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# Nine Means of Devotion<sup>1</sup>

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Swami Swahananda<sup>2</sup>

The *Bhagavata* (VII. 5. 18) speaks of nine aspects of bhakti in a well-known verse. They are: 1. Hearing the names of God or His Incarnation chanted or sung by others, or songs in praise of, or the narration of, His charms, pastimes and attributes. 2. Chanting or singing His names, narrating or singing His charms. 3. Remembering or thinking of His names and charms. 4. Showing respect to Him by visiting the sacred places associated with His pastimes, looking at His images or pictures depicting His pastimes, serving and keeping company with His devotees and showing respect to things connected with His memory. 5. Worship of Him in images by offering flowers, sandal paste, food, etc. 6. Bowing down before Him or His images at the place of worship. 7. Serving Him in the attitude of a devoted servant. 8. Comradeship - to think that one is His loving and intimate friend and He too is such, and to behave towards Him accordingly, generally through His images. 9. Resignation to the Lord - devoting oneself entirely to His services. According to the devotional schools these steps belong to *vaidhi* or scriptural devotion. Through their practice an intimate feeling for God generates, which leads to *Prema* bhakti.

The *Adhyatma Ramayana* which is sometimes described as a *Bhagavata Ramayana*, speaks of nine other means of devotion. Whereas Sri Rama is the Incarnation in the Ramayana, Sri Krishna is so in the *Bhagavata*, about whose glory these books speak of. Contemplation of God and these Incarnations are of the same value, is the considered opinion of the scriptures. The *Adhyatma Ramayana* is based on the non-dualistic philosophy and so

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<sup>1</sup> Published in Vedanta Magazine, of Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, UK.

<sup>2</sup> Swami Swahananda (1921-2012), a senior monk of Ramakrishna Order, was the spiritual leader of Vedanta Society of Southern California, USA.

considers *jnana* mixed with *bhakti* as the most profitable spiritual discipline. It gives high priority to devotion as a *sadhana*, which ultimately leads to knowledge and release. These nine steps to devotion have been given as the advice of Sri Rama to Tapasi Sabari who said that she was quite unfit to have His *darshan* being only a low-born maid. Sri Rama then replied (III. 22-30): "Manhood or womanhood, caste or station in life does not give the fitness to worship Me; devotion alone is capable of doing so. Even with sacrifice, gifts, austerity or study of the Vedas and performing rituals, men are not able to see Me, if they are not devoted to Me. So I shall tell you in brief the means of that bhakti. Contact of holy men is said to be the first *sadhana*. The second is talk and discussion about Me. The third is repeated thinking about My qualities. Explaining the scriptures dealing with My words is the fourth *sadhana*. Unreservedly to worship the Teacher as Myself is the fifth. Pure nature, *yama*, *niyama*, etc. and steadfastness in My daily worship constitute the sixth *sadhana*. Repeating of My *mantra* with other accessories is the seventh. Reverencing good devotees, seeing Me in all beings, detachment in external things along with *sama*, etc. are the eighth. Discrimination about Truth is the ninth.

"These are the nine means of *bhakti*. Whoever, man, woman or other creatures, are endowed with these means of devotion will have *bhakti* along with *Prema*. As soon as this loving devotion is generated there is the realization of My Nature. Whoever realizes My Nature gets released in this life itself. Hence know bhakti to be the first means of *Mukti*. Those who are first endowed with the means of *bhakti*, gradually perform the other means too. So they can have *bhakti* and then *Mukti*."

The scheme of bhakti prescribed in the above verses is in line with the well-known views of scriptures and saints. *Sadhusanga* or contact with holy men is very important to generate detachment and devotion. By their association alone, the amorphous spiritual ideas of an aspirant become crystallized.

When study, ritual and the like cannot satisfy us, it is the advanced *sadhakas* who can transmit a little of their conviction, zeal and steadfastness to us. About its importance, this *Ramayana* says in the words of Agastya: "Contact of holy men is the root of Release.... For by holy company a taste develops in hearing about Him; from it arises devotion to the Eternal God; from devotion clear knowledge, and from the latter Release arises. This is the path followed by the wise." (III,3.36&39-40)

The second means is talking and discussing about God and His Incarnations. The exploits of Sri Rama in the *Ramayana*, of Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavata* are all very inspiring and ennobling. We get clear ideas about spiritual verities through them. When virtue declines and vice prevails, the Incarnations come down to the world to regenerate and reinstate the religious values. By constantly handling these ideas we become convinced and one-pointed attention develops. About the importance of hearing and discussing about the exploits of the *Avatara*, Sri Krishna says: "He who thus knows, in true light, My divine birth and action, leaving the body, is not born again: he attains to Me, O Arjuna." (*Bhagavad Gita*, IV.9)

The third means is repeated thinking about the qualities of God and His Incarnations. The *Atman* is repeatedly to be heard, thought upon and contemplated, says the *Upanishad*. After a theoretical understanding of the real nature of God, man and things, it should be imprinted on our mind by deep reflection to remove the hoary hold of *Maya*. As you think, so you become, is the principle. By repeated thinking of the *sattvic* qualities we moreover imbibe those qualities which are essential for spiritual progress. Patanjali the great scientific writer of yoga says that the Highest can be realized, *samadhi* can be obtained through contemplation of God.

The fourth *sadhana* is explaining the scriptures dealing with the words of God and His Incarnations. Studying the scriptures oneself and explaining them to others have been the

recognized methods even from the *Upanishadic* age. In trying to explain, things become clearer.

The fifth means is the worship of the *Guru* as God Himself. This idea has been accepted by all the systems and more strongly by the devotees. The *Vedas* declare that knowledge must be received from a *Guru*. No amount of study is of any avail. And to make the *Guru's* words most fruitful there must be great faith in his words of wisdom. About the importance of the *Guru*, Swami Vivekananda says: "This insufficiency of books to quicken spiritual growth is the reason why, although almost every one of us can speak most wonderfully on spiritual matters, when it comes to action and the living of a truly spiritual life, we find ourselves so awfully deficient. To quicken the spirit the impulse must come from another soul. The person from whose soul such impulse comes is called the *Guru* - the teacher; and the person to whose soul the impulse is conveyed is called the *Sishya* - the student."

The sixth *sadhana* consists of a pure life, daily worship and practice of the eightfold *yoga*. This *yoga* has been forcefully presented by Patanjali, which has been incorporated by almost all the systems in their discipline. *Yama* and *niyama* are external and internal cleanliness, *asana* is steady posture necessary for long meditation forgetting the body and *pranayama* is control of vital breath for physical and psychical purification and strengthening. The next three steps constitute concentration. *Pratyahara* is trying to gather the mind, *dharana* is focusing on a point or the chosen Deity and *dhyana* is to remain in the thought without break, and *samadhi* is the mastery of the mind and its complete mergence. To bring the mind under control elaborate formal worship has been prescribed. The *Adhyatma Ramayana* in a different chapter gives a detailed description of it and this method is even now prevalent.

The seventh means consists of repeating the *mantra* bearing the name of the chosen Deity. This has acquired the greatest importance in most of the disciplines. The Divine formula

received from a *Guru* has special potency and by repetition of it all spiritual benefits are derived. Many are the sayings regarding its supreme efficacy. A well-known verse asserts that it is by *japa* alone without doubt, that spiritual success is achieved.

The eighth *sadhana* according to this book consists of a few things. Showing respect to good devotees of God has been accepted as part of the spiritual discipline, for by this and by contacting them we imbibe the divine qualities they possess. Seeing God in all beings is an advanced stage of *sadhana*. The *Gita* points out that the same-sighted yogi sees God in everything. When all creation is His or He manifests Himself as all beings, it is quite in the fitness of things that this recognition itself should be a part of *sadhana*. Detachment of external things or *vairagya* is an equally important discipline. This is the other side of seeing God in everything. *Vairagya* and practice are the methods by which the Highest is achieved, says the *Gita*. *Sama*, *dama*, etc. also are included in this *sadhana*. The *Advaita* system speaks of six treasures of *sadhana*, viz. *sama*, *dama*, *uparati*, *titiksha*, *sraddha* and *samadhana* - controlling the internal and external organs, withdrawing from the senses, bearing all sufferings without any reaction, faith in the words of the Guru and the Vedanta and concentration of the mind on the Goal.

The ninth means of devotion consists of discrimination about Truth. It is an important discipline according to *Vedanta*. In fact, according to some this is the only *sadhana* that is necessary.

These are the nine-fold means of bhakti, says the *Adhyatma Ramayana*. By practising these, bhakti is perfected and from samadhana *Vaidhi Bhakti*, the aspirant passes to *Prema Bhakti*, full of love and void of motive. As a result, *Brahma-jnana* dawns, showing that *Bhakti* is the root of *Mukti*. Thus in the above-quoted verses, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* harmonizes the claims of the followers of knowledge and devotion, of discrimination about the real nature of things and worship of the Deity, as also of the Impersonal and the Personal. Pure knowledge and pure devotion

are the same, said Sri Ramakrishna, and by the realization of the one the other also is realized. The modern prophet of harmony thus substantiates the position of the author of the *Adhyatma Ramayana*. By satisfying the intellectual and emotional elements in our nature, it is sure, this nine-fold discipline will be able to give the maximum spiritual benefit.



Reprinted from Vedanta Kesari, June 1961