

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
January 9, 2007

In the last class we have seen an extensive categorization of *bhakti* and a thorough description of what each *bhakti* form is. Thus, we have been given a complete framework of the subject that tells us *what bhakti* is. Now the next few sutras in our text will show *how* to practice *bhakti*. To briefly recap, we saw that *bhakti* was categorized as *tamasic*, *rajasic*, and *saatvic*. *Tamasic bhakti*, the lowest mode of *bhakti* is that of a devotee, referred to as *aarta*, who worships only when in dire need and under distress; *rajasic bhakti* is that of an *arthaarti*, one who prays for fulfilling desires, and, *saatvic bhakti* is that of a *jijnyasu* who *seeks God and knowledge of God*. *Saatvic bhakti* was then further categorized as five different modes of relationships with God:

1. *Shanta*: characterized by a feeling of peaceful relationship.
2. *Daasya*: 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.

Looking at such wide a variety of ways of *bhakti*, it is worthy of note that we are fortunate to belong to a tradition that does not put us into the same mold. Many other religions are highly prescriptive: "do this and nothing else"-their approach is narrow. That may be fine for many who may benefit from such an approach, but it creates a problem for others to whom this approach of "you must", and "you should" does not work. But such is not the case in the Hindu tradition, as well as in religions that evolved in India, e.g., Buddhism, Jainism, and other *bhakti* traditions, starting with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu about 500 years back, followed by many other saints. They all had the same basic Vedic principles but their approach differed in significant ways. For example, in the *bhakti* tradition of *Sanatana* (Chaitanya, and other saints) *murti puja* is the primary form of worship, whereas in Arya Samaja, there is never any worship of a deity on an altar, and the only form of worship is *havan* (fire ritual). Thus the Hindu tradition not only does not force us into the same mold, it acknowledges that we are all different with different inclinations and different personalities. It empowers us with various teachings for different types of people.

Tamasic, *rajasic* and *saatvic bhakti* represent different levels of *bhakti*. We all start out more or less from praying when we feel we are in need of God's help. We prayed for example for good grades when we had the exams-that's *rajasic bhakti*. That was all right then, but then our *bhakti* must mature and evolve. Just as we

go through growth and maturation at intellectual and emotional level, so too we must evolve from *tamasic* to *rajasic* to *saatvic bhakti*. Otherwise, if our *bhakti* is identical to how it was 10 or 20 years back, we are simply doing prayer in a mechanical way.

In the *saatvic bhakti*, as we noted previously, we can relate to God in any of five different relationships (*bhava*) or modes. *Bhakta* referred to as *shaanta* is the one who sees God as the reality of every one and in everything and has a simple appreciation of God who is here and now. This form of relating to God does not have the markings of other four modes, which have characteristic attitude towards God. *Daasya bhava* is when God is the master in charge and he takes care of you as you serve him with gratitude. *Saakhya bhava* is a relationship of friendship; God is with us throughout the journey of our life. In *vaatsalya* relationship, there is an attitude of tenderness, and the sense of devotion is so strong that the *bhakta* puts aside his own agenda, and his own interests for pleasing God, that is to say he follows dharma. The last one, i.e., *maadhurya* is the most intense form of devotion characterized by extreme intimacy-in this form the ego boundaries merge and one becomes one with God with a feeling of utter non-separation from *Bhagavan*.

Note again that one is free to choose any of these five different relationships. As a matter of fact, one does not even have to be restricted to just these five; one can create a relationship of one's own liking. For example, one may relate to God through nature-seeing God in the lofty mountains, the starry nights or the beautiful lakes, etc. Indeed these five attitudes may not even be considered as sequential steps of a ladder; they don't even have to be chosen as discreet or distinct in the sense that you must adapt only one and exclude others; it's perfectly fine to "mix and match" so to say. It depends on one's disposition. The approach is very much as in the practice of meditation or prayer, one can employ any of the techniques that work for an individual.

The next sequence of sutras are applications of pervious sutras that told us what *bhakti* is; these sutras show us how to actually engage in the practice of *bhakti* and by what means. In a manner of speaking, we have finished reading the cookbook, now let's start cooking.

Sutra 61: *Lokahaanau chintaa na kaarya; nivedita-aatma-loka-veda-toaat*

Translation: You need not worry about worldly problems because you have surrendered yourself, your worldly acquisitions, and your notions.

Commentary: Don't worry over worldly problems. Worrying over problems is different from planning. Practically speaking, planning is what goes on during the first five minutes when your are tackling a problem. Rest of the time after that is only unproductive worry. The sutra points out that as a *bhakta* you have

surrendered everything: your worldly acquisitions and your preconceived notions and whatever you think. So there is no cause for you to worry. You can apply this practical advice at any level of *bhakti*. As a *daasya bhakta*, you have the attitude that everything is in the hands of God and he will protect you. With the *saakhya* attitude, you know *Bhagavan* is always with you and therefore there's no cause for worry; as a *vaatsalya bhakta*, you don't worry because you have no agenda of your own; you live a pious and righteous life. In *maadhuria bhakti*, there is no problem because you are so immersed in love for God that you don't worry about anything. You are so intimate with *Bhagavan* that nothing bothers you.

As a *bhakta*, with any of these attitudes, you will not worry because you have given up your agenda and your individuality.

Sutra 62: *Na tat-sidhau loka-vyavahaaro heyaha, kintu phala-tyaagaha tat-saadhanam cha karyameva*

Translation: Having attained that, worldly activities are not to be given up, but (only) their fruit of action; actions are indeed done as *sadhana* (practice of *bhakti*).

Commentary: When you have attained that level of *bhakti*, having become a real devotee, one who is always devoted to the Lord (in contrast to one with a transient sense of *bhakti*), worldly activities need not be given up. You don't have to spend all your time in a *mandir*. However, you should practice renunciation of fruits of your actions (*phala-tyaaga*). You should remain engaged in productive worldly affairs but without a desire for fruits of your actions. Once again, you can again relate this practical application at any of the various attitudes of *bhakti* discussed above. (*Shaanta bhakti* is too general to talk in terms of application but the others can be). For example, with the *daasya bhava*, you go to work because the Lord, who is your master, tells you to do so; with *saakhya bhava*, *Bhagavan* is going along with you; with a *vatsalya bhava*, you go to work because it's your dharma; with *maadhurya bhava*, God is intimately with you all the time, no matter what you are engaged in.

The *bhakti* we are talking about in this context is not the one that comes and goes; it's the *bhakti* that becomes the fabric of the life of a devotee. *Bhakta* is what he is all the time. Worldly activities therefore are not to be given up, even when one has attained that *bhakti*. Commonly our actions are motivated by our desires. If you argue that you go to work not to fulfill any desire but because you have to, even then you are having fulfilling a desire—a desire to avoid unpleasant consequences of not going to work, such as losing your house and starving your family. On the other hand, a *bhakta* is motivated by *bhakti*—in any of its five forms. *Bhakta* is not seeking *phala*; he is engaged in worldly activities, because, for him these activities are *sadhana*'s for further growth and for developing his *bhakti* and making it even stronger. It's a pity when one thinks that after retirement from a

professional career, I can sit in front of TV and watch sports and games all day. Then the growth ceases-life is defined as growth; intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth must continue. Growth is what makes life so special. The end will come sooner or later, but why hasten the process! A houseplant that ceases to grow is a dead plant; either it's growing or it's dead-nothing in between!

Thus, even if one has attained a level of *bhakti* where one is not motivated by the fruit of actions, he still needs to be engaged in action to deepen his sense of *bhakti*.

Sutra 63: *Stri-dhana-naastika-charitram na shravaniyam*

Translation: Stories about women, wealth and of ungodly people should not be listened to.

Commentary: What's being discussed here is that certain types of materials that will pollute your mind should not be listened to; these include women, wealth and accounts of ungodly people or materials written by such ungodly people. The fact that the sutra refers to women rather than men is incidental and it simply denotes that the author is a man. But the intent of the sutra is to advise the spiritual aspirant to avoid any type of material that may be considered pornographic. For some men, women become an object of obsession. Sadly, now a days, there is an incredible amount of graphic pornographic material freely available on the internet-it is estimated to constitute a significant portion of the total material on the world-wide-web. This is not helpful even in ordinary life, what to speak of life of spiritual pursuit! The material that pollutes our mind and pulls it away from spirituality is not only sexual material-all the graphic violence on the internet as well as in media, movies, and television is just as much mind-polluting and equally harmful. These fill our mind with distorted image of what life is about. Any thing that pollutes our mind is defined here as *stri-charitram*, and should be avoided.

Dhana charitram, is stories that praise material acquisitions, material success or literature of this type. A realistic example in today's world is some one who watches stock market performance. It's one thing to invest your wealth wisely and keep track of your investments periodically; that's dharma. But some one who sits in front of TV and watches stock market performance all day long is obsessed by wealth. Such an obsession is mind-polluting and keeps one away fro a spiritual life and religious activities.

Naastika charitram: Literally, *naastika* is an unbeliever or an unreligious person. As an example, consider a circle of some modern, fashionanble socialites in India, strutting with their cell phones and showing off their iPods; in keeping up with their image of being "hip" some such people engage in "Hindu bashing" by putting down ancient traditions. They make mockery of some one going to an

ashram or a temple or following spiritual pursuits. This is a shame! Being modern is one thing, but there is no need to put down very profound ancient traditions. This is an example of *naastika charitram*. To associate with such people is not going to be helpful for your *bhakti*; it's not a healthy environment for a spiritual person. We talked about *dusunga* earlier, i.e., association with wrong people, and that's what needs to be avoided-because the bad stuff "rubs off".

Sutra 64: *Abhimaana-dambha-adikam tyaaajyam*

Translation: Pride, pretense, etc. must be given up.

Commentary: There are many undesirable personality traits that are pretty easy to pick up, such as pride and pretentiousness. Pride is to look at your achievements, etc., and exaggerate it; exaggerated sense of self is pride. Dambha (pretentiousness) is when you pretend to be what you are not; when you make up new stuff about yourself for self-importance. As an example, if you stretch your qualifications a little bit to suit the job descriptions, it's pride. But if you invent your accomplishments, you are pretending to be what you are not.

Such personality traits are to be given up. As a reader, notice here the context in which this moralistic statement is made. Contrary to how it is in other religious traditions, which say, "if you don't do what's prescribed, you will go to hell", or something similar. But what this text says is that if you don't give up negative personality traits (pride, pretense, etc.), these traits will hinder your devotion; Hindu scriptures do intimidate you into submission.

Traits, such as pretense, become a burden on you and cause you to lose the beautiful simplicity of life that comes with being truthful and righteous. Being pretentious means having to keep track of what you said to whom, lest you prove yourself a fraud and a phony.

Once again you can apply this practical advice to any of the *bhakti* attitudes. For example, as a *daasya*, you'd feel that everything you have belongs to the master; when all the good things you have, belong to *Bhagavan*, what is there to be proud and pretentious about?

Sutra 65: *Tad-aarpita-akhila-aacharaaha san kaama-krodha-abhimaana-aadikam tasminneva karaneeyam*

Translation: Dedicating all activities to Him, desire, anger, pride, etc., should be directed only towards Him

Commentary: Being a *bhakta* and having surrendered everything to Him, the *bhakta* should also surrender all undesirable traits-desire, anger, pride, etc. to Him, employing any of the *bhakti bhavas*, namely, *daasya*, *saakhya*, etc. Having done so, a *bhakta* would be much less subject to these negative emotions than a

normal person. Nevertheless, having reached any stage of *bhakti*, the *bhakta* is still a human being and will experience these human emotions time and again. But, these emotions have to be surrendered to God rather than directed towards others. Sharing his personal experience, Swamiji reflected on the fact that even after 25 years of spiritual life, when a lot of meditation and Vedantic understanding has taken place, and whatever level he has achieved on the spiritual ladder, there are still a few occasions when he feels negative emotions; but that is to be regarded as human nature. Most of the emotions are helpful, but occasionally, there will be problems. Continuing with his experience, he related how at the end of his 3-year residential Vedanta course with Pujya Swami Dayananda, he exclaimed to Swamiji how his mind still goes off! Pujya Swamiji's reply in front of the whole class was, "Minds are like that! You don't know how silly my mind can be sometimes!" If a Mahatma like Pujya Swamiji can say so for himself, who are we to deny this fact. Our minds are also going to be silly at times.

Bhagavan has blessed us with emotions-emotions that can cause pain and suffering. But why should we be afraid of them. Take sadness for example. So many people work so hard to avoid sadness at all costs. It seems like a terribly misplaced effort. Sadness is a normal human emotion. Sadness can be enjoyed. We enjoy sad movies, even when tears are flowing down our eyes!

When you are deeply committed to *bhakti* and these emotions come up, turn them towards *Bhagavan*; turn your mind to *Bhagavan*. Once gain you can do it from the perspective of any of the *bhakti bhavas*. As a *daasya bhakta*, God as your master gave you the emotions; as a *saakhya*, he is with you at all times when you have these emotions; as a *vaatsalya*, you will not be burdened by emotions because you have no agenda of your own; as a *maadhuria bhakta*, you are utterly non-separate from *Bhagavan* and so are your emotions.

Sometimes we make a judgment that we are not supposed to have certain emotions. We have certain image of ourselves: "I am not like that", etc. This is delusional, and immature because when you do experience certain emotions, you will only suffer trying to deny them. Emulate Pujya Swamiji and accept the silliness of your mind. But, it's very important to remember that accepting your emotions does not mean you let emotions run your life. Behavior is under your control. Your mind can be silly but don't afflict your silliness on others. If you are angry you need not direct your anger towards others. If you feel hurt, enjoy your hurt, but don't hurt others. You must control your behavior.
