

Satsanga with Sri Swami Vidadatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Bhaja Govindam – Verse 17

This verse tells us of the means for *mukti* or liberation.

कुरुते गङ्गासागरगमनं व्रतपरिपालनमथवा दानम् ।

ज्ञानविहिनः सर्वमतेन भजति न मुक्तिं जन्मशतेन ॥

kurute gaṅgāsāgaragamanam vrataparipālanamathavā dānam,
jñānavihinaḥ sarvamatena bhajati na muktim janmaśatena.

One may go on pilgrimage, observe vows, and give away wealth in charity. Yet, devoid of the knowledge of the Self, nothing can give freedom even in hundred lifetimes.

Jñānavihinaḥ sarvamatena bhajati na muktim janmaśatena. The second line says, *sarvamatena*. This is the *mata*, or the opinion of all the scriptures, that *jñānavihinaḥ*, one who is devoid of *jñānam*, knowledge of the self, *bhajati na muktim*, will not be able to get *mukti* or liberation, *janmaśatena*, even in one hundred lives. We are not talking of a mundane person or a *saṁsāri* here, but of a very sincere seeker. *Kurute gaṅgāsāgaragamanam*, he goes on a pilgrimage to Gaṅgāsāgar. Gaṅgāsāgar is a place in Calcutta where the river Gaṅgā meets the ocean. It is a very holy place. This seeker could also be one who may go to the river Gaṅgā, and to the *sāgara* meaning ocean. Gaṅgā stands for the north, so he may go to Kāśī, the Himālayas or Rishikesh on pilgrimage. *Sāgara* stands for the south, meaning places like Rāmeśvaram. This just means that he may go to various places on pilgrimage.

The story of the Badrinath temple

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya is said to have gone to various places of pilgrimage like Badrinath, Kedarnath etc. You will find a story associated with Śrī Śaṅkarācārya in most of the temples of India. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya went to a number of temples on the way to Badrinath. At that time, many of these temples had become old, and the worship was not performed properly. There were also many distortions in the forms of worship, particularly in the worship of *devī*, in which a lot of sacrifices were being carried out. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya changed all this. He installed benign images of the *devī*, and installed the *Śrī-cakra* in the worship of the forms of *devī*.

Badrinath is a temple of Lord Viṣṇu, where he is supposed to be doing penance. The rest of the *kṣetras* in the Himālayas are Śiva *kṣetras*. In Badrinath the Lord manifests as two *ṛṣis*, Nara and Nārāyaṇa, and they are constantly doing penance. There are two mountains there, one called Nara and the other, Nārāyaṇa. What we have in the temple is a *śāligrāma sila*, or image. In this *sila* there is an image of Lord Nārāyaṇa seated in a meditative posture. It is supposed to be a very ancient temple. The temple is covered in snow for six months of the year. At that time, all human beings come away from there, and it is said that for those six months, the *devatās* perform the worship of the deity at the temple. This is the story. Enjoy it for what it is! It is said that the Buddhists went there and, being atheists, threw away the image of Nārāyaṇa into the river Ganges, which is called Alakānandā there. So the temple was without an image for a long time.

It is said that Śrī Śaṅkarācārya had a dream in which Lord Nārāyaṇa came to him and said, “ I am lying at the bottom of the river. Retrieve me and install me back in the temple.” So Śrī Śaṅkarācārya went to the Alakānandā, and took a dip in its waters. He retrieved the *śāligrāma* image of Lord Nārāyaṇa from the river and installed it back in the temple. It was then discovered that the image was *khandita*, or damaged. Of the four arms of Lord Nārāyaṇa, only two were clearly visible. The other two arms were broken, and this damaged idol could not be worshipped. Therefore, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya threw it back into the river. He is said to have had another dream in which he was told to reinstall the damaged idol, which he again did. Thus it is, that this is one temple where a damaged idol is worshipped.

It is said that Śrī Śaṅkarācārya installed a Namboodri or priest from Kerala in Badrinath, and until today the tradition continues. Badrinath is in the northernmost corner of India and the priest who conducts the worship there is from the southernmost corner. In Nepal, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya installed a priest from Maharashtra to conduct the worship in the temple. This is what was done to bring about national integration in those days.

Pilgrimage unifies the people

The concept of a pilgrimage is a wonderful thing. In India, sightseeing is by way of pilgrimage. You go on a pilgrimage to Badrinath or Kedarnath, and the sightseeing of the Himālayas takes place. It is amazing how these temples are situated in very far away places. Sometimes they are in difficult places such

as on the top of a mountain. While these days access to these places has become much easier, in the past, you really had to exert yourself in order to reach them.

The custom of pilgrimage in India is widely prevalent. These pilgrimages brought all the Indians together because people from all over India would visit these centers. Even though the language was different, and the dress and food were different, the culture was one. This was a unifying factor. People living in the south of India always aspired to visit the Gaṅgā, go to Benares or Kāśī, and have the *darśan* of Lord Śiva. They would carry with them a pot of water from the ocean, and pour that water upon Lord Śiva out there. The people living in the north, on the other hand, always aspired to go to the south. They would carry a pot of water from the Ganges, go down to Rāmeśvaram in the south, and pour that water on Lord Śiva there. This is how the life was.

Pilgrimage is a process of self-purification

Pilgrimage formed a very important aspect of religious life. Even until 50 years ago, people had to walk two to three months to perform the pilgrimage to the four centers, *Chardham*, in the Himālayas (namely Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath, and Kedarnath). In India, it is generally those who are retired and have nothing else to do that go on these pilgrimages. These people over the age of 55 or 60 do not have much strength to walk, but they undertake these pilgrimages which require walking on the mountains and suffering the cold etc. Those days, when such elderly people left on a pilgrimage we used to bid them goodbye. We never knew whether they would come back or not. They themselves did not know, and they were prepared. If their body dropped on the way to Badrinath or anywhere in the Himālayas, they were happy. If they came back after a few months, it was a miracle! Thus the pilgrimage tradition has been an an important form of worship.

When I went on a pilgrimage once, I was with a busload of people. We stopped in Srinagar for lunch. The Śrī Śaṅkarācārya of Badrinath was also in the same guesthouse on his way to Joshimath. We went and prostrated before him like all others. He asked us where we were going and we told him that we were on our way to Badrinath by bus. He told us that the real way to go on a pilgrimage is to go on foot. Nowadays, you can go to Badrinath from Rishikesh in one day. And one is not prepared for that, because Badrinath is at a height of about 10,000 ft. It is cold and uncomfortable. If you have come from the comparative comfort of Delhi, the first thought that comes to you is about when you can return. Before you go on this pilgrimage, you have to tune up

physically. If you go on foot, it may take 15 or 20 days, during which you will slowly get acclimatized. You walk along the Ganges, constantly repeating the name of the Lord, constantly thinking about him and, therefore, your emotional fervor also rises. By the time you reach the temple, you are extremely eager to have the *darśan* of the Badrinath. On the way, you stop at all the holy places. You bathe in the Ganges every day. There are many ashrams, hermitages, along the way. There are many *sādhus* living there, and you have *satsangs* with them. There are also many temples and you can have *darśan* there. That is how the pilgrimages used to be conducted in olden days. It is a process of self-purification. Austerities and penances formed the life of all householders. That is what is being mentioned here, in *kurute gaṅgāsāgaragamanam*.

Vows help cultivate will power

Vrata paripālanam. People may observe a variety of vows. Fasting is very common and there are some people who are always on a fast! There are hardly days when they eat. They fast on Mondays, *caturthī* days, *ekādaśī* days, *puṇṇimā* days, in the month of *śrāvana*, and so on. This kind of vow is very common. What is a vow? It is a deliberate act of self-denial, that I will observe a fast; I will not eat, or I will eat once a day. This is how we cultivate our will power. When I fulfill that vow, *vrata paripālanam*, it gives me a certain satisfaction, and also increases the strength of my willpower. Merely observing a fast is not the *vrata*, of course. During the fast you use that time and energy in worship.

Gaining knowledge is the only means for freedom

Athavā dānam. *Dānam* is charity, giving to the people who are needy. These three observances, pilgrimage, vows, and charity, used to form the life of people. We are told here, that even if we were to do all of these things sincerely, if the effort is *jñānavihinaḥ*, without the knowledge, *bhajati na muktim janmasātena*, in spite of doing all of this even for a hundred lifetimes, one will not gain liberation or *mukti*. Liberation can only come about through *jñānam* or knowledge. The *jñānavihinaḥ*, one who is devoid of knowledge, cannot gain liberation even in a hundred lifetimes. This verse thus emphasizes the value or importance of knowledge.

As we have seen earlier, the problem of bondage is not a legitimate problem. Bondage, or the sense of inadequacy, the sense of littleness, or sense of non-acceptance is an imaginary problem. It is a projected problem. What we call bondage is projected by the mind. In reality, the Self is free, but is still taken to

be bound. It is taken to be limited because of *aviveka* or non-discrimination. This body or the mind which is not the Self is taken to be the Self. Therefore, there is constant suffering from a sense of mortality. I take myself to be a mortal being, subject to death, and so there is a constant fear of death. I take myself to be a limited being, and so there is an attempt to become big. I take myself to be a sad or unhappy person, and so there is an attempt to be happy. All of these notions arise on account of the identification with the body or with the mind. Therefore, the only solution to the problem of bondage is becoming free from that identification by recognizing the true nature of the Self.

The spiritual practices are necessary for self-purification, but are not sufficient

You can gain a variety of *siddhis* and powers, but you cannot gain liberation unless you gain the knowledge of the Self, which is ever liberated. This verse says that the *jñānavihinaḥ*, one who is devoid of knowledge, will not be able to gain liberation merely by the spiritual practices even in one hundred lives! That does not mean that the spiritual practices do not have a place. All of this is required. It does not mean that for the pursuit of knowledge you need not observe any fasts, or need not have any values or discipline in life. It is not so. All of these spiritual practices are required for self-purification. Self-purification is an absolute requirement for gaining knowledge. However, mere purification is not an end in itself. These practices are all only the means, while the end is the gaining of the knowledge¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.