



HARI BHAKTA SAMPRADĀYA SIDDHANTA





THE FOUR ARMED WAY PARAMAHAMSA VISHWANANDA'S PATH TO GOD

By faithfully following this path you can realise the bliss of your soul
and your eternal relationship with Narayana.

#FOLLOWTHEPATH





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Hari Bhakta Sampradāya For the Lovers of God

What is a Sampradāya?

A *sampradāya* is what links us to the Supreme Truth. It closes the gap between us and God. For millennia, incarnations, Masters and saints have described the supreme Truth as experienced directly by them in language understandable to people within a particular cultural setting and also provided tools appropriate to them. They have inspired and laid down principles and practices for others to follow. Devotees and disciples of these great personalities have passed this down generation after generation. The preservation, systematisation and evolution of these teachings has developed into living traditions, which are regionally focused and bound up into spiritual lineages known as *sampradāyas*. Each *sampradāya* contains its own philosophy and interpretation of scripture. Taking initiation into such a lineage is to pledge a commitment to follow the teachings and practices propagated by those particular teachers.

This path of the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is exactly what it says it is: A lineage for the lovers (Bhakta) of God (Hari). This is not a movement that seeks to claim supremacy over others, this is one that simply wants to open the heart of humanity. It is a platform and a pathway that makes God a lived experience. All of this has manifested because of Paramahansa Vishwananda. As we shall see, He is not only the founder, sustainer and authority of the *sampradāya*, He embodies the very goal of it.

The aim of this handbook is to lay down and clarify the key principles that underpin this movement. A path is defined by boundaries. As a result, there is a need to clarify what the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya stands for and what its initiated devotees hold to be true. When embarking on such a process it can be tempting to create vast amounts of philosophy to justify faith. There is no doubt that knowledge is important and philosophy has its place. However, care must be taken so that the various concepts and ideas do not themselves become a distraction to the very Truth we are trying to reach.

The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is both sincere and pragmatic in its approach. There is an immediate admission that no system of philosophy can hold the supreme Truth. Trying to reconcile every question about God and the nature of existence is a futile endeavour. We cannot reason our way to the Ultimate. The knowledge propounded here exists solely to provide direction. There is a certain amount of fundamental understanding that we need. The more we learn about God, His glory and attributes the more we can connect with Him. We must know where we belong, where we are hoping to go and how we can get there.

The crucial thing to note is that in the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya, faith is not blind, it is rooted in the divinity of Paramahansa Vishwananda.



Understanding the Wider Picture – Hinduism and the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya

Many might consider themselves ‘spiritual but not religious’. This statement is often uttered as a rejection against excessive dogma, rules and judgement. But Hinduism radically breaks the normal idea of religion. Central doctrines such as the divinity of the Self, reincarnation and *yoga* mean that by its very nature it is intensely spiritual.

At its core, Hinduism is a gathering of pathways that looks to pierce through this material existence and contact something beyond. It is a search to experience the transcendent, to meet God. India has developed innumerable ways for the individual seeker to realise this aim. As the famous Vedic dictum proclaims ‘The Truth is one, but the wise speak of it in many ways.’

These different ways have been consolidated into countless scriptures. Various expressions of *yoga*, ritual, *mantra* and worship have all been laid down for the individual to experience this revelation first-hand. The entirety of this religious landscape, with all its diversity is what we call Hinduism.

The *sampradāyas* exist at the heart of this landscape. The philosophical conclusions of a *sampradāya* act as a lens through which we can understand the reality we find ourselves in. It guides the seeking mind in the right direction. How we see the world dictates how we move through it. Through various theological and philosophical principles we are given a method to plough deep into our path. We have a base that grounds us and provides direction. We are gifted a forum to build the dedication and intensity needed to progress. But it is worth reiterating that however comprehensive a system of theology is, God will always remain an elusive mystery. Real spiritual knowledge does not attempt to imprison Him in our understandings, but rather it opens us to the Truth of who He really is. The aim of philosophy is not to compromise God to suit us, but to elevate us to meet Him.

Paramahansa Vishwananda – The Foundation of Faith

**‘The *guru* is without beginning, middle and end. He is the Supreme deity. There is nothing higher than the *guru*. Salutations to the *guru*.’
- Śrī Guru Gītā, 77**

Any spiritual movement has a foundation from where faith is built. For some it is scripture. The revered texts are seen as divine revelation,



the spoken or inspired word of God. They become an authority that directs the seeker to Truth. Having set canonised scripture is important. Fixed texts allow teachings to be grounded and consistent. Commentaries and specific interpretations can be drawn. Scripture allows a rich tapestry of insights to be created which are rooted in proven knowledge. Great personalities who have seen the Divine first hand deliver it to the masses and those around them record and preserve this wisdom. This is a continuous process. Humanity constantly needs reminding of the supreme Truth in ways that suit the cultural and geographical context of the time. Behind every scripture is a personality. There are always individuals who are honoured either as a messenger of Truth or one who embodies the Truth being sought. Their words and deeds become the ultimate authority, the reference point which underpins everything that follows.

'Throughout the ages, He has manifested Himself in many forms that no one knows about: not even the scriptures know about it. It's beyond the scriptures because the scriptures have a limitation. It's beyond the Vedas, because the Vedas have a limitation. How can limitation talk about the Unlimited One, who doesn't have a beginning or an end?' - Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love, 4.7

The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is not founded on a specific scripture, nor on a specific philosophy but on the personality of Paramahansa Vishwananda. To His devotees, He is seen as the supreme. He embodies the highest Truth and the deepest Love. All authority and teaching rests in Him.

Specific scriptures and tradition provide knowledge and an avenue to develop spiritually. They elevate the mind and nurture the heart. But fundamentally, in this *sampradāya*, all wisdom is understood in light of who Paramahansa Vishwananda is and what He has said. Revealed knowledge from the scriptures is used to nourish our connection with the Supreme Truth personified by Him.

First-Hand Experience of the Devotee

When we understand the place Paramahansa Vishwananda has in this *sampradāya*, it is natural to wonder why such a status should be allocated to Him. What qualifies a person to be positioned on the same platform as God?

It is important to state that there is no compulsion for anyone to hold this belief. People are free to develop their own relationship with Paramahansa Vishwananda. For some He is their dear friend, for others He might be a guide or counsellor. There are those who see Him as a healer or someone who can pass on the blessings and will of God. But for His devotees, He is the highest divinity. The reason for this is simple: They are willing to trust their first-hand experience.

When you meet a personality who is able to physically respond to your deepest thoughts and desires, you know you have encountered an individual who can respond to prayers. When you meet someone who is able to inform and prepare you for future events, you know you have met someone who is a Master of time and space. When



you follow someone who is able to identify and destroy your fantasy and ego, you know you are with someone who cares not for your praise but only your advancement. When you see someone who tirelessly works to uplift you, you are with someone who embodies unconditional Love. When someone's mere presence removes worldly attraction and awakens a longing for God, you know you have met a true Master.

The constant avalanche of life changing incidents for numerous individuals have caused them to perceive Him as the highest personality. Initiated devotees of the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya have been transformed by the presence of Paramahansa Vishwananda, they have received a higher taste. They have glimpsed the transcendent. It is this experience that inspires them to seek and commit to a spiritual path and they are willing to set aside all other pursuits.

Paramahansa Vishwananda has opened hearts to a divine connection. He has delivered something the world cannot offer. As a result, devotees have chosen to make Him the centrepiece of their lives. They have chosen to take what He embodies as the goal of their spiritual path. Trusting their own conviction and experience, they see that everything that is needed for their growth is found within Him.

Most movements today revere saints or prophets from hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Their knowledge is built on the testimony of others who have also lived centuries ago. The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya however, rests on the current, first-hand experiences of thousands of individuals across the globe. Each of them have felt compelled to trust and follow the teachings of Paramahansa Vishwananda. They have witnessed the spiritual progress they have made. They have seen how the presence of the Divine has become real, they observe new depths to who they are and they feel a sense of deep belonging to God. For the devotee, faith is not founded on philosophy or on the reasoned interpretation of scripture, nor is it based on the words of those who lived in the past. It is founded on direct, personal contact with living divinity.

Who is God in the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya?

Q: There are so many gods - Viṣṇu, Kālī, Jesus and Śiva - who would you say is the highest of all of them?

PV: If you ask me, then out of all the deities, Love is the highest. That Love has a form, that form is Śrīman Nārāyaṇa.

Within Hinduism there are countless deities and forms of God. Every religion has their specific vision of the supreme Truth and the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is no different. As Paramahansa Vishwananda states Divine Love (Prema) is the highest - this is Hari or Śrīman Nārāyaṇa - the original, Supreme Lord of all.



The tradition within Hinduism which takes Nārāyaṇa as the ultimate Truth is known as Vaiṣṇavism. The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is one of several Vaiṣṇava lineages. Scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Bhāgavatam* and various other hymns tell us in detail about who He is. Ultimately, Nārāyaṇa is everything. At the same time, He can be understood in various ways. The scriptures tell us how He dwells in the Supreme Abode, Vaikuṅṭha, how He immanently pervades this material world and how He dwells within our hearts. We learn about His eternal consort, Mahā-Lakṣmī, who is the original Devī (Divine Mother) from whom all other goddesses come. Most of all His various incarnations (*avatāras*) and their deeds are narrated in detail. *Avatāras* such as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and Lord Nārasimha show us how God can enter this material world to uphold righteousness and be close to His devotees.

As Paramahansa Vishwananda states Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is the highest not just because He is the origin of everything, or because He controls all that is, but because He is Love Itself.

Paramahansa Vishwananda, Śrīman Nārāyaṇa and the Devotee

The question may be asked that if Paramahansa Vishwananda is the supreme and highest authority, then what need is there for any deity or scripture? The answer is both subtle and profound. The status of Paramahansa Vishwananda as God is what might be called a 'public secret'. It is public in the sense that it is widely held that for a devotee He stands as the Ultimate, the absolute authority and the one who can grant the highest experience of life. But at the same time, it is a secret because the true depths of what this means is yet to be discovered. This, in fact, is what the whole spiritual path is about. Just as knowing the true nature of God is a journey, so it follows that realising Paramahansa Vishwananda's nature is also a journey.

Understanding the Two Dimensions of God

To see a living Master as the Supreme is challenging for the mind. At a superficial level the Master appears human and limited. The situation becomes easier to digest once we understand the two dimensions of God:

- 1 The cosmic creator and sustainer
- 2 The ultimate meaning to life

Every devotee views Paramahansa Vishwananda as the ultimate meaning to their lives. For someone who is walking a spiritual path, longing for the Love of God, this has the most importance. This is what motivates us to grow and move forward. Having said that, there are many devotees who also perceive that beyond His physical form,



Paramahansa Vishwananda is indeed the cosmic Sustainer of all that is. The *Śrī Guru Gītā* also states:

'Salutations to the *guru*. He pervades this entire universe consisting of the movable and immovable, the animate and the inanimate.'
- *Śrī Guru Gītā*, 71

The countless miraculous experiences indicate to us that He is in control of nature and our destiny. But to know Him as the origin of everything is an advanced inner understanding. It requires one to have experienced the mystical and transcendent nature of who He is.

The cosmic aspect of God is more easily accepted by the mind when we turn to the form of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. Knowledge of His qualities, His pastimes as well as His actual worship opens our minds and hearts to the transcendent. Together with scriptural insights we are made to comprehend the glory and grandeur of God. His omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence are all described. Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is recognised as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of all that is. He is the indweller in our hearts, the embodiment of Divine Love. As we advance, the gap between the cosmic nature of God and the ultimate meaning embodied by Paramahansa Vishwananda, closes. Eventually they become indistinguishable.

The direct experience we are given by Paramahansa Vishwananda ignites the flame of devotion. With this devotion we absorb our minds in worship of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa and His various aspects and the more this is done the deeper our love for God grows. The deepening of that love allows us in turn to know Paramahansa Vishwananda's true nature. When we look at the form of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa we see Paramahansa Vishwananda, when we look at Paramahansa Vishwananda we see Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. The secret of one reveals the secret of the other. The realisation that the two are one and the same is the ultimate realisation.

The situation is encapsulated by two of the prayers uttered by all devotees upon awakening:

'I remember my *guru* who is Para-Brahman (the Transcendental Absolute); I praise my *guru* who is Para-Brahman; I bow to my *guru* who is Para-Brahman; I serve my *guru* who is Para-Brahman.'
- *Śrī Guru Gītā*, 88

'At every moment I bow down to the Lotus Feet of Nārāyaṇa, I perform worship to Nārāyaṇa, I recite the pure Names of Nārāyaṇa, and I meditate on the infallible Truth of Nārāyaṇa.'
- *Mukunda-mala-stotram*, 35

In short, Vaiṣṇavism is superimposed on *guru-bhakti*. The cosmic splendour and beauty of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is amalgamated with the divine awakening that is experienced with Paramahansa Vishwananda. Gradually, as we advance, the two become indistinguishable from each other.

An important point is that the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya does not make the extreme claim that God can only be found as Paramahansa Vishwananda. We respect wholeheartedly any tradition that enriches



and takes one towards the Divine. We recognise that the Lord can be found by any seeker who sincerely longs for Him. There is no objection to other movements claiming their Master as the Supreme. God is infinite in His expression and it is upon each person to discover the Truth for themselves.

Understanding The Nature of God

The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya sees the supreme Truth, Śrīman Nārāyaṇa as a personality with infinite glorious attributes. This personality is in fact all that exists. Kṛṣṇa states:

'At the end of many births, the one who has true knowledge surrenders to Me, realising that "Kṛṣṇa is everything." Such a person is very rare.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 7.19

But what exactly does this mean? There are schools of philosophy (Advaita Vedānta), which state that supreme Truth is not a personality and there is no form or quality that can be ascribed to it. They maintain that the world around us is ultimately just an appearance that disappears upon divine realisation. Once this happens we realise, we are everything, we are in fact the Supreme. But this is not the conclusion of the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya, or indeed of other Vaiṣṇava school of philosophy.

The great Master and devotee Rāmānujācārya fought back against this interpretation of reality. He too belonged to the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Through his various writings and exemplary devotion, he put forward an alternative understanding of God which was also founded in the ancient Vedic scriptures. He taught that although Nārāyaṇa's true nature cannot be grasped with the mind, He could still be known through His infinite auspicious qualities. Using various statements Rāmānujā debated and showed the following:

- 1 Nārāyaṇa is all that exists.
- 2 All living beings and creation are like infinitesimal parts of the body of Nārāyaṇa. The diversity is real, not just an illusory appearance.
- 3 The goal of life is not to realise we are God, but rather that we are His eternal servants. It is to realise the highest state of a loving relationship with Him.

The Hari Bhakta Sampradāya builds upon this foundation. Essentially we are all separate parts of one organic whole, the Supreme Being - Nārāyaṇa. By following the *bhakti-mārga* - the path of devotion, we realise the Truth, that we inextricably belong to God. This is our original state, our constitutional position.

Just as a body has many parts, so too the body of God has many parts made of the individual souls and creation. The *Bhagavad Gītā* explains the situation in the following way in chapter seven:



Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and the ego; make up the eight parts of My material nature. (4)

This is My lower nature. But, Arjuna, know that My higher nature is different. It is made up of the embodied souls, which sustain this universe. (5)

Know that all beings originate from these two natures of mine. Understand therefore that I am the origin and the dissolution of this whole universe. (6)

There is nothing higher than Me, O Arjuna. All of this rests upon Me, like pearls on a thread. (7)

These verses describe how the material world is made up of eight components which form the lower nature of God. The individual souls make up His higher nature. Both natures form Nārāyaṇa's cosmic body. Creation, in all its entirety, and all living beings are eternally connected to the Supreme Lord. Overall God is one, but this oneness is made up of infinite distinct parts.

While these parts make up His body, the Lord is also personally immanent in every aspect of these parts. Every living being and every aspect of creation carries within it the totality of God. Every part is simultaneously a fragment of the whole and is the whole at the same time. This is the inconceivable nature of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. In this way, everywhere we look, His presence can be perceived. The *Gītā* states:

'I am the fragrance of the earth; I am the heat of fire; I am the life of all living beings, and the austerity of ascetics.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 7.9

As the body of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa, the world and all the souls are supported and controlled by Him. At the same time the essence of the world and souls are also pervaded by Him.

One of the many mysteries of God is that His cosmic body is the sum total of all creation and living beings and yet He is the essence of all creation and living beings themselves. Infinite diversity is married with complete oneness. From one stance we are just a fragment of the Lord and hence there is a distinction, but from another stance there is only Nārāyaṇa that can be perceived.

'...whoever has surrendered perceives Him everywhere, and He is the one that takes full control of the bhakta. And through different Leelas, different pastimes, He acts specifically for each individual; each one has their own personal relationship with Him. He manifests in a certain aspect for that person, and this is how He makes love grow - love for God, and love for all! Because one who loves God - truly - perceives the Lord everywhere.'

- Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love, 15.20



How God Can Be Accessed

Although Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is everything, there are various 'points' of access, where each one of us has the potential to know Him. In Vaiṣṇava tradition, despite God being unfathomable, He is still accessible. Here are the ways in which He can be contacted.

- 1 Nārāyaṇa who dwells in Vaikuṅṭha: This is in fact the goal of life. What this precisely means will be described later, but essentially it is to reach His Supreme Abode outside time and space.
- 2 Through His incarnations: Whenever God sees fit, He manifests Himself in this material world to fulfil a certain purpose. As Kṛṣṇa famously puts it:

'For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and to establish *dharma*, I incarnate Myself from age to age.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 4.8

Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and Nārasimha are all examples of when the Lord took on a form. Each time He rids the world of negativity and uplifts His devotees. Perhaps even more than that, through His actions He shows the world His various qualities. The interaction with devotees shows what a relationship with God looks like and what it takes to achieve it. By taking on a form and being in this limited world, we are introduced to the Lord's *līlā* or divine play. Although He is not bound by anything, He still acts, often in a human way. He displays heroism, mercy and even vulnerability. Through these deeds the gap between the infinite nature of God and us becomes reduced. He comes down to our level, so that we can eventually be brought up to His. By listening and meditating on Nārāyaṇa's deeds, we start to feel that we are His, and He is ours. This is how we build intimacy in our connection, step by step, making this relationship become the reality in our lives and growing to become truly loving, trusting, sincere and intimate.

Within the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya the same also applies to Paramahansa Vishwananda. In the role of the spiritual Master, He destroys the ignorance holding us back and uplifts His devotees. He comes as a reminder that God can and should be attained.

- 3 God seated in the Heart - However immense the Lord is, He still dwells within us as the Paramātmā (Supersoul).

'The Lord abides in the heart of every being, Arjuna.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 18.61

When our mind and senses are attracted to the things of the world, then He remains as a witness. He watches as we reap and sow the results of our actions. The more conscious we are, the more we become aware that He is seated within. As we walk the spiritual path, our connection grows and He becomes actively engaged in what we do. Behind our thoughts and our emotions, He is there whispering and giving direction. When we are ready, at the right time, He reveals Himself.



'Out of compassion for them, from within their hearts, I lift the lamp of knowledge and dispel the darkness born of ignorance.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 10.11

'My salutations to that reverential Teacher, who opened my eyes, by applying the divine collyrium of Self knowledge in my eyes, which had been blinded by the cataract of ignorance.' - *Śrī Guru Gītā*, 34

- 4 The Consecrated Deity - This is also seen as an *avatāra*. Through ritual process and the humble desire of devotees, the Lord personally incarnates into a material image. He allows us to serve and worship Him. Everyday He is bathed, dressed and attended to. Prayers are sung and *mantras* are chanted to glorify Him. Items are offered and they become suffused with God's presence. These are then taken by the devotees as *prasāda*. The Lord in the form of a deity allows us to live and physically interact with Him, having all our senses and therefore our mind centered on Him.
- 5 Revealed scripture and words of Paramahansa Vishwananda - The words of Paramahansa Vishwananda and the great Vaiṣṇava scriptures are seen as another form of Nārāyaṇa. They carry His instruction, they show us how to attain Him and they reveal His Divine qualities. Because they carry the highest Truth they are seen as no different to God Himself. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is the direct word of Kṛṣṇa on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra and in many ways is the manual for life. The *Bhāgavatam* describes the *līlās* of great devotees and the Lord's incarnations. The *Guru Gītā* directly teaches us how the Spiritual Master is the highest Truth.
- 6 The Divine Name of God - The Divine names such as Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Viṭṭhala, Giridhārī are God in the form of spiritual sound vibration. They are not merely praises, or powerful *mantras*, they are Nārāyaṇa Himself. The vibration stills and transforms the mind. It allows us to access the Lord who is seated within our hearts. The chanting of these Divine names is the easiest practice and immediately brings us into the presence of the Supreme Lord.

The Ātma - Who You Truly Are

'Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and the ego; make up the eight parts of My material nature.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.4

The aforementioned verse (7.4) speaks of eight aspects of material nature: earth, fire, water, air, space, ego, mind and intellect. Matter is composed of the five elements. The combination and consequences of these elements interacting make up everything our senses perceive including our physical body.

Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space – The physical body

Mind – Thoughts that bind us to the reality around us

Ego – The sense of ownership, doership and independence

Intellect – The ability to assess and discriminate



But deeper than this we have our mental world, our mind which contains the information given by the senses. This is what contains our endless stream of thoughts. Beyond this, is the ego which gives us our material identity. The feeling of 'I' and 'mine', the sense of doership and ownership. Deeper still is the intellect, the instrument which allows us to enquire, to discriminate and analyse. But beyond all of this is the *ātma*.

In chapter two of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa speaks at length about how the *ātma* is transcendent, nothing in this world can touch it. Nothing can stain or tarnish it in any way.

'Weapons do not cut the Self; fire does not burn It, water does not wet It, and wind does not dry It.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.23

'It cannot be cut; It cannot be burnt; It cannot be wetted, and It cannot be dried. It is eternal, all-pervading, fixed, immovable and everlasting.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.24

As chapter 7, verse 5 points out, the *ātma* is of a different nature, it is higher than the other elements. It is spiritual and does not belong to this material world. Although everything is part of the body of God, we as the *ātma*, not as the ego or mind, hold a higher position. We have a special place where we are dear to the Lord.

'The pure devotee is always within the core of My heart, and I am always in the heart of the pure devotee. My devotees do not know anything else but Me, and I do not know anyone else but them.'
- *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, 9.4.68

The *ātma* is described as *sat-cit-ānanda*. It is existence itself, pure awareness and divine bliss. The love-relationship with the *ātma* is what God Himself longs for. This connection between us and God is eternal. Just as Nārāyaṇa, has, is and always will exist; so it is with the *ātma*. The Truth is God cannot be separated from us and we cannot be separated from Him.

The Lord is the embodiment of Divine Love and we, as His fragment, also embody that Love. The *dharma* of the *ātma* is to express this Love. Whether we know it or not, we are constantly seeking to do this. Although our mind, ego and intellect are constantly distracted by the world around us, to express this Divine Love is the true purpose of our existence.

The only aim is to attain God's Love and God's Grace. That's the only aim of the soul: to attain Him.'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love*, 1.33-36

'The mind can't understand the soul, because the soul is beyond the mind. If you are looking at the soul only from the point of view of the mind, do you think that the mind can understand the soul? A mind which is always moving around is, 'cañcala', "restless," dancing and jumping like a monkey, from one thought to the other. How can the mind which is in constant movement, be still and perceive the unmovable? The mind will always move from one thing to another. Until one has gone deeply into the sadhana, deeply into meditation



and calmed the mind, only then will the soul reveal itself.'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love, 2.25*

The Material World

What is the Material World?

It is anything that changes and decays with time. We have already highlighted the five elements: earth, fire, air, water and space, as well as the mind, ego and intellect as making the material world. It is clear that they are all subject to change. They cause endless things to be created and destroyed.

The constant movement and interaction between these eight components is what causes us to have experience. But the kind of experience we have is dictated by the three *guṇas*; namely *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These are the three modes which are embedded into creation. Everything that happens within time and space is coloured by a combination of these *guṇas*.

Sattva is the mode of goodness, purity and knowledge.

Rajas is restlessness, activity, passion and attachment.

Tamas: is ignorance, slothfulness and stagnation.

The *Gītā* spends several verses showing how these *guṇas* dictate how we see the world. The more spiritually advanced we are, the more we will be established in *sattva* and the more our actions and experience will reflect that. The more attached or unconscious we are, the more we fall into the *guṇas* of *rajas* and *tamas*.

As mentioned, Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is all that exists and creation forms part of His lower nature. Although the material world is constantly changing, it is also eternal.

'Know that both material nature and the Self are without beginning, and all the transformations and *guṇas* arise from this material nature.' - *Bhagavad Gītā, 13.20*

Just as clay is a grounding substance used to make all manner of different objects, so too the material world and all its diversity is made from one grounding substance known as *prakṛti*. While creation is constantly changing, *prakṛti* from which everything is formed, exists eternally. Under the influence of the *guṇas*, this *prakṛti* produces endless matter, processes and experiences.



The Ātma in the Material World

Samsāra – Perpetual Birth and Death

'As a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on new ones, so does the embodied Self cast off its worn-out bodies and enter into new ones.' – *Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.22

The life we are living now is just one chapter of a much bigger story. As the *ātma*, we are on a cosmic journey, moving from one incarnation to another. In each incarnation we experience the world, we build relationships, we enjoy, suffer, learn and grow.



'God has given you this human body. Like the śāstra says after 8.4 million lives, you have to go through everything, then you get a human body. So treat it well, utilise it well to reach a higher level.' – Paramahansa Vishwananda

Throughout this journey, the *ātma* is longing to come back to the feet of Nārāyaṇa. It yearns to return to its original state of experiencing a relationship with God. The attachment and attraction to material existence prevents us from attaining this. Our senses become attracted to the things of this world. Our mind thinks and fantasises upon them. Our ego makes us believe that these things belong to us. Fundamentally, we feel we are independent and in control. Consequently, the intellect and its ability to discern becomes corrupted. The result is that we become perpetually entangled in this world, life after life. This is what is known as *samsāra*, the relentless process of repeated birth and death. Instead of understanding our true identity as the *ātma*, we live unconsciously, believing we are our body and mind.

Karma Binds Us

It is desire that binds and compels us to be in this world. This is what causes us to create *karma*. *Karma* is any action done with our body, thoughts or emotions. Whatever we project out into this physical creation has an equal and opposite reaction. So long as we have not understood ourselves as the *ātma*, all action brings results. These results bind us to further experience. The need to avoid suffering and run after pleasure keeps us locked in this game of action and reaction. The more we become entrenched in this condition, the more we forget the essence that we are. The divine radiance we all carry becomes constricted and the bliss of knowing God becomes dormant.

'...one must cut all the attachments to the material world, to the physical body, and also to everything which is linked to it, like all desires. One should relinquish everything completely. Without that step, the Lord will not manifest Himself to you. Because without that step, He has become second, third, or fourth priority'
– Paramahansa Vishwananda, *The Essence of Shreemad Bhagavatam*, 1.9.39



Understanding Māyā

'For this divine māyā of Mine consisting of the three guṇas is hard to overcome. But those who take refuge in Me alone, cross over it easily.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 7.14

Māyā is a common term that is sometimes used to describe the material world. Often it is translated into 'illusion' or 'appearance'. But in the Vaiṣṇava traditions the world is not illusory. It may undergo constant change but nonetheless it is real and as a material substance it is eternal. The term māyā refers to how the material world is capable of drawing us away from God. Śrīman Nārāyaṇa is everywhere and ultimately is all things, but realising this Truth eludes us. The inability to perceive the Divine and know ourselves as the ātma is because of māyā, resulting in our material identification. It is the hold the material world has upon us. It is the power that distracts us from our spiritual goal.

This power is also to be seen as a manifestation as the Divine Mother. Although Māyā is in many ways an obstacle to be crossed over, She is part of this creation and She has a divine purpose. To the person who is seeking pleasure, She is the one who deludes. She casts a veil over the Truth and makes us hopelessly chase after the things of the world. But for the devotee seeking God, She is a great teacher. By orchestrating situations and experiences we are made to learn. We discover what we really want and we see the shallowness of hankering after material enjoyment.

Beyond this there is another level of māyā, known as yogamāyā. Whereas Mahā-māyā uses the world to delude or teach us, yogamāyā is the personal power of Nārāyaṇa. Under the instruction of the Lord, She covers and prevents us from seeing the actual form of Nārāyaṇa, of knowing Him as He truly is.

'I do not reveal Myself to everybody, but I cover Myself with My yogamāyā. This deluded world does not recognise Me as unborn and infallible.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 7.25

A spiritual seeker may rise beyond Mahā-māyā and know the divinity that underpins this creation, but this is not the same as knowing the supreme Truth that is Śrīman Nārāyaṇa.

Is the world suffering?

The answer is yes and no. To someone who is spiritually unconscious, who is under the influence of māyā and the guṇas, then yes the material world is suffering.

'The pleasures that arise from contact with the external world are a source of suffering. They have a beginning and an end, O Arjuna, and so the wise do not rejoice in them.' Bhagavad Gītā, 5.22

When we forget that we are the ātma, an eternal part of God, then inevitably we act with our ego. We act for gratification, we have expectations which sooner or later lead to some degree of suffering. Kṛṣṇa states in this verse that at a deeper level even the enjoyment



we go through is a form of suffering because it does not last. Everything we hold dear will eventually drift or be taken away from us.

But at the same time this world has tremendous beauty, there is so much to treasure and so much to be thankful for. The *Gītā* also states:

'Know for certain that whenever something displays its splendour or power, it comes from just a part of My potency.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 10.41

The world is wonderful when we perceive it as part of Nārāyaṇa. Then we can behold His Divine presence everywhere we look. When we act in service, detached and without expectation, then we become free of suffering. Life becomes an opportunity to express our love and to witness the splendour of God. To the surrendered devotee everything that happens is auspicious. There is no such thing as suffering, there is only *līlā* or divine play.

'The body will go through the same cycle of birth, life, and death, again, again and again. This kind of suffering is because you are trapped in the game of Maya. But, you are meant for something greater'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love*, 2.22

'If your life revolves around serving others, and you offer all the 'good' that is in your life to the welfare of others, you will have the divine blessing. (...) You will become free because you are serving Narayana. That's why it is said, 'Manava Seva is Madhava Seva'. This means, 'Service to humanity is service to Narayana'. The service that you render to others with a selfless heart, with a pure heart is 'Narayana Seva' and releases you. Service is also sadhana. Service is also prayer. And if one does such service without expecting any results, one will be free. One will attain salvation'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love*, 3.13

The Goal of Life

Knowing the Ātma

Every spiritual movement will have variations of what the goal of life should be. Those who subscribe to the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta and an impersonalist vision of the Divine hold that Self-realisation is what we should be aiming for. By realising ourselves as the *ātma*, we automatically realise the supreme Truth. Effectively, we recognise that there is no difference between us and God.

According to Paramahansa Sri Swami Vishwananda Self-realisation means something quite different.



**‘Despite seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, moving, sleeping, and breathing, the one who is engaged in yoga practice and sees the truth, declares within himself: “I do nothing”’
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 5.8**

When we have detached from the world and understood ourselves beyond the body, mind, ego and intellect, then we have achieved the state of Self-realisation. We become the witness of action and we see, as Kṛṣṇa says, that we do nothing. It becomes clear that the thoughts and emotions which rise and fall have nothing to do with who we truly are. We exist in a different space untouched by the joys and sorrows around us. When we discover the divine Self within, we experience a transcendent bliss. This is not a bliss born of pleasure from the material world. It comes from knowing who we truly are.

Knowing the All-pervasive Energy of God

Perceiving that we are the *ātma* is the initial stage of realisation. As we grow in this we start to understand the reality around us in a different way. We can directly see that there is a Divine presence that pervades everything. This is the energy, the life-force of God, and is known as the impersonal Brahman. In this state the material world with all its distinctions becomes secondary and the all-pervasive divinity becomes primary:

**‘The sages perceive with equal vision, a good and learned *brāhmaṇa*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater.’
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 5.18**

There is no judgement of higher or lower, there is only the Divine underpinning and existing in all places.

Knowing the Supersoul or Paramātmā

This omnipresent divine energy emanates from multiple focal points. Alongside each *ātma*, there is a centre point of every living being. It is an aspect of God known as the Paramātmā or Supersoul. It rests intimately with the *ātma*, but is distinct from it. It is a form of Nārāyaṇa known as Viṣṇu (see later). It guides the *ātma* and orchestrates the flow of life. The all-pervasive divine energy is nothing but the effulgence coming from the innumerable forms of Viṣṇu. The *Gītā* states in relation to the Supersoul:

‘It is one and yet appears divided among living beings. That which must be known is the sustainer of all living beings. It devours them and brings them back into existence.’ - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 13.17

The Paramātmā appears as one because of the Divine energy, but It is also many because this energy comes from the different forms of Viṣṇu within each living being. A critical difference between this stage of realisation and the ones previously mentioned is that only a devotee can attain this, because they approach God as a personality.

A useful example is having countless candles in a dark room. From a distance all one can see is a homogenous mass of light. But as one ventures closer they can start to see that the mass of light is actually



the product of many candles. In the same way a spiritual seeker who does not view God personally cannot behold the forms of Viṣṇu within themselves or everywhere around them. They may experience the impersonal Brahman, the energy, but they will not behold the innumerable manifestations of God, as Viṣṇu, that exist within all beings. A devotee who is seeking to know God personally is able to perceive how this impersonal Brahman is founded in Him. For this to happen, there needs to be grace. Self-effort alone cannot reveal this Truth. Through spiritual practice one can know the *ātma* and the omnipresent divine energy, but it is only through the grace of God that one can know the Paramatma. Śrīman Nārāyaṇa Himself has to reveal this to His devotee.

These different stages of Self-realisation are certainly advanced states, but they are not the ultimate state. While we may know the *ātma*, the Impersonal Brahman or indeed the Paramātma, there is another stage of realisation which allows us to see and serve the totality of God.

God-realisation - Attaining Vaikuṅṭha

Although the process of Divine realisation has been presented as different stages, the reality is that the process is more like a spectrum. When we directly know ourselves as the Divine Self we are on the way to knowing God Himself. Gradually we are venturing closer to Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. The whole purpose of the spiritual path is to realise what the *ātma* has been longing for all along, to fully re-establish our relationship with Him, to experience that Supreme Divine Love and realise the nature of Paramahansa Vishwananda. This is beyond any form of Self-realisation, beyond knowing the impersonal Brahman and even beyond knowing the Paramātma. Attaining this state is God-realisation, it is to reach Vaikuṅṭha.

But what does this really mean? The *Bhāgavatam* has vivid descriptions of what this abode looks like:

‘In those Vaikuṅṭha planets there are many forests which are very auspicious. In those forests the trees are wish-fulfilling trees, and in all seasons they are filled with flowers and fruits because everything in the Vaikuṅṭha planets is spiritual and personal.’

- Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, 3.15.16

Passages such as this allow us with our limited mind to understand the magnificence, beauty and glory of what it is to be next to God. But the actual experience of Vaikuṅṭha cannot be translated into words. The question of whether this is a specific place or whether it is a state cannot be easily pinned down. Because it has nothing to do with the material world, it cannot fall into neat definitions that we are used to. There is nothing the mind can hold which will precisely deliver what it is.

Vaikuṅṭha literally translates as the ‘unrestricted reality’. It is the place that lies outside time and space. When we are bound to the material world, *karma*, desire, fear and attachments restrict our connection with the Divine. We can get glimpses of it, but unless we have totally risen above our mind and ego, we cannot know it in its fullness. Vaikuṅṭha is where there are no restrictions, no *karma*, no other desires of any kind.



There is only pure, undeviating devotion that allows the perfect vision of the Divine. It is where we rise beyond seeing even the forms of Viṣṇu within all living beings, we see the totality of God as Nārāyaṇa.

Fundamentally, Vaikuṅṭha is the realisation of pure Love. A God-realised devotee always dwells in Vaikuṅṭha. They perceive the fullness of God even if they are physically present in this material world. But as Kṛṣṇa states this is not an easy goal:

'Among thousands of men, perhaps one strives for perfection; even among those who strive for perfection, only one may know Me; and among those who know Me, maybe one alone knows Me in truth.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.3

The goal of any devotee in the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is to strive to know God in this way. But ultimately this realisation is not in our hands. For those rare devotees Vaikuṅṭha can be attained whilst in the physical, material body. But it is possible to enter Vaikuṅṭha after death and this is the path for most devotees. When a devotee has reached a surrendered state, when they have a longing heart and when they have implicit trust in Śrīman Nārāyaṇa and Paramahansa Vishwananda; then it is also possible to reach the Supreme Abode. Through divine grace this ultimate destination can be gifted to the devotee.

Once the *ātma* reaches this goal, it is totally free. It is no longer caught in repeated birth and death. It belongs entirely to God. The critical point is that this is not to be seen as something that is added or gained by us - Vaikuṅṭha is our home. The inevitable goal of life therefore is to reach that state that was and always will be ours.

What happens to the *ātma* in Vaikuṅṭha?

When the *ātma* is totally free, and unrestricted it naturally takes on a likeness or form that resembles God. It shares in His splendour, the qualities and *ānanda* (bliss) that is experienced is the same as the Supreme Lord. The defining difference between Nārāyaṇa and the *ātma* is that Nārāyaṇa remains the creator and upholder of all that is. The *ātma* is atomic, the Lord is infinite, supporting all that is. This distinction between the two never ceases. It is what defines the difference between Master and servant, between protector and protected, between supporter and supported. There is no concept of merging and disappearing into the Lord. The ego-false identity that hangs on the Self fools us into believing we are independent and ends up being eradicated. But our identity as the *ātma* remains.

In Vaikuṅṭha, because we have lost our ego and we have no binding *karma* to the material world, the expression of the Love that is present within the *ātma* is fully expressed. Its radiance is unleashed. God too has this infinite, unconditional Love for us. This relationship of Love binds us irreversibly to Nārāyaṇa. We belong to Him and He belongs to us. The situation is like a candle that is placed in front of the sun, no one can doubt which is higher and more powerful, but yet at some point the light of the sun cannot be distinguished from the light of the candle. In the same way, within the peak of this Love relationship, there is no difference between God and devotee.



A Devotee Wishes to Know God Personally

We have already established how all creation and individual living beings exist within the cosmic body of Nārāyaṇa. Just as the soul is beyond the body, the Lord is above creation and the living beings. This Supreme Person dwells in Vaikuṅṭha, the highest abode outside of time and space. Once again we must reiterate that the actual form of Nārāyaṇa is transcendent; it is beyond all mental conception. But His form is described in various scriptures such as the *Bhāgavatam* and the *Pañcaratra*. There are numerous features that adorn Him. All of this allows us to visualise and capture the Lord with our mind.

Form (material conception) → Formless (Impersonal Transcendent)
> Supreme Form (Personal Transcendent)

The form that we can see in the temple reveals to our limited material mind the beauty and grandeur of the Lord. It is the transcendent features of the Lord presented in a material form. But this is not just a symbolic representation, because even within this material form there is the Supreme Truth. Beyond the physical world is the impersonal aspect of the Lord. This is the divine presence that permeates and underpins this creation. Throughout the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa gives us insights into this aspect of Himself:

'Know Me, Arjuna, to be the original seed of all beings. I am the intelligence of the intelligent, and the energy of the energetic.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.10

But this impersonal aspect is not the full picture. Beyond this is the supreme personal form of God. The impersonal aspect can be described as merely the shadow of the toe of Nārāyaṇa. It is an aspect of His glory but not the source of it. The transcendent personal form of Nārāyaṇa is the ultimate Truth. It is beyond the material form and beyond the formless Divine presence and even the Paramātmā. It is at this highest level that a devotee is seeking to know God. They do not just want the presence of the Lord but the person Himself. This is where the ultimate relationship takes place. It is only the practice of *bhakti* and the reliance on grace that brings one to this place.

As Kṛṣṇa states:

'By devotion alone, he gains the true knowledge of who and what I am. Knowing Me in this way, through this devotion, he unites with Me.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 18.55

To know the personal transcendent form of God is to know Him at the deepest and most intimate level. This is where Love reaches its fullness. Those seeking Self-realisation elevate themselves to a point. They eventually experience the all pervasive presence of God and His manifestation as the Paramātmā. But despite reaching this state, they do not have complete freedom. The *ātma* longs to be with God, it yearns to experience this Love in its fullness and so it carries on in the material world. But this carrying on is not due to desires and the bondage of *karma*. Those who know the Self and have transcended body-mind identification have freedom. They are not involved in the cycle of birth and death like materially minded souls:



'Arjuna, just as a blazing fire turns wood to ashes, so does the fire of knowledge turn all *karma* to ashes.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 4.37

Even though there is no *karma* to work out, such advanced souls still seek to go further. The *ātma* yearns to experience the purity of Divine Love. As a result they take incarnations as great devotees. They set themselves on the path of *bhakti* to know the Lord personally as Śrīman Nārāyaṇa.

All Possibilities Exist in Vaikuṅṭha

As the minute candle, the *ātma* always has the desire to serve God. But because of this Love relationship, the Lord, as the sun, is even willing to serve His devotee. Vaikuṅṭha is where there is total freedom. There is no room for rules, restrictions or dogma. This is the highest platform of existence where all possibilities of a love relationship exist.

The *Bhāgavatam* and other scriptures describe several kinds of relationship the soul can have with the Lord:

Dāsya-bhāva: the feeling that the Lord is the Master. We take the highest pleasure in providing and attending to God. Hanumān exemplifies perfect servitude. In every situation he was willing to sacrifice himself and deliver what was pleasing to Lord Rāma. In all activities he manifested excellence and perfection.

Sakhya-bhāva: the feeling of friendship. We enjoy the freedom and dearness we have with God. Sudāma and Arjuna both experienced how Kṛṣṇa stood by them throughout all their challenges. He was ever dependable and loyal to them.

Vātsalya-bhāva: the feeling of parental affection. We enjoy looking after and showering affection on God as if He were our child. Yaśodā is famed for her devotion to Kṛṣṇa as her son. She did not view Him as the Supreme Lord, but rather as her mischievous and endearing boy. Yaśodā worshipped Him through nurturing and lovingly chastising Him.

Mādhurya-bhāva: is having the Lord as our Beloved and the feeling of conjugal intimacy with God. The *gopīs* illustrated this by giving up everything for Kṛṣṇa. They pledged their heart to Him and suffered the anguish of separation from Him. At all times they yearned to experience God as their Divine Lover.

The *Bhāgavatam* provides numerous examples of how these relationships play out. We learn about the mood and the Divine feelings that get evoked. Once again the various narrations are approximations. They provide an understanding, an indication for our mind. By retelling and meditating upon them, the truth which they hold starts to manifest in our hearts. The possibility of who we are to God gradually becomes apparent.

Another important point is that there is no hierarchy in these bhāvas. Because Vaikuṅṭha is the unbridled expression of our relationship with the Supreme, we cannot look upon one relationship above the other. Each one has its beauty and each one is equally close and



dear to God. Vaikuṅṭha is best understood as a realm with multiple chambers. Each chamber will have a different manifestation of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. It will have its own mood and form of Love. It may even have its own understanding of God. Vaikuṅṭha is where the ultimate stage of devotional ownership is displayed. Nārāyaṇa is ours and we are His. As a result there is infinite freedom. Rules, boundaries and philosophy exist in the material world. But they are completely absent in this abode. As a result one cannot draw distinctions on what form of Nārāyaṇa is higher or lower. All of them are the highest, that is what actually defines being in Vaikuṅṭha, it can be no other way.

Vaikuṅṭha is to be with Paramahansa Vishwananda

**There is no truth higher than the *guru*, no austerity more purifying than serving Him, no realisation greater than knowing His *tattva* (Person). Salutations to the guru who makes this realisation possible!
- Śrī Guru Gītā, 74**

For the devotee of the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya, all that has been described is found within our relationship with Paramahansa Vishwananda. In the depths of that connection we find that Divine Love and that Supreme bliss. As mentioned *guru-bhakti* is the foundation upon which our Vaiṣṇava tradition sits. The desire to reach Vaikuṅṭha therefore, is actually the desire to be with Paramahansa Vishwananda as He truly is. We do not want the barriers of our mind and ego to stand in the way of who we are to Him. He has awakened a longing in our hearts and we wish to dive in and plough the depths of it.

This dive never actually ends because Love keeps growing. There is no limit and the longing to experience it can never be satisfied. While Vaikuṅṭha is the ultimate destination, it is not to be understood as a resting place. Our relationship with Śrīman Nārāyaṇa, with Paramahansa Vishwananda, is constantly expanding and moving to greater depths.

'...one has to take advantage of the opportunity to surrender to the spiritual path. When one meets the Satguru, one has to make the most of it! Because this opportunity doesn't come in many lifetimes. This Grace of being near the Satguru, doesn't happen in every life. You will go through many lives, until one day, we will meet again. But you can attain this state completely of being with Narayana, by fully surrendering yourself in this life itself.'

- Paramahansa Vishwananda, Shreemad Bhagavad Gita: The Song of Love, 4.6

The Path

We have established our true identity as the *ātma*, we have described the goal of Vaikuṅṭha and we understand what it is to be bound to the material world. The path is the way out. It is the road in which we have to travel to come back to the Truth, to our relationship with God.



The Goal Affects the Means

Hinduism has presented a huge expanse of spiritual practice. The goal of every method is to discover what lies within, to raise our state of consciousness and experience the Divine. The essence of *yoga*, as Patañjali puts it, is to still the fluctuations of the mind. The *Gītā* stresses the importance of gaining control of the senses and acting with detachment. The *Bhāgavatam* makes us aware of the need to crush the ego and remove the sense of 'I' and 'mine'. Spiritual practice serves to focus and gradually transform us within. It moves us from the material to the spiritual.

But perhaps even more than the practice, is the aim of it. Earlier we stated the difference between seeing God as ultimately impersonal and God as personal. The former saw that the Supreme was non-different from the *ātma*. The latter saw the *ātma* as just a part of God. Being clear about this distinction is important on any path. How we see the Ultimate will dictate how exactly we practise our *sādhana*.

When the goal is Self-realisation, techniques are used purely as a means. They are a tool to discover the *ātma*. Meditation and *mantra* are done to still the mind. We practise self-enquiry and contemplation to discover who we are. It is to concentrate the mind and bring one to a state of complete oneness with the object of worship.

In Vaiṣṇava tradition and in the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya the practices might sometimes appear similar, but the goal is radically different. The aim is not merely to know who we are, but to know our loving relationship with God. It is to build, establish and enjoy our connection with Him. Spiritual practice is not just a means to an end, it is the means and the end. It is done as an offering to glorify the Supreme Lord and to know Him more deeply. The intention behind all acts of service and devotion is to please the Lord. Every devotee wishes to grow and perfect themselves as much as possible, but behind this, is a desire to please the one being served. Not because He needs or desires it, but rather because this is the nature of Love. The highest pleasure that can be experienced is not to take for self-gratification, but to give ourselves selflessly to the Supreme.

The Role of Divine Grace

As we have already described the goal is Vaikuṅṭha - the realisation of God. It is attaining the perfection of Divine Love, the full expression of the *ātma*, free from any trace of ego, *karma* or material contamination. This supreme destination can be attained in this life, while in the body, or after we leave this body at death.

However, whatever spiritual practices we might do, it is only by grace that we achieve anything. A devotee is crystal clear at all times that they are relying on the benediction of the Supreme Lord and Paramahansa Vishwananda. This is absolutely central to the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya.

Grace is the presence and power of God that purifies and uplifts us. It destroys the binding force of *karma*, it eradicates negative impressions and transforms the mind. In short, grace carries everything. It is



impossible to reach Vaikuṅṭha without this saving grace. Self-realisation is different. To gain knowledge of the *ātma*, to perceive that we are not this material body, can be achieved through our own effort. Through practise it is possible to disentangle ourselves from the mind and experience the peace of the *ātma*. But God-realisation is a totally different affair. It is to know the person behind this material world, the one who is the controller of all that is.

The inevitable question that follows is, 'If grace takes us to God, then what role do we play?' In other words, how does our effort feature in this? Paramahansa Vishwananda is clear:

'One who knocks at the door of spiritual opportunity with their best effort, will find it swinging open, as God helps those who help themselves.'

'As humans we can reach the top of the mountain through our own efforts. But to reach the sky one needs the *satguru*.'

Reaching Vaikuṅṭha is in many ways like journeying to the sun. It is an impossible task if we rely on ourselves. But even though it is grace which takes us there, the devotee must prove their worthiness to receive it. Grace is when God gives Himself and this cannot be thrown out to anybody. We cannot expect this treasure to randomly fall upon our heads. If we have no interest in spirituality, if we are interested in pleasure and personal gratification then how can the highest state of existence be given to us? There must be a striving, a desire, a longing to reach the destination. There must be a yearning heart that makes God the centre and highest priority in our lives. This is absolutely critical. Perfection may not be achieved, but the sincere effort for perfection is essential.

It is this intense effort and sincerity that moves the Lord into action. Our *karma* and entanglement to this material world is cleared away. He wipes the slate clean, and brings us back to Him. He delivers the realisation that allows us to know Him in Truth.

The various practices within the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya are where we can invest our effort. They have been given by Paramahansa Vishwananda to transform our hearts, to make us more God centred and less attached to the material world. As we engage with them, we become purified and we start to understand that life is not about satisfying what we want. Gradually we develop an attitude of a servant. More and more everything we do becomes about pleasing Paramahansa Vishwananda and God. Rather than pursuing our desires, we recognise a higher joy in doing what He wants. The pride and sense of independence starts to become less dominant. We see that our life is ultimately not our own.

The Spiritual Path is about Deepening Trust

Developing trust is critical. This is where we recognise that everything around us is happening for a reason. In every situation we see the hand of God and Paramahansa Vishwananda orchestrating and pushing us closer towards Him. It is where we understand that our whole existence is in the hands of the Divine and everything



is happening for the best. The more we trust the more we see Paramahansa Vishwananda as the Supreme. This is crucial and it manifests itself at different levels depending on our spiritual advancement.

'Quickly such a person becomes righteous and obtains everlasting peace. O Arjuna, let it be declared that My devotee never perishes.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 9.31

Kaniṣṭha-adhikārī - Understanding Life has a Purpose and Paramahansa Vishwananda Can Guide Us

At this stage everything is based on belief. The teaching that Paramahansa Vishwananda is the Supreme is an idea that guides us. It steers us in the right direction and motivates us to go deeper on our path. As a spiritual Master, He is a guiding light but we have yet to develop a strong sense of belonging.

Madhyama-adhikārī - Helpless Longing for God

As we grow spiritually we move past truths being just ideas to them being inner convictions. Knowing Paramahansa Vishwananda as God is not merely a mental belief, we feel it within our hearts. Through our connection, His divinity becomes a tangible reality in our lives. We still have attachments, desires, likes and dislikes but we are willing to put them aside to progress on our path. We recognise the shallow nature of material existence and how we are helplessly caught within its web. Within us, there is a deep longing and this is reflected in the level of commitment we pledge. In effect we become a gambler, we are willing to stake everything we have for the goal of knowing God.

The conviction in our hearts brings a strong sense of belonging. Paramahansa Vishwananda is no longer a distant figure, who merely instructs us, He is a palpable presence in our lives. The trust we have, allows us to recognise that only He can free us. Everything is in His hands and under His control. The sense of belonging creates exclusive reliance on His grace. We see that Paramahansa Vishwananda is not an ordinary *guru*. He has the ability to give the ultimate and highest relationship with God - who is none other than Him.

Uttama-adhikārī - The Perfection of Surrender - Śaraṅgati

There comes a point, when our mind along with the ego and intellect is completely handed over to God. The material world no longer has any hold over us. We become perfect instruments of God's will. Whatever He wants manifests through us, because there is no ego identity, we know we are the *ātma* who is intrinsically bound to Paramahansa Vishwananda. Our existence is one of complete servitude, we have no other desire. Even the desire to see God, to have Him bless us becomes redundant. We welcome whatever happens because everything is seen as a manifestation of the divine will. This is God realisation.

Trust Allows Grace to Descend

By intense and full effort in our path we move through the different stages and reach the stage of perfect surrender. This is where the



floodgates open and the fullness of our divine relationship manifests. It is important to note that despite the immense effort we have given, we have not earned this stage. At best we can say we have climbed a mountain, but climbing a mountain is not journeying to the sun. It is proving our intention. It is making ourselves ready and worthy to handle the grace of God. The effort we place on our path should not be likened to a business deal. It is not an exchange between how much we put in and how much we receive. God is longing to pour Himself upon us. He is searching for an excuse to bestow His blessings, He is earnestly looking for a receptive vessel to receive what He has come to give.

When contemplating these three stages of trust one may think that there are different levels of grace or that grace only comes at the end. But the reality is grace is ever present with everyone. The sun is shining on all beings alike, but if we have our backs towards it, we do not perceive what is available. The spiritual practice and the service we perform makes us more conscious. Our awareness grows and we are able to imbibe the grace that has forever been shining upon us.

'...the ones who are surrendered to the Guru always have the hand of the Guru on them. And they should not fear anything. Knowing that the Guru is always with you, why should you fear something? If you have such trust and such dedication - if you have full faith in your Guru, you should not worry about anything else.'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, Sri Guru Gita, 95*

Grace Cannot Be Calculated

Another important point to make is that grace cannot be seen as an exact science. It is easy to lay down criteria and stages of development but it is only Paramahansa Vishwananda who can perceive what the *ātma* is longing for. Is perfect surrender needed before the fullness of grace can descend? Is placing God first in our lives enough? Only He can decide who is worthy of grace and exactly when that should be delivered. While every devotee is earnestly trying to give themselves in perfect surrender no one can be sure of how and when God will reveal Himself. The churning of previous *karma*, desire and spiritual merit is extremely complex. Every individual has been born for a purpose and something specific to achieve. As a result, each of us has a unique position specific to our path that we have to reach. It cannot be assumed that what makes one person ready for grace will be the same for others. Having said that, although every person's path is different, the need for concerted effort still remains. There must be a striving for spiritual progress.

It is worth understanding the difference between *karma*, mercy and grace. *Karma* is the natural consequence of any action done with attachment. Everything we do with a materially conditioned mind is bound to produce results that we will experience. Mercy is when the Divine alleviates our suffering. He removes obstacles, He grants us solace and opens doors for us to march forward. Grace is something quite different. It is when God directly intervenes in our life and brings us back to Him. He emphatically steps in to rescue us from the bondage of the material world.



'But for those who love and surrender all their actions to Me, who worship Me with exclusive devotion and fix their minds on Me alone, for such people, Arjuna, who have their consciousness absorbed in this way, I quickly deliver them from the ocean of birth and death.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 12.6-7

'...you can do your sadhana, you can be disciplined in life, banish all evil thoughts from your mind, live piously, be strict, control your senses. But aim for the Grace of the Lord, because He is the final salvation, and there is nothing beyond that. You can't reach there, because you are bound by the mind, the gunas, and by the senses. Nevertheless, you can ask Him for His Grace, and you can make Him give it to you by loving Him fully. Ultimate salvation can only be attained by His Grace, nothing else.'
- *Paramahansa Vishwananda, The Essence of Shreemad Bhagavatam*, 5.3.18

Understanding Different Deities

Nārāyaṇa, Mahā-Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu

Nārāyaṇa: He is the Supreme Lord that dwells in the transcendent realm of Vaikuṅṭha. He is depicted reclining on the snake-bed Ādiśeṣa. He has two arms and a dark bluish tone. He has lotus-like eyes and wears the resplendent *Kaustubha* gem. Nārāyaṇa wears a yellow lower garment and is decorated with *vaijayantī* flowers and a Tulsī garland. At times He is in cosmic sleep (*yoganidrā*) and at other times He is engaged with His devotees. In this form the Lord is outside all time and space.

Mahā-Viṣṇu: But when He wills to engage with creation and the material world, He takes on the role of Mahā-Viṣṇu. In this form He has four hands holding the conch, Cakra, mace and lotus. From the body of this form numerous universes pour out. This is where *prakṛti*, the material substance of all creation is ignited with the Lord's potency and the creative process begins to unfold.

'Different beings come from various wombs, O Arjuna, but this material nature is the womb for all of them and I am the seed-giving Father.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 14.4

Viṣṇu: Each universe is made up of many *lokas* or realms (14 in total). To uphold and ensure the preservation of each universe, the Lord assumes the role of Viṣṇu. His form is identical to Mahā-Viṣṇu with four hands. It is this aspect of God that is also the Paramātmā. It is the Divinity that dwells alongside the *ātma*.

The distinction between Nārāyaṇa, Mahā-Viṣṇu and Viṣṇu is primarily a functional one. Just as one person can be a father, husband and a son, so too the Lord assumes different forms and moods to carry out different cosmic activities. Prayers and *mantras* sometimes refer



to Nārāyaṇa and sometimes to Viṣṇu, but this is not to be taken as referring to different deities. Ultimately, it is the same personality.

Avatāras of the Lord

**'O brāhmaṇas, the incarnations of the Lord are innumerable,
like rivulets flowing from inexhaustible sources of water.'
- Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, 1.3.26**

When the Lord sees fit, He incarnates and enters the material universe to restore righteousness and uplift His devotees. Sometimes He comes personally in all His fullness as Nārāyaṇa, other times a part of His being will descend or He may even empower one of His devotees to fulfil a specific task.

The Full Personal Incarnations of Nārāyaṇa

Kṛṣṇa

The Kṛṣṇa-avatāra is where Śrīman Nārāyaṇa descends to reveal His heart to devotees. The *Bhāgavatam* describes His various pastimes and through them we are given an insight into the various facets of God. In one incarnation we are shown a whole spectrum of Divine qualities. The incarnation of Kṛṣṇa is one but it can be viewed in four distinct personas. In each one the Lord displays a new aspect of Himself.

Vṛndavāna Kṛṣṇa

Kṛṣṇa is the cowherd boy who steals the hearts of the residents of Vṛndavāna and kills the demons sent by Kamsa. Here He is playful and mischievous. We see the maternal love of Yaśodā, the friendship of the cowherds and the intimate love of Rādhā and the *gopīs*.

The form of Giridhārī holds a particular place of importance, as He is the personal deity of Paramahansa Vishwananda. This is where He lifted Govardhana mountain and rescued the residents of Vṛndavāna from a terrible storm.

Dvārakā-Kṛṣṇa

Once Kṛṣṇa leaves Vṛndavāna He is never the same again. He takes up His royal duties in Mathurā and then later in Dvārakā. Here He is the great hero who defeats the enemies of the Yādavas. In the process He rescues and gains numerous wives, living the life of a householder.

Gītā-Kṛṣṇa

During the great war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas there is an epic moment where Kṛṣṇa takes on the role as the spiritual Master. He guides and teaches Arjuna about the goal of life, knowledge of the *ātma* and *bhakti*. In this short dialogue Kṛṣṇa blesses him with the direct revelation of His cosmic form.

Pañḍharpur-Kṛṣṇa (Viṭṭhala)

This is the final stage of the Kṛṣṇa-avatāra where Kṛṣṇa takes the form of Pāṇḍuraṅga. Typically He is depicted standing straight with



hands on His hips. What is unique about this aspect, is that the Lord comes to see and serve His devotees. Whereas in the earlier stages, devotees are attracted to Him, here Viṭṭhala is attracted to His devotees. He seeks them out and is ever at hand to bless and protect them. It is through the lives of the great Varkarī saints, such as Dnyāneśvara, Nāmdev, Eknath and Tukārām that we can witness this *līlā*. With Viṭṭhala, there is complete freedom and simplicity between the Lord and devotee.

Lord Rāma

The original record of Lord Rāma's life is written by Vālmīki, but since then there have been numerous *Rāmāyaṇas* that have been composed. In the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya, it is primarily (but not exclusively) the Tulsīdās *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Rāmacaritamānasa*) that is referred to. Here we are shown in detail Lord Rāma's relationship with His devotees. Hanumān, Bharata and Śabārī are particular examples of perfect devotion and service that are often cited.

Lord Nārasimha

The slaying of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu and the saving of Prahlāda is described vividly in the seventh canto of the *Bhāgavatam*. Lord Nārasimha is the fullness of power and Truth. He is the Lord in all His glory that comes to destroy illusion and rescue our soul. Many of the temples that Paramahansa Vishwananda has inaugurated have Him as the main deity.

Paramahansa Vishwananda

Guruji is no less than the fullness of Nārāyaṇa and therefore is on the same platform as these other *avatāras*. Guruji is the *satguru* (the highest spiritual Master), but the correct understanding is that He is the Supreme playing the role of the *satguru*. As the Master, He teaches and guides us to the Truth. But as we walk this path, we realise that this Truth is none other than Him.

Other incarnations

Along with these four *avatāras*, there are a number of other partial incarnations. Many of these are described in the *Bhāgavatam* such as Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Balarāma, Kapila and Pṛthu. Each one came with a specific task to reset the balance and restore *dharma*.

In Vaiṣṇava tradition it is often stated that various attributes of the Lord incarnate. For example, amongst the āḷvār saints Kulaśekhara was the *Kaustubha* gem and Thirumaḷisai Āḷvār was the *Cakra* disc. The overall point is that this material plane is never left alone. At all times the Lord or aspects of Him are present to guide and uplift it.

Mahā-Lakṣmī

Alongside Nārāyaṇa is His eternal consort Mahā-Lakṣmī. She is ever present at His feet serving Him. One of the defining features of the Lord is the Śrīvatsa on His chest. This is Her intimate residence and shows how dear She is to Him. While it is only Nārāyaṇa who is the goal of life and it is only He that can free us; Mahā-Lakṣmī is the



mediatrix, the intercessor who uplifts us. She is the personification of mercy, the one who steps out and heeds the prayers of devotees.

It is Nārāyaṇa who embodies justice. For us to approach Him, we require a degree of purity, a certain qualification that allows us to be near His majesty and exalted status. But with the blessings of Mahā-Lakṣmī, because of Her mercy we are made worthy. She overlooks our faults and recommends us to receive the blessings of the Lord. This is the role of the Divine Mother or Devī. Worshipping Her is a direct appeal to the mercy of God. Just as a child calls helplessly to its mother to be rescued, we too appeal to Mahā-Lakṣmī to be lifted out of bondage and distress.

From a cosmological stance Nārāyaṇa and Mahā-Lakṣmī personify two different realities - the spiritual and the material. *Prakṛti*, as mentioned, is the substance from which all the diversity of creation occurs.

‘My womb is the totality of material existence, within which I place the seed of life. From that, O Arjuna, all beings are born.’ - Bhagavad Gītā, 14.3

The womb referred to here is an aspect of Mahā-Lakṣmī. The Lord through His glance initiates life and activity to unfold. We have discussed repeatedly how the material world is a source of bondage and misery for the *ātma*, but this is only if we follow desires for gratification. Once we see the Truth, we perceive the world as the Divine Mother who serves the Lord. All of creation becomes a place of beauty. Everywhere we look we can behold the wonder of nature and creation.

Mahā-Lakṣmī is divine mercy, but She also embodies wealth, prosperity, creativity and abundance. She is pictured and praised as the one who has a golden complexion with gold and silver garlands. To many, Mahā-Lakṣmī grants money and helps with financial affairs. But to the devotee, Her wealth is something infinitely more precious - Love for God. She is undeviating devotion to the feet of the Lord and worship of Her is done to receive that same quality.

Worship of Devī

Worship of Devī is a major feature of Hinduism, there are whole Śākta traditions dedicated to worshipping Her as the Supreme. In the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya, Mahā-Lakṣmī is the source of all Devīs. Every goddess ultimately has their origin in Her. Whether it is Kālī, Durgā, Bhū-devī or Sarasvatī they are all manifestations of Mahā-Lakṣmī. Each one personifies a certain quality of divine mercy and feminine *śakti* or power.

Rādhā is the closest of the *gopīs* to Kṛṣṇa and holds particular importance in the *sampradāya*. Vṛndavāna is the abode where we see how intimate and free God can be with His devotees. But amongst all the residents of Vṛndavāna, Rādhā has a unique position. She personifies the highest and purest form of *mādhurya-bhāva*. Her longing for Kṛṣṇa as her lover is unmatched. Through Rādhā’s mercy, devotees are given a taste of the ecstatic state of devotion she embodies.



Śiva

'But more than all the yogīs, he who has faith and worships Me, is deemed by Me to be the highest of all.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 6.47

In the Śaivite tradition, Śiva is seen as the Supreme, but in Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas* he is held as the greatest of *yogīs* who meditates on the Lord. Śiva personifies mastery over the material world, one who has reached the stage of immortality. Śiva is the perfection of what it is to be a Vaiṣṇava. He embodies the state which has risen above the mind. This state is captured by the *liṅgam*. The *liṅgam* is the closest form to the formless. It is pure auspiciousness, pure consciousness. We worship Śiva in praise of his sublime devotion to the Lord and his unbounded mercy for humanity. By meditating and seeking his blessings we hope to be transported beyond the controlling nature of the mind. When we rise beyond this body-mind identification, we reach the state of 'Śivo'ham'. We experience the *ātma*, our true divine Self. This is what allows us to surrender ourselves without fear or any false conceptions. Śiva is the one who clears the way for pure, transcendent Love to grow.

On a cosmic level, Śiva also has a functional role within each universe. At the end of every age, Śiva incarnates himself and is responsible for the destruction of this universe so it can be dissolved back into the Lord.

Brahmā

Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are known as the *Trimūrti*. Each universe has its own *Trimūrti*, so in this sense there are countless Brahmās, Viṣṇus and Śivas. Brahmā, unlike Viṣṇu and Śiva, is bound by the material universe. His functional role is one of a secondary creator. The universe itself comes out of the body of Mahā-Viṣṇu, but the development of humanity and nature is the responsibility of Brahmā. The *Bhāgavatam* describes how he is born from the navel of Viṣṇu and then goes on to create the first ṛṣis and men. From there, the rest of civilisation manifests. Brahmā is the head of the Devas and Asuras. He has the ability to bless and grant boons. Although He is a master of Vedic knowledge, he is still limited to this material existence.

'Rebirth is inevitable right up to the world of Brahmā. But after attaining Me, Arjuna, there is no rebirth.' - Bhagavad Gītā, 8.16

The Devas and Asuras

Each universe has different realms and in each realm there are various beings. The Devas are a race of celestial beings that reside in Svargaloka. This is described as a heavenly abode complete with various pleasures. It is in many ways a hedonistic paradise. Those who have desires and have accumulated enough merit (through rituals and other deeds) during their life can reach this place after death. But once that merit has been exhausted, they are forced to return to this earthly plane (Bhūloka) to carry on reaping and sowing the fruits of their action.



'Those who are versed in the three Vedas, being purified from sin by drinking the soma juice [4], pray for heaven [5] and worship Me with sacrifices. After reaching that place where the king of the demigods [6] resides, they enjoy celestial pleasures.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 9.20

'Having enjoyed this vast realm of heaven, once their merit is exhausted, they return to the world of mortals. As a result, those who follow the Vedic rituals and are motivated by desire, go to heaven temporarily before coming back.' - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 9.21

The person who rules over the Devas takes the position of Indra. At different intervals, that Indra is replaced. Below Bhūloka are various other realms, at the lowest abode is Pātāla where the Asuras reside. The Devas and Asuras are in fact cousins descended from Brahmā. The *Purāṇas* describe the constant tension between the two groups. The Devas are not perfected devotees, but they do rely on the Lord for help in their endeavours. Generally speaking, the Asuras carry more arrogance and are further from the Lord. Having said that, there are numerous incidents of Indra becoming deluded and there are various examples of *asuras* such as Bali and Prahlāda who end up becoming great devotees.

Time

Each universe exists for as long as a life span of Brahmā. The *Gītā* gives us some indication of just how long that is:

'Those who know the duration of a cosmic Day and Night understand a Day of Brahmā lasts for a thousand *Mahā-yugas* and a Night of Brahmā lasts for another thousand *Mahā-yugas*.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.17

At the beginning of a Day of Brahmā all beings come forth from the unmanifest, and when the Night comes, they are dissolved back into the unmanifested state. - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.18

These same beings come forth again and again, and helplessly they are withdrawn at the coming of the Night. When the next Day begins, yet again they manifest. - *Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.19

A *Mahā-yuga* is made up of four *yugas* - *Satya*, *Tretā*, *Dvāpara* and *Kali*. Each *yuga* lasts hundreds of thousands of years and each one is also defined by the level of *dharma*. According to the *Bhāgavatam* there are four legs of *dharma*: austerity, purity, truthfulness and kindness. In the *Satya-yuga* they are all intact, so righteousness and spiritual principles prevail in their fullness. As the universe moves from one *yuga* to another, each leg is destroyed. By the time of the *Kali-yuga*, there is only one leg that is barely remaining. As a result, there is constant conflict and confusion. People have forgotten their purpose and their relationship to God.

A thousand cycles of the four *yugas* is one day of Brahmā. During this time souls are projected out (*sṛṣṭi*) and reap the results of their *karma* going through innumerable births. Then during the night of Brahmā, which has the same duration, everything is withdrawn (*pralaya*) into



a dormant state with no activity. This goes on for 360 days (a year) of Brahmā, who in turn has a lifespan of 100 such years. At the end of his life the universe is destroyed (*mahā-pralaya*) and withdrawn back into Mahā-Viṣṇu.

As Kṛṣṇa makes clear in the eighth chapter of the *Gītā*, we are perpetually caught in this cycle. We undergo numerous lives and are constantly forced out and withdrawn. But through devotion, and through the grace of God we can break free of this situation and reach the Supreme Abode of Vaikuṅṭha.

Subjective Time

What has been mentioned is cosmic time, but there is also something known as psychological time. As stated each *yuga* has its own influence, but this influence depends on our spiritual position. The *Kali-yuga* for instance, is the current age and the most troublesome. But for one who is a devotee, they may not experience the effects of *Kali-yuga*, but only of *Dvāpara* or even *Tretā* or *Satya-yuga*. In other words, even though objectively the world may be experiencing a certain age, the experience of the individual may be of a different one. The person seeking to know God travels through life in a different paradigm. It is quite possible that while the external world is in chaos, within the devotee's world they may be rising closer to God.

Conclusion

To summarise, the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is essentially one of *guru-bhakti* to Paramahansa Vishwananda. The goal of a devotee is to realise their relationship with Him. This is done through the Vaiṣṇava tradition that He has laid down. Through the path of four arms we discover the nature of God as Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. The connection we build with Him is carried simultaneously with our connection with Guruji. The relationship with one deepens the relationship with the other. Through our effort in service and spiritual practice, our connection intensifies. We strive to develop trust and surrender. This is what makes us worthy of receiving divine grace. This grace reveals Divine Love. It allows us to perceive that Śrīman Nārāyaṇa and Paramahansa Vishwananda are one and the same.



Questions and Answers

Q: Is it usual for the guru to be seen as God in Vaiṣṇava traditions?

A: In impersonalist traditions everybody is the fullness of God. The sense of separate individuality is merely an appearance. The *guru* therefore is worshipped as one who has realised this. In doing so, the disciple hopes to come to the same understanding and reach the same status as their *guru*. In Vaiṣṇava traditions however, God and the devotee are eternally distinct. The devotee is part of God, but never the fullness of who He is. It is therefore rare to find the *guru* who is worshipped as the Supreme. Because he always carries out the will of God, he is commonly described as the dearest devotee, or as being the ambassador of God or 'as good as God but not actually God'.

However there are notable exceptions within Vaiṣṇava traditions where the spiritual Master has been worshipped as the Supreme within their lifetime. Rādhāraṇa Charan Das and Caitanya Mahāprabhu are good examples. These personalities were seen as divine incarnations, where the Lord personally entered this material world to uplift devotees.

Q: Has Paramahansa Vishwananda taken some form of initiation?

A: There is no need for any formal initiation. Paramahansa Vishwananda is complete in Himself. However, out of respect for the Vaiṣṇava tradition, He has taken *pañca-saṁskāra* initiation into the Sri Vaiṣṇava *Sampradāya* by Veda-vyāsa Rangaṛāja Bhaṭṭāra in Srīraṅgam. Additionally, Mahavatar Babaji is often referenced as the *guru* of Paramahansa Vishwananda. Babaji has given Him *sannyāsa-dīkṣā*, and instructed Him to give the different levels of Atma Kriya Yoga. But this dynamic is to be understood as just a role that is being played. In truth, there is no difference in status between Paramahansa Vishwananda and Mahavatar Babaji. One personality is not higher or subordinate to the other.

Vedānta and Sampradāya

Q: Most Vaiṣṇava Sampradāyas have an established school of Vedānta rooted in Vedic texts, does the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya also have one?

A: We certainly respect the Vaiṣṇava schools of Vedānta. Rāmānujācārya's Viśiṣṭādvaita actually serves as our basic philosophical framework. But we would not call our understanding of God and reality Vedānta because it is not rooted in the Upaniṣads or *Brahma-sūtras*. The philosophical conclusions drawn are from the teachings of Paramahansa Vishwananda and His interpretation of the *Gītā*.

On a wider note, while Vedānta was an essential requirement to establish other *sampradāyas*. We do not believe, in this day and age,



that it is needed. Great Masters such as Rāmānujācārya were living in a different time and the need to prove their beliefs in line with the Vedic tradition was critical. In order for devotion to Śrīman Nārāyaṇa to flourish it needed a firm foundation in these revealed scriptures. In today's digital, globalised age, Truth is no longer validated by the statements of such scriptures. The majority of spiritual seekers around the world are not convinced by erudite arguments based on philosophy and Sanskrit grammar. A certain understanding of God is needed, but in reality most people are looking for a tangible connection, something that can capture their heart and draw them deeper within. This is precisely what the Hari Bhakta Sampradāya is focused on.

Q: Can you expand on the teaching that everything is part of the body of Nārāyaṇa, and Nārāyaṇa is part of themselves?

A: The statement encompasses two realities, or rather reality viewed from two different perspectives.

- 1 Helplessness
- 2 Absorption of Love

On one hand all of us are separate and distinct and just like a body relies on the soul, so too does everything depend on the Lord. As Kṛṣṇa puts it 'we are an eternal fragment of His Being' (*Bhagavad Gītā* 15.7). As a fragment we are helpless. The Lord is the Master and we are His servant. This has and always will be the situation.

As mentioned Kṛṣṇa also states the devotee who truly knows Him declares 'Vasudeva (Nārāyaṇa) is all things'. (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 7.19) The devotee who is God-realised understands Divine Love. He sees the Lord as the embodiment and source of it. He understands himself and even the material world as a fragment of this same Love. Everywhere the pure devotee looks, He beholds this Love- He beholds the presence of Nārāyaṇa.

Once again if we take the example of the candle and the sun. From one perspective there is a tiny flame and a seemingly infinite 'flame' which is the sun. But from another perspective between the two there is only light shining. This is how difference and oneness, helplessness and absorption of Love, exist side-by-side. As a flame there is distinction, as light there is no such distinction. A God-realised devotee is situated in the mystery of this paradox. On one hand he is praising and serving the Lord at the same time he is lost in the ocean of Love.

Q: Are you saying the ātma merges with God?

A: No. The *ātma* always retains its identity despite being united with God through Love. It is the false identity with the ego that is abandoned. The sense of being independent, the idea that 'I am the doer and owner' is completely obliterated.



Q: How did this all begin? How did the ātma end up in the material world?

This is a question that breaks through all boundaries of philosophy. The precise motivation for why life is unfolding in this material world cannot be fully grasped with our minds. What can be said is that the *ātma* does not belong in this conditioned state. Its original position is in Vaikuṅṭha. This is home, in the service of Śrīman Nārāyaṇa. The reason for leaving this realm is not because of any fault or offence. It is rather due to the inconceivable divine will of God.

Q When there is no sense of doership or ownership, does that mean we have no free will?

A: Free will is a matter of perspective. When we are bound to our ego-identity and have no spiritual connection, then we perceive that we have free will. We are the masters of our destiny, we plan and control what goes on. Obviously we understand that there are many things that are out of our hands, but by and large we believe we have influence over things. Those who have a spiritual connection, understand that their lives are guided and everything is being steered by God. They can see that there is a higher purpose unfolding and that everything is happening for a reason. Despite this there is also the understanding that sincere effort is required. Without this effort, we cannot expect grace to descend. At this level, we have the choice to step up and let God's plan for us unfold in our life.

But for the fully God-realised soul, there is no such thing as freewill. There is only God's will. The *ātma* is at its full expression and is united with the Lord in Love. As a result, there is no difference between what God wants and what the individual wants. Their wills become synonymous. Such a surrendered devotee becomes the perfect representative of the Lord.

From this perspective, every movement, even that of a blade of grass can only happen with God's consent. All events, whether good or bad, are auspicious. Everything is viewed from the ultimate perspective, it is seen as a cosmic unfolding. To the mind which is bound to this material reality, this is very difficult to accept. The confusion comes because we are trying to use logic to comprehend a much larger cosmic picture. This conflict is illustrated in the eleventh chapter of the *Gītā*:

'Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Jayadratha, Karṇa, as well as other mighty warriors, have already been destroyed by Me, therefore, kill them without hesitation. You shall surely defeat your enemies in battle.'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 11.34

Arjuna sees that the outcome in the war has been decided, his enemies have already been killed by Kṛṣṇa. From the level of the mind, he thinks he is the slayer of his enemies and that victory for the Pāṇḍavas rests on his shoulders. But in the cosmic form of Kṛṣṇa, he sees that the future has already happened according to His will. Arjuna learns that he is only an instrument. Someone who has a spiritual connection senses this. They therefore act as best as they can and offer



everything to the Lord. For a God-realised devotee, this is not a truth to aspire for, it is a lived reality.

But regardless of whether one is surrendered or not, free will is still an illusion. Any individual would have to concede that we do not have the liberty to do as we please. At best we have a conditioned will, where the material world restricts what we can do. Our abilities are not perfect. The choices and options that life presents are limited. But if we look deeper we will see that we are not even completely free to think and discriminate. So often we are plagued by desires and fears. We have not mastered our mind then inevitably we are in some way enslaved to the world around us. Despite all that has been stated, a devotee understands the need for responsibility and maximum effort. The truth that everything is orchestrated by God cannot be transposed onto our everyday lived experience. Such a mindset would only lead to ungrounded laziness and recklessness. So long as we have a mind and have not reached the state of God-realisation, then deal practically with situations as they arise. We must carry out all our duties with full enthusiasm and care. Even after showing Arjuna that He is in control of the outcome of the war, Kṛṣṇa repeatedly urges Arjuna to engage in his *dharma*:

'Therefore rise and win glory! Conquer your enemies and enjoy a prosperous kingdom. They have already been slain by Me; therefore, you should act merely as My instrument, O great Archer!'
- *Bhagavad Gītā*, 11.33

A devotee understands that they are an instrument of God's will. Therefore they have a willingness to strive and fulfil that role, knowing full well that ultimately the outcome is in His hands.

