



Badrinath

Dwarka

Jaganathpuri

Rameshwaram

CHAR DHAM

Tirth-Sthaan / Mandir
 (Spiritual Centers / Temples)
 The places of Paramount Peace

Bharat has been the Spiritual center for ages. Sacred sites in Bharat have played a key role in the development and preservation of our great culture.

These sacred places of Upaasana (worship) are called Mandir, Tirth, Devalaya, or Ashram.

Mandir in Sanskrit means-home or abode. Mandir is a place of upaasana (worship). It is a center of learning that helps us sustain our values. The mandir reminds us to live with pride in our philosophy, culture, and rich traditions. On a spiritual plane, the mandir is a devalaya, a place where Bhagwan 'lives'. It is an extension of the Ishta Devata, personification of Bhagwan that we have in our homes.

The history of our temples is very ancient. Devotees built mandirs within their homes so they can perform individual Sadhana (practice) and generate positive energy within and around the house; at the same time they built mandirs in their towns where they could collectively perform spiritual practices as a whole community.

Swami Vivekananda said, "The greatest source of strength for any society is its faith in God. The day it renounces this faith is the day it begins to die."

Mandir cultivates and sustains the faith, teaches harmony and brotherhood, teaches to distinguish right from wrong, and teaches how to live a virtuous life.

Why we need a Mandir?

Over the ages, man has built various institutions such as schools, hospitals, and entertainment centers to fulfill their social and physical needs. At the same time man has built centers to fulfill their spiritual needs; their desire to know the truth, seek happiness, peace and purification. We need the mandir to purify ourselves by learning and practicing good things, and the mandir provides for an environment in which we are surrounded by people who want the same things and form a harmonious society based deeply on traditions and spirituality. While Bharat remains the center of our inspiration, we have built thousands of other temples around the world. With changes in time and technology the buildings of mandirs have advanced, yet their foundations have remained true to ones in Bharat.

**Once, someone asked Soordas Ji,
"Why do you go to the temple? Due to blindness
you cannot even see Shri Krishna's moorti!"
Soordas Ji's divine answer to the person was,
"Of course I cannot see Shri Krishna,
but I know that he wants to see me. I go to the
mandir, so that he can see me every day."**

Mandir Architecture

Hindu Mandirs are built based on the specifications described in ancient architectural texts known as Vastu-Shastra. Our ancestors thoughtfully put down these architectural principles, mainly to form an environment of intense spirituality in and around the Mandir. We all experience an elevation of the innermost self whenever we visit the mandir. This feeling is not just because of the presence of murtees (deities) and the poojas performed there; the mandir was physically built in order to discover the inner peace out of devotee in a specifically structured environment. Established thousands of years ago by our ancestors 'Agama' principles are followed for the construction and worship practices of our mandirs. Based on the geographical locations, need and traditions of local devotees the outside architecture of temples may vary, but the essential principles of Agama remain the same.

Garbha Grih (Sanctum)

This is a place where deities (murti) are placed. The size of Garbha Grih is much smaller than the outside of the Mandir. There is a divine feeling as we enter this place.

Mandapa or Praasaad

This is enclosed area (sometimes looks like a hall) normally in front of Garbha Grih. Different types of artwork can be seen in this area.

Praakaar

This is an encircling passage outside of the Garbha Grih. Devotees do a clockwise Parikrama or Pradakshina (circumambulation) of deity by walking in this passage with the feeling that the center of all his or her actions is Ishwar.

Shikhar

This is a tower shaped structure above the Garbha Grih. In some temples, more than one Shikhars are built. A Kalash (sacred pot) and a Dhvaj (flag) are placed at the top of Shikhar.

Gopura

It is a magnificent gateway that leads devotees to the Garbha Grih. This tower like structure sometimes called Raja Gopuram. Few steps are built that devotees climb to reach to the Gopura.

Hundi

A box or a container that has a slit at the top for devotees to place their offerings in material form.

Mandir is a bridge between the atman (individual soul) and param-atman (Supreme Being); it is a resource for our spiritual and social needs, it is a symbol of our cultural identity and pride.

Once someone asked Mahatma Gandhi, “Bapu, why do you go to the mandir?” As always Gandhi ji's sparkling answer, “I do not go to mandir; my Atman (soul) goes to the mandir.” Our texts say mandir visit is one of the ways for self-purification.

Some Mandirs are also known as Tirth. Literal meaning of 'Tirth' is to 'go-across'. A pilgrimage (called Tirth Yatraa) takes us through the ocean of worldly sufferings and provides us peace & happiness.

The following are some main tirths, mandirs and sacred places in Bharat:

- **Char-Dham/Mutt** (char=four, dham/mutt=pilgrimage centers, 'tt' here is pronounced same as 'Th' in popular last name 'Thakur')

These are four centers established by Adi Guru Shankaracharya, around 800 CE, to continue teachings of Vedanta. These four centers in four corners of Bharat are the pillars of Hindu unity.

1. **Kalika Mutt at Dwaraka, Gujarat**
2. **Sharada Mutt at Shringeri, Karnataka**
3. **Govardhana Mutt at Puri, Orissa**
4. **Jyotir Mutt near Badrinath, Himalaya.**

* Rameshwaram, situated in Tamilnadu, is also referred to as one of the main pilgrimage centers. At this place Shri Rama worshiped Bhagwan Shiva.

- **Himalaya** is the abode of our Rishis / Gurus. They have done severe tapas (penance) at various places in the Himalayas, the mighty crown of Bharat. Four pilgrimage centers in Himalaya are:

1. *Badrinath: Mandir of Bhagwan Vishnu*
2. *Kedarnath: Mandir of Bhagwan Shiva*
3. *Gangotri: Origin of divine river Ganga*
4. *Yamnotri: Origin of divine river Yamuna*

- **Vaishnav Devi Mandir**

Mandir of Durga, situated at 6,000 feet from ground level. It is situated near Jammu, North India.

- **Shree Venkateshwar (Bala ji) Mandir**

Ancient Mandir of Bhagwan Vishnu situated on Tirupati Hills in South India.

- **Amritsar Harmandir Sahib**

Established more than 400 years ago by Sikh Gurus. Holy book Granth Sahib is placed in the sanctum. It is situated in Punjab, North India.

- **Sarnath Buddha Mandir**

The place where Buddha delivered his first discourse, after attaining enlightenment. It is situated near the holy city of Varanasi, North India.

- **Palitana Jain Mandirs**

These temples are icon of Indian architecture, built around 12th century. They are situated near Bhavnagar, Gujarat, West India.

- **Akshardham**

Mandir of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The temple is a classic example of volunteer efforts, ancient architecture and modern technology. It is situated near Gandhinagar, Gujarat, West India.

- **Sacred Cities**

Due to their spiritual contribution, in India's early and modern times, the following seven cities are called sacred cities:

1. Ayodhya: Birth place of Shri Ram.
2. Mathura: Birth place of Shri Krishna.
3. Haridwar: Place where Ganga River comes down to the plains from Himalaya.
4. Kashi (Varanasi): Center of education and learning.
5. Kanchi: City of temples, famous for temple art and sculpture.
6. Ujjain (Avantika): City of Mahakal (Bhagwan Shiva), known for mystic and contemporary literature.
7. Dwaraka: City where Shri Krishna spent later part of his life as a ruler and then departed from this earth.

- **Sacred Rivers**

Rivers are highly regarded in India due to their giving nature, their share in spiritual, social and economical development. Indian civilization has prospered on the banks of many great rivers: Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Krishna, Kaveri, Mahanadi, Sabarmati, Brahmaputra, Gandaki, Narmada, Godavari, Chambal, and Saryu.



Amritsar - Harmandir Sahib



Shree venkateshwar (Balaji)



Akshardham



Vaishnav Devi

The Hindu community in North America has continued the tradition of building temples as centers for upaasana (worship), education, and learning. These temples link American Hindus to their spiritual roots in Bharat. Here in USA, mandirs are the places where our younger generations learn sanskars and cultural values through various youth programs like Bal Vihar, Vidya Mandir and youth camps. Some to name here are: Shri Venkatesh Temple and Hindu Jain Temple of Pittsburgh, Ganesh Temple of NY, Durga Temple of Chicago, Hare Krishna Temple of WV, Meenakshi Temple of Houston, Shiva-Vishnu temple of Washington DC.

**Principle of Sacrifice
and Service**

Seva

Principle of Sacrifice and Service

The Hindi word Seva originates from the Sanskrit word 'Sev', meaning to serve or to attend without expecting anything in return; therefore, 'seva' can be translated to mean service or volunteering in English.

Seva is an act which brings about a positive change in the society. Seva requires many qualities such as dedication, commitment, empathy, and hard work, but the noblest quality of a Sevak (volunteer) is the aspiration to change within oneself. Once, Swami Ram Tirth, a social reformer, gave an advertisement in the news paper looking for volunteers. The advertisement stated, "Volunteers needed: high compensation will be paid to those who want to change themselves."

Mahatma Gandhi was born in an economically well-off family, he studied law in London and was well compensated as a lawyer. We all know the stories that narrate how he became a leader of the masses and the impact he had as a freedom fighter. If we look closely into his life's work, we will find that the key ingredient of his strength came from Volunteerism. He gave up his status and all his comforts so he could spend his life in the service of others.



नर सेवा =
नारायण सेवा
Service to Humanity =
Service to God



Continuing with the list of great men who volunteered throughout history: Benjamin Franklin's list of volunteer work is also very long. Two of his volunteer - based pioneer efforts that became milestones within American society are; the public library system and the fire department. He believed that if members of the community could volunteer in these two programs then society will be better governed. And the impact of his volunteer efforts can be seen today. To this day masses of people from all generations volunteer for both their fire departments and public libraries.

Some benefits of volunteer work:

- It is a self uplifting process
- It creates a sense of social empathy by forming human bonds between one who serves and the one who is being served
- It helps society and government during economic downturn
- Volunteers can help people in need with their skills, time, and some discretionary funds
- It helps understand multicultural dimension of society
- It motivates volunteers to learn and acquire new skills
- It generates a sense of community cohesion and leadership
- Above all, it gives self fulfillment if done with altruistic temperament

Avenues of Seva / Volunteering

We can perform Seva in various ways. The Seva act can be classified into the following four categories:

1. Karyatmak Seva (Seva through Action)

This includes providing physical help to someone in need. Both, volunteer and the one person benefitting are physically involved in this act of Seva. Some examples of this type of Seva are; helping elderly people, serving food or medicine to needy, collection and distribution of material, cleaning temple property, etc.

2. Bhavnatmak Seva (Seva through Emotion)

This includes fulfillment of Emotional needs of the person being served. For example; spending time with grieving friends, neighbor, family members, sending greetings to soldiers who are on active duty, reading or sending a prayer or sacred book to sick or elderly, celebrating birthday or festival with elderly or disable persons.

3. Gyanatmak Seva (Seva through Knowledge)

The old proverb says, "Give a man a bread, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man a skill and he will eat for a lifetime." This type of Seva includes providing education help to someone who is underprivileged. Education is not just about attendance, it is about raising the awareness about the issues related to a better and more fulfilling lifestyle - health, sanitation, knowledge, rights and liberty etc.

4. Danam (Donation in form)

This includes regular donation of money and new or unused items to underprivileged members of society.

The following are some avenues for volunteers to work:

- Work for a non-profit group.
- Help raise awareness and funds for social causes.
- Help in community improvement projects.
- Give time to spiritual, social and professional groups which are working towards betterment of the community.
- Mentor and tutor those who are less knowledgeable in any subject matter; physical or spiritual.
- Help seniors / elders.
- Small acts like cleaning up in an office kitchen, in temple rooms and in your own community centers; offering your seat in a public transport to the elderly, a pregnant woman, small child or someone who needs it more than you.

Volunteering requires the courage of giving up something personal to us, including our time. At its essence volunteering is the spirit of enjoying someone else's happiness, and the provides towards the consciousness for 'greater global good'.

'Greed is Good' is not the mantra of which should be chanted in order to improve social harmony, but instead, 'Giving is Good' is the mantra which should be followed.. Ben Franklin once said; "There are three categories of people - first are those who are immovable, second are those who are movable, and third one are those who move and move others." So, let us be in the third category and become volunteers who move, embody the change and help others move in a way which will only improve their lively hood, and give you a higher meaning of self. In short, "Give and Gain".

Inspired by Gandhi Ji's work, a Swami (Monk) came to him and showed willingness to work with him in his social reform work. Mahatma Gandhi said, "You cannot do that because your status is of a Swami (Monk), people respect your status, your dress, your outlook. Only if you are ready to sacrifice all that, you can serve the people in need. You have to be like the people in order to serve the people." And the story goes that the Swami (Monk) gave up his status and joined the team of Gandhi's volunteers.

Basic Principles and Symbols

Building Blocks
of Our
Glorious Heritage



SACRED SYMBOLS

Basic Principles and Symbols

Building Blocks of Our Glorious Heritage

The following concepts are described in detail in our spiritual texts and appropriately interpreted by our Dharma Gurus/Acharyas from time to time. In this book we have discussed them briefly.

- **Prakriti (Nature):** Prakriti is the matter (material substance) with which the universe is formed. *Unending energy* and *self-supporting* properties of Prakriti are essential components of the physical world. Everything around us is Prakriti.
- **Purush:** Purush is the pure consciousness (chetana) which is self-existent, the one who pervades or lives in the universe. In broad terms Prakriti is the field (body) and Purush is the knower of this field.
- **Paramaatma/Brahman/Bhagwan:** Explained in chapter 1
- **Atman** (closest English word is soul): It is the SELF of a living being. Atman is that which travels from one body to another during the cycle of birth and death. Atman is same in every living being (human and animal). That's why we say all are same. Atman's attributes are: eternal, all knowing, all present and all powerful, blissful. In essence, Atman is an element of Paramaatma.

- **Manas** (mind): It's the sum total of our thoughts and experiences. Ordinarily called 'mana'.
- **Buddhi** (intellect): Faculty of mind; discriminatory and decision making power.
- **Chetana** (consciousness): Domain of Manas and Buddhi. Also called 'Sakshi' the awareness.
- **Ahamkaar** (ego): Ego is our ignorance which makes us think that we (atman) are the physical body. When Aham (individual 'I') takes the Akaar (ownership) of physical body and material world, then the Ahamkaar (ego) is formed.
- **Law of Karma and Reincarnation**: Every act in our daily life is a Karma, for example studies, bathing, eating are ordinary karma, while yagna, pooja, yoga-asan, seva (charity) are superlative karma. Every karma produces a result, good or bad. Due to our past karmas we are caught in the cycle of birth and death (reincarnation). We (soul) are relieved from this cycle in a life in which all our karmas are good and we perform them with no attachment to the results. This state of liberation from this cycle is called 'Moksha' or 'Nirvana' or 'Anand'. Our Shaastras explain the ways and practices to perform good karma.

- **Four Purusharthas (aspirations) and Ashrams (stages of Life)**

The Rishis encourage us to fully engage in the four noble aspirations:

1. **Dharma**: Defined in Chapter 1.
2. **Artha**: Acquire worldly wealth and wisdom.
3. **Kama**: Enjoy every moment of your life (as part of the divine).
4. **Moksha**: Enlightenment.

The Rishis gave us a beautiful method for accomplishing these aspirations, called the *four Ashrams* (the four stages of life):

1. **Brahmacharya** (student life): Prepare yourself academically, physically and spiritually.
2. **Grihastha** (family life): Period when you find a life partner and together perform spiritual practices (pooja, study of shaastra etc.), impart values in children, and work hard to create wealth and prosperity for yourself and the society.
3. **Vanaprastha** (social service): Prepare for social service after children are well settled.
4. **Sanyasa** (unattached living): Renounce material world.

*For youth,
the first two stages are the ones to focus on.*

Why do we?

Light a lamp

All our auspicious occasions begin with the lighting of a Deepak (lamp). Light symbolizes knowledge (Gyan), the remover of ignorance (Agyan). Agni (fire) in the lamp is witness to our thoughts and actions during any auspicious occasion.

Have a pooja (prayer) place/room

We all have a separate place in our homes where we perform pooja. Doing meditation, reading, bhajan / keertan in this place generates lots of positive energy and vibrations within the house and around.

Do Namaste or Namaskar

Namaste is a gesture of respect and greeting. It is derived from the Sanskrit words “namah” and “te,” or, “I bow to divinity in you.” By saying Namaste we recognize the same soul (divinity) in the person before us.

Touch our parents' feet

We bend down to touch the feet of those whom we respect. It symbolizes our recognition of their selfless love for us, and the sacrifices that they have made for our welfare.

Put a Tilak/Bindi

The chandan, kumkum, or bhasma (vibhooti) which is offered to Bhagwan is taken back as prasad (blessings) and applied to the forehead. The spot between the eyebrows is known as Ajna Chakra, the energy center for the mind. The tilak cools the forehead, protects wisdom, and prevents energy loss.

Do not touch paper and books with our feet

Knowledge is treated as supreme in our culture--it is sacred. Books provide us with knowledge. We respect books and treat them as goddess Saraswati. That is why we do not touch books with our feet.

Offer food to Ishwar before eating

By offering food first to Ishwar, we acknowledge that He is the provider of everything we have. We consume offered food as Ishwar's prasaad (blessing). While offering we pray that none of the living being should remain hungry.

Do Pradakshina

At the temple we circumambulate the sanctum. This is called pradakshina. Ishwar is the center and source of everything within and around us. By doing pradakshina we recognize him as the focal point of all our actions.

Observe Fast

Fasting in Sanskrit is Upavaasa. Upa means “near” and vaasa means “to stay”. Upavaasa means to stay near Ishwar. On fasting day we devote more time remembering Ishwar, bringing joy and control over the senses.

Ring the bell in a temple

The ringing of the bell produces an auspicious sound. The vibrations produced help us to concentrate on Ishwar. Each bell ring resonates the sound of “OM.”

Worship Kalash

Kalash is a metal pot filled with water. It symbolizes the physical body filled with divine force (water) to perform auspicious things. Because water is the giver of life, water from holy rivers is filled or invoked in the Kalash.

Blow the conch

The conch is blown in temples and homes during aarti. It generates the sound of Om. It is a call for auspicious events.

Offer a coconut

The coconut is offered while performing pooja. Breaking of the coconut symbolizes breaking of the ego.

Do Aarti

It is a way to communicate with Ishwar to reduce suffering and gain joy. Camphor (or Deepak) symbolizes the fire of knowledge that illuminates the Truth (Ishwar). We do aarti to honor guests.

Chant Om

OM is the Supreme Being--Brahman that is beyond all things beyond names and forms. By chanting OM one attains joy. Chanting OM helps us meditate.

Draw Swastika

We draw swastika at the door or on a kalash or near the pooja place as sign of good-luck. It is a Sanskrit word, meaning: 'Su' means 'good' and 'Asti' meant 'to be'. It represents flow of divine energy in all the directions.

Say Shanti three times

We seek “Shanti,” or peace, for three entities: elements (physical world), devatas (divine powers), and self (body-mind-soul).

SAMSKARS – Character Building Rituals

- **The process of creating permanent positive mental impressions is called “Samskar.” Samskar is the building of Gunas (Virtuous Character).**

- **Due to our contact with the world, we loose our divine virtues. Samskar is the process through which we regain virtues and purify our conduct and sanctify the life span.**

The following are the sixteen main samskars performed at different stages of life:

Pre Birth

1. Garbhaadhan (Formation)
2. Punsavan (Strengthening child)
3. Seemantonayan (Mental health)

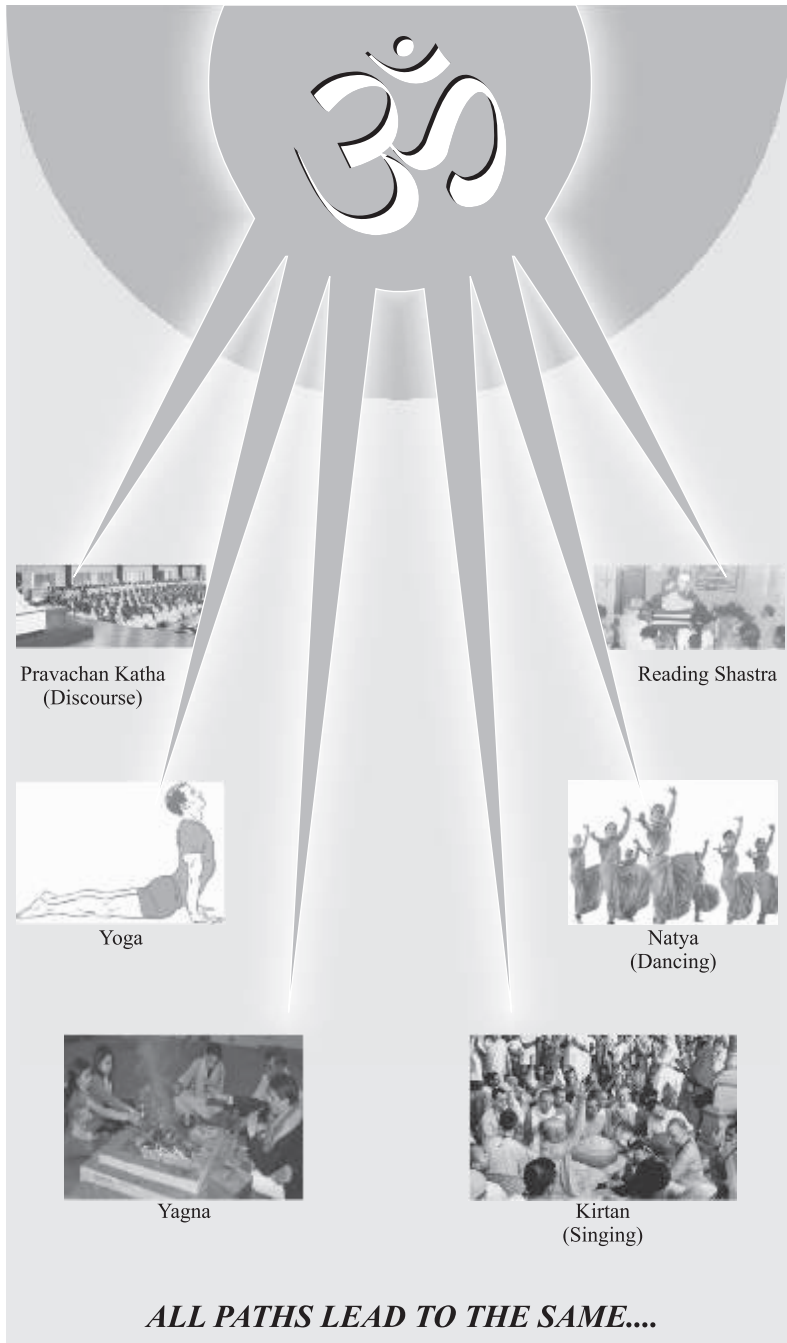
Post Birth

4. Jatkarma (Child Birth)
5. Namkaran (Naming Ceremony)
6. Nishkraman (Moving out of home first time)
7. Annaprashan (First solid food)
8. Chudakarma (Head shaving)
9. Karnabhed (Ear piercing)
10. Upnayan (Thread ceremony)
11. Vedarambh (Beginning of Education)
12. Samavartan (Returning home after education)
13. Vivah (Marriage)
14. Vanaprasth (Serving society, after completion of family duties)
15. Sanyas (Renunciation)
16. Antyeshti (Last rites)

In essence, any good thing we learn from our elders become a samskar. Samskars are the treasure of Hindu Heritage.

It has been a tradition of Hindus to walk with guests for some distance while seeing them off. In small towns people go up to the railway or bus station. A pandit ji went to a small town for religious discourse (katha). When the katha was over the host went with pundit ji to see him off at the bus station. The host took his 4 year old son along with him. Distance to the bus station was couple of miles. Pundit ji said to the host, "Why are you taking the small boy with you, back and forth will be about 4 miles, he will be tired". Host humbly replied, Pundit ji this the way he will learn how we honor our guests, he will better understand the meaning of Atithi devo bhav (guest is a Devata)".

Such mental impressions are our Samskars.



Upaasana (Way of Worship)

The Way to
Communicate with Ishwar



Upaasana (Way of Worship)

The way to communicate with Ishwar

Upaasana (Up = near, Asana = to stay) literally means, “Staying near Ishwar.”

Upaasana is a technique for making the mind and intellect sharp in order to communicate with and understand Ishwar.

In upaasana, the devotee visualizes Ishwar in different forms such as: Agni (fire), Shri Ram, Shri Krishna, Shiva, and Durga. Hindus also worship mother, father, learned atithi (guest) and acharya (spiritual master).

Rishis have suggested various ways to perform upaasana. These ways may have different names, but all of them have two things in common:

1. 'Bhakta (Devotee) & Bhagwan', and
2. Single aim, namely, 'Self-purification & Realization of Ishwar.'

The following are the ways we have been performing Upaasana for thousands of years:

- **Yagna**

Yagna means “sacrifice and surrender to God”. It is an act of offering, the best one has, for the welfare of others.

As an act of worship, yagna involves offering materials such as purified butter (ghee), grains, seeds and leaves, while chanting mantras and meditating on Ishwar.

- **Puja/Archana**

The word Puja has its origin in the Sanskrit word “Puj”, which means to honor, to welcome, to offer or to pray. According to our scriptures puja can be performed in steps: 8, 10 or 16. Conventionally Shodash-upachara (Shodash = 16, Upachar = steps) is performed by most of us. It starts with Avahanam (Invocation) and culminates in Aarti (Prayer).

- **Kirtan/Bhajan/Prarthana**

Singing Ishwar's glory in devotionally formed phrases, supported by music, is another way to communicate with Him/Her. According to some medical experts, this devotional singing is good for health as well.

Prarthana establishes dialogue between Bhakta and Bhagwan. It can also be performed for

others. It is a request to Ishwar and a way to express his/her gratefulness.

- **Jap**

Jap means repeating Ishwar's name (or a mantra) in low voice, or even in mind, while sitting in Sukh-asana or Padma-asan. It could be done with the help of a mala (beads). Jap generates enormous spiritual energy in devotee.

- **Yoga**

For Hindus yoga is one of the ways of worship. The union of an individual with Ishwar by controlling mind (thoughts) is Yoga. Performing an act with a balanced mind, detached from success and failure, is also called Yoga.

Yoga is a discipline for balanced functioning of the body and mind.

Yoga is a gift of Hindu rishis to the world.

Four major types of Yoga are:

1. **Bhakti** : devotional
2. **Karma** : performing good action
3. **Raj** : asans (postures), pranayam (breath control) and dhyan (meditation).
4. **Gyan** : listening to the spiritual texts and gurus

There was a pundit ji (priest) who used to perform puja everyday in a temple. Pundit ji had a son, who used to be present regularly at puja time and had a deep love for Ishwar. Even though he was devoted, he never made any effort to memorize puja mantras. One day, pundit ji had to go out of town for some work, so he asked his son to perform puja in the proper way. The next morning when the child sat for puja, he realized that he did not remember mantras. After doing abhishek (giving ceremonial bath to Bhagwan), he sat in front of Bhagwan and said, "Bhagwan, I do not know all the mantras properly, but I love you very much. I will say all the alphabets; you please put them in order and make mantras from them, which will complete the puja. I will then be able to give a satisfactory answer to my father upon his return". Seeing the child's undaunted devotion, Bhagwan gave Darshan (manifested) to him. The child devotee saw what Shri Krishna showed to Arjun and what the pundit ji could not see or realized in his entire life.

*As our gurus have said,
"It does not matter what way we worship,
it is Bhakta's (devotee's)
love which pleases Bhagwan".*

Festivals

Although these days festivals are mostly social and cultural events, they are also ways of performing upaasana for Ishwar. All of our festivals are centered on one or the other form of Ishwar. For example Navaratri signifies Durga puja, Deepavali signifies Lakshmi puja, Makar Sankranti signifies Surya (sun) puja and so on.

Our Festivals are celebrated throughout the year, signifying divinity and nature's (weather changes) importance in our life.

Some of the major festivals, which are celebrated by Hindus around the world, are discussed below in brief:

Makar Sankranti

Makar Sankranti falls on 14th of January. Hindu festival of Makar Sankranti marks the beginning of the Sun's northward journey (Uttaraayan). Makar is called Capricorn in the western calendar.



The Hindus all over the world consider this day as the most auspicious day and perform Surya puja. In south India it is celebrated as PONGAL and in Punjab, it is celebrated as LOHRI. In Gujarat, it is celebrated with puja and kite flying. Daanam (charity) on this day are very auspicious and fruitful.

Shivaratri

On Shivaratri, Hindus offer a special prayer to the lord of dissolution, Shiva. According to the *Puraanas*, during the great churning of the ocean (Called *Samudra Manthan*), a pot of poison emerged from the ocean.



The gods and the demons were terrified, as this poison could destroy the entire world. They ran to Shiva for help and he drank the deadly poison but Parvati intervened and made him hold the poison in his throat instead of swallowing it. This turned his throat blue, and therefore, he is known as *Neelkantha* (*Neel-Blue, Kanth-Throat*).

Devotees celebrate this event in which Shiva saved the world. Shivaratri is celebrated by observing a fast, performing pujas and abhishek (ceremonial bath). Traditionally, Bilva leaves are also offered to Shiva.

Holi

Festival of Holi falls in the month of March. There are two main reasons to celebrate Holi:

1. Arrival of Spring 2. The victory of Prahlad

(good over arrogant and wicked); death of the Hiranyakashipu's sister Holika, or Holi. Bhagwan Vishnu came in the form of Narasimha (half man –



Many bonfires are lit to celebrate the survival of Prahalad, and this is called 'Holika Dahan'. The day after Holi is the actual festival of colors. On that day, everything in sight is covered with colors. People take colored powder and apply it on each other. People of all ages enjoy the festival together; it strengthens social ties.



Ram Navami

Ram Navami falls on the ninth lunar day of the bright fortnight (full moon) in March-April. It is the birthday of Bhagwan Ram, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. Shri Ram was born to King Dasharath and Kaushalya.

Ram is most revered name in every Hindu home. Ram Janm (birth) is celebrated at noontime with Bhajans, Aarati and Prasad. This day offers an opportunity for devotees to remember and imbibe the ideals of Shri Ram.



Mahavir Jayanti

Mahavir Jayanti is the birth anniversary of Bhagwan Mahavir. He was born on the thirteenth day of rising moon in March-April. He was born to king Siddhartha and Trishala.



This day is observed by visiting temple, performing abhishek (ceremonial bath), and worshipping the Teerthankars (great souls). This is the day for devotees to imbibe Bhagwan Mahavir's teachings.

Guru Poornima

Guru Poornima falls in the month of July. This day is also celebrated as Vyaas Poornima. Rishi Vyaas compiled and organized the four Vedas for easy reading and understanding of common people.



On this day we perform Guru Puja. This is the day to remember all the Gurus who have showed us the path of Dharma and have helped us to remove our ignorance. Though a Guru does not expect anything in return, on this day we offer some Guru dakshina (closest English word for dakshina is offerings).

Raksha Bandhan and Upakarma

Raksha Bandhan falls in the month of August. Raksha Bandhan is also known as Rakhi. It has become a valued festival for sisters and brothers. Sisters tie rakhis (sacred thread) to their brothers, priests tie rakhis to the devotees attending pujas on various festivals. It is a reminder of religious duty of the highest order



Raksha means 'protection', and Bandhan means 'tie'. Within Rakhis reside sacred feelings and well wishes. Many diverse groups are also seen celebrating Raksha Bandhan.

Upakarma

On this day male members of the society go to temple for Upakarma: renewing the Sacred Thread (Yajnopavittam). Yajnopavittam reminds a man to discharge his duties to his ancestors, society and devatas.

Ganesh Chaturthi

Ganesh Chaturthi falls in the month of July. Bhagwan Ganesh is the bestower of wisdom and prosperity and is the remover of obstacles. He is the son of Shiva and Parvati, brother of Kartikeya and the leader of devas (Gan - Devas, i[e]sh - Leader).



Ganesh chaturthi is one of widely celebrated public festivals of Hindus, inside and outside Bharat. Devotees place images (murtees) of Bhagwan Ganesh in homes and temples. On the tenth day murtees are immersed in water with big celebration. The festival was revived in 1894 by revolutionary leader Shri Bal Gangadhar Tilak to bring the feeling of unity and social harmony.

Janmashtami

It falls on the 8th day of the dark half (new moon) of the month in August.

Janmashtami is the birthday of Bhagwan Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Shri Krishna was born to Vasudev and Devki.

On this day temples and homes are beautifully

decorated and lit. People spend the day immersed in Shri Krishna's glory by reading, reciting, and singing his divine leela especially in the evening. At Midnight, Bhagwan Krishna's birth hour, a grand aarati is performed. He is placed in the form of "Lalji"(child) in a swing and devotionally offered many food dishes including "Makhan"(butter).



Navaratri and Vijaya Dashami

Durga Puja or Navaratri commences on the first and ends on the tenth day of the bright half of September-October. Navaratri literally means 'nine nights', and is a puja in honor of nine manifestations of Durga.

The basic aim is to worship Shakti, the Goddess in her aspect of Power, to seek wealth, auspiciousness, prosperity, knowledge, and power for the entire society. Durga Puja is the greatest



Hindu festival in which Bhagwan is adored as Mother. The main ritual of the festival consists of placing images of the Durga at homes and temples through nine nights. Another popular way of celebrating Navaratri is by doing Garba dance. Not only in India, but in many other countries, this is a very big celebration.



The tenth day is Vijaya Dashami or Dussehra – Virat PARVA or Grand Occasion. Victory celebration of Bhagwan Rama over Ravana. Dussehra also means, "taking TEN sins away". Shri Rama symbolizes the best in humanity and Ravana the evil force. On this occasion huge effigies of Ravana are set on fire.

Deepavali

Deepavali falls on the last day of the dark half (new moon) of October-November month. It is a festival of lights ('Deep' means lamp/light and 'avali' means Row). Deepavali is celebrated to: 1. Welcome Shri Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity 2. Mark Victory of Shri Rama over Ravana, and his return to Ayodhya (Shri Rama's kingdom) 3. Mark liberation (moksha) of Bhagwan Mahavir and Swami Dayananda, founder



People decorate and light up their homes, shops and other places. On the night of Deepavali, Devi Lakshmi and Bhagwan Ganesh are worshipped with great devotion and rows of diyas (wick-lamps) are placed in and around the homes. Special pujas are held at Jain temples and Bhagwan Mahavir is worshipped. After the puja, people exchange sweets and use fireworks as a mark of celebration. Younger family members are presented with gifts. Sikhs celebrate Deepavali to express joy at the return of Guru Hargobind Ji, to Amritsar in 1620 CE from the prison of mughal ruler Jahangir.

Kumbh Mela

Kumbh (kumbh = pot) Mela (mela = fair / carnival) is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage that takes place at four locations in India: Prayag (North India), Haridwar (North India), Ujjain (Central India), Nasik (West India). Kumbh Mela represents the relationship between saints and society. The mela is the largest gathering (approximately 20 million people at one time) of Hindu sadhus and devotees at one place. Mela is organized once in twelve year at each of the four locations. The festival depicts an assertion of faith & traditions and performance of rituals.



	Hindu Calendar Month	English Name	Season (Ritu)	Festival
01	Chaitra	March-April	Vasanta	Ram Navami, Mahavir Jayanti
02	Vaishakh	April-May	Grishma	Baisakhi, Gudi-padva, Ugadi
03	Jyeshtha	May-June	Grishma	Buddha Jayanti
04	Aashaadha	June-July	Varshaa	Guru Poornima
05	Shraavana	July-August	Varshaa	Raksha Bandhan
06	Bhaadra	August-Sept.	Sharad	Janmashtami, Ganesh Chaturthi
07	Aashvina	September-Oct.	Sharad	Navaratri, Dussehra
08	Kaartika	October-Nov.	Hemanta	Deepavali
09	Agrahayana	November-Dec.	Hemanta	Geeta Jayanti
10	Pausha	December-Jan.	Shishir	Makar Sankranti, Pongal, Lohri
11	Maagha	January-Feb.	Shishir	Vasant Panchami, Saraswati Puja
12	Phalgun	February-Mar.	Vasanta	Holi, Shivaratri

“All of our pujas / archanas / prarthanas may appear different but actually they are one and the same; they have their origin in Vedas and Upanishads.”

Why should we read Spiritual Texts in Sanskrit, perform rituals and memorize the mantras?

Two possible answers to this:

1. Spiritual Texts, Temples, Yagnas, Mantras are the support/help on the spiritual path. As we progress towards divinity these supports are left behind. It is like this: cement structures are supported by wood and metal supports till they are stable and concrete. Mantras have divine power; they sanctify us and bring us closer to Ishwar when chanted with Bhakti (devotion).

2. We inherited these from our ancestors; we have to pass them on to next generations and so on.

If we believe Hinduism can bring peace and happiness to all, we must ourselves practice it first and then pass-on to others.



Festivals

Sanskriti (Culture)

Our Traditions and Pride



Sanskriti (Culture) Our Traditions and Pride

Literal meaning of “Culture” ('Sanskriti' in Sanskrit language) is “that which is refined” - 'a progressive, positive, evolving civilization'. Refinement comes from selfcontrol, so culture is also synonymous with selfcontrol.

Culture has many expressions: Language, Dress, Art, Music, Dance, Architecture, Crafts, and Food are some examples.

Arya ('noble') Sanskriti, or Hindu Sanskriti, now popularly known as Indian Culture is thousands of years old.

As stated, culture is not just following the traditions but constantly refining it; it is respecting and preserving Language (Literature), Dress, Food, Music and Dance.

India has several languages, dresses, food items and dances. Names and forms of these things may vary from region to region within India or within the Hindu communities in United States.

These variations are parts of our Culture as many colors are parts of one Rainbow or many-colored flowers are parts of one garland.

- ❖ Here in USA, we have heard younger generation Hindus saying, “I love Pav Bhajee, I love Chhole Bathure, I love Gulab Jamun, I love Curd Rice.....”.
- ❖ In temples, young devotees are seen organizing programs and performing pujas.
- ❖ Festival celebrations have a big number of young participants.
- ❖ In various gatherings, grand parents are seen getting the due respect and attention.
- ❖ Indian movies and dance programs attract large young crowd.

All above observations prove that we have brought our cultural values and traditions with us, 8000 miles away from our ancestral land and the younger generation takes a pride in it and is willing to carry it forward.

Languages

- Most of our languages are derived from Sanskrit. Our names are mostly taken from Sanskrit and are meaningful.
- In most Hindu homes, parents and children speak in their mother tongue.
- These languages are known as regional languages in Bharat, but in USA region is not as relevant, what is more relevant is preservation of cultural / ancestral roots through use of ancestral languages.
- There are approximately 15 major languages spoken by our community. To name some:

Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Bengali. Sanskrit is the language mostly used in Pujas and Yagnas. Most of our spiritual texts are written in Sanskrit (it is also known as Dev Bhasha).

- Whatever languages we speak, our cultural values remain the same. For example, elder brother is not called by name, called by a respectful title, in Hindi and Gujarati we say 'Bhai', in Tamil, Kannada and Telugu we say 'Anna', in Bengali we say 'Dada' and so on.



Dresses

- Our dresses are designed such that they bring dignity for self and respect for others.
- We have dresses for various occasions. Some of the popular traditional dresses are: Sari, Salwar kurta, Chaniya choli for women; Dhoti kurta, Kurta pajama, Jodhpuri suit for men.
- Sari with bindi, chudi (bangles), and Indian jewelry is one of the favorites of Indian women of all ages.
- Richness of Indian dresses has fascinated many diverse groups; they are seen wearing Indian dresses when they come to our temples or programs.

Food

- Most of our food items from different regions have same ingredients although their names are different. For example, rice is main ingredient in Dosa, Pulao or Dhokla; wheat is main ingredient in Chapati, naan, paratha etc.
- Spices are added according to their inherent qualities for good health. Spices like jeera, ginger, and turmeric, chilly are added to most of cooked vegetables and curries, whether it is daal or malai kofta or rasam. Gulab jamun, burfie, shree khand, kheer/payasam, laddoo are main desserts. *Popularity of Indian curry outside of India shows the influence of Indian Culture.*

Music

- *Sangeet* is Indian word for music. Singing (Gaayan), Playing instruments (Vaadan) and Dancing (Nritya) make Indian Music. *It means "bringing all three together and expressing in full."* These three are supplemental to each other.
- Indian music is Divine as it has its origin in Vedas.
- The Vedic mantras are also composed and are recited with certain beats.
- As defined in our scriptures, OM is primordial sound (sound of creation). OM is said to contain all the sounds of music and rhythms.
- Indian music is not just for entertainment, it has the power of painting the moods of nature and the minds of man.

- Some of great Bhaktas (devotees) have used music to compose and sing Bhajans as part of Ishwar Upaasana (worship).
- There are melodies in the rich heritage of Indian music that had the mystic strength to do things like light lamps and downpour rains.

Some of the musical instruments invented in India are – Sitar, Sarangi, Mridanga, Tabla, Dholak, Sarod, Veena, Ektara, Pakhavaj, Flute (Bansuri or Bansi), Shahanai, Santoor, and Jalatarang.

Dance

- When a person is overjoyed and is unable to express his/her feeling through some medium, he/she starts dancing.
- Indian dancing is not a movement of legs and arms; it is a form of worship, a temple art, identifying oneself with Ishwar.
- According to spiritual texts Bharat Muni founded the ancient dance with the blessings of Bhagwan Shiva (also worshipped as Nataraj: Lord of Dance).
- Students have to learn this through devotion and hard work from an able dance teacher (guru).

There are two types of dances: *Classical* and *Folk*.

1. Major Schools of **Classical Dances** are:

- **Bharata-natyam:** The oldest of all Indian

dances, originated in South India. This is one of the most popular bonds between young Hindu girls in USA and their ancient roots in Bharat.

- **Kathak:** Originated in North India, has intensive footwork and body turns. It is a dance presentation of Katha (story, act and message).
- **Odissi:** Originated in East India. This dance has its own devotional importance due to its roots in famous Puri temple, Orissa, India.
- **Kathakali:** Originated in Kerala, South India. It is a dance-drama with gorgeous costumes and elaborated makeup. It is based on the heroic events from the epics.
- **Kuchipudi:** Originated in Andhra Pradesh, South India. Dances present scenes from Hindu Epics combining music, dance and acting. The music used in Kuchipudi dance is classical Karnatic.

2. Folk Dances:

Folk dances are mainly originated from village people. Though these dances have emerged in rural areas, many of them symbolize Indian culture outside India.

Some of famous folk dances for all occasions and all ages are:

- **Bhangra:** Folk dance of Punjab, a lively and powerful dance is a favorite of young boys. This is performed in traditional Punjabi outfits with arms movements and dholak's (drum) quick beats. It tempts the audience and non-performers to dance too.
- **Garba and Dandiya raas:** Folk dance of Gujarat, it is associated with Shri Krishna and Durga, this graceful dance is a favorite of young boys and girls. This is performed late in the evenings by both men and women, moving in a circle holding and clicking sticks (dandiya).

Many of Indian cultural programs and functions have their grand finale with "Garba and Bhangra".

- **Yakshagaan:** Folk dance of Karnataka, an elaborate dance-drama combining dance, dialogues, music and amazing costumes.

We, the current generation, are lucky to have such a strong and living culture.

Let us work hard to preserve it!

One day a young student in Houston, Texas returned home from college in a sad mood. His father asked, "What has happened, my son? You seem discontented today". Son replied, "Today we had a group discussion in our class on religion and culture. The group had people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, most of them were confidently talking about their faith and teachings, but I couldn't talk much". Father said, "Because, you never learned!" Son asked, "Why didn't you send me to Bal Vihar when I was a kid?" Father answered, "We used to try to wake you up every Sunday morning for Bal Vihar, but you always wanted to sleep late and disregarded our efforts". Son asked, "Why didn't you force me to wake up???" **This incidence is not a story, but an eye Opener. Our Dharma and Culture help us identify ourselves in the society and generate Pride in our identity.**



SHADES OF DANCE

Nine Treatments

Guidelines for Daily life

1. Have faith in Ishwar / Bhagwan.
2. Three flaws of speech:
Remove them
 - a. Backbiting
 - b. False Speech
 - c. Harsh Speech
3. Three flaws of body:
Beware of them
 - a. Theft
 - b. Violence
 - c. Poison: Alcohol, Drug, Smoking
4. Three observances (fasting):
Practice them
 - a. Speak limited
 - b. Eat limited
 - c. Sleep limited
5. Three flaws of heart:
Control them
 - a. Greed
 - b. Hatred
 - c. Anger

Nine Treatments

6. Ishwar loves these three the most:
Become his/her beloved
 - a. Donor/Compassionate
 - b. Gallant/Brave
 - c. Humble/Devoted
7. These three will earn you more friends:
Learn and Earn
 - a. Don't be angry with an angry person
 - b. Don't insult anyone
 - c. Initiate talk with those who do not talk with you
8. Preserve three things:
Become cheerful
 - a. Silence
 - b. Solitude
 - c. High-quality reading
9. Daily rules: Follow them and
Become a Dharmic person
 - a. Wake up at dawn
 - b. Remember/meditate on Ishwar as you wake up
 - c. Eat little of your favorite food
 - d. Maintain regularly the time and place of prayer
 - e. Study, play, and exercise everyday
 - f. Spend time with someone younger than you
 - g. Think of your rights and wrongs before going to bed
 - h. Remember, meditate on, and thank Ishwar while ending each day

Hindu Dharma & Sanskriti Synopsis by Numbers

ONE	Brahman/Ishwar/Bhagwan
TWO	Atman (Unique You) and Parmatman (Bhagwan) Itihaas (History) books: Ramayana and Mahabharata
THREE	Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Tridev) Sacred rivers: Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati (also called Triveni)
FOUR	Gurus: Shri Krishna (Karma), Nanak (Bhakti), Buddha and Mahavir (Gyan) Vedas: Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Veda Ashrams (Stages in life): Brahmacharya (student life), Grihastha (family life), Vanaprastha (social service), Sanyasa (unattached living) Purusharthas (Aspirations): Dharma, Artha (wealth and wisdom), Kama (enjoyment) and Moksha (enlightenment) Pilgrimage centers: Kalika Mutt at Dwaraka, Gujarat; Sharada Mutt at Shringeri, Karnataka; Govardhana Mutt at Puri, Orissa; Jyotir Mutt near Badrinath, Himalaya.

Synopsis by Numbers

FIVE	Bhutas (Elemental world): Prithvi (earth), Jal (water), Vayu (air), Agni (fire) and Akash (space)
SIX	Darshans (Philosophies): Poorv Mimansa (talks about divine means of obtaining joy), Nyay and Vaisheshik (reaffirm that only Ishwar is attainable, and not the material world), Sankhya (understanding of the truth releases the Atman from bondage), Yoga (Performing an act with a balanced mind, detached from success and failure), Brahm-Sutra (Devotion/Bhakti is the way to realize Ishwar)
SEVEN	Swaras: Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni Rishis: Kashyapa, Atri, Bharadwaja, Vamdeva, Vishwamitra, Jamadagni and Vashistha
EIGHT	Parts of Yoga: Yama (codes of restraint), Niyama (observances), Asana (posture), Pranayam (breath control), Pratyahara (sense control), Dharana (concentration), Dhyam (meditation), Samadhi (deep absorption of meditation)

Suggested Resources

NINE	Nav Ratris (festival: worshipping nine forms of Durga during nine nights)
TEN	Characteristics of Dharma: Dhriti (patience) Kshama (forgiveness) Damah (self control) Asteya (not stealing) Shaucha (purity) Indriya Nigraha (sense control) Dhi (intellect) Vidya (learning) Satya (truth) Akrodha (absence of anger)

- **Book: Explaining Hindu Dharma**
published by Vishwa Hindu Parishad, UK
office@vhp-america.org
- **Book: The Hindu Mind** by Bansi Pandit
- **The Arsha Vidya Gurukulam,**
Pennsylvania publications
books.arshavidya.org
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publications
www.vhpamerica.org/programs/publications.htm
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- www.hindunet.org
- www.hindukids.org

DAILY PRAYERS

Early Morning

कराग्रे वसते लक्ष्मी, करमध्ये सरस्वती ।
करमूले तू गोविन्दः, प्रभाते करदर्शनम ॥

*Karagre vasate lakshmi, Karamadhye Saraswati
Karamooletu Govindah, Prabhaate Kara Darshanam.*

The front of hands (i.e. finger tips) is ascribed to Laxmi (Goddess of wealth), the middle of the hands to Saraswati, and the root (i.e. part of hands near to the wrist) to Govinda. Therefore, every morning one should respectfully have a look at one's hands (which symbolizes honest labor).

समुद्रवसने देवी, पर्वतस्तनमण्डले ।
विष्णुपत्नि नमस्तुभ्यं, पादस्पर्श क्षमस्वमे ॥

*Samudra Vasane Devi, Parvata-Stana-Mandale.
Vishnupatni Namastubhyam, Paada Sparsham
Kshamasva Me.*

O! Mother Earth, who has the ocean as cloths and mountains and forests on her body, who is the wife of Bhagawan Vishnu, I bow to you. Please forgive me for touching you with my feet.

GURU MANTRA

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णु गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।
गुरुः साक्षात् परब्रह्मा तस्मै श्री गुरवे नमः ॥

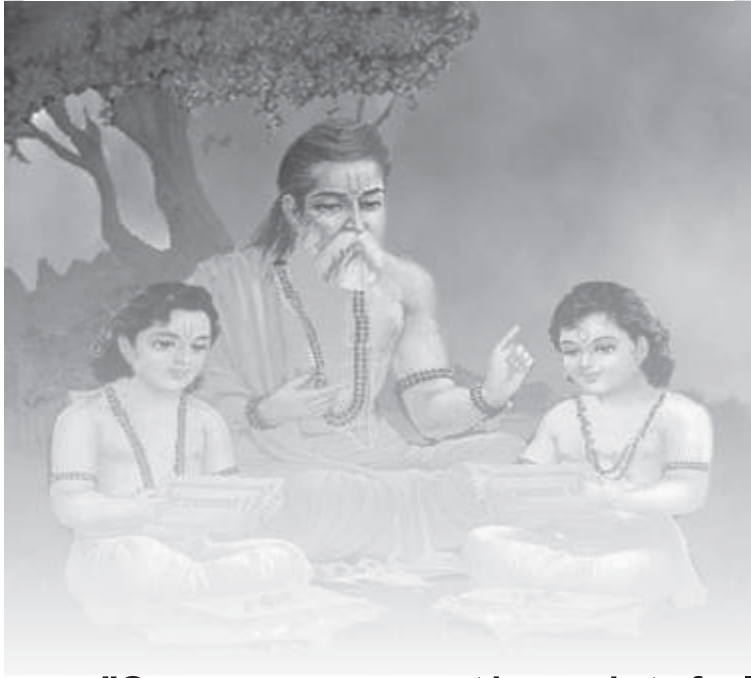
*Gurur-Brahma Gurur-Vishnu, Gurur-Devo
Maheshwaraha
Guruh Saakshat Para Brahma, Tasmai Shree Gurave
Namah.*

I Prostrate to that Guru, who is himself Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara and who is verily the Supreme Absolute itself.

त्वमेव माता च पिता त्वमेव ।
त्वमेव बन्धुश्च सखा त्वमेव ।
त्वमेव विद्या द्रविणं त्वमेव ।
त्वमेव सर्वं मम देव देव ॥

*Tvameva Mata cha Pita Tvameva,
Tvameva Bandhu cha Sakha Tvameva,
Tvameva Vidya Dravinam Tvameva,
Tvameva Sarvam Mama Deva Deva.*

*O Ishwar!
you are my mother and you are my father also;
you are my relative and my friend you are;
you are Knowledge and wealth onto me;
you are my all-in-all, O Lord of Lords.*



"Our young men must be made to feel proud of being born in the great lineage of Rishis and Yogis. If we are to live up to their legacy, we must live as Hindus, we must appear as Hindus and also we must make ourselves felt by the whole world as Hindus. It is only when we learn to respect ourselves, our customs and manners that we can hope to command respect from the world also."

- Guruji M. S. Golwalkar