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Part 1.

THEORY OF RITUAL

All human interaction is conducted through the medium of ritual. All our daily acts of living are a form of ritual. There are social rituals, company rituals, familial rituals, national rituals and interpersonal rituals. The way in which we dress, the way we greet each other, the socially expected behaviour on birthdays, weddings, funerals, holidays and all formal occasions are all conditioned by the traditional values, customs and structures of the society in which we live.

All systems of religion consist of three parts: —

1. A theory, theology/ philosophy / soteriology¹ — the theory of everything to do with life here and hereafter.

2. Myths — narratives which explain and communicate the theory through stories of creation, origination, saints, sages, gods etc.

3. Ritual which in a spiritual context is the enactment or practical application of the theology/soteriology component.

When spiritual ritual is done in the proper way with awareness and serious intent then it is not merely stereotyped action done to enhance group identity or affirm conviction but is actually psychic technology for the transformation of personal consciousness. It is a participation in the cyclic rhythm of the cosmos.

In Hinduism, highly structured and complex ritual accompanies every important bio-organic transformation that one may undergo; such as conception, gestation, parturition, birth, weaning, first walking, puberty, and death. These rituals also mark all the social transitions (saṃskāras) that one undergoes during the course of a life time such as initiation, commencement of education, marriage, retirement etc. There are also the various expiation rituals for the absolution of sins (prāyaścitta), as well as purificatory rituals, rituals for creating sacred space in the dwelling etc.

Svastika is a symbol of auspiciousness. It represents the projection and expansion of the Cosmos.

¹ Soteriology is the doctrine of salvation or Liberation.
The purpose of all these rituals is to bring about a real transformation of consciousness, because Sanātana Dharma is essential a religion of 'experience' and action (ācāram), rather than one based on “belief,” and the truth of Vedanta lies not in accepting a stated dogma or creed but in bringing about a direct personal realisation and spiritual transformation.

The major ontological problem today is that of alienation. Our lives are completely disconnected from the natural world. Our Gregorian calendar is completely arbitrary has nothing to do with the seasonal changes or natural cycles of time. Few people have any idea or the connection between source, producer and product. For example; our food is obtained pre-packaged in supermarkets and children and many adults have no idea of how the food is produced! Our day to day work is highly specialized and we only see a small part of the whole production process.

The natural cycle of existence consists of a series of changes and transformations. By adapting ourselves to these cycles of change and transformation through the practice of ritual we can attain a higher level of personal integration between ourselves and the world in which we live. Ritual also helps us to deal more constructively and efficiently with sudden and traumatic events as well as natural changes in our lives.

External rhythmic cycles of the cosmos such as eclipses, solstices, lunar cycles, seasons, progression of the planets through the zodiac etc., all have subtle effects on the state of an organism. These changes in the cosmos are expressed and integrated into the life process through ritual. Ritual activity helps one to maintain a conscious awareness of the laws of nature (ṛta) and one’s place in the cosmic scheme. Ritual also expands and intensifies one’s participation in the rhythms of the universe.

Change is the one constant in the universe — our personal suffering is often related to our inability to either cope with or integrate change into our lives. When intention is introduced to the equation the change becomes transformation.

Hindu ritual has 3 major sources.

Vedas
Purāṇas
Tantras/Āgamas.

Vedic ritual is seldom performed nowadays and is only found in the sacraments (saṁskāras).

The majority of modern Hindu ritual is based upon either the Purāṇas or the Āgamas or a combination of both. In fact they two are so intertwined that it is often hard to see the difference.

The Āgamic/Tantric System is a highly sophisticated methodology of ritual for the purpose of enhancing one’s personal integration and the establishment of harmony with the cosmos by the introduction of intention through the medium of ritual.
The Tantra Texts

The Tantra Texts also known as the Āgamas or Samhitas are manuals of ritual technology. The texts consist classically of four parts; jñāna-pāda, kriya-pāda, carya-pāda & yoga-pāda.

1. jñāna-pāda — deals with the theory of Knowledge, Theology, Soteriology, Cosmology and Philosophy.
2. kriya-pāda — deals with the details of temple construction, sculpturing of icons, the type and form of the vessels to be used etc.
3. carya-pāda — deals with the consecration of temples and icons, ritual practices used in the temples and at home, celebration of public festivals etc.
4. yoga-pāda — deals with the personal spiritual life of the aspirant — the theory and the practice of sādhana.

The fundamental theoretical basis of all the ritual taught in the Āgamas rests upon the teachings concerning Cosmology, Theology and Soteriology. In order to understand the ritual, one has to have a thorough understanding of this theoretical basis. Everything connected with the ritual has a definite symbolic meaning. Only when this esoteric meaning is understood and practiced with full awareness, and integrated in one’s life can a transformation in the consciousness take place.

In this book we are attempting to present the practical aspect of Hindu ritual and so we cannot possibly cover the vast theoretical foundation of Tantric Mysticism, Cosmology and Philosophy — the keen student of Tantra should learn about these from other sources.

Life as a Ritual

In Sanskrit there is no distinction between the words for ritual action, physical action, and mundane activities; all these are covered by the term karma which simply means — ’action’. The Tantric view of life makes no separation between sacred actions and profane actions. All actions are part of the cosmic symphony — the dance of life.

All actions involving others, whether spiritual or secular, have moral consequences (karma) and can either be positive or negative depending on their target effect or the intention behind the act. Morally neutral actions only involve one’s self. The law of Karma teaches us that all good done to other beings is actually good done to oneself, and the same applies to all pain that is caused to other beings. The Tantra therefore teaches that one should exert the maximum control possible over all one’s actions in regard to others, and one should channel them so as to bring about the maximum universal benefit (loka-saṅgraha). All social interaction takes place through the medium of commonly accepted rituals which we learn from birth through the process of socialisation. For example — sending birthday cards and greetings on various occasions, giving of gifts, cards and flowers on special occasions etc. are all demonstrations of friendship and affection. The way in which we greet people, the way we dress — wearing black at solemn occasions, formal attire, casual attire etc., and the way in which conduct ourselves at different social functions, are all ritual actions dictated by society. But all these social rituals are done unconsciously and for social benefit alone — for acceptance by our peers and for gratifying our basic needs for belonging, esteem and affection.
In the Tantric scheme each and every act of daily living should become a conscious and purposeful ritual. Bathing, dressing, eating, studying, play, sexual dalliance, etc., can all become forms of worship and should therefore be accomplished with mindfulness, order and precision.

The Need for Ritual

The Tantric position, based on the recognition and acceptance of intrinsic individual differences, is that everyone needs ritual in varying degrees and of various kinds for spiritual development. All sincere feelings need a channel for demonstration.

Although meditation on the inconceivable, indefinable Absolute may be the highest form of philosophical contemplation yet this is impossible for the average person to achieve, therefore the use of the techniques of visualisation of deities (Deity-Yoga) is recommended for everyone. Thus the Tantric system achieves results more efficiently and in a shorter space of time than does Yogic contemplation on the Absolute — devoid of all qualities, which is an “unnatural” process.

Whatever the ritual practice, it must be suitable to the spiritual attainment, competency and natural disposition of the practitioner. The dispositions, temperaments and intellectual capabilities of each person are different, so therefore, there are different types of devotional practices to suite each spiritual aspirant. This is the greatness of the Tantric tradition, and all controversy over differing forms of religion or devotional practice is futile, as each person is naturally attracted to a form of spiritual practice that is in harmony with his/her own individuality and character. A qualified and expert Guru is capable of discerning through intuition or Astrology, the character and spiritual development of the disciple and can then prescribe a particular practice to suite one’s individual needs.

Dīkṣa — Initiation

Because the Tantric Yoga practice is easier and yields more rapid results than the Yoga system of Patanjali it is also more liable to misadventure. When using the technique of visualising and identifying oneself with various deities there is a greater potential for self-delusion. When doing abstract meditation the potential for boredom and frustration is quite marked but there is very little potential for self-delusion. Initiation and expert guidance is therefore considered to be the sine qua non of Tantric spiritual advancement. No real spiritual progress is possible without initiation and the guidance of a competent Guru. The serious spiritual aspirant seeks out a qualified Guru and after testing him/her and establishing

\[
\text{dīkṣa} \\
\text{dī} — \text{diyate jjānam} \\
\text{kṣa} — \text{kṣīyate pāpam}
\]

Initiation (dikṣa) is that which grants knowledge and subsequently removes negative impressions (through its application).
The universe at large is conceived of as the macrocosm (*brahmāṇda*) and the human entity as the microcosm (*piṇḍaṇḍa*). Everything existing in the macrocosm has its correlation in the microcosm. All the presiding deities and forces of the cosmos are present within the human body. This sympathetic correlation between the two is the fundamental principle upon which the efficacy of the ritual is based. Ritual is thus an application of the subtle science of correspondences. The value of ritual cannot be estimated by its external presentation, but only through the changes it brings about in the consciousness of the practitioners. The ultimate purpose of all Tantric ritual is personal empowerment, the energising of subtle psychic energies and transformation of the consciousness of the practitioner towards perfect enlightenment.

If one accepts the concept of oneself as a microcosm, then one’s way of life and daily transactions with other members of society take on the character of a cosmic arrangement. In order to evolve spiritually one must realise the innate harmony of the universe and the inter-connectedness of all things, and to attune oneself with it. Although superficially the universe can be seen as governed by the third law of thermodynamics — everything tending towards a state of maximum equilibrium — which means that everything naturally and inexorably tends towards chaos and dis-organisation. But by observation one can easily perceive that Nature is in fact an impressive balanced harmony governed by cosmic laws, and humankind is a part of nature. The laws governing the human mind, body and activity (*Dharma*) reflect and partake of the functioning of the greater cosmic law (*Ṛta*).

Another concept included in this perspective is that of *Sakala* and *Niṣkala*. There are 2 sources of Truth which contribute to our meaningful existence — the subjective and the objective. Everything that we can grasp with our physical senses — the external world of objective investigation and verification that is dealt with by Science is called the *Sakala* — which means “with parts” this aspect of Reality is also known as *Prakṛti*. The subjective realm of the mind and spirit and the realm of the para-normal is called the *Niṣkala* — “without parts” — also known as *Puruṣa*. In the *puruṣa sūkta* of the Vedas we are told that the *Sakala* universe with its 100 billion galaxies represents only quarter of the whole, but the *Niṣkala* is the remaining 3 quarters.

Because of the sympathetic correlation between the macrocosm and the microcosm, as well as the *Sakala* and *Niṣkala*; all Tantric rituals have a simultaneous action on the Divine Forces which control the cosmos (*devas*) and the individual.

Every Tantric ritual has two functions;

1. a cosmic one — the propitiation or manipulation of certain deities (*devas*) or forces of Nature,
2. a individual one — the psycho-spiritual transformation of the practitioner.

In the process of the ritual, all the five senses and their corresponding objects which are the
means as well as the causes of disharmony, discord and disintegration, are used and sublimated.

With the aid of sound (chanting), forms (icons, yantras, mandalas), smell (incense, flowers), touch (ritualistic gestures), taste (food offerings) the mind of the worshipper is diverted from its preoccupations with the ego and the external world (sakala), into the transcendental realm (niśkala) of harmony, concord and integration, through communion and imitation of the Deity worshipped.

Ritual is the means to achieving these goals and is the key factor in spiritual practice (sādhana). One cannot claim to love another without ever demonstrating that love. The existence of a sentiment demands an external expression of that sentiment. So the love of another or of the Divine (bhakti) manifests as a desire to serve that other (kainkaryam), in order to demonstrate one’s love and commitment, and this mystical love is existentially applied through ritual.

**Mahābhūtas — The 5 Elements**

Two very important concepts pervade all Hindu ritual — (a) the Mahābhūtas and (b) the Guṇas. So it is important to have a good grasp of their functionality. Ritual is the formal interaction with the Universe on a sakala and niśkala level. The Scientific Universe can be reduced to 106 elements — none of which can be seen by the naked eye and can contribute nothing to our daily interaction with the universe.

Tantra presents a much simpler user-friendly interface in the form of the five elements know as mahābhūtas and the three guṇas. This simplified elemental system does not negate anything scientific and is not in itself “scientific” but is practical as an interface with the complex universe of 106 elements. Ritual deals a lot with these elements and so this is a good time to renew our acquaintance with them.

**Space — Ākāśa**

Space or ether is the ground from which everything arises — in which everything has its being and into which everything recedes. Space is not empty but is filled with vibrations or frequencies of cosmic energy (śakti) which are constantly washing over our bodies and minds.

Its function is to make space for and to transmit these waves. It is therefore associated with the sense of sound.

**Key-words:**— expansive, accommodating, endless, infinity, capacious, the void.
Air — Vāyu

The wind is the gaseous element which arises from space. Everything that comes into being is pervaded by, connected by and sustained by Wind. In the Brahmāṇḍa this universal life-force manifests as vāyu — the wind currents, whereas in the Piṇḍāṇḍa it manifests as prāṇa the respiratory function.

**Key words:**— versatility of movement and change, flexibility, communication, flow, changeable, unstable, unattached, independent, delicate, soothing.

Fire — Agni

Fire is the element which arises due to the friction caused by the wind. Fire is the great transformative force in the Universe. All forms of heat within the body and in the external universe are manifestations of this element. This is the primary source of energy. Hunger and digestion are both aspects of the fire element.

**Key words:**— strong will, ambition, determination, discrimination, perception, focus, illuminating, intense, consuming.

Water — Jala

The fire produces condensation which appears as the element water. Water is the element which nourishes life and comprises the principle element in the bodies of sentient beings. Water is life-sustaining and as such is the most purifying agent and most sacred of all the five elements. No Tantric ceremony can be performed without the presence of water. Water is the form of the goddess — the mother of the universe. Water is the great solvent, dissolving and transporting all essential elements.

**Key words:**— flowing, cool, intuition, emotions, love, affection, compassion, empathy, attachment.
Earth — Bhūmi

The final element to arise is Earth — the solidification appearing within the waters. The earth is our mother, our source of stability and grounding. It allows growth, and produces food whereby all beings exist. The earth is the most condensed form of the cosmic energy.

**Key-words:**— sense of form, order, firm, utility, practicality, material manifestation or physical expression, steady and unavering.

These five elements are found in different proportions in everything that exists. By discerning the qualities and proportions of the elements we can further create harmony and balance in our lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particular</th>
<th>Principle of</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ether</td>
<td>vacuity</td>
<td>space</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air</td>
<td>motion</td>
<td>pressure</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>luminosity</td>
<td>expansion</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>liquidity</td>
<td>contraction</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>solidity</td>
<td>cohesion</td>
<td>sound</td>
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<tr>
<th>Bhūta</th>
<th>Ākāśa</th>
<th>Vāyu</th>
<th>Agni</th>
<th>Jala</th>
<th>Bhūmi</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perception</td>
<td>Ear</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>Nose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motor-sense</td>
<td>Mouth</td>
<td>Hands</td>
<td>Feet</td>
<td>Genitals</td>
<td>Anus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory-sense</td>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Sight</td>
<td>Taste</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Accommodate</td>
<td>Shift</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Merge</td>
<td>Stabilize</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire</td>
<td>Create</td>
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<td>Change</td>
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<td>Restless</td>
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<td>Lusty</td>
<td>Greedy</td>
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</table>

The Elements are very important and their symbolism crops up repeatedly throughout the pūjā and indeed all Hindu ritual.
Elements and the Chakras

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sahasrāra Cakra</th>
<th>Element — Space</th>
<th>bija mantra — khaṃ</th>
<th>yantra — droplet</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viśuddha Cakra</td>
<td>Element — Air</td>
<td>bija mantra — yaṃ</td>
<td>yantra — half circle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anāhata Cakra</td>
<td>Element — Fire</td>
<td>bija mantra — raṃ</td>
<td>yantra — triangle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipura Cakra</td>
<td>Element — Water</td>
<td>bija mantra — vaṃ</td>
<td>yantra — circle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mūlādhāra Cakra</td>
<td>Element — Earth</td>
<td>bija mantra — laṃ</td>
<td>yantra — square</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Guṇas — The Qualities of Material Nature

The Universe consists of 2 Principles known in Indian Philosophy as Puruṣa and Prakṛti.

**Puruṣa**

The first principle is called Puruṣa and refers to the Self of the universe, the animating principle of nature. Puruṣa is the subjective aspect of nature. It is the universal spirit, eternal, indestructible and all-pervasive; it is the screen upon which the drama of life takes place. It is the niṣkala aspect of being. In Tantra it is identified with the masculine deities Brahma, Vishnu & Siva.

**Prakṛti**

This word is composed of the prefix pra, “before or first,” and the root kr “to make or produce.” This term connotes that which existed before the Cosmos was produced, the primary source of all things, the original substance out of which all things have come and to which they will eventually return. It is also called pradhāna “primary matter,” and avyakta, “unmanifest matter.” It is important to note that from a Hindu perspective Prakṛti as “matter” includes the mind.
In Tantra, Prakṛti is identified with the Goddess — all her manifestations are personifications of the various dynamics at play.

All manifestation is the interaction of Puruṣa (nāma) and Prakṛti (rūpa). Neither of these two principles has independent function. The formless Puruṣa cannot manifest itself because it has no vehicle; the Cosmic Substance (Prakṛti) can have no urge to action because it is inanimate; therefore, it is only by the union of (Puruṣa and Prakṛti) that existence can manifest. They are dependent upon one another and come into existence by the inseparable attributes of one another.

The Gunas

Prakṛti consists of three forces called Guṇas. These are postulated to account for the diversity of experience. The three constituents are called Sattva Guṇa, Rajas Guṇa, and Tamas Guṇa and each has its characteristic function.

❖ Sattva Guṇa

The term is derived from sat, “that which is real or existent.” It is used to connote the force that illuminates and reveals all manifestations. It is of the nature of pleasure (pṛīti). It is responsible for the lightness of things, the upward movement of fire, and the currents of wind. It is devoid of excitement and is the cause of equilibrium. It has no motion of its own; therefore, it is incapable of action or reaction. It manifests itself as light (prakāśa)

Key Words —
balance, wisdom, harmony, abiding happiness, healthy, supportive,
joy, peace, tranquility, compassion, unconditional love, metabolism

❖ Rajas Guṇa

The term is derived from ranīj, “to be clouded, affected or moved,” Here it is used to connote that force which affects and moves the other two constituents. It is of the nature of pain (aprīti). It is the activating and exciting potency without which the other constituents could not manifest their inherent qualities. Its function is to move things, overcome resistance, do work. It is responsible for all motion and change that goes on throughout nature. It gives matter its energy and impetus.

Key Words —
action, knowledge, impetus, heat, anger, rage, drive, pursuit, motivation,
creation, pro-activity, ascent, attention to detail, construction, solution, anabolism.
Tamas Guṇa

This term tamas means “darkness”: Here it is used to connote the force that restrains, obstructs, and envelops the other two constituents by counter-acting the tendency of Rajas to do work and Sattva to reveal. It’s nature is dullness (viṣāda). Its function is to resist motion. It is responsible for the attraction and downward pull of the earth and the tendency of water to descend. It is the cause of mass, weight and inertia. It makes it possible for us to feel invisible air.

Key Words —

sleep, torpor, stupidity, delusion, sloth, laziness, procrastination, dull, inert, descent, lack of motivation, negligence, destruction, dissolution, catabolism.

These three constituents are the root of all change in the empirical world. Before the manifestation of the objective world, they exist in a state of perfect balance and equipoise. When this condition of equilibrium is disturbed by the impetus of the collective Karma of all beings, the evolution and projection of the phenomenal world begins.

In the process of cosmic evolution, the three Guṇas are never separated; they co-exist in everything. They never function separately, but one or the other always predominates and gives the particular flavour or colouring to things. They always support one another and intermingle with one another.

During the state of rest after involution (pralaya) the three Guṇas loose their individual characteristics and rest in state of perfect balance however they never coalesce, but always remain potentially ready to emerge as distinct aspects when the conditions for the next cycle of evolution (srṣṭi) arise.

The Gītā in Chapter 17 gives some clarification about the division of ritual according to the Guṇas:—

4. The Sattvic types worship the gods. The Rajasic types worship Yakṣas and Rakshasas, and the others, classified as Tamasic, worship Pretas and the host of Bhūtas.

5. Those who practice severe self-discipline (tapas) not enjoined by the Śāstras, through ostentation and egoism, and impelled by the force of passion and attachment;

6. These foolish people, torture the material components of their bodies and Me also who dwell within the body — know them to be non-divine in their faith.

The Three Grades of Spiritual Practice.

11. The Sattvic yajña (sacrifice) is one that is offered by one without a desire for reward and with the conviction that it should be performed as enjoined in the Śāstras.

12. That yajña which is offered, O Arjuna, with an expectation of reward and for the sake of ostentation, know that to be Rājasic.
13. That yajña which is not based upon Scriptural authority, with unsanctioned offerings, devoid of the recitation of mantras, lacking in gifts of appreciation and faith — that is considered to be Tamasic.

The Threefold Division of Tapas (self-discipline)

14. Adoration of the gods, the twice-born, the preceptors, the enlightened ones, purity, rectitude, chastity and non-injury, these are said to be the physical disciplines.

15. Speech that does not cause distress and which is true, agreeable and beneficial, and also the recitation of the Vedas are called the verbal disciplines.

16. Peace of mind, benevolence, silence, self-restraint, perfect mindfulness — these are called mental disciplines.

17. This threefold self-discipline, practiced with firm conviction by those who desire no reward and are devoted — is called Sattvic self-discipline.

18. Discipline, practiced with ostentation for the sake of gaining respect, praise and reverence, is considered to be Rajasic. It is unstable and transient.

19. That self-discipline which is practiced with foolish obstinacy by means of self-torture or in order to injure another is declared to be Tamasic.

The Three Kinds of Charity

20. The charity that is dispensed from a sense of duty, to one who does not reciprocate, at the proper place and time to a deserving person — that is said to be Sattvic.

21. But that which is given as a consideration for something received or in expectation of future reward, or grudgingly, is considered to be Rajasic

22. That gift which is given at the wrong place and wrong time to unworthy recipients, without due respect and with derision, is considered to be Tamasic.
The Tripod of Spiritual Practice.

According to the Gita Chapter 17 the basic framework of one’s spiritual practice is comprised of three elements:—

- **Yajña** — sacrifice
- **Tapas** — self-discipline
- **Dāna** — generosity.

1. **Yajña**

   In a modern post Vedic context in which Yajñas as “Vedic Sacrifices” are irrelevant, the concept of yajña as spiritual practice needs to be redefined. Yajña is the exchange of energy between two different levels.

   The two elements of the Yajña as spiritual practice are:
   1. A sincere feeling of gratitude and appreciation for everything and every one we have in our lives, and
   2. Expression of that gratitude by making offerings, serving, blessing and committing ourselves to the others.

This development of gratitude and its expression can best be accomplished through the concept of the Five Great Sacrifices (pañca mahā yajñas) —

1. Parental obligations (*pitr-ṛṇa*)
2. Cultural Obligations (*rṣi-ṛṇa*)
3. Deity Obligations (*deva-ṛṇa*)
4. Social Obligations (*manuṣya-ṛṇa*)
5. Environmental Obligations (*bhūta-ṛṇa*)

1. **Parental Obligations** — offering libations to the ancestors in gratitude for the benefits of our lineage as well as the care and honour bestowed upon one by one’s parents.

2. **Educational Obligations** — The great sages and enlightened beings have gone to immense trouble to gather knowledge — both spiritual and temporal for our sakes. We therefore have an obligation of gratitude not to let their efforts go in vain. This duty is fulfilled by studying and teaching others — the transmitting of knowledge.

3. **Deity Obligations** — making offerings to the gods in gratitude for all the material benefits of rain, food etc.

4. **Social Obligations** — We are all members of a societal body — as such the welfare of the whole depends upon the wellbeing of each individual member. As Tantrik sādhakas we are compelled to become socially active as an outpouring of
our spiritual convictions.

5. **Environmental Obligations** — offering food to the animals (or ensuring their natural habitat) in gratitude for the benefits of the ecology. An essential realisation of spiritual practice is the interconnectedness of all things and that the world is the “body” of the Divine, hence environmentalism is an integral part of spiritual practice.

2. **Tapas**

This term is often translated as “austerity” but according to the Gita it has a much broader application when applied to body, speech and mind:

> Adoration of the gods, the twice-born, the preceptors, the enlightened ones, purity, integrity, chastity and non-injury, these are said to be the physical disciplines (Kāyika Tapas). Gita 17:14

purity — by regular ablutions in water; integrity — harmony of thought and action — hence a “physical” discipline; chastity — avoidance of considering others as mere objects of pleasure; non-injury — avoidance of causing pain to any being.

> Speech that does not cause distress and which is true, agreeable and beneficial, and also the study of the Vedas are called the verbal disciplines. (Vācika Tapas). Gita 17:15.

The study of sacred scriptures is called a verbal discipline because it is learned through speech and always involves chanting out aloud.

> Peace of mind, benevolence, silence, self-restraint, perfect mindfulness — these are called mental disciplines (Mānasika Tapas). Gita 17:16.

Peace of mind — the absence of anger, desire, delusion, pride, greed: benevolence — being devoted to the good of others; silence — control of expression; self-restraint — focusing one thought flow on the object of contemplation; perfect mindfulness — the avoidance of reflecting upon subjects other than the Self — these constitute the self-discipline (Tapas) of the mind.

3. **Dāna**

Dāna literally means “giving” or “generosity” in the broadest possible sense of the term. Giving freely of one’s resources as well as of oneself. This is the singular most important aspect of spiritual life in which all realisation, learning and achievement culminates in the tireless service of all beings. It is based upon the realisation of oneness with the cosmos as well as compassion and love for all sentient beings.
Part 2. PRACTICE OF RITUAL

1. Classification of Rituals

1. Obligatory Ritual Duties (*nitya karma*)

These are rituals which comprise the daily liturgical routine and are compulsory for brahmins and all those ‘twice-born’ (*dvijas*) ones who have been invested with the sacred thread (*yajñopavitam*). Their performance does not produce any merit, but failure to perform them brings demerit, these are:

1. Regular daily bathing
2. The ceremony of saluting the Sun and reciting the Gāyatri mantra (*sandhyā*)
3. *Pañca-mahā-yajña*; the performance of the five great sacrifices which are obligatory on householders;

2. Periodic Rituals (*naimittika karma*)

These are voluntary rituals performed on special occasions, such as Temple festivals (*utsavas*) and holy days (*parvas*) which are prescribed in the Āgamic treatises as well as the periodic requiem for the dead on new and full moon etc.

3. Desiderative Rituals (*kāmya karma*)

These karmas are of 2 types:—

*svārtha* — for one’s own benefit or *parārtha* — for the benefit of others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Svārtha:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Parārtha:</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These are the various vows (<em>vratas</em> or <em>puraścaranas</em>) which are undertaken for propitiating certain deities and obtaining some specific reward either for oneself or for the members of one’s family. These <em>vratas</em> are of various kinds and the Puranas elaborate upon them in great detail along with the merits obtained by their performance, they all have some common features which are;</td>
<td>These are charitable social works undertaken with the specific desire for attaining merit e.g. building hospitals, rest homes, planting trees and gardens, building temples, renovating temples, sponsoring temple festivals or yajñas etc. These have no compelling character and are done only by those who feel a need to do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the formal resolve to undertake the <em>vrata</em>,</td>
<td>According to the spiritual view of life all wealth and resources belongs to the whole creation and is lent to us. In order to discharge our duty to God and to society these resources should be used for the welfare of all beings.</td>
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<td>• a preparation consisting of some kind of self discipline,</td>
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<td>• sexual abstinence,</td>
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<td>• eating or abstaining from of a particular type of food or salt etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• a pūjā performed at the appropriate time.</td>
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</table>
In desiderative rituals the efficacy of the act lies in the meticulous performance of all the subsidiary parts (āṅga) of the ritual according to the prescriptions in the Āgamas. Any breach of the rules (vidhi-lopa) or deletion of some rite (kriya-lopa) or mispronunciation of the mantras (mantra-lopa) on the part of the priests (purohitās) or patrons (yajamāna) renders the act fruitless. Concentration is of paramount importance in causing the right effect. All acts of omission or lapses are due to imperfect concentration.

The realms of existence (lokas) are of many kinds, and since the effect of the ritual is not directly and immediately detected, (adṛṣṭa), they may create some wrong contacts in the spiritual world and have the opposite effect of that desired. Ritual is therefore a potentially dangerous technology and should not be taken lightly, no changes should be made except by skilled ritual technicians.

4. Unmotivated Rituals (niskāmya karma)

These are rituals done without any desire for personal gain but merely to please the Divine. This is the highest and most commendable form of devotional service. In unmotivated rituals the efficacy is based entirely upon the devotion of the worshipper, there is no fear of loss, and all imperfections are acceptable (within limits of course!).

2. Offences to be avoided in Ritual Practice

These are many “offences” (aparādha) which must be avoided by a ritual practitioner. They fall into three categories:

1. Offences against the Deity (bhagavat aparādha)

These all relate to misconduct in a temple or shrine or inattention during ceremonial worship of an Icon. They are as follows;

1. Approaching the Deity without brushing the teeth.
2. Entering the temple or shrine after touching a menstruating woman.
3. Approaching a sacred precinct after visiting the cemetery.
4. Entering a temple or shrine wrapped in a blanket.
5. Weeping or lamenting in the temple.
6. Combing the hair, or clipping nails or spitting in the vicinity of the temple.
7. Carrying an umbrella while circumambulating the temple.
8. Sleeping or eating in the temple or shrine.
9. Seeing a corpse and thereafter touching the Icon without having washed the hands.
10. Touching the Icon after having touched a corpse without having bathed.
11. Touching a sacred icon after having sex (without bathing).
12. Sitting upon an elevated seat in front of the Deity.
13. Eating meat prior to worship.
14. Drinking alcohol prior to worship.
15. Worshipping the Deity wearing unwashed garments.
16. Worshipping the Deity wearing a garment belonging to another.
17. Wearing an upper garment while prostrating.
18. Wearing shoes during worship.
19. Stretching the feet towards the Icon or turning the back towards it.
20. Interrupting the liturgical proceedings to answer calls of nature.
21. Lying, gossiping, praising or deprecating another deity or person in the presence of the Deity.
22. Using forbidden flowers in the worship.
23. Tasting the food or smelling the flowers before they are offered.
24. Refraining from prostrating or saluting with one hand.
25. Stealing or using the temple vessels or paraphernalia for oneself.

2. Offences against the Sanga/Kula members
1. Confiscating or appropriating the property of a sādhaka.
2. Wrongfully accusing a sādhaka of a crime or inventing accusations.
3. Abusing a sādhaka.
4. Assaulting a sādhaka.
5. Neglecting to show another sādhaka respect.
6. Inquiring into the caste or social status of a sādhaka or in anyway discriminating against another on these grounds.

3. Offences against the Guru
Any offence against the spiritual Preceptor is considered the worst of all offences. They are known as offences which is unbearable to the Lord. They are the hardest of all to forgive because the Guru has abandoned everything for alleviating the sufferings of others. These offences which are given in the Dharma-Śāstras are;

1. Addressing the Guru by his/her personal name, issuing instructions to him/her, requesting service of, or treating the Guru as an equal.
2. Saluting the Guru from a seat or carriage without having descended, or greeting the Guru while holding implements in one’s hands.
3. Wearing an upper garment in the Guru’s presence.
4. Speaking to the Guru while reclining on a bed, eating or with the face turned away.
5. Sitting on a seat higher than the Guru’s.
6. Stretching out the feet towards the Guru, holding one’s knees, or clasping the hands behind the back in his/her presence.
7. Breathing on the Guru or spraying spittle while talking to him/her in close proximity. (The hand or hem of the garment should be held over the mouth when talking to the Guru from close quarters).
8. Laughing in the presence of the Guru without putting the hand over the mouth.
9. Using the Guru’s seat, bed, books or other implements without permission.
10. Mimicking the Guru’s walk, speech or deportment.
11. Rendering service to the children or the spouse of the Guru by massaging them, assisting them in their bath, washing or anointing their feet or arranging their hair.

3. Location of Ritual Practice

According to the Āgamas the best places for personal spiritual practice (śādhanā) are; places of pilgrimage, river-banks, mountain tops, confluence of rivers, in the shade of the banyan tree, sea-shore, cattle shed, one’s own home or that of the guru, or any place that is isolated, free from wild animals, and naturally inspires devotion and tranquility of mind.

Temples are of secondary importance in that they are not places for personal spiritual practice or the gathering of the faithful in congregational worship, but are homes of the incarnation of the god in iconic form. The priests are the servants of the Deity, daily offering the services that any royal personage would enjoy. The devotees visit the temple as they would the home of any great personage, bringing gifts, paying homage and receiving the darśana or sight of the sacred icon.

4. Orientation during Practice

The correct orientation during ritual practice is based upon the path of the sun as well as the belief that each direction is ruled over by certain deities. The individual or the site of the ritual becomes the cosmic axis — Meru the centre of the Mystic Universe. All auspicious rituals take place facing the East which is the direction of the rising sun and the coming of the spiritual enlightenment. By facing east the individual expresses the desire and preparedness to receive the spiritual light and life. South is the direction of Yama the god of death. All inauspicious ceremonies take place with the aspirant facing south. North is the direction of the Rishis — the sages whose sole purpose is the guiding of humanity towards enlightenment. Normally when ceremonies take place outside of a temple the orientation followed is the natural one, but in the temple the orientation is always toward the deity as the rising sun.

- Deity faces east, the practitioner sits to its right
- Deity faces west, the practitioner sits to its left
- Deity faces south, the practitioner sits to its right
- Deity faces north, the practitioner sits to its left
5. The Basic Accessories to sādhana

1. Purity

All Tantric ritual practice is preceded by stages of purification. By purification (śaucam) is meant the removal of hindrances and obstacles to practice. The real Self has two vehicles; body and mind. The body and the mind are organically inter—related and one cannot exist and express itself without the other. Therefore a discipline which purifies the body will automatically purify the mind as well. The first stage is attending to the purity of the body thereafter one must pay due attention to the environment as well as the utensils and accessories that are to be used for the ritual.

Physical purity is achieved through taking bath and wearing clean clothes — white for men, boys and widows, coloured for married women, and marking the forehead with the sandal paste.

Purification of the place of worship by sweeping, washing it, sprinkling with water mixed with turmeric, smearing with cow—dung, drawing auspicious designs in rice flour, decorating the walls and doors with garlands and wreaths of mango leaves and banana leaves.

Purification of the seat. This means ensuring that the seat is the appropriate one for the ritual and that it is free from any impure substance. The seat should also be purified by sprinkling with water.

Cleaning of the vessels and implements to be used in the ritual. The method depends upon the substance from which they are made; metal items are scrubbed using tamarind, salt or vinegar until they shine, wooden items are washed with hot water, cloth items are either washed or sprinkled with water.

Ensuring that the items collected for the pūjā are of the best possible type and taken from auspicious places. There should not be any imperfection in them, they are purified by sprinkling with water. The Āgama also allows for substitutes to be made in case the prescribed items cannot be obtained. In the case of the prescribed item of inferior quality and the substitute of superior quality both being available, then it is the prescribed item alone which is to be chosen.

Purity of mind which is freedom from fear, selfish desire and anger. The development of knowledge, humility, renunciation and peace; the practice of truth, non—injury, control of the senses abstaining from gossip and back—biting, nurturing of compassion, forgiveness, resoluteness and absence of pride and envy.

Purification of the subtle elements of the body and the astral body — this is done through breathing exercises, nyāsa, and visualisation of the Deity in one’s own heart.
2. Development of the right mental state.

The right mental state is achieved through constant contemplation upon the Divine. Wherever there is a subject there will be an object, wherever there is consciousness there will be content. Knowledge without an object is inconceivable. The idea of ‘pure consciousness’ existing devoid of any content is itself inconceivable! The first aim of ritual is to ensure that the content of thought is a good and beneficial one. The best of all objects upon which to focus one’s mind is of course one of the aspects of the Godhead.

According to Yoga Psychology the process of knowing is an active one, it consists of a ray of consciousness from the mind going out through one of the five senses and coming in contact with the object of perception in the environment. It then reveals the object to the consciousness—taking it’s form. Thus if attention is given completely and undistractedly to an icon of a deity, then the mind so long as it holds the object will be transformed into likeness of the object. With complete concentration on the Divine the mind is transformed into a likeness of That with the mutual qualities of Being (sat), Consciousness (cit) and Bliss (ānanda).

In the Āgamas the various forms of the Deities to be meditated upon are formulated in what are called ‘Dhyāna-Ślokas’. These are the verses recited at the commencement of the ritual giving the details of that particular form which is being worshipped. The worship of specific form gives a particular result to the worshipper. These dhyāna ślokas form the basis of Iconography. One should only meditate upon prescribed forms which were conceived through the meditation of the ancient seers and which have stood the test of time.

The mind is extremely unsteady and the thoughts flow one after the other like waves. The inner dialogue and commentary never seem to end, and as such the wavering mind cannot keep itself transformed for very long, hence both intensity and durability of transformation are required.

Whatever thought occupies the mind persistently and regularly forms what is known as a samskāra — an impression. These impressions sink into the subconscious mind to become vāsanas — habitual tendencies. The sum total of these vāsanas form the character or svabhāva of the individual and condition future births. Therefore it is very important to establish the right impressions. Through regular spiritual practice (sādhana) all obstructing samskāras from previous births and conditioning are eradicated and new positive ones are set up in their place. This is the reason why the Scriptures continually repeat that a particular ritual or hymn (stotra) ‘purifies’ the mind and eradicates obstacles to enlightenment.
3. Prāṇāyāma

Prāṇāyāma — practice of breath control. Mind, prāṇa and air are inseparably related, and in mantra sādhana there is a strong stress placed upon breathing exercises to purify the subtle nerve channels (nādis). At certain junctions of the ritual, prāṇāyāma is prescribed, if time is not permitting then it is done symbolically by the display of “prāṇāyāma mudra” and recitation of the prāṇāyāma mantra — followed by touching the right ear (śrottra-ācamaniyam) for purification after touching the nose.


All the above are really preliminaries to the actual recitation of the mantra which is done in isolation. This recitation or japa is of three types;—

1. recited aloud. (vācika)
2. whispered but audible only to oneself. (upāmsu)
3. mental repetition. (mānasika)

The japa should be done not too fast and not too slow, while sitting down without moving the body and with full concentration of the mind. One should avoid, sleeping, eating, talking, hunger, thirst, anger and agitation during the japa. Stretching out of the legs, standing, sitting on the bare ground, or a bed or a vehicle are also strictly forbidden during japa. When using a rosary all the rules have to be observed but if the japa is done mentally only, then no rules apply.

5. Japa-mālā — Rosary

The rosary is also known as the japa—mālā and one is enjoined not to disclose it to others.

If the repetitions are more than 10 and less than a hundred, then one can use the knuckles of the hands for counting, but if the number of repetitions exceeds a hundred the use of a japa-mālā is recommended.

The beads can be made from a number of substances each one having a different effect. The best mālas consist of beads made from akṣa nuts (Eleocarpus seeds). Tulsī beads bring liberation, a māla made of gold is used for success, prosperity and the worship of the ancestors. A silver māla yields prosperity and good form. A copper one gives intelligence, strength and radiance. Lotus beads bring success, crystals give tranquility and liberation. Pearls are used in rituals for longevity, progeny and fame while shell beads bring prosperity. Mālas of tin, lead, bell— metal, brass and iron are used for occult rites for propitiating elementals and spirits.

The best māla consists of 108 beads, 54 is middling and 27 beads is the lowest type. The thread should be of cotton or jute and consist of three strands. There
should be a large bead called a Meru — this is not crossed over when doing japa. The māla should be consecrated in a proper manner before use.

The act of prostrating oneself is an outward demonstration of an inner feeling of humility and self-abnegation. It is an essential part of all sādhanas and no ritual is complete without it. There are two forms of prostration:—

1. pañcāṅga (five—limbed)
2. sāṣṭāṅga (eight—limbed).

The former is generally done by females and consists of touching the ground with five parts of the body — two knees, joined palms and forehead. The latter done only by males consists of lying down full—length and touching the ground with eight bodily parts:— feet, knees, genitals, chest, forehead and joined palms. The sāṣṭāṅga is generally not done by females but both forms are optional. Some devotees, as an act of extreme devotion and sincere desire to overcome the ego, circumambulate a sacred shrine or holy place by negotiating the entire distance by repeated and sequential full—length prostration.

7. Āsana
The āsana refers both to the posture adopted for practice and the material of the seat that one uses. One is discouraged from sitting on the bare ground because of the idea that certain energy fields are generated by the practice and this energy is dissipated through the ground but is contained by the āsana. The seat as well as the posture are conditioned by the result that one wishes to obtain from the japa. Thus, in kāmya karma a red woolen blanket is used; for perfection of knowledge — a deer skin; for liberation — a tiger’s skin; for long life — a seat of kusha grass; for health — a silk cloth. In almost all other rites a plain wooden seat is preferred. The āsana should also be purified by sprinkling with water. It should ideally consist of a kuśa grass mat, covered by the skin, if one is being used, and then a cloth.

The posture adopted also differs with the purpose, but for Devotional Service the posture is either padmāsana or svastikāsana.
6. Ritual Technology

The technology of Tantric ritual consists of 5 accessories; yantra, mantra, mudra, nyāsa & upacāra which will be discussed at length with Pūjā or Individual Worship.

1 Yantra — the Visible

This word in its most general sense means ‘an instrument’, or a device by which something is accomplished. In worship it refers specifically to the device by which the mind is fixed upon the object of meditation.

Yantras are geometrical designs which represent the basic energy forces of the universe. They are the visual equivalent of the mantras or the thought forms of the Deity. The Deity is the ‘Self’ as it were, the mantra is the “casual body”, the yantra is the subtle or “astral body” and the icon is the gross or “physical body”. So every form of divinity that is worshiped must be accompanied by these three components, i.e. mantra, yantra and bera (icon).

The yantra is the static geometric representation of the combination of dynamic forces which are present within a particular form of divinity. The yantras express the subtle nature of the cosmic forces (devas), at play in creation. They are the fundamental basis for all attempts at symbolic representation of sacred forms and the enclosing of sacred space. They are used in all sacred architecture; for the construction of temples, fire altars, and mandalas.

The secret of the yantras is one of the most closely guarded forms of esoteric
teaching, because the power of the yantra, when released through the proper rituals, is thought to be limitless and has the potential for great harm as well as good.

Yantras can be drawn on paper, leaves, on the ground or engraved on different metals, the medium and the form of the yantra varies with the Deity and the object desired. There is also a limitation upon the time-span that a certain material can be used with effect; gold and silver yantras can be used life long, those drawn on birch bark can be used for 12 years, copper yantras for 6 years and any other metal for only 3 years.

Although yantras are usually specific to each deity, there are some yantras which are common to a number of deities, sometimes with very minor alterations.

All yantras have a common outer square called a bhūpura containing four doors, through which the mind of the sādhaka is withdrawn from the external world and focussed on the inner world of the mind. Meditating upon the specific form of the Deity in the heart chakra, the sādhaka transfers it to the yantra.

2. Mantra — the Audible

This word is derived from ‘man’ which means the mind, tra means to protect. It thus refers to a device which protects the mind from negative influences, frees it from obstructions and transforms it into the vehicle for enlightenment and Self-realisation.

Sound is defined as a disturbance or wave produced by a vibrating object in a medium such as air in which one molecule collides with another and transmits sound. Sound waves travel through the air at an approximate speed of 1100 feet per second.

According to the cosmology of the Āgama – the universe is created by sonic vibration (śabda-brahman). When the Supreme Being wills to create the universe the first thing that happens in the primal space of Total Being (cidākāśa) is the emergence of a tiny point of stress. From this point a subtle vibration emerges which is the pranava — AUM. This vibration (śabda or dhvani) undergoes several stages of transformation before it becomes sonic vibration and finally audible sound. All forms of vibration (spandana) whether they are audible or not — such as the vibration caused by electrons in motion, constitute the śabda of the cosmos. The first stage is the rising of causal or unmanifest vibration called called nāda (para). Nāda is the first produced source of mantra. This is AUM, the source of all cosmic life-force or prāṇa. This vibration then transforms into bindu (paśyanti) which is a more advanced stage of manifestation but not yet polarized into articulate sound. Bindu is the source of the three forms of cosmic energy, rajas (revolving) tamas (centripetal) and sattva (centrifugal). The next stage in its evolution called madhyama, śabda undergoes a bifurcation into nāma (name) & rūpa (form). Nāma indicates the primary sound units (bījas) which as letters of the
alphabet are collectively known as *matrikas*. (Mothers) They manifest along with form as (psychic) colour, hence the letters of the alphabet are also known as *varṇas* (color). Sonic vibration is the quality of the ether — it is not produced by ether but is manifest in it. Sounds give rise to definite forms within the etheric world. The last stage is articulated and audible sound known as *vaikhari*, which is composed of syllables (*pūda*) which in turn make up sentences (*vākyas*) which form the composition of mantras.

Words are “sound forms” and they are the expression of ideas which arise in the mind. The term *śabda* embraces both the subtle idea, the word and its meaning. In the intermediary stage called *madhyama* the thoughts arise in the form of symbols called words (*nāma*) each having a specific meaning (*artha* or *rūpa*). These two are inseparable and form the basis of the entire perceptual universe. From the cosmic creative standpoint the mind comes first. From the mind the physical universe is evolved. The mental meaning (*mānasika-artha*) precedes the conventional meaning (*śabda-artha*).

The letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are also called ‘*akṣara*’ which means ‘imperishable’ — they are in fact nothing but the yantras of the Imperishable Brahman (*akṣara-brahman*). A mantra is composed of certain letters arranged in a definite sequence of sounds. Not just any letter or word can be a mantra, it is only specific sound formulae which were revealed by God when manifest in a specific form that can serve to reveal that same Divine Form now. To produce the desired effect the correct pronunciation of the sound is important, it must be intoned according to rhythm (*svara*) and sound (*varna*). Mantras are found in the Vedas, Tantras and Puranas.

A mantra is not the same as a prayer (*sthuti*, or *stotra*), a prayer can be composed in whatever language or words that the worshipper chooses, it can be sung or chanted or recited in any metre, and it’s meaning is usually quite clear. It is gross ignorance to think that a mantra is merely a string of words expressing what one has to say to the Deity! Therefore the only language in which mantras are chanted is Sanskrit, they cannot be translated and rendered into any vernacular languages for use in worship.

The efficacy of mantra practice depends on:

1. harmony of sound and rhythm
2. feeling — devotion, love, faith, veneration
3. mental associations — knowledge & experience

All these three factors work together to arouse, intensify and transform the latent psychic forces within the practitioner.

A mantra may or may not convey a distinct meaning on face value. Bīja (seed) mantras, such as *aim*, *klim*, *hrim* etc, have no semantic meaning according to the
use of ordinary language. They are indicative of the Personal Form (nīja svarūpa) of the particular Deity to whom they are related.

**Bīja Mantras**

The basic sound units (bījas) which in their seed or latent form possess specific powers which are enlivened and nurtured by the mantra chanting process. Each of the devatas has his or her specific bīja mantra.

3. **Mudra — the Tangible**

Mudras are gestures and manipulations of the hands and fingers during certain phases of the liturgy in order to supplement the power of the mantras. Mudras are shown at the time of invocation, valediction, making offerings, doing japa, bathing, homa, establishing of *viśeśa-arghya*, *naivedya* etc. There are different mudras which are specifically used for each deity.

The word mudra has several meanings; — seal, imprint, passport, badge, mystery, code language and gesture. Panini the grammarian derives the word from the root ‘mud’ which means ‘to please’.

The word is severally derived as follows:—

1. **mud + rā** = to afford pleasure (to the gods), or
2. **mud + dru** = *mudam drāvayati* — giving pleasure to the gods and making their minds melt with compassion.
3. **mudr** = to seal or to stamp — just as a seal guarantees the authenticity of a substance or document on the material level, on a spiritual level the mudra eliminates any possibility of error and “seals” the efficacy of the ritual act. It is a sign of a solemn contract which binds the sādhaka to the spiritual world and which permits one to become integrated into it.

Mudras are a non-verbal mode of communication and self-expression which cause a subjective reaction in the mind of the sādhaka. Mudras are archetypal symbolic gestures, taking the place of speech or supplementing the spoken word.

On the subtle level they are used to invoke within the mind of the sādhaka certain ideas of cosmic forces, in order to intensify concentration. They are also used to reinforce the mantra recited at the time of showing the gesture.

Both mudras and nyāsas are external expressions of an inner conviction, and this has been supported by modern psychology which has established that non-verbal communication is more forceful than the verbal and in fact about 60—70% of our daily communication is non-verbal. There are over 100 mudras used in the Āgamas accompanying almost every stage of the ritual.
Representation of the hands

The right hand represents the Sun and the left hand the Moon; the right hand represents the spiritual world and the left the mortal world; and this symbology is extended to encompass all the pairs of opposites of which the cognitive world is composed. The fingers carry the following associations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finger</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Sense</th>
<th>Upacāra</th>
<th>Deva</th>
<th>Graha</th>
<th>Kośa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little</td>
<td>earth</td>
<td>smell</td>
<td>gandham</td>
<td>Indra</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
<td>annamaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring</td>
<td>water</td>
<td>taste</td>
<td>naivedyam</td>
<td>Sūrya</td>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>prāṇamaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>sight</td>
<td>dīpam</td>
<td>Prajāpati</td>
<td>Saturn</td>
<td>manomaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>air</td>
<td>touch</td>
<td>dhūpam</td>
<td>Vāyu</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>vijñānamaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thumb</td>
<td>space</td>
<td>hearing</td>
<td>puṣpam</td>
<td>Agni</td>
<td>Maras</td>
<td>ānandamaya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Nyāsa — Transformative

The term Nyāsa is derived from the root ‘nyas’ which means ‘to place’, it refers to the placing of the tips of the fingers and palm of the hand on various parts of the body while reciting certain mantras. The purpose of this practice is to prepare the physical body for the reception of the divine presence of the Deity.

The body itself has to be properly consecrated and sanctified for communion with the Divine. The Deity is first invoked within the heart and then transferred to the yantra or the Icon. The bija mantras of the Deity are the jewels as it were, which the sādhaka places on various parts of his body and then with vyāpaka nyāsa one disseminates the presence of the deity over all the body. One thus becomes permeated by the divine presence, and attains a identification with the Divine Essence.

Nyāsa is also used for the distribution of the five prāṇas, or etheric energy forces, in their respective places so as to avoid disharmony and distraction during the worship. Nyāsa is very important for production of the right state of mind (citta-śuddhi). Transformation of thought is transformation of being — this is the essential rational basis of nyāsa.

Nyāsa has three variations:—

Srṣṭi nyāsa — disintegration or ‘projection-of-the-universe’ is used by brahmacaris (unmarried students).

Sthiti nyāsa — conservation or ‘protection-of-the-universe’ is the variant used by grhastis or married householders.

Samhāra nyāsa — reintegration or ‘withdrawal-of-the-universe’ is that used by sanyasis or renunciates.
The actual act of worship is called by various names such as pūjā, arcana, arādhana or upāsana — all are synonyms with different shades of meaning. The term arcana is generally used for that form of worship which is offered in a temple, the term pūjā usually refers to worship done in the home or worship in general, while the term arādhana can be used for either, and upāsana usually refers to one’s own intimate Deity-Yoga practice, but the terms are interchangeable.

Pūjā is a complex and elaborate art, it is ceremony performed by the individual (svārtha) or priest acting on one’s behalf (parārtha), using various materials according to time, place, availability and the financial & spiritual circumstance of the individual.

In the Āgamas there are always three standards given for all acts that are enjoined;—

- uttama — the best,
- madhyama — the middling,
- adhama — the lowest or the irreducible minimum.

These three are then further divided into three sub-standards each i.e.

- uttama-uttama — best of the best,
- uttama-madhyama — the middling of the best,
- uttama-adhama — lowest of the best etc.

If possible one should always aim for the best of the best, but circumstances not permitting one can settle for one of the middling or lower standards. After describing a certain standard the texts then usually give alternatives and substitutes or simply state — ‘according to your ability’. It is better to start with a lower standard and slowly improve with time, circumstance and place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>uttama</th>
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<td>madhyama-madhyama</td>
<td>madhyama-adhama</td>
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<td>adhama</td>
<td>adhama-uttama</td>
<td>adhama-madhyama</td>
<td>adhama-adhama</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Preliminaries**

The main liturgy is always preceded by three essential preliminaries;

1. **Purification**

The first step in performing any ritual is purification and sanctification, it is indispensable and the Āgamas place great emphasis upon it. (see 5:1)

2. **Removal of Obstacles: (bhūta-apasāraṇam)**

Obstacles in the form of elementals (*bhūtas*) and negative thoughts rising from the subconscious mind are dispersed by ringing of the bell, sprinkling the holy water and by invoking Ganeśa the embodiment of wisdom at the commencement of the practice.

3. **Saṅkalpaḥ — Statement of Intent.**

Every ritual act is preceded by the recitation of the *saṅkalpaḥ*. The *saṅkalpaḥ* is the statement of intent and purpose of the ritual about to be undertaken. It is the complete focusing of the mind of the participants upon the purpose of the ritual — a clarification of intent. Intent is the factor that causes a probability to materialise as a definite event. Intent is the factor which interlaces and joins events in our lives into a tapestry of coherence. Intent is the factor by which change becomes transformation. Intent is the factor which determines the positive or negative ethics of an act. If intent is absent, there is no meaningful connection between our life’s experiences, and the cosmic dynamic of change in which we unwillingly participate appears random, capricious, and even chaotic. Events only become meaningful to us as the result of an intent which rises from a vision of a goal, path or direction in which we intend moving. When the intent is clear and focused, paths will automatically appear.

The saṅkalpa consists of: —

(a) the statement of the spacio-temporal factors which limit and confine the ritual activity,

(b) the type of ritual and

(c) the purpose or expected outcome of the ritual.

The practitioner, sitting cross-legged, performs *prāṇāyāma* in order to purify the channels of the subtle body and to clear the mind, one then holds the hands in the pose (*mudra*) known as *brahma-āsana* — the right hand clasped in a fist resting downward on the upturned left palm which has been placed on the right knee. This represents the pose of the Creator Brahma sitting upon the lotus which issued from the navel of Lord Vishnu at the time of creation. The Vedas declare that in the beginning the Creator conceived of the universe in his mind before projecting it into a concrete reality. The practitioner is now participating in the on-going act of
creation by mentally conceiving of an event that will be projected into time and space.

After thrice invoking the name of the Supreme Being the practitioner calls to mind the time and the astrological data for the day. She mentions the location of the ritual with reference to the Axis Mundi — Mount Meru. She then states the type of ritual and the purpose; whether it be for material or spiritual benefits or merely as an act of service to the Supreme Being.

The recital of the saṅkalpa concentrates the mind of the practitioner on the activity at hand and clarifies the purpose. The entire Universe is mano-sambhava — created from the mind of the Godhead. The ritual is an enactment of that original creation through sacrifice and is an active participation therein and so it starts with a mental resolve.

**The Eight Stages of Pūjā**

1. **nyāsa**: placing the bija (seed mantra) of the Deity upon the various parts of the body.
2. **dhyāna**: visualisation of the Deity — consists of reciting the dhyana sloka or descriptive verse of the Deity and his/her paraphernalia.
3. **āvāhanam**: invocation of the deity requesting him/her to be present in the icon out of boundless compassion and to receive the offerings.
4. **mānasika -pūjā**: offering of mental worship to the Deity with imagined objects.
5. **upacāra**: offering of services which are of four kinds.
6. **japa**: silent recitation of the particular mantra of the Deity.
7. **stotra**: chanting of verses in praise of the Deity.
8. **visarjanam**: valediction — the formal requesting of the Deity to forgive the imperfections of the worship and bidding the Deity to depart from the icon.

**The Unfolding Services — Upacāras**

āvāhanam — visarjanam (Invocation & Valediction)

Invocation is preceded by the visualisation of the Deity in the lotus of one’s own heart while holding a flower in the kurma mudra close to the heart (anāhata cakra) or by holding the uddharini with water and a flower in the left hand, covering it with the right hand and holding close to the third eye (ajña cakra). After the visualisation and recital of the dhyāna śloka a flower is placed in front of the icon, with the request that the Deity who resides in the lotus of the heart be present within the icon for the purpose of receiving the worship. The Deity is thus projected from within to the icon which acts like a mirror. Certain mantras are recited and
the five invocatory mudras are shown.

After the worship is complete the Lord is dispatched — valedicted, and returned to the lotus of the heart. This act is known as visarjanam. With the nirvana mudra the flower that was placed at the feet of the deity when invoking is picked up and smelt, then cast aside. The Deity whose tangible presence is now felt in the icon is offered the services that one would offer to any special guest or a lover. These services which are offered are called upacāras. All these elements have an esoteric symbolism as well as the social function. There are different degrees of elaboration:

**Tri-upacāra —**
1. puṣpam — flower — representative of the destruction aspect śiva
2. dhūpa — incense — representative of the creative aspect brahma
3. jalam — water — representative of the preservative aspect viṣṇu

**Pañcopacāra —**
1. gandham — scent (usually sandal-paste or candana)
2. puṣpam — flowers
3. dhūpam — incense
4. dīpam — lamp
5. naivedyam— victuals (fruit or cooked food)

**Daśopacāra —**
1. arghyam — a libation
2. pādyam — water for washing the feet.
3. ācamanam — water for sipping
4. snānam — bathing
5. vastram — clothing
6. gandham — sandal paste
7. puṣpam — flowers
8. dhūpam — incense

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2 consisting of scented water (scents, flowers, sandal wood paste, sesame seeds, tulsi, kusha grass etc.)
9. dīpam — light
10. naivedyam — food offering

**Śoḍaśopacāra —**

1. āvāhanam — invocation
2. āsanam — enthronement
3. arghyam — scented water
4. pādyam — washing of the feet
5. ācamanam — sipping of water
6. snānam — bathing
7. vastram — clothing
8. upavītam — sacred thread.
9. ābharanam — adornment
10. candanam — sandal paste
11. puṣpam — flowers
12. dhūpam — incense
13. dīpam — light
14. naivedyam — food offering
15. tāmbūlam — betel leaf & nuts
16. nirājanam — offering camphor flame

This is about the most elaborate that an average pūjā will become and is the standard format. In the temples, according to the dictates of the Āgamas 108 or even 1008 services can be offered, all according to time, place, desire and of course financial ability. The more elaborate form of pūjā being known as *Rajopacāra* — the Royal services.

Although the pūjās are known technically as Threefold, Fivefold, Tenfold, Sixteenfold etc., they are only guide lines and the actual practice does vary somewhat. Extra offerings of ācamanam are done following bath (snānam) incense (dhūpam) and lamp (dīpam) as well as food (naivedyam). Some practitioners offer ācamanam after vastram and upavītam as well. There is always the nirājanam (camphor flame) offered at the end with mantra-puṣpam. These upacāras can be accompanied by Vedic mantras, Puranic verses or Tantric mantras according to the desire of the sādhaka.

A elaboration of the liturgy involving the 16 upacāras is as follows:

1. āvāhanam — invocation — this rite includes the stages of *Sānkalpa, prāṇāyāma, rishi nyāsa, anga-nyāsa, dhyānam* and āvahanam or invocation proper with the display of the five invocatory mudras. The deity is first visualized within the heart of the sādhaka and then through the process of invocation is transferred into the icon.

2. āsanam — enthronement — this upacāra involves a twofold process:—
(a) svāgata or reception and welcoming

(b) the offering of a bejeweled throne (ratna-simhāsana). In actual practice akṣata alone is offered while visualising a golden throne.

3. **arghyam** — scented water for washing the hands — one spoonful of scented water is touched to the hand of the icon and thrown into the phela (receptacle).

When offering arghya, in the vessel containing the water to be used for that purpose, all or as many as one can afford out of the following eight articles are to be included in it, viz. curds, whole grains of rice, tips of kuśa grass, milk, dūrva (lawn grass), honey, barley grains and white mustard seeds. The arghya which is offered to Viṣṇu by means of a conch should be water mixed with sandalwood paste, flowers and whole grains of rice. In the water for ācamana are mixed cardamom, cloves, uṣīra grass and kakkola or as many of them as possible.

4. **pādyam** — washing of the feet — two spoonfuls of water are touched to the feet of the icon and thrown into the phela.

5. **ācamanam** (or acamaniyam) — sipping of water — three spoonfuls of water are touched to the mouth of the icon and thrown into the phela. In the water for ācamana are mixed cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, mace, nutmeg and green camphor (parimala-dravya). In actual practice this is added to all the water being offered and no difference is made between arghya and ācamaniyam.

6. **snānam** — Bathing — water is taken with a flower and sprinkled upon the icon as a bath followed by three spoonfuls of water as ācamanam.

The snāna or abhiṣekam (bath) of images is done with five materials called pañcāmṛta (five ambrosial things) viz. milk, curds, clarified butter, honey and sugar. The image is to be bathed with these five in the order stated, so that sugar coming last removes all effects of oiliness. After these a bath with pure water follows. If one cannot afford these, one may bathe the image with water in which the leaves of the basil plant (tulasī) are mixed up, as that plant is deemed to be the favourite of Viṣṇu.

The water used in the bath of the image of a God is regarded as very sacred and it is used for ācamana by the worshipper and members of his family and friends and is called tīrtha (it is also sprinkled over one's head).

7. **vastram** — clothing — akṣata is offered upon the head of the icon in lieu of clothing.

8. **upavitam** — sacred thread — akṣata is offered upon the head of the icon in lieu of a sacred thread.

9. **ābharanam** — adornment — akṣata is offered upon the head of the icon in

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**Akṣata** is made by mixing raw white rice grains with turmeric and a little water. It can be mixed either in a bowl or plastic bag. By adding a pinch of quicklime (calcium carbonate) a lovely red colour is produced. Once mixed the akṣata should be dried in the Sun and then stored ready for use.

**Pañcāmṛta** is made by first melting a tablespoon each of ghee, honey and sugar — mixing them together and then slowly adding about half a cup of yoghurt followed by half a cup of milk.
lieu of ornaments.

10. **gandham** — sandal paste — sandal paste is applied to the forehead of the icon followed by kumkum and akṣata. As regards the unguents to be offered (anulepana or gandha) numerous rules are laid down (vide Pūjā-prakāśa pp. 39-41). The Viṣṇu Dh. S. (66.2) says that unguents should be one or more out of sandalwood, pine tree paste, musk, camphor, saffron, nutmeg.

11. **puspam** — flowers — a flower garland is offered or in lieu thereof a single flower is offered at the feet of the icon. This is followed by the offering of flower petals with the recitation of the 108 names of the deity — or at least 10 names.

12. **dhūpam** — incense — a few sticks of incense are waved around in a clockwise direction in front of the icon.

13. **dīpam** — light — a lamp is shown to the deity followed by three spoonfuls of water ācamanam. Lamps are to be made with ghee or sesame oil.

14. **naivedyam** — food — either cooked food or some fruit; a coconut and two bananas are offered. One can also offer some dried fruit. For naivedya no food is to be offered which is declared unfit in the śāstras for eating, nor the milk of a she-goat or she-buffalo though they are allowed for food, nor the meat of the five-nailed animals nor the flesh of the wild boar nor fish. The general rule is stated by the Ramayana as — 'whatever food a person eats the same is the food to be offered to his deities'.

15. **tāmbūlam** — betel — a wad of betel-leaf and areca nut are offered. The Nityācāra-paddhati (p. 549) quotes verses showing that tāmbūla comprised nine ingredients viz. betel-nut, betel leaves, quicklime, camphor, cardamom, cloves, kankola, desiccated coconut, the matuluṅga fruit. In modern times pieces of almond, nutmeg, mace, saffron and catechu are used.

17. **nirājanam** — camphor flame — this rite consists of waving a camphor flame around in a clockwise direction in front of the icon followed by three spoonfuls of water. This ceremony called ārātika or ārati (waving lights round the image) performed with several lights or pieces of camphor placed in a broad vessel which is held in both hands and waved round an image and over its head. It can become very elaborate using lamps with 2, 3, 5, 9 wicks. 27 wicks comprise a nakṣatra dīpam and a meru-dīpam is tiered with 108 wicks.

18. The ceremony is then brought to a close by the offering of **puspānjali** — a rite in which flowers are held in the cupped palms with the recitation of certain vedic mantras, and then offered at the feet of the icon. This is usually followed by **pradaksīna** — circumambulation and a full-length prostration. If there is

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3 Yad-annaḥ puruṣo bhavati tad annās-tasya devaḥ — Ayodhya kanda 103:30 & 104:15
not enough room to actually negotiate around the altar then each person simply
turns around three times on the spot and then prostrates.

**Summary Table of Upacāras**

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<thead>
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<th>Translation</th>
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<th>Symbolic/Substitute</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. āvāhanam</td>
<td>Invocation</td>
<td>Mudras</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. āsana</td>
<td>Enthronement</td>
<td>A throne</td>
<td>a flower or akṣata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. arghya</td>
<td>Libation</td>
<td>1 spoonful of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. pādyam</td>
<td>Washing of feet</td>
<td>2 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. snānam</td>
<td>Bathing</td>
<td>bathing with various ingredients</td>
<td>sprinkling with water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. vastram</td>
<td>Attire</td>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>akṣata/ a cotton thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. upāvītam</td>
<td>Sacred thread</td>
<td>Thread</td>
<td>akṣata/ a cotton thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. ābharaṇam</td>
<td>Adornment</td>
<td>Ornaments</td>
<td>akṣata/ flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. gandham</td>
<td>Unguents</td>
<td>Sandal paste &amp; kumkum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. puṣṭam</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>akṣata/leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. dhūpam</td>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>akṣata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. dipam</td>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Lamp</td>
<td>akṣata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. naivedyam</td>
<td>Repast</td>
<td>Cooked food</td>
<td>akṣata/ dried fruit &amp; nuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. phalam</td>
<td>fruit</td>
<td>fruit</td>
<td>dried fruit</td>
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<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. tāmbūlam</td>
<td>betel leaf &amp; nuts</td>
<td>betel leaf &amp; nuts</td>
<td>just a betel nut or a silver one</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. nirājanam</td>
<td>Waving of a flame</td>
<td>Camphor flame</td>
<td>akṣata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ācāmanam</td>
<td>Sipping</td>
<td>3 spoonfuls of water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. puṣpāṇjali</td>
<td>Handful of flowers</td>
<td>flowers</td>
<td>leaves or silver flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. pradaksīṇam</td>
<td>Circumambulation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. namaskāra</td>
<td>Prostration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. visarjanam</td>
<td>Valediction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When several deities are worshipped, there are two methods in which the upacāras may be offered. One may offer the upacāras from āvāhana to namaskāra to one deity or the principal deity and then the same upacāras to the other deity or deities one after another. This method is called kāṇḍānusamaya.

The other method occurs when āvāhana is done for the several deities in order, then āsana for all, then pādyā for all and so on up to namaskāra. This is called padārthānusamaya. This method is generally preferred.
Accoutrements of Puja & their esoteric meanings

**Water:** used at every stage of the pūjā, it is an instrument of purification and also, as the element which pervades all the universe and the beings within it, is symbolic of pervasiveness of divine consciousness. Water is also symbolic of life.

**Pādyam:** The water offered to wash the feet of the Deity indicates existence-consciousness-bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*) pervading and supporting all names and forms — all duality is a reflection of the Absolute Unity.

**Arghyam:** (libation or respectful offering of water) represents the Ultimate Reality pervading the entire cosmos.

**Ācamanam:** (water for sipping) represents the inner witness — the perception of perception itself.

**Snānam:** the bathing reminds us of *sat-cit-ānanda* pervading all the three guṇas or constituents of the material universe. The entire cosmos is being bathed by the radiation of the Divine Consciousness.

**Ornaments:** the ornaments symbolise the various predominant attributes of the Deity and the good qualities we should strive to manifest.

**Akṣata** — Rice-grains: rice being symbolic of the nutrition principle which is the basis of all life forms indicates the all-pervading underlying substratum of all existence. Brahman is described in the Vedas as the ground-of-all-being — as the food principle from which all beings arise, by which they live and into which they ultimately dissolve.

**Scent** (Sandal paste): represents the element earth — smell being the predominant attribute of earth.

**Flowers:** represent the element ether. They also symbolise certain virtues such as; compassion, harmlessness, forgiveness etc.

**Incense:** symbolizes the element air. It also symbolises the sweet smell of Dharma and the wish that the influence of the Dharma may pervade the entire earth like the smell of the incense.

**Lamp:** represents the element fire. Fire also symbolizes knowledge. The spiritual wisdom which dispels the darkness of ignorance.

**Food:** symbolizes the principle of immortality (*amṛta*). The coconut symbolises the offering of oneself in an act of self-surrender (*Prapatti*). The two bananas symbolise male and female and all the other pairs of opposites of which the world is comprised.

**Nirājanam:** — waving of the camphor flame affirms the wish that all beings throughout the three spheres of existence may attain enlightenment and liberation — just as the camphor melts into nothingness may all beings become free from the limitations of material nature and realise their true essence.
The Āgama teaches that there are four principle Loci (places) for invoking and worshipping the Divine. These Loci are technically known as the *Catuḥ-sthāna* — The Four Places.

1. **Kumbha**

The kumbha is the indespensable accessory to all Tantric worship where invocation is performed. This jar is also known as kalaśa and comprises of a metal or clay jar decorated with a string of three colours — red, white and black; it is filled with water and then spices (parimala dravya) are added along with precious stones (or a coin), herbs, and a betel leaf & nut. The mouth of the kumbha is covered with five leaves from the five sacred trees or just five leaves from one of the sacred trees. A coconut coloured yellow with turmeric is placed over the mouth of the jar. There are four dots (bindus) placed at each of the cardinal points on the outside of the kumbha, a kūrca [bunch] of 24 darbha blades is placed in the jar and another kūrca of five blades tied with a special knot (brahma-granthi) is placed over the top of the whole kumbha. This decorated kumbha is then placed on a bed of raw rice on a lotus design.

**Symbolism of the Kumbha**

This jar represents the axis mundi — the Holy Mount Meru which is the axis of the universe. A miniature model of the entire cosmos. The water represents the oceans and the all—pervading Supreme Consciousness. It symbolises the primordial ocean of cosmic unity from which creation arises. The kalaśa contains within it all vegetable matter represented by the tulasi leaf, all mineral matter represented by the precious stones (or coin). And all herbs symbolised by the spices.

The triple-coloured thread (white, red & black) represent the three qualities (guṇas) sattva, rajas & tamas — centripetal force, centrifugal force and the revolving force. The five leaves symbolise the five primordial elements or the five states of matter — fire, water, earth, air & ether — gaseous, liquid, solid, energy & space. The coconut symbolises the human entity which is the highest form of being in the creation. The Self in encased according to the Yoga Shastra in three sheaths;
1. physical body (sthūla-śarīra) symbolised by the external husk of the coconut.

2. astral body (sūkṣma-śarīra) symbolised by the white kernel.

3. causal body (kāraṇa-śarīra) or the “body” of Karma, symbolised by the coconut milk.

A kūrca — bunch of five blades of darbha grass tied with a special knot called the brahma granthi in placed over the top. This symbolises the five primary functions of the Godhead — projection of the universe, sustentation, withdrawl, administering the law of Karma and granting liberation. Another kūrca consisting of 24 blades is sometimes placed in the kumbha symbolising the 24 tattvas or primordial factors of which the universe is composed. (The five senses the five organs of action, the five primordial elements, the five subtle elements, mind, consciousness, intellect, and ego-sense.)

When complete, the Kumbha is placed upon a bed of raw rice representing food which is the basis of all life forms from Brahma to an amoeba. And the lotus diagram upon which the whole apparatus rests, represents the lotus of the spiritually awakened mind.

2. Maṇḍala

Maṇḍalas are sacred diagrams which are drawn on the ground with coloured grains, sand or rice-flour. According to the Āgamas, when the Supreme Being incarnates, all the associates from the spiritual realm accompany him/her. So the Maṇḍala is a diagrammatic representation of the abode of the Supreme Being manifested in the mundane realm. Some Maṇḍalas are specific and some are for general liturgical use. For example the Chakrābja Maṇḍala is used in most of the Vaiṣṇava Pañcarātra rituals, and in the consecration of temple priests. The Navapadma Maṇḍala is used in some forms of Vaiṣṇava initiation and for the worship of Lakṣmi. Sarvatobhadra Maṇḍala is one used in the worship of any deity. The Saiva Āgamas of course have their particular Maṇḍalas such as Lingatobhadra Maṇḍala and others. The
most important aspect of the use of Maṇḍalas is the invocation and location of the various attendant deities (parivāra-devatas) in relation to the Principle Deity invoked in the centre.

The seeing and ritually (meditatively) entering into a Maṇḍala are considered as very efficacious ways of destroying the obstacles to enlightenment and speeding up one’s spiritual progress.

After the invocation and worship the maṇḍala is “dissolved” and the elements from which it was made are ceremonially thrown into running water — a river or the sea.

3. Bimba — Icon

According to the Tantra, the Godhead by a ray of its divine potency takes up abode in the icon which is constructed strictly according to the dictates of the Scriptures and consecrated accordingly. Such a descent (arca-avatāra) takes place for receiving the service of the devotees and for bestowing grace upon them in return.

The purpose of the icon is to represent, through a combination of forms and proportions, some fundamental aspect of the cosmos and its presiding consciousness which is not directly perceptible by our senses.

The Godhead is all-pervading and intimately close, through the power of mantras and mudras the Divine Essence is invoked into the icon and She, through her infinite mercy condescends to take residence in the gross object for the purpose of receiving the worship of the devotees. The image is thus transformed into a living entity although its actual shape and ornamentation are symbolic and convey meaning in every single aspect. Once the invocation ceremony (prāṇa-pratīṣṭha) has been completed, the icon is no longer regarded as merely symbolic but as a murti which means a materialisation.

4. Agni — Fire

Fire is the only element, the nature of which is to rise upward only. Fire represents illumination — wisdom and is the antithesis of darkness — i.e. ignorance (nescience). Fire symbolises the power of wisdom which incinerates the effects of ignorance and sin. Agni is the gateway through which human beings can communicate with higher states of being and spheres of existence and with the
devas. It is through fire that one takes part in the cosmic symphony and co-operates with the devas. It is only through the medium of fire that the devas can be reached. Agni is the foremost amongst the devas, the messenger of the devas, manes and other celestial beings and the one who carries the oblations and the prayers to the respective deities. He is the most ancient and the most sacred object of worship as well as being the first priest according to the Vedas. He is also the most universal aspect of worship; all religions have some sacred connection with fire.

**GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR PRACTITIONERS**

1. During pūjā one should never turn one’s back on the sacred fire, or an icon, or a guru.
2. The chest or at least the right shoulder should always be exposed when in proximity to the sacred fire, an icon or guru. Obviously in cold climates this is not practical.
3. Never salute or prostrate to the deity with the upper body covered (males).
4. The oleander flower must not be offered to the Lord Viṣṇu. The reason is that the flower is poisonous and in the worship of Viṣṇu the prasāda is sacred water thus the water could become contaminated. In the worship of Śiva the prasāda is sacred ash (vibhūti) and this cannot be contaminated.
5. One should not break tulasi without having bathed. Some gurus suggest that only flowers should be offered repeating the name ‘tulasi’.
6. A votary lamp should not be extinguished or used for any other purpose.
7. A lamp should never be lit from another lamp.
8. Barley is also called “akṣata”. On the Salagrāma barley should never be offered. Tulasi is never offered to Ganeśa and dūrva (lawn grass) is never offered to Devi. The bilva leaves are never to be offered to the Sun and one must never offer the arka flower to Lord Vishnu.
9. Flowers kept in the hand and sandal paste kept in a copper vessel become impure.

10. After bathing in preparation for pūjā one should never dry oneself with the garment that was previously worn, otherwise another bath is recommended.

11. In images the most important thing is bathing and decorating, in maṇḍalas the most important thing is the invoking locating of the various divinities in their respective places, with the specific mantras, and in fire; the oblations soaked in ghee are the most important.

12. A thing once offered cannot be offered to another deity, even a lamp, this is the general rule. But the exception is in the case of ‘parivāra devatas’; e.g. the food offering to the Lord Vishnu is also offered to Lakshmi, Bhudevi, and all the entourage of the Lord. Lord Shiva’s naivedyam can be offered to all of His family as well.

13. Ācamanam must always be done after the following acts; sneezing, sleeping, eating, drinking, bathing, spitting, dressing, relieving oneself or walking on a high road.

The substitute form of ācamanam is touching the mouth with the right hand and then touching the right ear, this is repeated three times. [Ganga resides within the right ear.]

14. Before all religious rites tilak must be applied; if the clay or sandal paste is not available then simply apply water.

15. During pūjā, homa etc a pavitri — a ring of kuśa grass must be worn on the ring finger of the right hand, if this is not available then a gold, silver or copper ring can be used instead.

16. At every ceremony, and the termination of study, gratuity — guerdon [dakṣina] must be offered to the guru or the officiating priest, otherwise all the merit accruing from the ceremony goes to the priest and not to the host (yajamāna).

17. To a priest who performs the homa, a pair of garments; dhoti and aṅga-vastra should be given in addition to the sacrificial fee.

18. Flowers are offered with the ring and middle finger of the right hand, avoiding touching then with the thumb.

19. Flowers are always offered with the palm turned upwards [over-hand], rice grains etc with the palm downwards.

20. All offerings are made with both hands; i.e. with the right hand and the left hand touching the right forearm or elbow, except when ringing the bell which is done with the left hand.

21. The bell should always be rung when offering bath, incense, lamp, food, and decorations as well as during the nirājana rite.

22. One must never smell the food, incense and flowers intended for the Deity.

23. One must always stand or sit to the right of the Deity during worship. In a temple the men should stand to the right of the Deity and the women to the left.

24. When leaving the shrine one must not turn the back to the icon, one should leave walking backwards.
The Śastra is so accommodating that almost everything prescribed can be substituted by something else. The general rule is that we try our best to acquire the recommended item. A bad quality item is better than a good quality substitute.

Vastu Pratinidhi Vidhānam Summary

If the spice mixture for the arghya is unavailable then add only *siddhārthakam* (white mustard seeds).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Missing Ingredient</th>
<th>Substitute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gems – of all types</td>
<td>Pearl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits variety unavailable</td>
<td>Bananas are the best, but any seasonal fruit will do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Metals</td>
<td>Gold – the substitute for gold is ghee or even something golden like a coin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scents of all kinds</td>
<td>Cardamon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice for akṣata</td>
<td>Barley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghee</td>
<td>Oil, preferably coconut oil or sesame oil or even sugar water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coconut milk</td>
<td>Cows milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śānti vastu</td>
<td>Tulasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangala vastu</td>
<td>Lotus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>Leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaves various sorts</td>
<td>Palāśa leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>Flowers or dried fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naivedyam (cooked food)</td>
<td>Dried fruit and roast nuts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>Lamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeds (for nava-dhanyam)</td>
<td>Mung-beans, rice or barley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurca</td>
<td>Cloth or thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankūra</td>
<td>Twigs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toranam (banners)</td>
<td>Strips of coloured cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aṣṭa-mangalams</td>
<td>Mudras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havis (cooked rice for homa)</td>
<td>Diced Fruit or nuts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell</td>
<td>Drum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vina</td>
<td>Singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuṇḍa (Copper or brick)</td>
<td>Śthanḍila — a sand altar approximately one cubit square.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sruč (offering ladle)</td>
<td>Sruva or a mango leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuśa grass</td>
<td>Kāśa or straw</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>