

# Yajna: The Yoga of Sacrificial Fires

by Tiziana Stupia

Fire is sacred in many spiritual traditions, and has been used in religious rites for thousands of years. Along with water, earth, and air, fire is one of the four essential elements all living beings consist of. To honour it, the ancient Romans kept a perpetual holy fire cared for by the vestal virgins, whilst the Greeks tended and transported the sacred fire of Hestia during migrations. The Zoroastrians of Iran placed fire at the centre of their religion and worshipped it as the most ethereal and powerful principle, thought to have been presented directly from heaven by the Deity itself. In the Vedic scriptures, *Agni*, or Fire, is the messenger between the people and their Gods and the personification of the sacrificial fire.

During a recent stay in North India, living at *Anand Prakash Yogashram* in Rishikesh, I became intrigued by a ceremony that took place in the ashram's outdoors ritual space every morning. A small group of people would gather together around a square fire pit, chant Sanskrit mantras in hypnotic loop, and light a ceremonial fire which they would feed with spoonfuls of ghee, fragrant herbs and the exclamation '*Svāhā!*' after each mantra. This ritual lasted for about thirty minutes. Longer, more elaborate ceremonies would take place at the Full Moon and during special festival times, such as *Shivaratri* or *Navaratri*.

I felt immediately drawn to this ritual with its powerful sounds, leaping flames and sweet fragrances, and began to participate daily. Soon, I started to feel profound energetic and emotional shifts within me during and after the ceremonies. Sometimes, a great feeling of peace would permeate my being; at other times, difficult feelings arose, which I seemed to symbolically let go of into the flames with the offerings. More than anything, I felt my heart melting and opening through the heat of the fire. Before long, I was learning how to conduct *yajna*, so the name of the ceremony, myself, and translated the Sanskrit mantras into English. I was fascinated: what was this powerful ceremony exactly, why was it performed, and what were its benefits?

The ritual of *yajna*, also known as *yagya*, *havan*, *homa* or *Agnihotra*, is one of the most ancient Vedic rituals. It consists of the kindling and consecration of a sacrificial fire, the invocation of one or more divinities, and the placing of offerings such as ghee, *samagree* (fragrant medicinal herbs) or grains into the flames. Mantras and prayers are recited during the ceremony, which is often performed during auspicious astrological moments. In modern Hinduism, fire ceremonies still play an integral part in daily worship, and are used as a symbolic form of communication with and honouring of the Divine. Everything offered into *Agni*, the sacred fire, is believed to reach the Gods.

The Sanskrit word *yajna*, meaning 'sacrifice', is comprised of three syllables: *ya*, *ja*, and *na*, which refer to the three processes of every act we perform, i.e. production (*ya*), earning (*ja*), and distribution (*na*). For the Vedic priests of old, *yajna* was a way to invoke the Gods and seek their blessings. Similar to pagan traditions in the West, these rituals were used at important times for the community, such as sowing and during harvest, and also to regulate rainfall, to initiate a particular social event or before going to war. These days, *yajnas* are still performed for many different reasons, primarily to pray to and meditate upon the Divine; to create auspiciousness; to focus on the importance of giving; and to purify the atmosphere. Some say that merely inhaling the smoke of a *yajna* fire can cure respiratory ailments.

Essentially, *yajna* is a purifying ritual. By placing offerings into the fire, one simultaneously offers up negative emotions and surrenders to the symbolic fire of transformation. Anger, greed, jealousy, grudges, as well as illusions, are burned up in the rising flames and can transform into love and compassion over time. Awareness increases and it is believed that transformative effects on a subtle level can be vast and even dramatic. Crucially, the Vedic mantras that are recited during a *yajna* affect the energy centers of the body and produce spiritual power. Many of these mantras end with the phrase '*Idanna mama*', which literally means 'this' (*Idam*) 'is not' (*na*) 'mine' (*mama*), reminding us that the Divine has given us everything we have, and nothing is ours in reality.

In its simplest form, *yajna* in the form of *Agnihotra* is performed by householders to offer oblations into the sacred fire lit in their house. The short ceremony is carried out daily at dawn and dusk and consists of making two offerings to the fire at the exact time of sunrise and sunset along with the chanting of two Sanskrit mantras. The offerings consist of two pinches of uncooked rice grains smeared with a few drops of pure ghee. The fire is prepared with dried cow dung in a small copper pyramid. *Agnihotra* is specifically performed to balance the cycles of nature, to purify the atmosphere and cleanse the negative effects of pollution. A more complicated version involves the setting up of three to five fires and the pouring of offerings, such as food grains, ghee, milk and other substances into them, whilst chanting various mantras simultaneously, and invoking diverse Hindu Gods, in particular *Agni*, *Indra* and *Varuna*. These *yajnas* can last from hours to days. The more complicated the ceremony, the less frequently it is performed.

Despite the fact that there are several kinds of *yajnas*, it is believed that the aspect common to all of them is that the invisible forces (*devatas*) scattered throughout the atmosphere consolidate and gather in the area in which the ceremony is conducted. Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, one of the most eminent *yajna* authorities in the world, said 'Just as the vapour in the air becomes water through a

process of condensation in the same way these divine forces that are pervading the *akasha* condense and crystallise at one place.' Because of this, a *yajna* is considered a very powerful and potent tool for positively influencing the surrounding atmosphere.

In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Lord Krishna proclaims that every aspect associated with a ritual of sacrifice, i.e. the act of offering, the oblation, the sacrifice itself, and the sacrificial fire is *Brahma* (God) (4.23). He declares, 'I am *kratu* (Vedic ritual), *svadha* (offering), *ausadham* (medicine), *mantra* (chant), *aiyam* (ghee), *agni* (fire) and *hutam* (burnt offering).' Classical yoga literature stresses the importance of sacrifice for the purpose of liberation. The *Bhagavad-Gita* says that, 'The world is bound by action (*karma*), unless performed for the sake of sacrifice (*yajna*). *Yajna* feeds the Gods and the Gods will nourish you.' Brahma instructed 'Engage in this *yajna* and become prosperous. May this *yajna* fulfil all your desires.' (*Gita*, 3.10)

A Hindu marriage is seen as a form of *yajna*, too, because *Agni*, the sacred fire, is the witness of all marriages. The couple circumambulates the fire seven times, signifying the marriage contract to have been witnessed by the Gods. Along similar lines, the writer Octavian Sarbatoare suggests that a related approach was developed in great detail in Hinduism by the concept of *tantra*. Here, 'the ultimate *yajna* lies in the form of the sacred sexual union between man and woman for those able of mind control in reaching the conscious experience and staying there.' But until that level is reached, he adds, 'the outer *yajna* using fire is the answer.' From this perspective, the practice of yoga, as union (*yuj*) with the Divine, can also be seen as performance of *yajna*.

To perform a *yajna*, if there is no fire pit, an altar will be constructed, usually with bricks, and special types of grass and wood, or cow dung, are used to build the fire. Offerings and mantras will depend on the purpose of the ceremony. The purity of one's intentions and invocation of the appropriate deities are just as important. For example, to perform a *yajna* for increased health, it would be suitable to direct offerings to the sun deity *Surya*. To overcome obstacles, one could invoke and recite mantras in honour of Lord *Ganesh*; whereas the *Shiva-Shakti homa* is performed to help couples strengthen their relationship and to remove problems and distress.

### **Further reading:**

Sannyasi Gyanshruti & Sannyasi Srividyananda, '*Yajna: A Comprehensive Survey*', Yoga Publications Trust

Uma A. Saini, '*Vaidika Mantras – The Key to Spiritual Knowledge*', U. & K. Pub. Co

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### ***Agnihotra mantras***

#### **At Sunrise:**

Sooryáya Sváhá  
Sooryáya Idam Na Mama  
Prajápataye Sváhá  
Prajápataye Idam Na Mama

#### **At Sunset:**

Agnaye Sváhá  
Agnaye Idam Na Mama  
Prajápataye Sváhá  
Prajápataye Idam Na Mama