

Chapter X. The House of God

Next, about the house of God, the residence of the concretized formful aspect of Divinity, the temple (*alaya* or *mandir*) and the rules of *dharma* relating to it. Rules have overgrown and overwhelmed these institutions, following the whims and prejudices of various authorities. They have led people away from *dharma* and Brahman and even away from proper action; they have confounded the devotees by their variety and unreasonableness. The rules are insisted upon blindly, so they have done much harm to the welfare of the world itself. In fact, the rules and formalities form the first steps in the retreat away from God and have fostered atheism in great measure.

Functions of the temple

Think deeply over the functions of the temple. Temples are centres of discipline, where the aspirant is guided step by step to attain a vision of the truth. They are schools for the training of the spirit, academies for the promotion of scriptural studies, institutes of super-science, laboratories for the testing of the values of life. They are hospitals for the treatment and cure not only of the “birth-death disease”, which has persisted in the individual for ages, but even the much more patent “mental disorders” that trouble those who do not know the secret of acquiring peace. Temples are gymnasia where people are reconditioned and their hesitant faith, waning conviction, and upsurging egotism are all cured. Temples are mirrors that reflect aesthetic standards and achievements.

The purpose of the temple is to awaken the Divinity in humanity (*Madhavathwa* in *manavathwa*), inducing people to believe that the physical frames in which they live are themselves houses of God. Therefore, all the formalities, rites, and rituals of the temple emphasize and cultivate the spiritual truth (*Brahmajnana*) that the individual (*jivi*) is just a mighty ocean of God.

Devotion is the queen

The scriptures teach that all actions and activities must lead ultimately to non-attachment, for this is the best qualification for the development of knowledge of Brahman. Of the three, devotion, wisdom, and renunciation (*bhakthi*, *jnana*, and *vairagya*), devotion is the queen. The rules and rites are the maids-in-waiting; the queen treats her maids with kind consideration and favour, no doubt, but if the ceremonies, which are only “servants” and “aides”, disregard the queen, they should be mercilessly dismissed. All the formalities and rituals in the temples must therefore subserve the glorification of the queen, devotion; this is the sum and substance of the *dharma* that must direct and govern all temples. Only then can man reach the goal.

Devotion helps the attainment of the bliss of merger with the basic Brahman most easily by canalizing toward the Lord the mental agitations, the sensory reachings-out, and the emotional urges of people. It is in this direction that all the details of the worship of the Lord in temples took shape. In the temple, all the various ceremonies, from the “awakening of God in the early dawn” to the “laying in bed” late at night, are intended to heighten and promote the devotional trends of the mind. In turn, each incident helps the sublimation of the appropriate emotion, in a peculiarly charming manner. In the sublimity of that experience, the agitation of the lower emotions declines and disappears. The vulgar feelings of ordinary life become elevated to the status of worship and dedication to the Almighty Presence.

The Lord will evoke in each the emotion that the person associates with Him. If He is conceived as a monster (*bhuutha*), He will terrify as a monster; if pictured and believed as the master of the five elements (*bhuthanatha*), He will manifest Himself likewise. Perhaps, you might ask, how? Why perhaps? The fundamental foolishness of the age is this very attitude of doubt.

It has now become a fashion to distribute advice, a fashion indulged in by those who know and those who don't. They do not care whether the advice is followed or not. People jump into this superior attitude of giving advice just to feel important and show off their status. They are blinded by their own conceit, and they have to be pitied more than condemned. For no one can lay down "thus and thus only", as far as the Lord is concerned.

Moreover, though wisdom (*jnana*) and detachment (*vairagya*) might have some standards of measure, devotion has its own measure. It will assume many a form, adjusted to the attitude of the devotee. Kamsa, Jarasandha, Sisupala, Hiranyakasipu, etc., took up an attitude of hostility to the Lord, so the Lord manifested Himself as their enemy and finished their careers and struggles. If the Lord is conceived as the Most Loved One, as Jayadeva, Gouranga, Tukaram, Ramdas, Surdas, Radha, Meera, and Sakkubai conceived Him, He manifests Himself as the nearest and the dearest and showers bliss. The little child takes the sun to be similar to the vermilion (*kumkum*) dot on its mother's forehead, but the knowing adult sees it as a sphere of effulgent heat. This shows the effect of the mental picture on the process of comprehension. In case of Godhead as well as of the temple, the same law applies.

It is proper for people to have an exalted attitude toward the Lord as well as toward the habitation of the Lord, viz. the temple. This attitude yields great good. While it is quite natural and appropriate for people to picture God (Madhava) in human form, it is not desirable to assume that He is just an ordinary individual. The principle of devotion states that He is conceived as an extraordinary person, with a figure of sublime splendour.

Arousing feelings during worship

Feelings aroused by and during worship must be sweet and melodious and must, imperceptibly, transform the low desires and cravings of matter-bound people; they must not awaken or inflame the latent animal instincts of people. Take this example: Thyagaraja forgot that he should go to bed in his enthusiasm to see that Rama was put to bed. Here, you should infer not that Thyagaraja made Rama sleep in a swing but that Rama seated Thyagaraja on the swing of devotion and gently swung him to sleep (or the forgetfulness of all things material).

Instead of remembering your child in its cradle when you swing your chosen Lord (*Ishta-devatha*) in the silver or golden cradle, you must cultivate the attitude of seeing your chosen deity, Rama or Krishna, in the cradle when you swing your own child in it. So too, when you stand before the installed God, you must get confirmed in the installation of Brahman in your own heart as the real base of your existence, knowledge, and bliss. It is to instil this feeling that the rites and ceremonies of temple worship have been organized.

So, do not take the divine couples Sita-Rama, Radha-Krishna, Lakshmi-Narayana, and Parvathi-Parameswara in the temple as "pitiable couples" eking out a miserable existence in the cramped sanctorum, subsisting on food given by the worshipper and slaking thirst with the drinks that the worshipper offers. The worshippers say, "the Lord is sleeping", "the Lord is taking food", while refusing to open the door of the inner shrine. This is absurd. They sometimes even enforce silence, for "the Lord is asleep and He might be awakened too soon by the noise." There will be no chance at such times even for emergent pleadings.

Statements such as these may cause wrong conclusions in the minds of people. They raise many ridiculous queries, like the problems of the Lord answering calls of nature while shut up in the niche, and they promote atheism among people. The worshippers and the carping unbelievers are both ignorant of the real principles of temple-worship. That is the reason for their conduct. You should be cultured enough to avoid the lower worldly path. The temple should not be valued on secular principles at all; only the attitude of devotion can ennoble and beautify feelings that drag you down to the lower worldly path.

Temple rules should not conflict with highest conceptions of devotion

Today, on account of newfangled views, temples have become objects of derision. This is a sad state of affairs.

Therefore it is necessary to reveal publicly the real objective of temple worship and elevate temples to the status that is their due. The temple must prosper once again.

How stupid it is to be under the impression that the Lord sleeps as you do when a lullaby is sung, or that He wakes up as you do when someone calls on Him aloud, or that He feasts when some food is placed before Him, as you want to do, or that He becomes weaker and weaker when not given regular meals, as happens to you. Filling up the entire universe down to the minutest part of the atom, unreachable by time, effulgent beyond imagination, merciful above all expectation, the Lord has to be conceived as the vital energy that pervades and inheres everywhere, forever. How foolish to subject the Lord of that stature to the carping criticisms of cynics and the false theories of the ignorant.

Can you bind the Lord to a timetable as you can a devotee? Travails don't fall upon the devotee at a fixed time, do they? Does the devotee have to wait till the Lord is awakened from sleep? Oh, the foolishness of it all! The infant can cry for its mother's milk at any time; the mother will rise from sleep and feed it at her breast. She won't push it off, angry that it yells when she is sleeping. Well, the Lord, who is the Universal Mother, must be getting disturbed and awakened at least a million times, if He really slept.

It all depends on the progress of your mental faculties! They must reach the supreme level. The Lord is immanent everywhere; He is capable of everything; He is the Universal Witness; there is nothing He does not know. These truths must be taken as axiomatic, and all rituals and disciplines (*sadhanas*) must be arranged and interpreted in conformity with those truths. No low, demeaning, feeling must be associated with the worship of the Lord or with His name and form. Therefore, the highest devotion and rites that can supplement it are very essential. To say that the Lord's sleep will be disturbed, that one should not interrupt Him while eating, and that at such times the doors of the temple must remain closed is, to say the least, infantile. It does not indicate a broad or correct attitude. When the emotion of devotion gets ripe and blossoms more fully, these low secular feelings melt away into nothingness.

One small incident comes to mind now. Once in Calcutta, in the Kali Temple constructed by Rani Rasmani, a Gopala idol fell down, and its foot was broken a little. Since many elders declare that according to the scriptures a broken image should not be worshipped, Rani Rasmani made arrangements to get a new one made by sculptors. Ramakrishna heard of this and reproached her, saying, "Maharani, if your son-in-law breaks his leg, what will you do? What is the correct thing to do? Bandage the foot and set it right or discard the son-in-law and get another in his place? The elders and *pundits* were dumbfounded. The broken foot of Gopala was set right, and the image was

installed and worshipped as before. See, when devotion is purified and is ascendant, the Lord will be patent. This, too, is the *dharma* declared in the scriptures (*sastras*).

When the doors are closed, the rules might say they should not be opened; but that is only a general direction. For, when persons like Sankara, Sananda, Jayadeva, Chaithanya, and Gouranga come, it becomes impossible to follow the rule, isn't it? Lord Krishna turned round at Udipi to give *darshan* to His devotee; Siva yielded before the intensity of Nandanar's devotion. The reason for closing the doors is not connected with the Lord; such rules have been prescribed by elders for reasons unconnected with Divinity.

The rules must not conflict with the highest conceptions of the devotee. If the temple servants have no fixed timings and if everything is left to their whim and fancy, the temple will not be able to instil devotion in the mind of the ordinary man; certain limitations and regulations are needed even to arouse the awe and respect that are the roots of devotion. That is why certain hours are laid down for entry into temples and for opening the shrine for worship. Such restrictions are not repugnant to the main principle. For the aim of the temple is to promote *dharma*, to develop the inner culture and spiritual discipline.

Human behaviour, actions, attitudes—all have to be subservient to the overall need to grow in the consciousness of God as the living Presence. So, certain rules are necessary, no doubt, for the correct performance of temple rites. Otherwise, ordinary men will not learn steadfastness, faith, and discipline, and they will not grow in devotion. The responsibility of the worshipper (*archaka*), of those in charge of temples, and of the worshipping public is great indeed. Everyone must be aware of the purpose of temples and the need to carry out temple rites; they promote faith and devotion (*sraddha* and *bhakti*) more than anything else. Therefore, the doors of the temple can be opened for allowing worship by ardent seekers. No one should forget or ignore this basic fact: Temples exist for the progress and welfare of humanity.