

Discourses/Articles

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SANKIRTAN YOGA

Naama Sankirtanam yasya sarva papa pranaasanam; Pranamo duhkhasamanastam namaami Harim Param. Thus concludes the Srimad Bhagavata Maha-Purana. The great glory of God is in His magnificent Name. It is considered as the destroyer of all sins—*sarva paapa pranaasanam*—and a single obeisance to Hari is *duhkhasamanastam*, the abolisher of all sorrows.

The human mind is apparently heir to every kind of difficulty and from problem to problem one takes one's steps, as it were, due to the forgetfulness of a great protecting power, the invisible, all-compassionate, Divine Succour, which is perennially awake, ever vigilant and is never asleep. The world has protective powers which are ever awake, even as the powers that maintain the health of our body are never asleep. There is a perpetual guarding of our body even when we are fast asleep. There are unknown guardians of our physical personality. We are totally unaware of all things and helpless in the condition of deep sleep. We have no security whatsoever, and even in that totally helpless condition, when we are not even conscious that we are existing, we are guarded by invisible powers.

The Pranas, which are stationed in this body as sentinels by the Almighty, take care that the body does not deteriorate; the body is not only protected from decomposition and decay, it is at the same time positively replenished. We wake up from sleep not merely as secure individuals, protected by our guardian angels, but also with a freshness and a new enthusing spirit, due to the ambrosial dish that was served to us in that condition of oblivion, practically. This is a great wonder indeed, that people there are who feed us even when we are unconscious, and feed us with such stuff and food that it cannot be compared with any other delicacy in the world. The food that is dished out to us in the state of deep sleep, by the consuming of which we wake up with tremendous satisfaction, is incomparable indeed. No known diet of the world can give us that energy. We had no mouths to eat and our eyes were not visualising anything; our hands were not grasping foodstuffs. The body was not physiologically functioning in terms of consumption and digestion of food. When we had no mouth to eat, how did we conceive of and even much less consume that food which was adequate to make us feel healthier than we were earlier? Even a sick person feels a percentage of improvement the next morning because of what we usually call restfulness. But 'rest' is an enigmatic word. Its meaning is not always very clear to us. When we are relaxed perfectly, we are open to the inflow and action of divine power and this happens because it is only in this condition, when we are under compulsive relaxation, that we close all the avenues of obstruction to the entry of these forces.

Human ego is a repulsive element. The meaning of the word 'ego' is a centre of repulsion and self-affirmation. Its characteristic is simple. It asserts vehemently the sole

importance of its described and circumscribed existence and shuts off communication with anything else in the world. We maintain a self-completeness of our personality. We never feel that we are moving into somebody else, that we have communication or contact with anything. We are totally independent and one hundred percent isolated in ourselves; and the extent to which we feel locked up within our body will be enough characterisation of the strength and activity of the ego. The ego is not a person. It is not a visible stuff. It is not some solid substance that can be seen even with the subtlest of observational instruments. There is no thing called ego. It is only an attitude of consciousness, a vehement localisation of spirit, an adamant affirmation of its pinpointed existence and a total abrogation of contact with any other centre of that kind. This most unreasonable attitude, you may say, of this principle you call your consciousness, may be called the ego. It is very active in the waking state. Everybody knows that 'I am' and thus 'I am' is a hard-boiled independence to such an extent that everything else appears to be an appendage or an accessory or a contrivance for the existence and manipulation of the personality. In the state of deep sleep it temporarily gets dissolved. So the repulsive or the repelling character of the ego subsides. Hence communication with outer powers becomes possible. We are open to the entry of active energies in the world in the state of deep sleep while we prevent the entry of them in the waking condition. The more we are body-conscious, the less is the chance of protective powers entering us. Hence a highly cantankerous, egoistic person cannot be regarded as a healthy person. It is a state of ill health.

The power of the Divine Name, to which I made reference, is only an insignia of these divine forces. All the gods in the heavens, the angels in paradise, are the dignitaries stationed in different positions by the power of God, which we invoke through characterisation of it, and this characterisation of the glory and the function of God is called Naama Sankirtana—the chanting of the Divine Name, the recitation of the Name of God. It is a silent, submissive adoration, which we offer to the all-pervading Almighty, by implanting in our own personalities such qualities as are compatible with God's divinity. This is why saints have said, many a time, that only a purified mind can take the Name of God. It is so because the impure mind is nothing but the egoistic mind and, as mentioned, the ego repels entry of everything other than its own self. Hence a mechanical and routine chanting of a formula, a Mantra or a Name, with the adamantine ego functioning at the same time, as the greatest of impurities conceivable, would be like dipping granite in the holy Ganga—even if it is inside the Ganga, the water will not enter it because it is granite. Such a flint-like substance is this ego, though it is really not a physical substance. It is a conceptual centralisation of ourselves in a peculiar mode of the coming together of Desha, Kaala and Vastu Sambandha, i.e., space, time, causal relation. It is hybrid. No one knows where from it has come and what it is made of. That is why it can best be described as merely a conceptual centralisation of consciousness, in a particular mode of affirmation, for a given purpose, at a given moment, under a given stage of evolution.

This ego is an obstacle to the entry of protection not only from God but even from Nature. We cannot even be physically healthy if we are too egoistic and self-affirming, let alone divinely endowed. Hence such methods as fasting of the sense organs and the cleanliness of the body and such other ways of maintaining purity of personality are adopted as means to keep up some percentage of the modicum of purity that is necessary for some advantage to accrue by our religious programmes, worships, prayers,

meditations and obeisances. The greater the devotion from the spirit that wells up in relation to God, the humbler does one become. Vidya— knowledge, enlightenment, wisdom, illumination—always goes hand in hand with submissiveness, humility, good nature and a spontaneous non-parading of oneself. The illumined person is spontaneously free from the usual longing for recognition in society, because this unfortunate desire that is rampant in human minds generally is again a form of the human ego only.

“Silently may you offer your prayers so that publicly may you be rewarded by God.” Some such admonition is available to us from the mouth of Jesus Christ. Your prayers may be silently offered. But these silent prayers that are so invisibly offered to the ever-present God will be publicly rewarded. The devotee is concerned only with God recognising him and there is no need for recognition from anywhere else, but the human ego butts in. It will not keep quiet. It will go on whispering, like the Manthara of the Ramayana, that this way of silently offering prayers to God is not quite in order, that you have no value attached to social recognition or respect and adulation in the public. When you are to receive the fruits of your virtuous acts in the form of public acclamation and social recognition, you have got your reward and you need not expect anything further from God. What you wanted you have already got. What else do you want? Hence God may keep silent, saying: “You have got what you wanted. Now, what else do you want from Me?” But man, to repeat once again, is an ego-ridden bundle. He is a mischievous imp and it is very difficult to bend that ego. It will not melt as if it is hard flint.

All great saints were silent, unknown and simple people living in corners of the world, unbefriended by people, but they were known in some other way by even the atoms, the leaves and the winds that blew. “The first in this world will be the last in heaven; and the last here will be the first there.” This also is what we have recorded in the New Testament. He who is the first here is the last there and the last here will be the first there. But, who would like to be the last, despicable, unknown, wretched person in this world? There cannot be a worse, pitiable pain than to be an unrecognised nobody in this world. This only gives us some idea of the difficulty of living a godly life, because all the pleasure-centres of a person are severed by God when grace descends. This is an irony, you may call it, if you like. Though on the one hand it appears as if you are moving from glory to glory, from joy to joy, as you rise from the pedestal of divine service to the higher pedestal of divine experience—though it is true that the path of God is always a path of satisfaction and protection and immense delight—yet there is a mysterious passage through which one has to pass in order to be able to be blessed in this manner with that degree of delight which is the quality of the path to God. You will be wrenching completely as if oil is extracted out of you; and a stage of this kind one has to pass through and no one can escape this particular state. If it has not come today, it will have to come tomorrow. It is not only the Buddha that suffered or the Christ that was crucified; everyone has to be on the cross one day or the other. We may be postponing that date but that date has to be there, whatever be that date.

Why this irony in this wondrous kingdom of God, is the question of the spirit of man. It is so because God is a non-possessor. Though God is the richest abode of all glorious treasures in creation, God is a pauper in another way. He is a beggar. Lord Siva is sometimes portrayed as a Fakir, having nothing, not even a roof over His head.

Intense Vairagya, intense renunciation, intense self-abnegation and utter relinquishment of every particular, every possession, is one of the characteristics of God, because outside God nothing can be. He is lone existence. How can He possess riches and treasures, and where are the lockers and where are the shelves? Where would He keep His riches if riches were to be with Him? This lone, unbefriended mysterious Being cannot tolerate any devotee of that Being getting stuck up with material possessions which are knots of illusion and, therefore, as you move in the direction of this lone non-possessive Eternity, you will also be stripped of all your possessions, one by one, until you lose even your shame. It may come even to that point, so that you are ground to powder and annihilated in toto, burnished in the fire of that ordeal which was the test which saints and sages passed through in many a way.

The world cared not for great people, because the greater a person is the less is the world capable of understanding that person. They look like crazy, unknown, useless persons. "The greatest persons in the world are unknown to the world," said Swami Vivekananda in one of his lectures in America. "These Buddhas, these Christs that you are hearing of are second-rate heroes. They are not the first class ones." These are the words of Swami Vivekananda, spoken in a state of intense inspiration in America. "These greatest people, the saints and the masters whom you are adoring are the second-rate heroes. The greatest ones have never been known to humanity. They came unknown and went unknown and thought a few thoughts. This is the only work that they have done, but these few thoughts that they have left will last for eternity. These thoughts shall sustain the whole world." Such inspirational words were spoken by Swami Vivekananda once. So we need not be enamoured of the glories of this world very much. These are the temptations. These are the snares, and the devotee is a pauper possessing nothing. He is a veritable beggar because God Himself is a beggar. He has no possessions. He shall rid you of all your entanglements. "*Yasya aham anugrahanami tasya vittam haramyaham.*" I shall free you from all your pleasure-centres one by one. When the nerves are cut, what pain will you feel? Suppose each nerve is snapped. Can you imagine that pain you will feel? Such pain will be felt when pleasure-centres are plucked out. At that time you will feel that it would be better to die than to exist in this world. But that torture one has to undergo as the price for this glorious achievement and attainment which is direct vision of God. Gold has to be thrown into fire before it begins to shine; otherwise it looks like dust. So in this fire of the ordeal of intense austerity, of the poverty of the spirit, spoken of in that great statement "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—that poverty of the spirit which means the nakedness of the spirit stripped of all attire, connection, attachment and longing external, that aloneness, which is the purity of spirit, is that which will reach the purity of that 'Single Existence' which is God Almighty.

So the taking of God's Name is considered as a great Tapas by itself by the great masters. Singing the Name of God is not a mere humorous past-time. It is an intense austerity of the soul, self-purifying, self-abnegating and a great Yajna. Maha Sankirtan Yajna is the greatest Yajna in this Kali Yuga. Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj was a votary of Sankirtan. He was called 'Sankirtan Samrat'—Emperor of Sankirtan. Even till the last moment he was fond of this great Sankirtan of the Maha Mantra "Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare; Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare!" Glory be to God, the Almighty. Glory be to His Name. Glory be to the great Master Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj! Glory be to you all!