



Importance of Pratyahara and Vairagya in Bhakti Yoga as Propounded in Mukunda Mala

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Abstract

The Indian Literature is replete with scriptures propounding ways and means to the path of Yoga. The ashtanga yoga has many texts which prescribe practices to purify body and mind in the path of self realization. The Bhakti yoga is another approach which appeals to the emotional or feelings of a practitioner, to achieve mind body purity to attain the highest level of salvation. The south India dominated the Bhakti movement and has spearheaded the production of vast literary treasures accounting for ways and means to achieve the Self realization.

Keywords: Pratyahara, Vairagya, Bhakti Yoga, Mukunda Mala.

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Introduction about Mukunda Mala

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There are a few principles which are central to the practice of Yoga where Bhakti is a medium.

1. Belief in a Force, which is divinely responsible for the existence of this universe and self.
2. Yoga is that Union of self with the higher state of Consciousness, also termed as parmatma or God.
3. There are many tools and methodologies or approaches available in this process of self or God realisation which is considered as an exalted purpose of life.
4. The Process requires a following of a specified life style, practices which move one towards this goal.
5. The Bhakti yoga characterised by surrender, meditation is a path way which promotes this objective of self realisation.
6. Health, happiness, peace and a positive quality of life that it assures are all either a by-product or secondary to this primary goal of yoga which is salvation and eternal freedom from suffering.

There are many classical texts in yoga which expound the aforementioned facts. In order to present the concept of yoga, relevant practices to suit the needs of a householder, the investigator has taken up one of the popular composition in Bhakti Literature to highlight the relevant yogic concepts. Mukundamala is a popularly recited verse in many south indian households as a prayer to God. The Hymns provide a profound narrative of the discipline (Tapas), attitudes (Swadhyaya) and also the surrender (Ishwara Pranidhana) that a practitioner must have in the paths of Yoga. The objective of this article is to present the critical importance of this text for a yoga practitioner to Guide and gain insights into the way yoga has to be understood and applied in daily life.

A Brief about Mukunda Mala

Mukundamala is a devotional hymn, composed in Sanskrit. It was composed by Kulasekara Alwar, one of the alwars in the tradition of Vaishnavism. The work Mukunda Mala is a tribute to Sriman Narayana. The word Mukunda can be translated as the Giver of Liberation or Salvation. Mukunda Mala is a garland for Mukunda. The two words *muktim* and *dadaati* have united to form the single word mukunda. Mukunda is the 518th Name of Sri Vishnu in Vishnu Sahasra Naamam. Sri Parasara Bhattar, a renowned Vaishnava Acharya, has commented that *mukunda* is the one, who bestows the boon of salvation when the devotees pray to him with Supreme and single-minded devotion. The other interpretation of the Mukunda Naamam is that He Blesses each appropriately according to their karmas. The letter *Mu* stands for *mukthi* (liberation) and *Ku* stands for *Bhoomi* (Material comforts). Since the Lord who gives (*dadaati*) both *Mu* and *Ku*, He gains the name Mukunda.

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Position of Mukunda Mala in Bhakti Literature and Contribution of Kulasekara Alwar

The bhakti literature is the most significant contribution of the medieval period. Much of the bhakti literature was written in the form of hymns, which are still sung today. These hymns praised the deities and their deeds, or humbly beseeched their help. Before discussing the Bhakti Literature and the contribution of Kulasekara Alvar, let us ponder on the word "Bhakti" and its various divine dimensions. Bhakti means devotion culminating in true communion of the soul with the Supreme Deity. It shows what kind of devotion and love for God will bring the soul into the most intimate relation with the Divine Being. The paramount aspect of bhakti is elucidated by Lord Krishna Himself in Chapter 18 of the Bhagavad Gita as:

*bhaktya maam abhijanati
yavan yas casmi tattvatah
tato mam tattvato jnatva
visate tad-anantaram*

(One can understand the Supreme Personality as He is only by devotional service. And when one is in full consciousness of the Supreme Lord by such devotion, he can enter into the God.)

Further, Lord Krishna lays the importance on devotion in Chapter 9 as:

*patram puspam phalam toyam
yo me bhaktya prayacchati
tad aham bhakty-upahrtam
asnami prayatatmanah*

(Whoever offers Me with devotion and a pure mind, a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water – I accept this as devotion.)

The Bhakti movement started in South India has traditionally been considered as an influential social reformation in Hinduism, and provided an individual-focussed alternative path to spirituality regardless of one's caste of birth or gender. The movement made spirituality accessible to all, transcending the barriers of all hues. The yoga practice in some form or other was an integral part of the daily life of an individual. These practices paved a definite path in the development of bhakti movement. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, alvars of the Vaishnavite sect contributed greatly to the Bhakti movement by way of their divine hymns known as Divya Prabandham. Sri Kulasekara Alvar, one of the twelve vaishnavite sages, has composed composed 105 pasurams (slokas) in Tamil, forming a part of Nalayira Divyaprabandham, in praise of the avatars of Vishnu and these compositions are called Perumal Thirumozhi. This composition is a classic example of the yearning of a Bhakta to serve the Lord. Every single verse of the 105 verses of this work is so filled with touching emotion and packed with palpable desire that even a normal reading is sure to bring tears and leave an everlasting impression in one's mind.

The Alvar made a garland of devotional verses on Lord Mukunda (Granter of Mukti) called Mukunda Mala, which is an excellent composition in Sanskrit and

moving the reader with extreme bhakti. The composition is in praise of Krishna. The entire work is a perfect of nava vidha bhakti and strongly establishes the importance of nama sankirtanam in kali yuga. In the final sloka, Kulasekara Alvar describes himself as A bee (shatpadam) that drinks the nectar of the Lotus Feet of the Lotus-eyed Lord. There seems to be several versions of this work and the one chosen for the study here is the one with 40 slokas as all the versions contain these 40. Further, the authorship of Mukunda Mala itself is under question as confusion seems to stem from the fact that many Kulasekaras appear in the lineage of Chera dynasty. However, this should not have any relevance to the appreciation of this work, specifically with regard to its applicability in practice and philosophy of Yoga.

Emphasis of Mukunda Mala on Bhakti and Relating with Paramatma Narayana

Bhakti is not just a conditional state of mind; rather, it is actually an absolute surrendering of everything unto God by the devotee and becoming free of ego. Though bhakti is endowed by the grace of God, it can be cultivated by thorough discipline and training of one's will and the mind. It is pertinent to mention here that Yoga Sutra of Patanjali states that abhyasa (practice) and vairagya (dispassion / detachment) are the tools to reach a state of stillness of mind so that the progress happens. The practice should be the correct one and to be done for a long time, without interruption and with a positive frame of mind. As one develops the right practice, the ability to discipline oneself and to reject intrusive influences grows. This progress will eventually lead to vairagya. But the important question is whether complete detachment possible at the initial stages? In practical terms, the sensory objects are created to do their activities. For example, the eyes will feed on colour and form, nose on smell, ear on sound, tongue on taste and skin on touch. These are the normal samskaras of the sensory objects. However, the yoga philosophy of Patanjali says as:

Tajjah samskara anya samskara prati bandhi

(this type of samskara, which is the knowledge that is filled with truth, creates latent impressions in the mind-field, and those new impressions tend to reduce the formation of other less useful forms of habitual latent impressions.)

A famous anecdote to reiterate the replacement of a lower samskara with a strong good samskara is understood from the story of Sri Pillai Uranga Villi Dahsar. He was very attached to his wife's beauty, especially her eyes and he used to hold an umbrella to protect her eyes from the sun. On seeing this, Sri Ramanuja asked him whether Dahsar would focus on something more beautiful, if shown. He readily agreed and the Ramanuja took him to Sri Aranganathan temple. Dahsar was mesmerized by the eyes of Ranganatha and surrendered himself there. This shows that one type of lower samskara can be replaced with higher samskara.

When the devotee grows in devotion deeply, he attains absolute self-forgetfulness. This state, which is called *Bhava*, is an important factor for the progress. *Bhava* establishes a true relationship between the devotee and the Lord.

Perfect detachment from all objects is a preliminary to real devotion. *Vairagya* is the product of real love for God. It is given in *Srimad Bhagavatam* that Devotion to God is developed in nine different ways:

1. *Sravana* (hearing of God's Lilas and stories),
2. *Kirtana* (singing of His glories),
3. *Smarana* (remembrance of His name and presence),
4. *Padasevana* (service of His feet),
5. *Archana* (worship of God),
6. *Vandana* (prostration to Lord),
7. *Dasya* (cultivating the *Bhava* of a servant with God),
8. *Sakhya* (cultivation of the friend-*Bhava*) and
9. *Atmanivedana* (complete surrender of the self).

The nine modes of *Bhakti* are the ways in which a devotee attains the Supreme Ideals of life. A devotee can take up any of these paths and reach the highest state. The path of *Bhakti* is the easiest of all and is not very much against the nature of human inclinations. It slowly, but surely, takes the individual to the Supreme without frustrating his human instincts. It is not direct assertion of God, but a progressive realization of Him. The practice of this itself needs a discipline of body, senses, mind, reducing ego and finally to be in a state of *ekagra* (one-pointed state of mind.) Thus it involves the practices of *Yoga*. A very striking aspect of *Mukunda Mala* is that it is aimed at developing *vairagya* and *pratyahara* by continuously remembering *Mukunda*. All the nine facets of *bhakti* are shining throughout the work.

Concept of *Jivatma* – *Paramatma* and the Means for is Contemplative Meditation

Dhyana (Meditation) is a continuous flow of thought. It is a powerful tool in *yoga*, which greatly helps the practitioner to contemplate on any subject with astounding clarity. The following steps are involved in the practice of meditation.

1. Atmosphere plays an important role in stilling the mind. Hence, care must be taken to choose a conducive place for meditation.
2. Early morning and late evening timings are ideal to practice *dhyana* as the mind is relatively free.
3. Continuing the practice at the same time and the same place each day will condition the mind to slow down more quickly.
4. One should sit in a straight line with the back straight.
5. One should take a *sankalpam* (commitment) to keep the mind quiet during the practice.
6. *Pranayama* (Regulating one's breathing) is a prerequisite for a rewarding meditative practice.
7. One should also establish a comfortable rhythmic breathing pattern.

8. After following the mind in the initial days of practice, one should be able to bring the mind to rest on the focal point of your choice. Normally the mid-brow or heart centre is focussed on *dhyana*.
9. Applying your chosen technique, hold your object of concentration at this focal point throughout your session.
10. Meditation comes when you reach a state of pure thought, but still retain your awareness of duality.
11. After long practice, duality disappears and *Samadhi*, the superconscious state, is attained.

However, to keep the body still, one should practise the requisite *asanas*. The body should be both firm and comfortable in the *asana* posture. *Patanjali* defines *asana* as:

Stira sukham asanam (Chapter II and Sutra 46 of *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*)

Further, to have a steady breath, *pranayama* is a must. *Pranayama* ensures that the mind is able to achieve stillness. Besides the above, *nyasa* is a very useful tool in *yoga* towards contemplative meditation. *Nyasa* means "placing" or "touching." It is a ritual that involves a series of touches in specific locations on the body. This is done by with specific mantras or without them. It is believed that this ritual imparts the presence of a deity in the body, or makes the body of the individual more divine.

Likewise, *japa*, which is the meditative repetition of a mantra or a divine name, is a practice found in *yoga* and spirituality. The mantra or name may be recited loudly or softly or within the reciter's mind. While in meditation, it is possible to practice different types of *dhyana*. To meditate on a Name and Form of the Lord is *Saguna-Dhyana*. This is concrete meditation. One can meditate on any form of God of his choice, and repeat His Name mentally. This is *Saguna-Dhyana*. Alternatively, one may recite *OM* mentally and meditate on abstract ideas like Infinity, Eternity, Purity, Consciousness, truth, Bliss, etc., identifying these with your Self. This is *Nirguna-Dhyana*. However, *saguna-Dhyana* has many advantages as the *karmendriyas* are used to relate with the object of meditation. *Saguna dhyanam* is generally practiced in the following way. An image of the Lord is placed in front of the practitioner. He gazes at this picture steadily for five minutes, then closes the eyes and visualises the picture. During visualization, one should move the mind on the various parts of the Lord. One should see with the mind His feet first, then in the following order: His legs, His divine cloth, His golden ornaments, then the face, then the crown on the head. Then come down to the feet and repeat the process again and again. Finally fix the mind either at the feet or the face. Repeat the Mantra mentally.

To Delineate, two Slokas from *Mukunda Mala* are Presented

A very important aspect of *Yoga* practice is *Pratyahara*. *Pratyahara* is the fifth limb in the *ashtanga yoga*. Many scholars believe that it is the bridge

between the bahiranga sadhana and antaranga sadhana in ashtanga yoga. Pratyahara is the withdrawal of the senses (indriyas) of cognition and action from both the external world and the images or impressions in the mind field. The senses are said to follow the mind in the same way the hive of bees follows the queen bee. Wherever she goes, they will follow. Similarly, if the mind truly goes inward, the senses will come racing behind. Pratyahara involves reining in the senses for increased attention rather than distraction. It is essential to practice pratyahara for achieving the meditative stages of dharana, dhyana and Samadhi. These three antaranga sadhana disciplines are actually three continuous steps of the same process.

Our senses seem to drag us around in the external world, whether pursuing material objects, food, or circumstances related to professional, social, or economic life. Through the routine practice of pratyahara at daily meditation time, we gradually gain positive control over the mind being obsessively drawn towards all of those objects. This is a further refinement of minimizing the coloring of the mind field and is termed as Tapas. Sense withdrawal, pratyahara, rests on the solid foundation of a steady, comfortable meditation posture and smooth, deep, quiet breath that has no pauses. Without these two steps, sense withdrawal becomes a battle. With posture and breath regulated, pratyahara comes much more naturally.

Now, let us look at Sloka 16 of Mukundamala sloka.

Jihve kirtaya kesavam muraripum ceto bhaja sridharam
Pani-dvandva smaracyayuta katha: srotra-dvaya tavam
srnu Krsnam lokaya locana-dvaya harer gaccanghri-
yugmalayam Jighra ghrana mukunda-pada-tulasim
murdhan namadhokshajam Jihve kirtaya kesavam
muraripum ceto bhaja sridharam

The meaning of the above sloka is: O tongue, praise the glories of Lord Kesava. O mind, worship the enemy of Mura. O hands, serve the Lord of Sri. O ears, hear the topics of Lord Achyuta. O eyes, gaze upon Sri Krsna. O feet, go to the temple of Lord Hari. O nose, smell the tulasi buds on Lord Mukunda's feet. O head, bow down to Lord Adhoksaja.

It is clear from the sloka that Kulasekara Alwar is urging his karmendriyas and jnanedriyas to withdraw from outwardly objects and focus on Lord Mukunda. This should be a continuous and ongoing process. The normal nature of the tongue is to taste all kinds of food and to talk incessantly about inferior things. But, the Alwar asks his tongue to praise the glories of the Lord. Likewise, he asks his mind to worship the Lord, whereas the mind normally wanders around unnecessary things. The other karmendriyas like hands, ears, eyes, feet, nose and head generally do things which may not be beneficial for the jivatma paramatma samyam. Hence, Kulasekara Alwar directs these sensory organs to be in the service of Lord Kesava.

We should also note here that the mind which is higher directs the senses as to what the karmendriyas should do, thereby refraining from doing lower things. This means, pratyahara is an active training and withdrawal of senses happens by continuously directing them towards higher objects. There should be a complete mindfulness in action where senses and karmendriyas are used. Needless to say that Alvars lived this way. The next sloka numbered 17 Mukunda Mala follows thus:

he lokāḥ śrīnuta prasuti-marana-vyadhes cikitsaṁ imam
yoga-jñāḥ samudaharanti munayo yaṁ yajñavalkyadayah
antar-jyotir ameyaṁ ekam amṛtaṁ Kṛsnakhyam
apiyatam tat pitaṁ paramausadhaṁ
vitanute nirvanam atyantikam

In this sloka, Sri Kulasekharar addresses the people in general and asks them to listen to the cure recommended by great Yogis and Sages like Yagyavalkya against the cycles of birth and death that we all are subject to as being in the grip of samsara. Alwar points out that the medicine recommended by the revered Sages is a nectar-like drink known as Sri-krishna. That shining nectar which is immeasurable in its qualities will remove one's problems relating to samsara permanently. Alwar equates Sri Krishna to the powerful medicine which will cure the disease of recurring cycles of birth and death. He says the medicine has been time-tested by great Sages and it is the panacea for the disease of Samsara. It is amply clear from the above two slokas that pratyahara and vairagya are very integral to relate the jivatma and paramatma. Mukunda Mala has clearly demonstrated in most of the verses and specifically in the above two slokas that the yoga practices are the ladder that would take jivatma closer to the paramatma.

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