

Narada Bhakti Sutras from the Vision of Vedanta

Concise Version for Western Students



Studying Bhakti Literature from the Vedantic View

We are embarking on a study of the Narada Bhakti Sutras. The word 'bhakti' is generally translated as 'devotion' and is most commonly taken to mean: reverential love directed toward God. Bhakti is an important topic for students of Vedanta, as it's considered by the tradition to be a key qualification for attaining self-knowledge and moksha. As it says in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad (Verse 6.23):

Only those great souls who have intense devotion to the Lord and equal devotion to the teacher will fully comprehend the teachings of Vedanta.

Likewise, toward the end of the 18th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita (Verse 18.67) Krishna says:

This teaching should never be imparted to one who is without austerity, nor to one who is not a devotee, nor to one who is not desirous of hearing, nor to one who criticizes me.

The topic of bhakti is elaborated upon in the Puranas, Itihasas, and Agamas,¹ especially the Puranas, which go into great detail about the exploits of the Lord, the glories of the Lord, and the greatness of great bhaktas. Thus, bhakti is pervasive throughout Hindu scripture. The tradition says that one method of acquiring, nourishing, and stoking bhakti is through exposure to the biographies of saintly bhaktas. Accordingly, there is a vast literature on the lives of great bhaktas, including the biographies of the 63 Nyanars, or Shaivite Saints, and the famous Bhakti Vijayam, which has been translated into many Indian regional languages.

In studying the biographies of famous bhaktas, we learn about various devotional exercises, such as listening to the teachings of the Vedas, chanting the Lord's name, remembering the Lord, serving the Lord, ritual worship or puja, prostrating to the Lord, cultivating virtuous qualities, and so forth. We also learn about varieties of relationships with the Lord. For example, some bhaktas relate to Isvara as an infant, and enjoy waking, clothing, playing with, and singing lullabies to the Lord. Some bhaktas look upon the Lord as a lover, and foster a matrimonial or passionate dynamic. Others like to look upon Isvara as the Master Swami and themselves as servants, identifying with Hanuman's selfless service toward Rama. Still others look upon the Lord as a parent (indeed, mother worship is widespread in India and this is very convenient because the archetypal mother is known for her tender, forgiving heart). Countless stories and songs have been composed about these various relationships, resulting in a vast literature. This type of bhakti is also very media-friendly, easily lending itself to bhakti-based movies and television series. In fact, new stories are being invented in the popular media all the time, and many people assume that they come from the Puranas because nobody has read all the Puranas to be able to verify this. Thus, there are stories upon stories about Isvara and stories upon stories of bhaktas to be watched, read, sung, and acted out—it is all available for dramatization.

As a consequence of the ubiquity and popularity of the bhakti literature, it is very often misunderstood. Though this widespread exposure to bhakti is wonderful on the one hand, it brings with it some serious problems. These problems are rarely discussed among lay people, and they need not be; this is perfectly fine. But for any serious seeker of moksha, a careful understanding of these problems is imperative. Broadly speaking, the entire body of bhakti literature deals with two topics. The first topic is bhakti sadhana, or the means of devotion, and encompasses forms of devotional relationship, devotional practices, and values. Alongside this topic of sadhana, the bhakti literature also talks about the highest goal of life, or moksha, and the relationship between bhakti and moksha. Once we enter the topic of moksha, we find ourselves in a philosophy or view, known as bhakti darshana. In English, this is called the philosophy of divine love. Students of Vedanta should note that whereas bhakti sadhana is acceptable—and indeed, encouraged—bhakti darshana, which is an obstacle to self-knowledge and

¹ Puranas are ancient Hindu texts eulogizing various deities, primarily the Trimurti (i.e., Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) through story. Itihasas are epic histories, principally the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Agamas are non-Vedic scriptures dealing with the spiritual philosophy and practices behind deity worship.

moksha, is not, and should thus be rejected as the opposing view, or purvapaksha. Thus, in reading any text from the bhakti literature, we need to learn how to filter the sadhana from the darshana and discard the latter. This is akin to our view of yoga: whereas yoga sadhana is wonderful—the yamas, niyamas, asanas, and pranayama—yoga darshana should be rejected. Indeed, in the Brahma Sutras, there is a systematic analysis of different philosophies that culminates in the acceptance of Vedanta and rejection of all other philosophies as logically fallacious and contradictory to the Vedantic teaching. To be more specific, bhakti darshana directly contravenes Vedanta vichara, or inquiry, whose cornerstone is sruti, yukti, anubhava.²

Without going into all the details of the logical fallacies inherent in bhakti darshana, the fundamental problem is that all bhakti systems of philosophy retain duality between jiva and Isvara—and by extension, separation between bhakta and Isvara—permanently. Vedanta accepts transient dualistic devotion (i.e., dvaita bhakti) as a sadhana because it is instrumental for mental purification and for expanding our intellectual understanding. But the bhakti view's acceptance of permanent duality is a problem. In the Mandukya Karika, Gaudapada strongly criticizes those who follow bhakti darshana as unfortunate because such people remain as dualistic bhaktas, seeing Isvara as permanently separate from themselves. In fact, they want to retain this duality. By contrast, the Vedas uniformly declare that duality is samsara. Thus, all bhakti schools of philosophy are contradictory to the Vedas; they are anti-Veda. In studying the bhakti literature, then, it is crucial to recognize that it comprises a mixture of bhakti sadhana and bhakti darshana, and to have an intellectual sieve for filtering out the darshana while retaining the sadhana. Without this sieve, we run the risk of mistaking the bhakti view for the real view, which would be a serious obstacle to self-knowledge and moksha.

If bhakti darshana is the opposing view, what is the real view? The answer to this has been established in the three authoritative texts of Vedanta—namely, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras, collectively termed the *prasthanatrayam*—which adhere to the threefold yardstick of sruti, yukti, and anubhava and have been carefully preserved and perpetuated by an exceptional guru-student lineage. Remembering the four fundamental principles of the Vedantic view serves as our best filter when studying any bhakti literature. These four fundamentals are as follows: First, that moksha is the highest aim, or purushartha,³ of a human life. Second, that this goal can be accomplished by one method alone, and that method is knowledge, or jnanam. And what exactly is that knowledge? *Brahma satyam, jagan mithya, jivo brahmaiva na aparah*—the self alone is real, the universe is apparent, the individual is non-different from the self. Knowledge is not about having a conceptual understanding of this phrase, but about having a direct, fully assimilated, and unshakable conviction of the underlying truth that it expresses. The third fundamental is that self-knowledge does not happen automatically, but is itself accomplished by one method alone. That method is Vedanta *vichara* (inquiry); that is, sravana, manana, nididhyasana under the guidance of a proper guru. The fourth and final fundamental is that Vedanta vichara is possible only when the student has a refined or qualified mind. This refinement is accomplished through karma yoga and upasana yoga, both of which require Isvara-bhakti, or dualistic bhakti (dvaita bhakti).

Karma yoga requires Isvara-bhakti because one dedicates or offers every single action, be it mundane or spiritual, reverentially to the Lord. Upasana yoga requires Isvara bhakti because one dwells reverentially upon the Lord as an object of worship. Thus both these sadhanas require bhakti, demonstrating that bhakti is integral to the Vedantic view and that Vedanta is not at all against bhakti. In

²Sruti refers to scriptural authority and corresponds to sravana, or listening. Yukti refers to logic and reasoning and corresponds to manana, which involves reflecting deeply upon the scripture-based teaching that was heard and resolving any and all doubts. Anubhava is literally translated as experience, but this translation leaves a lot to be desired. In certain context, including the present one, anubhava means direct knowledge. Anubhava corresponds to nididhyasana, or contemplating and assimilating the self-knowledge until it has become unshakable.

³According to Vedanta, all human goals can be reduced to four types: (1) artha, or security; (2) kama, or pleasure; (3) dharma, or virtue; and (4) moksha, or liberation. The pursuit of artha, kama, and dharma is a permanent struggle. In moksha, all struggle ends because I discover security and joy in myself. Thus the four purusharthas can be reduced to two: artha-kama-dharma, the apparent, and moksha, the real.

both these forms of bhakti, the spiritual seeker looks upon God as something or someone different from him or herself, so there is separation or duality. As a karma yogi, I see God as someone separate from me who is receiving my offering, and as an upasana yogi, I take God to be the object of my meditation. But whereas bhakti would have us retain this duality permanently, the Vedantic method is to temporarily incorporate dvaita bhakti—in the form of the karma yoga and upasana yoga sadhanas—with the understanding that one must eventually come to Self-inquiry, and from there to non-dual wisdom, or advaita jnanam, otherwise known as advaita bhakti. It is only through this non-dual understanding that moksha can be attained. This is the Vedantic roadmap.

In line with this roadmap, studying the bhakti literature can be useful insofar as it discusses dvaita bhakti extensively and can thus inform the practice of karma yoga and upasana yoga. The bhakti literature also has some devotional features not found in the Vedas, which are collectively termed 'informal dvaita bhakti.' The first feature is that Isvara is brought down to the human level. Of course, our ultimate goal is to raise the human being to the level of the divine and not the other way around, but here we have managed to bring poor Isvara down to our level (it's an extraordinary play when you really think about it; like a person extending a hand to lift someone up, but that person is so strong he winds up dragging down the helper). Nonetheless, this humanization of the divine is the first distinctive feature of all stories in the bhakti literature. The second feature is that once God has been humanized, a relationship is struck with this human God. This relationship is amenable to a wide range of possibilities; for example, God may be treated as a baby, a lover, a master, or a parent. The third feature is that after striking up this relationship with a humanized God, there is regular and intimate interaction unconfined by any prescribed rules or regulations. The bhakta interacts with God at any time, in any place, and in any manner he or she pleases. God can be cuddled and pinched, kissed and caressed, cried to and confided in, and even scolded and—all without any fear of being ditched by God. This "anything goes" approach characterizing informal dvaita bhakti is distinct from our typical relationships with people, where the fear of rejection so often lurks in the background. It is also in stark contrast to the more formal scripturally based methods of worship, such as puja, in which specific rules must be adhered to, such as the types of flowers that can be offered to particular deities.

So there are two distinct types of dvaita bhakti. One is formal dvaita bhakti as prescribed in the scriptures in the form of specific pujas, as well as karma yoga and upasana yoga. The other is informal dvaita bhakti as described in the bhakti literature in which one is free to interact with the Lord in any manner whatsoever. Neither of these dvaita bhaktis is intended for moksha; rather, both are meant for refining and purifying the mind. Formal dvaita bhakti is compulsory for all spiritual seekers because it is specially designed for attaining the fourfold qualification required for Vedantic study.⁴ By contrast, informal dvaita bhakti is an optional add-on; optional because this practice of humanizing God requires a particular type of mindset. Informal dvaita bhakti is distinct from the five great acts of worship, known as the *pancha maha-yajnas*,⁵ which are compulsory. Informal dvaita bhakti also has the benefit of refining emotionally turbulent minds, and this is especially true for people who have difficult family or interpersonal relationships. When our close relationships are unhealthy, we need healthy relationships to neutralize them. A human being without any healthy relationships is at risk of becoming emotionally disturbed. Such a person desperately looks for companionship because the human mind requires good

⁴ These four qualifications, known as *sadhana chatushtaya sampatti*, all begin with the letter 'd': (1) Discrimination, (2) Dispassion, (3) Discipline—there are six inner disciplines: mind control, sense control, withdrawal, i.e., not being too extraverted, forbearance, faith in the Vedic scripture, and freedom from distraction. One who has all four of these is called a qualified student, or *adhikari*.

⁵ The five great acts of worship, which are to be performed daily as a way of offsetting harm, expressing gratitude, and purifying the mind are: (1) Deva Yajna, homage to God and the elements, which includes meditation; (2) Pitru Yajna, homage to our parents and ancestors (e.g., taking good care of one's parents); (3) Manushya Yajna, homage to humanity (e.g., charity, social service, physical help, or teaching—anything that one has to give); (4) Bhuta Yajna, homage to beings in the plant and animal kingdom (e.g., offering food and water), as well as preservation of the environment; (5) Bramha Yagna—worship of Vedic knowledge by studying the scriptures oneself and offering this knowledge to others.

relationships for psychological health. Indeed, psychologists talk a lot about the value of supportive relationships. Thus, for the spiritual seeker whose mind is unsettled because of turbulent relationships, informal dvaita bhakti will be particularly useful. When an emotionally troubled person puts his or her head in the lap of a loving person—whether actual or imagined—the pain is easier to bear. People often say that in the joint families of the past, children were more emotionally healthy because there was always an empty lap available to cry on. These days, joint families have been supplanted by nuclear families in which both the father and mother work and are often stressed and yelling. As a result, there are no empty laps for the child to rest his head on, and if there is a lap, there is likely a lap dog on it. Emotional disturbance is pacified by a consoling relationship. When the spiritual seeker doesn't have a peaceful mind, *aham brahma asmi* simply won't work.

Recapping the Vedantic view: start by following formal dvaita bhakti in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga, with or without informal dvaita bhakti, then come to Self-inquiry, then come to non-dual self-knowledge, otherwise known as advaita bhakti, which is moksha. This Vedantic roadmap must be exceedingly clear when we read the bhakti literature, otherwise we risk getting trapped in bhakti philosophy and getting permanently stalled. There are many bhakti texts out there and they are all useful. But in studying them, our interpretation must remain consistent with the Vedantic view. So although many people have written commentaries on the Narada Bhakti Sutras, most of these commentaries conform to bhakti philosophy rather than the Vedanta view.

The Narada Bhakti Sutras

The author of this text is Narada Maharshi, a well known figure in all the Puranas; without Narada there are really no Puranas. Narada is considered a great sage; indeed, in the Bhagavad Gita (Verse 10.26), Krishna says: *...among the divine sages, I am Narada*. So Bhagavan himself has validated Narada, making this text worth studying. Given these facts, is Narada more likely to follow bhakti darshanam or Vedanta darshanam? To answer this, we turn to the 7th Chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad, in which we come to learn that Narada studied Vedanta under a great Vedantic acharya named Sanatkumara. In fact, the chapter opens with Narada approaching Sanatkumara and making this beautiful statement:

I have indeed heard from teachers like you that a knower of self goes beyond this ocean of sorrow, I have no other resort except you, great master. Take me across this ocean of sorrow.

Narada has reasoned that dvaita bhakti alone can't lead to moksha, it can only lead to mental purification and we must come to non-duality if we want to cross the ocean of samsaric grief. As that famous saying in Tattva Bodha (Verse 38.3) puts it: *The knower of the self goes beyond all sorrows*. And is this self dualistic or non-dual? This question is answered in the Chandogya Upanishad, which tells us that non-dual self-knowledge is required for moksha. This is a statement coming from Narada himself, who studied Vedanta under Sanatkumara. Therefore, Narada can be considered an advaita acharya, and we should study his sutras in keeping with the Vedantic view rather than the bhakti view; that is to say, we need to carefully extract their implied meaning.

As the title suggests, the Narada Bhakti Sutras is in the form of sutras, which are capsule, axiomatic, or maxim-like statements. Unlike the Brahma Sutras, a canonical Vedantic text, or *jnana-grantha*, written in a rigid logical format to be unfolded by a teacher, the Narada Bhakti Sutras is a *sutra grantha*; it is a comprehensive presentation and elucidation of the topic of bhakti in 84 Sutras. In this particular version, published by the Ramakrishna Math, these 84 sutras are divided into five chapters. Although there are many commentaries available for this text, most of them unfortunately follow bhakti philosophy. This route is appealing to the vast majority of people because it allows us to evade responsibility. And taking responsibility is a burden after all. In this view, bhakti is presented as total surrender: simply give yourself over to God and keep chanting his name and when the time is right, He will swoop down and whisk you away to moksha. This may all be very nice to hear, but it is not in keeping with the teachings of Vedanta. As Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita, Verse 6.5: *One should uplift oneself by oneself. One should not lower oneself*. We mustn't wash our hands of responsibility and put everything on God. To understand the deep and powerful message of this text, then, we must interpret it in a manner that is consistent with the Vedantic view.

Every serious seeker of moksha needs to have a clear understanding of the role of bhakti in spirituality as revealed by the Vedantic view. This view can be summarized in the following five topics: (1) informal dualistic devotion, or dvaita bhakti, (2) formal dvaita bhakti, (3) Self-inquiry, (4) non-dual knowledge or devotion (advaita jnanam is synonymous with advaita bhakti), (5) liberation or moksha. The first topic, informal dvaita bhakti, involves personifying God and relating to this humanized God in any way that suits an individual's temperament and emotional needs (e.g., parent/child, lover/beloved, master/servant, etc.), without any scriptural precepts or restrictions. This informal dvaita bhakti can be useful, as it has many psychological benefits, and any spiritual seeker inclined toward practicing it is encouraged to do so, but it is not considered a compulsory sadhana. The second topic is formal dvaita bhakti in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga, which are elaborated upon in several Vedantic texts, particularly the Bhagavad Gita. Formal dvaita bhakti is specially and uniquely designed for mental purification and the development of the fourfold qualification necessary for Vedantic study (i.e., discrimination, dispassion, discipline, desire for liberation). As such, it is considered a compulsory sadhana for all spiritual seekers. This should be carefully noted. The third topic is Vedanta vichara, or self-inquiry under the guidance of a proper teacher. This is required for any seeker who has acquired the fourfold qualification to a reasonable extent. As Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita (Verse 4.34):

May you gain the knowledge by prostration, by service, and by proper inquiry. The wise sages will impart that knowledge to you.

Per our scriptures, a 'proper' teacher encompasses two specific qualifications. First, the teacher has learnt the wisdom of the Vedas from a guru, who in turn, belongs to the Vedantic lineage, known as the *guru-shishya parampara*. A person who meet this qualification is said to be a *srotriya*. Second, the teacher has fully assimilated non-dual self-knowledge and abides in the self as the self. A teacher who meets this qualification is said to be a *brahmanishta*. Such a teacher will invariably introduce self-inquiry to the student at the appropriate time. Self-inquiry alone converts dvaita bhakti into advaita bhakti, which is the fourth topic. Advaita bhakti (non-dual devotion), which is supreme devotion, is synonymous with advaita jnanam, or non-dual knowledge. Thus, dvaita bhakti is not complete without culminating in advaita bhakti, and advaita bhakti is not possible without going through dvaita bhakti (i.e., karma yoga and upasana yoga). It is not a matter of choosing one or the other; the two are sequential and mutually interdependent, with self-inquiry being the essential catalyst by which dvaita bhakti is converted into advaita bhakti. The fifth and final topic is moksha, which is the ultimate destination on the journey of dvaita bhakti, self-inquiry, and advaita bhakti. If we read any bhakti literature without a clear awareness of this fact, we risk getting ensnared by misconception and stunting or aborting our spiritual growth. The Narada Bhakti Sutras is a beautiful text because it deals with four of the five aforementioned topics—informal dvaita bhakti, formal dvaita bhakti, advaita bhakti, and moksha—clearly and explicitly. Self-inquiry is not altogether absent from the text; rather, it is hinted at. This implicit integration of Vedanta into the Narada Bhakti Sutra will be brought out in our reading and interpretation of the text. Thus, with this context for understanding the Narada Bhakti Sutra firmly in place, we enter the text proper.

Chapter 1: The Nature of the Highest Bhakti, Sutras 1-24

The Narada Bhakti Sutras begin with topic of advaita bhakti. As you will recall from the Chanodogya Upanishad, Narada is Sanatkumara's disciple, so he is considered a proper Vedantic teacher; indeed, the very word *Narada* means *knowledge-giver*. Narada begins the first two chapters of the text with advaita bhakti, and thereafter introduces dvaita bhakti as the stepping-stone to it, much in the way Krishna begins the Bhagavad Gita with clean self-inquiry, or jnana yoga, and later introduces bhakti karma as a means.

Sutra 1. Now, therefore, we shall expound upon devotion.

In the original Sanskrit version, this sutra begins with the word *atha*, which is supposed to be an auspicious word. In the Vedantic tradition, any scriptural teaching begins with a mantra for peace or an auspicious verse. As this is not a canonical Vedantic text, there is no provision for a peace mantra.

Nonetheless, all Sutrakaras⁶ invoke auspiciousness by using the word *atha* and Narada follows this tradition. The word *atha* has a twofold purpose: it is an auspicious speech sound and it also has a meaning: ‘now begins.’ In other words, we are about to embark on a detailed discussion of bhakti, both dvaita bhakti and advaita bhakti. *Atha* also means ‘therefore’ or ‘for this reason,’ and here, the reason is only implied, so we need to supply it explicitly. The reason is that dvaita bhakti and advaita bhakti will lead to moksha: dvaita bhakti as an indirect means and advaita bhakti as the direct means. We know this from the Bhagavad Gita itself, wherein Krishna says (Verse 7.16):

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me—the distressed seeker, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise.

In this verse, Krishna is enumerating four types of bhakta, known as *arta bhakta*, *artharathi bhakta*, *jijnasus bhakta*, and *jnani bhakta*, respectively. The first three of these four are dvaita bhaktas with various motives. The *arta bhakta*, or distressed seeker, is motivated to have his or her problems solved. The *artharathi bhakta*, or materialistic seeker, is motivated to attain his or her latest aspirations, such as money, entrance into a prestigious university, having a child, or landing a sought-after job. A *jijnasus bhakta*, or seeker of knowledge, is also a dualistic devotee, but he or she is intelligently asking the Lord for qualification, to find a teacher who will give proper guidance in self-inquiry, and ultimately, for self-knowledge. In contrast to these three, the *jnani bhakta*, or wise person, is an advaita bhakta.

Nowadays many spiritual teachers and teachings mislead people by saying that the path of knowledge is one of many possible paths for attaining liberation, and further, that it is a dry intellectual path or an exceedingly challenging path, and therefore one to be avoided. They will argue that the path of devotion also leads to liberation, and that it is juicier and easier to pursue. They will say: “Let all these intellectual types waste their time sitting in Vedanta classes. We will sing our devotional songs and attain moksha effortlessly.” This view of bhakti is all-too-common in popular spirituality, but it has never been taught by Krishna, who says (Gita, Verse 7.17):

Among the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise, it is the wise person, the jnani, who is continually and exclusively engaged in devotional service that is superior, for I am extremely dear to that cultivator of wisdom and he is likewise dear to me.

Many of these Gita-based teachings have been suppressed, and the common view is that the path of dualistic devotion is the easiest and most fitting in today’s world. There is nothing wrong with starting with *arta bhakti* and *artharathi bhakti*, but one must never lose sight of the fact that if moksha is the goal, one must come to *jijnasus bhakti*, or self-inquiry, and ultimately to self-knowledge, or *advaita bhakti*. This is Narada’s rationale for presenting both dvaita bhakti and advaita bhakti.

Sutra 2. That devotion [advaita bhakti] is of the nature of supreme love toward this one [God].

Narada gives the definition of *advaita bhakti*, and he says its nature is that of supreme love toward God. This naturally raises the question: “To which God is Narada referring?” Because God is described in one way in the Karma Kanda, the earlier portion of the Vedas focusing on religious action, and in an altogether different way in the Jnana Kanda, the latter portion of the Vedas focusing on self-knowledge. In the Karma Kanda God is presented as an extraordinary divine being who is the object of worship and meditation. Is this God who is an object of worship and meditation the self or “not-self”? This worshipped and meditated-upon God discussed in the Karma Kanda is an object that is different from me, or *anatma-Isvara*. In the Jnana Kanda, by contrast, God is talked about as the self—the very observer. To cite some examples:

This self cannot be seen, but it sees. Cannot be heard, but hears. Cannot be thought of, but thinks. Cannot be understood, but understands. There is no seer other than that. There is no hearer other than that. There is no thinker other than that.

⁶ A Sutrakara is a Rishi who systematizes the doctrines of a school of philosophy and puts them into short aphorisms or sutras.

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 3.7.23

He is the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech, the Life of life, and the Eye of the eye. The intelligent men after giving up identification with the senses and renouncing this world, become immortal.

—Kena Upanishad, 1.1-2

Krishna himself says this when he talks about the various forms of the Lord in the creation. For example, in the first description (Chapter 10, Verse 20) he says:

I am the self residing in the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings.

And toward the end, (Chapter 18, Verse 61) he says:

The Lord resides in the heart of all beings, revolving all the beings through maya, as though they are mounted on a machine.

Thus, the scriptures talk about God as both “not-self” and as self, and bhakti has just been defined for us as supreme love toward God. The question that is bound to arise is: “Supreme love toward which version of God?” We must answer this question with the Upanishads as our backdrop because without it, we will get caught in the trap of bhakti philosophy. The Upanishads, particularly the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, tell us that only one thing is the object of supreme love. For every human being—instinctively, universally, and unconditionally—there is only one thing that is of the highest love: oneself alone is dearest. As it says in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.8):

This self is dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than everything else, and is innermost. A person holding the self as dear is certainly competent to say to one calling anything else dearer than the self: “What you hold dear will die,” as this will indeed come true. One should meditate upon the self alone as dear for the dear ones are not mortal.

Only the self can be dearest. We can love all others; they can be dear or at maximum, dearer. They may also be considered undear. One might be inclined to ask: “But what about my spouse or children?” Yajnavalkya addresses this doubt very clearly in the following verse from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.5):

It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear, that the husband is loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the wife, my dear, that the wife is loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the sons, my dear, that the sons are loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of wealth, my dear, that wealth is loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the Brahmins [priestly class], my dear, that the brahmins is loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the Kshatriya [governing class], my dear, that kshatriya is loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the worlds, my dear, that the worlds are loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the gods, my dear, that thee gods are loved, but for the sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the beings, my dear, that they are loved, but for the

sake of the self. It is not for the sake of the All, my dear, that All is loved, but for the sake of the self. My dear Maitreyi, it is the self that should be realized; should be heard, reflected on, and meditated upon. By realizing the self through hearing, reflection, and meditation, all this is known.

Everything other than the self is only loved conditionally, the condition being my comfort. Once that object becomes a source of discomfort, I may continue to care for the person out of duty or conscience, but it is not possible to love that person or object because it is an impediment to my comfort. Thus, the highest love is reserved for oneself. The Upanishad tells us that there is no exception to this at all. Therefore, the God to which Narada is referring in the 2nd Sutra is none other than the self, and supreme love of this self is called advaita bhakti. So divine love, which is synonymous with self-love, is the highest love. Instinctively and naturally, supreme love is possible only in one place alone. All beings instinctively and naturally love the self alone, and therefore the self alone is the object of highest love. Nothing other than the self can ever become the dearest thing.

According to the Vedas, love is nothing but the natural liking of the mind directed toward the source of joy. Whatever object is a source of joy for me, whatever gives me happiness, my mind naturally likes. I hear a talk and that talks give me joy, so naturally I like that talk. It may be a material object, an event, a person, a place, or a pet, anything at all. The mind naturally gravitates toward liking whatever particular object is a source of happiness. We call this natural liking that the mind develops toward of a source of happiness 'love.' I love chocolate because it gives me happiness. In the case of material objects, we generally use the word 'like,' whereas in the case of living beings, we use the word 'love.' Liking is love and love is liking, irrespective of the term you use. Both are nothing more than the mind's natural tendency toward a source of happiness. People may initially love each other and decide to get married and discover each other more deeply. But after some time they may find themselves saying: "At one time I loved you, but now I'd love you to go away." So love turns into its opposite. Why does this happen? Until now I took this person to be a source of happiness because of our compatibility. But after living together, incompatibilities were discovered. When this incompatibility begins to eclipse the compatibility, the so-called source of happiness becomes a source of unhappiness and naturally the mind begins to distance itself, even as the other person has remained the same. Therefore, the definition of love is: mental liking toward an object that is a source of joy. The Vedas say that if you go by this definition, you can only truly and unconditionally love the self because it is the only causeless and abiding source of happiness. As it says in the Chandogya Upanishad (7.23.1): *The infinite alone is bliss, which is absent in finite objects.* Anything finite cannot give abiding joy, and when finite objects appear to be a source of joy, it is only your own happiness being reflected in that object. The self is thus the only infinite source of bliss and thus we can have supreme love toward the self alone. Therefore, Narada's thesis is that bhakti is divine love in the form of self-love, which is supreme love directed toward that God who is discovered to be non-different from myself, a thesis substantiated by the Vedas.

If we define divine love as self-love, are we degrading it? This question may arise for some people who mistakenly equate self-love with selfish love. Whether this question comes to you or not, it has been thoroughly analyzed in the scriptures. According to this analysis, self-love contaminated by ignorance is selfish love, and therefore not divine love. But when the very same self-love is purified of its contamination by ignorance, it is not selfish love at all; it is universal love. So Divine love is equal to uncontaminated, or purified, self-love, and purified self-love is universal love. When self-love is contaminated with ignorance, I have a misconception about myself; I take myself to be the body-mind complex. Contaminated self-love is love directed toward a mistaken "self;" namely, the body-mind complex. That selfish love cannot be divine love. When ignorance is removed, however, the self is no longer taken to be the body-mind complex; but rightly understood to be pure awareness, that knower whose nature is existence-consciousness-limitlessness. So self-love becomes love for the real self rather than ego-love. It is atma love, which is also universal love because without ignorance I understand that I am not the body-mind, but atma, and I recognize that the atma in this body-mind complex is the same atma everywhere. When I take the self to be the body-mind, it is a localized self. But when I understand that I am the atma—not only in this body but in everybody, even that of a

mosquito—self-love becomes the love of all because the atma in everyone is me. As we are told in the Kaivalya Upanishad (Verse 10):

Experiencing one's own self in all beings and all beings in the self, one attains the supreme brahman and not by any other means.

Likewise, in Chapter 6 of the Gita (Verses 29-30), Krishna says:

One whose mind is disciplined through meditation perceives the atma in all beings and all beings in the atma. He has the same vision everywhere. I am not lost to him who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me. He also is not lost to me.

Therefore, I see the atma not only in this body but everywhere, and atma love becomes all-love, whole love, unconditional love. Thus, bhakti is divine love, which is non-different from self-love, which is also non-different from universal love. Narada is telling us that it is this love that we have to discover. This love is called advaita bhakti because God, atma, and every living being are one. Advaita bhakti alone is the real and highest bhakti.

One might entertain some skepticism as to whether Narada really had all these ideas in mind. Such a person may wonder whether we are just putting these interpretations into Narada's mouth because we are Vedantis. A response to this doubt can be found in the text itself. In the Sanskrit version of Sutra 2, Narada does not define love of that God as divine love; he doesn't use the pronoun 'that' in referring to God; rather, he uses the Sanskrit pronoun *asmin*, which means this God. The very fact that Narada uses this pronoun indicates that he is not talking about a God that is remote or 'other,' but rather, the God that is non-different from self.

Sutra 3. And its essence is the nectar of immortality.

In this verse, Narada is saying that only divine love—or self-love or universal love—is unconditional and immortal. Any form of love other than divine love, which is love of the same self in every living being, will be conditional and impermanent, as we so frequently experience. As Shankaracharya has written in the devotional hymn Bhaja Govindam (Verse 5):

So long as a man is fit and able to support his family, see the affection all those around him show. But no one at home even cares to have a word with him when his body totters due to old age. Seek Govinda (the self).

You will be loved by everyone, including your family members, only as long as you're pleasing or useful, or at least until they're sure that you plan to write them into your will. But if you become a liability in any way, as in old age, they will send you to the nearby citizen's home, saying: "Please take care of everything and send us the bill." So in this hymn Shankaracharya advises us not to expect too much from the world. Don't expect too much from people and wind up getting shattered. Instead, be prepared. If you want real love, seek the self. Any other love will be conditional: the condition is that you must continue being a source of joy or utility. This is why Narada also says in Sutra 3 that divine love alone is immortal or everlasting. It is unconditional and therefore permanent. Every other form of love is conditional and when the condition passes, so too does the love, making it impermanent. Think about how we treat our gadgets. If your computer is freezing all the time, you won't say: "I love you. You have served me so much. I want to remain grateful and faithful to you;" you'll get rid of it and get a new one. In the past, we only disposed of our material possessions, but now we dispose of people this way, too. When we no longer feel the same joy in our marriages, we get divorced. Such is the nature of the human mind. Therefore, self-love alone is eternal love; all other forms of love are impermanent.

Having established that supreme bhakti, or love, refers to advaita bhakti (non-dual love aka firm self-knowledge), Narada discusses some of its benefits. In the introduction, we talked about the role of bhakti according to the Vedantic view. This is a crucial topic that we should return to regularly because

it serves as the foundation for our analysis of this entire text. We had summarized that role in five fundamentals. First, informal dvaita bhakti is very useful but not compulsory. Second, formal dvaita bhakti in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga is compulsory for all seekers of moksha. Third, after formal dvaita bhakti, one must come to Vedanta, or self-inquiry. Fourth, only through self-inquiry can one arrive at advaita bhakti (non-dual wisdom, self-knowledge, or self-love). In Vedanta, the terms self-love and self-knowledge are synonymous. Fifth, this non-dual wisdom is the only path to liberation.

All of this is elaborately discussed throughout the Bhagavad Gita. For example, in the 2nd Chapter, Arjuna becomes curious and asks Krishna to describe the characteristics of a jnani (i.e., one who is firmly established in self-knowledge). Krishna answers his question, not by describing the jnani's outward behaviors, but rather, by describing his understanding. He says the wise person is always satisfied in himself, independent of the world, and free from attachment, hatred, desire, anger, fear, elation, depression, etc. In the 12th Chapter of the Gita, Krishna enumerates the virtues that jnani or advaita bhakta, saying he enjoys: friendliness, compassion, equanimity, forbearance, contentment, self-control, firm self-knowledge, devotion, gentleness, purity, resourcefulness, and impartiality. He also talks about the negative traits from which the jnani, the supreme bhakta, is free: hatred, the 'I'-sense (egoism), the 'my'-sense (ownership), anxiety, elation, envy, fear, dependence, selfish action, grief, desire, and the pairs of opposites (e.g., pleasure/pain, praise/censure, etc). And in the 14th Chapter, Krishna explains how a wise person is beyond the three gunas and thus not attached to matter. One who is beyond the gunas does not have an 'I'-sense in the body or a 'my'-sense in the world, and thus observes variations in the gunas objectively, without becoming reactive. Such a person is unaffected by the pairs of opposites, as they are seen as a play of matter-nature. Being full, such a person seeks nothing and is thus free from selfish activities. These characteristics, or benefits, of liberation discussed in the Gita form the basis for the following sutras.

Sutra 4. One who obtains it [the highest bhakti, advaita bhakti] becomes perfect, immortal, and fully satisfied.

Suppose a spiritual seeker wants to discover this non-dual love. How might he or she go about doing so? Dvaita bhakti is incomplete without advaita bhakti, and advaita bhakti is impossible without dvaita bhakti; thus, one must start with dvaita bhakti, gradually converting it into advaita bhakti. Our scriptures make it abundantly clear that the conversion of dvaita bhakti into advaita bhakti doesn't happen automatically, and that nobody else can do it for us. Self-inquiry in the form of sravana, manana, nididhyasana under a proper guru's guidance is the only route connecting dvaita bhakti to advaita bhakti. For example, in the Bhagavad Gita (4.34), Krishna says:

*May you gain knowledge by prostration, by service, and by proper inquiry.
The wise sages will impart that knowledge to you.*

And the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12) says:

*To understand Reality, one must humbly approach a proper teacher, who
is learned in the Vedas and having made that knowledge his own revels
in it.*

There is no mention of any of this in the bhakti literature. A person who successfully goes through these stages will no longer be a seeker. A seeker is in a process of struggle: the seeking struggle. The very process of seeking has a built-in anxiety because the mind is constantly nagged by the thought: When will I reach my destination? This struggle ends with advaita bhakti; the seeker is no longer an aspirant (sadhaka), but has become a perfected one (siddha). The struggle of seeking and running about is over: Destination reached, mission accomplished, thumbs up. This person is fulfilled. There is a type of unleavened deep-fried Indian bread called puri. When the puri batter is dropped in hot oil, it begins to expand. As it is still expanding, it moves around in the oil because it is not yet full. But once it has become full, it comes to rest. Similarly, we run about in that cauldron of samsara until we become full.

As Narada says in the 3rd Sutra, the advaita bhakta becomes immortal; there is no sense of insecurity caused by the fear of immortality. And as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says:

Lead me from the unreal (apparent) to the real, from the darkness (of ignorance) to (the) light (of knowledge), from death (the sense of limitation) to immortality (limitlessness, liberation).

Until I discover this, I am troubled by a background hum of insecurity. For the advaita bhakta, that sense of insecurity is gone; he or she becomes immortal. A bhakta cannot make the body immortal because the body is by its very essence mortal. Ayurvedic practitioners used to talk about something called *kayakalpa*, various methods by which one can make the body immortal. The irony is that all the proponents of *kayakalpa* have died, so it's abundantly clear that the body cannot be immortalized. The mind cannot be immortalized either. So how does a bhakta become immortal? Immortalization is possible by one method alone: the firm knowledge that I am not the mortal body and I am not the mortal mind; I am the immortal self. Therefore, self-knowledge alone leads to advaita bhakti and immortality. The advaita bhakta is also fully satisfied. Nothing we get in the world can ever bring lasting satisfaction. No human being has ever or can ever become fully satisfied by getting anything in the world. Only advaita bhakti gives absolute satisfaction. As Krishna says in the Gita (2.55):

Satisfied in oneself by oneself, when one gives up all the desires obtaining in the mind, then this person is said to be of firm knowledge.

And in Gita 3.17:

Suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, who is happy with the self alone and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for this person.

Sutra 5. One who attains it [advaita bhakti] becomes completely desireless, grieving not, hating not, not rejoicing in fleeting happiness, and without passion for personal concerns.

For an advaita bhakta, all the desires born out of a sense of incompleteness are eliminated. Every desire is born out of a sense of incompleteness, or lack of fullness. I feel my life is incomplete without that object or person. Thus all of our desires stem from the struggle to complete ourselves. According to Vedanta, when a person wants to get married, it is born out of the feeling that the 'bachelor-I' is incomplete and therefore needs to become a 'husband-I.' Marriage is conversion of the 'bachelor-I' into the 'husband-I' in the hope that the incomplete one will become complete. Then after a few months this 'husband-I' begins to feel incomplete once again, and he thinks: I should become the 'father-I.' He repeats this three times and all three sons are educated, have jobs, and get settled. Soon the 'father-I' begins to think: I want to become a 'father-in-law-I.' And after being a father-in-law for a few years... Suffice to say it is an endless journey. Even on his deathbed, this person does not yet feel full. Desire is born out of a sense of incompleteness, and this only goes away through advaita bhakti, which is synonymous with self-knowledge; the knowledge that my very nature is fullness. As the Bhagavad Gītā (2.70) says:

All sense-objects enter the wise person just as waters enter the full, calm ocean. He attains peace, he is not the seeker of sense-objects.

The advaita bhakta is like an ocean and all others are like miserable water tanks. In the summer, they dry up and in the rainy season they get refilled. They dry up and fill up, over and over again. And what is the beauty of the ocean that is the advaita bhakta? Even though the ocean doesn't ask for anything, all the rivers pour their waters into it. So it just keeps getting fuller and fuller. When you ask, you don't get. But when you discover the fullness that is your nature, even though you don't want or need anything at all, it comes from all directions. Therefore, Narada says that one who attains self-knowledge

doesn't desire for anything. If any desires are there at all, they are selfless desires for the wellbeing of the world. As Krishna says (Gita, 3.22):

I have nothing to accomplish, but I am still busy. Not for my fullness, but to serve the world.

Likewise, the Katha Upanishad (6.14) says:

When all the desires situated in the heart are cleared away the mortal becomes immortal and enjoys brahman.

This disappearance of desire that characterizes the advaita bhakta is what is being described by Narada in Sutra 5. The advaita bhakta does not grieve or hate either. This is why a self-realized person has no desire to escape the world. Desire to escape the world betrays a dislike toward the world. One who has attained firm self-knowledge does not hate anything. As it says in the Gita (12.13): *A jnani is a non-hater of all beings*. Neither does such a person get carried away by worldly pleasures, which will continue to come as punya prarabdha karma is being exhausted. Remember that from the perspective of ego, a jnani still has prarabdha, so punya will bring pleasant situations and papa will bring unpleasant situations. Scripture tells us that the jnani still enjoys worldly pleasures, but it is a controlled enjoyment; he or she does not get carried away or allow those pleasures to turn into attachment to the source of pleasure or addiction to the enjoyment of pleasure. These are the two hooks of any sense pleasure and are the basis for Krishna's warning (Gita, 5.22):

Those pleasures born of sense contact are only sources of sorrow, because they have a beginning and an end. The wise person does not revel in them.

A wise person does not reject sense pleasure; we need not reject pleasure. But neither does a wise person get carried away by it. The same pleasure may repeat or not; he or she is happy with its arrival and just as happily accepts its departure. This is controlled sensory enjoyment; it is like the difference between rash driving and fast driving. Fast driving involves controlled speed. If a child were to run across the road, this driver would be able to brake in time. In rash driving, there is no control. In both cases, speed is there, but in one the speed is controlled and in the other it is out of control. The wise person's enjoyment of sense pleasures is like fast driving, whereas the ignorant person's enjoyment of sense pleasures is like rash driving; there is risk involved. The jnani doesn't revel in sense pleasures and is no longer excited by actions driven by selfish desire. Of course, he or she does not drop action altogether, but there is no tinge of selfishness to his or her actions. As Krishna says (Gita, 4.23):

All action of one whose mind is established in knowledge, who is free from attachment, who is independent, and who acts for the sake of worship dissolves.

All these are characteristics of liberation, which is the result of advaita bhakti.

Sutra 6. One who attains it [advaita bhakti] becomes wonderstruck and intoxicated, still and drunk in the self.

Having discovered this non-difference, or identity, between jiva and Isvara, the liberated person is thrilled about the fulfillment of life's mission. The very purpose of a human life is to attain liberation. If we discover this, life becomes meaningful and otherwise it is a waste; we have missed a great opportunity in this life and we don't know when the next one will come. Thus, the more an advaita bhakta reflects upon this success, the more intoxicated he or she becomes because moksha is the rarest of attainments. As Shankaracharya says in Verse 3 of Vivekachudamani:

These three blessings are rare, difficult to achieve, and attained only by the grace of God: A human birth, the desire for liberation, and association with a great sage.

There are innumerable species in the universe, so being born a human being is a very rare thing. And even after this human birth, there are countless goals one can be tempted to pursue (so many different versions of accomplishment!) that choosing moksha as the primary goal of one's life is exceptionally rare. And even after coming to the realm of moksha, there are dozens of versions of spirituality, each defining moksha in its own way, so coming to the right definition of moksha is rare indeed. And even after coming to that, dozens of systems prescribe dozens of methods for attaining moksha: meditations are prescribed, kundalini is prescribed (some people say ascending, others say descending). So many different versions of liberation and so many paths to choose from! So when a jnani reflects upon having come to Vedanta and stuck with it despite the innumerable possibilities of straying, he or she is thrilled to have arrived. As Vidyaranya says in the 7th Chapter of the Panchadasi:

O how grand and true are the scriptures, the scriptures. O how grand and great is my teacher, my teacher! O how grand is this merit, this merit! O how grand is this bliss, this bliss!

God is great, for he has given me a guru; the guru is great, for he has given me knowledge; knowledge is great, for it has given me bliss; and bliss is great because it lives within me. I am wonderstruck by the fundamental teachings of Vedanta, which are nothing short of a wonder. We experience a solid world capable of delivering so many problems and yet Vedanta tells us that this tangible world is mithya or unreal. Who is going to believe this? In fact, many students, even after 25 years of studying Vedanta, are unable to assimilate the knowledge of the unreality of the world. It is a wonder that an unreal world is presenting as so real. Then Vedanta tells us the self, which was never seen in the past, can never be seen in the present, and will never be seen in the future, is the only reality. So this self that nobody has seen at any time is the only reality and the world that we are confronting all the time is unreal. What a wonder! And Vedanta challenges anyone to dismiss this teaching. In fact, the 2nd Chapter of the Brahma Sutras is dedicated to defending this teaching. Vedanta says: *brahma satyam, jagan mithya*—the self is real, the universe is apparent. Finally comes the teachings that is perhaps most difficult to swallow: I am limitless. No seeker will believe this because one encounters so many physical problems, so many emotional problems, so many financial problems; some days it's tough just to smile. Yet Vedanta boldly says: Your nature is limitless, and further, that you are the only source of joy. What a wonder! As the Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 2, Verse 29) says:

One sees the self as a wonder. In the same way, another speaks about it as a wonder. Another hears of it as a wonder. Still another never understands it in spite of hearing.

And the Katha Upanishad (1.2.7):

Even to hear of it is not available to many; many, having heard of it, cannot comprehend. It is rare to find a good teacher for it and equally rare to find a good student. Wonderful indeed is he who comprehends it when taught by an able preceptor.

And in the Taittiriya Upanishad, (Part 3, Bhriguvali, Verse 10), Sage Bhrigu sings:

Bliss! Bliss! Bliss! I am food. I am food. I am food. I am the eater of food. I am the eater of food. I am the eater of food. I am the one who joins these two together. I am the first born of the true, the eternal and immortal. I am the center of immortality, prior to the gods. Whoever gives me away, surely preserves this. I am the food that eats him who eats food. I am luminous like the sun. He who knows this attains the aforementioned results.

What a great wonder! I am the non-dual reality, and I myself am also appearing as the experiencing jiva, the experienced universe, and the experience connecting it all together. With one single power of maya, I am appearing in the selfsame roles of jiva, jagat, and Isvara! So the advaita bhakta is wonderstruck. All the wonders of the world put together pale in their insignificance next to this knowledge.

Narada then makes a fantastic statement: he says this advaita bhakta revels in himself. When Narada started, he defined bhakti as supreme love directed toward God, thus the bhakta must be reveling in God alone. And now he tells us that the bhakta revels in himself. How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? In one way only: this bhakta has discovered this God to be non-different from himself, the atma. As Krishna says (Gita, 10.20): *I am the self residing in the heart of all beings*. This underscores the fact that when we read the bhakti literature, we have to closely follow sruti, yukti, and anubhava; otherwise we risk getting sidetracked and get trapped in the opposing bhakti view. We should never get caught in that, but rather, follow the teachings of the Upanishads.

Sutra 7. It [advaita bhakti] is not desire-generating, as it is by its very nature a form of renunciation.

Advaita bhakti is distinct from the dvaita bhakti practiced by most people, which is classified in the Bhagavad Gita into three types: arta, artharathi, and jijnasu. All three of these devotees go to Isvara, but their motive is to cash in on their devotion. This is called business bhakti and the attitude is: For every namaskara, I want to get something for me, my family, my business, or my freedom. Isvara is tired of hearing these bhaktas' continuous pleas for one thing or another. The arta bhakta drafts a contract with Isvara in which he says: Save me from this and I will do that for you. This bhakta wants solutions to his problems and comes to the Lord with an endless list. Isvara is bored by this list, but he is helpless. The artharathi bhakta also comes to Isvara with an application form, seeking prosperity of one type or another. Even the jijnasu bhakta, who is considered superior to the previous two because of his qualification, and whose bhakti is often called desireless (*nishkama*) has a desire or a demand. In reality, *nishkama* is a misnomer because he is saying: "Give me qualification, give me a guru, give me knowledge, give me Vedanta note-taking ability and clear audio recordings. I want knowledge and, ultimately, I want moksha." So even the jijnasu bhakta whose desires are noble is a demanding bhakta. Isvara is left waiting for someone who will simply say: "Thank you. I have come here just to express my gratitude for what you have given, rather than complaining and asking for something more." Only the jnani bhakta goes to the Lord without any application forms. The advaita bhakti is a full and desireless bhakti. Having discovered his own fullness, he has become non-demanding: he is satisfied in himself by himself. As Sutra 7 says, the very nature of advaita bhakti is that of renunciation.

Sutra 8. This renunciation consecrates the performance of worldly and religious social duties.

The natural next question is: renunciation of what? And the answer is: renunciation of all worldly goals, of all desire for worldly goals, and of all those activities leading to worldly goals. In other words, renunciation of all actions and their results, where karma refers to optional actions intended to secure particular ends. As Krishna says (Gita, 18.2):

*Sages regard the renunciation of desire-born actions as sannyasa.
Learned people declare that the renunciation of the results of all actions is
internal sannyasa.*

Renunciation is internal because all worldly accomplishments are finite. Through firm knowledge, the advaita bhakta has accomplished the infinite. Having become infinite, why would a person seek anything less? There is a funny parable about a milkman who prayed: "Oh Lord, please give me an inexhaustible vessel of milk from which I can continuously draw, so I can sell the milk and become very rich." And the Lord replied: "Given." Naturally, the milkman was overjoyed and sent the Lord off. But the Lord had not gotten even 10 steps away, when the milkman called the Lord back, saying: "Oh Lord, I forgot something. In selling the milk, I am in the habit of diluting it with water. So I'll need a perennial

source of water as well.” So the Lord is offering the milkman an infinite source of milk, and yet he can’t seem to drop the habit of watering it down? Old habits die hard. Like the miserable milkman, here we are offered the infinite milk of moksha and we are saying: “I want finite joy.” For the wise person, all such binding desires are gone. Such a person can have any number of non-binding desires; after all, the power to desire is the sacred ash of the human mind. The human mind has this special glory, bestowed by Isvara in the form of the power of desire (icca shakti); the power of knowledge (jnana shakti); and the power of using thought to act in the physical realm (kriya shakti). These three powers are unique to us as humans; animals do not have them. If someone asks you about your future, you can come up with various goals and plans. But if someone interviews a dog about his future plans, the most he can do is bark a couple of times and run off. Animals cannot have any extraordinary objectives in life. The power of desire is a wonderful endowment and there is nothing wrong with employing it. But a wise person employs that power to bring out glory. Being full and knowing that getting a few things in life cannot add to anything, he or she does not seek fullness or fulfillment through the power of desire. Instead, a wise person uses the power of desire to serve the world or to declare the glory of Isvara, but does not possess any binding desires. The wise person desires from fullness not for fullness. Even Isvara enjoys desiring. As the Taittiriya Upanishad (2.6.1) says:

He desired: I will become many. I will father many children. He performed austerities and created everything. Then he entered within the world He had created. After He entered He became all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest.

Desire in itself is harmless; indeed, it is wonderful. But it should be appropriate desire; it should be non-binding desire. A wise person renounces all the binding desires as well as the actions leading to their fulfillment. These ignorance-driven actions (i.e., driven by a sense of incompleteness) are of two types: desire-driven worldly activities and desire-driven religious or spiritual activities. In Sutra 8, Narada tells us that the advaita bhakta renounces both. After all, how can the infinite be improved upon? Thus, advaita bhakti is fundamentally sannyasa bhakti. This bhakta will continue to perform actions, but they will be actions that benefit others and protect the world. As it says in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.23):

The greatness of the knower of brahman does not increase or decrease by action done or action not done.

A jnani is one who cannot be improved upon because he is infinite. Therefore, he renounces action and dedicates his life to nididhyasana. If such an advaita bhakta lives as a householder, he or she may not renounce actions entirely because of family duties, but actions will be reduced to the extent necessary to support the practice of nididhyasana.

Sutra 9. Furthermore, renunciation requires singular devotion and complete indifference to anything that is contrary to that.

The term ‘singular devotion’ means something very different in Vedanta than it does for the bhakti schools of philosophy. They will take it mean exclusive love of the superior God and not of any other, inferior gods. If asked who this supreme God is, each bhakti school will supply a different name. If they are Shiva devotees, they will say “Shiva alone.” If they are Vishnu devotees, they will say “Vishnu and not any other god.” So for them singular devotion amounts to fundamentalism. They will begin by expressing this in mild language, saying something like: “Our God can give you everything you want, so there is no need to go elsewhere.” If you are not convinced, they will say: “You can only get moksha by practicing exclusive devotion, so if you want moksha, you should worship our God alone.” And if you are still unconvinced, they will go a step further, giving a very strong and rather unpleasant interpretation, which illustrates how the scriptures can be grossly misconstrued if they are not approached properly. They will say: “Krishna himself says: *Practice unswerving devotion to me with undivided attention* (Gita, 13.11).” And if you ask them: “What do you mean by ‘unswerving devotion’?” They will say: “It is a pure bhakti, unpolluted by infidelity. If you want to be a pure bhakta, you should avoid the sin of infidelity.” The implied meaning here is that visiting any other temple is like a trip to the

Red Light district, so be sure not to set foot in any other temples. What a frightening message! They will even go so far as to say that going near another temple is infidelity. Bhaktas who harbor this attitude will wind up developing disdain toward other deities, even those included in the Vedas, so it is a very unfortunate interpretation.

In the Vedantic view, singular devotion is interpreted in a completely different way. There is no question of singular love of God when one really understands what God is, per the prasthanatrayam. When the bhakti schools talk about an exclusive God, and say that one should worship this God exclusively, they are implying that their God excludes all other gods, humans, animals, plants, and so forth. When God excludes everything else, God is effectively reduced to one of the finite beings in the creation. They may think that they are glorifying God in saying this, but they are actually degrading God by talking about *our exclusive* God. What is the definition of God according to Vedanta? From the 7th to the 12th Chapter of the Gita Krishna says: "I am the cause of the entire universe and the entire universe is the effect," which means: "I alone manifest in the form of every blessed thing."

...with many mouths and eyes, with many wonderful sights (Gita, 11.10), I alone am the ritual prescribed by the sacred texts that are heard and remembered, the food of all living beings (Gita, 9.16)...many wonders which are not seen before (Gita, 11.6).

When Isvara includes everything how can you talk about an exclusive God? Talking about an exclusive God degrades God. Every bhakta should understand that God includes everything, conscious or

sentient and insentient.⁷ We should never study any bhakti text without also studying the Gita alongside it. Studying the Gita will render any work of bhakti literature meaningful, but without knowledge of the Gita, all bhakti literature is prone to being misunderstood. When God includes everything, love of God means love of everything, meaning no person or thing can be excluded. Thus, singular bhakti should never be taken to mean exclusive devotion to a particular form of God.

So what does singular devotion mean? According to Vedanta, singular or exclusive devotion (*ananya bhakti*) is a technical term used to describe the particular form of bhakti practiced by the jijnasu bhakta or jnani bhakta, as distinct from the artha bhakta and arthartha bhakta. In talking about the singular devotion of a jijnasu, or spiritual aspirant, we give one definition in talking about the singular devotion of a jnani, we modify this definition slightly. A jijnasu's singular devotion is one in which there is no goal other than God, or moksha. In the case of the jijnasu bhakti, it refers to a one-pointed and burning desire for liberation; this bhakta is not interested in any other finite goal. A jnani's singular devotion

⁷In Gita, 7.4-5, Krishna explains that God (i.e., the self) is of two principles: a higher principle (para prakriti) and a lower principle (apara prakriti). Both are beginningless and eternal, but there are fundamental differences between them. The higher principle is the conscious principle (chetana), whereas the lower principle is inert (achetana); the higher one is without attributes (nirguna), whereas the lower one is with attributes (saguna); the higher is not subject to change, as it is beyond time (nirvikara), whereas the lower one is subject to change and time is an integral part of it (vikara); and finally, the higher principle is independent (satyam), whereas the lower principle is dependent upon the higher one (mithya). This mixture existed before the emergence or evolution of the universe, which is gradual, occurring in two stages. Para prakriti remains unchanged in the evolution from the 1st to the intermediary stage because it is beyond time and space. By contrast, apara prakriti (also known as the matter or energy principle) divides into an eightfold principle. So in the intermediate stage we have one para prakriti and eight apara prakriti. In the final stage, the eightfold apara prakriti magnifies and expands to become the multifarious creation consisting of everything: the galaxies, solar systems, planets, continents, and the body (modified matter) and mind (subtle matter). Thus, body and mind are both final products of apara prakriti. Krishna then enumerates the eightfold apara prakriti in the intermediate stage. These consist of earth, water, fire, air, space (the five elements), as well as mana, buddhi, and ahankara. It is important to note that the scriptures talk about two types of five elements: the gross, tangible, or concrete elements that are final products and the subtle elements, which are intermediary objects. In Verse 4, Krishna is talking about the subtle elements or intermediary objects—the invisible earth, water, fire, air, and space principles, as well as the subtle mana, buddhi, and ahankara. These latter three are technical words based on Sankhyan cosmology; and should not be mistaken for the individual (i.e., human) mind, intellect, and ego. Rather, they should be understood as the intermediary stages of these three matter principles. Then in Verse 5, Krishna introduces para prakriti. According to scripture, both matter and energy (i.e., apara prakriti) are inferior because both come under the inert principle and are thus subject to change, whereas consciousness is superior. Many people mistake consciousness as a form of energy. But consciousness is not subject to modification, so it is neither matter nor energy. Then what is consciousness? It is consciousness. Therefore, Krishna says: “May you know my higher nature, which is other than matter and energy; which is beyond observation; which is beyond scientific study; which is beyond physical and chemical laws.” And where is this para prakriti located? It is very much within this creation. Whatever is changing should be placed on the apara prakriti list, and one must search further to find para prakriti. But a clue is given. Look at the whole creation. Whatever you come across is subject to modification, including space, which scientists tell us is expanding. Therefore, you can rule all this out as apara prakriti. Having ruled out the whole world, you come to your own body and find that it, too, is changing; it is getting out of shape despite all your efforts to keep it slim and trim. And what about mind? It is violently changing. Therefore, body, mind and world are all apara prakriti; in fact, whatever is observable is apara prakriti. Krishna says: “There is para prakriti here and now; discover it.” And Arjuna says: “But where to find it? I’ve searched all over.” Then Krishna reveals the answer: “If whatever you experience is apara prakriti, then what is para prakriti? It is YOU, the conscious experienter. Tat tvam asi. The whole creation is a mixture of para prakriti, the experienter, and apara prakriti, the experienced; the observer and the observed. This is the creation. Oh, Arjuna, it is not enough to have powerful arms; it is better to have a powerful intellect. May you know the para prakriti as the consciousness, the experienter behind the body-mind complex. Just as invisible electricity, enlivens a fan, a light, or a gadget, this inert body-mind complex is enlivened and activated by the touch of consciousness. That consciousness is my higher nature.” Because of spirit alone, this entire universe is sustained. At the physical body level, consciousness is experienced as the very life principle. If you have any doubt, touch your body and you will experience its sentiency, revealing that it is blessed by the conscious principle. As long as the body has life, it is functioning; the moment the life principle is not there, the body disintegrates and this dearest body has to be disposed of as soon as possible. Now the body is bathed, dressed, and perfumed; all kinds of elaborate rituals are performed. But without life, it rapidly disintegrates. Extend this to the cosmic level. The whole cosmos is in harmony only because of the intelligence principle. The world is functioning as though a cosmic human being. The visible part of the creation is called apara prakriti and the invisible, sustaining principle is called para prakriti. This is Isvara.

means there is no God to be worshipped other than the very bhakti. A jnani bhakta has singular devotion to Isvara, who is non-different from himself. When Narada talks about singular devotion, we should understand him to be referring to either jnani bhakti or jijnasu bhakti, and given that the context of these sutras is advaita bhakti, we should take him to mean the jnani's singular devotion. In fact, Narada explains the word *ananyata* further in the next sutra.

In addition to singular devotion (i.e., seeing God as non-different from myself), Narada says the advaita bhakta is "indifferent to things contrary to that," meaning contrary to Isvara and scripture. In Vedanta, we do not differentiate between Isvara and scripture, which is delivered by Isvara alone. In other words, the advaita bhakta is indifferent to atheists or those who look upon God as their enemy. Such people are described in the 16th and 17th Chapters of the Gita. For example, in Chapter 16, Verse 8:

They say 'the world is without truth, without dharma, without God, and born out of the union of the male and the female. The world is caused by desire alone. What else?

The advaita bhakta's attitude toward such people is never one of hatred; instead, he is indifferent to them. This is very important: we should never hate anyone, even terrorists. We must strongly condemn their actions and take remedial measures—this is our duty—and we can even keep our physical distance from them, but we should never curse or hate them. As Krishna says (Gita, 12.13):

My devotee is a non-hater of all beings; is friendly, compassionate, free from the 'I'-notion, free from the 'mine'-notion, the same in comfort as well as discomfort, and forbearing.

If at all we have something to say about such people, it will be in the form of a prayer: may this person's mind become purified. Because once purified, even a terrorist is a noble soul. Shankaracharya gives a lovely example of this in Vivekachudamani. He says: A piece of sandalwood has a delightful smell unless it is kept in a wet environment for a long time. The wetness causes a layer of moss to form, and because of the moss, it emanates a foul odor. Experiencing the foul odor, nobody would ever believe it is a piece of sandalwood. But if there is any doubt about this, rub that piece of sandalwood. Not only will the foul odor go away, it will be replaced by a pleasant fragrance. According to scripture, a terrorist is like a piece of sandalwood, but because of the "wetness" he emanates a foul smell. This wetness can be understood as ignorance resulting in egoism, ownership, and consequent delusion. Thus we must never hate anyone, but we can keep our distance. There is a wonderful prayer in the tradition that says:

May the wicked become good, may the good attain peace, may the peaceful attain liberation, and may the liberated help to set others free. May all beings be happy, may all be free from disease, may all beings find what they seek, and may none experience sorrow. May the rains fall on time, may the earth yield its produce in abundance, may this land be free from disturbance, and may we all be free from fear. May all beings cross over their tribulations, and may all attain their respective goals, may all realize their aims. May all beings, in all times and places, be happy.

We don't hate anyone; we pray for all.

Sutra 10. When one's bhakti is singular, one relinquishes seeking security in anything other than himself.

In the previous sutra, Narada touched upon singular devotion, and he expounds upon it further in this sutra. Again, per Vedanta, singular devotion, or *ananya bhakti*, does not mean avoiding certain temples. In fact, Shankaracharya introduced a system of worship known as shanmata sthapanam centered on

six main deities (Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesh, Surya, and Skanda) and panchayatana puja⁸ precisely so we could worship the divine in any form, according to our convenience. We can meditate upon an ishta-devata and become comfortable with one form, but this does not mean developing an aversion to other deities or temples. Once we get into such beliefs, fundamentalism is not far behind. When religion becomes associated with a fundamentalist interpretation, it divides humanity instead of uniting it, and religious division ensues—division between Hindus and Christians, Hindus and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, Hindus and Jains. And even within Hinduism, between Vaishnavites and Shaivaites, and so on. All these sorts of divisions stem from a fundamentalist interpretation of religion, which the Vedas never condone. If you understand God, then *all this is full, all that is full*, and loving God means loving everyone, so how can there be infighting? Therefore, singular devotion should not be interpreted fundamentally, but should be taken to refer to jijnasu bhakti and jnani bhakti.

What is the uniqueness of the jijnasu bhakta and the jnani bhakta? A jijnasu bhakta doesn't want to depend on anyone or anything else for peace, security, and happiness. She only wants to depend on Isvara. Nothing else in the creation can give security. All worldly relationships are ephemeral. We cannot expect any relied-upon person to be with us all the time because we never know who is going to die first. After 40 or 50 years together, a common topic of discussion among couples is: "Who will go first?" They may also add: "I should go first" or "You should go first" and then begin planning for when this happens. As discussed in the Gita, this world has beauty, variety, and novelty, but it does not have stability. Therefore, it doesn't have reliability and cannot give security. The jijnasu bhakti has the ability to discriminate between the eternal and the ephemeral, and is not attached to the fruits of actions. This bhakta wants to rely upon Isvara alone. This bhakta still loves and cares for everyone around, which means helping them. You can give others emotional support, but when you want care and support yourself, don't lean on anyone around. As Krishna tells us (Gita, 9.22):

Those who see me as non-different from them offer worship by dwelling on me. I take care of the getting and keeping of those ever-steadfast ones.

If anyone asks you who your support is, don't name the people in your family. Who is your support? The answer should be Isvara and Isvara alone. The jijnasu bhakta wants to hold onto the branch of a tamarind tree, not the branch of a mango tree. The branch of a mango tree is stout, but it breaks easily. The branch of a tamarind tree is thin, but it is safe. Therefore, singular devotion means that for peace, security, and happiness I rely upon God alone.

Now what is the difference between the jijnasu's singular devotion and the jnanis? Both rely on God only, but the difference is that when the jijnasu bhakta says: "God is my support," he is referring to *that* God, who is somewhere else and different from me. So although the jijnasu has progressed from world-dependence to God-dependence, it is still a remote. The jnani, by contrast, depends on God alone and for him God is *the self residing in the heart of all beings* (Gita, 10.20). Put another way, for the jnani, God-dependence is equivalent to self-dependence. As it says in the Gita (3.17):

Suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, is happy with the self alone, and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for this person.

Therefore, Narada defines singular devotion as the renunciation of dependence on anything other than the self.

⁸'Pancha' means five, 'ayatana' means dwelling, and 'puja' means worship. 'Panchayatana' means: one God resplendent in five forms, or dwellings. Panchayatana puja is a ritual form of worship honoring Isvara in the form of five deities: Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Ganesh, and Surya.

The verses of the 1st Chapter of the Narada Bhakti Sutras can be compared to the 12th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, titled Bhakti Yoga, in which Krishna outlines the five levels of bhakti yoga that ultimately lead to moksha. The five levels, described from Verses 1 through 12 of the Gita, are: (1) sakama-karma yoga—actions based primarily on our desires to relieve distress and gain worldly benefit; (2) nishkama karma yoga—actions performed without any attachment to their results or fruits; (3) ishta-devata dhyana upasana yoga—dwelling upon the Lord in a preferred embodied form; (4) vishvarupa dhyana rupa upasana yoga—dwelling upon the Lord in all forms; and (5) nirguna brahma vichara rupa—the firm understanding that Isvara is my nature as the ever-present witnessing consciousness (sakshi chaitanyam), which is never itself experienced as an object. So there are two levels of karma yoga, two levels of upasana yoga, and one level of jnana yoga. Taken together, these five levels comprise bhakti yoga. There is no separate thing called bhakti yoga; bhakti yoga refers to karma yoga plus upasana yoga plus jnana yoga. Anyone who wants to attain moksha through bhakti will necessarily have to go through all five of these levels. If a bhakti yogi stops at the first or second level, bhakti yoga will be incomplete. This is what Krishna teaches in the 1st Chapter of the Gita. A bhakti yogi who has gone through all five levels culminating in the inquiry into the self as formless awareness will wind up as a jnani because this is the highest level of bhakti yoga. As mentioned previously, Isvara has a lower nature, termed *apara prakriti*, with qualities or gunas and a higher formless nature termed *para prakriti*. A bhakta must eventually come to the para prakriti, the higher formless nature of God, which Krishna describes in two very brilliant and important verses in the 12th Chapter of the Gita (12.3-4):

Having restrained the sense organs, being even-minded towards all, and being interested in the welfare of all beings, some devotees meditate upon the imperishable brahman, which is indefinable, unmanifest, all-pervading, incomprehensible, immutable, immoveable, and eternal. They alone attain me.

Then in the next verse (12.5) he says:

Difficulties are greater for those whose minds are committed to the pursuit of the unmanifest (brahman), for the goal of unmanifest is difficult to attain by those with bodily attachment.

Thus, the highest level of bhakti yoga requires inquiry and analysis into formless brahman, and Krishna acknowledges that this is very difficult for those attached to name and form. Krishna's advice should be carefully heeded, but this does not mean we avoid this latter stage of inquiry because of its difficulty. Again, knowledge of Isvara is incomplete until a person comes to understand it from both the cosmic level, which appears as all forms and qualities, and from the ultimate level, which is beyond form. Because understanding Isvara's higher nature cannot be bypassed, one must prepare oneself to make the understanding come more easily. In other words, if understanding formless Brahman is difficult, postpone it, prepare yourself, and thereafter inquire. But sooner or later, I have to consummate, which can only be done by inquiring into my nature as formless awareness. This is jnanam. Once we reach this understanding and gain jnanam, knowledge will transform from dvaita bhakti into advaita bhakti and Isvara will be understood as the very jivatma.

As Krishna says (Gita, 7.5):

This eight-fold nature is my lower nature. Know that nature that is distinct from this lower nature and which is in the form of jiva to be my higher nature by which this universe is sustained.

Thus, knowledge of God's lower nature leads to dvaita bhakti and knowledge God's higher nature leads to advaita bhakti. Accordingly, Krishna says in the 1st Chapter of the Gita: "Go through all five levels of bhakti yoga, beginning with dvaita bhakti, and you will inevitably discover yourself to be an advaita bhakta." Advaita bhakti is equal to self-knowledge, which is equal to moksha. Naturally, Arjuna is

curious to know whether anyone has successfully completed this process, so he asks Krishna: “Do you have a case study for me?” (Before we are ready to put our time and effort into something, we want some evidence that it actually works, much as we want to know that new medicines have been tested on others before we are ready to take them ourselves). And Krishna reassures Arjuna that many have practiced and attained jivanmukti, and then goes into a brilliant description of the advaita bhakta, which he calls the supreme bhakta, from 12.13 to the end of the chapter:

My devotee is a non-hater of all beings; is friendly, compassionate, free from the 'I'-notion, free from the 'mine'-notion, the same in comfort as well as discomfort, and forbearing.

The advaita bhakta doesn't look upon God as a person in a temple; he looks upon God as the very same atma in everyone. For the jnani, Isvara bhakti means the love of all people; friendliness and compassion toward all beings. This advaita bhakta described in 12th Chapter of the Gita is the very same one that Narada is presenting in these sutras. Don't think we are dealing with new subject matter. The advaita bhakta, or jnani, enjoys everything in the creation, for it has beauty, variety, and novelty, and these are all attractive. She enjoys other people, loves them, and takes care of them, but she will never lean on them. This is called advaita bhakti.

Sutra 11. Singular devotion means conducting worldly and religious duties in a manner supportive of that.

One of the optional lifestyles for a spiritual seeker is that of a sannyasi.⁹ It is available and can be entered into, if one is interested. Sannyasa is of two primary types. In the first type, a person settles in a gurukulam to practice sravana and manana under the consistent guidance of a guru because he or she feels that householder life is less conducive to this pursuit. This is called *vididisha* (desiring to know) sannaysa and is intended for the systematic study of Vedanta. In the second type of sannyasa, a person has thoroughly studied Vedanta and despite being a jnani, wants to live as a sannyasi for *nididhyasanam*. Such a person does not need to stay with a guru or in an ashram, because the knowledge is already firm. This is called *vidvat* (knowing or wise) sannaysa. Narada refers to the *vidvat* sannyasi in Sutra 8, with his use of the term renunciation. Both types of sannyasa are optional, which means one can become an advaita jnani, or advaita bhakta, as a householder, a point that Krishna establishes throughout the Gita. This householder jnani can practice sravana, manana, and even *nididhyasana*, but he or she will have to make appropriate lifestyle adjustments to do so.

Suppose an advaita bhakta chooses to continue as a householder, managing *nididhyasana* in the context of householder life, what will his or her lifestyle look like? The advaita bhakta is not bound by duty as part of a *sadhana*, for he has already attained *jnana* and is no longer a seeker, so will he follow various customs and duties? The advice for the advaita bhakta living as a householder is to continue to follow them. The option to renounce them is always there, but it should be done properly and formally. Imagine, for example, that you've spent much of your life working in a company and have now earned enough to retire. Your children are settled and you no longer require a salary. You want to spend more time in self-contemplation and so would like to drop going into the office. How should you go about doing so? You can't just suddenly stop showing up to the office one day; there are specific

⁹ There are four type of sannyasa based on the nature of renunciation, ranging from partial to total. The highest form of sannyasa is *paramahansa sannyasa*, which is the renunciation of everything, and there are 'lower-grade' sannyasis who still have an interest in something. *Paramahansa sannyasa* is further subdivided into two types: *vididisha sannyasa* and *vidvat sannyasa*. *Vividisha sannyasa* is undertaken for scriptural study. *Vividisha* means desiring to know. *Vividisha sannyasa* is a step toward *vidvat sannyasa*, in which a sannyasi is no longer interested in anything. He has attained the knowledge and does not hold onto anything, not even to the idea 'I am a jnani.' He does not even have pride in the knowledge. Thus, the aim of *vididisha sannyasa* is committed scriptural study and the aim of *vidvat sannyasa* is total renunciation. According to the Vedas, *vididisha sannyasa* is the ideal means and *vidvat sannyasa* is the ideal end in life. Why is this the case? If someone wants an empirical model for brahman, a sannyasi serves as such a model because brahman is free of all actions and duties, and a sannyasi is also free from duty. He does not have family duties, social duties, religious duties, a duty to earn etc. Second, the Vedas say that brahman is free from all relations. Similarly, in taking sannyasa, the sannyasi breaks all relationships. Third, brahman is behind everything, supporting everything. Like brahman, the sannyasi supports the whole creation. He does not belong to anyone; he belongs to everyone. Nothing belongs to him; everything belongs to everyone. Fourth, brahman does not depend upon anything for security and neither does a sannyasi. He does not have a bank balance, a house, etc. He finds security in himself. The beauty is that he gives security to others and the irony is that the other person to whom he gives security could be a very rich person while the sannyasi himself is a pauper. This *vididisha sannyasa* is the ideal means. Sannyasa is also the ideal end. In renunciation alone does one achieve mastery. A sannyasi gives up everything that will inevitably be snatched away in time or death. The only un snatchable entity is the *atma*. The Vedantin's approach is this: when something is snatched away from us, the sense of loss is intensified; when it is given up or given away by us, the pleasure is intensified. There was a lady who, while visiting the temple, lost a gold ornament. She thought somebody had stolen it. She became very upset and took an oath that if the ornament were to be found, she would offer it to the Lord. As it turned out, she found the ornament and offered it to the Lord, which made her very happy. When she had lost the ornament, she lost the benefit of wearing it and was very sad, but when she gave the ornament to the Lord, even as she lost the benefit of wearing it, she was very happy. This example illustrates that both in loss and in giving we are without an object, but whereas in loss there is pain, in giving there is pleasure. So we hand over to time before time takes away from us. This way, when things go—whether money, relationships, or our hair and teeth in old age—we do not feel any pain. A renunciate is not worried about losing anything, including his body. He knows that time is going to take everything away. He holds onto just one thing that time cannot take away: *atma*. He can even challenge death, because he knows that death cannot touch him. So what is the ultimate renunciation? Giving up everything that can be lost or taken away and finding security in what cannot be snatched. This is called *Paramahansa sannyasa* or *vidvat sannyasa*. What is the life of such a sannyasi? Because he does not belong to any particular family or community, he keeps moving from place to place. If he remains in one place, there is a danger that he may get attached to people and that people may get attached to him. His life is to teach. He does not have anything; he does not know what his security will be tomorrow. Yet he seems to be the happiest person. When we see such a sannyasi we come to recognize that we don't need things for joy.

protocols in place. You will need to give a certain notice period, you will need to train someone else to fill your position, etc. That is the responsible way to retire. The vidvat sannyasi is beyond injunctions and prohibitions, but these must still be dropped properly. As long as one has not taken formal sannyasa and lives in society, one has to follow the rules. Not as part of a sadhana, not for mental purification, knowledge qualification, moksha qualification, or freedom—these things have already been attained—but for an altogether different purpose.

Narada presents three important reasons, not discussed in the Gita for why a jnani should follow rules and regulations, both secular and sacred. The first is the protection of society. As Lord Krishna says (Gita, 3.20): *At least considering the upliftment of society, you should act.* The second is the protection of the scripture. Until now, the scripture has protected you. After moksha, you have to protect the scripture. This is like the parent and the child. Up to a certain age, parents protect their children, and beyond a certain age, children are expected to protect their parents. The third and final reason is the protection of oneself.

Narada discusses the protection of society first. He says that with regard to both secular and sacred scriptural activities—from traffic rules to the niyamas (10 Vedic observances)—may you live in accordance with the Vedic injunctions and prohibitions. He then goes on to say: Follow the Do's and avoid the Don'ts, despite the fact that a jnani is unaffected by violating rules. A jnani who no longer has an 'I'-sense or 'my'-sense can be compared to a child. If a child violates the rules, the child is not arrested. Similarly, when a cow walks onto the road, violating the traffic signal, the traffic police don't ask the cow for its license and registration. Rules are relevant only where ego is involved. A jnani has transcended rules, so even if he violates them, he will not accrue agami papam or punyam. As it says in Tattva Bodha (Verse 38.1):

Knowledge destroys agami karma and the jnani is not affected by it, just as a lotus leaf is not affected by the water on it.

So even though a jnani need not be afraid of papam, because he is neither a doer nor an enjoyer, he or she nonetheless follows the rules—not out of a desire for moksha, nor out of fear of hell, but out of compassion for the worldly order; so as not to confuse society. As Krishna says (Gita, 3.25-26):

Just as ignorant people act with attachment to action, a wise person should also act without attachment, with a desire to bring about the upliftment of society. The wise should not create confusion in the intellect of the ignorant who are attached to their action. Efficiently performing all duties with discipline, the wise person should inspire them.

Not only should you perform these actions, you should perform them with utmost commitment. Don't do a sloppy job just because you yourself don't require the benefit. Anything worth doing is worth doing well. Therefore, may you maintain order and help society. Krishna also says that we can learn the proper way of life from three important sources. The first source is the Vedic literature (sruti pramanam), which tells us about the proper way of life. The second source is the Veda-based writings (smriti),¹⁰ such as the Itihasas, Puranas, and Dharma shastras, or the writings of various mahatmas. What about the segment of society that is illiterate and cannot study these texts? Scripture advises such people to follow those who know the scriptures well and lead a conforming lifestyle. Such a person, known as a sadachara or satpurusha achara (i.e., one who leads a virtuous life and serves as a guru for the spiritual aspirant), has not only read the scriptures, but lives them. This is the third source of knowledge. Every jnani should know that his or her lifestyle is being observed by others. Just as parents are models for their children, who learn to live, eat, walk, and talk by watching their parents'

¹⁰ To-be-remembered histories, the most important being the Bhagavad Gītā, Ramayana, and Mahabharata.

example, every jnani in society must be aware that he or she is a model, a standard. As Krishna says (Gita, 3.21):

Every other person performs only such actions that a superior one performs. The world follows that which is seen as the standard.

In any field in which someone becomes successful, that person becomes a role model. That is why athletes and film stars are used in public service advertisements. Once these people say something, everyone follows. This is the apish tendency of humanity. Jnanis are thus given a warning: you are being watched by society, and whatever you do, society will follow. You will not be affected one way or another, but society will be affected by your right way of life or wrong way of life. Therefore, Sutra 11 says that a jnani living in society needs to conform to its rules while treating with indifference that which is opposed to these rules. Indifference, but never hatred or disdain. A jnani should be ready to share his knowledge and help anyone, provided the other person is open and willing to follow. It is pointless to talk to someone who is not ready to listen. We often forget this and when we talk, it is like crying into the wilderness. When people are unreceptive, simply ignore them. Or at most, pray for them. So protection of society is the first motive for a jnani to follow rules and regulations.

Sutra 12. *Let there be a firm commitment to maintaining an ethical code, even after the development of spiritual devotion.*

The law of the world is that initially we are protected by something, and having benefited from it, we have a responsibility to protect it in return. If a healthy environment is useful for our growth, then it is our duty to take care of the environment. If we were cared for and protected by our parents when we were helpless and incapable, then when we become capable and they become incapable, we should reciprocate by protecting and taking care of them. This is the law of nature. Thus, the roles of protector and protected always become reversed. The scripture protects a person. In fact, the very definition of the word *shastram* is: that which protects by teaching. In other words, the scripture protects a human being from downfall by teaching the proper way of life. If I am protected by the scripture, then after benefiting from it in the form of moksha, it is my duty to do everything to protect and perpetuate it.

Protection of the scripture by a jnani is done in two ways. The first is by not bringing down its reputation. Suppose, for example, that after gaining self-knowledge, I were to abuse the freedom given by the scripture. Scripture says that a jnani is free of punya and papa agami karma, and is beyond the gunas and scriptural prescriptions and prohibitions. As Krishna says in Chapter 5, Verse 15 of the Gita: *The atma takes neither the papa nor the punya of anyone.* The scripture gives this freedom, but if a jnani were to abuse it and live an undisciplined and licentious life, he would revert to becoming an uncultured person. The Vedas take a lot of trouble to culture and educate because we as humans are born undisciplined and uncultured. Through the Vedas and its many prohibitions and injunctions an uncultured and undisciplined person is converted into a refined and purified one. Now imagine that after gaining self-knowledge through Vedanta, a jnani were to regress to becoming a licentious, undisciplined, uncultivated, uncouth person. Vedanta would earn a bad reputation for converting a purified person into a brutish one. Society would look at this person and say: "This is a Gita student. This is an Upanishad student. Before attending these classes he was following something good and after studying Vedanta with the Swami, this is the result." Instead of criticizing the person, society would wind up looking down upon the scripture and the teacher. Thus, at the very least to save the reputation of the guru and the scripture, every jnani should continue to follow all the scriptural rules and regulations, even if he or she doesn't require any benefit from it.

After gaining firmness of conviction (*jnana-nishtha*) in the knowledge: I am brahman, I am liberated, I was liberated, and I will ever be liberated, may you continue to follow dharma. Even if there is no downfall for brahman, and even if I am unaffected by any detriment to the ego, I should continue following secular and spiritual rules to avoid disrepute to the scripture and the sampradaya. Indeed, this

was Krishna's argument. He said: "Arjuna, if you run away from the battlefield, society will talk about you and follow your example." And then went on to say: "Observe me. I don't have anything to accomplish in life, but as a human being I have come to the world and I am following my duty." Therefore, a jnani should not bring disrepute to the tradition. This is the first aspect of protecting the scripture.

The second aspect of protecting the scripture is that a jnani should actively propagate the Vedantic teachings by sharing this knowledge with humanity. Only a jnani is capable of sharing this knowledge, so imagine if jnanis refused to share the knowledge while ajnanis enthusiastically came forward to share. They would only be sharing their ignorance and confusion, and we would wind up with several dead ends in the lineage. Therefore, the scripture says to every jnani: if there is a sincere seeker, may you not neglect him. Every jnani is instructed to educate a sincere seeker. As Shankaracharya says in Vivekachudamani, Verse 41:

*The great sage looked at the seeker with a gaze full of compassion,
urging him to abandon fear, now that he had taken refuge in him.*

Sharing knowledge can be in the form of oral teaching, or written works, as Shankaracharya did. We are able to study the Upanishads today because of his pioneering commentary. Thus, the second way to protect the scripture is by sharing the teaching with others. This is the jnani's second overarching motive for abiding by rules and regulations. The third motive is maintenance of self-knowledge through regular polishing. If we do not regularly polish the brass and silver valuables in our homes, they become tarnished. Similarly, a jnani is advised to remain in touch with the scripture for the protection of self-knowledge.

Sutra 13. Otherwise, there is the risk of a fall.

Even after gaining self-knowledge, a jnani must exercise caution. He should not become complacent or overconfident because maya is constantly pulling on him. Temptations are many and the scripture prescribes several rules for saving a jnani from temptation. If these rules are violated and caution is thrown to the wind, chances are a jnani will have a downfall. A downfall does not mean losing self-knowledge, because once it is gained clearly and thoroughly it cannot be lost. Nonetheless, it can be overpowered by egoism, ownership, and false pride; by attachment to sense pleasures; by worldly tendencies, and so forth. All manner of vasanas have the capacity to overpower knowledge. Accordingly, let a jnani not lead a licentious life because of overconfidence; otherwise, as Narada says in Sutra 13, there is a risk of a spiritual fall. Hence, the jnani continues to abide by scriptural rules and regulations as a way of protecting self-knowledge. In the last portion of the Kena Upanishad, various values are mentioned. The Upanishad is compared to a sacred cow and the mind to a shed. Protection is said to be the abode of brahman. Values are very important, not only for acquiring knowledge, but for preserving it. Therefore, the advice to a jnani bhakta is: May you follow a disciplined way of life.

There is a technical term in the scripture for the spiritual fall of a student of Vedanta who has been in the field for some time, and it is especially pertinent to a sannyasi who falls from sannyasa dharma. The term is *arudha patitvatvam*, which means: having ascended and then falling from that height. This is really the worst kind of fall. If you fall from the first rung of a ladder, you will only have a small bruise or sprain, but if, as a result of complacency you fall after having climbed many steps, you are at risk of a serious fracture. The more we climb, the more caution we need to exercise, not less. Thus, because of the risk of spiritual fall, a jnani should follow a disciplined lifestyle. Thus, for protection of the world, protection of the scripture, and protection of self-knowledge, Narada's advice is to continue to live a disciplined life. There is a Puranic story describing how Narada himself wanted to experiment with maya. He was overconfident and challenged Bhagavan saying: "What can maya do to me?" And the Lord replied: "At the appropriate time, I will tell you." Then Bhagavan created a temporary hallucination in which Narada was going to receive alms from a beautiful young woman. Narada enjoyed it and thought: "Why don't we settle in householder life together?" So he entered into householder life with the

women and they had several children. Then a flood came and Narada wanted to save the children. Carrying the first child in one arm, the second child in the other, and struggling to swim, he shouted “Narayana!” At that very same moment, the hallucination disappeared, for it had only been an artificial dreamlike experience created by Bhagavan. When it was all over, Narada and Bhagavan both fell silent. Bhagavan looked at Narada and Narada lowered his head, sending the message that he understood the power of maya. The moral of this story is, don’t become overconfident.

Sutra 14. For as long as the body lasts, one should engage minimally in worldly activities and in such behaviors, which are required to sustain the body.

Next, Narada says that even if a jnani bhakta is involved in worldly activities, a balance needs to be struck. Previously, Narada had talked about the importance of worldly behavior and activities being qualitatively appropriate, in keeping with worldly and scriptural duties and observances, and here he is talking about them being quantitatively appropriate. And he says: “Don’t get completely immersed in the service of the world.” Serving the world is wonderful, but leave enough time for your own dharma, especially the continuation of nididhyasana.” Nididhyasana is a compulsory duty, and don’t ask for how long. There is a sloka that says: *Till he goes to bed, till he leaves the mortal coil, he always thinks of Vedanta.* Until death, you have to allot time for Vedanta. Even if you are a great sage, allot time for Vedanta. Because desire, anger, kama, krodha, greed, indulgence in the sense pleasures—all those vasanas are waiting at the door for the right occasion to gatecrash. As you will recall, the 2nd Chapter of the Gita (2.62-63) says:

For a person who dwells on the sense objects, a fancy toward them arises. From fancy, desire is born. From desire, anger arises. From anger arises delusion. From delusion, the loss of memory. From the loss of memory, the loss of discrimination. Because of the loss of discrimination, he perishes.

Krishna warned us that this can even happen to a jnani, therefore be sure to allot time for Vedanta. Don’t make excuses; allot time. Just as we allot time for food—wherever we go, we carry bags with our special coffee concoctions, this and that type of bean, sugar-free sugar, and on and on; we carry all these things because we need the right coffee at the right time. If we are that particular about the coffee we drink, we need to be just as particular about that spiritual food called Vedanta in any form, be it hearing, reading, writing, or sharing. In one form or another, one must continue studying Vedanta until death. Therefore, do not let worldly transactions obstruct Vedantic pursuits. Narada says: Engage with worldly pursuits in limited measure. Likewise, Krishna says (Gita, 6.17):

Meditation becomes the destroyer of sorrow for one who is moderate in eating and recreation, who is moderate in sleeping and waking, and who is moderately engaged in actions.

Worldly involvement will gradually decrease on its own because of physical limits due to aging, but activities essential for supporting life will continue until death. Therefore, Narada instructs us to perform the minimum activities required for the maintenance of the body. As it says in the Gita (3.8): *Even the maintenance of the body would not be possible for you from inaction.* So we should take care to avoid the other extreme. In avoiding over-involvement in worldly pursuits, we can’t completely avoid the world either, because a minimum amount of transaction is required to maintain the body. Accordingly, Narada says: As long as one still has this body (i.e., until death), minimum transaction is required. Don’t eat too much, but don’t fast too much either. In short, keep the quantity of all worldly transactions balanced. This is the overarching message of Sutra 14.

Before moving onto the next sutras, it will be useful to highlight a few general points. We have talked about the importance of dvaita bhakti in the beginning stages of sadhana and how, through self-inquiry,

it gets converted into advaita bhakti. We also distinguished between two types of dvaita bhakti. The first is informal dvaita bhakti, in which a person does not follow any scriptural rules but instead expresses love for God in his or her own way, at times even violating scriptural rules. The second type is formal dvaita bhakti in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga, which involves the pancha maha yajnas and so forth. Both forms of dvaita bhakti will give joy to the dvaita bhakta, but there are also key differences between. In informal dvaita bhakti, the bhakta approaches God as a person and an emotional bond is formed with the Lord, which is expressed in varieties of transactions. This bhakti is more emotional than intellectual, and its joy is experienced in the form of emotional contentment. This is why the informal dvaita bhakta always describes bhakti using emotionally laden words: "Isvara is a person with whom I have an emotional bond" or "I regularly enjoy interacting with the Lord" or "I love God and I am affectionate to God." This is the type of language used when bhakti is predominantly emotional.

By contrast, when we get to formal dvaita bhakti, Isvara is not in the form of a person but a symbol. And even during worship, the focus is not on the particular or finite form of God, but rather, the symbol represents Isvara as everything; it is used as an indicator of God in all forms. If you examine the mantra chanted during formal five elements puja, they will say:

With [the bija, or seed mantra] 'lam' which is the root of earth, I offer sandal to the earth. With 'ham,' which is the root of ether, I offer flowers to the ether. With 'yam,' which is the root of air, I offer incense to the air. With 'ram,' which is the root of fire, I offer light to the fire. With "vam" which is the root of nectar, I offer the great offering to the nectar. With "sam" which is the root of all souls, I offer complete worship to all souls.

When I apply sandalwood paste on a symbol of the Lord, I remind myself that Isvara is not this 2-inch statue, but is in the form of the earth, the ether, etc. So where should I run to meet Isvara? If Isvara is in the form of ether, I don't need to run anywhere. In informal dvaita bhakta, Isvara is personified and the bhakta has to run to meet Isvara, whereas in formal dvaita bhakti, puja is performed with a symbol, but this symbol merely serves to expand the mind to see the earth as Isvara, to see ether as Isvara, and so forth. When I present the candlelight to Isvara, I remember that Isvara is in the form of fire. When I am feeling humidity, that is also Isvara in the form of fire (so I should try to enjoy it and not take it for granted by complaining). And because of fire, water comes. While offering water during puja, I remember that all the water on this earth is a manifestation of Isvara. And when the incense stick is presented, we get a beautiful fragrance that is carried by air. And in experiencing this fragrance, we are reminded of that fragrance-carrying air principle, which is all-pervading and which is also Isvara. Whereas informal dvaita bhakta focuses on Isvara in a particular, preferred form, formal dvaita bhakta focuses on Isvara in all forms. Which is more important? The latter is, because it alone will ultimately lead the devotee toward non-dual wisdom. Informal bhakti is only a temporary stepping-stone to formal dvaita bhakti, which involves cultivating an appreciation of Isvara in all forms. It is an intellectual appreciation of the beauty of the universal God, an appreciation of the harmony of the universal God. It is an appreciation of the principles that govern the macrocosmos and microcosmos, all of which are the glory of God alone. When the sun rises in the morning that is the glory of God. When water evaporates on a hot summer's day that is the glory of God. And when the water condenses during the rainy season and rain falls that is the glory of God. Thus, dvaita bhakti amounts to an admiration and appreciation of the entire creation itself as Isvara. It requires a mature and expansive mind. It is not an emotional expression of bhakti in the form of kissing, cuddling, and pinching; informal dvaita bhakti is an emotional outpouring. In formal dvaita bhakti, we translate bhakti not through an emotional world, but through appreciation and admiration of this wonderful universe in front of us, and a reverential attitude toward everything.

This is a crucial point because often, in the name of dispassion, we criticize the world. We talk about the three defects of the mind: mental impurities (subsuming desire, anger, greed, delusion, intoxication, and envy), projection, and confusion. And we say that the happiness we get when we achieve

something is always tinged with sorrow—we are supposed to see the sorrow, the limitation, in all worldly things. So in the name of dispassion, we find fault with the world. But this has to be neutralized and balanced. I should learn to see the whole universe as the wonderful body of God. I don't hate anything and I don't want to own anything. It requires maturity and an expanded intellect, and it brings intellectual joy. Whereas informal dvaita bhakti gives emotional joy, formal dvaita bhakti gives intellectual joy, and a mature and expanded mind. To appreciate Isvara, a bhakta needn't stand in a queue for seven hours. The mature bhakta says: "When I see the sunrise that is enough for me." As the Rudram (a Vedic hymn) says:

The same Lord is this sun, with a reddish hue during sunrise, light red after rising, and a golden hue thereafter is auspicious. Through our praise, we pacify the anger of thousands of Rudras who have resorted to the quarters on all sides of this earth.

Everything, everywhere is Shiva. Everything, everywhere is Vishnu. Thus, we should understand both forms of bhakti and remember that both forms will give joy.

The next important point regards a concern that often arises in the dvaita bhakta, who enjoys both emotional joy through Isvara in a specific form and intellectual joy through Isvara in all forms. Such a dvaita bhakta may wonder: If I come to advaita bhakti will I lose dvaita bhakti and the associated joy? Several related doubts may emerge from this concern. The first is whether advaita bhakti can logically exist at all. There are several people who challenge the very possibility of advaita bhakti, arguing that it is a contradiction in terms—like hot ice cream—because the very word *bhakti* seems to suggest a minimum of two entities: a devotee and an object of devotion. If deity-devotee duality is required for devotion, dvaitam is required for bhakti. Similarly, if bhakti is translated as love, this will again conjure up the need for two entities: a lover and a beloved. How can we speak of love without duality? Therefore, some people argue that advaita bhakti is illogical and irrational, a contradiction in terms. In reality, there is no contradiction: advaita bhakti is the bhakti of a jnani toward God, which has been discovered to be the bhakta's own essential nature. This means advaita bhakti is self-love in which the self is Isvara himself. Self-love is never illogical because everyone already loves him or herself, as repeatedly declared in the Upanishads. For example, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.5) says:

For the desire of the Infinite, which is the self, everything appears to be desirable.

The Mundaka Upanishad (3.1.4) says:

The supreme personality of godhead is the life of all. He is the supersoul splendidly manifest in all living beings.

And in the Bhagavad Gita (3.17), Krishna says:

Suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, is happy with the self alone, and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for this person.

All these scriptural verses are talking about self-love. Where is the contradiction? We all love our self. It is the reason we wander about procuring anything and everything: to please our self because we love our self. When someone wants to commit suicide, it is because he hates himself. Both self-hatred born of ignorance and self-love born of knowledge are very much possible. Therefore, advaita bhakti is self-love in which the self is discovered to be Isvara or brahman itself, *aham brahmasmi*. This may cause a doubt to rise in the technical experts: How can you talk about self-love in which both the lover and the beloved—both subject and object—are oneself? In Vedanta class we repeatedly stress that subject is different from object and object is different from subject. Saying subject and object are one and the

same amounts to a logical fallacy. To this we would respond that this is a logical fallacy only when the object is partless or indivisible, but if something has different parts, from the standpoint of one part it can be the subject and from the standpoint of the other it can be the subject, just as I am able to touch one of my hands with the other. Who is the toucher? The hand, which is myself. And what is touched? The hand, which is also myself. I am touching myself by myself. It is possible when I have different parts. The same logic applies in advaita bhakti: the vyavaharika-‘I’, or lower nature, am loving my own paramarthika-‘I’, or higher nature. And because I comprise both ‘parts’ (so to speak)—i.e., the apparent ‘I’ and the ultimate ‘I’—I can love myself, not as the body-mind complex but as atma itself. Therefore, there is no logical contradiction. Isvara himself talks about his own higher and lower self. He says (Gita, 4.6):

*Though I am birthless and deathless, though I am the Lord of beings, still,
I take birth again and again through my own maya by restoring to my
original transcendental form.*

If Isvara can have both a higher and lower nature, why can’t I have these two natures? Therefore, “I love myself” means I love my own higher nature: existence-awareness-limitlessness. So our conclusion is that advaita bhakti is not only possible, but that every jivanmukta enjoys it.

Then comes the next objection: Assuming advaita bhakti is possible, I am concerned that if I attain this difficult advaita bhakti, it will destroy my dvaita bhakti. Many dvaita bhaktas worry that if they drop dvaita bhakti in search of advaita bhakti, and don’t attain the latter, they will wind up losing both. They may also say: “Even if I do succeed in advaita bhakti, I don’t know exactly what type of bhakti it will be. I don’t want to miss the joy of dvaita bhakti. So I’m not so sure I want advaita bhakti because I fear it will destroy dvaita bhakti, given that non-duality and duality are opposed. This is a fear that many dvaita bhaktas harbor. Further stoking the fear, Krishna tells us that advaita bhakti is very tough (Gita, 12.5):

*Difficulties are more for those people whose minds are committed to (the
pursuit of) the unmanifest brahman, for the goal of unmanifest brahman
difficult to attain by the people with bodily attachment.*

Therefore, many dvaita bhaktas will protest: “I don’t want advaita bhakti.” In a spiritual magazine, one great bhakta writes a prayer to Isvara: “Never bring Vedanta or non-dual inquiry anywhere near me. I want to enjoy the wonderful Krishna,” he says. The advaita acharya’s response to this will be: “Advaita is never opposed to dvaita; advaita is *in spite of* dvaita.” It is non-dual awareness that has been supporting the cosmic manifestation, which appears as a duality, all along. If non-dual awareness were opposed to the dualistic universe, it could never have existed. The very fact that the universe was created and sustained is evidence that non-dual awareness supports, rather than opposes, it. Thus, non-duality never opposes duality; it is in spite of duality. It is the basis of duality. That is why all jivanmuktas have non-dual wisdom and still experience the dualistic cosmic manifestation. And not only is advaita bhakti not opposed to dvaita bhakti, Vedanta gives such skeptics a guarantee that their venture into advaita bhakti will not destroy dvaita bhakti. So you can attend Vedanta class without fearing that you will lose dvaita bhakti. This is the first point.

The second point is that not only will advaita bhakti not destroy dvaita bhakti, it will actually make dvaita bhakti more enjoyable. It is like roasting grains or nuts in the fire. Raw grains and nuts have some taste, but when they are roasted they become much tastier. Similarly, the fire of non-dual wisdom will roast and toast dvaita bhakti, making it tastier. When the advaita bhakta invokes dvaita bhakti, she celebrates because her dvaita bhakti has fully ripened. The purpose of dvaita bhakti is not permanently remaining in duality, but rather, progressing to non-dual wisdom and liberation. Dvaita bhakti fructifies only when advaita bhakti has been attained. Therefore, whenever I invoke dvaita bhakti, it is an opportunity for celebration, enjoyment, and mutual admiration of bhakta and Isvara. It is like a successful doubles team in tennis: through teamwork they get through the quarter-final, the semi-final, and eventually to the final, where they won the cup. After winning the cup, they don’t separate. Each time they meet it is an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate their successful partnership. Similarly, whenever an advaita

bhakta and Isvara meet, they celebrate their successful relationship and mutual contribution. Each giving credit to the other.

The relationship between an advaita bhakta and Isvara is one of mutual admiration and appreciation. The bhakta appreciates the glory of Isvara because Isvara provided the scripture and the guru, and Isvara appreciates the bhakta who has successfully gone through karma yoga, upasana yoga, and jnana yoga. It is a successful relationship in which both have discovered independence. The bhakta is free and, of course, Isvara is free. Two free people enjoying each other is the best kind of relationship because it's a non-demanding relationship. When parents are helping their children to learn and grow, initially the children are dependent upon the parents whose goal is for their children to become independent. When the children are finally in a position to say: "I have now started earning my own money, I no longer require support from you. But if you ever need anything, I can give you support," the parents are very happy. A relationship that transitions from dependence to independence is a successful one. Thus, when an advaita bhakta invokes dvaita bhakti, it is a non-demanding relationship. Isvara has grown tired of hearing nothing but complaints from the artha bhakta and desires from the artharthi bhakta. These bhaktas come demanding, and any relationship involving consistent demand will eventually become strained, even that between a husband and wife. As demands increase, the partner finds him or herself wanting to withdraw. No person in a relationship can meet all the demands of the other, and so demands become displaced by dissatisfaction and complaints, and complaints replaced by trading charges. Thereafter, husband and wife are together in the family but they don't want to be together because nobody wants a relationship in which there is continuous demand and complaint. This is just as true for Isvara. The relationship between Isvara and the advaita bhakta is one in which each is independent of the other.

Psychologists have said that dependence-based relationships create strain, whereas independence-based relationships thrive. As one psychologist writes: "When they say that the husband is half and the wife is half, and the two join thinking each half will complete the other, the relationship does not actually wind up functioning as half plus half. The mathematics are such that when the two halves join together for completeness, it winds up being half divided by half, or one quarter. Any relationship in which two people who feel incomplete join together expecting to be completed by the other is bound to fail miserably. Previously such couples stayed together because of tradition. These days such relationships last only a few months because no husband can fulfill all the expectations of the wife, and no wife can fulfill all the expectations of the husband. Women say that every husband wants his wife to be like Sita, but he doesn't want to be Rama. Therefore, a relationship based on expectations is bound to fail. Expectations are the core of dvaita bhakti, whereas there are no expectations in advaita bhakti. When the advaita bhakta invokes dvaita bhakti, it is a bhakti without any expectation; it is a simple and straightforward opportunity to celebrate. I admire Isvara for what he has given me and Isvara admires me for making use of his ladder. Thus, the second lesson is that advaita bhakti makes dvaita bhakti tastier, an opportunity for celebration.

Finally, the third point is that advaita bhakti makes dvaita bhakti safer. All the Upanishads uniformly declare that duality, whether secular or sacred, is the cause of samsara if it is not properly understood. The Upanishads repeatedly declare that duality that expresses as separation between two people, between a person and the world, or between a person and God is the cause of misery. What are some of these Upanishadic mantras? The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.2) says: *Certainly fear is born of duality*. The Taittiriya Upanishad (2.7) says: *Even a little bit of difference will be a source of fear*.

Superimposing even a fraction of duality such as: "God is one, he is non-dual, but I am dependent on him; I am an attribute of his, and he is not me," makes even Isvara a source of fear. This can happen in two ways. First, according to the laws of karma, Isvara alone has the power to snatch all these wonderful things and people away from me. Just as Arjuna became frightened of Isvara, when he said (Gita, 11.32):

I am the mighty time, the destroyer of all beings in the world. I am proceeding to destroy the people here. All the warriors who are arrayed in both the armies will cease to exist even without you.

We think of Isvara as compassionate, but some people are caught with their head between the teeth of the Lord. In duality, Isvara becomes a source of fear in the form of time, the giver of the results of actions, the destroyer, and the fire of time. There is a saying in the Katha Upanishad (2.1.11): *Whoever sees division or duality will travel from death to death.* And in the Mandukya Karika, Gaudapadacharya says:

The individual ego taking to the path of devotion imagines itself to be related to the manifest brahman, who is supposed by it to have manifested himself. Such an individual is said to be of narrow intellect because it thinks that before creation, all was of the nature of unborn reality.

Even a devotee who sees division between himself and the object of his devotion is unfortunate because his samsara will be preserved and perpetuated. Unless dvaita bhakta is used as a stepping-stone for advaita jnanam, it will only serve to perpetuate samsara. But when dvaita bhakti is boiled in the fire of self-knowledge, just as we boil our water to cleanse it of impurities. There is an advaita acharya named Madhusudana Saraswati, who has written many wonderful hymns of praise to Krishna, along with a classical non-dual text, called Advaita Siddhi, which many teachers say sufficiently resolves all the logical objections raised by dualists. Madhusudana says: "I enjoy Krishna bhakti. And after self-knowledge, I enjoy dvaita bhakti as well. But when I mix them, the result is all the more enjoyable." So enjoy chanting the name of the Lord, enjoy performing puja, enjoy going on pilgrimage, he says, but bear this in mind: before non-dual self-knowledge, all forms of duality, including dvaita bhakti, are the cause of delusion and suffering. But one who understands the non-dual nature of reality can intentionally "create" duality again for the sake of indulging in various forms of devotion. This time, however, it is backed by the knowledge that duality is apparent and non-duality is real. The resulting experience is that this play of duality is even more joyful than non-duality. That is why all of our acharyas enjoyed writing hymns of praise in addition to Vedanta literature. Shankaracharya himself enjoyed writing hymns of praise to all the deities, testifying to the fact that non-duality is not a threat to dvaita bhakti; that it doesn't only retain dvaita bhakti, but makes it safer and more enjoyable.

Sutra 15. There are various definitions of the characteristics of bhakti due to differences in view.

At the outset of this text, Narada defined bhakti as: *reverential love directed toward this one.* Although this love is non-dual it can take various forms based on different expressions; accordingly, bhakti itself is defined in different ways by different acharyas. In Sutras 16 through 19, Narada presents several definitions of bhakti supplied by different acharyas, including himself. The first definition is given in Sutra 16.

Sutra 16. According to Sage Vyasadeva, the son of Parasharya, devotion is expressed through enjoyment of performing ritual worship and so forth.

It is with all this background in place that we should interpret Sutra 16. The son of Parasharya, otherwise known as Vyasacharya, says bhakti is love of the Lord expressed in the form of puja and so forth, where 'so forth' refers to the nine forms of bhakti encapsulated in a famous verse from the Bhagavata Purana, 7.5.23:

*sravanam kirtanam vishnoho smaranam padasevanam archanam
vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam*

Sravanam means listening to the glories of Isvara, both with and without attributes. *Kirtanam* means singing or talking about the glory of the Lord, again with and without attributes. *Vishnoho* refers to Vishnu and is common to all of the forms of worship. It is worth noting here that one must not take this

to mean that only Vishnu should be worshipped (the Shiva bhakta is welcome to chant: *sravanam kirthanam Shambho*) any appropriate representation is fine. Initially, it is God in a particular chosen form; then it is God in all forms; and finally it is God beyond all forms or attributes (i.e., pure awareness); all three need to be included. *Smaranam* means remembrance. *Padasevanam* means serving the Lord, whether in temples or in the world at large. As Ramana Maharshi says in Upadesa Saram (Verse 5):

Serving the world with the attitude of serving the Lord is the true worship of God, who is the wielder of the eightfold forms—space, air, fire, water, earth, sun, moon and living beings.

Archanam means speaking the name of the Lord and offering flowers. *Vandanam* means prostrating before the Lord. *Dasyam* is serving the Lord, which amounts to living a life that is in line with scriptural injunctions and prohibitions; that is, promoting virtue and demoting or dropping vice. There is no other service than leading an ethical life. If I do, I am obeying Isvara because every Vedic instruction is Isvara's instruction. *Sakhyam* means friendship with the Lord; enjoying the company of the Lord and finding time to cultivate this friendship. Finally, *atmanivedanam* means surrendering the 'I'-sense and 'my'-sense to the Lord, which is nothing more than offering the results of all actions to Isvara. Never criticize God when situations are unfavorable. Accept the results of karma with the attitude: Thine will be done, oh Lord. Cultivate a contributive attitude rather than a controlling one. Control belongs to Isvara, who is the giver of the results of actions. Accept every result with outstretched hands and a willingness to go through whatever you must go through declaring: "Oh Lord, I know that you only give what is fair and just." That is true surrender. This may give rise to a worry: "If I offer everything to the Lord, will I become empty?" By offering egoism and ownership to the Lord, one does not become empty; one becomes Brahman. Ultimate surrender means resting in and as awareness after surrendering the sense of pride, egoism, and ownership. That is why Shankaracharya wrote a very famous and elaborate commentary on the very last teaching sloka of the Gita (Chapter 18, Verse 66), known as the Saranagati Mantra (mantra of surrender). The spiritual world is full of different definitions of surrender. Shankaracharya establishes that surrender amounts to letting go of ignorance and egoism through knowledge. Therefore, knowledge of the non-dual nature of reality is surrender, there is no other.

Sutra 17. According to Sage Garga, bhakti is expressed through spiritual discussion.

Garga Maharshi's definition of bhakti is introduced in Sutra 17 as the nine forms of bhakti, this time with an emphasis on *sravanam*, or listening. In the previous Sutra, puja and rituals were given prominence, which is especially relevant for highly rajasic types who have a lot of energy and need to be occupied to avoid going elsewhere. There are many other people, however, who don't have that kind of energy; just standing may be a challenge for them, let alone circumambulation of various sacred places. To these people, Garga Maharshi says: "Don't break your back. Instead, express your devotion by engaging in spiritual discussion. In your case, the best form of bhakti is sitting comfortably with the appropriate back rest, and listening to the glories of Isvara, making sure you don't fall asleep. In this case, bhakti takes the form of great affection. Both this definition and the Sutra 16 definition fall under ninefold bhakti, albeit with different emphases.

Sutra 19. According to Sage Narada, bhakti is expressed by sanctifying all activities, and by supreme anguish upon forgetting the Beloved.

Sage Shandilya's definition is provided in Sutra 18, but for the moment we'll skip ahead to the 19th Sutra, in which Narada provides his own definition. In this sutra, Narada says: Merely listening to Isvara's glory and doing puja is not enough; one should transform his or her very lifestyle. A non-transforming bhakti amounts to another mechanical chore or ritual. I have some statue of deity at home and I have gotten into the habit of offering things to it each day. Narada says: Don't make it a blind, mechanical ritual. Instead, transform your lifestyle by becoming a karma yogi and dedicating all your actions to the Lord. The purpose of ninefold bhakti is to make you a karma yogi, because in both sravana and puja, Isvara is described as the God in all forms. If you love God in the form of Krishna

and Rama while hating the people of the world and mistreating them, your bhakti is meaningless. Isvara himself will be dissatisfied with a bhakti in which one worships a form or an idol in a temple, while being rude to everyone around upon leaving the temple.

Isvara is in the form of the five elements and everything in the creation that is a combination of them. Therefore, loosen your attachment and aversion in the world. An increase of bhakti should lead to a reduction of attachment and aversion. Attachment arises when I want to get something or keep something. A true bhakta is non-attached because she knows that everything belongs to Isvara. As bhakti increases, attachment decreases, even towards our own family members. I don't get attached because I know they are not my children; they are Isvara's children. I am just their caretaker. Aversion will also be reduced through this understanding because when everyone and everything is Isvara, how can I hate anyone? If I find that someone is causing me a problem, I can take some physical distance. But physical distancing should not lead to hatred. In my mind, I wish well for all. That is why Krishna says (Gita, 5.3): *One who does not desire and does not hate is to be known as a permanent sannyasi.*

A true bhakta is an eternal renunciate because he doesn't have attachment or aversion toward anyone. Therefore, when you perform any action, let it be done with a worshipful attitude. People often say to me: "I have toiled so much for my family and I get no appreciation. Sometimes I even get criticism, from my own children!" But as Krishna says (Gita, 2.38):

*Regarding happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike,
prepare for war. In this manner, you will not incur sin.*

Regard everything alike. This attitude of offering all actions to the Lord and welcoming all results from the Lord is real bhakti, according to Narada. Don't confine your worship to an idol. Instead, may you see the entire creation and all people within it as Isvara. In this sutra, Narada is effectively expanding our understanding of God in a singular and preferred form and inviting us to look at God as the entirety of the universe. Vedanta gives more importance to the Lord in all forms than to the Lord in a particular form because only the former prepares the mind for the subtlety of self-inquiry. Narada is really saying: All activities, even mundane tasks like brushing your teeth, taking a bath, or eating food, are offerings to the Lord who dwells within. And they should all be done with a karma yoga attitude. With such an attitude, no event in life will agitate my mind. And when I say that I accept any and all results of my actions, it should not just be lip service; it should come from the innermost heart. A bhakta has become disturbed whenever he reacts to events in life. Every impulsive reaction, whether in the form of lack of gratitude, violence, or hurt signals a forgetting of the Lord. There is a beautiful verse that says:

*Miseries are not real miseries. Wealth is not real wealth. Forgetting the
Lord is the real misery. Remembering the Lord always is the real wealth.*

This is why Narada says that when Isvara is impulsively forgotten, the bhakta experiences supreme anguish. A bhakta doesn't mind forgetting family members because they are all impermanent, subject to arrival and departure. All such relationships, even our closest ones, are incidental, but the Lord is not like that. The Lord is inseparable from me. I can't afford to forget the Lord. So this is Narada's definition of bhakti, which is nothing more than the well-known practice of karma yoga featured in the 3rd Chapter of the Gita.

Sutra 18. According to Sage Shandilya, bhakti is expressed by perpetual delight in the self.

We return to Sutra 18 and Shandilya's definition of advaita bhakti: enjoying the other three forms of bhakti (i.e., puja, listening, and remembrance, mentioned in Sutras 16, 17, and 19, respectively), without ever losing sight of the fact that I am the substratum of it all. Enjoyment of these forms of dvaita bhakti is like watching a movie. I may get involved in the movie, I may shed some tears, but even as I enjoy it and feel touched, I don't forget that it is only a movie and I enjoy it knowingly. Shandilya says: without losing sight of complete delight in the self. All realized people swear that they have not lost even an iota of enjoyment of dvaita bhakti in whatever field they enjoyed before realization. If a person is not at home in a particular field before realization, he is unlikely to suddenly begin enjoying it after

realization. Imagine, for example, there is a buffet serving both North Indian and South Indian cuisine. The North Indian swami will attack the parotta, whereas South Indian swami will head straight for the idli because this is in accordance with their respective vasanas. Similarly, the dvaita bhakti enjoyed after realization will be the same as that enjoyed before realization.

Sutra 20. *Bhakti is correctly described in each of these ways.*

As illustrated in the previous four sutras, there are different definitions of bhakti, which are all correct and applicable to both dvaita bhakti and advaita bhakti.

Sutra 21. *The Gopis of Vraja are such an example.*

Here, Narada wants to provide an example of the ideal bhakta and points to the well-known Vraja Gopis of the Bhagavata Purana. Narada uses the Gopis as an example because they are ideal models of bhaktas at all three levels. Initially, they had bhakti toward God in a particular form, seeing Krishna as a humanized God and enjoying his company. Then they advanced to seeing God in all forms, seeing Krishna in everything with which they interacted. Finally, by Krishna's own grace, they attained non-dual knowledge, understanding Krishna to be the very atma in everyone. There is a famous verse in the Gopikam Gitam (Srimad Bhagavatam, 10.31.4), which says:

You are not actually the son of the Gopi, Yasoda, O friend, but rather, the indwelling witness in the hearts of all embodied souls. Because Lord Brahma prayed for you to come and protect the universe, you have now appeared in the Satvata dynasty.

In other words, "Don't think we are deceived by your beautiful form, Krishna. We know it is merely a **human costume created by** maya. In reality, you are not this physical man, we understand you to be the innermost self, residing in the heart of every living being including ourselves." So the Gopis enjoyed Krishna bhakti, knowing full well that Krishna was not another person, and that this was not a human-human relationship, but a relationship between a bhakta and Isvara. As such the relationship was not a naughty one between married females and a married male, but the most sacred and elevating relationship between a bhakta and Isvara, in which each was intimately and intensely aware of the other's true identity. According to the Puranas, the Gopis were rishis who wanted to enjoy this particular expression of dvaita bhakti and so deliberately took this form. How can we be sure that the relationship between the Gopis and Krishna is sacred (because it certainly bears a close resemblance to the dalliances depicted in films and TV)? How does one distinguish between a dharmic and adharmic relationship? This can only be deciphered from the motive underlying the relationship, which is articulated in the next sutra.

Sutra 22. *Even in the case of the Gopis, one cannot criticize them for forgetting the Lord's greatness.*

In the bhakti of the Gopis, there was no contamination of an inappropriate motive. There was no impurity because in worshipping Krishna, the Gopis never lost sight of who he really was. Even though the Gopis had female bodies and Krishna had a male body, it was not a physical relationship but a more elevated one; it was rooted in the firm knowledge of Krishna as the creator, maintainer, destroyer and cause of the universe.

Having presented the Gopis as model bhaktas, Narada wants to clear up any possible controversies likely to arise about their bhakti toward Krishna in Sutras 22 and 23. In the Bhagavata Purana and other texts, the Gopis' bhakti toward Krishna is described. There are some people who appreciate it as great devotion, and others who question its propriety, arguing that in their adoration of Krishna, the Gopis neglected their svadharma to their own families. After all the Bhagavad Gita (3.35) tells us: *Even in death, one's own duty is better; another's duty is harmful.* Narada wants to briefly address this controversy in three sutras that establish the Gopis' bhakti as proper and genuine. How does one

establish whether the Gopis' relationship with Krishna is appropriate or inappropriate? The only way to know is to examine the motive underlying their bhakti. If their devotion stems from desire or attachment born of lack of discrimination it can be considered improper, whereas if it is rooted in discrimination and knowledge it can be considered pure and proper. Indeed, Krishna talks about delusion when he says (Gita, 9.11):

Not knowing my higher nature as the great Lord of all beings, those deluded ones look down upon me who has taken a human form.

The Gopis never looked upon Krishna as a mortal samsari; that is the basis for Narada saying in Sutra 22 that the Gopis' understanding of Krishna never lacked knowledge of the glory of Isvara. Because their bhakti toward Krishna stemmed from discrimination or knowledge, their attitude was beyond reproach and the highest form of devotion. The Gopis saw Krishna as neither male nor female, but as the all. They knew that Krishna's embodiment did not represent a single form, but a totality, putting them in the category of jnani bhaktas.

Sutra 23. *If that mindfulness is forsaken, what exists is selfish passion.*

Hypothetically speaking, if the Gopis' attitude toward Krishna had lacked the knowledge of his true nature, it would have been considered attachment born of ignorance, and thus an adharmic relationship akin to that of an ignorant human being. Narada then concludes with the final sutra of the chapter:

Sutra 24. *In selfish passion, one's personal happiness is independent of the happiness of the beloved.*

Even though attachment born of ignorance and devotion born of knowledge may appear alike superficially, they are actually poles apart. But like the horse and the donkey, the differences between them are bound to emerge in time. Krishna talks about the difference between attachment (*raga*) and devotion in the Gita. Attachment is always selfish and demanding. Never giving, but always demanding. In a relationship born of attachment, a person seeks his own happiness without bothering to consider the other person's comfort or discomfort, without caring for the other. The attitude of attachment is: I want my share of happiness. In devotion, which is divine or pure love, such an attitude will not be there at all. The Gopis would never have dreamed of entering into an adharmic relationship with Krishna because Isvara would not have approved of such a thing. Indeed, Krishna appeared as an avatar for a very specific reason (Gita, 4.8):

For the protection of the righteous ones, the destruction of the unrighteous ones, and the establishment of dharma I take birth in every age.

Establishing dharma was Krishna's primary goal, which means he would never approve of adharma. If Krishna disapproves of adharma, is he going to enter into an adharmic relationship himself? He could never be happy with such a thing and the Gopis knew this to be the case. Therefore, their relationship with Krishna was a purely dharmic one. When a person has attachment, he or she will demand happiness without considering the happiness of the other, or even demand happiness at the cost of the other. That is attachment and it is the mark an impure relationship. The Gopis never had such attachment; theirs was a pure and genuine bhakti.

Before concluding the 1st Chapter, we need to derive some corollaries and make some side notes. In the last three sutras, Narada discussed the Gopis' bhakti toward the Lord as a person, which is also known as informal dvaita bhakti. In the introduction, we distinguished between informal and formal bhakti. Informal bhakti is emotional bonding with the Lord as a beautiful, attractive personal and personified God. This type of bhakti is the focus of all bhakti schools of philosophy. The bhakti schools

of philosophy never talk about devotion to the Lord in all forms, and if ever they do, it is minimal. For them, devotion toward the Lord in a particular form is the only kind of bhakti. By contrast, the Vedantic view gives a warning. We say that a spiritual seeker can practice informal bhakti, which has certain benefits for a limited period of time. In Vedanta, this type of bhakti is regarded as a temporary stepping-stone for formal bhakti in the form of intellectual appreciation of the Lord in all forms. Emotional bonding with a personal God, known as informal dvaita bhakti, should be brief. Sooner or later we must transform informal bhakti into formal bhakti, which amounts to an intellectual appreciation of God in all forms. Although informal dvaita bhakti has certain advantages and benefits, it has several disadvantages and pitfalls as well. That is why several bhakti schools of philosophy ran into problems after some time. They took to varieties of practices, which morphed into corrupt practices, known as vama-chara bhakti.¹¹ Gradually this bhakti and its expression can become corrupted, so it is a risky thing. That is the first disadvantage. Another, bigger disadvantage is that a person can get stuck at this level, and stagnation is an obstacle to self-realization. Therefore, Vedanta warns: Don't get trapped in bhakti philosophy. You can use their informal bhakti, but sooner or later you should come to see the universe as the manifestation of the Lord. That is why Krishna discusses only formal bhakti in the Gita, which is an intellectual appreciation of the Lord as everything (7.8-9):

I am the taste in the water. I am the radiance in the moon and the sun. I am the OM in all the Vedas. I am the sound in space. I am the manliness in men. Moreover, I am the fragrance in earth. I am the heat in fire. I am the life in all beings and I am the austerity in ascetics.

Don't limit your vision of the Lord, expand your vision instead. There is a major difference between the bhakti toward Krishna in the Bhagavata Purana and that in the Bhagavad Gita, and we should all come to the latter version of Krishna, who is everything and everyone. Vedic or formal bhakti, in the form of intellectual appreciation of the Lord in all forms, should serve as the foundation for karma yoga and upasana yoga. As Ramana Maharshi says in Upadesa Saram (Verse 5):

Serving the world with the attitude of serving the Lord is the true worship of God, who is the wielder of the eightfold forms [ether, fire, air, water, earth, sun, moon, and living beings].

And the Dakshinamurthi Ashtakam Stotram (Verse 9) tells us that Isvara is:

He whose subtle and unmanifest eightfold form causes the moving and unmoving universe, and by whose grace alone does all this manifestation disappear to reveal that 'All that exists is Brahman.' To that Dakshinamurthy, who is embodied in the auspicious Guru, I offer my profound salutations.

Let us not reduce Krishna, Rama, or Dakshinamurthy into an attractive person or an idol. Instead, we should learn to appreciate everything as Isvara. The bhakti of Vedanta is appreciation of Isvara in all forms. We can only come to karma yoga and upasana yoga by going through formal bhakti, which involves more intellect than raw emotion. The Upanishads talk about bhakti and its expression in the form of meditation on the Lord in all forms. For example, in the Shikshavalli of the Taittiriya Upanishad there is a verse that says:

The earth, sky, heaven, the primary quarters, and the intermediate quarters constitute the groups of five in the context of the worlds. Fire, air, sun, moon, and stars constitute the group of five deities, literally the

¹¹ This refers to the left-hand practices of the tantric doctrines, which involve ritualistic use of five heterodox items including: madya (wine), mamsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudra (parched grain), and maithuna (sexual intercourse).

shining ones. Water, herbs, trees, space, and atma [In this context (i.e., natural factors), the word 'atma' implies the cosmic gross body, virat]. Then with regard to the personal, there are three groups of five: The vital functions—prana [exhaling], vyana [pervading], apana [inhaling], samana [digesting], and udana [leaving the body]; the five sense organs—eye, ear, mind, speech, and touch; and the five material constituents of the body—skin, flesh, muscles, bones, and marrow. And the external also is fivefold. All this is verily constituted by five factors, through the fivefold ones [i.e., those relating to the personal], one strengthens or fills up the external fivefold ones [because of the similarity in number, they are realized as identical]. And he who realizes all this existence as fivefold becomes identified with the Prajapati himself, who is constituted by the five gross elements.

So if someone asks: What is Isvara? Your counter-question should be: What isn't Isvara? We often say that this Krishna, son of Vasudeva, is Isvara. Krishna says: "Don't think that way. That is just a temporary form that I took. Don't get stuck there." And don't quarrel as to whether Krishna is the real God or Shiva is the real God." These are all forms of delusion. Vaishnavas and Shaivas will quarrel, with Vaishnavas saying: "Everything is Vishnu, so we won't set foot in a Shiva temple." Well if everything is Vishnu, why don't you revere Shiva? These are all the disadvantages of getting hooked on informal bhakti. Never allow informal bhakti to stunt your growth. Beware of becoming a bonsai tree. This is a crucial difference between the bhakti view and the Vedantic view: whereas bhakti philosophy overemphasizes informal bhakti, Vedantic teachers say: Grow out of it and from devotion to the Lord in a particular form may you come to devotion to the Lord in all forms. And even this is not the ultimate destination. From there, one must come to devotion to that which is beyond form (i.e., pure consciousness). As Krishna says (Gita, 10.20):

I am the self residing in the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings.

The Gopis came to this conclusion themselves and yet, ironically, in the name of the Gopis we practice informal bhakti, refusing to grow further. Vedanta is the path from informal dvaita bhakti, to formal dvaita bhakti (in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga), to self-inquiry, to advaita bhakti. This is what Narada is intending to teach. But even the Narada Bhakti Sutra, if improperly read, can lead one to wrongly conclude that Krishna as a person is the ultimate God. To give an example, there was a group of Krishna Consciousness followers who were critical of Swami Chinmayananda. Swami Chinmayananda had established a gurukulum in Mumbai for the spiritual training of interested people and had a Shiva temple built in it. The critics said: "Chinmayananda gives talks on the Gita around the world and earns money because of our Krishna and now he has built a Shiva temple... Krishna will punish him!" All these silly arguments arise, even after scriptural study, demonstrating that one and the same scripture can lead to delusion when misunderstood (i.e., when the ostensible meaning of the verses is taken literally). Thus, to summarize the essence of the first chapter: Advaita bhakti leads to God-love, which is self-love because God is non-different from myself.

Chapter 2: The Glory of the Highest Bhakti, Sutras 25-33

Sutra 25. Advaita bhakti is even superior to karma yoga and jnana yoga.

Narada says that advaita bhakti, otherwise known as self-knowledge, is superior to karma yoga and jnana yoga. This is perfectly logical because karma yoga and jnana yoga are both sadhanas—they are paths or means—whereas self-knowledge is the sadhyam, or destination. Between the means and the

end, the end is always superior because we take to the means for the sake of the end alone. The means are subservient to the end. Indeed, when the end is reached, the means are rendered irrelevant. Therefore, self-knowledge is superior to jnana yoga, which is to say: sravana, manana, and nididhyasana. Jnana yoga will always be inferior because we are using it only as a means toward our destination, which is the fully assimilated and unshakeable conviction knowledge: I am awareness. Krishna makes a similar point in the Gita (7.16) when he says to Arjuna:

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me: the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise.

To clarify, one who practices jnana yoga (i.e., studies Vedanta) is a knowledge-seeker and one who has realized the self is a wise person. Between these two, who is superior? Krishna supplies the answer in the next two verses (Gita 7.17-18), in which he says:

Among them, the wise person who is always engaged exclusively in devotional service is superior. To that cultivator of wisdom, I am extremely dear and he is dear to me.

The wise person is superior because she is no longer a bhakta, but has discovered herself to be Isvara. Whose words are these? Krishna's words. Yet somehow they seem to get selectively blocked out by the bhakti schools of philosophy, which forget that duality is merely a stepping-stone to non-duality, in which any separation between the bhakta and Isvara has been removed. Someone once put it very nicely: When you are hungry and tasty food is placed in front of you, there is separation between you and the delicious food. Would you like to permanently look at the food, or would you like to merge with it? The enjoyment that comes from looking at the food is only temporary and in anticipation of actually eating. What you really love is when the food becomes one with you and there is no division between the food and the eater. The same is true of bhakti and therefore self-knowledge is considered superior.

Sutra 26. After all, [advaita] bhakti is the fruit of all endeavor.

The bhakti we are talking about here is neither informal dvaita bhakti nor formal dvaita bhakti; we are talking about advaita bhakti, which is synonymous with self-knowledge. That is the end result, the destination and culmination of all this sadhana. As the result, it is superior to all paths and means. This is why Krishna says (Gita, 6.46):

The dhyana yogi is greater than ascetics. He is considered even greater than the jnana yogi. The dhyana yogi is also greater than the karma yogi. Therefore, become a dhyana yogi.

Dhyana refers to a deeper awareness of oneness, which includes the perception of body, mind, senses, and surroundings, while remaining unidentified with these. Krishna is talking about the advaita bhakta, whose self-knowledge has been fully assimilated, and he says this advaita bhakta is superior to all others because this bhakti is the fruit. All other bhaktas still harbor desire. Even the Jijnasu bhakta has a desire (albeit a noble one): moksha. The jnani, or advaita bhakta, doesn't even have a desire for moksha, not because he is dispassionate but because he has already discovered it.

Sutra 27. Furthermore, the Lord dislikes the proud but is pleased with the humble.

In the previous sutra we said that advaita bhakti is superior to the other yogas because it is the ultimate destination of all spiritual endeavor, and a goal is always superior to the path. This is true of any endeavor. We value the college we attended until we have completed our education; thereafter, we forget that the school even exists. The school is only important and relevant insofar as it is a means for attaining knowledge. Human beings are always utilitarian: once something is no longer of use, we lose

interest in it. Therefore, between the means and the end, the end is always more valuable; it is a universal law.

Now Narada gives another reason for the supremacy of advaita bhakti, or self-knowledge. If you were to secretly interview God and ask: "Which bhakta among all of them do you like most?" What would the answer be? In fact, it is not even a secret; it is all over the internet (meaning the Bhagavad Gita), wherein Krishna says (Gita 7.16-18):

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me: the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise, Oh Arjuna! Among them, the wise man who is ever steadfast and who has undivided devotion is superior, for I am very dear to the wise man and he is very dear to me. All these devotees are certainly noble. However, the wise man is myself; this is my teaching. Because, with a steadfast mind, he has resorted to me alone who is the highest goal.

And at the end of the 12th Chapter, Krishna describes the glory of this dear jnani (12.14):

That devotee of mine whose mind and intellect are fixed upon me and who is ever-contented, tranquil, self-restrained, and with clear knowledge is dear to me.

Being dearest to Isvara, the jnani or advaita bhakta is superior to all. Thus, we can talk about the superiority of advaita bhakti from several angles. First, advaita bhakti is a destination whereas all other bhaktis are paths. Second, in all other bhaktis, desire subsists: the artha bhakti, despite loving Isvara, is distressed; his attention is divided between Isvara and some problem that he'd like to have solved. Wherever desirous devotion exists, we wind up loving the thing we want more than we even love Isvara; our very prayer to Isvara is in the service of such ends. Therefore, the artha bhakta's attention is fixed on getting out of the soup. The artharthi bhakta also wants some benefit and this is where his attention is focused. Even the jijnasu bhakta doesn't have his full attention on Isvara. He, too, is desirous because he wants self-knowledge or moksha. So although they are all bhaktas, their bhakti is not fully directed toward God; it is divided, with part of it directed toward the goal in which they're invested, be it relief of sorrow, securing wealth, or attaining liberation. By contrast, when an advaita bhakta goes to the Lord and says "I love you" there is nothing dividing his life and his mind because he has no problems. The knowledge 'I am brahman' makes him incapable of getting into a soup. The jnani or advaita bhakta doesn't seek to attain anything either; what could he possibly seek with the knowledge 'I am fullness'? This bhakta doesn't even have desire for moksha. Because the jnani's love toward God is undivided and motiveless, it is superior. That is what is meant by pure bhakti. Pure bhakti means motiveless. The third angle from which to understand the superiority of the jnani, or advaita bhakta, is that Isvara also loves this bhakta above the three other bhaktas. Narada gives a very interesting reason for this in Sutra 27: only the jnani is free from the sense of 'I' and 'my.' All other bhaktas have egoism and ownership because they all have ignorance. Because of this ignorance, there is egoism in the body-mind complex and ownership in family, property, and profession. As Krishna says (12.13):

My devotee is a non-hater of all beings; is friendly, compassionate, free from the 'I'-notion, free from the 'mine'-notion, the same in comfort as well as discomfort, and forbearing.

and then (12.14)...

That devotee of mine whose mind and intellect are fixed upon me and who is ever contented, tranquil, self-restrained, and with clear knowledge is dear to me.

Among all the bhaktas, only the jnani, or advaita bhakta, is free from worldly possessiveness and egoism. So the next question is: why does Isvara love this devotee who is free from egoism and ownership most? Narada goes so far as to say that Isvara 'dislikes' the egoic, possessive devotee, but that is a bit strong; it is perhaps more accurate to say that Isvara disapproves of egoism and ownership.

There are several reasons for this disapproval. First, these defects of the mind stem from delusion born of ignorance. Second, egoism and ownership are causes of samsara, and because Isvara loves all bhaktas, he does not want them to be trapped in samsara by these impurities. Third, any person who harbors the sense of 'I' and 'mine' is claiming ownership of the body, mind, family, property, etc., when in reality nobody has a legitimate claim on anything because everything belongs to Isvara. Claiming what is not legitimately yours is tantamount to stealing or trespassing on Isvara's property. Everything existed before we were born as individuals. When a bhakta claims what does not legitimately belong to her, Isvara will punish her as a trespasser. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Anyone with a sense of 'I' and 'mine' is a trespasser, and his or her punishment is imprisonment in samsara, experienced in the form of insecurity, anxiety, and stress. These are all Isvara's punishments. Every anxiety we suffer is Isvara's punishment for egoism and ownership. Every time we talk about my husband, my wife, my children, and so on, we experience anxiety. All worry is connected to the sense of egoism and ownership. I am not an owner of anything; I am only a caretaker. The caretaker only has to take care; it is the owner's job to worry. Therefore, if I become a caretaker and let Isvara be the owner, Isvara will handle the worry and I will be free of it. Every time worry affects me it means I have forgotten my caretaker status and I am claiming ownership. Ownership is taxing and will invariably be taxed. The fourth and final Vedantic reason that Isvara considers the jnani bhakta to be dearest is that as long as a bhakta has the sense of 'I' and 'mine' (that is, a clear sense of differentiation between Isvara and himself), he will not include Isvara and Isvara will not include him; in short, there will be separation. In dvaita bhakti, the bhakta excludes Isvara and Isvara excludes the bhakta, making both incomplete. If every bhakta excluded Isvara, saying: "I am this bhakta and this is my property," Isvara would become supremely incomplete. Thus, dvaita bhakti makes both the bhakta and Isvara incomplete. Isvara loves advaita bhakti alone because only in this form are both the bhakta and Bhagavan full. Each gives up their individual name and form to discover one whole and complete self. That is why so many Upanishadic mantras say that separation must be overcome. For example, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.2) says:

Certainly fear is born of duality.

...and also (1.4.10):

Now, one who worships the Divine as something other than oneself, saying 'that is one thing and I am another' does not know.

The Taittiriya Upanishad says:

Even a little bit of difference will be a source of fear.

...and the Katha Upanishad (2.1.11):

Whoever sees division or duality will travel from death to death.

Dvaita philosophers frequently offer an odd counterargument. They say: “Do you want to be sugar or do you want to taste sugar? If I become sugar than I cannot taste it, therefore I want to be distinct from sugar so I can continue to enjoy it. I don’t want to become Isvara; I want to taste the joy of Isvara.” All this may seem convincing until we respond: “OK, you want to taste the sugar. And in tasting the sugar, examine what happens. When you put the sugar on your tongue, the sugar becomes one with you, and you enjoy it only when this is the case. Therefore, even if you taste Isvara, it is because Isvara is becoming one with you, even if only temporarily. Whether Isvara becomes you or you become Isvara, ultimately the joy is in this merging, this oneness. Isvara wants to embrace us and become one with us, and here we are pushing him away. Isvara wants non-duality and we are asking for duality. He says: “Why can’t you allow me to embrace?” What exactly is this embrace? The absence of division. Love is that which does not want division. That is why hugging is an expression of love. It is an expression of the fact that I don’t want division between myself and the one I love. Isvara is saying: “Let us merge into advaita, the greatest bhakti.” We have established that Isvara disapproves of pride born out of sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine,’ along with the separation reinforced by it. So what pleases Isvara? Narada says: humility, which is considered a virtue. Indeed, in the 13th Chapter, when Krishna talks about various qualifications, the first one he mentions is humility.

So what is the means or spiritual discipline for attaining this highest bhakti, advaita bhakti? Different people present the sadhana in different ways. In the following three sutras, Narada presents three different views regarding advaita bhakti sadhana, the last one being his own view.

Sutra 28. Some people say that knowledge is the means for developing devotion.

Some people say that because the highest bhakti is jnani bhakti, one must become a jnani to attain it. And naturally, one becomes a jnani by getting jnanam. These people say that self-knowledge is the only sadhana for advaita bhakti. This is congruent with Vedantic reasoning. There is another general rule that applies here, too: We can only love something that we know. Suppose I were to ask you to love somebody. You would respond: “Who is this somebody?” And I would say: “Somebody. Please love that person intensely.” How can you love what you do not know? So the first condition of any form of love is that I should know the object of love. And not only know it, I should also feel that it is worth loving. I once overheard someone say: “You should understand your spouse, and only then can you love him.” And another person replied: “I do understand my spouse. That is precisely why I don’t love him.” Knowledge can lead to love, but knowledge can also lead to court. Therefore, there are actually two preconditions: I should know the object and I should know the object as lovable.

Similarly, Isvara bhakti—whether dualistic or non-dual— is impossible if we don’t know what that blessed God is. For some, the question arises as to whether there is a God at all. Modern science is progressing and it warns us never to blindly believe anything. In the past, it was easier to have faith, but these days people are far more skeptical. Many people ask: “Is there really God? And if so, what is the proof, because science doesn’t offer any proof?” If you reply that scriptures talk about God, they will say: “Why would I believe scriptures written by some unknown people? Maybe they didn’t have anything better to do? Why should I read the writings of some homeless people living on the riverbanks of the Ganga?” Such arguments present a challenge. Without knowing that Isvara exists and that Isvara is lovable, I cannot have Isvara bhakti. For this, I require knowledge of original consciousness and reflected consciousness, without both of these, there is no possibility of love. Dvaita bhakti requires knowledge of Isvara’s lower nature and advaita bhakti requires knowledge of Isvara’s higher nature; in

both cases, knowledge is imperative. First, I know something (jnana shakti), then I desire that thing (iccha shakti), and thereafter, I put forth action and effort (kriya shakti) to procure it: in that order. I know, I desire, and I strive. Here, desire stems from knowledge, and so knowledge is the sadhana for bhakti. In the Gita, Krishna clearly says to Arjuna (7.16)

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me: the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise.

And in talking about the highest of these four bhaktas, Krishna refers to the wise person as a jnani bhakta (Gita, 7.18):

All these devotees are certainly noble. However, the wise person is myself. This is my teaching. With a steadfast mind, he has resorted to me alone who is the highest goal.

Sutra 29. Other people consider devotion and knowledge to be mutually interdependent as cause and effect.

Other people present it differently. The sages who hold this view say: “You cannot say that knowledge is the sadhana and devotion is the sadhyam because we find that devotion is also the sadhana.” We have said that because of knowledge there is desire, so knowledge is the cause and desire is the effect. Yet to acquire knowledge in the first place, you need desire: a desire to know. If you are attending a class for knowledge, it is because you desire, or love, knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is the cause of desire and desire is the cause of knowledge. Without desire you cannot even attempt to know something. Different people take different subjects in college because they want knowledge of that particular subject; knowledge of this subject stems from desire. Therefore, one cannot say which is cause and which is effect; knowledge and desire are mutually interdependent as cause and effect. It is like saying you have to exercise a lot to be healthy. But you also need to be healthy to exercise. So is exercise because of health or is health because of exercise? They are interdependent. Does wealth come because of knowledge or does knowledge come because of wealth? If you want knowledge from a reputable institution, you have to pay; in fact, some people start saving for their children’s education before they even have children. You need money to get knowledge, and later if you want to earn money, you need a degree. Therefore, knowledge is the result of money and money is the result of knowledge; everything is interconnected. Similarly, because of bhakti, knowledge comes and because of knowledge, bhakti comes.

In the previous sutra we said that self-knowledge is the cause and bhakti is the effect, and here we are saying that bhakti is also the cause. Bhakti brings mental purification, a proper guru, and the capacity to understand the scripture, all of which lead to self-knowledge and advaita bhakti. Thus both statements are equally true: self-knowledge is the cause and bhakti is the effect, and bhakti is the cause and self-knowledge is the effect. They are mutually cause and effect. We can make this even clearer by specifying the type of bhakti to which we are referring: Dvaita bhakti leads to self-knowledge, which itself leads to advaita bhakti. So the journey is from dvaita bhakti to self-knowledge to advaita bhakti. Full stop. There is nowhere else to go; that is the end of the journey. Therefore, Sutras 28 and 29 are both correct, each from its angle. Then Narada comes in and presents his own view, which is also correct if understood from yet another angle.

Sutra 30. But the son of Brahma, Narada, says that bhakti is its own fruit.

Here, Narada presents a rather ingenious view, but we have to think very clearly to interpret its deep meaning properly. Context is essential. We must remember that Narada is a very great advaitic sage, and a disciple of Sanatkumara, as we learned in the 7th Chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad. Although Narada is most commonly associated with devotional songs, he is a great intellectual as well,

and here he makes a very interesting observation. He says that bhakti is both the sadhana and the sadhyam. What is now called the means will in time be called the end.

Perhaps the best way to understand the implied meaning of this sutra is by analyzing several potential misinterpretations. First, when we say that bhakti itself is the sadhana or the cause and bhakti is the sadhyam or effect, we should again include the appropriate adjectives: whereas dvaita bhakti is the sadhana and means, advaita bhakti is sadhyam or end. Bhakti as artha-bhakti, arthartha-bhakti, and jignasu-bhakti is the sadhana and bhakti as jnani-bhakti is the sadhyam. Dvaita bhakti ripens into advaita bhakti much like a green banana ripens into a yellow one. Naturally, this will raise the question: How can Narada say that dvaita bhakti itself becomes advaita bhakti? We established early in these teachings that dvaita bhakti never becomes advaita bhakti naturally, but that there is an important corridor connecting them. Through dvaita bhakti, one must become qualified, then go through self-inquiry (i.e., sravana, manana, nididhyasana) to attain self-knowledge, and through this alone will dvaita bhakti get converted into advaita bhakti. When there is such a crucial intermediary of self-knowledge, how can Narada quietly avoid discussing it and casually assert that dvaita bhakti is the sadhana and advaita bhakti is the sadhyam? Will it not confuse? In fact, it has confused many people. Many think that if they keep doing Rama-nama, self-knowledge will miraculously descend. Or ascend. This is the magical thinking entertained within the bhakti schools of philosophy, which Vedanta rejects outright. We say that self-knowledge cannot be bypassed; it is compulsory. Indeed, Krishna says (Gita 4.34):

May you gain knowledge by prostration, service, and proper inquiry. The wise sages will impart that knowledge to you.

Krishna doesn't say: "Just sing my name and you will get moksha. Instead, he advises Arjuna to go to a guru, and in the ensuing 17 chapters of the Gita, proceeds to teach Arjuna himself. If self-knowledge automatically and effortlessly through chanting the Lord's name, why would Krishna have taught the Bhagavad Gita and why would the Gita be a centerpiece of all Vedanta courses? The easy method is to say: "I will initiate you into some mantra to sing, and one day, by the grace of God, you will get moksha. It's that simple!" Remember all the Upanishads involve educating the student, and Krishna educates Arjuna in the Gita. This testifies to the fact that merely praying and singing bhajans cannot produce self-knowledge. These activities may purify the mind, but a systematic program of education—namely, Vedanta—is required for self-knowledge. Narada quietly skips this aspect in saying that dvaita bhakti is the means and advaita bhakti is the ends. How can a great Vedantic sage change parties and join the bhakti school of philosophy? Rest assured that Narada has not changed parties, we simply have to interpret his writings properly. Narada wants to say that self-knowledge is required for advaita bhakti; there is no compromise there. And self-knowledge comes only through self-inquiry; there is no compromise there either. And self-inquiry is the implied corridor linking dvaita bhakti to advaita bhakti.

Importantly, Narada also wants to say that self-knowledge does not produce non-dual wisdom/love because non-duality is not a product. In the Kena Upanishad commentaries it is made abundantly clear that non-duality is not something to be produced by any action, to be reached, brought to birth, perfected, or changed—it is none of these. Self-knowledge cannot produce advaita bhakti. Anything that has a manufacturing date also has an expiration date and this holds true for advaita bhakti. Self-knowledge does not produce advaita bhakti, nor does it convert dvaita bhakti into advaita bhakti. Self-knowledge does not bring advaita bhakti from somewhere or take you to advaita bhakti somewhere. It is not some far away destination to be reached by travel. Then what does self-knowledge do? It negates ignorance, or mithya. Duality is not a fact; it is a product of ignorance. As we are told in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.14):

Where there is an object of knowledge, naturally it can be known. Where there is something other than the eye, the eye can see it. Where there is something outside the nose, the nose can smell it; that is true. Where the sound is outside the ear, the ear can hear the sound. Where the spoken word is outside speech itself, one can speak about something. Where the thought is different from the object that is thought, it is possible to think it. Where the object of understanding is different from understanding, it is possible to understand that object.

Self-knowledge does not do anything to bhakti itself, it simply removes the ignorance that leads to duality or plurality. When this ignorance is removed, the bhakti that was previously divided becomes unified; the dividing blocks are removed. When the dividing blocks are removed, the very same dvaita bhakti “becomes” advaita bhakti. It is like removing a wall that appears to separate a space into two rooms and winding up with one large space. There was only ever one space all along, but because of the wall, it appeared as though the space was divided. Similarly, bhakti is only one, but because of ignorance it was divided in the mind. Self-knowledge doesn’t produce or transform; it simply removes the dividing barrier. What was previously dvaita bhakti is now seemingly transformed into advaita bhakti. Therefore, dvaita bhakti “becomes” advaita bhakti when the duality is removed by knowledge. This is the basis for Narada saying that dvaita bhakti is the sadhana and advaita bhakti is the sadhyam. Dvaita bhakti seemingly gets converted into advaita bhakti, just as jivatma “becomes” paramatma through self-knowledge; without becoming, he becomes.

There is a corollary to this that we need to derive. According to Vedanta, the very nature of the self is ananda: sat-chit-ananda. When this stored ananda expresses itself outwardly, like a full reservoir that flows through various channels, ananda becomes love. Flowing ananda is love and stored love is ananda. This is advaita philosophy. When this ananda flows out in the form of love, it takes different forms, like water flowing through different rivers. When it flows out and it is tainted by ignorance, the very same pure love takes the form of attachment. Pure love contaminated is attachment. When that very same pure love faces obstacles, it takes the form of hatred. As Krishna says in the Gita (3.37):

It is this desire. It is this anger. It is born of rajo-guna. It is insatiable and very sinful. Know this to be an enemy of this life.

Desire turns into anger when the desire is thwarted. A mother might say: “I love my child so much that I want the child to follow certain disciplines and rules.” But when the child doesn’t follow these, the same loving mother becomes angry with the child. Similarly, pure love may get converted into anger, jealousy (e.g., when the neighbor’s child gets higher grades than my child). Jealousy, anger, hatred—all these foul emotions—are flowing love. How can love be like that? Because the pure water gets polluted along the way. But that very same water, if purified through processing, becomes potable. Therefore, when pure love flows through ignorance, it takes on all these negative manifestations. But when the love becomes purified through self-knowledge, that love becomes compassion, that love becomes caring, that love becomes moral support, that love becomes empathy, that love becomes affection, that love becomes desireless devotion—reverence toward the Lord who helped me to attain that self-knowledge. We all have love. Nobody needs to produce love; love is nothing but stored up ananda. And because ananda is our nature, love is innately there in all of us, but so often in a polluted form. Even in dvaita bhakti, when we have bhakti toward the Lord, it is not pure love because we are expecting something in return. Imagine a woman who is desperate for a child and prays to the Lord. And when the Lord replies: “I will come to your home,” she says: “I want a baby, not you. I don’t mind you coming, but please come in the form of a child.” This is why arta bhakti and artharthi bhakti are impure; they are full of desire and ulterior motive. Narada is saying that we have polluted love, and this polluted love is our sadhana. By

various methods we have to convert it into pure love. Thus, dvaita bhakti is sadhanam and advaita bhakti is sadhyam. Love is the means and love is the end.

Sutra 31. This is illustrated by the examples of a king, a royal palace, a meal, and so forth.

Narada wants to give an example to show how bhakti can be an end in itself. The common ignorant person knows bhakti only as a means. Whenever we do namaskara to the Lord as an arta or artharthi bhakta, what immediately comes to mind is all our problems or various personal, professional, and family needs. Many people have difficulty even comprehending the idea of bhakti as an end-in-itself. Only a self-realized person knows what this is all about. Therefore, Narada wants to give a down-to-earth example, and he uses the example of dinner in a royal palace. We can think of it as dinner at the President's home. Being invited to dine at the White House is not an ordinary event; it is a rare and glorified event. Normally, when we eat it is simply a means of removing hunger. But if we are invited to **dinner at the White House**, we consider it to be an extraordinary accomplishment in which hunger-removal is merely a by-product. I want to be absolutely certain the event is photographed, and that I appear in the photos. So a meal that's normally a means to an end becomes an end-in-itself. Similarly, bhakti can become an end in itself. This is further explained in the next sutra.

Sutra 32. A king is not satisfied merely by seeing a palace, nor can someone satisfy his hunger just by looking at a meal.

The President is not honored by an ordinary person's visit; in fact, he may not even know who attended the event. Similarly, Bhagavan is not going to say: "I am honored by your bhakti." Bhakti is not for Bhagavan's pleasure. The President is not inviting people for the sake of removing their hunger; if this were the aim, he would invite the most destitute people in the country. So even though hunger will be removed as a result of the meal, it is not the primary aim. The eating is its own honor and accomplishment. Similarly, advaita bhakti should be sought after and accomplished as its own end and not for any other purpose.

Sutra 33. For this reason only, seekers of liberation should take to devotion.

It is interesting that despite the necessary role of knowledge, Narada does not explicitly give it credit. This doesn't concern us because we know full well that knowledge plays a role, and we also know that knowledge neither produces advaita bhakti nor converts dvaita bhakti to advaita bhakti. The role of knowledge is simply to remove the obstacles that prevent dvaita bhakti from naturally becoming the advaita bhakti that is our nature. If non-duality is our nature, then sat-chit-ananda is also our nature. And if sat-chit-ananda is our nature, love is also our nature. Therefore, advaita bhakti is our nature. Knowledge plays more of an undoing role by removing the obstacles to our discovering this. When the obstacles are removed, advaita bhakti is realized. The same applies to moksha. Initially we do a big publicity stunt and say that knowledge leads to moksha, but we later withdraw that statement saying that knowledge does not actually give moksha. So is knowledge useless then? No. Knowledge doesn't give moksha because moksha needn't be given; moksha happens to be our nature. Then what is the role of knowledge? It removes the obstacles to our claiming our nature and the ultimate destination of advaita bhakti. This is why Narada concludes in the 33rd Sutra that advaita bhakti alone must be sought after and accomplished by all seekers of liberation.

The next question that may arise is: How can Narada say that seekers of moksha should seek advaita bhakti? Moksha seekers should seek moksha. To this, Narada would respond: advaita bhakti and moksha are one and the same. Advaita bhakti is love of the Lord, which is equal to love of myself, which is equal to love of the world. Advaita bhakti is defined as that love of God, which is equal to self-love, which is equal to universal love, meaning in equal intensity and without gradation. As much intense love as I have for God, I also have for myself and for the whole universe. Advaita bhakti is complete and unconditional love for jiva, jagat, and Isvara, and it is born of admiration. Love is always preceded by admiration. In advaita bhakti, I admire God and I have equal admiration for myself. I never degrade myself. If I can chant in praise of God, I can do the same for myself, without any reservation.

And I can equally admire this universe, too. Thus, advaita bhakti is equal love and admiration of jiva, jagat, and Isvara because I know these are just three names for one and the same sat-chit-ananda brahma. I love God because love is my nature. Flowing ananda is love and stored love is ananda. This is advaita bhakti. This is moksha. And Narada says: “May you work to attain that.” Narada’s statement tallies with the prasthanatrayam, which tells us the same thing. For example, the Bhagavad Gita, 3.17:

Suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, is happy with the self alone, and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for this person.

And the Mundaka Upanishad (3.1.4):

With every breath, a kriyavan sharply watches the indwelling self, which is nothing less than the universal self.

Chapter 3: The Means for Discovering Bhakti, Sutras 34-50

Sutra 34. Great teachers have declared the means for achieving advaita bhakti.

The focus of the 3rd Chapter is sadhana, various disciplines and exercises that will take us to advaita bhakti. We already know that the overarching sadhana for advaita bhakti is dvaita bhakti, and we have distinguished between the informal and formal types. We have also established that informal dvaita bhakti is optional for those predisposed to practicing it, whereas formal dvaita bhakti is mandatory. This is a fundamental difference between the bhakti view and the Vedantic view. Bhakti schools of philosophy say that formal dvaita bhakti is optional, but Vedanta darshanam does not accept this: we say that formal dvaita bhakti cannot be evaded. The argument and underlying rationales for this are given in the Brahma Sutras, but we won’t get into those discussions here.

In the following sutra, Narada wants to talk about formal dvaita bhakti. This is a topic discussed at length in the 7th Chapter of the Gita, where we are told that the first level of dvaita bhakti is arta bhakti (i.e., devotion practiced by the distressed devotee who seeks the grace of God to solve his or her problems), and the next level is artharthi bhakti (i.e., devotion practiced by someone who propitiates God to gain worldly prosperity). These forms of formal dvaita bhakti are accepted initially, but we must eventually graduate to the third level, jijnasu bhakti. The jijnasu seeks the grace of God in order to attain wisdom through Vedantic study. Krishna warns that we must go through arta, artharthi, and jijnasu bhakti, and having come to jijnasu bhakti, which is still dvaita bhakti, we have to nourish the inquirer. Initially the inquirer is feeble. He or she has desire, but experiences some difficulty in implementing it. For this desire to crystallize into action, the desire to attend the classes and study Vedanta must be nourished, and the way to do so is given in a very important mantra from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.22):

The brahmanas seek to know it through the study of the Vedas, sacrifices, charity, and austerity consisting of dispassionate enjoyment of sense objects.

Thus, we have to graduate from arta to artharthi to jijnasu bhakti, all of which fall under dvaita bhakti. And when we come to jijnasu bhakti, karma yoga becomes very important because it nourishes the desire for learning. Karma yoga turns the spark of desire into a burning ember. The Vedantasara¹² conveys the intensity of the desire by giving the example of a man whose hair has caught fire:

Just as a man carrying a load of wood on his head that has caught fire would immediately jump into a pond to quench the flames, so will the

¹² *The Essence of Vedanta*, a 15th-century Vedantic text written by Sadananda Yogendra **Saraswati**.

qualified student, scorched by the mad pains of the fire of samsara, its births, deaths, and self-deluding futility, go rushing to a competent guru, who having himself discovered moksha now abides in serene and uninterrupted consciousness of the essence of imperishable being, ready to serve and prepared to obey in every way.

The desire for self-knowledge should become so intense that one will follow karma yoga and upasana yoga, thereby increasing the desire for knowledge as well as the capability to receive that knowledge. Many students say to the guru: “I have desire, but I don’t really understand what you are saying.” This is of no use. One needs both the desire for knowledge and qualification for receiving that knowledge. In all the following sutras in this chapter, Narada addresses all aspects of formal dvaita bhakti, and how they must ultimately culminate in jnani bhakti, for as it says in the Bhagavad Gita, 7.18:

Among these bhaktas, the man of wisdom who is always engaged exclusively in devotional service is superior.

Sutra 35. One achieves bhakti by giving up sense gratification and worldly associations.

In this sutra, Narada saying that much of humanity is in the grip of delusion. All are drunk. All are deluded and confused about what they want and how to get it. Everyone wants peace, security, and happiness: PSH. We are constantly seeking PSH in one way or another without a clear understanding of their reliable source. In ignorance, we run around grasping at things. We accumulate and possess and hold onto so many worldly things without recognizing that none of them is a reliable source of PSH. The world has beauty, it has variety, and it has novelty, but it doesn’t have stability. It is like a cardboard chair. Not knowing this fact is called delusion. We want to increase our possessions and expand our port, so we wind up with a set-up cluttered with too many things, expecting them to give us PSH. The fact is that not only can these things not give us the peace, security, and happiness we seek, they actually create more bondage.

Therefore, the first thing we have to do is to reduce the clutter, which we don’t want to give up. Consider garage sales. All the possessions that someone no longer wants are put out for others to browse and buy. In time the new owners of these things also come to find them useless, and wind up selling them at their own garage sales. All this stuff winds up traveling from garage to garage—the human mind just cannot seem to let go of stuff. We forget the famous railway slogan: travel light and make your journey pleasurable. This value is called freedom from possessiveness and dependency. And here, Narada is saying: drop things, reduce things, allow your life to be less cluttered because this nourishes dvaita bhakti. When we reduce our possessions, we may initially feel insecure because we were holding onto these things for security. But Narada is saying rather than holding onto things for your security, may you learn to lean more and more on God. The journey should be from world dependence to God-dependence to self-dependence, therefore reduce. And if you should find yourself feeling insecure, hold onto Bhagavan. There is a lovely verse in the Mukundamala Stotra, which says:

Oh my Lord! I have no attachment to religiosity, accumulating wealth, or enjoying sense gratification. Let these come as they inevitably must in accordance with my past deeds. But I do pray for this most cherished boon: birth after birth, let me render unflinching devotional service at your two lotus feet.

Therefore hold onto the feet of the Lord, as opposed to worldly things. Some may say: “We can drop many things, but we cannot drop all things because living requires many things, such as food, clothing, and shelter. And once we have a house, we require so many more things.” It’s true that even a sannyasi has his robes, sandals, and rudraksha mala—nobody can drop everything. Then how do we practice this reduction of worldly possessions? Narada says: by minimizing. Drop the droppable according to your discretion, and with those things you decide to keep, drop the sense of ownership,

becoming the user-cum-caretaker. Become the managing trustee of all “possessions,” including children. This is called abandonment of egoism (the ‘I’-sense) and ownership (the ‘my’-sense). Thus, we must practice renouncing worldly associations in terms of reducing both sense gratification and possessions, which amounts to egoism- and ownership-reduction. This renunciation should come from the heart, not just the lips. It is not a lipstick to be worn for ornamentation, but a wisdom to be lived for self-protection. Therefore, we must learn to depend more on God and less on the world. That is philosophy number one. One may be inclined to argue: “This is easier said than done. How does one do it?” Narada responds: “I knew you would ask this,” and shares the method in the next sutra.

Sutra 36. One achieves bhakti by worshipping the Lord ceaselessly.

This means regular, continuous, and uninterrupted worship or devotional exercises, as prescribed in the formal dvaita bhakti of the scriptures. Krishna discusses these devotional exercises throughout the Gita. For example, in the 3rd Chapter he says (Verse 30):

Offering all actions unto me with a devout mind, fight without expectations, without possessiveness, and without anxiety.

And in the 5th Chapter (Verse 10):

Dedicating actions to the Lord, he who acts without attachment is not affected by papam just as the lotus leaf is not wet by water.

And in the 9th Chapter (Verse 27):

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation, whatever you give in charity, whatever austerity you undertake, dedicate it as an offering to me.

And the 18th Chapter (Verse 58):

With your mind fixed on me, you shall cross over all obstacles by my grace. But if you do not listen due to egoism, you will perish.

Throughout the Gita, these devotional exercises are given, and what they really boil down to is ninefold bhakti from the Bhagavata Purana (7.5.23), which we described earlier:

*sravanam kirtanam vishnoho smaranam padasevanam arcanam
vandanam dasyam sakhyam atmanivedanam.*¹³

Of these exercises, the primary and most important one is sravanam, which means scriptural study, or more precisely, listening to the scripture being unfolded by a competent guru. Unfortunately, nobody in the bhakti schools of philosophy emphasizes this. They talk about remembering the name of the Lord, but they do not promote study of the Gita and other scriptures. And how exactly does sravanam help? We are holding onto worldly things because of delusion. We hold onto a worldly set-up, mistaking it for

¹³ sravanam=listening (to the scriptures); kirtanam=singing or talking about the glory of the Lord; vishnoho=Vishnu and is common to all of them (vishnoho sravanam, vishnoho kirthanam, etc.); smaranam=remembering; padasevanam=serving the Lord, or the temples of the Lord, or the world (an expression of vishvarupa-Isvara); arcanam=uttering the name of the Lord and offering flowers; vandanam=prostrating or putting namaskara; dasyam=serving the Lord by living a life that is in keeping with scriptural prescriptions and injunctions; sakhyam=finding time to cultivate friendship with the Lord; atmanivedanam=surrendering egoism and ownership to the Lord.

a reliable source of PSH. All delusion is born of ignorance, so to be rid of delusion we must get rid of ignorance; to be rid of ignorance, we require knowledge; and to acquire knowledge, we must study the scriptures. I am not referring to advaita scriptures here, but rather, scriptures that talk about jiva-jagat-Isvara. I should ask myself: “Between Isvara and jagat, which is more reliable? Is the cause more reliable or is the effect more reliable? Is the cause permanent or is the effect permanent? Is water more permanent or is a wave more permanent?” Please don’t say a wave! The effect is always impermanent.

In the Mundaka Upanishad there is a discussion of the four features of the cause and four features of effect. We learn that the cause is one alone (*eka*), essential (*sara*), eternal (*nitya*), and true (*satya*), whereas the effect, is multiple, inessential, fleeting, and unreal. An effect doesn’t have an independent existence; it borrows its existence from the cause. Therefore, for my peace, security, and happiness, should I depend on worldly things, which are effects, or should I hold onto their cause? The jagat, or creation, is multifarious, unreal, fleeting, and unreal. Isvara, the cause, alone is eternal. Therefore, if I want to hold onto a source of PSH, I should hold onto God, not the world. Isvara is the substance, whereas the world is name and form. As it says in the Chandogya Upanishad, 6.1.4:

All modifications of clay are only names based on words, the truth being that all is clay.

The clay is permanent, not the pot, and to really appreciate this we have to study the Bhagavad Gita. The crux of the teaching from Chapters 7 through 12 is: Isvara is reliable and the world is unreliable. Therefore, use the worldly set-up to come to God, and use God to come to peace, security, and happiness. Instead, we find ourselves praying to God for a worldly set-up. Can you see the irony in this? We are praying to God for a worldly set-up and then we want to use this worldly set-up to attain peace, security, and happiness. We want to go from God, to the world, to PSH: this is called desirous devotion. The intelligent approach is to go from the world, to God, to PSH, or desireless devotion. To put it simply, we must learn to rely more and more on God and less and less on the world. If anybody ever asks: on whom do you depend for your future? Never name any family member. We are not criticizing family members or questioning their intentions and love. But unfortunately, even their own lives are not in their hands. They may have the best of intentions, but one day they will be gone and we will find that the person who promised to protect me is out of the picture. Therefore, if anybody asks: “In whom do you trust? Say: “I trust God.”

When we study scripture, the first thing we notice is that our relationship is primarily with the Lord because paramatma is the cause and jivatma is the effect. Of course, we are not talking from the non-dual perspective here, but from what’s known as the triangular (i.e., jiva-jagat-Isvara) format, or apparent duality. From this angle, paramatma and jivatma have a cause-and-effect relationship. This relationship between Isvara and me is fundamental and distinct from all other relationships because it continues from birth to birth, whereas my relationships with family members or community—between any one jiva and another—are limited. Even parents and children get separated after some time, winding up in different countries. All human relationships are time-bound. Even the longest relationship between two human beings can only last for one lifetime, so there is no question of a permanent relationship between one effect and another, but the relationship between cause and effect is lasting. We must clearly assimilate this. What is more reliable our relationship with Isvara or with other jivas? If we are forced to choose between the support of the ocean and that of a wave, which would we consider more reliable? Certainly not the wave, which is subject to arrival and departure. Therefore, we need to stabilize the jiva-Isvara relationship day in and day out through various devotional exercises. The more I study scripture, the more I understand why I should hold onto God instead of holding onto others and getting frustrated and disappointed, and I begin to rely on Isvara alone. Bhakti in the form of sravana is thus a crucial exercise through which I come to discover that my relationship with God is more fundamental than any other relationship, and that God is more reliable than any blessed thing in the creation. The more deeply I understand this, the more I nourish my devotion.

Nourishing our relationship with Isvara is quite straightforward: we do it by simulating all the same things we naturally do to nourish our relationships with other loved ones. When we feel close to another person, we want to be in constant contact. We search for opportunities to be together more often. We remember the important occasions in the other person's life, regularly sending well wishes and cards. We are continuously relating, be it verbally, through gift-giving, or by spending time together. These are all the ways two human beings nourish their relationship. We can apply the same principle to our relationship with Isvara. This is what Narada is referring to in the 36th Sutra, when he talks about worshipping the Lord ceaselessly. In hearing this instruction superficially, one might be inclined to respond: "How can I practice bhakti continuously? Narada may have had time to do this because he didn't have anything else to do, but I have work and a family to take care of. A nice response to this is provided care of the Bhagavad Gita (9.27), when Krishna says:

*Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation,
whatever you give in charity, whatever austerity you undertake, dedicate
that as an offering to me.*

Imagine that every action is a flower and every performance of that action is offering the flower at the feet of the Lord. As a doer, convert every action into a puja through an attitude of offering; it is a like continuous bestowment. The results of actions will keep on coming. Every mosquito bite is a result of karma. But whatever result I receive, I must take it as prasada, which makes it a kind of bestowment. This reverential attitude makes life a ceaseless practice of bhakti. I am fundamentally a bhakta, merely putting on the father costume, the mother costume, the teacher costume, or the student costume for a time. All these roles come and go, but the role of bhakta is fundamental. Therefore, I make bhakti a continuous exercise by turning all my actions into an offering to the Lord and taking all the results of my actions as prasada.

There is an alternative reading of Sutra 36, which can be taken to mean: may you have a non-narrow, or non-circumscribed, bhakti. 'I'- and 'my'-centric bhakti, in which I am only praying for my personal benefit, is what's meant by narrow bhakti. Narada is cautioning us to avoid this trap and broaden our bhakti to desireless bhakti; let it be with no other motive than pure appreciation of the glories of the Lord. The 10th Chapter of the Gita is exclusively dedicated to describing this motiveless, expectationless admiration of the Lord in the form of every glory in the creation. Krishna says (Gita, 10.41):

*Whatever being is there which is glorious, rich, or powerful, may you
recognize that to be born out of a portion of my splendour.*

Even when you see a small insect, appreciate the glory of the Lord in it. The highest bhakti is motiveless appreciation of the glory of the Lord, and if at all you want to have a motive, let it be a pure, expanded motive, known as unreserved devotion. And what do pure motive and unreserved devotion look like? The following shantipath mantra gives us an idea:

*May all be prosperous and happy.
May all be free from illness.
May all see what is spiritually uplifting.
May no one suffer.
Om shanti, shanti, shanti.*

O Lord I have only one wish: that everybody be happy. Other than that, I have no other expectations. Such continuous and desireless bhakti will lead to spiritual growth by gradually diluting the sense of egoism and ownership. In practicing this bhakti, attachment to the body-mind and to family—arguably

the most difficult thing to drop—will automatically get diluted. Devotion free of ownership and ego as described in the 12th Chapter of the Gita is the jnani's bhakti. This is our goal.

Sutra 37. One achieves bhakti by hearing and talking about the Supreme Lord's special qualities, even while being engaged in the world.

Here, Narada is saying: try to maintain this devotional attitude in the presence of others. Do not only practice this personally, but in the company of others create an atmosphere of glorification of the Lord. As Krishna says in the Gita (10.9):

Fixing the mind and senses on me, mutually sharing the knowledge about me, and speaking of me, they are always contented and delighted.

A true bhakta will cease any opportunity to talk about the glories of the Lord. May you seek such company and may you seek such an opportunity, and if the opportunity does not readily present itself, try to create it. Some might think this sounds very idealistic and impractical. At social get-togethers, people discuss all manner of subjects and it is also an ideal time for gossip. Where is the place for talking about the glories of the Lord? Social get-togethers are indeed the place. According to scripture, when we talk about the virtues and accomplishments of other people, we should recognize these in our minds as the virtues of Isvara alone. So even if I'm talking about a great scientist and his ingenious invention, I know that it is really Isvara's glory. I am talking about the glory of the Lord expressed through that scientist. And if I'm appreciating someone's beauty, it is also the beauty of the Lord expressed through a person. Accordingly, the instruction is to talk about the glories of others, remembering them always to be the glories of the Lord. Conversely, we should never talk about the wickedness or weaknesses of others, which are juicy and tempting topics. However tempting this may be, we should make an effort to look for the virtues in every blessed person. Talk about others' strengths, remembering that these are all expressions of the Lord. In short, avoid speaking ill of others. When we talk about the virtues of the virtuous, it amounts to chanting the Lord's glories and when we encourage people to talk about the virtues of others, it amounts to listening to the glories of the Lord. Therefore, we must focus on talking about virtues and inspiring others to talk about virtues. And whenever gossip or the vices of others arise as topics of conversation, we must skillfully change the subject or look at our watches and bid a hasty farewell. We should always have a plan in place to avoid gossip. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna emphasizes the importance of non-calumny, avoiding fault-finding or talking about the weaknesses of others. So in social situations, talk about Isvara directly if they are also bhaktas; otherwise talk about Isvara indirectly by highlighting the good things in other people. If you talk about the glory of the ant you recently saw in a National Geographic film, this too is Isvara. This is another method for nourishing bhakti.

Sutra 38. However, by associating primarily with great souls through the Lord's mercy, one develops bhakti.

Although Narada has shared various techniques maintaining bhakti amid all types of people, doubts about whether these techniques are practicable are bound to come up. Indeed, it takes great intelligence and skill to enter into social interactions without mental pollution or contamination, regardless of the type of people with whom we interact. In Sutra 38, Narada says the best method is satsanga: association with other great souls who have perfected the techniques of speaking kindly of others, avoiding speaking ill of others (remembering that all beings are a manifestation of Isvara's glory), learning how to skillfully change the topic or quietly slip out whenever gossip surfaces. We learn most skills through observation. Narada considers satsanga, association with wise people who know how to manage these skills well, to be a very important sadhana for nourishing bhakti. Satsanga is discussed at length in the scriptures. In this text alone, Narada focuses on satsanga and its significance in five sutras (38-42). He tells us to find time to spend with mahatmas; they need not be jnanis, but

simply devotees who are committed to living according to the same values. As Shankaracharya says (Bhaja Govindam, Verse 9):

Being in the company of those who listen to, reflect upon, and assimilate the truth leads to non-attachment. Non-attachment leads to freedom from delusion. Freedom from delusion leads to steadiness of mind. Steadiness of mind leads to liberation.

Honing the skill of being in the world while keeping the mind pure is not easily, especially in a society where the topic always seems to turn to materialism. As somebody once said, it is like the soft tongue having to manage amid 32 hard teeth. The teeth are among the hardest parts of the body and the tongue is one of the softest. The tongue lies between 16 hard teeth above and 16 hard teeth below; it has no satsanga. The tongue constantly has to move while we speak and eat without getting bitten. Once in a while, it does get bitten, which is quite painful, but it generally manages well. Therefore, may you be skilled like the tongue and avoid getting bitten by a materialistic mindset and materialistic topics. Developing this skill requires the grace of the Lord; good friendship is a rare and great blessing, and the company of mahatmas is rarer still. In his work Niti Shatakam,¹⁴ the poet Bhartrihari says: "The type of person with whom you associate will heavily influence your future. Therefore, don't take it lightly." To illustrate this idea, he gives three examples. To check whether a hot plate is sufficiently hot, the cook will sprinkle some water on it. The very instant the water droplet hits the hot plate, it evaporates without leaving a trace. That very same droplet of water, when sitting atop a lotus leaf in a pond, gives off the glow of a pearl. So whereas in the first example the water droplet's association with the hot plate had a destructive effect, in the second example (association with the lotus) imparted a glow. Of course, this glow is only temporary. The moment the next gust of wind comes, the droplet will be blown off the leaf. So Bhartrihari gives a third example, which is based on a belief in the Hindu tradition. It is said that when a droplet of rainwater falls onto an oyster shell on the day of Swati Nakshatra¹⁵ it turns into a pearl. So unlike the case of association with the lotus, in which the water droplet had a pearly glow only temporarily, here the water droplet becomes a pearl for good because of its sanga with the oyster shell. Thus, three different types of company result in three different outcomes. So the complete verse is (Bhartrhari's Niti Shatakam, Verse 67):

You cannot even notice a hint of a drop of water fallen on a hot iron. The same drop shines like a pearl on a lotus leaf. And when the drop of water, under the Swati Nakshatra, falls under a seashell, it becomes a pearl. Excellent, average, and bad states of a person depend upon the company she keeps.

Therefore, choose your friends carefully. You can have acquaintance with many people, but thick friendship should be chosen wisely. By associating primarily with great souls, one can become that pearl called a jivanmukta.

Sutra 39. The association of great souls is rarely obtained, difficult to understand, and infallible.

There is a catch. Even though satsanga is great, it is difficult to attain because wise people are very rare in this world. Therefore, association with mahatmas is difficult to attain, almost unfathomable. So deep is its glory that it is incomprehensible and indescribable; one must experience it in order to fully discover and appreciate its value. It is like the flavor of a ripe mango: how can this possibly be

¹⁴ *Niti* means ethics and *shatakam* means 100 verses.

¹⁵ According to Vedic astrology, the 360 degrees of zodiac consisting of 12 constellations are divided into 27 nakshatras, or lunar mansions, each measuring 13.20' (13 degrees and 20 minutes). Swati nakshatra is one of them.

described in words? But it is also infallible, which is to say, it is certain to convert a non-bhakta into a bhakta, an atheist into a theist. Thereafter, the bhakta will be gradually transformed from an artha bhakta to an artharthi bhakta, then through the same satsanga into a jijnasu bhakti, and finally into a jnani bhakta. Materialistic people's efforts are full of failures, but satsanga never fails, it is infallible. Therefore, hold onto it and whatever you do, don't give it up. As Krishna warns in the Gita (9.12):

These indiscriminate ones are full of vain hopes, vain pursuits, and vain knowledge. They take to rajasic and tamasic nature, which deludes them.

Narada seems to be disappointing us in the last two Sutras. In the 38th Sutra, he tells us satsanga is fantastic. In the 39th Sutra, he says it is incomprehensible, indescribable, and unailing. He glorifies satsanga and just as we are becoming enthusiastic about it, he tells us that it is rarely obtained. So if it is unavailable, what to do? Narada himself gives a solution in the next Sutra:

Sutra 40. The association of great souls can be obtained, but only by the grace of the Lord.

He says that even this association with great souls can be obtained by the grace of the Lord. Therefore, pray to the Lord for such associations. And how is that grace obtained? Although it is not said here, we can add that it is obtained through prayer and worship. Desire for spiritual growth and association with spiritual people come through the grace of the Lord, which is, in turn, accomplished through prayer. As Shankaracharya says in Verse 3 of Vivekachudamani:

These three blessings are rare, difficult to achieve, and attained only by the grace of God: A human birth, the desire for liberation, and association with a great sage.

In this 3rd Chapter, Narada is focusing on formal dvaita bhakti, the scripture-based dvaita bhakti of the prasthanatrayam that is primarily expounded upon in the Bhagavad Gita. Formal dvaita bhakti is generally taken to include the five major rituals for inner purification that fall under sattvic actions (collectively termed *pancha maha-yajnas*; *pancha* means five, *maha* means great, and *yajna* means sacrifices), as well as the values enumerated in the Gita. In broadest terms, formal dvaita bhakti takes the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga. In addition, Narada is taking several sutras to highlight the important role of satsanga, or association with satpurushas (wise people) and mahatmas. And what exactly is a mahatma? A mahatma is one who is keenly aware of the Vedic tradition. Those who are only acquainted with the non-Vedic scriptures and traditions and informal dvaita bhakti practices cannot be considered mahatmas because without knowledge of the Vedic tradition, they will be limited to talking about the bhakti schools of philosophy, which views dualistic devotion as both the means and the end, and considers informal dvaita bhakti a direct means of liberation. These schools of philosophy tend to vehemently assert that Vedantic study is not required and even go to the extent of saying that Vedantic study is an obstacle. With this context in mind, we should take satsanga to mean association with mahatmas who understand the teachings of the scriptures to be the primary means (*pramanam*), and who remain in harmony with Shankaracharya's Upanishadic-based method of teaching. The Kaivalya Upanishad clearly proclaims that there is no means of liberation other than knowledge of the identity between jivatma and paramatma. That is the essence of the Vedic tradition. These days, spiritual teachers and teachings are springing up like mushrooms, taking us away from traditional Vedanta. Therefore, may you have regular association with a wise person who follows the Upanishadic tradition because the value of such satsanga is immeasurable. As Sutra 39 tells us: association with a mahatma is rare because mahatmas themselves are rare, but the value of such association is immeasurable and unailing.

The uniqueness of associating with a traditional mahatma is that initially he will ask devotees to follow karma yoga and so forth, but in time, he will put these same devotees on a course of sravana, manana, nididhyasana. Thus, traditional satsanga will lead a seeker to Vedanta vicara, whereas non-traditional

satsanga will take the seeker away from Vedanta vicara. In traditional satsanga, the bhakta will become more and more curious about studying and reflecting upon the scriptures, whereas in non-traditional satsanga the bhakta will lose interest in scriptural study. Satsanga that promotes scriptural study is genuine and unending because it leads to contemplation of the great Upanishadic statements. There are so many erroneous concepts floating around the spiritual world today, and we need to learn how to differentiate between the genuine ones and the disingenuous ones. In anything we procure, there are spurious versions and it is no different here. We needn't criticize them, this is a very important point, but we should know how to quietly steer clear of them. This is why Narada says that association with great souls is difficult to achieve.

How can one know who is genuine and who is not genuine? Is there any method for discerning this? To be able to do this, I require proper knowledge of the scriptures, but if I had this knowledge, I wouldn't be seeking satsanga in the first place. Thus, how can one tell who is genuine and who is not genuine while he or she is still in twilight? A blind person never knows whether his guide is blind or not. This difficulty is addressed directly in the Upanishads, which tell us that the only thing we can do is pray to God. As is said in Vivekachudamani (Verse 3):

These three blessings are rare, difficult to achieve, and attained only by the grace of God: A human birth, the desire for liberation, and association with a great sage.

This is the basis for Sutra 40, in which Narada says that the companionship of great souls is itself obtained by their (i.e., the great souls') grace. So we find ourselves in a Catch-22: only through association with great souls can we get their divine grace, and only through grace, can we get association with great souls. It is impossible to explain and because it is such a mysterious and unfathomable thing, we pray.

Sutra 41. One can attain bhakti by association with great souls or directly by the Lord's grace because there is no difference between the Lord's grace and those great souls arising from that grace.

Here, Narada is saying that association with great souls is possible only through the grace of the Lord or the grace of those great souls themselves. One might wonder how we can lump the grace of Isvara and the grace of mahatmas into one. The answer to this is that in the non-dual vision of reality, there is no difference between Isvara and a mahatma, because a mahatma is one who has firm self-knowledge and has thus discovered Isvara to be his own self. Even if a mahatma is not a jnani, but a dvaita bhakta, the mahatma still invokes the Lord in his heart all the time. Because Isvara resides in the hearts of mahatmas at all times, there is no difference between them and Isvara. When you do namaskara to Hiranyakashipu¹⁶ the namaskara goes to Hiranyakashipu, but when you do namaskara to Prahlada¹⁷ it never goes to Prahlada because Bhagavan is installed in his heart. This is the difference between namaskara to an ill-natured person and namaskara to a great soul: the former will go to the person, whereas the latter will go to Isvara. As Krishna says (Gita, 10.9):

Fixing the mind and senses on me, mutually sharing the knowledge about me, and speaking of me, they are always contented and delighted.

¹⁶ Hiranyakashipu is a demon from the Puranas whose name is taken to represent one who is fond of wealth and sex.

¹⁷ Prahlada is a saintly boy in the Puranas known for his piety and bhakti to Vishnu.

And (Gita, 11.55):

He who does works for me, who is my devotee, who keeps me as the supreme goal, who is free from attachment, and who is free from hatred toward all reaches me.

Regardless of whether we are talking about a dvaita bhakta or an advaita bhakta, both are mahatmas because they have God in their hearts. Thus, Narada says: there is no difference between Isvara's grace and the grace of those great souls arising from it. There is no difference between the devotee and the object of devotion. Thus, grace is required to obtain the company of a genuine mahatma. (Although the term 'genuine mahatma' is redundant because a mahatma is necessarily genuine, it helps to add the term genuine, referring to one who follows the Vedic tradition as opposed to the bhakti school of philosophy because so much confusion abounds. The latter represents the opposing view and we must avoid falling into that trap).

Sutra 42. That only should be strived for, that only should be strived for.

Given that satsanga is the most important sadhana, gradually taking one to moksha, finding an available mahatma becomes imperative. Whether you know how to search for a genuine mahatma or not, start by putting trust in the Lord or in any mahatma who talks about the Lord. Even if the person belongs to the bhakti school of philosophy and you do not yet know the difference, start by going to them. At one point or another, you will be brought to the Vedantic view. We have to start somewhere. But the one very important criterion is that this person must show devotion to the Lord. As Shankaracharya says in Sadhana Panchakam (Verse 2):

Seek companionship with wise people. Be established in firm devotion to the Lord.

Hold onto Bhagavan all the time and take to satsanga. And because satsanga is such a crucial sadhana, Narada repeats this instruction a second time in Sutra 40. Whether you begin with someone who encourages chanting the name of the Lord, gives a discourse on Puranic stories, or holds a Vedanta class doesn't really matter. Eventually, you will come to know what is what, and you will be able to distinguish between the 1st Stage, the 2nd Stage, and so forth. In time, clarity will come. It does take time but rest assured that Bhagavan will guide you. This is also what Shankaracharya says in Baja Govindam (Verse 9):

From association with wise and virtuous souls (satsanga) comes non-attachment, from non-attachment comes freedom from delusion, from non-delusion comes steadfastness, and from absolute steadfastness comes liberation in this life (jivanmuki).

Sutra 43. One should renounce all kinds of bad association by all means.

Keeping company with wise and virtuous people (satsanga) is one value, but there is a complementary value as well: renouncing association with wicked or ignorant people (duhsanga). We have to practice both. So Narada says: May you renounce association with wicked people and degraded souls. This doesn't mean you should hate them. Hatred must always be avoided because Bhagavan resides even in degraded and demonic people. All means absolutely all. Bhagavan is there in everyone, even a terrorist, but this doesn't mean you should praise and kiss terrorists. Keep a safe distance, but don't hate them either. Instead, offer this prayer:

May the wicked realize their goodness, may the good attain peace, may the peaceful attain liberation, and may the liberated help to set others free.

We must even bring the wicked into our prayers, appreciating that crooked people are not intrinsically bad, but rather, that ignorance has created confusion in them. Therefore, keep your distance from such people, but never hate them. What exactly do we mean by duhsanga? The first condition of satsanga is that the person has faith in Isvara. Avoid association with atheists/materialists, even if their arguments are initially enticing. Until we have studied the scriptures thoroughly and know the truth, atheism may appear attractive. In our tradition, atheism is called *carvaka*,¹⁸ which comes from *caru*, which means attractive, and *vak*, which means speech. Such people will say: “Why do you bother about punya and papa, who has seen these things? Why do you say that dharma will make you happy and adharmas will make you unhappy? Look at the world. It is the adharmic people who are driving it. Only you are getting into trouble. Learn to live practically.” This attitude seems to intensify amid struggle. There is a book called *Does He Know a Mother’s Heart?* in which the author, Arun Shouri, talks about the history of suffering in his family. When suffering piles up, the mind begins to question whether there is justice in the world. The mind begins to question Bhagavan’s compassion. The subtitle of this book is *Suffering Refutes Religion*, and throughout the book the author invokes logic and statistics to question the existence of a compassionate God. The author is highly informed, to be sure. He analyzes Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, then goes on to challenge the existence of God. Narada would advise us to avoid such books until we are well versed in scripture. Therefore, the first condition for satsanga is to keep company with those who have faith in God.

The second condition for satsanga is that the person must respect dharma, or values. The early part of the Vedas should be respected, even though dharma is more mysterious than it is tangible. The third condition is that it is preferable to keep company with a person who values Vedic tradition because the Vedas have an answer for everything. But to gain access to these answers, we must be sure to study the scriptures patiently, systematically, and with thoughtful analysis. Until we do so, we will be shaken. Thus, the three criteria for satsanga are: (1) one who accepts Isvara, (2) one who accepts dharma, and (3) one who accepts Vedic scripture. There are many spiritual teachers who have come up with their own philosophy, which deviates from the Vedas. And should there be any deficiencies in that philosophy, Bhagavan himself will bring you out of the relationship. Therefore Bhagavan and dharma will reject the person who does not fulfill these three criteria. The first two are imperative and the third one is a bonus. Even if the third one is not there, be sure that the first two are. If the first two criteria aren’t there, greet the person politely and promptly go your own way. You may have an acquaintance with this person, but don’t have any thick or long-term interactions with such people. Narada advises that we should do so by all means.

Sutra 44. Material association is the cause of lust, anger, confusion, forgetfulness, loss of intelligence, and total calamity.

Of the two aforementioned values—keeping company with wise and virtuous people and renouncing association with wicked or ignorant people—which should we implement first? The answer is the latter: renouncing duhsanga. Narada does not say this explicitly, but it is worth adding as a side-note. A wise person once said: “Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you what your future will be.” In this spirit, start watching and filtering your friendships and associations. We should start by renouncing duhsanga because this will aid in the discovery of satsanga. One might then pose the counter-question: “What if I don’t renounce such associations? What if I keep company with wise and virtuous souls while maintaining my friendships with materialists?” The answer is simple: you will wind up with one type of spirituality in the morning and another type of spirit in the evening. Narada has given us a clear warning: Even if you don’t yet have associations with wise souls, please renounce your associations with the ignorant. If you don’t have satsanga, you might not progress spiritually; but if you have duhsanga, not only will you not progress spiritually, but you will slip down from whatever level you are at now. Spiritual fall is inevitable because ignorant people do not accept all four aims (puruṣārthas) of

¹⁸ Carvaka darshanam is one of the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy, which rejects spirit and emphasizes materialism and philosophical skepticism.

life: security, pleasure, virtue, and freedom. They only value security and pleasure. Materialists do not recognize virtue or freedom because these two are subtler and not scientifically provable. Materialists value whatever is practically useful. If selfishness is profitable, they take to selfishness. If helping another person is profitable to me, then I will help. Otherwise I won't bother. Because this is their philosophy, their goals will be limited to security and pleasure without paying heed to values. And because such people are given to security and pleasure, when I associate with them unknowingly I also develop desire for material things. As Lord Krishna says in the Gita (2.62-63):

For a person who dwells on the sense objects, a fancy toward them arises. From fancy, desire is born. From desire, anger arises. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, the loss of memory; from the loss of memory, the loss of discrimination; and because of the loss of discrimination, he perishes.

Narada is essentially repeating these verses in Sutra 44. In associating with such people, discussions will center on different types of cars, different types of houses, different types of clothes, and different types of jewelry, and thus desire grows. Morning, noon, and night, the topics of discussion will center on materialism, consumerism, and comparison. Each time someone comes my way, the first thing I notice is the car he drives, or the brand of clothes she is wearing. So Narada says selfish desire, anger, delusion, and forgetting scriptural knowledge (assuming one is studying scripture in the first place) are all inevitable when we retain duhsanga. It is assumed that you are all students of scripture because one of the five great yajnas is brahma yajna, or scriptural study. It is our daily duty. In the Vedic tradition scriptural study is emphasized, whereas bhakti schools of philosophy emphasize chanting the name of the Lord. They are somewhat familiar with the scriptures and will quote them, but they discourage devotees from scriptural study. If we fall into the grip of selfish desire and anger, scriptural study will be forgotten, leading to a weakening of the intellect and spiritual destruction (this latter one is not in the Gita but is supplied by Narada himself). Swami Chinmayananda put it very nicely when he said: "There are three types of people, animal-man, man-man, and God-man. The human being is a man-man. He can grow into a God-man or he can slip into an animal-man. Sliding into desire and anger converts a man-man into an animal-man." Therefore, Narada's advice is whether or not you follow satsanga, may you begin by dropping duhsanga.

There are essentially two types of duhsanga. The first is the type that discourages Vedanta. We must always bear in mind that the Vedas include both the Karma Kanda and the Jnana Kanda, and the former is meant as a stepping-stone to the latter. If we start drifting from Vedanta, the Karma Kanda becomes redundant and meaningless. In short, anything that takes us away from Vedanta can be considered duhsanga. The second type of duhsanga is association with people who prioritize material wealth and physical pleasure over virtue and freedom. How do we differentiate a materialistic person from a non-materialistic one? Those who have four aims in life (i.e., security, pleasure, virtue, and freedom) fall within the Vedic tradition, which accepts all four as important. Materialistic people accept only two: security and pleasure. They reject dharma, and of course they reject moksha. Narada warns us that when we associate with such people we unwittingly slide down. As Krishna says (Gita, 2.62-2.63):

For a person who dwells on the sense objects, a fancy toward them arises. From fancy, desire is born. From desire, anger arises. From anger arises delusion. From delusion, the loss of memory. From the loss of memory, the loss of discrimination. Because of the loss of discrimination, he perishes.

Sutra 45. Rising like waves from material association, these bad effects amass into a great ocean of misery.

Here, Narada gives us another warning: All defects of the mind—desire, anger, delusion, and losing sight of our spiritual goal and faculty of discrimination—do not appear in their full scale initially. They

gradually build in us without our knowledge or awareness. They are like a disease with no obvious signs or symptoms, until we go for a test and learn that it has already become full-blown. Similarly, these rajasic and tamasic traits do not come on suddenly. Consider anger: the more you dwell on it (e.g., “he said this, she said that”), the more it grows into rage or even hatred. Therefore, Narada warns that although these negative tendencies may initially appear like a small ripple in the ocean, when fanned by the wind they can gradually grow into a huge tidal wave or tsunami. Desire does not start very strong and if we catch it early, we can nip it in the bud. But if we repeatedly dwell on the sense object that is evoking the desire, it becomes fully nourished. Thereafter, attachment becomes so powerful that we find ourselves unable to give up the object. Initially we may say: “Oh, that’s nice, that is attractive,” an objective sort of statement. Then we say: “It is worth having.” And then: “I desperately want it.” Until finally it is: “Without this, I cannot even survive.” These are the four stages of every rajasic or tamasic tendency and they are bound to unfold, not by themselves, but with our cooperation and collusion. The scriptures say that we must take care to set an intention while we are still in the first stage. As the old proverb says: Treat a loose stitch in time and you save the entire cloth. If we do not nip desire in the bud, the pressure created by it can become very difficult to handle. Therefore, even though desire, anger, delusion, losing sight of our spiritual goals, and the faculty of discrimination may initially appear like feeble ripples, through continued association they become like a swelling ocean or tidal wave. Hence, the advice of Sutra 43 to forever avoid the company of those who are a bad influence.

Sutra 46. Who can cross beyond maya? Who can cross beyond maya? One who abandons material association, serves the sages, and becomes selfless.

Associating with wise and virtuous people and avoiding ignorant and materialistic people are both crucially important for the devotee-cum-spiritual aspirant. Only in doing so can this person cross over delusion, which is the cause of samsara. Maya is a powerful temptress that can easily deceive us. This is exactly why Krishna warns (Gita, 7.14):

This divine maya of mine consisting of three gunas is indeed difficult to cross over. Only those who surrender to me cross over this maya.

Narada diverges from this slightly in saying: “You may want to surrender to God, but when you look around, you don’t see God anywhere. Therefore, surrender to the mahatma for this is as good as surrendering to Bhagavan. Thus by surrendering to a wise person (i.e., the guru) one will cross over maya. Narada himself asks the question: who will cross over maya? And because it is such an important question, he repeats it. Then to answer it, he offers a set of rules, for becoming an intelligent dvaita bhakta and coming to advaita bhakti, beginning with Sutra 46 and ending with Sutra 49. And in the 50th Sutra, he says: whoever follows these instructions will cross over. Narada asks the question twice and repeats the answer twice. He assures us that one can and will cross over provided these instructions are carefully followed.

The first instruction Narada offers is: watch your friends and associations. What do they do to pass the time? Do they gather to praise Bhagavan or do they prefer to gamble and gossip? If you belong to the latter type of group, renounce it today. The second instruction is: either associate with a jnani bhakta, the ideal scenario, or at the very least with a jijnasu bhakta. Association with arta and artharthi bhaktas is not advisable because they use religion to serve their own worldly needs, such as solving family problems, financial problems, or professional problems. Religion is not meant for such purposes. This is akin to bringing Ganga water home from Panch Prayag¹⁹ and then using it to clean the toilet. Sure you can do this, it is water after all. But when you’ve brought this holy water all the way home, it is meant for a higher purpose. Religion and bhakti are not meant for solving worldly problems and attaining success in worldly pursuits; this is an underutilization of religion. Thus, a spiritual seeker should gradually scale

¹⁹ An expression used to connote a holy place in Uttarakhand in the Himalayas where five sacred rivers meet.

back arta and artartha bhakti and come to jijnasu bhakti, acquiring the wisdom and fortitude to accept the results of karma. And we should not only be jijnasu bhaktas, but also associate with jijnasu bhaktas, who are religious spiritualists rather than religious materialists. Spiritual growth means using religion to obtain the fourfold qualification for Vedanta vichara; one who does this is called a jijnasu bhakta and is noble-minded. Apprehension, direct perception, and fruition of the self is glory, so may you increase your companionship with jijnasu bhaktas and jnani bhaktas. The third rule is something Lord Krishna repeatedly discusses in the Gita. Reduce your sense of ownership by handing over every object to Bhagavan. May you see yourself as the caretaker of your family and possessions. We don't want you to be careless, but be a caretaker instead of an owner. Drop ownership by repeatedly dwelling upon the Lord in all such forms, and let that prayer come from your innermost heart. I own nothing. At the time of sannyasa, a sannyasi gets completely naked, throwing away all of his clothes. And thereafter, through self-inquiry, he hands over his body to Bhagavan as well. So give up the house, the clothes, and the body. We can use things, but we should see ourselves only as leasees. And what is the length of the contract? Prarabdham. We can use things for the duration of prarabdham only, but not after that. As the old proverb says:

*Cattle, wife, children, and home are the result of previous birth bondage.
Once the debt is annihilated there is no relationship and hence end of
suffering in this samsara.*

We must understand this debt to mean a contract. Because of some prarabdha contract, we are related to different people as husband, wife, children, grandchildren, and so forth—they are all prarabdha contract-based and last only until the contract runs out. Let it be clear that the children are not yours. It is a disturbing fact, but it is a fact nonetheless. Nothing is yours. If you consider yourself a real bhakta, this point needs to register clearly. Fake bhakti is used for getting things, whereas real bhakti is used for giving things up. To determine whether your bhakti is real or fake, ask yourself: Do I use bhakti to get things or do I use it to give things up? The more I use bhakti to get things, the more I misuse it. I am moving in the wrong direction. As Krishna says to Arjuna (Gita, 18.66):

*Having renounced all actions, seek me, the non-dual, as shelter. I shall
liberate you from all sins. Do not grieve.*

This is not a physical giving up, but a mental and attitudinal abandonment of the 'I'-sense and 'my'-sense.

Sutra 47. [Who can cross beyond maya?] That person who stays in a secluded place, cuts off attachment to mundane society at the root, becomes free from the influence of the three gunas, and gives up craving for material gain and security.

We can see that Narada has been borrowing heavily from the Gita up to this point. And in Sutra 47, Narada incorporates several disciplines from the Gita. The first instruction is: Take to seclusion once in a while, away from those things that you are used to having all the time. When we get so used to having things all the time, like our cell phones, the sense of ownership is strengthened until it becomes an integral part of us. We think we are willing to renounce everything, but we won't renounce our cell phones ("I will put it in silent mode and only look at it"). We become hooked on so many things, many of which begin as luxuries but quickly morph into necessities. We travel from dependence to more dependence. Once in a while, we should practice dropping these things to see whether we can be without them for a few days.

There was a retirement home run by a Swami who wanted to help senior citizens by getting them to break away from certain habits and engage in more spiritual activities. In this spirit, the retirement home had a no-TV policy. Most of the rooms in this home remained vacant because nobody could stand the thought of being without television. Why can't we take to seclusion, without the TV, radio, newspaper, or

cell phone? When I used to hold Vedanta camps, you should have seen people's struggle to hold onto their newspapers and phones. They were unwilling to renounce these things for just seven days. How attached we become! Therefore, Narada says: May you learn to be without things for some time.

This same instruction appears in the 13th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, wherein Krishna says (13.11):

...seclusion, non-indulgence in the company of others.

It also appears in the 18th Chapter (Verse 52):

Resorting to a secluded place, taking limited food, restraining the speech, the body, and the mind, taking to detachment, one should be ever devoted to dhyana yoga.

Narada's instructions are getting tougher and tougher. The next instruction is: Learn to be in silence, without the contact or company of another person for some time. We see this instruction in the Bhagavad Gita (6.10) as well, when Krishna says:

Remaining alone in solitude with a restrained mind and body, without any desire, and without any possession, a yogi should constantly engage the mind in meditation.

What typically happens is that we are physically alone without actually being alone. As we can so often see when we walk down the street, people constantly have their cell phones glued to their ears. We insist on constantly talking to one person or another. Why can't we observe silence for even a day? Therefore, we must examine whether it is possible for us to snap our connections with others for a time, because ultimately in sannyasa, one does so for good. Narada is not asking us to do this permanently, just to try it for a day or two, or even a week, a temporary practice of sannyasa. When Swami Chinmayananda used to conduct his Vedanta camps, he would ask the campers to take solitary walks during the breaks to reflect upon the teachings. And what did people do? They would leave the ashram alone, but they would have made prior arrangements to meet up with their friends and spouses as soon as they got outside. They couldn't walk alone for even an hour. This is known as the problem of attachment, and giving up attachment is not an easy thing. But Krishna advises us to do the same (Gita, 13.10): *Dispassion and non-identification with son, wife, house, etc.* Relinquishing attachments to our kin can be quite painful, but spiritual growth involves such pain. If we want to grow out of our sense of individuality and embrace universality, the sense of egoism and ownership must be loosened. The good news is that very little needs to be done; the behavior of our loved ones will gradually reduce our attachment on their own. We need only to cooperate with Bhagavan. By the time we are old, all the people in our lives will have all taught us what detachment is. Therefore, Narada says: May we learn to live without family members, friends, and other relations, for the one who uproots attachment to people crosses over.

Narada's final instruction in this verse is: Learn to be free from all worldly desires other than moksha. This phrase is borrowed from a pillar verse in the Gita (2.45), which is the essence and foundation of karma yoga:

The Vedas deal with the world of three gunas. Be free from the desire for the world of three gunas. Be free from the hold of the pairs of opposites. Be ever established in sattva-guna. Be free from the concern for acquisition and preservation. Be mindful.

In the original rendering of this verse, Krishna uses the Sanskrit words *nistraigunya* and *niryogaksema*, both of which are introduced by Narada in Sutra 47. *Nistraigunya* is a technical word that Shankaracharya defines as: a karma yogi who is following the Karma Kanda of the Veda in preparation

to enter the Jnana Kanda. The Karma Kanda can be followed with different motives: it can be followed for the worldly results of action, or it can be followed as a stepping-stone to Vedanta vichara. The latter attitude, that of a true karma yogi, is what's meant by *nistraigunya*. Such a yogi wants to go beyond or be free of the gunas. Narada also uses a term adopted from the same Gita verse, *niryogaksema*. In this context, *yoga* refers to acquisition of more and more things—expanding our base in terms of family, possessions, bank balance, and so forth. And having acquired more and more, the struggle to preserve and maintain, which is even greater than the struggle to acquire is called *ksema*. The perpetual struggle of *yoga* and *ksema* are a lot like dieting: losing weight is almost impossible, but when we somehow manage to bring our weight down to some desired point, keeping it there is an even tougher task. Every object requires maintenance, especially relationships, and all that maintenance gives rise to anxiety. All human worry falls under two basic types: acquisition anxiety and maintenance anxiety. As long as these two worries occupy the mind, one cannot properly take to self-inquiry. A mind free from preoccupation and worry about getting and keeping things will be more available for *sravana*, *manana*, and *nididhyasana*. The bottom line is don't focus your attention and energy on securing your future.

In his commentary on Chapter 2, Verse 45 of the Gita, Shankaracharya tells us that it refers to renouncing attachment to anything within the three gunas. In other words, all worldly objects, worldly people, worldly relationships, and worldly aims (i.e., security, pleasure, and virtue). We cannot physically run away from all worldly things because we require food, clothing, shelter, and even people to live. Narada is not talking about physically getting away, but always keeping in mind that none of it really belongs to me. In the 5th Chapter of the Gita, Krishna defines the *sannyasi* (Gita, 5.3):

He who does not desire and does not hate is to be known as a permanent sannyasi. Because one who is beyond the pairs of opposites is completely freed from bondage effortlessly.

Even a householder is a *sannyasi* if he lives without attachment or hatred toward anyone. Naturally, when we reduce the possessions and relationships we acquired for security, a sense of insecurity may bite us, giving rise to doubt: "Is what I have enough in these days of inflation and with medical expenses being what they are?" Lord Krishna knows that when we reduce our preoccupation with getting and keeping, insecurity is bound to creep in and so he offers a solution (Gita, 9.22):

Those people who see me as non-different from them offer worship by dwelling on me. I take care of the getting and keeping of those ever-steadfast ones.

Why worry? At the right time Bhagavan will give us the strength to handle whatever life throws our way. The best life insurance is *bhakti*, or surrender at the level of karma yoga.

Sutra 48. [Who can cross beyond maya?] That person who renounces material duties and their profits, thus transcending the pairs of opposites [duality].

Here, Narada gives another three instructions as part of formal *dvaita bhakti* or karma yoga. We will rearrange their order slightly. First, we will take up the instruction: be free from the hold of the pairs of opposites (e.g., joy and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat, honor and disgrace, merger and division). Life is a continuous experience of pairs of opposites and we have a tendency to develop attachment and aversion toward these pairs; indeed, attachment/aversion is the most powerful pair of opposites. If there is attachment to joy, there is avoidance of sorrow. If there is attachment to gain there is avoidance of loss. If there is attachment to honor, there is avoidance disgrace, and so forth. Attachment/avoidance can be considered the crowning pair of opposites. May you transcend these pairs of opposites, which is to say, may you avoid attachment and aversion toward all pairs of opposites. Learn to welcome all experiences brought on by your own *prarabdha karma*. No experience we go through in this life is forcibly imposed by the Lord; every experience given is because we ourselves—whether knowingly or unknowingly, in the immediate past or in the remote past—have asked for it. Bhagavan has neither attachment nor avoidance, but simply gives us what we have asked

for. As Krishna says (Gita, 9.29): *I am the same toward all beings. There is no one hateful to me nor dear to me.*

Any experience given is nothing but the result of karma, which is handed out by the Lord as a dispenser of the fruits of action. Anything we go through in life is the price we pay for our own past deeds, so we must learn to accept it without resistance or reactivity. This is what is known as the attitude of welcoming the results of all actions as prasada (*prasada-bhavana*). Everything is Bhagavan's prasada, or going one step further to the level of seeing the God in all forms: everything is Bhagavan himself. Therefore, may we welcome Isvara: whatever comes, welcome, whatever goes, will go. May we appreciate all that comes our way with an open and unreactive mind, or as Krishna says (Gita, 2.38):

*Regarding happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike,
prepare for war. In this manner, you will not incur sin.*

Narada's next instruction is: renounce the results of actions, another topic taken from the Bhagavad Gita. When we talk about renouncing the results of actions, one question that frequently arises is: "The very purpose of action is for the result, so if I'm supposed to renounce the result, why would I perform any action at all?" As Krishna tells us, there are some actions prescribed by the Vedas that are compulsory. We have certain actions that do not stem from our likes and dislikes, but are simply required. It's a lot like paying taxes. The government doesn't ask us whether we would like to pay taxes or not. Some actions in this life are compulsory duties known as the *pancha maha-yajnas*, and neglecting them results in a particular type of papam, called *pratyavaya papam*, papam accrued for the error of omission.

With regard to these compulsory actions, the Veda talks about two types of results. For all other karmas only one result is offered, but for compulsory actions there are two. The first is materialistic benefit, such as money, name, fame, position, possession, etc. The second is spiritual benefit, such as mental purification (i.e., six-fold qualification), attaining a proper teacher, gaining the opportunity to study scripture, etc. Thus, two different types of benefit are offered for the *pancha maha-yajnas*. And of these two results, we get to choose only one—we cannot choose both, that's the catch. Choosing one automatically means losing the other because the two results are mutually exclusive. Therefore, I must perform the *pancha maha-yajnas*, or compulsory actions, because omitting them will bring the papam of omission, and I must also examine my motives and decide whether I am seeking the material benefit or the spiritual benefit. This choice is in my hands, not Bhagavan's. Bhagavan has given us a pen and two checkboxes and we are meant to place a tick mark in one of these boxes with our intention. Bhagavan is all ears and the karma yogi needs to be very alert. What to do? One should deliberately renounce the material benefits offered by the *pancha maha-yajnas*, relegating material benefits to other types of actions, such as going to the office to earn a salary. When we perform the *pancha maha-yajnas* and a material result is offered, we must decisively say: "No thanks, I don't want it." I need not even say that I want the spiritual result; the moment I reject the material result, I get the spiritual result by default. If we do not accept any of the material results, the spiritual result will automatically be credited to our spiritual punyam account. This is the principle of karma yoga expounded by Narada: Give up the worldly benefits of performing the *pancha maha-yajnas*. We do not do this by giving up the *pancha maha-yajnas* themselves, but by performing them with a clear and deliberate intention. This is a very important aspect of karma yoga.

Finally, after following this for some time, one should give up those actions themselves. In the Sanskrit version of the verse, Narada says: *karmani api sannyasyati*. In the traditional sense of the term, this refers to *vividisha sannyasa*, or formal renunciation of family life. Quitting the family and taking to a monastic life (i.e., going to a gurukulam to engage in Vedanta sravana, manana, and nididhyasana, and wearing the robes of a sannyasi). Although Narada is formally prescribing *vividisha sannyasa*, we needn't take his advice literally. There are other versions of *sannyasa* that we have previously discussed, which involve reducing karma and increasing sravana, manana, and nididhyasana. Even the *pancha maha-yajnas* should be retained in householder life, but they should be gradually reduced. If a

householder renounces them completely, he is bound to accrue pratyavaya papam (the papam of omission). Thus, while remaining in society, one should continue performing the pancha maha-yajnas, but the scale and extent of these karmas will gradually be reduced. And there is a very important caveat to this as well: the time saved by scaling back the pancha maha-yajnas should not be put toward watching TV or socializing with friends, but rather, toward studying, and cultivating mananam and nididhyasanam. This process is what's known as vividisha sannyasa. In other words, the proportion of jnana yoga should be gradually increased while the proportion of karma yoga is gradually decreased. Karma yoga can be totally given up only under one condition alone: when one gives up householder life. As long as I am in family life, karma yoga can never be totally given up, but the proportions can be shifted. I may begin with 25 percent jnana yoga and 75 percent family duties, and I gradually try to tilt these proportions so that jnana yoga becomes the 75 percent and karma yoga the 25 percent.

Sutra 49. [Who can cross beyond maya?] That person who renounces even the Vedas obtains exclusive and unbroken love of God.

Let us assume that a person has become a sannyasi, or has remained in household itself but has shifted the proportion of time spent on sravana, manana, and nididhyasana and gained firm self-knowledge. He will be called an implicit sannyasi—this is not an external sannyasi, but one who has mentally detached from everything. Krishna defines this sort of sannyasi in the following (Gita, 5.3):

He who does not desire and does not hate is to be known as a permanent sannyasi. Because one who is beyond the pairs of opposites is completely freed from bondage effortlessly.

Even while remaining in family life, if a person renounces worldly attachment, he or she becomes an eternal sannyasi. Krishna makes a promise as well: that implicit sannyasi living as a householder can practice sravana, manana, nididhyasanam while remaining in society and become a vidvat sannyasi,²⁰ a self-realized person. Such a person's life is only one of nididhyasana, and he does not even require Vedanta any longer. Therefore, this person drops the Veda, which is only a means for gaining self-knowledge. Once the knowledge has been gained, the means becomes irrelevant. As Shankaracharya says in Nirvana Dasakam (Verse 7):

There is no ruler nor rule; no pupil nor training; no you nor I. This universe is not, for the realization of the true nature of the self does not tolerate any distinction. That one, the residue, the auspicious, the alone, am I.

And in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.3.22):

In this state...the Vedas are no longer the Vedas.

For such a self-realized person who dwells in and as the self, even scripture becomes irrelevant. Whereas Sutra 48 referred to the vividisha sannyasi, Sutra 49 refers to the vidvat sannyasi. Thus, the journey is from karma yoga, to vividisha sannyasa, to vidvat sannyasa, in which even the Vedas are renounced. From that point on, unbroken self-love obtains. The wise person enjoys the causeless and abiding joy born of self-knowledge. And does this wise person derive joy from jivatma or paramatma? After attaining non-dual wisdom, this distinction is rendered irrelevant because non-dual self-knowledge

²⁰ Sannyasa is the renunciation of everything and is of two types: vividisha sannyasa and vidvat sannyasa. Vividisha sannyasa is taken for studying the scriptures ('vividisha' means a desire to know). Vividisha sannyasa is a step toward vidvat sannyasa ('vidvat' means advanced in knowledge). A vidvat sannyasi is not interested in attaining anything for he or she has already attained firm self-knowledge. A vidvat sannyasi holds onto nothing, not even the idea: 'I am a jnani'. He or she doesn't even have pride in self-knowledge. So whereas the aim of vividisha sannyasa is committed study of the scriptures, the aim of vidvat sannyasa is total renunciation.

reduces jivatma and paramatma to one and the same. You could say the wise person derives bliss from the Lord, who is non-different from herself, or that he derives bliss from herself, who is non-different from the Lord; she achieves the limitlessness of one self. This is also said in the Gita (3.17):

However, suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, is happy with the self alone, and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for him.

And the Mundaka Upanishad (3.1.4) says:

With every breath, a kriyavan sharply watches the indwelling self, which is nothing less than the universal self.

Therefore, a person with firm self-knowledge enjoys unbroken love toward the one self. And what about “not-self,” or anatma? Does such a person have love or aversion toward that which is “not-self”? In the jnani’s vision, there is nothing that is not atma. As it says in the Gita (Verse 5.18):

The wise see the same brahman in a brahmin who has knowledge and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, in a dog, and in a dog-eater.

And in Chapter 6, Verse 29:

One whose mind is disciplined through meditation perceives the atma in all beings and all beings in the atma. He has the same vision everywhere.

The so-called anatmas are nothing but atma for a jnani. Therefore, he loves them too. His self-love is equal to God-love, and his God-love is equal to universal love: self-love, God-love, and universal love have all merged into one. There is no question of a separate self, a separate God, and a separate universe: the separation between jiva, jagat, and Isvara has disappeared and he enjoys unbroken love of the self, or God, in all (because these are bhakti sutras, the word ‘God’ is used).

Remember we have to interpret these sutras very carefully. If we are careless, a lot of confusion will arise. If we hand these sutras over to the bhakti schools of philosophy, they will interpret them completely differently. We are interpreting them in a manner that is consistent with Vedanta, which results in this picture. If we read them through the lens of the bhakti schools of philosophy, they will be seen in a totally different color. These informal dvaita bhaktas will discredit karma yoga, the pancha maha-yajnas, and Vedanta sravana-manana-nididhyasana. They will argue that you need only to love Bhagavan morning, afternoon, and night, and he will appear to whisk you off to moksha. This is typical of the bhakti school of philosophy and it is a trap we should be careful to avoid. We respect informal bhakti, but we should remember that karma yoga and the pancha maha-yajnas are important, and must all be followed by self-inquiry (i.e., sravana, manana, and nididhyasana), which will ultimately take us to advaita bhakti. The unbroken love of God to which Narada is referring should not be mistaken for ishta-devata dvaita bhakti, but rather, should be understood as Vedanta nididhyasanam. This alone is in keeping with the Vedantic view. If we interpret it the other way, we are treating Vedanta as the opposing view (*purvapaksha*) and the bhakti schools of philosophy as the to-be-established view (*siddhanta*). There are so many bhakti schools of philosophy floating around and as students of Vedanta, we must know how to discriminate between their view and Vedanta. Accordingly, renunciation of the Vedas comes only after karma yoga, upasana yoga, and Vedanta sravana-manana. And unbroken love toward God means the firm conviction ‘I am the brahman,’ it means ‘my nature is limitless’ it means abiding in and as the self. These Narada Bhakti Sutras are tricky and we should be very alert to understanding the meaning of all the sutras properly. And what will happen if we follow all of the instructions given by Narada in the previous four Sutras? Narada himself tells us in the final sutra of the 3rd Chapter:

Sutra 50. Such a person certainly crosses [beyond maya], and he also helps the world to cross.

In the final sutra of the 3rd Chapter, Narada supplies the answer to the question that he raised in Sutra 46: Who can cross beyond maya? Who can cross beyond maya? And his answer is: Such a person certainly crosses. Here, the person to whom Narada refers is the one who follows the disciplines given from Sutras 46 through 49 in sequential order: namely, avoiding duhsanga, taking to satsanga, following karma yoga (consisting of the pancha maha-yajnas), gradually and proportionally reducing karma yoga and coming to jnana yoga, otherwise known as self-inquiry. Finally, having assimilated the knowledge of the Vedas and renounced any remaining distinctions between jivatma and paramatma, one transcends the scripture, or means of knowledge, and dwells in and as the self. As Shankaracharya says in Nirvanasatkam (Verses 1):

I am not the mind, the intellect, thought, or the ego. I am not the organ of hearing, tasting, smelling, or seeing. I am not the sky, the earth, the fire, or the air. I am the ever-pure blissful consciousness. I am Shiva, I am Shiva.

For this jnani, love of Shiva and love of self become identical. Love of Krishna and love of self become identical. This is nididhyasana. Thus, by following the progression given by Narada, one crosses beyond maya or ignorance. Narada even extends a guarantee, saying: certainly he will cross over illusion. And not only does the one who crosses over maya become a wise person, he also becomes qualified to help others cross. He becomes a sage.

Chapter 4: The Definition of Love; Sutras 51-66

Sutra 51. The essential nature of pure love of God is beyond description.

This chapter is titled *The Definition of Love*. The previous chapters were titled *The Nature of Advaita Bhakti*, *The Glory of Advaita Bhakti*, and *The Means for Discovering Bhakti*. The 4th Chapter is talking about the definition of bhakti, but the word 'love' is used in place of the word 'bhakti.' Narada uses the words 'love' and 'bhakti' interchangeably, and he can do this because he defined bhakti in Sutra 2 as: that whose nature is supreme love toward the one. Throughout the text, then, bhakti and love are synonymous. So when we encounter the word 'love' we should be clear that it is something distinct from the version of this word that gets tossed around in the popular imagination. We mustn't think of romantic love or any other worldly context; Narada is using the word love in the context of the self.

This chapter is titled *The Definition of Love* and Narada starts it by saying that love is undefinable. Imagine, a large crowd has gathered to hear Narada give his definition of love and he says it is that which cannot be defined. What an anticlimax. Anyway, Vedanta has analyzed love very thoroughly, particularly in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. According to Vedanta, love is nothing but ananda expressed outwardly as a mental attitude. That alone is what is meant by the word 'love.' When I say that I love something—be it a person, a pet, a place, a time, or a condition—I am saying that in the presence of the object I claim to love, I feel happy (at least for now). Therefore, whenever the attitude of love is expressed, there is fullness or joy in my mind. Vedanta says that ananda and love always coexist. When ananda is experienced internally, love is expressed toward the external conditions that were conducive to that experience, be it a person, a place, a material object, etc. Thus, love is expressed ananda. There is no difference between ananda and love. When I say I love someone, I have ananda, and when I have ananda inside, I express it at that time as love.

In experiencing this connection between an external loved condition and internal ananda, I implicitly posit a cause-effect relationship. Thereafter, my aim becomes to have ananda not only now but all the time, and my struggle becomes to maintain the loved, lovable condition because of its assumed cause-effect relationship with the experienced ananda. If it is a person, I want to meet that person often. I want

to meet and meet and meet and meet. And then what? I want to keep that person near me by striking up a relationship. Over time, a story forms. This is called samsara because the cause-effect relationship was actually a misconception. Similarly, if it's an animal, I want to buy it and keep it as a pet. Or if it's a place, such as Chennai in December, I want to come back again next December. So I come back and enjoy it again the following December and then decide to buy a house. Then April, May, June, and July roll around, and suddenly I find myself wanting to escape Chennai.

Vedanta says that love is nothing but ananda expressed outwardly. Because ananda and love are one and the same, and because ananda is of two types, love must also be of two types. To understand love, we must first try to understand ananda. Once we understand ananda, we can extend all of its conditions and rules to love. There is an analysis in the Taittiriya Upanishad of the two types of ananda. The first type is original ananda (*bimba-ananda*), which is my own nature. When this very same ananda gets reflected in the mind under conducive conditions, it is reflected ananda (*pratibimba-ananda*). Thus, ananda is of two types: atma-ananda, the bliss of the self, and kosha-ananda, the bliss experienced in the bliss sheath or causal body. Similarly, love is of two types. One is original love, or (*bimba-prema*), which is the very nature of the self, sat-chit-ananda. When this love, which is my very nature, gets reflected in the mind under conducive conditions, it is experienced as reflected love (*pratibimba-prema*).

When we analyze the nature of reflected ananda, we find that it has three defining characteristics. It is experiential, meaning it requires an object. It is temporary, which is to say it comes about only in the presence of certain conducive conditions. It is graded; for example, there is *priya*, the happiness that arises from the mere site of a desired object; *moda*, the happiness one experiences from obtaining the desired object; and *pramoda*, the happiness one gets from actual enjoyment of the desired object. By contrast, with original ananda these conditions—experiential, temporary, graded—do not apply. The same principle can be extended to reflected love. When original love is reflected in the mind, it is also experiential, temporary, and graded. That is why in Bhaja Govindam Shankaracharya says (Verse 4):

So long as a man is fit and able to support his family, see the affection all those around him show. But no one at home cares to even have a word with him when his body totters due to old age.

We say: “honey, honey,” but when the money goes, the honey goes. At one time, I loved you and later I unlove you; reflected love is temporary. Reflected love is also graded. If there are several people around us, we can always place them in a rank-ordered list. We may not declare this list aloud, or even want to admit it to ourselves, but if someone asked us: “If you had to live the rest of your life with one person...” We find that we actually do have a first preference, a second preference, and so on. We have these preferences because reflected love is subject to gradation. Even though we casually write “Dearest so-and-so,” it is not really so. Thus, reflected love has the same three features as reflected ananda: it is experiential, temporary, and graded. By contrast, original love, which is the same as original ananda, atma-ananda, or the bliss of the self, is not experiential. It is not an object of experience because it happens to be my very nature. Shankaracharya analyzes this in his commentary on the final verse of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (3.9) in which he says:

It (sat-chit-ananda) is the support of not only the individual in future birth, but also the ultimate support of one who is established in it, by knowing it. So, the supreme being, the absolute, is the support not only of the individuals who transmigrate in the process of samsara, but also the ultimate resort of the liberated soul who knows it and becomes it through self-realization. So, it is not only the goal relative to all the jivas, but also absolute to the atman in all jivas. The supreme brahman is the source of all. Every value visible or perceivable in life is due to its being. It functions not as individuals do. It acts not, but its very existence is all action. Its very being is all value and the goal of the lives of all individuals is the realization of this brahman.

Thus, original love is not experiential because it is my own self. Original love is also not temporary because it is the very nature of the self, which is eternal. Don't ask how to experience original love because the moment you talk about experience, it has become a temporary object. Experiential love is necessarily temporary, even the love we have for our own body. We will only love it as long as it serves our purposes. But suppose in old age we acquire a certain disease that is incurable, painful, incurs exorbitant hospital expenses, and causes trouble for those around us. What will be our prayer? Whether stated explicitly or not:

A painless cessation, a life devoid of misery, please grant these out of compassion, Shambho, and unwavering devotion to you.

The honeymoon is over, as they say—in this case, the honeymoon with the body. Our love of the body is temporary because the body is an object. Under certain conditions, the body can give us the sense that it has the capacity to reflect ananda, but when the body is sick it cannot give ananda. Therefore, only original love is permanent. And original love is not subject to gradation, it is one. On this basis, when we want to define original or pure love, which is the very nature of the self, we can use the same five features that we use to define sat, chit, and ananda: (1) Pure or original love is not a part, product, or property of the mind. (2) Pure love is an independent principle that pervades the mind when the conditions are ideal, making the mind a loving mind. (3) Pure love is not limited by the boundaries of the mind. (4) Pure love continues to exist even after the mind is resolved. That is why in deep sleep we have love. Love of what? Love of deep sleep. Does anyone experience sorrow in deep sleep? Both ananda and love continue in the deep sleep state because both are my nature. (5) Pure love is inaccessible to us, not because it is absent, but because there is no medium for us to express pure love, which is my very nature. Thus, we must be clear about differentiating between reflected love (*pratibimba prema*) and pure or original love (*bimba prema*). Only then does it make sense to say that the nature of atma cannot be described in words. As it says in the Taittiriya Upanishad (2.9.1):

The mind and speech return back from it baffled as they are not able to grasp and describe it.

If the nature of the self is inexplicable, the nature of sat (existence), the nature of chit (awareness), the nature of ananda (limitlessness), and the nature of love are all indescribable. We can only experience original love when it is available in its reflected form. I cannot see my original face, but I can see it when it is reflected in a mirror. When love cannot be expressed, how can we express reflected love for Isvara? And how can we later express reflected love when it is discovered to be nothing other than the original love that is my very nature? They are all beyond description. Therefore, the nature of original love, which is the self (sat-chit-ananda), is indescribable. The reason for this is simple: according to Vedanta, pure love is nothing other than the self. Just as the self is pure existence, pure consciousness, and pure happiness, pure love must also be understood as the self.

So the next question is: "If pure existence, pure consciousness, pure happiness, and pure love cannot be defined, can we experience them?" This is a sensitive question. The answer is that these four being the self, the ever-experiencing subject, cannot be available as an object of experience. Pure love cannot be experienced as an object, but has to be claimed as the subject. If you are desperate to experience existence, consciousness, happiness, and love, Vedanta says you can—though not in their original version, but rather, in their reflected or manifest versions, much like we experience the reflection of our face in a mirror. We can never experience our own original face, but if we are willing to compromise, we can experience it in reflected form. Reflected existence is available everywhere. When you say the wall *is*, the chair *is*, the table *is*, and so forth, you are experiencing the self in the form of reflected existence; the *is*-ness of a table is a reflection of the self in the name and form of a table. So reflected *is*-ness is available to be experienced in the world. Similarly, reflected consciousness can be experienced in the physical body. Reflected happiness can also be experienced. When is reflected happiness experienced? Whenever I am happy. Whenever I am happy experiencing any blessed thing,

even chocolate cake, I am experiencing the bliss of the self alone. According to Vedanta, chocolate cake doesn't contain happiness; it only contains sugar and cholesterol. So when you experience the happiness of chocolate cake, it is nothing but the happiness of the self reflected in the cake. Reflected existence, reflected consciousness, reflected happiness, and reflected love are all experienceable. Whenever anybody loves anything or any person, he or she is experiencing reflected love.

The difference between an ignorant person and a wise person is that when an ignorant person experiences any one of these in its reflected version, he doesn't recognize that they are reflected versions and attributes the happiness and love to the objects themselves. By contrast, when a wise person enjoys any one of these four, he does not attribute the happiness to the object, but rather, understands that he is experiencing the existence, the consciousness, the happiness, and the love of himself alone; a jnani sees the self everywhere experienced in the form of reflected existence, reflected consciousness, reflected happiness, and reflected love. A jnani says: "I am experiencing the self everywhere." As it says in the Gita (6.29): *He perceives all beings in the self and the self in all beings.* And how does he say he is experiencing the self or pure love everywhere? By understanding that any love anywhere and any happiness anywhere belongs to the self. With this knowledge, wherever he looks he sees the self, or existence-awareness-happiness-love everywhere.

Sutra 52. [Trying to describe the experience of pure love of God] is like a mute person's effort to describe what he tastes.

In this sutra, Narada gives us a very interesting example of the indescribability of original love. He says it is like a mute person experiencing something extraordinary—an extraordinary form, taste, smell, or wonder of the world. Assuming you can speak, after experiencing such a thing you will say "Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!" but you cannot say much more. A mute person cannot even say that much. Like a wonderful experience for a mute person, original love can never be described, but it can be discovered in the form of the firm conviction *aham brahmasmi* ('I am the self'). It is a matter to be claimed, not one to be known or experienced as an object. If you want to experience love, there is a possibility, but it won't be the experience of pure or original love; it will be reflected love and it will be dependent upon many conditions. That's why experiential love is always temporary. Dvaita bhaktas who objectify God struggle with this problem. You'll find that among their songs, there are many scolding ones because reflected love means it will be subject to arrival and departure.

Sutra 53. In rare cases [this pure love of God] is revealed in a qualified person.

So this highest love, which is permanent, ungraded, non-experiential, and my very nature, can only be discovered or claimed through an appropriate means. If discovering myself as pure existence requires a means, and if discovering myself as pure consciousness requires a means, then discovering myself as pure love also requires a means. It cannot be discovered by sitting with closed eyes or by singing bhajans. Chanting the names of the Lord can never help me to discover original love; it can only help me to discover reflected love. This might be disturbing news for those who are committed to chanting and have a distaste for Vedanta. And what is our rationale for saying this? You experienced that ananda, that bliss, only while singing and later found yourself back in samsara. This is evidence that chanting the name of the Lord can help in the discovery of reflected ananda, reflected love for Isvara, and fourfold qualification, but original love, cannot be discovered through any number of chants. This is why we strongly advise coming to scriptural study because it is the very nature of the self; it doesn't even come from Bhagavan as an object, which is subject to arrival and departure. As the Kena Upanishad (1.5) tells us, even that objective Bhagavan cannot be a source of eternal bliss:

Know that the supreme is not that which the world reveres.

Deity worship belongs to the realm of name and form, so pure ananda or pure love cannot come even from an objective God. It has to be discovered (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.4.8):

This self is dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than everything else, and is innermost. Should a person holding the self as dear say to one calling anything else dearer than the self, 'What you hold dear will die,' he or she is certainly competent to say so, as it will indeed come true. One should meditate upon the self alone as dear, the dear ones are not mortal.

Where does that pure love come from? That which is innermost is the self. Therefore, we have to come to discover the non-dual self, the only source of original ananda and original love. This can only be discovered through an appropriate means; namely, scripture-based self-inquiry. Very few people understand this and consequently fail to come to Vedanta. They try to attain eternal ananda through various practices, but this simply won't work because no action is eternal. No bhajan is eternal. No puja is eternal. No meditation is eternal. Even meditation is a form of action. Most people who are in the bhakti field don't want to listen to Vedantic instruction. The Vedanti is willing to share, not out of arrogance; he is simply repeating the guidance of the Vedas, which tell us that you have to come to the self. And to whom did Narada, the greatest bhakti, go? Sanatkumara. Dvaita bhakti gave him neither moksha nor permanent ananda. If dvaita bhakti had given him permanent ananda, would he have gone to Sanatkumara to learn about atma? Indeed, it was through Sanatkumara alone that Narada came to learn about the difference between the satya and mithya (Chandogya Upanishad, 7.24.1):

The infinite is that in which one sees nothing else, hears nothing else, and understands nothing else. The finite is that in which one sees something else, hears something else, and understands something else. That which is infinite is immortal and that which is finite is mortal. Revered one, wherein does that rest? In its own majesty or not in majesty.

Self-inquiry by way of the great Upanishadic mantras is the route for discovering that I am the self, that pure love that expresses as love for everyone because everyone is that same self. Through self-knowledge we discover that pure and permanent love can never be obtained from the external world. The love coming from the external world will always be conditional because others will love me only as long as they see me as a source of ananda for them; as we have said, love is defined as our attitude toward the source of ananda. As long as others look upon me as a source of ananda, love will flow from them. The moment I stop being a source of ananda—or worse, when I become a burden for them—their love, like a gradually depleting bank account, will also become depleted. It's very natural. It's not their fault. It's a universal thing. We have the same attitude toward a non-functioning car. As long as the car is working well and is a source of ananda, I love it. I drive it regularly, I wash it, and I have it serviced. But the moment the car becomes a headache, my love and gratitude for it is gone and I am eager to replace it. This is not your trait or my trait, it is universal law that love only flows toward a source of ananda. Therefore, any blessed person will love me only as long as they find me interesting and useful. When I want someone to love me permanently, I am expecting permanent love out of conditional love, which will last only as long as the conditions themselves last. Therefore, the first step toward Vedantic maturity is to stop expecting permanent love from others. If they are not able to give it, it is not their fault. It is simply the law of the universe. A Vedanti looks for a permanent source of love and discovers that nothing in the entire creation provides permanent love. At best, it reflects love temporarily. Just as objects cannot supply permanent ananda but provide it only temporarily, the love for or from any object will also be temporary. Permanent love is discovered in one place alone: myself.

Once I discover my self as the source of love, I have tapped into an endless source. In discovering love for and from myself, in discovering that everyone is essentially my self, my love becomes permanent and universal. Therefore, only self-knowledge allows me to discover permanent and universal love. After discovering permanent love in myself, I no longer bother much about whether others love me permanently. If someone were to say: "I am slowly losing my love for you," I would reply: "If you can discover it elsewhere, that is totally fine with me." I can happily accept others' refusing their love. We

have to discover that uninterrupted supply of love. An advaita bhakta is one who has discovered ananda and love in himself and no longer seeks it elsewhere. Yet, even without seeking love from outside, this self-realized person has the capacity to give love. Similarly, once I discover love in myself without asking for it from outside I have the capacity to give it unconditionally. Only a wise person can give unconditional love because he or she has an endless source of love within and doesn't expect reciprocation from others. Thus, knowledge alone enables me to discover unconditional love. Having discovered this unconditional love, how does the self-realized person express it? Like a mute person expresses taste, it is inexpressible, Narada says. And this unconditional love through self-knowledge exists only in rare and qualified people. We are specifically talking about the fourfold qualification, or the four Ds: discrimination, dispassion, discipline, and (a burning) desire for liberation. The bhakti schools of philosophy never talk about the fourfold qualification or knowledge, despite listing all sorts of other qualifications for unconditional love. Vedanta, by contrast, is very strict: it says only self-knowledge will enable the discovery of unconditional love, and that self-knowledge is possible by those possessing the fourfold qualifications. Therefore, pure and unconditional love shines only in self-knowledge. As it says in the Bhagavad Gita (7.3):

Among thousands of human beings, a rare one strives for liberation. Even among those seekers who strive, a rare one knows me in reality.

Sutra 54. This [pure love of God] is devoid of material qualities and material desires, manifests more at every moment, is uninterrupted, manifests as the subtlest consciousness, and is ever-experienced.

This infinite and unconditional love, which is directed toward everything in the creation, including Isvara, is free of the gunas. It is not sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic because it is discovered through the self, which is free of the gunas. As Krishna says (Gita, 14.19-20):

When one understands the doer to be none other than the gunas and knows the self, which is beyond the gunas, one attains my nature. Having gone beyond these three gunas, which are the cause of rebirth, a person becomes free from birth, death, old age, and sorrow, and attains immortality.

This advaita bhakti, this infinite and unconditional love, is also devoid of material desire. It is a non-demanding love. A demanding love is a conditional love. Such a love says: "If you do this, then I will love you. If you do not do this, I will not love you." Such a love is conditional and anything conditional is not real or essential. Suppose I say that you are very beautiful because of your wonderful dress. I am not talking about original beauty. If I love someone based on certain conditions, then it is not real love at all. Suppose you have money and you regularly lend some to me whenever I ask: I love you as long as you are lending me money, but the moment you stop lending, my love also stops. That means I have not loved you, but I have loved your money. So conditional love is never real. A jnani's love is unconditional because he does not demand anything in return, not even reciprocation. There are no conditions for the jnani's love. The artha bhakta demands: "Solve my problem." If after a few prayers, Isvara doesn't solve the problem, his prayers gradually decrease because they are not fulfilling the goal. Similarly, the artharthi bhakta has a demand: "Give me success." Even the jijnasu bhakta places a demand upon the Lord: "Give me moksha." Only the jnani bhakta is without demand. And even when Isvara wants to give him something, the jnani bhakta says: "I don't want anything" because *he is satisfied in himself by himself*, Gita 2.5). Why do I love Isvara if I am not getting anything in return? Because Isvara and I happen to be one and the same. For me, self-love includes Isvara. Self-love includes everything because the self is non-dual. Therefore, natural self-love becomes Isvara love and it becomes universal love because Isvara and the universe are included in the one, all-pervading self. So if Isvara were to ask a jnani what he wants, the jnani would respond: "I wish there was something I could ask for, but there is nothing I need."

This love is of the subtlest nature because the self is the subtlest and is ever-available as 'I am.' Self-love is always available as 'I am,' and therefore ever-experienced. All of these sutras can only be properly understood if we remember the fundamental Vedantic equation. According to Vedanta, existence is equal to awareness, awareness is equal to bliss, and bliss is equal to love. All four of these are synonymous; they are not four "parts" of the self—they are the self manifesting in different media differently. In the material world, for example, the existence aspect alone is manifest. You say the wall is—its 'is'-ness belongs to the self. But a wall cannot manifest awareness. Remember, it is not that the wall has produced existence, but that its deficiency is such that it cannot manifest awareness, bliss, or love. When it comes to the physical body, both existence and awareness are manifest. And when conditions are conducive—for example, all your family members are acting exactly as you would like them to—the mind can manifest existence, awareness, and bliss. This is not the bliss of the mind, but the bliss belonging to the self and reflected in the mind. In that mind, not only is bliss manifest, but love is, too; love toward whomever or whatever was responsible for making the mind conducive. Therefore, I have love toward whoever or whatever brings about that conducive state of mind. This love also belongs to the self, but it reflects or manifests in the mind. Therefore, existence, awareness, bliss, and love all belong to me, the self, expressing at different times and under different conditions. This love, then, is in the form of direct and ever-experienced self-knowledge.

This unconditional love increases at every moment. As self-knowledge becomes more and more firm, as insight into the true nature of reality gets converted into steady wisdom, as knowledge gets converted into the firm and unshakeable conviction 'I am the self,' as my prideful attachment to egoism decreases and the knowledge becomes clearer and clearer, brighter and brighter, the discovery of ananda also deepens and my ananda and love naturally grow. In fact, it is not that ananda or love actually grow (because they are infinite), but rather, that the obstructing vasanas are receding. They only seem to increase as my misconceptions, expectations, delusions, and confusion all decrease. On a full moon evening, the moon and moonlight are there on the horizon, but the moon does not seem that bright early in the evening. But as the sun recedes and night falls, the moon seems to get brighter and brighter. And at midnight on a full moon evening, the moon is at its seeming brightest. Between early evening and midnight, can we say that the brightness of the moon has increased? No. The moon has the same amount of brightness, but as the obstructing sunlight recedes, the moon's brightness seems to increase. We are the embodiment of love, but defects of the mind, such as attachment, aversion, desire, anger, greed, etc., all obstruct this love. As these recede, our love increasingly manifests. Love is a discovery, never a production. I don't produce love, I discover love. Discovery means removing whatever obstructs my natural love. When the worst criminal takes stolen money and buys a gift for his only child, even that so-called cruel person is an embodiment of tenderness toward the child. But that tenderness has been obstructed for various reasons. Therefore, Narada says that this love manifests more and more at every second. It is uninterrupted, or continuous, because the ananda or love of the self is unbroken.

Sutra 55. Having discovered it [this supreme love of God, i.e., the self], one sees only the self, hears only about the self, speaks only of the self, and thinks only of the self.

Having discovered this supreme love, which is equal to the self, existence-awareness-bliss, one sees nothing but supreme love everywhere. Without a proper understanding of Vedanta, one can easily misconstrue these verses. What do you mean seeing love everywhere? Love is not a person or thing, so what do you mean by this? Even the emotion of love cannot be seen everywhere all the time because the mind is given to all types of emotions at different times. As long as love is taken to be a particular substance this statement will be meaningless because there is no substance called love. If love is taken to be an emotion or feeling, it cannot be there in all people at all times. No mental feeling can be present all the time because the mind goes through varieties of feelings. Accordingly, this sutra can only be properly understood when supreme love is understood to be equal to the self: my nature as existence, awareness, bliss. Bliss is not a temporary emotion. Emotional bliss is reflected bliss; we are

not talking about emotional bliss, but the bliss of the self, which is original, causeless, and abiding happiness. Similarly, supreme love is not a feeling. The feeling of love can never be permanent because feelings belong to the mind and the mind is always in flux. Feeling means it is subject to fluctuation, therefore, the feeling of love cannot be everywhere all the time. The supreme love we are talking about is not a person, a thing, or a feeling—it is the self. As Krishna says (Gita, 6.29-30):

One whose mind is disciplined through meditation perceives the self in all beings and all beings in the self. He has the same vision everywhere. I am not lost to him who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me. He is also not lost to me.

Having attained that supreme or original love, which is the self, one sees the self everywhere. In some places it is available in the form of existence and in other places it is available in the form of awareness. And when I see that existence in an object, love is also there because the self is that love. But we say that in that object the conditions are not conducive to the expression of love. Similarly, in human beings, everyone is the embodiment of supreme love. Even when a person says: “I hate you,” he is love. But that love is not manifest because I am unable to produce the conducive condition of the mind in him. Therefore, that love is not expressed. If I give him what he wants, that love expresses. Everyone has love in the form of the self at all times—unobstructed or obstructed, manifest or unmanifest. A jnani understands this. For the jnani, all people are nothing but love, but in some people this love is manifest, whereas in others it is obstructed. And what about me? I am also love. But sometimes I express it and sometimes I don’t express it. Expressed or unexpressed, I am also an embodiment of love. This is the Vedantic view. So one sees original love in the form of the self everywhere—everything he listens to is the self, everything he speaks about is the self, and he thinks about the self all the time. Again, we should be clear about what we mean when we say: “thinks of the self all the time.” If we are thinking of the self all the time, how can we perform worldly transactions? Even as we perform transactions, we maintain that awareness of the self in the background all the time like the continuous background hum of a tanpura. We never lose sight of the fact ‘I am awareness, who is of the nature of love and fullness.’ As it says in the Bhagavad Gita, 3.17:

Suppose there is a person who loves the self alone, is happy with the self alone, and who is contented with the self alone. There is nothing to be accomplished for this person.

Sutra 56. Secondary devotional service is of three kinds, according to which of the three gunas predominates, or according to motive—distress, etc.—brings one to bhakti.

From Sutra 51 to 55, Narada talked about the definition of love or devotion, love and devotion being one and the same, and both being synonymous with the self, sat-chit-ananda. So supreme love, or original love, or pure love is discovered through self-knowledge. Having explained the meaning of original love, Narada returns to the topic of sadhana bhakti, or the means of that devotion or love, in the 56th Sutra. So we are now going from primary love to secondary love, from unconditional love to conditional love, from advaita bhakti to dvaita bhakti, from bhakti as an end to bhakti as a means. All the sutras from 56 onward really belong in the previous chapter on sadhana and the 4th Chapter (*The Definition of Love*) should really be from Sutras 51-55.

In Sutra 56, Narada introduces secondary love of the Lord, which is conditional or dvaita bhakti. Even though dvaita bhakti is secondary, we should remember that it is also extremely important because this secondary love is what eventually leads us to primary love. Without dvaita bhakti, we can never come to advaita bhakti. We have to note this in block letters. We accept dvaita bhakti in the form of karma yoga and upasana yoga, understanding that in time we need to go beyond these and come to jnana yoga, and ultimately to advaita bhakti. Narada divides secondary bhakti into three types, based on two different angles. The first is the gunas and the second is the underlying motive, as discussed in the 7th Chapter of the Gita.

In terms of the gunas, depending on the condition of a person's mind, this secondary bhakti will be sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic. And how does one differentiate between them? How do I know which one applies to me? You may be inclined to say: "I am a committed Vedanti, my bhakti doesn't fall under the lower kind." Understood and appreciated. But for those "other" people who want to know what category their bhakti falls under, we would say that sattvica bhakti is devotion directed toward spiritual growth or self-knowledge. In sattvic bhakti my motive is to attain the qualifications, to find a guru, to find opportunities for Vedantic study, to assimilate the knowledge, and to become a jnani. Sattvic bhakti is devotion used solely for spiritual growth, and does not place any other demands on Isvara. Rajasic bhakti is used for anything other than spiritual growth—all worldly benefits, such as family benefits, relationship benefits, career benefits, financial benefits. In short, this is devotion centered on egoism and ownership. So I can discern which category my bhakti belong to by asking myself: To what end is my devotion encashed? The rajasic bhakta seeks material and worldly benefit. Tamasic bhakti is that devotion through which a person wants to harm others; it is the abuse of bhakti for negative purposes. Tamasic bhaktas want power and control over others. All of this is care of the 17th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, in which Krishna differentiates between sattvic sacrifice, rajasic sacrifice, and tamasic sacrifice. These are the three forms of secondary bhakti. Primary bhakti does not fall under sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic because it is beyond the gunas. The jnani bhakta does not seek anything, not even seek spiritual growth, because he has already attained fulfillment.

In terms of underlying motive, Narada assumes our familiarity with the Bhagavad Gita, which he alludes to in the phrase 'distress, etc.' Without knowing the Gita, it would not be clear what he means by 'etc?' This sutra is properly understood with reference to the four types of bhaktas described by Krishna when he says (Gita, 7.16):

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me—the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise, Oh Arjuna!

There is potential for some confusion here. In the 7th Chapter, Krishna talks about four types of bhaktas and in Sutra 56, Narada says three types. Narada has purposely excluded the fourth type of bhakta on Krishna's list—the jnani bhakta—because he is addressing secondary or dvaita bhakti here. This leaves us with arta bhakti, arthartha bhakti, and jijnasu bhakti as the three types of secondary bhakti from the Gita's list of four. Following these three, we should all become jnani bhaktas, attaining the supreme bhakti. Regarding these three secondary bhaktas, Narada says:

Sutra 57. Each earlier one is considered superior to the latter one.

Although Narada is basing this threefold bhakti on the 7th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, there are certain distinctions between the Gita and Sutras 55 and 56. The first distinction is that when Krishna mentions the three secondary bhaktas in the 7th Chapter, he doesn't grade them. He only says (Gita, 7.17):

Among them, the man of wisdom who is always engaged exclusively in devotional service is superior [to the other three—namely, arta, arthartha, jijnasu].

Krishna does not specify which is lowest, intermediate, and highest among these three, whereas Narada is grading them here. The second distinction is that although Krishna doesn't grade the three secondary bhaktas in the 7th Chapter, various commentaries on this chapter have done so, but their gradation differs from Narada's. So we have two tasks before us. First, we have to recall what is said in the commentaries on the 7th Chapter of the Gita; and second, we have to reconcile this with Narada's gradation.

We had previously established that the lowest form of bhakta is the arta bhakta, who worships God only when in distress. There is a funny proverb in Malayalam about a person who had never invoked the

Lord and suddenly found himself having to cross a narrow, rickety bridge. Gripped by fear, he exclaimed: "Narayana, Narayana, Narayana!" But the moment he crossed to the other side, he dropped Narayana. Therefore, the proverb is: "Before you cross the bridge, it is: 'Narayana' and after you cross, it is 'koorayana,'" meaning the Lord has been forgotten. This proverb is meant to convey how arta bhaktas invoke the Lord only when in the grip of fear and sorrow. Arta bhaktas are opportunistic, much like our politicians. Coalitions will do anything and praise any leader before an election. They will scold left and right, but when election time comes, they will easily convert this into satirical praise. Thus, we say that the arta bhakta is lowest. The next one is the artharthi bhakta, who is superior to the arta bhakta but still materialistic because he worships the Lord for worldly success. We don't say this is wrong, but we classify it as artharthi. This bhakta remembers the Lord more often than does the arta bhakta because he invokes Isvara before every venture, big or small, that he wants to complete successfully. Still, the artharthi's invocation is for ventures of worldly or material benefit as opposed to spiritual benefit, such as mental purification or self-inquiry. The next bhakta is the jijnasu bhakta, who wants to attain self-knowledge. With that intention at heart, the jijnasu bhakta studies the scriptures and is acting in the role of an inquirer. Such a bhakta is superior to the arta and artharthi bhaktas by virtue of being closer to moksha, which they are not even seeking. In studying the Gita, then, we grade the three types of bhaktas from lowest to highest as: arta, artharthi, jijnasu.

Narada grades them differently, and we have to interpret what he says in its proper context. Narada says the artharthi bhakta is lowest because his devotion is solely for worldly purposes. In other words, he is a business bhakta: "You do this Lord, and I will do that." At best, he gives Isvara a token advance, making it a clean deal. This is our great bhakti. And do we think Isvara isn't on to us? He's onto us alright. But thank goodness Isvara is a jnani and is willing to put up with us. Otherwise he would have dismissed this convenience bhakti long ago. The next highest one, according to Narada, is the jijnasu bhakta, who wants to study the Vedantic scriptures. But the action of self-inquiry can be undertaken with two starkly different motives. The first is one of academic interest or curiosity. Indeed, nowadays people even study the Gita for business management purposes. Many great managers, without knowing a word of Sanskrit, write commentaries on the Gita and Krishna's leadership. Even though scriptures are intended for attaining moksha, the underlying motives for studying them can vary greatly. For example, people study yoga to improve their physical health even though poor Patanjali wrote the scriptures on yoga for moksha. Similarly, a person might study Vedanta in a university philosophy department to earn a PhD, specializing in a particular chapter of the Panchadasi. Therefore jijnasa can be there without the burning desire for liberation: this is desire to learn out of sheer intellectual curiosity, without the desire for moksha. In fact, some people openly admit that they are not particularly interested in moksha, but enjoy studying Vedanta because they find it intellectually stimulating. Thus we can have two distinct types of jijnasus: one with and one without the burning desire for liberation.

The reverse is also true: there are many people with a burning desire for moksha, but they don't want to study Vedanta because they think moksha can be attained through other methods. In fact, many people in the bhakti schools of philosophy have intense longing, but they believe that chanting the name of the Lord will give them moksha. So they desperately sing their bhajans and desperately pray to God, but refuse to come to scripture because they believe moksha can be attained through these various shortcut methods, as if moksha is a place to which Isvara carries us. The bhakti schools are full of mumukshus who are not jijnasus, whereas in Vedanta classes there are many jijnasus who lack mumukshutvam. When using the term *arta*, Narada is referring to the jijnasu bhakta who also has a burning desire for liberation; here the term *arti* means desperately seeking moksha through self-knowledge. For the jijnasu without this desperation for moksha, Vedanta is an armchair philosophy discussed while sipping coffee. Not only is Narada's arta bhakta desperate for moksha, he also approaches a guru saying: "Teach me about the self." Arjuna himself was an arta, a mumukshu and a jijnasu. In desperation, he said to Krishna (Gita, 2.7): "*I am your disciple. Teach me who has surrendered to you.*"

Any sannyasi who renounces everything and goes to a gurukulam asking for knowledge is two in one. He is a desperate seeker of moksha—which is precisely why he has renounced everything; the desperation has reached such a state that he cannot live in society and so decides to leave everything—and when he leaves society as a mumukshu and finds his guru, he wants nothing other than self-knowledge, which he knows is the only route to moksha. As it says in the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12):

When after examining the entirety of his life experience, one realizes that he cannot achieve everlasting happiness through the result of any action, he is advised to humbly approach a proper teacher, who is learned in the Vedas and having made that knowledge his own, revels in it.

Therefore, the greatest seeker is one who is both a desperate mumukshu and a jijnasu. A desperate mumukshu is one whose longing is so sincere and so intense it is analogous to a person whose hair has caught fire. If there is a nearby pond, this person won't check to see if the pond is dirty and he won't feel the water temperature to decide when it might be a good day; he will urgently jump into the water. When a spiritual seeker is burning from the spiritual fire inside, he won't think of his worldly duties; he will simply walk away. We hear the story of the Buddha, who was a prince but could not think of anything else and so walked away from his riches. That same story is shared by others who have a powerful fire of desire for liberation. Such people are called arta mumukshus, and they are very fortunate. But if they don't know how to get moksha, they are in trouble. There are many people who want moksha and leave society to go to the Himalayas. If they have punya, they will find a guru who tells them that self-knowledge is the only path. But if they don't have punya and find a proper guide, they are finished; these sannyasis will end up in various other activities, often benign ones, such as selling rudraksha beads. Therefore, a desperate mumukshu who doesn't know that self-knowledge is the only way may stray from the path of knowledge or even fall.

There are two different types of risk. The first is a mumukshu who never learned that studying the scriptures under the guidance of a proper teacher is the route to moksha, and so misses moksha even after becoming a sannyasi. In fact, many sannyasis fall this way. It is like the game of Snakes and Ladders. We think Himalayan sannyasis are lucky. They are lucky in the sense that they are ready for moksha, but if their punya is not there, they are finished. Like the game of Snakes and Ladders, they get to 94 and need to roll a six on the dice to reach the supreme abode. But between 94 and 100, there are three snakes. One wrong number and they are back down to 56, and before long back down to one. Therefore, remember that there are many sannyasi mumukshus who don't know that knowledge in the form of scriptural study and inquiry alone leads to moksha and so wind up falling. Vedanta has a special name for such people: *arudha-patita*, which means 'the one who has attained and fallen.'²¹ We have mumukshus who have not become jijnasus and fall. Conversely, there are many jijnasus who study the scriptures very well and are very scholarly, but they do not want moksha and their sincerity is lacking. They wind up as academic scholars, giving seminars and getting awards, but never attaining moksha. Narada says the arta bhakta is that rare person who possesses both mumukshu and jijnasu, the one who longs for both moksha and knowledge.

The arthartha bhakta is considered to be lowest according to Narada's classification because he neither wants moksha nor jnanam. The jijnasu bhakta wants jnanam, but is not interested in moksha. And the arta bhakti desperately wants both, like the disciple in Vivekachudamani, who comes to the guru saying (Verse 36):

I am roasted in the inextinguishable forest fire of samsara; tossed by the winds of misfortunes, I am terrified. Please save me from death, O Lord! You are my refuge; I know of no other refuge.

²¹ Literally translated, this term means 'having reached a level where he can stay firm in the bliss of brahman, he wants to settle down for a fraction of human bliss.'

To which the guru replies (Verse 43):

Fear not, O learned one! There is no danger for you. There is a way to cross over this ocean of Samsara. I shall instruct you the means by which the ancient Seers have gone to the other shore.

So returning to Sutra 57, which says: *Each earlier one is considered superior to the latter one.* This means the artha bhakta, who is understood to be both mumukshu and jijnasu, is superior to the jijnasu bhakta, who has desire for self-knowledge but not for liberation. Here, the jijnasu bhakta should be understood as merely a jijnasu without being a mumukshu; in short, he is an academic seeker. Still, the jijnasu bhakta is superior to the artharthi bhakta, who wants neither self-knowledge nor liberation. Thus, we have the two-fold seeker who wants both liberation and knowledge, the single seeker who wants knowledge only, and the seeker who wants neither. The artharthi is furthest away because he has two things left to seek, the jijnasu is less far away because he has one thing left to seek, and the artha is closest because in his desperation for liberation his study is anything but casual. He is like a gravely ill person reading a treatment manual for his own disease. When a healthy person reads a treatment manual, he will do it somewhat casually, perhaps with a view to sharing the information with others. But an ill person reading about the treatment for his illness will be one-pointed and utterly sincere.

Sutra 58. Success is easier to attain by bhakti than by any other process.

In this sutra, Narada talks about the glory of bhakti as a great sadhana, and he says that compared to all other sadhanas, bhakti is the easiest one with which to start. This is something that Krishna also says (Gita, 9.30-31):

He who worships me seeking nothing else should be considered a saint only, even if he has the worst conduct, for he has resolved rightly. Soon he becomes a noble soul and certainly attains lasting peace. Oh Arjuna! Declare to all—my devotee never perishes.

We must be careful not to mistake this as saying that bhakti is the easiest means to liberation. That is what the bhakti schools of philosophy say, but theirs is the opposing view. There is only one means to liberation, so it is senseless to talk about the easiest and most difficult; the only means is self-knowledge. That is Vedanta. But Vedanta also says that bhakti is the easiest means with which to start, especially informal bhakti, because one needn't know how to perform any of the rituals that fall under formal dvaita bhakti. Formal dvaita bhakti requires some degree of scriptural study, so if you want to know how to perform Vedic rituals, you need to study the Vedas. And if you want to know yourself, you have to do some serious study. Because all formal bhakti requires study, it is easiest to start with informal bhakti. Therefore Narada says bhakti is easier than any other means, such as karma yoga, upasana yoga, jnana yoga, etc. Love of God is the easiest sadhana with which to start, but it is never the place to end.

And why is bhakti said to be the easiest? Because the only capital required is love. Narada defined bhakti as love directed toward God. Given that bhakti is love and love is our essence, we all have love. Before coming to bhakti our love is not directed toward God, but toward countless other things—even a miserly person can be said to love his money. Every human being and even every animal has instinctive love. Self-love is always-already there, as is love for all people and things connected to us. The raw material is already there, so nothing needs to be acquired; we only need to redirect or convert this love into bhakti. This can be done most easily with a personified God (one Ishta-devata or another) and that bhakti produces a benefit; namely, peace of mind. The intensity of painful experiences is reduced. And this type of bhakti is accessible to illiterate people, who cannot read scripture. That is why Hindu temples are full of people willing to stand in a queue for nine hours—even that push-and-shove darshan is a source of joy. As Krishna says in the Gita (7.21)

Whichever devotee desires to worship faithfully any particular form, I stabilize the very faith of that devotee.

Sutra 59. [The reason bhakti is the easiest of all spiritual processes is] it does not depend on any other authority for its validity, being itself the standard of authority.

Narada refers to the first three bhaktis as secondary, as opposed to primary or ultimate bhakti. In saying that these three forms of dvaita bhakti should never be treated as the final goal, both he and Krishna intend to convey that they are nonetheless very important as stepping-stones. Jnani bhakti alone is the primary bhakti. Without advaita bhakti, dvaita bhakti is incomplete, and without dvaita bhakti, advaita bhakti is impossible. In this regard, Vedanta differs from all the bhakti schools of philosophy, which present dvaita bhakti as both a means and an end. The Vedantic view does emphasize dvaita bhakti; indeed, Shankaracharya has written hymns on various deities and works such as Shivananda Lahari²² really highlight his dvaita bhakti. Advaitans never criticize dvaita bhakti or dvaita bhaktas. Our only grievance with the bhakti schools is that they present dvaita bhakti without ever educating their followers about the need to eventually study scripture, go to a guru, practice self-inquiry, and gain self-knowledge, which is tantamount to discovering advaita bhakti. The bhakti schools of philosophy never give due respect to scriptural study, self-inquiry, and self-knowledge, despite the fact that Krishna says that jnani bhakti is the highest form of devotion. In neglecting these things, they wind up seriously misleading people. We should emphasize that we are not against dvaita bhakti; indeed, Narada openly says that it's the easiest way to start. There are continuous problems arising in life at the personal, family, and professional levels, so we already begin as arta bhaktas (distressed devotees). As Krishna says (Gita, 7.21):

Whichever devotee desires to worship faithfully any particular form, I stabilize the faith of that very devotee.

Krishna is assuring us that he will do everything to nourish that arta bhakti, and thereafter it should be transformed into artharthi bhakti, then into jijnasu bhakti. But we have to start somewhere. Similarly, Narada says: *Success is easier to attain by bhakti than by any other process.* Everybody intrinsically and instinctively has self-love, and it is this self-love alone that later gets directed toward our near and dear ones. The arta bhakta needs to redirect this already available love toward Isvara. Bhakti is simply love directed toward Isvara. It is therefore a good starting point, but it is not the final destination. As is said in the Kaivalya Upanishad (Verse 19), the final destination is the knowledge: *In me alone is everything born.*

Narada also says that bhakti does not depend on any other authority for its validity. Performing formal Vedic rituals requires scriptural authority. There are rules and regulations; I cannot simply do as I please. Upasana requires scriptural authority and karmas require scriptural authority, whereas love is already known to everyone; it is simply the direction of this love that needs to be understood. With regard to love, no other authority is required. Love is our nature and self-love is universal; it is self-evident in everyone as the very nature of atman. Even animals love themselves. We know this to be true because when there is a threat, they will run for their dear lives. Therefore, love is the easiest place to start.

Sutra 60. Furthermore, bhakti is the embodiment of peace and supreme joy.

²² Shivananda Lahari, which means 'Wave of Auspicious Bliss,' is a devotional hymn to Shiva comprising 100 stanzas, which was composed by Shankaracharya while he was staying in the pilgrimage town of Srisailem.

Our love toward other people and things is always subject to fluctuation because it is conditional. Before becoming a jnani, I have conditions for loving others. Even parental love seems to come with conditions—parents will even disown their children if they do not toe the line. Similarly, the love of a partner is conditional. As Shankaracharya writes in Bhaja Govindam (Verse 10):

When youth departs, what good is lust? What good is the lake, when water denudes? Where are kin, when wealth disappears?

When we lose money, the number of people who want to associate with us also decreases. All worldly love is conditional. But if we develop love for God, even if it is initially devotion to God in a particular form, that love will be unconditional, both from my perspective and from Isvara's. Whenever I invoke bhakti toward the Lord, it unfailingly gives supreme joy because Isvara does not place any conditions upon love. Indeed, Krishna promises this in the Gita (9.30) when he says:

He who worships me seeking nothing else should be considered a saint even if he has the worst conduct, for he has resolved rightly.

He is saying: "I will not shut the door on even the worst sinner, if he turns toward me." A real friend is one who opens the door when all others shut the door. A friend in need is a friend indeed. Similarly, Isvara is one who never shuts the door, even when everyone else shuts it. This is why Narada says that bhakti is a source of supreme joy. And not only joy, but peace, which means the absence of suffering. Thus, when I invoke my relationship with the Lord, all my mental disturbances diminish and there is positive joy, and the mere image of God is enough to give that benefit. This is what makes bhakti such an easy and useful way to start.

Sutra 61. After consigning to the Lord all one's mundane and Vedic duties, one no longer needs to worry about worldly loss.

Naturally when I like or love someone, I want to learn more about him or her. When I have admiration and appreciation and love for God, it will generate a curiosity for inquiry that leads to scriptural study. It may not lead directly to Vedanta, but at the very least it will lead to an understanding of the greatness of the manifest Lord. From devotion to a particular God, I find that I want to know more about the other glories of the Lord. And when I study those, I come to understand God in and as all forms. In the 1000 Names of Vishnu hymn, the first name of the Lord is *Vishvam*, which means the one who is himself the whole universe. It is a bow to the all.

When bhakti toward God in a particular form gets converted to bhakti toward God in all forms, the natural byproduct is a renunciation of the 'I'-sense and 'my'-sense. True devotion and true self-knowledge inevitably leads one to renunciation. If one does not develop this attitude of renunciation, devotion and self-knowledge have either not been understood or not applied correctly. Why does self-knowledge lead to renunciation? With knowledge, I know that I am unaffected by and unattached to anything. When I am truly non-attached, where is the question of claiming ownership of anything? Ownership necessarily disappears as a consequence of self-knowledge. Devotion also leads to renunciation because if I understand the Lord as the owner of everything, how dare I claim anything as mine while also proclaiming myself to be a bhakta? There would have to be a fundamental misunderstanding. What is the definition of the word Bhagavan? *Bhaga* means opulence and *van* means possessor. The Vedas define Bhagavan as the total possessor of six forms of opulence (Vishnu Purana, 6.5.47): (1) total power, (2) total courage or valor, (3) total fame—I should not claim any fame for myself. If anybody glorifies me and I am a real bhakta, not merely a lip-service bhakta, the glory should immediately be passed onto Bhagavan, (4) total wealth in all its forms—so I may wear all these

lovely ornaments but without developing a sense of ownership of them, (5) total knowledge, and (6) total dispassion. These six total wealths are called *bhaga* and Bhagavan is their one possessor. This means I cannot even claim this physical body. The more I understand and assimilate this, the more renunciation will naturally unfold. And when ups and downs take place in these various areas, I will not entertain any worry or anxiety because both of these stem from the sense of egoism and ownership. Therefore, Narada says that a bhakta drops anxiety and worry by saying: "I am only a caretaker." I will contribute my best, but I need not worry about the outcome. Contribution is the other side of love, whereas worry is the other side of ownership. So I contribute by helping in whatever way I can, but I don't harbor anxiety in the mind. This is the natural consequence of real bhakti. So when we experience setbacks, failures, losses, insults in our worldly affairs, we should not immediately take to newer and newer requests. It is our tendency to convert distress into artha bhakti, but this is not real bhakti. As it says in the Gita (6.1):

He who performs action without expecting the result of action, is a sannyasi, and not a renouncer of rituals. Moreover, he is a yogi and not a renouncer of activities.

Do what you can do and say to Bhagavan (Mukundu Mala Stotra, Verse 5):

For whatever has been decided by you will come to me in accordance with the karma of my past. But I have one soulful prayer to thee, O Lord. In birth after birth, may I show unflinching devotion at your two lotus feet.

Lord, I will do my duty and let the consequences unfold according to the laws of karma. I don't expect you to do something special for me. Let us not bribe God. Let us simply do our best and what will be will be. Then my prayer is simply this: "May bhakti give me the strength to face any failure or disappointment." So, a bhakta should not worry much about worldly losses. And why shouldn't I worry? Because a real bhakta surrenders everything to the Lord. This includes all things associated with the body-mind complex (i.e., egoism, ownership, and sense enjoyments); all worldly things (i.e., family, possessions, position, name, and fame); and all Vedic duties (i.e., performing rituals or invoking God for the explicit purpose of obtaining some desired end). As Krishna has criticized in the Gita (2.42-44):

The unintelligent ones who are enamoured with ritualistic Vedic statements, who are votaries of heaven, who always argue that there is nothing else, and who are full of desires speak such flowery words that are full of specific rites for attaining pleasure and power, and which lead to further births, the results of actions. Clear understanding does not take place in the mind of those attached to pleasure and power, and whose minds are carried away by those words.

The bhakta has not renounced just once, but it has become part of his natural inclination. Because difficulties always tempt us toward selfish and desirous action, resisting the temptation is the toughest part. And we can only resist this tendency if our bhakti is strong. Narada is saying: May you practice this desireless bhakti, which alone will lead you to jijnasu bhakti. Jijnasu bhakti can never be reached from devotion for the sake of wish-fulfillment.

Sutra 62. In attaining the highest bhakti, one should not abandon responsibilities in this world, but rather, surrender the results of all actions to the Lord.

As long as one remains in society as a householder, one should never give up family duties, social duties, and scriptural duties, especially the pancha maha-yajnas. Those duties should never be given up in the name of bhakti. One must continue to be involved in all the activities required for the achievement of worldly needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, and money. We must do whatever is required for that, but in parallel do the sadhana required for attaining the highest devotion known as advaita bhakti. But the attitude when performing these worldly activities will be one of surrendering all results to the Lord. Thus, the actions are performed for mental purification, not for name, fame, recognition, reciprocation, or even gratitude. We often expect gratitude from others, but as Krishna says in the (Gita, 2.47):

May you not be motivated by the results of actions and may you not have an inclination toward inaction.

Do what you have to, but do not expect gratitude. If others are grateful, that's wonderful. But gratitude must never be expected or demanded. It is my duty to offer gratitude, but it is never my duty to demand gratitude. When I don't expect worldly rewards, mental purification comes more quickly. I need not even ask for it; it will take place by default. In performing duties without expecting worldly rewards, mental purification comes. As long as advaita bhakti has not yet been attained, one must continue to attain it.

Sutra 63. One should not find entertainment in news of sex, money, atheists, and enemies.

In this sutra, Narada is asking the bhakta to take certain precautions to nourish bhakti and use it wisely for spiritual growth. Remember that throughout the Narada Bhakti Sutra, the primary aim is moksha or spiritual growth. One of these precautions is sense control, which is also discussed in the context of the fourfold qualification in Tattva Bodha as dama or control of the senses. Why is sense control important? Because the sense organs are the gateways linking the mind and the external world, and the external world is always waiting to gatecrash into the mind through the five doors. If there is no watchman, anything and everything can gatecrash. And once the external world enters the mind, it cannot remain quiet. It is a lot like catching a cold. If I go out with a compromised immune system, I will be a welcome host to all kinds of bacteria and viruses. Similarly, if the mind doesn't have immunity through sense control, anything can enter the mind and start working on it. There may be an incubation period, but eventually these things will start to operate. Krishna talks about this in the 2nd Chapter of the Gita by using the analogy of a tortoise (2.58):

Moreover, when one completely withdraws the sense organs from the sense objects, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs, then his knowledge becomes firm.

A tortoise withdraws its limbs into a thick shell whenever it senses a danger. Because it cannot run from danger very quickly, Bhagavan has given it this support. Once the danger is gone, the tortoise comes back out of its shell. Now suppose I don't withdraw my sense organs and instead keep them open for everything to gatecrash. What will happen? Krishna addresses this as well when he says (Gita, 2.62-63):

For a person who dwells on the sense objects, a fancy toward them arises. From fancy, desire is born. From desire, anger arises. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, the loss of memory; from loss of memory,

the loss of discrimination. Because of the loss of discrimination, he perishes.

Among the sense organs, two very powerful ones are the eyes and ears. So Narada advises us to filter what we see and hear. And if we don't filter, the world will enter and produce unproductive thoughts, including lust, anger, greed, and delusion. In Sutra 63, Narada gives four examples of the types of stories that lead to the fourfold mental disturbances and advises us not to listen to stories that promote the four internal enemies. There are so many stories out there, from people gossiping, to articles in trashy magazines, to movies and television programs. And what are the four specific examples given by Narada? The first is sex. Nowadays, the media is almost exclusively dedicated to writing hyper-sexualized stories, otherwise their magazines won't sell. In the name of marketing, they have to include all kinds of information about the private lives of celebrities, but if those stories aren't elevating, one should avoid them. The second example that Narada gives is money. Money is extremely important. The Vedas do not want us to underestimate or overestimate the importance of money. Money has value, but viewing money from either extreme is dangerous. There are so many books these days devoted exclusively to discussing the glory of wealth and how to earn it. The third example Narada gives is atheists; that is, people who do not believe in the purusharthas of virtue or freedom. Atheists argue that in today's world one needs to be practical. 'Practical' is a shorthand way of saying 'don't be too fussy about values. Instead, learn how to adjust your values according to time.' The fourth and final example Narada gives is enemies, which refers to our competitors or those who are hostile toward us. Involving ourselves in stories of sex kindles desire, in stories of enemies kindles anger in stories of money kindles greed, and in stories of atheists gives rise to delusion.

Narada is giving some important instructions here. He is saying monitor your lifestyle very carefully because spiritual seeking is not confined to a particular action at a particular time; we need to be aware of our entire lifestyle. Indeed, various types of conduct have been enumerated in the Gita. For example, in Chapter 16, Krishna clearly outlines a list of virtues that promote spiritual growth and a list of vices that obstruct spiritual growth, and he says (16.5):

It is known that daivi-sampat (virtue) leads to liberation and asuri-sampat (vice) leads to bondage.

These qualities are elaborated upon from Verse 7 onward, where Krishna says (16.7):

Asura people do not know what is to be done and what is not to be done. They have neither purity, nor spiritual discipline. And they lack truthfulness.

Likewise, in Sutras 62 and 63, Narada is saying: be sure your lifestyle promotes virtue and gradually weakens vice. This implies that the list must be clear. Consider committing the 16th Chapter of the Gita to memory, or write down the lists of virtuous and vicious qualities and paste them all over your walls or your body. Whatever I see, hear, speak, or do—whatever books I read, movies I watch, TV shows I follow, company I keep—must be sanitized so as not to promote vice because even if we feel alert now, we continue fight with old vasanas. If we are going to lead an alert life, we need to orient away from things that are likely to trigger our vasanas because their hold is strong and their decay is slow. Narada is imploring us to stay alert. As we saw in Sutra 63, anything that promotes desire, anger, greed, or delusion should be carefully avoided. We don't need to feel disdain toward anyone because everybody is the self. If we find that engaging with a person or activity is not favorable to our spiritual growth, we may smile at them or engage in brief and casual conversation, but we should renounce regular or intimate association with that person or thing.

Sutra 63 is a recapitulation of what Narada advised in Sutra 43—namely, avoiding the company of those who are a bad influence. In the earlier sutra, he was referring to the people with whom we spend our time, and here he is talking about the media that we consume. In fact, one can't help but wonder whether it's worth reading the newspaper at all, because negative news is what sells. In fact, many ashrams advise people to stop reading newspapers and watching TV altogether. We don't need to take such an extreme stance, but we do need to be mindful about what we consume. This advice harkens back to Krishna's example of the tortoise (Gita 2.58):

Just as a tortoise withdraws its head and limbs into its shell because it has no other mechanism of defense, so too must we remain alert.

Sutra 64. One should relinquish false pride, hypocrisy, and other vices.

Having touched on the 16th Chapter of Gita, we now turn to the 13th Chapter. All of the Narada Bhakti Sutras are Gita-based. Here, the language is cast in terms of bhakti, but it is really nothing more than action, meditation, and values. Narada emphasizes two things in this sutra. The first is prideful attachment to the 'I-sense' and 'my-sense,' known as hubristic pride or false prestige. As we study scripture and come to know more than lay people, as we find ourselves able to quote the Gita and Upanishads, it may unwittingly go to our heads. Hubristic pride regarding knowledge is the most dangerous form of pride because knowledge is the only antidote for pride. When the antidote itself becomes the cause of disease we are in very dangerous territory. Thus we should never allow a sense of feeling special, superior, holier, or wiser than others to develop. This is false pride. The second thing Narada underscores is prestige, which is nothing more than the outward expression of hubristic pride. Prestige includes publicizing or showcasing oneself through words, deeds, dress, material possessions, etc. Claiming my greatness from the standpoint of the self is not pride. When I claim 'I am brahman,' from the standpoint of my true nature, it is not arrogant, but comes from firm knowledge. But claiming my greatness from the standpoint of the body-mind complex is a real problem because the body, mind, and intellect are all full of limitations. In Verse 11 of Bhaja Govindam, Shankaracharya says:

Do not be proud of wealth, friends, relatives, or youth. Time can kill all these things in a moment.

You may be youthful now with an energetic walk, but let's see you walk when you're past the age of 60; the difference will be obvious. The same can be said of dropping the names of important people you know. Thus, may you relinquish egoism, arrogance, and exhibitionism and lead a life of humility and simplicity, developing the 20 virtues outlined in the (Gita, 13.8-12):

Humility, simplicity, non-violence, forbearance, uprightness, service to the teacher, purity, steadfastness, self-control, non-attachment to sense objects, absence of egoism, clearly and constantly seeing the defect of pain in birth, death, old age, and disease, dispassion, non-identification with son, wife, house, etc., equanimity in desirable and undesirable situations, unswerving devotion to the self with undivided attention, seclusion, non-indulgence in people's company, constant self-inquiry; and not losing sight of the fruit of self-knowledge—all this is said to be knowledge. And that which is opposed to this is ignorance.

Sutra 65. Offering all of one's activities to the Lord, one should feel desire, anger, and pride only with regard to Him.

In spite of our best efforts to give up desire, anger, greed, and delusion, they may continue to arise in the mind. To address this, Narada prescribes another method: May you redirect them as they arise.

Retain your desire, he says, but let it be directed toward scripture and liberation, or the self. In other words, let it be desire for knowledge, desire for God, desire for steadiness in non-duality. If your desire cannot be relinquished, refine it instead. And what is this refinement? As Shankaracharya says in Verse 1 of Sadhana Panchakam, may your desire be expressed as follows:

Study the Vedas regularly and put their teachings into practice. Worship the Divine in that manner and give up the thought of desires. Wash away the negative habit-energy and examine the defects of worldly excitement. Claim your identity as awareness, relinquishing your own limited identity.

Likewise, if we feel anger coming, we can close the door and shout at Isvara. One consolation is that Isvara won't shout back, hold a grudge, or file for divorce because Isvara's love is unconditional. If we are inclined toward anger, we might begin by asking: "What is the direction of my anger?" We tend to become angry with people or situations we feel are causing harm or trouble for us. But on careful examination, we find that the greatest cause of harm is the anger itself, which hurts ourselves and others. So we should direct our anger toward the anger itself. Thereafter, we can direct our anger toward God, inquiring: "Why are you giving me this anger?" or "Why are you not removing my anger problem?" It is the same with the vice of greed. We need to refine this greed by redirecting it toward doing more scriptural study and developing more of the virtues. Accordingly, Narada says: resolve to dedicate everything—all desire, anger, and pride; all traits, tendencies, and conduct—to Isvara. These are all instructions for the beginning stages of dvaita bhakti before Vedanta has come into the picture.

Sutra 66. After piercing through these coverings of the three modes of nature [i.e., the gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas], one should act only from pure love of the Lord, remaining perpetually in the mode of a servant serving his master, or a lover serving her beloved.

So we are being taught to refine our desire by redirecting it toward Isvara; in other words, by nourishing Isvara-bhakti. But even after developing Isvara-bhakti, the Isvara-bhakti itself must be further refined. We know about the stages of refinement from the 7th Chapter of the Gita: artha bhakti, artharthi bhakti, jijnasu bhakti, and jnani bhakti. Initially Isvara bhakti is of a purely commercial spirit. It is motivated by the desire to get rid of problems or accomplish worldly goals. That is to say, worldly things are the end and I use Isvara as a mean for attaining this end. This desirous bhakti needs to be converted into desireless bhakti, which means reversing the means and the ends. Rather than using Isvara as a means to attain worldly things, we use worldly things as a means for attaining Isvara. For many people, Isvara is useful for finding a soulmate, landing a dream job, or getting the mortgage paid off. In other words, Isvara is a means for nourishing egoism and ownership. Vedanta is asking us instead: Are you willing to renounce these cherished things for the sake of Isvara? If we are seeing Isvara as a means for attaining worldly ends, discrimination between the eternal and the ephemeral is still unclear for us. Desireless bhakti is devotion in which I am mentally willing and ready to renounce everything. In desirous bhakti, Isvara is the means and worldly attainments are the end. In desireless bhakti, the world is the means and Isvara is the end. In the Gita, the world is described as being contaminated by the three gunas. Krishna says (2.45):

Be free from desire of the world of three gunas. Be free from the hold of the pairs of opposites. Be ever established in sattva guna. Be free from the concern for acquisition and preservation. Be mindful.

Narada says: we have to transcend the three gunas, or desirous bhakti, which is samsara. This means seeing clearly and living with Isvara as the goal rather than the means. Enough of keeping Isvara as your personal assistant and errand boy. Why can't you give Isvara a promotion already? It seems we

are ready to put every goal on our lists, but we are not yet ready to include Isvara as the goal. And it's not enough to include Isvara as one among many goals. Many people squeeze Isvara onto a long list of other items. Isvara is the 5,374th goal, and only after completing 5,373 other things, are they ready to pursue Isvara. This is a condescending bhakti. Not only should Isvara be included on the list of goals (that is the first promotion), but Isvara should be at the very top of the list. Not only should Isvara be at the top of the list, eventually Isvara should be the only thing on the list. As Krishna says (Gita, 2.41):

There is only one clear understanding in this field. However, the notions of those without clarity are many-branched and endless.

If on your deathbed Isvara were to ask you to choose a single thing, you should be able to name one thing without batting an eyelid: Isvara alone. As it says in the Gita (13.11): *unswerving devotion to Me with undivided attention*. This bhakti can be in any form. Isvara can be invoked in various ways and Narada gives a couple of examples. He says it can be perpetual servitude, which means seeing all scriptural instructions as Isvara's instructions. As it says in the Bhagavata (11.20.9):

The srutis and smritis²³ are to be understood as my injunctions, and one who violates them is understood to be violating my will and thus opposing me. Although such a person may claim to be my devotee, he is not a true bhakta.

Going to temples and breaking coconuts is not bhakti. Bhakti is committing oneself to following the values outlined by Bhagavan. We may fail in our efforts sometimes; we are human beings with weaknesses after all. Bhagavan does not expect perfection from us, but Bhagavan does expect sincere effort. Therefore, Narada says: may you take to bhakti as a servant serving his master or as a lover serving her beloved. Either way, may you practice pure love of God alone.

In saying this, we need to be extremely careful because the bhakti schools of philosophy are always ready to launch in with their own interpretations, so need to be clear about how to differentiate between bhakti philosophy and the vision of Vedanta. Sutra 66 is particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation by the bhakti schools, who will say: "Narada is not talking about your Vedanta. He is talking about our bhakti because he has said perpetual servitude. They will underline the word 'perpetual,' and suggest that it means we should forever be saying "I am your servant, I am your servant," implying that we should never get to "I am that." Then they will conclude: "Narada belongs to our party, not yours." So we need to be very cautious. In interpreting any bhakti text, we should never violate sruti, yukti, and anubhava. Perpetual servitude is not what Vedanta teaches. The Chandogya Upanishad clearly says: *tat tvam asi* (you are that). Likewise, the Kaivalya Upanishad says:

I am that which is smaller than the smallest particle of matter one can think of. And I am great without qualification, bigger than the biggest one can think of. This entire amazingly variegated universe—that is what I am. I am eternal and I am unborn. I am the whole, all-inclusive, all-pervasive, undivided and indivisible being. I am the Lord of everything. I am the totality of all-knowledge. I am the very manifestation of Shiva, ever-

²³ Both srutis and smritis refer to scripture. Sruti literally means 'what is heard' and smriti means 'what is remembered.' Srutis are revealed and considered primary sources (i.e., the Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva Vedas and the 108 Upanishads) and Smritis are derived from these sources (e.g., the Bhagavad Gita).

*auspicious absolute happiness, the absolute reality behind all existence.
That is what I am.*

Shivoham (I am Shiva) or *So Ham* (I am that) is the final teaching of the Vedas. Therefore, the phrase ‘perpetual servitude’ should never be taken literally. This phrase simply means ‘as long as ignorance is there,’ so it is a relative or qualified definition of eternity, like the eternity of heaven. When we say heaven is eternal we don’t mean it literally, but relatively speaking heaven is eternal. If someone were to say that eternal servitude is the teaching, we would say this is the opposing view. But if one were to explain that this eternity is qualified, we would be back in the realm of Vedanta. So Narada says: however this love manifests, one should act from pure love alone.

Chapter 5: The Glory of the Supreme Devotee (Sutras 67-84)

Sutra 67. Among the Lord’s devotees, the greatest are those who are dedicated to him solely as his intimate servants.

This last chapter deals with the glory of the advaita bhakti, or supreme devotee. This bhakta is described in the three places in the Bhagavad Gita: the 2nd Chapter as one who is firmly established in self-knowledge (*sthitaprajna*), the 12th Chapter as the ultimate bhakti (*parabhakta*), and the 14th Chapter as one who is beyond the gunas (*gunathita*). The Chapter 12 description comes closest to Narada’s because Krishna uses the word *bhakta* and here we are talking about the greatness or glory of this bhakta. In the first sutra of this chapter, Narada says: the primary bhaktas who have discovered the Lord in themselves are unalloyed, which is to say they have clear and singular knowledge or resolve. In the 12th Chapter of the Gita, Krishna says (12.19):

That devotee who is the same towards censure and praise, who is of limited speech, who is contented with anything, who is homeless, and who has firm knowledge of the self is dear to me.

The firm knowledge that Krishna is referring to is: *brahma satyam, jagan-mithya, jivo brahmaiva napaaraha*: Consciousness is real, names and forms are apparent. You are non-different from consciousness. Through this knowledge, advaita bhaktas have discovered liberation and fulfillment. How does one know if a person has attained fulfillment? In the next sutra, Narada describes how jnanis talk about their journey and how happy they are. It is like hiking Kedarnath in the Himalayas. You are struggling, huffing and puffing throughout the journey, and when you finally reach the top you get the darshan of the Lord—how utterly fulfilling! This is like the fulfillment experienced by advaita bhaktas, as described in the next sutra.

Sutra 68. Conversing among one another with throats choked, hair standing on end, and tears flowing, the Lord’s intimate servants purify their own followers and the whole world.

A human birth is itself very rare. You may recall the 2nd Verse of Vivekachudamani:

Of all births, that as a human being is rare to obtain. More difficult than that is to be inclined toward the path of dharma declared by the Vedas. Still more difficult is scholarship in the revealed texts, discrimination between atma and “anatma,” perfect experience following profound

meditation, the state of being established in brahman and finally, liberation. These cannot be obtained without merit acquired over hundreds of thousands of lives.

To cross over so many varieties of births and end up born a human being, and further, to come to the Vedic path. Then to actually become interested in the Vedas when one could easily have followed another path. Then not getting stuck in action, but at the right time moving to meditation and eventually becoming interested in self-inquiry, and finding a proper guru to serve as a guide. All of this without getting caught in any traps along the way. If we stand at the top of Mount Everest and look down at all the traps we have successfully avoided, it is an overwhelming feeling of fulfillment. We see many people down below, but we can't shout at them because they won't be able to hear us. When a jnani looks down from the top, it is often lonely because very few others have successfully arrived at the same place. And when a jnani reflects on his or her accomplishment from this peak—with so many obstacles, so many lanes and bylanes, so many potential traps that were avoided along the way—when a jnani reflects upon this with the few others who can understand, there is such a sense of fulfillment that tears are shed. These are not tears of sorrow, though there have been plenty of those as well; now they are tears of joy. As it says in the 7th Chapter of the Panchadasi:

O how grand are the scriptures, the scriptures, O how grand is my teacher, my teacher! O how grand is this merit, this merit, O how grand is this joy, this joy!

I don't know whether to say Isvara is great, the scripture is great, or the guru is great, for they are all mutually interdependent. I can only understand the greatness of the scripture because of the guru, and I can only understand the greatness of the guru because of Isvara, who supplied him. So when I feel like glorifying the scripture, I remember the guru, and when I feel like glorifying the guru, I think of the grace of God. And when I feel like thanking God, I want to thank myself for having acquired the punya, without which Isvara would not have given me all these things. So ultimately, I want to pat myself on the back because this knowledge is bliss. Therefore, Narada says with tears flowing and hairs standing on end. And when I begin to talk about it, I get choked up with emotion. And these few jnanis alone purify the earth. Even though there is so much evil in the world: cheaters, robbers, terrorists in the millions. But the world remains fantastic because of the few jnanis moving about, purifying their communities, past and future, because there is no difference between a jnani and Isvara. There is a verse that says that Isvara exists in both stationary and mobile versions, much like our phones. The stationary version is the one installed in the temples and the mobile version is in the form of all the jnanis and sannyanis, moving about the world and purifying it.

In talking about the primary bhakta, or advaita bhakta, in this 5th and final chapter of this text, Narada begins by pointing out in Sutra 67: that only a jnani can be considered the primary or supreme devotee, because a jnani alone has attained fulfillment. All other types of bhaktas can only be considered secondary because they all retain one expectation or another. The artha bhakta is desperate to get out of problems, the artharthi bhakta wants badly to succeed in some venture, and the jijnasu bhakta, as the very name suggests, desperately wants self-knowledge. In all these bhaktas, there is a lack of fulfillment that expresses in four features. The first feature is a sense of helplessness or desperation. The second feature is demanding, a constant seeking of something from the Lord; the voice of this bhakta is a pleading one. The third feature is a feeling of smallness, inferiority, or insignificance before the Lord who is so vast. The fourth and most important feature is a sense of dependence; the attitude: "without you, I would fall." All these are prominent features of conventional or dvaita bhakti. Many people have a hard time wrapping their mind around the idea of devotion without these four features, which they see as essential components of bhakti. Without them, bhakti seems meaningless or even

impossible. In the absence of these four features, who or what exactly is a bhakta? A jnani bhakta is one without a sense of desperation because in knowing 'I am awareness' where is the question of helplessness? Such a bhakta cannot have a sense of seeking either because he or she knows that the I, the atma, includes everything. As it says in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.6): *All this is just the self.* So what could a jnani possibly seek when he or she knows 'I am full, I am whole, I am complete.' Therefore, there is no striving or seeking to pollute a jnani's bhakti. And there is no sense of smallness or inadequacy, which is only a superimposition of ignorance. As Shankaracharya says in Atma Bodha (Verse 4):

This self appears to be finite due to ignorance. When ignorance is destroyed, the one self is self-luminous, just as the radiance of the sun is known when the clouds pass away.

Inadequacy is the product of ignorance alone. Once ignorance is gone, the sense of inadequacy goes along with it. Finally, there cannot be a sense of dependence, which is the opposite of complete independence. A jnani will not have the attitude: I cannot survive without you, because he or she knows: I am the very existence that lends existence to everything. This is the jnani's wisdom, so how could she ever have a sense of dependence? Thus, if any of these four features is present in the jnani bhakta, it suggests that the knowledge is not yet firm. In all bhakti schools of philosophy, the bhakta permanently retains dependence and never entertains the sense of complete self-dependence. In fact, the bhakti schools consider independence or self-dependence to be inimical to bhakti. By their view, a bhakta will never say: "I depend on the self alone." Vedanta does not accept this. One can have a sense of dependence as an artha bhakta, an artharthi bhakta, and a jijnasu bhakta, but after attaining firm self-knowledge, this sense of dependence is abolished. As it says in the Chandogya Upanishad (7.24.1): *The supreme abides in his own grandeur, not depending on anyone.*

We have reviewed what the jnani bhakta is not. Let us be clear now about what the bhakti of a jnani is. What is the feeling in a jnani's love of and devotion to God? The first thing is a sense of fulfillment, the fullness of reaching the Everest of spiritual sadhana. A jnani is indebted to Bhagavan for having discovered this fulfillment; without Bhagavan's grace it would be impossible to discover the absence of desperation, demand, diminishment, and dependence. It is a great achievement to be able to abolish these four things from my bhakti because each of them represents samsara. And if I have managed to accomplish this it is because of Bhagavan. Bhagavan has helped me at the level of karma yoga, self-inquiry, and self-knowledge by supplying me with the Vedantic scripture. In fact, Bhagavan happens to be the Adi Guru and initiator of the scripture, which is why we say:

Salutations to the entire lineage, beginning with sadashiva, through Shankaracharya, and continuing with my own immediate teacher.

If it were not for this guru-student lineage, I would not be claiming that I am absolutely free. Therefore, bhakti for a jnani is an expression of gratitude, which is immeasurable because the achievement is so great. The more a jnani appreciates this achievement, the more grateful he feels toward the Lord. This gratitude and joy and fulfillment alone makes him emotional. His throat gets choked up and there are tears, not from fear or sorrow but from joy. This devotion proceeding from fullness defines the jnani's bhakti. This is why Narada says in Sutra 68: "...with throats choked, hair standing on end, and tears flowing." You may recall that Arjuna experienced a similar condition, but in his case, it stemmed from the confusion of samsara. As it says in the Kena Upanishad (2.5):

If it is known here, there is truth. If it is unknown here there is great loss.

The jnani also sings the glory of the Lord and himself, which have become identical. In the Taittiriya Upanishad (Part 3, Bhriguvali, Verse 10) the jnani's song is recorded:

Bliss! Bliss! Bliss! I am food. I am food. I am food. I am the eater of food. I am the eater of food. I am the eater of food. I am the one who joins these two together. I am the first born of the true, the eternal and immortal. I am the center of immortality, prior to the gods. Whoever gives me away, surely preserves this. I am the food that eats him who eats food. I am luminous like the sun. He who knows this attains the aforementioned results.

And in the Taittiriya (Shikshavalli, Verse 10):

I am the stimulator of the tree of the universe. My reputation is as high as a mountaintop. Elevated to the most Holy, I am the excellent immortal being as he is in the sun. I am the power, the wealth refulgent with divine intuition. I have attained true knowledge, I have become imperishable and immutable.

This is the advaita bhakti of the Vedantic view, which is never discussed by the bhakti schools, wherein permanent dependence is written. We want to claim: Freedom is my birthright. Therefore, Narada says that when these rare jnanis meet, they converse with each other about how they have won the Moksha Cup and share their joy. Their existence is a blessing to the world and to their communities. There may be billions of samsaris out there in the world, but the few jnanis in existence make the world glorious.

Sutra 69. Their association makes holy places holy, works auspicious, and the scriptures authoritative.

When jnanis travel from place to place, they have a purifying effect. As seekers they went to rivers, such as the Ganga or Kaveri seeking purification, but as jnanis, this is reversed: when they take a dip in the Ganga, they purify it because they are non-different from God. In fact, they say that the Ganga is waiting for the arrival of such jnanis. The Ganga is not only polluted in the worldly sense of the term, but in the spiritual sense as well. Everybody drops their papam into the Ganga and it has become polluted by the papam of the masses. So it awaits a jnani's arrival for purification. Even temples become sanctified after a jnani visits and sings hymns there. When Shankaracharya writes a hymn about a particular deity, the place associated with that deity becomes famous. And whatever actions jnanis perform are auspicious. They don't need to perform any karmas for purification, but any actions that they do perform are glorified. When a common person uses a book it becomes a second-hand item of lesser value, but when a jnani has used, written in, or autographed a book, it becomes even more valuable. This is why Narada says that even the scriptures, which are valid in and of themselves, gain extra validity for having been employed by a jnani. Wherever a jnani lives, that place becomes a temple, a pilgrim center drawing many visitors. The idea is that all of these things, and places, and actions become sanctified by the jnani's contact with them because there is no difference between a jnani and Isvara.

Sutra 70. [The supreme bhakta is] fully absorbed in God.

So why does a jnani sanctify all places? Here is the underlying logic: even as an advanced dvaita bhakta, a jnani remembers the Lord all the time. What is the difference between a bhakta and a samsari? A samsari keeps everything in his heart except Bhagavan. All kinds of people come and occupy the samsari's heart, whereas the bhakta has installed Bhagavan in her heart and worships the Lord in her heart. So when the bhakta moves from one place to another, it is the indwelling Lord that is

moving. Wherever a bhakta goes, the physical body holds Bhagavan inside making this being sacred. If this is true in the case of a dvaita bhakta, it is truer still in the case of the advaita bhakta, who doesn't say: "God is in me," but rather claims: "I am brahman." Previously he was a carrier of Bhagavan and now he knows himself to be Bhagavan, saturated with godliness. Thus wherever a jnani goes, that place becomes sanctified.

Sutra 71. [The supreme bhaktas'] forefathers become joyful, divine beings dance, and the earth itself feels protected by a good master.

Everyone feels proud to be associated with a jnani. Until a person achieves something, nobody is eager to claim association, but the moment somebody achieves something and becomes popular, everybody jumps to claim association, even old classmates. Parents are proud, teachers are proud, all those associated with the jnani in one way or another are proud. Even the gods and goddesses are happy. Initially, parents rarely want their children to move exclusively toward spirituality, as this instills fear. They will encourage their children to remain in society and have a family. But even though parents may initially worry and actively discourage their children from following such a course, when they see the accomplishment, they can't help but feel proud and happy. Even the gods and goddesses dance because they have presided over the jnani's five perceptive organs (i.e., eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin) and five active organs (i.e., speaking, grasping, moving, reproducing, eliminating). And that goddess who is the earth is also happy. There are millions of people committing offenses to her and she feels the burden of all their sin, but the few jnanis in existence serve to cleanse the entire earth of sin.

Sutra 72. There are no distinctions among such pure devotees in terms of social class, education, physical beauty, family, occupation, and so forth.

Here, Narada conveys the important fact that jnanis can never be graded. All jnanis are equally great, and all of them deserve equal and superlative respect, as much respect as Bhagavan deserves. As Shankaracharya sang in Manisha Panchakam:

He may be a learned brahmin or an outcast, no matter. The indwelling atma that shines distinctly in all three states is the same in one and all, irrespective of caste, creed or kind. The great one who inculcates this knowledge is the real preceptor.

A jnani's provenance, family, wealth, education level, career, outer appearance, or gender has no meaning whatsoever, for a jnani can never be graded according to conventional standards. There are so many hierarchies in society. One is always looked upon through the lens of one status or another, even friendships are often based on such standards. Society is constantly grading humanity, but such gradation based on worldly values is meaningless when it comes to the jnani. All these prejudices exist in society unfortunately, but as it says in Gita (5.18):

The wise see the same self in a brahmin who has knowledge and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, in a dog, and in a dog-eater.

Similarly, Narada says all these distinctions are irrelevant. This includes a jnani's functions, activities, or professions in society. Some jnanis are engaged in more service or activities than others, as Krishna says in the Gita (3.20): *At least considering the upliftment of the society, you should act.* Accordingly, jnanis don't have anything to accomplish in this life. They can bless society through one activity or another, based on your disposition because (Gita, 3.33):

Even a man of knowledge acts according to his nature. All beings go by their nature. What use is restraint?

The lifestyles of different jnanis will vary. Remember that even though self-knowledge is the same for all jnanis, their outward expression will vary because of differing vasanas and personalities (i.e., their body-mind complexes). The proportions of sattva, rajas, and tamas will also differ. Even though sattva is the predominant guna in all jnanis, there is some variation. Accordingly, one jnani may be withdrawn and enjoy stillness and solitude. Such jnanis don't feel compelled to stay active traveling from one place to another or teaching. If they are approached with questions, they may answer, but otherwise they will lead a transcendental way of life. The Himalayas are full of jnanis like this. We don't even know they exist because they don't publicize that they are sannyasis, or give out their website addresses. Then there are other jnanis, like Shankaracharya, who traveled around the globe several times establishing ashrams. So there are active jnanis and passive jnanis, and it's not that the active jnanis are superior; they are all the same. The very existence of a jnani is a blessing, whether active or not, whether teaching or not, whether serving society or not. Their very existence makes them great. Therefore, distinctions in their activities or professions are totally irrelevant. We include the word 'profession' here because there are jnanis who remain in society as householders and are given to different professions. We should not think of jnanis as being sannyasis only. What is the example of this? You are an example of this.

Sutra 73. [Pure devotees are not distinguished by external things because] they all belong to the Lord in equal measure.

This sutra is almost identical to Sutra 70, in which Narada said: "To them is the fullness of the Lord." Here, Narada puts it in a slightly different way. He says: "All jnanis belong to the Lord in equal measure." One cannot say that a serving jnani is closer to Bhagavan than is a non-serving jnani. All belong equally to Bhagavan, or are equally close to Bhagavan. 'Close' is not even the right word; they are one with Bhagavan. That is why the tradition says that worshipping a devotee is as great as worshipping Bhagavan. And what about samsaris? Do samsaris belong to God or not? Samsaris also belong to God, but unfortunately, they do not move any closer because they want to cling to their 'I'-sense and 'my'-sense. The more precisely we define our sense of egoism and ownership, the further away we move from God. For example, samsaris claim that this or that as my property, and other things as gifted to Bhagavan. In doing so, they draw a line between Bhagavan and themselves. Jnanis do not draw such a line. Where is the question of 'my property' and 'your property' for a jnani? Jnanis are closer to Bhagavan because they choose to move closer and samsaris are farther because they choose to remain farther. So when we combine the last two sutras we see that all jnanis belong equally to God because they make no distinctions in terms of caste, education, appearance, family, wealth, or role in society. And with this, Narada's discussion of the glory of the supreme bhakta, the advaita bhakta, comes to a close.

In the sutras that follow, Narada wants to wrap up the entire teaching. Specifically, he wants to give a few tips to the seeker or beginner devotee to help them arrive at the highest form of bhakti. This is very similar to the end of the 2nd Chapter of the Gita, when Arjuna asks Krishna about the traits of the wise. Krishna teaches him about these traits and about the practices of the wise as well. Narada has been talking about the traits of supreme or primary bhaktas and now he wants to give a few practice instructions to aspirants (i.e., the three types of secondary bhakta) so that they, too, can graduate to becoming jnanis. Narada's tips are directed toward jijnasus in particular who are studying the scriptures.

Sutra 74. One should not resort to argumentative debate.

The first bit of advice that Narada gives is: avoid arguments. The more we study, the more we tend to argue or debate. When anyone says anything, the first response we give is: "No." Then we try to correct, convince, or advise others. Unless someone explicitly says to you: "I am your disciple, please correct me," we should not correct. Such jijnasus also want to quote scripture and debate. This debating tendency can be harmful because debates lead to arguments, which nourish egoism because the goal is always to win. Narada advises us to be very mindful of this trap. His advice is not limited to discussions of spirituality or philosophy; it is best to avoid argument in any field. Healthy and enlightening discussion is possible only when the people involved are extremely mature. Intellectual discussions can be healthy and wonderful, but they may unwittingly get converted into debates, debates into arguments, and ordinary arguments into heated ones.

In the Vedic tradition, discussions are broadly classified into three types: two of these are considered unhealthy and one is considered healthy. The first type of unhealthy discussion is called *jalpa* and the second type is called *vitanda*. *Jalpa* is defined as debate that is undertaken by someone with the motive to win. The aim is not discover or arrive at the truth, but simply to convince the other person of one's own view. Even before listening to the other person, a person who argues like this has already concluded that the other's views are wrong, simply because they are the other's view, and that his own views are right because they are my views. Rather than being interested in the victory of truth, this person is merely interested in being a victor. One who enters into discussion this way has a lot of ego because his motive is centered on winning. Now imagine that the other person enters into the discussion with the same aim; she, too, wants to establish her own view and dismiss the view of the other, fueled by the same fat ego. It becomes like a verbal duel or war. The discussion may start calmly, but very soon egos become inflated, emotions rise, and voices get louder and louder. More heat than light is generated. Whereas healthy discussion generates light, egoistic discussion generates heat and emotion. In such discussions, one never gives the other time to talk, and even as the other person is talking, there is repeated interruption. After some time both people are talking over each other, with neither one listening to the other. This marks the climax of the argument. People never walk away from such discussions feeling happy or comfortable. There are feelings of bitterness, which often serve to weaken the relationship. There is an old proverb that says: If two people want to preserve and cultivate a friendship, they should avoid three things: debate, financial transactions, and talking about the other person's spouse. The most important one to avoid here is debate because in most of these scenarios the discussion is between two people who have already arrived at their conclusions. Discussion after one has already arrived at a conclusion is useless; only discussion for the sake of arriving at a conclusion together is useful. Thus, *jalpa* is a dangerous ego-booster.

The second type of unhealthy discussion is *vitanda*, or counter-argument, which is arguably worse than *jalpa*. *Vitanda* is defined as debate in which my only aim is to refute your view, without seeking to establish or formulate an alternative view. A person enters into this type of discussion to puff up his own ego and put others down. Given that most discussions unwittingly fall into *jalpa* or *vitanda*, argument should be avoided as much as possible. If one is sincerely interested and careful, argument or debate that does not devolve into *jalpa* or *vitanda* is possible. Healthy and constructive discussion, known as *vada*, is defined as that undertaken by two people in the interest of discovering the truth. I am ready to drop my views if they are found to be defective over the course of the discussion, and the other person must also be ready to do the same. In this type of discussion, I am not interested in clinging egoically to my own view; I am ready to say that I may be wrong. I should have the intellectual honesty to admit that I am not omniscient and that I may be wrong. I am willing to drop my conceptions if they are proved over the course of discussion to be misconceptions. I approach the discussion with humility, mutual respect, intellectual honesty, and an openness to drop my own views. I engage calmly and unemotionally, giving the other person the opportunity to speak and listening without interruption (and without planning my next argument while the other person is talking). Such discussions can be rich and fruitful. If I am genuinely interested in the Truth, I should listen to the other person. And if I need some more time to think, I can say: "I'm not ready to pass comments on your views at the moment, but I'll be

sure to consider them carefully and we can discuss them further in the future.” A discussion will only be meaningful if this kind of honesty is there. This type of argument or debate is perfectly acceptable. Narada is really telling us to avoid jalpa and vitanda. The moment I see that the other person is in an argumentative mood, I should pull out of the discussion. In stopping the discussion the other person may conclude that she won because she had the last word and I have been silenced. No matter. Let her consider herself the victor. It is better to stop because argument of this sort is a spiritual obstacle insofar as it only serves to fatten the ego. We need to remain very alert: the moment we see that a discussion is entering into argument territory, we should let the other person consider him or herself victorious and observe silence. Speech control (*vak tapas*) is an incredibly important sadhana.

There are many people who love argument; it is the only form of conversation they know. Whatever statement you make, they are ready to launch in with contradiction. With such people, the safest thing to talk about is the weather. But even there, if you say: “Oregon has been really pleasant this summer,” they will say: “No, it’s been way too hot.” Don’t make it any hotter by arguing. After all, heat and cold are relative terms. There are some people who start every discussion with counterpoint, no matter what we say—it’s some kind of gene. When we are with such people we should be extremely alert never to make statements, but instead to ask questions: “What do you think about the weather?” in the interest of maintaining peace of mind.

Sutra 75. [Such argumentation] leads to excessive entanglement and is never decisive.

Once we get into an argument on a particular topic, each person winds up trying to establish his or her view by giving a lot of reasons and examples and these, in turn, become fodder for further disagreement. So we start an argument with the intent to resolve one area of disagreement and the next thing we know we’re in a new area of disagreement. Then the other person introduces a third area and it becomes like the Second World War, which spread around the globe. Instead of resolving the initial issue, we find that we have entered into multiple issues and lost sight of the original point of the discussion. A perfect example of this is the use of the rope-snake metaphor in Vedanta, which is meant to illustrate the distinction between satya and mithya. Within the philosophical community, the rope-snake issue has burgeoned into so many different interpretations: from brahman is gone, to the world is gone, to jiva is gone, to samsara is gone. There are countless books and theories out there analyzing and explaining the rope-snake metaphor, each refuting the others. So we find that one topic leads to another until we wind up completely lost. Thus, Narada says: argument leads to entanglement. There is escalation, we lose control of ourselves, and we don’t know how to stop. I want to have the last word, the other person wants to have the last word, and that last word never comes. And argument is never decisive: one argument leads to another, which leads to another, *ad nauseum*.

Sutra 76. One should respect the revealed scriptures of bhakti and follow their prescribed exercises.

Because arguments, which breed arrogance, obstruct spiritual growth, and because we want to nourish bhakti, which breeds humility, Narada advises us to spend more time reading various scriptures on the subject of devotion. We should remember that when we talk about the bhakti scriptures, we are including arta bhakti, artharthi bhakti, and jijnasu bhakti. A dvaita bhakti scripture that only deals with the first two is incomplete; it must address jijnasu bhakti, which includes Vedanta vichara. Jijnasu means: *therefore, an enquiry into brahman*, which is the very first verse of the Brahma Sutras. So jijnasu bhakti, or self-inquiry, must be included, along with jnani bhakti, wherein the Lord is discovered to be non-different from myself. The Bhagavad Gita is an ideal bhakti scripture because it talks about arta bhakti and artharthi bhakti, but also deals with jijnasu bhakti and jnani bhakti. In the 12th Chapter of the Gita, titled *Bhakti Yoga*, Krishna talks about five levels of bhakti: (1) Devotion with expectation of desired worldly things; (2) Devotion without expectation, which purifies the mind; (3) Meditating upon

and nourishing a relationship with the Lord; (4) Seeing the self in everything; and (5) Abiding in and as formless awareness, which is beyond the gunas. Thus, in his bhakti yoga Krishna includes inquiry into self as formless brahman. Recall those two crucial verses (Gita 12.3-4):

Having restrained the sense organs, being even-minded towards all, and being interested in the welfare of all beings, some meditate upon the imperishable brahman, which is indefinable, unmanifest, all-pervading, incomprehensible, immutable, immoveable, and eternal. They alone attain me.

Don't just talk about Krishna with a beautiful face and body, even though that bhakti is wonderful. You should understand both spirit that is identified with matter and spirit which is beyond the gunas. Bhakti is only considered complete when I understand both. We need to read the bhakti scriptures holistically, rather than limiting ourselves to a truncated body of work that confines itself to duality. You can postpone knowledge of formless brahman if you like, but know that this understanding is compulsory one day or another. Narada also advises us to perform activities that help to generate bhakti if it is not yet there, to preserve bhakti if it is already there, and to continually nourish that bhakti. If you examine the rituals of formal puja you will find that they are all meant for nourishing bhakti. Thus, practice the pancha maha-yajnas, as well as reading the stories of great bhaktas, especially jnani bhaktas.

Sutra 77. Patiently enduring until one can put aside material happiness, distress, desire, and accomplishment, one should not waste even half a moment.

In the previous sutra, Narada had said: One should respect the revealed bhakti scriptures and follow their prescribed exercises. Naturally, a reader will be inclined to think: "That's easy for Narada to say, he has nothing else to do. He doesn't know what our lives are like. We are so busy with activities. Where is the time for all these things? How to find the time?" The answer to this question is one that Narada has already given: we have to reduce the PORT that guzzles our time. PORT refers to Possessions, Obligatory duties, Relationships, and Transactions. These are the four things that tend to consume our lives, and increasing any one of them invariably leads to increases in the other three. Therefore, we need to learn to trim our worldly activities intelligently. We can't wipe out worldly activities altogether. We do have to live in the world: we have jobs, loved ones, responsibilities. But we need to discover intelligent methods for trimming the PORT. There is a corollary to this, too. Assuming we have reduced our formal activities and transactions to some extent and now have more time, the mind may still be unavailable because of its preoccupation with worldly things and the various emotions generated by them. The transactions themselves may have ended, but the emotions generated by them may not have. A 15-minute exchange with someone that's long over may produce a hangover that lingers in the mind throughout the day. So even though I sit down to study Vedanta, I find that I can't focus. We need to learn how to stave off such emotional transactions and the hangovers they produce. Indeed, Krishna prescribes karma yoga for precisely this reason (Gita, 2.38):

Regarding happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike, prepare for war. In this manner, you will not incur sin.

All these ups and downs are part of life—it is all Isvara's prasada—but I don't to waste my time lingering on such thoughts; I need to come back to equanimity. In Krishna's words (Gita, 2.48-50):

Abiding in yoga, giving up attachment, and remaining the same in success and failure, perform actions. Equanimity is called yoga. Action with motive is indeed far inferior to karma yoga. Take refuge in karma yoga. Those who are motivated by results are unfortunate. A karma yogi

gets rid of both punya and papa. Therefore, prepare for yoga. Skill in works is yoga.

A karma yogi is one who is able to avoid the emotional hangovers. This requires great skill. If I can both clear more time and avoid these emotional hangovers, the mind will become more available for higher pursuits. Narada refers to varieties of emotional hangovers in Sutra 77. One is joy. You experience a very happy event that lingers in the mind. Another is sorrow, an unhappy event that lingers in the mind. Joy and sorrow share the same capacity to preoccupy the mind. Then desire. Various unfulfilled desires occupy the mind in the form of future planning. Life is meant for living, but lifelong I plan to live and so I die without living. And finally, achievements and attainments. Somebody praises me and that nice feeling of praise lingers. All these emotional hangovers preoccupy the mind. Intelligence means releasing ourselves from the clutches of emotional preoccupation brought on by joy, sorrow, desire, accomplishment in order to free up more quality time. If I manage to do this, time enthusiastically awaits. Time becomes my intelligent servant saying: "I'm at your beck and call." So Narada says: Don't even waste half a moment. When you release yourself emotionally and more time becomes available, use this time intelligently. If I don't give the mind an intelligent occupation, it will start cooking up all sorts of things. An idle mind is the devil's workshop, as the saying goes. So be intelligently and constructively occupied with the revealed bhakti scriptures and the actions prescribed therein.

Sutra 78. One should cultivate such virtues as nonviolence, truthfulness, cleanliness, compassion, and faith in the spiritual teachings.

Here Narada is saying that being a bhakta does not mean mechanically chanting: "Om Namah Shivaya, Om Namah Shivaya." This is not bhakti. One needs to cultivate the various virtues mentioned in the bhakti scriptures. Discernment must be used, values must be developed, scriptures must be inquired into, knowledge must be gained—there are so many elements involved. Many people think that mechanically chanting the Lord's name will safely land them into the supreme abode. There are so many misconceptions in the name of spirituality out there. Narada is reminding us to watch our character and to develop virtue. Krishna enumerates 20 virtues in the 13th Chapter of the Gita and 26 virtues in the 16th Chapter. We should consistently monitor whether we are adhering to them. In this sutra, Narada mentions several of them: Non-violence at all levels. Watch your words: are you using hurtful words loosely? Truthfulness at all levels. Purity at all levels. Compassion or consideration for others, remembering the fundamental rule: I should not do to others what I would not want them to do to me. Faith in the scriptures, especially those of the prasthanatrayam, from which we should not stray. I am stressing this because most of the bhakti schools of philosophy have gradually and unwittingly strayed from the Vedas. The Vedas outline a complete and specific educational program. Chanting the name of the Lord may purify the mind, but as it says in the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12):

To understand these things properly one must humbly approach a proper teacher who is learned in the Vedas and having made the knowledge his own, revels in it.

Thereafter we should to come to self-inquiry, inquiry into the creation, inquiry into the three states of experience. All of this is compulsory in the Vedantic view. In Sadhana Panchakam, the first words that Shankaracharya writes are: *Let the scriptures be studied daily.* He does not say: "What I say is correct because I am saying it," but rather, "I am trying to extract the teaching of the Vedas." The Vedas are our umpire and supreme court. In fact, the Vedantic definition of a proper guru is one who teaches based on scriptural authority. All these character traits or values need to be developed and maintained.

Sutra 79. Those who are free of doubts should constantly and wholeheartedly worship the Supreme Lord.

Naturally, this sutra raises the question: “Shouldn’t I eat my breakfast? Shouldn’t I eat my lunch? Shouldn’t I go to work? Shouldn’t I go to the bathroom? Who can afford to worship God constantly?” Narada seems to be giving some very impractical advice. The answer to this is supplied in the Gita, wherein two types of worship are described: One is specific ritualistic worship and the other is general worship. Ritualistic worship refers to the kinds of pujas we perform according to scriptural knowledge, or if we don’t have this formal knowledge, offering flowers, chanting, or doing namaskara. But there is another type of worship that involves converting every activity I perform into a puja. As said in the following invocation:

You are my self, my core, my essence. The goddess is my mind. My pranas [vital airs] are your attendants. My body is your temple. Enjoying the objects of the senses is my worship of you. My sleep is your samadhi. Wherever I walk, I am performing pradakshina (circumambulation) of you. Whatever actions I perform, they are all worship of You, O benevolent One!

The final line is essential: *Whatever actions I perform they are all in worship of you.* So convert even your work into a form of worship. I turn my daily bath into an abhishekam, imagining the body as a temple, the heart as the innermost sanctum with Bhagavan is installed there in the form of myself, my core, my inner essence. Similarly, when I eat I say (Gita, 4.24):

The ladle is myself. The offering is myself. It is offered into the fire of myself by myself. It is myself alone that I arrive at when I see myself in every action.

And (Gita, 15.14):

Residing in the body of beings as the digestive fire, and supported by exhalation and inhalation, I digest the fourfold food.

Whenever I put food into that digestive fire, I am performing a homa (fire sacrifice). With this attitude, this invocation, the results of every action will be received as an offering, making my whole day nothing but a continuous puja. As Krishna says (Gita, 3.9):

This world is bound by actions in the case of any action other than that meant for yajna. Perform action for that sake and without attachment.

Bhakti needs to evolve and ripen in three distinct domains. The first is the domain of knowledge. As children we are introduced to a simple notion of God, but we have not yet systematically studied scripture, or tried to inquire into who or what that God is. The second domain is my expression of bhakti. The third domain is the motive underlying my bhakti. When I express devotion in various ways, what do I hope to get out of it? What is motivating me to run to India, to a temple, to prayer, or to puja? This, too, must be examined and refined. Thus, knowledge, expression, and motive must all mature.

In terms of my knowledge or understanding of bhakti, I initially see God as a person existing elsewhere who makes regular appearances—either in response to devotees’ longing, or to save them from crisis—and then returns to his abode. This type of God, called *paroksha-Isvara*, which means an indirect or remote God, forms my initial conception. Unfortunately, most bhakti schools of philosophy stop at this type of God with attractive human qualities and comes and goes. Vedanta appreciates this bhakti, it’s a great place to start, but from this remote God, we need to come to what is known as *pratyaksha-Isvara*, a vivid and directly-experienced God. This means that everything I experience is God. In the Uddhava

Gita, while talking about various avatars of God, the first is the universe itself. All the avatars later come and go, but the first and most powerful avatars is *Vishvam*, the one who is the entire universe. I needn't close my eyes to see Bhagavan because everything I see is Bhagavan. I needn't invite nor send this God off, and I needn't stand in a 7-hour queue to have God's darshan because I have it anywhere and everywhere I stand. Vedanta emphasizes that we have to progress to this understanding of God as soon as possible. The Taittiriya Shikshavalli describes gods in the form of all the lokas: lightning, fire, sun, etc. Therefore, our knowledge should progress from a remote and indirect God to a vivid and directly-experienced God; from God in a single form to God in many forms. Then from *pratyaksha-Isvara*, I come to *aparoksha-Isvara*, an imperceptible but immediately known God. As said in the Kena Upanishad (1.5-1.9), the real Bhagavan is not what this world reveres. An object of meditation can never be the real God. The ultimate God is the meditator, the observer:

That which speech cannot express, but by which speech is spoken—know this to be the supreme and not what this world reveres. That which the mind cannot know, but by which the mind is considered known—know this to be the Supreme and not what this world reveres. That which the eye cannot see, but which sees every eye—know this to be the supreme and not what this world reveres. That which the ear cannot hear, but by which the ear is made to hear—know this to be the supreme and not what this world reveres. That which the living breath does not inspire, but which inspires the living breath—know this to be the supreme and not what this world reveres.

And in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, (3.7.23):

That which is never seen, but is the witness; that which is never heard, but is the hearer; that which is never thought, but is the thinker; that which is never known, but is the knower. There is no other witness, no other hearer, no other thinker, no other knower. That which is the inner ruler is your own immortal self. Everything else but this is mortal.

Bhagavan is the observer, not the observable. Thus, knowledge should grow from *paroksha* to *pratyaksha* to *aparoksha*; from *ekarupa* to *anekarupa* (aka *vishvarupa*) to *arupa*.

In terms of my expression of bhakti, I may initially strike up a personal relationship with God. This is the expression emphasized by the bhakti schools. Vedanta does not condemn it, but underscores the need to progress from this informal dvaita bhakti to formal dvaita bhakti (i.e., karma yoga; Bhagavad Gita, 9.27):

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as oblation, whatever you give in charity, whatever austerity you undertake, dedicate it as an offering to me.

Convert every action to an act of worshipping the God in all forms and receive every experience as an offering from God, then come to meditative reflection on God, to devotion in the form of self-inquiry and contemplation. Krishna says: whoever studies my real nature is expressing devotion, and indeed calls this the highest expression of bhakti (Gita, 4.33):

Jnana-yajna, the contemplation of wisdom, is superior to other yajnas, or rituals, involving materials. Every action, without exception, culminates in knowledge.

So the sequence goes from informal bhakti, to karma yoga bhakti, to upasana yoga bhakti, to jnana yoga bhakti, which Krishna himself presents in the Gita (12.3) as:

Meditating on the imperishable self, which is indefinable, unmanifest, all-pervading, incomprehensible, immutable, immoveable, and eternal.

Thus, in terms of the expression of bhakti, one should progress through three levels: from informal dvaita bhakti, to formal dvaita bhakti, to jnani bhakti.

In terms of the motive underlying bhakti, I initially use Isvara as a multi-purpose agent to whom I give varieties of tasks. When I've got problems, he has to solve them; and if necessary, he should perform a few miracles as well. In this type of bhakti, Isvara is not a goal or end for me, he is a vehicle by which I attain my worldly aspirations. Vedanta is not against this, but says we need to quickly grow out of the miracle-mongering that defines artha bhakti and artharthi bhakti. Vedanta transcends miracles and mysticism. The greatest miracle that Vedanta has to offer is the knowledge that I am the one who is the authority of everything. What better miracle do you want than this? It is a miracle that is a fact. So as we come to Vedanta, we should get out of miracles and mysticism and aim to discover the Lord as a goal instead of as a means for worldly ends. Jijnasu bhakti means seeing Isvara as an end. I don't want Isvara's stuff or Isvara's miracles; I want Isvara. My valuation of miracles dissipates because I recognize that they are illusory and impermanent: they may happen sometimes, but oftentimes they won't. If miracles happened all the time, would they be called miracles? Therefore, don't lean or depend upon Isvara for such unstable ends. I want what is stable and permanent. I want Isvara as an end; that is my motive. And eventually, Isvara will be neither a means nor an end; Isvara happens to be my very self, the seeker. Once I have reached this highest level, my motive for bhakti is not to get anything, not even Isvara, who I've discovered to be the very atma. At this highest level, bhakti is motivated by and expressed as only one thing: gratitude. I have everything that I could possibly want or need..

Sutra 80. When He is glorified, the Lord swiftly reveals himself to his devotees and allows them to know him as he is.

How should this sutra be understood? For the bhakti schools of philosophy, the phrase 'the Lord swiftly reveals himself to his devotees' will be taken to refer to the darshanam of an ishta-devata. Vedanta accepts this possibility; after all, Isvara is all powerful; if he can create the entire universe, surely he can take the form of an ishta-devata for the sake of a bhakta or aspirant. But Vedanta says don't get lost or carried away with this narrow understanding of darshanam, which is not particularly useful for spiritual progress. The ishta-devata form exists for the service of puja only; our aim is not to settle on darshanam in that form. Whereas bhakti schools of philosophy glorify this form, Vedanta is not enamored with it. Instead, Vedanta talks about two other stages of manifestation. First, Isvara should manifest as all forms. Of course, this is already there, but through mental purity I come to see the entire creation as Isvara. This kind of darshanam is found in the Gita (11.8):

However, you cannot see me with this ordinary eye of yours. I shall give you a divine eye. See my divine power.

May the Lord bless me with a pure mind, free of egoism and ownership, so that I will have a steady vision of God in all things. Thereafter, the next higher manifestation of God is nothing but the

knowledge: I am brahman, I am the divine. Thus, Sutra 80 can be interpreted in two ways, depending on the understanding of the aspirant. Initially in dvaita bhakti, it is taken to mean that Isvara gives darshan to the bhakta, but eventually at the advaita bhakti level, this darshan amounts to the firm knowledge: I am awareness.

Sutra 81. Devotion is the most precious possession of a person who honestly uses his mind, body, and words.

Which is greatest among the three levels of bhakti: devotion to a remote, indirectly-experienced God, devotion to a vivid and directly-experienced God, or devotion to an imperceptible God known to be non-different from me? The first two types of devotion are important stepping-stones, but devotion that manifests as firm knowledge of God that is beyond form—myself, awareness—is the greatest because it alone liberates. As it says in the Kaivalya Upanishad:

Discovering that atma which exists in all beings and in which all beings exist, one reaches the supreme brahman. There is no other means.

Moksha is only possible through this knowledge of absolute reality. Neither God in one form nor God in many forms is absolute reality because both are subject to arrival and departure. Absolute reality is pure, limitless, attributeless, universal, awareness alone: *satyam jnanam anantam brahman*. *Satyam* is pure being or existence. *Jnanam* is pure knowledge; not the relative knowledge of objects that occurs in the subtle body. *Jnanam* is consciousness and the intelligence underlying the manifest universe. It is the knowledge that is the very essence of awareness, the knowledge that is the very essence of being, for in the absence of this “knowability,” nothing can be said to exist. *Anantam* is limitlessness. As absolute awareness, brahman is infinite and eternal. It is that in the scope of which everything in existence obtains. It is all-pervasive, but even the word ‘pervasive’ is not exactly right as it suggests more than one. Brahman’s eternality is not a matter of unending duration, but of beginningless existence. Brahman has always been, is now, and will always be, it is beyond the limiting parameters of space and time.

To use the 15th Chapter language of the Gita (15.17):

Different from these is the supreme spirit, said to be the supreme self, which pervades and sustains the three worlds. It is the imperishable Lord.

Sutra 82. Although love of God is one, it manifests in eleven forms: reflecting on God’s glory, appreciating God’s beauty, worshipping God, remembering God, serving God, communing with God as a friend, caring for God in a parental way, interacting with God as a lover, surrendering everything to God [including and especially the ‘I’-sense], absorption in contemplation of God, and cherishing separation from God.

Love of God is one only, but it can be expressed in various forms, according to the temperament of the devotee. Narada gives 11 options for expressing love of God, and one can start by choosing any one of them. The final of these expressions, cherishing separation from God, requires some clarification. It is akin to when a person is separated from an object of love, as the saying goes: absence makes the heart grow fonder. When our family members are around, we are always quarrelling with them, but when we are apart, we begin to miss them. For this reason, some bhaktas deliberately entertain the idea of separation. But the separation being discussed here is transcendental or higher separation. Whereas a local sense of separation amounts to samsara, this type of separation leads to spiritual growth. Thus, bhakti can begin with any of these 11 forms, but one should eventually come to jnana bhakti, the ultimate destination. And now Narada concludes with the final two sutras.

Sutra 83. Thus say the founding authorities of devotional service: the Kumaras, Vyasa, Shuka, Shandilya, Garga, Vishnu, Kaundilya, Shesha, Uddhava, Aruni, Bali, Hanuman, Vibhisana, and others—speaking without fear of worldly gossip and sharing among themselves one and the same opinion.

All of the acharyas in our tradition, regardless of the particular text they are unfolding, make it very clear that it is not their own personal teaching. If any acharya gives his or her own teaching, it is vulnerable to becoming a human literary work. Nothing coming from a jiva can ever be perfect, no matter how great that jiva may be. That is why we have wound up with different schools of Hindu philosophy coming from rishis like Kapila (Samkhya philosophy), Kanada (Vaisheshika philosophy), Gautama (Nyaya philosophy), Patanjali (Yoga philosophy), and Jaimini (Mimamsa philosophy). All the aforementioned rishis shared their view as jivas, and all those views had inherent problems. In the 2nd Chapter of the Brahma Sutras, Shankaracharya refutes them all. Although they were rishis and bhaktas who practiced austerities, they disseminated their personal teachings. Any philosophy coming from a jiva will invariably be contaminated with defects and problems. This is precisely why traditional teachers of Vedanta say: “I am not giving my view. This comes directly from the Vedas.” Likewise, the Agamas—whether Shaiva, Shakta, or Vaishnava—are unsound because they fall under human literary works; Shankaracharya has also refuted the Agama-based bhakti schools of philosophy. We may take selected ideas from them, but our core teaching should be based in the Vedas. In Sutra 83, Narada is effectively telling us that he comes under the Vedic tradition. As you’ll recall, Narada learned Vedanta from Sanatkumara, whose instructions appear as the 7th Chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad. The message, then, is follow the Vedas rather than Agama-based bhakti schools of philosophy, which confine themselves to dvaita bhakti and only deal with a personal God, never coming to non-duality. Follow the tradition of great Vedic acharyas. And who are they? Narada provides a list in Sutra 83:

All these great bhakti acharyas teach in a manner that is consistent and they do not contradict each other. In every case, the teaching is karma yoga plus upasana yoga plus jnana yoga leads to advaita bhakti. This is the beautiful, royal path known as Vedanta. All the great Vedantic acharyas mentioned by Narada have taught with this consensus. They don’t have differences of opinion; coordination is there. Narada also tells us that they teach the Vedas without bothering about the opinions of worldly people. There may be atheists who reject the teaching and spiritual teachers who deviate from the Vedas, or reject them altogether. Vedantic acharyas don’t bother with the prattling of others. One can never force others to stop talking. These acharyas’ teachings are harmonized on the basis of sravana, manana, nididhyasana. And now the final sutra.

Sutra 84. Anyone who has faith in these auspicious teachings decreed by Narada will be endowed with devotion and attain the dearest beloved. Yes, he will attain the dearest beloved.

Here, Narada is referring to faith in both the scripture as a means of knowledge and the ultimate goal of this knowledge in terms of its deep meaning. The teaching, initiated by Dakshinamurthy and given by Narada is considered sacred, holy, or auspicious and it is based on the Vedas. As said in the preliminary portion of Vishnu Sahasranama:

He is the sanctifier of even what is most sacred. He is the most auspicious among auspicious beings. He is the Lord of all divinities. He, the undecaying, is the father of all beings.

A person who has unshakable faith in the scriptures will become endowed with devotion, as he moves through all four stages: artha bhakti, artharthi bhakti, jijnasu bhakti, and jnani bhakti. And when he

becomes a jnani bhakta, he will realize that which is dearest to him. If he were to write a letter to his dearest on Valentine's Day, who would he write this letter to? To Isvara. And how does one attain self-knowledge? By learning and understanding that Isvara is non-different from me. Is there any doubt that this self will be realized? Narada says: No. It is guaranteed that the dearest beloved, one's own self, will be attained. And he repeats this, indicating that we've arrived at the end of the Narada Bhakti Sutras.

Summary

As we established at the outset of our study of this text, the topic of bhakti can be approached from two different perspectives. One is the Vedantic view, which is rooted in the Vedas, and the other is the view taken by the bhakti schools of philosophy. In the Brahma Sutras, two great Vedantic sages, Shankaracharya and Vyasacharya, carefully analyze the latter approach and point out its various deficiencies. The core of their critique is that the bhakti schools of philosophy focus primarily on dvaita bhakti centering on a personal deity, and consider this informal dvaita bhakti to be the primary type. The Vedantic view, by contrast, says that dvaita bhakti can never in itself lead to moksha because moksha is impossible without self-knowledge. When Vedanta insists upon self-knowledge as a prerequisite for moksha, the bhakti schools reply that dvaita bhakti can also lead to self-knowledge. But we assert that self-knowledge is possible only through Vedanta vichara; that is, listening to the scriptures (*sravana*), reflecting upon their truths in light of our moment-to-moment experience and resolving any and all doubts (*manana*), and assimilating these truths until the knowledge is unshakable (*nididhyasana*). The bhakti schools of philosophy have no respect for this method; indeed, they actively discourage it. At most, they will say that self-inquiry is one among many available methods for attaining self-knowledge, adding that their method leads to self-knowledge and moksha through the easier dvaita bhakti route. If we repeatedly insist that self-knowledge and moksha are impossible without Vedanta vichara, they will say: "We don't really want self-knowledge and moksha anyway. Your view may value these things, but we don't consider them to be so great. We're quite happy with dvaita bhakti itself." So when cornered, the bhakti schools of philosophy reject the path of self-inquiry, self-knowledge, and moksha. They will then resort to quoting verses from the Bhagavata Purana in which a bhakta has said: "I am not even interested in moksha, I want to enjoy bhakti of you, Lord, as my ishta-devata." This is the tack that the bhakti schools of philosophy take: either they say that self-knowledge and moksha are possible through dvaita bhakti, or that they have no interest in these things.

Vedanta rejects the bhakti schools' approach as misguided because it is not in keeping with sruti, yukti, and anubhava. Nor is it in keeping with the teachings of the prasthanatrayam. The only bhakti we want to study is that which is in harmony with Vedanta. This is precisely why we've taken the time to read and interpret the Narada Bhakti Sutras in a manner that is consistent with the Vedantic view rather than the bhakti schools of philosophy. In doing so, we find that we're able to accept the Narada Bhakti Sutras because Narada himself, being a disciple of Sanatkumara, happens to be one of the advaita acharyas who respects the Upanishadic tradition. In the 7th Chapter of the Chandogya Upanishad (Sanatkumara's instructions to sage Narada on Bhuma-Vidya, the science of discovering the reality in which everything is based), we learn that Narada is an acharya of the advaitic lineage so we can be sure he won't be propounding bhakti philosophy. Not only that, we discover through our careful examination of the Narada Bhakti Sutras that Narada's teaching is very much aligned with the Bhagavad Gita, one of the three pillar texts of the prasthanatrayam. If you want to learn everything about bhakti in a way that's true to the Vedic tradition, the Gita is the ideal work because it discusses bhakti at length without ever violating the teachings of Vedanta. We have seen that throughout the Narada Bhakti Sutras the Gita serves as its foundation: specifically, the 2nd Chapter, the 13th Chapter, the 16th Chapter, and most important, the 12th Chapter, which forms almost the entire basis of the Narada Bhakti Sutras. In fact, the Narada Bhakti Sutras could be viewed as a commentary on the 12th Chapter of the Gita, and must therefore be interpreted with the Gita in mind.

In the edition of this text published by the Ramakrishna Math (from which these verses were extracted), the 84 Narada Bhakti Sutras are divided into five chapters. The 1st Chapter, spanning from Sutra 1 to 24, is titled *The Nature of the Highest Bhakti*. In analyzing these 24 sutras, we find that this supreme bhakti that Narada is talking about amounts to advaita bhakti, non-dual love of God. If we have non-dual, or undivided love of God, God must also be undivided. Therefore, the highest bhakti is a non-dual bhakti in which jivatma, paramatma, and anatma (“not-self”) have been reduced to one and the same atma. This non-dual vision can only be discovered through self-knowledge; therefore, supreme bhakti and advaita bhakti are also synonymous with jnani bhakti. This is how Narada begins the first chapter. If there were any division or duality in this bhakti, there would also be division in love, which would make it subject to comparison and gradation. In this case, God would become only one among my many objects of love. If you were to ask a mother: “Do you want Isvara or your child?” she would likely experience conflict. As one mother openly said: “If I’m supposed to remain non-attached from my only son for the sake of moksha, I don’t want moksha. Everything that I want in this life is for the sake of my child. I love Isvara precisely because Isvara can help my child.” When forced to choose between God and one of our dearest objects, many of us will take pause. Such problems arise whenever there is separation or duality because duality leads to fluctuation. Fullness is possible only when there is no duality. Wherever there is duality, there will be a sense of incompleteness or inadequacy. Therefore, only advaita bhakti, or jnani bhakti, can be properly called the supreme or highest form of devotion.

Advaita bhakti is expressed in the form of love of the undivided and indivisible self. That is why in elucidating this highest bhakti Narada says (Sutra 6): “such a devotee becomes self-content.” As said in the Gita (2.55): *[this bhakta] is satisfied in himself, by himself ... and...loves the self alone and is contented with the self alone* (Gita, 3.17). So Narada’s definition is in keeping with the prasthanatrayam. If we have to identify supreme bhakti in a person, Narada tells us it is that one who is firmly established in wisdom (*sthitaprajna*), *who is full in himself by himself, and one who is free of passion, fear, and anger* (Gita, 2.56). Thus, Chapter 1 of the Narada Bhakti Sutra amounts to a characterization of advaita bhakti, which is simply an elaboration of the definitions of *sthitaprajna* in the 2nd Chapter of the Gita, *parabhakta* in the 12th Chapter of the Gita, and *gunatitha* in the 14th Chapter of the Gita.

The 2nd Chapter is titled *The Glory of the Highest Bhakti*. Here, Narada says that this supreme or highest bhakti is even superior to karma yoga and jnana yoga, which may give rise to some confusion. Narada is not saying that bhakti yoga is the highest bhakti; rather, he is referring to the ultimate destination: advaita bhakti. Any destination is more valuable than the path we take to get there. The end is always superior to the means. When we buy something with money, money is the means and the purchased object is the end, and the end is superior to the means. The very fact that we give up money for the sake of an object testifies to this fact. So advaita bhakti is superior because it is the destination. Then what about karma yoga and jnana yoga? Narada says that they are both means, or sadhanas, making them inferior to the sadhyam or end. Narada’s point is thus perfectly logical. And the corollary we can derive from this is that to reach the end, we need to employ a means. To arrive at the highest bhakti, advaita bhakti, we need to employ karma yoga and jnana yoga. Some people may be inclined to argue that if these yogas are inferior, there is no reason to go through them. To this we say that although advaita bhakti is superior, one must necessarily go through karma yoga and jnana yoga. And what exactly is jnana yoga? Vedanta sravana, manana, nididhyasana. Therefore, may you follow karma yoga and jnana yoga and attain the ultimate destination.

In talking about the supreme bhakti, Narada wants to give a concrete example, so he cites the Gopis. Specifically, in Sutra 21 he says: “This is best illustrated by the devotion of the Gopis of Gokula.” And how should we interpret this example in a manner that is consistent with the prasthanatrayam? We should understand that all of the Gopis were jnani bhaktas or advaita bhaktas. As said in the Bhagavata Puana, 10.31.4, The Gopis’ Songs of Separation:

You [Krishna] are not actually the son of the Gopi Yasoda, O friend, but the indwelling witness in the hearts of all embodied souls. Because brahma prayed for you to come and protect the universe, you have now appeared in human form.

In other words, Krishna's embodied form is merely a human disguise. The real Krishna should be understood to be the "inner" consciousness of all embodied entities. Therefore, in looking to the Gopis one must not get sidetracked from knowledge, but rather, use the example of the Gopis to come to knowledge. The second idea we should derive is that the Gopis initially followed informal dvaita bhakti, and dvaita bhakti is a stepping-stone to advaita bhakti. Whereas informal dvaita bhakti can be optionally followed, formal dvaita bhakti is required. In citing the Gopis, Narada is conveying his approval for informal dvaita bhakti, but in his subsequent discussion of sadhana, Narada draws heavily on the 2nd Chapter of the Gita—namely, the karma yoga portion (Gita, 2.45):

The Vedas deal with the world of three gunas. Be free from the desire for the world of three gunas. Be free from the hold of the pairs of opposites. Be ever established in sattva guna. Be free from the concern for acquisition and preservation. Be mindful.

In doing so, Narada is indicating that we must not confine ourselves to informal dvaita bhakti, but follow traditional karma yoga and upasana yoga, including the pancha maha-yajnas. So when Narada says that the highest bhakti is superior to even karma yoga and jnana yoga, he is not advising us to replace these, but to go through them as a means of coming to advaita bhakti. This is the crux of Sutras 25 through 33.

The 3rd Chapter, comprising Sutras 34 to 50, is titled *The Means for Discovering Devotion*. Here, Narada introduces all the formal dvaita bhakti sadhanas taught in the Gita, including karma yoga; that is, performing the pancha maha-yajnas with an attitude of offering and welcoming all results with the understanding that they're based on the laws of karma. In this portion, Narada draws heavily from the 2nd Chapter of the Gita. Along with karma yoga sadhana, Narada emphasizes that we need to live a virtuous life. The rationale comes directly from the Gita, 2.62:

For a person who dwells on the sense objects, a fancy toward them arises. From fancy, desire is born. From desire, anger arises. From anger arises delusion. From delusion, the loss of memory. From the loss of memory, the loss of discrimination. Because of the loss of discrimination, he perishes.

Narada advises us to carefully avoid attachment or craving, lust, anger, delusion, etc., and also highlights some of the values mentioned in the 13th Chapter of the Gita: humility, pridelessness, non-violence, tolerance, etc. The notion that simply chanting the name of the Lord will give moksha is simply incorrect. Chanting the Lord's name is wonderful and all, but we need to closely monitor our day-to-day lifestyles. We need to follow a karma yoga way of life and follow values. Narada also draws heavily from the 16th Chapter of the Gita, in which the vices (*asuri-sampat*) are enumerated, and advises us to avoid these and replace them with virtuous traits (*daivi-sampat*). Thus, the Gita-based sadhanas are the focus of the 3rd Chapter of the Narada Bhakti Sutra, which requires intimate familiarity with the Gita in order to be properly interpreted and understood.

The 4th Chapter, from Sutras 51 to 66, is titled The Definition of Love, which could also be called The Definition of Advaita Bhakti because love and bhakti are synonymous, with both referring to love of God. Narada begins the chapter by saying in Sutra 51 that the nature of love cannot be defined. How are we to understand this? Just as sat, cit, and ananda are the nature of atma, love is also the nature of

everyone. That is why we needn't generate love; we need only to remove the obstacles to it. The embodiment of original or pure love is the nature of the self and because the self is inexpressible or indefinable, original love is also indefinable. Very few people discover this original love. As Narada tells us in Sutra 53: "[in rare cases], love is revealed to a qualified person." If we have to discover original or absolute love, which is identical with self, we must first discover the self. Without self-knowledge we can never come to original or absolute love. And because self-knowledge is so rare, very few people ever discover original and unconditional love. All other forms of love are conditional. Conditional love of another is love of a condition, not of a person. Saying: "I love you as long as you give me money" is the same as saying: "I love your money." Saying: "I love you as long as we have compatibility" is the same as saying: "I only love a particular type of behavior or characteristic in you, and I will love you only as long as it doesn't change." That is why the Hindu tradition doesn't accept compatibility-based marriage, but only espouses prarabdha-based marriage. One hundred percent compatibility between two people will never be there, not even between Vishnu and Lakshmi. If you were to ask Parvati, she would say: "Shiva doesn't know how to dress properly. How can I take him to a party?" Even the Trimurti wives have their complaints, so compatibility-based marriage are bound to end up on the rocks. And if there is initial compatibility, it is subject to change. Without self-knowledge any form of love will be conditional. Only a jnani's love is unconditional because he loves the self in everyone, which is always perfect. As it says in the Gita (5.18):

The wise see the same Brahman in a brahmin who has knowledge and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, in a dog, and in a dog-eater.

For a jnani, love is universal. Therefore, jnani bhakti is the highest bhakti and comes about by discovering that the very nature of the self is unconditional love. Narada discusses this in the first part of the 3rd Chapter, and later points out that this primary bhakti of unconditional love can only be discovered by following secondary, bhakti. To make his point, Narada draws on the 7th Chapter of the Gita, in saying: "arta etc." Narada does not do much explaining here. He presupposes our knowledge of the Gita, otherwise how could we make sense of the meaning of '...etc.'? And to which Gita verses does the term 'etc.' refer? Chapter 7, Verses 16 to 18:

Four types of virtuous people surrender to me—the distressed, the seeker of wealth, the seeker of knowledge, and the wise. Among them, the wise man who is ever steadfast and who has undivided devotion is superior, for I am very dear to the wise man and he is very dear to me. All these devotees are certainly noble. However, the wise man is myself—this is my teaching. Because with a steadfast mind he has resorted to me alone who is the highest goal.

Here, Krishna is saying: the jnani is not my bhakta, the jnani is me! From there, Narada talks about the three types of secondary bhakti: arta bhakti, artharthi bhakti, and jijnasu bhakti. First we go to God to solve our problems, then we go to God for success in our ventures, and then we go to God asking for God himself. "I want you alone as my goal" is the spirit of jijnasu bhakti. Having gone through these three stages and having kept Isvara as an end in itself, Isvara brings us a Guru and the scripture. As Krishna says (Gita, 10.10-11):

To them who are ever steadfast and worship me with devotion, I give that yoga of wisdom by which they reach me. Out of compassion, I, remaining in their intellect, destroy the darkness born of ignorance by the brilliant light of knowledge.

Out of compassion for these jijnasu bhaktas, Isvara, who has a guru agency, arranges to bring them to Vedanta, setting up all the conditions for them to attain self-realization. You will recall that Narada also presented the three forms of secondary bhakti as sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic, with the highest form of bhakti being beyond the three gunas.

The 5th and final chapter is titled *The Glory of the Supreme Devotee*. Previously Narada had talked about the glory of advaita bhakti, and here he is talking about the glory of the advaita bhakta. Narada says that jnani bhaktas are people who have become one with Bhagavan, thus there is no difference between a jnani and Bhagavan. That is why in the Guru Stotram we chant (Verse 3):

The guru is Brahma. The guru is Vishnu. The guru is the Supreme Lord Shiva. Guru is both the manifest reality and the absolute. Salutations to that glorious Guru.

We can think of there being two versions of Bhagavan: a mobile version and a stationary version, with the mobile version being the jnani sannyasi. One may be tempted to ask: “Of these two versions, which one is better?” The stationary version cannot teach, whereas the mobile version can move about and bless the world and society. This is why Narada says that these jnani bhaktas, who are non-different from Bhagavan, move about the world, purifying every place they visit with their presence. If they take a bath in the Ganga, they purify the Ganga. If they go to the temple, they purify the temple. So they are a blessing and an asset to society, even if they don’t actively serve. The mere existence of these jnanis in the world is a blessing. All their teachers are happy because their lessons have fructified in this jnani, all the scriptures are happy for having done their job, and all the gods are happy and love to be associated with such a jnani. And of course, the parents of a jnani bhakta are happy. As it says in the Skandapurana (Mahesvara Khanda, Kumarika section, 45.140):

The family is purified, mother feels fulfilled, even mother earth considers herself auspicious to have carried this happy jnani bhakta whose mind is immersed in the limitless self.

With this, Narada ends his discussion of the glory of the jnani bhakti, which spans from Sutras 63 to 74. In the final 11 sutras, Narada returns to the topic of sadhana because of its crucial importance. Previously Narada had highlighted the value of keeping company with truth seekers and truth finders, and the importance of avoiding those whose values and lifestyles are not in harmony with our own. Choose your friends carefully, he said in the 3rd Chapter, because friends can influence your outlook. Now, Narada is highlighting the importance of avoiding arguments. Shankaracharya offers similar advice in Sadhana Panchakam, telling us to avoid arguing with wise, elderly, and learned people in particular. Narada extends this further, saying avoid argument with anyone. You can present your view once or twice—at most a third time—but thereafter allow others to have their views because arguments spoil relationships. If you want your relationships to remain healthy and strong, one value you should follow is to avoid argument. Avoid them in terms of frequency, intensity, voice level, and drawn out recovery periods. Narada goes on to highlight several other sadhanas based on the 16th Chapter of the Gita, including renouncing vices (i.e., rajasic and tamasic traits). And with this, the 5th Chapter comes to a close.

In the concluding sutras, Narada says that the highest form of bhakti is not dvaita bhakti; that only advaita bhakti is glorious. He is careful to add that this bhakti scripture is not his own, but that it reflects the insights of several great acharyas in the Vedic tradition, the most immediate being his own guru, Sanatkumara. Narada briefly mentions a list of informal bhakti practices that one can initially choose from in the progression to advaita bhakti, which alone will lead to moksha.

Hari Om Tat Sat

