

The Purpose of Ritual Worship, By Stephen Knapp

Some people may ask what is the point of doing ritual worship? To this we should understand that traditional rites have a definite influence upon individuals. The activities involved while performing rituals may include a yajna, chanting mantras, special offerings, and group participation, which are based upon scientific principles. Scientists acknowledge the influence of sound and music, color, magnetic vibrations, and knowledge on which we concentrate. There is no doubt about the uplifting effect of rites and rituals. Good actions promote good habits and positive impressions that are absorbed by the mind and consciousness. Even psychologists admit that a person picks up good habits quickly when directed by good people in the correct environment.

The conscious mind controls the bulk of everyday activities. The unconscious mind looks after the more subtle and finer activities. The conscious mind collects impressions and influences from the outside world. The Vedic rituals provide a means for this to happen. However, the unconscious mind sorts the information and builds memories. Depending upon the kind of impressions and influences one gathers from the environment, the subconscious mind gradually transforms itself accordingly. A skillful and efficient mind renders the best support and service to the soul. It is not possible to awaken the perception of one's soul without a knowledgeable, controlled and pure mind.

During rites and rituals a priest invokes the blessings of the deities. When individuals experience the kindness of gods and are emotionally touched during the yajna and other activities, the mind gets charged with religious feelings. The importance of the occasion, the enthusiasm, the purity of the place, an emotional oath by the individual, the presence of the family, relatives and friends together add up to create a special kind of mental state. Activities during rituals leave an indelible impression upon the individual. This impression specially influences and educates the mind.

The effect of the ceremonies depends upon the atmosphere on the occasion and the way it is conducted. Hindus observe a variety of rites and rituals. The Gautam Smriti mentions that there are 40 basic rituals. Some religious texts place this figure at 48. According to Maharishi Angira, there are 25 basic forms of rituals.

THE PURPOSE OF THE AGNIHOTRA RITUAL

Agnihotra simply means a sacrificial fire. This is the ritual in which ghee and sesame seeds, and on some occasions other items, are offered into a small fire, usually in a pot or special container, while the priest chants various mantras for petitioning the presence and mercy of God. The fire, Agnideva the fire god, becomes the mouth of God, through which He accepts our offerings. These are also

distributed to the other demigods, thus, prayers to many divinities may be chanted during the ceremony. The ritual invokes auspiciousness, peace, goodwill, and changes the vibrations and atmosphere wherever it is held.

Amongst Hindus, there is a family name Agnihotri, which is derived from the fact that at one time these families maintained a perpetual fire in their homes. In many homes even today prayers are offered with the fire.

In the Valmiki Ramayana (1/6/12), it is said: Everyone performed Agnihotra in Ayodhya everyday. Lord Ram and Sita performed Agnihotra on the day of the coronation. It is also said the aggrieved Kaushalya did not miss out on Agnihotra even on the day Rama left home for 14 years of exile.

In the Suttinipat (568/21), Buddha explained the importance of Agnihotra: Just as the ocean amongst the rivers, a king amongst the people, and Savitri amongst the verses, Agnihotra is amongst the yajnas (rituals).

In the Atharva-Veda (19/55/3) it is also explained: May the fire in the home give us happiness and peace in the morning and evening, a happy temperament, resolve and good health. May it give us fame and honor. May we awaken you through yajna fire so that we may be robust and strong. Agnihotra promotes good health and mental contentment. It is a ladder to spirituality.

In the Atharva-Veda (9/2/6) it is said: Agnihotra destroys enemies.

The flames, smoke, and vibrations of the Agnihotra promote mental peace and give contentment. It clarifies the air in the home, spreads fragrance, purifies the atmosphere and thus helps householders. It gives them energy and the power to concentrate. It releases mental tension. Through a cleaner environment it promotes good health for everyone and has innumerable benefits.

The Agnihotra ritual is also called a yajna, or Vedic ritual. However, when conducting a yajna (pronounced as yagya) it is customary to have a havan or fire sacrifice. The fire is ceremoniously lit, symbolic of inviting Agni, the fire God. Thereafter as mantras are chanted an offering in the form of ghee or havan samagri (a mixture of herbs and ghee) is offered to the fire at the end of the mantra. This is also called ahuti, which is an oblation or offering that is put into the fire. While making the offering, the word Swaha is uttered loudly.

The Matsya Purana says that when the five essential constituents - gods, havan fluid or offering (such as ghee), Vedic mantras, the divine law, and a gift to the Brahmin - are there, it is a yajna (complete sacrificial ritual). Any good activity done for universal welfare is a yajna.

Sages and saints have identified three purposes of a yajna - prayer to gods, developing harmonious company, and charity. Prayers to gods are used as models to shape our lives. Harmonious company is having relatives and friends who share similar thoughts and are motivated towards togetherness and mutual support. Charity is to share one's blessings, extend support to society and create a feeling of universal brotherhood.

Through a yajna one attains physical, mental and internal peace, purification of the self, spiritual progress, and protection from sickness. The yajna fire has five qualities - it is always hot or active; it is exemplary; it is attractive to all that come to it; it is generous because it gives rather than stores its benefits; and the flame is always high, symbolizing concern, character, and self-respect.

In the Kalika Purana (23/7/8) it is said: Yajnas please the gods. It was through a yajna that the entire world was established. Yajnas support the whole world. Yajna protects people from sin. People live on grain. Grain is produced from clouds that bring rain. Clouds emerge from the yajnas. The whole universe depends upon yajnas.

In the Upanishads it is also explained: Through yajnas the gods attained heaven and overcame the demons. Through yajnas even enemies become friends. Therefore outstanding people consider a yajna a special activity.

In the Agni Purana (380/1) it is said: Through a yajna the gods grant one's wishes.

In the Padma Purana (Shristhi Khand, 3/124), it is said that pleased by a yajna the gods bless mankind with well-being.

In the Manu Samhita (3/76), it is related that an oblation dutifully offered to the fire is received by Surya.

In the Sama-Veda (879) it is said that whoever offers oblations to the fire is blessed with good children, wisdom, wealth and prosperity.

When Brahma created mankind, man visualized that his life would be full of need, problems and sorrow. He complained to Brahma, "Lord! Who would nourish and protect insecure mankind?"

Brahma responded, "Dear son! Through a yajna offer oblations to the gods. They will bless you with wealth, prosperity, well-being and fame."

In a yajna, after chanting the mantra it is customary to say Swaha when making an oblation to the fire. Swaha is the name of Agni's wife. It is customary to invoke her name during an offering to make her the medium of the oblation. Swaha literally means good speech.

THE PURPOSE OF A TEMPLE

A temple is a place where the deities are enshrined and worshiped. In personal expression, a temple is the abode of God. A temple represents an ocean of spiritual energy, which preserves and protects culture and tradition. It magnifies the spiritual vibration which the devotees can then use like a spiritual launching pad from which one can hasten and charge one's own spiritual development by coming closer to the spiritual dimension. Even a temple room in one's own house can work in this way to some extent.

PURPOSE OF THE DEITY OR IMAGE (MURTI) IN THE TEMPLE

Followers of Sanatana-Dharma believe in the concept of Atma (soul) and Paramatma (Super Soul). The Atma is the individual soul and is present in all beings. The Paramatma is the plenary expansion of Lord Vishnu which expands and appears as the Supersoul in all beings, and accompanies the individual soul in any situation or species. Yoga is meant to establish a connection, link or relationship between the soul and Supersoul, God. It is easier to build a relationship with God if one thinks of Him as a person. The deities are the personal manifestation of God that provides the mercy for us to see Him with our material eyes. Generally, until we become more spiritually developed, we cannot see spiritual items with our material mind and senses. So, the deity is the Lord's mercy on us so that we can still see Him in our present materialistic conditioning. The deity, once formed under strict rules, is then also installed in the temple in a special ritual in which by various means we call the Lord to inhabit the deity. Then the deity is considered to be no different than the Lord Himself.

WHY WE WORSHIP IMAGES

Almost any person [except maybe Jews] believes or utilizes an image or symbol of their religion, culture, or even business. This is not unusual. The Cross in the Christian church, the picture of Jesus Christ, the statue of Mary, statues of patron saints, even the black stone in Kabba are all what we could call images. If anyone bows in front of any of them, they are breaking laws of Old Testament. [LE 26:1, and EX 20:2-5.] So, use of images is practically everywhere and all people worship something or someone. In fact, the first sculpture of Christ was in the form of a small boy holding a lamb. Now, everywhere in the world people have pictures of Christ according to their culture. A loving, young, white man in the USA, or a tough man looking like a judge in Russia, a nice black man in Africa, and you find a man looking like a typical Chinese with a sheepish beard in China. All religions have some concept of God with name and form, but Hindus have the courage to present the details as described in their scripture.

The images and deities of the Divine that are worshiped in the Vedic temples or in homes of those who follow Sanatana-dharma are not someone's concocted imaginings. They are based on the detailed descriptions of God's form as described in the Vedic texts. This is another beauty of the Vedic culture. Whereas most texts of other religions offer little information on God's appearance and characteristics, these become specifically revealed in the Vedic tradition. Thus, we know what God looks like and can form images accordingly. Then these deities are installed, calling the personality of the Divine, according to specific prayers and rituals. And this is called the Prana Pratishtha ceremony.

As the Supreme Controller, God can appear to His devotees in any of His specific forms. And even if some say that these images that are presented are made of nothing but stone or wood, still God can turn what is spiritual into something material, or something material into something spiritual. In this way, we can use our material senses and still have the vision of God in the form of the deity, and approach Him with our love and service. Thus, the authorized deity is not an idol, and should not be called an idol, but is the Lord's mercy in giving us the chance to see something spiritual with material eyes. Of course, as we become more spiritualized, we can see with our inner spiritual eyes the transcendental form and activities of the Supreme Being, even while in this body that we have now.

An example is that the Post Office has authorized post boxes in which we put our mail, which is then picked up and delivered to the address on the envelope. If, however, we make our own unauthorized box and put it where we like, if we put our mail in it, it will not go anywhere. In the same way, by praying to the authorized forms of God our service will reach Him and be accepted by Him. Besides, there are many stories of how deities have come to life and interacted with devotees and engaged in all kinds of pastimes with them in very personal ways. So they are always full of potential to interact with us, or merely watch and see what we do, or even leave the deity form if we are too offensive or do not understand the basis of the deity. Thus, a deity, though appearing to be made of material ingredients, should in no way be considered material. The Lord can indeed make what is material into something spiritual, or take what is spiritual and make it appear as material. In short, the deities are the personal manifestation of the gods or goddesses they depict. So we should never think that deities are nothing but stone or wood. In fact, the Vedic scripture says that anyone who thinks in such a way exhibits a hellish mentality.

In this way, even though we may be unqualified to see God, who is beyond the perceptibility of our material senses, the living beings in this material creation are allowed to see and approach the Supreme through His archa-vigraha or His form as the worshipable deity in the temple. This is considered His causeless mercy on the materially conditioned living beings that He would allow Himself to appear to humanity as a deity to accept our worship and service.

In this manner, the Supreme Being gives Himself to His devotees so they can become absorbed in

servicing, remembering and meditating on Him. Thus, the Supreme comes to dwell in the temple to accept our worship and attract the eyes to concentrate and meditate on the deity, and the temple becomes the spiritual abode on earth. In time, the body, mind and senses of the devotee become spiritualized by serving the deity, and the Supreme can become fully manifest to him or her. Worshipping the deity of the Supreme and using one's senses in the process of devotional service to the Supreme provides a means for one's true essential spiritual nature to unfold. The devotee becomes spiritually realized and the deity reveals His spiritual nature to the sincere souls according to their progressive spiritual development. This can continue to the level in which the Supreme Being in the form of the deity engages in a personal relationship and performs reciprocal, loving pastimes with the devotee, as has previously taken place with other advanced individuals.

At this stage, darshan is not simply a matter of viewing the deity in the temple, but to one who is spiritually realized it is a matter of experiencing the deity and entering into a personal, reciprocal exchange with the Supreme in the form of the deity. At that stage, you may view the deity, but the deity also gazes at you, and then there is a spiritual exchange wherein the deity begins to reveal His personality to you. This is what separates those who are experienced from those who are not, or those who can delve into this spiritual exchange and those who may still be trying to figure it out. For those who have experienced such an exchange with the Supreme or His deity, at this stage the worship of the Supreme Being in the deity moves up to a whole different level, with no limits as to the spiritual love that can be shared between the devotee and the deity. This also opens up a completely new level of conversation on this topic, which we can save for another time. But this is why the deity in the temple is the main focal point of everything that goes on there.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARATI CEREMONY

The arati ceremony is the most performed of any ritual in the temple, and is the offering of a ghee lamp to the deity or object of respect. These lamps usually have five or more flames on them. Arati is performed in the temples to the Deities several times a day. It is also offered to special guests and holy saints. It is also accompanied with ringing a bell, singing or playing musical instruments.

In offering the lamp to the deity, it is held in the right hand and waved in a clockwise motion, 4 times to the feet, 2 times to the waist, and seven times around the whole body. It is a way of adding an intensity to the prayers and the image of the Lord. Besides, the aroma of the burning ghee is quite pleasing. Afterwards, the ghee lamp is passed around the room so that everyone can place their hands over the flame that has been offered to the deity, accepting it as holy remnants, prasada, and then touch the hands to the eyes or head. This is a gesture of accepting the light of knowledge, and the light which revealed the Lord. We use the lamp to light the form of the Lord who is in fact the source of all light. This was particularly significant before there was electricity and when temples were lit by lamps. The arati ceremony would especially provide light to various parts

of the deity when the priest would wave the lamp in front of it. Some of the older temples in India are still like this today. We also accept this lamp as a symbol of lighting our own vision and thoughts with hopes that they may be divine and noble.

Sometimes camphor is also used in place of ghee. This also presents a pleasing scent. The ghee or camphor also represents our inherent tendencies that are being offered to the fire of knowledge, which reveals the form of the Lord and thus increases our mental and physical purity in service to the Lord.

In some arati ceremonies there is not only the ghee lamp or deep that is offered but also the incense, a camphor lamp, a water filled conch shell, flowers, chamara fan, peacock feather fan, etc. These are for several reasons. One is that these are items to honor and offer comfort to the deity, but they also represent the different elements, such as earth, fire, water, air, ether, mind, intelligence, and ego. So we are also offering all the elements back to the deity, as well as our own mind, senses, intelligence and ego. This means that the performer of the arati is offering all of themselves to the deity, and if those who observe the arati follow along with the right meditation, then they also can meditate on offering all of themselves to the deity. You ask the deity to accept these items for their pleasure, but also to accept your whole being in their service, and as an offering for the deity to bless you to help you reach them and the spiritual atmosphere.

THE REASON LAMPS ARE USED

In many homes and temples there are lamps that are lit. And many special functions start with the lighting of a lamp. Light symbolizes knowledge which keeps us free from the darkness of ignorance. Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness. Therefore, the lamp is lit and we bow to it as this knowledge is the greatest form of wealth. It is kept lit during special functions as a guide and witness to our thoughts and actions. Of course, now lamps are not as necessary with the use of electric bulbs, etc. But the lamp is the traditional instrument which represents our vasanas or negative inclinations, while the wick signifies our ego. As the lamp burns, it also represents the burning away of our bad habits and bodily ego. The flame burns upward, as knowledge also takes our views higher.

In the old days when the temples did not have electricity, the lamps offered to the deity during the arati ceremony were also the main way the devotees could see the shape of the deity. So it is the lamp, which represents knowledge, that lights the deity, just as it is with transcendental knowledge which allows us to understand or awaken to the awareness of God. So after the lamp is offered to the deity it is circulated amongst the observes, and they receive the lamp of knowledge that has revealed the deity by touching it or waving their hands over it, and then bringing their hands up to their forehead or eyes. This is a gesture of respect toward the lamp and knowledge that has

revealed the deity, and also that this knowledge will awaken spiritual awareness within them.

WHY RING BELLS IN TEMPLES

When entering a temple, most of them have one or more bells hung from the ceiling. The devotee rings the bells as he or she enters, then proceeds for darshan to see the deities. The ring of the bell produces a sound similar to Om, the universal name of the Lord. This helps create an atmosphere of auspiciousness when entering the temple. This is also a reason why a bell is rung by a priest, pujari, while doing the arati ceremony. Ringing the bell, blowing the conch, and engaging in the kirtanas or singing holy songs, are all ways to worship the Lord and keep away all inauspicious and irrelevant noises and thoughts that might disturb or distract the worshippers from their devotions and inner peace. In this way, the bell is also a call to focus our attention on the ceremony.

WHY A CONCH SHELL IS BLOWN

Whether in temples or in our household temple rooms, the conch shell is blown three times before the arati ceremony or puja worship. It is kept on the altar as a symbol for Truth, dharma, auspiciousness, and victory. It also was blown before a battle or after the victory of an army. Blowing the conch emanates the sound of Om, which contains all the knowledge of the Vedas. It is an auspicious sound and represents the truth behind the illusion. It also can purify the atmosphere, as well as the minds of those who hear it. It also represents dharma or righteousness. So it is appropriate for it to be blown before the arati or puja. The sound of the conch draws one's attention to the presence of the Lord and the Vedic sound vibration. It thus drowns out the negative noises that may distract us from the sacred atmosphere or disturb our minds. This is also why sometimes devotees bow to the sound of the conch when it is blown.

The tradition relates that there was once a demon named Shankhasura who had defeated the devas and stole the Vedas from them. He then hid at the bottom of the ocean. The devas prayed to Lord Vishnu for assistance. He incarnated as Matsya and killed the demon. The Lord blew one of the conch shells that hung from His ears and the Om resonated, from which the Vedas returned. For this reason the conch is also called shankha after Shankhasura. The Lord's conch shell is named Panchajanya.

WHY COCONUTS ARE OFFERED

One of the most common items that are offered to the deities in the temple is the coconut. You will also see it being used to start special occasions, like weddings, festivals, etc., when it is offered and then broken. You may also see it sitting on top of a ceremonial pot with mango leaves. This is a

representation of Lakshmi devi, the goddess of fortune, or sometimes Lord Shiva. The coconut is offered to the deity as a representation of the body (the coconut shell), the mind (the white fruit within) and the soul (the coconut milk). All these are offered to the deity, and then it is broken to let out the milk and fruit. This indicates the breaking of the ego. Then, after it is offered to the Lord, what remains is accepted as remnants from the Lord, as prasada. This represents a complete circle in which God accepts our offering of the body, mind and soul and gives back the mercy, prasada, of the Lord.

WHY A KALASHA (POT) IS WORSHIPED

Sometimes, especially during a homa ritual, there is a special pot or kalasha, topped with a coconut, that is given special attention. The pot may be made from brass, copper or mud, and filled with water. Tied around its neck may be a red and white string. The pot often has designs on its sides. It may be used for special occasions like weddings, or set near entrances of homes, etc. The water in the kalasha symbolizes the waters of creation when the cosmic manifestation appeared with the arrangements of Lord Vishnu and Brahma. The leaves and coconut represent the creation, while the string indicates the love that is the foundation of the whole creation. When prayers are offered to the kalasha, it is considered that all the holy waters, the Vedic knowledge, and the blessings of the deities are invoked in it. The purified water within is then used in the rituals. At other times, the prayers are used to invoke the energy of the Goddess of Fortune, Lakshmi Devi, and the kalasha becomes a representation of Lakshmi Devi.

PURPOSE OF CIRCUMAMBULATING TEMPLES OR DEITIES

Another thing that you may see is when devotees circumambulate and go around the deities in the sanctum of a temple, or even around the temple itself, or around sacred places, like special hills or even holy towns. This is called pradakshina. This is a means of recognizing the center point of our lives, the center of the circular path we take in honor of the deities of the Lord, or something connected with Him. This is done in a clockwise manner so to keep the deity on our right, which is the side of auspiciousness. So in a way, it is a reflection of going through life while keeping God in the center. Walking around holy sites is another way of undergoing austerities for spiritual merit. It is accepted that each step takes away some of our material karma, and thus helps us get free from the mundane affairs and worldly consciousness which causes us to undertake the actions which create our karma, which helps free us from further rounds of birth and death in this material world. Respect can be shown to our superiors or parents by circumambulating them three times as well.

THE POTENCY OF CHARANAMRITA

The word charanamrita comprises two words, charan and amrita. Charan means feet and amrita is the celestial nectar that makes one immortal. Together the words mean nectar of God's feet. This is the water that has been used to bathe the deity of the Lord in the temple. It glides down the body of the deity and through His lotus feet. It is then gathered and sometimes mixed with yogurt and a little sugar and offered to all who come to the temple to see the deities. Thus, having touched the body of the deity form of the Lord, the water becomes spiritually very powerful. Those who come to the temple to see the deities gladly accept three drops in the palm of their right hand, which is supported by their left, and then sip it from their palm.

Charanamrita is normally kept on a special table near the deities in a copper vessel, as copper has many curative qualities. Ayurveda and homoeopathic practitioners have confirmed this. Copper cures spasmodic pains. It is believed that drinking water stored in a copper vessel improves intellect, memory, and wisdom.

The Padma Purana says that even if one has not done any pious activities at all, if a person accepts the charanamrita of the deity, he becomes eligible to enter Vaikuntha.

In the Ramayana (Ayodhya Kand, Doha 101) Tulsidas has said: When Kewat washed the feet of Sri Rama and accepted the water as charanamrita, not only did he attain salvation, but his forefathers also attained it.

In the text called Ranvir Bhaktiratanakara Brahma, it is said: To absolve oneself of sins and get rid of disease God's charanamrita is like medicine. If tulasi leaves are added, the qualities are enhanced.

In the Ranvir Bhaktisagar it is said: Charanamrita protects one from untimely death. It destroys all kinds of diseases. It breaks the chain of death and rebirth.

In this way, Charanamrita has great qualities and benefits a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Therefore, always accept charanamrita with grace and humility.

PURPOSE OF OFFERING FOOD TO THE LORD BEFORE EATING

We often see that food preparations are offered to the deities during the worship or at festival times. Or even in homes of devotees, food is prepared and then offered to the deities in the family temple room before anyone else accepts it. Then it is taken as prasada or mercy of the deities or God as spiritualized food. Even in many western homes food is taken only after observing a prayer. This is a recognition that whatever blessings we receive in life is a result of the Lord's arrangement. After all, everything is God's property, and we are merely borrowing it. So we offer to God whatever we accept before taking it ourselves. We can especially do this with food.

Furthermore, it has been detected that the particles of food change when prayers are said over it. So offering the food increases the high level of energy that goes into it that would otherwise not be there. More about this can be found elsewhere.

*** Practice eating Sattvic Foods, having Sattvic Thoughts and doing Sattvic Deeds for a good life