

# Pāda Pūjā: Its Significance

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All ritualism in every religion is nothing but dramatization of Vedantic truths, be it in the temples or in the *yajñasālā*, be it a *homa* or a *pūjā* with flowers. Not only in Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, in every faith, ritualism is simply a dramatization of the Vedantic path of Self-realization. The lights in front of you during a *pūjā* represent the P F T (Perceiver, Feeler, and Thinker) — the *jīvātmā bhāvanā* in each one of us. These lights are symbolic of the light in the altar from which these lights have been lit up.

To understand the significance of a *pūjā*, let us take the analogy of an election process. When we vote, we know that the local person standing for office represents the program of the party, the party platform. We may not like the personal qualities of this representative but our vote for him demonstrates our faith in his party's philosophy. In the same way, when we worship a person, it is not the person that we adore, but the ideal he stands for. Since at this moment we cannot have a direct experience of that ideal we take a symbol that represents that state — a Teacher.

Just as a Shiva Linga represents Shiva, a Saligrama represents Vishnu, in the same way, the feet of the teacher represent to the student not the feet, but the concept behind. What we are invoking is Brahman the Lord. But we cannot directly go to Him. We want a symbol. At this time, there is no symbol more sacred than the feet of the Teacher. Therefore, we borrow the feet of the Teacher for some time, and the Teacher allows us to play with them! We wash the feet and worship them, as though they are the Lord Himself. We clean them with love, put sacred ash, adorn with sandal paste and do all that we do in a *pūjā* at the temple; we worship the feet as though they are that Shiva Linga or a Saligrama, invoking Him, the Ideal.

So then friends, don't think you are worshiping my feet during this *pāda pūjā*. I am lending them to you for the time being! My personal experience may be unpleasant because my feet tickle when a devotee washes them but I am not supposed to say anything. One may sometimes pour very hot water and at other times ice-cold water. There can still be no reaction from me. Why? Temporarily they are not my feet, they have been lent! During that time, both you and I are in adoration of something else. What we are invoking is as much my substratum as yours. This teacher holds on to his teacher's feet and thus, the teacher and disciple lineage (*guru-śiṣya-paramparā*) is formed. You are not worshiping me. Don't misunderstand the fact that you are invoking Him through the feet of this teacher.

That is also why teachers always keep the feet clean. They don't wear shoes since the feet may not be ventilated properly. When the disciple prostrates he must have clean feet in front of him. Still the disciple may have his own doubts! So, he first washes them, and then the rest of the worship follows. All through the *pāda pūjā*, understand the significance that the feet are borrowed from Swami Chinmayananda. You are not worshiping the Swami. If you say or feel so, it is a disaster to me because my vanity will increase. All of us are worshiping Him. I will be turning my mind to my teacher and you are turning your mind to your teacher and the Lord.

Hence, this ritual is one of the most significant of rituals. It is not akin to the act of shaking hands, a common ritual that happens during a meeting. Do you know the significance of shaking hands?

In the Anglo-Saxon times, there was so much infighting that nobody believed that another person could come to you in love. So, for example, if I want to show you that I have not come to harm, kill or fight with you, but I have come in love, then I come with both hands open! My open hands let you see that there are no weapons. You may greet me but still have your own doubts. I have also got a trace of doubt about you. So both of us search the hands of each other while shaking hands!

In Arabia, this handshake alone is not sufficient. Two people who meet might have a fear that the other fellow has got a dagger behind him. So they embrace and look behind to complete the search.

## Remembering the Essence

In contrast, look at the tradition here in India, soaked in the Vedantic truth. As soon as I meet you, first we remember that the essence behind you, the pure Consciousness and the essence behind me, the pure Consciousness — both are one — to Him our prostrations (*namaskār*). Isn't it? Whoever you may be, you may be a wicked man or even a murderer, yet behind you that enlivening essence is one and the same enlivening essence in me. They are really both one. Once we know this, every time we meet, we first remind each other that the Lord who resides in each one of us is One Truth. Because we are working at the body level, there are naturally competitions and misunderstandings. But at the substratum we are all one, to that One we bow down.

Even if there are differences there is the one integrating Truth. You and I are brothers; we may quarrel amongst us but the father is one. So when we think of the father, harmony is created. This unity in diversity, this harmony amidst the disharmonies will be beautifully brought out in this symbol of the prostration. The mark of sandal paste or *kumkum* on one's forehead only means that today you had a satisfactory session in your prayers, meditation and contemplation. Of that joy you

make a mark, taking a little sandal paste from the feet of the Lord or *kumkum* from mother or *vibhūti*. Now if I see you in the marketplace, I see that mark and remember the mood of contemplation that I had today and when you see a similar mark on my forehead, your mind also moves into that. Our minds glide into a spiritual mood, and then our mutual contact becomes totally different.

One more culturally significant action is when we prostrate to our elders — father, mother, or teacher. Prostration means that one touches the feet of an elder with one's head. Why? The feet stands rooted in that elder's love for me, in the sacrifices that he or she has made for me, something that I admire in that person. That ideal I want to bring into my head. It is symbolized in the prostration. I surrender myself in order to invoke that great essence or quality into myself.

All these different ways of greeting hold a greater significance. So then the *pāda pūjā* is a venerable action of invoking that Infinite Reality, *tat-tvam-asī*. Just as we worship a symbol and that symbol can be made of wood, a cross, a Shiva Linga, and so on, we worship here the living feet, the moving feet of the Teacher. Once we understand the import of this symbolism, a *pāda pūjā* becomes a great beginning in that search for Reality.

