

Durga Puja: Worship Of The Divine Mother

by Swami Tathagatananda

Every autumn during Navaratri, a great vibration of love and joy is felt throughout India. It is the time of fullness, of worship of the Divine Mother, who comes to earth. The Divine Mother is worshipped as Durga throughout Bengal during the four days of Durga-puja. Devotees offer their worship so ardently in this unsurpassed festival as to reach the highest peaks of fervent spiritual devotion, joy and delight. This festival is a virtual testimony of the social and cultural benefits that spiritual joy brings to the community that worships God.

We conceive of God in a human way and address Him as a Mother and Daughter. In the Durga-Puja ceremony in Bengal, therefore, devotees address the Divine Mother as Mother as well as Daughter, who visits her parental home annually for four days and thereby makes everybody happy. When She departs, thousands of ardent devotees actually weep with great pathos as they do for their own daughter when she leaves for her husband's home.

MOTHER OF THE UNIVERSE

We can take refuge in God as Mother. We find the following prayer to Mother Durga in the *Mahanarayana Upanishad* (2. 2):

I take refuge in Her, the Goddess Durga, who is fiery in luster and radiant with ardency, who is the Power belonging to the Supreme, who manifests Himself manifoldly, who is the Power residing in actions and their fruits, rendering them efficacious (or the Power that is supplicated to by the devotees for the fruition of their work). O Thou Goddess skilled in saving, Thou takest us across difficulties excellently well. Our salutations to Thee.

Divine Mother is all-inclusive. She is the Mother of the Universe as well as the loving Mother we adore. Three eyes are set in Her captivating face, which radiates like the full moon. Her crowning emblem is the half-moon, yet She holds a trident in Her hand astride a white lion. The Divine Mother is the boundless benefactress of grace to Her devotee. She wields weapons in order to destroy the wickedness of our life, which creates obstructions to our spiritual growth. Although a mother loves her children, still, she spansks them for their benefit. The Divine Mother has a terrible aspect to create awe in the minds of the wicked people and also, at the same time, She is sweet and benign to

inspire loving adoration from her good children. She is duly worshipped in both aspects. One hymn praises Her benign Power, saying, “To Durga, the gracious and ever-benign, to the ever-auspicious One, the manifestor of all the worlds, I offer my respectful obeisance.” With words of humility and reverence, another hymn praises both aspects: “Obeisance to Thee, O Divine Mother, Durga, the benignant and yet terrific roaring. . . . Thou art power, the dark night of destruction.” Both aspects, understood correctly, reveal Her benign redeeming grace. She destroys but to save.

The Hymn to the Divine Mother in The Devi Mahatmyam (Chandi XI: 10-12) says, *sristi sthitivina shanam*, “[Thou art] creation, preservation and dissolution,” and *paritrama parayane sarvasyarti hare devi*, [Thou art] the remover of misery of all, full of eagerness to save.” The Divine Mother gently guides Her children to attain moksha, which Shri Ramakrishna says is Her Power of Vidya-maya.

Swami Vivekananda says:

Mother is the first manifestation of power and is considered a higher idea than father. With the name of Mother comes the idea of Sakti, Divine Energy and omnipotence, just as the baby believes its mother to be all-powerful, able to do anything. The Divine Mother is the latent power sleeping in us; without worshipping Her we can never know ourselves. All-merciful, all-powerful, omnipresent are attributes of Divine Mother. She is the sum total of the energy in the universe. Every manifestation of power in the universe is “Mother.” She is life, She is intelligence, She is Love. She is in the universe yet separate from it. She is a person and can be seen and known (as Shri Ramakrishna saw and knew Her). Established in the idea of Mother, we can do anything. She quickly answers prayer.

She can show Herself to us in any form at any moment. Divine Mother can have form (Rupa) and name (Nama) or name without form; and as we worship Her in these various aspects we can rise to pure Being, having neither form nor name.

The sum total of all the cells in an organism is one person; so each soul is like one cell and the sum of them is God, and beyond that is the Absolute. The sea calm is the Absolute; the same sea in waves is Divine Mother. She is time, space, and causation. God is Mother and has two natures, the conditioned and the unconditioned. As the former, She is God, nature and soul (man). As the latter, She is unknown and unknowable. Out of the Unconditioned came the trinity—God, nature and soul, the triangle of existence . . . A bit of Mother, a drop, was Krishna, another was Buddha, another was Christ . . . Worship Her if you want love and wisdom. (C. W., VII: 26-7)

ANNAPURNA AND LALITA

Generally, Mother is worshipped in India in Her two aspects of Annapurna and Lalita-Mahatripurasundari. Shri Shankara composed a devout hymn praising the power, beauty and glory of the Divine Mother as Annapurna, the “Giver of Food.” “Food” is Mother’s boon to worldly persons and sadhakas or spiritual aspirants alike. She is Avidya Maya to

worldly persons and Vidya-Maya to the sadhakas. Shankara says, “O Mother Annapurna, O Great Goddess, Presiding Deity of Kasi, O Receptacle of Mercy, grant me alms . . . that I may be firmly established in knowledge and dispassion.”

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE DIVINE MOTHER

Shri Ramakrishna worshipped the Divine Mother in the form of Holy Mother. Sarada Devi was the presiding Deity or *Sangha-Janani* of the Ramakrishna Order. During 1901, in a mysterious way, the Divine Mother was worshipped at Belur Math with all festivity and éclat. Swami Brahmananda saw a vision of Mother Durga coming from Dakshineswar on the Ganges. At that very time Swamiji was also coming from Calcutta. After reaching Belur Math, Swamiji felt a desire to worship Mother Durga. Holy Mother was specially invited on that sacred occasion and Sankalpa of the Durga puja was done in her name. From that time, Durga-puja is being done in Belur Math and other branch centers in the same manner.

To accept God as Mother is, according to Shri Ramakrishna, the final word in spiritual striving. It is indeed, to some at least, the smoothest and surest way of having God-vision. Shri Ramakrishna never condemned any form of approach to God but insisted that the one of a child to its mother was the purest, safest and best. Let us accept any attitude towards God according to our mental predilections, and develop the helplessness, restlessness, intense longing, faith and surrendering attitude of a child for its mother’s arms. Sincere prayer never goes in vain. Through genuine prayer we may get spiritual illumination.