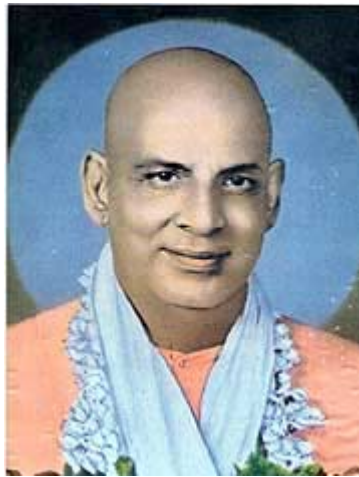


THE PHILOSOPHY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF IDOL WORSHIP

By

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The Divine Life Society**



**SERVE, LOVE, GIVE,
PURIFY, MEDITATE,
REALIZE
So Says
Sri Swami Sivananda**

A DIVINE LIFE SOCIETY PUBLICATION

First Edition: 1960
Second Edition: 1975
Third Edition: 1993
(3,000 Copies)

World Wide Web (WWW) Edition: 2001

WWW site: <http://www.SivanandaDlshq.org/>

This WWW reprint is for free distribution

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Published By
THE DIVINE LIFE SOCIETY
P.O. SHIVANANDANAGAR—249 192
Distt. Tehri-Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh,
Himalayas, India.

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WORSHIP OF THE IMAGE

Worship is the effort on the part of the Upasaka (he who does Upasana or worship to reach the proximity or presence of God or the Supreme Self. Upasana literally means ‘sitting near’ God. Upasana is approaching the chosen ideal or object of worship by meditating on it in accordance with the teachings of the Sastras and the Guru and dwelling steadily in the current of that one thought, like a thread of oil poured from one vessel to another (Tailadharavat). It consists of all those observances and practices—physical and mental—by which the aspirant or Jijnasu makes a steady progress in the realm of spirituality and eventually realises in himself, in his own heart, the presence of Godhead.

Benefits of Upasana

Upasana helps the devotee to sit near the Lord or to commune with Him. It purifies the heart and steadies the mind. It fills the mind with Suddha Bhava and Prema or pure love for the Lord. It gradually transmutes man into a divine being.

Upasana changes the mental substance, destroys Rajas and Tamas and fills the mind with Sattva or purity. Upasana destroys Vasanas, Trishnas, egoism, lust, hatred, anger, etc. Upasana turns the mind inward and induces Antarmukha Vritti, eventually brings the devotee face to face with the Lord, frees the devotee from the wheel of births and deaths and confers on him immortality and freedom.

The mind becomes that on which it meditates in accordance with the analogy of the wasp and the caterpillar (Bhramara-Keeta Nyaya). Just as you think, so you become. This is the immutable psychological law. There is a mysterious or inscrutable power (Achintya Sakti) in Upasana which makes the meditator and the meditated identical.

You will find in the Gita (XI-54): “But by devotion to Me alone, I may thus be perceived, Arjuna, and known and seen in essence and entered, O Parantapa.”

Patanjali Maharshi emphasises in various places in his Raja Yoga Sutras on the importance of Upasana. For even a Raja Yogi, Upasana is necessary. He has his own Ishtam or guiding Deity—Yogesvara Krishna or Lord Siva. Self-surrender to God is an Anga (limb) of Raja Niyama and Kriya Yoga. Patanjali says, “One can enter into Samadhi through Upasana.”

Of all those things which are conducive to spiritual advancement, Adhyatmic uplift and the acquisition of Dharma, Upasana is one which is not only indispensably requisite, but eminently beneficial to all classes and grades of people. It is easy too.

Eating, drinking, sleeping, fear and copulation, etc., are common in brutes and human beings; but that which makes one a real man or a God-man is Upasana. He who leads a mere outward sensual life without doing any Upasana is an animal only though he wears outwardly the form of a human being.

Saguna Upasana and Nirguna Upasana

Upasana is of two kinds, viz., Pratika Upasana and Ahamgraha Upasana. 'Pratika' means a symbol. Pratika Upasana is Saguna Upasana. Ahamgraha Upasana is Nirguna Upasana or meditation on the formless and attributeless Akshara or transcendental Brahman. Meditation on idols, Saligram, pictures of Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Lord Siva, Gayatri Devi is Pratika Upasana. The blue expansive sky, all-pervading ether, all-pervading light of the sun etc., are also 'Pratikas' for abstract meditation. Saguna Upasana is concrete meditation. Nirguna Upasana is abstract meditation.

Hearing of the Lilas of the Lord, Kirtan or singing His Names, constant remembrance of the Lord (Smarana), service of His feet, offering flowers, prostration, prayer, chanting of Mantra, self-surrender, service of Bhagavatas, service of humanity and country with Narayana Bhava, etc., constitute Saguna Upasana.

Chanting of Om with Atma Bhava, service of humanity and country with Atma Bhava, mental Japa of Om with Atma or Brahma Bhava, meditation on Soham or Sivoham or on the Mahavakyas such as 'Aham Brahma Asmi' or 'Tat Tvam Asi' after sublating the illusory vehicles through 'Neti, Neti' doctrine, constitute Ahamgraha Upasana or Nirguna Upasana.

Saguna Upasana is Bhakti Yoga or the Yoga of Devotion. Nirguna Upasana is Jnana Yoga or the Yoga of Knowledge. Worshippers of Saguna (the qualified) and Nirguna (the unqualified) Brahman reach the same goal. But, the latter path is very hard, because the aspirant has to give up attachment to the body (Dehabhimana) from the very beginning of his spiritual practice. The Akshara or the Imperishable is very hard for those who are attached to their bodies to reach. Further, it is extremely difficult to fix the mind on the formless and attributeless Brahman. Contemplation on the Akshara or Nirguna Brahman demands a very sharp, one-pointed and subtle intellect.

The Bhavas in Bhakti Yoga

The Yoga of Devotion is much easier than Jnana Yoga. In Bhakti Yoga, the devotee establishes a near and dear relationship with the Lord. He cultivates slowly any one of the six Bhavas according to his temperament, taste and capacity.

Santa Bhava, Dasya Bhava, Sakhya Bhava, Vatsalya Bhava, Kanta Bhava and Madhurya Bhava are the six kinds of attributes of devotees or Bhavas towards God. The Bhavas differ in type and intensity of feeling. The different Bhavas are arranged in order of their intensity. Dhruva and Prahlada had the feeling of a child to its parents. This is Santa Bhava. In Dasya Bhava the devotee behaves like a servant. His Lord is his Master. Hanuman is an ideal servant of God. In Sakhya Bhava, there is a sense of equality. Arjuna and Kuchela had this Bhava. In Vatsalya Bhava, the devotee looks upon the Lord as his own child. Yasoda had this Bhava for Sri Krishna. Kausalya had this Bhava for Sri Rama. Kanta Bhava is the love of the wife to the husband. Sita and Rukmini had this Bhava. The culmination is reached in Madhurya Bhava. The lover and the Beloved become one through the intensity of love. Radha and Mira had this type of love.

The last Bhava is the highest culmination of Bhakti. It is merging or absorption in the Lord. The devotee adores the Lord. He constantly remembers Him. He sings His Name (Kirtan). He speaks of His glories. He repeats His Name. He chants His Mantra. He prays and prostrates. He hears His Lilas. He does total, ungrudging, unconditional surrender, obtains His grace, holds communion with Him and gets absorbed in Him eventually.

In Madhurya Bhava, there is the closest relationship between the devotee and the Lord. There is no sensuality in Kanta and Madhurya Bhavas. There is no tinge of carnality in them. Passionate people cannot understand these two Bhavas as their minds are saturated with passion and lower sexual appetite. Sufistic saints also have the Bhava of lover and the Beloved, Madhurya Bhava. Gita Govinda written by Jaya Deva is full of Madhurya Rasa. The language of love which the mystic uses cannot be comprehended by worldly persons. Only Gopis, Radha, Mira, Tukaram, Narada, Hafiz, can understand this language.

Puja And Ishta Devata

Puja is the common term for ritual worship of which there are numerous synonyms such as Archana, Vandana, Bhajana, etc., though some of these stress certain aspects of it. The object of worship is the Ishta Devata or guiding Deity or the particular form of the Deity whom the devotee worships, e.g., Vishnu as such or His forms as Rama and Krishna in the case of Vaishnavites, Siva in the eight forms in the case of Saivites, Devi in the case of Saktas.

The devotee selects sometimes his Kuladeva or Kuladevi, family Deva or Devi, for his worship. Sometimes the Devata is chosen for him by his Guru or Spiritual Preceptor. Sometimes he himself chooses that Devata which most appeals to him. This form is his Ishta Devata.

An object is used in the outer Puja such as an image (Pratima), a picture or an emblem such as Saligram in the case of Vishnu worship or Linga in the case of worship of Siva.

Whilst all things may be the objects of worship, choice is naturally made of these objects which, by reason of their effect on the mind, are more fitted for it. An image or one of the useful emblems is likely to raise in the mind of the worshipper the thought of a Devata. Saligram stone induces easily concentration of mind. Everybody has got predilection for a symbol, emblem or image. Idol or Murti (Vigraha), sun, fire, water, Ganga, Saligram, Linga are all symbols or Pratikas of God which help the aspirants to attain one-pointedness of mind and purity of heart. These are personal inclinations in the worshipper due to his belief in their special efficacy for him. Psychologically, all this means that a particular mind finds that it works best in the direction desired by means of particular instruments or emblems or images.

The vast bulk of humanity are either of impure or weak mind. Therefore, the object of worship must be pure for these people. The objects that are capable of exciting lust and dislike must be avoided. But, a higher advanced Sadhaka who has a pure mind and who sees the divine presence everywhere and in everything, can worship any kind of object.

In Puja, an image or picture representing some divine form is used as the object of worship. The image is adored. An image, a Sila or a Vigraha or Murti represents the form of the particular

Lord who is invoked in it. A Linga represents Siva. It represents the secondless, formless Brahman. The Sruti says, “*Ekamevadvitiam Brahma*—the Brahman is one without a second”. There is no duality here. A Lingam is shining and attractive to the eyes. It helps concentration. Ravana propitiated Siva and obtained boons by worshipping the Linga.

A Saligram is an idol of Vishnu. Saligram is the symbol of Vishnu. There are images of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Karttikeya, Ganesha, Hanuman, Dattatreya, Sita, Lakshmi, Parvati, Durga, Kali, Sarasvati, etc., according to the taste of the particular devotee.

The image of Vishnu and of his Avatars, and the images of Sakti and Siva are the popular idols that are worshipped both in temples and in the houses. The idols in the temples of Tirupati, Pandharpur, Palani, Kathirgama, etc., are powerful Deities. They are Pratyaksha Devatas. They grant boons to the devotees, cure their ailments and give Darshan. Wonderful Lilas are associated with these Deities. There is no polytheism in Hinduism. Siva, Vishnu, Brahma, Sakti are different aspects of the one Lord.

God reveals Himself to His devotees in a variety of ways. He assumes the very form which the devotee has chosen for his worship. If you worship Him as Lord Hari with four hands, He will come to you as Hari. If you adore Him as Siva, He will give you Darsan as Siva. If you worship Him as Mother Durga or Kali, He will come to you as Durga or Kali. If you worship Him as Lord Rama, Lord Krishna or Lord Dattatreya, He will come to you as Rama, Krishna or Dattatreya. If you worship Him as Christ or Allah, He will come to you as Christ or Allah.

You may worship Lord Siva or Lord Hari, Lord Ganesha or Lord Subramanya or Lord Dattatreya, or any one of the Avatars, Lord Rama or Lord Krishna, Sarasvati or Lakshmi, Gayatri or Kali, Durga or Chandī. All are aspects of one Isvara or Lord. Under whatever name and form, it is Isvara who is adored. Worship goes to the Indweller, the Lord in the form. It is ignorance to think that one form is superior to another. All forms are one and the same. Siva, Vishnu, Gayatri, Rama, Krishna, Devi, Brahma are one. All are adoring the same Isvara. The differences are only differences of names due to differences in the worshippers, but not in the object of adoration. It is only out of ignorance that different religionists and different sects fight and quarrel amongst themselves.

The Idol—A Prop For The Spiritual Neophyte

Idol is a support for the neophyte. It is a prop of his spiritual childhood. A form or image is necessary for worship in the beginning. It is an external symbol of God for worship. It is a reminder of God. The material image calls up the mental idea. Steadiness of mind is obtained by image worship. The worshipper will have to associate the ideas of infinity, omnipotence, omniscience, purity, perfection, freedom, holiness, truth, omnipresence. It is not possible for all to fix the mind on the Absolute or the Infinite. A concrete form is necessary for the vast majority for practising concentration. To behold God everywhere and to practise the presence of God is not possible for the ordinary man. Idol worship is the easiest form of worship for the modern man.

A symbol is absolutely indispensable for fixing the mind. The mind wants a prop to lean upon. It cannot have a conception of the Absolute in the initial stages. Without the help of some

external aid, in the initial stages, the mind cannot be centralised. In the beginning, concentration or meditation is not possible without a symbol.

Everyone an Idol-Worshipper

There is no reference to worship of idols in the Vedas. The Puranas and the Agamas give descriptions of idol-worship both in the houses and in the temples. Idol-worship is not peculiar to Hinduism. Christians worship the Cross. They have the image of the Cross in their mind. The Mohammedans keep the image of Kaaba stone when they kneel and do prayers. The people of the whole world, save a few Yogis and Vedantins, are all worshippers of idols. They keep some image or the other in the mind.

The mental image also is a form of idol. The difference is not one of kind, but only one of degree. All worshippers, however intellectual they may be, generate a form in the mind and make the mind dwell on that image.

Everyone is an idol-worshipper. Pictures, drawing, etc., are only forms of Pratima. A gross mind needs a concrete symbol as a prop or Alambana; a subtle mind requires an abstract symbol. Even a Vedantin has the symbol OM for fixing the wandering mind. It is not only the pictures or images in stone and wood that are idols. Dialectics and leaders also become idols. So, why condemn idolatry?

A Medium For Establishing Communion With God

Idols are not the idle fancies of sculptors, but shining channels through which the heart of the devotee is attracted to and flows towards God. Though the image is worshipped, the devotee feels the presence of the Lord in it and pours out his devotion unto it. It is the appalling ignorance of the modern sensual man that clouds his vision and prevents him from seeing Divinity in lovely and enchanting idols of His form. The very scientific advances of this century ought to convince you of the glory of idol worship. How are the songsters and orators confined to a small box-like thing to be called a radio? It is a mere piece of a mechanical lifeless structure which breaks into a thousand pieces if you throw it away violently; and yet, if you know how to handle it, you can hear through it, the music that is being played several thousands of miles away, the discourse that is being delivered in the remotest part of the globe. Even as you can catch the sound waves of people all over the world through the radio receiving set, it is possible to commune with the all-pervading Lord through the medium of an idol. 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. Why do you then say that He is not in the idols?

There are others who would glibly say, "Oh, God is all-pervading formless being. How can He be confined to this idol?" Are these people ever conscious of His omnipresence? Do they always see Him and Him alone in everything? No. It is their ego that prevents them from bowing to the idols of God and with that motive puts this lame excuse forward!

Empty vessels only make much sound. A practical man who does meditation and worship, who is full of knowledge and real devotion keeps always silence. He influences and teaches others

through silence. He only knows whether a Murti is necessary in the beginning for concentration or not.

However intellectual one may be, he cannot concentrate without the help of some symbol in the beginning. An intellectual and learned person, on account of his pride and vanity only says, "I do not like a Murti. I do not wish to concentrate on a form." He cannot concentrate on the formless one. He thinks that people will laugh at him when they come to know that he is meditating on a form. He never does any meditation on the formless one. He simply talks and argues and poses. He wastes his life in unnecessary discussions only. An ounce of his practice is better than tons of theories. Intellect is a hindrance in the vast majority of intellectual persons. They say that the existence of Brahman is a guess work, Samadhi is a bluff of the mind and Self-realisation is an imagination of the Vedantins. Deluded souls! They are steeped in ignorance. They are carried away by their secular knowledge which is mere husk when compared to the Knowledge of the Self. There is no hope of salvation for such people. First their wrong Samskaras should be flushed by good Samskaras through Satsanga. Then only they will realise their mistakes. May the Lord bestow on them clear understanding and thirsting for real knowledge!

A Symbol of God

Pratima (idol) is a substitute or symbol. The image in a temple, though it is made of stone, wood or metal, is precious for a devotee as it bears the mark of his Lord, as it stands for something which he holds holy and eternal. A flag is only a small piece of painted cloth, but it stands for a soldier 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 Lord is superimposed on the image and the image generates divine thoughts in the worshipper.

A piece of ordinary white paper or coloured paper has no value. You throw it away. But, if there is the stamp or picture of the King or Emperor on the paper (currency notes), you keep it safe in your money purse or trunk. Even so, an ordinary piece of stone has no value for you. You throw it away. But, if you behold the stone Murti of Lord Krishna at Pandharpur or any other Murti in shrines, you bow your head with folded hands, because there is the stamp of the Lord on the stone. The devotee superimposes on the stone Murti his own Beloved and all the attributes of the Lord.

When you worship an image, you do not say, "This image has come from Jaipur. It was brought by Prabhu Singh. Its weight is 50 lbs. It is made of white marble. It has cost me Rs, 500/-." You superimpose all the attributes of the Lord on the image and pray, "O Antaryamin (Inner Ruler)! You are all-pervading; you are omnipotent, omniscient, all-merciful. You are the source for everything. You are self-existent. You are Sat-Chit-Ananda. You are eternal, unchanging. You are the Life of my life, Soul of my soul! Give me light and knowledge! Let me dwell in Thee for ever." When your devotion and meditation become intense and deep, you do not see the stone image. You behold the Lord only, who is chaitanya. Image worship is very necessary for beginners.

An Integral Part of Virat

For a beginner, Pratima is an absolute necessity. By worshipping an idol, Isvara is pleased. The Pratima is made up of the five elements. The five elements 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 whole world is His Body, Virat Form. The devotion goes to the Lord. The worshipper superimposes on the image the Lord and all His attributes. He does Shodasopachara for the idol, the sixteen kinds of paying respects or service to the Lord, such as Padyam (water for washing the feet), Arghyam, Asana (seat), Snana (bathing), offering clothes, Achamana (water for sipping), applying sandal paste, offering flowers (Archana), burning incense, waving of lights and camphor, Maha Naivedyam, etc. 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 his egoism.

To the worshipper who believes the symbol, any kind of image is the body of the Lord under the form of stone, clay, brass, picture, Saligram, etc. Such worship can never be idolatry. All matter is a manifestation of God. God is present in everything which exists. Everything is an object of worship, for all is a manifestation of God who is therein worshipped. The very 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.

Idol Worship Develops Devotion

Idol worship makes concentration of mind simpler and easier. You can bring before your mind's eye the great Lilas the Lord has played in His particular Avataras in which you view Him. This is one of the easiest modes of Self-realisation.

Just as the picture of a famous warrior evokes heroism in your heart, a look at the picture of God will elevate your mind to divine heights. Just as the child develops the maternal Bhava (mother-feeling) of the future caressing, nursing, protecting mother by playing with its imaginary toy-child made up of rags and suckling the child in an imaginary manner, so also the devotee develops the feeling of devotion by worshipping the Pratima and concentrating on it.

Regular Worship Unveils The Divinity In The Idol

Regular worship, Puja and other modes of demonstrating our inner feeling of recognition of Divinity in the idol unveils the Divinity latent in it. This is truly a wonder and a miracle. The picture comes to life. The idol speaks. It will answer your questions and solve your problems. 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. Puja makes the idol shine with divine resplendence. God is then enshrined in the idol. From here, He will protect you in a special manner. The idol will perform miracles. The place where it is installed is at once transformed into a temple, nay, a Vaikuntha or a Kailasa in reality. Those who live in such a place are freed from miseries, from diseases, from failures and from Samsara itself. The awakened Divinity in the idol acts as a guardian angel blessing all, conferring the highest good on those who bow to it.

The Image, A Mass Of Chaitanya

The idol is only a symbol of the Divine. A devotee does not behold therein a block of stone or a mass of metal. It is an emblem of God for him. He visualises the Indwelling Presence in the Murti or image. All the Saiva Nayanars or saints of South India attained God-realisation through worship of the Lingam, the image of Lord Siva. For a devotee, the image is a mass of Chaitanya or consciousness. He draws inspiration from the image. The image guides him. It talks to him. It assumes human form to help him in a variety of ways. The image of Lord Siva in the temple of Madurai in South India helped the fuel-cutter and the old woman. The image in the temple of Tirupati assumed human form and gave witness in the court to help his devotees. There are marvels and mysteries. Only the devotees understand these.

When Idols Became Alive

For a Bhakta or a sage, there is no such thing as Jada or insentient matter. Everything is Vasudeva or Chaitanya—*Vasudevah Sarvam Iti*. The devotee beholds actually the Lord in the idol. Narsi Mehta was put to the test by a Raja. The Raja said: “O Narsi, if you are a sincere devotee of Lord Krishna, if as you say the idol is Lord Krishna Himself, let this idol move.” According to the prayer of Narsi Mehta, the idol moved. The sacred bull Nandi before Siva’s idol took the food offered by Tulasidas. The Murti played with Mira Bai. It was full of life and Chaitanya for her.

When Appayya Dikshitar went to Tirupati temple in South India, the Vaishnavas refused him admission. The next morning they found the Vishnu Murti in the temple changed into Siva Murti. The Mahant was much astonished and startled, asked pardon and prayed to Appayya Dikshitar to change the Murti again into Vishnu Murti.

Kanaka Das was a great devotee of Lord Krishna in Udipi, in the district of South Kanara in South India. He was not allowed to enter the temple on account of his low birth. Kanaka Das went round the temple and saw a small window at the back of the temple. He seated himself in front of the window. He was soon lost in singing songs in praise of Lord Krishna. Many people gathered round him. They were very much attracted by the sweet melody of his music and the depth of his devotion. Lord Krishna turned round to enable Kanaka Das to get His Darshan. The priests were struck with wonder. Even today, pilgrims are shown the window and the place where Kanaka Das sat and sang.

The Murti is the same as the Lord, for it is the vehicle of expression for the Mantra-Chaitanya which is the Devata. The same attitude should the devotee have in regard to the Murti in the temple, which he would evince if the Lord would appear before him in person and speak to him in articulate sound.

Vedanta and Idol Worship

A pseudo-Vedantin feels himself ashamed to bow or prostrate before an idol in the temple. He feels that his Advaita will evaporate if he prostrates. Study the lives of the reputed Tamil saints, Appar, Sundarar, Sambandhar, etc. They had the highest Advaitic realisation. They saw Lord Siva everywhere and yet they visited all temples of Siva, prostrated before the idol and sang hymns, which are on record now. The sixty-three Nayanar saints practised Chariyai and Kriyai only and attained God-realisation thereby. They swept the floor of the temple, collected flowers, made garlands for the Lord and put on lights in the temple. They were illiterate, but attained the highest realisation. They were practical Yogis and their hearts were saturated with pure devotion. They were an embodiment of Karma Yoga. All practised the Yoga of Synthesis. The idol in the temple was all Chaitanya or consciousness for them. It was not a mere block of stone.

Madhusudana Swami, who had Advaita realisation, who beheld oneness of the Self, who had Advaitic Bhava, was intensely attached to the form of Lord Krishna with flute in His hands.

Tulasidas realised the all-pervading essence. He had cosmic consciousness. He communed with the all-pervading, formless Lord. And yet his passion for Lord Rama with bow in His hand did not vanish. When he had been to Brindavan and saw the Murti of Lord Krishna with flute in His hands, he said, "I will not bow my head to this form." At once Lord Krishna's form assumed the form of Lord Rama. Then only he bowed his head. Tukaram also had the same cosmic experience as that of Tulasidas. He sings in his Abhanga, "I see my Lord all-pervading, just as sweetness pervades the sugar-cane" and yet he always speaks of his Lord Vittala of Pandharpur with His hands on the hips. Mira also realised her identity with the all-pervading Krishna and yet she was not tired of repeating again and again, "My Giridhar Nagar".

From the above facts, we can clearly infer that one can realise God through worship of Murti or idol, that the worship of the Lord in Saguna form is a great aid for Vedantic realisation also and for the realisation of the Lord in His all-pervading, formless aspect and that the worship of the Murti is very 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 and those who vehemently attack Murti Puja are groping in extreme darkness and ignorance and they have no real knowledge of Puja and worship and that they enter into unnecessary, vain debates and discussions against Murti Puja to show that they are learned persons and that they have not done any real Sadhana at all. They are persons who have made idle talking and tall talk as their habit and profession. They have ruined themselves. They have unsettled the minds of countless persons and ruined them also. The whole world worships symbols and Murtis only in some form or the other. The mind is disciplined in the beginning by fixing it on a concrete object or symbol. When it is rendered steady and subtle, it can be fixed later on on an abstract idea such as "Aham Brahma Asmi". When one advances in meditation, the form melts in the formless and he becomes one with the formless essence. Image worship is not contrary to the view of Vedanta. It is rather a help.

From Ritualistic Bhakti To Para Bhakti

Bhakti is of two kinds, viz., higher Bhakti or Para Bhakti and lower Bhakti or ritualistic Bhakti. Ritualistic worship is Vaidhi or Gauni Bhakti. It is formal Bhakti. Vaidhi Bhakti is the

lower type of devotion depending on external aids. It is lower Bhakti. The mind becomes purer and purer. The aspirant gradually develops love for God through ritualistic worship. He who does ritualistic worship rings bells, adores a Pratika (symbol) or Pratima (image), does Puja, Arati, etc., with flowers, sandal paste, burns incense and waves light before the image, offers Naivedya or food for God, etc.

Mukhya Bhakti or Para Bhakti is advanced type of devotion. It is higher Bhakti. It transcends all convention. A devotee of this type knows no rule. He does not perform any external worship. He beholds his Lord everywhere, in every object. His heart is saturated with love for God. The whole world is Brindavan for him. His state is ineffable. He attains the acme of bliss. He radiates love, purity and joy wherever he goes and inspires all who come in contact with him.

The aspirant who worships the idol in the beginning beholds the Lord everywhere and develops Para Bhakti. From Vaidhi Bhakti, he passes on to Ragatmika Bhakti or Prema Bhakti. He beholds the whole world as the Lord. The ideas of good and bad, right and wrong, rogue, etc., vanish. He sees the Lord in a rogue, dacoit, cobra, scorpion, ant, dog, tree, log of wood, block of stone, sun, moon, stars, fire, water, earth, etc. His vision or experience baffles description. Glory to such exalted Bhaktas who are veritable Gods on earth, who live to lift others from the quagmire of Samsara and save them from the clutches of death!

Hinduism leads the aspirants gradually from material images to mental images and from the diverse mental images to the one Personal God and from the Personal God to the Impersonal Absolute or transcendental Nirguna Brahman.

The Glory of Hindu Philosophy

How sublime is Hindu philosophy and Hindu mode of worship! It does not stop or end with the worship of the idol. The Sadhaka is taken step by step to higher stages of devotion and Samadhi or communion through the worship of the idol. Though he worships the idol, he has to keep before his mental eye the all-pervading Lord. He has to feel His Presence in his heart and all objects also. Even in worshipping a small idol, he has to repeat the Purusha Sukta and to think of the Virat Purusha with countless heads, countless eyes, countless hands, who extends beyond the universe and of the Lord or Atman who dwells in the hearts of all beings. The same man who burns incense, scented sticks and camphor before the idol says, "The sun does not shine there nor the moon nor the stars nor the lightning. How then could the little fire shine there? All shine after Him. His effulgence alone illumines the whole world." The ways and rules of worship—Puja Vidhi—and the secrets of worship that are described in the Hindu scriptures are scientifically accurate and highly rational. It is only ignorant people who have not studied the scriptures, who have not associated with the devotees and great souls, who vilify worship of idols or Murtis.

Every other religion lays certain fixed dogmas and attempts to force people to follow them. It has only one kind of drug to treat several diseases. It gives only one kind of food for all and for all conditions. It places before the followers only one coat. It must fit Albert, Atkinson, Ahluwallia, Antony, Abdul Rahman. The Hindus know that the images, crosses and crescents are simply so many symbols to fix the mind in the beginning for developing concentration, so many concrete pegs to hang their spiritual ideas and convictions on. The symbol is not necessary for everyone. It is not

compulsory in Hinduism. It is not needed for an advanced Yogi or sage. A symbol is like the slate which is useful for a boy of the first standard. Those who are not in need of it have no right to say that it is wrong. If they say that it is wrong, they only betray their ignorance.

To Sum Up

There is nothing wrong in worshipping an idol in the beginning. You must superimpose God and His attributes on the idol. You must think of the Antar-Atma that is hidden in the idol. The aspirant gradually begins to feel that the Lord he worships is in the idol, in the hearts of all creatures and in all the names and forms of this universe. He begins to feel His presence everywhere.

Idolatry is only the beginning of religion. Certainly it is not its end. The same Hindu scriptures which prescribe idol-worship for beginners speak of meditation on the Infinite or the Absolute, contemplation on the significance of the "Tat Tvam Asi" Mahavakya, for advanced aspirants.

There are different grades of worship. The first is the worship of idols. The next is recitation of Mantras and offering of prayers. Mental worship is superior to worship with flowers. Meditation on the Absolute or the attributeless Nirguna Brahman is the best of all.

The supreme state is Self-realisation or Brahma-sakshatkara. The second in rank is meditation. The Yogi practises Sadhana or unceasing meditation on the Supreme Self. The third is the worship of symbols. The fourth is the performance of rituals and pilgrimages to holy places. The Sastras and Gurus are like kind mothers. They take hold of the hands of the aspirants, take them step by step, stage by stage, till they are established in Nirvikalpa Samadhi or super-conscious state. They prescribe gross forms of Sadhana or spiritual practices for the neophytes or beginners, with gross mind, and give lessons on abstract meditation for the advanced aspirants who are endowed with pure, subtle and sharp intellect.

Each marks a stage of progress. The human soul makes different kinds of attempts to grasp and realise the Infinite or the Absolute according to his strength, degree of evolution. He soars higher and higher, gathers more and more strength and eventually merges himself in the Supreme and attains oneness or identity.

Glory to the Hindu Rishis (and the Hindu scriptures) who take the aspirants from the lower to the higher form of worship, stage by stage, step by step and ultimately help them to rest in the attributeless, all-pervading, formless, timeless, spaceless Brahman or the infinite and the unconditional Brahman of the Upanishads.

Beloved children of the Lord! Shed your ignorant disbelief this moment. Enshrine supreme, unshakable, living faith in your heart this very moment. Recall to your mind the glorious examples of Sri Mira, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the South Indian Alwars and Nayanars. They believed; they reaped the rich spiritual harvests. You, too, can enjoy great peace, happiness and prosperity here and attain Him here and now if you have this faith in idol-worshipping.

Though you may perform external worship at regular intervals, let the internal worship of the Lord in your heart be constant, unbroken. Here worship attains completeness. Life is a divine worship. May you realise the significance of the universal worship of the Virat in daily life and performing it, attain the *summum bonum* of life. May the Lord bless you all!

THE TEMPLE

In the Kali Yuga and in the material world of busy day-to-day life, the temple of the Lord affords great opportunities for the evolution of man through concentration and devotion. The precincts of the temple are so sacred and give a peace which no other atmosphere can give. There is a divine vibration in the entire area. By the constant and regular Puja during the three sessions of the day, the recitation of the Holy Vedas and chanting of specific Mantras throughout the year, the auspiciousness of the temple increases everyday and the entire atmosphere elevates the soul of man to a very great degree.

The shrine in which the Murti of the Supreme Lord is installed is a hallowed place which exerts a powerful spiritual influence that can transform the minds of persons into a state of higher purity. The daily worships through prayers, invocations and Abhisheka and Archana, performed at the temple, endow the whole environment with a holiness and splendour that infuses into all a feeling of reverence, piety and devotion, whenever they enter its premises. But the sanctity of the temple should be carefully maintained by observing the prescribed rules usually connected with the maintenance of places of divine worship. External and internal Saucha are both necessary in the worship of the Devata in a temple.

The temple dedicated to the Archavatara of the Lord is a visible representation of the body of the Virat-Purusha and the rituals of worship in the temple are objective acts expressing the whole process of spiritual Sadhana. The temple is the microcosmic embodiment of the universe indwelt by the Antaryamin, Isvara, whose worship we conduct at the sacred temple. The Lord is invoked by means of the powerful Mantras of the Srutis, Smritis and Tantras and the Murti in the temple becomes a living manifestation of the force of the Divine, ready to fulfil the noble aspirations of the devout Archaka.

Archana is the easiest and the safest means of cultivating the love of the Almighty, for it becomes the link between His transcendent being and the world in which the devotee is placed. The one special feature of Archana-Bhakti is that it seeks to evoke the finer forms of the religious consciousness in man through offering to God articles of devotion by means of the physical forms which are the *immediate* aspects of the manifestations of God-Being, revealed to the senses here. Hence Archana is the foundation on which is constructed the grand edifice of spiritual effort and realisation. It is one among the nine gems of the way in which man aspires to reach God.

Worship the Lord with intense faith and aspiration. The Lord will surely bestow His grace upon you all. All are blessed—one who causes the temple to be built, who actually builds it, who assists in it, who is happy about it, who performs worship in it, who prostrates oneself before it with faith and adorns the Lord always in one's heart, with sincerity and love. The Lord is everywhere and

He allows Himself to be adored at particular places on account of the supreme compassion that He has for all beings.

GLORY OF PRASAD

Prasad is that which gives Peace. During Kirtan, worship, Puja, Havan and Arati, Badam, Kismis, milk, sweets, fruits are offered to the Lord. After offering them to the Lord, they are shared between the members of the house or the Bhaktas in a temple. Puja is done by Bael leaves, flowers, Tulasi, Vibhuti and these are given as Prasad from the Lord. *Vibhuti* is the Prasad of Lord Siva. It is to be applied on the forehead. A small portion can be taken in. *Kumkum* is the Prasad of Sri Devi or Sakti. It is to be applied at the space between the eyebrows (Ajna or Bhrumadhya). Tulasi is the Prasad of Lord Vishnu, Rama or Krishna. It is to be taken in. They are charged with mysterious powers by the chanting of the Mantras during Puja and Havan.

The mental Bhava of the devotee offering Bhog to the Lord has a very great effect. If an ardent devotee of the Lord offers anything to the Lord, that Prasad, if taken, would bring very great change even in the minds of atheists. The Grace of the Lord descends through Prasad. Go through the life of Narada. You will realise the greatness of the sacred leavings of the Lord as well as those of advanced Sadhakas and saints.

Namdev offered rice, etc., to Panduranga Vittala and He ate the food and shared with Namdev as well. If the food is offered with a yearning heart, sometimes, the Lord takes that food assuming a physical form. In other cases, the Lord enjoys the subtle essence of the food offered and the food remains as it is in the shape of Prasad. While feeding Mahatmas and the poor people, that which is left behind is taken as Prasad. When a sacrifice is performed, the participants share the Prasad which bestows the blessings of the gods. When Dasaratha performed Putrakameshti (wishing for son) sacrifice, he got a vessel full of sweetened rice which he gave to his queens, by taking which they became pregnant. Prasad is the most sacred object for a devotee. One should consider himself lucky to take the Prasad and there is no restriction of any kind in taking Prasad. Time and place and the condition in which one is placed—all these do not affect him in any way. Prasad is all-purifying.

The benefits of Prasad and Charanamrit are beyond description. They have the power to change entirely the outlook of a man's life. Prasad and Charanamrit have the power to cure diseases and even bring back to life dead persons. There have been ever so many instances in the past in this holy land of ours which bear witness to the potency and efficacy of Prasad. Prasad destroys all pains and sins. It is an antidote for misery, pain and anxiety. Faith is the important factor in testing the accuracy of this statement. For faithless persons it brings very little effect.

Those who are brought up in modern education and culture have forgotten all about the glory of Prasad. Many English-educated persons do not attach any importance to Prasad when they get it from the Mahatma. This is a serious mistake. Prasad is a great purifier. As they are brought up in the Western style of living, they have imbibed the spirit of Westerners and forgotten the spirit of the true children of Indian Rishis of yore. Live for a week in Brindavan or Ayodhya or Benares or

Pandharpur. You will realise the glory and the miraculous effects of Prasad. Many incurable diseases are cured. Many sincere devotional aspirants get wonderful spiritual experiences from mere Prasad alone. Prasad is a panacea. Prasad is a spiritual elixir. Prasad is the Grace of the Lord. Prasad is a cure-all and an ideal 'pick-me-up.' Prasad is an embodiment of Sakti. Prasad is Divinity in manifestation. Prasad energises, vivifies, invigorates and infuses devotion. It should be taken with great faith.

Prasad bestows good health, long life, peace and prosperity on all. Glory to Prasad, the bestower of Peace and Bliss! Glory to the Lord of the Prasad, the giver of immortality and undying happiness!

PHILOSOPHY OF HINDU SYMBOLS

Bells are rung in temples and while doing Puja to shut out the external sounds and to make the mind inward and concentrated.

Lights are waved before the Deity. This denotes that the Lord is Jyoti Svarupa. He is all-light. The devotee says, "O Lord! Thou art the self-effulgent Light of the universe. Thou art 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.

Dhoop or scented sticks are burnt before the Deity. The smoke spreads in the whole room. It acts as a disinfectant. Burning of Dhoop denotes that the Lord is all-pervading, that He fills the whole universe by His living presence. It is to remind this fact that Dhoop is burnt. The devotee prays, "O Lord! Let the Vasanas and Samskaras dormant in me vanish like the smoke of this Dhoop and become ashes. Let me become stainless."

Burning of camphor denotes that the individual ego melts like the camphor and the Jivatman becomes one with the supreme Light of lights.

The pasting of sandal reminds the devotee that he should, in his difficulties, be as patient as the sandal. Sandal emanates sweet odour when it is pasted. So also the devotee should not murmur when difficulties arise, but on the other hand, remain cheerful and happy and emanates sweetness and gentleness like the sandal. He should not hate even his enemy. This is another precept we learn from this. Though the sandalwood is crushed and pasted, it silently wears out emanating only very sweet odour. One should not wish evil even to his enemy.

THE SIVA LINGA

The popular belief is that the Siva Lingam 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 Linga became symbolical of the generative power of Lord Siva. Linga is the differentiating mark. It is certainly not the sex mark. You will find in the Linga Purana:

*Pradhanam Prakriti Yadahurlingamuttamam
Gandhavarnarasaiheenam Sabda-sparsadi-varjitam*

The foremost Lingam which is primary and is devoid of smell, colour, taste, hearing, touch, etc., is spoken of as Prakriti (Nature).

Linga means “Mark” in Sanskrit. It is a symbol which points to an inference. When you see a big flood in a river, you infer that there have been heavy rains the previous day. When you see smoke, you infer that there is fire. This vast world of countless forms is a Linga of the Omnipotent Lord. The Siva Linga is a symbol of Lord Siva. When you look at the Linga, your mind is at once elevated and you begin to think of the Lord.

Lord Siva is really formless. He has no form of His own and yet all forms are His forms. All forms are pervaded by Lord Siva. Every form is the form or Linga of Lord Siva.

There is a mysterious power or indescribable Sakti in the Linga to induce concentration of the mind. Just as the mind is focussed easily in crystal gazing, so also it attains one-pointedness when it looks at the Lingam. That is the reason why the ancient Rishis of India and the seers have prescribed the Lingam for being installed in the temples of Lord Siva.

Siva Linga speaks to you in the unmistakable language of silence: “I am one without a second, I am formless.” Pure, pious souls only can understand this language. A curious, passionate, impure foreigner of little understanding or intelligence says sarcastically, “Oh! The Hindus worship the phallus or sex organ. They are ignorant people. They have no philosophy.” When a foreigner tries to learn Tamil or Hindustani language, he first tries to pick up some vulgar words. This is his curiosity nature. Even so, the curious foreigner tries to find out some defects in the worship of symbol. Linga is only the outward symbol of the formless being Lord Siva 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 your heart, who is your Indweller, innermost Self or Atman, and who is identical with the Supreme Brahman.

Sphatikalinga is also a symbol of Lord Siva. This is prescribed for Aradhana or worship of Lord Siva. It is made up of quartz. It 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 Supreme Self or formless and attributeless Siva.

For a sincere devotee, the Linga is not a block of stone. It is all radiant Tejas or Chaitanya. The Linga talks to him, makes him shed profuse tears, produces horripilation and melting of heart,

raises him above body-consciousness and helps to commune with the Lord and attain Nirvikalpa Samadhi. Lord Rama worshipped the Siva Linga at Rameshwar. Ravana, the learned scholar, worshipped the golden Linga. What a lot of mystic Sakti there should be in the Linga!

May you all attain the formless Siva through the worship of the Linga, the symbol of Lord Siva which helps concentration of mind and which serves as a prop for the mind to lean upon in the beginning for the neophytes!

FAITH AND IDOL WORSHIP

Puran Chand's Guru had initiated him into the Narayana Mantra and given him a small Murti (idol) of Lord 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 Lord Siva. I shall initiate you into the Siva Mantra. Worship Lord Siva with faith and devotion. He is considered as Bhole Nath and is easily propitiable; He will bless you soon."

The next six months saw Puran Chand immersed in Japa and worship of Lord Siva. The idol of Lord Narayana was placed on a dusty shelf in the puja room. After many months, Puran Chand once more went to his Guru and complained that his worship of Siva 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; Siva 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 Siva 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 Siva 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 the Lord, smiling in all His mercy and compassion. Speechless with wonder and amazement, Puran prostrated himself before the Lord 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?"

IDOL WORSHIP

The Lord 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 recognised 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.