

THE PRAYER OF THE NAME IN THE HINDU TRADITION

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1. Introduction

Years ago some of my friends told me that a Hindu child from the neighbourhood would occasionally come and sit in their chapel while Mass was being celebrated. They did their best to get the child tell them her name, but without success. One day I was invited by them to celebrate the Eucharist for them. On seeing the child I said: "Oh Jyoti! I am so happy to meet you." The little one was not pleased at all and so, not without some disdain, she said to me: "I am not Jyoti. I am Kiran!" That is exactly what I wanted. When I called the child by some other name, the child was upset, because deep down the little girl felt that I was confusing her for some other child and, thereby, disregarding her unique identity. Somehow our name is intimately linked with our person. This explains why "name and naming activities are central to human symbolic and communicative processes. To be human is to name, and be named, and thereby to possess full being and the ability to relate to the world in meaningful ways."¹

Just as we call one another by a special name, so too different religions have given different names to the divine. In some way the name is related to the understanding the community has of God. Hence, "the name of God plays an important role in all the mystical and religious traditions of the world."² The name is part not only of the theological

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¹*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Name and Naming," by Frederick M. Denny, 300b.

²Günther D. Sontheimer, "Foreword" to *The Divine Name in the Indian*

discourse of the scholars, but also of the religious praxis of the believing community. This explains why the practice of the prayer of the divine name is found in some way or the other both in primal religions – which are confined to a particular tribal community or to some folk religiosity, and also in the religions, which have found followers from peoples of different regions of the earth.

The study of Hinduism reveals that “perhaps nowhere has the meaning of the divine name been more intensely and uncompromisingly explored by mystics than in India.”³ The practice of chanting the names of God (*nāma-saṅkīrtana*) is part of the joyful and sorrowful moments in the life of some Hindus.⁴ In this study I confine myself to the practice of invoking the divine name or names in the Hindu religious tradition. After presenting an historical background, I attempt a theological reflection on this form of prayer and conclude by describing a method that may enable us to make *nāma-japa* – the practice of reciting just one name – part of our own spiritual life.

2. The History of the Prayer of the Name

The prayer of the name of God can be of two types: a litany of many names, or an ejaculation involving only one name. Both these forms find their place in the Hindu tradition. The impression, however, is that in the earlier phase the litany was more common. Gradually, however, the chanting of a short formula becomes the more common expression of devotion.

a. The Vedic period

We find the practice of invoking the divine name already in the earliest Vedic texts. This practice was not confined to any particular deity. Thus, in

Tradition, by Sankar Gopal Tulpule, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1991, vii.

³Sontheimer, “Foreword” to *The Divine Name in the Indian Tradition*.

⁴Surajit Sinha, “Vaiṣṇava Influence on a Tribal Culture,” *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 70, 72; Milton Singer, “The Rādhā-Krishna *Bhajan*s of Madras City,” *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 105.

the oldest text of the Hindus, a sage invokes the beautiful (*cāru*) name of Agni, hoping to be blessed by him.⁵ In another hymn, the sage pays homage to the name of Rudra with many bows or salutations (*namas*), a name which is said to be *kalmalkin* (brilliant),⁶ an expression that occurs only once in the *Rg-veda*. Even the names of generous donors are gratefully praised.⁷ Sometimes the same deity is given more than one name.⁸

The Vedic sages developed "this principle of *multiple denomination*... in a most elaborate fashion in the case of Rudra."⁹ This explains the presence of the *Śatarudrīya* ("The Hymn of Praise to the Hundred Rudras" or "... Rudra in his Hundred Aspects"),¹⁰ that we find in the *samhitās* of the *Yajur-veda*. It is the first attempt to bring together the different names of Rudra-Śiva. It consists "of a lengthy series of declarations of 'homage' or 'obeisance'" to Śiva's "many names, traits, abodes, attendants and famous deeds."¹¹ It is also in this hymn that we encounter for the first time the *mantra* most commonly used by devotees of Śiva: *namaḥ śivāya* (I bow to Śiva).¹² The hymn reveals his auspicious and frightening features. "With the possible exception of Varuṇa, Rudra is the only god in the entire company of Vedic deities who is conceived to be a radically ambivalent deity."¹³ This hymn was chanted when offerings were made to Rudra. This litany had a formative influence on the

⁵ *Rg-veda-samhitā*, 1.24.2 (text as in *Rg-veda-samhitā*, with the commentary of Sāyanācārya, Poona: Vaidika Samshodhana Mandal, 1933-51).

⁶ *Rg-veda-samhitā*, 2.33.8. Sāyaṇa interprets it as *jvalat*, and explains its derivation as "*kalayati apagamayati malam*."

⁷ *Rg-veda-samhitā*, 1.48.4.

⁸ *Rg-veda-samhitā*, 1.164.46; 8.69.9.

⁹ J. B. Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment of Divine Ambivalence in the *Śatarudrīya Stotram*," in F. W. Clothey and J. B. Long, eds., *Experiencing Śiva*, Columbia, South Asia Books, 1983, 104.

¹⁰ Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 106.

¹¹ Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 105.

¹² *Vājasaneyi-samhitā*, 16.41; text as in S. D. Satavlekar, ed., Aundha (Satara Dt.): Sadhyaya Mandal, *vik.*, 2003.

¹³ Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 104.

development of Vedic piety.¹⁴ Even today the chanting of this litany is an important part of the ritual of Mahāśivarātri.¹⁵

The Upaniṣads do not make any reference to the practice of reciting the divine name. But, using the image of an archer, they tell us how we can experience communion with the highest reality. The instruction given by the Upaniṣads, as contained in the monosyllabic *om*,¹⁶ is the bow, the self (*āman*) is the arrow sharpened by meditation and Brahman is the goal.¹⁷ The repeated recitation of *om* anticipates the practices of some schools of Hinduism: not the chanting of a long litany of God's names, but the repetition of one particular name, and this becomes the heart of their spiritual life.

b. The epic period

The *Mahābhārata* is the record of the gradual emergence of the great cults that dominate Hindu religiosity today: the cults centring on Śiva, or Viṣṇu or some form of Durgā or Umā. The epic brings together the different names of these two gods to form the great litanies popularly known as the *sahasra-nāma*: the litany of a thousand names. "In the *Mahābhārata*, there appeared for the first time a mode of religious worship consisting [merely] of the recitation of the divine names (*nāmajapa*) of God."¹⁸ The Hindu tradition has travelled a great distance from the period that produced the *Śatarudrīya*.

The litanies in honour of Śiva and Viṣṇu are found in the thirteenth book of the epic (*Anuśāsana-parvan*). Kṛṣṇa himself tells Yudhiṣṭhira about his meeting with the sage Upamanyu, who taught him the litany in honour of Śiva, a litany of a thousand and eight names (*aṣṭa-uttara-sahasra*).¹⁹ These names have been derived from the scriptures and the

¹⁴Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 105.

¹⁵Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 106.

¹⁶*Kaṭha-upaniṣad*, 2.15; unless otherwise stated the texts of this Upaniṣad is taken from V. P. Limaye and R. D. Vadekar, eds., *Eighteen Principal Upaniṣads*, Poona: Vaidika Samsodhana Mandala, 1958.

¹⁷*Muṇḍaka-upaniṣad*, 2.2.3-4.

¹⁸Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 107.

¹⁹*Mahābhārata*, 13.17.29; unless otherwise stated texts of *Mahābhārata* are from the critical ed., Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-71.

auxiliary texts (*veda-vedāṅga-sambhava*), names well known all over the world (*sarva-loka-vikhyāta*), names uttered by Brahmā and other sages.²⁰ These names enable the devotee to achieve all that he desires (*sarva-artha-sādhaka*).²¹ They proclaim the glory of Śiva. Even an expert cannot adequately describe the Lord's glory even if he were to spend hundreds of years (*varṣa-śata*) in trying to do so.²²

The *Viṣṇusahasranāma* is taught by Bhīṣma in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's question: "Who is that one God who alone is the one goal of humans? Who is that God whom we must praise and worship? What is our supreme duty (*parama-dharma*)? Praising (*japan*) whom will we get freedom from the bonds of birth and death?"²³ In his reply Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that Viṣṇu is the one Lord of all (*sarva-loka-maheśvara*),²⁴ and, hence, the recitation of Viṣṇu's litany is our highest duty (*adhikatama-dharma*),²⁵ and this recitation alone is able to take us beyond all our sorrows (*sarva-duḥkha-atiga*).²⁶

The *Bhagavad-gītā*, a small part of the sixth book (*Bhīṣma-parvan*) of the *Mahābhārata*, has become a very important text for many Hindus today. It does not explicitly speak about the prayer of the name. However,

²⁰ *Mahābhārata*, 13.17.2.

²¹ *Mahābhārata*, 13.17.3.

²² *Mahābhārata*, 13.17.7.

²³ *Mahābhārata*, 13.135.2-3.

²⁴ *Mahābhārata*, 13.135.6.

²⁵ *Mahābhārata*, 13.135.8.

²⁶ *Mahābhārata*, 13.135.6. In his book, *The Divine Name in the Indian Tradition*, Tulpule discusses the *Viṣṇusahasranāma* (pages 148-50), but nowhere does he make any reference to *Śivasahasranāma*. In the notes added to the critical edition of the *Anuśāsana-parvan*, we find references to some recent editions of *Viṣṇusahasranāma* (page 1113). I do not find a similar entry for *Śivasahasranāma* (page 1062). There are quite a few English translations of the former but – as far as my knowledge goes – only one of the latter: Subhash Anand, *Śiva's Thousand Names: An Interpretative Study of Śivasahasranāma*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publishers, 1998. This is all the more surprising because, as has been noticed by many scholars, "an impressive number and diversity of names and epithets are assigned to Rudra throughout every phase of Indian religion. He is the multiform deity par excellence." Tulpule, *The Divine Name in the Indian Tradition*, 104.

from the description it gives about *bhakti*, both as means and the end,²⁷ it will not be rash to suggest that its author was aware of the religious practice of chanting the divine name. This suggestion is borne out by the fact that, reminiscent of the Upaniṣads, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna what a person should do at the moment of death. He should recollect himself as much as possible, lovingly focus his mind on Kṛṣṇa, and chant *om*. Whoever does this will be freed from death and rebirth.²⁸

c. The purāṇika period

The *Śiva-purāṇa*, as the name indicates, "is a sacred treatise of Śiva's legends and ritual."²⁹ It seems to have been "consolidated in its present form in the eighth century [C.E.]."³⁰ It maintains that the *mantra* "*śivāya namaḥ*" is the enlarged form of the sacred word *om*. By chanting this five-syllabled prayer (*pañca-akṣara*) the devotee can attain all perfection.³¹ Only Śiva, and none other, knows the secret of this prayer.³² This prayer is very highly recommended:

It is impossible to explain in detail the glory of the five-syllabled mantra, even in hundred crores of years. Hear it in brief. "The six-syllabled mantra (*ṣaḍ-akṣara*) is found in the Veda and Śivāgama."³³ It facilitates the understanding of all topics by the devotees of Śiva. It consists of very few syllables but is pregnant with meaning. It is the essence of the Vedas. It is conducive to salvation."³⁴

²⁷For the relevant texts see R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, 437-39, 446-48.

²⁸*Bhagavad-gītā*, 8.6-16; text as in *Mahābhārata*, cr. ed. For the influence of the Upaniṣads on the passage cited, see Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, 262-66.

²⁹J. L. Shastri, ed., "Introduction," *The Śiva-purāṇa*, 4 vols., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, xii.

³⁰Pushpendra Kumar, ed., *The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa*, Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1964, vii.

³¹*Śiva-purāṇa*, 1.17.33-34; text as in Kumar, *The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa*.

³²"*rahasyam śivamantrasya śivo jānāti na aparah*," *Śiva-purāṇa*, 1.18.158.

³³By including the *praṇava* (*om*) we have six syllables.

³⁴*Śiva-purāṇa*, 7.2.12.3-4; Eng. trans. from Shastri, *The Śiva-purāṇa*, 1951.

Thus, the Śaiva tradition maintains the Vedic origin of this prayer. It was taught by the omniscient Śiva himself.³⁵ The chanting begins with *om*, because Śiva, though omnipresent, is stationed (*sthita*) [in a very special way] in this one syllabled prayer (*eka-akṣara-mantra*).³⁶

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* has been a major influence in the development of Vaiṣṇavism.³⁷ It presents us a very forceful appeal in favour of the prayer of the divine name. It begins by telling us a story about a Brahmin, Ajmīla. He had abandoned his wedded wife and was living with a prostitute. He was deeply attached to her and to his offspring through her. As a result, he soon lost all virtue, even resorting to questionable means to make his wife and her children happy. He had a very special love for the youngest child, Nārāyaṇa.

One day, Yama's messengers came to lead Ajmīla to the realm of the dead. Frightened by their horrible look, he began to shout for Nārāyaṇa. Hearing the name of their Lord being called out, the attendants of Viṣṇu rushed to the scene. There followed a discussion between the messengers of Yama and the attendants of Viṣṇu. The former stated that Ajmīla had violated *dharma*. Hence he was doomed to be punished by Yama. But the latter declared him purified as he had uttered the name of Lord Nārāyaṇa, and then to justify themselves the attendants of Viṣṇu explain the efficacy of reciting the name of the Lord:

The name of the Lord frees man from all his sins even if he invokes it to call somebody (other than the Lord), jokingly, as a (meaningless) interjection, or even with (seeming) disrespect... Just as a powerful drug is effective even when used by a person who does not know its potency, so too the name of the Lord is effective irrespective of the fact whether a man knows its power or not.³⁸

³⁵ Śiva-purāṇa, 7.2.12.6.

³⁶ Śiva-purāṇa, 7.2.12.8.

³⁷ Subhash Anand, *The Way of Love: The Bhāgavata Doctrine of Bhakti*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996, 4-8.

³⁸ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.14, 19; text as in *Śrīmad Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1971. All quotations from this text are my own translation.

We have a similar eulogy of *nāmajapa* in Śuka's parting advice to King Parīkṣit.³⁹

The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* itself concludes with these words: "I bow to that Lord the recitation of whose name destroys all sin. By bowing to Him man is freed from all suffering."⁴⁰ No form of reparation for sin is so effective as *nāmajapa*,⁴¹ even if they were very great sins (*mahā-pātakas*).⁴² *Nāmajapa* is so effective because it deepens *bhakti*, fixing the mind of the devotee on the Lord,⁴³ filling it with an awareness of his greatness.⁴⁴

Nāmajapa is a prayer meant for all, even for those who have advanced on the way to perfection: "For those who have turned away from this world, and want to be freed from all fear, and also for accomplished spiritual men the recitation of the name of the Lord is the best way."⁴⁵ *Nāmajapa* can be a continuous prayer. Its very simplicity makes this possible. Even work, when it is undertaken in obedience to the Lord, need not be an obstruction to prayer.⁴⁶

In the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, we have several formulae for *nāmajapa*. These formulae refer to the attributes of God, to his creative function, to his iconographic form, or to his descent as Kṛṣṇa. However, the formula "*Om namo bhagavate vāsudevāya*" seems to be given preference, it being the greatest secret,⁴⁷ the twelve-syllabled wisdom.⁴⁸

d. Regional Śaiva traditions

The Śaiva tradition of Tamilnad has produced very great mystics, whose hymns continue to inspire the devotees even now. Appar, Campantar, and

³⁹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.11.

⁴⁰ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 12.13.23.

⁴¹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.7.

⁴² *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.9-10.

⁴³ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.10b.

⁴⁴ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.2.11.

⁴⁵ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 2.1.11.

⁴⁶ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.5.36.

⁴⁷ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 4.8.53.

⁴⁸ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 6.8.7; 8.16.39.

Cuntarar are considered "as the principal saint-leaders... of the Tamil Śaiva sect. They lived between the sixth and eighth centuries A.D."⁴⁹ The collection of their poems together makes the *Tevāram*, "the primary scripture for Tamil Śaivas."⁵⁰ The five-syllabled formula (*pañca-akṣari-mantra*), *namaḥ-śivāya*, is highly praised by these poet-saints. It is the essence of the Veda and it melts the heart of the devotee. When chanted with love it is sweeter than honey, prevailing over the power of Yama, washing away even the greatest sins, leading the devotee to God.⁵¹

In the Vīraśaiva or Liṅgāyata tradition of Karnataka, the *mantra* "*namaḥ śivāya*" is one of the eight helps to devotion (*aṣṭāvāraṇa*).⁵² It is the *mahā-mantra*, the great and only prayer of the Vīraśaiva devotees.⁵³ Basava (12th century) rejected the traditional Hindu expressions of piety: going to a temple, making offerings to the gods, etc.⁵⁴ The devotee need not go to any temple. All he needs to do is to chant the name of the Lord, who resides in the temple of his devotee's heart.

"Om namaḥ Śivāya!" is the spell;
 "Om namaḥ Śivāya!" the talisman;
 Merely to think of our Lord Kūḍala Saṅgama
 Is charm enough!⁵⁵

Through it the devotee is purified of all his sins:
 To tame the sins that bind you to this life
 Won't it suffice to say:
 "Om namaḥ Śivāya: I bow?"
 I keep on saying: "Hara, Hara,

⁴⁹Indira V. Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961, 4.

⁵⁰Peterson, *Poems to Śiva*, 4.

⁵¹Peterson, *Poems to Śiva*, 217-21.

⁵²S. C. Nandimath, *A Handbook of Vīraśaivism*, Dharwar: Lingayata Educational Association, 1942, 50-54.

⁵³Nandimath, *A Handbook of Vīraśaivism*, 63.

⁵⁴Shivakumara Shivacharya, "Introduction," to Basava, *Vacanas of Basava*, ed. H. Deveerappa, Sirigere (Chitradurga): Annana Balaga, 1968, 29-43. In this book, the introduction has a separate page-numbering, but using the Arabic numerals.

⁵⁵Shivacharya, "Introduction," 26-27. The expression *Kūḍala Saṅgama* "is the Mudrā (seal) of the Vacanas of Basavaṅṅa." Shivacharya, "Introduction," 459.

Śaṅkara, Śiva, Śiva, Śaṅkara,
Hail, O hail, Śaṅkara: to thee I bow."
And all my sins are gone!⁵⁶

It is the source of peace and joy. This name is the real teaching, the climax, of all the Vedas and all the sacred sciences, nay even of human reasoning:

"Om namaḥ Śivāya!" –
Short of this spell the Veda stays!
"Om namaḥ Śivāya!"
Short of this spell the Śāstra stays!
"Om namaḥ Śivāya!"
Short of this spell the Tarka stays!⁵⁷

e. Regional Vaiṣṇava traditions

The Vaiṣṇava tradition of Maharashtra owes a lot to Jnanadeva (1275-96), "this great spiritual fountainhead."⁵⁸ He, too, attaches much importance to *nāmajapa*: "The utterance of the name of God is the only royal road to meet Him. All other means, like yogic practices, performance of sacrifices, wandering from one holy place to another, and bathing in the sacred waters are of no avail... The name of God is like a door of His temple."⁵⁹ Tukaram, who is perhaps the most popular saint-poet of Maharashtra, was a great devotee of Viṭṭhal – the local version of Viṣṇu.⁶⁰ He sees the chanting of the divine name as the experience of life beyond death (*amṛta*) already while we are still in this world. Let me quote Tukaram himself: "O King of Paṇḍhari, how can there be any anxiety concerning birth and death to those who surrender themselves to you? O Cakrapāṇī, how can there be any fear in the one who has in his mouth Your name which is vivifying *amṛta*?"⁶¹ The chanting of the divine name by holy people has a

⁵⁶Shivacharya, "Introduction," 26-27.

⁵⁷Shivacharya, "Introduction," 27.

⁵⁸B. P. Bahirat, *The Philosophy of Jnanadeva*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1956, rep. 1996, xii.

⁵⁹Bahirat, *The Philosophy of Jnanadeva*, 19.

⁶⁰T. Dabre, *The God-experience of Tukaram: A Study in Religious Symbolism*, Pune: Jnanadeepa Vidyapeetha, 1987, 16.

⁶¹Cited in Dabre, *The God-experience of Tukaram*, 171.

community dimension, because "the men of God live by the *amṛta* and share it with others."⁶²

Śrī Caitanya (1485-1533) is best known for his contribution towards the revival of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult in Bengal, Orissa and some parts of Uttar Pradesh.⁶³ He attaches "the greatest importance to the chanting of the Lord's name, which alone may take one to the highest goal, and it is perhaps for this reason that the scriptures of the *Bhakti* cult admit no difference between Him and His name."⁶⁴ For this practice to be helpful the devotee must have humility and respect for others.

Śaṅkara Deva (1486?-1568) was the apostle of the Vaiṣṇava faith in Assam. Then the religious life of the common people was "influenced greatly by Buddhist Tāntric observances and ceremonies."⁶⁵ To counter the Buddhist influence, "he designated his form of initiation as *śaraṇa*, and divided it into three categories, as *nāma-śaraṇa*, *guru-śaraṇa* and *bhakta-śaraṇa*, corresponding to the Buddhist *dharma-śaraṇa*, *Buddha-śaraṇa* and *saṅgha-śaraṇa*."⁶⁶ The importance of the divine name in the spiritual vision and practice of Śaṅkara Deva was so great that "the congregational prayer house was called *nāma-ghar*."⁶⁷ Since in this tradition, "the main method of worship is *kīrtana* or singing the praise of the name of the Lord, it is also called *Nāma Dharma*."⁶⁸ The chanting of the divine name was only a means "to purify the mind, [and] to help one realize the supreme Deity, who is otherwise indescribable (*avyakta*) and formless (*mūrti-śūnya*)."⁶⁹ If the name of God is so powerful, then its unbecoming use is a very great sin. One may be freed from all other sins through just one chanting of the divine name, but "the person committing offence against

⁶²Dabre, *The God-experience of Tukaram*, 172.

⁶³Radha Govinda Nath, "A Survey of the Caitanya Movement," in Haridas Bhattacharya, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 4 vols., Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1937; rev. ed. 1956, rep. 1969, vol. 4, 186-200, here 188-89.

⁶⁴Nath, "A Survey of the Caitanya Movement," 195.

⁶⁵Raj Mohon Nath, "Śaṅkara Deva and the Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam," Bhattacharya, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 4, 201-10, here 203.

⁶⁶Nath, "Śaṅkara Deva and the Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam," 203.

⁶⁷Nath, "Śaṅkara Deva and the Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam," 203.

⁶⁸Nath, "Śaṅkara Deva and the Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam," 206.

⁶⁹Nath, "Śaṅkara Deva and the Vaiṣṇava Movement in Assam," 207.

such [*sic*] Hari-Name definitely sinks to the bottom as there are no means of salvaging him."⁷⁰

Tulasīdāsa (1532-1623) popularised the cult of Rāma in the Hindi region through his writings, especially through *Rāmacaritamānasa*, "the most important, the best known and the largest of his works."⁷¹ This text tells us that the name of Rāma is the very breath of the Veda (*veda-prāṇa*).⁷² If the name of Rāma is on the tongue, then it serves as a bright lamp, illumining both the inside and the outside of the devotee.⁷³ This name is so beautiful that even people who have fulfilled all their desires still chant this name.⁷⁴ It is higher than the qualified (*sa-guṇa*) and even the unqualified (*a-guṇa*) forms of God.⁷⁵ Even those who are considered the least in the society are supremely sanctified by the holy name.⁷⁶ It purifies the devotee of all the evils of Kali-yuga.⁷⁷ Chanting this name people cross the boundless ocean of life here (*ati-apāra-bhava-sāgara*).⁷⁸ Other means may be helpful in the first three ages, but in the Kali-yuga only the divine name can save us.⁷⁹

f. Modern Hinduism

Shiv Dayal Singh (1818-1878) founded the Rādhāsoāmī Satsaṅg in 1861. For him and his followers, Kabir was the highest saint. "The core of the teaching of Kabir is worship of the Name of the Lord."⁸⁰ Hence, it is no

⁷⁰ Śaṅkaradeva, *Kīrtana*, 2.44, Eng. trans., Chandrakanta Mahanta, *The Kīrtana*, Jorhat (Assam): Asom Satra Sangha, 1990, 7.

⁷¹ Candra Kumari Handoo, "Tulasīdāsa and His Teaching," in Bhattacharya, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 4, 395-407, here 296. I depend on this article for the date of Tulasīdāsa.

⁷² *Rāmacaritamānasa* 1.18.1. I am quoting from Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1976, p. 37. The first, second and third numbers indicate the *kāṇḍa*, *dohā* and *caupāyī*, respectively. Sometimes the reference is to a *dohā*, then there will be only two numbers.

⁷³ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 1.21, page 40.

⁷⁴ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 1.22, page 41.

⁷⁵ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 1.22.1, page 41.

⁷⁶ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 2.194, page 419.

⁷⁷ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 3.10.8, page 521.

⁷⁸ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 4.28.2, page 592.

⁷⁹ Tulasīdāsa, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, 7.102b, page 831.

⁸⁰ Isaac A. Ezekiel, *Kabir: The Great Mystic*, Beas (Punjab): Radhasoami

surprise that the holy name (*sat-nāma*) is considered very important by the members of the Rādhāsoāmī Satsaṅga, and constantly remembering this name (*nāma-smaraṇa*) is an essential part of their *sādhana*. God is spoken of as Rādhāsoāmī: not the Lord of Rādhā, but the Lord who is Rādhā, that is, the Lord who is Love. This is the highest conception of God, and only through His revelation can we come to the knowledge of this name.⁸¹

In his life, Mahatma Gandhi presents a fairly healthy combination of tradition and modernity. Brought up in a very traditional Vaiṣṇava family, he was familiar with the popular religious practices of his family and community. As a child he had a great fear of ghosts. His nurse told him that the repetition of Rāma's name would help him overcome this fear.⁸² This childhood practice remained with Gandhi all through his life. It would also become "the most important part of congregational prayer,"⁸³ that was a regular feature of his ashram. This form of prayer "is as simple as it is effective. Only, it must proceed from the heart. In its simplicity lie its greatness and the secret of its universality."⁸⁴ Gandhi believed that the Rāma of his chanting was not an historical person, but simply his name for the one God of all. "He belongs equally to all...; [hence, there is] no reason

Satsang, rep. 1992, 191. Given the importance of the divine name in the teaching of Kabir, some readers may well ask a very pertinent question: Why has Kabir not been mentioned in the main text when discussing the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions as a thinker in his own right? There is only one reason I have not done so: "It is obvious from Kabir's own writings that he never wanted to establish any sect. He who had opposed tooth and nail all rites and rituals, all outward forms of worship, he who had opposed all castes, creeds, dogmas, theologies, pilgrimages, bathing in holy rivers, visits to mosques and temples, he who had declared to the Mulla that his loud cry from the minaret was stupid and asked him whether the Lord, who could hear the tinkling of a microscopic bell tied to the tiny leg of an ant, needed the loud cry? – could such a saint be a party to all that is being practised in his name today?" Ezekiel, *Kabir*, 89. Kabir is beyond the traditional Śaiva-Vaiṣṇava divide.

⁸¹ Agam Prasad Mathur, *Radhasoami Faith: A [sic] Historical Study*, Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1974, 19-21, 81-86.

⁸² M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, (1927-29) 14th rep. (no date), 27.

⁸³ M. K. Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, Anand T. Hingorani, ed., Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1870, 86.

⁸⁴ Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, 87.

why a Mussalman or anybody should object to taking His name."⁸⁵ Hence, according to him, all can join in the chanting.

Swami Sivananda (1887-1963), founder of the Divine Life Society, "felt that modern scientific education introduced by the Christian missionaries and the British Raj was leading Hindu youth astray, and alienating them from their religious practices and tradition."⁸⁶ He wrote many books on Hindu philosophy and practice. He, too, gives a great importance to *nāmajapa*:

What a lot of joy the repetition of His Name brings! What a lot of power it infuses into man! How it changes the human nature marvellously! How it exalts a man to the status of Divinity! ... How sweet is God's Name! How it brings you face to face with the Lord and makes you realise your oneness with Him (*Para Bhakti* – Supreme Love)!⁸⁷

What fire, by its very nature, does in the material world – burn and purify – *nāmajapa* does in our spiritual life.⁸⁸ We become what we think. Hence, if through *nāmajapa* we constantly think of the Lord then we will become like the Lord.⁸⁹

Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) tries to make the Caitanya tradition come alive again for modern humans. In 1966 he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Here again we see a rejection of some aspects of modern culture, namely acquisition of unneeded wealth, consumer culture, competitiveness, distancing from nature, etc.⁹⁰ The traditional concept of *māyā* points precisely to this "world of the establishment with its emphasis upon sense

⁸⁵ Gandhi, *Food for the Soul*, 88.

⁸⁶ S. C. Gyan, *Sivananda and His Ashram*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1980, 13.

⁸⁷ Swami Sivananda, *Japa Yoga*, Sivanandanagar: Divine Live Society, 1967, 13.

⁸⁸ Sivananda, *Japa Yoga*, 14.

⁸⁹ Swami Sivananda, *Lord Siva and His Worship*, Shivanandanagar, Divine Life Society, 1980, 36.

⁹⁰ J. Stilson Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974, 16.

gratification."⁹¹ We need to become aware of the deeper significance of our life, and this becomes possible through the chanting of the Lord's name. This is "the sublime method for reviving our transcendental consciousness."⁹² This is the most effective spiritual discipline for our times.⁹³

3. The Theology of the Prayer of the Name

We have seen that throughout its history Hinduism has given a very great importance to the practice of the prayer of the name of God. This form of prayer is also found in many religious traditions, not only in India, but also in other parts of the world. Hence, some questions are bound to be asked: What is the significance of name and name giving? Why is the prayer of the divine name so common among humans? I shall now try to reflect on these questions.

To understand the hyperbolic praise bestowed on the prayer of the divine name, we need to see what significance is attached to a name. A name can be used merely to indicate, to point out something or someone as different from other individuals. In this case there is no real connection between the name and that which is named. This is like giving a number to a person appearing for an exam. The number given tells us nothing about the person to whom it is given. In fact, in this case the number serves to give anonymity to the candidate, so that in evaluating the answers, the examiner is guided not by *who* wrote them but merely by *what* is written. Names have a demonstrative function. They give a face to an otherwise faceless individual, and, thus, ensure that one does not get lost in the crowd. This enables us to enter into a dialogue with a person who is not just part of a crowd, but has significance in oneself. This is the reason why the name of a person "is of great importance. It is the key to effective relationship between two partners, both for the one who is named and for the other who uses his name in speaking to him."⁹⁴

⁹¹Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, 16.

⁹²Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *The Science of Self-Realization*, Bombay: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, rep. 1977, 146.

⁹³Prabhupada, *The Science of Self-Realization*, 148.

⁹⁴Paul Tournier, *What's in a Name?* London: SCM Press, 1975, 10.

In some primal communities the name chosen is intimately linked with the totem. In this way the individual is seen as part of the clan. In other communities there are also individual totems. In both these traditions the totem is believed to be the source of protection:⁹⁵ the more names people have the greater will be the protection they experience.⁹⁶ The Christian custom of choosing a patron saint for an individual, community, etc., may well be a carry-over of this ancient practice. As a member of the clan, the person receiving a name has certain rights and duties. A nameless person is not yet a person, in the sense that his or her individual identity has not yet been affirmed.

The name could tell us something about the reality named. Then it is not merely an empty label but also a description. The names may contain information about the place of origin or residence of the individuals named, their relation to other members of a family the wish their parents have for them, their outer appearance, their profession, the company they keep, their achievements, change of status, etc. Here are a few examples: Urban – born in a city, Sylvester – living in a forest, Primus – the first child, Sundara – “May he be beautiful!”, Kālī – the dark lady, Sonī – making or selling gold ornaments, Vīctor – victorious in battle,⁹⁷ Praviṇa – one who has excelled in some area of learning, etc. This way of naming individuals may be one explanation for the litany of many names of a god or goddess. The early humans were more concrete in their thinking. They also thought of their god or goddess more or less in the same way as they thought of each other. The only difference was that the god was much more and he was related not merely to an individual or some special group but to all the members of the clan. Their deities too had their abode, special appearance, escort, achievements, etc.⁹⁸ “Each of the epithets in the hymn

⁹⁵*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Totemism,” by Roy Wagner (Vol. 14, 573a-576b).

⁹⁶*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. “Names (Primitive),” by George Foucart (Vol. 9, 130a-136b).

⁹⁷In *Rg-veda*, 8.80.9, we meet a sage desiring an additional name – besides the three he already has, derived from his relation to the sacrifice. “This shows that a man could have a fourth name even in the times of Ṛg [*Rg-veda*] due to the performance of a yajña.” P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, 5 vols., Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, rev. ed., 1968-75, vol. 2, 240.

⁹⁸In *Rg-veda*, 1.6.4, the Maruts get a sacrifice-related name (*yajñīya-nāma*).

served as a *mnemonic* device to aid the worshipper in recalling the virtues, powers, exploits and offices of the deity for purposes of meditation and worship."⁹⁹

There is, however, a deeper reason for the use of litanies in religious life. The ancient poet-saints experienced the multifaceted character of Reality. They felt the presence of this Reality in every creature they encountered in their day-to-day life, be it animate or inanimate. They could not easily express their experience in one single word or term, image or concept. A contemporary scholar may be baffled by the often contradictory ideas put together, but the ancient sages were thinking not so much in clear and distinct concepts but more often through images that complete and correct each other.¹⁰⁰

In the course of time, what was originally a poetic insight became a handy religio-political tool. When different independent tribes and clans came together through political conquest, their gods were not abandoned; instead the god of the conqueror absorbed the function and names of the gods of the conquered. Monotheism or monolatry became a political need, legitimising the status of the monarch and his authority over the conquered peoples. This way of giving the deity many names may have some connection with the court eulogies composed by wandering bardic poets. Wherever they went, they would praise the king by mentioning not only his good qualities, achievements, etc., but also by super-imposing on their patron the good qualities and achievements of other kings. Their patron was not merely one king among other kings. He was the king of kings and lord of lords for them, at least, as long as they were in his kingdom.

Sāyaṇa interprets *yajñīya* as *yajña-arha* or *yajña-yogya*: worthy to receive a *yajña*. Originally the Maruts were not considered as worthy to be honoured through a *yajña*.

⁹⁹ Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 107.

¹⁰⁰ Commenting on the Vṛātya tradition documented in the *Atharva-veda*, this is what Griffith has to say: "it is hard to understand, and I do not attempt to explain, the idealization and grotesquely extravagant glorification of the Vṛātya or heretical nomad who appears at one time to be a supernatural Being endowed with the attributes of all-pervading Deity, and at another as a human wanderer in need of food and lodging." R. T. H. Griffith, trans., *The Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*, 2 vols., Banaras: E. J. Lazarus, 1895-96, vol. II, 199.

The name, however, may have a deeper function. When a young man is deeply in love with a young woman, then for him her name acquires a powerful evocative function. His friends may praise some other woman having the same name, but the lover will think that they are praising his ladylove, and, hence, in the heart of hearts he will be happy, and there will be a smile on his face. In like manner, the name of the Lord is more than a description. The Lord who is formless (*a-mūrtika*) is called *mantra-mūrti*.¹⁰¹ Śrīdhara says that the Lord has no form (*mūrti*) except the one expressed by the *mantra*.¹⁰² The *mūrti* is not merely an image, but somehow makes the deity present to the devotee.¹⁰³ The name of the Lord is a *mūrti*, i.e., it is not an empty representation of some distant reality, but a symbol of the divine presence.¹⁰⁴ This explains why the chanting begins with *om*. Because even though God is present everywhere, he is specially present in the *praṇava* or *om*.¹⁰⁵

There is a still deeper significance of the divine name. "In all human communities there is thought to be a close relationship between the name of a person or other phenomenon and its character, status, and very being."¹⁰⁶ Since the divine name shares in some way the very being of the divine reality, it shares in the power of the divine. Thus, it is not merely an evocative symbol but also an effective sacrament. "There is power in names, because they both participate in the reality named and give definition and identity to the reality. That is, name and named exist in a mutual relationship in which the power of the former is shared with the being of the latter."¹⁰⁷ In primal religions all the individuals of a particular clan bore the name of their totem, thereby ensuring themselves its protection. In the Hindu tradition, this way of thinking has its roots in the

¹⁰¹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.5.38; 4.8.58.

¹⁰² *amūrtikam mantruktavyatiriktamurtiśūnyam*. Comm. on 1.5.38.

¹⁰³ According to the Hindu belief, after the image has been duly consecrated by the rite of *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhāna* (the rite of infusing breath), the deity is supposed to dwell therein. Hence after the *pūjā* is over, either the image continues to be kept in a fitting place, receiving regular homage, or it is put beyond profane use. This is done by submerging it in the sea or a river or even an unused well.

¹⁰⁴ Anand, *The Way of Love: The Bhāgavata Doctrine of Bhakti*, 195.

¹⁰⁵ *Śiva-purāṇa*, 7.2.12.8.

¹⁰⁶ Denny, "Name and Naming," 300b.

¹⁰⁷ Denny, "Name and Naming," 300b-301a.

way the Vedic sages understood the role of the *yajña* and of all the articles to be used, gestures to be made, and formulae to be recited or chanted.

The Vedic priests believed that the hymns and ritual formulae were oral embodiments of cosmic forces. Not only couplets (*śloka-s*), lines (*mantra-s*) and quarter-lines (*pāda-s*), but words and even individual syllables (*akṣara-s*) are homologised with particular parts of the cosmos and with various deities who are believed to be in control of the many departments of the natural and social orders. Along with this belief in the efficacy of the Sacred Word is the conviction that the Divine Names serve not merely as figurative or symbolic representations of the god so-named, but as concrete and highly efficacious embodiments of the spiritual essence of the deity himself... In brief, sacred words of invocation and the divine power(s) designated by the terms are thought to be one and the same within the context of the sacrifice.¹⁰⁸

As an embodiment of God the divine name shares, in a mysterious way, in his infinite power,¹⁰⁹ instilling fear into Fear itself.¹¹⁰ This is also the belief of Hindus today. "*Nāma* and *Nāmī* are indeed one. This is the central truth upon which the sacred *Sādhana* and the science of the practice of the Divine Name (*japa*) are firmly based. This mystical identity is the secret of its efficacy and power to confer illumination upon the practitioner."¹¹¹ If the name of his beloved can deeply move the lover, then this is much more true of the divine name. One modern Hindu writer puts it in a very homely manner:

If you utter the word 'excreta' or 'urine' when your friend is taking his meals, he may at once vomit his food. If you think of 'Garam Pakoda', 'hot Pakoda', your tongue will get salivation. There is a

¹⁰⁸ Long, "Rudra as an Embodiment," 108.

¹⁰⁹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.18.19.

¹¹⁰ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.1.14.

¹¹¹ Swāmī Chidānanda, "Foreword" in Sister Vandana, *Nāma Japa: The Prayer of the Name*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1984, ix-x, here ix. So also Sivananda, *Japa Yoga*, 14: "*Nāmī* and *Nāma* are inseparable."

Śakti in every word. When such is the case with ordinary words, how much more power or *Śakti* should there be in the Name of God.¹¹²

This mysterious identity between the Divine and its name, explains why the Jews hesitated to take the name of God. So too, out of respect, Hindus do not take the name of their spouses.

The name of the Lord is a secret.¹¹³ He alone knows the secret of its power.¹¹⁴ No man can come to know it by his own intelligence.¹¹⁵ Only the Lord can reveal it to us.¹¹⁶ This is easily understood if we bear in mind that the name is not just a label, but a way of describing the named, an attempt at pointing out not merely the named but also in some way the essence of the named. Since the name is a description and some kind of presence, to give one's name is to disclose one's self, to reveal one's self, to share one's secret, more than that – to surrender one's self. God being the transcendent mystery, the formula containing his name is bound to be the highest secret.¹¹⁷

From the analysis of the formulae cited above, we can easily see that the *nāmajapa* is essentially a form of praise. The *yajña* is always ordained to some purpose,¹¹⁸ but the *nāmajapa* is the expression of selfless love, of *ahaituki-bhakti*, and as such, it is the highest form of worship,¹¹⁹ and,

¹¹² Sivananda, *Japa Yoga*, 20.

¹¹³ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.6.27; 1.9.47.

¹¹⁴ *Śiva-purāṇa*, 1.18.158.

¹¹⁵ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.3.37.

¹¹⁶ *Śiva-purāṇa*, 7.2.12.6.

¹¹⁷ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 4.6.53. In his *Bhakti-sūtra*, Śaṅḍilya seems to attribute the origin of *nāmajapa* to Jaimini, the sage who composed the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* (*nāmeti jaiminiḥ sambhavāi, Bhakti-sūtra*, 61). This would not be impossible, because the Mīmāṃsakas hold that "all words have a natural denotative power by which they themselves, out of their own nature, refer to certain objects irrespective of their comprehension or non-comprehension by the hearer," and that they are "eternally existent." S. N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922-55; Indian reprint by Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975, vol. 1, 395-96. This doctrine may help us to understand why the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* suggests that even the inadvertent invocation of the Divine Name can be effective.

¹¹⁸ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.53.1-8.

¹¹⁹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 1.5.38.

therefore, is capable of making reparation for any defect in the *yajña*.¹²⁰ The devotee is expected to repeat the *nāmajapa* formula while performing image-worship,¹²¹ because it is this chanting of the Lord's name that gives meaning to image-worship, making it what it ought to be: an expression of love, praise and service.

4. The Practice of the Prayer of the Name

One modern Hindu writer shares with us his experience of practising *nāmajapa* and its impact on his life:

It is no exaggeration when I say that it is the Name which has sustained me throughout. It is impossible for me to narrate in detail how many times I have been saved by the Name from falling into the abysmal depths of sin, how many times It has guided me along the right path amidst circumstances of stress and difficulty, how many times It has saved me from the clutches of satanic forces, how many times It has rescued me from grave dangers, how many times It has stood by me as a loving friend amidst terrible sufferings and sorrows, in what miraculous ways It has supplied my wants and saved my honour and what rare and incomparable treasures It has conferred on me, treasures which I could never dream of possessing through my own efforts.¹²²

He found the practice of *nāmajapa* a help towards spiritual growth. "As for myself, when I used to take the Name with interested motives, it saved me... but It did much more. My relish for the Name grew more and more, which led ultimately to the development of the spirit of disinterested practice of the Name."¹²³ A person, deeply in love, constantly thinks of his beloved, even when the beloved is absent, or when he himself is involved in some work. Constant *nāmajapa* is possible if the aspirant grows in love for the Lord. Continuous *nāmajapa* is the articulation of a mind that is fixed on the Lord, and therefore a man who in life constantly thinks of the

¹²⁰ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 8.23.16.

¹²¹ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, 4.8.54.

¹²² Hanumanprasad Poddar, *The Divine Name and Its Practice*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1940, rep. 1953, 8.

¹²³ Poddar, *The Divine Name and Its Practice*, 23.

Lord, can hope to die with the name of the Lord on his lips.¹²⁴ I shall now suggest a method of making *nāmajapa* part of our life and eventually our constant companion. The method I propose is based on the talk of Fr. Anthony D'Mello, I heard over forty years ago.

a. Choosing the *mantra*

In some Hindu communities there is one *mantra* which is used by all the devotees for *nāmajapa*. But we also have instances when a special *mantra* is chosen by the *guru* or *ācārya* and imparted to the devotee. In this case it is a secret to be safeguarded. This latter practice is based on the assumption that our prayer is intimately linked with our individual personality in a given space-time framework. The *mantra* may indicate where we are in our spiritual journey, our peculiar way of understanding God and our relation to Him, the area we need to grow in, etc. Hence, we need to take time to choose our own formula. As we progress in our prayer-life, we may feel the need to modify our *mantra*, to shorten it, or even to choose a new *mantra*.

I suggest that the *mantra* should have eight syllables. Here are some examples: "Abba Father, your name be praised." "Loving Father, help me love you." "Holy Father, help me trust you." The *mantra* must be in our mother-tongue, or in another language in which we normally articulate our deeper feelings and aspirations. The reason why the *mantra* should have eight syllables is that then we can more easily synchronize our *mantra* with our breathing: the first four syllables while breathing in and the remaining four syllables while breathing out. Later on, we can drop the second half and repeat the first two syllables while we breathe in and the remaining two while we breathe out. Still later we may need only two syllables.

b. Appropriating the *mantra*

Sometimes we are so taken up by the face of a person, or some other aspect of her or his behaviour that we find ourselves thinking of that person ever without making any special effort. This may even happen even when we want to quieten our mind and get down to prayer. This happens very strongly in the lives of young people. A young man becomes aware of the

¹²⁴ *Bhāgavata-purāna*, 1.9.23.

fact that the face of a young woman whom he met recently keeps on coming back to his consciousness. He has fallen in love with her and so her face has found a place in his sub-conscious. We can have a similar experience with the *mantra* – by making it part of our sub-conscious.

After you have chosen the *mantra*, write it on some pieces of paper. Place one piece where you hang your clothes, another near your tooth-brush, another on the inner side of your door, etc. After you have changed your clothes and are in bed for restful night, start repeating the *mantra* slowly, and if possible synchronize it with your breathing. Breathe gently and slowly. Soon you will fall asleep. Between being fully awake and fully asleep, there is, what we may call, the twilight zone. This is the time when our sub-conscious opens up. Slowly our *mantra* begins to find a place there. When you get up in the morning, the piece of paper near your tooth-brush will remind you of your *mantra*. Make an effort to repeat the *mantra* silently as you brush your teeth, etc. You may even take the *mantra* for your 'meditation'. For this you must sit comfortably in a place where there are no mosquitoes or other forms of disturbances.

As you do this daily, especially if you are careful to repeat the *mantra* as you lie down to sleep, soon you will find that the *mantra* keeps on coming to your mind without any effort on your part. When this happens, accept it and consciously repeat it. As you do this, you will be surprised that the *mantra* comes more and more frequently to your mind. You have *fallen in love* with your *mantra*. It has become part of your sub-conscious. The more you consciously accept it as it surfaces, the more rooted will it become within you, and the more often it will remind you of its presence in your life. Thus, slowly you will find that whenever your mind is not engaged in any other activity you are praying, that is, while having a wash, while waiting for a bus, while sweeping your room, etc. Thus, our life will become more and more a prayer.

c. Praying the *mantra*

Hindu writers repeatedly tell us that *nāmajapa* is the most suitable prayer for people living in the Kali-yuga – that includes you and me. What is being suggested is that spiritually we are very weak. We need a simple form of prayer, and the *nāmajapa* is just that. "It is only '*Nama-Smaraṇa*'

that is free from difficulties and troubles."¹²⁵ We can do the *nāmajapa* silently all by ourselves, or we can do it together as a community. This is very helpful because when we gather as a community we encourage each other and we generate a prayerful atmosphere. This is the reason why traditional and modern Hindu writers point out the importance of *satsaṅga*:

The most powerful aid to meditation, however, is *satsaṅga*. The word can mean both the company of saints, as well as the company of the seekers. The company of saints is more effective, but at the same time more rare... *Satsaṅga*, in this sense [i.e., as the company of the seekers], has been one of the thematic headings present in the writings of almost all poet-saints.¹²⁶

I myself have been practising the prayer of the name for some years now. My *mantra* at the moment is: "Abba Father, all praise to you." In writing this essay I have also shared my experience with you, my readers. If the reading of this essay helps you in your spiritual journey, then please whisper a prayer for the writer, that he, too, may come closer to the Lord and to His children. When this happens our prayer becomes our life, and our life becomes our prayer.

¹²⁵Sivananda, *Japa Yoga*, 21.

¹²⁶Tulpule, *The Divine Name in the Indian Tradition*, 133.