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What have you gained?

What is it that one gains through spiritual longing, realization or God-awareness?

The answer lies hidden in the following:

What have you gained, if you have not gained yourself, the immortal, the infinite?

What have you gained, if you have never tasted the deep longing for deliverance and supreme emancipation in your life?

What have you gained, if you have not realized the pleasure of contentment?

What have you gained, if you have not tasted the joys of self-surrender, if your heart has not longed to make an instrument of God of you, if you have not been able to sweeten all your miseries with a touch of God?

Can you buy any of these through the money you have in your bank account?

(Excerpts from my notes, T.K. Sribhashyam)

“You are the air, the fire, the water, and also the moon.
You are the absolute master and forefather.
Thousand times, again and again
I offer you my sacrifice and my respect”

Bhagavad Gîta XI,40

“I prostrate myself before the lotus feet of Nârâyana
I immerse myself completely in Nârâyana,
By the constant offering of my prayers and
by the trusting recitation of his holy name”

Excerpt of Mudundamâla de Kulashekhara

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Ândâl's Thiruppâvai

Excerpts from an exclusive commentary by Sri T. Krishnamacharya

Thiruppâvai, in Tamil, the language of Tamil Nadu, is a poetic composition that has the power to lead to devotion. Thiruppâvai is a call for women to dedicate themselves to devotion.

Poem 9: "You, uncle's daughter, sleeping on a cot with scented fumes circulating in the air; wicks of light faintly glowing all around in a mansion studded with pure precious stones; unlock the gem bedecked door!"

"Aunty! Would you arouse her? Is your daughter dumb, deaf, lazy and dreaming? Is she accursed to a grand sleep and guarded by a sentinel or hypnotized?"

"Worship him as Mâdhava, Great Hypnotist, Mukunda, Vaikuntha, and so on and chant Him." Arise! Listen and consider, Damsel.

Here Ândâl addresses to a devotee who is in service to God, and at the same time she is related to her as a cousin.

In this poem Ândâl points out the importance of the mother. It is her duty to awaken devotion in her children. It is also the duty of the mother to drive away laziness, lethargy and sleepiness from her children and lead them towards God.

In devotion one may be awaken "from outside", that is, by being deeply involved in the duties. Or one may be awaken "from inside", that is, by pondering over the greatness of the means or the results. In this poem, Ândâl advises the service to God as a means to be awaken from outside as well as from inside. Once again Ândâl shows her prowess in poetical aesthetics. Every word of the poem carries two meanings: the apparent romanticism and the inherent spirituality.

When she describes the doorway to God as a mansion studded with pure precious stones, it can be either a well-decorated house which stands for men and women. But it also denotes that just as we do not want to tamper with such a precious door, we would avoid opening it, even if we lose to see what is behind the door. Our ego and all the values our ego imposes on us are the precious stones we do not like to be damaged. Consequently, we do not want to open ourselves to see what is beyond our ego, and into the bargain we lose the Divine. Ândâl uses another example: wicks of light faintly glowing all around. Naturally the precious jewels are well appreciated, when there are sparks of light. So too, the values imposed by our ego glitter through the sense data.

The expression 'sleeping on a cot' can be interpreted as a careless sleep, just like the slumber when one is intoxicated by material pleasures. But it also means our watchful carelessness or the detachment from wrong knowledge of the divine subject and measured detachment from materialistic activities. 'Scented fumes circulating in the air' is a metaphor for the following: through perfumes one attracts others or one is attracted. The same is true for right knowledge, it attracts either others or one is attracted by right knowledge. In Indian thoughts right knowledge is considered a divine perfume.

Earlier commentators of Thiruppâvai say that Ândâl in this poem invokes a Sri Vaishnava Saint, Thirumalisai Âlwar. He was a staunch devotee of Shiva, but one of the Vaishnava Saints awakened devotion to Vishnu in him. Thirumalisai Âlwar preached both, in Kanchipuram and in Kumbhakonam (South India).

Sri T. Krishnamâchârya's commentary

Our mind is a living place for our ego, our feelings and emotions, as well as for God and His attendants. Our beautifully decorated ego constantly shuts the mind. As long as we are attracted by these glitters of the sense data, our mind will be shut to Reality. Just as the jewel-studded door is guarded, the ego that shuts our mind is guarded by emotions. Ândâl says that the only way to unlock the door is by casting off the sense of "mine-ness". She reminds us of the responsibility of the mother. In Hindu tradition the mother wakes up her children with sweet words (or songs), uttering God's name, so that the first early morning sound and image in the children's mind would be love, affection and God. In this ninth poem, Ândâl recalls this tradition and reminds of the mother's responsibility for awaking the spirit of devotion in her children.

Vishnu, Sri Krishna in particular, is named Mukunda, because He is easily accessible through His power of attraction. Another name of Vishnu is Mâdhava, or the Consort of Sri Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity and auspiciousness. Vishnu is also called Vaikuntha, because he prevents disintegration.

By seeking the help of her aunt Ândâl recalls the two types of blood relations we have to us: those who support us in our devotional life and those who are against our devotional life. In Hindu tradition

the maternal uncle and his wife (aunt) are (and should be) the supportive relation in our devotional life. Our life is studded with nine precious gems: parent-child; master-servant; husband-wife; brother-sister; lover-loved; mine-others; knowable-unknown, supporter-supported and protector-protected. Some are supportive, while others could act against us!

Woman's quest for individuality

Srimathi Pundarikavalli (the eldest daughter of Sri T. Krishnamacharya)

If a woman is normal, i.e. reticent, shy and simple, she is dubbed by many as 'backward'. If she is smart and intelligent, she is dubbed as 'aggressive, unnatural, unwomanly and Amazonian.' Pseudo-spiritualists criticise that a woman is always an obstacle to spiritual life. A woman thus gets confused what her real individuality is. In this confusion she ends as a mere plaything in the hands of men, self-centred, decorative, possessive, passionate, insecure...

In the past well-educated and cultured women were really responsible for the wonderful happiness, harmony and peace in their homes and in the society as well. Wifehood and motherhood were their sacred and whole-time occupation. In their position as wives and mothers they manifested their innate feminine qualities of selfless love, sacrifice and service to the others, they nurtured through these the noblest qualities of humanity.

Veda praises the woman as equal to God and ordains: Consider your mother as your God. The wifehood of sharing joys and sorrows with her spouse smoothly passed into motherhood, wherein she shared her joys and sorrows with all the family members. Through this she grew de facto into a head of the family. Her bashfulness was the protective veil to her chastity and purity. Her gentleness and softness in speech and action manifested her love to every member in the family. Her faith and prayer gave her a unique spiritual strength and forbearance, with which she integrated the heterogeneous members into a homogeneous family.

Women in general possessed an innate faith in God, a spirit of service, forbearance, humility, compassion and sweetness. Women possessed all the wealth of the home and society. In the course of time this situation passed on to man. He even considered the woman as a part of his wealth and began to consider her as his slave. He thought that power and wealth would make him reach the ultimate goal. The woman started to fight for liberation. She followed the path of revolution, earned equality in education, in work and in responsibilities and strove to excel men in every field, fighting for equal rights. She called herself emancipated.

She thought that by being equal to men externally, she would reach the goal. What was that goal? To know God, to know the Truth and to know the Self.

Did she find the answer? Has man accepted this equality? Is he willing to give back to woman what he took from her? Has he succeeded in reaching the goal?

Symbolism in Veda: six foes

Atharva Veda 8.4.22 describes the six psychological foes, namely kâma (lust), krodha (anger or wrath), lobha (greed), moha (delusion), mada (arrogance) and mâtsarya (jealousy).

Each one of them is symbolised by an animal or bird in Sanskrit literature, namely delusion by an owl, anger by a wolf, jealousy by a dog, lust by chakravâka (Ruddy Shelduck or Casarca ferruginea), arrogance by an eagle and greed by a vulture. The translation of this verse is:

"O Indra, kill the delusion (owl), kill the anger (wolf), kill the jealousy (dog), kill the lust (chakravâka), kill the arrogance (eagle), kill the greed (vulture)."

Any student in Sanskrit knows about the love stricken chakravâka birds. 'The dog in the manger policy' is a popular phrase in Indian English to express that the dog certainly does not eat grass, nor does he allow the cow to eat the grass in the manger either. Indian myths describe eagles as brimming with arrogance about their ability to cross over any obstacle. There are many stories in the Purânas about the mythical eagle, Garuda, and its humiliation at the hands of Lord Vishnu. In Indian

myths the owl is said to be full of dullness or delusion. Since it is awake at nights unlike all other birds, it is supposedly not sure whether it is a bird or a nocturnal animal.

Good actions should be spontaneous

Karna, a Kaurava prince, was known for his generosity. Every morning he would give gifts to his subjects, before conducting his daily prayers. He would offer whatever came to his hand. One day, when he was about to start his prayers, an old man came and asked for alms. Karna took a golden pot and offered it to the old man. However, the old man refused, saying that Karna was giving it to him with his left hand. In Indian tradition one should use the right hand to give anything – be it a payment or a gift.

Karna told him that even though he knew that he should not give anything with his left hand, and especially a gift, he did not wait to change the golden pot from the left to the right hand, because that short span of time would have been sufficient to modify his mind and the gift also. Karna explained the old man that when we want to do good to any, it should be done spontaneously, without giving an iota of time for reflection, as this iota of time would be sufficient to withdraw our spontaneity.

So too like Karna, whether we want to offer or we want to express our joy or even our indebtedness, we should do it spontaneously without any ulterior motives.

Vishnu (part 3)

Sri D. Pattanaik, Mumbai

“Sacrifice me.” said Vishnu. Vishnu, the embodiment of every aspect of the cosmic sacrifice, became the cosmic dwelling, its four cardinal directions, its four intermediate directions, its roof and floor. Brahmā divided Vishnu into four parts. So vast was Vishnu, that from just one quarter of his being Brahmā could create the whole world and everything in it, including the gods and the demons. Vishnu became Vastu Purusha, the Lord of Space, and Yuga Purusha, the Lord of Time.

Overwhelmed by the sheer magnificence of Vishnu, Brahmā saluted him, “You are Bhagavān, the totality of the cosmos. Everything in this world has come from you.” As soon as the gods and demons were created, they wondered, “Where is everything?” Vishnu said, “All that you seek lies dissolved in the primeval waters. Churn it out.” “What could we use as a churning spindle?” they asked. “Use Mount Meru, the Axis of Space.” “Where do we get the churning rope?” “Use Ananta Shesha, the Serpent of Time.”

Mount Meru lay submerged beneath the primeval waters. Neither the gods nor the demons could pull it out. So Vishnu, took the form of the celestial bear, Varāha, and ploughed up Meru with his mighty tusks and brought it to the surface. Vishnu then wound Ananta Shesha round the celestial mount to create the cosmic churn. Taking the form of the celestial turtle, Kurma, Vishnu supported the cosmic churn on his back. Kurma’s upper shell made up the vault of heavens and held the sky; his lower shell formed the abyss and contained the sea. His feet rested upon the four cardinal directions. The gods and the demons saluted this cosmic turtle praising him as the celestial foundation of the universe.

The gods held Ananta’s tail, the demons grabbed his neck, and they began churning the cosmic waters. The mountain twisted and turned, the ocean frothed and fumed. The new world emerged. After a thousand years of churning there arose from the ocean Kālakuta, the accumulated impurities of the old world. As the churning became intense, the rocks on the mountain slopes crashed into each other, spitting fire that set ablaze the trees atop of Meru. Smoke filled the air choking the gods and the demons. “Help us Kurma,” they cried. The divine turtle flapped its flippers and splashed water all around putting out the fire, clearing the air, refreshing everyone. Thus, the rain was born.

As the churning continued, the formless, limitless mass within the cosmic waters began to take wonderful shapes. First came the sun, the moon and the pole star. Vishnu placed the pole star above mount Meru, the sun and the moon danced round it giving the cyclical rhythm of the seasons, Ritu. Plants began to flower and fruit, while animals began to eat, mate, migrate and hibernate.

Vishnu, the pivot of this wheel of life, came to be known as Chakrappāni. Then came the elements – earth, fire, wind and water. But no sooner were they churned up than they began slipping away in different directions. Vishnu stretched out his four hands and recaptured the four escaping elements. Fire became His discus, water His lotus, wind His conch and earth His mace. He became ether, and

permeated every corner of space weaving all things into the cosmic fabric like the string in a necklace of beads. Vishnu became Vaikuntha, the Lord of Cohesion, He who prevents disintegration.

As the churning continued, there emerged from the cosmic water, its most precious gift: Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune and splendor, bestower of power, prosperity and pleasure.

Lakshmi was accompanied by Dhanvantari, the divine physician, the foe of disease, death and decay. He brought with him the science of health and healing, Ayurveda, a bag of herbs, a leech to suck out toxins, a knife to cut out tumors, a pestle and mortar to make medicinal potions. He also carried a pot of amrutha, the elixir of immortality.

(to be continued)

The four boys who made a lion

Once upon a time there lived four sons of a poor Brahmin who taught them all the Vedas and the holy scriptures. On their parents death, they decided to go and stay with their grandmother. But on reaching there they found themselves unwelcome and their cousins were disapproved of the brothers. Facing this situation the brothers decided to go out into the world separately, each learning a special skill and come back and meet at a common place after a while. So they dispersed and came back to the same place at the appointed time. Each of them told what he had learnt. The first one said, "I can create the flesh of a creature from a single bone of this creature". The second one said, "I know how to grow the hair and skin of a creature, if it has flesh and bones." The third one said, "I can create the limbs of a creature, if its form is complete with skin, hair, flesh and bones". The fourth one said, "I know how to give life to that creature, once it is complete in form with limbs."

So they set off into the forest to find a piece of bone, on which they could test their skills. The first bone they found was a lion's. So each of them displayed his skill and created a huge living lion, which – as fate would have it – killed all the four of them and sped away.

Who among the four brothers is responsible for the death of all of them?

"The fourth one, as he was the one who gave life to the otherwise dead structure of bones, flesh, limbs and hair."

Sense control during Prayer or Meditation

For a successful and fruitful prayer or meditation, the senses, the mind and the intellect should be directed towards the object or subject of prayer or meditation.

The following are some of the indications that one should apply during prayer or meditation:

- One should be dumb to worldly matters but talk only on the subject of prayer or meditation.
- One should be deaf to all worldly subjects, be it family, society, economy or even politics, but listen attentively to God's name or prayers.
- One should be blind to all objects that attract one's attention to worldly matters, but open the eyes widely to see only the object of prayer or meditation.
- One should shun from the perfumes that come from the surrounding people, but catch the smell of perfumes offered to the object of meditation or prayer.
- One should prevent the mind from invoking the matters of worldly life, but invoke only the past experiences of prayer and meditation.
- One should avoid invoking or referring to human emotions like anger, desire, jealousy and hatred, but replace them by the emotions of contentment, happiness, satisfaction, love and devotion.
- One should not feel guilty that all these activities vanish once one comes out of prayer or meditation.

One should feel rejoiced at the experience of meditation or devotional practices, however short it was.

Devotion as it is taught in Bhagavad Gîta

Sri T. K. Sribhashyam

(Seminar in Aachen, November 2003, Bénédicte Chaillet and Heike Schatz-Watson)

Sri Krishna uses a metaphor to explain the path of the soul. He compares the soul to a swan (hamsa), flying towards God. The white swan is able to filter good from bad, whatever the mixture may be. Many Upanishads even describe that the swan will drink only the milk out of a mixture of milk and water, and will leave the water. The swan has got a body and two wings. In Bhagavad Gîta the two wings stand for jñâna and karma yoga, whereas the body represents bhakti yoga. When the swan wants to reach God, it not only needs the body, but the wings too – both the wings. Though bhakti is the main principle in Krishna's teaching, one also needs the other two principles, karma and jñâna yoga. God cannot be reached through karma and jñâna yoga alone; nor can He be reached only through bhakti yoga. All the three paths are needed. Karma yoga does not only mean the performance of disinterested actions, without aiming at the results, but the offering of all actions and their results to God. We cannot live without acting, but all depends on how we act and why we do something. When all our actions are offered to God – daily, monthly, yearly,... – it is called karma yoga.

In the same way jñâna yoga is not only mere intellectual knowledge, but first of all the knowledge of the Reality, the soul and God. All studies and reflections leading to the experience and the knowledge of the soul and of God are included in jñâna. Karma yoga, offering all actions to the Supreme, is one wing of the swan or the spiritual path. Jñâna yoga, all actions done in order to know God and the soul and to maintain this knowledge, represents the other wing of the swan.

Well, what is bhakti yoga in Bhagavad Gîta? It is the devotion to the Supreme, which we have in our daily life; it is how we live with Him in our daily life; how we love the Supreme. This love cannot be compared to human love, as it has no contrary. It is the unconditional love to God, which never changes – whatever happens. Human love can always turn into its opposite, hatred, whereas the love to God will never be modified.

This devotion can be seen in the metaphor of the bird, too. When the swan flies, it has to face obstacles: the cold, the warmth, it is exposed to all kinds of dangers, exposed to the unknown force of the wind. In what way does this image resemble human devotion? How does the unknown force deviate daily devotion? How does it lead man astray?

Following a devotional path needs conviction; the obstacles often come from unknown and unexpected forces, far and near. Just like the wind and the currents of air become stronger the higher the swan flies and approaches God, the obstacles in our path of devotion may even derive from the close environment, the family, etc. Before the time of Bhagavad Gîta, a part of Mahâ Bhârata, which is a recent text for Indians, there were two types of disciplines for devotion: Severe austerity (tapas) – a strict discipline of mind and body, rituals and study of holy texts to reach God. A path, where man was free to do what he wanted to reach God, provided that everything had some spiritual value. The second path looks easier than the first, since everything is prescribed in the first, whereas one seems to be almost free in the second – if there wasn't any condition. As a matter of fact both are not easily applicable in our daily life; they are almost incompatible with the family life. In Bhagavad Gîta Krishna uses Arjuna to propose a way between these two: a moderate way. In his teaching, he gives importance to man's duties. Everybody has to follow his duties according to his age, his marital and social status, the surroundings, etc. Not all can do the same thing; it depends on the situation. The duties of an old man are not the same as that of a youngster, for example. Bhagavad Gîta gives importance to the observance of one's duties. Apart from that, one should act according to the moral and ethical values of the action, but also according to the situation. There are moral values in certain professions, which are not important in other professions. Equally, the ethical values for parents differ from those of the grand parents.

Krishna proposes three types of disciplines: the discipline of study, the discipline of speech and the discipline of mind.

The discipline of study contains everything, which concerns the soul and God. It not only means reading, but understanding and reflecting at the same time. All what comes out of these three as one's own result is called study. Naturally the time for recollection should be shorter than the time for reading; and the time for reflection should be longer than the time for reading and recollection. Reflection is a more intellectual reasoning here, it is not contemplation.

The discipline of speech consists in using kind words, avoiding words and expressions which might hurt others, telling the truth without offending others, applying what one says (including mental speech), reflecting the content of one's speech.

The discipline of mind includes the discipline of sense activities too. It implies giving an equally balanced value to the opposite of an emotion. Man should not be carried away by an emotion, which, later in his life, can turn into its opposite. He should be watchful to the value of an emotion to avoid the extreme.

Here the metaphor of the swan can be used for illustration again. The two wings are the two opposite emotions we have. The higher a bird flies the less it uses the wings. Only low flying birds use the wings a lot. Consequently, when the opposite emotions and values are kept in a balanced state, one can fly higher. Here is a very important poem in Bhagavad Gita: One should strive to keep a balance between pleasure and displeasure, success and failure, gain and loss and keep the concentration on God or the soul, which is part of the mental discipline.

The body of devotion, which carries us to God, is made up of the moral and ethical values, the duties and the three types of discipline. The variable measure of the age, the social and professional status, etc. is a specialty of Bhagavad Gita; it always depends on what we are for the society as a whole.

Considering the Vedic or a more modern way of devotion, it is the same for all, but in Bhagavad Gita devotion depends on the age, the family situation, etc.

In the metaphor of the swan, God is the Supreme. He is beyond as well as in the created world. Our unconditional approach to God is our love to God. Therefore all actions should be offered to Him. This assumes three conditions:

We are part of God; we are issued from Him.

Since we are issued from Him, all we do can only be offered to Him.

We cannot do any action against Him, as we are part of Him.

These three conditions are called bhakti in Bhagavad Gita. To follow bhakti one has to surrender oneself completely to Him, which would resemble the master-servant relation. This is not found literally in Bhagavad Gita, but Krishna uses expressions like "Leave everything behind and ..." for this relation.

So, the two fundamental concepts of devotion according to Bhagavad Gita are: Complete self-surrender to God; meaning that one will neither act against God nor perform actions which will keep oneself away from Him. Absorption in God; being totally wrapped up in Him; at no time one will be separated from God.

The page of Srimathi T. Namagiriammal (Wife of Sri T. Krishnamacharya)

Pumpkin Halva

Ingredients:

500 grams of pumpkin (firm and mature weighed after peeling and extracting the seeds)

150 grams of brown sugar

5 pistachios + 5 cashew nuts, cut to pieces

5 cashew nuts cut to pieces

1 tablespoon of sliced almonds

3 cardamom seeds crushed

100 ml of milk

1 teaspoon of ghee

Cooking time: 20 minutes

Preparation:

Grate the pumpkin. Pour the milk into a think frying pan (or casserole) and bring to the boil. Add the grated pumpkin and boil quickly for 8 to 10 minutes, stirring and mashing all the time till the mixture becomes thick and fairly dry. Add the brown sugar, and continue boiling for another 7 or 8 minutes. Fry with 1 teaspoon of ghee, pistachios, cashew nuts and almonds to bring them to slight brown colour. Pour them on the pumpkin and mix well (without heating further).

Pour on to a buttered dish and decorate with crushed cardamom seeds.

Pumpkin Halva is a nourishing (flour free) and cooling Indian dessert. It reduces gastric acidity as well as constipation. It is a galactogogue. Improves the functions of the small intestines.

According to Ayurveda Sesame oil does not increase or decrease the body fat. Rather, it regulates the body fat.