

22. The Immortal Bhaktas

AMONG all forms of *Sadhana*, *Bhakti* (devotion to the Lord) is the easiest and holiest. *Bhakti* is derived from the root "*Bhaj*", with the suffix "*thi*." It means *Seva* (Service). It denotes a feeling of friendship coupled with awe.

For one who is a creature of the *gunas* (*Satwa*, *Rajas*, *Tamas*), to understand what transcends the *gunas*, an attitude of humility and reverence is required. "*Bhaja Sevaayaam*" (worship the Divine through *Seva*). *Bhakti* calls for utilising the mind, speech and body to worship the Lord. It represents total love. Devotion and love are inseparable and interdependent. *Bhakti* is the means to salvation. Love is the expression of *Bhakti*.

Narada declared that worshipping the Lord with boundless love is *Bhakti*. Vyasa held that performing worship with love and adoration is *Bhakti*. Garga Rishi declared that serving the Lord with purity of mind, speech and body is *Bhakti*. Yajnavalkya held that true *Bhakti* consists in controlling the mind, turning it inwards and enjoying the bliss of communion with the Divine. Another view of *Bhakti* is concentration of the mind on God and experiencing oneness with the Divine.

Win love through love

Although many sages have expressed different views about the nature of *Bhakti*, the basic characteristic of devotion is Love. Love is present in every human being in however small a measure. The *riva* (individual) is an aspect of the Divine, who is the supreme embodiment of Love. Man also is an embodiment of Love, but because his love is directed towards worldly objects, it gets tainted and he is unable to get a vision of God in all His beauty.

Ordinarily people regard offering worship to God, reciting His name and meditating on Him as constituting *Bhakti*. True devotion really means installing the Divine in the heart and enjoying the bliss of that experience. It is the mystic union of the individual soul and the Universal. When the devotee prays ardently from the depths of the heart and his love gushes forth, *Bhakti* is manifested. Winning love through love is the vital aspect of devotion. Prayer does not mean merely appealing to God for favours. It is a means of conveying to God one's troubles, desires and aspirations and offering all one's merits and the fruits of one's actions to God. The basic quality of devotion is the yearning for realising oneness with the Divine.

Two kinds of devotion

Devotion is of two kinds. One is acquiring knowledge about God and transforming oneself thereby. This is a natural process by which one starts with the physical, proceeds to the mental and ultimately attains the spiritual goal of mergence in the Divine. But in taking to this path of knowledge, only the individual concerned can benefit. In the second type of devotion, the devotee not only benefits himself, but shares his experience with others and benefits them also. Such a devotee not only saves himself but helps others to save themselves.

Love is flowing in an endless stream through humanity all the time. By turning this love towards worldly objects and fleeting pleasures man is missing the opportunity to make life purposeful and to secure enduring bliss. Man should direct this love towards God to attain the true goal of life. Love of the Divine. is not developed by secular education or scriptural studies. It springs from the heart. One who is filled with love of the Divine will not be attracted by anything, else in the world. Nor will he submit to anything demeaning or unworthy.

Love is selflessness. The devotee filled with love of the Lord welcomes what may appear as punishing, as something for his good. Even when the Lord appears to be angry, His compassion is evident. Even in punishment, God's kindness will be seen. Hence, no one should cherish a grievance that he is being singled out for punishment. Even punishment is a means of leading one to God. The display of anger is for safeguarding the devotee. The true devotee is one who recognises this truth and welcomes whatever happens to him as intended for his good. Eschewing interest in worldly concerns, he should concentrate on means to realise the Divine.

Nine ways of devotion

Nine ways of expressing devotion to God and attaining Him have been described by the sages. They are: *Sravanam* (listening to God's glories), *Keerthanam* (singing the glories of God), *Vishnusmaranam* (ever remembering the Lord), *Paadasevanam* (worshipping the Lord's feet), *Archanam* (offering daily worship), *Vandanam* (prostration), *Daasyam* (dedicated service), *Sneham* (friendliness) and *Atmanivedanam* (total surrender). Many devotees who have pursued one or other of these methods have been high-souled persons, some of whom have been great emperors.

Sravanam: King Parikshit, the moment he learnt that he had been cursed by Sringi to meet with death in seven days, summoned all the sages to ascertain how best he could utilise every moment of the remaining life span given to him. He felt that waste of time is waste of life. He appealed to the sages to advise him how best he could use the seven days left for him. When the Sage Suka entered the assemblage, the king requested him to redeem his life by converting what was a curse into a blessing. Suka taught the king continuously night and day all about the Supreme Lord and His incarnations and glories. Listening to Suka's words, Parikshit was immersed in an ocean of bliss. All the sages present felt equally ecstatic and were lost in contemplation and love of the Lord. By enjoying the stories about the Lord, Parikshit was filled with devotion and experienced the Lord within him. He exemplifies how devotion can find the highest expression in merely listening to the glories of the Lord.

Keerthanam: Sage Suka taught how by listening to the exploits of the Lord, singing His glories and constantly reciting His name, the supreme goal of God realisation can be achieved. Suka experienced the bliss of union with the *Brahman* by revelling in singing His glories.

Vishnusmaranam: Prahlada is the supreme example of the devotee who always centered his thoughts on Vishnu regardless of whether he was subject to pain or pleasure. "Namo Narayana" was his response to every ordeal. He was ceaselessly repeating the names of the Lord without any concern for the tortures to which he was subjected by the demons deputed by Hiranyakasipu. He was neither afraid nor distressed. Prahlada was fully conscious that the body composed of the five elements was perishable while the Indweller was eternal. Hence he did not care what happened to the body. All his thoughts were ever concentrated on God.

Paadasevanam: Not all devotees get the opportunity to worship the feet of the Lord. Even when the opportunity is available most people use it for material purposes. Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, is the supreme example of one who dedicated herself totally to the worship of the Lord's feet, regarding the Feet as the source of the entire creation, holding them supremely sacred owing to their being washed by Brahma himself, wondering at them as feet which had measured the whole cosmos, and venerating them as all-pervading.

Archanam: Emperor Prithu stands out as the exemplar of this type of devotion. In all circumstances, Prithu adhered to the worship of Hari as his primary occupation. He saw the Lord in everything in the universe. Hence, he dedicated every thought, word and deed to the Divine.

Vandanam: Akrura is an illustrious example of a devotee who sanctified his life by constantly prostrating before the Lord and offering obeisance to Him with humility and purity. *Vandanam* does not mean merely folding the palms together and offering salutations. It means offering to the Lord all that the *jnanendriyas and karmendriyas* (the sense organs and the organs of action) do in a spirit of total surrender. Akrura worshipped the Lord in this spirit of total submission to the Divine will. Hence he could get a vision of Vishnu everywhere.

Daasyam (service): Hanuman is the great exemplar of this type of devotion. Concentrating on the name of Rama and rendering service to Rama were Hanuman's preoccupation all the time. He was no ordinary being. He was a master of the 64 sciences and arts. Rama described him as a hero of peace, who possessed immense strength and wisdom. In everything he handled, Hanuman would examine whether it had Rama's name on it. If it was not there, he would discard even a precious gem as a useless piece of stone. While building the bridge to Lanka, Hanuman hurled rocks into the sea uttering the name of Rama and they rose to the surface. The letters "Ra" and "Ma" were written on separate stones and when they were thrown into the sea they joined together on the surface and thus the bridge was formed.

Each hair of Hanuman was echoing the name of Rama. He was a devotee who remembered Rama at all times, whether in joy or sorrow. He had no sense of ego. He had given up all feeling of "mine" and "thine." When the *rakshasas* asked him in Lanka who he was, he firmly declared: "I am a *dasa* of the Lord of Kosala (Rama)." In all situations he described himself as a servant of Rama.

Qualities of a real devotee

Those who call themselves devotees these days put on the sacred ash on their foreheads while going to a temple and rub it off on their return. When they are near Swami they behave like devotees. But when they go to a place where religion is in disfavour, they explain away their visits to Puttaparthi in a casual manner and declare that they are not devotees of Swami. What value is to be attached to the devotion of such pusillanimous persons? Real devotion consists in courageously standing up for your faith anywhere at any time. Hanuman was such a courageous and steadfast devotee. By his devoted services to the Lord he 'redeemed his life and became immortal.

Maithri (friendship): The great exemplar of this kind of devotion is Arjuna. Arjuna and Krishna lived together closely. Arjuna accompanied Krishna like a shadow. He experienced innumerable troubles and was subjected to calumny and abuse. But through all these experiences, he did not allow his faith in Krishna to waver. He always prayed: "Krishna! You are my sole hope and refuge. There is none other to protect me." In this way, looking upon Krishna as friend, kinsman and alter ego, Arjuna relied on Krishna for everything. Krishna, for his part, was even ready to act as Arjuna's charioteer in battle. Arjuna made Krishna the charioteer of his life. Krishna thereby acquired the appellation *Parthasarathy*--the charioteer of Partha (Arjuna).

Atmanivedanam (Or *Atmaarpanam*) (Surrender of the self): Emperor Bali, the grandson of Prahlada, was an example of a devotee who completely surrendered to the Lord, offered everything he possessed to the Lord and thereby sanctified his life. He was totally dedicated in

his devotion to the Lord. He was prepared to offer his head to the Lord and go down to the nether-world. No sacrifice was too great for him to win the Lord's grace. When his *guru*, Sukracharya, advised him to go back on the gift he had promised to Vamana, Bali rejected the advice, declaring that his life, his body and all that he had belonged to the Lord.

Devotion and society

Many high-souled men and great rulers practised these different ways of devotion in the past and held themselves forth as examples to the world. Devotion, the sages felt, should not be solely for achieving individual salvation. It should find expression in some kind of collective action. Offering worship or prayer in seclusion and for one's own sake savours of some kind of selfishness. The ancients felt that the Divine cannot be attained by one who is self-centered. Even among Christians and Muslims, there is the practice of some one reading passages from the scriptures which are repeated by the congregation that is present. The Indian sages valued community prayers for the welfare of the world as good for the individual and the world.

In the year 1459 A.D., Guru Nanak, the first Sikh *guru*, started the practice of *bhajans* (community singing). This practice gathered momentum over the years and in 1798, the great South Indian saint-composer Tyagaraja invested *Bhajans* with *raga* and *tala* (musical form and rhythm). Since then *bhajans* have acquired national vogue in all parts of the country.

***Bhajans* are intended to harmonise feelings**

Bhajans should not be treated as one way of spending time. They are intended to harmonise the feelings, the singing, and the rhythmic beats of the participants so that they experience in unison the oneness of the Divine. Such *bhajans* are considered spiritually efficacious. *Bhakti* (devotion) should be given pride of place in *Bhajans*. They should be surcharged with love. When *bhajans* were first introduced in villages, Tyagaraja began with the song: "Come, all ye blessed ones, come, and let us join in singing the glory of Sri Rama". He also said that when they have Kodandapani (Rama with the *Kodanda* bow) on their side, they need not fear Dandapani (Yama, the Lord of Death).

It was in this spirit of intense love for the Lord and pure devotion that *bhajans* were started in the past. But in *bhajans* today this spirit of holiness is absent. More importance is given to *raga* and *tala* (the tune and the rhythm) than to *Bhava* (the feeling) and *raga* (the melody). The attempt is more to please the hearers by sweet singing than to promote in them finer feelings of devotion. The feelings expressed in the *bhajans* should melt the hearts of the participants and move them to their depths.

The essence of *Bhakti* is Love and not formal exercises in *japa* or worship of various kinds. Worship should be offered to the Divine who resides in all beings. Love is God: live in love. Love is the means of realising the bliss of the Self, which is centered in ourselves. It need not be sought elsewhere. It can be found within one's self when all thoughts are controlled and the mind is turned inwards. Dedicate all actions to the Lord. This is the highest knowledge. It is the summum bonum of existence. Love should become a way of life. That alone is true devotion.

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You must realise that the grace of the Divine cannot be got by sweet talk or singing songs. When your hearts are pure the Divine will dwell in them.

The Divine is not pleased by showy offerings or expensive paraphernalia. A loving heart is the only means to Divine Grace.

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