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Shiva: A Theological Reflection

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For centuries, Hindus have worshipped and described God through the name and form of Shiva. The name Shiva connotes kindness, benevolence and grace. Shiva is also commonly known as Shankara, meaning one who acts unceasingly for the good of all. The many names and forms of God available in the Hindu tradition are not just expressions of India's religious and cultural diversity. These names and forms, especially those that have endured and lived for centuries, express profound insights about the nature of God and the meaning of human existence that enrich our understanding. Along with our use of these names and forms in worship and festivals, such as Shivaratri, we must also contemplate and explore their theological significance and richness. On this occasion of Shivaratri, I want to suggest four ways in which the name and form of Shiva speaks relevantly to us through the ages about God and the meaning of human life.

The first insight arises from the contrast between the predominant icon or murti representations of Shiva and those of God as Vishnu. Although, both as I emphasize, are forms of the one God, there is an unmistakable difference. Icons of Vishnu typically represent him in the symbols of royalty, power and wealth. He wears a crown on his head, jewels around his neck, golden earrings on both ears, and resplendent robes. He is accompanied and served by the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. Shiva, on the other hand, wears nothing but a loincloth. His body is bereft of jewels; his only "jewels," if the term is still appropriate, are snakes and rosaries. The icon of Shiva attracts us by its stark simplicity and lack of adornment. The eyes of Vishnu are open looking out to the world; the eyes of Shiva are half-closed in meditation.

The representation of Vishnu with the symbols of kingship and splendor properly emphasizes the nature of God as the omnipotent source and lord of creation, and the one to whom everything belongs. Kingly insignia are an effective statement of these truths. The icon of Shiva, on the other hand, empty of all trappings of power and wealth, reminds us that the value of the human being and lasting source of human contentment are to be found in who we are and not in what we own. Although wealth and power are important for a comprehensive human wellbeing, these are impermanent, unpredictable and ultimately fail to satisfy the thoughtful person. These necessary ends must be pursued with the detachment that comes from understanding their limits. Our human worth is an intrinsic one that has its source in divine that exists at the heart of each one of us. Shiva's half-closed eyes, his contented expression and his smile of peace point to the condition of being awake to this divine reality. Shiva reminds us of the Upanishadic wisdom that we forget at the expense of our joy: 'Human beings cannot be content with wealth alone' ("na vittena tarpaneyo manusyo", Katha Upanishad 1:27).

The second meaningful insight about Shiva arises from his association with time and change. As a form of God, Vishnu is associated with preservation, stability and continuity and there is no doubt that these are important ingredients for a good life. We need the predictable and familiar to provide constancy in our lives. A life in which the fundamental ingredients of our existence changed on a daily basis will be intolerable. God as Shiva, however, reminds us that even as we value and seek stability in our lives, change is inevitable. On his flowing hair, Shiva wears the crescent moon, the symbol of time, reminding us that there is no creation without movement and motion and that there can be no peace without our acceptance of impermanence. The value of God as Shiva is also a reminder to us that although it is a human tendency to resist change, we must learn also to see the positive possibilities in change. Without change, our sons and daughters will not grow into beautiful young men and women, the seeds that we plant will not blossom into plants and winter will not come to an end. A consciousness of Shiva must enable us also to embrace the present more fully knowing well that we can only live in this moment and that it must inevitably pass away. When we forget Shiva, we forget also to embrace fully the present and live too much in anticipation of the future.

The third insight about God as Shiva is a challenge to our own expectations of where and in what forms we may discover God. The city of Varanasi (Banaras) is considered to be one of the most sacred locations in Hindu geography. Yet, it is famous for its cremation grounds. Elderly and terminally ill Hindus travel to Varanasi in the hope of dying there and attaining liberation. Traditionally, death is an event of inauspiciousness and ritual impurity (asoucham). Cremation grounds are to be avoided, as well as contact with a deceased body. Varanasi, however, is also the holy city of Shiva and the location of one of the most famous Shiva temples, the Vishwanath Mandir. Shiva is described as frequenting the cremation grounds, dressed in beggarly attire and smearing himself with the ash of the cremation sites. The point of this is that we must be careful not to associate God only with beautiful temples and richly adorned icons. Although we affirm and teach God's omnipresence we are more reluctant to discern God in places associated with death and suffering. Shiva reminds that we must be careful not to place limits on the divine. Our human boundaries, our notions of purity and impurity are not God's own and Shiva's association with the place of death dramatically states this fact.

We have a tendency, not only to limit and associate God with particular places, but also to particular persons. One of the most famous stories of the non-recognition of God, is the narrative of the relationship between Shiva and Daksha. Daksha held a great feast to which he invited a host of distinguished guests. They all expressed homage and acknowledged his power and might, with the exception of one guest who was poorly dressed in a loincloth, covered in ash and holding a beggar's bowl. Failing to recognize Shiva because of his unusual appearance, Daksha took an intense dislike towards him. Unfortunately for Daksha, his youngest daughter, Sati, fell deeply in love with Shiva. On the day that Daksha chose to invite interested suitors for the hand of Sati in marriage, Sati disappointed him by choosing Shiva. He condemned her for the choice of a poor beggar as a husband, described her as beggar's wife and asked her never to return to his home or to gaze at his face. Daksha's problem, like so many of us, was his inability to look beyond outward appearance. He associated the divine only with forms that expressed power and affluence. It is Shiva who most often assumes the form of the lowly and despised to remind us that God must be seen and valued in every being. In one well-known story, it was Shiva who, in the guise of an untouchable, challenged the famous teacher Shankara, in a narrow lane in the city of Varanasi when Shankara forgot his own teaching about God's equal presence in all beings and asked him to move aside. The infinite God, Shiva reminded Shankara, is already present everywhere and cannot move aside.

The fourth and final insight about Shiva that I want to share is one that is concerned with our consciousness of our environment and our need to be good stewards of the earth and its resources that sustain life. The most popular representation of God as Shiva depicts him as residing in a Himalayan abode in the midst of lush and verdant vegetation. The bull, Nandi, sitting happily next to Shiva and the snakes playfully adorning his neck and arms present us with a portrait of harmony between God and nature, suggesting an ideal to which we must similarly aspire. The Ganges River is shown as flowing from and through Shiva's luxuriant hair, suggesting that nature's bounties, like our sources of water, are God's gifts to us and must be seen as sacred. We must care for these gifts and use them in ways that express our value for God. We are more likely to abuse nature when we disconnect the natural world from God and it is stripped of all sanctity. The icon of Shiva placed firmly in the midst of nature speaks of our interdependence with and our inseparability from the natural world. Shiva uses the tiger's skin, taken from an animal that has died naturally, as a meditation seat (asana) and for warmth. The tiger's skin and his beggar's bowl point to a prudent use of the resources of nature, the practice of conservation and the overcoming of greed. In an age when we worry about the sustainability of our natural resources, these are invaluable lessons that we must learn.

One of the compelling forms of Shiva represents him as the teacher of wisdom or guru. In this form, Shiva is known as Jnana Dakshinamurti. He is seated under a banyan tree and surrounded by eager students and facing a southerly direction. The index finger of Shiva's right hand touches the tip of his thumb, with the remaining three fingers stretched outwards. This is the gesture of knowledge or the jnana mudra. Dakshinamurti is eternally young, suggesting that Shiva's teaching is a continuous process for those of us who are open to learning.

Shiva can become our teacher. Let us learn from him the value of detachment, the positive possibilities in change, the importance of the present moment, the ability to see God where we least expect him, and a renewed value for nature as a gift of God.

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