

18. The Royal Road to God

THIS land is made holy by many saints and seers, kings and scholars who have enriched its culture and brought joy and peace to the lives of people. It is a source of inspiration to remember their teachings on days set apart for the purpose and to resolve to put them into practice.

Sankaracharya was one of the greatest of these. At very young age, he mastered the scriptures, and composed elaborate commentaries on the Upanishads, the *Brahma Sutra* and the Bhagavad Gita (three basic treatises of *Sanathana Dharma*). He journeyed by foot all over India, visited the famous shrines and holy places, and spent some years on the Himalayas, before his death at the age of 32. He revealed that the fundamental message of the seers and sages was *Adwaita* (Non-dualism). The *Vedic* axioms, *Aham Brahmaasmi* (I am the Absolute), *Thath Thwam Asi* (That Thou Art) etc. are expressions of Truth which are validated by scriptures, logic and experience. The individual is the same as the Universal. There is never any two; all are One, the omnipresent Cosmic Consciousness, the Formless, Nameless, Impersonal, Attributeless Being.

Man, Nature and God are One

Adwaita did not encourage or inspire devotion to a Personal God. There was no room for surrender to a master figure. The masses who longed for the removal of an inner thirst had to be led, step by step. Ramanuja interpreted the basic texts and discovered that man can realise God through worship, using the gift of Nature as instrument. God is the kernel, the shell is man and the fibrous stuff is Nature (as in the coconut). They are intimately intertwined, as limbs in the body, parts with their own peculiar characteristics. Man, Nature and God are One without a Second (*Adwaita*) in a special and unique sense (*Visishta*). So, Ramanuja's philosophy is named Qualified Non-Dualism.

However, qualified *Adwaita* was an experience not easily accessible to ordinary men. They would put their faith in a compassionate, all-knowing, all powerful God to whom they can pray and offer life and love. Madhwacharya, whose original name was Ananadatheertha, declared that man is totally distinct from God, that man is neither God nor Divine. Man's highest destiny is to serve God, as Radha adored Krishna. Longing for the service, yearning to see and fill one's eyes with the beauty and majesty of the Lord--that is the most potent *Sadhana*. The aspirant would much rather be an ant nibbling molecules of sugar than becoming a lump or a mountain range of sugar.

This process of devotion and dedication is the royal road, the smoothest path, to spiritual success. This day, people of Kerala state, wherever they are, do experience this holy process. The Kerala region is today, the Onam festival day, refreshed by the monsoon rains; forest, lowland and coast are bright and burnished; the earth has a carpet of golden blossoms. The country is resplendent with an atmosphere of worship. A wonderful story, explains this widely spread expectation, hope and gratitude.

The golden empire of Bali, the Emperor

Hiranyakasipu is described in the *Puranas* as a demonic ruler. He denied God and terrified his subjects. While he asserted that God is nowhere, his son Prahlada affirmed that God is everywhere. As a consequence, God was nowhere for the father, though He was everywhere for the son. Prahlada's son was Virochana and the hero of the story behind the Onam festival, was the son of Virochana. He was named Bali, Balichakravarthi (Bali, the Emperor). Being the

grandson of the devout Prahlada, Bali too was engaged in the glorification of God and in the material and spiritual uplift of his subjects. There was no trace of poverty or ill health in his empire. Every home was lit with joy; every day was festive occasion.

He decided to celebrate an elaborate sacrificial rite called *Viswajith*, which would propitiate the Gods so much that, with their blessings, he could extend his beneficent rule over the entire world. The Lord utilised this opportunity to shower Grace on him. He incarnated as Vamana and proceeded to the sacrificial altar in the form of a mendicant student, just initiated into spiritual life. Bali was happy to welcome Him. When Vamana was asked, which gift he would accept, He replied that he needed only three feet of ground, measured by His feet. Bali was surprised at this answer. For a short second, he doubted the intention and identity of the strange visitor. His preceptor, Sukra, warned him against promising to agree. But, Bali stood by his word. He permitted Vamana to measure for Himself the three feet of ground.

Why the Lord incarnated

The Lord had incarnated to bless Bali, not to destroy him. So, when He had measured the earth with one stride and the sky with the second, He placed his foot on Bali's head and accepted the Emperor as the third foot of ground. That foot released Bali from the recurrent cycle of birth and death.

But Bali made one last, lingering wish, which the Lord agreed to fulfil. He prayed, "Allow me to come to the Kerala I ruled over, one day in the year, so that I can see people I love and the land cherish in my heart." Onam is that day. The word *Sravanam*, when it is applied to this month, has become *Chingore* and when applied to the star with which the moon is associated this day, has become Onam---Savanam, Vanam, Onam. Bali chose for his annual visit the day of the *Sravanam* star, in the *Sravanam* month.

Arrival of Bali is a day of rejoicing

The people of Kerala celebrate the arrival of Bali with great rejoicing. It is a holy day, when they prepare delicious sweets and offer them to the Lord. Everyone wears new clothes (*Ona-Kodi*), every home is decorated with festoons, garlands and floral designs. The atmosphere is fragrant with incense from every domestic shrine. Villagers spend the day together in dance and song. Lamps are lit in front of each home; they are placed on door sills, held before temples by rows of children. The lighted lamp symbolises the jiva (individual) whose self is but a tiny flicker of the Cosmic Light. Old and young, rich and poor, are all equally immersed on Onam Day in grateful adoration of the Lord and of Bali who earned the grace of the Lord by sacrificing his ego.

The lesson that Onam imparts is: A lifetime spent without devotion to the Almighty Lord is a pitiful waste. Ridding oneself of identification with the body and its adjuncts, one must involve oneself with the Spirit. This alone can reveal to him his reality, the *Atma*. Once the Atmic core of oneself is contacted, it needs only one step more to discover that all else have the same Atma as their reality. Thus, man becomes aware of the Unity that is the Truth, that is God.

Man is now suffering from a totally topsyturvy, view of things. He believes that Man is real, Nature is Real and God is a figment of the imagination. But God is the seed which has expressed itself as Nature, of which the human body is a part. Just as in every fruit that the tree yields, the primal seed is evident, *Paramatma* (the Cosmic Consciousness) is the core of every being too.

The lower self or ego acts like a fog to hide this truth, which when known can make man free. The ego is the unseen cause for the ups and downs which one struggles with all his life. To

remove the fog, to cleanse the mind of desire and distress, man has to engage himself in positive activity. Man is prompted towards activity by the better nature rooted in him. But, out of sheer perversity, he pursues ruinous activity which pollutes his thoughts, words and deeds.

God exists and can be experienced

The ear ought to be eager to listen to, the glory of God. The tongue ought to love the taste of His story only. Every action must be worthy enough to be an offering to Him. I have told you often, "See good; hear good; speak good; do good; be good. This is the way to God." I often add, "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil; do no evil; be not evil. This is the way to God."

There are today people who affirm that there is no God. But Hiranyakasipu who belonged to this category was confronted by his own son, who asserted even as a child, that God exists and can be experienced. Those who deny God cannot prove that He does not exist, except by their limited reason and logic. The experience of God earned by sages in all ages and all lands cannot be argued away with the help of reason, which can be affected by prejudice, pride and even ill-health. There are many truths which are too stable to be dismissed. The magnet attracts iron, three plus three add upto six, a green betel leaf with white lime on it when chewed with a brown nut produces red coloured salsa, a sapling hung with the roots above grows nevertheless upwards as is its wont--these facts cannot be negated at all. The awareness of God, which is the very purpose of human existence, has to happen--however long the time taken, however difficult the process. When the heart is putted and the consciousness is illumined, the task is easy.

Message of Onam festival to all

God is minuter than the minutest. When you are unable to see air which you know is all around you, how can you see God who is minuter? God is vastest. When you are unable to picturise the Cosmos which astronomy has not succeeded in unravelling how can you see or imagine the vaster than the vastest? Emperor Bali, who is welcomed into their hearts and home by the people of Kerala on Onam Day, had unwavering faith in God. He served his subjects, as if he was commissioned by God (Narayana). He offered all he earned, all he was, himself most gladly to God. He overcame the clouds of ignorance and rose to the heights of supreme wisdom. His self expanded so vastly that it merged in Divine Consciousness. Putty leads to Unity and Unity to mergence with Divinity. This is the Message that the Onam festival and the story of Bali conveys to mankind.

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