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## THE BHAKTI MYSTICISM OF THE BHAGAVATA PURANA

As a result of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has exhibited some signs of awakening to the spiritual depths of other traditions. In India, the impetus has begun to be expressed in the form of an open dialogue between Catholicism and Hinduism. Common prayer meetings and an experimentation to adapt and create a distinctive Indian Liturgy<sup>1</sup> have for the most part been initiated by Catholic efforts. Yet Hindus have cooperated more or less actively with this initiative. These prayer meetings have usually worn a Hindu garb; in spirit, however, they have remained Christian.

Such religious encounters raise many questions concerning prayer. Does prayer mean the same thing for the Hindus and the Christians? Does prayer have the same place in the life of a Hindu as that of a Christian? What is the significance of the "Hindu prayer"? Such questions led me to search more deeply into Hindu spirituality, especially its prayer dimension.

### 1. The Bhāgavata Purāna

*The Bhāgavata Purāna* or the "Purāna of the Blessed Lord" is the most important, at any rate the most popular, of the eighteen major purāṇas. Although fundamentally a Vaishnava text, it is honoured and accepted by all Hindus. There is much dispute concerning its date of composition.<sup>2</sup> Prof. J. Filliozat concludes

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1. Cf. Anand Nayak and Joseph Melookunnel, *An Outline for the Celebration of the Eucharist in Indian Rite, Paths* vol. 3 no. 1. (Poona: Pontifical Athenaeum, 1968). pp. 47-50.

2. For an account on this controversy, cf. A. E. Pusalkar, *Studies in Epics and Purāṇas of India*, (Bombay, 1955), pp. 214-216.

that the *Purāṇa* must have been written after the 10th century A.D.<sup>3</sup> This position, however, is questionable for in the first place a close reading of the *Purāṇa* reveals that the text was not composed in one single period. At least two layers can be distinguished in its composition: the first two and the last two books (11 and 12) appear to be more recent both in style and particularly in content. It could very well be that the Ālvārs (to whom the origin of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is attributed by Filliozat and others) revised an existing text in the 11th century. For there is evidence that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* was known already to Al Birūni (born in 973);<sup>4</sup> in addition, internal textual evidence as detailed by A. Gail points to an earlier date, perhaps even the middle of the 8th century.<sup>5</sup>

In its content, like the other purāṇas, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (henceforth indicated as Bh. P.) deals with five topics: creation (*sarga*), secondary creation (*pratisarga*), genealogies (*vaiṣṇava*), reign of Manus (*manvantarāni*) and the history of their posterity (*vaiṣṇānucarita*).<sup>6</sup> Numerous topics— theological, philosophical, ritual, discourses on various disparate subjects—are all strung together on the thread of *bhakti*, which is the Purāṇa's *leitmotiv*. Each episode, each subject-matter removed from its original context is re-interpreted here in the light of *bhakti*. The whole *Purāṇa* turns around the *bhakti* of Bhagavat, the blessed Lord, the source and end of all, named also as Hari, Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa, who manifests himself in his various descents (*avatāra*), particularly in the form of Kṛṣṇa. The Bh.P. calls for not only incessant *bhakti* manifested towards this Supreme Being, Bhagavat, but an exclusive *bhakti*, the *ekāntabhakti* or *ekabhakti* (4,24,55; 3,23, 43): Bhagavat above all and above everything. In spite of this personal, loving attitude to the deity developed and taught by it, the Purāṇa does not follow a dualistic philosophy. Rather, Bhagavat is ultimately the Brahman proclaimed in the *Vedas*, the Supreme and the Only Principle. *Bhakti* is the pathway cut across the illusory world of existence leading to Reality.

3. J. Filliozat, "Les dates du *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* et du *Bhāgavata-mahatmya*," in *Indological Studies in honour of Norman Brown*, ed. by E. Bender (New Haven; American Oriental Society, 1962).

4. Cf. E. C. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, (London: 1887), p. 131.

5. A. Gail, *Bhakti im Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (Wiesbaden: 1969), pp. 15-16.

6. In the Bh, P. the list of these five topics is sometimes expanded to ten, cf. 10, 24, 20-2.

The Bh. P., curiously enough, preaches a *clear anti-orthodox attitude* towards the Hindu tradition while yet remaining orthodox and making itself acceptable to one and all. It condemns the Vedas, the sacrifices and the whole tradition and yet supplants its own teachings in the place. The key to Bh. P.'s success is its ingenuity in interpreting the orthodox tradition: the essence of all the Vedas and all practices is the *bhakti* of Bhagavat; without this *bhakti*, all is useless.

### 3. The Forms of Prayer

At the outset, it should be noted that the Bh.P. is not a book on or about prayer; it is rather a book of prayer, that is, a text that "prays." We find in it no formal teachings or discourses on prayer but, on the contrary, an abundance of prayers and experiences of the practice of prayer.

Secondly, "prayer" is to be understood not only as the formal prayers addressed to the deity but also the different methods and means by which the *bhakta* enters into a relationship of love with Bhagavat. In this sense the prayer in the Bh. P. assumes different forms which are methods of experiencing *bhakti* or the love of Bhagavat.

This *bhakti* is described in the Bh. P. as a continual flow of mind towards Bhagavat:

Just as the waters of the Gaṅgā continuously flow into the sea, similarly by merely listening to my qualities the mind incessantly flows (*manogati*) to me who resides in the hearts of all (*sarvagubhāśaya*).<sup>7</sup>

This attachment of the mind is said to be *abhaitukyā* (3,29, 12), which according to Śrīdhara, means "free from the desire of fruit" (*phalānusāmbhānaśūnyā*); it is *avyavahitā* (3,29,11), that is, "without differentiation of I-thou" (*bhedadarśanarahitā*).

The Bh. P. attributes to *bhakti* nine characteristics (*navalakṣaṇa*) which in fact are nine forms or means of attaining or experiencing the love of Bhagavat:

There are nine forms (*navalakṣaṇa*) of devotion to Lord Viṣṇu—(1) to hear (*śravaṇa*) the names, episodes, etc.,

7. Bh. p. 3, 29, 11.

of Viṣṇu, (2) to sing (*kīrtana*) his name and glories, (3) to remember (*smarṇa*) his name; (4) to render service (*pādasvāḍā*) unto him, (5) to worship (*arcana*) him, (6) to pay obeisance (*vandana*) to him, (7) to dedicate (*dāsyā*) all one's actions to him,<sup>8</sup> (8) to confide to him as a friend (*sakya*), (9) to offer one's body and belongings (*ātmanivedana*) to his service and care. I regard it as the highest type of learning, if one offers himself completely to the Lord and performs this nine-fold devotion (7,5, 23-24).

The Bh. P. does not formally develop all of these nine forms of *bhakti*, although they are clearly latent in its spirit. We find in the text a clear development of the first four forms: *śravaṇa*, *kīrtana*, *smarṇa* and *pādasevāna*. In their development, the Purāṇa does not always employ the same terms. "*Śravaṇa*", the hearing of the stories usually termed as *kathāśravaṇa*; *kīrtana* and forms part of the *stuti* or the prayer of praise; *smarṇa* is to be seen in the *dhyāna*, and *pādasevāna*, an aspect of the *satsaṅga*. In this study, therefore, these four forms will be discussed in their wider context in the Purāṇa and in the following order: *kathāśravaṇa*, *satsaṅga*, *stuti* and *dhyāna*. The other forms enumerated under the *navalākṣaṇa* can all be assimilated and absorbed by these four.

#### 4. Kathāśravaṇa (Hearing the Names, the Stories)

As a method of prayer, the *kathāśravaṇa* (literally, "hearing of stories") is typical of the Bh. P.; it is marked by a striking simplicity in contrast to the sublime but arduous ascetical practices of the Upaniṣads. For a Bhagavata, the simple act of hearing a story related to Bhagavat has the greatest significance because it means much more than an edifying narration. It is an actual re-living of the scene, a real taking part in the deed of Bhagavat, an experiencing of Bhagavat's presence, power and glory, leading to an intense enjoyment of *bhakti*. It is deeply personal.

The stories concerning Bhagavat are recited, sung or acted in mimic, dance or song by the *bhaktas* of Bhagavat. Such celebrations spontaneously attract crowds in whom the "hearing" of Bhagavat's deeds inspires *bhakti*.

8. "dāsyā" rather signifies "servitude," "to be the Servant."

The right inner disposition for listening to these stories is *bhakti*, and *bhakti* too is its chief fruit. The listening is said to purify the mind (*mati*) like "autumn purifies the waters of the rivers" (2,8,5), effacing sins and destroying the cycle of rebirth (1,8,36; 10,1,4).

The Bh. P. attributes a very high importance and efficacy to this simple type of prayer. Moreover, it exalts this method in such a way as to accord it the highest place in its spiritual *sādhana*:

The exertions undergone for carrying out the prescribed religious duties pertaining to one's *Varna* and *ashrama*, penance (*tapas*), vedic studies, etc...are for the sake of reputation (*yasas*) or affluence (*śrī*). But by singing of and listening to the excellences of the lotus-feet of Śrīdhara, unflinching remembrance thereof is ensured (12, 12, 53).

For the Bh.P., the *Kathāśravaṇa* in fact becomes a substitute for the orthodox and venerated practice of "hearing the sacred scriptures" (*śravaṇa*), that is, the Vedas. The composition of the Purāṇa is in reality intended for this purpose. It offers an inexhaustible source of stories of the "great deeds" of Bhagavat and his *bhaktas*. Some of the best known stories are the "life of Bharata" (Bh. 5, chapters 5-12), the story of Ajāmila (Bh. 6, chapters 1-3 and Prahlāda (Bh. 7, ch. 3-10)). The tenth book, the most popular of the Bh.P., is completely devoted to the incarnation of Bhagavat as Kṛṣṇa. In it the episode on the *rāsatīlā*, the dance of Kṛṣṇa with the Gōpīs, (chapters 29-33), is the favourite subject of the *kathāśravaṇa*.

### 5. Satsanga (Community)

A striking feature of the Bh.P. is that it includes a communitarian dimension. The *kathāśravaṇa* is either unfolded in the course of a *satsaṅga* or as is very often the case, it creates a *satsaṅga* when the *bhaktas* assemble to celebrate the great deeds of Bhagavat.

The word *satsaṅga* signifies "the community or the association of the good." A *satsaṅga* is therefore, not just a prayer service, but basically a "communion with the good," with the *bhaktas*, a communion experienced through conversing with the *bhaktas* or hearing their instruction, praying with them or merely sitting in their presence (*darśana*). The idea behind the *satsaṅga* is not so

much a common prayer or praise addressed to God, as the communion with those who re-present God on earth, that is, through whom God's presence on earth is felt, in whose company the novice absorbs the spirit of holiness.

In the Bh.P. there are various forms of *satsaṅga*.<sup>9</sup> Although its external form is ill-defined, one can notice several recurring elements. There may be a group of eminent *bhaktas*, surrounded by a mass of others wishing to celebrate Bhagavat. The celebration may include all that expresses and leads to *bhakti*: the *bhaktas* glorifying Bhagavat by praise, recounting his great deeds and people responding with spontaneous acclamations and songs. A "worship" (*pādaseva*) is rendered to the "feet of the *bhaktas*" and a worship (*arcana*) to Bhagavat. The *satsaṅga* can be spontaneous or planned, occasional or regular; it may even be permanent when the *mumukṣu* or the person desirous of liberation chooses to live continuously in the presence of the *bhaktas*.

Who is the *sat* whose company is so ardently sought by people? In 11, 2, 44-47, the Bh.P. distinguishes three types of *bhaktas*: the eminent (*uttama*), the middle (*madhyama*) and the ordinary (*prākṛta*). The ordinary *bhakta* is the one who worships Hari only in his images and not in his *bhaktas*. The *bhakta* of the middle order is the one who cherishes affection for Bhagavat and friendly feelings for his devotees. Whereas the superior *bhakta* is:

He who sees his own self existing in all beings as Brahman and realizes that all (mobile and immobile) creations are established in his own Self which is Brahman, is the foremost of all devotees (11, 2, 45).

Such a *bhakta* is described in the Purāṇa as the "fool of Bhagavat":

His heart is melted with love (*anurāga*) and devotion. He laughs loudly, cries, screams out, bursts into songs and dances like a mad (*unmādhava*) person. Unconventional as he is, he transgresses the ways of the world (11, 2, 40).<sup>10</sup>

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9. Today among the Vaishnavas the more formal *satsaṅgas* are known as *bhajans*. For an interesting account of them, cf. Milton Singer, "The Rādhā-Krishna *Bhajans* of Madras City," and T.K. Venkateswaran, "Rādhā-Krishna *Bhajans* of South India," in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. by Milton Singer, (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966).
10. The last phrase is the translator's paraphrase of *lokabhāya* or outcast.

In fact the Bh.P. proposes such a *bhakta* as the ideal person: his wealth and heritage is Bhagavat alone, his *raison d'être* is Bhagavat's *bhakti*. It is interesting to note that the Bh.P. has no concept of "guru" other than the concept of the *uttama bhakta*. The highest *guru* is the "fool of Bhagavat" who goes about "teaching" and enkindling the *bhakti* of Bhagavat.

The *satsaṅga*, therefore, is the adoration of Bhagavat residing in his eminent *bhaktas* and these *bhaktas* adoring Bhagavat residing in all. This mutual communion in Bhagavat is the prayer that forms the heart of the spirituality of the Bh.P.

The *Pādasevana* or a "veneration to the feet" done during a *satsaṅga* signifies the adoration paid to Bhagavat himself who is represented on earth by the eminent *bhaktas*. The feet of Bhagavat are the "rock of refuge" for men held in the grip of *samsāra*; it is the "stronghold" in the world of appearances and illusion. Such *pādasevana* again illustrates the fundamental attitudes on which the *satsaṅga* is based—respect and deep reverence.

The *arcana* or *puruṣārcana* performed during the *satsaṅga* can signify either the worship paid to the holy *puruṣas* (in which case it corresponds to the *pādasevana*) or to the *Puruṣa*, that is, to Bhagavat. In any case, as noted above, the Bh.P. scarcely makes a clear distinction between these two types of worship since for it the *Puruṣas* are identical with the *Puruṣa*. In the earlier books of the Bh.P., *arcana* appears as a simple, prayerful cult:

...in her own garden, the goddess Lakṣmī attended upon  
by her maid-servant, was worshipping (*abhyarcati*) the  
Lord with Tulasī petals... (3,15,22)

In the later books, *arcana* is a complex ritual form developed in the context of *karmayoga* or *kriyāyoga*.<sup>11</sup> In 11, 27, the triple form of this cult—vedic, tantric, and a mixed form—, are treated in detail. However, examples of such worship used in *satsaṅgas* are not to be found in the Bh.P. The ritual aspect of *arcana* is not emphasized in the Bh.P.

However, the Bh.P. evidently attaches great value to this prayer:

11. Cf. R. V. Joshi, *Le rituel de la dévotion Kṛṣṇāite*, (Pondicherry: Institute français d'Indologie, 1959).

...in this worldly existence, association (*saṅga*) with saints (*sat*) or the righteous, even for half a moment is like finding a valuable treasure. (11,2,30)

Its value is incomparably higher than all other spiritual forms.

Neither the path of Yoga, nor the philosophy of Sāṅkhya, nor the path of Dharma, nor the recitation and the study of the Vedas, nor penance, nor adoption of Saṅnyāsa nor performance of sacrifices nor constructions of works of public amenities, nor religious gifts and donations, nor self-denying vows, nor *yajña*, nor internal repetition of mystic *mantras*, nor ablutions in sacred waters nor the observance of rules of bodily and mental purity and discipline (*niyama* nor the vows of self-control (*yama*) capture me in the heart of the devotee as does the association with saints (*satsaṅga*) which exterminates all attachment (*saṅga*) (11,12,1-2).

The *satsaṅga* then is recommended specially to all those who begin to seek the pathway of Bhagavat. The company of the good helps them to break away from all worldly attachments, fix their minds on Bhagavat alone and strengthen their relation with Bhagavat.

## 6. Stuti (Praise)

*Stuti* or praise in the Bh.P. is the response of the *bhakta*, rapt in wonder before the great deeds of Bhagavat. Praise is not merely a human response. In the Bh.P. it resembles a "cosmic symphony" played by the entire creation of the cosmos, gods, men and beasts.

To cite but a few of these numerous psalms of praise:

- 8,5,20-30: a hymn chanted by Brahmā on Mount Meru in praise of Bhagavat. Brahmā pleads for the creatures of the three worlds suffering from the curse of Durvāsa.
- 4,24,31-58: the Rudragītā, the praise of Bhagavat sung by Śiva to the Pracetas.
- 6,4, 23-35: the praise of the mystery of Brahman known as *Hamsagubhya*.
- 1,9, 29-45: the song of Bhīṣma at the hour of his death. Lying on the bed of arrows, he breaks forth in praise of Kṛṣṇa, his adversary in battle.

*Stuti* is fundamentally a praise of some of the qualities (*guṇa*) of Bhagavat. The texts describe Bhagavat's theological nature,



his power of *māyā*, his creative power, his descents (*avatāra*) and his mighty deeds. The psalm is interspersed with deep sentiments of wonder, admiration, adoration, and thanksgiving. Although it is difficult to see any general structure in these texts, a *stuti* normally contains the following ideas: *saraṇāgamana* or invitation to take refuge in Bhagavat and a *namaskāra* or homage paid to him followed by an elaborate praise of Bhagavat's qualities (*guṇa-stuti*). Sometimes the singer reflects (*samkalpa*) upon himself, his own life and its meaning and prays for blessing (*āsīrvāda*) and favours (*prārthana*).

To illustrate some of these sentiments, let us cite a few verses from the *Hymn of Brahmā* (8,5,20-50):

20. ...with a concentrated mind (*samābitena manasā*) the great venerable Brahmā contemplated (*samsmaran*) the Supreme Person, and with a cheerful countenance addressed the gods as follows:

(*saraṇāgamana*)

21. Let us all—I who am but a portion of the Lord, the Asuras, human beings, sub-human creation like birds, beasts, trees and sweat-born beings who are the progeny of Marīcī, who in turn are just a modicum of his energy, approach for refuge (*saraṇam vrājama*) to him, the imperishable Lord (*namaskāra and guṇastuti*).

26. We bow (*namamabe*) to the Supreme Lord, who is changeless, eternally true, infinite, beginningless, present in heart (*guhāsaya*), unconditioned, incomprehensible, quicker than the mind and beyond the range of words (*vacasānirukta*).

28. I seek asylum in that Deity, the Truth, which the Vedas call the axle of the lightning like the fast rotating wheel of life, owned by the Jīva. The wheel is propelled by Māyā. It has mind (*manas*) as its chief component and consists of fifteen spokes,<sup>12</sup> three naves,<sup>13</sup> and eight fellies.<sup>14</sup>

Then after a long but beautiful prayer invoking the *vairāja-puruṣa*, the cosmic form of Bhagavat, in each member of his body, starting from his feet, the *Hymn* continues:

12. Ten sense organs and five vital breaths—*Prāṇas*.

13. The three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

14. In the form of eight-fold *Prakṛti* consisting of five elements, the mind, the intellect and the ego.

(*asīrvāda*)

32. May the Lord, the Supreme Person, the veritable, absolute Brahman itself, be propitious unto us—the Lord who has created as his *feet*, this earth which supports the fourfold creation of beings<sup>15</sup> and yet is completely self-dependent, and the Master of infinitely great powers.

The prayer then invokes other parts of the *vairājapurūṣa* surveying the body right up to his face.

(*prārthana*)

45. You being such, be pleased to reveal to us your lotus-like smiling countenance in such a way as it will come within the range of our sense of perception, for we have completely surrendered ourselves to you and are eager to look at you.

The *stuti* then concludes with some verses of *saṁkalpa*:

48. Even the slightest resemblance of action, if dedicated (*arpita*) to the Lord, never becomes futile; for the Lord loves and wishes well of such persons.

49. Just as watering the roots of trees proves nourishment to its trunk and branches, similarly the propitiation of Lord Viṣṇu leads to the propitiation of all gods and of one's own self also.

These *stutis* then, are condensed treatises of the Bhāgavata theology. Composed in terse, melodious Sanskrit, they are proclaimed on various occasions of cultic celebrations or spiritual reunions. Apart from the erudition they contain their primary aim is to enkindle devotional *bhakti*:

I am highly pleased with you, oh great gods, for the knowledge (*vidyā*) enshrined in your eulogy which will awaken the memory of transcendental nature of their real self among beings and engender in them devotion (*bhakti*) unto me (6,9,47).

In the *kathāsravaṇa* and *satsaṅga* accent, the social dimension of the prayer of the B.P.P., the *stuti* emphasizes a cosmic dimension. Bhagavat, the “axle of the fast rotation wheel of life,” is continually recognized and praised by all creatures moving around him. *Bhakti*, “the incessant flow of the mind,” fixes and links the individual firmly to the unshakable Centre of Life.

15. *Caturvidha-sargah*: the four categories of beings are viviparous, oviparous, the sweat-born and the plant-world.

Similar to the *guṇastuti* but much simpler is the prayer of *nāma-saṁkīrtana*, the invocation of the names of Bhagavat. It is the simple prayer of the great and the low, a loving recollection of Bhagavat's names which signify "his incarnations (*avatāra*), his attributes (*guṇa*) and deeds" (3,9,15) and which uttered at the time of death, even unconsciously, "frees people from sins of many births and makes them attain Brahman uncovered by *māyā*" (*Ibid.*). This idea is illustrated in 6, 1-3 through the story of the wicked outcast Brahmin Ajāmīla who is saved by his unconscious invocation of the name "Nārāyaṇa."

## 7. Dhyāna (Meditation)

*Dhyāna*<sup>16</sup> or meditation, however, is the most sublime prayer form found in the Bh.P. This meditation is couched in the *bhakti-yoga*, that is, the eight steps (*aṣṭāṅga*) of yoga, as developed in the *Pātañjala yoga*, but re-interpreted by the Bh.P. to convey *bhakti*. The Bh.P. stresses the seventh step, *dhyāna*, and gives it a new flavour of *bhakti*.

Several texts are especially noteworthy: 3, 28, 1-38, a complete text on the *bhaktiyoga*. Although enumerating all eight steps of yoga, it develops a lengthy treatment of meditation on the personal form of Bhagavat. 1, 6, 17-26: notes in particular the consolation enjoyed in *dhyāna* and 2, 1, 16-39 is a text on the meditation on the cosmic form of Bhagavat.

The first two steps of the *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, the *yamas* and the *niyamas* receive a fairly thorough treatment in the Purāṇa. The five *yamas*, *ahiṁsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (continence) and *aparigraha* (non-possession) are clearly upheld by the Bh.P. as universal moral laws. Some modifications are introduced in the *niyamas*: *sauca* (purity) for the Purāṇa is not so much physical purity as the purity of the unconditional love (*bhakti*); while the traditional understanding of *santoṣa* as contentment in the status of life as determined by one's birth and *tapas* as physical austerities are accepted, a new meaning is given to *svādhyāya* and *Īśvarapraṇīdhāna*. *Śvādhyāya* is not the study of the Vedas but the texts concerning the glories of Bhagavat. The *Īśvarapraṇīdhāna* is changed to *puruṣārcaṇa*, the worship of Puruṣa, that is, Bhagavat; the Bh.P. rejects Patañjali's

16. Anand Nayak, *La méditation dans le Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1978).

concept of *īśvara*. A person is prepared for the meditation when he has lived for a long time according to all these *yamas* and *niyamas* and embraced them as a way of life.

The next three steps, *āsana* (posture), *prāṇāyama* (regulation of breathing) and *pratyāhāra* (retraction of the senses), though often mentioned are not developed. The Bh.P. attaches no particular importance to the physical endeavours but underlines the necessity of the control of *manas*. For the Purāṇa, the mind is controlled not by physical acts but by internal attachment to the *sats*, the holy men, and to Bhagavat's stories.

*Dhāraṇā*, the sixth step is linked with *dhyāna*. As the commentator Śrīdhara says (as 3, 28, 11); "*manassthirīkananam dhāraṇā*," the stabilizing of *manas* is *dhāraṇā*, fixation; and "*sthīrasavyavrttisantatiḥ dhyāna*," the continuous activity of the stabilized *manas* is *dhyāna*.

Meditation, *dhyāna*, is therefore fixing the mind continuously on Bhagavat, the object of meditation (*śubhārtha*). Bhagavat is considered under two aspects: the *vairājapurusa*, the cosmic form of Bhagavat comprising all that exists in creation, and the *Bhāgavato-rūpa*, the personal form of Bhagavat. The former is the inferior form of Bhagavat manifest throughout creation whereas the latter is the superior form, the form revealed in his *avatāras*. One begins to concentrate on the former and gradually passes on to the deeper, more personal form.

*Dhyāna*

Bh.P. 3, 28, 12-19

12. When one's mind becomes pure and properly steady (*susamāhita*) by Yoga, one should meditate (*dhyāyet*) on the form (*kāstha*) of the Supreme Lord, with his eyes fixed on the farthest end of his nose. The Yogin should meditate on the complete form of God, till his mind is completely fixed on God;

13. Whose lotus-like face is kindly (*prasanna*); whose eyes are reddish like the interior of a lotus; whose complexion is dark-blue like the petals of a blue lotus; who is holding a conch (*śaṅkha*), a disc (*cakra*) and a mace (*gadā*);

14. Whose silk garments are yellow like the bright filaments of a lotus; whose chest bears the mark of Śrīvatsa, who wears the resplendent jewel *kaustubha* around his neck;

15. Who is garlanded by a *vanamāla* about which intoxicated bees are humming sweetly; who is adorned with invaluable necklace, bracelets, crown, armlets (*aṅgada*) and anklets;

16. Whose waist is engirdled by a lustrous belt; whose seat is in the lotus-like hearts of his devotees; who is the most beautiful, serene, delighting the eyes and the minds;

17. Who is extremely charming to see; who is ever bowed by all the worlds; who appears like a boy in age; who is eagerly absorbed in gaze of his servants;

18. Whose holy fame deserves to be eulogized; who has enhanced the fame of Bali and other *punyaślokas*.

19. With his mind full of pure devotion, he should contemplate the God as standing, walking, sitting, lying, or occupying his heart—Lord whose *līlās* are worth looking.

The meditation on this *śubhārtha* is done in two steps. The first is a *general meditation*, that is, contemplating the entire object; the second is a *particular meditation*, that is, pondering lovingly each detail of Bhagavat's form.

The general meditation is a sort of preparation, a *compositio loci* for the particular meditation. Fixing the mind (*manas*) and all the senses on the image before him, the person who meditates experiences the sentiments of grandeur, beauty and love. He exalts and magnifies the appearance of Bhagavat in such a way as to feel the infinite Reality hidden within the concrete form.

When his mind is steadied by a fixation on Bhagavat's form, the *sādhaka* then concentrates on each member of Bhagavat, on each detail of the form, dwelling on it at length and recalling to his mind all the great deeds of Bhagavat symbolized by or connected with it. A prolonged meditation of this sort purifies the mind. The Yogin gradually loses awareness of his own personality. He becomes entirely absorbed by Bhagavat. Bhagavat alone exists, all radiant in splendour, majesty and power. At this stage the *sādhaka* approaches the threshold of the *samādhi*, the final step of *bhaktiyoga*.

## 8. The Bhāgavata Purāna: Cosmic yet Personal

These multiple prayer forms of the Bh. P. are best understood when situated within a Hindu worldview. How then does the Hindu see the *Bhāgavata Purāna*? Clearly, the Bh.P. is not a "history" of man; rather it is the story of Bhagavat, the Blessed One. Bhagavat is the axle of the cosmic wheel and everything else turns round him and tends towards him: Man does not occupy

the central place in this wheel. He is but one of the spokes, composed—like all other beings—of a *puruṣa* or “consciousness” or “spirit” caught within the substance of *māyā* (*prakṛti*, the strands of three *guṇas*). All this is the result of the mysterious “play” (*līlā*) of Bhagavat. Prayer ultimately means a return to Bhagavat, a discovery of the Reality of existence, a liberation from enveloping *māyā*.

Prayer, in the Bh.P., therefore, does not seek a communion with God during a limited space of time; to pray means to enter seriously upon a path of liberation. Hinduism proposes various methods for such a liberation; the Bh.P. upholds the path of *bhakti*, an experience of the love of Bhagavat as the pathway to liberation.

The multiple methods of prayer in the Bh.P. are therefore to be understood as methods of experiencing *bhakti* in anticipation of liberation. One fundamental spiritual endeavour has been noted in all *Purāṇic* methods of prayer: control of the *manas* and a fixation of Bhagavat. *Manas* is the human faculty that unifies the sense data. But the task of unifying is difficult because of the unstable nature of the senses. Hence, the “mind” has to be fixed on an immovable, unchangeable principle, that is, Bhagavat. In the *kathāśravaṇa*, *satsaṅga*, *stuti* or *dhyāna*, the fundamental effort lies in this fixation of *manas* on Bhagavat by means of a contemplation of the salutary deeds of Bhagavat.

Now the “other-worldly” dimension of the prayer of the Bh.P. can be appreciated. Daily life, its joys and sorrows, man’s life and history, his humanity and all that happens within time and space has scarcely a place in this prayer. He who prays is turned towards what is eternal, non-temporal, immaterial, completely away from all that pertains to the world of *māyā*.

Yet it must also be noted that the *bhakti* school of prayer introduces a new dimension in prayer, the experience of God here and now within the existing world. Eternity in some way is linked with history.

The prayer of a *bhakta* then, is not just a mental or affective relation with Bhagavat. His whole person and his whole nature participate in this prayer. For according to the Bh.P., man is not a closed monad, not even a “person” but a cell of an organism, the branch of the cosmic tree. Moreover, he is essentially the same as other beings in nature—all creatures having but one nature with different gradations. This is seen not only in the ex-

ternal aspects of the prayer—like the choice of a fitting place for prayer, seat, regulations concerning food, sleep—but also in deeper aspects like the breath-control leading to a “cosmicization,” unification with the all-pervading breath. Similarly, the sentiments of communion with all beings, both human and non-human, reiterate this lesson of “cosmic oneness.” However, the role of nature in prayer is not final, for nature participates with the *sādhaka* only up to a point. *Māyā* is eliminated in the final stage when the pure consciousness alone beholds the Personal Form of Bhagavat and enters into the cave of mystery. Ultimately, “cosmicization” ends in profound personalization. This is the mysticism to which Bhagavat invites.