

DEVOTION: SECONDARY AND SUPREME

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THE INDIAN mind is very analytical and it stops at nothing until it would arrive at the highest that could be reached; specially it is so in the field of religion. Swami Vivekananda, referring to this characteristic of the Hindu said, 'One peculiarity of the Hindu mind is that it always inquires for the last possible generalisation.' At another time he remarked, 'This analytical power and the boldness of poetical visions which urged it onward are the two great internal causes in the make-up of the Hindu race.' Endowed with this mind, as the Hindus were, they critically evaluated every phase of man's progress in the spiritual life. To them, therefore, all devotion was not one. It was foolish, they thought, to class one who had attained the highest in devotion with a person who had just begun to tread the path; one is like the mature man and the other like a baby in swaddling-clothes. They saw what a vast difference there was in the devotion of the two towards the Godhead. So they classified devotion or Bhakti as *parā* (highest) and *gauni* (secondary).

Why this difference even in the spiritual life, is a naive question. For it is not as the difference that is made in the social or political field, either according to the station in life in which one is placed or to the party which one belongs. It is a difference in the transformation of the inner being. And we have to remember that this difference is not imposed by the person who has attained to *parā* Bhakti upon one who is just beginning his spiritual life, that is one who is still struggling to reach God; but a distinction that is to be marked by those who yearn to progress in spiritual life. For them the lowest man cannot be the ideal. Ideals should always be high, otherwise they cannot be ideals, but only ideas. What Swami Vivekananda said regarding ideals can be profitably remembered here. 'Without the struggle towards the Infinite there can be no ideal.' And again, 'If we cannot follow the ideal, let us confess our weakness, but not degrade it; let us not try to pull it down.' We have to approach all problems of spiritual life keeping this in mind so as not to get confounded by our unfounded and illogical reasoning.

WHAT IS GAUNI BHAKTI?

Gauni Bhakti is preparatory devotion, a stage in the final evolution of *parā* Bhakti. It is a helpful process by which one arouses and directs

the faculty of love towards God. 'It is of three kinds, according to the qualities of the mind of a person in whom it manifests itself; either it may be classified as *sattvika*, *rajasika* and *tamasika*, or it may be divided as *Arta*, and others.'¹ This is a division in keeping with the Hindu tradition, of allowing every person to grow in his own way, according to his mental evolution and make-up. To prescribe a uniform mode of worship of God to one and all, Hinduism feels, is to blind oneself to the actualities of life, to facts, and to stunt, cramp or distort the growth of the individual.

In this preparatory stage man takes the aids of symbols, uses rituals and the like for adoring God. He takes the name of God a certain number of times daily, sings hymns to Him and so on. Again, according to the qualities of the mind of the individual he may perform these things in an ostentatious manner or without any outward show. Sri Ramakrishna in his inimitable way gives the description of these types of devotees thus: 'Bhakti, devotion has its *sattva*. A devotee who possesses it meditates on God in absolute secret, perhaps inside his mosquito net. Others think he is asleep. Since he is late in getting up, they think perhaps he has not slept well during the night. His love for the body goes only as far as appeasing his hunger, and that only by means of rice and simple greens. There is no elaborate arrangement about his meals, no luxury in clothes, and no display of furniture. Besides, such a devotee never flatters anybody for money.'

'An aspirant possessed of *rajasic* Bhakti puts a *tilak* on his forehead and a necklace of holy *rudraksha* beads, interspersed with gold ones, around his neck. At worship he wears a silk cloth.'

'A man endowed with *tamasic* Bhakti has burning faith. Such a devotee literally extorts boons from God, even as a robber falls upon a man and plunders his money. "Bind! Beat! Kill!"— that is his way, the way of the dacoits.'

Again, the *Bhagavad Gita* speaks of four types of people who worship God. One who is moved by a sense of misery, one who is eager to know the correct path, one who is moved by the desire of acquiring some gain and lastly the *jnani*, the true knower of God.² But the last of these does not come under the category of people having *gauna* devotion. He is of the other class, those possessed of Mukhya-bhakti. His love of God is for the sake of God alone.

But we have to take note that man should try to elevate himself from the lower to the higher type of devotion. The *tamasic* Bhakti, for instance, usually is resorted to, to attain some occult power to do evil or gain some end which will entail great harm to others. In this *tamasic* condition of man he does not understand what is good and what is evil for himself; he is moved by his own inertia, indolence and indulgence. Nevertheless, devotion and earnest prayer may lead him on to the right path and save him from much waste of his precious labour and time. His

¹ Narada Bhakti Sutras, 56.

² Bhagavad Gita, IV, 16.

wicked urges would get curtailed under the effect of earnest prayer and ultimately may leave him. He may gradually evolve into the *sattvika* type; so also with those of *rajasic* kind.

Now, *sattvika* Bhakti is nearer to the devotion without taint, Mukya-bhakti, than the others. After a little practice the former slides into the latter. For as the *Bhagavata* says, 'A person, who is devoted to inaction, performs them for the sake of the Most High; or does any sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice alone (without any motive), yet has not gone beyond the idea of difference is of the *sattvika* type.'³ This little distinction it is that separates him from the Lord and that is why he should persist in his devotion.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THIS KIND OF BHAKTI

Narada says that this devotion is more easily attainable and recognizable than the supreme Bhakti,⁴ though the exact nature of devotion defies precise analysis, definition or description.⁵ In man this feeling of love is present as a natural element. There is none so unfeeling as not to have experienced love towards something or somebody, at some time or other. This intrinsic feeling when purified and directed towards God with added strength is called Bhakti. That is why it is told that this devotion is not very difficult to achieve or recognize.

Further proof of possession of this phenomenon of Bhakti is that a peace, that goes beyond all understanding, settles on such a person. He becomes calm, not for the time being, but for all time. This experience of inner peace forms the firm bedrock of all spiritual edifice. Reaching it one is able to understand arguments against godly life as mere baby-prattle.

Yet, should there be a doubt as to how a devotee who is very anxious and always seems to be worried to serve the world can be at peace, it is to be understood that the devotee does not look upon the world as something that needs his help, but as the manifestation of the Lord, his God. He understands that, as a puny creature, he can do but little to help the world and that the Lord who is omniscient and omnipotent needs no help from the devotees to bring about its good. As such though engaged in service the devotee's mind is not perturbed.

It is such people alone who are a potent force in the regeneration of the world. By worry and anxiety much of man's energy is wasted, whereas those whose mind is made tranquil can work better and more effectively. From all these distinctive characteristics manifest in a person one can understand that devotion has dawned in his heart.

³ III, 29,10.

⁴ Narada Bhakti Sutras, 58.

⁵ Ibid., 51.

IN WHAT WAY CAN ONE APPROACH THE LORD?

As already stated love is not a foreign element that is to be introduced into man's nature. It is inherent in him. In the generality of mankind, however, this love flows towards persons closely related, such as father, mother, wife, husband, child, friend or master. Now when this love is turned towards God it may not be far different from this natural love, only the direction, the flow is to be changed. Once an old lady complained to Sri Ramakrishna that though she was eager to do her spiritual practices her love for her grand-child prevented her from doing them. Sri Ramakrishna suggested a simple remedy. He asked her to look upon that child as the Lord Himself and think that she was serving Him alone when she was attending on the child.

That by any type of Bhakti mentioned above one can not only move towards God but realize Him through it, is amply supported by scriptures and proved by the experience of saints and sages. Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, 'Whosoever approaches me in whatsoever way even so do I accept him. For in all ways, O Partha, men walk in My path.'⁶ We read that in the ancient times the Gopis, the cowherds of Vrindavan, and Yasoda, the foster mother of Sri Krishna, looked on him and loved him in different ways, knowing full well that he was the Lord Himself incarnate. Coming to the middle ages, Meera, the Rajaput princess, and Andal, the South Indian Brahmin girl conceived of God as their consort and realized Him. So too did St. Theresa, St. John of the Cross and others followed other ways to attain the same goal. Other saints of other times too sought and realized Him in various ways.

Almost in our own times one of the women-disciples of Sri Ramakrishna who was a child-widow and was pretty old when she came in contact with the Master, meditated upon God all through her life as her darling child, as baby Krishna. With her practices she had the vision of her Chosen Ideal. It was a marvellous phenomenon. For some months she actually saw with her eyes open, her Gopala. She fed him, put him to bed, and He played with her, snatched her rosary and teased her in innumerable ways. And this happened not in the mythological times, nor *pauranic* ages but towards the end of the last century and beginning of this. Some of the Western disciples of Swami Vivekananda like Sister Nivedita met her and were charmed by the simple, unlettered, village lady who had reached the acme of Bhakti by sheer yearning and faith. Sri Ramakrishna himself realized God through all these modes of approach, which in the Vaishnava literature are called *Santa*, *dasya*, *sakhya*, *vatsalya* and *madhura*, and even more than these.

⁶ B. Gita, IV, 11.

PARA BHAKTI

We now come to supreme devotion. It is pure devotion untainted by any desire, unmarred by any motive. It is love for love's sake, for the sake of God who is all love. This devotion is one-pointed. Such devotees want nothing else in the world except God. Their life is for the benefit of mankind. One who has attained such a state of devotion is called a *Bhagavata* and a Saint.⁷ They are filled with God and may or may not perform ritualistic worship. 'Hearing about Me but once, their minds become absorbed in Me, who is the indwelling spirit of all, like the Ganges that gets merged in the ocean. This is the sign of Bhakti that goes beyond the *gunas*,⁸ says the *Bhagavata*. Again it says, 'That is called the acme of Bhakti by which one transcends the three *gunas*, and becomes fit to attain My Being.'⁹ Swami Vivekananda speaking about this supreme Bhakti declares, 'When the soul succeeds in appropriating the bliss of this supreme love, it also begins to see Him in everything. Our heart will then become an eternal fountain of love and when we reach even higher states of this love, all the little differences between the things of the world are entirely lost; man is seen no more as man but only as God. . . . Thus in this state of Bhakti, worship is offered to every one, to every life, and to every being.' In the *Bhagavata* there occurs a passage which speaks in an identical language: 'I do not find any one superior to him, whose all actions are dedicated to Me and whose body, mind and soul are given to Me ; because such a person has reached the state of same-sightedness (*samadarsanat*). He bows down mentally to all beings and respects and reveres them knowing that the Lord alone has entered these beings in the form of *Jiva*.'¹⁰

With this intense Bhakti the ego of the devotee gets dissolved. He accepts whatever comes to him, good or evil in the eyes of the world, with an equanimous mind. 'He ceases to distinguish between pleasure and pain in so far as they affect him. He does not know what it is to complain of pain or misery and this kind of uncomplaining resignation to the will of God, who is all love, is indeed a worthier acquisition than all the glory of grand and heroic performances', are some of the outpourings of Swami Vivekananda, about whom Sri Ramakrishna said, 'He is all Bhakti inside and Jnana outside.' Finally let us conclude with what Sri Ramakrishna says about this divine love: 'Attaining that love (which transcends the three *gunas*) the devotee sees everything full of Spirit and Consciousness. To him "Krishna is Consciousness, and His sacred Abode is also Consciousness." The devotee, too, is Consciousness. Everything is Consciousness. Very few people attain such love. Such a devotee becomes like a child five years old, not under the control of the *gunas*.'

⁷ Bharadvaja Samhita.

⁸ Bhagavata III, 29, 11.

⁹ Ibid., III, 29, 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., III, 29, 32 & 34.