

THE DIVINE NAME

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TO CALL on God by His hallowed name is as old as religion itself. In the Rig Veda, Agni, the presiding deity of fire is hymned profusely. For it was Agni who was to carry the oblations offered into the mortal fire to the higher gods. Indra, Varuna and the like are the other names that we come across there. But Indra of the Rig Veda is not the same as of the Puranas. Indra was considered as the supreme deity, having overlordship over all the worlds. For the matter of that all names, says the Rig Veda, are of one and the same God. Those are not several gods but the same God addressed variously by different sages.¹

"Name and form" constitute the whole phenomena of the universe. You cannot recall a form without referring to its name. And conversely also when you think of the name, the form too spontaneously comes before the mind's eye. So, as long as man is aware of these differences of 'I' and 'you', world and its objects, he must have recourse to names and forms of God also. And we have to remember that persons who are able to go beyond the idea of the phenomena are very few. People may be able to give splendid discourses on Advaita but those who have attained the *nirvikalpa samadhi* state alone can do without 'names and forms'. But it will be the height of absurdity if everyone that has a smattering of the knowledge of the scriptures thinks himself competent to tread such a path.

Again, taking the Divine Name is a wholesome method by which spiritual aspirants can turn their psychological being to good account. Man by the principle of association of ideas connects up life and actions. If by this principle man hooks his train of thoughts on to God and His blessed attributes it would be easier for him to approach God. Every day, every minute of his waking state man is engaged in this pursuit, nay even in dreams this principle works. So what is required is only a shift of the centre of attraction— from world to God.

A very high place has been given by the sages of antiquity to the Divine Name. Narada, Vyasa, Shuka, Shandilya, besides the sages mentioned in the Vedas, are some of those who laid great store on the repetition of the Lord's name. Again, it is not Hinduism alone that prescribes God's name as a means to realization. Christianity, Islam and

¹ R.V. II. Iii.22.

other faiths too have the same consideration for it.

TRADITION

Taking the Divine Name as a means to God-Realization is a long-standing method. If we go into the religious history of India, or for that matter of any country, we will find that this process is time-honoured and very effective too. By repeating the Lord's name alone people have attained to the Highest. And our sages have in unequivocal terms declared this with all the firmness and certitude at their command. For it has been a tried and well established practice. People for ages have put faith in these words of the sages and have enshrined the Divine Name in their hearts.

In India, particularly, the Divine Name is taken with all solemnity before the commencement of any undertaking great or small, auspicious or even otherwise. Protected by the name they feel sure of themselves in their endeavour. People have become so much accustomed and habituated to take the Name that even unconsciously they do not take a step without uttering it.

It is a great source of power armed with which a man of faith defies the world to do him any harm; nay, he even defies death with a challenging voice, 'O Death where is thy sting?'

Sings Ramaprasad, a poet-mystic of Bengal, praising the efficacy of the *Name*:

*I have surrendered my soul at the fearless feet of the Mother;
Am I afraid of Death any more?
Unto the tuft of hair on my head
Is tied the almighty mantra, Mother Kali's name.
My body I have sold in the market-place of the world
And with it have bought Sri Durga's name.
Deep within my heart I have planted the name of Kali,
The Wish-fulfilling Tree of heaven;
When Yama, King of Death, appears,
To him I shall open my heart and show it growing there.
I have cast out from me my six unflagging foes;
Ready am I to sail life's sea,
Crying, "To Durga, victory!"²*

Replete is the religious lore of India with songs that depict vividly the glories of God's name. A host of saints and sages from every part of India can be quoted in support of this. A parable is told of a crow that preferred to die of thirst but would not lose the time, it was utilizing in

² The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p.245. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4.

taking Rama's name, to slake its thirst.

Religious literature of India is full of the names of God. There are the *astottaras*, and the *sahasranamas*, (the hundred eight and thousand names) of every name of God, to remind the aspirants about the exploits of that particular form or aspect, or Incarnation of the God-head. People there are who cannot live or breathe without taking Lord's name, without tasting its divine bliss. For the believing and the trustful their one ambition in life is to make their exit from this world with the Lord's name on their lips. To do it they retire from all worldly entanglements and cares and live in holy places like Varanasi during the later part of their lives.

God's name is very efficacious in more ways than one. In the Bhagavata we read of Ajamila's episode: Ajamila was a brahmana by birth but after living for a long time the life required of him according to his station fell on evil ways, infatuated with lust. In that condition of his, he fell seriously ill. He despaired of his life. He saw the messengers of Death approaching. In his anguish he cried out to his dearest son, who was fortunately given the Lord's name, Narayana. Now, it is said, that the name of the Lord though unmeaningly uttered brought to the scene Vishnu's messengers who disputed the right of the messenger's of Death to take away a soul that had become pure by the repetition of God's holy name. Ajamila was spared his life that time and was given an opportunity to mend his ways and attain the Lord's abode. Man cuts off the bonds of birth and death if he remembers the Lord at the time of his death — is an assurance of Sri Krishna.

The Lord's name does not go in vain. It must bear its benign result. It is like the philosopher's stone converting all baser metal into gold. It is like the magic wand of the magician performing unbelievable and unthought of miracles; the only difference being that in the latter case it is of a moment's duration, whereas in the former it leaves a permanent impress on the devotee. It transforms man's life for ever.

Man seeks refuge in God's name also when he is confronted with difficult situations or involved in crises. Innumerable stories are extant which go to illustrate this fact. When Draupadi was being subjected to insult and humiliation in the court of the Kauravas it was Krishna's name that saved her honour. When Radha, the cowherdess of Vrindavana, was asked, as a test of her chastity, to bring water in a multi-holed pitcher it was with the name of the Lord that she came off more glorious than ever, out of this fiery ordeal. The great hero of the *Ramayana*, whom Tulsidas calls the 'jewel in the great garland of *Ramayana*', Hanuman crossed the ocean to Lanka merely by taking the name of Rama. These are not fictitious stories, but explanations to illustrate the principles.

There is a beautiful story, told to emphasize the identity and inseparableness of the Lord and His name. Sri Krishna was once being weighed against gold and ornaments. Even when all the gold and jewels of his palace were heaped in the other pan, Krishna's pan did not move up nor was it balanced. Then Rukmini, the divine consort of Sri Krishna,

had put in the place of the ornaments a *tulsi* leaf with Sri Krishna's name written on it on the counter pan to weigh the Lord. And lo! The pan moved up and there was the Lord weighed against His own name. Such really is the potency of the Lord's Name. It has its peer only in the Lord, nothing else can compare with it.

SCRIPTURAL INJUNCTIONS

We find references as to the efficacy of the Name in the Rig, Yajur and Sama Vedas, which prove that it is not a later development in religion. One *mantra* reads: 'O, Glorious, all-pervading Lord, we use no sacrificial stakes, we slay no victims but we worship Thee by mere repetition of Thy name.'³ The minor Upanisads, the *Ramayana*, the *Gita*, and the *Mahabharata*, and the *Bhagavata* and other Purāṇas overflow with hymns and injunctions that enjoin this practice of taking the Name of the Lord, on the devotees. The *Yogasikhopanisad* defines a mantra as a 'holy formula', 'because of its scope for reflection, because of its saving power, because it reveals the Lord's nature and also because it forms the Lord's abode', and thus helps to realize Him. 'Rama established by his conduct and life the path of Righteousness and the path of knowledge by His name,' says the *Ramapurvatapani Upanisad*⁴. The *Mahabharata* declares, 'The aspirant always repeating the name of the Lord, reflecting on its meaning and observing the vows of Brahmacharya attains the highest.' Sri Krishna says in the context of His *vibhūti*s, 'Among yajñas I am the *japa* yajña.'⁵ Thus we find that the recourse to the Name as one of the methods to God realization has been known from time out of mind.

IN WHAT WAYS CAN THE NAME BE TAKEN

The well-known forms of taking the Lord's name are many. *Mantra Japa*, repetition of the holy formula given by a competent Guru is the most auspicious and helpful. Next comes singing hymns and songs in praise of or describing the exploits of the Lord. Sankirtana, singing in chorus the names of God, is also another method. Formal worship by offering the five, ten or sixteen articles or even mental worship (*manasa puja*) is still another. Here, we may remind ourselves that worship when done conscientiously, noting the meaning of all the mudras and rituals, which to the uninitiated and the ignorant may appear meaningless, can burst open the flood-gates of devotion and knowledge.

³ Sama Veda II.2-9-2.

⁴ I.4.

⁵ Gita 10.25.

EXAMPLES AND PRECEPTS OF INCARNATIONS

The world has before it the shining examples of the Avatars, their apostles, sages and saints to demonstrate what the Divine Name can do. Sri Chaitanya, an ultra logician of his times even up to the day of his initiation into the name of God, was a changed man at the very first mention of the Name by the Guru. All the stored up waters of devotion flowed then onwards like a mountain torrent carrying with it all that impedes or resists its path. The entreaties of his pupils to the life of the scholar and teacher, of his mother to the life of the householder were carried away in that current. The pull of God was irresistible for him; and in his turn his own attraction too became irresistible to many.

Sri Ramakrishna stormed the citadel of God with nothing but the name of Mother Kali. All his other *sadhanas* may be said to have come after the first vision of the Mother. The Divine Mother could not hold Herself back from the earnest call of Her dear child. He almost forced Her to yield him Her presence. We know that Sri Ramakrishna breathed his last uttering the name of Kali and entered into *mahasamadhi*. In the life of the Holy Mother we read how incessantly she repeated the Name in spite of her varied duties of the household and onerous responsibilities of the spiritual ministry. She set for herself a huge number for her *japa*, but she did it regularly till the last days of her life. Her day dawned at 3 in the morning and her time for rest arrived only at 11 in the night, yet the repetition of the Lord's name continued unhampered.

In the disciples of Incarnations too we find this trait prominently present. A look at the life of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna in the initial stage of the organization will amply hold out this fact. In the very throes of penury, of suffering and privacy there flowed a constant stream of divine bliss expressing itself now and then in the form of Sankirtan, songs and ecstatic dances, at the Baranagore Math.

It may now be said: 'O! Well, it is all right with the Incarnations and their apostles who were pure from their very birth or who had mighty Gurus to help and guide. But what about us who have a load of inherent tendencies to overcome?' To this we draw attention of such people to the precepts and the assurances given by these holy men. We have to follow in their footsteps; there is no other way. When we despair, observing no progress in our spiritual life, let us hearken to the words of the Avatars which bring solace and infuse confidence. Here is Sri Chaitanya telling us: 'The name of God has very great sanctity. It may not produce an immediate result, but one day it must bear fruit. It is like a seed that has been left on the cornice of a building. After many days the house crumbles and the seed falls on the earth, germinates and at last bears fruit.' Even in the case of ordinary vegetation we have to wait for the season to yield fruits and how then can we be impatient when it is concerned with the highest fruit of life!

Again, Sri Chaitanya says that it is not possible in this Kali age to do

the sacrifices enjoined in the Vedas on their elaborate scale, nor is it possible for every one to do them. For the Kali age, therefore, he avers, the name of Hari alone, without any doubt, is the path for liberation.

Sri Ramakrishna confirms that by chanting the Lord's name one gets rid of all the dross of the body and mind; and in a purified mind reflects the image of God in all splendour. One of the songs of another poet, that Sri Ramakrishna cherished very much, describes what merits accrue to one who takes the Divine name:

*Why should I go to Ganga or Gaya, to Kasi, Kanchi, or Prabhas,
So long as I can breathe my last with Kali's name upon my lips?
What need of rituals has a man, what need of devotions any more,
If he repeats the Mother's name at the three holy hours?
Rituals may pursue him close, but never can they overtake him.
Charity, vows, and giving of gifts do not appeal to Madan's mind;
The Blissful Mother's Lotus Feet are his whole prayer and sacrifice.
Who could ever have conceived the power Her name possesses?
Siva Himself, the God of Gods, sings Her praise with His five
mouths!⁶*

Sri Ramakrishna gives the example of a devotee, Krishnakishore, who though a brahmin had no hesitation in drinking water from the hands of a person of low-caste when he had uttered Shiva's name. Another time Sri Ramakrishna said, 'A man was about to cross the sea from Ceylon to India. Vibhishana said to him: "Tie this thing in a corner of your wearing-cloth, and you will cross the sea safely. You will be able to walk on the water. But be sure not to examine it, or you will sink." The man was walking easily on the water of the sea — such is the strength of faith — when, having gone part of the way, he thought, "What is this wonderful thing Vibhishana has given me, that I can walk even on the water?" He untied the knot and found only a leaf with the name of Rama written on it. "Oh, just this!" he thought, and instantly he sank.'⁷

Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the milk-maid and the Guru is amazingly revealing as to what faith in the Name did to the disciple and how the teacher himself could not get over doubt.

Holy Mother too in her teachings has exhorted us to be devoted to the Divine Name. In the Bible also we have certain passages glorifying Name. We shall quote a few of them here. 'Let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee' (*Psalms*, 5.11). 'Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name', (Ib. 29.2). 'O, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together,' (Ib. 34. 3-4). 'Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious,' (Ib. 66.1-3), 'I will lift up my hands in thy name,' (Ib. 63.4).

However, real faith in the potency of the name can come out of

⁶ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. P.76.

⁷ Ibid., p.33.

one's own personal experience. We, therefore, leave it to every reader to find out the truth of this thesis by consulting his own experiences in life. Even an average man might have received a response from on High when he in his difficulty had called on Him.

HOW TO TAKE THE NAME — THE MODUS OPERANDI

It is easy to say that we should not at all discuss how we are to take the Divine Name. But the question remains whether we should take the Name to gain material ends, with ulterior motive. It cannot be gainsaid that such a step is not proper. It may lead to material prosperity, no doubt, for the Lord like a kind mother will bestow on us whatever we pray for, but it will throw us into the whirlpool of innumerable births and deaths. It is religion which comes to help us out of this predicament. And religion being the most practical of all the sciences under the sun, any practisant will find out in no time that utmost caution and guidance are required to chant the Name effectively.

When one chants it with due regard and propriety, said Swami Vivekananda once, one can have both Bhakti and Jnana through it. Again, we sing in the *Ramanama Sankirtan*, '*dhanyāste krtinah pibanti satatam sri rāmanāmāmrtam*,' 'Blessed are those virtuous persons who drink the nectar of immortality of Sri Rama's name.' Shall we not try to become blessed!

In conclusion, we have to impress on our minds that purity of thought and sincerity of purpose are the essential conditions one has to achieve and develop in the religious life if it is to be expeditiously fruitful. He must practise Brahmacharya, physically and mentally. He has to avoid all slips in the ethical life and should live a life of discipline. These are the *sine qua non* of the higher life, and it is well-known that nothing will happen if *sadhana* is practised perfunctorily. So, when that purity of purpose and sincerity in *sadhana* is achieved and when one tries in secret and in solitude and with single-minded devotion to repeat the name of God, His vision will come and the devotee will get absorbed in Him.