

Sri Swami Satchidananda On Puja:

Transcribed from a class conducted by Sri Gurudev Satchidananda
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The entire purpose of puja is this. You were somewhere out in the world probably and you just walk in and want to sit and meditate immediately. You can't gather your thoughts that quickly and put that vibration into the mind that fast. So gently you have to coax your mind, "Come on, sit." Then do this and that: you clean the place, arrange for the puja. Then slowly after all the greeting, dressing, feeding is over, you start simply praising and saying some prayers.' So, from doing you start saying. And then from saying a number of ideas (prayer), you come to just one (the mantram). Instead of His many stories and glories, you are saying just the mantram. So. you are narrowing down your mind from outside, slowly coming to the very center and then when you come to the mantram you have more or less centered your mind. Then you stay there as long as you can. Then at a certain point, without the mantram, you just meditate. So, it takes such a long time.

It is like when a child is very naughty and if you want to make that child sleep, you can't just simply take him, put him in the bed and he sleeps. You have to bring the child in, give him a wash, put an some loose dress, give him something to drink, put him on the bed, then you also should lie down there and start telling stories and so an- It's very practical. It takes almost half of an hour and still if you think the little child sleeps and you stop the story, "Hey Mama, what happened then?" It's exactly like that with the mind. You want to make it more subtle and soft and stick to one place. It takes a long time. You have to calm down all those physical vibrations, sensual vibrations, and slowly come to the central core. It takes a while. So, the preparation for your meditation is more important than the meditation itself. If you prepare well, you meditate well, So the entire purpose of puja is that.

But one thing I want to tell you again and again and again is that you don't need all these things for the puja. I don't want to make it so complicated that you feel, "Oh, the Swami had this and that and I only have this, so how can I do it?" Then very soon it will be, "I don't think I can do all these things, so I'd better drop the puja entirely." It can be very simple. And even if you can't do puja, the japa is very important. If you want to simplify the puja, just have a candle, light it, sit in front and say, "Lord, You are the Light, give me Light." Simple puja. So, you can simplify it in any way you want, but if you want to have a little fun, elaborate it. I just want you to know that it is all joyful, not a rigid thing. You must enjoy what you are doing. You are just playing with God. Don't think that He. is going to punish you if you show the light first, then the incense. He is not going to curse you and send you to Hell. You are simply playing with your Dad. Imagine that way. God is like that. Ultimately, we are all children playing with God to keep ourselves occupied in some-thing useful or something trouble-free. Yes, just like children dressing their dolls, you are dressing the Gods. It's all mainly to keep you occupied in something beautiful and make the mind more one-pointed.

The Atma Artha Puja

And again, the atma artha puja is divided into two parts. One is bhahya (outside) and the other is manasika or antarika (mental or inner) puja. In inner puja you don't see anything, no alter, nothing. You just sit there; imagine you are setting up an altar and doing everything that you would normally be doing outside. So, the inner puja would not be that easy unless you are thorough with outer puja. Because only what you do outside can you imagine in-side. Without knowing how to do outside, you cannot even imagine that. Just like if you know how to play chess well, then you can just close your eyes and play it within yourself. So, outside puja is important to begin with. But inside puja could be done more elaborately and it is more concentrated. In outside puja you have to see all the different things simultaneously. You have to open your eyes. When you have to take the dhoopam (incense) to wave, you will be also seeing the flower vase by the side. When you see the candle, you will see other articles there too. But in manasika puja it is all within. You are not distracted; you are into it always. So manasika puja is more concentrated. But you cannot do it without practicing externally. Bhahya puja is important to get into manasika puja.

That's why, even after bhahya puja you can sit and recollect mentally all what you have done. It's something like you can make a mental pilgrimage if you have once made it physically. If you had once gone to the Holy City of Jerusalem, you can come back home and relive that from the beginning. How you went to the bank, got your checks, then went to the airport to buy your ticket, how you passed through the security, one after the other. How you landed there, what were the holy places you visited: the Wailing Wall, the Shrine of the Nativity; all the Fourteen Stations of the Cross. If you really learn to concentrate on that you can probably make beautiful pilgrimages again and again without even a cent expense. And it is worth more. You can eliminate all that was undesirable in the pilgrimage. Yes. In the manasika pilgrimage you can just eliminate it easily. So it's more concentrated and so it brings more benefit.

Puja Explanation and Symbolism

God is omnipresent as the Cosmic Consciousness, but due to our own limitations, we try to perceive and worship that Cosmic Presence in one area through one object. We should always remember that God is not really limited to just that image or symbol. We are limited, so in a way, we try to limit God. That's why I always say that when God made man in His own image, certainly He made many many individuals and they each tried, in turn, to make God in their own image. So because of many individuals, there are many Gods, because according to our own limitations, we give a name and form to that God.

Each religion has its own images and symbols for God and some religions have many. In Hinduism there are at least 100 times more symbols than all the other religions put together. Yes, because this Hindu scriptures permit that. They say, "Just worship Me in any way you like, in any form you like. In whatever manner you want to think of Me I am ready to say 'yes' because I am in everything, as everything." That is why in Hinduism you see people worshipping even stones, trees, snakes, books, you have full liberty to choose to worship God in a different form completely your own. So you literally see the freedom of worship in the Hindu faith. Your pilgrims left England because certain worship was forced on them. But in India probably they didn't want us to leave and come settle here, so they said, "Just worship anything you want, any way you want." There were even people who didn't believe in any symbol, any form. "Okay, *nirgunam*." That means without any attributes.

So here in the name of Yoga we just want to do worship (puja) in a sort of universal way. The universal symbol that could be accepted by everybody is a light. Nobody would deny the light. Even an atheist would not deny it. So that is why we just have a light on the altar as a symbol. The candle is the main symbol for worship. If you like, you could also add a *poorna kumbum* (full pot). It's filled with water with a coconut in the mouth surrounded by leaves. The coconut probably represents the head of the Cosmic Body and the full pot represents the other parts of the body. So the candle represents the Light and the kumbum represents the fullness. For personal puja, you can just have the Light is you want or you can add the poorna kumbum also.

Now there are two types of pujas, *paraartha*, for the sake of others, and *atmaartha*, for the sake of your own self. Paraartha is something like a priest conducting a service for the benefit of everybody who gathers. Atmaartha is just for yourself, which you would be doing at your own home.

And again the atmaartha puja is divided into two parts. One is bahya (outside) and the other is manasika or antarika (mental or inner) puja. In inner puja you don't see anything, no altar, nothing. You just sit there, imagine you are setting up an altar and doing everything that you would normally be doing outside. So the inner puja would not be that easy unless you are thorough with outer puja. Because only what you do outside can you imagine inside. Without knowing how to do outside, you cannot even imagine that. Just like if you know how to play chess well, then you can just close your eyes and play it with in yourself. So outside puja is important to begin with. But inside puja could be done more elaborately and it is more concentrated. In outside puja you have to see all the different things simultaneously. You have to open your eyes. When you have to take the *dhupam* (incense) to wave, you will be also seeing the flower vase by the side. When you see the candle, you will see other articles there too. But in *manasika* the puja it is all within. You are not distracted; you are into it always. So *manasika*

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That's why, even after *bhahya* puja you can sit and recollect mentally all what you have done. It's something like you can make a mental pilgrimage if once you have made it physically. If you had once gone to the holy city of Jerusalem, you can come back home and relive that from the beginning. How you went to the bank got your checks, then went to the airport to buy your ticket, how you passed through the security, one after the other. How you landed there, what were the holy places you visited: the Wailing Wall, the Shrine of the Nativity; all the Fourteen Stations of the Cross. If you really learn to concentrate on that you can probably make beautiful pilgrimages again and again without even a cent expense. And it is worth more. You can eliminate all that was undesirable in the pilgrimage. Yes. In the *manasika* pilgrimage you can just eliminate it easily. So it's more concentrated and so it brings more benefit.

Theory Behind Each Step

In the puja, first we meditate on God as the Cosmic Being who resides in you (*dhyanam*) and then request Him to come and be present in an object which we would be having on the altar. "You are everywhere but I can't see You, I can't understand You, so please come and reveal Yourself through this symbol." This is of a *avahanam*, welcoming him or invoking his presence.

Certainly God is something much greater than an ordinary person, even a great person. If you are even inviting a king to your house, what do you do? You make all arrangements, special couch, etc. Even if you don't have, you go and borrow from somebody. You bring nice clothes, nice coverings, borrow some nice carpets. Even if you don't have nice cutlery and things like that, you go and borrow. You want to bring all the nicest things to receive and to serve him. And that is exactly what we do in the name of puja.

So after meditating on Him and then requesting him to come and be present, you say, "I am giving you a beautiful seat, please take your seat." Literally that is what you say in Sanskrit, "asanam samarpayami," "I am giving you a seat." Okay, He has come and been given a seat. Now He must be really tired. He must have come walking from a long distance. His feet must be a little dirty. Because according to the Hindu way in those days, they treated Him exactly like a human being and they imagined that even God must have walked. "Come on, I'll wash your feet." That is *padyam*. Then a little water to wash the hands. It's really surprising to see how similar it is with our normal receiving of a guest. We say, "How about a drink?" Isn't it so? Exactly the same, here we say, "arghayam samarpayami", I offer you something to drink. And the Indian tradition is you don't give Him any juice or anything in the beginning. First give Him plain pure water. After that, give Him some juice, "madubarkam samarpayami." Then He is a little fresh now. "Okay, would You like to have a bath?" Give him a bath "snanam". After the bath, you give Him nice fresh clothing "vastram". Then you give nice decorations, ornaments, Sandalwood paste, cum cum and this and that. Garland Him. Then you burn some incense "dhupam", then show light "Dheepam". After that you should certainly feed Him with something nice "naivedyam" and in between let Him have something to sip. "Madhye, madhye, amritpaniyam samarpayami". In between I give you something to sip." (Sip, not to drink; see how it teaches about health also?)

So now He is all satisfied; He has come, taken His seat, His bath and His lunch. Now you start your business. What's that? Say some nice glorifying words, "Oh You are this, You were that, You are all beautiful, You have helped so-and-so when he was in distress." Pamper Him a little. Praise Him. And certainly He knows why you praise Him. Because after the praise, the appeal, just say, you have been helping so many people, please know that there is somebody here also in distress. I am totally ignorant. Wherever I go I see darkness. Give me a little light." This is prayer.

Then repeat His mantram. When you repeat, every time you take a few petals and offer it at the altar "*archanam*." Then at the end you just say, "I am offering myself to You, let me be like this camphor. Please touch me with Your Light and let me melt in You." This is the *camphor harathi* waving. Because the idea here is, you are an individual but when you get the touch of the Divine Light you lose yourself completely in Him. Because when the camphor burns, nothing is left. The whole light gets absorbed in that Light. So the idea is that you should simply melt into Him. Then there's no more you, only Him. To paraphrase Jesus Christ, "I went to my Father to get His grace; when He started blessing me I lost myself and I became the Father. I realized that I my father are not different, we are one. That is what you call true realization. So this symbolizes that sort of realization, that absorption. That's why it comes at the end of the puja. Once this comes, you are no more there, you have lost yourself. (At least temporarily. Once the puja is over the ego comes back and says "I did wonderful puja!" And what about the prasad? Because examples last only a certain time.) But when you really become the camphor then that's the end of the puja, you don't need to do anything more.

So then after waving the camphor, sit quietly in meditation, then make a final offering with the petals "*pushpanjali*" and offer the fruits of the puja to God "*samarpayam*". Then get up and bow down. That will be the end of the puja. Take the offerings as your prasad. If there are people, share it with them. And if the puja is at a temporarily arranged place, you can dissolve everything by asking God to come back to stay in your heart "*visarjanam*". You began meditating on Him within. Then you invoked His presence to come out and stay on the altar. When everything is over, "Come back into me." It's almost like, if you want to decorate your face, you just go stand in front of the mirror and say "my face, please go into the mirror. See in the mirror and decorate it. And when everything is decorated take back your face and go.

But one thing I want to tell you again and again and again is that you don't need all these things for the puja. I don't want to make it so complicated that you feel, "Oh, the Swami had this and that and I only have this, so how can I do it?" Then very soon it will be, "I don't think I can do all these things, so I better drop the puja entirely." It can be very simple. And even if you can't do puja, the japa is very important. If you want to simplify the puja, just have a candle, light it, sit in front and say, "Lord you are the Light, give me Light. Simple Puja. So you can simplify it in anyway you want, but if you want to have a little fun, elaborate it. I just want you to know that it is all joyful, not a rigid thing. You must enjoy what you were doing. You are just playing with God. Don't think that He is going to punish you if you show the light first, then the incense. He is not going to curse you and send you to hell. You were simply playing with your dad. Imagine that way. God is like that. Ultimately we are all children playing with God to keep ourselves occupied in something useful or something trouble-free. Yes, just like children dressing their dolls, you are dressing the gods. It's all mainly to keep you occupied in something beautiful and make the mind more one-pointed.

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It is like when a child is very naughty and if you want to make that child sleep, you can't just simply take him, put him in the bed and he sleeps. You have to bring the child in, give him a wash, put on some loose dress, give him something to drink, put him on the bed, then you also should lie down there and start telling stories and so on. It's very practical. It takes almost half of an hour and still if you think the little child sleeps and you stop the story, "Hey mama, what happened then?" It's exactly like that with the mind. You want to make it more subtle and soft and stick to one place. It takes a long time. You have to come down all those physical vibrations, sensual vibrations and slowly come to the central core. It takes a while. So the preparation for your meditation is more important than the meditation itself. If you prepare well, you meditate well, So the entire purpose of puja is that.

Questions and Answers About Various Items in the Puja

QUESTION: What is the significance of putting the sandal paste, cum cum and holy ash on the forehead after the puja?

The significance of the sandalwood *potu* (dot) placed at that place between the eyebrows, is to bring the awareness to this important center of consciousness and act the same time cool the body. Sandalwood is the best thing to cool the system. So a paste made of sandalwood can be applied at the proper pivot, nerve center. *Trikuda* or the place between the eyebrows is a very important junction for the major subtle nerves: *ida*, *pingala*, and *sushumna* which run through the spine. So when you cool this place, the entire body is cooled. And of course, it looks a little pretty also. It becomes like a beauty spot. And because it is sanctified thing after the puja, you feel the vibration also.

The kumkum is made of turmeric. Turmeric is a good antiseptic. You can wash any wound with turmeric lotion and it kills all the germs. Indian women wash the face with it and it takes away any little hairs without any razor or chemicals. It prevents pimples. And the yellowish color gives a little extra glow to the skin. It is a very natural form of beautification. Most of the articles that we use in puja are good for the health.

Now, about the ash. In India we really use a lot of holy ash. But I purposely avoid using it here because I don't want to antagonize people of different religions and make them think I am converting people. But the symbolism is beautiful and we can just take the spirit of it. The holy ash is actually made of cow dung. They pick it up, dry it and burn it in an airtight place. When it burns, it becomes completely white ash. They clean it and use it as holy ash. That means that

even though it is nothing but dirt, fecal matter, if burned well it becomes holy. So everything could be made holy if it undergoes such a process. Our minds are as dirty as the cow dung, or sometimes still worse. If we could allow the fire of wisdom to burn them, we can be holy. We can reach the four head of the Lord. That is the symbolism. And another meaning to

Applying the ash to the forehead is just to say, “After all, everyone is going to become a bit of ash, so let me think of it even now. The whole body will ultimately be burnt into ash so I want to remember the impermanency of it so I need not be wasting my time in constantly decorating it.” And there’s a third reason, a health reason, also. It brings heat to the body. If you rub ash on the body you can bring heat quickly and take away chills. Even certain rheumatic complaints due to cold can be helped. If you apply the ash and rub it you take away the cold and stagnation of fluid in those areas. It improves circulation. In *Saiva Siddhanta* practice, they apply the ash not only to the forehead but on all the joints. So it is an antidote for cold. And it need not be cow dung ash for this purpose. Even ash from the oven is fine. The most important use of the ash is that it easily conveys the Divine vibrations of the Deity or of the person who passes it to others.

QUESTION: What do you do with the coconut from the kumbum after the puja?
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Take it as prasad or use it for cooking.

QUESTION: I’ve heard it should be thrown away because it has all the bad vibrations in it.

Now, you have charged it with good vibrations. But coconuts are used for that purpose also. For example, after an Indian marriage, the couple is taken in procession. As they go around, how many thousands of people might look at them and say, “Ah, what a pretty couple.” Is it not so? Some will admire, but some might have a sort of jealous look also. “Look how beautiful she is; my gosh, I’m not so beautiful like that.” That means when they look at them with such jealous feelings, they cast a sort of evil eye on them which might affect them. So when the couple comes back home, before they enter the house, the elderly ladies of the family will go around their heads three times with the coconut and then break it somewhere. That means they draw all the evil eye into the coconut and break it. That is where you got that idea probably.

QUESTION: If you practice Yoga, won’t that protect you from bad vibrations?

Yes. If you are regular in your practices, that makes a big protection. You are completely encircled by those vibrations and nothing can affect you. If anybody sends such evil vibrations to you, they bounce back to them.

QUESTION: Could you use the same coconut for two pujas?

Normally, you don’t.

QUESTION: What do you do with the kumbum water after puja?

Either you drink it or you can pour it into a plant. You just don’t throw it on the road. Everything that remains here from the altar should be used. It is charged with holy vibrations.

QUESTION: Why do we use eleven leaves in the kumbum?

Well, it could be any odd number normally. With an odd number, if you take away all the dualities, the one remains. At least that is what I can say now.

QUESTION: Could you explain the significance of incense and camphor?

The fumes of the incense invite Divine spirits and drive out evil ones. They also destroy all the germs. When the fumes are there, nothing can come in. If you burn incense regularly in your house, no evil spirits can enter in.

And again, camphor brings pure light. It is also another antiseptic. Homeopaths know the importance of it. If you just bring a piece of camphor and place it in the midst of hundreds of other medicines, the camphor takes away all the power of those medicines. And the camphor fumes cut the mucous in your system.

QUESTION: Is camphor made from a plant?

Yes, from the tropical camphor tree.

QUESTION: Isn't it difficult to get natural camphor in this country?

Yes, but it is available, Not that many people use camphor here so it is difficult. But if they know more people are using it, it will become available. A few years back it was difficult to get incense sticks. Now you see them everywhere because people are using them. But some people keep camphor because it's used for medicinal purposes, so you can get it.

QUESTION: What are the meanings of the different leaves used in Indian pujas?

Tulsi leaves are used in pujas to Lord Vishnu. We don't seem to have it here; but in India, the leaves are soaked in the consecrated water so when you sip this water it is not only holy water, it is also tulsi lotion. Tulsi lotion is a very good medicine for cough or mucous problem. And it contains a lot of iron. And bael leaves are used to worship Lord Shiva. They contain a lot of gold. Unfortunately you don't have bael trees here either.

QUESTION: Why is the Tamil OM appropriate for the harathi?

The shape of the letter is so fitting. It makes a complete circle. The Sanskrit OM doesn't. If you like, you can use the English OM, three times "O", or just three circles and a half to bring it up to the face. It is said in the scriptures that the Kundalini coils in the system three and a half times. Somehow I often like a combination of English and Sanskrit OM. I used to even put it in my letters and writings. Just a simple "O" and then a crescent and a dot above. It's more symmetrical also.