

Agni's Flight and Return

Presented to the ADF Summerlands Festival, Camp Clifton, Ohio, August 2016.

by Nathan Large



Agni has been born many times, of many mothers and fathers. He is born out of the heavens, in the solar fire. He is born of the celestial waters and brought forth in the winds, the rains, and the lightning. He is born of two mothers, the drill and board, with ten maids attending the birth. He is born, and dies, and is reborn again.

Agni was a handsome young priest, a hotar, newly ordained as minister of all sacrifice. He was to succeed his elder brothers, each of whom served before as hotar, each of whom died in that service.

The gods waited eagerly for the bounty of offerings their priest would bring, offerings from Manu, first human, representative of all humankind. But the offerings never came. The sacrifices were not made. Agni, promising young priest, had disappeared.

Like us, without Agni, the gods cannot eat and grow weak. Hungry, angry, and afraid, the gods rode forth, after learning of their priest's absence. Indra the Thundering King, Varuna the Lawgiver, and Yama the Judge rode at their head, best skilled to seek out the missing priest. They sought him out, but Agni was well hidden.

Knowing the fate of his brothers before, fearing his own inevitable death, Agni fled far and hid deep.

First he hid in the darkness of the skies, but Matarisvan the lightning sensed Agni and revealed him to Indra. Agni ran flashing to the earth.

Next, Agni hid under the soil, but the Angiras, bright-eyed seers, told the gods where he could be found. Agni fled again, but the places he had touched retained some of his brightness: gold and silver and shining gems.

Next, Agni hid in the plants of the earth, spreading himself across trees and reeds and lotus leaves. But the beasts of the earth spotted him and called out to the gods. Agni cursed the beasts, twisting their tongues so that they would never again speak clearly. He left the plants, but again, a part of him remained behind: in the wood that lights the sacrificial fire, in the reeds that sing, and in all fruits and grains that fuel life.

Forced to run again, Agni spent a time between the horns of a buffalo cow, but the seers and the beasts and the gods found him out.

Finally, he dove deep, entering again the womb of the waters, wrapping himself in a membrane, so that none could spy his presence... except for a fish, who saw Agni pass. The fish swam up to the gods, alerting them to Agni's presence. For this, Agni cursed the fish, declaring it food for all creatures.

Yet even though the gods knew Agni was within the waters, they still could not easily find him or draw him out. Yama, deep king of the underworld, extended his sight and finally detected Agni's great energy.

Then the gods sent Varuna, powerful persuader, to speak with Agni, pleading with him to return. Agni refused. He explained how his brothers died as hotar, while presenting the sacrifices. If he followed in their path, serving the gods, he too would die.

Varuna begged Agni again to return. Varuna reminded Agni that without the hotar, the gods would starve, and mankind would also suffer, unable to make offerings or receive the gods' blessings. Still, Agni refused, as he would not accept death.

Finally, Varuna negotiated a bargain between Agni and the gods. If Agni would return, he would be granted long life and immunity to any injury. When death came, he would be guaranteed rebirth.

Yet this promise was not enough for Agni. He pressed for more, knowing how much he was needed. Agni demanded the first part of every sacrifice and the best portions of every offering. This demand was granted.

He insisted that any offering spilled outside the sacrificial fire would belong to his brothers, who served and died before him. This, too, was granted.

Last, Agni insisted that the gods themselves train him in his duties as hotar, so that his observations would be flawless and his sacrifices perfect, so that no portion would be wasted or stolen away by unholy spirits: the raksha and other Asuras. In return, Agni agreed to forever aid the gods and to strike down their enemies.

To this, the gods agreed readily. Young Agni was thus made immortal, ever youthful and ever reborn. He was made the perfect priest, eternal courier of sacrifices to the gods and their blessings back to mankind. Agni returned to his place as hotar and resumed his duties gladly.

To Agni go the first part and the best part of every offering, as his due for his services.

Let us grant Agni his due. If the gods have agreed to such terms, we should observe the same.