
Gurvashtakam with meaning

सार्थं गुर्वष्टकम्

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Transliterated by : N.Balasubramanian bbalu at satyam.net.in

Proofread by : N.Balasubramanian bbalu at satyam.net.in

Translated by : N.Balasubramanian bbalu@satyam.net.in

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Send corrections to : sanskrit@cheerful.com

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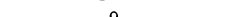
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Commentary by N. Balasubramanian

This work consisting of eight verses and one more known as

फलश्रुतिः or a verse that gives the benefit of reciting the poem is attributed to Sri Sankaracharya. These verses are couched in simple language and are easy to read and understand. In these verses the poet stresses the need for devotion to one's guru or spiritual preceptor. He states repeatedly that all the wealth, fame, knowledge etc., one might have acquired will be of no avail if one does not have total devotion to his guru . Let us find out the raison d'être for making such a statement.

Strange as it may sound, our shastras and the saints who have realised the truth stated therein tell that most of us do not know what is happiness, what is sorrow, what is good for us and what is not good for us. Had we known all this we should all be living a life of utter bliss without a vestige of sorrow. But what do we find? Our lives are full of trials and tribulations. In between we come across spots of joy. This joy may be followed by grief or still worse may leave us hankering for more of the same thing, thus leading to avarice or frustration in case the desire is not fulfilled. This is anything but joy. But the scriptures aver that our true nature is totally different. They stress that we are divine in nature and free from all forms of sorrow. But as of now we are not be able to digest such a statement. Why is this so? If happiness be our true nature we should be only too willing to go to any extent to find it. What

prevents us from doing so? These are vital questions that have been bugging people for a long time. These and related questions have been answered by our scriptures and also explained again and again by saints like Sri Sankaracharya in many of their works. Let us briefly review what our scriptures have to say on this important subject. The following abbreviations are used in the commentary:

(1) BG: Bhagavad Gita with Sri Sankara's commentary. (2) BH: Srimad Bhagavatham. (3) KU: Kathopanishad. (4) MU: Mundakopanishad.(5) VC: Vivekachudamani.

When we say "I" they ask us what do we mean by "I". This may startle us a bit, but then we will point to our body and say "I" means the body and includes the mind etc., that are at our disposal for use.

The scriptures say this is a fundamental mistake and is the root cause for all our problems and misery. When we talk of the "body" as usual, they point out that it includes not only the physical body but there is an unseen entity called Self (or atma or jivatma as it is called). This is what lends sentience to the body. Krishna says that He is the Self seated in the heart of all beings. **अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।** BG (10-20). This Self is behind our speech, actions, thinking etc. But because it is behind all these activities it itself is unseen and unknown. That means the eyes, for example, cannot see what enables them to see; the ears cannot hear what enables them to hear and so on. In other words, atma is beyond the reach of our senses. This is an important fact that requires to be chewed and digested.

**श्रोत्रस्य श्रोत्रं मनसो मनो यद्वाचो ह वाचं स उ प्राणस्य प्राणः ।
चक्षुषश्चक्षुरतिमुच्य धीराः प्रेत्यास्माल्लोकादमृताभवन्ति ॥**
(Kena Upanishad. 1-2).

That who is the mind of the mind (cause); the vital essence of vital forces, speech of the speech; ear of the ears and eye of the eyes;

(it is) He by knowing whom the wise ones become liberated, depart from the world and become immortal.

न तत्र चक्षुर्गच्छति न वाग्गच्छति नो मनो(ibid 1-3).

There neither the eye approaches nor the speech (includes other organs of action and perception) nor does the mind.

Sage Yagnavalkya, while teaching this subject to his wife Maitreyi

asks: येनेदं सर्वं विजानाति तं केन विजानीयात्, विज्ञातारमरे

केन विजानीयात् (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. 2-4-14) “By what can one know that by which all this comes to be known? By what you can know the knower?”

Thus we have two entities, the body that by itself is inert and the atma that animates it. The body by its very nature is subject to growth, decay and finally death. But the atma who resides in the body is eternal and not subject to any change. Krishna points this out to Arjuna:

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन्नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।

अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥

BG (2-20).

It is same as the Supreme Being itself. Krishna says this in Gita :

ममैवांशो जीवलोके जीवभूतः सनातनः । BG(15-7)

The atma being same as the Supreme Being has the same attributes like the Supreme Being - it is eternal, of the form of bliss and wisdom.

सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म । (Taittiriyaopanishad.2-1). Vedanta

clearly states that we are that atma and not the body. Being atma we are eternal and the embodiment of bliss. But as pointed out earlier everyone identifies himself with the body and consequently suffers.

Thus when the body is sick one says he is sick, when it grows old he says he has become old and when it dies people say that particular

person is dead. In addition one looks out for happiness and security.

He gathers around him people (in the form of friends and relatives)

to gain happiness and security. He imports their happinesses and sorrows also on to himself. Thus if a close relative is sick, he is worried. If a close friend dies he is very upset. All of us will be happy to have a fat bank balance as we know that a lot of money at our disposal gives a feeling of comfort and security.

But vedanta thinks otherwise. What we think is good and contributory to our happiness and security may not be so at all times. On close examination we find that these things seem to give joy and security but not in the long run. In fact it may yield the contrary results.

Too much money is a source of anxiety. A son or daughter may turn out to be a source of worry or disappointment in one's old age. Wealth, health, familial bonds are all fragile. Our own body that we cherish, becomes a source of worry when it grows old and decrepit. We all know this only too well. Still we tend to hold on to them. Why is this so?

This is caused by wrong understanding of the truth, say our scriptures. The truth is that these things viz., our body, wealth, family etc., are themselves not long lasting. They will go sooner or later. They are not secure themselves. How can they confer security on others? Such being the case it is sheer folly to look to them for happiness and security. Attachment to them can only result in sorrow and misery. Recognising this fact - that is, that every thing in this universe is impermanent and Self alone is permanent is known as

discrimination or **विवेकः** -viveka. As we ponder over this fact again and again in our mind, the truth of the scriptural statements sinks in our mind. We realise that things we hang on to are finite and limited by time and so cannot give us lasting peace and security. Our mind starts turning away from these things and towards God who has no such limitations. This is the second stage in spiritual growth. This detachment from ephemeral things of this world is called vairagyam **वैराग्यम्**. Next as the detachment takes root our search for God also becomes intense. Our mind wants to get away from things that are in the real sense a bondage and yearns to be liberated from them.

This yearning for liberation is called **मुमुक्षुत्वम्**. Coming up to this stage is a rare phenomenon says Krishna. **मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यतति सिद्धये । BG(7-3)**. Yama the god of death, says that people are very much attracted by wealth and such mundane pleasures that they are unwilling to give this up and look beyond it. Such people are blinded by ignorance and come within his grip repeatedly.

**न सांपरायः प्रतिभाति बालं प्रमाद्यन्तं वित्तमोहेन मूढम् ।
अयं लोको नास्ति पर इति मानी पुनः पुनर्वशमापद्यते मे ॥ KU(1-2-6)**

The misplaced infatuation for wealth, health etc., is caused by ignorance that veils wisdom that is our true nature.

**आवृतं ज्ञानमेतेन ज्ञानिनो नित्यवैरिणा ।
कामरूपेण कौन्तेय दुष्पूरेणानलेन च ॥ BG(3-39)**.

WISDOM. The question then is how to gain the wisdom. Scriptures say that since wisdom is inherent in us as our very nature we need not do anything to gain it. We only have to get rid of the ignorance that is covering the wisdom. The source of happiness and security, thus, does not lie outside in worldly things that are not permanent. The only permanent thing is within ourselves as atma or Self. Its very nature is supreme bliss. Any joy experienced by any being is just a droplet derived from this bliss that is Brahman, says Brihadaranyakopanishad. **एतस्यैवानन्दस्य अन्यानि भूतानि मात्रामुपजीवन्ति ।.(4-3-32)**. So if we want peace, security and happiness we should shift our focus from the body-mind complex to the Self that is inside us.

This knowledge is known as brahma vidya, atma vidya and adhyatma vidya. Krishna calls it as sovereign science or raja vidya

राजविद्या. He says **राज विद्या राज गुह्यं पवित्रमिदमुत्तमम् ।
प्रत्यक्षावगमं धर्म्यं सुसुखं कर्तुमव्ययम् ॥ BG(9-2)**.

It is the Sovereign Science, the Sovereign Secret, the Supreme Purifier. It is called Sovereign Science because it talks about the

brahman. So also it is the king of secrets. Of all the purifiers, the knowledge is the best purifier. The Mundaka Upanishad calls it as the higher vidya. It says that all other knowledge is inferior.

द्वे विद्ये वेदितव्ये इति ह स्म यद्ब्रह्मविदो वदन्ति परा चैवापरा
च । तत्रापर ऋग्वेदो यजुर्वेदः सामवेदोऽथर्ववेदः शिक्षा कल्पो
व्याकरणं निरुक्तं छन्दो ज्योतिषमिति । अथ परा यया
तदक्षरमधिगम्यते ॥ MU(1-5).

“The knowers of Brahma say with a sense of certainty that there are two vidyas worth knowing: Para and Aparā. Out of these two; the four vedas - Rik, Yajus, Sama and Atharva, the science of pronunciation, Kalpa, grammar, Nirukta, Chanda and Jyotisha - all these are Aparā Vidya; Para is that through which the imperishable Brahma is known.” Sri Sankaracharya in his commentary says:

अपरा हि अविद्या सा निराकर्तव्या ।
तद्विषये हि विदिते न किञ्चित्तत्त्वतो विदितं स्यादिति ।

The Aparā vidya constitutes only ignorance and so is to be rejected. By knowing it the truth does not become known. Krishna says that there is no gain that is equal to or superior to this wisdom. Once established in the Self one is not moved by even by greatest of the sorrow.

यं लब्ध्वा चापरं लाभं मन्यते नाधिकं ततः ।
यस्मिन्स्थितो न दुःखेन गुरुणापि विचाल्यते ॥ BG(6-22).

Such is the glory of the wisdom about the Self that Krishna says He is this knowledge of the Self among all knowledges.

अध्यात्मविद्या विद्यानाम् । BG(10-32). It is the chief among all knowledges, because it leads to mokSha says Sri Sankaracharya in his commentary. अध्यात्मविद्या विद्यानां मोक्षार्थत्वात् प्रधानं अस्मि । Because of its exalted nature it is identified with Goddesses. Thus one of the names of Sri LakShmi and Lalitha is Vidya.

It has been said that one cannot gain the wisdom by one's own effort

by studying the books. It can create doubts or worse still misunderstanding. Our tradition says that one has to learn about it at the feet of a guru. आचार्यादेव विद्या विदिता साधिष्ठं प्रापयति । (Chandogyopanishad). Then only the learning will be fruitful. तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत् । MU (2-12).

The striver should approach a guru. Sri Sankaracharya in explaining this statement says that the implication is that even one proficient in scriptural studies should not try to do the inquiry by himself:

शास्त्रज्ञोऽपि स्वातंत्र्येण ब्रह्मज्ञानान्वेषणं न कुर्यदित्येतत्
गुरुमेवेत्यवधारणफलम् ।

THE GURU. The next question that arises as a corollary is who is a guru? What are his qualifications? Is it enough if he is a veritable scholar in scriptures? These questions have been answered in detail in the scriptures. These are important questions requiring an answer by an anxious seeker as if he falls in the wrong hands he may be misled and would waste his time, effort and perhaps money also. Let us see a few descriptions of a guru as given in the scriptures and by our acharyas. The Prashnottararatnamalika of Sri Sankaracharya says:

भगवन् किमुपादेयम्? गुरुवचनम् ।

Question: sir, what is to be accepted?

Answer: guru's teachings.

को गुरुः? अधिगततत्त्वः, शिष्यहितायोद्यतः सततम् ॥

Question: who is guru?

Answer: one who has learned the truth. One who constantly strives for the upliftment of the disciples who have approached him.

The Mundaka Upanishad says briefly that the guru should be well versed in the secrets of vedas and established in Brahman.

श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् । The teacher should have learned at

the feet of his guru in the traditional way and had all his doubts cleared and then got firmly established in Brahman. His knowledge is not shaky and so he can convey it with the same clarity to his disciple. Yama says that any one who is not so qualified is inferior and his teaching will not be effective.

न नरेणावरेण प्रोक्त एष सुविज्ञेयो बहुधा चिन्त्यमनः ।

अनन्यप्रोक्ते गतिरत्र नास्ति अणीयान् ह्यतर्क्यमणुप्रमाणात् ॥ KU(1-2-8).

The knowledge is very subtle. It has to be taught by a wise person who is established in Brahman. Sri Sankaracharya talks about the qualifications of a guru in two places in his Vivekachudamani. First he briefly says सन्तं महान्तं समुपेत्य देसिकं ।

The guru should be "established in Brahman and exalted". VC (8).

What is meant by महान् or exalted"? Lord Rishabha Deva defines an exalted soul or महान् in the advice He gave to His sons before He renounced and left the kingdom.

महान्तस्ते समचित्ताः प्रशान्ता विमन्यवः सुहृदः साधवो ये ।

ये वा मयीशे कृत सौहृदार्था जनेषु देहम्भरवार्तिकेषु ।

गृहेषु जायात्मजरातिमत्सु न प्रीतियुक्ता यावदार्थाश्च लोके ॥

BH(5-5-3).

They alone are great who are even minded, exceptionally calm and composed, (and as a result) are free from anger, (and so are) kind-hearted and pious or again they who regard love offered to Me as the (only) object of human pursuit, who take no delight in (the company of) men (solely) engaged in pursuits (merely) calculated to nourish their body.

In the above He used the word साधवः or pious or saintly persons. Lord Kapila gives in detail the qualities of a sadhu in His advice to His mother Devahuti.

तितिक्षवः कारुणिकाः सुहृदः सर्वदेहिनाम् ।

अजातशत्रवः शान्ताः साधवः साधुभूषणाः ॥

मय्यनन्येन भावेन भक्तिं कुर्वन्ति ये दृढाम् ।
मत्कृते त्यक्तकर्माणस्त्यक्तस्वजनबान्धवाः ॥

मदाश्रयाः कथा मृष्टाः शृण्वन्ति कथयन्ति च ।
तपन्ति विविधास्तापा नैतान्मद्गतचेतसः ॥

त एते साधवः साध्वि सर्वसङ्गविवर्जिताः ।
सङ्गस्तेष्वथ ते प्रार्थ्यः सङ्गदोषहरा हि ते ॥

BH(3-25-21 to 24).

” Saints are forbearing, compassionate and composed: they are friendly to all living beings and inimical to none and follow the injunctions of the scriptures. Their good disposition itself serves as an ornament to them.(21) With an undivided heart they practise unflinching devotion to Me; and for My sake they abandon even their obligatory duties and forsake their kinsmen and relatives. (22) They listen to and narrate delightful stories relating to Me, their minds ever set on Me. Afflictions of various kinds, therefore, never torment such people. (23) Such are holy men, free from all attachments, O virtuous lady! Attachment to such holy men must be sought for by you, for they destroy the pernicious effects of attachment.”

Then later, Sri Sankaracharya gives in greater detail the qualities of the guru.

उपसीदेद्गुरुं प्राज्ञं यस्माद्वन्धविमोक्षणम् ।
श्रोत्रियोऽवृजिनोऽकामहतो यो ब्रह्मवित्तमः ।
ब्रह्मण्युपरतः शान्तः निरिन्धन इवानलः ।

अहेतुकदयासिन्धुर्बन्धुरानमतां सताम् ॥ VC (32, 33).

The inquirer of truth should approach a wise preceptor, who confers emancipation from bondage; one who is versed in the Vedas, sinless, unsmitten by desire and a knower of brahman par excellence, who has withdrawn himself into brahman; who is calm, like the fire that has

consumed its fuel, who is a boundless reservoir of mercy that knows no reason, and a friend of all good people who prostrate themselves before him.

Sri Vedanta Desika similarly gives a detailed description of the qualities of a guru in his Nyasa Vimsati. He says:

सिद्धं सत्संप्रदाये स्थिरधियमनघं श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठं
 सत्त्वस्थं सत्यवाचं समयनियतया साधुवृत्त्या समेतम् ।
 दम्भासूयादिमुक्तं जितविषयगणं दीर्गबन्धुं दयालुं
 स्वालित्ये शासितारं स्व-पर-हितपरं देशिकं भूष्णुमीप्सेत् ॥

“One who desires to attain liberation should strive to have a spiritual teacher possessing the following qualities. He must be well versed in established tradition, should have a strong mind, flawless, well versed in the vedas, full of devotion to the Lord and full of sattva guna. He must be truthful, conduct himself in accordance with the prescribed codes of the given system, should be free from arrogance and jealousy, should have control over his senses and should be one of enduring relationship. He must be full of compassion, should correct the errors, and should be a well-wisher of himself and others.”

It is clear that a person possessing such exceptional qualifications will indeed be a rare phenomenon.

IMPORTANCE OF THE GURU. The summum bonum of human life is liberation. This is got by removal of wrong understanding about ourselves (known as ajnanam). When the ajnanam is removed our Self shines in all its glory. The knower goes beyond sorrow, repeated birth and death cycle. We saw that a guru's guidance is required in this learning process. Thus the role of the guru is important and cannot be described adequately in words. Our scriptures say that one is not easily blessed with a guru in his life time. They say that the human birth is rare and very valuable as only humans are endowed with

discrimination to set their goals and the intelligence to work towards achieving them. Animals are driven by instinct. They cannot set any goal for themselves. Thus only a human being can understand the value of his life and work to reach the ultimate goal. It will indeed be the height of folly if this important point is not understood, but the life is allowed to drift or spent simply in pursuit of material pleasures (which we saw earlier are only ephemeral). Such pleasures that gratify the senses are sought by even animals. So if one keeps himself busy working for them he degrades himself and wastes his precious life. Lord Rishabha Deva stresses this point in His advice to His sons.

नायं देहो देहभाजां नृलोके कष्टान् कमानर्हते विद्भुजां ये ।
तपो दिव्यं पुत्रका येन सत्त्वं शुद्धेत् यस्मात् ब्रह्मसौख्यं त्वनन्तम् ॥
BH (5-5-1).

This human body does not deserve to be given up to (the pursuit of) sensuous pleasures, which are (really) a source of misery and are enjoyed even by swine, dogs and other animals (that feed on ordure). It is worthy of being devoted to sublime austerities (pursuit of knowledge) whereby the mind is purified; and from the purity of mind follows the unending bliss of absorption into the Absolute. Thus getting a human birth is difficult, thereto yearning for liberation and most difficult is getting a qualified guru to guide one. These are got by divine grace only. Sri Sankaracharya points this out. VC(3).

दुर्लभं त्रयमेतद्देवनुग्रहहेतुकम् ।
मनुष्यत्वं मुमुक्षुत्वं महापुरुषसंश्रयः ॥

Yama, the god of death tells the same thing to his disciple Nachiketa. KU(1-2-7).

श्रवणायापि बहुभिर्यो न लभ्यः शृण्वन्तोऽपि बहवो यं न विद्युः ।
आश्रयो वक्ता कुशलोऽस्य लब्धाऽऽश्रयो ज्ञाता कुशलानुशिष्टः ॥

That which many people do not have the opportunity to hear; that which many people do not understand even after hearing; the teacher of such a subject is indeed rare; the gainer of this is rare; and well versed; that who is taught by a realised great soul and thus the knower of this subject is also very rare.

Therefore, if anyone, who has got all the three gifts of god, fails to take full advantage of them, such a one is indeed the most ignorant and unfortunate. Krishna states this clearly in His advice to Uddhava. BH(11-20-17).

नृदेहमाद्यं सुलभं सुदुर्लभं प्लवं सुकल्पं गुरुकर्णधारम् ।
मयानुकूलेन नभस्वतेरितं पुमान्भवाब्धिं न तरेत्स आत्महा ॥

Getting the first and foremost requisite, a human body which is like a strong boat - so difficult to secure, with the guru as the helmsman, and propelled by Me as a favourable wind - with such means as these, the man who does not strive to cross the ocean of samsara, is verily a suicide. It is the guru who has to help the disciple to get rid of his ignorance. The Guru Gita defines the word guru thus:

गुकारश्चान्धकारो हि रुकारस्तेज उच्यते । अज्ञानग्रासकं ब्रह्म
गुरुरेव न संशयः ॥ (1-32)

The letter “gu” denotes darkness. The letter “ru” denotes light. There is no doubt that guru is the very same brahman that dispels ignorance.

गुकारश्चान्धकारस्तु रुकारस्तन्निरोधकृत् ।
अन्धकारविनाशित्वात् गुरुरित्यभिधीयते ॥ (1-33)

The letter “gu” denotes darkness. The letter “ru” dispels it. Since the guru dispels darkness (ignorance) he got the name.

Our scriptures accord a very high place to the guru and emphatically state he is Brahman Itself. The Taittiriya Upanishad commands that one should venrate the teacher as God. आचार्य देवो भव । The popular verse given below confirms this notion.

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुः गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।
गुरुरेव परं ब्रह्म तस्मै श्री गुरवे नमः ॥

“My guru is Brahma, my guru is Vishnu, my guru is Maheswara - the god of gods. My guru is verily the Supreme Brahman. Salutations to that guru.”

The guru invests the disciple with knowledge about himself: thus creates a new person out of him and in this process he is like Brahma the creator. The guru holds the disciple's hand during the learning process and watches over his progress and nurtures him with tender care like a mother bird would its chicks. In this way he takes on the role of Vishnu the sustainer. The guru destroys the disciple's ignorance and along with it his imagined limitations and misery. In this way the guru is like Siva. By taking on all the three roles the guru is verily the Brahman itself.

In fact “guru” is one of the names of the Lord. गुरुः - सर्वविद्यानां उपदेष्टृत्वात् गुरुः । Vishnu Sahasranama.(209). It is also one of the names of Siva. Navaratnamala says that Devi Herself appears as the guru and shows the way to attain the goal.

देशिकरूपेण दर्शिताभ्युदयाम् । One of Sri Lalitha's names is गुरुमूर्तिः । गुरुरेव मूर्तिः शरीरं यस्याः ।

तामिच्छाविग्रहां देवीं गुरुरूपां विभावये दिति नित्याहृदयेषु ।

Lalitha Sahasranama (603).

Because of these reasons our tradition insists that one should show utmost respect to his guru; treat him on a par with God Himself and never show disrespect to him. In the Taittiriyaopanishad we saw the teacher admonishing the student आचर्यदेवो भव । Venerate your acharya as a deity. Krishna teaches this to His disciple Uddhava in His last message.

आचार्यं मां विजानीयान्नावमन्येत कर्हिचित् ।

न मर्त्यबुद्ध्यासूयेत सर्वदेवमयो गुरुः ॥ BH (11-17-27).

One should know the teacher to be My own self and never disregard or look down upon him as a man; for the teacher is the personification of all gods. He advises Arjuna also the same thing. BG(4-34).

तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।
उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्सिनः ॥

“Know it (superior wisdom) by means of obeisance, exhaustive questionings and service to the teacher. Knowers who have realised the truth will impart to you that knowledge.”

One can never repay the debt one owes to the guru. The kindly guru also does not expect anything from the disciple. The only way in which the latter can show his gratitude to his guru is by serving him with dedication. Krishna says this in His advice to Uddhava.

शुश्रूषमाण आचार्यं सदोपासीत नीचवत् । BH (11-17-29).The disciple should always worship the teacher and serve him as a dedicated servant. The guru is won over by his humility and teaches the supreme vidya. Sri Sankaracharya advises us to have devotion to the guru and free ourselves from the grip of this world. (Bhaja Govindam). (18). गुरुचरणांबुज-निर्भरभक्तः
संसार-दचिराद्भव मुक्तः ।

One can also think of another reason for offering worship and service to the guru. Prahlada talks of nine features that mark devotion to the Lord. These are:

श्रवणं कीर्तनं विष्णोः स्मरणं पादसेवनम् ।
अर्चनं वन्दनं दास्यं सख्यमात्मनिवेदनम् ॥ BH(7-5-23).

- (1)To hear the names, praises and stories of the Lord,
- (2) chanting them,
- (3) to remember Him as well as His names and stories,
- (4) to wait upon Him,

- (5) to offer worship,
- (6) offering service to Him,
- (7) to dedicate one's actions to Him,
- (8) to cultivate friendship with Him, and
- (9) total surrender (of body and belongings) to Him.

It is clear that till one gains knowledge of Self and as a result the term “worship” takes on a different colour, one has to continue the worship of the Lord using some representation like an icon or a picture as most of the people do. In such a case how can one practise some of the forms listed above such as (1) waiting upon Him, (2) offering service to Him, (3) to cultivate friendship with Him and (4) total surrender to Him? The answer is, that with one's guru being there as the personification of the Lord one can meaningfully wait upon him, offer service to him, cultivate friendship and also totally surrender to him. Arjuna was lucky in that he could have friendship with Krishna and also surrender to Him at the time of the KurukShetra war. But one need not consider oneself less lucky as he has his guru whom he can serve and worship. It is, in all respects same as serving the Lord Himself.

Sri Sankaracharya says that there is nothing in the three worlds that can be compared with the guru.

Can one compare one's guru with the fabled philosopher's stone that is said to be capable of converting base metals into gold? No, says he; because a piece of gold thus obtained by conversion cannot convert another piece of iron into gold. But the guru blesses the disciple who had taken refuge in his feet with his own natural state. In other words the guru not only transforms his disciple into a knower but also confers on him the capability to transform another into a knower.

दृष्टान्तो नैव दृष्टस्त्रिभुवनजठरे सद्गुरोर्ज्ञानदातुः

स्पर्शश्चेत्त्र कल्प्यः स नयति यदहो स्वर्णतामश्मसारम् ।
न स्पर्शत्वं तथापि श्रितचरणयुगे सद्गुरोस्स्वीयशिष्ये
स्वीयं साम्यं विधत्ते भवति निरुपमस्तेन वा लौकिकोऽपि ॥

(Shatashloki)

It is like the case of a lamp lit from another lamp. What would be the difference between the two? The second lamp also can light other lamps; thus there is no difference at all between them. Kalidasa says this: प्रवर्तितो दीप इव प्रदीपात्. (Raghuvamsam. 5-37).

From the above facts we derive that if one is blessed with the guru's grace, then ipso facto the Lord's grace follows. Great acharyas like Sri Vedanta Desika and Sri Sankaracharya who knew this truth have said that it is enough that they have got their guru's grace and so do not worry about getting the Lord's grace. Tamil saints like Tirumular have spoken at length on the greatness of the guru and the need to worship him. Let us see an example of what wise men have to say about the glory of the teachings of the guru. The sage minister Shukanasa said this in his advice to the prince Chandrapida.

(Kadambari). There is delightful punning on words in this passage which one with knowledge of sanskrit will be able to enjoy. हरति च सकलं अतिमलिनमप्यन्धकारमिव दोषजातं

प्रदोषसमयनिशाकर इव । गुरूपदेशः प्रशमहेतुर्वयः परिणाम
इव पलितरूपेण शिरसिजजालममलीकुर्वन्
गुणरूपेण तदेव

परिणमयति । गुरूपदेशश्च नाम
पुरुषाण-मखिल-मलप्रक्षालनक्षम-मजलं स्नानम्,

अनुपजात-पलितादिवैरूप्यमजरं वृद्धत्वम्,
अनारोपित-मेदोदोषं गुरुकरणम्, असुवर्णविरचनमग्राम्यं
कर्णाभरणम्, अतीतज्योतिरालोकः, नोद्वेगकरः प्रजागरः ।

The teachings of the guru dispel even the densest of darkness (ignorance) just as the rising moon. Just like the onset of old age

(maturity) converts the darkness of the hair white (whiteness stands for purity), so also the teachings make the turbulent sense organs pure by making them calm. They constitute a bath sans water that washes away all the (internal) impurities; they confer maturity (respectfulness) without the grey hair and other such disfigurements that mark onset of the old age; they make one weighty without the defect of obesity; they are adornments to the ears not made of artificial golden ornaments; they illumine without light; they awaken without disturbing or upsetting one.

Now let us study the verses proper.

॥ गुर्वष्टकम् ॥

शरीरं सुरूपं तथा वा कलत्रं यशश्चारु चित्रं धनं मेरुतुल्यं ।
मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ १ ॥

शरीरम् = the body. सुरूपम् = handsome. तथा वा = as
also. कलत्रम् = the wife (beautiful). यशः = fame.
चारु चित्रं = agreeable and pleasing. धनं =
wealth. मेरुतुल्यम् comparable to Meru the golden mountain .
गुरोः = guru's. अङ्घ्रिपद्मे = lotus like foot. मनः =
the mind. न लग्नम् चेद् = if not attached. ततः किम्? =
then what is the use? ततः किम्? = then what is the use?
ततः किम्? = then what is the use? ततः किम्? = then what
is the use?

Meaning of the verse. One may be blessed with a handsome body, beautiful wife, great fame and immense wealth. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

The implication is that they are of no use. The repetition of the question "what is the use?" four times stresses the point. The second

line is the same in all the eight verses.

कलत्रं धनं पुत्रपौत्रादि सर्वं गृहं बान्धवाः सर्वमेतद्धि जातम् ।

मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ २ ॥

कलत्रं = wife. धनं = wealth. पुत्रपौत्रादि सर्वं =
son, grandson and all that. गृहं = house.

बान्धवाः = relatives. सर्वं एतद्धि जातं all these that are
available. Second line is same as in verse No. 1.

Meaning of the verse. One may be having wife, wealth, son, grandson,
relatives etc. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is
not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

In the above two verses wife (husband included), children and money
have been mentioned twice. This is because one is strongly attached to
them. Attachment follows desire. Desire is for something one does not
have. One desires to have something because one feels that thing will
give happiness, comfort or security. Such things include wealth,
family, friends, house etc. Having got them one holds on to them.
This is called attachment. The utmost attachment is, of course for
one's body. Every one wants the body to remain ever young and to last
for ever - knowing very well that this wish is unnatural and so can
never be had. Scriptures talk of three attachments; one towards the
husband/wife, one towards the children and lastly the one towards
wealth. The attachment, when it grows strong and becomes intense
clouds one's judgement and makes one to act in unpredictable ways.
Prahlada had talked about attachment. He said that it is impossible
for a person who has not got control over his senses to free himself
from the attachment to his home. BH(7-6-9).

को गृहेषु पुमान् सक्तमात्मानमजितेन्द्रियः ।

स्नेहपाशैर्दृढैर्बद्धमुत्सहेत विमोचितुम् ॥

The attachment to money, for example, can make one to sacrifice even
one's life for it. He had given three examples - of a thief, a

soldier and a merchant.

को न्वर्थतृष्णां विसृजेत् प्राणेभ्योऽपि य ईप्सितः । यं
प्रीणात्यसुभिः प्रेषैस्तस्करः सेवको वणिक् ॥ BH(7-6 10).

A thief will not hesitate to commit a murder or risk his own life to get at money. He may try to snatch a gold chain from the neck of a child and if necessary be ready to strangle the child to take the chain. For him a golden chain is more valuable than the life of a child. Next, a soldier goes to the battle and stakes his life - only to earn some money in return. Lastly, a merchant will take many risks and go to strange and far off places to earn money.

षडङ्गादिवेदो मुखे शास्त्रविद्या कवित्वादि गद्यं सुपद्यं करोति ।
मनश्चेन्न लयं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ३ ॥

षडङ्गादिवेदः = veda with its six limbs. मुखे = in the
mouth. शास्त्रविद्या as also the scriptural learning.

कवित्वादि = intelligence and other qualitive. गद्यं = prose
composition. सुपद्यं well structured. करोति = makes.

Second line is same as in verse No. 1.

The vedas have six members.that help in the correct pronunciation and interpretation of the text. They are: शिक्षा = the science of proper articulation and pronunciation; छंदस् = the science of prosody; व्याकरणं = grammar; निरुक्तं = etymological explanation of difficult vedic words; ज्योतिषं = astronomy and; कल्पं = ritual or ceremonial.

शिक्षाकल्पो व्याकरणं निरुक्तं छन्दसां चयः ।
ज्योतिषामयनं चैव वेदाङ्गानि षडेव तु ॥

One may have thoroughly studied the vedas and its six branches; be able to reel off words of learned length and thundering sound from them and quote from the scriptures extensively. This may greatly impress an innocent audience and earn him accolades besides money. Similarly one may be able to compose great literary pieces - prose or

poetry. But these achievements will not help in gaining knowledge about the Self. The upanishads very emphatic about this.

नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यो न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन । MU (3-2-3).

The knowledge about the Self can be had only at the feet of the guru. Till it is got all the learning one carries in his head can only be termed a burden. Sri Sankaracharya says this clearly.

वाग्वैखरी शब्दभरी शास्त्रव्याख्यानकौशलम् ।

वैदुष्यं विदुषां तद्वद्भुक्तये न तु मुक्तये ॥

Loud speech consisting of a shower of words, the skill in expounding the scriptures, and likewise erudition - these may bring in some money or fame and as a result some joy to the scholar; but they are of no use in gaining liberation. VC(69).

Bhartruhari also says this in his Vairagaya Satakam. He asks what is the use of studying vedas, smritis, puranas, extensive shastras or the maze of ceremonials? They may take us to heaven. One may stay there for a long time ; but the stay is not permanent . As soon as one's stock of merit that has taken him to the place is exhausted he is flung back to earth to take birth again. MokSha or liberation is the only thing that will guarantee escape from rebirth.

किं वेदैः स्मृतिभिः पुराणपठनैः शास्त्रैर्महाविस्तरैः

स्वर्गग्रामकुटीनिवासफलदैः कर्मक्रियाविभ्रमैः ।

मुक्त्यैकं भवदुःकभाररचनाविध्वंसकालानलं

स्वात्मानन्दप्रवेशकलनं शेषैर्वणिग्वृत्तिभिः ॥

Meaning of the verse. One might have thoroughly studied the vedas with its six limbs, mastered the scriptures and be able to compose wonderful poetry and prose pieces. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

विदेशेषु मान्यः स्वदेशेषु धन्यः सदाचारवृत्तेषु मत्तो न चान्यः ।

मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ४ ॥

विदेशेषु = in the foreign countries. मान्यः = respected. स्वदेशेषु = in his own country. धन्यः = wealthy, fortunate. सदाचारवृत्तेषु = in the virtual or moral conducts or in observing traditional observances. मत्तः = proud or arrogant. न च अन्यः = none like him. Second line is same as in verse No. 1.

One may be honoured in other countries and also be respected in his own country. He may be virtuous and follow the prescribed duties as per custom. But they cannot help in gaining the knowledge of the Self. Works prescribed by the scriptures when properly done lead to the purification of the mind. Knowledge can be had only by enquiry under the guidance of the guru. Sri Sankaracharya says: VC(11)

चित्तस्य शुद्धये कर्म न वस्तूपलब्धये ।
वस्तुसिद्धिर्विचारेण न किञ्चित्कर्मकोटिभिः ॥

Meaning of the verse. One may be respected in his own country as well as in other countries. He may also be known to be a follower of duties as prescribed by tradition. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

क्षमामण्डले भूपभूपालवृन्दैः सदा सेवितं यस्य पादारविन्दम् ।
मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ५ ॥

क्षमामण्डले = in this great globe/earth. भूपभूपालवृन्दैः = by many kings and rulers. सदा सेवितं = always served, attended. यस्य पादारविन्दम् = whose lotus like foot. Second line same as in verse No.1.

One may be very great and exalted. Kings may wait at his feet. But wise men do not attach any importance to such a person if he carries only a crown and not knowledge of Self on his head. Sri Vedanta Desika refers to kings who are puffed up with pride with contempt in

his Vairagya panchakam. He says a king never rules over the entire world but only a small portion of it. But even this is enough to make him proud. Sri Desika says he does not care for them but is determined to worship the Lord who, in return for a handful of pounded rice, made Kuchela rich as Kubera himself.

क्षोणीकोणशतांश-पालन-कलादुर्वारगर्वानल-
क्षुभ्यत्क्षुद्रनरेन्द्र चाटुरचना धन्यान् न मन्यामहे ।
देवं सेवितुमेव निश्चिनुमहे योऽसौ दयालुः पुरा
दानामुष्टिमुचे कुचेलमुनये दत्ते स्म वित्तेशताम् ॥

Bhartruhari says the same thing in his Vairagya Satakam. This verse is addressed by a yati or sanyasi (one who has renounced the world) to a king. The yati speaks of the vanity of the king's possessions, and declares that a yati is greater than a king. The reason is that a king may be rich in wealth but the yati is rich in wisdom aquired at the feet of his preceptor.

त्वं राजा वयमप्युपासितगुरुप्रज्ञाभिमानोन्नताः
ख्यातस्त्वं विभवैर्यशांसि कवयो दिक्षु प्रतन्वन्ति नः ।
इत्थं मानधनातिदूरमुभयोरप्यावयोरन्तरं
यद्यस्मासु पराङ्मुखोऽसि वयमप्येकान्ततो निःस्पृहाः ॥

The yati says that if the king chooses to be cold towards him, he too is perfectly indifferent towards the king!

Meaning of the verse. One may be very powerful and kings may wait at his feet. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

यशो मे गतं दिक्षु दानप्रतापाज्जगद्वस्तु सर्वं करे यत्प्रसादात् ।
मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ६ ॥

मे यशः = my fame. दानप्रतापात् = by the glory of the gifts. दिक्षु = in all directions. गतं = gone or is spread. यत् प्रसादात् = by whose favour or condescension. सर्वं जगद्वस्तु = all the things in this world. करे = in hand.

Second line as in verse No. 1.

The same idea as in the previous couple of verses is restated for emphasis.

Meaning of the verse. One may claim that by his charities and gifts his fame has spread in all directions and nothing in this world is not obtainable by him. But what is the use of these things if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

So far the poet has been talking of a person who has attachment to wealth, home, family, fame etc. In the next two verses he says that what is said is equally applicable to one who claims to have shed such attachments.

न भोगे न योगे न वा वाजिराजौ न कान्तामुखे नैव वित्तेषु चित्तम् ।
मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ७ ॥

चित्तं = (my) mind (is) न भोगे = is not in enjoying
sensuory pleasures. न वा वाजिराजौ = not in either horses or in
being a king. न कान्तामुखे = not in (looking at) my wife's face;
(ie), not having attachment to wife, child, and other members of the
family. नैव वित्तेषु = never in wealth. Even if one makes such
a claim; which implies that he has got detachment, what is the use of
this if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

Meaning of the verse. Even if one has developed intense aversion to
worldly possessions and relations, such a detachment is of no use if
one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

अरण्ये न वा स्वस्य गेहे न कार्ये न देहे मनो वर्तते मे त्वनर्घ्ये ।
मनश्चेन्न लग्नं गुरोरङ्घ्रिपद्मे ततः किं ततः किं ततः किं ततः किम् ॥ ८ ॥

मे मनः = my mind. न वर्तते = does not dwell on.
अरण्ये = (living in the) forest or वा स्वस्य गेहे = (living
in) my own house. न कार्ये = not in indulging in prescribed
activities. न देहे = or my body. तु अनर्घ्ये = not to
invaluable or priceless things. Second line as in verse No.1.
Meaning of the verse. Even if one claims that his mind is not

attached to forests, or house, or his own body or even wealth such a detachment is of no use if one's mind is not attached to the lotus like foot of the guru?

Now the poet concludes after mentioning the फलश्रुतिः or benefit of reciting the poem. They are stated so that one will develop deep interest in studying the poem, mull over the contents and in due course accept and act on them (ie.) develop devotion to his guru. This devotion will, in due course bear fruit.

गुरोरष्टकं यः पठेत्पुण्यदेही यतिर्भूपतिर्ब्रह्मचारी च गेही ।
लभेद्वाञ्छितार्थं पदं ब्रह्मसंज्ञं गुरोरुक्तवाक्ये मनो यस्य लग्नम् ॥ ९ ॥

गुरोः अष्टकं = the composition consisting of eight verses on the guru. पुण्यदेही = one who has done meritorious deeds. यः पठेत् = if he reads. यतिः = be he a sanyasi (ascetic). भूपतिः = a king. ब्रह्मचारी = a student studying under a teacher. च गेही = or a householder. He will लभेत् = get. वाञ्छितार्थं = desired goal. ब्रह्मसंज्ञं पदं = the status known as brahman. गुरोरुक्तवाक्ये = in the teachings of the guru. यस्य = whose. मनः = mind. लग्नं = is attached.

Meaning of the verse. Any one whose mind dwells on the teaching's of his guru, be he a king or an ascetic or a bachelor who is studying or a householder reads these verses regularly he will, by the grace of his guru, get his wishes fulfilled in this world and also attain the highest goal known as mokSha.

CONCLUSION. The human birth is rare. One gets it after many inferior births as birds, animals, insects etc. Such inferior births are meant solely for reaping the consequence of their past deeds. One who has got such a birth cannot make any conscious effort to gain spiritual progress. Only the one who has been blessed with a human birth has the discrimination to distinguish between what is good for him and


what is not; what is temporary and what is permanent. Having found this, he alone (not the animals, insects or birds) can set his goal and make efforts to get at it. In this the Lord has been very kind to give us scriptures that discuss about the goals. He has also sent us many acharyas who, out of immense mercy, talked at great length on this subject and answered every possible question one may have. It is up to us to study them and make the best of the precious human life. If we were to miss the chance we cannot say with certainty what our next birth will be. The Kenopanishad (2-5) says that if one fails to make a sincere attempt to attain the goal of life he makes a grave error. The loss is inestimable.

इह चेदवेदीदथ सत्यमस्ति न चेदिहावेदीन्महती विनष्टिः ।


Thus the only way to make our life meaningful (that is to avoid sorrow and miseries) is to pursue the spiritual path in this life itself with the guidance of a guru. One has to hold on to his teachings with absolute faith and serve him sincerely knowing he is the very personification of the Lord.

॥ ॐ तत्सत् ॥

Written and encoded by N. Balasubramanian bbalu at satyam.net.in

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Gurvashtakam with meaning

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Please send corrections to sanskrit@cheerful.com

