

## **Puja (Sacred Ritualistic Worship)**

*By Yoga Acharya Bharat*

The literal meaning of *Puja* is adoration. It is an all-purpose term used to denote the many stages of ritual action that compose worship in Hindu culture. The derivative meaning is thought to be from Pu-chey, 'flower-action,' and refers to the act of offering flowers to the deity. *Puja* is a post-Vedic phenomenon in its current form. The Vedic ritual was Homa, the offering of grains and sanctified liquids into a sacrificial fire. Most *Puja* differs from the Vedic sacrifice primarily in the fact that an image or representation of god is used in the service unlike the Homa where an altar alone, albeit highly stylized and over-laden with symbolic meaning, is used. The only common requirement is the creation of a sacred space to perform *Puja*.

*Puja* is the ceremonial act of showing reverence to a God or Goddess through invocation, prayer, song, and ritual. An essential aspect of *Puja* is communion with the Divine. The worshiper believes that through this contact she or he has established direct contact with the deity. This contact is facilitated through an image: a sculpture, painting, or print. Through this *Puja* and the image, a Hindu worshiper invites the presence of the deity with his or her cosmic energy. And thus, in the eye of devotees, the icon then becomes the deity, whose presence is reaffirmed by the daily rituals of honoring and invocation.

The principal aim of any *Puja* is the feeling of personal contact with the deity. Generally, special communication with a deity is made through the intervention of a Brahmin Hindu priest during a strictly regulated ritual in the temple or home. During *Puja*, the Divine presence is invoked by which the devotee obtains blessings.

*Puja* or Hindu ritual worship has a special place in spiritual practice. *Puja* helps us express our love and devotion and is a means of drawing near to the Divine by a very powerful process. The idea of *Puja* is to take the seeker's mind from the known to unknown. Also, *Puja* is a method of cleansing the mind through concentration on God, who is sitting in our heart.

*Puja* is not only performed in the temple but also can and should be done in our homes. The objective of sacred Hindu worship in homes is to create thoughts and vibrations of spiritual forces in and around us. This is best achieved by inviting a Brahmin Hindu priest to help facilitate the *Puja*, a Brahmin priest who is proficient in mantra chanting, in performing the ritual actions, and in making an offering as prescribed by the Vedas (Hindu scripture). Sanskrit verses or *slokas* are powerful repositories of spiritual forces, and must be chanted with correct pronunciation to invoke the presence and blessings of gods.

A learned priest must perform sacred Hindu Rituals with focused attention, by exactly pronouncing the correct mantra so that the right wave of mental energy is broadcast out into the subtle worlds, reshaping reality to the desired effects.

Particular rituals were established by enlightened sages and have been performed million of times over the years by successive generations of priests. This is believed to make them particularly super-charged because a priest who enacts a ritual today is "riding" on waves of energy generated by numberless priests who enacted the rituals in previous centuries. Rules for rituals are incredibly elaborate and must be followed to the letter. And therefore, traditionally, Brahmin priests are invited to one's home to perform Pujas to achieve the desired results.

Hindus celebrate life's crucial junctures by holy sacraments, or rites of passage, called *Sanskaras*, which impress the subconscious mind, inspire family and community sharing and invoke the Gods' blessings. For the Hindu, life is a sacred journey in which each milestone, marking major biological and emotional stages, is consecrated through sacred ceremony. Family and friends draw near, lending support, advice and encouragement. Through Vedic rites and mantras, family members or priests invoke the Gods for blessings and protection during important turning points, praying for the individual's spiritual and social development. There are many sacraments, from the rite of conception to the funeral ceremony. Each one, properly observed, empowers spiritual life and preserves Hindu culture, as the soul consciously accepts each succeeding discovery and duty in the order of God's creation. The essential *Sanskaras* are the rites of conception, the three-month blessing, hair-parting, birth, name-giving, head-shaving, first feeding, ear-piercing, first learning, puberty, marriage, elders' vows and last rites.

Pujas are performed for two reasons:

- \*To receive the blessings of the god
- \*To develop the inner consciousness of divinity

Pujas have three common actions:

- \*The devotee or person doing the Puja makes an offering to the god
- \*Darshana is granted to the devotee, i.e. the blessed viewing of the god, which confers grace
- \*A consecrated article from the worship ceremony is given to the devotee as a blessing or Prasada.

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