

Philosophy of Idol Worship

By Swami Shivananda

THE IDOL is a support for the neophyte. It is a prop in his spiritual childhood. A form or image is necessary for worship in the beginning. It is an external symbol of God for worship. It is a reminder of God. The material image calls up the mental idea. Steadiness of mind is obtained by image worship. The worshipper will have to associate the ideas of infinity, omnipotence, omniscience, purity, perfection, freedom, holiness, truth and omnipresence with the form of worship he chooses.

It is not possible for all to fix the mind on the Absolute. A concrete form is necessary for the vast majority for practicing concentration. To behold God everywhere and to practice the presence of God is not possible for the ordinary man. Idol worship is the easiest form of worship for the modern man.

A symbol is absolutely indispensable for fixing the mind. The mind wants a prop to lean upon. It cannot hold a conception of the Absolute in the initial stages. Without the help of some external aid the mind cannot be centralized. In the beginning, therefore, concentration or meditation is not possible without a symbol.

Everyone an Idol Worshipper

Idol worship is not peculiar to Hinduism. Christians worship the Cross. They have the image of the Cross in their mind. The Muslims keep the image of the Kaaba stone when they kneel and do prayers. The people of the whole world, save a few Yogis and Vedantins, are all worshippers of idols. They keep some image or the other in their mind.

The mental image also is a form of idol. The difference is not one of kind, but only of degree. All worshippers, however intellectual they may be, generate a form in the mind and make the mind dwell on that image.

Everyone is thus an idol worshipper. Pictures, drawings, etc., are only forms of idols. A gross mind needs a concrete symbol as a prop and a subtle mind requires an abstract symbol. Even a Vedantin has the symbol Om to fix his wandering mind. It is not only the pictures or images in stone and in wood that are idols, but dialectics and great leaders also become idols. So, why condemn idolatry?

A Medium for Establishing Communion With God

Idols are not the idle fancies of sculptors, but are shining channels through which the heart of the devotee is attracted to God and flows towards Him. Though apparently the image is

worshipped, the devotee feels the presence of the Lord in it and pours out his devotion unto it. It is the appalling ignorance of the modern sensual man that clouds his vision and prevents him from seeing Divinity in the lovely and enchanting idols of His forms.

The wonderful scientific advances of this century ought to convince one of the glory of idol worship. How are the songsters and orators confined to a small boxlike thing called a radio or a T.V.? The latter are merely lifeless, mechanical structures which would break into a thousand pieces if thrown violently; and yet, if you know how to handle it, you can hear through it the music and see through it the pictures occurring several thousands of miles away. Even as you catch the sound-waves of people all over the globe through the radio and T.V., 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. Why do you then say that He is not in the idols?

There are many who would glibly say: "Oh, God is an all-pervading formless Being. How can He be confined to this idol!" Are these people ever conscious of His omnipresence? Do they always see Him and Him alone in everything? No. It is their ego that prevents them from bowing to the idols of God and with that motive they put this lame excuse forward.

Empty vessels make much sound. A practical man who does meditation and worship, who is full of knowledge and real devotion, always keeps silent. He influences and teaches others through silence. He alone knows whether an idol is necessary in the beginning of concentration or not.

However intellectual one may be, one cannot concentrate without the help of some symbol. An intellectual or a learned person may say on account of his pride and vanity: "I do not like an idol. I do not wish to concentrate on a form." He cannot concentrate on the formless One. He thinks that people will laugh at him when they come to know that he is meditating on an idol. He never does any meditation on the formless One. He simply talks and argues and poses. He wastes his life in unnecessary discussions only. An ounce of practice is better than tons of theories.

Intellect is a hindrance in the vast majority of intellectual persons. They say that the existence of Brahman is guess-work, the superconscious state is a bluff and Self-realisation is an imagination of the Vedantins. Deluded souls! They are steeped in ignorance. They are carded away by their secular knowledge which is mere husk when compared to the knowledge of the Self. There is no hope of salvation for such people. First, their wrong impressions should be flushed by good impressions through Satsang. Then only will they realise their mistakes. May the Lord bestow on them clear understanding and thirsting for real knowledge!

A Symbol of God

The idol is a substitute or symbol. The image in a temple, though it be made of stone, wood or metal, is precious for a devotee as it bears the mark of his Lord, as it represents something which he holds holy and eternal. A flag is only a small piece of painted cloth, but to a soldier it stands for something that he holds very dear. He is prepared to give up his life in defending his flag. Similarly, the image is very dear to a devotee. It speaks to him in its own language of devotion. Just as the flag arouses martial valour in the soldier, so also the image arouses devotion in the devotee. The Lord is superimposed on the image and the image generates divine thoughts in the worshipper.

A piece of ordinary white paper or coloured paper has no value. You throw it away. But, if there is the stamp of the Government on the paper (currency note), you keep it safe in your money pocket or trunk. Even so, an ordinary piece of stone has no value for you. You throw it away. But, if you behold the stone idol of Lord Krishna at Pandharpur or any other idol in shrines, you bow your head with folded palms, because there is the stamp of the Beloved Lord on the stone. The devotee superimposes on the stone idol his own Lord and all His attributes.

When you worship an image, you do not say: "This image has come from Jaipur. It was bought by Prabhu Singh. Its weight is 50 lbs. It is made of white marble. It has cost me Rs.500." No! You superimpose all the attributes of the Lord on the image and pray: "O Inner Ruler! You are all-pervading. You are omnipotent, omniscient and all-merciful. You are the source of everything. You are eternal, unchanging. You are the life of my life, the Soul of my soul! Give me light and knowledge! Let me dwell in Thee for ever!"

When your devotion and meditation become intense and deep, you do not see the stone image. You behold the Lord only who is pure Consciousness. Image worship is very necessary for beginners.

An Integral Part of the Cosmos

For a beginner, the idol is an absolute necessity. By worshipping the idol, the Lord is pleased. The idol is made up of the five elements. The five elements constitute the body of the Lord. The idol remains an idol, but the worship goes to the Lord.

If you shake hands with a man, he is highly pleased. You have touched only a small part of his body and yet he is happy. He smiles and welcomes you. Even so, the Lord is highly pleased when a small portion of His cosmic body is worshipped. An idol is a part of the body of the Lord. The whole world is His body. The devotion goes to the Lord.

The worshipper superimposes on the image the Lord and all His attributes. He does the sixteen forms of reverence to the Lord. First, the Presence of the Deity is invoked. Then a seat is offered, the feet are washed, water is offered, and then hospitality is offered. The idol is bathed, dressed and invested with the sacred thread. Sandal paste is applied to its forehead, flowers are offered, and incense is burnt. Then a lamp is lit and waved before the Deity. Food is now offered, together with the burning of camphor. A gift of gold is offered. Finally (the sixteenth step), the Deity is bidden farewell.

In these external forms of worship, the inner love finds expression. The wandering mind is fixed now in this form of worship. The aspirant gradually feels the nearness of the Lord. He attains purity of heart and slowly annihilates his egoism.

To the worshipper who has faith in the symbol, any kind of image is the body of the Lord, be it made of stone, clay, or brass, or be it a picture, drawing, etc. Such worship can never be idolatry. All matter is a manifestation of God. God is present in everything. Everything is an object of worship, for all is a manifestation of God who is therein worshipped. The very act of worship implies that the object of worship is superior and conscious. This way of looking at things must be attained by the devotee. The untutored mind must be trained to view things in the above manner.

Idol worship Develops Devotion

Idol worship makes concentration for man simple and easy. You can bring before your mind's eye the great pastimes of the Lord in His particular incarnation in which you view Him. This is one of the easiest modes of Self-realisation. It is one that suits the majority of people today.

Just as the picture of a famous warrior evokes heroism in your heart, so also a look at the picture of God will elevate your mind to divine heights. Just as the child develops the maternal feeling by caressing, nursing and protecting its doll made of rags, and suckles it in an imaginary manner, so also the devotee develops the feeling of devotion by worshipping the idol and concentrating on it.

Unveiling the Divinity in the Idol

Regular worship and other modes of demonstrating our inner feeling of recognition of divinity in the idol unveil the Divinity latent in it. This is truly a wonder and a miracle. The picture comes to life. 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. It is like a powerful lens that focuses the sun's rays onto a bundle of cotton. The lens is not fire and the cotton is not fire either, nor can the sun's rays by themselves burn the cotton. However, when all three are brought together in a particular manner, fire is generated and the cotton is burnt.

Similar is the case with the idol, the aspirant, and the all-pervading Divinity. The idol is the lens which brings into focus the all-pervading rays of Divinity and lights up the aspirant with divine illumination.

God is enshrined in the idol. From here, He will protect you in a special manner. The idol will perform miracles. The place where it is installed is at once transformed into a temple, nay, a Vaikunta or Kailas in reality. Those who live in such a place are freed from miseries, from diseases, from failures and from worldliness itself. The awakened Divinity in the idol acts as a guardian angel blessing all, conferring the highest good on those who bow to it.

The Image—A Mass of Consciousness

The idol is only a symbol of the Divine. A devotee does not behold therein a block of stone or a mass of metal. It is an emblem of God for him. He visualises the indwelling Presence in the idol. All the sixty-three Nayanar saints of South India attained God-realisation through worship of the Shiva Linga, the image of Lord Shiva. For a devotee, the image is a mass of consciousness. He draws inspiration from it. It guides him. It talks to him. It assumes the human form to help him in a variety of ways.

The image of Lord Shiva in the temple at Madura in South India helped the fuel-cutter and the old woman. The image in the temple at Tirupati assumed a human form and gave witness in the court to help His devotees. These are marvels and mysteries. Only the devotees understand them.

When Idols Become Alive

For a devotee or a sage, there is no such thing as insentient matter. Everything is consciousness. The devotee actually beholds the Lord in the idol. Narsi Mehta was put to the test by a king. The king said, "O Narsi! if you are a true, sincere devotee of Lord Krishna, if, as you say, the idol is Lord Krishna Himself, let this idol move." According to the prayer of Narsi Mehta, the idol did move. The sacred bull, Nandi, standing before Shiva's idol, took the food offered by Tulsidas. The idol of Krishna played with Mirabai. It was full of life and consciousness for her.

When Appayya Dikshita went to the Tirupati temple in South India, the Vaishnavas refused to grant him admission. The next morning they found that the idol of Lord Vishnu in the temple had changed to the idol of Lord Shiva. The priest was greatly astonished and startled. He asked pardon and prayed to Appayya Dikshita to change the idol again to that of Lord Vishnu.

Kanaka Das was a great devotee of Lord Krishna in Udipi, in the district of South Kanara, in South India. He was not allowed to enter the temple on account of his low birth. Kanaka

Das went round the temple and saw a small window at the back of the temple. He seated himself in front of the window. He was soon lost in singing songs in praise of Lord Krishna. Many people gathered round him. They were very powerfully attracted by the sweet melody of his music and the depth of his devotion. Lord Krishna turned round to enable Kanaka Das to get His Darshan. The priests were struck with wonder. Even today, pilgrims are shown the window and the place where Kanaka Das sat and sang.

The idol is the same as the Lord, for it is the vehicle of the expression of the Mantra-consciousness which is the Deity. The devotee should regard the idol in the temple with the same attitude of respect and reverence that he would evince should the Lord Himself appear before him in person and speak to him in articulate sound.

Vedanta and Idol Worship

A pseudo-Vedantin feels ashamed to bow before an idol in the temple. He feels that his Advaita (attitude of oneness) will evaporate if he prostrates himself. Study the lives of the reputed Tamil saints—Appar, Sundarar, Sambandhar, and others. They all had the highest Advaitic realisation. They saw Lord Shiva everywhere. Yet, they visited all temples of Shiva, prostrated before the idol and sang hymns which are on record till today. The sixty-three Nayanar saints solely practised the worship of the idols of Shiva and attained God-consciousness thereby. They swept the floor of the temple, collected flowers, made garlands for the Lord and put lights in the temple. They were illiterate, but attained the highest realisation. They were practical Yogis and their hearts were saturated with pure devotion. They were embodiments of Karma Yoga. All practised the Yoga of synthesis. The idol was all consciousness to them, not a mere block of stone.

Madhusudana Swami, who had Advaitic realisation, who beheld oneness of the Self and who had the feeling of oneness with all creation, was intensely attached to the form of Lord Krishna with flute in His hands.

Tulsidas realised the all-pervading essence. He had Cosmic Consciousness. He communed with the all-pervading, formless Lord. And yet, his passion for Lord Rama with bow in His hand did not vanish. When he was at Brindavan, beholding the idol of Lord Krishna with flute in hand, he said, “I will not bow my head to this form.” At once Lord Krishna’s form assumed the form of Lord Rama. Then only he bowed his head.

Tukaram also had the same cosmic experience as that of Tulsidas. He sings in one of his songs: “I see my Lord all-pervading, just as sweetness pervades the sugar-cane”, and yet, he always speaks of his Lord Vittala of Pandharpur with His hands on the hips. Mirabai also realised her identity with the all-pervading Krishna, and yet she was not tired of repeating again and again, “My Giridhar Nagar!”

From the above facts, we can clearly infer that one can realise God through worship of the idol; that the idol is a great aid for the realisation of the Lord in His all-pervading, formless aspect also; that the worship of the idol is very essential for the purpose of concentration and meditation in the beginning; and that such a worship is not in any way a hindrance to the attainment of God-realisation.

Those who vehemently attack idol worship are groping in extreme darkness and ignorance, and have no real knowledge of worship. They enter into unnecessary, vain debates and discussions against idol worship to show that they are learned persons. They have not done any real Sadhana at all. They are persons who have made idle talking and tall talk their habit and profession. They have ruined themselves. They have unsettled the minds of countless persons and ruined them also. The whole world worships idols alone in some form or another.

The mind is disciplined in the beginning by fixing it on a concrete object or symbol. When it is rendered steady and subtle, it can be fixed on an abstract idea such as *Aham Brahma Asmi*. As one advances in meditation, the form melts in the formless and one becomes absorbed in the formless essence. The worship of idols is, therefore, not contrary to the view of Vedanta. It is rather an aid to the highest Vedantic realisation.

Conclusion

Idol worship is only the beginning of religion. Certainly it is not its end, The same Hindu scriptures which prescribe idol worship for beginners, also speak of meditation on the Infinite or the Absolute and contemplation on the significance of *Tat Twam Asi* for advanced aspirants.

There are different grades of worship. The supreme state is Self-realisation. Second in rank is meditation on the Supreme Self. The third is the worship of symbols. The fourth is the performance of rituals and pilgrimages to holy places. The *Shastras*, the Gurus, are like kind mothers. They take hold of the hands of the aspirants and take them step by step till they are established in the highest superconscious state. Glory to the Hindu Rishis who take aspirants from the lower to the higher form of worship!

Beloved children of the Lord! Shed your ignorant disbelief this moment. Enshrine supreme, unshakable, living faith in your heart this very moment. Recall to your mind the glorious examples of saints of the past. They believed, and they reaped the rich spiritual harvests. You too can enjoy great peace, happiness and prosperity here, and attain Him here and now if you have faith in idol worship.