

# Worshipping God through Images A Hindu Perspective

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## An Event that Influenced the Modern Times

Let us first refer to a historical event of 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), the celebrated Brahmo leader who succeeded Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was an accomplished scholar and charming orator. He had absorbed many ideas from the Western philosophy. He was also a great master of English, and his eloquence equalled that of Gladstone, one of the famous prime ministers of England.

Keshab Sen came into contact with Sri Ramakrishna, and over a period of time began to love and respect Sri Ramakrishna. But the two men were quite different. While Keshab Sen was the master of the English language and philosophy, and knew about Jesus Christ and many of the Hindu saints, Sri Ramakrishna scarcely had any formal education, even in his native Bengali. While Keshab Sen preached *one formless*, God, Sri Ramakrishna though believing in one God, always proclaimed that one God could have many names—Shiva or Vishnu, Jehovah or Allah. He also asserted that God could be formless and also with form. Keshab Sen considered the belief of many Hindus in the God with form as idolatry, and one of the objectives of his reform movement was to cleanse Hinduism of this ‘abomination’.

However, Keshab Sen had to learn a lesson of his lifetime from Sri Ramakrishna about what real idolatry is. He had, along with many ‘progressive thinkers of the day’ come to believe that God is formless and that it is a great sin to believe that God can be present in an image, and to pray and worship Him in that form. But then they heard the Master’s remarks on image worship: ‘As formless water freezes and becomes ice, so the formless Satchidananda is frozen, as it were, by devotion and given form.’ Or, ‘As an imitation custard apple reminds one of the real fruit, so one can experience the true nature of God by worshipping an image that represents Him.’<sup>1</sup>

In other words, an image of Shiva or Vishnu reminds the devotee of Shiva or Vishnu and to concentrate on his Ideal and realize Him. So, one is worshipping Shiva or Vishnu *through* their images, not the images in themselves. This approach had a far-reaching influence.

Keshab Sen often spoke of glories and powers of God, being merciful, kind, forgiving, and so forth, in his sermons, which the Master believed made Him distant from His children that we are. What Sri Ramakrishna meant was that when some value like worshipping images, endlessly praising of God, or what Karen Armstrong has said in her *A History of God*, a

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Western value of individualism becomes an end in itself, it is idolatry.<sup>2</sup>

### Worshipping Images: A Spiritual Aid

Swami Vivekananda too argued that if an image is worshipped as such, and not as a 'help to the vision' of God, it is idolatry. So the point that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda emphasize was that the main objective of a man of religion is to realize God and to have his vision. If a stone image is *helpful* as a *means* in doing so, or the image provides a *suggestion* of the Ultimate Reality that it represents, and turns our minds to its realization, it is a perfectly valid form of worship.

In the recent times, Harvard University professor Diana Eck, too, concurs with the above viewpoint about what is idolatry and what is not. She says,

The king, the lord, the shepherd, the father, the God with a mighty arm stretched through history are images, too. Even so, many of us .

. . . think that those who address God through material images are idolaters, while those whose images are shaped by words are not. There is idolatry on both sides, but it has to do with the shortsightedness of those whose vision stops at the image. The image is a window, not an object. The eighteen-foot image of Vishnu is no more an idol than the cross, the 'Our Father,' or the bread at Holy Communion. . . Idolatry is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>3</sup>

The cross, indeed, is the greatest symbol of Christianity. It signifies not only the death of Christ but also the redemption of man. For, here the blood of Christ cleanses man of the original sin. Islam, which is the most vehement opponent of images, and yet Muslims use the graves of their saints and martyrs almost in place of images. In fact, since such worship in both Christianity and Islam is for the objects in themselves and not as a means of having the vision of God, such worship *is* real idolatry.<sup>4</sup>

Mind you, the images of God that Hindus use are *symbols* by which they express the invisible by visible or sensuous representations. All our contact with the world outside is through symbols. Our language is nothing but symbols. Our art, our poetry, in fact every aspect of our life is based on symbols. According to Vishishtadvaita or qualified non-dualism, the whole universe is but one vast symbol of Brahman (or God). The Advaitin asks: 'is not everything Brahman when the name and the form have been removed from it?'

In other words, worshipping God through images or *Pratikas*, taken as substitutes for God—not God itself—is quite an accepted means for realizing God. The important thing, as Sri Ramakrishna said, is sincerity and yearning as a kitten has for the mother cat. In fact, having been appointed as a priest of the Kali Temple, Sri Ramakrishna wanted





to know if the Divine Mother was real, and not just an image carved by an artist. He would often become restless and yearned to see the Mother behind the image of Kali. At last the Mother heard his prayer; so

Sri Ramakrishna had one of his great visions of the Divine Mother Kali. Later, he himself described his first vision of the Mother:

I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered with a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize Her [Divine Mother Kali] in this life. I could not bear the separation from Her any longer. Life seemed to be not worth living. Suddenly my glance fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. I determined to put an end to my life. When I jumped up like a madman and seized it, suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself. The building with

its different parts, the temple, and everything else vanished from my sight, leaving no trace whatsoever, and in their stead I saw a limitless, infinite, effulgent Ocean of Consciousness. As far as the eye could see, the shining billows were madly rushing at me from all sides with a terrific noise, to swallow me up! I was panting for breath. I was caught in the rush and collapsed, unconscious. What was happening in the outside world I did not know; but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss, altogether new, and I felt the presence of the divine Mother.

It is not clear from Sri Ramakrishna's account that he actually saw the form of Mother Kali in the midst of this vision of shining consciousness. But it would seem that he did; because the first words that he uttered on coming to himself were 'Mother, Mother!'<sup>5</sup>

This experience of Sri Ramakrishna is a vindication of many spiritually realized persons who have realized God by meditating on their Ideal through Its image. The thing to remember is that so long as we use the image of any Deity to realize the invisible God, it is not idolatry. How else can we concentrate on something, which is beyond thought or form? The visible image helps us focus on the Invisible Reality.

(To be continued . . .)

#### References

- 1 Swami Chetanananda (tr.), *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* (St. Louis, MO: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 724; originally written in Bengali by Swami Saradananda, as *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*.
- 2 Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 93.
- 3 Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God—A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 78.
- 4 *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991), v.3, 61-62.
- 5 *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, op.cit. 212.

In a potter's shop there are vessels of different shapes and forms—pots, jars, dishes, plates, etc—but all are made of the same clay. So also God is one, but He is worshipped in different ages and places under different names and aspects. —Sri Ramakrishna