

Tirtha (Place of Pilgrimage)

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From The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section CVIII
Translated by Sri Kisari Mohan Ganguli

Yudhishtira said: Do thou tell me, O grandsire, of that which is regarded as the foremost of all Tirthas (place of pilgrimage). Indeed, it behoveth thee to expound to me what that Tirtha is which conduces to the greatest purity.

[Note: The word 'Tirthas' as explained in the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata means a sacred water. There can be no Tirtha without water, be it a river, a lake, or even a well. Bhishma, however, chooses to take the word in a different sense.]

Bhishma said: Without doubt, all Tirthas are possessed of merit. Listen, however, with attention to me as I tell thee what the Tirtha, the cleanser, is of men endued with wisdom. Adhering to eternal Truth, one should bathe in the Tirtha called Manasa, which is unfathomable (for its depth), stainless, and pure, and which has Truth for its waters and the understanding for its lake.

[Note: The language is figurative. By 'Manasa' is not meant the trans-Himalayan Lake of that name, which to this day is regarded as highly sacred and draws numerous pilgrims from all parts of India. The word 'Manasa' is used here to signify the Soul. It is fathomless in consequence of nobody being able to discover its origin. It is pure and stainless by nature. It is presented here as having Truth for its waters and the Understanding for its lake. Probably, what is meant by this is that the Understanding, containing the waters of Truth, forms a part of this Tirtha as the lakes of Pushkara form a part of the Tirtha called by that name.]

The fruits in the form of cleansing, that one acquires by bathing in that Tirtha, are **freedom from cupidity, sincerity, truthfulness, mildness (of behaviour), compassion, abstention from injuring any creature, self-restraint, and tranquillity**. Those men that are freed from attachments, that are divested of pride, that transcend all pairs of opposites (such as pleasure and pain, praise and blame, heat and cold, etc.), that have no spouses and children and houses and gardens, etc., that are endued with purity, and that subsist upon the alms given to them by others, are regarded as Tirthas.

Tirtha (Place of Pilgrimage)

He who is acquainted with the truths of all things and who is freed from the idea of meum is said to be the highest Tirtha.

[Note: Once freed from the idea of meum implies him who identifies himself with all creatures; him, that is, in whom the idea of self has been extinguished.]

In searching the indications of purity, the gaze should ever be directed towards these attributes (so that where these are present, thou mayst take purity to be present, and where these are not, purity also should be concluded to be not). Those persons from whose souls the attributes of Sattwa and Rajas and Tamas have been washed off, they who, regardless of (external) purity and impurity pursue the ends they have proposed to themselves, they who have renounced everything, they who are possessed of omniscience and endued with universal sight, and they who are of pure conduct, are regarded as Tirthas possessing the power of cleansing. That man, whose limbs only are wet with water, is not regarded as one that is washed. He, on the other hand, is regarded as washed who has washed himself by self-denial. Even such a person is said to be pure both inwardly and outwardly.

They who never concern themselves with what is past, they who feel no attachment to acquisitions that are present, indeed, they who are free from desire, are said to be possessed of the highest purity. Knowledge is said to constitute the especial purity of the body. So also freedom from desire, and cheerfulness of mind. Purity of conduct constitutes the purity of the mind. The purity that one attains by ablutions in sacred waters is regarded as inferior. Verily, that purity which arises from knowledge is regarded as the best. Those ablutions which one performs with a blazing mind in the waters of the knowledge of Brahman (the Supreme Reality) in the Tirtha called Manasa, are the true ablutions of those that are conversant with Truth. That man who is possessed of true purity of conduct and who is always devoted to the preservation of a proper attitude towards all, indeed, he who is possessed of (pure) attributes and merit, is regarded as truly pure.

These that I have mentioned have been said to be the Tirthas that inhere to the body. Do thou listen to me as I tell thee what those sacred Tirthas are that are situate on earth also. Even as especial attributes that inhere to the body have been said to be sacred, there are particular spots on earth as well, and particular waters, that are regarded as sacred. By reciting the names of the Tirthas, by performing ablutions there, and by offering oblations to the Pitris in those places, one's sins are washed off. Verily, those men whose sins are thus washed off succeed in attaining to heaven when they leave this world. In consequence of their association with persons that are righteous, through the

Tirtha (Place of Pilgrimage)

especial efficacy of the earth itself of those spots and of particular waters, there are certain portions of the earth that have come to be regarded as sacred.

The Tirthas of the mind are separate and distinct from those of the earth. That person who bathes in both attains to success without any delay. As strength without exertion, or exertion without strength can never accomplish anything, singly, and as these, when combined, can accomplish all things, even so one that becomes endued with the purity that is contributed by the Tirthas in the body as also by that which is contributed by the Tirthas on the earth, becomes truly pure and attains to success. That purity which is derived from both sources is the best.



Tirtha (Place of Pilgrimage)

Hari Om Tat Sat