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## श्री लक्ष्मी नारायण मन्दिर

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श्राद्ध (Shrāddha)

1. The current tract is presented in response to the numerous questions and requests from the devotees, on customs, practices and rituals relating to death. The main objective is to deal briefly with the rituals observed by the followers of the Sanathan Dharma. Details could be found by referring to the bibliography at the end.

All religious, sects, even tribes have different observances followed when some member of the family dies. The rites are based on certain beliefs and convictions enshrined in the religion. One of the cornerstones of the Sanathan Dharma is belief in the eternity of the Atma. The Atma leaves the body at death. Life after death continues. The Atma goes through the process of transmigration. The passing of the Atma from the physical body, and its sojourn through the many states-of-being, the description of the different bodily forms it attains, the existence of hell (नरक) and heaven (स्वर्ग) and the supreme abode of no return, reincarnation, etc. are given in great detail in the scriptures. The concepts presented in connection with the above are, to some, new, to some foreign, far different from what they know and jealously hold. It is however, necessary to have an open mind, to reflect on ideas which are novel and alien. Being confronted with these ideas someone inquired: "Can you prove that these things happen after death?". "Can anyone prove that they don't", was the retort. A compromise may be reached from the adage: for one who believes, no proof is required; and for one who does not believe, no proof exists.

2. In the Sanathan Dharma there are sixteen Sanskaras संस्कार (sacraments) from गर्भाधान (conception) up to अन्त्येष्टि (ANTYESTI last rites), all of which are to be observed as prescribed duties. Their observance will spiritualise life and purify our existence. But in the present article discussion will be confined to the performance of rites relating to death. The final rites after death is called ANTYESTI, during which the corpse is cremated or buried. The ceremonies performed after the 10<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> day followed by monthly observances until the yearly ceremony are called shrāddha. The name is derived from the word श्रद्धा shraddhā, meaning faith and deep devotion. The performer of the shrāddha must not only have the correct attitude but must be purified by good discipline and austerities. It must be stressed that the shrāddha is a memorial service in respect of the departed atma as well as a spiritual act which benefits the performer and his family. Bhagavan Sri Krishna is addressed thus at the conclusion of the ceremony:

अनादिनिधनो देवः शंख चक्र गदाधरः। अक्षय्यः पुण्डरीकाक्षः प्रेतमोक्षप्रदोभव ॥

'Beyond birth and death, adorned with the conch, disc and club, omnipotent Vishnu, with eyes like the Lotus, bestow the departed Atma with salvation'.

The annual Shrāddha performed during Pitr Paks falls into the same category of rituals.

3. Death is a happening that we all experience sometime or the other at the passing away of a dear one. It is the only event of which we should be certain. It may occur at any time, at any age. If, at any time, it becomes known that a person is about to die, the relatives / friends of such a person have a duty to carry out. The mind of the dying one and others closely associated with him/her, should turn towards the one divine reality सत्य (Satya), understanding that everything in the material world is असत्य (Asatya), being subject to decay and destruction. A divine atmosphere should be created by reading the holy scriptures, by japa, chanting of the holy names, singing of bhajans and kirtans. If possible, let the one on the point of death drink Ganga jal or water with Tulasi leaf. In Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna says (8.5)

अन्तकाले च मामेव स्मरन्मुक्त्वा कलेवरम्। यः प्रयाति स मद्भावं याति नास्त्यत्र संशयः॥

'And whoever at the time of death quits his body remembering ME alone, at once attains MY nature. Of this there is no doubt.'

4. In order to arrive at a clear understanding of any custom or practice, especially in Hinduism, rituals, philosophies and kathas (parables) must be viewed together as one package. Any one aspect taken in isolation could easily give the wrong meaning. The offering of pindas (balls of rice), tarpana (oblations), 10<sup>th</sup> day, 13<sup>th</sup> day, 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> month Shrāddha, reading of scriptures, are features relating to death. The performance of rituals, the uttering of holy mantras, the eating of Satwik food cooked in a prescribed way and the observance of other austerities by family members of the deceased, have a salutary effect on the mind; the food devoid of oil and masala, eaten for the 10 days, is especially beneficial to facilitate digestion and the general body metabolism, and helps to heal the deep emotional state into which the family has been thrust through the sudden demise of a beloved member. It has been observed that after the 13th day ceremony, there is calm and an acceptance of the reality of the situation; the emphasis on the spiritual path being followed, creates a peaceful, tranquil atmosphere, infusing the bereaved family with new strength to cope with life and duties. One comes to the realization that self pity and the expression of grief is of no help, as Bhagavan Sri Krishna almost chastises his disciple Arjuna (Gita 2, 11):