

# **SIGNIFICANCE OF SYMBOLS IN SPIRITUAL LIFE**

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Symbols and ensigns have been in vogue from time out of mind. 'They have not become obsolete with the advance of time or science. Probably today more symbols or signs are used in the world than ever before — nations have their particular flags, military personnel have their ensigns, manufacturers have their trade marks, governments have their seals, political parties have their symbols. The signs and symbols, connected with a nation remind one of its peculiarity, its status in the world, its contribution to the welfare or hardship of the world. The manufacturer's trade mark is an assurance of the genuineness of the products, if they, the products, have proved their usefulness. So also every other emblem brings with it the memory of the thing it represents so vividly as if its whole history had been presented to us in a nutshell.

Another type of sign has, traditionally, come to be recognised as representing a particular sentiment or wish — the white flag in battle indicates surrender; an olive branch is taken as a token of disposition on the part of the bearer for reconciliation; red signals mark danger ahead and green presents a clear way. There are again some distinctive signals which the crew of an aircraft have to understand in its approach to an airport. In short, symbolism is weaved into the fabric of man's life ancient or modern, scientific or unscientific.

Religion also has adopted this method of symbolism and is as old as religion itself. For instance we have in the Rg Veda, which is acknowledged as the oldest written record of spiritual revelations, the *Purusa Sukta* where the Divine is conceived of as a person with millions of heads, myriads of eyes and legs, pervading all the universe and also transcending it.<sup>1</sup> Human beings are on the highest scale of evolution according to any estimate, not excluding that of biological science. Most of the people, therefore, can understand God only as a person. The conception of the ordinary man cannot go beyond it. He can understand Him as a benevolent, beneficent, munificent Person, always ready to help His children. This is an anthropomorphic conception no doubt, but that is nearest to the Truth. But here again the Vedas excel. The very idea is put in a way as to mean more than what meets the eye. It does not mean that an actual form like that of a person was conceived by the Rishis. The real meaning is that the Divine manifests in all beings of this universe and is beyond also. This is made clear in the next two Rks. 'This whole

universe that we see is only that Purusa (the Divine). That which is past, and that which is yet to come that also is only Purusa. He is again the Lord of immortality. He manifests in the form of this world for the experience of the *jīvas* but on that account this is not His true essence. All this is only His power, Purusa transcends all. This universe and all its beings are only one fourth of Him, the rest immutable portion rests in His own bright self-illuminated nature.’<sup>2</sup> Here again the proportion is only figurative, just to show that the expanse and extent of the Purusa is immeasurable. He is infinite — that is conveyed by these hymns. So though the idea appears in the beginning as anthropomorphic, a little deeper investigation belies this theory.

Again, this symbolic methodology was used both in the Yajñas or sacrifices and Upāsana or meditation as well. In the Aswamedha Yajña, for instance, the body of the sacrificial horse was considered to be the body of the Virat Purusa, the Cosmic Being. Every part of it represented symbolically some aspect of the Cosmic Being — the dawn was represented by the head of the horse, the sun by its eye, the air by its vital force, the fire by its open mouth, and so on. So even while the sacrifice was being conducted the goal aimed at was to impress the constant thought of the Divine. Man lives usually on the mundane plane; very gross are his enjoyments. So the Vedas said that he can have better and more enduring enjoyments if he laid store in the other worlds. He would go to heaven and live happily for a long time there if he did certain sacrifices. They even said that he became immortal, in the sense that the duration of the life there was infinite compared to his mortal span. Among sacrifices the Aswamedha was pronounced to give the highest fruit — attainment of the highest heaven, the Brahmaloka. But it entailed heavy expenditure and collection of rare ingredients which were possible only for kings and emperors. On the other hand there were some obligatory sacrifices to be done by a Brahmana. The life of the Brahmana was a life of abstinence and sacrifice. He had to perform every month two sacrifices known as Darsapurnamāsa, for a long period of thirty years, from the day he 'lights the fire, or in some cases for the rest of his life. Each sacrifice took two days; and on these days he had to abstain from meat and other carnal pleasures. Besides he had to perform the Agnihotra sacrifice, twice daily, once immediately after sunset and again just before sunrise, all through his life. Again there were other sacrifices which a covetor of heaven would have to do. The sacrifices, the performance of which required observance of great austerity and self-control, helped to cleanse the minds of the sacrificers. The purified mind in its turn reflected the truths of religion clearly. So though the sacrificer might have started with the most earthly of motives, he would soon get over them and long to know about the Eternal Truth. This was the purpose of the *karma kanda* of the Vedas — to sublimate man by leading him gradually from gross to the subtle.

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In respect of Upāsana one proceeds from subtle symbols to subtler ones. Once, Narada approached Sanatkumara, one of the first four recluses and a mind-born son of Brahma, and requested to be taught. Sanatkumara wanted to know what Narada already knew. Narada replied, 'I have studied the Vedas, the puranas, the itihisas' and so on. In brief, every science that was then extant was known to him. But he added 'I know only the mantras (the words, and their word-meanings) but do not know about the Ātman. I have heard from persons like you that a knower of Ātman overcomes grief. Respected Sir, I am still under the sway of pain and pleasure. Please ferry me across this ocean of grief.'<sup>3</sup> Knowing the meaning of the texts of the scriptures is not knowledge of Ātman. It does not make one perfect; does not free one from the pairs of opposites. Narada felt it keenly in spite of all his knowledge of the different Sastras.

'This (that you know) is all name only. Meditate on it as Brahman,'<sup>4</sup> says Sanatkumara. By meditating on it one can reach to whatever is named. 'Is there anything higher than name?' asked Narada. 'Definitely there is. Speech is greater than name. Through speech only you understand everything. Meditate upon speech,' replied the preceptor. Narada again asked whether there was anything greater than speech. The preceptor by and by instructed that mind was greater than speech; will was greater than mind; *chitta* was greater than the will; meditation was greater than *chitta*; knowledge was greater than meditation, and so on until he came to *Prāna*. Narada who was every time questioning whether there was anything greater than what the teacher was describing, failed to ask whether there was anything greater than *Prāna*. For he thought *Prāna* as represented by Hiranyagarbha was the final reality. Though the disciple did not ask, the preceptor knowing his worthiness, of his own accord instructs Narada not to be satisfied with the knowledge of the *Prāna*, that there was something higher than *Prāna* which was to be known. One does not go beyond disputes (*ativādi*) by knowing *Prāna*. One should seek the Truth to become a true *ativādi*.

Narada seeks refuge again with the preceptor and desires to be illumined. 'That which is the vast, that is bliss. There is no happiness in these little things. In the Great one alone is bliss. That vast one is to be known.'<sup>5</sup> And what is that vast one? 'When one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, knows none other, that is the Great one.'<sup>6</sup> When one goes beyond duality one knows the Great one, Brahman.

In this episode, mentioned in the Upanisad, we see how gradually Narada was asked to seek higher and higher truths. Though Name (the *Sāstras*) was not itself Brahman, he was asked to meditate on that as Brahman, then on speech and so on. These were projected as symbols of Brahman, and such meditation had their own results, far superior to the mundane things. But they were not final. The finale was to be reached only in Brahman. Why did not the preceptor immediately enlighten the

disciple? The truth is elusive, almost impossible to understand and there is the danger of misunderstanding when taught to immature minds.

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A brilliant example, of how difficult of assimilation subtle truths are, is found in Prajapati's instruction to Indra and Virochana in the *Chândogya Upanisad*. The story runs thus: Once Prajapati, the Lord of the Universe, announced that he who knows the Ātman, which is untouched by taint, unageing, deathless, free from sorrow, devoid of hunger and thirst, whose desires are true, whose wishes are facts, attains to all the worlds and obtains all his desires. This declaration led the gods and demons, who were naturally hankering after enjoyments, possessions and overlordship of the worlds, to depute their kings Indra and Virochana to learn that knowledge from Prajapati. It was the tradition in those days to go to a teacher with all humility and serve him. The preceptor would, when he thought that they had been sufficiently long with him to understand the knowledge he was going to impart, ask them with what intention they were living with him. Prajapati also followed the rule. He allowed them to serve him and stay with him for thirty two years, on the completion of which period he asked what they wanted to know. They expressed their desire to know about the Ātman. Prajapati said: 'That Purusa which is seen in the eye that is the Ātman; It is immortal; It is fearless; It is Brahman.'<sup>7</sup> The purport of Prajapati's instruction was to make them understand that, the Ātman seen by the Yogis of controlled senses and annihilated desires, is Brahman. But the disciples, because of their want of penetration, understood Ātman as the reflection seen in the eye. The symbolical expression was overlooked and the literal meaning was taken.

The disciples — however it should be said to their credit, to make sure that what they understood as the Ātman was correct — asked whether it was the same Atman which is reflected in the water and in the mirror. Prajapati, not to embarrass them by saying that they were completely wrong, said that it was so and that was 'seen in all these'. Ātman being the innermost of all beings and nearest to the mind could be seen inside all. But again the disciples missed His point and took it too literally. Prajapati again tried to impress on them that they were mistaken, by asking them to see their reflection in water first as they were — with beard and hair unkempt and dressed in ascetic robes — and again after they had shaven and adorned themselves. Yet by then they were so convinced of their grasp of the subject that they did not take any particular note of the instruction. They took their outer form to be Ātman and left.

Virochana had no speck of doubt as to the clarity and veracity of his

understanding. So he went and proclaimed to his subjects that the body was Ātman and that It should be well fed and taken care of. Indra on the other hand, when he had gone a little distance, reflected over the two images he had seen. He thought, 'If this body is Ātman, then it too changes — when the body is well-adorned Atman becomes adorned, when well-clothed It becomes clothed, when cleansed It looks clean, likewise when the body is blinded Ātman also becomes blind, when the leg becomes lame Ātman also becomes lame, if so with the death of the body Ātman also dies. Then where is the result promised by Prajapati?' Thus cogitating Indra returns. Prajapati asks: 'You had gone well-pleased with yourself along with Virochana. What brings you now?' Indra replies, 'Lord, You did not mean, that this reflection was Ātman when you said that which is seen in the eye is Ātman.' 'No, certainly not;' replied Prajapati, 'live another thirty two years with Me and I shall teach you.' Indra did so, and Prajapati again spoke to him: 'That which you see enjoying many things in the dream that is Ātman.' Indra was satisfied and started for his abode. But he mused, 'Though this Ātman is not affected by the modifications or maimings of the body yet it also is sometimes as if sorrowful, as if weeps. So this also cannot be the Ātman that the Lord meant.'

A second time he returns and asks to be enlightened. Prajapati asks him to live with him again for another thirty-two years, at the end of which He says, 'that which you see in deep sleep, when even dream is not seen that is Ātman.' Indra departed delighted at having known, what he considered as the secret about Ātman. But again doubt assailed him. And he returned and said: 'Lord, in the state you have described now to me, I do not see anything as to say "This am I" neither do I see these creatures. It is almost dark, everything seems, as if, destroyed there. In this I do not see any of your promised fruits.'<sup>8</sup> 'Yes, it is as you say; reside another five years with Me and then I shall teach you,' exhorted Prajapati.

At the end of the period Prajapati said: 'It is true that what you perceived with your eyes and other senses, as also the mind, evaporate into void in deep sleep. You should not be sorry for it. For this body (senses and the mind) are beset by death. It is subject to destruction, but it is the abode of Ātman, which is incorporeal, and immortal. As long as the Self is embodied and identifies itself with the body there will be pain and pleasure. It is unavoidable. Pain and pleasure do not touch him alone who transcends the body idea.'<sup>9</sup> A glimpse of which one feels in deep sleep.

We have now seen how the same advice was differently interpreted by different persons, due to the lack of acumen to understand and absence of the required purity of mind to reflect. That is why a graded course and proper symbols are a necessity in the beginning and in most cases for a long time.

## IV

Raja Yoga is another method of approach to the Divine. To attain *samādhi* by control of the life-breath, *prāna* is the way prescribed therein. Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras at one place says, *samādhi* can be attained also 'by devotion to Īsvara.'<sup>10</sup> Then he gives some idea with regard to Īsvara. But the idea to be remembered is to be condensed or named. So he posits, 'His symbol is Om.'<sup>11</sup> Swami Vivekananda explaining this *sutra* says: 'Every idea that you have in the mind has a counter-part in a word; the word and thought are inseparable. The internal part of one and the same thing is what we call thought. No man can, by analysis, separate thought from word.' Sounds may vary according to languages but the relation between the sounds and thought is a natural one. Swamiji further states, 'Symbol is the manifestor of the thing signified, and if the thing signified has already an existence, and if, by experience, we know that the symbol has expressed that thing many times, then we are sure that there is a real relation between them. Even if the things are not present, there will be thousands who will know them by their symbols.' Millions of aspirants have verified the efficacy of this word 'Om'. In the Upanisads it is said that this Om represents the Universe, past, present, and future and even that which is beyond the three times; beyond the universe.<sup>12</sup>

Patanjali assures us that a repetition of this *mantra* along with meditation on its meaning<sup>13</sup> leads to the desired end, *samādhi*. How does this repetition of a *mantra* purify the mind? A scientific mind will naturally pose this question. We have to recall here that man is born with a load of *samskāras*, inborn tendencies. What has made these tendencies, rather how are these inclinations created? They are created by us. Whatever we think, speak or do, will and feel disturb the mind-stuff. Swamiji has compared this mind-stuff to a lake. When we throw stones in the water of a lake it is disturbed. Ripples are seen to spread all around. The stones or pebbles go and deposit at the bottom. Likewise the thoughts that we think and actions that we do have an immediate effect of disturbing the tranquillity of the mind, and has a later, more enduring effect as an impression deposited in the recesses of the mind in the form of a tendency — tending to arise again when suitable opportunity presents itself. In Swami Vivekananda's words, they leave a furrow, as it were, in the brain and after a time when the actions are repeated man is compelled to move along this line. Any attempt to deviate from this beaten path is vigorously resisted by the mind. These are called *samskāras*. How then are we to overcome these *samskāras*? Sri Ramakrishna used to say a thorn that has pricked you must be extracted by the aid of another thorn. The evil *samskāras* are to be got rid of by good acts, and good thoughts. By repetition of a *mantra* and meditating on its meaning the mind is secured from sliding back into its old ruts. Fresh *samskāras* are formed by such constant meditation which overwhelm the evil ones, if the practice has been long and intense. The



mind being rid of dross inclines naturally towards tranquillity.

The path of Raja Yoga, no doubt, is through psychic control. It prescribes the control of the *prāṇa*,<sup>14</sup> vital force, — which Swamiji calls the energy in the universe — as a means to purify the mind-stuff. This is accomplished by the regulation of breath as a first means. The Yoga *sāstra* gives detailed instructions as to how long one has to breathe in, how long to hold it in and how long one should take to expel it. Swami Vivekananda suggests that one should, instead of simply counting numbers to measure time, repeat a holy name, which is the symbol of the Godhead, while doing so, so that one's mind may all the while remain in the thought of the Divine.

Again if this idea appears too abstract for the aspirant, Patanjali suggests alternatives. He says, 'Concentration on an Effulgent Light which is beyond sorrow; or on the heart that has given up all attachments to sense objects; or anything that appeals to one and is good,'<sup>15</sup> is also helpful.

## V

With the passage of time when man became more and more extrovert, when he could no longer abide by the duties laid down for him due to various reasons, when ritualistic sacrifices became blind observances and soulless, Hindu teachers developed this idea of symbolic representation of the Godhead so that it could be easily understood even by the common man. Images, and *sālagrams*, and temples and shrines to house them came into being. Images were not looked upon at any time even by the most ignorant Hindu as mere stone or wood. To him they were the reminders of the Conscious Divine, symbols of Divinity. It is easy to criticize and condemn the image-worship of the Hindu as idolatry, but why does not one, who condemns such worship look to his own creed. Every sect, every religion worships a symbol. But each one thinks that his own symbol is a true one, a correct representation of the Godhead and that all others are in the wrong. This is a perverted view of things and most abject form of self-love. There may have crept some abuses into such worship. But abuses of all sublime thoughts and practices are seen in every sect and every religion. That is no reason to condemn the practice itself.

One has to take the good and leave out the evil. If it has done a little harm at some time owing to the evil hands into which the practice had fallen, it has done infinite good also. Further, as long as man is man, more inclined towards flesh than soul, he requires all the other outer paraphernalia as well to hammer into his consciousness the existence of a Supreme Being which he should not forget. It is fruitless to speak against symbols. They have contributed enormously to the religious culture and spiritual upliftment of man and will continue to do so in future. Masses

require them and even the majority of the intellectual classes cannot dispense with them without trepidation as to the consequences. The only thing we should guard against is that such worship does not take a dogmatic shape to enforce one's symbol or image on others.

We shall conclude with Sri Ramakrishna's exhortation regarding image-worship: 'But why clay? It is an image of spirit. Even if the image is made of clay, there is need for that sort of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge.' What is said of images is also true of symbols.

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<sup>1</sup> Rig Veda, 10.7.90.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.7.90.2&3.

<sup>3</sup> Chandogya Up. 7.1.3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.1.4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7.23.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7.24.1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 8.7.4

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.11.2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.12.1.

<sup>10</sup> Yoga Sutras, 1.23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.27.

<sup>12</sup> Mandukya Upanishad, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Yoga Sutras, 1.28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.36 to 39.