

Developing Clarity, Resilience, and Inner-awareness

Insights from Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram of Ādi Śankarācārya¹

The 21st century is the melting pot of science and technology. From humble beginnings in the middle of the 20th century, we have made enormous progress in the use of computing and networking technologies. With AI technologies at our disposal, we are able to literally obtain any information and guidance from the installed base of computing power and a knowledge repository distributed globally.

At the society level, we have witnessed several positive changes. Income levels are increasing, and material progress is accelerating at a rapid pace. There are more opportunities for education, and AI engines such as ChatGPT deliver an enormous amount of information at the touch of a button on our computers.

Despite all this, it is not always good news. We also notice that youngsters are getting older faster than before. People contract Hypertension or Diabetes early in their lives. Many complain of depression, job burnout, and the need for Psycho-counseling. With all the material progress, it gives us the impression that the quality of life is deteriorating.

Typical Questions We Face Today

- I am distracted, not able to concentrate. How is it possible to put the best foot forward?
- I get tossed by emotions and am not feeling good. How is it possible to have Peace of Mind, Happiness?
- I keep looking at what others are doing. How is it possible to feel confident? How to discover the inner strength? How is it possible to be myself?

Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram of Ādi Śankarācārya addresses these questions and provides a direction for a true seeker.

Need for a Guru

It is not prudent to ignore the warning lights or dismiss these signals and keep doing what we know. It is imperative that we pause and reflect on these and inquire into the larger notion of happiness. If we search for the true meaning of life, it will invariably lead us to a path of contemplating and reinventing ourselves (Figure 1). The way forward must help us put the best foot forward in our life pursuits and engage in various life pursuits with peace, satisfaction, and happiness. One also needs to tap into the inner strength by knowing about the inner self. We also need the divine blessings to develop superior knowledge and skills in life.

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A person desirous of walking through the path of self-reflection needs someone to guide his/her and life and show the pathway. In the Sanatana-dharma tradition, the role of a Guru is greatly emphasized. A catalyst, by definition, does not take part in a chemical reaction. But it aids the process and makes it more effective by providing facilitating mechanisms for the chemical process to take place. A guru plays a similar role in one's life. With deep reflection, enormous experience, and boundless compassion towards the seeker, a guru plays a critical role and draws a safety net for the seeker to make steady progress.

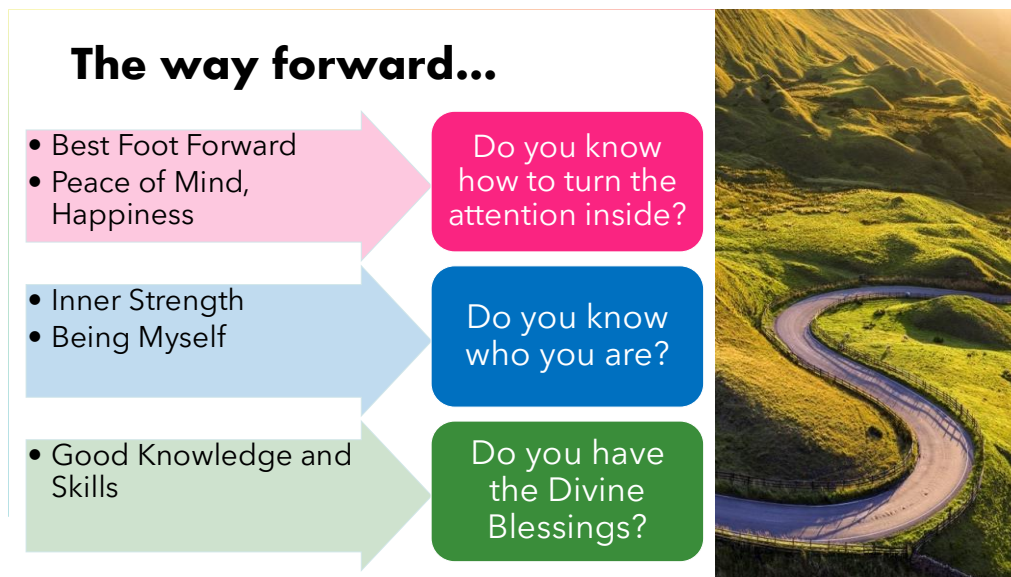


Figure 1. The Pathway for Successful Living

Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram

One of the key works of Ādi Śankarācārya, the 8th century spiritual giant and the greatest of the avatāra purushas, is the Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram. Dakṣiṇāmūṛty is one of the manifestations of Lord Śiva, who sat South-facing in Kailāśa to instruct the seers and sages. Etymologically, Dakṣiṇā means Buddhi or the divine power of subtle perception generated in a pure intellect. It is the “eye” of wisdom and experienced knowledge by which Śiva can be seen directly. In the Sanātana-dharma tradition, Dakṣiṇāmūṛty is considered to be the Ādi Guru.

In an apparently short work consisting of just ten verses, Ādi Śankarācārya has provided the essence of the Advaita-siddhānta and has discussed the key existential questions that we all have:

- Who am I? What is my life journey?
- What is the connection between Jīva – Jagat – Īśvara?
- How to make sense of my life experiences?

In short, the composition is a handbook for individual psychology. A proper understanding of the teachings in the Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram will help an individual lead a life with clarity. Knowledge of one's true nature, the trajectory (the sojourn of the atman through several janmas), and the key differences between permanent and perishable will enable an individual to draw from the inner-strength and develop resilience to unfolding life situations. Such a person will lead a life with purpose, clarity, and peace of mind and will contribute significantly to society at large.

Key Insights from Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram

In every verse in Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram (DS), Ādi Śāṅkarācārya has left a key insight for us to contemplate. It will shape our assumptions about our lives, our true nature, and the path we need to take going forward. We shall look at a few of these insights.

Insight 1: We and the World around Us

We have taken many things for granted and are leading a life without inquiring about several beautiful things we are endowed with. In order to develop a reasonably good cell phone, companies invest in several thousand manhours of R&D work. How about the complex world with several interconnected things? The human body has complex sub-systems. They all work in tandem and run a host of chemical processes so that we can lead a productive life. In the first verse of DS², Acarya presents this idea and inspires us to make sense of how we perceive the world. The world and all that is happening is nothing but an extended version of the dreaming process that we undergo every day.

Developing a deeper understanding of oneself in the context of the world around him/her will help an individual to develop the right orientation towards others. We will be able to deal with others with a sense of responsibility, the events unfolding, and the perceptions that we develop will become less impactful on us, and we may be more tolerant of the idiosyncrasies of life situations and people.

Insight 2: Developing a Sense of Our Life Journey

The ācārya presents an interesting example of the tree-seed conundrum in the second verse of DS³. It is not easy for us to say whether the tree came from the seed or vice versa. Inquiring this question is important for every one of us as it relates to our own life journey. Where did we come from and where are we going? In the Sanātana-dharma tradition, this is an important aspect of an atman's life journey through several janmas. Death is never a full stop, but a comma.

² विश्वं दर्पणदृश्यमाननगरीतुल्यं निजान्तर्गतं पश्यन्नात्मनि मायया बहिरिवोद्भूतं यथा निद्रया ।

यः साक्षात्कुरुते प्रबोधसमये स्वात्मानमेवाद्वयं तस्मै श्री गुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्री दक्षिणामूर्तये ॥ 1

³ बीजस्यान्तरिवाङ्करो जगदिदं प्राङ्निर्विकल्पं पुनः मायाकल्पितदेशकालकलनावैचित्र्यचित्रीकृतम् ।

मायावीव विजृम्भ्यत्यपि महायोगीव यः स्वेच्छया तस्मै श्री गुरुमूर्तये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्तये ॥ 2

Deeply reflecting on this idea will take needless tension out of an individual, as there is no undue pressure to perform and succeed right here and now. The notion of what the ultimate goal of life is, what success is, and what the purpose of life is will be revisited afresh. An individual will find greater clarity and purpose in life and avoid getting needlessly distracted by various events unfolding in daily life.

Insight 3: The Knowing – Doing Process

Our journey in the mundane world is one of a knowing-doing process. We acquire knowledge through multiple sources that help us earn a gainful living. We also engage with the world with our organs of action. The question that begs our attention is how this is possible. In the fourth verse of DS, ācārya uses a simple metaphor of a lamp placed in a pot emitting light through the holes pierced in the pot⁴.

We are all nothing but a self-effulgent being (swayam-prakāśa). The manifestation of this effulgence is the consciousness. A good understanding of this helps us understand our true nature. External appearances, objects, and entities of the world are presented to us through our internal instruments (buddhi, manas, citta, and ahaṁkāra) on account of our consciousness. While consciousness is pure, the filtering mechanism in the form of our indriyās and the internal instruments present a distorted picture of reality. This idea helps us declutter our thoughts and remove opinions, impressions, and assumptions about people around us. We become more confident in ourselves, handle issues with greater clarity, and lead a life with minimal disappointments.

Benefiting from the Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram

Although we have seen a few verses from the Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram, every verse carries key insights and messages that can shape our lives. How can we fully benefit from this? Acarya has provided an in-built mechanism to achieve this in the last verse of DS⁵. Ācārya recommends four methods to get the benefits:

1. Śravanam – constantly hearing the verses. This helps to get to know the contents and commit them to memory.
2. Samkīrtanam – reciting the stotram with a nice metre and a musical note so that the entire experience is pleasant. It helps in attracting the seeker to the stotram and encourages him/her to recite the stotram regularly.
3. Artha-mananam – Contemplating the meaning of the verses by repeatedly thinking through the messages contained in the stotram. This helps one to clear all the doubts about the intended purpose of reciting the stotram. It also helps one to take the messages to an experiential plane.

⁴ नानाछिद्रघटोदरस्थितमहादीपप्रभास्वरं ज्ञानं यस्य तु चक्षुरादिकरणद्वारा बहिः स्पन्दते ।

जानामीति तमेव भान्तमनुभात्येतत्समस्तं जगत् तस्मै श्री गुरुमर्त्ये नम इदं श्रीदक्षिणामूर्त्ये ॥ 4

⁵ सर्वात्मत्वमिति स्पुटीकृतमिदं यस्मादमुष्मिंस्तवे तेनास्य श्रवणात्तथाऽर्थमननाद् ध्यानाच्च सङ्कीर्तनात् ।

सर्वात्मत्वमहाविभूतिसहितं स्यादीश्वरत्वं ततः सिद्ध्येत्तत्पुनरष्टधा परिणतं चैश्वर्यमव्याहृतम् ॥ 10

4. Dhyānam – Deep contemplation and meditation of the ideas presented in the verses. This logically leads us to the intended purpose as envisaged by the ācārya.

The ācārya also ends the Dakṣiṇāmūṛty Stotram by enumerating the spiritual and other benefits that one can attain. There is nothing more for us to add as the ācārya has made the work complete in all respects.