

Seeing and Serving God in All

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1. Introduction

Let us start with the Śānti Mantra (peace invocation) from the Kenopaniṣad:

*āpyāyantu mamāṅgāni vāk-prāṇas-cakṣuḥ śrotram atho
balaṁ-indriyāṇi ca sarvāṇi sarvam brahmaupaniṣadam
mā'ham brahma nirākuryām mā mā brahma nirākarot
anirākaraṇam-astv-anirākaraṇam me'stu
tad ātmani nirate ya upaniṣatsu dharmās-
te mayi santu te mayi santu
Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ*

“Let all my limbs including speech, vital airs, eyes, ears, and the other sense organs and my capacity grow in their power. Everything is that Brahman unfolded in the Upaniṣads. May I not reject Brahman (for lack of faith). May not Brahman, the Lord, reject me. May there be non-rejection of the Lord by me. May there be non-rejection of the Lord for me. In me who am committed to the pursuit of knowledge of Brahman, may there be all those qualities which are mentioned as qualifications in the Upaniṣads. Let those qualities be in me. Om peace, peace, peace.”

I will divide this talk into five parts:

- a) According to the scriptures, God is in everything, in fact God is everything. This is the entire basis of Vedāntic thought.
- b) Numerous sages have said from their direct experience that it is possible to experience God, that is, experience oneness with the Divine.
- c) If that is so, why are most of us not able to experience the divinity that is present in each of us? What are the obstacles?
- d) What is needed to be done to bring about the experience of divinity?
- e) The service aspect: since God is present in all beings, we have the moral obligation to serve everyone.

2. God Alone is Present

The Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā, the Purāṇas, and the teachings of the sages are all based on one theme: that it is God alone who is present in everything, both animate and inanimate. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Śrī Kṛṣṇa unequivocally mentions in several places that God is present in everything. For example, in the 13th chapter He says: Know Me to be the indweller in all bodies (human, animal, plant, even inanimate matter):

*samam sarveṣu bhūteṣu tiṣṭhantam parameśvaram
vinaśyatsv avinaśyantam yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati* (Gītā 13.27)

“He really sees who perceives the Supreme Lord alike in everything – as the Imperishable Substance abiding amidst perishing phenomena.”

And in Gītā 13.26, He says: “Whatever is born, whether moving or unmoving, it has come into being due to the union of the body (*kṣetra*) and the Spirit (*kṣetrajñā*).” In other words, all things, both moving and unmoving, are made up of a combination of two things: the body and the Spirit. The nature of the Spirit is clarified in Gītā 13.33, where it is declared that just as the one sun illuminates this whole world, so the Spirit in all bodies is a reflection, a part, of the one Spirit, the Supreme Being.

All aspects of Hinduism – our art, our architecture, our music, the way we greet each other, the way we eat, etc. – are deeply influenced by this principle, that God alone is and God is everything.

3. The Experience of our Sages

This truth has also been the direct experience of all our sages, both ancient and modern. And they have recorded their experience for the benefit of the rest of us. We recall how Swāmī Vivekānanda, long before he became a monk, when he was a student in college in Calcutta and was known as Narendranāth Datta, went around asking everyone he met: Have you seen God? He had read much of western and eastern philosophy and he had this question very much on his mind. One of his English professors told him: “I have known only one person who has realized that blessed state, and he is Rāmakrishna of Dakshineswar.” When Naren went to the Dakshineswar temple just outside Calcutta and asked Śrī Rāmakrishna whether he had seen God, the latter unhesitatingly replied: “Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly. God can be seen. One can talk to Him. But who cares for God? People shed torrents of tears for their wives, children, wealth, and property, but who weeps for the vision of God? If one cries sincerely for God, one can surely see Him.” Naren could feel that Śrī Rāmakrishna’s words were uttered from the depths of an inner experience. They could not be doubted. Śrī Rāmakrishna could see God more vividly than the person standing in front of him because the world to him had a dream-like quality whereas God was very real.

In Kathopaniṣad 1.3.12, Yama tells Naciketas that God can be seen by qualified people:

*eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūḍho”tmā na prakāśate
drśyate tvagrayayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣma-darśibhiḥ*

“This Ātman is hidden in all beings and does not shine forth, but it is seen by subtle seers through their sharp and subtle intellect.” We do not generally see God in people because we see only their outer shell: their features, their dress, their gender, the language they speak, etc. We miss the indwelling Spirit behind the outward appearance. But the sages have the incisive power to cut through the facade and see the Spirit within.

Similarly, Gītā (6.21) talks about *buddhi-grāhyam atīndriyam*, that (bliss) which is beyond the ken of the senses but is capable of being grasped by the purified intellect.

4. The Obstacles

What are the obstacles that stand in the way of Self-realization? When one knows what the obstacles are, one can strive to remove them, but not otherwise.

a) Our mind and our senses are always very preoccupied with the outside world and we do not spend enough effort to know the Self. As Yama explained to Naciketas (Kathopaniṣad 2.1.1): “The self-existent (Brahma) created the senses with outgoing tendencies; therefore man beholds the external universe and not the internal Self (Ātman). But some wise man with eyes averted from sensual objects, desirous of immortality, sees the Ātman within.” It is only a person of firm determination – a *dhīraḥ*, to use the term that occurs in this mantra – who has the capacity to stop the outward flowing current of the senses and make it turn inward like turning back the current of a river, meditate on the inner Self, and behold the Ātman.

Let me tell you a silly story to illustrate this. A person was searching for something on the grounds outside his house in the light of the streetlamp shining there. When a neighbor asked him what he was doing, he replied that he was looking for his ring, which he had last seen in his bedroom. When the neighbor asked why he was not looking in the bedroom, the man replied: It is easier to search here, in the light of the streetlamp, than in the darkness of the bedroom! We are all making the same mistake: we are looking for happiness in a place where there is no chance whatsoever of finding it.

b) God is invisible to the physical senses. As the teacher tells the disciple seeking knowledge of God in Kenopaniṣad 1.3:

*na tatra cakṣur-gacchati na vāg-gacchati no mano na vidmo
na vijānīmo yathaitad-anuśiṣyād-anyad-eva tadviditād-atho aviditād-adhi*

“The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor the mind. We do not therefore know how to instruct one about it. It is different from what is known and it is beyond what is unknown.” In other words, Brahman cannot be an object of perception, because He is

partless, attributeless, extremely subtle. He is beyond the reach of the senses. He can only be intuitively realized through meditation. The senses and the mind can perceive only the external objects of the universe.

c) The Ātman remains hidden in all of us, even though it is present in all of us and is our essential core. Refer to the Kaṭhōpaniṣad mantra 1.3.12 quoted in Section 3. We have to make very strenuous effort to realize the Ātman.

5. What Things are Needed for Us to See God

Many things are needed for us to see God.

a) The foremost thing needed is the Grace of God. God's grace is present for all of us unconditionally – our very being able to speak and see and move about is by the grace of God. But we do not always experience the grace of God. Sri Ramakrishna gives the example of a sailboat. If the sails are unfurled, the boat catches the breeze and moves forward in the water. But if the sails are furled, the boat remains stationary. We have to unfurl our sails to allow God's grace to flow into our lives. We have to open ourselves up to receive the infinite grace that is there for the asking. If we take one step towards God, He will take 10 or 20 steps towards us.

As Nārada says in aphorism 38 of his *Bhakti Sūtras*:

mukhyatastu mahatkrpayaiiva bhagavatkṛpāleśad vā

“One realizes perfection in devotion through the grace of great learned people or by a little of Divine Grace.”

b) If there is no longing to see God, nothing works. This longing is called *mumuṣutvam* (intense burning desire for God). As Śankarācārya says in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 3:

*durlabham trayamevaitad-devānugraha-hetukam
manuṣyatvam mumuṣutvam mahāpuruṣa-samśrayaḥ*

“There are three things which are rare indeed and are due to the grace of God—namely a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfected sage.” By human birth, Śankara does not mean merely the fact of being born a human but the possession of human qualities. Foremost among these is the endless quest until the highest flight of evolution is reached. This quest for perfection is what sets human beings apart from animals. Animals are content when they are provided food and shelter, but we humans are not content with food, shelter, and all the comforts of life.

Mumuṣutvam or *vyākulata*, the intense yearning for liberation, must be cultivated. In Section 3, we quoted Śrī Rāmakrishna's words to the young Naren: “If one cries sincerely for God, one can surely see Him.” The Hindu tradition has many stories of saints who exhibited this intense longing for God. One such story is of a young boy whose parents

were devotees of Lord Viṭṭhala at Paṇḍharpur in Maharāshtra. It was customary for the father to carry every day to the temple the offering of food for the deity. After the ritual of offering was made he would bring it back home as *prasād*. One day, when the father was away, the boy went to the temple to offer the food to God. In his innocence, he believed that God would actually eat it. So he stood modestly with bowed head and folded hands. When nothing happened, the boy became very sad and told God: “If you don't eat, my mother will take me to task when I return. Have I made any mistake in the ritual of worship? But I don't know these rituals. I am still young. Please don't be angry with me.” Moved by these words, the God actually ate the food and told the boy, “Look here! Don't tell anyone about this.” The boy felt very happy. He bowed again to Viṭṭhala and went home. When the mother asked him where the *prasād* was, the boy replied: “God ate it.” The parents did not at first believe him, but were eventually convinced. That boy was the great 13th century Maharāshtrian saint-poet Nāmadeva.

Śrī Rāmakrishna gives a parable to convey the nature of the intense yearning to see God. There was a *gurukulam* where young boys stayed as residential scholars to be taught the scriptures. One boy asked the teacher how he could see God. Without speaking, the teacher took the boy by the hand, walked with him to the nearby river, and waded into it. When the water was up to the neck of the boy, the teacher pushed the boy's head into the water and held it down for 5 seconds before releasing his hold. Then he asked the boy: What were your thoughts when your head was under? The boy replied: Just that I should be able to breathe. That was the only thought in his mind, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. It is this one-pointedness of purpose that we need to cultivate in our search for God. We see this same one-pointedness in Olympian athletes as they train for years for a moment of glory on the victory stand.

c) Some kind of *sādhana* or spiritual practice is needed. Here, we are fortunate because the Indian tradition offers us many choices. The simplest of these is the practice of chanting the name of God. Caitanya Mahāprabhu has a couplet to describe this:

*harer nāma harer nāma harer nāmaiva kevalam
kalau nāsty eva nāsty eva nāsty eva gatir anyathā*

“Chant the Holy name, chant the Holy name, chant the Holy name. In the Kali yuga, there is no other way, no other way, no other way!”

We will not describe the different spiritual practices, except to mention that all of them are effective if done under proper guidance.

Incidentally, we note that the practice of chanting God's name is prevalent in other religious traditions as well. In the First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, which is a book of the New Testament of the Christian Bible, there is the advice (5.17): “Pray unceasingly.” This advice is the equivalent of *mantropadeśa*. It is vividly illustrated in the 19th century religious classic titled “*The Way of the Pilgrim, and the Pilgrim Continues the Way*.” This book describes the life of a Russian orthodox hermit, who is advised to

repeat the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” frequently while trying to put all other thoughts aside. At first the hermit repeats the prayer 3,000 times a day, increased to 6,000 and then 12,000 later. Soon, the hermit finds the prayer at his lips and in his mind every waking hour, as spontaneous and effortless as his breath itself. A synopsis of the full story appears at: <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/pilgrim.html>.

d) Cultivation of *vairāgya*, dispassion, is another important prerequisite needed for us to see God. The essential thing here is inner dispassion, dispassion of the mind, and not renunciation of material things. We do not need to shun possessions, property, or money. As Swāmī Vivekānanda has said in his *Karma Yoga* lectures, money is not bad in good hands. It is all right for householders to acquire as much money as can be made in *dhārmic* (i.e. legitimate) ways. (Only *sannyāsins*, renunciates, are not allowed to have money.)

There are several areas in which cultivation of dispassion or detachment is important.

i) We can attain a certain degree of dispassion towards sense objects by realizing that they are not the real source of our happiness. We recall Gītā 5.22:

*ye hi samsparśa-jā bhogā duḥkha-yonaya eva te
ādyantavantaḥ kaunteya na teṣu ramate budhaḥ*

“Whatever enjoyments are there born of sense contact, they are sources of suffering only, for they are with a beginning and an end. A wise man finds no delight in them.”

We recall the story of Yayāti, related in Mahābhārata Ādiparva 85.12. Yayāti had two wives, Devayānī (the legitimate wife) and Śarmiṣṭhā (the secret wife). Devayānī complained to her father, Śukrācārya, who cursed Yayāti to lose his youth. Yayāti begged his five sons to lend him their youth. Four sons refused but the fifth gave his father his youth. Yayāti got older and still his sexual desire did not decrease. He went to Kubera’s palace and had contact with the women there. Suddenly he realized the folly of what he was doing. What he exclaimed then has become famous:

*na jātu kāmāḥ kāmānām-upabhogena sāmyati
haviṣā kṛṣṇavartmeva bhūya evābhivardhate*

“Desire never gets fulfilled even if it is temporarily satisfied; as fire consumes offered ghee and increases, desire also increases with consumption.” This thought has also been beautifully expressed by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in Gītā 3.37-39.

ii) In regard to relationships, we should not treat our relatives (spouse, children, others) just from the viewpoint of our happiness. Interact with them the way Rādhā interacted with Kṛṣṇa. We should not expect our relatives to be the providers of our happiness.

iii) Dispassion in relation to *karma* and *karmaphala*, work and the fruits of the work, is a very big topic. We will discuss this only briefly here.

The worst attitude to work is to think that we are the doer and that we are entitled to enjoy the fruits of our work. This attitude is described in Gītā 3.27 thus:

ahamkāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham-iti manyate

“Deluded by egoism, man thinks, ‘I am the doer.’” The distinction between the ignorant man and the enlightened one is stated here. The enlightened man has no sense of agency or doership (*kartrutva bhāva*) and is therefore free from bondage. The ignorant man thinks he is the agent and he has therefore bondage arising from the good and bad fruits of his work. We should make every effort to gradually rise from this level, as described next.

The next higher level is to offer all our work to God while still retaining the sense of doership. This attitude is described in Gītā 9.27 thus:

*yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat
yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva mad-arpaṇam*

“O son of Kunti! Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give as charity, whatever austerity you perform – do that as offering unto Me.” In other words, whatever we do, let us think of it as worship of the divine Lord. By thus dedicating our actions to the Lord, we achieve purity of mind (Gītā 18.46):

sva-karmaṇā tam abhyarcya siddhim vindati mānavaḥ

“By worshipping Him through the dedicated performance of one’s duty, man attains to spiritual competency.”

The third level is to view ourselves as an instrument in the hand of God (Gītā 11.33):

mayaivaite nihataḥ pūrvam eva nimitta-mātram bhava savyasācin

“For these warriors have already been slain by Me. Be you but an instrument thereof, O you master-bowman, Arjuna.” Here we have to a slight degree given up the sense of doership; we just happen to be the instrument that God holds in His hand.

The highest level is that where we have completely given up the notion of doership. This attitude is described in Gītā 5.8-9 thus: “I (the Self) do nothing; only the senses are occupied with their objects – this should be the conviction of one who is detached in action and established in the Truth (that he is the Ātman), even while seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, conversing, holding, walking, giving up, winking, and even sleeping.”

If we are unable to reach the highest level described in the last paragraph in regard to our sense of doership for our actions, we can take either of the lower levels described in the preceding two paragraphs – whichever stage we are comfortable with.

e) Cultivation of discrimination, *viveka*, is also important. We have the presence of God in us, but we are not God. In order to experience that presence of God, to understand

that presence, we must discriminate between what is real and what is unreal. How to do this is the whole thrust of Śankara's *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* ("Crest Jewel of Discrimination").

God is infinite, eternal, pure consciousness, and each individual reflects that pure consciousness as the sun is reflected in various pools of water. But the divine reflection is hidden from us. Around that divine core a great many layers are added on. We wear so many masks: our profession is a mask, our body is a mask, our mind is an internal mask, and we keep on adding more and more masks: I am a rich man, I am a poor man. I am a patient, I am a doctor, I am an engineer, I am this, I am that. These masks are shelters for the individual ego: position, power, intellect, wealth, influence, knowledge, abilities, relationships, possessions, and work. The wise person will not base his or her life only on these things which come and go. The practice of discrimination is to get us to pierce through these masks to experience the Self within.

The divine Self within is the ultimate reality. It is changeless. It is not born. It does not change. It does not decay. It does not die. The unreal is that which changes, that which decays, that which dies. By discriminating between the real and the unreal, little by little the spiritual aspirant purifies the mind and rejects all that is not divine and meets the divine Self within.

We can reach there. I am not saying we can do it today, but by the grace of God, yes, that is our destination. We are all bound to reach that freedom. Even the worm crawling on the ground is going toward the same destination, but slowly. We are bound to reach this sooner or later. By spiritual study and practice, we can facilitate the journey.

6. The Service Aspect

One implication of seeing the presence of God in all beings is the service aspect, the moral imperative that we should serve people. This is best described in Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa III.29.21, 27, in the spiritual teachings given by sage Kapila, the Divine Incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, to his mother Devahūti.

*aham sarveṣu bhūteṣu bhūtātṁvāvasthitaḥ sadā
tam-avajñāya mām martyaḥ kurute'rcā-vidambanam
atha mām sarva-bhūteṣu bhūtātṁnam kṛtālayam
arhayed dāna-mānābhyām maitryābhinnena cakṣuṣā*

"I am ever present in all beings as their very Self (Inner Controller). A man (therefore) who worships Me through an idol, showing disrespect to Me (as abiding in all creatures), makes a travesty of worship."

"Therefore worship Me in all beings – for I am the One Self in all and have already made a temple for Me in them – through *dāna* (removal of their felt wants), *māna* (respect to the ones served), *maitri* (attitude of friendliness), and *abhinnena cakṣuṣā* (an eye of non-separateness)."

Swāmī Vivekānanda has dealt at length on the topic of service and the attitude with which the service should be done. It is important, he notes in his book *Karma Yoga*, in the fifth chapter titled “We Help Ourselves, Not the World,” that the service should be done with humility and thankfulness that we are allowed to exercise our power of benevolence and mercy in the world and thus become pure and perfect. That is, the opportunity to serve is an opportunity to improve oneself. The service is meant to benefit us in our spiritual unfoldment and is not for improving the world. Who are we to improve the world? The world is perfect as it is – that is, “perfectly fitted to meet its ends,” to quote from that *Karma Yoga* chapter. The world serves as a moral gymnasium for us.

The proper attitude to service is the same as what was explained long ago in Taittirīya Upaniṣad (I.11.3) as the proper attitude to charity (*dānam*):

śraddhayā deyam
aśraddhayā’deyam
śriyā deyam
hriyā deyam
bhiyā deyam
samvidā deyam

“Gift should be given with faith, it should never be given without faith, it should be given in plenty, with modesty, with awe, with sympathy.” (a) Give with an attitude of worship to the Lord. One has acquired things because one was given the capacity and opportunity to do so. Give out of faith, not out of competition. With the proper attitude, *dānam* becomes an act of gratitude to the Lord for all that one has received in life. (b) If one does not have the attitude that *dānam* is an act of worship, *dānam* does not produce any benefits. (c) Give liberally, but according to one’s means. (d) Give with humility and without ostentation. It is not proper to give with the attitude, “This is more than the person deserves.” (e) The giver must value the opportunity to share and be thankful that he or she is in a position to do so. (f) Give with a friendly attitude. If the giver is seen as a friend, the recipient does not feel deprived of self-esteem.

We end this section by noting that the late Swāmī Ranganāthānanda has written: “These great ideas and values formed the central theme of Swāmī Vivekānanda's philosophy of service: service becomes worship when reverence is added to service. And he asked modern India to adopt this type of service as the best form of true religion and of inter-human relations.”