

Worshipping God through Images A Hindu Perspective

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(Continued from the previous issue. . .)

An Inspiring Incident

Let us illustrate the idea that visible images help to focus on the Indivisible Reality by an encounter that Swami Vivekananda had with Maharaja Mangal Singh of Alwar, now a part of Rajasthan, in February 1891; Swami Vivekananda was then a wandering monk and happened to pass through that state.

The Maharaja opened the conversation and one of his remarks was, 'Well, Swamiji Maharaj, I have no faith in idol-worship. What is going to be my fate?'

The Maharaja smiled as he spoke, apparently on his own sarcastic remark. 'Surely you are joking', said the Swami. 'No, Swamiji, not at all. You see I really cannot worship wood, earth, stone or metal, like other people. Does this mean that I shall fare worse in the life hereafter?'

'Well, I suppose every man should follow the religious ideal according to his own faith,' the Swami responded. But Swamiji had not yet finished; his eyes lighted on a picture of the Maharaja, which was hanging on the wall. At his desire, the picture was passed to him.

Holding it in his hand he asked, 'Whose picture is this?' The Maharaja's minister answered that the picture was of the Maharaja. The Swami commanded, 'Spit on it.' He repeated his command, 'Any one of you may

spit on it. What is it but a piece of paper? What objection can you have against doing so?'

The Maharaja seemed shaken up, and all those present were thunderstruck and feared that some thing terrible was about to happen for such an insolent remark by the Swami. But the Swami persisted in his demand, 'The Maharaja is not bodily present in this photograph. This is only a piece of paper. It doesn't contain his bones, flesh or blood. And still if you refuse to spit on this picture, it is because it is the shadow of the Maharaja; indeed by spitting on this photo, you feel that you will be insulting the Maharaja himself.'

Then turning to the Maharaja, the Swami continued, 'You see, Your Highness, though this picture is not you in one sense, in another sense, it is you. That is why your servants were so reluctant to spit on it. It is a shadow of you; it brings *you* into their minds. In the same way with the devotees who worship stone images of gods and goddesses, which bring to their minds the thought of their Ishta, or some special form and attributes of the Divinity, and help them to concentrate. I have travelled in many places, but nowhere have I found a single Hindu worshipping an image, saying, "O Stone, I worship Thee." "O Metal, be merciful to me." Everyone, Maharaja, is worshipping the same one God who is the

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Supreme Spirit, the Soul of Pure Knowledge. And God appears to all according to their understanding and their representation of Him.'

Maharaja Mangal Singh felt greatly embarrassed and with folded hands asked the Swami's forgiveness and said, 'Swamiji, you have opened my eyes. I had never met anyone who explained to me the meaning of worshipping God through an image the way you have told me today. But what will be my fate? Have mercy on me.'

The Swami assured the Maharaja that God alone could be merciful. 'Pray to God; He will show His mercy to you.'⁶

After returning from his very successful tour of America and Europe between early 1893 and the end of 1896, Swami Vivekananda embarked on a tour of India. In early 1897 Swamiji delivered a lecture at the Victoria Hall in Madras (Chennai). There he dwelt, among others, on the subject of idolatry. For, in his time and as it is also now, it had become fashionable and a sign of being an intellectual to say that idolatry was wrong without understanding what it really means. Swamiji said that Sri Ramakrishna realized everything through idols, and said,

If such Ramakrishna Paramhansas are produced by idol-worship, what will you have—the reformer's creed or any number of idols?⁷

Other Aspects of Image Worship

As a point of fact, installation of images in temples follows an elaborate procedure of preliminary rituals. The priests sing Vedic chants and say prayers to invoke and sanctify, and thereby enliven the presence of the Divine in the image (*prana-pratishtha*) for



An artist's representation of the incident
(Photo courtesy Ramakrishna Math, Pune)

worship. Once again, worship is offered to the consecrated *Deity* in the image and not to the image as such. Just as a picture of our father reminds us of our father and not of the paper on which the picture appears, so also the image of Shiva reminds us of Shiva Himself.

In ordinary life when we salute the national flag, we are not doing it for the piece of cloth with some markings, but for the honour of the country or nation that it represents. Similarly, images of the Deity, though humanly conceived, represent the invisible divinity that receives our worship.

The worship of God through an image, however, is not a compulsory practice for every Hindu. But it has certain advantages. In the first place, as we mentioned before, an image helps the worshipper concentrate on the Deity within oneself, of which the image outside is just a representation. In the second place, worship through images indirectly allows a devotee offer services—plucking flowers, making sandal paste, polishing the utensils of worship, arranging offering, etc.—to the Deities incidental to their worship,

thereby keeping the body, senses, and mind engaged in the thought of the Deity.

Finally, and quite importantly according to Diana Eck, images of the Deities, artistically sculptured as they are, serve both theological and narrative functions. In a country like India, where a large percentage of population is still without formal education, images are visual 'theologies', and they continue to be 'read' that way by the Hindus.⁸

Eck illustrates her point with reference to the icon of the four-armed Shiva or Nataraja, dancing in a ring of fire, which displays the many aspects of this god in one visual symbol. The flaming circle in which he dances is the circle of creation and destruction called *samsara* (the earthly round of birth and death) or *maya* (the illusory world). The Lord who dances in the circle of this changing world holds in two of his hands the drum of creation and the fire of destruction. He displays his strength by crushing a demon under his foot. Simultaneously, he shows his mercy by raising his palm to the worshiper in the 'fear-not' gesture and with another hand, by pointing to his upraised foot, where the worshiper may take refuge. It is a wild dance, for the coils of his hair are flying in all directions, and yet the face of the Lord seems very peaceful and serene, while his limbs are in complete balance. Around one of his arms the Lord has put the ancient serpent as an ornament that he has incorporated as his power. In his hair sits the Holy River Ganga (Ganges), who landed

first on Shiva's matted locks when she first descended from heaven to earth.⁹

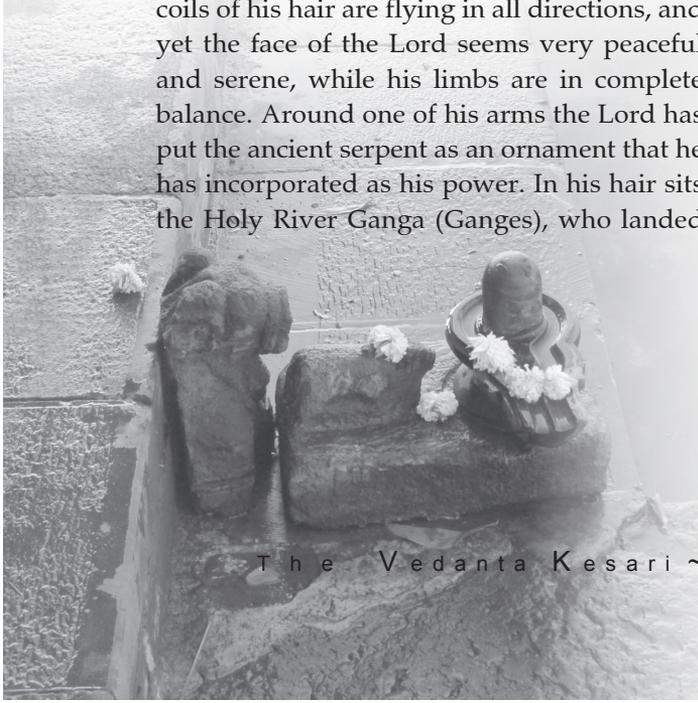
More over, says Eck, not only are images visual theologies, they are also visual scriptures. Many myths of the tradition are narrated in living stone. On the railing around the Buddhist stupa at Bharhut, India, one can see some of the earliest sculptural reliefs with carved medallions that tell Jataka tales. Similarly, many Hindu temples in India display bas-relief portrayals of myths and legends. One such relief of the late Gupta period depicts the story of the descent of the River Ganga. It shows Shiva standing, flanked by his consort Parvati and Bhagiratha, a great Yogi, who had performed austerities for thousands of years in order to bring the Ganga to earth. Bhagiratha, all skin and bones, is shown in an ascetic posture, holding his arms up in the air, while the Triple-Pathed Ganga—flowing in heaven, on the earth, and in the netherworlds—hovers over Shiva's head.¹⁰

Or Swami Vivekananda said in his famous Paper on Hinduism presented in Chicago, 1893:

The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols—so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for every one, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong. Nor is it compulsory in Hinduism.¹¹

While we hope to have brought home the point that image worship is not idolatrous, it should be borne in mind that this type of worship is only the preparatory form (*gauni*) of bhakti or devotion.

Religious quarrels that we often encounter are over such rituals, dos and don'ts of religions. Only when through such preparatory form, worship ripens into what is



called *para* bhakti or supreme devotion that the objective of the worship, which is experiencing the direct vision of God within oneself, is achieved. That becomes possible when our hearts get purified through preparatory worship and we develop intense yearning for the vision (*darshan*) of God as a child that yearns for his or her mother. Keeping the company of holy people, attending spiritual retreats from time to time, cultivating dispassion and discrimination, and having constant awareness of what one thinks, speaks and does, helps this kind of attitude.

Conclusion

Since the worship through images and performing many rituals enjoined by our scriptures are only the means for having darshan or view of God, and if and when through intense yearning the objective has been achieved, does a devotee continue to worship through images? Sri Ramakrishna, as was mentioned before, himself became quite casual about visiting the Kali temple, or performing other rituals. He used to illustrate it through many similes. One such simile was about using one thorn to remove another thorn from the body, and when the task has been

accomplished, both thorns may be thrown away. Similarly, it is said in the Bhagavad-Gita (2.46) that when the whole country is flooded, the reservoir becomes superfluous. So to an illumined seer, the Vedas are all superfluous.

Sri Ramakrishna also said that books, scriptures, rituals, and worshipping through images, etc., only point out the way to reach God. After finding the way, what more need is there of books and scriptures? Then comes the time for action.

In other words, one must follow the spiritual disciplines to realize Him. And once God has been realized, all rituals, reading books, etc. drop off. There is no need for them any more. He always reminded his devotees that scholarship was not the goal of religion; it was spirituality. He said that scholars without spiritual inclination and practice behave like vultures, soaring high up in the sky but their attention is always on the dead bodies on the earth. It was more so with respect to performing rituals, going to temples and pilgrimages. A person with a mature and meditative attitude will free from 'secondary details' of worship and go the higher aspects of Reality directly. □

(Concluded.)

References

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| <p>6 <i>The Life of Swami Vivekananda</i> by His Eastern and Western Disciples (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), v.1, 268-270.</p> <p>7 <i>The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda</i> (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991), v.3, 218.</p> <p>8 Diana L. Eck, <i>Darshan—Seeing The Divine Image in</i></p> | <p><i>India</i> (New York: Columbia University Press, 3rd ed., 1998), 41-42.</p> <p>9. <i>Ibid.</i></p> <p>10. <i>Ibid.</i></p> <p>11. CW, 1.17</p> |
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There is a Hindu saying: 'Say "yea, yea" to everyone, but keep your own seat firm.' Do not compromise on ideals and principles. But when it comes to opinions, appreciate views differing from yours, and accept them when they merit it.

Stubbornness is not strength. Stubbornness merely hides one's weakness. Strong is he who is flexible like steel and does not break. Strong is he who can live in harmony with many people and heed opinions other than his own. —Swami Turiyananda