



Shukadeva Narrating Bhagavata

Vaishnava Tantra As Outlined in the Bhagavata

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IF YOU ASK A VAISHNAVA whether she or he practises tantra, the answer is likely to be: ‘No, absolutely not. I practise bhakti!’ Indeed, it is safe to say that most Vaishnavas consider devotion, bhakti, to Vishnu, Narayana, or Krishna to be the defining feature of Vaishnavism. What may be less known even within current Vaishnava circles is that tantra—or aspects of what can be identified as tantra—is

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generally an integral feature of Vaishnava culture and practice. This is particularly the case in the area of formal or ritual, practices, which Vaishnavas often identify as *archana*—the constellation of activities centred on the worship of Vishnu as embodied in a physical form, graphic representation, or feature of physical nature. Here I want to sketch some features of Vaishnava tantra, particularly as these are found in one of the most important sacred texts for Vaishnavas, namely, the Bhagavata. I hasten to add—and this is one reason mainstream Vaishnavas may reject the idea that they practise tantra—that

the Vaishnavism I describe here firmly rejects the sorts of transgressive practices associated with some forms of tantra, sometimes referred to as 'left-handed' tantra, or the *vama-marga*.

Without lingering on attempts to define tantra as such, let us very briefly look at the Vaishnava scriptural corpus in which tantra plays a part. Here the beginning point of inquiry must be the classical locus of the tradition, a group of texts known as *Pancharatra Samhitas* or *Pancharatra Agamas*. Srivaishnavas, in particular, have regarded these texts as revelation, on a par with the revelatory Vedic Samhitas. *Pancharatra* is, broadly speaking, concerned to link the phenomenal world with the transcendent realm, where Narayana rules as the supreme divinity, with whom a practitioner seeks to gain some form of union or communion, and whose eternal association and residence in his realm is sought. A key principle in *Pancharatra* literature that links this world with the transcendent world is the notion of *vyuha*, whereby a fourfold expansion of Narayana—as the deities Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha—bring into manifest form the fundamental constituents of this world, thus bridging the otherwise unbridgeable chasm between the phenomenal and transcendent realms. Also important in *Pancharatra* for establishing a connection to transcendence is the employment of mantra—sacred incantations—in meditation and audible recitation, as regular practices for divinisation of the practitioner, bringing her or him to the level of purity fit for approaching the divinity.

In later *Pancharatra* literature, possibly after 500 CE, the application of mantra is seen less as a matter of mechanical recitation and more as a vehicle for the realisation of bhakti, devotion, in relation to the deity. In this view, the carefully recited mantra, properly received through

initiation from a qualified guru or acharya conveys divine grace to the sadhaka, practitioner, facilitating devotional, reciprocal exchange that comes to be the dominant ideal of the various Vaishnava bhakti traditions. Within these traditions, along with the recitation of appropriate mantras, the worship of physical images of the divinity is common, and the particulars of worship continue, to the present day, to be drawn from *Pancharatra* and related or derivative literature. Thus, the emphasis on bhakti may somewhat obscure practitioners' conscious awareness that their ritual practices are tantric in character. Still, one can speak of these practices as Vaishnava tantra, recognising 'family resemblances' to more explicitly tantric traditions.

In a much different genre of Sanskrit texts than *Pancharatra* literature, is arguably one of the most important and popular works for Vaishnavas of several traditions, the Bhagavata, also known as the Srimad Bhagavata Purana or Srimad Bhagavatam. The time and place of this work's provenance is much disputed, but most agree that at least by the tenth century CE its present form and content were fixed. Evidence of its popularity can be found—aside from its wide-ranging interpretation in the performing and graphic arts throughout India—also in the high degree of Sanskrit commentarial attention it has received from representatives of several different Vaishnava traditions, because the Bhagavata is a springboard for reflecting on Vaishnava tantra, broadly conceived.

Here I will not make a detailed examination of the Bhagavata in terms of tantra. Suffice to note that throughout most of the Bhagavata there are occasional allusions to *Pancharatra* elements, such as reference to the four *vyuhās*, initiation into the practice of mantra recitation, and—more on this later—allusions to circular graphic shapes, mandalas, conducive

for meditation. However, we find one chapter in particular, in the eleventh, out of twelve *skhandhas* or books, that expressly focuses on ritual worship, overviewing practices that the narrator—Sri Krishna, addressing his devotee Uddhava—explicitly refers to as a mixture of both Vedic and tantric elements. Here I offer my translation of a few selected verses from the twenty-seventh chapter of book eleven of the Bhagavata, and I provide brief elaborations and explanations in pursuit of a broad understanding of how many Vaishnavas from both early and contemporary times engage with tantra.

‘In an image, on the ground, or in fire; in the sun, in water, or in one’s own heart, the twice-born, imbued with devotion, may forthrightly worship me—one’s own guru—with physical objects and substances.’¹ The idea of ‘worship’—here the Sanskrit term *archana* is used—can have a variety of associations. Here the emphasis is on ritual practices involving the presentation of physical objects and substances considered pleasing to the divinity, in this case Sri Krishna, since it is he, speaking to Uddhava, who refers to himself. In turn, such physical objects and substances are to be offered to the divinity seen as present in a physical object—image, ground, or sun—or substance, fire or water.

The inclusive spirit of the Bhagavata is indicated here: Sri Krishna offers a variety of options regarding physical and non-physical objects and forms in which he is willing to receive worship. But he also indicates two restrictions. First, he stipulates that one must be *dvija*, ‘twice-born’, referring to the Vedic rather than the tantric system, wherein birth into what Vedic-brahminical culture regards as one of the three higher *varnas*—brahmana, kshatriya, or vaishya—is a prerequisite for initiation into Vedic study and ritual practice. However, more broadly and accommodating of the tantric system, it may refer

to one who has received a ‘second birth’ in the form of initiation, *diksha*, which in Vaishnava tantra is possible for anyone who accepts and seriously follows a qualified guru’s guidance, regardless of one’s family background. Tantra is also implied in the second of the two restrictions, namely, that the worshipper must be ‘imbued with devotion’. Although bhakti, devotion, is typically contrasted with tantra, in Vaishnava tantra traditions, a proper mood of selfless devotion must be the driving force and basic principle of all tantric practices.

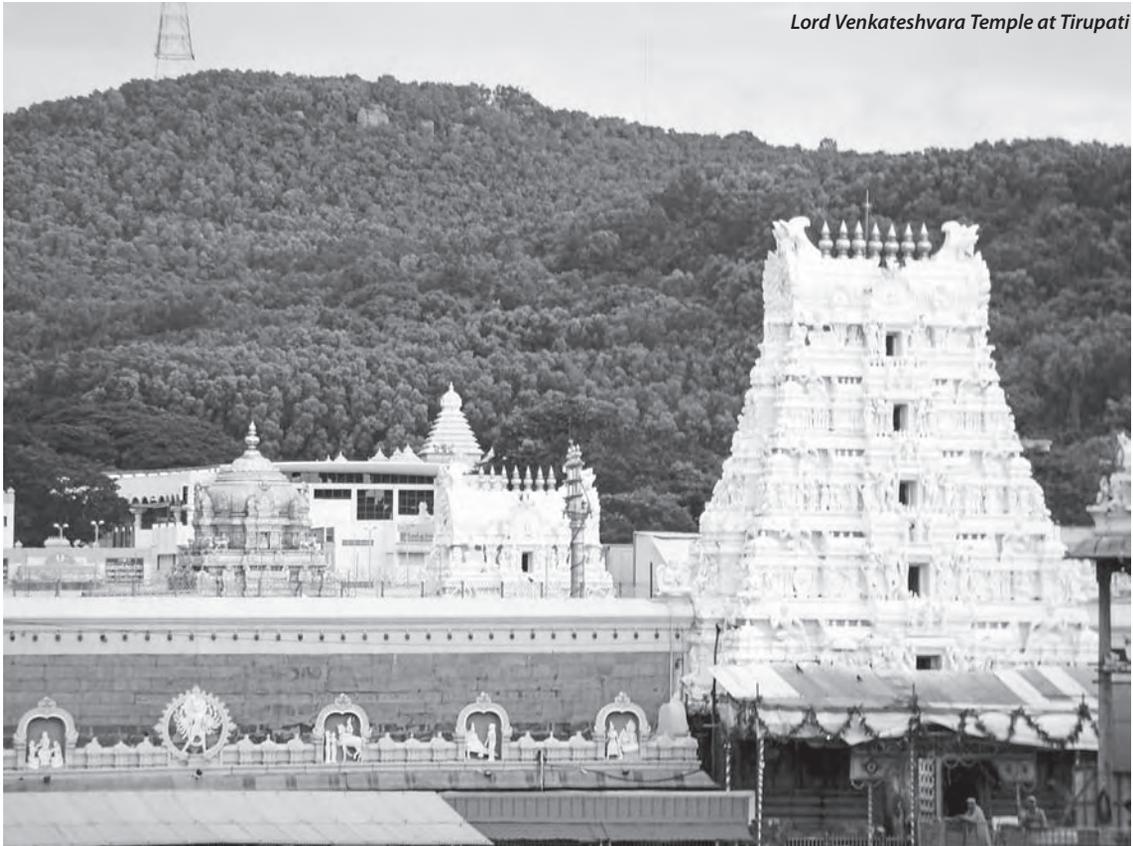
‘It is declared that there are eight types (of sacred images appropriate for worship), namely, those formed of stone, of wood, of metal, of clay, of sand, of jewels, as a painting, and in the mind’ (11.27.12). One might well wonder: ‘How is it possible to have devotion for a lifeless image made of material elements?’ In the practice of Vaishnava tantra, one learns to regard all ‘matter’ as energy, *shakti*, of the supreme energetic, *shaktiman*, person, Bhagavan or Vishnu. Since all energy originates in Vishnu, he can transform or perhaps better, ‘transubstantiate’, any material substance for his own purposes, or for benefiting his devotees. The Vaishnava tantra texts, *Pancharatra Agamas*, provide detailed ritual procedures for invoking Vishnu into an image, either temporarily or permanently. The aggregate of these procedures is called *prana-pratishta*, literally ‘establishing life’. But equally important as such formalities is the devotional attitude of the practitioner, by virtue of which her or his eyes are said to be ‘smeared with the salve of love’, enabling the practitioner to see the object of worship as the divine subject.

‘The ritual worship of me in images, and so on, is done with prescribed items; yet for the desireless devotee, (ritual worship is done) with whatever items can be readily obtained, as well as by mentally fashioned offerings’ (11.27.15).

Vaishnava tantra facilitates becoming free from selfish motivation while uncovering the supreme Self or Subject, residing in the heart. Here 'desireless' translates *amayin*, literally 'void of trick or guile'. In this understanding, the Vaishnava is so absorbed in the spirit of selfless service that she or he can very easily please the Lord, Vishnu, by offering him simple, easily obtained items. As Sri Krishna, a form of Vishnu; or as many Vaishnavas would say, the original Lord, of whom Vishnu is a secondary form, tells Arjuna in the Bhagavadgita: 'A leaf, flower, fruit, or water—whatever is offered to me with devotion, I, who am moved by such devotion, accept.'² Still, there are more detailed prescriptions of how one may please the Lord, and votaries try their best to follow them.

'O Uddhava, in the worship of images, ritual bathing and decoration are most pleasing; for a graphic design on the ground, *tattva-vinyasa* (ritual invocations with mantras) is most pleasing; for worship in consecrated fire, oblations of food grains soaked in ghee is most pleasing.'³ The devotional Vaishnava engaged in Vaishnava tantra practices is eager to know what pleases the Lord. Such a Vaishnava understands that perfection is attained simply by giving pleasure to the supreme person. Just as one naturally seeks to please a person whom one respects and admires, the same principle applies in relation to Vishnu.

Today, in India especially, some temple images of Vishnu or Sri Krishna are well known for receiving rich ornamentation. For example, Lord Venkateshvara, also known as Balaji, who



Lord Venkateshvara Temple at Tirupati



Tirupati Balaji

is visited daily by thousands of pilgrims in his temple in Tirupati, south India, is always seen adorned with genuine diamonds, rubies, and gold finery.

Especially in tantric forms of worship, there are numerous types of *vinyasa* or *nyasa* prescribed. Typically, these procedures involve the meditative ‘placement’ of particular mantras or single syllables, often with a physical gesture of touching the intended location, on parts of one’s own body or on parts of a sacred image or diagram. The idea is that by such placement, one is infusing the body, image, or diagram, with the sacred sounds, thus raising it to the level of atemporal being on which proper worship takes place.

Worship in sacred fire, though generally associated with Vedic, rather than tantric practices, is included here to affirm the Bhagavata’s inclusiveness. Oblations of grains and ghee are conveyed by sacred fire to various divinities invoked by mantras—divinities who are understood to be representatives of Vishnu in specific functions and capacities.

‘Offerings (such as *arghya* and flowers) are preferred in sun worship; worship in water is best performed with water oblations accompanied with mantras. Even a little water offered with faith by my devotee is most pleasing, whereas abundantly presented (items) of a non-devotee do not bring me satisfaction, what to speak of (a non-devotee’s offering of) perfumes, incense, flowers, lamps,

and foods’ (11.27.17–8).

Arghya, literally ‘valuable’, is a ritual vessel that usually contains water into which certain food grains have been added. It is offered as an honorific gesture to a respected guest. In relation to this ritual practice, Vaishnavas like to remember a famous episode in the Mahabharata, in which Sri Krishna is honoured with an *arghya* offering at the beginning of King Yudhishtira’s *rajasuya* sacrificial rites. In that situation, Sri Krishna’s cousin Shishupala, who had been nursing a growing hatred for Sri Krishna, vociferously objects to Sri Krishna being revered so much, spewing out at him a volley of one hundred insults and disparagements. In response, Sri Krishna blesses Shishupala with instant death, by decapitation with his divine weapon, the Sudarshana discus, and thereby with liberation—Shishupala’s soul, entering into Sri Krishna’s body. As in verse fifteen earlier, here the emphasis is on the attitude of devotion rather than on the particular items or procedures of offering. Shishupala’s hatred of Sri Krishna, though the opposite of



devotion, was so intense that his sheer concentration of emotion earned him freedom from the cycle of birth and death, *samsara*. By rendering *arghya* unto Sri Krishna or Vishnu, practitioners of Vaishnava tantra remember Shishupala's death and its circumstances, confirming for them that Sri Krishna, as the primal God, is indeed the proper recipient of this offering.

'The practitioner should consecrate the three vessels—(containing water) for foot-bathing, for *arghya*, and for refreshing the mouth—with the heart mantra, head mantra, and hair-tuft mantras respectively, followed by the Gayatri mantra' (11.27.22). Both Vedic and tantric rituals have much to do with the establishment of equivalences—a local, 'microcosmic' item or

substance being ritually identified with another ‘macrocosmic’ entity or principle. In this case, the common element, water, becomes identified—through mantras associated with different parts of the body—with physical, human or human-like form. This practice underscores the identification of the divinity being worshipped—Vishnu—with the substances offered to him. The consecration of sacred waters for offering is similar to the *nyasa* functions of mantra placement we have already encountered in verse sixteen. But here the additional invocation of the Vedic Gayatri mantra—considered the concentrated embodiment of the Veda—again indicates the Bhagavata’s inclination to bring Vedic and tantric traditions together to emphasise completeness and complementarity.

‘When one’s physical body has been purified by air and fire, one should meditate on my supreme, subtle presence on the lotus of the heart—the Lord of all beings who is apprehended by adepts in the reverberation that concludes the syllable *Om*’ (11.27.23).

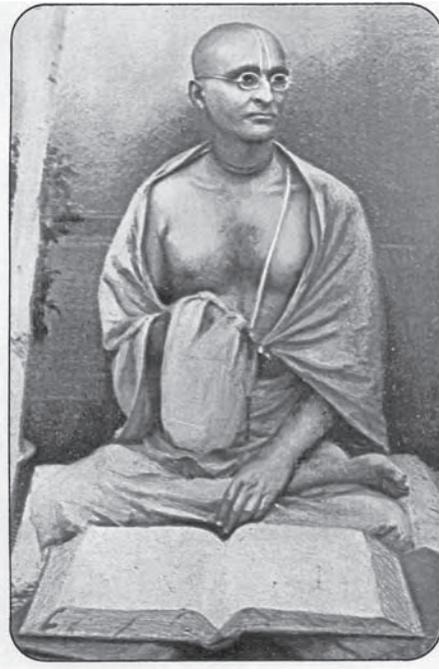
This verse refers briefly to a fairly complex ritual called *bhuta-shuddhi*, ‘purification of the elements’; by processes involving mantras and visualisations, the worshipper is to purge her or his own body. We might think of this process as a ‘subtle bath’ that follows the physical, but nonetheless ritual, bath, *snana*, that one takes prior to performing the worship of Vishnu.

After *bhuta-shuddhi*, one is ready to go a step deeper in meditation, by bringing to awareness

Vishnu’s presence within oneself. Here is mentioned that ‘perfected beings’, *siddhas*, are able to experience Vishnu’s presence by carefully invoking the sacred syllable *Om*. This syllable, much praised in the Vedas and Upanishads, is considered the sound-embodiment of Vishnu, especially in his ‘non-personal’ aspect, often equated with Brahman, the absolute, devoid of limiting qualities, *gunas*. Generally, however, Vaishnavas prefer to meditate on a non-abstract form of Vishnu. Indeed, the Bhagavatam advises else-

where to visualise the divinity within one’s heart in a human-like form that is in a sitting, standing, or reclining position (3.28.19).

To gain success in both (the pursuit of pleasure and of liberation), one should mentally arrange my eight-petalled lotus seat—its whorl radiant with saffron filaments—with (personified) dharma and so on, and with the nine (divine powers). Then, following both Vedic and tantric prescriptions, one should make offerings such as foot-washing water, water for refreshing the mouth, and *arghya* (11.27.25–6).



Srila Bhaktisiddhanta (1874–1937)

Sridhara Swami—an important fourteenth to fifteenth century Bhagavata authority—and other early Sanskrit commentators fill out the details of which personages are to be represented in the lotus seat: dharma, righteousness; jnana, knowledge; *vairagya*, renunciation; and *aishvarya*, plenitude, are placed by mantra and visualisation, respectively between the four cardinal directions, beginning with the southeast and moving clockwise. Their opposites, *adharma*, irreligion;

ajnana, ignorance; and so on, are placed in the four cardinal directions, beginning with the east. More toward the centre of the seat, one mentally places the nine feminine powers, *shaktis*, namely, *vimala*, purity; *utkarshini*, eminence; *jnana*, knowledge; *kriya*, accomplishment; *yoga*, communion; *prahvi*, modesty; *satya*, truthfulness; *ishana*, sovereignty; and *anugraha*, mercy.

These verses describe a yantra, a symmetrical graphic design that is typically two-dimensional but may also be three-dimensional—a common device found in many varieties of tantric practice. Here, the yantra of Vishnu serves as a graphic illustration of the notion that Vishnu is the centre and source of all principles upon which the phenomenal world operates, as well as of the feminine powers—counterparts and complements to his identity as the supreme *powerful*. The combination of masculine and feminine principles in the *yantra* particularly marks this account as tantric in character, more on this below.

Then, assets permitting, one bathes the image of Vishnu daily, using waters scented with sandalwood paste, khus-khus, camphor, vermilion, and aloe wood, while reciting mantras such as the *svarna-gharma*, the *Mahapurusha Vidya*, the *Purusha Sukta*, and Sama Veda hymns such as the *Rajana* and the *Robinya* (11.27.30–1).

We come now to a central moment in the sequence of Vaishnava ritual worship, the bathing of the image. Although the image, seen as the very form of Vishnu, is understood to be beyond all contamination, still, the act of bathing is understood as devotional service, rendering to the Lord a sense of freshness and well-being that is understood to be not unlike the experience we all have from bathing ourselves.

Some of the mantras mentioned here are less known today. However, the *Purusha Sukta* is widely known and recited. It narrates a cosmic sacrificial rite in which the cosmic person's

dismemberment as a process of sacrificial offering generates the various features of the experienced cosmos. Although the *Purusha Sukta* is decidedly a Vedic hymn, it has become well-integrated into Vaishnava tantra worship; indeed, often the sixteen verses of this hymn are recited sequentially with the offering of each of sixteen worship items (11.27.38–41).

Next, following appropriate prescriptions, my loving devotee may decorate me with garments, a sacred thread (*upavita*), ornaments, painted designs, garlands, and unguents' (11.27.32). Vaishnavas celebrate the physicality of Vishnu's sacred image, caring for it, for him—as one would attend a highly respected person—by providing clothes, ornaments, and other accoutrements. In many of the countless public temples of Vishnu and Sri Krishna in India, and indeed outside India, worldwide, dress and ornamentation is a source of special attraction for visiting votaries. Priests are likely to dress and decorate the image in accord with the season or in connection to a particular festival or theme. In some temples, in a playful and artful spirit of participating in divine *lila*, pastime, on certain occasions the image will be dressed in such a way as to make him appear as one of the many Vishnu avatars. All such practices are largely sustained by local tradition more than by specific scriptural injunctions. By such services, physicality and visibility of the deity remind the votive of the divinity's actual presence in the world and thus of his accessibility to all, despite—or in gracious response to—the limitations of human physical embodiment. Put another way, as I have written elsewhere:

The practices of image worship are practices of embodiment, both acknowledging the shortcomings of embodiment and celebrating the sensory functions with reference to the object of worship as the perfect embodiment of sentience. Yet they are also practices aimed at

transcending temporal embodiment, to gain full and uninterrupted participation in Kṛṣṇa-līlā. As such they involve not only the senses, but also the disciplined imagination, a thinking and functioning more or less as if one is already situated in the transcendent realm.⁴

Again, the emphasis on embodiment and engagement of the physical senses can be regarded as an indicator of the tantric character of Vishnu or Sri Krishna worship.

‘If possible, one then arranges food offerings (such as) molasses, *payasa* (sweetened rice boiled in milk), ghee, fried cakes, biscuits, sweets, *samyava* cakes, yogurt, and soups.’⁵

Unlike some Shakta tantric traditions, Vaishnava practitioners follow the sattvic-tantra principle of strictly excluding all non-vegetarian foods from their worship and their own diet. Here Sri Krishna provides only a very minimal list of vegetarian items that one might offer him, emphasising sweet and dairy preparations. Other texts dedicated to the details of Vaishnava worship, *archana*, such as the sixteenth-century work *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, provide detailed lists of offerable and un-offerable foods. Regarding dairy products, the assumption is that they are obtained from cows which are under life-long protection, *go-raksha*, meaning that, unlike in modern factory dairies, cows that no longer give milk will not be sent for slaughter; rather, they will be maintained throughout their natural lives.

Vaishnavas invest great attention in the preparation of food for offering to Vishnu or Sri Krishna in the *murti*-form. Since the Lord is understood to be fully present in his image, he can receive food offerings that have been properly prepared with high standards of cleanliness, and without the cook having tasted any of the items to be offered, prior to offering. Here again, the key element is devotion, *bhakti*, which, if present

in the practitioner, inspires Sri Krishna to receive and relish the offerings, leaving the ‘remnants’, *prasada* for Vaishnavas and others to accept as the Lord’s grace in the form of consecrated food.

The practitioner may then meditate on my serene form as having the hue of molten gold, with four arms, bearing conch, disk, club, and lotus flower, and wearing brilliant garments the colour of lotus filaments. I bear a glittering helmet, bracelets, belt, and precious arm-bands; and the *Shrivatsa* emblem, shining *Kaustubha* gem, and forest flower garland adorn my chest. While thus meditating, one proceeds to offer worship: throwing ghee-soaked wood (into the fire), one then sprinkles the fire with two portions of ghee and offers ghee-soaked oblations to sixteen divinities, beginning with Dharma (Yama), accompanied with the appropriate *mula*-mantra and appropriate verse from the sixteen-verse *Purusha Sukta*, followed by “*svishiti-krite svaha*” (11.27,38–41).

As part of the concluding rites in Vaishnava tantric worship of Vishnu, Sri Krishna here advises another ‘mixed’ practice: Meditation on the divine form, as detailed here, is arguably specifically tantric in character, while offering oblations into a consecrated fire with various mantras is a Vedic practice. Mention of the *Purusha Sukta* hymn,⁶ particularly marks the fire rite as Vedic in character. A *mula*-mantra, literally ‘root mantra’, invokes a particular deity by sound. The idea is that the deity, in effect, ‘sprouts’ from the properly intoned mantra.

‘Having thus worshipped, one then shows obeisance to the Lord’s associates and renders them offerings. One then softly chants the root-mantra, remembering Brahman to be Narayana himself.’⁷

We may notice that Sri Krishna provides no specific root-mantra in this chapter, nor indeed throughout the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata is committed to a non-sectarian stance that gives

a sense of inclusivity, such that a variety of traditions or schools, sampradayas could identify with the Bhagavata vision. Within this broad world view, the gurus of particular traditions give specific detailed instructions for the practice of their disciples, along with the particular mantra(s) that have been handed down by the guru's succession, *parampara*, of preceptors. As in other tantric traditions, Vaishnava tantra is a practice grounded in a close preceptor-disciple, guru-*shishya* relationship. And although Vaishnava tantra is not essentially a secretive practice, practitioners are nonetheless careful to preserve a spirit of intimate reverence for their gurus. One way such intimacy is preserved is by keeping the mantra(s) received from one's guru to oneself, unless and until one is blessed and commanded by one's guru to take responsibility for becoming oneself a preceptor.

'One may then be my entertainer for a while—singing, reciting praises, dancing, acting out my activities, and hearing or narrating about me' (11.27.44). Sri Krishna encourages his votaries to display their various performative talents for his pleasure. Some temple traditions are particularly supportive of this aspect of worship, attracting visitors to see and hear such skilled and devotional performances. Some temples maintain a complete repertoire of songs that are sung by temple musicians on appropriate occasions, and particular ancient poets whose songs are in praise of Vishnu may be honoured by the recitation of their works. Classical Indian dance traditions such as Bharatanatyam are regarded as having been originally developed for the specific purpose of facilitating dance performances for the pleasure of temple images, as have classical forms of drama. It is also common for recitations and discussions of Vishnu's or Sri Krishna's divine pastimes,

lila, especially as recounted in the Bhagavata, to take place in temples, within hearing distance of the sacred image as well as for the upliftment and pleasure of the attending audiences.

'Eulogising me with formal and informal hymns and prayers—from the Puranas and even from folk traditions—one may then pray: "O Bhagavan, be pleased (with me)!" while lying prone in obeisance' (11.27.45).

One reason the Bhagavata has enjoyed enduring high regard among Vaishnavas is its very strong focus on theological reflection. This particular chapter is concerned with ritual rather than theology, but elsewhere is expressed in considerable detail the nature of Bhagavan. In particular, we find the notion that he is *atmarama*,

Vishnu as Narasimha Kills Hiranyakashipu, Stone Sculpture, Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu, Karnataka



‘self-satisfied’. Thus, one might be surprised to find here that Sri Krishna blatantly welcomes eulogy of himself from his votaries. However, we may take into consideration a prayer found in book seven, in which the young devotee Prahlada declares that, because the Lord is complete in himself, the rendering of offerings and prayers is for the benefit of the devotee who makes them.

‘One’s head placed at my feet, with hands together (one may pray): “O Lord, please protect me, a supplicant. I am terrified by this ocean wherein lurks the crocodile of death” (11.27.46). Sri Krishna offers another example of a prayer that one might voice as she or he completes the process of daily worship to Vishnu. One is thereby reminded of the urgency of practising and, one hopes, soon perfecting one’s practice, of devotional worship: Temporal existence is a condition of perpetual uncertainty, in which the gross and subtle bodies of the bound jiva, individual soul, are ever vulnerable to the ravages of time. Again, this is a major theme of the Bhagavata as a whole, beginning with book one, in which the main inquirer, King Parikshit, urgently seeks spiritual guidance after having been cursed to die in seven days, due to an infraction of etiquette. Facing death, Parikshit listens, while fasting completely for seven days and nights, to the words of sage Shuka, who recites before him and many attending sages the Bhagavata.

‘Thus praying, respectfully placing on one’s head the remnants I have given, if (the image is) to be dismissed, one may now dismiss it, its light again placed within the light (of the lotus within one’s own heart)’ (11.27.47). Here the word ‘remnants’ refers to various items that have previously been offered in worship, especially flowers and food. Having been offered to the Lord, these items are understood to be sacred, to be regarded respectfully as the Lord’s mercy, prasada. By contacting such items in the proper

devotional mood, it is said that one can progress rapidly in spiritual life.

The practice mentioned here of ‘dismissing’ an image or other worship-able form refers to ‘temporary’ or ‘moveable’ forms, *chala-murti*, as opposed to permanently consecrated forms, for which no such ritual is to be done. Dismissal, *ud-vasa*, is associated with tantric practice, whereby the form is employed as a means of externalising the image understood to be present within the practitioner’s heart. The particularly tantric character of this practice is in the practice of visualisation, in which, according to classical commentators, the practitioner, in effect, relocates the light that she or he identifies with the presence of the deity in the worshipped form back into the light that is visualised as situated in her or his own heart, which is conceived as being in the shape of a lotus flower.

‘Surely one should worship me in my sacred image or elsewhere—wherever one has faith—for I, the self of all, abide in all beings, as well as (independently) in myself’ (11.27.48). We already saw, in verse nine, that Sri Krishna suggests several options as objects or forms in which he may be worshipped; and there also we saw that Sri Krishna specifies the attitude with which such worship must be imbued, namely, ‘with devotion’, for such worship to be efficacious. Now, in this verse, Sri Krishna broadens the range of possibilities for his reception of worship to include ‘wherever one has faith’. Sridhara Swami explains that this verse intends to counter the notion that one type of worship-able form is superior or inferior to another. The later commentators Vishvanatha Chakravarti and Vamshidhara Sharma elaborate: Although the *archa*, worship-able image, is to be seen as foundational with respect to the practice of ritual worship, with deeper faith one may appreciate the Lord’s presence in other forms,

knowing that he abides as the 'self of all'. They cite the example of Prahlada, for whom the Lord appeared as Narasimha, the half-man, half-lion avatara, described in the Bhagavata, book seven, chapter eight, from an apparently inanimate palace pillar because of Prahlada's complete faith in his presence therein. Vaishnavas place great importance on the panentheistic notion articulated here, namely, that Vishnu is simultaneously present in all beings *and* he is situated beyond and independent from all beings. Thus all beings are understood to be dependent on him.

'Thus worshipping with the Vedic and tantric processes of ritual activity, one receives from me one's cherished fulfilment in both (this life and the next)' (11.27.49).

Tantra is widely conceived as seeing worldly

desire, kama, as a legitimate human pursuit that need not be denied in the course of pursuing ultimate release from temporal bondage, moksha. Here Sri Krishna reiterates that both Vedic and tantric practices serve their purposes in facilitating the engagement of one's physical and subtle bodies for the complete fulfilment of one's aspirations. The implication is that in the course of performing such practices, which revolve around actions aimed to elevate one's consciousness, one will naturally shed unnecessary and unbeneficial aims, leaving one free to pursue true fulfilment in accordance with divine will. Elsewhere in the Bhagavata, Sri Krishna says that, in the case of his dear devotees, he does *not* fulfil worldly longings when he sees that they will be detrimental to their spiritual progress. In this way he shows

Vaishnava Puja



his care for them, not wishing them to become distracted from the ultimate goal of achieving unmotivated and incessant *prema*—spiritual love—for the supreme person.

Having gone through this sketch of Vaishnava tantra as represented in a relevant chapter of the Bhagavata, one might well wonder: Isn't a more fundamental level of the tantric world view missing from this account? What about tantra's well-known emphasis on the feminine principle or indeed on the multi-level principle of male-female polarity that features so prominently in both Shakta and Shaiva forms of tantra? True, these features of tantra are hardly present in this particular chapter, though there is a hint of it in verses twenty-five and twenty-six, wherein the nine divine powers, *shaktis*, surrounding the deity are mentioned. Rather, it is in the Bhagavata's celebrated tenth book that we find this theme fully developed, albeit inseparably from the theme of selfless devotion. It is in a series of five chapters, the twenty-ninth to the thirty-third, in book ten, that the dramatic narrative of Sri Krishna's rasa-dance *lila* with his eternal consorts, the cowherd maidens of Vraja, *gopis*, is elaborately developed. In this episode, Sri Krishna, as a young cowherd, by his charming flute-playing attracts all the village girls to join with him in a grand circle dance that extends through the night. For our purposes here, suffice to note that the text's Vaishnava commentators have taken pains to emphasise that, contrary to what is commonly thought, Krishna's association with the *gopis* is by no means illicit; rather, as the eternal consorts of the supreme divinity, they are his own *shaktis*, with whom *only* he can consort. Thus, for the majority of Vaishnavas, it is entirely inappropriate and deeply misguided for any man to think that he can imitate Sri Krishna by consorting with women. What is proper and

indeed purifying for a mainstream Vaishnava in regard to Sri Krishna's rasa-dance *lila* is to visualise and meditate upon it as described in the Bhagavata. In this way, not only can a practitioner be drawn to identify her or him-self as a humble female servant-assistant to the *gopis*, but she or he can gradually become perfectly suffused with the emotions of bhakti that constitute the ultimate aim of Vaishnava practice. Far from wishing to become a non-differentiated unity with the deity or to 'transcend' the variegated-ness characteristic of the rasa dance, Vaishnavas seek to remember and thus participate eternally in it, ever deepening their love for the supremely beloved Lord.

This has certainly been a rudimentary overview of what we can call 'mainstream' Vaishnava tantra. No doubt many, if not all, features of it may appear similar to tantric currents in other Indic traditions, and from an historical perspective this is not surprising. If we see tantra, broadly conceived, as a current which has, over a period of several centuries, flowed through South Asia, touching more or less deeply all the various paths of spiritual perfection, we can appreciate its importance. For Vaishnavas, not unlike other traditions, tantra continues to play an important role. And the Bhagavata, a sacred text of the Vaishnavas that enjoys enduring presence as a living tradition, provides a clear window into Vaishnava tantra practice. 

References

1. Bhagavata, 11.27.9.
2. Gita, 9.26.
3. Bhagavata, 11.27.16.
4. Kenneth Russell Valpey, *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Mūrti-Sevā As Devotional Truth* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 58.
5. Bhagavata, 11.27.34.
6. Rig Veda, 10.90.
7. Bhagavata, 11.27.42.