

Praise: An Esoteric Practice

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[Published in *The Beacon*, July/August 1998.]

To praise is to commend, extol the attributes of, express warm appropriation of, or glorify a revered personage, particularly God. Our word “praise” comes from the Old French *preisier*, which also meant “prize.” Praise has been a conspicuous element of traditional religious practice. But it is rarely discussed in esoteric circles, and the Tibetan never used the word in his teachings, except in the purely human sense of praise of another person. Praise is often dismissed as a relic of emotional religion, entwined with devotion to or flattery of an external god.

However, praise may be more relevant to modern esoteric practice than is commonly supposed. This essay examines what praise is, or should be, and suggests that praise should form part of routine esoteric work. The author further asserts that praise is a universal response to divinity by humankind and all other kingdoms of nature, lower and higher.

Praise in Scripture

The scriptures of the world’s religions are replete with references to praise. In the *Rig Veda*, one of the world’s oldest books, we find Indra praised for his might in battle and also for his softer qualities:

Spirit! Confirmed in Your friendship,
We have no fear, O Lord of Might.
We glorify You with praises,
Invincible Lord of Victory...

Singing Your praise, O Mighty One.
I came full of grace to the water
And the workers of Truth stood by
Witnessing, O Lord of Song...

To Spirit, Who rules by His might
We have joyfully sung praises.
His blessings flow a thousandfold
And ever more abundantly.¹

And, in an ancient tradition of reverence for the natural order, a Celtic hymn offers praise to the sun:

Glory be to thee, O splendid Sun,
Glory to thee O Sun, face of the god of life.

The Psalms of David, in the Old Testament, give special emphasis to acts of praise. God is to be praised by his people, not just by verbal affirmation, but with song, dance, and music. Two passages that have enriched our culture and inspired great musical compositions are:

Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.
O let the nations be glad and sing for joy: for thou shalt judge the people righteously,
and govern the nations upon earth.

Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.
Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.
God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him.²

Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.

Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.

Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.

Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.³

Significant events in the New Testament also were greeted by expressions of praise. For example, Zacharias praised God and prophesied when his wife Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist.⁴ The birth of the Christ in Bethlehem was praised both by the shepherds and by angels:

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.⁵

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.⁶

“Praise” (along with related words, such as “praiseth” and “praising”) occurs 279 times in the Old Testament and 35 times in the New.⁷ Actually the single English word “praise” translates eight different Hebrew words and six Greek words. Two Hebrew verbs appear most frequently in the Old Testament. One is *halal* (הלל), which has a range of meanings including “to boast (upon),” “celebrate,” and “praise.” The word “Hallelujah” is derived from it. The other verb is *yadah* (יָדָה): “to stretch out one’s arms” either to throw a stone or to praise or give thanks. A less-common verb is *zamar* (זָמַר), which means “to sing praises or psalms” or “to play a musical instrument to accompany singing.” The most common Hebrew noun is *tehillah* (תְּהִלָּה), which means “a hymn of praise.” Also appearing frequently is *todah* (תּוֹדָה), which captures the broader notion of extending the hands in praise or worship. In the New Testament, two Greek verbs are *aineō* (αἰνεῶ), meaning simply “to praise,” and *humneō* (ὑμνεῶ), which means “to sing a hymn of praise.” The Greek noun *epainos* (ἐπαινος) means simply “laudation” or “praise.” However, *doxa* (δοξα) is used more frequently and captures the broader meaning of “dignity,” “honor,” “praise,” or “worship.” *Doxa* is the root of our word “doxology,” a hymn of praise.

The notion of praise clearly was refined over time. In the Old Testament, praise involved expressions of emotion that included dance and evocative gestures. Sometimes it arose from sheer exuberance, while at other times it had a more utilitarian purpose, for example, that God would be moved to protect his people from enemies or grant them a good harvest. Since flattery could sometimes influence a king’s judgment, praise could possibly soften God’s harshness. New Testament praise was more restrained, and a clearer distinction was drawn between acts of praise and prayers of petition or supplication.

Praise in Religious Devotion

Praise, associated closely with adoration, rejoicing, and thanksgiving, has played a major role in Christian devotion. A modern commentator describes praise as “a never-ending hymn of wonder at the unfathomable mystery of God in his Trinity, at the marvel of his love for us.” He goes on to say that Christian prayer “is a praise that has no end, an unceasing repeated, ever increasing praise...”⁸ It is no accident that the West’s most famous work of sacred music is the Hallelujah Chorus, the great expression of praise from George Frederick Handel’s *Messiah*.

Handel's contemporary, Edward Fitzgerald, remarked that the Hallelujah Chorus was "a chorus, not of angels, but of well-fed, earthly choristers."⁹ Nonetheless, prayers and hymns often link our expressions of praise with what is believed to be ceaseless, and perhaps more potent, praise of the angels. Singing praises is one of the angels' attributes most often mentioned. Significantly, the 6th century writer Dionysius the Areopagite identified nine *choirs* of angels. A few centuries earlier, the Essenes had identified twelve.

The *Gloria*, used in the Mass, except in Lent and Advent, includes general expressions of praise and thanksgiving but starts with the words of the angels rejoicing at the birth of the Christ:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace to men of good will.
We praise Thee.
We bless Thee.
We adore Thee.
We glorify Thee.
We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory...

Numerous Christmas carols recall the same Biblical story, including this popular one by Felix Mendelssohn:

Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King...

Join the triumph of the skies:
With th'angelic hosts proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.

The hymn of praise, *Te Deum*, not only mentions angels in general but invokes specifically the cherubim and seraphim, the two highest of Dionysius' nine choirs of angels:

We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting.
To thee all Angels cry aloud: the Heavens, and all the Powers therein;
To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry,
Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;
Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty of thy glory.

Christian praise has avoided much of the contamination of praise by petition or supplication, evident in earlier periods. However, many hymns of praise rejoice in God's blessings. The famous *Doxology*, often sung to the tune "Old Hundredth," reminds us that God is the source of all blessings:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

In the *Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon*, St. Francis of Assisi, like many before and after him, rejoices in divine beneficence. But, interestingly, in view of what we shall see later, he calls upon the forces of nature to sing with him:

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,

In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made...

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs...

Devotion to the Virgin Mary has increased steadily over the last millennium, sometimes rivaling devotion to God. Many prayers and hymns of praise reflect this increasing devotion. Perhaps in keeping with Mary's title of Queen of the Angels, her angelic subjects again are assumed to participate. For example, the Preface for feasts of the Blessed Virgin addresses Mary thus:

(W)e should praise, bless and proclaim Thee... Through whom the angels praise Thy majesty, the dominions worship it, and the powers stand in awe. The heavens and the heavenly hosts, with the blessed seraphim join together in celebrating their joy.

The devotions of other religious traditions contain their own hymns of praise. The following, from a Tibetan Buddhist devotion, praises both male and female individualities:

Give Praise to the Buddha!
Give Praise to the Dharma!
Give Praise to the Sangha!
Give Praise to the Beautiful One! The Great Devi!
She who is Completely Fulfilled and Whose Activities can be seen
everywhere like mountain peaks!

Through praise we speak to God, and God speaks to us, in an ongoing, joyous dialogue. Praise expresses our highest sentiments, calms the emotions, inspires a sense of peace, focuses the mind on the eternal, and brings people into closer communion with one another. Centuries of praise have sanctified places of worship, from small chapels to great cathedrals and temples, to oak groves and mountain peaks. Praise literally raises the vibration of participants and their environment.

The Cosmic Sound

Traditionally, praise has been expressed verbally or through song. The 14th century mystic, Meister Eckart, worried that words of praise, particularly spoken words, might be "dangerous, harmful, and unfitting... due to the imperfection which names and words entail and their distance from God's simplicity."¹⁰ But few people have shared his concerns. Most often, praise, as in the Old Testament, has been very audible. Psalm 66 contains the famous line: "Make a joyful noise unto God." The relationship between praise and sound has profound esoteric significance.

Ancient philosophies placed great emphasis on the Cosmic Sound or *Word*, the expression of Divine Will that brought the universe into being. "In the beginning was Brahman, with whom was the Word. And the Word is Brahman." This text, from the *Vedas*, was echoed thousands of years later in the first verse of St. John's Gospel.¹¹ In *Genesis* we read: "God said 'Let Their Be Light,'" implying that sound preceded light. In the Kabbalistic tradition, the Word is first uttered in the nascent universe by the Archangels of the Sephiroth and then repeated in a cascading chorus by echelons of lower angels.¹² As divinity descended into manifestation, the Word was made flesh. The rider of the white horse in Revelation, whose vesture bore the words "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," was named *Logos*.¹³ Vishnu, the second person of the Hindu *trimurti*, was sometimes referred to as "the Voice" or the "Great Singer."¹⁴

Humanity has tried to capture the Cosmic Sound in the *Om* or *Aum*, the Christian *Amen*, the Moslem *Amin*, and the Tibetan *Hum*. Some authorities link these words also to the Hebrew *Eheieh*, as in God's revelation to Moses in *Exodus*: "*Eheieh asher Eheieh*," translated as "I AM THAT I AM." The Tibetan remarked that the mantric rhythm of the Great Invocation is responsible for deeper penetration of higher energies into the earth plane than has previously been possible.¹⁵

The Sanskrit language distinguishes between *ahata*, or audible sound, and *anahata*, or inaudible sound. *Anahata* is a closer approximation to the Cosmic Om, but *ahata* can influence not only people's minds but also the order of the universe. Hindu chants were designed to ensure that the sun rose each morning and the seasons progressed on schedule.

Divine energies are released into the world through music, but they can also be invoked through music.¹⁶ Plato wrote "Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul... imparting grace." It is no accident that, until recently, music was viewed primarily as a spiritual art, and many of the world's greatest musical compositions have had spiritual themes. Martin Luther remarked: "I place music next to theology and give it my highest praise." Two hundred years later, Johann Sebastian Bach was to assert that music was intended for the glory of God and the betterment of mankind. Few composers expressed that intent more successfully than he did.

The OM resonates with many natural and man-made sounds. The sound of gongs summons Tibetan monks to their offices, drums summon Native Americans to their rituals, and tolling bells summon Christians to church. The Master Koot Humi, an accomplished organist, is reported to communicate through his music with the *Gandharvas*, or Devas of Music.¹⁷ The *Gandharvas* are regarded in Hindu tradition as embodiments of the OM. César Franck, the distinguished French composer of organ music, is reported to have been able to invoke the same devas whose song is heard in the sounds of nature.¹⁸ The rich folklore of fairy musicians attests to a similar truth. Another French composer, Claude Debussy, heard music in rippling water, and the Russian Alexander Scriabin sought to capture the sounds of a summer evening. Oscar Hammerstein wrote:

The hills are alive
With the sound of music.
With songs they have sung
For a thousand years.

The Cosmic Sound is associated also with light. In a meditation by Paramahansa Yogananda, we read:

The cosmic sound is comingling with millions of multicolored rays. The cosmic sound has entered the realm of cosmic rays. Listen to, behold, and feel the embrace of the cosmic sound and the eternal light... And the light enters the bosom of infinite joy.¹⁹

The twin vibrations of sound and light pervade the whole of creation. Rhythm is the basic motion of the physical world, from the vibration of atoms, molecules, and crystals to the rotational and orbital motions of planets, stars, and galaxies. The rhythm of celestial motions inspired Pythagoras to speak of the Harmony of the Spheres. Every living being, from the smallest cell to the planetary Gaia and beyond, is ruled by internal and external rhythms. The Ageless Wisdom has related the energies of the chakras to sounds and colors.

Symphony and Synthesis

Praise has often been interpreted as an act of devotion to something or someone outside us. The people of Israel stretched out their arms to Jehovah and raised their voices in praise and supplication. Christians and others offer praise to a transcendent God who rules over us and showers us with his blessings. But praise can also be interpreted as an invocation of the higher consciousness *within* us, a recognition of our own individual and collective divinity. Regular acts of praise can establish right relationships among the various levels of our being and between us and the rest of creation.

Our praise can link us with the devic kingdom, whose denizens range from the lowliest nature spirit to the highest archangel. To the extent that consciousness manifests at all levels of creation, we can also conceive of praise extending to the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms. It is as though they are saying, “It’s good to be alive.” We need to link our praise with theirs also. If we can make our praise resonate with that of our cousins on parallel evolutionary paths, what will this mean, and what implications can it have for the planet?

If we acknowledge that praise is an affirmation of life and the omnipresence and immanence of God, we may need to expand its definition to capture the richness of meaning. Perhaps the following will serve as a starting point:

PRAISE IS CREATION’S JOYOUS RESPONSE TO ITS OWN DIVINITY.

The different movements and tones of praise that spans the kingdoms need to be brought together, not in unison but in symphony—not in unity but in *synthesis*. The synthesizing principle is Will. For the lower kingdoms, the expression of will is unconscious and instinctive. But we, members of the 4th kingdom blessed with *manas*, can ensoul our praise with the intentional recognition of divinity. Through praise we can build a global thoughtform which attests to the immanence of God and the brother-/sisterhood of all creation. Perhaps the other kingdoms can show us how to do this more effectively.

Praise is an affirmation of the Will-to-Good. In raising our voices in praise, we activate the throat chakra which expresses individual will. We purposefully add our praise to the combined chorus of the kingdoms of nature. We can do this by means of the spoken word, chant, and song as well as by instrumental music and dance. The OM that we chant in meditation has special significance because it captures, however imperfectly, the Cosmic Sound. Emotional or physical expression is not out of place, so long as mental focus and intent guide it.

Where does praise fit in with other esoteric practices, such as the Great Invocation, World Goodwill, or the Triangles? It can provide an atmosphere, an ambiance, in which those practices can be more powerful. Just as devotional praise raised the vibration of places of worship, our symphony of praise can raise the vibration and anoint the very fabric of creation. In Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, the words of Christ are accompanied by an instrumental *continuo* often described as a musical halo or aura. Praise can provide a similar continuo underlying—or overshadowing—everything else we do. Cyril Scott concluded his book with a statement attributed to the Master K.H.:

Today, as we enter this new Age, we seek, primarily through the medium of inspired music, to diffuse the spirit of unification and brotherhood, and thus quicken the vibration of this planet.²⁰

Our chants, mantras, hymns, music, and dance joyously affirm the divinity and communion of all creation. The Earth, ringing with the sounds of praise, is on its way to becoming a sacred planet.

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- ¹ Jean LeMée (Ed.). *Hymns from the Rig-Veda*. Borzoi, 1975.
- ² Psalm 67:3-7 (KJV).
- ³ Psalm 150:1-6 (KJV).
- ⁴ Luke 1:64-67. (KJV)
- ⁵ Luke 2:20. (KJV).
- ⁶ Luke 2:13. (KJV).
- ⁷ Data for the King James Version.
- ⁸ Jean Daujat. *Prayer*. Hawthorn, 1964, p. 70.
- ⁹ Percy Young. *The Oratorios of Handel*. Dobson, 1949, p. 112.
- ¹⁰ Bernard McGinn (Ed.). *Meister Eckert: Teacher and Preacher*. Paulist Press, 1986, pp. 98-99..
- ¹¹ David Tame. *The Secret Power of Music*. New York: Destiny Books, 1984, p. 205.
- ¹² Geoffrey Hodson. *The Kingdom of the Gods*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1952, p.231.
- ¹³ Revelation 19:13 (KJV).
- ¹⁴ David Tame, *op. cit*, , p. 214.
- ¹⁵ Alice Bailey. *Externalization of the Hierarchy*. Lucis Trust, 1957, p.659.
- ¹⁶ David Tame, *op. cit*, , p. 23.
- ¹⁷ Charles W. Leadbeater. *The Masters and the Path*. Theosophical Publishing House, 1925, p. 34.
- ¹⁸ Cyril Scott. *Music: Its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages*. Aquarian Press, 1933, pp. 118-123.
- ¹⁹ Paramahansa Yogananda. *Metaphysical Meditations*. Self-Realization Fellowship, 1973, p. 36.
- ²⁰ Cyril Scott, *op.cit*, p. 204.

Table 1
Occurrences of “Praise” in the King James Bible
(a) Old Testament*

Hebrew Word	Meaning	Occurrences
Verbs:		
halal	To make a show, boast (upon), or shine; to be (clamorously) foolish; to rave; to celebrate; to commend; to give in marriage; to be worthy of praise.	166
yadah	To hold out the hand; to throw (a stone, an arrow); to revere or worship (with extended hands); to bemoan (by wringing the hands); to confess; to praise or give thanks.	114
zamar	To strike with the fingers]; to touch the strings or parts of a musical instrument, i.e. play upon it; to make music, accompanied by the voice; to celebrate in song and music: to give praise, sing forth praises, psalms.	43
shabach	To address in a loud tone; to pacify by words: to commend, glory, keep in, praise, still, triumph.	11
shebach	To adulate or adore: to praise.	5
Nouns:		
tehillah	Laudation; a hymn of praise.	57
towdah	An extension of the hand in adoration; a choir of worshippers; a confession; (a sacrifice of) praise or thanksgiving; an offering.	32
mahalal	Fame; praise	1

(b) New Testament*

Greek Word	Meaning	Occurrences
Verbs:		
aineo	To praise (God):--praise.	9
humneo	To sing a hymn; to celebrate (God) in song; to give praise.	6
Nouns:		
doxa	Glory; dignity; honour; praise; worship.	170
epainos	Laudation; a commendable thing; praise.	11
ainos	A story; praise (of God); praise.	2
ainesis	The act of praising; thanksgiving; praise.	1

* The total number of occurrences exceeds occurrences of the English word “praise” because the Hebrew and Greek words may be given some other translation.