

SEVA

Shri Krishna, dark as a rain-filled cloud, adorned with peacock feathers, wild flowers and a gunja bead necklace, graces the banks of the Yamuna river. When He applies His lips to the flute, melodious notes fill Vrindavan and enrapture the hearts of the love-smitten dairy-maids, the Gopis. This Krishna, a herder of cows, the son of Yashoda, the butter-theif and the beloved of the Gopis, is the object, means and reward of the Grace-Filled practice of *seva*, Shri Krishna's pleasing worship.

Shri Vallabhacharya explained that to attain God you must please Him and to do so, practitioners should apply their bodies and wealth in Shri Krishna's *seva*. This will help thread their minds and hearts directly into Shri Krishna. Shri Vallabhacharya received the *Brahma Sambandh mantra* from Shri Krishna on the 11th day of the bright fortnight of the month of Shravana (usually August). Shri Krishna instructed Shri Vallabhacharya to initiate bhaktas with the mantra. It marks their spiritual marriage and connects the soul to its divine source. The Sanskrit mantra is received from a descendant of Shri Vallabhacharya's lineage. Its English translation is given below.

"Thousands of years have passed in separation from You and I am filled with intense pain and anguish. I have lost my true joy and now dedicate my body, senses, vital breath, mind, intelligence, reason and sense of I along with all their functions as well as my spouse, children, house, relatives, wealth and this world or any other, along with my soul, to you Shri Krishna. O Krishna, I am yours."

After this initiation, the bhakta is eligible to perform Shri Krishna's *seva*. *Seva* is an integral part of Shri Vallabha's doctrine. It is its very essence and is motivated by love. It uses flowers, fruits and other materials found in this world for His pleasure. It is performed within the bhakta's own world, in the home. When *seva* is infused with *bhava*, divine inspiration, a lila realm arises in the material sphere. When *seva* matures, it fills the heart with His joy and continues effortlessly. It is considered to be the main dharma of grace-filled souls. Shri Vallabhacharya tells us, "One should always be engaged in Shri Krishna's *seva*."

Seva can be offered to Shri Krishna in the tender mood of mother Yashoda or with the passion of the Gopis. In any case, it always begins with the feeling that "I am Shri Krishna's *das*, His devoted follower." The nine-fold devotion revealed by the bhakta Prahalad is contained within the loving acts of *seva*. Shri Krishna is remembered and sung to. His praises are heard and the bhakta bows his head to Him and adorns His feet. She offers all types of worship to the Beloved by collecting the necessary things for His *seva*. After becoming His true follower, the bhakta rises to the level of being Shri Krishna's friend and ultimately offers her soul and everything to Him in the exalted state of complete soulful offering called *atma nivandanam*. This total offering is the beginning and the end of *Seva*.

Shri Vallabhacharya identifies devotion as progressing through three stages. "When divine love arises, it removes worldly hankering. When you become attached to the Beloved, there is no taste for the worldly home and the bhakta sees it as unconnected to one's true self. When the blessed one becomes totally addicted to Shri Krishna and can no longer live without Him, she has attained devotional excellence."

Today Shri Krishna's *seva* is found in the homes, *havelis* and temples of Shri Vallabhacharya's descendants as well as

in the houses of their followers. In the Shri Subodhini, Shri Vallabhacharya calls Lord Krishna a "householder". In Vedic tradition, the majority of the teachers and sages that have handed the Paths of Enlightenment down to us have also been householders. Although Shri Krishna wanders the forest havens of Vrindavan, He actually lives at home. He resides with His mother Yashoda. He is also at home with His bhaktas and makes special visits to the houses of His Beloved Gopis, the dairy maids of Braja.

Shri Krishna's householder tradition has been continued by Shri Vallabhacharya and his descendants. The lineage-holder's spacious homes (*Havelis*) have housed the various forms and lilas of Shri Krishna since the times of Shri Vallabhacharya. Today their homes can be found all over India. The sacred architecture found in their residences always centers around Shri Krishna's pleasure and His blessed worship. His inner sanctuary is the most private part of the house. The kitchens are also hidden away from onlookers. A porch with triple archways called a *Dhol Tivari*, provides a space for Shri Krishna to swing during the spring and rainy seasons. A large courtyard, considered to be the formless aspect of the Supreme Brahman is where bhaktas congregate to have Shri Krishna's darshan.

Traditionally, followers would come to pay their respects to their guru in his *haveli* and while there, they would take the blessed opportunity to have *darshan* of the guru's personal Krishna *seva*. To see Shri Krishna at home with the Vallabh lineage-holders inspires bhaktas to make Shri Krishna's *seva* in their own residences. Wherever Shri Krishna resides is Vrindavan and the bhakta's natural dharma is to worship Shri Krishna at home.

Shri Vallabhacharya developed the initial forms of *seva* and his son, Shri Gusainji, greatly enhanced the practice. He was an enlightened poet and musician as well as a creative

artist who devoted his manifold talents in Shri Krishna's *seva*. He gifted us with the modes of grace-filled worship and it was then further developed by his descendants. *Seva* is a continuing process and it develops in unique ways, according to the temperaments of the bhaktas.

The stories of the followers of Shri Vallabhacharya and Shri Gusainji reveal to us some of the ways *seva* has been performed. Shri Krishna's *seva* is very personal and differs from the practice of *puja* because it is not generated by mantra, but by love. Although it has a format, the main concern is His pleasure and any rule can be transcended if it is for His delight. Shri Vallabhacharya identified the fruits of performing *seva* and explains...

"From the moment the Blessed Lord gives a divine gift, the bhakta's spiritual desires are fulfilled. Time is never a controlling factor regarding eligibility and the three fruits of *seva*. These rewards are the capacity to experience transcendental love, to be absorbed into God's lila and to attain a spiritual form that is useful in eternal realms." (Seva Phalam.)

God made this world and so it is fit for His pleasure. Fresh leaves, flowers, vegetables, fruits, dry fruits and water are all offered to Shri Krishna. He promises us in the Gita that as His bhaktas worship Him, so He honors them and accepts whatever is offered with love. The practice of *seva* is open to anyone who feels the rush of His presence. Lord Krishna's *seva* as performed in Shri Nathji's temple and other havelis or homes is often eight-fold. It unfolds according to His daily life. Shri Krishna lives with and for His bhaktas and they honor Him from the moment He gets up in the morning until He retires for the evening.

The object of *seva* is always the multi-dimensional Shri Krishna. While infant Krishna swings in mother Yashoda's cradle, He relates to the Gopis as their lover. Shri Krishna

appears for the bhaktas' benefit, to accept their various types of *seva*. He also limits Himself in order to please His beloveds. His grace-filled concealment allows His bhaktas to find Him in their homes. Unlimited God is unapproachable and so His bhaktas constrict Him, all with His grace. For them, He is not the Lord of the universe, but a child who will dance for a glass of buttermilk.

Shri Krishna's *seva* is a joyous and beautiful affair. A multitude of arts are employed in His pleasing *seva*. They are dedicated to Him and are sanctified when He enjoys them. Shri Krishna is served food (*bhog*) in thousands of varieties, always made with the finest ingredients. Shri Krishna is always adorned with a variety of clothes and jewellery. *Seva* is also full of music. Lovely songs composed by the great bhaktas are sung in different ragas that correspond to the various seasons, festivals and times of day and offered to Shri Krishna, the master of enjoyment.

Many bhaktas have a *Svarupa*, a form of Shri Krishna that resides with them in their homes. Sometimes the Krishna *svarupa* can be a picture or Shri Krishna's very form. Svarupas are often handed down from generation to generation and regarded as Shri Krishna Himself. Food offerings are *prepared* and after they are offered, they become prasada, portions of grace. In many homes of worship, Shri Krishna is accompanied by Shri Svaminiji (Shri Radha). The bhaktas, by replicating the daily routine of Shri Krishna's activities, make their homes to be Shri Krishna's homes. Their towns all become Gokul. The dharma of the bhakta is to worship Shri Krishna at all times with every *bhava*. The true wealth is Shri Krishna and our desires are fulfilled when He lives in the heart. To always serve and remember Him is liberation.

Shri Vallabhacharya's descendants serve Shri Krishna at eight different times during the day starting early in the morning. After lunch there is a four hour break before the

afternoon worship. Each period is called a *darshan* and not all *darshans* are open to the public. Some lineage-holders do not allow the public darshan at all. The *seva* that is performed in the homes of the bhaktas follows a similar format, but rarely has eight darshans. Home worship is done according to the ability of the bhakta. Each of the *darshans* have their own time, mood, and *lila*: Shri Krishna is either worshipped as a child or as a young lover. The gurus of the path of *seva* are the Gopis who worshipped Shri Krishna as their Beloved. Mother Yashoda is the role model for worshipping Shri Krishna as a child. These two moods can mingle, but they both arise from the foundations of devotional servitude. The bhakta poet Surdas sings about the practice of daily *seva*.

"Those who have surrendered their bodies to the Blessed Lord, offer Him only the best things. Those who bring the Lord a jug of water hold a position in the eternal realms. Those who clean the temple are never caught in the Lord's maya. Those who clean the Lord's grains receive the fruit of visiting all the sacred shrines. Those who make the Lord a garland entertain a great devotee daily. Those who bring sandal-paste for the Lord are relieved of life's threefold miseries. Those who clean the Lord's pots remain forever pure. Those who blissfully sing of the Lord's glories attain all four types of liberation."