

WHAT IS VAISHNAVISM?

Bhagavat Dharma Discourse #1

***(based upon a booklet from the Vaishnava Research Institute,
re-edited by Suhotra Swami)***

How Did it Start?

Krishna is the most sublime, awe-inspiring and compassionate appearance of the Supreme Being ever to be known in human history. His words and pastimes have given hope and reassurance to untold millions of devotees since time immemorial. He is the Creator - the original source of everything. He effortlessly maintains the entire cosmos, which includes innumerable universes like our own. And when He sees fit, He may dissolve the whole thing and start over again. He is realized as the embodiment of eternity, knowledge and bliss. He is one and indivisible, yet He is simultaneously present within the hearts of all. And He is present externally in countless transcendental forms by the expansion of His inconceivable potency.

Krishna consciousness, the pure state of cognition of God, is attainable through bhakti-yoga, or the yoga of devotion. Bhakti-yoga is the foundation of the religion known commonly as Vaishnavism, or worship of Vishnu (a name of Krishna that indicates that His consciousness pervades everything).

Actually, Vaishnavism has no beginning in time, for Vaishnavism is the expression of God's own nature and so exists with Him since all eternity. In the spiritual realm, far beyond the limits of material existence, every soul is by natural constitution a Vaishnava, or devotee of Krishna.

According to the Vedic literatures, this universe, along with countless others, was produced from the breath of Vishnu some 155,250,000,000,000 years ago. The Lord's divine breath also transmitted all spiritual wisdom required to revive the dormant Krishna consciousness of the souls dwelling in the material creation. This wisdom is called Veda, and it was received by 4-headed Brahma, the first created being within this universe. Brahma, acting as an obedient servant of the Supreme Lord, populated the planetary systems with all species of life and gave the Veda as the guide for proper human life. In this way, Vaishnavism has existed since the beginning of the cosmos.

Unlike other religions, Vaishnavism has not changed, even after thousands of years. This is because Vaishnavism, being completely transcendental, has no need of trying to keep up with the world. Rather, Vaishnavism is the sanatana-dharma, the religion of eternity, and therefore does not change.

The hymns of the Veda were passed on since time immemorial via the system of guru-parampara, or disciplic succession, which has formed a continuous chain of enlightened spiritual masters extending back to Brahma. Students of such spiritual masters learned their portions of the Vedas by hearing and memorization. The Vedas were formally set down in writing 5000 years ago by the great sage Vyasa.

Modern academicians who study the Vedic texts often dispute the Vaishnavism of the Veda. They think that the Vedic religion was polytheistic, recognizing no single Supreme Being. The big mistake of these scholars is that they refuse to understand the Vedic message via the

authorized disciplic succession but instead rely upon their own "objective" speculations. Thus they fail to comprehend that the "many gods" praised in the Veda are ultimately just aspects of the one Supreme Person Vishnu, Who is glorified in the Purusha-shukta, the climax of all the Vedic hymns. In the philosophical portion of the Veda, called the Upanishads, Vishnu is equated with Krishna, Who appeared in this world as the son of Vasudeva (narayana vidmahe vasudevaya dhimahi tan no vishnu pracodayate, from the Taittiriya-aranyaka). And in the Bhagavad-gita, which was spoken by Krishna during His appearance on earth 5000 years ago, the Lord says "I am that which is to be known through all the Vedas. Indeed, I am the compiler of Vedanta and the know of the Vedas." (B.g. 15.15)

Another mistaken idea that is found in some Western books is the notion that Vaishnavism or Krishna worship was an outgrowth of Christianity, which is said to have reached India within the first century after Christ.

However, this is not supported by historical or archeological evidence. The Greeks who settled India's northwestern provinces in the wake of Alexander's conquest have mentioned in their annals that the Indians of their time (300 B.C.) were devout worshippers of Krishna. There is also other evidence in inscriptions, architecture, sculpture, coins and so forth to validate the widespread existence of Vaishnavism in India long before Christianity.

Vaishnavism was never a closed religion, but always welcomed members from outside the Hindu fold. Thus the Greeks who came to conquer India were themselves conquered by the special charm of Vaishnava-dharma. The same happened in the case of other invaders, such as the Scythians, Huns, Mongols, Tartars, etc. By adopting the Vaishnava customs they were accepted by the Hindus as co-religionists. According to Vaishnavism, there are no social bars that can prevent one from developing love of God. In Vaishnavism a person is accepted according to his or her individual sincerity, not by social position or caste.

Today Vaishnavism is practiced by all people from all walks of life all around the world. In India a Vaishnava may be anyone from a great Maharaja down to a simple villager. And in the rest of the world, Vaishnavas are businessmen, teachers, housewives, scientists, students, lawyers, artists, etc. All kinds of people have come to Vaishnavism because of its ability to give them spiritual fulfillment.

Vaishnavism was first introduced in the West in 1965 by the arrival of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in New York City. Although many Indians who were Vaishnavas came to America before him, they were ordinary working people who were trying to establish themselves in a foreign land, so they kept their religion as a private matter. Who would ever imagine that Americans would adopt Vedic practices and become Vaishnavas? Only Srila Prabhupada had that vision, and thus he founded his International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which has since become established all over the world, including even in communist countries like Russia, China and Poland.

What am I?

Everyone knows what the words "pleasure" and "pain" mean. But how and why do we perceive pleasure and pain? Some people think it's just a simple matter of sensual stimuli - a soft touch on the skin creates pleasure, and a hard slap creates pain. But a single spoken word - for instance, "no" - can be more painful than a slap, although no physical contact is involved. And, in different circumstances, hearing someone say "no" (as if your doctor tells you, "No, you don't have cancer") can bring great pleasure.

If you think about this little puzzle for a moment, you'll soon realize that it can't be solved until we determine what we really are. Are we simply conglomerations of gross physical matter? If so, then from where arises consciousness with all of its idealistic, nonmaterialistic yearnings (like the desires for "peace" or "endless, selfless love", which simply don't exist in the material world)? If we're not our bodies, then perhaps we are our minds. But then, a person can "lose his mind", go insane or otherwise undergo a radical personality change. What is it about a person that cannot change?

According to the Vedic literatures, we are neither bodies nor minds, but pure spirit souls covered by bodies and minds. The body is changing constantly from a new-born infant to a toddler to a child, adolescent, adult and old person. Despite this continual change there is an unbroken sense of identity. What is the "self" throughout all these physical and mental stages of development? Obviously, it is something other than the body or mind. That something is our real self - the soul.

The symptom of the soul is permanency and stability - it does not change. Therefore, as the soul passes through the different conditions of birth, infancy, childhood, youth and old age, we can also understand that the soul continues undisturbed by the final change of body at death. But after death, what happens to the soul? Does it go somewhere? The Bhagavad-gita informs us that as the soul passed through different bodies in infancy, youth and old age, it similarly passes on to another body after death. The next birth is determined by the state of consciousness that one develops in this life. But it is not that we are condemned to eternal reincarnation, for Krishna assures in the Bhagavad-gita that those who worship Him with all their heart and thus remember Him at the time of death do not take birth again in this world, but attain His supreme abode.

Karma is the material law of action and reaction. According to how one acts in this life, one will be rewarded in the next. Thus if one observes the principles of dharma and leads a pious life, one will achieve a good birth full of material enjoyment. But if one disregards common sense and morality and acts in a licentious and self-centered way, one will take a miserable birth, perhaps even as an animal or plant.

Because there is a soul in every living thing, no one has the right to kill anything, not even an ant. To do so makes one guilty of violating the right to live of other creatures, and thus one brings karmic reactions upon himself. Since it is karmic reactions that keep one entangled in the cycle of birth and death, anyone desiring liberation will have to avoid killing at all costs.

It is said, "One living being is the food of another. This is the way of nature." If we eat, we will always have to kill something. Although Vaishnavas are vegetarians who do not eat meat, fish or eggs, the plants they eat are also living things. So, by vegetarianism does one become implicated in karma? Yes, unless one offers the food to Krishna. In the Bhagavad-gita Krishna promises that if one offers Him with love and devotion vegetarian food, He will accept it. And when one eats the remnants of that offering, one becomes absolved of all sinful reaction by His mercy.

The devotee lives in harmony with the universe because he is in tune with the will of its Creator. The devotee is exemplary in whatever he or she does. Indeed, Vaishnavism is the highest standard of conduct and morality and the most liberal as well because it takes into account all living beings.

Those who seek the spiritual truth often hope to attain mukti, or liberation, after a whole lifetime

of severe austerities and meditation. The devotee, however, simply engages in serving the Lord. By His mercy the devotee attains liberation as soon as pure service begins. He does not have to wait for death to become free from the dualities of this material world. He gets to enjoy that freedom while still in this world. He always relishes transcendental bliss in ecstatic communion with the Lord by serving Him, remembering Him and chanting His holy names.

Our True Nature

According to usage, the word dharma has several different meanings. First of all, dharma means duty. Everyone has certain responsibilities to perform in relationship to family, friends, society, etc. That is one's dharma or duty and should not be neglected. One who disregards this kind of dharma is irresponsible and spoils his life. Dharma also means religion. Many people attend temples, churches and mosques out of a sense of duty and they go through the motions of being religious in the required ceremonies without ever feeling any real love or devotion for God. They do this in the hopes of some future material reward from God. This, then, is dharma in the sense of mundane religiosity.

Dharma has another meaning which is even more significant. Everything has a particular characteristic or propensity which is natural to it, which in fact defines the very nature of that thing. For example, fire is hot and bright. Something which is cold and dark can never be termed "fire". Ice is cold and hard. A rose is soft and fragrant. Those qualities which are inseparable from a thing and which distinguish it from other things are called dharma. Every entity has its inseparable dharma. As explained earlier, our most essential identity is the soul. What, then, is the essential characteristic, or dharma, of the soul?

The dharma of the soul is service. Everyone renders service to someone. One has to serve his wife, his boss, his dog, his country, etc. And if one tries to avoid doing any service for anyone else, he'll still have to serve his own self, his own senses and mind. In any case, everyone has to serve without exception. The sanatana-dharma or eternal function of the soul is service to the Supreme Lord. When we engage in His service we are actually fulfilling our true service.

The hand gets nourishment by giving food to the stomach. Similarly, the soul gets real benefit, or eternal spiritual benefit, by serving God, whereas the benefit of things done for the body last at most only as long as the body.

Bhakti is devotion to God, but when we turn away from God and refuse to serve Him, our natural sentiment of bhakti manifests itself as attachment for material things. Vaishnavism teaches us how to purify this natural tendency to love God by engaging us in regulated devotional service practices at the temple and at home. When we are free from all material identity and attachment, our bhakti will fructify as prema, or pure love of God. This is the highest religion and duty of the soul. This is its sanatana-dharma or eternal character. Devotional service is the means of obtaining self-realization. Self-realization is simply the platform of pure (materially unmotivated) devotional service. It is not that after becoming realized one does not have to do anything. It is only after realizing our spiritual nature that our real, eternal service begins.

Can God be Known?

Every living being has four defects:

1. The tendency to perceive things wrongly due to imperfect senses.
2. The tendency to make mistakes.
3. The tendency to become illusioned.
4. The tendency to cheat.

To illustrate these defects, there is a nice example: because of imperfect senses, a man cannot properly discern that the thing he sees laying in his footpath one evening is just an old piece of rope. He thereupon mistakenly assumes that it is a snake. Fear is the illusion that follows. And cheating occurs when, in his fright, he warns another man: "Don't pass this way. There's a snake in the path!"

Because of these four defects, knowledge acquired through sense perception cannot be relied upon as final or authoritative but is always subject to revision and so-called improvement.

In contrast, the Vedic process of acquiring knowledge is to receive the perfect verdict of authority. Although people are not usually inclined to accept authority, there really is no other way for understanding Truth. If a child wants to know who his father is, he has to accept the verdict of his mother. He cannot speculate, he simply has to accept her version. And if we want to know the father of all living beings, then we have to accept the verdict of the scriptures revealed by God. The word Veda means knowledge, thus the Vedas are full of knowledge about the Absolute Truth. Although Napoleon was a real person, we cannot see him and speak with him because we are separate from him by time and space. But we can know something about him by reading authorized literature written by his contemporaries and by seeing his portrait. In the same way, we can know about God through the information given in the Vedic literatures.

Our present inability to see God is not natural to the soul, it is due to the encumbrance of the body. The ability of the soul to see God is latent and atrophied because of disuse. The Vedic literatures especially instruct us how to purify ourselves from material contamination so that we can revive our innate spiritual ability.

Although people think that yoga is a way to lose weight or keep physically fit, this is incorrect. Yoga means the process for putting us back in touch with God. The scriptures recommend various paths of yoga for different classes of people. For instance, previously people would realize God by meditating, performing elaborate sacrifices, or by opulent temple worship.

The present age is called Kali-yuga in the Vedic literatures, or "The Age of Quarrel." In this age everyone is full of anxiety due to war, social unrest, natural disasters, etc. The scriptures have recommended that we simply chant the holy names of God to achieve the perfection of yoga. God has innumerable names, but one mantra (spiritual vibration), formed from the holy names Krishna (the All-Attractive), Rama (the All-Blissful), and Hare (the Liberator from material desires), is identified as the most effective for this age: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. The holy name is an incarnation of the Lord as sound and thus immeasurable transcendental benefit can be obtained by regularly chanting it in an inoffensive manner.

When we chant the Lord's name, we are directly in contact with Him. Thus we can experience Him and know Him through His holy name.

The Concept of God

God is the source of everything - both material and spiritual - therefore He is the divine fountainhead, or Godhead. He has no equal or superior, rather He leads all others. For all these reasons He is called Godhead. Godhead is both personal and impersonal.

Ultimately, however, Godhead is personal. He is called Bhagavan, which means "The Possessor of opulence." There are six transcendental opulences that distinguish the Personality of Godhead from all others. He possesses all beauty, knowledge, wealth, strength, fame and renunciation. Ordinary living creatures may exhibit these opulences partially, but the personality of Godhead possesses them in full.

Although the Personality of Godhead is not subject to mundane duality but is always absolute and one, He exhibits His Personality in two ways:

1. The original Supreme Personality of Godhead is the original source of all manifestations. Everything is resting on Him like pearls on a thread. Although the original Supreme Personality of Godhead is the source of infinite manifestations, He never becomes diminished by their production - He remains ever the same. And He is always in the position of being original.

2. When the original Supreme Personality of Godhead expands Himself into plenary forms, these are in no way different from or inferior to His original self. The relation between them is like that of many candles lit from one original candle. The only difference is that one is original. In the same way, all the plenary expansions of Godhead are identical with Him. Since Godhead exists beyond time and space, His different expanded Personalities have no beginning or end. The fact is that all of the Lord's Personalities exist in Him throughout all eternity. It is only because of our being in the material world that we have to use such terms as "expanded form" in order to understand Their relationship. The many facets of a gem shine with different hues of colors, yet the gem is an integral whole. So, the many expanded Personalities of Godhead are nondifferent from the original Supreme Personality of Godhead. Some of His expansions are only manifested in the spiritual world, but others are the avatars or incarnations who descend into this world for our benefit.

Although the original Supreme Personality of Godhead is always in the spiritual world and thus is the Supreme Transcendent Being, He is immanent in this material world as Paramatma or the Supersoul. This is His expansion by which He pervades and supports all existence. The Supersoul is present everywhere, and He is the witness and guide present in the heart as the constant companion of the individual soul. Because of His omnipresence He is also omniscient.

The impersonal Godhead is just an aspect of the Personal Godhead. A person can act in an impersonal way, but something impersonal can never be personal. Therefore personality is the source of the impersonal. The impersonal is simply the divine light or effulgence of Godhead. Seeing it, one should try to know its source - Krishna.

Sri Caitanya

Krishna personally appeared in this world just prior to Kali-Yuga, or approximately 5000 years ago. Actually, Krishna incarnates in different ages to establish true religious principles. Because of the degradation of the present age, Krishna again appeared 500 years ago in Mayapura,

West Bengal, as Sri Caitanya. He travelled extensively throughout India preaching love of God and made His headquarters at Puri in the state of Orissa.

The most noteworthy thing about Sri Caitanya was His magnanimity in accepting all persons, regardless of caste, creed, race or sex, as devotees in His movement. According to Him, every fallen conditioned soul can be rectified by following the principles of Vaishnava-dharma and by chanting the holy names of the Lord. Being full of compassion for the suffering of all embodied beings, He propagated everywhere sankirtana, congregational chanting of the holy names. Sri Caitanya taught His followers the principles of humility, tolerance, compassion and devotion for the holy name, and asked them to distribute the treasure of love of God freely. He said that this love of God based on chanting His names would spread to every town and village of the world, a prediction which is presently being fulfilled.

Lord Caitanya also instructed His disciples to write books explaining the philosophy of Vaishnavism. This is being continued by His modern-day followers.

Vaishnavism Today

Since 1965 Vaishnavism has spread all over the world. How does such an ancient religion relate to the hectic material advancement of this age? And what about science and technology? The principle of Vaishnavism is utility. Whatever can be used for the advancement of God consciousness should be accepted. Although the Vedic literatures explain that the material world is temporary and not eternal, it is not unreal and non-existent. Vaishnavism sees that the world has its own particular utility in relation to the service of the Lord.

As far as politics is concerned, Vaishnavism teaches that God-conscious leadership is the only form of government that can actually do good for humanity. Unfortunately, in the present day, political leaders are mostly self-interested, even when they are so-called religious persons. But even though we may not be able to have a God-conscious government, at least we as individuals can become God-conscious and go back to Godhead, back to our original spiritual home.

Because His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada was the one who introduced Vaishnavism into the West, most people who become Vaishnavas take initiation into the parampara, or disciplic succession, to which he belongs. Initiation means to receive entrance into the chanting of the holy name from a bonafide spiritual master or guru. Before initiation one must qualify him or herself spiritually by accepting the disciplines of no meat eating, no illicit sex, no gambling and no intoxication, as well as chanting the prescribed daily number of holy names:

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.