

VEDIC JURISPRUDENCE AND ATONEMENT

Prāyaścitta according to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

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Executive Summary

The ISKCON India Scholars board had been requested to provide references from scriptures of the *pāñcarātrika-mārga* and *vaidika-mārga* pertaining to *prāyaścitta* (atonement) for a Vaiṣṇava, as a result of an accidental falldown.

The following is the summary of our findings:

- ❖ According to both Pañcarātra and Vaidika texts, *prāyaścitta* for a Vaiṣṇava is different from that prescribed for a non-vaiṣṇava.
- ❖ In the *Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā*, Śrī Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī states that a Vaiṣṇava should perform *prāyaścitta* as prescribed in the *Nārada-Pañcarātra* texts, especially *Bhāradvāja-saṁhita* verses 3-22 to 25. He forbids the other forms of *prāyaścitta* such as charity, austerity, *yajña* etc., as “*smārta-kalpita-niśedhaḥ*,” what to speak of judging a Vaiṣṇava based on mundane rules of *āśūric* society.
- ❖ Lord Caitanya in his instructions to Sanātana Gosvāmī states that for one who has given up all activities and is engaged in devotional service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead there is no further *prāyaścitta* needed. Even if he is involved in some sinful activity by accident. The Lord as *caitya-guru*, seated in his heart, will purify him.
- ❖ Śrīla Śrīdhara Svāmī, Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, Śrīla Jiva Gosvāmī, and Śrīla Prabhupāda have all added that such a devotee incidentally attains the result of *prāyaścitta* by his continuous remembrance of the Lord.
- ❖ As per the Vaidika-mārga, if a spiritual master is involved in accidental sinful activity such as adultery or even the killing of a *brāhmaṇa*, he can be purified and reinstated by his disciples, or by observing total fasting etc.,
- ❖ The *Agni Purāṇa* forbids inflicting a punishment or *prāyaścitta* on anyone (not to mention a Vaiṣṇava) for the fault that has already been judged and atoned for.
- ❖ There is no mention of removing a person (Vaiṣṇava) from the position of guruship, even for sins as heinous as *brahmahatyā*, and even a sin such as *brahmahatyā* does not necessarily mean that a guru is no longer bona fide, as the example of Vaiśampāyana shows.

Introduction

In this paper, we will present some of the various texts in *pañcarātra-sāstra* and *vaidika-sāstra* pertaining to *prāyaścitta* (atonement) prescribed for a *Vaiṣṇava*. We should keep in mind that *Pāñcarātra* is the governing scripture for all topics related to *vaiṣṇava-saṁskāras*, specifically the rules and regulations of *pañcarātra-dīkṣā*, which ISKCON follows. At the same time, one should also be conversant with the rules and regulations presented in the *vaidika-saṁskāras* and their corresponding *prāyaścitta*, because these prescribe the limit for the punishment for non-devotees, what to speak of devotees who are on a higher path. Neither should be neglected. In summary, although both the *Pāñcarātra* and *Vaidika* paths offer atonement even for great sins such as the killing of a *brāhmaṇa*, it does not necessarily follow that the person atoning for such sins be removed from a position of guruship. And punishing someone again for the same sin for which he has already atoned is prohibited.

Prāyaścitta prescribed in the Pāñcarātrika-mārga

There are several *prāyaścittas*, or atonements, prescribed in the *Pañcarātras* for a *Vaiṣṇava*. The *prāyaścitta* for a *Vaiṣṇava* is different from that of a non-*Vaiṣṇava*

Śrī Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī about *prāyaścitta* in *Sat-kriyā-sāra-dīpikā*

With regard to the rules and regulations that prohibit *Vaiṣṇavas* from worshipping demigods and forefathers, Gopala-Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī cites and comments on verses from *Padma Purāṇa*. In canto five under title "*Sātvata-prāyaścitta-vidhānam*," Gopala-Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī makes a reference to *Nārada-Pañcarātra Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* verses 3-22 to 25 for the proper atonements for *Vaiṣṇavas* to follow. And under the title "*Vaiṣṇavanām Smārta-kalpita-niśedhaḥ*," he describes the improper methods of atonement that *Vaiṣṇavas* must avoid.

*prāyaścittam tu paramam prapattis tasya kevalam
kuryāt karmātmakam vāpi vāsudevam anusmaran || 22 ||*

*viśuddhyed viṣṇu-bhaktasya dṛṣṭyā sparśena sevayā
smaraṇenānna-pānādyair girā pāda-rajo-'mbubhiḥ || 23 ||*

*viṣṇor niveditānnādyais tathā tat-kīrtanādibhiḥ
abhāgavata-dṛṣṭyādeḥ śuddhir eṣā viśeṣataḥ || 24 ||*

*kṛtā yaj.āḥ samastās ca dānāni ca tapāṁsi ca
prāyaścittam aśeṣeṇa nityam arcayatā harim || 25 ||*

Translation: "For a *Vaiṣṇava* the highest kind of atonement is full surrender to the Lord. Otherwise one should perform activities while remembering Lord *Vāsudeva*. By seeing the Lord's devotee, touching his feet, serving him, feeding him with cooked grains and water, speaking sweetly, taking the dust of his feet and drinking the water from his feet, eating *mahāprasāda* of the Lord and chanting the names of the Lord, one can purify oneself specially from the contamination of seeing and touching non-devotees. One who constantly engages in worshipping Lord Hari is considered to have performed all activities like sacrifice, charity, penance, austerity, atonement etc."

In simple terms, Gopala-Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī recommends that *Vaiṣṇavas* who fall from their position of exclusive devotion to Lord *Viṣṇu* and take up worship of demigods or forefathers must first get re-initiated by the same guru or guru's relatives or his other disciples. Furthermore they have to follow

the *prayaścitta* given in *Nārada-pañcarātra Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā* verses 3-22 to 25 that are given as atonements. Given this *śāstra-pramāṇa*, an irrevocable fact, there is no validity in demanding that a Vaiṣṇava undergo any other tribulations that are *smārta-kalpita* (mixed with *karma-kāṇḍa* or *jñāṇa-kāṇḍa* etc.,) not to mention being subjected to regulations based on *āsuric* mundane conceptions.

Note how the *prayaścitta* recommended here from *Nārada-pañcarātra Bhāradvāja-saṁhitā*, as cited by Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī, closely resembles the *prayaścitta*, atonement, recommended by Śrīla Prabhupāda in his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* 9.30 (*api cet sudurācāro. . .*), in that being fully engaged in devotional service itself is sufficient atonement. And because our immediate *ācāryas* (Śrīla Prabhupāda and Śrīla Sarasvatī Ṭhākura) have specifically enjoined *sādhana-bhaktas* on the *vaidhi-bhakti-mārga* to follow the *pāñcarātri-vidhi*, this is necessarily the most appropriate *prayaścitta* for devotees to perform.

It is important to note that the *Nārada-Pañcarātra Jayākhya-saṁhitā* also offers a suitable remedy for the worst offences, as cited below:

*duṣṭena manasā drṣtvā gurorbhāryāṃ sutāmataḥ |
siṃhamantram japenmantrī snātaḥ pañca śatāni vai || 25.107 ||*

Translation:- “If one looks towards the wife of guru, or his daughter with bad intention he should do *prayaścitta* by chanting the Nṛsiṃha mantra and bathe five hundred times.”

*strīśūdrabālakānhatvā kāmato'kāmato'pi vā |
dve'yute hyayutaṃ sāṣṭaṃ japtvā yāgena śudhyati || 25.108 ||*

Translation:- “If one kills a woman or a *śūdra* or a child, intentionally or unintentionally, he should do *prayaścitta* by chanting the Nṛsiṃha mantra ten thousand and eight times and perform a fire sacrifice.”

The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava conception of *prayaścitta* for those fully surrendered to the Lord

Apart from these authoritative statements from *Nārada-Pañcarātra*, there is a more general and relevant scriptural consideration regarding *prayaścitta*, or atonement, with regard to those fully surrendered unto Lord Kṛṣṇa's lotus feet. Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu teaches this to Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya 22.144:

*ajñāne vā haya yadi 'pāpa' upasthita
kṛṣṇa tāñre śuddha kare, nā karāya prayaścitta*

“If, however, a devotee accidentally becomes involved in a sinful activity, Kṛṣṇa purifies him. He does not have to undergo the regulative form of atonement.”

Śrīla Prabhupāda remarks, “Kṛṣṇa purifies from within as the *caitya-guru*, the spiritual master within the heart. This is described in the following verse from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (11.5.42).”

In the next verse of *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, the Lord quotes:

*sva-pāda-mūlaṃ bhajataḥ priyasya tyaktānya-bhāvasya hariḥ pareśaḥ
vikarma yac cotpatitaṃ kathañcid dhunoti sarvaṃ hṛdi sanniviṣṭaḥ*

“One who has given up everything and taken full shelter at the lotus feet of Hari, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, is very dear to Kṛṣṇa. If he is involved in some sinful activity by accident, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who is seated within everyone's heart, removes his sins without difficulty.”

Śrīla Śrīdhara Svāmī and Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura note that there is no further *prāyaścitta* for one who has given up all activities and is engaged in devotional service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Śrīla Jiva Gosvāmī has added that such a devotee incidentally attains the result of *prāyaścitta* by his continuous remembrance of the Lord.¹

Śrīla Prabhupāda has explained this in a lecture:

“If by accident, if by previous habit, one commits some mistake or falls down, that is excused. And one should be repentant: ‘My dear Lord, I have committed this offense. Please excuse me.’ And one should fast. One should be very much repentant. Then Kṛṣṇa is so kind. But he hasn’t got to take to the *prāyaścitta* or, what is called, atonement system. A devotee hasn’t got to do that. A devotee’s sinful activities is excused, and if he is repentant, then he is again elevated to his original position. That is the verdict of all *śāstras*.”²

Not only is this “the verdict of all *śāstras*,” Śrīla Prabhupāda has himself demonstrated such a consideration in his own dealings with his disciples who had difficulties in the past.

Prāyaścitta prescribed in Vaidika-mārga (Vedic texts)

Not only Pañcarātra texts, even Vedic texts enjoin *prāyaścitta* for an accidental sin, even a serious one, which does not necessarily disqualify one from being a spiritual master.

The incident of Vaiśampāyana (a Vaiṣṇava guru)

Here is evidence from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* that

- a guru may still continue as a guru even for the offence of brahma-hatya, and
- his disciples can perform *prāyaścitta* on his behalf to free him from the offence:

*vaiśampāyanaśiṣyā vai carakādhvaryavo'bhavan /
yaccerurbrahmahatyāṃha: kṣapaṇaṃ svagurorvratam // 61 //*

“The disciples of Vaiśampāyana became authorities in the Atharva Veda. They were known as the Carakas because they executed strict vows to free their guru from his sin of killing a *brāhmaṇa*.” (ŚB 12.6.61)

¹ Bhāvartha-dīpikā: vihita-karma-nivṛttim uktvā niṣedha-nimitta-prāyaścitta-nivṛttim āha—sva-pāda-mūlam iti. tyakto’nyasmin dehāda devatāntare vā bhāvo yena. ata eva tasya vikarmaṇi pravṛttir na sambhavati. yac ca kathañcit pramādādinā utpatitaṃ bhavet, tad api harir dhunoti. nanu, yamas tan na manyeta? tatrāha—pareśaḥ. nanu, śruti-smṛti mamaivājñe iti bhagavad-vacanāt svājñā-bhaṅgaṃ kathaṃ saheta? tatrāha—priyasya. nanu, nāyaṃ pāpa-kṣayārthaṃ bhajate? tatrāha—hṛdi sanniviṣṭaḥ. na hi vastu-śaktir arthitām apekṣate ity arthaḥ. Krama-sandarbha: na ca vikarma-prāyaścitta-rūpaṃ karmāntaraṃ kartavyaṃ, tasya tac-charaṇasya vikarma-pravṛtty-abhāvāt. kathañcid āpatite’pi vikarmaṇi tad-anusmaraṇenaiva prāyaścittasyāpy ānuṣaṅgika-siddher ity āha—sva-pāda-mūlam iti. hṛdi sanniviṣṭatve hetuḥ. tyaktānya-bhāvasyeti. tyakto’nyatra devatāntare bhāvo bhagavatīva bhaktir yena vikarma-dhūnane hetuḥ hariḥ svabhāvata eva sarva-doṣa-haraḥ pareśaḥ śaktiś cety arthaḥ tatrāpi priyasyety āgrahataś cety arthaḥ. Sārārtha-darśinī: vihita-karma-nivṛttim uktvā, niṣedha-nimitta-prāyaścitta-nivṛttim āha—sva-pāda-mūlam iti. tyakto’nyasmin devatāntare bhāvaḥ sevya-buddhir yena, tasya vikarmaṇi pravṛttir eva na bhavet. kathañcit pramādādinā utpatitaṃ cet, tad api harir dhunoti. nanu, vikarmavati bhṛtye daṇḍayanta eva prabhavo dṛśyanta iti harir eva taṃ daṇḍayatu, na priyasya bhaktasya priyatvād evādaṇḍyatvam. pareśa iti etad eva tasya pāramaiśvaryam iti bhāvaḥ. nanu, nāyaṃ pāpa-kṣayārthaṃ bhajate? tatrāha—hṛdi sanniviṣṭa iti. na hi vastu-śaktir arthitām apekṣate ity arthaḥ.

² Lecture on Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 6.3.25-26 in Gorakhpur on 18 February 1971.

This is because Vaiśampāyaṇa said to Pāṇdvās that his guru Vyāsa was initiated by the Nārāyaṇa mantra:

vaiśampāyaṇa uvāca
yo hyasmākaṃ guruśreṣṭhaḥ kṛṣṇadvaipāyano munīḥ || 135 ||
jagau paramakaṃ japyam nārāyaṇamudīrayan |

Translation: “Vaiśampāyaṇa said our guru the sage Vyāsa is a devotee of Lord Nārāyaṇa, and always chants the Nārāyaṇa mantra and the glories of the Lord.” (Mahābhārata, Śāntiparva 349.135)

So his example is applicable here also.

Viṣṇupurāṇa 3.5.4-6 gives the history of how Vaiśampāyaṇa came to commit *brahmahatyā*, the killing of a *brāhmaṇa*, and the *prāyaścitta* his disciples performed to free him from that sin.

śrīparāśara uvāca
yajurvedadarosśākhāḥsaptaviṃśanmahāmuniḥ |
vaiśampāyananāmāso vyāsaśiṣyaścakāra vai || 1 ||
śiṣyebhyaḥ pradadau tās ca jagṛhustepyanukramāt |
yājñavalkyastu tatrābhūdbāhyarātasuto dvija || 2 ||
śiṣyaḥ paramadharmajño guruvṛttiparaḥsadā |
ṛṣiryodya mahāmeroḥ samāje nāgamiṣyati || 3 ||
tasya vai saptarātrāttu brahmahattyā bhaviṣyati |
pūrvamevaṃ munigaṇaiḥ samayo yaḥ kṛto dvija || 4 ||

Translation: “Parāśara continued: Of the tree of the Yajurveda there are twenty-seven branches, which Vaiśampāyaṇa, the pupil of Vyāsa, compiled and taught to as many disciples. Amongst these, Yājñavalkya, the son of Brahmarāta, was distinguished for piety and obedience to his preceptor. It had been formerly agreed by the Munis, that any one of them who, at a certain time, did not join an assembly held on mount Meru should incur the guilt of killing a *brāhmaṇa* within a period of seven nights.”

vaiśampāyana ekastu taṃ vyatīkrāntavāṃstadā |
svastriyaṃ bālakaṃ sotha padā sprṣṭamatādayat || 5 ||
śiṣyānāha sa bhoḥ śiṣyā brahmahattyāpahaṃ vratam |
caradhvaṃ matkṛte sarve na vicāryamidaṃ tathā || 6 ||
athāha yājñavalkyastu kim ebhir bhagavan dvijaiḥ |
kleśitair alpatejobhiścāriṣyehamidaṃ vratam || 7 ||
tataḥ kruddho guruḥ prāha yājñavalkyaṃ mahāmuniḥ |
mucyatām yattvayādhītaṃ matto viprāvamānaka || 8 ||
nistejaso vadasyenānyattvaṃ brāhmaṇaṃpuṅgavān
tena śiṣyeṇa nārthosti mamājñābhaṅgakāriṇā || 9 ||

Translation: “Vaiśampāyaṇa alone failed to keep the appointment and consequently killed, by an accidental kick with his foot, the child of his sister. He then addressed his disciples and desired them to perform on his behalf the penance for killing a *brāhmaṇa*. Without any hesitation Yājñavalkya refused and said, ‘How shall I engage in penance

with these miserable and inefficient *brāhmaṇas*?’ On which his guru, being incensed, commanded him to relinquish all that he had learnt from him. ‘You speak contemptuously,’ he observed ‘of these young *brāhmaṇas*, but of what use is a disciple who disobeys my commands?’”

*yājñavalkyastataḥ prāha bhaktyaitat te mayoditam |
mamāpyalam tvayādhītaṁ yanmayā tadidaṁ dvija || 10 ||*

*śrīparāśara uvāca
ityukto rudhirāktāni sarūpāṇi yajūṁśisah |
chardayitvā dadau tasmai yayau sa svecchayā muni || 11 ||*

*yajūṁśyatha viśṣṭāni yājñavalkyena vai dvija |
jagṛhustittirā bhūtvā taittirīyāstu te tataḥ || 12 ||*

*brahmahatyāvratam cīrṇam guruṇā coditais tu taiḥ |
cākrurādhvaryavam te tu caraṇānmunisattama || 13 ||*

Translation: “‘I spoke,’ replied Yājñavalkya, ‘in perfect faith; but as to what I have read from you, I have had enough: it is no more than this—’ (acting as if he would eject it from his stomach); when he brought up the texts of the Yajus in substance stained with blood. He then departed. The other disciples of Vaiśampāyana transforming themselves into partridges (*tittiri*), picked up the texts which he had disgorged and which from that circumstance were called Taittirīya; and the disciples were called the Caraka professors of the Yajus, from Caraṇa, ‘going through’ or ‘performing’ the expiatory rite (*prāyaścitta*) enjoined by their master.”

The case of Vaiśampāyana is accidental, not intentional, because he was compelled to commit *brahmahatyā* on account of a vow that he broke. Moreover, for the sin of adultery, *Mahābhārata* prescribes that a *brahmacārī* perform the same penance, *prāyaścitta*, that is prescribed for *brahmahatyā*.

Mahābhārata about the *prāyaścitta* for adultery

avakīrṇinimittaṁ tu brahmahatyāvratam caret |

Translation:- “If a *brahmacārī* falls from his vow of celibacy he should perform the vow prescribed for *brahmahatyā*.” (*Mahābhārata*, *Śāntiparva* 35.24)

Bhārata kaumudī commentary:- *avakīrṇam bhāve kṭapratyayaāntayaā brahmacārīṇo yoṣidagamanam tadeva nimittam yasya tat |*

The *prāyaścitta* prescribed for *brahmahatyā*

*ṣaḍabhirvaśaiḥ kṛcchrabhojī brahmahā pūyate naraḥ |
māse māse samaśnamstu tribhitarvaśaiḥ pramucyate || 7 ||*

*saṁvatsareṇa māsāśī pūyate nātra saṁśayaḥ |
tathaivopavasana rājan svalpenāpi prayate || 8 ||*

*kratunā cāśvamedhena pūyate nātra saṁśayaḥ ।
sarvaṁ pāpmānaṁ tarati tarati vrahmahatyāṁ yo'śvamedhena yajate ॥ 9 ॥*

Translation:- “One may be cleansed of the sin of having slain a *brāhmaṇa*. By living upon the scantiest meal every day for a space of six years, a person may be cleansed of that sin. By observing a harder vow with regard to food one may be cleansed in three years. By living upon one meal a month, one may be cleansed in course of only a year. By observing, again, an absolute fast, one may be cleansed within a very short time. There is no doubt again that: one is cleansed by a horse-sacrifice.”

Redundant *prāyaścitta* or double jeopardy

The Vedic scriptures, clearly states that the correct *prāyaścitta* purifies the aggressor of his sinful reactions and the sin itself. Such atonements needs to be executed only once. In fact the *Agni Purāṇa* clearly prohibits a court from trying a person for a sin twice, as cited below:

“A court should neither entertain, nor hear a cross-suit or a cross-case, without first deciding the original one, nor should it take up a case or suit dismissed or rejected by another tribunal of competent authority.” (*Agni Purāṇa* – Ch. 253 verses 38-46)

Hence it is important that one consult the *śāstras* for its prescriptions of the right atonement and not whimsically or emotionally subject the accused to double-jeopardy.

Conclusion

It is clear that in both *pāñcarātriaka-mārga* and *vaidika-mārga* there are specific atonements, *prāyaścittas*, prescribed for both a devotee of Viṣṇu and a non-devotee. One should thoroughly understand these scriptural conclusions make careful judgements, taking all these injunctions into consideration. In his purport to *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 8.20.1, Śrīla Prabhupāda stresses the contrasting point of when to reject a guru.

“Anyone who is supposed to be a guru but who goes against the principle of viṣṇu-bhakti cannot be accepted as guru. If one has falsely accepted such a guru, one should reject him. Such a guru is described as follows (Mahābhārata, Udyoga 179.25): *guror apy avaliptasya kāryākāryam ajānataḥ utpatha-pratipannasya parityāgo vidhīyate.*” (ŚB 8.20.1 purport)

From the above references provided from both *pāñcarātriaka-mārga* and *vaidika-mārga* it has been clearly established that even for the worst of kinds of the sins committed by a devotee (one who is *not against* the principle of *viṣṇu-bhakti*), there is no mention of removing him from the position of guru or giving him other kinds of punishments not found in the revealed scriptures.