

## FESTIVALS IN APRIL 2005

### Tamil New Year (13<sup>th</sup> April - Hindus)

For the Hindu Tamils whose calendar is based on the solar year, the New Year, falls on the first day of the month *Chaitra* (in mid April, usually the 13th or 14th ). This year it is 13th April.

The sun, after six months of shining in the Southern Hemisphere, appears over the equator on March 21 and continues its apparent movement north of the equator. South India, is in the Northern Hemisphere and the approach of the sun appears to be the main reason for the selection of April as the first month of the New Year.

At homes, the sun is received with all veneration by cooking and offering on the open fore-ground sweet milk-rice called *Ponkal*. Some prefer to perform this ritual on the temple yard itself along with *AnnaThaanam* - feeding the poor.

#### Some excerpts from Swami's Discourses:

“Today everyone is rejoicing celebrating Tamil New Year's day. *Swabhanu* is the name of this year (2003). 'Swa' means Atma. In the spiritual parlance, we have four stages towards liberation: *Salokya* (mental proximity to the Divine), *Sameepya* (physical proximity to the Divine), *Sarupya* (identifying oneself with the Divine) and *Sayujya* (becoming one with the Divine). The letter 'Sa' is associated with the Atmic feeling. With the onset of the New Year, *Swabhanu*, one should also develop new and divine feelings.

Many New Years have gone by. But to what extent man has transformed himself? Man should tread a new and noble path and set an ideal to others. Only then would he have celebrated the arrival of the New Year in the true sense. He should practise and propagate newer ideals in his daily life. *Vedanta* declares, *Aham etat na* (I am not this). *Aham* means 'I', the Atmic principle and 'this' refers to body. Man should not give scope to *ahamkara* (ego) by identifying himself with the body. 'I' does not correspond to the body. 'I' corresponds to the eternal and immortal Atma, which is not tainted by ego, pomposity, and immorality. Only when man develops such *Atma viswasa* (Self-confidence) can he set an ideal to others. Man today does not understand the meaning of Self-confidence. First of all, man should have faith in himself.

*Where there is confidence, there is love;*

*Where there is love, there is truth;*

*Where there is truth, there is peace;*

*Where there is peace, there is bliss;*

*Where there is bliss, there is God.*

**14<sup>th</sup> April 2003**

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### Baisakhi (13<sup>th</sup> April – Sikh Festival)

On *Baisakhi* Day, March 30, 1699, hundreds of thousands of people gathered at Anandpur Sahib. Guru Gobind Rai addressed the congregants with a most stirring oration on his divine mission of restoring their faith and preserving the Sikh religion. After his inspirational discourse, he flashed his unsheathed sword and said that every great deed was preceded by equally great sacrifice: He demanded one head for oblation. After some trepidation one person offered himself. The Guru took him inside a tent. A little later he reappeared with his sword dripping with blood, and asked for another head. One by one four more earnest devotees offered their heads. Every time the Guru took a person inside the tent, he came out with a bloodied sword in his hand.

Thinking their Guru to have gone berserk, the congregants started to disperse. Then the Guru emerged with all five men dressed piously in white. He baptized the five in a new and unique ceremony called *pahul* (Sikhs today know this as the baptism ceremony called *Amrit*). Then the Guru asked those five baptized Sikhs to baptize him as well. He then proclaimed that the *Panj Pyare* - the Five Beloved Ones - would be the embodiment of the Guru himself: "Where there are *Panj Pyare*, there am I. When the Five meet, they are the holiest of the holy."

He said whenever and wherever five baptized (*Amritdhari*) Sikhs come together, the Guru would be present. All those who receive *Amrit* from five baptized Sikhs will be infused with the spirit of courage and strength to sacrifice. Thus with these principles he established *Panth Khalsa*, the Order of the Pure Ones.

At the same time the Guru gave his new *Khalsa* a unique, indisputable, and distinct identity. The Guru gave the gift of *bana* (the distinctive Sikh clothing and headwear). He also offered five emblems of purity and courage. These symbols, worn by all baptized Sikhs of both sexes, are popularly known today as Five Ks: *Kesh* (unshorn hair), *Kangha* (wooden comb), *Karra* (iron [or steel] bracelet), *Kirpan* (sword) and *Kachera* (underwear). By being identifiable, no Sikh could ever hide behind cowardice again.

The birth of the *Khalsa* is celebrated by Sikhs every *Baisakhi* Day on April 13. *Baisakhi* 2005 marks the 306th anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh's gift of *Panth Khalsa* to all Sikhs everywhere.

### Ram Navmi (18<sup>th</sup> April – Hindu Festival)

Ram Navami is a festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Rama, the son of King Dasharath. It was a joyous occasion in Ayodhya at the time when King Dasharath's heir was finally born.

Lord Rama was an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu (the Preserver) who came down to earth in human form to battle the invincible Ravana. Lord Brahma had been receiving complaints from all the gods about the havoc that Ravana was wreaking on earth. Because Lord Brahma had granted Ravana so many boons, even God could not kill him. Ravana had become so overconfident that he never expected an attack from a human being. Therefore, Lord Vishnu agreed to go to earth in the guise of Prince Rama, the son of King Dasharath and Queen Kaushalya.

Lord Rama was born on the *ninth* day of the month of *Chitra*, hence we celebrate his birthday as a *Navami*. Indian mathematicians and philosophers see nine as a magical number. Planets in our solar system are also nine, as are the main forms of goddess Durga and the ways of bhakti - devotion. On *Ram Navami* day, one needs to remind oneself of Rama's qualities:

#### Some excerpts from Swami's Discourses:

"Rama moved about in the world as an ordinary human being. He exemplified the ideal life. Yet, all considered him as an ordinary human being. However, do ordinary people live like Rama? Rama was one who, while appearing to lead the life of an ordinary man, led the life Divine. He demonstrated the ideal life of a spiritually realised person.

The term "Rama" has another esoteric significance. It consists of three syllables: Ra + Aa + Ma. Ra signifies Agni (the Fire-god). "Aa" represents the Sun-god (Surya). Ma represents the Moon-god (Chandra). The combination of the three letters constitutes the Rama name. Ra, representing the Fire-god, burns away all sins, Aa, representing the Sun god, dispels the darkness of ignorance. Me, representing the Moon-god, cools one's temper and produces tranquillity. The name Rama has the triple power of washing away one's sins, removing one's ignorance and tranquillising one's mind. How is the profound meaning of this sacred name to be imparted to mankind? Only the Divine coming in human form and demonstrating to mankind the power of the Divine can do this. Rama's name signifies the harmony in thought, word and deed. Rama demonstrated this harmony by his thoughts, words and deeds.

The story of Rama is the story of one who was filled with the sweetness of compassion. This story is the royal road to human progress and an ideal life. The Rama Principle is a combination of the Divine in the human and the human in the Divine. The inspiring story of Rama presents the triple ethical code relating to the individual, the family and the society. If society is to progress properly, the family should be happy, harmonious and united. For unity in the family, the individuals composing it must have a spirit of sacrifice. The Rama story exemplifies the ethical codes governing the individual, the family and society.

Today everybody utters "Ram," "Ram." However, very few follow the example set by Rama. They are not true devotees of Rama. At best, they may be described as "part-time devotees." True devotion means perpetual remembrance of the name of the Lord and constant meditation on that name, cherishing the figure of Rama in the heart.

It is not necessary to devote many hours to prayer. It is enough if one thinks of God with all his heart and offers one's self even for a few moments. A single matchstick when it is struck can dispel the darkness in a room that has remained closed for years. A single spark can burn down mountains of cotton. Likewise, wholehearted chanting of the name of Rama even once can destroy mountains of sins. But the chanting should not be done mechanically like playing a gramophone record. It should emanate from the depths of the heart."

## FESTIVALS IN APRIL 2005

### PASSOVER / PESACH (24<sup>th</sup> April – 1<sup>st</sup> May – Judaism)

The Feast of Passover ("Pesach" in Hebrew) is celebrated to commemorate the liberation of the Jewish people who were led out from Slavery in Egypt by Moses. It lasts for eight days during late March or early April. The first evening of Passover is marked by a ceremony called *Seder*.

Passover is also called the '*Festival of Freedom*' and is a celebration of freedom, not just for Biblical times, but its importance to the individual today and throughout history.

Passover is also known as the '*Festival of Spring*' and was celebrated as an agricultural festival, which marked the beginning of the cycle of production and harvest during the time the Jews lived in ancient Palestine. It symbolises hope and new life and the importance of starting afresh.

It is called Passover because on this day the Jewish children were saved from being killed by God who was punishing the Egyptians for not releasing the Jews. Their doors were marked in Lamb's blood and so were "passed over" i.e. The Almighty literally "passed over" Jewish homes, sparing Jewish children.

The celebrations lasts for seven or eight days, depending on where one lives. In Israel, Passover lasts 7 days, the first and second days are observed as full days of rest (*Yom Tov*), and the middle five as intermediate holidays (*Hol ha-Moed*). Outside Israel, Passover lasts eight days and the first two and last two days are observed as full days of rest.

*Pesach* is a special time in Jewish homes, when families & friends gather for *Seder* meals. During the meal, the Passover story is read from a book called *Haggadah*. Today as well, Passover celebrations continue to focus on the home. This makes Passover the most popular Jewish holiday. Families travel great distances to be together on this special occasion. Passover food is a special meal, which has items having special meanings for the Jewish people. Bitter herbs, for example are a reminder of the misery of slavery, and eggs symbolise a new life. Thus, it holds an important place amongst all Jewish festivals.

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### Vesak (24<sup>th</sup> April – Buddha Day)

On this day, Buddhists are reminded of the birth, enlightenment and death (attainment of *Nirvana*) of Lord Buddha.

One is reminded of the unique and most profound knowledge and insight which arose in Buddha on the night of his Enlightenment. This coincided with three important events which took place, corresponding to the three watches or periods of the night.

During the first watch of the night, when his mind was calm, clear and purified, light arose in him, knowledge and insight arose. He saw his previous lives, at first one, then two, three up to five, then multiples of them . . . ten, twenty, thirty to fifty. Then 100, 1000 and so on.... As he went on with his practice, during the second watch of the night, he saw how beings die and are reborn, depending on their Karma, how they disappear and reappear from one form to another, from one plane of existence to another. Then during the final watch of the night, he saw the arising and cessation of all phenomena, mental and physical. He saw how things arose dependent on causes and conditions. This led him to perceive the arising and cessation of suffering and all forms of dissatisfaction paving the way for the eradication of all taints of cravings. With the complete cessation of craving, his mind was completely liberated. He attained Full Enlightenment. The realisation dawned in him together with all psychic powers.

This wisdom and light that flashed and radiated under the historic Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya in the district of Bihar in Northern India, more than 2500 years ago, is of great significance to human destiny. It illuminated the way by which mankind could cross, from a world of superstition, or hatred and fear, to a new world of light, of true love and happiness.

The heart of the Teachings of the Buddha is contained in the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, namely,

The Noble Truth of *Dukkha* or suffering  
The Origin or Cause of suffering  
The End or Cessation of suffering  
the Path which leads to the cessation of all sufferings

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of *Dukkha* which has been generally translated as 'suffering'. From the Buddhist point of view, therefore, the purpose of life is to put an end to suffering and all other forms of dissatisfaction - to realise peace and real happiness.

The Second Noble Truth explains the Origin or Cause of suffering. *Tanha* or craving is the universal cause of suffering. It includes not only desire for sensual pleasures, wealth and power, but also attachment to ideas, views, opinions, concepts, and beliefs. The failure to satisfy one's desires through these things; causes disappointment and suffering.

The Third Noble Truth points to the cessation of suffering. Where there is no craving, there is no becoming, no rebirth. Where there is no rebirth, there is no decay, no old age, no death, hence no suffering. That is how suffering is ended, once and for all.

The Fourth Noble Truth explains the Path or the Way which leads to the cessation of suffering. It is called the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold path avoids the extremes of self-indulgence on one hand and self-torture on the other. It consists of Right understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Wisdom in the Buddhist context, is the realisation of the fundamental truths of life, basically the Four Noble Truths. The understanding of the Four Noble Truths provides us with a proper sense of purpose and direction in life. They form the basis of problem-solving.