

BRAHMAM: From none to all the attributes

Shri Kanchi Mahaswami's Discourses

(English Translation By P.N. Ramachandran pnamchandran@yahoo.co.in)

(The *Mahaswami (late) Shri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Swami* is considered a saint of recent times. His discourses on various topics while on a visit to Madras in 1930's are indeed the benchmark.)

दामोदर गुणमन्दिर सुन्दरवदनारविन्द गोविन्द ।
भवजलधिमथनमन्दर परमं दरमपनय त्वं मे ॥ ६ ॥

Damodara! You are the repository of all the qualities! You have a face that is beautiful as the lotus flower! Govinda! In churning the ocean of *samsara* and in granting the *amrita* (nectar) of immortality (of soul) You are like the *Mandara* Mountain! You dispel my great fear!

In the *Vedasutras*, special mention is made only of Mahavishnu's *avatara* as *Trivikrama*. Thereafter in *puranas* (ancient episodes), Bhajans, *Sankirtana* (musical worship) etc., Krishna is considered as *purnavatara* (complete *avatara*) of Mahavishnu. The *avatara* names of *Trivikrama* and Krishna alone find a place in *Dwadasanamas* (12 names). The Acharya has used two of the 12 names, that is, *Damodara* and *Govinda* in the sixth sloka of Shatpadi. He addressed the first sloka to Vishnu and thereby dedicated the entire Stotra to Him: But in the sixth sloka the Acharya has used only the two names of Krishna.

Gunamandira – One who is the repository of all the qualities. Persons with inadequate knowledge of *advaita* (non-duality) doctrine may question whether the Acharya is justified in so describing God as the repository of all the good and auspicious qualities. This is due to the reason that according to the *advaita* doctrine firmly established by the Acharya, *Brahmam* (or God) is devoid of qualities; it has no qualities whatsoever. It is the same as the *jeevatma* (individual soul). Only due to the attributes of the mind does the *jeevatma* possess qualities, actions, name and figure. If by profound knowledge, the attribute of the mind is got rid of, then *jeevatma* becomes one with the non-dualistic *Brahmam* itself. This is *Moksha* (liberation). Shri Bhagavatpada has established this doctrine.

It was Shri Ramanujacharya who has stipulated that *Brahmam* is Shri Narayana with all the good and auspicious qualities. According to him, the enjoyment of those auspicious qualities and deriving bliss from these constitutes *Moksha* (liberation). Shri Madhvacharya also commends the worship of *Brhamam* having the attributes of all qualities. Shri Kanchi Mahaswami does not propose to go deep into these doctrines here. The question now is whether the Acharya who

had specified *Brahmam* with no attributes of qualities, is justified in praising Him in this sloka as one with all the qualities.

The answer is in the affirmative. The conclusion from the Acharya's treatises is that in the end, there is only *moksha* (liberation) with no qualities at all. That is the state in which *jeevatma* and *paramatma* become into one real form. But, of these, *paramatma* with the power of *maya* (illusion) creates the *jeevatma* and the worlds and conducts them as *Iswara*. This *Iswara* is *Brahmam* with the attributes of qualities.

Both Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya have described the pleasure of worshipping *Iswara* as a separate (different from *jeevatma*) entity. The same worship and pleasure are described by the Acharya: He has however stated that from the above worship as the first step, one should go on to the next higher state where one will be both the worshipper (*jeevatma*) and the worshipped (*Brahmam*) and thus reach out to the *advaita* with no qualities. The *advaita* doctrine states that the inclination for the above mindset itself is by the grace of *Iswara-Brahmam* with the attributes of qualities.

Shri Acharya has composed numerous stotras on the many deities that are the various forms of *Brahmam* with the attributes of qualities. In these stotras, he has described the personalities from head to foot and from foot to head and sung about the deities' various attributes of qualities and their illusory plays. *Gunamandira* does not mean that the Acharya has forgotten the no-quality nature of *Brahmam* or that he has spoken in denial of that attribute. On the contrary, *Gunamandira* itself, it appears to Shri Kanchi Mahaswami, indicates that the Acharya refers to the attribute of non-quality of *Brahmam*. How is that?

There are seven colours known as *Vibgyor*. Combining these seven colours become white, losing all the seven colours. Similarly because *Iswara* is the repository of all the qualities he becomes the one *Brahmam* without attributes of any quality whatsoever. Just as sunlight (which has no intrinsic colour of its own) divides into seven colours by refraction, the one and same *Brahmam* without attributes of qualities, due to the refraction of *maya* (illusion), becomes one with the attributes of many qualities. *Brahmam* without any name and form becomes so many worlds with many names and forms.

There is a word play in *Gunamandira* following *Damodara*. *Gunam* also refers to rope (*dama*). *Gunamandira* seems to indicate the *Brahmam* (without any attributes of qualities) appears to have been tied with *Guna* (qualities). In truth, God cannot be controlled by the attributes of qualities. Yet, as God on his own got his stomach tied with the rope, *Brahmam* indulges in the illusory play of being tied with the attributes of qualities.

Referring to Yasoda's action, *Krishna Karnamrutham* states in a sloka thus: "What a surprise! *Brahmam* (without any attributes of qualities) that is the

essence of *Upanishads* remains tied to a pounding stone”. As if to indicate that *Brahmam* being the repository of all the qualities is also its attribute of being tied down, the words *Damodara* and *Gunamandira* follow each other in *Shatpadi Stotra*

To enjoy *Brahmam* when it appears with the attributes of qualities and form, the Acharya has described it thus: “You have the face which is as beautiful as the lotus flower!” Supreme *advaiti* that he is, the Acharya who has personally experienced *advaita* (non-duality), has described the beauty of form in an awe struck-manner. *Gunamandira* means that He is the repository of *all* the qualities and not merely of some qualities only: This makes Him the *Brahmam* without the attributes of any qualities whatsoever. To satisfy our fancy and to make us think of Him with intense devotion, He who has no form appears with a form of beauty. *Sundara vadanaravinda* – face that is beautiful as the lotus flower. The formless *Brahmam*, on taking on a form, also gets a name. Name and form go together. So *Brahmam* has to be named once it gets a form. The Acharya calls Him by the name *Govinda*. To the question as to which is the very special name in Hindu *Dharma*, the Kanchi Mahaswami’s answer will only be *Govinda*, which is acceptable to both worshippers of *Siva* and *Vishnu*.

According to the legend, seeking *amrita* (nectar), *devas* (celestial beings) and *asuras* (enemies of *devas*) churned the ocean, having the *Mandara* Mountain as the churning stick. The Acharya prays that God should be as the *Mandara* Mountain in churning the ocean of *samsara* (the world or the constantly repeating cycle of birth and death) and in granting the *amrita* (nectar) of immortality (of soul). In his *Kurmaavataara*, Vishnu bore the weight of the *Mandara* Mountain as *kurma* (tortoise). This event is referred to thus in the fourth sloka of this *Stotra*.

Here God is described as the churning stick itself (*mandara* Mountain.) While churning the ocean, poison appeared first and *amrita* (nectar) only thereafter. So also our lives are embattled by the bad attributes of desire, anger etc. But these also contain within themselves the divine qualities and nectar. If the bad qualities are got rid of, then the *amrita* (nectar) of divine experience and oneness to God will come of itself. By various disciplines such as worship, pilgrimage, reciting holy prayers, the task of getting rid of bad attributes is undertaken with a view to attain the *amrita* (nectar) of *moksha* (permanent freedom from the cycle of birth and death.)

Despite the existence of the bad attributes, the Acharya encourages us to seek divine grace. Good happenings as well as the evils are both due to *maya* (illusory play). Just as out of countless flowers in nature, only a few ripen fully into fruits, only a very small number of people grow to attain their full spiritual stature. Gradual development is common to all. For this, one should seek the aid of *bhakti* (intense devotion) and divine grace. The Acharya prays to God to dispel our great fear – (fear of non-attainment of *moksha* (liberation), fear of death, fear of rebirth after death, fear of punishment (*naraka*) for our *papa* (sins) etc.)