

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
October 31, 2006

Previous verses, 15 and 16, introduced the topic of many forms of *bhakti* as seen by several *rishis*, starting with sage Vyasa. In this context it is worthy of note that Hindu tradition provides a very wide range of approaches to the practice of *bhakti*, which represents a variety of forms of devotion. In the vision of ancient *rishis*, people have different tendencies and inclinations; therefore they provided a variety of ways to worship God. Hindu religion is all encompassing and none of the forms of *worship* are seen as blasphemous or otherwise unacceptable. Consider for example how in the tradition of Arya Samaj there is emphasis exclusively on doing *havans* and *yajnas* to worship God, and that the traditional *puja* to deities on an altar is completely discouraged, they still are fully a part of the Hindu tradition! This wide acceptance in Hindu religion is in stark contrast to other religions. Imagine if there were a reform movement in Christianity that rejected worship of Jesus Christ; certainly, those adopting such a reform will be excommunicated out right!

Verse 17: *Katha-aadishvati Garga*

Translation: Garga (believes in love for) stories, etc.

Commentary: In the previous verse, sage Vyasa held that *puja* was deep love and devotion to *puja*. In this verse, sage Garga sees *bhakti* as being that same intense love for the sacred stories in the scriptures. The word used for love (in verse 16 and implied in verse 17) is *anuraga*. *Anuraga* is love exclusively for one and only one; it excludes love for any thing else. This is the kind of love for the stories that Garga is talking about.

In the Hindu scriptures there are many stories. These stories are mainly described in Ramayana, and Mahabharata, which are *itihasa*, based on historical events, and in the 18 *puranas* and 18 *upa-puranas* which are mythological. There is a lot of importance placed on these stories because they powerfully convey moral, religious and spiritual teachings. Not only that, but they are beautiful stories-they engage the attention of the young and the old alike, because they are interestingly complex with a huge caste of characters. Incorporating the teachings in such stories makes learning easier and much more interesting than reading a book that only has the teachings. As an aside, when Swamiji wrote his book "Roar of the Ganges", he was really conveying the teachings of Vedanta but, through telling the captivating tales of his experiences in India and then weaving the teachings in the context of his story. Otherwise, he thought, his book on Vedanta might end up on the night table and become a sleeping aid! Teaching by means of stories is like taking medicine with honey to make it more

palatable. There is more emphasis on teaching by way of stories in the Hindu tradition than in any other religion.

Ramayana and Mahabharata are recognized as marvelous pieces of literature through out the world. Mahabharata is the world's longest poetry with 100,000 verses followed by Ramayana in the second place with 24,000 verses! The question often arises if these are true stories in a historic sense. A reasonable answer is that yes they are based on simple historic events which got the stories started but, over generations and over a long period of time, there have been many embellishments by many a devoted scholarly saints and pundits. These additions have become a part of Ramayana and Mahabharata; they do not diminish the scriptural values of the stories in any way-rather they enhance their value by making them more engaging and making the learning easier. On the other hand, it would be unreasonable to believe that everything in the stories is historical. To believe that, in the story of Ramayana, monkeys and bears built a bridge across the ocean is not logical; in fact such claims in modern times would raise question about the credibility of the sacred scriptures and cause them to be discarded. (*See footnote below relating an interesting personal experience of Swamiji about additions/embellishments to stories*)

Puranas, in contrast, are mythological stories and are mostly not based on any historical events. Stories, such as the battle between Lord Shiva and the child Ganesha, are fictional. Nevertheless, fictional stories can powerfully convey very profound truths and help readers understand something about life. Accordingly, stories in *puranas* are meant to teach religious, spiritual, and ethical values.

Continuing with verse 17, Garga believes that the love (*anuraga* as described above) for telling and listening to stories (*katha*) are meant to instill a value for *bhakti*. *Katha* can also include, *kirtan*, *bhajan*, recitation, etc.

Verse 18: *Aatmaratyavirodheneti shaandilyah*

Translation: (According to) sage Shaandilya, reveling in *atma* without discrimination (is *bhakti*).

Commentary: Reveling in one's self is meditating on God within you. This is what Lord Krishna tells Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita: "Meditate on Me, the one present in your own heart". Divinity within can be a focal point for prayer and worship. This is seen symbolically, when a priest performs a *puja* and, as one of the steps in the *puja*, takes a flower and yellow rice (*akshata*) in his hand and taps it on his head. It's a symbolism for acknowledging and worshipping the God within. The symbolism of women putting *tilak* (red dot) on the foreheads and wearing ornaments, is similarly, to anoint God dwelling within.

Even if one has not truly discovered the presence of God within, one can still revel in *atma*, the fullness of one's true nature-because that person knows that God is there. This is just like a devotee offering prayers to a deity in the dark inner chamber of a temple, even when *murti* cannot be seen (e.g., when pundit with the lighted lamp is not available to shine the light to the *murti*). The devotee knows the *murti* is there; he has *shraddha*.

The last three verses (16-18) actually have a specific common pattern. Vyasa's *bhakti* is done physically with the body (*kayena*); Garga's katha is by speech (*vachasa*), and Shankilya's *bhakti* is with the mind (*manasa*). The next verse describes *bhakti* as seen by Narada himself (the author of this text).

Verse 19: *Naradastu tad-arpita-akhila-aachaar-taa tad-vismaraneparamavyaakulateticha.*

Translation: But, according to Narada, it (*bhakti*) is the activity by which all activities are offered to that (God).

Commentary: By starting the verse with "but", Narada is not contradicting the other three sages above. He is encompassing all three forms of worship done by body, speech, and mind, into *bhakti*. As a matter of fact, not only rituals but also, (according to Narada) all of your actions, done by body, mind, and speech, should be offered to God. It is a life of total surrender. This indeed is the essence of karma yoga as expounded so well in Bhagavad Gita: everything one does, should be a form of prayer.

Footnote:

Manda Baba, a dim-witted saint, was facing rising floodwaters and in danger of drowning. Rescue workers come to warn him to vacate but he replies: "I will stay here, and I am sure God will take care of me!" As the water approaches and he is up to his knees in waters, workers come by in a boat to rescue him. Manda Baba: "Don't worry, I am sure God will take care of me!" Eventually the waters completely overtake him and he drowns. When he reaches the gates of heaven, he angrily asks God, "Why didn't you save me, I am such a great devotee of yours!" God: "I did Manda Baba! I came as a rescue worker to warn you and then again I came to ferry you out, but you did not heed my advice!" Moral: You have to recognize God's grace when you get it and not depend on a miracle. This is how the traditional story goes. Now for Swamiji's contemporary addition for the amusement of children: "After he refuses the boat rescue, the waters keep on rising and Manda Baba has to get on the roof of his hut to keep from drowning. This time a helicopter flies by and tries to pull Manda Baba up to safety! But once again he refuses and ends up drowning."

The punch line: In an article put out recently by an ashram in Rishikesh, India, this Manda Baba story was told; but now with Swamiji's embellishment of the helicopter rescue effort! Who else but Swamiji could have imagined this type of anecdote? It seems

the story had traveled by word of mouth to India and became a part of the traditional story.
