

INTRODUCTION TO SADHANA PANCHAKAM

Every being in this world without exception seeks happiness and inner peace. Even an insignificant creature as an ant tries to avoid pain by crawling away from the railway track when the mighty railway engine crosses the track. But the true nature of happiness cannot be explained by anyone who lacks the philosophical instinct. Philosophy is the love for wisdom which begins when mind feels the insufficiency of material knowledge. Every human being has an inclination towards the path of perfection. But the path to perfection is not a cake walk. The Kathopanishad narrates it to be sharp as edge of a razor, hard to cross and difficult to tread. (क्षुरस्य धारा निशिता दुरत्यया दुर्गे पथस्तत्कवयो वदन्ति।—कठोपनिषत् १.३.१५). The journey becomes difficult especially when one observes that the primordial world as nothing but the projection of an unending stream of thoughts of what one experiences through sensory influences. Even at the end of one's sadhana if one becomes enlightened, the experiences finds it impossible to express completely, wholly and on entirety the experience in human speech, constrained as it is by the words which are required to give expression to the experience it being declared यतो वाचो निवर्तन्ते अप्राप्य मनसा सह. Sadhana is a conscious performance of disciplined actions in furthering one's journey on the Path to Perfection understanding the seer's experiences and through that awareness be conscious of the essence behind the words, symbols and legends which they used to express their experiences of that Supreme Essence, सत्य or the Prime Existence.

Sri Adi Shankaracharya towards the end of his brief 32- year lifespan wrote the text SADHANA PANCHAKAM when he was requested by his disciples that he should write a brief text summarizing his approach to spiritual life. Bringing all his experience to bear, the great Bhashyakara Sri Adi Shankaracharya wrote the poem which forms the basis of these talks. Sadhana Panchakam derives its name from the five verses that comprise the poem, each one dealing with spiritual practices. Each verse contains 8 instructions, making a total of 40 instructions. In spite of their brevity, they are remarkable for their deep insight to reveal the very essence of Sadhana at every stage of one's spiritual growth. The instructions are considered to be very precious and priceless, and contain the principles of the practice of Sadhana. For this reason the text also goes by a second name, Upadesha Pancharatnam, meaning "Five precious gems of advice or teaching". Further, the instructions are not in a

haphazard order, but presented in a logical sequence, in the order in which they have to be practised. They are like the stations we pass during a railway journey, each station taking us closer and closer to our destination. This sequential format of the text gives it its third name, Sopana Arohana Nyaya, which means “A Logical Climbing Ladder in Sadhana”. The first 24 steps (Verses 1-3) take us sequentially through the Four Stages of Life. The four stages are the natural structure of each person’s life. It is not only an Indian concept but actually universally applicable, and is seen in human societies all over the world. Indian society has simply formalised the pattern into the above four stages, without forcing the issue by putting ages to each stage:

1. Brahmacharya Stage: The Life of Studentship (Steps 1 to 4)
2. Grihastha Stage: The Householder’s Life (Steps 5 to 8)
3. Vanaprastha Stage: The Life of Retirement (Steps 9 to 12)
4. Sannyasa Stage: The Life of Renunciation (Steps 13 to 24).

These are followed by the next 16 steps (Verses 4-5) in which four distinct topics are taken up to take us to the highest Goal of Self-Realisation:

5. Practice of Tapas Voluntary Austerity (Steps 25 to 28);
6. Practice of Titiksha Enduring Life’s Pin-pricks (Steps 29 to 32);
7. To Nirvikalpa Samadhi Final Steps to Realisation (Steps 33 to 36);
8. Jivanmukti Freedom from All Bondage (Steps 37 to 40).

Sankaracharya’s Sadhana Panchakam is likened to an inclined ladder because Sadhana is a constant and continuous endeavour to climb step by step, even if the obstacles and impediments, sensory attractions treading the Path to perfection carefully. This work is one such small but significant attempt to understand the steps to reach out to Brahmajnana, which is the highest goal and gives the greatest bliss. Jagadguru Sankaracharya has compassionately as a teacher and a poet has gifted the possible steps for any layperson to march towards the Path of Perfection if willing to through his work Sadhana Panchakam.

.....