

NINE FORMS OF DEVOTION



Nine Forms of Devotion



This book is dedicated at
The Lotus Feet of
Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

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PREFACE

This book is a humble offering at the Lotus Feet of our beloved Swami, from the Sri Sathya Sai Organisation of Hong Kong.

The nine steps of devotion was taken up for study by some devotees and later offered to all in the form of short talks after bhajans in the Sai Centre. The presentations were spread over ten weeks. The presenters felt immensely blessed and grateful to Swami for the opportunity to study and reflect upon very inspiring thoughts, which have filled our barren hearts with love. We benefited immensely and have decided to share this divine treasure with the whole Sai family.

Writing and editing the articles revealed very vividly that when one works for the Lord He empowers the sadhaka. He gives the ideas, He gives the opportunity to be a part of His Divine Mission, He gives the energy to complete the task, He gives the inspiration and ability required, He gives the time and space that one needs and He alone gives the devotion that fills one with sweetness.

It is actually Swami Himself who does His own work. We unwisely think that we are the doers. In fact, we are only actors in His divine drama, playing the roles He has assigned to us.

As we place this booklet at His Lotus Feet, we pray that Swami ever keeps us all close to Him, ever devoted to Him.

We cannot reach God with our puny little effort. Our hands cannot reach Him. But His Hands can reach us always. May the Lord take us into Him. May He grant us the sweetness of Ananya Bhakti.

Sri Sathya Sai Organisation

FOREWORD

This book is a distillation of extensive writings on the various forms of devotion on the Path of Bhakthi. In the Bhakthi Path the focus is on a God with Form. The bhaktha learns to forge a living link with his chosen Deity through his devotional practices. This living connection is between the individual consciousness of the devotee and the Divine Consciousness of the Deity. This book describes the nine forms of devotion – each an individual and valid form by itself even though devotees often combine them and express their devotion through several forms of devotion at the same time. The goal of each of these forms of devotion is to develop a level of intensity that will establish a living and moment by moment contact between the individual and the Deity so that the devotee lives constantly in the Divine Presence.

The main challenge for most devotees is that they have difficulty in establishing and sustaining intense love for their Deity, particularly in face of everyday and distracting urgent events of their life. Many people are struggling for a living and are consumed by their survival needs. Whatever leisure they have is spent in recreation and watching television and recovering from the exertions of their job and family commitments. When the mind is so crowded with worldly thoughts there is little space and hence little motivation to cultivate devotion to a Deity.

The nine forms of devotion enable devotees to incorporate their choicest form of devotion into their everyday life and so

cultivate an ever-deepening connection with their chosen Deity. While they may chose to set aside special time for their devotional practices for certain forms of devotion they do not need to do so for certain other forms. Thus the devotion becomes an ongoing activity that engages the devotee no matter what he is doing – his mind is constantly immersed in the loving thoughts of the Lord, in singing His glory, in chanting His name, in serving Him ever as he serves others, in considering himself a servant or a friend of the Lord, and in surrender to the Divine Will. Such a devotee does not experience disappointment, sadness, anxiety, grief and loss as others do. What a blessing!

In the pages of this book the readers will find valuable inspiration to strengthen their own devotion and faith. It is not exhaustive and perhaps that is a major advantage, as readers often get lost in the scholarly writings on the subject of Bhakthi.

May Bhagawan shower His Divine Love by intensifying the devotion of all the readers of this book.

Jai Sai Ram,
(Dr) Pal Dhall
Chairman International Zones 3, 4 and 5

INTRODUCTION

The Supreme Reality which is revealed in the Vedas has now incarnated as Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He is the ocean of Supreme Bliss. The scriptures say that even a drop of this bliss is enough to make all beings in all the worlds supremely happy. Infinite is the glory of Bhagawan which cannot be described by the instrument of language which is finite.

We will taste this nectar of bliss when the Lord softens our hearts with Bhakti (devotion). Bhagawan says “If you take one step towards me, I will take ten steps towards you.” That much is His love for us. To fill our hearts with love we must approach the source of love, which is the Lord Himself.

It is often said that birth as a human is a precious opportunity to improve oneself and to attain liberation. Of the many methods for achieving liberation, the path of Bhakti, or devotion, is the simplest and shortest way to experience the Divine. Bhakti lifts man to supreme heights. It is considered a ‘Yoga’. Yoga is that which unites us to the higher. In this case the bhakta gets united with God.

Bhakti Yoga (the Path of Bhakti) is the DIRECT path to God. “It is the easiest way to reach me”, says Swami.

What is Bhakti?

Swami says Bhagawan + Anurakti = Bhakti.. Bhagawan means ‘That in whom all powers are inherent’, namely omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience. And Anurakti means ‘intense

love'. Thus, Bhakti is nothing other than love for that all knowing, all powerful God.

We say God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent without actually understanding what these words imply. As we walk up these 9 steps of devotion, which is actually growing in devotion, we will begin to really understand God. When we say God is omniscient it implies He knows what is happening in our lives, He knows what is best for us, and He only sends this our way. It also means He does not need any reminders, and so if we are plead again and again it means we do not believe in His omniscience and our devotion is not complete.

When we say God is omnipotent, it implies He wills all that happens. He does everything. We are deluded when we think we are doing anything. Do we have the faith to feel His Hand everywhere and in everything? If we are still complaining about our lives that means we do not believe in His omnipotence.

When we say God is omnipresent it implies that He alone is. He is the whole world and He is each one of us. Do we feel Him at all, in and around us? If not then we must try to know Him in all entirety because only then we will be able to love Him completely. It is only then that devotion will be complete.

We only love those whom we know well. We do not love strangers as we have no feelings for them. But we have feelings for those whom we know well, e.g. our mothers. Hence, we must all put in the effort to know the Lord. This effort is the beginning of devotion (Shravanam).

Devotion comprises various feelings, emotions and thoughts

relating to God. It includes gratitude, reverence, adoration, love, thanksgiving, and even fear of sin. But ultimately all descriptions must fail for, in truth, devotion is only understood when it is experienced. The Lord is understood only by the true devotee (who is a rare being), and the devotee is understood only by the Lord. Devotion (Bhakti) is a Yoga, it unites the two. The two merge to become one.

Faith, Love, Feeling, Yearning and Surrender to the Lord are some of the key ingredients of devotion.

Faith

Faith is the cornerstone of devotion. When the Lord says He will take care, He certainly will and He does. But there is a fine print attached and this is where faith enters the picture. What is that fine print? Swami explains:

“Rely on the Lord and accept whatever is your lot. He is in you, with you. He knows best what to give and when to give. When there is a problem and when we pray to the Lord for its resolution, we usually have some expectations of the outcome. But supposing the outcome is not as per our desire, then our faith in God should not slacken; instead we should have full confidence that whatever has happened is actually for the best.”

That is what true faith is all about, namely, that the Lord will never do anything that is not good for us. We should have that unshakable faith and trust HIS WISDOM in everything that happens. Why? Because He never makes a mistake. We will always get what is our due. This is key to our devotion.

Love

Swami says “Love is God and God is Love”. What is this love which Swami keeps talking about ever so often? Can it be defined? NO, because it is beyond language. But by knowing what it is not, and by knowing how it manifests, it can be pointed out. He says:

Love knows no hatred
 Love is free from selfishness
 Love is ever distant from anger
 Love will never take; it knows only giving.

‘Love all’ is not a catchy slogan, it is rich in meaning. It implies that when one truly sees GOD, then one cannot help but ‘Love all’ as the Lord is all.

The life of the well-known Indian social worker Baba Amte is a good example of this. Baba Amte spent a good portion of his life working with lepers. One day a friend of Amte approached him and said: “You are such a good and kind man. You do so much to help the suffering. Why don’t you take just a few minutes off to go to the temple and pray? It would be the crowning glory” Amte smiled and said: “Why do I have to go to the temple to have the Darshan of the Lord when He comes here to my relief centre begging me for help?”

Feelings

An important element in devotion is feeling, or Bhava as it is known in Sanskrit. Clearly, one cannot love without feeling, which is why in relation to one’s prayer at an altar Swami says, “Don’t make God into a stone but make stone into God.” One must feel one is standing before God Himself and praying to

Him, not an idol of Him. The idol is there to remind you of the Ideal. He is in everything and hence can respond and manifest from anything.

Swami tells a story to explain that while worshipping the form of God one must put the right feeling into the worship:

Once there was a boy who was weak in his studies. Someone advised him to worship Lord Narayana. So the boy got hold of a picture of Narayana and started worshipping the picture for a whole year. But in spite of it, he failed. He was very disappointed and depressed. On one occasion a friend asked him what his problem was. When it was explained the friend said, “You have got it all wrong. The one who removes obstacles is Ganesha. You have been wasting your time. Get cracking and start at once to worship Ganesha; your troubles will all be over.”

Taking the advice to heart, the boy packed up the picture of Lord Narayana and stored it in a cupboard. He got hold of a picture of Ganesha and started worshipping it with much enthusiasm. But as ill luck would have it, he once again failed in the exam. Furious, he flung the picture of Ganesha into the cupboard (to keep company with Narayana) and sat broken-hearted, not knowing what to do.

Yet another friend came and said, “You fool, Saraswathi is the Goddess of Learning. Don’t you know that? Why have you been wasting your time praying to the wrong Gods? If you want results, you must go to the right counter. So try again.” The boy got a picture of Saraswathi and started his worship routine all over. One day while he was busy with the worship, some of the smoke from the incense he was burning found its way into the

cupboard through a narrow crack. Angrily the boy got up, flung open the door of the cupboard and shouted to the two pictures stored away there: “You two, what business have You to quietly divert the smoke from the incense towards Yourself? I prayed so hard and You both let me down badly. And now you want to grab what I am offering to someone else?”

At that instant, both Lord Narayana and Lord Ganesha appeared before the boy and said “We wanted to test whether you looked upon the picture as a mere picture or as God. We now know that you feel. Don’t worry! You have our blessings and you will pass the exam this time with flying colours.”

In the ultimate analysis, it is all about one’s attitude, which can be either positive or negative. For the one who treats the picture of the Lord as a mere work of art, it will appear only as a picture. But for the one who sees God in the picture, he will surely experience God for He is very much there.

Yearning

True devotion comes only when there is an intense yearning for God. The gopis yearned for Krishna, Radha yearned for Krishna, and Meera’s heart ached for Krishna.

In defining the term ‘yearning’ Swami says we must cry in the same way a calf cries for its mother who has left and gone off with the herd. We must cry as if our very life depends on Him. Only then He will reveal Himself.

Clearly, Bhakti is not a casual affair! Unless one has deep yearning and unless God becomes priority number one, one cannot expect to behold Him within.

Surrender

Devotion should eventually lead to complete surrender to the Lord. In knowledge (jnana yoga), that which is called Self-Realisation is the state of total surrender (sharanagati). It is the state when the ego, the individuality, gets completely sublimated.

By surrendering to the Lord we achieve true oneness with Him. Complete surrender means a devotee lays down his body, mind, heart and soul at the Lotus Feet of the Divine Beloved. In other words, the bhakta accepts whatever happens entirely as God's will, be it favourable or unfavourable from the worldly sense.

From the devotee's view point everything is favourable no matter what. When Meera-Bai was sent poison by the king, who was her brother-in-law, she happily drank it, taking it to be the Lord's will. The poison turned into nectar. That is the glory of complete surrender. Indeed, the limited capacity of a human being can be transformed into the unlimited capacity of God through surrender.

Swami says "The awesome power of God can be bound by the power of love. Therefore, in this path of devotion you can tie up the Lord Himself and keep Him locked in your heart."

How do we start on the path of Bhakti Yoga?

We can all love God in our own way. There is no one relationship with the Lord which is suitable for all devotees. Bhakti is a state of mind which gets more and more infused with the Lord. Understandably, therefore, the classification depends upon how one views the Lord and worships Him.

One person may assume the attitude of a child toward its parent. Another may see God as a companion or close friend. Any positive type of relationship or attitude enables us to draw closer to God. All forms of devotion are accepted by the Lord when expressed with Love.

What is declared in the Bhagavatha as Nava-Vidha Bhakti, the 9 paths of devotion, has been explained by Swami as the 9 steps leading higher and higher towards God. They are:

1. Shravanam – Listening to the glories of the Lord
2. Kirtanam – Singing His glories
3. Smaranam – Chanting His name and remembering Him
4. Padasevanam – Serving His lotus feet
5. Archanam – Worshipping Him
6. Vandanam – Paying obeisance to Him
7. Dasyam – Considering oneself His servant
8. Sakhyam – Considering Him as the best friend
9. Atmanivedanam – Total Surrender

The first step is Shravanam, hearing His glories. We have all come to Swami because we all first heard about Him, about the wonderful things He does for His

devotees. With each step the devotee's love for the Lord is growing until the devotee himself merges in that love (Atmanivedanam).

There are instances in history of great personalities, including sages and kings, who attained perfection by practising these 9 forms of devotion. The final entry into the Infinite, i.e. the final jump from manhood to Godhood, is possible only through Atmanivedanam. A seeker may predominantly come to practise a particular form of devotion but the other steps too are practised by him.

Meera Bai is well known for her kirtans, but she also came in the Lord's fold through Shravanam. Because of her love for the Lord she contemplated on Him and she served the community in whatever way possible. She worshipped Him, she paid obeisance to Him, developed a relationship with Him, surrendered and finally merged in Him. But throughout her life her devotion manifested in soul stirring kirtans, and that is why she is an exemplar of that form of devotion. And so are the other saints who are known for the other forms of devotion.

The *puranas* have described the lives of the great exemplars of the 9 forms of devotion. They are Parikshit for *Shravanam*, Narada for *Kirtanam*, Prahlada for *Smaranam*, Lakshmi for *Padsevanam*, Prithu for *Archanam*, Akrura for *Vandanam*, Hanuman for *Dasyam*, Arjuna for *Sakhyam*, and Bali for *Atmanivedanam*.

Let us all seek Swami's grace and blessings to reach our potential through these 9 forms of devotion.

ONE

SHRAVANAM



“Listen to the message of the Rishis who had the Vision of the Most Majestic Person, the Purushothama, the Foremost and the First, who dwells beyond the realms of Illusion and Delusion. O ye Human Beings!”

SHRAVANAM

ONE

The first step that a person takes to move towards God is SHRAVANAM. Shraavanam is listening to the divine glories of the Lord.

Divine love (devotion) is possible only when the Lord is understood as the source of happiness. When one is not sure of the very existence of the Lord, let alone He being the source of happiness, how can one think of loving Him? So, the first step towards Divine love is to understand what divinity is. The first effort in this direction is Sravanam.

Listening to the glories of the Lord includes anything pertaining to the Divine: His form, qualities, miracles, activities, and His spoken word. As we begin to appreciate the Lord by listening to His glories, we begin to sub-consciously develop love and reverence for Him. This is the beginning of the devotional process.

We have all come to Swami because we first heard about Him; someone told us or we overheard someone talking about Him or we read a book about Him. Listening is drawing one's attention, said Professor Kasturi, one of Swami's closest devotees. And then Swami Himself draws one's attention towards Him by announcing in various places that He has come. He drops His 'calling cards' everywhere.

The manifestation of vibhuti, haldi, kumkum, amrit, etc. from His pictures are His announcements, His 'calling cards' which draw attention to Him. Then there are the miracles of Him appearing in dreams or in meditation, calling seekers to Him. Absolute strangers, far away in some corner of the earth are being beckoned to Him. He is announcing His own arrival. What compassion of the Lord! So we come into His fold when we hear of Him—SHRAVANAM.

Listening to the glories of the Lord is, therefore, the first step in the nine steps of devotion. This also marks the beginning of our process of spiritual awakening. When we are engrossed in worldly life we can be compared to a sleeping person. Listening to the glories of the Lord is the alarm clock which wakes us up to begin our spiritual journey.

The following story highlights the importance of Shravanam:

Maharaja Pariksit was a very pious king but, unfortunately, because of his actions he was cursed by a brahman boy to die within seven days. Pariksit understood that within a week he would die and so he prepared himself. He gave up his kingdom, entrusting it to his son, he detached himself from the family, and he went to sit on the banks of the Ganges. Parikshit now

inquired from all the great sages present there: “What is my duty? I am going to die within seven days, what should I do? You are all learned sages, please tell me.”

Some said to practice yoga and others said to practice jnana, there were different opinions. But at that time Sukadeva Gosvami entered the forest. Since he was so learned, everyone agreed to follow his advice. Parikshit reverentially asked him “O great master, please teach me the way of obtaining freedom from this chain of birth and death.” On hearing this request Sukadeva replied, “If you want to be fearless in meeting your death next week, then you must immediately begin the process of listening to the glories of the Lord.” He then narrated the story of the Lord’s divine play in the universe. Parikshit attained liberation thereafter.

Such is the power of Shravanam. It quickly leads one higher and higher on to the ladder of devotion until one merges in the Lord.

From whom should we listen? We should listen to HIS glories from realised people like saints and sages who have experienced Divinity. We should listen to people who are true devotees of God, who live their lives in accordance with divine directions, and who are exemplary God men. When a pure devotee speaks, his words act upon the hearts of the audience.

Today, the compassionate Lord has made it easy for us to listen to divine glories by walking in our midst. First it is hearing about Him, then it is hearing from Him. Indeed, it is our extreme good fortune that the almighty Lord, Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, has come personally to direct us in our spiritual journey. Out of His compassion, the Lord has been guiding us through

His divine discourses for the past sixty years.

Parikshit attained liberation by listening for just seven days. We have to ask ourselves how far we have progressed after listening to Swami for all these years? If we have not benefited from His direct guidance thus far there must be a reason. Maybe we are not listening to Him properly.

What makes listening effective then? The following are some of the pre-requisites for effective listening.

ATTENTIVENESS

First and foremost, listening requires the person to have a child-like mind which is innocent, unbiased and unprejudiced while listening. Swami narrates this through a Telugu poem:

“If the brain is empty we can stuff it with any material, with any knowledge, with any wisdom. If the head is already pre-occupied and filled with worldly matters, what else I can tell you? You have come here with your stuffed head. Well, what is it that I can put in there?”

If we have to fill the mind with Swami’s thoughts and words then we must get rid of the existing worldly thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ present in our minds. If the mind is often wondering into the worldly lanes of selfish thinking, then listening will not be effective. There is a difference between hearing and listening. Listening requires the total attention of the mind and the desire to do what the beloved Lord wants us to do. You will notice that your listening skills improve as you grow in your devotion.

If we attend Swami's discourses with a focused mind we will leave the place with a clearer understanding. We should receive His message with a child-like innocence. If we do not understand what He says we should not reject it, instead we should pray to Him for greater understanding.

Listening requires attentiveness. The power of listening is God's gift to us. For listening to be effective, besides our ears, the mind and the heart must be involved. Swami narrates a story to highlight the involvement of the mind.

A teacher was teaching subtraction to his students in a math's class. One of the students was engrossed in a mouse finding its way into a ceiling crack. This student was watching the mouse disappear until only the tail was sticking out when the teacher interrupted the boy and asked what remains when one takes 5 out of 9, to which the boy replied "Only the tail remains, Sir."

YEARNING

Next, one has to listen with true yearning. When Parikshit realised his impending death, he yearned for an opportunity to liberate himself. That intense yearning helped him to listen with an attentive mind, which quickened his pace towards liberation. Parikshit was so focused that he covered the pace between Shravanam to Atmanivedanam in only 7 days. Parikshit indicated he was very fortunate to be listening to Sukadeva who was a highly enlightened master. Imagine how fortunate we are to be listening to Lord SAI directly. We should seize this opportunity to listen to Swami with full yearning. When we listen with genuine yearning we realise that the opportunity to listen to His glories is in itself a blessing.

Parikshit knew which day was his last one and so he worked towards it. But we do not know which day will be the last one for us. But if we take each day to be the last one, we will focus only on the important things and our minds too will get focused like Parikshit's and our shravanam be as effective.

FAITH

For listening to be effective one has to listen with child-like faith, taking every word of Swami to be nothing but the truth.

We tend to have complete faith in the medicine that our doctors prescribe. In some cases, we do not even check the qualifications of these doctors before we entrust our lives to them. When we are prepared to do this should we not have complete faith in the words of our Divine doctor, Sathya Sai, who has come to save us from life's miseries and show us the path to liberation?

PRACTISING

The process of Shravanam is not complete unless one makes an effort to put into practice what has been listened to, for devotion is to do that which pleases the Divine Beloved.

A person's hunger anyways will not be appeased just by listening to the word 'food', nor will a person's thirst be quenched by listening to the word 'water'. Likewise, one can only reap the reward of listening when one is determined to follow what has been said.

We all remember when Swami stopped giving us discourses for a brief period of time a few years ago. After the continued

pleading of his students, Swami broke His silence and resumed giving discourses. Swami later mentioned that there was no point in Him continuing to give these discourses as people were simply not prepared to listen and put His teachings into practice. As simple as that.

It is His grace that we are born when He walks in our midst. The least we can do is to take the first step of listening to His divine discourses attentively, with the intention of following what has been said.

Swami says: “Listen to all such things as will draw you towards God, then think it over in silence and make it a part of your consciousness, this is what makes Shravanam effective.”

How do we make it a part of our consciousness? By simply reflecting over His words in silence, which in turn helps our understanding go a little deeper, and by putting His teachings into practice and working towards our spiritual transformation.

In summary, when we listen to the glories of the Lord with child-like faith, with attentiveness, with an open mind, with sincere yearning, and we reflect on His words, we finally come to practice what has been heard from the Lord.

Then, and only then, the act of listening itself becomes worship of the Lord and the process of SHRAVANAM becomes effective and a form of devotion, leading us to liberation. The choice is ours.

The nature of our choice is illustrated in the following event in the life of Lord Jesus:

Jesus was traveling with his disciples and preaching to the people. He spoke in parables. While he narrated this parable, he was sitting in a ship with his disciples, and preaching to the people who were standing on the seashore. There is a well known parable which goes as thus:

“Behold!, a sower went forth to sow. When he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places where they had not much earth and forthwith they sprung up because they had no deepness of earth; when the sun was up, they were scorched and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprung up and choked them. But others fell into good grounds and brought forth fruit, some hundred-fold, some sixty-fold, some thirty-fold.”

The parable was explained by Jesus at the request of his disciple as follows: The seed is the word of GOD. Naturally, the farmer is a prophet who brings the word to the people. To some listeners of the prophet, his words are like the seeds that fall by the wayside. The words make no impact on them. The birds eat the seeds, which are equated to evil tendencies which remove the words from the hearts of the listeners.

Some listeners welcome the words but their interest in them is short-lived. Here the words are like the seeds sown on strong grounds. The seeds sprout but since the saplings cannot drive their roots deep, they wither in the hot sun. That is, the listeners believe in the words for sometime. But when there is temptation in worldly pleasures or persecution on account of their belief comes, they are not able to stand up.

The seeds sown among the thorns are the words heard by people

who are after worldly pleasures. Their craving for worldly pleasures chokes the seeds.

The seeds sown into good earth are the words heard by good spiritually inclined people. They keep the words in their hearts, ponder over them, live according to their teachings and become examples to many. The seeds become plants and bear fruit a hundred fold.

Each and every word of Swami is a Mahavaakya, i.e. a very dynamic statement with deep meaning. Swami's words will not be in vain. We are very fortunate to be listening and learning from the Lord Himself, Sri Sathya Sai.

May the Lord of the Universe, our Parthi Maha Raja, Sathya Sai, bless all with the mighty power of listening with intense yearning, faith, and the determination to practise all that has been listened to.

TWO

KIRTANAM



*“Devotional singing induces in you
a desire for experiencing the truth,
to glimpse the beauty that is God, to
taste the bliss that is the Self.”*



KIRTANAM

TWO

A university education, good looks, and financial wealth are not necessary for advancement in spiritual life. Rather, purity of heart and devotion to the Lord are necessary. Devotees with these qualities are satisfied by glorifying the name of the Lord, and such glorification is called Kirtanam. When the Lord enters your heart through your ears (Shravanam), devotion manifests as kirtanam. When you love someone, you cannot help but talk about the loved one.

God is the source of all love and to fill our hearts with the sweetness of love (devotion) we must naturally approach Him. Man's love for God loosens his worldly bonds and saves him from sorrow, it saves him from the cycle of birth and death. There is no difference between the holy name of the Lord and the Lord himself. As such, the holy name is as perfect as the Lord himself, in auspiciousness, purity and divinity.

Swami says “Chanting the name of the Lord must be considered as the highest form of sadhana. You can travel anywhere in the light of this name. In this age of Kali Yuga the easiest way to reach the Lord is this chanting of the Lord’s name. There is nothing more sacred than his name.”

Simply by chanting the holy name of the Lord one can advance perfectly in one’s spiritual life. In this Kali age, this is the simplest and most powerful route to success. Anyone can do this and even if one is physically unwell, has no material possessions, or is not advanced in his spiritual exercises, chanting and singing of the holy name is extremely beneficial.

Kirtanam also includes talking about His leelas or His spoken word. When the devotee hears about the Lord, His mercy, His compassion, His love for the devotees, His selflessness, he cannot help but move to the next step of devotion, which is KIRTANAM. The devotee then wants to tell everyone about it. Whoever comes to him will hear the divine name and its glory. Or the devotee seeks the company of other devotees with whom he can openly talk about his beloved Lord and His delightful activities. The devotee cannot contain the growing love for the Lord within himself and so wants to share it with others. In this way he immerses himself in the beauty of the Lord and His name by singing it constantly.

Combining one’s voice, tune and rhythm to the melody of the devotional song, the devotee immerses himself in the singing. By harmonising one’s feeling with devotion, the sacred words of the song become an outpouring of love for God. And when the Lord’s names are sung melodiously they appeal to the hearts of listeners as well.

Meera Bai expressed her devotion through singing. Meera was a princess and when she was young a saint by the name of Goswami visited the palace. During his visit he brought an idol of Lord Krishna which he worshipped. Meera was attracted to the idol and seeing her love for it the saint left it behind for her. From then on, her childhood centered on the idol, she played games with it, danced and performed puja for Krishna. She loved to listen to stories about his childhood and her love for the Lord grew.

When she was of age her family got her married to King Bhojraj, who loved her very much. She was a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law but after she finished her household chores she went back to her Krishna. Her devotion to the Lord was pure, simple and so complete that none of the hurdles she faced in life affected her. She used to sing all the time, making up the most beautiful and moving lyrics. Her devotion for the Lord was immense and she spent all her time remembering Him through singing, dancing and chanting His name.

Even though Meera-bai moved on in her devotion to reach Atmanivedanam, she did not stop the kirtans. That is why we can consider her to be an exemplar of this step of devotion. Sri Narada Muni is another great devotee who stands for kirtanam.

The benefits of singing devotional songs with love for the Lord are many. They include:

1. Singing calms the mind

Every man seeks joy and peace. However, Swami says that most do not know where to look and so they seek joy in personal relationships and material possessions, and they look for peace

in quiet spots. But joy and peace are actually within us. When we realise this and turn inward, with the grace of God, we will begin to experience heaven on earth.

The principal agent through which joy and peace are experienced is the mind. Our mind is a bundle of thoughts and depending on the quality of the thoughts we experience pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow, peace or agitation. Swami says that with bhajans one can train the mind and expand one's heart because bhajans encourage man to look within. In fact, Swami often concludes His discourses with the bhajan "Hari bhajana bina sukha shanti nahi" which means that without singing the glory of God, without being devoted to Him, one cannot experience joy and peace.

Devotional singing occupies a prominent role in almost every religious tradition as it has a very calming effect on the mind. When the mind is focusing on the Lord who is pure and unconditionally loving, it calms down. Therefore, one should train the mind to revel in the glory and majesty of God.

2. Purifies the mind and fosters virtues.

Today the mind of man has not only become agitated but also mean and wicked. Swami says: "In this Kali Age, the wicked have to be reformed and reconstructed through love and compassion. That is why this Avatar has come unarmed. He has come with the message of love. The only weapon which can transform the vile and the vicious is the name of the Lord, uttered with love. The name is redolent with divine glory. So when it is turned over in the mind, it transmutes it into an instrument for liberation from delusion."

Kirtanam purifies the instrument of speech, namely the tongue. Swami says “If the tongue is properly controlled all other sense organs will come in line by themselves.” A devotee who can achieve this Swami says will soon develop a pure and steady heart and feel the constant presence of the Lord.

Speech has a very powerful impact on the mind. It can perplex your mind. It can break your heart. It can even kill you, Swami says. It can also give life and encouragement and help you to reach your divine goal. With appropriate speech it is possible to transform the entire mind of an individual. Words can cause endless troubles and they can also give boundless joy. A devotee is one who fills himself with joy and then distributes that joy to all in his orbit. That joy is gained from singing His glories.

‘As we think so shall we become’, so the Lord tells us. When the mind dwells on Him, who is all auspiciousness and the embodiment of all values, gradually we will also acquire those same values. Hence, one must train the mind to dwell on the Lord more and more.

3. Purifies the atmosphere

The recitation of the names of the Lord will purify the atmosphere as a result of the sacred sound waves being transmitted into the atmosphere. The atmosphere that has been polluted by impure sound waves can be changed by the chanting of the divine name. There is no better purifying agent than this. Thus, everyone should sing the name of the Lord and His glories, and so purify the atmosphere and promote the well being of the nation and the whole world.

Thus, Kirtanam not only purifies the individual mind but the

entire atmosphere. People who are unable to serve God in any way, either because of old age or other limitations, can easily do this simple sadhana of singing or speaking His glories. In this way, Kirtanam is a form of seva.

4. Draws divine grace

Remembrance of God becomes constant and steady through Kirtanam. This speeds us on the path of winning the Lord's grace. Swami says: "The tongue is the post and bhajan is the rope, you can bring God near you and tie him up so that his grace becomes yours." In order to reach God through Kirtanam singing must be a felt experience. Devotion is the stamp which posts our loving thoughts to God.

When a song is sung without understanding and love for God it is just a mechanical performance. Swami says: "I accept your singing only when love is the key note."

While singing His glories one must do so with one-pointedness and enthusiasm. One must sing aloud without any reservation. When a man has fallen into a well and is unable to get out, does he mutter to himself or does he scream for help? The yearning to be saved from the cycle of birth and death should be expressed sincerely and loudly through singing.

Swami says: "Let your whole life be a spiritual song. Derive strength, comfort and joy by singing His glories in His presence. Let melody and harmony surge from your hearts and let all take delight in the love that you express through that song."

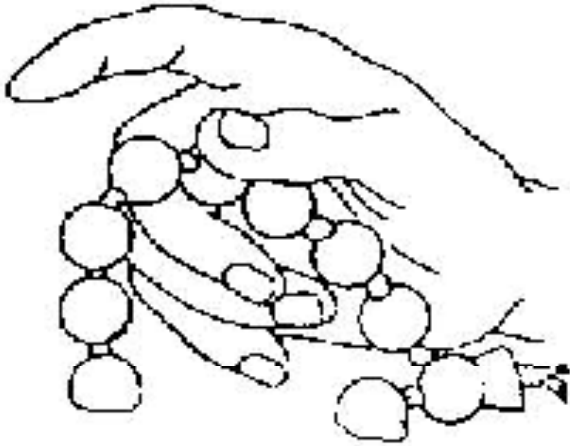
On this step of devotion the Lord Himself comes to his devotees so that their love may grow further. By singing His glories

with faith and feeling they can invoke His presence in their midst anywhere and at anytime. As our beloved Swami has proclaimed: “Where ever my glory is sung, I install myself there.”

As our devotion increases we will be able to live in His presence more and more until His presence alone remains. Such is the power of Kirtanam.

THREE

SMARANAM



*"The Lord becomes your companion,
your guide, your mentor. He yearns
for you as much as you yearn for Him.
He will be at your beck and call, if you
constantly take His Name."*

SMARANAM

THREE

Smaranam is the third step on the 9 fold path of devotion. It means “Remembering the Lord”. The first step is listening to the glories of the Lord, for that is how one comes to know the Lord. The second step is singing and glorifying His name, and the third step is remembering the Lord, His glories and His teachings.

How does one do that? Very often we are unable to retain what we hear. Previously, when I was asked about an inspiring talk I had just heard, I would often say “Oh! It was beautiful, very inspiring.” Not a word beyond that. My mind, however, was like a strainer, full of holes from which all new information seeped through. Unfortunately, this appears to be a problem for many. So how do we stop this from happening?

Swami says that what is heard is retained only if one

contemplates on it. Remembrance, contemplation, and reflection fills the holes in our mind. The more one does so the extra he remembers. It is only contemplation that makes Shraavanam (listening) complete.

King Parikshit heard the wonderful glories of the Lord from Sukdevji, and when the latter finished talking for the day the king put all his mental energies into the bliss of remembrance. It was his contemplation that immersed his being in the Lord, and helped him remember all that he had heard. It was his contemplation on the glories of the Lord which made his Shraavanam complete.

One may ask: Why should one remember the Lord? How should one remember the Lord? When should one remember the Lord?

There is an ancient story of Alladin and the genie. Once upon a time there was a young boy named Alladin. One day he was digging in his garden when he came across an object buried in the ground. When he took it out, he found an old lamp. It was covered in mud so he wiped it with a cloth. As he rubbed it, smoke came out of lamp and out of the smoke emerged a genie. The genie said to Alladin “Master, I was trapped under the ground in that lamp for hundreds of years and today you have set me free. To show my gratitude, I am willing to work as your servant forever. But I have one condition, you must always keep me busy with some work. If I am idle even for a moment, I will eat you up.”

Alladin was happy to get a life-long servant and so he agreed immediately. His first command to the genie was for a big mansion to live in. The genie snapped his fingers and the mansion was ready. Alladin was extremely surprised because

he thought a mansion would keep the genie occupied for at least two to three years. He quickly ordered the genie to build a beautiful garden around the mansion. Again, the giant snapped his fingers and a beautiful garden appeared around the mansion.

Now Alladin started to worry, he asked the genie for many more things and the genie produced all of them in a flash. Alladin was really worried for his life now as he was running out of things to ask for. Suddenly, an idea came to him. He asked the genie to build a tall tower. When the genie had done so, Alladin instructed him, “Keep climbing up and down this tower unless I ask you to do something else.” In this way Alladin was able to save his life and get the benefit of the genie’s miraculous abilities.

The genie in the story represents the mind. The mind is a very powerful tool and capable of fulfilling our needs and desires. However, like the genie, the mind is also dangerous and, if left uncontrolled, can destroy us. Such a mind is the devil’s workshop. Swami says “Mind is both the instrument of bondage and liberation.”

The tower in the story represents the Lord who the mind can dwell on when it is idle. In Hindu spiritual tradition, this ‘tower’ is dwelling on the Lord’s Name, His Form, His Leelas, or His Spoken Word. One might also use a *mantram*. Chanting a mantram is the same as remembering Him provided the mind concentrates on the mantram and understands what it stands for.

The word ‘mantram’ has two components: ‘Man’ means mind and ‘Tri’ means to cross. So, that which enables us to cross the ocean of the mind is a mantram. The mantram is the living symbol of the Lord. When we repeat the mantram,

we remind ourselves of the Supreme Reality that resides in our hearts. The more we chant the mantram the deeper it sinks into our consciousness. As it goes deeper, it strengthens our will, heals the old divisions that cause conflict and turmoil in our mind, and provides deep resources of strength, patience and love.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “The mantram becomes one’s staff of life and carries one through every ordeal. It is repeated not for the sake of repetition but for the sake of purification. Each repetition has a new meaning and carries you nearer and nearer to the Lord.”

One might ask how the mere repetition of God’s name brings us closer to Him? Words are very powerful. This can be illustrated with a brief story. A young man was visiting his girlfriend and for some reason they ended up having a big argument. The girl became very angry and told the young man that she did not want to see him again, and she pushed him out of the door.

The poor man was heartbroken. He stood waiting at the sidewalk, wondering what to do. Suddenly, he had an idea. He started calling her name, “Maria, Maria”. He shouted it louder and louder, and soon the whole block was echoing with “Maria, Maria, Maria.” Passers-by started gathering, the neighbours started coming out of their houses to see what was going on, and even the dogs started howling. Finally, Maria opened a window and told him, “All right, I’m coming down!” If ordinary words have such power, will the all loving Lord not come to us when we call out to Him?

There are thousands of devotees who have experienced Swami’s presence when they have called out to Him from the

depths of their hearts. Sincere remembrance of His Name, His Form, His glories, and His teachings draws His attention towards us, and brings His Grace into our lives. Swami has been waiting for us to return to Him for many years over countless lives lived away from Him. Now, when we call out to Him and show a desire to return back to Him, how can He, the all loving, contain Himself? He comes running to save His devotees from the sorrows of maya.

The little six year old devotee, Prahalad, is the most outstanding example of Smaranam. While Prahalad's father Hiranyakashyapu hated the Lord, Prahalad madly loved Him. He defied every rule made by his father, who was the most powerful and evil king.

Hiranyakashyapu had a boon from Brahmaji, the Creator, that no man or animal could kill him. He could neither die in the day nor night. He could not be killed inside or outside. He could not be killed by an astra (a weapon held in the hand) or shashtra (a weapon that can be thrown from a distance). He could die neither in the sky nor on earth. Having this boon he became invincible and, hence, arrogant, cruel and demanding. He ordered people in his kingdom to worship him and he destroyed all temples of the Lord. Those who worshipped the Lord were persecuted and tortured.

Prahalad learnt his lesson of devotion while he was still in his mother's womb from none other than the sage Narada. The sage saved the pregnant queen when she was kidnapped and gave shelter to her in his ashram. Living in the holy company of the sage and listening to the glories of the Lord from him, the unborn Prahalad absorbed all that he heard through his mother. Having heard from the very best of teachers, who is

an exemplar of Kirtanam, it is no surprise that such a great devotee was born.

Hiranyakashyapu was surprised and annoyed to hear little Prahalad talk about the Lord. Even talking about the Lord was considered a crime in his kingdom. Hiranyakashyapu tried to teach the boy his own views and preach his own godhood. But even at that tender age Prahalad was not confused or misled by anything he heard. Instead, he corrected his father even though this angered him.

Prahalad was repeatedly told not to worship or talk about the Lord. But he did not listen to that instruction of his teacher and father. Prahalad understood that even though one's elders should be honored and respected, if they ask one to do something grossly wrong, something against dharma, then the scriptures permit not acting on it.

Even though Prahalad was scolded, he listened to his heart and continued with his devotion. His father felt insulted and insecure with his son's ways. The whole world feared and obeyed him except his own son. Hiranyakashyapu was afraid of being laughed at, and that people would stop fearing him. Therefore, he decided to have him killed.

He gave orders that Prahalad be trampled under the feet of drunken elephants. Yet, Prahalad sat unperturbed remembering his Lord. He immersed himself in contemplation. And wonder of wonders! The elephants that came charging towards him menacingly calmed as they neared him, and they sat at his feet. That is how the Lord rescues His loved one. For such a dear one He breaks every rule of nature that He Himself has set.

Prahalad was given poison to drink but it turned into nectar. He was thrown down from the top of a mountain, but Prahalad did not let anything distract his remembrance. The Lord manifested at the bottom of the mountain to catch him. Prahalad was then made to sit in the fire with his aunt Holika, who had a boon that fire would not burn her. But lo and behold! Holika got burnt and Prahalad was unscathed.

The most powerful man on the earth was unable to kill his six year old son, who did not even resist. Hiranyakashyapu felt helpless and angry for he did not know what or who was protecting Prahalad. When Prahalad said the Lord who was protecting him and He was everywhere, the king, in a fit of anger and frustration, broke a pillar in his court room. From the debris emerged a most terrible form that no one had seen before. It seemed to be from another world for it as neither a man nor an animal. It was half man and half lion roaring menacingly.

The Lord assumed that terrible form to outsmart Hiranyakashyapu. By asking for the boon Hiranyakashyapu tried to outsmart the Lord, not realising that no one can do that. The Lord caught hold of him and dragged him to the threshold which was neither inside nor outside. He pulled him on his lap which was neither in the sky nor the earth. It was dusk at that time, which was neither day nor night. He used His nails, which was neither astra or shashtra, to kill him. Thus, He kept His word and protected His dear devotee who always remembered Him.

Thousands of devotees have experienced Swami's love and protection when they have called out to Him. Even those who have not known Him but called out to God have received His help. He says all names are His. Swami says "There is only

one God and He is omnipresent.”

In the Bhagawad Gita, Lord Krishna says, “Whoever at the end of his life gives up his body remembering Me alone, merges with me. Of this there is no doubt.” But it is not so easy to remember the Lord at the time of death unless we have done it all our lives.

We do not know when we will die. Death might creep up quietly and quickly. It might catch one unawares as it does not always give notice of its impending arrival. One must develop the habit of remembering Him all the time, even when we are safe. Swami says that what we do all our lives will come to us at our last moment too. If we have lived a life full of attachment to the world then that is what will come to mind at the last moment. If one has remembered the Lord in everything that has passed, the Lord will come to his mind. The choice is ours.

We must realise the power of thought and be careful what we think. Swami says “God if you think God you are, dust if you think dust you are.” Hence, we must spend our time thinking and reflecting on Bhagawan and His Leelas. We must spend time contemplating on His precious words.

When the mind dwells on His leelas and the things He does to protect and teach His devotees, the remembrance of His beauty fills the heart with sweetness. And when one contemplates on His words, all confusions and doubts are gone and greater understanding takes place. Without Smaranam one cannot grow. Smaranam melts all negativities in the mind and fills it with the beauty that is Sai.

Remembering the Lord’s leelas and repeating His Name is a

simple exercise! One does not need a special time, place or qualification to do it. Perhaps, we lack the faith that it can cure and save us from all difficulties. Swami says *“The constant recital of the name of the God – by any one of the million names by which He is identified is the best way of correcting and cleansing the mind of man.”*

This remembrance of the Lord will grow as one’s love for Him grows, for one does not need to remind oneself to think of a person one cares about. The mind automatically runs to that person whom one loves and cares about. The more one loves Him the more one will remember Him. And the more one remembers Him the more one will love Him.

May Swami grace us with the love and strength and closeness of Smaranam.

FOUR

PADASEVANAM



“Every seva done with sympathy and skill to any one in distress anywhere in this world is Sathya Sai Seva.”

PADASEVANAM

FOUR

Explaining the meaning of Padasevanam, Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba says: “Pada means feet. Seva means service. This is when you blend your practice of karma yoga with bhakti. In doing your duty and serving humanity, develop the bhava that you are serving and worshipping the Lord’s Feet.” But why do the Feet assume such importance? In a discourse, Swami explained that the head is the most important part of the body and that it why it is crowned. But even this head cannot go anywhere without the help of the feet and so the feet must be respected.

Goddess Lakshmi used to offer devotion to Lord Narayana by offering Padasevanam. She always massaged the Lotus Feet of Lord Narayana. However, even though she had the boon of being the Lord’s wife, it is said that even she was envious of the Tulsi leaves which were placed at Lord Narayana’s Feet, for the leaves remained there whereas even Goddess Lakshmi

had to go to answer the prayers of Her devotees. Like Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, our devotion should be such that we wish only to be close to the Lord. She is an example to us to dedicate our lives to worshipping and serving the Lord's Lotus Feet.

How does one become close to the Lord? By going to live in Prashanti Nilayam? No, for one can be very far away from Him even though one is living physically close to Him. And one can be extremely close to Him even though one is living at the other end of the earth. It must always be remembered that the Lord is omnipresent and is close to all no matter where we live. He has shown this to us on innumerable occasions by appearing at various parts of the world to help His devotees in distress. Each one of us is close to Him. In fact, He is closer to us than even our spouse. The fault lies in our vision if we do not feel Him to be so.

Baba says He is the resident in every heart. But do we believe Him? Do we feel Him in our heart? How do we then proclaim ourselves as His devotees? A devotee is one who listens to his beloved Lord's words carefully and practices the advice given. If we do that then we will also come to see the Truth that He resides in every heart. And like Swami we will be able to serve all.

Swami says that all service done anywhere and to whomsoever reaches Him alone, for He is the resident of every heart. If we serve with that attitude that would be Padasevanam. We must selflessly serve humanity, nay the whole creation, with whatever is required, be it food, clothing, good counsel, labour, encouragement, or even a smile. There should be no expectation of reward. Service done with this attitude will bring the Lord

close to us, for that alone is the reality which will be revealed to us.

Padasevanam truly means serving the very cause on which the Lord stands. And what does He stand on? What are His Lotus-feet rooted in? They are rooted in TRUTH. Hence, devotees must take up the holiest of all duties, of serving the Truth and never leaving it's side. What is that Truth? Lord alone is, is the Truth. So love all and serve all must become our sadhana and goal.

There was once a king who was very devoted to his subjects. He considered his subjects like his own children. Every night he would disguise himself and go out to see for himself whether his subjects were happy and comfortable in his rule. One such night, while he was roaming around, he saw a beautiful lady, well dressed in fine jewellery, trying to leave his kingdom in the dark of the night. He approached her and asked "Who are you, o mother, and why are you leaving at this late hour?" She replied "I am Laxmi, o king, and I am bored to be in the same place. I have served you quite long and now wish to go else where." The king saw no point in stopping her since she had already made up her mind, so he thanked her for her services and bade her farewell.

The next day the king saw another strange scene. This time it was a plainly dressed woman trying to leave his kingdom in the dark of the night. He asked "Who are you, o mother, and why are you leaving the kingdom at this hour?" She replied "I am Charity, o king, and I like to live near Mother Laxmi. Since she does not live here anymore, I would like to follow her. I have enjoyed living with you because you took great care of me, but I think it is time to move on." The king also bade her

goodbye, a little sadly.

The next night the king was in for another surprise. This time it was a young man trying to leave the kingdom. The king approached him and asked “Who are you, young man, and why are you leaving us?” He answered “I am Name and Fame, o king. You do not have Laxmi anymore and you do not do charity so how can you have name and fame? Therefore, I have decided to leave. I am sorry, I used to be quite busy here but I think there is no more work for me here. Good bye, o king, and take care.” The king also bade him goodbye and returned home.

The next night the king saw another gentleman leaving and this time it did not surprise him. He was curious to know who this man was so he approached him. He asked “Who are you, my good fellow, and why are you leaving me?” Upon which came the reply “I am Good Behaviour, o king. I do not desire to leave you but what can I do? You do not have Laxmi, you are not charitable, you do not even have a good name, so how can your behaviour be good? I think I must also go else where. Goodbye, o king.” The king said “Goodbye my good fellow” and moved on.

The following night the king thought “I wonder who will leave me today. Lets see.” When he went out sure enough there was someone ready to leave. This time it was an old man. The king asked “Who are you, o grandsire, and why do you wish to leave me?” He answered “I am Truth, o king. And I wish to go too You do not have Laxmi, you are not charitable, you do not have a good name, and your behaviour is also not good. How can such a person uphold Truth. I must go where I am respected. Goodbye, o king, I enjoyed being with you. You took great care of me, but I think you cannot continue to do

so. I must leave now.” On hearing these words the king fell at the old man’s feet. With tears in his eyes he begged him to stay. He said “I will die but I will not let you go. You are my very life breath, how can I live without you?”

On seeing the king’s love, Truth decided to stay. The next night when the king was at his usual rounds, to his surprise he saw Mr. Good Behaviour returning. He said “O king, you have Truth with you, how can your behaviour be bad?” The king welcomed him.

The next night the king saw Mr. Name and Fame returning. He said “O king, you are truthful and your behaviour is good so you are bound to have a good name.” The king welcomed him . The night after that the king saw Ms. Charity returning. She said “O king, you are honest, your behaviour is good, and you have a good name . Such a person is bound to be charitable. Even if you have little you will still part with it to help others if their needs are greater. So I have decided to come back.” The king welcomed her warmly.

The night after that the king saw Mother Laxmi returning. She said “O king, you are charitable by nature, and you have a good name, your behaviour is impeccable and, most importantly, you worship and honour Truth . My beloved Lord, my Swami, my Narayana, lives in Truth, and I can never stay away from Him. Whosoever upholds Truth is upholding my Lord. For one who so loves my Lord, I serve such a one like a dasi (servant). I would want you to use me in His service, for that alone would please me the most.”

If one holds on to the Truth, every thing else that is required in life is granted. Laxmi is where Narayana is. Narayana is

where Truth is. Hence, the Lord's insistence on holding on to truth. If one runs after Laxmi, Laxmi will make one run more for she is very restless. But if one seeks her in His service, she lays down every thing for such a person, for she is a bhakta and she always wants to be close to her Lord.

Swami loves all and serves all . He is rooted in Truth. Hence, whatever work He takes up Laxmi never runs far behind. He has taken up massive projects, like the water project and the two hospital projects, which require huge amounts of money which never seems to run out. Such is the power of Truth. No where in the world selfless work like this can be seen.

That work which our Lord Sai takes upon Himself should become the devotee's priority too. Does the Lord not tell us to follow the master? Following Him the devotee reaches Him alone. Swami also tells us to face the devil. This is where karma yoga comes in. There is no devil outside, the biggest devil is inside each one of us in the form of our vasanas, i.e. likes and dislikes, which are the cause of our sorrow. We have to get rid of this sorrow producing devil with the help of karma yoga.

And what is Karma Yoga? It is doing every action for the sake of the action, not letting our likes and dislikes affect the doing of the action. Normally we want to do what we like to do and we do not want to get involved with that which we do not like. We choose actions according to our likes and dislikes. This is the cause of our bondage. Swami says that happiness lies in liking what one has to do.

The thought might arise here 'how can I like to do that which is unpleasant?' If every duty of ours is seen to emerge from the Lord then it becomes easy for the devotee to take it up, be

it pleasant or unpleasant. How? Wherever we are placed in life, the Lord has put us there, according to our karma and for our own evolverment. The people that are in our lives (good and bad) are the ones that we need to evolve. Understand very firmly that the Lord gives us what we need for our evolverment (for example people, situations). He never makes a mistake so we must trust His wisdom in everything.

Since He has placed us where we are and with the people we are with, we must realise all duties come from Him. And since all duties come from Him, we must do all our duties for Him. We must do all that is needed by those around us for His sake, because He gave these people to us to look after (be they good or bad). When action is done with this attitude, all personal likes and dislikes will get flushed out of the mind and we will be able to act for the sake of acting. In other words, work for work's sake. We should take up that activity which is important, which is our duty and not just that which we like doing. This is no doubt easier said than done but with practice and perseverance it can be achieved.

That is exactly what Krishna asked Arjuna to do. He asked Arjuna to do his duty, even though Arjuna found his duty to be very unpleasant. Because the Lord has put us in the right place according to our vasanas (likes and dislikes) doing our duties purifies our minds. Our vasanas get exhausted when we do our duties sincerely and happily. A purified mind finds happiness. A purified mind works with happiness, not for happiness.

It becomes easy for such a mind to see the Lord as the indweller of every heart. The devotee worships the Lord with all his actions. He readily serves the Lord in whichever form the

Lord chooses to come as, be it human or animal, without any thought of personal gain. Which means whosoever needs his help, he readily and happily gives it, because it is the Lord which is perceived in every form. That is truly serving SAI. It is seva done with this attitude which will immensely please our beloved SAI. Even the smallest of seva done by seeing the Lord in the recipient will greatly please SAI. That is Padasevanam, serving the Lotus Feet of the Lord.

Once the great teacher Adi Guru Sankracharya went for a pilgrimage. He wanted to offer the holy water of the river Ganges to a famous Shivalingam many hundreds of miles away. After walking many miles and for many days with the pot of water, his group of pilgrims were nearing the temple when they saw a donkey lying on the road dying of thirst. The pilgrims were only too eager to pour their holy offerings, which they had so carefully and lovingly carried, for their beloved Deity. No one wanted to waste their precious offering on a useless animal like a donkey, except of course the noble Sankracharya who saw his beloved Lord suffering. He poured the entire pot of water into the donkey's mouth. He considered the act greater than offering the water on the Lingam. It is said that Lord Shiva was so pleased with him that He granted him HIS DARSHAN.

That is exactly what the devotee achieves when he feels he is serving the Lord in each one. He gets the real darshan of the Lord. This real darshan is constant, and more real than the vision of the world. In fact, the world is the manifestation of the Lord only. Working with the Padasevanam attitude helps one to see that Lord hidden every where.. And every action of such an aspirant becomes service of that Lord. That is truly Padasevanam.

In the Ramayana, Bharata went into the forest to plead with Lord Rama to return to Ayodhya so that Rama could assume the throne. True to His father's words, Rama refused. Sage Vasishtha then advised Bharata with the following words: "Rama has come to the forest to carry out the command of his father. It is not right on your part to ask him to change his mind. Let us take his padukas (sandals) to Ayodhya. Those padukas will reign over the kingdom." Thus, whilst Bharata performed his duties in the kingdom, in his heart he accepted Lord Rama as the ruler. The padukas in Ayodhya came to symbolise the reign of Lord Rama over the kingdom even though the physical form of Lord Rama was in the forest.

In the same way our beloved Swami's padukas should reign over our hearts. We must perform our duties (serving) the Lord in all beings] accepting Him as the ruler. The padukas should come to symbolise the reign of the Lord over the kingdom of our body and mind, even though the physical form of the Lord is in Prashanti Nilayam.

Lord Rama returned to His kingdom after the agreed term. When we do our duties sincerely and happily, the mind undergoes a terrific transformation. Its inherent purity invites the Lord to manifest in that heart. He takes over that body-mind completely. That heart becomes His kingdom, it becomes His Prashanti Nilayam.

FIVE

ARCHANAM



“Worship the Lord in mind and offer Him something that is yours, which is clean and fragrant, with the perfume of virtues and innocence, and washed in the tears of repentance.”

ARCHANAM

FIVE

The whole of humanity suffers from a deadly disease which even the World Health Organisation has failed to list. They have not been able to do so because it is common to all. When something is common to all it is taken to be a normal state of being, until of course one meets someone who is not suffering from it. One then inevitably wants to achieve that healthy state too.

The disease which is common to everyone is sorrow and the person who has come to provide a cure is Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who is himself untouched by sorrow.

Swami says the only anecdote for this disease is love. Love is that nectar which fills the heart with supreme happiness. There is no other remedy for sorrow.

Who is a devotee? The scriptures say a devotee is one

who is ever happy in every situation. Sai devotees take great joy from the fact that they are devotees of Swami. But devotion cannot be 60-80%, it must be 100%. One has to make every effort to make one's devotion complete, for complete devotion leads to perfect happiness. Only when one reaches this state can one qualify to call oneself His true devotee.

The fifth step on the ladder of devotion is Archanam which means 'An offering'. Love expresses in giving, and as devotion it grows in the heart of the devotee. The offerings change as the devotee grows in his devotion.

Devotees start by offering flowers, fruits, food, clothing, incense, light, various objects, money, jewelry, etc. to the Lord while worshipping Him. We devotees have been practising Archanam for many years now, but has our sorrow gone? If not then we must find out what the Lord really wants from us. There may be something else that He wants us to offer Him.

Swami says that the cause of sorrow lies within us and not without. The cause of one's sorrow is one's anger, lust, greed, jealousy, delusion, and pride. One alone is responsible for his sorrows, and one alone can make himself happy. How? By offering these sorrow producing vices at the Feet of our dear Lord. Swami says "Offer the fires of your sorrows to me and rest on the cool waves of MY LOVE."

Through the medium of worship, it is these vices which one should really offer Him. Swami says, "Give me all your sorrows and miseries, and take Ananda from Me." What a fantastic deal this is. One dumps his worthless rubbish at His Feet and He gives us the priceless jewels of peace and bliss.

This is, of course, easier said than done. To give up the garbage in the mind which is producing the sorrowful stink in our lives, the devotee should be alert whilst sweeping (sadhana). If one is not alert, or if one does not sweep properly, the bad smell continues to trouble us. That is exactly our condition. We are troubled by so many things in life and are putting a lot of effort to fixing them but we are not looking in the right direction. Hence, we are not able to spot the dirt which is causing so much discomfort.

The real problem lies within and not without. We are constantly blaming others for our miseries without realising that the pain felt is not because of another's doing but because of our own expectations and attachments. Swami says "Expect not and grieve not". Our own desires lead to anger, lust, greed, jealousy, pride and delusion, which in turn cause sorrow. So the cause of sorrow lies within our own minds. It is only when we offer these vices to Swami will we be able to rest on the cool waves of His Love.

'The cool waves of His love' represents the flowering of values in the mind. When the vices are laid at His Feet, He fills our minds with the wealth of values. The Lord wants us to worship Him with these beautiful flowers grown with love in the garden of our minds. These are the flowers that truly please Him. There are 8 special flowers that Swami wants us to offer Him. They are:

1. Ahimsa – The flower of non-violence.
2. Indriya Nigraha – The flower of sense control.
3. Kshama – The flower of patience, forbearance and forgiveness.

4. Sarva Bhoot Daya – The flower of compassion to all beings.
5. Shanti – The flower of peace.
6. Tapas – The flower of penance.
7. Dhyana – The flower of contemplation on the Lord.
8. Sathya – The flower of truth.

However, we devotees must remember that the Lord does not need our worship. He is complete in Himself. When worshipped in the right way with these 8 flowers, He blesses the devotee by revealing Himself in all entirety. Which means He reveals the true identity of the devotee too. When one goes in search of God, one ends up finding one's true Self. He realizes that God alone has become all.

In worshipping the Lord many objects and rituals are involved. But is one himself involved in worshipping the Lord? Is our mind focused and involved in the worship? If it is not then the worship will not bless one with expansion. All worship should be done with the feeling that Swami is present. The feeling that the Lord is present will keep the mind in the puja (worship).

What one offers to the Lord in one's pujas is not important, rather the attitude with which one offers is more important. That is what He values. The worship is only a medium to carry the devotees' love to Him. And love is all that He seeks in every heart.

In the Bhagawad Gita the Lord says He is pleased to receive even a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or even water as an offering from the devotee. What the Lord means is that in terms of worldly objects we do not have to offer Him expensive items. What He really wants from us is a feeling of pure love for Him. This

only truly pleases Him and melts His heart.

There is a story in the Bhaagwat Purana about Sathyabhama and Rukmini, Sri Krishna's wives. For Sri Krishna's birthday, Sathyabhama decided to do some charity. She wanted to weigh the Lord in gold and give away the amount in charity. She was from a rich family and being the king's wife she had a lot of personal wealth. Maybe she was trying to prove to the other wives that she loved Him more than them. The Lord can never tolerate arrogance from His dear devotees. He tries to break it as soon as it rises. This is His compassion.

So a big weighing scale was brought and the Lord was made to sit on one side very ceremoniously. On the other side huge amounts of gold were kept. But Krishna proved to be heavier. Some more gold was called for but to no avail. Krishna was still heavier. Now Sathyabhama called for all the gold that she had, even her personal jewelry. Even then the scale did not tilt.

Sathyabhama grew anxious and did not know what to do. She could not believe her eyes. How was that possible? Krishna was definitely not that heavy, she thought. Rukmini, who had been watching with interest, understood the game and came to her rescue. She plucked a tulsi leaf and prayed to Krishna, and then she kept it with the gold. Immediately the scale tilted in her favour. What is heavier than the Lord? Nothing, absolutely nothing but the Lord is moved by pure love.

The Lord is bigger than the biggest and, at the same time, smaller than the smallest. Who can really capture the uncapturable? Who can measure the immeasurable? No one. But pure love has the power to hold Him, to capture and to measure Him.

Love alone is what He seeks from devotees, for it pleases Him immensely. There is nothing else that He wants from us.

Nothing in this world is really ours. Whatever we are offering to Him is already His. He has given us whatever we have. What can we really offer Him? Swami says “Everything that you see, hear, smell, taste or touch belongs to Me. So how can you give to Me what I already own but your love and that, I gave you before time began as your souls possession. When you return it to Me then I will know you are truly Mine and I will dissolve your sorrow and happiness into Me. I will place you in Bliss forever.”

When you give yourself completely to Him, He enters your heart. And wherever the Lord is sorrow cannot be, just as there is no darkness wherever the sun shines.

Sometimes the objects which one wants to offer to the Lord are not available. Does that mean one cannot offer them? There can be no obstacle for a true worshipper. The devotee can offer them to the Lord mentally. This is called manasa puja (mental worship and offering). Manasa puja is more effective and powerful because the mind is the only ingredient that is required for worshipping, and in the manasa puja the mind is wholly present. Puja loses its meaning when the mind runs here and there. Swami Vivekananda said “External worship is only a symbol of internal worship, but internal worship and purity are the real things. Without them external worship would be of no avail.”

In the book “Science of medicine” the authors, Dr. Hiramalini Sheshadri and Dr. Sheshadri Hariharan, write about their experiences while treating their patients. Whenever they were

in a dilemma as to the course of treatment to be given they would sit by themselves, focusing on Swami. Dr. Hiramalini says she would imagine she was with Swami, asking Him about the course of treatment to be given. After doing this for a couple of times she says Swami started responding. Swami actually started telling her directly what course of treatment she should give to her patients. She was definitely not hallucinating. The proof lay in the treatment that was given. It was just what her patients needed. Obviously her mind was so focused on Swami that He started responding.

Manas puja is very powerful because it is done with the mind alone and nothing else. In any puja that one participates in, one must always focus one's mind and try to feel His presence. If one cannot feel His presence in the puja room or in the Sai Centre, how can one see Him everywhere? Yes, that is the goal ... to see Him everywhere.

As one's mind gets more and more focused with manas puja, one reaches deeper levels of Archanam, where all is offered to Him. One will soon realize that everything is coming from Him. One might say "I know all is coming from Him" but knowing and realizing are two different things. Realising means feeling all is His all the time. Do we feel so? Maybe for a minute or two when we hear about it, then we are back to square one, fighting for every little thing.

Since everything is given to us by the all merciful Lord, we must realize that our family too has been given to us by the Lord alone and all duties arising in the home have been given by Him. So one must do them all for Him. One's relatives and friends, and one's talents, capabilities, and wealth all are granted by Him. Body, mind and intellect also are given by

Him.

The time and space to do all things are likewise given by Him. So every act must be done for Him, as everything is so graciously granted by Him. Done with this attitude, even the most mundane action becomes worship. One's life itself becomes worship. One should go on serving and worshipping Him with every action. Objectively one may be doing housework or office work but inside one knows he is worshipping Swami. Swami says "No matter where you go, always do your duty as you see it and know that I will be there inside you, guiding you every step of the way. You are my very own, dearer than the dear to Me. I will never leave you and you can never leave Me."

The Lord has placed us wherever we are and with whichever people we are with, at home, at work and at leisure. Hence, all duties, whether unpleasant or pleasant, come from Him alone. Since one's duties come from Him, one must execute them for Him alone. Then there will be no distinction of 'personal work' and 'Sai's work', every action will become Sai's work. Swami always says, "Work is Worship". This is how it will be when one offers all work to Him, who alone resides in every heart. Swami says "Make every breath an offering to Him. Do not be upset by calamities, take them as acts of Grace. Understand that nothing happens without HIS WILL, everything that happens has a deeper significance attached to it."

This attitude of Archanam will cleanse one's heart and give great joy. Hence, engage in work in accordance with one's nature and circumstances, and dedicate it to the Lord. Invoke Him in every activity and ask Him, "Will it please You Swami if I do this?" Do everything for His pleasure, not one's own.

It does not matter if one is not at the high level of a contemplative sage. Inner revelation will happen if one performs all actions for the Lord.

All actions, no matter how beautiful they are, are limited. They are finite and imperfect. Even though actions are imperfect, they have the power to perfect the mind if done in the right spirit. The fruit of Archanam is a pure mind and a purified mind becomes detached. The devotee considers everything as the Lord's and nothing as his.

Attachment is in each one of us, and it brings sorrow because we consider family, relatives, friends and material possessions to be ours. So what should be one's attitude? The Lord has given families to us so one must look after the family members for Him. It should be remembered that our children are merely through us, not from us. We are not the creators of our children, if we were we would have made the children as we wanted them to be. We are merely caretakers for Him.

Living a life full of Archanam one will develop the ability to respond to change. Change cannot be avoided. Change is the changeless law governing this universe, an enlightened one once said. Practising Archanam one will develop detachment and adaptability. Hence, continuously the mind must be trained. May our most compassionate Lord Sai fill our hearts with loving worship.

SIX

VANDANAM



“God serves; He allows you to claim that you have served! Without His will, no single blade of grass can quiver in the breeze. Fill every moment with gratitude to the Giver and the recipient of all gifts.”

VANDANAM

SIX

Love directed towards God is devotion, or Bhakti. This super highway of devotion to God has many lanes, nine of them from the Bhagwatam being the most popular ones. The sixth lane on this highway of devotion is Vandanam.

Vandanam literally means “Salutations” but it has various implications. It means praising the Lord, offering our gratitude by way of prayer, and it indicates acceptance and appreciation of everything as His grace.

Praising the Lord and dwelling upon and admiring His various forms is known as ‘stuti’. But why praise Him? Does God need our praise? God certainly does not need us to glorify Him. He is beyond all forms and attributes, and His glory is self-evident, reflected everywhere in all creation. Can we limit Swami to only the 108 names that we recite? The answer is

obviously 'No'.

Yet, if we cannot so limit Swami, why do we have the Namavali? It is not for Swami, it is for us, to help us in our Sadhana. When we are reciting the names with understanding and love, it helps us to focus our minds. Even if for some time our thoughts drift away, the names bring them back. At least for that time we are connected to God, we are calm and peaceful. Therefore, we must try to maintain this connection as far as we can. With constant practice our concentration increases and this helps us in all spheres of our life, in our family life, at our jobs, in our studies, essentially everywhere and at all times.

Vandanam also indicates acceptance of everyone and everything that comes our way as having been sent by Him. We are blessed with so much grace: our family, friends, society, a beautiful nature to sustain us, and this temple of God, our very own body with which we enjoy this world.

When we are faced with any difficulties in life we feel sad, depressed, and start to complain "Why me? Why me?" But we often take things for granted and forget to count our blessings. The highly revered Sadhu Vaswani said beautifully "I always cried that I had no shoes until I met the man who had no feet!"

We must have firm faith in God and believe that whatever happens there is a reason behind it. Swami says: "Rejoice in all that happens for in every incident and accident of life, there is a meaning of My Mercy."

Yes, even in the difficult situations in life, God is ever merciful. His ways are mysterious. When Jesus was put through all that terrible torture, he did not blame anyone for his misery. He saw

the Lord's hand in everything that happened and took it all for his higher good. He said "You people cannot do anything to me unless HE sanctions the power to you." Seeing the Lord's hand in every situation, even the worst of them, Jesus was still able to love the people who harmed him.

He felt they were only instrumental in handing to him his destiny. What came was not from them, only through them. It was from God, His Grace, and so how could he not accept it lovingly? He had laid down his all at His Feet.

Such was the strength of his devotion. Such is the beauty of Vandanam. We should all try to follow this attitude.

When dark clouds gather and it gets dark, we know the rains are to follow. As we pass through this time, there are two ways we can bear it. We can either groan, cry and make ourselves, as well as others around us, miserable, or we can sing through it, accepting it as the Lord's will, His Prasad, and learning our lessons during these cloudy days.

Guru Arjan Dev, one of the ten gurus of Sikhism, went through a lot of difficulties and still thanked his Guru: "Tera bhana meetha laage, Nanak naam padarath maaange".

Often we may not see the good in a situation at the time when we are going through it, but later we realise that it was for our own good. A family of Sai devotees from Delhi went to visit Him. After a week's stay when they were about to leave, He advised them not to go that day. However, the train reservations in India were difficult to get and the children had to appear for exams. They were not sure when they would get the booking again, and if they could not get the booking children would

not make it in time for exams.

They were concerned but decided that since Swami had said not to go, they should not. The next day they discovered the train they were supposed to take derailed in an accident and most of the people on it lost their lives.

God may not respond to our prayers the way we want, but He gives us what is best for us. The following prayer sums it up well. This is how it goes:

I asked for strength, God gave me difficulties to overcome.

I asked for wisdom, God gave me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity, God gave me brain and brawn to work.

I asked for courage, God gave me dangers to overcome.

I asked for love, God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked for favors, God gave me opportunities.

I received nothing – nothing that I wanted.

I received everything – everything that I needed.

Silently, unknowingly, all my prayers were answered.

Accepting everything (people in our lives and situations that come to us) as His Prasad, we must offer our gratitude, our salutations, to God in our prayers.

Most of us generally associate prayer with asking God for something. The Hindi word for prayer is “Prarthna” which literally means asking God. But as explained by Swami’s well-known devotee and author of many books on Swami, Sri N. Kasthuri: “Prayer is an expression of our gratitude to God for all that He has blessed us with.” So, most of our daily prayers should be prayers of gratitude.

It may be a prayer like “Twameva mata cha pita...” from Hinduism; a prayer like “Tum Thakur tum pai ardaas...” from Sikhism; or a prayer like “Our Father who art in Heaven hallowed by Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...” from Christianity. All such prayers are just expressions of our gratitude and faith.

On the practical side, such prayers help us to connect to the higher power, the all-powerful, all-pervading Lord. And when we connect to the Supreme Power we derive positive energy, we gain courage and confidence, and we rise above our limitations. Above all, we overcome qualities like pride, arrogance and egoism which cause all the negativity within us and make us miserable, agitated, and unhappy in life.

Accepting all as His grace, praying to Him in gratitude, we offer our love and reverence as salutations to God. In so doing, we bow down to God.

When reciting the Namavali we say “Namah” at the end of each name, for example “Om Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Babaya Namah”. We must say it keeping in mind the meaning of the word as explained by Swami himself. He says, “Namah” means na-mama, that is, not mine, but thine. Same as in Christianity where it is said “Thy will be done” indicating surrender.

In many temples in India, especially in the south, the priests bow down by falling absolutely flat on the ground. This is known as Saashtanga Namaskaar. Sa-Ashta-Anga, that is, prostrating on eight faculties: the knees, feet, palm, chest, intelligence (dhi), forehead, speech (the word), and sight (eyes directed on the lotus feet of the Lord). Thus, it indicates total surrender at the feet of the Lord; body, mind and intellect, all.

Even in the Gurudwara when we bow down to touch the ground with our forehead, we offer to God all our actions performed with our body, mind and intellect. The forehead symbolises our intellectual faculties.

When we are not able to fall flat to bow, we offer our namaskar with folded hands. When we fold our hands together, what does it signify? Swami Himself explains, “When you fold your hands and bring them together, feel that you are offering at the feet all the actions of five karmendriyas and gyanendriyas indicated by the ten fingers.” Again, this indicates total surrender.

The joint hands should also remind us of our true nature. How? The right palm indicates the Supreme, all-pervading consciousness that we call God – “Tat” or “That” from the Upanishads. The left palm indicates “Twam” – I, the limited Jeevatma. It reminds us that the ultimate goal of all spiritual practices is the merging of the two – jeevatma and parmatma. “Tat Twam Asi” – That Thou Art, or I and He are one.

How do we put this into practice? In the 10th chapter of the Bhagawad Gita, Lord Krishna says, “Aham Atma Gudakesha”. Baba explains this in the following words: “I am the inner Atma in the Lotus heart of each and every Being. So if you believe and direct your life on the basis of the belief that the inner atma

in every being is 'My Paramatma', that is enough dhyana for you. Stick to it steadily, practice that belief, and apply it in your deeds, words and thoughts. Then the experience of Oneness, of your being ME and I being YOU, can be achieved." (Geeta Vahini, pg 172-173).

Swami also says: "Andari Lonoo, Sai Unaaru", or "In all beings, there is Sai".

At the Bal Vikas conference in Prashanti Nilayam in 2001, Swami declared that He was not going to allow padnamaskaar to anyone anymore. WHY? He explained that He wanted His devotees to see Him in one and all. He said that the namaskaar we want to offer Him, we should offer to our parents, elders, gurus, etc. He said: "See me in your heart and in the heart of everyone you meet." That is the ultimate goal of all spiritual practices, to see and serve the Lord in all His creation.

While going through these 9 forms of devotion, we must remember that they are not only for practising in the temple, Sai Centre, or any place of worship. These loving approaches to God can and should be practised in our daily lives while dealing with the many situations and people we come across. Only then will we truly succeed and progress.

Holding onto Him in love, we must use all our faculties wisely for serving others while performing our dharma, our daily duties. Seeing and loving Him in one and all is true devotion. We must live our life as Swami says: "With hands in society and heads in forests." Let that be our consistent prayer, a true Vandanam.

SEVEN

DASYAM



*“Be a servant, a servant of God, then
all strength and joy will be added
unto you... Feel that you are an in-
strument in His hand. Let Him shape
you and use you as He knows best.”*

DASYAM

SEVEN

Life is an opportunity to seek God, see God and merge with God. Life acquires meaning and value only if it is used for this purpose. Dasyam is the seventh step on the ladder of devotion. With every step the devotee is getting closer and closer to His Lord. That means the devotee's heart is expanding, he is growing and so is his happiness.

Firstly, one is introduced to the Lord through Shravanam. Then, through Kirtanam, Smaranam, Padsevanam, Archanam and Vandanam one experiences Him more often and gets to know Him better. The Lord becomes more than an acquaintance. When one gets to know a person well, one wants to establish a relationship with that person. In the same way, when the devotee's heart expands and gets filled with love for the Lord, it only makes him want more to establish a relationship with His Lord.

One can have any kind relationship with the Lord, for the Lord is the basis of all relationships. Some look to Him as mother, some as father, some as master, some as their beloved, and some as friend. Dasyam means to look at Him as the master and consider oneself His servant.

The Ramayana depicts a scene in Lanka, in the court of the demon king Ravana. Hanumanji, who had gone there in search of mother Sita, was caught and brought before Ravana who questioned him thus, “Impertinent monkey, tell me, who are you?” To this Hanumanji replied, “*Dasoham Koshalend rasya.*” I am the servant of Lord Ram who is the noble son of mother Kaushalya.

Hanumanji was the son of Vayu, the wind God. He was the disciple of Surya, the Sun God. He was the chief minister of Sugreeva, who ruled Kishkinda. But when questioned by Ravana he did not mention any of these by way of introduction. Instead, he very proudly announced himself as a servant of Sri Ram. His devotion to Lord Rama exemplifies Dasyam. Of all the relationships he had in the world, he felt the relationship with the Lord as the dearest to him, hence the declaration.

Dasyam means servitude. It is a form of devotion in which the devotee regards God as the master and considers himself as the servant. Swami says “Devotion begins with dasoham, the attitude that you are the servant of God, and progresses to the stage of soham, where you become one with God.” Devotion is not complete at this stage of dasyam. It is complete only when one understands the Truth or, like Swami says, when one becomes one with God.

Hanumanji achieved that oneness going from Dasyam to Atmanivedanam. But on the physical and mental level he still maintained the Dasyam bhava (feeling).

Once Lord Ram asked Hanumanji: “Hanuman, tell me, how do you regard me and relate to me?” Hanumanji replied, “Lord, at the physical level, I regard you as the master and consider myself as your servant. At the mental level I regard you as the object and myself as your reflection, and spiritually I am you.”

Hanuman was a highly evolved being. That is why at all levels he was able to identify himself correctly and related to Lord Ram accordingly.

Dasyam expresses as seva (service) of the beloved. For it is that which gives maximum happiness to the devotee. But, by itself it is not seva, it is an attitude. It is the willingness in the devotee to serve. The devotee considers himself as an instrument and becomes an able instrument in the hands of his beloved Lord. He considers all situations as coming directly from the Lord. He considers all actions coming from his own body mind as the Lords work, as His grace. For what is it that he can call his own.

The body and mind are given by the Lord. One’s ability, talents and energy to perform all tasks was granted by Him. The time and space to do the work is given by Him. The desire to do the particular job is granted by Him. The knowledge, the know-how of the task, is graciously granted to him. So how can one claim any action? How can one claim to do anything? One is always ready to do the Lord’s bidding, taking cue from all that is happening. As all that is happening is willed by the Lord alone.

There is nothing more divine than allowing Him to work through oneself. Such a person becomes available to the Lord all the time. Swami says “I call upon you to radiate the devotion within you so that its unseen power will envelop all who come into your orbit. To successfully perform your part, always remain centered upon Me.” When He says always, it means 24/7 i.e. 24 hours over 7 days of the week.

Are we always centered on Him? We must constantly check what is distracting us. This constant checking will bring our flaws in front, meaning we will become aware of our failings. We will become aware of that which is taking our mind away from the Lord. Only if we are aware can we do something to check our desires, for it is our desires which stand between us and the Lord.

He further says “You are My instruments for whom My love will pour. Be always aware that the moment you let your ego descend upon you My work ceases. When you have overcome your negative unmindfulness you will again become My source.”

So, it is this negative unmindfulness that we need to eradicate from our system. And we can do that only if we are watching our minds. Watching the mind is the most beneficial spiritual exercise. It matures the devotee tremendously.

Desires take the form of our personal likes and dislikes. We will allow Him to work through us by reducing our personal likes and dislikes. How does one reduce them? By doing our duties SINCERELY and HAPPILY.

The Lord has placed us wherever we are in life and with certain people. The situations we face are what we need to evolve. Everything is from Him, everything is really Him. The servant (bhakta) never questions. He only follows orders, taking cue from what is happening. He knows that nothing is from him really, it is only through him. He accepts all as the Lord's prasad happily, all bitter and sweet experiences. The bhakta knows very well that not even a leaf can move without Him willing it. So what ever is happening is happening with His will.

This knowledge, and the experience that things happen through one and not from one, will not be genuine if there are personal likes and dislikes. If one thinks that things are done by oneself, then personal likes and dislikes come in and the result of one's actions may cause disturbance. There is no way one can escape that. The only way to escape all sorrow is to see clearly that one is not the doer, that without His presence in the body no action is possible. It is wonderful to experience this, but it happens only with His grace. Without His presence in the mind no thought is possible.

We pay lip service to this idea, we do not really believe in it. The proof lies in our sorrow, for Swami says that a devotee is one who is never sorrowful. How many of us are His devotees? Can we even call ourselves His devotees?

Our Upanishadic Rishis are an example of this level of devotion. They wrote masterpieces but never claimed them to be their work. No Upanishad comes with the authors name on the text because they knew it was only through them, not from them. In the quietness of the mind, that knowledge, those thoughts, appeared. They were mere instruments to pass over the thoughts, they were not the originators of the thoughts.

Hence they did not claim those noble thoughts or actions as theirs. That is true detachment and devotion.

O Swami, may Thy Grace flow through us to the world around.

EIGHT

SAKHYAM



“Friendship should not be based on consideration of fear and favour. The only friend who will continue to be with you for all time is the Divine friend - God.”

SAKHYAM

EIGHT

The eighth stage of the nava-vida bhakti described in the Bhagavatha and other scriptures is Sakhyam. When translated Sakhyam means friendship, a beautiful relationship between two or more people.

We all understand the word friendship. As we go through life, wading through joy and grief, we want someone with whom we can share our happy days as well as our sad ones, someone who is like-minded with whom we can communicate, and someone who will encourage us and inspire us. As we trek along the journey of life we want someone to be by our side no matter what. Essentially, we long for someone we can call our own. To this someone, we designate the relationship of a friend.

This is a relationship that we make of our own free choice. We decide who our friends are. That is why friendship is such a

special relationship.

The Lord responds to a devotee according to the devotee's feelings for Him. When devotion has grown stronger in a devotee's heart, the devotee desires a still closer relationship with his beloved Lord. He yearns to move closer into the inner circle of the Lord. The Lord is all, He is Poorna (complete). He responds to a devotee in the form and relationship the devotee loves. Friendship is particularly sweet when it is with the Lord.

In the Sakhyam stage, the devotee sees God as his friend. A friend is always your well-wisher, hence whatever happens is accepted as a special gift from this special Friend. Everything is seen as His Prasad. He sees God to be the companion by his side (in everything and everywhere). In every relationship he see Him. Sranavam (listening), Kirtanam (singing), Smaranam (contemplation), Padsevanam (serving His lotus feet), Archanam (worship), Vandanam (salutations) and Dasyam (considering the Lord his master) have brought him to the stage where he yearns not only to be with God at all levels, physical, mental and spiritual, and in all situations, but to merge and become one with Him.

Formalities are there between people when the understanding is not deep rooted. When a relationship is very close there are no formalities left between two people, especially if they are in the other's inner circle. Both understand each other very well. The Sakhyam level of love is very deep. It takes a lot of sadhana and depth of understanding to reach that level. The absence of formality here means the devotee goes beyond all the charms for the promised fruits of the Vedic rituals.

Vedic rituals are done for worldly and other worldly gains. His

self-control, study and constant meditation has taken away his fascination for material wealth and sensuous life.

The friend of God stops desiring the world and the worldly. His eye is fixed on his divine Friend alone. Eyeing his divine Friend he becomes a friend of all creation. His intentions have become purified, meaning he is no more selfish, he no more works for personal gains. From personal he has moved to the universal. These 9 steps of devotion help the devotee move from the personal to the universal. That is a tremendously big gain by itself.

For this great love that he has acquired, there can be no rules or expectations. For example, if I worship the Lord because He answers all my prayers, then the day He does not answer according to my wishes will be the end of my love. That is not true love. Swami says “No reason for love, no season for love” is divine love is the unconditional love. Swami also says “Duty without love is deplorable, duty with love is desirable and love without duty is divine.” The devotee with unconditional love has reached the threshold of Godhood. He is almost there, for at the threshold he is not really in. Being at the threshold he is neither in nor out. Being so close to divinity the devotee’s vision is extremely clear and so the secrets of God are revealed to him, for between friends there are no secrets.

There is a story in the Bhagawad Gita about Krishna and Arjuna. Arjuna was said to be at the Sakhyam level of devotion and such was the relationship that Krishna always revealed the secrets of His actions to him. One day when they were out in the jungle they lost their way. They eventually reached a village near the jungle. As they were hungry and tired they went to a rich man’s house and asked the residents for some food. The

rich man only gave abuses and sent them off. On departing Krishna blessed the man with more riches. Arjuna observed this but kept quiet.

Then they reached a poor man's hut near the jungle. Likewise, they asked the resident for some food. It was a poor brahmin who lived there. He invited them in with joy and brought some milk for them. That was all he had in the house. Not knowing who they were, he followed the vedic call for 'atithi devo bhavah'. He was a great devotee of the Lord and was pleased to be of service to Him in the form of these two strangers. Thanking him for his kindness they left and Krishna blessed him with "may your cow die".

Now this was too much for Arjuna to digest. How could his friend Krishna bless the rich man for abusing them and curse the brahmin for his sacrifice? He had a sickly looking old cow which gave only a little milk, which he offered to his hungry guests and so leaving nothing for himself. Being a warrior Arjuna protested at the injustice in Krishna's words. But can the Lord ever do injustice?

Being a true friend of Arjuna, Krishna revealed the secret of His action. His blessing for the rich man to prosper more was actually a curse. The rich man was already very arrogant because of his riches, he had no compassion in his heart for his fellow beings. By giving him more riches he was damned to stay in that arrogance which would increase. From the spiritual standpoint it was a curse, but from the worldly perspective it was taken to be a blessing. The Lord sees the spiritual standpoint only because it is that which brings us happiness and sorrow, and not the amount of money we have. We devotees must learn to see things differently.

Krishna's curse for the old brahmin was actually a blessing. Krishna revealed that the brahmin had detached himself from the world. He was only attached to his cow. So to remove his attachment to the cow, Krishna took it away. From that time onwards the brahmin learnt to depend solely on the Lord for his existence. He gave himself up to His care. It was a great step forward for him. So what was a curse from the worldly standpoint was actually a blessing from the spiritual standpoint.

The Lord cannot bear to see a fault in His devotee. He only wants the growth of His devotees. Whatever He does is actually for our benefit only. The devotee on this level of devotion comes to see that and so is happy in all situations. Swami says "Friendship is the expression of unshakable love, love that is noble, pure, free from desire or egoism."

If I like someone and want to establish a friendship with him, I have to get to know that person and let the person get to know me too. On the Sakhyam level of devotion, the devotee gets to experience God's love and so the devotee solves the mystery of God. When he does this he solves his own mystery and the mystery of the universe. That would be entering the Lord's inner circle truly.

One who enters the inner circle knows about his close Friend and His secrets. Such a devotee truly see God, he sees the real face of God, which is really faceless. Also, he sees His real form which is really formless. Seeing God means he sees God in everything and everything in God. In that supreme vision he himself is also included. Hence, he has solved his own mystery too.

We devotees only imagine that we know God. The truth, however, is otherwise. So long as we think that there is a God and we are His devotees, we have not understood Him. In understanding God, there is only God. There is no devotee left to claim his understanding. The devotee dissolves in the vision of His beloved Lord. He sees God only in everything and everyone, even in his own self.

If one is asked to define God, we say God is Love. What is love? We answer Love is God. Thus, we go round in circles. We think God is Krishna, Rama, Shiva, Sai, etc. What is Sai? Whatever we may answer (for example, infinite, imperishable, all pervading), we again go round in circles for we do not understand the implications of any of these descriptions. Long reflections are required to understand them.

Sai is not what we understand with our mind or intellect. He is not a limited form. He is the illuminator of all our experiences. God is not only a name and form, He is the totality, all names and forms are His (Vishvaroop). In totality, the individual 'I' is a part of God and not separate from Him. The day we are able to see Him in everyone we too will become His friend.

When a devotee comes close to God all forms start melting, even the form of His beloved God. All forms are His and yet no form is His. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa said that from a distance the water of the ocean appears to be blue. When you go near and take it in your cupped palms, it is colourless. Likewise, from a distance God appears to have attributes but when one goes near, one finds Brahman has no attributes. He is both attributeless and with attributes, formless and with form. He is like the infinite ocean.

When one comes close to God all scriptures seem to be of no use to the devotee; to reach the truth he has gone beyond the descriptive words in the scriptures. Long reflections on those words have helped him to transcend the words to discover the Lord who lies beyond all words and thoughts. Eventually the devotee drops all words and thoughts because God can be known and seen only in silence.

Once there were two men who were invited to visit a mango garden with a view to start an investment. As soon as they entered the garden, they were both amazed at the quality and abundance of the fragrant fruit. One of the men immediately started counting how many mango trees there were and how many mangoes grew on each tree. Then he took out a calculator and started to compute the value of the orchard.

The second man, however, on seeing this amazing orchard and its fruit walked straight to the office of the owner of the garden. There he introduced himself and after a short chat the owner invited this man to not only pluck the fruit and taste it, but also to take away as much as he wanted for his family and friends. Thus, while one man was busy counting and calculating, the other was tasting the delicious fruit itself.

Ramakrishna Paramhansa often cited this example to show the difference between an ordinary devotee and an advanced devotee who had reached the Sakhyam stage. The ordinary devotee busies himself with probing the genesis of creation while the advanced devotee makes a direct acquaintance by presenting himself.

In the Gita, Krishna declares, “He who searches me out in friendship he shall find Me. Then, I am always with him,

always. He will never lose sight of me nor will I ever lose of him.”

“Take one step towards me and I shall take a hundred steps towards you,” Swami has said to us time and time again. Baba says, “This is not the kind of friendship that can be cultivated by just saying hello. Instead you have to make your heart hollow so that it can be filled with the Divine and his secrets.”

Arjuna saw Krishna as a friend and enjoyed this intimacy, as is told in the Gita. Arjuna is described as joking and playing with Krishna, and even eating meals out of the same plate. This was a friendship between the embodiment of the Highest (Krishna) and the embodiment of the best (Arjuna). When God makes you a friend, there is no hierarchy in this friendship. Friends are equal. He makes you His equal.

Baba says, “Earn the right to approach God without fear and the right to ask for your heritage. Whatever role you give God to play in your relationship, he will play it to perfection, but you too must play yours with the utmost integrity.”

There was once a man who had three very good friends. One day, he was accused of a very serious crime and had to appear before the court. He approached his first friend to help him. The friend was willing to help except that the friend said he could only help him from the confines of the house. He could not leave the house he lived in.

The man approached his second friend and asked him to help him. The second friend was also willing except that he too had a condition. He could come up to the courthouse but he could not enter the witness box to bear witness to his friend’s

innocence. Becoming desperate, the man approached his third friend. The friend was not only willing to help, he was willing to go to the courthouse and stand in the witness box and speak for his innocence.

In our life, we all acquire three kinds of friends. The first friend is all the material belongings that we accumulate, these are useful to us as long as they are in the confinement of our homes. The second friend is symbolic of our family members, worldly relations and worldly friends, they will carry us to cremation but will not burn in the fire with us.

The third friend is the values that we acquire through the life we lead, the qualities that we accumulate, the virtues that we install in our hearts. These will persist with us even after death and burial. These values are the foundation on which stands the super structure of God-Realisation.

We must live our life virtuously. This is easiest done by installing the Lord, our Friend, firmly in our heart.

May the Lord Grace us by taking us in His inner circle.

NINE

ATMANIVEDANAM



“Surrender - Leaving everything to God’s will is the highest form of devotion. Whether we lose or gain, have pain or pleasure, our faith must be unshaken. Whatever happens, accept it as His gift.”

ATMANIVEDANAM

NINE

Atmanivedanam is the last step on the ladder of devotion. This last step leads the devotee straight to his beloved Lord. Atma means 'I' and Nivedanam means 'offering'. Offering the 'I' (the ego, the sense of individuality) is Atmanivedanam, which is the highest of all offerings as the devotee offers himself and everything to his beloved Lord. What remains after offering one's individuality is the true 'I', which is the Supreme Reality, the Lord. The bhakta (devotee) dissolves to merge in his Bhagawan (Lord). What remains after the dissolution is Bhagawan alone. This is a very rare phenomenon.

The Bhagawad Geeta says that among the thousands of devotees a handful of them strive to know their reality. Among these handful, only a rare one reaches that supreme most goal. It is the rare one who crosses the threshold of manhood to enter into Godhood. This is the greatest of all jumps that man can take. Yet, this jump requires no effort on the part of the

individual for in any case he is no more an individual. From individual he has already become the universal, and now from the universal he becomes the Absolute. This is the state of Being which words cannot describe. This is the rare one who is the most evolved one in all creation. For this is the Man of Realisation, who is God walking on earth.

One can put effort only till he becomes the Universal (Sakhyam level of devotion). After that all effort needs to be dropped. Putting effort means one is still in bondage. Doing meditation means that the meditator (the ego) is very much alive. The meditator with the help of meditation dissolves to become the meditation itself. In other words, all 3, the meditator, the subject of meditation and the meditation itself have merged to become one. Jnana (knowledge) can only take one till the universal. Beyond this, even that must be dropped. For the real 'Me' transcends both knowledge and ignorance. 'I' am the only support of knowledge and ignorance and yet 'I' transcend both. 'I' transcend all pairs of opposites, all duality. For 'I' am the Supreme Reality – Aham Bhrahmasmi. That becomes one's experience.

Our imperfect minds cannot comprehend the majestic glory, the brilliant perfection of this realized man. He has awakened from the dream to become the Self. On awaking from a dream, one puts it behind as something unreal. Such is his attitude towards everything, even his own body. He does not care whether his body drops down dead or rises up to live. He no more desires sense pleasures or even liberation. AT ALL TIMES AND AT ALL PLACES he remains free of even the shadow of desire.

A realized man cannot be described because he cannot be

measured by the activities of his body, mind and intellect. He is much larger than that. He is the substratum on which his body-mind appears like a little trifle, a feather floating aimlessly. He recognizes nothing but the Absolute Reality everywhere, in all things and at all places, and so he comes to rise above good and evil. He no more lives on our level of consciousness for he has awakened to be the Supreme Reality. How can one who has awakened from the dream hold on to the dream whether it was good or evil?

He cannot be judged from our moral and ethical standards. In any case, we cannot judge anyone from their external behaviour, for the waking state does not reveal our true personality. We are very good in hiding our feelings and deceiving ourselves and everyone else too. That is why Swami says our thought, word and action should be one. That helps to integrate one's personality. The wise man is beyond all and there is nothing more for him to gain. He has achieved the ultimate. Criticism and praise do not affect him. We have all seen these signs in our beloved Baba, who is the perfect example of *Atma-Nivedanam*. We can go on describing the wise man but in the end only fail in our efforts. For what can be said about him who is indescribable?

So long as one feels there are two, he and his Bhagawan, one is still in delusion. After he has offered himself, the bhakta realises that the bhakta and Bhagawan are not two. From manhood he enters into Godhood. Thereafter, there is no more return to the sorrowful state of the mind. He enjoys unbroken Supreme Bliss and lives happy ever after.

What is involved in offering the 'I'? How does one make this offering? There is nothing external to offer. Offering the 'I'

requires that one perceives the ‘I’ in the correct way. At the ego level, one’s sense of ‘I’ is expressed in words like “I’m standing”, the I referring to the body. If one says “I’m happy or sad” the I is referring to the mind. Likewise, if one says “I understand” the I is referring to the intellect. Therefore, at this level one always identifies with body, mind and intellect.

Swami says that what one can observe is not the real identity of the observer. So, the observer is different from that which is observed. The observer is the Subject and that what is observed is the object. The Subject can never become the object (the observed).

Can one observe the body? Yes, one can observe all its conditions of health and ill-health. So that means one is not the body. Likewise, one can observe the mind, including all the moods it passes through – happiness, sorrow, anger, jealousy, greed, calmness, etc. That means one is not the mind and its various moods either. One can also observe the intellect, the various ideas, reasoning, and logic passing through it. That means one is also not the intellect.

One might then ask: “Then who am I? Am I nothing? Is there anything else left for me to claim?” Surely, the one who is observing all these is the real ‘I’, which is Pure Consciousness, Awareness, that is aware of the body-mind entity. The real Self is the witness of the body-mind entity. It illuminates the body-mind entity. Since the body- mind can be observed, it is an object and not the Subject. The object is experienced only in the Subject and not elsewhere. The real ‘I’, the Subject, can never be observed. It can, however, be known and experienced.

This witness, which is the real ‘I’, is free, All pervading, perfect,

formless, eternal, infinite, imperishable, changeless, birthless, deathless, action-less, desire-less and quiet. That is who I truly am. I am Divine, I am all. I alone am. And this 'I am' is neither aware nor unaware. I am indeed a mystery, a wonder. Because nothing can be said about 'Me'. Anything that one may say is in the realm of the finite. Language is limited. Therefore, dropping everything known, one becomes silent. And in that golden silence what is there is revealed. That revelation fills one with Supreme Bliss.

Swami says, "Man can realise his mission on earth only when he knows himself as divine, and when he reveres all others as divine." What we see is nothing but the manifestation of that one Divinity, which we all are with no exception, whether we be good, bad or ugly. Objects, plants and animals and humans are all manifestations of that Divinity too.

Hence, one cannot say that one can or cannot get liberation. This is because one is not bound in the first place, being the real Self which is always free. How can we get something that we already have and are?

However, because one cannot see one's reality, one considers oneself to be the body-mind. The Truth is not easily known, no matter how intelligent one might be. It has to be pointed out by a guru. In our case that is our SWAMI who comes to us in various forms to teach us. Yet, the guru pointing it out is not enough. One needs to reflect for a long time upon the Truth with dedication and then only, with His grace, can it be grasped and experienced. Everything is His grace. There is nothing but His grace in this world.

Can the body do anything without the presence (grace) of

this consciousness in it? Can the mind think a single thought without it? This Consciousness is the Lord in each and every one of us. We have never been away from the Lord even for a fraction of a second. The only problem is that we do not look towards Him. Thus, all we need really is a little shift in our attention. God is everywhere and all that we see is nothing but His own manifestation (including one's body-mind). Realising that Truth one will at once become peaceful because other than Him and His will there is nothing else.

This 'me' that I take myself to be is just a ghost that I see because of poor light (ignorance). When the sun of knowledge rises with the help of contemplation and meditation, in the divine light the ghost of body-mind will vanish (not literally) and every thing will be seen as it is.

The poet saint Kabeerdasji said: "Prem ki gali ati saakri, jame do na samaye, Hari hai to mein nahi, mein hoon to Hari nahi." This means that the path of love (devotion) is very narrow. On this narrow path two people cannot walk, only one can. If the Lord is there, the little I (ego) cannot be there, and vice versa.

If one feels the existence of the little self that means one has not reached the goal. One has reached the goal when one feels God in every name and form, 24 hours of every day. At this time there is discovery of one's innate divinity. So, when one goes to find God one ends up finding oneself. For God and we are one.

The scriptures say that knowing one is liberated is liberation itself. In knowing the Supreme Reality, which is the real 'I', the false little 'I' is easily given up. One is then able to see that Sai and he are one. One realises the Supreme Reality alone is.

One might say, “Hold on! My experience is quite the opposite.” Why is that? Swami says this is because of ignorance. Hence, put in the effort to know oneself by studying spiritual literature. Then contemplate and meditate on the divine words contained there, on Swami’s words.

In other words, practise the eight forms of devotion until you reach Atmanivedanam. Atmanivedanam is living in oneness with the whole creation. It is merging one’s will in the will of the Lord. Not resisting or questioning whatever is happening because nothing remains apart from Him. Nothing can take one away from God, even if one wants to, because God is one’s reality. Without God one is nothing. One is because God is.

When Jesus Christ was crucified there was a moment when he said “Why this to me, my Lord? I have spent my entire life living as per Your command, now why this to me, oh Lord?” After a moment he realised his mistake and said “Forgive me, forgive me, my Lord, please forgive me. Let THY will be done. THY will, not mine, oh Lord.”

Such a devotee wills to will God’s will, no matter what. He understands that everything is happening in him and not to him. His own body-mind is in him, the Supreme Reality. And accepting His will in everything, he becomes free. Just like Jesus did.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the great saint of the 19th century, demonstrated the spirit of oneness with the whole world. At the end of his life he developed cancer of the throat. It was very painful for him to talk to his disciples and devotees, nevertheless his love for them made him speak till the very

end of his body. It was also very painful to eat. The act of swallowing itself was quite painful. His disciples would be in pain seeing their beloved Master suffer so much. His favourite disciple Naren, who later became Swami Vivekananda, pestered him to ask the Divine Mother to relieve the pain so that he could, at least, eat. One day when Naren requested the Master again, the latter went to the Mother with the request.

Sri Ramakrishna reported later “The Mother says I alone am eating through so many mouths, (indicating all of them) why do you insist on eating from this particular mouth?” He lived that spirit of oneness, unlike the rest of us who just talk about it.

Offering a coconut to the Lord in the temple symbolises Atma-Nivedanam. In the temple one offers the coconut to the Lord by breaking its hard shell, which symbolises the little ‘I’ (the ego). The white sweet meat, which symbolises the purified mind, is then offered to the Lord. A purified mind is a mind which has been transcended. If one can break this hard shell, the little ‘I’, then only can one merge in Him.

We are very lucky to have Swami in our midst to teach us these eternal Truths. God has come as man today so that man may become God. He has come to help us achieve GODHOOD. Let us not miss this golden opportunity that has come our way. Let us put in the effort so that eventually we effortlessly may rest in Him as Him.



It is often said that birth as a human is a precious opportunity to improve oneself and to attain liberation. Of the many methods for achieving liberation, the path of Bhakti, or devotion, is the simplest and shortest way to experience the Divine. Bhakti lifts man to supreme heights. It is a Yoga. Yoga unites the bhakta with God.

What is declared in the Bhagavatha as the 9 paths of devotion, has been explained by Swami as the 9 steps leading higher and higher towards God.

Devotion alone bestows the supreme good;
Devotion alone is the destroyer of the disease
of the cycle of birth and death;
Devotion alone is the means of recognizing Divinity;
Devotion alone is the means of Liberation.

