



The Poetry of Worship

By Michelle Valentino

*A poet is someone
Who can pour Light into a cup
and raise it to nourish your
beautiful parched holy mouth*

--Hafiz



April is National Poetry Month, which inspired me to write an article about poetry as a means of worship. That's potentially a huge topic, so I'm limiting the coverage to a short discussion of some of the works from India available in English translation that might be of interest to students at The Movement Center. I owe many thanks to Professor Alexis Sanderson, who shared both his insights and resources with me.

Many of us are familiar with devotional poetry by Utpaladeva, a tenth century Shaiva author who was the founder of the *Pratyabhijnā* philosophical tradition. Utpaladeva composed three longer hymns and a large number of single devotional verses for recitation in his daily worship. After his

death, the shorter verses were grouped into hymns and combined with the longer works to form the *Shivastotravali*. Utpaladeva's work is an expression of intense *bhakti* or longing, and is still revered by the Hindus of Kashmir. A sample verse:

Only those who are immersed
In the joy of fervent devotion
Know the essence, O Lord,
Of your boundless ocean of bliss.

(from Shaiva Devotional Songs of Kashmir: A Translation and Study of Utpaladeva's *Shivastotravali*, by Constantina Rhodes)

Another beloved collection of devotional poetry from Kashmir is by Lal Ded or Lalleśvarī, a 14th century female Shaiva mystic. Her verses, composed in the Kashmiri language, are called “Wākhs” or “verses.” An example:

Some leave their home, some the
hermitage,
But the restless mind knows no rest.
Then watch your breath, day and night,
And stay where you are.

(from Lal Ded, by Jayalal Kaul.
This book is out of print but the verses
can be found on the Kashmiri Overseas
Association website.) There are also
contemporary versions by Coleman
Barks, Swami Muktananda, and Ranjit
Hoskote.



Alexis Sanderson brought to my attention a variety of other poetic works in both the Shaiva and Buddhist traditions in the form of *stotras*. The word *stotra* is generally translated as “hymn,” as are *stuti* and *stava*, its synonyms. The words are all derived from the Sanskrit root that means “to praise” and, more specifically, “to celebrate in song.” *Stotras* can have many functions in both in public rituals and personal worship:

- a means to make an offering of the beauty of speech;
- a way of expressing what cannot be conveyed effectively in prose;
- a form of prayer to obtain some benefit, express praise, obtain protection, give thanks, or pay homage;
- to give rise to bhakti, fostering identification with and immersion in the deity.

Many *stotras* are intended for verbal recitation and contain at the end a statement of benefits to be obtained by doing so (a *phalasruti*). The *Lalitatrishati Stotra* that we recite in the mornings is a type of hymn called a *nāmastotra*, which consists of the names or epithets of a deity in an auspicious number (such as eight, twelve, three hundred or a thousand). The *phalasruti* for this hymn, as translated by Professor Sanderson, states, in part:

“The reward for [reciting] the Three Hundred Names is ten million times greater than that which is earned by recitations, hymns and acts of worship other than these.”

Here are three other hymns available online that might be of interest:

1. The *Bhairavastava* of Abhinavagupta, a short hymn to the fierce form of Shiva:
2. The *Śambhukṛpāmanoharastava* of the 17th-century Kashmirian Śaiva scholar Rājānaka Ratnakaṇṭha. In this hymn, Ratnakantha extols the virtue of simply remembering the name of

Shiva to deliver one from the misery of worldly existence. (Available on Professor Sanderson's website: <http://www.alexissanderson.com/publications.html>)

3. Hymn to the Buddha (*Śatapañcaśataka* or Hymn in One Hundred and Fifty Verses) by Mātṛceṭa, a famous hymn from the first century CE praising the virtues of Sakyamuni Buddha.

Namaste



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