

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
January 2, 2007

We have been learning about various categories of *sadhana bhakti*, i.e., bhakti as a means to achieve the goal of *sadhya bhakti*. To summarize, *sadhana bhakti*, as we saw, is classified into two main categories: primary and secondary *bhakti*. Secondary *bhakti* is then further categorized as three successive forms starting from *bhakti* driven by the three *gunas*:

Tamas, characterized by inertia, lethargy, and ignorance,
Rajas characterized by passion, desire, energy and activity, and
Sattva, which essentially is absence of *tamas* and *rajas* and indicates purity of mind.

These three forms correspond to *bhakti* of people who are described as: *aarta*, the one who prays only in a dire situation, *artharthi*, who prays for fulfilling desires, and *jijnyasu*, who seeks God and knowledge of God.

Prayers by *Aarta* and *artharthi*, even though they are not the most mature forms of prayer, are still of some value, and Lord Krishna in fact praises them as devotees.

We now continue with further understanding of *bhakti* by a *jijnyasu*. *Jijnyasu*, driven by *sattva guna*, begins to develop a personal relationship with God that continually grows deeper and deeper with every step. *Jijnyasu*, literally meaning the one who wants to know, is eager to get more and more intimate with God and is always asking, "what can I do to get even closer". This continuously deepening relationship is further categorized as five stages of increasing intimacy according to different sets of sentiments or relationships with God:

1. *Shanta bhakti*: characterized by a feeling of peaceful relationship.
2. *Daasya bhakti*: attitude of being a servant
3. *Saakhya*: relationship as a friend,
4. *Vaatsalya*: a relationship of tenderness, as between a mother and a child, and
5. *Maadhurya*-Intimately connected to God, as one is to one's beloved.

These are steps of increasing intimacy, leading ultimately to being utterly non-separate from God. We will take a closer look at each of these five relationships.

Shanta bhakti is the worship of a one who has some sense of as to who God is. He knows that everything is manifestation of God, stated by *rishis* as "*sarvam kalvoidam brahma*", meaning, "all this is nothing but *Bhagavan*". It takes time to

develop this vision and this feeling of seeing *everything* as God; it's the vision when you see *Bhagavan* in every one, including your parents, your spouse, your children, and even your car! You see nothing but *Bhagavan*! *Shanta bhakta* feels related to God all the time and this is the form of his prayer.

As such, it is difficult to have an all-encompassing definition of prayer, because no single form of worship completely defines prayer. If one says prayer is chanting Sanskrit mantras, isn't chanting psalms in Latin not just as much of a prayer? Prayer can be performed physically, mentally, or by speech, or by being in Samadhi, etc., etc. A good general definition of prayer might be "any act in which one relates to God"; it includes all conventional forms of prayer. But, the prayer of a *shanta bhakta* allows for even a wider and a more general definition. For a *shanta bhakta* prayer is not simply "an act"; he relates to God in every act, and in every moment. When he is teaching a group of students, the act of teaching is God; students are God! This *bhakti* is not the one that comes and goes like that of an *aarta* or an *artharthi*-their prayers are transient. To understand a *shanta bhakta's* uninterrupted relationship to God, imagine this: you are walking out in the nature, and then suddenly you get an uncanny sense that you are "walking through God"! It's that sense of connectedness that *shanta bhakta* enjoys all the time.

The next stage of intimacy of a *jijnyasu's bhakti* is *daasya bhakti*, meaning a relationship as between a master and a servant. To put in proper perspective, we have to recognize a master-servant relationship as it was in ancient times in India. It was the duty and the responsibility of a master to take care of all the needs of his servants and provide them adequate comfort by way of food and shelter. The servant, from his standpoint, looked upon his master as a benevolent person who treated him compassionately, and in turn he served his master with a sense of worship and gratitude because his master took good care of him.

Shanta bhakti, by comparison to *daasya bhakti*, is vague in the sense that everything is God; it's not a personal intimacy or a specific relationship. *Daasya bhakti*, on the other hand, is when one begins to understand that the cause for all the natural laws of the cosmos is *Ishvara*-which literally means the one who rules; *Ishvara* rules the universe. He is the one by whose rule the planets revolve around the sun. It's *Ishvara* who makes the negatively charged electrons revolve at virtually the speed of light around the positively charged nucleus at a precise angular momentum and maintaining a delicate balance. Every atom in your body is held together by these nuclear forces. It's by God's wish and command that your heart beats some 100,000 times a day, every day of your life! *Bhagavan's* laws are not fickle; they don't vary even a slightest bit. Astronomical events can be predicted thousands of years in advance or back calculated just as

much. Even the slightest variation in the physical constants, like the speed of light, can cause tremendous effects on the universal order as it is. It is God who decides that gravity attracts and not repel. Laws of nature are astoundingly intelligent—they reveal *Ishvara's* Lordship. It's only with God's will that you live, that your brain functions. You are utterly dependent on *Bhagavan*. Even the next thought in your mind is God's will. God's will is to be understood as his laws; his natural order. God's will is not like human will. To live in conformity with this natural order is following God's will. With this perspective one develops an attitude of a servant. One recognizes that all the power, all the control, and all the authority is that of the Lord of the universe. Whatever power or capacity we have is what *Bhagavan* has given us. It's like working for a corporation; you only have that power which is delegated to you; you can't act beyond your authority, and beyond what your boss has empowered you with. *Daasya bhakti* means to recognize that all your power, even to walk, to talk, to see, is *Bhagvan's* power.

Saakhya bhakti is the next level higher in terms of closer relationship with God. This is a relationship of friendship with God. Friend obviously implies a sense of a buddy, and some one you hang out with. In the context of *bhakti*, God is your friend means some one who is with you on the journey of your life; on the same path walking along with you and sharing daily activities. How does one become friends with God? When we begin to see that God is with us all the time, with us in all our activities; that's when you feel a relationship of friendship. In a way it is ironic to talk about beginning to see God at all times, because God is already here now and with us at all times in whatever we are doing. He is our *jeevan saathi*, meaning the one who travels with us on the path of life. There is a reciprocity between friends; a give and take relationship. He is there for you and you are for Him. It's easy to see how He gives; but what do *we* give? What *can* we give? What we can give is the gratitude; being grateful to God even when we don't get what we want or what we expected. When you get a headache, be thankful that you at least have a head! All our life experiences come from God.

Just as other relationships, the *saakhya* relationship can also be cultivated with time and effort. It may start out as *daasya bhakti*, and then with time, being taken care of by the master, the *daasya* relationship grows into friendship.

Next in order of intimacy between a devotee and God is the attitude we referred to as *vaatsalya bhakti*. This is a relationship of tenderness typified by a mother's relationship with her child. It's strange to think how can we be a parent and God our child. But, in fact some *Vaishnavite* devotees take care of *Bala Krishna* and worship Him as the Lord looking upon Him as their child. *Vaatsalya* is an attitude of tenderness to one you love. Some one who has been your friend, who has given you a lot, could with time, evoke in us that feeling of tenderness and loving regard. It only happens when you are very close to some one; when you

are intimately connected, even more intimately than you are connected with the family. You recognize that ultimately, God takes care of you. He takes care of all what you need; with this feeling there is a shift in the perspective. There develops a sense of taking care of His needs; when His priorities are higher than yours. When you set aside your agenda. What are *Bhagavan's* priorities and His needs, you may wonder. *Bhagavan's* need is your conformity with His natural order; and that means conformity with dharma; living with a sense of tenderness, following His dharma.

Now, we come to the fifth stage of *bhakti*, *maadhurya bhakti*, which is the most intimate relationship with God. It is a relationship of intimacy as between lovers who are physically and emotionally completely together; it is when one in love feels that whatever happens to the beloved happens to him/her. It's as though the two have become one. We need a bit of Vedantic perspective to understand what this "two becoming one" really means. The sense of "I am I" and "you are you" recognizes our individualities or our egos, giving each one of us the sense of a doer, called *ahamkara* in Sanskrit. In *maadhurya bhakti*, it is as though the individual egos melt. It's when the boundary of my ego expands to include you and vice versa, enveloping the two us in a common "bubble" of one-ness, so to speak. Psychologically speaking, it's the merging of the boundaries of two egos. In terms of *bhakti*, your ego begins to melt. Everything in you is God; what separates us is our ego; the feeling that I am an individual being. When that ego disappears, sense of separation from God disappears, and what is left is experientially non-distinct from God.

To summarize:

Shanta bhakti is illustrated by the statement "God is everything and everywhere".

Daasya bhakti signifies, "I am yours", or in other words, "I am a servant You are the master",

Saakhya bhakti is, "I am Yours and You are mine", or, "You are with me all the time",

Vaatsalya bhakti is, "You are mine", or "Your priority is higher than mine", and

Maadhurya bhakti is, "You are me, and I am You".

As mentioned before, these five relationships develop in stages, each one representing a progression towards closer intimacy with God than the previous one. Yet, all these *bhakti* forms are *sadhana bhakti*, i.e., the means, and not the goal!

Sutra 59: *Anyasmaat saulabhyam bhaktau*

Translation: In comparison to (*para*) *bhakti* this is easier.

Commentary: The sutra means that pursuing *sadhana bhakti* in successive steps is more easily attained compared to *para bhakti*, which is the goal .

When you are engaged in a long journey of spiritual growth, you wonder how to proceed. The fact is that you simply start by taking the first step, and proceed step by step, one at a time. A 1000-mile journey can only start with the first step. When you are crossing a wide stream, you go across stepping one stone at a time. Similarly, *bhakti* has to be cultivated step by step. The next sutra addresses the question that might arise: “How do we know these *sadhanas*, as a step by step approach will work for us?”

Sutra 59: *Pramaana-antarasya-anapekshatvaat swayam pramaanatvaat.*

Translation: Because it does not depend on any other proof; it is self-evident.

Commentary: Some things are self-evident and do not require a proof for their being true. Same way the result of *sadhana bhakti* is self-evident. If some one is sitting in front of you, how will you prove that he is sitting in front of you? Obviously, you are not going to prove this fact by means of hearing with your ears or by means of your nose by smelling. The fact that you see the person in front of you by means of the sight of your eyes does not need to be proven by any other means. Sight is a valid means for seeing. If you want to know if the cup of tea in front of you has sugar, you don't need any other proof than tasting it and finding out. Taste is an authoritative source of itself.

Sadhana bhakti is the same way-you have to try it out. Engage yourself in *bhakti* and you will get the sense of coming closer to God.

Sutra 60: *Shaanti-rupaat parama-ananda-rupaat cha*

Translation: (Because, it is) of the form of peace and of the form of supreme joy.

Commentary: *Bhakti* starts out in the form of *shanti* (peace) and ultimately leads to ultimate bliss of non-separateness. The sutra implies the five stages of *bhakti* as described above, starting from *shanta bhakti* of peaceful relationship with God and then finally culminating with *maadhurya bhakti*. It's a process of growing and cultivating the feeling of more and more *shanti* with each step.

Finding out if *bhakti* works is the same as finding out if meditation works. When you engage yourself properly in meditation, you find yourself more and more peaceful as you cultivate the practice. Similarly, *bhakti* proceeds from the first step of being *shanti-rupa* to the final step of being *paramananda-rupa*.

In the pursuit of spiritual growth, one will discover that what is gained, and what is received, is beyond any thing that one might have expected!
