

10

Vaiṣṇava Practice

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A Vaiṣṇava is one who is devoted to Viṣṇu. It is a self-designation that is used by those who consider Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa or Rāma—who are all considered to be aspects of the same deity—to be God, from whom all worlds emanate, by whom they are sustained, and into whom they will dissolve at the end. He is identified with the *brahman* of the Upaniṣads and seen to reside in the heart of all living beings as the ‘supreme self’ (*paramātman*) or the ‘inner ruler’ (*antaryāmin*). According to most Vaiṣṇavas, he is both the efficient and the material cause of this world. Everything that exists exists within his being, and everything depends on him for its very existence. He thus pervades all, and yet always resides in his divine realm, beyond the physical confines of this world of matter, in his divine form. He possesses all perfections and is ever untainted by the blights found in this world. All the gods bow before him, but they can never fathom the greatness of his being. He rules all and is ruled by none.

Yet what captures most Vaiṣṇavas is not God’s incomparable majesty and divine power, but his boundless love and compassion for his devotees and his overwhelming beauty. ‘You have placed your truth and your very body at the feet of those who serve you,’ writes Vedānta Deśika.¹ ‘His heart is compassion through and through,’ sings Sūrdās.² Bilvamaṅgala says God’s play is ‘sweeter than sweetness [...] Oh, it steals my heart away. What am I to do?’³ The only proper response to God’s love is to reciprocate that love, through worship and service. It is this, above all, that characterizes Vaiṣṇava practice.

This chapter attempts to offer not a historical overview of Vaiṣṇava practice, but an overview of the ways Vaiṣṇavas have viewed their own practice. Given the enormous variety of Vaiṣṇava traditions and their very regional nature, any overview of Vaiṣṇava practice is necessarily selective. I have drawn upon the writings of Vaiṣṇavas from most major traditions, and on a wide range of scriptural texts, but there is undoubtedly a bias—due to familiarity as well as fondness—in my selection.

¹ Hopkins (2007: 27).

² Hawley and Bryant (2015: 687).

³ Wilson (1975: 120).

After an analysis of the Vaiṣṇava understanding of *bhakti*, I discuss just four distinct Vaiṣṇava practices, which Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas proclaim to be the principal practices for the four cosmic ages (*yuga*): Vedic ritual, image worship, praising God, and meditation. Examining the various practices indicated by just these four, while not exhaustive, does demonstrate the great diversity of Vaiṣṇava practice, and also brings to light how these practices, despite their apparent differences, are all interconnected and, in the Vaiṣṇava mind, all have the same aim: constant remembrance of God.

1. Bhakti

If only you simply give Hari a try,
 if only you refuse to worship anything else,
 in mind, deed, and word letting truth fill your heart,
 if only you sound his name and praise him night and day,
 drowning your doubts in the liquid of his love—
 if you resolve to live in the world this way,
 who can turn your gold to glass?
 You won't be touched by hot or cold, by joy or pain;
 you won't feel grief at whatever comes or goes.
 Sur says, enter his treasury—go
 and you'll never have to return
 and dance to this world's tune.

—Sūrdās⁴

The central aspect of Vaiṣṇava practice is *bhakti*. What is *bhakti*? This Sanskrit term is often translated as 'devotion', sometimes even as 'love', but its significance is greater than what either of these English words denote. Some scholars have opted to translate it as 'participation',⁵ since the verbal root *bhaj* from which the noun is derived can mean 'to share' as well as 'to worship', but while this captures something of the intimacy between the devotee and God that *bhakti* denotes, it is perhaps also too abstract to convey this without commentary.

In Vaiṣṇava texts, the Sanskrit term *bhakti* is used in two distinct ways. Often the word is used in the instrumental (*bhaktyā*, 'with *bhakti*'), generally in combination with a verb that denotes an act of worship. In this sense *bhakti* denotes a mental state with which one worships God. The *Parama-saṃhitā* defines it as 'constant meditation [on God] based on affection.'⁶ For Śrīnātha Paṇḍita it is 'the

⁴ Hawley and Bryant (2015: 741–3).

⁵ See Prentiss (1999: 24, 216n36).

⁶ *Sneha-pūrvam anudhyānam bhaktir ity abhidīyate (Parama-saṃhitā 4.71).*

awareness that someone is worthy of worship';⁷ for Parāśara Bhaṭṭa it is 'a servant's affection for his master';⁸ for Rāmānuja 'a particular type of awareness which destroys all desires for oneself or others, which is its own end, and which is the highest form of love';⁹ while for Madhva it is 'an unshakeable affection, greater than any other, based on an awareness of God's greatness'.¹⁰ Understood in this way, *bhakti* is not merely a state of mind that accompanies an act of worship, but is that act's most important aspect. As many Vaiṣṇava texts emphasize, ritual worship without *bhakti* is pointless: 'worship without *bhakti* is undone, even if it's done', says the *Parama-saṃhitā*.¹¹ The *Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* similarly states that 'everything that is performed by persons without *bhakti* is fruitless'.¹² Or, as Madhva writes, in Vaiṣṇava practice *bhakti* 'is primary; there should be nothing else, for without it all is pointless'.¹³

But in Sanskrit texts *bhakti*, in the accusative case (*bhaktim*), is often used as the direct object of the verbal root 'kr', 'to do': one does or performs *bhakti*, as in this passage—one of very many—from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*: 'with the greatest joy, the wise perform *bhakti* to the Lord, Vāsudeva'.¹⁴ Here *bhakti* is not that which accompanies the act—or even that which makes the act matter—but the very act itself. This understanding is reflected in various other definitions of *bhakti*. Parāśara Bhaṭṭa explains that *bhaj*, the verbal root from which the noun *bhakti* is derived, is used to denote performing service, and 'therefore the wise denote great service (*sevā*) by the word *bhakti*'.¹⁵ Similarly, the *Nārada Pāñcarātra* defines *bhakti* as 'serving the Lord of one's sensory faculties with those faculties',¹⁶ and Rūpa Gosvāmin defines *bhakti* as the 'continuous service' to God that is, among other things, 'pleasing to him, and free from desires for anything else'.¹⁷

But what is striking in this understanding of '*bhakti* as action' is that, across Vaiṣṇava traditions and texts, it is never equated with a single practice. If we leave aside for now the many types of *bhakti* that later theologians are fond of classifying¹⁸—based mostly on degrees of purity—Vaiṣṇava texts have often

⁷ *Upāśyatva-jñānam (Caitanya-mata-maṅjuṣā 11.12.8).*

⁸ *Svāmini dāsasya anurāgamayī sthitiḥ bhaktiḥ (Commentary on Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma, p. 32).*

⁹ *Bhaktir api niratīśaya-priyānanya-prayojana-svetara-vaitṛṣṇyāvaha-jñāna-viśeṣa eva [...]* (*Vedārtha-saṅgraha* 92).

¹⁰ *Māhātmya-jñāna-pūrvas tu sudṛḍhaḥ sarvatoḍhikaḥ sneho bhaktir iti proktaḥ (Mahābhārata-tātpārya-nirṇaya 1.85).*

¹¹ *Pūjanam hi vinā bhaktyā kṛtam apy akṛtam bhavet (Parama-saṃhitā 4.72).*

¹² *Nṛñām abhaktānām kṛtam sarvaṃ niṣphalam (Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa p. 97).*

¹³ *Mukhyam eṣaiva nānyat syāt sarvaṃ vyartham tayā vinā (Madhva's Tantra-sāra-saṅgraha 155).*

¹⁴ *[...] kavayo nityam bhaktim paramayā mudā vāsudeve bhagavati kurvanti [...]* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.22).

¹⁵ *Bhaja ity eṣa dhātur vai sevāyām parikīrtitaḥ/tasmāt sevā budhaiḥ proktā bhakti-śabdena bhūyasi (Commentary on Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma, p. 39).*

¹⁶ *Hṛṣikeśena hṛṣikeśa-sevanam ṃ bhaktir ucyate (cited in Rūpa Gosvāmin's Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.1.12).*

¹⁷ See *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.1.11.*

¹⁸ Harivyaśadeva, for example, lists no fewer than fifteen different categories of *bhakti* as practice, depending on what motivation it is performed with; see *Vedānta-siddhānta-ratnājalī* pp. 256–7.

defined ‘*bhakti* as action’ as comprising a variety of different practices. Thus, the *Parama-saṃhitā* talks of *bhakti* having eight ‘aspects’ (*aṅga*), which include the worship of God, upholding Vaiṣṇava discipline, confidence in the Vaiṣṇavas, great respect for worship, care for one’s own acts of worship, respect for hearing narrations about God, not desiring to torment others, and not making the worship of God one’s livelihood.¹⁹ Vedānta Deśika also lists eight, but different ones: being affectionate to God’s devotees; rejoicing at worship; being devoted to listening to narrations about God; experiencing bodily changes such as stuttering, crying, or trembling; personally exerting oneself to worship God; being free from duplicity; always remembering God; and not making the worship of God’s one’s livelihood.²⁰ The most famous of such analysis of *bhakti* is found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which talks of a ninefold *bhakti*: ‘hearing, praising Viṣṇu, remembering, serving his feet, worshipping his image, bowing [to him], servitude, friendship, and self-surrender.’²¹ In other words, although Vaiṣṇavas may at times extol certain devotional practices popular in their tradition as paramount and, in some cases, even denounce those of other Vaiṣṇava traditions, generally there is a degree of tolerance—theologically, at least, if not always socially—and a recognition that the worship of God can take many forms, and that various Vaiṣṇavas may be drawn to various practices.

Bhakti thus denotes both emotion and action. A Vaiṣṇava worships God with reverence, love, or affection, and the act of worship itself is an expression of that love. As we will see below, acts of worship are mostly ritual in nature, and are thus governed by scriptural rules the worshipper should follow. Vaiṣṇava ritualists insist on the proper ritual procedure in all acts of worship, as stipulated in scriptural texts. ‘Śruti and Smṛti are my commands,’ Viṣṇu declares in an often-cited passage; ‘one who disregards them violates my command and hates me. Even if he is devoted to me, he is not a Vaiṣṇava.’²² ‘Single-minded devotion to Hari that does not follow the injunctions of the Śruti, Smṛti, Purāṇas, and Pāñcarātra texts is mere disturbance,’ writes Rūpa Gosvāmin.²³ For some Vaiṣṇavas, this is an absolute principle. Śrīnivāsamakhin, for example, argues that if one worships the Lord without following the scriptural injunctions, even unknowingly, one’s worship cannot lead to liberation. A person who loves Viṣṇu, he continues, will never violate the scriptural ordinances, ‘even in thought.’²⁴

¹⁹ *Parama-saṃhitā* 4.72–4.

²⁰ *Rahasya-traya-sāra* p. 299. The list is nearly identical to that given in the *Kriyādhikāra* (24.106–8).

²¹ *Śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam pāda-sevanam/arcanaṃ vandanaṃ dāsyam sakhyam ātma-nivedanam* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.5.23).

²² *Śruti-smṛti mamaivājñe yas te ullaṅghya vartate/ājñā-cchedi mama dveṣi mad-bhaktō’pi na vaiṣṇavaḥ* (cited, for example, in Śrīnivāsamakhin’s *Daśa-vidha-hetu-nirūpaṇa* pp. 56, 65; Jīva Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 173; Vedānta Deśika’s *Rahasya-traya-sāra*, p. 316; Maṇavāla Māmuṇi’s commentary on Piḷḷai Lokācārya’s *Śrī-vacana-bhūṣaṇa* 282).

²³ *Śruti-smṛti-purāṇādi-pañcarātra-vidhiṃ vinā/aikāntikī harer bhaktir utpātāyaiva kalpate* (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.101); see also Jīva’s *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 312.

²⁴ See *Daśa-vidha-hetu-nirūpaṇa*, p. 65.

But if *bhakti* is also emotion, there is another dimension to these acts of worship too. Śrīnīvāsamakḥin argues, as we have just seen, that a devotee's love for the Lord is demonstrated by his strict adherence to the ritual prescriptions, but many Vaiṣṇavas also argue that love can transcend ritual. Indeed, many Vaiṣṇava traditions teach that there is an alternative path that transcends scriptural injunctions—not because such injunctions are deemed pointless, but rather because some devotees are seen to have already fulfilled their purpose. This is particularly the case for traditions whose object of worship is Kṛṣṇa. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, for example, distinguish between two types of practice: devotion that is governed by scriptural injunctions (*vaidhī bhakti*) and devotion that is governed by passion (*rāgānugā bhakti*). Most devotees would practise the former, but some devotees have attained a natural attraction to Kṛṣṇa and 'upon hearing about the sweetness of the various emotions (*bhāva*) [of Kṛṣṇa's eternal companions] their mind proceeds without regard for either scriptural instructions or logic'.²⁵ Such a person, Jīva Gosvāmin argues, would not intentionally violate the injunctions of scripture, but even if they accidentally do so, whatever sin might be considered to follow from that is immediately negated by their own devotional absorption.²⁶ As the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* states, one who practises such *bhakti* 'is never neglectful; even if he is running on this path with his eyes closed, he will not trip and will not fall'.²⁷

Similarly, Vallabha's school makes a distinction between 'the path of limitations' (*māryāda-mārga*) and 'the path of grace' (*puṣṭi-mārga*), after which his tradition is popularly named. The former follows the 'limitations' or 'boundaries' (*māryāda*) of scripture, such as the Vedic texts, which cannot be transgressed; there is an emphasis on one's own effort as well as a desire to attain liberation. The path of grace, however, is one of full surrender to the grace of God, in which one's main motivation is love. As we will see below, though the spontaneity of love is the guiding force, ritual is not abandoned, but rather re-evaluated as a conduit and expression of such love.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava teachings on 'surrender' (*prapatti*), much discussed in academic literature, are often also seen in this light. Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who follow the theology of Rāmānuja, distinguish between two devotional paths. On the one hand, there is the discipline of *bhakti* (*bhakti-yoga*), which they understand as the Vedāntic devotional path. The devotee acquires knowledge (*jñāna*) of the self and God through a study of the Upaniṣads and pursues Vedic ritual practices (*karma*), which purify the mind, to support this. When such knowledge matures, it becomes

²⁵ *Tat-tad-bhāvādi-mādhurye śrute dhīr yad apeṣate/nātra śāstraṃ na yuktiṃ ca [...]* (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.277; translation after David Haberman).

²⁶ See *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 312.

²⁷ *Yān āsthāya naro rājan na pramādyeta karhicit/dhāvan nimīlya vā netre na skhalen na pated iha* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.2.35).

a constant meditation, ‘uninterrupted like the flow of oil’,²⁸ and is a form of love.²⁹ Since this path is rooted both in Vedic practice and in Vedic (or, specifically, Vedāntic) study, it is only accessible to those who are eligible for those, namely the twice-born (*dvija*) upper three classes.³⁰

The second path, surrender to God (*prapatti*) or seeking refuge in God (*śaraṇāgati*), however, is open to all and, moreover, need only be performed once in order to attain salvation, unlike the path of *bhakti-yoga*, which depends on repeated practice. Surrender to God, Śrīvaiṣṇavas explain, is grounded in the awareness that the self is helpless and utterly dependent on God, as it is, ontologically, a part (*śeṣa*) of him who is the whole (*śeṣin*). To surrender, then, is to make God one’s ‘means’ (*upāya*) to liberation: the devotee no longer relies on his own actions to attain salvation, but rather abandons himself fully to God, ‘just as a jewel belonging to another person is rightfully returned to him, for him to protect and wear.’³¹

Śrīvaiṣṇavas have long disputed the exact relationship between these two paths,³² and though surrender (*prapatti*) has generally been accepted as the preferred practice, *bhakti-yoga* is also considered to lead to liberation. But it is a path in which the emphasis is on the devotee’s own agency, whereas in surrender the emphasis is on God’s agency in the attainment of salvation. The primary difference between the two is the inner disposition of the devotee. As both Vedānta Deśika and Piḷḷai Lokācārya emphasize, those who have sought refuge in God alone are nevertheless expected to follow whatever devotional practices are appropriate to their social class (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*), as ordained by scripture. But such acts are performed *only* out of love for God—since scripture is his command, as we have seen—and they should not consider them to be the means to liberation.³³

Rules and emotion, or ritual and devotional love, are thus not antithetical for Vaiṣṇavas, but complement each other. To use Kenneth Valpey’s typology,³⁴ ritual is the grammar of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, while love and emotion constitute its poetics. Both the goal of and the motivation for all Vaiṣṇava ritual is love, and love expresses itself through ritual practice—even if it may at times break its conventions.

²⁸ *Dhyānaṃ ca taila-dhārā-vad-avicchinna-smṛti-santāna-rūpam* (Śrī-bhāṣya 1.1.1, translation by George Thibaut).

²⁹ See Rāmānuja’s *Vedārtha-saṅgraha* 141.

³⁰ See Vedānta Deśika’s *Rahasya-traya-sāra*, chapter 9.

³¹ Vedānta Deśika’s *Rahasya-traya-sāra*, p. 227 (translation after N. Raghunathan).

³² The complex disputes that arose within the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition as to the exact relationship between these two paths and the role of human agency in surrender is beyond the scope of this chapter, but see Mumme (1992) for a succinct overview of the debate, and Narayanan (1987) and Raman (2007) for a very detailed study.

³³ See Vedānta Deśika’s *Rahasya-traya-sāra* pp. 316–22; see also Piḷḷai Lokācārya’s *Śrī-vacana-bhūṣaṇa* 279–82.

³⁴ Valpey (2006), particularly pp. 9–11.

Bhakti denotes thus both emotion and action. A Vaiṣṇava worships God with love, and the act of worship itself is an expression of that love. This also means that, for a Vaiṣṇava, *bhakti* is never a means to an end, but its own end: a devotee performs acts of worship in order to obtain *bhakti*, and that *bhakti* leads to more worship. Vaiṣṇava texts may at times state that *bhakti* leads to liberation, but *bhakti* continues in the state of liberation, and so the latter is not its end. Madhva puts it as follows: ‘By *bhakti* one attains knowledge [of God], and then *bhakti*, then a vision [of God], and then *bhakti* again, then liberation, and then that same *bhakti*, which is of the nature of joy.’³⁵ Vaiṣṇavas have therefore often distinguished between two types of *bhakti*: the first is the devotional practice itself, the second the perfectional state of that practice. This distinction is referred to by various terms. Harivyaśadeva talks of *bhakti* ‘which takes the form of practice’ (*sādhana-rūpā*) and that which ‘takes the form of its result’ (*phala-rūpā*);³⁶ Jīva Gosvāmin talks of ‘*bhakti* as the means’ (*sādhana-bhakti*) and ‘*bhakti* as the end’ (*sādhya-bhakti*);³⁷ and Madhva makes a similar distinction between *bhakti* as practice (*sādhana*) and *bhakti* as perfection (*siddhi*). The latter arises when one is liberated and no longer conditioned by the deluding forces of matter. As Madhva states, ‘the worship of Hari in that state [i.e. liberation] is always pure joy. It is not a form of practice, but it is perfection, which arose from that.’³⁸ Mere liberation (*mokṣa*) is therefore never the goal for Vaiṣṇavas. As the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (3.29.13) states, Viṣṇu’s devotees do not accept any form of liberation if it does not lead to serving him.³⁹

Some Vaiṣṇava texts—such as early Pāñcarātra texts—claim that the worship of God can lead to both liberation (*mokṣa*) and enjoyment (*bhoga*) in this world.⁴⁰ But if some Vaiṣṇavas see the desire for liberation as too self-centred, what to speak then of sensual enjoyment! Rūpa Gosvāmin writes, ‘As long as the fiend of longing for worldly enjoyment or liberation resides in the heart, how can the joy of *bhakti* arise there?’⁴¹ Many Vaiṣṇavas therefore advocate detachment from the world and its sensual pleasures, reaffirming Kṛṣṇa’s own verdict: ‘those enjoyments that arise from contact [of the senses with their objects] are only sources of suffering.’⁴² Renunciation (*vairāgya*) is thus praised, but cautiously. First of all, true renunciation arises only from *bhakti*: only when one understands the true position and nature of the Lord can one become detached from the pleasures of

³⁵ *Bhaktiyā jñānaṃ tato bhaktis tato dṛṣṭis tatas ca sātato muktis tato bhaktiḥ saiva syāt sukharūpīni* (*Anuvyākhyāna* 3.4.215).

³⁶ See *Vedānta-siddhānta-ratnājalī* p. 256.

³⁷ See Jīva’s commentary on *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.1.

³⁸ *Harer upāsana cātra sadaiva sukha-rūpīni/na tu sādhanā-bhūtā sā siddhir evātra sā yataḥ* (Madhva’s *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* 4.4.21).

³⁹ Some Vaiṣṇavas even condemn liberation, as it comes to be associated with the impersonal goal of radical non-dualists. See Lutjeharms (2018).

⁴⁰ See also Madhva’s *Tantra-sāra-saṅgraha* 154: [...] *sā bhaktir iti vijñeyā sādhanam bhoga-mokṣayoḥ*.

⁴¹ *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.22.

⁴² *Ye hi saṃsparśa-jā bhogā duḥkha-yonaya eva te* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 5.22).

this world. ‘As a result of one’s capacity for maintaining unconditional love and surrender towards the Lord’, Vallabha writes, ‘the renunciation of sense objects becomes firm.’⁴³ Or, as Vedānta Deśika puts it, only ‘he who is attached to the supreme self is detached from that which is not the supreme self.’⁴⁴ But too much asceticism also harms *bhakti*. Vallabha cautions against renunciation, because it can lead to pride which is opposed to *bhakti*,⁴⁵ and Rūpa Gosvāmin states that while renunciation may be somewhat useful in the beginning, ‘the saints believe that it causes the heart to harden’; it is thus not suitable for devotion, which is by nature ‘very tender.’⁴⁶ He particularly warns against ‘superficial renunciation’, which causes one to reject everything as material, and argues that true renunciation is that by which one always properly employs worldly things, not for one’s own pleasure, but in the service of God.⁴⁷

Many Vaiṣṇava ritual texts also emphatically denounce those who make the worship of God their livelihood, especially brahmin priests in temples. Priests in a Vaiṣṇava temple should ‘be single-minded, situated in true goodness, and until their death not worship anyone else; they should worship the Lord of gods out of sense of duty, without [the desire for any] reward’, according to the *Pauṣkara-saṃhitā*.⁴⁸ Indeed, both the Vaikhānasa *Kriyādhikāra* and the Pāñcarātra *Parama-saṃhitā*—both texts written for temple priests—claim that ‘not making the worship of God one’s livelihood’ is one of the principal aspects of *bhakti*.⁴⁹ Śrīnivāsamakhin, who discusses this topic at some length, states: ‘A brahmin, even if he has learned the four Vedas, who is devoted to the worship of God with an ulterior motive, with the desire for wealth, should be considered equal to a casteless outcast (*caṇḍāla*).’⁵⁰ A Vaiṣṇava always serves God, and does not make God his servant.

As some of the above citations indicate, for Vaiṣṇavas *bhakti* is exclusive: only God is a suitable object of devotion, and those who are devoted to him should not worship other gods. As Kṛṣṇa states in the *Bhagavad-gītā* ‘those who are devoted to other gods and worship them with faith, worship me alone’, but, he adds, they do so ‘without following the injunctions of scripture.’⁵¹ Their faith comes from him, the *Gītā* claims, as do whatever little rewards the gods may give,⁵² and thus

⁴³ *Nirodha-lakṣaṇa* 15 (translation by Frederick Smith, 1998).

⁴⁴ *Paramātmani yo raktō viraktō paramātmani* (cited in *Rahasya-traya-sāra*, p. 158).

⁴⁵ *Sannyāsa-nirṇaya* 4. ⁴⁶ *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.248–9.

⁴⁷ *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.255–6.

⁴⁸ *Ekāntinaḥ susattva-svā dehāntaṃ nānya-yājinaḥ/kartavyam iti deveśaṃ saṃyajante phalaṃ vinā* (*Pauṣkara-saṃhitā*, cited in Rao 2005: 92). See also Rao (2005: 164–6).

⁴⁹ *Tat-pūjānujīvanam* (*Parama-saṃhitā* 4.75); *yac ca tan nopajīvati* (*Kriyādhikāra* 24.108). See also Yāmuna’s *Āgama-prāmānya*, pp. 156–8.

⁵⁰ *Devārcana-paro yo’pi parārthaṃ vitta-kāṅkṣayā/catur-veda-dharo vipraḥ sa caṇḍāla-samo bhavet* (*Daśa-vidha-hetu-nirūpaṇa* p. 64).

⁵¹ *Ye’py anya-devatā-bhaktā yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ/te’pi mām eva kaunteya yajanty avidhipūrvakam* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 9.23).

⁵² See *Bhagavad-gītā* 7.21–2.

only those who have but ‘little intelligence’ worship the gods whose blessings are paltry.⁵³ Therefore, as an often-cited passage states, ‘he who disregards Vāsudeva, and attends another god, is [like] a thirsty fool who digs a well on the Ganges’ banks.’⁵⁴ The worship of Viṣṇu makes the worship of the gods redundant, Madhva explains: ‘When the Lord of all gods, who holds the conch, disc, and club, is worshipped, all the gods are worshipped, since Hari is omnipresent.’⁵⁵ The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* uses this analogy: ‘just as by watering the root of a tree its trunk, branches, and twigs are satisfied, [...] exactly so offerings to the Infallible also honour everyone.’⁵⁶ A Vaiṣṇava is thus free from the three debts a human being is born with according to Vedic texts: a debt to the gods, repaid by sacrifice; a debt to the sages, repaid by study of the Veda; and a debt to one’s ancestors, repaid by continuing the family lineage through a son.⁵⁷ Just as there is none higher than Viṣṇu, in whose being everything exists, so there is nothing higher than *bhakti* to him.

This is not to say that Vaiṣṇavas dismiss other gods. The gods are seen as beings vastly more powerful than humans, but as temporary as this material world over which they preside. All the gods are seen to be attendants of Viṣṇu, who serve him in various capacities, and are to be honoured as such. Jīva Gosvāmin, for example, states ‘a person who worships Gopāla [Kṛṣṇa] but disparages other gods—let it be! Both his future and his previously performed *dharma* will be destroyed!’⁵⁸

One other deity does gain an immense prominence in all Vaiṣṇava traditions: God’s divine consort—Śrī for Viṣṇu, Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa, Sītā for Rāma. She is seen as God’s greatest devotee, inseparable from him, and eternally perfect. As such, God can never be worshipped without her. ‘The great sages, adept in the knowledge of the nature and person of the Supreme Lord,’ Vedānta Deśika writes, ‘have declared that the self-evident, essential, and manifest qualities and attributes of the Lord and his glories, obtain greater lustre from the nature, form, and glories’ of his consort, who is to him ‘like the radiance which cannot be separated from the sun.’⁵⁹ ‘She is full of compassion and grace and very affectionate to the Vaiṣṇavas,’ the *Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* states, ‘and therefore one should approach Śrī, and with great effort strive to obtain Śrī, until one’s death. One should not

⁵³ *Bhagavad-gītā* 7.23.

⁵⁴ *Vāsudevaṃ parityajya yo’nyam devam upāsate/trṣito jāhnavī-tire kūpaṃ khanati durmatih* (cited by Vedānta Deśika in *Tattva-ṭīkā*, p. 64 and by Madhva in *Kṛṣṇāmṛta-mahārṇava* 112; for similar verses, see Madhva’s *Kṛṣṇāmṛta-mahārṇava* 108–14; Jīva Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 106; and Gopāla Bhaṭṭa’s *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 1.111–15).

⁵⁵ *Arcite sarva-devēse śaṅkha-cakra-gadā-dhare/arcitāḥ sarva-devāḥ syur yataḥ sarva-gato hariḥ* (*Kṛṣṇāmṛta-mahārṇava* 9).

⁵⁶ *Yathā taror mūla-niṣecanena tṛpyanti tat-skandha-bhujopasākhāḥ/[...] tathaiva sarvārhaṇam actyutejyā* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.31.14).

⁵⁷ See *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 6.3.10.5.

⁵⁸ *Gopālaṃ pujaḥ yas tu nindayed anya-devatām/astu tāvat paro dharmāḥ pūrva-dharmo’pi naśyati* (cited in *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 106).

⁵⁹ *Rahasya-traya-sāra* p. 651 (translation after N. Raghunathan).

think that she is hard to attain.⁶⁰ She is thus commonly seen as a mediator between God and his devotees—indeed, some say she is more merciful than he!

Finally, for Vaiṣṇavas *bhakti* is inherently communal. There is much emphasis on one's individual practice (*sādhana*) and personal worship, but such practice is pursued in a community of fellow Vaiṣṇavas, who themselves should also be an object of devotion. 'Even more than God', Harirāma Vyāsa says, 'I like God's servants!'⁶¹ To love God is to love those he loves. 'Those who are my devotees,' Kṛṣṇa says, 'are not my devotees. But those who are devotees of my devotees, those I consider to be the best devotees.'⁶² Such devotion is particularly directed towards the saints and preceptors of one's own tradition (*sampradāya*)—and especially one's own guru—but is also extended to the wider community of Vaiṣṇavas.

All devotees should be honoured on the basis of their devotion to God, Vaiṣṇava unanimously agree. Caste or gender, or anything else by which society evaluates persons, is irrelevant in this regard, and Vaiṣṇava traditions generally offer initiation to anyone who desires it. On the importance of caste in the lives of individual devotees, however, Vaiṣṇavas are not quite in agreement. For example, Vedānta Deśika argues that devotees should certainly be honoured in accordance with the degree of their devotion, irrespective of caste, but their devotion does not eradicate caste distinctions. 'The idea that devotees of Viṣṇu have the same caste', he writes, 'is a foolish claim. [...] Equality due to the destruction of such things as caste will happen only at the time of liberation.'⁶³ Especially in regards to social customs, Vaiṣṇavas should uphold such conventions, and each Vaiṣṇava 'should not discard their castes; they should render service to the Lord according to what is prescribed as competent for that caste.'⁶⁴

Others, however, are more radical, and argue that since Vaiṣṇava initiation (*dīkṣā*) is said to destroy all the effects of one's past actions, this includes the body with which the Vaiṣṇava is born. Caitanya is said to have said: 'the body of a Vaiṣṇava is never material. The body of a devotee is non-material and is only pure consciousness and bliss (*cid-ānanda*). At the time of initiation the devotee surrenders himself [to the Lord], and at that time Kṛṣṇa makes him equal to himself.'⁶⁵ To think of Vaiṣṇavas in relation to the body of their birth would

⁶⁰ *Sā ca prasādānugraha-parā vaiṣṇava-vatsalā, tataḥ śriyaṃ tu sādhyed yatnāt āmrtyoḥ śriyam eva kāṅkṣeta. Durlabhāṃ nainām avamanyeta [...]* (*Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* p. 70).

⁶¹ Pauwels (2002: v).

⁶² *Ye me bhakta-janāḥ pārtha na me bhaktās ca te janāḥ/mad-bhaktānām ca ye bhaktās te me bhakta-tamā matāḥ* (cited in Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.11.28 and Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.218).

⁶³ *Sājātyaṃ viṣṇu-bhaktānām iti mandam idam vacaḥ [...]* *jāty-ādi-dhamsatas sāmayaṃ mukti-kāle bhaviṣyati* (*Rahasya-traya-sāra* p. 568).

⁶⁴ *Rahasya-traya-sāra* p. 563 (translation after N. Raghunathan).

⁶⁵ Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 3.4.191–3.

thus be an offence, and caste should therefore not be considered in the community of Vaiṣṇavas.

Now, let us turn to the nature of Vaiṣṇava practice. How do Vaiṣṇavas worship God? As mentioned above, Vaiṣṇavas have always recognized a variety of ways in which God can be worshipped, and also show an awareness that Vaiṣṇava practices have changed over the centuries. Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, for example, claim that Viṣṇu is to be worshipped differently in the four cosmic ages (*yugas*). So the *Bhāgavata* states: ‘That which was attained in Kṛta [Satya-yuga, the first of the ages] through meditation on Viṣṇu, in Tretā through sacrifice, in Dvāpara through worship [of the image], that is attained in Kali through praising Hari [Viṣṇu].’⁶⁶ Using this Purāṇic categorization of Vaiṣṇava practice—saving meditation, as the foundation for all Vaiṣṇava practice, for the end—we now turn to the specifics of Vaiṣṇava practice.

2. Vedic Sacrifice (*Yajña*)

I glorify the actions of Viṣṇu
 who made the earthly regions,
 who held up the lofty gathered site,
 traversing three times—he is praised
 by those who are exalted. [...]
 May my fortifying thought go forth to Viṣṇu,
 who dwells in speech, the one of many hymns,
 the one who showers; he alone
 by his three steps made this wide and enduring aggregate.

—*Rg Veda* 1.154.1,3⁶⁷

In the famous *Puruṣa-sūkta* (‘Hymn to the Person’) of the *Rg Veda* (10.90), we are told about a divine person (*puruṣa*) who encompasses this entire world and exists beyond it. In the hymn, he is identified with sacrifice (*yajña*) itself, the central Vedic ritual act, and it is through the sacrifice of himself to himself that the other gods are able to create the variety we now experience in this world. In the words of the *Rg Veda*: ‘the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice with the sacrifice.’⁶⁸ This hymn is of immense importance to Vaiṣṇavas. It is recited daily in many Vaiṣṇava temples and is commented upon and alluded to in many Vaiṣṇava texts. This is because Vaiṣṇavas identify this cosmic person as Viṣṇu.

⁶⁶ *Kṛte yad dhyāyato viṣṇum tretāyām yajato makhaiḥ/dvāpare paricaryāyām kalau tad dhari-kīrtanāt (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 12.3.52).*

⁶⁷ Translation after Laurie Patton (2005: 171).

⁶⁸ *Yajñena yajñam ayajanta devāḥ (Rg Veda 10.90.16).*

Viṣṇu is a Vedic deity. He is invoked occasionally in the four Vedas and has about half a dozen hymns dedicated to him in the *Rg-veda*. He is thus certainly not the most prominent Vedic deity, but was, according to Jan Gonda, nevertheless ‘a god of considerable notability’,⁶⁹ because of his association with the most prominent aspect of Vedic religious culture: sacrifice (*yajña*). According to Vedic texts, Viṣṇu munificently supports those who perform sacrifice;⁷⁰ he is the guardian of sacrifice,⁷¹ and is, according to the *Rg Veda*, ‘upholding dharmic deeds.’⁷² But the Vedic Brāhmaṇa texts go one step further: Viṣṇu does not just uphold sacrifice and rewards those who perform it, but he *is* that very sacrifice: ‘Viṣṇu indeed is sacrifice’ (*yajño vai viṣṇuḥ*), the Brāhmaṇas state again and again.⁷³

Given the association of Viṣṇu with sacrifice, it comes therefore as no surprise that Vaiṣṇavas claim the Vedic tradition and its central ritual, the sacrifice (*yajña*), as their own. Vedic ritualists are frequently criticized in Vaiṣṇava texts as lacking in spiritual insight and being too infatuated with the pleasures and power that may be obtained from sacrifice,⁷⁴ but this is generally not seen as a criticism of Vedic ritual itself, just of the mentality with which it is performed. It is only when the Vedas are read in the light of the Upaniṣads, Vaiṣṇavas argue, that the true significance of the Vedic revelation can be understood, because these texts are, by their own admission, the ‘*vedānta*’⁷⁵—the ‘end’ or ‘final word’ (*anta*) of the Veda. Vaiṣṇavas thus considered themselves to be ‘superior insiders’, as Alexis Sanderson put it, in contrast to Śaivas who positioned themselves as outsiders to the Vedic tradition.⁷⁶ Indeed, Viṣṇu is seen to uphold the Vedic tradition, and descends into this world in his various forms (*avatāra*) ‘whenever there is a decline of *dharma* and a rise of *adharma*’, in order to ‘perfectly establish *dharma*’, the *Bhagavad-gītā* claims.⁷⁷

In contrast to radical Advaitins like Śaṅkara, Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins have always defended the importance of Vedic ritual even for those who pursued knowledge (*jñāna*) of *brahman* through the Upaniṣads. Śaṅkara claims that ritual action and knowledge of *brahman* are incompatible, since the former constantly forces an identification with the body and the latter exposes such identification to be ignorance. Since ignorance and knowledge cannot coexist, and liberation is dependent on knowledge, renunciation of ritual action is necessary for the aspirant of liberation.⁷⁸ However, Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins argue that the two can and indeed should be pursued together, as, they argue, the Upaniṣads themselves teach: an often-cited

⁶⁹ Gonda (1954: 77). ⁷⁰ See Gonda (1954: 21–4).

⁷¹ See, for example, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.1.3, 1.1.11.

⁷² *Dharmāṇi dhāraṇa* (*Rg Veda* 1.22.18), translation by Laurie Patton (2005: 97).

⁷³ See, for example, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.1.2.13, 1.1.3.1, 1.1.4.9, 1.2.5.33, 1.4.5.2, 1.7.1.21, 1.9.3.9, 3.2.1.38, 3.6.3.3, 3.6.4.2, 3.6.4.9, 4.2.2.10, 4.5.7.7, 5.4.5.18, 11.1.4.4, 13.2.2.9; *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 9.7.10, 13.5.5; *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.4.6.

⁷⁴ See, for example, *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.41–5.

⁷⁵ See *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.6 and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 6.22.

⁷⁶ Sanderson (1993: 40).

⁷⁷ *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.7–8.

⁷⁸ See *Upadeśa-sāhasrī* 1.1.2–15.

passage from the *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad* states that ‘it is he [God] that brahmins seek to know by means of vedic recitation, sacrifice, gift-giving, austerity, and fasting.’⁷⁹

The Vaiṣṇava argument for Vedic ritual is twofold. First of all, it is argued that when such ritual actions are performed without desire for their rewards but only out of a sense of duty, as the *Bhagavad-gītā* teaches, such acts do not hinder but rather help one achieve knowledge of God. Kṛṣṇa teaches in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (18.5) that ‘sacrifice, giving, and austerity purify even the wise’ and should therefore not be renounced. Rāmānuja explains that ‘for those who desire liberation and practice contemplative worship (*upāsana*) throughout their lives, these actions destroy the [effects of] previous acts (*karma*) that obstruct the consummation of such contemplation.’⁸⁰ Vedic ritual—as well as the duties of one’s social position (*varṇāśrama-dharma*) which support such ritual practice—are thus seen to support one’s worship of God by purifying the mind and eradicating the power past acts have upon them.

The second argument is not unrelated to this but looks at Vedic ritual in a different light. When performed in this way, as supporting contemplation on God, the nature of the ritual is fundamentally changed, Vaiṣṇavas argue. The form of the Vedic ritual remains unchanged, but it is performed with a different intention: not as worship of the many gods, but as worship of Viṣṇu himself, who resides within the gods as the inner ruler (*antaryāmin*) and grants them their powers, or, as Madhva argues, who alone is the true referent of all the hymns of the Vedas.⁸¹ This change in intention makes all the difference. Such Vedic sacrifice for Viṣṇu does not reinforce ignorance as Śaṅkara claims, but rather, as an act of *bhakti*, leads to liberation and Viṣṇu himself. ‘Oh, how extraordinarily wonderful is this’, Rāmānuja proclaims, ‘that though engaging in the exact same activity, but with a different intention, some receive paltry rewards and are likely to fall [into the ocean of rebirth], whereas others, whose reward is the obtainment of the supreme person who is limitless and unequalled bliss, will not return [to this world]!’⁸²

As we have seen, Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* is open to all. But traditionally Vedic ritual is not: only male ‘twice-born’ (*dvija*), members of the upper three social classes (brahmin, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*) who have received Vedic initiation (*upanayana*) and studied the Veda are eligible to sacrifice. Vaiṣṇava traditions that advocate Vedic ritual as worship of Viṣṇu generally uphold this restriction, and mostly expect it only from Vaiṣṇava brahmins born in a family of Vedic ritualists. Texts like the

⁷⁹ *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22 (translation by Patrick Olivelle).

⁸⁰ *Mumukṣūnāṃ yāvaj-jīvam upāsanaṃ kurvatām upāsana-niṣpatti-virodhi-prācīna-karma-vināśanānīy arthaḥ* (Rāmānuja on *Bhagavad-gītā* 18.5).

⁸¹ See Madhva’s *Karma-nirṇaya*, pp. xxviii–xliv.

⁸² *Aho mahad idaṃ vaicitryaṃ yad ekasminn eva karmaṇi vartamānāḥ saṃkalpa-mātra-bhedena kecid atyālpa-phala-bhāgiṇaś cyavana-svabhāvāś ca bhavanti, kecānānavadhikātiśāyānanda-parama-puruṣa-prāpti-rūpa-phala-bhāgiṇo’punar-āvartinaś ca bhavanti* (Rāmānuja on *Bhagavad-gītā* 9.25).

Bhāgavata Purāṇa do declare that anyone, even if they are a ‘dog eater’ (i.e. an outcast), who recites God’s name, praises him, bows down to him, or merely remembers him once, ‘becomes at once eligible for Soma offerings.’⁸³ But Vaiṣṇava commentators argue that, even though his devotional practice has destroyed all his *karma*—including the ‘manifest’ (*prārabdha*) *karma* of the ritually impure body in which he was born—and he is thus technically eligible for such ritual, as the *Bhāgavata* claims, such an ‘outcast’ Vaiṣṇava should nevertheless not perform Vedic ritual, because he would not have performed the required rituals to grant him the status of being a ‘twice-born’ (*dvija*), which would ordinarily have been undergone during childhood and which even a brahmin must observe in order to be eligible for Vedic ritual.⁸⁴ Vaiṣṇavas are thus, in this regard, generally very conservative and orthodox in their attitude to Vedic ritual—a conservatism generally not seen in the other, more popular, forms of Vaiṣṇava practice.

Vedic ritual is therefore not very widely practised among Vaiṣṇavas, but there is one Vaiṣṇava tradition which more than any other grounds itself in Vedic texts and practice. The Vaikhānasa are perhaps the oldest living Vaiṣṇava ritual tradition. They are a Yajur Vedic school, and their communities are nowadays mostly located in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, where several prominent temples (such as the temple of Veṅkateśvara in Tirupati) follow the Vaikhānasa rite.

Vaikhānasa draw upon two textual traditions. The oldest and foundational Vaikhānasa texts are two Yajur Vedic ritual manuals (*sūtra*) which are traditionally ascribed to the sage Vikhanas, from whom they derive their name: the *Vaikhānasa-śrauta-sūtra*, which describes the solemn Vedic (*śrauta*) rituals, and the more influential *Vaikhānasa-smārta-sūtra*, which is divided into two parts: the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra*, which discusses domestic ritual, and the *Vaikhānasa-dharma-sūtra*, which mostly deal with the stages of life (*āśrama*) and social classes (*varṇa*). The second corpus, collectively called the Vaikhānasa Āgamas, probably dates to the medieval period. This is a collection of texts ascribed to Vikhanas’ four disciples, Bhṛṅgu (to whom is ascribed, among others, the *Kriyādhikāra*), Marīci (*Vimānārcanā-kalpa*), Atri (*Samūrtārcanādhikaraṇa*), and Kāśyapa (*Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa*).

The *Vaikhānasa-śrauta-sūtra* is, according to Willem Caland, not particularly original in its treatment of the Vedic (*śrauta*) rituals and borrows much material from other Yajur Vedic (*Taittirīya*) ritual texts.⁸⁵ The rituals the text prescribes are rather unremarkable for a Vedic school, but the text’s Vaiṣṇava character is unmistakable. The text repeatedly stresses meditation on Viṣṇu during the ritual, and sees him as the lord of the sacrifice.⁸⁶ The basic ritual plan of the

⁸³ *Yan-nāmadheya-śravaṇānukīrtanād, yat-prahvaṇād yat-smaraṇād api kvacit/śvādo ‘pi sadyaḥ savanāya kalpate . . .* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.33.6).

⁸⁴ See Jīva Gosvāmīn’s commentary on Rūpa’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.1.22.

⁸⁵ Caland (1941: xxvii); see also Gonda (1977: 524–5).

⁸⁶ See Caland (1941: xxi–xxii).

Vaikhānasa-śrauta-sūtra is elaborated upon, and slightly modified, in the *Vaikhānasa Āgamas*. Both enjoin that the ‘sacrificial hall’ (*yāga-śālā* or *agni-śālā*) should contain five different sacrificial fire altars:⁸⁷ the round ‘household’ altar (*gārhapatyā*) in the west, the square ‘offering’ (*āhavanīyā*) in the west, the semi-circular ‘southern’ (*dakṣiṇāgni* or *anvāhāryā*) in the south, and the triangular or square ‘domestic’ (*āvasathya*) in the north. The fifth fire altar, the square ‘congregational’ (*sabhya*), is the most important for the *Vaikhānasa*, and is to be placed near the centre of the hall, to the west of the offering fire (*āhavanīyā*). Right beside it, between the four cardinal fires, is the ‘altar of repose’ (*śayyā-vedī*) where images of Viṣṇu are placed.⁸⁸

The worship of Viṣṇu’s image, which is the primary interest of the *Āgamas*, is not discussed in the *Vaikhānasa-śrauta-sūtra*, but is discussed in some detail in the *Vaikhānasa-smārta-sūtra*, a much more influential text. The practice taught by the *Vaikhānasa-smārta-sūtra* is a remarkable Vaiṣṇava adaptation of standard Vedic ritual. It involves the performance of standard Vedic ritual offerings to the various gods through Agni, the god of fire, but combines this with the worship of Viṣṇu’s image. Both rituals are seen to complement each other. As the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* proclaims: ‘Now, after the daily (*nitya*) offerings to Agni comes the daily worship of Viṣṇu, which honours all the gods. As the [*Aitareya*] *Brāhmaṇa* (1.1.1) states, “Agni indeed is the lowest of the gods, Viṣṇu is the highest. Between them are all the other deities”’.⁸⁹ Thus, with the worship of Agni through the regular Vedic rituals and the direct worship of Viṣṇu, as taught in the *Vaikhānasa-smārta-sūtra*, all other gods are honoured.

The text describes in detail the rituals by which the image of Viṣṇu is consecrated (*pratiṣṭhā*).⁹⁰ During the ritual, which lasts three days, the devotee fashions an image of Viṣṇu ‘not less than six fingers’ tall,⁹¹ which will then be consecrated with a variety of Vedic ritual acts—offerings into the domestic fire, various oblations, and the recitation of Vedic verses. On the second day, the priest fills a vessel with water, *kuśa* grass, unhusked rice, a piece of gold, and some gems, and then meditates on Viṣṇu in his ‘partless’ (*niṣkala*) form in the heart. He then meditates on Viṣṇu in his form ‘with parts’ (*sakala*), ‘as golden of colour, as having a red face, red eyes, red hands and feet, as wearing the Śrīvatsa-mark, as four-armed, as wearing a yellow garb, as having in his hands the conch and the disc, and as of

⁸⁷ See *Vaikhānasa-śrauta-sūtra* 1.2–3; Colas (1996: 267–71). In the description that follows, I have followed the *Āgamas*.

⁸⁸ A sixth altar, called the ‘lotus’ (*pauṇḍarika*), is added to this in the *Āgamas*. It is placed south of the *sabhya* and is used primarily for expiatory offerings as well as for the rite of image consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*).

⁸⁹ *Athāgnau nitya-homānte viṣṇor nityārcā sarva-devārcanā bhavati. ‘Agnir vai devānām avamo viṣṇuḥ paramas tad-antareṇa sarvā anyā devatā’ iti brāhmaṇam* (*Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 4.10). See also *Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* p. 2.

⁹⁰ See *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 4.10–12.

⁹¹ *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 4.10.

benign countenance.⁹² Viṣṇu is then invoked in the five forms Vaikhānasas worship—Viṣṇu, Puruṣa, Satya, Acyuta, Aniruddha—as are his two consorts Śrī and Bhū, followed by more Vedic oblations. On the third day, the new image of Viṣṇu is brought to the place where it will be worshipped, either at home, in a temple, or in the ‘fire hall’ (*agni-śālā*) where the standard Vedic rituals are performed. The water that was consecrated the previous day and which is now ‘infused with the power (*śakti*)’ of Viṣṇu is then poured over the image of Viṣṇu, who is requested to appear in this new form. The image is thereby consecrated and comes to be Viṣṇu himself.

The text describes but briefly the actual worship of Viṣṇu. It is to be performed every morning and evening, immediately after the Vedic fire ritual (*agni-hotra*) performed at sunrise and sunset. The devotee then bathes the consecrated image of Viṣṇu, dresses and adorns him, and offers him flowers, perfume, incense, a lamp, water, and food. All this, which is not typically Vedic in character, is to be accompanied by the recitation of various Vedic verses in praise of Viṣṇu and, especially, of the *Puruṣa-sūkta*. The *Vaikhānasa-smārta-sūtra* talks elsewhere of the worship of Viṣṇu with more standard Vedic rituals,⁹³ but these are not used in the daily worship of Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu is, however, ‘sacrifice personified’ (*yajña-puruṣa*), and the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* states that ‘what was omitted in the sacrifices is completed by this [worship of Viṣṇu’s image], according to the Śruti. Without laziness, the twice-born should daily worship Lord Nārāyaṇa with *bhakti*, either in their home or in the temple. They will attain that highest abode of Viṣṇu, it is declared.’⁹⁴

All of this is elaborated in extraordinary detail in the Āgamas, which follow the main sequence given here, and list the countless mantras that should be used, many of them from the *Rg* and *Yajur Veda*. We do not need to dwell on those details here,⁹⁵ but there are two aspects of the Āgamas’ rite that are worth mentioning. The most striking difference between the Āgamas and the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* is that the Āgamas employ five different images of Viṣṇu. The first of these is the ‘immovable image’ (*dhruva-bera*), which is that described in the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra*. This is the principal image and resides perpetually in the temple. It embodies Viṣṇu, who is, as we have seen, invoked to reside in this form during the rite of consecration, and from then on is permanently present in this image. The daily (*nitya*) worship, however, is not offered to this image, but to a smaller and mobile image, which is the ‘ceremonial image’ (*kautuka-bera*).

⁹² *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 4.10, translation by Willem Caland.

⁹³ See *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 3.13, where Viṣṇu is worshipped as part of standard Vedic pre-natal rituals, and *Vaikhānasa-dharma-sūtra* 10.9–10, where offerings are made to Viṣṇu during funerary rites.

⁹⁴ *Yajñeṣu vihinaṃ tat sampūrṇaṃ bhavatīti śrutir dvi-jātir atandrito nityaṃ grhe devāyatane vā bhaktiā bhagavantaṃ nārāyaṇaṃ arcayet tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padaṃ gacchantīti vijñāyate* (*Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra* 4.12).

⁹⁵ For a detailed overview of Vaikhānasa daily worship, see Goudriaan (1970).

Similarly, there is a ‘bathing image’ (*snapana-bera*) used to bathe the deity, a ‘festival image’ (*autsava-bera*) that is taken on processions during festivals, and the ‘offering image’ (*bali-bera*) to whom oblations are made. Unlike the immovable image, these other four images are not consecrated. Rather, at the beginning of the worship Viṣṇu is requested to move into the image from the main image, and at the end of the worship, Viṣṇu is ‘sent back’ to the main image. This ritual of ‘invitation’ (*āvāhana*) and ‘dismissal’ (*visarjana*) is distinctly Vedic in character and modelled on the Vedic ritual of invoking the gods, through Agni, into the sacrificial fire and dismissing Agni at the end of the ritual.⁹⁶ These five forms, identified with the five main forms of Viṣṇu recognized by Vaikhānasas—Viṣṇu, Puruṣa, Satya, Acyuta, and Aniruddha—are also seen to represent the five Vedic fires Vaikhānasas use.

The second aspect that is unique to the Vaikhānasa Āgamas is the self-deification that takes place before the worship proper begins. The devotee recites the ‘Hymn to the Self’ (*Ātma-sūkta*), a Vaikhānasa hymn of nine verses in which the various parts of the body are identified with aspects of Viṣṇu and the cosmos, so as ‘to enlarge the worshipper’s consciousness into cosmic size, so that he may be able to identify himself with the Lord Whom he is going to worship.’⁹⁷ The hymn starts as follows:

The self of the self, the highest and inner self, the inner self of the earth; he, the primeval self, is our inner self; He envelopes everything, maintains the whole; he, whose merit reveals itself, is our chief.

As the outward breath (*prāṇa*), he is guidance; as the upward breath (*udāna*), he is the primeval Boar [Varāha] who grants boons; and as the circulating breath (*vyāna*), he is the concrete accumulation of ascetic power, Kapila, prince of hermits; and our downward breath (*apāna*) is Hayaśīrṣa.⁹⁸

The hymn is an interesting instance of the Vaikhānasas’ Vedic Vaiṣṇavism. It resembles Vedic passages, like those common in Brāhmaṇa texts, that talk of correspondences between the microcosm of the body and the microcosm of the universe which are deemed important for Vedic ritual, and passages from the Upaniṣads in which *brahman* is seen as the self of all, but re-envisioned this in a distinctly devotional Vaiṣṇava fashion.

The Vaikhānasa Āgamas differentiate between two types of ritual worship of Viṣṇu: ‘formless’ or ‘aniconic’ (*amūrta*) and ‘with form’ or ‘iconic’ (*amūrta*).⁹⁹ The former type is performed through Vedic ritual, while the latter consists of the worship of an image of Viṣṇu at home or in a temple. While it may be tempting to

⁹⁶ See Colas (1996: 280–1). ⁹⁷ Goudriaan (1970: 212).

⁹⁸ Translation after Goudriaan (1970: 214).

⁹⁹ See, for example, *Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 5, *Kriyādhikāra* 9.1–3, *Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* p. 3.

classify only the former as Vedic, since the latter introduces elements not typically associated with Vedic ritual, it is difficult to do so. Although it is not its main element, even the ‘iconic’ worship involves a fire sacrifice, into the *sabhya* fire,¹⁰⁰ but the ‘Vedic’ character of this system goes much beyond that. The ‘iconic’ worship these Vaikhānasa texts describe may seem far removed from the traditional Vedic fire rituals, but the Vaikhānasa tradition is not the only (Yajur) Vedic school to use images in Vedic ritual,¹⁰¹ and the Āgamic rite is a clear development of the early Vaikhānasa Vedic rituals as described in the Vaikhānasa *Sūtras*. As we have seen, the Vaikhānasas interpret the images in Vedic sacrificial terms, beginning from their consecration, and view both ritual systems as complementary. While the Vaikhānasa Āgamas do contain a few (minor) Tantric elements, as Gérard Colas has noted,¹⁰² their rite is markedly non-Tantric and deeply rooted in Vedic imagery, if not also ritual and text. Traditionally, certainly, the Vaikhānasa rite is viewed as a Vedic tradition, and based on its Vedic character it has been differentiated from the (now more popular) Tantric Pāñcarātra rite, which we will discuss below.

3. Image Worship (*Arcana*)

Ineffable inner light of ascetics, mystical *kohl*
of a yogi’s eye; precious stone,
vessel of perfect liberation, healer of the sorrows
of the poor and afflicted—
God of gods, divine eye in the assembly
of the Vedas:
we see him here,
in the middle of Śrīraṅgam town!

—Vedānta Deśika¹⁰³

Later Vaikhānasa texts claim that of the two forms of worship—aniconic and iconic—iconic worship is ‘best’. Unlike the more complex Vedic rituals, image worship does not depend on a patron (*yajamāna*) and is thus easier to sustain, says the *Vimānārcana-kalpa*.¹⁰⁴ But the *Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa* gives another, more popular reason: ‘in iconic worship there is the constant flow of delight for both the eyes and mind. That will lead to *bhakti* and faith (*śraddhā*), and only for

¹⁰⁰ See Goudriaan (1970: 205).

¹⁰¹ See, for example, the use of images in the *Baudhāyana-grhya-pariśiṣṭa-sūtra* (Harting, 1922, II, 13, p. 1).

¹⁰² Colas (1996: 285–7).

¹⁰³ Hopkins (2002: 157).

¹⁰⁴ *Tac chreṣṭham. Yajamānābhāve’pi avicchinnam bhavati (Vimānārcana-kalpa p. 5).*

one who has both faith and *bhakti* does all perfection arise';¹⁰⁵ 'by repeatedly seeing [the image] and serving it, *bhakti* arises'.¹⁰⁶

This view is shared across Vaiṣṇava traditions. Piḷḷai Lokācārya, for example, has a similar argument: Viṣṇu's beautiful image is so potent and important because this form of his attracts the mind of his devotee and thereby distracts him from his worldly attachments and generates in him a deep 'taste' (*ruci*) for the Lord—even in those who are disinterested in him. It is this attraction, he argues, that leads them to Viṣṇu.¹⁰⁷ Viṣṇu's image is so attractive, Maṇavāla Māmuṇi explains, because, although he manifests himself fully in that form, he also assumes 'simple' qualities that make him more approachable, while he hides some of his overwhelming divine majesty: out of his boundless grace the omnipotent sovereign of all worlds resides here, in his image, among common mortals!¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, as Jīva Gosvāmin argues, attending to God's image is particularly important because it nurtures a 'special relationship': the constant service and worship creates a strong intimacy between the Lord and his devotee, which, for Vaiṣṇavas like Jīva who worship Kṛṣṇa, can take on various forms: the devotee can come to see him as master, friend, child, or even lover.¹⁰⁹

As such statements make abundantly clear, Vaiṣṇavas do not look upon the image they worship as a 'representation' of God or a symbol. Rather, the image is non-different from him. The image *is* God. As Śrīvaiṣṇava theology in particular stresses, it is a divine descent (*avatāra*) of God into this world. Out of his compassion, God assumes a form made of matter so as to be perceptible and approachable by his devotees in this world, and Vaiṣṇavas therefore attend the image not just by offering ritual worship (*pūjā*), but also by bathing him, dressing and ornamenting him, offering him food, allowing him to rest, and so on. The image is treated as a person because he is seen to be the embodiment of the supreme person, and whether in a temple or a household, the image is the central focus of all activities. The temple is seen to be his home, and he is the legal proprietor of all the temple's assets, which the temple's priests, who are his servants, merely manage on his behalf.

Viṣṇu's image (*arcā*, *bera*) in temples is generally an image made out of stone, wood, or metal that is a physical representation of one of God's many divine forms. But Vaiṣṇavas also worship Viṣṇu's aniconic form of the *śālagrāma*. These are stones—generally, but not always, black—named after the place where they are found, in the Gaṇḍakī river at the town Śālagrāma, in Nepal. Based on the

¹⁰⁵ *Samūrte cakṣur-manasoḥ prītiḥ sadā saṃsṛtiś ca. Tābhyāṃ bhakti-śraddhe syātām. Śraddhā-bhakti-yutasyaiva sarva-saṃsiddhiḥ (Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa p. 3).*

¹⁰⁶ *Abhikṣṇa-darśanāt paricaryayā bhaktir bhavati (Kāśyapa-jñāna-kāṇḍa p. 97).*

¹⁰⁷ See *Śrī-vacana-bhūṣaṇa* 43.

¹⁰⁸ See Maṇavāla Māmuṇi on Piḷḷai Lokācārya's *Śrī-vacana-bhūṣaṇa* 43 and 40.

¹⁰⁹ See *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 283.

stone's marks and colour,¹¹⁰ or on the desire of the devotee,¹¹¹ these *śālagrāma* stones are identified as one of Viṣṇu's many divine manifestations (such as Narasiṃha, Hayagrīva, Rāma, Vāsudeva, etc.). These forms reside in the stone naturally, and the worship of *śālagrāma* stones therefore does not require any rite of consecration.

The sculpted images of Viṣṇu, however, do require consecration. The matter out of which they are made needs to be ritually transformed and through the ritual of consecration (*pratiṣṭhā*) Viṣṇu is requested to become fully present in the image. As we have seen, the Vaikhānasa tradition has such consecration rituals, which are developed out of and associated with Vedic ritual, but the majority of Vaiṣṇavas follow not the Vaikhānasa rituals but those of the Tantric Pāñcarātra texts—or at least rituals that are inspired by these. The Pāñcarātras are a large corpus of Sanskrit Tantric texts. Though they are considered a separate revelation from the Vedic revelation, Vaiṣṇavas have always insisted that they are merely complementary to the Vedic canon and do not replace it. As Yāmuna explains, Viṣṇu revealed the Pāñcarātra texts because he realized most devotees could not understand the intricacies of Vedic texts, and so, out of his compassion, revealed a new set of texts, the Pāñcarātra, which taught the same but would be easier to follow.¹¹² Thus, though the rite is different, it is not contrary to Vedic ritual.¹¹³

The consecration rituals described in various Pāñcarātra texts are detailed and also vary from text to text. The (simplified) account in the *Īśvara-saṃhitā* is as follows. An image is carved, in accordance with the regulations outlined in Pāñcarātra texts, and is then brought to a newly erected pavilion. There it is ritually awakened by the 'opening of the eyes' (*netronmīlana* or *nayanonmīlana*): the right and left eye of the new image are traced with a golden and silver needle or pencil dipped in honey and ghee respectively, after which the priest prays for the Lord to awaken into this form: 'Now, with this very form of this image please delight the people of this town, who are ignorant of reality. By you, who have entered into them, they will quickly go from sin born from a thousand births, to liberation (*mokṣa*).'¹¹⁴ The image is bathed, and then fully consecrated by the 'placement of mantras' (*mantra-nyāsa*), during which the priest touches various parts of the image's body and 'places' a mantra there. The image will thereby be transformed from inert matter into God's divine and fully conscious body. Once the rite is complete, the image is moved to the temple, where it will permanently reside. Like the Vaikhānasas, the Pāñcarātra rite also worships several images—the big 'immovable image' (*dhruva-bera* or *mūla-bera*), the 'festival image'

¹¹⁰ See Rao (2009: 148–331).

¹¹¹ See, for example, *Bhakti-sandarbha* 286.

¹¹² See Yāmuna's *Āgama-prāmānya* p. 102.

¹¹³ See Yāmuna's *Āgama-prāmānya* pp. 139–40.

¹¹⁴ *Mūrti-bhedena rūpeṇa anenaiva hi sāmpratam/lokān ajñāta-tattvāṃs tu samāhlādāya nāgarān/yenāntas sampraviṣṭeṇa iṣat-kāla-vaśāt tu vai/janmāntara-sahasrotthān mokṣam āyānti kilbiṣāt* (*Īśvara-saṃhitā* 18.49). See also *Īśvara-saṃhitā* 18.229–34.

(*autsava-bera*) which is taken on procession, the ‘bathing image’ (*snapanā-bera*) which is bathed daily, and so on¹¹⁵—and these are all consecrated as well.

This procedure is often simplified, and in some traditions performed not just once but each time the image is worshipped. The ritual is then, mostly, reduced to just the ‘placement’ (*nyāsa*), and after the worship is completed, the process is practised in reverse, while the devotee asks forgiveness for any shortcomings and requests the Lord to return to the devotee’s heart.¹¹⁶

Since the consecrated image embodies God and is considered to be no longer made of matter, the devotee too needs to ritually transform his own body into a divine one in order to be able to worship the image. The first step in this is initiation (*dīkṣā*),¹¹⁷ which is available to anyone, irrespective of caste or gender. The ritual of initiation is of great importance, since only by undergoing this ritual can the devotee worship the image. The ritual of initiation is centred around one or more fire rituals (*homa*). It can last several days, according to Pāñcarātra texts, but, if one does not have the means to do so, it can be performed very simply too, merely by the recitation of the mantras.¹¹⁸ Whatever form the initiation takes, it has two essential elements: the disciple receives from the guru the mantra(s) with which he will worship the Lord, and initiation transforms the disciple ritually and spiritually. The ritual of initiation destroys all the consequences—good or bad—of past actions (*karma*) of the disciple. The disciple’s old identities, determined by the accidents of birth and body, are thereby destroyed and the disciple attains the new identity of being a servant of God. The disciple receives a new name—generally a name of Viṣṇu or one of his attendants—and in some traditions even a new caste (*jāti*) and family lineage (*gotra*)—he now belongs to the caste of Vaiṣṇava and the family of Acyuta (Viṣṇu).¹¹⁹ This change is also physically marked: according to Pāñcarātra texts the disciple should be branded (*tāpa*) on the upper arms with the mark of the conch and discus of Viṣṇu—a practice that, when followed, is usually renewed each year on Śayana Dvādaśī in the month of Āṣāḍha (June to July)—and on the forehead the sign of a Vaiṣṇava (*tilaka* or *ūrdhva-puṇḍra*) should be (daily) drawn with clay from Vaiṣṇava sacred sites, its shape also signifying one’s specific Vaiṣṇava tradition.¹²⁰ All these mark the devotee as belonging to God: ‘Wearing the discus and so on is especially so men announce their relation [to the Lord], [just as a wife] adorns herself with bangles and so on to signal her chastity to her husband’.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Pāñcarātra texts list up to six different images. For more on the various images, see Varadachari and Tripathi (2009, Vol. 1: 186–8).

¹¹⁶ See Tripathi (2004: 303, 366).

¹¹⁷ Some texts talk of different types of initiation. See, for example, *Lakṣmī-tantra*, chapter 41 and Czerzaniak-Drożdżowicz (2003: 132–4).

¹¹⁸ See, for example, *Lakṣmī-tantra* 41.9–10.

¹¹⁹ See O’Connell (2019: chapter 6).

¹²⁰ See Entwistle (1981–2).

¹²¹ *Cakrādi-dhāraṇam puṣṣām paraṁ sambandha-vedanam/pātvratya-nimittam hi valayādi-vibhūṣaṇam* (*Varāha Purāṇa*, cited in Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmin’s *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 15.47).

The change is seen to be not just social, however. As we have seen earlier in Caitanya's claim, the disciple's actual body is now transformed into a divine body like that of the Lord. In some initiation rituals the guru ritually 'deconstructs' the disciple's body and then builds up a new, divine, body with mantras.¹²² Other texts describe a ritual that is reminiscent of the consecration of images: during initiation the disciple is blindfolded or has his eyes closed, and his eyes are then 'opened' by tracing them with a small golden pencil. Just as the deity is awakened into the image by the 'opening of the eyes' (*netronmīlana*) with a needle or pencil during the consecration, so are the disciple's eyes opened to the divine reality of God during the ritual of initiation.¹²³

This process is repeated, in some form, each time the initiated Vaiṣṇava commences his daily worship. While preparing for the worship, the devotee visualizes how the material elements that constitute his physical body are dissolved and then consumed by fire. Having thus mentally destroyed his material body, he then constructs a divine body by the placement (*nyāsa*) of Vaiṣṇava mantras on the various parts of his body, by which 'he becomes equal to the God of gods and becomes eligible for all the ritual acts, such as worship (*pūjā*)'.¹²⁴ Though rooted in Tantric rather than Vedic practices, the effect and purpose of the ritual is similar to that of the Vaikhānasa recitation of the *Ātma-sūkta*: the devotee comes to identify himself not with any of the temporary identities he has assumed in this fleeting life, but sees himself only in relation to the unchanging God, whom he is about to worship.

The image, then, is worshipped as one would honour an important guest, by offering various kinds of services to the deity. Sixteen main acts of service (*upacāra*) are generally listed, which are often prescribed to be performed while chanting the sixteen verses of the Vedic *Puruṣa-sūkta* hymn. There are some minor variations in this list, but the basic structure of the ritual is the same across the different texts. This is the list given in the *Nāradya-saṃhitā*.¹²⁵

1. invoking the Lord
2. offering him a seat
3. offering water to wash his hands
4. offering water to wash his feet
5. offering water to rinse his mouth
6. bathing him
7. dressing him

¹²² See, for example, Czerzaniak-Drożdżowicz (2003: 142).

¹²³ See Sanātana Gosvāmin's commentary on *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 2.130–1 and 2.222–5.

¹²⁴ *Yena vinyasta-mantreṇa deva-deva-samo bhavet/pūjādi-sarva-kāryāṇām adhikāras ca jāyate* (*Īśvara-saṃhitā* 2.50–1).

¹²⁵ *Nāradya-saṃhitā* 2.58–60. For variant lists, see *Pādma-saṃhitā* 4.6.62–4, *Lakṣmī-tantra* 36.76–104 (listing eighteen *upacāras*), *Īśvara-saṃhitā* 4.47–8, 132–9.

8. offering him a new sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*)
9. anointing him with sandal paste
10. offering a flower garland
11. offering incense
12. offering a ghee lamp
13. offering food
14. bowing down before him
15. circumambulating him
16. dismissing, and asking for forgiveness for mistakes made

This final offering, ‘dismissing’ (*visarjana*) the deity, is not included in all Pāñcarātra texts: some add other elements—such as adorning the image with jewellery—and end with submitting oneself and one’s family to God as the final act.¹²⁶ The difference between the two lists points to the difference in practice: for some God is invoked in the image, honoured as a guest, and then asked to leave the image, but for others, as long as the image is regularly worshipped, God remains present in the image. The latter is certainly the more popular view, as also reflected in countless poems in praise of specific temple images.¹²⁷ For them, God is ‘not an invited guest—instead, he is always present’; he does not visit the temple, but rather ‘the temple *is* his home.’¹²⁸

Of all Vaiṣṇava practices, image worship is undoubtedly the most common. It is also the most ritually involved. Pāñcarātra texts and ritual manuals following them are immensely detailed in their prescriptions, and the rituals I have summarized above, as described in these texts, appear overwhelmingly complex to one not familiar with them. But those texts really describe just one aspect of image worship, which is the grand, public worship performed in temples by families of priests for whom this is their only occupation. Most Vaiṣṇavas practise some form of image worship at home as well. Their rituals are modelled, to a greater or lesser degree, on those performed in the temples, but are generally greatly simplified.

However, the ritual aspect of image worship so far discussed is just one of its aspects. Vaiṣṇava communities establish themselves around temples where Viṣṇu is worshipped, and prominent temples became important places of pilgrimage. Devotees visit these temples to participate or observe the rituals, to offer prayers or join in song, or just to *see* the form of their beloved Lord. The devotees go, often daily, to have an audience (*darśana*) with God—to see him and be seen by him, and to be in union with him through that act. As Cynthia Packert has argued, this act of seeing is not a ‘singular, definitive moment of religious transaction’ but rather ‘the appreciative, all-over kind of looking that savors the

¹²⁶ See, for example, *Īśvara-saṃhitā* 4.139.

¹²⁷ See Hopkins (1993).

¹²⁸ Packert (2010: 12).

details of the body, the surface, and environment of the gods in much the same way as a poem is appreciated, word by word, phrase by phrase.¹²⁹ It is a deeply sensuous experience, and always a different one, as the image is richly dressed and ornamented anew each day, and the dress and ornaments change with the seasons and the calendar of festivals celebrated in the temple. As countless Vaiṣṇava poets have expressed, to see God in his adorned image ‘offer[s] privileged glimpses’ of the deity’s daily routine, ‘and reflect[s] his many moods and activities.’¹³⁰ Sūrdās sings:

Let your eyes fill and fill
with the beauty of the blessed Cowherd [Kṛṣṇa].
Gaze at the splendor of that lord of life
so intensely that your eyes can’t bear to close.¹³¹

Although the ritual complexity and rigidity of temple worship might suggest otherwise, it is because of this intimacy that image worship is also emphasized in those Vaiṣṇava traditions that teach a practice that transcends the parameters of scripture. As we have seen above, Śrīvaiṣṇavas distinguish between *bhakti* and surrender (*prapatti*). They argue that in the former the devotee depends on ritual practice, while in the latter the devotee depends on God. This should not be understood as a dismissal of temple ritual, however. Indeed, Piḷlai Lokācārya argues that Viṣṇu’s image is the best means for the practice of surrender. Surrender consists in making the Lord one’s ‘means’ (*upāya*) and not only is his image non-different from him, but only in this form is he actually accessible to the devotee—all other forms of his are beyond our immediate reach.¹³² Devotees should therefore surrender to the Lord in his form of the image, and attend him in that form according to their capacity.

Similarly, image worship is central in the practice of the ‘path of grace’ (*puṣṭi-mārga*), taught by Vallabha and his followers, although they view the practice quite differently. They consider their method of image worship to only resemble the structure of the Pāñcarātra method, since they do not worship a consecrated image but the ‘essential form’ (*svarūpa*) of God. As Anand Mishra explains, ‘the presence of divinity in the *svarūpa* does not result from elaborate rituals designed to give life to the idol (*prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā*), but from Kṛṣṇa’s decision to reveal himself in this form, for the sake of providing special delight to his devotee through the performance of *sevā* [‘service’], which otherwise would have been impossible.’¹³³ This idea that God manifests himself in the image due to love is not entirely alien to Pāñcarātra practice. The *Īśvara-saṃhitā*, for example, states that

¹²⁹ Packert (2010: 13). ¹³⁰ Packert (2010: 58). ¹³¹ Hawley and Bryant (2015: 721).

¹³² See *Śrī-vacana-bhūṣaṇa* 39–42. See also Vedānta Deśika’s *Rahasya-traya-sāra* pp. 285–9.

¹³³ Mishra (2012: 100).

when God is invoked, in the first of the sixteen acts of services (*upacāra*), he is ‘reflected [in the image] by the mirror of emotion (*bhāva*), from the lotus of [the priest’s] heart’ where he perpetually resides.¹³⁴ But whereas in the Pāñcarātra rite this emotional aspect is rigidly circumscribed by complex ritual, in the image worship of the Puṣṭi-mārga it comes to shape the ritual actions themselves. ‘Offer homage to Krishna’s image with the utmost love,’ Gopeśvara writes. ‘Do nothing without love. When you are able to perform *seva* with an absolute dedication of your entire being [...], you will experience the bliss of which the divine image is constituted.’¹³⁵

Similarly, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava practice of devotion that is ‘pursuing passion’ (*rāgānuga-sādhana*) is a meditative practice in which one emulates the spontaneous love of Kṛṣṇa’s immediate companions. Although one *may* forgo any form of ritual practice while pursuing this, this is rarely done, and image worship especially is not rejected. Indeed, this state of devotion is said to come about by the worship of Kṛṣṇa’s image,¹³⁶ and such worship is expected to continue, although some authors argue that certain of the more complex aspects of Pāñcarātra worship—like the practice of the placement of mantras (*nyāsa*), or various hand gestures (*mudrā*)—as well as any form of identification with Kṛṣṇa are to be rejected.¹³⁷ The rituals are thus simplified, and, more importantly, directed more by the spontaneous love for God that is gradually awakening in one’s heart than by the injunctions of scriptural texts.

4. Praise (*Kīrtana*)

To punish Kamsa who tormented the good,
the Lord left his primal form of light
up there and took birth here:

What are people who cannot sing of him,
the Lord placed first in the *Vedas*,
who cannot jump about
in the streets—
Why do the learned and the wise
chant and roll the beads?
Are they even human?

—Nammālvār¹³⁸

¹³⁴ *Bhāva-darpaṇa-saṅkrāntaṃ kṛtvā hṛt-kamalāt tu vai (Īśvara-saṅghitā 4.51).*

¹³⁵ Arney (2007: 521).

¹³⁶ See Rūpa Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.300.

¹³⁷ See Viśvanātha Cakravartin’s *Rāga-vartma-candrikā* 12. Nevertheless, some of the rituals that are rejected here do seem to have been followed in communities that followed this type of devotional practice: see, for example, Rādhākṛṣṇa Gosvāmin’s *Sādhana-dīpikā*, chapter 4.

¹³⁸ Narayanan (2007: 192).

In the words of Rāmānuja, Viṣṇu possesses ‘immeasurable, innumerable, all-surpassing beautiful qualities’; he has

one invariable divine form that is in accordance with His pleasure and in harmony with Himself; He has an infinite variety of unsurpassed beautiful ornaments that suit His form, and immeasurable, endless and marvelous weapons of all kinds that are equal to His power; He has a Consort [Śrī] who suits His pleasure and who is in harmony with Him [...]; He has an infinite entourage of attendants [...]; He has a divine residence, the proper form and nature of which are beyond the ken of thought and the power of expression: all of this [...] is everlasting and irreproachable.¹³⁹

Parāśara Bhaṭṭa comments that a Vaiṣṇava worships Viṣṇu ‘mentally, contemplating the Lord’s qualities which fully extinguish the threefold torments of worldly life (*saṃsāra*)—[such contemplation] becoming an uninterrupted stream of nectar’ and ‘verbally, striving to praise his qualities—his body bristling by the extraordinary joy which is born from experiencing them, with welling tears and choking voice.’¹⁴⁰ Thus, those who love God talk of God—of his beauty and power, his opulence and splendour, his innumerable attributes, his divine consort and his greatest devotees, his transcendent abode and his descents into this world. As Kṛṣṇa states in the *Bhagavad-gītā* his devotees are ‘always praising me,’¹⁴¹ and when they meet other devotees whose ‘thoughts are in me’ and whose ‘lives are dedicated to me,’ they ‘enlighten one another and always talk about me.’¹⁴²

Such praise is, however, not just an expression of the devotee’s love for God, and thus an outcome of practice, but is also seen as an important practice in its own right. Vedic ritual is restricted to the twice-born (*dvija*), and while image worship is generally open to all, it requires following proper conduct and following many rules. But praising God can be practised by all. It rids the person who does so from all sins, because it brings him in contact with God, who is the ‘purest of the pure.’¹⁴³ Because of this it is deemed particularly important for those born in this age of Kali, the most difficult of the ages. ‘In Kali, which is a sea of evil,’ the *Bhāgavata* claims, ‘there is still one good quality: by praising Kṛṣṇa, one can become free from attachment [to this world] and reach the highest.’¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ *Vedārtha-saṅgraha* 127, translation by J.A.B. van Buitenen.

¹⁴⁰ [...] *mānasam avicchinnāmṛta-dhārākāraṃ niḥśeṣa-saṃsāra-tāpa-traya-nirvāpana-bhagavad-guṇa-cintanaṃ kurvan* [...] *vācikaṃ ca tādrśaṃ tad-anubhava-janya-harṣa-prakarṣa-pulakita-śarīraṃ bāṣpa-gadgada-kañṭhaṃ tad-guṇa-saikīrtanaṃ samihamānaḥ* (Commentary on *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma* p. 33).

¹⁴¹ *Satataṃ kīrtayanto mām* (*Gītā* 9.14).

¹⁴² *Mac-cittā mad-gata-prāṇā bodhayantaḥ parasparam/kathayantaś ca mām nityam* (*Gītā* 10.9).

¹⁴³ *Pavitrāṇām madhye paramaṃ mahat pavitram* (Parāśara Bhaṭṭa’s commentary on *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma*, p. 67).

¹⁴⁴ *Kaler doṣa-nidhe rājann asti hy eko mahān guṇaḥ/kīrtanād eva kṛṣṇasya mukta-saiṅgaḥ paraṃ vrajet* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 12.3.51).

But praising does more than just destroy sin. It awakens the devotee's love for God and draws him ever closer to him. The Lord is seen here to be the principal agent. As Vallabha states, 'having heard his own attributes sung in the hearts [of his devotees], the Lord causes these people to become fully immersed [in bliss]'.¹⁴⁵ The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* too states when one is absorbed in narrations of the Lord's play, the Lord himself, situated in everyone's heart, purifies the heart of all impurities, awakens *bhakti* for him there, makes one immune to the deluding powers of matter, and thereby grants the devotee liberation.¹⁴⁶ Thus, 'he who praises him becomes praiseworthy'.¹⁴⁷

Such praise takes on many forms. While many texts contrast the practice of praise (*kīrtana*) with either Vedic ritual or image worship, it is intimately connected with both. Reciting Vedic hymns in praise of Viṣṇu or various prayers of praise (*stotra*, *stuti*, *stava*) is an integral part of both ritual practices. Image worship specifically is closely linked with the practice of praise. Countless Vaiṣṇava poets composed poems in praise of a specific image of God, often describing in detail the beauty of his adorned body and singing of the great grace bestowed upon his devotees. Such poems, expressing the poet's love, are then in turn recited by other devotees as a vehicle for their own devotion. 'Their very recitation bodies forth God', Steven Hopkins explains; they are 'icons of icons' whose recitation brings the devotee in the presence of the deity, and thereby recreate, for the reciter, the 'saint-poet's experience'.¹⁴⁸ Such poems, especially those composed in vernacular languages, even become integrated into the temple's worship. Many Vaiṣṇava temples, and especially those dedicated to Kṛṣṇa in northern India, developed a rich musical tradition, in which poems sung in praise of the deity and recounting his divine play were seen as a particularly potent vehicle for the devotees' love.¹⁴⁹

But the practice of praise reaches beyond the worship of the image. Especially popular is the praise of God's divine play (*līlā*), as displayed in his many descents (*avatāra*) in this world. Praising God's play and listening to such narrations reveals his otherworldly beauty and charm, as well as his great love for his devotees. These divine acts too are recounted in poetry and song, but also take the form of discourses (*kathā*), in which a devotee narrates episodes from sacred texts, such as the *Purāṇas*. The most favoured of this type are week-long narrations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*bhāgavata-saptāha*) in which the entire text—or portions thereof—is retold, interspersed with devotional songs and even dramatic performances.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ *Nirodha-lakṣaṇa* 8, translation after Smith (1998: 518).

¹⁴⁶ See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.17–21.

¹⁴⁷ *Yaṃ stuvan stavayatām eti* (Parāśara Bhaṭṭa's commentary on *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma*, p. 43).

¹⁴⁸ Hopkins (2002: 165).

¹⁴⁹ See Beck (2012), esp. chapters 3–5, and Richard Williams' chapter in this volume.

¹⁵⁰ See Taylor (2016).

The praise (*kīrtana*) that the Purāṇas particularly praise, however, is the singing of God's name (*nāma-saṅkīrtana*). God's name is softly recited (*japa*), counting each name on a rosary (*mālā*), as a meditational practice, or sung in congregation, accompanied by musical instruments. God's name is particularly singled out, because Vaiṣṇavas consider God to be non-dual (*advaita*), and so they argue that there is no distinction or duality between God and his attributes. 'The name Kṛṣṇa is the philosopher's stone. It is the embodiment of the essence of consciousness, complete, pure, and ever free, because there is no difference between the name and the named.'¹⁵¹ This notion can also be traced to the Pāñcarātra tradition. According to Pāñcarātra, mantras are one of the ways in which the transcendent God reveals himself to us: just as the consecrated image is the physical embodiment of God, mantras are sonic embodiments of God. 'All mantras are manifestations of god in his pristine glory as saviour,' Sanjukta Gupta writes, and the mantra's power is therefore 'the expression or embodiment of god's saving grace (*anugrahamūrti*).'¹⁵² To recite the mantra is therefore to be in the presence of God.

But, as some Vaiṣṇavas proclaim, God's name is more than a mantra. Pāñcarātra mantras are only received after initiation, as we have seen. They not only necessitate adherence to Vaiṣṇava standards of purity and good conduct, but their use is also subject to ritual rules. God's name, however, is not subject to those limitations. Caitanya wrote: 'O Lord, you revealed your many names. You have invested in them all your potencies (*śakti*), and there is no established time for remembering them. Such is your mercy!' God's name can therefore be recited by anyone, at any time. Though it is often conferred during initiation as a mantra, texts from those traditions that emphasize the importance of the name often claim that it does not require initiation.¹⁵³ Rather, merely by reciting God's name, all perfection can be achieved. No other practice but the name is required, because 'when his name is unreservedly sung a man is at once released from all sins,' the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* declares, '[which flee] like wolves frightened by a lion.'¹⁵⁴ Since the name is God, nothing else is required. As Tulsīdāsa proclaims, Rāma's name 'is provisions for those who journey empty-handed, and a friend for those who travel alone, it is blessedness for the unblessed, good character for those with none, a patron to purchase goods from the poor, and a benefactor to the abandoned. It is a good family for those without one, they say—and the scriptures agree—it is, to the crippled, hands and feet, and to the blind it is sight.'¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ *Nāma cintāmaṇiḥ kṛṣṇaś caitanya-rasa-vigrahaḥ/pūrṇaḥ śuddho nitya-mukto'bhinnatvān nāma-nāminoḥ* (attributed to the *Pādma Purāṇa*, cited frequently in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava texts, such as Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.233 and Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.17.133).

¹⁵² Gupta (1989: 224 and 243).

¹⁵³ See, for example, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.15.108–11.

¹⁵⁴ *Avaśenāpi yan-nāmmi kīrtite sarva-pātakaiḥ/pumān vimucyate sadyaḥ śiṃha-trastair vṛkair iva* (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.8.19).

¹⁵⁵ Translation by Hawley and Juergensmeyer (2004: 166).

5. Meditation (*Dhyāna, Smaraṇa*)

In the hollow of the hearts
of those who discern some ultimate truth
 beyond meditation
may the self abide—
 nothing but mere consciousness,
while in ours
may this charming self remain,
with lotus eyes and smiling lotus face,
 dark as a cloud
 clothed in gold.

—Kaviratna¹⁵⁶

As an independent practice, meditation (*yoga, dhyāna, smaraṇa*) is relatively rare in Vaiṣṇava traditions. It is prescribed in various scriptural texts, and has been practised by Vaiṣṇava ascetics, but since the majority of Vaiṣṇavas are householders, it has rarely been their central practice. Many Vaiṣṇava texts do include some system of pure meditation, often drawing on the meditation taught in the school of Yoga, as developed in Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtras*. The *Bhagavad-gītā* offers a Vaiṣṇava version of yogic meditation by which, Kṛṣṇa says, one can come to 'see me in everything and see everything in me.'¹⁵⁷ Purāṇas, like the *Bhāgavata*, also teach the eightfold meditation practice (*aṣṭāṅga-yoga*) to meditate on the form of Viṣṇu, claiming that by such practice 'the characteristics of *bhakti* quickly appear.'¹⁵⁸ We find a similar adaptation of this form of meditation among the Vaikhānasas. The *Vimānārcana-kalpa*, for example, list meditation (*dhyāna*) as one of the four ways in which Viṣṇu can be worshipped (the other three being through mantra meditation, through sacrifice, and through image worship): 'one should contemplate the supreme self within the living being (*jīva*) with the self by the practice of eightfold (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga; this is meditation (*dhyāna*).'¹⁵⁹ The eight aspects of yoga are the traditional ones, although their interpretation is distinctly Vedic and Vaiṣṇava. Among the ethical observances (*niyama*), for example, are the worship of Viṣṇu, listening to the meaning of the Veda, recitation of mantras, and sacrifice, alongside the more traditional ones like austerity or contentment.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ *Dhyānātitaṃ kim api paramaṃ ye tu jānanti tattvaṃ, teṣāṃ āstāṃ hṛdaya-kuhare śuddha-cin-mātra ātmā/asmākaṃ tu prakṛti-madhuraḥ smera-vaktrāravindo, megha-śyamaḥ kanaka-paridhiḥ pañcakajākṣo'yaṃ ātmā* (cited in Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Padyāvali* 77).

¹⁵⁷ *Yo mām paśyati sarvatra sarvaṃ ca mayi paśyati* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 6.30).

¹⁵⁸ See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.1.21; see also *Bhāgavata* 3.28, 11.15, 11.28.38–44.

¹⁵⁹ [...] *aṣṭāṅga-yoga-mārgeṇa paramātmānaṃ jīva ātmanā cintayet tad dhyānam iti* (*Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 509).

¹⁶⁰ See *Vimānārcana-kalpa* pp. 510–11; cf. *Yoga-sūtras* 2.32.

Since meditation on the transcendent ‘partless’ (*niṣkala*) form of Viṣṇu ‘even the gods cannot define,’ because that form ‘is imperceptible,’¹⁶¹ the *Vimānārcana-kalpa* only enjoins, meditation on the form of Viṣṇu ‘with parts’ (*sakala*). Such meditation can either be on the divine form of Viṣṇu that is ‘without [material] qualities’ (*nirguṇa*), or on those forms ‘with qualities’ (*saguṇa*), in which he is present in this world of matter. This latter form of meditation draws on various Vedic and Upaniṣadic notions and involves meditating on the effulgent form of Viṣṇu, accompanied by his consort and surrounded by his associates, as he is present in various material bodies—such as fire, the sun, and the moon. In the former type of meditation, after ‘making the self pure by the practice of breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), disengagement of the senses (*pratyāhāra*), and concentration (*dhāraṇā*),’ ‘one should see with the self that [form of Viṣṇu] who pervades all like fire wood, who is [omnipresent and indivisible] like space, who is hidden in the cave of the self of all, who exists both within and outside, who is seen and unseen, tangible and subtle, who is without blemish, immensely clear, immeasurable, without parts, who never exerts himself, who is eternal, inconceivable, and partless.’ ‘In the central space of the lotus of the heart which blooms by the practice of breath control (*prāṇāyāma*)’ one should see ‘with the greatest devotion’ ‘the inner self, Nārāyaṇa, who is the cause of all worlds, imperishable, unmanifest, and the unalterable supreme light’ who illumines the body ‘from the waist up to the crown of the head’ and who is ‘the embodiment of the highest bliss.’¹⁶² Both forms of meditation lead to absorption (*samādhi*), in which one attains, even in this life, supreme bliss and ‘always sees and experiences Nārāyaṇa, the supreme self.’¹⁶³

Meditation also plays an important role in Pāñcarātra practice. The *Īśvara-saṃhitā*, for example, writes that before engaging in the worship of the image, the devotee should meditate on God. He should sit down and, withdrawing his sensory faculties from their objects, turn his focus to his Lord. Invoking him with mantras, he should prepare a seat for the Lord in the lotus of his heart and invite him to sit there with his consort. He should then meditate on God, his consort, and his attendants, paying attention to every detail of his divine form and attributes, praying ‘Welcome, Lord of the god of gods, infallible one, please be near me, and receive my mental worship (*pūjā*), which is properly imagined.’¹⁶⁴ The devotee visualizes God and then performs worship exactly as he would of the consecrated image, but mentally.¹⁶⁵ This gives the meditation a distinct sensory aspect: the senses are withdrawn from their objects but imagined actively in the meditation. As the *Parama-saṃhitā* states, the devotee should approach the

¹⁶¹ *Niṣkalaṃ devair apy anabhilakṣyam adṛśyaṃ syāt* (*Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 516).

¹⁶² *Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 517. ¹⁶³ *Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 519.

¹⁶⁴ *Svāgataṃ deva-deveṣa sannidhiṃ bhaja me'cyuta/grhāṇa mānasīṃ pūjāṃ yathārtha-paribhāvitām* (*Īśvara-saṃhitā* 2.107). Cf. *Lakṣmī-tantra* 36.135.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, *Īśvara-saṃhitā* 2.108–28, *Lakṣmī-tantra* 36.114–36.

Lord in meditation ‘as if he were seeing’ him, bow down to him ‘as if he were touching’ him, and meditate on him ‘as if he were hearing his words.’¹⁶⁶

The Pāñcarātra meditation is thus clearly subordinated to the worship of the image. It is not an independent practice. Not only is it to be practised before one worships the image, as a preparation for it, it is also just an internalized form of the external image worship.¹⁶⁷ While the Vaikhānasa method of meditation is less tied to ritual worship, it is nevertheless also subordinated to image worship. The *Vimānārcana-kalpa*, for example, claims that while meditation is a valid, independent practice, image worship is still the ‘best means to attain all things,’¹⁶⁸ and such meditation on both forms of Viṣṇu—in a slightly simplified manner from that described above—is better while performed during the Vaikhānasa rites.¹⁶⁹

In the *Bhagavad-gītā*, when Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna the practice of yogic meditation, Arjuna despairs and declares it to be impractical: because the mind is fickle, how can such meditation ever be steady? ‘The mind is fickle, Kṛṣṇa, turbulent, powerful, and obstinate. It think it is as extraordinarily difficult to control as the wind!’¹⁷⁰ It is a sentiment that is echoed by many Vaiṣṇavas throughout the ages, who see pure meditation as too difficult for those born in this troubled age of Kali, when people are ‘sluggish, have the most sluggish thoughts, are ill-fated, and disturbed.’¹⁷¹

This is not to say that Vaiṣṇavas reject meditation entirely. As we have seen, meditation (*dhyāna*) is a key part of both the Vaikhānasa and Pāñcarātra rites. While they may discourage meditation as a practice on its own, they fully embrace meditation if it is part of the larger cultus, because meditation is what all Vaiṣṇava practices have as their goal.

According to the Purāṇas God is to be worshipped in different ways in the different cosmic ages (*yuga*). In the Kṛta or Satya age, the first and longest of the cycle, people are pure and can therefore easily take to the worship of Viṣṇu: all they need to do is meditate on him. But as the ages progress, people grow more restless and distracted and require more engagement to gain the same result. So, in Tretā, the second age, they should perform the ‘aniconic’ worship of the Vedic sacrifices; in Dvāpara, the third age, they should worship an image of God; and in Kali, the last and most troublesome age, they should turn to the name of God.¹⁷² The practice of each age after the first is a substitute for meditation proper, but as

¹⁶⁶ *Parama-saṁhitā* 10.23.

¹⁶⁷ *Yoginām api sarveṣāṁ mad-gatenāntar-ātmanā/śraddhāvān bhajate yo mām sa me yuktatamo mataḥ* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 6.47).

¹⁶⁸ *Teṣv arcanaṁ sarvārtha-sādhanam syāt* (*Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 509).

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, *Vimānārcana-kalpa* p. 224.

¹⁷⁰ *Cañcalaṁ hi manaḥ kṛṣṇa pramāthi balavad dṛḍham/tasyāhaṁ nigrāhaṁ manye vāyor iva su-duṣkaram* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 6.34).

¹⁷¹ *Mandāḥ sumanda-matayo manda-bhāgyā hy upadrutāḥ* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.1.10).

¹⁷² See, for example, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 12.3.52 and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.2.17.

proper substitutes they will lead to the same goal as the meditational practice of the first age.

Vaiṣṇavas of all schools stress this. Irrespective of what specific practice is followed, the goal is the same: constant awareness of God. As Rūpa Gosvāmin states, ‘Viṣṇu should always be remembered; he should never be forgotten. All scriptural injunctions and prohibitions should be servants of these two principles.’¹⁷³ Rāmānuja similarly stresses that constant engagement in ritual practice will lead to meditation. Such meditation, he writes:

is of the nature of remembrance, but in intuitive clearness is not inferior to the clearest direct perception (*pratyakṣa*); which by constant daily practice becomes ever more perfect, and being duly continued up to death secures liberation. Such meditation is originated in the mind through the grace of the Supreme Person, who is pleased and conciliated by the different kinds of acts of sacrifice and worship duly performed by the devotee day after day.¹⁷⁴

As we have seen, the followers of Caitanya also teach that the practice of image worship and praising God’s divine play (*līlā*) in particular can bring about a spontaneous attraction to Kṛṣṇa and the desire to have an intimacy with him like that of his eternal companions. The dominant practice then becomes meditation (*smaraṇa*) on the divine play of Kṛṣṇa, which, as we have seen, could replace all other forms of practice but normally just infuses those other practices—like praising (*kīrtana*) and image worship—with that meditation.¹⁷⁵

Similarly, in the Puṣṭi-mārga meditation is an essential part of image worship. ‘It is the nature of the mind to always want to be jumping from one object to another. Therefore, keep it occupied with Krishna’s infinite and multifarious *līlas*,’ advises Gopeśvara, ‘recollecting them one after another in chronological succession.’ This should be practised while one serves the image: ‘As you perform *seva* before the *svarup* [image],’ he writes, ‘[...] savor the sublime sweetness of those *līlas* that Krishna performed in the company of his devotees.’ And when one is not in the presence of the image, ‘keep his lotuslike face constantly in mind as you experience the sorrow of separation.’¹⁷⁶

Meditation is for Vaiṣṇavas thus generally not a distinct practice, performed on its own, but all the external practices that Vaiṣṇavas perform are seen as a form of meditation or a means to it. Earlier we have seen the Vaiṣṇava claim that any act of worship without *bhakti* is invalid: even if it is performed, the *Parama-saṃhitā*

¹⁷³ *Smartavyaḥ satataṃ viṣṇur vismartavyo na jātucit/sarva-vidhi-ñiṣedhāḥ syur etayor eva kiṅkarāḥ* (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.8).

¹⁷⁴ *Śrī-bhāṣya* 3.4.26 (translation after George Thibaut).

¹⁷⁵ See Rūpa Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.2.291–307; Jīva Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-sandarbhā* 312; and Haberman (1988: 133–7).

¹⁷⁶ Arney (2007: 513, 514, 519).

claims, it is as if it is not performed if there is no *bhakti*.¹⁷⁷ *Bhakti* is a type of love, Rāmānuja argues, and love is a form of awareness.¹⁷⁸ It is therefore meditative awareness of God, his attributes, and his divine play that counts in practice. ‘One may offer the wide earth with all its gems to Kṛṣṇa, but if his mind is elsewhere he will not easily attain Janārdana [Kṛṣṇa].’¹⁷⁹ Whatever way one might worship God—whether by Vedic ritual, by the ritual worship of his image, by gazing upon his divine image, by singing his glories and his divine name, or by any other means—one should in each instance contemplate the nature of God, if it is to be worship at all.

Meditation, in some form or another, is thus immensely important for Vaiṣṇavas, but they do not see it as the only form of practice since it is too difficult to pursue. And meditation is, in part, so difficult because it does not engage all one’s faculties. Like all Vedāntic traditions, Vaiṣṇavas assert that the bodies we bear are temporary, yet deludedly we think we are these bodies—both physical and mental—rather than the unchanging, eternal, and unborn self (*ātman*) that briefly inhabits this body, and has inhabited countless other bodies before it. Some Hindu traditions see renunciation of all things bodily, insofar as is possible, as the only proper response to this. But while Vaiṣṇavas see our human bodies as temporary and our identification with them as illusory, the body with all its faculties is not something that can be tossed aside. ‘One who is embodied’, Kṛṣṇa teaches in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, ‘can never renounce actions entirely.’¹⁸⁰ In Vaiṣṇava thought agency is a permanent character of the self,¹⁸¹ and such agency is expressed through the faculties of the body. *Bhakti* is the proper exertion of that agency, and *bhakti* therefore uses the body in the service of God. As cited earlier, the *Nārada-pañcarātra* thus defines *bhakti* as ‘serving the Lord of one’s sensory faculties with those faculties.’¹⁸²

Now, meditation alone is seen as limited because it only uses one of the body’s faculties—the mind—but Vaiṣṇavas want to engage all their faculties in the worship of God. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* describes an ideal devotee thus: ‘he used his mind [to meditate] on the lotus-feet of Kṛṣṇa, his speech in constantly describing the qualities of Vaikuṅṭha, his hands in acts such as cleansing Hari’s temple, his hearing in listening to the true narrations of the infallible Lord, his sight in seeing the temples of Mukunda’s image, his limbs in touching the bodies of the Lord’s servants, his faculty of smell in smelling the fragrance of the blessed *tulasī* at his lotus-feet, his faculty of taste in [the food] offered to him, his feet in walking to Hari’s pilgrimage sites, his head in bowing to the feet of the lord of his faculties,

¹⁷⁷ *Parama-saṁhitā* 4.72.

¹⁷⁸ *Vedārtha-saṅgraha* 141.

¹⁷⁹ *Prthivīm ratna-sampūrṇaṁ yaḥ kṛṣṇāya prayacchati/tasyāpi anya-manaskasya sulabho na janārdanaḥ* (cited in Parāśara Bhaṭṭa’s commentary on *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma* p. 60).

¹⁸⁰ *Na hi deha-bhṛtā śakyam tyaktuṁ karmāny aśeṣataḥ* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 18.11).

¹⁸¹ See *Brahma-sūtras* 2.3.33ff.

¹⁸² *Hṛṣikeśena hṛṣikeśa-sevanam bhaktir ucyate* (cited in Rūpa Gosvāmin’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.1.12).

his desire in service, not in longing for pleasure'.¹⁸³ Vallabha writes: 'an organ which is clearly not seen to be used for the Lord's service should decisively be brought under complete control' and be used to serve him.¹⁸⁴ Vaiṣṇavas therefore want to do more than think of God: they want to *serve* him, and experience him with every one of their faculties. Even in meditation—as in Pāñcarātra's inner worship—when the external faculties should be dormant, the sensory faculties are imagined and the Lord is both served and experienced through them.

This emphasis on 'meditating' on God with all one's bodily faculties also means that Vaiṣṇavas have a much broader understanding of practice. Since the act of worship itself is seen to be less important than the mood with which it is performed, as we have seen above, any act can become an act of worship: whatever is done, if it is done for God, is considered to be *bhakti*. This means that *bhakti* does not end with the ritual act of worship itself, but is rather something that comes to govern one's entire life. Vaiṣṇava practice is thus, ultimately, the way a Vaiṣṇava comports himself in every aspect of his life. In the *Bhagavad-gītā* Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to 'remember me and fight':¹⁸⁵ throughout his daily duties he should meditate on God, by making all his worldly acts acts of worship, through remembrance of God, and with the aim of pleasing him. 'When even a single moment passes without meditation [on the Lord]; Parāśara Bhaṭṭa writes, 'it is proper to weep as if one were robbed by thieves'.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, as Kṛṣṇa later states in the *Bhagavad-gītā*: 'whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give away, whatever austerity you perform, [...] make that an offering to me'.¹⁸⁷ 'Whatever one does in accordance with one's nature—whether with one's body, speech, mind, senses, intellect, or self—all of it should be offered to the Supreme, with the thought "this is for Nārāyaṇa"'.¹⁸⁸ Or, as it is put in one prayer: 'May my life be service, my walking pilgrimage, my thoughts meditation, my words words of praise—may what I do with my entire self be done for you, Viṣṇu'.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ *Sa vai manaḥ kṛṣṇa-padāravindayoḥ, vacāṃsi vaikuṅṭha-guṇānuvarṇane/karau harer mandira-māṛjanādiṣu, śrutim cakārācyuta-sat-kathodaye/mukunda-liṅgālaya-darśane dṛṣau, tad-bhṛtya-gātra-sparṣe 'nga-saṅgamam, ghrāṇam ca tat-pāda-saroja-saurabhe/śrīmat-tulasya rasanām tad-arpite, pādau hareḥ kṣetra-padānusarpane/śiro hṛṣīkeśa-padābhivandane, kāmam ca dāsyē na tu kāmā-kāmyayā* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.4.18–20).

¹⁸⁴ *Nirodha-lakṣaṇa* 19 (translation by Frederick Smith).

¹⁸⁵ *Mām anusmara yuddhya ca* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 8.7).

¹⁸⁶ *Ekasmim api atikrānte muhūrte dhyāna-varjite/dasyubhir muṣiteneva yuktam ākranditum bhṛṣam* (Commentary on *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma*, p. 31).

¹⁸⁷ *Yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi yat juhoṣi dadāsi yat/yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva mad-arpanam* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 9.27).

¹⁸⁸ *Kāyena vācā manasendriyair vā buddhyātmanā vānusṛta-svabhāvāt/karoti yad yat sakalam parasmai nārāyaṇāyeti samarpayet tat* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.2.36).

¹⁸⁹ *Sthitiḥ sevā gatir yātrā smṛtiś cintā stutir vacaḥ/bhūyāt sarvātmanā viṣṇo madiyam tvayi ceṣṭitam* (cited in *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 8.431).

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