

Perils of Imperfect Devotion

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There are different varieties of devotion that we see in our life. Elaborate *yajñas* are performed by people for obtaining specific benefits. One may want to amass wealth in great measure and therefore that person may perform a “Kubera – Lakshmi” homa as advised by an expert. Some other may want success in business, more profits etc. He/she will be asked to worship a certain God and perhaps offer Pooja in a particular temple every Friday for a certain number of weeks. Somebody wants a transfer or a promotion and therefore would be asked to recite *Āditya Hṛdayam* and worship the Sun God for say 41 days. There are several celestial Gods and endless ways to worship these Gods to obtain the desired benefits.

Whom to worship in the name of devotion?

A genuine and a truly evolving Bhakta will be at the cross roads looking at these varieties of worships that he/she sees around. The most important question that such a Bhakta will face is, what is the right thing to do in the name of devotion? To which God should we channelize our devotion? For a bhakta on the right trajectory of bhakti, this question gets compounded by another one pertaining to what we should ask for in the prayer. Should we ask for amassing wealth, transfer and promotions etc.? Because if the things to ask for belong to the above list, then two complications arise.

Firstly, depending on what we want, the God to be approached changes from time to time. Therefore, God and devotion in some ways will become the flavor of the season. This does not appeal to a true bhakta. Secondly, such a bhakta would have more or less come to a conclusion that this list has items which are impermanent and perishable. In fact in the *Kaṭhapaniṣad*, Yama tried hard to bless the young boy *Naciketas* with such material riches and send him home. The boy simply dismissed all these offers saying these are “perishables”. Why to ask for perishables is a logical outcome of this thinking.

In order to clarify these issues Shri Krishna has devoted 3 – 4 *ślokas* in chapter 7 of the *Gītā*. We shall look at two of them.

As you ask, so you get

Shri Krishna acknowledges first that each individual is conditioned (*niyatāḥ*) by his/her own (*svayā*) mental make-up constituted by the *Prakṛti* and *guṇas* (*prakṛtyā*). This drives their own desires (*kāmaistaitaiḥ*) and deludes them and takes them away from true knowledge (*hṛta-jñānāḥ*). Guided by this frame of mind, they worship (*prapadyante*) other celestial Gods (*anya-devatāḥ*) in the manner laid out (*niyamam-āsthāya*) to worship such Gods (*taṃ taṃ*) for obtaining the desired results. Although not explicitly stated here, by the choice of the phrase “other Gods”, it is implied instead of the Supreme Brahman, the all-powerful and primordial source of everything including the celestial Gods.

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कामैस्तैस्तैर्हृतज्ञानाः प्रपद्यन्तेऽन्यदेवताः ।

तं तं नियममास्थाय प्रकृत्या नियताः स्वया ॥ 7.20

*kāmais-taistair-hṛta-jñānāḥ prapadyante'nya-devatāḥ,
taṁ taṁ niyamam-āsthāya prakṛtyā niyatāḥ svayā.*

There is a natural question that comes to our mind. What is the difference between offering our bhakti to a celestial God vis-à-vis the Supreme Brahman? The CEO of a company administers the organisation with the help of numerous officers. While these officers have power and entitlements to fulfil requests it is subjected to certain limits. In the same way, the *devatās* (celestial Gods) are all minor officers in Supreme Brahman's government. They cannot grant anyone liberation from the bondage of Maya and the infinite cycle of birth and death that we all go through. Shri Krishna clarifies this aspect through another *śloka*.

Those who worship with various means (*deva-yajāḥ*) the celestial Gods (*devān*) will indeed reach them (*yānti*) and obtain the desired result. On the other hand, those who worship Me, the Supreme Brahman (*madbhaktāḥ*), they indeed reach me (*yānti mām*) and obtain the fruits of that (which is ultimate liberation). For such people (*teṣāṁ*), with inferior understanding and incomplete knowledge (*alpa-medhasām*), the fruits so obtained (*tad phalaṁ tu*) from celestial Gods becomes (*bhavaty*) finite and perishable in nature (*antavat*).

अन्तवत्तु फलं तेषां तद्भवत्यल्पमेधसाम् ।

देवान्देवयजो यान्ति मद्भक्ता यान्ति मामपि ॥ 7.23

*antavat-tu phalaṁ teṣāṁ tad-bhavaty-alpa-medhasām,
devān-devayajo yānti madbhaktā yānti māmapi.*

The major implication of these two *ślokas* are that one indeed has the choice to worship lesser forms of God or the Supreme Brahman. A true bhakti to any of these will indeed yield the results. However, the devotion towards the celestial Gods is imperfect as the results are perishable in nature. It is not prudent to choose a path that leads to perishable results. It is best illustrated with a parable of a king and the forest dweller.

King's gift to a Forest Dweller

The king of a vast empire went for hunting in the forest. In his enthusiasm of hunting he entered into the deep pockets of the forest. The king was indeed lost in the jungle, not knowing how to return back to the capital city. A forest dweller came to his rescue and eventually led him out of the forest. The king was extremely pleased by the act of the forest dweller and revealed to him that he was indeed the king of the country. He asked him to come to his court the next day so that he can be suitably rewarded for his act of saving the king.

The forest dweller promptly appeared in front of the king in his court the next day as instructed. The king was happy to see him and profusely thanked him for his act the

previous day. Finally, he asked him what he would like to receive from the king as gift. The forest dweller thought for a while and finally asked for some vegetables so that he can have a good dinner that night. The king granted him his wish, but was generous enough to gift him vegetables for two days of cooking. The forest dweller was elated that his dinner problem for that evening was solved, not knowing he could have asked for more lasting things. This story reminds us two important facts of our life. First, we should be able to ask for favours from a very powerful person. Secondly and more importantly, irrespective of the capability of the giver, what one receives is conditioned by the capability of the person asking.

In the matter of devotion the rule cannot be any different. Whom do we ask and what we ask is a function of what our frame of mind is. To be blessed with the right approach to this aspect of devotion may be the first step of a true Bhakta.