Publisher's Desk: Making Your Home God's Home
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Making Your Home God's Home

Establish a formal shrine room as the family's place of communion with the Divine through worship and meditation

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A unique aspect of Hinduism is that everyone can be a priest and be in charge of one's own temple. That temple is your home shrine, which you can spiritualize or turn into a mini-temple through conducting daily puja. This process works best when the shrine is a separate room, strictly reserved for worship and meditation, unsullied by worldly talk and other activities. That is the ideal. When that is not possible, it should at least be a quiet corner of a room--more than a simple shelf or closet. Make the shrine a refuge for all family members, a place of peace and solace where they can connect with God and offer their praise, prayers and practical needs.

The late Sri Sri Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Maha Swamiji of Kanchipuram Kamakoti Pitham commented on the necessity of home puja: "Every family must perform puja to Ishvara. Those who find it convenient to do so may conduct elaborate types of puja after receiving proper initiation into them. Others need perform only a brief puja, not lasting more than ten minutes or so. Office goers must offer at least this brief worship. The sacred bell must ring in every home."

Here's a story to show how our efforts to perform puja in the home shrine can start simply and gradually become more elaborate. The Shekhar family always kept a shrine room in their home. Over the years the husband systematically learned more

and more about conducting puja. In the beginning he just chanted a simple mantra to Lord Ganesha while waving incense. Then he learned a few more chants and began passing the arati flame at the end of puja. Finally he learned the entire Ganesha Atmartha Puja, which he now does every morning before breakfast. He finds performing the full puja deeply satisfying and notes that it uplifts all members of the family as well. (The Ganesha Atmartha Puja is available with text and audio files at www.himalayanacademy.com/audio/chants/ganesha_puja/.)

About Personal Puja

Many people do not realize it, but personal worship is a fundamental element of what we call Hinduism's Code of Conduct, the yamas and niyamas, or restraints and observances. And this code, comprising steps one and two in ashtanga yoga, is often regarded as the foundation for meditation. Worship, one of the ten niyamas, is known as Ishvarapujana. It refers to puja that we conduct for ourselves rather than the rites done by a priest on our behalf. This worship, performed in the home shrine, can range from simply offering a flower to performing a full and formal puja. Puja conducted by a lay person, called Atmartha Puja, is regarded as a personal worship rite; whereas the public puja held by a priest in a temple is called Parartha Puja. After performing Atmartha Puja, it is customary to sit for a few minutes in meditation, internal worship, taking in to the soul level the refined feelings, the prana, that the puja has created and which still remains in the room. In this way, we receive maximum benefits from the puja.

My Gurudeva observed that some people are afraid to perform puja. Why? They often feel they lack sufficient training or don't understand the mystical principles behind it well enough. Many Hindus depend on the priests to perform the pujas and sacraments for them. However, Gurudeva points out, as did Maha Swamiji of Kanchipuram, that simple pujas may be performed by anyone wishing to invoke grace from God, Gods and devas. Love of the Deity is more important than ritualistic perfection. Those wishing to perform advanced Atmartha Puja can receive training and permission to do so through initiation, called diksha, from qualified priests.

Gurudeva placed one important restriction on performing Atmartha Puja: "If a serious outbreak of anger is experienced, one must refrain from doing puja for thirty-one days. Simple waving of incense before the icons is permissible, but not the passing of flames, ringing of bells or the chanting of any mantra, other than the simple recitation of Aum."

He invoked this restriction knowing that an angry person would invoke, in the Second World, asuras that can upset us rather than the devas that bring us blessings. In fact, to successfully spiritualize the home, there is a need to minimize expressions of anger, as well as swearing. Take as an analogy assembling a complex jigsaw puzzle. Performing the puja is the equivalent of correctly fitting ten puzzle pieces together. Minor anger takes away five pieces, simple swearing two and a major argument twenty. Clearly, we will never finish the puzzle unless we bring anger and swearing under control. In other words, even the most sincere efforts we put into increasing the spirituality of our home will not succeed if we nullify them with outbursts of anger and swearing.

Keeping in Touch

All Hindus have guardian devas who live on the astral plane and guide, guard and protect their lives. The shrine room is a space for these permanent unseen guests, a room that the whole family can enter and sit in and commune inwardly with these refined beings, who are dedicated to protecting the family, generation after generation. "A token shrine in a bedroom or a closet or a niche in a kitchen is not enough to attract these Divinities," Gurudeva counseled. "One would not host an honored guest in one's closet or have him or her sleep in the kitchen and expect the guest to feel welcome, appreciated and loved."

The most cultured Hindu homes center around the home shrine, a special room set aside and maintained to create a temple-like atmosphere in which we conduct puja, read scripture, perform sadhana, sing bhajans and do japa. This sacred space serves as a solitary refuge, a meditation chamber. It is a safe room in which we retreat from the world, draw into ourselves and get in touch with our superconscious intuition. It is a place to face ourself, to write and burn confessions and make new resolutions. It is a place to dissolve problems in the light of inner knowing with the help of our guardian devas.

You can strengthen the vibration of your home shrine by going to the temple regularly, ideally once a week, and making extra visits during festivals. Lighting an oil lamp in the shine room when you come home from the temple brings the temple's religious atmosphere into your home. Mystically, that simple act brings devas who were at the temple right into the home shrine, where, from the inner world, they can bless family members and strengthen the home's religious forcefield.

Gurudeva takes the idea of having a separate shrine room in which God and the devas can dwell one step further. He states that cultured and devout Hindus dedicate their entire home to God: "The ideal of Ishvarapujana, worship, is to always be living with God in God's house, which is also your house, and regularly going to God's temple. This lays the foundation for finding God within. How can someone find God within if he doesn't live in God's house as a companion to God in his daily life? The answer is obvious. It would only be a theoretical pretense, based mainly on egoism."

Hindus who believe in God's presence in their home naturally wish to honor Him, even feed Him. They lovingly place food before His picture, leave, close the door and let God and His devas partake of the meal. Gurudeva observed: "God and the devas do enjoy the food; they do so by absorbing the pranas, the energies, of the food. After the meal is over and everyone has eaten, God's plates are picked up, too. What is left on God's plate is eaten as prasadam, a blessed offering. God is served as much as the hungriest member of the family, not just a token amount. Of course, God, Gods and the devas do not always remain in the shrine room. They wander freely throughout the house, listening to and observing the entire family, guests and friends. Since the family is living in God's house, and God is not living in their house, the voice of God is easily heard as their conscience."

Gurudeva challenges each of us: "The psychology and the decision and the religion is, 'Do we live with God, or does God occasionally visit us?' Who is the authority in the home, an unreligious, ignorant, domineering elder? Or is it God Himself, whom the entire family, including elders, bow down to because they have resigned themselves to the fact that they are living in an ashrama of God? This is religion. This is Ishvarapujana."