

Summary of Bhagavat Sandarbha

In the first volume of the *Ṣaṭ Sandarbha*, namely, the *Tattva Sandarbha*, Jīva Gosvāmī first establishes the Vedic sound revelation (*śabda*) known as *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* as the means of valid knowing of Ultimate Reality. It is ideally suited to do so because it not only provides veridical conceptual knowledge about that Reality, but also discloses it directly when received in perfect correspondence with the heart of its author, Śrīla Vyāsadeva, and its primary speaker, Śrī Śuka. So, after equipping the reader with an infallible epistemological viewing frame, Jīva Gosvāmī proceeds to examine the nature of Reality itself. In that volume he first ascertains the Absolute (*tattva*) to be nondual consciousness (*advaya-jñāna*), which is the impartial direct experience of all truth-knowers (*tattva-vit*). Now in this volume, the *Bhagavat Sandarbha*, Jīva moves forward from this general understanding to elucidate the nature of that nondual Reality in explicit detail.

The one indivisible total Reality (*akhaṇḍa-tattva*) is referred to primarily by the names Brahman, Paramātmā and Bhagavān. These three different names refer to the exact same Reality, but seen from different points of view. When that Reality is intuited as unqualified being, it is known as Brahman; when realized as the Immanent Self, it is known as Paramātmā; and when directly apperceived as the trans-conventional Person inclusive of all opulence and potency, it is known as Bhagavān. Since Paramātmā is subsumed within Bhagavān, Jīva focuses the discussion here on isolating the distinction between the perception of Reality as Brahman and the view of the same Reality as Bhagavān.

To accomplish this, Jīva Gosvāmī first introduces three vitally important terms: *viśeṣya*, the substantive prior to its being qualified; *viśeṣaṇa*, its qualifiers; and *viśiṣṭa*, the very same substantive when qualified. When the Absolute is perceived as devoid of intrinsic potency and thus bereft of name, form, qualities and action, it is known as Brahman, the unqualified substantive. The potencies that are intrinsic to the Absolute are its qualifiers. When the Absolute is seen as inclusive of all opulence (*bhaga*), or as He in whom all potencies reside, it is known as Bhagavān, the qualified substantive. The suffix *vān* in *bhaga-vān* indicates that these opulences with which the Absolute is intrinsically endowed are inherent states of being and not mere attributions.

The above insight of Jīva Gosvāmī is highly significant because it radically alters the conventional view of nondual Reality popularized by Śrī Śaṅkara. The view of Śaṅkara Vedānta, which has become so prominent that it is mistakenly thought to represent the sole Vedāntic view, argues in exactly the opposite way. Śaṅkara's position is that any qualification of the Absolute in terms of potency, name, form and so on introduces duality into the realm of the nondual. Hence, for him the qualified Absolute is an inferior manifestation. This conclusion he has reached by giving sole importance to the Upaniṣadic statements that stress oneness and non-distinction (*abheda*), completely disregarding those that advocate variety (*bheda*) within unity.

What Śaṅkara has failed to realize—and along with him the vast majority of Vedāntic scholars and New Age Spiritualists—is that the distinction between the Absolute's essential being (*svarūpa*) and its form (*rūpa*) is purely figurative. What Jīva Gosvāmī is making clear here is that the only difference between the unqualified Absolute and the same Absolute when qualified is that the former amounts to an incomplete vision, when the substantive is seen without attributes;

whereas, the latter amounts to the complete vision, when that same substantive manifests in a transcendental form with attributes that demonstrate the varieties inherent in its essential nature. As an extension of this principle, Jīva points out that the Absolute reveals Himself in direct correspondence to the specific qualifications and internal disposition of the spiritual aspirant. So *brahma-jñāna* leads to the indistinct or incomplete vision of the Absolute devoid of attributes (i.e., Brahman), whereas *bhakti* leads to the distinct or complete vision of the Absolute inclusive of all potencies (i.e., Bhagavān).

From this essential starting point, Jīva Gosvāmī proceeds to outline the ontology of Bhagavān. He explains that the transcendental variety that inheres in Bhagavān is a manifestation of *viśuddha-sattva*, or unadulterated being, which is untinged by, and utterly beyond, the *guṇas* of primordial nature. This non-material *sattva* is His own self-revealing potency by which He, the self-luminous supreme existent, is directly realized. As such the characteristics of Bhagavān are inherent within His essential being and not imposed or acquired from elsewhere.

Bhagavān is the refuge of mutually conflicting potencies, such as knowledge and ignorance. He is the support of both intrinsic and extrinsic potencies that are inconceivable and naturally existent in Him. The word *acintya*, inconceivable or trans-rational, means that His energies cannot be thought of in terms of oneness with, or difference from, Him. To accomplish the otherwise impossible is the meaning of *acintya*.

The potencies of Bhagavān are broadly divided into three categories: intrinsic, extrinsic and intermediary. The intrinsic potency is that which belongs to, or is identical with, His essential being (*svarūpa*). It is conscious by nature (*cit*) and beyond the *guṇas*. The extrinsic potency, also known as *māyā*, is inert (*acit*) and external to His *svarūpa*, being constituted of the *guṇas*. It is activated by and functions under the control of Bhagavān's own self-expansion as the immanent Self, Paramātmā. The intermediary potency refers to the conscious living beings (the *jīvas*), who are compared to ray/particles (or wave/particles) of the self-luminous all-pervading Sun, i.e., Paramātmā. Since the intermediary potency (the *jīvas*) and the extrinsic potency (*māyā*) are directly related to Paramātmā alone and only indirectly to Bhagavān, they are elaborately described in the next volume of the series, the *Paramātmā-sandarbhā*. Consequently, the balance of the *Bhagavat-sandarbhā* is dedicated to an exposition of the intrinsic potency, which belongs to Bhagavān proper.

Jīva Gosvāmī explains that the qualities of Bhagavān are intrinsic to His nature, meaning that they constitute His essential nature. As such, they are not of the *guṇas* and are eternal, which is to say that they are never diminished by time. The form of Bhagavān is part of His essential nature. Consequently, His body is Advaya-Brahman, the nondual Absolute. Since time is under His control, His body is not subject to the influence of time. He is called *amṛta-vapu*, "One who has an immortal body." His body is without beginning or end. It is all-pervading (*vibhu*), meaning that it can be neither measured nor bound. It is inconceivably both localized and all-pervasive. Bhagavān has neither inside nor outside, neither front nor back. He exists in front of the cosmos and behind it. He is both within and without. He is the cosmos and yet beyond it. He is unmanifest and beyond sense perception, yet appears as a human being. Countless universes pass through the pores of His body like atoms through a window.

Bhagavān is inconceivable in all respects. No one knows where, how, to what extent or when He expands His intrinsic potency and enacts His divine play within the cosmos. He is all-expansive (Bhūman), including unlimited forms in His own form. This implies that He has one

primary form that simultaneously contains unlimited forms within it. Although one, He is seen as many in accordance with the maturation of worship. The degree of completion in the manifestation of the Absolute is determined by the completeness of vision of the worshiper. Thus Bhagavān exceeds Brahman in completeness and inclusivity. His pre-eminence is evidenced by His ability to captivate the attention even of highly self-realized sages, *ātmārāmas*, who delight in the Self alone.

Bhagavān's form is finer than the atom and immeasurable, meaning, in fact, that it is the basis of all measurement. His form is neither subtle nor gross. Though His form is imperceptible, it can be seen by His grace, or in other words, by His own wilful self-disclosure. He is not visible due to having a body constituted of elements that are perceptible, but due only to His own will. Invisibility belongs to His body.

Bhagavān's name, form, actions and attributes are transcendental, because they spring from His essential nature and are thus diametrically opposed to their material counterparts. There exists no conceptualization of name, class and so on in the eternal, immutable, unborn Absolute. His names are distinct from ordinary sound, being the cause of the cosmos consisting of material elements, such as sound, which come into existence only later on.

Bhagavān's senses are transcendental. He is independent (*svarāt*), or, "self-luminous by the potency inherent in His own essential being." He is the upholder of everyone's sensory power (*akhila-kāraka-śakti-dharah*). His bodily limbs are non-material, because He is the entity in whom all self-actualized potentialities eternally inhere. His form is the Supreme Absolute, because it is eternal, all-pervading, the shelter of everything, distinct from all gross and subtle material objects, beyond sense perception, self-luminous and that in which all the statements of the Śrūtis find reconciliation. His form meets the criteria of being the ultimate end of all that can ever be aspired for (*parama-puruṣārtha*), which is supreme bliss. His form is that supreme bliss.

Bhagavān's abode, Vaikuṅṭha, is also part of His *svarūpa*. As such, it is not attained by dualistic action of any kind. It is transcendental to the cosmos and the place from which there is no fall. Being the shelter of the *nirguṇa* state, it is attained only by one who is altogether free from the *guṇas* of primordial nature. It is eternal and attained only by pure devotion, which is to say that it is beyond liberation. It is the condensed essence of being, consciousness and bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*). His associates, being residents of that abode, are also part of His essential nature. Consequently, eternal existence in their company is the highest possible good.

In this way, Jīva Gosvāmī has elaborated, in breath-taking manner, the trans-conventional nondual nature of Bhagavān's name, form, attributes, action, abode and associates, or in other words, the variegated display of His intrinsic potency. This takes us right back to our starting point of *viśeṣya*, *viśeṣaṇa* and *viśiṣṭa*. Brahman is the unqualified substantive, the above-described expanse of potency is the qualifier, and Bhagavān is the very same substantive when qualified with such multi-dimensional self-luminous power. From this it is unmistakably evident that Bhagavān far surpasses Brahman in completion and, correspondingly, that devotion transcends *brahma-jñāna*. Summing up all of the above, Jīva Gosvāmī conclusively demonstrates that Brahman is not independent of Bhagavān and that Bhagavān is in fact the entity to be attained by *brahma-jñāna*. Brahman is but a fraction of Bhagavān, being no more than His attributeless magnificence. Hence the experience of Brahman is included in the experience of Bhagavān. Bhagavān is beyond Brahman, meaning that He is the substratum (*pratiṣṭhā*) of everything, including Brahman. The primary meaning of the word Brahman is Bhagavān. His immeasurable attributes are collectively

indicated by the word Brahman (etymologically, “the all-expansive” and “the causing-all-to-expand”).

If all this was not enough already to arrest the mind with all its conventional or other-worldly ideas about truth, meaning and transcendence, Jīva Gosvāmī slips in at the very end, almost as an afterthought, one last piece to complete the picture; namely, that of the Divine Feminine. The One Absolute exists both as energy (Śakti) and as energetic source (Śaktimān). Bhagavān, as above depicted, is Śaktimān. In its primary sense Śakti refers to the intrinsic potency in the form of Māhā-Lakṣmī. She is the embodiment of existence (*sandhini*), consciousness (*samvit*) and bliss (*hlādinī*), which are progressively more complete expressions of one essential power. Lakṣmī is the Lord’s eternal consort. Being the personification of His intrinsic potency (*svarūpa-śakti*), She is non-different from His *svarūpa*.

From all this Jīva Gosvāmī extracts one last final conclusion, that Bhagavān can be known only through the Vedas, for how else is one to know such a Being, who is in truth His own attributes and simultaneously in possession of them? And beyond mere knowing, here implying “mental intuition”, which is still a mediated state of awareness, the unmediated direct disclosure of Bhagavān is through devotion alone. Being constituted entirely of Consciousness, He can never be the object of consciousness.

It must be noted once again in parting just how significant is the contribution of Jīva Gosvāmī. The novel insight he provides by which to impartially assess the Absolute in terms of its qualified and unqualified capacities amounts to no less than a quantum leap in perspective in the understanding of Vedāntic thought and nondual metaphysics. Once the inevitable implications of this insight dawn, the over-simplistic “All is One” outlook can no longer stand the test of relevance, and we are forced to re-evaluate Bhagavān and *bhakti* in the light of a new all-accommodating emergent awareness.

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