

nāmarūpa

Issue 08 Volume 02-03 August-September 2008



CATEGORIES OF INDIAN THOUGHT

GANESANI
NARA ALLSOP

DISCOVERING GANESH
SHANA DRESSLER

SANDHYAVANDANAM
WITH ACCOMPANYING AUDIO
SRIVATSA RAMASWAMI

YOGA MANGA
BARRY SILVER

NAVARATRI
H.H. SRI SWAMI SIVANANDA

EVERYTHING IS TRUE
HOOMAN MAJD

ROBERT BEER
INTERVIEWED BY
ROBERT SVOBODA

DURGA PUJA
DOUBLE TAKE
DINESH KHANNA



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*Gaṇeśanī, Tāmil Nadu, South India.
January 2007. Photograph by Robert Moses.*

ISSUE 08 VOLUME 02 AUGUST 2008

GAṆEŚANĪ *The Female Gaṇeśa* 4
Nara Allsop

YOGA MANGA 6
Barry Silver

SANDHYAVĀNDANAM 8
Srivatsa Ramaswami

An audio file of Srivatsa Ramaswami chanting
the mantras in this rare article is available at:
<http://www.namarupa.org/volumes/vol02.php>

DISCOVERING GANESHA 21
Shana Dressler

ISSUE 08 VOLUME 03 SEPTEMBER 2008

DURGA PUJA or NAVARATRI 29
H.H. Sri Swami Sivananda

EVERYTHING IS TRUE 33
Hooman Majd

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BEER 37
Dr. Robert E. Svoboda

DOUBLETAKE
DURGA PUJA PANDAL 46
Dinesh Khanna

NĀMARŪPA uses diacritical marks, as per the chart shown below, for the transliteration of all Samskr̥ta words. While many of the articles do contain these marks, it is not a universal occurrence in the magazine. In those cases where authors have elected not to use diacritics, Samskr̥ta words remain in their simple, romanized form. Chart by Vyaas Houston.

अ a	आ ā	इ i	ई ī	उ u	ऊ ū
ऋ ṛ	ॠ ṝ	ए e	ऐ ai	ओ o	औ au
क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa	
च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña	
ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa	
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	
प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma	
य ya	र ra	ल la	व va		
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	ह ha		
क्ष kṣa	त्र tra	ज्ञ ñā			



» GANEŚANĪ «
THE FEMALE GANEŚA
Artwork and Text by NARA ALLSOP

INDIA IS HOME TO A VARIETY OF LITTLE-known images of an elephant-headed Goddess. The earliest currently known dates from the first century BC and was excavated in Rairh near Jaipur. It is a small terracotta and very rough. Although its identification is disputed, one can certainly make out the goddess' image in the worn terracotta if one wishes to! Such two-armed figures are sometimes considered to be *Yakṣīs*—magical female nature spirits.

There is also the elephant-headed *Yoginī* included in the iconographic programme of the tenth century Chaunsaṭha Yoginī temple in Hirapur, Orissa. In various *Purāṇas* groupings of such Yoginīs are usually given as sixty-four. The earlier conception of these forms is that of powerful, dangerous, dreaded beings to be placated and worshipped as grantors of magical power and averters of disease and witchcraft, much in the same way as Grāma-Devatās are regarded in small villages throughout India. These Yoginīs are shown with all kinds of animal heads—snake, crane, goat, buffalo, lion, vulture and many more, including elephant. So it would seem that this is a separate identification to that of a female form of Gaṇeśa. Of course, this is India and categorizations merge. The later conception of the Yoginīs is that of emanations of the Great Goddess Devī or servants of Devī. The *Kālikā Purāṇa* mentions ten million such Yoginīs.

A feminine Gaṇeśa may perhaps be a later conception arising with the explosion of Gaṇeśa's popularity in medieval times. The *Devī Sahasranāma* includes names of such feminized forms as Lambodāri, Gaṇeśvarī and Vainayakī. Up until now, iconographic scholars who have written on the subject have been silent or unaware of a spectacular ten-armed form of Gaṇeśanī painted on the sanctum wall of the nineteenth century Śiva temple in Parayil, Kuttipuram, Kerala. This image is of particular importance because no other ten-armed form is known; all others recorded thus far are two- or four-armed. Not only this, but her iconographic attributes are nearly totally undamaged and visible. Gaṇeśanī is holding (clockwise from

her bottom right hand) her broken left tusk, a pink lotus, *cakra* (discus), *śūla* (trident), either an *aṅkuśa* (elephant goad) or *mazhu* (axe)—there is some damage to the mural just where the blade of either implement would be—*pāśa* (three-corded noose), sugar cane, ripened grain, a blue lotus and a fruit—possibly mango or citrus. In addition, Gaṇeśanī holds a golden chain in her trunk. The trunk is right turning, which is said to indicate that the deity is suitable for tantric worship. Her skin is vermillion and she wears a blue dress.

FOR THE PAINTING, I HAVE TRANSLATED this mural from the simplistic but powerful Keralan style into the more visually complex Tamil idiom. The issue over the object held in her upper right hand being an axe or goad is resolved by depicting an implement that could serve both functions. The facts that Gaṇeśanī is three-eyed and holds her broken tusk indicate that she is the female counterpart to Gaṇeśa as opposed to her being solely an independent Yoginī, Matrika, or nature spirit, as some writers have suggested. Furthermore, in the ten-armed form at Kuttipuram, the skin coloration matches that most popularly seen in Gaṇeśa—vermillion, and also, the Deity wears the crescent moon on her crown. In addition, all of her implements are those commonly held by South Indian forms of Gaṇeśa. One further irrefutable piece of evidence toward a definite identification of a female Gaṇeśa is the very recent discovery by Dr. J.N. Pandey, History Professor of Allahbad University, of a rock-cut sculpture of Gaṇeśa seated with Gaṇeśanī at His side.

In the Vijayanagar period, Tamil Nadu gives rise to the visually arresting form of Gaṇeśanī with the legs and feet of a lion (*Vyāla*) or tiger (*Vyāgrā*). The two-armed Vyāgrapāda Gaṇeśanī at the bottom left of the painting is from a stone relief within the Madurai Śrī Mīnākṣī Temple's Kambattadi Maṇḍapa. A similar form is also seen at Chidambaram's Śiva Naṭarāja temple. In our form, the Deity's left arm is hanging by her side in *dola hasta mudrā*, whereas Chidambaram's Vyāgrapāda

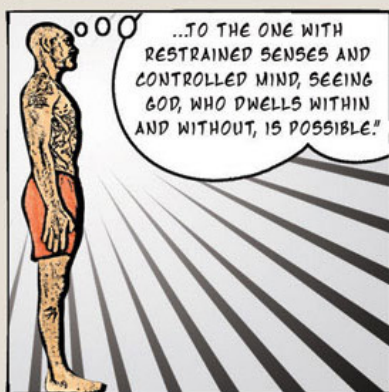
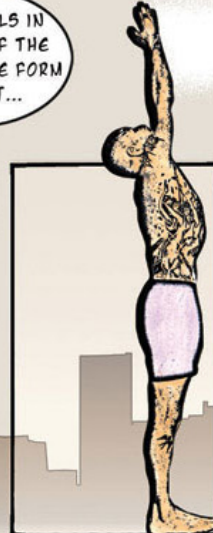
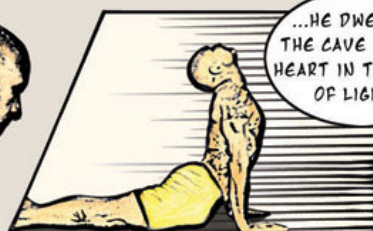
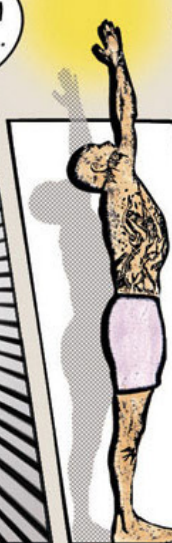
Gaṇeśanī extends her left arm out in dance posture. Both hold lotus buds in their right hands. Why Gaṇeśanī has the lower half of a tiger or Vyāla is unknown as no textual description has been discovered as yet. However, it is interesting that Chidambaram has historically been known as Puliur (Tigertown) due to Goddess Kālī's patrolling the vicinity with the help of a tiger. The great devotee of Śiva Naṭarāja, also known as Vyāghrapāda, is given his tiger legs as a boon from Śiva. This was to enable him to better reach the flowers he required for pūjā from the tree tops of the 'tillai' forest of Chidambaram.

Vyāghrapāda Gaṇeśanī, on the lower right of the painting, is from a wooden sculpture at Tirunelveli's Nelliyan temple. She is marching forward with *gadaī* (mace), *udaivall* (sword), *kedaya* (shield) and *aṅkuśa* (goad). Not all Tamil forms of Gaṇeśanī are tiger-legged—a four-armed version is shown in relief at Suchindram's Sthanumalaya Temple within the Chempakaraman Mandapa seated on a throne in *lalitāsana* with her left leg extended.

THESE ARE VERY EXCITING TIMES for the iconographic study of Gaṇeśanī and no doubt further discoveries are to be made as She Wills. In my own research, I tentatively propose that the Goddess currently identified as Śaradā, who is seated on the lap of the peacock-mounted, three-trunked Ganesha, housed within the eighteenth century Trisunda Gaṇapati Temple in Pune, may, in fact, be Gaṇeśanī. This is due to what could be interpreted as Her having a trunk, rather than Ganesha possessing an overly elongated trunk on his left, in comparison to the central and right trunks. She can also be identified as Gaṇeśanī because of her pot belly and third eye. Anyway, it is an altogether highly unusual icon, as the peacock-mounted Mayureśvara Gaṇeśa is, in every other case I know of, shown with only one trunk. ▶

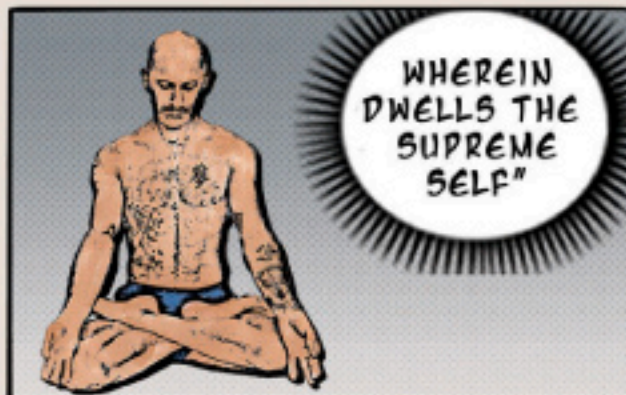
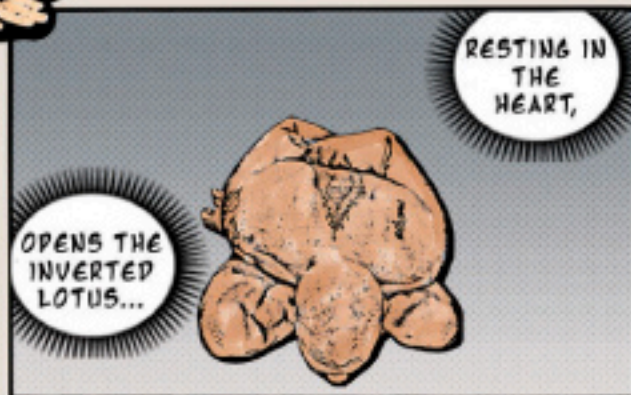
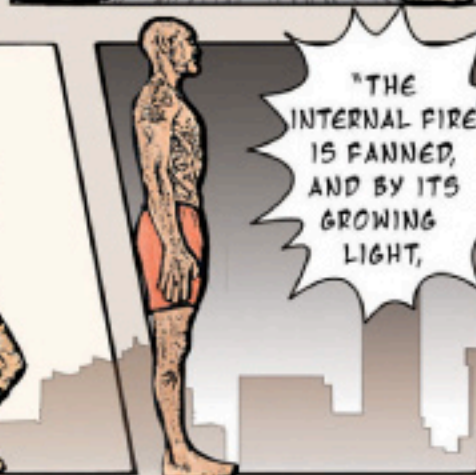
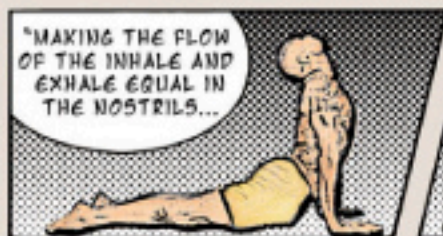
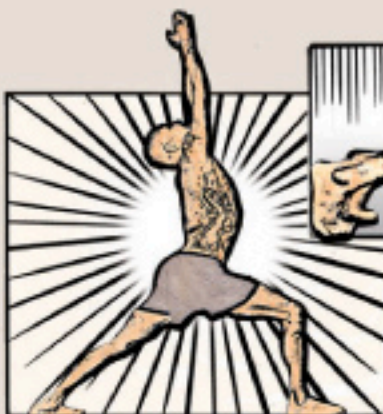
Nara Allsop a painter of deities, studied for five years with Robert Beer. He lives in Arizona under the auspices of his patron, Lee Lozowick.

YOGA MANGA



HE INSTRUCTED
"PRACTICE EVERYDAY, WITH GREAT DEVOTION..."





SANDHYĀVANDANAM

Ritualistic Gāyatri Meditation

SRIVATSA RAMASWAMI

Photographs by Badri Ramaswami



SANDHYĀVANDANA IS A STRUCTURED meditation ritual centered on the profound *gāyatrī* mantra. The *gāyatrī* is considered the mother of all vedic mantras even as the *praṇava* (Om) is considered the origin of the Vedas.

गायत्री छन्दसां माता इदं ब्रह्म जुषस्व नः ।
gāyatrīm chandasām mātā
idam brahma juṣasva nah ।

The Vedas themselves exhort the initiated to worship the Sun every dawn while facing the East with *gāyatrī* mantra. This mantra is at the heart of the sandhyāvandana ritual. *Sandhyā* means the meeting, or meeting of night and day, and *vandana* means worship. Sandhyāvandana is Sun worship with meditation on the *gāyatrī* mantra.

The word *sandhyā* is etymologically interpreted differently by some scholars. *Sandhyā* is considered a word derived from the root *dhyai*, to meditate or think deeply (*dhyai cintāyām*), as is the yogic word *dhyāna*, meditation. The prefix *saṁ* means something complete, it being a cognate of the English word *sum* which means total. So *sandhyā* could be considered to mean total contemplation. And sandhyāvandana could be thought of as worship (of the Sun) with complete contemplative veneration, a complete meditative ritual.

Universal interest in mantras and meditation has been growing steadily and even Western medicine has begun to view meditation as a healthful practice. But some meditative procedures adopted by contemporary yogis lack proper structure. Many choose mantras at random and practice meditation irregularly. The ancients found that well-thought out meditation done regularly and with sincerity was a restorative practice for the mind.

It is traditionally believed that the mind, made up of the three *guṇas*—*sattva*,

rajas, and *tamas*—slowly deteriorates. *Sattva* becomes dormant and the mind becomes dominated by *tamas* and *rajas*. Once these two *guṇas* take hold of the mind and dominate it, they incline the mind to the same groove, the same *saṁskāra*. According to *sāmkhyas* and yogis, a tamasic mind tends to become stagnant and depressed. A predominantly rajasic mind, on the other hand, tends to become aggressive, angry, distracted, and likely to experience considerable pain. Once these *guṇas* dominate the mind, they often make people depressed, weak, and considerably anguished. *Samskāras* (habits) strengthen *tamas* and *rajas* and make one continue to function in the same groove all through life.

Almost every mind is capable of experiencing *sukha* (comfort) and *ekāgrāta* (concentration) as a matter of habit if the mind becomes *sattva* dominated. Many old texts including the venerated *Bhagavat Gītā* exhort everyone to make the body/mind increasingly *sattvic*, and maintain a *sattvic* mode all through life. But how does one achieve this?

Yoga offers a time tested and fundamentally sound solution. According to Patañjali, Svātmārāma, and other yogis and yoga texts, a proper, well designed, and regular *āsana* practice will slowly but surely reduce the rajasic *guṇa* in us. Likewise, the other highly venerated yet rarely observed yoga practice, *prāṇāyāma*, reduces the debilitating and corrupting influence of the heavy *tamas*. With the weakening of *rajas* and *tamas*, the previously dormant *sattva* slowly takes hold of the mind. A well regulated consistent practice of meditation (*dhyāna*, *saṁnyāma*) slowly strengthens the *sattvic* *saṁskāras*. If a person practices a proper mix of *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, and meditation, associated with a regulated *sattvic* diet and the lifestyle practices recommended in the *yama-niyama*, then the mind

(*citta*) becomes totally transformed (*pariṇāma*). One can maintain a *sattvic* mind or a one-pointed mind (*ekāgratā*) all through one's life and use it to obtain spiritual results as well.

SANDHYĀVANDANA OFFERS A STRUCTURED, regular and, sustained meditative practice that combines *āsana*, *nyāsa*, *prāṇāyāma*, *gāyatrī* mantra, and prayers to the Lord and the other devatās, and helps the mind and body to experience great comfort (*sukha*) and to attain spiritual awakening and freedom.

Sandhyāvandana is a daily ritual (*nityakarma*) that may be considered a duty for those initiated into the study and practice of the Vedas. Many perform it three times a day: at dawn, at noon, and at dusk. It is then known as *trikālasandhyā* (worship done at the three sandhyās of the day). The mantras and procedures vary slightly depending upon the time of day, the denomination to which one belongs, the veda or veda sect to which one belongs, and which code book (*smṛti*) one follows. In the south, most people follow the *Āpasthamba* code book (*Āpasthamba sūtra/smṛti*).

THE SANDHYĀVANDANA RITUAL IS MADE up of three parts: the *pūrvāṅga*, the preliminary part of the ritual; the *gāyatrī japa*; and then the *upasthāna*, or additional worship. There are some slight differences in the choice of the mantras during the three sandhyās done at dawn, noon, and dusk, but here we will basically follow the dawn ritual. There are also three very important functions in sandhyā: the *arghya pradhāna* or offering to the Sun, as sanctioned in the Vedas; *prāṇāyāma* done with the Vedic *prāṇāyāma* mantra; and the meditative *japa* (repetition) of *gāyatrī* mantra.

A prayer to Lord Rāma called *Śrī Rāma Jayam* extols the greatness of this mantra.¹

अच्युतानन्त गोविन्द
नामोच्छारण भेषजात्
नश्यन्ति सकला रोगाः
सत्यं सत्यं वदाम्यहम् ।
*acyutānanta govinda
nāmocchārāṇa bheṣajāṭ
nasyanti sakalā rogāḥ
satyaṁ satyaṁ vadāmyaham* |
By the medicine of the
chanting of the names
achyuta, ananta and govinda,
all diseases are eradicated,
this is the Truth, and certainly
this is the Truth.

¹This part of the *śrī rāma jayam* prayer, which starts with ‘*āpatām apahartāram*’, is recited by parents to children before they go to sleep, so that they sleep without nightmares. Children are assured early in life that the Lord will protect them always, even when they sleep.

PŪRVĀNGA

ĀCAMANA

After a bath or shower, or a dip in the river or village pond, one starts the sandhyā before dawn facing the East. One sits on one’s haunches with knees spread, in *kūrmāsana*, or seated turtle pose, somewhat similar to the yogic *utkaṭāsana*. The first procedure is called *ācamana*. One keeps the right hand slightly cupped using the *mrgī mudrā* as in *prāṇāyāma* and pours a spoonful of water taken from the vessel *pañca pātra* which is kept in front.

Then, silently saying

अच्युताय नमः

acyutāya namaḥ

Salutations to the one who does not deteriorate or fall from His exalted position [the Lord].

one should tilt the water into the slightly opened mouth from the hand and swallow it.

With a second spoon of water one says

अनन्ताय नमः

anantāya namaḥ

Salutations to the One who extends beyond the entire creation, or another meaning would be One who is the Universal Breath, or Life.

Thirdly, with another spoonful of water in the hand, one says the mantra

गोविन्दाय नमः

govindāya namaḥ

Salutation to the Cowherd, or the One who shepherds all the beings.

and then sips the sanctified water.

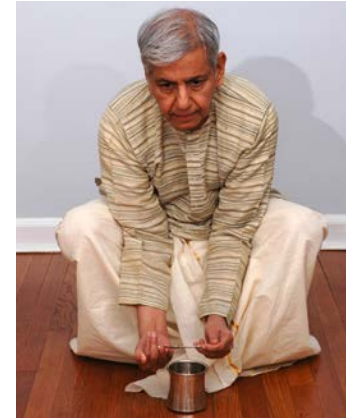
These three mantras are done at the beginning of all rituals, and are said to be the first ‘purificatory’ mantra.



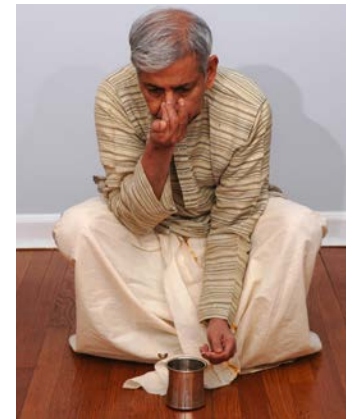
pañca pātra



kūrmāsana



ācamana stage one



ācamana stage two



keśava



nārāyaṇa



mādhaba



govinda



viṣṇu



madhusūdana



trivikrama



vāmana



śrīdhara



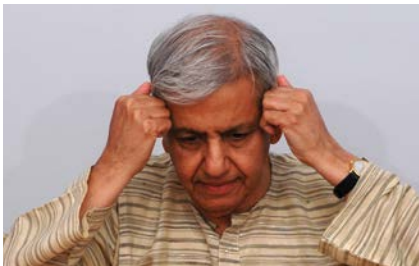
hrīkeśa



padmanābha



dāmodara



Gaṇapati dhyāna

NYĀSA

The next step as part of ācamana is called nyāsa, or invoking the Lord to protect the important senses. Placing the right thumb on the right cheek one would say *keśava*, a name of the Lord. Then saying *nārāyaṇa*, one places the right thumb on the left cheek. Then say *mādhaba* and place the right ring finger on the closed right eye, then *govinda* touching the closed left eye. *viṣṇu* is the mantra said when one places the right index finger outside the right nostril and then the same finger is placed by the left nostril saying *madhusūdana*. *Trivikrama* is the mantra used with the right little finger on the hole of the right ear and *vāmana* is the name of the Lord said while placing the same finger on the left ear. The right middle finger is then placed on the right shoulder while the mantra *śrīdhara* is muttered and then on the left shoulder, saying *hrīkeśa*. Then all the fingers are kept together and one touches the navel or heart saying *padmanābha* and then the top of the head saying *dāmodara*. These are the *dvādaśa* mantras (twelve sacred mantras) of Lord Viṣṇu, invoked to protect all the senses and the vital organs.

GAṆAPATI DHYĀNA

Meditation on Lord Gaṇeśa for the removal of all impediments in the performance of the sandhyā ritual follows. Closing both the fists, gently tap the temples repeatedly, saying the following mantra

शुक्लांबरधरं विष्णुं
शशिवर्णं चतुर्भुजम् ।
प्रसन्न वदनं ध्यायेत्
सर्वविघ्नोपशान्तये ॥

śuklāmbaṛadharaṁ viṣṇuṁ
śaśivārṇaṁ caturbhujam
prasannavadanaṁ dhyāyet
sarvaviḡhnopaśāntaye ॥

I meditate upon the all pervading Supreme Lord, wearing a white cloth and having a white complexion, with four arms and a pleasing face, for the removal of all impediments.

SAMANTRAKA PRĀṆĀYĀMA

Samantraka Prāṇāyāma is prāṇāyāma with the vedic mantra. Keeping the fingers of the right hand in mṛgī mudrā or deer gesture, one closes the right nostril and slowly inhales through the left nostril. Then closing both the nostrils, one should mentally chant the prāṇāyāma mantra slowly.

ॐ भूः । ॐ भुवः । ॐ सुवः । ॐ महः । ॐ जनः ।
ॐ तपः । ॐ सत्यम् । ॐ तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो
देवस्य धीमहि । धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् । ओमापो
ज्योतीरसोऽमृतं ब्रह्म भूर्भुवस्सुवरोम् ॥

om bhūḥ | om bhuvaḥ | om suvaḥ | om
mahah | om janah | om tapah |
om satyam | om tatsaviturvarenyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi | dhiyo yonah
pracodayāt | om āpo jyotirasaḥ amṛtaḥ
brahma bhūrbhuvassuvar om ॥

Om is the consciousness of the *bhū* loka or that in individual waking state. Om is the consciousness in the dream stage. Om is the consciousness in the deep sleep stage. Om is the consciousness in the *turiya* or the individual liberated stage. Om is the consciousness of the macrocosmic stage of Universal creation. Om is the consciousness of the stage of deep contemplation of Universal Creation. Om is the Supreme pure Consciousness.

Then one should exhale slowly through the right nostril. This is one prāṇāyāma.

With this, all the seven stages of Consciousness, from the waking individual to the undifferentiated supreme consciousness are contemplated as One Consciousness, an advaitic or non-dual contemplation of the ultimate reality. Some yogis do this contemplation by focusing on the cakras sequentially from *mūladhāra* to *sahasrāra*. Then the gāyatrī mantra is chanted (the meaning is given when we discuss the gāyatrī meditation later) and finally the last portion is known as *śīras* or head. Om is the pure consciousness (*āpaḥ*), it is effulgence, essence of everything (*rasaḥ*), immortal or non-changing (*amṛtam*), the source of the Universe (*brahman*) and is known/experienced individually in waking, dream, and deep-sleep stages (*bhūrbhuvassuvarom*).

SAMKALPA

A resolve, a determination.

This mantra is repeated with the *prayoga*, or by keeping the left hand on the right thigh and keeping the right palm on it at right angles. This procedure is universal for all rituals including japa or pūjā.

ममोपात्त समस्त दुरितक्षयद्वारा
श्रीपरमेश्वर प्रीत्यर्थं प्रातस्सन्ध्यां उपासिष्ये ।
mamopātta samasta durita kṣayadvārā
śrīparamēśvara prītyartham
prātassandhyāṁ upāśiṣye |

To eradicate all the sins I have accumulated, and to please the Supreme Lord, I now worship Goddess sandhyā with intense meditation.

MĀRJANA

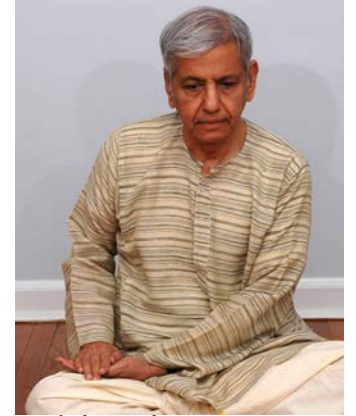
Mārjana is the wiping away of dross—a purificatory procedure. The prayoga of the mantra is to sprinkle on oneself a small quantity of water while chanting the mantra. A spoon, uddharaṇī, full of water is taken from the pūja vessel, panca pātra, and placed across the top of the vessel. First write Om on the water in the spoon and repeat *Om śrī keśavāya namaḥ*, making a vertical mark with the water on the forehead. Dipping the tip of the right ring finger into the water, one should sprinkle the water on oneself (*prokṣana*) at the end of chanting each of the following vedic mantras:

आपोहिष्ठा मयोभुवः ।
āpohiṣṭhā mayobhuvah |
तान ऊर्जे दधातन ।
tāna ūrje dadhātana |
महेरणाय चक्षसे ।
maheraṇāya cakṣase |
योवश्चिवतमोरसः ।
yovaśśivatamorasaḥ |
तस्यभाजयतेह नः ।
tasyabhājayateha naḥ |
उशातीरिव मातरः ।
uśatīriva mātaraḥ |
तस्मा अरंगमाम वः ।
tasmā araṅgamāma vaḥ |
यस्य क्षयाय जिन्वथ ।
yasya kṣayāya jinvatha |
आपो जनयथा च नः ।
āpo janayathā ca naḥ |

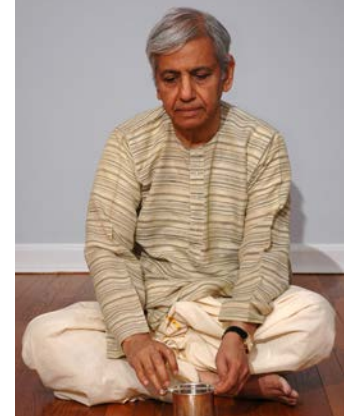
You, the water devatas are the givers of great happiness.
Give us the great eyes of wisdom.



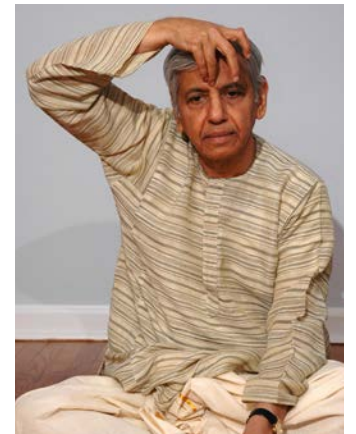
prāṇāyāma



samkalpa with prayoga



Writing 'Om' in the water



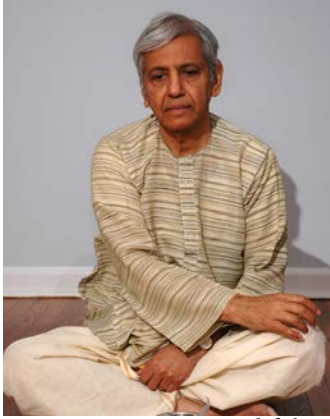
Om śrī keśavāya namaḥ



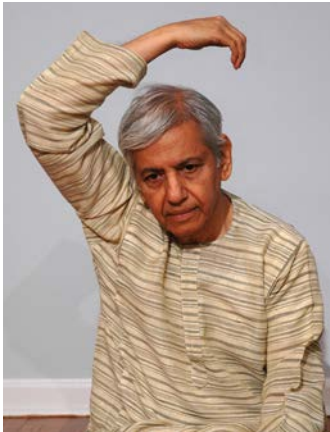
prokṣana



mārjana right knee



mārjana left knee



om bhūrbhuvassuvah

You have the most enjoyable peace-producing essence. Give us that here itself, like the loving mother and make us worthy.
We seek you for that great essence.
May we be reborn with wisdom.

With the last mantra one should sprinkle the water on the right and left knees.

ॐ भूर्भुवस्सुवः ॥
om bhūrbhuvassuvah |

So chanting, a spoonful of water is poured into the hand and circulating the hand around the head the water is offered into the ground

PRĀŚANA

One sips a spoonful of water after purifying it with the following mantra. This mantra is pertinent to morning sandhyā.

सूर्यश्च मामन्युश्च मन्युपतयश्च
मन्युकृतेभ्यो पापेभ्यो रक्षन्ताम् ।
यद्रात्रिया पापमकार्षम् ।
मनसा वाचा हस्ताभ्याम् ।
पद्भ्यामुदरेण शिश्ना ।
रात्रिस्तदवलुपतु ।
यत्किञ्च दुरितं मयि ।
इदमहं माममृत योनौ ।
सूर्ये ज्योतिषि जहोमि स्वाहा ॥
sūryaśca mā manyuśca manyupatayaśca
manyukṛtebhyo pāpebhyo rakṣantām |
yadrātriya pāpamakāṛṣam |
manasā vācā hastābhyām |
padbhyāmudareṇa śiśnā |
rātristadavaluṃpatu |
yatkiñca duriṭam mayi |
idamaham māmamṛta yonau |
sūrye jyotiṣi juhomi svāhā ||

Sūrya, the Sun, anger which possesses everyone, and the gods that govern anger, may they protect me from all the sins committed due to anger.
All the sins committed in the previous night—by mind, words, arms, legs, stomach, sex organ, may the deity of night remove and all other sins committed by me. Thus cleansed of all sins, may I offer into the luster of the Sun, and may it be that this action be well observed.

Thus chanting the mantra the practitioner drinks the water from the right hand.

There are different mantras from the Vedas that are used for the noon and dusk rituals.

PUNARMĀRJANA

For purification, at the end of each mantra, using the tip of his right ring finger, the practitioner sprinkles the ‘mantra-impregnated water’ from the spoon onto himself.

दधिक्राविण्णो अकार्षम्
जिण्णोरक्षस्य वाजिनः ।
सुरभि नो मुखाकरत्
प्राण आयुषि तारिषत् ॥
आपोहिष्ठा मयोभुवः ।
तान ऊर्जे दधातन ।
महेरणाय चक्षसे ।
योवश्शिवतमोरसः ।
तस्यभाजयतेह नः ।
उशतीरिव मातरः ।
तस्मा अरंगमाम वः ।
यस्य क्षयाय जिन्वथ ।
आपो जनयथा च नः ।
ॐ भूर्भुवस्सुवः ॥

dadhikrāviṇṇo akāṛṣam
jīṣṇoraścasya vājinaḥ |
surabhi no mukhākarat
prāṇa āyūṃṣi tāriṣat ||
āpohiṣṭhā mayobhuvah |
tāna ūrje dadhātana |
maheraṇāya cakṣase |
yovaśśivatamorasah |
tasyabhājayateha naḥ |
uśatiriva mātaraḥ |
tasmā araṅgamāmaṇavaḥ |
yasya kṣayāya jinvaṭha |
āpo janayathā ca naḥ |
om bhūrbhuvassuvah ||

I salute the Lord who bears the whole Universe, permeates it, the source of all skills in the form of *haya-grīva*, the conqueror. May He keep my face (mouth) and other indriyas sweet smelling.

The second part of the mantra starting from *āpohiṣṭhā* has already been described in the Mārjana.

ARGHYA PRADĀNA

The next procedure, known as *arghya pradāna* (respectful offering), is considered a very important ritual. Take a spoonful of water in the right hand. Facing East in the morning moments before sunrise and at noon, or West in the evening moments before sunset, one should chant the following mantra and pour the water on the ground.

ॐ भूर्भुवस्सुवः ।
तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यम् ।
भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि ।
धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥ स्वाहा ॥
om bhūrbhuvassuṣaḥ |
tatsaviturvareṇyam |
bhargo devasya dhīmahi |
dhiyo yonah pracodayāt || svāhāh ||

This is done three times at dawn and dusk and twice at noon. This mantra is the gāyatrī mantra. Then *prāṇāyāma* with the mantras is done for *prāyaścitta* (repentance for transgressions due to tamasic mind) followed by one more *arghya* as described.

AIKYA ANUSANDHĀNA

Meditating on oneness.

One touches the water dropped on the ground and keeps the moist fingers at the heart saying the following mantra

असावादित्यो ब्रह्म ब्रह्मैवाहमस्मि ।
aśāvādityo brahma
brahmaivāhamasmi |
This *āditya* or the Sun is verily the brahman. And I am that brahman.¹

TARPAṆA /DEVATARPAṆA

Presenting libations of water to please the Lord and the planetary gods. Take a spoonful of water in your right hand, chant each of the mantras one by one and, at the end of chanting the mantras, raise the hand and pour the water on to the ground as in *arghya pradāna*. One starts with offerings to the nine planets: Aditya (Sun—*ādityam tarpayāmi*), Soma (Moon) or Śiva, Angaraka (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Brihaspati (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sanaiscara (Saturn), Rahu (the shadow planet I) and Ketu (shadow planet II). Then to the twelve names/aspects of Lord Viṣṇu.

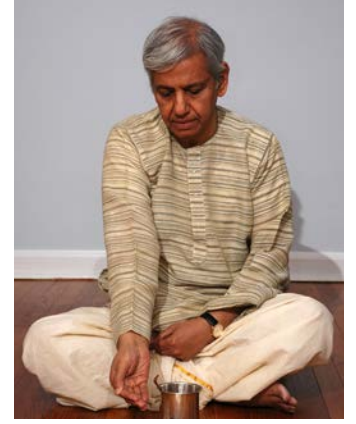
आदित्यं तर्पयामि
सोमं तर्पयामि
अङ्गारकं तर्पयामि
बुधं तर्पयामि
बृहस्पतिं तर्पयामि
शुक्रं तर्पयामि
शनैश्चरं तर्पयामि
राहुं तर्पयामि
केतुं तर्पयामि ।
ādityam tarpayāmi
somam tarpayāmi
aṅgārakam tarpayāmi
budham tarpayāmi
brhaspatim tarpayāmi
śukram tarpayāmi
śanaīścaram tarpayāmi
rāhum tarpayāmi
ketum tarpayāmi |

केशवं तर्पयामि ।
नारायणं तर्पयामि ।
माधवं तर्पयामि ।
गोविन्दं तर्पयामि ।
विष्णुं तर्पयामि ।
मधुसूदनं तर्पयामि ।
त्रिविक्रमं तर्पयामि ।
वामनं तर्पयामि ।
श्रीधरं तर्पयामि ।
हृषीकेशं तर्पयामि ।
पद्मनाभं तर्पयामि ।
दामोदरं तर्पयामि ॥
keśavam tarpayāmi |
nārāyaṇam tarpayāmi |
mādhavam tarpayāmi |
govindam tarpayāmi |
viṣṇum tarpayāmi |
madhusūdhanam tarpayāmi |
trivikramam tarpayāmi |
vāmanam tarpayāmi |
śrīdharam tarpayāmi |
hr̥ṣīkeśam tarpayāmi |
padmanābham tarpayāmi |
dāmodaram tarpayāmi ||

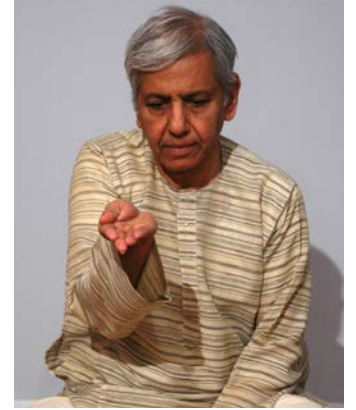
Then *Acamana* is done one more time. With this the preliminary part is over, and one sits and prepares for the second part which is the gāyatrī japa or meditation.

GĀYATRĪ JAPA

Start with *gaṇapati dhyāna*, then perform one round of *prāṇāyāma* and then the japa *saṅkalpa*—a resolve to do gāyatrī japa. The mantra (*mamopātta* ...) is chanted with the palms placed

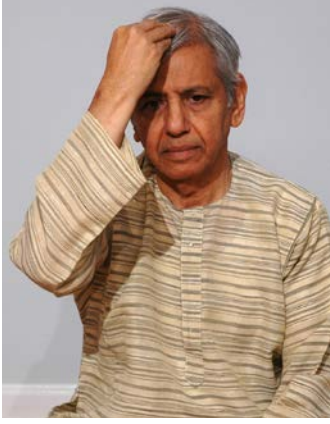


arghya pradāna step one



arghya pradāna step two

¹This is done only by adherents of some sects who are comfortable with Advaita philosophy.



nyāsa ṛṣi



nyāsa chandas



nyāsa devatā

one on the other on the right thigh. One would add that one will do a certain number of repetitions of gāyatrī, or say that one will do *mamopātta samasta... aṣṭottara śata samkhyā / aṣṭottara sahasra sarikhyā gāyatrī mahāmantra japam kariṣye*. For example, one could resolve to keep chanting until after the Sun rises completely in the East, until the stars appear in the evening, or the resolution could be for a specific number of repetitions—say 108 or 1008.

One of the most important practices before starting meditation or japa or pūjā is doing a certain number of repetitions of prāṇāyāma with mantras. This *samantraka* prāṇāyāma is extolled in all Yoga disciplines, haṭha yoga, rāja yoga or mantra yoga. According to Patañjali, prāṇāyāma removes tamas (āvaraṇa or cobwebs) from the mind and makes it fit for meditation (dhāraṇā). Usually prāṇāyāma is done with the famous prāṇāyāma mantra, described earlier.

It is customary to use a prayoga with an important mantra. Many vedic mantras have a ṛṣi or sage who intuitively ‘discovered’ the potent mantra, its meter and the *devatā* to whom it is addressed. In prāṇāyāma we have three mantras, first the seven *vyāhṛtis* with *praṇava* preceding each one of them, then the gāyatrī, and last the part called the śiras or head. One touches the head, *nyāsa ṛṣi*, as one mentions the name of the sage credited with the mantra, then one touches the mouth or, more usually, the nose, *nyāsa chandas*, while chanting the chandas or the meter in which the mantra is ‘seen’ and then one touches the heart with the fingers of the right hand, *nyāsa devatā*, saying the name of the devatā. For prāṇāyāma first the *praṇava* is taken. While touching the crown, the mantra *praṇavasya ṛṣirbrahmā* is chanted silently, meaning that the Creator Lord is the sage who uttered the OM mantra initially, then one touches the nose saying *devī gāyatrī chandaḥ*, or naming the meter—here it would refer to gāyatrī—and finally one touches the heart and chants the mantra *paramātmā devatā* or the deity is the Supreme Self or the Lord.

The same procedure is repeated for the *vyāhṛti* portion of the prāṇāyāma. Touching the crown one would say *bhūrādi sapta vyāhṛtīnām atri bhṛgu kutsa vasiṣṭha gautama kāśyapa āṅgīrasa ṛṣayaḥ* meaning that for the seven *vyāhṛtis* or utterances, starting with *bhūḥ*, the seven ṛṣis associated with each one of them are Atri, Bhṛgu, Kutsa, Vasiṣṭha, Gautama, Kāśyapa and Āṅgīrasa. Then, as one touches the nose, the following mantra is chanted silently, *gāyatrī uṣṇik anuṣṭup bṛhatī paṁktī tṛṣṭup jagatī chandāmsi*, meaning the chandas or meters of the Vedas are gāyatrī, uṣṇik, anuṣṭup, bṛhatī, paṁktī, tṛṣṭup and jagatī. Then, touching the heart, one silently remembers the following mantra: *agni vāyu arka vāgīsa varuṇa indra viśvedevāḥ devatāḥ* meaning the deities remembered are Agni, Vāyu, Arka, Vāgīsa, Varuṇa, Indra and Viśvedevās.

PRĀṆĀYĀMA

Preparation for japa

According to Manu and several other sages and *smṛtikāras* (those who have written code books consistent with the teachings of the Vedas), prāṇāyāma should be done with the mantras. According to an oft-quoted verse found in *Manu Smṛti* and several other books, prāṇāyāma should be done with the mantras chanted while holding the breath.

सव्याहृतिं सप्रणवां गायत्री शिरसा सह ।

त्रिः पठेत् आयतः प्राणः प्राणायमस्स उच्यते ॥

savyāhṛtiṁ sapraṇavāṁ

gāyatrīm śirasā saha |

triḥ paṭhet āyataḥ prāṇaḥ

prāṇāyāmassa ucyate ||

Prāṇāyāma is said to be that procedure when the mantra consisting of the seven *vyāhṛtis* with *praṇava*, then gāyatrī and then the śiras is chanted three times while holding the breath.

Since only adept yogis can hold their breath for three rounds of mantra japa, it is customary to chant the mantra once holding the breath, but to do the prāṇāyāma three times. Different *smṛtis* refer to different procedures, but all of them refer to *samantraka* prāṇāyāma (prāṇāyāma done with mantras).

GĀYATRĪ ĀVĀHANA

Before starting the gāyatrī japa, it is customary to meditate on gāyatrī and invoke and invite gāyatrī into oneself. This is called *āvāhana*. There is a vedic mantra of gāyatrī invitation.

First the nyāsa for the āvāhana mantra: Keeping the fingers on the crown, one would say

आयात्विति अनुवाकस्य वामदेव ऋषिः ।
āyātviti anuvākasya vāmadeva ṛṣiḥ |
 For the mantra starting from
āyātu, the sage is vāmadeva.

Then one would keep the fingers touching the mouth (or nose) and say anuṣṭup chandaḥ (the meter for this mantra is anuṣṭup) and then keeping the fingers touching the heart one would chant silently gāyatrī devatā (the deity is gāyatrī).

Then the gāyatrī āvāhana is done with the hands in āvāhana mudrā, wherein one keeps the hands in añjali mudrā, but keeps the thumbs touching the base of the respective ring fingers.

आयातु वरदा देवी अक्षरं ब्रह्मसम्मितम् ।
 गायत्रीं छन्दसां माता इदं ब्रह्म जुषस्वनः ।

āyātu varadā devī
akṣaram brahma sammitam |
gāyatrīm chandasām
mātā idam brahma juṣasvanah |

May the goddess (gāyatrī), grantor of all desires, the mother of all meters, enter this eternal hymn of praise, the gāyatrī mantra, equal to Brahman. Be favorable to us.

ओजोसि । सहोसि । बलमसि । भ्राजोसि ।
 देवानां धामनामासि ।
 विश्वमसि विश्वायुः सर्वमसि ।
 सर्वायुः अभिभूरो गायत्रीमावाहयामि ।
 सावित्रीमावाहयामि ।
 सरस्वतीमावाहयामि ॥

ojosi | sahosi | balamasi | bhrājosi |
devānām dhāmanāmāsi |
viśvamasī viśvāyuh sarvamasī |
sarvāyuh abhibhūroṃ gāyatrīm
āvāhayāmi | sāvitṛīm āvāhayāmi |
sarasvatīm āvāhayāmi ||

O gāyatrī! You are vitality, energy, physical strength, mental strength, the luster of divinity, you are the universal space, universal time, you are

everyone and the life of everyone, you are the conqueror of everything.
 O gāyatrī, sāvitṛī and sarasvatī
 (three aspects of the Sun)
 I beseech you to be present in me.

While saying the āvāhayāmi mantras one would inwardly turn the hands in a gesture of invoking gāyatrī within oneself (see āyātu nyāsa).

Then, after the nyāsa of gāyatrī, the gāyatrī japa or repetitive meditation is performed.

सावित्र्या ऋषिः विश्वामित्रः
 निचृगायात्री छन्दः ।
 साविता देवता ॥
sāvitṛyā ṛṣiḥ viśvāmitraḥ
nīcṛgāyatrī chandaḥ |
savitā devatā |

Keeping the fingertips touching the crown, chant the mantra which means Viśvāmitra is the ṛṣi. Placing the fingers on the nose or mouth, declare: the meter is *nīcṛ-gāyatrī*. Then placing the fingers on the heart, affirm that Savitā, or Sun, is the deity worshipped.

GĀYATRĪ JAPA

Then one should do the gāyatrī japa, the main aspect of sandhyā

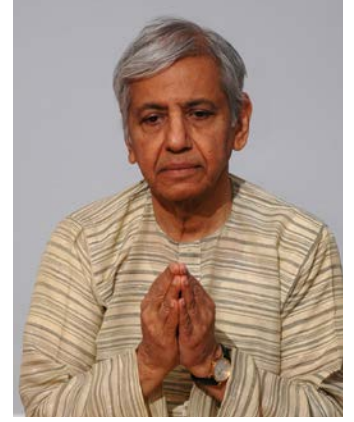
ॐ । भूर्भुवस्सुवः । तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यम् ।
 भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि । धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥
om | bhūrbhuvassuvaḥ |
tatsaviturvarenyam |
bhargo devasya dhīmahi |
dhiyo yonah pracodayāt ||

The meaning, according to the micro-cosmic interpretation, is as follows:

The three vyāhṛitis, the Praṇava (Om) are in me as *paramātman*, *bhūḥ* (the witness of the waking state), *bhuvah* (the dream state) and *suvaḥ* (the deep sleep state)

Or according to the macrocosmic level:

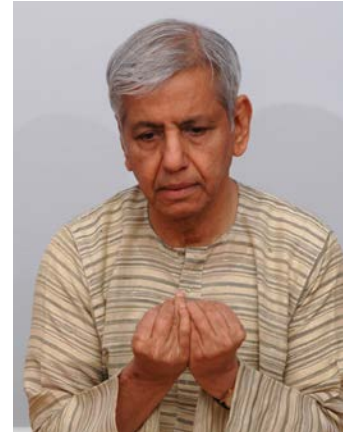
Om the paramātman is the creator of the earth (bhūḥ), the intermediate region (bhuvah) and the heaven (suvaḥ).
 The gāyatrī ... “ May the luster of the



āvāhana mudrā



āvāhana mudrā detail



āyātu nyāsa

Lord in the orb of the Sun on which we meditate kindle our intellects” or
 “May we meditate on the luster of the Lord, the Supreme Creator, who kindles our intellect.”

The difference lies in the interpretation of the words *saviturvarenyam*. Savitā is another name of Sun and also Creator. *Varenya* could mean that which surrounds, or here, the orb of the Sun or it could mean the Superior One, the Lord.

Some chant the bare gāyatrī mantra starting with *tatsavitur*, but many chant with Praṇava preceding the mantra—*Om tatsavitur*. But traditionally the gāyatrī mantra is chanted with the praṇava and the vyāhṛtis and thus three important mantras are chanted together as shown above—*Om bhūrbhuvassuval tatsavitur*, etc. Viśvāmītra, the sage credited with the discovery of the gāyatrī mantra, recommends chanting the gāyatrī mantra with the three important mantras, the gāyatrī with the praṇava and the three vyāhṛtis. Some say the bare gāyatrī mantra is called sāvitṛī and gāyatrī mantra is the more complete one including the praṇava and three vyāhṛtis.

HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD ONE CHANT the mantra? And how should one do the japa or mantra repetition? Several smritis have different prescriptions. According to many the gāyatrī should be repeatedly chanted facing the East in the morning and West in the evening. One should be standing in the morning while doing the japa according to many experts, but one should assume a seated posture in the evening. But many going by the general rule that meditation should be done while seated, do so all the time they do Japa. In the olden days many would go to the river or the village tank for an early morning bath. After ablutions, they would stand in knee-deep water and offer the arghya to the rising Sun and then continue to do the gāyatrī japa standing in the water. In the noon and evening sandhyās one is supposed to sit and do japa.

It is customary to silently chant the gāyatrī mantra 108 times in the morning. Sometimes one is permitted

to do a smaller number, say fifty-four or sixty-four, or thirty-two, or even twenty-seven, but not less than that. It is said that one should limit the gāyatrī chant to 108 especially grhastha or family people as they have other duties like further pujas or wordly activities like *jīvanopāya* (making a living). However, *vānaprastha* (retirees), *saṁnyāsīn* (renunciates) and *brahmacārīn* (students) can do up to 1008 repetitions. I knew a young man of about thirty-five years who had decided to do gāyatrī japa ten million times in his life. By doing 1008 repetitions every morning he had planned to complete the ten million repetitions in a matter of about thirty to thirty-five years. Starting this vow at the age of about ten years he had, when I met him, followed this practice for about twenty-five years. I also know of other people who chant their favorite mantras ten million times (one crore). They are said to attain mantra siddhi (successful use of the mantra) by this kind of perseverance. Another piece of information may be of interest. Some ancient sages suggest doing gāyatrī japa while holding the breath in prāṇāyāma. Inhale through one nostril and while holding the breath, chant the gāyatrī as many times as possible, then exhale stopping the japa. Then again inhale, hold the breath and continue with the japa. This may be repeated as many times as necessary until one completes the predetermined number of japa, possibly 108.

Some use a japa mālā, a garland with 108, fifty-four or twenty-seven beads, and after chanting the mantra once, they push one bead and so on until they reach the peak or meru which will indicate the end of one round of japa. But many orthodox people, while doing gāyatrī japa, do not use a japa mālā but use the cross lines of the fingers. Many who have been initiated into the Vedas through *upanayana* (initiation ceremony) have a sacred thread which they are supposed to wear all the time. With the thumb and the index finger (web) around the knot of the sacred thread, they would use the right thumb and count by moving the thumb with the longitudinal creases of the fingers. Again different procedures are found

to be in vogue. The creases at the root of the little finger then the next two folds then the tip of the little finger are counted. Then the thumb is moved to the top of the ring finger and then the two folds and then the bottom of the ring finger, thus it would be eight counts. Then the thumb is moved to the middle finger root and the next line and that is the meru or peak, then the thumb works in the reverse order and thus it would be twenty mantras in one round and five such rounds will be one hundred japas. There are some other variations but suffice it to know that the counting is done with the longitudinal lines of the fingers of the right hand. And while doing japa one superior method is to stop at the end of each repetition and dwell on the meaning of the mantra, then continue in this manner. It will be consistent with Patañjali's yoga sūtra, where he says, *tajjapah tadartha bhāvanam*, and the elaborate commentary on this sūtra of Śaṅkara.

GĀYATRĪ UPASTHĀNA

After one completes the japa, the next step is to proceed to do upasthāna—giving a reverential farewell to the gāyatrī—and do other additional worships and procedures. After the gāyatrī japa one should do a



Counting mantra japa

round of prāṇayāma with mantra and then, with folded hands or hands in añjali mudrā, say:

प्रातस्सन्ध्या उपस्थानं करिष्ये ।

prātassandhyā upasthānaṁ kariṣye
Now I will do the upashtāna

Then standing up, in tadāsana, and with folded hands looking at the East, one says the following vedic prayer, the gāyatrī upasthānam

उत्तमे शिखरे देवी भूम्यां पर्वतमूर्धनि ।
ब्राह्मणेभ्यो ह्यनुज्ञानं गच्छ देवी यथा सुखम् ॥
*uttame śikhare devī
bhūmyāṁ parvatamūrdhani |
brāhmaṇebhyo hyanuññānaṁ
gaccha devī yathā sukham ||*
O, the lustrous one (gāyatrī),
having given your blessings to us,
devotees of the supreme Lord in this
world, please happily return to your
abode in the highest peaks of the
(Meru) Mountain.

SŪRYOPASTHĀNA

Then follows the sūrya upasthānam.
This mantra is for morning sandhya.

मित्रस्य चर्षणी धृतः
श्रवो देवस्य सानसिं ।
सत्यं चित्रश्रवस्तमम् ॥
मित्रो जनान् यातयति
प्रजानन् मित्रो दाधार
पृथिवीं मुतद्याम् ।
मित्रः कृष्टीरनिमिषाभिचष्टे
सत्याय हव्यं घृतवद्विधेम ॥
प्रसमित्र मर्तो अस्तु प्रयस्वान्
यस्त आदित्यं शिक्षति व्रतेन ।
न हन्यते न जीयते त्वोतो नैनमं हो
अश्रोत्यन्तितो न दूरात् ॥
*mītrasya carṣaṇī dhṛtaḥ
śravo devasya sānasin |
satyaṁ citraśravastamam |
mitro janān yātayati
prajānan mitro dādāhāra
prtvimutadyām |
mītraḥ kṛṣṭīranimiṣābhicaṣṭe
satyāya havyaṁ ghṛtavadvīdhema ||
prasamitra marto astu prayasvān
yasta āditya śikṣati vratena |
na hanyate na jīyate tvoto nainamaṁ ho
aśnotyantyito na dūrāt ||*
I meditate on the worshipful and
captivating greatness of the universal

friend (the Sun) who protects all
beings. The omniscient Sun-god
knows everything and conducts the
lives of all beings. He supports the
earth and the heaven. The Sun-god
watches all beings without a wink.
We make offerings to Sun-god, made
of rice and ghee for eternal boon.
Oh Lord-Sun, the universal friend,
whosoever wishes to worship you in
the right way, may such a person be
endowed with all righteous blessings!
The one who has received your
blessings will not fall ill, and sins of
the recent or distant past will not
afflict him

DEVATĀ VANDANAM

Worship of praiseworthy gods.

Then facing the direction of the gāyatrī
japa (East in the morning, West in the
evening), with folded hands one should
say *sandhyai namaḥ* or salutation to
goddess Sandhyā, then turning ninety
degrees to the right one would say
with folded hands *sāvitrīyai namaḥ* or
salutations to Sāvitrī, then the next
direction with the mantra *gāyatrīyai
namaḥ* salutations to Gāyatrī and then
sarasvatīyai namaḥ or salutations to
goddess Sarasvatī. Then returning to
the starting point, the mantra *sarvebhyo
devatābhyo namo namaḥ* is muttered,
meaning salutation to all the devatās.
According to the Vedas there are 330
million devatās, created by the Supreme
Lord to control the myriad natural
forces. There is a god of water (jala
devatā), of fire (agni), of earth (bhū) and
even of emotions like anger (manyu)
and desire (kāma). And this prayer is
to all the devatās of the universe so that
one gets the blessings and goodwill of
all these gods.

कामोकार्षीन्मन्युरकार्षीन्नमोनमः ।

kāmokārṣīnmanyurakārṣīnnamonamaḥ |

This interesting vedic mantra is then
recited with folded hands. This implies
that all the bad actions one has done were
due to *kāma* or sensual desire (tamasic)
and *manyu* or anger (rajasic), and not
out of one's own volition and hence
should be pardoned. Then keeping the
hands covering the ears one chants one's

abhivādana or obeisance mantra and
then bends down and places the tip of
the fingers on the ground as a gesture
of reverence to all the devatās. One may
also lay prostrate in *daṇḍa samarpana* as
a gesture of total surrender.

ABHIVĀDANA

Gesture of respect.

The abhivādana mantra varies depending
upon one's *gotra* or lineage. There are
about twenty gotras that are well known.
It normally refers to vedic sages of the
lineage, usually about three but rarely
five as in my gotra śrīvatsa. The mantra
of śrīvatsa gotra goes as follows

अभिवादये भार्गव च्यवन आप्रवान

और्व जामदग्न्य पंचारषेय

प्रवरान्वितः श्रीवत्स गोत्रः ।

आपस्तम्भ सूत्रः । यजुःशाखाच्यायी ।

श्री रामस्वामी शर्मानामाहं अस्मि भोः ॥

*abhivādāye bhārgava cyavana āpnavāna
aurva jāmādagnya pañcārṣeya
pravarānvitaḥ śrīvatsa gotraḥ |
āpastambha sūtraḥ | yajuṣśākhādhyāyī |
śrī rāmasvāmī śarmānāmāhaṁ
asmi bhoḥ ||*

I, with the name (Śarma) of
Rāmasvāmī of the lineage of the sage
Śrīvatsa whose forefathers include, the
five sages, viz., Bhārgava, Cyavana,
Āplavāna, Aurva and Jamdagni, a
follower of the code book (sūtra) of
āpastambha, and of the branch of Yajur
veda pay my obeisance to you.

The variables in this mantra are the
name of gotra, the ṛṣi, the name, the
sūtra and the veda.

NAMASKĀRA

Prostrations

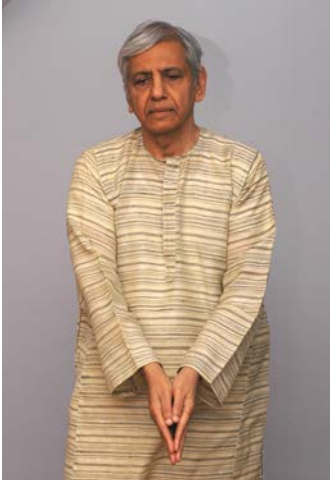
Thereafter one does namaskāra or
pays respects to the 'directions' and
others. Facing East with folded hands,
one should chant *prācyai diśe namaḥ*
or respects to the Eastern direction.
According to my guru, this can be
done by bending half forward (*ardha
uttanāsana*) and stretching the arms
with folded hands. Then one turns to
face the southern direction and chants
dakṣīnyai diśe namaḥ, then the West
with *pratīcyai diśe namaḥ*, and then
the north with the mantra *udīcyai diśe*



abhivādana



ūrdhvāya namaḥ



adharāya namaḥ

daṇḍa samarpaṇa



namaḥ. Then standing facing East in the morning or West in the evening, one would point the folded hands upward and chant *ūrdhvāya namaḥ*, then downward with *adharāya namaḥ*, then up with the mantra *antarikṣāya namaḥ*, then directed downwards with the mantra *bhūmyai namaḥ*, then upwards with the mantra *brahmaṇe namaḥ*, then the hands facing downward with *viṣṇave namaḥ*, and the hands pointing upward with the mantra *mṛtyave namaḥ*.

YAMA VANDANAM

Then facing South, one would say *yamāya namaḥ* and continue with a prayer to Yama the Lord of death as follows:

यमाय धर्मराजाय मृत्यवे चान्तकाय च ।
वैवस्वताय कालाय सर्वभूत क्षयाय च ।
औदुम्बराय दध्नाय नीलाय परमेष्ठिनो ।
वृकोदराय चित्राय चित्रगुप्ताय वै नमः ॥
चित्रगुप्ताय वै नम ओन्नम इति ॥

*yamāya dharmarājāya
mṛtyave cāntakāya ca ।
vaivasvatāya kālāya
sarvabhūta kṣayāya ca ।
audumbarāya dadhnāya
nīlāya parameṣṭhine ।
vṛkodarāya citrāya
citraguptāya vai namaḥ ।
citraguptāya vai nama om nama iti ॥*

I salute the Lord Yama, the controller of lifespan, who is also the god of dharma/ piety and order, god of death, the terminator, the son of Vivasva, the god of time, the ultimate destroyer of all beings, the powerful, also named as Dadhna, one with dark complexion, venerated by everyone, one with a wolf-like belly, unfathomable, mysterious. To that mysterious and secretive one I offer my salutations over and over again.

Then facing West (or North according to some customs) one would chant the following prayer for both Viṣṇu and Śiva (*haribara vandanam*) with folded hands. It is also a vedic prayer.

ऋतं सत्यं परं ब्रह्म पुरुषं कृष्ण पिङ्गलम् ।
ऊर्ध्वरेतं विरूपाक्षं विश्वरूपाय वै नमः ॥
विश्वरूपाय वै नम ओन्नम इति ।

*ṛtaṁ satyaṁ paraṁ brahma
puruṣam kṛṣṇa piṅgalaṁ ।
ūrdhvaretaṁ virūpākṣaṁ
viśvarūpāya vai namaḥ ॥
viśvarūpāya vai nama om nama iti ।*

I worship the Great Brahman, the ultimate Reality, the absolute Truth, the indwelling consciousness, which is the black complexioned Viṣṇu and also the bright colored Śiva, with the upward pointing vitality, the three eyed and the one that contains the universe within Itself. I worship the all encompassing Lord again and again.

So saying one would lay prostrate on the ground as a gesture of total surrender.

Facing the direction of *gāyatrī* japa (East in the morning, West in the evening) the following prayer is said to the Sun in the form of Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu).

नमस्सवित्रे जगदेकं चक्षुषे
जगत्प्रसूतिस्थिति नाश हेतवे ।
त्रयीमयाय त्रिगुणात्मधारिणे
विरिञ्चिनारायण शंकरात्मने ॥

*namassāvitre jagadeka cakṣuṣe
jagat prasūti sthiti nāśa hetave ।
trayīmāyāya triguṇātma dhāriṇe
viriñci nārāyaṇa śaṁkarātmane ॥*

I salute You, Lord Sun!. You are the only eye of the world. (You are the only original source of light for the world so

every one can see). You are the cause of creation, sustenance and ultimate annihilation of the world. You are the three Vedas. Possessing the three universal guṇas (of sattva, rajas and tamas) you are the trinity of Brahmā, Nārāyaṇa and Śaṅkara.

ध्येयस्सदा सवितृमण्डल मध्यवर्ती
नारायणः सरसिजासन सन्निविष्टः ।
केयूरवान् मकरकुण्डलवान् किरीटी
हारी हिरण्यवपुर्धृतशंखचक्रः ॥

*dhyeyassadā savitr maṇḍala madhyavartī
nārāyaṇa sarasijāsana sanniviṣṭaḥ |
keyūravān makara kuṇḍalavān kirīṭī
hārī hiraṇmayavapur
dhṛta śaṅkha cakrah ॥*

One would always meditate upon Lord Nārāyaṇa, who exists in the center of the Sun, is seated firmly in Lotus pose, with ornaments on the shoulders, wearing jeweled ear studs, crowned, wearing a garland, having a body of golden hue, bearing a conch and the disc (*cakra*) in the hands.

शंख चक्र गदापाणे द्वारकानिलयाच्युत
गोविन्द पुण्डरीकाक्ष रक्ष मां शरणागतम् ।
आकाशात् पतितम् तोयं यथा गच्छति सागरं
सर्व देव नमस्कारः केशवं प्रतिगच्छति ॥

*śaṅkha cakra gadāpāṇe
dvārakānīlayācyuta
govinda puṇḍarikākṣa
rakṣa mām śaraṇāgatam |
ākāśāt patitam toyam
yathā gacchati sāgaram
sarvadeva namaskārah
keśavam pratigacchati ॥*

O Lord (Kṛṣṇa)! I totally surrender to You, the One bearing a conch, disc, mace, residing in Dvārakā, and you never let down your devotees. O Govinda, the lotus eyed, protect me. Like all the drops of water falling from the skies, ultimately reach the Ocean, all the offerings and salutations made to all the gods ultimately reach the Lord Keśava. Certainly they reach the Lord.

श्री केशवं प्रतिगच्छति ओन्नम इति ॥
śrī keśavam pratigacchati om nama iti ॥

The above three prayers are to Sun, Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa. Visual worship and form meditation have been an integral part of worship from time immemorial.

SAMARPAṆAM

Conclusion and dedication

कायेन वाचा मनसेन्द्रियैर्वा
बुद्ध्यात्मनावा प्रकृतेः स्वभावात् ।
करोमि यद्यत् सकलं परस्मै
नरायणायेति समर्पयामि ॥

*kāyena vācā manasendriyairvā
buddhyātmanā vā prakṛteḥ svabhāvāt |
karomyadyat sakalam parasmai
nārāyaṇāyeti samarpayāmi ॥*

Do another ācamana and then

मयाकृतमिदं प्रातस्सन्ध्या गायत्री
महामन्त्र जपाख्यं कर्म
ओं तत्सत् ब्रह्मार्पणमस्तु ।

*mayākṛtamidaṁ prātassandhyā gāyatrī
mahāmantra japākhyam karma
om tatsat brahmārpaṇamastu |*
Whatever I do with my body, speech, mind, senses, intellect or the self/ego, due to natural tendencies, all of which I dedicate to the Supreme Nārāyaṇa. I dedicate this morning daily ritual, sandhyā , the japa of the great mantra gāyatrī which I have just done, to the Supreme Lord.

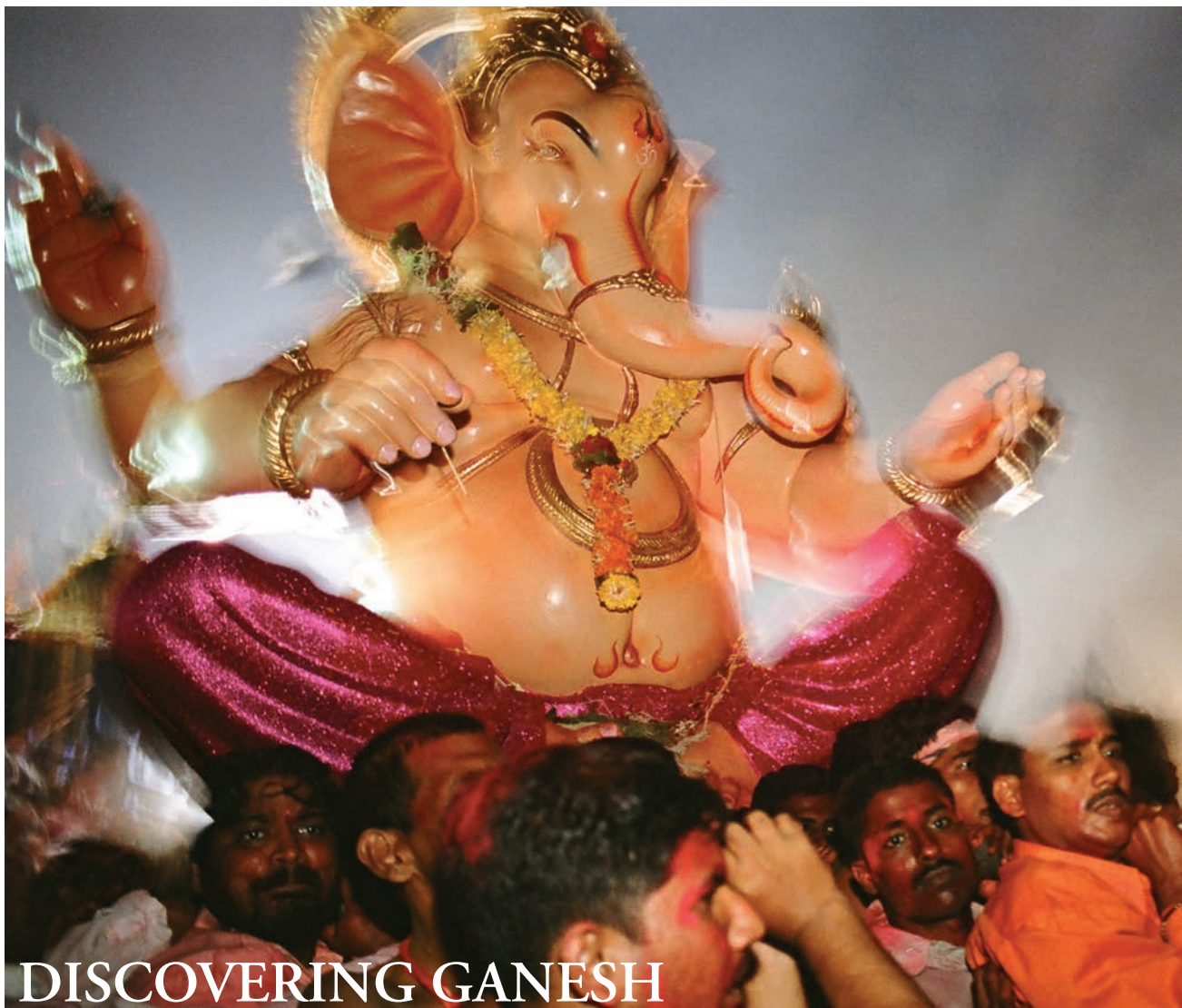
Sitting down, place a spoonful of water in your cupped right palm and after chanting the above mantra, pour it down on the ground. This ends the sandhyā of the morning. ❀

NOTES

Although gāyatrī is the most venerated mantra, those who have not been initiated (*dīkṣā*) into it use a number of other mantras and follow well-defined japa procedures (*japa vidhāna*). The well known five-syllable *pañcākṣarī* (*om namaṣṣivāya*), the six-syllable *ṣaṭpañcākṣarī* (*om hrīm namaṣṣivāya*), the eight-syllable *aṣṭākṣarī* (*om namonārāyaṇāya*), and the twelve-syllable *dvādaśākṣarī* (*om namo bhagavate vāsudevāya*) are the more prominent ones. Others would include *subrahmaṇya pañcākṣarī*, *sūryanārāyaṇa*, *rāma*, *rāmatāraka*, *hanumat*, *santānagopālākṣarī*, *hayagrīva*, *sudarśana*, *gurutāraka*, *annapūrnā*, *bhuvaneśvarī*, *caṇḍī*, *navākṣarī*, *mahālākṣmī*, *vākvādinī*, *śrī vidyā*, *balātībalā*, *ajapāgāyatrī* and several more.

In 1985 the author recorded the complete sandhyāvandana mantra which is still being sold in India. See www.vinyasakrama.org & www.vinyasakrama.com for more information.

Srivatsa Ramaswami was a long-time student of the legendary teacher T. Krishnamacharya. He has written four books on Yoga.



DISCOVERING GANESH

SHANA DRESSLER

IMAGINE A COMMUNITY SO POOR THAT its inhabitants live in tents fashioned out of tarps attached to public buildings and city walls. You pass through this neighborhood and notice that the residents, despite their poverty, have somehow scraped together enough money to commission a beautiful, eight-foot sculpture of their beloved elephant-headed god, Ganesh, for the annual ten-day festival, Ganesh Chaturthi. Even after spending four years photographing this festival, this first observation left a lasting impression on me.

IN 2003 I BOARDED AN AIR INDIA flight with my friend Diana. We were on our way to experience the Ganesh Chaturthi first hand. Years earlier, while

passing the Aperture bookstore and gallery on 23rd street in New York City, I had seen the photography book *Bombay* by Raghubir Singh, one of India's best known photographers. On the cover was a photograph of a fifteen to twenty-foot high plaster of Paris Ganesh being splashed by a small army of men in the Arabian Sea, I knew the sculpture was a depiction of Ganesh as I had taken an entry-level course on Hinduism in 1991 when I was studying comparative religion and anthropology at Columbia University. I had also seen his image on various yoga studio walls when I first began my practice.

When Diana and I arrived in Mumbai, we were met by an Italian photojournalist friend of mine who

was living there at the time, working on a story about AIDS and sex workers in Kamathipura, Mumbai's red-light district. She introduced me to Sudharak Olwe who was a staff photographer at the Times of India. Diana and I spent much of the ten festival days with Sudharak as he had shot the Ganesh Chaturthi for years and knew where to go.

We began our journey in Lalbaug, a Mumbai neighborhood where some of the best studios which produce Ganesh *murtis* (icons) as high as 35-40 feet are located. We saw artists putting the final touches on hundreds of Ganesh murtis, which were soon to be picked up by various patrons and brought to their homes. The larger murtis were purchased collectively by communities



and businesses, which set up *mandips*, or shrine-like public installations. Inside, highly decorative scenes of Ganesh were on display, often placed against a colorful background with other Hindu deities, living saints and historical figures from India's freedom movement.

What I loved about the various *mandips* was the incredible variety in the depictions of Ganesh. Some included elaborate Coney Island-esque mechanical, or light and audio, shows in which Ganesh emerged from a red curtain as the hero at the end of a parable. Some had social themes, others political ones, and still others represented current affairs that had impacted the consciousness of Mumbaities. Over the years, some of my favorites have been the Ganesh murtis

made out of astroturf, spices, peacock feathers, and dried fruit. I saw an incredible thirty-five foot high Ganesh mounted on the symbol OM, another riding a swan, yet another crushing a demon, and one of my favorites, Ganesh sitting on a half moon. I've seen Ganesh on the shoulder of King Kong, sharing the stage with Harry Potter, sitting on a conch shell and, on a more serious note, presiding over the Twin Towers on September 11th.

THOUGH THE FESTIVAL LASTS ten days, householders keep a consecrated murti of Ganesh anywhere between one and a half and ten days. They are required to perform *puja* twice a day and many choose to take off from work to dedicate themselves

fully to the required rituals. Families typically submerge their idol either after one and a half days or on day five, seven or ten. That said, I've seen murtis submerged on the "off" days as well. The Ganesh murtis on public display remain for ten days before they are paraded through the city en route to one of the various beaches in and around Mumbai. The largest idols are brought all the way to Chowpatty beach, which is at the southwestern tip of Mumbai. During the day there are spontaneous outbreaks of song and dance in the streets, unapologetic assaults on passers-by with showers of colored powder, and a palpable sense of deep devotion and sanctity. At the culmination of the festival,



tens of thousands of Ganesh murtis of varying sizes, shapes, and materials are submerged into the Arabian Sea to ensure that Ganesh will return the next year.

The popularity of the Ganesh Festival is attributed to Lokmanya Tilak, a social reformer and freedom fighter who, at the end of the 19th century, transformed the festival from a family celebration to a public one. The idea was to create unity among Indians using grassroots efforts in order to organize protests against British rule. Given that social and political gatherings were forbidden at the time, the festival made it possible for people from all different castes and communities to gather together and discuss the affairs of the day.

WALKING AROUND TOWN IN AND out of the mandips there was always a feeling of generous inclusiveness toward us. When Diana and I went off on our own, we were often invited into people's homes. "Come in, come in! Where are you from? What is your name?" At many other religious festivals that I have been to around the world, I have never felt this sense of openness. In order to witness the more sacred rituals that take place, I have had to work hard at finding a trusted member of the community to invite me in.

During the first few days I began photographing the festival as an outsider observing through my American lens. What quickly changed once I got to know people in Mumbai was that, instead of

photographing Ganesh as an object, I shifted to photograph him as everyone around me saw him—as a deity. I would refer to a Ganesh murti as a sculpture. I was immediately corrected, "That is not a sculpture, that is Lord Ganesh!" I started to understand the incredible look of devotion and tenderness that I was seeing. I wouldn't describe it as awe per se. The look that I saw over and over again, watching devotees looking at the Ganesh murtis was one of deep, deep love. This concept was so radically different from my Judeo-Christian upbringing in which paintings and sculptures are representations of God, not embodiments of Gods.

So the challenge became how to convey this devotion and understanding



on a technical level. This included using slower shutter speeds, film sensitive to low light and a technique I learned as a photography student years ago called “shake and bake.” With this technique you need to use a slow shutter speed along with a flash. What this creates is an image where the ambient scene around the main object creates a blur while the rest of the photograph is in sharp focus. The blur for me was a way to give a sense of spirit being present as opposed to merely matter.

WHEN I RETURNED TO NEW YORK after the first year, I decided to submit my best shots to Kodak for a film grant and I received enough film to shoot the festival again the following year. The

incredible, creative expression found in the Ganesh murtis and the deeply moving rituals performed to bring him to life inspired me to transform what began as a photo essay into a multimedia exhibition. What I had seen in the homes of Ganesh devotees and in public spaces throughout Mumbai transformed my own idea about “acceptable” ways of depicting divinity.

After returning to New York from Mumbai the second year, I started to approach galleries with my work and presented a slideshow at the United Nations. In 2006 the Rubin Museum of Art decided to mount the show. The exhibition was slated to open in the fall of 2009 and the plan was to exhibit a floor and a half of sculptures,

paintings and other sacred art dedicated to Ganesh. The rest of the second floor would showcase my multimedia exhibition about the Ganesh Festival. The exhibit would bring photography, video shorts, soundscapes, and artifacts together to communicate a palpable experience of the festival as celebrated in Mumbai. Unfortunately, one month before I was set to leave for India to complete the photography and shoot the video shorts, the curator with whom I was working resigned and the museum dropped the show. I didn’t skip a beat, however, and left for India in the fall of 2007 as scheduled.

It wasn’t until I returned with all my film developed, finally satisfied that I had filled the holes in the story, that I



had to confront the obstacle of finding a new home for the exhibition. When I had settled back into my life in New York, I had more mental space to think about what losing this opportunity meant. I began wondering what obstacles were present, what lessons I could learn, what was missing in my research, what connections needed to be made in order to go beyond the surface level and move people. I came up with some answers. Most importantly, I realized that in producing this entire project I hadn't really spent time looking at the sacred texts, learning the mantras, or talking to experts, pundits, and devotees to get insight into what would be most meaningful to share with a Western audience. I don't know

if these realizations were the spiritual lessons I needed to learn from the show falling through at the Rubin Museum. A pundit whom I met on my third trip told me that Ganesh will often put an obstacle in the way of those who are driven by their egos, so that they can redirect their energies and actions to better align with their soulpaths.

MY EXPERIENCES IN INDIA WORKING on this project and everything I've learned about Ganesh have had a profound effect on my life. On a broad level I see how important community is in feeling part of a larger whole. One can do something much greater in a group of like-minded people with a common goal than as an individual.

Many people in India live a life of squalor by American standards. But unlike many of America's inner-city poor, in many of the poor communities I saw in India people were not strung out on drugs, depending on the system to take care of them, isolated and in despair. They are not broken people the way it seems people are here. There is a real sense of community and interdependence. Whenever I hear people talking about poverty in India, I can't help but think that psychologically and emotionally they are not the ones who are impoverished. Many have a connection to God that helps them to make sense of their suffering and to move beyond it so that they see meaning in their lives.



On a personal level, I see that in working on this project I have had to ask myself a lot of questions: What does Ganesh represent to me on my journey as an artist, an individual, a non-Hindu American who grew up in another faith? What are my obstacles—physical, mental, emotional, financial, spiritual, professional, interpersonal—and what am I struggling with most and why? What would my life look like if I didn't have any obstacles? What would I talk about or do with my time if the majority of it wasn't spent judging, assessing, understanding, analyzing and trying to overcome everything that I perceived as an obstacle? What would I feel called to do if I had no obstacles? What new life would reveal itself to me?

THE EXHIBIT, WHICH I AM CALLING *Discovering Ganesh*, is designed to be a kind of guided mandip. A variety of media are used to engage viewers, but with a lot of context to help American viewers understand this kaleidoscope of stimuli. And the show is not just for those interested in Hinduism or even any form of spirituality. Regardless of religious or cultural background, the universal questions that I asked myself are interwoven in the presentation. The exhibit simultaneously explores the significance of Ganesh and his place in the Hindu pantheon of deities and encourages viewers to ponder these questions whether through a cultural, religious, or personal lens.

As a culture I think we obsess about what we think our deficiencies and shortcomings are. When I worked at top global advertising firms in my twenties, I saw many of the strategies employed in their various advertising campaigns. The largest profits were being made in the “fix-it” industries—fashion, weight loss, relationships, get rich quick gimmicks, etc. These strategies spoke to the customer's deepest suffering and pain and promised a quick remedy. But how often do you hear people ask themselves, “What do I feel called to do? What new life would reveal itself to me if I could see through the perceived mess called my life?” I hope this project not only informs the public about India's religious and cultural contributions—



using Ganesh as the entry point—but also engages them in planting seeds of their own inquiry. I hope this is the real discovery in *Discovering Ganesh*. ❧

Shana Dressler is founder of Swimming Elephant, exploring world cultures and religions through multi-media presentations.

To find out more information about *Discovering Ganesh* please visit:
www.discoveringganesh.com





H.H. SRI SWAMI SIVANANDA SARASWATI 1887 - 1963

DURGA PUJA or NAVARATRI

H.H. SRI SWAMI SIVANANDA

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SALUTATIONS TO THE DIVINE MOTHER, Durga, who exists in all beings in the form of intelligence, mercy, beauty; who is the consort of Lord Shiva, who creates, sustains and destroys the universe.

This festival is observed twice a year, once in the month of Chaitra and then in Aswayuja. It lasts for nine days in honor of the nine manifestations of Durga. During Navaratri (the word literally means “nine nights”) devotees of Durga observe a fast. Brahmins are fed and prayers are offered for the protection of health and property.

The beginning of summer and the beginning of winter are two very important junctions of climatic and solar influence. These two periods are taken as sacred opportunities for the worship of the Divine Mother. They are indicated respectively by the Rama-Navaratri in Chaitra (April-May) and the Durga Navaratri in Aswayuja (September-October). The bodies and minds of people undergo a considerable change on account of the changes in Nature. Sri Rama is worshipped during Ramnavmi, and Mother Durga during Navaratri.

The Durga Puja is celebrated in various parts of India in different styles. But the one basic aim of this celebration is to propitiate Shakti, the Goddess in Her aspect as Power, to bestow upon man all wealth, auspiciousness, prosperity, knowledge (both sacred and secular), and all other potent powers. Whatever be the particular or special request that everyone may put before the Goddess, whatever boon may be asked of Her, the one thing behind all these is propitiation, worship and linking oneself with Her.

There is no other aim. This is being effected consciously or unconsciously. Everyone is blessed with Her loving mercy and is protected by Her.

DURGA PUJA OR NAVARATRI COMMENCES on the first and ends on the tenth day of the bright half of Aswayuja (September-October). It is held in commemoration of the victory of Durga over Mahishasura, the buffalo-headed demon. In Bengal Her image is worshipped for nine days and then cast into water. The tenth day is called Vijaya Dasami or Dussera (the “tenth day”). Processions with Her image are taken out along the streets of villages and cities.

The mother of Durga (that is, the wife of the King of the Himalayas) longed to see her daughter. Durga was permitted by Lord Shiva to visit her beloved mother only for nine days in the year. The festival of Durga Puja marks this brief visit and ends with the Vijaya Dasami day, when Goddess Durga leaves for Her return to Mount Kailas. This is the view of some devotees.

In Bengal, Durga Puja is a great festival. All who live away from home return during the Puja days. Mothers reunite with their sons and daughters, and wives with their husbands.

The potter shows his skill in making images, the painter in drawing pictures, the songster in playing on his instrument, and the priest in reciting the sacred books. The Bengalis save money throughout the year only to spend everything during the Puja days. Cloth is freely distributed to the Brahmins.

The woman of Bengal welcomes

the Goddess with a mother's love and sends away the image on the last day, with every ceremony associated with a daughter's departure to her husband's home and with motherly tears in her eyes. This signifies the parting of Durga from Her beloved mother.

DURGA PUJA IS THE GREATEST HINDU festival in which God is adored as Mother. Hinduism is the only religion in the world which has emphasized to such an extent the motherhood of God. One's relationship with one's mother is the dearest and the sweetest of all human relations. Hence, it is proper to look upon God as mother.

Durga represents the Divine Mother. She is the energy aspect of the Lord. Without Durga, Shiva has no expression and without Shiva, Durga has no existence. Shiva is the soul of Durga; Durga is identical with Shiva. Lord Shiva is only the silent witness. He is motionless, absolutely changeless. He is not affected by the cosmic play. It is Durga who does everything.

Shakti is the omnipotent power of the Lord, or the Cosmic Energy. The Divine Mother is represented as having ten different weapons in Her hands. She sits on a lion. She keeps up the play of the Lord through the three attributes of Nature, namely, Sattwa, Rajas and Tamas. Knowledge, peace, lust, anger, greed, egoism and pride, are all Her forms.

You will find in the *Devi Sukta* of the *Rig Veda Samhita* that Vak, symbolizing speech, the daughter of the sage Anbhirna, realized her identity with the Divine Mother, the Power of

the Supreme Lord, which manifests throughout the universe among the gods, among men and beasts and among the creatures of the deep ocean.

In the *Kena Upanishad*, you will find that the Divine Mother shed wisdom on Indra and the gods and said that the gods were able to defeat the demons only with the help of the power of the Supreme Lord.

The worship of Devi, the universal Mother, leads to the attainment of knowledge of the Self. The story in the *Kena Upanishad* known as the “Yaksha Prasna,” supports this view. It tells how Uma, the Divine Mother, taught the Truth to the gods. Goddess Shakti thus sheds wisdom on Her devotees.

Devi worship is, therefore, worship of God’s glory, of God’s greatness and supremacy. It is adoration of the Almighty. It is unfortunate that Devi is ignorantly understood by many as a mere blood-thirsty Hindu Goddess. No! Devi is not a vicious demoness nor is She the property of the Hindus alone. Devi does not belong to any religion. Devi is that conscious power of God. The words Devi, Shakti, etc., and the ideas of different forms connected with these names are concessions granted by the sages due to the limitations of the human intellect; they are by no means the ultimate definitions of Shakti.

THE ORIGINAL OR ADI SHAKTI IS BEYOND human comprehension. Bhagavan Krishna says in the *Gita*: “This is only My lower nature. Beyond this is My higher nature, the life-principle which sustains the universe.”

The Upanishad also says: “The supreme power of God is manifested in various ways. This power is of the nature of God, manifesting as knowledge, strength and activity.”

Truly speaking, all beings in the universe are Shakti worshippers, whether they are aware of it or not, for there is no one who does not love and long for power in some form or other. Physicists and scientists have now proved that everything is pure, imperishable energy. This energy is only a form of divine Shakti which exists in every form.

A child is more familiar with the

mother than with the father, because the mother is very kind, loving, tender and affectionate and looks after the needs of the child. In the spiritual field also, the aspirant or the devotee – the spiritual child – has an intimate relationship with the Mother Durga, more than with the Father Shiva. Therefore, it behoves the aspirant to approach the Mother first, who then introduces Her spiritual child to the Father for his illumination.

The Mother’s Grace is boundless. Her mercy is illimitable; Her knowledge infinite; Her power immeasurable; Her glory ineffable; and Her splendor indescribable. She gives you material prosperity as well as spiritual freedom.

Approach Her with an open heart. Lay bare your heart to Her with frankness and humility. Be as simple as a child. Kill ruthlessly the enemies of egoism, cunning, selfishness and crookedness. Make a total, unreserved, and ungrudging self-surrender to Her. Sing Her praise. Repeat Her Name. Worship Her with faith and unflinching devotion. Perform special worship on the Navaratri days. Navaratri is the most suitable occasion for doing intense spiritual practices. These nine days are very sacred to the Divine Mother. Plunge yourself into Her worship. Practice intense repetition of the Divine Name, having a regular “quota” of repetitions per day, and of the number of hours spent on it.

DEVI FOUGHT WITH BHANDASURA AND his forces for nine days and nine nights. This Bhandasura had a wonderful birth and life. When Lord Shiva burnt Cupid with the fire of His “third eye,” Sri Ganesha playfully moulded a figure out of the ashes, and the Lord breathed life into it! This was the terrible demon Bhandasura. He engaged himself in great penance and on account of it obtained a boon from Lord Shiva. With the help of that boon, he began harassing the worlds. The Divine Mother fought with him for nine nights (the demons have extraordinary strength during the night), and killed him on the evening of the tenth day, known as the Vijaya Dasami. The learning of any science is begun on this highly auspicious

day. It was on this day that Arjuna worshipped Devi, before starting the battle against the Kauravas on the field of Kurukshetra.

Sri Rama worshipped Durga at the time of the fight with Ravana, to invoke Her aid in the war. This was on the days preceding the Vijaya Dasami day. He fought and won through Her Grace.

In days of yore, kings used to undertake ambitious expeditions on the day of the Vijaya Dasami. Those kings who did not go on such expeditions used to go out hunting in the deep forests. In Rajputana, India, even up to this date, people arrange mock attacks on some fort on Vijaya Dasami.

This day, however, has much to do with the life of Sri Rama. Nowhere in the history of the world can we find a parallel to the character of Sri Rama as a man, son, brother, husband, father or king. Maharishi Valmiki has exhausted the entire language in describing the glory of Sri Rama. And we shall be rightly celebrating the Dussera if we make honest efforts to destroy the demon of our ego, and radiate peace and love wherever we go. Let us all resolve to become people of sterling character. Let us resolve and act. The story of Sri Rama is known in almost all parts of the globe, and if we but succeed in following even a hundredth part of His teachings, we shall make our lives more fragrant than the rose and more lustrous than gold!

Dussera can also be interpreted as “Dasa-Hara,” which means the cutting of the ten heads of Ravana. So, let us resolve today to cut the ten heads – passion, pride, anger, greed, infatuation, lust, hatred, jealousy, selfishness and crookedness – of the demon, Ego, and thus justify the celebration of Dussera.

Religious observances, traditional worship and observances at times have more than one significance. Apart from being the adoration of the Divine, they commemorate stirring events in history, they are allegoric when interpreted from the occult standpoint and, lastly, they are deeply significant pointers and revealing guides to the individual on his path to God-realization.



OUTWARDLY, THE NINE-DAY WORSHIP of Devi is a celebration of triumph. This nine days' celebration is offered to the Mother for Her successful struggle with the formidable demons led by Mahishasura. But, to the sincere spiritual aspirant, the particular division of the Navaratri into sets of three days to adore different aspects of the Supreme Goddess has a very sublime, yet thoroughly practical truth to reveal. In its cosmic aspect, it epitomizes the stages of the evolution of man into God, from Jivahood (the state of individualization) to Shivahood (the state of Self-realization). In its individual import, it shows the course that one's spiritual practice should take.

LET US, THEREFORE, EXAMINE IN detail the spiritual significance of Navaratri.

The central purpose of existence is to recognize your eternal identity with the supreme Spirit. It is to grow into the image of the Divine. The supreme One embodies the highest perfection. It is spotless purity. To recognize your identity with That, to attain union with That, is verily to grow into the very likeness of the Divine. The aspirant, therefore, as his initial step, has to get rid of all the countless impurities, and the demoniacal elements that have come to cling to him in his embodied state. Then he has to acquire lofty virtues and auspicious, divine qualities. Thus purified, knowledge flashes upon him like the brilliant rays of the sun upon the crystal waters of a perfectly calm lake.

This process demands a resolute will, determined effort, and arduous struggle. In other words, strength and infinite power are the prime necessity. Thus it is the Divine Mother who has to operate through the aspirant.

Let us now consider how, on the first three days, the Mother is adored as supreme power and force, as Durga the Terrible. You pray to Mother Durga to destroy all your impurities, your vices, your defects. She is to fight with and annihilate the baser animal qualities in the spiritual aspirant, the lower, diabolical nature in him. Also, She is the power that protects your spiritual practice from its many dangers and pitfalls. Thus the

first three days, which mark the first stage or the destruction of impurity, and determined effort and struggle to root out the evil tendencies in your mind, are set apart for the worship of the destructive aspect of the Mother.

Once you have accomplished your task on the negative side, that of breaking down the impure propensities and old vicious habits, the next step is to build up a sublime spiritual personality, to acquire positive qualities in place of the eliminated demoniacal qualities. The divine qualities that Lord Krishna enumerates in the *Gita* have to be acquired. The aspirant must cultivate and develop all the auspicious qualities. He has to earn immense spiritual wealth to enable him to pay the price for the rare gem of divine wisdom. If this development of the opposite qualities is not undertaken in right earnest, the old demoniacal nature will raise its head again and again. Hence, this stage is as important in an aspirant's career as the previous one. The essential difference is: the former is a ruthless, determined annihilation of the filthy egoistic lower self; the latter is an orderly, steady, calm and serene effort to develop purity. This more pleasant side of the aspirant's Sadhana is depicted by the worship of Mother Lakshmi. She bestows on Her devotees the inexhaustible divine wealth or Deivi Sampath. Lakshmi is the wealth-giving aspect of God. She is purity itself. Thus the worship of Goddess Lakshmi is performed during the second set of three days.

Once the aspirant succeeds in routing out the evil propensities, and develops Sattwic or pure, divine qualities, he becomes competent to attain wisdom. He is now ready to receive the light of supreme wisdom. He is fit to receive divine knowledge. At this stage comes the devout worship of Mother Saraswathi, who is divine knowledge personified, the embodiment of knowledge of the Absolute. The sound of Her celestial veena awakens the notes of the sublime utterances of the Upanishads which reveal the Truth, and the sacred monosyllable, Om. She bestows the knowledge of the supreme, mystic sound and then gives full

knowledge of the Self as represented by Her pure, dazzling snow-white apparel. Therefore, to propitiate Saraswathi, the giver of knowledge, is the third stage.

The tenth day, Vijaya Dasami, marks the triumphant ovation of the soul at having attained liberation while living in this world, through the descent of knowledge by the Grace of Goddess Saraswathi. The soul rests in his own Supreme Self or Satchidananda Brahman. This day celebrates the victory, the achievement of the goal. The banner of victory flies aloft. Lo! I am He! I am He!

This arrangement also has a special significance in the aspirant's spiritual evolution. It marks the indispensable stages of evolution through which everyone has to pass. One naturally leads to the other; to short-circuit this would inevitably result in a miserable failure. Nowadays many ignorant seekers aim straight at the cultivation of knowledge without the preliminaries of purification and acquisition of the divine qualities. They then complain that they are not progressing on the path. How can they? Knowledge will not descend until the impurities have been washed out, and purity is developed. How can the pure plant grow in impure soil?

Therefore adhere to this arrangement; your efforts will be crowned with sure success. This is your path. As you destroy one evil quality, develop the virtue opposite to it. By this process you will soon bring yourself up to that perfection which will culminate in identity with the Self which is your goal. Then all knowledge will be yours: you will be omniscient, omnipotent and you will feel your omnipresence. You will see your Self in all. You will have achieved eternal victory over the wheel of births and deaths, over the demon of worldliness. No more pain, no more misery, no more birth, no more death! Victory, victory be yours!

GLORY TO THE DIVINE MOTHER! Let Her take you, step by step, to the top of the spiritual ladder and unite you with the Lord! ❖

EVERYTHING IS TRUE

A story

HOOMAN MAJD ©2008

In much of ancient and post-ancient history, particularly of religions and from oral traditions, there are numerous tales and accounts, often contradictory, of which we simply have no proof. The early history of Islam is no exception. What is generally accepted as fact, though, is that the split between Sunni and Shia (originally Shi'at Ali-followers or party of Ali), began as a disagreement over the prophet's succession (and the right to lead the Muslim Ummah, or nation), with the minority Shias insisting that the Caliphate be restricted to direct descendants of the prophet Mohammad. The majority of Shias revere twelve Imams, from Ali who was both the prophet's cousin and son-in-law to his twelfth descendant, the Mahdi, who is believed to be in occultation. For Shias, the seminal, defining moment in their history is the Battle of Karbala. The story of that battle which pitted Imam Hossein, the prophet's grandson, and his ragtag army against the overwhelmingly superior forces of the Caliph Yazid and ended with Hossein's martyrdom, is told in many ways; the battle itself is commemorated every year throughout the Shia world, including by Shias in India (and even by some Sunnis who revere the prophet's family, or the ahl'ul Bayt). What is less known is that there are also Hindus in India who commemorate the Battle of Karbala, and furthermore, that there are Hindus in India, in the western Punjab, who claim descent from a Brahmin who fought alongside Imam Hossein at the Battle of Karbala some fourteen hundred years ago. They call themselves "Hosseini Brahmins," and although Shia texts and history make no reference to Hindus at Karbala, the Hosseini Brahmins (in dwindling numbers) insist that their history is true. Unlike other Brahmin clans, the Hosseini Brahmins boast a martial tradition that they trace back to the Battle of Karbala, and it is even said that some Hosseini Brahmin families used to cut the foreheads of their newborns, leaving a permanent scar as a testament to their devotion to their ancestor's sacrifice and to Imam Hossein. The Hosseini Brahmins, who will perhaps vanish one day under continuing sectarian pressure to conform to one religion or another, believe it is possible to be Hindu and Muslim at once. I cannot argue that, nor can I argue that written history's neglect of their story means it is untrue. My story is fiction and from my imagination, an imagination colored by the stories I've heard since childhood; the Battle of Karbala may or may not have happened as I write it, and there may or may not have been Hindu devotees of Hossein fighting alongside him. But how does it matter?

I AM ONE OF THE FEW MALE SURVIVORS of the Battle of Karbala. Me and three of my sons. What, you say? Oh, I'm not proud, for I was willing, no, eager, to lay my life down, but that was not to be my fate. Seven of my sons, yes, but not me. Seven sons I gave for Hossein, seven. Their heads separated from their bodies, a cruel fate but an easy death, and I will see them every day of my life, this one and the next and the one after that, impaled on the grimy spears of Yazid's army. How, you wonder, did it come to pass that this Brahmin and his ten Brahmin sons, fought and died for Hossein? We were not the only ones, you know. I am Hindu, but I am in Shi'at Ali.

My name is Rahib, Rahib Sidh Dutt. I am a warrior, a warrior by trade and by sentiment, and I once lived in Medina. And why not? Why should there not be Hindus in Arabia? There were many

of us, maybe a thousand and more. Even the astrologer Yavanacharya, from whom the Arabs learnt much, was there. And we worshiped Shiva and Makreasha and no one bothered us. Least of all the prophet or his family, peace be upon them forever and ever. I was engaged in trade at the time, the occupation of the prophet himself! before he received his wisdom, as were many other *Hindis*, for whom long travels were no ordeals. I never met the prophet, peace be upon him and his family, *please*, but I knew his family and his grandsons, Hassan and Hossein, both wise and good. It was Hossein for whom I was willing to die (and for whom my sons happily gave their precious lives). But of course it was he, instead, who died; a sad, tragic death at Karbala, that infernally hot and dusty town on the plains of Mesopotamia that will now forever be covered with clouds of infamy. He is buried there, you know,

his head now reunited with his body (and that was my doing!), and mark my words, one day he will have a shrine, and I will return there, in another body to be sure, maybe not even human, but I will return, right to the spot where he fell. And where my sons fell. The arrows that the armies of the caliph had promised they would not use, not against women and children and only seventy-two (!) thirsty men, those arrows felled them, and the sword of Shemr, that inhuman incarnation, that *deev* in human form, sliced their beautiful faces from their necks. I know what you're thinking right now, you're thinking that I am a mercenary. But what mercenary, I ask you, what mercenary gives his sons' lives for treasure? What amount of gold or silver does it take to have a man watch his sons, Sahas Rai, Haras Rai, Shir Khan, Rai Pun, Ram Singh, Dharoo and Poroo, bloodied by arrows and spears,

beheaded? Yes, I am a warrior, but I have never done battle for gold. But give me a moment and let me tell you my tale.

I was in Medina when Persia fell, when Yazdegerd, that last Sassanid king (king of kings! ha!) was defeated, and when his daughters were brought to my city in chains. Sell them, they said, sell them to the highest bidder! But Ali, *Imam* Ali, or Om Murti as we Hindus called him, said no. I loved Ali, as I loved his sons, for he was a beautiful man. No, he said, no! They must be free, free to choose whichever husband they want. And Shahrbanu, the prettier one if you ask me, chose Hossein. And who wouldn't? She may not have known she was choosing the grandson of Mohammad, peace be upon him and his family for eternity, but believe me, she chose him willingly and she converted to Islam voluntarily. I was there. Yes, I felt for her, for she had Indian blood, too, but I tell you, I did not see her unhappy. It is the truth. And then she gave birth to Zein-ol-Abedin, the half-Persian great-grandson of the prophet of Islam, may he live forever, but that's another story. I'll come to that later (for the Persians always manage to figure into every story, don't they? Ha!)

I WAS FRIENDS WITH HOSSEIN, AND Hossein was friends with me. Yes, good friends, and I miss him so. And why should the grandson of the prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, not have a Hindu friend? Exactly. You don't know the prophet's family, do you? Hossein's father Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, was a great man; he did not deserve to die as he did, and all of us Hindus had great respect for him. And he for us. But I already told you about him. Om Murti. Yes. Hossein, his son, as beautiful as he, was my *friend*. And when the caliph, that Ummayad usurper Yazid ensconced himself away in Damascus, when Yazid diverted from the path, my friend claimed the caliphate. He had to, didn't he? And right he was. He was the grandson of the prophet! He was the son of Ali! He would have made a just ruler, I know, because I tell you, a Brahmin does not choose his friends lightly. Now, I also know it was not my

business to interfere with Islam, and certainly not my business to take sides in a struggle for the caliphate. But let me tell you something: do you know that the Lord Krishna foretold Imam Hossein's martyrdom in the *Bhagavad Gita*? Yes he did. I am a Brahmin, I know the *Gita*, and I should know the truth. The *Kalanki Purana*, the last of the eighteen Puranas, and the fourth Veda, the *Atharva Veda*, refer to Hossein as the incarnation for the Kali Yug, the present age. What do you think of that? *Shah ast Hossein!* King is he! I joined Hossein, as did all of my sons who are also, by the way, versed in the *Gita*, in his rightful claim. I was a warrior, after all, and what else would a warrior do? Fighting a just cause, the cause of a *friend*, is the highest honor, is it not?

So, when Hossein made his decision to challenge the Ummayads, he gathered his family, his baby son even, and we set off for Kufa. His brothers and half-brothers and cousins and sisters, the Ahl'ul Bayt—the family of the prophet!—were on the march. Seventy-two men, thirty-two horsemen and forty infantrymen, along with the women and children, and of course me, my sons, a dozen or so other Hindu Brahmins, and a smattering of tribesmen who knew and understood the righteousness of our cause. We were perhaps two hundred, but yes, I know, everyone likes to think of the seventy-two. It's a good number, I'll admit, and for the Moslems it has its peculiar significance, so who am I to argue? Seventy two it is, if you prefer. Everything is true. We first went to Mecca so that Hossein could perform a pilgrimage, for his piety was never in doubt (and how could it be?), and then we turned and set out for Kufa, the city Om Murti had used as his capital. Kufa, not too far from Karbala, a city with many followers of his father, those in the Shi'at Ali, from where Hossein would legitimize his rule. After a journey of eighteen days (and I will not bore you with the mundane details, and believe me, they are mundane), it was the second of Moharram by the Arab calendar when we pitched camp on parched land in Karbala. Yazid must surely have been panicking, for he sent an entire army to

meet us! Us, a few hundred, women and children included! But this will tell you something of the caliph Yazid, and you decide whether you think he was a man of God or not (and I'm not referring to his wine drinking habits, for who am I, a Hindu, to judge that?). Omar ibn Sa'ad, his commander, immediately had five hundred horsemen cut us off from the Euphrates. Now can you imagine that? What kind of man gives such orders, I ask? They dared not attack us, but they were going to deny us water! An army to prevent the family of *their* prophet, mind you, *their* messenger of God, from drinking water in the desert!

But Abbas ibn'Ali, Hossein's half-brother and he too a righteous man, was not to be deterred, and he said he would get us water. Allah made the Euphrates flow, and Allah would provide, he proclaimed. Hossein was worried, of course, but he let Abbas carry out his plan. I wanted to send my sons with him, although Abbas wouldn't hear of it. "Do not worry," he said. "We will go quietly with my men and if we do battle, we will be victorious, for Allah is with us." Allah yes, I thought, and please, Shiva too! Abbas left with thirty men and twenty infantry and he returned that very night, having indeed done battle but without suffering a single casualty. "See!" he exclaimed, "It is the will of Allah! Five hundred men we destroyed, and not one of us hurt!" Now I don't know how they counted the five hundred, but there were many dead from Omar's army, and we saw reinforcements by the thousands come in to guard the Euphrates. By the thousands! Everything is true. So Omar knew he had lost many men, and he knew we were not to be taken lightly. But poor Hossein, my dear Hossein, fell into a gloom when he saw the armies of Yazid gathering by the river, and he knew then that he could not defeat them.

"I and my sons are with you, Hossein ibn'Ali!" I said, "As is every man here. Let's do battle now, for there is no more glorious death than this! I will come back to this earth, surely, and you will have your paradise!"

"No," he said. "We have no water, we

have little food, and we have few men. I am not afraid of dying, and I know you are not, but we have to devise another plan.” He huddled with his family and then sent an emissary to Omar, offering to return to Arabia if the siege were lifted. Now I was not a witness to any of the conversations, but I heard that “Surrender or die” was the response, all the way from Damascus. I knew then, as I’m sure my friend Hossein did, that, naturally, we were going to die.

It was night, you see, on Tasua, the ninth day of Moharram as the Arabs calculate, and what I am about to say will tell you why I was willing to die with Hossein. He turned to the men, all of us, and said, “Under the cover of night, you may escape. Omar has promised to allow us the night for our prayers, and any or all of you can and should take this opportunity to leave.” Hossein turned to pray. “Go,” he said, but no one moved. “Go!” he said to me, “you are not *Bani Hashem*, go and live a long life!” Instead, we all joined him in his prayers. Yes, me too, the Hindu Brahmin. And I performed a puja, and I saw Hossein’s tears. Little do you know of Hindu belief!

IN THE MORNING, ON ASHURA, THE tenth day of Moharram, and after praying all night, thirty-two of our men under Zuhair formed our right flank and did battle with thousands from Omar’s army. You do not believe me? I swear thousands died at the hands of Zuhair and his thirty-two! It is not with glee that I say this, for what Brahmin rejoices in death? But I saw the dead men with my own eyes, and they died an ignoble death. Everything is true. And when Omar saw this, the arrows rained down, arrows and lances that he had said he would not use. So much for honorable men! Hossein mounted Zuljena, the magnificent white stallion that his grandfather (peace be upon him and his family) had given him, and to prevent the indiscriminate arrows of the enemy from falling on the women and children, we made for battle one by one. One by one! I myself cut down a great number of Syrians, and I can tell you that I thought nothing of it. You might

think that Brahmins mustn’t be warriors, or that Brahmins never do battle, but let me tell you, these Brahmins fought gloriously. Who are you? And Zuljena, the steed that had bowed to Hossein when he had been a mere child, who had lowered himself to the ground so that the tiny Hossein could mount him, pranced about, charging every now and then as if he was doing battle too! Hossein had told me the story of his horse on the road to Kufa, of how his grandfather had cried when Zuljena had lowered himself for him, and how Mohammad, peace upon him and his household, had then foretold that the horse would one day once again lower himself to allow an injured and dying Hossein an easy and graceful dismount. And the Arabs deny reincarnation! Zuljena will one day be human; anyone who took one glance at him could surely see that!

But the battle wore on and our men perished; I remained with my sons by Hossein’s side, hoping to protect him until the end. You want details? Why? What is there to be said about war that hasn’t been said before? Men kill other men, with whatever implement they have, sometimes with their bare hands, sometimes with a stone. Animals die a more dignified death at the hands of humans, I tell you, even a Brahmin knows that! There are others who will, no doubt, tell you stories of this battle, and they may want to relive the gore and the destruction, so I leave it to them. They are honorable too. Everything is true. So let me tell you this: at the midday, *zohr*, prayer, Saiid and Zuhayr stood in front of Hossein, and Saiid was immediately killed in a rain of arrows. Yes, we continued our prayers, over the body of the martyr. And as our regular soldiers were picked off one by one, Hossein’s immediate family, the Bani Hashem, went to join the battle. His son, Ali Akbar, along with sons of his brother and his cousins, were all killed instantly. My sons and I followed Hossein as we advanced towards the Euphrates with Abbas, his half-brother, who was intent on filling a water skin to quench our thirst (for we had not had a drop to drink!) but he never made it back from the river after he split off from us. Ram Singh, who had accompanied him told

me that, right before an arrow pierced his heart, his hands had been chopped off as he tried to carry the water skin, but even that did not dissuade him, for he carried it with his teeth until his death moments later. Yes, his teeth! And what did Abbas scream as he fell off his horse? What were his last words? “Hossein!” That’s right, he screamed for his brother. How can you not be moved? Hossein Shah ast! And I cried for Abbas, and for my sons who were dying with the Bani Hashem. Hossein, who sensed the end was near, commanded me and my remaining sons to guard the women’s tents, and believe me, I resisted, but he roared at me. “Will you not defend the children of the prophet?” And I fell to the ground, tears streaming down my cheeks. Tell me, what would you have done?

And then Hossein let out an anguished cry. “Who will help me?” he screamed. Even Yazid in Damascus had to have heard him! The women and children began to cry, a great sobbing that carried their grief across the desert floor and over the bodies of their fallen men. Inside a tent, Hossein’s six-month old infant son, Ali Asghar, had fallen from his crib at exactly the moment Hossein had spoken, and Hossein, upon hearing this, ran to his tent, picked up the infant, and made for the enemy’s camp. He put the child down on the hot sand and shouted, “Who will give me water for my child?” And do you know what happened next? Yes, an arrow, right through the baby’s throat. These were the men that we were facing. And you wondered why a Brahmin would fight for a Moslem! Hossein charged into the enemy lines, killing many, many of the Syrian soldiers, but he finally succumbed to his wounds—from arrows, lances, swords and yes, even stones. Zuljena returned to the tents, his white coat red with the blood of prophet, his son, and his grandson, and Shahrbanu wept. Oh, how she wept! She jumped on Zuljena’s back and they rode off at a gallop heading east, never to be seen again. I later heard that she made it all the way back to Persia, all the way to the north and the town of Rayy, where she and the horse were swallowed up by a mountain. (Now if you can believe that,

I can't see why you wouldn't believe they will be reincarnated.) Everything is true. But back to Hossein. My poor friend Hossein! His head was cut off by Shemr, his body trampled by horses. Soldiers came to our tents to take us captive. I was ready to defend, to stand and die, but doing so, I knew, would mean they would kill the prophet's family. And so I dropped my sword, and watched as Yazid's army took away the women and children, parading them in the front of the spears holding the heads of their husbands, brothers, and fathers. And my seven sons. There was nothing for me and my surviving sons to do. We were left alone by the Arab army from Damascus, I don't know why, and we set off for Kufa as they set all the tents on fire with their torches. Yes, we hurried off, before they might change their minds, even though I wanted to stay and protect the family of the prophet, peace be upon them.

HOSSEIN'S HEAD, ALONG WITH THE heads of his brethren soldiers, was taken to Kufa, and the prisoners to Kufa and then on to Damascus. Everywhere the prophet's family gave speeches, even as prisoners, honoring Hossein and denouncing Yazid, and I tell you, they were affecting speeches. The Shi'at Ali grew in numbers, and Yazid feared them, for he knew that he had displeased God. (And a year later he ordered the family of the prophet freed and returned to Medina. Ha!) And Hossein's head? He was my friend, and I could not rest until it was reunited with his body. Soon after the Battle of Karbala, my sons and I recovered it one night from the household of Obayd'ullah ibn Ziyad, the brutal commander of Kufa and Basra, that butcher! and we made our escape to Damascus. I bathed the head myself, I cleansed it, I looked into its eyes, and then I wrapped it carefully in muslin. We returned to Kufa, and then to Karbala, where I placed it carefully in the grave with Hossein's body. And it is there today. As for me, I have no more desire to live in Arabia. Medina is a great city, but I have lost my friends. I shall return to India, to Hind, where I will tell this tale to men, women, and children, and where Hossein's name will live on. Other

Brahmins will come with me, those who knew Hossein and those whose families fought by his side. Thousands of years from now, men and women will still weep on Ashura, I tell you. They will hit themselves, just as I saw the prophet's family do that day in Karbala, and they will feel the sting of injustice. Hindus in a *pitna dalna* and Moslems in their own mourning ceremonies, I am certain of it. The Shi'at Ali will endure, in Baghdad and Basra and Kufa, in Persia and Arabia. There will be more battles, I am sure, but the truth always wins. We Brahmins, we *Hosseini* Brahmins, will keep alive the story of Hossein and the Battle of Karbala in India and beyond. Everything is true. Yes, our children and our children's children and their children will bear scars across their throats, scars that attest to their

ancestors' slit throats, to their loyalty to an Arab named Hossein. But we will not return to Hind yet. Not before we avenge the death of Hossein, not before we see the end of Yazid, Omar, and the butcher of Kufa who kept my Hossein's head, and who I will personally dispatch to meet his creator and who will return to this earth as the lowliest insect. We are Hosseini Brahmins, you see, *Hindu ka dharm, Musalman ka iman*: with the religion of the Hindu, and the faith of the Moslem. Yes. The faith of the *Shia*. Everything is true. How else can you explain my story? ❦

Hooman Majd is an Iranian born, New York based writer and music executive whose book on Iran, *The Ayatollah Begs To Differ*, will be published by Doubleday in 2008.



AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BEER

January 9, 2008, Oxford, United Kingdom

DR. ROBERT E. SVOBODA



Dr. Robert E. Svoboda with Robert Beer.

ROBERT BEER HAS STUDIED TIBETAN *Thangka* painting for more than thirty years. One of the first Westerners to become actively involved in this art form, he initially studied for a period of five years in India and Nepal with several of the finest Tibetan artists living at the time. Since 1975, he has lived in England, working consistently on developing the artistic skills, vision, patience, and understanding of this highly complex subject as well as the historical and cultural contexts within which it arises. He is the author and illustrator of *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* and *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. His work has appeared in numerous publications around the world.

Robert Svoboda was introduced to Robert Beer's work in the mid-eighties, when Robert Beer provided the artwork for the cover of Svoboda's book *Aghora*. Shortly thereafter, they met in the isolated Scottish village where Robert Beer and his family were then living and have since remained in regular contact.

ROBERT SVOBODA: If you could start off just by speaking a little about your background and what brought you to where you are.

ROBERT BEER: What brought me to where I am? Going back right to the beginning?

RS: Far enough back as seems useful.

RB: Basically the strongest event of my childhood was the death of my sister, who died when I was fourteen. She died of hydrocephalus when she was three years old; her head grew to an enormous size and was filled with cerebrospinal fluid. She was kind of the center of the family, and because of this our whole family broke up soon after

her death. Two days after she died, I had a dream in which my sister and I were flying through the sky together, and she was no longer deformed; she was actually perfect in form; it was so real. As we were flying together through a very beautiful clear sky I heard a church bell ringing, and then I woke up to our doorbell ringing; it was my mother and father just coming back from church.

When my sister died, her face had an agonized expression, but when I actually went into the front room to look at her in her coffin that morning, she had the same expression that she had had in the dream. Her face was smiling and very beautiful, so I realized that something actually survives death. From then on I essentially became somewhat obsessed with death, and trying to understand what life is all about.

I spent a couple of years living homeless and on the road after this, because I didn't really have a home anymore. This was the period of the beatnik generation in Britain, but there were few of them on the road then. I began to meet people involved with Buddhism, people who were older than me who were looking into Eastern religions. From the time I was sixteen years old I strongly gravitated toward Hinduism and Buddhism. In 1965 I set out for the East with the romantic notion of becoming a Buddhist monk. I was eighteen years old at that time.

RS: Did you finish school?

RB: No, I left school at sixteen. I was basically not in school much from age fifteen onwards, and I was living in friends' houses because I didn't have a home. From age sixteen to eighteen, I was more or less on the road until I set out for the East to

become a Buddhist monk, because that seemed the brightest option.

But in Istanbul I was turned onto LSD, and LSD became the center of my life for the next three years or so. It was during this period that I really started painting, after I had returned to the UK. Then I became very involved with Hindu and Buddhist imagery and symbolism, Indian music (*sitar*), and Gnostic Christianity. The mid and late '60s were a very creative period in my life, as they were for many others, when the transmission of the language of symbolism became very potent and meaningful for me.

But when I was twenty-two I flipped out on acid, and that's when I left for India and really became deeply involved with Tibetan art and Indian music, because I was quite honestly no longer able to function on any other level. The vehicle of Tibetan art and its imagery became a way for me to identify strongly with my own internal process. It was an aboriginal or primeval instinct, rather than an intellectual impetus, that actually propelled me into this world. Its reality resonated very deeply, and in time I began to find a valid sense of understanding through the drawing and painting of Buddhist deities. The imagery resonated with what was taking place inside of my psyche; some kind of transmission was taking place. That's basically how I started on this path.

RS: So there you were in India, at twenty-two.

RB: Yes. I spent five years in India, the winters in Varanasi studying Indian music, and the summers in the Kangra and Kulu Valleys studying Tibetan art. I also spent a year in Kathmandu,



Detail of the Face of Bhairava, an oil painting by Samundra Man Singh Shrestha. 2005

where I studied Indian music with a lovely blind *sarod* player named Mohan Sundar Shrestha. I also became involved with Newar art in Kathmandu. Although my main discipline was Indo-Tibetan Buddhist art, I have always been fascinated with Newar art (the indigenous Hindu-Buddhist art of the Kathmandu Valley). It was during this time, 1973-74, that I met the Newar artist Siddhimuni Shakya (1933-2001) who was my greatest inspiration. The work that he was producing at that time was unbelievable and exquisite; it was quite revolutionary for me.

RS: It's probably fair to say few Westerners have heard of Newar art, even among those who have heard of Tibetan Buddhist art...

RB: Yes, Tibetan Buddhist art has become very popular. When I came back to the West in 1976 not many people had heard of Tibetan Buddhist art. But the Tibetans are very good travelers through time and space. They came to the West and have now established many monasteries and centers. They are very good at being a race in exile; as nomads and traders they have been able to take care of themselves. While Tibetan Buddhism has been taking firm root in the West, Newar art has remained somewhat neglected in Nepal. Like Tibet, Nepal was also a closed country for many years, until the early '50s in fact. A friend of mine was there in 1965, when it first started to open to foreign tourists; and the British consul in Kathmandu invited every Westerner in the city to Christmas dinner in the embassy.

RS: When did Newar art originate?

RB: Buddhism originated in India. The Buddha lived in the heartland of Magadha (now Bihar), and from here his teachings spread eastward into Bengal, westward into Gandhara, southward to Sri Lanka, and northward into Central Asia. But the final flowering of Indian *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* Buddhism remained vital in Bengal and Bihar until its great monastic academies were finally destroyed by Muslim invaders at the end of the twelfth century.

The great transmission of these teachings from India into Tibet had

taken place between the seventh and twelfth centuries, and the main route of this transmission passed through the Kathmandu Valley. The Kingdom of Nepal thus became the main staging post for the transmission of Buddhism between Eastern India and Tibet.

A vibrant renaissance in Buddhist art had developed during the late dynasty of the Pala Kings of Eastern India, who patronized many of the Buddhist monasteries and Hindu Temples of Bengal and Bihar. With the demise of the Pala Dynasty, Nepal became the direct inheritor of this ancient and highly evolved artistic tradition. And the Newars, who were the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, essentially became the Buddhist artists and artisans who actually instigated much of what we now recognize as Early Tibetan Buddhist Art. The influence of the Newars, particularly on early Central Tibetan art, was simply enormous, with the three great cities of the Nepal Valley, Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon), Patan (Lalitpur) and Kathmandu (Kantipur), respectively being known for their technical skills in woodcarving, bronze casting and painting.

Many Newar artisans and merchants maintained a presence in Central Tibet until the Chinese invasion of the '50s, even though Buddhism in Nepal had declined greatly since the three cities of the Valley had been conquered by the Gorkhas in the late eighteenth century, when the country became predominantly a Hindu nation.

RS: How would you define art?

RB: Art is outside and heart is inside.

RS: Very good.

RB: Art is the outward expression of the inner heart. To me art should convey beauty and devotion, and skill and time, and all of the things that are fine; art should be spiritually uplifting. The Western trend is often for art to portray neurosis. In the West art is often a product of neurosis; the artist somehow has to be tormented or demented. It's all become too conceptual—conceptual art—just thoughts that flash in the mind. Thoughts and ideas are so easy to come by. But to portray beauty, to

produce something that carries real peace, tranquility, beauty, grace—to me that's art, that's really art. For me art is uplifting, art is spiritual.

RS: Is there any part of modern art that you find uplifting or artistic?

RB: Artistic? Oh yeah, I think it's artistic. I wouldn't necessarily say that it is uplifting though. I think modern or conceptual art is extremely overrated. As an artist myself I've only met a small number of people who I believe can really see paintings; almost everybody can read books, but very few people can see—can actually absorb essence with their own eyes and interpret. Really, it's a handful of people I've met in my life, a very small number. When you have a very fine Newar or Tibetan painting, people will often say, "I could look at this for hours." But after maybe two or three minutes their attention lapses. These big exhibitions that take place now in the West, of the famous artists of the last century; people go there and they try to see, but I think most people don't really see that much. They try to educate themselves in a way of seeing perhaps, but it is usually more of a cultural event, something that they believe they should see. At most gallery openings people tend to pay more attention to the wine and the snacks than the paintings. For me art comes from the inside, from within, if that makes sense; but I think this may sound somewhat arrogant.

RS: When you look at a piece of art what do you see?

RB: I actually see it. I see what's really there; certainly in terms of the art I'm familiar with. But I wouldn't say this about abstract art, because like most people, I can't often see its point. I don't think you can see something in it until somebody explains what you're supposed to see, which may be conceptual or conjectural.

You remember Richard Buhler? When I visited him in Las Vegas a couple of years ago he showed me a Tibetan painting he had bought, and he wanted me to tell him what it was about. So I explained it to him and he said, "My god, it's like you are reading



Manjuśrī, an oil painting by Samundra Man Singh Shrestha. 2003

hieroglyphics! You read it as though you are reading some strange language.” And I said, “Yes, that’s what its like. My kind of visual awareness is basically like I have learned an ancient language.” I’ve learned a language of line and I’ve learned a language of symbols, but these are very specific. I have a very good understanding of Tibetan art, and if I look at a *thangka* I can usually explain or understand everything in it. I may not be able to identify historical characters, but as regards most of the deities, I understand what they are holding, why they are holding them, why they are this, why they are that, it’s all pretty clear on this level.

But Newar art is somewhat different from Tibetan art; it’s a different tradition—so now I’m exploring Newar art. But unlike Tibetan art, there are very few people left who are able to understand and convey the actual meanings within Newar art. So I’m kind of trying to decode Newar art at the present time, trying to understand it, and to help the artist in Nepal to understand what they are painting, and to make the art known. This too sounds a bit arrogant, but really it is like this.

RS: Have you found that at least some people are becoming able to understand it?

RB: Yes, in Nepal, are we talking about Newar art?

RS: Yes.

RB: The Newars themselves, they have this unique skill of being able to reproduce most anything. You walk around Kathmandu City and many restaurants are now making hummus, salads and pizzas. They’ve learned how to prepare and cook such things. And when they play rock music, they’ve learned all the riffs from Eric Clapton, or Pink Floyd, or whoever. They have this perfect ability to replicate things. Newar artists likewise have this innate ability in casting bronzes, in woodcarving, mask making, in painting, to basically get it right. It’s an innate thing they grow up with in their culture; it’s in their unique genetic codes. They basically get it right. But artistically there are some things they don’t get right; like when there

is a specific deity offering, they don’t really understand what that offering should contain, because they don’t hold that tradition anymore. So there are facets of their art that are sometimes inaccurate or weak, like a right-hand attribute erroneously appearing in the left hand of a deity; or a deity sitting on a golden sun disc, when he or she should appear upon a white moon disc. They can usually replicate perfectly, and innovate to an astonishing degree, but a sophisticated understanding of iconography is rare amongst the artistic community.

To me these artists are very beautiful people, and I love them dearly. They are usually very humble and intelligent; but not highly educated, not highly trained; a lot of their tradition knowledge has been lost over the last few centuries. Most of the artists are quite young, and it is easy for me to identify with them. As an artist myself I had a very tough life financially, but I chose to do what I wanted to do, what I felt I was destined to do. And it is easy for me to recognize my younger self in many of these artists, to inspire them with an ability to really ‘see’ and appreciate their work, and sometimes to dazzle them with an iconographical description of every aspect of a deity that they have just painted.

More than anything I can recognize what their skills and talents are, and how, given the opportunity to paint what they really want to paint, they can create really incredible masterpieces. This they would love to do, but they have been held in bondage by the need to produce works for the market, especially to reproduce deity images that have become very popular. So in the past they have often kept making versions of popular images, but this stifles the artists’ creative talents. Given the chance to paint what they would like to paint, and paying them adequately for their work, so that instead of spending three weeks on a painting they could spend four months, their work will reach a much higher standard. This also gives them a greater sense of meaning and inspiration—of hope really. So that’s what I’m involved with at the moment:

trying to nourish that creative energy and talent, because it is a very, very beautiful legacy.

Tibetan Buddhist art is meditative; people want *thangkas* because they are doing a meditational practice of Tara or the Medicine Buddha, or some similar deity. I would define Newar art as devotional, not meditative; it kindles a strong devotional feeling, which is why I say heart is inside and art is outside. It resonates very strongly with the human ideal of the divine, of something that’s much more potent in its initial impact than it is in any symbolic meaning or esoteric sense.

RS: The modern world is not a particularly devotional place. Do you think that it is more difficult today than it might have been earlier for people who are involved in Newar art, which is, as you put it, more devotional than meditative, to tap into a devotional reality?

RB: It’s still possible; I find this ability in most of the good young artists, the ones in their twenties and thirties. You know, forty years old is quite old for a painter; after forty, your eyes begin to go. When you get to forty years old you are considered to be a senior Newar artist, and there is a great respect from the younger artists toward those whom they consider their seniors, the ones who blazed the trail. We don’t seem to have this in the West, where it’s much more competitive. There’s often a little jealousy among these young Newar artists, but you don’t have the kind of gross, “This is me, I’m a great artist attitude” that you often find in the West. There is instead a strong humility.

Newar society is quite difficult to penetrate; it has its own language (Newari), castes, annual festivals and complex rituals. And as the artists have come to know me over the past ten years or so, I’ve on occasion been in a situation with a couple of them where they have made a painting that they ask me to appraise, and I talk about the quality of the art, and then I start to talk about the symbolism, and they can’t believe how I know all of those things. Then they’ll find a reproduction in a book, and I’ll



Black and white photograph of Siddhimuni Shakyas's last painting of Padmāpāṇī Lokeśvara. 1998

explain everything in the painting, and they can't believe that anybody carries this knowledge anymore. So on that level they have begun to respect me, not just for what I know but also for who I am. I self-identify with them because I know how hard it was for me at that time in my own life, and how little help I actually had, and how little I still actually have. The painters of Newar *paubhas* and Tibetan *thangkas* have traditionally always been anonymous, and rarely ever accorded the respect of a scholar, lama or pandit. I can identify with them because they also have had so little help, but times are changing and the artists of Nepal now commonly sign their own works. So I'm there to help them on these levels. I think the best thing I can do in the latter part of my life is to help nourish these artists, both in terms of patronage, of giving them the freedom to create what they want to create, and of helping them understand their own art form better and learn more about their own Newar tradition themselves. And they facilitate that now, so if I'm with some of the more knowledgeable artists—and there are only a few that I consider really knowledgeable—then an incredible transmission of information takes place between us. And that's real transmission for me, that's real guru-disciple transmission, whoever is the guru in that relationship. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's somebody else, but it does take place and I bow to its beauty. There is a life force behind everything; and this world is very alive and dynamic from my perspective.

RS: Yes, it does sound like this sort of art is alive, and that the tradition behind it is alive. The art itself comes alive in the artist, then it manifests externally and has the potential to live outside.

RB: And this is reflected in the *thangka* shops in Kathmandu, which now have Newar art in them, whereas four or five years ago you wouldn't see Newar art there, only Tibetan art. Now you see Newar art everywhere, including many copies of paintings that I have bought

the originals of. It's becoming much more popular.

RS: From what you've seen does any of the art they carry in the shops have any artistic merit to it?

RB: There are often some good artists' paintings in the shops of Thamel; the skill of the Tamang artists who copy most of the Tibetan *thangkas* is often very good. Unfortunately, virtually all of the shopkeepers in Kathmandu have very little knowledge whatsoever about Buddhist or Newar art, even though some of them have been in the business for thirty years. When I was there recently I went to visit a shopkeeper I know who has been selling Buddhist art for the last thirty years and is now selling pashmina shawls—and it's no different for him, he said—shawls are better business. So none of the art had any real meaning for him although he is a very sweet man; it's an industry, essentially. And customers go to the shops and they obviously think that the shopkeepers know something about what they sell, but they don't. And you should know that most of the Buddhist art in commercial shops in Kathmandu is never actually painted by 'Buddhist monks,' so there are often many mistakes in these Buddhist paintings, particularly with the more complex wrathful deities and their mandalas.

RS: Given how many mistakes are being made now in this industry, do you think there will always be a separation between the more commercial art and the actual art that maintains the symbolism and the accuracy of the symbols?

RB: Yes. I think it's very hard to influence the Tamang artists. There are various things I've said to no avail to some of the people who own these shops. One of the biggest sellers of art in Kathmandu has several hundred Tamang artists working for him. But just by telling the shop owner "You should change this," or "Make Amitabha a much darker red," it will never happen, because that advice will never penetrate from him to the working artist. So I can't influence

things on that level. They work mainly from copies, you know; they copy copies. These young Tamang boys are making copies of photographs, photocopies, or sketches made by other artists. They keep copying and then they begin to lose details. What is held in one hand of a deity—maybe it is a *vajra*, or a club—suddenly becomes a trident, and then next time it is copied as a trident, and it goes on like this. It is a bit like coins that were made in the Roman Empire: the farther away from Rome they were minted, the more abstract the image of the emperor became on the coin.

There is no real source of knowledge, as such. Even among the young Tibetan lamas who go to buy *thangkas* there, they often really don't understand the iconography themselves. And amongst their students there are probably very few who really understand the art well. It's such a complicated subject: the iconography, the imagery, it's just too much for people to learn or even attempt to learn—unless you're a painter yourself. Then there's a real need to learn these things.

This is a complex discussion of course.

RS: Of course. ▲

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