

Five Ways of Relating to and Worshiping Divinity

God is indeed One and exists in all, as stated in the first article of this series. But for most people it is hard to relate to Him in His abstract form, so Hindus have developed a theological system according to which He exists in a fivefold form. That is, God manifests Himself in five main ways, which provide five ways of relating to divinity and worshiping Him. While the fivefold form is a core tenet of Vaiṣṇava theology [1], all Hindus believe in it with varying degrees of emphasis.

1. *Parā* – The supreme form of God, One beyond everything we can think of, described by the neuter noun Brahman. Brahman is self-transcendent and absolute. Sometimes He is simply called “That,” for no human description can ever do justice to His infinitude. Brahman in relation to the universe is called Īśvara. Īśvara is both the material cause and the efficient cause of the universe and is possessed of six divine qualities: *jñāna* or knowledge, *bala* or strength, *aiśvarya* or lordship, *śakti* or potency, *vīrya* or virility, and *tejas* or splendor. The word *bhaga* denotes these six divine qualities, and the one possessing them is called Bhagavān. Thus Bhagavān and Īśvara are the same.
2. *Vyūha* – Manifestation of the absolute through a series of emanations, with each emanation having some but not all of the six divine qualities of the highest. Īśvara is termed Brahmā when He creates, Viṣṇu when He protects, and Śiva (Rudra) when He destroys. These names only denote the different aspects of the one God. That is why they are called the Trimūrti: the One with three forms. The *vyūha* emanations comprise the highest level of the universe; each *vyūha* has a cosmological function with regard to the lower creation. Of course, in popular religion these become separate gods with appropriate symbols, dwelling places, *vāhanas* or vehicles, and followers. The abstract ideas regarding the three different aspects of God were thus rendered concrete to the masses. In course of time, the powers and functions of the one God were further divided and subdivided and personified, giving rise, for example, to consorts and children for Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. God is thus given a web or a family structure, making it easy for us to relate to Him and meditate on Him.
3. *Vibhava* – God manifesting in the form of different incarnations (*avatāras*) upon the earth during times of darkness. The ten principal *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, including Śrī Rāma and Śrī Kṛṣṇa, are well known; they are described in epics and Purāṇic stories. Note that the cause for these “descents” of God into the world of mortals is His will only and not the effects of karma. The fruit is the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked. There are many secondary *avatāras* as well. The aspirant who seeks liberation is advised to worship the primary or *mukhya avatāras* only, and not the secondary ones, for the latter are qualified by egoism.
4. *Arcā* – God in his various manifestations as symbols and icons (*mūrtis*) in temples and shrines. *Arcāvatāra* is the descent of God as one who can be worshiped, without remoteness of space and time, by all human beings. Devotees regard the *arcā* in the temple as the Lord present on earth, just as He is present in His celestial abode and in His emanations. A devotee is free to choose a favorite *arcā* which he or she considers specially adorable. This gives us an easy way to relate

to God, by “humanizing” Him to fulfill our own cherished ideas and ideals by doing rituals such as *pūjā*, *japa*, and *bhajan* singing. In *arcā* form, God becomes dependent on the worshiper for bath, food, sitting, sleeping, etc; He is present in houses, villages, towns, sacred places, hills, etc.

5. *Antaryāmīn* – God who abides within the hearts of all beings as their inner controller. This form of Īśvara stays with the individual self as its friend in its states of experience and is perceptible to the *yogins*. This mode of realizing Īśvara has great practical benefits for the practitioner. To paraphrase verses 6-7 of the Īśa Upaniṣad: One who practices seeing all beings as if they lived and felt within his own body, and himself as living and feeling in the bodies of other beings, overcomes all ill-will and aversion; if one thus attains unity of oneself with all other souls, all grief automatically disappears.

All these five visions of God are allowed and they are all meaningful. Which way is appropriate for any one of us depends on our state of mind. People who have the inner maturity to relate to God through the first or the last of the above five ways may not have the need for a physical or visual temple. But the other three forms of relating to God are possible in a temple. For example, celebrating the Vivāham (wedding) of Śrī Rāma with Sītā or of Śrī Venkaṭeśvara with Bhūdevi and Śrīdevi is a way to worship the Vibhava form of the Lord. But we should never forget that the Lord who manifests himself as an *arcā* in the temple is the supreme being spoken of in the Upaniṣads, the inaccessible Lord of the Vedas. It is this Lord, who is so mighty and yet so gracious that he appears to human eyes, whom Kurattālvān, the scribe and disciple of the great 12th century Vaiṣṇava saint Śrī Rāmānuja, describes: “That great being who is distant even to the minds of the *yogins* who have conquered their senses, who is not known even in the *Vedānta*, stands manifest on the Hasti Hill....”

We end this discussion with a passage that describes various stages of worship and states that, starting from the gross forms, we should adopt progressively subtler modes.

*prathamā pratimā-pūjā japastotrāṇi madhyamā
uttamā mānasi pūjā so’ham pūjottamottamā*

The first stage is image worship; the next consists in *japa* (chanting of a prayer or a particular word – either audibly, or in a low voice not audible to others, or mentally) and prayer; still higher is mental worship; the highest is of the form “I am He.”

This article is dedicated to the memory of Sameer Kashyap who, in 1998 at the age of 12, wrote on this topic in our temple’s Prāṇa Pratiṣṭha brochure.

[1] The fivefold form of Īśvara is described, for example, in chapter 9 of the book *Yatīndramatadīpikā* (Light of the System of Yatīndra, i.e. Śrī Rāmānuja) composed by the Vaiṣṇavite philosopher Śrīnivāsa who lived about the beginning of the 17th century. The text, with English translation and notes by Swāmi Ādidevānanda, has been published by Sri Ramakrishna Math (1949, 1967).