

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
February 6, 2007

As we come to the end of the text we will see that there is a great deal of important material concentrated in these sutras. The section in the beginning was also very important, whereas in the middle, it was not unimportant but less so than at the beginning and the end. This is not unusual, because authors want to start with important material to interest the reader and then at the end they want to focus on the main points of their message. These last sutras give practical instructions to apply the teachings to our every day life. If we come here every Tuesday night to listen to the talk and don't go back with a take-home message, we are completely wasting our time. The purpose of this book is to show us how to live a life of *sadhana*, and not simply instill us with concepts and ideas. We must convert these teachings and apply them to our daily lives, so as to change our behavior, thinking, and handling of the situations. We must put these teachings into practice. This is the reason why there is so much emphasis on karma yoga in Bhagavad Gita, because karma yoga turns our daily life into a spiritual *sadhana*. Same way the next several sutras give us practical advice and practical steps to pursue a life of spiritual growth.

Sutra 74: *Vaado Naavalambyaha*

Translation: Argument (debate) does not deserve to be entered into.

Commentary: *Vaada* means taking a philosophical position and it also means debate and argument. The sutra is advising that a spiritual aspirant should not be inclined towards *vaada*, i.e., he should not take a philosophical position on his ideas and should not engage into debates and arguments about philosophical ideas.

Taking an example, it seems conventional to consider Vedanta as a philosophical position. It's common to hear from those pursuing Vedanta, a statement such as, "I am an *advaita Vedantin*". Saying so is akin to some one saying, "I am a Republican". Question arises, "Which part of you is Republican? I see you as a person". Being a Republican or a Democrat is only a political point of view, tangential to what you really are; by making such statements, you are limiting yourself. Saying you are a *bhakta* or a *Vedantin* is similarly not helpful. By these statements, we paint ourselves into a corner, from where it's difficult to step out. We are limiting ourselves and limiting our thinking.

These teachings, Vedanta or *bhakti*, are not merely philosophical points of views. They have to change our life. If you know the Republican platform in minute detail, what's the point? And if you know all the 84 sutras of Narada Bhakti very well, of what use is that?

Vaada, in the sense of debate or argument can be a problem for a spiritual aspirant. Swamiji reflected on his own situation, some 25 years back. He had studied and learned about spiritual teachings in a traditional style, and he used to have several friends who were also very much interested in spiritual teachings. Knowing that he had learned the spiritual teachings under the guidance of a highly qualified traditional teacher, he had a sense of certain pride and smugness about his depth of knowledge. Thus, whenever there was a discussion on topics of such teachings, he would spiritedly engage in the debate and correct others based on what he was taught. This is *vaada*, i.e., arguing for the sake of debate. He realized this was immature and served no good purpose. If some one held a different position, and you felt that he was wrong, you are not going to change that person or his view point. He would question what authority you have so that he has to consider you as being right, and he being wrong? A situation like that only creates discomfort and discord and leads to further argument. It's harmful to take spiritual discussion to an argument. In casual conversations, it is best to avoid such discussions and debates, as it's not a wise thing to do. These debates become a contest of intellects-each one thinks in his way and thinks he is right.

The problem is that when we use our intellect to argue and debate about spiritual teachings, they take us away from God. Let us use the power of our intellect to bring us closer to God!

Sutra 75: *Baahulya-avaakaashatvaad aniyatatvaachcha*

Translation: Because of room for diversity and because of no reason being conclusive.

Commentary: This sutra amplifies what was said in the previous sutra that it is not proper to enter into a debate because people can have different viewpoints and there is no one single reasoning or logic that is the one and only conclusive reasoning. In spiritual life there is no one right way. Everything we have discussed before tells us how ancient *rishis* completely rejected any dogmatic approach. Many other religions would tell the followers what is the one and the only truth, what God is, and what exact teachings, prayers, rituals, and do's and don'ts to follow; and nothing else. *Rishis* embraced the attitude that there are many valid approaches to spiritual growth. People differ in their intellectual capacities and their inclinations. We are vastly different from each other. Hence, we have whole array of *sadhanas* and paths to address us individually. *Rishis* did not cast us all in one mold-thank goodness for that!

As an example of this multi-dimensional approach, there is a central doctrine in the Jain philosophy called "*siyaadvada*", which maintains that nothing is singularly conclusive. If you ask, "Is this right? Is that right?" Based on the

doctrine of *siyaadvaada*, the answer to any such question will be, “It could be, or it might be”; showing that there are no dogmas and that there is room for other possibilities.

Some might object to such an approach because they want to know what’s the right answer, what’s the truth. It’s a fact that the truth we seek is indeed one, but to think that there is one way to get to that truth is not correct. If there is a temple on the top of the mountain and you want to get there, you can go by any number of routes-you can go straight up, zigzag, from East or West, etc.-each of these approaches will get you to the peak of the mountain and to the temple.

That’s what the sutra means by *avakaasha*; there is room for a variety views and they are all acceptable. That’s how the Hindu tradition is! There is no need to cling on to your view and perceive others as wrong. So the best way to pursue spiritual life is to follow whatever leads you closer to God. Embrace that and set aside whatever comes in the way. You have complete freedom to follow the path of your choosing as long as it’s a *dharmic* path (righteous way). *Adharma* will never take you closer to God. That’s wrong.

To summarize, the last two sutras emphasize not to cling to your philosophical point of view; there is no rule that says there are no other ways to reach the goal

Sutra 76: *Bhakti-shaastraani mananeeyaani tat-udbodhaka-karmaani karaneeyaani*

Translation: Bhakti-scriptures should be reflected upon; practices that evoke *bhakti* must be performed.

Commentary: This sutra offers more of practical advice, by saying that scriptures on the topic of *bhakti* and devotion, etc. should be studied and reflected upon. Note that the sutra uses the word *mananeeya* and not *maananeeya*. *Maananeeya* means to be respected. Respecting scriptures is not the idea. If the Bhagavad Gita text is put on the altar and worshipped, it’s not going to help much; may be a little bit only because worship is a good action. Instead the sutra is advising that the scriptures deserve our reflection upon them. Many of us have excellent books lying on untouched on our bookshelves. To make use them, we have to pick them up and read them. Similarly, we have to spend time with our scriptures. We have to stay with the scriptures a long time because it’s easy to grasp the ideas and concepts, but we need to undergo a process of change; and that’s the whole point.

All other actions related to staying with the scriptures and conducive to their reflections ought to be pursued. Because they will stimulate your understanding and lead you to knowledge. Listening to talks from qualified teacher is certainly an important way to achieve this aim. Reading by yourself is all right, but with a proper study with the guidance of a teacher, you will be amazed to see how

much more you can learn and how vivid the teachings become. You realize how little you really understood, otherwise. This was exactly what Swamiji experienced personally; he discovered how much more was there to understand compared to reading by himself. It is much more advantageous to learn with proper guidance.

It's worth considering whether you should stick to one teacher and learn only according to teachings of one of many traditions that our religion provides, such as Vedanta, *Shaivism*, yoga, *bhakti*, etc. Conventionally, one follows one teacher and one of the traditions. Because in the beginning, if you listen to 10 different teachers of ten different traditions, you will find tremendous contradictions and will be totally confused. What really works is to get a solid understanding of one tradition and from one teacher. With that solid foundation of knowledge, you will be able to understand other teachings in a much better way, because you have a solid frame work of your knowledge, and you will be able to see where on that framework other teachings fit in. A bee can take nectar from many flowers, but all the nectar the bee gets is the same-there is no confusion about that. But gaining spiritual knowledge is like digging a well. If you keep on digging many wells and stop each time before you hit the water, you will have dug many shallow wells without getting water. If you keep on going from one teacher to the other, you will similarly miss getting the proper understanding. Once you have the full understanding, you can then easily make the sense of other teachings. Understand the principles of one tradition, like *advaita* Vedanta and then study other schools of thought-you will develop a finer appreciation for other traditions and find them valuable. After his 3-year study with Pujya Swami Dayananda and being well established in the Vedantic tradition, Swamiji found the teachings Buddhism and of Christian mystics as being profound and beautiful; something that would not have been possible without having properly understood *advaita* Vedanta.

Sutra 77: *Sukha-dukha-ichha-laabha-aadi-tyakte kaale prateekshamaane kshanaardhamapi vyartham na neyam.*

Translation: Having given up pleasure, pain, desire, gain, etc., at that time don't even waste half a second

Commentary: When you have reached a stage where you have given up pursuit of pleasure, you are not running away from unhappiness or pain, not fulfilling desires, and pursuing any gains for selfish goals, at that point you have gained enlightenment. But while you are waiting to reach this stage, you should not waste even half a second without pursuit of spiritual growth. This may seem like an exaggeration, but it's not, if you understand the concept of karma yoga. Spiritual journey is the most challenging and the loftiest goal of life. How much effort should that require? Going to California takes effort, going to India takes more effort, and reaching the moon takes even greater effort. But all those are

finite goals and an appropriate amount of effort will get you to that goal. Spiritual journey is the highest goal and it will take the highest effort; in fact it requires full-time commitment. Meaning that you have to be pursuing this goal non-stop, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This can be done! It can be a problem when we compartmentalize life into religious activities and secular activities. With this separation, there is no hope whatsoever to reach the goal of enlightenment. That's why the sutra emphasized not to waste even half a second. As a metaphor, consider that a real *sadhu* does not play a sitar but only plays an *ektaara*; (imagine Narada *muni*). Sitar, which has many strings, represents many goals, whereas a *sadhu*, with one single string and one single note, is completely focused on a single goal. Reaching enlightenment is an extraordinary goal that requires an extraordinary effort,

Sutra78: *Ahimsaa-satya-shaucha-dayaa-aastikya-aadi-charitrayaani paripaalaneeyaani*
Translation: Virtues like non-injury, truth, purity, compassion, belief, etc., should be cultivated and preserved

Commentary: Here we have been given a set of values as listed in the sutra; i.e., ahimsa, truth, etc. which should be cultivated and practiced in the life of a *saadhika*. It seems like we have been given a set of commandments, just as the 10 commandments are given in the Bible to the practitioners. But note how different the approach is. As such, every tradition has moral and ethical values that are to be practiced. But the orientation in which they are given is very different. In the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), the common approach among all three religions is that if you don't follow these commandments or values, you are doomed to hell and you will suffer. In our Vedic culture, the approach is very pragmatic. We are told to follow these values because they are good for us. These values define dharma and are universal values. They are the order of the universe. As Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati would say, if you rub against dharma (order) it will rub you back harder and you will get hurt. If you rub your arm vigorously against a rough bark of the tree, the tree will not have much problem but you will certainly have a bleeding arm. This is what happens when you go against dharma. *Rishis* tell us, if you want happiness, freedom from conflict, peace and contentment, consider following these values; follow dharma. Following dharma contributes to spiritual growth. It's easy to see that: if you are engaged in a life of extreme stress, conflict, friction and fighting, how much energy will you have left for spiritual growth? Whenever you do something wrong it creates a conflict with some one; and at the least it creates inner conflict that robs you of your peace of mind.

Thus the message of the sutra is to follow the basic principles by following the virtues that are described.

Question and answer session

Q: When a *sadhu*, who sees God manifested in everything and everywhere, and nothing is separate from God, in that case how does he respond to *adharma*?

A: In a sense it's easier for such a person. Normally, we put our interests first. But a *sadhu*, with a perspective of a non-doer, does not have an agenda of his own and therefore does not have a conflict situation that would compel him to engage in *adharma* for his own sake. When one is utterly surrendered to God, one will spontaneously follow dharma. If it's his duty to respond, he will do it so spontaneously as well.

Q: An earlier sutra talked about the value of having intense emotions (goose bumps, tears flowing, etc.) as a means of developing one's devotion. But, emotions belong to the mind and our true nature transcends mind. In that case, what's the need for emotions to achieve enlightenment?

A: To cultivate emotional intensity is *sadhana bhakti* that helps one to connect to God. Once one reaches the *saadhya*, i.e., one is enlightened, there is no need for this kind of emotional intensity.

Q: In sutra 66, why were the *nitya daasya* and *nitya kaanta (maadhuria)* described as the highest of the five *bhakti* attitudes (*shanta, daasya, sakha, vaatsalya, and maadhuria*) ?

A: Actually they were considered to be better than not the remaining three of these five attitudes, but better than these three: *tamas, rajas, and saatoic* forms of *bhakti*; these also correspond to three kinds of *bhakti* of an *aarta, arthaarti, and jijnyasu*, as explained previously.

Q: How Narada, not having been married, can relate to *madhuria bhakti*, which is compared to intense love between a husband and a wife?

A: Narada himself did not invent the teachings of *bhakti*. Narada is summarizing the teachings that are already there, just as Patanjali summarized the teachings of yoga and just as Brahma Sutra are a summary of the Vedantic teachings by Shankar Acharya. Narada is acting as a compiler.
