

## **What Is a ‘Puja’?**

The Sanskrit word ‘Puja’ is an acronym for ‘Purna Jagruti’, which means ‘Complete Awakening’. Puja is generally considered as a Bhakti Yoga practice. Puja is a form of kinetic meditation involving Mudras, Pranayama, Mantra chanting and Meditation. Puja is also seen as a sacred ritual to connect with the Divine. Sometimes, Kirtan is also combined with Puja.

## **A word about Bhakti Yoga**

Religions usually preach that God or Divine is out there or over there or up there. Bhakti Yoga teaches that Divine is actually in our heart. Puja is a way of connecting with the Divine within our heart.

In Bhakti Yoga, we personify the Divine, which is actually beyond all forms, names and qualities. We give this Divine Personality a name and a form. May be Ganesha, Shiva, Vishnu or the Divine Mother...your preference. The Divine Personality is called as a ‘Deity’. We cultivate a humanized relationship with the Deity. We can treat the Divine like our friend, Master, Sweetheart or even a child. Any form of love can be cultivated towards the Divine. A Bhakti Yogi truly connects with the Deity thru the sheer force of Love and sees the Deity everywhere and in everyone.

In a Puja ceremony, we invite this Divine Personality into our home(heart) like a guest and extend our hospitality to him/her.

## **How is a Puja done?**

Puja being a way of connecting with the Divine inside you, there are no hard and fast rules about it. It is intensely personal.

Probably the only rule about Puja is that your heart should be tuned out to the world and perfectly tuned into the Divine. A Puja can be as simple and short as you want or as complex and long as you want. A Puja can be simply offering a prayer with a perfectly tuned heart. A Puja can also be a long ritual involving many elements of Yoga such as Mudras, Pranayama and Meditation.

One of the popular forms of Puja is called ‘Shodasha Upachara Puja’. This kind of Puja involves invoking the Divine energy of your favourite deity into an idol or symbol and treating the Divine like a guest visiting your home. When a friend or family member shows up at your door step, you invite them in, offer a seat, a glass of water/tea, let them take a shower, offer food, rest and other forms of hospitality. We do the same with Divine as the guest.

## **The 16 steps of a Puja**

The Puja ceremony begins with certain preliminaries involving energizing oneself, the ambiance and setting the sacred intention for the Puja. In the Puja proper, we visualize the Divine as the guest visiting us and offer different types of hospitality services. These are:

1. Dhyanam - Meditation on the Divine Energy
2. Avahanam - inviting/invoking the Divine

3. Asanam - offering a seat
4. Padyam - water to wash the feet
5. Arghyam - water to wash the hands
6. Achamaneeyam - water to drink
7. Snanam - Bathing
8. Vastram - Clothes
9. Abharanam - Jewellery
10. Chandanam - Sandal wood paste
11. Pushpam - Flowers
12. Sugandham - Fragrance
13. Anga Puja - Meditation on the Divine form
14. Ashtottaram - Remembering the 108 aspects of the Divine
15. Dhupam - Incense
16. Deepam - Light
17. Naivedyam - Food
18. Tambulam - Betel Leaves and spices
19. Neerajanam - Camphor
20. Mantra Pushpam - the flowers of sacred Mantras
21. Atma Pradakshinam - Acknowledging that inner Divine is everywhere
22. Prarthana - Final Prayer

Even though the Puja looks like an external ritual, it is actually all internal. The purpose of the Puja is to transcend the sense of individual ego by surrendering it to the Divine and ultimately merge into the Universal Consciousness.

Please wear loose clothing so you can sit on the floor comfortably.