

The Ritual Spiral: A Link with Divinity

Rituals: A Transcendental Communion

Zoroastrian doctrine is supported and enriched through a legacy of rituals which when properly performed, gives the participant an incontrovertible experience of something meaningful and special. This experience often helps the individual into an awareness and a deeper involvement, in order to realize the power and existence of an intangible dimension which is believed to complement the physical world. The purpose of a Zoroastrian ritual is to generate a conscious awareness, which in turn gives the celebrant an insight into and an understanding of the nature of divinity. The field of ritual practices therefore is a subjective one, open to many interpretations; however, it is founded upon certain common and inherent principles which when correctly enacted, leads one to a mystical experience.

What are Rituals?

Rituals are a set of practices which when enacted in a given prescribed order, become the medium through which a person is able to relate to the unseen spiritual world. It is through a ritual that an individual existentially experiences a link between the physical and spiritual worlds. A ritual also enables one to maintain a continuity of religious experience with the past.

In a ritual all the items are arranged in a certain prescribed order, and this order constitutes a form in which the physical creations are represented. Upon the proper enactment of a ritual, a qualitative appreciation of the goodness of God begins to emerge, which in turn generates an inexplicable harmony that momentarily brings the participant in contact with the divine centre—the source of all reality! A person who recognizes and experiences this, is the “one who knows” the alchemy of the ritual spiral.

The Role of Man

Man has to:

- i. generate a heightened awareness and sensitivity;
- ii. be in harmony with the physical, psychological and spiritual worlds;
- iii. recognize the inherent qualities of the purity and goodness of God;
- iv. invest emotionally and psychologically in a ritual;
- v. maintain a continuity by relating to his primordial source;
- vi. give pleasure and strength to the spiritual world.

The Role of Priests

The role of priests¹ in the enactment of a ritual goes far beyond the mere recitation of prayers. The priests will be able to generate the ritual power (*Per.amal*) necessary to transpose the physical experience of the ritual into a spiritual reality, only if the recitation of the prayers is accompanied by the right intention, balanced with a virtuous mind.

Ritual purity, cleanliness, devotion, dedication and knowledge of the religion when brought together, makes the priest not merely a *mobed* but a *mobedan* – *mobed*.

“...The priest himself, like the surgeon, a skilled and dedicated craftsman, concentrates utterly on the work in hand....the Zoroastrian priest solemnizes the *pāw-mahal* services with scrupulous exactness in purity of intention, word and act. Thereafter, what he has consecrated from the vegetable and animal creations he gives as offerings to pure sources

1. Zoroastrian priests wear a rectangular piece of muslin (*padān*) which covers the lower part of the face from the nose downwards, in order that no saliva may fall on the sacred fire whilst they pray.

of fire and water. A part may also be consumed by those present as worshippers (who must themselves be wholly clean)....”²

In the *Gāthās* (Y.33.6) it is stated, “The priest who is just in harmony with truth is the offspring from the best spirit. In consequence of this, he is allied with that (good) thinking by reason of which he has respected to bring to realization his pastoral duties. By reason of this very thinking, O Wise Lord, I am eager for Thy sight and Thy counsel.”³

The Role of Rituals

Rituals give man a basic faith and devotion which, when consciously brought together, may result in a special behavioural pattern within the person. Ritual-oriented religions often inculcate within the members of a community, a sense of acceptance and discipline. Large scale rituals often generate an integrating euphoric quality that binds together the faith and devotion of the participants; for example, an open-air Mass conducted in the Vatican.

The Three Worlds of Rituals

Rituals incorporate in their enactment and form;

- i. the physical sensate world which is represented by the materials and implements (*ālāt*) used;
- ii. the psychological world within which are involved the emotions, feelings and participation of the celebrant;
- iii. the spiritual world within which the celebrant becomes aware of an intangible, experiential dimension of reality.

2. See Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* Vol.1 p.323.

3. See Stanley Insler, *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra* Vol.1, Acta Iranica Series, 1975.

The Two Categories of Rituals

Positive Rituals

These rituals are enacted through affirmation; for example, ritual practices which encourage man to forge a link between the physical and spiritual worlds, such as the performance of a *jashan* ceremony.

Negative Rituals

These rituals are enacted through taboos; for example, customs and practices which are observed through the process of abstinence, such as not eating meat on Bahman *rōz* Bahman *māh*.

The Power of Rituals

In the Spiritual World

Zoroastrian rituals bring great pleasure, joy and strength to all the spiritual divinities including the *fravashis* of the departed ones. “*Yazatanām thwā ashaonām kukhshnīsha us bī-barāmi rathwascha berezatō gāthāōschā srāvayōit.*” – “Of the righteous *Yazatas*, I desire to please Thee (Ohrmazd), I dedicate (this libation) to the exalted Lord and he (the *zōtar*) should chant the *Gāthās*.”⁴

In the Physical World

Zoroastrian rituals bring about increased purity, goodness, strength, peace and prosperity within this world, leading to the quicker destruction of Angra Mainyu (*Ph.Ahriman*) and his legions.

Rituals : “A Magical Collage”

Sacredness is the sentiment evoked within man through a conceptual framework which generates reverence and harmony towards an object. This reverence is often contagious in the sense that others notice it. As a result, they show a similar reverential attitude towards the particular object. This state is further heightened through a play of images within a variety

4. See F.M. Kotwal and J.W. Boyd, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* Vol.2 No.1 1977, p.26.

of mental combinations, which often generates a force and power that the person then projects onto the object itself. It is this experience that gives the individual a feeling of sacredness.

Purity is the inherent quality that reflects the goodness of God in the physical, psychological and spiritual worlds. In Zoroastrianism, purity is closely linked to the concept of *asha*—order, truth and righteousness. It is purity of thought, word and deed that makes man follow the path of *asha*. Purity, therefore, is the experiential dimension of truth.

The Three Levels of Purity

Physical Purity

It is the process of washing and cleaning, which in a ritual takes place when the priest makes all the implements (*ālāt*) clean (*pāk*) and pure (*pāv*). Physical cleanliness is a part of godliness in the life of a Zoroastrian.

Psychological Purity

It is the recognition of truth for its own sake in the thought, word and deed process of man. In a ritual it is attained when the priest, with proper dedication and emotional commitment, brings about a feeling of communion and harmony between the seen and unseen worlds.

Spiritual Purity

It is experienced when man harmonizes with the immutable principles which govern the order of both the worlds. It also takes place when, through the ritual, the priest is able to forge a conscious link with divinity whereby the presence of the spiritual world is felt by the participant.

Symbolism: A Representation of Reality

Symbolism is the vehicle through which man learns to experience a subtler dimension of reality by means of a variety of physical representations that reflect a multitude of existential image patterns. A symbol represents a quality or an attribute which transcends the

obvious physical appearance of the object itself. Within the religious symbolism of a ritual is incorporated the prescribed order that exists in the universe. This order becomes dynamic when it is transposed into a discernable psychological state, resulting in the experience of the inherent qualities of God during the performance of a ritual.

Spenta Māthra: The Holy Word

The strength of the word is said to emerge from the world of thought, while the power of the word manifests through the deed. A word rightly uttered is believed to generate harmony in both the spiritual as well as the physical worlds.

In a ritual, a string of holy words generates a special power (*amaš*) which forms an intangible barrier. This barrier may be likened to a kind of "prayer *pavi*" which shields the celebrant from evil influences. "The faithful one who pronounces most words of blessing is the most victorious in victory; the *Māthra Spenta* takes best the unseen *druj* away." (*Yt. 11.3*).

For a ritual to be successful, there needs to be the right intention which allows the words to generate the ritual power (*amaš*) that brings together a perfect balance between the seen and unseen worlds.

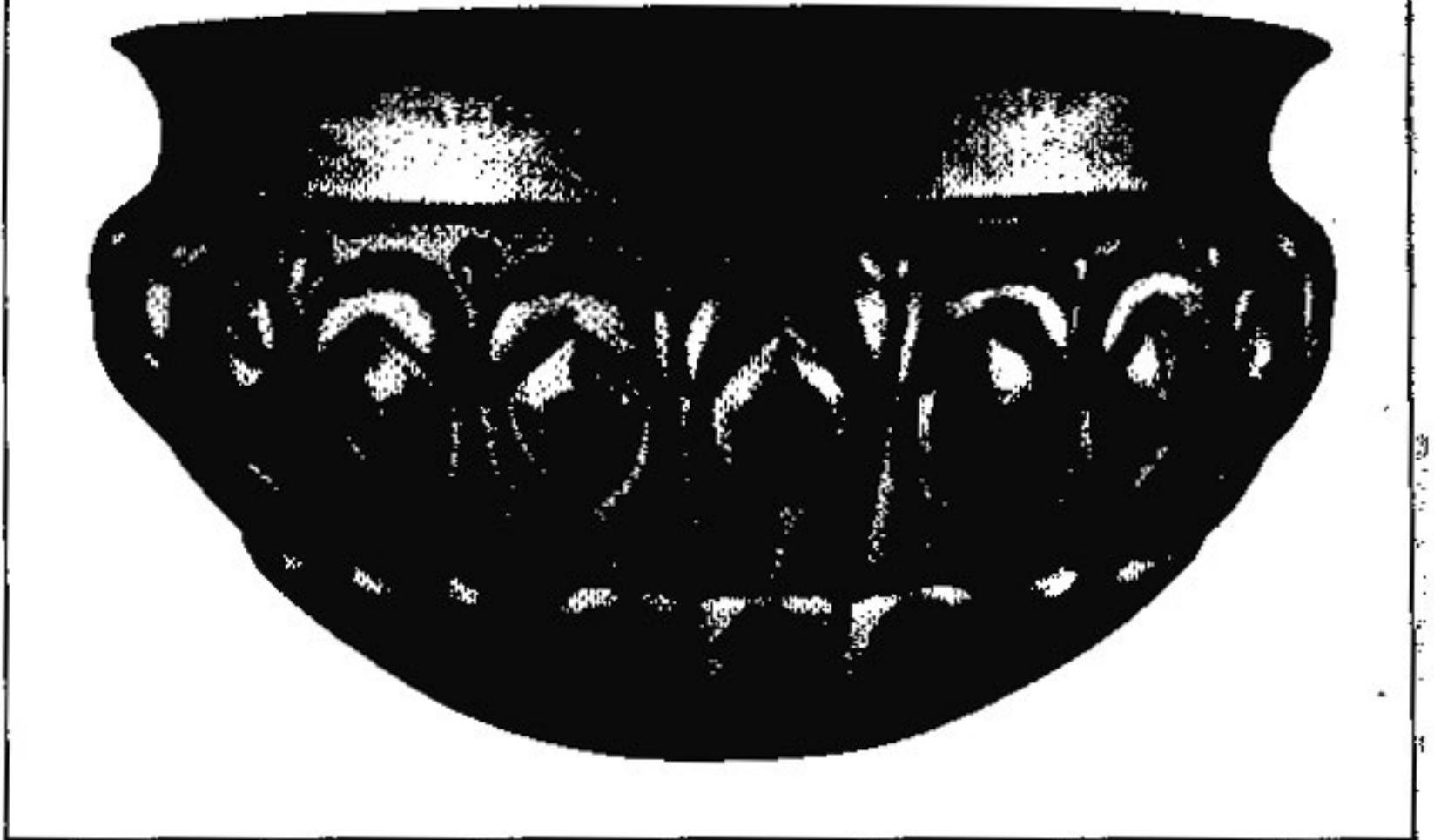
The Purification Rituals

Purification is a process through which a person ritually cleanses himself in order to be consciously pure in body and soul.

The Pādyaḥ-kūstī Ritual

This ritual is the first stage of purification that a Zoroastrian often undergoes. The person recites the formula "*Khshnāōthra Ahurahē Mazdāō*" (Glory be to Ahura Mazda), followed by the recitation of one *Ashem Vohū*. Next,

A libation bowl made of gold (c 5th century B.C.)



the person physically ablutes by washing the exposed parts of the body thrice. He then dries himself with a clean towel.

The individual next recites the *Kēm nā Mazdā* prayer which ends with the recitation of one *Ashem Vohū*. After this, the *kūstī* (sacred girdle) is untied and then retied with the recitation of the *Ahuramazda Khodāē* prayer followed by a formulae of two *Ahunavars* and one *Ashem Vohū*.

Finally, the celebrant recites the *Fravarānē*, commonly known as *Jasa mē avanghē Mazda*. Upon the recitation of this prayer, the *pādyāb-kūstī* is complete.

The *Nāhn* Ritual

The *nāhn* ritual is administered by a priest on any auspicious occasion, when the celebrant chooses to undergo a process of purification which is deemed to bring down the blessings and strength from the divine world.

The purification ceremony begins with both the priest and celebrant doing their respective *pādyāb-kūstīs*. Three pomegranate leaves are placed in the right-hand palm of the celebrant, who in an intoned voice is made to recite a short prayer known in Gujarati as the

Jamvāni Bāj, which in translation reads, "Here then, we worship Ahura Mazdā who created (both) the cattle and the corn. He created the waters and the good plants. He created the lights and the earth and all (that is) good". This recitation is followed by three *Ashem Vohūs* after which the celebrant chews the pomegranate leaves. The leaves are part of the plant world, and therefore are deemed to symbolize the principle of immortality (*Ameretāt*).

The third part of the *nāhn* ritual, commonly referred to in Gujarati as the *Nīrang Pivāni Bāj*, is performed thrice. Here the celebrant is made to recite in an intoned voice a short prayer which in translation reads, "I drink this for the holiness of the body and for the purity of the soul". At the end of this prayer the person is made to sip *nīrang* (a consecrated potion), the properties of which are deemed to be miraculous. Each sip of this sacred potion is believed to help towards the internal spiritual catharsis of thought, word and deed—an important requisite for the purpose of ritual purification.

Next, the priest and the celebrant recite aloud four *Ashem Vohūs* and two *Yathā Ahū Vairyās* followed by another *Ashem Vohū*, making a total of seven short invocations.

These seven prayers may be likened to the seven *Amesha Spentas* whose blessings are sought by both the priest and the celebrant. They next recite the last part of the *Sraosh Bāj* which includes the *Ahmāi Rāescha*, *Hazan-ghrem*, *Jasa mē avanghē Mazda* and the *Kerfēh Mōzd* prayers. The person once again silently unties the *kūstī* and reties it promptly, as a gesture of reaffirmation and commitment to the religion of Zarathushtra.

The celebrant then stands at the threshold of the bathroom door, whereupon a lady member of the household performs a curious ritual. She takes an egg in her right hand and rotates it seven times in a clockwise manner over the person's head. The egg is then broken on a stone placed to the right of the celebrant's feet.

What might the symbolism be as gleaned from the oral tradition?

The egg is held to be a symbol of fertility and life. The clockwise rotational gesture over the head of the person is believed to have a two-fold ritual significance. First, like a corkscrew, the clockwise rotational gesture moves downwards as this act is deemed to generate an energy which permeates into the celebrant; secondly, this movement ensures the symbolic transmission and penetration of the intrinsic goodness of the egg from the spiritual world into the psychological world in which the ritual experience should be felt by the celebrant. The seven rotations are symbolic of the seven Bounteous Immortals (*Amesha Spentas*) who represent the seven key attributes of Ahura Mazda, as well as they are the guardians of the seven physical creations in this world. The heptad of these Bounteous Immortals is ritually invoked in order that they may symbolically penetrate the body of the celebrant through the rotational gesture. Upon the goodness of the egg having ritually entered into the person, what remain are the dregs and hence the egg is cast down and broken.

The *kūstī* is once again untied and the *sudreh* (sacred undershirt), together with the other

clothes, is taken off as the celebrant is about to take the important ritual bath. The priest standing outside, then recites the *Sraosh Bāj* upto the words "...astavaitsh ashahē". He knocks on the door and according to his earlier instructions, the celebrant rubs a drop or two of *nīrang* all over the body. This is done three times after which a mixture of milk and rose petals is rubbed onto the body. Finally the body is washed clean with fresh well-water thereby completing the process of physical purification. The spiritual and psychological purifications were undergone earlier through the processes of chewing the pomegranate leaves and sipping the *nīrang*. The milk and rose petals are symbolic reminders of the well-being and beauty in God's wonderful world.

The celebrant then emerges from the bathroom in a state of ritual purity, after which the priest completes reciting the remaining portion of the *Sraosh Bāj* and then proceeds to recite the *Patēt Pashēmāni* prayer. Meanwhile, the celebrant once again reties the *kūstī* bringing the *nāhn* ritual to a conclusion.⁵

Upon the enactment of this ceremony, the person undergoes:

- i. Spiritual purification through the chewing of pomegranate leaves;
- ii. Psychological purification through the sipping of *nīrang*;
- iii. Physical purification through the ritual bath.

The *Barashnom* Ritual

This ritual ablution is the highest form of purification in Zoroastrianism. It is administered when a priest or a *behdīn* (member of the laity) is deemed to be *rīman* (unclean).

The purification necessitates the services of two priests. The ritual bath is undertaken by

5. All the prayers of the *nāhn* ritual, if known, may be recited by the celebrant jointly with the priest.



the participant in an enclosed open-air courtyard. The segregation and purification ceremony lasts for nine days and nights during which stringent laws of purity and self discipline have to be observed.

The *barashnom* is a necessary pre-requisite for a priest to be able to perform the inner high rituals of the Zoroastrian tradition. In Iran, both the priests and the *behdīns* are allowed to take the *barashnom*. In India, however, the *barashnom* is generally administered only to members of the priestly class.

The importance of rituals lies in the fact that the celebrant is given the vehicle to experience the majesty and glory of God through a sense of devotion and reverence. Critics of religious rituals often fail to realize the emotional benefit that accrues when a ritual is properly enacted. Therefore, to reject rituals on the grounds that they are not to be found in the prophet's utterances, or to change the form of the rituals as is often done today, are both self-defeating points of view. In the former case, a Zoroastrian foregoes the religious experiential dimension that otherwise would be generated, while in the latter, this potential experience itself is undoubtedly curtailed by the arbitrary change in the format of the ritual. A practising Zoroastrian thus, is the one who blends the best of both dimensions by first understanding the doctrine and then allowing an integration of it to be ritually experienced.

A Persian holding barsom rods (7th-6th century B.C.)