

WHY RITUALS ?

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Religions all over the world have rituals-be it Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam or Hinduism. Jainism is no exception. Many of us go through rituals as a matter of tradition without questioning their usefulness. Should we follow our traditions blindly or spend our time more intelligently in doing something else? Before we analyze this issue, let us enumerate some of the rituals we Jains perform through out the year:

· Performing Aarti and Mangal Divo · Doing Pratikraman every morning and evening , or doing every fortnight , or once a year · Doing regular Pooja, or Snatra Pooja, or Panch Kalyanak Puja or Antaraya Karma Pooja · Doing Samayik or doing Paushadh · Chanting religious songs (stavans) and verses (stutis)

I believe that the rituals are the tools that were created by our sages to invoke the right spiritual thinking-PURE BHAVAs. Jainism says that everything starts with how and what we think, day in and day out, and has given us ample means to generate right thoughts. Some people might say..why do I need rituals to make my mind think right thoughts? Why can't I sit down and study a book and get equally good results? Let us examine the following reasons:

1. First of all, we are all creatures of habit. Once we form a habit of doing anything, we tend to continue with it subconsciously. Same thing happens with rituals. For example, when we start doing a pooja or pratikraman, reciting Navkar Mantra, or doing any other kind of ritual every day, after a while we just go through it as matter of habit without any excuses. If we did not do this, most probably we would have spent the same time on non-spiritual worldly affairs.
2. Secondly, many of our rituals require us to go to a temple or upashraya . This makes it easy for us to get away from a routine life and practice in a sacred environment full of positive vibrations. The chances of influencing our thought process in a holy place are much better than in our own homes.
3. Thirdly, rituals provide a frame work or an infrastructure to practice religion. It is no different than why we go to schools and colleges to acquire the knowledge rather than by studying at home.
4. Rituals could serve as a source of inspiration and strength. Jain history is replete with stories where some souls made enormous spiritual progress while going through some kind of a ritual.
5. Rituals also add a variety. If we do meditation alone, it could be tiring for many of us -laymen, after a while. Very few of us can meditate for an extended length of time. But if we do pooja, samayik, pratikraman etc. , our body and mind-both get involved in many different ways, making religious practices more interesting. And there is a social dimension to the rituals too. Social interaction, group encouragement are other benefits that naturally flow by participating in ritual events.

Let us never forget that rituals will not yield good results if we just go through them mechanically without understanding the meaning. However, if there is a choice between doing rituals mechanically and not doing anything at all, let us prefer the former. By going through rituals even mechanically, atleast there is a hope that some day, a spark might come that will change our lives for better. Instead of discarding the rituals because we lack the understanding, we need to seek the right Jain scholars/monks, study the scriptures and strive very hard to understand the meaning behind our rituals and get the most value from our effort.

