

Sivaratri—The Night of Siva

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Though Sivaratri or the night of Siva is observed differently, fasting, vigil and prayer are hallmarks of its observance, and in most places, it is observed throughout the night. Nighttime symbolizes our own inner darkness or ignorance – and vigilance, the awakened wisdom. The awakened wisdom is the Light in whose presence darkness or ignorance cannot exist.

Lord Siva is also known as the ‘Auspicious One’ and is often depicted as a great yogi in unbroken meditation. Oneness is auspicious—it is a state of yoga or inner undividedness. This requires one to be always alert, always vigilant or always meditative. All actions stemming from this inner awareness will be wise, good and peaceful.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali tells us the solution to dealing with that which causes pain or sorrow—that which exists and that which hasn’t arrived yet. Pain that has not come can and should be avoided, and pain or hurt that exists must either be resolved or dissolved. When I make myself incapable of both—being hurt and hurting others—natural peace ensues. This is accomplished not by inner and outer fortification or isolation but by a heightened state of awareness or vigilance. This has immediate relevance to our lives, as we would all like to live without experiencing and causing pain. Patanjali feels that yoga is aimed at the avoidance and cessation of pain. In the Bhagavad Gita, we are told to practice yoga for purification of the self.

Fasting is also an observance during Sivaratri, often for 24 hours and some do not intake any food or even water. Physically, one frees oneself from all concerns for the period and can dedicate oneself completely to prayer, sustained by this deep inner longing of love of God. Aside from the physical dimension, there is the mental dimension and mental fast where the mind is kept alert and awake in the presence of God. The physical discipline frees one to experience a much deeper psychological clarity.

When we are alert, we are careful and can recognize that which causes pain and how to intelligently deal with it. By giving the mind a new channel, that of adoration of God, we learn that new pathways can recycle the energy of old habits and this is a tremendous discovery. Swami Sivananda says, “Detach the mind from the world, attach it to God”. This can be experienced as we fast or disallow the old and at the same time, channel the hunger towards the good—towards God. Here is a lasting lesson on transforming the mind and *being* change—not merely changing things. We see old inner promptings, those that led to pain and caused pain, and seeing this directly we learn to channel the energy within by choosing God instead. If we can learn how to do this during the night or the few hours we observe Sivaratri, we can apply this at all times and

in different settings too as the dynamics are the same. Vigilance is the Light on the path. It is the only light you have and it is your best friend.

However, vigilance needs to be sustained by the fuel of self-effort. If we clearly realize what results from lack of awareness or vigilance, we will be on the alert, as it is this that avoids pain. The understanding of this has to sink deep into one's bones—even deeper still, it has to fill the space in every cell of the body so that carelessness or callousness will find no room.

The practice of fasting, vigil and prayer on Sivaratri is thus symbolic of a new beginning of learning how to detach from the old, be alert and direct one's energies towards that which is auspicious, towards that which is good. These most valuable lessons must continue beyond the festive night we call Sivaratri. Many festivals have come and gone, the spirit being doused with the new day. Let this Sivaratri be different, meaningful and lasting! Let it truly be the awakening of Siva or the Light of God within in whose presence the darkness of ignorance cannot exist!

Om Namah Sivaya!

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