

VEDĀNTA 20/20
INTRODUCTION TO VEDĀNTA
BHAKTI YOGA

Today I will take the topic of *bhakti*, a very important topic. It is a topic with various shades of meaning and therefore very confusing also. We should clearly understand what *bhakti* is. The word *bhakti* is used in the scriptures in two different meanings. One meaning is devotion to God. Devotion is nothing but love devoted to a higher principle. When love is directed to a principle that we revere, that is sacred, then that love is called devotion. Reverential love is called devotion. We talk about *māṭṛ bhakti*, *pitṛ bhakti*, because in our tradition, we look upon parents as superiors deserving respect. Similarly *guru bhakti*, *deśa bhakti*, we talk about and also *Īśvara bhakti*. In general *bhakti* is love towards a higher principle, especially toward God.

Now this love has been every elaborately analyzed in our scriptures, both in its general form as love, and in specific form as love of God. Scriptures point out all forms of love that a human being can entertain is directed only toward three things. The first is whatever goals we want to accomplish in life. These are the goals that we love. It is because we love them we want to acquire them, accomplish the goals. We can call it love toward various ends or goals. Later we find that to accomplish the ends, we have to use various means. Only through means we can accomplish the ends. Since the means are useful to accomplish the ends, we begin to love the means also. So the second direction of our love is toward the means. So we have end love and means love. The third type is the object of love is love of oneself. Everyone loves himself or herself. We can call this self-love. Therefore all forms of love are of only of these three categories, end love, means love and self-love. This is love in general. We will leave God for now and just talk about general love.

Then scriptures point out that there is a gradation in the intensity of love in

these three forms of love. The love of the means is the least in intensity, next in intensity is the love of the end and the most intense is the love of oneself. Love for oneself is the highest form of love. The reason is simple, the love for the means is not for the means itself; nobody loves the means for the sake of the means, people love the means for the sake of the end. Once the end is accomplished, then the attitude toward the means is completely different. In fact after accomplishing the end, the means is often not loved. We see the rich people are loved more than the poor people because they are the means for the end called wealth. As long as the end called wealth can be achieved through the rich, they are loved. The moment money goes away from them, there is no more love for them. Elderly rich people are very sincerely loved by family members, why? The sincerity comes because of the potential for inheritance. Suppose the elderly person makes the mistake of transferring the properties before death, you often see them being abandoned. *Yāvadvitto-pārjanasaktaḥ tāvannijaparivāro raktaḥ, paścājjīvati jarjaradehe, vārtān ko'pi na prcchati gehe*, most of the time love for people is a love as a means to get to an end and money is the end. Therefore love for the end is superior to that of the means. If means is dear to you, the end is dearer to you.

Now between the love of the end and the love of oneself, which is superior? Again logically analyzing, the love for the various ends is not for the end itself but I love various ends hoping that they will give me security, comfort and happiness. It is for my benefit, it is for my comfort, security, happiness, I love various ends. The moment that I see some end does not give me joy, the end is either changed or abandoned. That is why people marry and then divorce. The initial end was sharing the life together and that was pursued as long as it was joy giving. Once that is no longer there, just drop it. Let us separate now. End of love story! So who do we love more? *Ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṁ priyaṁ bhavati*, everything is dear for one's own happiness. *Upaniṣad* very clearly says, nobody loves the husband for the husband's sake, or the wife for the wife's sake. Everybody loves the husband or wife for one's own sake.

So is the case of love for children or parents. So no love is really for the sake of the end, but it is only for one's own sake.

Now let us apply this principle in the love of God. If we have *bhakti*, if a person loves God, what will be the intensity of that love? Scriptures point out that the intensity of this love depends upon how you look upon God! People look at God differently. The way you look upon God will determine the intensity of your love for God. Most people look to God only as a means to a worldly end. If I go to this temple, if I worship this god, then I will get this and this. We have so many worldly ends and to accomplish them, God is used as the means. As long as you look upon God as the means, that will be the least intense. It will be only a *manda bhakti*. That love will be dull. Such people will get angry with God if they do not get what they prayed for. It is only a conditional love, once the condition is not fulfilled, the love is not there anymore. This is the most common type of *bhakti*.

Then the next set of people, a few of them are there. They do not look upon God as a means, they are mature enough, their understanding of God is clear enough that they are able to choose God for God's sake, as the goal of life. They know God represents security! God represents peace! God represents happiness. Once I understand God as security, peace and joy, then I know that God is the end in life. Naturally my love of God as the end is more intense than the previous one where it was looked upon as the means to an end. This type of love is *madhyama bhakti*.

Now we can extend this further and find out what will be *uttama bhakti*. This is the third, rarer form of love. This is the most intense form of love. I do not look upon God as the means, not even as the end, but God as not different from me! *So'ham asmi!* That Lord is essentially me, not different from me. The Lord and the self being identical, love for God becomes equal to love for oneself. As we have said, love for oneself is the most intense love, and therefore love for God becomes very intense. It is *uttama bhakti*. For

manda bhakta, God is dear, for *madhyama bhakta*, God is dearer, for *uttama bhakta*, God is the dearest. Śrī Kṛṣṇa beautifully elaborates on this in the 7th and 12th chapters of *Bhagavad Gītā*. Love for God in all these forms is the first meaning of the word *bhakti*.

Now let us look at the second meaning of the word *bhakti*. The second meaning is *bhakti* as a course of discipline to accomplish the spiritual goal, the ultimate goal of *mokṣa*, freedom or liberation. To convey this idea, the word *yoga* is generally added. We then call it *bhakti yoga*. In *Bhagavad Gītā* (v. 14.26), *Bhagavān* says, *mām ca yo'vyabhicāreṇa bhaktiyogena sevate, sa guṇān-samatīyaitān, brahmabhūyāya kalpate*, and the 12th chapter is titled *Bhakti Yoga*. The suffix *yoga* indicates it is a course of discipline. Naturally the question is what is *bhakti yoga*? What course of discipline is indicated by it? Do you remember the three-fold course of discipline to attain the human goal of *puruṣārtha*? We talked about *karma yoga*, *upāsana yoga* and then *jñāna yoga*. We did not talk about *bhakti yoga*. We know what is *karma yoga*, *upāsana yoga* and then *jñāna yoga*. What do you mean by *bhakti yoga*? Is it a fourth *yoga*?

Bhakti yoga is not an exclusive course of discipline, but it is the name of the entire group of disciplines. It is not a 4th discipline, but it is the name of the 3-fold course of discipline. If you want you can say, the first stage of *bhakti yoga* is *karma yoga*, the second stage is *upāsana yoga* and then the final stage is *jñāna yoga*. *Karma yoga rūpa bhakti yoga*, *upāsana yoga rūpa bhakti yoga*, and *jñāna yoga rūpa bhakti yoga*, it is one consisting of all the three. Why do you call all the three commonly as *bhakti yoga*? How come *bhakti yoga* is the common name for all the three? Why don't you treat it separately as the 4th *yoga*? The reason is that *bhakti* is the common atmosphere in which all these three *yoga*-s are practiced. *Bhakti* is not separately practiced, at a separate time. *Karma yoga* must be imbued with *bhakti*, *upāsana yoga* must be soaked in *bhakti*, and *jñāna yoga* should float in the syrup of *bhakti* like *gulab jāmun*.

Karma yoga involves dedicating all actions to the Lord, and accepting without resistance all the consequences of life. Then how can there be *karma yoga* without *Īśvarārpaṇa bhāvana* and *prasāda buddhi*? Therefore a *karma yogi* should necessarily have *bhakti*. When? Of course, all the time! *Yatkarōṣi yadaśnāsi, yajjuhoṣi yadāsi yat, yattapasyasi kaunteya, tatkutuṣva madarpaṇam*. What about *upāsana yoga*? In *upāsana yoga* I have to meditate upon the Lord for developing mental discipline and integration. How can I meditate on God if I do not have *bhakti*? So *upāsana yoga* also takes place in the atmosphere of *bhakti* only. What about *jñāna yoga*? *Jñāna yoga* also involves *bhakti*. Before any study of scriptures, we start with a prayer. We also end with prayer. In *jñāna yoga*, we are inquiring into our own real nature, discovering our own identity, that of our real nature with the nature of God. This is nothing but discovery of God. Therefore *jñāna yoga* also involves *bhakti*. At no time is a true seeker away from *bhakti*. So the three *yoga*-s put together is called *bhakti yoga*. This is the second meaning of *bhakti*.

We will now include one more topic in this context. When we talk about *bhakti*, it is love or devotion toward God and without understanding the principle of God, how can we discuss the topic of devotion? Integral part of love is the object of love. In fact you cannot develop love toward anything without understanding what that one is. How can I love an unknown thing? How can I love an unknown person? So we cannot talk of love of God, without the knowledge or understanding of God. Let us see briefly who is God, the object of your love.

Scriptures give three definitions for God depending upon the maturity and the intellectual caliber of the seeker. There are three levels of definitions directed to three types of people. The first definition for the beginner is, God is, *jagat kartā*, the creator of the world. This is presented as a simple to understand reasoning. Any well designed product, any purposeful product must have an intelligent being behind it to design. The more well designed it

is, the more you appreciate the designing intelligence. If even ordinary worldly products require an intelligent being to design them, what to talk of this wonderful universe! This is so very well designed and very purposeful. If this creation is purposeful and well-designed, there must be an intelligent creator behind it. That intelligent creator is *Īśvaraḥ*. Once I define *Īśvara* as *jagat kartā*, we visualize God as a person because we are used to intelligent beings as human beings. So we imagine a very very intelligent God who is omniscient and omnipotent. Since we do not see Him around, we safely place him above the clouds. This is called the Lord as the creator, a personal God with a special form as *Śri Rāma*, or *Śri Kṛṣṇa*. This is called *eka rūpa Īśvaraḥ*. This is a very specific form, with a particular dress he wears, how many feet are there, how many hands are there, what he has in those hands, how many heads are there, *pañca mukha*, *ṣaṭ mukha*, or *catur mukha*. This is for the beginner intellect.

Once you have matured a little bit more, and capable of thinking further, the scriptures present the next level of *Īśvara*. That is God is *jagat kāraṇam*, the cause of the world. The first posit was *jagat kartā* is *Īśvara*, now we say that *jagat kāraṇam* is *Īśvara*. How do we introduce this idea? It is like this. Suppose I understand that God is the creator of the world, immediately the question is, what is the raw material out of which the world is created? A potter needs clay as the raw material to make pots, a goldsmith needs gold to make ornaments, a house builder needs brick and mortar to build. Without raw material nothing can be created. If I take God to be the creator, what is the raw material? Nothing else is available, because before creation God alone was there. Even space was not there. Even time was not there. Even before the creation of time, space and objects, when God alone was there, what is the raw material? So scriptures point out, God himself has to be the material. Therefore we say God is the *kāraṇam*, the very material out of which the world is created. The *upaniṣad* gives the example of a spider that weaves the web out its own saliva. Similarly God is the material cause of the universe.

From this the scriptures extend that raw material alone becomes the product, the manifold products, and since God is the raw material, God alone has become the universe. Therefore the whole universe is nothing but God alone. The whole universe is God. Since the whole universe is God, every form that I see, is a form of God. Therefore God does not have just one form, all forms are God's form. He is no more a personal God, he is an universal God. He is no more a *eka rūpa Īśvara*, but he is *aneka rūpa Īśvara* or *viśva rūpa Īśvara*. To have the *darśan* of God, I need not go above the clouds, he is available right here, everywhere. In *rudram*, Lord Śiva is worshiped as the rising sun, all the different hues of the sun are the complexion of the Lord. This is the second definition. First I say God created the world and then I say, God has become the world.

Once you have matured to the next level, scriptures give the third definition, *jagat adhiṣṭānam Īśvaraḥ*. This is the highest and the toughest to understand. In this we say, God did not become the world, because if and when I say God has become everything, immediately you will say, all the ugly things in the creation, all the diseases in the creation, all the criminals in the creation, are they also God? If we say yes, we had it. Already the devotion we have is so weak, fledgling, how can I say that? In order to blunt such objections, the third definition is given, God does not become the world, God appears as the world, with different forms not affected by any form he appears to be. To put it in other words, God is the very substratum of all forms but he transcends them all. God is the transcendental Reality. He is not affected by anything in the creation. This is *jagat adhiṣṭāna Īśvara*. Since God transcends all forms of creation, no particular form belongs to God, and that God is *arūpa Īśvaraḥ*. He is formless.

To summarize, God as *jagat kartā*, *jagat kāraṇa* and *jagat adhiṣṭāna*, and in English, the creator of the universe, the cause and substratum are the three definitions. God creates the world is the first level of understanding, God

becomes the world is the second level of understanding and God appears as the world is the third level of understanding. God is *eka rūpaḥ* is the first level of understanding, *aneka rūpaḥ* is the second level of understanding, and *arūpaḥ* is the third level of understanding. *Aśabdam asparśam arūpam avvyayaṁ, tatārasaṁ nityam agandha vacca yat, anyatra dharmāt anyatra adharmāt*, it transcends good and bad, beautiful and ugly, everything. We have to understand all the levels. When I am at the initial stage, I have the *eka rūpa bhakti*, in the middle stage I have *aneka rūpa bhakti* and in the final stage my *bhakti* is *arūpa bhakti*. Remember when I say later stage or final stage, that does not imply you are replacing the earlier stages. It is just a different dimension. If someone has risen to the level of *arūpa bhakti*, that does not mean he should abandon worship of his *iṣṭa devatā*. His personal God can still be very dear to him. *Arūpa bhakti* includes, embraces the other two types also. That is why an *advaitin* who talks about formless God, can happily worship God with a particular form as well as all the forms. He can appreciate God as the beautiful nature also.

To consolidate the whole discussion on *bhakti*, I have talked about nine aspects of *bhakti*. First as *manda*, *madhyama* and *uttama* love of God, *bhāvana dṛṣṭyā bhakti trayam*. Then *karma yoga rūpa bhakti*, *upāsana yoga rūpa bhakti* and *jñāna yoga rūpa bhakti*, *sādhana dṛṣṭyā bhakti trayam*. Then I talked about *eka rūpa bhakti*, *aneka rūpa bhakti* and *arūpa bhakti*, *devatā dṛṣṭyā bhakti trayam*, depending upon my understanding of God. The word *bhakti* is used in all these meanings. So anytime we read, study or use the word, we should clearly understand the context and take the meaning appropriately. This is a very important topic in the scriptures.