

SRIMAD BHAGAVATAM--THE NATURAL COMMENTARY ON VEDANTA (ARTHO 'YAM
BRAHMA-SUTRANAM) by H.H.Suhotra Swami

A STUDY GUIDE BASED UPON THE GOVINDA-BHASYA OF SRILA BALADEVA
VIDYABHUSANA

INTRODUCTION

The word Veda means 'knowledge.' In the modern world, the term 'science' is used to identify the kind of authoritative knowledge upon which human progress is based. To the ancient people of Bharatavarsa, the word Veda had an even more profound import than the word science has for people today. That is because in those days scientific inquiry was not restricted to the world perceived by the physical senses. And the definition of human progress was not restricted to massive technological exploitation of material nature. In Vedic times, the primary focus of science was the eternal, not the temporary; human progress meant the advancement of spiritual awareness yielding the soul's release from the entrapment of material nature, which is temporary and full of ignorance and suffering.

Vedic knowledge is called *apauruseya*, meaning that it is not knowledge of human invention. Vedic knowledge appeared at the dawn of the cosmos within the heart of Brahma, the lotus-born demigod of creation from whom all the species of life within the universe descend. Brahma imparted this knowledge in the form of *sabda* (spiritual sound) to his immediate sons, who are great sages of higher planetary systems like the Satyaloka, Janaloka and Tapaloka. These sages transmitted the Vedic *sabda* to disciples all over the universe, including wise men of earth in ancient times. Five thousand years ago the great Vedic authority Srila Krsna Dvaipayana Vyasa compiled the *sabda* into Sanskrit scripture (*sastra*) which collectively is known today as 'the Vedas.'

In the India of old, the study of the Vedas was the special prerogative of the *brahmanas* (the priestly and intellectual class). There were four degrees of education in Vedic knowledge that corresponded to the four *asramas* of brahminical culture (the *brahmachari* or student *asrama*, the *grhastha* or householder *asrama*, the *vanaprastha* or retired *asrama* and the *sannyasa* or renounced *asrama*). The first degree of learning was the memorization of the Vedic *Samhita*, which consists of thousands of *mantras* (verses) divided into four sections--*Rg*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*--that are chanted by priests in glorification of the Supreme Being during sacrificial rituals. The second degree was the mastery of the *Brahmana* portion of the Vedas, which teaches rituals for fulfillment of duties to family, society, demigods, sages, other living entities and the Supreme Lord. The third degree was the mastery of the *Aranyaka* portion, which prepares the retired householder for complete renunciation. The fourth degree was the mastery of the *Upanisads*, which present the philosophy of the Absolute Truth to persons seeking liberation from birth and death.

The texts studied in the four stages of formal Vedic education are collectively called *sruti-sastra*, 'scripture that is to be heard' by the *brahmanas*. But *sruti-sastra* is not all there is to the Vedic literature. *Chandogya Upanisad* 7.1.2 declares that the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* comprise the fifth division of Vedic study. The *Puranas* and *Itihasas* teach the same knowledge as the four Vedas, illustrating it with extensive historical narrations. The fifth Veda is known as *smrti-sastra* ('scripture that must be remembered'); Srila Vyasadeva compiled it into eighteen *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*. *Smrti-sastra* study was permitted to non-*brahmanas*. At *Naimasaranya*, therefore, Suta Gosvami, a non-*brahmana* by birth, was requested by the great assembly of *brahmanas* to recite the *Srimad-Bhagavata Maha-purana* that his father *Romaharsana* had learned directly from Vyasa.

Before Vyasadeva's compilation, the Vedas had long been taught in the *brahmana-asramas* by six schools of Vedic philosophy. Each of these schools had come to be associated with a famous sage who was the author of a *sutra* (code) expressing the essence of his *darsana* (standpoint on the ultimate meaning or purpose of the Veda). To dispel the confusion that had arisen among *brahmanas* because of the incongruities of these standpoints, Vyasa wrote *Vedanta-sutra* as a final judgement on the arguments of the six schools

as well as those of other philosophies. Vedanta-sutra forms the third great body of Vedic literature after the sruti-sastra and smrti-sastra. It is known as the nyaya-sastra, 'scripture of philosophical disputation.'

The sad-darsana (six standpoints) are Nyaya (logic), Vaishesika (atomic theory), Samkhya (analysis of matter and spirit), Yoga (the discipline of self-realization), Karma-mimamsa (science of fruitive work) and Vedanta (science of God realization).

The sad-darsana are termed astika (from asti, or 'it is so'), because they all acknowledge the Veda to be authoritative. The nastika philosophies of the Carvakas, Buddhists and Jains (nasti, 'it is not so'), reject the Vedas. Beginning with Nyaya, each of the sad-darsanas in their own turn presents a more developed and comprehensive explanation of the conclusion of Vedic knowledge. Nyaya sets up the rules of philosophical debate and identifies the basic subjects under discussion: the physical world, the soul, God and liberation. Vaishesika engages the method of Nyaya or logic in a deeper analysis of the predicament of material existence by showing that the visible material forms to which we are all so attached ultimately break down into invisible atoms. Samkhya develops this analytical process further to help the soul become aloof to matter. Through Yoga, the soul awakens its innate spiritual vision to see itself beyond the body. Karma-mimamsa directs the soul to accept the duties prescribed in the Vedic scriptures. Vedanta focuses on the supreme goal taught in the Upanisads.

Originally, the six darsanas were specialized fields within a harmonious, comprehensive study of the Veda. The purest and most ancient versions of these darsanas are found in Srimad-Bhagavatam, propounded by great mahajanas like Brahma, Narada, Siva, the four Kumaras, Devahuti-putra Kapiladeva and Sukadeva Gosvami. But later and far lesser scholars of the darsanas advanced opposing, contentious points of view. Thus Vedic philosophy came to be misrepresented for selfish ends. For instance, Karma-mimamsa (which by 500 BC had become the foremost philosophy of the brahmana class) was misused by bloodthirsty priests to justify their mass slaughter of animals in Vedic sacrifices. But the unexpected rise of a novel non-Vedic religion challenged the power of Karma-mimamsa. This new religion was Buddhism. When King Asoka instituted the Buddha's doctrine as the state religion of his empire, many brahmanas abandoned Vedic scholarship altogether to learn and teach nastika concepts of ahimsa (nonviolence) and sunyata (voidism). This seriously eroded the influence of the astika schools.

In the seventh century after Christ, Buddhism in its turn was eclipsed by the rise of the teachings of the Vedantist Sankara, who revived the Vedic culture all over India. But Sankara's special formulation of Vedanta was itself influenced by Buddhism and is not truly representative of the original Vedanta-darsana taught by Vyasa.

After Sankara, Vedanta was refined by the schools of great teachers (acaryas) like Ramanuja, Madhva and Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Having shed the baggage of Sankara's crypto-Buddhism, Vedanta philosophers soared to heights of dialectical sophistication that has been much appreciated by many Western intellectuals. Vedantic dialectics are represented today in the bhasyas (commentaries) of the acaryas and the tikas (subcommentaries) of their disciples. All possible philosophical positions, including some bearing remarkable resemblance to the ideas of European philosophers, are therein proposed, analyzed and refuted.

Vedanta study is jnana-yoga, the yoga of theoretical knowledge. But from jnana one must come to vijana, practical realization of the ultimate truth. The theoretical dialectics (sastratha) of Vedanta twist and turn from thesis (purvapaksa) to antithesis (uttarapaksa) to synthesis (siddhanta) like the gnarled branches of a tree. But the ways of philosophical disputation do not themselves add up to the Absolute Truth. The Absolute Truth, being transcendental, is only indirectly framed in the branches of jnana, like the rising full moon may be framed by the branches of a tree. A friend who wishes us to see the moon may first draw our attention to that tree. This may be compared to the indirect or theoretical stage of knowledge. Actually seeing the moon is vijana.

There is a straightforward path to vijnana. It is explained by the Supreme Personality of Godhead to Brahma in Srimad-Bhagavatam 2.9.31:

sri-bhagavan uvaca
jnanam parama-guhyam me
yad vijnana-samanvitam
sarahasyam tad-angam ca
grhana gaditam maya

TRANSLATION

The Personality of Godhead said: Knowledge about Me as described in the scriptures is very confidential, and it has to be realized in conjunction with devotional service. The necessary paraphernalia for that process is being explained by Me. You may take it up carefully.

This verse, which establishes that vijnana is attainable by one who coordinates scriptural study with pure devotional service, is the prelude to the Catuhsloki Bhagavatam, the four original verses of the Srimad-Bhagavatam spoken before creation by the Lord to His servant Brahma. (Bhag. 2.9.33-36) Five thousand years ago, the Catuhsloki Bhagavatam was expanded into 18,000 verses by Srila Vyasadeva as his own commentary on Vedanta-sutra. The Srimad-Bhagavatam, then, is meant for persons who are willing to go beyond mere thinking about the Absolute Truth to the realized stage of practical engagement--body, mind, soul and words--in the ninefold angas (divisions) of devotional service to Krsna. As Sri Prahlada Maharaja states, kriyeta bhagavatya addha tan manye 'dhitam uttamam: 'One who has dedicated his life to the service of Krsna through these nine methods should be understood to be the most learned person, for he has acquired complete knowledge.' (Bhag. 7.5.24)

The study guide that follows is designed to help the student of Srimad-Bhagavatam to 1) discern the original Bhagavata versions of the six darsanas, 2) learn the Srimad-Bhagavatam's answers to challenges fired from many different philosophical stances, and 3) appreciate the solid Vedic philosophical foundation of Krsna-bhakti. In this guide, verses of the Srimad-Bhagavatam are presented as commentaries on philosophical controversies raised in the Vedanta-sutra. The outline of Vedanta controversies provided by this guide is drawn from the Govinda-bhasya of Srila Baladeva Vidyabhusana. The Govinda-bhasya quotes a number Bhagavatam verses deemed to be the elucidations of specific sutras. All verses mentioned therein are incorporated into this study guide. And wherever the Govinda-bhasya provides no Bhagavatam verses to match the Vedanta, other Vaisnava studies of the Srimad-Bhagavatam were consulted. They are: Sri Bhagavata-arka Marici Mala by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura, Sri Bhakti Ratnavali by Visnu Puri, Vedanta-darsana by Haridasa Sastri and--first and foremost--the computerized BBT Folio of the books of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

Readers should note that this study guide examines the Srimad-Bhagavatam from a very specific angle of vision--Vedanta philosophy--so as to heighten our appreciation and understanding of certain verses that may have escaped our careful consideration due to their seeming technical or esoteric nature. Thus this study guide is really aimed at augmenting an already developed appreciation for Bhagavata philosophy. It is not conceived of as a general introduction to the Srimad Bhagavatam. Nor is it meant to be an exhaustive study of the Vedanta-sutra either. Many of the finer details of Vedanta philosophy that are dealt with in Govinda-bhasya can find no place in such a work as this, which utilizes Vedanta only as a background reference for a deeper understanding of the Srimad-Bhagavatam.

SRILA PRABHUPADA ON THE SRIMAD-BHAGAVATAM AS THE NATURAL COMMENTARY ON VEDANTA-SUTRA

From Teachings of Lord Kapila, Chapter 4: 'Srimad-Bhagavatam is a commentary on Vedanta-sutra. Vedanta-sutra explains that the Supreme is the source of everything, and the nature of that source is explained in Srimad-Bhagavatam (1.1.1): janmady asya yato 'nvayad itaratas carthesv abhijnah svarat. That source is abhijna, cognizant. Matter is not cognizant; therefore the theory of modern science that life comes from

matter is incorrect. The identity from whom everything emanates is abhijna, cognizant, which means He can understand. The Bhagavatam (1.1.1) also states, tene brahma hrdaya adi-kavaye: Krsna instructed Lord Brahma in Vedic knowledge. Unless the ultimate source is a living entity, how can He impart knowledge? Srimad-Bhagavatam was compiled by Vyasadeva, who also compiled the Vedanta-sutra. Generally the Mayavadis emphasize the commentary made on the Vedanta-sutra by Sankaracarya, the Sariraka-bhasya, but that is not the original commentary on Vedanta-sutra. The original commentary is given by the author himself, Vyasadeva, in the form of Srimad-Bhagavatam. To understand the actual meaning of the Vedanta-sutra, we must refer to the commentary made by the author himself. As stated by Sri Krsna Himself in Bhagavad-gita (13.5):

rsibhir bahudha gitam
chandobhir vividhah prthak
brahma-sutra-padaish caiva
hetumadbhir viniscitaih

"The knowledge of the field of activities and of the knower of activities is described by various sages in various Vedic writings-- especially in the Vedanta-sutra--and is presented with all reasoning as to cause and effect."

Transcendental knowledge is therefore very logical. According to the Vedic system, the acarya must understand Vedanta-sutra (also called Brahma-sutra) before he can be accepted as an acarya. Both the Mayavada-sampradaya and the Vaisnava-sampradaya have explained the Vedanta-sutra. Without understanding Vedanta-sutra, one cannot understand Brahman.'

From Sri Caitanya-caritamrta, Adi-lila, Chapter 7, Text 72, purport: 'Knowledge of the unlimited is actual brahmajnana, or knowledge of the Supreme. Those who are addicted to fruitive activities and speculative knowledge cannot understand the value of the holy name of the Lord, Krsna, who is always completely pure, eternally liberated and full of spiritual bliss. One who has taken shelter of the holy name of the Lord, which is identical with the Lord, does not have to study Vedanta philosophy, for he has already completed all such study.'

One who is unfit to chant the holy name of Krsna but thinks that the holy name is different from Krsna and thus takes shelter of Vedanta study in order to understand Him must be considered a number one fool, as confirmed by Caitanya Mahaprabhu by His personal behavior, and philosophical speculators who want to make Vedanta philosophy an academic career are also considered to be within the material energy. A person who always chants the holy name of the Lord, however, is already beyond the ocean of nescience, and thus even a person born in a low family who engages in chanting the holy name of the Lord is considered to be beyond the study of Vedanta philosophy. In this connection the Srimad-Bhagavatam states:

aho bata svapaco'to gariyn
yajjih vnre vartate nma tubhyam
tepus tapas te juhuvuh sasnur arya
brahman ucir nama grnanti ye te

"If a person born in a family of dog-eaters takes to the chanting of the holy name of Krsna, it is to be understood that in his previous life he must have executed all kinds of austerities and penances and performed all the Vedic yajnas." (SB. 3.33.7) Another quotation states:

rg-vedo 'tha yajur-vedah sma-vedo 'py atharvanah
adhitas tena yenoktam harir ity aksara-dvayam

"A person who chants the two syllables Ha-ri has already studied the four Vedas--Sama, Rk, Yajuh and Atharva."

Taking advantage of these verses, there are some sahajiys who, taking everything very cheaply, consider themselves elevated Vaisnavas but do not care even to touch the Vedanta-sutras or Vedanta philosophy. A real Vaisnava should, however, study Vedanta philosophy, but if after studying Vedanta one does not adopt the chanting of the holy name of

the Lord, he is no better than a Mayavadi. Therefore, one should not be a Mayavadi, yet one should not be unaware of the subject matter of Vedanta philosophy. Indeed, Caitanya Mahaprabhu exhibited His knowledge of Vedanta in His discourses with Prakasananda Sarasvati. Thus it is to be understood that a Vaisnava should be completely conversant with Vedanta philosophy, yet he should not think that studying Vedanta is all in all and therefore be unattached to the chanting of the holy name. A devotee must know the importance of simultaneously understanding Vedanta philosophy and chanting the holy names. If by studying Vedanta one becomes an impersonalist, he has not been able to understand Vedanta. This is confirmed in Bhagavad-gita (Bg. 15.15). Vedanta means "the end of knowledge." The ultimate end of knowledge is knowledge of Krsna, who is identical with His holy name. Cheap Vaisnavas (sahajiyas) do not care to study the Vedanta philosophy as commented upon by the four acaryas. In the Gaudiya-sampradaya there is a Vedanta commentary called the Govinda-bhasya, but the sahajiyas consider such commentaries to be untouchable philosophical speculation, and they consider the acaryas to be mixed devotees. Thus they clear their way to hell.'

From Caitanya-caritamrta, Adi-lila, Chapter 7, Text 102, Purport: 'The Mayavadi sannyasis, appreciating Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, inquired from Him why He did not discuss Vedanta philosophy. Actually, however, the entire system of Vaisnava activities is based on Vedanta philosophy. Vaisnavas do not neglect Vedanta, but they do not care to understand Vedanta on the basis of the Sariraka-bhasya commentary. Therefore, to clarify the situation, Lord Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, with the permission of the Mayavadi sannyasis, wanted to speak regarding Vedanta philosophy. The Vaisnavas are by far the greatest philosophers in the world, and the greatest among them was Srila Jiva Gosvami Prabhu, whose philosophy was again presented less than four hundred years later by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura Maharaja. Therefore one must know very well that Vaisnava philosophers are not sentimentalists or cheap devotees like the sahajiyas. All the Vaisnava acaryas were vastly learned scholars who understood Vedanta philosophy fully, for unless one knows Vedanta philosophy he cannot be an acarya. To be accepted as an acarya among Indian transcendentalists who follow the Vedic principles, one must become a vastly learned scholar in Vedanta philosophy, either by studying it or hearing it.

Bhakti develops in pursuance of Vedanta philosophy. This is stated in Srimad-Bhagavatam (1.2.12):

tac chraddadhana munayo
jnana-vairagya-yuktaya
pasyanty atmani catmanam
bhaktya sruta-grhitaya

The words bhaktyasruta-grhitaya in this verse are very important, for they indicate that bhakti must be based upon the philosophy of the Upanisads and Vedanta-sutra. Srila Rupa Gosvami said:

sruti-smrti-puranadi-
pancaratras-vidhim vina
aikantikiharer bhaktir
utpatayaiva kalpate

"Devotional service performed without reference to the Vedas, puranas, pancaratras, etc., must be considered sentimentalism, and it causes nothing but disturbance to society." There are different grades of Vaisnavas (kanistha-adhikari madhyama- adhi kari uttama-adhikari), but to be a madhyama-adhikari preacher one must be a learned scholar in Vedanta-sutra and other Vedic literature because when bhakti-yoga develops on the basis of Vedanta philosophy it is factual and steady. In this connection we may quote the translation and purport of the verse mentioned above (SB. 1.2.12):

TRANSLATION

That Absolute Truth is realized by the seriously inquisitive student or sage who is well equipped with knowledge and who has become detached by rendering devotional service and hearing the Vedanta-sruti.'

From a lecture by Srila Prabhupada, given on January 11, 1967:
'So far Vedanta-sutra is concerned, Bhagavata is Vedanta-sutra itself.
Bhagavata is the natural commentary on the Vedanta-sutra. Therefore
one who has sufficient knowledge in Bhagavata, he has automatically
sufficient knowledge in Vedanta-sutra.'