THE EXISTENTIAL, SOCIAL, AND COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UPA-NAYANA RITE

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For the Hindu as depicted in the Grhyasūtras, life moves along in a succession of periods. For each of these periods there are proper rites to perform. The most critical periods of life are birth, puberty, marriage, and death. These crucial times in the life of religious man are periods of transition. They are times of great danger. In order for man to pass over the danger, he must occasionally take a leap. The anthropologist — Mary Douglas — cogently expresses the situation, as she writes:

Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status 1).

Thus the successful leap entails a transition into a new realm of reality. For the Hindu the transition of various danger periods is accomplished by means of numerous Sāṁskāras (sacraments). Traditionally one of the most important Sāṁskāras has been the Upanayana (initiation) ceremony.

This paper will not be primarily concerned with the general structure of the rite. This investigation will focus on those aspects of the Upanayana rite which will enable us to view the existential, social, and cosmic significance of this rite for the Hindus. Thus this paper will attempt to show the significance of the Upanayana rite in terms of three levels of being.

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In speaking of initiation in general terms, one finds that it denotes a body of rites and oral teachings. It is the purpose of these rites and teachings to produce a radical modification in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In more precise philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition. In other words, the initiate emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation. Thus there is a change in status from one ontological level of existence to another.

In the Upanayana ceremony, there are some examples of this change in ontological status of the initiate. There are, for example, several preparations before the actual ceremony. The day before the ceremony the auspicious god Ganesa and several other deities were propitiated. On the night before the ceremony, the body of the candidate was smeared with a yellow substance. A silver ring was tucked into the top-knot of his hair. The child was also instructed to remain silent during the night. The yellow substance on the child's body may have symbolized his embryonic state, as did the command to absolute silence. For example, what is silent is undetermined (S.B.VII.2.2.14). The Hindus also believe that every man is born a Sudra. The color yellow is the color of the southern direction. The southern direction is symbolic of the Sudra caste. The south is also the direction of Yama who is the lord of the dead. Furthermore, yellow is one of the colors symbolic of demons who are residents of Yama's realm.

He views transition as a process and in the case of rites de passage a transformation. In the transitional or liminal period, the individual is structurally invisible. This structural invisibility has a twofold char-

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5) Ibid., p. 30.