

# Bhakti: A path for realizing our Ultimate Goal in Life<sup>1</sup>

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What is our goal in life? This is a question that is being asked wherever you go. In schools the young students are asked to think about this question so that they get the right focus in life. Parents at home also encourage their children to think about this aspect. Career counseling centres are busy training working professionals and graduates on this. If we do a quick survey of a cross-section of people in our country cutting across regions, age, gender etc. we will get to know the answers to this question. What do you expect the answer to be? The specific answers of course may vary from person to person. Some may say I want to become a doctor or an engineer. Some others may say the goal is to have a high paying job, become an entrepreneur, a famous artist or a sports person, own a house in the prime locality of the city, buy a farm house, a car etc. All these answers revolve around a common theme pertaining to making oneself materially rich and secure so that we can lead a comfortable life.

## Our Ultimate Goal in Life as per śrīti

If we read Ancient Indian wisdom, this has been a central question that our ancestors have also addressed. However, the commonality ends here. Surprisingly our ancestors found a different answer to this question. No matter what literature we read, the śrītis (consisting mainly of *Jñāna Khānda* of Vedas and the Upanishads), the *smṛtis*, the *itihāsas* (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and various *Purāṇas*, we get an understanding that the ultimate goal of everybody's life is to obtain eternal bliss through eternal freedom from the clutches of birth and death.

This has been articulated in several ways. आत्म साक्षात्कारः (*ātma sākṣātkāraḥ*) is a term that denotes how we realize the self within. *Bhagavān* Ramana *Mahaṛṣi* put this in simple terms by encouraging us to find a lasting answer to the question "Who am I?" Another way to articulate this is जीव — जगत् — ईश्वर ऐक्य अनुभूतिः (*jīva – jagat – īśvara aikya anubhūti*), where every individual realizes the oneness of the God and His manifold manifestations. *ādi śankarācārya* propounded the grand *advaita* Philosophy by which this idea was explained in great detail with the precision of a logician and a world class psychologist.

The question in front of us is what is our real goal in life? If we accept the wisdom of the ancestors, then it creates a lot of confusion in our minds. Does that mean that students stop studying for the exams and instead pursue the "Who am I question? Or working executives stop

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going to the offices. In fact many young and middle aged people who seem to claim to be getting into the spiritual path exhibit this kind of behavior. This creates anxieties and tension in the minds of their parents, spouse, children and other well-wishers. Some of them also drift away from their chosen path and land in bigger troubles. In general the question one gets is “by pursuing the line of thinking of the ancestral wisdom should we become dis-interested in the normal pursuits of our life?”

On the other hand, if we ignore the ancestral wisdom, then the path seems to be clear. Earn good salary, have a good job, buy a house, car etc. and earn a respectful position in the society and be happy. A number of people in the society seem to find this a fairly convincing, clear path. On a day-to-day basis parents, elders and teachers seem to be advising their wards in this fashion only. Therefore, there seems to be a tendency to ignore the voice of the rishis of yore. Before we resolve this conflict it is pointless to discuss further on the topic of the goal of our life.

### **Developing clarity on our ultimate goal in life**

The Indian society for time immemorial is governed by the prescriptions contained in the *śṛti*. That is why our *ācāryas* time and again mention that *śṛti* alone is *pramāṇa* for us. Therefore, the prescriptions of the *śṛti* ought to be right. If we have a clinching faith in this idea, then we need to now reconcile the apparent conflict in our goal of life. Let us take an example to resolve this confusion.

Suppose one young boy who is an athlete has set a goal in his life to win an Olympic gold medal. As the boy sets in this journey, he will subject himself to rigorous physical exercises, sporting routines etc. For example if he is a sprinter, then there will be continuous practice sessions and daily running routines. Does that mean he stops eating (since eating has nothing directly to do with his winning the medal it is not a bad question to ask in the first place!)? However, this very question will be dismissed as insane. On the other hand, we will argue that he will have special menus, eating practices and even life style changes. All these will be done with the objective of helping him win the gold medal. In other words, while winning the gold medal is the super-ordinate goal, it will have a number of sub-goals and each one of them will be in such a way that it will not be in conflict with the super-ordinate goal. If the boy develops clarity of these multiple goals and their relative importance and relationship to one another and has the necessary training he may end up with a greater propensity to win the gold medal.

Let us now return to the prescriptions of *śṛti*. Self-liberation is the super-ordinate goal in everyone’s life, just like winning the Olympic gold. However, it does not mean there are no sub-goals in this journey. Studying well and passing examination with flying colours, securing a good job, acquiring some personal assets for comfortable living and securing the life in reasonable

ways are all sub-goals to this super-ordinate goal. There are two important points we must remember about the relationship between the ultimate goal and the sub-goals. First of all, the sub-goals cannot be in conflict with the super-ordinate goals. For example, if a certain eating habit will hinder the process of achieving the Olympic gold, then the aspirant must abstain from it immediately. Similarly, if some of our materialistic pursuits threaten our journey towards self-realization and liberation then it is not worth pursuing them.

Secondly, a sub-goal cannot be the surrogate (sole replacement and representative) of the super-ordinate goal. In the case of Olympic Gold medal, the goal of succeeding in diligently following food habit is not equal to the goal of winning the gold medal. Similarly, merely pursuing a goal of materialistic accomplishments cannot be the same as the ultimate goal of self-realization that the *śṛti* enjoins.

Once we develop this clarity, all the apparent confusions melt away and we will be able to pursue various activities in our life with a guided vision and purpose. Developing a spiritual bent of mind does not necessarily mean abandoning our worldly activities. In fact this is the central thread of argument that one can see in *bhagavad gītā*. In fact the questions raised by Arjuna in the opening verse of Chapters 3, 5 and 18 and the reply provided by Lord Krishna amply clarify this aspect pertaining to leading an active spiritual life.

The question that still lingers in our mind is “What are the ways by which we can accomplish the ultimate goal of life even when we are an active participant in this world?” We shall address this question in some detail.

## **Two paths for Self-realization**

We have tremendous amount of wisdom and experience of great seers, rishis, saints and religious leaders to guide us in this journey. These are preserved, explained and retold in many ways in the *śṛti*, *smṛtis*, *purāṇās* and even other forms such as music. For example, Thyagarajar’s kritis and Purandara Dasa’s *devarnāmās* can educate us vividly on this. Broadly, two paths are laid out. One is the path of knowledge (ज्ञान or विचार मार्गः - *jñāna or vicāra mārgaḥ*) and the other the path of devotion (भक्ति मार्गः — *bhakti mārgaḥ*).

The path of knowledge is one which requires constant quest for the ultimate truth with a spirit of inquiry. It demands a mind completely free from the thought of worldly entities, forms, names and attributes and refocusing them entirely into this inquiry process. Bhagavan Ramana *mahaṛṣi* and Ramakrishna Paramahansa were living examples of this path of Self-realization. In chapter 12 of Bhagavad Gita (*bhakti yoga*) when Arjuna requested Lord Krishna to prescribe a path for self-realization, Lord Krishna said that the path of knowledge is likely to be very

demanding for those who are worldly and bodily conscious. According to Him the path of knowledge is difficult as it is beyond names and forms that we are normally used to.

क्लेशोऽधिकतरस्तेषां अव्यक्तासक्तचेतसाम् ।

अव्यक्ता हि गतिर्दुःखं देहविद्भिरवाप्यते ॥ 12.5

*kleśo adhikataras-teṣam avyaktāsakta-cetasām  
avyaktā hi gatir-duḥkham dehavadbhiravāpyate*

On the other hand, Lord Krishna prescribed the path of devotion to common people like us. In the path of knowledge, self-realization is achieved first by realizing the knowledge and then experiencing the oneness through a process of merging and self-surrender. In contrast, in the path of devotion self-surrender precedes the realization of knowledge.

### ***bhakti*: The Path of Devotion**

The path of *bhakti* is a common theme in all the major *purāṇās*. Of these, *śrīmad bhāgavatam* is popular and it is a grand treatise on *bhakti* that extols the great virtues of a *bhāgavata*. Many of us have neither the time nor the background to go through these *purāṇās* and understand various aspects of *bhakti*. However, *śivānandalahari* of *ādi śankarācārya* and *mukundamāla* of Kulasekhara Alwar are two easy to access, simple and yet wonderful work on *bhakti*. The ideas contained in this are easy to understand, contemplate on and practice in our daily life.

*śivānandalahari* is a collection of 100 verses in which *ādi śankarācārya* brings out multiple perspectives of *bhakti*. In the 61<sup>st</sup> verse he has provided a wonderful definition for *bhakti* using five examples. In a cluster of Ankola trees, the seeds of the respective Ankola tree will travel towards it and get attached to the trunk of the tree. This is the first example he gives to define *bhakti*. The next example is the attraction of the iron piece by a magnetic needle. He further follows this with another example of the relationship between the wife and the husband. The fourth example is that of the dependence of a creeper on a tree. Finally he likens *bhakti* to that of the river's continuous journey to pour itself into the Ocean thereby losing its name and form.

अङ्गोलं निजबीजसन्ततिरयस्कान्तोपलं सूचिका  
साध्वी नैजविभुं लता क्षितिरुहं सिन्धुः सरिद्वल्लभम् ।  
प्राप्नोतीह यथा तथा पशुपतेः पादारविन्दद्वयं  
चेतोवृत्तिरुपेत्य तिष्ठति सदा सा भक्तिरित्युच्यते ॥ 61

*ankolam nijabīja santatiḥ ayaskaanto palam sūcikā  
sādhvī najjavibhum latā kṣitiruham sindhuḥ saridvallabham  
prāpnoti iha yathā tathā paśupateḥ pādāravinda-dvayam  
cetovṛttirupetya tiṣṭhati sadā sā bhaktiḥ itucyate*

These five examples relate to five stages in *bhakti*. In the first stage, the example point to the effort required on the part of the Bhakta (पुरुष प्रयत्नः - *puruṣa prayatnaḥ*). This is indicated by the fact that the seeds have to move towards the tree and not vice versa. Once a Bhakta makes genuine efforts, the Almighty showers its blessings on the *bhakta*. Therefore for a step a *bhakta* takes, God will come closer to the *bhakta*. This is evident from the second example. Either the magnetic needle or the iron piece can move to provide the force of attraction. This signifies the threshold for melting of the Ego of the individual. The third stage of Bhakti is one of melting of the individuality and a desire to discover the oneness (परस्पर भावः — *paraspara bhāvaḥ*). This is indicated with the example of a husband – wife relationship. A true husband – wife relationship is one of melting of the ego and the individuality and discovering the oneness of purpose with which they walk through the corridors of life. Only such a relationship can result in the *gruhasta* and his wife leading a *dharmic* life and fulfilling both materialistic demands of life and spiritual aspects.

In the fourth stage of *bhakti*, the relationship becomes much deeper and it takes the *bhakta* to a stage of greater inseparable dependence on God (शरणागतिः - *śaraṇāgatiḥ*). This is depicted by the example of creeper and the tree. The existence of a creeper independent of a support is simply not possible. Once a *bhakta* reaches this stage, he/she develops a state of restlessness to become one with the God. This is the final stage of *bhakti*, which is indicated by the example of the river and the ocean. It appears as though ever since its origin in a far off mountain range, the river runs ceaselessly until it merges into the ocean (ऐक्यता *aikyatā*). It is no wonder that the ocean enters into the land nearly up to 10 kilometers to receive the river (known as back waters). Such is the power of *bhakti*. *ādi śankarācārya* says that when a *bhakta* reaches the final stages of *bhakti*, his mind is fixed on the lotus feet of Lord Shiva on a 24X7 basis.

In *śrīmad bhāgavatam* three types of *bhakti* have been mentioned. The initial stage of our journey is characterized as *prākṛta bhakti*. The examples of Ankola seeds and the magnetic needle are examples pertaining to this category. The second stage of Bhakti is *madhyama bhakti*. The examples of the wife – husband relationship and the dependence of the creeper on

the tree belong to this category. The third stage is *uttama bhakti*, characterized by the example of the river and the ocean.

## **Bhakti transforms our life into a happy one**

It is abundantly clear from the above examples that the culmination of *bhakti* is a state of mind in which there is total surrender to the Almighty. Every action a *bhakta* engages in will happen in the context of the God which is the focal point for devotion. As we develop a deep sense of devotion, we will also develop *śraddha* on God. Lord Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita that for those who have unflinching devotion to Me, I will take care of their *yoga* and *kṣema*. A *bhakta* who has also developed *śraddha* will understand this pronouncement of Lord Krishna as a grand safety net laid to protect him when he dives into the world of activity. Therefore he/she will engage in worldly activities without fear or apprehensions. The *bhakta* will consider his/her participation in worldly affairs as offerings to the God. Once we reach this stage, we will view all the unfolding events and outcomes in our life as *bhagavad prasāda*.

This will clarify our understanding that we are instruments in the hands of the Almighty. We will begin to see our role as a player in the divine cosmic play that is being unfolded every moment in our life. Rather than worrying about the outcome of the cosmic play we will focus on the play itself. This will have a telling effect on our mind as it will turn to be a bit self-introspecting. The vibrations of the mind will slow down and will help us calm down the mind. Over time, as we travel in the path of devotion the distractions of the mind will come down. We will also develop a broader and positive perspective of life. Consequently, the relationships with people and entities around us will improve.

With such a frame of mind we will develop an unshaking faith in the large principle of divinity. Many of our worries will disappear and there is no scope to get agitated by ups and downs of life. All our materialistic pursuits (which were identified as the sub-goals) will be tension free and in a larger perspective of things. Such an approach will eventually catalyze our journey in self-realization.

No wonder our ancestors were not only spiritual to the core but were also privy to some of the exciting knowledge that was created for the benefit of the mankind. Let us rediscover the path of the ancestors once again. In this process, we will not only rediscover the glory but also the treasure hidden in each of us.