

**Narada Bhakti Sutra**  
**A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse**  
**December 26, 2006**

At this point in our text, we continue to focus on *sadhana bhakti*, i.e., *bhakti* as a means to achieve the goal.

For next few verses, the text will present what might appear to be simply a technical list of various *sadhana bhaktis* classified into different categories and subcategories, etc. One may wonder what's the point of all this itemization and classification? Is it not like a botanical classification of plant kingdom into class, family, genus, species, variety, etc., which is not necessary to enjoy and admire the beautiful flowers? Yes, it is true that you don't need to know botany to enjoy the beauty of flowers, but it's also true that knowing the subtleties of each plant and recognizing their place in the whole order of plant kingdom will only enhance your appreciation of the beauty of the fauna and the flora that you are looking at. Given our rather high educational background, we feel comfortable knowing the broader picture and the structure of the subject. Classifying various practices of *bhakti*, will enhance our understanding of various forms of *bhakti* and their interrelationships. It empowers us to immerse ourselves deeply into *bhakti*.

To start with, *bhakti* was differentiated as *para* and *apara bhakti*, which were then identified as *saadhya* and *sadhana bhakti*. Now, under *sadhana bhakti*, we have:

- 1) *Mukhya* or primary *bhakti*, and
- 2) *Gauni* or secondary *bhakti*.

Next sutra describes primary *bhakti*.

Sutra 54: *Guna-rahitam kamanaa-rahitam pratikshana-var dhamaanam avichhinnam sukshmataram anubhava-rupam*

Translation: Free of attributes, free of selfish desire, growing each moment, uninterrupted, extremely subtle, of the form of an experience.

Commentary: This sutra describes primary *bhakti* by various terms, which are examined below.

To understand what is *bhakti* that is "free of attributes", we have to look at it from a Vedantic perspective first. It is the Vedantic methodology, based on negation that unfolds *sat-cit-ananda atma* as being free of attributes. Vedanta systematically negates everything that covers *atma* and as a result of that reveals it. This is the only way *atma* can be discovered, because in fact, your true nature already is *sat-cit-ananda*; you already have what you seek. Your true divine nature is obstructed by ignorance (*avidya*). Ignorance that makes you perceive

yourself as the body and the mind. Mind is thoughts, sensory perceptions, emotions and ego. These are all obstructions to our seeing our true nature. Vedanta negates all of these. Ultimately, it is the ego (ahamkara or "I maker") that keeps us separate from God. As a metaphor, as long as the wave sees itself as an individual separate form (maintaining its ego, so to speak), it remains finite and limited and separate from the ocean. It's one with ocean when sees itself as water. Thus, it is when *ahamkara* is negated, that one discovers the attribute-free *atma*. This is the Vedantic goal of *advaita* or the sense of non-duality from Bhagavan. And this is how attribute free (primary) *bhakti* is to be understood. Attribute free *bhakti* is the ultimate surrender; which is the surrender of your "self", or the surrender of the ego (*ahamkara*) itself. In the context of *bhakti*, destruction of ego was described in a previous sutra as "*prapatti*" versus "*ahamkara naasha*" in Vedanta. The conclusion that, "I am separate from God" is a wrong conclusion. When wave recognizes itself as water, false identification as the wave-from goes away. The less the identification with the ego, the closer is the identity with *Bhagavan*. It could be said, "More of me (ego) means less of Him and none of me means only Him". That's the state of ultimate surrender and this is what is meant by "*guna-rahita*" or "without attributes" in the sutra.

Primary *Bhakti* is "*kamanaa-rahitam*" or free of selfish desires or personal agenda. Next, it is "*pratikshana-vardhamaanam*" which means it grows in its intensity with each and every passing moment. Practice of *bhakti*, like any other practice, needs to be cultivated, so that it will continue to mature. In this regards, it's very much like meditation. In the beginning, meditation is not easy-it is very difficult to focus and make your mind quiet; it can even get frustrating. But, with practice, as the mind gradually quietens, you discover that quieter the mind becomes the better you feel, and more enjoyable the meditation becomes. When mind is at its quietest, you find it to be the most blissful state. This feeling is contrary to what we normally think makes us happy, i.e., engaging our mind in as many pleasurable activities as possible.

*Bhakti* is like that also. In the beginning when you do *puja*, you feel awkward performing the gestures and ringing the bells, etc.; you feel artificial and silly joining other devotees in their swaying motions and dancing around jumping up and down in what seems to you a state of frenzy. But once you join in, the sentiment rubs off; it's an infectious feeling. With time, the sentiment grows and you develop more and more liking for singing *kirtans*, doing *puja*, etc. The more you enjoy, the more you engage yourself into it. It's exactly the same as with any ordinary pursuits; the more you enjoy playing tennis the more you play and better you become at it. It becomes an automatic process driven by positive feedback. We are automatically driven to what we like. In the beginning it takes conscious effort and it takes time. This is how *bhakti* is always growing when it's cultivated.

Primary *bhakti* is “*avichhinnam*”, i.e., uninterrupted. *Bhakti* is not one more emotion. Emotions come and go. *Bhakti* at its highest is surrender and the surrender has to be uninterrupted; you can’t surrender something one day and take it back the next day. You would not give a Christmas gift on the day of Christmas and then take it back the following day!

Continuing with the sutra, primary *bhakti* is “*sukshmataram*”, meaning it’s very subtle. This is not meant to be a vague term. In this context, it precisely means that which has no *guna*, i.e., no attributes. It is subtle because it is difficult to see something that has no *guna*; it’s like seeing the absence of something. You can obviously see a pen that I am holding in one hand, but not “see” the absence of that pen in my other hand.

Primary *bhakti* is “*anubhava-rupam*”, literally meaning it is in the form of experience. But in fact it does not mean that *bhakti* is some defined or specific experience. You already have that experience of *bhakti*. *Bhagavan* is present in this ordinary experience here and now and you need not go anywhere. If you recognize that, then you don’t have to go to a temple to see *Bhagavan*. True, it’s helpful for many to go to a temple because lots of people don’t yet see *Bhagavan* everywhere and in everything. But if you can’t feel *Bhagavan*’s presence even in a temple, you surely will not see Him here and now. That’s why you need *bhakti* as a *sadhana*; this *sadhana* is what Narada refers to in the sutra as primary *bhakti*, to attain *para bhakti*.

Sutra 55: *Tat praapya tadevaavalokayati tadeva shrinoti tadeva chintayati*

Translation: Having attained that, one only sees that, only hears that, and only thinks that.

Commentary: “That” refers to *Bhagavan* and *Bhagavan*’s presence.

This sutra describes the vision of the *rishis*, “*sarvam kalvidam brahma*”, “all this is nothing but *Bhagavan*”. It expresses the essential divinity of everything. Everything means everything! Even the deadly virus, HIV! Sure, HIV is a killer and needs to be avoided like a poison would be, but it is natural and part of God’s creation. “All this” also means everywhere; there isn’t a place where God is not. Many a stories are told of sages and saints in this context. A *sufi* saint was scolded for having his feet directed towards Mecca, when he exclaimed, “show me please a direction in which Allah is not, so I can put my feet down”. In another anecdote, a *rishi* was laying down with his feet resting on a *linga*; when asked how he could be so disrespectful, he asked to have his feet guided elsewhere; when that was done another *linga* appeared under his feet; and this went on and on with a new *linga* appearing wherever his feet touched the ground. The moral of these stories is that God is everywhere!

It is easy to see *Bhagavan's* presence within when you have sentiments of love and compassion in your heart; but seeing *Bhagavan* everywhere means seeing *Bhagavan* even when you have anger and frustration; same divinity is still there; it did not disappear!

With this understanding, we can appreciate when Narada says, "one who attains this primary *bhakti*, sees, hears, and thinks of that only!"

The next sutra then describes what is secondary *bhakti*.

Sutra 56: *Gauni tridhaa guna-bhedaad aarta-aadi-bhedaad vaa*

Translation: Secondary *bhakti* is threefold, based on differences in natural tendencies (*gunas*) or according to distinction among *aarta*, etc.

Commentary: Secondary *bhakti* is further classified based on the three *gunas*, namely, *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*. Alternatively, secondary *bhakti* can also be classified based on the distinction specified in the sutra as "*aarta*, etc". This distinction refers to four distinct categories of *bhakti* as narrated by Lord Krishna in Bhagavad Gita, Chapter VII, Verse 16.

Looking at the first classification of *bhakti* by *gunas*:

- i) *Tamas* is characterized by inertia, lethargy, and ignorance,
- ii) *Rajas* is characterized by passion, desire, energy and activity, whereas,
- iii) *Sattva* is absence of *tamas* and *rajas*. It indicates purity of mind.

The second classification is based on kinds of prayers the seekers offer:

- i) *aarta*, the one who prays only when in distress.
- ii) *artharthi*, one who prays to God for this and that; he seeks specific goal
- iii) *jijnyasu*, the one who seeks to know God.

These three categories correspond in the same order to the ones in the above classification based on *gunas*. *Aarta* is governed by *tamas*. He would pray only when in deep distress. He may be some one who has prayed not even once before in his whole life; but he remembers God when he is in deep trouble. *Artharthi* makes a contract with *Bhagavan*! He would pray at the altar and plead, "God! Please bless me with a son and I will put thousand dollars in this donation box right after that!" As *pujya* Swamiji would put it, this one takes *Bhagavan* as his business partner! This person is driven by *rajas*. *Jijnyasu* is the one whose mind is free from *tamas* and *rajas*; he wants God's blessings to remove his ignorance.

The fourth category of bhakti that Lord Krishna talks about is one of a *jnani*. One who has discovered the Lord: one who sees, thinks and feels *Bhagavan* everywhere. The *bhakti* of a *jnani* is what in fact Narada describes as the *mukhya* (primary) *bhakti*.

Something needs to be understood about description of four kinds of seekers as described in Bhagavad Gita. Lord Krishna is not putting down the prayers of *aarta* and *artharathi*. At least *aarta* resorts to prayer when he is in distress, rather than going to a local bar to “drown his sorrows”! And *artharathi* at least reckons God as a source of grace and blessings. The two are not very mature forms of prayers, but they can be seen as stepping-stones to cross the river of maya. You can’t at once jump across a 30-ft wide river! So, the lower forms of prayers are to be seen as stepping-stones or as rungs on a ladder to reach the top.

Sutra 57: *Uttarasmaad uttarasmaat purva-purvaa shreyaaya bhavati*

Translation: Each prior one is better than the successive one.

Commentary: The rank order of *bhakti* going from the highest to the lowest form is: primary *bhakti*, followed by secondary *bhakti*. Within the secondary *bhakti*, the order is *bhakti* characterized by *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* gunas.

Sutra 58: *Anyasmaat saulabhyam bhaktau*

Translation: Compared to (primary) *bhakti* these (secondary forms of bhakti) are more accessible.

Commentary: The secondary forms of *bhakti* are easy to pursue and also necessary as starting steps of a ladder to get to the top. We start with the easiest step and then next one and then more difficult ones. These teachings are successive and build on each other.

*Jijnyasu*, who is driven by *sattva*, begins to develop a personal relationship with God. This relationship is further classified into five more categories and identifies *jijnyasus* according to different sets of sentiments or relationships with God:

1. *Shanta bhakti*: characterized by a feeling of peaceful form of relationship.
2. *Daasya bhakti*: Relating to God as a worshipful servant with a feeling of gratitude.
3. *Saakhya*: Relationship as a friend; as some one who is always with you on the journey of life.
4. *Vaatsalya*: A relationship of tenderness, as between a mother and a child.
5. *Maadhurya*-Intimately connected to God, as one is to a beloved; like *Gopis'* relationship to *Bala Krishna*.

These are steps of increasing intimacy, leading ultimately to being utterly non-separate from God. This topic will be discussed further in the next discourse.

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