

Chapter XXIII. Modes of Worship

Vedas: source of all-knowing wisdom

The *Veda* is the most ancient as well as the most lasting knowledge discovered by humanity. That is to say, people did not invent it; they only recollected it in the serene silence of the soul. So, the *Veda* can lead people into the vision of the truth, unreachable by the senses and unrelated to the material world. It is inaccessible to human reason because it is transcendent. So, it is described as the Great Protector (*Paramam-vyoma*) and as indestructible Truth (*Thath*). These words denote all four *Vedas*, beginning with the *Rig-veda*.

The term *Veda* was originally applied to the Supreme Lord (*Parameswara*), the All-Knowing (He who knows is *Veda* (*Veththi ithi Vedah*)). Then, it was applied to the principle of understanding (That which makes known is *Veda* (*Vedayathi ithi Vedah*)). The *Rig-veda* and the other *Vedas* have the all-knowing characteristic, so this meaning is also appropriate. Later, the word was applied to activities in consonance with the *Vedas*—activities promoting the goals laid down, namely, righteous, economic, volitional, and spiritual.

Secret of Vedic rituals and sacrifices

The Supreme Lord is all-seeing; He is the person on whom all the hymns of the *Vedas* converge. The *Vedas* enable people to get the vision of that Lord, and those who have earned that vision are the sages (*rishis*). They were guided by the *Vedas*; many psalms, hymns, and declarations emerged from them. As a result, the Supreme Lord Himself is referred to in the *Brahma-sutra* as the Great Sage (*Maha-rishi*). Among the 108 names of Siva, the supreme Lord, we find the Chief Sage and the Foremost Sage (*Maha-rishi* and *Mukhya-rishi*).

Even the *Veda* is personified and referred to as sage (*rishi*), for the same reason. *Brahman* (the vast Expanse) is another word that denotes the supreme Lord as well as the *Veda*. Hence, all acts undertaken with no other desire than the attainment of *Brahman* are also known as Brahma activities (*yajna*). A *rishi yajna* is a sacrificial act designed to gain the vision of truth—but with no desire to earn the fruit ensuing therefrom.

While performing such sacrificial acts, the expression *swaaha* is used. Sacrificial acts are pure, auspicious, sacred acts. The exclamation *swaaha*, used while offering oblations or reciting the *Veda*, is full of significance. It is used in this manner: *Kesavaaya swaaha, pranaaya swaaha, Indraaya swaaha*. The meaning generally given is:

Let this be duly consumed. May these materials we are now placing in this holy fire be fully accepted and consumed, so that through this fire they can reach the deity for which they are intended — Kesava, Prana, Indra.

Doubts may arise: why pray to fire for something that is inevitable, since it is the very nature of fire to burn all that is put into it? But the scriptural meaning is different. In the poem “The Birth of the (war god) Kumara” (*Kumara Sambhavam*), Kalidasa describes the Himalayas as divine-souled, that is to say, the embodiment of the divine.

The scriptures distinguish the divine body and the material body, which each entity and being possess. The divine body of everyone cannot be cognized by the senses. When an oblation (*aahuthi*) is given to it, it becomes

sanctified. The oblation is trans-substantiated into a sacred offering (*havis*).

The oblation is described in the *Veda* thusly. The offering (*attha*) and offeree (*adya*) become one through the acceptance. Who in this case is the offeree, the acceptor? It is Agni, the divine power inherent in fire, in the sun, in the warmth of the vital air, which sustains life. When, with the recitation of the appropriate ceremonial formulae, material oblations are placed in fire (*agni*) with the phrase *swaaha*, it is not a mere exclamation; it is expiation; it is realization of the prayer that the ritual represents.

Fire rituals conducive to world welfare

The *Veda* is also known as *Chandas*. This name means pleasant, joyous. It is also associated with kindred meanings like strong, vital, and shielded. Since all the attributes and characteristics can be predicated of the *Vedas*, *Chandas* is very appropriate.

The sacred ceremonies and rituals that the *Vedas* expound confer joy not only on the participants but on the entire world and even on worlds beyond. The supreme Lord, the source of bliss, is known in the scriptural text as having the *Vedic* ritual as His limbs and using the *Vedic* ritual as His vehicle.

When Godhead assumes form, the first manifestation is *Hiranyagarbha* (the golden womb). This is also embodied bliss, having as vehicle the bird with wings of beauty, or Garuda. The Supreme Lord is also known as He whose chariot is the bull (*Vrisharatha*), the symbol of *dharma*. This is why in temples we find the bird Garuda carved or kept as an idol before the shrine of Vishnu and the figure of the bull or its idol placed before shrines of Siva.

Cha or *chadana* has as its root meaning another important aspect of the *Vedas*: shielding, fostering, or promoting —promoting the welfare, the ultimate liberation of humans engaged in the unceasing round of worldly affairs. Humans are ever caught up in activities pursued with the profit available as the purpose. They have to be moulded as righteous men and women at the same time; the Tree of Life has to be guarded to offer them fruits and shade. The *Veda* has to shield activist “doers” (*karma* lovers) from the evil temptation to court unrighteousness. It has to shield inquiry-fond thinkers (*jnana* seekers) from the evil temptation to pursue the pleasure-bound senses. Since the *Veda* both guides and shields, these verses are called, in totality, *Chandas*. Through their role as armour or shield, they shower bliss on all who rely on them. “By shielding they become *Chandas* (*Chaadanaath chandaasi*).”

There is a myth about *Vedic* rituals (*yajnas*). Once, Yajna fled from the gods, taking the form of a black antelope. The gods went in pursuit, but they succeeded only in retrieving its skin. That skin became the sacrifice (*yajna*), the symbol of the rite. The white, dark, and tawny colours of that skin represent the *Rig-*, *Yajur-*, and *Sama-* *Vedas*, and it was adored as sacred for this very reason. It was honoured as symbolizing Triple Knowledge, that is to say, mastery of the three *Vedas*. The skin is used by the officiating priests and other participants in all *Vedic* ceremonials in order to invoke the protecting hymns, called *Chandas*. The three colours are also believed to represent the three worlds; therefore, the one who is seated on or wears the skin benefits the three worlds by their *Vedic* recitations and oblations.

The master of the ceremonials at the *Vedic* rite (*yajna*) is described in the *Vedic* scripture as the “Fetus in the Womb”. Since the fetus is safe and secure, with its fingers clasped and body prostrate, enveloped in the mother, the priest initiate must be enveloped in the antelope skin that symbolizes Mother *Veda*. To human eyes, it is just

a skin, but during *Vedic* rites it becomes a shield. This is why, before wearing it, the initiate prays, addressing it, “You are the shield (*charma*), shield me as *charma*.” Since it shields people from grief, injury, and wrong, *Charma* has come to mean happiness and bliss. Vishnu, the second of the Trinity, is the embodiment of bliss, and *Vedic* sacrifices confer bliss. Vishnu is praised as sacrifice (*yajna*) itself (Yajno vai Vishnuh). The Lord Vishnu is the embodiment of the Triple *Veda*.

Fourfold Vedic paths to divinity

Upasana means the acquisition of the presence of the divine, the achievement of the bliss of adoration. *Vedic* tradition sanctions four paths as legitimate and fruitful to win this achievement. They are called truth-based, manifestation-based, symbolized-divinity, and step-by-step methods (*sathya-vathi*, *anga-vathi*, *anya-vathi*, and *nidaana-vathi*). We shall consider these in some detail.

Truth-based (*sathya-vathi*). The scripture defines the Divine thus: The *Atma* is immanent everywhere, just as ghee interpenetrates every drop of milk (*Sarva vyaapinam Atmaanam, ksheere sarpiriva arpitham*). When the seeker pursues the truth with this conviction urging their endeavour, the spiritual practice is called truth-based. The Lord declares, “In My latent form, I am in the entire creation, operating the mystery. See in Me all this, see all this as Me (*Maaya thitham idam sarvam, jagadavyaktha murthinaa*)”. When one succeeds in this effort, the truth-based path will lead to success. The Lord assures, “I shall be visible to you as all this and in all this.” The Lord promises this vision of immanence and transcendence to whomever persists with sincerity on this truth-based path.

Manifestation-based (*anga-vathi*). The universal being is the fire, the wind, the sun, the moon, and all else. He is the breath that sustains life in all beings. He is the fire that illumines all. He is the rain that feeds the plants that provide sustenance. So He can be adored either as fire (*agni*), wind (*vayu*), or rain (*varuna*), as having graciously assumed all these beneficent forms. This approach through benign manifestations (*angas*) is the manifestation-based path (*anga-vathi*). *Anga* means “limb”, “fact”, “feature”.

Symbolized divinity (*anya-vathi*). Picturing the many-faceted divine and symbolizing, in perceivable ways, the attributes that are evidenced in each facet, the seeker endeavours to acquire the presence of the Divine.

One form of the Divine, the Omnipresent (Vishnu), is pictured as having the conch, wheel, and mace (symbols of the primeval word or sound, of time, and of might and majesty). The facet to which is ascribed the power and willingness to overcome obstacles (*Vigneswara*) has the symbol of the single tusk, which symbolizes sharpness and concentration. It is associated with Siva (Iswara), the facet of disintegration and dissolution, who bears the trident (*trisula*), which symbolizes in its three prongs the past, the present, and the future.

Rama, the form of *dharm*a, is always pictured with the bow, which can send the arrow (will) straight to the target. Krishna, the manifestation of universal love, has on His crown a peacock feather, which symbolizes the thousand-eyed glance of grace. He bears a flute on which He plays entralling tunes; the flute is the symbol of the egoless desireless seeker. The facet of wisdom pictured as the Goddess Saraswathi has a veena (a stringed musical instrument) in Her hand, symbolic of heart strings responding with harmony and melody to the gentle touch of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Seekers meditate on these pleasing personifications and the significance of the symbols of their attributes. They adore the divine in the delight that wells up in their hearts. This is named the path through symbolized divin-

ity (*anya-vathi*) —*anya* meaning the other, the adjunctory, the appurtenance.

Step by step (*nidaana-vathi*). This path is slow, but progress is always achieved when each step is successfully negotiated. Below are the eleven stages through which the seeker has to pass to win the final consummation in bliss. Therefore, the name for this path is “slow and sure (*nidaana*)”.

1. Listening to the glory of God (*sravanam*)
2. Singing His unique graciousness joyously (*kirtanam*)
3. Always keeping in memory and recapitulating the majesty and mercy of the Lord (*Vishnuh smaranam*)
4. Aspiring to fall at the feet of the Lord (*pada-sevanam*)
5. Offering prayers to the image or idol of the Lord (*archanam*)
6. Offering gratitude for blessings received (*vandanam*)
7. Surrendering to the will of the Lord (*dasyam*)
8. Confiding completely in Him (*sakhyam*)
9. Dedicating thought, word, and deed to Him (*Atma niVedanam*)
10. Longing to merge in Him (*thanmaya-aasakthi*)
11. Agony at the slightest separation from Him (*Parama-viraha-aasakthi*)

Each of these four paths (truth-based, manifestation-based, symbolized-divinity, and step-by-step) is more commendable than the previous ones, as far as simplicity and practicability are concerned. In the end, they award oneness with the Universal Will.

Of the various other forms of worship or spiritual practices (*upasanas* or *sadhanas*) mentioned in the sacred texts and practised by seekers, idol adoration or image adoration is included under manifestation-based.

Divine omnipresence

“Everywhere His hands and feet, everywhere His head and face (*Sarvathah paani paadam thath, sarvathokshi siro mukham*).” The Lord has His Hands everywhere, for He is in all. He sees through all eyes. He thinks, plans, and resolves in all heads. He eats through all mouths and hears through every ear. Through one form, you can adore Him as all forms. This is the highest ideal: He is latent in all beings; He operates unseen in and through all. This is worshiping Him as present in each, the image worship. Various other modes of worship are also mentioned in the texts:

Sun worship (*Bhanopasana*). Ascribing to the Lord the highest splendour, the deepest compassion, the most potent power, etc. and worshiping Him as such.

Adoring Him as the Master and Preceptor who teaches the *Gita* and reveals the Way (*Gitopasana*). The epic *Mahabharatha* is revered as a Veda, the fifth one. It sets out the code of morality to which people must adhere in order to realize their goal, both here and hereafter. It is an inexhaustible treasure chest of guidelines for righteous living and spiritual uplift. Here, the Lord can be seen on the theatrical stage of the field of *dharma* (*Dharma-kshetra*), with all the equipment and roles, plots, counter-plots, denouements, and devices for the cosmic play He is enacting in His own marvelous way. This play is the epic, the *Mahabharatha*. In this play, the actors, actresses,

dialogues, texts, cues, and songs have been assembled by Him. He is the cast, the director, the audience—all.

It is God (Madhava) who manifests Himself and manipulates in every thing and being. On the one side is boundless material strength urged on by unrighteous greed; on the other, the apparently limited strength of the *Atma*, the ever-righteous. In the cosmic confrontation and conflict between these two forces, the Lord stands forth as the arbiter, the supreme embodiment of the victory of right over might. This ultimate ambrosia is available in the *Mahabharatha*—the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Song of Divine Triumph.

The core lesson that the epic is bent on teaching is contained in the *Gita*: the seeker surrenders with the words, “Your word shall be obeyed (*karishye vachanam thava*)” and the Lord admonishes the seeker that “in fulfilling the duty assigned to you lies your safety and prosperity (*swadharme nidhanam sreya*).” All work should be tested on this criterion.

The path of dedication to the Will of God (devotion, *bhakti*). This path should not be discarded, for it can lead to all-round delight and bliss. Instead, if you close your eyes and instil in yourself the conceit that you are *Brahman*, you will miss the joy and become a victim of anxiety. When you pound husk, you can’t expect rice grains to result, can you? And, Krishna is no other than the very *Brahman*!

Three Vedanta paths

Nondualism (*adwaitopasana*). The body of the cow has milk in it. The milk has ghee in it. But the ghee can’t be a source of strength yet. The milk has to be drawn, yeast has to be added to curdle it, butter has to be churned out and clarified to produce the ghee, which, when consumed, gives strength. So too, though God is omnipresent and omni-motivating, He has to be discovered and cognized in order to realize bliss, awareness. Like oil in mustard, butter in yogurt, water inside the earth, and fire in timber, God is present but not patent in everything. God is in the human body and in the human mind. To become aware of Him there, spiritual effort is necessary. When that is undertaken, the unity of both can be realized. One will not thereafter experience “two” or “difference”. The awareness of the one without a second is “liberation”, release from bondage.

Qualified nondualism (*visishta-adwaita*). Ramanuja considered the problem whether the God whom one seeks to worship and realize as real must be conceived as being apart from oneself, or whether God can be conceived as in oneself. His answer is: Life is the soul of the body; God is the soul of Life. God is the grantor, the force, the sustainer. Seek Him in that spirit. The supreme sovereign Lord (*Purusha*), in whom all the elements reside and who is the indweller and inner motivator of all creation, can be known and experienced only by winning grace through surrender. Understand well His transcendence and immanence and, realizing your deficiencies, surrender the ego in order to partake of His Glory. The mental attitude of the seeker should be “Thou alone art all, O my God of Gods (*Thvam eva sarvam, mama deva deva*). You are the urge, you are the path, you are the goal.” The spiritual effort must be one-pointed, unwavering, untiring.

Dualism (*dwaitopasana*). The dualistic outlook on the relationship between God and the individual is that of husband and wife. Vishnu, the Lord, the ever free ever full, has to be adored as the wife adores the husband.

Krishna consciousness

Chaithanya’s spiritual ecstasy (Chaithanyopasana). Among such spiritual seekers, Chaithanya is most note-

worthy. He established a distinct spiritual practice. Without the anguished yearning for the feet of Lord Krishna, liberation cannot be gained. Why? Even purification of one's intelligence isn't possible without that yearning. This is Chaithanya's assertion. He declares that sages and others capable of being immersed in inner bliss can enjoy the ecstasy of the supreme consciousness through contemplation of the auspicious, restorative, and cleansing attributes of the Lord, Sri Hari.

No text or scripture is needed to realize this bliss. Sunk in the waves of that divine ecstasy, the person ignores all the norms of social behaviour and escapes from all conventions. The person sings aloud the names of Hari, sheds streams of joy, dances in divine delight, and experiences unadulterated genuine bliss. The person feels that the Lord's feet have made every inch of ground holy. Thus, people sing the glory of the Lord fully attuned to Him. This spiritual practice (*sadhana*) was emphasized by Chaithanya as the easiest and most fruitful. His foremost goal was to attain the absence of body consciousness in the flood of ecstasy that surges from melodious group singing of the majesty and mercy of the Lord.

The Gowdha form of worship (*Gowdeyopasana*). A few other forms of worship merit mention. The *Gowdha* form is one such. Sri Krishna (formulated and incorporated in the unmanifest immanence as the highest Supreme (*Purushothama*)) and Radha (formulated and incorporated as unmanifest universal energy) are both visualized and known as Krishna-Radha or, more commonly, as Radha-Krishna. Madhava is another name of Krishna, signifying that He is the master of cosmos or nature (*prakriti*). So, the name used in this worship is Radha-Madhava. The recitation of this name is held by the adherents of this path of worship to be capable of leading to ecstasy that can confer liberation from all forms of bondage.

The founders (*acharyas*) of this path declare such liberation to be the attainable goal. The Lord is the very embodiment of the nectar of delight. Living beings can get immersed in spiritual delight only when they imbibe that nectar. The *Vedas* (*sruthis*) proclaim that those born in bliss (*ananda*) can live only in and through bliss. The sacred name Radha-Madhava is the key, it is said, to the treasure house of that precious nectar.

Radha-Madhava is nature-spirit (*Prakriti-Purusha*). This dual category is assumed to represent the duality of the individual soul and the universal soul (*jivatma* and *Paramatma*), the wave and the ocean. Worship is offered to both through that name. Vallabhacharya proclaimed, "Krishna is the Lord Himself". Attaining Him was explained to be equal to merging in the Universal, which was the goal of genuine monists.

Siva consciousness

Siva worship (*Saivopasana*) is also a notable path. This emphasizes the worship of Siva as formulated in the infinite *Lingam* or divine symbol, "*Lingam Sarva Kaalam*". The infinite *lingam* is the symbol of the primal energy that forms the basic cause of the origin, condition, and progress of the "elements" that compose the cosmos. The *lingam* is the form of Siva Himself, and realizing it as such is asserted as the ultimate goal, liberation.

Iswara worship (*Virasaivopasana*) advocates the worship of Siva, the Lord (Iswara), as the one and only, everywhere and always. The merging of the individual in the splendour of the *lingam* or Iswara is the acme of all spiritual practice, the achievement of liberation.

Pasupathi worship (*Pasupathopasana*). Pasupathi is another name for Siva. The individual entity (*jiva*) is tied by the bond (*paasa*) of the qualities or modalities arising from nature. Pasupathi is worshiped in order to earn freedom from bondage.

Worship of Goddess of universal energy

Worship of the feminine aspect (*Saakthopasana*). “The Goddess is all Gods (*Sarvadeva mayee Devee*).” The Primeval Universal Energy (*Adi Parasakthi*) is conceived as the matrix of all forms of divinity. The cosmic urge (*prakriti*) is the cause of the variety and multiplicity of expression, the manifold forms. The Supreme Divinity (Maheswara) has this capacity to manifest and is therefore so named.

The Supreme Divinity and the Universal Energy are two aspects of the same force. This dual-faceted force motivates the universe, from the vast expanse of the sky to the entire earth. The unmanifest supreme Person manifests as the Feminine Universal, the *maya*, the *Parasakthi*. In each individual, it is experienced as knowledge, strength, and activity.

Worship in prophetic religions

Jain mode of worship (*Jainopasana*). The Marvari community, in worshiping the Lord, adopt a *vaishnavite* slant. Idols of Vishnu, with the traditional equipment of the conch, the wheel, the mace and the lotus, are found in Jain temples. The Jains have as their mantra:

Salutations to the great heros who have conquered desire, etc.

Salutations to those equipped with supernatural powers.

Salutations to the great masters of spiritual wisdom.

Salutations to the great teachers who transmit the wisdom.

Salutations to the good persons of all lands.

Namo arihanthaanaam

Namo siddhanaanam

Namo ayiriyanaanam

Namo uvajjhayanaanam

Namo Loye sabba saahuunaam

This five-fold adoration helps remove the evil effects of all sinful acts. Experiencing the meaning of this mantra gives one the sum of prosperity. The Jains declare that when one merges in this universal adoration, one is liberated and attains *moksha*.

Sikh mode of worship (*Sikh-upasana*). The preceptor (guru), who reveals the *Atma* and makes one conscious of its existence as one’s reality, has the highest place in this system of worship. The collection of the teachings of the gurus —referred to as *Granth Saheb*— is extolled and revered by the Sikhs. It is derived from the spring of Indian (*Bharathiya*) spiritual traditions. Its ideas form the very core of Indian cultural traits.

Christian worship (*Christ-upasana*). Lord Jesus is the Saviour. People are by nature prone to fall into sin, knowingly or unknowingly. Jesus shed his heart blood on the cross to free people from sin and to cleanse their souls. Follow this Lord and his teachings contained in the Bible and worship him —this is Christ worship. Sing his glory and adore him through hymns —this is the mode of worship that this method envisages.

Mohammedan worship (*Mohammadan-upasana*). “Acquire self-confidence and place all burdens on God; have implicit faith in the power of God every moment of living; recognize it at every step (*Imaamdaaree khaldaamey ho, Pygambar mey bharosa*)” —these are the rules for meaningful life. One has to evidence one’s rectitude in the

court of the Lord, when one lays down one's body. So, one has to follow the straight path laid down by the Lord until the very end. For this, the holy *Koran* is the guide; it has to be revered and observed down to the very letter. This is the spiritual instruction to be observed in this worship.

“*Allaho Akbar; La Illah Ill Allah.*” This sacred formula of Islam signifies that God is the supermost sovereign; Allah is the undisputed unexcelled ruler of creation. He alone is worthy of worship. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says, “there is nothing higher than Me.” The *Koran* formula says the same. The Mohammedan worship is a form of the same spiritual practice, based on the same truth.

India: spiritual treasurehouse

All these modes of worship reveal that, since people initiated their agelong inquiry into their own truth, they have accumulated, especially in India (Bharath), a vast spiritual treasure that can save them from sorrow and bondage. The treasure is so vast and so deep that it has survived the passage of centuries as vast and as deep as ever it was, unaffected by the emergence of different modes or the influx of other forms of worship.

Moreover, the spiritual wisdom of India is today a triumphant beacon, shining in one resplendent flame in the thickening darkness, illumining all lands, encompassing all races, and enchanting all mankind.

No fortune is more splendid than being born on this sacred land, Bharath, repository of this magnificent and beneficent culture, which can save the world. Becoming aware of this blessing is indeed a spring of immeasurable divine bliss (*ananda*).