

The Place of Japa and Prayer in Christianity.

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If I am not mistaken, *Japa* may be distinguished into either the muttering of a particular divine name or the muttering of certain mantras. As far as I know, there is no practice of repeating Christ's name again and again as a *mantra*, to awaken the heart and the inner powers, as an invocation and carrier of spiritual power, unless it were part of the advanced and half-secret meditation practices of some religious Order. But the practice of calling upon the Lord with a number of sweet names was and is very prevalent among mystics and devotees. In Christianity much stress was always laid by the mystics on the value of prayer as spontaneously rising from the heart. The Church, however, always recommended the muttering of certain prayers, to be repeated again and again for a certain number of times, with the help of a rosary. Such muttering is also considered as an important penance. It is prescribed for the spiritual benefit of an individual worshipper, or for the benefit of another person, or for the purification and spiritualization of a particular place of worship, for instance, a church. In some places there is an incessant muttering of prayers. In some monasteries and convents it is the practice that monks or nuns are praying in groups of at least two or three. After hours of praying they are relieved by another batch. This kind of prayer makes exactly the same impression on the listener as Hindu *Japa*, and may I think be called by that name, though the muttering may not be that of one particular divine name or *mantra*, but may consist of the incessant repetition of prayers like "Our Father"

and "Ave Maria" (prayer to the Mother of God) and other prayers. Those are mantras with as great a spiritual power as Hindu mantras.

Jesus of Nazareth did not recommend special prayers. In the only case of a prayer he gave, the "Our Father", in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "pray ye after this manner", perhaps not intending at all that it should be repeated exactly like that for all time to come, but wishing to present a model. Yet the "Our Father" is full of secret meaning, and many can affirm its high mantramistic value.

The Jews were fond of *Japa*, or rather of a louder variety of repetition of their scriptures: The Synagogues were (and are) full of the sounds of loud muttering. Prayer had become a public affair whereas it should be a secret conversation of the heart of the devotee and God. Therefore Jesus said, also in the Sermon on the Mount: "When ye pray, ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to pray publicly, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thine inner chamber, and having shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret and thy Father which seeth in secret shall recompense thee."

That Jesus condemned prayer which was mere lip-work, we gather from a saying like the following, also from the Sermon on the Mount: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that

doeth the will of my Father which is in Heaven." He says this in connection with developments within Christianity in the far future. Those days may well have come now: "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.....A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.....Therefore by their fruits you shall know them.....Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out devils, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them: I never knew you, depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

As regards praying and preaching, Jesus the Master upheld spontaneity and condemned mind-made prayers and sermons: "Take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." (Gospel of St. Matthew). To him prayer and watchfulness of spirit were the spring and principle of human life: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak." (Gospel of St. Matthew), meaning that the hardest thing in life is to bring conformity between sattvic good intentions and rajasic or tamasic impulses to action. Because of this difficulty the popular saying arose: The way to hell is paved with good intentions! It is prayer alone which may make the good intentions bear fruit in actual life. And it is watchfulness alone which will open man's eyes unto Divinity, which was his in the beginning: "The Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority

to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore, for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at cock-crowing, or in the morning. Lest coming suddenly he finds you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch!" (Gospel of St. Mark).

To many of the great Christian mystics prayer was such an all-absorbing and evident thing that they forgot to write about it. For instance, St. Augustine wrote his Confessions largely in the form of prayer. Some of it is directed to the readers of his Confessions for their benefit, some is in the form of philosophical speculations, but most of it is an outpouring of his soul to God. "Narrow is the mansion of my soul, enlarge Thou it, that Thou mayest enter in. It is ruinous, repair Thou it. It has that within which must offend Thine eyes; I confess and know it. But who shall cleanse it or to whom should I cry, save Thee?" "Oh, that I might repose on Thee! Oh, that Thou wouldst enter into my heart and inebriate it.....Speak, that I may hear. Behold, Lord, my heart is before Thee, open Thou the ears thereof, and say unto my soul, I am thy salvation. After this voice let me haste, and take hold on Thee. Hide not Thy face from me. Let me die—lest I die—only let me know Thy face." And another time he realizes: "Thou, being the Good which needeth no good, art ever at rest, because Thy rest is Thou Thyself. And what man can teach man to understand this? or what Angel an Angel? or what Angel, a man? Let it be asked of Thee, sought in Thee, knocked for at Thee; so, so shall it be received, so shall it be found, so shall it be opened. Amen." (Confessions).

There is a mistaken conception that prayer means an asking or begging

for certain benefits. It may be so in the case of the unevolved or of the commercially-minded, who promise things to God in return for benefits to be received. But it was certainly not the case as regards the great Christian mystics. The only asking was for the grace of God, as we see from the above-quoted words of St. Augustine. In the conception "prayer" was often felt rather the divine response than the aspiring words of the devotee. Or rather, it was realized that prayer in the truest and deepest sense meant complete unity and supreme realization. Doktor Tauler, the great German mystic, for instance, wrote: "He goeth into God, uniteth himself to Him, and God leadeth man with Himself into Himself, and thus he hath an everlasting entrance into God. He is indeed quite encompassed by God, so that he loseth himself and knoweth nothing more save God only. And thus sinketh he, and is drowned in the fathomless ocean of the Godhead; he liveth in God as a fish in the sea, and thus as the sea encompasseth the fish, so the soul is encompassed by God and hasteneth to its aim, where she shall eternally abide." The great mystic Suso wrote from the standpoint of *Bhakti*: "Earthly friends must needs endure to be distinct and separate from those whom they love; but Thou, O fathomless sweetness of all true love, meltest Thyself fully into the essence of his soul, that nothing of Thee remains outside, but Thou art joined and united most lovingly with Thy beloved."

Spinoza, the great Dutch philosopher, though a Jew and not generally regarded as a Christian mystic, may well be quoted in their company. He did away with the idea of duality altogether, nevertheless remaining a devotee in his heart. "We can love God, but it would be a contradiction to say that He, the One that contains

us, returns our love; it is better to say that the love we devote to Him is part of that infinite love that God devotes to Himself." And even the humblest Christian bhaktas like that foremost and greatest of devotees, brother Thomas of Kempen in Holland, hinted about the mystery of Oneness and the primeval word: "He to whom the word everlasting speaketh is sped and delivered from a multitude of opinions. Of one word came all things, and all things speak one word; that is the beginning that speaketh to us. No man without him understandeth or judgeth righteously. He to whom all things are one, and who draweth all things to one and seeth all things in one, may be stable in heart and peaceably abide in God." (Imitation of Christ). He also often expressed the idea that teachers and prophets and their words and symbols are nought compared with the direct teaching of God: "Blissful is he whom truth herself teacheth not by figures and voices but as it is!" "Let none of the prophets speak to me: but speak thou, Lord God, inspirer and illuminer of prophets; for thou alone without them mayest teach me perfectly, but they without thee shall nothing profit. They may sound words well but they give no spirit." (Imitation of Christ).

Master Eckhart, the great German mystic, gave the various stages or depths of prayer: "There are three kinds of men see God. The first see Him in faith, they know no more of Him than what they can make out through a partition. The second behold God in the light of grace, but only as the answer to their longings, as giving them sweetness, devotion.....The third kind see Him in the divine Light." Words must have been brought to silence and forms to nothingness before God may be realized: "There must be perfect stillness in the soul before God can whisper His word into

it, before the light of God can shine in the soul and transform the soul into God. When passions are stilled and all worldly desires silenced, then the word of God can be heard in the soul." St. Angela of Foligno mentioned three stages of prayer also. Threefold is the transformation of the soul. The first is when the soul uses all its endeavour to imitate the life of Christ, the second is when the soul is united to God and loves God, the which, however, it is able to explain and set forth in words. The third is when the soul is so entirely made one with God and God with it that it knoweth and enjoyeth with God the most high things, the which cannot possibly be set forth in words nor imagined save by him who feeleth them."

Perhaps because in most Christian Churches stress was generally laid more on discipline and practice, on ceremony and dogma, on tradition and authority, there was a tendency on the part of the truly great sons of Christ towards freedom, liberality and tolerance. The great seers and mystics naturally saw beyond the limiting bars of creed, and generally, if not always, experienced the bliss of union beyond the practices and rituals recommended to or enjoined upon the average devotee. They always pointed to the glory of divine grace, as a reply to the spontaneous outpouring of the soul. Again and again and again the divine contact is renewed. As the great mystic Ruysbroeck wrote, "When the interior and contemplative man has followed after his own eternal image, he is illumined by divine truth and partakes anew every instant of the eternal birth, and by means of the light he enters into divine contemplation. And from this comes to pass a loving union, wherein, above all else, our eternal beatitude resides."

Christianity, like every other religion, has its mystics and its priests,

its lovers and its ritualists, its bhaktas and its scientists. Everywhere the bhaktas will tend to uphold only spontaneous prayer, free from form and ritual. Everywhere the priests will proclaim the necessity and use of mantras and rituals. Perhaps the latter category sometimes forgets a little that unnecessary help is a waste of time and energy, like the use of crutches to a man who has become strong of legs. Perhaps the mystics sometimes tend to forget to some extent that the science of words and ritual has been developed by divine grace for the good of man, and holds many treasures to those interested in it in the right spirit. If proper care is taken that the science is only used as means to reach the supreme end, and never serves lower ends or develops ends in itself, every devotee will greatly benefit by it. Wisdom lies, as ever, in keeping to the golden mean and in avoiding extremes. And all depends on individual needs: "All must not have one manner of exercise, but one this, another that, as according." (Thomas of Kempen).

Though the various methods of approaching God may vary, though the forms and ways of *Japa* and prayer may differ, in essence and in end they are one, and they lead to One Goal.

THE WORD, THE NAME OF GOD

In conclusion, a few words about the sacred word: Amen. The ancient Syrians used the word *Amen* as an invocation, a sacred word, before their prayers. It is very likely that it is the same as the Hindu OM (AUM). The Jews developed the practice of using the word also at the end of their prayers, and soon used it only at the end, as a symbol of divine affirmation, a sacred "so be it!".

In one of the Apocryphal scriptures, the Gospel of Thomas, not included in

the New Testament, is a remarkable passage. Jesus is scolding a teacher, because he teaches the *Beta* (the letter *b*) before he knows himself the *Alpha* (the letter *a*). Jesus can only mean by the *Alpha* (the first letter of the "alphabet") the First Word, and by the letter *Beta* the secondary words of creation, power and knowledge. The scripture goes: "Jesus saith unto Zacchaeus the teacher: "Thou that knowest not the *Alpha* according to its nature, how canst thou teach others the *Beta* ? Thou hypocrite, first, if thou knowest it, teach the *Alpha*, and then will we believe thee concerning the *Beta*..... Hear, O teacher, the ordinance of the first letter, and pay heed to this, how that it hath lines and a middle mark, which thou seest, common to both, going apart; coming together, raised upon high, dancing, of three signs, like in kind, balanced, equal in measure: thou hast the rules of the *Alpha*." This description might even well apply to the Sanskrit symbol for the sacred word. In the Gnostic Hymn of Jesus also many indications are found that the author was well aware of the occult power and significance of word and sound. Gnostic literature abounds with references to the science of mantras.

But if Jesus knew the full significance and use of the sacred word, in Christianity, in which the word *Amen*

was taken over from the Jewish religion, conscious insight into the profundity of the word was practically lost, except in a few mystic sects and orders. Yet to the present day the word *Amen* is found as a sanctifying word at the end of every Christian prayer.

In connection with this it is also very interesting that the ancient Egyptians also knew the sacred word. Manetho, the Sebenyte (quoted by Plutarch in his "On Isis and Osiris") wrote "that Ammon is the hidden name of God, and that His power of hiding is evident by the very articulation of the sound." The latter is also very remarkable. Plutarch writes in this connection: "When they (the Egyptians) call to the First God—who they think is the same for every man—as unto the Unmanifest and Hidden, invoking Him to make Him manifest and plain to them, they say Amoun!"

Let us not speculate on the fact whether the Syrian (incidentally the Christian) and Egyptian forms of OM were derived from India, or received by independent revelation. The Supreme need not travel by the roads of men, and is well capable of making Itself heard within the inner ear of people of all races and religions, if they have called with an open heart and if they have trained that inner ear to listen to the Silence.

O Maitreya, just as fire burns up the dross of a metal, in the same manner the *Kirtana* of the Divine Name performed with devotion burns up all sins.

—*Viṣṇu-Purāna*.

All sins get dissolved like salt thrown into water through *Kirtana* of Bhagavān Vāsudeva, whether done consciously or unconsciously.

—*Viṣṇu-Purāna*.

