

## [Honoring Ancestors](#)

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### TRADITION

## Honoring Ancestors

The ancient Hindu practice of ancestor worship invokes the benevolent presence of souls passed on, seeks protection for those now departing and prays that embodied souls might be blessed with peace on Earth

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Beginning on January 1, 2005, we at the Wise Earth Monastery in Candler, North Carolina, performed a 13-day food offering ceremony for the souls who lost their lives during the earthquake-generated tsunami that razed the coastal villages of Southeast Asia and killed more than 300,000 people on December 26, 2004. On January 13, we conducted a culminating rite of worship during which offerings were made to the deceased relatives of the departed as well as to Soma, the moon Goddess, and Agni, the fire God.

Generally, this sequence of rituals, called shraddha tarpana, is performed by the grihasta community (families) during the 13 days immediately following the death of a loved one. I performed it as a symbolic gesture of respect for all of the thousands who died in the tsunami.

According to the Vedas, cremation is the most appropriate way to dissolve the physical body after death. This purification through fire allows the soul to be easily released from the physical plane. Although the soul is eternal and self-sufficient, its subtle imprint, sometimes called individual jiva, needs to ascend after death. To aid in this ascension, a transitory form called the linga-sarira must be created so that the jiva can successfully make its journey into the higher ethers. According to the Sama Veda, it takes a full year for the departed jiva to reach Pitri Loka, the abode of the ancestors.

During our shraddha tarpana, hundreds of crows and black birds gathered on the ceremonial grounds for the occasion. This was an auspicious sign that the ritual offerings had been successfully received by the journeying souls.

An Inspiring Testimony: A fine young man named Rajan is a disciple of mine who lives in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. By the grace of God, he was not at home when the tsunami flood waters ravaged his home, but his aunt and uncle perished in the catastrophe. Like so many who suffered the loss of their loved ones, and millions more who remained stunned by the grief of it all, Rajan and his wife, Anu, felt helpless and lost.

Along with thousands of my disciples worldwide, Rajan and Anu tuned into our twelve days of food offering in North Carolina. On January 13, they gathered all of their family members and friends together to perform their own shraddha at the same time we were doing ours.

Rajan later confided to me that during those 13 days both he and his wife had a number of mystical experiences. In one vivid dream he saw his departed aunt dressed in a bright pink sari, carrying a bouquet of multicolored flowers. She was walking in familiar fields outside her home and smiling as she approached Rajan. The air was crisp and clear, and the scent of jasmine was everywhere. It was a good dream.

The following morning Rajan was informed by authorities that the bodies of his aunt and uncle had just been discovered in the very fields Rajan had seen in his dream.

Later, Rajan and Anu both experienced visions of children dressed in white who joined in the chanting of mantras during the food offering.

Stories like this provide testimony to the fact that, even in the most traumatic of circumstances, we are never alone or helpless. The healing energies of the universe, when carefully invoked, are always there to support us. Just the thought of such an unshakable truth can inspire us to rever that one life force that supports both the physical and the spiritual worlds.

The Importance of Service: Striving to understand and apply a perception of loving service is important in establishing a connection with the ancestors, for the vast powers of nature respond well to selflessness.

There are many ways to serve. Giving time and money are just two. The greatest service is not physical but spiritual. Spiritual service begins within our thoughts and feelings. We can make any act of service more spiritual by the way that we hold ourselves inwardly as we perform that action. To serve with a reverence for the oneness that we all share is an example of this spiritual service.

Service also aids in restoring the memory of our ancestors and allowing us to heal the long-ignored rift we have created with the spirit world through neglect. Honoring ancestors through service not only brings an immediate sense of comfort to bereaved families, it also helps to resolve the shock carried in the subtle body of those individuals who have perished. Such service also earns a palpable grace from our ancestors that can fortify our lives with stability.

I believe that the state of chaos and restlessness that we are currently experiencing in both the inner and outer worlds has its roots in our faltering relationship with the ancestors. These beings maintain a vital connection with the living, and because of this can help us in practical ways--if we invoke them properly. Our invocation gives them permission to provide us with guidance, inspiration and protection. The Taittiriya Upanishad (Verse 1.11.2) advises, "Let there be no neglect of the duties to the Gods and ancestors. Be one to whom mother is God. Be one to whom father is God."

A Special Time for the Ancestors: According to Vedic tradition, important rites for the ancestors should be performed each year. These should occur on the anniversary of the day of death, as well as during the period of pitri paksha--the dark fortnight following the last autumnal full moon of the year. Pitri paksha is considered the most auspicious time to offer nourishment and oblations to the ancestors.

The Vedic sages recognized that each of us exists as an interdependent being linked to the universe through our ancestry. They predicted that the collective grief of the modern world would be caused by the loss of our ancestral memory--and that

this would cause the breakdown of dharma, the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature or destiny that guides and safeguards our living values as they relate to self, family, community and nature. They understood that honoring ancestors keeps us living in harmony not only with our forebearers but also with the whole of humanity.

Offerings made during pitri paksha are said to reach the ancestors directly due to a special boon granted to humanity by Lord Yama, the cosmic purveyor of death. The origin of pitri paksha may be traced back to the story of Karna, the renowned hero of the Mahabharata who, when he ascended to the celestial world after his death, was rewarded with gold and silver for his many charitable deeds performed on earth, but was not offered food. Much to his embarrassment, he was made to understand that, while on Earth, he had not performed any offerings of food to the ancestors, nor had he shown any such generosity in offering food to anyone. Dismayed by this revelation, he prayed to Lord Yama that he might return to Earth to recompense for this neglect.

Lord Yama did indeed allow him to return to Earth, but only for fourteen days. During that short time, which has come to be known as mahalaya paksha, Karna nourished the brahmins and the poor with a great abundance of food. As a result of this penance, Lord Yama granted certain boons to all of humanity. By Yama's decree, all souls who encountered a premature or unnatural death, like those taken by the recent tsunami in Southeast Asia, would benefit from all pitri paksha rites performed anywhere in the world at any time.

Performing the Ancestral Ceremony: The Shraddha Tarpana, when dedicated to a departed family member, is traditionally performed on sacred ground by a river by the eldest male of the family. Guided by a priest, this presiding family member makes ritual offerings to the departed, as well as to three generations of fathers that passed before. Twelve days are devoted to building the jiva's transitory body, piece by piece--first the torso, next the arms and legs and finally the head.

On the first day of the ceremony, cakes made from rice flour and cow's milk are placed on beds of kusha grass. Three of these rice cakes are used immediately. The first is offered to the sacred water, symbolizing Soma, the moon Goddess, whose gratification protects the ancestors. The second rice cake is eaten by the spouse of the man officiating at the ceremony with the prayer that she might give birth and thus continue the family lineage. The third rice ball is offered to Agni, the God of fire, whose grace is invoked for protection and the auspicious performance of the

ceremony. On each of the following eleven days, a rice cake is offered into the sacred water to slowly and methodically build that transitory body necessary for the jiva's celestial journey to the abode of the ancestors. On each day a new part of the body is formed until finally on the twelfth day, the head is created. On the thirteenth day, his newly manifested entity is worshiped as a God in an important culminating ritual. After all of the ceremonies have been completed, the remaining rice cakes are given to the cows and crows.

Each year, this same ritual practice is also observed by Hindus during pitri paksha to revive their memory of their ancestors and to seek their blessings.

Looking to the Future: With the passage of time, the cosmic unrest experienced during pitri paksha intensifies. Natural disasters are increasing steadily during this period. The terrible disaster of September 11, 2001, occurred during pitri paksha.

We must strive to calm these recurring cycles of upheaval. Each one of us can help in this endeavor by personally respecting our ancestors. This can be accomplished in a practical way by making small sacrifices with our ancestors in mind. We can offer food to the poor, devote an hour a week to community service, pray to alleviate suffering, offer a pound of rice to a homeless shelter, visit a nursing home, fast one day a month for world peace and make a conscious effort not to injure, pollute or otherwise compromise the Earth, her rivers, animals, plants and the environment. The highest personal contribution we can make is to embrace a spirit of reverence for nature and work toward healing the damage we humans have brought to the planet.

According to the Vedas, we are arriving at an age of darkness called the Kali Yuga and will witness a breakdown of dharma and morality. This is a time when our most profound goals should include embracing our ancestors and honoring the Earth.

Ancestor worship may be performed anytime, anywhere. Each experience of life provides an excellent opportunity to reconnect emotionally and spiritually to the memory and vibration of our forebearers, even if we do not have specific, historical details about their lives. We may begin to resonate with them in our dreams and feel their grace protecting us in ways not outwardly apparent.

May the challenging events of these trying times serve as a metaphor, not for the eruption of nature and the erosion of dharma, but for a building determination within us all to change our ways and restore the divine heritage of our ancestors to its rightful place at the center of our lives.

Sri Swamini Mayatitananda has been teaching Vedanta and Ayurveda for 25 years. She is the spiritual head of Wise Earth Monastery and School of Ayurveda centered in Candler, North Carolina, <http://www.wisearth.org> and has written three books entitled Ayurveda: A Life of Balance, Ayurveda: Secrets of Healing and The Path of Practice. She is also the founder of Mother Om Mission (MOM), a charitable organization in Guyana, South Africa. On March 12, 2002, in Rishikesh, India, she received swamini initiation in the Veda Vyasa tradition from His Holiness, Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Swamini's current projects include raising funds for 300,000 flood victims in her native Guyana, South America (go to [http://www.wisearth.org/info/guyana\\_flood.html](http://www.wisearth.org/info/guyana_flood.html) for more information) and developing the Honoring the Ancestors Conference 2005 for Kripalu, to be held in Massachusetts, September 25 to 27 (go to [http://www.wisearth.org/programs/pitri\\_paksh\\_2005.html](http://www.wisearth.org/programs/pitri_paksh_2005.html))