

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

A DEVOTEE

## The *mantra*

The *mantra* is a short prayer invoking the presence of a deity. In doing *japa*, you repeat it continuously. There are all kinds of *mantras*; most are associated with a particular deity; some are found in books. The most common ones have four words.

Probably the best-known *mantra* is the famous Tibetan one, *Om mani padme hum*, usually translated as ‘Hail to the jewel in the lotus.’ Another famous one is the Hare Krishna *mantra*. This one goes on for sixteen words:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna  
Krishna, Hare Hare.

Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare  
Hare.

The ‘Hare Krishna’ *mantra* invokes two deities, Rāma and Krishna, both incarnations of Vishnu. And if you put them together, with Rāma first, you get Sri Ramakrishna’s name. It has been set to music. It’s very catchy; you can sing and dance to it; and the Hare Krishna people do just that.

Within the Ramakrishna movement, there are several expressions that are similar to *mantras*, such as ‘Om Sri Ramakrishna’ and ‘Jai Sri Ramakrishna!’ (‘Victory to Sri Ramakrishna!’). There is also a *mantra* which I believe is chanted in some of the schools run by the Ramakrishna Mission: ‘Om Namō Bhagavate Ramakrishnāya’ and

its variant, ‘Om Bhagavate Ramakrishnāya namo.’ Both mean ‘Salutations to Bhagavān Ramakrishna.’

In addition to well-known *mantras*, there is your personal *mantra*, which your guru gives you at the time of initiation. This one is supposed to be kept secret. The only people who know what it is are you, God, and the guru.

There is a belief that the power of the *mantra* is reduced if many people know it. There’s also a story about the Vaishnava sage Rāmānujāchārya. When he was initiated, his guru told him not to reveal his *mantra* to anybody. Being a youth of normal curiosity, Rāmānuja asked why not. ‘If you tell your *mantra* to anybody,’ his guru informed him, ‘you will go to hell. But the person you tell it to will be saved.’ Thereupon Rāmānuja, who was very altruistic, went up on the rooftop of his house and started shouting his *mantra* so that everybody could hear it, and be saved.

## The *mantra* is sacred

*Japa* is sometimes difficult for Westerners, because the *mantra* is in Sanskrit, a language we’re unfamiliar with. I know an American devotee who once rebelled against his *mantra*. ‘I’m tired of this Sanskrit gibberish,’ he grumbled. ‘I want an English *mantra*.’ So, although he had been initiated by a perfectly qualified guru, he made up an English

THREE FACES OF *BHAKTI* AS MIRRORED  
IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS (II)

*mantra* and started doing *japa* with it.

At first it seemed new and fresh, and he was encouraged by the results. The image of his Chosen Ideal glowed within him; it seemed to be cheering him on. Novelty is always exciting, and he expected to make rapid progress.

But surprise, surprise! Novelty wears off pretty quickly unless there's some substance behind it. Pretty soon, about halfway through his rosary, he began to nod off, and his old *mantra* started welling up from the depths of his consciousness. He stopped it, re-imposed his English *mantra*, and succeeded for a while; but the old Sanskrit *mantra* was stubborn, and kept resurfacing when he least expected it. No matter how much he resisted, it kept coming back. Eventually the image of the Chosen Ideal seemed to be grinning at him, and then he got the message.

Finally he gave up, chastened, and went back to his old *mantra*. He had learned a good lesson the hard way: a *mantra* is holy, and when your guru gives you one, it's sacrosanct. It's sacrilegious to revise it, add to it, embellish it, or change it in any way. So we have to stick to the *mantra* our guru gives us.

**'But it's boring!'**

The big complaint that most people make about *japa* is that it's boring. Who wants to keep chanting the same old line? What's the point?

The point, of course, is to recondition the mind. That's what religious practice is all about: to recondition the mind so that it will be fit for God to dwell in. But our minds are restless, and scream for more exciting fare. This is especially true in our switched-on era, when cyberspace is crackling with high-tech entertainment. Who wants to pray when you can google? Who wants to chant

when you can tweet? Who wants to meditate when you can be updating your Facebook page?

If we're serious about religious life, we have to shut down all our electronic toys and work within. Swami Brahmananda's remark that his disciples could come back and slap his face if they didn't feel any results within three years is something we need to think about. He didn't mean three years of just piddling around. He meant three years of *persistent* and *intensive* effort.

Experience shows that if we keep working on our *japa*, it gradually takes hold. It stops being boring and eventually becomes sweet. The *mantra* becomes an old friend, something solid in the quagmire of our minds: a rock for us to stand on, an anchor for our wayward thoughts. It can be a healing balm in times of grief, a refuge in times of trouble. It takes on a life of its own, and rises from our subconscious to greet us whenever we turn to it.

It also becomes something very much like the default setting of the mind. When the mind wanders, the *mantra* often emerges spontaneously. We find it resounding within us without making any effort. All we have to do is listen.

In fact, this may be the answer to the famous Zen koan, 'Who is it that recites the Buddha's name?' When we become established in *japa*, the Buddha's name recites itself.

**Meditation**

Prayer calls God from the heavens to the heart, *japa* invites Him to stay there, and meditation tries to keep Him there. Just as there are many schools of religion, so there are many types of meditation. The type taught in the Ramakrishna movement is a continuous effort to see God within us and remain aware of His presence.

Swami Satprakashananda describes it in a wonderful little book, *Meditation : Its Process, Practice, and Culmination*, published by the Vedanta Society of St. Louis in 1976. He tells us to think of our body as the temple of God, and to imagine the mind as a crystal-pure lake with a beautiful lotus blooming in the centre of it. Then:

As you watch the lotus within your heart, you see the Divine Lord seated on it in a form of ideal beauty, radiating love, wisdom, power, beauty and peace. Out of compassion for you the formless, featureless Divine Being has assumed form so that your mind can grasp Him. This is the form of the Formless One, an embodiment of Divine Consciousness, Divine Bliss crystallized.

Meditate on this Divine form, showering blessings upon you with upraised hands, watching you with compassionate eyes, greeting you with the sweetest words. Meditate upon Him as your All-in-All, as the sole Goal and Abode, until your mind becomes completely merged in Him and you realize Him as your very self.<sup>5</sup>

Some readers may wonder what form the swami is talking about. It's the form of the *Ishta Devatā*, which is usually translated as the Chosen Ideal or the Favourite Deity. This is the personal aspect of God we love the most, the aspect on which we focus all our love and devotion.

During meditation, we do *japa* and make an effort to see the *Ishta* seated upon the lotus of the heart. Some succeed at this better than others. If we have trouble visualizing the *Ishta*'s form, we can visualize it as light, engulfing and irradiating the heart. If we can't even do that, we can think of its formless presence.

### Some critical objections

Sceptics will object that we're deluding ourselves by imagining that the *Ishta* dwells

within us. 'Self-hypnotism!' they'll scoff. 'You're like children playing with dolls, only you imagine that the doll is a living being inside you.' 'Playing with phantoms!' sniffs the famous writer and explorer of Tibet Alexandra David-Neel in one of her books. Anyone who has read the account of Sri Ramakrishna's Rāmlālā *sādhanā*, in which he assumed a parental attitude and frolicked with a metal image of the boy Rāma, may have the same disdainful reaction.

But, however childish it may seem to sceptics, the Rāmlālā *sādhanā* worked. By 'playing with a doll,' Sri Ramakrishna made the leap from imagination to realization. He realized Lord Rāmachandra as the creator, sustainer, and pervader of the universe, and as the transcendent Brahman Itself.<sup>6</sup>

The Rāmlālā *sādhanā* is a sobering reminder that no *sādhanā* is to be despised. Even 'make-believe' can serve as a gateway to the divine. Sri Ramakrishna reminds us that even a scavenger can enter the house through the back door. Sceptics don't have to use it if they don't want to.

In his book *The Evolution of God*, (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2009), Robert Wright argues that what we call God is a personalized construct that arises from a more impersonal reality. Wright calls this impersonal reality the 'source of the moral order'—or, with a nod to Tillich, the 'ground of being'. 'Could it be,' Wright wonders, 'that thinking of this source, and relating to this source, as if it were a personal god is actually an appropriate way for human beings to apprehend that source, even if more appropriate ways might be available to beings less limited in their apprehensions?''<sup>7</sup>

Vedanta concurs, and adds that *Ishvara*, the personal God, is the highest reading the human mind is capable of when it tries to

grasp the incomprehensible Absolute. Swami Vivekananda illustrates this more concretely when he says that if a buffalo tries to imagine what God is like, the closest it can come is to think of Him as a big buffalo.<sup>8</sup> We have personalities, so we naturally think of the highest reality we can imagine as also having a personality. If there is an impersonal supreme Reality, the personal God may be one of the conceptual stepping-stones available to us in our long and tortuous journey to a point in our evolution when we'll be able to perceive it as it really is.

### **The abiding presence of God**

It is an article of faith in the Ramakrishna movement that advanced meditators may experience visions, ecstasies, and varying degrees of *samādhi*. But even those of us who haven't experienced such things will eventually feel God's presence. We may feel it within us, outside us, or both. We may experience it as personal, impersonal, or both. We may feel it as universal and all-pervading, or as localized in a particular area. In prolonged or deep meditation, this feeling of God's abiding presence can become very powerful.

This is an all-nurturing presence which we perceive as always benevolent, even though its workings may have no perceptible effect on our external circumstances. It may assume a stern aspect if we misbehave, for one of its functions is to guide us. It may vary in strength: sometimes we may feel it intensely, other times less so. In periods of stress, when we're preoccupied with worldly affairs, or when we neglect our meditation, it may vanish altogether. But it has only become dormant. However long we may neglect it, whenever we turn back and seek it, it is bound to come forth.

This is an abiding source of comfort, an

enduring source of strength, a light that never fails, an eternal companion that will always accompany us as we pass through the valleys and shadows of life. Somebody once asked Swami Akhilananda, the founder of the Vedanta societies of Boston, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island: 'Swami, what's the point of all this meditation? What do you get out of it?' Swami Akhilananda's face lit up with an indescribable smile, and he uttered one word: 'Joy!'

Vedanta assures us that joy is there. That comfort is there. That strength is there. That light is there. That Being is there. Let us seek it and find it through meditation.

### **In praise of *bhakti***

*Bhakti* means one-pointed love for God. It prunes away everything that is not God and focuses on Him alone. *Bhaktas* (devotees) hold Him in the forefront of their minds; everything else fades into background shadows. Some people pray for long life, good health, riches, fame, power, enjoyment. *Bhaktas* don't want any of that. They want God alone.

This is beautifully expressed in the *Shema*, the *mahā-mantra* of Judaism: *Adonai elohenu Adonai echad*: 'The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.' The next verse adds: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.'<sup>9</sup> These two verses are a perfect encapsulation of *bhakti*.

*Bhaktas* may 'want' God—but how do they 'get' Him? God can respond to our wanting. If our love is intense enough, and if God is favourably disposed, He can reveal Himself. He can speak to us, give us visions, ecstasies, *samādhi*.

Some of us don't get any of those things. We have to ask ourselves if we're worthy. A highly revered and beloved senior

swami once told me, ‘You have to polish yourself.’ The craving for visions and *samādhi* is still a craving, and the only thing we should be craving is God Himself. Maybe our devotion is insufficient, or maybe we harbour deep-rooted moral flaws we don’t even recognize. We may be like the farmer in Sri Ramakrishna’s parable: we’re trying to irrigate our field, but all the water is running out through the rat-holes of our cravings and attachments.

Whatever the case, for us God has prepared a consolation prize. This is the sense of His abiding presence mentioned earlier. It may seem to be a smiling presence standing by our side. Or it may well up as bliss from within, till it floods our consciousness. Sometimes it may surround us, envelop us, and engulf us from outside. At its most intense, we may feel as if God’s spirit is embracing us, drawing us close to Him, merging us into Him. The sense of His presence often persists long after the embrace has ceased. It leaves our minds uplifted, enriched, and purified.

#### **A gift from Hinduism : The Chosen Ideal**

People will ask: ‘What do you mean by God?’ Hinduism believes in many gods. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe in only one. Then there are all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of Buddhism, and the myriads of deities worshipped by other faiths. Which of these should we worship?

Any of them you like. For God is one, as the Veda reminds us: people call him by various names. (*Rig Veda* 1.164.46) They also worship Him in various forms. We believe that God has provided all these names and forms to suit the tastes of His devotees. Sri Ramakrishna tells the parable of the mother who prepares the same fish in different ways to suit the tastes of her different children. For one she makes fried

fish, for another she makes fish curry, for a third she makes fish chowder. But it’s all the same fish. In the same way, God reveals Himself through different names and forms to suit the tastes of His devotees. He’s a divine shape-shifter, the ultimate user-friendly deity.

Here we have a wonderful gift from Hinduism: the concept of the *Ishta Devatā*, the Chosen Ideal. Take a favourite deity, Hinduism says, and worship it with special fervour—but also give respect to all the others. Sri Ramakrishna gives us the example of the dutiful wife who honours and serves all her in-laws and relatives, but reserves her greatest love and service for her husband.

#### **A gift from Vaishnavism : The *bhāvas***

Vaishnavism has also given us a wonderful gift: the idea of *bhāvas*, or attitudes. By adopting a certain attitude, or relationship to God, we can deepen our devotional life. Take the average man. He has different relationships to different people. To his wife he’s a husband, to his children he’s a father, to his parents a son, to his boss an employee, to his subordinates a superior. In each of these roles he behaves differently, in each relationship he shows a different face—but still he is the same man. So also with God in the various *bhāvas* He enjoys with His devotees.

Vaishnavas count five major *bhāvas*:

***Shānta***, the peaceful relationship. *Shānta bhaktas* assume a peaceful, serene attitude toward God, although no specific relationship is prescribed.

***Dāśya***, the servant relationship. *Dāśya bhaktas* regard God as their lord, creator, or parent—and seek to serve Him as such. This is the attitude most often assumed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

***Vātsalya***, the parental relationship. *Vātsalya bhaktas* regard God as their

THREE FACES OF *BHAKTI* AS MIRRORED  
IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS (II)

beloved child. Christians who worship the baby Jesus and Hindus who worship Krishna as the child Gopāla follow this *bhāva*. Sri Ramakrishna was following it when he worshipped Rāmlālā, the metal image of the boy Rāma.

*Sakhya*, the relationship of one friend with another.

*Madhura*, the lover relationship. *Madhura bhaktas* regard God as their lover. That was the attitude the Gopis had toward Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna believed that this *bhāva* is dangerous for ordinary people, and likely to lead to a fall; so he forbade his disciples to practise it.

Now, the wonderful thing about these *bhāvas* is that they are capable of infinite adaptations, variations, and combinations. In his relationship to Krishna, Arjuna was at once a friend, servant, and disciple. He was also Krishna's boss, because Krishna was acting as his charioteer. Sitā was Rāma's wife and lover, but also his servant, disciple, and friend. Christians might regard God as their creator, lord, and father, as Jesus did—but they also might regard Him as their dearest friend. They might regard Jesus as their lord and saviour, but also as their elder brother and friend.

Worshippers of Kāli will regard Her as their mother, as Sri Ramakrishna did—but also as a terrifying cosmic power. They might regard Sri Ramakrishna as their elder brother. Sri Ramakrishna's own devotees may regard him as their lord, teacher, or friend. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi comes to us with a built-in *bhāva*: always she is the mother and we are her children. Whatever *bhāva* we may choose, its purpose is to heighten, deepen, and strengthen our love for our Chosen Ideal.

### The image as living deity

We customarily use an image of our Chosen Ideal as a focus for devotion. To

increase that devotion, we treat the image as the living deity. We enthrone it on an altar, pray to it, meditate in front of it, offer flowers and incense to it. We may sing and talk to it, wake it up in the morning, offer food to it at mealtimes, and put it to bed at night. All this is intended to impress upon our minds the realization that the image is much more than an image: it is the living deity itself.

Critics may object that *bhakti* can degenerate into a squishy and maudlin sentimentality. It can, but we don't have to let it. We're free to seek a more robust mode of devotion. *Bhakti* has a thousand arrows in its quiver. If other *bhaktas* can benefit from sentimentality, who are we to scold them? *Mount Realization is not a single peak*, accessible by a single trail. It's an entire massif, with many trails. We pick the trail we like and give others the right to do the same. What seems to be a stumbling-block for us may be a stepping-stone for others.

### *Bhakti* and beyond

*Bhakti* is frankly dualistic. Its primary practices are prayer, *japa*, and meditation. Prayer calls the Lord from the heavens to the heart, *japa* invites Him to stay there, meditation tries to keep Him there, and *bhakti* makes Him never want to leave. No prayer, no progress; no *japa*, no joy; no meditation, no meaning; no *bhakti*, no bliss.

*Bhakti* is based on a sense of otherness. There will always be a veil of separation, however thin and transparent, between *bhaktas* and their Chosen Ideal. They don't want to become one with the object of their devotion, but just to experience it close up. How can a lover enjoy gazing at the face of his beloved if he's become a part of her? So, as Sri Ramakrishna says, quoting Rāmprasād, *bhaktas* don't want to become sugar—they want to taste it.

(Continued to page 33)