

HMEC WORKSHOP (Sept 16th, 2017)

Topic: Significance of Rituals , Rites, Symbols and worship at homes & temples

Worship is an integral part of all mandirs & temples all over the world and play an important role in our Hindu Religion. Mandirs or Temples are ideal places for strengthening four pillars of spirituality: Worship, Education, Culture and Service. In Hindu tradition, we worship alone or together (samuhik) at home or any place preferably mandirs. In Hinduism, we worship the nameless and the formless supreme Reality by various names and in various forms such as Lord Ganesha, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswathi , etc. Each God or goddess or deity is a particular manifestation of the one supreme Reality. Worship (puja) of these gods consists of a range of ritual offerings and prayers typically performed either daily or on special days before an image of the deity. In general, worship begins with personal purification and invocation of the God followed by offerings of clothing, kunkum, haldi or chandan, flowers, food /fruits and other objects such as Aarti etc and ends with pradakshina namaskaram and Prasad.. Various traditions follow different standards of ritual purity and purification such as achamanam, punyahavachanam and abhishekam. Let me now explain significance of some of these rituals, rites and symbols that are an integral part of many worship programs in the mandirs and homes..

1. Why do we light a lamp or Diyya?

In almost every hindu mandir or home, a lamp or diyya is lit daily before the altar of the Lord. Why?. Light as you all know, symbolizes knowledge, darkness and ignorance. The Lord is the “*knowledge principle*” (chaitanya) who is the source and the illuminator of all knowledge. Hence light is worshipped as the Lord himself. Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness.

2. Why do we do Namaste?

We always greet each other with namaste or namaskaram. The two palms are placed together in front of the chest and the head bows whilst saying the word namaste. This greeting is for all, whether people younger than us, or of our own age, or those older than us, friends and even strangers. Namaste could be just a casual or formal greeting, a cultural convention or an act of worship. In Sanskrit, *Namaste means “I bowe to you-my greetings, salutations or prostration to you “.*

3. Why do we wear tilaks on forehead?

Most religious people, especially married women wear a tilak or pottu on the forehead. It is applied daily after a bath and on special occasions before or after ritualistic worship or a visit to the temple. In many communities, it is enjoined upon married woman to spot a kunkum mark on the forehead at all times. The tilak is applied on saints, priests and images of the Lord as a form of worship and in many parts of India as a respectful form of welcome, to honor guests, or when bidding farewell to a son or husband about to embark on a journey.

4. Why we do pradakshina?

When we visit a mandir, after offering prayers, we circumambulate the sanctum called pradakshina. We cannot draw a circle without a center point. The lord is the center source and essence of our lives. Recognizing him as the focal point in our lives, we go about doing our daily chores. This is the significance of pradakshina. As we circumambulate,

we chant: “*All the sins committed by an individual from innumerable past births are destroyed by each step taken whilst doing pradakshina.*”

5. Why do we ring the bell in a temple?

In most temples, there are one or more bells hung from the top near the entrance. The devotee rings the bell as soon as he enters, thereafter proceeding for darshan of the lord and prayers. Why? Is it to wake up the Lord? But the Lord never sleeps. Is it to let the Lord know we have come. Is it a form of seeking permission to enter his precinct? Here is the answer to these questions:

The ringing of the bell produces what is regarded as an auspicious sound. It produces the sound Om, the universal name of the Lord. There should be auspiciousness within and without, to gain the vision of the Lord who is all-auspiciousness. Even while doing the ritualistic *Aarati*, we ring the bell. It is sometimes accompanied by the auspicious sounds of the conch and other musical instruments. An added significance of ringing the bell, conch and other instruments is that they help to minimize the disturbances created by others.

6. Why do we blow the conch?

In mandirs or homes, the conch is blown once or several times before ritualistic worship or pooja. When the conch is blown, the primordial sound of ohm emanates. It represents the world and the truth behind it. As the story goes, the demon shankhasura defeated the devas, stole the Vedas and went to the bottom of the ocean. The devas appealed to lord Vishnu for help. He incarnated as Matsya avataara-the fish incarnation and killed shankhasura. The Lord blew the conch shaped bone of his ear and head. The ohm sound emanated from which emerged the Vedas. All knowledge enshrined in the Vedas is an elaboration of ohm. The conch therefore is known as shanka after shankhasura. The conch blown by the lord is called panchajanya. He carries it at all times in one of his four hands. It represents dharma or righteousness that is one of the four goals of life. The sound of the conch is thus also the victory call of good over evil.

7. Why do we offer coconut?

Coconut is one of the most common offerings in a temple. It is also offered on occasions like weddings, festivals, Griha pravesh etc. A pot or kalasha full of water adorned with Mango /pan leaves and a coconut on top is worshipped on important occasions and used to receive revered guests. It is offered in the sanctificial fire whilst performing homa. The coconut is broken and placed before the Lord. The fibre covering the dried coconut is removed except for a tuft on the top. The marks on the coconut make it look like the head of a human being. The coconut is broken symbolizing the breaking of the ego.

Tender coconut water is used in abhisheka rituals since it is believed to bestow spiritual growth on the seeker. The coconut also symbolizes selfless service. Every part of the tree is used in innumerable ways like thatches, mats, tasty dishes including chutney, oil, soap etc. It takes in even salty water from the earth and converts it into sweet nutritive water that is especially beneficial to sick people. It is used in the preparation of many ayurvedic medicines and in other alternative medicinal systems.

8. Why do we do aarati?

As you all know, we perform the aarati towards the end of every ritualistic worship

(pooja/bajan) of the Lord or to welcome an honoured guest or saint. It is one of the 16 steps (shodasha upachara) of the pooja ritual. It is referred to as the auspicious light (mangala niraajanam). Holding the lighted lamp in the right hand we wave the flame in a clockwise circling movement to light the entire form of the Lord. As the light is waved, we either do mental or loud chanting of prayers or simply behold the beautiful form of the lord illuminated by the lamp. We experience an added intensity in our prayers and the Lord's image seems to manifest a special beauty at that time. At the end of the Aarati, we place our hands over the flame and then gently touch our eyes and the top of the head. It means—*“may the light that illuminated the lord light up my vision, may my vision be divine and my thoughts noble and beautiful.”*

Aarati is often performed with camphor. Camphor when it burns itself out completely without leaving a trace of it. Camphor represents our inherent tendencies and when lit by the fire of knowledge which illuminates the Lord, our vaasanas thereafter burn themselves out completely, not leaving a trace of the ego. Also while camphor burns to reveal the glory of the Lord, it emits a pleasant perfume even while it sacrifices itself.

9. Why do we say shaanti thrice?

Shaanti meaning peace is a natural state of being. Disturbances are created either by us or others. For example, peace already exists in a place until someone makes noise.

Therefore, peace underlies all our agitations. When agitations end, peace is naturally experienced since it was already there. Where there is peace, there is happiness.

Therefore, every one without exception desires peace in his /her life. To invoke peace, we chant shaanti prayers. By chanting prayers, troubles end and peace is experienced internally irrespective of the external disturbances. All such prayers end by chanting shaanti thrice.

All obstacles, problems and sorrows originate from three sources: Aadhidaivika, Aadhibhautika and Aadhyaatmika. We sincerely pray to the lord that while we undertake special tasks, there are no problems or that problems are minimized from these three sources. May peace alone prevail. Hence shaanti is chanted thrice. It is chanted aloud the first time, addressing the unseen forces. It is chanted softer the second time directed to our immediate surroundings and those around and softest the last time as it is addressed to oneself.

10. Significance of Swastika: Swastika represents the supreme sovereign power that brings goodness and well-being. The swastika symbol was created by our rishis thousands of years ago. The horizontal and vertical lines demonstrate that the one and only non-dual Brahman is pervading the whole of the universe. The vertical line of swastika means the jyotirlinga while the horizontal line means the expanse of the universe. The four arms of swastika represent the four arms of Lord Vishnu who feeds all creatures in all four directions with His four hands. Swastika is drawn with vermilion on all auspicious occasions like weddings, Diwali etc and also at the entrance to houses and temples.

11. Significance of Ohm: Ohm bestows spiritual power. The chanting of ohm drives the life force upwards. When chanted several times, it helps eliminate disease-causing germs from the body as well as sadness and dejection from the mind. That is why the scriptures praise ohm and the rishis have placed it at the beginning of every mantra.

12. What are the Shodasha Samskaaras : Samskaaras are rites of passage in a human being's life. They are the ornaments that decorate one's personality. They mark the important stages of one's life and enable one to live a fulfilling life complete with happiness and contentment. They pave the way for one's physical and spiritual journey through this life. It is believed that various hindu samskaras meticulously lead to a purification of one's sins, faults and even correction of physical deformities.

The Upanishads mention samskaras as a mean to grow and prosper in all four aspects of human pursuit: Dharma (righteousness), Artha(wealth), Karma & Kama (work & pleasure) and Moksha (salvation).

The most important **sixteen** samskaras or rites of passage in one's life are:

- (i) Garbhadhana (Conception ritual for having healthy children)
- (ii) Punswana (Fertilization ritual performed on the third month of pregnancy asking for life and safety of the fetus)
- (iii) Seemantonnayana (Ritual observed in the penultimate month of pregnancy for safe and assured delivery of the baby)
- (iv) Jatkarma (Birth ceremony of the new born baby)
- (v) Namakarana (Naming ceremony of the baby, which is observed 11 days after its birth. This gives the new-born an identity with which he or she will be associated all his life)
- (vi) Niskramana (Act of taking the four- month- old child out for the first time into the open to sunbathe)
- (vii) Annaprashana (Ceremony conducted when child is fed cereal or solid food for the first time at the age of six months)
- (viii) Chudakarma, Mundan or Keshanta Karma (Ceremony tonsuring of the head . The baby's head is shaved off and hair is ceremonially immersed in a river)
- (ix) Karnavedha (Ritual of having the ear pierced. These days, it is mostly girls who have their ears pierced).
- (x) Upanayana or Thread Ceremony (Investiture ceremony of the sacred thread)
- (xi) Vedarambha or Vidyarambha (Observed when the child is initiated into study. In ancient times, boys were sent to live with their gurus in a "gurugriha" or "gurukula or Hermitage to study).
- (xii) Samavartana (Returning to the house after completion of studies)
- (xiii) Vivaha (Wedding or Marriage ceremony. After marriage, the individual enters to life of a "Grihastha" or "Conjugal life", the life of a house holder).
- (xiv) Vanprastha (Preparation for renunciation; This is performed to celebrate departure from householder stage to Vanprastha stage where person begins to engage in spiritual activities)
- (15) Sanyas (Renunciation; performed after Vanprastha)
- (16) Antyeshthi (Final rite of passage or hindu funeral rite that is performed after death)