

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
October 24, 2006

Up to this point Narada's, Bhakti Sutra has dealt mainly with definitions, e.g., *sadhana bhakti*, *sadhya bhakti*, etc. The next section describes various approaches (*sadhanas*) to *bhakti* to reach the goal of *sadhya bhakti*.

Sutra 15: *Tal-lakshnaani vaachyante naanaa mata-bhedaat*

Translation: Characteristics of that *bhakti* (*parama prema*) are described because of different approaches.

Commentary: In Hindu tradition there is a variety of ways in which *bhakti* can be practiced. We know we pray to one God but we can pray in many different ways. Ancient *Rishis* seemed to recognize that every one is unique with their own set of inclinations, likes and dislikes. A devotional form of prayer may work fine for an emotional type but not for some one intellectually inclined. This is the reason why in the Hindu tradition there is a choice. One can pray in many different ways and pray to any one or more forms of God of one's own choice (*ishtha devta*), from among millions of gods. Even so, it is incorrect to conclude that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, in contrast to the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), which are monotheistic (this in fact is ironic; see footnote 1 below). In fact Vedas proclaim: "*sarvam khalvidam brahma*" meaning "All this indeed is God alone"; or as *Pujya Swami Dayananda* puts it beautifully: "There is not one God, there is only God". When one discovers this reality (i.e. all is God), there is a total dissolution of the ego (*ahankara*) and complete non-separation from God. It's like an ice-cube floating on water that melts and becomes one with water!

Just as water coming into the ocean can come from different approaches and still merge and become one with the ocean, different approaches to *bhakti* lead to the same goal of being one with God. Next several sutras will unfold a variety of forms and styles of worship.

Sutra 16: *Puja-aadishu anuraga iti Paaraarsharyah*

Translation: In *puja*, etc, it is the love, according to the son of sage Paraarshara, i.e., sage Vyasa.

Commentary: According to sage Vyasa, *bhakti* means to have a love for *puja* and worship. *Puja* and *bhakti* are often criticized as being ritualistic. In some educated modern Hindu circles "*puja* bashing" seems to be in vogue. There are two impediments to having love for *puja*. One is a lack of *shraddha*) (faith) and the other is a lack of understanding of the meaning and symbolism of *puja*.

Reflecting on his personal experience, Swamiji observed how in the beginning he just could not relate to *puja* ceremonies like *abhishekam*, etc. “It seems so messy!” he thought, what with the milk, honey, and the curds being poured over the Shiva *linga*, for example. But that was 25 years ago! Now, after regular practice over the years, he cherishes performance of *puja*. He realized at the outset that there must be something of value in all these rituals that have been practiced for thousands of years. He had a sense of commitment and *shraddha*. And he learned the meaning and the beauty of the symbolism behind *puja*.

With the prevalent level of education, it is helpful to first have an understanding of the rituals; practice can then follow without the otherwise constant nagging by the intellect. Blindly following a practice can become a silly ritual (see footnote 2 for a humorous anecdote). Following are the brief meanings of some of the principal rituals.

Havan or Yajna

Historically, *havan* (the fire ritual) was the primary means of worship during the Vedic period, way before the advent of *puja* as is now commonly performed to worship deities on an altar. *Agni* (fire) in the vision of *Rishis* was symbolically the priest that helped you worship God or any of His other forms, e.g., Lord Indra, Surya, Varuna, etc. *Agni* acts symbolically as the messenger for the one performing the *havan*. All the offerings into the fire are transported through its flames and smoke to the God whom the worshipper is praying to. A mantra is recited with each offering, pronouncing the God to whom it’s being offered, e.g., “this offering is to God Indra and it’s no longer mine”. *Agni* can itself be worshipped as God too. Thus, *havan* is a simple and a meaningful way of praying.

Puja

Puja can be simple or elaborate; one of the common forms is a 16-step *puja* to worship a deity. Briefly, in a *puja*, the Lord is invoked to come upon the altar and be present in the deity that is being worshipped. Then he is welcomed and received like an honored guest in your house and is treated with all your hospitality. Step by step, symbolically, He is offered a seat and his hands and feet are washed. He is then given a bath, offered clothes, ornaments, flowers, incense, lamp (*diya*), etc. and then the food is offered (*naivedyam*). After the food has been blessed by the Lord, it is received as *prasada*. During the offerings of flowers, the deity is offered many salutations and is addressed by various names, numbering 16, 108 or even 1008! These names reveal the glories of the Lord.

Aarti

Aarti is done while chanting a prayer. In doing *aarti*, one lights a lamp kept on a platter and then moves the platter circularly in a clockwise fashion around the *murti*. After that is done, the devotees make the gesture of receiving the light in their cupped hands and put the two hands on their eyes. The practice of circling the light around the *murti* goes back to olden days when the *murti* of the main deity was placed in the inner most chamber of the temple where it was dark and it was hard to see the *murti*. As the devotees came to pay their respects and see the image of the Lord (*darshan*), the priest would light a lamp and circle it around the *murti* so the devotee can have the *darshan*. The light represents knowledge, and this symbolism signifies revelation of God through knowledge. The gesture of taking light in hands signifies receiving knowledge and putting it on the closed eyes so we can see the Lord within, on the altar of our heart!

Havans and *pujas* are physical forms of worship in which the body, mind and speech all actively participate to engage one emotionally and evoke the feeling of deep devotion. This is the method of *bhakti* according to Vyasa.

Footnote 1:

In Christian theology, God is seen as three separate entities: God who is in heaven, Jesus, the son of God, and the Holy Ghost, one who is in the heart. Yet Christianity is claimed to be monotheistic!

Footnote 2

A humorous anecdote: Hundreds of years back, in a temple in India, just before the morning puja, one of the priests saw a stray cat and offered it some milk. As is true for cats, sure enough the cat started coming every day regularly and the priest, out of his good nature, continued to feed the cat. One day, as the puja ceremony was going on, the cat jumped on the altar and snuggled up to bowl of fruits and started to rub itself against the fruits. Being that cats lick their bodies to clean themselves, the Swamis were horrified to see this height of ritualistic impurity. But out of compassion they did not kick out the cat; instead they tied it with a piece of rope and put it on one side of the altar. Every morning the cat would come before the morning puja and one of the priests would tie it up, and put it on one side of the altar. This went on day after day, and became a routine. Now imagine a scene after 200 years after many Swamis and many cats. A distraught priest comes running to the Swami before the morning puja and desperately screams, "Swamiji, something terrible has happened; the cat just died a few minutes back! We have no cat to put next to the altar; how are we going to start our puja?" Obviously, the practice had become a blindly followed meaningless ritual.
