

The Essence of Bhagavat Sandharba

We all live our lives and have conscious or semi-conscious ideas about the meaning and purpose of life which may be roughly summed up as a pursuit of happiness. We want to be happy and we seek happiness through our near and dear, through food we eat, through houses we live in, through our work and leisure activities, by trying to be healthy, by consuming more and more products, by beautifying our bodies and environment, by learning and knowing more, by taking to spiritual life. The Vedic seers called this quest *puruṣārtha* (the purpose (*ārtha*) to be achieved by a human being (*puruṣa*)). They also made a step further dividing *puruṣārtha* into four categories: fulfilling various desires (*kāma*), trying to become rich (*artha*), living ethical life while performing duties (*dharma*); and, ultimately, achieving liberation (*mokṣa*).

If we look more closely at these four categories of *puruṣārtha*, we might discern how each subsequent one takes us to a higher spiritual level. *Kāma* is primarily about satisfying our basic physical desires for staying alive and healthy, for security, food, sex, and also reaching for other seemingly more "refined" enjoyments; *artha* is about becoming independent, rich and powerful, commanding respect and admiration of people, by becoming Bill Gates or Madonna; *dharma* is about focusing on goals and values that transcend our personal existence, by sharing and helping others, by becoming Gandhi or Mother Teresa; and ultimately, *mokṣa* is what will take us out of this material ever-changing world of births and deaths to eternal union with God. But Vedic seers say something more, namely that we should not strive for any particular goal at the exclusion of the others. Realizing all four goals is necessary to experience full happiness! So now one may ask how can we implement the vision of Vedic seers?

The answer to this question is what Jīva Gosvāmī's *Bhagavat-sandarbha* is about. It tells us in the very first paragraph that Reality (*tattva*, essence of life) manifests itself exactly in accordance with the understanding and mood of a person who approaches it. This means that Reality is ready to reveal its beauty and fullness to us at any time. This means that life is not against us, it is not withholding its essence from us due to some complicity. It is up to us to turn this possibility of understanding Reality into reality. *Bhagavat-sandarbha* shows how the root of all our problems is the beginningless not-knowing (*anādi avidyā*) of our essential nature, of the world around us, and of the Nondual Consciousness (God) that pervades and supports everything.

In *Bhagavat-sandarbha* Jīva Gosvāmī solves the problem of not knowing who we are by giving the knowledge of Ultimate Reality with unparalleled precision and level of detail. Reality (*tattva*) is described as Nondual Consciousness (*advaya-jñāna*). Furthermore, this truth is said to be the common realization of all "truth-knowers" (*tattvat-vit*). And what is this Nondual Consciousness? Jīva Gosvāmī says that it comes in three faces, as Brahman, (God without any qualities, Unqualified Absolute), Paramātmā (Immanent Being residing in each of us), and Bhagavān (all-powerfull, all-blissful, infinitely charming playful Person).

Moreover, in striking opposition to such popular spiritual ideas as "All is One", (V: add something else?) Jīva Gosvāmī boldly asserts that Nondual Consciousness (God) who can only accommodate Oneness while failing to provide for Variety and Distinction, is like a one-sided Coin. This popular vague, indistinct vision of God is similar to the view of the pale blue mass of the ocean from an airplane window, prior to landing on a beach to chase and enjoy the warm salty waves, each unique one at a time. In its *svarūpa* (its own essential nature), God is neither dual nor nondual, but includes and transcends both. (V: but then one might say that calling it Nondual is misleading. One should call it "Beyond-Dual-Nondual Consciousness"!) Consequently, Jīva Gosvāmī shows that the individual self's oneness or identity with Brahman, the pinnacle of Śaṅkara Vedānta vision, does not necessarily entail absolute oneness (absolute non-distinction) between the two. To approach Ultimate Reality with a rigid idea "All is One" is to impose one's own mental conceptions and categories on the Transcendental Reality that lies beyond our imagination. So, ultimately, it is our own limitations and preconceived ideas about the truth which obstruct the Reality from revealing itself on its own terms.

If Reality reveals itself strictly in accordance with our understanding and mood, we should ask "what should we do to invite unrestricted manifestation of it in its fullness?" This question is at the heart of Jīva Gosvāmī, when he leads us into a dimension of *puruṣārtha* (goal of life) far exceeding the four traditional goals outlined above. The fifth dimension is known as *parama-puruṣārtha* (the supreme goal of life) and it does not only transcend the other four but radically alters their basic meaning. It gives the answer to the question "what lies beyond the shore of liberation?"

Somehow this simple question never arose in early Vedānta nor in the other traditional systems of Indian philosophy, because liberation was thought to be self-evident supreme goal of life. The proposal of the fifth *puruṣārtha* (*pañcama-puruṣārtha*), which includes and transcends the other four, required the fundamental change of view on the Reality itself. And this is exactly what Jīva Gosvāmī does in *Bhagavat-sandarbhā*. He lovingly takes the reader by the hand and painstakingly shows that the unqualified Absolute (Brahman) is merely "a glow" of Bhagavān (the sun-like Person) which is full of various energies (*svarūpa-śakti*). Moreover, in order to have blissful and playful relation with this Person it is not necessary to wait for after-death liberation. It is fully available here and now.

Thus, the answer to our original question - "what is the meaning and purpose of life?" – lies in the realization of Reality as Bhagavān. By realizing this we uncover complete Nondual Reality ultimately rooted in Love. We have to only open our hearts to receive this embodiment Love. Thus the careful study of this book holds the potential to unlock the mystery of existence and give us the Ultimate Happiness for which we are starved.

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