

Stages of Inner Experiences in Vedic Ceremony

by Bill Francis Barry

This article proposes that important insights, about the performance of Vedic ceremonies, can be gained by considering the inner experiences of the devotee who regularly performs such ceremonies over a sustained period of time. Viewed as three approximate stages of the pujari¹ priest's inner experiences, the progression of these experiences offers a vision of potentially transformational benefits available with Vedic ceremony as a spiritual practice.

"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." Sadguru Sant Keshavadas²

Context

Vedic ceremonies are commonly understood in terms of their physical and acoustic attributes including murtis (statues) and flaming vessels with ritual offerings of water, food, cloth, flowers, special fragrance, etc., accompanied by bells, Sanskrit mantras, Sanskrit hymns and other ritual gestures or actions. These physical ceremonies, also known as murti pujas or homa fire ceremonies, are considered the external worship aspects of Vedic ceremony. While the inner devotional focus and the inner sankalpa³ (sincere intention) that is affirmed for each ceremony, is taught as an essential component of the ceremony, the major focus of the priests and attendees can often appear to be limited to the external physical components.

By necessity, while learning Vedic ceremony, the dominant focus of students and their teachers is on the physical procedural elements and efforts to develop proficiency in the pronunciation of the Sanskrit hymns and mantras. This emphasis is essential to establish the proper focus and other prerequisites to the progressive inner mystical experiences.

Vedic ceremony, as sadhana (frequent spiritual practice), can be understood to be a personal growth practice to develop inner purification, expanded consciousness and the realization of our spiritual potential. In this article, we will consider teachings from several great spiritual masters and some Vedic scriptures which explain that the practice of physical external Vedic ceremony leads the practitioner to profound inner experiences and that the external physical form of the ceremony can eventually be superseded by an inner mental (manasika) ceremony.

Stage One – of the Pujari's Experiences

The initial stage of the pujari's experiences is, by necessity, focused on learning and gaining proficiency in the many procedural components of the ceremony. The external focus of the pujari dominates the experience as the priority emphasis is on correct sequence of materials offered to the sacred images, the instruments used, and the mantras & hymns chanted properly in support of the sankalpa (intention) of the ceremony. All performed with an emphasis on developing and sustaining a smooth flow in the ceremony that is enriched by the pujari's devotional attitude and focus.

With practice, as the mechanics of the ceremony become mastered, the devotional empowerment⁴ that the pujari brings to the ceremony gains strength. Additional ways for the pujari to strengthen the energies invoked during the puja ceremony, are described in an article on my website titled "*The Energies of Vedic Ceremony, Beyond the Basics*" by Bill Francis Barry. The Pujari's inner experiences of the energies described in that article, primarily pertain to this 'Stage One' category. Although some students of puja who decide to memorize the Purusha Suktam⁵ hymn have reported extraordinary meditative experiences while practicing that hymn multiple times with eyes closed.

Stage Two – Progression of Changes in Perceptions

“Regarding the worship of stone images – when our hearts are stone, then the outer symbol becomes stone. When our hearts are filled with consciousness, we are able to hear sermons from stones ...”
Sadguru Sant Keshavadas⁶

“... when God is invoked, the omnipresent God is immediately present before you. That is the beauty of puja (worship)” Sadguru Sant Keshavadas.⁷

Inner experiences of the pujari, and the progressive frequency of such experiences, will vary according to each individual. For many, the transition into this second stage is gradual and may involve changes in perceptions which are intermittent over months or longer, until eventually becoming more frequent and sustained. This transition is not characterized by a clear boundary but is subtle and may involve months or years.

By this point, the pujari’s confidence, experience and mastery of performing all components of the ceremony will have achieved a relaxed fluidity in the accurate performance of the Puja ceremony. This relaxed proficiency can be an enabling factor for progressing in this second stage of experience. Subtle changes in the pujari’s perceptions during the ceremony may begin to occur. These new perceptions may include: visual experiences; awareness of new energy flows within the pujari; external perceptions of energy flows between the pujari and the physical murtis, yantras or pictures; or these new perceptions may also involve unusual sounds that coincide with these energy flows.

Some examples can make this clear. During an invocation of the deities or archetypal principles, the pujari may notice extensions of energy emanating from within him or herself that expand to some remote place or realm. Another example is that during an offering of water, rice or flower petals, the pujari may perceive energetic emanations that flow through their arm and hand, through the offered item and into the objects on the puja tray. Or during the blessing of the ceremonial waters there can be an electric-like current that comes through the pujari and into the water vessels. During a ceremony’s period of silent inwardly focused prayer, there may be brief or extended perceptions involving a remote participant or beneficiary of the ceremony.

An element common to many traditions involves the teaching that there is a special relationship between the pujari and the instruments and materials that are part of the ceremony. We are taught to handle these tools and ingredients with reverence. Initially this understanding may be primarily intellectual, perhaps with a recognition of a devotional component. However, the fuller understanding of this relationship requires the discovery of the experiential knowledge involved.

The gradual expansion of this experiential knowledge will involve changes in perception. These changes unfold within the pujari’s inner awareness as well as expanded perceptions involving previously hidden energy exchanges occurring between the pujari, the pujari’s instruments and the ceremony’s puja tray, murtis, or fire vessel.

Depending on factors such as the frequency of ceremonies performed as well as progress in the pujari’s other daily spiritual practices, the frequency and duration of these expanding perceptions may grow. An essential factor in this progression involves the capacity of the pujari. Namadeva taught that most of those who are attracted to these teachings are working their way through processes of purification (involving inner energy channels and chakras⁸) to where they develop ‘sattva guna⁹ dominant’ bodies¹⁰. An inspiring explanation of what this means is stated by Sanjukta Gupta, Oxford University Professor Emeritus in her commentary on the Lakshmi Tantra, chapter 35, “the purification of the body (bhuta shuddhi)” where she explains that the attainment of a sattva guna dominant body makes us “fit for worship”¹¹.

Becoming ‘fit for worship’ enables the pujari’s progression towards becoming a conduit for the divine energies being invoked through the Ceremony. 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...”¹². Namadeva Acharya taught that eventually the pujari can become the vessel for these divine forces, *Aham Karishe, ‘I am the vessel’*¹³.

Important Perspective from Sadguru Sant Keshavadas

The occurrence of new or mystical perceptions should be kept in perspective. They can serve as indications of progress, however they are not the goal. The eventual goal of puja as sadhana and service is not flashy mystical phenomena, but divine realization. Sadguru Sant Keshavadas also taught that the absence of mystical experiences should not be mistaken as a lack of progress. He stated¹⁴ that progress is also measured by strengthened faith, increased inner peace or joy, increased love and desired to serve others. He taught that the Divine Self is realized by the inner light within and not by the senses, mind or intellect.

Stage Two – Further Inspiration from the Adepts.

“Puja merely means ceremony. 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.

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.”¹⁵

Progress in expanding and deepening these experiences during the performance of ceremony can also include mystical experiences such as perceptions of spirits or non-physical beings. For example, during some Sudarshana Chakra Yajna (fire ceremonies) performed by Namadeva Acharya, which I attended in India and in North America, at peak energy points during these ceremonies there were sometimes reports of attendees perceptions of those deities which held the Sudarshana chakra¹⁶. A similar experience was sometimes reported at Gayatri fire ceremonies where people had visions of assemblies of master souls who had achieved spiritual realization through the power of the Gayatri mantra¹⁷. In a small book on Vedic fire ceremonies, author Henry G. Herzberger wrote that the ceremonies sometimes were able to “...create an interdimensional doorway to different realms of creation. This enables the devata (or angelic being) to appear and be present at the yajna. This is actually the experience of advanced meditators – that a circular window or doorway appears and the form of the devata appears.”¹⁸

Stage Three – External Puja Eventually Superseded by Inner Manasika (Mental) Puja

The inner experiences that I propose, as comprising this third stage, represent an advanced level of consciousness. In our attempts to comprehend this level of consciousness we rely on the insights and clues we have from what is reported by advanced souls regarding their experiences or in some cases their commentary on scripture or other classic texts.

One teaching is that the performance of physical puja or fire ceremonies is accompanied by inner transformations that parallel the external ceremony. For example in Paramahansa Yogananda’s commentary on the Bhagavad Gita verse 4:32, Yogananda equates spiritual ceremony with the inner process of spinal awakening, starting on the altar of the muladhara chakra (base chakra) and progressing to bring one’s consciousness up the sushumna (central energy channel) leading to spiritual realization¹⁹. In the writings of Sannyasi Gyanshruti and Sannyasi Srividyananada as reported in their book Yajna, A Comprehensive Survey²⁰, we see the same teaching, of the external yajna (fire ceremony) ‘inducing’ an internal yajna, which ignites internal fire of the kundalini and opening the Sahasrara (crown) chakra leading to internal purification, bliss and spiritual liberation,

Another teaching is that the entire ceremony becomes internal and what remains external are the daily behaviors of the advanced pujari. In his book Prema Yoga, Sadguru Sant Keshavadas taught “*When the external worship leads toward higher knowledge ... the esoteric worship becomes incessant and continuous.*

This manasika puja is indeed the highest. The external worship properly done leads towards this mental worship."²¹.

In the Uddhava Gita scripture, chapter 22 on 'methods of worship' the discourse between Sri Krishna and his advanced disciple begins with Uddhava asking for instruction in the proper way to worship. The chapter describes several options for worship, suited to different students' levels of progress. This chapter describes how the advanced devotees' practices move from the external physical forms of ceremony to the internal manasika or mental form of attunement to, and worship of, the Divine. Although in the four translations of the Uddhava Gita that I have read, I'll note that some commentaries on this chapter seem to miss the point of the external physical ceremony practice being eventually superseded by the advanced internal experience of ceremony, as explained by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Paramahansa Yogananda and other authorities quoted in this article.

In closing: the Highest Role of the Pujari

"The Purusha has spread Himself among the Universe – according to the Purusha Sukta – so each part of this Universe is actually a part of that Purusha, who is called Paramatman. By performing this type of Yajna one can attain the state of Moksha by merging his so called separate 'Jiva bhava' into all pervading Purusha, and one can become Purusha himself. This is a kind of Upasana (worship) by which one can elevate oneself and become God." Rajani Patki, from the book *The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature*.²²

"Puja is the great sadhana. Contained within puja are meditation, prayer, worship, healing and communion with God... Eventually, after continuous practice of puja, the outward worship we offer becomes an inner reality, our body the shrine, our heart the throne of God." Sadguru Sant Keshavadas²³

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End Notes

¹ Pujari refers to that person who has been trained to perform Vedic ceremonies including puja ceremonies, yajna fire ceremonies .

² Sadguru Sant Keshavadas , as quoted by Ravidas and Karuna, Guru Kripa(The Grace of the Guru), published by Vishwa Shanti Ashrama, Bangalore, 1984 1st edition, page 86

³ "Performed silently or vocally, Sankalpa is the act of clearly stating our reason and intended outcome for performing the ceremony. Sankalpa means resolve... To be effective, sankalpa must be based upon the inner focused expression of our sincere intention." From the article "The Energies of Vedic Ceremony, Beyond the Basics" by Bill Francis Barry

⁴ "Pujas and yajnas work according to, and by the use of, spiritual laws ... Pujas and Yajnas act as spiritual attractors, with the strength of our devotion... acting as a super-charger. So through the power of the sound and the power of our devotion, that profound inner experience can be achieved." Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) quoted from his Pancha Devata: Puja to Five Deities DVD. www.sanskritmantra.com

⁵ "The Purusha Sukta is one of the most commonly used Vedic hymns even now, in almost all rituals, or religious ceremonies" wrote Swami Harshananda of the Ramakrishna lineage. Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) taught "The Purusha Suktam, Hymn to the Transcendental Oversoul, is widely used in most Vedic ceremonies". Sadguru Sant Keshavadas taught: "The essence of the Vedas is in the Purusha-Sukta". Sage Veda Vyasa taught that "This Purusha Sukta is more important than all other suktas of all the vedas" according to author Rajani Patki, in the book The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature.

⁶ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, from Immortal Teachings of Satguru Sant Keshavadas, compiled by Elisabeth Veena Seabrook Page 7 1994 Vishwa Dharma Publications, Temple of Cosmic Religion. www.templeofcosmicreligion.org

⁷ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, from Immortal Teachings of Satguru Sant Keshavadas, compiled by Elisabeth Veena Seabrook Page 20 1994 Vishwa Dharma Publications, Temple of Cosmic Religion. www.templeofcosmicreligion.org

⁸ Within our pranamaya kosha (pranic body) blockages in the many nadi (energy channels) exist due to past actions. As explained in classic yoga texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika or the Shiva Samhita, certain yoga practices (including mantra, puja, pranayama breathing exercises, etc.) work to purify these energy channels resulting in increased circulation of prana energy which enables greater vitality and expanded spiritual attunements.

⁹ The Vedic teaching of the three Gunas states that everything in our universe is made up of a mix of *Three Qualities of Nature: Sattva = purity, light, harmony, intelligence, truth; Rajas = constant activity, passion; and Tamas = evil, untruth, inertia, ignorance.*

¹⁰ As stated by Namadeva Acharya “*Most of us involved in some aspect of the world-wide community of yoga are in some stage of purification. We are making our subtle bodies more and more sattvic. It is personal alchemy as we transmute the lead of our karma into the gold of a completely sattvic vehicle.*” Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) page 54, Teacher of Mantra Instruction Manual, 1st edition, published by Saraswati Publications LLC in 2007. www.sanskritmantra.com

¹¹ Sanjuka Gupta, Laksmi Tantra, A Pancaratra Text, published by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2003. See page 203 footnote 2 and page 210 footnote 5

¹² Ravidas and Karuna, Guru Kripa(The Grace of the Guru), published by Vishwa Shanti Ashrama, Bangalore, 1984 1st edition, page 86

¹³ As stated by Namadeva Acharya “*Aham Karishe, interesting. I am the vessel. So there are forces and celestials and the gods and goddesses but they manifest through our own heart center, through our own sacred heart, the Atman. So, in a sense, we are always the vessel even of our beloved, for their manifestation. ... Even though we are the vessel, personally it certainly doesn't interfere with my devotion. I am devoted to Ganesh, Panduranga, Lakshmi, and all the planetary spirits, and Dattatreya and all the rest. And, I never think of Aham Karishe even though it may exist. I think of them, and the Grace that they are bringing to you and me and all of us.*” Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Ceremony, Volume III: Puja and Yagna, edition 2.1, published by Saraswati Publications LLC, 2010. from the audio recording for the Satyanarayana Puja, CD #17, starting about 20:15 into track 1) www.sanskritmantra.com

¹⁴ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas taught: “These and more mystical experience may come to the seeker to show that he is moving in the right path. These experiences come to the seeker to instruct him to go further and to transcend all these experiences ... In some cases there may not be any of these experiences. Still it should not be mistaken that he has not progressed. If you have developed a firm faith in God, your memory power has increased, you can interpret the scriptures, you heart is filled with peace or joy, you have extraordinary energy, love is surging forth in you to embrace the whole universe, you feel for others, and you want to extend your helping hand to others; all these positive and practical powers are also to be considered as progress in this pilgrimage towards the Self. ... By Self-realization, the soul transcends the pairs of opposites and attains freedom from the bondage of karma forever. The Self is not realized by the senses, mind, or the intellect, but the Self is revealed by the light of the Self... This Self is the indwelling spirit in all beings...” from the book Self Realization (Paramatma Sakshatkara) by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas. Published by Temple of Cosmic Religion, Southfield Michigan, 1976, Pages 53-55

¹⁵ Namadeva Acharya (Thomas Ashley-Farrand) The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Ceremony, Volume I, page 26 www.sanskritmantra.com

¹⁶ “*Sudarshana means ‘auspicious vision’. The Sudarshana Chakra, the disc of Vishnu, is the power of the enlightened mind which defeats all ignorance, all evil. Practices which develop the Sudarshana Chakra enable, and are built upon, progressive sattvic purification in all aspects of life. The Sudarshana Chakra is a spiritual weapon in support of dharma. The Sudarshana Chakra,*” Bill Francis Barry

¹⁷ This experience was described to me by several attendees, after two of these Gayatri fire ceremonies.

¹⁸ “Yagyas enliven the impulses of nature (the devas) on the level of consciousness which is omnipresent – this is a field of energy and intelligence which is infinite, unlimited, the source of all quantum mechanical forces (electromagnetism, gravity, and nuclear forces). The human nervous system is the resonator – the tuning fork – which vibrates the mantras into the infinite unified field of energy. Lighting a fire, ringing a bell, sprinkling of water, and chanting purificatory mantras in the beginning of a yagya enlivens the subtlest quantum levels of energy (tanmantras) – light, vibration (sound), etc. It thins or enlivens the fabric of space-time to create an interdimensional doorway to different realms of creation. This enables the devata (or angelic being) to appear and be present at the yagya. This is actually the experience of advanced meditators – that a circular window or doorway appears and the form of the devata appears.” Henry G. Herzberger, in his book Yagya: Book 1 Universal Principles of Ritual, self-published in 1993, page 5,

¹⁹ From Paramahansa Yogananda’s commentary on the Bhagavad Gita verse 4:32 . Yogananda equates this verses reference to spiritual ceremony with inner rite of spinal awakening, starting on the altar of the muladhara chakra leading the yogi’s consciousness up the spine to the Sahasrara
“By perceiving this center (the muladhara chakra) and communing with the divine Creative Consciousness of God enthroned therein, the yogi realizes that all actions of the body, mind, and speech involved in connection with any form of soul-and-Spirit-uniting ‘fire ceremonies’ can be particularly initiated through this center. He realizes that all spiritual fire ceremonies are born of spiritual activities. ...The true devotee knows that spiritual activity alone can bestow salvation. Therefore he performs spiritual actions; he receives the resultant inner perception; he becomes liberated.” From Paramahansa Yogananda’s “God Talks With Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita. Royal Science of God-Realization”, volume 1, published by Self Realization Fellowship, LA California, 1995, pages 513-514

²⁰ Inducing Internal Yajna: “The greatness of external yajna lies in the fact that it induces internal yajna. The effect depends on the strength, potential and quantum energy in the source. So the extent of the ignition in internal yajna depends on the power and purity of the external yajna... To achieve internal yajna, the yajamana (host) uses his spinal cord to ignite the symbolic fire. In external yajna, fire is ignited at the bottom of the arani [fire pit]. In internal yajna the spinal cord acts as the rod of the arani, the fire is ignited at its root, i.e. in the mooladhara plexus. Therefore, this chakra can be equated with the fire-pit of the physical yajna. This fireplace is called a ‘kunda’. ... The yajamana (host)... arouses the Kundalini. The chit agni kunda sambhuta power reaches sahasrara, opens the pot of nectar, and on its way back showers nectar on the host, purifying his body and enlightening his soul. He experiences the bliss of anandamaya kosha, the abode of supreme consciousness. In fact, at this point in time, he achieves moksha, salvation.” from Yajna, A Comprehensive Survey by Sannyasi Gyanshruti and Sannyasi Srividyananada, published by Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar India, 2006, pages 82-83

²¹ “Archanam (puja) is worship. It has two methods: internal and external. The external puja or worship should always have the internal devotion. Otherwise it cannot please God. Similarly, the internal love and worship, even though of a higher level compared with the external ritual, should still manifest in the acts of worship. There are sixteen forms in the external worship known as Shodashopachara puja. In all these forms, the supramental truth is invoked in the image or the symbol and then the worship is conducted. When the external worship leads toward higher knowledge then the devotee feels that all the means of worship are inadequate... thus the esoteric worship becomes incessant and continuous. This manasika puja is indeed the highest. The external worship properly done leads towards this mental worship. from the book Prema Yoga, by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Prema Yoga, published by Vishwa Shanti Ashrama, Bangalore India, 1st edition, 1982, page 32

²² Rajani S. Patki, from the book The Concept of Upasana: Worship in Sanskrit Literature, published by Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi India, 1st edition, 1996, page 14

²³ Ravidas and Karuna, Guru Kripa(The Grace of the Guru), published by Vishwa Shanti Ashrama, Bangalore, 1984 1st edition, page 86