



Home Deity Worship Course

Sipping water for purification (ācamana)



ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry

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In Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam we find this statement:

The gopīs first executed the process of ācamana, drinking a sip of water from the right hand. They purified their bodies and hands with the nyāsa-mantra and then applied the same mantra upon the body of the child.¹

Ācamana, or sipping water, is a means of purification. Immersing the body in water brings about physical and subtle cleansing. Taking water infused with mantras into the body by sipping brings about subtle and spiritual cleansing. When there is an extreme emergency and purification is required, but it is not possible to bathe, ācamana is prescribed.

The general process of ācamana is as follows: While sitting on an āsana², take some water in your right hand, and while looking into the water cupped in your right hand, chant a mantra directed into that water and then sip the water. Then, as you recite more mantras, purify your senses by touching different parts of the upper body. The basic procedure is the same in all types of ācamana. The difference lies in the mantras that are chanted while sipping the water. There are Vaidic, Purāṇic, Śaivite, tantric, and Vaiṣṇava ācamanas.

In giving the rules for Vaiṣṇava ācamana, the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa quotes from the Kāśī-khaṇḍa, Yājñavalkya-smṛti, Bharadvāja-smṛti, Kūrma Purāṇa, and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. These rules are summarized as follows:

A devotee performs ācamana to achieve subtle and spiritual purity before performing spiritual activities such as applying tilaka, chanting Gāyatrī and japa, performing pūjā and homa, observing a vrata, taking prasāda, reading or reciting śāstra or mantras, and meditating.

¹ Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Canto 10, Chapter 6, text 21.

² If there is no āsana, kneel with your right knee touching the floor and your left foot flat on the floor.

You should do ācamana twice before performing a homa, chanting Gāyatrī, worshipping, eating, giving in charity, as well as after going to a cremation grounds, touching the lips, and talking to a caṇḍāla.

It is also recommended to perform ācamana after sleeping or rising from bed, bathing, dressing, drinking, touching the lips, going to an impure place (such as cremation grounds), spitting, coughing, yawning, sneezing, speaking improper words, touching something impure, returning from a journey, walking on a road, urinating, passing stool or semen, and talking to caṇḍālas and mlecchas.³

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas commonly perform ācamana before performing spiritual activities, as described above. It is less common to perform ācamana after the bodily activities mentioned, unless one also intends to perform some spiritual activity.

Devotees who worship the deity should know these rules so they can maintain the principle of cleanliness.

The place where a devotee performs ācamana should be pure—free from hair, bones, ash, or any other impure item.

The water should be cool, fresh, without bubbles, without foul odor or taste, and untouched by fingernails, hair, or other impure items. Rainwater should not be used.⁴

Out of respect for a spiritual activity, do not perform ācamana without first cleaning your hands, with shoes on, while standing, or sitting with your feet showing. In this regard, Hari-bhakti-vilāsa states:

³ Hari-bhakti-vilāsa 3.196-198; quoted from Kūrma Purāṇa.

⁴ Even though Hari-bhakti-vilāsa places a restriction on the use of rainwater for ācamana, Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, in his Sārārtha-darśini commentary on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.21.10, explains that rainwater is considered pure and may be used after ten days.

It is impure to perform ācamana with head and throat covered, with śikhā and kaccha untied, without clean feet. The intelligent person does not perform ācamana wearing leather shoes, while standing in water or while wearing a turban. He does not perform ācamana using rainwater, with hands contaminated from eating food, using only one hand for both putting water in the hand and drinking, without wearing a gāyatrī thread, while sitting on shoes or with his knees uncovered.⁵

Śāstra recommends facing east or north in padma- or svastika-āsana.

Contrary to custom in Bengal, do not take your upavīta thread in your hand or wrap it around your thumb when performing ācamana, as your lips will contaminate it.

⁵ Hari-bhakti-vilāsa 3.199-201.