

CHAPTER 15

SAMSKARAS: SACRAMENTS

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Samskara is the process of refining and making perfect. Hindu tradition prescribes a number of sacraments, known as *samskaras*, which aim to purify an individual's inner being during the journey through life.

Without knowledge of how we as individuals relate to the world around us and to the Divine Being that is the Source of all life, we have difficulty coping with the ups and downs of life. Unlike other forms of life, human beings have the capacity to make choices that can alter the course of their lives. Other forms of life, such as animals, are hard-wired to live by instinct. While their actions exhaust the burden of *karma* with which they are born, they are unable to accelerate the pace of their spiritual evolution. Human beings have the privilege of being able to engage in spiritual practice to purify their minds and connect with the Divinity residing within all beings. However, only a minority of human beings devotes time or attention to serious spiritual practice and that is often in their twilight years when both physical and mental capacity has declined. To offset this deficiency, Hindu scriptures, *Dharma Shastras*, define *samskaras* that require all Hindus to be involved at least to some degree in spiritual practice as a part of their daily lives.

Tradition defines as many as forty *samskaras* that span the entire gamut of milestones in a person's life, from the womb to the funeral pyre. Sixteen of these are said to be more important. This note briefly describes only the most prominent *samskaras* and merely alludes to the others.

The sacred fire, *Agni*, plays a central role in Hindu *samskaras*. The very first set of *mantras* of the *Rig Veda* is the *Agni Sukta*, the hymn in praise of *Agni*. The word *Agni* itself means 'the one who leads us forward.' The hymn praises *Agni* as the One who illuminates our paths and guides us to our true welfare; and appeals to *Agni* to be as a father unto all of us, saving us from harm. The transformative power of fire is well known to all. In the Vedic tradition, prayerful offerings are made into the sacred fire, known as *homa* or *havan*. The subtle essence of these offerings is delivered by *Agni* to the particular Divinity that is the intended recipient. Hence, all Vedic rites require the invoking of the sacred fire, *Agni*, who is like a witness to the prayers and vows uttered in His presence.

Childhood: There are several *samskaras* that are performed during infancy and childhood to pray for the health and well-being of the child and the mother, starting from the time of conception. They include landmarks such as birth, naming the child, first solid food, first outing, first haircut and piercing of the ears. An important *samskara* in this group is the *upanayana* when the child undergoes a religious initiation by the *guru* and embarks on formal education and regular religious practice. The *upanayana* applies only to Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya boys who embark on this journey although the gender restriction is being contested by reformers as being contrary to the older scriptures.

Marriage is the most prominent of the Hindu Samskaras and has great practical as well as religious significance. Marriage marks the beginning of the second stage of life: that of a

householder, and central to the functioning of society. According to the scriptures, a man cannot fulfil his role in protecting dharma without having a spouse.⁶⁹ The Vedic mantras used in the marriage ceremony make it clear that the primary purpose of getting married is to have children and continue the family line. For parents, finding a suitable husband for their daughter is a most serious parental obligation and giving their daughter's hand in marriage is the best gift possible. Traditionally, the proposal for marriage is usually initiated by the girl's parents who approach the parents of the prospective groom. Marriage requires the consent of both families, including the bride and groom.

The core rituals of the marriage ceremony use mantras from the Vedas, with numerous additions that vary greatly by region and family traditions. Only the main steps of the ceremony are outlined here. The marriage takes place at a specially constructed *mantap*⁷⁰ at a venue hosted by the bride's parents. When the bridegroom arrives at the *mantap*, the bride and groom exchange garlands to signify their free intention to marry. The groom is formally welcomed by feeding him a sweet while praying for sweetness in all of nature; and gifts are exchanged. The bride's father places the bride's hand in the hand of the groom, recalling the divine marriage of Lord Vishnu and the Goddess Lakshmi. Bride and groom accept each other, saying "our hearts shall be one and at peace like water" and their scarves are joined by a knot for the rest of the marriage ceremony.

The main part of the ceremony now begins by invoking the sacred fire, *Agni*. To the accompaniment of Vedic mantras, bride and groom make several offerings of puffed rice into the fire, praying for blessings of prosperity and long life and affirming their commitment to support each other. The bride places her foot on a rock, symbolizing her commitment to be firm in her devotion to Dharma. The groom leads the bride for seven steps, praying for progeny, energy, wealth, happiness, health and friendship. Completing these seven steps is seen as the culmination of the marriage. Bride and groom then look at the sun or the pole star as a symbol of being steadfast. Holding their hands over each other's hearts, each of them vows: I place your heart in mine; may our hearts and minds be in harmony. The ceremony closes with the married couple being blessed by all those gathered to witness the marriage.

Cremation: the final *samskara* is performed at death. For almost all Hindus, this means the body is cremated, either on a funeral pyre using wood or in an electric crematorium. Cremation purifies the body and returns it to the five physical elements of which it is composed: earth, water, fire, air and space. When a person is dying, his or her lips are moistened with sacred water from the river Ganga and the name of God is chanted softly. After death, the body is washed and prepared for cremation in daylight as soon as practicable after death. Embalming of the body is not recommended. Family members and friends accompany the body to the crematorium where a priest conducts the rites for this final sacrament. Mourners generally wear white clothes. The pyre is lit by a family member, generally the eldest son. After cremation, the ashes are collected and immersed in a river or ocean. For several days following the death, the family conducts readings of the scriptures at home and specific rituals to help the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Details of the rituals vary widely among different groups of Hindus. Thereafter, on each anniversary of a father's or mother's death, the eldest son performs a ritual in honor of three generations of forefathers as long as he lives.

⁶⁹ *Manu Smriti* 9.42.

⁷⁰ A dome decorated with flowers.