

## The Hymn of a Thousand Names.

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The Vedas say:—

नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्या न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन ।  
यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणुते तन्नं स्वाम् ॥

(Kathopanishad I. ii. 23)

“God cannot be attained by learning, nor by intelligence, nor by sermonizing. He alone can attain God, whom God favours. To such a one God reveals His own Self.”

The question arises: Whom does God favour? What is the means of pleasing Him? The Upaniṣads say:—

प्रणवो धनुः शरो ह्यात्मा ब्रह्म तल्लक्ष्यमुच्यते ।  
अप्रमत्तेन वेदव्यं शरवत्तन्मयो भवेत् ॥

“The word *Om* is like the bow, the soul is like the arrow, *Brahma* is the target. One should shoot without faltering. One should be absorbed in *Brahma* even as the arrow is in the target.”

Uttering the word *Om*, the soul will receive a Godward impulse. But a single utterance does not give the soul a sufficient impulse to enable it to reach God. It has to be repeated again and again,—till one forgets one's external surroundings and becomes one with God. *Om* is the name of God.

‘ओमित्येतदक्षरमिदं सर्वम्’

(Mandukyopanishad)

“*Om* is the imperishable One (*i. e.*, *Brahma*). All this universe is *Om*.”

Elsewhere the Upaniṣads say: ‘सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म’ *i. e.*, “all this universe is *Brahma*.” Here it says: “All this universe is *Brahma*.” The two statements are reconciled by identifying *Om* with *Brahma*.

In the *Brahma-Sūtras* (IV. i. 1) Vedavyāsa says:—

‘आवृत्तिसहस्रदुपदेशात्’

Śankarāchārya explains it thus:—

We get the following passages in the Upaniṣads:—

‘आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः।’

(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad)

“The soul is to be seen; one should hear (about God), ponder and contemplate.”

‘स अन्वेष्टव्यः स विजिज्ञासितव्यः।’

(Chhandogyopanishad)

“He (God) is to be searched. He is to be known.”

The question arises: Are these acts to be performed once, or repeated? Will it do if one hears about God once, thinks once, and contemplates once? To remove this doubt Vyāsa in his *Sūtra* says: ‘आवृत्तिः असकृत्’—*i. e.*,

the act has to be repeated again and again. 'श्रोतव्यः,' *i. e.*, one should hear again and again; 'मन्तव्यः' *i. e.*, one should think again and again; 'निदिध्यासितव्यः' *i. e.* one should be engaged in a series of continuous and unbroken acts of thinking. In order to explain the term 'निदिध्यासितव्यः' Āchārya Śankara says:—'ध्यायति प्रोषितनाथा पतिं इति या निरन्तरस्मरणा पतिं प्रति सोत्कण्ठा सा एवं अभिधीयते।' "A woman whose husband has gone abroad is said to be wrapt in contemplation of her husband if she constantly contemplates about him and is very anxious for him." The feeling of a devotee towards God should thus be like the feeling of a woman towards her absent husband. There should be constant and continuous contemplation. There should be a hankering for God.

Turning now from the Śrutis to the Smṛtis we find in the *Bhagavad-gītā*:—

अनन्यचेताः सततं यो मां स्मरति नित्यशः ।  
तस्याहं सुलभः पार्थ नित्ययुक्तस्य योगिनः ॥

"He who feels no attraction for anything else and constantly thinks about Me, he who is always attentive and has a control over his senses, can attain Me easily."

How apt is the illustration of Śankara! The devoted wife yearning for her absent husband has no attraction for anything except him. She is अनन्यचेताः. She thinks constantly about him—'स्मरति नित्यशः'.

Thus the essential condition for attaining God is constant and con-

tinuous contemplation. The wife thinks of the form of her husband. The devotee may also think of one of the many forms assumed by God out of His kindness towards His devotees, although He has really no form. But few devotees have seen God in a particular form.

As an aid towards focussing the faculties of his mind he takes an image or a picture. But an image or a picture cannot be always carried with us. For this reason the name of God is very helpful in enabling a man to think constantly of God. Even while walking, eating or doing any work with the body,—provided the mind is not otherwise employed,—a man can always take the name of God mentally and thus think of God. The *Onkāra*, although a name of God, is not suitable for all. The Śāstras say,—no doubt for the good of the Śūdras,—that they should not utter the word *Om*. Hence the Śāstras have given many other names of God,—e. g. Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Hari,—which may be uttered by all, including the Śūdras and the Chāṇḍālas. All men and women can with the help of these names of God remember God constantly and thus advance in the spiritual path.

The Vaiṣṇavas at the time of initiation receive from their preceptors a *mantra* consisting of one or more names of God and a string of beads. They repeat the *mantra* constantly and every time they utter the *mantra* they count a bead. This they do for hundreds or thousands of times every day counting the number with the

help of the string. This method is a direct application of the *sūtra* 'आवृत्तिरसकृदुपदेशात्' i. e., one should think of God again and again, which is the most important rule about spiritual exercise (साधना) laid down by Vedavyāsa in his *Brahma-Sūtras*, in which the teachings of the Upaniṣads have been collected in a systematic manner.

The English poet has said "Call the rose by any other name, it will smell as sweet." But from this it does not follow that there is nothing in a name. The proper names in the English language serve, it is true, no other purpose than indicating particular objects. In the English language if two proper names denote the same object, the only difference between them is in sound,—one name may sound sweeter than another,—and that is all. Not so in the Sanskrit language where even proper names have meanings. If an object has

several distinguishing qualities it may have different names which refer to those different qualities. Thus the ocean may be called either as 'जलधि' or as 'रत्नाकर' to denote that it is a vast reservoir of water or contains many priceless gems. God has infinite qualities. Hence God can have infinite proper names. To illustrate this Bhīṣma recited the hymn of a thousand names of Viṣṇu. Such a thing has not been conceived in other religions in which one or two names of God have sufficed, and no necessity has been felt for giving a thousand names of God. In making his commentary on this hymn Śankarāchārya has made the choicest quotations from the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Purāṇas, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* where the particular quality mentioned in a particular name of God is referred to. Reading of the *Sahasranāma Stotra* with the commentary of Śankara gives one of the most pleasant religious experiences.

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What wonder if sins get dissolved through Kīrtana of that immortal and infallible Being who blocks the way to hell for him who fixes his mind and Intellect on Him, whose meditation is so absorbing that he who gets addicted to it or develops a taste for it looks upon the bliss of heaven as an impediment and will not be prepared to exchange it even with the abode of *Brahma* (the highest region in this creation of Māyā, even higher than Indra's paradise) and who entering the mind of pure souls grants them salvation.

—*Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*.

