

PERFORMING THE HIGHEST RITUALISTIC WORSHIP



Within the spiritual practices of Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism), many are drawn toward the attractive external method of offering articles of beauty to Holy Icons or Images. In Sanskrit this practice is commonly known as *Puja*.

What is not commonly known, however, to the correct etymological meaning of the Sanskrit bijas (root letters) that comprise this word. Many interpretations can be given in Hinduism to the word "puja" which consists of two letters, namely, "pa" and "ja". According to the most ancient and traditional interpretation, "pa" means "parayana" or continuous repetition of the Names of God and "ja" means "japa" or continuous mental recitation of the Names of God. According to this interpretation "puja" is essentially a kind of Hindu worship in which both parayanam and japam are practiced by the devotees.

One of the esoteric meanings of the actions being accomplished within the puja ceremony when flowers and water are offered conveys the point of view that "pu" means "pushpam" or flower and "ja" means "jal". The letter "ja" can also mean simultaneously "japam". So in this context, puja becomes that form of Hindu worship, during which water and flowers are offered to God along with recitation of His names.

Lastly, puja has a spiritual dimension also. According to this interpretation, puja means that form of worship through which we give birth to or awaken the indwelling spirit in us. Here "pu" means "purusha", meaning the eternal self and "ja" means "janma", meaning to give birth to or to awaken.

Traditionally, several levels of puja are discussed in the scriptures of the Eastern religions. Of these, the lowest or most basic level is the external offering of items of worship given with corresponding mantras. The higher levels of worship range from simple offering of five elements (flower, incense, light, fruit and water) with the main focus being on the prayers uttered as the offerings are placed before the Deity, to one of the highest forms called *manasika* or purely mental ritual. As with early esoteric Christianity, the highest form of offering within the Eastern practice is done within the heart of one's being, and that which is being offered is oneself! But, as is correct in all true spiritual endeavors, moving toward this final stage is, for most, a long and protracted process. This is so due to the undeniable truth that a great deal of purificatory "spade" work must be done to establish us in a position of truth and sincerity that is required to make an acceptable offering of ourselves.

Since the purpose of this article is to aid aspirants towards true growth in the Spirit that invokes transformative change, a description of a form of puja considered to be appropriate for beginners as well as seasoned aspirants will be discussed.

The five elements mentioned above are offered, one-by-one, but not with the intention of adorning the Deity. Although they should be of the best quality and beauty available, they are being used as "vehicles" that will carry your heartfelt prayers to God!

The visible qualities of each offering, such as the scent or the beauty of the flower, the fragrance of the incense, the brightness and warmth of the light, the nourishment of the fruit, or the purity and cooling effects of the water, are to be seen as aspects of your mind and heart that need to be attained through prayer.

The prayers that you say should be your own, and should change with your intent. Here is a suggestion of how this can be done.

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While offering the Gifts

You might be at a point or situation in your life when feel that your mind is manifesting anger, hatred, envy, etc. and as is right you perceive these qualities as vices of an ugly nature. The saints and scriptures of the East and of the early Western tradition direct us to never grapple with the negativity of the mind by attending to the vice itself. Rather, direct your thoughts to the opposite virtue of the ugly vice you want to eradicate. Therefore as you hold the flower of beauty before God, you might pray thus:

“O Lord, as this flower, created by Thee, sheds only fragrance and beauty, cause my mind to be full of the fragrance of compassion and the beauty of remembrance of Thee.”

If you feel that your mind is entertaining dark thoughts and habits, either through past tendencies or from present negative association, you might pray while you are offering the light: “O Lord, as this light brightens all, cause Thy light of purity shine forth within me, banishing all levels of darkness.”

If you feel that your strength to endure with daily repetitive sadhana is waning, you might pray while offering the fruit: “O Lord, as this fruit nourishes that which consumes it, give my mind and heart (or my meditation) strength to endure.”

Your daily worship should remain dynamic in the sense that it will change as your spiritual progress proceeds. Thus, your prayers will change to conform to the aspirations of your mind and heart.

The important thing to stay focused on is that the physical offerings are only vehicles that carry the prayer to God. The finer and more beautiful the offering is, the greater it should reflect the virtue you are seeking.