

3. The Ladder That Enables An Ignorant Person Become A Liberated Soul

Young students!

Today, the question arises in the mind of every youth, whether our country Bharath, deserves to be called by that name. We are experiencing Indian culture at the present moment in a most ridiculous manner. For instance, the only significance that has remained in respect of the *Gayatri Manthra* is the ritual of holding tight the tip of your nose. The *sanyasi* is carrying a burden on him which is perhaps even more than the burden that the head of a family carries. When we talk of *pranayama* (regulation of breath), it looks to us as something trivial. It has deteriorated into a meaningless process.

In this context, there should be no surprise if we get a doubt whether India really deserves to be called

by her ancient name Bharath, and whether in Indian culture there is any significance left for us at all. It is true and natural that in every country, after some time, a situation of this kind arises and such deterioration sets in. Depending upon the nature of the country, the passage of time and the individuals who live in that country, such deterioration sets in at different times. When such a deterioration sets in, God will appear in human form either in the garb of a *Paramahansa* (Realised sage) or as an *Avatar* for the purpose of re-establishing righteousness and restoring the original traditions.

Many years ago, when in this country, righteousness and all that was dependent upon *dharma* was on the decline, Adi Sankara appeared on the scene and propagated the ancient and *Vedic dharma* in the form of *Adwaitha* or non-dual philosophy. He also established several well-known seats of learning all over India. The first signs of such decline in *dharma* were noticed as long ago as 5000 years. This was when Lord Krishna gave up his mortal coil.

More recently, in the year the name of which was Nandana, in the month the name of which was Vaisakhi, and on a day called Panchami, a Sunday, and in the early hours of the morning which we call *Brahma* Muhurtha, in a place called Kaladi, a village in Kerala, Sankaracharya took birth. At the early age of five years, Adi Sankara learnt the *Gayatri Mantra*. Having learnt the *Gayatri Mantra* and through its exposition, by the

time he attained the age of fourteen years, he had learnt all that was contained in the *Vedas*. In this manner, he had the determination to spread the cult of spirituality throughout the world. Sankara was a great individual who, during his lifetime, wrote commentary on all the *Upanishads* in easily understandable language for the benefit of all people. He prepared the texts and his commentary acquired the name *Sankara Bhashya*. He devoted all the time that was available to him and all the energy that was in his body for the purpose of propagating the sacred Indian culture all over India.

In the pursuit of this programme, he travelled all over India. During his travels, he lived in Benares for some time. His fourteen important disciples accompanied him. It was his daily routine to move about, along with his disciples, through the streets of Benares and to teach and preach his philosophy. He visited various houses of Brahmins in Benares and established the scriptural authorities for them.

Sankara, during one such travels through the streets, noticed that in a house belonging to an old Brahmin, the owner of the house was reciting some rules of grammar. At that time Sankara entered the house, and he carried on a conversation with the Brahmin. Sankara asked the Brahmin to tell him what he expected to get by reciting the rules of grammar. The Brahmin replied that he had a big family, was unable to support such a big family and that he was acquiring some knowledge

of grammar with which he hoped to go about and earn a little money to support his big family. Sankara then told the Brahmin all that was needed to be told and said that reciting rules of grammar will not help him. Sankara returned to his place and decided to put his advice in the form of a verse and that was what happened that day. The substance of the verse which Sankara then composed and began to sing along with his devotees, is as follows:

శుభశోభించం - శుభశోభించం
 శుభశోభించం - మోక్షమతే,
 సంశ్రాంతైః సన్మహితైకాత్రై
 మోక్షమోక్షమేతి ముక్తార్థకరతైః.

హరిశోభించా, హరిశోభించా:
 హరిశోభించా దేవదామంతా:
 మృత్యుశ్చ నాశ్చనమోక్షమప్రశు
 ప్నోకశబ్దము వానాశమశా.

Sing the glory of Lord Govinda. Utter the name of Lord Govinda, Oh! you ignorant person! You should go on uttering the name of the Lord. It will not be possible for you to do so when death faces you and you are close to it. Reciting rules of grammar cannot save you.

While the greatness of Sankara was evident in this verse itself, his disciples were also very scholarly persons and they wanted to satisfy their *guru* by

exhibiting their abilities. Each one of the disciples then composed a verse, and altogether fourteen verses were composed at that time by the fourteen disciples. As soon as the fourteen disciples thus composed fourteen verses, Adi Sankara himself was pleased and gave expression to his pleasure by composing what has since come to be known as *Dwadasa Manjari* or the series of twelve verses.

He then began thinking and came to the conclusion that teaching and preaching should be followed by some form of blessing by the *guru* in order that one may get full benefit and therefore gave four more verses in the form of blessing. In this manner, after having composed a total of thirty-one verses, the name of *Moha Mudgara* was given to those verses, and they were handed over to posterity as the *Bhaja Govinda* series. The most important thing that has been communicated in these verses is the word *moodhamathi* (one so foolish that he cannot understand or grasp). We have to ask, who in this context is the *moodhamathi* or the one that cannot understand. Sankara himself has given a beautiful answer to this question and the answer is contained in the sentence "*Nastiko Moodha Udyate.*" That is one who does not believe in God or one who is an *Anatmavadi*, who does not accept the existence of *Atma*, is the foolish man referred to here. These words "*Nastiko Moodha Udyate*" have been used by Dharmaraja in the *Mahabharatha* in the part which relates to the questions put by the Yaksha. Today, we

are understanding that *moodhamathi* signifies one who is a total materialist.

We have to make some further enquiry as to what this word means. There are very few people who realise the truth in the statements, “I am not the body. The body is something that is temporary and will perish. I, on the other hand, am imperishable and I am the immortal child of Divinity.”

When we look at these from the worldly aspect, there are many facets that may be noted. One is to tell oneself, I am born in this body, I am growing in this body, and I have the right to enjoy the various pleasures of this world with this body. One may waste his life in this manner.

Another aspect is that, when I can decide as to what I like and what I dislike, where does God come into the picture? Why should I have any faith in God and invoke His blessings for my likes and dislikes? It is not as if there is no other aspect which is quite the opposite of these. Some people feel that they are paying rent for the house in which they live, that they are paying taxes for the professions they engage in, that they are paying for the water, electricity and for practically everything that they use in their daily lives. They question the need for faith in God in any context. It is true that such people are paying taxes for all worldly possessions like a house, water, light, power and so on.

They should also ask themselves what taxes they are paying to mother earth for providing all amenities and for meeting many of our requirements, thus enabling man to carry on his daily life. They should also ask themselves what taxes they are paying to the sun, to the moon and to the space around us for providing the needed light, air and the capacity to work. These unseen powers, which keep us going, are not being paid anything in return.

Scientists can only study and describe the qualities of existing materials. They can divide them into components, reconstitute them into new compounds, and reshape them according to processes which they can explain. No scientist can create things which do not exist. Is man able to produce all the water he needs by mixing elemental substances like hydrogen and oxygen? Is he able to produce natural rain where it does not exist? Is he able to produce oxygen when he finds the need to carry it all the way with him to keep his life process going? Are the scientists able to create the sun and the stars which are the sources that give the necessary light and energy for the existence of man? Occasionally, the scientists may put together a few elemental substances and create artificially small quantities of new materials, but are they able to create the life-giving substances like oxygen, air and water for sustaining the created life on earth? It is not possible for anyone to do so. They can be created only at God’s will and pleasure. The person

who realises this truth that all creation is at God's will and pleasure can be said to be one who is not a *moodhamathi*.

In some cities, there is a shortage of drinking water and scientists are trying to convert the saltish ocean water into drinking water. In this attempt, they may be partially successful; but wherefrom will they get the drinking water if ocean water itself, which is the source, is not available. Thus in all cases, the original substance or the source, if we make a careful analysis and enquiry, is God given and no scientist can create it.

No matter how high a position and capacity a scientist may have achieved in his profession, he can have no connection with things beyond the five elemental substances, earth, water, fire, air, and space. God is behind the curtain and beyond these five elements. God exhibits His powers outside the region of these five elements. Man operates within the region of these five elements. So long as the intimate connection, as we know it in our daily lives, exists between man and the five elements, man cannot understand the true significance of the *Paramatma Thathwa* (Elemental principle). To some extent, we can make use of the five elements to make things easy and comfortable for ourselves in this material world, but that process should be only for the purpose of understanding the Divine aspect or the *Paramatma*. On the contrary, to try and confine ourselves within the domain of the

five elements for the purpose of understanding God's ways or working in the belief that God can be brought down to the material plane on which we choose to build our sensory desires will be tantamount to wasting our time.

One who is able to understand and realise the truth that these five elements are the creation of God and that they are created at his pleasure is one who understands things in their proper perspective. One who does not understand and accept this perspective as the ultimate truth is a *moodhamathi*. It means that so long as you do not yearn for the grace of God and so long as you allow your life and its activities to get mixed up with the five elements around you, you will be meeting with a great many disappointments and difficulties. You will be wasting your life and there is no escape from the truth that you will be spending your life like a *moodhamathi*.

In the second half of the verse, Sankara is saying that as your death is drawing close and as your end is nearing, reciting rules of grammar will not help you. For man, amongst all the fears that come his way, the fear of death is the most terrifying one. At the time of death, the feeling generally is not just that a *lakh* (hundred thousand) of scorpions are crawling on you; it is as painful as if a lakh of scorpions are stinging you all the time. Sankara is telling you that when death, of which you are afraid in such an extreme manner, approaches you and you are suffering great pain, nothing except the

thought of God can save you. That is what he means by saying that reciting the rules of grammar or recollecting your scholarship in various fields will not save you when you are close to death.

For the verse *Bhaja Govindam, Govindam Bhaja*, there are varied interpretations given by many learned scholars; and the word *Govindam* has been assigned several meanings. But the real meaning of *Govindam* is that it refers to one who looks after the cows or tends the cows. The inner meaning is that it refers to one who has control over the animal nature in man. There is some animal nature which is remaining as a residue in man. This residual animal nature of man has to be changed and transformed. One who is able to transform this animal nature in man is Govinda. For an animal, human nature is inaccessible as a goal, but for man, Divine nature is accessible as a goal. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a residual animal nature in man and we have to enquire what is meant by this animal nature. When we show green grass to an herbivorous animal, it is attracted, comes close and expresses its pleasure by moving its tail. The same animal runs away if you take a stick and go to beat it. In this manner, man today is attracted, comes close if you show him some money, but if you are angry and shout at him, he runs away. Is this not animal nature in human beings?

On the other hand, as human beings, we should not be afraid nor should we cause fear to others. We are

not cattle to be afraid and we are not animals to cause fear to other. However, when some wrong deeds come to our notice or when something false is said, then to expose the truth separated from untruth and punish the persons responsible for such misdeeds should be the accepted qualities of man. These cannot be the qualities of an animal. So when we utter the word Govinda, we must understand and discriminate between wrong and right and punish the person for his wrong deeds and reward him for his good deeds. To carry on the improvement of human nature so as to move closer to the Divine is thus the aspect of Govinda. Every day you have to think of Govinda, utter His name and develop faith and confidence in Him. It is not possible to do otherwise and yet be happy.

Another meaning of the word Govinda is that it is an uttered sound. Whether it is for the words that are uttered by man or for the sounds that are produced by animals or for what has been said in the *Vedas*, there is only one base. There may be superficial differences in the quality, but the base is the same sound for all of them. Therefore, this alternative meaning enables us to look at Govinda as the personification of sound or *sabda*. *Gam* or cow, *Bhumin* or earth, *Ved* or *Vedas* and *Swarga* or heaven: He who represents all these things is Govinda. This word *Bhumin* also gives us the meaning that Govinda is at the back of all the drama of this world that is enacted on the earth. In the word *Swarga*, we get the

meaning that He is the Lord of the place where we can get all kinds of happiness and pleasure. In referring to the *Vedas*, we also get the meaning that in talking of Govinda, we are talking of the aspect of Lord Himself since we say “*Vedo Narayana Hari Hi.*” Thus, we have to recognise that whether it is in the gross, in the subtle or in the causal appearance of this world, it is Govinda who is shining.

It is in this context that Prahlada proclaimed that there is no pleasure in this world. There is no pleasure in being born again and again. There is no pleasure in being born only to die and in dying only to be born again. Why should we be born if it is only to undergo the repeating cycle of births and deaths? One should be born in such a way that he becomes immortal and is never born again. One who, after finding the path, arrives at such truth is the wise person. If we carefully enquire into the words that Prahlada used on that occasion, we will note that he said that the intelligence of such a person is that of a wise man and not that of an animal. This means that Prahlada decided that one who understands and is after the path of immortality is a wise person. If one does not understand this, he is like an animal. He gave a very satisfactory answer to those who doubt the truth of such a statement. He illustrated it by comparing your body to a bow, your mind to the string on the bow and your life to the arrow. This means that the bow of your body has become subservient to the string which is

your mind. When you put the arrow, that is your life, on this string of your mind and pull it, you find that the bow or the body bends. The arrow goes just as straight as is determined by the extent to which you are able to pull the string of your mind. This string of your mind should be pulled quite strong and should not be left loose.

It is in this context that we are told that the right path to reach Madhava is to control our mind. By attaching much importance to our mind and body, a mind which is unsteady and a body which is like a water bubble, our entire life is rendered fruitless.

This first verse is also establishing the *Annamaya*, *Manomaya* and *Pranamaya* aspects of our body. Without food, the body cannot live. If there is no body, we cannot really picture the mind. If there is no mind, we cannot recognise life in the body. The aspects of knowledge and bliss are dependent upon the aspects of food, of mind and of life. Therefore, we are after these three aspects. It is true that these aspects are transient and not permanent and that they have no value. But since the aspects of knowledge and bliss are dependant on these, we attach some importance to them.

To be able to experience the aspects of knowledge and bliss, we should protect our body, mind and life. There is a small example for this. If in our house, we have some valuable jewels and gems to be protected, we put them in a comparatively cheap iron safe. This steel *almirah* or an iron safe has no value compared to

the jewels, but we are putting valuable jewels in it. Our body is like the valueless iron safe. In this valueless body, God has kept for protection, very valuable things like knowledge and bliss. But sometimes, according to our convenience, we think that God has not done the right thing in keeping such valuable things in a valueless and impermanent body. God is the embodiment of intelligence and wisdom and looks at things in a total and complete manner. In His creation, there cannot be anything which has no specific purpose. He creates everything with a specific purpose. If we keep the valuable jewels in a valuable gold box, nobody will wait till he has a look at the jewels inside. They will take away the box itself as soon as they see it. It is natural to protect valuable things in a valueless box which will not attract attention. Therefore, in order that we may reach the realm of knowledge, bliss and happiness it becomes necessary to look after the well-being of the outer casing namely, body, mind and life.

There is another small matter to which we have to pay some attention. When we keep valuable things in a box, we have to lock the box and keep the key safely with us. If you do not have the key, it will not be possible for you to take out of this box the knowledge and bliss when you really need them. This key has been referred to by Sankara as the key of *bhakti* or devotion. When you use the key of devotion and turn it on the side of detachment, you will be able to open the box and utilise

the knowledge and bliss that are contained in this box. But, if the key of devotion is turned in the wrong direction, away from detachment and towards attachment, you will not be able to open the box and use the knowledge and bliss for your benefit. Therefore, either for detachment or for attachment, this key of devotion which is between attachment and detachment is important, and you should protect it. It will be possible for you to have this devotion when you have faith in God.

Today in the world, we see many people who say that they have no faith in God. But, in fact, it is not possible to live even for a moment without faith in God. We should not be under the impression that God exists somewhere, having a special form, vested with special powers and so on. What is contained in your own heart as a clean thought and as supreme consciousness is itself God. He is God and you do not have to look for Him elsewhere. This sacred part of one's heart is necessary for everyone. There is no one who does not have such a sacred heart. Because such a sacred heart is present in everyone, one can say that God is in everyone.

He who does not have faith in himself will have no faith in God. There is no one who does not love himself, has no belief in himself and has no ambition to rise higher and higher. Even a man who does not have faith in God does have faith in himself and desires to have the strength by which to cultivate faith in himself.

This is something which is quite natural and which comes surging from the depths of one's heart. There is a small example for this.

There was once a *guru* living in a place and he was communicating wisdom to people who used to come for his *darshan*. Those people who were coming to have his *darshan* used to bring some flowers and fruits in accordance with Indian traditions. One day, as the offerings were plenty in the form of fruit, he called a disciple and asked him to cut the fruit and arrange for its distribution as *prasad*. The disciple cut the fruit and reported to the *guru* that all was ready for distribution and asked him as to whom should be given the first fruit. The *guru* asked him to start with the person in whom he has the greatest faith and the highest confidence. All the people assembled there thought that the disciple would first give the fruit to the teacher and then distribute to the others. But the disciple did not do so. He took the first fruit himself. When the surprised onlookers asked for an explanation, he said that since he had the greatest confidence and affection for himself, he took the first fruit. This demonstrates that he had indeed, confidence in himself and that he truly loved himself.

When we look at this story outwardly, it may look as if the disciple had no faith in the *guru*, but we should realise that he acted in this manner because of supreme confidence in himself. Therefore, if one does not touch the feet of God, does not go to a temple or does not go

on a pilgrimage, we should not conclude that he has no faith in himself. Confidence in one's self is something which can only be experienced and cannot be exhibited. What is important is that one should have faith in himself. While individuals may have their own notions and these may differ from each other, the *Atma Thathwa* is one and the same to whomsoever it belongs. Sankara taught this oneness of the *Atma Thathwa*. It is with a view to promote faith in God that Sankara had taken the *moodhamathi* as an instrument in the very first verse that he composed. If we want to climb to the top of a tall building, we use a ladder for that purpose. For such a ladder, there must be a base and a top, on both of which, it is supported. Thus, what Sankara did was to take the *moodhamathi* as the base and the *mukthamathi* as the top or the destination.

Between the base of *moodhamathi* and the destination of *mukthamathi*, he used the twenty-nine verses that describe the aspects of life as the twenty-nine steps of the ladder. When we go further on and understand all the succeeding verses, there is no doubt that our ignorance will be dispelled and we will get a clear picture of what Sankara conveyed to us in this remarkable set of thirty-one verses of *Bhaja Govindam*.