

Śrī Rudram

A short exposition of one of the most beautiful Vedic hymns from *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*

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1) Introduction

Śrī Rudram, also known as *Śrī Rudrapraśnaḥ*, is a hymn offered to the all pervading *Brahman*, designated as *Rudra-Śiva*¹, present in auspicious, benign forms as well as terrible forms which He assumes at the time of the dissolution and the destruction of the cosmos. It occurs in the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda*² in the 4th *kāṇḍa* (chapter), 5th *praśna* (topic) and it is considered as one of 108 *Upaniṣads*. It is also known as *Namakam* because of the repeated word *namaḥ*³ in it.

The greatness of *Śrī Rudram* is beautifully explained in the following verse:

विद्यासु श्रुतिरुत्कृष्टा रुद्रैकादशिनी श्रुतौ।

तत्र पञ्चाक्षरी तस्यं शिव इत्यक्षरद्वयम्॥

vidyāsu śrutirutkṛṣṭā rudraikādaśinī śrutau
tatra pañcākṣarī tasyaṁ śiva ityakṣaradvayam

Meaning: Among the sources of learning, the Vedas are supreme; in the Vedas, *Rudra Ekādaśī* is supreme; in the *Rudram* the *Pañcākṣarī* mantra *Namaśivaya* is supreme; in the *Namaśivaya* mantra the two letters *Śiva* stand supreme.

Śrī Rudram is divided into 11 *anuvākas* (passages) and consists of 37 *ṛks* (verses) in various Vedic *chandās* (meters) in *anuvāka* 1, 10 and 11. *Anuvākas* 2 to 9 and the last line of *anuvāka* 11 consist of 130 *yajus* (sacrificial formulas).

¹ *Rudra* has two forms, *ghora* or terrible form and *śiva* or auspicious form. Hence *Rudra* is one side and *Śiva* the other side of the same coin. They are not two, but one. The *Brāhmaṇa* text which interprets the *Rudram* states: “*Rudra* is verily this fire. He has two forms; one terrible, the other auspicious. If a man does sacrifice to Him by chanting the *Rudram*, that man pacifies the terrible form”.

² *Yajurveda* is one of the four Vedas, the other three being the *Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. *Yajurveda* is divided into *Śukla* (white) *Yajurveda* and *Kṛṣṇa* (black) *Yajurveda* and consists of five *Samhitās*, of which *Taittirīya Samhitā* is one. The date of *Yajurveda* is placed after the *Rgveda*, which is said to be oldest among the Vedas with the period of composition between the thirteenth and tenth centuries B.C. It consists of phrases, ordinarily in prose, which are used as ritual instruments in invoking a divinity or offering oblations.

³ The word *namaḥ* does not indicate mere physical obeisance, but utter surrender of oneself, taking refuge in God through body, mind and soul.

2) Origin of the word *Rudra*

The word *Rudra* has 4 root meanings: (a) dreadful, terrific, angry; (b) great or large; (c) driving away evil; (d) fit to be praised. Another explanation derived from the meaning of its roots is also; “ru”, to cry or to teach, “rud”, to make a person weep, and “dra” to flow. Hence *Rudra* is considered as a deity who teaches the supreme knowledge to all and whose energy flows in everything.

3) The significance of *Śrī Rudram*

The purpose of this magnificent hymn is to set aside once and for all, the extra-cosmic notion of God that people sometimes entertain in their religious fervour, and to instil into the minds of people the greater, profounder knowledge of the fact that God is not merely the creative extra-cosmic Parent of the Universe, but He is also immanent in every particle, in every speck of space, in every unit of time, in every nook and corner, in every particle of creation. A very intriguing aspect of God present in this wondrous hymn is that God is existing in both the aspects; the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the right and the wrong, the positive and the negative, the high and the low, the conceivable and the inconceivable, mortality and immortality, existence and non-existence.

यो रुद्रो अग्नौ यो अप्सु य ओषधीषु यो रुद्रो विश्वा भुवना विवेश तस्मै रुद्राय नमो अस्तु॥

yo rudro agnau yo apsu ya oṣadhīṣu yo rudro viśvā bhuvanā viveśa
tasmai rudrāya namo astu

Meaning: To the *Rudra* who is fire, who is in water, who is in trees and plants, who has entered into the entire Universe, to that *Rudra* let our salutations go.

It is considered as the only hymn of its kind in the religious literature of the entire world which focuses on the idea of God, not only associated with the ideas of pleasant and good, but also with the idea of dreadful and destructive; that the God permeates everything in manifestation, including aspects deemed not ethical by the purists and fault-finders.

4) Summary of *Śrī Rudram*

Anuvāka 1: The first *anuvāka* may be styled as the *anuvāka* of terror and the beseeching for the destruction of sins which hinder the descent of God’s grace. *Rudra* is prayed to turn away his fierce appearance and to keep his followers’ weapons at bay. Having been pacified, *Rudra* is requested to destroy the sins of those for whom it is being chanted.

Anuvāka 2: As a result of devotee’s hearty prayer in the first *anuvāka*, he is granted a cosmic vision of *Rudra*, the Absolute Principle who appears in animate and inanimate Universe. In this *anuvāka*, *Rudra* is prayed to as one who pervades the earth and as the green foliage and heritage of medicinal herbs. He is also asked to loosen the bonds of worldly illusion.

Anuvāka 3: In the third *anuvāka*, *Rudra* is described as the prince of thieves and cheats. *Rudra* is the Lord not only of the pleasant and praiseworthy things like the sun, the moon and the stars, the green trees and the grassy earth, but of the shocking and the terrible as well. He is the in-dweller of every being. He is the Self of all, whatever shape or form exists, He too exists in that shape and form. In this context, we who are unenlightened have stolen the immortal status of the Self and replaced it with our own limited conception of ego. And in turn, it is *Rudra* who will come and steal our ignorance from us, restoring us to our natural status of enlightenment.

Anuvāka 4: In the fourth *anuvāka*, *Rudra* is described as the creator and worker of all kinds. He is the cause of both the significant and the minor.

Anuvāka 5: In the fifth *anuvāka*, *Rudra's* existence in running water is praised and his five activities are described; creation of the Universe, preservation of the Universe, destruction of the Universe at the time of dissolution of the world, bondage in ignorance, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Anuvāka 6: The sixth *anuvāka* states the connection of *Rudra* with the concepts of time and age, with four kinds of birth, with different kinds of worlds, with Vedas and Vedanta, and the warrior aspect of Him and His army.

Anuvāka 7: In the seventh *anuvāka*, His all pervading presence in waters, rains, clouds, storms and His various other forms are described.

Anuvāka 8: The eight *anuvāka* is the focal piece of the *Śrī Rudram*. It declares that God's real nature is *Om* *kara*, the sacred symbol *om* which represents God, and which is the surest means for attaining Him. Verse 11 proclaims:

नमः शिवाय च शिवतराय च।

namaḥ śivāya ca śivatarāya ca

Meaning: Salutations unto *Śiva* the auspicious one, unto *Śivatara* the one than whom none more auspicious can exist.

Thus it contains the two of the great mantras; *Śiva Pañcākṣarī* (5 lettered) mantra *namaḥ śivāya* and *Ekādaśa* (11 lettered) mantra *namaḥ śivāya ca śivatarāya ca*. This is the sum and substance of all *Upaniṣads*, the great *mahamantra*, the central gem of the *Rudropaniṣad*.

The rest of the eight *anuvāka* salute *Rudra* as residing in secret places and holy rivers and their banks and that it is He who is the means for destroying all sins and crossing the ocean of birth and death.

Anuvāka 9: In ninth *anuvāka*, the strength and power of His attendants, *Rudra Gaṇas*, is celebrated who are the manifestations of the great power and glories of the one supreme God Himself and who illumine the gods and the world and control the forces of the Universe.

Anuvāka 10: The tenth *anuvāka* repeats the same ideas, words and phrases of the first *anuvāka*, but this time with a great difference. The earlier was in sheer terror, but this one is with assurance, for *Rudra* and his *Gaṇas* have been beheld and understood for what they are. *Rudra* is thus prayed to

shed his fury and shower his benevolence by displaying his bow without arrows and to gracefully appear with his tiger skin on his body with pleasing countenance ready to shower boons upon his devotees.

Anuvāka 11: In the last eleventh *anuvāka*, the countless *Rudra Gaṇas* are praised and His benevolence is invoked with unconditional salutations.

Additional mantras: In South India it is customary that after *Śrī Rudram* recital, additional seven mantras are chanted which also contain the famous *mṛtyumjaya* mantra. It is a prayer to *Rudra* to loosen the devotee automatically from death and confer immortality:

त्र्यंबकं यजामहे सुगन्धिं पुष्टिवर्धनम्।

उर्वारुकमिव बन्धनान्मृत्योर्मुक्षीय माऽमृतात्॥

tryāmbakaṁ yajāmahe sugandhiṁ puṣṭivardhanam

urvārukamiva bandhanānmṛtyormukṣīya mā'mṛtāt

Meaning: We worship the fragrant and three eyed One, who confers ever increasing prosperity; like the ripe cucumber which drops from the stem, let us be saved from the hold of death and freed from its hold; let us not turn away from liberation.

5) Why chant *Śrī Rudram*

It is said: “By reciting Veda once, he becomes pure on that day, but by reciting *Rudram* the very next moment he gets purified.” Yet another verse declares: “Where a devout reciter of the *Rudram* lives, be it in a village or town, that place will be free from disease, drought, thefts, and other ills.”

Vāyu Purāṇa even extends its greatness and significance in a famous verse and says:

चमकं नमकं चैव पौरुषसूक्तं तथैव च।

नित्यं त्रयं प्रयुञ्जानो ब्रह्मलोके महीयते॥

camakaṁ namakaṁ caiva pauruṣasūktaṁ tathaiva ca

nityaṁ trayam prayuñjāno brahmaloke mahīyate

Meaning: A person reciting and applying daily the *Chamakam*⁴, *Namakam* and *Puruṣa Sūktam* is honoured in the *Brahma loka*.

⁴ *Chamakam*, occurs in the *Taittirīya Samhitā* of the *Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda* in the 4th *kāṇḍa*, 7^h *praśna*. It is so called on account of the recurrence of the word *ca me* directly translated as “and me”. After praying and identifying *Rudra* with everything in the *Namakam*, *Chamakam* is usually recited immediately after, in which the devotee asks Him to give him everything, 347 things to be precise, coupled with the article *ca* (and) and the verb *me kalpatām* (be granted unto me). *Chamakam* furnishes completely the idea of human happiness and defines in the highest degree the desires to be asked or to be granted. *Chamakam* roots are firmly implanted in the worldly desires ultimately leading to the divine fulfilment.

Śiva Purāṇa further explains: “By chanting *Rudram*, one gains both worldly pleasures and liberation.” The *Jābāla Upaniṣad*⁵ states: “Once the students of sacred knowledge asked sage *Yājñavalkya*: Can we gain eternal life by repetition of mantras? *Yājñavalkya* said: By the repetition of *śatarudrīya*⁶ a man becomes immortal, for the names of God therein are nectarine.” *Kaivalya Upaniṣad*⁷ also declares: “Whoever reads *śatarudrīya* becomes pure as fire, becomes pure as air”.

Bhagavān Śrī Satya Sāi Bābā on the occasion of *Ati Rudra Maha Yajña*⁸ held in August 2006 in *Praśānti Nilayam* stated the following in his opening Divine discourse: “It is Swami’s wish that the Vedas be spread to every country, so that every human being irrespective of religion, caste or nationality learns Vedas and chants them”.

Following this Divine command, the devotees are prayed to undertake regular chanting of Śrī *Rudram* as a part of their spiritual activity for the benefit of humanity and their spiritual upliftment.

6) References

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⁵ The *Jābāla Upaniṣad* belongs to the *Atharvaveda* and discusses important questions regarding renunciation.

⁶ Since *Rudra*, in his numerous forms, is worshiped as various gods, *Śrī Rudram* has also acquired fame as *śatarudrīya*.

⁷ *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* belongs to the *Atharvaveda* and its study and practice lead to the state of *kaivalya* or aloneness.

⁸ One person chanting *Namakam* for 11 times with one *Chamakam* (one *anuvāka* of *Camakam* is repeated after *Namakam* is chanted, until all 11 *anuvākas* of *Camakam* are chanted), becomes *Rudra*. If it is multiplied by 11, it becomes *Rudraikādaśinī*, if this is multiplied by 11 it becomes *Maha Rudra* and if *Maha Rudra* is multiplied by 11 then it become *Ati Rudra*. Also, if 1331 priests for one day chant 11 times *Namakam* and one time *Chamakam* it becomes *Ati Rudra*, or if 11 priests for 121 days chant 11 times *Namakam* and onetime *Chamakam*, it becomes *Ati Rudra* or if 121 priests for 11 continuous days chant 11 times *Namakam* and onetime *Chamakam*, it becomes *Ati Rudra*. *Ati Rudra* becomes when *Namakam* is chanted 14641 times and *Camakam* 1331 times.