

## [Value of Samskaras](#)

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### COMMENTARY

## Value of Samskaras

Religious rituals are a dance of symbols, verbal and visual, mapping the way to liberation

SWAMI VEDA BHARATI

Excerpts from an interview conducted by Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik at the 2001 Maha Kumbha Mela in Allahabad.

The word samskara has a far-reaching connotation. In metaphysics we use the word to mean imprints that we carry in our subtle body from life to life. Samskara also pertains to the handling of karma, for karma is carried forward in these imprints. Samskara is a process of editing. In Sanskrit there is the meaning of refining, modulating, altering, changing. So, what we are referring to is the process of refining an individual. How do we refine and culture an individual? By putting the right kinds of imprints within his mind and upon his subtle body.

Now, if we look at the mantras that are recited in the performance of the samskaras, we will find that they provide the guidelines for what is to be done until the next station in the life process is attained.

Anthropologists talk of life cycles and annual cycles. Life cycles begin with things we do at certain intervals in our life, such as being born, going to school, getting married, having a child. These are events that initiate life cycles. Then there are annual cycles, designated by festivals. All of these are components of the culturing process for the individual and the community. If you look at the mantras that are recited in a samskara ceremony, those mantras clarify the training that should be imparted or retained in thought, word and deed. These guidelines proceed in a step-by-step progression.

Many times people ask me at what age the spiritual training of a child should begin. And they are surprised when I tell them it should begin three years before conception. How is that possible? It is because what the parents are doing with their minds invites a like-minded soul. It is because a child is born by the union of three souls, not the union of two. What kind of soul do you want to invite? For that you have to start printing invitations three years in advance. When a couple does intensive Gayatri Mantra recitation for three years before deciding to conceive a child, you might be surprised to learn that their child could never need to

go to school. The intensive three-year recitation has already educated the child. They are now inviting a pre-educated soul. It is that scientific.

The symbolism of the ritual practice is a language that teaches us about modes of behavior in physical, vocal and mental terms. It is a culturing process. It is not just a ceremony. For example, when we perform the sacred thread ceremony, that sets the theme for the next twelve years of life for the child. The child is going to be under the guru's care. Today, even if he is not going to live with the guru, it still sets the theme for the next twelve years of private life.

In addition to all of the secular schooling, there are certain other very important matters to be imparted to the child in the process of education. And this is where samskaras come in. A person is being cultivated--his mind is being cultivated--in a certain direction to receive certain imprints through the vocal language and through the language of symbols.

The symbol is much more powerful than vocal language. Here is an example: Quite often people come to me and say that they do not believe in rituals. I say, "fine." And a minute or two later I say, "That ring you are wearing, what ring is that?" They reply that it is a

wedding ring or an engagement ring. Then I say, "If you do not believe in rituals, then why are you wearing that ring? It is a symbol. In symbolic language, it means something. It immediately states your condition, your relationship. You need not keep reciting, 'I am married to you darling, I am married to you darling.'" And the symbol's statement is non-stop. In this way the power and potency of symbols is much deeper than the spoken word of a vow.

Rituals are a dance of symbols. I see a ritual as the sixth art form--a spiritual art form. And as you know, in India all art forms are spiritually based. As far as the mystical significance of samskaras is concerned--I would prefer not to use the word mystical, because it makes it some kind of a mystery that we cannot unravel--it maps our journey towards moksha, towards liberation, towards enlightenment. And we have to be aware that it is a process of constant self-reformation--dropping old forms, old conditioning, and creating new ones. Eventually we are an enlightened being. But until that time we constantly need to imprint upon our subtle body and our mind the higher images. Every moment we are reshaping ourselves.

At this very moment the total frame and structure of your mind is undergoing a change. It is like a constantly

changing chemical process in a test tube. You are always putting certain chemicals into the test tube. One microsecond you have one grain of a particular compound and the next micromoment you have another grain of chemical compound. Constant transformation is taking place. Every grain is a catalyst. It is always an addition to what was there before, changing the entire chemistry. So, ultimately you reach the point where you have only the highest components of mind, and all the culturing processes, like samskaras, move in that direction. When we die, we should be a little better than when we were born, so that our next birth will be a happier one, a more beautiful one.

You can know of God, but you cannot know God by reading texts, scriptures, books, writings and listening to sermons. They speak of God, but they do not show you God. The essential part of our aspiration for enlightenment, for samadhi, for liberation, for moksha is knowing God personally. Knowing God personally. When you have a little glimpse of what God really is, you find that everything you have heard is not quite right, that God is simply not quite like that. The actual experience is the only truth.

Swami Veda Bharati is a direct disciple of the late Swami Rama and is the current Spiritual Director and Preceptor of Sadhana Mandir in Rishikesh. He

has been teaching for 52 years and officially received Sannyas initiation in 1992.