

The Purpose and Utility of Bhagavat Sandharba

Life is essentially a search for value (*artha*), in whatever specific field or action an individual may be inspired to take up. Human beings in particular desire quality of experience in their relationships, their work, the food they eat, their living spaces, their aesthetic relish of beauty, their knowledge acquisition and in the life of the Spirit. The Vedic seers termed this quest for value as *puruṣārtha*, the aims to be achieved by human beings. Broadly speaking, these goals were divided into four categories: the fulfillment of desire, be it instinctual, vital or mental (*kāma*); prosperity (*artha*), moral integrity (*dharma*); and, ultimately, liberation from conditional existence (*mokṣa*).

Psychologically speaking, these four goals are directed towards progressively evolved levels of being. Fulfillment of desire relates primarily to the vital-physical aspect of being, prosperity to the mental-egoic, moral integrity to the soul aspect, and liberation to pure Spirit. All of these goals are important to our overall well-being and to the quality of our existence. All of them are necessary for an integrated value-centered life. So the pertinent question must be, how can we avail ourselves of the complete spectrum of value that life holds in store for us?

This question is precisely what is addressed in Jīva Gosvāmī's *Bhagavat-sandarbha*. It tells us in the very first paragraph that Reality (*tattva*) manifests its own existence exactly in accordance with the specific qualification of the pursuant. What this implies is that life, truth, existence or Reality is perfectly available to disclose itself unto us, is ready to deliver all that it embodies in the fullness of its own essential being. Any withholding of life's intrinsic value and meaning is not due to the complicity of life against us; it is due, rather, to our non-fulfillment of the conditions that can turn such a possibility into actuality. The basic disqualification that is at the root of all our problems is the beginningless absence of knowing (*anādi avidyā*) of the essential nature of the Self, of the world as it truly is in its original primacy, and of the truth-consciousness that pervades and supports everything.

In *Bhagavat-sandarbha* Jīva Gosvāmī addresses this debilitating absence by providing precise detailed knowledge of Reality in its completion. Reality (*tattva*) is herein defined as nondual consciousness (*advaya-jñāna*). Furthermore, this truth is said to be the common realization of all "truth-knowers" (*tattvat-vit*). From this equable starting point, the elaboration of nondual consciousness proceeds decisively, extending far beyond the shores of New Age spirituality, Neo Vedānta and Neo Buddhism.

Nondual consciousness is minutely examined in terms of unqualified Consciousness-Being (Brahman), Immanent Omniscient Spirit (Paramātmā) and Trans-conventional, All-power-possessing, All-blissful Personhood (Bhagavān). Moreover, in contradistinction to the popular but glib "All is One" ideology of modern times, Jīva Gosvāmī audaciously asserts that a nonduality that can accommodate oneness only, devoid of variety and distinction, is but a one-sided coin. Such an impoverished nonduality can envision but a vague and indistinct Absolute prior to the disclosure of, and acquaintance with, its intrinsic specificity. In its own essential being and nature (*svarūpa*), the Absolute is neither dual nor nondual, but includes and transcends both. Consequently, the individual self's identity with Brahman, so vehemently proclaimed in Śāṅkara Vedānta, is shown

not to entail categorical non-distinction between the two. To approach the Absolute from a radically one-sided perspective is to impose one's own mental conceptions and categories on a Reality that lies altogether beyond such conventional constructs. So in the end, it is our own mental delimitation of the truth that obstructs the Absolute from revealing itself on its own terms.

If Reality's impartial self-disclosure is said to correspond exactly to the core disposition of the aspirant, then it behooves us to inquire, "What is the self-nature and self-condition that invites the unrestricted manifestation of the Divine in its fullness?" This question is at the heart of Jīva Gosvāmī. The answer he provides leads us into a dimension of value (*artha*) far exceeding the four traditional goals discussed at the beginning of this review. As such, it is known as *parama-puruṣārtha*, the supreme value for humanity, or more precisely, that value which not only categorically transcends all other possible value, but also radically alters the very nature of the four conventional *puruṣārthas* that are concomitantly energized. It provides the solution to the question, "what lies beyond the shore of liberation?"

This extraordinary question never arose in early Vedānta nor in the other traditional systems of Indian philosophy, because liberation was thought to be the supreme destination and ultimate value attainable by the self. To speak of a fifth human value (*pañcama-puruṣārtha*) that is all-including and all-transcending of the other four first requires a correspondingly elaborated view of Reality itself. This is exactly what Jīva Gosvāmī provides in *Bhagavat-sandarbha*. He lovingly takes the reader by the hand and painstakingly shows that the unqualified Absolute (Brahman) is subsumed within, and utterly exceeded, by the Personal Nondual Whole (Bhagavān), inclusive of His own intrinsic interiority (*svarūpa-śakti*). Moreover, the unrestricted blissful participation with that Reality is not something that must wait for some future state of disembodied liberation (*videha-mukti*). It is fully available here and now, in this very form and life.

So, returning to our original question, it is the assimilation of the truth of Reality as Bhagavān that makes available to us the complete spectrum of value that existence is simply waiting to deliver. We have only to extend our hands and hearts to receive it. The careful study of this book is the key to unlock the mystery of the guileless all-potentiating receptivity to the ultimate play of existence.

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