

Sacrifice and Spirituality

When a religion shifts its focus from presenting offerings to a deity and asking for blessings and protection in return, to sacrificing oneself for the well-being of the others, it goes through a critical phase of deep spiritual awakening. The concern is no longer about what one can gain by performing the sacrificial ritual, but about the spirituality manifested in sacrificing oneself for others out of love.

Such a transformation occurred in the history of Hinduism. Hinduism arose from the confrontation between, and the synthesis of, the Aryan culture and the indigenous Indus Valley civilization. The Aryans who eventually came to dominate and rule the Indian subcontinent were nomads, much like the ancient Jewish people. Their nomadic way of life forged their strong tribal identities and religions. They had their own tribal deities, whom they appeal to for protection and prosperity. It is quite understandable that nomadic tribes in antiquity, in coping with their anxiety over security and survival, turned to the supernatural and entrusted their fate in the hand of their deities. Given such a socio-economic and cultural background, it is no wonder that sacrificial ceremonies, through which the connection and relationship between the tribe and its deities was sustained, became the focal point in tribal life.

However, after settling down in the subcontinent and adopting the more agrarian way of life, the Aryans went through religious identity crises, in ways very similar to what the ancient Israelites experienced after settling down in the Canaan, though with different outcomes. With the new way of life, the Aryans wondered whether they should continue the ritual tradition that their ancestors followed on the vast grassy plain of central Eurasia. Along with questioning the necessity and the practicality of performing ritual ceremonies, they dived deeper into the rationale of such undertakings. They increasingly felt uneasy about, and were no longer satisfied with, the traditional understanding of sacrificial rituals, which they meticulously performed to gain favors and blessings from their deities. Throughout the Upanishads period they strived to find a deeper meaning behind the sacrificial ritual. Eventually it was dawned on them that the meaning lies in the sacrificed. They came to see that the idea and practice of presenting offerings in rituals in order to gain what they want are

self-centered. Accordingly, the concerns about whether the ritual ceremony is carried out correctly, whether the people involved are purified and pious, are all self-serving. This recognition led them to see that the sacredness and nobility of sacrifice lie in the sacrificed, which symbolizes the willingness to suffer and even die for others' well-being. The willingness illustrates one's unselfishness and love for others, which become the hallmark of this newfound spirituality. This deeper understanding of sacrifice became the cornerstone of Hindu spirituality and elevated Hinduism from a regional and tribal religion to a major world religion. Spiritual transformation is now understood as the transformation from self-centeredness to selflessness.

The shift of attention from the sacrificial ritual to the sacrificed is also a shift from the supernatural to the spiritual. Once our focus moves from concerns over improving our well-being to the willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others' well-being, it is no longer necessary to believe in the supernatural as a source or power that can guarantee the fulfillment of our desires—including the desire for immortality. This enables religious followers to deepen their understanding of the divine beyond the common anthropomorphic conception of gods and goddesses. The divine, instead of being pictured as supernatural sentient beings, is now understood as the highest spirituality, love and compassion.

Parallel to the change toward a deeper understanding of the divine, there is also a shift in spirituality from piety to love. The traditional idea of obeying and appeasing a powerful deity so that one can live long and prosper is no longer the focal point of being religious. Empathy, love and compassion are now the new center of spirituality. In the Hindu tradition, various ways of cultivating love and compassion would come to be known as yoga. Yoga is the religious and spiritual activities that a devout Hindu would practice daily so as to become a loving and spiritual person over time.

Understanding such a shift of spiritual focus will also help us appreciate the Buddhist spirituality. The central concern of Buddhism is to lessen and eliminate sentient beings' discontent and suffering. It is very telling that such a concern does not lead to the worship of deities as a means to safeguard and promote the followers' well-being. The worship of deities is never emphasized as essential in Buddhism. Instead, the concern leads to the teaching of Bodhisattvas—the teaching of forgoing one's attainment of nirvana to help others reach theirs. Bodhisattvas vow to devote themselves for eons to bear and ease others' suffering, and thus become the embodiment of unlimited compassion.

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