

# **Maha Shivaratri**

## **The Great Auspicious Night**

### **Celebrations at Chinmayam**

#### **26<sup>th</sup> February 2006**

*By Vandana Bapna*

On Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February, CMWRC celebrated the auspicious occasion of Maha Shivaratri from 5:00 am until midnight at 'Chinmayam' in Silver Spring, Maryland. During our weekly Bala Vihar meditation sessions, our resident Acharya, Swami Dheerananda, describes Lord Shiva as the divine life force, the light of consciousness that



illumines the functioning of our body, mind and intellect (BMI). In the absence of Lord Shiva, the Divine Life, the five senses, the feelings and the thoughts radiating from the BMI become non-functional, insentient, lifeless, dead! So, on Maha Shivaratri, we celebrate 'Life' itself, in its blessed, auspicious and divine form.

The entire day was planned beautifully and executed immaculately by the many member volunteers who brought in food for the maha prasada (although some were fasting), decorated the altar and the hall, strived for perfect sound and stage arrangements, and arranged for the pooja to be conducted by the adults as well as by every Bala Vihar child. And, through the grace and blessings of the Lord, the day climaxed into a symphony of harmony and peace by midnight.

Maha Shivaratri day arose early in the morning with about 20 members who had gathered at Chinmayam at 5:00 am, for performing Shiva manasa pooja. Shiva manasa pooja hymns, composed by Sri Adi Sankara and chanted beautifully on the tape by Swami Brahmananda of Chinmaya Mission, Bangalore, were played continuously on our state of the art sound system to fill the entire auditorium with its serene vibrations. The altar of Lord Shiva was beautifully decorated with flowers, fruits and pooja items set in gleaming silver. Water from a copper pot was arranged to flow continuously over the crystal Shiva-lingam at the altar. The attending adults were guided by Swami Dheerananda to

perform the Shiva manasa pooja with the intention that “I pour the water that represents my thoughts unto the sacred Shiva-linga that represents the Light of Consciousness! I watch the flow of water that represents the flow of my thoughts unto the Auspicious Lord Shiva! The Light of Consciousness!”

Being a Sunday, we continued with our regular Bala Vihar and adult sessions, from 10:00 am until 3:00 pm. During the common time, each Bala Vihar child conducted pooja with plates containing small bells, flowers and chocolate raisins as prasada, which were placed around small Shiva lingas. The pooja started by invoking the Lord to purify our outer and inner personality. The symbolic worship accompanied by sacred chanting in Sanskrit included welcoming everything that is Divine by ringing the bell, seeking the Lord’s Grace to keep us on the path of virtue, courage and wisdom, offering our devotion and gratitude to Gurudev, welcoming Jagadeeshwara Lord Shiva, offering him a seat in our hearts, offering sandalwood paste, kumkum and flowers, glorifying the Lord in his many



forms and names, offering food or naivedyam for prasada, and ending with mangal neerajanam, the auspicious aarati. The wonderful explanations of the symbolic pooja offered by Swami Dheerananda will go a long way in our youngsters’ lives.

During the adult sessions, we continued to soak in the calming vibrations of the Shiva manasa pooja, just like the early morning pooja. All the attending members could avail of the opportunity to perform Shiva manasa pooja by turns.

The program continued in the evening from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm with about 150 attending members who immersed themselves in the immensely melodious bhajans sung by our Chinmaya Mission music teachers and members. From 9:00 pm to 10:00 pm, maha prasada was served to the non-fasting member families. A group of guest artists continued to render sweet devotional bhajans from 10:00 pm to 11:30 pm., followed by meditation over the Shiva nama japa for the next half an hour. At 12:00 midnight, Swami Dheerananda blew the conch to the sound of Om vibrations to wake us again to the ever-present OM in the world of BMI. We ended with Shiva maha aarati amidst only the glow of light that was shone on the radiant Shiva idol and Shiva linga by several diya that were set up around it. We ended the day with seeking the blessings and prasada from the Lord and Swami Dheerananda. At this point, it was interesting to note and impressive to

watch the faces of about 30 members who stayed up until midnight, dew-fresh, as though they had just woken up from a restful night's sleep!

When our acharyas, Swami Dheerananda and Vilasiniji, requested me to write down the experiences of that day, the mind started seeking many answers. Why did it feel so good? The mind spilled out many explanations. However, in the simplest analysis, the answer seemed to be in the culmination of the 'stillness of the mind and the feeling of fullness' as the day progressed with various quiet and meditative activities.

Here are some other reflections. 'Bliss' is the inner expression of the light of consciousness that we experience when we withdraw inwards from the struggles of the outer world of body, mind and intellect (BMI). This withdrawal is also the true significance of fasting. We experience deep peaceful states during our inner journey of deep sleep or during meditation or during experiences such as outlined above during Maha Shivaratri celebrations. Conversely, when we are performing in the outer world of BMI, as we have no choice and act we must, all human endeavors are ultimately in the pursuit of this 'Bliss' alone. And, everything that we are conscious of in the outer world of BMI is in reality the experience of 'Bliss' too, for the same light of consciousness illumines the 'Bliss' within and without. For example, we feel vibrant and alive when the light of consciousness is shining brightly on the opposite experiences of either ecstasy or agony and so 'Bliss' is inherent in both the experiences. The dualities of pain/pleasure, joy/sorrow, honor/dishonor as the outward expressions of the same light of consciousness, thus in actuality are 'Bliss' itself, in the same way as the inner 'Bliss' experienced during deep sleep or meditation... *only if the ego does not veil the Light!* Then, moksha and samsara do not stand apart but become one and the same.

Yet somehow, we expect to find contentment by 'seeking, resisting, doing and pursuing' rather than 'just Being' the fullness and 'Bliss' itself. It seems that if we can be 'just Being' and are able to live fully in the present moment, without the 'doing' to seek fullness and contentment, 'the Bliss' would be with us to stay, whether our attention is turned inwards or outwards. ***There is one caveat to this though...the unconditional, joyful and loving acceptance of whatever life brings to us in our outer world of BMI must be an inherent, natural, spontaneous, intuitive and effortless part of our 'Being', and not as a deliberate, struggled, strained and forced thought and action.*** After all, information is not transformation.

There is nothing to renounce and nothing to seek, just as there is nothing to gain and nothing to lose. As long as we seek and strain and resist and grasp towards contentment, the light of our consciousness and so also the 'Bliss' that we experience will remain contracted. As our scriptures proclaim, we are that full and perfect 'pure Consciousness, immortal Truth, and eternal Bliss', whether being in the inner world or the outer world. And, there is Freedom, Love and Life in the fullness. Maha Shivaratri reminds us of this and celebrates 'Life' in all its forms...within and without!

**THE END** 😊!!