

*For centuries, yogis, healers, and householders alike have turned to this mantra for comfort,*

**ACCORDING TO SHIVA,**  
*the Lord of the Yogis, the  
light of this mantra outshines  
millions of suns.*

clarity, and courage on the path to joyful living. Now you can, too.

*A Mantra for Peace and Prosperity*  
**Heal Yourself,  
Heal the World**

By ROLF SOVIK

**Hailed by the sages as the heart of the Vedas,** the *maha mrit-yunjaya* mantra will help you tune into the healing force that is always at work within you, supporting your growth, lifting you up in times of trouble, and reminding you of the higher aim of life. In the pages that follow, spiritual teacher and author Rolf Sovik unveils one of yoga's most powerful, nourishing mantras.

—*The Editors*

The scriptures of ancient India are filled with stories, myths, and legends in which philosophy is entwined with devotion. Great personages appear in these tales, among them the sage Markandeya, whose teachings are found in the *Markandeya Purana*. His text is remembered especially for its account of the glory of the Divine Mother. Markandeya is also acclaimed for his vision of the cosmic deluge, and in the *Mahabharata* he is an honored guest at the forest encampment of the heroic Pandava brothers. But his story begins before his birth.

Childless, the forest-dwelling sage Mrikandu and his wife, Marudvati, undertook a long penance, hoping to earn merit and the boon of a child. They were rewarded with a vision of Lord Shiva, their *ishtadevata* (the deity of their hearts). After hearing their request, Lord Shiva told them they could either parent a child who would be a brilliant spiritual light but whose life would be a scant sixteen years, or they could raise a long-lived child who would be witless and self-absorbed.

They chose the child with spiritual virtue, and in time Marudvati gave birth to a boy they named Markandeya. The couple decided not to tell him that he would have a short life span, but as he approached his sixteenth birthday his parents' growing sadness betrayed them. And when he asked them to explain their downcast mood, they told him what Lord Shiva had said. Already an accomplished yogi, Markandeya rededicated himself to his practice.

On the day of his sixteenth birthday Markandeya took refuge in a temple and sat next to a *shiva lingam* (a symbol of divine consciousness) to do his worship and meditation. When the messengers of Lord Yama, the lord of death, arrived to take him away, they found him so absorbed in his prayers, they could not complete their mission.

Returning to Yama, they described their dilemma. So Yama himself traveled to the temple to accomplish the task. He urged Markandeya to follow the natural laws of life and death, and to come willingly, but Markandeya wrapped his arms around the shiva lingam and surrendered himself to its protection. Yama threw his noose to gather Markandeya in, but the noose encircled the lingam as well, and immediately, Shiva, dwelling in the image, split the lingam open and emerged in a rage. Yama had thrown his noose too far, for he had no authority to encircle Shiva himself.

Yama was killed with a blow from Shiva's foot as the other gods looked on in dismay. Fearing that Yama's death would upset the order of the universe, they implored Shiva to bring him back to life—and in the end, Shiva complied. But he pointed out that Markandeya's devotion had protected him, and he was therefore blessed to remain a sixteen-year-old sage eternally. The ancient belief is that the realized soul of Markandeya is still moving in the universe.

### SHIVA: THE SHELTER OF KINDNESS

The story of Markandeya opens doors to a vast spiritual heritage with the mysterious figure of Shiva at its core. Shiva is dual-natured. He guards the universal order with ferocious resolve, destroying attachments and freeing his devotees from ignorance. He is the inner controller and the dissolver, bringing compulsive pursuits of passion, and even life itself, to its natural end. This aspect of Shiva is reflected in his ancient name Rudra, “one who howls.” The more familiar name Shiva, on the other hand, means “auspicious, gracious, or kind.” Here compassion is Shiva’s nature. He is a shelter of kindness and the giver of boons. With tenderness and a sure hand, he guides those who aspire to self-realization and he relieves the suffering that exists in the universe.

Shiva personifies pure consciousness. He manifests the universe and exists in it like a net into which every particle and being is woven. Yet he remains unaffected by the world’s charms and temptations as he silently holds all that moves in an unmoving presence. He is the Lord of Yogis, established in meditation.

He has many names. To Markandeya he is Mrityunjaya, the Death Conqueror. And some say it is this aspect of Shiva’s being that Markandeya was worshipping on his sixteenth birthday. But Shiva’s



**A STONE LINGAM** This symbol of Lord Shiva is adorned with sandalwood paste.

thus the nurturing light of the sky). They possess destructive energy, but they are also the protectors of the household. When they act in harmony, they create an environment of peace and prosperity.

Vasishtha pays homage to these forces and then continues with the final stanza, a mantra revered throughout the scriptures. It is called the *Maha Mrityunjaya* mantra, the Great Death-Conquering mantra. It is a mantra that has many names and forms. It is called the *Rudra* mantra, referring to the furious aspect of Shiva; the *Tryambakam* mantra, alluding to Shiva’s three eyes; and it is sometimes

The mantra is divided into four lines, each containing eight syllables. Translations vary considerably. A bit of research, however (try looking the mantra up on the Web, for example), will make it clear that no single translation can ever do justice to all its levels of meaning. The multi-leveled nature of Sanskrit words makes this impossible.

But differences in translation also reflect the fact that the sounds of the mantra are more important to practitioners than its exact translation. Like music, the resonance of these sounds attracts the mind and leads it to an inner experience. The literal meaning of the mantra is secondary.

But even so, it is important to understand the mantra in order to develop faith in it. The individual words of the mantra convey its nourishing quality, and, even in English, they are life-sustaining. They fill us with the sense that a great force of goodness is at work within us, supporting our growth, lifting us up during times of trouble, and helping us recall, even in the midst of our busy lives, the higher aim of life itself.

### CONQUERING FEAR

There was a time, it is said, when there was no death. But the world became congested, and its resources approached the point of exhaustion. So Yama was given the role of bringing death to beings to

*Whether to enhance your life or to assist in the transition to death, this mantra is ultimately a means for self-realization.*

conquest over Yama does not give us the complete picture of Mrityunjaya, for even in his aspect as the ruler of death, Shiva is deeply nurturing as well as fearsome.

### THE HEART OF THE VEDAS

The great mantra dedicated to Shiva as Mrityunjaya is found in the *Rig Veda* (Mandala VII, Hymn 59), where it is attributed to the sage Vasishtha. The hymn in which it is found begins with eleven stanzas honoring the forces of nature (the *maruts*) said to be the children of Rudra/Shiva. The maruts control the energies of storms, winds, cyclones, and clouds (and

known as the *Mrita-Sanjivini* mantra because it is a component of the “life-restoring” practice given to the primordial sage Shukra after he had completed an exhausting period of austerity. The Maha Mrityunjaya mantra is hailed by the sages as the heart of the Vedas. Along with the *Gayatri* mantra it holds the highest place among the many mantras used for contemplation and meditation.

The Sanskrit text of the mantra reads:

OM. Tryambakam yajamahe  
Sugandhim pushti-varadhanam  
Urvarukamiva bandhanam  
Mrityor mukshiyam mamritam

restore nature’s balance and relieve the suffering of the planet.

Death needed servants to accomplish its task. Disease, famine, accidents, and old age played this role and acted as death’s messengers. But, not understanding its place in the order of the universe, all beings feared death. They witnessed premature death and worried lest

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they be taken before their appropriate time. When that time did come, fear of death led to even greater suffering.

To overcome this fear, it is said that Lord Shiva himself gave humanity the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra. Whenever there is listlessness, stress, grief, or illness, or when fear of death intrudes in awareness, this great mantra can be used for healing, for maintaining vitality, and for refuge.

The Maha Mrityunjaya mantra restores health and happiness and brings calmness in the face of death. When courage or determination are blocked, it rises up to overcome obstacles. It awakens a healing force that reaches deep into the body and mind.

Just as a plant patiently gathers nutrients from the soil, so healing and nourishing forces enter the human body through foods, medicines, supportive emotions,

and encouraging thoughts. The Maha Mrityunjaya mantra attracts these forces and creates an inner environment to enhance their effectiveness. Thus the mantra can be used whenever any restorative process is undertaken.

The mantra can be recited when taking medicines, for it prepares the body and mind to make the best use of them. In India, when ash (*bhasma*) is applied to the body (as either a medicinal or a spiritual

### { THE MANTRA IN TRANSLATION }

OM. Tryambakam yajāmahe  
Sugandhim puṣṭi-vardhanam  
Urvārukamiva bandhanān  
Mṛityor mukshīya māmṛitāt

**OM** This sound is said to be the underlying kernel of the manifest universe and vibrates eternally at the heart of creation. It signifies all-pervading consciousness. Although it is not found in the actual text of the hymn, it is added to the body of the mantra whenever the mantra is used for meditation practice.

**tryambakam** The prefix *tri* (pronounced with a short “i”) means “three.” When it is joined to *ambakam*, the letter “i” becomes “y” and the word reads *tryambakam*. *Ambaka* means “eye.” *Tryambakam* is “three-eyed,” an epithet for Shiva which alludes to a well-known story in which Parvati, Shiva’s wife, playfully places her hands over his eyes. In consequence, the whole universe is thrown into blinding darkness. To save the universe, which in truth exists only in his eyes, Shiva opens a third eye at the center between his eyebrows, with which he sees both within and without.

The term “three-eyed” signifies the deep and pure consciousness of the universe that pervades and transcends time (past, present, future); perfectly manifests the powers of will, knowledge, and action; dwells as the witness within the three states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, and sleeping); and embodies the powers of the fires of heaven (the sun, *surya*), skies (the moon, *chandra*), and earth (fire, *agni*). Shiva is every spiritual trinity and dwells everywhere. Some also say that the word *amba* found here means “mother.” Shiva is manifested as the child of three mothers, the three great principles: mind, life force (*prana*), and matter.

**yajāmahe** We worship, adore, honor, revere.

**sugandhim** *Su* means “good, sweet.” *Gandha* is a fragrance.

Shiva is the sweet fragrance, the joy (*ananda*), which permeates life.

**puṣṭi** A well-nourished condition, thriving, prosperous, full, and complete.

**vardhanam** One who nourishes, strengthens, causes to increase (in health, wealth, well-being); who gladdens, exhilarates, and restores health; a good gardener.

**urvārukam** A cucumber-like plant that grows as a creeper in India. It produces a gourd that is attached to the vine by a strong, woody stem. The vine itself easily entangles other plants, attaching itself to them and becoming an obstacle for their growth. Thus, more generally the word stands for disease, attachment, obstacles in life, and resulting depression.

**iva** Like, just as.

**bandhanān** Stem (of the gourd); but more generally, unhealthy attachment.

**mṛityor** From death.

**mukshīya** Free us, liberate us.

**mā** Not.

**māmṛitāt** Immortality, emancipation.

#### TRANSLATION:

OM. We worship and adore you, O Three-Eyed One, O Shiva. You are sweet gladness, the fragrance of life, who nourishes us, restores our health, and causes us to thrive. As, in due time, the stem of the cucumber weakens and the gourd is freed from the vine, so free us from attachment and death, and do not withhold immortality.

✦ To hear this mantra recited aloud, visit [YogaPlus.org](http://YogaPlus.org) and click on “Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra.”

act) the mantra is recited. And so, whenever matters of health, vitality, nurturance, or freedom from the fear associated with death arise, the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra naturally surfaces as a remedy and comfort.

It is also said that those in the healing professions will benefit from reciting the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra regularly. Through it, they will draw from an infinite reserve of energy, and thus prevent burnout while opening a channel of healing from which life can be nourished.

#### **AWAKENING THE HEALING FORCE**

Stories glorifying Shiva as Mrityunjaya and extolling the practice of the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra abound. Many of them are allegorical—infusing characters and story line with symbolic meaning; others are primarily inspirational; still others reveal details about specific practices.

The power of the mantra has been explained by Shiva himself in the *Netra Tantra*, a conversation recorded between Shiva and his wife, Parvati. At the opening

of the text Parvati asks, “Your eyes are so beautiful; they are filled with the tears of compassion. How is it possible that from such eyes flared forth the terrible fire capable of reducing death itself to ashes?”

Shiva said, “Be joined in yoga, O Parvati, for only then will you be able to understand how the fire inherent in my eyes is the immortal elixir. The light in my eyes is all-pervading. It faces every direction and it resides in all states of waking, dreaming, and sleep. It is the source of life for all living beings. It can be known only through the practice of yoga, and can never be experienced by those who lack self-effort.

“The light in my eyes is the same as one’s own radiance. It is self-evident. It is the highest form of inner strength. It is eternal and it is *ojas* (the radiant energy that infuses matter with life). It is the power of will—the indomitable will of the soul. In it lies the seed of omniscience, the power to

know, and the power to act. It is through this force, intrinsic to me, that I destroy and I create.

“The whole universe is filled and sustained by this energy. In fact the powers of will, knowledge, and action together are my eyes. They are the source of immortality, the ultimate force of healing and nourishment. They are the embodiment of my radiant vitality. The knowers of mantra science call it *Mrityunjaya*, “the conqueror of death.” It enables one to attain freedom from all forms of misery, for it is the destroyer of all diseases. Meditation on this brilliant light manifesting in the form of Mrityunjaya mantra cools down the scorching heat of worldly and spiritual poverty. It is pure, peaceful, and unyielding.

“The light of this mantric shakti outshines millions of suns. It is with this fire of radiant divine energy that

✦ *For more information on ojas, see Everyday Ayurveda, page 16.*

**THE MAHA MRITYUNJAYA** mantra, one of yoga’s most important mantras, restores health and happiness and brings calmness in the face of death.



I destroy the world in a flash and breathe life into it in no time. There is nothing beyond this power... With this mantra one is able to conquer all one's enemies (anger, hatred, jealousy, and greed). It is the source of longevity, health, and well-being... Assuming different forms and shapes, the power of this light, the Mrityunjaya mantra pervades the whole universe. It is the source of all protection, physical, mental, and spiritual. There is no mystery higher than this, the mystery of my eyes, the fire residing in them, and how that fire manifests in the form of Mrityunjaya mantra."

—Excerpted from the *Netra Tantra*, translated by Pandit Rajmani Tiganait, PhD

#### HOW TO USE THIS MANTRA

Inspired by such words and instructed by teachers who have preserved the traditions of practice, many meditators have made the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra a part of their daily routine. There are no restrictions as to who may learn and practice the mantra, nor is it necessary to embrace the mythology surrounding the mantra in order to use it. It is enough to approach it with respect.

The first step is to learn to recite the mantra correctly. Although it may appear long, it has only thirty-two syllables and it can be learned with a modest effort. Slow repetition combined with a review of the meaning of the individual words (see sidebar on page 45) will help in remembering them.

Once the mantra is learned, bring it to mind as you begin your daily meditation, as a kind of invocation to your normal practice. After calming the body and breath, do 3, 11, 21, or even 36 recitations, and allow your mind to become absorbed in the sounds and rhythm of each line. Let the mantra draw your awareness to the heart center or the eyebrow center, whichever feels most natural to you, and use that center as the focal point of your awareness. If you are reciting the mantra to help with a health problem, focus your awareness at the navel center.

#### { THE BIRTHDAY MANTRA }



**IN INDIA**, when an infant reaches its first birthday, the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra is often recited as a form of spiritual well-wishing. It is the equivalent of wishing the child a long and healthy life—one that, like Markandeya's, has a spiritual direction. Some people remember the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra on each of their own birthdays to instill the event with sanctity. And on their 60th or 80th birthdays, both of which are considered special times of transition, many meditators make a special effort to recite this mantra.

At some point you may wish to do more repetitions in a given period of time. There are many reasons for wanting to do this. You may be going through a period of poor health or low energy; you may be seeking a deeper sense of security or confidence; you may feel stressed or overwhelmed by events or attachments in your life; your own death, or the death of someone for whom you are dedicating your practice, may be approaching.

But often the sentiments that draw one to this practice are prompted less by health issues than by a deep urge to be part of the unfolding harmony of life itself. The nurturing quality of the mantra acts in the human mind and heart

just as the forces of light, water, and soil act in the life of a plant. The mantra magnifies the qualities of personality that give our lives purpose and meaning.

Use a *mala* (a string of 108 beads) to keep track of your practice. Treat one complete mala as 100 repetitions of the mantra. A fulfilling practice is to complete 8,000 repetitions in 40 days. This can be accomplished by doing one mala in the morning and one in the evening.

Each day, before beginning, remember the seer of the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra, the sage Vasishtha. Simply bring his spirit to mind, paying respect to him. Then begin your practice. In time, you may find that the one or two malas you do each day have become a regular element of your life.

#### RADIANT VITALITY

In the end, the many reasons for taking up the practice of the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra fold into one another. Whether to enhance your life or to assist in the transition to death, this mantra is ultimately a means for self-realization. The consciousness it inspires is none other than the deep, unending consciousness of the indwelling Self.

In this respect, Markandeya's story is allegorical, a reminder to us that the temple of human life is the body; that prayers and acts of worship culminate in meditation; and that the inner lingam which blesses us with immortality is the energy flowing from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. Awakening that energy was Markandeya's act of faith.

Words of another of the ancient sages, Suta, point us in a similar direction and inspire us to begin our own practice. They make a good closing to this article.

O sages of good and holy rites,  
there is no other lord so merciful as  
Tryambaka. He is propitiated and  
delighted easily. Truly, it is just so  
with the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra.  
One who is united with it, whatever  
may be his plight, shall undoubtedly  
be liberated from attachment, and by  
meditation he shall become one with  
the infinite itself. +