

Satsanga with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

Bhaja Govindam – Verse 20

This verse describes to us certain means for the attainment of this knowledge.

भगवद् गीता किञ्चिदधीता गङ्गा जललव कणिकापीता ।
सकृदपि येन मुरारि समर्चा क्रियते तस्य यमेन न चर्चा ॥

bhagavad gītā kiñcidadhītā gaṅgā jalalava kaṇikāpītā,
sakṛdapi yena murāri samarcā kriyate tasya yamena na carcā.

To the one who has studied the Bhagavadgītā even a little, who has sipped at least a drop of Ganges water, who has worshipped Lord Murāri at least once, there is no discussion with Yama, the Lord of Death.

Kriyate tasya yamena na carcā. Yama is the Lord of Death. *Yamena carcā na kriyate*, even the Lord of Death does not bother about such a person as is described here, *tasya*. This means that when the proper means are followed he is not afraid even of death; he goes beyond the realm of death.

Bhagavadgītā is the text of the Bhagavad Gītā. *Kincid* means a little. *Kiñcidadhītā*, one by whom the Bhagavadgītā is studied even a little. *Gaṅgājala*, the water of the Ganges. *Lava* is a drop. *Kaṇikāpītā*, one by whom even a tiny drop of the Ganges has been sipped.

Sakṛd means once, and *api* means even, so *sakṛdapi* means even once. *Yena*, by whom. *Arcana* means worship, and *murāri* means Lord Kṛṣṇa, *murāri samarcā* is the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Mura was a demon, and *ari* means enemy. Lord Viṣṇu destroyed the demon Mura, so he is called Murāri. This refers to one who worships Lord Kṛṣṇa even once.

The study of the Bhagavadgītā is the first step to liberation

In this verse we see that in order to become free from death all one needs to have done is studied the Bhagavad Gītā a little, or taken a sip of the water of the Ganges, or performed the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa even once. The study of the Bhagavad Gītā stands for the study of the scriptures. The Bhagavad Gītā is a sacred text, and is the essence of all the Upaniṣads and the Vedas. The study of the Bhagavad Gītā or the study of Vedanta is the first step to liberation.

The sacred water of the Ganges also grants liberation. Most of us know the story of the Ganges. It is said that in the olden days, the river flowed in the heavens for the gods and was called Ākāsagaṅgā. It was brought down to flow on earth in order to give liberation to the sons of King Sagara, who were burned to death. According to the story, King Sagara, who had 60,000 sons, was performing the *aśvamedha-yajñā*. In that ritual, a horse was let loose to roam, and wherever it went became territory that had to be conquered by the king performing the *yajñā*. The king thus conquered each new territory, and the horse was ultimately sacrificed. It is said that whoever performs this *yajñā* 100 times will acquire the kingdom of the heavens and become the Indra.

King Sagara was performing his hundredth *aśvamedha-yajñā* and Indra was concerned that he would lose his position. Thus, he came in disguise and stole the horse. The 60,000 sons of Sagara were following the horse as an army to conquer the territory. The horse was gone and they were lost. They searched for it all over, but could not find it. They started digging through the earth and went to Pātāla, the nether land. Indra had stolen the horse and taken it to Pātāla, where he had quietly left it in the hermitage of a sage called Kapila. The sage was in *samādhi*, but the horse was tied there in his hermitage. The sons of Sagara arrived at the hermitage and discovered the horse. Furious, they disturbed the sage and insulted him. Sage Kapila, who was stirred from his *samādhi*, realized that they were insulting him and was so angry that by his very glare, he burnt them to ashes. A big mountain of ashes was left there. King Sagara, worried about his sons, sent some people in search of them. Ultimately they came down to Pātāla, and found the mountain of ashes. They asked sage Kapila, and he told them the whole story. “What do we do? The sons of Sagara have met with an unfortunate death and will therefore go to hell. How can we save them?” Sage Kapila advised them, “If you bring Gaṅgā down from the heavens onto the earth, the water will purify the ashes and all of them will be liberated and go to heaven”. Gaṅgā had thus to be brought down from the heavens.

King Sagara himself, leaving his kingdom to his grandson, Amśuman went to the forest and performed a great penance. However, he died before he could fulfill the task. After him, his son carried on the mission, but he also did not succeed. King Sagara’s grandson also tried, but again, without success. In the fourth generation after King Sagara, Bhagīratha, his great-grandson, went to the forest and performed a severe penance. Even today, when a very difficult task is to be performed, it is called ‘Bhagīratha-kārya’. He performed a penance beyond imagination, by which he was able to please Brahmāji, the creator.

Brahmāji asked him what he wanted. “I want the Ganges to come down to the earth.” “Very well. The Ganges will come to the earth alright, but she will come down with such a tremendous force that the earth will be completely crushed and destroyed. Therefore you require someone to bear the force of the falling Ganges.” “Who can do that?” “Only Lord Śiva can do that.”

The story of Gaṅgā

Bhagīratha performed another penance to please Lord Śiva. Lord Śiva was pleased and asked him, “What do you want?” “I want you to receive the flow of the Ganges when she comes down to the earth.” Lord Śiva agreed, and then the Ganges was invited to drop from the heavens to the earth. Gaṅgā was very proud and arrogant. “Who is there, that can sustain my flow or bear my weight? Let me see how Lord Śiva does it.” With this pride, she began to flow down onto the matted locks of Lord Śiva. He knew her arrogance. She got lost in the matted locks and could not come out. Bhagīratha waited for the Ganges to come down, but no water emerged. “What happened?” “She is arrogant, and has to pay the price.” “She may pay the price, but I have to pay the price also.” Bhagīratha again prayed to Lord Śiva to show kindness and release the Ganges. Lord Śiva then released a small stream, which is called the Ganges today. Wherever there is Lord Śiva, we always see a small stream. Even on the head of the idol of Lord Dakṣiṇāmūrti, we see a tiny maiden who stands for the Ganges.

The Ganges came down, but she was still very proud, full of energy and surging down, without any consideration to where she was flowing. The plan was for Bhagīratha to ride a chariot, and the Ganges to follow him. They came along the hermitage of a sage called Jahnu. He was a king who was living in a hermitage performing *yajñās*, and the reckless Ganges that was flowing without concern for anybody flooded the hermitage of sage Jahnu. He was so angry with her that he drank up the waters of the river. Bhagīratha, who was going ahead, looked back to discover that the Ganges had disappeared! He came back and pleaded with the sage Jahnu to release the ganges. It is said that Jahnu released her from his ears, and that is why she is called Jāhnavi. The *yātra* then proceeded without any further difficulties. Gaṅgā followed Bhagīratha to the hermitage of sage Kapila in Pātāla, and all the ashes were sanctified. All the sons of Sagara were finally released. That is how the ocean, *sāgara*, was formed. It is called *sāgara* because the sons of Sagara dug it. The Ganges filled the ocean completely. It is because of the Ganges that the ocean has all this water. Whenever Gaṅgā is mentioned, all of this is understood to be mentioned.

Gaṅgā represents the flow of knowledge

What does Gaṅgā symbolize? Gaṅgā was released from the head of Lord Śiva and, therefore, represents the flow of knowledge. The Lord is the very first teacher from whom the knowledge has come down to us.

सदाशिवसमारम्भां शङ्कराचार्यमध्यमाम् ।

अस्मदाचार्यपर्यन्तां वन्दे गुरुपरम्पराम् ॥

*sadāśivasamārambhāṁ śaṅkarācāryamadhyamām,
asmadācāryaparyantāṁ vande guruparamparām.*

I salute the lineage of teachers, beginning with the ever auspicious Lord Śiva, linked by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya in the middle and extending up to my own teacher.

I salute the *guru parampara*, all the teachers in this tradition, which began with Lord Śiva. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya is the central link in this lineage, which continues down to our own teachers. Therefore, the Ganges symbolizes the perennial flow of the knowledge from the Lord right up to our own teachers. The Ganges originates in the Himālayās. The Himālayās are the abode of Lord Śiva who resides on mount Kailasa. The Himālayās are also the place where the ṛṣis have always lived and continue to live. The re-emergence of the Ganges from the ears of sage Jahnu represents the *karṇa-parampara*, the tradition of oral instruction. This knowledge is imparted orally by the teacher to the student. All of this is symbolized by the story of the Ganges.

Gaṅgā also represents sanctity

Symbolism apart, there actually is a river that flows in the plains of Northern India called the Ganges, which is considered to be the most sacred river in India. It is said that taking one dip in the river Ganges releases you from all sins. Of course, it is a matter of faith. If you have that faith, you will be released from all your sins. All of this is described in the Gaṅgā *stotram*. *Tava cen mātaḥ, śrotaḥ snātaḥ punarapi jathare sopi na jātaḥ* [Gaṅgāstotram, 7], oh mother, when someone takes a dip in your stream, he does not have to be born again in the womb of the mother. The Ganges is thus the most sacred river. It signifies the flow of knowledge and represents a great sanctity.

Three essentials of spiritual pursuit

There are three aspects in the spiritual pursuit: knowledge, devotion, and action. All three are symbolically represented in this verse. The study of the Bhagavad Gītā is the pursuit of knowledge performed by our intellect. It offers both the vision of life, and the way of life. It tells us what the goal of life is, and the path or *sādhanam* to be followed in order to attain that goal.

Bhakti or devotion is the second requirement in one's spiritual pursuit. Sipping the water of the Ganges represents devotion. The Ganges also represents pilgrimage. In order to sip the water of the Ganges, you must live there, so it represents dwelling on the banks of the river and living a life of austerity and penance.

There was a great saint in India, by the name of Tulasidas. He compares the great sages to the most important of pilgrim centers, Prayaga. There is a confluence of the two holy rivers, Gaṅgā and Yamuna at Prayaga. It is said that there is a third river flowing underneath, called Saraswati, which is not visible. This place is called *triveni sangama*, the confluence of three holy rivers. Therefore, Prayaga is considered to be one of the holiest places in India. Tulasidas says that the great sages are also Prayaga, a wandering or traveling Prayaga. He says that a sage represents the confluence of the three qualities that the three rivers symbolize. Saraswati, as we all know, is the goddess of knowledge. Gaṅgā, according to Tulasidas, represents *bhakti* or devotion, and Yamunā represents *karma* or action. We find all the three in *mahātmās*; we find the knowledge or wisdom in them, we find in their heart, great devotion, and we find in their life, the right action. Thus, there is a confluence of wisdom, devotion, and action in the *mahātmās*. Tulasidas says that while you have to undertake a difficult journey to reach the pilgrimage center of Prayaga, you don't have to go anywhere to see the saints. The saints themselves come to you.

The third aspect of spiritual pursuit is *karma*, action. The worship of the Lord represents action. What is the means of worshipping the Lord? Let every action become a means for worship of the Lord, *svakarmanā tamabhyarcya siddhirivindati mānavaḥ* [Bhagavadgītā, 18-46]. We may worship the Lord through our actions. *Archana* in worship is when you utter the name of the Lord and offer a flower each time. But Lord Kṛṣṇa says, let all your actions become the *archana*. Let every action be a flower. Remember the name of the Lord and offer every action at his feet. Thus, the performance of our day-to-day actions also becomes a worship of the Lord when these actions are performed in that spirit.

In this verse, the worship of Lord Murāri can be said to be *karma*, the sipping of the water of the Ganges can be seen to symbolize devotion, and the study of the Bhagavad Gītā can be understood to represent the aspect of *jñāna*, or the pursuit of knowledge.

A person who pursues knowledge, devotion, and right action is liberated

Lord Yama is the great controller. He determines a person's lot depending on the kind of *karma* that the person has performed, and dispenses justice accordingly. In this verse, we are told that when there is a confluence of all three aspects in a person i.e., knowledge, devotion, and the right action, the Lord of death is never going to bother him. This conveys the meaning that such a person gains the knowledge and becomes free from the cycle of birth and death¹.

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