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Imagining Reality: Image and Visualization in Classical Hinduism

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Contrary to Western traditions, Indian traditions give centrality to imagination. Imagining, following Hindu philosophies, is a power that can constitute and transform reality. We observe this role of imagination in the ritual of visualization where a deity image is mentally construed and receives ritual offerings.[1] This prominence of imagination is also crucial in viewing an image as living and breathing. The very beginning of image worship has utilized this primacy of imagination. In this sense, ritualized imagination functions as an engineering capacity of the cognitive faculty of imagination. In the yogic traditions, it is conceived that an established yogi can materialize an entity or transform reality by his mere will, an extension of the very power of imagination. The role of imagination in our everyday life has been vastly undervalued in contemporary culture with an exaggerated focus on the 'reality' that precludes imagination. This essay examines the way imagination is used in Hindu Tantric visualization, which not only aims to encounter the divine but also to experience the higher truth beneath the apparent manifestations. Constructing and worshipping images, an essential part of Hindu religious life, thus rests on cultivating a cognitive faculty of skillful imagination. After briefly exploring the history of image worship, I explore in this essay how imagination is understood and used in ritualized contexts, particularly with a focus on 'mental offerings'.

Historical Overview

The power of visualization, or imagining something as living and breathing, is essential to worshipping images in the Hindu traditions. In the absence of this imaginative process, images are merely stones. After tracing the early history of worshipping images in India, I will advance the argument in this paper that the power of imagination has always remained at the center of worshipping images. Existing scholarship has paid excessive attention to the historicity of images, while

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shortchanging the creative imaginative role of humans in constructing reality. Image worship is a good example for exploring the early history of imagination, where human ingenuity vividly manifests the divine in its own image, and acceptance of this image as alive becomes an initial ground for comprehending the transcendent. This belief works when there is no dichotomy between the manifest and the unmanifest. The attribution of presence in material form to the transcendent especially depends on the underlying principle that there is no dichotomy between the transcendent and the immanent: the manifest reality is an expression of the absolute.

The tradition being explored in this essay, and the particular ritual of visualizing images, depends on and expresses these concepts. After addressing the early instances of beliefs about images, I will explore a range of terms used to denote the image in classical India that align with the thesis of the absolute manifesting in multiple immanent and mundane forms. Besides highlighting the scope of imagination, this process of visualization also suggests several ways that embodiment was viewed in classical India. This essay will culminate with an exploration of *anusmṛti, dhyāna* (the rituals of recollection) in which the deity image is imagined and the rituals offered to the deities are mental. To read images, along these lines, is to explore human creativity.

Prior to the time of the Buddha (c. 560-477 BCE), the existing literature on Vedic Hinduism provides sparse references to image worship.[2] Although the use of figurines in the ritual context is found in the Vedic literature,[3] it is merely a component of the fire ritual. As time passed, images became ubiquitous, and unlike the shelter for the fire ritual that was dismantled at its culmination, more permanent temples were erected to house the deities. Early references that discuss images are impressionistic and vague. They do not provide a robust conceptual framework for advancing theological claims, but they do give some clues upon which to develop theological and philosophical arguments. Textual references that can be roughly dated from around the time of the Buddha until the Common Era provide sufficient clues about the scope and nature of image worship in the earliest period. With the later emergence of Smārta and Tantric Hinduism, images moved to the center of religious experience. One of the commonly cited texts for the image worship in classical India is the *Ṣaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa.* This text lists the obstacles encountered when particular deities are displeased.

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[2]This issue has been addressed in early Indological works. For select studies on the emergence of image worship in classical India, see Farquhar 1928; Srinivasan 1979, 39-54; Banerjea 1956.

[3]For the geometric designs and various figures used in Vedic rituals, see Staal 2001.

Following this text, if Viṣṇu is somehow displeased, temples can shake as a result. The images of the deities can be seen laughing, crying, singing, dancing, exploding, sweating, opening and closing their eyelids, and walking.[4] The existence of these beliefs follows from the animation of images and are still widely found throughout the Indian sub-continent. This classical text takes for granted the animate and anthropomorphic nature of images that have been consecrated as bodies for the gods.

In traditional Hinduism, Vedic theorists also raised various arguments regarding the gods and embodiment. Vedic Hinduism presents a plethora of deities, and whether these deities are embodied is an ancient question. Yāska (c. 6th century BCE) raises this issue (Nir. 7.6) and presents three distinct positions. One position maintains that deities are embodied. The second rejects this position, and the third makes a compromise, identifying deities as both embodied and disembodied. Yāska gives three distinct citations to demonstrate that deities are addressed as having limbs, endowed with human attributes, and able to perform human actions. Following the alternate position, while deities do not have human bodies, Yāska gives the examples of fire, sun, or air as evidence of natural forms of embodiment. The tension between the religious beliefs of accepting the deities having anthropomorphic forms or simply considering them as natural phenomena is vivid in Yāska's account. All of these arguments depend on the fundamental reality of animate deities present in the world, but they do not settle the question of how these deities express themselves explicitly and concretely to human beings. Yāska does presume that deities are embodied and that their embodiment has important consequences for ritual action. This embodiment allows the gods to express their desires and partake in ritual activities. Despite the importance of deities and embodiment for later forms of Hindu ritual, the central philosophical school dedicated to the study of rituals in classical India, Mīmāṃsā, offers a contradictory position. To begin with, Mīmāṃsakas do not believe that gods are embodied. They do not even believe that the primacy of ritual is to pacify, praise, or interact with gods to whom the sacrificial food is being offered. Mīmāṃsā instead reveres the ritual itself. Jaiminī and Śabara (1st C. BCE -1st C. BCE, respectively) propound that it is the ritual that transforms reality and brings about the desired result. Gods, in this position, are merely instrumental to the sacrifice.[5]

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[4]*… devatāyatanāni kampante daivatapratimā hasanti rudanti gāyanti nṛtyanti sphuṭanti svidyantyunmīlanti nimīlanti pratiprayānti. . . Ṣaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa* (V(VI).10.2.

[5]*Mīmāṃsāsūtra* 9:6-10 and Śabara's commentary thereon.

Śabara addresses some of the issues regarding the embodiment of gods. His arguments and examples are pertinent to our discussion, as they provide some textual verification of image worship in India. Śabara says: "People have the conventional view that gods are embodied. They draw Yama carrying a stick with his hand, and describe him accordingly. Likewise, [they draw] Varuṇa carrying a rope with his hand, [and] Indra carrying a bolt."[6] Śabara cites multiple passages in this context from the Ṛgveda that identify the neck, belly, and hands of gods.[7] He eventually rejects this position, maintaining that these passages describing the images are merely *arthavāda* (praise), and metaphoric in nature. We can nonetheless glean from this presentation that the belief that humans can capture the transcendent in images had entered the Hindu theological paradigm around the beginning of the Common Era.

Also noteworthy is the fact that people used to draw images of the deities during the time of Śabara. A tension is explicit here, as the Vedic Mīmāṃsā tradition does not support the depiction of deities. After the decline of Vedic rituals and the rise of image worship, this tension has almost completely vanished.[8] Texts discussing rituals that relate to image worship appear soon after the time of Śabara. *Mānavagṛhya* (2.15.6), for instance, mentions the ritual of pacification if the image is broken.This practice continues and elaborates on the practices and beliefs described in *Śaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa* where the pacification ritual is used when the statue laughs. People associating strange phenomena with images and maintaining pacification rites seem to be commonplace from the first century up to the present day.[9]

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[6]*tathā vigrahavatīṃ devatām upacaranti | yamaṃ daṇḍahastam ālikhanti kathayanti ca | tathā varuṇaṃ pāśahastam | indraṃ vajrahastam |* Śabara's commentary on MS 9:6.

[7]For further discussion on Vedic references, see Kane 1980, 388-90.

[8]Various streams of the Samāj movement during the colonial India have rejected image worship. Dayananda (1824-83), being himself a Vedic scholar, was aware of this classical discourse.

[9]For image worship in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, see Kane 1980, 390-92. Pāṇīni and Patañjali mention image worship and artists constructing images. In 1980, I witnessed thousands of people gathering in Durbar Square in Kathmandu, drawn by the rumor that the statue of Paśupati was sweating. Likewise, thousands gathered in Dolakha, with the rumor that the statue of Bhimsen was sweating. The most famous of these events was of Gaṇeśa drinking milk on September 21, 1995, with incidents reported across India (for the report see New York Times, September 22 1995 ("Does the God of Learning Drink Milk?"). See also the report by Suzanne Goldenberg, "India's gods milk their faithful in a brief 'miracle'," *The Guardian*, September 22, 1995.

Enlivening Images: The First Step towards Visualization

In order to explore the role and significance of images in contemplative practices in classical India, familiarity with some of the key terms in Sanskrit that denote an image is warranted. There is no shortage of such terms: *mūrti*, *bimba*, *vigraha*, *ākṛti*, and *pratimā* are most prominent.[10] The term *ākāra* (m.) or *ākṛti* (f.) refers to "shaping the form." Diana Eck explains the term *mūrti* as "anything which has definite shape and limits; a form, body, figure; an embodiment, incarnation, or manifestation."[11] A similar term used is *anukāra*.

Mūrti not only describes an image but also identifies the process of providing immanence to the transcendent. An image, based on this etymological understanding, shapes or materializes the transcendent (that is normally concealed) into a specific form. As the term suggests, something beyond the perceptual field is brought to appearance through an image (*mūrti*). In the process of consolidating the abstract, whether it be emotions, thoughts, or both, that which is subtle in its elementary form becomes tangible. Thus, *mūrti* explicitly reveals an important detail regarding our thesis: imagination, image, and their relation to the transcendent are related concepts, and are embedded in the very notion of image.

Another key term for describing an image is "*bimba*."[12] Unlike other terms, this directly translates into English as "image." The term refers to the reflection or the mirror image of the absolute and thus describes the process through which the supreme reality manifests in phenomenal form. In the Tantric paradigm, the body is often presented as the *bimba* of the absolute, as it mirrors the totality. Just as a *maṇḍala* mirrors the cosmic planes, so does the body, and thus is conceived of as a *maṇḍala*. This mirroring of reality in form (both as speech and image) reflects not only a part but also the total entity in every scale, although in abstract form. The world, in this paradigm, is a mirror image of the absolute. The cognitive act of imagination is used here to bridge the subjective and objective horizons, merging these two poles into a single, non-dual, and all-encompassing experience.[13]

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[10]While I have thoroughly explained the terms *mūrti* and *bimba* in subsequent paragraphs, the other terms do not add much to our critical discourse and are therefore not explored further.

[11]Eck 1981, 27.

[12]For instance, see *Sātvatasaṃhitā* 24:4, 215, 226, and 238. This text uses the terms *mūrti* and *pratimā* as synonymous to *bimba*.

[13]Noteworthy is that the term *pratibimba*, translated here as reflection or counter-image, not only describes the process of the absolute manifesting in the finite form of the world and individual subjects, it also stands for two different streams of monistic and non-dual philosophies, both identified as *pratibimbavāda*, first

Starting from the earliest reference above, it is clear that images are conceived of as alive. Engaging with an image thus requires the cognitive faculty of imagination. Here, we must enter into the Hindu worldview to understand where the concept of "image" and the concept of "being alive" meet in the act of imagination. One can see the culmination of this imagination in the ritual of *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* (life installation).[14] This ritual can be lengthy, taking nine days or even up to a month, and involves drawing various *maṇḍalas*, worshipping deities, and submerging the image in water. The eyes of the image remain closed until the culmination of the ritual and once the eyes are opened, the image receives various offerings and devotees begin the process of worshipping the deity. The core of the *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* ritual involves articulating select syllables that correspond to identifying the bodily limbs and asking these limbs to be established as part of the image along with *prāṇa* (vital energy) and *jīva* (life force).

The concise version of this life-installation ritual found in both Smārta and Tantric texts involves both the invocation of the associated parts of the *mantra* (such as the Ṛṣi associated with the *mantra*, its governing deity, the meter of the specific *mantra* that one is supposed to articulate), and the practitioner mentally "installs" these attributes in the image. With the recitation of the specific *mantra* associated with *prāṇa*, the image is considered enlivened, ready to receive the ritual offerings. Although this ritual can be lengthy, the essential elements involve finding correlates among the seed syllables mantras on the one hand and the sensory and motor organs or various other limbs of the deity image on the other. Eventually, when one recites the following, the image is ready for worship:

> Let all the *prāṇas* abide here. Let all the *prāṇas* move here. This is the image for worship.[15]

Essential to this ritual is a complex process of mental projection. Along with chanting the seed syllables, a live body is projected onto the statue in this ritual. The sensory and motor faculties of the projected body are

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championed by Abhinavagupta among the Tantric philosophers and next by Padmapāda and Prakāśātman among the followers of Śaṅkara. For a detailed analysis of this doctrine in the school of Śaṅkara, see Timalsina 2006.

[14]For an in-depth study of the ritual of bringing images to life, see Davis 1997.

[15]The text *Sarvadevapratiṣṭhāprakāśa* is one of the commonly used manuals for the installation of life in Hindu rituals. The specific process discussed above is borrowed from this text, pages 35-36.

reinforced through the projection of mantras. This ritual is quite comparable to the ritual of visualization, in which a practitioner constructs a mental representation of the deity image and engages with it in dialogical form. These points suggest that an emphasis on constructing the image accurately in artistic representation (so as to differentiate one god from another) is only a small part of the whole process of embodiment. The rituals that bring the image to life are in essence projective acts of imagination.

Significance of visualization in classical Hinduism

Bringing the deity image vividly to mind involves multiple cognitive processes. It evokes memory by recalling the myths associated with the deity being visualized. It also involves imagination, when the image is considered alive and the subject participates in mental acts of ritual worship. It rests on the attentive mode of awareness, as the visualization demands a constant flow of consciousness towards the same object (i.e., mental focus). The active gaze (visualizing) bridges the binaries of subject and object, and this singular awareness is the ultimate meaning, encompassing both the act of visualization and its object, an image. Visualization, ultimately, involves the comprehending mode of awareness, for when an image is viewed, the subject also brings to mind the significance of each and every attribute. This cognitive function of imagination is not categorically distinct from other activities that involve imagination, whether it is listening to music, viewing an image, or participating in ritualized acts. What is unique here is the meticulous effort to create "reality" through imagination. In this Hindu cosmos of image worship, external objects and human imagination collaborate in creating realities.

This process of visualization is identified by various terms, and a brief analysis can reveal what exactly is anticipated in this act. One of the most common terms is *manana* (contemplation). This addresses the particular act carried out by √*man* (the mind) alone. While being an act of imagination, the significance of this ritual lies in its efficacy in generating the intended mental state. The act of imagination is implicit even in the terms used to describe visualization. For instance, the texts instruct the practitioner to visualize an image with the terms, *bhāvayet*, *kaplayet* (one should imagine), or *dhyāyet* (one should visualize). The very process is identified as *dhyāna* (contemplation) and not perception. Having mere reflection, or an after-image somatically imprinted in the process of sense-object contact is thus not sufficient for visualization. It demands a conscious gaze. These acts are not unconscious; they are willful and intentional. This intentionality produces the creative power

in such acts.

In addition to imagination, the ritual of visualization is a meticulous process of bringing one's own memories to mind. The frequently used term in describing the ritual is *anu*+√*smṛ* (follow the memory or in accordance with memory). After detailing the image of a deity, a term such as *anusmaret* (one should bring *x* to memory), depicts the process by which an image is brought to mind. This process can be equated with recall, bringing memory back to life. This aspect of visualization affirms the recall of previous experiences, either gleaned through sensory modalities or constituted through imagination. Creating an image in the mental space, with that being derived from external input, thus becomes a central modality of the visualization practice. In this way, imagining the image is not individualistic or idiosyncratic: it occurs within the conventional symbolic framework of Hinduism already established firmly in memory. It is creative and imaginative, but dependent on already well-established practices and concepts.

Visualization is the process of activating the underlying principles that bring these images alive. This process culminates with the mind of the viewer immersing itself within the image. These processes and the underlying principles give us insights into how closely these concepts relate to the fundamental practices and assumptions of *yoga*. Patañjali's understanding of *samādhi* as the mere presence of an entity with the absence of the phenomenal self makes sense in light of the practice of visualizing the image in rituals. In the Tantric or Smārta context, the ritual of visualization can be described by *dhāraṇā* (concentration) and *dhyāna* (meditation). Patañjali uses *dhāraṇā* in the sense of fixing the attention of the mind on one object (YS 3.1) and *dhyāna* as a process where the mind is fixed on the same object to sustain attention (YS 3.2). The manuals that outline visualization use the terms derived from √*dhyai*, such as *dhyāna, dhyāyed*, along with other terms that mean 'to bring something to mind.' Although Patañjali does not prescribe the visualization of images, the traditions involving images for mental or physical rituals have incorporated the concept of *dhāraṇā* in the specific sense of bringing images to mind. Both yoga and the enlivening of images depend on a shared set of concepts and practices regarding active imagination and visualization.

Three central constituents of visualization are *mantras*, image, and *maṇḍala*. While mantras are recited, they are also viewed as an image. In order to see the mantras, specific phonemes are mentally placed in different centers of the body (whether in the body of the deity or in the body of the practitioner), and the viewer actively imagines a direct correlation between the phonemes and the corporeal limbs. A single syllable can be viewed as a deity having associate deities as her limbs.

For instance, while viewing the first Sanskrit letter /*a*/, the viewer envisions the phone as a feminine form, being comprised of the body of four different deities, with the "head" of the phoneme linked with Raudrī, the face with Vāmā, hands with Ambikā, and weapons with Jyeṣṭhā.[16] Contemplation upon the meanings of the *mantras* relates to viewing various deities that depict distinct cosmic and corporeal correlations.[17] When viewing a *maṇḍala*, various deities and their corresponding mantras are simultaneously apprehended. In active visualization of the *maṇḍala*, the practitioner also brings to mind the central and surrounding deities and their body-to-limb-type correlation. Visualizing a *maṇḍala* always relates to the animation of the central deity and those surrounding it, where the external circles and the deities presiding in these circles reflect the roles the central deity plays by assuming a myriad of forms. Although Tantras widely elaborate upon the concept of deity circles where the surrounding deities are considered the limbs of the central deity, this seminal concept can be found in earlier literature. In Yāska's account, different deities are just the different roles played by the same deity. Considering various deities to be aspects of the single self, Yāska explains that "on account of the supereminence of the deity, a single soul is praised in various ways. Other gods are *pratyaṅga* (the individual limbs)of a single soul."[18] Although this understanding of 'limb' in the *Nirukta* seems metaphoric, Tantras affix a literal meaning when some deity images are viewed as an integration of other deities. Just like a single priest is addressed as Hotṛ, Adhvaryu, etc. according to his role in performing the ritual, according to Yāska, a single deity is identified with various names corresponding to its various roles.[19] This concept is vivid in Tantric visualization where the same deity is visualized differently to accomplish different results. The differences between a metaphorical usage and a literal one in these contexts may be a Western or otherwise modern influenced anachronism. The various acts of visualization, imagination, enlivening, memory, meditation, and concentration in these closely related traditions suggests an ongoing, intimate, and very complex interrelation between the transcendental, symbolic, abstract, concrete, and mundane. They are connected through many layers of conceptual and imaginative acts.

Returning to the ritual of visualization, the manuals describe

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[16]*śirasy āsāṃ sthitā raudrī vaktraṃ vāmā prakīrtitā* ||13
aṃbikā bāhusaṃlagnā jyeṣṭhā vai daṇḍavat sthitā |
akāra eṣa vikhyāto . . . . ||14|| *Pauṣkarāgama*, *Tantramantrotpatti*.

[17]For mantras, see Timalsina 2005, 2010.

[18]*Nirukta* 7.4. Translation, Laksman Sarup (Sarup 1984, 115).

[19]*yathā hotādhvaryubrahmodgātety apy ekasya sataḥ* | *Nirukta* 7.5.

visualization with terms derived from √*dhyai*, √*bhū*, √*kḷp*, and the Buddhist manuals often call them *dhāriṇīs* from the root √*dhṛ*. What exactly is expected in this ritual process can be described by the terminal meaning, through analysis of these roots. While the term *dhāriṇī* simply suggests holding something in mind, these *dhāriṇīs* are also used to make actual talismans that are sometimes worn by practitioners. The words derived from other roots relate to psychological aspects. √*dhyai* refers to contemplation, a reflective thinking, from which the term *dhyāna* is derived. √*bhū* describes bringing something to reality, materializing something, or giving shape to something abstract. √*kḷp* relates to the imaginative domain of consciousness, with the term *kalpanā* for imagination derived from the same root. Rather than considering this imagination as illusion, Vedic poets described the function of the creator god in terms of √*kḷp*. The imaginative power of the seers materialized entities into reality. The process of visualization, along these lines, is to bring something to reality through a contemplative mental process.

Classical Indian thinkers sought a bridge between the visible and the invisible. Images fill this gap, and perception and imagination merge. Following BĀU II.3.1, Brahman has two forms: the manifest, and the invisible. While the invisible aspect transcends both name and form, all that is manifest resides within space and time and possesses name and form. Thus, having a name means being endowed with form.[20] The rise of visual culture in India relies on this central premise that the very transcendent is envisioned in form.[21] Kane cites a passage: "For the sake of the worshippers, the image of the Brahman is imagined which in itself is comprised of consciousness, non-dual, free from attributes (*niṣkala*), and disembodied."[22] This concept is found in Trika philosophy, where the absolute is addressed in terms of transcending *viśvottīrṇa* (the totality) and comprised of *viśvamaya* (the totality). Following the Trika adepts, these two sides of the reality are not sequential but simultaneous. This reinforces ritual, embodied experience, and an active engagement in social life.

Both the Tantric Trika philosophers and the Advaita Vedantins utilized the concept of *ābhāsa* (appearance) or *pratibimba* (counter-image) for describing the process wherein the absolute, Śiva or Brahman, manifests in a myriad of forms. In essence, these terms denote that the supreme reality, due to its magical power, becomes many. They clearly

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[20] *ākṛtimantaḥ saṅjñinaḥ* | Patañjali on *Mahābhāṣya* 1.1.1.

[21] For analysis on *ākāra*/*ākṛti*, see Sharma in Bäumer 2002, 37-70.

[22] *cinmayasyādvitīyasya niṣkalasyāśarīriṇaḥ* | *upāsakānāṃ kāryārthaṃ brahmaṇo rūpakalpanā* || cited in the *Devapratiṣṭhātattva* of Raghunandana. Cited in Kane 1980, 475.

evoke the sense of *bimba* and *ākṛti*, discussed earlier. The term *ābhāsa* is also used to describe painting.[23] Although both these traditions consider the absolute beyond mind and thus *kalpanā* (beyond imagination), they both use images in their discursive process. In the case of Tantras, the use of images is ubiquitous. In the case of the Advaitins, the application of *ākāra* (image) to describe a mental representation of the Brahman, describes the same concept.[24] Accordingly, Advaitins seek to have an image of the Brahman, a mental representation of the absolute that has no form in particular. Either way, there is a bridge between the visible and the invisible.

This concept is also crucial to the linguistic philosophy of Bhartṛhari who describes the Vedas as the *anukāra* (copy or mirror image) of the Brahman (VP 1.5).[25] The concept is that while the absolute as it is cannot be grasped, it is nonetheless experienced through the apprehension of its image. This image for Bhartṛhari is linguistic in nature. We can address this as *śabdākāra*(an image in the form of word). The absolute and the image are not really different, though. Mirroring, or assuming manifold forms, is intrinsic to the Brahman in Bhartṛhari's linguistic philosophy. In other words, when the absolute is represented (even partially or imperfectly; or in a not-absolute form) this act of representation (through art, visualization, or imagination) constitutes or creates a manifestation of the absolute in a true and profound way. A limited or linguistic representation of the absolute expresses a limited understanding of the absolute. While this does include some paradoxical logic, it expresses something rather subtle. If something expresses the absolute in a limited way (in as much as this representation is accurately expressing something), then the image in the mirror (even though a reflection) does connect explicitly with that same absolute.

While the formless aspect of the absolute is described as singular in nature, its manifestation is always depicted in multiplicity. The diversity of images arises not only due to the plurality of deities but also because every aspect of a deity — an act of being in specific space and time — can be depicted in varied forms. This pluralistic vision is congruent with the Ṛgvedic passage that invokes Indra as assuming every different shape with *māyā* (magical power),[26] or Tvaṣṭṛ as *viśvarūpa* (manifesting in all forms).[27] The Vedic imagery of the cosmic Puruṣa is

[23]Coomaraswamy 2004, 141-152.

[24]For discussion, see the *Brahmākāravṛttināśakanirūpaṇa* section in the *Siddhāntaleśasaṅgraha* (pages 671-681).

[25]Vṛṣabhadeva explains *anukāra* in terms that indicate no distinction between the image and its counter-image: *vastuto bhedābhāvād anukāra iva vedo brahmaṇaḥ | Paddhati* in VP 1.5 (p. 24, line 14 in Iyer ed.).

[26]ṚV III.53.8ab.

[27]ṚV I.13.10ab.

not an isolated example. Even other deities such as Rudra and Agni are invoked as having multiple emanations.[28] The Vedic *Śata-rudrīya* passage invokes one hundred Rudras. While some Rudras are found in a sequence governing all directions in a group of ten, others have independent names. Śiva is also invoked as *aṣṭa-mūrti* (possessing eight forms), and five Śaivite deities constitute the five faces of Śiva in subsequent Purāṇic and Tantric depictions. The concept of the universal form of a single deity becomes so pervasive that even *yūpa* (the sacrificial post) is invoked as having *bahurūpa* (many forms).[29] Emanation in multiple forms, along these lines, is an intrinsic property of that which lies beneath forms, as the absolute is latent within the forms.

Visualization: Where Imagining Becomes a Ritual

It is not possible to explore all the texts utilized in ritual visualization because many prayer hymns starting from the Vedas evoke the feeling of the presence of the deity and even the most popular texts in living Hinduism that utilize visualization techniques are too numerous to count. Thus, our best approach to address this ritual relies on exploring select hymns and making some general remarks. The themes of all these hymns are similar: they describe the deity image, they bring to mind particular mythical themes, and they outline a ritual where, if performed in the temple, real objects such as milk or flowers would be used for offerings.

There is no shortage of texts that are entirely dedicated to conducting a mental ritual. Active imagination is prominent in the Vedic hymns, such as *Śrī Sūkta*. Subsequent texts such as *Bhāvanopaniṣad* epitomize the internal ritual, where the *maṇḍala* and the body of the deity correspond to the body of the aspirant. Internalized ritual is prominent in some traditions, such as that of Tripurā, with texts such as *Saundaryalaharī* or *Subhagodaya* highlighting the internal worship. The *Cidvilāsastava* of Amṛtānanda provides highly philosophized detail of all the constituents comprising the worship of the goddess Tripurā. It is not the case, however, that other deities lack this mental ritual. The *Mānasapūjā* (mental worship) texts invoking Śiva, Durgā, or other popular deities are the most chanted hymns in popular Hinduism. They all have the same themes of bringing the deity to the mind and making various mental offerings. These invocations often identify the body of the goddess with the mantra and the *maṇḍala*, and suggest oneness between the aspirant and the deity. Deity images

[28] ṚV 2.33.9.
[29] *Ṣaḍviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* IV.4.10.

are distilled in these visualization practices to somatic and cognitive states of the aspirant, eventually transforming the subject's experience.

The manuals for mental *pūjā* can come in just a few verses or as a detailed book. The most common *prātaḥ-smaraṇa* (remembering in the morning) verses come often in three to six stanzas. These verses describe the specific deity, its particular function, the myth associated with the deity or some terms that reminds one of the myths that are known otherwise.[30] For example, the "morning recollection" of Durgā follows:

> I remember you, the highest divinity, in the morning with the glow of the rays of the autumn moon, adorned with beads, [and with the] earrings shaped as a crocodile and decorated with gems, having one thousand arms [shining] blue, distinguished with the divine weapons. I bow to you, Caṇḍī, in the morning, of infinite forms, the one skilled in destroying the demons, in particular Mahiṣāsura, Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, Śumbhāsura, who is fond of stupefying Brahmā, Indra, Rudra, and the sages and who is an embodiment of all the gods. I pray in the morning to you who bestows what is desired to those who pray [to you], who holds the entire world, who removes all sufferings, who is the cause of liberation from the bondage of *saṃsāra* by knowing the highest power of illusion [generated by] the supreme Viṣṇu.[31]

These hymns are distinct from those dedicated to specific deities to bring them to *mānasa-pūjā* (active contemplation). The central theme of these hymns is to offer all the rituals given to an honored guest: awakening the deity from sleep, giving a bath, drying the body with a towel, brushing the teeth, inviting the deity to the shrine accompanied by the associate deities, offering the seat, waving a dry towel over the feet, offering a favorite object to initiate worship, and offering sixteen or sixty-four objects that have been mentally prepared.[32] In this ritual, the image of the deity is brought to mind and held in the forehead or heart.[33]

A summary of the mental ritual worship of Śiva follows:

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[30]*Bṛhatstotraratnākara* (BSR), one of the most widely circulated texts for prayer hymns, includes these "memory hymns in the morning" (*prātaḥsmaraṇastotra*) for Nārāyaṇa, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Caṇḍī, Sūrya, and Rāma (pages 392-396).

[31]This is based on the text published in the last page of *Durgāsaptaśatī* (Gītā Press, Gorakhpur).

[32]For instance, the text, *Lalitācatuṣṣaṣṭyupacāramānasapūjā* (compiled in pages 512-513 of *Śrīvidyāratnākara*) details 64 offerings to the goddess Tripurā.

[33]In BSR, '*Gaṇeśamānasapūjā*' comes with 84 verses (pages 65-71). *Śivamānasapūjā*, attributed to Śaṅkara, comes in five verses (page 140) and another *Śivamānasapūja* comes in the same compilation in 23 verses (pages 463-465).

> I offer you the seat of gems, cool water for a bath, divine robe adorned with many jewels, the lotion made of musk, flowers such as jasmine and *campaka* and *bilva* leaves, flame and incense, all imagined by my heart. Lord! I have prepared with my mind sweet rice, five kinds of food made from milk and yoghurt, bananas, vegetables, camphor-scented water and betel leaf. I offer you with mental creation (*saṅkalpa*) a canopy, two yak-tail whisks, a fan and a spotless mirror, the music from a lute, kettledrum, *mṛdaṅga*, and other drums, songs, dance, and prostration, and various hymns. You are my self, the goddess Pārvatī my intellect, my senses are your attendants, my body your abode, and the pleasure through my senses, your worship. My slumber is the state of *samādhi*, all the speech your prayer. Śambhu! Whatever act I do, all of that is for your satisfaction.[34]

In addition to a set of hymns that describe an internal offering, other hymns are accompanied by complex processes, integrating various meditation practices along with mental rituals. Tantras take this one step further by incorporating their worldview within the ritual offering process. For instance, the Śiva hymns for bringing him to memory compiled in BSR relate the ritual to yogic exercise. In this manual, the deity's coming to the shrine is equated with entering the heart, with the mind oriented towards the self. The offering of the seat is equated with faith in the words of the preceptor; worshipping the shrine is equated with the recognition that the deity is the support for all that exists. The manual progresses by integrating the steps of external rituals with various yogic practices.[35]

The following summary of Amṛtānanda's *Cidvilāsastava*[36] draws on the above description of internal *pūjā*. Composed in 40 verses, this text details the ritual worship of the goddess Tripurā, where all constituents of the ritual are mental. One needs to keep in mind that this deciphering of ritual attributes rests on a broader Śākta monistic worldview where the subject of experience, the practitioner, identifies himself with the cosmos and the central deity being invoked. In this paradigm, the deity manifests herself into the world and the individual subjects, and when the aspirant realizes this oneness, he experiences himself as the divine. Every single mode of ritual worship is deciphered in light of this philosophy and these rituals, and in this light are supposed to transform

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[34]This is a summary of the first three verses from the *Śivamānasapūjāstotra*, attributed to Śaṅkara. This is widely circulated and is compiled in BSR (p. 140)

[35]One of the most detailed mental rituals is found in the *Mahātripurasundarīmānasapūjāstotra* in a lengthy 127 verses (compiled in *Śrīvidyāratnākara*, pages 387-402. The same text also compiles *Bālātripurasundarīmānasapūjāstotra* in 70 verses (pages 403-410).

[36]For the text of *Cidvilāsastava*, see Dwiveda 1984, 323-327.

experience from a fragmented self-experience and a dualistic perception of the self and the other (where the other involves both other subjects and the world of their respective experiences) to a monistic cosmos with the self and the deity being one and the same. All the attributes of ritual visualization are thus linked to generating this non-dual experience. Congruent with this reading, Amṛtānanda initiates the mental worship by invoking the feet of the Guru, by equating them with *prakāśa* (light) and *vimarśa* (awareness), or the illuminating and reflective modes of consciousness. The first in the ritual order, the recitation of the Guru mantra, according to Amṛtānanda, is to experience the entire world as comprised of three energies divided in solar, lunar, and fiery forms (CVS 2). Merging in the ocean of non-dual awareness surrounded with the tides of reflective consciousness of the self, along these lines, is associated with taking a bath (CVS 3). For Amṛtānanda, all the constituents of ritual worship involve non-dual realization. For instance:

> *Sandhyā* (dawn and dusk prayer): Śrī is the goddess of the dawn and dusk worship, since she is the meeting ground of the night that deludes the world and the day that illumines the wisdom (CVS 4).
> Sun worship: the supreme Śiva, the self-luminous one, is the sun and reflective awareness is seen in the rays of this sun that manifest the entire circle of the entities to be cognized. Worshipping the sun is thus to have the awareness that this entire illumination is the very self (CVS 5).
> Worshipping the altar: the very self is the altar, with the 'walls' of consciousness and the lamp of knowledge dispelling the darkness, and the recognition of this self is worshipping the altar (CVS 6).

Accordingly, protecting oneself in all directions is to view the entire world as comprised of consciousness and to rescue oneself from duality (CVS 7). The heart is the sacrificial altar and the deity comprised of consciousness dwells there. Bhairava removes the bondage of the one who worships this deity (CVS 8). Removal of obstacles refers to the removal of mental constructs, thereby facilitating the ability of the aspirant to rest in the pure state of mind devoid of constructs (CVS 9). The seat for the yogin is the array of 36 categories wherein the supreme Śiva of the character of pure consciousness abides (CVS 10). The purification of the self and of hands refers to the purification of action and their instruments by envisioning their dissolution into pure consciousness (CVS 11). The restraint of *prāṇa* here refers to submerging the consciousness manifest in the form of what is cognized into the form of the cognizing self (CVS 12). The installation of mantras in the body is equated with the recognition of *adhvan* (the sixth-fold

path) as comprised of self-awareness (CVS 13). Along the same lines, various forms of *nyāsa* (the installation of mantras and phonemes within the body) relate to viewing the coordination of the body, speech, and consciousness, ultimately the self or pure consciousness permeating the rest (CVS 14-17). *Arghya* (purification of the libation object) accordingly, relates to the retrieval of the entities manifest in the triadic form, distinguished by sun, moon and fire, or cognition, the entities of cognition, and the subject of cognition into pure awareness (CS 18). Here, we see that all aspects of an external ritual are reimagined as internal acts of awareness and imagination. These acts of awareness dissolve apparent dualities into a more genuine and true formulation. Imagination creates and activates a more fundamental relationship between the practitioner and ultimate reality.

Amṛtānanda details all the ritual constituents in the same terms as those of realization of the self, being in the state of pure consciousness, and reducing external phenomena to Śiva nature. Ritual constituents, along these lines, are designated to reveal the supreme deity, the very self of the form of consciousness alone. The *maṇḍala* to be worshipped, along these lines, is the collection of all the categories from Śiva to earth, and pure consciousness that resides in all these categories is the deity being worshipped (CVS 19). Invoking the deity, accordingly, is to shift the inner self-awareness outside to the realm of the entities of cognition (CVS 20). The offering of the five-fold entities is to retrieve consciousness flowing outside by withdrawing all five senses and resting in pure consciousness (CVS 21). Worshipping the fifteen Nityā deities relates to submerging time within timelessness (CVS 22). The gradual retrieval of consciousness from external circles to the inner self is worshipping the *maṇḍala* (CVS 23). Offering gifts to the goddess relates to dissolving the manifest entities into the formless void of consciousness (CVS 24). Along the same lines, offering the lamp relates to the identification of the five-fold consciousness flowing through the senses to the inner self-awareness (CVS 25). Recitation of the mantra, accordingly, describes the retrieval of speech along with the mind to the transcendent state devoid of mind or speech (CVS 26). The realization that the world is a reflection of the very heart, self-awareness, is considered displaying the mirror to the goddess (CVS 27). The umbrella offered to the goddess refers to the Śiva nature that abides in the void of consciousness that covers all the entities with self-awareness and protects from all forms of suffering (CVS 28). Offering the fan to the goddess relates to observing the flow of pure consciousness in the form of five-fold sensory modalities (CVS 29). Surrender here refers to surrendering the ego with all desires to pure consciousness (CVS 30). The surge of bliss identified with the divine nature (Śiva and also with

the preceptor) that is at the core of cognitive activity is identified as accepting the *prasāda* (offering) (CVS 31).

Offering *pavitra*, accordingly, refers to the removal of the snares of duality (CVS 32) and the offering of *damanaka* relates to the offering of the mind to the supreme Śiva (CVS 33). Initiation identifies the gaze of the preceptor that grants identity with the supreme Śiva and removes the collection of all sins (CVS 34). Worshipping the *karaṇa* deities refers to uniting self-awareness to the transcendent self, self-effulgent and beyond the mind (CVS 35). Worshipping *darśanas* (six-fold views) pertains to dissolving the five-fold sensory consciousness and the mind into pure consciousness (CVS 36). Along the same lines, the dissolution of four-fold consciousness in the forms of waking or other states to the transcendent fifth state concerns worshipping the Samayā deities (CVS 37). Displaying the gesture of *khecarī* refers to dissolving all the activities to the supreme void of consciousness (CVS 38). To bid farewell to the deity is to recognize the multitudes of forms as the self itself, comparable to recognizing that the snake seen in a rope is due to illusion (CVS 39). Ritual offering, along these lines, is to establish the supreme Śiva nature by dissolving external entities into pure consciousness (CVS 40).

The above treatment of Amṛtānanda is one of the most explicit and detailed accounts of mental projection onto every ritual act. Hindu rituals rest on invoking and situating the deity, making particular offerings (the number can vary from five to sixty-four), and a ritual farewell to the deity. By interpreting all the pertinent aspects of ritual worship as a mental act, Amṛtānanda is using ritual as a template for transforming mundane experience into the transcendent one. External rituals, along these lines, become tools for reinforcing the mental world. What is more real, following these arguments, is what has been imagined, rather than the entities external to the subject. The primacy of imagination in transforming experience and recognizing reality is thus vivid in this portrayal of ritual worship.

To sum up the above discussion on mental worship, there are three distinctive strategies applied in the procedure. First, the image is viewed as alive: it is worshipped with objects and actions that please living beings. Next, the practice moves to isolate external objects, both the image and the objects that are offered, and to conduct the entire ritual mentally. In the third and the most exalted state, the entire ritual mechanism is viewed as a process to reinforce non-dual awareness, and in this stage, the essence of ritual is the experience of the identity of the self with the deity. All the everyday pūjās rely on the first stage of imagination, as the lived aspect of image is fundamental to carry out such rituals. The aspect of imagination is stronger in the second phase

where the entire ritual is carried out by the mind alone. The third stage focuses on experience, and transformation of self-awareness is its goal. The above examples of mānasa-pūjā (mental offering) and Amṛtānanda's detailed account buttress the same argument that imagination is essential to worshipping images. A broader argument to be gleaned from the above account is that imagination is not contradictory to reality. On the contrary, the given world requires an act of imagination to be completed. Thus, a meticulous cultivation of the power of imagination through rituals relates to a deeper realization of the identity of the self, the cosmos, and the deity as one, the underlying philosophy of Trika monism.

Conclusion

Arguing along the same lines as David Shulman (2012), imagination is viewed in India as causing reality. In this case, deity images are real because we visualize them as such. It may be the case that images were not objects of visualization in the early days of image worship, as is the case in Tantric and Smārta cultures of medieval times. Nevertheless, even in early times, these images were viewed as living and breathing because they conceived of them as getting angry, sweating, shedding tears, laughing, or in need of food and care. The lengthy rituals associated with visualization replace external worship and while a sense of objects being offered to the deity is present in this mode, the focus is on the subject's own mental and corporeal states. The process of visualization discussed above highlights the roles memory and imagination play in this ritual paradigm. This cultural fusion of imagination and reality parallels the uninterrupted link between the transcendent and the immanent.

In conclusion, the rituals examined above make it explicit that Hindu traditions refine several concepts associated with "imagination" and provide us new cognitive tools to address reality and commonsense experience. Along these lines, the act of imagination is a creative act that assists in rediscovering reality. This notion is crucial, both to this paper and to a broader discussion on imagination, as it challenges the naïve realism of contemporary cultures where the terms such as imagination, fiction, or make-believe are used in opposition to reality. The above analysis is not to conclude that imagination is experienced as real by the subjects performing the act of imagination. The argument instead is that imagination functions as a complementary tool in transforming the subject's experience wherein he recognizes a greater reality that is underlying the sensory modalities. This paper does not aim to give a conclusive position of the Hindu traditions regarding the role of

imagination, as the traditions are complex, with them incorporating multiple and oftentimes contradictory viewpoints; however, it is a starting point from which imagination can be better explained and positioned. This is relevant not only for cultural studies but also is crucial for understanding human nature and the role of imagination in our cognitive processes in general.

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