

BHAKTI YOGA - PART 15

SWĀMI DAYATMANANDA

Class begins with the chanting of the following Shanti mantra:

ॐ सह नावतु ।
सह नौ भुनक्तु ।
सह वीर्यं करवावहै ।
तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ।
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Om Saha Naav Avatu |
Saha Nau Bhunaktu |
Saha Viiryam Karavaavahai |
Tejasvi Naav Adhiitam Asthu Maa Vidvissaavahai: |
Om Shantih Shantih Shantih: ||

Meaning:-

Om May Brahman protect us both |
May Brahman bestow upon us both, the fruit of knowledge |
May we both obtain the energy to acquire knowledge |
May what we both study reveal the truth
May we cherish no ill-feeling toward each other |
Om Peace Peace Peace be unto all ||

We had discussed about the important role rituals and symbols play in religious life, especially in the path of devotion or Bhakti yoga. Now the point comes, towards which end all these have to be directed? This is because if we do not have a single goal, then these very rituals can become distractions for us. Rituals produce tremendous amount of energy. (1.27) Rituals are also great time-savers. Why? Because rituals are sanctified habits directed towards God. Recall the definition of a ritual: any action that reminds us of God and becomes sacred to us, that alone deserves to be called a ritual. Though in ordinary language we call many things as rituals, like the morning ritual of going out for exercise, it is a habit, not a ritual, since the meaning of the word is degraded here. But if he is going to remember God, then that becomes a ritual. So here comes a very

important part: to which direction or goal should we direct all these rituals, all these symbols?

There are various types of symbols of which we have discussed. A symbol by itself does not mean anything – it always points out to something beyond itself. (2.47) And what is that beyond? Nothing but God. That is what we have to always keep in mind. If we have to direct all our energy towards something, it must be only one thing, because in any field, whether it is economic or political or religious field, the secret of success is that we must have tremendous concentration. The power of concentration should be directed towards only one goal. (3.23) This is called, in religious language, the chosen ideal, *Ishta-nishtha*. Every religion, without exception, always emphasizes on this *Ishta-nishtha*, tremendous unwavering one-pointed devotion towards one idea. (3.45). <audio unclear due to disturbance> *Ishta* means that particular manifestation of the divine, form of God, name of God. Now here is our *Ishta* <audio unclear due to disturbance> always many things ... when I was in Bangalore, a good person, a devotee used to come. (I asked)

-- “So, what are you thinking now?”

-- “Swamiji, I went to see this Ramayana, my whole mind was going to see this Rama only.”

-- “Ok, hold on to it.”

After a few months, Mahabharata was being telecast.

-- “Oh Swamiji, this Krishna, the greatest incarnation of God! My mind, somehow, is attracted, I don’t want anything else. I want to offer myself heart and soul to Krishna.”

-- “Very fine.”

After some time, he saw the film “Santoshi Ma”. (5.04) Then he said. Oh, I cannot describe the glory of Santoshi Ma – she has fulfilled so many of my desires. You know, any cinema that he is seeing, he is transferring his devotion to God. This kind of thing is absolutely condemned. Every religion insists upon *Ishta-nishtha*. whom do we follow <unclear audio here>? We have our “Purba janma samskara” -- we are born from our past lives with certain tendencies. (5.47) It is also determined by the family tradition; if we are coming from a particular family tradition, then we usually develop

love for it. Then there is also the Guru's direction. Many times, the Guru only confirms what we have already been doing. If any person is coming from a family worshipping say, Divine Mother, the mantra, the Ishta will be of Divine Mother¹. Exceptions are made. How are they made? A great Guru is capable of looking into the minds of the devotees, seeing what is good for their future. Now a days, there are various psychological tests for determining the aptitude of a candidate if he goes for an interview². A Guru also sees the determination of the person, the past samskara, how he might change – usually that also happens.

This is how we come to know who is our Ishta. It is absolutely necessary. If we study the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (8.28), always keep in mind that he is the greatest interpreter of the Hindu scriptures, and also other scriptures by implication. The purpose of this < unclear audio > Is always taken for granted in the early interpretation of the scriptures. Scriptures contain two types of truths: One is the eternal truth: God exists, this is his nature, and God realization is the only goal of life etc. That is common to all religions. No religion ever quarrels with any other religion with regard to the existence of God, or even with regard to the methods to be adopted to realize God at a higher level. But scriptures also contain what is called non-eternal or ephemeral truths -- this means in trying to practice religion, which is actually spiritual practice, we have to take the language, local conditions, the nature of the person, the nature of the society into consideration. And the stage at which we start our spiritual practice also counts. That is where things are very temporary. What is good for one person, may not good for the other. What is good for one person at some point of time, may not good for the same person (at a different point of time?) (10.05) I will give you an example. There was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. His name was Swami Abhedananda. At some point, he was meditating on a personal God. He was

¹ or of Rama or of Krishna (if that is the family tradition)

² My God, what type of terminology they have evolved! I heard the other day a new word, when somebody advised one of my known persons to “network” with other people. Does that mean the person is supposed to carry a big net. And go on putting it on everybody? Another book by an American author, it is a wonderful book “How much time are people wasting to find jobs” It is even more time they spend getting any job done – they are searching for jobs. And the person who wants to search for jobs, has to learn this lingo, called corporate lingo. “Networking” is one of these corporate lingos. It is mind-boggling. That is why I am happy with what I know, I do not want to go to all those things. Working for Ramakrishna is the easiest thing in this world. (8.01) You just need to know one lingo, the name of (Ramakrishna) and it will save you.

developing so fast that he had lots of visions of God. One day, he had a tremendous experience – all the gods and goddesses, it seemed, merged in a great light. The man was very much delighted. He came to Sri Ramakrishna and told him: this is what I have experienced. Immediately Ramakrishna told him, “From now onwards, you will not have any visions of God. You will only have bhava, the impersonal aspect of God.” I do not know whether it was foretelling of the events that were to take place, because in his life, some events happened which changed the whole tenure of his life. Once Swami Vivekananda (**was telling – unclear audio**), felt tremendous power in himself, so he wanted to test if this was his imagination, or actually the power was with him. Unfortunately, Swami Abhedananda was sitting by his side and meditating. Swamiji turned to him and said, “Just touch me.” So, he touched his thigh and immediately felt an electric shock. Sri Ramakrishna was very ill at that time, living at Cossipore. Swami Abhedananda³ could not hold his hand touching Swami Vivekananda, as though he was touching a live electric wire. But that itself was not the real event. (12.03). Both of them sat. That day, the depth of meditation that Swami Abhedananda experienced was never before experienced by him. The event passed, they got up from meditation, and immediately somebody came and said to Swami Vivekananda that Sri Ramakrishna was asking for him. Narendranath went upstairs and got a thorough scolding from Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna said: “What is this? You have practically destroyed this boy! He had been growing up in a particular way, and now you have induced your own special mentality into him!” What was that mentality? Swami Vivekananda used to practice non-dualism (Advaita Vedanta), whereas Swami Abhedananda used to meditate on a form of God. He was a bhakta, so to speak. Now, in Sri Ramakrishna’s words, it was as if an eight-month fetus had been forcefully expelled (**extracted? from the mother’s womb**) and some other infant had been put in its place. He scolded and said, “It is fortunate that I am still alive, otherwise this boy’s life would have been completely destroyed. After that, for several months, Swami Abhedananda had tremendous problems in spiritual practice. Why? Because he was accustomed to doing things in one particular way, and now he had taken a completely new way. Sri

³ Kali Maharaj as that time.

Ramakrishna's greatness was that now he could not undo what has been done⁴, so he guided him very gently: 'You are making this mistake, you are making this mistake.' (14.06).

One such mistake was this: Swami Abhedananda once went and started catching fish in the Ganges. Sri Ramakrishna called him and asked:

-- "What are you doing?"

-- "I am catching fish."

-- "Don't you feel ashamed that you are catching live fish with this (showing the hook)? What happens to you if the hook is put in your throat, and somebody wrangles it?"

-- "Everything is Brahman. Brahman is catching Brahman. What is wrong there?"

Sri Ramakrishna said: "That is not correct. A person who says Brahman, will never harm another person. He will only love that person, because we love ourselves, and if we see everyone as manifestations of ourselves, then nobody will harm the other, because it is harming ourselves."

So, how much moral practice is to be done before one even goes into the practice of non-dualism, or even the path of devotion for that matter, to which we will come very shortly. (15.22) So, sometimes, choosing a wrong ideal, a wrong path, can delay. Nothing can, of course, prevent us from realizing God, but we might suffer a lot. Without the guidance of a Guru, people can suffer tremendously, as it has been found out. Many Christian saints suffered a lot because there was no Guru to guide them. So, the Guru not only gives an ideal, but also sees that the disciple does not stray from that ideal. In this connection, devotion to one particular ideal, whether it is economics, or politics, or art, or religion, or spirituality – one has to devote oneself with one-pointedness. (16.20). Then only some amount of success is possible. Why is this <why can't we?> devote ourselves to several things? The first point why we cannot do it is this: what is the secret of greatness? It is the power of concentration. What is concentration? Putting the mind only on one idea. If we go on changing one idea every minute to another idea, then <audio is not audible>. Second, most of us <not audible> Our energy (17.09), our opportunities are extremely limited. How much

⁴ Probably he could have done, but perhaps he did not do it.

limited? <not audible> How old are you now? Average is 40-50 years. How much time are you going to live? We can reasonably expect another 25-30 years. So, how much time do you have for spiritual practice? Of course, 25-30 years! Absolutely wrong. How much time is going away in sleeping, eating, cooking, bathing, cleaning? How much time is going away in talking over cell phone? How much time is going away in various distractions? Just to keep us alive, a lot of time and energy is going away. And then there are other things – so many events can happen (18.12). If it is too hot, you cannot meditate; if it is too cold, you cannot meditate; if a mosquito is buzzing around, then you cannot meditate. You know that opportunities are rare, so how do you know that your energy will be the same? (Even) If you are very healthy, after 50, our health goes downhill. How much time do we really have in terms of energy, time, and opportunity within the 25-30 years? <not audible here> Hardly we have six months or four months of time. Utilize that time properly. So that is why (till 19.32, the audio faded very often, difficult to transcribe). One religionist wants to convert peoples to his own religion. Is this Ishta-nishtha, or is it wrong understanding? Ishta-nishtha, by the very word, means rationality – to be reasonable, to think clearly, rationally, reasonably, in a calm and quiet mood (20.00). The problem with rationality is, every person thinks, he alone is rational, and everybody else is irrational. Why don't you <inaudible> ... How much more stupid can people be? A small child has done something, thrown something on the floor.

-- “ Don't you see you are making the house dirty?”

How does a child of 3-4 years see it? We grown-ups think that the child sees and understands things exactly like we understand. A wife went to a party. They were married for a few years. The husband said: <poor audio here> “My wife never agrees whatever I say even if we are married for six years.” Immediately the wife said: “You are wrong! Not six years, it is seven years!” (21.07)

<bad audio, skip till 21.37> It is the age of irrationality that brings in wars, restlessness, competition, destruction, killing – anything that does harm is because of irrationality.

So, every religion has this emphasis: you must turn all your attention to God. That is fine. But it is only the Vedas that discovered long back that there is another

side to Ishta-nishtha – give complete freedom to everybody. By the very word Ishta-nishtha, it means, I have my chosen ideal, therefore by implication, you also have your own chosen ideal, everyone else has his or her own chosen ideal. But (it is) a great mistake all over the world -- they always said, yes that is true, all the time, everybody has complete freedom to think of God in his or her own way, but it is only those who do not practice any spiritual discipline have all the time in the world to quarrel with others. (22.47). Now, coming back I said that the purpose of an incarnation is always to reinterpret the scriptures. He brings out the salient points of particular scriptures, he practices them in his own life, and he influences other people so that others also can follow the same way the interpretations. In this age, Sri Ramakrishna is considered as the greatest incarnations. He re-interpreted the scriptures, and Gospel is that re-interpretation, just as the Upanishads are the re-interpretations of all the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita is the reinterpretation of the Upanishads, and the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is the interpretation of Bhagavad Gita, and by implication, the Upanishads, and by implication the Vedas. In the Vedas, it was discovered that all our attention should be focused on God alone. What is the essence of a scripture? God exists, turn your attention to God. (24.04). That is the essence of it. This is what Swami Vivekananda expressed in his inimitable way in the essence of Vedanta: “Each soul is potentially divine; the goal of life is to manifest this potential divinity.” If we do not do that, then our life will be in vain.

Sri Ramakrishna reinterpreted -- many people do not understand what the important points are. There are five different points of reinterpretation in Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings: one religion, one Scripture, one chosen ideal or chosen deity, one Guru, and one mantra. Do they smack off fanaticism? (25.13) Every religion is telling: “our religion is supreme, our scripture is the only scripture, our concept of God is the only concept, our Guru is the only Guru in the world, and whatever we say is the mantra.” What did Sri Ramakrishna preach? All religions are valid, all scriptures are valid, and all Gurus are great people, all mantras lead to the same goal. But without Ishta-nishtha⁵, that tremendous focus on one’s chosen ideal, it is not possible to make progress in spiritual life. (26.09). So, we have to take for granted two things: you

⁵ He emphasized it so much. In the Gospel, we have several references.

go on focusing on your own ideal, and at the same time, respect every sincere spiritual aspirant, every prophet, every scripture, everything else, but you have to follow your own path as directed by your Guru. You know, Sri Ramakrishna used to give several illustrations. I will give you three illustrations. One is, of course, the most famous one related to Hanuman. Rama went to fight with Ravana. Truth is one, but our sages call it by various names. It is one singular point that was being emphasized by the Upanishadic rishis, by Sri Krishna, by Rama, by all great incarnations of God. That is what Sri Ramakrishna has done. In the Ramayana there is this story: Rama was fighting Ravana, and he needed the help of his *vahana* (or vehicle) *Garuda*. So, he remembered *Garuda*. Immediately *Garuda* came and the problem was solved. Then *Garuda* wanted to have the *darshana* of the Lord before going back. But the chosen deity of *Garuda* was the form of Vishnu, but here was Sri Rama! *Garuda* knew that Lord Vishnu was incarnated as Sri Rama, so he was fidgeting. Immediately Rama assumed the form of MahaVishnu with four hands and all that. *Garuda* was very pleased, but Hanuman was by his side, and now he was fidgety! (28.02). His chosen deity was the form of Sri Rama. He also knew that Sri Rama and Vishnu are the same, but still he was fidgety. *Garuda* praised the Lord and disappeared; Vishnu again took his old form of Sri Rama. Then Sri Rama was supposed to have asked⁶: “Hanuman, you know that I am Vishnu, I am Sri Rama, why are you so much fidgety?” Then, from the mouth of Hanuman came a beautiful verse⁷:

Srinathe janaki-nathe
Abhedah paramatmani
Tathapi mama sarvasvam
Ramah kamala-locanah

Meaning: I know that the Lord of Lakshmi, Sri Vishnu, and the Lord of Sita, Sri Rama, are absolutely one and the same. Even though it is true, I would like to see the lotus-eyed Sri Rama.

⁶ Don't worry about the story – these are pegs to teach us about this wonderful truth.

⁷ Somebody must have composed it and put it in the mouth of Hanuman.

Sri Ramakrishna use to quote this and say: “That is the kind of nishtha (নিষ্ঠা) that one must have.” There are more stories: Hanuman is called *Chiranjeevi*⁸ (living forever)-- he is not dead, he is even now living in the physical form, though it is hidden. So, Hanuman can be found by devotees, even now they can have a vision of him. (29.37) Long after Sri Rama disappeared, the Lord reappeared as Sri Krishna. Once Hanuman also felt like visiting Sri Krishna, so he came to Dwaraka. Immediately Sri Krishna called Rukmini and said: “You assume the form of Sita (30.01) and I will assume the for of Sri Rama, otherwise Hanuman will not be happy.” So, they entertained him at that point -- he was very happy and went away. The second example Sri Ramakrishna gave is that of gopis. You know, how much the gopis loved Sri Krishna! Sri Krishna left them permanently. He became a king maker in Mathura. Once the gopis decided to visit him. Somehow, they went there by bribing the doorkeepers, and to their shock, they saw their beloved Gopikrishna but what was he doing? He put on a crown, sitting on a throne. They were wondering: ‘Whom have we come to see?’ This is a *parapurusha*⁹ (a stranger), not our beloved! Immediately they covered their faces and ran away. Sri Ramakrishna used to tell this to mention that even though it was Krishna, it was not *their* Krishna. Their Krishna is only Gopikrishna, without the crown and the costly royal robes and all those things. What a marvelous example of Ishta-nishtha – even though he was none other than Sri Krishna, (they would recognize) only that aspect of Krishna with whom they were familiar. In a way, that also is very important for most of us. (31.48) Suppose somebody is a very restless person, and he becomes a devotee of the Divine Mother. Then he should have a correct concept of the Divine Mother. But suppose somebody with a child’s nature, like a baby, is always dependent upon the mother. That person is also a devotee of the Divine Mother. Then what type of the Divine Mother does he see in his nishtha? Like a mother who look after the baby. That is how, depending on our psychological types, we have to forge our relationship with God. There are five such types of possible relationships with infinite variations among themselves. In the third example that Sri Ramakrishna points out in the Gospel is, “You know Radha was the

⁸ Hanuman, Bibhishana are, as some people call, long-lived people.

⁹ Bengali word, meaning ‘not our, or my man’.

chief gopi, queen of the gopis. Why? A gopi is an individual soul who has turned all her devotion towards God. Radha was the supreme of the gopis because there was not an iota of deviation. Her soul, through 365 days in a year and 24 hours a day, was turned only towards Krishna. She did not know anything other than Krishna, so intense was her devotion. (33.23). It is an ideal. Don't think there was a person like that, although there might have been, because Sri Ramakrishna was one such manifestation of Radha, Sri Krishna Chaitanya or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. (33.37), as though Radha had re-embodied herself in that particular form. Once it so happened that Sri Krishna had gone to visit another gopi at night, and Radha was suffering from the pangs of separation. She was very piqued, as it were. So, her friends asked:

-- "Radha, you love Krishna."

-- "Yes."

-- "Krishna is very happy with Chandrabali. Why are you so much piqued?"

Radha said: "Don't misunderstand me. I am not piqued because Krishna has gone to Chandrabali's house. If Krishna is happy, I am very happy. I am piqued because what does Chandrabali know about how to take care of Krishna??"

So, you see, the others were thinking (34.30), Krishna did not come to her and she was feeling jealous. No, she was not feeling jealous – she was feeling unhappy because she was always thinking, how can I make my beloved a very happy person. If other people don't know how to make him happy, then I will be unhappy. Where was her mind? What are we thinking of? What was Radha thinking of? This is the truth about all great souls! What was Sri Ramakrishna thinking of? And what do we think of him after seeing certain actions? This is an example of ishta-nishtha. But ishta-nishtha also at the same time must have that generosity, that rationality, that everyone is calling on my own beloved in his or her own way – that is part of ishta-nishtha, that is the true ideal of the path of devotion. (35.24). Otherwise, what does it lead to? Fanaticism! That is the trouble with all of us. People have peculiar ideas.

So, the ideal of the chosen deity, combined with that truth, that everyone is calling upon the same Divine Lord and has equal devotion to every religion, every prophet, every saint – that is one of the musts. What happens now-a-days? People's minds are so restless! They go for a few days to this ashrama, a few days to the other

ashrama (36.04); they are always seeking, and get bored with one Guru, so they go to the other Guru. Of course, getting bored has become a habit now. So, they go to some other Guru, some other center, for some other instruction – they go on moving. This is, what I call in harsh language, spiritual prostitution. Ishta-nishtha, ekanishtha, must be there all the time. Swami Vivekananda has dealt with this subject so beautifully. His words are so beautiful, says what is called ishta-nishtha: one who aspires to be a devotee must know that there are so many opinions and so many ways. This was literally the translation of what Sri Ramakrishna was teaching *jato mat, tato path*. Now, opinions here do not mean irrational opinions. We go on changing our opinions at every opportunity. (37.02) That is not really what is meant here. Ishta-nishtha is my opinion. Your ishta-nishtha is your opinion. You think, ‘this is my way,’ or you have been told this is your way. I have been told that this is my way. We must stick to our own, do not go on changing your opinions. So, a bhakta must know that so many opinions are so many ways. He must know that all the various sects of the various religions are the manifestations of the glory of the same Lord.

They call you by so many names. They divide you, as it were, by different names, in each one of these names is to be found your omnipotence. You reach the worshipper through all of these – neither is there any special time, so long as the soul has intense love for you. You are so easy to approach -- it is my misfortune that I cannot love you¹⁰. And in each one of your names, you have put all of your power (38.10) and there are no set times or conditions. So vast is thy mercy! How huge is then my misfortune, my wretchedness, that I have not acquired devotion to thy name!

This is exactly what Sri Ramakrishna was telling through so many analogies. (38.28) There is a small pond, and there are four *ghats*: the Hindus go to one and call the water ‘*jal*’, the Muslims go to one and say ‘*pani*’, and Englishmen come, take the same water, and call it ‘water’, somebody gets the water and calls it ‘*aqua*’ – all these are different names of the same substance. This is one of the things that Sri Ramakrishna used to emphasize so much. The substance has not changed, only there are various names. Why are we quarreling so much about these names? (39.02) Not only that, the bhakta must take care not to hate, nor even to criticize. Those radiant

¹⁰ This is a famous quotation from Sri Chaitanya’s Shikshashtaka.

suns of light who are the founders of the various sects – He must not hear them spoken ill of, not to speak of criticizing! What a wonderful thing Swami Vivekananda is telling: Suppose somebody criticizes Jesus Christ. What should you do? You should not even listen to it, or (**criticisms of**) Prophet Mohammad or Gautam Buddha, or any other great soul.

You know, I have learned a great lesson – we instinctively somehow degrade. Suppose there is a follower of Sai Baba or a follower Ma Amritanandamayee among the contemporary saints – somehow, we think they are not great saints. I am not saying whether they are great or not great, what I am saying is, in the eyes of the followers of them, they are the greatest, just as we look upon Sri Ramakrishna, they look upon them. They have every right to do so! If that helps them progress in spiritual life, then what is your headache? We must always respect. I remember an incident: Swami Yatishwaranandaji was in Bangalore, and there was a great soul in South India, called Swami Ramdas, in Ananda Ashrama. Once this swami came to the Bangalore Ashrama temple with his devotees to pay his respects to Thakur. Swami Yatishwaranandaji was sitting in the verandah of his room a little distance away from the temple, but he has seen Swami Ramdas coming with his followers. Swami Yatishwaranandaji stood up in great humility, and until Swami Ramdas left the premises, he kept on standing there. That was a great lesson we have to learn. We don't know whether he was a great man or not, we had no direct contact except reading the books -- but in the eyes of his followers, he was like God, (41.11) as we consider Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, they consider Mata Krishnabai and Swami Ramdas in that light. To show respect to other saints, Sri Ramakrishna's life is full of illustrations. One Christina came, William -- Sri Ramakrishna stood up and shook hands with him. When Sikhs came, he used to talk highly of Guru Nanak. When Muslims used to come, he used to talk about their religion. Sri Ramakrishna went and did Namaz, did you know that? Even now that mosque is there near Dakshineswar. He had no problem, but we have the problem. You know, one devotee and one admirer¹¹ of Sri Ramakrishna had a big quarrel between them, to such an extent that they would not speak with each other. One day unfortunately it so happened that they

¹¹ Keshab Chandra Sen was his admirer and Bijoy Krishna Goswami was his devotee.

had to meet in a boat. They were sitting with long drawn faces. Sri Ramakrishna was sitting there. He told a story: Rama is the Guru of Shiva and Shiva is the Guru of Rama. They had a quarrel, (42.24) but being Rama and Shiva, they soon made up their quarrel. The followers of Rama and the followers of Shiva, the monkeys and the demons – their quarrel never came to an end. So, a bhakta should never hear them spoken ill of. Very few indeed are those who are at once the possessors of an extensive sympathy and power of appreciation, as well as an intensity of love, yet we know it is practicable to educate a large number of human beings into the ideal of a wonderful blending of both the width and the intensity of love. (43.04) And the way to do that is by the path of ishta-nishtha, steadfast devotion to the chosen ideal. Bhakti yoga, therefore, places upon us the imperative command of not to hate or to deny the various paths that lead to salvation, and yet the growing plant must be hedged around to protect it, until it has grown into a tree. Another important aspect of the devotion to chosen ideal is that, we are human beings – even with regard to God, though we say that “Oh God! You are God and we are helpless ordinary beings”, but in practice we demand¹² “You must do this to me, otherwise I will see, I will not care to think about you!” What I am referring to is that the thought of the devotion to Ishta or the chosen ideal is: whatever the chosen ideal wills, must be accepted in totality. (44.26) We have no right to question: “Why did you do this? I only depended upon you, and is the result of my devotion to you?” That should never be, otherwise that is not ishta-nishtha. “Anyway, I tested you, but you did not stand up to my test. So, I am going to choose somebody else;” that does not work. Sri Ramakrishna used to illustrate: A man built a house, and a big storm came. He was a devotee of Hanuman. The house was about to fall down, and he started praying: “Oh Hanumanji, I am your greatest devotee, please protect the house.” Unfortunately, the wind did not stop, so he thought, Hanuman is useless. Then he called Sri Rama, “Ramji, Ramji, Hanumanji is your servant and I am a devotee of Hanumanji. Please protect my house.” But Ramji also did not protect. Ultimately the storm came and broke the house. He was telling: “This is Hanumanji’s house, don’t destroy it, it is Ramji’s house, please don’t destroy it.” When nothing

¹² A master can demand, “Hey, you bring coffee or tea”, but a servant cannot ask his master to do so. He should remain a servant.

worked, he said: “It is *shala*’s¹³ house, satan’s house!” {laugh¹⁴} (45.47) Many of our devotions are like that -- if our desires are not fulfilled, if we undergo a certain amount of suffering, we seem to develop terrible doubts about God, whereas Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s Shikshastaka is telling: “Oh Lord! I have dedicated myself to you. Whether you love me, whether you bestow your grace on me, or you choose to make *chutney* of me under your feet, you alone will remain my chosen ideal. I am not going to leave you. You may leave me, but I am not going to leave you.” That is called real ishta-nishtha.

Swami Vivekananda is telling that (46.33) Ishta- nishtha is alright, it is very necessary, but it is necessary not to be too liberal. It is alright that every religion is fine, every deity is fine, every path is fine, every scripture is fine, every guru is fine, every mantra is fine, but we must hedge around, i.e., the tree must be allowed to grow. This is illustrated so beautifully in one of our *Panchatantra* stories: A man had a monkey, and the monkey was a great friend of his, always moving with the man. The man had a garden, where he planted some seeds and the seeds grew into small plants. The plants were growing up, and suddenly he had to go away. So, he called the monkey and said: Look here, the plants will die without water, so please take care that they have sufficient water.” Then he went away. The monkey promised he would do that. He brought water, but would he know that plants had sufficient water? So, he pulled out the plants, soaked the roots, and put them back. Everyday, 3-4 times, he was pulling them out, and put them back. After a few days, the man came back, and all the plants were completely dead. What is the moral of the story? That we should not go on changing whether this is being effective, Rama is looking after me, Ramakrishna is looking after me, and all those things. We must have that ishta-nishtha, otherwise progress will be stopped. (48.06) The tender plant of spirituality will die if exposed too early to the action of a constant change of ideas and ideals. Many people, in the name of what may be called religious liberalism, may be seen feeding their idle curiosity with a continuous succession of different ideals. With them, hearing new things grows into a kind of disease, a sort of religious drink-mania. They want to hear new things

¹³ The Bengali word *shala* means wretch.

¹⁴ Because it was not saved!

just by way of getting a temporary nervous excitement called a kick, and when one such exciting influence has had its effect on them, they are ready for another. Religion is with these people is a sort of intellectual opium-eating, and there it ends.

“There is another sort of man”, says Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, “who is like the pearl-oyster of the story.” There is a pearl oyster, it makes pearls. This oyster, in Sri Ramakrishna’s words, waits for a drop of rain when the star Svâti is in ascendancy. As soon as it gets it, it goes down to the depth of the ocean, and does not come out until the pearl is perfectly formed. There is a beautiful song “*Dub dub dub dubsagare amar mon*”¹⁵. Its meaning is *ishta-nishtha*, once you get from the Guru and our good luck is really there, and when the Guru whispers that *maha-mantra* into the ears – that is the raindrop. Then close yourself, dive deep into *sadhana* until the ‘pearl’ is formed. What is the ‘pearl’ here? God-realization! Do not come out, do not be distracted. That is the meaning of diving deep. (50.00) That is what Sri Ramakrishna has done throughout his life. Whatever path he followed, he never allowed (**himself to be distracted**). Just an example: when he was practicing Islam under the direction of Sufi saint Govinda, he removed all the pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. He never visited the temple of the Divine Mother, even a thought of the Divine Mother did not cross his mind. He had the power of emptying the mind of everything else. He wanted even to eat the Muslim food biriyani and all those things. He was a scientific man – whatever his Guru said, he would do 100% with *nishtha*. That is why he could accomplish things so quickly. This *eka-nishtha* (devotion to one ideal) is absolutely necessary for a beginner in the practice of religious devotion. He must see Hanuman in the Ramayana: “Though I know that the Lord of Sri and the Lord of Janaki are manifestations of the same supreme being, yet my all-in-all is the lotus-eyed Rama.” (51.08) Then, if the devotional aspirant is sincere, out of this little seed will come the gigantic tree like the Indian banyan, sending out branch after branch and root after root on all sides, till it covers the entire field of religion. Thus, will the true devotee realize that he who was his own ideal in life is worshipped in all ideals, by all sects, under all names, and through all forms. So, in the path of *bhakti* or devotion, the ideal of a chosen deity as determined by our Guru is a must. All the rituals, all the pujas, all

¹⁵ Dive deep, O mind, into the ocean of the beauty of Lord.

symbolisms – everything has to be directed toward the Lord. At the same time, we must not forget that the spiritual progress is like a three-dimensional progress. We grow, our soul grows, and God comes in here, but at the same time, the world comes near to us. (52.10) We become identified with God and the world at the same time. One of the problems that come is: some people are very good in meditation, payer etc., but they are extremely selfish when they come out into the world. If that is not looked after or combated properly, the problem is going to be a big one because there is no inner growth and there is no outer growth. Both growths stop for a selfish person. That is why, every religion says, purity of the heart, both inner and outer **counts**. So, at the same time we have devotion to the chosen deity, we must have a kind of outlook, a kind of behavior to the external world. That is what, in the next chapter, Swami Vivekananda is going to discuss by taking the cue from Sri Ramanujacharya. As you know, he was the greatest exponent of devotion in modern times. The methods and the needs – there are, in brief, seven such methods. We will discuss them in our next class. (Om, shanti, shabti, shantihi).