

Preface to Tattva Sandarbha

For thousands of years, India has been the land where people have molded their lifestyle in pursuit of spiritual realization. Many types of spiritual practices and theologies were developed, experimented with by religious specialists, and taken up by the masses. It was generally accepted that the ultimate goal of human life was to access the direct experience of Absolute Reality. Every aspect of human life, be it economic, social, political, moral, or religious, was designed to facilitate this ultimate aim. It is for this reason that knowledge systems or schools of thought were called *darśana* (lit., vision).

Today the word *darśana* is often translated as “philosophy” or “school of thought,” but that fails to capture its true meaning. *Darśana* signifies the vision of Reality. A *darśana* is a system that explains Reality, both empirical and transempirical, how it relates to the conscious self, and also provides a map of the path one can adopt to actualize moment to moment direct visioning capacity of that Reality.

Books like the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas* were written to help religious practitioners gain intuitive insight into Absolute Reality. In academic circles, however, there is a tacit consensus on remaining objective about religious studies. This “knowledge for its own sake” acts as a barrier preventing the investigator from directly accessing the interior states disclosed by realized authors of religious works. Such studies may serve academic goals without touching the spirit of the book or conveying the true intent of the author.

Proper Understanding of the Subject

In presenting the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas*, written by Jīva Gosvāmī, I have not been tied to any such constrictions. Being a practitioner of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, my comments represent the viewpoint of an insider who was educated in the Gauḍīya tradition. I have tried to preserve the intention and spirit of Jīva Gosvāmī. My commentaries are written primarily for adherents of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to help them fully comprehend its basic tenets so they may follow the path properly and achieve success. Correct understanding fortifies a person’s faith and supports effective practice. Improper understanding leads to wrong practice and a failure to achieve the desired outcome. It therefore, behooves every practitioner of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to study the *Sandarbhas* carefully. It makes a world of difference when practice is undertaken with an accurate understanding of the subject.

Our human life is limited; time elapsed does not return. Therefore, we have to use it judiciously. In *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 11.29.22, Śrī Kṛṣṇa teaches that the real intelligence of the intelligent and the wisdom of the wise is to utilize the temporary material body to attain the Eternal. Thus, it is of utmost importance to gain a clear understanding of the *darśana*, so that one may walk with the unfailing vision toward the destination.

To give an example, even if you have a superb car in perfect condition, are a trained driver, driving on an excellent highway, and are alert, you will still end up in the wrong place if you have taken a wrong turn. Alternatively, even if you are walking leisurely on a dirt road, you will reach your goal sooner or later, as long as you are walking in the right direction. Every step you take brings you closer to the destination. Thus, the proper orientation to Reality is necessary for a sincere and serious seeker and practitioner.

Knowing the Prescriptions of Scripture

Spirituality is the path of enlightenment. To be successful, one must have a clear picture of the path as well as the goal. As it is said in *Maitrayāṇī Upaniṣad* 6.22, “One who is adept in the sound revelation of *Brahman* (*śabda-brahma*) attains the Supreme *Brahman* (*para-brahma*).” A practice that is not based on and not aligned with the proper meaning of *śāstra* (scripture) will not yield the desired result:

*yaḥ śāstra-vidhim utsrjya vartate kāma-kārataḥ
na sa siddhim avāpnoti na sukhaṁ na parāṁ gatim
tasmāc chāstraṁ pramāṇaṁ te kāryākārya-vyavasthitau
jñātvā śāstra-vidhānoktaṁ karma kartum ihārhasi*

“One who, casting aside the ordinances of scripture, acts instead according to the impulse of material desire, attains neither perfection nor contentment nor the supreme goal. Therefore, scriptural revelation is the means of authentic knowing available to you in ascertaining what is to be done and what is to be avoided. You should perform action in this world only after knowing the prescriptions of scripture.” (*Gītā* 16.23–24)

Some *sādhakas* (those who undertake a specific spiritual practice) argue that the emphasis on discriminating scriptural knowledge is relevant only to the path of *jñāna* (knowledge) and has nothing to do with *bhakti* (devotion). This is a gross misconception. If such were the case, Jīva Gosvāmī and other *ācāryas* would not have labored so rigorously to write an abundance of literature. They were certainly not confused about the difference between *bhakti* and *jñāna*. Knowledge related to *bhakti* is also an integral part of *bhakti* and has nothing to do with *jñāna-marga*, the purpose of which is quite different. In fact, hearing (*śravaṇam*), which includes studying *śāstra* via the faculty of human rationality (*mananam*), is the first limb of *bhakti*.

Complete View of Reality through Shastra

Then there are others who opine that there is no need to study *śāstra* because *bhakti* itself, such as chanting the divine Names of Kṛṣṇa, will reveal everything. But how is this conclusion arrived at? Either it is known from *śāstra* or from somewhere else. If the latter option is the case, then such an understanding cannot be taken as authentic. If it is known from *śāstra*, such protagonists must accept the importance of *śāstric* knowledge and concur with the perspective that discloses its central importance. Furthermore, the idea that all knowledge is revealed through chanting of the Name is itself a scriptural teaching on the Name meant to emphasize its extraordinary power, not to minimize the importance of scripture. Moreover, it is from *śāstra* itself that the very process of authentic chanting is to be learned. Indeed, *śāstra* provides a complete view (*darśana*) of the Supreme Reality and of the means of Its attainment through *bhakti*. It is this vision alone that can make possible genuine devotion in any of its forms. So why would any serious aspirant to true knowledge of and love for God neglect to study the *śāstra* as a whole?

Another question that must be addressed in response to *sādhakas* who argue that scriptural knowledge is irrelevant to *bhakti* is this: Without authentic scriptural knowledge, how can a practitioner truly know what *bhakti* is and how to execute it properly? Authentic knowledge of *bhakti* can be known only from *śāstra*. One’s practice must be

aligned with the true understanding of the goal. On the *yoga* path, faulty practice of *āsanas* (physical postures) or incorrect *prāṇāyāma* (breathing exercises) is likely to damage one's body or vital system over the course of time. In the same way, on the *bhakti* path, a perspective that is not recognized as valid and not aligned with the goal will not yield the desired result, but can cause mental and spiritual complications. Regular practice improperly performed may be slow to deliver its detrimental consequences, but, in the long run, the cumulative repercussions are significant. It is comparable to making use of a powerful and appropriate medicine, yet doing so in an unprescribed manner.

Need to Study the Sandarbhas

Millions of people pursue the path of *bhakti*; yet, even after decades of practice, only a few of them are observed to have arrived at or near the goal. If an astute business person is not gaining success or a dedicated athlete is failing to achieve his desired goal, then that person will analyze the cause and look to correct himself. He will consult an expert or a coach in his field. Similarly, it behooves a sincere seeker of Reality to do the same thing and investigate the cause behind one's lack of progress. The most likely reason is either deficiency in or incompleteness of, one's root understanding, and outlook, which inform and pattern every detail regarding self-concept, God-concept, life-view, and the practice of devotion. Authenticity of practice can arise only from a genuine understanding of Reality, process, and goal.

Since Śrī Jīva composed the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas* to make both the process and the goal crystal clear, there is a great need to study these texts. They have served practitioners for centuries and represent a thoroughly tested and validated body of evidence. Previously this knowledge was locked in Sanskrit and not many had access to it. Now it is available in English and a sincere seeker should take advantage of it. If one is dedicating time and energy in pursuit of one's goal, one will fare better if one clearly understands the process as well as the goal. The *Ṣaṭ Sandarbhas* award this knowledge, dispelling all doubts.