

Antyeṣṭi (the last rites)

This is the last *saiṅskāra* for sanctifying the body in this material world. The rites are not described in Śrīla Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī's "Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā", and are mentioned only briefly in "Saiṅskāra-dīpikā" in relation to the burial of a *sannyāsī*. The standard rituals are performed to insure that the departed soul does not remain in the form of a ghost or *preta*, and to insure the best possible destination. Since the sincere *Vaiṣṇava* who worships the Lord out of love and chants His name is assured the best possible position to pursue his spiritual activities, his relatives and friends are less particular in executing all the rituals, which ensue after death.

In the context of society however, it may be necessary to observe the rules, as was the case with the passing away of King Daśaratha, Pāṇḍu and Bhīṣma. Thus some orthodox *Vaiṣṇavas* carry out the full Vedic *Antyeṣṭi* rites and *Śrāddha-kriyās*.

Different *Purāṇas* and *Smṛti* scriptures give different details of rites to be observed, and thus, according to locality and family the customs may differ to some degree.

- **Procedures:**

When a person is nearing death it is recommended that the person give a gift of a decorated cow (*vaitaraṇī*) to a *brāhmaṇa* to ensure his safe passage over the river of death. If a cow is unavailable he should give an equivalent sum of money. Gifts of iron pots, salt, land, grains, *ghee* and *laddus* are also recommended. *Mahābhārata* recommends that the *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma* (one thousand names of Lord Viṣṇu) be recited at this time, the point here being that the dying person should hear the names of the Lord. The legitimate claimant to the last rites may whisper the *Karṇa-mantra* starting with "āyusaḥ" in his ear.

**om āyuso me pavasva varcaso me pavasva vidhuḥ pṛthivyā divo janitrayāḥ
śṛṇvastvāpohadāḥ kṣaranti somo hodagāya mamāyuṣe**

(Pañcaviśa-brāhmaṇa 1.2.9, 6.6.17)

Lamps may also be lit in the room. Some people place *tulasī prasādam* and *caraṇāmṛta* or *Gaṅgā* water in the person's mouth.

When it is confirmed that the soul has passed from the body, the body may be shaved (this is optional), bathed and clothed in clean cloth (preferably new or silk), and placed on a mat on the floor. According to some traditions, new cloth should be obtained, washed, and while still wet placed on the body. If the deceased is an old man, he should be clothed in white, middle aged men wear red, and young men and women wear colored cloth. Widows wear white, black or blue. The face may remain uncovered at this time while family members pay their last respects. *Tilaka* should be applied.

Then a frame made of *udumbara* (fig) wood, a cot or carriage should be supplied to carry the body. The body should be placed upon it, with the face covered. The eyes should be closed, limbs straightened, and the big toes and thumbs should be tied together with string. The body should pass out of the house feet first.

Since cremation should not take place after dark, if the person dies during the daylight hours, preparations should be hastily made so that the burning will take place before sunset. Otherwise the body should be taken after sunrise the next day. The body should be burned before decomposition sets in.

One man sprinkling water, followed by a man with a pot of fire should lead the procession. The body should follow next, and neither the fire nor the body should be dropped along the way. No one should walk between the fire and the body, or walk along side the body. Behind the body the family should follow, the elders first, women and children last. The bearers of the body should be bathed, shoeless and without upper cloth on their bodies. The members of the procession should also be without upper cloth, and hair (including *sikhas*) should be unbound. The place for cremation should be a clean place, on a river bank, a mountain or a forest.

When the procession arrives at the site, they should take bath, they should bathe the body and place it upon *kuśa* with the head facing South. *Ghee* should be smeared over the body, and again it should be bathed, while saying:

om gayāḍini ca tīrthāṇi ye ca puṇyaḥ śilocayaḥ
kurukṣetraṃ ca gaṅgāṃ ca yamunāṃ ca śaridvāram
kaṣṭhikāṃ candrabhāgamāṃ ca sarva-pāpa-pranāśinīm
bhadravākāśaṃ gaṇḍākiṃ sārāyurṃ panasāṃ tathā
vainavaṃ ca varāhaṃ ca tīrthaṃ piṇḍāraḥ tathā
prthivyāṃ yāni tīrthāni saritaḥ sāgaraṃs tathā
dhyāva tu maṇasā sarve kṛta-snānam gatāyusaṃ

“Having meditated upon all the holy *tirthas*, rivers, and oceans, the deceased has bathed in all these rivers.”

The body should be dressed in two pieces of fresh cloth and a new *yajñopavīta*. Garland and *candana* should be applied. Pieces of gold or bell metal should be placed on the two ears, the two eyes, the two nostrils and the mouth. The face should be covered with another cloth. A body should never be burned without clothing.

The *kuṇḍa* for the cremation should be the length of the person from toe to outstretched hand, as wide as his outstretched arms and as deep as the measurement from the person’s toe to his chest. The hole should be cleansed and smeared with cow dung and water, and then filled with wood.

The body should be placed on the fire with the head pointing South (according the followers of *Sāma Veda*) or North (according to followers of the other *Vedas*). Men should be laid face downwards, and women should be laid on their backs, with face upwards. Wood may be piled over the body while chanting:

om devas cāgni mukhaḥ sarve enaṁ dahantu

“May all the *devas* with Agni as their mouth consume the body in flames.”

The claimant to the last rites should take fire in his hand. He and his assistants, should circumambulate the fire three or seven times, and then, approaching the head, and facing South, he should apply fire near the head, over the mouth, or on the chest, while the others apply fire to the wood under the body, going towards the feet.

When the fire has burned until only a few remnants remain, they should each take seven sticks of wood one *prādeśa* in length, and circumambulating the fire seven times should offer one into the fire each time around, saying:.

om kravyadāya namas tubhyaṁ

“I pay my respects to the personality of funeral fire.”

He should take an axe and hit the wood of the fire seven times. Bones may be collected at this time and kept in an earthen pot.

Each assistant should then take three or seven pots of water and pour them over the fire to extinguish it. The selected member should place an earthen pot filled with water on the fire and cover it with an earthen dish, in which he should place five or eight coins. While the others turn away from the fire without looking back he should break the pot with a stone or brick, and coming around the fire in counterclockwise direction he should leave the place without looking back. They should then proceed to take bath in a river or the ocean, the elders going first.

The burner of the body should shave, and all persons attending should bathe with loosened hair. All cloth should be washed. After bathing, facing South with *yajñopavīta* over the right shoulder, wearing lower cloth only they should say:

om āpo naḥ sośucad agham

“May this action purify us of sin.”

Stirring the water with the ring finger of the left hand, they should submerge themselves under water once and then performing *ācamana*, they should offer *tarpaṇa* three times.

śrī.....(deceased's name) -dāsāya / dāsyai śītalodakena tarpayāmi

“I offer cool water for the satisfaction of.....”

Then taking bath again, they should rise from the water, the children going first. They should remain away from the house until night. Only with the permission of a *brāhmaṇa* may they return before this time.

On approaching the house of the departed person they should place *nīma* leaves between their teeth, and touching leaves of the *sāmi* tree they should say:

om sāmi pāpam śamayatu

“May the *sāmi* leaves eradicate the sin.”

Touching a stone with their feet they should say:

om̐ aśmeva sthiro bhuyāsam

“May I be steady like a rock.” (Pañca-viśa-brāhmaṇa 1.7.1)

Touching fire they should say:

om̐ agnir naḥ śarma yacchatu

“May fire give us shelter and happiness.”

They may then enter the house, the children going first. The house may be cleansed by fumigating it with cow dung smoke three times and then sprinkling it with flowers, sesame and rice paddy.

On the day of the ceremony no cooking or eating should be done. If ones mother, father or husband dies one should fast for three days, or if that is not possible, then one should take only fruits. From the fourth to the tenth day one should eat *haviṣyanna* (non-grains) once a day during the daylight hours.

According to ancient authorities the bones should be collected on the fourth day (or later) after the cremation has taken place. They should be placed in a jar which is covered with deer skin and silk cloth and tied with a *kuśa* grass cord. This should be submerged in a sacred river, to the accompaniment of chanting of the *Agha-marṣaṇa-sūkta*:

om̐ āpō hi ṣṭhā māyō bhuvās tā nâ ũrje dâdhâtana /

mâhe raṇâyâ cakṣâse //1//

yo vâḥ śivatâmō rasās tasyâ bhâjayatēha nâḥ /

ũśâtir îva mâtaraḥ //2//

tasmâ arâṇ gamâma vō yasyâ kṣayâyâ jinvâtha /

âpō jānayatâ ca naḥ //3//

om̐ bhūr bhuvaḥ suvaḥ

“O Waters, may you give everyone blessings of all kinds, take us to the Supreme Lord who is steadfast, exalted, charming and like unto the eyes of one and all. May you help us acquire in this world that auspicious essence of yours just as a loving mother cares for her child. We meditate on you to help us attain the Lord Whose pleasure you have earned by being His abode. O waters, give us real life.” (R̥g-veda 10.9.1-3)

According to the *Jayākhya-saṁhitā* boys of five years or less and girls of seven years or less, and *sannyāsīs*, should not be burned, but buried. Other sources say that children of two years or under should be buried. In that case *tarpaṇa* need not be done. After burying the child one should submerge oneself once in water.

- **Throwing bones in the Gaṅgā**

One should bathe in the Gaṅgā, and performing *ācamana*, facing North, holding sesame and water one should perform *saṅkalpa*,

oṁ viṣṇur

oṁ tat sat

adya

..... **māse**

..... **pakṣe**

..... **tithau**

..... **(name of deceased) asya etāny asthini gaṅgāyām viniṣṭipāmi**

“On this *tithi*, of this fortnight, of this month I throw the bones of _____ in the Gaṅgā.”

The person should chant the purification *mantras* over *pañcagavya*:

MILK:

om āpyāyasvā samētu te vīsvataḥ somā vṛṣṇiyam¹ /
bhavā vājāsya saṅgathe //

“O Soma, please increase! May strength come to you from every side; be dilligent in the supply of food for us.”(Ṛg-veda 1.91.16)(Śukla-yajur-veda 12.112)

YOGHURT:

om dādhi-krāvṇō akāriṣam jīṣṇor aśvāsya vājinaḥ /
sūrābhino mukhākaraṭ praṇā āyūgmaṣi tāriṣat //

“I offer myself unto the Lord who gave Himself to the gopīs of Vraja in exchange for yoghurt; the killer of the horse-demon, who is swift, who gives fragrance to the face, let Him increase our life span.”(Ṛg-veda 4.39.6)(Śukla-yajur-veda 23.32)

GHEE:

om tejō ‘si śūkrām āsy amṛtām asi dhāmā nāmāsi /
priyam dēvānām anādhṛṣṭam devā-yajānam asi //

“You are light, you are splendour, you are nectar. You are the favourite dwelling place of the demigods, the undoubted means of worship.”(Śukla-yajur-veda 1.31)

COW URINE:

om gāndhā-dvārām dūrādharsām nitya-puṣṭām kariṣiṇim /
īśvarigṃ sarvā-bhūtānām tām ihopāhvayē śriyam //9//

“By gandha you become protected, continually nourished. Abounding in purity, wealth, beauty and prosperity, I call you here.”(Śrī-Sūktam)

¹ the word vṛṣṇyam is pronounced as vṛṣṇiyam. (Nārada-Purāṇa 50.157)

COW DUNG:

om bhūr bhuvah svaḥ / tat sāvītūr varēṇyām /
bhargō dēvasyā dhīmahi / dhiyō yo nāḥ pracōdayāt //

“Let us meditate on the worshipable effulgence of the divine sun who enthuses our meditation.”

KUŚĀ WATER:

om dēvasyā tvā savītuḥ prāsavēḥ² svinōr bāhubhyām pūṣṇo hastābhyām /
sarāsvatyai vāco yāntur yāntriye dadhāmī
bṛhāspateṣṭvā sāmṛājyenā bhiṣīncāmy asau //

āgnayē juṣṭām gṛhṇāmy āgnī-ṣomābhyām juṣṭām gṛhṇāmi //

“I sprinkle you with sacred water by the desire of Savitar, with the arms of the Aśvinis, with the hands of Puṣan, I put you under the guidance of Brahmā, the lord of Sarasvatī and the control of Bṛhaspati” (Śukla.yajur-veda 9.30)

Placing his *yajñopavīta* over his right shoulder he should wash the bones with the *pañcagavya*. Mixing the bones with gold, honey, *ghee* and sesame, he should seal them in earth, and holding the earth in his right hand he should say:

om namo ‘stu dharmāya

“I pay my respects to *dharma*.”

Entering into the water he should throw the earth into the water saying:

om sa me prīto bhavatu

“May he be pleased with me.”

He should submerge himself in water, then come out, look at the sun, and give gifts in charity.

² prāsavēḥ = prāsavē ē this svāra is called kampa-svāra.

om viṣṇur

om tat sat

adya

..... **māse**

..... **pakṣe**

..... **tithau**

(gotra of the deceased) **gotrasya**

śrī (name of deceased) asya kṛtāitad gaṅgādhikāranakāṣṭhi nikṣepa-karmaṇaḥ

samgatārtham dakṣiṇām idaṁ kañcana mūlyam śrī viṣṇu devatām yathā

sambhava gotra nāmne brāhmaṇāya ahaṁ dadāmi

- **Dahana Adhikārī** (claimant to the last rites):

There is a specific order of precedence of the person who should perform the last rites including burning of the body. The order for a deceased male is as follows:

The son, from eldest to youngest, their sons, sons of their sons

The wife, either childless or with children

Unmarried daughter, betrothed daughter, married daughter

Daughter's son

Youngest to eldest brother

Youngest to eldest half-brother

Youngest brother's son, oldest brother's son

Youngest half-brothers son to oldest half-brother's son

Father, mother

Daughter-in-law

Step mother

Grand daughter, married grand daughter (through the son)

Wife of great grand son

Great grand daughter

Father's father, Father's mother etc.

Other relatives including uncles, cousins,

Disciple, priest, friend, friend of the father

Resident of the same village of same caste

King

- **Order for a deceased female is as follows:**

Eldest son, to youngest son

Son's son

Great grand son through male lineage

Unmarried daughter, betrothed daughter, married daughter

Daughter's son

Husband

Daughter-in-law etc.

Disciple or student of husband

A *brahmacārī* should avoid performing funeral rites, but if others are unavailable he may perform rites for parents, grand-parents. The parents of a *brahmacārī* should perform his funeral rites.

- **Aśauca (period of contamination)**

Following a birth or death there is a period of contamination for the relatives of the person born or deceased, the length of which depends upon the closeness of the relation, caste and age of the deceased. With the decease or birth of a close relative a *brāhmaṇa* has ten days of *aśauca*, a *kṣatriya* twelve days, a *vaiśya* fifteen days and a *sūdra* thirty days. If the relation is distant the *brāhmaṇa* will have three days *aśauca*.

If a child of *brāhmaṇa* dies within ten days of birth, impurity is observed for ten days after the birth by the father and mother only. If the child dies within two years, *aśauca* is one day.

If the child dies before six years and three months, the *aśauca* is three days for close relatives.

During the period of contamination one should not study scripture, or perform *homa*, Deity worship, *tarpaṇa*, entertain guests etc. If one is performing Deity worship one may perform, worship by *manasā pūjā*. However if one has made a vow to perform worship of the Lord for his whole life, he should not break this vow, but should continue the *pūjā*.

Those performing sacrifice, students (*brahmacāris*) and realized souls, or one who has performed funeral rites for a *sannyāsī* need not observe *aśauca*.