

## Chapter XXI

Liberation requires giving up attachment to the body; the path of devotion.

“Arjuna! People think that the worship of God with form and attributes is quite enough. This discipline will be of only some help; it will guide the person along the road only for a little while. For the Lord will not condescend to grant liberation for just this! He who aims at liberation must first give up attachment to the body. Without that, the *Atmic* stage cannot be attained. Identification with the body is the expression of ignorance. The *Atma* must be recognized as distinct from the objective world (*prakriti*).

“The craving for objective pleasure based on the unreal value attached to the world has to be removed by meditation and penance (*tapas*). When that craving is lost, the individual becomes like the dry nut inside the coconut shell, which becomes loose and unattached both to the shell and the fibre outside it; it does not germinate or sprout again; it will remain forever without being spoiled, the individual has no more birth and consequent death. That is to say, the individual will be liberated. Becoming like that dry nut inside the shell is the stage called liberation while alive (*jivan-mukthi*).

“The contemplation of the Godhead as ‘above and beyond all attributes’ is necessary for becoming liberated while alive. If that is difficult and beyond your capacity, you can do another thing. Dedicate to Me all worship, all adoration, all *Vedic* rituals and other vows and vigils, with all the fruits that may accrue. Take Me as the ultimate goal, as the final aim, which transforms all acts into worship; fix your mind on Me, meditate on Me; I shall then shower My grace and take you across the ocean of constant change (of *samsara*); I shall favour you with the goal you seek. Arjuna! It is not an easy task to fix your mind steadily on Me. Not everyone can succeed in this. However long the practice, it is hard to keep the mind on Me without deflecting it toward other things or ideas.

“Therefore, you might ask, ‘Have we no other means?’ My reply is this: yes, there is. Even those who are eager to engage themselves in acts that please Me can get established in the *Atmic* consciousness and gain liberation. By means of prayer, recitation of the name, adoration of the glory, worship, etc., the sins of the past can be destroyed, the inner consciousness purified of impulses and urges. Then the light of wisdom will dawn, leading to liberation from darkness.”

There is great need for readers to ponder this point, for it is through the weighing of pros and cons that valuable conclusions are reached. Consider, for example, the difference between *bhakthi* (devotion) as described in popular usage and *bhakthi* as declared by the Lord. Popularly, *bhakthi* is described as genuine devotion of the Lord. But it connotes much more than this.

Devotion to the Lord is only a form of discipline to reach the goal. Seekers should not stop with acquisition of devotion; they should pay attention not so much to the devotion or love that they have toward the Lord but to the love and grace that the Lord bestows on them! They must be always eager to find out which behaviour, what acts of will be most pleasing to the Lord, will fill the Lord with bliss (*ananda*). Inquire about that, yearn for that, carry out the things that will secure that objective, be engaged in acts conducive to gain it, that is real devotion (*bhakthi*).

But people generally do not follow this ideal of devotion, nor do they think about its implications. They pay attention only to the love that the devotee has to the Lord, and, in the process, they do not pay much attention

to the *dharma* and action that the Lord approves or appreciates! This is why Krishna says, “Action that pleases the Lord is superior to action that fulfils the yearnings of the devotee.” Whatever devotees do or think or plan or observe should draw down the grace of God. Devotees should not be subject to their own will; they should be in accordance with His will. Devotees must test every thought and feeling on the touchstone of the Lord’s declared preferences.

The *Gita* declares that, although one may have deep devotion to the Lord, one cannot be called a devotee if one lives without regard to the commands of the Lord, that is, to the *dharma* laid down in the scriptures (*sastras*), which embody His orders, revealed to saints and seers. It is in this sense that Krishna uses the phrase “one full of devotion (*bhakthi-maan*)”, when He declares in the *Gita*, “Those who are full of devotion are dear to me (*Bhakthimaan yah sah me priyah*)”.

Again, whatever the act, a devotee should not feel that it is, “my action”; Krishna says that it must be conceived as “action for the Lord, by the Lord”. Usually people feel that some acts are “theirs” and others are “the Lord’s”. This is not the mark of the true devotee. If all acts are felt as the Lord’s, they will not be tarnished by egotism or the taint of “mine”.

Devotion is to be identified as the discipline that removes egotism and the limitations of “I” and “mine”. That is why the devotee is defined by those who know as one who is “non-separate” from God. At all times and under all conditions, one’s acts and feelings must be God-centred. Instead, if you pray when overwhelmed by misery, worry, and loss, “Oh God! Save me, rescue me from these,” and when they pass, if once again you plunge into objective affairs enslaved by worldly aims, such conduct is reprehensible.

This is the teaching of the *Gita*. Don’t worship the Lord as an emergency measure. When the tongue is affected and does not relish food, people seek hot pickles; so too, when grief afflicts, people seek God! This kind of demonstrative devotion is rampant today, perhaps due to the influence of the fundamental hypocrisy of the age. Hollow devotion that seeks to exhibit the strength of one’s attachment to the Lord is unfortunately evident even among “great” spiritual aspirants and persons who have renounced “everything” for the sake of Him, whom they consider to be their “All”! For many, devotion is a veil that is worn when on pilgrimage, when approaching elders, or when visiting temples. Once back home, they discard the veil, and with it all ideas and feelings of reverence for the Lord.

These are but exhibitionist stunts. Devotion, however, has to be steady and full; it is the establishment of the mind in the Lord, under all situations, at all times. Many assert that all their acts are dedicated to God (*Deva*) but their attitude shows that they are dedicated only to the body (*deha*). Instead of dedicating their acts to God, they dedicate them to themselves, the bodies with which they ignorantly identify themselves. They assert, “This I offer to Krishna,” but really, it is an offering to their son. They declare “This is an offering to Rama,” but their urge reveals that it is an offering to their sense of attachment and passion (*raga*). How can these acts be dignified by the word dedication or offering?

Dedication inspires the body, mind, and speech. If what you speak is not approved by the mind, if what is felt in the mind is not whole-heartedly put into action, then it becomes sheer hypocrisy. Be convinced that the doer, the deed, and the doing are all He; be devoted to Him, rather than to riches, wife, and children.

Where your mind attaches itself, there your devotion also stays. Devotion is as pure as the waters of the Ganges (*Ganga*); action (*karma*) as the water of the Yamuna; and spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) as the Saraswathi, flowing

secretly and mysteriously underground and sanctifying itself by merging with the other two. It is the commingling of these three that is called *Triveni*. It means the disappearance of the mind, unison, the “becoming-one” of the three qualities (*gunas*); it brings about the destruction of ego.

However, many are ignorant of these basic facts. They dip in water twice a day, go through the morning, noon, and evening rituals, worship the household gods, draw lines of ash or sandal paste on their brows, arms, and chest, put dots of saffron on their faces, wear strings of beads and rosaries around their necks, and roam about from temple to temple or from one spiritual teacher to another. They circumambulate holy shrines. They attend many discourses, recitals of epics, and readings of scriptures. The best we can say about such people is that they are engaged in good activities; we cannot say they are devotees.

Devotion (*bhakti*) has no relationship with dress and speech. On the basis of mere raiment and religiosity of expression, we cannot call a person “a devotee of the Lord”. Devotion is a matter of the inner consciousness, of feeling rather than external behaviour or conduct. Where there is smoke, there is fire. But some types of fire do not emit smoke, although all smoke originates from fire. There is a possibility that acts will be done without feeling, but you cannot say that all feeling must be expressed through outer show. Even without pomp and outer show, it is possible to have sincere feeling. Pure feeling is the important thing. Mere pompous outer activity is positively harmful to the progress —if one aspires at all for progress!

The question that Arjuna asked drew these further answers: Of course, there are two different types of devotees, the votary of the formful (*sa-guna*) One and the votary of the Formless (*nir-guna*). Among the devotees, the distressed (*artha*), the poor (*artha-arthi*) and the inquirer (*jijnasu*) are all eager about the nameful and formful aspects of Godhead. Just as for every auspicious act the right foot is placed first, the right foot of devotion of the formless (*nir-guna-bhakti*) must be used for the attainment of liberation. That is the “all auspicious”. That is to say, the spiritual discipline of the formless Godhead alone gives illumination. Both aspects have value and are indispensable. How long can anyone have one foot inside and another outside? Even if that were possible, of what avail is it? So devotion of the form (*sa-guna-bhakti*) has to be adopted as a spiritual discipline and devotion of the formless is the goal to be reached.

Either you can see the whole universe as God (*viswa* as *Visweswara*) or you can see the universe and God as separate and distinct. But both are the same. You may see the cloth as yarn or you may see yarn and cloth as separate. But whether you realize it or not, yarn is cloth and cloth is yarn.

Seeing yarn and cloth as distinct is contemplation (*upasana*) of God with attributes (*sa-guna*). Seeing yarn as included in the cloth and the cloth as a collection of yarn, and the two as identical, is contemplation of the formless aspect.

Devotion is not something that can be imported from somewhere; it is not something that is supplied by someone. It does not grow from the ground or fall from the skies. It wells up from oneself; it is selfless attachment to the Lord. The attachment, the love inherent in humanity should not flow wildly in diverse channels; it should flow uninterruptedly in the direction of God; then it becomes devotion. This love is in every living being. Birds and beasts, insects and worms —all have love inspiring them, filling them, to the extent that is appropriate to each. In short, life is love; love is life.

Each member of each living species has many-sided love toward offspring, parents, comforts. Each guards its food and drink, its joys and plays. Each of these types of love or attachment has a distinct name suited to the

objects on which it is fixed. It is called affection when directed toward offspring; infatuation when directed toward people who are less fortunate; comradeship when flowing toward equals; attachment when extended to goods or places. It becomes fascination in some cases, friendship in others. When directed toward elders and teachers and parents, it becomes reverence, humility, etc.

But the word *bhakti* (devotion) is used only with reference to love as directed to the Lord. When this love is broken up into many streams flowing in many directions and toward many points, it causes only grief, for it gets fixed on mortal things of the moment.

Instead, allow the love to flow single-pointedly to the ocean of the Lord's grace; this is the spiritual discipline called devotion (*bhakti*). Why waste life in the salty marsh of change? Strive rather to reach the vast ocean of grace. There you realize yourself; you attain existence-knowledge-bliss (*satchidananda*). How holy is that consummation! How filled with bliss!

The cowherd maids strove and succeeded in this spiritual exercise. Every moment and under every condition, their every thought, word, and deed was dedicated to the lotus feet of Sri Krishna. That is why the cowherd maids are called *yogis*. When Lord Krishna Himself addresses them as *yogis*, you can gauge the height of spiritual discipline they had achieved.