

The Paths of Yoga

Svami Sadananda Dasa

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A bhakta called Barasvami¹ once said to a crowd of people who were listening to his explanations of the Bhagavatam on the footsteps leading into the river Ganges in Benares: “Each and everyone in this world complains about his own unhappiness, his troubles, difficulties and the hard cross he has to bear. And everyone imagines himself to be the one who has to suffer the most.

Our longing for enjoyment and our efforts to escape suffering keep us busy day and night up to the last moment of our life. This has been going on from eternity and will go on for eternity; from birth to birth.

We uselessly imagine that fate or, as we sometimes think, God is unnecessarily hard, even cruel to us, and forget that we are cruel to our own true selves. We suffer and enjoy the results of our own actions – not a bit more or less.

The body changes from birth to birth, but the subtle covering of the inner mind accompanies the atma on his endless journey. The impressions and desires we cherish in our heart are deposited there like tiny seeds, which sprout and grow and determine the course of our next life and the sort of fate – as we call it – we have to bear in the present life.

But there is a silent Friend always along with us. It is the Paramatma or Vishnu, the immanent form of God, residing in every heart. His very *presence* causes that most impartially and most objectively we get what we deserve. This *true* Friend is always keen that we faithfully follow the path of life, that Bhagavan has propounded in the Shastrams. Over and over again *He leads us to the company of holy people [bhaktas]*, because in their company alone we can hear from their lips the words that tell about atma, Paramatma, Brahma and Bhagavan. These words can instil knowing love of God (bhakti) into our hearts and remove our ignorance about ourselves, this world and God.

The eternal Friend, however, does not interfere with our free will. We need not pay any heed to the Shastrams, unless we wish to. Many people think they can chalk out their own path and they cherish their own fantasies and ideas about the world, atma and God, and the way to salvation. But all those who have attained salvation have followed the way shown in the Shastrams, and all great philosophers and sages, who practised what they preached and thought, have accepted the Shastrams as their only guide.

How should it be possible to know what God is, when our mind is incapable even of grasping what the atma is, as the mind is unable to go beyond its own

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limit?

Our mind is always prompted by desires. As truth we consider and accept only what appeals to our mind and instincts and bluntly reject what we do not like. Our mind is always going astray.

You all know from the Gita, that Krishna says to Arjuna: 'I alone know the meaning of the Shastrams. The Shastrams have their origin in Me' and 'If someone thinks that he can ignore the Shastrams and act and think as he likes – he is free to do so – but he will not attain what he hopes for: he will *not* become happy, not to mention attainment of the highest goal of life. The Shastrams are the only authority on what a man should do or not should do. Hence, you should make yourself well acquainted with the meaning of the Shastrams and act accordingly.' (XVI, 23–24).

It will be of no use, to think of, to pray to and to love a 'God', whom we imagine in our mind, and even in the case we try to follow what the Shastrams say, we will require their help at every step, so we can examine and check ourselves, to see if we are proceeding correctly. And if we are happy to find a guru, he will instruct and correct us whenever needed and he will never utter a word, different from or contradictory to what the Shastrams say.

Time after time there may be a series of new discoveries in the fields of natural science and psychology, but there can be no new discoveries in the field of Hindu religion, because atma, Brahma and God are always the same.

It is a fact that the abundance of the Hindu Shastrams from time to time gets in some disorder for the reason that people are incapable of memorizing and retaining the original texts as they were propounded by Shri Vyasa. Moreover, people do not understand the position of Vyasa, because they do not comprehend the very concept of what we Hindus call Shruti. Shruti means 'that which has been received through the ear'. Shri Vyasa does not compose the Shrutis. He arranges them in systematic groups. He arranges them in various divisions and subdivisions so that especially eligible persons will be able to memorize that part of the Shastrams which they are entitled to.

Shri Vyasa also has the task to express the Shrutis in a language which can be understood at the time of presentation. This is the reason why scholars find certain parts of the Shastrams to be in a more recent form of the Sanskrit language than other parts. The sum total of all the Shastrams is eternal, but they are published so to say through the mouth of Vyasa in the language of the time of their appearance. Shri Vyasa is by no means a human being. He is one of the many forms through which Bhagavan reveals Himself. He is an avatara.

When the Shastrams are written and printed in our days there is some possibility of interpolation by interested groups, but those who know and have realized the purport of the Shastrams can tell at once if a passage has been distorted or not. An expert in music feels at once when a wrong key is played or some new keys are inserted, because he knows the fundamental principles according to which a great master of music has composed.

Madhusudan Sarasvati was a renounced scholar of the advaita school of Shri Shankaracharya. He lived about 1600. He wrote a detailed commentary on the Bhagavadgita and in this commentary he tried to refuse the attacks of the vaishnava acharyas against the proclaimed monism of Shankaracharya.

His commentary, however, is influenced here and there by a change in his own attitude. He writes in the introduction to the XIII:th chapter: 'If some yogis by strict control of their mind through habitual meditation are able to realize that unqualified (nirguna) and non-active abundance of light (jyotis), let them realize it but our mind runs permanently more and more to the *astounding Blue [Krishna]* on the banks of the river Yamuna.' Similar passages occur elsewhere, too. Later on, Madhusudan Sarasvati wrote the 'Bhakti Rasayana', a work entirely in the spirit of the bhakti school.

The other day, our Sadananda Maharaj asked me about my opinion on the age of certain Upanishads etc. My reply is: Some people have tried to prove the monistic Upanishads older than the Upanishads teaching other views. Let them do so. It is also possible to establish the opposite theory. It all depends on the angle of vision. Look at the sky: sun, moon, stars, constellations of stars, planets – they rise one after the other, some individually and some together in groups. Is it not stupid to ask which is historically the first and which is the later? It only depends on where we are on our globe and at what time, is it not so?

The Shastrams are all eternal. They always teach man the same thing, but as men are on different stages of their spiritual development they give instructions accordingly.

It is said that in times of yore people had greater capacity to grasp subtle things than people in later eras. There was a time, when a few hints were sufficient, often only a single word *or* a mantra and the person would realize the meaning instantly. Later, more and often painstaking details were needed to awaken the proper understanding. The substance is the same, the words or the form may get more elaborate. This does not mean that at a certain historic point a new Shastram is propounded or, as modern people mistakenly think, is written! Whenever our universe gets destroyed and a new one emanates, the same Shastrams get revealed or rise above the horizon of the spiritual sky. And just as our astronomers know about the rise of stars etc. in days to come and their characters, so our ancient rishis knew about the Shastrams and their contents long before they were known to the common man or as we say to the history of Sanskrit literature.

Look at the tremendous multitude of our Shastrams. There are some people who consider themselves very intelligent and they say: 'In some Shastrams there was a certain form of religion and philosophy or cult. Then some people came who were of different opinion, and they successfully promulgated some new cult and pushed forward with it by writing or teaching some new Shastrams. From time to time there were even clever fellows who changed passages in the established Shastrams and inserted new things to suit their own needs'.

I do not know what support these historians have for their theories. There was never at any time a council of religion that tried to codify the Shastrams and to collect them in bundles at one place or to summon all the people who knew them by heart.

Even those who are busy determining the age of certain Shastrams are puzzled by the fact that, except for a few omissions and a few writing mistakes, the most important texts are to be found in the same form in the scripts of geographically widely separated tracts of India.

Some people also confuse the original Shastrams and the writings of great acharyas of the past, who on the basis of the Shastrams propounded what they understood as the true meaning of the Shastrams. Some of them have accepted certain parts of the Shastrams and rejected other parts, not because these were not accepted as Shastrams or unknown to them, but in order to establish their own theories they had to exclude everything that did not suit their own purposes. Shastrams are authorities, *not* acharyas.

As men are by no means equally and uniformly developed the Shastrams give instructions for their respective stage and eligibility. And they do it in such a way, that even a person who simply thinks in terms of his own wellbeing in this present world, is told what he should do, but very significantly he is made to do certain things – under the pretext to appeal to his selfish instincts – which will gradually make him eligible for a higher path.

To expiate his sins or to obtain certain improvements in his life he is asked to go to places of pilgrimage in order to have his purifying ablutions. The hidden intention is that at such places he will have a chance to meet and serve bhaktas, those who have realized God, and listen to the Shastrams from them.

As man, the intellectual animal, is always inclined to revert to a more primitive stage, the karma-khanda of the Vedas insists by its commands that he should incessantly be busy with some sort of ritual, and that he should follow strictly the commands relating to his physical and mental life.

This is the month of marriages. People in our country have forgotten the implication of the sacrament of marriage according to our Shastrams. Modern people think that the Shastrams have given them the sanction for fleshly indulgence. By no means. The Shastrams say that the sacrament of marriage is given to all those who are not able to abstain from carnal desires, and the observation of the sacrament, the vedic rules for a married life, restricts indulgence to the absolute minimum with the intention to lead the person to gradual abstinence. It is true that our Sanskrit literature has works which deal with the technique of sexual life, but they clearly say that their real purpose is to create disgust for it.

The karma-khanda of the Shastrams teaches certain religious disciplines for the attainment of greater happiness in the next birth, either here or in a higher world in the realm of Maya. But for their followers, too, the instruction is given, that as a matter of virtue they should hear the Shastrams which deal with things

that are of eternal value, namely the atma and Bhagavan.

Others have realized by their own experience and have got confirmation from the lips of the saints, that it is sheer ignorance to think that I am the body, the mind, the heart, the individual personal soul, as which I experience myself day and night. They are keen to get rid of this ignorance and they want the eternal atma, covered by body and mind, to awake to real self-awareness.

They have understood that the atma has nothing to do with the present individual soul or ego, for whose sake we crave for blessings and happiness in this world or in heaven (svarga). They are eligible for the instructions given in the jnana- and yoga-khanda of the Vedas and especially for those passages in the Upanishads which deal with the method of realizing the atma as the way to get out of the incessant cycle of rebirths.

In the karma-khanda, the Shastrams give directions to the person who expects happiness for the present or future unit of body, mind and soul, i.e. his own 'individual person', but he is made to do things that in the long run are conducive to the awakening of his own – to himself as yet unknown – eternal atma.

People nowadays fail to grasp the value of the acts or duties that the karmi has to perform, which I think is often due to what they read in books of confused modern authors. Karma is by no means a sort of activity whatsoever and the expression of an active life as opposed to a quiet, contemplative or meditative life. 'Karma' means the execution of those duties that are obligatory to an individual according to his caste, birth, qualification and the social stage of life: as a genuine bachelor; as a married man; as a man retired from active life, a 'senior citizen', who leaves his domestic affairs to his children and retires to a lonely place for a contemplative life – either alone or together with his wife; and finally as a monk.

The jnana- and yogakhanda on the other hand speak to the person who thinks that his real happiness would consist in getting completely rid of his individual personality. It is a sort of negative egoism which prompts a person to look for the final annihilation of not only suffering, but the very elimination of even the possibility of suffering.

The person eligible for the path of jnana gets instructions regarding the real nature of the atma, who in reality is not separated from Brahma, the great infinite mass of pure Knowledge (cit), absolute or self-dependent Being or Existence (sat) and pure Bliss (ananda).

When in the course of his spiritual training and disciplin the adept is able to attain the stage of samadhi – that complete elimination of the functions of his intellect, mind, reason, feelings, his consciousness and subconsciousness – then the innermost layer of the subtle mind (cittam) gets completely saturated with the presence of the atma. When he returns to normal consciousness and awareness of his body, his mind and the external world, he exclaims in enthusiastic joy: 'I am that', which means 'I am not physical and mental stuff; my real Self is the atma and everything else is ignorance'.

He even teaches others from his own experience, telling them: 'Keep in mind that you, your real self, is that, i.e. the atma, the Brahma'. Whenever he enters into that condition of experience his present empirical individuality, his name, his form etc. all vanish like the names and forms of a river entering an ocean.

When he no longer loses this awareness of being essentially the atma – and not the person he normally experiences – and keeps this awareness even in the greatest forms of external trouble, physically or otherwise, then he has acquired perfect wisdom, mukti. He has become a mukta. Now he is free from ignorance about the atma and he is peaceful, because he is convinced that he does not have to return to this world of births and rebirths anymore. The seeds of actions from endless births have been burned by the fire of wisdom. His physical existence, however, his body and mind, will remain till the last rest of the reaction to the deeds which produced the present body and mind are consumed, and then he will die. The atma is forever free.

The yogi has a slightly different path. He is reminded that Vishnu, the immanent aspect of God, is present in his own heart. By withdrawal of the senses and the mind from their objects, assisted by a special physical training, the atma flashes on the finest inner layer of the mind (citta) and at the same time he realizes the presence of the Paramatma. The atma gets filled with the light of the Paramatma and in that process of beholding the Paramatma the atma gets beyond himself and realizes his qualitative identity with the Paramatma, as a minute particle of His Being.

In both cases the atma is freed from his wrong belief that he has anything to do with body and mind, which are imposed on him by the power of Maya and which consist of her stuff.

A third group is entirely different. People in this group have either in this life or in a previous life got in contact with true bhaktas, who for all eternity have dedicated their whole life to the will, pleasure and joy of Bhagavan, the transcendent aspect of God, the very essence of Divinity. These bhaktas are dedicated to the service of Bhagavan, according to what He Himself calls His service – in the Shastrams which describe bhakti and Bhagavan.

Having seen the lives of these bhaktas and having served them (if possible even by manual service), having heard from their lips about Bhagavan, His eternal realm, His eternal associates and His eternal play or drama – and the interrelation between Bhagavan, Paramatma, Brahma and atma on the one hand, and the world with all that belongs to it on the other hand – they feel the utter meaninglessness in striving for happiness for their own selves in any form whatsoever.

According to the bhakti-Shastrams the very concept of bondage and liberation is ignorance of Reality in its highest sense. As Brahma says in the the Bhagavatam X,14,26: 'If a person thinks about and looks at things from Bhagavan's point of view, from the point of Eternity in its highest climax, where it has nothing to do with what is non-eternal, then the concept of bondage and liberation is nothing but

the meaningless talk of the ignorant. Night and day concern the earth, not the sun.’

There is a fair number of Shastrams which serve the only purpose of helping the adept to change from the geocentric to the heliocentric point of view, i.e. what God is *to Himself* and *in Himself*, irrespective of the rather external display of endless universes, and to help him get rid of the foolish notion, that God as He is *as such*, should find one of His occupations in looking after the supply of the mental, physical and spiritual needs of those who have chosen to turn away from Him and prefer to be tossed in the currents of endless births.

All possible kindness has been shown to man in God’s Revelation of the paths of karma, jnana, yoga and bhakti and the paths that are combinations of any of these four. Moreover, whenever in the course of His play, alone or with His associates, He reveals Himself as He is during a short stay on this earth, He gives instructions about the true meaning of the Shastrams. It is clear from the very conception of the atma already, who is nothing but a tiny ray emanating from the eternal Sun of Consciousness, that nothing whatsoever, which belongs to the category of Knowledge (cit) and consists of it, has anything to do with the world of Maya.

Hindu Shastrams mainly teach the responsibility of the individual atma for his own fate and abhor the idea of a God who gets sentimental in view of the sufferings of mankind or the creatures in general. His kindness does not consist in confirming man in his wrong idea that he is meant to be or should be happy or unhappy, but in bringing home to him through the Shastrams, that man, woman, animal, plant etc. are all misunderstanding and ignorance. Man is at the utmost a transition.

Hindu Shastrams do not teach pantheism either. To them it is inconceivable, that God could be able to forget Himself, to become an atma, and then by wading through all the refuse of the universes, gradually find the way back to Himself and realize that He is God, after all. Such ideas may flatter the self-conceit of some people and are as much a frivolity as to think that we can draw Bhagavan into the affairs of our individual life.

To be eligible for the path of bhakti it is not sufficient to believe *that* God exists and to believe what is said of Him in the Shastrams. There is only one criterion of a person’s eligibility: a strong confidence accompanied by the firm resolution to act accordingly, a strong confidence in the *service* of Bhagavan, that this service is the eternal purpose of life; service as the means *and* the end, irrespective of one’s own happiness.

To be turned towards God with the intention to serve – He being the centre and focus of all thoughts and action – that is real liberation from the real bondage of selfishness, of being a slave to one’s own desires.

It does not matter in what corner of the universes and under what conditions he may have to serve God; the bhakta is happy whenever he gets the greatest Grace and Mercy, which consists in the capacity to think, feel, breathe, work, live and die

for His sake. The Shastrams teach him what is meant by the words ‘His service’. We can summarize it in a few words: In the beginning the adept will be asked to learn how to use his whole body, mind and soul with all its resources in His service. This is bhakti, regulated by the injunctions of the Shastrams. He tries to follow the commands accurately, because he knows that this is the first infallible method to please Him – to carry out His commands.

Gradually, if Krishna and His bhaktas are pleased with his seva, more power to serve, to love and to understand will be infused into him. It is this power which enables the mind, the heart and the senses to serve, to love and to understand.

Hearing about the eternal play of God with His Own eternal associates, this power, which *is* these very words, will awaken in his heart the strong desire (lobha) to serve one of the eternal associates; now mentally, later – should it be the wish of God – in a body consisting of pure Knowledge, his future atma-body so to say. He will then follow the same injunctions of the Shastrams as he did before, but the motive will no longer be the desire to please God by fulfilling His commands, but the spontaneous desire of his enlightened heart. He cannot but do all his duties and over and above he cannot resist the enthusiastic longing to become eligible to serve most personally his ideal associate of the Lord.

To anyone who has understood the Shastrams, it will be quite impossible to fantasize oneself *as* that ideal associate. Those associates belong to the fullness of Godhead. The atma by its never-changing, eternal constitution is simply a ray emanating from the Fullness and eternally co-existent with it.

It would be sheer blasphemy to think, that it could be the possible aim of any form of religious disciplin of any of the four paths we have described above to *become* Brahma, Paramatma, Bhagavan or even one of His eternal associates as such, in the strict sense of the word. Some people think that ‘to become Brahma or Paramatma or to enter into Bhagavan’ means that the atma itself becomes Brahma etc. They fail to understand the language of the Shastrams. A drop falling into the ocean never *becomes* the ocean; it loses its identity and it shares the nature of the ocean to some extent. To enter into Bhagavan does not mean that now the atma is Bhagavan. Does a tiny insect entering into my body become the body?

I heard some people say that the ideal of bhakti is finally to become one *of* the eternal associates of Bhagavan and that this is the meaning of the expression ‘go behind’ (anugata) or *following the example of the parishada*. This is quite wrong. The ideal is to become not one *of* but one *among* the associates, to become eligible to serve God by *assisting* His associate in his eternal form of service.

Without worrying about how to get rid of the wrong notion about his own atma, body, mind and ego, his atma gets awakened by itself, as it were, in the degree of the power to serve.

He does not have to make any separate efforts for acquiring atma-jnana, nay, he gets so much absorbed in his serving the Lord, by following the Shastrams, that he does not become aware that the atma has become awakened in the meantime.

From here starts that form of bhakti, which is called prema-bhakti, and which gives the ability to *see* Bhagavan, His realm, His Play etc. directly. As long as he carries his physical body and mind this direct experience will be restricted to brief moments. But this does not upset him. The motive of his religious life is not the experience of the joy to see God, but to serve Him in the way *He Himself* recommends. If He chooses to keep a bhakta in the world, the bhakta considers it His blessing to be allowed to serve Him here. If He wants the bhakta to come to His realm for direct seva of the parishads, i.e. if the person has to die as we say or, as it would be correct to say, if the atma leaves his body, mind and ego-individuality – the bhakta considers it His blessing.

I know that all this is mere theories to us, because we have not been as fortunate to have got His Own power of Self-realization, which alone enables us to love and to know Him.

All this must be abstruse to us, because it is all contrary to what we in our selfishness expect from religion and philosophy.

Once I was asked: how can we love and serve someone whom we do not know? I admit that this is impossible. But do you believe that the Shastrams ask us to do something which is impossible? If we like to get enlightened through the words of the Shastrams coming to us through the lips of the saints, then we open ourselves in a praying mood, ready to receive that power of Intelligence and Love, which is His Own power, exactly the same power through which He knows *who* and *what He* is. Having received this power and in the degree of our willingness to be guided by it, our intellect, our emotions, our heart, our whole body gets saturated with it. We think then that *we* serve, do rituals, pray, sing God's names, dance, rejoice, weep, but it is actually His power which does it. A rod of iron put into the fire gets saturated with it. It is still a rod but it can burn.

If we are a bit more advanced we shall realize that it is His power which does all the acts of bhakti. In that sense, and in that sense alone, one may say that God loves Himself, serves Himself.

From the moment a person gets under the influence of this power, he starts to serve and to know Him and from now on he will serve and know Him more and more. But as God is infinite in every respect he will never come to the end of serving Him and he will never get exhaustive knowledge.

Some modern critics of our Shastrams, who think that they are much advanced, say that all the Shastrams were written by men, who were brainy and gifted with lofty power of imagination. They take our Shastrams as a sort of literature meant for past ages. I am sorry to say that they are rather latecomers. In the early ages of Indian history there was a philosophy or rather a school of philosophy called carvaka, since it uttered things, which were pleasing to the ear and minds of ordinary people. This school taught that the Vedas were composed by some crooked minds who wanted to cheat man in order that he should give up the path of enjoyment of this world by diverting his attention to something imaginary

behind the visible world of our senses. Some modern people in the West teach similar things about religion in general. This is not surprising. People who are bent on securing the utmost enjoyment in this world are rather like intellectual animals, and they must revolt against the authority of the Shastrams, which curtail their scope of unrestricted enjoyment. They must decry the Shastrams as human books to get rid of the chastising words in them. They will not be able to make the world or themselves happier.

It would be wiser to have an unprejudiced look at the Shastrams and try to grasp what they say. What *we* think about the world and God may not be correct at all! Let us hear the Shastrams in an inquisitive mood to see if it is true that they can give us better and more correct ideas and guidance than our own mind. There must be methodic hearing, of course. This is so in the case of every science.

We are in doubt about what we are and where we are. How can we understand what is going on in the hearts of those who sit, play and serve God directly, most personally, and not only at a certain time, but always. God, whose halo and whose rays we cannot grasp even with the subtlest intellect and with the purest heart, that very form of the infinite Fullness of pure Existence, Knowledge and Joy; to talk to Him, to hear Him, to see Him, to play with Him – in the loving service of Him – would it not cause a sort of madness simply to dream of it? Can we, who dare not even believe that the atma and God exist – not to talk of believing in His service as means and end – intellectually or emotionally imagine this?”