CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS SERIES

Bhakti Marg 1

Invoking the Divine

From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

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With kind regards, ॐ and prem

Swami Niranjan

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Including answers from the satsangs of
Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati

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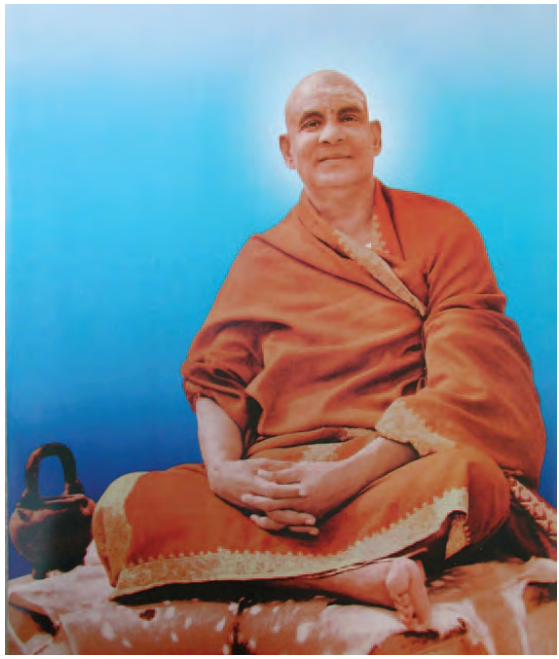
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Dedication

In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga.

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Preface

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

Customs and Traditions – Bhakti Marg consists of three volumes. They explore the depth and beauty of the many paths leading to the experience of bhakti, carved forever in the hearts of bhaktas. Yet how to express this feeling of love for the unlimited, infinite reality or Being? Out of compassion for seekers and aspirants, bhaktas of all times have tried through music and poetry to give expression to the innermost chamber of their hearts.

In *Bhakti Marg* the voice of three generations of masters is heard. The question and answer format lends immediacy to the content and establishes a personal relationship between the masters and readers, who may discover questions they would also like to ask and answers they are looking for. The wealth of information, insight and practical guidance contained in these volumes becomes a source of inexhaustible inspiration to the devotee. Ultimately however, it is the devotee's sincerity and ability to develop more and more love that will lead to the unique experience of bhakti. The poet Jafar has said:

> Why do you ask me the way to meet Him?
> If it is your resolve to meet the Lord,
> The way is there from all sides.

The three volumes of *Bhakti Marg* show the devotees how to find and adore their deity, how to unite with the beloved in the state of bhakti. The understanding that there is something beyond the gross, material dimension of existence is part of the human psyche. Unkown and incomprehensible as the transcendental dimension may be, the desire to experience at least a glimpse of it is embedded in the collective consciousness of humankind.

Worshipping the sun, the god hidden in thunder and rain, a tree, rock or river are the first expressions of this longing to connect. In the course of human history, seers and sages discovered and revealed *mantras*, sound vibrations, and *murtis*, elaborate forms of the Divine which were used to reach out into the unknown. Through sound and form the distant reality enters the devotee's heart and life. *Bhakti Marg* presents ways and methods to appease the yearning for closeness with the Divine.

Introduction

Bhakti Marg 1: Invoking the Divine describes the fascinating world of worship. In today's world many people are lost in their freedom and the unlimited possibilities of choice. They feel like a rudderless boat tossed on the waves of the vast ocean of life, yet they also sense that there is something 'beyond' this world. They yearn for direction, guidance and discipline as this material existence is no longer enough for them. A system, a method, a practice – something is required to reconnect with that spiritual dimension of their being, they know exists. Worship can play that role and fulfil that requirement.

Worship is a discipline to establish a connection with the transcendental dimension and to invoke its manifestation into one's life. However, worship must be filled with the devotee's love. Love is the bridge between the external act of the ritual and the heart seeking solace and fulfilment. Without love, rituals are just mechanical movements, prayers just words, a pilgrimage just a journey, and a festival becomes a party. Without intense longing, worship is meaningless and will not be part of *bhakti marg*, the path towards supreme love or *bhakti*.

Bhakti yoga and bhakti marg

According to tradition and scriptural evidence, there are two methods of attaining the state of bhakti or supreme love: bhakti yoga and bhakti marg.

Bhakti yoga is the way of transforming one's nature. It is a systematic process of purifying the human heart. It is not the yoga of devotion, as commonly understood. Devotion is an outcome of this process. Devotion is not a prerequisite for practising bhakti yoga. The aspirant lives a disciplined life, transforms the qualities of the heart and develops faith and unconditional love for the Divine. The aspirant's emotions become positive, sattwic and conducive to the experience of bhakti. With purity of heart, the aspirant reaches out to the divinity inherent in all of creation.

Bhakti marg is known as *karmakanda*, the external actions used to reach the state of bhakti. It is the path of worship and rituals. The connection with the Divine is found by performing worship, developing a personal relationship with the Divine, through pilgrimages and by celebrating festivals dedicated to the Divine. The aspirant comes closer to divinity and encounters thereby his own divine nature.

Bhakti yoga and bhakti marg both lead to communion with the object of worship. One may go to many temples and spend hours in performing rituals yet if the heart is not pure one will never be a bhakta. The day, however, one is able to see divinity in all of creation, no matter the method or practice, one has truly become a bhakta.

Worship – the medium

Worship is as old as humankind. The need to connect to the transcendental dimension through personal or well-defined gestures of devotion has been known to all civilizations, from early cavemen to the modern society of today.

Worship is an art to be learnt, developed and perfected. It is an expression of one's love and a practice of one-pointed attention. It is a path from the gross dimension of existence to the transcendental realm of experience. Rituals are a discipline if they are used as a tool to take the aspirant to the goal, otherwise they remain a mere exercise to satisfy an immediate need or desire. Rituals in whatever form and expression have to evolve and be performed according to rules laid down by tradition.

With *Bhakti Marg 1: Invoking the Divine*, the journey on the path of rituals begins. The multifaceted aspects and practices of worship are explored. Far from being acts empty and devoid of meaning, each ritual is a tool to invoke the presence of the Divine in the object of worship and into one's heart.

God is not an idea or a concept. He and She are real. On the path of rituals, the devotee connects first with the Divine manifested in the form of a symbol, image or *murti*. The object of worship creates an association, a feeling that resonates. As Swami Niranjanananda points out, "This principle of karmakanda is similar to the theories of quantum physics. It states that you can pick up anything, a rock from the road, and bring it to your home. That rock has no energy, no power, no shakti. However, every morning you perform pooja to this rock, and in the course of time, you will see the shakti of the rock come alive. That shakti in the rock will respond to you, and according to the power of your invocation, it can give you the benefits of worship."

When through the practice of worship the mind is purified, the inner experience of the transcendental formless divinity dawns. The form opens the doors to the experience of the formless within. This experience gives solace and meaning to one's existence. The aspirant journeys from the experience of God with form, *sakara*, to the experience of the formless, *nirakara*.

The devotee uses the five elements of nature – earth, water, fire, air and space or ether – to invoke the cosmic force, the transcendental dimension. Knowing that rituals, mantras and images are only a medium, the devotee calls out to the Beloved. With this awareness each gesture becomes a practice, a sadhana, and is filled with a single purpose.

Worship – the sadhana

The possible modes of worship are as numerous as the number of devotees. They range from a purely personal style, based on individual inclination and understanding, to rituals of great complexity known only to a few initiates,

learned in the art of worship. A flower may be placed in front of the image or object of one's devotion and a prayer whispered, or one may assist in rituals spanning many days and which include mantras, yantras, mudras, havan and abhisheka. The more intricate and regulated the ritual, the greater the need to focus the mind.

The symbols of worship must have the quality of attracting the devotee, holding his attention and touching the deepest recesses of his heart. Swami Sivananda says that a symbol is absolutely indispensable for a beginner, for the mind is being disciplined by fixing it on a concrete object or symbol. While lighting a lamp, waving incense, celebrating a devotional festival or undertaking an arduous pilgrimage, the motive and inspiration must be love and the desire for closeness and union.

Worship is the sadhana of devotees and aspiring bhaktas of the Kali Yuga. It is a sadhana in its own right. If done with feeling, *bhavana*, and faith, *shraddha*, it will change the understanding of one's place in life and the relationship one wishes to cultivate with one's object of devotion. With time, the correct method has to be understood and replace the personal form of worship. Sri Swami Satyananda says, "There is a correct method for doing pooja, just as there is a correct method for constructing a house, cooking a dish, or stitching cloth to make a shirt."

One goal only

The immediate aim of worship is to focus the mind, purify the heart and allow the feelings of love and devotion to unfold through the performance of the ritual. The aim is *darshan* of the beloved deity, the manifestation of the Divine in one's life.

The experience of darshan is described as seeing one's *ishta devata*, one's chosen symbol. Sri Swami Satyananda defines darshan in the following way, "Darshan means seeing Him face to face," and therein the bhakta finds fulfilment of all desires. Darshan is divine grace. It depends solely on

the will of the Divine. However, the bhakta's feeling and expression of yearning are necessary not only to propitiate divine grace but to fill life with peace and contentment.

Shiva and Shakti

Shiva and Shakti of tantra, Brahma and Maya of the Vedas, Purusha and Prakriti of Samkhya are the eternal principles of the manifest and unmanifest creation. They are the ying and yang, the day and night, the positive and negative poles without which this universe could not exist. Without Shiva, Shakti has no existence and without Shakti, Shiva has no expression.

Shiva is the manifest form of the spiritual consciousness in man; however, to experience the formless nature of Shiva a symbol is needed. The Shivalingam represents the nirakara or formless nature of Shiva and is worshipped with abhisheka. The Shivalingam has different meanings according to the level of awareness of the worshipper, and one should find out the meaning for oneself. The same is valid for the many forms of Shakti, the Cosmic Mother. She is the primal force and the embodiment of compassion, kindness, forgiveness and love.

It is said that the easiest way to obtain grace is the worship of Shakti, which imparts prosperity, liberation from bondage and leads to knowledge of the Self. Shakti can do anything. For the sake of her divine play, she herself as the veil of ignorance, veils the truth and binds the devotee to this worldly existence. When Shakti is propitiated through the practice of devotion and unconditional surrender she removes this veil and allows the truth to be known.

Shakti is worshipped with abhisheka of the Sri Yantra or Sri Chakra, the most complete geometrical symbol – the blueprint of creation. The abhisheka of the Shivalingam and Sri Yantra are not separate as Shakti is inherent in the Shivalingam, and Shiva is inherent in the Sri Yantra.

Worship of Shiva and Shakti allows the aspirant to experience the omnipresent consciousness and the nature of the all-pervading energy – Shiva and Shakti.

In *Bhakti Marg 1: Invoking the Divine*, the devotee is shown the purpose and concept of worship and practical ways to communicate with the Divine. With sustained commitment and deep devotion, there are no limits to the heights to which a devotee may climb. There are no boundaries to a devotee's expression of love and longing, the source and force of invocation. Purity of heart and disciplined action will surely take the bhakta to the goal. Sri Swami Satyananda identifies this goal clearly for all of us, "We have to have one mission in life: communication with God. That is the purpose of life."



1

The Art of Worship

> With lovely flowers of wisdom and love picked up from the garden of your heart weave a beautiful garland for God and crown Him in love and reverence.
>
> —*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

WHAT IS UPASANA?

How is worship defined?

Swami Sivananda: Worship or *upasana* is the expression of love and devotion by the devotee to the Divine. It is the expression of extreme reverence towards Him, keen longing to be in conscious communion with Him, eager aspiration to be always at His feet, and intense craving to be united with Him. The devotee feels the pangs of separation from the Divine, sheds profuse tears, and sings His praise, glory, splendour and greatness. Worship may take the form of prayer, praise, meditation or kirtan.

What is the aim of worship?

Swami Satyananda: The aim is to reach a point where there is total identification with the object of worship. It is at this point that one can say the same thing that Hanuman, the monkey deity and the epitome of a bhakta, said to Sri Rama, "O Rama, when I identify with my body I am your servant.

When I identify with the individual *jiva*, soul, I am part of you, but when I lose all these identifications, I realize that I am you."

What does the term upasana mean in Sanskrit?

Swami Sivananda: The term *upasana* means 'sitting near the Divine'. Upasana is approaching the chosen idol or object of worship by meditating on it in accordance with the teachings of the *shastras*, scriptures, and the guru, and dwelling steadily on the current of that one thought, like a thread of oil being poured from one vessel to another. The practice consists of observances and methods, both physical and mental, by which the aspirant makes steady progress on the path of spirituality and finally realizes the presence of God within himself. *Upasya* means that which is the object of upasana, namely, God.

Upasana is a broad term that includes many forms of worship. No matter the form of worship, the devotee longs for the benign grace of God to grant him devotion and remove the veil of ignorance. The devotee constantly remembers His name, he repeats His mantra, sings His praise, does kirtan, hears and recites His stories, lives in the company of His devotees, meditates on His form, nature, attributes and pastimes. The devotee visualizes the form of God with closed eyes and enjoys supreme peace and bliss. Love and devotion naturally arise in his heart when he hears the glory and greatness of the Divine. The devotee's worship helps his spiritual evolution.

What does aradhana mean?

Swami Satyananda: *Aradhana* means worship of God by chanting His name, singing His glories, performing pooja to Him with ritualistic precision or by mental absorption. Ritualistic precision means with articles of pooja like the conch, bell, flowers and leaves. Worship of God can be done at the mental level also without paraphernalia or external means. Reading *Hanuman Chalisa*, *Ramacharitamanas* or

singing kirtan are also forms of worship and with any of the aforesaid attitudes, it becomes aradhana.

One may cry out to Him in adversity to remove one's sorrows and sufferings, ask His favour for wish fulfilment, turn to Him for knowledge about Himself or one may love Him just for the sake of love. These types of worship are called aradhana. One type of devotee prays to God to save him from a crisis, the second type begs Him to fulfil his own wishes and desires for wealth and happiness, the third type questions God for knowledge and divine experience, and the fourth type seeks His love for its own sake. The devotees remember God and worship Him with different motives, but what they do constitutes aradhana.

According to tantra, what are the elements of worship?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Aradhana*, which means worship or invocation, is perceived in three different parts. The first is known as *karma kanda*, a physical act to connect oneself. The second part is known as *upasana kanda*, a mental act to guide the mind, to channel the forces and the powers of the mind. The third part is known as *jnana kanda*, realizing what one has to do, what one is doing and what one has done. These are the three aspects of aradhana.

Is worship always done with a motive?

Swami Satyananda: Upasana or worship of God means setting one's heart on any aspect of God that attracts and satisfies, that is within the grasp of one's limited awareness, stirs the feelings and sustains the interest.

If women, wealth, happiness and sensual enjoyment are worshipped, one will obtain them, but they will inevitably bring misery and sorrow in their trail, just as everything brings its shadow along with it. Everything in this world has a material shadow. Whatever one wishes for in this world one will get – a son, a wife, wealth, prosperity, success, fame, honour and status – but these will also bring sorrow and unhappiness. However, when one worships God with a heart

full of love and wants to establish a relationship with Him, there is no question of sorrow or unhappiness.

It is easy to worship God. It is good to talk about Him, to hear about Him, but to establish a relationship with Him is difficult. This is the purpose of upasana. One who has struck a relationship with God and clearly recognized that relationship, has already attained God.

What is the purpose of worship in the life of householders?

Swami Niranjanananda: As part of spiritual life, householders go on pilgrimages and visit places of worship. They pray for peace in the family or professional growth. In the *grihastha ashrama*, householder life, every person worships their chosen form of God inspired by one idea: 'Something good and auspicious will result out of my worship, unhappiness will go away and I will attain happiness and success.' When life becomes favourable they say, "I have the grace of God with me, everything is favourable."

Out of these, some people decide to perform more difficult sadhanas, poojas, anushthanas and aradhanas so their difficulties may be resolved more quickly. Those who are disturbed by tension and worry, think that they will attain mental peace by doing some extra japa and meditation. In order to eradicate mental tensions, worries, disturbances and weaknesses, and to gain spiritual strength and willpower, they practise meditation.

Therefore, this group in society connects with spirituality to seek divine intervention for fulfilment of their needs. Once that intervention has taken place, they are happy and they do not seek anything more. This is the relationship that a householder, a worldly individual, establishes with God. Although this relationship is forged with an ulterior motive, it is also called *bhakti* or devotion, as God is still being worshipped. Thus, this path is said to be worthwhile. Worship with a view to future gain has been given the form of bhakti for householders, as it connects them with the transcendental, uplifting force of the Supreme Spirit.

What is ishwara pranidhana?

Swami Sivananda: *Ishwara pranidhana* means surrendering the fruits of work to God. The root meaning of the word *pranidhana* is 'placing something under another to the fullest extent'. The devotee says, "Whatever I am doing, beautiful or ugly, virtuous or vicious, with desire or without desire, I renounce all that on Your account; I do all things with submission to You."

Renouncing the fruits means doing an action without thinking of the fruit to be obtained thereby. That is the reason why Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:47):

> *Karmanyevaadhikaaraste maa phaleshu kadaachana;*
> *Maa karmaphalaheturbhoormaa te sango'stvakarmani.*
>
> Your right is to work only, but never to its fruits; do not let the fruits of actions be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction.

Ishwara pranidhana is one of the five niyamas of raja yoga. Here it means worship of' God. Ishwara pranidhana, according to Sage Patanjali, is a special purusha that is untouched by misery, the results of action and desires. Praising Ishwara, remembering and worshipping Him by words, thoughts and actions and unswerving devotion unto Him is called ishwara pranidhana. This word is translated by some as 'feeling the omniscience of the Divine'. Ishwara pranidhana bhakti is an unbroken stream of love towards the feet of God, a love that is the be-all and end-all of a person's existence and during which he is absorbed in the object of his devotion.

Are there many ways to worship God?

Swami Sivananda: Upasana is a broad term which includes many forms of worship such as meditation, japa, daily morning ablutions, prayer, repeating verses in praise of God. It is of two kinds: meditation on God without form and meditation on Ishwara with form and attributes. Upasana is

either gross or subtle according to the nature of the seeker, his degree of competency or advancement on the path. One who worships a *murti*, an idol or statue, rings bells and offers sandal-paste and flowers does a gross form of worship, whereas one who visualizes the image of the ishta, meditates on it and offers mental offerings, *manasic pooja*, does a subtle form of worship.

The fundamental object in worship is union with the Divine who pervades or permeates all names and forms, by developing intense love. Ishwara has different aspects or forms such as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Ganapati, Kartikeya, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Indra, Agni, but whatever the name and form, it is Ishwara who is adored. All devotees are worshipping the one basic Reality, Ishwara. The differences are only differences in name and form on account of differences in the worshippers. Worship of Jesus, Mohammed, Sri Guru Nanak, Buddha or Mahavir is really worship of Ishwara. These are all forms. It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* (7:21):

> *Yo yo yaam yaam tanum bhaktah shraddhayaarchitumichchhati;*
> *Tasya tasyaachalaam shraddhaam taameva vidadhaamyaham.*
>
> Whatsoever form any devotee desires to worship with faith – that (same) faith of his I make firm and unflinching.

How does bhakti relate to worship?

Swami Sivananda: Bhakti implies the knowledge of God. If the gopis did not know the real nature of Sri Krishna, how could they have loved Him as God? Sri Krishna tells Uddhava that a devotee like Narada, who sees Him as the inner soul abiding in all, is dearest to Him. The *Narada Bhakti Sutras* say that upasana through bhakti is liberation itself. There is no place for worldly desires in this type of worship, which teaches how to become one with Ishwara. There are different levels of upasana in bhakti. One may perform upasana in one's worship of the gods. Upasana is

performed when extolling the different stories of God; this is meditation on the Self. Upasana is the highest, the most intense worship and love of God. It is total attachment to God with distaste towards everything else.

METHODS AND FORMS OF WORSHIP

What are the forms of worship?

Swami Sivananda: The practice of worship differs according to the growth and evolution of the individual. There is nature worship. The Parsis worship the element of fire. Hindus worship the Ganges, the cows, the ashvattha tree and the tulsi plant. In the Vedas there are hymns to Indra, Varuna, Agni and Vayu. This is nature worship. There is also hero worship. Great heroes like Shivaji and Napoleon are worshipped even today. In hero worship the individual imbibes the virtues of the person whom he worships. Birthday celebrations of great persons and their anniversary celebrations are also forms of worship. There is also the worship of gurus, rishis and different deities.

As one evolves, one passes from one stage of worship to another. The lower stages drop away by themselves. A person at a higher stage should not condemn another who is at a lower stage. One should not forget the underlying, indwelling, interpenetrating essence or intelligence when one performs any kind of worship. The fundamental object in worship is union with the Lord who pervades or permeates all names and forms. This has to be achieved by developing intense love.

How else can worship be defined or described?

Swami Sivananda: The rishis of yore have prescribed five classes of worship according to the predominating element in a man or woman. They are worship of Ganesha, Shiva, Hari, Shakti and Surya. If the earth element is predominant, Ganesha should be worshipped; if the water element is predominant, Hari should be worshipped; if the fire element

is predominant, Surya should be worshipped; if the air element is predominant, Shakti should be worshipped; and if the space element is predominant, Shiva should be worshipped.

Are there any other classifications of worship?

Swami Sivananda: There is another classification of worship according to the nature and capacity of the individual. Some worship the elements and lower spirits. Some worship forefathers, rishis and celestials. Some worship avatars, such as Sri Krishna and Sri Rama. Some worship the *saguna Brahman*, God with attributes. Some worship *nirguna Brahman*, the formless, attributeless and unmanifest. Meditation is mental worship of the Divine. Singing the God's names or *kirtan* is vocal worship. Service of living beings with love and a divine attitude is physical worship.

Even trees, brooks, rivers, oceans, the gentle breeze, birds, sun, moon and stars are doing bhajan silently. They are repeating His name. Rivers repeat *bhum bhum*. The breeze utters *Om Om*. The waves of the ocean repeat *Hari Om* or *Soham*. The sound of *Hari Om* comes out of the mouth of every bird. Even railway trains, engines or factories repeat *Hari Om Tat Sat*. Mark this very carefully.

What are the various levels of worship?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are five methods of worship in bhakti. If an arta bhakta follows someone's advice to perform a certain ritual or call upon a spirit to be free of problems, then this constitutes the lowest kind of worship. In an effort to attain siddhis or to acquire something, some people try to gain control over others or spirits or departed souls and practise worship towards that end. All this is considered to be the lowest kind of worship and bhakti.

At the second level, people worship rishis, devatas, nature, and so on. Then there are those who worship the various forms of gods and avataras, such as Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, the saints and the enlightened gurus. This is

worship at the third level. The fourth level is worship of the manifest Brahman, and the fifth level is worship of the unmanifest Brahman.

These are the five kinds of worship practised in bhakti. The worship of disembodied souls or spirits is the lowest level and the worship of the unmanifest Brahman is the highest. The worship of gurus or the incarnations of God is considered to be at the medium to high level. 'High level' and 'low level' are merely words used for the purpose of understanding. A low level means a state wherein the consciousness is not flowing upwards; it is still mostly engrossed in material phenomena and the world of senses and sense objects. At the highest level of worship, the consciousness is expanding and progressing. A person is unable to overcome negative, tamasic conditioning at the lower levels. The purpose of bhakti is to cultivate *sattwa*, the luminous, pure nature in life, and this purpose is realized only with the highest level of worship.

Many methods of worship and belief can be seen in society. Someone is praying to one form of the divine, someone else is worshipping another form, yet another person is offering adoration to another aspect; somebody is undertaking a special sadhana or *anushthana*, someone is going to church, someone to the temple, somebody is practising in solitude, another at the marketplace. People adopt different methods of sadhana according to their natures and temperaments. One's desire and emotions inspire one to worship or establish a relationship with the Divine. If there is no such desire or emotion, then the person does not have a relationship with the Divine.

Why should we worship a symbol or form if we can worship everyone around us instead?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is no harm in worshipping everyone present around us, providing our worship does not make them big-headed. It is not only we who are important, the object of worship is equally important. If the person we

worship is not balanced, their ego will go sky-high, and that is the danger of worshipping everyone. Worship by its nature must instil a sense of purity, humbleness, awe and respect, and it should be mutual.

We also worship the guru. The guru is not swayed by emotions when being worshipped – there is equanimity. If we are able to offer our worship to the feeling and existence of equanimity, then we are part of nature, and we can worship nature in any way we wish.

There are two aspects of worship – exoteric and esoteric. When we feel hungry, we go to the kitchen, make something to eat, and eat it. That is the external effort, which stops when we have swallowed the food. The process of digestion goes on, unknown to us. That is the internal aspect, the esoteric aspect, over which we have no control. Up to a point we are in control of what we do; beyond that things happen according to the law of nature, the law of the divine. It is the same in worship. Up to a point we can worship according to the pleasure of our heart, but thereafter the worship goes on internally unknown to us, in the psychic dimension. Therefore, it is impossible and impractical to have the same sentiment for everyone we encounter.

We have to connect our feelings with what is happening, whether it is a spiritual, material or social effort. When the feeling is strong and we are able to experience the intensity of the feeling with our participation, then even in chaos we are able to glimpse harmony. Being able to witness harmony in chaos is the biggest miracle that can happen.

Express your devotion, ensuring that you are pure and the object to which you are offering your devotion is pure. That is when bhakti comes alive.

How does Swami Sivananda classify bhakti?

Swami Niranjanananda: Swami Sivananda says that bhakti can be classified in six ways. The first classification is saguna and nirguna bhakti. In saguna bhakti, the devotee or aspirant is involved in ritual: ringing bells, offering flowers,

waving lights and incense, lighting a lamp, and making food offerings. Nevertheless, the heart and emotions remain narrow, constricted and restricted as the devotee likes his Beloved and no one else. The devotee does not even like those who do not share the same beliefs.

In nirguna bhakti, the devotee experiences the divine in everything. Idol and prayer are not necessary, as the devotee is completely absorbed and infused with God and there is an incessant flow of love from the devotee towards God. Nirguna bhakti is seen in the lives of saints and is expressed in their behaviour. The flow of love in their lives is only towards God, the Supreme Spirit. Just as a river loses its identity when it merges with the ocean, in nirguna bhakti all the expressions of the devotee's inner being become one with God. In every aspect of the consciousness – manas, buddhi, chitta and ahamkara – only God is experienced at all times. In para bhakti an aspirant does not try to attain some part of God's glory, only closeness and intimacy with God is desired.

Swami Sivananda says that the second division of bhakti is that of *vidhi*, ritual, versus ardent divine love. In ritualized bhakti, a person focuses on observing the prescribed rules and religious conduct though there is love for the Divine. The bhakti of ardent love is not bound by any rules or laws. Examples of such bhaktas are Mirabai and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. What bound Mirabai's bhakti? She was a princess, yet she was such a passionate bhakta that her mind was on the Divine every moment. She sang, *Mere to Giridhara Gopala dusaro na koyi* – "Nobody but God is mine. He is everyone to me. The husband is not mine, the family is not mine, wealth is not mine; God is all I have. He is my husband, he is my child, he is my happiness, he is my everything." In the bhakti of ardent love, *ragatmika bhakti*, there are no rules, laws, restrictions or boundaries of any kind. A deep, strong current of emotion flows constantly towards the Beloved.

The third division of bhakti is sakama and nishkama. The first is inspired by a desire or need, and the second

by emotion and sentiment. *Sakama bhakti* is motivated by thoughts such as: 'I want wealth and glory, I want name and fame, I want success, I want a child.' Prayer to fulfil a desire is called sakama bhakti, whereas *nishkama bhakti* is selfless and free from self-gratifying wishes, cravings or desires.

The fourth division of bhakti is vyabhichara bhakti and avyabhichara bhakti. *Vyabhichara* means fluctuating, flirting, or searching for pleasure in many places. The attitude in vyabhichara bhakti is like that of a bee that flies from flower to flower in search of nectar – a little from this one, a little from that one. The mind does not stay constant on one ishta in this bhakti; it is drawn towards many. You think a certain devata or god will be stronger, another mantra will benefit you more, another pooja will bring you more grace, another guru will show you more mercy, another deity will give you more boons. Somebody tells you to chant a certain mantra as it will be auspicious for you, so you accept that. Then a second person advises you to do another mantra, saying it will bring about your welfare, so you start to chant that one as well. In a few years, there is such a collection of mantras that there is no time to chant them all. You chant the different mantras with different desires. This is vyabhichara bhakti.

Sri Swamiji says that if you want water from the ground, then do not dig fifty holes each one foot deep. Dig one that is fifty feet deep and you will get water. It is also written in the scriptures: *Eko Brahma dwitiya nasti* – "God is only one; He is not two." Due to your need, you see Him in many forms. That is your personal feeling, yet in reality God is one.

Look at yourself: you are someone's spouse, parent, sibling and child. You are related to each person in a different manner. You are only one person, yet you play many different roles. If a person can play so many varied roles, then the Almighty God can also do so, and does. God is one, yet you give Him different names and forms to suit yourself. However, there should be only one Beloved, one ishta, as the goal. This is avyabhichara bhakti, the bhakti of fidelity.

There is always progress in bhakti. When Raja Uttanapada's son, Dhruva, was praying to God, his bhakti was sakama. He was praying as his stepmother had forbidden him to sit on his father's lap. His own mother then said to him, "Your real father is God. Go sit on his lap." Dhruva practised sakama devotion to God with the desire to sit on his lap. After a period of time, sakama bhakti changed into nishkama. When God appeared before him, he forgot everything. He did not say, "Give me the opportunity to sit on your lap." Upon seeing God he was dumbfounded; he could not say a word. God then put His conch to Dhruva's lips and upon feeling that touch, Dhruva begged for everlasting bhakti. In response, God gave him a special status. As the star Dhruva in the night sky, or the Pole Star, he always remains fixed at one point.

Everyone's bhakti is saguna at first; it is vyabhichara, apara and vidhi bhakti. In the course of time, as the emotions quieten and settle, the mind becomes clearer and desires reduce, bhakti changes to nirguna and nishkama.

The fifth division of bhakti is gauna and mukhya bhakti. The worship of spirits, elements and nature are all considered a part of *gauna*, or secondary, indirect bhakti, while worship of the formless Parabrahma is *mukhya*, or principle, foremost bhakti.

The sixth classification is tamasic, rajasic and sattwic bhakti. These are inspired by the predominance of a particular guna. For example, sattwic bhakti will cause the sattwa guna to predominate so the sadhaka will give up selfish and self-oriented desires, and think, feel and act in accordance with pure bhakti. The sadhaka moves from the negative, destructive, tamasic nature to the pure, luminous, harmonious nature of the divine.

How does the type of worship relate to bhakti yoga?

Swami Sivananda: In upasana there are four stages of bhava corresponding to the four different states and dispositions of the seeker himself:

1. *Pooja bhava* is external worship, which arises out of the dualistic notions of the worshipper and the worshipped, the servant and the Lord. This duality necessarily exists to a greater or lesser degree until the experience of oneness is attained.
2. *Japa bhava* is higher than pooja bhava, and is the expression of mantra repetition and hymns of praise.
3. *Dhyana bhava* is the expression of constant meditation upon the form of the Divine in the heart, and is higher still.
4. *Brahma bhava* or *atma bhava* is the highest state of realization that the Supreme Spirit, *Paramatma*, and the individual spirit, *atma*, are one; that everything is Brahman and nothing but Brahman. One who experiences Brahma bhava knows that all is Brahman. For this type of devotee there is neither worshipper nor worshipped, neither yoga nor pooja, neither meditation nor japa, neither vows nor rituals. He is a *siddha*, a perfect sage, in its fullest sense. He is one who has attained *siddhi*, perfection, which is the aim of sadhana.

In what way would a bhakta reach the brahma bhava stage of worship?

Swami Sivananda: Brahma bhava cannot be attained all at once. One has to slowly ascend the ladder of bhava, from pooja bhava to japa bhava to dhyana bhava to Brahma bhava. The heart must be purified thoroughly through pooja, japa, hymns, prayer and meditation. These are rituals on the path of upasana for beginners. When the upasaka advances and the mind is totally absorbed in the object of worship, there is no use in waving lights, offering sandal paste and ringing bells. The whole cosmos is Vrindavan for him. What a glorious state of devotion it is! The devotee attains *para bhakti*, supreme devotion, or divine bhava. Rituals drop away by themselves for such an exalted devotee. However, rituals are of great help for beginners in developing upasana, and they should not be ignored on any score.

The upasaka should pass through the various initial stages of upasana, just as an academic student goes through matriculation and BA before sitting in the MA class. He should make garlands of flowers for the Divine, sweep the floors of the place of worship, light lamps and ring bells. This should be done with faith, devotion and intense feeling. If the aspirant falsely and foolishly imagines that he has attained the highest state of para bhakti and neglects to practise upasana, his little devotion will evaporate quickly. He will soon fall into the deep abyss of worldliness.

What form should a bhakta choose to know and worship God?

Swami Satyananda: God exists in all forms. He may be seen in the form of a serpent, or Devi, the goddess, or a hideous sadhu, or *Bala Mukunda*, the beautiful child Krishna, or Sri Rama with bow in hand. God may be seen in any form. The devotee can worship God in whatever form he wishes, and that form will appear before him. As Tulsidas says in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Balakanda, after doha 240, chau 2):

> *Jinha ke rahee bhaavanaa jaisee,*
> *Prabhu moorati tinha dekhee taisee.*
>
> Everyone visualized in the Lord the reflection of his own emotional disposition.

Nothing that exists in this world is fiction; everything is reality. I speak on the basis of my experience. God is our friend who always works for the wellbeing of everybody. We are the ones who forget Him. Swami Sivananda used to sing this bhajan by Mahatma Binduji:

> I have entrusted all the responsibilities of my life to you,
> O Lord, now my upliftment or downfall depends on you.
> I never remember you, still you never abandon me.
> I am mischievous, still you are my benefactor.
> The difference between you and me is that

I am Nara and you are Narayana.
I am in the clutches of the world
Which is under your rule.
Trying to sail over the ocean of separation
I am suspended in mid-journey,
Yet I am confident because the rudder is in your hands.

God exists and He remains always a friend. Swami Sivananda used to say, "God is the breath of the breath, prana of the pranas, and the life of lives. God is my reality. This is the only truth in life."

Is vandana an important practice for a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: *Vandana* is worship through prayer and prostration. This form of upasana includes: humble prostration, touching the earth with the eight limbs of the body, *ashtanga namaskara*, bowing down with faith and reverence before a form of God, bowing to all beings as forms of the one God, and becoming absorbed in the divine love of God. The *Srimad Bhagavatam* says: "The sky, air, fire, water, earth, stars, planets, the cardinal points (direction), trees, rivers, seas and all living beings constitute the body of Hari. The devotee should bow before everything in absolute devotion, thinking that he is bowing before God himself."

In the *Uddhava Gita*, Sri Krishna says to Uddhava, "One should prostrate and bow down to all beings, even to the dog, the ass, the pariah and the cow, giving no attention to those who laugh in ridicule, forgetting the body and insensible to shame. All is Myself; nothing is but Myself." Similarly, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna says to Krishna in a most beautiful manner (11:40):

Namah purastaadatha prishthataste
namo'stu te sarvata eva sarva;
Anantaveeryaamitavikramastvam-
sarvam samaapnoshi tato'si sarvah.

> Salutations to You from the front, salutations to You from behind, salutation to You from every side! O All! Immeasurable in strength, You pervade all. You are all.

The aim of this form of worship is to realize God through exclusive love. The *Mahabharata* says: "There is nothing more auspicious than Vasudeva; there is nothing more purifying than Vasudeva and there is no higher deva worthy of being worshipped than Vasudeva. One who offers his salutations to Vasudeva suffers no afflictions." The ego is completely effaced through devout prayer and prostration to God. Divine grace descends upon the devotee and man becomes God.

Again, the *Mahabharata* describes how the great warrior Bhishma offered his salutations to Sri Krishna: "Having thus offered his prayer to Sri Krishna, Bhishma, whose mind was wholly absorbed in the Supreme said, 'Salutations to Krishna' and bowed his head to Him. Learning the depth of Bhishma's devotion through His power of yoga, Sri Krishna bestowed upon Bhishma the light of divine knowledge which illumines the three worlds."

How do the gunas and the bhakta's disposition affect the way a devotee worships?

Swami Sivananda: The sattwic or pure person worships the gods; the rajasic or passionate person worships the yakshas and rakshasas; the tamasic or deluded person worships the ghosts and the hosts of the nature spirits.

Sri Krishna, after defining faith, tells Arjuna how this faith determines the object of worship. The nature of faith, sattwic, rajasic or tamasic, has to be inferred from its characteristic effects, the worship of the gods and the like. Each person selects his object of worship according to the ruling guna of his being. The expression of a person's faith depends on the guna predominant in him.

According to the inherent predominance of sattwic, rajasic and tamasic qualities, people have different types of nature and abilities to understand and relate in life.

Therefore, different modes of upasana are undertaken to achieve self-realization. The karmas of past lives also play a major part in determining human temperament. For this reason, Sri Krishna describes upasana according to the attitude of the worshipper. The performance of sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas is an upasana that leads to moksha for people living in the world. Similarly, to work hard for social welfare and to enjoy name and fame is the highest goal for those who are immersed in active life. Yogis give importance to self-restraint, discrimination and detachment, which lead to moksha. Intellectuals and politicians give importance to wealth, prestige and power as the highest goal. Some regard the worship of deities as a means to attain God. For others, the observances of yama and niyama are important to attain moksha.

Sri Krishna teaches that these inclinations towards upasana lead only to temporary satisfaction, if performed without dedication to Him. The impurities of the mind, the wandering tendencies and extraneous desires vanish when the upasaka performs worship with intense devotion to the Divine. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Sri Krishna teaches Uddhava that whatever action is performed should be done to please God only, with faith, devotion and love towards God. By following this way of life and worship, one can definitely attain moksha and supreme bliss. Sri Krishna gives the same teaching to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* when He tells him that unification with God is achieved by giving one's mind to Him only. One should act with a pure mind and try to surrender to God. After the state of complete surrender, the real upasana begins.

How does upasana evolve for the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: Upasana is sublime and does not end with the pooja and worship of an image. The upasaka is taken step by step to higher stages of devotion, samadhi and communion with God through worship. After doing pooja with flowers and other articles of worship for some

time, he can take up mental worship, an advanced form of worship. The upasaka has to feel His presence in the heart as well as in all objects everywhere. Even in worshipping a small image, he has to repeat the *Purusha Suktam* and think of the *Virat Purusha*, universal body of God, which extends beyond the universe with countless heads, eyes, hands, and also of God or Atman, who dwells in the hearts of all beings. The upasaka gradually feels that the God he worships in the pooja is in the hearts of all creatures and in all names and forms of this universe.

In this way, the upasaka begins to feel His presence everywhere. During worship, as he repeats the mantra of the Divine and touches his heart, head, tuft, arms and hands, he feels the divine consciousness in every letter of the mantra. Through touching the body with repetition of the mantra, the upasaka gradually transforms himself into an instrument of the Divine. Spiritual currents are generated and there is an awakening. Tamas and rajas are destroyed and he is filled with pure sattwa. In this way, the upasaka becomes identical with the object of his worship. He actually beholds the Divine in his worship and is absorbed into the Divine. There are many instances when God manifested Himself to the devotee. The sacred bull Nandi, which sits before Shiva's image, took the food offered by Tulsidas. The image of Sri Krishna played with Mirabai and manifested full of life and consciousness for her.

The upasaka makes different attempts to grasp and realize the infinite or the absolute according to his degree of evolution. He soars higher and higher, gathers more and more strength, and eventually merges in the Supreme and attains oneness with Him. Glory to the tradition of the rishis and the scriptures of Sanatana Dharma! Glory to those who take the upasakas from the lower to the higher forms of worship, stage by stage. This will ultimately help them in their quest to realize the attributeless, all-pervading, formless, timeless, spaceless Brahman, the infinite and the unconditional Brahman of the Upanishads.

Ideally, does worship encompass every part of life?

Swami Sivananda: Beloved upasakas, enshrine unshakeable, living faith in the heart this very moment. Recall to mind the glorious worship performed by Mirabai, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and the South Indian Alwars and Nayanars, who reaped the rich spiritual harvests. All upasakas can enjoy great peace, happiness and prosperity and attain Him here and now if there is faith in worship. Though one may perform external worship at regular intervals, let the internal worship of the Divine in the heart be constant and unbroken. In this way worship attains completeness. All aspects of life are parts and paths of divine worship.

A BHAKTA'S WORSHIP

How should the bhakta approach upasana?

Swami Satyananda: The tradition of bhakti does not insist on the necessity of ceremonial worship as much as other traditions such as the pancharatra system of tantra. The *Bhagavat Purana* emphasizes three characteristics of worship.

Firstly, worship with little means offered in a spirit of devotion exceeds an elaborate ritual carried out in a purely mechanical way. Sri Krishna said (10:81:3–4):

> What present have you brought for me from your house, oh Brahmana? Even the slightest offering, a particle given with affection by my devotees is considered by me as great, but even if a lot of presents are given by one who is not my votary, they are not conducive to my joy or satisfaction. A person who devoutly offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even water, I enjoy that which has been brought to me with devotion by a person of controlled and pure mind.

The *Bhagavata Purana* narrates the story of King Ambarisha, an ideal bhakta of Vishnu, who dedicated his actions to Vishnu's service. "He engaged his mind in meditating on the lotus feet of Sri Krishna, his speech in singing of the

excellences of Vishnu (Vaikuntha), his hands in services, cleaning the temple of Hari and other duties, and his ears in listening to excellent stories of the Imperishable. He employed his eyes in beholding the images and shrines of god Vishnu (Mukunda), his tactile sense in embracing those who served the gods, his olfactory sense in smelling the fragrance of the tulsi leaves dedicated to his feet, and his tongue to what he offered to the Divine. He used his feet in walking to the holy places hallowed by Hari's feet, his head to bow down to the feet of god Vishnu (Hrishikesha), his own desire in the humble services of the Divine, and not for the fulfilment of his worldly desires. In this way the King dedicated his daily behaviour and duties to the glories of Vishnu.

Secondly, worship is to be performed without expectations. The merit gained by the performance of religious rites with selfish motives can only lead to the enjoyment of heavenly pleasures for a limited time, resulting in rebirth; it does not lead to final liberation, but (3:32:3) "the person who follows the path of disinterested devotion to Me directly attains to Me only."

Thirdly, worship should not be restricted to that of idols but is to be offered to all forms of the Divine (11:27:53): "He who foolishly neglects me, the controller of the world dwelling as a soul, atma, in all beings, and worships merely the images, is as if offering oblations to the ashes instead of the fire." Likewise (3:29:25): "Although the Divine is present everywhere, the idol worship is recommended to those devotees who have not realized this truth."

How does the *Srimad Bhagavatam* guide the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Krishna gives a description of worship to Uddhava in the eleventh chapter of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*: "The sun, fire, earth or clay, water, a Brahmin and any image of Mine in the concrete form, clearly thought of as seated in the heart, may be worshipped in My name sincerely with such articles as could be obtained by him. This

worship should be sincere and wholehearted and the devotee should imagine Me as his preceptor. He should begin My worship for obtaining My grace and not for any other desire. In ordinary images I should be invoked and released at every time of worship. I can be pictured in the mind. The worship of My image in the heart should be with accessories pictured in the mind.

"The image should be washed or bathed, cleaned and adorned with ornaments and marks. The devotee must put My image facing north or east or must himself sit also facing east or north. He must sit facing Me or sideways. The devotee must be facing the north while the image faces the east. He should repeat the mantras for purifying himself and clean his body by control of breath. He should sit quietly and meditate on Me for some time.

"He should think of Me as seated on a lotus with eight petals, overflowing with fragrance and radiant with light. The emblems – conch, chakra, mace, lotus, the ornament of *kaustubha* or diamond, the necklace and the mark or spot in the heart – should be imagined at the proper place and worshipped. Sandalwood, saffron, camphor, kumkum and fragrance should be used. *Purusha Suktam* and other sacred literature should be repeated. My devotee may adorn Me with cloths, gems, sacred thread, sandal paste, flowers, saffron and ointments, etc. The devotee should give water for washing the feet, *achamanam* (sipping water from the palm of the hand), sandalwood paste and words of greeting, invitation and hospitality. He should also show fragrance, light and camphor at My altar. He can sing loud hymns in My praise. He can sing songs and dance at My altar, reciting My various deeds and achievements. He should seek My grace, prostrating himself duly before Me. Putting his head on My feet, he should ask for My grace to protect him and save him from the wheel of births and deaths.

"He should adorn himself with the flowers and sandal used in such worship. The devotee may worship Me in any form, in all objects or in himself, in the manner that appeals most to

his mind and inclinations, as I am immanent in all things. My devotee worshipping Me thus with rituals, mantras or both, attains not only bliss and self-realization, but also all things he desires. By building temples and altars devotees attain powers over all the worlds. By worship of Me they attain Brahma loka. By all the acts, they attain My powers and immanence."

What attitude should a bhakta have when worshipping God?

Swami Satyananda: Christ said, "Be childlike," and one has to be like a child. One does not have to be a think tank, an intellectual, an analyst or a commentator on whether God is the creator or not. Who cares whether God is nameless, formless or attributeless? If it is known that God is nameless, formless or attributeless, what is gained? For many years people have been listening, defining God, defining Coca Cola, but it is no use defining something without experiencing it directly. One has to drink Coca Cola to know what it is, and Coca Cola is available in a simple shop for fifteen rupees.

God is the easiest thing in this world to attain. One can catch him in one's hands quite easily. To renounce, to give up, to leave something is the easiest action. It takes many years to gather and accumulate something, but just a moment to leave it. The joy gained from accumulating something is not a patch on the joy one gets from giving it up. Therefore, renunciation is easy to obtain but, in order to reach God, please take the straightest path. Love God as one would love a wife or husband. Sing His name as one would sing in a discotheque. Instead of other songs sing *Rama, Rama, Rama*. Crave him as one craves money.

Whatever sadhana upasana has been learned, do it like a child, do not use the mind. Sadhana upasana is a subject of the heart, not of the mind. Sadhana upasana is not a subject of the intellect; it is a subject of feeling and emotion. The foundation of feeling is *shraddha,* faith, and the basis of intellect is argument. Intellect goes with argument and emotion with shraddha. There is no interrogation in faith,

and *vishwas*, belief. Where the intellect is concerned, there are always questions and answers. In faith and belief, there is no questioning.

Are faith and devotion more important than the value of the offering?

Swami Sivananda: A gift, however small, is accepted by God when it is offered with profound faith. God is quite satisfied even with a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water when it is offered with single-minded devotion and a pure heart. Was He not satisfied with the little parched rice from the bundle of Sudama and the small berries offered by Shabari? One need not build a golden temple for Him. One need build a golden temple in the heart and enthrone Him there. He wants only one's devoted heart. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:26):

> *Patram pushpam phalam toyam yo me bhaktyaa prayachchhati;*
> *Tadaham bhaktyupahritamashnaami prayataatmanah.*
>
> Whoever offers Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water, that, so offered devotedly by the pure-minded, I accept.

The object of worship is sincere devotion and real surrender for the sake of union with the Divine. During worship the devotee's mind should be always concentrated on the form of the Divine. It should think of His attributes, His infinite nature, bliss, immortality, not of earthly things. Devotees like Prithu and Ambarisha practised *archana* or worship of God. Their stories are found in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. God appeared before Prithu, the first king of the world, and gave him His blessings. God protected Ambarisha and gave him emancipation. They were immersed in the love of God and they wanted nothing but God. They did not crave for worldly things from God but wanted only His grace. They wanted to please God and serve Him. Nothing else did they want. Such should be the devotion of all bhaktas of selfless motive.

The temples are so crowded. How can bhakti be made or become spiritual and not mechanical?

Swami Satyananda: For that, satsang is necessary. Now and again you will have to recharge your battery, otherwise your emotions will remain mechanical. As for the crowd, why does it matter to you? You are being irrelevant. True lovers do not see the snakes, the thorns, or the jungle; they only see their loved one. Forget the crowd on the path of bhakti. Why should you be concerned with the crowd and the dirt? Let it be crowded, let it also be dirty. It is all right if children are crying, you stay with your purpose. Long ago I also used to think like you, but after many years I gradually changed my way of thinking. I thought, 'No excuses, this is simply my complex.'

What should one look for in a temple?

Swami Satyananda: Whatever a man does, he does it according to his understanding and capability. My understanding and capacity are different from your understanding and capacity. Every individual's point of view cannot be the same. In a temple your viewpoint is different from mine. A child, a youth and an old man, all three look at the same thing in different ways. Every person should go to a temple according to his own conditioning, and decide for himself how he should interact or conduct himself. One day, intuitively, you will know. If nothing at all dawns in your understanding, then go to the temple and say, "God, I am very ignorant. I do not understand anything. Swamiji told me to go to the temple so I have come. Yes, I trust, but more than that I do not understand anything." Think of this as an extremely easy way. Whenever a child goes to its mother, the mother will love it. This is the real secret of going to a temple.

On a practical level, how can a bhakta deepen worship in daily life?

Swami Sivananda: One should cultivate *shraddha*, faith, *bhava*, feeling, and devotion. There should be a taste for God's name. One should have knowledge of the science of upasana,

japa yoga, mantra yoga and bhakti yoga. There should be a clear idea of the goal and nature of God. One should have *vairagya*, non-attachment to sensory experiences. One should know how mantra japa produces its purifying effects on the mind, destroys rajas and tamas, fills the mind with sattwa, and changes human nature into divine nature. Only then will one be highly benefitted and have quick progress on the spiritual path. Enquire, think and cogitate.

What other considerations are there for the bhakta?

Swami Satyananda: Whatever devotional practice you are doing – pooja, burning incense – do it regularly at a fixed hour for whatever duration can be managed, whether an hour or merely fifteen minutes. I take five minutes to do my pooja of mother Tulsi and during that time my mind becomes one-pointed. Tulsi is my mother, my ishta devi. It is not necessary that I have a one-pointed mind when I worship and pray to her because I have faith, and that faith yields its due fruit.

What are examples of simple offerings to the Divine?

Swami Sivananda: Worship can be done either in a temple or in one's own house, or even anywhere outside. Offerings to God need not necessarily be rich and costly things. The god of elephants, Gajendra, offered only a flower from the pond. Draupadi offered a vegetable leaf and Shabari some wild plums, but God was pleased. It is the feeling of love for Him that God takes into account and not the material that is offered. He is pleased even with leaves and mere water.

What else can be offered in worship?

Swami Niranjanananda: Once somebody left behind their cigarettes and lighter in Jyoti Mandir: they surrendered that habit. That is also a kind of offering one can make. The offering need not be of flowers and love all the time; the offering can be of a habit as well. By giving up a habit we are actually surrendering to the cosmic will. We are giving up a

need, a dependency, and becoming more self-aware, more responsible for our health and wellbeing. We are connecting with our courage and strength. This is a miracle in which we have submitted a part of our conditioning which comes from the ego, and that is also bhakti.

What is the recommended worship for Kali Yuga?

Swami Satyananda: Mother Teresa believed that God is the image of love, and whenever one embraces a dying man, a diseased person, an orphan, or a miserable soul, that is the worship of God. There are many ways to worship God. One can go to a temple and offer bael leaves and tulsi leaves; this is considered one form of pooja. Ringing the bell and blowing the conch is also pooja. Pilgrimage and fasting are also forms of worship. However, in today's times, in Kali Yuga, the ultimate pooja is to do good for others.

It is mentioned in the Uttarakanda of *Ramacharitamanas* that in Kali Yuga, only two things are significant for the liberation of humanity: the first is to repeat the name of God and the second is to do good for others. The eras of Satya, Treta and Dwapara had different mandates. In Satya Yuga it was to perform yajnas, in Treta it was penance, in Dwapara it was yoga, and in Kali Yuga it is the name of the Divine. The basis of the *Ramacharitamanas* is the name of God and nothing else.

Why is worship in the form of helping others important for the bhakta?

Swami Satyananda: The biggest mistake in our society is that five hundred litres of milk will be offered in a temple, yet no one will give five litres of milk to a sick man. A person thinks, 'I will not be blessed by giving this sick man milk; however, if I offer five hundred litres of milk to Shiva, he will be pleased and my case will be dismissed from court'. This is his faith! People's faith has lost direction. Faith can also be channelled in the right direction. My guru, Swami Sivananda, used to say that helping others does not just

mean that you are giving them medicine or clothes. The real meaning of helping others is that you are cleaning yourself. When you help someone, where does this act take place? It takes place in the mind, which becomes purified. It is only when your mind is pure and your mirror is clean that you will be able to see your face.

What feeling or attitude does a bhakta have when performing idol worship?

Swami Sivananda: Puran Chand's guru had initiated him into the Narayana mantra and given him a small *murti*, idol, of Narayana for worship. Puran was regular in his worship and did not omit repetition of the sacred mantra, but there was no sign of the idol blessing him; so he went to his guru and asked him the reason. The guru smiled at Puran and said, "Well son, take this idol of Shiva. I shall initiate you into the Shiva mantra. Worship Shiva with faith and devotion. He is considered as Bhole Nath and can be easily propitiated; He will bless you soon."

The next six months saw Puran Chand immersed in japa and worship of Shiva. The idol of Narayana was placed on a dusty shelf in the pooja room. After many months, Puran Chand once more went to his guru and complained that his worship of Shiva had brought him no result. He begged him to give him the murti and mantra of a devata that would bless him.

The guru smiled again; the time for enlightenment had come, yet he felt the disciple would learn from experience. So he said, "Good son, in this yuga, Mother Kali is Pratyaksha Devata. Worship this image of Her and repeat the Navarna mantra and you will obtain Her grace." This time, Puran Chand had no misgivings whatsoever; he had full faith.

Kali worship commenced. Shiva joined company with Narayana on the shelf. With devotion, Puran was waving incense before the image of Mother Kali when the fumes rose up and reached the shelf where the other two idols were

kept. Puran was enraged. What right had Shiva to inhale the incense intended for Mother Kali? He had refused to be propitiated when he had tirelessly worshipped Him; it was Mother Kali whom he now worshipped. In great anger he took down the image of Shiva in his hands and began to insert cotton wool in His nose to stop Him from inhaling the incense. Before he could accomplish his task, however, the idol disappeared and before him stood God, smiling in all His mercy and compassion. Speechless with wonder and amazement, Puran prostrated himself before the Divine who told him to ask for any boon as He was immensely pleased with his devotion.

Puran answered, "My Lord, I am much perplexed. You did not deign to bless me when I devoutly worshipped you and repeated the panchakshara mantra for six months. But you suddenly chose to reveal yourself to me when I had discarded your image and given up your worship. What is this mystery, O Lord?"

God answered, "My child, there is no mystery to be explained; how could I reveal myself when you treated me as a mere image, as a mere piece of metal worshipped or thrown away according to your whim? Today you treated my image as a living presence when you wanted to plug the nostrils with cotton wool; thus you revealed that you recognized my living presence in the idol and I could no longer withhold myself from you."

Speechless and enlightened, Puran bowed once more and was immersed in His love. He could ask for no greater boon, for in His love he found fulfilment.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF UPASANA

What is the purpose of worship for a bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Man does not obtain full satisfaction from sensual pleasures. He always feels that he wants something. He is restless and discontented. Then he longs to come into conscious communion with the God of the universe and

to attain immortality and everlasting peace. This ultimate craving finds its satisfaction in worship. The individual soul desires to unite with his father, the supreme soul. This is done through worship. Love and devotion naturally rise in his heart when he hears the glory and greatness of the Divine. An object of worship is therefore necessary for man to pour forth his love and devotion.

Worship helps spiritual evolution and eventually brings the devotee face to face with God. As the Absolute or Infinite cannot be comprehended by the limited and finite mind, the conception of the impersonal God in His lower, limited form came into existence. The *nirguna Brahman*, God without attributes, assumes forms for the pious worship of the devotees.

The object of worship or bhajan is to attain infinite eternal peace, immortality and freedom from the wheel of birth and death with its concomitant evils of disease, old age, sins and miseries of all sorts. There is no iota of happiness in this world and its objects; it is all imaginary, illusory, nerve-irritation. The inner mind is a blazing furnace. Worship destroys the three kinds of pain caused by oneself, other beings and acts of God. It eradicates the knots of ignorance and annihilates the five afflictions and the three defects of the mind. It takes the devotee to Brahman. The bhakta enjoys divine wealth and drinks the nectar of immortality. He enjoys being on the same plane as God, being near to Him, having His form and becoming one with Him.

For a bhakta, what is the ultimate aim of worship?

Swami Sivananda: In the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:11) it says:

> *Ye yathaa maam prapadyante taamstathaiva bhajaamyaham;*
> *Mama vartmaanuvartante manushyaah paartha sarvashah.*
>
> However men approach Me, even so I welcome them, for the paths men take from every side are mine, O Partha.

Therefore, worship God. Praise Him. Seek enlightenment and realize serenity, truthfulness, compassion and love. The

individual soul desires to unite with his Father, the Supreme Soul.

Of all those things which are conducive to spiritual advancement, bhakti and upasana are not only indispensable requisites, but eminently beneficial to people from all walks of life. They are easy too.

What are the benefits of worship?

Swami Sivananda: Worship enables one to feel the nearness of God and to feel His presence. Worship is the means to be united with God. It is one's prayer to Him to give more devotion, to remove ignorance, to show the right and proper method of getting rid of impurities, defects, pains and sufferings. It is the effort to actually feel the gracious presence of God in the heart, knowing that it is He alone who is working through one. Worship is a way of showing love for God as well as a means by which one can develop love for Him. Through regular worship, gradually a stronger and stronger love for God is felt. One is in tune with the divine will, which grants peace, prosperity and protection in daily life. There are many benefits of worship, some of which are:

- It purifies the heart and fills it with pure love for the Divine.
- It turns the mind inward and allows one to look at oneself honestly.
- It steadies the mind and develops effortless concentration.
- It destroys evil qualities such as anger, lust, jealousy, hatred, egoism and greed.
- It fills the heart with the divine virtues of honesty, understanding, forgiveness and cheerfulness.
- It slowly changes the devotee into a divine being, like a holy saint.
- In the end it leads to union with the Divine, which is the goal of human life.

How does one benefit from connecting to a higher force through worship?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Aradhana* means worship – the worship, invocation and realization of the higher nature that is within all of us. One strives to attain this by trying to understand the spiritual concepts that govern life, by singing mantras, chanting stotrams and connecting with a different state and frame of mind in which joy, contentment and happiness are experienced. This sustained experience of joy, contentment and happiness is the beginning of spiritual awareness.

Whenever you are happy and free of mental problems, whenever you are content and have no cause for discontentment in life, whenever there is joy and no sorrow within, then that state of mind is able to lead you to the realization of your spiritual nature. Your material nature, your gross nature, is subject to the influences of the environment, society, people and the world. Due to these influences that affect the mind constantly and continuously, the colours of the mind keep on changing. Whatever the colour of the mind, you begin to perceive the world in that colour as well. When there is happiness, contentment and joy, you connect with the aspect and the energy of luminosity, *jyoti* or light, and illumination.

The energies that uplift the human mind are known as devatas and devis. This energy has two principles: the masculine principle and the feminine principle; the positive pole and the negative pole. The positive aspect is known as *deva*, and the negative as *devi*. Do not take the words 'positive' and 'negative' as good and bad, rather, understand them to be two poles of the same energy. Just as there is day and night or plus and minus, in the same way, there is deva and devi. Both coexist; one cannot exist without the other.

Traditionally, Indians have believed that devas and devis could actually materialize. It was much later in the course of history and time, when missionaries from different cultures and religions came to India that the thought that God is

only a concept and not a reality was put into people's minds. This is what religions have professed until today, that God is a concept, an idea and not a reality.

In India, people did not believe that God is an idea; they did not believe that God is a concept. They believed that God is real; they believed that God is transcendental, with the ability to manifest in the gross dimension as well. Consequently, they understood God as omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. This God quality, this God nature, this God consciousness has to perform different roles at different times in human life. It is not different from human existence; human existence is an integral part of the God-consciousness. This is what yogis visualized and realized in higher states of meditation. They said that the presence of God, that divine nature, the transcendental nature and quality, the higher virtue, can be invoked and experienced in one's life. This was the start of spiritual awareness and spiritual understanding in the Indian psyche.

In the course of time, the sages and seers of the tradition also identified different qualities and functions of energy, in relation to the mind, the senses, people's interactions in the world, ego, emotions, in relation to every dimension of human experience. All these forces and powers, these energies were given a name, and these names represented different manifestations of this cosmic power, the godly power. What many people today call devis and devatas, gods and goddesses, are not just residents of an imaginary heaven; they are realities of human life.

In what other ways does worship affect the bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: Upasana changes the mental substance, destroys *rajas* or restlessness and *tamas* or dullness, and fills the mind with *sattwa* or purity. Upasana destroys subtle desires, cravings, egoism, lust, hatred, anger. It turns the mind inward and eventually brings the devotee face to face with the Divine, frees him from the wheel of births and deaths and confers on him immortality and freedom.

The mind becomes that on which it meditates. There is a mysterious or inscrutable power in upasana which makes the meditator and the meditated identical.

How does worship change a bhakta's destiny?

Swami Sivananda: Upasana transmutes a person into blessed divinity. One who leads a mere sensual life without doing any worship is only an animal, although he appears outwardly in the form of a human being. Eating, drinking, sleeping, fear and copulation are common in brutes and human beings, but that which makes one a real man or a god-man is upasana. Of all the things that are conducive to spiritual advancement and the acquisition of virtues, upasana is not only an indispensable requisite, but is also eminently beneficial to all classes of people.

Man sows an action or thought and reaps a habit of doing or thinking. He sows a habit and reaps a character. He sows a character and reaps a destiny. Habit is second nature, or rather first nature itself. Man creates his own destiny by thinking and acting. He can change his destiny also. He is master of his own destiny; there is no doubt of this. By right thinking, enquiry and strong self-effort, he can become master of his destiny. Markandeya changed his destiny through austerity and worship of Shiva. Vishwamitra became a *Brahmarishi*, realized sage, through vigorous austerities. Everybody who has a strong will and iron determination can do this.

What does the *Bhagavad Gita* say about the benefits of worship?

Swami Sivananda: Sri Krishna says that to people who meditate on Me as non-separate, who worship Me in all beings and who are ever devout, I secure gain and safety. They consider themselves as non-separate, and look upon the Supreme Being as their own Self. Those devotees who behold nothing as separate from themselves have no selfish interests of their own. They certainly do not look for their own gain and safety. They have no desire for life or death.

They have taken sole refuge in God. They have nothing to lose, because there is nothing they call their own. Their very bodies become God's. They have no desire for acquisition because all their desires are gratified by their communion with the Divine. They have eternal satisfaction as they possess the divine *aishvarya*, the supreme wealth of the Divine. They entertain no other thoughts than those of God. Sri Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita* (9:22):

> *Ananyaashchintayanto maam ye janaah paryupaasate;*
> *Teshaam nityaabhiyuktaanaam yogakshemam vahaamyaham.*
>
> For those who worship Me alone, thinking of no other, for those ever-united, I secure what is not already possessed and preserve what they already possess.

Consequently God Himself looks after their bodily wants, such as food and clothing – this is known as yoga, and preserves what they already possess – this is known as *kshema*. He does these two acts. Just as father and mother attend to the bodily needs of their children, so God attends to the needs of His devotees.

These persons direct their whole mind with full faith towards God. They make God alone the sole object of their thought. For them nothing is dearer in this world than God. They think of Him only with singleness of purpose and one-pointed devotion. They behold nothing but God. They love Him in all creatures. When they lead such a life, God takes the whole burden of securing gain and safety for them upon Himself.

MEDITATION AS WORSHIP

How does upasana transform the bhakta?

Swami Sivananda: The upasaka takes refuge in Him alone. Upasana gives *amrita bhava*, the sense of absolute fulfilment. Then one knows everything and becomes calm and quiet. Jnana yoga, raja yoga and karma yoga are simply the means

to prepare the aspirant for real upasana. Bhakti is the reward for the sadhaka's efforts in yoga sadhana. Bhakti is the means as well as the goal. To prepare for real upasana one must relinquish interests in sensual life and practise detachment towards everything except God. By keeping the company of saints and sages, one will naturally imbibe real love towards God. This is important, for the saints and God are not different from each other.

The mind is purified by constant worship. It is filled with good and pure thoughts. Repetition of worship strengthens the good samskaras. 'As a man thinks, so he becomes'. This is the psychological law. The mind of a man who trains himself in thinking good, holy thoughts develops a tendency to think good thoughts. His character is moulded and transformed by continued good thoughts. When the mind thinks of the image of God during worship, the mental substance actually assumes the form of the image. The impression of the object is left in the mind; this is called a *samskara*. When the act is repeated often, the samskara gains strength by repetition and a tendency or habit is formed in the mind. One who entertains thoughts of divinity becomes transformed actually into the divinity himself by constant thinking and meditation. His *bhava* or disposition is purified and divinized; the meditator and the meditated, the worshipper and the worshipped, the thinker and the thought become one and the same. This is samadhi. This is the fruit of worship or upasana.

How is meditation offered as a form of worship?

Swami Sivananda: Worship should be both external and internal or mental, manasic pooja. When the devotee develops attachment for worship of God, his mind will automatically withdraw itself from the objects of the world. Those who perform worship of God attain the supreme eternal and blissful abode of God. The devotee establishes identity with the Absolute through rigorous and constant meditation. This is the highest form of worship. The worship

is offered to the Divine within. This is also internal worship. Internal worship is more powerful than the external worship with flowers, and other items. Bhima did manasic pooja. It was more powerful than the external worship done by Arjuna. It is said in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* (sutra 16):

> *Poojaadishvanuraaga iti paaraasharyah.*
>
> Vyasa, the son of Parasara, is of the opinion that bhakti consists in attachment of God and other similar acts.

When a form is brought to the mind it becomes subtle, and the Self is apprehended in the form of a Shivalingam or anything else. When the mind is able to apprehend the Shivalingam in the deeper form, its grossness is still further reduced until it sees the shining one. Eventually there comes a time when that medium is completely removed and one says, "He is neither guru nor disciple, nor God, nor Brahman, nor Vishnu – no time and no space – I am what I am. That is the final stage. It need not be learnt from a guru, it has to be one's own experience.

In deep meditation does the meditator become one with the vision of a form of God?

Swami Satyananda: In vedic philosophy God is seen in two forms: immanent as well as transcendental. The concept of God should not be confined only to immanence or to transcendence. One starts with immanence, God with form. In that form the raw material may be marble or something else; but when the eyes are closed, suddenly one goes into a different dimension and sees Him there inside. What is the basic material then? Not the marble, but one's own self, one's own mind, concept and thought.

The whole mind has concentrated into the form of Sri Rama. As one goes on using the limited, finite properties of the mind, it becomes more and more subtle, but still the form of Sri Rama remains. What is the basic material then? Not marble, gold or mind. As the consciousness changes, the

'I', ego, duality drops and there is neither you nor I. I am not aware that I am meditating. I am not aware of time, of space, or even of the process of meditation. There is no trikuti, no awareness of the meditator, of the meditation. There is no awareness of anything, but Sri Rama remains. Somebody sees him, somebody is witnessing, somebody is experiencing. What is the basic material of that?

Why should one meditate on God in human form?

Swami Satyananda: It is much easier to think about God in a human form. It is no use talking about abstract or intellectual things, vedantic philosophy or this or that. Try to seek God in human form. This is the greatest sadhana in man's life. Intellectualization and contemplation bring nothing. Telling oneself, "I am Brahman" does not make one Brahman. Even saying, "God is in my heart," gives no result. One must see God.

Therefore, the word *darshan*, 'inner vision', is used. One can have this vision in a dream, in meditation or in any state. In that state of darshan there is no awareness of you or me, only the *swaroopa* or form of God remains. What is the form of God? It is like the form of water which takes the shape of the pitcher it is poured into. It takes the shape of a glass when poured into a glass, the form of a bowl when poured into a bowl. What is the form of water, that of a cup, a glass, a bowl, a pitcher, a bucket or an ocean? Water has no form of its own. What is the form of gold? If God is shaped in the form of a stone, God takes that form. If God's picture is woven in cloth, God takes that form. Whatever material is used, God takes on that form.

Why is it important to practise meditating on a form of God when He is formless?

Swami Satyananda: Do not speak about God having no form, *nirakara* or *nirguna*. The only way is to accept God as *sakara*, with form. One may think of this form as the creation of an artist or a sculptor, but when one starts meditating upon this

form regularly with the eyes closed, a day comes when the image that is outside appears vividly in front of the closed eyes, within oneself. Is this not darshan? Darshan is no different to this. When the differentiation between the outer and the inner comes to an end, that is darshan. When the image of Sri Rama being meditated on outside can be seen within, that is God's darshan.

The important point to be remembered is that meditation must have an object as the sheet anchor for the consciousness to travel. There has always been a controversy about saguna and nirguna meditation, meditation on form and on the formless. Most people who believe that the reality is formless have a serious objection to accepting an object for meditation. They say that if the supreme consciousness is formless, how can a form help to achieve that experience? Experience has led to one conclusion: no matter what the nature of reality is, it does not matter if the reality is absolutely formless, but in order to maintain steady spiritual progress and to be able to have a grip over the transforming states of consciousness, meditation on a form, saguna, should be practised.

Is it difficult to reach this level of awareness with God?

Swami Satyananda: The truth or the essence is grasped more easily by people who are uneducated, illiterate and innocent. Once an illiterate man asked me for diksha and I gave him the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya* and asked him to meditate on that. He returned after a month and told me of his experiences. I immediately understood him. I realized that an illiterate person does not know how to read or write. Naturally, when he was meditating on the mantra he was not thinking through the letters, so there was no interference, no hindrance from the medium of script. The script form relates with intellect and it becomes a block, an obstacle in the case of an educated person. Sri Aurobindo has written, "Intellect was the helper, intellect is the barrier, transcend intellect!" In matters relating to God there is no scope for intellectual

function. For God the intellect must be kept aside. Accept God like an innocent, illiterate person – in full faith.

What is the difference between bhakti and upasana?

Swami Sivananda: The essence of bhakti and upasana is cosmic love. The innate nature of all beings is to love an external object. It is an unconscious urge to become unified with everything. Love is the forerunner of experience. Love is the craving; experience is its fulfilment. Though emotions are generally considered a hindrance in perfect realization, it is only earthly emotions that are of a binding nature. The concept of God does not rouse any binding emotion. It is pure emotion devoid of carnality and attachment. One cannot develop earthly love towards God. If you are attached to a finite perishable object such as your son or daughter, you become miserable when they die; but if you are attached to the lotus feet of the Divine, you acquire eternal peace.

How does love for God give us liberation? Man is an egoistic entity. His only enemy is the ego. He feels that he is entirely different from other things of the world. To root out the ego is the ideal of all forms of yoga. In bhakti yoga, the ego cannot assert itself for God alone is everywhere. The mind cannot modify itself into vrittis of sense objects for, to the bhakta, there is no object except God. Who is there to be loved or hated? The bhakta is therefore blissful at all times. The mind cannot think of anything, for everything is God. This is the path where one does not need to curb the emotions or run to the forest. One has to only direct the emotions to God and see God as present in the world. It is the sweetest and best of human endeavours.

Bhakti is the bhava and upasana is its expression. Upasana is approaching the chosen ideal or object of worship by meditating on it in accordance with the teachings of the shastras and guru. The upasaka dwells steadily on the current of that one thought, like a thread of oil being poured from one vessel to another. The practice consists of

those observances and methods, both physical and mental, by which the aspirant makes steady progress on the path of spirituality and finally realizes the presence of God within himself.

The methods of upasana purify the heart and steady the mind through practices directed towards God, such as pooja, meditation, prayer and kirtan. Those who worship God in the form of an image, give offerings of flowers and sing kirtan, practise an exoteric form of worship. This is known as *saguna upasana*. Those who visualize the image of their personal deity internally, meditate on it and make mental offerings practise esoteric worship known as *nirguna upasana*.

No matter which form of worship the devotee practises, it is the expression of a keen yearning to be united with Him, and a deep spiritual thirst to hold conscious communion with Him.



2

Worship Made Alive

Just as fragrance is always present in a flower, devotion and belief in God are innate to the human heart.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

POOJA – UNVEILING DIVINITY

What is pooja?

Swami Sivananda: *Pooja* comes from the Sanskrit root *pooj*, which means 'to worship'. Pooja is a simple form of worship. A picture or image is used for worship. Mantras are recited, water is poured over the image, flowers are offered, sandal paste is applied, camphor and incense are burnt. The devotee pours forth love and devotion to the Ishwara who is hidden in the picture or image. He who does pooja must abandon the idea of ownership of the articles of worship, and must think that the articles and wealth belong to Ishwara and he is only the caretaker. Then only will his worship bring the desired result. Prostrations and offering are outer worship.

What is the practice of pooja?

Swami Sivananda: Pooja is an important form of upasana which involves the ritual worship of the Divine. Pooja transforms the upasaka into a divine being by bringing him into the proximity of God and enabling him to commune

with Him. Pooja purifies the heart and steadies the mind, filling it with *shuddha bhava*, pure feelings, and *prem*, love, for the Divine. The upasaka performs worship according to his choice, but with faith and devotion. The object of worship is the *ishta devata*, personal form of the deity that the devotee worships.

Vaishnavites worship Vishnu in any of His ten forms, such as Sri Rama and Sri Krishna. Shaivites worship Shiva in one of His eight forms. Shaktas worship Devi in one of Her many forms. The method of pooja is chosen in accordance with the requirements and preferences of the devotee, and may be vedic, tantric or mixed, such as a *shaligram*, the fossilized shell taken as a symbol of Vishnu, in the case of Vishnu worship, or a *lingam*, the smooth, oval, black stone, in the case of Shiva worship. The devotee superimposes God and His attributes on the concrete symbol and ultimately it becomes God for him. Traditionally, there are eight kinds of images of God. The image can be moveable or fixed.

What is the difference between pooja of the ishta devata and idol worship?

Swami Sivananda: The object of worship is the ishta devata or guiding deity or the particular form of the deity whom the devotee worships. By the performance of pooja, the deity is pleased. The idol is made up of the five elements; they constitute the body of the Lord. The idol remains an idol, but the worship goes to the Lord. If you shake hands with a man, he is highly pleased. You have touched only a small part of his body and yet he is highly pleased. He smiles and welcomes you. Even so, the Lord is highly pleased when a small portion of His *virat*, cosmic body, is worshipped. An idol is a part of the body of the Lord.

The worshipper superimposes on the image the Lord and all his attributes. He performs *shodashopachara*, worship with sixteen kinds of offerings, such as *padyam* (water for washing the feet), *arghyam* (water offered in a vessel), *asana*

(seat), *snana* (bathing), *vastra* (clothes), *achamana* (water for sipping), *pushpa* (flowers), *dhupa* (incense), *dipa* (waving of lights and camphor), *naivedyam* (food). The wandering mind is fixed now in this form of worship. The aspirant gradually feels the nearness of the Lord. He attains purity of heart and slowly annihilates the ego.

To the worshipper who believes in the symbol, any kind of image is the body of the Lord. Such worship can never be idolatry. All matter is a manifestation of God. The act of worship implies that the object of worship is superior and conscious. This way of looking at things must be attained by the devotee. The untutored mind must be trained to view things in the above manner.

How does one connect to the divinity of an idol?

Swami Sivananda: Regular worship unveils the divinity latent in an idol. God is enshrined in the idol. From here, He will protect you in a special manner. This is truly a wonder and miracle. The picture comes to life. The idol speaks. It answers your questions and solves your problems. The awakened divinity in the idol acts as a guardian angel blessing all.

The God in you has the power to awaken the latent divinity in the idol. It is like a powerful lens that focuses the sun's rays on to a bundle of cotton. The lens is not fire and the cotton is not fire either, nor can the sun's rays by themselves burn the cotton. When the three are brought together in a particular manner, fire is generated and the cotton is burnt. Similar is the case with the idol, the sadhaka and the all-pervading divinity. Therefore, the devotee should have the same attitude in regard to the idol which he would show if the Lord were to appear before him in person and speak to him in articulate sound.

The place where an idol comes alive is transformed into a temple. Those who live in such a place are freed from miseries, diseases, failures and from samsara itself. The image guides the devotee. It talks to him. It assumes human

form to help him in a variety of ways. There are many marvels and mysteries which only a devotee understands.

What is the concept of pooja in the tantras?

Swami Niranjanananda: In tantra, the fifth aspect of shatkarma is *pooja*, worship. This worship is not religious worship. It is an attitude, an awareness. When one goes to a temple, a church, or any place of worship, the mental behaviour, attitude, perception and belief change for those few moments that one is in the place of worship. One consciously tries to cultivate faith. On exiting the place of worship, one can forget about faith and go about one's normal business. However, in the place of worship, one must always have the idea 'I am here to express my faith'.

Faith and belief are two essential ingredients in any worship. Worship is an external act, but the purpose of that external act is to strengthen and intensify faith and belief. In this way, tantra uses worship both externally and internally. The external, ritualistic system is used to engage oneself and cultivate the awareness so that one can perform worship internally, during meditation. The two forms of worship are called *bahya pooja*, external worship, and *manasika* or *antarika pooja*, internal worship.

Bahya pooja includes burning incense, lighting a lamp, applying tilaka, offering flowers and naivedyam or food. These rituals have a special purpose. Through them, the sadhaka tries to link his feelings and emotions with the worship of the concrete form. When this is achieved, an atmosphere favourable for sadhana is created.

Worship in the internal dimension is known as manasika or antarika pooja. According to tantra, manasika pooja is the highest level of worship. It is the state when one has gone beyond the rituals and is simply self-contained in that identity of faith, conviction and belief. One lives that, experiences that and expresses that. Manasika pooja is the state of self-surrender.

What must a beginner on the path of bhakti take into consideration?

Swami Sivananda: The aspirant should pass through the initial stages of bhakti yoga just as the student should go through matriculation. He should visit temples and do pooja, make garlands of flowers for God and sweep the floor of the temple. He should bring water for abhisheka and clean the lights. He should light the lamps and ring the bells. This should be done with faith, devotion and intense feeling. He should prostrate again and again before the deity and perambulate around the temple.

Some aspirants think that it is beneath their dignity to ring bells, clean lights, bring water and make garlands of flowers. They think that it is the work of a menial servant. Such aspirants cannot dream of developing bhakti even in thousands of births. They have not understood the alpha-beta of bhakti yoga. Study the lives of the sixty-three Nayanars, the Tamil saints of southern India, who were illiterate but had intense and unswerving devotion to the Divine. Day in and day out they practised the preliminary purificatory services in the temple and attained oneness with Shiva through these practices alone. If the aspirant falsely and foolishly imagines that he has attained the highest state of para bhakti and neglects to practise bhakti sadhana, his little devotion also will evaporate quickly. He will soon fall into the deep abyss of worldliness.

What is the purpose of rituals?

Swami Niranjanananda: The creation of a connection between oneself and one's inner self is the most important aspect of any ritual in any religion. Rituals and other types of worship do not give realization of God. By following rituals, yajnas and havans one cannot attain darshan of God. Rituals are performed because they create a change, a metamorphosis of the mind. They make the mind aware of one's aspirations in life. That is one of the main reasons of rituals.

What are the various methods of performing pooja?

Swami Satyananda: In scriptures, pooja is described as a systematic ritual. There is a method, a specified procedure in pooja. The worship being done of Goddess Chandi is the tantric method of pooja. In this ritual everything is precisely specified: prayers, lamps, incense, flowers, everything down to the minutest detail has a particular order. The sequence of rituals is prescribed differently by various sects. For example, classical texts have their own way; Shaivites and Vaishnavites have another way. Currently only three sects exist. Previously there were five: Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Saurya and Ganapatya, out of which two, Saurya and Ganapatya, have become obsolete.

Ordinarily, how is Shiva worshipped? The devotee walks into the temple, lights the lamp, offers flowers, puts marks on the forehead, bows down, rings the bell and walks out. If he knows how to blow a conch, he can blow that as well. The manner of worship is casual and, moreover, if the ritual is done without devotion, it means nothing at all.

The tantric method of worship is not like this. The benefits obtained by tantric devotion are not achieved by partaking of meat, fish, sex and wine. That is a branch of tantra known as the left-hand path. Tantra means a method of pooja, a technique of worship by which one can awaken the divine forces.

The tantric method of worship involves mantras and kriyas. The pronunciation of the mantras should be exact. This is mentioned in the Vedas. A small mispronunciation can bring destruction instead of protection. One must learn the science of mantra before attempting tantric worship. Everybody is free to choose a form and method of worship. In Shakta Tantra there are the ten mahavidyas; Shaivites and Vaishnavites have their own forms. Each has different specifications about what colour flowers will be used, whether tulsi leaves or bael leaves are required.

Different methods of worship have their own requirements, such as flowers, sandalwood paste, grains of rice,

ashes, red paste, and so on. The Tantra Shastras explain that specific flowers and leaves are required for these rituals. This tradition is well maintained in South India, and these rituals are done with great precision there. In North India these rituals are not so well preserved because the region came under greater influence from foreign cultures, due to which the rituals were gradually corrupted over a period of time. However, this tradition was not broken in South India, even during the periods of Muslim and British rule. Temple worship in the southern parts of India, as well as Maharashtra is still performed according to the rules and regulations, but none of the temples in the North perform pooja with accuracy and precision. Even the basic requirement of correct pronunciation and intonation of mantras, whereby the mantra becomes efficacious, is not fulfilled.

Where did this method of worship originate?

Swami Satyananda: The method of worship by means of pooja is unique to tantric and vedic culture. It does not exist in any other religion. Detailed literature on it can be found in the Tantras and Vedas. Pooja is done to focus the mind for the attainment of samadhi. The meaning of *samadhi* is to stop the mind and enter the void. This state is not possible for all to achieve directly. Therefore, as a rule, daily worship of whatever deity one chooses should be performed. This worship can be done in many ways. There are specific poojas for Shakti, Kali, Durga, Vishnu, Shiva, even pooja for the cosmos, for creation, is described and there are definite procedures for each one. This pooja can be of half an hour's duration, or as a special ritual it can go on for a few hours, or even the whole day. In the shastras there is a complete and detailed description of which mantra is to be chanted, where a specific procedure is to be undertaken, which kriyas that ritual involves, and which method of pranayama is performed with specific mantras.

What is the effect of performing pooja?

Swami Satyananda: When pooja is performed daily for an hour and a half with awareness and devotion, the mind begins to settle down. There is no point in chanting *Hanuman Chalisa* and thinking of something else at the same time. Only chanting *Hanuman Chalisa* will not necessarily settle the mind. However, if it is chanted, kriyas are performed, pranayama practised and a variety of other activities are done, the mind cannot dissipate beyond fifty percent. Controlling fifty percent of the mental dissipation is a great achievement because it is difficult to stop the mind.

What is being attempted in sadhana? One is trying to control the mind. One who has attained total control of the mind becomes a saint. Mind is a power that has to be controlled and channelled. Control means purification, getting rid of distractions and illusions. It is only this veil of illusion which lies between God and man. When the mind is controlled by kriyas and other practices, one is brought face to face with God. Although God is sitting right here, He is not seen because of the veil. The method for removing that veil is not far away. It is not necessary to travel to Satya loka, Brahma loka, or any other astral plane.

What is the prescribed procedure to perform pooja?

Swami Sivananda: Take a bath in the morning before performing pooja and daily prayer. An image of the devata may be used for the pooja; otherwise the worship can be done on the floor after cleaning the area and drawing a *mandala* there. Keep the following items ready beforehand: flowers, incense sticks, sandal paste, oil lamp, camphor, fresh water, food offerings for God, a clean seat to sit on, a small bell, conch and cymbals, if available. One should not need to get up in the middle of the pooja to find anything. Repeat the mantras and prayers which have been decided upon to kindle divine emotion. Decorate God with fresh clothes and garlands made of flowers. Adore him with ornaments, flowers, scent, sandal paste. Perform the offerings with intense love and devotion.

Offer sweet cooked rice or some other appropriate food that can be offered with love or bhava. Foods specially prepared with ghee, milk and curd, or vegetables and butter are traditionally recommended. Offer prayers with the feeling of devotion. Offer flowers or rice soaked in water with *kumkum*, vermillion powder, as you chant his 108 names or his bija mantra repeated 108 times. Offer *abhisheka,* bathing of the Lord with fresh water, milk, ghee, honey or *panchamrit*, five nectars of banana, ghee, honey, brown sugar and milk, as is convenient. If possible, offer flowers with the thousand names of the Lord. Offer water and burn camphor. Mentally always think of the form of the Divine; although you worship the image, keep the all-pervading God before your mental eye. Sing God's glories and chant His names.

Offer prayers and surrender to the Divine. Hear the stories of the Divine as recorded in the *Bhagavatam* and *Ramayana*. Say, "Oh Lord! Have mercy on me. Be gracious unto me." Place your head on His feet and pray, "Oh Lord! Protect me from the ocean of samsara with the shark of death in it. I am terribly afraid of it. I have taken shelter in You." Do everything with the feeling that you are an instrument in the hands of the Divine. There should be no selfish desires behind your worship.

What are the components of pooja according to tantra?

Swami Niranjanananda: The first aspect of aradhana, *karma-kanda*, the physical act, is identified as a ritual, something that you do externally, a worship or *pooja*. In order to understand any created object or life form, you have to know three things about it: name, form and quality. For example, if you do not know the name 'tree', and you do not know the form of the tree or the quality of the tree, then even if the tree is there, you will not be able to recognize it. If you do not know the name, if you do not experience and realize the form, if you are not aware of the quality contained in the form, then there is no awareness, there is no realization. Each and every object in creation is recognized by name,

form and quality. If any one of these is absent, knowledge is incomplete. For knowledge to be complete, these three things must be known. In this context, the name is the mantra, the form is the image, and the quality is your realization of the inherent powers of that image.

In karmakanda, the external act, the image and the name are used. For instance, if you look at a Periodic Table of the elements, you will find the name of an element, either one letter or two letters, and those letters represent the nature and quality of that particular element as well as the name. In the same manner, image also plays a role. When you see an image in front of you, the mind associates, connects and identifies with that image or form. The image is used to focus the mental attention.

What are the five elements that we offer to the image? In any ritual, a flower is offered first. The flower represents the *prithvi tattwa*, the earth element. It is a product of the earth. Earth is insentient and a flower is also insentient. The goodness of the earth, the beauty of the earth, the smell of the earth, the colours of the earth are seen in the flower, and that is what you offer first. The second thing that you offer is water. The sprinkling of water, as is done in havans and in different forms of worships, is the offering of *jala tattwa*, the water element. Third is the element of fire, *agni tattwa* – lighting the deepak, the jyoti. The image or form is shown in that jyoti; that is the offering of fire. The fourth element is air, *vayu tattwa* – the lighting of incense. The fumes of the incense become one with the air molecules and pervade the entire environment with their sweet smell; that represents air. The fifth element is space, the *akasha tattwa*, which is offered through *shabda* or sound. Sound is an attribute of space, therefore mantra becomes the fifth element, representing space. In any worship, in any ritual to any cosmic power, offering of these five items becomes the pooja.

These five items are offered with the *bhavana* or sentiment that 'You are the creator of all this, and I am offering You the best of what You have created.' This

sentiment, this bhavana, becomes constant, powerful and strong provided that you keep on nourishing that sentiment.

Every sentiment develops and grows as you nourish it. Hatred will develop and grow as you nourish hatred, and greed will grow as you nourish greed. Jealousy will grow as you nourish jealousy. You nurture the negative. You feed the negative. Through karmakanda you nurture the positive, you become aware of the positive and identify with the positive. That is the purpose of rituals. Karmakanda is, therefore, the first part of aradhana, in which the mind connects, identifies and fuses with the symbol, and you offer the best of the five elements to the cosmic power which will, in turn, nourish you.

This principle of karmakanda is also a theory of quantum physics. The theory of quantum physics states that you can pick up anything, a rock from the road, and bring it to your home. That rock has no energy, no power, no shakti. However, every morning you perform pooja to this rock, and in the course of time, you will see the shakti of the rock come alive. That shakti in the rock will respond to you, and according to the power of your invocation, it can give you the benefits of worship. The human mind works in the dimension of energy, and symbols are there to guide the energy flowing from the human mind. That is the first part of aradhana.

Why is pooja recommended as a practice to attain bhakti?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanatan dharma, a mild form of yoga, known as pooja, is given in the early stages. Pooja is a form of pratyahara sadhana. It is not a high powered act. It is necessary for those men, women and children who have tender minds. In Sanatan dharma, the stronger mode of pratyahara is not given to everybody. Only after practising the milder form for a sustained period should the aspirant become consistent in one kind of sadhana like *nama japa* (japa of the name), *nama smaran* (remembrance of the name) or *nama sankirtan* (singing the name). These practices are

capable of raising the mind to the heights of dhyana and samadhi. Any or all of these three can definitely be used to transcend the barriers of time, space and object in order to reach the final destination.

The best sadhana in this age is to do pooja with deep faith. There is no risk at all in this type of sadhana. Repeat God's name, spread God's name, write God's name, do japa of God's name, sing God's name, teach God's name, inspire the people to love God's name. Whether one does music or dance, mantra or japa in the form of kala sadhana, it has to be practised daily. There should be no laziness.

How can one do a simple pooja at home and what makes it uplifting?

Swami Niranjanananda: Prakriti is the force of creation through which the jiva comes to the divine. In this sequence, external rituals are involved such as poojas, small ceremonies that people can do in their home to create a centre of positive vibration, where they feel uplifted and at peace. Here the individual is trying to understand his role in life, his connection with the cosmos.

The ladder to realize the cosmos is through *prakriti*, nature, through the *tattwas*, the elements. You can begin to connect with the tattwas or elements of nature by having a small corner in your home to keep the things you consider spiritual: a little statue of a laughing Buddha, a small cross, an Om symbol, a photo of Jesus, a photo of Swami Sivananda or Satyananda, or maybe a picture of Shiva or Devi. That is your place of peace and prayer. This place is the simple form of creating a place of cosmic strength in your house. In all traditions, air, fire and water are the three tattwas used to worship the altar. Lighting a small deepak, an oil lamp or candle, represents fire, an incense stick represents the air element, and a little water represents the water element.

This is how the ancients used to connect with the divine prior to the existence of any structured religious belief.

Cultural traditions of the past have always used nature to understand the transcendental. The so-called modern traditions have neglected nature. They try to find a straight connection between the manifest and the divine, and therefore they can never find the missing link. How can you make the big jump from manifest to unmanifest? You have to go through the stages of experiencing and knowing the subtle and the gross manifestations of nature.

How can one achieve a high quality of devotion during pooja?

Swami Satyananda: This high quality of devotion can only come if the body, prana and mind are trained through yoga. There has to be chittashuddhi, pranashuddhi, bhutashuddhi. If one sits for pooja without bathing, without putting on clean clothes, without attending to nature's calls, with a full stomach, how would one feel? In the same way, one should take care of the mind. People bathe and change their clothes, but do not understand that if the mind is not focused, the pooja is wasted, it does not bear fruit, because they have only attended to the non-essentials, not to the essentials.

The mind is the basis. If one does pooja, if the mind is one-pointed, there will be darshan of God, *Bhagavat darshan*. For this one must practise yoga, the children must practise yoga and learn pranayama. That is one secret. People say that it is difficult to control the mind, and it is, for one who has no *yukti*, no technique, no trick. Pranayama is the trick. If pranayama is performed before pooja, for fifteen minutes with pooraka, kumbhaka and rechaka, the mind will be calm, quiet and steady throughout the pooja because pranayama at once controls the mind. Therefore, learn asana and pranayama.

What are the ways to perform manasika or mental pooja?

Swami Sivananda: *Manasika*, or mental pooja, is preferable to actual pooja of the murti with flowers, sandal paste and other items, but beginners should start with physical pooja. When

they advance in devotion, they can take up mental worship. Sri Shankara's mental pooja in the form *Atma Tvam*, *Girija Matih* is a beautiful way of worshipping God mentally. Learn this sloka by heart and before starting worship repeat it with bhava. Mental pooja consists of offering mentally flowers, sandal paste, cloth, ornaments, food to God. Shiva was more pleased with the mental worship of Bhima than the actual offering.

In mental pooja, the worship of the Divine is performed without any external materials. The same services, or *upachara*, offered in the outer pooja are mentally offered to the deity. There is no difference regarding the items and the sequence of offerings. Before starting, all the materials necessary for the pooja must be imagined in the mind, and during the pooja one should mentally feel that one is offering each item to the Divine, as in formal worship. In the mind the worship takes place. In the mind the incense, sandal paste, flowers are offered to the Divine. In mental pooja one must generate the feeling of what is otherwise offered with the hands. Feeling is more powerful than action, so concentration is better in mental pooja than in external pooja.

Mental pooja belongs to the interiorized forms of ritual, like mental bath, mental fire sacrifice or mental repetition of a mantra. Mental pooja cannot be thought of without the idea of the external pooja on which it is modelled. As imagination is unrestricted, more offerings, and among them rare and expensive ones of best quality and in any season, may be given. The image that receives these offerings is also mental. When this pooja is performed, mentally enthrone your God on a beautiful seat of honour, set with diamonds, pearls and emeralds. Mentally apply sandal paste to His forehead and body. Mentally offer water, *madhuparka*, various sorts of exotic flowers and magnificent clothes. Mentally burn the most fragrant incense, wave lights and burn camphor. Mentally offer various kinds of fruits and sumptuous sweetmeats. Be extremely generous in manasika pooja, and in no way miserly.

In tantric pooja, the mental worship usually comes first, followed by the outer pooja. After being worshipped mentally in the devotee's heart, the deity also enters the image or *yantra*, the geometric symbol of divinity, and is worshipped outwardly. For the entire duration of the outer pooja, the deity is ever-present in the devotee's heart. In mental pooja, offerings can be symbolic. For example, the lotus of the devotee's heart is offered as the deity's seat, *asana*; the nectar flowing from sahasrara chakra is the water for washing the feet, *padya*; the mind is the *arghya,* offering; the functions of the senses and the restlessness of the mind are *nritya,* dance.

Mental pooja demands full concentration of the mind and cannot be done absentmindedly. Therefore, when performed correctly, mental worship is said to be far superior to outer worship. While outer pooja requires the use of utensils and materials to be offered, mental pooja can be done independently. Purification rites, bathing, cleaning one's teeth, similar to those preceding the outer worship, are performed mentally first. In the end, repeat mentally, "Whatever action I perform with the body, speech, mind, senses, intellect or my own nature, I offer to the Supreme." Finally repeat, "I offer everything to the Absolute – *Om Tat Sat Brahmarpanamastu*." This will purify the heart and remove the taint of expectation of reward.

What is the essential element to any pooja or ritual?

Swami Niranjanananda: People have become misers; they do not have the right sentiments. The pooja is done because they want freedom from some misery or pain or because they expect some reward from the effort. That pooja does not have the essence of worship. Most people sit for some time to do the pooja and then have it done by someone else, generally the Brahmins. Therefore the custom has been distorted. People generate negative thoughts and make excuses like, "It is a lot of hard work. I have to sit for eight hours. I cannot read Sanskrit. I cannot sit that long. I

am already unwell." These are negative thoughts and true worship is impossible in their presence.

Another point is that the altars are made in a half-hearted way, not with devotion. The logic given is, "Oh, it is only a question of nine days, after that they will be broken up anyway. Let us make them of mud; let us plaster them with cow dung." After the pooja no one has any respect for the structure where the gods and deities were invoked. What happens to it after the ninth day? Dogs and cats are found urinating there. People have no *shraddha* or faith for that area where the deity resides.

Many mistakes like this are made and as a result the fruits of the pooja cannot be fully obtained; the blessings of Bhagavati cannot be realized. If some effort is made and everything is organized efficiently the effects will be apparent in one's life.

The yardstick of successful organization is not the expenditure incurred or the number of people who turn up for the event. The success of the event depends on how much of one's body, mind, feelings and spirit have been offered. Industrialists can spend millions to organize a beautiful yajna. They can invite millions of people, yet, if the sentiments and feelings of devotion do not exist, the event will become a party. How effective will the yajna be then?

As long as the flame, the *jyoti*, receives oxygen, it will burn. If you cut off the oxygen supply it will go out. The shraddha, bhakti and faith of those present work as the oxygen. The chanting, the pooja and the atmosphere that develops is the jyoti. The brilliance and grandeur of the jyoti depends on how much oxygen it is fed.

LIVING WORSHIP

How should one maintain concentration during pooja?

Swami Satyananda: When doing pooja, one should concentrate only on the pooja. There should be nothing else in the mind. Of course, if the child is small, one has to make

allowances, but if the children are older, it is better to let them face their ups and downs rather than interfering. If one tries to attend to something else while doing pooja, neither will be done properly. The mind will move away from the pooja towards the distraction. Therefore, the less one thinks about anything other than the pooja, the better it will be. Yoga means to quieten the mind and to maintain a one-pointed state.

How can one imbibe the spirit of pooja?

Swami Satyananda: This is not an intellectual feat, it is a spiritual feat. The basis of a spiritual feat is the inner feeling, one's spiritual and inner receptivity. The spirit of this pooja is imbibed not through understanding but by feeling. Why do they sprinkle water, why do they sing loud or soft, why do they chant that mantra five times? These are all intellectual questions. Either they have no answer or they have as many answers as can be given.

The only point is that mantra and ritualistic worship, the *karmakanda*, the tantric form of worship, creates a stir, a living movement in the etheric plane, in the plane of energy, a plane few people have reached. Man is not only the little he knows about himself. One only knows the tip of the iceberg.

That infinite atma, that infinite personality, that infinite being that one is, is still hidden. That is the tragedy of the human being: he has it but does not know it. Kabirdas said:

Tera saai tujjha men jyon pushpana men baas
Kasturi kaa miraga jyon puni puni khojai ghaas.

Your Lord lives within you
as the fragrance remains in the flower.
But man, like the musk deer,
searches for the scent in the worldly grass.

Like the musk deer, everything is within. It is that inner being which is being stirred by the mantras and rituals.

They influence the etheric personality, not the conscious mind, not the subconscious mind and not the unconscious mind. The conscious, subconscious and unconscious is just the tip of the iceberg – man extends far beyond the unconscious.

Why do scriptures say women should not practise pooja during their menstrual cycle?

Swami Satyananda: When pooja, meditation, or even pranayama, except bhastrika and kapalbhati, are practised, the inner body temperature based on hormonal adjustment is also affected. The period of menstruation is not only a physiological process. It involves the psychological process as well: a deep psychological process – emotions, hallucinations and more. At this time of emotional imbalance, if meditation is practised, one will have unbalanced experiences, not in all cases, but it can happen.

According to the Hindu scriptures, poojas, the spiritual or religious practices should not be done during periods of mental imbalance, mental turmoil or restlessness. When someone is born in the family or someone dies, these two periods affect the emotions very much, either through happiness or through sorrow. At that time, someone who goes deep into meditation will see his own psychological and emotional reflections, and he may even misunderstand those reflections to be spiritual experiences. That is the reason why, during the period of acute emotional restlessness, it is better to practise simple pranayama, a few asanas, and a lot of japa, but not deep meditation.

Why are some traditions opposed to women performing pooja and other rituals?

Swami Satyananda: Ladies should learn pooja and chanting of the Sanskrit stotras and perform these rituals in their homes. In Maharashtra there is a place called Shirdi and the establishment of Sai Baba is nearby. A saint named Upasani Maharaj lived in the vicinity. He had a disciple

whose name was Sati Godavari. Girls used to live in that ashram, even young girls, and they were taught vedic rituals and chanting of the Vedas. Maharashtra is orthodox and the people objected to females chanting the Vedas, although there is not a single point in favour of this opposition. Nowhere in the smritis, Kalpa shastras, or any of the religious texts has it been said that a woman cannot wear the sacred thread. In all the six philosophies, four Vedas, one hundred and eight Upanishads, eighteen Puranas and two epics, nowhere is it written that a female cannot wear the sacred thread.

The second point is that women should not conduct pooja and other rituals. This is also not mentioned anywhere in the scriptures, yet it is the reason why female priests are not found in temples. This restriction is only due to the Muslim and Christian influence on Indian culture. In Islam and Christianity one does not find female priests. It is only recently that some provision has been made for female clergy in the Protestant church. When the Protestants allowed women to become priests, many people resigned their membership. They said, it is written in the Bible that women should not conduct rituals in the church, but this is absolutely wrong.

Karmakanda refers to the precise rituals for the chanting of mantras and the conduct of pooja. There is a correct method for doing pooja, just as there is a correct method for constructing a house, cooking a dish, or stitching cloth and making a shirt. Everything one does in the world has a definite process and method. In the same way, there is a definite process for pooja and that is called *vidhi*. Women are certainly qualified to learn the chanting of mantras and the correct method of performing pooja. When women perform these rituals in the home, as well as in the temples and sacred places, then society will benefit and the social atmosphere will improve.

What should be considered when discussing pooja and the menstrual cycle?

Swami Niranjanananda: There was a time when women were asked to stay away from household work during their menstrual period due to a lack of facilities. They were asked to take rest. This is the only point and nothing else. In the modern age there are so many ways to maintain hygiene. Advertisements are seen on television and billboards saying: menstruation is not a problem. It is not a sin.

As far as menstruation is concerned, it purifies the body. Poisonous hormones and toxins of the body are cleared away during menstruation. After that the body attains purity.

Today facilities are available and hygienic conditions have been created. In places where these facilities are not available, such as remote villages, previous rules are still followed. These rules are not the ultimate commandments that need to be followed. Sri Swami Satyananda said that when the body is purified, the mind is also purified.

People go to the toilet daily, and it is not impious, yet menstruation becomes impious. The fact is that faeces have more dirt than menstrual discharge. Both men and women contain faeces, yet they perform pooja and offer their prayers. No objections are raised to that.

Yet when the body is undergoing the process of purification, people raise questions. When the body is undergoing purification, there is no harm, no sin. Religious rituals are not concerned with physical impurities but with mental impurities.

One has to focus on the purity of intention, purity of thought, purity of emotions, purity of faith and purity of convictions. When one has purity and faith in one's convictions, these things do not matter at all.

Are there any rules and restrictions in the performance of pooja?

Swami Satyananda: There are certain rules for Devi pooja but not for Shiva. This is natural. Even in ordinary life there is *maryada*, or a code of conduct, with the mother, not with the

father. Shiva can be worshipped in any way, but sometimes one has to follow rules with one's mother. No rules work with the father, but there is a code with the mother, even for her own son.

Anything which bears fruit quickly requires greater restrictions and stricter rules. At the bank there are restrictions, a process to be followed to withdraw money. The process of worship is similar. All worship is coded under the title of tantra. In tantra, the aspects of mantra, kriya and upachara have to be accurate, because these processes influence the mind, emotions and psyche. Therefore, carelessness in performing them will influence the psyche negatively.

Is there a deeper significance in the use of flowers in worship?

Swami Satyananda: Oh flowers! The most beautiful thing that God has created besides the heart of man! The most beautiful thing is the heart of man, but the next most beautiful thing is the flower. Therefore flowers represent the most beautiful, the most delicate and the most pure sentiments of man.

So far as the practice of yoga is concerned, flowers have an immediate influence on the chakras and on the mind. They help the mind to go in.

What is para pooja?

Swami Sivananda: Uddhava asked Sri Krishna the method of worshipping Paramatman. Sri Krishna replied that the upasaka should sit on a level seat in a comfortable posture. He should commence with the practice of pranayama, followed by *pratyahara,* sense control, and then repetition of the mantra *Aum.* He should perform this worship three times daily for one month to acquire breath control. He should then fix his mind on the heart centre and contemplate the sun, the moon and fire. In that fire, he should visualize the sacred form of the Divine of dark blue hue, with the goddess

Lakshmi sitting beside Him. He should see God with four arms, graceful poise and a charming smile, adorned with ornaments, a garland of flowers and the precious jewel. In his hands he should see the conch, chakra and mace. Contemplating in this way upon the form of the Divine, the upasaka becomes one with Him. By performing this *para pooja* intensely, and abandoning all else, the upasaka experiences the *Paramatman*, or Supreme Soul.

In the traditional para pooja attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, the jnani devotee mentally worships the Supreme without attributes. This form of pooja is beautifully described in the following poem:

Why summon by invocation that which fills all?
Where is the seat for the indweller of all?
Why give water for feet washing or oblation to one who is transparently dear?
Why offer water for rinsing the mouth to one who is absolutely pure?
Why bathe one who is free of all blemish and stain?
Why offer clothing to one who encompasses all?
Why give a sacred thread for one who needs no support?
Why adorn with ornaments one who is intrinsically beautiful?
Why offer perfume to one without odour?
Why offer flowers to one without vasanas?
Why offer incense to one free of all scent?
Why wave lamps before one who is self-luminous?
Why make a food offering to one who is ever satisfied?
Why offer the after meal betel nut to one who is all pervading?
What fruit offering can there be for the giver of fruits?
What gift can be offered to the Lord of Lakshmi?
What circumambulution is done of one whose extent is without end?
How can there be bowing before the One who has no second?

What leave-taking can there be of that which is full within, and without?

The para pooja of jnanis is considered to be the highest kind of worship in all conditions and at all times. Immersed in this worship, the devotee feels that he can do nothing but experience God. He thinks, "Oh how can I worship You, who is without parts, who is Existence itself? How can I pray to You when You are my very being itself? How can I offer water to You, when You are ever pure?" This form of para pooja leads to direct realization of the Self.

Is there a form of worship that connects one with the Divine through Nature?

Swami Niranjanananda: Before philosophical and religious systems came into existence, people used to commune with the divine in a simple way. The five elements are space, air, fire, water and earth. The power and grace of God is experienced in the element earth. Space is unmanifest matter. Earth is manifest matter. We survive because of the earth. Earth has given everything in abundance. Mother Earth is the representative of the power, benevolence and compassion of God. If you plant a seed in a handful of soil, it will sprout. Earth is always giving, but human beings return waste, polluting chemicals and fertilizers to the earth. The rampant destruction of this beautiful element now threatens our survival. Earth represents the ultimate power of God. It represents the ultimate power of prakriti, Nature.

There is an ancient practice which indicates how people used to connect with the divine before religions and temples were established. It is a simple way to connect with the transformative, nourishing power of earth and see its connection with the transcendental. Take a lump of earth or clay in your hand and make a pinda, a shape, for example, a small oval-shaped Shivalingam. The base of the pinda is connected to vasundhara, the earth, which gives everything in abundance for our welfare, happiness, health, joy,

prosperity and peace. The tip is connected to the invisible power in space. This powerful symbol represents that which links the manifest and unmanifest dimensions of existence.

It is worshipped with three elements. Sprinkling a little water on it is worship with the water element. Placing a deepak or flame, in front of it is worship with the fire element. Waving incense is worship with the air element. It is a simple idea. So, the pinda comes from the earth, reaches into space and is worshipped by the three elements in between. This ancient practice is a beautiful way of connecting with the elements and the power of prakriti, the power of shakti, which is inherent and contained in earth. We experience God's grace and abundance not through space, air, water or fire, but through earth. Earth gives us life, nourishment, sustenance and the opportunity to grow. In reality, earth is God. It represents the manifest power of the transcendental self or consciousness.

Living naturally is connecting with each and every element within each and every being on this planet and also with the Divine. That is the focus of bhakti yoga. In karmakanda, the aspect of ritual, this ritualistic interaction with nature takes place.

Later, many different images, concepts and theories were included in worship. People have imposed likes and dislikes and modified the natural form of worship. Placing a flower because they like it, is an addition, but it is not necessary and has no role to play. The simplest and most natural way is just connecting with those elements which have made it possible for life to come into being. This is the highest form of bhakti because it does not involve any kind of self-projection or adherence to any conditioning. Even Shiva or Devi are conditionings, although they are realities too. When one thinks of Shiva or Shakti, one is only thinking of one aspect of that cosmic quality. There has to be a focus, which is the *sakara* or manifest form of that divine quality. It can be a guru, an avatar, a master, an image, impression or symbol, but these are only used to channel one's feelings and thought

FORM AND FORMLESS WORSHIP

What are some examples of worship of God as a form and formless worship?

Swami Sivananda: Hearing stories of God, singing kirtan and bhajan, constant remembrance of God, service of His feet, offering flowers, prostration, prayer, chanting of mantras, self-surrender, service of devotees, service of humanity and country with *Narayana bhava*, attitude of serving all, constitute worship of a form, *saguna upasana*. An object of worship is necessary for man to pour forth his love and devotion.

Service to humanity and country with atmabhava, mental japa of *Om*, chanting of *Om* with atmabhava, meditation on the mantras *Soham* or *Shivoham*, or on the *mahavakyas,* the great sayings of the Upanishads, such as *Aham Brahmasmi* or *Tat Tvam Asi*, and contemplation of the doctrine *neti-neti*, 'not this, not this', constitute examples of worship without form, *nirguna upasana*.

Why is a form necessary?

Swami Niranjanananda: The ancients said that the higher reality could be experienced in two forms. The unmanifest or *nirakara* is formless, attributeless, nameless and timeless. God can also be experienced as *sakara*, with attributes, forms, names and identities. The formless and the form of God, they both were accepted. The reasoning behind this was simple, pure and innocent. If one is able to realize the subtle nature of reality, then that is an attainment, realization and achievement of divinity.

Those things which can be given a shape, and which can be brought into the ambit of the intellect, intelligence and mind are considered to be with form, sakara. Form does not mean the body, the external body, but anything which is identified is a form. A thought or desire that generates in the mind has a form – the envy that one experiences, the greed and jealousy that one experiences, and the love and affection that one experiences. They are mental, yet they

have a form. They are identified as something definite. Some abstract thing takes a form. The form is given so that one can understand that abstract quality. Words that are spoken are forms expressed by the mind in order to convey something. Anything which is created, composed of the five elements or one element, is a form; anything beyond the grasp of the five elements of the senses is formless. That is the concept of nirakara and sakara: the manifest world which is perceived, perceivable by the senses and the mind and the unmanifest dimension not perceivable by the senses and the mind.

After all, the only tool which you have to understand the cosmic reality is a small mind. It is like a single cell torch light in the darkness of the jungle – pitch black, *amavasya*, no moon, no stars, nothing. In that pitch black darkness of the jungle you only have a single cell torch. How much road will you illuminate with it? What area can you illuminate with it? A tiny part, a miniscule part. In the same way, how can the cosmic and universal reality be understood and grasped by this monkey mind, which doesn't even understand the basic principles of a human relationship? That is the mind trying to comprehend the mysteries of the universe.

It is not possible to grasp the nirakara. In order to access the nirakara, you have to have the sakara. Nirakara, the unmanifest, is the top of the roof, the ceiling, the terrace. You need to have steps. You can't just take a flying leap because you are not superman. You need to use steps to go up. Steps become the medium for you to reach the terrace. In the same manner, the manifest forms become the medium to access the unmanifest.

What is the purpose of worshipping the Divine through a form?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Swami Satyananda says that in order to climb up to the roof you need a ladder. Once you have reached the roof, throw the ladder away, as it is no longer needed. In the same way, in order to experience the nirakara or the formless, in the beginning it is necessary to have a sakara

symbol. According to Sri Swami Satyananda the foundation of Indian culture is worship of images or idols. On account of this, India has been attacked by different cultures that believe idol worship should not be performed, as God is formless and should not be portrayed by a form or an idol. However, Swami Satyananda states that if you accept only the formless God and do not accept the different forms, it is an insult to the omniscience and omnipresence of God. If God is omnipresent and omniscient, then he is everywhere, whether with form or without. If you accept God only as nirakara and negate his sakara aspect, then that God cannot be poorna, complete.

All the methods and techniques of upasana or aradhana all over the world are essentially sakara. If you are focusing on your breath, that breath is sakara: it is a form on which your mind is focusing. If you are meditating on a mantra, that mantra is sakara: it is the support for your mind. If you meditate on a form, you connect yourself with that form. Aradhana or upasana cannot be a nirakara method.

How can the sakara mind accept the nirakara? Take the example of a water pot whose mouth is closed. When this pot is dipped in water, no water will enter. However, when the mouth is open, water will immediately enter. When a person contemplates on the formless or nirakara God and does not accept God with form, that is like a pot in the water with its mouth closed. The water cannot go inside, and so remains outside. That person is not able to experience God in his life. This is why in the Indian tradition and philosophy, sakara has been accepted as more important than nirakara, as this is the path that can take you to your ishta.

In the vedic tradition, is God seen as having a form or is God formless?

Swami Satyananda: In the *Srimad Bhagavatam* it is said:

> You are formless, but for the convenience of my meditation I have created a form for you. You are placeless, but in order to worship you I have erected

a place for you. You are beyond all description, but in order to pray I have created your descriptions. God, due to my inability and inexperience, I have committed three sins. Please pardon me.

The absolute experience is beyond time and space. At the same time, most people cannot visualize the formless aspect. So from time to time, God has incarnated himself in different manifestations and forms, *avatars*, so the devotees will love Him. I like Sri Rama very much because His personality is absolute, disciplined, systematic and perfect. Other people are attracted to Sri Krishna as the ideal form and embodiment of joy, dynamism, love and music. For others still, the form of Shiva, whose detachment is perfect, is the form of greatest attraction. The form of the supreme varies according to the inclination and personality of the devotee. These forms become the object of awareness through which the devotee moves forward and evolves.

In the vedic tradition, everyone starts from where they are and ultimately all converge in the centre. It is not necessary that only Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Govinda, Devi, Christ or Mohammed will take one there. Any way one goes will take one there. That is experience, and after experience there is fulfilment.

Why is there a need to worship God with form?

Swami Satyananda: It is very easy to say that God is formless, but how will you experience it? What will you think of, what will you see, whom will you worship? In reality, although people speak of a 'formless God', they do not understand it and are not able to experience it. When the formless God realized this, He felt great compassion. He said to the Goddess, "This is a big problem. These people keep saying, 'God this, and God that', but actually they do not understand anything at all." Devi said, "Let us both go there," and so they both embodied in different forms. God became Rama and the Goddess became Sita, God became Krishna and the

Goddess became Radha, God became Shiva and the Goddess became Girija.

Both came and enacted a play, a play that would be useful to people. Krishna came and he played a part suited to the age. Rama lived according to his time. Everyone agreed that he was a very good person, an avatara.

By contemplating on God, Rama, Sita or Shiva and by worshipping them, the mind gradually becomes clean and purified; it becomes silent and clear. When the inner mirror starts becoming clean, the formless begins to reveal itself. Eyes are needed even to see the formless, the *nirakara*; however, you do not have those eyes, no one does. You say that there are germs in the water, but where are they? I do not see them. First, we need a microscope to look through. Just as germs and microbes can be seen only through a microscope, similarly, the eye of knowledge is needed for the experience of God. It is said in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Balakanda, after doha 1):

> *Guru pada raja mridu manjula anjana,*
> *Nayana amia driga dosha bibhanjana.*
>
> The dust of the guru's feet is like the soft, beautiful kohl;
> If you wear it in your eye, all defects of the vision will be destroyed.

Tulsidas says that everyone has cataracts or faulty vision, and that is why it is not possible to see anything. Therefore, the cataracts have to be removed. How can they be removed? First comes the guru, and then, more importantly, the dust of the guru's feet. That cures the malady of the eyes so that even the formless God may be seen.

There are many descriptions of rishis and munis such as Markandeya, Sanak, Sanandan, Sanat Kumar and Shukadeva who had this vision, this eye of knowledge. Shukadeva was a brahmarishi, the son of Vyasdeva. He left home at the age of five and was a person who experienced the formless God. Yet what did he teach people? He taught *Krishna bhakti*,

devotion to Krishna. The *Srimad Bhagavatam* was recited by Shukadeva. Why would a graduate or professor of the subtle knowledge of the formless teach about the the manifest God?

Maybe you have a PhD, but if you have to teach students of the seventh grade, you will have to teach according to their level. The teacher has to teach, not according to how much he knows, but according to the capacity of his student. Shukadeva was a *Brahmajnani*, a knower of God. He had a degree in the knowledge of the Absolute, but he taught people Krishna bhakti. What else can a simple man learn but Krishna bhakti? Worshipping a form of God is the link, the thread to reach the formless. One has to hold the thread and move forward slowly.

Tulsidas has said it clearly, "Why are you eagerly awaiting the formless with a garland in your hands? Remain only with the form." He even said that the formless God is very simple and easy, because what is there to ask about? The difficult thing to deal with is the *sakara*, the God with form. As soon as you talk about sakara God, people will ask a hundred questions, while if you talk about the nirakara God, everyone falls silent. The formless is simple. It is the form that is difficult, because it is hard to understand and to believe. Even Sati doubted that Rama was an avatara. If Sati doubted, then what chance do you or I have? Despite Shiva's explanations, she still went to test Rama. Everyone doubts; that is why sakara is very difficult. Nevertheless, worship has to begin with sakara and while worshipping the form, remember one thing: *shraddha*, faith, and *vishwasa*, trust.

What are the main distinctions between worship of the manifest and unmanifest?

Swami Niranjanananda: The tradition speaks of two methods of upasana, two ways of communing with God or the higher self. The first method is concentration on *nirakara*, the formless, attributeless, unmanifest. The second method is concentration on *sakara*, manifest form. There are different views as to what is manifest and what is unmanifest. Some

say that concentration on an image, figure, idol, carving or picture is sakara upasana, or worship of a manifest form. Any process or method that one adopts to experience the transcendental quality has to be manifest. The breath is also a symbol on which one concentrates. If one thinks of a mantra such as *Om* or *Om Namah Shivaya*, the sentence, the word, the vibration, also becomes a symbol, a manifest form of energy. Focusing on the sun, moon, stars, a lake, a mountain, one's own shadow, is also sakara or form, an object on which one is concentrating. The mind cannot function without a definite point of reference, which is sakara, or manifest form.

Whether one worships an idol with twenty hands, ten heads and two legs, or whether one concentrates on the image of a distant star, the same thing is happening in the mind, but the belief and interpretation can be different. Logic and intellectual interpretation is not relevant at that time. A distant star is a symbol and a ten-headed monster is also a symbol. With the star one associates no attribute, as it is there in form of a point of light. With the image one associates a quality. If one sees the image of Shiva, apart from the picture, the quality comes to mind. If one associates with the image of Devi, Rama, Krishna or guru, apart from the image, there is awareness of the quality and an understanding that it is either divine or diabolical, so there is already a colouring to it. No one is free from that conditioning. Another image which does not contain such conditioning is an abstract image, like a distant star, yet despite it not having a colouring, one knows that it is a star. The association of idea with form is always there, one cannot negate this association, and that is called sakara worship.

Mantra, yantra, mandala, chakra and visualization are part of the manifest process of meditation, but they are more intimately connected with one's inner psychic development. When one perceives a chakra, one does not see it as divine or demonical. It is inside, not as separate from oneself. So kriya yoga, kundalini yoga, mantra yoga, nada yoga, and chakra

sadhanas are internal upasana, by which one is able to realize one particular state of existence, harmonize it and acquire purity and balance.

What does the *Bhagavad Gita* say about worship of God with form as well as the formless God?

Swami Sivananda: It is said in *Bhagavad Gita* by Sri Krishna (9:15):

> *Jnaanayajnena chaapyanye yajanto maamupaasate;*
> *Ekatvena prithaktvena bahudhaa vishvatomukham.*
>
> Others also sacrificing with the wisdom-sacrifice worship
> Me the All-faced, as one, as distinct and as manifold.

Others too sacrificing by the wisdom-sacrifice, seeing the Self in all, adore Me the One and the manifold, present everywhere. They regard all the forms they see as the forms of God, all sounds they hear as the names of God. They give all objects they eat as offerings unto the Divine in various ways. Some adore Him with the knowledge that there is only one reality, the Supreme Being who is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. They identify themselves with the Truth or Brahman. This is the monistic view of Vedantins. Some worship Him with the knowledge that He exists as the various divinities, Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Shiva. Sri Krishna says (12:5):

> *Klesho'dhikatarasteshaamavyaktaasaktachetasaam;*
> *Avyaktaa hi gatirduhkham dehavadbhiravaapyate.*
>
> For those whose mind is fixed on the unmanifest, there is greater difficulty; it is a very difficult aim for the embodied.

Worshippers of the saguna, qualified, and the nirguna, unqualified, Brahman reach the same goal. The latter path is hard and arduous because the aspirant has to give up attachment to the body from the beginning of his spiritual practice. He who realizes the nirguna or attributeless

Brahman attains eternal bliss or self-realization or *kaivalya*, moksha, which is preceded by the destruction of ignorance with its effects.

He who realizes the saguna Brahman, Brahman with attributes, goes to Brahma loka and enjoys the wealth and powers of God. He then receives initiation into the mysteries of the absolute from hiranyagarbha and without any effort and without the practice of hearing, reflection and meditation attains, through the grace of God alone, the same state as attained by those who have realized the nirguna Brahman. Through the knowledge of the Self, ignorance and its effects are destroyed in the case of the worshippers of the saguna Brahman also.

What is the difference between saguna Brahman and nirguna Brahman and how do they relate to worship?

Swami Sivananda: Saguna Brahman is with limiting adjunct, *maya*, and nirguna Brahman is without any limiting adjunct; He is free from maya. Saguna Brahman is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent; saguna Brahman is Ishwara. Nirguna Brahman assumes the form of saguna Brahman for His sport, *lila,* and for the pious worship of devotees.

Worshippers of saguna and nirguna Brahman reach the same goal. It is difficult for those with attachments to reach the imperishable Brahman, which is unmanifest, incomprehensible to the senses and devoid of all attributes. The nirguna Brahman is beyond time, space and causation; it is eternal and indefinable. Therefore, in the early stages of sadhana it is extremely difficult to fix the mind on nirguna Brahman.

Saguna Brahman has form and attribute, yet is still omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent; saguna Brahman is Ishwara. One who realizes saguna Brahman attains *kaivalya*, separation from the wheel of life and death, without any effort, through the grace of God. In this way he experiences the same state attained by jnanis through the practices of *shravana*, hearing the scriptures, *manana*, reflec-

tion on their meaning, and *nididhyasana*, deep meditation. *Avidya* or ignorance is destroyed in the saguna worshipper through knowledge of the Self.

Saguna upasana relates to the practices of bhakti yoga, and nirguna upasana to the practices of jnana yoga, the yoga of knowledge. In nirguna upasana the aspirant aspires to attain realization by imbibing the four means of liberation:

1. *Viveka*, discrimination
2. *Vairagya*, indifference to sensual enjoyments
3. *Shatsampat*, sixfold wealth: *sama*, tranquillity, *dama*, restraint, *uparati*, renunciation, *titiksha*, endurance, *shraddha*, faith, and *samadhana*, balance of mind
4. *Mumukshutva*, keen longing for liberation, deliverance from the round of births and deaths.

Then he approaches a guru who has realized the Supreme Self and hears the scriptures from him. Afterwards he reflects and meditates on the atman, and eventually attains direct realization of the Self. Contemplation on nirguna Brahman demands a sharp, one-pointed and subtle intellect. The scriptures say: "The atman is hidden in all things and does not shine forth, but is seen by seers through their sharp and subtle intellect." One who realizes the nirguna Brahman attains eternal bliss, self-realization or kaivalya, liberation, which is preceded by the destruction of avidya.

What method of worship relates best to the bhakta?

Swami Satyananda: If the mind fixes itself on a human form of God, it is good as this is an important aspect of bhakti. How can one feel if one's God does not eat, sleep or talk? To love God, one must have a concept. He is a living God and a living God eats. What kind of child, for example, does not eat or talk? My child eats, and this is a particular concept. For instance, my Ganesha in Ganesha Kutir changes his clothes four times a year. In winter he wears warm clothes. In June and July, I will remove his warm clothes because he'll be feeling hot! Shouldn't there be sensitivity to that? If I am

not sensitive enough when my God feels cold or suffers with a cough, cold and fever, there is no connection between Him and me. This is the concept.

The difference between the upasaka and God must go away. There is a great difference between myself and the formless, transcendental God. I can't reach Him, and if I can't reach Him, He can't reach me either! The unmanifest God is so far away that He can't reach me and I can't reach Him. There has to be a connection, a relationship with God, like the relationship with family members. If my son can be sick, so can my God. Whether He is sick or not, at least I can feel that He is sick. If one can believe that God sleeps and eats, then His food should be prepared, and that is an indication of one's sensitivity. Until one becomes this sensitive, His form does not materialize in one. It is for this reason that vedic dharma talks about seeing God in human form, such as Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva or Devi. These forms are used for meditation and are also loved and worshipped by the devotee.

Personalizing the Divine is essential to a bhakta. Does this limit the concept of divinity or God?

Swami Satyananda: People often ask, "How can Sri Krishna, Sri Rama and Christ possibly be the Supreme? Why should we worship the Supreme in a limited form?" However, this misses the whole point of worship and bhakti. If the Supreme, the Absolute is verywhere in everything, then why not also in the form of Sri Krishna or Christ? It does not matter whether it is Crishna or Christ, or whether it is Krishna or Krist! There is no difference. It does not matter what form one chooses. Furthermore, this worship or bhakti to a specific form, this personalization of the supreme, is a means to know the higher experience for oneself. Everything and anything is simultaneously the absolute and not the absolute. This seems a contradiction in logical terms, and it is! One must understand the implications behind this statement for oneself. Forms or deities such as Sri Krishna

and Christ are both the supreme and not the supreme. It depends entirely on one's level of awareness.

The important thing, however, is that anything for which overwhelming, intense bhakti is felt can be the means to go beyond the normal, mundane levels of awareness and experience. People say that Sri Krishna, Christ, Sri Rama and others are avatars, divine incarnations, but actually everything and everyone in the universe is a divine incarnation. One is oneself a divine incarnation, but probably one does not know it. The idea and aim is to go beyond the limitations of one's individual self and to know the transcendental nature of one's real Self.

To worship God with a form is difficult. It is nice to say that God is abstract, transcendental, formless, nameless, spaceless. One can believe it and say, "Yes, it is right. I think it is like that," but it is hard to believe that God has the form of Shiva, Vishnu or Brahma. Children and those with innocent hearts and minds can believe it, but intellectuals will say, "What? The son of a king? Sri Krishna running after girls? He was married eight times! Does God have a wife? Who is God's wife?" It is hard to believe, like an innocent child, that God has a form. For the innocent, this path is the easiest, safest, surest, quickest and perhaps the best. For the intellect, it is the most difficult because the mind which rationalizes does not accept it.

Should one consider one kind of worship superior to the other?

Swami Satyananda: People often wonder whether it is best to worship inside or outside, mental worship or the worship of external forms. Actually both should be done. However, most people cannot practise internal worship by visualizing an inner image, so they worship external forms. They go to the temple and worship. There is nothing wrong with this at all. The purpose is to lead to devotion of a particular form. If the external worship develops bhakti towards a specific form, this is a good way to begin on the bhakti path. The

specific form can be worshipped internally. The purpose of both external and internal worship is the inducement of meditation. From this will come spontaneous worship of both the inner and outer environment. It will be seen that there is not really much difference between them.

The best approach is to worship both the outside and the inside worlds, but with awareness. One should act and worship in the outer world through detached work – karma yoga. At the same time one should try to introvert the awareness through hatha yoga and raja yoga. This is the integral approach.

What else is considered necessary in order to have an integrated attitude towards worship?

Swami Satyananda: The mind is power, but right now it is in a state of dissipation. Sunlight illuminates everything that it falls on, but if concentrated through a magnifying glass, it can also burn. Similarly, when the dissipated mind is channelled, concentrated and brought into focus, it becomes powerful. Therefore, the discussion on whether God has a form or not is meaningless. As long as the mind is in a dissipated state, it needs the form. However, when the mind has been concentrated and enters the state of savikalpa and nirvikalpa samadhi, where the mind is totally one-pointed and all dualities cease to exist, one can transcend the form. One should start with the form and, when it is no longer required, transcend it.

The *Ramayana* does not accept this view, nor does the *Srimad Bhagavatam* or the entire gamut of vedic religion. In these texts it is said that the ultimate form of God has form. If the ultimate form of God is a form, then what is that form? Vaishnavas say it is Vishnu or Narayana. The Shaktas say it is Devi or the Goddess. Shaivites say it is Shiva. This means that God has a form and He also has innumerable or endless forms. The *Ramayana* has talked about this from beginning to end. It says that Sri Rama incarnated and that the form of Sri Rama is the same as the ultimate form.

No one should be confused or get into strife thinking about whether God has a form or is formless. Only consider whether one will be fulfilled by seeing Him with or without form. If one is fulfilled by the formless divinity, that is perfectly all right, or if one prefers to see His form, that too is okay. The scriptures have said, 'Alakh Niranjan'. The word *alakh* means 'that which can't be seen' and *niranjan* means 'one without second', 'untainted'. However, a form is needed in order to focus the broken and dissipated mind. If one does not want to see God in a human form, one may seek Him in various other forms. Divine power has also been revealed in the form of mantra, yantra and mandala. Divinity is represented in the form of yantra, mantra and mandala.

If we are all manifestations of God, what is the need to worship God in an external form?

Swami Satyananda: The one that you worship in the temple, in stone, in paper, is no one else but you. However, you are not able to forget yourself; you are not able to forget that you are an old woman, a shopkeeper, a businessman, an industrialist, or an employee. You won't be able to see yourself as God, because you are convinced that you are an old lady. That is why you worship Shiva, because you are convinced he is God. However, when your heart becomes clean, a mirror begins to shine and shows that the God in that rock is false, and that the truth is that He is no one else but you.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Vedas, the Upanishads and in countless holy books, this is what is written from beginning to end. I do not criticize worship of the form, for that is also one way. Gods, goddesses, asana, pranayama, meditation, concentration, self-control or whatever you do, that is a way. I do not criticize the path, but it is a path only, and not the destination. It is a means, not the end.

When you worship Shiva, Rama, Ganesha or Devi, you do so not as the means but as the end. It is necessary to do so. By believing them to be the goal, eventually their true

nature is understood. We are unable to see the truth due to an absence of affection, love, compassion and devotion; the affection that exists between brother and sister, the love between man and woman, the compassion that a happy man feels for an unhappy one, and the devotion that we feel for the power of God. Affection, love, compassion and devotion, these four soften life. The way iron melts when it is heated and can be given any shape, in the same way, to melt this hard heart, to soften it, these four are necessary.

FORM AND FORMLESS WORSHIP
AS EXPERIENCED BY SWAMI SATYANANDA

Do you see God's form in meditation?

Swami Satyananda: I had clear instructions throughout, so whether or not I have seen God is immaterial. I do not crave to see Him because I know that all forms are His form and, at the same time, He has no form. Similarly, Kabirdas has said:

> How can I describe the beauty of love,
> When I am completely merged in its splendour?
> The dye in which I have been coloured
> And the grace which I have experienced,
> Have intoxicated me so that I forget
> Everything including my body and mind.

Is it true that you worship Sri Rama, Sita and Hanuman? If God is formless, then why this idol worship?

Swami Satyananda: It is easy to describe and accept God as formless or nirakara. It is even easier to talk about the formless God. Nobody can dispute it because nobody has seen God. If someone describes him as formless, having no fixed name or place, nobody can challenge him because nobody has seen God. Whatever is said about the formless God, one has to accept. Refutation or challenge can only come in the case of known things which both have seen. Two

people can dispute the appearance of a squirrel and describe it differently because both have seen it. Once three disciples were quarrelling over the exact colour of the chameleon. They could quarrel because they had seen the chameleon while it was changing colour. However, God with form is difficult to comprehend, to explain, to accept and to ingest, but it is the easiest thing to dispute. Even a small child can criticize the concept of God with form.

People have written volumes about God without form. I was born in a family that believed in the formless God. I began my spiritual quest with the philosophy of the formless God. I had studied Advaita Vedanta and Shankaracharya. I had never given a thought to God with form, nor had I thought over the formless God, because it was not possible for me to think of a formless God. The God who has no form, name, abode, colour or attribute simply cannot be a subject of contemplation.

However, later on I had many experiences which made me realize there is somebody talking to me and instructing me. He can talk in English and Hindi. After that, I began to meditate on the God with form and results began to show up very soon. I started sakara upasana only after coming to Rikhia, and it started with an image of Sri Ganesha. Ganesha said, "Satyananda, you have just given me names, now watch and see my maya, my miracles." This is the background of my transition into sakara worship.

How did you come to your own method of worship?

Swami Satyananda: I had many problems in Rishikesh for I believed that God is formless and nameless. Some of my gurubhais used to worship Sri Krishna or Sri Rama, and go to the temples to do long poojas. I used to say it was nonsense because at that time I did not believe that God could have a form, and if anyone told me so, I said they were wrong. My whole concept has changed because of personal experience.

In Rishikesh, under the instruction of my guru, I took part in rites and rituals, but as a duty. My heart was not in it.

If I was assigned the duty of worshipping Shiva, or asked to do Rudrapath, I did it. However, in Rikhia, I began to light an incense stick before the four images of Ganesha. As all the gods enjoy incense sticks, I made it a daily routine to burn incense sticks in front of all the images in my pooja room. As soon as I get up in the morning, the first thing I do is light the incense sticks, even before washing my hands and mouth. This is my sakara worship. Sakara means to worship God according to one's own faith and belief. The *Bhagavad Gita* (2:46) says:

> *Yaavaanartha udapaane sarvatah samplutodake;*
> *Taavaansarveshu vedeshu braahmanasya vijaanatah.*
>
> To the Brahmana who has known the Self, all the Vedas are of as much use as is a reservoir of water in a place where there is a flood.

There is an immeasurable quantity of water in the ocean, but one can take away only as much as one's container will hold. Similarly, one can only grasp God to the extent and depth of one's awareness, feelings, soul, personality and the totality of oneself. Swami Satyananda could not grasp the formless, nirakara God then, nor can he do it now, nor will he ever have that capacity. Swami Satyananda's capacity is limited to lighting a lamp and an incense stick in front of Ganesha's image and singing his praises.

How does each devotee find his own method of worship?

Swami Satyananda: Worship God according to the capacity of the intellect and feelings. Adopt a pooja which delights the heart and can move and melt it. The chosen deity is called *ishta devata*, because it is what one's heart opts for, what one's heart wishes for. It is that God who enthrals and captivates the imagination. Read the *Ramacharitamanas* devoutly, profoundly and with understanding. Tulsidas has illustrated this point throughout the *Ramacharitamanas*. In fact, this is the theme of the *Ramacharitamanas*. The nirakara becomes

sakara, the formless God becomes manifest in a recognizable form. Tulsidas has not neglected the nirakara aspect of God (Uttarkand, after doha 117):

Sohamasmi iti vritti akhandaa;

The continuous awareness of *Soham*.

The important point he makes is that worship or upasana of God means to set the heart on any aspect of God that attracts and satisfies, and is within the grasp of one's limited awareness, stirs one's feelings and sustains one's interest.

If I see a yellow rose, I know there is a yellow rose, and if someone says, "No there cannot be a yellow rose because I have never seen a yellow rose," I will say, "You may not have seen it, but I have." It is a matter of personal experience, *aparokshanubhuti*. I had years and years of denying God with form. There was a time when I did not even believe that there could be rebirth. I said, "Karma is nonsense!" However, those views have changed, not because I was defeated, but because I was convinced. I was not defeated in my intellectual convictions, I was convinced by my personal experience.

Should one choose to worship the form or formless divinity?

Swami Satyananda: God is both without form and with form. It is up to the individual to choose how to worship Him, to adore Him and to ask a boon from Him. One has to make a choice between the formless God and the embodied God and offer one's obeisance to Him. One is absolutely free to exercise one's preference for any form of God. Hanuman is not greater than Sri Rama and Sri Rama is not superior to Hanuman. Devi is not superior to Sri Krishna and Sri Krishna is not greater than Devi. The names may be different, but the ultimate truth is the same.

What is the best way to begin the process of worship?

Swami Satyananda: Sadhana has to be started with a form. It need not be Sri Rama. Sri Rama is a name that represents the highest reality. In English it is called God, in Arabic Allah, Vedantins call it Brahman and others call it Paramatma or Sri Rama. As there is one Rama, which Rama do I mean? I mean the Rama who is the son of Dasharatha. I mean the Rama who is the indweller of all hearts. I mean the Rama who is the creator of the sun, moon, stars and the whole cosmos, and I mean the Rama who transcends everything.

How can I accept that God is formless? I may not have seen His form. Why should I lie? I have not seen the beautiful face of God, His beautiful countenance, His hands or His feet. I have not seen His eyes, but I read that they are like the petals of the lotus flower, but I have definitely heard His voice, not once but twice. When I have heard Him, how can I take Him to be nirguna, without attributes? My definition of God will depend upon my personal experience, not on what the books say. People are quoting what has been written in the books. I am telling what I have experienced. What I heard was the voice of God. I have the proof that He spoke to me. How can I take Him to be nirakara?

What are the advantages of worshipping God in form rather than formless?

Swami Satyananda: If God is formless, He can be called nirakara, but how can the one who has no form be seen? How can a formless entity ever be seen and a nameless entity be named? How will the one who does not live anywhere be found? I don't want such a God. I want a God who has a name and a form, who has a home and an address. This makes things easy. Great yogis and saints can find Him, but I want an easy way to locate His address, so I have enshrined Him in Raghunath Kutir. Every day I take care of that room. I meditate on and worship Him daily and I can say truly that my God lives there. Why should I say that God is

everywhere? Maybe He is, I don't deny it, but where will I manage to keep hold of Him?

Water exists everywhere, but one drinks it from one's own well. God is everywhere, but I have enshrined Raghunath in my room and He is mine. This I learned from the *Ramacharitamanas*. People have tried millions of ways to find Him, but where did they find Him? Where will they worship Him? Everybody is lost and confused. From the *Ramacharitamanas* I learned that God is everywhere, but He has to be held at one place. Just as sunlight has the warmth and brilliance of the sun, but it is not the sun, in the same way, I may have a spark of divinity, but I am not the Divine. I may be a part of Him, but I cannot be Him.

How important is the question about form and formless divinity?

Swami Satyananda: In vedic dharma, worship of form has been given the ultimate importance. Yet Shankaracharya was under a compulsion to advocate formless worship. At that time Buddhism had influenced the thinking people of the country. Shankaracharya began to talk about formless worship in order to reconcile vedic dharma with Buddhism. It was a compromise. Even today there is a compromise. Shankaracharya began to talk about formless worship even though, by definition, there cannot be worship of something formless. How can something which has no form be worshipped? One can only worship something which has a form, whether Sri Rama, Shiva, Sri Krishna, Hanuman, guru or a Devi such as Durga or Kali. A form is a must for worship. However, Shankaracharya had to talk about formless worship to reconcile the influence of another religious stream of thought.

Despite highlighting the importance of worship of form, Tulsidas was also forced to write about worship of the formless. Tulsidas advocated worship of a form throughout, but nowhere did he negate or ignore worship of the formless either. He wrote in the *Ramacharitamanas* (Balakanda, after doha 22, chau 1):

Aguna saguna dui brahma saroopaa,
Akatha agaadha anaadi anoopaa.

The concept of Brahma is twofold,
Formless and with form.
Both are indescribable and immeasurable,
Without beginning and incomparable.

I am only interested in having the darshan of God, in form, not formless, because nirakara is easy but sakara is difficult. If God comes in the form of a child, Vishnu, Brahma, innocent Shankara or pot-bellied Ganesha, welcome! To be able to perceive through the eyes that tattwa which is not visible to the eyes is *sakshatkara*. This life is dedicated only to that. Kabirdas has said:

Unmanifest is my father and manifest my mother.
Whom to praise and whom to blame?
Both sides of the scale are in balance.



3

Symbols of Worship

Love is the forerunner of experience.

—*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

PURPOSE OF SYMBOLS

What is the purpose of using symbols in worship?

Swami Sivananda: The image of God is a support for the neophyte, a prop during his spiritual childhood. A form or image is necessary in the beginning as an external reminder of God. The worshipper associates the ideas of infinity, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, purity, perfection, freedom, holiness and truth with the form of worship he chooses. The material image calls up the mental idea. Steadiness of mind is obtained by worship of an image. For a beginner, concentration or meditation is not possible without a symbol. The mind requires a symbol because it cannot hold a concept of the absolute in the initial stages. To behold God everywhere and to feel His presence every moment is not possible for the ordinary person. The mind cannot be centred and fixed on the absolute without the help of some external aid.

Therefore, a symbol is absolutely indispensable for a beginner. The mind is disciplined in the beginning by fixing it on a concrete object or symbol. The image or *murti* of the

deity, sun, fire, water, shaligram, lingam, swastika, cross, *Om*, Tao, circle or triangle are all symbols that help the upasaka to attain one-pointedness of mind and purity of heart. When the mind is rendered steady and subtle, it can be fixed on an abstract idea such as *Aham Brahmasmi* – I am Brahman. As the upasaka advances in meditation, the form melts into the formless, and he becomes absorbed in the formless essence. The worship of form is not contrary to the view of Vedanta, the final teaching of the Vedas. Even the Vedantin has the symbol of *Om* on which to fix his wandering mind. Images of God are considered an aid to the highest vedantic realization.

A symbol is absolutely indispensable for fixing the mind in the direction the worshipper wishes to move. Christians use the cross. A gross mind needs a concrete symbol as a prop, whereas an abstract symbol is more appealing to the subtle mind. In the beginning stages of spiritual practice, one cannot concentrate on the formless. The help of some kind of symbol is a necessity.

Worship of God with form is a great aid to the eventual realization of the Divine in the all-pervading formless aspect. The form is essential for the purpose of introducing the practices of concentration and meditation. The upasaka who worships the image of the Divine from the beginning beholds God everywhere and develops para bhakti. Later he beholds the whole world as divine. The form melts into the formless and becomes one with the formless essence. Ideas of good and bad, right and wrong vanish. He sees God in all things and feels His presence in his heart as well as in all objects such as a dacoit, cobra, scorpion, ant, dog, tree, log of wood, block of stone, the planets, fire, earth. This vision or experience baffles description!

How did Birbal explain the need for a form to the Emperor Akbar?

Swami Niranjanananda: One day, the Emperor Akbar asked his minister, "Now tell me, how do you bind the eternal, undefined, infinite God to a finite form? We believe that

the Almighty has no face, that He is beyond the range of thought, that he is latent and has no form; whereas you Hindus have idols, be it Rama, Krishna, Shiva or Vishnu. What is the need for all these?"

Birbal said, "Maharaja, let us do one thing. Tell the courtiers to spit on the picture of your father that hangs in the hall." Enraged, Akbar said, "How dare you say such a thing?" Birbal replied, "Maharaja, that is only a lifeless picture, isn't it? Made of cloth and paint. Who would have any problem spitting on it? If you say so, I will do it myself." To this, Akbar roared, "Birbal, don't you dare! Do you not know that that is the painting of my father?"

Birbal explained to the enraged emperor, "Maharaja, the painting is inanimate, however, when you see it, an emotion and sentiment arises in your heart. You cannot spit on the picture of your father, as the sentiment in your heart connects you to it. Similarly, when a devotee worships an idol he sees his *aradhya*, his Beloved, his God in it. The idol is only a symbol and nothing more. For a *bhakta*, a devotee, an image is essential, as only through this will he be able to express his sentiments of faith, trust and devotion towards God. When you see the picture of your father, what do you feel?" Akbar said, "Respect, love, devotion and closeness." Birbal responded, "Maharaja, just as an inanimate painting evokes feelings of love and respect in your mind, the feelings in a devotee's heart and mind at the time of worship please God."

Just as the body is composed of the five elements, an idol is also composed of five elements. The idol remains an idol, however, the worship of the idol goes to God. You worship the symbol, yet you delight the one who you are really worshipping. Whatever you offer in worship or prayer always goes to God, not to the idol. Just as a girl playing with a doll is able to awaken in herself maternal feelings towards the doll, similarly a devotee worshipping an idol with a one-pointed mind is able to awaken *bhakti bhavana*, the feelings of devotion within.

The foundation of Indian philosophy has been image or idol worship, for which the culture has fought many battles. There have been many invasions, and idol worship was forbidden several times. However, the Indian people said, "How can we stop idol worship? It is due to this that trust and faith thrive in our lives. It is through this that we are able to establish a relationship with God in our lives. How can this be stopped?"

Bhakti can be awakened through connection with the *sakara*, manifest form. The goal of worship is to lose yourself in your object of devotion. Until the mind finds a base, how can it become one-pointed? When you meditate, you focus your attention on the breath. If you do not fix your attention on the breath, the mind will wander. To keep the mind steady, you fix your attention on the breath, body, symbol or mantra. This creates a base to engage your mind on one point, to keep it steady and connected. That support or base is sakara.

In the worship of the sakara, a devotee sees the Beloved alive in that symbol. For a devotee, a symbol is not merely a symbol. It is a channel for the expression of the emotions, and since it is an expression of emotions, the symbol represents a living experience. In the same manner that you feel love and respect when you see the picture of your father or guru, when a devotee sees the symbol of the Beloved, the sentiments of love, devotion, trust and surrender are felt towards it. The worship of sakara is necessary for this feeling and emotion to rise, and for the evolution of spiritual life.

What other reasons are there for using symbols in worship?

Swami Sivananda: There is another mystic reason for idol worship. Thoughts are potential entities; they continue to remain in the subconscious mind and influence the conscious thoughts and attitudes. A devotee who worships Sri Krishna or Sri Rama is helped by the thought forces of millions of devotees who have meditated upon and worshipped these divine symbols through centuries.

Here the rational, traditional mind is touched, but if I invent a new name for God for myself, such as AQB or P239, I shall not feel much devotional emotion while uttering these names. On the other hand, if I use a symbolic name that has been used by humankind for a long time, such as Allah, God, Narayana or some sacred personality, I shall be easily inspired. Therefore, the name of God is also a symbol, but there must be some sort of association with it to capture the attention. *Sankirtan*, singing God's name, namaz, prayer, church hymns, or simple repetitions of God's name arouse the emotions of the subconscious mind. Devotional music, the ringing of bells in temples, or the resonant chanting of psalms are definitely useful and almost universally necessary for the same purpose.

How do symbols help in communion with God?

Swami Sivananda: A symbol is a medium for establishing communion with God. Images are not the idle fancies of sculptors, but shining channels through which the heart of the devotee is attracted to God and flows towards Him. Although the devotee seems to be worshipping an image of God, he is actually feeling the presence of God within that image and pours his devotion upon it. The ignorance of the modern sensual man clouds his vision and prevents him from seeing the Divine in the lovely and enchanting images of His forms.

Scientific advances ought to convince one of the glories of symbolic worship. Are the singers and orators confined to a small box called a radio or a television? The box is a lifeless mechanical structure, which would break into a thousand pieces if thrown. Yet, if one knows how to use it, one can hear music and see pictures through it which are occurring hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Even as the sound waves of people all over the globe are caught through radio and television, it is possible to commune with the all-pervading Divinity through the medium of an image. The divinity of the all-pervading

God is vibrant in every atom of creation; there is not a speck of space where He is not. Who can say that He is not in His images as well? There are many who say, "Oh, God is an all-pervading formless being. How can He be confined to this image?" Are such people really conscious of His omnipresence? Do they see Him and Him alone in everything? No, it is the ego that prevents one from bowing down to the image of God. The bhakta beholds the Divine in the symbol or image. For him, there is no such thing as insentient matter. Everything is God or consciousness, so his worship of an image is worship of God.

However intellectual one may be, one cannot concentrate without the help of a symbol. An intellectual person may say, "I do not like idols; I do not wish to concentrate on a form," yet he cannot concentrate on the formless One either, so because of his ego he fails to progress in his worship. The idol is a concrete, physical image or symbol, a representation of God, which is an abstract concept. The image in a temple, though it may be made of stone, wood or metal, is precious for a devotee as it bears the mark of his God, and represents something that he holds holy and eternal. A flag is only a small piece of painted cloth, but for a soldier it stands for something that he holds very dear. He is prepared to give up his life in defending his flag. Similarly, the image is very dear to a devotee. It speaks to him in its own language of devotion. Just as the flag arouses martial valour in the soldier, so also the image arouses devotion in the devotee.

The devotee superimposes the attributes of the Divine on the image, and when his devotion and meditation becomes intense and deep, he does not see the form as a stone image. He beholds it as the Divine, who is pure consciousness. Therefore, worship of form is necessary for beginners on the path of spiritual awakening. The idol may remain an idol, but the worship goes to God. The inner love of the devotee finds expression through external forms of worship. The wandering mind is fixed in this form of worship and the aspirant gradually feels the nearness of God. He attains

purity of heart and slowly annihilates his egoism. All matter is a manifestation of God. God is present in everything. Everything is an object of worship.

How does one move from an objective experience to an emotional connection?

Swami Niranjanananda: The rituals of upasana aid the aspirant in allowing the subjective experiences to unfold. By using deities and their forms or images as support, the form or image becomes an external reminder of God. The mind requires a symbol to experience through the senses something that can be seen and touched, for it cannot hold a subjective concept of the absolute in the initial stages. The aspirant associates the qualities of divinity with the form or image of a deity, and then begins to connect on a more subtle level with that deity through worship. As the worship continues, the connection with the subtle qualities represented by each devi and devata strengthens. The objective, sensual experience lessens as the emotional connection deepens and a subjective experience begins to unfold. Through concentration of mind and emotion towards the deity and its special quality, one establishes intention in action; intention to change, grow, remove the dross and reveal that same divine quality within.

How does the symbol become an embodiment of divine force and life?

Swami Sivananda: Worship of form develops devotion and makes concentration simple and easy. For example, the devotee can bring before his mind's eye the great pastimes of the Divine in whichever incarnation he views Him. This is one of the easiest modes of self-realization that suits the majority of people. Just as the picture of the beloved evokes a feeling of love in the heart, so also the picture of God elevates the mind to divine heights. Just as the child develops the maternal feeling by caressing, nursing and protecting its doll made of rags, and suckles it in an

imaginary manner, so also the devotee develops the feeling of devotion by worshipping the image and concentrating upon it.

Regular worship and other modes of recognizing the divinity in the form unveil the Divine latent within it. Then the devotee is able to visualize the indwelling presence in the idol. The power of God in the devotee can awaken the latent divinity in the form, and thus God becomes enshrined in the image. This is truly a wonder and a miracle. The idol or image actually comes to life. From this moment the idol will protect the devotee in a special manner. The image can become a mass of consciousness through which the devotee can draw inspiration. It can answer the devotee's questions and solve his problems. The idol can speak to the devotee and guide him. It can help him in a variety of ways that only the devotee understands.

When the image comes alive, it can perform miracles. The place where the living image is installed is transformed at once into a temple. Those who live in such a place are freed from misery, disease, failure and worldliness itself. The awakened divinity in the image acts as a guardian angel. It is blessing all and conferring the highest good on those who bow to it. For a devotee or a sage, there is no such thing as insentient matter. Everything is consciousness. The idol is the same as the Divine, for it is the vehicle of the expression of the deity. The devotee should regard the idol in the temple with the same attitude of respect and reverence that he would evince should God Himself come to him.

How does a symbol lead to higher stages of bhakti?

Swami Sivananda: Worship does not stop or end with worship of the symbol alone. The sadhaka is taken step by step to higher stages of devotion and samadhi or communion through worship of the symbol. Though he worships the symbol, he has to keep before his mental eye the all-pervading God. He has to feel His presence in his heart and all objects. The ways and rules of worship, *pooja vidhi,*

and the secrets of worship that are described in the Indian scriptures are scientifically accurate and highly rational. Only ignorant people who have not studied the scriptures, who have not associated with the devotees and great souls vilify worship of idols or *murtis*.

For a bhakta there is no such thing as insentient matter. Everything is God or consciousness. The devotee actually beholds God in the idol. Narsi Mehta was put to the test by a rajah. The rajah said, "O Narsi! If you are a sincere devotee of Sri Krishna Himself, let this idol move." According to the prayer of Narsi Mehta, the idol moved.

Tulsidas realized the all-pervading essence. He had cosmic consciousness. He communed with the all-pervading formless God, and yet his passion for Sri Rama with bow in hand did not vanish. When he had been to Vrindavan and saw the murti of Sri Krishna with flute in His hands, he said, "I will not bow my head before this form." At once Sri Krishna's form assumed the form of Sri Rama. Then only he bowed his head.

Tukaram also had the same cosmic experience as that of Tulsidas. He sang, "I see my God all-pervading just as sweetness pervades the sugar cane," and yet he always speaks of his Vithala of Pandharpur. Mira also realized her identity with the all-pervading Krishna and yet she was not tired of repeating again and again 'My Giridhar Nagar'. Madhusudana Swami, who had advaitic realization, who beheld oneness of the Self, who had awareness of non-dual consciousness, was intensely attached to the form of Sri Krishna with flute in His hands.

From this it can be clearly inferred that one can realize God through worship of a murt;, that the worship of the Divine in saguna form is a great aid for vedantic realization and for the realization of God in His all-pervading formless aspect; that the worship of the murti is essential for the purpose of concentration and meditation in the beginning, and that such a worship is not in any way a hindrance to the attainment of God-consciousness.

Those who vehemently attack murti pooja are groping in extreme darkness and ignorance. They have no real knowledge of pooja and worship. They enter into unnecessary, vain debates and discussion against murti pooja to show that they are learned persons, but they have not done any real sadhana at all. The whole world worships symbols and murtis only, in some form or other. A practical person who does meditation and worship, who is full of knowledge and real devotion, always keeps silent. He influences and teaches others through silence. Only he knows whether a murti is necessary in the beginning or not.

How do religions use objects of devotion?

Swami Satyananda: In many religions, the whole purpose is to encourage the expression of bhakti in the followers. To do this, specific figures are given as objects of adoration. If this adoration is sufficient, one can know intense bhakti, bliss and transcendental experience. The method is powerful, and has led many people to the highest states of awareness. But there has to be strong devotion to obtain the final results.

All of these bhakti religions have used the same method. They have only differed in the specific form (or forms) to which the followers are recommended to devote themselves. The basic mechanics are the same in all cases. They have all used bhakti and bhakti yoga as a powerful means to transcendence.

What is the role of symbols in yogic meditation?

Swami Niranjanananda: In order to associate the mind with the formless God, initially it is important to have a symbol of God to which the mind can be attached. This attachment of the mind is one of the prime concerns of yoga. Images of Rama, Krishna, Devi, Mary or Jesus are not used in yogic meditations, yet symbols of breath, sound, mantra and yantra are definitely used to evoke similar mental associations with something which is beyond mind and which is transcendental. These mental associations with

symbols help to prepare the mind to eventually experience the universal manifestation of God's energy. It has also been stated in scriptures that one is free to see God in the image that one wishes to create. Once that understanding dawns, one becomes a devotee who in yogic terminology is known as a *sakara upasaka*, one who worships the form of God.

CHOOSING A SYMBOL

What kinds of symbols exist?

Swami Sivananda: Symbols may be concrete or subtle. Pictures and drawings are pictorial forms of images. The Puranas, ancient mythological scriptures, and the Agamas, esoteric scriptures, describe how form is to be worshipped both at home and in the temple. Worship of form is not peculiar to any one religion. Every Hindu worships an image of his choice. Christians worship the cross and have the image of it in their mind when they pray. Muslims hold the direction of the Kaaba in their mind when they kneel and do prayers. Most people throughout the world, save for a few yogis and Vedantins, are all worshippers of form. They keep some image or the other in their mind.

Every deity is identified with a separate universal power. The Sun is a divinity representing the spirit of all sentient and insentient beings. It is given different names like Aditya, Vishnu and Mitra. Indra is described as the god of warfare who bestows victory. Usha is the deity of the dawn. The Maruts are the deities of power. Agni symbolizes fire or the light of the Sun on Earth. Agni is worshipped for gaining food and nourishment, wealth, cattle, progeny. The mental image is also a form for the difference is not of kind, but of degree. All worshippers, however intellectual they may be, generate a form in the mind and make the mind dwell on that image.

There is one class of symbol which represents the images of avatars such as Jesus Christ, Buddha, Sri Krishna or Sri Rama, whom the devotee believes are incarnations of

God. Another class represents the various aspects of God; for example, the image of Saraswati represents knowledge or learning, and Lakshmi represents wealth or beauty. There is no philosophical difficulty in regard to the former class of symbols. If the devotee believes they were divine incarnations, he worships their images exactly as he would have idolized them had they still lived.

Some semitic religions, such as Islam and Judaism, forbid idol worship because their prophets felt that worship of the idea of God as an abstract entity was sufficient. However, generally, the use of symbols is common to all religions. In Islam and Judaism, the sacrifice of animals on certain occasions was permitted to bring to mind the necessity of sacrificing one's lower instinctive nature to God. Even metaphysical ideas of God are in fact symbols, because the conception of God is not possible for the human mind without some kind of association. Indeed, symbols are much more powerful and effective in arousing the emotions of the subconscious mind than merely abstract, intellectual ideas. This is now a well-established truth of modern psychology.

What guidelines help a bhakta choose a symbol?

Swami Sivananda: While all things may be used as objects of worship, the choice of object is naturally made for the effect it will have on the mind. An image of any archetypal emblem easily induces concentration of mind and is likely to raise the thought of the devata in the mind of the worshipper. Every person has a predilection for a particular symbol, image or emblem, according to their personal inclination and belief in its special efficacy. Psychologically, this means that a particular mind finds a specific symbol or image that works best as a means to direct it to its goal.

The shaligram stone easily induces concentration of mind. An idol or murti, the sun, fire, water, the Ganges, a Shivalingam are all symbols of the Absolute which help the aspirants to attain one-pointedness of mind and purity of heart. They refer to personal inclinations in the worshipper

due to his belief in their special efficacy for him. Every image of a god or goddess suits the tastes of a different devotee. God reveals himself to his devotees in a variety of ways. He assumes the form which the devotee has chosen for his worship. If you worship him as Hari with four hands, he will come to you as Hari. If you adore him as Shiva, he will appear before you as Shiva. If you worship him as Durga or Kali, he will come to you as Durga or Kali. If you worship him as Rama, Krishna or Dattatreya, he will come to you as Rama, Krishna or Dattatreya. If you worship him as Christ or Allah, he will give you his vision as Christ or Allah. All are aspects of the one Truth.

Psychologically, all this means that a particular mind finds that it works best in the direction desired by means of particular instruments, emblems or images. The vast bulk of humanity has impure or weak minds. Therefore, the object of worship must be pure for these people. The objects that are capable of exciting lust and dislike must be avoided. However, an advanced sadhaka, who has a pure mind and sees the divine presence everywhere and in everything, can worship any kind of object.

Worship goes to the indweller through the form which is being worshipped. It is sheer ignorance to think that one form is superior to another. All worship goes to the one basic reality, the Supreme Brahman. The differences are only differences in name and form, on account of differences in the worshippers. There is no difference in the essential object of worship. It is only out of ignorance that different religions and sects fight and quarrel among themselves. Therefore, be tolerant and have a broad outlook on life because the basic essentials of all religions and paths leading to God are the same.

What do you recommend to use as a symbol?

Swami Niranjanananda: The psychic symbol can be anything. It is a point, a figure, an image on which we are able to concentrate and hold our attention.

A symbol can be your ishta devata, which has the quality of God or divinity. It can be an image which has a feeling of closeness and affinity, or a symbol which does not denote either a negative or a positive state of mind, but is neutral. At the same time it can also unconsciously inspire the psyche, the mind, to realize the potential of consciousness. Powerful symbols are the sun or the figure of the mantra *Om*, or even a yantra, whether it be a triangle, interlaced triangles, a circle, a point or a complex geometrical figure. It can be the image of the guru who represents the source of inspiration. It can be the image of Jesus, a saint, or the image of different incarnations of God in the form of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna or Buddha. It can be anything, but it should not have a personal emotional content.

Some people may imagine a family member, but then there is a selfish emotional association which should not be present. Therefore, it is recommended that one uses the image of saints, gurus and avatars, or the image of yantras or simple images like the sun, moon and stars.

What symbols of the Supreme should be used?

Swami Satyananda: Visualize and concentrate on a picture of any great saint, bhakta, yogi, sage, incarnation such as Guru Nanak, Kabir Das, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, Adi Sai Baba, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Sivananda, Swami Ramdas, Mohammed, any of the Sufi saints, Christ or any of the Christian saints such as Saint Francis or Saint Teresa, any of the Jewish saints, Buddha, Mahavir, Krishna, Rama, Milarepa or anyone one cares to choose.

One may concentrate on one's guru if one has one. One has a choice, but there must be devotion. In the *Uddhava Gita*, Sri Krishna instructs his disciple Uddhava:

> Having withdrawn the senses, *pratyahara*, from contact with the surroundings, the devotee should concentrate on my form, especially one part such as my smiling

face. Then he should be aware of my all-pervading self which is free like the sky. Leaving that after some time, he should feel as though he is one with me, and stop thinking of all other things. He will see me, the *antaryamin*, the inner being, in himself, and himself in me like the light that is united with the fire. All doubts about matter, knowledge and action will completely cease.

Any symbol of the Supreme will take one beyond the symbol itself, if one has intensity and sincerity. It is difficult for most people to feel love, *prem*, for something intangible or impersonal. It is for this reason that a concrete form is used. Total absorption in the limited form or name will lead to the unlimited.

How does a bhakta choose a symbol to enhance devotion?

Swami Satyananda: One can devote oneself to anything, but it must be something for which one spontaneously feels bhakti, love or devotion. The object is a means to an end. The object should not be imposed on one's character, not be foreign or unnatural to the personality. It should be something for which devotion arises spontaneously. The symbol can be anything. In the *Uddhava Gita*, a section of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, it says:

The Supreme can be worshipped in whatever image or medium for which the worshipper feels reverence and devotion, for being the soul of the universe, I (Krishna) dwell in all things.

The best way to find out the symbol is to sit down in deep meditation and ultimately it will come. Instead of getting it through intellect, it comes through intuition. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna says (7:21):

Yo yo yaam yaam tanum bhaktah shraddhayaarchitumichchhati;
Tasya tasyaachalaam shraddhaam taameva vidadhaamyaham.

> A bhakta can worship me in any form; whatever form he chooses, I will justify and accept his bhakti.

This sums up the whole subject. Follow your own feelings of devotion and do not feel obliged to worship only traditional forms. Aspects of nature can be chosen if one wishes, as did so many poets such as Wordsworth. Worship can be in so many ways. The great scientist George Washington Carver expressed his bhakti when he said: "When I touch that flower I am touching infinity. It existed before human beings were on this earth and will continue in the millions of years to come. Through that flower, I talk to the infinite which is only a silent force."

What should one keep in mind when choosing a symbol?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is important that the symbol you choose should become so compelling that your mind is automatically drawn to it and completely integrates with it. When you practise in this way, you will enter into concentration easily. When you practise meditation, you can also use distractions as objects of concentration, just like the wise yogi in the story:

There was once a king who was very attached to his riches, yet still he wanted to meditate for he was beginning to see the worthlessness of his vast wealth. A yogi gave this king instructions. The king sat down to meditate in earnest, yet whenever he tried to fix his mind upon the eternal, it went blank. Then, without knowing it, his imagination began to hover around his beautiful gold bracelet of which he was particularly fond. Before his admiring gaze, the bracelet began to sparkle in all the colours of the rainbow. As soon as he found himself in that fantasy, he fought his way back to God. The harder he tried to fix his mind upon God, the greater was the frustration that he experienced. God invariably changed into the bracelet in his mind.

With much humility, the king went to the yogi for further instructions. The yogi knew how to turn the weakness into

a source of strength. He said to the king, "Since your mind is so attached to the bracelet, start your practice from there. Meditate upon the bracelet. Contemplate on its beauty and sparkling colour. In essence, the bracelet is a configuration of energy vibration solidified into metal. It is the perceptive mind which lends it its beauty and colour. Therefore, try to understand the nature of the mind which created the world as you see it."

What are examples of symbols that are worshipped in different traditions?

Swami Satyananda: Anything can be chosen, for whatever is worshipped is a form of the Supreme. For devotees of Sri Krishna, he represents, symbolizes and is everything. He is the essence of all things. Though he is usually depicted in human form, playing a flute and with a peacock feather in his hair, he can actually be represented by any form and object. The well-known form of Sri Krishna is highly venerated by a large number of people in India. Many people feel overwhelming bhakti for this human form of Sri Krishna. He captivates their hearts and their aspirations. This is wonderful, for it can easily lead to higher experience and expanded awareness, but Sri Krishna is not restricted to this form. He can be anything. It is the focus of attention that is important. If devotion is felt for one particular form, then it should be used as a means of expressing bhakti.

In Christianity, the focal point of bhakti is Christ or the Virgin Mary. These can also lead to transcendence if the bhakti is great enough. In fact, this is the method that many great Christian saints have used in order to know the unspeakable. Saints like Saint Bernard, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Francis were bhaktas. They used their love of Christ as a means to deeper understanding of existence. In this way, they harmonized their whole being and from this arose cosmic understanding and bhakti.

In tantra, there are vast numbers of forms of Shakti, the cosmic mother. They all represent the various aspects of

existence. They all represent the absolute. It does not matter whether it is Kali, Durga, Chhinnamasta, Tripurasundari, Saraswati, Dhumavati, Shodashi, Bhuvaneshwari, Annapurna, or any of the hundreds of other traditional forms of Shakti. If bhakti is felt for one of these forms, one should direct one's emotional and mental energy towards it. This will channel all the forces of one's being.

Incidentally, this is why the spiritual climate of India is so extraordinary. There are countless numbers of deities, all of which are perfectly acceptable as a focal point of bhakti. Such is the tolerance and freedom of worship. The worship of the Supreme can be directed towards anything. Why not? The different images act as a centre through which one can expand awareness, but there must be compelling devotion. There must be attraction towards a particular form. Without this, there cannot be bhakti.

Certain systems of Buddhism use deities as a means to higher awareness. Buddha was against the use of deities, for he knew that they could so easily lead to superstition, ignorance and dogma. This is partly true, and was certainly the case in Buddha's time when religion had totally degenerated into mere ritual without meaning, purpose and understanding. This will not occur if one keeps in mind the purpose of bhakti and is tolerant of other forms of worship. Bhakti can lead to expanded awareness. Many Buddhists, after the death of Buddha, realized that there was justification for the use of deities. Because of this, many deities were introduced into such sects as Tibetan Buddhism – Amogh Siddhi, Tara, Avaloketeshwara and others. They represent different aspects of existence and states of awareness, and can be used as objects of bhakti. They can invoke power well beyond their material form.

In Islam, Mohammed discouraged the worship of images of the Supreme for the same reason as Buddha, because among superstitious people, it can so easily lead to mere idolatry. This again was certainly true when Mohammed was alive. People worshipped idols in a blind fashion. Rituals

were performed with false piety, without any real feeling; this led to ignorance, exactly the opposite purpose of worship and bhakti. There has to be an attitude of understanding.

Islam, however, is a bhakti religion. The bhakti is directed towards Allah, the all-embracing God. He is worshipped as an abstraction. What we have said about Islam also applies to Judaism: the bhakti is directed to a nebulous or formless form of the Supreme.

One can use a specific form as a focus of devotion, or use an abstraction. It does not really matter. If one feels some type of bhakti, the important thing is to express it and channel it in one direction towards the form or non-form of the Supreme.

What is the relationship between the symbol given and the personality?

Swami Satyananda: There is, in fact, no direct relationship between the symbol and one's personality. The personality is one thing and the symbol is entirely different. The purpose of the symbol is to awaken the inner spirit, the inner awareness, so that the external mind will be fused and united in that. After that the present personality undergoes a change. Mantra has a lot to do with personality, name has a lot to do with personality, but yantra, the symbol on which one meditates, can change the personality and transform it totally.

Can a personal symbol be chosen that does not correspond to the personal mantra?

Swami Satyananda: There are many symbols which can be selected just for concentration, without any corresponding mantra, such as a rose, lotus, cross, crescent moon, candle flame, temple, or serpent. For some people the psychic formation of a human being is easier to concentrate upon than a cross or a moon, because every person has a different composition and according to that, a particular form may suit his mind or not.

EFFECTS OF SYMBOLS

Is the unconscious mind made conscious by the use of symbols?

Swami Satyananda: Yes, the unconscious mind responds to various symbols and pictures. Therefore, in different cultures, symbols have been designed.

Are thoughts a form of symbol?

Swami Satyananda: Thoughts are so subtle that we are unable to know them, and they come in the form of symbols. The Greeks used to feel that thoughts have therianthropic symbols, which are figures having animal and human bodies combined, and they were right in a way. It was not just a mental configuration. Human thoughts have roots in animal memories, in the memories of animal bodies. That is why in many of the ancient symbols, one finds figures which, for example, have the upper body of a lady and the lower body of a fish or cobra, or the upper body of a man and the lower body of a tiger or goat. That proves that the human mind has evolved recently on the level of thinking and intellect, while still retaining the animal instincts intact.

In India, the conception of thought was anthropomorphic, which means that thoughts were considered to have human symbols. The Egyptians and some ancient civilizations considered that thoughts have geometrical symbols, such as the inverted triangle, and that concept of geometrical configuration was adopted. These geometrical symbols were actually considered to be figures of thought.

Please expand on how the mind uses symbols.

Swami Sivananda: Symbols are important in the evolution of man. Primitive man thought in symbols as he had no vocabulary to express abstract ideas and qualities. Before the alphabet was invented, there was only picture reading and writing. The ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is written entirely in picture symbols. Modern psychology has revealed

the significance of symbols in relation to the subconscious mind. The subconscious mind stores the memories right back to childhood, along with cultural memories since the dawn of history.

The subconscious is the seat of deep feelings and emotions; it is also the seat of telepathy, clairvoyance, hypnotism and other occult powers. The activity of the subconscious mind is seen in dreams. For example, if some feeling of ambition is aroused in the mind, we dream that we are flying in the air; if there is fear in our mind, we dream of demons and frightful animal. The suggestion or repetition of the same idea again and again also influences the subconscious mind. It can also be influenced by loud sounds like ringing of bells or music. However, the subconscious mind is hardly influenced by intellectual ideas as it thinks entirely in symbols.

What use does the psychic symbol serve?

Swami Satyananda: In meditation practices a psychic symbol is necessary for maintaining awareness. By concentrating on a symbol one can crystallize the tendencies of the mind at one point. When meditation becomes deep and one is able to visualize an object as if it were real, the mind has become creative. By thought, one is able to create an object. In pratyahara and dharana, psychic symbols are for the purpose of crystallization, but in deep meditation they are for materialization.

How should people try to eliminate their ego?

Swami Satyananda: Ego is one aspect of human personality, and with this ego the mind has been able to create many things and give many substantial contributions to humanity at large. It cannot be completely eliminated, nor should one try, but there is one thing that can be done. The personal ego can be transformed through a concrete symbol. Once the ego is symbolized, the spiritual transformation becomes automatic.

How does the psychic symbol appear within?

Swami Satyananda: The image is clear when the consciousness is pure. This purity of consciousness is to be understood absolutely in the spiritual and metaphysical sense, rather than in the ethical or moral sense. In spite of the fact that the mind was running here and there in during the practice, the moment one stops the movement and closes the eyes, the image should appear. One can take any image – a circle, a triangle, a rose or a human form – but once it is decided upon, the image should not be changed, even if other forms come to replace it.

The form which has been decided upon is the basis for the manifestation of consciousness. This particular form can be one's deity, one's guru, one who is loved and adored. Awareness of this one, unchanging form should always be developed. When this form comes in the form of imagination or an idea, it means that the awareness is not yet clear; there is some kind of disturbance of mind. When one is able to see that image as if it is a conscious dream, it means the awareness is coming to the point of consolidation or crystallization. If the form continues in the plane of consciousness like a vivid dream with colours, it means the consciousness is completely disassociated and is functioning independently on the borderline of knowledge.

All these things which come in the form of an image, an idea, a vision, or a conscious dream, are different manifestations of one's own awareness. It is one's own being, the atman, the nucleus of one's personality. When one has this vision, when one experiences this fourth dimension of one's personality, then one has completed yoga and one is having the higher experience that 'I am all'.

What is anubhava?

Swami Satyananda: What is meant by experience? The word in English is a defective word. In Sanskrit it is called anubhava. *Anubhava* means 'to become'. When one sees a rose with one's eyes one becomes the rose, and the

perception takes place. This is important for everyone to understand. Perception cannot take place unless the mind transforms itself into the object. This can be understood by reading the first six sutras of Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. When the mind assumes a pattern that is called experience; experience through the eyes, through the ears, through touch, etc. When one closes the eyes and begins to see a rose, it means that the mind has transformed itself into a rose. Unless one's mind becomes a rose, one cannot see a rose. Therefore, in Sanskrit, the word is anubhava, to become. An experience is a state of becoming.

What is the psychic and spiritual significance of experiencing an object internally as a symbol compared with seeing the same object externally?

Swami Satyananda: When one looks at a flower with the eyes open it is a sensorial experience of the rose, the lotus or whatever it is. When one closes the eyes and tries to formulate the lotus, the rose, any other object within, and one is able to see it in the form of a vision, what is that experience? Is it the rose which was seen outside on the rose bush? No, the inner rose, the experience of the rose, the experience of the flower which one has is made up of mental stuff, the constituting factor of that rose which one is cognizing or experiencing within is constituted of mind, of one's own psyche and consciousness.

One is realizing oneself in the form of Sri Krishna, seeing oneself in the form of Sri Rama, in the form of Christ, in the form of guru, and the experiences which one has within during deeper stages of meditation are manifestations of oneself. It is not manifestation or ascending of anybody or anything from outside. Realization is an expression of oneself or what is called *darshan*; God's darshan or divine vision is a manifestation of oneself. Passion is a manifestation of oneself. Anger, greed, desires, anxiety, these mental patterns, which are experiences in day-to-day life, are manifestations of one's lower self.

Compassion, mercy, love, sacrifice, dedication, selflessness are manifestations of one's human self, good self. The inner vision experience of stars, moon, mountains, divine beings, angels, devis, devatas, sounds, all kinds of things that one may be fortunate to see, are manifestations of one's evolving self, higher self, growing self, progressing self. As one goes deeper and deeper one becomes aware of the finest form of oneself.

Modern science has proved that matter has many forms. Matter can be split, stage by stage, step by step, grade by grade so that ultimately it becomes nuclear energy. Sound is also a manifestation of matter. Even as matter has many forms, finer and finest, in the same way consciousness has finest forms as well as a grossest form. The senses, sensual cognition, sensorial cognition, is the grossest form. The mind is also a gross form.

The self, *atman*, can be given any name one likes – Christ or God or light, but the Upanishads say 'atman'. Atman means self. Atman means myself.

What is the significance of some of the symbols used in ritual worship?

Swami Sivananda: Bells are rung in temples while doing pooja to shut out the external sounds and to make the mind inward and concentrated.

Lights are waved before the deity. This denotes that God is all-light. The devotee says, "Oh Lord! You are the self-effulgent light of the universe. You are the light in the sun, moon and fire. Remove the darkness in me by bestowing your divine light. May my intellect be illumined." This is the significance of waving lights.

Incense is burnt before the deity. The smoke spreads through the whole room. It acts as a disinfectant. Burning incense denotes that God is all-pervading, that He fills the whole universe by His living presence. It is to remind us of this fact that incense is burnt. The devotee prays "Oh Lord! Let the desires and tendencies dormant in me vanish like

the smoke of this incense, and become ashes. Let me become stainless."

Burning camphor denotes that the individual ego melts like the camphor, and the jiva becomes one with the Supreme Light of lights.

When sandalwood is ground into a paste, it reminds the devotee that he should, in his difficulties, be as patient as the sandalwood. Sandalwood emanates sweet odour when it is made into a paste. So also the devotee should not murmur when difficulties arise, but on the other hand should remain cheerful and happy and emanate sweetness and gentleness like the sandalwood. He should not hate nor wish evil even to his enemy.

What is the value of using a mandala?

Swami Satyananda: The importance and effectiveness of a mandala lies in its power to explode psychic visions in one. Many people take psychedelic drugs because they want spontaneous psychic visions. Many other methods are also used to 'see'. People know how to think, will, reason and remember. That is what is taught in school, but when people are asked to 'see', difficulties are confronted.

The process of 'seeing' continues within. For example, if a person has a child, he knows what he looks like, how his nose is shaped and what his complexion is. If the child goes to boarding school and comes back after six months, he will still recognize him as his child. How? What is the process through which previous knowledge is connected with present events? What was seen in the child then and what is seen now is continued all the time. The picture is there. That is called the unseen link, and that is the secret of memory. Those who cannot relate these frames together have a bad memory. Therefore everybody who wants to develop memory should learn how to 'see'. Everybody should learn to realize mandalas.

What is the difference between a mandala and a symbol used in worship?

Swami Satyananda: The mandala must have three dimensions: height, depth and width. This means a statue is a mandala, a person is a mandala, but a picture has only two dimensions, breadth and height, and is not a mandala. A statue in a church or temple, a Shivalingam in the corner of a room is a mandala. Mandalas have a great effect deep in the mind. It has been experimented by various thinkers and scientists who are working on the brain, mind and consciousness.

What are yantras?

Swami Satyananda: *Yantras* are geometrical formations of certain universal forces. Not natural forces like ocean waves and electric waves. There are invisible forces in nature which are beyond the reach of the human mind. Therefore, if one has to invoke them or explain them, how can they be represented? One of the ways which mystics and occultists have found is through geometrical diagrams. It appears that this higher reality or in the deeper reality, these forces actually may have that form, which means that geometrical formations, yantras, represent the actual forms of invisible and supramental forces.

How long ago was the symbol 'Om Shanti' introduced to devotees?

Swami Satyananda: It was five thousand years before Christ when this peace symbol was used. There is a reference to it in Egyptian hieroglyphics in a number of places. Peace and war coexist for a brave man.

What is the relationship between mantra and symbol?

Swami Niranjanananda: The mind should concentrate on the psychic symbol in order to complete the cycle of mantra. This psychic symbol can take any form according to the sound vibration. Every kind of vibration can create

a shape. Every musical note can create a pattern in sand, a geometrical figure or picture.

Experiments have been conducted on different mantra sounds, consonants and vowels of the Sanskrit language, and although no in-depth study has been made, the basic principles are known.

The symbol which is given at the time of mantra initiation represents the shape of the vibration and frequency of the mantra, and the form that it will adopt naturally and spontaneously. This form is inherent in the consciousness. Many people will have noticed that while practising normal meditation without any symbol, in the course of their sadhana, perhaps after five or ten years as they intensify awareness of the mantra, an image superimposes itself on the mind in chidakasha. Later on, when they ask for a symbol, they recognize it as being the one which was observed. They feel that it came to them naturally.

Sound vibration creates a diagram in the consciousness. This diagram can be a yantra, a tiny symbol like a star or a moon, a river, a stream or an ocean. Symbols are related closely to the mantra.

How can one develop the ability to visualize a symbol?

Swami Niranjanananda: Initially one may not be able to concentrate on the symbol due to the distraction of the mind and awareness. This is an important point to remember. Only when one has perfected the awareness of the mantra, does one use the symbol. To intensify that depth of awareness, when one begins to use the symbol, it will only be a process of imagination, unless it comes up spontaneously from within. The distracted frame of mind which retains different kinds of memories will show those memories in glorious technicolour. In the concentrated or one-pointed state of mind, one is trying to see the symbol which is the vibration of a sound. It may not be seen in technicolour in the first few weeks or months of practice.

The process of visualization is only imaginative at first. However, as concentration intensifies one may see a dark, unclear, hazy outline of the symbol. Maybe one will have flashes in a solid form and colour that remains there for a few moments. It begins to move up and down, left and right and to dance. With continued effort, as one gains further depth of consciousness, awareness and concentration, that symbol will become part of one's being. Later on, it will come to the stage where even with the eyes open one will be able to see it.

I have had this experience. There was a time when my symbol awareness became very intense and even with my eyes open I could wilfully block out the images in front of my eyes and see the symbol covering my entire vision. Whenever I wanted to I could make it disappear and retrieve my normal vision. That stage can only be achieved with constant, continuous and regular practice.

What is the significance of symbols in relation to the mind?

Swami Niranjanananda: Many years ago Carl Gustav Jung wrote a book called *Man and His Symbols*. He claimed that the unconscious of the individual retains many impressions in the form of symbols. He was simply confirming what yogis have always said, that in our greater mind we retain certain impressions, some of which are religious and some which are cultural. Christians who meditate may suddenly see an image of a cross, Mother Mary or the sacred heart coming up out of the blue. They may be total non-believers but because of the religious impressions in their mind, these particular symbols may come up. It happens with the Hindus of different sects also. They may never go to a temple or know what they are supposed to do there, however, the religious education which they have imbibed makes them see the face or image of Shiva, Kali, Rama, Durga or Krishna in their meditation. That is one form of symbol, the religious impression.

There are also cultural or social symbols and in tantra you will find a wide variety of them. There are subconscious

and unconscious symbols in tantra in the form of yantras and mandalas. In meditation, as you go deep inside your being, changes take place. As the mind and energy patterns change, it is like turning a kaleidoscope and you see different images. These images which come up from deep inside are the yantras and mandalas which represent states of consciousness or qualities of human nature.

In the course of time, the psychic symbol manifests in deeper states of meditation. Initially, in order to focus ourselves and get away from different kinds of religious, cultural and social impressions in the subconscious, we take up a symbol which is non-aligned, like a flower which represents beauty, a flame which represents light, or a star. These non-aligned symbols are used in the initial stages of meditation to provide a point of focus and act as a catalyst to take us deeper into our personality.

What is the power of a symbol?

Swami Niranjanananda: The psychic symbol is the focus for channelling the energies of the mantra in order to create a corresponding change in the psychic body, which is governed by images, symbols, yantras and mandalas. Each symbol, image, yantra or mandala used as a psychic symbol conveys, in the language understood by the consciousness, an idea of harmony, equilibrium, balance, stability, strength, power and wisdom; in fact all the qualities which are necessary to convert a person into a superperson. The purpose of the symbol is to convey an idea to the consciousness in a language which is understood by consciousness.

DARSHAN – INNER VISION

What is darshan?

Swami Satyananda: Every student of meditation should have a symbol for himself. The symbol can be a green leaf, a flower, a star, a triangle, or anything as a matter of fact, but he must have one. There is no use having an abstract idea. I have

practised this for years and years and it is called abstract meditation, meditation without form. Abstract meditation leads one to unconsciousness; concrete meditation leads one to the unconscious with consciousness.

What is the proof that you have been able to perceive the unconscious? What are the symptoms? What is the indication that you have visualized your unconscious? I am not speaking about super consciousness. When you are able to see, to visualize the object of your meditation as closely as you see me or other people every day, you will know that you have seen your unconscious and you have come back.

It is not a conscious dream. In a dream, if you see a rose flower, but you are not aware that you are seeing a rose flower, it is subconscious. The indication of manifestation of the subconscious personality is that you will see psychic visions, one after the other, both good and bad. When you go into the unconscious, the visions stop. No angels or ghosts come. You will only see the object upon which you were trying to crystallize your consciousness. You will see the lotus flower, the elephant, the serpent or the flame, that is all, because this was your object of meditation.

When you see the object of meditation internally, it is so clear, so true that sometimes when you come out, there is a doubt as to whether this is true or that is true. When the unconscious is perceived, the distinction between conscious experience and unconscious experience is dissolved. The experience is unconscious if the object is as real as the experience of that object on the conscious plane. If you happen to see me in the unconscious, it is only when you withdraw yourself from the unconscious and come back to the conscious plane that you will know, 'Oh yes, I saw Swamiji as real as this'. This particular state of experience is known in yoga philosophy as 'darshan'.

Darshan means unconscious visualization or perception of the object in all its dimensions. When your consciousness has become completely free from limitation, completely free from sense consciousness, intellectual consciousness and all

other modes of empirical consciousness, it is in this state that peace is achieved. It is in this moment that you become a yogi. It is in this moment that all the tensions, afflictions, troubles, shocks and reactions of day-to-day life are completely resolved.

How can one understand darshan?

Swami Satyananda: Meditation is a living experience. Another word for living experience is darshan. *Darshan* is inner vision, but it is definitely different from a psychic experience. When one has darshan, one feels the same depth of awareness as one feels during the waking state of experience and therefore meditation is a living experience.

Eventually an object can be seen as clearly as with the eyes open. This is the experience of expanded consciousness, or the fourth dimension, which is the ultimate aim of yoga. Through yoga that dimension of consciousness is achieved in which one's consciousness can be seen as clearly and as real as things are seen outside. In the yogic texts this is called spiritual vision. The classical term is darshan. Darshan means to see an object without the medium of the senses, without thinking, without feeling, without touching.

Hindus call it *Bhagwan ka darshan*, God's vision. Darshan means to see without eyes, to hear without ears, to think without the mind, to speak without a tongue. That is the stage when one can have the vision of one's ishta devata in the depth of consciousness, when 'I' is no more.

Take a rose, look at it, then close the eyes and visualize it. What is the difference between the real flower and the mental image of that flower? One is gross and the other is subtle. The form becomes subtle. The Rama whom one sees in the stone sculpture in the temple is the gross, visible form, but the same Rama takes a different subtle form when he is seen at a supramental, transcendental level. In that dimension of perception the ordinary consciousness evolves to such a state that it becomes extinct.

One Rama is the son of Dasharatha, one Rama dwells in the hearts of all, one Rama has created the world and one

Rama is beyond all of these. These are the four stages. Open the eyes and see one Rama with the physical eyes. Close the eyes and see his mental image. The raw material of the Rama seen by the physical eyes is stone or marble. The raw material of the Rama seen by the mental eye is mind. When one goes beyond these into the deeper dimensions, the raw material is not even mind. In that state the 'I' ends.

In this stage the raw material of that Rama is neither the marble nor the mind, but it is the product of the supramental, intuitive consciousness. That Rama is like an incarnated form. There is yet one more Rama who appears in such a state of consciousness where the mind dissolves, the senses are left behind and even the 'I' and 'you' consciousness melts away. In that dimension of awareness, where no duality is left, Rama is seen not as a statue of stone, a mental picture or an intellectual concept, but as transcendental.

When one goes to a temple and sees Rama, closes the eyes and sees Rama, withdraws the mind and sees Rama, forgets the body, mind, name, place, forgets even that one is seeing him, but still he is there – that is called darshan. In the state of darshan there is no mind. Darshan means 'living experience'. Darshan is seeing the image inside exactly as it is. The aspirant prepares himself through yoga. He can materialize his ishta devata because that purusha which he sees enshrined in the temple – he is that, and towards that point one has to strive. All the tapasya, the pooja, the dedication, the pain and pleasure, the grihastha dharma, whatever one is doing, must be directed towards attaining that end. That is the central point of Sanatana dharma. It is for this that the Vedas were created. *Veda* means 'to know', not 'to know through the books'.

There are two forms of knowledge: transcendental knowledge and empirical knowledge. Mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy, history are the empirical sciences. Transcendental *vidya*, knowledge, is that by which one can have the experience of the imperishable purusha,

and it is for this that the Vedas were created, that the shrutis, the smritis and all literatures were created.

What is the experience of darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Darshan means to see a rose inside as if it were real. It is not the same as imagination, where one is only putting pieces together, yet the rose inside is not vibrant or alive. When the rose becomes alive inside, when one sees it inside exactly as one sees it with the eyes open, it is known as darshan. *Drishya* is what is seen outside, *drashta* is the one who sees, and darshan is the exact replica.

What is one experiencing when one has darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Darshan is an experience of the inner spirit. Surdas, who was a blind saint, is one of India's most renowned poets. He saw visions of Krishna on his mental screen, which he described in his poems. These descriptions are unparalleled in their beauty and vividness. Surdas could clearly see all Krishna's exploits. He would see him sporting, dancing, performing rasa lila; he would see every behaviour, mood and moment of Krishna's life in his inner experience. This means that God's grace is not received through the sense faculty; its vessel is your inner strength and spirit force.

What is an indication of an awakening to the state of darshan?

Swami Satyananda: The deity or ishta devata on which one has been concentrating must be very clear. That is one indication that awakening has taken place. It must be as clear as myself or yourself. It is not a vision, not a dream. It is exactly the same there as it would be outside. It comes in a snap of the fingers, a glimpse of the reality within, the awakening of the ishta devata within, but it appears as if it is happening outside. Bhaktas say that they see their ishta devata outside, but actually everything is taking place within. It is not a hallucination. There is no doubt about it! That is one of the indications of awakening. It is called darshan.

How easy is it to enter the state of darshan?

Swami Satyananda: If I hold a person's nose and try to strangle him, he will fight desperately for his life. That kind of anxiety and desperation he experiences to live is akin to the degree of devotion necessary to materialize God or guru. If a person is a real bhakta or devotee and I ask him to come and follow me like a dog, he won't think first and decide whether it is good or bad, his mind will be one-pointed. It is because of the depth and intensity of one's bhakti that one can make the guru or God manifest.

Does bhakti yoga prepare a devotee to have a vision of an image of God?

Swami Sivananda: The way to God is through the heart. God-realization is achieved through perfection of the lower nature and its transmutation into higher divine nature. God can be realized through faith, devotion and meditation. Only a bhakta or a devotee can have the vision of God. God reveals Himself in the form in which the devotee loves Him most. The devotion of the bhakta and the intensity of his concentration on a particular form cause its materialization either in dream, or in meditation or even while awake.

Is there a practice that a bhakta can do to facilitate the experience of an image of God?

Swami Sivananda: Fix the mind at the lotus feet of Hari. Then rotate the mind on His silk cloth, the gem on His chest, the bracelets on His arms, earrings, the crown on the head, then on the conch, disc, mace and lotus, on His hands and then come to His feet. Repeat the process again and again. Think of His attributes also. In this way one can meditate on Sri Krishna, Sri Rama or Shiva.

Uddhava asked, "In what form and with what rites should the devotee think of You?" Sri Krishna said, "Seated comfortably in a seat neither high nor low, keeping the hands near the body unmoved, control the eye from wandering outwards. Fix it on the tip of the nose to prevent

distraction. Control the breath by taking it through one nostril and letting it out through the other and vice versa. Control the senses. Pronounce the letter *Om* continuously and with deep devotion, both while inhaling and exhaling.

"The above practice daily at the three periods, morning, noon and dusk, will enable the jiva to have perfect control of breath within a month. Imagine in the heart the lotus flower with its petals as a seat, and fancy the sun, moon and fire to be the three lights, at their proper places. Concentrate the mind and imagine My present form as seated in the flower, with calm, dignified, smiling face, the cheeks resplendent with the lustre of the gold earrings, beautiful neck, of sky colour, wearing a white cloth of spotless purity, with three ornaments and the Goddess Lakshmi on the chest. With the weapons and other usual appendages: chakra, mace, conch and lotus flower in My four hands – My feet shining with diamonds, with the splendour of the various ornaments on My body – crown, *kaustubha* or diamond, on the chest, waist-ring, and the amulet at the shoulder – overflowing with grace towards My devotees.

"Run your fancy over the whole form till you complete all the details and then fix your mind on the same without thinking of anything else. By thus looking at the form and fixing the mind from wandering elsewhere, the face will gradually wear an ecstatic look. When thus the mind oblivious of everything gets fixed in concentration of My form, the jiva becomes completely merged in Me."

In the beginning one may not be able to bring the full image before the mind's eye. When thinking of the face of Sri Krishna, the feet and hands will disappear. When thinking of His feet, His face will slip away. Through constant sadhana, a well-defined, clear-cut, full image can be defined.

A ray of the mind goes forth to the object, which in turn shapes and moulds the mental substance into the form of the object. When a man thinks of an image of Sri Krishna or Sri Rama constantly, with single-minded or one-pointed concentration like the unbroken flow of oil, his mental

substance takes the form of the image. The image leaves a definite impression on the mind, called *samskara*. If this impression is repeated often, a tendency or habit is formed in the mind. That is the reason why the aspirant is asked to repeat the mantra several lakhs of times. A man can shape his mind for good or bad. It depends upon the nature of food he gives to the mind. Every thought produces a definite change in the substance of the brain also.

Are there different qualities or experiences of darshan?

Swami Satyananda: Feeling, imagination, vision, anubhuti, dreamlike experience, are all lower qualities of darshan. To see Him face to face is the highest quality of darshan. That is the ultimate point of expansion and it has been proved by people like Mirabai, Tukaram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and others. It is not a myth.

In hypnotism the consciousness shrinks. In the type of meditation that most people today want, the consciousness shrinks. They call it relaxation – it does not matter. One can obtain relaxation through LSD or ganja. Meditation is not practised for relaxation; meditation is practised for expansion and transcendence. How can one know if one's consciousness is expanding or shrinking? One must be able to measure it and that measurement is done through the form of the guru or devata.

In the first stage the aspirant thinks about him, he can't see him. In the second stage he has a feeling about him – that is the first step of expansion. Then he has a clear outline of his figure – he can see the two eyes and nose and everything else, for a moment – that is further expansion. The ultimate point of expansion is darshan. Darshan means to see oneself in the form of one's devi, devata or guru.

Can there be a vision of God without form?

Swami Satyananda: The vision of God can be in a form or without a form; it can be in the form of inspiration and it can be in the form of emotions. The vision of God can be in

many forms; it is not in any one specific form. Arjuna saw Him in His four-armed form. Some have heard Him in the tune of musical instruments, some have seen Him in the form of light and others have seen Him as something else. So what if someone has seen Him in such and such a form? There is no need to search.

What prevents one from having a vision of God?

Swami Satyananda: God is here, where one is, but He can't be seen because the instrument used for seeing is blunt. It is blunt because in that instrument there is one's son, daughter, uncle and aunt. There is no sentiment of selfless service in that; there is the emotional attachment of selfishness. Everything is for oneself: my wife, my son, my husband, my guru, my disciple, all mine – until this whole world is for oneself. Forget about God. With such an attitude one can go to all the temples, but it will make no difference. A tightly sealed jar of poison kept in the river Ganga for a thousand years will retain its poisonous character. It will not change into the water of the Ganga.

Is the intellect an obstacle to experiencing darshan?

Swami Satyananda: The truth or the essence is grasped more easily by people who are uneducated, illiterate and innocent. In matters relating to God there is no scope for intellect. For God the intellect must be kept aside. Accept God like an innocent, illiterate person in full faith.

Do not speak about God having no form, *nirakara* or *nirguna*. The only way is to accept God as *sakara*, with form. Think of this form as the creation of an artist or a sculptor, but after meditating upon this form regularly with the eyes closed, a day comes when the image that is outside appears vividly in front of the closed eyes, within oneself. When the differentiation between the outer and the inner comes to an end, that is darshan. When the image of Sri Rama outside can be seen within, that is God's darshan.

If all the emotions can be channelled in independent devotion, bhakti becomes powerful. When bhakti is of great intensity, it is possible to feel the presence of the person to whom one is devoted. For those who are innocent and childlike, who don't question too much, and who have one-pointed and unfaltering faith, this higher bhakti is possible. However, such people are rare, and in most people the flow of bhakti is dissipated.

The child thinks of mother and mother alone. A passionate husband thinks of his wife and his wife alone. A greedy money-lender thinks of his money and his money alone. Even so the devotee should entertain in his heart the picture of his ishta and the ishta alone. Then he can have darshan of God easily. Sri Krishna says to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* (8:14):

> *Ananyachetaah satatam yo maam smarati nityashah;*
> *Tasyaaham sulabhah paartha nityayuktasya yoginah.*
>
> I am easily attainable by that ever-steadfast yogi who constantly and daily remembers Me (for a long time), not thinking of anything else (with a single mind or one-pointed mind), Oh Partha!

Has anyone had a vision of their ishta devata as they went about their everyday life?

Swami Satyananda: When Tulsidas, the author of the *Ramacharitamanas*, was alive, he used to live in Chitrakoot, a place sanctified by Sri Rama during his exile, just as Vrindavan was sanctified by Sri Krishna, and Rajgirh was sanctified by Buddha.

Tulsidas was an ordinary Brahmin and not a very rich man, so he had to earn his livelihood every day. He was making sandal paste for the pilgrims and applying it for one or two annas. One day, while he was doing this, he saw a young bright man. He looked at him and applied the tilak. That moment he realized who it was. At once he knew that he was Sri Rama, because at once the whole figure changed.

He was young, with his bow and arrow, white chest and hands reaching to the knees. Sri Rama is known as Ajanu Bahu, meaning one with his hands to the knees, and his complexion was that of a blue lotus.

The moment Tulsidas put the tilak on him, he knew who he was because he had that shock. He then wanted to touch Sri Rama's feet, but he had gone away. That is called darshan. In the vedic tradition it is believed that one can have the darshan of one's ishta devata. Darshan means seeing Him face to face. The Vedas and other traditions consider this as the ultimate aim of man's incarnation. Even if there is no God, if one can see the nucleus of one's existence face to face, one is the greatest of men.

Not everybody can do it. People cannot even see their complexes, their character or personality, but if one can go deep and deeper and much deeper beyond the ego, to the point of existence, the nucleus of one's existence, one can see what one is. If it can be seen outside as an object, as a form, as a reality, and visualized face to face with eyes open, that is man's greatest achievement. It is for this that yoga, tantra, karma, shastras, niyama and yama are being taught – only for that purpose and for nothing else.

Is it easier for Hindus than followers of other religions to enter the state of darshan?

Swami Satyananda: This concept of darshan is peculiar to the Hindu religion. They believe that the divine entities can be seen face to face, in flesh and blood, and therefore one of the greatest desires, one of the greatest wishes of a Hindu is to have darshan of his deity.

Whenever they go to a temple or to a guru, and whenever they pray, it is just for one thing: "Please come to me, face to face, not in dream, not in meditation, not in imagination but in three dimensions."

The method applied for this is mostly bhakti yoga. The emotion they have for their husband and wife, children and parents, their money and property, they try to channel in

one direction. When the emotions are channelled in one direction, bhakti matures. When one pines for His darshan, even as one pines for one's life when drowning, darshan comes. That kind of bhakti is necessary to materialize the universal spirit.

How does meditation prepare one to move towards the state of darshan?

Swami Satyananda: Meditation is nothing but a kind of movement of consciousness and japa yoga is the rhythmic movement of consciousness. In this method, one takes a particular sound, *Om*, *Kleem*, *Ram*, or any other sound, and brings about a state of transcendence in the realm of one's awareness. Make a rhythmic movement of the sound without stop, for half a second, or for twenty minutes. Let the mind continue to function in the forms of worries, anxieties, memories, reflections, anticipations, brooding. Remain one-pointed in straightforward rhythmic movement of the sound, or rather in rhythmic movement of the consciousness in the form of a sound. Continue at the same moderate speed, neither too quick nor too slow. Maintain the same speed.

Now develop the awareness in the form of an image and find out if the movement of consciousness has brought about some tangible results. If the sound movement has brought about a tangible result, the moment the eyes are closed and one thinks of a triangle, the triangle comes as a vision, rather than a thought.

Eventually the object can be seen as clearly as seeing an object with the eyes open, and that is the experience of expanded consciousness. That is the experience of the fourth-dimensional consciousness, which is the ultimate aim of yoga. Through yoga, that dimension of consciousness is open, so that one can see one's consciousness as real as one sees things outside. That state is called darshan in Sanskrit, but it should be translated as the science of self-awareness.

On the spiritual path, when does the experience of darshan become a possibility?

Swami Satyananda: My guru, Swami Sivananda, told me to tread the following paths to obtain the vision of God. Just as there are various classes in schools – kindergarten, lower primary, upper primary, high school, college or university – in the spiritual path also there are six paths. The first is service, the second is love, the third is give, give, give and not take, take, take. Only give and give. This is the first preparation.

Then comes purification of the self. Once that is done, one can just close one's eyes and one will have the vision of God, because He is everywhere. He does not have to be pulled from somewhere else. The scriptures say that God exists in every particle. There is no place where He is not present. So, where does one search for Him?

How important is mumukshutva in attaining darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Mumukshutva* is the desire, drive and motivation to attain transcendence. This is not simply an ordinary desire; it is an intense, burning and all-consuming desire for liberation. The key is intensity, absolute intensity, not just a desire. When a man, lost in the desert and yearning for a drop of water, sees an oasis, he rushes towards it with nothing else but water on his mind. That is the degree of intensity required for mumukshutva. A man will always search for water in the desert, as it is impossible to survive without it. Similarly, while in this world keep your eyes open for God. You need God's grace and strength to live in this world. When you come into this world, this thought is forgotten and you die without experiencing God. You die in the absence of His grace. Just as a man dies in the desert without water, you perish in this world without God. When you do not find God, you keep struggling with yourself, you keep fighting this losing battle, and you die persisting with it. This is why intensity of *shraddha,* faith, in your goal, your actions and your reflections, is spoken of in relation to

mumukshutva. It is this intense feeling that allows you to become one with your God, your object of devotion, and to maintain that connection always.

Can darshan be obtained through sadhana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Once there were two sadhus performing tapasya. They were hanging upside down from a huge neem tree for many years. One day, they heard somebody walking on the path chanting, 'Narayana, Narayana'. They knew instantly that it was Sage Narada and came down to greet him. They asked him where he was headed. Narada replied that he was going to interview God. He wanted to know what God was up to – new projects, plans for the world, and so on. The two sadhus said, "Would you ask Him a question for us. When will He give us His darshan? We have been performing this austerity for a long time." Sage Narada agreed and went his way and the sadhus climbed back on the tree and began their tapasya again.

A few days passed and Sage Narada reappeared. The two sadhus once again climbed down and eagerly asked him, "Did you ask God? What did He say?" Sage Narada replied, "God said that you will have to wait as many years as there are leaves on this tree." The sadhus looked up at the tree. It was in full bloom. One said, "How can I know the number of leaves on this tree? There are too many to count. This means that I am not going to get God's darshan," and he left. He dropped his tapasya and began his journey back home. The other thought, "This is nothing. I now have God's word. He will give me darshan. What does it matter how long it will take. I have His guarantee. I am going back up on that tree." As soon as he thought this, God appeared in front of him.

The other sadhu had gone some distance and noticed a brightness and peace cast over the forest. He turned to look at what it might be and saw Sage Narada and God. He ran back to that spot but he could not see God's form. He was only able to sense His presence due to his long years of penance.

Sage Narada was livid. He said to God, "You have turned me into a liar. Everybody will say I lie. You told me it would take you many years to appear before them, and now you are here five minutes later." God said, "This sadhu's faith was so strong that it changed his entire thinking, mind and intellect. The other was disappointed and left. Due to his penance he can sense something special, yet he cannot witness it."

This story illustrates that it is not tapasya, meditation or wisdom that creates a connection with God. These are only tools to increase the capacity of your mind, the worthiness of your life and the receptivity of your soul. If you meditate, your mind will become peaceful. Once it becomes quiet, the mind's power of comprehension increases. Meditation and tapasya become practices to develop discipline, sensory restraint and mental restraint.

Through these methods your abilities become refined, your understanding is enhanced, your intellect becomes sharper and you become radiant. This is not the path that will connect you with God. For that, you have to purify the emotions. Having done so, make your emotions the medium to invite God into your life. This is the easiest method. There is nothing to show in this method and nothing to hide. It is the method of opening the heart and connecting. Once you are able to do this, that's it. You will have all the happiness, peace and prosperity you are looking for.



4

Shiva Worship

> The ability to know and to do what is appropriate and auspicious is the power of Shiva. Worship of Shiva, the spirit that is in everybody, is a connection of one's mind with one's inner benevolent and auspicious self.
>
> —*Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*

WHO IS SHIVA?

Who is Shiva?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva's work is to meditate, and when he is not meditating, he is destroying. He cannot have a normal, peaceful life. Shiva lives in extremes. He is either at total peace in samadhi, oblivious to everything that is happening around him, or he is so ferocious that he is ready to burn even Kamadeva, the lord of passion. When Shiva becomes active, he dances his cosmic dance and the world dissolves, falls apart, shatters. He opens his third eye and burns someone to ashes. He could swallow poison and survive. He can hold the purity of the intellect. He can use the raw energy of kundalini, and is often in a mischievous mood.

Was Shiva an actual person?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva, the yogi, was once a real man, not a mythological person or part of the religious trinity.

He lived an incredible, wild life in the mountains, not tied by any social conditions. Shiva represents yoga; in duality, conflict and confusion, he remains stable in his identity and at peace. Sri Swami Satyananda has said, "There is no peace in the Himalayas and there is no noise in the world; it is in our own mind. If the chattering of the mind continues, even in the remotest corner of the Himalayas you will not find peace, yet if the mental chattering has been stilled, you will find absolute silence even in the middle of the market." Shiva represents this *purushartha* or attainment.

Who is Shiva and what are his attributes?

Swami Sivananda: Shiva is the Lord of the universe, the destroyer of egoism, lust and anger, the Lord of Uma who is also called Gauri and Ganga, full of light, knowledge and bliss, the Lord of yogis, the storehouse of knowledge and known by various names such as Mahadeva, Shankara, Hara, Shambhu, Sadashiva, Rudra, Sulapani, Bhairava, Uma-Maheshwara, Nilakantha, Trilochana or Tryambaka, the three-eyed, Vishwanath, Chandrashekhara, Ardhanarishwara, Parama Shiva, Digambara, Dakshinamurti.

How large is his heart! How loving, merciful and kind he is! He is an embodiment of renunciation, mercy, love and wisdom. It is a mistake to say that he is the destroyer. Shiva in reality is the regenerator. Whenever one's physical body becomes unfit for further evolution in this birth because of disease, old age or other causes, he at once removes this rotten physical sheath and gives a new, healthy, vigorous body for further quick evolution. He wants to take his children to his lotus feet quickly. He desires to give them his own status.

It is easier to please Shiva than Hari. A little divine love and devotion, a little chanting of his mantra is quite sufficient to infuse delight in Shiva. He gives boons to his devotees quite readily. He gave his own bow to Arjuna without any difficulty for his little penance. He gave a precious boon to Bhasmasura. In Kalahasti near Tirupati he gave darshan to Kannappanayanar, the devoted hunter

who plucked his two eyes to replace the weeping eyes in the murti. In Chidambaram even the untouchable pariah saint, Nandan, had darshan of Shiva.

Shiva ran with tremendous speed to make the boy Markandeya immortal when he was in the clutches of Yama, the god of death. He initiated the four youths Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara into the mysteries of jnana in the form of Guru Dakshinamurti. In Madurai, in southern India, he assumed the form of a boy and carried earth on his head for a devoted lady when a dam was erected in the Vaigai River. Look at the unbounded mercy for his devotees.

How magnanimous and self-effulgent he is. He lived in the house of Pattinattu Swami in southern India for several years as his adopted son and disappeared after leaving a note saying: "Even the broken needles will not follow you after your death." Reading this note was the starting point for attainment of jnana for Pattinattu Swami.

In Me the Universe has its origin,
In Me alone the whole subsists;
In Me it is lost – this Shiva
The timeless, It is I Myself.
Shivoham! Shivoham! Shivoham!

Why are householders often attracted to Shiva?

Swami Satyananda: When aspirants meditate on Shiva and perceive Krishna, this means that their deeper attachment is for Krishna. When they see Devi, it means they have attachment for worldly things, because Devi is the giver of gifts and worldly benefits. The trishula is a symbol of the personality and it is a reminder of Shiva. The Shivalingam is also a symbol of Shiva.

In India the women worship Krishna and the men worship Devi. That is considered to be right and proper. Householders also like Shiva very much, whereas the sannyasins who belong to the order say 'Sri Ram' before

starting their meditation. Shiva is the Lord of austerity and vigour of those who live a difficult life in the jungle, but still householders love and worship him and obtain peace of mind through this. Sri Rama was a king whose life was full of riches and luxuries and that theme gives peace to the minds of those who lead lives of austerity.

Householders are usually living lives of enjoyment and their inner, subconscious mind wants relief from that. The conception of Shiva comes to them because he is the Lord of austerities; no worries, anxieties, husbands, nothing of that sort, no trouble at all. He spends twenty-four hours in meditation; no fear of snakes, scorpions and tigers. He doesn't have to pay any taxes. What a free life he lives. Therefore, the concept of Shiva gives relief to the inner psychology of householders. A worldly person must choose a deity who is not worldly. A sick person chooses a healthy deity. Sannyasins lead lives of rigour and discipline, self-abnegation and mortification, therefore Sri Rama gives them some sort of relief.

What is the symbology of Shiva?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva represents the spiritual consciousness in man. The crescent moon in the matted locks represents ida nadi. The flow of the Ganga represents pingala nadi. The serpents residing at different parts of the body represent the awakened force of kundalini. This awakened force is represented by the hissing snakes. The bull represents the individual ego on which Shiva is sitting and controlling – the animal in man. The bull does not ride on Shiva but Shiva rides on the bull. In the symbology of Shiva there is a tortoise, inverted facing Shiva. The inverted tortoise represents the introverted mind of a person. When the mind is introverted to spiritual life, inner being, or inner point, that is represented by the turtle. Standing beside Shiva is a trident with three spears. The trident represents the three gunas of nature: *tamasic*, dormant, *rajasic*, dynamic and *sattwic*, balanced. These are the three stages of nature.

What is represented by the symbols associated with Shiva?

Swami Sivananda: Pictures of Shiva have great symbolic meaning. Shiva is the lord of ascetics and lord of yogis robed in space, *digambara*. The *trishula*, or trident, held in his right hand represents the three gunas: sattwa, rajas and tamas. That is the emblem of sovereignty. He rules the world through these three gunas. The damaru in his left hand represents the *shabda* Brahman, sound. It represents *Om* from which all languages are formed. It is he who formed the Sanskrit language out of the damaru sound.

The wearing of the crescent moon on his head indicates that he has controlled the mind perfectly. The flow of the Ganga represents the nectar of immortality. The elephant represents symbolically the vritti of pride. Wearing the skin of the elephant denotes that he has controlled pride. The tiger represents lust. His sitting on the tiger's skin indicates that he has conquered lust. His holding a deer in one hand indicates that he has removed the *chanchalata*, the tossing, of the mind. Deer jump from one place to another swiftly like the mind which jumps from one object to another. His wearing of serpents around the neck denotes wisdom and eternity. Serpents live for a long number of years. He is Trilochana, the three-eyed one, with the third eye, the eye of wisdom. Nandi, the bull that sits in front of the Shivalingam, represents the pranava *Om*. The lingam represents *advaita*, non-duality. It points out "I am one without a second" – *Ekameva Aditiyam*.

What does Shiva's trident represent?

Swami Satyananda: There are two important symbols associated with Shiva – the trident and the drum. In Sanskrit the trident is known as *trishula* and the drum as *damaru*. These two symbols relate to the spiritual practices of every yogi.

The three bodies, the gross, astral and causal body, are like three fortresses, and are symbolically represented as a steel fortress, a silver fortress and a gold fortress. Beyond

these three fortresses is a being which has to be tackled. To unite with that being, one will have to somehow penetrate these three impregnable fortresses. The body is so difficult to transcend, and the mind and emotions are just as difficult. The difficulty is that one is not able to transcend the idea of the body, the mind or the individual consciousness, but still one wants to realize that which is infinite. The yogi has to transcend these three; only then can he reach the innermost being.

These three fortresses, symbolic of the body, mind and ego consciousness, are of different depths, and belong to the three gunas, or qualities of nature, sattwa, rajas and tamas. The gunas can be related to each of the three fortresses. At the grossest level, sleep represents tamas, meditation represents sattwa and the active life represents rajas. When the mind is active, full of desires, ambitions, passions, fulfilments and frustrations, that is rajas. When there is laziness, dullness, lethargy and inactivity, that is tamas. When the futility of life has been realized, and the mind is calm and completely unperturbed under any conditions of life, that is sattwa or harmony. The trident, represents these three states of nature in relation to the three bodies.

How can the symbolism of Shiva's damaru be explained?

Swami Satyananda: When practising meditation, at a certain moment one comes in contact with certain inner sounds. These sounds are many and they have been fully explained in nada yoga. Nada yoga is a sphere of experience and everybody who practises has to pass through that stage of experience. Various sounds are experienced. They are known as *nada*, sound or inner melody, inner voice or inner music. Many yogis and mystics have spoken about this experience. These mystical inner sounds have been heard by many people in deep meditation. Some have heard the flute, others the sound of a bird, a thunder clap or other noises, and they have described their experiences in their songs and hymns and in various scriptures.

The drum which is seen with Shiva represents this aspect of experience. At a certain stage of meditation, the beating of the little drum called a damaru can be heard. This is an indication of transportation of consciousness from this finite realm to the infinite one. The Shivalingam, the trident and the drum are not external objects but symbolic expressions of the deeper nature of reality.

What is the symbology in the image of Shiva?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva is the destroyer, the transformer, the catalyst for change. In creation, he is part of the trinity in which Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver and Shiva is the transmuter. Shiva is the first or original yogi. He is considered to be the greatest of all the gods, the emperor, yet he lives not in heaven but in the cremation ground where material life is destroyed and a new journey begins.

Shiva's body is a composition of different symbols. Imagine him as a yogi with matted hair. On his head, the Ganga emerges as a stream, representing the fountain of purity, youth and eternal life. He is the only god who has three eyes. When his two eyes see the world of duality, his third eye remains closed. The eye of unity only opens when the eyes of duality are closed, at which time everything dissolves in one single identity. That is why the opening of the third eye is also seen as the bringer of death and destruction to duality.

At vishuddhi chakra, in his throat, he retains poison. This has turned his throat blue, so he is called *Nilakantha*, blue-throated. To save creation, Shiva drank poison churned from the ocean of milk by the gods who were seeking the nectar of immortality, and retained it in his throat where it could not harm him.

Shiva's body is smeared with ashes. Ash is what remains after all the elements or *tattwas* are burned and fused into one. The body has five elements: matter, water, fire, air and space, yet when the body burns, everything becomes one

tattwa: ash. Matter represents existence. Ash represents non-existence. Symbolically, ash represents the essence of birth and death.

While the other gods live in beautiful palaces in heaven, Shiva lives in an absolutely desolate area: the plateau of Tibet and the mountain of Kailash. While the other gods wear beautiful clothes and ornaments, he wears a tiger skin, which symbolically represents prana shakti or energy. As ornaments around his neck, arms and waist, Shiva has snakes, which represent awakened kundalini shakti.

Shiva is considered to be the ishta devata, symbol or hero of sannyasins due to his ability to maintain perfect spiritual balance. It is no easy task for him to keep the balance in his personal life, nor is it simple to differentiate between the two eyes of duality and the third eye of unity, as creation and destruction are happening at the same time. Shiva is the symbol of the equipoised person. He is a yogi who always finds balance in life, although he does not live in the peaceful environment that one craves. He has the habit of accumulating people and animals that are always after each other's blood. If you have ghosts, demons, ghouls and spirits as your assistants, how can there be peace?

What are the aspects of Shiva?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva is sometimes depicted with matted locks, and sometimes without. Sometimes he is symbolized in the form of a Shivalingam, an oval-shaped black stone. He has influenced the thinking of this country tremendously, and it is through him that yoga emerged. They say that Shiva was the first yogi and teacher of yoga, and that it is from him that tantra has also come. Shiva was the first teacher of tantra. He instructed Parvati, his consort, on yoga, tantra, medicine and many other aspects.

Shiva or Shankara has two aspects. One is the universal aspect, in which Shiva is a force, not a person. When the electric current manifests through a bulb, it is light. When it manifests through a refrigerator, it is cold. When it manifests

through this microphone, it is sound. Is electricity sound, light or temperature? No, it is energy and energy is always neutral. It has no particular form of its own. Shakti or energy has no particular form of its own. But all forms are the forms of energy. Light and refrigeration are forms of energy.

In the same way, once upon a time Shiva was born in India in the form of a mendicant. He had a human body and he lived the life of a hermit. He used to put cobras around his neck, drink poison and smoke hashish. Shiva is the eternal destroyer, which is one of the universal aspects of creation. If there were no destroyer, there would be no creation. Destruction and creation must be balanced by each other. Therefore, creation, preservation and destruction, this trinity is beautifully explained in the vedic stories.

What is Shiva?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva has always been considered the founder of yoga. The image and symbol of Shiva is unique. *Shiva* means auspicious being. The lifestyle of Shiva, who has been presented as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent being, is one of solitude and isolation in the mountains of Kailash. This means that, although one may be omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, an awareness of the self has to be maintained, which can only be done in solitude and isolation, away from the influences and distractions of the senses and maya.

Shiva represents harmony because in his family there are many opposing forces. The mount of Shiva is a bull, Nandi, and the mount of Shakti is a tiger. The mount of Ganesha, a son of Shiva, is a rat, while that of Kartikeya, another son, is a peacock. Around the body of Shiva are a large number of serpents. All these different animals really hate each other. The snakes on Shiva's body are always eyeing the rat, waiting for an opportunity to strike and devour it. The peacock is always eyeing the snakes, which form Shiva's necklace, waiting for an opportunity to gobble one up. The tiger is always eyeing the bull, saying, "Okay, wait until you are alone and

then I will show you what my power is." Therefore, Shiva always has to maintain a balance between the members of his family.

On Shiva's head is a crescent moon which represents the *maha tattwa*, the manifestation of the individual mind, not the human mind, but the cosmic mind which is waxing and waning. From Shiva's matted locks flows the Ganga. Water symbolizes life. Therefore, the cosmic mind, the water of life and the ability to harmonize every opposing force are the qualities of Shiva.

Another aspect of Shiva is Tryambaka Mahadev, the ishta devata of Sri Swami Satyananda. This aspect has three heads, each having three eyes, representing the causal, subtle and gross manifestations of consciousness, the three dimensions of human existence and knowledge. The eyes represent tamas, rajas and sattwa. The third eye is sattwa. When sattwa awakens, rajas and tamas no longer have any place, but as long as the eye of sattwa remains closed one swings between rajas and tamas. The rajasic and tamasic states represent the dualities of life, whereas sattwa represents its unity. The third eye is the symbol of the awakening of the sattwic nature.

Shiva is considered to be a god, a deity who has totally transcended every form of manifestation of prakriti or shakti, and is the essence of consciousness. Prakriti manifests in the form of various elements. When the shakti is burnt away and the tattwas are dissolved into one another, all that remains is ash, *bhasma*. Ash is the essence of the whole of creation.

The only element which can bring about transformation and destruction of the elements is fire. Fire can burn the element earth. Fire has the power to evaporate water. Fire can be fanned by the power of wind. Fire burns in space; space is the container of fire. Thus, fire represents the cosmic force. Fire is the symbol of Shiva. Shiva wanders around cremation grounds where prakriti, maya and shakti are being consumed by the force of fire, where shakti is being converted into the pure essence of ash, the original tattwa.

In the life of sannyasins, Shiva represents transcendental consciousness beyond the world of name, form and idea. It is not necessary for anyone to identify with the symbol or image of Shiva; it will happen naturally and spontaneously as one evolves spiritually. People in countries outside India, who have never read about Shiva, and who have no concept of him, as they evolve, they see different images in their meditation. Sometimes it may be an open and awakened third eye, the trident, or even the image of Shiva himself.

Those who have really thought about it do not consider Shiva to be a religious or mystical figure or symbol. They consider him to be a representation of the nature of consciousness. In deeper states of meditation, as we begin to realize the nature of consciousness, the image of Shiva also manifests.

There was a person from Germany who had never been to India, knew nothing about India and was not interested in any kind of yogic system, philosophy or practice. One day he went swimming in a river and was caught in the middle with cramps and nearly drowned. While he was going under he suddenly yelled, "Shiva save me!" Later on, he said that he did not even know the name he had shouted. After he had gone under and was nearly unconscious, he felt as if somebody or some force lifted him up and threw him on to the riverbank. There was nobody around for miles except for a few friends who were frantic on the other shore. Nobody had come forward to help. Therefore, for him this experience was something unique and mystical.

Later on, he came to India and began to make investigations about Shiva, the name that he had called out in desperation, and he told this story. I believe that when he was going under, in his panic and fear he bypassed the cobwebs of the mind and went into the deeper mind. He had unconsciously tapped into that nature of consciousness, which had given him the force to be thrown out of the river on to the shore. Whether he did it himself or whether it was divine grace, he received this energy and was thrown to

shore. It is possible that in the process of one's own yogic sadhana one can reach a stage where, unconsciously, one taps into that source of energy and consciousness. It is a momentary experience.

What is Shiva's nirakara form?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shiva is a god who is fond of the number five. Shiva has five faces: four faces look in the four directions and the fifth face looks upward. Each face has given birth to a different letter of the alphabet. The first face has given rise to the first and primordial letter A. The second mouth has given birth to U, which is the fifth vowel. The third mouth has given rise to M, which is the fifth letter of the fifth group of letters called *vargas*. The fourth mouth has given rise to *bindu*, the source of all vibrations. The fifth face has given rise to *nada*, psychic sound.

A, U, M, bindu and nada: these five manifest as mantras and combine to form *Aum*. *Aum* has been accepted as the mantra of Shiva's *nirakara* or formless entity. Just as the Shivalingam is the visual symbol of Shiva's nirakara form, *Aum* is the mantra of Shiva's nirakara form, known as the shabdabrahman. *Brahman* means the beginningless, infinite reality that is God, and the experience of that ultimate reality as sound is called *shabdabrahman*.

What is the purpose of Shiva's dance?

Swami Sivananda: The dance of Shiva is for the welfare of the world. The object of his dance is to free the souls from the fetters of maya, from the three bonds of anava, karma and maya. He is not the destroyer but he is the regenerator. He is the *mangala data* and *ananda data*, bestower of auspiciousness and bliss. He grants boons quickly for a little tapas or a little recitation of his five letters.

He dances quite gently. If he dances vehemently the whole earth will sink down at once. He dances with his eyes closed because the sparks from his eyes will consume the entire universe. The five activities of the Lord, the

panchakriyas, are the dances of Shiva: *srishti*, creation, *sthiti*, preservation, *samhara*, destruction, *tirobhava*, illusion, and *anugraha*, grace.

In the night of Brahma or during *pralaya*, the destruction of the whole universe, Prakriti is inert, motionless; the three gunas are in a state of equilibrium or poise. She cannot dance till Shiva wills it. Shiva rises from his profound silence and begins to dance. The undifferentiated sound becomes differentiated through the vibrations set up by the movements of his *damaru* or drum. Shabdabrahman comes into being. The undifferentiated energy becomes differentiated. The equipoise in the gunas becomes disturbed. The three gunas, sattwa, rajas and tamas, manifest. All the spheres, the atoms and the electrons dance rhythmically and in an orderly manner. Atoms dance in the molecule and molecules dance in all bodies. Stars dance in time and space. Prakriti begins to dance about him as his glory or *vibhooti*. The prana begins to operate on *akasha* or subtle matter. Various forms manifest. *Hiranyagarbha* or the golden egg or the cosmic mind also manifests.

Who was Appayya Dikshtar?

Swami Sivananda: Appayya Dikshitar is one of the luminaries in line of highly revered acharyas or learned scholars of the Advaita tradition established by Sri Shankaracharya. A highly acclaimed scholar of rare erudtion and author of several gems on the scriptures, Appayya Dikshitar was a staunch bhakta devoted to Shiva.

Born into 1554 into a family of renowned pandits and scholars – his grandfather was Acharya Dikshitar and his father was Ranagarajadhvari – knowledge, creativity and devotion flowered early in his life and yielded a rich bounty of authoritative literature – commentaries on sacred texts and the teachings of Sri Shankaracharya as well as books on the principles of various schools of philosophy that are upheld as gems of spiritual works – and several hymns and compositions dedicated to the praise and glory of Shiva

which are sung by the faithful in temples and gatherings of devotees all over Tamil Nadu even today.

Initiated into the teachings of Advaita philosophy by his grandfather and father, such was the extent of his confidence in himself and his knowledge that he could lecture and debate on any subject, whether in favour of or against any idea and school of thought. Apart from being an erudite scholar, Appayya Dikshitar's devotion to Shiva is unparalleled in the depth of his emotions and commitment. He wrote several books that became the foundation of the Saiva Siddhanta. The great scholar and teacher from the banks of the Narmada, Sri Narasimhashrama Swami, inspired and encouraged him to document his wealth of knowledge, and he went on to produce works of immense importance such as *Parimala*, *Nyayarakshamani*, *Siddhantalesha*, to name a few.

Appayya Dikshitar was sought after for his spiritual strength and scholarly wisdom to accept the position of royal pandit by the courts of many kings at that time, like Raja Tirumallai, Chinnabomma, Venkatapati, and there is a record of their royal edicts in many of his books.

When Appayya Dikshitar lived in Kashi for some years, Bhattoji Dikshit got acquainted with him and they grew to become close friends. In fact, in his book *Siddhantakaumudi*, Bhattoji refers to Appayya Dikshitar as his guru. Though Appayya Dikshitar was a devout Shiva bhakta and Bhattoji was a Vaishnava, their bond was very strong and they held each other in great esteem. Being learned scholars, they both believed in the essential unity of Shiva and Vishnu, holding up a laudable example to those who held strongly divisive points of view in the difference between Shiva and Vishnu.

At the age of seventy-seven he realized that his time on earth was drawing to a close and he expressed a deep desire to visit the great Shiva temple in Chidambaram. In the sanctum sanctorum he burst into a spontaneous composition, singing about the unique and special *tattwa* or quality of Shiva enshrined in Chidambaram. Before he could continue with the next line of the stanza, his pranas left his mortal

frame and he became one with the body of Shiva. Such was the perfect culmination of a life lived in dedicated sadhana to the Divine!

What aspect of Brahman does Shiva represent?

Swami Sivananda: Shiva represents the destructive aspect of Brahman. That portion of Brahman that is enveloped by the aspect of maya and where tamas is predominant is Shiva, who is the all-pervading Ishwara and who dwells on Mount Kailash. He is the storehouse of wisdom. Shiva minus maya (Parvati, Kali or Durga) is pure nirguna Brahman. With maya he becomes the saguna Brahman for the purpose of pious devotion of his devotees. Sri Rama himself worshipped Shiva at the famous Rameshwaram temple. Devotees of Sri Rama must worship Shiva. Shiva is the Lord of ascetics and Lord of yogis.

What is the difference between Ram Naam Aradhana and Shiva Aradhana?

Swami Satyananda: There is no difference between Ram Naam Aradhana and Shiva Aradhana, because wherever Rama is worshipped, Shiva is present, and wherever Shiva is worshipped, Rama is present. Shiva himself repeats the japa of Sri Rama. He himself has said that whenever Rama's name is chanted, he is always present there.

Why is the Ram Naam Aradhana being conducted in Rikhia?

Swami Satyananda: The Ram Naam Aradhana that has been organized here has only one objective. Shiva himself has finally declared that whenever the name of Rama is chanted, kirtan is sung about him, any festival is held in his honour, be it his birth, celestial marriage with Sita, his exile into the forest, his return to Ayodhya and coronation, Shiva has to be present to participate in it.

One day as I was reading the *Ramacharitamanas*, the idea flashed across my mind that the best way to entice Shiva is to

chant the name of Rama or to arrange a festival connected with Rama and the events of his life

When a desire rises in the mind of God, He also arranges for its fulfilment. I decided to hold this festival and I told the people that the name of Rama would be chanted here in collective worship. So they thronged to this place and the aradhana started in full swing. This aradhana is neither a conference nor a seminar. It is a festival, a celebration, a carnival of joy.

God can be worshipped in many different ways, not by just one particular method. Naam sankirtan is the easiest way of *aradhana* or worship. One may do *abhisheka*, oblations with water, or skip it. One may do *arati*, waving of lights, or skip it. One may or may not chant the mantra. One may worship him with sandalwood paste, flowers or leaves, but when one worships Him by chanting His name, one gains the maximum and spends nothing. When one chants the name of God, it pervades and charges the atmosphere everywhere. An energy field is created and whoever comes into this field, sits in it, lives in it or passes through it, is touched by that energy from within. This Ram Naam Aradhana has only the one aim of compelling Shiva to descend upon this place.

In the *Ramacharitamanas*, Shiva himself tells Parvati. Tulsidas has conveyed the same thing through the words of Sri Rama. The essence of their utterances is that wherever the name of Rama is chanted, wherever Sri Rama is worshipped, Shiva is bound to come. He will come, not to give darshan, but to listen to the name of Rama.

How are the qualities of Shiva relevant to one's life?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Shiva* means 'auspicious one', 'benevolent one'. He always wants what is right and appropriate for creation. It is people who misuse the potential and facilities given to them. Instead of being creative and constructive, they condition themselves. Instead of being open and receptive, they close themselves in with their own thoughts, beliefs and ideas. Instead of trying to learn

from and understand another person's viewpoint, they overemphasize their own views. Instead of learning to flow with life, they find happiness and strength in struggling, in doing the opposite to what they should do.

The ability to know and to do what is appropriate and auspicious is the power of Shiva. Once an invocation is made to that auspicious nature and the reins of life are handed over to that force, life takes on a different meaning. Worship of Shiva, the spirit that is in everybody, is a connection of one's mind with one's inner benevolent and auspicious self. Some people call it *atma,* spirit, some call it *jivatma,* individual spirit, yet according to kundalini yoga, it is Shiva, the consciousness which resides in sahasrara chakra. As part of that eternal consciousness or *chit,* it is eternal truth, *sat*. As it is eternal truth and consciousness, seeking to uplift everyone and bestow freedom from bondage, it is *ananda*, bliss or auspiciousness.

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE SHIVALINGAM

What does the Shivalingam tell us?

Swami Sivananda: The Shivalingam speaks in the unmistakable language of silence. It represents Advaita and points out, *Ekameva Advitiyam* – I am one without a second. The lingam is the *visvaroopa* or God's form of the Universe.

How did Shiva explain his three forms to Parvati?

Swami Niranjanananda: Parvati asked Shiva how consciousness and energy, in their manifest form, became the Shivalingam and what the Shivalingam represents. Shiva said, "I have three bodies. The first is the body of vibration, the sound of *Aum*, experienced by the *devas*, the transcendental beings, Narayana and Brahma. They were guided by the *rishi*, the seer, the visionary. It was the grace of the rishi, maybe Shiva himself in the form of the rishi, who gave them an understanding of the vibratory body of Shiva, of vibration or spandan being the first manifestation of cosmic existence.

The second form of realization of my existence is the Shivalingam in which Shakti and Shiva are both seen as integral parts. Shiva is passive and Shakti is active in the Shivalingam. The third is the actual physical form through which I am talking to you as a person. That energy has descended in this body. Energy is moving the body, energy is moving the senses, consciousness is moving the senses, consciousness is guiding everything, energy is guiding everything in this body – this is the manifest form of Shiva."

The three forms of Shiva are vibration, the unmanifest nature as consciousness and energy in the form of the Shivalingam, and the manifest nature as the body. These are the three bodies of Shiva.

What is the Shivalingam?

Swami Satyananda: According to vedic philosophy, the word *lingam* means 'astral awareness'. It can be described as a kind of monolithic representation which influences the subconscious forces. When the mind is projected before the monolithic symbol of the Shivalingam, the psychic contents of the mind are exploded.

The Shivalingam is the symbol of higher consciousness. What is the real form of the higher self? When one is a little beyond the mind, what is the form of one's consciousness? When one has a perfected mind, *siddha*, what is the form of one's consciousness then? When one is in deep meditation and one has forgotten everything that is happening outside, what is the form of one's consciousness at that time? It is so difficult to describe! The language of symbols has to be used in order to understand it.

What is the significance of the spiritual symbology of Shivalingam?

Swami Satyananda: *Shivalingam* means 'the supreme consciousness in its causal form'. Everything has three forms – gross, astral and causal. Lingam means the causal body, that is, the causal form of Shiva. In this physical

body there are twelve centres which are considered to be important points of concentration for the improvement and awakening of consciousness. Of these twelve points, three are most important. One is mooladhara chakra at the base of the spine; the second is ajna chakra at the top of the spine, behind the mid-eyebrow centre; the third is sahasrara chakra, the cosmic brain at the crown of the head. These three points are considered to be the most important forms of Shiva.

The form of Shiva in mooladhara chakra is that of a smoky grey, oval- shaped stone, which has no illumination. The second place of shivalingam in ajna chakra is black in colour. The third place in sahasrara chakra at the top of the brain is said to be the illumined Shivalingam. This concept of Shiva has inspired Hindus for thousands and thousands of years to follow the path from gross to subtle, subtle to causal, causal to transcendental, because Shiva represents the yogic process in human life, not the process of matter. Matter also has a process of evolution, but Shiva represents spiritual evolution in man.

The philosophy of Shiva is at once a concept which relates, not only to the body or mind, but to the highest consciousness within which it is trying to manifest. Therefore, in every temple Hindus have an oval-shaped stone which is black in colour, never white. This stone is concentrated upon in order to awaken the twelve centres in the body.

How does the lingam relate to creation?

Swami Sivananda: The light of consciousness manifesting out of Sadashiva is, in reality, the Shivalinga. From him all the moving and unmoving creations take their origin. He is the linga or cause of everything. In him, the whole world merges itself finally. The Shiva Purana says: *Pitham Ambamayam Sarvam Sivalingascha Chinmayam* – "The support or *pitham* of all is Prakriti or Parvati, and linga is Chinmaya Purusha, the effulgent light which is self-luminous." Union of Prakriti or Parvati, and Purusha or Shivalingam is the cause of the

world. In the *Shiva Purana*, Shiva says: "O Parvati, daughter of mountain, there is none dearer to Me than the man who worships Me in the lingam, knowing the lingam to be the root cause of everything and knowing the world to be Linga-maya or Chaitanya-maya."

The union of linga with yoni is a representation of the eternal union between the static and the dynamic aspects of the absolute reality. This represents the eternal spiritual communion of the paternal and the maternal principles from which all the phenomenal diversities have originated. This is an eternal communion of the changeless being and the dynamic power or shakti from which all changes flow.

The spiritualization and divinization of lingam and yoni, helps the aspirants to free themselves from sexual thoughts. All base thoughts gradually vanish by entertaining this lofty idea. All sexual relations in this world are spiritualized as the manifestations of the ultimate creative principle, of the eternal self-enjoyment and self-multiplication of Shiva in and through his power or shakti. The union of lingam with yoni symbolizes the creation of this universe by Shiva in conjunction with his shakti.

The so-called educated men of the modern age have no spiritual insight and philosophical penetration. Hence, they criticize the union of lingam with yoni as immoral and obscene, owing to their extreme ignorance and lack of enquiry, deep thinking and *satsang* or association with sages.

What is the significance of shakti in relation to the Shiva-lingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: The worship of the lingam predates the worship of the image of Shiva. The Shivalingam is the first manifest symbol of Paramshiva. When there was nothing in existence, the formless manifested itself as the lingam. Thus, the Shivalingam has been accepted as the first symbol of divinity, of God.

Shiva and Shivaa, his shakti, are the same. Just as fire is hidden in wood, Shivaa is concealed in Shiva. As water has

fluidity inherent in it, similarly Shivaa is inherent in Shiva. They are not different from each other. There is strength hidden in the body and when it is needed, it comes out. If a glass of water is to be lifted from the table, that much strength will manifest. If the whole table is to be lifted, a corresponding amount of strength will become manifest in the muscles. Shakti or power remains in the body in a subtle form. Similarly, the Shivaa element remains in Shiva in a subtle form.

The Shivalingam is the expression of the nature of Shiva and Shakti. The part where the lingam is placed is called the argha or peeth. This argha is of the nature of Shakti. Why is it called a lingam? The lingam is the symbol of Paramshiva himself and it is derived from the word *laya*, dissolution. As it is the support for dissolution, it is called lingam. When the entire creation ends and merges into the formless, everything dissolves into that lingam.

The lingam is the symbol of Paramshiva and the peeth or argha is that of Paramshakti. There is no life without Shakti. There is no srishti, stithi, samhara, tirobhava or anugraha without Shakti. Shakti exists in all ages. Argha is the form of Shakti that has taken the past, present and the future into her fold. The Shivalingam is the symbol of consciousness and thus faces upwards, and is uplifting. That which wants to know and understand itself, to achieve something, to go beyond the worldly existence and try to evolve, that consciousness has the form of the Shivalingam; the Shivalingam has both Shiva and Shakti established in it. Argha is also the symbol of the yoni, the female reproductive organ. The lingam is placed in the yoni; the creation proceeds through the union of the male and female elements, and the Shivalingam is the symbol of that union.

What is the purpose of worshipping the Shivalingam?

Swami Sivananda: The popular belief is that the Shivalingam represents the phallus or the virile organ, the emblem of the generative power or principle in nature. This is not only a

serious mistake but a grave blunder. In the post-vedic period, the lingam became symbolic of the generative power of Shiva. Lingam is the differentiating mark. It is certainly not the sex mark.

Linga means 'mark' in Sanskrit. It is a symbol which points to an inference. From a flooded river, one infers that there had been heavy rains the previous day. From smoke one infers that there is fire. This vast world of countless forms is a lingam of the omnipresent Lord. The Shivalingam is a symbol of Shiva. When looking at the lingam, the mind is at once elevated and one begins to think of the Lord. Shiva is really formless. He has no form of his own and yet all forms are his forms. All forms are pervaded by Shiva.

There is a mysterious power or indescribable shakti in the lingam to induce concentration of mind. Just as the mind is focused easily in crystal gazing, so also the mind attains one-pointedness when it looks at the lingam. That is the reason why the ancient rishis and the seers of India have prescribed the lingam to be installed in temples of Shiva. The Shivalingam speaks in the unmistakable language of silence: "I am one without a second. I am formless."

Pure, pious souls only can understand this language. The lingam is only the outward symbol of the formless Shiva, who is the indivisible, all-pervading, eternal, auspicious, ever-pure, immortal essence of this vast universe, who is the undying soul seated in the chambers of the heart, who is the indweller, innermost Self or Atman, and who is identical with the supreme Brahman.

Sphatikalingam, or crystal lingam, is also a symbol of Shiva. It is prescribed for worship of Lord Shiva. It is made of quartz and has no colour of its own but takes on the colour of the substances which come in contact with it. It represents the *nirguna* Brahman, or the attributeless or formless Supreme Self or Shiva.

For a sincere devotee, the lingam is not a block of stone. It is all – radiant light and consciousness. It talks to him, makes him shed profuse tears, produces horripilation and

melting of the heart, raises him above body consciousness and helps him to commune with the Lord and attain nirvikalpa samadhi. Sri Rama worshipped the Shivalingam at Rameshwaram. Ravana, the learned scholar, worshipped the golden lingam.

Where do Shivalingams come from?

Swami Satyananda: Shiva is not a God. Shiva literally means 'auspiciousness; and it is indicated by an oval-shaped stone, which can be called a monolith. It is black in colour. This particular stone is not made. Sometimes these oval-shaped stones will become visible or they come out from underneath the ground. There are twelve important Shivalingams.

Most of these oval-shaped stones come from the bed of the river Narmada, which flows through the centre of India and merges into the Arabian Sea. The lingams found in the various Shiva temples of India come only from this particular source, the zone of the Narmada River. However, the twelve Jyotirlingams do not come from the Narmada river. There is a clear distinction between these two types of lingams. One type is called Narmadeshwara lingam because it comes from the Narmada zone. The second type is called *swayambhu* or self-born lingam, because it originated at the same place where it now stands. The twelve Jyotirlingams are swayambhu lingams. They were not removed from their original place, rather, a temple was erected around them. On the other hand, Narmadeshwara lingams are ceremoniously brought to a particular temple and installed there.

What are the different kinds of Shivalingams?

Swami Satyananda: There are three types of Shivalingams. The first is called Gomateshwara, originating from the Gomati river; the second is called Narmadeshwara, originating from the Narmada river; the third is called Jyotirlingam. A Jyotirlingam is one that has manifested where it is worshipped; it has not been brought there from somewhere else. For example, one might dig in the ground

and a Shivalingam emerges. It will be established in that same place. It will not be moved. If somebody wishes to build a temple, it will be built around it.

There are many temples where Shivalingams have been brought from outside. However, there are twelve temples where Shivalingams manifested at that very place. They are called the *dwadasha* or the twelve Jyotirlingams. They are at Rameshwaram, Somnath, Mahakaleshwar, Bhimashankar, Kashi Vishwanath, Tryambakeshwar, Kedarnath, Ghushmeshwar, Baidyanath, Nageshwar, Omkareshwar and Mallikarjuna. These are the twelve Shivalingams that were established where they were found. At all other temples, no matter how large or important, Shivalingams were brought from elsewhere.

The question is not which of these is more important. It does not matter in which form one worships God; what is important is the faith and belief. If there is no faith and belief, it is only stone. There is nothing without faith and belief. A person has faith as long as his heart is pure, he is honest and transparent, he does not lie, and is simple. Children say, "Papa says to tell you 'Papa is not at home.'" This is being as innocent as a child. The innocence of a child is faith. The intellect, and by intellect I mean the mind, can think about God, it can write about God, but it cannot know God.

God has no connection with the mind. All great saints have said this. If one wants to experience God in any way, the mind has to be left in another room. Mind means thoughts. 'Why', 'how', 'good', 'bad', the mind dwells on all this. Words are the domain of the mind. One cannot reach God through this. To reach God, to have the darshan of God, to receive the blessings of God, one has to be simple like a little child. Whether a person is of good character or bad character, a sinner or a saint, is irrelevant. God says, "Those who come to Me simply, without cunning, I show Myself to them." That is why one should not try to analyze the worship being performed for God.

Whether Rameshwaram has a crystal Shivalingam or a Jyotirlingam or a Narmadeshwara lingam, these are all useless discussions. The smallest stone can be God. One can see God in any form. One can see God as a Shivalingam, as a shaligram, and one can see God in the form of a goat! Only one qualification is required: innocence.

One has to open one's heart to God. So what if one is a thief? So what if one is a prostitute? What difference does it make? The title has been given by society. The Brahmin got his position from society. God did not make him a Brahmin. Who gave the stamp of caste? Did God make one an ironmonger? Did he make one a carpenter? Before God all are lost souls. The devotee is the one who is praying and the one who is listening to the prayers. When you listen, God is listening.

What is the significance of the shape of the Shivalingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Indian mythology, it is said that in the beginning of creation when there was nothing, two powers emerged and they were the powers of creation and sustenance, Brahma and Vishnu. These two powers were in conflict with each other, debating as to who had a better and greater role and who was superior to the other. While this confusion was going on between these two powers called Brahma and Vishnu, a third power manifested in the middle of them in the form of a pillar of light.

This pillar of light manifested between the two warring or debating forces and a sound was heard, "Superior is he who can discover my beginning or my end." Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upwards to see where the pillar ended and Vishnu took the form of a boar and dug inside the earth to see where the pillar ended and they both searched for the beginning and the end of pillar but they could not find it. They both realized that there is a greater power than they. The first manifestation of the pillar of fire is the image of Shivalingam.

The upper part of the Shivalingam represents consciousness, the vertical, the ascending consciousness, and the flat part of the Shivalingam represents shakti. In the Shivalingam one will find representations of both, Shiva and Shakti. Shakti represents the movement of time, space, creation, manifestation, and emergence of object in time and space. The lingam represents the ascent of consciousness from gross to subtle to transcendental.

How do Shiva and Shakti manifest in the Shivalingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the *Shaiva Agamas* it is said that Shiva's nirakara form is that of the Shivalingam. The Shivalingam is a symbol not only of Shiva, but it is the joint symbol of Shiva and Shakti. It has been called a lingam because during laya or dissolution, the entire creation merges and dissolves back into the lingam. The cause of laya is called the lingam.

Shakti manifests herself in the Shivalingam in two other forms. In the lingam, she manifests as *kalaa*, creative expression of the intellect, and in the argha as *bhakti*, creative expression of emotions. Shiva also exhibits two forms in the lingam: the destroyer and the base of creation. The argha is the symbol of the foundation of creation and the lingam is the symbol of its dissolution. In this way, the Shivalingam is the symbol of both Shiva and Shakti. It is the symbol of the nirakara or the formless nature of Shiva and Shakti. In the end, the formless also has to be experienced, and how is it possible to experience it without a symbol?

EXPERIENCING THE SHIVALINGAM

What are the major elements inside a Shiva temple, and what is their significance?

Swami Satyananda: The courtyard of a Shiva temple may cover miles, but the temples themselves are always congested. The moment one enters a temple, the first thing one comes across is a bull. This bull is called Nandi

and is representative of the total ego of man's personality. Nandi is the vehicle of Shiva. This bull represents one's first introduction to oneself. To enter, first one must confront the animal, instinctive aspect within oneself. The animal is not merely an owl, goat, deer or horse; it represents the lower instincts of consciousness. Inside the temple there is a Shivalingam, the oval-shaped stone.

Is the Shivalingam sometimes described as a column of light?

Swami Satyananda: Inside the temple, there is a Shivalingam, the oval-shaped stone. Shiva literally means 'higher consciousness'. It can also be understood in many other ways. It can be said Shiva means Purusha, the ultimate matter or the basis of creation. The reality and the basis behind the nature of the whole creation is based on two factors. One is Shiva – pure, unchanging consciousness, and the other is Shakti – eternal evolution through action. When Shiva and Shakti interact with each other, there is the universe and there is creation.

When a person practises yoga and transcends the body and the intellect, he has certain inner experiences. These experiences, which many successful yogis have, often take the form of light. The lives of Mohammed, Zoroaster and the Christian saints mention columns of light.

These columns of light are not necessarily the same in everybody's experience. Sometimes a column of smoke is seen and sometimes a column of light mixed with smoke. Sometimes it is oval, sometimes round and sometimes shaped like a pillar. This experience of enlightenment, which has been described by so many yogis, is what is meant by Shiva.

Where are the Shivalingams in the causal body?

Swami Satyananda: This physical body is a miniature replica of the macrocosmos. The external world is an expression of oneself. The physical body is a miniature of the external

world. The oceans, planets, rivers, mountains and continents are in this physical body. It is not mythology, nor a belief, it is an absolutely scientific fact.

Just as in an atom the whole cosmos can be found represented mathematically (the intra-molecular space in the atom is mathematically proportionate to the external space), in the same way, in this physical body, the entire universe can be located, not only one solar system, but all galaxies. They are within everyone.

People often make philosophical errors in thinking that this body is bone, marrow, fat, blood vessels, some sort of low voltage energy flowing through the nervous system and cutting through the veins and cutting through the cells through the brain like a computer, but it is not true. This body is the microcosmos and the totality of the universe is in the microcosmos. What is in the microcosmos is in the macrocosmos, and what is in the macrocosmos is in the microcosmos.

Lingam means astral body, not the physical. One has an idea inside, one has emotions and energy. They cannot be seen, they are experienced, felt. Fear cannot be seen, but it is known because of its effect, by the consequences and results. The memory of the fear is not lost, knowledge of inner perceptions is not lost; they are astral faculties. Love is an idea, but it can never be seen because it is an astral substance.

What do the different colours of the Shivalingam signify?

Swami Satyananda: According to the symbology of kundalini yoga, the Shivalingam can have three different colours. These three colours represent the three stages of purification or evolution of consciousness – dim, consolidated and illumined. In mooladhara chakra there is a smoky lingam known as *dhumralingam*. Ajna chakra has a black lingam, the *itarakhyalingam*, and in sahasrara chakra is found the luminous *jyotirlingam*.

When a person of unevolved mind concentrates, he experiences the Shivalingam in the form of a smoky column.

It comes and then disperses, comes again and disperses. With deeper concentration, as the restlessness of the mind is annihilated, the lingam becomes black in colour. Then, continued concentration on that black Shivalingam produces the jyotirlingam within, the astral consciousness. Therefore, the black lingam of ajna chakra is the key to the greater spiritual dimension of life.

Is the Shivalingam an experience or an object?

Swami Niranjanananda: Parvati asked Shiva, "Is this image of the Shivalingam you have described an actual manifestation, or is it a personal experience?" Shiva said, "It is a personal experience which you realize to be the actual manifestation." For somebody who has never tasted sugar or chocolate, their first taste is a personal experience, but after tasting it, they know what chocolate is like. That experience remains with them, it is actualized, it manifests, it becomes inherent in their life, part of the life process.

A Shivalingam has two parts: the vertical lingam and the flat body or base. Tantrics believe that the lingam is the male principle, and the flat body, the yoni, is the female principle. Western interpreters have translated lingam as phallus, the male organ, and yoni as vagina, the female organ. However, nowhere in Sanskrit does lingam mean phallus, not in the ancient texts or scriptures. *Lingam* simply means something which is emerging. *Yoni* means the ground from which the seed emerges. Earth is the yoni for all seeds. Without it, no growth would take place, not even a blade of grass would grow. Yoni is the container from which life emerges. What has emerged is the lingam.

Shiva told Parvati that Shakti is inherent in the Shiva lingam. In the flat base, which is the body of the Shivalingam, Shakti is inherent in the form of bhakti. In the vertical lingam, Shakti is inherent in the form of *kalaa*, manifestation. The flat base from which the lingam grows represents the continuity of time. Life is governed by time. In this journey of life from birth to death, the aspiration

is to rediscover the source. That discovery of the source will happen through bhakti. Bhakti makes one aware of the spiritual nature, whereas maya makes one aware of the material nature.

How is the process of bhakti represented in the Shivalingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhakti becomes the process by which one can come back to the realization of the source. In the journey through life, ultimately one has to come to bhakti if one wants to evolve spiritually. Swami Sivananda has said it many times, "You can practise anything you want to experience physical and mental wellbeing, but ultimately, for spiritual realization you will have to forget even jnana and come to bhakti, for at one point knowledge impedes the growth of human nature."

Sri Aurobindo has said, "In the beginning intellect was my helper, my guide and my friend, but at the end it became the barrier and my worst enemy." Yogis have said this too. Salvation is possible only when one is able to open the heart and to realize one's soft nature, the benevolent qualities of life. People often think that if they speak gently and softly, they are pure, spiritual and divine. However, the purity and softness of the heart is not what one expresses through speech, behaviour or action, rather it is what one cultivates in life as the positive and appropriate nature, leading to development and attainment.

Compassion, love, sympathy and understanding are the soft nature, not aggressiveness, hardness or rigidity. Arrogance, jealousy and hatred are hard, raga and dwesha are hard. Cultivating the soft nature is the aim of bhakti, taking one from the head space into the heart space. Maya is the opposite; it makes one hard, crooked, devious, aggressive, selfish and manipulative. Bhakti has to be the last sadhana of life. After going through every kind of physical, mental and emotional gymnastics one has to come to a point where one can become fixed, stable, peaceful and pure.

Bhakti has been defined in two ways by Narada and Sandilya. Sandilya's *Bhakti Sutras* number one hundred and describe the whole process of bhakti as a way to soften and purify the inner self as a process to transform the hard qualities and acquire the soft qualities. Rishi Narada describes bhakti as a means of devotion and worship of God. Both processes are accepted, a process by which one can open oneself, and a process by which one can appreciate and celebrate the existence of life. This concept of bhakti is represented in the base of the Shivalingam, which represents the movement of time through life, through existence, through creation.

How can a Shivalingam be used in spiritual practice?

Swami Satyananda: The Shivalingam can be used as an object of concentration, as a focus for awareness. It can be used to draw one into the deeper realms of one's being. It can be used as a vehicle to higher experience.

If the concentration and reflection is sufficiently intense and one-pointed, a veritable jewel of knowledge will be brought to the awareness; a prize will be brought to the surface of the mind. If one submerges oneself into the mind by intense concentration on the lingam, one will start to plummet, to explore the depths of the mind. Whichever way one looks at the process, the result is the same.

The meaning of the Shivalingam is something that must be realized for oneself. The lingam has different meanings according to the level of understanding. Thus to say one thing about the lingam can seem to be contradicted by the meaning at another level. Therefore, one should not take any explanation too seriously; one should find out the meaning for oneself according to one's level of awareness.

What are the effects when an aspirant practices trataka on a lingam?

Swami Satyananda: By practising trataka on the Jyotirlingam, the aspirant comes face to face with himself and learns the secret of birth and death. He is able to fulfil his spiritual

ambitions. Finally he sees eternal life inside himself. This Jyotirlingam is *swayambhu*, self-created, self-born. Nobody created it. Even before one was born, it existed because the subtle body existed before the birth of the physical body. The Jyotirlingam is different on different planes of consciousness. In the physical world, it is seen in temples. On other planes, it is seen in the form of light. In order to worship this Jyotirlingam, one need not use prayers, mantra or flower offerings, but one has to sit before the lingam, pour water over it and gaze into it, trying to assimilate its physical form within. Nothing else is necessary, not even religious sanctity. One can be Hindu, Christian, Muslim, a believer or disbeliever in God.

There are also crystals in which can be found figures of snakes coiled three and a half times around, just like in mooladhara chakra. In some, the head of the serpent is upward and in others it is downward. They represent the awakened and the sleeping kundalini.

What is the story of Sri Rama's worship of the Shivalingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Vishnu's incarnation as Rama, he reached the shore of the ocean, along with Sugriva and eighteen battalions of the monkey infantry, in pursuit of Ravana who had abducted Sita. The army was wondering how to cross the sea to Lanka. There were various suggestions. Some suggested crossing with a boat, but then others said this would be dangerous as the demons might sink their boats before they reached the shore. That idea was discarded and the suggestion was made to construct a bridge, which would enable the army to cross over safely.

When the arrangements were being made for the construction of the bridge, Rama said, "Before we start on this undertaking, I would like to worship Shiva, the object of my worship and devotion, my aradhya, and receive his blessings." Rama built a Shivalingam on the beach out of sand and performed his aradhana with a stuti. When Rama

repeatedly invoked his aradhya with this stuti, Shiva could not remain unmoved in Kailash. He broke his samadhi and manifested in the Shivalingam. When Rama had darshan of his aradhya in the lingam, he praised his aradhya and prayed to him for victory in the ensuing battle with Ravana. Hearing this, Shiva did not offer his blessings or a boon, but said with palms joined in pranam mudra, "Victory to you, Rama!"

When Rama heard this call of victory, he realized that his victory over Ravana was now certain. Thereafter, Rama took permission from Shiva for the war and said, "You have blessed me by giving me darshan in this earthly lingam. I wish that at this place where I have performed your worship, you would come and stay permanently." Shiva agreed and entered the lingam. From that time on, this Shivalingam became known as Rameshwaram.

JYOTIRLINGAM

What is the song of the twelve Jyotirlingam?

Swami Sivananda: There is a stotra on the twelve Jyotirlingam, *Dvaadasha Jyotirlingani*:

Sauraashtre somanaatham cha shreeshaile mallikaarjunam.
Ujjayinyaam mahaakaalamomkaare parameshvaram.
Kedaaram himavatprishthe daakinyaam bheemashankaram.
Vaaraanasyaam cha vishvesham tryambakam gautameetate.
Vaidyanaatham chitaabhoomau naagesham daarukaavane.
Setubandhe cha raamesham ghushmesham tu shivaalaye.

In Saurashtra Shiva is called Somnath
and in Shrishaila Mallikarjuna;
In Ujjain Shiva is called Makakaal
and in Omkareshwar Mamaleshwar;
In Himvatprishtha Shiva is called Kedaram
and in Dakinyam Bhimashankar;
In Varanasi Shiva is called Vishvesham
and in Gautamitatt Tryambakam;

In Chitabhoomi Shiva is called Baidyanath
and in Daarukavan Nageshwar;
In Setubandha you are called Ramesham
and Ghushmeshwar in Shivalaya.

What is the significance of the twelve major Shiva temples in India with the Jyotirlingams?

Swami Satyananda: Although there are thousands of Shiva temples, there are only twelve such leading centres in India. The lingams installed in these centres are not called Shivalingams, they are called Jyotirlingams. *Jyotir* means light, effulgence, brilliance, bright light; it is the opposite of darkness. When there is darkness nothing can be seen, nothing can be identified, the colours and distinctions are completely merged and cannot be distinguished, but when there is light everything can be identified.

Man is in darkness. He does not know what is beyond this plane of existence, this mundane experience. Perhaps he knows a little bit about dreams, but he is not aware that there could be other, greater states of awareness, or that he could attain them. Therefore, the inner field of man is completely in darkness. If one closes the eyes, nothing is seen. Sometimes, if a little japa or mantra is done something like a movie screen or a television can be seen, otherwise nothing is seen.

When a person is angry, he knows he is angry, but he can't see it. When he is afraid, he knows he is afraid, but not exactly what he is afraid of, because there is darkness. If there were light he could see fear, love and hatred, he could see everything. Many times people don't know what is in their minds, because they only think, they don't see.

There should be light, there should be enlightenment. In that enlightenment, one begins to see things. One begins to see one's animal nature, one's spiritual nature and one's mental problems, suppressions, repressions and oppressions. One begins to see the subjective things that have not been seen before. When does it happen and how does it happen?

It can only happen if there is enlightenment. The light grows more and more and one begins to see more and more. One begins to see, not just think.

In the same way, the higher experience can be seen, and the twelve Jyotirlingams symbolize that enlightened state of man. They are situated all over India and throughout the year people visit them on pilgrimages. There is never an inauspicious time to see them.

Where are the Jyotirlingams found?

Swami Satyananda: There is a tradition that when a Shivalingam is found anywhere in the earth, one should dig deep around it and if the other end is not found after fifteen feet, it is said that it has no end. That is called a Jyotirlingam, because it was born there on its own. Then a temple is built around it. There are twelve such temples in India, which house the twelve Jyotirlingams.

These twelve important centres have shrines dedicated to Shiva. Every shrine has a form known as Jyotirlingam, the effulgent lingam of the light within. These twelve Jyotirlingams are displayed in the shrines of India and they symbolize the twelve important centres within man.

The twelve Jyotirlingam have been established: Somnatheshwar, Mallikarjuna, Mahakaaleshwar, Omkareshwar, Kedareshwar, Bhimashankar, Vishveshwar, Tryambakeshwar, Baidyantheshwar (100 miles from Munger), Nageshwar, Ghushmeshwar and Rameshwaram. These are the lingams on which trataka is practised. These lingams are oval-shaped except two: one at Kedareshwar, resembling the form of a buffalo, and the other at Baidyantheshwar, which is very much depressed at different points.

What is the significance of the different Jyotirlingams?

Swami Niranjanananda: Here is a short description of the twelve Jyotirlingams.

1. *Kedareshwar*: This is Shiva's first Jyotirlingam in the Himalayas. Nara and Narayana had performed their

sadhana here. Kedareshwar is situated to the west of Kedar mountain on the banks of the Mandakini river.

2. *Somnath*: The second Jyotirlingam is situated in Saurashtra. This is in the state of Kathiawada in the area known as Prabhasa.
3. *Mallikarjuna*: This is located on the Srisailam mountain, on the banks of Krishna river, in the Krishna district of the region of Chennai. Srisailam is also known as the Kailash of the South.
4. *Mahakaaleshwar*: This temple is in the state of Malwa, in the city of Ujjain, on the banks of the Kshipra river. Lord Shiva exists here as Mahakaala.
5. *Omkareshwar*: The two separate lingams of Omkareshwar and Amleshwar are situated at the pilgrimage centre of Omkara, on the banks of the Narmada river. These two Jyotirlingams have been accepted as two forms of the same Jyotirlingam.
6. *Bhimashankar*: This is situated on the banks of the Bhima river, at the source of the river at Sahya mountain, around 190 kilometres from Nasik.
7. *Vishvanath*: Vishvanath is in the famous city of Kashi or Varanasi, which is a part of the avimukta kshetra or Anandavana. Kashi is not destroyed during the pralaya or the great dissolution, as Shiva has established himself here in Vishvanath.
8. *Tryambakeshwar*: Tryambakeshwar temple is located in the Nasik district, 29 kilometres from Nasik Panchavati, at the source of Godavari River, near Brahmagiri.
9. *Baidyanath*: In the Puranas, the Deoghar area is known as the *chitabhoomi*, the funeral grounds, as this is where Lord Shiva burnt Sati's body. It is also the place where Sati's heart fell. The Ravaneshwar lingam, known as Baidyanath Mahadeva, is also located here. In the *Shaiva Agamas* it is called Chitabhoomau or Deoghar.
10. *Nageshwar*: Nagesh Jyotirlingam is located in Darukavana, about twenty kilometres from Gomati Dwaraka. For this reason, some people call it Dwarakavana instead of

Darukavana. Some people accept the lingam located in Audagrama, in the state of Hyderabad, as the Nageshwar Jyotirlingam. However, according to the description in the *Shaiva Agamas*, it is near Dwaraka.

11. *Rameshwaram*: This is in Setubandha, in the Ramanada district of the Chennai area.
12. *Ghushmeshwar*: This is in Shivalaya, in the state of Hyderabad, next to Daulatabad in Berul village.

God has established himself in his own form in these twelve Jyotirlingams. Even today, if one does aradhana, sadhana and archana in these places, Shankara showers his blessings on the devotee.

God is omnipresent, yet people search for him here and there. Devalaya or temples are the accepted centres of God. A temple is a place where, through the power of faith, God manifests as a conscious entity. Where the consciousness of God is not manifest, that place is samsaralaya, the residence of the worldly. In these twelve Jyotirlingams, one experiences the presence and divinity of God. Over thousands of years, millions of people have worshipped God in these places, with faith and devotion, and have awakened the power of God in those areas.

Can you please tell us about the history of some important Shivalingams and temples?

Swami Satyananda: The *Vaikhanas Sutras* are of the opinion that if any idol of God is lost, desecrated or broken and if it is not a Jyotirlingam, a new one may be re-established in its place. It is absolutely certain that the Baidyanath linga is not a Jyotirlingam, because Ravana brought it there. Wherever a Jyotirlingam or a swayambhulinga is found, it is consecrated right at that spot, it is not moved. The word *swayambhu* means "one that is born of itself", it is not established or created by you.

Therefore, the Baidyanath linga is not a Jyotirlingam. The *Vaikhanas Sutras* state that in such a case, the idol being worshipped may be propitiated by *pancha, ashta*

or *shodasha upachara*, five, eight or sixteen modes of worship, and then supported by any other idol. Amongst other idols, the foremost is the shaligram. The Indian tradition believes that shaligrams and the Narmadeshwar and Gomateshwar lingams are all lingams. These are not considered swayambhu as they originate in one place but are established in other places.

There is no mode of replacement for a Jyotirlingam in the *Vaikahanas Sutras*. If it is lost, then what will happen? This matter is very difficult. Historically, when Kashi-Vishwanath was attacked, the Jyotirlingam, Vishwanath, was hidden in Gyanvapi. Gyanvapi is the name of a well. Later, it was taken out of Gyanvapi and consecrated again. There was much opposition to this in India. The pandits, acharyas, teachers and erudite scholars said, "A swayambhu Jyotirlingam is consecrated right where it is born. You removed this one and put it into Gyanvapi. Now if you consecrate it again, can it still be called a Jyotirlingam?"

The people of India are not only ritualistic, but they are also very emotional. To them Vishwanath is firstly Shiva and secondly a Jyotirlingam. In the end, the Vishwanath linga was consecrated again. Even though Vishwanath Baba was moved, he is still respected as a Jyotirlingam. This is the result of the emotions of the devotees. The scriptures do not accept the re-consecration of Vishwanath, but the people accept that consecration of Vishwanath. There is nothing wrong with that.

Similarly, when Aurangzeb's army was advancing towards Maharashtra, Nasik's Tryambakeshwar was on his hit list. In the Tryambakeshwar temple, the Jyotirlingam is beneath the plinth. You have to walk up first and then descend a few steps to reach it. So what did the priests there do? They covered the whole Jyotirlingam with mud, plaster, lime and stones, and then made another Shivalingam on top of it. Then they began to worship it, unconcerned about the advancing army. Aurangzeb came, destroyed the Shivalingam and went away. Then they uncovered the

Jyotirlingam and began its worship. This is the story of Tryambakeshwar.

Can some lingams be used for crystal gazing?

Swami Satyananda: Those practising crystal gazing should keep it secret and not tell others. In India there are two types of crystal: sphatiklingam and Jyotirlingam, which are used for meditation. Sphatiklingam is transparent like a glass ball, and Jyotirlingam is luminous, light. Concentration comes very quickly with the sphatiklingam. The telepathic communications are automatic because crystal has the property of attracting sound waves. Radios also contain crystals which attract sound waves, but these are synthetic crystals. However, those interested in crystal gazing should take a Jyotirlingam and not a sphatiklingam. The best place to get a Jyotirlingam is Varanasi. They are also found on the banks of the Narmada river. If the Jyotirlingam is placed under a flow of water, at any time of the day, it causes different shades, colours, visions and lines to appear. Without any strain, figures, snakes, elephants, jungles, rivers, landscapes, worlds being born and destroyed may also appear.

What are nuclear Jyotirlingams?

Swami Niranjanananda: A scientist in Punjab has taken pictures of underground nuclear activity on the Indian Subcontinent. He located around twenty-eight places like that. Out of the places that he had located through satellite, eight are the centres where nuclear reactors exist. Therefore, those signatures can be read easily. Twelve are the locations where the twelve Jyotirlingams are. He says that in the past, in the remote past, there was underground nuclear fission in that area. When the wave comes up to the surface through that fission, it melts the rock and the rock becomes oval. The places where the nuclear measurements were registered and where the rock has melted, are the areas that have become the twelve Jyotirlingams. It was natural nuclear fission.

The scientist says that people knew that some nuclear activity was going on. To contain the emission of the radiation, Jyotirlingams are the only places where a water container is placed above the lingam to always keep it wet. By keeping it wet the radiation is reduced. All the twelve Jyotirlingams are natural formations from a nuclear fission which happened many, many thousands of years ago. However, still today they have to be kept wet.

ABHISHEKA

What is the purpose of abhisheka?

Swami Niranjanananda: The Shiva and Shakti upasana, as mentioned in the tantras, bring the devotee to the point of experiencing the transcendental without the trappings and pre-conditionings of the mind, through the use of mantras and symbols, which have to be understood in the right perspective. There has to be an understanding of what each symbol and each action means, as it indicates the process that one is going to go through in one's own mind and nature. The abhisheka represents the teaching and learning of a process that allows one to explore the deeper levels of one's own mind.

How does one worship the lingam?

Swami Sivananda: The worship of Shiva consists in offering flowers, Bilva leaves and other gifts on the lingam, and bathing it with milk, honey, butter, ghee, rosewater, and more.

What kind of worship was done at Swami Sivananda's ashram?

Swami Satyananda: In the Vishvanath temple at my guru's ashram in Rishikesh, there is a Shivalingam in the centre. Behind it is a statue of Sri Krishna in black granite. On the right side are Sita and Rama, along with Lakshman and Hanuman on one side and Shatrughna and Bharat on

the other. Nandi is also there along with all the devatas. When people do pooja, the main deity is Shiva. They do Rudrabhishek in the morning, but before that they wake up all the deities. In the early morning first someone cleans the whole temple, removes the old flowers and chants mantras in praise of the deities.

Every morning there is abhishek for Shiva. He is worshipped first, then Krishna. Afterwards the *Purusha Sukta* is read, followed by *Rama Raksha Stotra*.

What do people do on pilgrimages during the monsoon?

Swami Niranjanananda: The lunar month of Shravana is the month of the heavy monsoon. During this month, throughout India, people worship Shiva. They conduct pilgrimages carrying the water from Ganga to one of the twelve main temples of Shiva, the twelve Jyotirlingams, or to some prominent Shiva temple.

The pilgrims walk for days carrying water on their shoulders following a hard discipline: no shoes, bare feet, minimum clothes, just orange shorts and a t-shirt. They carry a bamboo pole over the shoulders with water containers hanging on both ends. In Bihar people carry water from the river at Sultanganj all the way to Deoghar in this period. They are called Kanvarias; their mantra during this three-day journey is *Bol Bam*. Everywhere from Sultanganj to Deoghar, one will see millions of orange ants carrying water on their shoulders in order to bathe Shiva at the temple in Deoghar.

Is worship of the Shivalingam only found in India?

Swami Satyananda: Today worship of Shiva is confined to India only, but in the past this tradition was found all over the world. The Shivalingam is a widely venerated symbol in India. It is a tantric symbol, as well as being an integral part of Hinduism. It is a symbol which is buried in the deeper layers of the psyche. It is waiting to be brought to the surface, to conscious perception, together with the knowledge that

surrounds it. If the symbol is brought up from the depths, one will simultaneously realize the incredible reality that it represents.

Veneration of the lingam is not confined to India. Much before the advent of the Christian era, it had been venerated throughout every part of the world, where there was ritual worship of Shiva – the worship of an oval stone. Archaeological discoveries in Mexico and other parts of Latin America have thrown light on this ancient form of worship. Even in the Kaaba, in Mecca, there is an oval-shaped stone venerated by Muslims the world over.

How is the Shivalingam used in worship?

Swami Satyananda: The Shivalingam is erected on a platform over which hangs a copper pot filled with water. From a small hole in the pot a little bit of water drips over the Shivalingam all the time, day and night. The little bit of water that drips from that copper pot represents the constant process of nectar in the human mechanism. In the higher realms of human consciousness there is a constant flow of nectar and this is what makes one immortal.

What are the recommended texts for the study on Shivalingams?

Swami Satyananda: There is a beautiful book written by Swami Sivananda, called *Lord Shiva and his Worship*. There are also other books written by many brilliant and outstanding authors. The *Shiva Purana* is devoted to the subject. It is a type of mythology. There are eighteen such books in the vedic tradition.

What is the idea behind abhisheka?

Swami Sivananda: *Alankarapriyo Vishnu, Abhishekapriyah Shiva* – "Vishnu is very fond of *alankara*, fine dress and beautiful ornaments; Shiva is fond of abhisheka." In Shiva temples, a pot made up of copper or brass with a hole in the centre is kept hanging over the image or linga of Shiva, and water

is falling on the image throughout day and night. Shiva drank the poison that emanated from the ocean and wore the Ganga and moon on his head to cool his head. He has the fiery third eye. Constant abhisheka cools this eye. Shiva is propitiated by abhisheka.

How is abhisheka performed?

Swami Sivananda: Abhisheka is a part of Shiva pooja. Without abhisheka, worship of Shiva is incomplete. During abhisheka Rudra, *Purushasukta*, *Chamaka*, *Mahamrityunjaya* japa and other stotras are chanted in a particular rhythm and order. Monday is a very important day for Shiva and the thirteenth day of the fortnight, *Pradosha*, is also sacred. On these days, devotees of Shiva worship him with special pooja, abhisheka with Ekadasa Rudra, *archana*, offering plenty of prasad, and illumination.

In Ekadasa Rudra abhisheka, every *Rudra* is chanted with distinctive articles for abhisheka. Ganga water, milk, ghee, honey, rose-water, coconut water, sandal paste, *panchamrita*, milk, curd, honey, ghee and water from the river Ganga, scented oil, sugarcane and lime juice are made use of for abhisheka. After every abhisheka, pure water is poured over the head of Shiva. When *Rudra* is repeated once, the different articles of abhisheka are made use of after every stanza of the *Rudra*. The abhisheka water or other articles used for abhisheka are considered very sacred and bestow immense benefits on the devotees who take them as Shiva's prasad. It purifies the heart and destroys countless sins. It must be taken it with intense bhava and faith.

What are the benefits of abhisheka?

Swami Sivananda: When you do abhisheka with bhava and devotion, your mind is concentrated. Your heart is filled with the image of the Lord and divine thoughts. You forget your body and its relation to your surroundings. Egoism gradually vanishes. When there is forgetfulness, you begin to enjoy and taste the eternal bliss of Shiva.

Recitation of *Rudra* or *Om Namah Shivaya* purifies the mind and fills it with sattwa. Abhisheka bestows health, wealth, prosperity and progeny. Abhisheka on Monday is most auspicious. By offering panchamrita, honey, milk and more, to Shiva, thoughts of your body diminish. Selfishness slowly vanishes. You derive immense joy. You begin to increase your offerings unto God. Self-sacrifice and self-surrender come in. Naturally, there is an outpouring from your heart, "I am Thine, my Lord. All is Thine, my Lord."

Kannappa Nayanar, a great devotee of Shiva, a hunter by profession, did abhisheka with the water in his mouth for the lingam at Kalahasti in South India and propitiated Shiva. Shiva is pleased by pure devotion. It is the mental bhava that counts and not the outward show. Shiva said to the temple priest, "This water from the mouth of Kannappa, my beloved devotee, is more pure than the water of the Ganga."

A devotee should be regular in doing abhisheka for Shiva. He should know by heart *Rudra* and *Chamakam*. *Ekada*. In Northern India, every man or woman takes a lota of water and pours it on the image of Shiva. This also causes beneficial results and brings about the fulfilment of one's desire. Abhisheka on Sivaratri day is very effective.

What is the significance of the ritual of abhisheka?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shivalingam is not only an image, but a philosophy to discover the awakening of consciousness. Since people don't know and don't have the understanding, for them it has become a religious ritual. Abhisheka is a tantric expression of invoking the cosmic power through the use of mantras.

Abhisheka means anointment, anointing. In different religious traditions there is anointing at baptism and other times. Abhisheka means that: anointing the Shivalingam, anointing the Sri Yantra. In this process of anointing, sixteen different items are used. Different items are put on the Shivalingam: yogurt, milk, honey, butter, bananas, as well as many other items like different coloured pastes – bhasma,

sindhur and sandal – and rosewater and scent. Sixteen different items are used which represent two activities. The food stuff like milk, yogurt, sugar, honey is offered as a symbol of returning to God what he has given. As God has fed one all one's life, sheltered, clothed, given food, now one is returning that. With the abhisheka one is nourishing God.

When we use different colours, the white, pink, red, yellow, turmeric, that is giving a bath, like a mother bathes a baby. In the same way, one is giving, purifying, cleaning the external symbol, one is also working on one's inner self – purifying, cleaning and identifying with the act that is happening outside. While one is performing the anointment, one is not only a performer, one becomes the person who is being anointed too. One has to be one with the activity. The sixteen items of anointment represent sixteen different aspects of creation which are being offered. This offering is supposed to be the best as there is faith, belief, devotion and conviction; there is a proper attitude and thought in mind and a connection between oneself and the symbol. When one is performing abhisheka, one becomes the Shivalinga, one becomes that symbol.

There was a saint in the eighteenth century. One day, people found him doing some strange things during abhisheka. They found him sitting there pouring half the items on the Shivalinga and half the items on himself. So people asked him, "Why are you doing that? Half the milk on the Shivalinga, and half the milk on yourself. Half the yogurt on the Shivalinga, half the yogurt on yourself." The saint replied, "Well, I don't see any difference between that and myself. That is me, I am that." Of course this level of realization is the last level. When all the earthly attachments and bondages are cut and one becomes totally immersed in identifying with that energy, such a change and such a statement can take place. This is the idea of abhisheka: to connect with the most ancient idea, to connect to one's higher self, God.

How does worship affect a Shivalingam?

Swami Niranjanananda: Even if the rock is made into a murti, an image or idol, the consciousness within it will remain dormant as long as it is left alone. The moment one identifies the murti as something and projects one's feelings, faith and devotion onto it, the consciousness changes. Stimulation causes an awakening to take place in the nascent consciousness of the rock, and it enters the dreaming stage.

In the dream state, the consciousness is not aware, yet at the same time it is active. If the piece of rock continues to be the object of adoration and reverence, and one gives one's consciousness to it in this way, its dream state will eventually become illuminated. A stone like the Shivalingam in Baidyanath Dham, Deoghar, towards which people have expressed their faith and devotion for many generations, has become vibrant, illuminated. Whether this Shivalingam is seen as Shiva, as a rock or as a hole in the ground covered with water is not important. The reality is that generations of people have awakened the consciousness of that stone with their faith. It has consciousness; it is vibrating, it is illuminated.

What is the highest form of abhisheka?

Swami Sivananda: The greatest and the highest abhisheka is to pour the waters of pure love on the atmalinga of the lotus of the heart. The external abhisheka with various objects will help the growth of devotion and adoration for Shiva and eventually lead to internal abhisheka with pure abundant flow of love.

SIVARATRI

What are the three events that took place on Sivaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sivaratri is a night on which many things have happened. According to the *Shiva Purana*, the stories of Shiva, when the universe was created, it was not inhabited by any life form. Brahma and Vishnu saw this created universe and debated as to who was the first person, who was superior and senior?

It is a natural human behaviour. If two people meet anywhere in the world, the first impression is the age. Before one even speaks, what one looks for is the age. If somebody is elder, one speaks in a certain manner. If somebody is younger, one speaks in a different manner. The first awareness is, who is senior? While Brahma and Vishnu were having this debate about which one of them was the greater, a pillar of fire appeared between them. This pillar of fire appeared on top of the mountain Arunachalam.

That pillar of fire was so huge that Brahma and Vishnu, the two immortals, decided to find the beginning and the end of this pillar of fire. Brahma took the form of a swan and flew up. Vishnu took the form of a boar and dug down. For eons, they went searching, digging and flying, yet they could not find the beginning or the end of this pillar of fire.

When they were exhausted and tired, they met again in the central place. They expressed their inability to find beginning or end, and wondered what this pillar of fire represented. Suddenly, they heard a sound.

That sound was the sound of *Aum*. In the vibrations created by *Aum*, they saw the image of Shiva. The first appearance of Shiva in the beginning of history happened on Sivaratri, the night when he emerged from the dark as a luminous pillar of fire, representing the vital force. Fire contains everything, heat and light. That was what Shiva was. After Shiva appeared as the pillar of fire, the creation of life forms began. He was the catalyst for the creation of life forms in the universe where no life forms had previously existed. He became the first pranic power.

Shiva appeared twelve more times. His appearance coincided with the day of Sivaratri. Whenever he appeared these twelve times, he became the self-effulgent Jyotirlinga, the twelve Jyotirlingas. These twelve Jyotirlingas represent the manifestation of Shiva at different times, in different ages, to fulfil one purpose of dharma. Whenever they appeared, that night was called Sivaratri.

The third incident of Sivaratri is the marriage of Shiva and Shakti, which is a paradox in itself. Shiva was a renunciate. He used to live in the *smashan*, cremation ground. His ornaments were snakes and scorpions and the animals that crawl in the cremation ground. His powder was the ash of the bodies burnt in the cremation ground. An introvert who has rejected the world, attachments and associations, suddenly marries a woman of great beauty, the Cosmic Mother, Parvati, and is united with her.

It is a big paradox in the history, the philosophy, or the cult of Shiva. The same idea is reflected in kundalini yoga too. When kundalini rises to sahasrara and unites with Shiva, it is known as the marriage of Shiva and Shakti. Both become one and are united. Just as kundalini unites with Shiva in sahasrara, the cosmic principle of shakti unites with the cosmic principle of sentient consciousness in the night of Sivaratri. This was the first Big Bang. When Shiva and Shakti came together, the explosion happened, the Big Bang. The marriage and union of Shiva and Shakti, is the cosmic Big Bang.

What is the significance of Sivaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Aum* was the first evolute of the Big Bang. One can create a doll, a statue, from earth, paint it, cover it, dress it and decorate it nicely. With Brahma and Vishnu there is creation and preservation, however there is no life, no consciousness, no sentientness which allows one to evolve and grow. That is the Shiva tattwa: the pillar of fire which appeared on Sivaratri.

Historically, the human consciousness took a leap when the primitive person discovered fire. The discovery of fire by primitive man opened up a new world, and humankind continues to live in that world. Fire is still used for the same purpose as it was used by our ancestors – for protection, warmth and food. The emergence of fire represents the emergence of life and the experience of life.

The first evolute of life, sentientness, is the omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent nature. That is AUM. While

Brahma and Vishnu are wondering where the sound is coming from, this pillar of flame took a shape, a form, and that became the manifest form of Shiva. This is the beginning. The day Shiva manifested between the two disputing parties was the day of Sivaratri, in the dark fortnight in the lunar month of Phalguna (February–March). It can be said that on this day Shiva took birth, took physical form, the sakara form: matted locks, serpents, ashes, mala and trident. That form, the manifest form, became visible on Sivaratri.

How is Sivaratri observed by the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: Sivaratri falls on the thirteenth or fourteenth day of the dark half of Phalguna. The name means "the night of Shiva". The ceremonies take place mainly at night. This is a festival observed in honour of Shiva.

People observe a strict fast on this day. Some devotees do not take even a drop of water. They keep vigil all night. The Shivalingam is worshipped throughout the night by washing it every three hours with milk, curd, honey, rosewater, and other items, while the chanting of the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya* continues. Offerings of bael leaves are made to the lingam. Bael leaves are very sacred; it is said that Lakshmi resides in them.

Hymns in praise of Shiva, such as the *Shiva Mahimna Stotra* of Pushpadanta or Ravana's *Shiva Tandava Stotra* are sung with great fervour and devotion. People repeat the Panchakshara mantra, *Om Namah Shivaya*. He who utters the names of Shiva during Sivaratri, with perfect devotion and concentration, is freed from all sins. He reaches the abode of Shiva and lives there happily. He is liberated from the wheel of births and deaths. Many pilgrims flock to the places where there are Shiva temples.

The two great natural forces that afflict man are rajas, the quality of passionate activity, and tamas, that of inertia. The Sivaratri *vrata*, vow, aims at the perfect control of these two. The entire day is spent at the feet of Shiva. Continuous

worship of Shiva necessitates the devotee's constant presence in the place of worship. Motion is controlled. Passion, anger and jealousy born of rajas are ignored and subdued. The devotee observes vigil throughout the night and thus conquers tamas. Constant vigilance is imposed on the mind. Every three hours a round of worship of the Shivalingam is conducted. Sivaratri is a perfect vrata.

The formal worship consists of bathing the lingam. Shiva is considered to be the form of light, which the Shivalingam represents. He is burning with the fire of austerity. He is therefore best propitiated with cool bathing. While bathing the lingam the devotee prays: "O Lord! I will bathe you with water and milk. Do you kindly bathe me with the milk of wisdom. Do you kindly wash me of all my sins, so that the fire of worldliness which is scorching me may be put out once for all, so that I may be one with you – the One alone without a second."

What is the meaning of Sivaratri?

Swami Satyananda: Sivaratri, the cosmic merger of Shiva and Shakti, represents the awakening of consciousness at the material level of existence and uniting with shakti at the higher point of evolution. The word *ratri* refers to the 'dark night of the soul', the state just before illumination. Sivaratri is considered to be the most auspicious day for sannyasins and for taking *sannyasa diksha*, initiation. It represents enlightenment in absolute darkness, the evolution of creation in empty space, the manifestation of knowledge in nirvikalpa. When the whole of maya sleeps, this is what sannyasins call Sivaratri. It signifies the passing of the entire universe and worldly attachments into the unconscious state where there is neither abode nor any sensual possibilities. This is the end of all directions into which the mind, the sun, moon and stars have all disappeared. Here the fire of passion is extinguished and only shoonyata prevails. This state of consciousness is called Shiva or Shankara, the state of a siddha, perfected being.

This is not the final state, the ultimate aim. Beyond shoonyata where everything is submerged, the universal consciousness which is Shiva and the universal power which is Shakti meet in advaita mudra in great bliss and happiness, fear, and surprise, on the highest summit of Mount Kailash. Afterwards, Shiva escorts Parvati back down to the earthly level. Thus they become one, but for the sake of the universe, they live and function as two, in order to make the higher knowledge manifest in the material world. This is why householders as well as sannyasins celebrate Sivaratri.

There are two concepts of spiritual illumination. One is that Shakti awakens, goes up sushumna nadi and unites with Shiva in sahasrara chakra. Shiva represents the higher cosmic consciousness and Shakti represents evolution of energy. Kundalini yoga is based on this concept.

The other concept is that consciousness goes to meet Shakti, and this is Sivaratri. The concept of Sivaratri is the awakening of consciousness at the material level of existence and uniting with Shakti at a higher point in evolution. Therefore, the word used is *ratri*, meaning dark night. What are the night and day of consciousness? When the individual experiences existence, the objective reality all around him, that is the day of consciousness. The night of consciousness is when the consciousness is all alone and no objective experience takes place. One does not hear, see, feel or know anything. Time, space and objectivity, three qualities of mind, fall flat. Consciousness alone remains. That is the dark night of the soul, the stage just before illumination. Sivaratri is a symbol of the spiritual state of samadhi.

What is the story of Sivaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: Once upon a time there lived a man who was a great yogi, the first yogi. His name was Shiva. He lived a reclusive and isolated life in the mountains, in the jungles, immersed in the discovery of his own nature. He was a *sadhaka*, a spiritual aspirant, all his life. He was a spiritually enlightened person and recognized by society as

a great personality, a spiritual personality. He was the first teacher and exponent of yoga, to his wife Parvati. The asana, pranayama and other yoga techniques practised today were originally taught by him.

When Shiva married Parvati, it happened under unusual circumstances. He was an ascetic and she was the princess of a kingdom. Sivaratri is the day they got married. In today's society, people associate their marriage with the merger of the individual self with the higher self. Parvati, the consort of Shiva, represents the individual self – the yearning to unite, to come together with the beloved. Shiva, the ascetic observer of everything, remains aloof. That is the nature of the individual self and the transcendental self which is all-pervasive.

One always looks for some experience, glimpse and grace of the transcendental self. The vision of light that people have is a glimpse of that transcendental self. The feeling of all-pervasive peace is an experience of that higher self. One is always looking to the higher self to receive what is beneficial and useful to develop in life. On this day the energies around the planet are said to be benevolent and beneficial for the upliftment of the human nature.

What is the meaning of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati?

Swami Satyananda: Once a year, the devotees of Shiva observe a special day called Sivaratri. The story of Sivaratri is most interesting, and has much meaning behind it.

Shiva was engaged to Parvati, the daughter of the Himalayas, who came from a kingdom high on the peaks of those majestic mountains, which are always covered with snow. A day was fixed for the marriage ceremony. It is the tradition in Indian weddings for the boy to go with his marriage party to the girl's home and escort her to the ceremony. So Shiva went with his kith and kin to Parvati's snow-capped kingdom where the arrangements for the reception had been made. It was a beautiful city with beautiful men and women, and everyone was happily

anticipating the arrival of the groom's party. The little children were especially happy because in India wedding celebrations are a time of great excitement for children.

Eventually Shiva and his party arrived, and the children went with great anticipation to meet them. The moment they saw the party, however, they became terribly frightened. Some children fainted on the spot, some developed epileptic fits and the rest ran away. The ladies who were waiting and watching from the balconies also fainted. Shiva was riding on a huge bull; he had one cobra here and another cobra there. Ashes were smeared all over his body. Behind him followed a procession of ghosts and demons. Some had their mouth in their stomach, some had only one foot and some had three. They were all freaks of nature. What a peculiar party it was!

Then everybody brought this news to Parvati's mother. They said, "Your son-in-law is horrible and his companions are absolutely obnoxious!" Parvati's mother could not believe it. She came out and looked for herself and was horrified. She decided, "I am not going to give my daughter to this wretched fellow." There was pandemonium in the whole city. Everybody was disturbed, but Shiva kept moving with his companions steadfastly towards the house where the marriage ceremony was to take place.

According to Hindu marriage customs, there is a particular area which is designated as the marriage area. As soon as Shiva and his party passed through the portals of that area, they were transformed. Shiva became a beautiful young man, and his companions became divine beings with shining robes, glittering adornments, sweet scents, and garlands of flowers. So the marriage was duly performed amidst great joy and celebration.

At the time of marriage in India, the boy has to announce his whole genealogical lineage – his father, his father's father and so on. When the people asked Shiva who his father was, he said, "I have no father or mother." "Then how were you born?" they enquired. He said, "I was not born." "But," they said, "You look so young!" "I am forever young," Shiva

replied. Then they asked, "Where is your home?" "Anywhere in the forest," he said. "Well," they said, "you must have some relatives at least." He said, "The ghosts, dead souls, apparitions and spirits are my relatives. Fear and anger are my relatives."

Then they asked him, "Well, where is our daughter going to live?" "Oh," Shiva said, "no special arrangements are necessary; she can just become part of me. One half of my body can be male and the other half female." Shiva and Shakti are neither male nor female. They symbolize our highest aspect of life. The divine union which takes place when Shiva comes to meet Shakti is Sivaratri.

What do the ghosts and demons represent in the story?

Swami Satyananda: In the story, Shiva, who lived in the forest, went to marry Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, who lived up in the snow peaks. He was the master, guru and controller of ghosts and demons, and so they were part of his marriage procession. Shiva is symbolic of consciousness. For the individual, consciousness is moving higher and higher towards Shakti. It moves along with the instincts and animal propensities, with all that one is. Even while practising yoga, fear, anger, passions, worries, anxiety are still within. The soul is also evolving, progressing, along with these companions, but there comes a point in spiritual life when these companions are transformed, and the same instinct becomes intuition.

During the course of spiritual evolution, one tries many times and fails. One goes to the church for the wedding but when one comes to the door, the bride is not there and one has to return home disappointed. One has inspirations, one may catch a glimpse of the higher state, but it is not complete. When the time comes and the transformation occurs, the ugly companions turn into divine attendants. The horrifying aspects of the personality become ornaments and helpers.

Parvati symbolizes the higher energy and the kundalini shakti in tantra. The divine union which takes place when

Shiva comes to meet Shakti represents enlightenment in absolute darkness.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SHIVALINGAM

Could you tell us about the dialogue you had during abhisheka?

Swami Niranjanananda: During the abhisheka of Satyameshwar in Paduka Darshan, I asked a question. I received an answer. Again I asked a question and received an answer. It was an incredible dialogue. I don't know with whom – my mind, the internal guru or the transcendental God.

While I was watching the Shivalingam a question came to my mind, "Why a rock? Why not some other precious stone? Why a black rock?" The answer I received was, "The black rock that you see is not a precious stone but it is a miraculous stone."

I asked the next question, "What do you mean by saying miraculous?" The answer was, "When the world was created, I put many riches in the world to bring material and external prosperity as well as internal and spiritual prosperity. Everything is here in this world. All the objects for material prosperity are available: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, metals, gold, silver, so many types of precious minerals and metals are here, so many types of semiprecious metals and minerals are here, which people use to attain prosperity in society and in their life. The acquisition of these stones and precious metals gives one the security and prosperity to survive in this world. Just as there are the precious stones strewn around the world, similarly there are also magical stones which can be found in every part of the world; they do not bring material prosperity or wealth, they give spiritual prosperity and spiritual wealth. What you see in the form of a Shivalingam is not a precious stone; it is a miraculous and magical stone."

Again I asked a question, "Is this the only kind of magical stone in the world?" The reply came, "No. Right from the beginning, from time immemorial, the highest consciousness,

which is pure and transcendental, subtle and invisible, unseen and unperceived, transmutes and transforms itself into different tattwas. That cosmic force transforms itself into grosser elements, the grosser *tattwas*: the mind, space, air, fire, water and earth. Earth represents the final expression of that cosmic power and is represented in the form of stone or rock which is the most solid substance.

"There are two rocks which are magical and miraculous. One is the Shivalingam and the other is the Shaligram. These are the only two rocks that are identified as special rocks from all the other normal-looking rocks. When you hold a Shivalingam in your hand, it is by the shape, the smoothness, the curvature of the stone that you recognize it as being the Shivalingam. When you hold a Shaligram in your hand you see the spirals engraved in it by nature and the smoothness that indicate that this is a Shaligram.

"The symbols associated with these rocks belong to Shiva and Narayana. Shiva represents consciousness, the spiritual and the transcendental. Narayana represents the material, the manifest and the nurturing, the sustenance of the manifest. These two are the eternal symbols of divinity in the world, touching the life of the devoted person from the physical to the spiritual level.

"When there is suffering in life and you pray to the Shivalingam and Shaligram, you receive help to overcome the suffering and pain, death and disease in life. If you want to attain spiritual luminosity and realization, these two act as a bridge between the gross and the causal, allowing you to journey from the gross to the transcendental and discover your own spirituality. In this manner, these two rocks touch human life in all aspects, from the physical to the mental, emotional, psychic and spiritual, to the social and material aspects. Therefore they are not just ordinary rocks from a mountain or from a river bed. They are special rocks left behind by our maker to reconnect us with our source."

Then again I asked, "What is contained in the rock that makes it special?" The answer came, "In every aspect of

creation there exists a gross tattwa and a subtle tattwa. When you look at a tree you see the wood which is the gross tattwa. However, fire is also hidden in the wood which is the subtle tattwa. Similarly, the gross tattwa is the rock. What is the subtle tattwa in that rock? Is it air, fire, water?

"The subtle tattwa in the rock is space, the container of the other tattwas. What happens when you strike two rocks together? You see the spark as the fire element is also in the rock. It is not the predominant element for stone will not burn like wood. In wood, fire is the predominant subtle element. In a rock the predominant element is *akasha tattwa*, space. Akasha tattwa is the container of all the gross and the subtle tattwic experiences.

"Quantum physics states that a link is created between the individual and an object. As an example, if you pick up a rock from the road and bring it to your home, place it on an altar and worship the rock daily, after a few months you will discover that the insentient rock which you picked up from the road comes alive. It begins to interact with your mind and consciousness. It begins to interact with your prana shakti. As the energy in the rock becomes more powerful, vibrant and alive, it can help you overcome obstacles in life.

"This is the theory of quantum physics: that a link is made by human consciousness with another object as everything is connected through the senses. Through the senses one can transmit *shakti* or power and what you transmit brings alive the content of prana in the other object. A bridge is made between you and the object of contemplation, concentration, adoration or worship. Every time you come in front of that object the bridge is instantly created, and you experience faith, peace, comfort and security.

"This is the theory of quantum physics and the experience that we have when we interact with an object at the pranic level, or at the level of consciousness. The two rocks, the Shivalingam and Shaligram, are the *anadi tattwas*, eternal tattwas. In matter is contained the existence of space, and in space is the realization of the higher self. This is expressed

in the vedic statement, *Aham Brahman*. Although the rock is insentient, the space content in the rock is vibrant with all the particles of the different elements and lights floating in it.

"Particles of light float in space as well yet you cannot see those particles of light until they strike an object. Once the particles of light strike an object, the object becomes visible and you are able to recognize the object, and you are able to recognize the light. In the absence of an object, the light particles continue to exist and to travel in space, invisible. They exist yet cannot be seen until they strike another object.

"In the same manner, even the transcendental self is not perceived or seen until it strikes an object in our own mind and consciousness. When the light particles of the transcendental consciousness strike the object of our mind, an experience takes place of one's self. First comes the gross, the outer, then the subtle, the internal, and then the transcendental. This is the concept of the Shivalingam and Shaligram as well. They are the containers of the miraculous wonders that the universe has given us; they just have to be explored, seen and discovered."

Finally God said, "Just as people are attracted to wealth, diamonds, emeralds and rubies for their material gain, spiritual people are attracted to the Shivalingam and Shaligram for their spiritual prosperity and spiritual gain. Remember that these are the magical cubes which I have left behind in this world to reconnect you with Myself when the time is right."



5

Devi Worship

> The mother is gentle, soft, sweet, tender and affectionate. She is full of smiles.
>
> —*Swami Sivananda Saraswati*

WHO IS DEVI?

Who is Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Devi is the Cosmic Mother from which everything has come forth. Devi represents the cosmic power of creation. Not only of the body but life as it is experienced at all levels and dimensions.

The original concept of God is feminine. It is known as *hiranyagarbha*, the golden womb. The concept of God begins as a golden womb from which creation comes forth, and the womb is Shakti. Later, this Shakti is given many different names, such as Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kali, and all represent different attributes of the same Shakti. Energy is one, the cosmic energy is one, the cosmic force is one, and there are different attributes of this cosmic force. The attribute which regulates is identified as Saraswati. The attribute which brings prosperity is identified as Lakshmi. The one which is responsible for removing obstacles is known as Durga or Kali.

How can Devi be defined?

Swami Satyananda: Devi is the embodiment of emotion, the embodiment of nirguna, the one whom I have installed in my heart as Mother. *Devi* means luminous, illumined, lustrous, the light that is within. Mother is Divine, she is formless. Devi is *nirakara*, formless, and she is also *sakara*, with form.

Devi has no religion, gender, nationality or language. Perhaps she does not understand English, or Sanskrit or Hindi. She understands only one language, the language of the heart.

In Shakta Tantra there are many systems for the worship of Shakti, the primal energy, from which the creator as well as creation has come. From a careful reading, that is the primary hypothesis in the *Devi Bhagavatam*. Adi Shakti is the first Mother, the first energy.

The creator must have been born from someone. The creator is not the original creator; he has also been created. Who can the original creator be but the mother? It is the mother who creates, not the father. Therefore, in Shakta Tantra the Mother is considered to be the first creator, although Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians and Jews do not accept it. Many Hindus also do not accept it, but we accept it. The first creator is the Mother, and that concept is still found in most of the tribal traditions. Among the North American Indians, the South American Indians, the Aborigines, everywhere there is worship of the Mother. All tribal communities have a female deity. They worship some form of Mother according to their own culture.

What does Devi look like?

Swami Satyananda: Mother is such a beautiful lady and she uses beautiful ornaments. Her nose is beautiful, her forehead is beautiful, her cheeks are beautiful, her lips are beautiful, her breasts are beautiful, her plait of hair is beautiful, her eyes are beautiful, her ears are beautiful, her ornaments are beautiful, her waist is beautiful, her hips are beautiful. She is nothing but beauty, nothing but grace, nothing but

kindness. She will never frown on anyone but she will destroy all their evil qualities – the *rakshasas*, the demons, the black forces, the dark forces. That is why she incarnates in us. May that Mother incarnate in everybody to destroy the internal demons, so that one may realize the grace of the Divine.

Although most people are patriarchal, the Cosmic Mother is matriarchal. Mother was the first and God came next. This has been written in the *Devi Bhagavat Purana*, one of the epics of Shakti, in the form of *Devi Bhagavatam*. Adi Shakti is the original or primal mother, who was not born from a womb. We worship that eternal mother who has no particular form but every form is her form, even as gold has no particular form, silver has no particular form, earth has no particular form, water has no particular form and air has no particular form, but every form is their form. Every golden ornament is the form of gold. This is enough to understand that the mother has no particular form, which means every form is her form. It should not be said that she is formless. She has no particular form, even as clay has no particular form but every pot is a form of clay. It is her glory that is seen in the sun and moon, in all forms of life.

Yogis know her as kundalini shakti, Vaishnavas as Lakshmi, Shaivas as Gauri and Amba, Christians as Mary. Mother is the giver and nourisher of life. At the same time, she has the power to bless everyone, but she does not punish anyone. God may punish, because the father is known to become angry, but the mother is full of compassion and forgiveness. She has infinite tolerance. The children may go wrong, even the husband may go wrong, but mother never goes wrong. The son may turn out to be a bad son, but the mother never turns out to be a bad mother. This is the teaching of Shakta Tantra. Mother never punishes and, even if she gives a slap, it is out of love, not anger.

What is the power of Devi?

Swami Sivananda: The power or active aspect of the immanent God is Shakti. Shakti is the embodiment of power. She

is the supporter of the vast universe. She is the supreme power by which the world is upheld. She is the Universal Mother. The countless universes are only dust of the Divine Mother's holy feet. Her glory is ineffable. Her splendour is indescribable. Her greatness is unfathomable. She showers her grace on her sincere devotees.

She leads the individual soul from chakra to chakra, from plane to plane and unifies it with Shiva in sahasrara. Shakti is always with Shiva. They are inseparable, like fire and heat. The Shakti tattwa is really the negative or polar aspect of the Shiva tattwa. Although they are spoken of separately, they are really one. The Shakti tattwa is the will of Shiva. Without Shiva, Shakti has no existence and without Shakti, Shiva has no expression. It is through Shakti that the impersonal Supreme Being, Shiva, or nirguna Brahman becomes the personal being or saguna Brahman. Shiva is the soul of Durga or Kali. Durga or Kali is identical to Shiva. Shiva is *satchidananda*, truth-consciousness-bliss. Durga or Kali is *satchidananda mayi*, infused with truth-consciousness-bliss. Shiva and Shakti are one and neither is higher than the other.

Shaktism speaks of the personal and impersonal aspects of the godhead. Brahman is *nishkala* or without Prakriti and *sakala* or with Prakriti. The Vedantin speaks of *nirupadhika Brahman*, pure Brahman without any attributes, and *sopadhika Brahman* or saguna Brahman, with attributes. It is all the same. It is merely a play of words. In reality the essence is one. Clay is the truth and its modifications such as pot or vase, are names only. In nirguna Brahman, Shakti is potential, whereas in saguna Brahman, Shakti is kinetic or dynamic.

The Divine Mother is everywhere in triple form. She is endowed with the three gunas: sattwa, rajas and tamas. She manifests as will or *iccha shakti*, action or *kriya shakti*, and knowledge or *jnana shakti*. She is Brahma shakti, Saraswati, in conjunction with Brahma, Vishnu shakti, Lakshmi, in conjunction with Vishnu, and Shiva shakti, Gauri, in conjunction with Shiva. Hence, she is called Tripurasundari.

Why is Devi as mother easy to relate to?

Swami Sivananda: In this world all the wants of the child are fulfilled by the mother. The child's growth, development and sustenance are looked after by the mother. All the necessities of life, activities in this world and the energy needed for these, depend upon Shakti or the Universal Mother.

Shiva is indifferent to the external world. He is unattached. He is lost in samadhi with his eyes closed. It is Shakti or the Divine Mother alone who really looks after the affairs of the world. She will introduce a devotee to her Lord for the attainment of final emancipation when she is pleased with the earnestness of the devotee. No one can free himself from the thraldom of mind and matter without the Mother's grace. The fetters of maya are too hard to break. If you worship her as the great Mother, you can easily go beyond Prakriti through her benign grace and blessings. She will remove all obstacles on the path, lead you safely into the illimitable domain of eternal bliss, and make you free. When she is pleased and bestows her blessings on you, only then can you free yourself from the bondage of this formidable samsara.

The mother is dearer to the child than the father. The mother is gentle, soft, sweet, tender and affectionate. She is full of smiles. The father is stiff, harsh, rude, rough and hard-hearted. The child runs towards the mother for receiving presents, sweets, fruits and other gifts. The child can open the heart more freely to the mother than to the father. Poets and saints also are more familiar with the Divine Mother than with the Divine Father. They also open their heart more freely to the Divine Mother. They have found much more intimate cries of the heart when they speak of the deity as their Mother than when they address God as Father. Go through the following hymn to Mother by Sri Shankaracharya. You will feel and realize the truth of the above statement.

By my ignorance of your commands,
By my poverty and sloth,

I had not the power to do that which I should have done,
Hence my omission to worship your feet.
But O Mother, auspicious deliverer of all,
All this should be forgiven.
For, a bad son may sometimes be born,
but a bad mother never.
O Mother! You have many sons on earth,
But I, your son, am of no worth,
Yet it is not right that you should abandon me.
For, a bad son may sometimes be born,
but a bad mother never.
O Mother of the world! O Mother!
I have not worshipped your feet,
Nor have I given abundant wealth to you,
Yet the affection which you bestow on me
is without compare.
For, a bad son may sometimes be born,
but a bad mother never.

Who are Usha and Prithvi?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the *Rig Veda* the goddess Usha is consistently associated with and often identified with the dawn. She reveals herself in the daily coming of light to the world. She has been described in the *Rig Veda* as a young maiden drawn by one hundred horses. She brings forth light and is followed by the sun who urges her onwards. She is praised for driving away, or is petitioned to drive away, the oppressive darkness. She is asked to chase away evil demons. As the dawn she is said to rouse all life, to set things in motion and to send people off to do their duties. She sends the curled up sleepers on their way to offer their sacrifices, and thus render service to the other gods.

Usha gives strength and fame. She is that which impels life, and is associated with the breath and life of all living creatures. She is associated with, or moves with, cosmic, social, and moral order. As the regularly occurring dawn she reveals and participates in cosmic order, and is the foe of

chaotic forces that threaten the world. Usha is generally held as an auspicious goddess associated with light and wealth and is often likened to a cow.

In the *Rig Veda* she is also called 'the Mother of cows' and like a cow that yields its udder for the benefit of people, so Usha bares her breasts to bring light for the benefit of humankind. Although she is usually described as a young and beautiful maiden, she is also called 'the mother of the gods and the ashwins'. Considered as mother by her petitioners, she tends to all things like a good matron and mother of the earth. She is said to be 'the eye of the gods' and is referred to as 'she who sees all', but is rarely invoked to forgive human transgressions. It is more typical to invoke her in time of need to drive away or punish one's enemies.

Usha is known as the goddess, reality, or presence that bears away youth. She is described as a 'skilled huntress who wastes away the lives of the people'. In accordance with the ways of *rita*, the eternal laws of the universe, she awakes all living things but does not disturb the person who sleeps in death. As the recurring dawn, Usha is not only celebrated for bringing light from darkness, she is also petitioned to bring long life, as she is a constant reminder of peoples' short time on earth. She is the mistress or marker of time.

The ancient vedic tradition has viewed Usha as the harbinger of light, awareness and activity. People divided time into the form of day and night. At night all creation rests and in the day the whole of creation is active. The transformation which takes place from night to day is known to be the attribute of Usha, the awareness that stirs up the activity of creation, the light that gives sight to the eyes, that gives power to the senses, that gives power to the mind and the intellect. Usha has been regarded as the light, or the dawn of human consciousness.

Another goddess commonly referred to in the *Rig Veda* is the goddess Prithvi who is nearly always associated with the earth, the terrestrial sphere where human beings live. Furthermore in the *Rig Veda*, she is always coupled with

Dyaus, the male deity associated with the sky. So dependent are these two deities in the *Rig Veda* that Prithvi is rarely addressed alone, but almost always as part of the dual compound Dyaus-Prithvi, Sky-Earth. Together they are said to kiss the centre of the world. They sanctify each other in their complimentary relationship. Together they are said to be the universal parents who created the world and the gods. As might be expected, Dyaus is often called 'father' and Prithvi 'mother'.

In the *Rig Veda* in addition to her maternal productive characteristics, Prithvi along with Dyaus is praised for her supportive nature. She is frequently called 'firm', 'she who upholds and supports all things'. She encompasses all things, is broad and wide, and is motionless. Although elsewhere she is said to move freely, Prithvi along with Dyaus, is often petitioned for wealth, riches and power. The waters they produce together are described as 'fat, full, nourishing and fertile'. They are also petitioned to protect people from danger, expiate sin and to bring happiness. Together they represent a wide, firm realm of abundance and safety, a realm pervaded by the order of *rita*, which they strengthen and nourish. They are never-wasting, inexhaustible and rich in gems.

In a funeral hymn, the dead one is asked to go now to the lap of his mother earth, Prithvi, who is described as gracious and kind. She is asked not to press down too heavily on the dead person, but to cover him as gently as a mother covers a child with her skirt. The most extended hymn in praise of Prithvi in vedic literature is found in the *Atharva Veda*. The hymn is dedicated to Prithvi alone and no mention is made of Dyaus.

The mighty god Indra is her consort and protects her from all dangers. Vishnu strides over her, and Parjanya, Prajapati and Viswakarma protect her, provide for her, or are her consorts. Agni is said to pervade her. Despite this association with male deities, the hymn makes it clear that Prithvi is a great deity in her own right. The hymn repeatedly emphasizes Prithvi's fertility. She is the source

of all plants and crops, and nourishes the creatures that live upon her. She is described as patient and strong, supporting the wicked and the good, the demons and the gods. She is frequently addressed as 'Mother', and is called to nurse all living things.

Prithvi is said to manifest herself in the scent of women and men, to be the luck and light in men, and the splendid energy of maids. In brief, Prithvi is a stable, fertile and benign presence in vedic literature. It is clear that those who praise her see her as a warm, nursing goddess who provides sustenance to all those who move upon her broad, firm expanse.

How should a bhakta relate to Devi?

Swami Satyananda: There should be sensitivity in the relationship with Devi. When there is sensitivity in the relationship with one's wife or husband, son or daughter, brother or sister, then why should it not be so with God?

Why is it helpful to perceive God as the Mother rather than the Father?

Swami Satyananda: God can comfortably, logically and scientifically be conceived of as Mother. It is much easier and much more natural to see God as Mother. There is no objection to seeing God as Father, but for a child the relationship with the father is a distant one compared to the relationship with the mother. The relationship of a child with its mother is not only intimate, but intense and natural, for the child is nurtured by the warmth drawn from the mother and maintained by the mother's milk in every respect. It is far easier, much more real, natural and practical to conceive of God as Mother.

Why is Devi seen as a mother rather than a goddess?

Swami Satyananda: Devi is not a goddess, she's a mother. There is a difference between mother and goddess. One is closest to one's mother. The goddess is she whom one has

never seen. She is the mother and I am the child. She is full of forgiveness and I am full of mistakes. A child can become a bad child, but a mother can never become a bad mother. A child may become a hopeless child, a disastrous child, but a mother can never become a disastrous mother. She is a mother with tolerance, forbearance, eternal forgiveness, compassion, and love for every child, whether blind or incapacitated, a thief or a criminal.

It is not an abstract, academic or philosophical approach; it is a pragmatic approach. If she is a mother, she has to be only a mother, and if she is a mother, everybody has a right to her compassion, to her love, just as every child has a right to demand that from the mother. If she is not a mother, and if she is an abstract and formless goddess, then I don't know how to manage her. If she is abstract, she has perhaps only a psycho-emotional reality, not a true reality. The approach of a spiritual aspirant towards God should be like the relationship between a child and a mother; it is the easiest.

God should be brought closer, not taken away. Of course if God is brought closest, the principle is 'My Father and I are one' – *Aham Brahmasmi – Analhaq.* But that is not easily digestible. The easiest approach is that, perhaps next to myself, the closest to me is my mother. That is the concept of Devi, that is the concept of mother and that is the concept of true reality.

True reality is not an abstract reality. True reality is a reality. There is a difference between truth and reality. The Vedas, the Koran, the Bible talk about truth. Swami Satyananda is talking about reality, not truth. Reality is always in connection with oneself. When I talk about reality, it is about something that is connected, related, associated with me. Truth is not something that is related to me. It is the truth, that's all it is. Truth is truth, and I don't challenge the Bible. I don't challenge any truth, but there is something more important, which is called reality. The reality is that people need compassion, blessings, shelter, sympathy and help.

What was the relationship between Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and his wife?

Swami Satyananda: Ramakrishna Paramahamsa loved his wife, Sharada, so much that it has become a part of history, but he used to say to her, "You are my mother." All their life, they lived together, ate together, slept together. She is considered to be the divine half of Ramakrishna. She was illiterate, she did not know how to write in Hindi or in English, but her life was very commendable.

She was married at the age of six and Ramakrishna was eight. At the age of sixteen she was brought to his house. There, an elderly woman trained her in how to excite a husband, but Ramakrishna had decided otherwise and told her, "I have the greatest love for you which I don't have for anybody else in the world. From today you are my mother." Sharada was shocked. At first she could not understand him. It took some time for him to convince her that his type of love could be immeasurable and infinite.

According to tantra, what are the different forms of Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: The ten mahavidyas are the ten original forms of Shakti: 1. Kali, 2. Tara, 3. Shodashi, also known as Srividya, Sridevi, Tripurasundari or Kameshwari, 4. Bhuvaneshwari, 5. Bhairavi, 6. Chhinnamasta, 7. Dhumavati, 8. Vagala or Bagalamukhi, 9. Matangi and 10. Kamala.

Each of these forms or vidyas has a different *guna* or quality that is symbolic in nature: Kali is the first vidya and she is seen as a fierce, furious, terrible power. Tara, the second vidya, represents the power of speech; Tripurasundari is the third vidya and she represents realization of beauty and bliss; Bhuvaneshwari, the fourth, represents the power of sight; Chhinnamasta is the power of dissolution or destruction as the fifth vidya; Dhumavati, the sixth vidya, represents the power of ignorance or inconscience; Bagalamukhi is seventh and is seen as the power of obstruction or hindrance; Bhairavi is eighth and represents the power of restraint; while Matangi, the ninth,

represents the power of playfulness; Kamala is the tenth and last vidya, representing virtuous power. These ten vidyas are related to the ten senses and ten types of internal receptivity.

How does Devi manifest in our lives?

Swami Niranjanananda: Life is realized between birth and death. On one side is birth, one cosmic force, on the other side is death, another cosmic force, and in the middle is life, a third cosmic force. At the time of birth it is the Saraswati power. At the time of death it is the Durga power. In between birth and death the force that nourishes life is the Lakshmi power.

An example: you require office space. You locate a building. It is new, ready to be leased out. You select your office space in the building. When you receive the space, it is empty, not even clean, full of dust and cobwebs. What do you do first? Clean the office. What do you do next? Bring in your furniture and place it the way you want it and then decorate your office as per your preference. When all this is done, on a given day you enter your office, sit down at your desk and begin work. This example indicates the application of the three powers in this simple process of acquiring an office space.

The first power is Durga. She cleans. She removes all the dirt and cobwebs, she gives you the energy to open the windows which allows the sunlight and fresh air in. She gives you the inspiration and strength to clean the room thoroughly. This is kriya shakti. Once the room is cleaned, the Lakshmi power takes over. You bring in your furniture and decorate the office; you make yourself comfortable, secure and happy. Icchha shakti is primary and kriya shakti assists the attainment of icchha. Once the icchha or Lakshmi power has completed its run, Saraswati power takes over. On a given day you come, inaugurate the office, sit down and start your work. You begin to add to your knowledge and understanding by jnana shakti. This is the application of the three shaktis.

Durga is that aspect of cosmic power which helps one overcome, transcend and transform the limitations and negativities of life. The word *durgam* means difficult and *durga* means one who eases the difficulties. If you had to convert a barren piece of land into a farm, what difficulties would you encounter and what would you do to facilitate the conversion of land? You would start to dig the land first, remove the weeds, grass, stones and rocks, and prepare the soil. Such a change from a given state to another state is the Durga component. Until you give the land a shape which will be finally used for farming, the whole exercise is of Durga power.

Then you start working on the field, start planting and looking after the plants with the hope that they will one day nourish you and also earn you some money – this idea of prosperity, security and comfort is the Lakshmi concept. Afterwards, when everything is harvested and you are enjoying the result of your effort, and feel happy and contented, that is the Saraswati concept.

Durga represents change, transformation and the preparation to cultivate something new. Durga is not the aggressive energy, but a benevolent energy preparing the ground for change. However, even benevolence needs to have some force and power; it needs some aggressive power for it to establish itself. Power and benevolence, the destructive force and the benevolent force – both are seen in Durga. She is depicted as holding different weapons in her ten hands, which are symbolic representations. When you need to bring about a change in life and attain a new state, when you wish to leave the old behind and acquire the new, you need certain weapons or methods to accomplish this. The weapons in Durga's hands represent methods to transform the negative qualities in life.

Lakshmi eases the passage through life by bestowing happiness, security, contentment and fulfilment, and by removing that which you lack in life and making you full. Lakshmi sustains and nourishes. She does not hold any weapons in her hands – only a lotus and a pot of gold,

representing auspiciousness and prosperity. Only when there is physical, mental, spiritual wellbeing and prosperity can one attain wisdom and bliss. Finally, when you enjoy the fruits of action, feeling contented, in bliss – that is Saraswati, depicted as holding a book and a veena. The sequence of the three processes in life: change, stability and realization of one's potential, culminating in bliss, is achieved through the invocation of these shaktis.

WORSHIPPING DEVI

Why is the Cosmic Mother worshipped?

Swami Satyananda: Worship of the Mother is an ancient culture, which was born with civilization. Worship of the Mother was not introduced by religion, not taught by any canon. It is natural for a child to love his mother. A child does not have to be taught how to love his mother because it is in the scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Upanishads, the Bible or Koran. Love for the mother is intrinsic in a child. It is so natural, so spontaneous, so primitive, so total.

From ancient times, right from the beginning of creation, the mother has given birth to the child, not the father. Not only in the history of humankind, but even in the history of God, in the history of all the universes for billions of years, on any planet, it is the woman who has given birth to the child. Therefore, she was the first person the child knew, not the father. When he was an infant, when he was a child, when he was a boy and when he was a lad, he only knew his mother. Father is a redundant principle, but society has included him as a social factor, a political factor, an economic factor. The mother is the child's real friend. Therefore, worship of the Mother is as ancient as humankind.

Some religions denounced Mother worship, but not the religions of India where worship of the Mother is considered to be supreme. A mother can never be cruel. Even if she slaps, it is out of compassion, love and affection. A son may betray his mother, a son may forego his mother, but a mother

cannot and should not repeat the folly of her child. In India this worship has been prevalent for many, many thousands of years. We don't call Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Lakshmi and other goddesses by the name goddess, we always use the word 'devi'. *Devi* means luminous, illumined, lustrous, the light that is within. Everybody is Devi.

What is the true form of the Mother?

Swami Satyananda: Many ways were devised to obtain grace, but the most powerful one was worship of the Divine Mother. The mother is always an embodiment of compassion and kindness; that is the pure image of mother love. She is the ocean of forgiveness. Whether it is the Divine Mother or my mother, wherever there is mother's energy, it is always in the image of love and kindness. However, the most important thing is that she is the embodiment of forgiveness. A child does a lot of naughty things. She may slap him once or twice, but her real form is forgiveness.

Everybody is full of mischief, passion and ill will. All the weaknesses are there and some bad habits. The body is dirty and the mind too is dirty. People speak positively, but the mind is full of poison. Even then they want to be forgiven, but this pardon can only come from the mother, and that is why one form of God is the Mother.

The form of God as Mother is the form that was there at the beginning of creation. The divine Mother is the Adi Shakti. She is the Adi Janani of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, and exists in the heart of all beings. This Devi shakti is the answer to all humankind's difficulties, poverty and sickness. This is what the rishis and munis of India have said since time immemorial.

In tantric worship of Devi, what is the significance of the married woman, the nine girls and the boy?

Swami Niranjanananda: The married woman symbolizes the married aspect, the mother aspect of Devi. The nine aspects of the nine kanyas are the virgin aspects; from the

age of eight to the age of sixteen. They represent the virgin aspect of the cosmic power, the Nava Durga. The married woman, *suvasini*, represents the mother aspect, the consort of Shiva. This married aspect is seen in two ways: she is the maya, and this maya is known as avidya maya and vidya maya. *Avidya* means ignorance, *maya* means illusion – *avidya maya* is illusion arising out of ignorance. *Vidya maya*, *vidya* representing knowledge, is illusion rising out of knowledge. These two aspects of shakti, avidya maya and vidya maya, are seen in the suvasini aspect, for as mother, she is subject to *asakti,* attachment, and as mother she is also the experiencer of *anasakti,* non-attachment. Asakti and anasakti are both contained in the aspect of mother.

The *batuk*, the boy, is the protector of the cosmic shakti, as a youth, as a young boy. The batuk represents one of the eleven forms of Shiva, where he takes the form of a young person to protect the mother aspect. Batuk represents the protection of Shiva, suvasini represents the mother aspect of Shakti, and the nine kanyas represent the virgin aspect of Devi. With this, the tantric aradhana is complete – the component of Shiva and the ten aspects of shakti.

These nine kanyas plus one, the ten, also symbolically represent the *Das Mahavidyas*, the ten great learnings of tantra. The Das Mahavidyas start with Tara and go up to Tripurasundari. Tara, as the first mahavidya, the first aspect of Devi, becomes the guiding power, and Tripurasundari, the last aspect of Devi, becomes the acknowledgment, appreciation and recognition of the beauty that this creation, this world has to offer. Awareness of Shakti does not end in realization of one's higher nature, but with appreciation of beauty that exists and underlies every aspect of creation. The Das Mahavidyas of tantra and the aradhana, worship that takes place of the nine kanyas with one suvasini are symbolic of this transformation of the individual and collective consciousness.

What are the important places for the worship of Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: The story goes that Sati or Shakti immolated herself at the *yajna kunda*, sacrificial altar, of her father. This made Shiva wild with anger. He lifted the charred body of Sati on his shoulders and began wandering around the world. This caused tumult all around. The gods started praying to Vishnu for protection. Vishnu cut the body of Sati into pieces with his *sudarshana chakra*, his discus. Different parts of her body and ornaments fell in various places on earth and each created a *shaktipeeth*, a seat or place of energy. Temples were later established at these places.

There are different viewpoints with regard to the number of shaktipeeths. In some books there is mention of one hundred and eight, fifty-one, fifty-four, and thirty-four shaktipeeths. Most of the shaktipeeths are located in Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. It is said of the Chandisthan temple in Munger that the right eye of Sati fell there. The heart of Devi fell at Baidyanath Dham in Deoghar, and the tradition there is to worship Shakti before the worship of Shiva. The Kamakhya temple of Guwahati in Assam is considered to be an important shaktipeeth where the vagina of the Devi fell. Similarly, there are many other shaktipeeths. At these places, one receives a direct experience of the energy or vibration of Shakti. Many sadhakas perform their sadhana there to attain perfection and siddhis.

In Shakti sadhana, a sadhaka should go to a shaktipeeth and live there with a sense of detachment. The sadhaka should survive on alms and sleep on the ground. A male sadhaka should wear only a *kaupin*, loin cloth, and a female only a sari. Until mantra siddhi is attained, the sadhakas should devote all their time in performing mantra sadhana. At the same time, the systems and methods related to Shakti sadhana should be observed.

Have you been to Kamarupa in Assam?

Swami Satyananda: I went there and did Devi anushthana before coming to Rikhia. I fasted for nine days and on the

last day I went to the temple to worship the deity. I also arranged for *kanya bhojan*, ritual feeding of young girls, to be performed. It was a beautiful scene. I arranged the feast for the virgins and after that I performed my own pooja. At the temple of Kamarupa they gave us the blood of a pigeon as prasad, because there a pigeon is sacrificed and the goddess is bathed in its blood. This made no difference to me. If you cannot bear to see it, then don't do the pooja there, but if you go there to do pooja, you will have to eat the prasad that is distributed.

Kamaksha, Kamarupa, Kamada, Kamakhya and Kamakshi are all names of the goddess. The vaginal part of Sati dropped in Kamakhya, so it is called a *yonipeeth*. Deoghar is called a *hridayapeeth* because the last part of Sati, which was her heart, fell here. The story goes that while Shiva was carrying Sati's corpse, the different parts of her body fell here and there. Wherever a part fell to the ground, that spot became a *shaktipeeth*. At last the upper torso fell at Deoghar and it was here that Sati was cremated. Therefore, this place is called the *chitabhoomi* of Sati, the burning ground of the goddess. This is not the chitabhoomi of Shiva, which is in Varanasi.

What is the benefit of connecting with the higher form of goddess?

Swami Niranjanananda: In tantra there are three categories of gods and goddesses: lower, intermediate and higher. The gods and goddesses of the lower category place obstructions on the path of spiritual aspirants. Their aim is to maintain nature and sustain creation, therefore they obstruct the path of the sadhakas who want to transcend the realm of nature or creation. This function could be compared to that of speed bumps for slowing down road traffic. These energies or 'spirits', often identified as ghosts, demons or evil spirits, are the gods and goddesses of the lower category. A sadhaka cannot make spiritual progress by controlling them or seeking help from them.

Gods and goddesses of the intermediate or middle category can cause both the rise and fall of a sadhaka; both these capacities are inherent in them. They observe or discover the intentions, feelings and sentiments of a sadhaka. If one wants to use them or have their cooperation, one must come to know them. Gods and goddesses of this category motivate the sadhaka to ask for a boon, gift, favour or blessing. They catch his wishes and desires. If the wishes and desires of a sadhaka are holy, pure and pious, they ensure his upward movement and spiritual development. If, however, his desires are impure, they cause his decline and spiritual downfall.

Gods and goddesses of the higher category occupy the highest realms of Brahmavidya and the ten forms of Shakti belong to this group. The sadhanas related to the gods and goddesses of lower, intermediate and higher categories are respectively known as lower, *apara* and *para* sadhanas. The mahavidyas are related to para sadhana, the sadhana that leads to transcendence. If a sadhaka is able to establish contact with a particular Mahavidya, then this contact becomes so deep and abiding that he always finds himself under her protection. All physical, mental and material desires of the sadhaka cease to exist.

Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was a tantric devotee and his relationship with Kali was deep and abiding. She was his mother; he used to talk to her. Sheer remembrance was so intoxicating for him that the moment he remembered her, he would lose all awareness of the material world. He received *jnana*, higher knowledge, from the Mother and all his material desires came to an end.

When a higher relationship is established between a sadhaka and a god or goddess, the body and *siddhis*, attainments, become meaningless. The entire physical or material life loses its hold. In India, many saints and sages like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa have been born who have had the experience of Shakti in their lives. Both Ramprasad and the famous aghori tantric from Bengal, Vama Khepa (1837–1911), attained direct experience of Shakti in their lives.

What is considered to be service to the Mother?

Swami Satyananda: When one enters this world one has to pass through the phases of pain and pleasure. Even if one wallows in pleasure and plenty, one is bound to pass through a phase of worry and anxiety, fear and apprehension. Granted one has wealth and affluence, but still there is fear lurking in the mind. How to get rid of this fear and worry? Devi relieves one of psychological and unfounded fears. One becomes free and fearless. Therefore, *Durga Saptashati* should be recited at home.

This duty enjoins service to Mother Bhagavati, or service to the Mother Goddess. The feeling of service should be imbibed. The spirit of service to Mother should be the guiding force behind the recitation. There should be a feeling of humility, not ego, arrogance, or feeling superior to others. The Mother should be served with the same spirit of dedication as servants serve their masters. Recitation of *Durga Saptashati* is service to Mother.

What particular grace does worship of Devi bestow on the devotee?

Swami Sivananda: Worship of Devi, the Universal Mother, gives not only prosperity, but liberation from all bondage. It leads to the attainment of knowledge of the Self.

Shakti is all. She can do anything. She can make or mar, she can mend or end. For the sake of the continuance of Her divine play here, She Herself, as the veil of ignorance, has veiled the truth and bound one to this *samsara*, worldly existence. When She is propitiated through the practice of sincere devotion and unconditional self-surrender, She, as knowledge, removes the veil and enables one to perceive the Truth.

No one can free himself from the thraldom of mind and matter without Mother's grace. The fetters of maya are too hard to break. If the aspirant worships Her as the great Mother, he can very easily go beyond the phenomenal world through Her benign grace and blessings. She will remove

all obstacles on the path, lead him safely into the illimitable domain of eternal bliss and make him absolutely free.

The aspirant thinks that the world is identical with the Divine Mother. He moves about thinking his own form to be the form of the Divine Mother, and thus beholds oneness everywhere. He also feels that the Divine Mother is identical with Brahman.

Worship of the Divine Mother, intense faith, perfect devotion and self-surrender will help one to attain Her grace. Through Her grace alone can knowledge of the imperishable be attained.

What is a major outcome of worshiping Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Krishna did everything there was to be done in life, but remained untainted by everything. His purity was granted by Shakti, his sister. He attained so much, yet never in his life was there an iota of arrogance; he was free from ego, he lived his life spontaneously and naturally. That was the grace of Shakti: no ego. There was never any rigidity in Krishna's life; he was fluid like water. That was the grace of Shakti: absence of rigidity.

HISTORY OF DEVI WORSHIP

What is the history of worship of the Divine Mother?

Swami Satyananda: It is said that the feminine divine power is the ultimate power, the mother power. Without the mother there can be no one. *Jagatmata*, the Divine Mother, the world Mother, is the ultimate reality. From her, all forms of god have sprung: Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh and other gods. They are all created by that Mother who is birthless and beginningless, *anadi*. That is the concept of Mother in the Shakta as well as in the vedic tradition.

Later the social traditions relegated the Mother to the background – in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and many forms of Hinduism, but the main factors responsible are not really spiritual but social. They started with God as

a masculine reality, such as Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, and then Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati became secondary realities, just counterparts of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. That situation continued for a long period of time. Due to the Greek influence as well as Christianity and Islam, the masculine concept of divinity spread all over the globe, and it was widely accepted that God is supreme and nothing is beyond God. There was no thought about the human rights of a female, because in most religions the feminine gender was considered to be inferior, but this was not so in the Shakta tradition.

In the Shaiva tradition, Shiva is on the right and Shakti is on the left, but in the Shakta tradition, Shakti stands with one leg on Shiva who sleeps. Moreover, Shakti is seen as the sole power in the body at mooladhara chakra. The Shakta tradition believes that Shakti is at the bottom of everything in creation, that she is the centre or nucleus of all matter. Not only is Shakti the nucleus of all matter, she is also the nucleus within, not just of the mind or *antahkarana*, but of the soul or *atma*. Shakti is seen in the form of light, electricity, dharma, beauty, anger, charm and unity. She is seen in every teaching in many forms. In *Durga Saptashati* (Chapter 5), the different forms of Shakti are described: *Shakti roopena, shuddha roopena, shanti roopena, tushti roopena, pushti roopena*: the form of energy, the form of purity, the form of peace, the form of satisfaction, the form of nourishment. She is seen in many forms, not just in the feminine form, in the form of electricity or in the form of tantra. *Sarva bhootena* means that she exists not only in human beings but in all forms of existence.

How old is the practice of Devi or Shakti worship?

Swami Satyananda: Worship of Shakti, or *shaktism*, is one of the oldest and most widespread religions in the world. In reality, everybody in this world is a follower of shaktism. Everybody in this world wants power, loves to possess power and is elated by power. Everybody wants to dominate over others through power. War is the outcome of greed

for power. Scientists are followers of shaktism. One who wishes to develop willpower and a charming personality is a follower of shaktism.

Scientists say that everything is energy only, and that energy is the physical ultimate of all forms of matter. Followers of the Shakta school of philosophy have said the same thing long ago. They further say that this energy is only a limited manifestation of the infinite supreme power or *Mahashakti*.

What is the connection between Mother and Shakti worship?

Swami Satyananda: The worship of Mother is shakti worship. *Shakti* means energy, capacity, ability and potentiality. Indians who follow the rituals and traditions of the Vedas have conceived of God, have perceived God, have worshipped God and have believed in God in many forms: in the form of animals, divinities, human beings, air, water, fire, and so many other forms. Shakti worship is much more ancient than Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and the vedic religion. The first thing that man saw and began to worship, adore and revere was the mother.

How did Devi worship relate to worship of God as the Father?

Swami Sivananda:. The Agama literature details the upasana for shaktas. The concepts behind shaktism play an important role in the esoteric aspect of yoga. The worship of God as Mother is a very old concept and images of the mother goddess are found amongst the relics of many ancient civilizations. In one of the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, Shakti is described as residing in heaven and supporting the earth. In another passage the goddess *Aditi,* meaning the boundless one, is identified with all gods and all men, with 'whatever has been and whatever shall be'. There are many minor Upanishads in which Shakti is worshipped as the absolute Brahman, the One without a second.

Shaktas believe that the Supreme Mother transcends the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. She is Durga or *kriya*, power as action, she is Lakshmi or *iccha*, power as will, and she is Saraswati or *jnana*, power as knowledge.

Sir John Woodroffe said, "Ritual is an art, the art of religion. Art is the outward material expression of ideas which are intellectually held and emotionally felt. Ritual art is concerned with the expression of these ideas and feelings that are specifically called religious. It is a mode by which religious truth is presented and made intelligible to the mind in material forms and symbols. It appeals to all natures passionately sensible to that beauty in which God most manifests Himself. But it is more than this, for it is the means by which the mind is transformed and purified. The shakta is thus taught that he is one with Shiva and His power of Shakti. This is not a matter of mere argument; it is a matter of experience. It is ritual yoga practice that secures that experience for them."

Anthropological research shows that primitive man lived in matriarchal societies on every continent around the globe. In matriarchal society, the wife did not go to her husband's family after marriage, but the husband lived with the wife's family. Such types of societies still exist in South India and are common in Tibet. The renowned Sanskrit scholar and the erstwhile Sanskrit professor of Leningrad University, Rahul Sankrityayan, proved that the matriarchal society did certainly exist among the Aryans. Worship of the Divine Mother was developed in such societies. This kind of worship was popular and soothing to the mind as no other relationship could exceed the feeling of the mother for her child. This concept of mother goddess was a great help to the devotee.

Absolute surrender is the main feature of Devi upasana, as in other forms of worship. Mother worship may also be synthesized with the worship of God as Father, as when Sita and Rama, or Radha and Krishna are worshipped together. Devi worship is a potent means for the removal of passion.

The aspirant sees the Divine Mother in every female form and tries to maintain this attitude in life. Carnal emotions cannot thrive in this case, for anyone can imagine how sacred one's own mother is. The sacred word *Om* is also a remnant of ancient Aryan Mother worship. In every language of the world, the sound 'Ma' expresses the idea of mother: in English 'mother'; in Latin 'mater'; in Sanskrit 'matri'; in French 'maman'; in Persian 'madar'; in Arabic 'umm'. The sacred mantra *Om* occurs in every religion of the world as well. In Christianity it occurs as *Amen*, in Islam as *Amin*. The Buddhists chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*. *Om* is really a universal name for God.

What is the story of Sati revealing her ten forms to Rudra?

Swami Niranjanananda: In Satya Yuga, the age of purity and truth, Shiva and Shivaa took the form of Rudra and Sati to carry out their lila. Shiva, as guru, first gave the teachings to Sati, and then Sati, as guru, gave the teachings of the sixty-four traditions of tantra. After the long discussion between Shiva and Sati about pashu and pati, Sati said, "We will continue this discussion later." Quite some time passed, yet Sati did not show any further interest in the matter. Shiva thought, "Perhaps Sati's mind is full with this teaching. Let me now go and do some tapasya."

As he departed from Kailash with this thought in mind, he found Sati standing on the road blocking his way. He tried a different road, yet again he found Sati standing there, in another form. He tried a third road, but again Sati was there in yet another form. He tried ten different directions, yet everywhere he went he found Sati standing there in a different form.

Shiva wondered, "Why is Sati blocking my path?" Sati smiled and said, "Lord, it seems that you are also in the grip of maya." Shiva said, "Sati, if you wish to delude someone, not even I can escape. Now, tell me why have you blocked my path with these ten different forms?" Sati replied, "You have told me about the Pashupata philosophy, which

essentially relates to the Shiva tattwa. I want to tell you about some other secret teachings: the ten Mahavidyas of Shakta tantra, which essentially relate to the Shakti tattwa. These ten forms of mine, which you have seen, are the ten forms of the mysterious teachings of Shakti tantra." These ten forms of Sati are known as the *Das Mahavidya*, or ten great repositories of knowledge.

When Shiva saw Sati standing in front of him in these ten different forms, he also assumed ten different forms and said, "Sati, your first form is that of Kali. I will remain with her as Mahakaala." Kali and Mahakaala have been accepted as the first of the ten Mahavidyas; to deserving people, this form gives enjoyment, *bhoga*, and liberation, *moksha*. The second incarnation of Sati was Taraa and that of Shiva was Tara; these two have the ability to give enjoyment and liberation, and also happiness. The third form of Shakti was Bhuvaneshi and that of Shiva was Bala Bhuvanesha; these two also give happiness to deserving people. The fourth form of Devi was Shodashi Sri Vidya and the corresponding form of Shiva was Shodasha Sri Vidyesha; they give enjoyment and liberation.

The fifth incarnation of Devi was Bhairavi who grants the desired fruits to worshippers. The fifth form of Shiva was Bhairava, who always grants the desires of his devotees. The sixth incarnation was Chhinnamastaa and Chhinnamastaka. The seventh was famous as Dhumavati and Dhumavan, who fulfil the desires of evolved worshippers. The eighth was Bagalamukhi and Bagalamukha. The ninth was Matangi and Matanga, who fulfil all the desires of the worshippers. The tenth was Kamalaa and Kamala, who give enjoyment and liberation and nourish the devotee in all ways.

In tantra, these ten incarnations have been said to have the capacity to fulfil all wishes. They destroy the negative forces and illumine the higher consciousness. Shiva and Shivaa complement each other in their lila and present the teachings of Shakti tantra, in which Shakti is predominant and Shiva is her assistant.

DEVI AND SHAKTI

What is the relationship between Shakti and Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shakti or energy has been identified by different names, according to the expression and experience of the individual. In the Indian tradition, one of the identities that this energy has been visualized as is the form of Devi. The Devi image is a symbolic representation to understand and identify a state, a change and a process. The term 'devi', which is used to identify transformative forces, is derived from the root *div*, which means 'self-illumined'. These forces are self-illuminated; they are complete in themselves. The three main cosmic powers that guide the created dimension and life have been realized as Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati.

What does Sri Yantra symbolize, how does it relate to Shakti and Devi?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sri Chakra or Sri Yantra represents the *avyakta*, the transcendental, and the *vyakta*, the manifest, the visible creation. It represents the ultimate nature of shakti. Everything that is created is nothing but shakti. All the elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether – are expressions, modified forms of that universal power manifest forms of the universal power, which are recognizable through the senses. Just as the five elements, and everything that is composed of these five elements, are recognized by the senses as a modified form of the cosmic shakti, similarly through mind also one becomes aware of different aspects of shakti. These aspects of shakti pervade this body, this environment and this universe in the form of karma shakti, in the form of chitta shakti, and in the form of other sentient behaviours and actions. The same power is recognized in the spiritual dimension as Devi: the effulgent energy, the effulgent shakti, the self-luminous power in the form of Durga, Lakshmi, Kali and Saraswati. The entire visible and invisible universe is a modified form of this cosmic shakti.

How does tantra view Devi?

Swami Satyananda: An integral part of tantric sadhana is total surrender to Shakti as the divine power. The philosophy and practice of tantra is the science of absolute surrender. In tantra, Mother is considered to be the highest power. She makes consciousness function and become active. This Mother is the mother power which tantra invokes. In Sanskrit she is called *matri*. She is the greatest power, also known as *Shakti*, and termed *prakriti* in Samkhya philosophy.

The presiding deity of tantra shastra is Devi, the so-called feminine deity to whom all mantras, mudras, and other elements of worship are devotionally dedicated. Acts such as bathing, dressing, sitting for practice, giving offerings, making sexual contact, in fact all the everyday activities are performed with a feeling of total dedication and devotion.

What is the role of shakti in spiritual life for the removal of ignorance, and how can it be experienced in daily life without having to go through the rituals?

Swami Satyananda: Shakti is inherent in all matter, so it is inherent in man too. It can be awakened through will, through sankalpa. The hatha yogis say through pranayama. Others say through mantra, others say through other items of tantra, but the easiest way to awaken the shakti within is by developing the relationship of Mother and son – "I am the son and She is my Mother." Through that devotion the shakti will awaken.

What has to be taken into consideration in regard to Shakti worship?

Swami Satyananda: In tantric worship, one is dealing with a mysterious, hidden power about which nothing is known. Shakti has three forms: the benign, the destructive and the creative. If her destructive aspect is awakened, one knows what will happen. Playing with one's mother as one plays with one's wife is a negative approach. Similarly, there is a negative approach in Shakti worship, and if that approach is

taken, the Mother will give a kick in return, and that kick can be anything. A kick from an elephant will throw a person fifty metres. If Shakti gives a kick, one will be cursed. One cannot afford to misbehave with the Mother.

Worship of Shakti has to be done only to awaken her benign powers. A mother must be loved and respected. The relationship should not be abused. That is why there are rules for all aspects of diet, mantra, kriya and *upachara*, procedures of worship. Devi worship gives quick rewards. Worship of the Mother gives quick results, so rules and regulations must be observed. The rules are specified because there is a certain grace and dignity in worship of the Mother goddess. That has to be respected. Although there are many methods of worshipping Devi or Shakti, worship performed with faith and devotion is best.

Why does Shakti take so many different forms of Devi?

Swami Satyananda: The vast number of tantric scriptures are designed to suit differing temperaments, interests and levels of awareness. For this reason Devi is described in many forms. Her particular form depends on the needs and the level of awareness of the aspirant. Tantric followers are worshippers of Shakti and the purpose of all tantric systems is the same – to evolve and express the mother aspect, *matri*, which is the nucleus and centre of total consciousness in all living beings. The mother aspect denotes the central sphere or focal point of individual awareness, which is shakti or energy. This mother aspect should not be confused with the so-called maternal instinct. Worship of the Mother is not designed to develop an emotional mother complex, nor is it anything to do with women's liberation. The term matri symbolizes 'the greatest power in human beings.' In tantra, that power is considered feminine and is called Shakti. It is the great power lying almost dormant in the deepest sphere of individual consciousness. She is capable of creation, sustenance and destruction. Shakti is in all. Philosophers term her 'prakriti', and in scientific terminology, she is matter.

What does the upasana of Devi as Sri Vidya involve?

Swami Sivananda: The main tantric upasana of Devi is Sri Vidya, which has two aspects, exoteric and esoteric. It involves external meditation on the Sri Chakra or Sri Yantra, which is the most respected geometric symbol of Devi, and internal meditation on the mental form of the Devi or Shiva-Shakti. This upasana leads to identification with the Divine Mother within oneself. The internal form of worship is for more advanced sadhakas, while the external worship is for the less advanced.

In the external form of Sri Vidya upasana, the yantra of the Sri Chakra is inscribed upon a gold or metallic plate. During the worship, mantras are repeated with gestures, postures, waving of lights, incense and various food offerings. The internal form of worship has neither rituals nor ceremonies. Shiva united with Shakti is worshipped mentally at the various chakras or centres of energy. Those who perform the internal mode of worship believe in the identity of Shiva-Shakti and the awakening of *kundalini*, the evolutionary consciousness and energy in man. By mental worship and mantra japa, they take the awakened kundalini up through the various *chakras*, or psychic and energy centres, to *sahasrara*, the thousand-petalled lotus at the crown of the head, where the individual soul unites with the Supreme Soul.

Each verse of the Sri Vidya text has a particular yantra with *bija aksharas*, or seed syllables, and a prescribed course of worship. The bija aksharas and yantra are inscribed on a gold or copper plate. The food offerings to the Devi vary according to the mode and purpose of worship. There is a definite, distinct aim to be achieved by a particular mode of worship with a particular yantra and a particular offering. The days of worship also vary from four to one hundred eighty days.

Many results can be attained by this worship of Devi such as wealth, learning, lordship, success in enterprise, mastery over the elements, eloquence, poetic talents, conquest over

the enemy, eradication of incurable ailments, and more. Generally, people perform this upasana for the fulfilment of worldly desires. Success depends upon the faith and devotion of the upasaka. If there is any delay in the attainment of the specific result, the worship will have to be continued for some more days with intense devotion. The verses can be used for internal worship also and will result in the attainment of final beatitude, if the upasaka seeks that alone from the Divine Mother.

What is the symbology of the Sri Chakra?

Swami Sivananda: An upasaka who has been initiated into the worship of Sri Vidya should meditate on the Devi and identify with her, and then he will become one with the Devi. Sri Chakra is the residence or the temple of Devi and is important in Sri Vidya upasana. Adi Shankaracharya describes Sri Chakra in *Saundarya Lahari* (v. 11):

> *Chaturbhih-shreekanthaih shivayuvatibhih-panchabhir-api*
> *Prabhinnaabhih-shambho navabhir-api moola-prakritibhih,*
> *Trayash-chatvarinshad vasudala-kalaashra-trivalaya*
> *Trirekhaabhih-saardham tava charana-konaah-parinataah.*
>
> O Mother, the four triangles with downward apex are called *srikantha*, because they belong to Shiva, and the central point is Shiva himself. The five triangles, starting from the central point, belong to Shakti. These nine triangles together are called *shivayuvati*. By interlacing these nine triangles, forty-three triangles are created; the main point, housing the *bindu* (central point), is itself the forty-fourth triangle. Surrounding all of these triangles are two circles: the first is an eight-petalled lotus, and the second a sixteen-petalled lotus. Three concentric circles surround these lotuses. A triple lined square with four gates, called *bhupura*, encloses the whole diagram.

The upasaka meditates on this Sri Chakra yantra, step by step. First, he meditates on the four gates located in the four

directions of bhupura. The three lines of the bhupura are said to be white, red and yellow respectively. The ten siddhis reside in the ten directions. Different shaktis, called yoginis, protect the different parts of the chakra, and the upasaka must please them by his upasana. The eight *matrikas*, the 'little mothers' of the Sanskrit letters, reside at the right and left side of the doors of the second line. The yoginis reside on the third line.

The lines of the three *mekhala traya*, concentric circles, are said to be the forms of sattwa, rajas and tamas; the moon, sun and fire; or iccha, jnana and kriya shakti. The circle of the sixteen-petalled lotus is said to represent the moon, with sixteen yoginis in their unmanifest forms residing within it. The circle of the eight-petalled lotus is the residence of Shiva. The eight petals are symbolic of his attributes: the five elements, sun, moon and atman. The portion nearest these lotuses is referred to as *kshira sagara*, ocean of milk.

The fourteen triangles are called *saubhagya chakra*, in which the fourteen yoginis of the fourteen *sampradayas*, or traditions, reside. The ten triangles are called the residence of the ten incarnations of Sri Vishnu. The *kulottirna* and *nigarbha yoginis* are the residing deities of these triangles. Then there are the eight *vag devatas*, known as the *rahasya yoginis*. Through this step by step meditation the upasaka now enters the main triangle, where the deities of sattwa, rajas and tamas reside. The *nada*, or sound, starts from this point, where the three consecutive circles represent the seats of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh and their consorts. *Jagriti* or waking consciousness, *swapna* or dream consciousness, and *sushupti* or unconsciousness are the three deities of these seats. In the main triangle, Maha Tripurasundari in the form of a girl is united with Shiva, and here she is called Parabhattarika. This Devi has the Sri mantra, or *panchadas sakari*, fifteen syllable, mantra. Each letter of this mantra is an attribute of the Devi. The upasaka is to meditate on this mantra. The mantra, the Devi and the world are the same.

The kundalini is identified with Tripurasundari, who represents the universal energy, or *prakriti*. She is the primal energy, and in the human body resides in the form of kundalini, lying dormant at mooladhara chakra. The six main chakras – mooladhara, swadhisthana, manipura, anahata, vishuddhi and ajna – are similar to the diagram of Sri Chakra, where the Devi resides unified with Shiva.

Along with Shiva-Shakti, various manifestations of Mahashakti or Parashakti are also worshipped in this upasana. The body of Parashakti is formed of pure and concentrated sattwa, without any admixture of rajas and tamas. The other shaktis merely have a preponderance of sattwa over rajas and tamas, and are not of pure sattwa. Therefore, She is the highest prototype of Parabrahman. The different Shaktis are: Adi Shakti, Iccha Shakti, Kriya Shakti, Jnana Shakti, Bala, Tripurasundari, Rajarajeswari, Annapurna, Gayatri, Savitri, Kundalini, and many others.

The worship of each Shakti produces a specific result, but may produce a general result also. Any name of the Devi may be repeated, however, the goddess must be invoked by the corresponding name to obtain a particular result.

Just as the fruit is hidden in the seed, butter in the milk and virility in boyhood, so various Shaktis remain latent in man, veiled by ignorance. If one purifies the mind and practises concentration and meditation, these latent powers will shine forth. The best fruit of upasana or meditation is identity with the object meditated upon. The meditator and the meditated become one. The devotee of Devi attains realization of oneness with Her through intense upasana or worship. The *Kurma Purana* says: "Water is able to quench the fire, the presence of the Sun to dispel darkness, and the repetition of the name of Devi to destroy the multitude of sins in the Kali Yuga." The *Brahma Purana* says: "Those who worship the Supreme Shakti, whether regularly or irregularly, are not entangled in samsara. There is no doubt they are liberated souls."

What is the significance of the shape of the Sri Yantra?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shakti is represented in the form of the Sri Yantra. Sri Yantra is not only a symbol, it is a philosophy as well. The image is a philosophy as each triangle represents a state of existence, a type of creation, a mode of mind, a dimension of energy.

These triangles have three points, three corners, and these three corners represent the three aspects of this cosmic force: sattwa, rajas and tamas, the three qualities. The three functions: creation, sustenance and destruction. The three dimensions: gross, subtle and transcendental. Shakti is represented by the number three, the triangle, representing creation, sustenance, transformation or change. A specific power and form is allocated to each of these three functions of creation, sustenance and transformation; the three powers which are given are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The image of the Sri Yantra is not only a symbol, it is a complete tantric philosophy of creation and the transcendental dimensions that we are able to experience in our own lifetime.

What is the Sri Yantra pooja and how can it be used in sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: The Sri Yantra sadhana or pooja is a very elaborate sadhana. It is a tantric ritual, belonging to the right hand side, *dakshina tantra*. It is a *shuddha sadhana*, not *vama tantra*. As it is a part of right hand tantra it has elaborate rituals, not just simple ones, which take three to four hours every day. It is like any kind of ritualistic pooja. From the yogic point of view, the Sri Yantra has a mantra of its own, although many other mantras can be practised. Yantras need not be analyzed; they have an effect on the deeper mind, or on the deeper existence of the devotee himself.

How did Swami Sivananda revive the practice of Sri Vidya?

Swami Niranjanananda: Swami Sivananda was a sannyasi of the Shankaracharya tradition in which Vedanta is the main theme, yet at the same time he inspired many disciples to

revive the ancient science of yoga. He inspired Sri Swami Satyananda and other people to revive the science of yoga. He inspired people like Swami Chinmayananda to revive the subject of Vedanta as it is taught in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He also inspired another swami to revive the science of Sri Vidya and his name is Swami Advayananda Saraswati.

When the subject of Sri Vidya, the real tantric tradition, was to be revived, it was necessary to initiate females into the sannyasa tradition and the tantric tradition. A personality was chosen for that, known as Swami Sri Vidyamba Saraswati. She became the force behind the revival of the Shodashi tantra in which worship of Sri Vidya is the main theme.

What is the meaning of Sri Vidya?

Swami Niranjanananda: The mantra and sadhana of Tripurasundari is that of Sri Vidya. *Sri* means auspicious and *vidya* means perceptive knowledge, inner experience, inner awakening or the perception of awakened inner consciousness. With the practice of mantra, the consciousness of the sadhaka awakens and evolves. As a result, inner spiritual development becomes possible. Thus, Sri Vidya is an auspicious vidya, and tantra claims: *Shrividya jnanamatrena sarva siddhih prajayate* – "All the siddhis can be acquired with the knowledge of Sri Vidya alone."

KANYA AS DEVI

Why is the kanya a replica of the goddess?

Swami Satyananda: The concept of the kanya is unparalleled in man's philosophy. The rishis discovered that a young virgin was capable of symbolizing and representing the Cosmic Mother. Just as one sees greed in money, passion in a woman, fear in a ghost or tiger, similarly, why can't the goddess be seen in the kanyas? Why do people need to be convinced? It is a daily experience that where there is money, there is greed. Money represents greed. The replica of greed is money. The replica of passion is a woman. The replica of

fear is a tiger. The replicas of the goddess are the kanyas. It does not have to be proved.

Who are the kanyas and batuks of Rikhia?

Swami Satyananda: The kanya is the medium of the shakti of God. The kanyas and batuks of Rikhia are the medium of Devi, just as wire is the medium of electricity. A wire can be a good or bad conductor. The kanyas and batuks are good conductors of divine energy.

The kanyas and batuks have received samskaras. Their inner self has received samskaras. I want to open their minds, to evolve their consciousness, to unfold their emotions so that they live their life with honesty and devotion.

How old is a kanya?

Swami Niranjanananda: One can worship a girl of any age. The worship of a girl may begin from the age of one and continue until she attains the age of sixteen. Generally, the custom of the worship of a girl of eight years is most common. The girls of different ages have been given different names. These are: one year, Sandhya; two years, Saraswati; three years, Trimurti Swarupa; four years, Kalika; five years, Suryaja; six years, Rohini; seven years, Malini; eight years, Kubjika. A twelve-year-old girl is called Bhairavi. A sixteen-year-old girl is known as Shodashi. Shodashi is another name for Tripurasundari.

Girls of eight, twelve and sixteen years are usually selected for kumari pooja. They are worshipped according to the prescribed methods. Food, clothes, jewels and ornaments are offered to them and the descent of the Mother-form is perceived in them.

What does virgin mean in relation to kanyas?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bal Sundari is one of the manifestations of the Cosmic Mother. *Sundar* means beautiful, *bal* means young. Only virgins are called Bal Sundari. In tantra,

virginity means purity of heart, the heart is without any taint. One is innocent, without the intellect superimposing itself.

When one functions from the heart and when one is innocent and pure, that is the state of the Devi, the Cosmic Mother. That is also the state of the spirit, the *atma*. The divine manifests only in this virgin nature. Mother Mary, the Virgin Mary, was pure, and Christ came into her womb through immaculate conception. That is purity of heart, purity of spirit, purity of nature. The Bal Sundaris represent that aspect of the Cosmic Mother. They are the manifestation of that cosmic purity. They represent the manifest form of the power which has been invoked.

How does a young girl become Devi through the practice of kanya pooja?

Swami Niranjanananda: A relatively common tantric ritual of worship is *kanya pooja*, where the cosmic principle is invoked through mantras into the body of young girls and they become the representative of that cosmic power for the particular period of worship. It is often performed during Navaratri, the nine days of worship during autumn and spring. A grand-scale performance of this ritual is seen in Rikhiapeeth, the tapobhoomi of Swami Satyananda, on the last day of the Sat Chandi Mahayajna with the feeding and pooja of kanyas. This is one form of aradhana. Swami Satyananda says, "The worship of kanyas, kanya pooja, is a sacred tantric ceremony in which the kanyas are worshipped as the living, breathing manifestation of Devi. They are not Devi, they are the medium of Devi, through whom she manifests and blesses all. Through worship, the kanyas become the medium for the descent of the refined and luminous energy of Devi and through them her blessings are received."

What bhava is invoked when performing kanya pooja?

Swami Niranjanananda: The bhava generated by this sadhana is *bala swabhava*, the nature of a child. The learned, wise

people have said that, for the attainment of virtue, a sadhaka should become pure and simple like a child.

Tripurasundari is seen as a bala, a kumari, and one must have the bhava or feeling that: 'I am dedicating myself to Tripurasundari who is the Universal Mother'. No sadhana can succeed without this bhava. A child sucks the milk from the breast of its mother with a pure, passionless feeling. There is no negative feeling in the child's mind at that time. Instead, the child feels close to its mother and this generates a sense of security within. The feelings of intimacy, love and affection arise.

Traditionally, kumari pooja should not be performed in the house. It should be performed in a shrine, temple or place of pilgrimage where the environment is spiritual and conducive to the awakening of consciousness. At the time of kumari pooja, one should feel that the effulgence and splendour of both fire and moon have entered into the girl's body and spirit.

The moon is the mental *kalaa*, or luminosity, which is seen in the form of Shodashi. The effulgence of fire means heat or a blazing stream of light. When these feelings arise, the kanya is seen in the form of an omniscient Mother or the Universal Goddess, not as an ordinary human girl.

TULSI

Why does one worship Tulsi?

Swami Satyananda: Every akhara has some special feature. The Akhara of Rikhiapeeth does not specialize in asana, pranayama or dhyana, hatha or raja yoga, jnana or laya yoga. We preach only Tulsi pooja and daily chanting of *Ramacharitamanas* for forty minutes.

This is the *paramahamsa sampradaya*, in which worship of Tulsi for health is a must. Health is the first need of every human being, whether a beggar or a millionaire, a sannyasin or a householder. This is the teaching of the scriptures and Vedas: *dharma, artha, kama, mokshnam, arogyam moolam*

uttarnam – "for the practice of *dharma,* righteous conduct, *artha,* earning wealth, *kama,* fulfilment of desires, or *moksha,* spiritual pursuit, the first requirement is health." One way of attaining sound health is to worship Tulsi, the queen of all medicinal herbs.

Every day I do Tulsi pooja before sunrise and at sunset. Tulsi is the queen of all herbs. One does not even have to eat the leaf, just pray. I have never had even half a day's problem in eight years. My spiritual adventure, my spiritual practices have continued without any interruption. During panchagni the temperature went up as high as ninety degrees Celsius, but I suffered no dehydration. My stomach is okay, my limbs are okay. I used to sit for eight hours with no pain at all. I did not practise yoga. Yoga is not the subject of this akhara. Now I only talk about bhakti.

How does Tulsi support your sadhana, Swamiji?

Swami Satyananda: When I came to Rikhia, I decided to make Tulsi the *ishta devi*, presiding goddess, of this place. I planted a Tulsi plant here. She is the ruling goddess of this place. Just as a married woman maintains ties not only with her husband, but also with other male members of the family – someone is her brother and another is her nephew – in the same way, Tulsi is Devi Ma, Mother Goddess to me. My guru mantra is different, my favourite god is Rama, and I worship all of them. I do not have any difficulty with that. Tulsi is the Devi Ma of this place for the simple reason that I want to remain healthy.

I have never been ill in my life. I have never had a cold, cough or fever. I have never taken any medicine. I do not wish to miss even one day of my sadhana. If I have a cold and cough, I will not be able to perform my sadhana, and my *anushthana*, my resolution to practise, will be broken. Tulsi is the symbol of health; therefore, in the seven years that I have been in Rikhia I have not missed even one day of my practice. She is the mother of all medicinal plants. I pray to her only for health. Even if I die I will not be bothered, but

falling ill, calling the doctor, taking medicine all the time is not good for a sannyasin. That goes against his nature. I am not at all afraid of dying; everyone has to die one day, no one can escape that. Death is certain, though sickness is not. It is not necessary that one must fall ill.

One also needs to know whether Tulsi is effective or not. This depends on one's faith. It is necessary to have a shaligram along with Tulsi, but we did not have a shaligram. I said, "That is fine. We will bring Tulsi, and the shaligram will come by itself." We received bags of shaligram. A stranger sent them from Nepal, and a sackful has been stored. I understood then that the resolution to worship Tulsi was the right one.

There was only one aim: I should not miss even one day of my anushthana. The rule of this observance is that I would do a specified number of japa for a specified period of time every day. I had made a resolution to do this for five years. What was the practice? That there would be a fire in front, a fire at the back, a fire on my right, a fire on my left and the sun on top. The tradition calls it the *panchagni* sadhana, meaning five fires. This practice is done from the day of Makar Sankranti until Karka Sankranti, for six months in a year. This has to be undertaken by every paramahamsa.

After all, we are educated people who have lived in institutions, in society and visited places both here and overseas. We have dealt with money and land, wealth and rights, so we have incurred karma. The austerity to dissolve karma is panchagni. The old lifestyle has to be completely destroyed. Those who have stayed with kings and queens and in five-star hotels have to destroy everything; that is the reason for panchagni.

The sadhana of panchagni is such that on 14th January it feels good, as it is cold at that time. However, when the month of *Vaishakh*, roughly April or May, approaches the temperature shoots up to forty-five, fifty or even sixty degrees Celsius; one day it even reached ninety degrees! There is a fire on all sides and the sun god above. The

possibility of dehydration always exists, and you know what happens if there is dehydration. However, nothing happened to me. God is very kind to me.

I could have chosen Ganesha, Chandi, Shiva or any other god or goddess. What was most important for me was not to get a cold, cough or headache for even a day, and that is very difficult at the age of sixty-five. It would be even more difficult for a man who has always led a five-star life. My room was air-conditioned with automatic temperature control. I could not tolerate heat at all. I could not bear heat over twenty-five degrees. However, nothing happened to me during panchagni – no dehydration, no fever, no dysentery. I used to get sound sleep. Through God's grace, I used to sleep in the open on a cement platform. I wanted excellent health and Tulsi is the symbol of good health. I used to worship Tulsi and blow the conch every day before sunrise and before sunset.

How is tulsi important for health?

Swami Satyananda: Tulsi is a botanical plant – basil. Each plant has some property which is known to the pharmacists. Tulsi has many properties. Tulsi has the property to resist disease. Chemically-based antibiotics are also used for the same purpose, to counteract disease. Companies have started making antibiotics from tulsi.

Why is tulsi important for girls?

Swami Satyananda: Tulsi has a special significance in relation to girls and even to the nadis, in India. Tulsi controls the hormonal cycle of women, the period of menstruation for five days every month. This is the reason girls are asked to worship Tulsi. Sometimes males also put lighted earthen lamps near Tulsi, but it is the duty of the girls or the ladies of the family. It is certain that tulsi is a very sensitive plant.

When I lived in the ashram below Ganga Darshan there was a tulsi plant. One female swami came and stayed there. She was devotional and she started watering the tulsi. She

was watering it daily, even during her hormonal cycle. The tulsi died. It dried up. After some time I asked her about the tulsi. She said it had died, but she was not able to explain why. I enquired if she watered it daily even during her hormonal cycle. She answered in the affirmative. There was the explanation!

What are the customs for tulsi elsewhere?

Swami Satyananda: In Greece it is planted in front of each house. This is their tradition. It is similar to the Indian custom. The Greek people also put the icon of Christ near it, but this is common only in the countryside, not in the cities. They make a small parapet and plant it. This can be also seen in Thailand, where they even put it in coffins.

How does one use tulsi in worship?

Swami Satyananda: Pour water on the tulsi in the morning. Give a bath to the plant. After that, stand near it, do not sit, and sing its prayer for two or three minutes. There is oil in tulsi. Dust collects on it during the day. So first it should be given a good bath. By pouring water on it the dirt is washed away along with the oil, but after two or three minutes the oil again appears on it. Then take tulsi leaves as prasad. Not much, only three or four leaves.

In the worship of Vishnu, tulsi water is given as prasad. It is not given from a religious viewpoint, but based on scientific knowledge and understanding. Two types of tulsi are found, Shyam, twilight, and Krishna, black. Both are efficacious, but the Shyam species is considered more efficacious because it contains more chemicals in more concentrated form.

How do you worship Tulsi as part of your sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: I water the Tulsi and blow the conch thrice in the morning and thrice in the evening. Thrice a year I replant it and once a year I perform its wedding.

Replanting is done once just before the rains start. Then again a little before the wedding, close to Kartik Poornima.

Then the third time sometime after December. There are rules written down in the *panchang*, the Indian almanac. There is no superstition involved in this. I understand it in a scientific way. The foundation of my faith is built on scientific thought and understanding. I have understood the reasons and experienced the effects firsthand. Every house should have Tulsi.

What approach should be taken in the worship of Tulsi?

Swami Satyananda: Tulsi worship does not require a good intellect, it requires a good heart. A person who has neither a good intellect nor a good heart is a poor, deprived person. A person who has a good intellect but no heart is like a fancy sweetshop where the sweets lack sweetness. What can one really do with a high intellect? Does one love with the intellect or the heart? Is hate intellectual or emotional? Love, hate, mercy and lust are all manifestations of the heart, not the intellect.

God is. God's existence can't be proved or disproved. It may be believed or not. The best thing, therefore, is to make God a matter of the heart. Spiritual life, sadhana, bhakti or God are matters of the heart, not the intellect. They can be approached easily with feeling and faith. To write books use the intellect, but to feel, the heart is best.

What is the significance of the marriage of Tulsi and Shaligram?

Swami Satyananda: I am a man of faith. I have a collection of shaligrams. I keep some inside and some outside. Once a year I celebrate the marriage of Tulsi and Shaligram. My heart overpowers my head in this respect. I go by my feelings of reverence and faith. From 1990 onwards I have been worshipping Tulsi for the sole purpose of health. I want her blessings to keep me fit in old age. When the car gets old, a lot of repair work becomes necessary to keep it going. I was inspired to worship Tulsi, so I had a shrine made for her and began to worship her morning and evening.

One day I noticed a pest on the tulsi plant. Someone suggested the use of the pesticide Thymet, but I declined and placed the shaligram under the plant instead. Tulsi became free from disease and I married her to the shaligram. This is a true event, a fact.

How do you perform the marriage of Tulsi and Shaligram?

Swami Satyananda: On Kartik Shukla Ekadashi, I performed the marriage of Tulsi and Shaligram. Tulsi is the plant called basil in English. Shaligram is the inner core of an aquatic animal which is worshipped by the Vaishnavas. I adorn them with a red brocade veil and ornaments and then I offer everything to them and sing. Three days before I negotiated the marriage ceremony, somebody came and gave me a silver ornament. Then another lady gave me an ornament of gold studded with diamonds. One can see that she is married.

If a person thinks about this intellectually, he will not understand it. I cannot explain these things, but I enjoy them. Why not? When children play with dolls and one doll is broken, why do they cry? When the doll breaks, they do not say, "This doll is nothing; I can get another doll." They have their feelings. Similarly, it is the feelings, the *bhavana*, which one has to develop on the path of bhakti, not the intellect.

TREE POOJA

Why are trees worshipped in India?

Swami Satyananda: Trees have always been worshipped in India, whether ashoka, peepal, tulsi, neem, amla, bael, or others. It is believed that different gods and goddesses live in trees. Shiva is believed to live in the bael tree, so it is worshipped to fulfil a desire or remove an obstacle. Tulsi is worshipped and watered. She is not thought of as a plant. She is called Tulsi Devi.

How do scientists worship trees? Reforestation is undertaken so that the air is purified, there is ample rainfall,

enough oxygen, better assimilation of carbon, and the cycle of oxygen and carbon are held in balance. Scientists say the same thing as Sanatana dharma, but use a different language.

How should trees be worshipped?

Swami Satyananda: There are many instances that illustrate the nature of reality. These examples show that God pervades each and every iota of creation. God lives not only in human beings, not only in the poor and the sick, but also in trees.

Trees are *devatas*, gods. Tulsi is a goddess, Rudraksha is a deity. The rudraksha is Shiva's favourite. Mahatmas were enlightened and attained *jnanam*, wisdom, under the trees. Buddha was enlightened under the banyan tree and became a jnani. Dattatreya, who was the embodiment of the trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, was enlightened under the gular tree. He attained jnana and samadhi under a tree.

What is the significance of trees in Indian culture?

Swami Satyananda: In India, many plants and trees are considered to be sacred. Trees and plants are regarded as brothers and sisters. There is an interesting custom still practised in many families. When a girl is about to be married, her astrological chart is analyzed to see whether she is destined to become a widow early in life. If so, before the actual wedding ceremony takes place, the girl is taken to a particular tree, which is regarded as the devata, and given in marriage to that tree. Thus, even if her husband dies, the girl is never widowed, because of her first marriage to the tree devata. This is why trees are considered to be important members of the human family.

Are there any stories about worshipping trees?

Swami Satyananda: There is a legend. A hunter went out hunting and night fell before he could return to his base. The forest was wild, deep and dense, and he had to spend

the night there. He climbed up to the top of a tree and sat down. Then he began to feel drowsy. What could he do? He started picking up one leaf at a time and throwing it down. The whole night he continued to throw leaves. Before dawn, the whole area around him was illumined. Shiva came to him and said, "Why have you worshipped me? Tell me, what is your request? What is your need?" The hunter replied, "But I did not worship you!" Lord Shiva said, "You offered me bilwa leaves continuously throughout the night!"

The leaf of the bilwa tree is the only plant that is offered to Shiva. The bilwa or bael is a tree which has large, sweet fruit. It has many leaves and big thorns, one and a half inches long. The hunter had been offering the bilwa leaves all night. For him it was a simple act of ignorance which became an act of spiritual life. There are such instances in the lives of people who 'bump into God' by chance. However, such people are very few. The rest will have to work for this life after life. One life is not enough.

Why have you started the tradition of tree pooja at Ganga Darshan?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhakti yoga should become a method by which one can attain purity of one's inner nature and connect with the surrounding nature. At Ganga Darshan every evening the residents of the ashram go to a tree and light a small deepak, place a small flower and an incense stick there and pray for the welfare of everyone. *Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha, sarve santu niramaya* – "May auspiciousness prevail everywhere, may happiness and contentment prevail everywhere."

When you do tree pooja, you walk away after this prayer, let the light and incense burn and the flower look beautiful. In summer, just put a flower and a cup of water, nothing more, no deepak or incense. Don't change your tree, stick to one tree. That becomes your tree. Bhakti becomes part of yoga ecology. When you begin to be in that natural environment, you express a pure sentiment. When you are

able to divert and direct your emotion from yourself to something more universal, the emotions become a power.

Emotion means 'energy in motion'. Sri Swami Satyananda has said many times that when energy in motion, emotion, connects with an object, it evokes a response. When you look at something nice or at something bad, an emotional response will be created. When you look at your child, you feel affection. When you look at your partner, you feel love. When you look at money, you feel greed. When you look at your adversary, you feel hatred, jealousy, competiveness. When you look at a flower, there is appreciation. When you look at your elders, there is respect. Each contact evokes a response and emotion. When you think of God, there is awe. There is a response.

These energy responses are being directed outward, connecting you to the world around you. When the same external energy response stops and the energy flow is diverted inside, that becomes bhakti. It is the diversion of emotional energy towards the discovery of the Self which will lead you to the purity of feelings, sentiments and emotions. Bhakti leads to purification first, identification next and connection with a different attitude and mind, third. When you pray in front of the tree, "Let auspiciousness prevail, let contentment and happiness prevail. Let it radiate around the world like a beautiful fragrance," for that split moment, come out of your selfish shell and connect with the selfless thought. That selfless thought generates a positive vibration. This simple act will give you a lot of peace. It has generated positive vibrations and has connected you with the energy of the earth.

Why use a tree as the object of worship?

Swami Niranjanananda: The most powerful element in existence is earth; not fire, not air, not water. It is the earth which nourishes and gives life at its own expense. You starve the earth of energy yet it never complains. Your selfish motivations make the earth barren yet it never complains. It

continues to give and to give. It will continue to give as long as it has the ability to produce even one blade of grass. Then it will die. As long as earth is alive it will continue to produce.

The best connection between the earth and the cosmos is in the trees. The tree has grown up from nothing. It has taken the essence of the earth and condensed it. It has taken the essence from the air, the cosmic environment and the energies and condensed it. That condensation of energy is given to you in the form of its fruit. All the nourishing energy of the earth and the cosmos, all the beauty that the earth can give and the cosmos can make you aware of, you will find in fruit and flowers. A tree is the representative of this power and nature of earth. It gives and gives.

During tree pooja, you are appreciating, respecting, acknowledging and realizing the earth's power of giving and the cosmic, transcendental energy that sustains and nourishes the earth. Connecting with this energy will uplift you. It will make you pure, vibrant and enlightened. In the course of time, as you connect more with nature and the environment, you will discover that you will naturally begin to sing and chant mantras. Mantras create the right ambience, the right vibration, the right feeling. Mantras act as a bridge between the individual and the universal. Mantra is the connection. From one side of the river to the other, connecting the two shores, that is mantra.

Tree pooja is the bhakti yoga that I believe in. Bhakti should be able to enlarge your heart, open the doors of your heart, not close them. Instead of opening the door of your heart, you try to open the door of your intellect. Bhakti yoga is a way to enlarge the experience of the heart, and through the heart connect to the cosmic energy, the prana shakti which nourishes life at all levels.

Why is it useful to do tree pooja as a sadhana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Tree pooja should be taken up as sadhana, as it is not just an act that you are doing externally, rather, it is an internal connection with nature. In vedic

times, this was a prevalent custom. In villages and small towns, not in cities, in the evening little deepaks would be lit under many trees. It used to be a beautiful culture, that after going through the grind of the day, in the evening you just sit down for a few minutes in front of the tree and offer your pooja to it. In the vedic tradition, the tree is the symbol of life.

The trunk, the branches and the leaves represent the outer expression of life, the roots represent the spirit. When you are worshipping a tree, you are not only doing it externally but you are also giving it some water, nourishing the roots. If you continue doing that, maybe after some time you will feel the need to do that to your own roots as well. The body is the trunk, the mind is the branches, leaves, flowers and fruits, and the spirit is the root. When you begin the external act of worship, it will give you an awareness of something that you need to do inside as well. Nothing much has to be done. For a few minutes go to your tree, light a stick of incense, put one flower, pour one mug of water, close your eyes, say a half-minute prayer, 'I wish to be like you', open your eyes and walk away.



6

Celebrating Devi

> Most festivals in India have their origin in remote antiquity and indicate the direction, growth and connection of human life with nature and the cosmos.
>
> —*Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*

BASANT PANCHAMI

What is the significance of Basant Panchami?

Swami Sivananda: Basant Panchami is an important bathing day. It is also known as Magh Sukla Panchami as it falls in the month of Magh (January–February). This is the festival that marks the fifth day of spring. *Basanta* means the spring season, which is congenial for doing vigorous yoga sadhana.

Men, women and girls wear yellow clothes. The yellow colour is a sign of auspiciousness and spirituality. It represents the ripening of the spring crops. Even the food is coloured yellow by using saffron. All the folk get together and sing songs connected with spring. They get up in the early morning, take a bath and worship the sun, Mother Ganga, the deity of the sacred river Ganges, and the earth.

On this memorable day, Shiva burnt the god of love, Cupid. The gods had sent Cupid to tempt Shiva while he was absorbed in samadhi in order to beget a powerful son who would be able to destroy the wicked demon Tarakasura.

Cupid discharged an arrow at Shiva from behind a tree. Shiva became greatly enraged. He opened his third eye and reduced Cupid to ashes.

Bengalis call this festival Saraswati Pooja. They worship the Goddess Saraswati on this day. The image of the goddess is taken in procession and immersed in the holy Ganges.

Why is Basant Panchami celebrated by sannyasins?

Swami Niranjanananda: Basant Panchami is a special and auspicious day. According to the lunar calendar it is the fifth day of spring, and this fifth day of spring is dedicated to mother Saraswati. Saraswati is the power, the shakti, the energy of learning, wisdom, understanding, creativity, arts and sciences. Any knowledge and understanding that one gains in life is due to the grace of this cosmic power called Saraswati. Saraswati is the force which is responsible for the transformation of human consciousness – leading one from *avidya*, ignorance, to *vidya*, knowledge, from darkness to light.

Sri Swami Satyananda said that the purpose of the Saraswati tradition and the sannyasins of the Saraswati tradition is only one, to preserve the knowledge for posterity. In India, whenever there was a decline in society, it was the swamis belonging to the Saraswati and to the Puri order who have maintained and preserved the spiritual knowledge as well as the material knowledge. When the time came, they again brought this knowledge to society. Saraswati is the deity, the devi worshipped in the Saraswati tradition.

Why is Saraswati celebrated during Basant Panchami?

Swami Niranjanananda: Most festivals in India are not festivals for entertainment but have a purpose. They have their origin in remote antiquity and indicate the direction, growth and connection of human life with nature and the cosmos. The important day of the Basant season, the spring season, is the fifth day when the season is being established. The energy, force and power of the season is symbolized in

the form of Saraswati. That force comes alive from dormancy. When a seed sprouts, the shell breaks off the seed. On Basant Panchami the shell of the seed breaks open and the power of Saraswati emerges and sprouts.

Each element, each *tattwa* and each object in this universe is controlled by energy which decreases and increases in intensity. In the middle of the water element, the various currents and the intensity of the currents of the water element will make an object move. The air element has its own nature; when the intensity in the air is strong it is a storm. When the intensity of the flow is less, it is a gentle breeze. By the power generated in each element, by the intensity of each element, the manifestation of that element is identified by a name. A gentle breeze indicates the passive flowing of air. A storm and thunder indicate greater power.

Similarly, each element has its level of passivity and its level of hyperactivity. The same applies to prana and to consciousness. In winter, pranas become less active; one just wants to snuggle up, stay in the room and not come out. With spring, when the pranas become more active, one starts coming out of the room, enjoying life again.

Consciousness, mind, nature and character also go through similar expressions of passivity and activity. Spring is the time when the environment, energies and forces, both cosmic and material, become conducive to the growth of life. Spring represents the emergence or growth of life. Saraswati is the Devi, the power behind growth, existence and creation. She also represents knowledge.

Knowledge is the first thing required before desire and before action. There cannot be desire if there is no knowledge; only when one knows something will one desire it, reject it or reflect upon it. Therefore knowledge or Saraswati is the first item to emerge. From knowledge comes desire, *iccha*. Iccha shakti and desire is always to become prosperous in life, materially, mentally, emotionally and spiritually: to be happy, content, satisfied, fulfilled. Desire is always towards prosperity and happiness and that is the spirit

or energy of Lakshmi. Only with the emergence of desire is one motivated to act and kriya comes in. Kriya is represented by the power of Shakti as Parvati, Uma, Shivani, the consort of Shiva.

Basant Panchami is the time when the Saraswati power, the creative power, is most active in pranas, consciousness, nature and the cosmos. It is stated that of the total cosmic energy, the unmanifest transcendental power, jnana shakti, or the power of wisdom, is only one thousandth part. Of that power of knowledge one thousandth part is iccha shakti, the power of will, and of that power of will one thousandth part is kriya shakti, the power of action. The action part is little and the knowledge part is intense. If one analyzes it, one will see this division is appropriate and correct, even in one's own life. Many times actions don't match desires, and desires don't match one's understanding, knowledge and wisdom. One has desires but those desires are often not comparable or compatible with the level of one's knowledge or actions.

Saraswati represents the first transformation of the creative, cosmic force, or transcendental force, the first one thousandth part corresponding to knowledge. This is the symbology of the spring season and for this reason in India most of the festivals that are celebrated are not meant for entertainment but are cultural in nature. 'Cultural' here means that which enhances and beautifies the nature of the individual, and that which rectifies the chinks of one's personality, so that one becomes one's best in everything that one does. When one strives to do good one is cultured. Smayak kritena iti sanskriti – "Harmonious actions represent the cultured character of the individual," and disharmonious actions represent a person who is not cultured.

The traditional festivals in India are cultural festivals. They indicate that within one's life situation and environment there is the possibility of new development and growth. Because everything is appropriate and auspicious during festivals, they also indicate sadhana, new sankalpas and new positive frames of mind. The sadhanas of Basant Panchami

are geared towards the development of knowledge and wisdom.

Why is *Saundarya Lahari* chanted on Basant Panchami?

Swami Niranjanananda: Basant means 'spring' and Panchami means 'fifth day'. Saraswati is the patron deity of the arts, music, science and knowledge. Saraswati is the force which is responsible for the transformation of human consciousness – leading the human consciousness from avidya, ignorance, to vidya, knowledge, from darkness to light. Saraswati represents the first manifestation of this cosmic energy in the form of wisdom. After Saraswati is Lakshmi, representing prosperity. Wisdom then prosperity; prosperity cannot come without wisdom. The third manifestation of Shakti is Parvati: change, transformation, growth, progress, evolution. Saundarya Lahari is the invocation of this cosmic energy to uplift the mind, uplift the consciousness from gross to transcendental.

Saundarya Lahari is the invocation of the cosmic Shakti, God is seen as the mother energy. In the Sanatana tradition God has been visualized as the mother energy, the mother manifestation. In the ancient religions God was always visualized as the cosmic energy. The Sanatana dharma has clearly stated that the entire creation comes from the cosmic womb. The cosmic womb is representative of the universal energy, which is responsible for creation, nurturing and sustenance. This cosmic womb is the representation of the Cosmic Mother, the birth of life. The creation of different gods and goddesses happened afterwards.

Saundarya Lahari is the invocation of that unmanifest motherly energy responsible for the entire creation including the existence of God. Even the paternal, the patriarchal God does not come into existence, does not take birth until the Mother has given her sanction. God is always formless, energy is also formless; God takes a form when one associates oneself with God, then one recognizes God in this form or that form. Energy becomes recognizable when one is

associated with it. The pure, transcendental, raw form of energy is unmanifest. This unmanifest energy has been given the name *hiranyagarbha*, the golden womb. Just as a child is born from the womb of the mother, the entire creation has come forth from the gold womb of the cosmic mother.

The opening sentence of *Saundarya Lahari* is: "Shiva is dead without Shakti." Shiva does not exist in the absence of Shakti. Shiva can only exist when Shakti is around. In the absence of Shakti, Shiva is 'shava' and 'shava' means corpse, dead body.

Saundarya Lahari is divided in two parts, the first part is known as *Saundarya Lahari*, 'the wave of beauty'. This is the description of the cosmic mother. The second part is *Ananda Lahari*, 'the wave of bliss'. This is the experience which one has after receiving the grace of the cosmic energy. In the literature of worship of the unmanifest God, *Saundarya Lahari* holds the highest position; no other invocation can even come close to the invocation of *Saundarya Lahari*.

Prayer to Saraswati

Saraswati, Maha Saraswati
Goddess of real knowledge and true beauty
Inspire our minds and awaken our hearts.
In your service man is liberated
His dull mind becomes bright
And wisdom manifests within him.
Your gift to the world is yoga,
The path to freedom, love and creative life.

O, Mother Saraswati,
Source of all the sacred scriptures and vedic chants
Mistress of the sixty-four fine arts,
All the arts of living.
You symbolize the essence of tantra,
Of liberated consciousness,
Expansion of all our human capacities.

You are creativity and intuition
The expression of Brahma who created the cosmos.
O Saraswati, seated within the white lotus on the swan
With book and veena, hands in the gesture of blessing,
It is your great work we do.

In ajapa japa
When the mantra changes itself
From soham to hamso
This represents discriminating wisdom
The swan on which you sit.
There immersed in meditation
On the lotus of detachment
All our samskaras, good and bad
Begin to rise and be eliminated.

In your hands you hold the veena
Its vibrations resound throughout the whole world
Directing the emotions of man.
Its tuning keys are the senses of this body
Through which we are able to attain balance in life.
As the scale ascends the sushumna
It makes a background through the chakras
To our expanding consciousness.

Your face is full of love and compassion.
Radiant and white
Like the kund flower or the moon
You draw inspiration
From the deep well of spirituality
And through you
It pours out to the thirsty world.

Our order of sannyasa is Saraswati
Inspired by your intuition
Which bestows cosmic knowledge.
The akhanda jyoti, eternal light,

Burning in this ashram
Since its foundation in 1964,
On your day of celebration,
Symbolizes the removal
Of all darkness and disease
Both mental and physical
Through the science of yoga.
This is your work,
The inspiration of Saraswati
The spreading of light through yoga.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati

NAVARATRI

What is Navaratri and when is it performed?

Swami Satyananda: In India the tradition is this: in the months of April and October, Devi is worshipped, the divine female – Durga, Lakshmi and Kali. For nine days they do uninterrupted japa mantra, nothing else. The tenth day is considered as the day of victory, the day of accomplishment, of conquest of light over darkness.

What is significant about the observance of Navaratri?

Swami Sivananda: During Navaratri the whole of India adores the Mother and worships Her with great devotion. On the first three nights, Durga or the destructive aspect of the Mother is worshipped. On the succeeding three nights it is the creative aspect, or Lakshmi, that is adored. On the last three nights the knowledge aspect, or Saraswati, is invoked. The tenth day is Vijaya Dashami, the day of victory.

This arrangement has a special significance. When Devi is worshipped by a devotee in this order, as Durga she first destroys the evil propensities that lurk in the mind. Then, as Lakshmi she implants therein the divine qualities conducive to spiritual unfoldment. As Saraswati she bestows true knowledge.

The tenth day commemorates the victory of knowledge over nescience, goodness over evil. Aspirants are initiated on this day. On this memorable day the carpenter, tailor, mason, artist, songster, typist and all technical workers do pooja to their instruments and implements. They behold and recognize the shakti or power behind these instruments and worship the Devi for success and prosperity and peace.

What is the tradition of Navaratri based on?

Swami Niranjanananda: Traditionally, Navaratri is the worship of the Cosmic Mother. In this culture, which evolved in the Indian subcontinent, the first form of God was the womb, *hiranyagarbha*. Hiranyagarbha is the representative of that cosmic creatrix from which this creation has issued forth.

In accordance with cosmic energies – planetary conjunctions, permutations and combinations – the natural energies become conducive to the development of the human consciousness. The effect of these conjunctions remains for nine days, and these are the days of Navaratri as enunciated by the saints, vedic seers and astrologers of the past. Navaratri, over a period of time, became a very intense tantric ritual. There are people who follow the disciplines of Navaratri for nine nights. These nine nights and nine days are devoted to repetition of mantra, to meditation and to upasana, in order to connect with the inner inspiration.

What is the significance of the time of Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: Navaratri is an auspicious time, which comes four times a year; however, the main celebrations of Navaratri happen twice, in the month of Chaitra and the month of Ashwin. For nine days the astrological position and placement is such that it sensitizes the human mind. There are planets, constellations, and so many other things up in the heavens which exert their influence on each other and on creation. There are times when the placement of these planetary objects happens in such a way that they effect creation, life, plants and human beings.

Navaratri is a time when the placement of the celestial objects becomes conducive to the development of spiritual energy in everyone. Navaratri is a time when the doorway of the divine realm opens up. People live in a mortal realm and have their suffering and pains, They have their struggles, likes and dislikes, conflicts, confusions. They continue to live that as it is part of their nature. It is as if one is standing in front of the closed door of a room which is air-conditioned and the door opens, and one feels the touch of the cool wind, although one has not entered the room. One is still outside in the sun but able to feel the coolness. In the same manner, although one is practising sadhana with the same mind, attitude, thought and desire that one has every day of one's life, at certain times the process of sadhana will open the door of the divine realm so that one can get that air-conditioned air touching the body, giving the experience of fulfilment, contentment, joy and happiness. It is to experience the coolness of the spirit while living in this mortal realm that Navaratri sadhana is done in one form.

What is a common anushthana performed by householders in India?

Swami Niranjanananda: People get up, perform some asana and pranayama and then repeat their mantra – one mala, two, three, four, five, one hour, two hours and then break for half an hour and take a walk. Then again they sit for two hours followed by walking. They take light meals, no grain, no pulses, only fruit, milk, sago, barley, boiled vegetables, for nine days. They do not shave and do not cut their nails. They sleep on the floor on a blanket or carpet.

Even rich people and multi-millionaires do it. They do not go to their wives or husbands. They do not associate much with the family. During this period the younger ones look after the family as well as all the business transactions and everything else. This japa goes on at the rate of nine to ten hours a day, and in what little time they have to relax, they do some spiritual reading, so that it can keep them

spiritually alive. After nine days they are back again as normal householders. They shave, cut their nails, change their dress and again return to the mundane world. It depends on them whether they do this in the month of April or October.

What is the daily schedule for a householder in India during Navaratri?

Swami Satyananda: In India, Navaratri is a national holiday. Millions of people observe Navaratri twice a year, in April and October, as these two months are neither too hot nor too cold. The whole country goes on a nine-day retreat, known as nine nights. Navaratri is a very solemn occasion. Everyone gets up at four o'clock: men, women and children. They go to the nearest river, pond or lake to bathe, not in the bathroom. Then they come back, and sit down and practise one, two, three, four, five malas of their mantra for one hour, two hours, then break for half an hour and go for a walk. They have to sit for two hours. Then again sit for two hours; then break after two hours and walk for half an hour. At eleven or twelve o'clock, a light meal is taken.

What is anushthana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Navaratri is an example of anushthana. Those people who are religious by nature do it using religious methods, but there are yogis who use these nine days for their own meditation, as the environment is conducive. When they sit for meditation, with a sankalpa that they will sit for three hours or two hours in meditation, then for that period they do the complete practice.

Does Christianity also practise anushthana?

Swami Satyananda: Christianity also has a system known as Novena worship, during which the Divine Mother is worshipped for nine days.

How is faith connected to Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: In India, from ancient times, Navaratri has been a celebration and an experience of going deep into one's own faith. That faith is an expression of the positive and uplifting sentiments in one's life. What in Christianity is known as 'the dark night of the soul' is known in India as Navaratri, the nine dark nights of the soul. Navaratri represents the identification of the individual with the protective, motherly nature of the universe, the shakti, power and strength which removes the state of helplessness from life. During the nine-month period in the womb, the mother nourishes and protects you, ensuring that you are born healthy. In the same manner, the cosmic Shakti is the container of the individual soul. There is a heart connection. The original form of realization was identification with the mother aspect. When one connects with the cosmic energy, one finds happiness and peace, and overcomes helplessness and anxiety. Therefore, Navaratri is an expression of one's faith. People connect with the transcendental energy, the transcendental reality in a symbolic celebration of faith.

What advice is there for westerners who would like to begin a Navaratri program?

Swami Satyananda: Once a year retire completely for one day in a place which is quiet and secluded. Take just milk or fruit juice, no more. From six in the morning until six or eight in the evening just practise mantra non-stop. No meditation, no concentration, just the mantra *Om Nama Shivaya, Om Nama Shivaya* mentally for the whole day, for ten hours. It will create a lot of change. It is like cleaning the whole house once a year.

Do this when the temperature is moderate, neither too cold nor too hot. Solitary seclusion for some time is also important for psychological growth. One can even say that it is a practice for psychological healing, and one week is nothing.

These nine days of practice will transform the whole self. The mind will become powerful and the mantra will become

powerful. One will develop a lot of peace within, and the total quality of life and family will change.

What are the different sadhanas during Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: People notice that their emotions will run high. They will become irritable, fiery and aggressive, or have a mood swing and just want to be quiet and alone. Mood swings happen during Navaratri and they are uncontrollable, and people have experienced it; yet what they are experiencing is only one aspect of energy influencing the mind. There is energy influencing the pranas, buddhi, the senses, all the parameters of life and the mediums of expressions in life. Over this influence of shakti there is no control of human intelligence. When one is angry one cannot control one's anger, when frustrated one cannot control the frustration, when dejected one cannot control one's dejection. One goes with the flow, with the mood of the moment, and there is no awareness of what is happening. People are like little magnets and their little magnet is being influenced by a bigger magnet, and that greater magnet is being influenced by another even bigger magnet. In this way the link is created.

One type of sadhana is for householders, which is the religious sadhana, and one type of sadhana is for renunciates and sannyasins, that is the mantra and meditation sadhana. Throughout India this nine-day period is a religious festival, where different forms of Shakti, the cosmic power given form, are invoked and worshipped. In ashrams where sannyasins live, their form of sadhana will be more meditative, more explorative and mystical in nature, rather than religious in nature.

There is another type of sadhana, in which one goes into isolation, and for nine days one is alone without anybody nearby. One lives in isolation, following a strict regime of *tapasya*, austerities. Sadhana which is done intensely is austerity. Sadhana which is done keeping the comfort of body in mind is the regular sadhana. Sadhana in which

one does not keep the comfort of body in mind is known as austerity. These are three traditions of Navaratri sadhana: the isolated sadhana; the grihastha sadhana, the religious sadhana; and the renunciates' sadhana, the meditative sadhana.

How do the mantras chanted during Navaratri bring us closer to the cosmic nature?

Swami Niranjanananda: The sadhana of Navaratri is an age-old practice of worshipping this cosmic nature, this cosmic Mother, the force of creation, the focus. The mantras that have been chanted, the *Saundarya Lahari*, the thirty-two names of Durga, all the other chantings and practices are designed to awaken the human psyche. You see, there is a vibratory level to our life as well. Just as there is a mental level, just as there is an emotional level, just as there is a pranic level, just as there is a physical level, there is a vibratory level. This vibratory level is the most subtle of the bodies and the only thing that it responds to is frequency. Mantras create such frequencies in the body, in the personality which stimulate, awaken the subtle personality.

This opening up of the subtle personality is also opening of the heart. Logic governs life up to a point, after logic comes faith and after faith comes fusion. When this fusion takes place at a subtle, psychic and spiritual level, one becomes more sensitive to the universe, life, spirit, creation, and one's attitudes. One learns to live life in a more responsible way, appreciating and applying the wisdom that has been gained through the ages.

NAVARATRI INVOCATION

What is the aim of Navaratri worship?

Swami Sivananda: The beginning of summer and the beginning of winter are two important junctions of climatic and solar influence. These two periods are taken as sacred opportunities for the worship of the Divine Mother. They

are indicated respectively by the Rama-Navaratri in Chaitra (April–May) and the Durga Navaratri in Ashwin (September–October). The bodies and minds of people undergo a considerable change on account of the changes in nature. Sri Rama is worshipped during Ramnavmi, and Mother Durga during Navaratri.

The Durga pooja is celebrated in various parts of India in different styles. The one basic aim of this celebration is to propitiate Shakti, the goddess in her aspect as power, to bestow upon every individual wealth, auspiciousness, prosperity, knowledge, both sacred and secular, and other potent powers. Whatever be the particular or special request that one may put before the goddess, whatever boon may be asked of her, the one thing behind all these is propitiation, worship and linking oneself with her. There is no other aim, consciously or unconsciously. Everyone is blessed with her loving mercy and is protected by her.

In India, Durga pooja is the greatest festival in which God is adored as Mother. One's relationship with one's mother is the dearest and the sweetest of all human relations. Hence, it is proper to look upon God as mother.

Durga represents the Divine Mother. She is the energy aspect of the divine. Without Durga, Shiva has no expression and without Shiva, Durga has no existence. Shiva is the soul of Durga; Durga is identical with Shiva. Shiva is only the silent witness. He is motionless, absolutely changeless. He is not affected by the cosmic play. It is Durga who does everything.

Shakti is the omnipotent power of the divine, or the cosmic energy. The Divine Mother is represented as having ten different weapons in her hands. She sits on a lion. She keeps up the play of the divine through the three attributes of nature, namely, sattwa, rajas and tamas. Knowledge, peace, passion, anger, greed, egoism and pride, are all her forms.

A child is more familiar with the mother than with the father, because the mother is kind, loving, tender and

affectionate and looks after the needs of the child. In the spiritual field also, the aspirant or the devotee, the spiritual child, has an intimate relationship with Mother Durga, more than with Father Shiva. Therefore, it behoves the aspirant to approach the Mother first, who then introduces her spiritual child to the Father for his illumination.

What is the purpose of the invocation of Shakti during Navaratri sadhana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The Navaratri aradhana is nine days of worship of the *shakti tattwa*, the cosmic power, the cosmic energy. This tradition has carried on in India since time immemorial. There are three main figures of this cosmic shakti: the first one is known as Maha Durga or Maha Kali, the second as Maha Lakshmi and the third as Maha Saraswati. The word *maha* has been added which means 'great'. These are the three great attributes of the cosmic power.

There is an interesting description of the world and the higher world in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It says that in this world everything is standing upright but in the higher world everything is upside down (15:1):

Oordhvamoolamadhahshaakhamashvattham
praahuravyayam;
Chhandaamsi yasya parnaani yastam veda sa vedavit.

They (the wise) speak of the indestructible peepul tree, having its root above and branches below, whose leaves are the metres or hymns; he who knows it is a knower of the Vedas.

On earth, the roots are underground, the trunk is above ground and the branches grow up in space. Now just reverse the whole thing. The roots are up, the trunk is coming down and the branches are spreading down. So whatever is in this world upright or which looks straight, in the other world it is the opposite, the reverse. One may wonder how this

happens. The journey through the chakras has been from sahasrara, the transcendental state of being, to mooladhara, the gross dimension. In spiritual life this process is reversed; one moves from down up, so whatever has come into the material dimension reverts to the spiritual.

In the material dimension, first comes Saraswati, then comes Lakshmi, and then comes Maha Kali or Durga. However, in the worship on these nine days one does the reverse: first Kali, then Lakshmi and then Saraswati are worshipped. If one follows the sequence as it is commonly followed, first Saraswati, then Lakshmi, then Durga, it does not give any spiritual benefit. It gives material benefit but when one reverses it the gain becomes spiritual. This is the statement of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this is the statement of yoga and this is the statement of the spiritual traditions in India.

Understanding this sequence is beneficial in spiritual life for in life everyone is a conditioned being. People live according to the traits of the mind, habits of the mind, behaviour of the mind and nature. This is the state of tamas, the conditioned or formed identity. *Tamas* means something that has taken form, something that has taken shape. Tamas is the condition in which one lives. It is not negative, it does not have any negative connotation; people take it in a negative manner. Tamas is a state, a condition in which one is living at present. This tamas has to be changed.

Therefore, the first part of Navaratri worship is to transform the tamasic nature, to make it more positive, creative and harmonious. Once the personality is undergoing a positive and qualitative change, contentment comes in. Contentment denotes the absence of craving; if there is craving in life there is no contentment; with contentment, then there is no craving. Craving is an aspect of tamas. People desire, want, like – and that is to enforce their own identity. Desires enforce one's own identity. In the transformation of Durga the cravings reduce, the mental conditionings break down, and the limited self changes into a universal Self.

Then contentment in the form of Lakshmi comes in and that contentment is the wealth of human life. Not the bank balance! The greater the bank balance the less sleep one gets, and the more one worries about how to protect one's money from income tax. One is tossing and turning in bed in order to save one's wealth. The power of Lakshmi is to reduce frustration in the outer dimension, leading to greater contentment in the inner dimension.

Then Saraswati comes, the component of understanding and wisdom which allows one to progress in life in a positive manner. The purpose of Navaratri is to invoke these powers to help transform one's nature and mind.

How does Navaratri sadhana change the nature of the mind?

Swami Niranjanananda: The same shakti, which in the benevolent aspect is known as Saraswati, is known as Lakshmi in the nurturing aspect and Durga in the transformative aspect. Saraswati symbolizes sattwa, the effulgence, understanding, wisdom and knowledge, the arts and sciences, and mastery over all these things. Lakshmi represents fulfilment, attainment, and the absence of absences in life. Durga represents change and transformation, deciding to change something, to transform something, to break a conditioning. The thoughts, ideas and concepts that one is not willing to change are modified by this Durga power. It is these shaktis which become active and dynamic in the process of creation.

During Navaratri the three aspects of shakti are propitiated through mantras, meditation, practices of yantras and sadhanas. Mantra and yantra are the two powerful tools to awaken the shakti and access the subtle levels of consciousness. When one begins to chant the mantras and to focus on the yantras, the normal nature of the mind changes. From extroverted it becomes introverted, from dissipated it becomes focused, and one begins to observe certain aspects of one's nature which one did not know existed. This is a surprise. Many times one is able to perceive the goodness

within oneself or the blocks within oneself. Many times one is able to perceive the different traits of one's nature and personality which inhibit progress and growth or which allow one to move forward with greater confidence, conviction, faith and belief.

Navaratri is synonymous with the concept of 'the dark night of the soul'. The idea is simple. If all the lights go off, one will not be able to see anything. In the absence of light nothing can be seen. When the light comes back on, shapes, forms, colours and size of every object can be seen in the light. In the same manner, when the veils of ignorance are on the conscious self, at that time the luminosity of life is not perceived or seen, but an awareness of 'I am self-contained' comes in, an awareness of self-identity, of ego-identity. 'I am self-contained. I am a unit.' When the veil is removed and the light begins to shine, one is not contained anymore but becomes universal. By the use of mantras and yantras one is able to bring a qualitative change in the patterns of energy and consciousness. This qualitative change is used to deepen one's spiritual awareness, which allows one to become better and excel in all areas and dimensions of life.

How are the mood swings of Navaratri transformed into equilibrium?

Swami Niranjanananda: These nine days are considered to be important as the planetary conjunctions and their influence on the human mind and psyche create a strong spiritual and subtle inclination to discover one's Self. During the period of Navaratri the energies are conducive to the spiritual and psychic unfoldment of the individual due to the galactic alignment of energies and the individual's alignment of energies.

Nature is subject to planetary influences; each individual is also subject to them. At the time of full moon, the magnetic fields of the earth change and the tides of the ocean rise, so the influence of the moon on the magnetic sphere of the planet is known. In the same manner, there are

many constellations, galaxies and planets which influence shakti, the cosmic Shakti, and that cosmic Shakti influences the individual shakti.

Throughout India, for nine days the environment is changing. In every village, in every hamlet, in every town, in every nook and corner of every city, and in practically every Indian home, this period is being celebrated with worship of Devi and worship of Sri Rama. Devi is the cosmic Mother from which everything has come forth. Devi represents the cosmic power of creation, not only of the body but of life as it is experienced on all levels and dimensions.

Durga shakti represents the energy which allows one to come out of one's distress. The power of Durga represents the power to lift us from those states of mind and life where one is in distress or pain, where one suffers due to one's conditioning. Conditioned beings, tamasic beings are the people who suffer. They identify with everything around them – the world, senses, objects, material comforts and pleasures – and that is what they seek. By seeking happiness in the material dimension, they become so conditioned in their minds, in relation to the senses and the sensory experiences that they block out every other experience of life as invalid or not important.

That is the tamasic quality, and this conditioned nature becomes the cause of grief, pain and suffering. Whenever one feels pain, suffers or undergoes a crisis in one's life, conditionings have been challenged, expectations have been changed. Durga is the shakti that elevates one from that state of depression, despondency, confusion and distress to again regain one's balance. That is the Durga power, and three days are dedicated to the invocation of Durga shakti.

Then three days are dedicated to the worship of Lakshmi shakti, and Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity: not only material, physical or financial, but also mental, emotional and spiritual wealth. After one comes out of the distressing states of life, Lakshmi represents gaining and experiencing prosperity, which is not only material but also spiritual. This

cultivates a sense of wellbeing, security, happiness, fullness and peace in life. The grace of Lakshmi is not money; the grace of Lakshmi is when one finds peace, *shanti*, in one's affluent life. The real grace of Lakshmi is shanti, not bank balance. Lakshmi represents the rajasic shakti, and the attainment of a peaceful state even in rajas. Rajas always indicates motion, movement, dynamic progression, however, if one is able to maintain one's peace and balance of mind in this dynamic state of movement, that is the grace of Lakshmi.

After transcendence of the tamasic state and shanti in the rajasic state, the third power is illumination in the sattwic state, or Saraswati. Saraswati represents sattwa and Saraswati represents *jnana*, knowledge, realization. The cosmic power is seen in these three forms. These three forms are invoked through mantras to attain contentment which comes from freedom from strife, to attain peace in the dynamic life, and to attain wisdom and knowledge. One is able to connect with everything and the state of equilibrium dawns.

What is the significance of beginning the Navaratri sadhana with worship of Durga or Kali?

Swami Niranjanananda: According to the *Durga Saptashati*, the cosmic power manifests in three forms, as Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Saraswati. Kali is hideous, horrible, frightening. The image of Kali evokes fear but the nature of Kali is not fearsome, it is benevolent. When one is under the influence of *tamas*, the negative, detrimental, destructive, conditioned, and the doors of the mind, heart and perceptions are closed, and no wisdom, no awareness exists in the mind, and evil becomes the predominant power in life, then the cosmic power manifests as Kali, the dark image, representing the unconscious. She is naked, holding a knife in one hand, a severed head in another, wearing a garland of skulls, her hideous red tongue hanging out, and she is dancing wildly. That is the frightening image of Kali, yet the nature of Kali is benevolent. Kali can be compared to a farmer.

A farmer acquires a piece of land and wants to farm it. He tills the land, clears the land of weeds and stones. He moves the earth, breaks the solid chunks and prepares the ground. So, is the farmer destructive or creative? The first act of the farmer can be said to be destructive, for he is changing a state, a condition which has existed there for some time unchanged. Therefore, the change in condition represents alteration, destruction leading to transformation.

Alteration and destruction, removal of the evil, the bad so that one can experience the luminosity of the spirit, is the manifestation of Kali. In one hand she has a knife or *khudga*, representing the power of *vairagya*, non-attachment, of having everything but not being attached to it. The severed head in the other hand represents that which has been destroyed by Kali does not take birth again. An evil tendency or a bad habit which has been destroyed will not come back again. A negative quality that has been overcome will not raise its head again.

The outcome of Kali is benevolent yet the form of Kali is destructive for it is the outer act. The inner attainment is benevolent. When one is subject to pain and suffering in life and just desires some solace and peace, some form of stability, one invokes the power of Kali to overcome the negative, detrimental, limiting, negative, dissipated and conditioned qualities from life to experience clarity of mind and purity of intention. This state is attained not only through grace but through sadhana and self-effort.

What is the next step after invoking Durga or Kali?

Swami Sivananda: Once you have accomplished the task on the negative side, of breaking down the impure propensities and old habits, the next step is to build up a sublime spiritual personality, to acquire positive qualities in place of the eliminated negative qualities. The divine qualities that Sri Krishna enumerates in the *Bhagavad Gita* have to be acquired. The aspirant must cultivate and develop all auspicious qualities. He has to earn immense spiritual wealth

to enable him to pay the price for the rare gem of divine wisdom. If this development of the opposite qualities is not undertaken in right earnest, the old negative nature will raise its head again and again. Hence, this stage is as important in an aspirant's career as the previous one.

The essential difference is: the former is a ruthless, determined annihilation of the impure egoistic lower self; the latter is an orderly, steady, calm and serene effort to develop purity. This pleasanter side of the aspirant's sadhana is depicted by the worship of Mother Lakshmi. She bestows on her devotees the inexhaustible divine wealth. Lakshmi is the wealth-giving aspect of God. She is purity itself. Thus the worship of Goddess Lakshmi is performed during the second set of three days.

Once the aspirant succeeds in routing out the bad propensities, and develops sattwic or pure, divine qualities, he becomes competent to attain wisdom. He is now ready to receive the light of supreme wisdom. He is fit to receive divine knowledge. At this stage comes the devout worship of Mother Saraswati, who is divine knowledge personified, the embodiment of knowledge of the Absolute. The sound of her celestial veena awakens the notes of the sublime utterances of the Upanishads which reveal the truth, and the sacred monosyllable, *Om*. She bestows the knowledge of the supreme, mystic sound and then gives full knowledge of the Self as represented by her pure, dazzling snow-white apparel. Therefore, to propitiate Saraswati, the giver of knowledge, is the third stage. The tenth day, Vijaya Dashami, marks the triumphant ovation of the soul at having attained liberation while living in this world, through the descent of knowledge by the grace of Goddess Saraswati.

What is the Lakshmi sadhana during Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is said that if one acquires spiritual prosperity first, every other form of prosperity will naturally come to one. If one acquires material prosperity, one will not have mental peace or spiritual peace. Yet if one is able to

acquire spiritual prosperity beforehand, then even material prosperity is attracted to that. It will come naturally as the grace of Lakshmi, provided one has attained spiritual prosperity first.

To attain spiritual prosperity, one has to make the effort to cultivate positive, creative and uplifting samskaras in life. Samskaras are cultivated by planting the right thought, the right impression in the mind at the right time. Just as with any seed, one can only plant in certain seasons. A seed is not planted in mid-winter, because it is not going to grow. One plants the seed when the temperature and climate are appropriate for the growth of the root and the shoot.

In the same manner, a sankalpa has to be planted at the right time in life. It is not something that one can do any day and every day. There are certain things that one can do every day like the sankalpa in yoga nidra, but if one wants to eradicate vices and cultivate virtues, there has to be the appropriate time, the right climate, the right season in the mind and also in relation to other influences that come from the stars. The grace of Lakshmi is attained only when one is able to cultivate the positive qualities and nature in life.

The last mantra in the *Lakshmi Ashtottarashata Namavali*, in the 108 names of Lakshmi, is *Bhuvaneshwaryai namah*. *Bhuvaneshwari* means 'She, who resides in the world'. The grace of Lakshmi is palpable and receivable. It is not an abstract thing. The grace of Lakshmi can be attained when one is able to observe and analyze one's own limitations and weaknesses and try to improve one's character, behaviour and mentality.

Therefore, one makes a resolution, identifies an aspiration to be fulfilled. When there is intensity in thought, it becomes inspiration, it becomes motivation, something that one truly desires and truly wishes to become. Life is a process of becoming and being. Initially, one has to make the effort to become; at the end one is that which one has worked for to become.

What does Saraswati represent?

Swami Niranjanananda: Once Durga has completed the job of cleaning the land, the Lakshmi power comes in. Lakshmi plants the seeds in the ground and protects them from outside influences and destruction. When the seeds sprout and become a plant, the Saraswati energy comes in. Saraswati represents bliss, peace and knowledge. With the understanding that everything has gone well and the right plants are coming up, there is greater peace in the mind.

Saraswati is also considered to be the goddess of learning, wisdom and speech. When one speaks the appropriate words which uplift another being, that is the effect of Saraswati. When one speaks critically, when one speaks ill, it means Saraswati is not there in one's life. The word 'Saraswati' is composed of three different ideas, *sa*, meaning 'with', *ras* meaning 'taste' and *vati*, the feminine power which is full of taste.

Every experience in life is a taste of life: pleasure and pain, happiness and difficulties. The understanding one derives gives one an experience, an impression or the taste of life. Whatever one experiences should lead to further development of knowledge. As the saying goes, "One should learn from mistakes, to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated again." Some people keep on making the same mistake over and over again due to a closed mind. That is the lack of grace of Saraswati. When one can learn from one mistake and ensure that it is not repeated again, that is the grace of Saraswati. Learning and knowing have to convert into wisdom.

One can have a vast source of knowledge in one's mind but if one is not able to apply that knowledge, that understanding, knowledge remains knowledge only. When knowledge is applied and becomes a part of one's expression, it is called wisdom. Knowledge is to know, wisdom is to apply what one knows.

How does one approach Devi?

Swami Sivananda: Approach Her with an open heart. Lay bare your heart to Her with frankness and humility. Be as simple as a child. Kill ruthlessly the enemies of egoism, cunningness, selfishness and crookedness. Make a total, unreserved, and ungrudging self-surrender to Her. Sing Her praise. Repeat Her name. Worship Her with faith and unflinching devotion. Perform special worship on the Navaratri days. Navaratri is the most suitable occasion for doing intense spiritual practices. These nine days are very sacred to the Divine Mother.

Why is Sri Rama associated with Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: According to myth, the birth of Rama, the cosmic consciousness, takes place on Ramnavmi, the ninth day of Chaitra Navaratri (March–April). On Vijaya Dashami, the last day of Ashwin Navaratri (September–October), Rama is victorious over Ravana, and he is able to reclaim and become one with the individual self. These two events are an indication of what one can aspire to.

Navaratri is therefore connected with Rama as well as with Devi, the Cosmic Mother. It is an attempt to reconnect with the underlying reality within, to tune the individual consciousness with the cosmic consciousness, and to redirect life towards the goal of positive evolution.

What is the significance of Chaitra Navaratri?

Swami Niranjanananda: The period of Chaitra Navaratri is dedicated to the Cosmic Shakti and to Sri Rama, who represents the perfect individual. This is a beautiful concept of tantra. On the one hand, the grace of Shakti, the cosmic power, the feminine power, the power of creation is invoked, and on the other hand, the grace of Sri Rama, who represents the *purusha tattwa*, the masculine principle and the awakened consciousness, the perfectly balanced individual, is invoked. Shakti represents Prakriti, nature and energy, and Sri Rama represents Purusha, consciousness.

Devi is the Cosmic Mother from whom everything has come forth and Sri Rama represents the balance of the cosmos.

Sri Rama is known as *maryada purushottam*, which means the best person. It indicates perfect equilibrium. There is no overstepping of the boundaries, or any encroachment on another's area, remaining instead within appropriate boundaries and the defined area. This equilibrium is between life, nature and the divine. It indicates a person who is in perfect tune and harmony with the cosmic will and the dharma of human life. There is no conflict or confusion. Rather, he knows the parameters of appropriateness, lives and functions within those parameters for the welfare of all. That was the character of Rama, perfect equilibrium.

How does one experience the various forms of Devi?

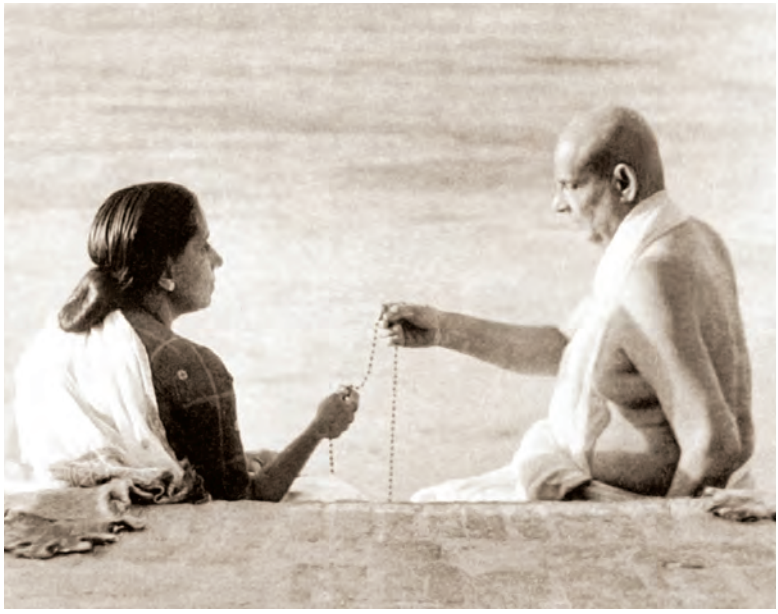
Swami Niranjanananda: As the mind becomes more and more subtle one begins to experience energies as living entities. As the mind moves from tamas to sattwa, from maya to yoga, one begins to experience forces in the form of living entities which manifest. One can have the darshan of these forces, one can see them, one can visualize them, one can feel them. As the mind becomes more sensitive, the purity of heart develops, the clarity of mind develops. The purity of heart and clarity of mind make one aware of the unseen, and suddenly one sees these forces in the form of images which are called devas and devis. One begins to see them as effulgent forms, luminous forms. When one sees them as luminous forms, the energy governing life, governing the body, governing the mind in meditation, one has the revelation that is called darshan. Seers who have gone beyond the fetters of life have called these forms by different names: Kali, the ruler of time, the darkness where everything lies hidden. From darkness the journey begins towards light; that is the first state of energy from nescience to light, from darkness to light.

When the mind becomes pure and subtle, one begins to experience this energy as the visualization of the form of

Kali, Lakshmi, a devi or devata. It can be anything, but it is not a distant thing in one's life; it is very close to reality.

When one begins to understand and realize that the Lakshmi, or Kali, in the image is expressing and manifesting in one's own nature, life and behaviour, then an understanding begins to evolve of the transformation in human consciousness – from gross to subtle to transcendental.

At the gross level one is aware of the world of objects, not of the energy. At the subtle level one is aware of the world of the mind, imagination, fantasy, visualization, and at the transcendental one is aware of the energies, not of the gross level. As the mind shifts from gross to subtle to transcendental, the same forces and the same experiences which one is having at present will be seen and visualized in a different form all together, which will give one a realization that one is part of a unified cosmic field and that unified cosmic field is the shakti tattwa.



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(2:47) Your business is with the action only, never with its fruits; so let not the fruit of action be your motive, nor be attached to inaction. 11

(7:21) Whatsoever form any devotee desires to worship with faith – that (same) faith of his I make firm and unflinching. 12

(11:40) Salutations to You from the front, salutations to You from behind, salutation to You from every side! O All! Immeasurable in strength, You pervade all. You are all. 22

(9:26) Whoever offers Me with devotion - a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water – that , so offered devotedly by the pure-minded, I accept. 30

(4:11) However men approach Me, even so I welcome them, for the paths men take from every side are mine, O Partha. 36

(9:22) For those who worship Me alone, thinking of no other, for those ever-united, I secure what is not already possessed and preserve what they already possess. 41

Chapter 2: Worship Made Alive

(9:15) Others also sacrificing with the wisdom-sacrifice worship Me the All-faced, as one, as distinct and as manifold. 79

(12:5) For those whose mind is fixed on the unmanifest, there is greater difficulty; it is a very difficult aim for the embodied. 79

(2:46) To the Brahmana who has known the Self, all the Vedas are of as much use as is a reservoir of water in a place where there is a flood. 88

Chapter 3: Symbols of Worship

(7:21) A bhakta can worship me in any form; whatever form he chooses, I will justify and accept his bhakti. 108

(8:14) I am easily attainable by that ever-steadfast yogi who constantly and daily remembers Me (for a long time), not thinking of anything else (with a single mind or one-pointed mind), Oh Partha! 130

Chapter 6: Celebrating Devi

(15:1) They (the wise) speak of the indestructible peepul tree, having its root above and branches below, whose leaves are the metres or hymns; he who knows it is a knower of the Vedas. 258

BHAGAVAT PURANA

Chapter 1: The Art of Worship

(10:81:3–4) What present have you brought for me from your house, oh Brahmana? Even the slightest offering, a particle given with affection by my devotees is considered by me as great, but even if a lot of presents are given by one who is not my votary, they are not conducive to my joy or satisfaction. A person who devoutly offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even water, I enjoy that which has been brought to me with devotion by a person of controlled and pure mind. 26

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(Balakand, after doha 240, chau 2) Everyone visualized in the Lord the reflection of his own emotional disposition. 21

Chapter 2: Worship Made Alive

(Balakand, after doha 1) The dust of the guru's feet is like the soft, beautiful kohl; if you wear it in your eye, all defects of the vision will be destroyed. 76

(Uttarkand, after doha 117) The continuous awareness of *Soham*. 89

(Balakand, after doha 22, chau 1) The concept of Brahma is twofold, formless and with form. Both are indescribable and immeasurable, without beginning and incomparable. 92

Chapter 5: Devi Worship

(verse 11) O Mother, the four triangles with downward apex are called *srikantha*, because they belong to Shiva, and the central point is Shiva himself. The five triangles, starting from the central point, belong to Shakti. These nine triangles together are called *shivayuvati*. By interlacing these nine triangles, forty-three triangles are created; the main point, housing the *bindu* (central point), is itself the forty-fourth triangle. Surrounding all of these triangles are two circles: the first is an eight-petalled lotus, and the second a sixteen-petalled lotus. Three concentric circles surround these lotuses. A triple lined square with four gates, called *bhupura*, encloses the whole diagram. 224

Glossary

Abhisheka – ceremonial bath, consecration

Advaita Vedanta – non-dualistic philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya based on the experience of Brahman as the Absolute Reality, the union of Brahman and atma, (the universe and the individual soul)

Agama – the philosophy and scriptures of tantra where Shiva teaches his consort Parvati; esoteric tradition of tantra suitable for the present age of Kali Yuga

Ahamkara – faculty of ego, awareness of the existence of 'I'; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument

Akhanda – unbroken, whole; entire; complete

Alvars – followers of the Vaishnava tradition in South India

Anugraha – divine grace; kindness; assistance

Anushthana – a resolve to perform a sadhana, often mantra sadhana, with absolute discipline for a requisite period of time; a fixed course of sadhana

Aradhana – service, adoration

Aradhya – symbol, object of worship

Archana, **archanam** – worship

Atma, **atman** – the self beyond mind and body; principle of life, highest reality, Supreme Consciousness, spirit, soul

Atmabhava – feeling of unity with all; seeing the atman (soul) equally in all beings

Avatara – descent or incarnation of God to the mortal plane

Avidya – ignorance of reality; ignorance

Balakanda – first section (kanda) of *Ramacharitamanas*

Bhagavad Gita – literally, 'divine song'; Sri Krishna's discourse to his disciple Arjuna delivered on the battlefield of Kurukshetra at the commencement of the great Mahabharata war; one of the source books of Hindu philosophy, containing the essence of the Upanishads and yoga

Bhajans – devotional song

Bhakta – devotee

Bhakti – intense inner devotion in which the intellect, emotions and self are channelled towards a relationship with the divine

Bhakti Yoga – branch of yoga in which emotional energy is channelled towards a divine relationship; a systematic path with nine stages which expand, strengthen and purify the emotions

Bhava, **bhavana** – feeling; condition; attitude; inclination or disposition of mind

Brahma, **Brahman** – God of the Hindu trinity who creates the universe; God as creator; manifest force of life and creation; ever-expanding, limitless consciousness; absolute reality

Dama – control of the outer senses; self-command through self-restraint and curbing the passions

Darshan – a glimpse; vision; direct perception; philosophy

Devata – form of divine dignity or power; divine being representing the higher states of evolution

Devi – female deity, goddess

Devi Bhagavatam – a subsidiary text of the *Shiva Purana*; a collection of stories about Devi, the Cosmic Mother

Diksha – initiation; dedication of oneself to a particular object

Durga Saptashati – text on the creation of Durga, her glories and victories over the demonic forces

Dwapara Yuga – the third aeon of the world

Guru – one who dispels the darkness caused by ignorance (avidya); teacher of the science of ultimate reality who by

the light of his own atma can dispel darkness, ignorance and illusion from the mind and enlighten the consciousness of a devotee/disciple; preceptor

Hanuman Chalisa – devotional song dedicated to Hanuman

Hiranyagarbha – cosmic mind or subtle body; Brahman; golden seed of the unity of life; it is said that Brahman alone is creating himself from his own substance

Ishta deva, **ishta devata** – one's personal chosen deity and form of worship

Ishwara – higher reality; God; non-changing, indestructible principle or quality

Ishwara Pranidhana – cultivation of faith in the supreme or indestructible reality; surrender to God; complete dedication of one's actions and will to the Lord

Japa – a meditation practice involving repetition of a mantra

Jiva – principle of life; individual or personal soul; living being

Jnanakanda – is that inner or esoteric portion of the Vedas which refers to spiritual knowledge, or the knowledge of the supreme spirit, as distinguished from knowledge obtained through ceremonial rites

Kala – one of the five limiting aspects of energy, restricting the creative power of individual consciousness and body; emanating ray; primal shakti; the power through which creation comes into manifestation

Kali Yuga – the present age or yuga; during this cycle man is collectively at the height of technology, decadence, dishonesty and corruption of spiritual awareness

Karmakanda – another name for bhakti marg; the path of ritual and worship to attain the state of bhakti

Kirtan, **kirtanam** – singing of God's name; practice in which a group of people sing a collection of mantras

Kundalini – the evolutionary energy in a human being; spiritual energy; Devi described as the potential energy of a human being dormant in mooladhara chakra, which when awakened, awakens the chakras, resulting in progressive enlightenment

Lingam – See Shivalingam

Mahabharata – epic of ancient India said to be composed by Sage Vedavyasa, involving the history and consequences of the great battle between the Kaurava and Pandava princes. It consists of eighteen sections and the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of it

Manana – reflection, the second of the three steps on the path of knowledge in vedantic sadhana

Mandala – visual image, form or symbol which one may visualize or concentrate on, externally or internally, may be two or three-dimensional; circular symbolic pictorial depiction of cosmic power and/or the human psyche

Mantra – words of power; sound vibrations which liberate the mind when repeated

Maryada Purushottama – see Purushottama

Maya – means by which Brahman creates the phenomenal world; power of creation; illusive power; in Vedanta philosophy, the two powers of maya are: 1. the power of veiling, and 2. the power of projection; in Samkhya philosophy; another name for Prakriti

Moksha – liberation from the cycles of birth and death and the illusion of maya

Mukhya bhakti – unbroken stream of love for God

Murti – body; form shape figure, statue; symbol; idol

Nada – sound; subtle sound or vibration created by the union of the Shiva and Shakti tattwas; the first manifestation of the unmanifest Absolute

Narada Bhakti Sutras – one of the main bhakti yoga texts, authored by Sage Narada

Navaratri – a period of nine days; celebration of the Cosmic Shakti

Nayanar – follower of the Shaiva tradition in South India

Nididhyasana – profound, deep meditation, the third of the three steps on the path of knowledge in vedantic sadhana

Nirguna – without quality or attribute; formless

Nishkama – without desire, expectation or personal interest

Niyama – observance of rules or rules of personal discipline to render the mind tranquil in preparation for meditation

Para Bhakti – supreme devotion (bhakti); it is said to accompany or follow the highest knowledge and be a state of consciousness which is self-contained

Pooja – worship

Prakriti – individual nature; nature; manifest and unmanifest nature composed of the three gunas; the active principle of manifest energy

Pranava – another word for the sacred syllable *Aum* or *Om*, the primal sound vibration, the symbol of the Soul or Self

Puranas – eighteen ancient texts containing the earliest mythology of the tantric and vedic traditions

Purusha – literally 'who dwells in the city', in Samkhya philosophy purusha designates pure consciousness, undefiled and unlimited by contact with prakriti or matter

Purushartha – human attainment; self-effort; the four basic needs or desires to be fulfilled in life, viz artha (wealth), kama (desire), dharma (duty), moksha (liberation)

Ramacharitamanas – a version of the *Ramayana* written by Tulsidas. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Rasa Lila – the circular dance of Krishna and the cowherd girl of Vrindavan

Rishi – seer; realized sage; one who contemplates or meditates on the Self

Sadhaka – one who practises sadhana; a spiritual aspirant

Sadhana – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly

Saguna – with qualities (gunas)

Sakama – desire-oriented attitude, motivated by self-interest

Sakara – with form; manifest

Sakshatkara – anything which is experienced personally; direct realization, experience of the absolute, knowledge of Brahma Jnana

Sama – renunciation of actions; equanimity

Samadhi – the culmination of meditation, state of oneness of the mind with the object of concentration and the uni-

versal consciousness; self-realization; the eighth stage of raja yoga

Samkhya – one of the six systems of Hindu philosophy, attributed to the sage Kapila

Sampradaya – tradition, lineage

Samsara – illusory world; the course or circuit of worldly life; unending cycle of birth and death

Samskara – mental impression stored in the subtle body as an archetype; the impressions which condition one's nature, causing one to react or respond in a certain way

Sanatana Dharma – system of eternal values underlying the vedic civilization. See Dharma

Sankalpa – positive resolve; purpose, aim, intention; will-power

Satsang, **satsanga** – gathering in which the ideals and principles of truth are discussed; spiritual association; association with the wise and the good

Shaivite, **Shaivas** – relating to the God Shiva; one who worships Shiva as the Supreme Reality

Shakta – relating to Shakti, the Cosmic Mother; one who worships the various manifestations of shakti as the supreme reality

Shakti – primal energy; manifest consciousness; power, ability, capacity, strength, energy; counterpart of Shiva; the moving power of nature and consciousness; in Hindu mythology Shakti is often symbolized as a divine woman.

Shaligram – black oval–shaped stone containing the preserved shell of an aquatic animal, found in Nepal, symbol of Vishnu

Shastra – an authoritative treatise on any subject, particularly science and religion; sacred book

Shiva Purana – collection of six ancient scriptures that tell the story of Shiva. See Puranas

Shivalinga, **shivalingam** – black oval-shaped stone; symbol of Shiva; symbol of consciousness

Shoonya, **Shoonyata** – void, state of transcendental consciousness; space behind the eyebrow centre

Siddhi – perfection; enhanced pranic and psychic capacity; paranormal or supernormal accomplishment; control of mind and prana; eight supernatural powers obtained by yogis as a result of long practice

Sloka – verse

Smriti – vedic texts transmitted by memory; a class of dharma shastras handed down by tradition

Stotram – group of mantras sung in praise of a deity, from the *Sama Veda*

Swaroopa – one's own form or shape; natural state or condition; essential nature; true constitution

Tantra – most ancient universal science and culture which deals with the transition of human nature from the present level of evolution and understanding to a transcendental level of knowledge, experience and awareness; a particular path of sadhana including mantra, yantra and other esoteric practices

Treta Yuga – second of the four aeons of the world; the yuga in which Sri Rama lived

Upasana – personalized form of worship

Uttarakanda – seventh section (kanda) of *Ramacharitamanas*.

Vaishnava, **Vaishnavite** – the sect that reveres incarnations of Vishnu as the Supreme Reality

Vandana, **vandanam** – adoration, salutation; one of the means to attain the state of bhakti

Vasana – subtle impressions which are the seeds of desires

Vedantin – practitioner of Vedanta, a philosophy stating one non-dual eternal principle underlying and causing all creation

Vedas – ancient texts revealed to the sages and saints of India, explaining and regulating every aspect of life from the Supreme Reality to worldly affairs; four in number: *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, *Atharva*, which are further divided into the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads; the oldest books in the library of mankind, parts of them revealed to sages and seers before 5,000 BC

Vritti – a modification arising in the mind related to a thought pattern; a particular mental state or condition

Yajna – sacrifice; yajna has three components: ritual or worship, satsang and unconditional giving

Yama – self-restraints or rules of conduct which render the mind tranquil

Glossary of Names and Places

Agni – fire; the god of fire

Ambarisha – mythological king of the solar dynasty; devotee of Vishnu

Annapurna – form of Durga, the Cosmic Mother

Arjuna – name of the third Pandava brother; son of Indra and Kunti; in the *Bhagavad Gita* he received divine revelation from Sri Krishna

Aurobindo, **Sri** – (1872–1950) famous yogi; settled in Pondicherry; concerned with the transformative power of yoga on all levels of the human being

Bharat – brother of Sri Rama; son of King Dasharatha and Kaikeyi

Bhima – one of the five Pandavas; son of Kunti and the God Wind

Bhuvaneshwari – form of the Cosmic Mother

Brahma, **Brahman** – god of the Hindu trinity who creates the universe; God as creator; manifest force of life and creation; ever-expanding, limitless consciousness; absolute reality

Brahmaloka – the world of Brahma; also called satya loka

Buddha – (566–483 BCE) 'The enlightened one'; commonly referred to the founder of Buddhism

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, **Gouranga** – (1485–1534) reformer of the Vaishnava faith; one of the contributors of the bhakti movement in India during the Mughal era

Chinmayananda, **Swami** – (1916–1993) one of the disciples of Swami Sivananda; founder of the Chinmaya Mission

Dasharatha – king of Ayodhya; father of Sri Rama

Dattatreya – an ancient sage who learned from twenty-four gurus; considered to be an incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; author of Yoga Shastra of Dattatreya

Dhruva – bhakta famous for his steadfast worship of Narayana; the pole star is named after him

Draupadi – wife of the five Pandava brothers, in the Mahabharata epic; great devotee of Sri Krishna

Durga – goddess who removes difficulties, wife of Shiva

Ganesha, **Ganapati** – elephant-headed Hindu deity; remover of obstacles; son of Shiva and Parvati

Ganga – river Ganges, most sacred river in India

Girija – another name of the goddess Parvati

Gopis – companions of the young Krishna in Vrindavan

Guru Nanak – (1469–1538) founder of Sikhism

Hanuman – name of a powerful monkey chief possessing extraordinary strength and powers which he manifested on several critical occasions on behalf of Sri Rama, the Lord of his heart

Hara – name of Shiva

Hari – name of Vishnu, the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the preservation of the universe; Supreme Consciousness

Hari – name of Vishnu, the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the preservation of the universe; Supreme Consciousness

Indra – king of the vedic gods, the ruler of heaven; lord of the senses; the mind or the soul; the rain go

Kailash – sacred mountain in the Himalayas; residence of Shiva and Parvati

Kanchipuram – ancient city in South India

Kartikeya – son of Shiva and Parvati; older brother of Ganesha

Kashi – see Varanasi

Keshava – name of Krishna

Krishna, **Sri** – the 'black' or 'dark one'; eighth incarnation of Vishnu; avatara who descended in the Dwapara Yuga. Sri Krishna is perhaps the most celebrated hero in Hindu mythology and seems to be an historical figure. To uphold dharma he orchestrated the Mahabharata war. His teachings to his friend and disciple Arjuna during that war are immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita*

Lakshmi, **Mahalakshmi** – goddess of fortune, prosperity and beauty, the consort of Vishnu

Mahavira – (599–527 BCE) contemporary to Buddha; founder of the Jain religion advocating non-violence, compassion and restraint

Markandeya – a rishi devoted to Devi, the Cosmic Shakti

Mathura – name of an ancient town which is the birthplace of Sri Krishna, situated on the right bank of the river Yamuna

Milarepa – (11th century) Tibetan saint

Mirabai – (1547–1614) princess; Indian poet saint; devotee of Sri Krishna

Nara and Narayana – according to the *Mahabharata* epic, Nara is Arjuna and Narayana is Sri Krishna

Narada, **Sage** – author of *Narada Bhakti Sutras*; devotee of Vishnu

Narsi Mehta – (1414–1481) poet saint of Gujarat

Parvati – goddess and consort of Shiva, mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya

Prithu – first king, from whom the earth received her name 'Prithvi'

Rama, **Sri** – seventh avatara of Vishnu and embodiment of dharma, hero of the epic *Ramayana*; a heroic and virtuous king

Ramakrishna, **Paramahamsa** – (1836–1886) Indian saint and mystic who perfected sadhanas from all religions; guru of Swami Vivekananda

Ramana Maharshi – (1879–1950) a renowned jnana yogi and enlightened sage who taught mainly through silence; establisher of the path of self-enquiry

Ramdas, **Samartha Ramdas** – (1608–1682) Indian saint, poet and social reformer

Ravana – ten-headed demon king who kidnapped Sita; he was slain by Sri Rama; his ten heads symbolize attachment to the phenomenal reality

Sai Baba – (1835–1918) Indian spiritual master and siddha of Shirdi

Sandilya, **Sage** – author of *Sandilya Bhakti Sutras*

Saraswati – goddess of knowledge, speech and learning, daughter of Brahma

Shabari – tribal woman and devotee of Sri Rama; she waited 60 years for darshan of Sri Rama; symbol of unflinching faith

Shatrughna – son of King Dasharatha and his wife Sumitra; younger brother of Sri Rama, and twin brother of Lakshman

Shiva – state of pure consciousness, individual and cosmic, original source of yoga Lord of yogis; auspicious, benevolent one; name of the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the work of destruction; destroyer of the ego and duality

Sukadeva, **Shukadeva** – son of Vedavyasa; he narrated the *Bhagavata Purana* to Raja Parikshit

Sugriva – a monkey chief who assisted Sri Rama in his search and recovery of Sita

Surdas – (1478–1581) celebrated blind saint and poet of India; his devotional songs to Sri Krishna are known throughout India

Tukaram – (17th century) Indian poet saint of Maharashtra

Tulsidas – (1532–1623) author of one of the versions of the famous epic Ramayana called the *Ramacharitamanas*, which describes the life of Sri Rama. It is composed in poetic form and is chanted by devotees throughout India

Uddhava – devotee of Sri Krishna; a childhood friend of Sri Krishna who later learned bhakti from the gopis

Vaikuntha – heaven; abode of Vishnu

Varanasi – holy city connected especially with Shiva; also known as Benares and Kashi

Vasudeva – father of Sri Krishna

Vishnu – vedic deity; the second deity of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), entrusted with the preservation of the universe, a duty which obliges him to appear in several incarnations; Supreme Consciousness

Vishwamitra, **Sage** – literally, 'friend of the universe'; a celebrated sage during the time of the Sri Rama

Vitthal – name of Sri Krishna at Pandharpur

Vivekananda, **Swami** – (1863–1903); disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa; he brought his guru's teachings to the West

Vrindavan – name of a forest near Gokula where Sri Krishna used to play as a child

Vedavyasa, **Vyasa** – compiler of the four Vedas in their present form

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Notes



The series *Customs and Traditions – Bhakti Marg* reflects the timeless longing to connect to the Divine or transcendental reality within and around every speck of creation. Three generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati, Swami Satyananda Saraswati and Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati – share their personal insight and explain the historical and social context of this search for connection. In the form of question and answer, they give practical guidelines to spiritual seekers thus inspiring them to discover for themselves their own personal understanding and living experience.

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