

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's Kāśī Pañcakam

With the commentary Tatva Prakāśikā
by
Svāmi Tattvavidānanda Sarasvati

Introduction:

There are three aspects to any dharma: karma or rituals, upāsana or mental worship, also called bhakti or devotion, and jñāna or philosophy. All these three aspects are beautifully integrated in Hindu Dharma. In the Western culture, however, we find that philosophy is distanced from religion, which is limited to rituals and devotion. Even great philosophers like Aristotle did not contribute to religion and, in fact, some of them like Bertrand Russell and Nietzsche have spoken against organized religion. We find a marvelous synthesis of philosophy and religion in Hindu Dharma. Here, religion is not opposed to philosophy, and philosophers are not against religion. For example, even though Śrī Śaṅkarā is dedicated to jñāna, yet, he accommodates karma with certain restrictions. Needless to say, no philosopher can accommodate niṣiddha karma or prohibited action. Śrī Śaṅkarā does not accommodate kāmya karma, ritual prompted by desire, either. Even in the Gita, kāmya karma is denigrated and rejected outright without any hesitation. The nitya karma, duty-based action, on the other hand, is beautifully integrated into yoga, the means of

communion with God or the pursuit of knowledge.

One's life is a life of action and therefore, karma has to be integrated properly into Self-knowledge. Karma has the quality of perpetuating itself and rituals have grown very unwieldy over time. Philosophy cannot accommodate all of these karmas. For example, the Kaivalyopanishad (3) says, na karmanā na prajayā dhanena tyāgenaike amṛtatvamānasuḥ, it is through renunciation that a few have attained immortality, not through rituals, progeny, or wealth. If ritualism is divorced from the doctrine of philosophy, it becomes mechanical, repetitive, and dulls the mind. Karmas practised with the right attitude of duty and devotional offering are nicely integrated into philosophy as karma yoga, a means of purifying the mind. As Śrī Śaṅkarā repeatedly points out, karma yoga is a wonderful means to neutralize phalābhisandhi, the attachment towards the result of actions.

Normally, we have so much attachment to the result, which fructifies in the future, that we tend to justify any means to achieve it. Since the mind cannot be committed to two

things at the same time, our commitment to the result impacts our commitment to the means. It is the means that shapes the end, and karma yoga is an attitude of action without an attachment to the result. This attitude is described in Gita, 6-1, as *anāśritaḥ karmaphalam kāryam karma karoti yaḥ*, the one who performs action that is to be done, not driven by the result thereof. The striver has to perform *nitya* and *naimittika* karma, duties to be fulfilled daily and on occasion, without seeking the results thereof.

Bhakti, devotion, which includes mythology, is also well integrated into Hindu philosophy. For instance, the Gita, 14-26 says, *mām ca yo vyabhicāreṇa bhaktiyogena sevate sa guṇān samatīyaitān brahmabhūyāya kalpate*; whosoever worships Me with unwavering yoga of devotion, he transcends these *guṇās* (*satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) and becomes eligible to become Brahman. This *niṣkāma* bhakti, motiveless devotion. It helps one gain Self-knowledge. Again, if devotion is not validated by doctrinal philosophy, it becomes superstitious and does not help elevate the devotee. It has to become Yoga.

When religion gets divorced from philosophy and the rituals and mythology dominate, it loses its transformative power. One may perform elaborate rituals, often ostentatiously, with lots of effort, yet he is not transformed. If religion does not inspire and transform the individual who is the pillar of the society, it is a failure. This is

how some of the ancient religions have lost their transformative power – their rituals and mythology are divorced from philosophy. Even while relating to mythology, philosophy should be kept in mind. This is one of the main contributions of Śrī Śaṅkarā. He removes all the weeds out of karma *khāṇḍa* and makes karma into karma yoga, a means of attaining Self-realization. Also Śrī Śaṅkarā's encomiums bring the flavour of philosophy into devotional literature and make it a means to the realization of the Self. He transforms bhakti into bhakti yoga. Mechanical recitation of these encomiums should not be the goal of devotees. These encomiums help us take the life of karma and bhakti into *jñāna*.

Religion is mythological descriptions taken literally, whereas spirituality is rising above literality. If one does not take the spirit of the mythological descriptions, one falls into the trap of division. When a person takes the division between him and Īśvara to be true, other divisions such as the division between him and other individuals become true as well, and the oneness or the undividedness of the Reality is completely lost. Therefore, students of Vedānta should overcome literalism.

The Hindu mythological literature is created based on the principle of symbolism. *Parokṣa priya iva hi devāḥ* (*Aitareyaopaniṣat*, 1-3-14), 'the gods are verily fond of indirect names'. The seers love to shroud the truth in symbolic language. For instance, instead of saying

that the sunlight can be split into seven colors, the puranas portray the sun as saptāśvarathamārūdham, the one who travels by a chariot pulled by seven horses. The literal meaning sounds ridiculous, but the symbolism shows that the seers had a marvelous power of observation. Similarly, a serpent is supposed to swallow the sun or the moon during the eclipses. There is only shadow which covers up a part of the light of sun, and that is presented as a serpent. As the spirit of the portrayal is understood, the literal poetic beauty could be better appreciated.

Kāśī is an ancient town bustling with pilgrims. Like any other ancient town, it

is full of narrow lanes. And, taking bath in the Ganges in Kāśī could be an ordeal due to the sheer number of people that throng its ghats. Yet, we rise above personal considerations and take a dip in the Ganges. Our deep love for the Ganges and Kāśī can overcome all these inconveniences. It is believed that the ceremonial dip in the Ganges washes off all the sins and the person becomes eligible to enter the heaven after death. But, there is a deep spiritual significance to every aspect of Kāśī and its sacred river, Ganges. A study of the Kāśīpañcakam helps us understand this spirit and helps us rise above the literality.

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