

Hindu Rituals and Prayers - Why do we follow them?

An explanation for kids and adults alike...¹

In the process of raising Hindu kids in the US , I have found that a lot of rituals and prayers that I just did by rote growing up now need to be explained scientifically

When I was a kid if I was told not to touch paper or books with my feet, that's what I did - or if I was told to ring the bell at the temple - that's what I did and never bothered to question it.

But if I ask my kids to do something, it is followed by their all-time favorite question "Whhhhhy?"

So to help other parents who may be in a similar situation here's a compiled list of some of the reasons we follow certain Hindu rituals and traditions - Of course, the answers may need to be a bit modified depending on the age of the kids.

- I. Why do we light a lamp?
Why do we have a prayer room?
Why do we do *Namaste*?

Why do we light a lamp?

In almost every Indian home a lamp is lit daily before the altar of the Lord. In some houses it is lit at dawn, in some, twice a day – at dawn and dusk – and in a few it is maintained continuously (Akhandā Deepa). All auspicious functions commence with the lighting of the lamp, which is often maintained right through the occasion.

Light symbolizes knowledge, and darkness, ignorance. The Lord is the "Knowledge Principle" (Chaitanya) who is the source, the enlivener and the illuminator of all knowledge. Hence light is worshiped as the Lord himself.

Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness. Also knowledge is a lasting inner wealth by which all outer achievement can be accomplished. Hence we light the lamp to bow down to knowledge as the greatest of all forms of wealth.

Why not light a bulb or tube light? That too would remove darkness. But the traditional oil lamp has a further spiritual significance. The oil or ghee in the lamp symbolizes our *vaasanas* or negative tendencies and the wick, the ego. When lit by spiritual knowledge, the *vaasanas* get slowly exhausted and the ego too finally perishes. The flame of a lamp always burns upwards. Similarly we should acquire such knowledge as to take us towards higher ideals.

Whilst lighting the lamp we thus pray:

Deepajyothi parabrahma Deepa sarva tamopahaha

Deepena saadhyate saram Sandhyaa deepo namostute

I prostrate to the dawn/dusk lamp; whose light is the Knowledge Principle (the Supreme Lord), which removes the darkness of ignorance and by which all can be achieved in life.

¹ <http://hindumommy.wordpress.com/2006/06/06/hindu-rituals-and-prayers-why-do-we-follow-them-an-explanation-for-kids-and-adults-2/>

Why do we have a prayer room?

Most Indian homes have a prayer room or altar. A lamp is lit and the Lord worshipped each day. Other spiritual practices like *japa* (repetition of the Lord's name), meditation, *paaraayana* (reading of the scriptures), prayers, and devotional singing etc is also done here. Special worship is done on auspicious occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, festivals and the like. Each member of the family - young or old - communes with and worships the Divine here.

The Lord is the entire creation. He is therefore the true owner of the house we live in too. The prayer room is the Master room of the house. We are the earthly occupants of His property. This notion rids us of false pride and possessiveness. The ideal attitude to take is to regard the Lord as the true owner of our homes and us as caretakers of His home. But if that is rather difficult, we could at least think of Him as a very welcome guest. Just as we would house an important guest in the best comfort, so too we felicitate the Lord's presence in our homes by having a prayer room or altar, which is, at all times, kept clean and well-decorated.

Also the Lord is all pervading. To remind us that He resides in our homes with us, we have prayer rooms. Without the grace of the Lord, no task can be successfully or easily accomplished. We invoke His grace by communing with Him in the prayer room each day and on special occasions.

Each room in a house is dedicated to a specific function like the bedroom for resting, the drawing room to receive guests, the kitchen for cooking etc. The furniture, decor and the atmosphere of each room are made conducive to the purpose it serves. So too for the purpose of meditation, worship and prayer, we should have a conducive atmosphere - hence the need for a prayer room. Sacred thoughts and sound vibrations pervade the place and influence the minds of those who spend time there. Spiritual thoughts and vibrations accumulated through regular meditation, worship and chanting done there pervade the prayer room. Even when we are tired or agitated, by just sitting in the prayer room for a while, we feel calm, rejuvenated and spiritually uplifted.

Why do we do *Namaste*?

Indians greet each other with *namaste*. The two palms are placed together in front of the chest and the head bows whilst saying the word *namaste*. This greeting is for all - people younger than us, of our own age, those older than friends, even strangers and us.

There are five forms of formal traditional greeting enjoined in the *shastras* of which *namaskaram* is one. This is understood as prostration but it actually refers to paying homage as we do today when we greet each other with a *namaste*.

Namaste could be just a casual or formal greeting, a cultural convention or an act of worship. However there is much more to it than meets the eye. In Sanskrit namah + te = namaste. It means - I bow to you - my greetings, salutations or prostration to you.

Namaha can also be literally interpreted as “*na ma*” (not mine). It has a spiritual significance of negating or reducing one's ego in the presence of another.

The real meeting between people is the meeting of their minds. When we greet another, we do so with *namaste*, which means, “may our minds meet,” indicated by the folded palms placed before the chest. The bowing down of the head is a gracious form of extending friendship in love and humility. The spiritual meaning is even deeper. The life force, the divinity, the Self or the Lord in me is the same in all. Recognizing this oneness with the meeting of the palms, we salute with head bowed the Divinity in the person we meet. That is why sometimes, we close our eyes as we do *namaste* to a revered person or the Lord – as if to look within.

The gesture is often accompanied by words like “Ram Ram”, “Jai Shri Krishna”, “Namo Narayana”, “Jai Siya Ram”, “Om Shanti” etc - indicating the recognition of this divinity. When we know this significance, our greeting does not remain just a superficial gesture or word but paves the way for a deeper communion with another in an atmosphere of love and respect.

More answers to some common questions raised by kids on Hindu rituals and traditions:

- II. **Why do we prostrate before parents and elders?**
Why do we wear marks (tilak, pottu and the like) on the forehead?
Why do we not touch papers, books and people with the feet?
To touch another with the feet is considered an act of misdemeanor.
Why is this so?

Why do we prostrate before parents and elders?

Indians prostrate before their parents, elders, teachers and noble souls by touching their feet. The elder in turn blesses us by placing his or her hand on or over our heads.

Prostration is done daily, when we meet elders and particularly on important occasions like the beginning of a new task, birthdays, festivals etc. In certain traditional circles, prostration is accompanied by *abhivaadana*, which serves to introduce one-self, announce one's family and social stature.

Man stands on his feet. Touching the feet in prostration is a sign of respect for the age, maturity, nobility and divinity that our elders personify. It symbolizes our recognition of their selfless love for us and the sacrifices they have done for our welfare.

It is a way of humbly acknowledging the greatness of another. This tradition reflects the strong family ties, which has been one of India's enduring strengths.

The good wishes (*Sankalpa*) and blessings (*aashirvaada*) of elders are highly valued in India. We prostrate to seek them. Good thoughts create positive vibrations. Good wishes springing from a heart full of love, divinity and nobility have a tremendous strength. When we prostrate with humility and respect, we invoke the good wishes and blessings of elders, which flow in the form of positive energy to envelop us. This is why the posture assumed whether it is in the standing or prone position, enables the entire body to receive the energy thus received.

The different forms of showing respect are :

Pratuthana - rising to welcome a person.

Namaskaara - paying homage in the form of namaste

Upasangrahan - touching the feet of elders or teachers.

Shaashtaanga - prostrating fully with the feet, knees, stomach, chest, forehead and arms touching the ground in front of the elder.
Pratyabivaadana - returning a greeting.

Rules are prescribed in our scriptures as to who should prostrate to whom. Wealth, family name, age, moral strength and spiritual knowledge in ascending order of importance qualified men to receive respect. This is why a king though the ruler of the land, would prostrate before a spiritual master. Epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have many stories highlighting this aspect.

Why do we wear marks (tilak, pottu and the like) on the forehead?

The *tilak or pottu* invokes a feeling of sanctity in the wearer and others. It is recognized as a religious mark. Its form and colour vary according to one's caste, religious sect or the form of the Lord worshipped.

In earlier times, the four castes (based on varna or colour) - Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra - applied marks differently. The brahmin applied a white chandan mark signifying purity, as his profession was of a priestly or academic nature. The kshatriya applied a red kumkum mark signifying valour as he belonged to warrior races.

The vaishya wore a yellow kesar or turmeric mark signifying prosperity as he was a businessman or trader devoted to creation of wealth. The sudra applied a black bhasma, kasturi or charcoal mark signifying service as he supported the work of the other three divisions.

Also Vishnu worshippers apply a chandan tilak of the shape of "U", Shiva worshippers a tripundra of bhasma, Devi worshippers a red dot of kumkum and so on).

The tilak cover the spot between the eyebrows, which is the seat of memory and thinking. It is known as the Ajna Chakra in the language of Yoga. The tilak is applied with the prayer - "May I remember the Lord. May this pious feeling pervade all my activities. May I be righteous in my deeds." Even when we temporarily forget this prayerful attitude the mark on another reminds us of our resolve. The tilak is thus a blessing of the Lord and a protection against wrong tendencies and forces. The entire body emanates energy in the form of electromagnetic waves - the forehead and the subtle spot between the eyebrows especially so. That is why worry generates heat and causes a headache. The tilak and pottu cools the forehead, protects us and prevents energy loss. Sometimes the entire forehead is covered with chandan or bhasma. Using plastic reusable "stick bindis" is not very beneficial, even though it serves the purpose of decoration.

Why do we not touch papers, books and people with the feet?

To Indians, knowledge is sacred and divine. So it must be given respect at all times. Nowadays we separate subjects as sacred and secular. But in ancient India every subject - academic or spiritual - was considered divine and taught by the guru in the *gurukula*.

The custom of not stepping on educational tools is a frequent reminder of the high position accorded to knowledge in Indian culture. From an early age, this wisdom fosters in us a deep reverence for books and education. This is also the reason why we worship books, vehicles and instruments once a year on Saraswathi Pooja or Ayudha Pooja day, dedicated to the Goddess of Learning. In fact, each day before starting our studies, we pray:

Saraswati namasthubhyam Varade kaama roopini

Vidyaarambham karishyaami Sidhirbhavatu me sadaa

O Goddess Saraswati, the giver of Boons and fulfiller of wishes,

I prostrate to You before starting my studies.

May you always fulfill me?

To touch another with the feet is considered an act of misdemeanor. Why is this so?

Man is regarded as the most beautiful, living breathing temple of the Lord!

Therefore touching another with the feet is akin to disrespecting the divinity within him or her. This calls for an immediate apology, which is offered with reverence and humility.

- III. Why do we apply the holy ash?
Why do offer food to the Lord before eating it?
Why do we fast?
Why do we do pradakshina (circumambulate)?
Why is pradakshina done only in a clockwise manner?
Why do we regard trees and plants as sacred?
Why do we ring the bell in a temple?

Why do we apply the holy ash?

The ash of any burnt object is not regarded as holy ash. **Bhasma** (the holy ash) is the ash from the homa (sacrificial fire) where special wood along with ghee and other herbs is offered as worship of the Lord. Or the deity is worshipped by pouring ash as abhisheka and is then distributed as bhasma.

Bhasma is generally applied on the forehead. Some apply it on certain parts of the body like the upper arms, chest etc. Some ascetics rub it all over the body. Many consume a pinch of it each time they receive it.

The word bhasma means, “that by which our sins are destroyed and the Lord is remembered”. **Bha** implied *bhartsanam* (“to destroy”) and **sma** implies *smaranam* (“to remember”). The application of bhasma therefore signifies destruction of the evil and remembrance of the divine. Bhasma is called *vibhuti* (which means “glory”) as it gives glory to one who applies it and *raksha* (which means a source of protection) as it protects the wearer from ill health and evil, by purifying him or her.

Homa (offering of oblations into the fire with sacred chants) signifies the offering or surrender of the ego and egocentric desires into the flame of knowledge or a noble and selfless cause. The consequent ash signifies the purity of the mind, which results from such actions.

Also the fire of knowledge burns the oblation and wood signifying ignorance and inertia respectively. The ash we apply indicates that we should burn false identification with the body and become free of the limitations of birth and death. This is not to be misconstrued as a morose reminder of death but as a powerful pointer towards the fact that time and tide wait for none.

Bhasma is specially associated with Lord Shiva who applies it all over His body.

Shiva devotees apply bhasma as a tripundra. When applied with a red spot at the center, the mark symbolizes Shiva-Shakti (the unity of energy and matter that creates the entire seen and unseen universe).

Bhasma has medicinal value and is used in many ayurvedic medicines. It absorbs excess moisture from the body and prevents colds and headaches. The *Upanishads* say that the famous *Mrityunjaya mantra* should be chanted whilst applying ash on the forehead.

*Tryambakam yajaamahe
Sugandhim pushtivardhanam
Urvaa rukamiva bhandhanaan
Mrytyor muksheeyamaa amrutaat*

“We worship the three-eyed Lord Shiva who nourishes and spread fragrance in our lives. May He free us from the shackles of sorrow, change and death – effortlessly, like the fall of a rip brinjal from its stem.”

Why do offer food to the Lord before eating it?

Indians make an offering of food to the Lord and later partake of it as *prasaada* - a holy gift from the Lord. In our daily ritualistic worship (pooja) too we offer *naivedyam* (food) to the Lord.

The Lord is omnipotent and omniscient. Man is a part, while the Lord is the totality. All that we do is by His strength and knowledge alone. Hence what we receive in life as a result of our actions is really His alone. We acknowledge this through the act of offering food to Him. This is exemplified by the Hindi words “*tera tujko arpan*” – I offer what is Yours to You.

Thereafter it is akin to His gift to us, graced by His divine touch. Knowing this, our entire attitude to food and the act of eating changes. The food offered will naturally be pure and the best. We share what we get with others before consuming it. We do not demand, complain or criticise the quality of the food we get. We eat it with cheerful acceptance (*prasaada buddhi*). Before we partake of our daily meals we first sprinkle water around the plate as an act of purification. Five morsels of food are placed on the side of the plate acknowledging the debt owed by us to the Divine forces (*devta runa*) for their benign grace and protection, our ancestors (*pitru runa*) for giving us their lineage and a family culture, the sages (*rishi runa*) as our religion and culture have been “realised”, aintained and handed down to us by them, our fellow beings (*manushya runa*) who constitute society without the support of which we could not live as we do and other living beings (*bhuta runa*) for serving us selflessly.

Thereafter the Lord, the life force, who is also within us as the five life-giving physiological functions, is offered the food. This is done with the chant

praanaaya swaahaa , apaanaaya swaahaa, vyaanaaya swaahaa, udaanaaya swaahaa, samaanaaya swaahaa, brahmane swaahaa

After offering the food thus, it is eaten as *prasaada* - blessed food.

Why do we fast?

Most devout Indians fast regularly or on special occasions like festivals. On such days they do not eat at all, eat once or make do with fruits or a special diet of simple food.

Fasting in Sanskrit is called *upavaasa*. *Upa* means “near” + *vaasa* means “to stay”. *Upavaasa* therefore means staying near (the Lord), meaning the attainment of close mental proximity with the Lord. Then what has *upavaasa* to do with food?

A lot of our time and energy is spent in procuring food items, preparing, cooking, eating and digesting food. Certain food types make our minds dull and agitated. Hence on certain days man decides to save time and conserve his energy by eating either simple, light food or totally abstaining from eating so that his mind becomes alert and pure. The mind, otherwise pre-occupied by the thought of food, now entertains noble thoughts and stays with the Lord. Since it is a self-imposed form of discipline it is usually adhered to with joy.

Also every system needs a break and an overhaul to work at its best. Rest and a change of diet during fasting is very good for the digestive system and the entire body. The more you indulge the senses, the more they make their demands. Fasting helps us to cultivate control over our senses, sublimate our desires and guide our minds to be poised and at peace. Fasting should not make us weak, irritable or create an urge to indulge later. This happens when there is no noble goal behind fasting.

The Bhagavad-Gita urges us to eat appropriately - neither too less nor too much - *yukta-aahaara* and to eat simple, pure and healthy food (a *saatvik* diet) even when not fasting.

Why do we do pradakshina (circumambulate)?

We cannot draw a circle without a center point. The Lord is the center, source and essence of our lives. Recognizing Him as the focal point in our lives, we go about doing our daily chores. This is the significance of *pradakshina*.

Also every point on the circumference of a circle is equidistant from the center. This means that wherever or whoever we may be, we are equally close to the Lord. His grace flows towards us without partiality.

Why is *pradakshina* done only in a clockwise manner?

The reason is not, as a person said, to avoid a traffic jam! As we do *pradakshina*, the Lord is always on our right. In India the right side symbolizes auspiciousness. So as we circumambulate the sanctum sanctorum we remind ourselves to lead an auspicious life of righteousness, with the Lord who is the indispensable source of help and strength, as our guide - the "right hand".

Indian scriptures enjoin - *matrudevo bhava, pitrudevo bhava, acharyadevo bhava*.

May you consider your parents and teachers as you would the Lord. With this in mind we also do *pradakshina* around our parents and divine personages.

After the completion of traditional worship (*pooja*), we customarily do *pradakshina* around ourselves. In this way we recognize and remember the supreme divinity within us, which alone is idolized in the form of the Lord that we worship outside.

Why do we regard trees and plants as sacred?

The Lord, the life in us, pervades all living beings, be they plants or animals.

Hence, they are all regarded as sacred. Human life on earth depends on plants and trees.

They give us the vital factors that make life possible on earth: food, oxygen, clothing, shelter, medicines etc.

Hence, in India, we are taught to regard trees and plants as sacred. Indians scriptures tell us to plant ten trees if, for any reason, we have to cut one. We are advised to use parts of trees and plants only as much as is needed for food, fuel, shelter etc. we are also urged to apologies to a plant or tree before cutting it to avoid incurring a specific sin named *soona*.

Certain trees and plants like *tulasi*, *peepal* etc., which have tremendous beneficial qualities, are worshipped till today. It is believed that divine beings manifest as trees and plants, and many people worship them to fulfill their desires or to please the Lord.

Why do we ring the bell in a temple?

Is it to wake up the Lord? But the Lord never sleeps. Is it to let the Lord know we have come? He does not need to be told, as He is all knowing. Is it a form of seeking permission to enter His precinct? It is a homecoming and therefore entry needs no permission. The Lord welcomes us at all times. Then why do we ring the bell?

The ringing of the bell produces what is regarded as an auspicious sound. It produces the sound *Om*, the universal name of the Lord. There should be auspiciousness within and without, to gain the vision of the Lord who is all-auspiciousness. Even while doing the ritualistic *aarati*, we ring the bell. It is sometimes accompanied by the auspicious sounds of the conch and other musical instruments. An added significance of ringing the bell, conch and other instruments is that they help drowned any inauspicious or irrelevant noises and comments that might disturb or distract the worshippers in their devotional ardour, concentration and inner peace.

As we start the daily ritualistic worship (*pooja*) we ring the bell, chanting:

*Aagamaarthamtu devaanaam
gamanaarthamtu rakshasaam
Kurve ghantaaravam tatra
devataahvaahna lakshanam*

I ring this bell indicating
the invocation of divinity,
So that virtuous and noble forces
enter (my home and heart);
and the demonic and evil forces
from within and without, depart.

IV. **Why do we worship the *kalasha*?**
Why do we consider the lotus as special?
Why do we worship *tulasi*?

Why do we worship the *kalasha*?

First of all what is a *kalasha*? A brass, mud or copper pot is filled with water. Mango leaves are placed in the mouth of the pot and a coconut is placed over it. A red or white thread is tied around its neck or sometimes all around it in a intricate diamond shaped pattern. The pot may be decorated with designs. Such a pot is known as a *kalasha*. When the pot is filled with water or rice, it is known as *purnakumbha* representing the inert body which when filled with the divine life force gains the power to do all the wonderful things that makes life what it is. A *kalasha* is placed with due rituals on all-important occasions like the traditional house warming (*grihapravesa*), wedding, daily worship etc. It is placed near the entrance as a sign of welcome. It is also used in a traditional manner while receiving holy personages.

Why do we worship the *kalasha*? Before the creation came into being, Lord Vishnu was reclining on His snake-bed in the milky ocean. From His navel emerged a lotus from which appeared Lord Brahma, the creator, who thereafter created this world. The water in the *kalasha* symbolizes the primordial water from which the entire creation emerged. It is the giver of life to all and has the potential of creating innumerable names and forms, the inert objects and the sentient beings and all that is auspicious in the world from the energy behind the universe. The leaves and coconut represent creation. The thread represents the love that “binds” all in creation. The *kalasha* is therefore considered auspicious and worshipped. The waters from all the holy rivers, the knowledge of all the Vedas and the blessings of all the deities are invoked in the *kalasha* and its water is thereafter used for all the rituals, including the abhisheka. The consecration (*kumbhaabhisheka*) of a temple is done in a grand manner with elaborate rituals including the pouring of one or more *kalashas* of holy water on the top of the temple. When the asuras and devas churned the milky ocean, the Lord was bearing the pot of nectar, which blessed one with everlasting life. Thus the *kalasha* also symbolizes immortality. Men of wisdom are full and complete as they identify with the infinite Truth (*poornatvam*). They brim with joy and love and respect all that is auspicious. We greet them with a *purnakumbha* (“full pot”) acknowledging their greatness and as a sign of respectful and reverential welcome, with a “full heart”.

Why do we consider the lotus as special?

The lotus is the symbol of truth, auspiciousness and beauty (*satyam, shivam, sundaram*). The Lord is also that nature and therefore, His various aspects are compared to a lotus (i.e. lotus-eyes, lotus feet, lotus hands, the lotus of the heart etc.). The lotus blooms with the rising sun and closes at night. Similarly, our minds open up and expand with the light of knowledge. The lotus grows even in slushy areas. It remains beautiful and untainted despite its surroundings, reminding us that we too can and should strive to remain pure and beautiful within, under all circumstances. The lotus leaf never gets wet even though it is always in water. It symbolizes the man of wisdom (*gyaani*) who remains ever joyous, unaffected by the world of sorrow and change. This is revealed in a shloka from the Bhagwad-Geeta:

***Brahmanyaadhaaya karmaani
Sangam tyaktvaa karoti
yahaLipyate na sa paapena
Padma patram ivaambhasaa***

He who does actions, offering them to Brahman (the Supreme), abandoning attachment, is not tainted by sin, just as a lotus leaf remains unaffected by the water on it.

From this, we learn that what is natural to the man of wisdom becomes a discipline to be practiced by all *saadhakas* or spiritual seekers and devotees. Our bodies have certain energy centers described in the Yoga Shaastras as chakras. Each one is associated with lotus that has a certain number of petals. For example, a lotus with a thousand petals represents the Sahasra chakra at the top of the head, which opens when the yogi attains Godhood or Realisation. Also, the lotus posture (*padmaasana*) is recommended when one sits for meditation. A lotus emerged from the navel of Lord Vishnu. Lord Brahma originated from it to create the world. Hence, the lotus symbolizes the link between the creator and the supreme Cause. It also symbolizes Brahmaloaka, the abode of Lord Brahma. The auspicious sign of the swastika is said to have evolved from the lotus.

Why do we worship tulasi?

In Sanskrit, *tulanaa naasti athaiva tulasi* - that which is incomparable (in its qualities) is the *tulasi*. For Indians it is one of the most sacred plants. In fact it is known to be the only thing used in worship, which, once used, can be washed and reused in pooja - as it is regarded so self-purifying. As one story goes, Tulasi was the devoted wife of Shankhachuda, a celestial being. She believed that Lord Krishna tricked her into sinning. So she cursed Him to become a stone (*shaaligraama*). Seeing her devotion and adhered to righteousness, the Lord blessed her saying that she would become the worshipped plant, tulasi that would adorn His head. Also that all offerings would be incomplete without the *tulasi* leaf - hence the worship of *tulasi*. She also symbolises Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu. Those who wish to be righteous and have a happy family life worship the *tulasi*. *Tulasi* is married to the Lord with all pomp and show as in any wedding. This is because according to another legend, the Lord blessed her to be His consort. Satyabhama once weighed Lord Krishna against all her legendary wealth. The scales did not balance till a single *tulasi* leaf was placed along with the wealth on the scale by Rukmini with devotion. Thus the *tulasi* played the vital role of demonstrating to the world that even a small object offered with devotion means more to the Lord than all the wealth in the world. The *tulasi* leaf has great medicinal value and is used to cure various ailments, including the common cold.

***Yanmule sarvatirhaani
Yannagre sarvadevataa
Yanmadhye sarvavedaascha
Tulasi taam namaamyaham***

I bow down to the tulasi, At whose base are all the holy places, At whose top reside all the deities and In whose middle are all the Vedas.