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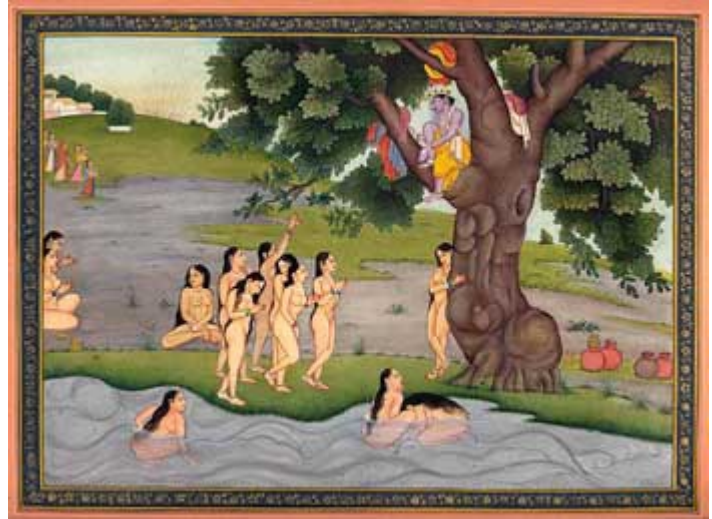
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Namaste: The Significance of a Yogic Greeting

Article of the Month - November 2001

In a well-known episode it so transpired that the great lover god Krishna made away with the clothes of unmarried maidens, fourteen to seventeen years of age, bathing in the river Yamuna. Their fervent entreaties to him proved of no avail. It was only after they performed before him the eternal gesture of namaste was he satisfied, and agreed to hand back their garments so that they could recover their modesty.



The gesture (or mudra) of namaste is a simple act made by bringing together both palms of the hands before the heart, and lightly bowing the head. In the simplest of terms it is accepted as a humble greeting straight from the heart and reciprocated accordingly.

Namaste is a composite of the two Sanskrit words, nama, and te. Te means you, and nama has the following connotations:

- To bend
- To bow
- To sink
- To incline
- To stoop

All these suggestions point to a sense of submitting oneself to another, with complete humility. Significantly the word 'nama' has parallels in other ancient languages also. It is cognate with the Greek nemo, nemos and nosmos; to the Latin nemus, the Old Saxon niman, and the German neman and nehman. All these expressions have the general sense of obeisance, homage and veneration. Also important here is to note that the root 'nama' is a neuter one, the significance of which will be elaborated upon later.

The word nama is split into two, na and ma. Na signifies negation and ma represents mine. The meaning would then be 'not mine'. The import being that the individual soul belongs entirely to the Supreme soul, which is identified as residing in the individual towards whom the namaste is directed. Indeed there is nothing that the soul can claim as its own. Namaste is thus the necessary rejection of 'I' and the associated phenomena of egotism. It is said that 'ma' in nama means death (spiritual), and when this is negated (na-ma), it signifies immortality.

The whole action of namaste unfolds itself at three levels: mental, physical, and verbal.

It starts with a mental submission. This submission is in the spirit of total surrender of the self. This is parallel to the devotion one expresses before a chosen deity, also known as bhakti. The devotee who thus venerates with complete self-surrender is believed to partake the merits or qualities of the person or deity before whom he performs this submission. There is a prescription in the ancient texts known as Agamas that the worshipper of a deity must first become divine himself, for otherwise worship as a transaction would become invalid. A transaction can only be between equals, between individuals who share some details in common. Hence by performing namaste before an individual we recognize the divine spark in him. Further by facilitating our partaking of these divine qualities, namaste makes us aware of these very characteristics residing within our own selves. Simply put, namaste intimates the following:

*'The God in me greets the God in you
The Spirit in me meets the same Spirit in you'*

In other words, it recognizes the equality of all, and pays honor to the sacredness of all.

Translated into a bodily act, namaste is deeply rich in symbolism. Firstly the proper performance of namaste requires that we blend the five fingers of the left hand exactly with the fingers of the right hand. The significance behind this simple act in fact governs the entire gamut of our active life. The five fingers of the left hand represent the five senses of karma, and those of the right hand the five organs of knowledge. Hence it signifies that our karma or action must be in harmony, and governed by rightful knowledge, prompting us to think and act correctly.

By combining the five fingers of each hand, a total of ten is achieved. The number ten is a symbol of perfection, and the mystical number of completion and unity. It is true for all ancient traditions. Ten is the number of the Commandments revealed to Moses by God. In the Pythagorean system, ten was a symbol of the whole of creation. Ancient Chinese thought too thought of ten as the perfectly balanced number.



Another significant identification of namaste is with the institution of marriage, which represents a new beginning, and the conjoining of the male and female elements in nature. Marriage is a semi-divine state of wholeness - a union between the opposite principles of male and female necessary to create and protect new life. The idea of human divine association was often expressed in terms of marriage, as in the description of nuns as "brides of Christ". Thus in the exhaustive marriage rituals of India, after the elaborate ceremonies have been completed, the new husband and wife team perform namaste to each other. Wedding customs, full of symbolic meanings, attempt to ensure that marriages are binding, hence fruitful and happy. Namaste is one such binding symbolic ritual. The reconciliation, interaction and union of opposites is amply reflected in this spiritual gesture. It is hoped that the husband and wife team too would remain united, as are the hands joined in namaste. By physically bringing together the two hands, namaste is metaphorically reconciling the duality inherent in nature and of which the marriage of two humans is an earthly manifestation, a harmonious resolution of conflicting tensions. Thus namaste, which symbolizes

the secret of this unity, holds the key to maintaining the equilibrium of life and entering the area where health, harmony, peace and happiness are available in plenty.



In this context, namaste is equated with the image of Ardhanarishvara, the hermaphrodite form symbolizing the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, or the coming together of the parents of the universe, for the purpose of creation. In this form Shiva has his beloved spouse engrafted in his body. It is conjectured that by wresting from her husband one half of his body as her own, and herself commingling in his physical frame, Parvati has obtained an ideal, archetypal union with her husband. Indeed which couple could be more devoted than the one which finds completion only by merging into each other? By merging her creative aspect with him, Parvati balances Shiva's destructive urge. Similarly when Ardhanarishvara dances, the dance step is itself believed to be a combination of two principal and antagonistic styles of dance. 'Tandava', the fierce, violent dance, fired by an explosive, sweeping energy, is a delirious outburst, precipitating havoc. On the other hand is 'lasya', the gentle, lyrical dance, full of sweetness, and representing the emotions of tenderness and love. It is in the lasya of the goddess that death is annihilated and turned into transformation and rejuvenation, rebirth and creation. The image of Ardhanarishvara is thus the perfect master of the two contrary elements in the manifested universe. Such an ideal,

perfect marriage is the message of namaste. Thus is 'nama', the root of namaste, of neuter gender, as is Ardhanarishvara, the androgyne.

Namaste recognizes the duality that has ever existed in this world and suggests an effort on our part to bring these two forces together, ultimately leading to a higher unity and non-dual state of Oneness. Some of these dual elements which the gesture of namaste marries together and unifies as one are:

- God and Goddess
- Priest and Priestess
- King and Queen
- Man and Woman
- Heaven and Earth
- Sun and Moon
- Solar bull and Lunar cow
- Sulfur and Quicksilver (Alchemy)
- Theory and Practice
- Wisdom and Method
- Pleasure and Pain
- Astral body (consciousness) and Etheric body (sensation)
- Mind and body
- Pneuma (spirit) and Psyche (mind)
- Hun (spiritual soul) and p'o (material soul) (Chinese)
- Conscious and Unconscious

- Animus (unconscious male element in woman) and Anima (unconscious female element in man) (Jung)
- Objectivity and Subjectivity
- Extraversion and Introversion
- Intellect and Instinct
- Reason and Emotion
- Thought and Feeling
- Inference and Intuition
- Argument and Experience
- Talent and Genius
- Silence and Cacophony
- Word and Meaning
- Schizophrenia and Epilepsy
- Depression and Mania
- Sexuality and Anxiety
- Katabolism (breaking up) and Anabolism (building up)
- Ontogeny (individual evolution) and Phylogeny (race evolution)
- Right side of body (warm) and Left side (cool)
- Front side of body (positive) and Rear side of body (negative)
- Brain and Heart
- Sahasara Chakra and Kundalini
- Insulin and Adrenalin
- Pingala (yellow solar channel in body) and Ida (white lunar channel)
- Hot breath and Cold breath (Yoga)
- Exhalation and Inhalation (Yoga)
- Linga and Yoni

There is indeed no sphere of our existence untouched by the symbolic significance of namaste.

Finally, the gesture of namaste is unique also in the sense that its physical performance is accompanied by a verbal utterance of the word "namaste." This practice is equivalent to the chanting of a mantra. The sonority of the sacred sound 'namaste' is believed to have a quasi-magical value, corresponding to a creative energy change. This transformation is that of aligning oneself in harmony with the vibration of the cosmos itself.



At its most general namaste is a social transaction. It is usual for individuals to greet when they meet each other. It is not only a sign of recognition but also an expression of happiness at each other's sight. This initial conviviality sets the positive tone for the further development of a harmonious relationship. Namaste as a greeting thus is a mosaic of movements and words constituting an intimation of affirmative thoughts and sentiments. In human society it is an approach mechanism, brimming with social, emotional and spiritual significance. In fact it is said that in namaste the hands are put together like a knife so that people may cut through all differences that may exist, and immediately get to the shared ground that is common to all peoples of all cultures.

In this context, a comparison with the widely prevalent 'handshake' is inevitable. Though shaking hands is an extremely intimate gesture, namaste scores over it in some ways. Primarily is the one that namaste is

a great equalizer. You do namaste with God (and not shake hands!). A king or president cannot shake hands with the large multitude they are addressing. But namaste serves the purpose. It is the same gesture one would have exchanged with a king when with him alone. So no incongruity arises. In the absence of namaste, those facing a large audience will have to make do with a wave of the hands, a much less congenial greeting, and indeed which does not state the essential equality of all people, but highlights the difference even more. But on a parallel level it has been conjectured that both the namaste and the handshake developed out of a desire on the part of both the parties to show themselves to be unarmed and devoid of malicious intention. The outstretched hand, and the palms joined together, both establish the proponents as disarmed and show that they come in peace.

Conclusion

As much as yoga is an exercise to bring all levels of our existence, including the physical and intellectual, in complete harmony with the rhythms of nature, the gesture of namaste is an yoga in itself. Thus it is not surprising that any yogic activity begins with the performance of this deeply spiritual gesture. The Buddhists went further and gave it the status of a mudra, that is, a gesture displayed by deities, where it was known as the Anjali mudra. The word Anjali itself is derived from the root Anj, meaning "to adorn, honor, celebrate or anoint."

According to Indologist Renou "Meditation depends upon the relationship between the hands (mudras), the mouth (mantras) and the mind (yoga)". The performance of namaste is comprised of all these three activities. Thus namaste is in essence equivalent to meditation, which is the language of our spirit in conversation with god, and the perfect vehicle for bathing us in the rivers of divine pleasure.



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This article by Nitin Kumar

Editor

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