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The Path of Devotion according to the *Shrîmad-Bhagavad-Gîtâ*

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

*There are mainly four ways for reaching the highest stage by unfolding our inner soul. These are the path of knowledge, the path of disinterested work, the path of devotion and the path of disciplined psychic control of the mind. Among these paths, the path of devotion is the easiest and universal. Following this path a devotee can quickly overcome all the trials and tribulations obstructing his spiritual elevation and he can drink the nectar of his mental progress. The tenets of devotion as envisaged by Lord Shree Krishna in the *Shrîmad-Bhagavad-Gîtâ* have been presented in this short article. The nature of devotion, its varieties, the duties of a devotee, the liberality and graciousness of God etc. have been explained with the lucidity of language. Comparison with other treatises is also shown with proper connection.*

Key Words

Devotion, Chosen Deity, Discrimination, Meditation, Austerity, Renunciation.

Introduction

The *Shrîmad-Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, precisely called as the *Gîtâ*, is regarded as a *smriti*-text consisted of 700 melodious Sanskrit verses in the non-dualist school of philosophy. So the verses of this philosophical text are to be learnt by heart by a seeker (*sâdhaka*) of truth to keep a sharp memory of the theoretical background of his religious practices. The threads of the fundamental basis of the *Sanâtana* (eternal or the oldest) religion are woven in this holy metrical composition composed in Sanskrit by the great sage Vedavyâsa in his great Epic – the *Mahâbhârata*. It is a conglomeration of the different paths like the path of action, the path of knowledge, the path of devotion and the path of disciplined meditation for achieving the ultimate truth in our human life. As Lord Shree Krishna promulgates or lays down the disinterested or self-less action or one's own duty for duty's sake to humanity at large through his entrusted and dear disciple Arjuna, so also He disseminates the soft rays of the supreme knowledge as discrimination and renunciation which eradicate or dispel the unfathomable and deep darkness of delusion from our minds derailed from the right path of actual spirituality. The devotional aspects of a devotee and the disciplined way of meditation of a meditative or contemplative man have also been presented by Him in the same chord. Nothing has been kept aside in His holistic approach. In this article the path of devotion will be thoroughly depicted as envisaged by Lord Shree Krishna in the *Gîtâ*. Though the 12th chapter among 18 chapters of the *Gîtâ* mainly deals with the path of devotion, yet some scintillating and deeper ideas on devotion are found in some other chapters also in the *Gîtâ*. So with a holistic view the broader aspects of devotion are being portrayed in this article.

The Nature of Devotion

In Sanskrit the word for devotion is 'bhakti'. The root 'bhaja' takes the 'ktin' suffix to form the word 'bhakti'. In the *Dhâtupâtha* the root 'bhaja' is stated like this: "bhaja sevâyâm" which means, "the meaning¹. So the derivative meaning of the word 'bhakti' is to serve one's own chosen deity. Lexicographer Amarasingha had not given the meaning of the word 'bhakti' in Amara - Kosa. The great sage and devotee of Nârâyana, Nârada said in his 'Bhaktisûtra' "sâ tvasmin paramapremarûpâ"² which means, that devotion is indeed of the nature of Supreme Love in God. A person may be called a devotee (*bhakta*) when he expresses his supreme love towards God. All affections for others become inferior to this extreme love.

The Varieties of Devotion

After completing his study under the guidance of *Sanda a and Amarka*, the two disciples of Shukrâcârya, when the great devotee Prahlâda returned home his father wanted to know from him a good teaching which Prahlâda had learnt from his teachers in the *Shrîmad-bhâgavatapurâna*. Prahlâda answered,

"Sraavanam kîrtanam visnoh smaraman pâdasevanam/
arcanam vandanam dâsyam sakhyamâtmanivedanam//
iti pumsârpitâ visnau bhaktiscennavalakcanâ/
kriyate bhagavatyaddhâ tanmanye'dhîtamuttamam//"³

Here Prahlâda said that there are nine types of devotion to Lord Vishnu. These are listening to the attributes and play of God, chanting the names of God, remembrance of God, serving of the holy feet of God, worship of God, praising of God, being a servant of God, being a friend of God and complete surrender to the wishes of God. If these nine types of devotion are practised with the attitude of offering of everything to God then that would be the best teaching. This was the opinion of the great devotee of Lord Vishnu, Prahlâda. The varieties of devotion are lucidly presented in the above text.

The Necessity of the Path of Devotion

From the Non-dualistic point of view God is formless and devoid of any attribute. But all are not entitled to think on this formless aspect of the ultimate truth. So for the benefit of the devotees God takes some forms which are called the incarnations of God. According to the *Shrîmad-Bhâgavatapurâna* there are 24 incarnations of Vishnu. The devotees fix their minds upon the form of God and concentrate on that form by their various kinds of spiritual practices to achieve their goal. Here comes the necessity of the path of devotion. In the path of knowledge only the constant thinking of the eternal existence- consciousness –bliss (*saccidânanda*) is enough for leading a spiritual life. But a devotee engages himself in various kinds of religious activities depending on God. These make his life sweet and beautiful.

The Nobility of the Path of Devotion

The eleventh chapter of the *Gîtâ* deals with the cosmic or universal form (*visvarûpa*) of God Krishna. By the grace of God the fortunate Arjuna had seen the universal form of Krishna which was dealt in the eleventh chapter. The blessed Lord said that neither by the Vedas, nor by austerity, nor by voluntary contribution, nor by scriptural sacrifice could He be seen as Arjuna had seen Him. But only by single-minded devotion He might be known in this universal form and seen in reality and with such devotion a seeker can enter into this form of God. Here the speech of God eradicates all our doubts:

"nâham vedairna tapasâ na dânenâ na cejyayâ/
shakya evamvidho drastum dristavânasi mâm yathâ//
bhaktyâ tvananyayâ shakya ahamevamvidho'rjuna/
jnâtum drasmum ca tattvena pravestum ca parantapa//"⁴

(Neither by Vedas, nor by austerity, nor by gifts, nor by sacrifice can I be seen as thou hast seen me. But by single-minded devotion I may in this form, be known, O Arjuna, and seen in reality, and also entered into, O scorcher of foes.)

Here the word ‘*ananyâ bhakti*’ means, according to the great Acârya Shankara, that devotion by which the devotee does not realize anything other than Vâsudeva Krishna or does not give importance to anything other than Vâsudeva. Shankara says in his commentary on the *Gîtâ*,

“ ‘*ananyayâ*’ *aprthagbhûtayâ bhagavatah anyatra prthag na kadâcid api yâ bhavati sâ tu ananyâ bhaktih sarvai api karanaih vâsudevâd anyad na upalabhyate yayâ sâ ananyâ bhaktih tayâ bhaktyâ ‘shakyah aham evamvidho’ visvarûpaprakâro he ‘arjuna jnâtum’ sâstrato na kevalam jnâtum sâstrato ‘drasnum ca’ sâksât kartum ‘tattvena’ tattvatah ‘pravesmum ca’ mokcam ca gantum ‘parantapa’* “. ⁵

So God told His dear disciple Arjuna that he who works for Him alone and who has finalised Him as his goal, who is devoted to Him, is freed from attachment, and bears enmity towards no creature—enters into Him. Hearing this Arjuna wanted to know who is a better *yogi* (a person connected with God) between the steadfast worshiper and the worshiper of the imperishable and unrevealed (*avyakta*) Supreme Entity? Here starts the *Bhaktiyoga* of the *Gîtâ*. Krishna clearly answered that those who, fixing their heart on Him, worship Him, ever-steadfast, and endowed with the highest reverence, they have the best expertise in Yoga (the psychic control of the mind). But who follow the path of the *Jnânayoga* by controlling their senses and think on the indefinable, unchangeable, immovable and eternal entity, and who are engaged in the philanthropic activities --- they verily reach only God. But in this path there is greater trouble because the goal of the unrevealed (*avyakta*) entity is very hard to reach for the embodied person. The path of devotion is easier. In the path of knowledge one has to abandon all attachment to the perishable, temporal and material body from the very beginning of the practice. In the path of the dedicated service sometimes egoism may come to our minds. In this path we may not always get the opportunity to perform great work. But in God-love this kind of hardships and hindrances are not there. One may start this path from any point of his life. There is no requisite for this path. Only love for God is the means for this path. The great seer Nârada also had put the similar opinion in his *Bhaktisûtra* – “*sâ karmajnânayogebhyo’pyadhikatarâ*”. ⁶ (That devotion is superior to work, knowledge, psychic control of the mind etc.) He gave some reasons for this conclusion. Nârada said that God-love is of the nature of the fruits of all *Yoga*. Love is its own fulfilment. *Bhakti* is the *sâdhana*, the means, and the *sâdhya*, the end at the same time. Not only that, God dislikes egoism (*abhimâna*) and He loves meekness (*dainya*). Meek Nârada said,

“*ishvarasyâpyabhimânadvesitvâd dainyapriyatvâcca*”. ⁷ (Because God possesses the quality of hating egoism or pride and He also has the characteristic of loving meekness.)

According to Lord Krishna those who worship Him, resigning all activities in Him, regarding Him as the supreme goal, meditating on Him, with single-minded *Yoga* are saved by Him out of the ocean of the mortal world (*samsâra*). This is a great promise to us made by God Himself.

Liberality and Graciousness of God

So God advises Arjuna to fix his mind on Him, and to place his intellect in Him; then he will be able to live in Him hereafter. If Arjuna is unable to fix his mind steadily on Him, then by practice he may seek to reach Him. This is called the *abhyâsayoga* (the way of practice). If also he is unable to practise *abhyâsa*, Arjuna should be intent on doing actions for His sake. Even by doing actions for His sake he must attain perfection. If he is unable to do even this, then taking refuge in Him, Arjuna should abandon the fruit of all actions, being self-controlled. Here God comes down from rigidity to flexibility. He knows very well that all individuals do not have mental strength. So He has become liberal and compassionate to His dear devotee Arjuna. But behind this liberal aspect there is a logical background. So God said that better indeed is knowledge than (blind) practice; meditation (with knowledge) is more esteemed than (mere) knowledge; than meditation the renunciation or offering of the result of action; peace immediately follows renunciation. So renunciation is the easiest way for having the peace of mind. So a devotee should follow the path of renunciation for cultivating the peaceful state of mind.

The Characteristics of a Devotee

Now Lord Krishna presents the characteristics of a devotee. A devotee does not hate anybody. He is friendly and compassionate to all. He has no feelings of “I and mine”. He takes equally pain and pleasure. He is forbearing, ever content, steady in meditation, self-controlled. He possesses a firm conviction. He has fixed his mind and intellect in God. Such kind of devotee is dear to God. No person is agitated or afflicted by a devotee and he is also not agitated by anybody. He who is free from joy, envy, fear and anxiety is dear to Lord Krishna. Any person who does not rejoice, nor hates, nor grieves, nor desires, renouncing good and evil, full of devotion to God, is dear to God. A devotee bears the same attitude to his friend and foe. He maintains equilibrium of his mind in honour and disgrace. He is not perturbed by the opposites like heat and cold or pleasure and pain. He has no attachment to anybody except God. Censure and praise are equal to him. He is silent, content with anything, homeless, steady-minded, full of devotion. Such man is dear to God. The *Shântiparvan* of the *Mahâbhârata* gives the definition of a Brahmin or the knower of the Supreme Reality like this: “Who is clad with anything, who may take any kind of food, who lies down anywhere, him the gods call a Brahmin.” The devoted persons who follow this immortal righteousness as described above and who have *Shraddhâ* (veneration) to God and who regard God as the Supreme Goal are exceedingly dear to God. Here the twelfth chapter of the *Gîtâ* ends.

The Duties of a Devotee

The ninth chapter of the *Gîtâ*, namely, *Râjavidyâ-râjaguhya* points out the duties of a devotee. In the 26th verse God admits that whoever with devotion offers Him a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that He accepts — the devout gift of the pure minded. God does not want exuberance of things for offering to Him. The relevant Sanskrit verse goes like this:

“*patram puspam phalam toyam yo me bhaktyâ prayacchati/
tadaham bhaktyupahritamashnâmi prayatâtmanah ||*”⁸

Here a pertinent question may be raised: If a wicked person offers leaf etc. then will God accept those materials from him? Obviously He will not accept those because there are two conditions prescribed in the above verse by God Himself. These are:

1. The offer should be made with devotion.
2. The giver should be a ‘*prayatâtman*’ or a person who has completely controlled his sense-organs. The wicked man has not controlled his sense-organs yet. No trickery or deception is permissible in the path of religion. The wicked man has to change his mind. He must shed tears of repentance for his previous misdeeds. He has to firmly resolve that he will not involve himself in any sinful act anymore. He must be an honest man. Then only God may shower His grace to him.

So in the next 27th verse God advises us through Arjuna that whatever we do, whatever we eat, whatever we offer in sacrifice, whatever we give away, whatever austerity we practise, we should do that as an offering unto God. The simple Sanskrit of the great poet Vedavyâsa enchants us:

“*yatkarosi yadashnâsi yajjuhosi dadâsi yat/
yattapasyasi kaunteya tatkurusva madarpanam||*”⁹

If we are able to do that then we will be free from the bondages of actions which bear good and evil results. Being liberated we will go unto God. If even a very wicked person worships God, with devotion to none else, he should be regarded as good, for he has rightly resolved to abandon the evil ways of life. Very soon he becomes righteous and he attains peace. The devotees of God never destroy. With their minds completely in God, with their sense-organs absorbed in God, enlightening one another, and always speaking of God, they are verily satisfied and delighted. The essential knowledge for conducting their life is given by God. So they are not foolish. God eradicates the darkness of ignorance of the devotee by the luminous or incandescent lamp of knowledge. So we should fill our mind with the consciousness of God.

Here a question may be asked: If a devotee is always engaged in the worship of God then how will he earn his livelihood? Here God Krishna assures us that the persons who meditate on God and worship Him never harbouring any other thought, to them God carries what they lack and He preserves what they already have. These two kinds of actions are termed as '*yogaksema*' in Sanskrit. The promise made by God goes like this:

*“ananyâscintayanto mâm ye janâh paryupâsate/
tesâm nityâbhilyuktânâm yogaksemam vahâmyaham//”*¹⁰

It is absolutely true. Have we ever heard of any devotee or any mendicant died out of unavailability of food or starvation? The helper comes to help the devotee to help him by the grace or mechanism of God. So we should take refuge in God relinquishing all righteous and unrighteous actions to have emancipation from the bondage of the worldly life. God shall liberate us from all sins. We should never grieve for our mistakes and sins inadvertently performed in the course of religious life. We should never look back. We must look forward and go ahead.

Conclusion

The world is full of pain and suffering. To become happy and jolly we should divert our minds to the spiritual practices. Among the many paths, the path of devotion leads us to the paragon of happiness. Following this easiest path we may unfold our inner soul and ultimately feel the supernatural and divine bliss in us in this very mundane world. Continuous prayer, chanting, muttering of one's own chosen mantra and leading a chaste life are the means for this highest achievement. We must be optimist and steady to have the grace of God. A devotee does not want anything except showing his deepest love to his beloved God. The great preacher of Vaisnavism Lord Shree Chaitanyadeva (1486AD-1533AD) wrote in his *Shiksâtakam*

*“na dhanamna janamna sundarîm kavitâmvâ jagadîsha kâmaye/
mama janmani janmanîshvare bhavatâd bhaktirahaitukî tvayi”*//

It means, “Oh, Lord of the universe! I do not want wealth, nor do I want people or highly ornamented poetry. Let there be unconditional devotion in my every birth to you who is God.” This is an example of the purest prayer of a sincere and honest devotee. We must seek God. We should not seek anything from God. Praying to God for seeking something is nothing but business. Though four kinds of virtuous people i.e. the afflicted or distressed ones, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of enjoyment and the wise, worship God according to Lord Krishna, yet the wise man, ever-steadfast, and fired with devotion to the ultimate reality, excels the other three kinds of worshipper. This is the supremacy of a wise devotee.

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