Publisher's Desk: God of Fear/God of Love
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PUBLISHERâ□□S DESK

God of Fear/God of Love

Love is the basis of worship in all Hindu denominations, expressed through bhakti yoga toward oneâ□□s chosen Deity

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

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ON A RECENT TEACHING JOURNEY I MET Ravindran, who was raised in India but had

lived in the West for many years. He was openly grappling with lingering questions about beliefs he learned while growing up. He shared that Hindus in his region feared that if they didnâ□□t regularly and properly propitiate the Deities of their village, the Gods and Goddesses would be upset, and this would cause negative events in their life. Thus, they were kept busy appeasing a multiplicity of Deities that had been worshiped for generations. The premise of this type of worship is fear, specifically that if we lapse in our ritual obligations we will be punished, or we will suffer, in some way.

I assured Ravindran that the great Gods of Hinduism do not live in a consciousness of wrath, hurtfulness, judgment, retaliation or pettiness. They are beings of love and light, showering their blessings on each of us, regardless of our failings, frailties and omissions. With this belief as its cornerstone, Hinduism is a joy-based religion in which one never need fear God, never worry that God will be offended or exact some punishment if we do not perfectly perform our puja. Worship in its highest sense is an outpouring of love. God is love and nothing but love.

My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, affirmed: â□□Hinduism is such a joyous religion, freed of all the mental encumbrances that are prevalent in the various Western faiths. It is freed of the notion of a vengeful God. It is freed of the notion of eternal suffering. It is freed from the notion of original sin. It is freed from the notion of a single spiritual path, a One Way.â□□

Ravindran told me more about his villageâ□□s belief. When negative events occurred, such as a death of a child, a flood or a sudden illness, the elders looked for lapses in the mandatory rites, believing that the Deities must be penalizing them for neglecting some aspect of the worship. He hoped that a better understanding of the nature of the Gods would help overcome such superstition.

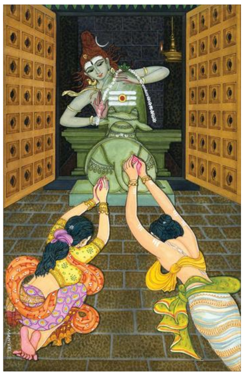
Hindu philosophy teaches that all events in our life, be they positive or negative, are the result of actions we performed in past lives. A distressing situation is a self-created misfortune, not a punishment from God. Life itself, taking place within the realm of duality, is a playground of natural forces, a classroom for embodied souls to experience joy and sorrow, elation and depression, success and failure, health and sickness, good times and bad. The divine beings who reside in the deeper realms of consciousness are always there to assist embodied souls in their journey through samsara. Puja rituals are performed not to propitiate them or mollify their wrath, but to adore them and invoke their blessings and guidance.

Ritual appeasement does have a scriptural purpose, to protect against the negative energies and efforts of astral entities who actually do seek to upset the lives of embodied souls. Gurudeva taught that the best way to guard against such malevolent beings is to build a positive spiritual force field by invoking the protection of higher and more powerful benevolent beingsâ□□the Gods of Hinduism. Astral entities are powerless where there is harmony, cleanliness and close communion with the Gods and their devas.

On that same journey a teenage boy, leaning forward in earnest, asked, â□□Do I have to worship all the Deities in the temple, or can I focus on just Lord Ganesha? I am finding that by keeping a singular focus I am getting much closer to Him. Iâ□□m beginning to form a connection that Iâ□□ve never had with any of the other Deities.â□□

I replied in the affirmative, that it is fine to focus on just one Deity. In fact, this is the pattern followed by most Hindus. However, it is only fitting to honor and acknowledge all the Divinities when in the temple. I shared, â□□When attending puja to another Deity, worship sincerely and show deep respect; but you need not strive to feel as close to that Deity as you do to Lord Ganesha.â□□

In Sanskrit, the Deity of oneâ□□s most pious attention is called Ishta Devata, literally, â□□cherished or chosen Deity.â□□ Vaishnavas may choose among many Divine forms: Vishnu, Balaji, Krishna, Radha, Rama, Lakshmi, Hanuman and Narasimha, as well as the Shaligrama (a black-colored fossil found in the sacred river Gandaki). Smartas traditionally choose their Ishta from among six Deities: Siva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya, Ganesha and Kumara (or any of their traditional forms). Shaktas, who worship the Divine as the Goddess Shakti, may focus on one among Her many forms, from the furious Kali to the benign and graceful Parvati or Ambika. Saivites direct their worship primarily to Siva, as represented by the Sivalinga, Nataraja and Ardhanarishvara. Many Saivites choose Lord Karttikeya, also known as Murugan or Skanda, as their Ishta Devata. My Gurudeva, a staunch Saivite, taught us to worship Siva as the Supreme God while starting with the worship of Lord Ganesha, who is â□□the closest God to the material plane of consciousness, most easily contacted and most able to assist us in our day-to-day life and concerns.â□□



Worship based on love: Two devotees, husband and wife, prostrate before Lord Siva in total surrender, or prapatti. Their love of God brings them into a profound proximity to the Divine.
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An analogy to friends is helpful. Teenagers have many friends, but it is common to have one best friend with whom we share the most intimate and personal details of our life. Having an Ishta Devata is like that, and the feeling we should have toward that Divinity is the same as the feeling we have for our best friend. Holding a singular focus helps us to draw closer and closer to that Deity.

Another approach to understanding the Deityâs compassionate nature, and in the process ridding ourself of any lingering fear, is to think of the God or Goddess as the parent and ourself as the child. In fact, the Deity is the perfect parent, because no matter what we do, He/She always sends us blessings and love. When we make mistakes, He never becomes angry or punishes us. The Deityâs love is perfect love, existing at all times, in all circumstances for all souls. In developing a closeness with the Deity, we eventually discover and bask in that perfect love. The Tirumantiram affirms this idea: âThe ignorant foolishly say that love and Siva are two, but none of them knows that love alone is Siva. When men know that love and Siva are the same, love as Siva they ever remain.â

In giving talks on the topic of love of God, I often share the similarity of the Vaishnava and Saiva concepts. In the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, for example, bhakti is seen as progressing through five stages: neutrality toward God, servitude to God, friendship with God, parental feelings for God, and relating to God as a lover to the beloved. Saivism expresses a parallel concept. The first stage is called the dasa marga, âpath of servitude,â with the soul relating to God as servant to master. In the second stage, satputra marga, our relationship is as a

child to his parents. In the third stage, sakha marga, God is like a friend. In the fourth stage of maturity, called san marga, or â□□true path,â□□ God is our dearest beloved. Both denominations emphasize the soulâ□□s coming ever closer to God, in stages that begin with bhakti yoga, which leads the devotee to an intense love of God. Some common bhakti practices are:

- shravana: Listening to sacred texts and stories of God.
- kirtana: Singing devotional hymns and bhajans.
- smarana: Remembering the presence and name of the Divine. This includes mantra repetition.
- pada-sevana: Service to the holy feet, which includes serving humanity.
- archana: Attending ritual worship in the temple and attending or conducting worship in oneâ□□s home shrine.
- vandana: Prostrating to the Deity.
- atma-nivedana: Complete self-surrender.

Bhakti yoga develops qualities that make communion possible, such as love, selflessness and purity, leading to self-effacement and surrender to God. It is in this idea of the need for surrender, prapatti, that the members of all sects merge in oneness. We know that we have attained prapatti when we effortless know that everything that happens is due to the grace of God and not our own actions. There is no trace of fear in this mode of worship.

In a letter he wrote to a young man, our paramaguru, Yogaswami (1872â□□1964), explained the unitive perspective to be held not only toward God, but toward everything.

â□□I am with you and you are with me. There is no distance between us. I am you. You are I. What is there to fear? Look! I exist as you. Then what must you do? You must love. Whom? Everyone. To speak more clearly, your very nature is love. Not only you, but all are pervaded by love. But there is no â□□all,â□□ for you alone exist. All are you!â□□