

[Dispense with that Awful Word](#)

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MY TURN

## Dispense with that Awful Word

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Among the many problems faced by Hindus is finding appropriate English terminology for Sanskrit terms. This is important for those who seek to understand, practice and transmit their tradition outside of India. This is not always an easy matter, and appropriate substitutes are often difficult to find. Sometimes one has to be content with selecting from a number of imperfect alternatives, and careful thought has to be exercised when all the choices are inadequate. Some English terms are more advantageous than others. They become the means by which our beliefs are represented to people outside our tradition as well as to a new generation of English-speaking Hindus.

The term murti is familiar to all Hindus and is used to indicate the various representations of God in our temples and homes. Perhaps the most widely used English term to translate murti is idol. I often shudder when I hear a Hindu guide, giving a temple tour to a visitor, describing the murtis on the altar or in the sanctum as idols. The problem is that this term is commonly used today to indicate something which is false and untrue. In the West, still deeply influenced by the views of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the term has a specific religious connotation. An idol is a false God, and idolatry is a term of rebuke and moral disapproval. We cannot ignore that Hindus have been and continue to be condemned by many for so-called "idolatrous practices." How strange it is for us to appropriate a term to describe ourselves which others use to condemn us! Perhaps there should be a serious and concerted effort to avoid its use.

The word statue is also frequently used to refer to a murti, but this has its own drawbacks. It describes a sculptured, cast or molded figure, human being or an animal. Usually it approximates to the original size of the person or animal it represents.

The term image is also used in place of murti and is an accurate indication of the form which it represents. Murtis are meant to focus our minds on God. Unlike the word image, the viewer is not asked to believe that the murti is actually how God appears.

The search for a suitable English rendering of murti, however, is not fruitless. I recommend the adoption of the term icon. While there is some broad usage, it is employed primarily to denote a religious representation or figure. Icons are treated with respect because they represent that which is sacred. In the popular culture of the West, the term does not resonate negatively. From icon is derived the term iconography, which literally means "writing with icons." Iconography describes one of the central purposes of murtis in the Hindu tradition. Each murti is a nonverbal statement about the nature of God. Like a scripture consisting of words, a murti communicates knowledge about the Divine, and the viewer must be equipped with the necessary skills to "read" the meaning of the murti. For example, the symbolic gestures of the murti, among others, are a visual text or theology.

As Hindus continue to make the geographical transition from East to West, we cannot be indifferent or heedless about the challenges of making the linguistic transition. It is necessary to be spiritually creative in finding new words and symbols to express ourselves confidently in order to transmit our tradition to new generations.

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