

THE LAST RITES

The entire world is enchanted by fascinations of external world; no one wants to look within oneself. The self is being either made a slave of intellectual upheaval that leads to human degradation, or is left to remain the slave to the ghosts of old fashioned purposeless-life. The modernity has presented highest challenge to mankind. Everywhere we see enticements and traps — child to old man — all are on the rush. Many realise their folly but are unable to come out, many others don't and are getting trapped. Without limiting ourselves in any way, we have to milk religion with our head and heart, with faith and love for our own benefit and for others'.

The only purpose of Religion is to make man attain Freedom, attain Perfection which ensures everlasting Peace and Bliss — that is to attain God. Presently, religion is far from reaching its objectives and its purpose. It is no more an escalator but a merry-go-round which keeps us moving endlessly leaving us where we are. When we have known this, it is our duty and responsibility to revive its spirit again rendering it suitable for our modern way of living. It is our turn that we need to advance the human progress towards realisation of the Truth, and reach our Goal too. Let us try to understand the Hindu paradigm of well-being.

Say not I am 'this or that' nor that 'I shall love'
 He's confronting many mirrors, a mirror that art thou.
 He casts his image on all the mirrors, He alone ever that IS
 Thou in truth art He Himself, He manifests so with ease.

He is all Beautiful, Yet, how can you love Him or see?
 Love like Beauty comes from Him, Reveals itself through thee.
 If thou canst erase thy I, thou shalt perceive Him in all
 He is The Treasure and The Casket alike, and also the ferrying yawl.

This world is His and He world is, have not 'I or mine'
 Turn inward and witness there, in heart you see Him shine.
 Silence! No more of this at all, for, endless is His tale
 Words lack power to tell of Him, love moves Him, not the gale.

The Hindu community was more bent on human evolution to Divine than on day to day needs and demands of body and mind. Joy or suffering was not a point of attention or debate. Because, every problem of man, collective or individual is his inability to be or not being divine. And the solution is to make him divine; i.e., to somehow eliminate his animal nature, make him transcend the human nature and manifest the inner hidden Divine nature. This is what the Seers (*Rṣīs*) had discovered pledging their entire lives — the path to the attainment of a trouble free life here enriched with peace and love, as well as the state of Immortality.

So, a well programmed society and individual life pattern was designed — which passed through centuries of refinement and corrections before it could take a final shape a

few centuries ago till it fell in the clutches of alien invasions, and in the grip of the modern world since a century ago.

They had God Realisation or 'Let each one know their own Divinity and be Divine' as the one aim of human life, renunciation and service as their common motto, love as their guiding principle. With hundreds of *Rṣīs*, *Munis*, sages and saints realising this ideal, the utopian model became a realised truth and their flawless lives remained an epitome on the Indian soil. The early Pauranic age seems to be the Golden era with innumerable ways to realise the human goal, discovered and found available to suit individual life. To realise the Ideal, the mottos, the individual life as well as the society were divided into four segments, and every individual received according to his station of life tendencies creating and life moulding sacraments of religious character based on spiritual footing.

a.) In a Matching way to the model of the Nature¹, The Society had four classes called *Varṇās* (वर्णस) — (i) *Brāhmaṇās* (ब्राह्मणस) (the Enlightened intellectuals, men endowed with wisdom — the planning body and law makers), (ii) the *Kṣatriyās* (क्षत्रियास) (the heroic martial, valorous — the governing body, the protective, defence and maintaining law and order) (iii) the *Vaiśyās* (वैश्यास) (the trading, business and agricultural — the trading and commercial body) (iv) the *Śūdrās* (शूद्रास) — labour class, the workers, toiling and exerting — the labour force.

b.) The individual life was divided into four segments called the *Āśramās* (आश्रमास). (i) The *Brahmacharya* — the studentship/novice : (age up to 24) the period of learning/training (infrastructure). (ii) The *Gārhasṭhya* (गार्हस्थ्य) — (age up to 60) the house-holdership — the life of the married: earning and legitimate enjoyments, follow up of Dharma (virtue etc.). (iii) *Vānaprastha* (वानप्रस्थ) — (age upto 72) total withdrawal from the stage of the world and dedicating entirely for preparing for the next, the life of seclusion in forests or spiritual retreats and (iv) *Sannyāsa* (age after 72 or at any stage of life) — the life of a renunciate withdrawal from all enjoyments and productive activities — dedicating oneself entirely for reaching absolute Perfection through God- realisation.

c.) The life-moulding and tendency creating sacraments an individual receives from time to time are called 'the Hindu *Saṃskārās*', the 'Hindu-sacraments'. There arising some variations regarding number of *Saṃskārās*, presently the Hindu society maintains them to be sixteen, from the conception to funeral.

¹ These four classes are found in one way or the other in every organized body. For example for a country : there is cabinet of ministers, the defense force/ police, the trade-commerce and the general labour class; the same with a factory : the organizers, the watch/ward, the purchase/sale, and labour; same with a human, animal or insect body : the brain and intelligence, the defense-immunity system with senses, the ingestion-respiration-excretion, and the circulatory with limbs of action.

They can be grouped under five heads :

The five groups	Sixteen sacraments	Remarks	Significance
1. The Pre-natal <i>Samskārās</i>	(1) The <i>Garbhādhāna</i> (गर्भाधान)	Conception	Providing a body.
	(2) The <i>Puṁsavana</i> (पुंसवन)	Man making; i.e., awakening all capabilities physical, intellectual and spiritual (3 rd , 4 th month foetus).	Furnishing the body for a competitive world.
	(3) <i>Sṁantonayana</i> (सीमन्तोन्नयन)	Hairs of the mother with foetus parted at the centre of the head into two parts: Awakening divinity in mother so that foetus receives it (5 th month).	Divinising the body and mind to help in its evolution.
2. The childhood <i>Samskārās</i>	(4) <i>Jātakarma</i> (जातकर्म)	Ceremony at birth <i>Medhāsūkta</i> etc.,	Celebrating the birth and dedicating to Nature.
	(5) <i>Nāmakaraṇa</i> (नामकरण)	Naming ceremony : 12 th day.	Building up the identity relating to Divine.
	(6) <i>Niṣkramaṇa</i> (निष्क्रमण)	First outing: after 3-4 weeks.	Acclimatizing and introducing ecological and social responsibilities.
	(7) <i>Annaprāśana</i> (अन्नप्राशन)	First rice feeding, 6 th month.	Energy from mother to energy from Nature.
	(8) The <i>Cūḍākaraṇa</i> (चूडाकरण)	Tonsure, 1 st or 3 rd year.	Beast-hood to human-hood; make aesthetic and tidy.
	(9) The <i>Karṇavedha</i> (कर्णवेध)	Boring the ears.	Symbol of self-restraint (especially with respect to restlessness during childhood, anger during boyhood and sex during adulthood, ego/pride during youth.).
3. The educational <i>Samskārās</i>	(10) The <i>Vidyārambha</i> (विद्यारम्भ)	Initiating learning, alphabets : 3 rd year.	Initiating intellectual unfoldment.
	(11) The ¹ <i>Upanayana</i> (उपनयन)	Spiritual initiation, at arrival of youth; Brahmin-8 th year, } or <i>Kṣtriya</i> -11 th year, } earlier <i>Vaiśya</i> - 12 th year, }	Initiating Spiritual unfoldment.
	(12) <i>Vedārambha</i> (वेदारम्भ)	Schooling – the beginning of the studies: vedic and secular	Knowledge of the world, universe and the realm beyond mind.
	(13) The <i>Keśānta</i> (केशान्त)	Shaving of beard.	Rejection of sensuality and determination to retain purity.
	(14) The <i>Samāvartana</i> (समावर्तन)	End of studentship, returning home from <i>Gurukula</i> .	Vow to lead a purposeful life.
4. The marriage <i>Samskārās</i>	(15) The <i>Vivāha</i> (विवाह)	Entering wedlock .	Duties of life: earnings, legitimate enjoyments. Consecration of life to Nature, God and humanity.

¹ There is a deep human conviction, and a fact too that the contact with world since birth makes the child lose his native purity and pure innocent vision of the world (and thus acquires *Rāga-Dveṣa* — likes and dislikes); and that he must be given a ‘re-birth’ to enter the Spiritual Kingdom again and to visualise spiritual version of this world and of man.

5.The Funeral <i>Samskārās</i>	(16) The <i>Anteṣṭi</i> (अन्तेष्टि)	Obsequies and connected rites.	To facilitate future journey and to promote acquisition of next evolved noble state or birth.
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The last sacrament (*Samskārās*), in the life of a Hindu, is imparted to the departed soul posthumously. It is called *Anteṣṭi* or the Funeral with which the concluding chapter of man's life in this world ends. While living he consecrates his life progressively by acquiring the *Samskārās* (sacraments) and by performing various rites, ceremonies and duties of life as a worship unto Nature or God. His survivors consecrate his death for his future felicity in the next birth or next world. Though this is posthumously imparted, it is no way less important, because for a Hindu the future destination and future life is greater than that of the present, and thus they too are performed with meticulous care.

We are to move from the horror to the sublimity of death; it is right understanding, right knowledge that brings in the sublimity. The horror is not of pain and suffering the dead or the survivors undergo, but the mystery behind and abrupt ending of life and relationships, of hopes and promises and of the unknown future. Amidst the mixed feeling of dread and love, of fear and anxiety, of grief and helplessness, we witness the death shrouded in mystery, always with a question mark – why, what and what thereafter? Man's fear, anxiety, beliefs and knowledge have generated rites, rituals and ceremonies. But since it is not within the reach of a common man to prove or disprove the '*believed to be facts*', we have to move with scriptural authority, and many a times with customs and traditions as far as possible by understanding the underlying principle and with a spiritual attitude that helps manifestation of our inner Divinity. Notwithstanding all these modes of operation, these customs and tradition, these rites and rituals have been giving consolation, relief, courage, strength and peace to mankind, we shall follow whatever needed for our own spiritual evolution and good of humanity. Death and destruction are inevitable part of creation and sustenance. No doubt death is ascribed to cause beyond human control, yet it is so natural. It is a stern law that those things that come together have to part, the thing that is composed has to decompose, that which is born has to die, that which appears has to disappear. The mankind has never accepted this fact with open arms, otherwise death would have been one of the most beautiful part of termination of worldly career to begin it again in a more conducive atmosphere and under a more evolved state of oneself. On the Indian soil, however, there was a positive trend owing to the acceptance of the idea of reincarnation of soul. The incentive for a higher future life here on this earth or in a different plane, rendered the present life clean and beautiful. Moreover the striking contrast between life and death made sages to enter into secrets of life and of death, and search for destiny of the soul. Instead of making futile efforts to avert death, efforts to transcend them and attain immortality was discovered. Man's real nature of being himself ever Divine, Blissful and Free was discovered. The facts about Existence of the individual, Cosmic and the beyond were discovered. The facts about the action, the *Karma*, being the only cause of birth-death-cycle was known. The functions of the inner unseen soft-ware of *Vāsanās* and desires was uncovered. Then based on these facts man's life pattern was designed. Thus the procedures to impart *Samskārās* sprang up. It was known and accepted that death is a natural end of human life. The efforts to make death a pleasant

and happy journey and life after death easy and noble, certain arrangements were made during the last part of life and through after death ceremonies.

The Soul, death and transmigration : The real status of the Soul is known to be Immortal and Eternal and also as the all pervading Pure Consciousness, the *Caitanya*. But in embodied state it appears to be limited, bound, experiencing joys and sorrows, and involved in activities. The former is the Real Man and the latter is the apparent man. Imagine a pot placed in open space : there is the inner space and the outer space. But space is *one indivisible existence* which gives room for all objects, and pervades every object through and through, but it appears to be bisected into the inner and outer space! When we move the pot from one place to the other, the space contained in it does not move along with the pot to the new place. The space remains unmoved where it was and the pot alone moves in SPACE. Wherever pot moves we find there is an inner space and an outer space when we take pot as the reference point. If we take space as the reference point instead of pot, then it is One Indivisible Space, the inner and outer are mere appearances. So also with *Caitanya* : with body as reference point we get the apparent man, and the *Caitanya* as reference point we get the Real Man. The Real Man is an uninvolved witness in the body, The Pure Spiritual Entity, The *Ātman*. And the apparent man is the one involved in the activities working out the result of past deeds (*Karmās*), the joys and sorrows, and fulfilling desires and acquired tendencies (*Vāsanās*) in and through the body. When the pending *Karmās* (result of deeds) and *Vāsanās* (tendencies acquired) can no more be worked out through the present body, the involved self (the *Jīvātman*) leaves the present body and acquires a new body in accordance with the pending *Karmās* and *Vāsanās*. This separation of soul from the body is the common phenomenon we see as death. Thus, the deceased, though disembodied is said to be still living. The life to continue must have some base and is assigned to what is called an ‘astral body’.

The Astral body : If we happen to travel in a train or a vehicle for a long time at a stretch, after we alight and while taking rest the same feeling as if we are travelling continues. Similarly if we happen to witness T.V. programmes hours after hours, then while resting, the same trend continues and we remain internally dwelling as if in some different world. Similarly after a man leaves his physical body in which he was dwelling, acting through it, and experiencing so many things, the soul continues to carry the impressions possessing an imagery replica of it, as it were, and continues to feel and behave as if he still possessing the body. This ‘replica body’ which the soul experiences after the physical body falls off is called the Astral body. When the trend, the ‘hang over’ drops, the astral body gradually collapses and disappears leaving behind the simple subtle body which being guided by *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* moves on to acquire the next physical body.

The subtle body : When we are awake i.e., in our waking state (*Jāgrat Avastha*—जाग्रत अवस्था) we are aware of our physical body, the gross body. It is like a hardware which functions backed up by an unseen system comprising of five organs of senses, *Buddhi*, mind, five organs of actions, the vital energy network (the five *Prāṇās*) — the seventeen parts — which is like a software. This backing up unit (which the individual’s own *Buddhi* alone can

perceive and none else) is the subtle body (*Sūkṣmaśarīra*—सूक्ष्मशरीर). When we are awake the awareness pervades both the gross body and subtle body. When we enter into sleep the awareness is withdrawn from the gross body completely (which is natural phenomenon, and happens automatically) with it our external awareness too ends, where as the awareness continues to pervade the subtle body as earlier; and because of that we witness dreams and is called ‘the dream state’ (*Svapna Avastha*—स्वप्नावस्था). When the awareness is further withdrawn even from that dream state, we enter into deep dreamless-state called *Suṣupti* (सुषुप्ति). There, in that state, we are not aware of anything nor we have our self-awareness because the instruments of perception [the mind, *Buddhi* (intellect) and sense organs] themselves are all absent (dissolved or their activities suspended). And therefore, we cannot know what exactly happens in that state of deep sleep. However, we continue to exist and live; this existence into which all our awareness of gross and subtle perceptions get withdrawn and remain dissolved there, is our causal body, the *Kāraṇa Śarīra* (कारण शरीर). It is called causal body because from it all awarenesses proceed and extend into subtle and gross levels bringing us back to dream state and waking state. But nothing is found there of this Nature (*Prakṛti*) except the ignorance of the True knowledge of the Self, *Ātman*, the Spirit.

Now we can clearly understand, we bear two distinct aspects (we can even say, we are made up of two parts) : (i) our pure Spiritual Being and (ii) our material being – i.e., ‘The Spirit’ and ‘The Matter’. They are bound together by forces of *Karma* and *Vāsanās*; and is called the *Jīvātman*, the individual soul or the transmigratory soul. Our Pure Spiritual Existence, we may call the God within or the indwelling Spirit, the *Antaryāmin* (अन्तर्यामिन्), and the external material covering (the three bodies together) is part of Nature, the *Prakṛti* (प्रकृति). While in deep sleep (*Suṣupti*), in the absence of the entire net-work of *Prakṛti* (Nature), the individual self behind the wrapper of ‘ignorance, *Avidyā*’, rests dissolved in the Cosmic Self, the *Īśvara* [the Cosmic Consciousness (The Cosmic ‘I’) that pervades and governs the cosmos (The Universe); generally called ‘God’ or the Lord of the Universe] in a state of unalloyed Bliss, the *Ānanda*.

Thus, in waking state we possess all the three bodies, the causal, the subtle and the gross; in dream state we possess two bodies the causal and the subtle; in the dreamless deep-sleep we possess only the causal body; and our real nature is beyond all these three limiting adjuncts, — Ever Free, Ever Blissful *Ātman*.

During sleep we are temporarily separated from the physical (gross) body. Often, during severe sickness, shock, swoon and intense suffering we may experience such temporary separation from our gross body. Whereas the death is the final separation from the physical encasement, the physical body pertaining to that particular birth.

In all living beings we see there is the incessant struggle to live. During sickness, old age, threat to life and in dangers we can see how the soul pants to regain normality and to continue living. The same trend continues in dreams too. So, clinging to body and clinging to life is said to be the innate nature of beings and lies deep within. So it is after the death

too. Death occurs when the pending *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* can no more be worked out through that particular body. The departed soul struggles to re-occupy the body as long as it is not cremated, but in vain. Since man lives in world-consciousness and not in Divine consciousness, he hangs over with worldly *Samskārās* (tendencies) surfacing up while his divine *Samskārās* remain hidden deep below within. Once the body is cremated or buried, the *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* divert the soul towards the next destination to acquire a suitable new body to fulfil those *Vāsanās* and workout those *Karmās* which have come to maturity. So, before the disposal of body, in the presence of the body if we can chant or read holy texts or sing bhajans or songs (especially those loved by the departed soul) then worldly *Samskārās* get suppressed and driven to the bottom while the Divine *Samskārās* come to the top surface helping the *Jīva* to acquire body conducive to noble life.

The man being endowed with intellect (*Buddhi*), mind and senses, in his embodied state he goes on doing actions — seeing, hearing etc., thinking, understanding deciding etc., moving about, procuring food, eating, sleeping, taking, etc., — all these constitute actions and are called *Karmās*. Even simply sitting is *Karma*. In Nature there is what is called ‘The law of causation’ : ‘Behind every effect every happening there is a cause’ and , ‘for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction’. This law is applicable to actions of man too. His every action bears two fold reactions – (i) the fruit of action, the *Karmaphala* (कर्मफल) (ii) the tendency to repeat the action, the *Vāsanā* (वासना) i.e., the impression left behind. Suppose there is tub containing water and a stone is dropped at the centre. The falling stone on reaching the water surface presses down the water at that spot and creates a depression and the stone reaches the bottom. While the depression trying to regain its original surface, rises up with such a force that the depression travels as ripples in concentric circles towards the wall of the container. On reaching the wall they bounce back and in the same concentric wave form to reach the centre, the point of their origin. In a similar manner, each action of man expands in cosmos and returns back like a boomerang, reaches back the point of its origin and is ‘fruit of action – *Karmaphala*’. It is an inevitable law – ‘as one sows, so one reaps’. The reason behind this is a simple fact. Man is a *part and parcel* of this universe which is a *whole* unit. Whatever happens to a part, happens to whole. If I strike on a corner of my table, it reaches the entire table. I can feel its vibrations at every point of table. If I place a tuning fork immediately after striking at that very point of striking after a fraction of a second I can see the waves of vibration spreading on to the entire table reaching back the source and vibrating the fork. There shall be an impression left behind at the point of striking too. So works the principle of *Karma*. If the returning of vibration be the ‘fruit’ of action, then the impression left behind (the tendency that is created) is the ‘seed’. Both together create the wheel of *Karma* and keep it perpetually rolling.

The law of *Karma* is applicable to humans alone. It is because amidst thousands of species it is man alone that keeps the ego that projects the sense of doership, *Kartṛtva* (कर्तृत्व) and enjoyership, *Bhokṛtva* (भोक्तृत्व). A man who has realised the fact that he is not ‘body’, is not bound by *Karma*. Other than Man all other beings lower (animals, insects etc.,) or higher (gods, etc.,) are not bound by *Karma*. The lower beings neither have ego of doership nor the

intellect, while the higher beings possess knowledge and insight into *Karma*. They possess bodies only to work out past *Karmās* and no new *Karmās* are acquired by them. Thus it is said man alone has rights of *Karma* (*Karmādhikāra*—कर्माधिकार); man is maker of his own destiny; that the human life is precious. Thus the evolution of *Jīva*, spiritual attainment and God-Realisation i.e., attainment of absolute Bliss, Peace and Freedom is possible only while in human life.

Jīva, the individual soul enters various species and various planes of existence according to its *Karma* [i.e., fruit of action (*Karmaphala*) + tendencies acquired (*Vāsanās*) + firmly resolved but unfulfilled intensions (*Saṅkalpās*—सङ्कल्पास)]. The cosmic existence, the universe has three levels of existence – the gross, the subtle and the causal. The causal pervades the subtle and the subtle pervades the gross. Comprised of these three levels, the universe displays fourteen planes of existence, called the *Lokās* (लोकास). We live in the earthly plane called the *Bhūḥ* (भूः) with our material body in this world of matter, amidst the stars and galaxies. There are six other higher and higher refined planes, [the *Bhuvah* (भुवः), *Mahaḥ* (महः), *Janaḥ* (जनः), *Tapah* (तपः), *Satyam* (सत्यम्)] and there are seven lower and lower crudened planes of existence [the *Atala* (अतल), *Vitala* (वितल), *Sutala* (सुतल), *Talātala* (तलातल), *Mahātala* (महातल), *Rasātala* (रसातल), *Pātāla* (पाताल).] the classification of higher and lower is not with respect to space but with respect to more or less manifestation of Consciousness. In higher planes there is more and more joy and freedom. In the lower planes there is less and less of joy and freedom, and, more of bondages and suffering. The *Jīva* according to its *Karma* and stage of evolution lies in one of these *Lokās*. There certain *Karmās* get worked out, some old *Karmās* those that attain maturity come to the front. Thus, when there is a drastic change in the Karmic load and merit, the *Jīva* gets transported to different suitable plane. Higher the meritorious deeds (*Puṇyakarmās*—पुण्यकर्मास), higher are the planes attained; higher the demeritorious acts (*Pāpakarmās*—पापकर्मास), lower the planes of existence. When demerit is marginally high the *Jīva* gets birth in lower species in the *Bhūloka* [भूलोक the physical plane in which we presently live] itself. When the merits and demerits are more or less equal, then they again get human birth with eligibility to act and gain *Karma*. Hinduism does not foster the idea of eternal hell or heaven. Hell and heaven are something like purgatory where the *Karmās* are worked out. The state of *Mukti*, the Ultimate Emancipation, is beyond these two opposites, a state of Absolute Bliss and Freedom. The mission of human life is to eradicate *Vāsanās* that are the causes of *Karma* and transmigration. We have to land in the realm that is beyond all planes of existence, beyond this universal existence.

In Nature there is nothing called good or bad; there is for every action an equal and opposite reaction. If the fruit of our actions are pleasant, we call it good, if it is unpleasant it is called bad. It is only with reference to beings that there is good and bad, merit and demerit and not with reference to Nature (it is like the temperature : objects lie at various temperature, that which is higher to our body temperature we call it hot, and if lower, we call it cold.)

Human actions are of four types depending upon the fruits they yield

<u>Actions (<i>Karma</i>)</u>	<u>Their fruits (<i>Karmaphala</i>)</u> (B.G XVIII-12)
1. Those that are good (ex. Serving beings)	<i>Iṣṭam</i> (इष्टम्) desirable (happiness)
2. Those that are bad (ex. harming beings without a valid reason and authority)	<i>Aniṣṭam</i> (अनिष्टम्) undesirable (misery)
3. Those that are mixture of good and bad (ex. pest control, fishing etc)	<i>Miśram</i> (मिश्रम्) mixture of both desirable and undesirable (joy and sorrow)
(The motivation behind <i>Karma</i> (actions) for above three types is desire <i>Kāmanā</i> (कामना))	
4. Those that are neither good nor bad (ex. one's own duties of life performed without attachment or expectations in return; action like drinking water, taking bath, picking up a stone to see what it is etc.,)	No fruit, no reaction, no Karmic bondage.
(The motivation behind this fourth type is one's duty according to one's station of life)	

Similarly work done for love of God, giving up doership (*Kartrtva*), unselfish work (*Niṣkāmakarma*— निष्कामकर्म) do not bind man, instead help him in his evolution to god-hood.

What is expected 'to be done' by a man and by not doing which it stains him and, what is expected of a man as 'not to be done' and by doing which it stains him — i.e., the obligatory do's and dont's are called *Dharma* (धर्म) as a religious term. *Dharma* complies with the laws of Nature. But they are inevitable actions or restraints of man by observing which man remains unstained and unbound. If it is done with a spirit of detachment or as an offering to Divine, even *Vāsanās* do not get accrued instead it leads to spiritual evolution.

Whatever man does to release himself from the bondage of *Karma*, or for cleansing his soul of the acquired tendencies, the *Vāsanās*, or for one's own evolution or with a definite aim of God-realisation or seeking emancipation is called *Sādhanā*, the 'means', or the spiritual strivings. Our physical/material status is decided by our *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* and our spiritual status is decided by our *Sādhanā* that overthrows our material shackles. *Jīvā*'s net state at every moment is determined by these three factors — *Karma*, *Vāsanā*, *Sādhanā*. Superseding all these three, stands the Divine Grace.

This shows that we need to strive and walk with utmost caution at every step of our life in such a way that these three factors — our *Karma*, *Vāsanā* and *Sādhanā* are securely yoked to our spiritual evolution than to a mere promise of heavenly joys or 'eternal life' after we pass out of our brief and feverish life on this planet. We have to care more for our 'inner life' than for our external life and possessions. The vital point to focus upon is to make a definite beginning somewhere and at our earliest, and let it be — Now. The moment we

seriously make the beginning, all favours amass, all our faculties converge, various uplifting forces of Nature gather round the centre of endeavour, the Divine grace too descends and take us forward towards the Supreme Goal, slowly at first; but with accelerating speed until we become so absorbed in the pursuit that time and distance cease to matter for us. And a day shall surely dawn that we have reached our Goal and shall look back with wonder at the strange way we have completed the impossible task gradually progressing through many many lives— a long tiresome journey indeed — in the realm of the Great Time; and with thrill know that all the time we were living in the Eternal and were never bound!

And we have to accomplish this task before the body falls off.

When I was all alone in the deep virgin forests of Madhya Pradesh un-inhabited by men, the most striking thing that came to my observation was the abundance of life. Plants, animals, insects, birds and reptile seemed to be flooding every corner, which scene we rarely see in our common dwelling places. However our normal vision fails to see what is happening behind that abundance of life — unceasing extermination(!) — dead animals and insects, fallen trees and decaying trunks, rotting leaves and decomposing matter at every other step. Life and death move together. Taittiriyanopanishad gives us a hidden secret of Nature. It says food is life, life is food. Śrīmad Bhāgavatam also reflects the same idea – *Jīvo Jīvasya Jīvanam* (जीवो जीवस्य जीवनम्) life sustains life, i.e., A life can continue its life if another one sacrifices its life. Wherever there is rotting or decomposition, there we see millions of lives springing up and growing forth. Food that beings eat is life (be it vegetables, grains or meat) and from that the new off springs come out. When we observe how the dead matter appears again as life, we see that in the presence of Consciousness, the old molecules are getting re-arranged to form a new body. There the decaying matter is not only giving birth to new life and sustaining them, but are passing through a temporary phase of rest from life to life. Death is a mere changing phase of life at physical level; and with respect to the transmigrating spirit too, life is continuing. Death is not opposite of life, neither death is cessation of life. Life has no opposite; death has an opposite, the birth. Life is eternal, be it perceivable by us or be it imperceivable. Anything that is Eternal is always non-dual, One. Life finds its fullness and its Unitary Existence in Consciousness, and as Consciousness. Thus it is consciousness that we are seeing as life.

Life is an expression of consciousness; just as the light that an electric bulb throws out is an expression of electricity. On the other side we see life cannot exist without energy. Plants receive energy from the Sun to synthesise its food picked up from earth and air sucked in from atmosphere. And, that makes it possible for the emergence and sustenance of all other forms of life on this earth. The coal and gas we use for cooking and warming up is the stored energy received from sunshine millions of years ago which these very plants had picked up. The bread, meat and milk we consume are but the organic matter built by sunshine, the energy supplied by Nature. If there be no sunshine, then no energy and then no life too. Energy conserves itself in Nature to preserve life. Life and energy are inextricably interwoven, and again, they are inseparable and One. So we see Life, consciousness and Energy or Power are one indivisible whole. But this Truth, we neither feel nor experience.

We see that the Consciousness to express Itself as life needs a field which has got to be a manifestation of Power, the Power of Consciousness — and that is what this universe is which is a massive energy in various forms. Manifestation creates duality and duality blinds the vision and understanding. Man lands in Relativity, misses the absolute, identifies with the field, the body, the *Kṣetra* (क्षेत्र) and there begins the wheel of action and reaction, and the play of transmigration!

So, to know the truth again we have to transcend the relative existence; forgetting our bodily existence, we have to peep beyond. For that is the spiritual initiation, the path to return Home. The *Upanayana* (उपनयन—one of the sixteen Hindu sacraments), the *Mantra Dīkṣa* (मन्त्र दीक्ष—initiation into spiritual life and imparting sacred *Mantra*, mystic syllable), *Brahmacarya Dīkṣa* (ब्रह्मचर्य दीक्ष—vows of celibacy and to dedicate one's entire life for spiritual goal), *Sannyāsa Dīkṣa* (सन्न्यास दीक्ष—initiation into a life of renunciation, monastic life) — all aim at realising Eternity of life, immortality of 'The Self'.

Whatever be the type of initiation, the initiated gets a *Mantra*, repeating which with love and dedication the aspirant is assured of reaching perfection, the Perfected state of Transcendence. When a disciple receives a *Mantra* from a *Guru* with the only object of Realising God, the intentions of the receiver of *Mantra* and the bestower of *Mantra* being beyond the physical existence, reaches the innermost layer of the disciple. It reaches the transmigratory soul that moves from one body to the other. The Soul (*Jīvātman*) captures the *Mantra*. *Mantra* is a channel drawn from the Realm beyond to our physical realm. Infact *Mantra* is the only thing that links this realm of the *Jīva* to That Realm of the Supreme. Even the *Karma* and *Vāsanā* which the *Jīva* carries with it after the fall of the body is a cyclical circle revolving within this realm without any relationship to the Beyond. *Mantra* is the only thing that belongs to the Realm beyond and is available here. Performance of *Japa* with complete trust on it, with heart set on it, with an attitude of surrender, making the *Mantra* one's *Avalambana* (अवलम्बन—support of life), it gets awakened within itself like life manifesting in a seed when put in water, it becomes a living force within itself. If it is practised with intense longing, it gets awakened to the aspirant too; it becomes a living power, is known as the *Mantra* becoming *Mantra-Caitanya*.

Perhaps, through millions of lives the *Jīva* (the individual soul) was wandering about without any shelter in the scorching fieriness of the worldly existence and transmigration. Now, on being initiated, it finds a shelter for the first time; *Guru* like a fond mother, holding an umbrella, as if, over it. In embodied state the physical body of the *Jīva* does find another physical body as a companion, but the *Jīvātman* within remains all alone without a companion throughout. After the body falls off also, the *Jīva* continues its journey without a companion. No *Jīva* is provided with any mechanism to have access to or perceive another *Jīva*. The *Jīvātman* moves about in the infinitely vast universal existence of various planes of existence all alone burdened with the *Kārmic* load and driving *Vāsanās* without any shelter or external perception. It has only one link existing and it is to the Source from where it came, the Abode of Bliss and Peace. But its door is closed because of the Karmic load and

Vāsanās. It is like millions of mobile phones which have no direct access to each other except through the tower to which they are linked; the only link of the mobile is to its tower : the sim card is the *Jīvātman* and the mobile unit is the body, sim card can change any number of bodies or be in any body it matters not, it has its link with tower. Once it links itself to tower it can have access to all other mobiles. Similarly if we open the door linking to God, we can link ourselves to all other *Jīvās* through Him. Till then we remain stranded alone in the universe. On being initiated with a *Mantra*, the *Jīva* finds for the first time a lively companion endowed with Light of its Source and with the power and authority to be the path back to the Source. It consoles the *Jīvātman* with motherly affection, whatever be the state (joy or suffering) of the external sheaths covering it. Spiritual initiation is actually for the *Jīvātman* and not to its bodily existence; body and mind are only the media to carry *Mantra* to *Jīvātman*. *Jīvātman* takes it as support of its existence and carries it with it when it leaves the body. When an initiated person performs *Japa* with a reverential love and complete dedication, it comes to active state. The person may not get any spiritual experience at all, there may not be spiritual awakening in him either, yet when he leaves his mortal coil the *Mantra* takes a luminous form envelops the *Jīva* with Light (Spiritual Radiance) and irrespective of *Karma* and *Vāsanās* carries it to a suitable womb where the *Jīva* can get conducive atmosphere for continuing *Sādhanā*. It goes without saying that the journey is a joyful, pleasant one with higher awareness and higher ideals pulsating in it. The *Mantra* further helps in building up a suitable body needed for the particular type of *Sādhanā* in progress, and, at the time of birth, enters back the *Jīva* as potential Power to guide from within. For all other common *Jīvās*, their *Karma* and *Vāsanās* lead the *Jīva* through darkness overpowered by unknown fear and a feeling of abandonment because only *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* are dragging the *Jīva* forcing for a next birth. They determine the place and body accordingly. When we are asleep we are no doubt disconnected from the body, but have a link within to come back to the waking state, to bodily existence, but when we die we have no hold of any kind, and that generates an unknown fear. It is like the fear and pain experienced by a foetus of two-three months old in the womb being poked with a knife; it knows nothing, neither understands anything, for, it has no other senses to perceive, nevertheless it experiences intense fear and pain. In Christianity the procedure of confession was introduced to lean down the sense of abandonment and the fear that pesters the soul after body falls off and to reduce the weightage of guilt while living, but it does not link the *Jīva* to God neither it helps evolution to God-hood, instead it drives the sins to deeper layers giving a temporary relief to continue normal living. *Mantra* works in an entirely different way. So, for those who are on the death-bed we must help them to remember God and repeat his Holy name or the Guru given *Mantra*. That is the right time to clasp to *Mantra*, trap the God or the *Ātman* in the awareness and slip away safely from bodily encasement and fly away happily like a bird released from a cage. The Jain monks are supposed to practise this every day and the Buddhist monks are directed to think every night while going to bed, as the last night of their life and keep all accounts and transactions with this world finally closed – no file pending, no file to be reopened – relationship with this world and body completely closed. And we too have to practise this – witness attitude while moving about in the world, to

remain uninvolved during activities, and to remain in spiritual consciousness at all times and in all state and under all conditions.

In beings, especially in man, the part or the aspect that is not perceivable is the more important and valuable than that which is perceivable. We do not think of the spiritual treasure we possess instead we think in a queer way 'what is use of imagining a thing which has no proof and is inaccessible'. Science has gone too far in supporting this idea and in smashing down man's belief in his spiritual greatness. That has made man to lose his way and lose his identity. Some are completely deluded, some are chasing their own shadows and that of others, while the rest are in a fix being fallen in moral and existential dilemma. A few are trying to retreat and regain their breath. The Immortal Spirit that man is, Ever Free and Ever Blissful is made to believe that he is a psyche-inbuilt material mass, an insignificant creature that by chance or otherwise has cropped up on this 'grab and eat' parlour, the insignificant planet lost in the great cosmic immensity. The modern man is finding terror and horror in all directions in the outer world while the inner world is boiling with passion, is craving for worldly enjoyments, and is clasping a few enjoyments with venom in the fangs for others who want to share them. Thus he finds himself isolated, alone and abandoned. The promises of science have destroyed even the only way out provided for man — the refuge in his 'inner life' which is a sure way to eternal Peace and eternal Bliss. So goes the man's life and he dies. The inner complexities, contradictions, fear; the fruits of good, bad, noble, ignoble deeds; the various tendencies, resolutions, vows and promises — the soul carries forward. An unknown power controls, guides and manages all these affairs and effects the destiny of man. That being the predicament of *Jīva*, it needs protection, consecration and refinement. Much of it has to be accomplished during one's own life time through a pious life enriched with love and Light and harmony with Nature. If one gets mounted with some amount of stability on this track, one gets eligibility, competency and a desire to enter into spiritual world. The purpose of religion and religious sacraments is to ensure this entry into spiritual world. The one who has entered the field of spiritual seeking with earnestness, has transcended the conventional religious barrier. For such seekers nothing much to be done after their demise. Their aspirancy, their *Mantra*, Guru, the Mother Nature and God lead them ahead. But for the rest, these things are to be invoked by the nearest relative or successors or the heir or an intimate friend or a disciple.

There are three ultimate entities — the individual soul, the universe/the Nature and their common substratum, the God; this fact appeals to our reasoning too. These three are taken recourse to for effecting the posthumous sacraments, because they alone are accessible to the *Jīva*, and the *Jīva* continues to exist in the Nature and the God.

We approach (i) the God through prayer

(ii) the Nature through rites

(iii) and the *Jīva* through supplication

We need to affirm in our minds that the *Jīva*, God and Nature are intimately related, and that the God and the Nature respond to the *Jīva*'s deep genuine feelings without any delay. With this as the basis we perform the last rites of giving the final *Samskāras* and shape to the departed soul.

When a monk or a holy person dies we only sing praises of God or name and glories of God and thank Him for keeping him till then in the world and bringing us in contact with him. And we seek the blessings from that departed Soul. Often the Divinity, nobility, magnanimity, love, concern and sacrifice of such great Souls forces our hearts to pray for their reappearance and to be in their company once more. With great honour, reverence their holy bodies are interned in the earth and a grave-monument is built and treated as a holy shrine. Usually they are not cremated. Those bodies being free from worldly attractions and repulsion (*Rāga-Dveṣa*) and lust and greed (*Kāma-Kāncana*) are said to sanctify Mother Earth and humanity. But there is provision for cremation of the body of a monk [*Yati* (यति), *Sannyāsī* (सन्न्यासी)] and of a novice/Brahmacharin¹. After the cremation the ashes and bones are collected as holy Relics and are usually preserved and worshipped.

In case of the lay devotees who have not taken up spiritual life seriously and others in general, because of their involvement in world, when they die certain procedures that help their further evolution, give relief and solace to the departed souls has to be adopted.

(i) The Invocation of Divine grace and Divine interference

Every *Jīva* remains continuously engaged in *Karma* since the time of its immemorial past. The reactions from Nature that follows those actions too remain stored in the *Jīva*'s structural base as *Karmaphala* and *Vāsanās*; this store house is called *Karmāśaya* (कर्माशय). Similarly, opposed to *Karmāśaya* there is the store house of the knowledge, wisdom, right understanding etc., which is the source and basis of the spiritual tendencies; this store house is called *Jñānāśaya* (ज्ञानाशय). *Jīvās* which are involved in world forgetful of their higher nature generally possess a weak *Jñānāśaya* and a powerful dominating *Karmāśaya*.

¹ “ब्रह्मचारियति चैव दहेदुत्तपानाग्निना” (*Brahmachari-yati Caiva daheduttapanāgninā*): The bodies of Brahmacharis and *Sannyāsīs* are to be cremated with ‘*Uttapana*’ (उत्तपन) fire. *Uttapanāgni* (उत्तपनाग्नि) is explained as दर्भाग्नेऽग्निं तु प्रज्वाल्य पुनर्दर्भस्तु संयुतः । पुनर्दर्भे तृतीयेग्निरेष उत्तपनः स्मृतः ॥ (*Darbhāgne 'gnim tu prajvālyā punardarbhastu saṃyutaḥ | Punardarbhe Tṛtīyegniṛeṣa uttapanāḥ smṛtaḥ* ||). The pointed end of *Kuśā* (कुशा) grass is lighted first and the fire is shifted to another bunch of *Kuśā* grass from that the fire is again shifted to the third bunch. This final fire is called *Uttapana* fire – ‘elevated lighter’. The first fire is considered as gross and fit for cooking purposes; the second is considered as subtle and used for lighting purposes; the third is considered as causal fire meant for sacrificial purposes. The body is offered as an oblation into the Absolute, the Ultimate Reality, the God. And is considered to pervade the whole of creation and bring solace to all beings. A *Sannyāsī* was and even now is buried. In modern times and traditionally all through a *sannyāsī* is always buried and not cremated, every where throughout India. For the first time the tradition of cremation of *Sannyāsī* was brought about by Swami Vivekananda by consigning the Holy body of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa to the sacred fire. There was a controversy too regarding that procedure. Overpowered by the force of tradition nobody knows even now that there is scriptural sanction for the cremation of the body of an ascetic or a monk (*Sannyāsī*).

Sādhakās (spiritual aspirants) develop their *Jñānāsaya* through a disciplined life of self-control, austerities, scriptural studies, dedication to spiritual ideal and self-surrender, and overtake their *Kārmic* forces and progress along the spiritual path. For all other *Jīvās* their *Karmāsaya* drives them to their next unknown birth — somewhere among the varieties of species ranging from lowly insects to evolved beings. Divine grace and Divine interference alone can over-rule the Nature's laws and help *Jīva* to acquire a suitable human birth where the *Jīva* can have infinite opportunities to learn, serve and evolve. A true devotee of God, the one who loves God can easily invoke the Divine grace upon the departed soul. Say, a monk who has renounced world for God (or even a devotee who maintains constant touch with God through prayer etc.) who keeps his inner channel connected to the Divine through higher awareness or consciousness. Their prayers are surely answered. It would highly benefit the *Jīva* and change its course. Sw. B told me that “Thakur has answered every prayer of mine that was meant for my own spiritual attainments and for the good of others.” We asked Rev. Bhuteshanandaji Mj what happens to his initiated disciples after they die. Rev. Maharaj replied “For a normal man in the world it may take few lives to attain Spiritual Perfection. So, I pray to Thakur, Mother and Swamiji to help them continue their *Sāadhanā* smoothly in their next life without much obstruction and inconvenience. And I witness my prayers are being answered.” Devotee's prayers please the Lord and at once they become potent to reshuffle the *Karmas* by suppressing the harmful ones and triggering those that help a noble human birth that leads to evolution. Normal people have to tune themselves to the Divine before they offer their prayers to the All pervading Lord.

We take the following twelve steps :

1. Salutations : *Praṇāma* (प्रणाम).

- i. “*Om*, at the very outset I bow down to the Ultimate Truth, the One beyond name, form, time, space and causation, Who rules this universe and Who has incarnated Himself as Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa to redeem all *Jīvās*.”
- ii. “I bow down to His Supreme Power who is non-different from Him, who creates, sustains and dissolves this universe, who in Her redemptive aspect has incarnated Herself as Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother.”
- iii. “I bow down to that ever Free One who is the friend and well wisher of all *Jīvās*, who has come down as Vivekananda to help Him in His Mission.”
- iv. “I offer my salutations to all prophets, saints and holy men who have tread and sanctified this earth.”

2. Self-purification : *Ācamana* (आचमन)

Om “I remember the Pure-spirit, [The *Nārāyaṇa* (नारायण) or *Viṣṇu* (विष्णु)]that pervades all that exists in this universe — the gross, the subtle and the causal — the pure consciousness; may It purify my gross physical body, my subtle body and my causal body and making them free from all evils, sins, evil or sinful tendencies.”

3. Deliberation : *Pavitra Dhāraṇa* (पवित्र धारण)

Om “I assert my Spiritual existence which is rooted in God. Guided by my own conscience, I feel the responsibility to discharge my duties and obligations towards the departed soul. May the Divine Mother guide my thoughts, feelings and actions.”

4. Resolution : *Saṅkalpa* (सङ्कल्प)

Om “I here with resolve to perform the obsequies of my brother/mother/friend...../Mr/Mrs....., knowing the need and necessity of it by taking refuge at the feet of my Lord.”

5. Warding off the evil : *Bhūtāpasaraṇa* (भूतापसरण)

Om “May the thought of Divine in me and my holy intention ward off the evil promptings of Nature and ill-will of any beings, if any, against us who are engaged in the performance of the obsequies.”

6. Becoming aware of our real Nature :

Om “though encased in this body-mind-complex for the reasons beyond my understanding, I am the ever Pure, ever Perfect, Eternal, and the Bliss absolute. As long as I possess individuality (*Jīvatva*) I am eternally bound to the Supreme Lord of the Universe and thereafter ever one with Him.”

7. Steps against possible set-back : *Sthirīkaraṇa* (स्थिरीकरण)

Om “May my deliberation and resolution be firm and unwavering. May the Grace of God, blessings of Mother Nature and, good-will of all beings be on me and my performances. *Om Tat Sat* (ॐ तत् सत्).”

8. Extolling God to invoke His Divine Presence :

“You are the Supreme, The One without a second, The Pure Consciousness, *Caitanya Svarūpa*. You are the Existence Consciousness Bliss Absolute, the *Sat-Cit-Ananda*. You are Eternal Ever Existing, beyond time, space, causation as well as name and form. You pervade this universe and exist as the indwelling Spiritual essence (*Antaryāmin* – अन्तर्यामिन्) in all beings. Though we are essentially one with You and indivisible from You, yet Your deluding Power (The *Māyā*) has enveloped us and our understanding, and has riveted our attention to the glittering world of senses which is unsubstantial and inflicted with uncertainty and impermanency. Now that You have made the right understanding reach us, with my heart and soul I pray : Please be kind to us fill our awareness with your Divine presence and lead us from this unreal world of appearance (the realm of matter) to the grand Real world of Pure Existence (the realm of Spirit) from this engulfed darkness to Light, from death to Immortality. Through Your Grace and blessings of all elders May I be able to perform the rites without any hindrances. May success crown my sincere efforts and unselfish performance in this direction.”

9. Meditation : *Dhyāna* (ध्यान)

[The mind of the performer of rites might be agitated and filled with grief; it is natural and perfectly normal. Nevertheless at this juncture he sees the impermanency of life,

inevitability of events and vanity of worldly prospects. We can utilise these rare occasions to shift our paradigm of life from normal to the Divine, from constrained personal 'profit and loss' vision to the broad vision of universal truths. Only then we can hope to gradually reach the higher realities. Real meditation is possible only when we cultivate indifference or witness attitude towards the world. Meditation is precisely eschewing all other thoughts other than the God, The *Ātman* or the Spirit.]

For a minute or two one has to forget the entire world and one's own individuality and be aware of the Lord enshrined in the core of one's existence, the heart. Then one has to endear Him as one's own and feel extreme closeness, intimacy and freedom to ask for anything or perform any acts or give, offer or worship Him in any way. This is meditation for all practical purposes under the Hindu religious format seeking spiritual or secular ends or for the purpose of religious ritualistic worships. The same meditation becomes a part of our spiritual practice when our mind seeks the Lord for ever on its own eschewing all other thoughts.

10. Mental worship : *Mānasa Pūjā* (मानस पूजा)

The performer of rites shall mentally offer as a token of love and gratitude anything that pleases him. And then heartily offer salutations.

11. Prayers :

Now is the time for invoking Divine grace and Divine intervention for the upliftment of the departed soul. The heart should feel closeness to God on one side, and on the other should feel compassion and need of help for the departed soul. Then there shall be free flow of tearful hearty prayers. The mental state of the performer of rites shall be very conducive for this act. Let him offer in the naturally flowing out words of prayer. It shall be something like this 'O Lord, unaware of the consequences man does many good and bad deeds being forced by the one's own acquired inner nature and by the promptings of the external Nature. You are all knowing and all capable. Kindly help this soul move towards Light and Freedom, whatever be his/her *Karma*. You are the only refuge for all *Jīvās*, and who is capable of mending their destiny. Guide this soul, the child of yours, to move further along the path that leads to his/her evolution to Divine-hood which alone can ensure Bliss, Peace and Freedom that is ever lasting.....etc.,'.

The performer's intimacy with God, his unselfish prayers shall make him feel within himself that his prayers are being heard by the compassionate Lord and are being answered. The principle that governs the sphere of prayer is 'Act your faith and belief; let there be reality embodied in it (i.e., feel really, act really, join your heart to mind) then your prayers, your thoughts and your actions shall be verily true and genuine.'

The creeper and tendril grasp the nearest support and grow upwards to the unimaginable heights, so does the *Jīva* help itself by holding on to prayer reach the Supreme. Creeper and tendril have no eyes to see, no senses to perceive but it feels!

Feels the support, trusts it fully, clings to it, grasps it, feels its warmth and intimacy — so it grows. Same is the prayer and the unseen imperceived God. This state can be compared with that of a child seeking its mother even in an assembly unhesitatingly with a doubt-free mind, and taking her as the sole support even when there are other more capable people there.

It is such prayers of the survivors that impel God to transport the departed soul to a safe and comfortable state of advancement.

12. Thanks giving : *Kṛtajñatā Prakāṣana* (कृतज्ञता प्रकटन)

‘O lord, it is You that are sitting in me and guiding my mind and feelings. How shall I express my gratitude to you except offering my prayers to you to make me perform all my duties of life as an offering to You. Make me Your servant for ever to serve this world of Yours and You. I have no other words to thank you, may You remain ever enshrined in my heart and keep me in your vigil.

Salutations :

I offer my salutations to The Supreme Reality the *Parabrahman*, The Ultimate Imperishable One.

I offer my salutations to that Pure Consciousness that pervades this universe and all beings, and governs the universe and all beings as *Īśvara* (The Supreme Lord).

I offer my salutations to the Ultimate Reality that manifests in the universe time and again as the Incarnation of God to redeem *Jīvās* and re-establish righteousness (*Dharma*—धर्म) and who has Incarnated as Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa for the present age.

I bow down to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the Lord of all beings.

I bow down to Supreme Power, which in Her aspect as redemptive Power of Incarnation has come down to this earth as Sarada Devi.

I bow down to their torch-bearers Sw. Vivekananda and other participants of their Divine play.

I bow down to the ever enlarging circle of devotees.

I bow down to this universe which is but an aspect of His own Existence.

These are the twelve steps the performer of the last rites should perform. All things are to be accomplished in constant reverential and affectionate remembrance of God without any expectations of reward for oneself.

(ii) Availing Nature’s benevolence and benediction

Nature is based on the action-reaction principle. Nature on one hand kindles what is contained in a person, and on the other reflects back what a person projects or puts forth. Thus, we see situations kindle in man things like lust, greed, hatred, compassion, love etc., and also hatred begetting hatred or love begetting love. For example, the sight of a man or woman walking in a street may kindle lust in one and may awaken a worshipful attitude in another, and no reaction at all in some one else, for, that is what is contained in each of them;

while the person walking in the street is unconcerned, disinterested and uninvolved to the various reactions the witnesses are undergoing within themselves. Each situation shows what is within us and passes off. Again, we commonly see a normal person getting angry when an angry person pounces upon him/her; the Nature is making the former reflect back the latter's angry approach. Similarly polite approach receives in return a polite approach. Nature is very sensitive, because it is manifestation of the Power of Consciousness, *Citśakti* (चिद्रक्ति) and that the Consciousness is its substratum and is embodied in it at every level.

Just as the buildings are built with bricks and mortar, this universe is built with 'love' and 'sacrifice' as its imperishable contents because its origin is Divine, and that the life can manifest and sustain only where there is love and sacrifice. Hindu rites are either of love or sacrifice, or an expression of divinity. Through them they seek and avail Nature's benevolence. A life of sacrifice, of universal love and dedication, a life that seeks welfare of all beings, a life free from blemishes of hatred, jealousy, curse and destructive ideas – i.e., a life divine – is in itself a worship of Nature. Rites and rituals help working it out consciously and help manifest Divinity at all levels and under all circumstances.

All these ideals were embodied in the Indian culture and, every form of daily life of a Hindu was enriched by their presence. Over generations through millennia these ancient teaching were being passed over from generation to generation and they formed the very essence of Indian culture, which the modern Indian is missing and thus has become aimless and without an ideal. It is his misfortune. Hope this phase does not last long.

In turning ourselves to Nature we follow the following method:

- i. Everything we do (secular, religious or spiritual) begins with *Om*, *Namaste* and *Svasthi* (ॐ, नमस्ते and स्वस्ति).

The whole universe and all beings are rooted in Divine — all together forming One Indivisible Reality — is what Om indicates.

Namaste means — I respect and honour you all, all that exists in this universe. May my insight of Divine never slip away; a stone in the street, a plant on the road side, a beggar on the footpath, an ant crawling in the soil all deserve my respect and honour, for they are expression of One Divine Entity pervading this universe; we are all one.

Svasti means: - May the good, the auspicious, the benediction and benefaction befall on this world, may everyone be happy; may heaven descend on this earth.

- ii. ॐ ह्रीं प्रकृत्यै नमः । I bow down to this vast Nature, the immeasurable sum total of the vast Power in this and behind this Creation, the Universal Power (represented by ह्रीं *hrīm.*)

[To know and love Nature as mother, (the 'Mother Nature'!) is one of the unique privilege given only to the human. Every being, by nature, experiences insecurity. Every

living organism wants to live, so it is always afflicted by fear of death. A child is secure before it is born. After birth till it develops knowledge, skill and capacity to survive, it feels helpless. Nature compensates the helplessness by infusing trust in that infant, it fully trusts the person who loves and takes care of it (usually the mother). Nature withdraws this trust and dependence as the child grows — it feels confident, but insecurity returns! Insecurity or fear is one of the important constituents of the ego of every person. This bars man to part with or share whatever he possesses as his. Man becomes constrained, puny and limited. The sense of insecurity or the helplessness does not generate the sense ‘I am useless’. ‘I am useless’ is different from ‘I am helpless’. Nature keeps the sense of insecurity or an innate fear to facilitate pursuit of Spiritual attainments, at the same time She maintains the sense of ‘I am somebody’ by feeding so many varieties of experiences to that *Jīva* since its birth, i.e., the Nature imparts a personality to that *Jīva*. Like a mother showing concern, overt appreciation and love, the Nature too provides him with prosperity, success and opportunities and help him to develop stability, self-dignity, self-respect, self-worth and self-esteem. The failures, misfortunes and sufferings man gets are mere warnings and reminders that he may not lose the path. If we look at the child’s trust in its mother, we understand how total is its trust and dependence, how pure is its innocent love, how true and complete is its surrender attitude! The Vedic Rishis loved Mother Nature in the same way as the innocent helpless child does, and Mother Nature responded to them in the same way as their personal Mother. And from their heart flowed the words ॐ ह्रीं प्रकृत्यै नमः। We see Sri Ramakrishna demonstrating again by manifesting the same *Bhava* (dynamic feelings / emotions, moods) of the Rishis. We too must genuinely become the children of Mother Nature and love Her truly].

The key to Nature is ‘love’. It is the love that is beyond our bodily existence. Love truly, act lovingly, you shall discover Love — that is the way. It is simple act of caring, showing concern for others, that invokes Nature’s grace. Refrain from hurting others, that invokes nature’s grace. If a man really loves Nature, his heart expands to accommodate the entire world with all beings in it, and he remains beyond good and evil, impurities and imperfections, and standing in a vantage point of Divine he serves. Holy Mother’s life is an example of this, apart from Her being Divine Mother Herself.

Understanding alone does not help. Nature wants us to act and show, it should be a reality. Hindu houses grow *Tulasi* (holy basil) plant in an Alter-like designed and artistic plant-pot. The Alter-like pot to grow plant represents the Universe (*Bhūpura*, भूपुर) and the *Tulasi* plant represents the pristine Love that sustains the universe and all beings. Growing *Tulasi* plant is supposed to remind the house-holder and others living in that house, that it is obligatory to live and perform all duties of life and actions that are conducive to universal well being, to live in harmony with Nature and all people by pouring love on one and all.

Thus we pray —

“O! Mother, make me a real child of this beautiful Nature. Make me love you and serve all beings those that are growing on your Lap, as much as possible, as a mark of love

for you and make me live in perfect harmony with all things, events and people without losing my grip on the Divine.” “Make my life beautiful one to reflect Love and Peace under all circumstances amidst thorns and roses as well as the old age and the death. Build my life in such a way that I reflect Lord’s glory and be able to realise Him in this very life.”

iii. *Svakarma* (स्वकर्म)– Duties of life as worship

Man is endowed with an intellect to understand and certain amount of freedom to act. Therefore the demands of the Laws of Nature are formulated as the duties of man. To live in harmony with Nature, we have to discharge these obligations lest the Nature revolts.

How time, space and the objective world including our bodily existence appears in the cosmic Consciousness can be understood through the dream experience in sleep. We do not create dream, it happens automatically, we may say ‘it is given’ to experience. Who gives it? our own inner knowledge. We possess so many pieces of knowledge. When the waking state is eclipsed the objective world disappears. The knowledge which is within projects a dream-world including a body for ourselves, may be that it does in crude way or in a confused way or in an un-intelligent way – but it does project, it is the power of knowledge. There appears time, space, there is world, there are objects – we actually experience and participate. But, in fact, there is neither space nor time, neither objects nor the world! I was the creator of my dream and all objects in it, and I was pervading it. I being one with my knowledge, I was the subject and I was the object too. When I wake up all things – dream, and dreamer, and the dream objects resolves back into me. There is no sense of creation or created, it is just presented. There is Consciousness and the knowledge: when vivid, it appears; it is ‘presented’ as if, the Consciousness perceives and experiences holding on to the ‘presented ego’. Everything is presented. And presented can never be separate from the one who presents because what is presented is the knowledge of the presenter. When we view this world similarly as the dream of *Īsvara*, it is not different from *Īsvara* and His knowledge. It is like music which is but the knowledge of musician expressed in sound, dance is expression of knowledge of the dancer expressed / presented in movements. Thus, when I view this the entire universe, the Mother Nature, as one whole, I see it is embedded in the Consciousness as knowledge and the Consciousness itself being the witness, It pervades the universe and is known as *Īsvara*. It is in this sense that the *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*, the Consciousness and the Power, are said to be Father and Mother of this universe. When this understanding dawns in us, we see this world as phenomenal and is covered by God, the *Īsvara* (this is the essence of *Īśavāsyopaniṣad*). Our bodies, our mind and senses are projections of *Īsvara*’s Knowledge. Though the entire thing is One Whole, our pragmatic view of it finds The One Whole as so many levels and so many orders. Gross, subtle and causal are the levels; while a particular patterns in which a particular thing behaves forms an order. Mind behaves in a particular way and the body in some other way. So, they are different orders. If life forms an independent order from that of matter, then, within life order we find animal order different from plant order.

Īsvara, all-Knowledge, is the common factor of all orders. Microcosm is neither independent nor separate from Macrocosm and the *Īsvara*. We are and this Nature too is intimately connected with *Īsvara*, when viewed separately. When viewed collectively – everything is *Īsvara*, His Knowledge. When viewed in this awareness, we do not miss seeing God in our pains and sufferings, in our bereavements and loneliness as much as in our pleasures and delights. Other's harshness, hatred, jealousy we see flooding with *Īsvara*. Radha never felt her pangs of separation from Krishna, independent of Him. She said "He is very much here, in my heart in the form of pain." Sri Ramakrishna used to say "I see that He alone has become this whole universe and the twenty four cosmic principles".

Every bit of our existence is pervaded by Him and His presence, at all times under all situations. We need to perceive it. Our abilities, capabilities, knowledge, skill – everything is verily the *Īsvara*. And *Īsvara* is my essence and the essential nature. With His infallible presence in me, He is always in me, with me and pervading me. The duties of my life are His commandments for me as long as He keeps independent ego in me. He pervades my actions and receives them as and when I do. Through my duties (the *Svakarma*) I worship Him. I am connected to Him internally as non-dual Spiritual Entity and externally as a part of Nature which is He Himself being His knowledge expressed. I am safe, secure and whole, ever full without the feeling of being isolated or lacking anything; I am *Pūrṇa*.

Thus, being in the jurisdiction of Nature, and aspiring for the above mentioned experience, the prayer follows:

"Mother, I am your child still groping in the darkness and seeking a way out, kindly illumine my intellect so that it can conceive the Truth, and illumine my heart so that it can experience the truth. Make my entire life a worship unto God and may I be able to discharge all my duties of life as an offering to Him. Keep my heart pure and unstained, my mind clear, and my life clean and transparent so that I will be able to receive your grace, your benediction and benevolence. Make me remain a *true child* of this Beautiful Nature".

Our indebtedness to Nature

There are so many entities in Nature that are serving man and sustaining his life on this earth – the sun, the air, the water, the plants, our teachers, our forefathers, the holy scriptures etc., each being a power directly influencing the life of every being, apart from themselves being *Īsvara*, deserve our gratitude. Each of them is *Īsvara* and Power together and is honoured and adored by Hindus as *Devatās*. We offer our love, respect and gratitude to them all by remembering them in our daily prayers.

Thus, the performer should offer his salutations to mark his love, respect and gratitude; with each salutation he should offer palm full of water containing a pinch of black gingly¹ seed into a bowl as an oblation to them.

This is called *Tarpana* (तर्पण= that which is offered to please and fill someone with joy and satisfaction).

- | | |
|---|---|
| (i) My salutations to all divine beings. | <i>Om sarvebhyo Devatābhyo Namaḥ.</i>
(ॐ सर्वेभ्यो देवताभ्यो नमः।) |
| (ii) My salutation to all Incarnations. | <i>Om Sarvebhyo Avatārebhyo Namaḥ.</i>
(ॐ सर्वेभ्यो अवतारेभ्यो नमः।) |
| (iii) My salutation to all prophets. | <i>Om Sarvebhyo Ācārebhyo Namaḥ.</i>
(ॐ सर्वेभ्यो आचारेभ्यो नमः।) |
| (iv) My salutation to all saints / sages. | <i>Om Sarvebhyo Ṛṣibhyo Namaḥ.</i>
(ॐ सर्वेभ्यो ऋषिभ्यो नमः।) |

(The water collected in the bowl is disposed of under a tree or a plant in the garden where people usually do not place their feet).

The light (self-luminosity) and heat (power) in Sun are considered to symbolise the Consciousness (*Caitanya*) and its Power (*citsakti*); and the material aspect and the power of the Sun to sustain life and to render all movements and activities on this earth possible – is symbolised to represent Nature. Thus the Sun is considered to symbolically represent the entire Creation with the Lord of Creation, *Īsvara*, actively pervading it. Thus the Sun is considered as the visible God and as a constant reminder of the Reality which is beyond the perception of mind and senses. The Sun is considered as the media (like a cell phone) to convey our prayers, adorations and worships to *Īsvara*.

With this understanding in the mind we offer *Arghya* (अर्घ्य) to Sun. Mildly perfumed water (usually with sandal, agaru etc.,) with a few flowers, green shoots of grass (*durva*) and a pinch of rice (*Akṣata*) in a small palm-filling container is held in the two palms joined together and facing the Sun ourselves, is offered on the ground (if possible from an elevated place, say, standing on a terrace of the house or at least standing in the same place where rites are performed).

Our role to perform rites and pray for the deceased

With this knowledge we can understand and recognise our place in this vast Nature. We are basically children of Nature. It is this '*child of Nature*' who plays all roles. First, the

¹ The gingly seeds are used as an example to indicate God pervading everything of the universe — such a tiny seed as gingly contains oil which uniformly pervades every point of the seed, so does God, the *Īsvara* pervade the universe. With this background it is used in presenting libation of water to manes, gods and demigods or any type of being beyond our reach.

role begins as a material child and last it ends up its play as spiritual child. In the middle, of course, it is the child of Nature that is putting on and playing various roles. When this identity grows in a person (that happens to keep the person fully connected to the Nature and to God through the inner awareness), the person remains untouched, unstained and unaffected by the various roles he/she plays in his/her life. Such a life imparts joy to everything. Sri Krishna uses the simile of *padmapatra*, the lotus leaf (*padmapatramivāmbhasā* B.G. V.10). The lotus leaf in water or the water on the lotus leaf does not wet the leaf, not a bit even. While, on the other hand, it imparts beauty and lends a glow that makes the droplets shine like pearls while lotus leaf remains by itself untouched and un-involved though supporting it fully. We can see Sri Ramakrishna remaining unaffected by the numerous problems including the excruciating pain in the throat. He confined the problems, pains and duties to the role and remained aloof as a child. He illumined his divine play lending a glow to all that happened during that time – the joys, the merriment as well as the bereavements and sufferings; ever remaining himself free and untouched by any of them, enjoyed the Bliss of God.

Having discovered our identity as a child of Nature, we should never again identify with different roles we play. Our situation prescribes our role and appropriate to it we play. Here in the role of the performer of last rites we come back to our basic role as the child of Nature and without deviation and assuming any other role, as a mere child talking to its fond mother, we pray —

“O’Mother, the unchallengeable Queen of all beings and of the clans, the wonderful Directress of the rites, I being Your child praise You, please hear our call. You are the Guardian of *ṛtam*, shining through every object you exist as the invincible Law and Order in the universe. You are the all-pervading Consciousness existing as Mother for us all. This prayer is my souls sincere desire. Please do take personal care of this deceased soul, give him shelter at Your feet and bring him up in a suitable atmosphere that he/she can recognise his / her own true nature and attain the imperishable state of Bliss, and be free forever. In full trust in You I offer this departed soul mentally at Your feet, and knowing she/he has a responsible mother to take carefully, I free my mind of all anxiety and concerns, I release my conscience free from the dues of duties and responsibilities regarding this person. Fill us with Your Holy lusture and make us shine with the Spiritual glory. Make us successfully complete these rites and all our duties of life”.

(iii) **Supplication to the departed Soul**

Dissolve all awarenesses in one thought of God. It is something like two lovers forgetting the world around in thought of each other. By that we tune ourselves to the Divine, transcend the mundane, and expand to the cosmic level. Then, being in perfect harmony with all beings and the universe, we find the ‘*oneness*’ with all beings which is inherent in our deepest nature; all beings are rooted in the same Consciousness. The whole cosmos is but name, form and action (नाम,रूप,कर्म) intelligently put together. Everything has its

place in the scheme of things, serving a definite purpose. Just as we have our intelligence backing us, there is Cosmic Intelligence behind this universe. Everything is placed intelligently. There is a way-in, there is a way-out. There is a way to accomplish anything a man wants to, because man's thinking cannot cross universal limits. If we make the present moment the focal point of our attention, we go beyond the ego and the shackle of past and future awareness. We relinquish our relationships too — our interpretation of who he/she was and what he/she did in the past. We become free from our own egoic movements and also our desires and fears. The departed soul remains in our awareness as a helpless child of Nature. Attention, which is alert stillness grounded in compassion or pure unadulterated love is the key. Pure love neither wants nor fears anything, the pure love bars all self-seeking and the compassion demands service. Our understanding of the departed soul is now not limited by form, it is neither formless (because I am able to conceive that soul mentally and feel its presence), but something beyond form. So we plead not through thought but through stillness expressed through heart. Stillness cannot be and need not be created. It is already there but obscured by our own mental noise. If we are but attentive we recognise it and if we are receptive to it we experience it. Thoughts create artificial barrier, a separation. Let heart alone convey the message. Communications rooted in Being are expressed through heart and they alone reach the intended soul. Mere thoughts that are mind-based cannot reach the departed or un-embodied souls.

So, we feel, feel, feel. Leave the mundane and feel the cosmos, emerge out of thoughts and feel the stillness within, putting ourselves into the whole we feel the root Being, we feel the inner stillness, we feel the oneness. It dissolves all the difference and limitations, and connects our hearts to the Divine and to the departed soul. We may not be able to see or perceive the departed soul but our desire and intention create the link to convey the message, our supplication/request, and it is through our inner- connectedness in Nature and in Spirit.

Without words we have to convey our message, or we have to put our words through the stillness of our heart. In the inner stillness, feel the presence of the departed soul with the exalted purpose of presenting the message to enlighten the soul. Like a mother gazing at the face of her infant on her lap and conveying her heart without words, convey the following message by discerning the meaning vividly in your heart.

“Our dear one, listen me with your heart, we have a message for you. Wherever you are and in whatever condition, know you are on your spiritual pilgrimage with the ultimate purpose of reaching Perfection. It is God-given responsibility to *Jīva*. May you be awake to the Spiritual element in you. Look ahead and bow your will to God and Mother Nature, joyfully yield to their move. They are favourable to you. God is ocean of compassion brightly shining within you. Mother Nature is love, sacrifice, harmony and beauty in whose lap you are moving about and growing. They are bringing all-healing Nectar of Purity and Divinity. They shall provide you with the strength, knowledge and power to overcome all limitations. Help yourself by releasing old grips or holdings, if any, and convert all experiences contained in you into the power to go God-word. We release you from all obligations, all duties and responsibilities which you had left unfinished, we release you from

our hold, our expectations and demands and binds of mind and attachments. Please go forward to attain Freedom, and Peace. May the Supreme Lord of the universe and Mother Nature guide you further”.

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The pre-disposal ceremonies

The marriage is the last sacrament while living. It is conducted in presence of *Homa* fire as the witness. That *Homa* fire is supposed to be carried by the married couple to their living place and till the death of the husband the fire is kept live and as a part of daily devotions oblations are offered in it, and the vows of marriage and to live a pious life, his duties to society, etc., are renewed every morning and evening. This fire is called *Gārhyapatya* fire. After the death four offerings are supposed to be made to the *Gārhyapatya* fire while touching the right hand of the dead man with a spoon full of clarified butter. With the decline of the sacrificial religion among the Hindus, this prescription has become obsolete, perhaps one or two orthodox families might be following it in the entire India. It is this fire, which was a constant companion throughout his householder’s life and protector of his righteousness, that is carried to the cremation ground to light his funeral pyre.

Now, the new *Paurānic* and popular customs have taken its place. It is to pour a few drops of water with a *Tulasi* leaf in the mouth of a dying person or the corpse.

The Bier

According to *Gr̥hyasūtras* a cot made of *Audumbarā* wood (*Ficus glemorata*) is to be provided, having spread on it a piece of black antelope skin, the corpse is to be laid thereon with face upward and head pointing to south. Under present practices, however, a bamboo bier is being used with a cloth spread instead of antelope skin. In recent days hospital stretchers are being widely used to serve the purpose.

We may spread a cloth in a convenient place preferably on a thin plastic sheet so that any discharges from the corpse may not contaminate the surroundings, and place the corpse on it so that visitors and relatives can offer their respects. A coconut is split into two halves, wiped to remove wetness inside, filled with oil, a wick is placed in it and lighted as a lamp. The two lamps are placed on either side of the head on the ground say, six inches away from the head. The coconut contains the five basic elements with which the physical bodies of all beings are formed. The five basic elements are, elemental space (*Ākāśatattva*, आकाशतत्त्व), elemental air (*Vāyutattva*, वायुतत्त्व), elemental Fire (*Agnitattva*, अग्नितत्त्व), elemental water (*Jalatattva*, जलतत्त्व) and elemental earth (*Pr̥thvī-tattva*, पृथ्वीतत्त्व). In coconut they are represented by empty space within the coconut, the air contained in it, its shell (wood), the water contained in it and the kernel in it, respectively. So the coconut is said to represent the human body here. It is broken into two halves to show that it is the body alone that gets

destroyed. While two lamps are lighted in them and placed near the head to show that the life is continuing independent of body and the real nature of man, the inner spiritual being, the *Ātman* is imperishable and eternal. The *Jīva* or the individual self had many past lives and is going to have, perhaps, many more before it reaches Perfection. Between the two halves, the one with three eyes (sprouting vent) is considered as female half and the other is considered as male half. The lamp in the male half is placed to the right side and represents the light of Pure Consciousness, the *Ātman*, the uninvolved witness. And the lamp in the female half is placed to the left and is said to represent the individual soul involved in nature and undergoing transmigration. This gives lot of consolation to the visitors and relatives. They feel they have come to bid adieu wishing a grander future; as if the present event is a promotion to a higher level of existence. In case, if acquirement of coconut etc., is difficult, a pair of lighted candles can be used to serve the purpose.

Usually the body is bathed and new cloths are put on. In place of bath we may invoke holy waters remembering the divinity pervading various holy rivers and their purifying nature and sprinkle a palmful of water over the corps. The old cloths may be removed (if possible) and the body be wrapped in a new sheet of cloth (preferably unbleached and uncut). Then perfumes be applied to it. Body be decorated with flowers, garlands and wreaths placed over the body to honour the person and show respect to the body in which ‘man’, the image of God, lived. Incense sticks are lighted and placed at any convenient place near the body. It creates pleasant transcendental feelings. It represents *Praṇās* (vital life-force) and indicates life to continue beyond death.

In the mean while some songs can be sung. *Bhagavad Gītā* chanted, *Vedic* chantings done. The purpose is that it offers some consolation to the grief stricken people and gives a diversion to their moods. This purifies the atmosphere and fills the mind with some higher thinking. As for the deceased, these songs and chantings especially those loved by him/her stir-up the inner contents of the departed soul. The intense desire to live, the struggle for existence of the *Jīvātman* continues as long as the corpse remains. It is an unconscious drive, without any awareness. The *Jīvātman* struggles to enter and occupy the body again habitually without a will. But there are no *Karmās* (the *Prārabdha*) that can be worked out through that body. So, body cannot accommodate it. Once the body is disposed of the *Jīvātman* continues to live around the dwelling place to a maximum of 12 days; *Karmās* and *Vāsanās* or other forces taking it away to some other place thereafter, where it can workout *Karmās*, that have come to maturity (the *Prārabdha*). These twelve days form the mourning period. So, when the body is present, the Soul being still present, if we can charge the atmosphere with divine awarenesses, then its inner *Samskāras* get re-shuffled. Usually, for the great majority of people their awareness remains crowded with the mundane; and the good, the great, the noble and the spiritual — the sublime remains buried in the deeper layers. At the time of death, except a rare few who have strived to keep their awareness turned to the Divine during activities, all the rest masses die with intense clinging to the world. When we charge the atmosphere with the Divine, the Soul’s spiritual awareness springs up and its

worldly awareness sink to the bottom. This changes the course of the Soul to acquire a noble human body with noble tendencies in a holy set up.

Different kinds of disposal

The earliest literary mention of funerals is found in R̥gveda and Atharvaveda¹. The religious belief of the people and their cultural background determine the mode of disposal of dead bodies. Vedic hymns belong to a society which is highly advanced in philosophical outlook and Spiritual attainments, so there are no chances to finding primitive forms of disposal in Vedic and Pauranic literature.

Nowhere we find any reference to cannibalism or eating away of the dead by survivors. Probably the sub aerial deposit (leaving body on some unused ground as the Parsis do) was the earliest method. Primitive nomadics had to leave behind the dead and move away. During Vedic period people led a settled and civilized life and the aged persons were revered, held in great respect and love. So exposures or abandonment or neglect is out of question. Cave burial is also un-heard of the Hindus. The idea of preservation of corpse in the house with or without previous desiccation or mummification could not raise in the Hindu thought because had outgrown the stage of archaic society that believed that spirit of man dwells in the body even after his death. Water burial (sea or river) is recognized in Hinduism. Those who have no survivors to perform their funeral ceremonies are given water burial. The water is said to purify the soul, and the body is supposed to have served as food for the aquatic life, the fishes etc.,. Children are also given water-burial or ground-burial for the reason that they are esteemed too innocent to require a purification; also, usually for children no post-burial ceremonies performed. Ascetics, monks and mendicants who have no family ties and do not stand in need of funeral formalities are also offered water burial.

Burial proper (ground-burial) is not there in the present day Hindu custom, except in cases of great saintly personalities and very small children. From the Vedic period to the present day the cremation or burning of the dead body is the accustomed and the accepted mode of the disposal. It is accomplished with respect and honour as a sacrifice. Therefore this mode is said to have evolved at a high stage of human evolution. It is considered to be most scientific and refined.

The potent factor that gave lasting position to this is the Indian way of viewing things. The Indo-Aryans tried to search for a common unifying factor in the diversity of this universe. They thus perceived the Divinity pervading all that exists and even transcending all that exists. So, the sentiment of fear was never prominent in the Hindu mind, especially in the educated and those of matured thinking. Wisdom supervised the fear-range and kept it within its limits. More than that, it made them see something beyond the normal human

¹ Records regarding disposal of corpse in pre-vedic period is not found. Recent archaeological discoveries claim some instances of how the dead bodies were disposed in ancient India. It is however limited to burial and fail to give informations or other methods and ceremonies observed.

understanding. They found death, birth and life were different manifestation of the Divine, yet being ephemeral, does not deserve a chase for coveting anything of this world; while the human birth is more precious and is meant to transcend all limitations of Nature and reach the Beyond. Seeing the fire consuming all objects that come under its sway without making any differences (be it a fine silk cloth or the dirty filth, is reduced to one and the same ash), seeing its effulgence, its impartiality, its purity, uncompromising nature, it was symbolically accepted and used to represent the Divine. It was a visible fact and helped to clearly comprehend and realize the concept of Divinity. It took the place of standing a witness to ceremonies, vows and promises. Extending it further they started regarding fire as the messenger of gods on earth who carried oblations offered by men to them. To love nature and be in tune with Her and to bring mankind together through a common ideal, various things which were liked by all and commonly available like the food items, sweets, cloths, fruits, ghee etc., were offered to fire as oblation to various forces in Nature, like the sun, air, rains etc. The love and respect for the dead, the understanding of all pervading Divinity that pervades the survivors, the dead and the corps, made them to consecrate the death, the dead and the corpse to the Nature by offering the dead body into the fire. [The world as manifestation of God was not prominent among the parsis, they were not aware of the Divinity pervading even the mean-deemed things like corpse. Apart from it, the body till death is the temple of God, in which God lived as man! Thus, though they are staunch worshippers of Fire, they regarded Fire too sacred to be polluted by such unclean things as the corpse. So they developed the custom of exposing the corps to be devoured by birds and beasts. This idea is essentially a religious one and not the spiritual which transcend religious limits].

Hindus offer ceremoniously the dead body to fire as an oblation to Mother Nature fixing their aim as transcending Nature to reach the Eternal, and also to help the future generation continue the Spiritual tradition. The Hindus even now regard cremation as absolutely necessary for the welfare of the Souls of the dead, excepting those of the infants who are sinless and pure, and the monks and holy men who are supposed to have overcome all sinful tendencies during their life-time, and therefore accorded a burial as perfectly harmless. These ceremonies are deemed to release the soul from the old bodily bindings and help the Soul move on the progressive path to higher states or higher realms. In that sense cremation ceremony is called *Aurdhvadaihika-Kriya* (और्ध्वदैहिक-क्रिया). In the absence of the ceremony the departed soul is believed to linger about its late habitation and hover without consolation, and in great distress as a *Preta* प्रेत (un-embodied spirit helplessly roaming about because of the unreleased old bindings).

The funeral procession

If it is not electrical crematorium, then a batch must go in advance and prepare or arrange for the pyre. Usually local Government authorities provide all facilities, including certificate of cremation. After all have offered their love and prayers, before the body is taken out for transporting to cremation ground, the offered flowers from the shrine (of house or

temple) are placed on the chest and the holy water (*Caranāmṛta* – चरणामृत) too is offered. It is to remind the seat of God in man's heart while living. And to satisfy our feelings some food items relished by him/her while living are packed and kept by the side of the body which accompanies the body to the pyre. Whether carried on shoulders or by a vehicle, the funeral procession is headed by the chief mourner who is going to perform the obsequies, generally the eldest son of the dead. He usually carries a fire brand (a pot containing burning charcoals from the sacred domestic Homa fire). He is followed by the bier and the bier is followed by the relatives and friends of the deceased. Usually with elders in the front, age wise they form an orderly group and move. Women too are permitted go but rarely a few go. While lifting the bier the following prayer is uttered "May this sight of impermanency help us live a noble life of love, purity, compassion and service. May our minds eschew the temporal and seek the Eternal." "O my mind understand now at least God alone is Real and Eternal, the Ultimate Truth". While the procession keeps moving towards the cremation ground they go on repeating 'Lord's Name alone abides' (*Rāma Nāma Satya Hai*—राम नाम सत्य है), or "The All pervading Eternal Truth is Sri Ramakrishna" (हरिः ॐ रामकृष्ण)". Earlier in olden times the cow was one of the important member of the funeral procession and was called *Anustarani* (अनुस्तरणि). Before the pyre was lit she was made to walk thrice round the pyre. The verse uttered at that time conveys the meaning something like this "Sinless you are, service is your life, may your circumambulation make the deceased soul sinless. May it keep us sinless and serviceful in this world! Then she was sanctified by another verse "May thou be the source of satisfaction to all mankind by the milk you provide". Lastly the cow was set free or given away as a gift with the verse "This cow is Divine by heritage so, I solemnly plead to all wise men, kill not this sacred harmless cow, may her live her full life, Om!, I let her loose".

With change of time presently we may set aside a small amount of money, within our own limits and after the 12 days donate it to some spiritual organisation with sinless life and service as their motto.

After reaching the crematorium, the pyre is sanctified by sprinkling water with Mantra 'Om, my salutations to the elemental Fire-principle' [*Om Agnitattvāya Namaḥ*, ॐ अग्नितत्त्वाय नमः, five lamps (candles) are lighted and placed at a distance, incense sticks are lighted and placed near the lamps. The five lamps represent five scorching fires (the first one is the common fire we see in the world, four others torture man and keep him burning within!):

- i. The natural external fire (*Prākṛtāgni*— प्राकृतग्नि) which cooks food etc., which is going to burn the body in funeral. – Acts upon matter.
- ii. The tormenting fire of hunger (*Jaṭharāgni*, जठरग्नि). Manifesting as hunger and thirst, demanding food and water frequently. – Acts upon *Prāṇa*.
- iii. The devastating fire of lust (*Kāmāgni*— कामग्नि). Manifesting as desire for sex and attachment to progeny. – Acts upon senses and body.

- iv. The torturous fire of emotion (*Hridayāgni*– हृदयाग्नि). Manifesting as worldly love, panting for a companion, feeling of loneliness. – Acts upon heart.
- v. The burning fire of knowledge (*Jñānāgni*, ज्ञानाग्नि) manifesting as worldly wisdom, scientific knowledge, commonsense, conscience, general understanding. – Acts upon intellect.

The five fires are purified by a gaze uttering *Om* (ॐ)

Sanctified by sprinkling water uttering *Hūm phat* (हूं फट्)

Divined by touching the lamp/candles with uttering ऐं (*Aim*) or sprinkling rice (*Akṣata*).

Mentally perceiving that:

The first lamp i.e., the natural external fire is now rendered fit for sacrificial purpose – (pyre is considered to be sacrificial fire to represent Mother Nature, and body as an oblation)

The second lamp, the fire of hunger pertaining to the departed soul – is divinised to have changed the attitude; food eaten is no more for enjoying taste or gratification of senses but is an offering to the Indwelling Spirit.

The third lamp, the fire of lust – is now divinised so that the energies draining through lower channels are transmuted to seek higher channels i.e., seeking the Spiritual.

The fourth lamp, the emotional fire – is now divinised to transform into divine love to love God, and into universal love to love all beings.

The fifth lamp, lamp of knowledge – is now divinised to dissolve all differences that mind perceives to find the One Reality pervading everything, i.e., the God, the Divine, the *Om*.

Then the prayer follows:

“O, you five fires accompanying every being, do not scorch us any more in any way. Be a blessing to the departed Soul to guide his/her future lives to persue the good, noble and divine, bless us all to lead a life centred in God and Reality. May the world bewitching Māyā not engulf us and delude our minds. Bless this world and all beings, Om!”.

All the five candles are used to light the pyre. In case of electrical incinerator, candles may be placed on the corpse and sent in.

The fire is lit with the Verse:

“For the promotion of our Spiritual glory, our physical well being and for the upliftment of the dead, I am lighting the pyre. May this noble act serve us to prosper in life, overcome all assailants and progress in every way”.

When the pyre catches fire and flames rise up burning down the body – the prayer is uttered with a palm filled with water: “May the body be reduced to ashes, may the senses dissolve in Nature, may the vital air merge in the atmosphere, may the mind and intellect dissolve in God. Mayest thou proceed, according to the virtuous deeds to heaven or earth or the nether regions, whichever place is beneficial to thee. May the whole episode and any future possible corporeal existence lead thou to Eternal Spiritual Existence of Bliss.” The water in palm is sprinkled on the pyre.

This is the most touching scene when the survivors and relatives send off their dead relative to the next world for ever, a lasting parting indeed, but with every solicitude for his or her future everlasting happiness and peace which man seldom finds in his life on earth.

During the *Sūtra* period (Pauranic times) Spiritualists who could see beyond human range of perception divined as to where the dead had gone after the cremation. Or from the five traditional fires preserved by the house holder, which fire engulfed the dead was noticed and it was argued whether the dead moved to the world of gods or of the manes or to somewhere else. Presently neither different kinds of fires are preserved by a householder nor are the relatives of the deceased bother about his future abode.

The return:

Then the funeral party returns without other diversions. They are asked to restrain themselves from any expression of grief, instead decide to lead a good and noble life for themselves. They are advised to entertain the good deeds of the dead in mind and entertain one another with consoling speeches and virtuous tales. It is said ‘Many tears burn the dead’. In Mahābhārata Epic Vyasa rebukes Yudhisthira for bewailing the death of his nephew. To drive away grief and bring consolation to the survivors story-tellers are engaged in North India or *Purāṇas* are read.

A small such story runs like this:

A young couple lived with a growing girl baby. When the child was just six, the mother passes away. Father brings up the girl with great care and love; as if she was his very life. Owing to some epidemic the girl succumbs to death. Overpowered by unbearable grief, the father gives up his job and is seen often moving about weeping and wailing even in open streets. He becomes indifferent to food and manners, he looks as if stark mad. One day while sitting alone in a lonely place, he gets a strange vision. He sees far above in sky a huge cave like opening into which some semi-transparent human-like figures moving in a row with a slow pace into the cave. The cave is pitch dark. All are seen carrying a candle in their left hand and protecting the flame of the candle with right hand from the strong wind gushing out of the cave. Immediately the understanding flashes in his mind that they are the dead ones moving to some other unknown world. As he stands witnessing the scene with surprise, with a few people left over in the row he sees to his utter dismay his daughter too is there being the last person in that row. Unable to bear the sight of her parting he at once shouts in shrill quivering voice — “Oh! My child, please come back, I can’t be without you”. She turns not

and is intent on her path. He shouts again ‘come back, come back’; a third time again. Then she turns back and looking at the father says “Never again call me back. Don’t you know I can’t return, I am on my journey to grand new place” and follows the row. After a while, when all have entered the cave, herself left alone is about to enter the cave, with great difficulty the little girl is protecting the flame from the blowing wind, the father screams and wails ‘Don’t go away, please come, please come’. Hearing the screaming voice of the father she turns back to look at him and the wind blows off the candle in her hand. She is engulfed by darkness and is not able to find her path anymore, no one to help her either. Then she says “what have you done, dad, I can neither return nor go ahead, what a sad plight your weeping has put me into”.

So make the way clear and pleasant bidding a farewell and
wish a good future rather than weep and wail.

The offering of water

The next ceremony is offering of water to the dead called udakakarma (उदककर्म). It is performed on the same day of cremation or if time does not permit, then they return home take bath and next day morning they observe it. The relatives of the dead (to whomsoever it is possible) bathe in the nearest stream, river, lake or sea and purify themselves and offer prayer to the Lord of all beings (*Prajāpati*) for the universal welfare. While bathing the mourners turn their face to south, plunge in water. Then, after bath, standing in knee deep, (naval deep or chest deep water or whatever depth available) they fix their minds on their chosen Deity, (feel the presence and offer water from the cup formed by joining palms uttering “*Om*, May this water of honour please the beloved Lord dwelling in my heart.” Then again with palms with filled water they offer that water (pick from stream and pour back into the stream, symbolising that from God/Nature we take energy knowledge etc., and is to be returned back to the Source) uttering “*Om, Hrīm*, May this water of honour please Mother Nature, the substratum of life and source of all energies.” Once more the water is offered in the same way uttering “*Om Aim* (ॐ ऐं) may this water of honour please all great teachers of the world and my Spiritual Teacher (*Guru* – गुरु).” Lastly calling upon the dead person by name with love and respect, feeling his/her presence ‘wherever be you and in whatever state, may you be pleased by this, and be pleased with us all. May your journey to the Eternal proceed on, *Om*’. Then they get out of water, put on dry cloths and rinse the old ones and carry back. There is an interesting custom which is commonly observed in the present day enjoying the udakakarma. Just after the water offering, some grains of boiled rice and peas or balls made of boiled rice mixed with black gingly are placed on the ground for the crows. Crows and birds eating it is considered to indicate the departed soul getting pleased. [It resembles the primitive belief according to which deads are supposed to appear as birds].

Regaling the mourners:

After the water offering ceremony they do not return to the village till sunset, they retire to a clean pleasant open grassy spot. There persons conversant with past histories and epics and mythologies regale the assembly with anecdotes and praises of the life and meritorious, righteous deeds of the deceased. They try to bring out the greatness of people to mind and make them land in positive thinking. They pictorially bring out consoling stories from the ancient lore. They revolutionize their perspective and provide them with a philosophy that Radiates Light. ‘God, the Truth is source of invincibility, purity, perfection and peace’ is brought to day light, the fact that trials and tribulations are necessary for human evolution and spiritual growth is brought out with examples. The means of transcending individual limitations and secrets of achieving success are also promoted by the wise and elderly people.

The pain of the heart covered by cheer of mind and with a constructive-will they return home. Young ones walk first and elders behind in order – a procedure reverse of that followed when the procession went to the cremation ground. It symbolises death and birth two opposite movements grave-ward elders first, world-ward children first. When they arrive at home by the way of purifying themselves they touch water or tulasi plant, or a cow, or cow dung or anything, even a stone, which they consider to be holy and purifying, and then step in the house. These symbolise the final release of traces of hold of ‘myness’ relating to that person. The above holy articles used as purifying are supposed to serve as barriers against the depressing thought or thought of fear that would raise with memory of the dead.

The defilement: *Aśauca* or *Sūtaka* (अशौच or सूतक)

After death of a family member, the whole family and all direct relatives are said to be under defilement or pollution or impurity. It is an act of prohibition or restriction imposed on usually the survivors in the family and on the relative circle from performing and attending any religious or social function usually for a period of 12 days (the day of death included). It is a religious and social taboo. The main reason is that while in excessive grief (as in death) and excessive joy (as in birth of child) one cannot perform one’s obligatory duties devotedly and with perfection. Once we lose grip on dedication and perfection, performing religious observances loosely without dedication, just for name sake, becomes a normal course. The very purpose of observances gets defeated.

The second thing is on sanitary grounds, the contagious nature of the corpse. Same case with the birth of a child. Till a few decades back active sanitary system and hygienic methods were absent, epidemic was seen to spread from the house of the dead during sickness of the dead and from the corpse after his death and from the house where child is born. The fear at the sight of corpse itself, the horror of death, corpse as vehicle of death, or dreadful thought of evil disembodied spirits also would have been responsible for the restrictions. Whatever be the reason, the present age has set man in a different set up and with a different understanding. Moreover, the period of defilement/impurity varies according to the relationship of the persons to the dead. The near relatives are defiled by death than the distant ones.

According to profession, age, sex of the deceased, the period and scope of defilement differs. The intellectuals, cultured families and the warrior families who maintain maximum purity and cleanliness are restricted to 10 days defilement, the business people moving about here there were restricted to 15 days *Āśauca* and the labour class who maintain less purity and cleanliness were accorded one month of restriction. This distinction was based on purity and cleanliness they observe and their involvement and circle of operation in the society¹. “A student of scriptures strictly dedicated to religious observances is absolved from defilement in one day; who is only a student of scriptures but not a performer of religious observances, in three days; and others who follows neither of these, in ten days.” says Paraśara-Smṛiti². The later Smṛtis eliminate *āśauca* altogether. “Persons engaged in or initiated in a sacrifice, those performers of acts of service/sacrifice, men vowed to certain observances, Novices, the Realised Souls (Illumined ones), the artisans, sculptures, doctors, servants, barbers, kings and their servants become instantly purified”³. Here, the exception is purely based on the social convenience.

“The death of a child under the age of two inflicts defilement on parents alone, for one night, the rest of the family and the clan are untouched” (*Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* iii. 10.2-5). The death of a boy after his *Upanayana* causes full fledged (twelve days) defilement, while that of a girl before her marriage causes only three days defilement. The *Dharmaśāstrās* and the *Smṛtis* make defilement incumbent on the affected persons, while it is optional in *Gṛhyasūtra*. “It depends on one’s wish to observe the rules of *Āśauca*....” (P.Gs.,-iii 10.46-47).

Looking at all these scriptural mandates, traditions and customs as well as the intended purpose, we may have two options. Just as the Government observes mourning when the President or Prime Minister passes away, we may observe for three days and end the observances. Or, since it is once in a life time, and for the last time that we carry out these observances, we can extend through the full period of twelve days. We have nothing extra to do except keeping a lamp burning and offering a handful of water once daily and to abstain from merry-making which is good for our soul. So, we can have the twelve day observance for our nearest and dearest people, and have the three day observance for the distant relatives.

Collecting the remnants (*Asthi-sañcayana* —अस्थिसंञ्चयन)

¹ Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra. iii. 10. 29-30.

² Paraśara Smṛti: III.5. — एकाहात् शुध्यते विप्रो योऽग्निवेदसमन्वितः।
त्र्यहात् केवलवेदस्तु निर्गुणे दशभिर्दिनेः॥

*Ekāhāta śudhyate vipro yo 'gnivedasamanvitaḥ |
Tryahāt kavalavadastu nirguṇe daśabhirdinaiḥ ||*

³ ऋत्विजां दीक्षितानां च यज्ञियं कर्म कुर्वताम् ।
सन्नव्रति ब्रह्मचारिदात् ब्रह्मविदां तथा ॥ *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* iii.28.
कारवः शिल्पिनो वैद्याः दासीदासश्च नापिताः ।

*Ratvijām dīkṣitānām ca yajñiyam karma kurvatām |
Satravratī brahmacāridātṛ brahmavidām tathā ||
Kāraṇaḥ śilpino vaidyāḥ dāsīdāsaśca nāpitāḥ |
Rājanah śrotriyāścaiva sadyaḥ saucāḥ prakīrtitāḥ ||*

राजानः श्रोत्रियाश्चैव सद्यः शौचाः प्रकीर्तिताः ॥ *Parāśara smṛti*. Iii. 21-22

The next ceremony is “collection of bones”. The remnants — ash, bones etc., are considered to be the ‘goodness’ that sanctifies man and mankind. ‘Goodness’ can never be destroyed; based on this axiom, the Fire is supposed to have destroyed all evil and evil tendencies in the body and thus the moral purity, goodness, all virtues possessed by the deceased are supposed to have left behind by the fire. So, to preserve them in the world and to spread it all over, it is left in river waters or buried in unoccupied forest areas. Now-a-days it is regarded very meritorious for the dead to collect the bones on the day of cremation and subsequently at a convenient time leave them into the Ganges or any other holy-river. The Relics of the saints and holymen are regarded as sanctifying the earth and therefore either preserved or offered in water of Ganges or any other river.

When the cremation is complete, on the same day or the next day or the third day, the chief mourner accompanied by one or two family members goes to the crematorium and picks a few bones and a little ash from the remains and puts them into a small earthen pot (or any container) and brings it home. It is preserved safely in some place preferable outside the house.

The peace invoking ceremony (*Śānti Karma* — शान्ति कर्म)

The subsequent ceremony is pacificatory rites for the well being of the living. It is the regards shown to life and the living and invoking peace and harmony in life.

The first twelve days including the day of passing away are observed as mourning days. After the body is sent to crematorium a lamp is lit and placed at home usually where the shrine is situated. If it is oil lamp we can continuously keep it burning by supplying oil frequently. If it is causing inconvenience, early in the morning and at dusk a candle can be lighted. Everyday before noon cupped palmsful of water be offered to the chosen Deity, Mother Nature and the departed soul as mentioned earlier (as in page 32, but at home). *Śānti Karma* may conveniently be performed on the thirteenth day.

The *Gṛhya Sūtras* prescribes a very long procedure which is not convenient and suitable for the modern times. Modern *Smṛtikārās* (law-makers) enjoin the shaving of head and beards (in case of men), pairing of nails and bathing, which is the present custom. Having special worship at home or at nearby temples and feeding all friends and relatives is a generally observed custom. Indian families are closely knit and intensely attached to each other. Family functions and ceremonies including birth and death ceremonies are attended by large groups. The trend is slowly changing with Western wind blowing over the Eastern minds. In fast moving modern times, they have become unwanted obligations and people peep in for a while to ‘put their attendance’ and not out of their genuine feelings but to fulfil obligations. Hosts too invite out of obligation. The whole scene is taking an artificial look. Ingenuity corrupts the ceremony and defeats the purpose. So, without enforcement of obligations, it would be nice to feed a few poor and needy or create an endowment for such purpose in an institution. To directly feed someone, it gives great satisfaction.

The main purpose of this ceremony is the regards shown to life and the living and is to give a higher turn to our lives by invoking peace and harmony. And we must utilise the occasion to know that everything here is ephemeral and thereby activate and quicken our steps towards some positive spiritual attainments which are Eternal and unchanging. What we need is Light and Life. In ancient days all relatives by blood, both male and female used to assemble at a selected place. There a fire used to be lit and all would sit on bullock hide of a red colour and offer their prayers. The fire represented the all pervading Consciousness, The *Īsvara*, and the bullock skin was taken as a symbol of life. Looking at the rituals without knowing the inner significance, the modern Hindus have given up many of these rituals as ‘*mere superstitions*’. When we know the inner significance, we can change the symbol to suit our times keeping the spirit alive. So, we may use a candle or an oil lamp in place of fire to symbolise the all pervading Consciousness and a sapling of a tree as a symbol of life in place of red bullock hide.

Accordingly, place a burning lamp and a sapling in any convenient place where all family members can gather together for a prayer. A coffee table or a low stool would serve the purpose. Then the chief mourner recites the Mantras :- *Bhadram karṇebhiśruṇuyāma*¹..... (भद्रं कर्णेभिःश्रुणुयाम.....). Then a prayer is offered :

‘O! Lord, we need Light, we need life — to reach the Truth. Please provide us with your Light and life. Death is inevitable, but be it to release us from pains and sufferings and to bestow new and noble life. May purity pervade our hearts and be able to love to all beings. May we learn from the dead that nothing we carry from here, nothing earthly comes with us after our death. Having known that this world is impermanent and uncertain, let us devote our lives for reaching what is Eternal and changeless. May our missing friend seek the same light and life. May everyone of us live to a decrepit old age, even as days follows one another, seasons are attached to seasons; even as the young forsake not the elders, so, may the *Dhātā* (धाता ; The Supporter) prolong the life of all people to the full span of hundred years, and help us live a divine life on this earth. May all love each other and live in peace. The children, the disabled, the old, the sick and the suffering, worthy of every attention, being served by us live free of worries without tears. May every woman that they are the builders, protectors and the strength of the society, nay, the strength of the human race, live as decent mothers, free from all blemishes, free from all fears or anxiety. May them receive due respect and be revered by all. This day we invoke gods for our good, for success in conquest over our inner and outer enemies, and for our joys and freedom. We proceed eastwards towards the rising sun leaving the darkness of life behind. *Om* peace, peace, peace.’ The prayer may be followed by devotional singing or the elders addressing the assembly with

¹ भद्रं कर्णेभिः श्रुणुयाम देवाः भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः । *Bhadram karṇebhiḥ śruṇuyāma devāḥ bhadram*
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवांसस्तनूभिर्व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ॥ *paśyemākṣabhiryajatrāḥ |*
Sthirairāṅgaistuṣṭuvāmsastanūbhirvyaśema devahitam
yadāyuh ||

‘O gods, may we hear with our ears what is good and auspicious. O ye adorable ones, may we see with our eyes what is good and auspicious. May we who adore you enjoy with strong limbs and body, the life bestowed upon us by you gods’.

enlightening and soothing words. Then a feast is offered to all who have assembled, and the survivors follow the course of ordinary life. The lamp that is lit in the assembly may be placed in the shrine and the sapling be planted for offering shade in public place. Any act of pity or service in the name of the dead is believed to serve the purpose of a boat to dead to ferry across the unknown unseen regions during transmigration to a next station.

The Memorialisation :- *Pitṛmedha* (पितृमेध)

This ceremony is optional. The remnants of the dead after cremation is interred under earth and a mound or tomb is erected. Among Christians and Mohammedans the burial of the dead and some kind of elevation or tomb or mausoleum is an universal custom. The Hindus have reserved it to honour great saints, monks and Sannyasins only. And it receives very significant position amidst the funeral ceremonies, since it guides future generation to walk along the honoured path of righteousness and spirituality. Raising of mound is not found in the modern Hinduism except building of the monuments, stupas, ‘*Samādhis*’ or ‘*Brindāvans*’ or some kind of memorials to commemorate a few religious celebrities. They are symbols of conquest over death and assurance that the man independent of bodily existence is Immortal; and the purpose of human life amidst innumerable species of beings on this earth is only for attaining this Immortality; and that can be attained through renunciation of worldly seekings through self-surrender and universal love.

Offerings to the dead :- *Śrāddha* (श्राद्ध)

This is the last item of the funeral ceremonies. During the *Āśauca* (mourning period) and later on once in a month and there after once in a year the offerings are made. Here, in a sense, the person who is no longer alive is regarded as still living. These are actually the efforts of the survivors to continue to express their love and concern and guide his/her footsteps to the paramount abode of the Supreme (परस्थाम – *Parandhāma*).

Every human being at any particular moment of its existence displays a highly complicated psychological structure. So many weakest to the most powerful tendencies, so many desires, expectations and demands, and adding fuel to these fires there stands the *Rāga-Dveṣa* (attachments and aversions) — imagine the state of a man, whatever be the age, when he dies in such conditions. Can that soul being tossed and pressurised by so many things be able to rest in peace? Never, rebirth is inevitable. But all the old desires cannot be fulfilled by the new environment the *Jīva* gets after rebirth. In the new birth the *Jīva* does forget everything of the past life, but the inner pressure remains seeking fulfilment. When the immediate relatives perform the last rites and offerings are offered, some of the inner pressures of the *Jīva* in its new birth (or yet in an unembodied state) get released, and the *Jīva* feels light. Many a times people all of sudden find light, unburdened from within, some kind of joy and relief — this is usually assigned to the release of inner pressure of one of the past births owing the offerings made to the *Jīva* by the relatives of a particular past life. This is possible because there is a common platform — the Consciousness on which all *Jīvas* (beings) are living; and are pervaded and inter-linked by that very Consciousness. Intense

remembrance and invocation connects our external awareness to the internal awareness of the departed *Jīvātman*, and though the offerings do not reach the *Jīva* in material form, the intentions do reach the *Jīva* creating an unknown satisfaction within the *Jīva* that releases the good old inner pressures and helps him to be on the move freely. This process is called the *Śrāddhā* (the dedicated offerings). So, whole heartedly with deep feelings anything that is offered to a departed soul connects the offerer and the receiver to the common platform, the consciousness. The consciousness is like a computer net-work or mobile network. If we can log on, we can reach anywhere. Likewise the intentions behind the offerings done with deep feelings reach the intended part of the consciousness and gives relief to the departed soul wherever in whatever condition it is. The custom of making offerings to the dead is prevalent in all religions of the world.

Usually rice-balls (are called *Pinḍa* (पिण्ड) — cooked rice is mixed with a pinch of sasme or *Tila* (तिल) and balls are made of the closed fist size) and are placed on a leaf plate along with water in a leaf cup or mud cup. In a convenient place within the house a mat like seat (*Āsana*) made of the grass is placed and offerings are placed in front of it and the dead is invited affectionately by name and asked to partake the food offerings. This is done on tenth, eleventh and twelfth day after death; and once every month there after on the date of death for subsequent twelve months and thereafter once in a year on the date. Then the offered food, the *Pinḍas* are not eaten but are left in an open area to be eaten by birds especially crows or given to cows. Any other thing like perfume, lamp, milk, flowers etc., can also be offered. If articles like umbrella, sandles, waterpot, cloths etc are offered, then they are given away as gift to priests. We may offer the tradirional rice-balls or even cakes and biscuits.

In a few traditions the *Śrāddhā* is performed for only one year as the dead is believed to reach next station [abode of fore fathers (पितृलोक – *Pitṛloka*) or other planes of existence or next birth on earth] in one year.

Special cases:-

In case of homeless ascetics and beggars who did not leave heirs behind them, the exposure of the dead bodies on trees is adopted. If there is deep river (not in shallow waters) nearby, (*Jala Samādhi*) it can be left in water too (Satapatha Brahmana iv.5.2.13). There is no harm in giving normal funeral.

The rite of *Brahmamedha* is performed (Taitiriya aranyaka - iii) at the death of Brahmana who had realised Bramanhood. No funeral ceremonies were performed and bodies were left uncared specially in case of those who had entered forest and pursued *Brahmavidyā* and supposed to have reached *Brahmaloka* from where there is no return (Chandogya Upanishad VI.6.2.3.). In case of children, their innocent life neither inflicts impurity upon the family nor requires purification as they have not entered worldly life of householders. So, uninitiated boys and unmarried girls are buried. So also the abortive child be buried and the performer becomes purified with mere bath. In case of pregnant woman, the attempts may be made to save the child in the womb. Funeral ceremonies are same as in normal cases.

In case of those who die of accidents, in warfield, by poisons, stings or bites of animals, drowning in water, fall from heights, suicide, they too are give normal funeral with special prayers for their welfare.

The criminals and the morally fallen are on account of unsocial habits were not entitled to funeral ceremonies. Presently there are no authorities to badge them as so or publicly proclaim. And therefore their relatives offer them normal funeral.

Men dying in distant lands far from their homes may be offered if possible same way of funeral or may have to follow the laws of that land. In any case the *Śrāddhā karmas* can be performed in the normal way of at home.

In modern times a novel practice has come into vogue called *Jīvacchrāddha* (जीवच्छ्राद्ध —according to *Jīvacchrāddha prayoga* by Narayana bhatta). An orthodox Hindu believes that the *Samskāras* derived from the proper funeral washes down the soul and therefore essential for one's *Sadgati* (सद्गति – supreme end, salvation). When a person has no sons, or when he is doubtful of his last rites being performed properly by his children, he may wish to see that it is rightly done when he is still alive. So all the ceremonies are performed personally by the person himself.

What we need to derive through these ceremonies is spiritual benefits, salvation and beatitude of both the dead and the survivors. The seeking for freedom from the cycles of birth and death and attainment of everlasting Immortality must be our main aim. The prayers and inner seeking must be accordingly set. Finally we come to an important class — the renunciates, monks, the *Parivrājakās*, ascetics and mendicants, *Sādhus*, *Vairāgīs*. They form a class by themselves. During the Vedic period *Sannyāsa* was one of the Ashramas (stage of life). After the transition from Vedism (or Brahmanism) to Purānism and Tantrism, *Sannyāsa* came to be regarded as *Kalivarjya* (कलिवर्ज्य – banned for kaliyuga). Suppressing Hindu trend Buddhism came up with largest band of renunciates but could hardly remain long in the land of its birth. Shankaracharya lifted the ban and re-established *Sannyāsa* by his own example. But it never took wide shape. However, many traditions took up the *Sannyāsa* path and adopted it in their own way — Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Madhvacharya, Basaveshvara, Shaiva etc., — both belonging to Bhakti path and *Jñāna* path. So many sects and types of Sadhus and Sannyāsins came up. But with the establishment of Ramakrishna Math and Mission, a new world wide tradition of *Sannyāsa* got established wherein the essence of all paths and faiths find an honoured place. Now the Sannyāsahood is becoming widely known and widely sought.

The funeral of these varieties of renunciates differs slightly according to the tradition followed by them. The Sannyāsins except of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission are not cremated, because they are purified by the fire of spiritual knowledge. And, being the seekers of Brahman and practising Brahman-hood in unbroken stream, they do not need material fire to sanctify their body or to convey the soul to the next world. They are the persons who have renounced all worldly prospects and attachments and trying to realise

Brahman or the universal soul. They don't even seek higher planes of existence or heavenly enjoyments. Their goal in life is salvation, Realisation of God. Therefore, they are far above and incomparable with the man of the common run. Hence their *Anteṣṭi* differs (see page 14).

The funeral of a Sannyāsin is an highly esteemed ceremony in Indian soil. With the death of a sannyāsin, a drop is felt to have reached ocean, a bird from a dark cage is seen to have been let free into the infinite horizon of brightness, of Bliss and Peace.

The cremation ceremony consists of laying the body with honour in a clean place accessible to all. Bhajan are sung, Vedic and Bhagavad gita chantings are done. Then the body is brought out, head and beards are shaved, a bath is given, ochre clothes are put on, a *Sāpi* (a two feet square cloth, four corners are tied together and used as a bag for begging) with few fruits and sweets are hung to the right shoulder, *Vibhūti* (sacred ash) is applied to the forehead, decorated with garlands and flowers. Then some lighted incense sticks are offered and an Arati is waved. Others may then offer flowers as a mark of reverence and honour then the body is taken for cremation. Usually the pyre is lighted by the Brahmacharins or Sannyāsins of the Math. The ashes may be immersed in a river or buried under some tree without much significance. No other funeral ceremonies or *Śrāddhās* are performed. Usually on the thirteenth day special pūja is offered to the presiding deity of the Math and devotees are fed with the Prasad. This thirteenth day ceremony is to exemplify the life of monk and uphold the ideal of *Sannyāsa* — wherein, dedication, renunciation, holiness, purity, divine love, universal concern and motto of service by seeing God in man, all noble qualities, goodness and righteousness — are seen in living form in one place.

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**May we never forget that the only purpose of  
human life is to Realise God  
and attain Immortality which alone ensures  
Eternal Bliss, Eternal Peace and Eternal Freedom**

THE END