

PHILOSOPHY OF THE BHĀGAVATA

THE *Bhāgavata* purports to be only one among the various Sāṃhitās or compilations which have been handed down by word of mouth in the form of folk-songs, ballads, hymns, and instructions, current among the masses as well as among kings. The compiler of the *Bhāgavata* takes Śrī Kṛṣṇa's life and teachings as the quintessence of all scriptures. Though the book deals with the five topics which characterize the Purāṇas, its main and central theme is God. The stories are meant only to illustrate the principles and way of life of the Paramahamsas or people who see God in everything and renounce all worldly ambition for the sake of the enjoyment of the love and service of man as the highest manifestation of God.

PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK

The *Bhāgavata* is a gospel of divine life and not a text-book of systematic philosophy as ordinarily understood. Its philosophy is based upon the actual direct experience of the absolute Reality attained in the first instance by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in a state of superconsciousness and afterwards corroborated by the similar experiences of a host of his disciples. This actual direct experience of the absolute Reality is known as *viññāna* and the rational philosophy built on it as *jñāna*.

This philosophy has its theoretical as well as its practical aspects, known respectively as Brahmovāda and Bhāgavata Dharma. From the standpoint of *viññāna* it is admitted by all teachers that Bhagavat is the only absolute, independent Reality; and *dharma*, the means of realizing Him through complete surrender to His grace. Both the aspects are non-dualistic from the standpoint of *viññāna*, and dualistic from that of the relative knowledge gained in the other three states, viz. of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep.

The essence of this philosophy is that Brahman or Ātman is the only absolute Reality and that the whole universe, including body, mind, and ego, is only an expression in name and form of this Reality and as such has no independent existence of its own. This view of the absolute Reality must, however, be distinguished from pure pantheism. In the latter, God fully exhausts Himself in manifestation as the universe. He is not limited or affected by the phenomenal universe according to the *Bhāgavata*. He exists beyond phenomena and even in their absence. This transcendence and immanence of God must also be distinguished from

those of Western theism. Whereas in the latter, God, man, and the world are always different and separate, the theism of the *Bhāgavata* insists that all these are one in *viññāna*, where there is no other real entity to be transcended or to be immanent in. The transcendence and immanence of God are predicated only in relative consciousness.

The *Bhāgavata* accepts four *pramāṇas* as aids which point out this ultimate essence of the universe, viz. perception, inference, the tradition of the spiritual experience of saints, and the *śrūtis*. All these merely point to the essential reality of the non-dual Brahman only. They are primarily capable of proving only the unreal and ephemeral nature of the phenomena experienced in the three normal states of consciousness. They can never actually prove the existence of Brahman, but only help to remove misunderstandings. Brahman is self-effulgent and self-evident and requires no proof. Even the *śrūtis* are incapable of describing or proving Brahman. It exists as the very stuff and substratum of phenomena and can actually be experienced by any practised, concentrated, and pure mind, by an analysis of the three states. Such an analysis shows that there is an inner witness of these three states which remains unchanged even in the midst of the change of states, and which alone can explain the fact of memory of the three states. Every act of normal knowledge therefore involves also the knowledge of this pure Consciousness. It is this pure Consciousness or Cit that constitutes the real essence of Sat, the cause and support of the universe.

This basic, essential, and absolute pure Consciousness, as realized in *viññāna*, is described in the text as the Paramātmān, Pratyagātman, Brahman, Puruṣottama, Akṣara, Turiya, Bhūman, etc. as in the Upaniṣads. The *Bhāgavata* calls it also by such other names as Kṛṣṇa, Vāsudeva, Nārāyaṇa, Hari, etc. It is, however, beyond words and thought and free from all attributes and limitations. It can be grasped or experienced only when all obstructions are removed. It can be correctly characterized, if at all, only negatively in terms of the *neti, neti*—‘not this, not this’—of the Upaniṣads. It is that which is beyond Māyā and therefore absolutely inexpressible by any thought, word, or activity. The text uses all these negative descriptions of the Absolute, only to give the reader at least some idea of the final goal of all spiritual endeavours.

From the standpoint of normal consciousness, however, this Absolute is described positively as an impersonal super-person, the creator, maintainer, and the final refuge of the whole universe of mind and matter. He is its material, efficient, final, and first cause, present in His entirety and in undiluted glory in every atom of the universe, regulating every thought, feeling, and activity from inside and outside, without Himself

being in the least affected by the world process or phenomena. He is the parent, teacher, friend, and the Lord of the universe, wielding the infinite power, *Māyā*, and yet ever gracious in bestowing upon His devotees all the fruits of their actions according to their deserts, and leading them to the ultimate goal of union with Himself. He is the embodiment of infinite beauty, love, and bliss, of the highest goodness, holiness, and truth, and is the source, ground, and goal of all values. He takes whatever form His devotees desire to worship Him in, though at the same time He continues to be formless. He is therefore also described as the highest and the twenty-sixth among the *tattvas*. Form is sometimes described as being attributed to Him only by the ignorance of man for purposes of devotion, and sometimes as actually assumed by God, just as He assumes the form of any other object. At other times, again, these two ideas are combined in a more comprehensive doctrine according to which the formless, attributeless God assumes different forms and attributes through His own *Māyā* in order to bless the devotees according to their desire. Even the devotees themselves transcend these names and forms in their highest spiritual experience, and God shows His form to the devotees only temporarily and withdraws it afterwards. The emphasis of the text is on this personal God with form as more suited to love, devotion, and worship.

One such favourite ideal form of God and His attributes is described in the text symbolically on the basis of the experience of saints, and the symbolism is explained. The personal God in this particular form is not merely an abstract imaginary entity but a concrete being. All their heart's worship, love, and adoration were showered upon Him alone. The psychological necessity of understanding the unknown only in terms of the known, the ontological fact of all creatures being in essence only God, the *Śruti* statement of the identity of Brahman with a realizer of Brahman, the traditional practice of worshipping the *guru* and men of realization as God, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa*'s express declarations and demonstrations about His own divinity, the religious faith that God Himself is the only *guru*, and spiritual experiences of the saints in which God appeared to them only in the form of *Kṛṣṇa* according to their desires and in which they merged into and emerged from the Absolute in *samādhi*—all these justify the conviction of the saints and devotees that not only was *Kṛṣṇa* God, but God was none else than *Kṛṣṇa*. In fact, it is only in response to the desire of the devotees of *Kṛṣṇa* to purify themselves by listening to His glories that the *Bhāgavata* was composed and narrated. The doctrine of *vyūhas*, wherein not only *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* but also His relatives were deified, shows how God was conceived only in terms of *Kṛṣṇa*. The transplantation of even the earthly *Vṛndāvana* to the celestial regions and the idea of God enjoying His eternal dance with

the *gopīs* there point to the same conclusion. It also explains why all the incarnations are treated as only *avatāras* of Kṛṣṇa.

No doubt this personal God is sometimes called Viṣṇu, but the Viṣṇu of the *Bhāgavata* is only an idealized form of Kṛṣṇa and is thus entirely different from the Viṣṇu of the Vedas. Though this aspect is not unknown to the text, it gives Viṣṇu a higher status as one of the trinity, functioning as preserver and protector and as identical with the Absolute in His highest state. As the highest personal God, one with the Absolute, Viṣṇu is identical with the Śiva of the Śaivas. The same sages are represented as devotees of both Viṣṇu and Śiva. Rudra and Viṣṇu are themselves described as vying with each other in recognizing themselves in each other.

BHAGAVAT AND AVATĀRA

Bhagavat is one of the central concepts of the text. Etymologically it means 'one who possesses or has realized *bhaga*', which, derived from the root *bhaj*, implies, true to its Vedic sense, 'the gracious Lord', 'the adorable One', who loves to bless His devotees with the recovery of their lost inherent divinity. Hence it is applicable to all *ṛṣis* and holy men possessing the required virtues of imparting grace to fallen humanity. Nowhere in the Śrutis is the word used as the name of God Himself. And the *Bhāgavata* is true to this tradition as is amply borne out by its usage of the term throughout the text. But it has extended the application of the term to both the personal God and the Absolute; and therein lies its uniqueness. But since it has been imitated by all theistic literatures of the land, this has come to be regarded as the sole meaning of the word.

Although the same divine man is often termed Bhagavat and *avatāra*, there is a slight difference in the connotation and implication of the two words. In the latter concept, it is God that is seen as a person for purposes of love and worship, whereas in the former, it is a human being that is deified and worshipped as God. The *avatāra* is Bhagavat, but Bhagavat is not necessarily an *avatāra*. While any Jīva can become a Bhagavat by effort, an *avatāra* is not a Jīva but a special manifestation of God. The word *avatāra* has been used in the religious literature of the Hindus in a number of senses, the most widely accepted being, however, the sense of descent—the *avatāra* is one who brings down the kingdom of heaven on earth. There is a difference, according to the *Bhāgavata*, between an ordinary man of realization and an *avatāra*. The former is only a Jīva, whereas the latter is God Himself. While the former represents the ascent of man to Godhood, the latter represents the direct descent of God to humanity. While the birth of the former is the inevitable result of his *karma*, the birth of the latter is the result of free choice. While the Jīva

takes up the body only for his own sake, the *avatāra* incarnates only for the sake of saving others. Whereas the former's body is still under the sway of his *prārabdha karma*, the latter has no such *prārabdha* at all. If God's manifestation as the universe and His omnipotence and grace are once admitted, there is nothing unreasonable in supposing that He can also assume a special and unique form as an *avatāra*, fully retaining consciousness of divinity from His very birth. Though it is sometimes said that the purpose of the *avatāra* is the destruction of evil-doers, the so-called destruction is only a poetical and allegorical description of the destruction of their wickedness by purifying their minds for the purpose of redeeming them. So, along with the virtuous, even the wicked are saved by being restored to their natural form. The real object of an *avatāra* is therefore only to protect all by placing before them an adorable object wherein the glories of God are fully manifested and to which worship can be offered spontaneously. It is only the *avatāra* that sees both the Absolute and the manifested world simultaneously and can teach the world about the Absolute. Even the highest Vedāntic truths would have remained but theories, had not God appeared as man and actually demonstrated how they could be put into practice and perfection attained here and now.

Historically, the *avatāra* is a man of realization engaged in the service of the world. Many of the *avatāras* such as Sanatkumāra, Nārada, Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Pṛthu, R̥ṣabha, and Paraśurāma were actually the *ṛṣis* (seers) of Vedic *mantras*. Even the apparently sub-human or semi-human *avatāras* were originally only certain *ṛṣis* of ancient days carrying the names of their clans, some of these clans themselves being named after their totems. Thus we find various *ṛṣis* of Vedic *mantras* named after animals, birds, and fish, such as R̥ṣabha, Śunaka, Śvetāśvatara, Sarpa, Kapota, Śyena, Pataṅga, Matsya, etc. Many of the miracle stories and myths about some of their achievements might have been originally only local traditions current among these clans, which were later given a spiritual colour and absorbed into stories of the *avatāras*.

The number and sequence of the *avatāras* seem to have changed in the course of time. Thus the earlier texts mention only ten, whereas the *Bhāgavata* mentions about forty of them by name and believes that the *avatāras* are innumerable, like thousands of streams issuing from the same lake, overflowing its banks. In fact, it also forecasts future *avatāras*. It enunciates the general law that no part of the world need suffer at any time for want of a saviour, as God is always ready to manifest Himself, at the right time and place, to restore spiritual equilibrium, wherever and whenever it is too violently disturbed. Some of these *avatāras* are called *kalās* or digits, some *aṁśas* or smaller parts, and others *aṁśāmśas* or fractions of

parts, according to the degree of divine manifestation. While some are considered to be the actual birth of God, others are regarded as having only the divine afflatus or *āveśa* temporarily. Kṛṣṇa is considered to be the most perfect of all the *avatāras*, and all the others, only partial manifestations of Kṛṣṇa Himself.

PURUṢA

Whereas the concepts of Bhagavat and *avatāra* are post-Vedic, the concept of Puruṣa is as old as the *Rg-Veda*. All attempts to understand man in terms of the material universe must prove futile, as the objective universe can never be known without the help of consciousness, which, however, is self-evident and self-effulgent. The highest and purest form of this consciousness is available only to man. Having no direct knowledge of anything except himself, whatever knowledge of the external world he has, is, according to the principle of apperception, only in terms of himself. Philosophically as well as scientifically, it is a fact that the external universe, if any, can only be known indirectly in terms of the sensuous and mental reactions produced by it. Therefore only this pure consciousness constitutes the essential reality of man as well as of the universe. This the text calls the real Man or Puruṣa or Puruṣottama, manifesting Himself objectively as the individual and the universe ; and Kṛṣṇa is the same as this Puruṣa or Puruṣottama.

Progressive understanding of one's own essential nature facilitates a corresponding understanding of the universe also. When man considers himself to be only a physical body, he correspondingly regards the universe as constituted only of material sense objects. When he comes to know the mind as the more essential reality of himself, the body itself being only an idea, the whole universe also seems to him to be only mental in nature, being waves in the cosmic mind. When, as a result of the philosophical analysis of the three mental states, he finds pure consciousness to be the essence of both body and mind, and consequently knows himself only as the Ātman, he finds the whole universe also to be essentially the same Puruṣa who spontaneously projects the world out of Himself. Self-knowledge thus leads to God knowledge. The concept of Puruṣa is thus helpful in facilitating the understanding of the identity of man, God, and nature, which is the central theme of the *Bhāgavata*.

The universe, thus pictured as an organism and invested with a body, mind, and soul, is conceived of only as a magnified edition of the *avatāra*. The Puruṣa is described in various contexts almost in terms of the *Puruṣa-sūkta*. The cosmic forms of Vāmana and Kṛṣṇa, revealed to Bali and Yaśodā respectively, illustrate this. This Puruṣa is none other than God

who has covered Himself with His own Māyā, just as a spider covers itself with its own web. He is the infinite, which has finitized itself only to regain its original infinity through an equal and opposite reaction in the form of world process. He has a subtle, seed form, called Brahmāṇḍa, and a manifested form, the variegated universe. The Puruṣa is the material cause of the universe, the trinity representing the efficient cause. This belief in the bifurcation of Godhead into the material and efficient aspects from the standpoint of causality, and a further subdivision of the efficient aspect into the trinity on the basis of the difference in functions and *guṇas*, is very helpful in understanding the unity of Godhead and the divinity of the universe.

MĀYĀ

While the concept of Puruṣa emphasizes the reality of the universe as existing only in God, the concept of Māyā lays emphasis on the unreality of its phenomenal aspect as divorced from God. Māyā does not exist in *viññāna* (self-knowledge). This is poetically described as Māyā feeling shy to face the Absolute. It is said to be *sat* in relation to the phenomenal universe but *asat* in relation to the Absolute. As time, space, and causality exist only within Māyā, no sort of causal relation can be predicated between the Absolute on the one hand and Māyā and its products on the other. The world can be causally related only with Māyā or the personal God, as all of them belong to the same plane of consciousness. The statement of this relationship is called Satkāryavāda according to which it is the cause itself which is manifested as the effect, and the effect exists in a potential form in the cause before manifestation. If therefore the personal God is the cause of the universe, the universe as the effect is also God Himself. If, on the other hand, it is only Māyā that has evolved into this universe, then, too, since Māyā is only a power of God, God is the final basis and support of all names and forms.

The personal God is the wielder of this inscrutable power by means of which He evolves Himself into this variegated universe without being affected by this modification. Māyā is thus not only not in perpetual opposition to God, like Satan or Ahriman, but is actually a helpmate and is, in its ultimate essence, one with Him. To show this intimate and subordinate relation of Māyā to God, it is called '*devī*'. This power has two aspects, *avidyā* and *vidyā*. By the former it deludes the Jīva, and by the latter it redeems him from the bondage and suffering caused by such delusion. Bondage and freedom occur only within the realm of Māyā and depend respectively upon the impurity and purity of the mind.

Within Māyā, everything is relative; and in everything there is an

element of good and evil, as none is entirely free from the effects of the three *guṇas*. There is nothing absolutely good except the Absolute. Relative good consists in approximation to the ideal of life set by such men of realization as Kṛṣṇa, and evil is only a deviation from this ideal. But evil is not ultimate, as, in the last analysis, evil also is only a form of the Absolute.

The universe of waking experience is as unreal as that of a dream. Sometimes a distinction is made between *jagat*, the universe of God's creation, and *saṁsāra*, that created by the human mind, the former being considered to be more permanent than the latter. But even God's universe is ultimately impermanent and ephemeral, since it appears and disappears in regular periodic succession in the course of aeons. The whole universe along with the personal God and His *loka* disappears in *ātyantika pralaya* (final dissolution).

Māyā has three ingredients or strands—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. The whole universe is a product of the permutation and combination of these three when their equilibrium is disturbed by the will of God, who Himself remains inactive like a magnet, itself at rest, inducing movement in iron filings. This evolution is said to be set in motion sometimes by the *avidyā śakti* of Māyā, and sometimes by the Lord's power as *kāla* or time, *svabhāva* or nature, and the *karma* of individuals. *Kāla* is the cause of the agitation of the *guṇas*, *svabhāva* of changes of form, and *karma* of birth. These are not really different from God, but they manifest themselves directed by His wish. Evolution takes place in two stages, primary and secondary. Various categories or *tattvas* are involved in it in the first stage. These are differently enumerated and classified by different *ṛṣis* in varying orders of evolution. The text accommodates all these as reasonable. In thus periodically evolving into the universe, God provides a stage for the various deluded souls to gather experience by reaping the fruits of their accumulated actions. Thus by realizing the ephemeral nature of the world and finally turning to God as the sole refuge, they gradually work out their own salvation. Though this may seem to imply that all creation will come to a stop if and when all souls attain *mukti*, such a possibility is ruled out as the souls are infinite in number and are inexhaustible. Moreover, the world process is only an expression of the inherent playful nature of God and hence cannot cease altogether.

The world process appears to the devotees as only a *līlā* of God, where He is the only actor in the drama, playing all the rôles. *Līlā* is not to be taken in the sense of a pastime or play or sport, as there cannot possibly be any motive or necessity for Him to resort to them. It only suggests that He has no special purpose, and that He is not constrained by any external

agency or desire. His activities are only a spontaneous overflow of the fullness of His own bliss like the activities of a man of realization. It also suggests the effortlessness, ease, and pleasure with which He undertakes activities, and complete independence of others for help. The pleasure of the Lord is in the activity itself and in the redemption of struggling souls. He is personally unattached to any of these, and hence His activity is called 'yogamāyā'.

No doubt this Māyā appears to be inconsistent and self-contradictory, but this inconsistency itself is its crowning glory, since it drives the normal mind to seek the reality beyond itself. It is only *vijñāna* that can really explain how the world is only an illusion or a mystery. Hence we find that, when Vidura questions Maitreya about the illogicality of Māyā, the latter coolly accepts it and directs Vidura to go beyond Māyā and attain the super-conscious experience of the Absolute for himself, when alone all doubts would be finally set at rest.

LOVE DIVINE

The practical philosophy of the *Bhāgavata* aims at the development of an all-round perfection of personality through a synthesis of various spiritual practices, approved by scriptures, which have to be cultivated with effort by aspirants, but which are found in saints as the natural external expression of their perfection. Due recognition is given to each man's tastes, capacities, and qualifications ; and each is allowed to begin practice with whatever he feels to be the most congenial. But it is insisted that as the practitioner advances in spiritual life, he should not neglect the correcting, steadying, and purifying influence of the proper use of all his faculties.

While it is thus liberal in its views in this matter, it specially favours the emotional and volitional approaches as more effective, easy, and natural to the ordinary man, and as open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, age, or sex. Anyone who reads the text is at once struck by the supremely important place it gives to love and service, without prejudice to knowledge or ritual. Without love, everything else is considered useless and ineffective. With love, the others are not necessary, but they come of their own accord. Mere dry *jñāna* (knowledge) or ritual is only a waste of energy like pounding the husks of grain. Love as an emotional relation between two individuals certainly has no place in superconsciousness where there is no duality. But love in its purest and highest form is only the enjoyment of absolute bliss when all duality is transcended. Even in ordinary love the ideal seems to be the complete union and merging of the lover and the beloved into one, where there is complete self-effacement and identity of

interests. Human love is only a higher expression of the reaction against the action of *Māyā* in splitting up the one into the many and in making the infinite finite.

As in human love, both God and the devotee are eager to rush into each other's arms. Thus two aspects of love are dealt with in the text—God's love for man and man's love for God. The first is divine grace and the second is *bhakti*. God is even more anxious about the welfare of His creatures than they themselves are, like a cow anxious about the welfare of her new-born calf. His grace is perennial, spontaneous, and impartial, as it is His very nature. The very names Hari and Kṛṣṇa are suggestive of this grace, as they mean by their derivation one who is eager to take away the sins, miseries, and ignorance of devotees and to steal their hearts. This grace is not merely theoretical, but a fact experienced by all devotees who feel how at every step of their spiritual progress they have been helped by God.

The whole world process is an expression of this grace, as it affords opportunities to souls in bondage to work out their own salvation. The *avatāra* is an especial expression of this grace, before which even the law of Karma loses its inexorability. Though grace triumphs finally, it works only through the law of Karma in the intermediate stages of man's evolution, and is often rendered temporarily ineffective by the obstacles created by bad *karma*. Even God, though omnipotent, has to wait till the time is ripe to show His grace by enabling man to wipe out his own *karma*.

Like God's grace, man's love for God is inherent and perennial, though temporarily dormant, as both are phases of the same attempt to reunite. Love develops only when obstacles to its manifestation are removed by congenial surroundings and proper spiritual practices. These spiritual practices constitute the lowest variety of *bhakti* known as *sādhana-bhakti*, *vaidhī-bhakti*, or *maryādā-bhakti*, and may be undertaken even in childhood. Although of the form of *karma*, they are called *bhakti* only by courtesy, as they are intended only as devices for the manifestation of love. When love actually appears, there is no further necessity for such practices. When this love first manifests itself, it is, however, in many cases contaminated by the *guṇas* of the mind and is therefore classified as *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, or *tāmasika* according to the predominance of the particular *guṇa*. When the mind becomes perfectly pure and free from all *guṇas*, it is called *nirguṇā*, *aikāntikī*, *ahaitukī*, *ātyantikī*, etc. In this stage love flows towards God spontaneously and uninterruptedly like the flow of a river into the ocean or the movement of a piece of iron towards a magnet. It is called *kevalā* (unmixed) or *śuddhā* (pure) when traces of *jñāna* and *karma* are so dim as to appear completely absent. When *jñāna* and *karma* are patently

associated with this love, it is called *jñāna-miśrā* or *karma-miśrā*. One who has reached this *nirguṇā bhakti* is still conscious of a difference between himself and God. He is then called a *mahā-bhāgavata*. When, as a result of superconscious experience, the lover enjoys the natural bliss of the realization of his identity with the Absolute, his bliss expresses itself in the form of love and service for the whole of creation as God. One who has attained this final stage of *bhakti* has reached the status of God Himself, which is variously described as *Bhagavadbhāva*, *Brahmapada*, or Viṣṇu's *paramapada*, and the devotee is called a *bhāgavatatama*, *bhaktatama*, *sattama*, *paramabhakta*, or *bhāgavatottama*. This highest love itself is called *parā bhakti*. This *parā bhakti* is not the fruit of any *karma* at all, as it is only the perfect manifestation and expression in life of the natural bliss of the soul and is one with *mukti*. It is the same which is known as *vijñāna* in terms of the intellect and *paramadharmā* in terms of the will.

The object of *bhakti* may be the personal God or *avatāra* or the whole universe. Of these, love and devotion to the *avatāra* or saint is the easiest and sweetest, as he can be grasped not only in thought and imagination, but also by the senses. Two forms of this love are described, one based on actual contact between the devotee and the *avatāra*, and the other based on their separation. The latter is more powerful than the former in cleansing the mind and in facilitating meditation. Kṛṣṇa therefore advises the *gopīs* to profit by their separation from him, which is deliberately engineered by him only to strengthen their pure love. Various types of this love are portrayed in the stories of the devotees of Kṛṣṇa, viz. *śānta*, *dāsyā*, *vātsalyā*, *sakhya*, *kānta* or *mādhuryā*. This love for the saint should not be confused with ordinary attachment for other beings. Whereas attachment is selfish, love is always selfless. It makes all the difference whether the love and meditation are on a worthy object or on an object with debasing attributes. This explains how even the apparently sexual love of the *gopīs* was transmuted into pure *bhakti* by the fact of its being directed to an *avatāra* like Kṛṣṇa. The fact that even men like Uddhava aspired to have the same love for Kṛṣṇa shows that it could not have been of a sexual nature. Their contact with Kṛṣṇa made them purer and purer and, in the days of long separation after he left Vṛndāvana and with the spiritual instruction given by him through agents and in person, their love ripened into *parā bhakti*.

A special feature of this emotional relation is the doctrine that even such emotions as hatred and fear may be sublimated and transmuted into love. Some passages go to the extent of saying that hatred is even superior to love. But, when studied with other statements which condemn hatred, these are seen to be mere poetic exaggerations to show how much easier

it is to purify oneself by love when God is so gracious as to save even those who hate Him. It is not the hatred that saved them but the intense meditation that resulted from such hatred. The stories are given only to illustrate how God is gracious to *bhaktas* (devotees), even though they chance to hate Him sometimes on account of the predominance of temporary *rajas* or *tamas*. Their contact with the saint or *avatāra* led to their sin being wiped out, and they benefited by His grace, impartially bestowed on enemies and friends alike. The statement that it was because of Prahlāda's *bhakti* that Hiranyakaśipu was saved shows that the latter also benefited by his son's holy company.

SERVICE

Pure love naturally expresses itself as service. The service of the ideal personal God is more symbolic and mental than actual, but the saints of the world can be actually served in person. This service gradually expands in scope until it includes the service of the whole world as God. This concept of service is rooted in the philosophical idea of the universe as a cosmic person and also in the factual identity of everything with God. All elements of nature as well as human society are really forms of one's own self and of God—limbs of the cosmic person.

We therefore find selfless service considered to be one of the highest of all kinds of worship of God. A man of realization sets an example to others in being always engaged in the service of the world, especially the poor and the distressed. Kṛṣṇa tells Nanda, his foster-father, how the service of all beings down to an outcaste and a cow is superior to mere ritualistic worship, and he demonstrates the same in his own life. Prahlāda condemns those pious men who run away from the world seeking their own spiritual welfare, and says that he prefers to spend his life in the service of others even risking his own salvation. Referring to Śiva's drinking poison to save the world, it is declared that the highest form of worship consists only in the selfless service of the world as God. This ideal of service is to be distinguished from ordinary conceptions of social service, for in these one does not get the spiritual benefit of seeing God in everything. Service may be negative or positive in character. Even if one cannot help others, one should strive, as far as possible, not to injure them by obstructing their spiritual development. The best kind of positive service is the removal of such obstacles. Since the chief obstacles are ignorance and selfishness, spiritual and moral help which removes these is the highest form of service. Even wicked people are not outside the scope of service, though the service in such cases may often take the form of punishment.

To the *Bhāgavata* the motherland is a special object of reverence and

worship, than which there is no holier symbol of God. Bhāratavarṣa (India), named after Bharata, is not a mere geographical unit but the mother of civilization and the very embodiment of moral and spiritual culture. It is the land of *ṛṣis* and *avatāras*, of holy places of pilgrimage, of purifying rivers and forests, of saintly kings who renounced their kingdom to seek God. Compared to it, heaven itself is contemptible, and the gods themselves are said to be hankering to be born on this sacred soil where they can easily attain the final goal of life. It is a land full of holy associations, its river-banks, woods, and hills reminding its people of the hermitages where saints and spiritual aspirants lived a life exclusively devoted to the spirit and to the service of the spirit. Patriotism is thus synonymous with love for God and the universe, and is not a parochial, racial, or national sentiment.

The whole *varṇāśrama dharma* (scheme of duties according to castes and stages of life) is a vindication of man's right to grow to the highest heights of spiritual realization. It recognizes only character and conduct as a test of greatness, and not birth. He only is a *divija* whose mind is cultured through moral and spiritual practice. A devotee, though of low birth, is superior to one who is a Brāhmaṇa only by birth. In fact, the greatest of devotees and saints, those who are themselves the promulgators of the *Bhāgavata*, do not belong, by birth, to the so-called higher castes at all. The social service expected of each one is dependent upon individual qualifications, hereditary as well as acquired. *Varṇāśrama dharma* is planned to provide everyone with the opportunity to give his best for the good of society as worship to God.

The principle of *svadharma* (class duties), which is the corner-stone of this organization of society, ensures to every individual member of any class the opportunity to convert his social service into an act of worship unhampered by others. The State is given the right to use force only against those who are engaged in interference with the freedom of others, and against external enemies who threaten the freedom of the State. The use of force in defence of the freedom of the individual or the State is not only not considered *himsā* or violence, but is actually treated as *ahimsā* or non-violent service. Soul-force, no doubt, is the best defence against any encroachment, as is so convincingly demonstrated by Prahlāda in his stand against his tyrannical father. But where the enemy is too callous, even physical force has to be used, though mercifully, when all other means fail. This explains Kṛṣṇa's insistence on Arjuna's fighting even with his own kith and kin and *guru*, and his inducing Yudhiṣṭhira to utter a white lie in order to eliminate Droṇa. He who punishes the wicked and the supporters of wickedness only worships God thereby, but by meting out

unjust punishment he goes to hell. Those who kill animals, even in a sacrifice, go to hell, as well as those who exploit others for their own pleasure. Any help rendered to another because of blood or race relationship or in return for services rendered or in expectation of future return, cannot be regarded as service. Service is free giving from fullness of the heart in order to make the world free and happy and to enable it to progress towards its high spiritual destiny.

WORSHIP

Religious emotion consists not merely in love but also in reverence. Whereas in the former there is a sense of equality between the lover and the beloved and, sometimes, even of the inferiority of the object of love, as in the case of Yaśodā's love for Kṛṣṇa, reverence is felt only towards an object that is superior. Worship is the external expression of this reverence, as service is of love. Worship can therefore be offered only to him whom one adores and reveres. Any ritual which does not provide a proper stimulus and opportunity for the exercise of religious emotion does not deserve the name of worship, even if sanctioned by the scriptures. The company and service of men of realization constitute the most efficacious environment and means for the development of *bhakti*. At the beginning of his religious life a man has his parents or teacher as a substitute towards whom reverence is natural. But very often the reverence inspired by them may remain only as a sort of attachment and subservience. To avoid this danger, symbolic representations of a saint or God, called *pratimās*, are prescribed as constant objects of worship, thereby spiritualizing the emotion of reverence. Books dealing with the inspiring lives of saints and sages and places associated with them, as well as institutions like temples which are meant solely for glorifying God and spiritual life, also serve as suitable stimuli. The text also allows the worship of inspiring objects of nature, termed *pratīkas*, such as the sun, the river Gaṅgā, and the Himālayas. The essence of all such worship, according to Prahāda, is renunciation and self-surrender to God. According to Nārada, it is continuous remembrance of God by any means available. While the former emphasizes the negative aspect of all spiritual practices, viz. *tyāga*, the latter emphasizes the positive aspect, viz. *yoga*. But Kṛṣṇa emphasizes both these aspects and adds that the essence of all worship consists in self-control and, in thought, word, and deed, looking upon all beings as God. According to others, constant repetition of the names of God accompanied by meditation is the most efficacious in the *Kaliyuga* (Iron age).

Ritualistic worship is only a help for the cultivation of this higher worship. But it is necessary for most people, if not for all. To think of

God, however, there must be a form, and various forms are provided in the text. These forms may be worshipped internally in the heart or externally in images. In either case the worshipper has to meditate on the form as one with his own self. All such worship involves the service of the image or symbol exactly as the worshipper would honour God or a saint if either of them came to his house in person.

The text has also some valuable suggestions to give regarding the various aspects of worship. A real devotee does not pray to God for anything for himself, for he is quite sure that the omniscient Lord knows what is best for him. God does not really stand in need of being petitioned for His grace. Prayers are meant only for self-purification. The essence of prayer is a craving for the love and service of God and His creatures, and for freedom from selfish desires and attachments, as indicated by various typical prayers given in the text. The devotee need not expect all his foolish prayers to be granted ; and God, in His mercy, grants only those that are spiritually beneficial. The objects to be offered in worship should be such as are considered valuable from the worldly standpoint and which are likely to create attachments. All the fruits of worship are to be surrendered at the feet of the Lord. Places of pilgrimage have their value only on account of their association with saints ; and therefore worship of saints is preferable to pilgrimages, as it is the saints that really constitute the *tīrtha*.

LIFE AND LIBERATION

Kṛṣṇa says that the Deity manufactures various types of bodies in the course of organic evolution for the purpose of manifesting Himself, and it is only in the human body that He could do so in all His glory. Even heavenly beings are said to be anxious to be reborn as men to get the opportunity of realizing their true divinity. Among man's special endowments are free will, creative activity, and the capacity to understand and achieve the goal of life. As vestiges of the previous stage of evolution cling to him in the form of *tamas* and *rajas*, his inherent *sāttvika* nature is clouded, and his freedom of will and creative activity are rendered sterile. The purpose of free will is fully served only when the ego is completely surrendered to God and divine grace is allowed full play. Fate or destiny is only the result of the working of free will in the past, and so it cannot stand in the way of the same free will in the present or in the future.

The highest goal of life is called *mukti*. Negatively, it is a state where all bondages are annulled and an unhampered freedom felt ; positively, it is the achieving, rather the getting back, of the natural divinity or the bliss and perfection of the soul, as of a lost 'treasure trove'. The

freedom is from Māyā and its delusions—ignorance, doubt, misery, fear, egoism, passions, desires, attachments, and a sense of difference—which constitute the impurity of the mind. It is also freedom from *karma* and its effects, the *saṁsāra* with all its hordes. The achievement of perfection consists in the experience of oneness with God and His universe, enjoyment of undiluted bliss, disinterested love and service of the world, and realization of one's true nature. *Mukti* is also further explained in terms of the three functions of the mind. In terms of the intellect, it is called *parajñāna* or *viññāna*, in terms of emotion *parā bhakti*, and in terms of the will *paramadharmā*. Of these, the text attaches the greatest importance to the *parā bhakti* aspect.

Mukti, as described above, can be achieved only by the superconscious experience of the Absolute. As such an experience is possible in this very life, it is called *jīvanmukti*. But those, who have not had this experience, and who are afraid of losing their individuality in such an experience, prefer the blissfulness of *mukhyā bhakti* or *nirguṇā bhakti*, where the difference between Jiva and Īśvara is still retained. This bliss of *mukhyā bhakti* is also an actual experience of these devotees. The intimate union with the personal God is called *sāyujya*. Some of the devotees, however, enjoyed this highest felicity merely by living in the same place as Kṛṣṇa ; others, like the *gopīs* and Kumbhā, in his company ; others, when they acquired the same perfection of character as Kṛṣṇa by following in his footsteps ; and still others, when they acquired the same divine powers as demonstrated by Kṛṣṇa in his life. Naturally, in the course of their meditations on the personal God also, they obtained the type of felicity which they aspired after. These four types are called respectively *sālokya*, *sāmīpya*, *sārūpya*, and *sārṣṭya*. Though each is considered by the devotee concerned to be the highest goal, it can be seen on critical examination that these are only progressive steps towards *parā bhakti*. When Kṛṣṇa became the personal God, the latter's Māyā of pure *sattva* became his *loka*. Since this Māyā and the personal God are, in the final analysis, the same Absolute, Vaikuṇṭha is the Absolute itself pictured objectively, and, since Śakti and Brahman are not different from each other, both of them are called by the same name 'Vaikuṇṭha'. Vaikuṇṭha is pictured concretely in terms of the earthly Vṛndāvana. The eschatological description of the *devayāna* or the path of the soul to Vaikuṇṭha is only an objective, allegorical picture of the various stages of the subjective progress of the soul in devotion and enlightenment. The description of Vaikuṇṭha and the mention of the fact that the devotee finally merges, together with the personal God, into the Absolute at the time of the final dissolution, show

that the highest goal is nothing more than the realization of identity with the Absolute in superconsciousness.

It would seem, however, that some of the devotees apparently consider *bhakti* to be a separate and superior goal of life. A closer study of the text as a whole will, however, reveal that the *mukti* to which *bhakti* is considered superior cannot be *parā bhakti*. These passages refer only to cases of individual preference in people of an emotional temperament who naturally value emotional satisfaction through love and service more than the death-like absorption in *samādhi* aimed at by other *yogas*. These passages only eulogize the *bhakta's* absolute freedom from all desires, even the desire for *mukti*.

Dharma is accepted as a goal only because it is a means to *mukti*. It is not merely a code of conduct which ensures and conserves the stability of society, nor a code of laws or morals as understood by law-givers and sociologists to whom society is all in all and whose idea of its welfare is confined merely to the worldly prosperity of its members. Nor does it mean religious merit supposed by the ritualists to accrue from the mere performance of scriptural duties, entitling one to more intense and enjoyable sense pleasures in another world called *svarga*. Even *siddhis* or supernatural powers are said to be only obstacles in the path of spiritual progress. *Dharma* consists of only those practices that help to develop the *sattva-guṇa* leading directly to divinity. This, especially, is called the Bhāgavata Dharma as Bhagavat or God is the root as well as the fruit, the alpha and the omega, of the *dharma*, as it is based on the truth that the whole universe is the Lord Himself. The attainment of *svarga* is only a temporary transfer from mundane life and is subject to the vicissitudes of *saṁsāra*. *Vaikuṇṭha*, on the other hand, which is the abode of spiritual bliss in the love and service of God Himself, is attained through devotion and is more permanent. In the cosmography of the *Bhāgavata*, *Vaikuṇṭha*, occupies a region beyond the three *lokas* and forms a part of *Satyaloḥa* or *Brahmaloka*. Whereas *svarga* is attained through the *pitṛyāna* (the path of the manes), *Vaikuṇṭha* is attained through *devayāna* (the path of the gods). Spiritually, *svarga* is not a world at all, but only a state of mind. It is only the development of *sattva* and the resulting enjoyment of the bliss of God at the stage when one has not yet transcended the relativity of the three *guṇas*, whereas *Vaikuṇṭha* represents the fuller enjoyment of the same bliss after transcending the *guṇas*. Rituals, however, are not objected to, if they do not involve sacrifice of life, and if performed as worship of God without desire for their fruits. If properly performed, they lead to a stage when ritual itself is transcended through *bhakti*.

Artha or wealth does not itself deserve to be considered a goal of

life at all. It is condemned not only as a great obstacle to spiritual life, but as a great source of trouble, worry, and anxiety even in worldly life. One should not therefore aspire to amass wealth even on the plea of its being sanctioned by the scriptures. It is tolerated, however, if it is in any way really helpful to the practice of *dharma*. Although a person may therefore own enough to maintain the health of himself and his dependants, he should be careful not to be attached to his possessions and should cease to earn more when the bare needs have been met.

Kāma or desire for sense enjoyment is the greatest of all obstacles to spiritual life. Amongst these, the pleasures of sex and the palate are the most powerful and dangerous. Their control is the *sine qua non* of spiritual life. It is impossible to control sex through enjoyment, which leads only to greater craving. Passion can be conquered only by avoiding all kinds of sex indulgence and developing love of God. Those who are engrossed in domestic happiness cannot sufficiently benefit by the instructions of saints or the scriptures. The married couple cannot escape misery or secure real happiness. Even good sons, like Śuka, are only a source of anxiety and grief to their parents when they leave home in search of God ; a bad son may be preferable, as he may evoke *vairāgya* (detachment) in them as in the case of Aṅga. One should not therefore hanker after a child, for, after all, he is only a deluding bondage which causes various kinds of trouble. Rṣabha therefore advises parents, if they care for God's grace, not to drag down their children to the householder's life like their own. Nārada advises spiritual aspirants to practise *brahmacarya* (celibacy) even against the advice of elders and parents. It is not wrong even to go against those teachings of the scriptures which apparently advise one to discharge one's debt to the ancestors by marriage and the production of children, for he who takes refuge in God has no such debts to discharge. All demigods, *pitṛs*, etc. are really only forms or limbs of God and are therefore satisfied when God is pleased. Of all the stages of life, the *sannyāsin's* is the highest, being the culmination of all the others, and the householder himself is expected to treat the *sannyāsin* with the highest respect and honour. Once, however, a little taste of the love and bliss of God arises, the spiritual aspirant will no longer be able to remain a householder.

THE IDEAL PHILOSOPHER

We thus see that the philosophy of the *Bhāgavata* is intensely practical and affects all aspects of life. A thorough understanding of this philosophy can be had only by a study of the lives of the great philosophers presented in it. They come from all walks and stages of life, from all classes of

society, from both sexes, and from all age-groups. But the greatest amongst them all is Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the first great teacher in the history of the world to discover and proclaim the grand truths of love for love's sake and duty for duty's sake. Born in a prison, brought up by cowherds, subjected to all kinds of tyranny by the most despotic monarchy of the day, and derided by the orthodox, Kṛṣṇa still rose to be the greatest saint, philosopher, and reformer of his age. All the greatest sages and the most immaculate saints of his time pay him divine honours; they consider him the best and most perfect among the spiritual men of the age, and with one voice acclaim him as divinity manifest on earth, looking up to him for light and guidance. To them, he is not only a *vibhūti* (an especial divine manifestation), *vyūha* (the fourfold expression of Puruṣottama), *bhagavattama* or *avatāra*, but also the personal God and even absolute Reality. In him we find the ideal householder and the ideal *sannyāsin*, the hero of a thousand battles who knew no defeat, the terror of despots, sycophants, hypocrites, sophists, and pretenders, the master statesman, the uncrowned monarch, the king-maker who had no ambition for himself. He was a friend of the poor, the weak, and the distressed, the champion of the rights of women and of the social and spiritual enfranchisement of the Śūdra and even of the untouchables, and the perfect ideal of detachment. In him, again, we find the perfect harmony of *jñāna*, *bhakti*, and *karma*—of head, heart, and hand. The philosophy of such a man cannot but be an inspiration to all who study it, and the *Bhāgavata* which records and illustrates his teachings is, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, 'sweet as cake fried in the butter of wisdom and soaked in the honey of love'.