

Narada Bhakti Sutra
A summary of Swami Tadatmananda's Discourse
February 27, 2007

With today's lecture we will conclude our approximately 6-month study of Narada's Bhakti Sutra. Bhakti Sutra, as we have seen has been an exploration of a subject that is taught quite differently from Vedanta texts we have studied so far. As we conclude, we will summarize the framework in which *bhakti* was presented in this text. In the beginning, the author distinguished two forms of *bhakti* as being *para* and *apara*. We needed clarity of our goal, and the author provided some very careful definitions. This approach is in keeping with the sutra style of the text, which is a careful analytical approach. *Para bhakti* is the ultimate goal, and in this regard the goal cannot be different from the goal of other *sadhanas*, such as karma yoga, meditation, and pursuit of knowledge through Vedanta. Thus, the end is the same, but the starting points are many. If the goal is to reach a *mandir* on a 5000-ft peak of a mountain, the journey can start from any number of different points following different paths. In spiritual pursuit, paths are many but the goal is one.

Para bhakti was described as the most intense form of *prema* (love) with utter non-separation between the lover and the beloved. *Prema* starts with a physical connectedness, which then becomes an emotional connection of increasing intensity, and increasing closeness. Ultimately, emotions have limitations. A total loss of distinction between the lover and the beloved is what characterizes *para bhakti*. *Bhakti* has been called art of losing oneself; this means losing one's ego and individuality, or a process of deconstructing yourself to become one with the object of your love. The sense of "I-ness" and "doership" disappears. That is the culmination, and that's the goal. Therefore, *para bhakti* is not something you can practice, because this is where you arrive. This is the stage of enlightenment! To arrive at this point you need a lot of help. Help from every source: epics, puranas, Vedas, Vedanta, Bhagavad Gita (karma yoga); we need all the support we can get. One cannot ask, "What is the best path?" It is a mistaken notion that one can choose one practice (*sadhana*) at the exclusion of others. One cannot ignore *atma vichara* (contemplation), meditation, prayer, or *bhakti*.

Reaching the goal is important, but the spiritual journey to reach the goal is challenging. Therefore, there was a lot of emphasis on *apara bhakti*, i.e., *sadhana bhakti*, meaning the actual practice of *bhakti*. We saw that there were many kinds of such *sadhanas*. The text did not prescribe one single method or practice that must be followed. That would be putting every one in the same mold. Each one of us has different needs, according to our personality and inclinations. We saw that, to cultivate *bhakti*, there were a variety of ways to develop a relationship

with God. As we have previously observed, in our tradition we have the freedom to choose from a number of *sadhana*s. But, that being the case, it is extremely important to recognize that along with that freedom comes the responsibility. The responsibility is to *make* a choice; selecting “no choice” is not an option! Because, that would be an abuse of the freedom. You can choose your *ishta devata*, choose among any forms of prayers or *pujas*, and then make it a daily practice to do the *sadhana* of your choice. This is the responsibility. Every typical teenager wants freedom, but if he is given that freedom without any responsibility, he will only get into trouble. Same way in the Vedic tradition, there is plenty of freedom-but without appropriate responsibility, that freedom only becomes a long rope with which one will hang oneself. Some people take that freedom by thoughtlessly saying, “Hinduism is not a religion it’s a way of life”- both these ideas are fallacious; first, Hinduism *is* a religion, and secondly Hinduism is as much a way of life as any other religion, so saying it’s way of life does not define it or make it any unique. But even if it’s true that it’s way of life, does one live that life style? Simply calling it a way of life to justify giving oneself freedom is, as said above, taking a long rope to hang one self!

Moral systems can be highly structured and directed by a central authority. They may have set doctrines and set beliefs; for example enumeration of Ten Commandments in Bible. In Hindu tradition there are no ten commandments, no organized body that sets out doctrines or dictates what to believe or not to believe. There is no central figure like a Pope, and no single prescribed scripture. When there is such freedom from any outside authority, then the direction has to come from within; from within the individual; it’s individual responsibility.

People with regard to their conduct and duties can be grouped in two categories. Those who are self directed, self-confident and self motivated, and those who need external guidance to avoid making mistakes. For these two categories, we have two types of religions. For the first kind (self motivated), Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) will not work; but Hinduism will work very well. For the second category (who seek direction), the Abrahamic religions will work just fine. You can decide for yourself, which category you fit into. If Hinduism is right for you, you have the freedom to explore; the question you need to ask then is, “am I using that freedom?” If not, then start exploring. Swamiji related his personal experience, by observing that any time he sits to mediate, it’s an exploration that leads to discovery of something new all the time. Teaching itself is a new experience every time-for him, the experience of teaching Bhagavad Gita or Narada’s Bhakti is not exactly the same as it was 10 years back.. What we learn in these classes is a tiny fraction of the vast amount of literature that is available. So we have to continue to explore.

After thorough definition of *bhakti*, we now end with the last two sutras.

Sutra 83: *Ityevam vadanti janajalpanirbhayaahaa ekamataahaa Kumaara-Vyaasa-Shuka-Shaandilya-Garga-Vishnu-Kaundinya-Sheshoddhvaaruni-Bali-Hanumad-Vibhishanaadayo bhaktyaachaaryaahaa*

Translation: Thus declare the (following) teachers of *Bhakti* unanimously, without being afraid of people's gossip: Kumara, Vyasa, Shuka, Shaandilya, Gaarga, Vishnu, Kauninya, Shesha, Uddhava, Aruni, Bali, Hanuman, Vibhishana and others.

Commentary: This second to last sutra begins to conclude the text by saying that all the teachings of *bhakti* as described in the whole text were taught in this manner by the great teachers of *bhakti*, including some of them who are named in the sutra. The word used for the teacher is *achaarya*, which also means behavior. The great *bhakti* teachers are role models of exemplary behavior because their character and the way they live is very influential in conveying their teachings to their disciples. They lead by example and they live like a *bhakta*. All of these and other teachers are of one mind as far the teachings of *bhakti* are concerned. They are not afraid of idle gossip and non-constructive talk of people; they are not guided by opinion of others.

It is sad that often others who are around do not share someone's creativity and commitment to a cause. Their values are different from this person, and unfortunately a concern for the opinion of others can derail a person and pull him away from his goal. This is what wrong company can do. In the pursuit of spiritual growth, it's not helpful if one is too concerned about opinion of others; what counts is one's commitment. One has to disregard disparaging comments suggesting that you have become prematurely old or that you are too old-fashioned if you pursue *bhakti*, Vedanta and attend Bhagavad Gita classes.

All the teachers mentioned in the sutra and many others have provided the teachings of *bhakti* and they were not afraid and were like-minded. It is to be noted that this text is describing such teachings in a systemic fashion compiled as sutras; the knowledge itself was already in existence.

Sutra 84: *Ya idam Naradaproktam shivoanushaasanam vishvasiti shraddhate, sa bhaktimaan bhavati, saha preshtham labhate saha preshtham labhate. Om tat sat.*

Translation: One who believes and practices these auspicious teachings narrated by Narada, becomes immersed in *bhakti*; he attains the highest goal; he attains the highest goal. *Om*, that's the truth.

Commentary: Shiva can mean auspicious in the context of the teachings narrated by Narada, or it could mean teachings passed on from Lord Shiva to Narada. The emphasis in the sutra is on conviction (*vishvaas*) and faithful commitment (*shraddha*). It is with these characteristics that *bhakti* has to be cultivated. It is easy to make this point, but it is hard to put it in practice; it takes a lot of effort.

To simply believe in *Bhagavan* in the sense that God is somewhere up there is useless; it does not help you. What is necessary is to have a relationship with God. Relating to God through love and devotion is necessary and that's what helps. Love and devotion can be cultivated through prayer; prayer is an act of relating to God. One who employs these teachings will gain what he seeks; he will attain the highest goal.

We chose this text in favor of all the other possible texts, because this text offers *bhakti* as an approach to attain the ultimate goal in contrast to other approaches like pursuit of knowledge (Vedanta), meditation, or karma yoga. We need all of these means to reach the goal. Ultimately, as spiritual aspirants, we need all the help we can get. Without prayer and devotion we cannot succeed. *Bhakti* can be instilled in our minds and it can be increased by practice. As Swamiji has remarked previously: 20 years back he jokingly said that he did not have a devotional bone in his body. But that changed with the grace of his Guru and the grace of God. And that happened in spite of his childhood religious experiences that were not conducive to *bhakti* or devotion. By the same token, every one of us can cultivate the spirit of *bhakti*.

In conclusion, Swamij expressed his hope that the Bhakti Sutra has been a stimulating experience for us and given us a new perspective and new ways of thinking to pursue our path of spiritual growth. Just as teachings of Bhagavad Gita guide us in our daily life, this text serves the same purpose. It takes time for the teachings to take hold in our minds. That is why we need to continually keep ourselves engaged in *satsangs* and the reason why we have so many activities and different classes in this ashram, like Vedanta, meditation, and Bhagavad Gita. Pujya Swami Dayananad picked a period of three years for his Vedanta courses, for no other reason than the fact that it takes time before the teachings sink in.

Finally, Swamiji expressed that it has been a great privilege for him to teach this text as it serves as his own *sadhana*.

Om, tat sat.

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