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Learning to Love is Practicing Religion

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There is a saying, "He who loves knows God." Most of us cannot connect this with daily life because it sounds very abstract. If you are asking yourself, "What do personal relationships

have to do with the divine?" I would reply that we need to discover the bond between all others and ourselves and through this process, we find our connection with God. It's not about getting



to know God first and then, by some miracle or grace, we come to love all living beings.

When Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the God of Love, gave his concise teachings to his dearest disciple Sanatan Goswami, he said, "Compassion towards living beings, the chanting of the Holy Name and the service of devotees are the only three steps needed to follow the religion of love."

Loving others comes first because it takes cou-

rage to remove "I" ness. For example, there are millions of people who love and serve their pets selflessly, even if these animals can be selfish. Yet this act of selfless service towards others who may be selfish is one of the first steps to show our compassion towards living beings. In that sense, learning to love is practicing religion. Those who can put the welfare of others before their own small personal interests are religious, even if they may deny it.

Sage Narad's Journey to Eternal Vrindavan



The scriptures declare that Radha and the *gopis* of Vrindavan have the highest form of love, and after hearing about this land of love from Narayan in Vaikunth, Sage Narad wished to experience it for himself. The story of Narad's journey to eternal Vrindavan is told in *Padma Puran (Patal Khand, chapter 75)*.

Narad's father and guru, Lord Brahma, took him to Braj and instructed him to bathe in Amrit Sarovar, which is believed to be the same as Apsara Kund, a holy lake in Govardhan. As soon as Narad bathed in the sacred water, he was transformed into a beautiful *gopi*.

When Narad opened his eyes, he saw that he was surrounded by many beautiful *gopis*, and they began asking him questions:

"Who are you?" they asked, "and where have

you come from?"

"I am not sure really. I am very confused. How did I become a woman?" said Narad. The *gopis* explained to him what had happened and that he had reached eternal Vrindavan. Then they took him to meet Radha and Krishn.

In his *gopi* form, Narad remained with the Divine Couple for an entire year, drowning in the nectar of love. Then Radharani took Narad back to Apsara Kund and made him bathe in it again, and he was transformed back into his form as a sage.

After that, Sage Narad chanted the Holy Name relentlessly, longing to return to the eternal *lila*. However, he was unable to. Finally, one day on the bank of the River Yamuna, Narad had *darshan* of Lord Shiv.

Shiv Teaches Narad the Way to Eternal Vrindavan

In the *Padma Puran (Patal Khand, chapters 81-83)*, Sage Narad said to Lord Shiv:

"O Mahadev! I have been chanting for thousands of years, sometimes eating only simple

fruits and vegetables, sometimes only dry leaves, water or air, and sometimes nothing at all. I have avoided seeing women or speaking to them, and have conquered lust and all my senses. Still my heart is not satisfied. Please tell me what I should do." Shiv then gave Narad a

Krishn mantra and taught him about the method of chanting it, along with other instructions on devotion. He also taught him how to worship the Divine Couple in the Vrindavan mood; particularly, the mood of a *gopi* maidservant of Radha.

Shiv Gives Narad two Dhyan Mantras

As part of the worship procedure, Shiv gave Narad two *dhyan* mantras. Shiv said:

पीताम्बरं घनश्यामं द्विभुजं वनमालिनम्
बर्हिर्बर्हं कृतोत्तंसं शशिकोटि निभाननम्
घूर्णायमान नयनं कर्णिकारावतंसिनम्
अभितश्चन्दनेनाथ मध्ये कुंकुम बिन्दुना
रचितं तिलकं भाले बिभ्रतं मंडलाकृतिम्
तरुणादित्य संकाशं कुण्डलाभ्यां विराजितम्
घर्माम्बु कणिका राजद्वर्षणाभ कपोलकम्
प्रियास्यन्यस्त नयनं लीलापांगोन्नत भ्रुवम्

अग्र भाग न्यस्त मुक्ता विस्फुरत्प्रोच्चनासिकम्
दशन ज्योत्स्नया राजत्यक्च बिम्ब फलाधरम्
केयूरांगद सद्रत्न मुद्रिकाभिर्लसत्करम्
बिभ्रतं मुरलद्यं वामे पाणौ पद्मं तथैवच
कांचीदाम स्फुरन्मध्यं नूपुराभ्यां लसत्पदम्
रतिकेलि रसावेश चपलं चपलेक्षणम्
हसतं प्रियया सार्द्धं हासयंतंचतांमुहुः
इत्थं कल्पतरोर्मूले रत्नसिंहासनोपरि
वृन्दारण्येस्मरेत्कृष्णं संस्थितं प्रिययासह

"Meditate upon the two-armed form of Krishn, who is sitting under a divine tree on a jewelled throne with Radha in Vrindavan. He is dark like a raincloud, wrapped in a yellow dress, with a garland of wildflowers around his neck. His face is more beautiful than infinite moons, and his eyes are half closed in ecstasy. He wears a peacock-feather crown, sandalwood *tilak* with a dot of *kum-kum*, and earrings that sparkle like two baby suns. A single *karnikar* flower decorates his ear, and his adorable cheeks sparkle like mirrors as he perspires with pure bliss."

"Watching Radha from the corner of his eye and raising an eyebrow, he completely loses himself in her beauty. His defined nose is decorated with a droplet of pearl, and as he smiles, his red lips reveal the radiance of his teeth. His hands and arms shimmer with bejewelled rings, bracelets and armlets, and he holds the flute and a lotus in his left hand. Around his waist, he wears a golden belt, and his feet sparkle with lovely anklets. He is restless to enjoy the bliss of Radha's love, which can be seen in his naughty eyes. Meditate in this way upon Shri Krishn, who is laughing with his Beloved and is repeatedly making her laugh." (*Padma Puran, Patal Khand, 81.35-43*)

Shiv continued:

वामपार्श्वेस्थितां तस्य राधिकां चस्मरेत्ततः
नील चोलक संवीतां तप्तहेमसमप्रभाम्
पट्टांचलेनावृताद्ध सुस्मेरानन पंकजाम्
कान्त वक्त्रेन्यस्त नेत्रां चकोरी चंचलेक्षणाम्
अंगुष्ठ तर्जनीभ्यांच निजकांतमुखांबुजे
अर्पयंतीं पूगफलं पर्ण चूर्ण समन्वितम्
मुक्ताहारस्फुरच्चारु पीनोन्नत पयोधराम्

"Then meditate upon Shri Radha. Her skin is like molten gold and she is seated to the left of Krishn, wearing a blue *sari*. The sweet smile on her lotus face is partly masked by her veil. Holding a *paan* with her thumb and forefinger, she gently places it in Krishn's mouth, and her eyes are firmly fixed on his face, like the *chakori* bird that loses herself in the moonlight. The pearls of her necklace shimmer on her gracious chest. Her waist is thin, and her shapely hips carry a waistbelt of tiny bells. She is decorated with jewelled earrings, armlets, rings, bangles, and tinkling anklets. She is the very essence of beauty, captivating in every way, and she drowns in the ocean of joy. She is an eternal youth and she is easily pleased. Surrounded by friends who are similar to her in age and virtues, she is served by them in different ways, such as fanning with a *chamar* whisk." (*Padma Puran, Patal Khand, 81.44-50*)

A Prayer of Surrender




Shiv told Narad: "There is a bird called a *chatak* who only drinks rainwater directly from the clouds. She doesn't drink any other water, even if the clouds are its source. Abandoning all lakes, rivers and oceans, she either dies, or prays to the clouds with all her heart. In the same way,

क्षीणमध्यां पृथुश्रोणीं किंकिणी जालमंडिताम्
रत्नताटकं केयूर मुद्रावलय धारिणीम्
रणत्कटक मंजीर रत्न पादांगुलीयकाम्
लावण्य सार मुग्धांगीं सर्वावय वसुंदरीम्
आनंद रस संमग्नां प्रसन्नां नवयौवनाम्
सख्यश्च तस्या विप्रेन्द्रतत्समान वयोगुणाः
तत्सेवनपरा भाव्याश्चामर व्यजनादिभिः



you should always pray to Radha and Krishn saying, 'Please be my shelter!' Always try to make Priya-Priyatam happy, and try to please those who are their very own, especially Gurudev and you must also avoid displeasing them. Keeping firm faith in them, you should always be sure that Radha and Krishn will definitely save you.

"Tell them in your prayers, 'O my dearest ones! You destroy the fear of everyone who takes your



shelter. You always save your devotees from the illusions of this world. Whoever I am and whatever I have, in this life or in any other, I offer it all to you. I am a sinful person, and I have given up all hope of saving myself. There is no other way for me. O lover of Radha! In my thoughts, words and actions I am yours. O beloved of Krishn! I belong to you. You are both my refuge.

O jewel-mines of compassion! Please bless me with the chance to serve you.'

"Quietly offering this prayer with the desire to serve them, you should keep thinking about them all the time. If you do this, Narad, they will surely accept you as their maidservant."

Temple Steps by an Anonymous Lali

Since returning from my first trip there, Braj has continued to demand much of my attention. Like a band of thieves, elements of this holy land take turns to penetrate my unguarded mind at any time, without prior notice. Last night, the intruder came in the form of steps. More specifically, these are steps just after the place where we leave our shoes, which lead into the main area of the Shri Radharaman Temple. Marble, off-white, reflecting a pinkish hue, unassuming and lying in the shadow of sacred walls, these steps have found their way into my heart.

As with many temples or sacred spaces, I saw people touch the top step then touch their head and heart as they entered. I've seen many people do this, many times, in many places, but I did not understand why so, as usual, I asked one of the beautiful devotees whose shadow I had the good fortune to walk in throughout my time in Braj. She began by explaining that it's just a way of showing respect to a holy place and of acknowledging that it's sacred. What she said next would prove to be the real gem; it was for her the most significant reason behind this act.

Countless devotees go to receive the *darshan* of Shri Radharamanji every day. You just never know which devotee, saint, Vaishnav, Brajwasi has passed through the doorway of his temple and placed the soles of their feet on those steps. The devotee who introduced me to the divinity of these steps lays her hand on them in the hope that she will collect the dust from the lotus feet of these great souls and place it on her forehead. Once I heard this, I was instantly compelled to do the same.

The next time I went for *darshan*, I halted before the steps, moved my palm over and over the surface of the top step and smeared the dust from it on my forehead. Needless to say, I did this every time I visited the temple, as I realized the rarity and significance of this seemingly ordinary stone. I almost didn't even want to place my foot on it as I entered.

With respect for those who know devotion that I do not know, and in the selfish hope that I'd absorb even a fraction of grace of a grain of that dust, I felt such joy from this simple act. The potency of those blissful moments seems to incr-

ease as I sit thousands of miles away from Vrindavan and I wish I was there again, even if it was just to feel those cold stone steps beneath

my fingers, collect a few grains of holy dust and leave.

Upcoming Events



March 14: Start of the Holi Festival

Special Holi songs called *rasiya* and *dhamar* are sung. Every day Radharaman wears golden yellow (*kesariya*) clothes, sits on a silver throne in the evening, and plays Holi with everyone. A special *bhog* of sweet, fried flatbreads (*pua*) is offered to him. On this day, Laddu Holi is played in Barsana.

March 15: Lathmar Holi in Barsana

March 16: Lathmar Holi in Nandgaon

March 17: Rangbhari Ekadashi

March 20: Choti Holi (Small Holi)

A bonfire is lit, symbolising the destruction of the demoness Holika, and this is called *holika dahan*.

March 21: Holi and Gaur Purnima

Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's *abhishek* is held at the Amiya Nimai Temple in Gopinath Bazar, Vrindavan, and his *prasadi* cloth is brought out for *darshan* in the Shri Radharaman Temple. This day is also known as Dolotsav, as Shriji dresses in pink and sits on a swing. Special *bhog* of *jalebi* (funnel cakes), *pua* and other items are offered. Shriji plays Holi on this day while sitting on the swing.

