

How does “true” Bhakti Manifest?

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How do we treat “God” in our homes? By this I mean on a festival day what do we do? One of the things that we all may have noticed these days is that doing a pooja or observing a religious custom (such as lighting lamps, preparing offerings to the Lord etc. during some festive occasions) are almost given the go by. When it comes to doing a Saraswathy pooja or a Ganesh Chaturthi pooja, we make it elegantly simple and brief. The reasons are not far-fetched. Many a times we are on travel, on work etc. and therefore justifiably are not even in a position to observe these practices. We live in an era of handheld smart devices and we have scores of SMSs, twitter and whatsapp messages to wade through, leaving with us very little time to attend to these activities.

If we ask, “Are you not feeling uncomfortable with ignoring these aspects?”, the answer invariably is, “No, after all everything is in our minds. True devotion need not necessarily mean elaborate mantras and rituals. God is above all these and does not ask for these things”. Such an attitude is often understood as “spiritual” and “high thinking” by many. Before we take up this issue for some more analysis, let us look at another one which we are very much used to.

Treating the CEO in our Office and Home

When the CEO of a multinational company visits one of the branch offices it is amazing to see the efforts put in connection with this visit. The planning starts several months ahead, and the entire organization gets involved right from the top to the janitorial worker and the gate keeper. The programme is worked out in great (and finer) detail as to how to receive the boss, who will stand, where at the gate, who will open the car doors, who will hand over the bouquet etc.

The other aspect is that the entire premises is cleaned up and white washed and new furniture added to the building. The menu for lunch is carefully planned and the best available caterer is contacted for supply of the food. When the CEO leaves, he/she is garlanded, robed with an artistic shawl and a special artefact given as memento. If the VIP’s family accompanies him/her, they are also treated in the same manner. All this fanfare will perhaps be for a three-hour visit. We see similar preparations when the CEO, for example pays a visit to one of the employee’s home.

If we analyse the above episodes we will notice that the theme of the entire programme is to show love and respect to the visitors and make the VIP happy so that good things will happen to everybody in the organization in the future. Let us shift the focus now to matters of divinity. What is truly intriguing is the difference in the approach between our treating the CEO and God. All reasons mentioned with respect to God, such as non-availability of time does not hold water when it comes to attending to the CEO.

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A person who has knowledge of *Gītā*, also derives strength from a *śloka* in chapter 9 to justify the method adopted to handle Godly activities such as pooja. We shall first see the *śloka* before making a deeper understanding of the message conveyed by Shri Krishna.

Treating the God in our homes

When a person (*yo*) with great effort (*prayatātmanah*) and true devotion (*bhaktyā*), offers (*prayacchati*) to me (*me*) some leaves (*patraṃ*) or flowers (*puṣpaṃ*) or fruits (*phalaṃ*) or even in the extreme case merely water (*toyam*) as abhisheka without any of the others as *naivedyam*, I indeed accept and partake (*aśnāmi*) them (*tadahaṃ*) for it was offered with true devotion (*bhaktyupahṛtam*).

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति ।

तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्रामि प्रयतात्मनः ॥ 9.26

*patraṃ puṣpaṃ phalaṃ toyam yo me bhaktyā prayacchati
tadahaṃ bhaktyupahṛtam-aśnāmi prayatātmanah*

What does this *śloka* indeed convey? For almost all of us this *śloka* tells us that the most important raw material in praying to God (say during festive occasions) is “bhakti”. Once we pass this acid test, it does not really matter what we offered in material terms. It can be even merely water as indicated above. This *śloka* indeed is the savior for the modern people and the game changer. Arguably a knowledge of this *śloka* removes all our guilt in doing half baked poojas or even not doing any pooja etc. After all bhakti is in “our minds” not in these material objects and elaborate rituals.

What type of a devotee Shri Krishna had in his mind when he narrated the above *śloka*? To clarify this the next *śloka* follows. Krishna says, whatever you do (*yatkarōṣi*), whatever you partake (*yadaśnāsi*), whatever you offer (*yajjuhoṣi*), whatever you give (*dadāsi yat*) and whatever austerity and tapas you do (*yat-tapasyasi*) let that all (*tat*) be done (*kuruṣva*) with a purity of mind and a sense of surrender as a divine offering unto me (*madarpaṇam*).

यत्करोषि यदश्रासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।

यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥ 9.27

*yatkarōṣi yadaśnāsi yajjuhoṣi dadāsi yat
yat-tapasyasi kaunteya tat-kuruṣva madarpaṇam*

The devotee as mentioned in the above *śloka* is one deeply rooted in the thought of the Lord all the time. Such a devotee will have enormous respect for the Lord and will see his/her approach towards treating the Lord as a sense of duty, a great blessing and an opportunity. If this is the case, the question will be. “How will he/she approach an activity such as pooja or making an offering to the God”? Will the devotee take the easy route and offer merely some water? Will the devotee come to the conclusion that “God is great, He needs nothing from us”? Therefore, instead of rituals, mantras, and flowers etc., just carry the thought in our minds. Or will the devotee take enormous care and perform elaborate

preparations joyfully to receive the God in his/her home and do what we seem to be doing in the case of a CEO visit.

Bhakti – A Long Term Approach in Life

If Krishna indeed meant a true devotee of this caliber then why is this mention of a gradation of offerings up to merely some water as abhisheka? Under normal and conducive situations, a true devotee will indeed make the offerings and pooja as elaborate, detailed and meaningful as possible. However, if there were adverse conditions, unconducive situations etc. a true devotee will feel very sad that he/she is unable to pray to the Lord in the manner he/she is used to. To absolve the true devotee of this sense of guilt or helplessness Shri Krishna provided these alternatives and assured that such offerings are as valuable as what the devotee would have done under normal conditions and the Lord will partake these offerings in the same manner.

In other words, the flower, leaves, water etc. are the last resort when nothing other than this is genuinely possible. Unfortunately, in our evolving practices these have become the norm and first and the only option to be adopted citing reasons of work pressure, travel etc. To gain clarity on this aspect it is important for us to ask, “If the visiting CEO is a very simple person, not really expecting anything, will we run down our preparations to receive him and treat him in a simpleton way”? The answer to this question is “no”, 100% of the occasions. Then why are we having double standards?

The only possible explanation that we can provide is the lack of conviction. An average devotee feels that the CEO has more potential to reward material riches and happiness to him/her, while the Lord does not. We have unwittingly chosen to evaluate the worth of bhakti by assessing what we get tangibly “here and now” and ignoring the enormous benefit and goodness that we are likely to get later in this *janma* and through several *janmas* to follow. In fact a right approach to bhakti and a reverential attitude towards Godly matters in itself will shape our destiny and provide the right trajectory towards future *janmas* leading us to the ultimate goal of liberation in a shorter time.

These two *ślokas* have, in a subtle manner, brought out the meaning of true *bhakti*, the attitude of a real *bhakta* and the importance of it in our journey of self-evolution. The type of devotee that Shri Krishna is mentioning is one with two governing principles in life:

- A sense of total and unconditional surrender (*śaraṇagata buddhi*) to the Lord and
- An unshakeable belief that every turn of events and outcomes that the devotee faces in life is nothing but the *prasāda* of the Lord (*prasāda buddhi*), which the devotee will gladly accept with folded hands.

If we are able to develop this deep conviction we would have travelled a long way in our journey of self-evolution. Therefore, let this be the theme of our prayers to the Lord and very soon our prayers will be answered.