

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
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Although this text, Narada Bhakti Sutra, is attributed to Narada muni, it is quite clear that it is written by some other author. Narada, as such, is associated with many ancient stories of *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. This text, based on its context and linguistic evidence, appears to be more recent than the life period of Narada. Nevertheless, the value of this or any other text is in its contents rather than its age and author. The author of this text apparently wanted it to be read widely, and for that reason attributed it to Narada. This text is titled as Sutra, which means it's written very concisely and precisely.

The title of this book might suggest that it's a book that follows the path of *Bhakti Marga*. For that reason, it's worth noting that there is a common misconception about *bhakti* among students of Vedanta. *Vedantins* think that *bhakti* is not an intellectual pursuit and conclude, "It's not for me!" But Vedanta is not an intellectual pursuit of knowledge; Vedanta is for spiritual growth. And *bhakti* is one of the essential practices (*sadhana*) for spiritual growth. The idea that there are four separate paths (*marga*) for spiritual growth (viz. karma; *bhakti*; *dhyana* and *jnana*), and that we can choose only one of them depending on our personality, is a misconception. It's a mistake to assign ourselves to narrow categories (*bhakti* for emotional types, *jnana* for intellectuals, etc). We need them all! Just as for cooking rice, we can't choose among fire, water, and a pot -we need them all.

One reason for studying Narada's Bhakti Sutra is just that, i.e, we need it as an essential *sadhana*. Secondly, *bhakti*, properly understood, is not simply intense *tapasya* as it is depicted in *puranic* stories and in movies. In the study of Narada's Bhakti Sutra, we will see inseparability of *bhakti* and *jnanam*. We will see the deeper and more profound meaning of *bhakti*; more than devotion to God or divine love. At its highest level, *bhakti* is enlightenment!

It is important to understand that *bhakti* is not a gradual process that progresses from desire (*kama*, which is romantic love or sexual attraction) to emotional love (*prema*) to *bhakti*. Although, all three have some element of love, they are all completely different from one another. A good way to understand any absence of a continuum among the three is to consider the metaphor of a seed (*kama*)

giving rise to a tree (*prema*) and the tree bearing a fruit (*bhakti*). Although the tree arises from the seed, and the fruit from the tree, the tree and the seed are very different and so are the tree and the fruit. Tree is not a bigger form of the seed and the fruit is not an intense form of tree. Similarly, *bhakti* is not an intense form of conventional or emotion based love and emotional love is not physical love or sexual attraction. Physical love is rooted in the physiology of the body like desire for food and water. Emotional love, as between a husband and a wife or between parent and child is located in the mind.

Love has many shades; romantic love is barely love; because it's based on the premise "you make me feel loved, therefore I love you," or, "you make me enjoy life, therefore I love you," or, "I love you as long you love me". This kind of love is need-based. "I love you" really means in this case, "I need you". On the other hand, love, such as between a mother and a child is a much stronger bond especially when the child is very young. However, parental love is not pure and unconditional, because, there are various expectations. When the 18-year old wants to be an auto mechanic or a waitress, the parent might disapprove and reject the idea and insist that the child must go to college. In such a case the parent is fulfilling his/her desire, and hence it's not unselfish love. Essentially, emotional love cannot be pure or totally unconditional, unless one is an enlightened person! Emotional love can be less pure or more pure, but never perfect!

Bhakti, in its highest form, referred to as "*parama prema*" (supreme love), transcends love; it is limitless and infinite love. No matter how intense the conventional love is, it's not *bhakti*. Love, either physical or emotional, is based on a sense of incompleteness, a sense of need, however little that need may be. *Bhakti*, on the other hand, transcends the mind. It relates to one's true self, which is *sat-cit-ananda* (eternal, unlimited, consciousness). This *bhakti* is called "*para bhakti*". In comparison, *apara bhakti* is the divine love for God as exemplified by devotion of *bhakta* Prahalada, or some one worshipping the Lord standing at an altar.

Para bhakti is not something you can practice because in reality it is the goal or the point of arrival. *Para bhakti* is enlightenment!. This is what the Narada Bhakti sutra will unfold as we pursue our study.