

FIVE FEATURES OF BHAKTI

Swami Paramarthananda's Shivratri Talk-2016

One of the words which is very widely used in all religious and spiritual circles is the word *bhaktih*. It is used by various spiritual groups and has several shades of meanings. Different groups understand the word *bhakti* in its own way. Unfortunately, the meaning of the word *bhakti* has changed so much, nowadays that the popular meaning of the word has deviated from the traditional meaning of the word *bhakti*. Nowadays it is popularly used in the sense of blind, thoughtless, obsessive, emotional involvement - with a particular form of any deity. These kinds of *bhaktas* often look for occasions and opportunities to get into an emotional frenzy, in the name of *bhakti*. Therefore, *bhakti* has been misunderstood nowadays as some kind of an emotional frenzy. Since this meaning has come away from the original concept of *bhakti* found in the scriptures, it is worth knowing the important features of *bhakti*, as visualised by our scriptures.

Reverential appreciation of *Isvara* or *Bhagavan*

Only because of reverential appreciation of *Isvara* as the cosmic intelligence behind the universe, there is order and harmony and natural functioning of the whole universe of things and beings. This cosmic intelligence is defined by our vedas as the eternal, all pervading and inherent intelligence or consciousness principle. Since *Isvara* is eternal and all pervading, there is no specific form for *Isvara*. Hence, *Isvara* should not be mistaken as a person, residing somewhere, with limbs like a human being. Such a specific form is not there for *Isvara*.

Therefore, reverential appreciation of this intelligence not in one place, but, considered inherent in the entire universe. This is the first feature of *bhakti*. And even though *Bhagavan* in His original form, original nature, is formless, for the sake of worship and meditation, scriptures themselves provide provisional forms like, *abhisekam*, *puja* etc.

The scriptures warn that we should never be emotionally hooked to a particular form and make it an obstacle to discovery of the original God. We start with a provisional form and later *bhagavan* should be recognized as the invisible, inherent, intelligence that is pervading everywhere.

Reverential appreciation of the very universe itself as the very body of *Isvara*

If *bhagavan* is inherent in the entire universe, pervading the entire universe, the universe must be the physical body of the lord. Just as, 'I' am the conscious principle inherent in my entire body, *bhagavan* is the cosmic intelligence inherent in the universe. Therefore, the universe must be appreciated as the body of *Isvara*. This is appreciating the universe as *visvarupa Isvara*. This reverential appreciation of the world is very, very important; because, as even our appreciation of the whole universe - consisting of a mixture of good and bad - when I learn to reverentially appreciate, then gradually, both my attachment and aversion will get diluted.

Visvarupa bhakti will help us in reducing our attachment and aversion. And this is very important for emotional balance and peace of mind. Lesser the appreciation, greater will be my *raga* and *dvesa*.

Rudram is description of *siva* as the universe. *Purusa suktam* is the description is *Vishnu* as the universe. And if the universe is called *siva*; and the universe is called *Vishnu*; what is the difference between *Vishnu* and *Siva*? So, the one who has got real *bhakti*, will never, never differentiate different forms as different gods. We do not have different gods at all; we have only different forms, representing one *Isvara*. Whether you call it *Vishnu* or *Siva*, there is no question of comparison.

Reverential appreciation of *Isvara* as the source of the *vedas*, our primary scriptures.

Without the scriptures, we have no way of knowing god himself. All our instruments of knowledge, including modern scientific equipments and any amount of search or research they do, are not able to come across or discover *Isvara*, indicating that, *bhagavan* is not accessible for the human beings and the human instruments. Therefore, the only source of knowing *bhagavan* is scriptures. In the absence of scriptures, the very existence of *bhagavan* is unknowable. And in the absence of *bhagavan*, there is no question of *bhakti*? The very survival of *bhakta* is because of the scriptures only. Therefore, *bhagavan* should be appreciated as the source of scriptures

Reverential appreciation of the scriptures themselves, as a gift from the lord.

Scriptures are the guide map for a *bhakta*. He uses *bhagavan's* scriptures as a guide map for his life and has full faith and trust in the validity of scriptures.

For developing this reverence, we have *brahma yajna* which means the worship of the scriptures themselves. A *bhakta* should not confine to the worship of *bhagavan* only; but, he should worship the scriptures themselves as a gift from the lord.

Even *Vyakaranam* [grammar] which we use to study the scriptures is reverentially appreciated. Nowadays, the importance of scriptures is coming down. Traditional *bhakti* includes worship of scriptures and using the scriptures as a guide map.

Study the scriptures systematically

Every *bhakta* who wants to be a *bhakta* - in the traditional sense of the term - will have to go through two fold educational systems. One educational system is the formal education system that does not need any introduction or explanation. If we want to practise *bhakti* and if we want to be a *bhakta*, the fifth and most important feature is, systematic study of the scriptures so that the lifestyle as well as the code of conduct given by *bhagavan* in the scriptures is followed. *Bhagavan* addresses the *bhakta* through the scriptures, prescribing a lifestyle as well as the code of conduct.

Challenge in studying the scriptures systematically

But, if I have to study the scriptures, we do face a difficulty; because, our scriptural literature is very vast. *Vedas* themselves are very big. Later *smṛti* granthas have come, which expound and elaborate the vedic teaching. Therefore, *bhagavan* in *kṛṣṇa avatara* - through arjuna - condensed all the scriptures in the form of *bhagavad gita*.

Scriptures talk about *sat karmani* (appropriate actions), in the form of *panca maha yajna*. In the 16th chapter of the *gita*, right values to be followed, the wrong habits to be given-up - *daivi sampatti* & *asuri sampatti* - are all described. A *bhaktha* has to know and attempt to follow *sat karmani*, *sat gunah*, *sat bhavanah*, healthy attitudes. Merely doing *nama sankirtanam*, in the name of *bhakti*, is not traditional.

Reverential study of the scriptures will not only help in becoming a true *bhakta* but will also remove several misconceptions regarding *bhakti* and *bhakta*, which are prevalent now.

Misconceptions in bhakthi

One of the widely prevalent misconceptions is that, *bhakta* will never have problems in life. The scriptures never make such promise. Whether one is *bhakta* or non-*bhakta*, the *prarabdha karma* will have to be experienced, by everyone. Promise for *bhakti* is, inner peace and strength to confront the problem with courage, confidence. *Bhakti* will give inner balance and inner strength, which will help in confronting the *karma* with courage and confidence.

Second widely prevalent misconception is that a *bhakta* can get anything just by sending an application to *bhagavan*. He is exempt from all effort. Traditional *bhakti* or traditional scriptures, never say that. Whether you are *bhakta* or *abhakta*, goals can be accomplished only by following the appropriate effort in the appropriate direction. All goals can be achieved by hard work only.

For a *bhakta*, two types of *karmas* are available. He can do worldly activities also, and parallelly, he can do *vaidika karma* also - *laukika karma* and *vaidika karma*. But, he only have to put forth the effort. *Bhakti* is not a replacement for *karma* or hard work. *Bhakta* must do *karma* with *bhakti*, for fulfilling the goals of life, whether it is *dharma*, *artha* or *kama*.

So, when you expect miracles, and miracles do not happen, many uninformed *bhaktas* begin to question the efficacy of *bhakti*. They question the fairness of god. Such *bhakti* becomes so fragile and shaky and is a mere emotional obsession. *Bhakti*, with appropriate *karma* alone, will achieve the goals of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*.

For *moksa* also, an appropriate effort is required. The appropriate effort is spiritual knowledge alone. That means, knowing the real nature of god, real nature of world and real nature of myself. make it very clear. *Bhakta* must do *karma* for worldly benefit. *bhakta* must gain *jnanam* for *moksa*.

Spiritual knowledge also requires a systematic study in the form of *guru sastra upadesa*. It is a spiritual education program.

This is traditional *bhakti*. It is not an emotional attachment to a finite *bhagavan* in the form of a person. It is not an emotional obsession; but, it is a proper approach, with the help of the scriptures. Only when a *bhakta* fulfills these five features, he can be called so in the traditional sense of the term.

With these words, I conclude and today we have done *sivaratri puja* wherein we see *siva* as the source of the scriptures and *bhakti*.

'Swamiji's talk transcribed by Smt Vinodhini'