

## **RISHI MARKANDEYA AND THE ISLAND OF BALI: A SPIRITUAL BRIDGE ACROSS THE SEAS**

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### **1. Abstract**

The remarkable association of Rishi Markandeya, a revered immortal sage in Indian tradition, with the island of Bali in Indonesia underscores the far-reaching influence of ancient Indian culture across Southeast Asia. Rooted in Usana Bali (traditional Balinese palm-leaf manuscripts) and Lontar texts, as also in Balinese oral traditions, the narrative of this article highlights Markandeya's pivotal role in introducing the philosophy of Agama Tirtha, the "Religion of Holy Water," and establishing the sacred Besakih Temple at Mount Agung. According to Balinese lore, Markandeya's initial expedition to Bali along with his followers failed due to a disease outbreak, most likely cholera, prompting his return to Java. Upon deep introspection and application of Atharva-vedic knowledge and Rasa Shastra principles, he developed a water purification strategy and returned to Bali. Using the therapeutic principles of the Panch Dhatus, five sacred metals, he sanctified the water sources on the island, by strategically burying these metals at specific points on Mount Agung, especially in the areas around Besakih temple.

This contribution of Rishi Markandeya to the unique Balinese hydrological and temple systems is maintained to this day. By integrating Vedic teachings with local animistic practices, Markandeya also laid the foundation for Balinese Hinduism, where water rituals such as melukat and sacred springs like Tirta Empul continue to play a central role. His legacy is embedded in Bali's cultural identity, temple architecture, and ritual practices, illustrating how spiritual and ecological wisdom can be intertwined to sustain communities. This article underscores the enduring relevance of Markandeya's contributions, not only in preserving Hindu traditions in Bali but also in demonstrating the role of traditional knowledge systems in environmental stewardship and health.

### **2. Introduction**

The spiritual heritage of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, is deeply interwoven with ancient Indian traditions. The Indian spiritual heritage is the product of the strenuous endeavours of several generations of seers, who were known as Rishies. Among the sages whose influence transcended geographical borders is Rishi Markandeya, a revered personality in Hinduism known for his devotion, ascetic power, and immortality granted by Lord Shiva [1,2]. His association with the island of Bali in Indonesia, a land that has preserved its Hindu traditions even amidst a predominantly Muslim nation, is a remarkable testament to the far-reaching influence of Vedic culture and the spiritual diaspora of India's ancient seers [3].



Figure 1. Lord Shiva repelling Yama, God of Death. Following Rishi Vashisht’s instructions, Markanda prayed to Lord Hari with scented flowers under the Bhadravat banyan tree by the Bhadra river, and when Yama came for him, Shiva intervened and granted him immortality.

The tradition of Agama Tirtha, introduced by Sage Markandey, continues to thrive in Bali, not only as a spiritual tradition but as a cultural identity [3,4]. Balinese ceremonies involving tirtha are still performed by temple priests and Brahmin priests, keeping alive the teachings that Rishi Markandeya is believed to have introduced. The reverence for water, purification, and nature reflects a deeply sustainable belief system, that is very relevant in modern days’ sustainable development goals [5]. There is present day relevance of the Agama tirtha importance given to pure water, since large water bodies and underground water reservoirs are becoming more and more polluted.

### 3. Rishi Markandeya: The Immortal (Chiranjeevi) Sage

Rishi Markandeya is considered to be one of the eight immortals (*chiranjeevis*) listed in the Puranas, the seven others being Hanuman, Ashwatthama, King Mahabali, Veda Vyasa, Vibhishana, Krupacharya, and Parashuram. Scriptures like the Markandeya Purana, Skanda Purana and Bhagavata Purana, describe him as a seer born to the sage Mrikandu and his wife Marudvati after intense penance [6,7]. Destined to live only 16 years, Markandeya’s unwavering devotion to Lord Shiva altered his fate—he conquered death and became an immortal yogi (Figure 1). Known for having witnessed the cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*) and for his hymns like the Devi Mahatmya (Durga Saptashati), Markandeya embodies the ideals of tapas (austerity), bhakti (devotion), and jnana (wisdom) [8,9]. He had deep knowledge of Ayurveda, alchemy (Rasa Shastra), yoga, and dharma.

### 4. Journey to Bali: The Spread of Sanatana Dharma

The connection between Rishi Markandeya and Bali is revealed by Balinese local legends that trace the island's sacred geography and cultural practices to his arrival and stay in the Island, working assiduously to create a sustainable ecology and economy (10). According to Balinese lore, Rishi Markandeya is credited with introducing Hindu rituals and establishing the foundations of Balinese Hinduism, which remains unique in its fusion of Sanatana philosophy, Hindu rituals, unique architecture and indigenous animistic practices.

Though modern history promotes the concept that Hinduism was introduced into Indonesia in the middle ages, the local legends state otherwise (11). Historians theorize that in the 10th or 11th century AD, as Indian traders and priests journeyed to Southeast Asia, travelling on land through Burma, Thailand and the Malay peninsula, and also by sea, the influence of Indian scriptures and rituals spread across the archipelago of Indonesia.

However, in Balinese belief, Rishi Markandeya's arrival predates this historical trade by thousands of years, in the Puranic era which is dated to the pre-Christ period. He is believed to have travelled by boat from Mount Raung in Java, to the Bali island, where he found the sacred Mount Agung. Feeling the divine vibrations at Agung, he decided to build the Besakih temple on this mountain (12).

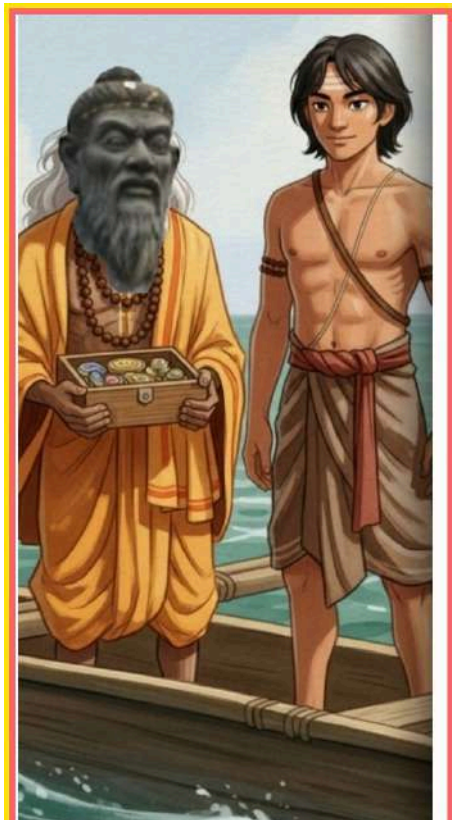


Figure 2. A thematic representation of the Sea Voyage of Rishi Markandeya along with his disciples, from Java to Bali island.

### **Failure of Rishi Markandey's initial attempt, and Key to His Final Triumph**

During the first voyage of exploration, which Markandey made along with his followers from Java to Bali, the group met with disaster. After a few days stay in the forests of Bali, the party lost several members to disease, probably cholera. In those days, cholera epidemics were common, and this water-borne disease was transmitted to the explorers through contaminated drinking water (13). Rishi Markandey realized this truism, since he belonged to the Atharva-veda school of learning (14). Due to this immense loss of personnel, Markandey had to return back to his hermitage near Mount Raung in Java (Figure 2).

After immense retrospection and discussions with other seers, Rishi Markandey hit upon a solution to overcome the scourge of the epidemic that they had faced in Bali. The Rishi used ancient health concepts to purify and fortify the drinking water sources in the island. The rishi also devised an intricate water management system, centred at Mount Agung, which would survive over the centuries, and provide potable and healthy drinking water down the ages. This was achieved by using the basic principles of *Rasa-shastra*, the science of metals and their various preparations (15). Central to this science, is the concept of the Five Sacred Metals (Panca Dhatus), which the rishi brought with him, and buried them in a specific pattern at Mount Agung (see section 5b).



Rishi Markandey carried the Five Sacred Metals from Java to Bali by boat

The five sacred metals are gold, silver, copper, iron, and lead, and local tradition maintains that the rishi buried these at the site of the Besakih temple, located on the slopes of Mount Agung, Bali's highest and holiest mountain ( Figure 3). This act symbolically energized the land and impregnated the water sources with essential trace elements to make it health promoting and potable, as concisely described below (16).

**5. PANCH DHATUS: THE FIVE SACRED METALS IN AYURVEDA AND INDIAN TRADITION**

In the rich tapestry of Indian tradition, the term *Panch Dhatu* (पंचधातु) refers to a combination of five metals, considered sacred and spiritually potent. These five metals are **Gold (Suvarna)**, **Silver (Rajata)**, **Copper (Tamra)**, **Iron (Loha / Ayas)** and **Zinc (Yashada)**. The last one, Zinc, may sometimes be replaced with **Lead (Naga)** or **Tin (Vanga)**. The concept of an amalgamation of five metals is deeply rooted in **Ayurveda, Rasa Shastra, temple architecture, and Indian metallurgy** (17). These metals are widely used in making **idols, Ayurvedic preparations, temple utensils, and ritual objects** (18). In

Ayurveda and **Rasa Shastra** (alchemy and iatrochemistry), they are also believed to possess **therapeutic properties**, influencing the balance of doshas and strengthening the body's internal energies (19).

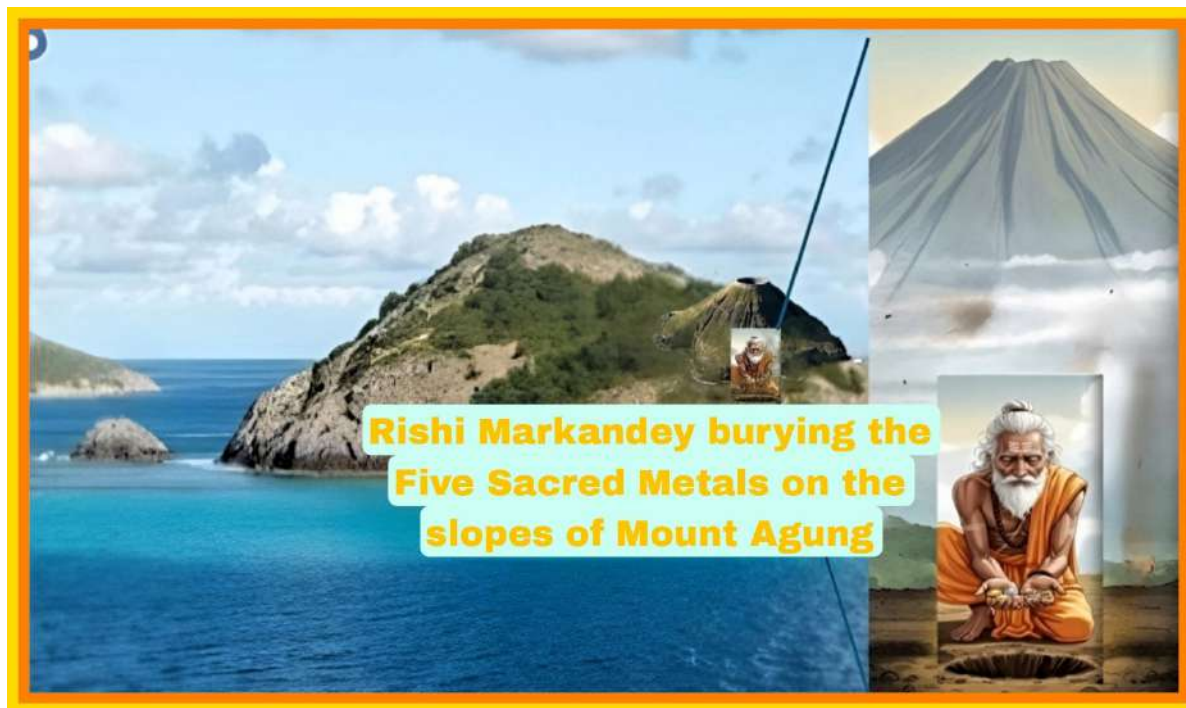


Figure 3. After exploring the island, Rishi Markandey experienced a special energy field at Mount Agung. He decided to set up the Besakih temple here, and buried the five sacred metals in a particular fashion on the slopes and water sources located on this mountain.

### 5a. Uses and Significance of Panch-dhatu in Balinese tradition

#### In Idol Making and Rituals

In Hindu temple traditions, idols of deities are often cast in **Panchaloha** (a variation of Panch Dhatu), which is an alloy of gold, silver, copper, iron and lead (18). This blend is believed to imbue the idol with vital force, vibrational vitality and cosmic resonance, especially when consecrated through **Prana Pratishtha**. Panchaloha idols are also considered **durable** and resistant to corrosion, symbolizing **immortality and spiritual integrity**.

#### Spiritual and Symbolic Importance

Each metal resonates to **planetary energies, as shown below :**

Gold → Sun ; Silver → Moon; Copper → Venus; Iron → Mars; Lead → Saturn.

They also symbolize the **Pancha Mahabhutas** (Five Creative Entities), out of which springs all creation (17).

The alignment with the elements is as below:

Earth (Prithvi) → Iron ; Water (Apas) → Silver ; Fire (Agni) → Gold; Air (Vayu) → Copper ; Ether (Akasha) → Lead/Zinc

This **parallelism** between the five sacred metallic elements, the planets, and the five creative principles (**Pancha Mahabhutas**), thus connects and aligns the three entities (19). The Panch Dhatu may also be perceived as conduits between the **gross and the subtle realms**, suggesting that they help bridge the physical world with the spiritual realms.

### 5b. Definitive Tirta Sources on Mount Agung and The Sacred Hydrology of Pura Besakih

In Balinese tradition, the word **tirta** stands for water, and water holds great significance in Balinese temple and family rituals. The rituals conducted at Besakih temple must therefore, use the most pure and sacred water, as described below. Pura Besakih, the site of the Besakih Temple, is strategically positioned on the southwestern slopes of Mount Agung, at an altitude of approximately 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) above sea level (20). The volcano functions as a massive **natural impluvium**, effectively capturing rain on its southern slopes. Over years, this rainwater slowly filters through protective layers of volcanic rocks and sands, naturally enriching the water with essential minerals. This process ensures the water drawn from this altitude is chemically and spiritually pure.

The definitive spring source for Pura Besakih's high-level rituals is located at Pura Batu Tirtha (21). This specific site is explicitly recognized as the source that supplies holy water Pura Besakih. It is also the source of water for *karya agung*—the rituals in grand, multi-village ceremonies. This establishes the unique, unparalleled position of Pura Batu Tirtha within the ritual hierarchy of Bali. This Tirtha is geographically situated high on the volcano slope, to the East of Pura Pangubengan, which is part of the intricate flow management system that delivers holy water toward Pura Batu Tirtha. Pura Pangubengan itself is a crucial upstream temple, located closest to Mount Agung's peak and roughly a 30-minute walk uphill from the main Pura Penataran Agung complex (22). This deliberate water flow management from Pura Pangubengan to Pura Batu Tirtha, through conduits kept highly secret and away from the public eye was, in all probability, designed by Rishi Markandey. There is immense possibility of the calcined **sacred metals** (called *bhasmas* in Sanskrit) being **buried along these conduits**, so that when water flows in these channels, traces of the metal salts get dissolved in the water, providing antiseptic effect, and health promoting trace elements (23). This possibility is strengthened by the local belief that the ritualized control ensures that the water undergoes implicit sanctification or ritual filtration before it is officially collected at Pura Batu Tirtha for the Mother Temple's highest rites.

### 5c. Health Benefits of the Five Sacred Metals (*Panch-dhatu*)

In Ayurveda and Rasa Shastra, each metal in the Panch Dhatu system is believed to have unique **therapeutic effects** when properly processed. Usually, the metals are incinerated using a long heating and purification (*shodhana*) process extending to weeks or even months, to create an ash-like substance called a *bhasma*. These processes also employ vegetable matter, which make the metal calx (*bhasma*) **biocompatible and safe** for ingestion. The benefits of the calx created from the five sacred metals are as follows.

**Gold** *bhasma* enhances vitality, immunity (*ojas*), intellect (*medha*), and longevity; often used as *Swarna Prashana* ( a mixture of gold ash, ghee and honey) for enhancing the immunity and memory of infants and children. **Silver** is cooling and anti-inflammatory, and is used for calming the mind, and in treating fever and skin diseases. **Copper** (*Tamra Bhasma*) supports digestion, liver health, and detoxification. **Iron** as *Lauh Bhasma* is widely used for treating anemia, weakness, and menstrual disorders. **Zinc** boosts immunity and skin health, and is used as *Yashada Bhasma*. **Tin** (*Vanga*) or **Lead** (**Naga**) are used in genitourinary and metabolic disorders with great care, following detoxification (*Shodhana*) (24,25,26).

To sum up, the concept of Panch Dhatus—the five sacred metals—reflects the deep integration of material science, holistic health, and spirituality in Indian tradition. Whether transformed into *bhasmas* in Ayurvedic therapeutics, cast into Panchaloha idols, or used in sacred rituals, these metals have long been revered as

guardians of health, heritage, and higher consciousness. Today, modern science is gradually unveiling the physiological importance of trace elements such as zinc, gold, and copper—affirming the timeless insights of Ayurveda and Rasa Shastra.

## 6. Symbolic and Cultural Legacy of Rishi Markandey

### 6a. Founding of Besakih Temple complex

One of the most significant contributions attributed to Rishi Markandeya is the founding of the Besakih Temple, the temple named after the great serpent known as Vasuki. The Besakih temple is situated on the slopes of Mount Agung, which symbolizes Mount Meru. In fact, the multi-roofed pagoda style temples seen everywhere in Bali, symbolize the divine Mount Meru, and are known as Meru towers (27). The layered structure of the roof symbolizes the cosmic layers of the universe, with the highest point, known as the *Wuwungan*, representing the summit of the divine



Figure 4. The ocean's churning yielded nectar, poison, priceless gems, and great beings like Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Dhanwantari, the God of Medicine, who taught core healing principles, including the importance of the Five Sacred Metals.

world. The number of roofs is always an odd number, such as 5,7,9 etc. Mount Meru holds an important

position in Indian belief systems, since the churning of the Ocean of milk (*Samudra manthan*) was carried out by using Mount Meru as the churner, and Vasuki as the rope ( Figure 4). The Samudra manthan, held in very ancient era, holds very great significance, and can be considered the most important event in universal history (28). Vasuki and Meru, thus hold central position in Indian cosmology.



The multi layered roof of Meru towers signify the cosmic Mount Meru

The temple complex of Besakih, central to Balinese Hinduism, is believed to have been established as part of Markandeya's divine mission to sanctify the island. The sage also initiated the Agama Tirtha—the religion of the holy water—fusing Vedic principles with local customs centred on the worship of nature and ancestral spirits (29). Rituals such as *melukat* (spiritual purification with water) and reverence for natural elements like mountains, rivers, and trees align with the Shaivite traditions and the broader tenets of Sanatana Dharma that Markandeya is said to have propagated (30). The Mother Temple of Besakih, established by Markandeya, is central to the tirtha rituals. Water from springs near the temple is distributed to other temples for rituals.

#### 6b. Agama Tirtha: The Religion of Holy Water in Bali

Water, known as *Jal* in Sanskrit, hold an important place in all Hindu *poojas* ( religious rituals). A pot of water, representing the ocean, is almost always placed first thing during initiating the ritual. A coconut is then usually placed on the pot, so as to cover the opening of the pot. This water is supposed to become energized by the sacred verses chanted during the pooja, and is usually sprinkled over the gathering at the end of the pooja. It may be stated with some amount of certainty that water forms

an essential component of any Hindu ritual.

In Bali, the significance of water in religious rituals and in daily life, is taken to an even higher level. Holy water is known as Tirtha in Bali, and Agama Tirtha (from Agama = religion, Tirtha = holy water in Sanskrit) is a distinctive form of Balinese Hinduism that emphasizes the sanctity, ritual use, and symbolic importance of water as a divine purifier (31). Agama tirtha is both a theological system and a ritual tradition deeply rooted in the Vedic concept of water (Apas) as sacred and life-giving (29). The Balinese people believe that this spiritual system was introduced by Rishi Markandeya, who journeyed firstly from the Indian mainland to Java, and then from Mount Raung in East Java to Bali Island in ancient times to spread the sanatana dharma and perform sacred rites. This eventful journey marked the mythical and spiritual beginning of organized Hindu worship in Bali.

### 7. Doctrinal and Ritual Basis of Agama Tirtha

#### 7a. Tirtha as a Medium of Purification

As already given above, Tirtha refers to holy water sanctified by mantras and ritual, which is used in nearly every Balinese Hindu ceremony. Important among these ceremonies are life-cycle rituals, temple ceremonies,

exorcisms, and ancestral rites. Life-cycle rituals, called *manusa yadnya*, include *Magedong-gedongan* (a 7th-month pregnancy ceremony), *Telubulan* (a 3-month post-birth ceremony), *Mepandes* (tooth filing at adolescence), and *Ngaben* (cremation), and are performed for every born Hindu.

### **7b. The ritual of melukat**

Melukat is a sacred Balinese Hindu ritual of spiritual purification using tirtha (water), believed to cleanse the body, mind, and soul of negative energies, past karmic influences, and emotional burdens (32). Rooted in ancient Vedic traditions and practiced at holy springs, temples, or natural water sources across Bali, melukat symbolizes the washing away of spiritual impurities and a renewal of inner harmony. The ritual often involves prayers, mantras, offerings, and the ceremonial pouring of blessed water (tirta) by a priest or spiritual guide. More than a physical act, melukat is a deeply personal and transformative process aimed at restoring balance, fostering emotional clarity, and reconnecting with the divine. It reflects the Balinese philosophy of Tri Hita Karana—the harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

### **7c. Water Temples and Springs**

Sacred springs, such as Tirta Empul, Tirta Gangga, are considered gateways between the physical and spiritual worlds. In India, the homeland of Sanatana dharma, the most sacred river is the Ganga, and its waters are considered purifying and health-giving. A dip in the flowing waters of the Ganga river is considered purificatory, and transcendental, just as in Tirta Empul. Tirtha in India denotes an ancient, sacred place having spiritual significance. Almost all tirthas in India have an associated water body or spring. Hence, there is great congruence between the sacred nature of water and water sources, as perceived in India and in Bali. In Bali, temples like the ones at Tirta Empul and the Pura Ulun Danu Beratan on Lake Beratan are dedicated to water deities (especially Dewi Danu, the water goddess). Holy water is drawn from mountain springs, especially especially those present on Mount Agung, and also from rivers, and lakes. The waters of Pura Batu Tirtha, situated at a higher altitude from Besakih temple, on the slopes of Mount Agung, are considered especially sacred.

### **7d. Theological Roots in the Vedas**

In the Rigveda, Hymn 10.9, called *Apah Suktam*, water is described as a source of purification and a vehicle for divine presence (33). These concepts were absorbed and ritualized in Agama Tirtha. The Taittiriya Samhita and Yajurveda associate water (Apas) with healing, fertility, and the sustenance of Dharma. Markandeya's teachings in Bali are in line with this philosophy, adapted to Balinese cosmology and agricultural life, particularly the rice cultivation cycle.

### **7e. Historical and Cultural Legacy**

Rishi Markandey is believed to have performed the first yajna on Mount Agung, spreading Agama Tirtha and planting the seeds of temple-based worship in Bali. The immortal sage introduced Shaivite and Vaishnavite concepts, and merged these with local animist traditions. The Subak water-temple system, protected by UNESCO, was also, in all probability, introduced by Markandey, and reflects how religion, irrigation, and ecology are intertwined in Agama Tirtha (34).

## **8. Conclusion**

The story of Rishi Markandeya's association with Bali Island highlights the transoceanic spread of Indian culture and the adaptability of spiritual traditions across landscapes. His presence in Balinese belief exemplifies how myth and faith can forge timeless connections between peoples and places. Whether historical

or legendary, the tale of the sage who brought sanctity to the island of Bali continues to inspire devotion and cultural pride, echoing the enduring power of India's ancient rishis to shape civilizations beyond their shores. The enduring legacy of Rishi Markandeya in Bali serves not only as a cultural bridge between India and Indonesia but also as a symbol of spiritual continuity. The Rishi is revered not just as a transmitter of religion but as the spiritual architect of Balinese identity. Annual ceremonies and pilgrimages to Besakih Temple reflect the living memory of the sage, and many Balinese Hindus still perform rituals invoking his blessings for purification, prosperity, and protection.

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