

The Meaning Of Durga Puja

by Swami Tathagatananda

We are taking up the subject of the ritualistic worship of God as Mother, practiced throughout the ages in India by endless streams of Her devotees. Renewed interest in the profound significance of this worship by Indian devotees and by members of the general population who are sincerely seeking guidance into the meaning of faith and religion in their lives must be satisfied. Hence, this essay is offered with all humility to the Divine Mother during the auspicious period of Her worship known as Durga puja.

BRAHMAN AND SAKTI: ONENESS OF THE CHANGELESS AND THE CHANGEFUL

Modern science accepts that everything has come out of consciousness.

Vedanta accepts Absolute Brahman as the final ground behind this world of name and form. In and beyond the known universe is an invisible, intelligent, self-existent, eternal, all pervading, indwelling, super-human Being commonly called God. This One without a second is Impersonal and Transcendent as well as Personal and Immanent. Shri Ramakrishna says, "He who is attributeless also has attributes. He who is Brahman is also Sakti. When thought of as inactive, He is called Brahman, and when thought of as the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, He is called the Primordial Energy, Kali" (*Gospel*, p. 107). The changeless Essence and changeful Immanence are identical, indivisible and complimentary. Impersonal God manifests Itself as the Personal God, the Soul and the world of multiplicity through Its infinite Power or Sakti. Shri Ramakrishna says:

Brahman and Sakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn. If you see the fire, you must recognize its power to burn also. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn, nor can you think of the power to burn without fire. You cannot conceive of the sun's rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without it's rays . . . You cannot think of the milk without the whiteness, and again, you cannot think of the whiteness without the milk.

Thus one cannot think of Brahman without Sakti, or of Sakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the Absolute without the Relative, or of the Relative without the Absolute.

The Primordial Power is ever at play. She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This Power is called Kali. Kali is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily

Kali. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of it as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call it Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call it Kali or Sakti. The Reality is one and the same; the difference is in name and form. (*Gospel*, pp. 134-5)

One fundamental Reality pervades and perpetuates all. It irradiates our mind with the light of consciousness with unbroken continuity. Its Power makes cosmic forces possible, animating, quickening and interpenetrating them all. Transcendent God is equally present in everything, from the far-off nebulae to the tiny flower at hand, whose light and fragrance are mere modulations of Eternal beauty. A feeling for both God and His Power is indispensable for a healthy and full spiritual life. Though the Absolute Being is formless, nameless, and cannot be comprehended by the senses, through meditation with a purified mind and heart, It can be experienced in our heart through worship of the Personal God.

The concept of the Personal God is no empty theory. God is the ever-vivifying and loving Protector and Preserver, the all-harmonizing, merciful Redeemer and everlasting benevolent Guide. Shri Ramakrishna in our time gave eloquent testimony to this verifiable truth. His “living experience” can be realized by anyone. During the days leading up to Vijaya-Dassami we may turn to God wholly in our hearts for His redeeming grace in our lives.

SAKTI OF BRAHMAN IS PARA-PRAKRITI, THE DIVINE MOTHER

India has long upheld that Nature is the Mother of God, in any sense that we think of God as being conscious. Therefore, Hindus contemplate Sakti as the Divine Mother, Divine Father or Lord. “Wherever there is the expression of any force or power in the universe, there is the manifestation of the eternal Prakriti or the Divine Mother—Mother, because that energy contains the phenomenal Universe, projects it into space and preserves it when it is born,” the ancient texts tell us. “Thou art the Para-Prakriti, the divine energy of the Supreme Being. Of Thee is born everything of the Universe; therefore Thou art the Mother of the Universe.” Para-Prakriti united with the Purusha or Absolute Reality creates the Universe. “Mother of the Universe” is a way of referring to the inscrutable Primordial or Supreme Nature or Sakti and Its unique manifestations as Durga, Kali and Devi to guide and protect us, to remove all obstacles and to show us Her Vision. The benevolent power of Sakti naturally brings to mind this concept of mother, loved by her child as the embodiment of unselfish love and wisdom. Vision of that Power is possible only through the grace of Sakti.

Sakti is Infinite Love as well as Infinite Power, causing awe and wonder. The creative force gets Herself expressed in infinite ways, in infinite spheres. Whatever lives, moves and breathes is Her manifestation. The entire superstructure of science develops on the foundation of Sakti. Matter, energy, sound, light, heat, electricity, etc.—all these are modifications of the same Primordial Energy. To the physicist, Sakti is the inherent active force of matter. To the psychologist and biologist, Sakti animates and enlivens the

living organism. The mystic alone obtains the ineffable divine experience of unity in diversity through Her grace.

MOTHERHOOD OF GOD IN HINDUISM

Hindus purposefully think of God as Mother. Sakti expresses the purpose and energy behind the one, whole and harmonious life of the Universe. We find that this phenomenal world is a manifestation of the Sakti or Power of the quiescent Brahman; therefore, the Divine is called “Mother.” Wherever motherhood is highly developed, we find greater peacefulness, sobriety, healthfulness, overall development as well as spiritual and cultural creativity and joy. From time immemorial, chastity and motherhood have had great significance in India. These two qualities are profoundly attuned to the mother’s capacity to give birth. Mothers honoring their true nature have been nourishing their children for the sake of spiritual fulfillment. In this respect, Shri Ramakrishna permits meditation on the form of one’s own mother: “Yes, the mother should be adored. She is indeed an embodiment of Brahman” (*Gospel*, p. 128).

Vedanta says that the Absolute Reality is possessed of inscrutable, mysterious power, will and wisdom.

WORSHIP OF GOD AS MOTHER

Shri Ramakrishna says, “The means of realizing God are ecstasy of love and devotion—that is, one must love God. He who is Brahman is addressed as the Mother” (*Gospel*, p. 107). The exclusive worship of God in the West as a loving Father awaits the universal dimension of the mother-heart of love that worship of God as Mother brings. Shri Ramakrishna sheds light on the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God:

He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views—the Sakta, the Vaishnava, the Vedanta—have that One for their center. He who is formless is, again, endowed with form. It is He who appears in different forms. “The attributeless Brahman is my Father. God with attributes is my Mother. Whom shall I blame? Whom shall I praise? The two pans of the scales are equally heavy.”

He who is described in the Vedas is also described in the Tantras and the Puranas. All of them speak about the one Satchidananda. The Nitya and the Lila are the two aspects of the one Reality. It is described in the Vedas as “Om Satchidananda Brahman,” in the Tantras as “Om Satchidananda Siva,” the ever-pure Siva, and in the Puranas as “Om Satchidananda Krishna.” All the scriptures, the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Tantras, speak only of one Satchidananda. It is stated in the Vaishnava scriptures that it is Krishna Himself who has become Kali. (*Gospel*, p. 490).

***THE DEVI MAHATMYAM* HYMN OF THE GLORY OF THE DIVINE MOTHER**

p. 331, 2; 369, then 366-7

MOTHERHOOD OF GOD AS CONCEIVED IN THE WEST

p. 328-32

Man has always been directly or indirectly inclined to worship God as Mother. For over two thousand years, this essential impulse has been seriously thwarted in the West by the dogma of the Semitic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christian and Mohammedan leaders ordered the systematic destruction of cultural evidence of Mother-worship dating from Neolithic times in the Mediterranean region.

At the very least, Mother-worship was undermined and reduced to the cult of Mary, who is an intercessor, not divine, according to official church doctrine. Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109, established that “Salvation is easier through Mary than through Jesus.” San Filippo de Neri perpetuated the doctrine when he wrote, “There is no more excellent way to obtain graces from God than to seek them through Mary, because her divine son cannot refuse her anything.” Though suppressed, indirectly, Mother-worship was also glorified. Barnadino of Siena declared, “At the command of Mary all obey, even God. This is because when we have recourse to the Mother, and she prays for us, her prayers—prayers of a mother—are more irresistible than our own.” Pope John Paul I said, “God is father, above all Mother.” Hindus can well appreciate such remarks from their own worshipful perspective.

At the very worst, Mother-worship was rejected altogether. Even so, ample literary evidence demonstrates that the idea of Mother-worship has had an impact on human thought in the West. From Goethe’s last line in *Faust* which reads, “The Eternal Feminine leads us on and on” to American Transcendentalist Walt Whitman’s song to the “Dark Mother, always gliding near with soft feet” to come “unflinching” to the poet in *Leaves of Grass*, God as Mother is being deeply explored. Today, Christian women of all denominations, Jewish women and Islamic women are expressing the deeply felt need to correct male predominance in religion and remove gender bias by seeking, demanding or even forcing their entrance to the religious hierarchy by establishing churches or temples of their own.

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA AND THE WORSHIP OF DIVINE MOTHER KALI

More than twelve hundred years ago, Shri Shankaracharya emphasized the concept of God as Mother in India. In the modern age, Shri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda appeared to exemplify God as Mother to the suffering humanity greatly in need of the Power of God’s supreme universal love. The pulse of that Power and Nature behind the universe is also worshipped as the transcendent Brahman in Its triple designation of Om Tat Sat. Shri Ramakrishna worshipped God as Divine Mother Kali with prema-bhakti, ecstatic love of God. Through his Divine Mother Kali, he realized his identity with both the Personal and Impersonal aspects of Brahman. Shri Ramakrishna says:

When I think of the Supreme Being as inactive, neither creating, nor preserving, nor destroying, I call Him Brahman or Purusha, the Impersonal God. When I think of Him as

active, creating, preserving, and destroying, I call Him Sakti or Maya or Prakriti or Kali, the Personal God. He who is the Absolute Existence, Intelligence and Bliss is also the all-knowing, all-intelligent, and all-blissful Mother of the universe. But the distinction between them does not mean difference. The Personal and the Impersonal are the same Being, in the same way as milk and its whiteness, or the diamond and its luster, or the serpent and its undulations. It is impossible to conceive of the one without the other. The Divine Mother and Brahman are one.

REDEEMING LOVE OF MOTHER THROUGH WORSHIP OF THE AVATARA IN THE KALI YUGA

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Shri Ramakrishna has been praised as the “Beacon in the sea of darkness.” Worshipping Him as the Avatara in the Kali Yuga redeems us and liberates us from bondage.

SHRI RAMAKRISHNA’S WORSHIP OF GOD AS KALI

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Shri Ramakrishna was inspired to worship God as Kali. The whole universe, with its animate and inanimate objects, is an evolute of Sakti or Kali. She is guiding the process of evolution even as the human mother guides her child. Shri Ramakrishna experienced the presence of the Divine Mother in everything. He saw that She was all and that all is in Her. Her love is the source of everything, by Her love all is sustained and in Her love all is absorbed. His Divine Mother Kali is love Itself. This is what Shri Ramakrishna experienced:

And lo! The whole scene, doors, windows, the temple itself, vanished. It seemed as if nothing existed anymore. Instead I saw an ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling. In whatever direction I turned, great luminous waves were rising. They bore down upon me with a loud roar as if to swallow me up. In an instant they were upon me. They broke over me, they engulfed me. I was suffocated. I lost consciousness and I fell . . . How I passed that day and the next I know not. Round me rolled an ocean of ineffable joy. And in the depths of my being I was conscious of the presence of the Divine Mother. (Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master*, Swami Jagadananda, trans. [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952], p. 143)

SIGNIFICANCE OF DURGA PUJA TODAY

Every autumn, the Divine Mother is worshipped throughout Bengal during the four days of Durga-puja, its most popular form of Sakti-worship. 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.

God as Mother is all-inclusive. She is the Mother of the Universe. 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. Before the forms obstructing the devotee's spiritual progress and all wicked oppressors of the good She inspires fear; Her terrible aspect strikes them with awe and wonder. 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 complaisance, 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, *sristhi sthitivina shanam*, "[Thou art] creation, preservation and dissolution," and *paritrana 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.

VALUE OF LOVE CONQUERS ALL FEAR

P. 371, 413, 410-18

Historical investigation of the female goddess and Mother-worship by followers of the Women's Liberation Movement may actually be the mask over a true preoccupation with the idea of man's divinity introduced by Swamiji at Chicago's Parliament of World Religions. The initial extreme challenge to male domination by the leaders of the Women's Liberation Movement matured into a second stage, which "cannot be seen in terms of women alone [separate or equal with men]" but rather as one which "involves coming to new terms with the family—new terms with love and work . . . men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage [which] has to transcend the battle for equal power in Institutions."