

A Ritual to Go Beyond Rituals

Every human being gets an identity immediately after his or her birth. A person is born into a religion, a cultural group, a nationality, or race. This identity is given by the people around. Vedanta calls it a superimposition on the otherwise free being. Probably this is what Rousseau, who was also influenced by the Upanishads, meant when he reflected, 'Man is born free but everywhere he is bound in chains.' The identity becomes a baggage which the person cherishes, protects, or even fights and dies for it. Some individuals shake off this identity at some point of time and assume a different identity such as a religion, a creed, or ideology. But we do not normally think of a situation in which a person shakes off all identities, rises above all the identities created by man and stands on par with the Supreme Divinity.

Such a situation is envisaged in the *sanātana dharma*. It is also a highly revered stage in a person's life. I was an eager witness to this ritual a few days ago. On the 31st of March and the 1st of April, 2021, at the sacred banks of the river Godavari in Rajahmundry in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh witnessed a two-day long ritual in which two seekers obliterated their identity and entered identitylessness. Swami Tattvavidananda Saraswati of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, a sage who is already established in such stage, inducted the two seekers to attain such stage. Of the two, one is an elderly person, an active politician turned into a serious student of Vedanta. He discharged his duties as a *grhastha* and *vānaprastha*. The other is a *brahmacārī*, a student of Vedanta, in his thirties who is already leading a semi-recluse life in an ashram in Uttarakasi. The two persons got a new identity and emerged as Swami Sivaramananda Saraswati and Swami Sthitaprajnananda Saraswati respectively.

This is a ritual going back to Vedic times, in which persons who reflected on the ephemeral nature of the world, who contemplated on the nature of one's real self and thus weakened their worldly bonds, chose to leave home and became identityless. A very ancient example in our books is the sage Yajnavalkya in the Brihadaranyaka *Upanishad*, who took leave of his wife Maitreyi and entered this stage. This is a living tradition despite the assaults by marauding cultures on the Vedic dharma.

What is so unique about this ritual? What is its nature?

Advaita talks of two levels of renunciation – the renunciation of the fruit of action and renunciation of action itself. It is the latter which is discussed in the present context. The

Vedic seers evolved a ritual to renounce the normally unbreakable bonds. The ritual is probably to reinforce a person's conviction to renounce the life-long bonds and obligations. A person in social life has three obligations – to the gods, to sages and to forefathers. For that he must perform several duties. However, it is recommended that a person has to call it a day and renounce the three-fold obligations. There is a ceremonial renouncement of this.

Sanātana dharma has devised a lifelong timetable of duties to be performed by a worldly person. One has to worship the deities, the sages, and the forefathers through several rituals. One well known ritual is the annual *śrāddha*, performed for the departed parents or elders. We offer *tarpaṇam* (water with sesame) to sages on certain occasions. One worships deities with devotion (*śraddhā*) as a matter of duty for various worldly desires. Whatever is performed with *śraddhā* is *śrāddha*. The ritual of renunciation talks of the eight different types of revered persons to whom he was offering respect in various forms. Now, in the new level, the renunciant goes beyond the eight duties. Hence for the last time, he performs the rituals – almost with the spirit of renouncing bondage with the deities (thus renouncing worldly desires), with the sages and with the forefathers.

On the first day the two interns performed eight different *śrāddha*-s to eight revered groups. The list of revered ones is impressive.

1. The first is the trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara.
2. The divine sages like Nārada, the brahmarṣi-s such as Vasiṣṭha and the rājarṣi-s such as Bhishma to whom the *gṛhastha* used to offer *tarpaṇam*.
3. The three types of deities – Vasu-s, Rudra-s and Aditya-s. All gods are worshiped at an empirical level, for fulfillment of desires. They are now given up.
4. The sons of Brahma – the sages Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatkumara and Sanatsujata
5. The five elements and their evolutes – the senses and mind (signifying transcendence from sensual desires)
6. The paternal forefathers
7. The maternal line in a similar manner
8. One's own self, which was identifying with the body-mind-complex (BMC).

The last *śrāddha* is a farewell to his former self. A person offers *pinda* to his own former self. He is liberated from the bonds of the BMC now.

After these *śrāddha*-s on the river bank the two interns came back to the ashram where we all halted. They were on a vow, *dīkṣā*, and so they observed fast all through the day

and kept awake till the next morning, chanting Gayatri for the last time.

The second day started with a fire ritual called *virajā*-homa at 0530 am on the banks of Godavari. It was interesting to see that when the purohit was fumbling with the mantra-s, Swami Tattvavidananda, a scholar in Yajur Veda, helped him out by reciting them from the Maha-Narayanopanishad. These mantra-s, as the name *vi-rajā* indicates, are to affirm removal of rajas, the impurities of the mind.

This is the final ritual performed by a person who would be a *sannyāsī*. During this, the would-be *sannyāsī* is given a twig of the pippala tree. The pippala, also called as the as-wattha tree, symbolizes *saṃsāra*, as we know. The two interns invoke *agni* (symbolizing rituals) into the twig and get ready for the final step of renouncing the rituals.

The next step is a physical action by the Swamiji. He personally removed the sacred threads and cut the *śikhā*-s with a scissors and handed it to the interns. After this, the two interns and the Swamiji got into water. The Swamiji administered certain oaths to the two interns. The oaths related to *sarvātma-bhāva*, the vision of Brahman in all things in the universe. When you see Brahman in all things, it is natural that you love the other as your own self. It is an unconditional love. The newly graduated *sannyāsī* declares non-injury towards all living beings – those which are moving beings (humans, animals or insects) and stationary beings such as trees. They had chanted Gayatri on the earlier day but now it is given up and a new *sannyāsa* mantra is given to them by the Swamiji.

‘What is the contribution of such renounced persons to society?’, the lay persons ask. The *saṃnyāsī* is a moral compass to the people around him or her. Patanjali describes his state as the *dharma-megha*, a state which showers *dharma* on people around. There is an infectious flow of *dharma* from such person. He is a moral and spiritual mentor, a guide for universal peace.

This is the logical culmination of the teaching of the *Advaita* Vedanta. It is an illustration of walking the talk. The snapping of worldly bonds happens mentally, as the seeker advances in his philosophical reflections. The ritual is a solemn pledge to oneself.

Dr. Aravinda Rao K (Retired Director General of Police)

Date: 04-04-2021