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Some Modern Religious Groups and Teachers

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Vibhūti

Vibhūti (lit. great power, might, splendor) is the name given to ash usually made of cow dung (*gomaya*) or taken from crematory grounds (*śmaśāna*). Another common term for it is *bhasman* (that which is pulverized or consumed/calcined [by fire]). From vedic times, ashes have been a memento of death, of the fleeting character of one's individuality. As stated in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 5.15.1 (= *IśU*. 17), "Ashes (*bhasman*) are this body's lot."

A peculiar cleansing efficacy is attributed to ash (*MaSm*. 5.111). Used primarily among Śaiva adepts, *vibhūti* is applied to the body first and foremost as a purifying substance, purification (*śuddhi*) being preliminary to all religious practices. Impurities are thought to be instantly wiped away thanks to contact with ash, and it is widely believed that one can rid oneself of any physical and even moral defilement by applying ash to one's body.

Ash from a fire sacrifice (*agnihotra*; see → *yajña*) or any ash that remains in a fireplace – as in the case of the ever-burning *dhūnī* kept by *yogīs* and → *sādhus* – is credited with special power. Besides applying the *vibhūti* of the *dhūnī* to themselves while reciting the appropriate → *mantras*, holy men offer the ash to their devotees as a token of grace (→ *prasāda*).

→ Fire is simultaneously the sacrifice and the instrument of sacrifice. The life cycle is understood as an ongoing sacrifice, *vibhūti* being the remnant of the old existence and the "seed" of regeneration. Applying ash to one's body is the hallmark of renunciants, since it conveys a sense of radical detachment (*vairāgya*). Everything, starting with one's desires, must be burned into the purifying flames of self-sacrifice and knowledge. In order to achieve final consummation in → Śiva, the ascetic's ego must be turned into ash.

Being the remainder of sacrifice, ash is thought to promote renewal, materially as well as spiritually, and is linked with wealth, fertility, and healing. *Vibhūti* is believed to protect from evil spirits, strengthen the body, and avert illnesses. In → *āyurveda* an ash (*bhasman*) preparation is used in the treatment of wounds to cause sepsis and stop bleeding (*SuśrSa*. 1.14). Ash is also eaten as consecrated food. Eating or drinking ash mixed with

water (*KaṭhŚU*. 39) is thought to heal the body/mind complex and purify the soul (→ *ātman*).

Ashes worn by *yogīs* or kept in their small bag (*jholī*) are believed to be so powerful as to revive the dead. An illustration is the story told in Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* (11th cent. CE) of the Brahman Candrasvāmin, whose dead wife was on the verge of being cremated. At the crucial moment, a → Kāpālika ascetic placed some ash on the woman's corpse, and she immediately rose from the pyre (*KSS*. 18.5.1–22). Symptomatically, Śaivas homologize *vibhūti* with *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality.

In iconography, Śiva as the exemplary *yogī* is white, that is, smeared with ashes. According to Śaiva theologians, his body is naturally covered with eternal ashes. The god's primary function, out of compassion (*karuṇā*) for all suffering beings, is that of dissolving (*saṃhāra*, *pralaya*) the world of multiplicity in the abyss of the one godhead, which is he himself. His role as Hara ("The Annihilator") makes of Śiva the icon of transcendence. As the vanquisher of the cycle of births and deaths (→ *saṃsāra*), he is homologized with fire, the fire of the sacrifice as well as the fire of knowledge, through which he dissolves all names and forms. Ashes symbolize Śiva's supreme consciousness, which alone remains after everything has been burned.

In myth, Śiva reduced the god Kāma – personification of sensuous desire – into a heap of ash through his fiery third eye. Kāma – from then on known as Anaṅga ("The Bodyless") – had tried to divert Śiva from his asceticism and meditative absorption by shooting his floral arrows at him, so that he would desire the beautiful goddess → Pārvatī, his promised bride (*MtP*. 154.1–495; *ŚiP*. 2.2.8–20, 2.3.1–55). Opposite to Śiva, Kāma represents the fire of lust, the agent responsible for *saṃsāra*. The splendid ashes with which Śiva is besmeared are in fact Kāma's ashes, signifying the triumph of *preman* (pure love) over → *kāma* (sensuous love). At the same time, Śiva's *vibhūti* also bears an erotic value, representing the god's semen. Thus, Śiva's ashes bring forward the subsequent resurrection of Kāma, proving their vital force and highlighting the inextricable interplay of asceticism and eroticism in Śiva's mythology.

Mixed into a paste, *vibhūti* marks the body with sectarian symbols. The → *tilaka* (sign) that characterizes all Śaiva adepts is the *tripuṇḍra*, three horizontal lines, which are drawn on the forehead as well as other body parts. These lines represent Śiva's threefold power of will (*icchāśakti*), knowledge (*jñānaśakti*), and action (*kriyāśakti*). Śaiva authorities also say that the *tripuṇḍra* stands for Śiva's trident (*triśūla*) and the divine triad (→ *trimūrti*) of → Brahṃā, → Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Wearing ash is praised as the sole right conduct in order to achieve merits and powers, wash off all sins (*pāpa*) – be it even killing a Brahman or murdering one's *guru* – and attain → liberation (*mokṣa*).

In the old Śaiva sect of the → Pāśupatas, bathing in ashes (*bhasmasnāna*) or lying in ashes (*bhasmaśayana*) – especially those taken from cremation grounds – was an important practice. Through ashes, a Pāśupata adept was thought to achieve not only bodily purity (*gātraśauca*) but also the purity of the soul (*ātmaśauca*). Covering the body with *bhasman* was said to be the characteristic mark of a madman (*unmatta*), thought to provoke disgust in onlookers. According to Pāśupata theologians, good → *karman* and *ātmaśauca* were gained precisely by incurring disdain from others, that is, by actively seeking dishonor. Among other sources, *Atharvaśiropaniṣad* 67 refers to the Pāśupata custom of besmearing the body with *bhasman* and cites their ritual formula:

What is Agni is ashes; what is air, is ashes; what is water, is ashes; what is earth, is ashes; what is ether, is ashes; what is all this (phenomenal world) is ashes; what are the mind and such as these, the eyes, are ashes alone. (trans. Srinivasa Ayyangar, 1953, 49)

In the Brahmanical *Samnyāsopaniṣads*, we find references to Paramahansa and Turīyātita renunciants covering themselves with ashes and bathing in ashes (*NāPariU.* 175, 203; *BrSamU.* 255). Even today, extreme Śaiva ascetics such as *nāgas* (see → *sādhus*) and *avadhūtas* (highest class of renunciants who have “shaken off” all worldly ties) smear their naked bodies with ash.

Particularly important in the Śaiva milieu are the presumably late *Bhasmajābālopaniṣad* and *Brhājābālopaniṣad*, which concern themselves with the preparation of the holy ash and the astounding virtues of it. These texts detail when, where, and how the *tripuṇḍra* lines must

be drawn, from one's forehead to one's feet, while muttering the appropriate *mantras*.

Brhājābālopaniṣad 1.15 explains the meaning of the five names of the holy ash, said to be derived from the dung of five heavenly cows (Nandā, of tawny color; Bhadrā, of dark color; Surabhī, of red color; Suśilā, of white color; and Sumanā, of variegated color):

Thus are the five names – *vibhūti*, *bhasita*, *bhasman*, *kṣāra* and *raṁṣā* – given to ashes. Through being the cause of immense power and prosperity, *vibhūti* is so called; through eating up all sins, *bhasman* is so called; through shining brightly, *bhasita* is so called; through causing troubles to melt away, *kṣāra* is so called; through affording protection from the fears caused by evil spirits, the manes of the departed, devils, Brahmarākṣasas (spirits of murdered Brahmins seeking to wreak vengeance), and Apasmāra (epilepsy), *raṁṣā* is so called; thus through these five significant names one should know ashes. (trans. Srinivasa Ayyangar, 1953, 120)

Besides Śiva, another deity fond of *vibhūti* is → Dattātreyā, whose cult is centered in the Marathi area. Dattātreyā is revered as the supreme *guru* and renouncer, and in his *trimukhi* (three-faced) aspect, he encompasses the *trimūrti*. Chapter 29 of the Marathi *Gurucaritra* (c. 1550), the sacred text of the Dattasampradāya, is devoted to the wonderful powers of *vibhūti*; whoever comes in contact with it is said to be instantly purified and to attain the knowledge of → *brahman*.

A characteristic activity of the controversial god-man → Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) of Puttaparthi has been the “materialization” of miracle-working *vibhūti* by a wave of his hand. Every day for decades, Sathya Sai Baba's *vibhūti* – an off-white fine ash, bearing a slight fragrance – used to appear in his down-turned palm after a few circular motions of his arm and hand. This *vibhūti* is thought to cure the sick and afford protection, acting as a talisman. Devotees mix it with water and drink it as a medicine. Even → Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) – said by Sathya Sai Baba to have been his previous incarnation – used to give his followers ash (*udī*), which he took from his *dhūnī*, as both a token of grace and a healing substance.

Until 1979, on the occasion of religious holidays such as *śivarātri*, *daśaharā*, and *navarātri*, Sathya Sai Baba used to perform the ceremony of bathing a silver statue of Shirdi Sai Baba in ashes

(*vibhūtyabhiṣeka*). Churning his arm in a supposedly empty urn held by an attendant above the statue, he “materialized” huge quantities of *vibhūti* to the point of covering the image in a heap of ash. It has been calculated that Sathya Sai Baba used to produce an average rate of one pound of *vibhūti* per day. When in a state of trance, *vibhūti* was seen emerging from his forehead as well as his face, mouth, thumbs, and toes. *Vibhūti* has even been reported to ooze out from the *guru*’s portraits and idols, in India as well as abroad.

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