

DEVI MAHATMYA

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society

Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

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Visitor: Should all the *slokas* and mantras of the Devi Mahatmya be treated as three separate portions.

Swamiji: This was done because they were addressed to Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Were the chapters then spoken from different aspects? No. The three deities are the three stages of consciousness—*tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*—reached in an ascending order.

Visitor: Are the chapters then suitably written to *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*?

Swamiji: No, because they are all one. It is our incapacity to see all three as one that brings in the distinction. It is the same one *guna* that appears as *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*.

Visitor: Then the number of *slokas* in each portion has no meaning as so many mantras? The numbers vary, unlike in the *ashtottara* and *sahasra*—*namavalis*.

Swamiji: There is no significance in the number as such of the *slokas*. It is all one continuous mantra of prayer to one deity only.

PRONUNCIATION OF MANTRAS

Visitor: Is it a sin if a *mantra* is mispronounced due to ignorance or physical defect?

Swamiji: Some people become fanatics and think only their mantra works, and only if pronounced correctly. A devotee in Tamil Nadu used to recite Namah Chivaya (instead of Namah Sivaya) with such faith that he was able to walk on water while reciting Nama Chivaya. One day a grammarian taught the devotee to pronounce the mantra correctly as Namah Sivaya. But with the correct pronunciation, the devotee could no longer walk on water. He fell into the water because he was concentrating on the pronunciation of the mantra and had lost faith in his Guru who gave the mantra.

There was a sweeper woman who approached her employer, a proud Namboodiri Brahmin of Kerala, for a mantra she could recite. He was angry that she should ask for a mantra, as she was of a low caste. But she persisted. The Namboodiri yelled at her contemptuously "Go and recite Tapala Curry", meaning frog curry. The woman took it in good faith and went on repeating the phrase with such devotion that she became enlightened. People asked her who her Guru was, and when she told them they went and praised his disciple's saintliness and how good a Guru he must be. But the Namboodiri had forgotten all about the low caste woman. Now he remembered the incident and felt sorry for himself; for he was still in *samsara* while she had become enlightened with the 'frog curry' mantra! All these parables emphasise the importance of the attitude or *bhava* in mantra japa. The attitude is much more important than the mere sound of the word.

HINDU GODS

Visitor: Swamiji, someone with a definite purpose of his own, in order to provoke me into an argument, remarked, "Hinduism is nothing but one god fighting with another!" I knew his mind and so refused to say anything. But what is the meaning of these so-called wars between Vishnu and Brahma, for instance, when Lord Siva vanquishes them both and quells their pride? Lord Siva establishes at the same time that He is the Most Supreme! Is it because in such contexts the Manifested God gets accretions of their level which is lower than that of the Supreme Being? The Puranas and the Epics are full of such incidents of war among the Gods.

Swamiji: The subject-object opposition in time and space, the affirmation of the ego as superior to and supreme over everything, causes the clash, no matter at what level. This clash of the positive and the negative, both of which are inherent in everything finite, produces a spark as a higher synthesis and is absorbed in the higher synthesis. But this level of the present higher synthesis is, again, not the highest. It is still only in the process of evolution into the next higher synthesis. Hence this clash and this spark are repeated, and so is the absorption of the spark into the next higher synthesis, from level to level. This clash or 'war' between the gods - deities of the different levels - goes on until the last higher synthesis is absorbed into the Absolute. This process of the sparks getting absorbed thus is explained in the Puranas and the Epics as one god warring with another and a third god conquering (absorbing) both within Itself.