

# A TEMPLE OF GOD

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PEOPLE all over the world are familiar with the idea of sacred places of worship, a temple, a church, a mosque and the like. We build temples, decorate them with architectural beauty, install images, appoint proper persons to perform worship and engage people to keep the precincts clean. For as the proverb goes, cleanliness is next to godliness. Cleanliness in the exterior is an essential contributing factor to cleanliness of the interior, of the mind. A clean place spontaneously produces a soothing effect on man.

Now, what is the idea behind these temples? Millions of people, even today in spite of the materialistic trend of the society, attend churches, temples and mosques. Why? Because there is in man an unquenchable thirst to know the Unknown, to know the Wielder of destiny, to know the Highest Principle and to adore, and to worship It. God is that Unknown, by whatever name you may call Him. To the generality of mankind the abstract Principle is beyond comprehension. They require some concrete symbols through which they can worship Him. So images and symbols are a necessity in the religious field. To house the images temples are dedicated. If you go through the history of the founding of any temple, which has continued to cast its influence, you will find that there has been some saint, some seer who had sanctified that place with his austerities, practice of spiritual disciplines, or by his mere stay. Narada in his *Bhakti Sūtra* says, 'They (the great devotees) impart sanctity to places of pilgrimage'.<sup>1</sup> Sri Ramakrishna avers, 'God is present where people talk about Him. One feels there the presence of all holy places. Places of worship recall God alone to my mind'. Most of us are aware of the law of association. It is equally applicable to places of worship as it is respect of persons, and ideas. Sri Ramakrishna used to cite the example of a devotee who was overwhelmed with ecstasy at the sight of a babla tree. The idea flashed in his mind that the handle of the axe in the garden of the temple of Radhakanta was made from the wood of babla'. Of course these are instances where the mind has been tuned to a very high pitch. Even on a lower plane and with a little direct association the temple would bring to anyone's mind the idea of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Narada Bhakti Sutras, 69.

That is the purpose of the temples.

Further, the temple is not merely a place of congregation for all types of people. It is not meant to be utilized for social functions. It is a place of worship of God. The very idea of visiting a temple makes us feel that we should be pure. People take bath, put on washed and clean clothes and contemplating on Him they approach the deity. And if at that time he should find the surroundings are dirtied, and that neglect reigns everywhere then his mind would naturally rebel at the condition; the idea of holiness associated with the temple would recede to the background. Today if these simple rules are forgotten and a temple becomes a place of assemblage of people for transacting business or exchange of views on mundane matters, then that temple loses its sanctity. Remember how Jesus drove the moneylenders and businessmen who were pursuing their trade even inside the temple, saying 'It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves'.<sup>2</sup> Neither should man indulge in idle pastimes in places of worship. So, meticulously should one be careful in maintaining the sanctity, purity and cleanliness of a temple, of a place of worship.

## II

Now this idea of images and temples can be extended to one's own self, with much benefit, spiritually. We find that we are fettered with the limitations of the body, senses and the mind, that is, the idea that we are the body cannot be got rid of even with much effort. The ailments of the body, the miseries overwhelming the mind bring us down to think ourselves as body, or mind. There are only two ways of overcoming these concepts. By intense dispassion to all that is of the world. To treat even one's body as a meaningless burden, to be spurned. People devoted to the path of knowledge can only be successful in having such an attitude. The other method is to look upon the body as a temple of God. We have to take care not only of the outer structure but the inner sanctum sanctorum, i.e., not only the body but also the heart should be maintained pure, free from blemish. Otherwise how can we install the image of the Lord within?

Sri Ramakrishna in an exquisite parable illustrates this idea. Of course he gave it out in a different context but it will not be out of place here. 'There lived in a village a young man named Padmalochan. People used to call him "Podo", for short. In this village there was a temple in a very dilapidated condition. It contained no image of God. Aswattha and other plants sprang up on the ruins of its walls. Bats lived inside and the floor was covered with dust and the droppings of the bats. The people of the village had stopped visiting the temple. One day after dusk the villagers heard the sound of a conch-shell from the direction of the

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<sup>2</sup> Gospel according to St. Luke, 19.46.

temple. They thought perhaps someone had installed an image in the shrine and was performing the evening worship. One of them softly opened the door and saw Padmalochan standing in a corner, blowing the conch. No image had been set up. The temple hadn't been swept or washed. And filth and dirt lay everywhere. Then he shouted to Podo:

*You have set up no image here,  
Within the shrine, O fool!  
Blowing the conch, you simply make  
Confusion worse confounded.  
Day and night eleven bats  
Scream there incessantly . . .*

‘There is no use in merely making a noise if you want to establish the Deity in the shrine of your heart, if you want to realize God. First of all purify the mind. In the pure heart God takes His seat. One cannot bring the holy image into the temple if the droppings of bats are all around. The eleven bats are our eleven organs: five of action, five of perception, and the mind.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that divinity dwells within all. But as long as the heart is not made pure, how can you feel the divine presence within. Sri Ramakrishna says: It is one thing to know that there is fire in the wood and quite another to generate it by friction between two pieces of wood. It is one thing to know that milk is good for health but quite a different matter to drink and be benefited by it. Likewise it is one thing to know that we are all divine but quite another thing to realize it, experience it. We know ourselves mostly as fair or dark, of a certain height, weight and so on. What does this all denote but the body? The body is only a vehicle for the Self to work through. It is only a structure. As the temple is no temple as long as there is no image of God installed within it, so too, so long as God is not realized within, the body is only a collection of bones, flesh and so on.

### III

Love of God is the priest of the temple in the human heart. Discrimination and dispassion can be stated to be the caretakers and cleansers of this temple. Love of God, devotion or *bhakti* is essential if God has to make any response to man's endeavours. It is said that God looks into the heart of man and not what he says nor even what he does. He is satisfied with the smallest service done to Him with the greatest sincerity.

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<sup>3</sup> The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 53, 3rd Edn., 1957. Pub. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4.

Sincerity is the clay out of which the bricks of the *sanctum sanctorum* of this temple are made of. When man prays sincerely to God to grant him His vision, He sends him all that is necessary for his progress. The Guru who will guide him will come and all other requirements will gather unto him by themselves. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you',<sup>4</sup> said Jesus. The obstacles in one's path to spiritual progress are cleared without any effort on one's part if one but seeks God earnestly. God chooses him who prays to Him earnestly and sincerely, not for things mundane but for His vision alone. It is dependence on God alone that can save us from many a fall. As Sri Ramakrishna points out, 'A boy who holds the father's hand, while walking on the ridge of a field, may slip and fall down but not when the father firmly takes hold of the boy'. And in this dependence prayer is a necessary instrument, for it cleanses the mind as well. As in the parable of Sri Ramakrishna cited already, there can be no installation of the image of God unless the heart is cleared of the dross, of the attachments to worldly things. God does not come into a place already occupied with worldly desires. 'When there is some one already in charge of the stores, the owner of the house will have nothing to do with matters concerning the store.'

Sri Ramakrishna was once asked by a devotee as to how love for God can be developed. His reply was, 'One gradually acquires love of God through the practice of chanting God's name and glories. One should not be ashamed of chanting God's holy name. As the saying goes, "One does not succeed so long as one has these three: shame, hatred and fear".' But this is what exactly prevents our progress. We are ashamed to be labelled as religious in the present age, for religion is looked down upon as the occupation of some crazy fellows, as the opiate of the poor. How then can they who seek status and position in the social ladder openly identify themselves with religion? This is the difficulty or embarrassing position of many. However, the law of nature cannot change whether you like it or not. The law of spiritual development too cannot be modified because it irks some. If we want a jewel, we have to pay the price or give up all hope of acquiring it.

What does Sri Ramakrishna mean by telling, 'one should not be ashamed in chanting God's holy name'? Does he mean that we should make a display of our religiosity? He does not. At another time he instructed the devotees: 'you will do your spiritual practices in your own mind, in a secluded place of your house or in the forest'. But it is quite a different matter if it is a congregational singing. One should not feel himself too big to chant God's name along with others.

Purification of the heart comes through reciting prayers, chanting God's name. Then alone love of God wells up. Unless one has deep affection for God it is not possible to remember Him always and until this

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<sup>4</sup> St. Mathew, 6. 33

remembrance of God becomes constant and uninterrupted, we may conclude that love of God has not taken firm root. Narada in his *Bhakti Sutras* enumerates the characteristics of Bhakti as 'the consecration of all activities by complete self-surrender to Him, and extreme anguish if He were forgotten'.<sup>5</sup> It is such supreme love of God that makes a man holy, makes his body a temple of God, in the real sense of the term. This love of God is not acquired all of a sudden. We have to work hard for it. It is the greatest treasure that man can possess. Can it then be so easily attained?

Dispassion for the things of the world, and discrimination between the real and the unreal, are to be cultivated to make our devotion strong and infallible. For it is impossible to hold on to God, think of Him or meditate on Him for any length of time, if we are not sure that He alone is real and all other things are unreal. The follower of the path of devotion also has to discriminate between the real and the unreal. Otherwise how can he withstand the temptations that always surround him?

The question that raises its head at this juncture is: What shall we do with our turbulent senses? How can we control them? What is the way to overcome them? The devotee of God directs the senses towards Him. In a beautiful verse a lover of God entreats his limbs and senses in this wise: 'O tongue, sing the glories of Keśava; O mind, meditate on Murāri; O hands, worship Śrīdhara; O ears, hear you the stories about Acyuta; O eyes, see Krishna; O feet, go to Hari's abode; nose, smell thou the tulsi (basil leaf) offered at Mukunda's feet; O head, bow yourself to Adhoksaja'.<sup>6</sup> The several names we find here are of Vishnu, the great Lord, and each of them projects a picture, of some incident that occurred in one or other of His Incarnations before our mind's eye or describes His glory. Ruminating over them we become absorbed in the thought of the Lord and thus attain concentration of the mind. The more we are able to dwell on God's form and His sport the more will we be able to lift ourselves above the mundane plane. For the baser desires will then be held in abeyance for the time being and if one pursues one's devotion without any intermittance and without any remission, these desires will slowly weaken and ultimately be wiped out.

Perhaps a doubt still lingers: It may be all right in the case of a mind which has somehow stumbled into the path but what of those persons who have not got any taste for the spiritual life, who though immersed in worldly pursuits, duties and enjoyments, have a faint liking to transcend it? To them Sri Ramakrishna prescribes holy company to get over the disease of worldliness. 'Prayer and the company of holy men beget yearning for God. But it is not enough to be in the company of religious people only for a day. You should constantly seek it, for the disease has become chronic,' says Sri Ramakrishna. The *Bhāgavata* too extols holy company in these words: 'In this world the company of holy

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<sup>5</sup> N.B.S. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Mukundamala Stotra, 16.

men even for half a minute is a covetable treasure for man'.<sup>7</sup> 'For people struggling in the terrible waters of this transmigratory existence the tranquil saint, the knower of Brahman, is the supreme resting place, even as an invulnerable boat is for a drowning man.'<sup>8</sup> Narada opines, 'But it is extremely difficult to come into contact with a great soul and to be benefited by his company; the influence of such a one is subtle, incomprehensible and unerringly infallible in its effect'.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult for a small spark to kindle a heap of wet wood but a roaring fire can consume even the plantain trees. Likewise by contact with the knowers of Brahman even the worst sinner can turn a new leaf in his life, though the ordinary man with a little devotion may lose even what little he possesses, if he associates with a wicked person.

## V

We have not only to seek holy company but simultaneously avoid evil association. For otherwise what benefit we reap from the former will be neutralized by the latter. Nay, we may be, dragged down to levels lower than where we originally were. As in the instance of company so too about food should one be careful. There is a reference to food as a means to the purification of the mind in the Upanisad. 'If the food is pure one's mind becomes pure. When the mind is pure the memory remains steady. The memory remaining steady there comes release from all bondages.'<sup>10</sup> Śrī Śankara commenting on the above passage remarks, 'Whatever is gathered in through perception and imagination is *āhāra* (food) for the mind. The purity of knowledge regarding these sense contacts means their being not influenced by one's defects such as attachment, aversion and infatuation.'<sup>11</sup> What Śrī Śankara wants to convey is that purity of mind can be achieved only through giving up of attachment and aversion to worldly objects. And when that purity of thought is achieved the memory of the Lord becomes constant, and that leads to liberation.

Other interpreters of this passage of the Upanisad have taken the word *āhāra* in its literal sense i.e., the food that is eaten. They find three types of defects in food, viz., (1) those impure by nature, (2) impure by adulteration and (3) impure due to association. Some attention paid to these things will be really helpful for the aspirants. But we need not be too fastidious about these things, forgetting the main purpose of life, viz., God-realization. There is a song of Mirabai, the great poetess-saint of Rajasthan, which, though couched in sarcasm, points out the real discipline that leads us to God. She sings: 'O Man, it is necessary to practise spiritual disciplines, it is necessary too that you should sing the

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<sup>7</sup> Bhagavata, XI.2.30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., XI.26.39.

<sup>9</sup> N.B.S. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Chandogya Up. VII. Xxvi. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Commentary of Sankara on the above passage of the Upanishad.

glories of God. It is incumbent that you should develop devotion to God as also love Him. What will mere outer purification by bathing daily do? If that were only sufficient then all the creatures living in water would have seen Hari first. If living on fruits and roots could give a glimpse of Hari, bats and monkeys would have it before all. If living on milk alone Hari could be attained then the young ones of all mammals would have been blessed indeed. Mira is of the firm opinion that the Darling of Nanda cannot be had without pure love'. This shows that, though we may not discard or disregard the ordinary rules about the purity regarding food and the like, too much stress on the externals will only divert our attention from the main issue and as a consequence hamper our progress. The primary aim is to love God, for His own sake. Thus alone is the body converted into a temple of God.