

# A Balinese Religion Primer with American Commentary

Dear Folks,

Here is a “tourist’s” primer in Balinese religion that Ed and Marie copied from a local English weekly newspaper and a few American thoughts (mostly mine) thereunto.

Peace,  
Robin

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## **HINDU DHARMA: An Introduction to Balinese Belief and Worship**

Hindu Dharma, the religious belief system of Bali, governs all activities of the daily life of the Balinese. The three basic fundamentals of the Hindu Dharma are Yadnya (ceremony), Tatwa (philosophy), and Susila (moral behavior). These interact to form Balinese culture.

### **Yadnya: Ceremony**

The simplest ceremony, and most often performed, is the Messaiban, the daily presentation of the offerings. Every day in every family, small offerings are prepared from a piece of banana leaf with some rice and other foods. These are placed at every building and shrine in the compound and at places to be blessed. This is the Yadnya for the protection of everyday life. Other ceremonies are performed every five days (Kliwon), every 15 days (Kajeng Kliwon), every 210 days (Piodalan), and every five or ten years. The largest ceremony of all, the complete cleansing of the island – Eka Dasa Rudra – is performed every

100 years and only at Besakih Temple. The last one was held in 1979.

There are five types of ceremonies in Bali, the Panca Yadnya listed below. Panca means “five” and Yadnya means “holy sacrifice with a pure heart.”

1. **Dewa Yadnya:** to the Gods and Goddesses as manifestations of the Supreme Being.
2. **Pitra Yadnya:** to the ancestors who give the people guidance in life and gave them the opportunity to be born.
3. **Manusa Yadnya:** to protect our lives and those of future generations.
4. **Rsi Yadnya:** to the priests who guide us all on our spiritual journey.
5. **Bhuta Yadnya:** to any other beings (visible and invisible) to ensure that there will be harmony and unity in nature.

### **Panca Srada: Five Beliefs**

The Yadnya are performed as part of a system of belief called Panca Srada. Panca means “five” and Srada means “faith” or “belief.” The five fundamental beliefs of Balinese Hindus are:

1. Belief in the Supreme Being
2. Belief in the Atman (soul)
3. Belief in the judgment of Karma Pala, the law of cause and effect
4. Belief in Samsara (reincarnation)
5. Belief in Moksa (unity with God).

### **Khayangan: Sacred Places**

The Khayangan are places where sacred artifacts are kept and are considered holy ground, for the performance of prayers and religious ceremonies. The type and name, as well as the anniversary of each Khayangan, depends on its function as well as the history and legends associated with it. Khayangan include

house temples, family temples, merchants' temples, rice field temples, and the three main temples of every desa adat or Balinese town. Every Khayangan is a holy place and it is expected that anyone who enters there should respect and preserve its holiness.

### **Susila: Moral Behavior**

First and foremost, the ceremonies which take place in any village in Bali are for the well being of the people of the community. Each village has its own customs (adat) and regulations which have been passed down from the ancestors and which are determined by Desa (place), Kala (time), and Patra (situation/context).

As a visitor, if you wish to witness or take part in a ceremony, it is important to feel as one with the people of the community and be prepared to cooperate. Some points of conduct should be noted before entering a Pura or Khayangan where a ceremony is taking place. You will usually be welcome if you observe these guidelines. Without observing them, the Balinese believe that your conduct could be harmful to both yourself and the community.

It is essential to remember that a ceremony is an important event in the life of the community, not merely a spectacle laid on for the benefit of visitors. Accordingly, visitors should stay in the background and respect the following rules.

- Don't push people.
- Don't stand in the paths or entrances.
- Don't talk too loudly.
- Don't sit on any part of the buildings of the inner temple.
- Don't wander about when the community is praying, especially not in front of someone praying.

- Don't stand above the holy objects, priests, or anyone else, for that matter.
- Don't use flash when taking pictures.
- You may not enter a Khayangan if you have wounds or are bleeding; have recently lost a relative; or have a child less than four days old.

## **A Guide to Prayer**

These are the eight steps to Balinese prayer with flowers. Sometimes additional prayers are added in the middle of the prayer cycle for important ceremonies.

1. Asana and Pranayama. Light incense and sit quietly to calm yourself, men crosslegged, women kneeling, breathing slowly in a state of harmony. This is preparation for prayer.
2. Karoshadana. One 'washes' one's face and hands in the smoke of the incense.
3. Atmatatwa. Pray with empty hands to connect to one's own soul.
4. Sryanamastuti. Hold a single flower in the fingertips to pray to the Supreme God who is manifest in the sun.
5. Brahma, Wisnu, Iswara – Tri Murti. Now hold a mixture of different coloured flowers in the fingertips, in prayer to the Trinity God manifestation; Creator, Preserver and Destroyer.
6. Samidaya. Holding three or more flowers, this prayer symbolizes worship of the Supreme God (Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa) and all His other manifestations which people visualize in many forms throughout the world.
7. Shanti. Praying again with empty hands, beseeching peace in ourselves, peace between us, and peace throughout the world. Finish smiling in mindfulness.
8. Nunas Tirta. Wait quietly until the Pemangku (priest\*) comes around to you. First raise your hands slightly in a

receptive position while he sprinkles Tirta (holy water) over you. Then raise your right hand, supported by the left, and receive Tirta three times to drink, and three times to spread over your hair and face. Then raise your hands slightly again to receive another sprinkling of Tirta. Finally, raise the right hand supported by the left, to receive a few grains of rice. Place some on your forehead, on each of your temples and just below the throat, eat a few and sprinkle some on your head.

Now that you have some background about Balinese religious practices, you can participate in ceremonies and enjoy a meaningful interaction with the community. To learn more, feel free to ask the Balinese volunteers present at temple ceremonies.

From our guide book: "Pemangku, always dressed in white, can come from any caste other than Brahman. They consecrate offerings, make holy water, and preside over temple ceremonies. The most important Pemangku are those attached to the village temples, but there are also Pemangku for irrigation temples, family temples, and others, sometimes up to a dozen or more in a village."

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After it was decided that I would write some "theological thoughts" about this tourist guide to Balinese Religion and after I read it without a clue as to what to say, I decided to ask a couple of people in my life to read it and give me their first reactions. One said, "I know this isn't Christian or even PC, but the first thing that springs to mind is that old Pharaaic prayer, "Thank God I'm not like 'them'." The second said, "What a pain in the a- to have to go through all of that to order their lives."

That got me thinking. What do we use to order our lives? I suppose I could spin out a jeremiad about REAL American sacred space. Let's see – I'd say our national Khayangan is Wall Street, banks are our city Khayangan, ATMs are our neighborhood sacred spaces. No doubt Alan Greenspan could be called our high Pemangku and all those "Y2K compliant" stickers on everything now are the result of our Eka Dasa Rudra, the complete cleansing of the island ceremony which happens every hundred years.

Then I could quote Amos: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

That still leaves American Christians wondering how to order our lives today. Lots of us have decided to turn back to the "good old days" when Christendom reigned. Being a clergywoman tends to keep one faced into the future because a return to the "good old days" would mean the immediate demise of my ministry and even further back, the demise of my personhood. Not really an option as far as I'm concerned.

It seems to me that the Good News of Jesus Christ in the midst of our disorder is that we are strengthened to faith and witness even when the order is not clear, just as Balinese Christians are strengthened to faith and witness in the midst of such well defined, but decidedly unChristian order. That is part of the wonder of being Christian – that Christ is not bound to any one culture and we are not bound to any one way of ordering our lives. The Good News is as much Good and News in a culture as remote and exotic as St. Louis, MO as it is in Bali.