

BRAHMOPADESHA :ETHOS & VALUES

MEANING:

Upanayana is one of the most significant ‘samskaras’ i.e. the process of purification & refinement - to make one fit for the life thereafter. Various descriptions imply:

- taking (‘upa-nayana’) one to a teacher
- giving one a third eye (upa-nayana) - eye of knowledge and wisdom
- ‘mounjee-bandhana’ - three strands of a thread of ‘mounjee’ grass are tied around the waist
- ‘brahmopadesha’ – (brahma = veda = ‘savithree’ manthra in this context) one is initiated into savithree manthra.

MOTTO:

It is the innate desire of every parent that one’s child should grow to be an educated, civilized, cultured and responsible citizen. Progression towards this involves committing all our resources to: (a) learning what ought to be learnt – rejection of what is undesirable (b) seeing and listening to what is virtuous – ignoring what is sinful (c) speaking truth – refusing what is ‘untrue’ (d) accepting affable objects, pious thoughts, noble principles, righteous deeds, pleasant memories while rejecting others after careful deliberation.

Nurturing purity of thought, speech and mind, compassion, kindness, mercy, generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, sympathy, self-restraint, character, equilibrium, modesty, humility, gratitude, self-respect (qualities considered ‘sathvik’) and desisting anger, jealousy, arrogance, unhealthy desires, lust, passions, ego, greed, conceit, snobbery (qualities considered ‘rajasa’ and ‘thamasa’) is virtuous. These are the true ‘human’ values. These are qualities that can blossom one’s personality - lead one to success, contentment, delight and eminence.

Note: Here is the intent to develop qualities in the child that would make him a ‘dwija’, a ‘sathpraja’ – edifice of a progressive society.

PREFATORY:

A perusal of the objectives stated earlier and process described hereafter would explicate that the objective of ‘upanayana’ is to inspire, promote and facilitate blooming of an individual’s personality and is neither a social gathering nor a community festival. The din and noise of gatherings, ‘collective upanayana’, luncheon, gifts & presents and engaging in mere physical activities like touching, uttering a few sanskrit words guided by a priest not knowing their import does not amount to or lead to any ‘samskara’.

It is imperative for the parents to appreciate the objectives, nature and scope of the rituals, have a good grasp of the import of the mantras and indulge in activities that are consistent with them with a view to lay a lasting foundation for securing the future of the child through disciplined daily routine and meaningful education - both vedic and professional. Evidently, there are no demands of wasteful, ostentatious expenses.

Note: What is needed is an intense desire to put the child on a progressive path and create an environment attuned to it.

The father is mandated to repeat 'savithree manthra' 12,000 times to be eligible to initiate the child into it. It would however be foolhardy to believe that mere 'japa' would make one fit for the job. The child, in the course of the ritual says: "please unravel the mystery of savithree manthra". Just as we send our children to the most competent teacher of subjects with which we are not conversant, enlisting the support of another member of the family or a versatile vedic teacher who can kindle interest in the child and impart knowledge would serve the interest of the child best.

Note: An occasion for some introspection.

The general rule is to perform upanayana ritual when the child is between 8-16 years. The parents have a key role to play – rather than considering this merely as a 'formality' or fulfilment of 'duty', in the interest of the child's well-being, they should gauge the maturity and mental ability of the child to receive this education. If the initiation is done at an early stage, qualities of head and heart may make an indelible imprint in the innocent mind. Any delay may come in conflict with the demands of his other professional education resulting in inadequate attention to 'aahnika vidhi' (mandated daily routine).

Let there be no delusion that three hour-long rite can be a magic wand turning the child into a 'dwija'. Attaining 'dwijatwa' requires years of 'sadhana' i.e. assiduous practice of what is advocated as 'brahmachari vratha' – as a part 'upanayana samskara'.

PREPARATORY

- Seeking smooth conduct of the ritual by invoking, worshipping, meditating upon Shreemanmahanadhipathi.
- 'punyaha-vachana' – elders, teachers wish that, with the grace of shree Lakshmi-Narayana, the moment be auspicious.

- ‘swasthi-vachana’ – the learned bless that the ritual bring health, longevity, vitality, peace and prosperity. Sprinkling of ‘theertha’ at the end makes us feel that we have been cleansed to be able to proceed with the ritual.
- ‘nandee-shraaddha’ - seek the blessings of departed ancestors. Not to forget those who are alive – touch their feet and seek their blessings as well.
- ‘mathr’ka-poojan’ – seek the blessings of a group of 23 mothers i.e. human as well as celestial.
- ‘mantapa-devatha’ – seek the blessings of Ganapathi & 7 feminine devathas to forestall mishaps at the venue.
- ‘vapana’ – shaving the head leaving a tuft to protect pivotal nerve centre.

VASTHRA, UPAVEETHA, AJINA:

The vatu will wear a set of new dress – dhoti, uttariya & another thread with a small piece of 'krishna-ajina' i.e. deer skin (since it is difficult to get deer skin large enough for uttareeyya) as "yavam vastrani..." & "aum mithrasya" mantras are chanted. Mantras request ever luminous Mithra-Varunas whose creations are flawless to grant worthy clothing, destroy all sins and to guide the vatu through righteous path which by itself acts as an impeccable shield.

Yajnopaveetha is worn with "yajnopaveetham paramam pavithram..." mantras. The mantras affirm the purity, sanctity & divinity of yajnopaveetha and potency in granting strength, good health, brilliance, eminence and long life. "Yajnopaveetha" is the sacred thread that leads one to 'yajna'/'yajnapurusha' i.e. 'paramathma' (hence the name) on a path that is free from sins and ignorance. The declared objective is make one fit to perform 'karmangas' i.e. rituals as per the traditions handed down (by mouth, out of memory) & those enshrined in Puranas.

The three strands represent (a) three vedas to be studied (b) purity & control of 'thrikarana' - deeds, speech & thought (c) debts he owes to deva, rishi & pitr (d) three purusharthas - dharma, artha & kama (e) three manifestations of Brahman i.e. creation, existence & dissolution.

Note: It cannot, however, be presumed that these qualities will befall by merely wearing it – it can only remind one of the 'sadhana' to be pursued.

AACHAMANA VIDHI:

The vatu is initiated into the process of doing ‘aachamana’. Touch the middle joint of the middle finger with the tip of the thumb & separate the little finger - shape of a cow's ear

emerges - fill it with drops of water sufficient to soak a black gram and sip each time after chanting 'namathrayas' - Keshava, Narayana & Madhava.

Aachamana mandated at the start of every ritual, is made for purging the mind of all thoughts of 'I', 'My', 'Mine' for placing trust in Him. Experience the sublime bliss as the consecrated water enters the food pipe and settles down.

Note: Just as bath cleanses the body externally, aachamana cleanses internally.

AGNI PRATHISHTA & PRADHANA HOMA:

Principal 'homa' - with four 'ajya' offerings into duly consecrated fire are made.

(1) 'Agna ayoomshi ': Eradicating all difficulties and poverty, grant me energy, strength, eminence and long life. (2) ' Agnir-rishihi....': we seek benevolence of Agni - one who is all knowing, purifying, resourceful and enchanting all sections of the society (3) ' Agne pawasva...': you adore all actions that are auspicious. Grant us energy, strength, wellness - both physical and spiritual prosperity. (4) ' Prajapathe....': You are the creator of this world & you alone can administer it. Hence, we place before you all our wishes/desires. Grant us wealth and happiness.

Note: Here lies a suggestion for the vatu i.e. to be like fire -in purity of thought & conduct.

SHISHYATHWA:

The guru cleans vatu's hands chanting "thatsaviturvreneemahe...." mantra seeking from Savithr' Deva (who is all-pervading, luminous, adorable and revered by all) such resources as will drive away our enemies and lead to happiness. In this context it is to drive away our ignorance and gain ability to pursue knowledge.

The guru will now hold vatu's right hand including the thumb with his own right hand chanting three mantras, each time uttering vatu's name with 'Sharma' as the surname. This confirms 'shishyathva' (studentship). (1) 'Devasyathva ...' : Let 'ashwinee devathas' reside in my shoulders and 'poosha-devatha' in my hands. I am holding your hand to seek 'savithr' deva's approval. (2) 'Savitha tey hastha..' : reckon that it is 'Savithr' Deva' (manifest in my hands) who is holding your hands (3) 'Agniraacharya' : know / trust that it is 'Agni Devatha' who is holding your hands in the form of 'aacharya'.

The guru guides the vatu to a darshan of Sun-God chanting "Deva savitharesha" mantra, visualising that the vatu is under savithr-deva's guard. I present the 'brahmachari' to you (i.e. the radiating 'savithr-deva'). Kindly protect him from mishap/death.

The guru chants " yova suvasaha...." manthra and touches the heart of the vatu. This vatu has taken re-birth and entered ' brahmacharya '. May he be distinguished by his 'sadhana'. May the blessings of devoted and discerning people take him to greater heights.

Here is a pointer: modesty, utter humility and complete absence of pride and arrogance. The guru affirms again and again that it is the Lord who is (a) holding vatu's hands (b) vatu's teacher (c) vatu's protector. He takes no credits for guiding, guarding or teaching. He believes that it is benevolence of the Lord. Even in a short and beautiful teacher-student conversation, vatu says that he is Parabramha's disciple.

Note: Watch the virtues of the teacher. Ego, if any, is being completely mollified and mauled.

AGNI KAARYA:

The vatu is initiated into his daily ritual of doing 'agni-karya' - he is required to do it daily, both at dawn & dusk after his 'sandhyavandana'.

Agnideva is our life-line. There is no better way of expressing our gratitude to Him than offering what He likes most - a fuel stick (samidh). "Agnaye samidha...." manthra chanted here means: I have brought this fuel stick for the learned and noble Agni. As He glows, may He enlighten me with vedic knowledge. Thereafter, vatu will hold his palm near the fire to feel the warmth, rub it on his face chanting "thejasa ma samanajmi " manthra : Oh Agni, I get engulfed in your glow and as a result earn the brilliance.

The vatu will offer prayers standing with folded hands and facing Agni chanting " mayi medham ... " manthra. Meaning: Oh Agni, nourish me by granting brilliance, memory power and eminence, association of noble persons. May Indra bestow vitality and Soorya grant lustre, glow and radiance. Oh Agni, let your prowess enhance my esteem, eminence, prestige and splendour.

Vatu will do bhasmadharana collecting it from the agni chanting "manasthoke....." manthra : Oh Rudra, we will always satiate you with our offerings. Do not get angry or be cruel to members of our family, our associates and animals. Bhasma is worn with thumb, middle & ring fingers (known as thri-pundra) on the forehead followed by neck, naval area, right shoulder, left shoulder and head.

Note: Bhasma collected from such 'agni' contains salts that have proven, salutary effect on the human body & hence applied to vital organs.

ABHIVADANA

The vatu will bend his right knee touching the ground, touch his own left & right ears with right & left hands respectively and touch the feet of the guru - right feet with right hand & left feet with left hand.

Note : Touching ears is symbolic – it is the gateway.

Vatu will also mention his name, gothra & pravara while doing so. It is also desirable to mention the veda shakha/upashakha, soothra (school to which one belongs) etc. Guru responds by saying 'aayushmanbhava.....sharma' blessings him for his long life. Through his life, the vatu should be respecting all elders and teachers in the same manner.

Note : This helps one to (a) stick to traditions handed down from generations (b) to be proud of the lineage (c) to be conscious of duties & responsibilities cast by such heritage.

SAVITHREE UPADESHA

Vatu beseeches "adheehi bhoh, savithreem bhoh, anubroohi": teach me Savithree manthra and unfold mystery (i.e. meaning and prowess). Savithree manthra is taught to the vatu little by little with proper intonations (swaras) until he picks it up.

Note: Knowledge is not given – it is always sought.

"Om bhur" meaning: we contemplate on all-knowing, all-pervasive, lustrous Savitha Devatha (responsible for the creation & sustenance of the three worlds - the earth, the heaven & intervening space) existing in the solar orbit to impel our intellect in the right direction.

Perhaps, this is the most widely known, oft repeated, highly revered (appearing as the 10th 'rik' i.e. manthra in the 3rd mandala of Rig-Veda as also other vedas, upanishads, aranyakas) prayer addressed to Savithr' Devatha, unveiled by sage Vishwamithra set to a metrical form (a stanza with 24 letters in 3 lines) known as Gayathree. Because of the popularity of the metrical form as also the manthra, it has come to be known as "Gayathree manthra".

It should, however, be remembered that we are meditating upon the Savithr' Devatha (the Supreme Lord i.e. Parabrahma) and not any feminine deity. On the earth He manifests and we worship Him as "Agni".

The guru touches the heart of the *vatu* chanting "mamavrathe hridayam...." manthra: You will always remain guided by me on all matter relating to vedic education. I have united my heart with yours so that you can always conform to me. You will always take my words as summon and act upon with delight. On all these matters, reckon that Lord has placed you under my guard.

Note: It is implicit here that the guru will transmit all the knowledge handed down to him through generations. What an exemplary and honourable thought! What a perfect beginning!

MOUNJEE, DANDA DHARANA

Mounji-bandhana' is done - three strands of '*mounji*' grass around the waist with three knots near the naval area (substitute is *darbha* grass). Mantras are: (1) "Iyam durukthath...." Let this *mounji* energise, enrich, protect and sanctify you & your surroundings; prevent from misdeeds and lead you to righteousness. (2) " rithasya gopthree..." This *mounji* is a protective shield - for truthfulness, *yajna* & *tapas*; drives out enemies; prompts you to engage in honourable activity. *Vatu* contemplates that he is encircled by three *vedas*. He is free from '*ashoucha*' during the period he has it on his body.

Note: *Mounji* grass has proven medicinal properties and helps strengthen the muscles around the waist - enables the *vatu* to engage in long-drawn rituals.

The *vatu* is required to hold a '*danda*' of *palasha* (substitutes : *oudumbara*, *bilva*, *shami*) tree. The '*danda*', as tall as the *vatu*, is handed over by chanting "swasthino....." manthra and the *vatu* accepts it by saying "adantham....." A vow to exercise '*dama*' / control over sense organs is implicit here. As a result, the path forward would be free from obstructions & fear.

Note: It would guide him through righteous path, protect him from obstacles on his voyage of self-improvement, self-discovery and help in discharge of the duties enjoined by his '*guru*'.

BRAHMACHARYA VRATHA

The guru advocates a code of conduct which includes: '*nithya-karmas*' i.e. *snana*, *sandhya*, *agni karya* etc.; doing *aachamana* after attending to nature calls; learning *vedas* for 12 years (until it is mastered); control over senses ; celibacy ; leading simple / frugal life ; speaking less, avoiding a seat / bed higher than that of the elders, *guru*; avoiding excesses in sleep, food, greed, fear, sadness, abuse ; being loyal to the *guru* except in unethical acts ; avoiding perfumes, oil bath and other luxuries ; respecting *guru* / elders ; purity of body, mind & speech;

accepting biksha twice a day ; avoiding day sleep, anger, lies, jealousy astringent/non-vegetarian food etc.; avoiding riding animals ; developing good conduct & behaviour.

Note: These are noble thoughts, affable conduct & behaviour.

BIKSHA

"Biksha" is an integral part of the ceremony - symbolic of the austerity & sacrifices to follow during student life. The mother is the first one to offer biksha: who else can be so generous, affectionate, pristine, wholesome and selfless i.e. not expecting anything in return? While one may be swayed by the pomp, flashy & ostentatious gifts, the enduring virtues of a 'biksha' should not be overlooked:

- Food obtained by biksha is pure - 'madhukari' - just like the honey collected by the bees.
- It should be accepted only from those who are 'dharmanishtas'. Only such articles are suitable for offerings to Him.
- Just as it is a religious duty to seek 'biksha', it is obligatory for the householders to give 'biksha'.
- Food collected should be placed before the teacher first. Affirmation of complete faith that it is He (God i.e. guru in this context) who apportions it equitably.
- Excess is given to other needy / animals – a concern for cohabitants on the earth.
- Just as we enjoy the fruits of others' labour, there are claimants on what we earn.

ANUPRAVACHANEYYA HOMA

Homa is performed by the vatu after evening sandhya. Three cheru offerings are made to: (1) seeking prosperity, agility & perceptive powers from Agni - Indra's favourite& lord of all yajnas & yajnagrihas. (2) savithr' Deva (3) 'Rishi'

Parents and vatu will break their fast after brahma bhojana and manthrakshatha.

THRI-RATRA VRATHA, AGNI PARICHARYA & UPASANA:

Vatu observes thri-rathri vratha – to break away from mischief, naughty, childish behaviour, dependence on parents, disorderly lifestyle etc.

Performing 'sandhya' twice a day is practiced. Learning to adore the ecstasy, panorama, panache of sun-rise / sun-set, experiencing the impact it leaves on the nature and offering oblations to Sun God who is our life-support, with a sense of gratitude.

Note: The vatu learns to express gratitude – early in his life.

'Agni' is His representative on the earth. He is Parabrahma – the Supreme Lord. It is well-nigh possible to repay the debt we owe to Him – in fact, life without Him is unthinkable. He is with us all the time. We enjoy His warmth. We feel his proximity. What can one give Him in return? Can there be a choice better than 'samidh' i.e. fire-stick which He would like most? Precisely, this is what "agni-paricharya" is all about: assiduously preserving 'agni', kindling the flames, offering fuel sticks and seeking His blessings. Agni-karya should be done twice a day on all these days and thereafter – through his student days.

Note: While there is a belief / faith that the Lord is omnipresent, here the young mind gets to feel and experience it and to be responsive.

'Agni' is purifying. Hence there is emphasis on 'agni-karya' in the process of purification of inner qualities – 'athma-gunas'.

When 'agni' is here at home, how can the boy sleep on a cot? Hence, it is advocated that he should be sleeping on the floor and for the same reason not to accept a seat higher than that of teachers, elders. This is neither a bond nor a punishment.

Note: Here is an attempt to build a sense of humility, respect for the Lord, teachers & elders.

Avoidance of spicy & salted food is again no hardship inflicted. What is intended here is taking food that is wholesome, one which 'Vyshvanara Agni' in his body likes, one that helps keep him alert and agile to receive the education and one that improves his grasp, memory and intelligence.

Note: The emphasis is on 'sathvik' food that would buttress 'sathvik' qualities in the child.

MEDHA JANANA:

On the fourth day 'medha-janana' takes place. A branch of palasha tree (or whole darbha plant) is planted to represent 'Medha' i.e. the Goddess of intellect. Shodashopachara pooja is performed beseeching Savithree, now in the form of "Medha", to hone intellect, fortify the memory & augment the power of retention.

The vatu will do three pradakshinas to the plant, each time watering it, chanting "sushravaha sushrava ..." mantra : Oh Lord you are delighted by the palasha tree, you guard vedas & yajnas and you know all about 'Paramathma' and hence I pray that you facilitate my learning veda vidya and brahma vidya.

Note: The aspiration that as the plant grows so does the personality of the child through proper education.

The vatu will have bath, wear a new set of clothes, mounji, yajnopaveetha with krishnajina etc. Medha sooktham : " medham mahyamangeeraso....." will be chanted praying Aangeerasa, the 7 sages, Indra, Agni, Varuna, Saraswathee and Ashwinee Devathas to infuse strong will-power, grasp, memory, retention ability, intellect, association with noble persons, imagination, charm/grace in speech & action, peace and happiness.

Note: The child learns to appreciate the good qualities in others & yearns for it.