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Diwali: The Threshold Light in the Midst of Darkness

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The word "Diwali" means an arrangement or a row of lights. Traditionally, Diwali is celebrated on the darkest night of the year when the beauty and mystery of lights can be experienced in a special way.

In the Hindu tradition, light is a symbol for God and for truth. God is described in the Bhagavadgītā (13:17) as the Light of all lights, beyond darkness. It is in God, the original and uncreated Light, Katha Upanishad (5:15) teaches, that everything else exists and shines. Hinduism invites us to a reverential attitude to creation by seeing the light of the sun, the moon, the stars and fire as reflecting the eternal light of God. On the occasion of Diwali, Hindus pray to be led from darkness to light (tamaso mā jyotiḥ gamaya).

As dusk turns into darkness on Diwali day, Hindu homes, thoroughly cleaned in the days leading up to the festival, are magically illumined with tiny earthen oil lamps. These are creatively arranged in symmetrical rows and artistic patterns. Hindu children enjoy the freedom to playfully arrange and rearrange lights.

This freedom, however, is not without requirements. There are certain special locations for the placing of lights. Every home is required to place a light at the threshold of the house: in the space, so to speak, where the inside meets the outside, the inner meets the outer and self meets the world. The simplicity of a tiny light, shining on the threshold of a Hindu home, speaks powerfully to us about the spiritual life and the meaning of Diwali.

The home, in the Hindu tradition, is a metaphor for the body. The Bhagavadgītā (5:13) likens the body to a home with nine doors. Within this home shines the light that is God. It is the light because of which we see, we hear, we taste, we touch and we smell. In its radiance, our minds think, imagine and create. To emphasize its indispensability for life, Kena Upanishad (Chapter 1) describes the divine light as the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech, the Breath of the breath, and the Eye of the eye. This light is not your light or my light. It is the light because of which all eyes see, all ears hear and all minds know. It is the same light that is present equally in everyone, enlivening all bodies and all minds. The Sanskrit word used for this light is ātmā. In the Bhagavadgītā (10:20), Shri Krishna asks his disciple, Arjuna, to know him as the ātmā shining in the heart of all beings.

The fulfillment of human life in the Hindu tradition is in the knowledge of this divine light in one's own heart and the heart of everyone. It is this wisdom that frees us from greed and fear and blesses us with peace, self-acceptance and joy. The Bhagavadgītā (2:70) likens this peace to the stillness in the depths of the ocean even when waves rage and rushing rivers enter at the surface.

One of the great temptations of this religious wisdom and awakening is its privatization. To savor the peace that is within, we believe that we must close the door of our home, and turn away from the world. Authentic religion, we think, is an inward turning marked by indifference to the world and its concerns. We regard God and the world, the inner and the outer, the home and the public space, as mutually excluding each other. We believe that to grow close to one is to grow further from the other. To turn to the world is to turn away from God; to look within we must cease to look outward. Religious privatization is often associated with the negativity of the world; the world is represented as a place of darkness and liberation equated with escape from the world.

The light at the threshold of the home on the night of Diwali is there to remind us that our awakening to the light of God in our hearts is incomplete if it does not radiate from within us to the darkness of the world outside. It represents the light of God in the human heart radiating outwards to illumine a world shrouded in darkness.

The knowledge of God that does not shine outwards to unite us with the world in active compassion is lacking and deficient. The Hindu tradition wants us to understand that the light of God that shines in us shines equally in all. Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (4:3-4) speaks beautifully of this light as shining in men and women, in the old and the young, the dark blue butterfly, the green parrot with red eyes, the rain cloud, the seasons and the ocean. To embrace and value the light in us is to embrace and value it within all beings. It is to be open in a profound and generous way to the world by seeing all creation as enfolded in God. When Hindus, and people of other religions, forget this teaching, we devalue, oppress and treat others unjustly.

If the light at the threshold reminds us that the inner light must radiate outwards, it also reminds us that we cannot dispel darkness if we are not awake to the light within. We cannot do much good in the world outside if our own hearts are deep in the darkness of ignorance (avidyā), greed (kāma) and hate (dveṣa). Lost in darkness, we will contribute to the world's suffering and not help in its overcoming. The light that shines out must first shine within. Darkness does not dispel darkness.

Light, in the Hindu tradition, is a symbol for knowledge, even as darkness symbolizes ignorance. It is easy and tempting, however, when we speak about knowledge dispelling ignorance, to represent ignorance as an abstract, distant and ethereal phenomenon, disconnected from the concrete realities of human life. The light on the threshold, however, shines just outside the door. It reminds us that the darkness to be dispelled is real. It is here, it is now, and it is present in our own communities. It takes form in all the social, cultural, economic, political and religious structures that devalue human beings and that are sources of suffering. We live in darkness when we oppress our women, humiliate gays, condone and practice violence against Dalits, abuse children, and recklessly exploit nature. These are the demons of the dark against which the light on the threshold must shine brightly.

In the midst of all the beautiful lights of Diwali, let us meditate on the light at the threshold: The place where light meets the darkness, the inner meets the outer and our spirituality meets the world. It is the place where the light of God (ātmājyoti) radiating from our hearts engages the world with loving compassion and a commitment to justice. It reminds us that, on Diwali, our doors must be open to allow the light of our homes to enter the world. We should not celebrate Diwali by shutting our homes and ourselves to the world.

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