

Means and Ends : Bhakti

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We undertake some means to achieve a cherished goal, selecting out of several options, the means which has the greatest efficacy in taking us to our desired destination. All our endeavours in the course of our lives are patterned on this syndrome of selected means to achieve a desired objective. We work hard at our studies not that we like the heavy tomes necessarily and cram for examinations in order to obtain the desired degree. Many of us perhaps would not persevere in our present jobs had it not been for the lure of the monthly pay packet- we would rather be doing something else, if the need to earn our livelihood is not so pressing. There are people who swallow swords and drink tumblers of sulphuric acid just that they may eat, just because they have to bring up a family.

The idea needs no further elaboration: most of the time, perhaps for some of us all the time, we are engaged in doing something not perhaps very pleasant or elevating but because only thereby we fulfil our desired objectives. Now this phenomenon may be alright if it is confined to the world of material endeavour leading to material goods. Unfortunately, it is not. If, gentle reader, you stop to examine the religious exercises prescribed in all religions and practised earnestly by the faithful, you would realise how everything turns out to be a means of achieving some definite end: you would realise, too, perhaps with a sense of shock, how we seem to do nothing ever in the field of religion just for its own sake, just for the love of it.

For we practise religious rites of the kamya variety to achieve definite material ends – the acquisition of wealth, the cure of disease, victory in litigation or even the destruction of an enemy. The Gitacharya also refers to this in the passage where he counts four types of people who worship. The worship of village deities is actuated by a fear of divine reprisals, that the crops may be blighted by locust hordes, that the rains may fail or it may rain too much, that the village may be ravaged by epidemic disease.

People who worship God for achieving material ends must be in an overwhelming majority. But there are undeniably a few persons whose burning faith, whose selfless love for God have purged their minds of all desires, who are actuated by nothing else than a desire for release from the bondage of samsara. Their number may be small but they do exist; there have been such dedicated devotees all through the religious history of man. What of them-are they also tainted by the blemish we have been discussing all this while? Obviously yes; for high though their objective-emanicipation is the highest and the noblest of all human goals- these devotees are still employing devotion as the means of achieving this most laudable end. They resort to bhakti not because it is a worthwhile exercise in itself but because it shall lead them on to that effulgent shore beyond the murky sea of samsara, from which no traveller ever returns.

Sankaradeva teaches a most refreshingly different attitude towards bhakti in his famous work the Bhakti Ratnakara. The work is interesting on account of the numerous verses he cites from the Srimad-Bhagavatam and other Puranas. Sankaradeva's treatment of the two

processes, sravana and kirttana, is quite lively and constitute a real contribution to our total knowledge of devotion.

But the most lasting contribution made by the savant of Assam is the emphasis he gives in the eleventh chapter to devotion, not as a means to achieve an end but as the supreme end in itself. But is this not opposed to the teachings of all the Hindu scriptures? Can there be a goal higher than total emancipation?

Sankaradeva makes his point clear by first quoting a verse from the Srimad-Bhagavatam, from the passage which records the conversation between Kapila, God's incarnation, and his earthly mother Devahuti:

**Animitta bhagavati bhaktih siddhargariyasi
Jarayatyasu ya kosam nigirnamanalo yatha.**

In explaining the purport of the second line here, Sankaradeva projects the brilliant beam of his spiritual insight when he says:

**Muktisca prasangiki bhavati
(Emancipation is a by-product of the process of devotion)**

From the exalted position of the sole end to be striven for, emancipation has been dismissed as a by-product, casually to be garnered. And, the great teacher of Assam points out two aspects, one explicitly and the other by implication in support.

The aspect that is implicit in this passage (elsewhere explicitly dealt with by the great savant) is that the exercise of loving God is so sweet, so limitlessly blissful that it is a sufficient end in itself. Devotion is not an unpleasant means adopted in a resigned attitude in order to gain a welcome end, as is the way of the world. This idea has been very specifically expressed by the great Acharya of the South Sri Madhwa:

**Harerupasana catra sadaiva sukharupini
Na tu sadhanabhuta sa siddhirevatra sa yatha.**

God's personality is the sweetest thing in all the world. His name is the sweetest word that any human language possesses. Loving God and chanting His Name are, therefore, the happiest acts man can perform; they are not unpleasant tasks that need any incentive whatsoever.

Though this is so (that no exertion is necessary in bhakti), the great teacher Sankaradeva indicates the spiritual future that is ahead of a devotee who performs this animitta bhakti. At the end of a life spent in such motiveless devotion, nothing at all remains of his load of sin accumulated over his past births; his lingasarira which causes him to be born again and again in this vale of tears is worn away without any conscious effort on his part, even as food gets digested in the body. Purged of all sins, free from the samsaric cycle, he is an emancipated soul who shall forever abide in His domain, never coming back. This

glorious spiritual future which is the Hindu ideal becomes an incidental by-product of the process of bhakti.

The abiding significance of Srimanta Sankaradeva's teaching is that a selfless, motiveless devotee perseveres in his love of God, not as a task which shall lead him after death to heaven as its reward, but as a supremely worthwhile exercise, as the highest human ideal in itself that man can pursue on this earth.

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