consciousness manifesting as nondual wisdom, the Third Eye, the Eye of Awareness.”

Sāyaṇa also gives another meaning:

trayāṇām brahma-viṣṇu-rudrāṇām ambakaṁ pitaraṁ yajāmahe
“We venerate the father or progenitor of the three – Brahmā, the one who creates or brings forth a state of existence, Viṣṇu, the one who maintains or preserves a state of existence, Rudra, the one who annihilates or dissolves a state of existence.”

In this sense, Tryambaka is Absolute Consciousness or Brahman itself – the Boundless Space which gives rise to creation, preservation and destruction, that which in every moment – even the smallest moment – makes it possible for a state to arise, to abide and then to cease.

“We venerate Absolute Consciousness which is the boundless space within which the states of creativity, maintenance and dissolution occur, within which all experiences arise, abide and then cease moment to moment.”

Yajāmahe – we venerate (present tense, 1st person plural)

√yaj means:

- deva-pūjā: to worship a Deity

- saṅgātikaraṇa (saṅgaṭhana): to bring together, to unify

- dāna: to bestow, to yield

Sāyaṇa explains it as pūjayāmaḥ, ‘we venerate’, ‘we worship’.

It could also in an extended sense mean ‘we venerate in order to unify with’.

“We venerate Absolute Consciousness in order to unify ourselves with it (i.e. in order to realise our unity).”

Su-gandhim – him whose fragrance (of goodness) is wonderful (accusative, 2.1)

Sāyaṇa explains it as prasārita-puṇya-kīrtim, ‘the renown of his purifying goodness or puṇya is widespread’.

śobhanaḥ śarīragandhaḥ puṇyagandho vā yasyāsau sugandhiḥ | yathā vṛkṣasya saṃpuṣpitasya dūrād gandho vāty evaṃ puṇyasya karmaṇo dūrād gandho vāti | (Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 10.9)

“Sugandhi is one whose body odour or the fragrance of whose goodness (puṇya) is wonderful. Like the fragrance of a tree with marvellous flowers is fragrant even from afar, similarly, the fragrance of an auspicious action is fragrant even at a distance.”

Maitrī sarveṣu bhūteṣu śiva-dharmasya lakṣaṇam (Śiva-Dharmottara-Āgama)

“Maitrī (loving kindness) towards all beings is the characteristic of the Dharma of Śiva.”

Puṇya – Pātaka = Pāpa

√puñ pavane, “to purify”, pūyate anena iti puṇyam, that whereby one is purified (of negative emotions and states) is Puṇya.”

√pat, “to fall”, pātayati iti, “that which causes one to fall (into negative emotions and states)” is Pātaka = Pāpa.

kṣaṇārdhenāpi yat puṇyaṃ kuryān maitrīsubhāvitaḥ |
na tadvarṣasātenāpi tapo-yajñasatairbhavet || (Śiva-Dharmottara-Āgama 7.74-75)

“The Puṇya (the purifying goodness) one engages in by just half a moment of cultivating Maitrī properly, is not attained even by a hundred years of engaging in hundreds of austerities and ceremonies.”

“We venerate Absolute Consciousness whose fragrance of all-purifying goodness and Maitrī is far-reaching and purifies all negative emotions and states.”

Puṣṭi-vardhanam – him who increases well-being, nourishment, a state of fullness and contentment (accusative, 2.1)

√pūṣ vṛddhau

Sāyaṇa gives two explanations for Puṣṭi-vardhanam:

1. jagad-bijam | uruśaktim – the seed of the universe, the powerful energy that gives rise to the universe. Śiva is then “he who causes the powerful energy that is the seed of the universe grow/expand”.
2. śarīra-dhana-ādi-viṣayāṁ puṣṭim vardhayati iti – he increases well-being with regard to the body, wealth, (knowledge) etc.

“We venerate Absolute Consciousness who increases our well-being and who causes the powerful energy that is the very seed of the universe to grow/expand in the form of the manifold universe.”

urvārukam (accusative, 2.1), iva (indeclinable, meaning ‘like’), bandhanāt (ablative, 5.1) –

like a cucumber from (its) stalk

mṛtyor mukṣīya(m) – May I be released from death

Visarga-sandhi ‘mṛtyoḥ + mukṣīya’

1st person singular, benedictive (Āśīrlīn) ātmanepada of √muc, ‘to become free, to be released’.

(m)ā amṛtāt – so (I may attain) attain immortality, liberation
a-mṛta, ‘not-dead’ is the state of immortality or enlightenment.

It is the term used by the Buddha after his Enlightenment: “apāvrtā amṛtasya dvāraḥ”, “Wide open are the doors to the Immortal” were the first words the Buddha spoke after attaining Enlightenment, since he knew he was going to be able to teach the path to others. For this reason, he is also called ‘amṛtasya dātā’, ‘the giver of immortality’.

The three possible syntaxes with a similar meaning are:

mṛtyor mukṣīya mā amṛtāt – May I be released from death, not from immortality.

mṛtyor mukṣīya mā ā amṛtāt – Release me from death, not from immortality.

mṛtyor mukṣīyam ā amṛtāt – May I be released from death so as to attain immortality.

“Like a cucumber that is naturally released from its stalk, may I be freed from death and attain immortality, enlightenment.”

The succinct innermost meaning of the Mantra for Yogīs and Yoginīs:

When we abide in Awareness through the Yogic practice of unifying the energies of the left and the right subtle body channels within the middle channel or Suṣumnā, we are granted:

- **purification:** the wonderful fragrance of all-round goodness, Puṇya rooted in Maitrī, which gradually purifies all negative

emotions and states

- **joy:** increased well-being of the body and the mind
- **freedom:** a gradual but certain release from the bondage of negative emotions (self-centredness, obsessive wanting, aversion, superiority and inferiority) and their consequences, ultimately ushering in the utmost realisation of immortality: enlightenment.

PRAYER *to*
GODDESS SARASVATĪ *to*
INCREASE *our* INTELLIGENCE



GODDESS SARASVATĪ, THE SANSKRIT LANGUAGE PERSONIFIED

Illustration © Himalayan Art Resources

PRAYER to GODDESS SARASVATĪ to
INCREASE *our* INTELLIGENCE

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

om namaste śārade devi kāśmīra-pura-vāsini
tvām ahaṁ prārthaye nityaṁ vidyā-dānaṁ 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 Kāśmīr!
I ever beseech you:
Grant me the gift of knowledge!

