

## 13. Three Roads to Self Realisation in Sanathana Dharma

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We know by now that the supreme goal of human life is to realise the divinity within. This divinity which is known as *Brahman* is the ultimate destiny of every being born on earth. The realisation that *Brahman* has no name or form but only pure existence as consciousness, is the consummation of all spiritual practises. Though the goal is one, *sanātana dharma* allows the seeker to pursue the path of one's own choice.

The three most advocated paths to the same divinity are - the path of action or *karma yoga*, the path of devotion or *bhakti yoga*, and the path of knowledge or *jñāna yoga*. Though different in their approaches, all the three lead to the same goal of divine realisation.

Our scriptures mention that there are three obstructions in the path of realisation of one's divinity, which are, *mala* - impurities of selfishness and self-interest, *vikṣepa* - distorted understanding of the truth due to an attached and agitated mind, and *āvaraṇa* - the veil of false identification with the body that clouds the divinity within. To make it simpler, let me explain with the analogy of a mirror. Think of a mirror that is covered with a layer of dust and so is incapable of reflecting the object. This is akin to a mind filled with impurities or *mala*, that is unable to reveal divinity. Now think of the same mirror being unsteady, swinging or moving, and thus creating distorted reflections that are not recognisable. This is like *vikṣepa* or distortions in the mind due to the unsteadiness born out of the duality of emotions like happiness and sorrow or positive or negative outcomes of actions that one is attached to. Again, consider the same mirror as if covered by a piece of cloth and thus unable to reflect at all; this is like the body consciousness that every being has which makes the seeker believe that the body is his or her real identity and thus veiling the truth of *Brahman* within. The three paths of *karma*, *bhakti* and *jñāna yoga* are the precise antidotes for each of these obstructions that afflict the seeker.

'Yoga', simply translated, means 'to yoke', and it has more to do with an inner process of purifying and steadying the mind than simply bending one's body externally in various *asanas*. Thus, *Yoga* essentially is a process to yoke or to unite oneself with divinity.

*Karma yoga* therefore can be understood as undertaking *karma* or actions that unite oneself to the divine. Therefore, actions that do not lead to inner purity and the realisation of divinity, are to be shunned. The actions that are suffused with selflessness and purity alone can lead one to divinity. This is the way to get rid of '*mala*' or impurities of the mind and body, born out of selfishness and self-interest, like wiping away the dust settled on the surface of the mirror. The most often quoted *śloka* from the *bhagavadgītā* - *karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana* - is the essence of *karma yoga*. Doing alone is your right, but not the results that arise therefrom. As easy as it sounds, it's often very difficult to practise. The *śloka* further exhorts the doer to not undertake actions for the sake of results, and at the same time cautions that the doer should not lose enthusiasm and become inactive. Therefore, as long as one does what one has got to do for the sake of performing one's duty and not for one's selfish sake, one is a *karma yogi* and entitled to Self-realisation. One may be from any section of the society (*varṇāśrama*) - a teacher, doctor, leader, sweeper or even a homemaker - can be a *karma yogi*, without any further qualifications of knowing the scriptures or engaging in certain austerities and rituals. The motivation to work does not come from rewards or recognition here, but solely comes from the satisfaction of being able to discharge one's duties to the best of one's abilities.

The *bhagavadgītā* further explains that *perfection in action is yoga* - *yogaḥ karmasu kauśhalam*. Thus, a *karma yogi* strives for perfection in every action undertaken, for nothing less than perfect would suffice to be offered to the Divine. However, this perfection should not be judged based on certain universal standards but only according to one's individual immaculate personage. Thus, no act is truly greater or lesser, as long as one undertakes actions with utmost effort and sincerity and with absolute selflessness. In fact, the only action that is truly perfect is a selfless action, and that precisely is *karma yoga*. Sri Ādi Śaṅkarācāryaḥ

in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* defines actions as those that purify the mind - *cittasya śuddhaye karma* - as purification of the mind leads to the ultimate realisation, just as a clean mirror reflects the object clearly. For people with a work-a-day life, with little time for rituals and meditation, this is the easiest and the surest road to realisation.

*Bhakti yoga* - or the path of devotion, has been glorified by many simple saints as well as learned scholars equally. When the knowledge of scriptures was not available to one and all, the idea of devotion helped the simple folks to transcend the dualities of life and attain the oneness of realisation. The idea of devotion to a Supreme Being is the basis of all religions and faiths; but *sanātana dharma* defines devotion not just as *bhakti* - which is love for God and can be born out of fulfilment of worldly wishes, but to a much-elevated state of existence - called *parā bhakti* where one loves God only for God's sake and not for any material gains.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Sri Krishna mentions that four kinds of meritorious devotees come to God, namely *ārṭi* - the grief stricken, *arthārthī* - the desirous ones, *jijñāsu* - the curious seekers and the *jñānī* - the wise ones. Out of the four, Sri Krishna affirms the fourth kind - devotees who are wise to know that God must be loved for love's sake and not for fulfilling one's material wishes. Thus, true devotion is that which unites the mind of the devotee to the divine in pure love, without any expectations and in complete surrender, so as to accept all dualities with equal fortitude. In Chapter 12 - *Bhakti Yoga* of the *bhagavadgītā*, Sri Krishna defines devotion as that which treats both happiness and sorrow as equal (*sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣhamī*) and thus remains steady and unwavering. Not being affected by the dualities of life, due to surrender born out of devotion, is the way to keep the mind steady and thus get rid of the obstruction of *vikṣepa* or distortion caused by attachments to objects and ideas. Thus, desireless devotion steadies the mind and helps see the truth of one's existences as divinity without any distortions.

The *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* describes nine kinds of devotion that ultimately culminates in *ātma-nivedanam* or self-surrender; just as a river would merge into the ocean, devotion leads to merger of the mind of the devotee in the Divine, thus wiping away the difference of duality. While the *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* defines

devotion as the highest kind of love for the Divine that ultimately leads one to a state of satisfaction and immortality beyond the desires of the mind, Sri Ādi Śaṅkarācāryaḥ in his *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* describes that of all the ways to attain realisation, devotion is the supreme one (*bhaktireva garīyasī*) as it leads to the search of the true Self within - '*swaswaroopa anusandhanam* . Thus, the path of supreme devotion leads one to divinity. This *bhakti* can be to a personal God - *saguna saakara bhakti* or to an impersonal universal God - *nirguna nirakara bhakti*; either way it leads one to the supreme realisation of the Self as Divine.

The *jñāna mārga* or the path of knowledge is often the most difficult and misunderstood one. Many think that it has to do with certain strict austerities and meditative practices in extreme living conditions, while others think it's about reading scriptural truths and being initiated by a *guru* who would guide the path of certain spiritual practises. Yet others equate it with certain *yogic* and *tantric* practises that involve rituals, postures and techniques which require tremendous practise and perfection. However, *jñāna mārga* as per Sri Ādi Śaṅkarācāryaḥ is simply the path of discrimination and detachment - using *viveka* to analyse and segregate the real from the unreal and then being able to reject the unreal and accept only the real, is the way of wisdom. The same path is taught by Sri Krishna as *Buddhi Yoga* in the *bhagavadgītā*. Let me explain.

The *advaita* philosophy propounds that the various names and forms are superimpositions on the one reality of *Brahman*, like the various pictures are projected on the screen. The projections cannot exist without a screen due to their dependent existence, and thus they are unreal. The same applies to the world around us which depends on the consciousness of *Brahman*, to be perceived through the mind and senses. *Brahman* exists independently, whereas all else depends on *Brahman*; so, *Brahman* alone is real and all else is unreal, is the essence of the path of knowledge - *brahma satyam jagan mithyā*. This understanding comes from learning the truths as taught by the scriptures or from a *guru* who has realised the truth, and then continuously meditating upon this thought with a focused mind until one is able to comprehend the truth as an existential experience. It's only for this reason that scriptural studies are advised, and contemplation on the truth, under the guidance of a *guru* in solitude away

from societal activities is recommended. However, the truth can be meditated upon at all times by the one who is eager and focused, be it in a forest or at home. The path is that of *ātma vichāra* or discriminative contemplation. Sri Ramana Maharishi would encourage the seekers to ask the question ' –Who am I? ' - and then gradually discriminate and discard the dependent senses, body and the mind only to realise that one's independent and eternal existence as divinity alone is true. This is like removing the veil that covers the mirror - *āvaraṇa* - and being able to see the reflection clearly. This is the path taught by the *upaniṣads*, the highest philosophy of the *vedas*.

All the paths ultimately lead to the knowledge of the Self in which one becomes the very Self. *muṇḍaka upaniṣad* says - *brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati* - the knower of *Brahman* becomes *Brahman*. At that point in Self-realisation, the knowledge, the process of knowing and the knower of the Self all become one, as told by *aṣṭāvakra gītā* (*jñānaṃ jñeyaṃ tathā jñātātritayaṃ nāsti vāstavam*). The ultimate knowledge is the destination of all paths and it's one and the same, irrespective of the paths. This in-built flexibility within *sanātana dharma* is what makes it the most practical and pursuable way of life.

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