

Samsakaara of Upanayanam/YajnyoPaveetam/MekhalAa
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The title above contains two words, the *SamskAra* and *YajnyoPavEtam*. We will take each word and understand its meaning and the significance for us. However, before we do that it will add to go through a digression on some of the elementary understanding of Indian cosmogony vis-à-vis individual living being.



Digression I: The tradition posits three bodies for the living beings, still in the state of MAyA. These three bodies are “Sthula SharIra” (Gross body), “Sukhshama SharIra” (Subtle body) and the “KArna SharIra” (causal body). The “Sthula sharIra” is the external physical body, with which we all are familiar, which is used for the physical activities. The “Sukhshama ShrIra” on the other is the triplet of the “Manas-Budhi-AhankAra” or Mind-Intellect-ego. The whole physical body is mapped on to this triplet so as to allow both the understanding and activity in-and-of the external world. Most of us are aware of its presence to

some extent. The “KArna SharIra” or causal body is the composite of the “SamskAra”. It called “KArna” because it is these SamskAras, which root cause of the rebirth of the triplet of the “manas-budhi-ahankAra”. In our traditional understanding, the “samskAras along with the triplet of “manas-budhi-ahankAra” takes appropriate body, appropriate according to the “samskAra”. Thus, there are two types of “dehAnta” (death) of living beings. The death of ordinary individual in which only the body dies, while the “samskAras” along with the triplet of “manas-budhi-ahankAra” continue to live. Then there is the death of a realized yogi, in which case along with the body the samskAra along with the manas-budhi-ahankAr also dies. The later death is of one who has achieved the mokhsha. KArna SharIra accumulates the samskAras both from the formal and from our daily actions and the desires. Thus within the parlance of the above description it is imperative to initiate accumulation of good samskAra for future. And the role of the formalized SamskAra is to do just that.

Samsakaara:

The word "*SamskAra*" is the conjunction of (Sam+sKAara). “*Sam*” is to “Equilibrate” and “*sKAra*” means “with form”, “to make well”, that is a “good form which equilibrates” i.e., “good action which brings equilibrium in life”. The Sanskrit dictionary gives the following additional meanings. (Putting together, forming well, making perfect, accomplishment, embellishment, adornment, purification, cleansing, making ready)

SanskAra, the “equilibrating form” get built out of all the activities one undertakes in a daily life, including meditation, prayers. However, there are times in one’s life when dis-equilibrium seems to be the norm. At these times, we do not know what to do and the society around us does not know how to treat us. These times seem to be common to us all and are points of transition from one stage in life to another. For such times the sages devised specific rites of passage to help bring back equilibrium to our life. These rites of passage get encapsulated in ceremonies, which

provide us and the society guidance and anchor for the transition to the next stage of life. Thus, SamsakAra may be understood as "introduction to the right thought or activity at a given stage in life".

Samsakaara also refers to the culture of rites and practices, which emphasize the importance of higher thoughts, and reveals their impact on our daily life. Samsakaara provides a growing child with a sense of belonging to a culture and its traditions. This personal identification is critical for the child in overcoming difficult and trying periods as he/she goes through the life. *Samsakaara* thus provides general guidance towards a happy life in which spiritual aspects form a part of living.

Vedic & Aagamic Rushis have designed specific *SamskAra* for every transitional stage of life in order to provide for the person going through the transition a sense of support, belonging, anchor and guidance. *Samsakaara* act like signboards on the path of an individual's journey and supplies him/her with guidance, mental vigor and righteousness at every important crossroad of life.



Eternal is called “*Brahman/Aatman*” and external world and physical life of a human being is just one manifestation. Birth and death are only two important transition stages. Ever-existing *Aatman* manifesting as *Jeeva* continues to the path of self discovery in this play of hide and seek. The one who hides is also the one who seeks. This is the reason why in Hinduism we have *SamsakAra* to signify events, which are beyond the limits of this life cycle. *SamsakAra* begin prior to birth and continue beyond the cremation of the body following death.

Following is the brief list of *SamsakAra* in Hindu tradition along with a brief description. Only the *Upanayanam Samsakaara* is given in some detail.

- **Garbhadhana** (conception of a child): Married couple performs this rite before the conception of a child. The whole idea of this ritual is to remind the married couple that the child to be conceived needs the right kind of environment, which can only be built by loving and conscientious parents.
- **Punsavana** (Protection of the fetus): This SamskAra is performed during the third or fourth month of pregnancy.

- **Simantonnayana** (Well-being of the Pregnant mother): In ritualistic aspect and on a physical plane, this ritual has certain similarities with the baby shower. It is performed during the seventh month of the pregnancy.
- **Jaatakarma** (child birth): The Jaatakarma Samskaara is for the occasion of celebrating the arrival of the new born baby.
- **Naamakarana** (naming the child): This is the ritual for giving a name to the new born baby. In Hinduism names are not just some proper nouns without any meaning.
- **Annaprashana** (feeding the child solid food): In the sixth, seventh or eighth month after the birth when teeth begin appearing, the child is fed solid food.
- **Mundan/ZaraKAasai** (cutting hair): This is performed during the third year of age when the child's hair is removed by shaving.
- **Upanayanam** (Sacred thread ceremony): (See below for details) *
- **VedAarambha** (Commencement of formal education):
- **Snaatakatawa** (Getting formal Degree from institution of learning).
- **VivAah** (Marriage)
- **SrAada** (rituals after leaving the body, passing away)
 - **Pitri SrAdha** (Ritual for all the ancestral pitris)

Out of all these SamskAaras we will focus on the Mekhala (Girdle)/Upanayanam.

Digression II: There is an overarching concept called “Dharma” in our tradition. The “Dharma” has many hues of meaning. It does not mean religion, even though it encompasses it, it does not mean morality, even though it encompasses it, it does not mean ethics, even though it encompasses it. It has to be tasted and experienced by living in a society, which is steeped in it.

In Hindu society, the ideal life span of an individual is supposed to be 100 years. These hundred years are divided into four equal parts of 25 years each. The ideal form of living, during each of these 25 years of period is Aashrama (place or state in which an effort is performed). An ideal way of living is to pass through each of these four stages and act according to the “dharma” of each of these stages. These four stages are called as (1) BrhmachArya Aashrama (school) (2) Gruhastha Aashrama (House hold) (3) VANaprastha Aashrama (Social Activism period) (4) Sanyasa Aashrama (Devotional period).

* **Upanayanam** (Sacred thread ceremony): The other two names for this ceremony are *MekhalAa* and *Yajnyopaveetam*. The “Upanayanam”, (Lit. Upa+Nayanam) = Bringing Near the Eyes. Eyes here are the symbol of seeing, implying bringing near to inner seeing or guidance. The *Yajnyopaveetam* = Yajnya + upavit = Purified by yajnya or Worn at yajnya. The last name *MekhalAa* means Girdle the round boundary reminding us of the limits within which to function and limits not to be transgressed.

The ceremony is the initiation of a child into the pursuit of both the physical and spiritual knowledge. This ceremony symbolizes the second birth of the child (called Dvija). The first birth is in the realm of physical world and the second birth in the realm of knowledge, physical as well as Spiritual. In particular, birth to the realm of Spiritual world. This was formally done by handing over the child to his chosen Guru at the end of ceremony.

This initiation by Guru, entailed various ritualistic functions carried out during *Yajnya*, performed at a predetermined auspicious time. The student wears saffron garments, the girdle, the sacred thread (“*Yajnyopavita*”), a deer skin, and a staff. During *Yajnya*, *Guru* through *Gayatri Mantra* of

the *Savitr* (i.e. Sun, but the implied meaning is that SUN which is source of inner Light of Recognition, i.e. Aatman which is identical with Brahman.) initiates the student in the life of *BrahamaCaarya Ashram*. “Brahmani charitam iti BrahmachArya, meaning whose follows to understand Brahman is the BrahmachArya.(The *BrahamaCaarya* = *Brahmana* + *Caarya*. i.e. the study of the Brahman, i.e. the study of the Nature of Existent.)

Then ritual of mounting the stone by pupil, symbolically reminds the pupil to be firm as a stone. The most important part of this ceremony is the wearing of the sacred thread accompanied by the recitation and teaching of the Gayatri Mantra to Savita. The sacred fire is kindled after the formal teachings of the Gayatri mantra, and the student goes around for alms to inculcate humility. *MhaRisi Vaisvamisra* gave this Maha-Mantra to us.

The thread is a constant reminder of our vow of commitment to our goal of seeking the eternal while following our *BrahamaCaarya dharmAa*. That being the constant effort of understanding and realizing the Brahman while living within the prescribed values and rules laid down according to our dharma.

The mystery of the spiritual knowledge is represented by the famed Gayatri mantra. The word *Gayatri* is derived from the root *gai*, which means “to sing”, and *Gaya* is a “song”. The word *Gayatri* then means a song with three components. The word *gauh* in Sanskrit means Earth (like the Greek {Gai}), ray of light or wisdom, and cow, and this word is in itself derived in the *Nirukta* from the root *ga*, which means “to go”. A song also goes in the sense that it marks time and it has becoming within its being. The *Gayatri* has 24 syllables, and each set of 8 is supposed to represent a foot. So the *Gayatri* is the “three-footed song”, “three-footed ray of light”, or the “three-footed cow”. This light-hearted name is to suggest that {insight} needs to be added to the symbolism and literal meaning of the mantra for it to become “four-footed” vehicle of wisdom and subtle knowledge. The mantra is stated as follows:

AUM bhUr bhuvaha svAha
Tat savitur varenyam (Rikh Samhita hymn (RV III,62- 10))
Bhargo devasya dhimahee
Dhiyo yonaha prachodayAata

In the Rikh Samhita, only the last three lines are there, the first line is padded in to this at present without changing the main content of the last three lines.

The first line of the mantra means as follows:

- **AUM** is the invocation of the Brahman, or Ganesha or the Sat-Chit-Aananda. It is the Shabada BRAHMAN, the undifferentiated, primordial root of Knowledge expressed and un-expressed.
- **BhUr**: implies gross, earthiness, physical world which an individual experiences in the wakeful state, hence also the “waking state”, indicating at the gross existent.
- **Bhuvah**: it means subtle existent, of fire, which is experienced by the mind-intellect indicating subtle in the external but sukhshama sharira as experiment.
- **SvAha**: Refers to the causal, which gives rise to the gross and the subtle, to that which is free of the gross and the subtle. This is reference to Karna SharIra in humans, it refers to Susupti (deep sleep state) as the state of existence as experient.

The first verse expresses the cosmology of reality as an experient, in which highest state is AUM, which is beyond the ordinary experience of duality, and the triplets of Gross body, Subtle body and the Causal body as ordinary living being, It also refers to existence in the speech aspect as

Para, PashyAnti, Madhyamika and the VaikherI . Thus first verse reminds us the ultimate reality of the “AUM”/BRAHMAN/ParmaSivA etc, which brings forth the other triplets from within and then absorb it in to within.

The Second line of the mantra means as follows:

- **Tat** = That, this “That” is not indicative of the something there in space but the thatness of the existence as in “Tatva” and talks of “that Savitur”
- **Savitur** is Sun the giver of light; the Sun here is the symbolic representation of the giver of the inner light, which is the Aatmana. That light, which brings forth the meaning and the understanding of that you do not know and do not understand but then make you say “ah” when you do understand. Which suddenly illumines not only the intellect but is the source of all understanding. (Tat Savitur refers to that Sun, which does the illumination, so it is not restricted to “SUN” only as it is that too eventually but to that which is the all knowledge itself “embodied knowledge, “svatha”).
- **Varenyam:** It means, the effulgent, full of brightness, referring to divine light, which is the very source of all manifestation.

Thus the verse indicates to that “SUN” which is bright and effulgent and source of all illumination, which as “Sabda Brahman” is AUM, and which ultimate reality is called “BRAHMAN” and as the crux of individual is called “Atmana”. All these three categories refer to the same reality in different contexts. These two Salokas together can be equivalently interpreted as, that splendid magnificence of Savitur, that Sun which permeates the three Lokas, is assuredly the *BRAHMAN*. (These three *Lokas* are,

- **Jaguta Loka:** Waking state i.e. the state in which the external world is available to us,
- **Swapana Loka:** Dream state, in which the dream world is available to us but the external world is not existent in it,
- **Susupti:** Deep sleep state, where neither the external world nor the dream world is available to us)

The words of the third verse have following meanings and implications:

- **Bhargo:** It is the conjunction of the “Bhar” + “Go”. The “Bhar” means to fill and the “Go” means the rays of light. “Bhargo” hence means filling with the rays of light.
- **Devasya:** “Devasya”, is the declination of the “Deva” meaning “of Deva”
- **DheemahI:** It comes out of “Dhee+mahI”. Dhee means perceive, think, wish desire and mahI also means great world which includes earth and beyond earth. “DheemahI” would hence imply desiring all the transcendence and the immanence..

The verse would imply that fill me with my desire of the earth and the effulgent Light of Divine. May he illumine our mind and fill us with our desires. The prayer and desire for the illumination of the minds, is the realization of that Divine self.

The meaning of the last verse is as follows:

- **Dhiyo yonaha:** It is the conjunction of “ Dhiyo + yo + nah” Dhiyo is intellect, yo is who and nah means our
- **PrachodayAata:** requesting to inspire, may inspire, urging to inspire.

The verse means “who may inspire our intellect”. This who is again that same Savitur, to whose whole of this gaya-trayi mantra is addressing.

The totality of the mantra starts with declaring AUM as the ultimate transcendent reality from which arises the gross, subtle, and causal, or as speech from which arises Pashyanti, vAc, Madhyamika vAc and the vaikhari vAc. Which comprises the whole material universe. Then it points to that ultimate reality as the source of all inner light, and pray for filling the individual with that light, hence revealing the ultimate from which it as individual arises.

The *Atharvaveda* 13.1.10 compares the Gayatri to a calf. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (5.14.6-7) explains the three feet of the *Gayatri*: the first foot represents the three-fold division of the world as described above; the second foot represents the three-fold knowledge of the Vedas; the third foot represents the three vital breaths (*pranas*). But this knowledge, represented as a progressively deeper involution from the outer to the inner, is merely the background in which the fourth foot can be seen representing the cause and the meaning of the universe. This fourth foot is really not the fourth, but contains the three earlier ones. From Avastha or Loka point of view it is the *Turiya Avastha*, from the Prana point of view it is the *AUM* and from the Veda point of view it is the *BRAHMAN*.

The ceremony introduces the child (both girls and boys) to a teacher in order to receive education. This samskaara marks the entry of the child into the BrahmaAarya Ashrama, the first of the four stages in life. This samskaara is usually performed at around fifth to eighth year of age, when the child is invested with a sacred thread (consisting of three strands) to be worn around the neck and waist. In case of girls, most of the time the thread is worn around the neck only.

Yajnyopaveet is symbolic of the initiation, of a householder into performing his threefold duties. These duties are towards the household, to his *Devas*, and to his *Pitras* - hence the three strands with brahmagranthi, or divine knot and three ways of wearing it. It is worn over the right shoulder to performing duty of a gruhasti. It is worn over the left shoulder and around the neck only while performing the duty towards towards the other two. The three strands also are the representation of the three-footed “go” which ties us, and from which we come out through this initiation by finding the “fourth”, which is the TuryA avastha of the transcendent.

The three threads symbolize three specific debts that every Hindu has to repay.

The first debt: It is owed to the Supreme Being, which one can repay by making an attempt for self-realization. In essence it also means understanding and realizing the very truth that the same birth-less, deathless, ever-existing Brahman is present in every being of this universe. To a Hindu, the service of the Eeshwara means service to all mankind, regardless of caste, color or creed. Reverence to all forms of life, including plants and animals and protection of the environment are important parts of the first debt. As means to self-realization a Hindu is also encouraged to practice truthfulness, self-control, purity of thought, and a pleasant and respectful attitude towards every other individual. Respect and reverence to teachers and parents are given very high importance in conjunction to this debt.

The second debt: The second thread, which symbolizes the second debt, is to the sages, saints and self-enlightened individuals who have realized the truths in Vedas. Preserving and enriching the cultural heritage that is handed down through each generation can pay this debt. To preserve and enrich the cultural heritage, an individual should learn and practice the philosophical and universal themes of the Hindu way of life. To accomplish this goal, every Hindu is encouraged to organize events to spread the ocean of knowledge present in Hinduism, to donate to organizations

that are involved in teaching people about the principles of Dharma and to practice the philosophical teachings of Vedas in daily life.

The third debt: The third thread, symbolizing the third debt is to our ancestors. It is paid during one's life. The repayment of this debt includes raising one's family in accordance with the universal teachings of Hinduism. Since proper education is essential for success in raising a family, a major part of the debt consists of providing the children with adequate formal education on arts and science.

The summary of the Vedic knowledge, which a BrahamaCaarya is urged to follow and vows to follow, is given below:

There exists an all-pervasive Supreme Being (called variously *Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti*) who is both immanent and transcendent. Only through knowing Brahman can we reach the goal of life. Spiritually awakened knowledge is essential to know Brahman. Knowledge is possible because of the equivalences (*bandhu*) between the outer and the inner. These *bandhu* are described in the *Vedas*, the *Agamas*, and other books. To follow this there are the requirements of the personal commitment and presence of appropriate *Samaja*.

- On the personal note the regular practices of *yoga*, meditation, service, ritual, and science are the prescribed efforts to discover Knowledge.
- The second requirement of the existence of *Samaj* or association is necessary to promote this knowledge and its discovery among people. The *Samaj* has as its primary principle the seeking of this supreme knowledge along with the practices and disciplines necessary to bring it about. Membership in the *Samaj* is based upon personal dedication to the knowledge, its realization and its propagation. The members of the *Samaj* should meet regularly for meditation, and discussion.

Who has the right of initiation for the upanayanam?

There is quite a bit of miss understanding about who has the right to the samsakAra of mekhala. The recent history of Hindus in India and Kashmiri Hindus in particular has cast a lot of erosion about the memories of the tradition. This has occurred mainly because of destruction of our institutions of learning and the pressures from the Islam to refuse the traditional arts of Hindus. In this process we have lost the understanding of philosophies, learning, celebrations and the purpose of the celebration. Because of the traditions of the recent past questions are raised that girls should not be given yajnyopaveetam. In this section, we want to address that issue. We will give a general rational argument in favor of giving this samskAra to girls. We will also point to a large class of scriptural evidence in favor of this. Thus, we will seek the evidence about this as follows.

- First of all the ceremony is the commemoration of the transition from the careless childhood to the life of a student. This celebration, as pointed out earlier, announces to, and prepares the child for, the transition that is about to take place at the end of the ceremony. To that extent every child, inducted in to the learning should have this ceremony.
- The other side of the same celebration is the preparing the family and the society supporting the learning process to make them aware of another of its members making the transition, and they should be ready and willing to support the young initiate to succeed in the transition. The celebration must help transition in the attitude of the society, for showing more respect towards the young student, who has undertaken the

responsibility. For this reason also all those who under take the education process (both the secular and the higher), should be initiated in to this SamskAra.

- These two considerations alone, not invoking tradition and the scriptures, justify giving this samsakAra to all who undertake learning. In our families that mean both boys and girls are eligible for this ceremony.

Scriptural traditions:

The Aashrama associated with the period of studies is brahmachArya aashrama, as stated earlier in this article. And, as opposed to the popular notion of the brahmachArya, it only means the study of the reality/existent etc... Thus the evidence of about who is eligible for the samskAra, we can have the following types of evidence. Either, we will find explicit recommendations for who gets the ceremony or the indirect recommendations by finding who all got initiated in to the brahmachArya aashrama. Fortunately, we have both types of scriptural evidences available, which urges that right to this ceremony for both the boys and girls. The evidence comes from four Vedas, texts of Dharma-AdhikAra-Nirnaya Shastras and the Smruti. I have not looked in to the PurAnas, but that is not necessary. Even the evidence from the Smruti is not necessary. However, all of these make clear the right of samsakAra for both the boys and girls.

Evidence from Manu Smruti: The chapter 2, which is on the sacred law to be followed by the people, in verse 66 of the Manu Smruti says, quote “This whole series of ceremonies must be performed for female members also in order to sanctify the body, at the proper time and in proper order” end quote. The chapter has already described the upanayanam ceremony.

Evidence from the Vedas:

Atharva Veda: The mandla X1 of the Atharva Veda extols the Vedic student called brahmachArin. In verse 18 of that chapter it says,

“Anadvaan brahmachaaryenaashvo ghaasam jigaeershti”

Which means, “by becoming a Vedic student (i.e. after taking gayatee initiation) a wins a young husband etc etc...”. This is the indirect evidence of the desirability of performing this samskAra to the girls.

Other Vedic evidence: From here we get explicit examples of the famous rushikAs (i.e famous women who were given this samsakAra. There in Taitriya Brahmana book2, chapter 3 verse 10, verse 1, verse 3 talks pf how Sita (not of RamAyana) and the Saavitrii were well versed in three Vedas. In the satpatha brahmana Maitriya has been extolled as the gret vedAntin. And she was married to yajnyavAlkya. Then in Mahaabharata, shanti parva “Sulabha” born in famous Kheshatriya family has become astute Pandita of the ShAstrAs. The large numbers of references are available from different scriptural sources (in particular Vedas and the Mahabharata) supporting the *Upanayana* samskAra to women. It is not within the scope of this write up to give all of these. However, I will give a list of some of the important women, most of who were married, and initiated in to the samskAra. These are,
“GhoshA, godhA, VishvavArA, ApAlA, Upnishd, Nishad, Juhoo, Aditi (Agastya’s sister), SaramA, RomashA, LopamudrA, YamI, ShashvatI, ShrI, LAXshA, MedhA etc. etc...”

At some stage, for reasons not completely understood, the practice of educating the girls fell out of favor in the Hindu society. Whatever the reason may have been for not educating girls, these reasons are not applicable today. Today both the boys and girls get educated. Moreover, it is also true that the celebrations of one kind or the other kind is still used to initiate in the education process. This celebration could be the Mekhala ceremony itself. It would revive the cultural symbols and also develop good SamskAras in the individual as a good daughter/Son, provide the perspective of right and wrong, provide an anchor of belonging, and overall review the cultural consciousness.

In India the revival started, with the movement started by Shri BAla GangAdhara in Maharashtra. In addition the GAyatrI ShaktI Peeth, movement, with its head quarters in HaridwAr, started some time ago. They encourage performing this samskAra to the girls. Among Kashmiris too, several families have realized the importance of this event and have performed the samskAra for the girls. This is yet another way to review the cultural tradition of the community.

AUM SHANTI: SHANTI: SHANTI: