

The Culture of Ritual and the Quest for Enlightenment

By David Frawley (Vamadeva Shastri)

Since prehistoric times, ritual has been perhaps the most important human activity. Throughout the world there has existed an ancient and ongoing tradition of sacred action performed with the aim of improving not only our condition in the universe, but the condition of the universe itself.

Indeed, the further back we look, the more we examine traditional and indigenous cultures, the more we find that human life has been primarily a ritual or set of sacred actions. Whether we consider the aborigines of Australia, the Native Americans, the ancient Hindus and Egyptians, or our own European ancestors, we find a world-wide preoccupation with ritual action that cuts across all races, religions, and cultures. We could even say that human culture is primarily a culture of ritual.

Yet ritual has been rejected by the modern mind as irrational, superstitious, or primitive. The church had already stifled and sterilized ritual, and the Western enlightenments--a materialistic, not spiritual, enlightenment--has largely stripped our lives of ritual. The idea that our actions could affect the mental or spiritual realm, or be linked with cosmic powers like the stars and planets, appeared contrary to the mechanistic scientific view that all things are matter, and that what is not evident through the senses must not exist.

However, twentieth century science has revealed a universe consisting of interrelated energy fields and transcending ordinary time/space limitations. This is a world view that runs counter to ordinary sensory ideas of physical reality, but is not so different from the ritualistic view of a universe as an organic intelligence in which human beings play an integral part and purpose.

There is a revival of interest in ritual today that is part of our culture's reexamination of mythology. In the academic world, ritual is now viewed as an art form or a means of social bonding, not merely a curious superstition. But such an intellectual view of ritual does not consider its spiritual meaning. Academics find ritual interesting, like an antique or relic, but do not see a need to incorporate ritual in our daily lives. Nor does this viewpoint regard ritual as necessary for either personal or collective well-being.

Is ritual just some exotic or superstitious form of action, requiring strange paraphernalia like fires or feathers, or is it any action done with conscious purpose, attention, and power?

Any action that is repeatedly energized with thought and intention gains power, thereby becoming a ritual of sorts. In fact, all our actions have a ritualistic orientation, because action tends toward repetition and reinforcement, thereby projecting a particular energy to link us with certain forces in the world in which we live. In this regard, even basic vital functions like eating and breathing are rituals, that is, rhythmic actions drawing into us various cosmic energies.

Yet it is our most meaningful actions that approach ritual. Artists and scientists project energy and intent in action, performing with a certain regularity and purposefulness which renders their actions into a kind of ritual. Indeed, the creative individual experiences his or her work in a meaningful way that can be called ritualistic. The highest ritual is meditation, wherein everything we do becomes imbued with attention and awareness.

RITUAL AND KARMA

The Sanskrit word karma, which usually refers to the effects of our actions through various lives, originally meant "ritual." Action or karma is always a ritual; that is, whatever action we do sets in motion certain forces, not only of a personal but of a collective and cosmic nature.

All action, we could say, is like jumping into a stream. We can choose the stream to jump into, but once in the stream we come under the stream's forces, which are no longer a matter of choice. Whatever we do places us in a stream of action which has a momentum that will carry us in a particular direction. Conscious actions reinforce the energy of consciousness, which causes us to grow in awareness. Unconscious actions reinforce habit, inertia, and the energy of ignorance, which places us under the domination of the external world.

Once we recognize that action is karma, we will approach our actions with an awareness that makes them sacred. We will then give even simple and everyday actions an attention so that we do not let ourselves drift in the stream of unconscious action into greater darkness and sorrow.

However, most of us seldom recognize the karmic or ritualistic nature of our actions. This is because effects of our action manifest only through time. Some of our actions do not bear fruit at all in the present incarnation. Unless we look at the really long-term consequences of what we do, it is difficult to take control of our actions. For example, if we could put our hands in a fire and not get burned until some months or years later, we might carelessly throw our whole body into a fire. Yet this is the type of delay that often exists between destructive mental actions and their outer consequences.

RITUAL AND REINTEGRATION

We have eliminated from our lives the rituals that sustain traditional cultures. This process began with the triumph of Christianity, which reduced the abundance of pagan rituals that permeated all of life to but a few rituals, like Mass on Sunday. Protestant Christianity in turn rejected most Catholic rituals, tending to view all ritual as idolatrous. Science in its crude realism removed us still further from ritual, questioning the very existence of God.

Stripped of meaningful rituals, our lives have become meaningless, and our action lacks any real purpose other than personal enjoyment. Our action is denied any cosmic significance, becoming merely a personal affair in which we project personal achievement and gratification as the true meaning of our lives.

However much we may achieve personally, our action will remain limited and will bring inevitable sorrow. In our emphasis on the separate self, our actions fail to connect us with the cosmos and the deeper reality beyond our conditioned life.

To fill the void created by a lack of true ritual, or sacred action, we have created, perhaps unconsciously, an entire set of false rituals. These are rituals of entertainment, sports, politics, and even crime. We have not eliminated ritual from life, but have only succeeded in removing any dimension of transcendence from our actions.

Our rituals have become mundane and sensate, with no spiritual goal; they have become a repetition of sensation, and at worst, of negative emotions. We have invested the heroes of sports events and violent movies with a kind of sacred reality and given them prestige, honor, and adoration. It is as if they were not mere mortals, but gods and goddesses, glamour images of a higher reality.

Even much of our religion, in which ritual survives at a reduced level, is dominated by false rituals promoting conflict and division between people, rather than uniting us with the universe. Church services are largely mechanical, a kind of social duty, or, if lively, a kind of drama and entertainment. The main messages of religion have become negative: sin, guilt, the devil, hell, Armageddon, and the need to convert "unbelievers. Such religion is rarely part of a living and creative opening to the great powers of the cosmic mind.

Much of our modern malaise, characterized by crime, drugs, and promiscuity, appears to stem from a lack of meaningful ritual. True ritual does not consist in reinforcing conditioned patterns of separate identity (us vs them). Actions which do this are false rituals, which project a kind of hypnosis that blinds us to the unity of life.

True ritual acts in harmony with the rhythms of the universe, uniting us with the great current of time and transformation leading to the eternal. True ritual gives a universal meaning to all that we do and to all with whom we come in contact, including all of nature. It requires being cognizant of the divine presence in the world and the cosmic power and interplay of all the forces in our lives.

Ritual, moreover, is not illogical or unscientific. Ritual is perhaps the ultimate science of action, with its own logic, structure, and order. It is often a detailed and precise activity, in which even minor deviations can distort the ritual, even turning it into a negative action.

We have lost our sense of the philosophy behind the science of ritual. Ritual teaches us that what we do on a personal or microcosmic level corresponds to what occurs on a universal or macrocosmic level. It shows the way to achieve harmony in life by connecting our personal actions with their cosmic equivalents, uniting the human and the cosmic in the awareness of the cosmic being. Until we rediscover this inner truth of ritual, our lives are likely to remain confused and superficial.

RITUAL AND SPIRITUALITY

In the spiritual realm, we also find that ritual has often been devalued. Many forms of mind-oriented or psychological spirituality --like the direct awareness paths of Vedanta and Buddhism--appear to reject ritual. It is frequently stated that no action can lead us to enlightenment, that only knowledge--not any rite--can dispel the darkness. Yet the rationale for this spiritual rejection of ritual is quite different from that of the materialistic mind.

Direct awareness paths ultimately regard ritual as a lower level of spiritual practice, appropriate to outer or lesser goals of life like health or mental harmony, but not sufficient for Self-realization. This is because ritual is bound by time and relies on material substances, which keeps us in the relative realm. These spiritual systems regard ritual as maintaining harmony in the relative realm, and so reject ritual along with the realm of relativity.

Those trained in logical materialism may be inclined to adopt the logic of mind-oriented spirituality, rejecting ritual without having ever practiced any, and not grant ritual even the efficacy which mind-oriented teachings recognize. Mind-oriented teachings may not regard ritual as the highest path, but this does not mean that they reject ritual as useless or that the followers of these paths never perform any rituals. Indeed, many yogis on direct awareness paths do perform rituals, not for enlightenment as such but for purification, protection, or the giving of blessings.

OUR PSYCHIC ENVIRONMENT

Ritual provides a meaningful way to deal with our subtle, or psychic, environment, which consists of the various mental and emotional forces which energize our lives. Though these forces are not visible, like the health or disease promoting bacteria found in the air we breathe, nevertheless they do have specific effects. Like the physical environment, so too our subtle or psychic environment requires attention. We clean our house, do the dishes, and clean our body daily, but how many of us give similar care to our psychic environment? We may be cautious and drive carefully in the visible world, but how many of us give the same care to our journeying in the subtle world? An unclean physical environment breeds diseases, and the same is true of an unclean psychic environment. If we don't air our house out, stagnation can breed diseases. A stagnant emotional or psychological field has the same effect on an inner level.

Most of what have been regarded as demons or ghosts in traditional cultures are simply negative energy patterns within our subtle environment or astral field. They are like the molds, bacteria, and viruses that attack us on a physical level. Just as cleaning our physical environment helps eliminate such toxins, so clearing our psychic environment does the same thing on its level. This is the basis of the work of various yogis, shamans, and psychic healers, and was also the original role of priests and magicians.

The great yogis and sages have always been aware of the subtle environment. To those of inner vision, these inner influences are as evident as the forces of the outer world, like sunshine or rain. To be unaware of the forces of the subtle environment can be as dangerous as to be blind to those in the physical world. Yet if we recognize these subtle forces and adjust to them--like putting on a raincoat to go out on a rainy day--we will find

that most of our difficulties in life are avoidable, and that a new dimension of spiritual growth will open to us.

MODALITIES OF PSYCHIC PERCEPTION

There are several ways to read our inner environment. Intuition is perhaps the best thing. True intuition is a form of perception, not mere imagination or emotion, nor is it the product of wishful thinking. Unfortunately, much of what we may think is a real perception of our psychic field may be imaginary, or may be a true intuition mixed with false imagination. To develop such a real intuition requires training in concentration, visualization, mantra, and meditation.

There are persons who possess degrees of psychic perception. Yet such psychics may not be truly helpful, even when their knowledge in some respects is correct. Many psychics possess a light which, like a flashlight, can illuminate some aspect of our lives. But a limited light can be misleading. Though a flashlight might reveal something, one cannot rely upon it for full illumination. One cannot use it, for example, to drive a car at night. Psychic perception must be integrated into a full spiritual vision, an openness to enlightenment or Self-realization as the goal of life.

There are various subtle or occult sciences which help develop and structure our intuition. Astrology, for example, most specifically shows the subtle forces in operation in our lives, as transmitted via the stars and planets. The astrological birth chart shows the subtle energies which govern our life as a whole. It is like a map of our subtle environment and its forces through the current incarnation. The astrological chart done for any particular day and place reveals the general or collective subtle environment.

Natural healing systems aligned with various yogic and spiritual practices--like the Ayurvedic medicine of India, or Tibetan medicine --contain an entire science of diagnosing and treating the subtle body. Subtle body disorders are mirrored in mental and emotional conditions, in dreams, and in nervous system and sensory derangements. Treatments for the subtle body include subtle sensory modalities like aromas, colors, and gems, the use of breath (pranayama), mantra, and meditation. Certain foods and herbs also have their benefit. Such treatments usually occur as part of various rituals.

Meditation, which helps us to observe and understand the workings of the mind, is central to any clear psychic insight. It removes the limitations of the ego which tend to distort our perception and cloud it with desire.

FORMS OF RITUAL

The best way to change our subtle environment is through various rituals, which produce a subtle energy that can clear or alter the psychic realm. We can learn to harness the latent subtle forces that exist within the physical world.

Most rituals involve invoking and offering various essences or precious items from the world of nature. In typical Hindu puja (ritual offering), these involve the essences of the five elements and their corresponding sensory qualities.

Earth--A fragrant oil (like sandalwood)

Water--Sweet food or pure water

Fire--The flame of a ghee lamp

Air--Incense

Ether--A flower

Of these five, incense is perhaps most important as well as easiest to use. Incense creates a subtle aroma which removes stagnant energy from our psychic environment.

Different types of incense have their respective properties and can be used for specific effects. For example, sandalwood is cooling and calming, and reduces fever, agitation, and anger. Jasmine is invigorating and purifying to the heart. Fragrant oils can similarly be used, either for anointing parts of the body (like the third eye) or for anointing the altar or sacred space that we use.

The use of light or fire is another universal way to affect the subtle realm of light around us. According to yogic science, it is best to use a nutritive oil as fuel for the lamp. This helps nourish the positive energies and entities of our subtle environment. Ghee (clarified butter) is considered to be the best oil for lamps, but other vegetable oils also may be used. Candles are helpful but do not have the same effect as the nutritive oil in a lamp.

Wood fires are still more powerful, but should be limited to special events. A special Vedic fire offering called Agnilotra, in which cow dung is burned at precise moments of sunrise and sunset, is considered the most powerful of Hindu rituals.

Many rituals involve the use of images, which may be the picture or statue of a guru, avatar, or deity. Such forms help redirect our mental energy, which in life is usually concentrated on a personal form (family or friends), toward the forces of the subtle realm and their benefic influences. Stone or metal statues are particularly strong for carrying psychic energy. Through them, various Devas or beings of the subtle world can be brought into our psychic environment. The images themselves are not worshipped, but used as conduits for higher forces. We could compare them to a picture of our spouse that we keep at the work place to maintain a mental harmony.

Ritual generally requires an altar or sacred room. Like any action, it requires the appropriate field for it to be done properly. A ritual is a way of maintaining a garden of helpful astral forces, and like any garden it must be tended on a regular basis. By creating a sacred space, ritual cleanses and spiritualizes the subtle environment.

The main way of empowering ritual is through the use of mantra or the repetition of sacred sounds. Mantra helps us to participate mentally in a ritual, which is necessary to giving the ritual real power. This is so because ritual is a way of inner action or knowledge, not merely a mechanical procedure. There are various mantras which relate to different

ritual actions. These may be single seed syllables like OM, words of praise to the deity words of offering, or other propitiatory measures. Through mantra alone, which is the internal ritual or ritual of the mind and does not require any external substance, we can turn all of our actions into ritual.

RITUAL AND DISEASE

Most physical and psychological disorders begin with a derangement of our psychic or emotional environment. For a disease to manifest on the physical plane, it must first take root on the psychic plane. There must be some stagnation in the aural field or some degree of psychic vulnerability. Hence, clearing our psychic environment on a daily basis is an important key to physical and mental health, as well as an aid to spiritual practice.

Each part of our environment has its special requirements. The kitchen, as the place where food is prepared and eaten, must be rendered sacred. This is done primarily by preparing our food with an attitude of love and respect. The bedroom, where we sleep and leave our bodies daily to return to our souls, also requires beauty or sanctification. The rooms of children, whose partially developed minds and bodies are more vulnerable to negative psychic influences, must also be protected. Our workplace, where we connect to the external world with its destructive influences, also requires protection.

While it is best to create an altar or meditation room, we must consider needs of the various spheres in which we live and perform appropriate rituals. This does not mean that we must spend our entire day doing rituals. It is no more necessary to do so than it is to brush our teeth or sweep the floor all day long. But a certain period of ritual action, about one hour a day, can be helpful.

Most societies have developed special classes of ritualists, such as priests, yogis, shamans, or magicians. Even artists and doctors have been given such roles in some cultures. Such knowers of ritual are important for primary sacraments or special events such as birth, death, marriage, or moving into a new house. Society needs such a class of individuals and should give them proper compensation for their invaluable service.

That such classes have at times degenerated and promoted exploitation is no reason to reject them altogether. All fields of human life can be abused by the human ego, but this does not deny the value of the action itself. Even in the modern world we invest our doctors, psychologists, and lawyers with a special religious aura, and regard their actions with ritualistic awe. This only indicates an ongoing social need for ritual and for those who are trained in its proper performance.

From the yogic standpoint, what is important is to learn to master the subtle forces. It is of little use to analyze them. Modern psychology often emphasizes analysis of the psyche, especially relative to personal patterns of a particular incarnation. Yoga emphasizes changing this energetic pattern by learning how to use the subtle forces. Yogic practice is a process in which ritual, posture, breath, mantra, and meditation are used to enable us to recreate our own reality.

RITUAL AND SOCIETY

Ritual is of special importance for the collective life, for the benefit of society as a whole. Collective rituals help clear the collective mental field of its negative karma, and help create peace and harmony in society, preventing war and other social disorders.

One of the most simple of all rituals is a collective prayer for peace. Such prayers should always be directed toward peace for all beings, for all creation, and should not be prayers on behalf of particular countries, religions, or groups. The divisive interest created by "particularist" prayer actually breeds further conflict.

One of the great problems in the modern world is that we no longer have spiritually meaningful collective rituals. Our collective rituals have become negative rituals of drama and sensation, sex and violence, or political action aimed at defeating an enemy. Our mass media generally projects a negative psychic field because it is the product of inorganic forces and of commercial and political motivations. TV, radio, and other media devices also emit vibrations that tend to lower the energy of our psychic field. Unless we counter these influences with positive rituals, the state of the world cannot improve.

Rituals are of special importance for young people, who need not only social bonding but bonding with the world of nature and spiritual reality in order to discover who they really are. Otherwise, young people feel alienated and out of harmony with life. Lack of meaningful ritual is surely a factor in the high rate of crime, depression, and suicide among the young.

RITUAL AND MEDITATION

Some great spiritual thinkers, notably J. Krishnamurti, have appeared to object to the use of any ritual. Such critics say that ritual binds us to the realm of action and that ritual, being an outer action, is useless for the pursuit of enlightenment or Self-realization. Though such objections may reflect a lofty state of awareness, they do not address the real purpose of ritual. Ritual binds us to the realm of action only if it is done out of personal desire. If it is done with the same intention that we keep the rest of our lives in order, then it has its importance for all of us, even those who may be enlightened.

In the true sense, ritual means right action, and any action done rightly, with wisdom and compassion, is a ritual. We cannot avoid action as long as we live. For action not to bind us, it must be a ritual not in the personal sense but as a means of connecting with cosmic being and its movement.

In this regard, meditation itself is the highest form of ritual or right action. Few of us can go into a state of spontaneous meditation whenever we choose to, but we can carry out rituals that help prepare the mental field or create the sacred space in which meditation can occur. As long as we are doing such actions in a preparatory manner, they cannot harm us. From outer rituals, like fire offerings, we move to inner rituals, like mantra, to arrive finally at the inmost ritual, which is meditation. This is the true way of action for human beings.

Ultimately all of our action is a ritual, and each action sets in motion certain forces which further either enlightenment or ignorance. There is no neutral action. To become conscious of our actions and to connect them with the benefit forces of the universe is the essence of all ritual.

To restore the science of ritual is thus a spiritual and psychological endeavor of the highest order. It is one of the challenges of the coming millennia. Ritual creates the structure that sustains our personal and collective lives.

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