

# MURTI

## ON THE WONDERS OF HINDU IDOL WORSHIP



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2007

## ON THE WONDERS OF HINDU 'IDOL WORSHIP'

The belief that an icon or idol is a cruder, more naive or 'primitive' object of religious reverence or worship – or even an unholy object – is itself as crude as the belief that painting, sculpture and music are cruder or more 'primitive' mediums of expression of spiritual truth than the written or spoken word. In reality they can be wondrous mediums. As for the attack on idol worship by the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – this is nothing if not hypocritical. For not only do they have their own idols – the Christian crucifix or the Muslim Kaaba for example. They also revere their own holy books as sacred *objects* in themselves – not only decorating them or filling them with iconic images but going so far as to effectively elevate them to the status of religious 'idols'. Thus in Jewish religious practice, the holy scroll of the Torah is consecrated, housed in a sacred chamber, veiled and unveiled, carried round in procession, its tassels kissed etc.

What distinguishes the Abrahamic faiths from Hinduism and other 'Dharmic' religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, is not their rejection of idol worship as such therefore, but rather their exclusive iconisation and idolisation of *the word* – not least in its concrete, material manifestation as the stone tablets of Moses. The idolisation of a Holy Book is a recognition of the truth that it is more than a material artefact of paper and ink. Similarly however, there is more to a temple, cathedral, synagogue or mosque than brick or stone, more to music than man-made material instruments and the sound vibrations they produce, just as there is more to a painting than its pigments, more to a great religious sculpture or 'idol' than wood, stone or bronze or some idle fancy of the sculptor. That is why, in the Hindu tradition, worship of sculpted idols (Pratima) is no mere religious prop for the illiterate, the

ignorant or the spiritual neophyte, even though there may be some who consider it so. For as Swami Sivananda writes:

"[Only] a pseudo-Vedantin ... feels that his Advaita [non-duality with the divine] will evaporate if he prostrates [before an idol]. Study the lives of the Tamil Saints ... They had the highest Advaitic realisation. They saw Lord Shiva everywhere, and yet they ... prostrated before the idol and sang hymns ... The idol in the temple was all Chaitanya or consciousness for them. It was not a mere block of stone."

And yet there *are* indeed sacrilegious forms of idolatry - two of which in particular dominate today's world. One is the 'bibliolatry' of literalist religious fundamentalisms - which take the words of their sacred texts literally, never going beyond their 'letter' to their many-layered meanings or polysemous 'spirit'. This is like mistaking the menu with the meal. The other form of sacrilegious idolatry is what Marx called "the fetishism of the commodity" and "the monotheism of money" - in other words the religion of consumerism, which makes idols of branded products and uses glossy media icons to promote their worship. An advertising mantra such as "Real chocolate. Real feeling" says it all - showing how manufacturers seek an almost religious feeling of devotion to their brands and iconic logos by a purely artificial association with the entire range of authentic human feelings and values, from love to spirituality - even worship itself.\* Just as Hinduism offers an alternative to the global disarray and conflicts brought about by the Abrahamic religions, so does genuine religious idol worship offer an alternative to - and a powerful weapon against - the religious fetishism, idolisation, and pseudo-spiritualisation of crass material commodities, whether chocolate, skin creams or cars. Even religious icons and idols are today reduced to the status of mere decorative items, whether sacred African carvings or statues of Buddha on the suburban mantelpiece of the bourgeoisie.

From a Hindu perspective, meditation of a 'Murti', whether in the form of an image, symbol or three-dimensional idol, no more negates an acknowledgement of God's formless or invisible omnipresence in all things than does carrying round and studying an artefact of paper and ink in the form of a Holy Book such as the Bible or Koran. On the contrary, precisely by virtue of its tangible, material form, the Murti makes it easier to experience the presence of the divine in all things, to understand that things are just as much symbols of the divine as words are, and to come to a direct experience of things (and not just the words with which we name them) as the manifest word of the divine, its material metaphors, its solidified speech. The Murti does not hinder but offers a far more direct route to a living experience of the essence of the divine, revealing it as something neither formless and immaterial nor reducible to a particular form, but rather as a dynamic relation between formlessness and form - in tantric terms, the relation between pure awareness (Shiva) and its innate power (Shakti) of formative activity and material manifestation.

The multiplicity of human forms taken by icons, idols or 'murti' of the Hindu gods does not imply any sort of 'anthropomorphic' idea of God of the sort that belongs exclusively to the Abrahamic religions - with their claim that Man was made "in the image of God". In contrast, the human form given to Murtis of the Hindu gods is designed to awaken the worshipper's experience of their own human bodily form as a fleshly embodiment and expression of 'spirit' - of that higher 'air' or 'aether' of awareness (Akasha) that ensouls all bodies as their vital breath (Prana) and from which matter itself is formed. This aether may be perceived only as the seemingly empty space 'in' which the Murti stands as a mere object. In reality space itself (Kha) pervades every object in it, just as it itself is pervaded by the aether of which all objects are formed. As the physicist Paul Dirac noted: "A place is nothing; nor

even space, unless at its heart – a figure stands.” The sacredness of the space in which the Murti stands is both distinct and inseparable from it. It is what allows the Murti to stand out or ‘ex-ist’ in its sacrality, just as it is the presence of the Murti that makes the space around it sacred, offering an experience of the divine aether of awareness (Akasha) surrounding and pervading it.

Yet just as a spiritual text or scripture may in itself be more or less superficial or deep in meaning, and the ‘letter’ of its word a more or less distorted human expression or translation of its wordless inner meaning or ‘spirit’ - so too can a Murti be more or less crudely or beautifully crafted as an expression of spiritual truth. It is no accident that the most wondrously powerful Murtis, particularly in the form of sculptures, are not just ‘objects’ of reverence, worship or even meditation but show the very gods they represent *in states of meditation*. A Murti of this sort is not just a particular divinity given a characteristic human form that enables one to recognise, name and worship it as this or that ‘god’. Instead its form is spiritually crafted to reveal the nature taken by the human form when it itself becomes an *embodiment* of particular states and qualities of meditative union with God – with the divine as such. Murti meditation is not ‘worship’ understood as mere ‘obeisance’ to a particular divinity through its image. Nor is it even meditation ‘of’ the divine in the form of a particular divinity. It is co-resonance with a divinity - one whose image is crafted in such a way that its whole bodily form and bearing itself embodies a profound resonance with the divine as such. Sivananda again:

“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.”

Just as a radio is more than a box of electronic parts but a vehicle of transmission, so is a Murti. And just as the images on a television screen are not inside the 'box' itself but relayed to it from without, so is the Murti itself an embodied transmission of spiritual truth carried on the waves of the divine-cosmic aether. Meditation of its bodily form (Rupa) is a way of entering into resonance with it, a resonance that can be tuned to different frequencies and 'channels', and that result in feeling experiences, visions and 'hearings'. It was such hearings ('Shruti'), borne of meditative inner silence, that first inspired the *words* of the Vedas, and all the world's holy scriptures.

To those capable of entering into deep inner silence and resonance with the Murti – on any number of different wavelengths of spiritual attunement - its visible form will transform before their eyes. It will cease to be a mere object of their worshipful gaze, but communicate wordless wisdom to them through its own gaze. Indeed it will also speak to them directly - in the form of 'hearings' transmitted to their inner ear. To come to know the divine through meditating the Murti of a chosen divinity is a truly profound and ever-new experience - an inexhaustible source of revelations, and not the mere repetition of a prescribed ritual. The Murti itself ceases to be a mere image or 'idol' of a divinity. Instead through it, the divinity itself becomes one's most intimate partner and most revered Guru in meditating, understanding and experiencing the divine – capable of answering one's deepest personal or religious questions through the knowing awareness it embodies and transmits, both in inner silence and through the word, inwardly heard. 'Puja' – ritual worship - is unthinkable without 'idol worship' – sitting in the presence of the Murti and using one's whole body and all its senses to resonate with the awareness it embodies and transmits. Through *co-resonance*, 'idol worship' becomes an experience of the particular truth of Tantric Puja – that 'to worship a god is to become that god'.

“Regular worship, Puja and other modes of demonstrating our inner feeling recognition of Divinity in the idol unveils the Divinity latent in it. This is truly a wonder and a miracle. 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 ... Puja makes the idol shine with Divine resplendence. God is then enshrined in the idol ... the idol will perform miracles. The place where it is installed is at once transformed into a temple.”

*Sivananda*

As Sivananda also reminds us, a Sanskrit word for meditative contemplation is ‘Upasana’ – which simply means ‘sitting near’. The meaning and value of Murti meditation in ritual worship or Puja derives from the basic act of ‘sitting near’ the Murti of a god or divinity – for doing so brings us into the nearness and presence of God and Divinity.

“Upasana is approaching the chosen ideal or object of worship by meditating on it in accordance with the teachings (Shastras) and the Guru ... 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 ... pure love for the Lord. It gradually transmutes man into a divine being.”

Yet for those to whom ‘meditation’ is merely a method of steadying the mind and calming the soul, and not also a matter of feeling the Divine from the very *heart* of one’s soul – a medium of *living relationship* uniting the Self with a divine Other - such spiritual words will mean nothing without Upasana - sitting in the nearness of a material Murti, and experiencing it in all its wonders. For the sitter or Upasaka, after the ritual process of lighting oil lamps and scenting the air with incense, the meditational process begins with ensouling their own body and breathing with ever-greater awareness, particularly those regions of their body that feel tired or tense, muddled or dissonant in tone. The sitter then ensouls the body of the Murti with their own awareness, using their own body to outwardly sense and resonate with it from without and within. In time the Murti will in turn ensoul the inwardness of the

sitter's body from within and from without - allowing them to feel their own fleshly form as no less a manifestation of the divine-cosmic aether around them than the material form of the Murti itself. Union with the divinity ensouling the Murti comes to a climax when the worshipper kneels to touch the foot of the Murti, and peer up at its face allowing an even more powerful direct transmission of awareness from it - one that will pervade if not overwhelm the body and mind of the worshipper, bringing with it not only a culmination and ultimate consecration of the union they have experienced through the sitting, but an experiential answer to the deepest questions they may have felt or consciously meditated in the course of it. Murti meditation is the most ancient, primordial and powerful form of 'channelling' or 'direct transmission of 'gnosis' (Jnana). For every truly 'sacred' Murti - one crafted out of a higher awareness - is in turn a powerful medium for transmitting and receiving that awareness. The unique bodily face and figure of every sacred Murti, like the unique bodily face and figure of every human being, is the *embodiment* of a unique centre and direction of meditative awareness, and a unique mood or quality of the divine awareness itself. Every such Murti can thus teach us something new - becoming a profound and enduring bodily medium of spiritual *transmission* and *transformation*. If this is called 'idol worship' however, then this term should not be misunderstood - in theory or practice. For the word 'worship' derives from the Indo-European root *wer* or *uer* - 'to turn'. The starting point of Murti meditation is finding the courage to *turn* and fully face the Murti outwardly - and then, closing our eyes, learning to visualise and feel to the nature and quality of its own meditative gaze within us. The *turning point* of 'idol worship' comes when - having turned to, faced, recognised and meditated the Murti as an embodiment of the divine - we begins to feel how *it in turn* begins to turn to, face, perceive and meditate *us* in the same way - thus ceasing to be a mere 'idol' but instead becoming spiritually *alive*.



**Notes:**

\* An advertisement (2007) showing dark-skinned neo-Mayan tribe worshipping the image of a leading branded ice-cream bar and ending with the slogan 'I am a worshipper'.

**References:**

Swami Sivananda *The Philosophy and Significance of Idol Worship*  
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