

## Three Faces of *Bhakti* as Mirrored in Different Religious Traditions (I)

A DEVOTEE

**T**he Sanskrit word for religious practices is *sāadhanā*. *Sāadhanā* includes (but is not limited to) activities such as worship, prayer, *japa*, meditation, performing rituals, studying scriptures, discussing religious subjects, singing hymns and devotional songs, participating in religious gatherings, keeping holy company, and going on pilgrimages. Some of these are best practised in solitude; some require others to participate.

Finally, *sāadhanā* includes the practice that Swami Vivekananda emphasized most strongly: serving God in others. This is an outward-directed ideal that not only benefits others, but prevents religious practice from degenerating, as it sometimes does, into a self-centred narcissism.

*Sāadhanā* is an ongoing effort to recondition the mind so that it will always be aware of the presence of God. In the Vedantic tradition, its preliminary aim is to attain heightened consciousness of a personal deity or the impersonal Absolute. That may result in religious ecstasies and mystical experiences. But eventually it should lead to a *transformation of character*. Its ultimate goal is *vijnāna*, seeing God in everything—and acting accordingly.

### **Preliminary preparations**

Before we begin, we have to make the

mind fit for God to dwell in. We wouldn't invite a king to visit us if we were living in a pigsty. We'd remove the pigs, get rid of any evidence that they had ever lived there, remodel the whole place, paint it, decorate it, sweep and scrub the floors, open the curtains to let in the light, and set out some flowers to welcome our royal guest.

In the same way, we have to make preparations to receive God in the little cottage of our heart. We have to clean it up—get rid of all inappropriate, dirty, and evil thoughts; banish unwholesome emotions, habits, and tendencies; and fill it with purity and holiness.

This is hard. *Sāadhanā* is not for sissies. While we're scrubbing out the corners of our mind, we're often appalled to find how much dirt has accumulated. The more dirt we scrub away, the more we find, until sometimes it seems that the mind is composed of nothing but unending layers of dirt. That can be discouraging. But God's grace can overcome all obstacles; and often we sense Him watching us, encouraging us, urging us onward.

It has often been said that for every step we take toward God, He takes a hundred steps toward us. It would be impossible for us to keep struggling to make ourselves worthy of His indwelling if we didn't believe this. We hope and pray that He

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wants to dwell within us as much as we want Him to dwell there. Swami Sarvagatananda used to say, ‘Do your best and forget the rest.’ All we can do is try our best—and pray for God to help us.

This article deals with three kinds of *sādhanā*: prayer, *japa*, and meditation. And because we have to pray for God to help us, we start with prayer.

### Prayer

Prayer means talking to God. It’s a wonderful *sādhanā* for people who like to talk, and is especially beneficial for those who are lonely and need somebody to talk to. Why be lonely? God is with us. He’s right here, right now. He’s in the air that surrounds us. So talk to Him. That’s what He’s here for. The words can be spoken aloud, whispered, or uttered mentally. But what should we talk to Him about?

Some people ask for specific blessings or favours. ‘O Lord, please help me to pass all my courses, let me find a good job, let me earn enough money to buy a car.’ This is called petitionary prayer, and it has a shortcoming. It turns God into a cosmic Santa Claus.

If God were human, He would surely get irritated with people who are always begging Him for things. Fortunately for us, He’s not human. But good manners require us to exercise restraint in our importunities. Pestering God for favours all the time is impolite.

Despite its shortcomings, petitionary prayer is at least a beginning. It can easily expand into less self-centred kinds of prayer. One of these is *thankful prayer*. Anybody can ask God for things. How many people bother to thank Him?

Thankful prayer is a good way to start

the day. It puts us in a good mood and reminds us of how much God has blessed us. Counting our blessings, in fact, is a wholesome practice much neglected in the modern world. Thanking God for everything He’s given us may still be self-centred, but it’s a considerable improvement over ‘gimme, gimme, gimme.’

There’s also laudatory prayer, in which we praise God and recount His glories. Some people feel uneasy about this, because it can get smarmy. ‘O Lord, how great You are! You are omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. You bestride the universe and give light to the sun and stars. The heavens are Your throne and the earth is Your footstool. The very stars proclaim Your glory. O Lord, You are so great!’

Do we think God wants us to butter Him up? Do we think He’ll be pleased if we flatter and fawn upon Him and grovel before Him like slaves? Do we want to turn Him into a fathead? I can picture Him listening to the prayer above and growling, ‘Yes, yes, yes, I know all that. Get to the point. What do you want now?’

### The lummoX and the casserole

One of the best kinds of prayer is *conversational prayer*. It’s simply talking to God, and it brings us back to the question we asked at the beginning: What should we talk to Him about?

Anything and everything: whatever is going on, both in our minds and in the world. We can discuss knotty theological questions with Him if we like, or any doubts that we may have. We can ask for His advice and guidance. Adults can talk to Him about their families and their jobs; children can talk about their friends and their schoolwork. We can talk about our hobbies, sports, and

even politics. I know a devotee who, as an adolescent, used to discuss current events with God. It turned out to be excellent preparation for his Social Studies classes.

A wonderful embodiment of conversational prayer was Brother Lawrence, a 17th-century Carmelite monk whose writings have been compiled into a little book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Brother Lawrence cultivated God's presence by constantly conversing with Him. He was a simple and humble man who worked as a cook in the monastery kitchen. He described himself as 'a clumsy lummoX who broke everything.'<sup>1</sup>

Whether at work or at rest, Brother Lawrence talked to God about everything, all the time, and experienced a constant sense of His presence. I picture him as a big, burly guy, lumbering around the kitchen in his apron, juggling the pots and pans and talking to God. I've often wondered how these conversations might have gone. They might have gone something like this:

'O Lord, please help me to make this casserole a tasty one. I want it to please the monks. Should I add more salt? What do you think, Lord?... All right, it's salty enough. A bit of pepper, then... Good, it tastes good. Into the oven, then... Out of the oven and onto the table. And, Lord, please help me not to drop it, clumsy lummoX that I am.'

Some people will scoff at this kind of prayer as nothing more than childish chatter. But Jesus reminds us that we have to become like children to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3); and our minds are always chattering. Why not funnel such chatter into a constant conversation with God?

'Well,' people will say, 'God will get

bored. Do you think He has nothing to do but listen to some simple-minded fool prattling about casseroles? God has more important things to do with His time. He's got the entire universe to run.'

True, but don't forget: He's not like you and me. He's God. He's omnipresent. Even more than that: He not only pervades the universe, He transcends it. This suggests that He must be capable of running all of it—both the macrocosm and the microcosm, from the vastest and most far-flung galaxy down to the tiniest molecule—with equal attention, *all at the same time*.

It also suggests that He must be the ultimate multi-tasker. He wouldn't be much of a God if He didn't take a keen interest in the lives of His devotees, no matter how boring other human beings might find them. Whenever a devotee reaches out and talks to Him, God must be delighted. He won't care if the devotee's prattle is boring. What He values is not so much the prattle as the reaching out. After all, how many people reach out to Him? How many bother to talk to Him at all?

### **Sri Ramakrishna shows the way**

Sri Ramakrishna was the king of devotees, and he really knew how to pray. There was nothing formal or pre-planned about his prayers; they were artless and spontaneous. He often said that God is our nearest and dearest, and that's how Sri Ramakrishna approached Him. He was never shy or diffident; he never held anything back. His prayers were spontaneous outpourings of emotion, passionate and intense. He prayed the way a child cries out for its mother.

Before his first vision of Kāli, his only prayer was for Her to reveal Herself. After

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his first vision, his only prayer was for Her to reveal Herself again and again, and to stay with him forever. In all his prayers, he conversed with Her the same way a child converses with its mother: now cajoling, now weeping, now satisfied, now laughing, now grateful, now philosophical, now petulant and complaining. You can't beat Sri Ramakrishna when it comes to praying.

Above all, Sri Ramakrishna prayed for *bhakti*, pure love for God. 'Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholy. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love.'<sup>2</sup>

By his example, Sri Ramakrishna taught us how to transform petitionary prayer into a constant reaching out for God. If we're going to ask for anything, Sri Ramakrishna says, we shouldn't ask for trivial things like wealth, power, and enjoyment. We should ask for the greatest gift of all: the gift of God Himself. And prayer does that. It calls out to God in love and yearning, and through its calling draws him from the heavens to the heart.

### *Japa*

*Japa* is one of the main religious practices of the Ramakrishna movement. It's the continuous, silent repetition of a very short prayer or invocation called a *mantra*. It can be done on its own or together with prayer and meditation. Once prayer has called out to God and drawn Him to the heart, *japa* invites Him to stay there.

In the intervals between our devotions, we usually get preoccupied with our daily work. If God gets restless at being neglected and seems inclined to leave His seat, we can try to bring him back through *japa*.

Of course, His grace is also necessary. Without it, nothing happens.

### **Do it now**

Prayer and meditation require our full attention, but one of the advantages of *japa* is that you can do other things at the same time. Holy Mother, who was famous for doing prodigious amounts of *japa*, did much of it while busy with her household chores—husking paddy, sweeping and scrubbing the floor, washing and cutting vegetables.

*Japa* is a good way to deal with the endless chatter of the mind. We often find our thoughts wandering. *Japa* pulls them back and gives them focus. It's like a thread that ties the mind to the lotus feet of the Lord; it reminds us always to pay attention to Him.

Sri Ramakrishna taught a variety of religious practices, but Swami Brahmananda and Holy Mother placed special emphasis on *japa*. If you study their teachings, you'll find that they constantly emphasized the necessity of doing it, and especially at fixed times in the morning and evening.

The fixed times establish the habit. Once you get used to doing it at certain times, you get restless to do it when those times come. If you don't do it, you feel guilty. In fact, guilt feelings are common among devotees who skip doing their *japa*. So if you don't want to feel guilty, you'd better not skip it.

A common complaint among beginners is that they don't feel any results. Swami Brahmananda constantly had to reassure his

disciples that if they didn't feel any results in the beginning, they would feel them later on. *Perseverance* is the key. In fact, he told one disciple, 'Follow some spiritual discipline for at least three years, and then, if you find you have made no tangible progress, you may come back and slap my face!'<sup>3</sup>

### **Vicarious *japa* : A gift from Holy Mother**

Holy Mother said that some of her disciples were incapable of doing much *japa*, so she did it for them. In her old age, when her attendant noticed that she was doing *japa* even in bed, she asked, 'What can I do, my son? The boys come and entreat me eagerly. They take the *mantra* and go home. But nobody does any *japa* regularly. Some don't do it even once. Yet as I have shouldered the burden, should I not look after them? That's why I do *japa* and pray to the Master, "O Master, grant them enlightenment, grant them emancipation, and do you take on their care in every way here and hereafter!"'<sup>4</sup>

I can imagine some people grumbling, 'Holy Mother made it too easy for her disciples. She spoiled them. How could they develop any character if she did everything for them?'

I can also imagine her giving a sharp reply: 'I am the Mother! Shall I not do everything for my children? As for their character, don't worry about it. I will take care of it.'

Lazy people like me envy Holy Mother's disciples. We don't have the luxury of knowing that she's doing *japa* for us. Some of us have to do three rounds of the rosary just to get started. Sometimes it takes that long just to drag the mind away from worldly thoughts and get it to settle

down. That's especially true in the evening, after a day of being beaten up by the world.

### **Beads or digits?**

In Hinduism and Buddhism, we traditionally count the repetitions of the *mantra* on the beads of a rosary. It's called a *japa mālā*, or just a *mālā*, and it has 108 beads. When you've repeated the *mantra* 108 times and counted all 108 beads, that constitutes one round of the rosary.

Different kinds of beads are traditionally associated with different deities. Buddhists often use rosaries with beads made from the seeds of the Bodhi tree, the species of tree that the Buddha sat under when he attained enlightenment. Beads made of *rudrāksha* seeds are associated with Shiva, and beads made from the wood of the *tulsi* plant are associated with Vishnu.

Some people find using a rosary bothersome. It's just one more accessory to keep track of, and in religious life it's a good idea to keep accessories to a minimum. They might get lost, damaged, or stolen, and they can become objects of attachment. The rosary can certainly become an object of attachment, especially if it was given to you by your guru.

For these and possibly other reasons, the Ramakrishna movement has devised several methods of counting the repetitions of the *mantra* on the digits of the fingers of the right hand. You use the right thumb to count with, and touch it to each digit with each repetition of the *mantra*, until you've touched nine digits and repeated the *mantra* nine times. Go through this procedure 12 times, and you'll reach the full complement of 108 times provided by a rosary.

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