

Guidance note for traditional Hindu Upasana

The purpose of this note is not to inspire people towards, or to promote Hindu Upasana, as religion and spirituality are issues that must not be ‘sold’ or marketed.

The limited objective of this note is to offer proper and authentic guidance to those who have already made up their minds to do Hindu Upasana.

For those, still undecided on the issue of doing Upasana, it would be better to wait for the right inspiration rather than seek out conviction by debate. This note will not offer answers to the question of why Upasana should be done and readers are requested not to contact the writer for further discussion on this.

The terms Puja, Upasana, Sadhana, Jap, Paath and Dhyaan are used interchangeably for Hindu religious practices in general. For clarity, we define Puja as worship of an external deity in the form of an idol or yantra (pran pratishthit) using material offerings (panchopchar 5, shodashopchar 16 etc).

Jap is repetition of a mantra by a person authorized as necessary by diksha, either mentally (mansik) or as a soundless uttering with only lip and tongue movement (upanshu). Paath is recitation, spoken out (vachak) of a stotra, stuti or sahasranaam by a person authorized as necessary by diksha. Dhyaan is contemplation of either the formless, light or God in any of his various forms. For householders (grihasthya) in the thick of worldly life, dhyaan of the formless or of light is not advised as being excessively detaching in nature. Dhyaan of God in any form is ok but is already covered as a Jap where the mantra repetition is accompanied by a visual contemplation of the specific deity in the defined form. Anyways, the formless dhyaan is best done as a natural progression in the hatha yoga sequence as defined in the Patanjali Yoga Sutras (Ashtang yoga, meaning the 8 steps).

Upasana (root: up – asana) means (the Upasaka) sitting or being situated near God and in usage, encompasses one or all of the above (Jap, Paath, Puja and Nyaas). Sadhana refers to a more formal, sustained and daily effort (as in music) towards Upasana by a person (Sadhaka) authorized as necessary by diksha.

Some general but firm principles of Hindu Upasana:

1. Hindu Upasana is rule based and rule bound. The rules derive from, in order of priority, the word of the Guru (belonging to an uninterrupted guru hierarchy) and the directions from the scriptures. Intelligence and rationale is no substitute for the above precisely because so many of the rules do not have a logical basis. Also, individual opinions may be

- varying by the thousands and reconciliation is next to impossible. With innumerable streams of Hindu Upasana, and every second person ever willing to offer home made advice, as well as advice galore from dailies and periodicals, the confusion and damage to Sadhakas is obvious.
2. Hindu Upasana is fully a doable. The intellectual/logical component serves only the limited purpose of clarifying the doables and not the rationale behind them. At a later stage, some amount of meaning enters the rituals and rightly so when the Sadhaka is ripe and mature enough to grasp it.
 3. Faith and belief is good but not necessary as a prerequisite for a successful Sadhaka. They are the natural consequences of Sadhana and indeed lead to it blooming like a beautiful flower. The point is that a Sadhaka should not wait to have faith before starting Upasana nor should be discouraged by lack of it. Only the minimum belief is required to keep the person sticking to his daily routine of Sadhana and prevent him from bunking or giving up or, worse still, distorting the directions given to him by either his own logic or borrowed snippets from the multitude of advice so readily available to him. Once he has chosen a guru or a friend whose guidance he accepts, the Sadhaka must stick to it without questioning the rationale (clarification is not a taboo, but on the contrary very healthy) for some amount of time and see the results for himself.
 4. We have referred repeatedly to a duly authorized Sadhaka above. This means that either the Jap, Paath, Puja etc. being done by the Sadhaka does not require diksha, or else he possesses the requisite diksha if so required. Similarly the food habits (veg/non veg) must be in consonance with the Jap etc. being practiced by the Sadhaka. As an example, all Vedic and Tantric mantras require diksha. Pauranic mantras normally do not require diksha (exceptions must be checked out with the person guiding). Authority to practice certain mantras is a sensitive issue and also a sore point for (specially the well-educated ones) Sadhakas. What has to be understood is, that this not a VIP issue and that a Sadhaka should not make it a prestige point to practice mantras without proper diksha. Unauthorised Sadhana is clearly harmful to the Sadhaka as also to the one who has wrongly so directed.
 5. The time budget for Sadhana should be determined keeping in view the daily sustainability. Rather than choose to do a long daily routine with over enthusiasm, which may be difficult to afford, it is better to

- opt for a lesser routine in terms of daily commitment to time, which can be sustained. It is of prime importance to stick to the daily routine and not miss or bunk Sadhana (excepting the monthly chumming for women). Please note that the result is not linear – in the sense that the result of 50 minutes daily is NOT 10 times that of 5 minutes daily. The Sadhana can be left out while traveling or ill, but it is not desirable to do so. Just as we manage to squeeze in our daily activities like bathing etc, Sadhana too must be stuck to unless compelling circumstances prevail otherwise.
6. Sadhana must be focused on to a single deity (Isht) or at most one subsidiary deity (Up-Isht). This is a major weakness with most Upasakas who end up scattering their Upasana amongst multiple deities. This loses impact and is a serious impediment to success. And emotionally, Sadhakas have a great resistance to stopping the extras. It is hard to let go and I have found people persisting for years before focusing on one deity, which is the right way. The formless Brahma first expresses itself as the one with form and subsequently the form divides itself into many rays of light which are the manifestation of innumerable Hindu deities. The Sadhaka can view all other deities that he is trying to let go of, as the rays of his Isht and thus try and limit himself to one Isht.
 7. Some basic rules of hygiene etc: - Clothes worn below the waist are said to lose their purity the moment they are taken off (no matter how much the time they have been on) unless made of pure silk or wool. Hence it is desirable to have all puja clothes as pure silk or pure wool. The asana of Kush and wool is best for men and wool for women (women are not suited for kush asana). The asana cannot be shared with anybody, not even the closest family. The puja must be located in the north-east sector of the built-up area and the Sadhaka may face anywhere in the arc north to east. The Jap mala is made of 109 round and large sphaatik beads which have knots in between each bead so that they do not touch or knock together. The Jap is done with the mala completely concealed in a sock like L shaped silk cloth pouch called a gomukhi with the right index finger poking out of the slit provided. Jap is done on the middle sector of the right middle finger with the thumb unless otherwise instructed by the guru. If more than one malas are to be done, the 109th bead called the sumeru is not crossed over but the mala flipped around and the next mala is done retracing the steps back along the beads. The Jap mala cannot ever be worn (unless you do not intend to use it for Jap anymore) and a mala

- once worn can never be used for Jap. Mantras are done only upanshu or mansik, paaths only vachak. Some mantras which are short or otherwise not very sensitive can be done on the move but purely mansik. All other Upasana has to be done only on the asana.
8. Like food, Upasana too can be sattvik, rajasic or tamasic in nature. Tamasic Upasana is obviously undesirable while purely sattvik Upasana too is not recommended for grihasthyas as it creates vairagya or a spirit of detachment as well as problems in worldly affairs. Hence a healthy component of rajasic Upasana is desirable for people still in the thick of worldly affairs.
 9. As said above, dhyana (meditation) on the nirguna (that without attributes) or nirakar (formless) is prohibited for grahasthyas (householders). Even accomplished saints have meditated on the sakara (with form) form of the deity. This is commonly called Sumiran (distortion of Smaran, remembrance) and the formal and systematic way of doing this is the Jap itself, which is appropriate for householders
 10. Commonly used terms for the various paths of Hindu Upasana are Bhakti, Gyana and Karma. Of these, Bhakti and Gyana are the end results of Upasana and strictly speaking, not paths, in the sense of not being do-ables. If at all Bhakti and Gyana are thought of as 'paths' then they are tough paths indeed. In contrast the Karma path of Jap, path and puja is easier, consisting of pure do-ables. The only rider and a critical one at that, is that these (Jap, path and puja) must be either strictly according to the scriptures or as per directions of the Guru, and this in a sense is the true meaning of Karma Yoga as said in the Geeta. Following the Karma path leads to easy development of Bhakti as a bhava or feeling on the emotional plane and Gyana as realization on the intellectual plane, in the Sadhaka.
 11. Sadhakas need a word of caution against the so called modern Gurus whom we often see on TV because they are found to give mass diksha publicly, which is against the basic directives of the scriptures regarding diksha. Diksha as per the scriptures is an intimate and completely private event restricted to only the Guru and the disciple.
 12. The good and the bad (and the ugly!) dished out to us in the present lifetime is a result of our actions in thousands of past lifetimes. Rebirth can be a matter of debate for some, but it is so fundamental a tenet of Hindu philosophy that if you are still looking for conviction on this count then you are definitely not ripe for Sadhana and better wait for the right time. The cumulative effects of all the karma

- (actions) in all the births of a Jeeva (soul) are called Sanchit karma. Of the Sanchit, the sum total you are allowed to expend in this lifetime is the Prarabdha and whatever good or bad actions (karma) you perform in this lifetime or current karma is called Kriyaman karma. It is this present action (Kriyamana) that cancels the effects of the Prarabdha and in overwhelming quantity can even reach back to the Sanchit. Once the Sanchit is wiped out there is release from the cycle of death and birth. A strongly negative Prarabdha can even prevent positive Kriyamana (this manifests as obstacles or Vighnas in Upasana). In essence, the Kriyamana and Prarabdha fight like rams (Adhyatama Ramayana; dialogue between Vashishtha and Vishwamitra in response to Sri Ram's query) and the more powerful one succeeds in putting down the other. Thus debate is fruitless and instead time and energy is better spent in relentless and intense Upasana (Kriyamana) which can successfully burn up the negative Prarabdha.
13. Sadhakas should, in the early stages, avoid study/intellectual activity pertaining to the sadhana unless specifically a part of the routine prescribed by the Guru as often such study, specially philosophy, diverts a sadhaka by pointless debate as also wastes time. Later on, mature Sadhakas with solid hours of Upasana under their belt may spend time on scriptural study (an exception to this is Vedic Upasana where study is itself an integral part of the Upasana). This caution is even more important for Sadhakas with high educational qualifications as intellectual pursuit, debate and analysis come naturally and compulsively to them. As said above, with freely flowing advice on Upasana from people, media and periodicals, the issue arises as to what are the criteria for a valid mantra. Every mantra has a viniyoga (object statement) which includes the Rishi who discovered (visionary or drishta Rishi) the mantra, its meter, seed (beej), lock (keelak), power (shakti) and deity (devta). There is also a defining shloka for the deity (dhyana shloka) and nyasa on the hands as well as heart etc 6 parts. So when a well-wisher insists on your doing a particular mantra and you cannot shake him off, try asking the above defining parameters of the suggested mantra as proof of authenticity.
14. A common misconception about Hindu Upasana is that it is appropriate only for old age or vanaprastha ashram. In reality, purely sattawik Upasana is of course appropriate for old age but rajasic Upasana is not only suited for, but very much desirable in youth and adulthood. In fact, there is no age when Hindu Upasana is not

- relevant. For young students, the power to grasp and learn is magnified manifold by the appropriate mantras or paath of Saraswati devi. Another serious error of belief is that Upasana needs no rules as whatever is offered to God with love is accepted happily. The fallacy is that while Bhakti may not be rule bound, Karma definitely is, being ipso facto subordinate to a system of rules and procedures. Miracles and magical powers (Siddhis) are majorly confused with the results of Upasana. The fact is that while Siddhis, miracles etc. may occur as a purely incidental by product of Upasana, they neither have any relevance nor serve as criteria for the progress of Upasana. Sometimes they occur in order to clear the way of minor obstacles for the Sadhaka, or to provide him faith and hence attract him towards the deity and at other times they can be a distraction meant to throw the Sadhaka off track (as a Vighna). In short, Sadhakas must steer clear of any such inclination towards Siddhis and miracles.
15. There exist some sensitive places on the earth and periods in time which multiply the effects of Upasana many times over. Examples are Navratri, Eclipses (only if visible at the location of the Sadhaka), four Maharatris of the year (Diwali, Holi, Mahashivratri and Janmashtami) reflected each month as Amavasya, Purnima, Krishna Chaturdashi and Krishna Ashtami respectively, all Siddha Peeth, all Shakti Peeth, all 12 Jyotirlingas, the four Dhama, places where saints have done Upasana and their Samadhi, proximity to the Guru, holy rivers.
 16. Tantrik Upasana is a much misunderstood field of Hindu Upasana and evokes feelings ranging from awe and attraction, to fear. It's also thought of mistakenly as a panacea for all problems and hence people are vulnerable to exploitation in many forms from charlatans and quacks posing as 'tantriks'. Tantrik puja is commonly associated with corpses, cremation and burial grounds, liquor and meat as offerings. This is a completely wrong impression and the above ingredients only refer to the Left path (Vaama marg) of any kind of Upasana, Tantrik or otherwise. We will not discuss the Vaama marg here as being beyond the scope of this note. Another wrong belief is that Tantrik Puja relates to the 6 actions (Shat Karma) of Marana (killing), Mohan (attraction), Vashikarana (subjugation of will), Uchhatana (displacement from the place), Vidweshana (creating mutual animosity) and Stambhan (making immobile). The truth is that these Shatkarmas can be achieved by Vedic and Pauranic puja too, in addition to Tantrik, and thus are not a hallmark of Tantrik puja alone. (The morality and consequences of such karmas are a separate issue). In its purest sense,

- Tantra is merely a system of Upasana just like Vedic and Pauranic systems. Tantra originates from Vedas and branches off as a separate stream, also called as Agama Shastra (Vedas are the Nigam Shastra), and derives its validity from being the result of Shiv Parvati dialogues (essentially a monologue from Shiv to Parvati with the Goddess asking questions or clarifications). Tantra evolved primarily because it was meant to give quicker results in Kaliyuga and also because Vedic Upasana would be tougher in Kaliyuga with its many restrictions and binding rules. What Sadhakas should watch out for is self crowned Tantriks promising miracles and Siddhis and quick fix solutions to worldly problems. Such self declared Tantriks should be avoided and even if a pressing need is felt to have a Tantrik Puja performed, the Tantrik must be questioned about his Guru Parampara (hierarchy of the Gurus) as also the ability to undertake a Sankalp (resolution for the Puja) using the Tantrik Ashtang (similar to the Vedic Panchang)
17. Privacy is a serious issue with Upasana. Your mantras and paaths etc. are a very personal thing like your body and must not be exposed by speaking out amongst others. It is not so much a secrecy issue as much as intimacy. Only the Guru is supposed to hear these and for the rest we refer (if at all necessary), by the names and not the actual mantras.
 18. This note is only for guidance and queries for clarification are welcome. Debate however shall not be entertained.

Kalyananandnatha