

UNDERSTANDING GOD

Swami Paramarthananda's Shivratri Talk 2008

Relationship with the lord

Religious activities and religious study are two methods by which a devotee preserves and promotes his or her relationship with the lord. Every devotee considers his or her relationship with the lord as the most important and the most supporting relationship. If there are emotional problems and turmoil caused by other worldly relationships, the main remedy or source of strength is this relationship with the lord. This relationship lasts eternally and has continued जन्म (birth) after जन्म. All other relationships are fluctuating, fragile and perishable. A devotee keeps this primary relationship and looks for functions or occasions like शिवरात्रि (shivarathri) in which he can revive and reinforce this भक्त- भगवान् (devotee-god) relationship.

Religious study also helps because by the study of scriptures more knowledge about god is gained which helps the devotee to go a few steps closer to the lord. Understanding god will help in strengthening the जीव ईश्वर सम्बन्ध (relationship with god and individual). In the Hindu scriptures, there is a very vast literature about the nature of god, the glories of god, the functions of god, etc. When these descriptions are understood better, the relationship with the lord is strengthened. A wrong understanding of these descriptions may challenge the भक्ति (devotion) itself. We'll briefly study and understand few of the important descriptions of ईश्वर (lord) as per the scriptures.

The scriptures define the nature of ईश्वर (god) as a formless, intelligence principle which pervades the whole universe and maintains/sustains the universe in perfect harmony through a network of universal laws. Since भगवान् is all pervading intelligence principle, he cannot be limited by a particular finite body. To be all pervading is to be formless and to be formless is not to have a limited body. But, भगवान् must have some form if he/she is all pervading intelligence.

माया as भगवान् body

The scriptures describe भगवान् body as formless, all pervading माया तत्त्वम्. माया is a formless, all pervading principle like space and this all pervading माया is the body of the lord. It carries the intelligence. Therefore भगवान् is intelligence with माया शरीरम्.

Even though भगवान् has got the formless माया as his शरीरम् without any distinct body, भगवान् can accomplish everything through his सन्कल्प शक्ति that is given by माया. Through this सन्कल्प शक्ति, भगवान् can also assume temporary finite bodies for the sake of devotees. This is the definition of ईश्वर given in the scriptures.

ईश्वर जगत् कर्ता

भगवान् is described in several important terms in the scriptures. One of the descriptions of भगवान् not only in the Hindu religion but also in other religions is that भगवान् is creator of the world. It is a very important description and hence, should be properly understood.

According to scriptures, the word creator should not be taken in its literal meaning but in figurative meaning. This is because the scriptures point out that all the living being, all the जीवस and the inert universe (जीव and जगत् – चरम् and अचरम्) are eternal and therefore, uncreated. Science also states the same. According to the law of conservation of matter and energy, even an ounce cannot be created (or destroyed). Therefore, there is no question of creation at all.

भगवान् cannot be the creator of the uncreated eternal universe. Therefore the word creator should not be understood literally. This literal understanding (or misunderstanding) has led people to ask many questions such as the purpose of creation, etc.

Active and passive state

The scriptures point out that even though the जीव and जगत् are eternal and uncreated; both of them go through alternate conditions of active state and passive state, like the wave having a crest and a trough. Exactly like we go to sleep in the night and wake up in the morning, जीव and जगत् are eternally going through active and passive state. Each state is preceded by the other and followed by the other.

भगवान् does not create जीव जगत्, since they are already there. भगवान् role is activating the जीव and जगत् from their previous passive state. Every time he activates, it is not a fresh activation but a reactivation. This reactivation is only referred to as "creation". भगवान् has been doing the reactivation eternally and will continue to do so.

Why is भगवान् required for the reactivation?

Scriptures point out that भगवान् is required because the reactivation of जीव and जगत् is not a random process. It has to take place according to the law of कर्म. During the passive state, all the जीव exist with their own कर्म (which can be पुण्यम् or पापम् depending on the good or bad actions respectively).

The quality of universe, therefore, is not dependent on भगवान्'s will. It is dependent on law of कर्म. So when terrible events and calamities happen, it is not because of भगवान् but because of the law of कर्म. ईश्वर, as the reactivator, is called सामान्य कर्त and our कर्म (पुन्यम् and पापम्) are called विशेष कर्त. The activation involves not only creation of universe but also the creation of body mind complex. भगवान् has to reactivate (create) because the पुन्यम् and पापम् will have to come into play.

भगवान् as the protector of devotees

Scriptures describe भगवान् as the protector of devotees. भगवान् protects the devotees in four different ways.

लौकिक साधनानि

भगवान् has already kept solution to problems in the creation itself. For hunger problem, food has been kept. For the thirst problem, water is already provided. भगवान् has given us the बुद्धि to explore, understand, implement and benefit. लौकिक साधन means worldly solution. भगवान् has given land, water, grains and brains –we have to sow the seed, plant, protect, reap and enjoy. He will not directly plant the seed; he has given us the provision.

शास्त्रीय साधनानि

In the scriptures, especially in the कर्म खण्ड portion and in the मन्त्र शास्त्र, varieties of ritualistic solution, for varieties of problems in the form of परिहार, प्रायश्चित्त or शान्ति is provided by भगवान् . भगवान् has also given the method of diagnosing the problem. If the person has got the skill, he can diagnose the problem and find out which particular देवता is connected to that particular problem. Technically, it is called देवता कोपः – displeasure of a particular deity. For देवता कोपः, देवता शान्ति is the type of remedy which is also provided by भगवान् . Therefore through शास्त्रीय साधनानि, भगवान् protects the devotees. But this method should be employed carefully since wrong diagnosis can lead to adverse results.

अलौकिक साधनानि

Occasionally or rarely, भगवान् himself performs miracle in answer to devotee's intense and sincere prayers and through miraculous methods, a devotee's problems are solved. The devotee has only used intense prayer as a solution and in answer to that prayer, भगवान् performs one miracle or the other and the devotee is out of problem. पुराण is full of such stories – Prahlada, Dhruva, Draupadi, etc. In answer to the prayer, भगवान् rarely, occasionally for some people at some time, performs miracles. This is called अलौकिक साधनानि.

आध्यात्मिक साधनम्

In answer to devotee's prayer, भगवान् gives the devotee the power of endurance and also change of attitude. And because of this change in attitude, the devotee does not see a problem as a problem. He sees it only as another situation and since he doesn't see it negatively, it is no more an unwelcome situation. This is called आध्यात्मिक साधनम्.

आध्यात्मिक साधनम् is a subjective solution in which nothing has happened outside but something has happened inwardly. In Ayodhya kanda of the Ramayana, both Kousalya and Sumitra face separation from their sons. While Kousalya is extremely upset, shattered and curses everyone including भगवान्, Sumitra who is facing the very same situation is not at all upset. Infact, she happily sends lakshmana to the forest. Seeing Kausalya upset, Sumitra gives her great advice which is described by Valmiki in one sarga. Sumitra changed the attitude of Kausalya and at the end of the counsel, kausalya does not see it as a problem. Problem is not solved but dissolved. This is called आध्यात्मिक साधनम्.

Thus through worldly solution, ritualistic solution, miracle solution and internal solution, भगवान् protects a devotee.

Which solution is the most successful?

Scriptures point out that out of these four solutions, the first three are unreliable. All the problems are not solved by the first three methods. The only fully successful solution is the fourth one. Through आध्यात्मिक साधनम्, sufficient endurance is obtained and भावना also undergoes a change.

Therefore when भगवान् is said to be protector, भगवान् uses any of the four methods but warns that only the fourth method is a completely reliable one.

भगवान् as स्वामी (master)

भगवान् is described in the scriptures as स्वामी or master. After reactivating the जीव and जगत्, भगवान् created scriptures as a manual to help human beings. These scriptures are specially meant for human beings as they have got will, intelligence and power and therefore there is a chance of misuse of power. The animals do not have freewill, choice, knowledge and hence no power. Animals are not a threat to the universe. As the famous saying goes, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore भगवान् addressed humanity and said that humanity cannot live a life as they like. He prepared a set of moral and ethical principles without following which, we will be named असुर. When labelled as an असुर, even if you are the greatest भक्त like Ravana, you will be destroyed. Therefore, being the master, भगवान् includes moral and ethical principles along with भक्ति. A true भक्त follows ethical and moral principles.

It is very important to understand this because in certain other religions and also in Hinduism, there are certain cults that say if when we have surrendered to the lord, there is no need to follow ethical and moral principles. This is a misconception in the name of चरणागति तत्वम्. There is a misconception. चरणागति does not save you from your responsibility. You have to study the scriptures, know what is right and wrong and follow what is right. That is being obedient to भगवान् as master.

If these three words are clearly understood - भगवान् as creator, भगवान् as protector and भगवान् as master, we will be true भक्त and true भक्ति will help us attain the greatest goal of life.