

The Energies of Vedic Ceremony, Beyond the Basics

By Bill Francis Barry

“The Chinese Book of Wisdom, the I Ching says, ‘If one could comprehend the power of such ceremonies, he/she could rule the world as if it were a globe spinning in the palm of one’s hand.’ If the Indian priests really comprehended the power at their command, India would be quite a different place today.”, according to Namadeva Acharya.¹

Vedic Ceremonies such as Pujas and Yajnas (fire ceremonies) are a form of religious ceremony performed according to precise procedures found in ancient Vedic scriptures. Using Sanskrit mantras, hymns and prescribed materials, these ceremonies were taught by the rishis and adepts as a means to invoke extraordinarily powerful spiritual energies which can be aligned with sincere, clearly stated, intentions to achieve a desired outcome. The importance of properly learning: to chant the Sanskrit mantras and hymns; to select and use the proper materials and instruments; and to respect the component steps and sequence, as best understood by the tradition of a trusted lineage – cannot be overstated. Those components are among the basic fundamental building blocks of these ceremonies.

Unfortunately, some components of invoking spiritual energies through Vedic ceremonies seem to be less understood. A helpful distinction is that the energy attracting power of Vedic ceremonies can be considered using a metaphor of two *axis of attraction*: a horizontal axis and a vertical axis.

Along a *horizontal axis of attracting energy*, Vedic ceremonies can range from simple to complex. For example, a simple Vedic ceremony can be a brief few minute arati, or short pancho-pachara (5 form) puja, while an elaborate shodasho-pachara (16 form) puja or yajna can last for hours or days. In terms of the energies invoked, the longer more elaborate ceremonies, when performed properly, will invoke increasingly powerful energies relative to the short ‘simple’ ceremonies. However, it would be a mistake to think that the magnitude of Divine energies invoked by these ceremonies is correlated only to what I am referring to as the somewhat linear quantifications of: duration of time; variety of materials & sacred objects used; or the number of extra hymns chanted.

On a *vertical axis of attracting energy*, there are several aspects of attracting or channeling energy that can be considered to have a metaphorically perpendicular orientation to the above categorized horizontal measures. Below I will explain several of these vertical axis attractors of energy within Vedic ceremonies.

In learning Vedic ceremony (or most ritual practices) the initial emphasis, by necessity, is on the details of discrete components² and then the proper sequence. As the components are mastered, and the sequence is learned, the pujari starts to feel the flow and his or her confidence builds. At this point, the increasingly confident pujari may decide to add some mantras, hymns, or additional invocations, to increase the overall energies of their ceremony (assuming such changes are consistent with teachings of their lineage). Or they may decide that their path to an increased level of invoked energies will be to learn a longer puja or yajna with additional materials, sacred objects and steps. This is a valid path, but it is not the only path towards the realization of the great energetic potential of these ceremonies. More materials, hymns, and procedural steps *is not the only path* to more shakti.

Reverence, Self-purification and Sankalpa

The amount of reverence and devotion we bring to the ceremony has a direct correlation to our ability to successfully manifest spiritual energies through the ceremonial process. In our preparation³ and performance of the ceremony, our behaviors demonstrate the caliber of our sincerity and respect. This demonstration of sincerity acts to magnify the capacity of the ceremony to attract and channel the powers of the Divine into our clearly stated intentions for the ceremony.

Performed silently or vocally, Sankalpa is the act of clearly stating our reason and intended outcome for performing the ceremony. Sankalpa means resolve. Sankalpa typically involves specific mantras included in the early steps of pujas or yajnas. However, setting the sankalpa is much more than chanted mantras or ceremonial gestures. To be effective, sankalpa must be based upon the inner focused expression of our sincere intention. The essential component of setting the sankalpa, found within the inner core of the pujari, is our sincerity which, when combined with the knowledge of how to perform Vedic ceremony, enables one to properly proceed. Properly setting sankalpa is like switching on the beacon light which begins the process of invoking and attracting the greater Divine shakti to empower the ceremony.

When Vedic ceremony "... is performed with knowledge it gives Moksa and when it is performed without knowledge it leads to Samsara. God is the ultimate knowledge to whom we worship by sacrifice... Lower grade of thoughts and sankalpa leads to lower category of existence, and higher sankalpa leads to higher consciousness. Therefore, one's sankalpa must be higher, that is 'to get the knowledge of Paramatma.' one's aim must be to go very close to God and to experience the Truth and Knowledge. The same thing is said in Srimadbhagavat." According to author Rajani Patki.⁴

Dharana – Concentrated Focus of the Pujari

In our culture many of us have learned that multi-tasking, where we are simultaneously performing several tasks while possibly thinking about one or more unrelated tasks, can be productive and rewarding. Unfortunately, this approach to performing tasks involves a dissipation of energies. Those who have practiced advanced yoga techniques which involve focusing the mind, have discovered that with sustained practice, one's ability to become more disciplined in holding a 'single-pointedness' of focus is a learned skill that is transferable to other tasks. This is the principle of dharana or concentration that is one of the eight essential principles taught in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

When learning to perform Vedic ceremonies that successfully invoke and channel powerful Divine energies, the level of dharana or concentration of the pujari, is one of the essential factors that either facilitates or restricts, the flow of powerful shakti energies in support of the intention and beneficiaries of the ceremony. Namadeva taught that Vedic ceremonies should be treated as sacred but not somber. He and Sant Keshavadas effectively used the ceremony as an opportunity to engage those present by interjecting brief instructional comments during *some parts* of the ceremony. However sustaining the focus and flow of the ceremony remains an essential component. Lengthy digressions to teach will disrupt and reduce the energetic vortex being built by the ceremonial process.

Dharana, concentrated focus, on the central components and process of the ceremony, is an essential enabler of the pujari's ability to invoke increased energies. For those who perform these ceremonies, next time you are in the middle of a puja or other ritual ceremony process, check where your focused thoughts are. Are your thoughts multi-tasking somewhere else or are they centered within the ceremony?

Physical Posture of the Pujari

The physical and energy bodies of the pujari act as conduits for the Divine energies. Fueled by the sincerity and mental focus of the pujari, the chanting of the Sanskrit and the tasks of the ceremony build into a crescendo of invocation and attraction of Divine grace and shakti. The primary conduit of these energies is the pujari. Subtle orientations in the physical posture and physical acts of the pujari can either enhance or restrict this conduction of energy into the sacred space being built within the proximity of the sacred objects used in the ceremony.

The facility of the pujari to channel ceremony-invoked energies can benefit from the yogic teachings that physical posture and alignment will either enable or prevent the flows of certain energies through our physical and energy bodies. Learning to become sensitive and attuned to the relationship between physical posture and energy flow can be accomplished by various means, including mantra sadhana, pranayama, yogic ananas, and other approaches. Or such sensitivity can be developed, over time, through the study and practice of ceremony. As this sensitivity and attunement is developed, the influence of

physical posture (for example the relationship of erectness of the spine with the flow of energy through the pujari during ceremony) becomes more evident in the experience of the pujari. This is an attunement that can be learned and strengthened. This relationship between the performance of Vedic ritual and the energy flows in the sushumna and major chakras is highlighted in the writings of Paramahansa Yogananda⁵ and in the writings of Sannyasi Gyanshruti and Sannyasi Srividyananada (from the lineage of Swami Sivananda).⁶

According to Sant Keshavadas: *“When we do puja properly and we are pure and evolved ourselves, automatically we feel the presence of the Almighty during the worship.... Our whole life becomes like a puja. Then our mind becomes the light offering, our body the shrine, our heart the throne of God.”*⁷

Understanding & Respecting the Build-up of Energies During Ceremony

Namadeva Acharya taught the traditional shodasho-pachara, 16 form, puja⁸. This form of puja remains widely used in India^{9,10,11}. It is very important to understand that, as Namadeva instructed, the puja process involves a process of invoking, and attracting tremendous energies that are built-up to a climax of Divine power centered on our expressed intention. *The most sacred time of this build-up of energy is during the Abhisheka (the ceremonial bathing of the objects) and during the period of silent prayer that immediately follows the Abhisheka.* This accumulated vortex of sacred energy, is then further focused on our stated intention, during the time of ‘The Enumeration of the Powers of the Divine’ when the appropriate Astotara, the 108 names or the 1000 names of the deity, is chanted. As Sadguru Sant Keshavadas taught, it is with the involvement of all present who wish to participate, that the Divine powers of the puja are then extended from the central sacred space of the puja, further into the expressed intention of the puja, into the participants, and out to the local environment and the world.

The period of most elevated energetic power in the puja is during the Abhisheka and the period of silence immediately following the Abhisheka. For the pujari, this is the time when the sincerity of the heart’s sankalpa and the dharana concentration of the mind are of most paramount importance to allowing the Divine forces and presence from the upper lokas to penetrate into the sacred space created by the puja. During this time, the magnitude of the energies made present is directly correlated to the performance of the pujari leading up to, and during, this central part of the puja ceremony. *This is the time that the pujari can fulfill their highest ceremonial role as conduits of Divine shakti and grace.* If the pujari’s goal is to maximize the energy manifested, then this is not a time for satsang discourse.

Most people who have attended a puja at a local temple or in India have probably noticed that temple priests will exhibit varying degrees of concentration during the puja, and many do not include this period of silence immediately after the abhisheka. Perhaps they are following a different tradition? Or perhaps they do not perceive or comprehend the power of energies available through Vedic ceremony?¹² At the foundation of Vedic ceremonies are universal scientific laws involving the attraction of spiritual energies from the upper luminous lokas. The role of these laws and forces in Vedic ceremony are among the least understood spiritual practices, both in the west and in India, according to the teachings of Namadeva Acharya.

Beyond Metaphors

This vertical and horizontal theme is common to the teachings of many mystics and theologians. Dropping the metaphor label, this vertical axis of attracting energy is present in several essential parts of our individuality, including the vertical path of the Kundalini through the chakras along the sushumna and upward through the antahkarana to parts of ourselves that are not within the physical body or the earth plane¹³, fueled by the ‘upward’ path of our devotion.

May all who aspire towards increased spiritual energies and grace through the path of Vedic ceremony realize the highest outcomes.

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End Notes

¹ Thomas Ashley-Farrand, The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, Vol. 1 (2002), page 26.

² The focus of this article is on Vedic ceremonies involving sacred objects, procedures and vocal Sanskrit chanting. Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, and other respected teachers, have taught that there are two broad categories of Vedic ceremony, external (involving sacred images and objects) and internal (manasika puja/yajna or mental worship, also known as meditation). They taught that the highest form of ceremonies is the internal. That is a topic for another time, but is included here for added perspective. *“There are two methods of puja. One is murti puja, or image worship, another is manasika puja or mental worship, also known as meditation. There is no doubt that meditation is greater than external worship, but an impure mind can never successfully meditate. Mental purification is the goal of external worship. It is equally true that the more a man gains internal purity, his external worship becomes more profound, and he realizes he is not worshipping the image but God in the image.”* Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Cosmic Shakti Kundalini (1976), Page 22

³ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas wrote about forms of purification (shuddhis) which should be performed before Vedic ceremonies. These forms of purification include: bodily purification; reverence for articles used and the place of ceremony; purification of the place of ceremony; and purification through repetition of mantra. Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Cosmic Shakti Kundalini (1976), Page 22-23

⁴ Rajani Patki, The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature, (1996) page 4-5

⁵ Paramahansa Yogananda, God Talks With Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita. Royal Science of God-Realization, Vol 1, page 513-514

⁶ Sannyasi Gyanshruti and Sannyasi Srividyananada, Yajna, A Comprehensive Survey (2006), pages 82-83

⁷ From the teachings of Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, as presented in the book Guru Kripa by Ravidas and Karuna, page 86

⁸ Thomas Ashley-Farrand, The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, Vol. III (2002), pages 8-9.

⁹ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Cosmic Shakti Kundalini (1976), Page 24

¹⁰ Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda lineage, in his booklet Devapuja or Worship of God (2009), page 14

¹¹ Musashi Tachikawa, Shoun Hino and Lalita Deodhar, Puja & Samskara (2006)

¹² *“Over the thousands of years in the evolution of Hinduism, complex ceremonies have developed surrounding many of the deities. These ceremonies contain great power. Largely, that power is almost completely ignored in the West. Even in India, many of the priests who have been trained to conduct such ceremonies perform them in a dry and restless manner, as if they cannot wait to finish. The understanding of the hugeness of spiritual resources at their command seems far from their operational state of mind. It reminds me of a dam with huge turbines that could provide power for the entire valley, if only someone would throw the switch.”* Thomas Ashley-Farrand, The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, Vol. 1 (2002), page 26.

¹³ Thomas Ashley-Farrand, Teacher of Mantra Instruction Manual (2007), pages 84-85.