

The Path of devotion

Winning such perfect security requires following the path of full devotion, dedicating oneself to the Lord. It cannot be obtained by other means. The path of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) is possible only for one in a million; it is beyond the reach of all. Is it possible to negate the body and the objective world, so patent to the senses, by repeating “Not this, not this (*nethi, nethi*)”? Unless this is possible, how can the “Not this, not this” argument be applied? Under present conditions, the path of wisdom is indeed very difficult. The path of selfless activity is also not quite so feasible. It is also full of difficulties. To work in the proper spirit, love and devotion are essential for success. The path of *yoga* or communion also bristles with obstacles. Thus, the path of devotion is the smoothest, the most conducive to success, and the most bliss-yielding.

Even this path of devotion cannot be defined and demarcated as such and such. Since it has many forms, roads, and types of experience, it is impossible for anyone to describe it accurately and fully. Each devotee gets bliss only through their individual experience —through the experience of other devotees, at best they can get only encouragement and guidance. The experience changes from one person to another, so it eludes comparison and even description. If anyone describes it by examples and limits, be sure that their experience is not real.

The limited soul is immersed in the limitless love of the Lord, and how can words describe that experience called by the *Upanishads* as the unbroken uniflow of sweetness? One cannot express that state of unbounded devotion in human language. By outward signs that can be cognized by the senses, one can feel that the devotee is in a high state of bliss, but who can gauge the depth of that joy? It has no relation with the senses at all. Devotion has to be realized in your own experience, though great souls can illumine the path a little for you by their examples. With their help, you can grasp something of the path, but always remember that words fail when they approach the Beyond. They are useful only for purposes of the objective world. They are instruments of no value in regions of experience where comparisons are impossible.

Still, consider a few illustrations. Maitreyi, one of the foremost devotees among women, compared the mind of a devotee to a still lake, that is to say, all agitation is stopped, the mind becomes inactive, ineffective, so to say, worn out into nothing. Kapilamaharshi, speaking of the same devotion, compares it to a flowing stream. Streams and rivers like the Ganga and the Godavari flow uninterruptedly, without rest or any other thought, toward the sea; so too, from the very moment of birth, the devotee yearns to reach the sea of the grace of the Lord. Devotion is that unbroken relationship. Whatever the task on hand, whatever road is trod, the mind dwells on the goal alone, the goal of attaining the Lord. Again, in the *Devi Bhagavatham*, it is said that devotion is like the flow of oil from one vessel to another. This is more or less like the image of the river. Sankara characterizes devotion differently in the *Sivanandalahari*. Like the piece of iron that is drawn toward the magnet, the individual soul (*jivi*) is drawn toward and attaches itself firmly to the Lord. All modifications of the mind get merged in the feet of the Lord. Also, Ramanuja explained that devotion as well as meditation done through love are essentially the same.

Though each interprets it differently, all interpretations are correct, for they are all based on actual experience, which cannot be negated. These statements do not exhaust the types; there are many more, for devotion has a thousand forms; it flows along a thousand streams to reach the ocean of the Lord’s grace. The goal of all the forms is the merger of the individual soul with *Brahman*, an absorption in total bliss.