

# Initiation: The Sacred Thread Ceremony

This ceremony is essential to the members of the three higher classes and marks a boy's official acceptance into his *varna*. At this point he becomes "twice-born." Everyone has a first, biological birth, but when a young man seeks his spiritual identity he symbolically accepts a spiritual teacher as father and the Vedas as mother. He may also receive a new, spiritual name. At the ceremony, he receives the *jenoi* (sacred-thread), usually worn for his entire lifetime. It is replaced at intervals, but never removed until the new one has been put on. There is a separate *samskara* marking the beginning of education, but today the two ceremonies are often combined.

*Upanayana* means "sitting close by," referring to the boy's taking shelter of the guru (spiritual teacher). Traditionally, he would move away from home to the teacher's *ashram*, called "*gurukula*." Even members of the royal family were trained to live simply without luxury or sense-gratification, in order to keep their minds pure and unspoiled. When later married, they would remain attached to the spiritual values they imbibed during their school days. The emphasis at *gurukula* was on the study of the Vedas and development of character.

## The Ceremony

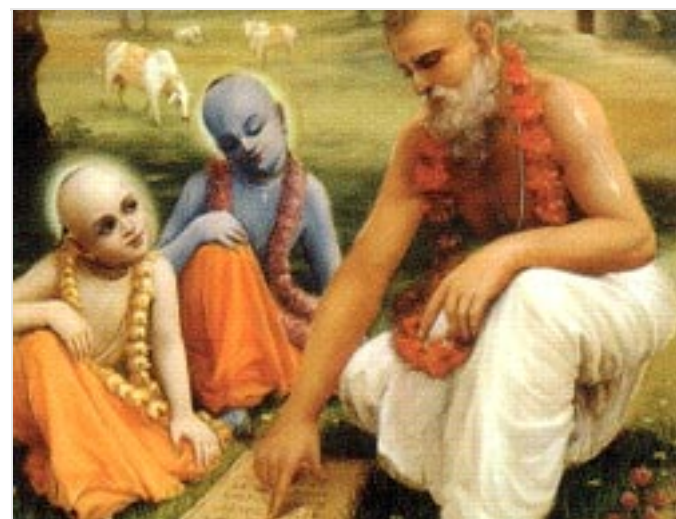
The ceremony itself involves shaving the head, bathing and wearing new clothes. The boy may also beg alms from his mother and from other relatives. There is a *havan* and the investiture of the sacred thread, which hangs over his left shoulder. The boy will then hear the Gayatri *mantra* from his priest or guru, who may give him a spiritual name to signify his "second birth". Thereafter, wrapping the thread round the thumb of his right hand, he will chant this prayer thrice daily, at dawn, noon, and dusk. The boy takes vows to study the Vedas, serve his teachers and follow certain vows, including celibacy. He often concludes the ceremony by offering the traditional *dakshina* (gift) to his teacher.

## Related Values and Issues

### Initiation for Girls



A recent *upanayana* ceremony in the UK. The *brahmachari-ashram* is not generally given as much importance these days, and more emphasis is given to secular education. Often the father himself performs the ceremony.



The *upanayana* ceremony is very old, dating back to at least the time of Krishna. This painting shows Krishna and his brother Balarama at *gurukula* (the school of their spiritual teacher).



Traditionally this ceremony was open only to boys. With changing attitudes, some groups now initiate girls, although girls usually do not receive the sacred thread.

*Vivaha* (marriage) is perhaps the most important *samskara*. Traditionally it was the only rite performed for women, and for men in the fourth *varna* (*shudras*). A couple would stay together for life or until the husband took to the path of renunciation. Divorce was not allowed, and those who left their partners were often ostracised from society. Matches were usually arranged by the elders and based on astrological principles. Despite modern attitudes towards this practice, evidence suggests that these marriages worked relatively well.

Marriage was usually between members of the same *varna*, and the same *jati* (occupational sub-group). Scripture approved of a woman accepting a partner from a higher *varna* but the opposite was shunned. Men in some *varnas* could accept more than one wife provided they could adequately maintain them. Almost all marriages today are monogamous. Until more recent times, women were often married very early, to protect their chastity and because women were considered to mature much quicker than young men. So-called child marriage was often akin to a system of betrothal and marriage was only consummated when the bride reached adulthood. The giving of a dowry, as a symbol of the father's affection towards his daughter, is an ancient practice, apparently going back at least to the time of Lord Krishna. At that time, the wealth remained the bride's personal property. Because of more recent wide abuse, the Indian government declared the dowry system illegal in 1961.

Scripture lists eight types of marriage and current rituals fall within the "Brahma" category. The ancient, elaborate and often lengthy ceremony is usually performed by *brahmana* priests. There is much regional and denominational variation, but certain features are common. These include:

1. Welcoming the bridegroom
2. Exchanging flower garlands
3. The daughter being given in marriage
4. Sacred fire ceremony
5. Holding of hands



The bride and groom, symbolically tied together, circumambulate the fire. Most ceremonies these days last two or three hours and are followed by a reception and wedding feast.



A traditional painting of Shiva and Parvati, whose wedding ceremony was performed by Brahma.

6. Circumambulation of the sacred fire
7. Marking the bride's hair-parting with kum-kum
8. Taking seven steps together
9. Tying the knot (the garments of bride and groom)
10. Viewing the Pole Star
11. Receiving the elders' blessings
12. Exchanging presents

After marriage, most Hindus spend the rest of their lives as householders. After children have left home, there is generally a period of gradual retirement from active life and an increased dedication to spiritual practice. This corresponds to the third stage of life (*vanaprastha*), which these days is rarely adopted formally and certainly followed less rigorously. A few men still take *sannyasa* and, leaving home, prepare for inevitable death. In one sense, the whole of life, with its various stages and *samskaras*, is a preparation for death and beyond.

The funeral rites are almost universally performed and follow similar patterns. Most Hindus cremate their dead. The exceptions are small children and saints, whose bodies are considered pure, and are therefore buried. The rationale is that burning enables the departed soul to abandon attachment for its previous body and move swiftly forward to the next chapter of life. Funeral ceremonies should therefore be performed as soon as possible – by dusk or by dawn, whichever occurs first. Therefore, in India a funeral takes place within hours of death. Regulations elsewhere mean that it may take much longer.

There is also a period of mourning, extending to about thirteen days after the funeral (varying according to *varna* and other considerations). During this time, the family is considered impure. They will not attend religious functions nor eat certain foods (e.g. sweets). It is a period for giving vent to one's grief, so that one can live unhindered by unreleased emotions. Significantly, though, these rites are more for the benefit of the deceased than for the bereaved. They are essential to ensure the smooth passage of the soul to a better level of existence. Most essential is the *shraddha* ceremony performed on the first anniversary of death. *Prasad*, often balls of cooked rice, are offered to God and in turn to the departed soul.

## The Ceremony

The body is washed by relatives, dressed in fresh cloth, and bedecked with flowers. A few drops of



The coffin leaves for the crematorium during a funeral ceremony in Wembley.



In South India, an annual *shraddha* ceremony, in which (rice balls) are offered to God and to the departed soul.

Ganges water are placed in the mouth. The corpse is then carried on a stretcher to the cremation grounds accompanied by *kirtan*, chanting *mantras* such as "Ram Nam Satya Hai" (the name of Rama is truth).The eldest son lights the funeral pyre. For renunciates, it is considered important that the skull is cracked, and this is sometimes part of the ritual, apparently urging the departed soul to move on. Towards the end of the ceremony a priest or relative recites appropriate verses from scripture.

Usually three days later, the eldest son will collect the ashes and place them in the Ganges, or another sacred river. In the UK, relatives may travel to India for this purpose, though some are now using the Thames.

**Scriptural Passages**

"As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones."

*Bhagavad-gita 2.22*