

Response to Questions on the Way of Invocation

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The way of the invocation, sometimes referred to as jaculatory prayer or the way of the Name – *nama-japa* or *japa-yoga* in India- can be defined as the methodical, trusting, and virtually – or actually - permanent invocation of a Divine Name or a sacred formula. The modalities of the practice vary greatly, from singing aloud to silent concentration upon the heart. This path is practiced and lived within the context of a religious tradition – with its various ritual, moral and legal demands, of which it constitutes the perfection, at least in terms of its ultimate end, i.e., as perfect conformity and union with the Divine. Within the framework of this tradition, the methodological practice of the invocation normally requires an authorization in the form of an induction or initiation into such a spiritual rule or a contemplative order under the guidance of a spiritual instructor. As in the case of monastic engagement, it may also take the form of a vow. In other words this practice cannot be initiated and pursued in a spirit of individualistic improvisation without incurring grave danger; it cannot be artificially severed from the religious universe in which it unfolds. It may, however, in some instances be substituted – as a continuous and integrated mode of orison –for virtually all the other practices that define a given religion. It bears stressing that if it occasionally does so it is only on the basis of a deep immersion in the invocatory practice and certainly not as a starting point.

The conventional objections to the way of invocation are not few: among these are its reputation of being mechanical; its danger of superficiality; its excessive facility;

its making the words of the scriptures and sacred laws unnecessary, if not dispensable; its depriving religious life of a need for action. To the first kinds of objections, spiritual masters of the invocatory way have answered by stressing the importance of intention in the path, an intention that is inseparable from faith. An invocation that is legitimate in its intention cannot but produce spiritual fruits, whether it stems from a desire to be saved, from a love of the spiritual and the Divine, or from an intellectual recognition of the primacy of the divine Reality – in all cases faith is a prerequisite for the invocation. How could one effectively and consistently perform that in which one has no faith? Here faith can be defined as a sincere trust in the Divine nature and virtue of the Name or sacred formula that is invoked. It is through faith, and through the persevering practice that is buttressed by legitimate intentions, that the invocation may deepen, and – far from being a merely mechanical or superficial utterance – become the center of one’s life, the sole contentment of one’s heart.

That the way of invocation is ‘easy’ cannot be denied since it is formally simple and accessible under all circumstances. It is plain that it is this “easiness” that makes it particularly appropriate for our time of “sounds and fury”. It is also more access, as a method, to contemporary men and women who are, for the most part, unable, or at least ill-fitted –given their poor psycho-spiritual constitution –to follow more complex and ascetic approaches to the Divine. This “easiness” does not preclude “difficulty” however, as is plain from the fact that the incessant solicitations of the world and the soul cannot but represent a challenge to a consistent practice. Moreover, the idea, that an effective spiritual practice should be “difficult” is predicated upon an emphasis on effort, therefore on the individual and human side of the “spiritual equation”. By contrast, the *tarikī* accentuation of the way of invocation –its reliance upon the Divine Other- takes stock of the intuition that “with God all things are possible”. Unburdening oneself of “what is” might in fact be “easier” than pretending one “is” when one “is not”; it is also much wiser. The category of “facility” and “difficulty” are too relative and too subjective to be of real import, especially when the matter is a recognition of Reality more than a tension of the will.

The way of the invocation is understood as being so powerful, and its practice places so much emphasis on the divine Presence and Grace, that it is not uncommon to

extend its prerogatives and effects to their ultimate consequences. There is a sense that nothing else matters, spiritually speaking, than the Name itself, the exclusive unicity of the means becomes virtually one with goal. It could even be said that the distinction between means and end becomes moot since “God and his Name are one”, as Ramakrishna has said. Even though this overemphasis might be ill-sounding to many who like to think of religion in psychological or moral terms, its must be acknowledged that is fundamentally no less than a full methodological recognition of the doctrine of the essential unity of Reality, such as is expressed in the Hindu Advaita Vedanta or in the Sufi “unicity of existence”, or simply – in more implicit and less metaphysical parlance – of the Absolute primacy of the Divine. On this level, the invocation is not only a prayer of the human to the Divine, it is also a prayer of the Divine to itself through a human intermediary.

Along with its reputation for ‘easiness’, *japa-yoga* is sometimes considered as a path well suited for individuals who are less intellectually gifted. This was, among others, the opinion of Shankaracharya, who favored the path of the intellectual discernment (*viveka*).¹⁴⁰ This reputation is directly connected to the needs of our time, a time when metaphysical acumen, and the very time to think and meditate, have grown more and more sparse. However, it could be unfair to reduce the way of invocation to a mere devotional practice involving no intellectual component. In principle, and often in fact, the way of the invocation can be associated with metaphysical meditation. It would be also inaccurate to limit it to the status of a methodical means toward an end –although it is undoubtedly that in some respects- since it also constitutes, and above all a most direct metaphysical “situation” in the axis of the divine Reality, although the Name that makes it present. As such, it may be defined as virtual knowledge. In a sense, the invocation leads to a future salvation, as not commonly understood by Jodo practitioners who seek to be reborn in the Pure Land; but in a deeper sense the invocation is a participation in reality, here and now.

¹⁴⁰ This did not prevent Shankara from engaging in Hindu devotions, nor from his full recognition of the spiritual validity of *japa*, as he eloquently testifies in the following hymn in honor of Govinda: “Remember, nothing can save thee at the last moment except the shelter of the Lord, so sing thou His sweet Name Govinda! Govinda! ... indulge not in formal ceremonies. Dwell in the Atman. Cross the Ocean of transmigration singing the sweet name – Govinda! Govinda! Govinda! (Bankley Beharis, *Sufis, mystics and Yogis*, Bombay Bharatiyah Vidya Bhavan, 1971, pp. 198-200)

The way of the invocation is at the junction of the two paths of “faith” and “works”, illustrated theologically by the “*ex opere operato*” of the Catholic Church and the “justification by faith” of the Protestant Church. The principle of “*ex opere operato*” maintains the objective validity of the sacrament, for instance the Eucharist, irrespective of the subjective conditions, such as the moral imperfection of the officiating subject or the faithful who participate in it. By contrast, and by reaction, the doctrine of justification through faith places an exclusive emphasis, with respect to spiritual and salvific effectiveness, on the subjective reality of faith as inner acceptance of truth *ex toto corde*. When analogically applied to the domain of jaculatory prayer these “extreme” principles corresponds, *mutatis mutandis*, to the recognition of the divine inherence in the Name, on the one hand and to the principle of complete trust in its saving power, on the other hand. The way of invocation normatively involves a kind of reciprocity between these two terms, in the sense that faith “actualizes” the objective and efficient power of the Name, while the Name “kindles” and nourishes faith within the heart of the practitioner. This reciprocity always pertains to a dimension of mystery because relative consciousness, the starting point of the path, cannot even begin to fathom the depth of absolute consciousness which is ultimately, and *a priori*, the source of spiritual work, and actually its sole agent and subject. In asking the enigmatic question “who invokes?” mentioned above, some Buddhist and Hindu masters have pointed to this mystery as something that will always remain out of the reach of the mind.¹⁴¹

The relationship between the way of the invocation and the systems of religious prescriptions, proscriptions and complex practices within which it unfolds and grows nearly entails tensions, or even oppositions, between its practitioners and their collective context. How could it be otherwise when the religious system that is embodied by an institution and a collective body finds itself confronted with a way that appears to relativize its forms and even transcend them? This fact is, for *japa-yoga*, the invocation is a synthesis of all laws and prescriptions while being also the essence of all scriptures. The invocation realizes the *raison d'être* of all religious practices since the latter ultimately

¹⁴¹ This is what Taitezu Unno beautifully suggest when he refers to the distinction between “growing rice”, “watching rice grow,” and “listening to rice growing”. These three ways correspond to the three types of practice: “practice as a mean to an end (growing rice), practice as focusing on the process rather than on the end (watching), and practice in which the end expresses itself (listening). (*Living in Amida's Universal Vow: Essays in Shin Buddhism*, edited by Albert Bloom, Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom, 2004, p.ix)

aim at recognizing, remembering and assimilating the supreme reality. It is true that the multiplicity of rules and practices is intended to address the variegated aspects of the human person and the collectivity on all levels of reality; however, it is not less true that *japa-yoga*, inasmuch as it infuses the whole of life, realizes, or contributes to realizing all the objectives of the religious laws and practices: it does so by orienting human activity toward our higher ends and by permeating the former with a greater measure of awareness and beauty, thereby fulfilling the spirit of religion as such. The synthetic character of the invocation can also be brought home by the simple and obvious fact that any state of urgency, and the moment of death is one *par excellence*, evokes a single call to God, not a plunging into complex practices or prayers.¹⁴² Before death, the Name of God is all that can be given and all that is needed; it summarizes our life and our being.

¹⁴² The last words of a stewardess who was to be among the victims the September 11 hijackings are most expressive in this respect: “She said, calmly, “I see water and buildings.” There was a pause, then in an entirely different tone of voice. “O my God!” Again a pause, and again “Oh my God!” It is probably safe to say that she was neither a Sufi nor an Hesychast, and that her last words began as an involuntary exclamation wrung from her shocked heart, not a consciously intended prayer. But instinctively and, I believe, unerringly in the final moments of her life, her soul found its true center, and at the last possible instant, she invoked God. Her last words were, I am convinced, truly an invocation” (Vincent Rossi, “Presence Participation, Performance: The Remembrance of God in the Early Hesychast Fathers,” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, edited by James Custing, Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom/Louisville, KY, Fons Vitae, 2002, p.111)