

54. The four stages of liberation

Worship, with fixity of consciousness and purity of feeling and free of all extraneous thought, becomes itself mental union with the Divine (*bhava-samadhi*). As a result of this mental union, the Lord appears before the inner eye of the devotee in the form that he has chosen for worship. The vision is not merely a matter of imagination; it is a “face-to-face” experience. Without changing location, the devotee can abide in the presence of the Lord in the self-same place. This is called “being always with God (*salokya-mukthi*)”. Besides being always with the Lord, devotees realise all that they see as the glory of the Lord. The experience is referred to as “seeing always the glory of the Lord (*samipya-mukthi*)”. Existing ever with the Lord, witnessing always the glory of the Lord, and becoming suffused with God-consciousness is merger in the divine form (*sarupya-mukthi*). This is the final fruit of devotional scriptures.

But at this stage, there is still a trace of differential feeling. So, the nondualist won’t admit it as the highest. Simply because a devotee has the same form as the Lord, we cannot assume that the devotee has the powers of creation, preservation, and destruction that the Lord has. Only when all trace of difference disappears and unity is attained is the highest stage reached. This is called union (*sayujya*). This comes of divine grace won by the essence of the spiritual practice of each; it cannot be claimed as the fruit of effort.

The devotee will aspire to this merging (*aikya*). The devotee wishes to serve the Lord as he pleases and to experience the joy of the form that he has attributed to the Lord. But the Lord, out of His grace, gives them not only existence with the Lord, witnessing always the glory of the Lord, and being suffused with God-consciousness but also union (*sayujya*)! The path of devotion (*bhakti marga*) results also in attainment of knowledge of *Brahman* (*Brahma-jnana*). Even if the devotee does not crave it, the Lord Himself vouchsafes it to the devotee. Union-with-God liberation (*sayujya-mukthi*) is also referred to as absolute liberation (*ekantha-mukthi*).