

Yajna is the celebration of the first awakening of consciousness, the first breakthrough of consciousness that dawned in man and brought him to the first rung of evolution. When man learned how to use fire to help, protect, nurture and sustain him, and when he learnt that grains could be cooked and cultivated, this understanding put him on the first rung of evolution. Yajna celebrates that first realization, that first untainted, pure experience. The aim of yajna is to use that potential to launch the consciousness into the unknown dimensions for further discoveries.

In ancient days, before the advent of religions, yajna or fire sacrifice was conducted throughout the world. The Native American Indians, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Babylonians and many other tribes practised fire sacrifice. Scientists excavating ancient towns and cities have found the fire-pits where the yajnas were conducted. Yajna is the basis of the vedic culture and you can read about it in many of the ancient texts. In the Vedas, Puranas and Smritis we are advised that householders should perform yajna. Yajna is involved in Devi pooja, Chandi pooja, Shanti pooja, Deva pooja, Vishnu pooja, Shiva pooja and many other forms of worship. According to the Bhagavad Gita, yajna does not just mean a ritual where pooja items are consigned to the flames and thereby dedicated to God. Yajna is a very powerful tool for inspiring and enlightening human consciousness.

There was a time when yajnas were a part of the day to day culture of this land. Rishis and munis performed yajnas of all kinds. It was quite common to drop in at the hermitage of a rishi and discover them in the midst of a yajna. The chanting of vedic mantras abounded in the atmosphere. The fragrance of homa, or fire ceremony, and the tranquil resonance of sattwic vibrations filled the air. It felt as of beauty and auspiciousness had made their permanent abode there. On account of the regular performance of yajna, nature was in harmony and the seasons were always kind and benevolent. Fruits and flowers adorned the trees. Birds chirped merrily. Deer and wild beasts frolicked around, not at all wary of humans. The water and air was pure and invigorating. Peace and tranquillity pervaded the surroundings.

Yajna is no different to yoga. Asanas, pranayama, dharana and dhyana are not the only forms of yoga. Yajna is also a form of yoga. Asanas discipline and regulate the body to function in its optimum condition. Dharana and dhyana train the mind to focus and concentrate. Those forms of yoga are for the body and mind, the physical attributes of man. Yajnas are esoteric yoga. They deal with the hidden part of us that we do not know, have never experienced and can never see. Yajnas communicate through symbolic language, not the language of words. Yajna is pure experience, and therefore our conscious mind cannot understand it, nor is it even necessary to comprehend all that is happening during the ceremony.

The mind simply does not have the faculty to know that dimension because it functions in the realm of intelligence. Even our buddhi, the discriminating aspect of mind, cannot take us there because buddhi is governed by intellect. Beyond intelligence and intellect there is a much greater power and that is intuition or prajna. Yajnas alter the state of mind and buddhi, allowing us to experience that dimension of consciousness. The esoteric nature of a yajna draws out eternal archetypes that are embedded in us. Samskaras from the casual body are expressed in this way, removing deep-rooted blockages and

obstacles. Without our knowledge, with ease and comfort, great transformations take place within us. Yajnas exist in time and space as well as beyond time and space. The smoke that arises from the yajna kunda travels to higher realms and other planes of existence. It is consumed by the cosmic energy. This is why yajnas are conducted by proficient pandits, with great accuracy and philosophical attention.

Yajna has a threefold purpose. The first purpose is production, utapadana; this is also the meaning of 'ya', the first syllable of the word yajna. The second purpose of yajna is distribution, uparjana, and the third is assimilation, vitarana. These are the three events that take place in a yajna. The tradition, the scriptures and the saints have all spoken of yajna as a process that governs the whole creation, the whole of life. For example, the food cooked in the kitchen fulfils the first purpose of yajna, production. The same food is distributed to the family, fulfilling the second purpose of yajna, distribution. Eating the food fulfils the third purpose of yajna, assimilation. So the daily actions that are performed from birth to death are also yajna. Even the education received in a gurukul, school, college or university is yajna. These are the three processes of life which take place naturally, without any effort.

Of course, the difference arises in relation to awareness, which is generally not profound while performing mundane activities. During yajna, however, the simplicity and richness of the event, the surcharged energy and the feeling of unity that is generated create a shift in the awareness. We become aware of the present moment and see the divine within everything. "All that exists in this ever-changing universe is the abode of the Lord. Enjoy whatever the Lord gives and do not covet, for whose indeed is all wealth?" This is the first mantra of the Ishavasya Upanishad, found in the fortieth chapter of the Yajur Veda. This is the vision which develops in spiritual life, and yajna is a part of that vision. Yajna is not only a fire ceremony, the recitation of mantras, or the invocation of higher forces. Those are the ritualistic aspects, known as karmakanda. When the external rituals become internal, that is known as upasana, and when that internal ritual becomes a part of your expression in life, that is known as yajna.

Performance of a yajna is an act of universal love and compassion, universal because it is not limited. It reaches out to all that is animate and inanimate, the manifest as well as the unmanifest. It is an act of love because it expresses our remembrance of that which gave us life and gratitude for the chance to live. It is an act of repaying a debt to nature for feeding and nurturing us on this beautiful earth, and an unspoken thanks for all that we have received from it. Giving back what you have received is true compassion. This heightened remembrance in return renourishes us and gives us the ability to achieve our objectives and goals with ease and integrity. Thus our relationship with existence grows deeper and deeper, and the bonds strengthen more and more.

There are three aspects to a yajna. If one of these three aspects is missing the yajna is incomplete. The first is the ritual itself, which consists of adorning the area of the yajna, invoking higher forces through the chanting of mantras, kindling the fire and offering oblations into it. The second aspect is satsang or association with sadhus and saints. To listen to the truth is satsang; to be in the presence of truth is satsang; to withstand truth is satsang. This is a vital part of the yajna.

The third aspect is daan. Daan means to give away what belongs to you. A yajna without daan is like a newly married bride without ornaments. The act of daan glorifies a yajna. It is the cream on top of

the pudding. Offerings at a yajna earn thousand-fold merits in this life and hereafter. Daan does not mean charity and alms alone. When you offer a gift or present to someone who is not in need, that too is daan. To give to one who is not in need is a gift. Kings and emperors also received daan in abundance from rishis during yajnas. Each and every person at a yajna is eligible for daan, not just the poor. Daan is the Prasad of the yajna.

The act of yajna is so attractive because it is pure and simple. It is in harmony with nature and its creation. Purity and simplicity are essential ingredients of a yajna. In order to maintain the purity and simplicity, yajnas evolved into a highly technical science. Just as modern scientists evolved matter to create highly technical missiles and satellites, in the same way the sophisticated and refined science of yajna also creates a laser guided missile which is not restricted to this realm, but travels far beyond. The only difference is that the yajna missile is composed of love and compassion, not of hatred and destruction. It is a benevolent missile, not a malevolent one. This missile creates rather than destroys. It rejuvenates rather than extinguishes.

Everything that is offered at a yajna is taken from nature. No substances of chemical or artificial origin are used. The fuel that is burnt is aromatic and purifies the air. It is kindled by rubbing the samidha sticks, not with a candle or matchstick. The people who kindle the fire are those who have been devoted to fire worship for generations and generations. In their daily life they worship the fire with mantras at sunrise and sunset. It is called the heavenly fire because it reaches out to the heavens and forms a link between heaven and earth.

Yajna is an act of bhakti or pure devotion. It is uncontaminated power which is known to perform miracles, later events, nullify calamities, make the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the mute speak. In bhakti, there is no room for doubt. It is very hard to have faith that what you have not seen is there, close beside you, taking care of you with each breath. During yajna, that faith is restored, as the experience of the divine presence becomes a palpable and living reality.