

## *Atmarama* but not *Atmarama* – Part 2

BB 2.2.210

The final fruit of devotional service is *prema*, in which, by its nature, one will never be satiated. Sainly authorities deem self-satisfaction the most unwanted secondary fruit of *prema*.

COMMENTARY

A devotee who relishes *prema* is never satisfied with himself but always wants to surrender more and more for the satisfaction of his Lord. Thus experts in the science of devotional ecstasies condemn self-satisfaction as the most harmful impediment to bhakti. Of all the secondary fruits available to advancing Vaiṣṇavas, self-satisfaction is the one they should most carefully avoid. There is room for only very few exceptions. For example, satisfaction in the self may be all right for some time for a person trying to take shelter of the Supreme Lord but unable to give up hankering for liberation. Or the offerings of self-satisfaction and other perfections that come with the attainment of Brahman may entice an ignorant nondevotee to begin devotional service. These perfections are in fact opulences of the Supreme Person, and so they can attract certain kinds of persons toward Him.

BB 2.2.211

There is no reason to be unhappy if someone attains self-satisfaction without devotion to the Supreme Lord. The leaders of the saintly Vaiṣṇavas consider such an occurrence very good.

COMMENTARY

What is wrong if something so useless and contemptible as *ātmārāmatā*, satisfaction in the self, arises when devotional service has not been performed? Bhakti is a precious jewel, *ātmārāmatā* but a piece of straw. Wise devotees, therefore, are not bothered if satisfaction in the self is achieved without devotional service. Compared to the magic touchstone of devotion for the Personality of Godhead's lotus feet, impersonal satisfaction in the self is abominable, a cause of misery only, like life in hell. The great authorities in the science of devotional service are pleased to see this contrast between the rare treasure of bhakti and the worthless attainment of *ātmārāmatā* because it highlights the superexcellence of pure devotion. And if someone foolishly strives for *mukti* but fails, that also is very good.

BB 2.2.212

Or, from another point of view: Purity of heart, which is the cause of satisfaction in the self, may come about from performing one's prescribed duties—and this, after all, is a kind of devotional service. Thus, the result that comes from the external form of devotional service is paltry, and from the internal form sublime.

COMMENTARY

After all this discussion, some Vaiṣṇavas may still insist on the principle that nothing at all can be achieved without at least a touch of bhakti. To satisfy them, the bhakti-śāstras here look at the topic from another angle, as indicated by the word *vā* (“or else”). The self-satisfaction aspired for by impersonalists arises from purified consciousness, which one may achieve by fulfilling one’s duties within the *varṇāśrama* system. And since performing such duties is a type of devotional service mixed with karma, it is true that even for an impersonalist success depends on bhakti.

In case someone objects that the fruit of devotional service cannot be satisfaction in the self but only love of God and nothing else, the *bhakti-śāstras* further say that following one’s Vedic obligations is only devotional service in an external form. As such it results in mere self-satisfaction, whereas the essential form of devotional service—through hearing and chanting about the Lord, remembering Him, and so on—bears the most desirable fruit, that of prema.

BB 2.2.213

After achieving impersonal self-satisfaction, some begin worshiping the Lord’s lotus feet, and without hardship they quickly obtain the abundant happiness of being fixed in devotional service.

COMMENTARY

Of those who achieve satisfaction in the self, a rare few somehow particularly favored by the Supreme Lord give up their self-satisfaction to worship Him. They quickly reach the highest perfection. Ordinary people, entangled in various miseries of material life, cannot at once succeed in devotional practice. But self-satisfied impersonalists have already transcended the small-minded miserable existence of material life, so they can progress to joyful bhakti without delay. They quickly comprehend that what they knew before as the unnameable essence of liberated life—the reality of full eternity, knowledge, and bliss—is actually the all-attractive Personality of Godhead.

Some philosophers even hold that self-contented impersonalists are excellent candidates (*uttama-adhikārīs*) for bhakti. Indeed, no one is disallowed from entering devotional service. As the saying goes, *gaṅgā-snāna iva bhagavad-bhaktau sarve ’py adhikāriṇaḥ*: “Just as for bathing in the Gaṅgā, everyone is a fit candidate for the Supreme Lord’s devotional service.”

Nonetheless, in the opinion of Śrīla Sanātana Gosvāmī and his *sampradāya*, no material opulence, such as the ability to follow all the rules of *varṇāśrama*, can qualify one for beginning the process of pure bhakti. In Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (10.14.8) Lord Brahmā confirms that pure devotion is easily attained simply by depending on the mercy of the Supreme Personality of Godhead (*tat te ’nukampām su-samīkṣamāṇaḥ*). There is no other means to attain it. By the Supreme Lord’s mercy, one who practices bhakti, depending only on Him will surely achieve complete happiness. Devotion in practice gives birth to devotion in perfection.