

The Role of Faith in Hinduism

by

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Three stages of religious life

According to our scriptures, the religious life of a Hindu has to evolve through three distinct stages.

- ◆ In the first stage, one gives importance to the virtue of ***Shraddhā*** [faith] and hence is a *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha*. [faith-oriented person].
- ◆ In the second stage, one gives importance to ***Dharma*** [(universal) reverence] and becomes a *Dharma Pradhāna Purushaha* [(universal) reverence-oriented person].
- ◆ And finally one gives importance to ***Jñānam*** [knowledge] and becomes a *Jñāna Pradhāna Purushaha* [knowledge-oriented person].

Purushaha means human being irrespective of gender. Hence the religious or spiritual evolution is from *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha* to *Dharma Pradhāna Purushaha* to *Jñāna Pradhāna Purushaha*.

And we consider that all these three stages are equally essential and important. Without the earlier stages, we cannot go to the later stages and without going to the later stages, the earlier stages remain incomplete. Therefore everyone requires all the three stages.

First stage — *Shraddhā Pradhāna* — Concept of God as separate entity

We have to understand this stage correctly so that we can use the first stage as a preliminary stage and sooner or later, transcend or grow out of it and go to the second and third stages. In the first stage when I am *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha*, religious life heavily consists of scriptural or scripture-prescribed rituals. In this stage, rituals are in the form of *Īshvara Pūjā* or *Ārādhana*. The *Pūjā* is a physical *Pūjā*, a concrete physical activity and *Īshvara* is also physicalised in the form of different types of *Mūrti* [images] with various number of heads, hands, and other physical features. *Īshvara* is also physical and my expression of *Bhakti* is also physical. This stage is prescribed by the scriptures for a Hindu in the beginning. In our ritualistic portion, we have got several rituals: *Shrouta Karmāni* involving Vedic fire, we have got several *Smārtha Karma* in the form of *Pūjā*, and we have got varieties of physical austerities, observances etc. This is a ritual-oriented religious way of life.

When the scriptures talk about varieties of *Pūjā* offered to the varieties of *Mūrti*, they only give instructions for the *Pūjā*. The *Upachārāhā* [procedures] are enumerated one after the other and the scriptures command a person to perform them diligently. And we

find that scriptures do not explain why one has to do this particular thing. The “why” of the steps are not at all mentioned in the scriptures. We are expected to exactly and implicitly do as commanded or instructed by the scriptures. Questions at this stage are not encouraged. Shankarāchārya uses the expression: *Vachanāt Pravritti Vachanāt Nivritti*. One does the ritualistic activities because it has been said so in the scriptures and one does not do certain things because they have not been said so. One does not ask any questions beyond this. Therefore this is a (faith-based) stage of *Shraddhā Prādhānyam*.

And the scriptures do not give the reason for what we are doing in the rituals and the scriptures also do not mention how a particular ritual is going to produce the result. The mechanism of the ritual is also not presented at all in the scriptures. Therefore how it works, is also not mentioned. The *Shāstram* does not give all the explanation because in the vision of the *Shāstram*, this is only a preliminary and temporary stage of religious life. One need not bother about the details and explanation of all these things. This is because once you enter into these details, you will get lost in the ritualistic aspect and you will not be able to come to the second stage. Therefore since the ritualistic portion is a preliminary and temporary stage, we follow that faithfully. And the scriptures say, if you faithfully follow these rituals without asking unnecessary questions, I will give you the guarantee that it will fructify and it will give you *Prayojanam*.

And the scriptures promise two types of *Prayojanam*. One benefit is material or worldly well being at the individual level, family level, community level, national level and at the global level. However this material well-being is only a secondary result. More importantly, this stage of life will take one to the more important second stage of religious life which is *Dharma Pradhāna* and later *Jñānam Pradhāna* life.

Therefore when you are in this ritualistic stage of religion, may you utilise your **faculty of faith**. *Shāstram* promises the benefit, and hence the rituals will give me benefit. *Shāstram* will not mislead me and therefore I will follow what the *Shāstram* says. And my aim is to grow out of this and enter into the second stage as early as possible. I don't want to get lost in unnecessary enquiries and analysis.

And the scriptures point out that the efficacy of the ritual is directly proportional to the intensity of your faith. Greater the faith, greater the result. There is a beautiful *Shloka* which tells this:

*mantra tīrthe dvije deve daivajñe bheṣaje gurau |
yādṛṣī bhāvanā yasya siddhir bhavati tādṛṣī | |Pancatantra_5.98| |*

“These following items enumerated will bless you depending upon your faith and depending upon the intensity of your faith:

- *Mantra* : Vedic Mantra like Rudram
- *Tīrthe* : all sacred holy river and holy places like Gangā, Kaveri etc
- *Dvije* : the Āchārya who is helping you in performing the rituals
- *Deve* : *Īshvara*

- *Daivajñe* : astrologer
- *Bheshaje* : the doctor and medicine
- *Gurau* : the teacher.”

How the above benefit me, depends heavily upon the mindset with which I approach. Therefore during the ritualistic stage of religious life, I am a *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha*. And that Shraddhā or faith will work and this has been experimentally proved. We only do not know how the faith works, but we know that faith works.

And the scriptures point out, if the faith is going to work and benefit me, what is wrong in employing faith ? Just because I do not know, how it works, why should I give up faith ? I can use the faith for my benefit, because it is a faculty provided to human beings by the Lord. Just because I do not know how it works, I am not going to deprive myself of that benefit. Imagine a person arguing, that he won't use his brain because he doesn't know how his brain works ! This is a silly argument. Let the scientists discover how the brain works after many years, I do not care. When Bhagavān has given me a faculty which can help me and which can improve the quality of my life, I will make use of that faculty. Thus in the beginning stage, I am *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha*.

And many people think that if I claim that I have *Shraddhā*, I should feel ashamed because it is unscientific and irrational. Unfortunately many people feel bad to claim that they have faith in religion or scriptures. There is nothing unscientific or irrational in making use of the faith faculty. I am not unscientific because I have equal faith in science also. As a Hindu, I have faith in science also because that also improves the quality of my life. I have faith in religion and rituals because that also improves the quality of my life. There is no contradiction in using both science and *Shraddhā*. Therefore I am not unscientific nor am I irrational. I am only a pragmatic person because I know that I have a faculty of faith. And if I use that faith, in the first stage of religious life and go through *Īshvara Pūjā*, in the form of varieties of *Kāyika Karma* [physical actions] without asking questions, then I can successfully go to the second stage of *Dharma Pradhāna Purushaha*.

Second stage – Dharma Pradhāna – Concept of God & World as one entity

Now the question is – what is the difference between the first stage and the second stage ? In the first stage, I have got a triangular vision in which I look upon God as something other than *Jīva*, the individual, and other than *Jagat* the world. I visualise God as an extra-cosmic, supernatural being located outside the universe. Whereas in the intermediary stage, *Shāstram* says – take your mind out of this orientation. You should grow out of visualising God as a supernatural being endowed with extra-ordinary features and located outside the world. It is very good in the first stage of *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushaha*, but in the second stage, we grow out of differentiating God and world.

Instead of having the triangle of *Jīva Jagat* and *Īshvara*, I merge *Īshvara* and *Jagat* into one entity. And in the second stage, there is no *Īshvara* located outside the world

and there is no world separate from *Īshvara*. I have to eliminate from my mind the *Īshvara*-world dichotomy and should get out of the orientation of *Īshvara* as some invisible supernatural being also known as *Paroksha Īshvara*. *Īshvara* is not *Paroksha* or someone outside the world. In fact *Īshvara* is none other than *Pratyaksha Prapancha* [perceptible universe] which is in front of me all the time. Therefore the orientation of a supernatural extra-cosmic being, I have to grow out of.

And I should also grow out of the idea of closing the eyes for getting that vision of that extra-cosmic supernatural being or the vision of *Īshvara Darshanam* [God-vision]. And what should be my new approach? What I am experiencing is not an ordinary world but what I am experiencing is the live body of *Īshvara*. And this vision is called *Vishva Rūpa Īshvara Bhāvanā* [dwelling on universal form of the Lord]. I have to change my attitude towards the universe. And this vision of looking at the *Prapancha*, or universe as *Īshvara* is called *Ashta Mūrti Bhrit Īshvara*. This means *Īshvara* is not a supernatural extra-ordinary being located outside, but the very universe is the manifestation of *Īshvara*. This vision I have to develop in the second stage. While chanting Dakshināmūrti Stotram, we have that description of *Ashta Mūrti Īshvara*. *Ashta Mūrti* means *Īshvara* with eight facets. They are:

*Bhūhu Ambhām Asya Anal Anilo Ambaram Aharnātho Himāmsuhuhu Pumān
Ityā Bhāti Charācharātmakam Idam Yasyaiva Mūrtiyashtakam*

What are the eight facets? The *Pancha Bhūtāni* [five elements] are the first five sacred aspects of *Īshvara*.

- *Bhūhu* – means the *Prithvi* or earth principle.
- *Ambhāmsi* – means the waters,
- *Analaha* – means fire
- *Anilaha* – means air
- *Ambaram* – means *Ākāśah* [space]

These *Pancha Bhūtāni* [five elements, principles] which are in front of me are the live direct [Aparoksha] forms of *Īshvara*. And in addition to that we have:

- *Ahar Nāthaha* – means *Sūryaha* or sun. The sun represents all the stars and galaxies.
- *Himāmsuhuhu* – means the *Chandrahā* or moon. The moon represents all the planets satellites, meteors.
- And finally *Pumān* – means all the living beings.

The first seven are *Achetana Tattvam* [inanimate principles] but the last represents all the *Chetana* [animate] *Jīva*. With that, the universe is nothing but the cosmic body of *Īshvara*. And just as the individual body functions in harmony perfectly in order, every organ is interconnected, similarly the whole universe is also in harmony, well interconnected. The universe is not a chaos but it is cosmic organism. Therefore I do not look on the universe as a material bundle but the live body of *Īshvara* with the invisible

power serving as an organising whole. Therefore whenever I look at the world, my *Bhāvanā* [attitude] is that of *Īshvara Darshanam* [perception]. World *Darshanam* itself is *Īshvara Darshanam*. And every transaction with the world is communion with God.

This *Bhāvanā Parivartanam* [attitudinal change] is the most important second stage – I do not look for an extra-cosmic supernatural being, that is out of my mind-set. Now my aim is reverential attitude towards the entire cosmos. And once I have reverential attitude towards the cosmos as *Īshvara*, reverential attitude towards the body which is also *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara*, I have a reverential attitude towards life also.

And this orientation is extremely important. This is because, in the beginning stage, we had a triangular vision. The triangular vision is that – I am here, the world is there and God is somewhere. And when I have this attitude, the religion says that God is wonderful and the world is terrible. There is a dichotomy created between my attitude towards the world and God when I am in the triangular vision. And invariably most of the theologies look at creation and life as full of suffering. This is a very negative attitude. They treat the body itself as a curse because it is bringing me to the world which is suffering. Therefore my very attitude towards life is a negative pessimistic attitude. And all the people want to escape from the world of suffering and the prayer all the time is: “O Lord, let this be my last *Janma*, I must run towards You and I should never come back.”

But when I come to this level, I understand that world is God and God is manifest as the world. Therefore my attitude towards the world is that it is sacred. My attitude towards life is that it is sacred. My attitude towards the body is that it is sacred. I never want to run away from the world. I never want to run away from birth or body because everything is wonderful. Life is a celebration. The whole universe is a *Nandanavanam*. Life is beautiful and I will never pray to God that this must be my last birth. I will never run away from the world because world and God are not two separate things, where is the question of running away from the world and running towards the Lord. Therefore my attitude towards the world is that of reverence.

So this is the most important attitudinal change in *Dharma Pradhāna Purushaha* – Bhagavān is world and world is Bhagavān.

And once I have a reverential attitude towards the universe, I have to gradually reduce my *Rāga/Dvesha* [likes/dislikes]. I do not have an attitude of attachment towards someone or aversion towards another. Both of them are unhealthy attitudes towards the things of the world. This division of the world into my likes and dislikes is an unhealthy attitude because the whole world is *Vishva Rūpam* [(the Lord's) universal form] therefore neither attachment nor aversion is to be harboured. Whatever comes is considered sacred and whatever goes is considered equally sacred. The arrival of body or birth is sacred, and the departure of the body or death is sacred. The people I am associated with are sacred and the people I am not associated with are also sacred. There is no question of attachment or aversion.

In fact all the painful experiences are given by the Lord only to get rid of attachment

and not develop hatred. All pleasurable experiences must be utilised to avoid hatred and not to form attachment. Therefore in the second stage, reverence towards the world and reduction of *Rāga/Dvesha* is the most important *Sādhana*. Rituals may continue but my focus comes down with regards to the ritualistic stage. My attitude is that everything is wonderful, everything is sacred. This is refinement of the mind by three R-s

- Reverential attitude
- Reduction of *Rāga/Dvesha*
- Refinement of the mind

We call it refinement because, once *Rāga/Dvesha* come down, all the unhealthy traits of the mind like jealousy or anger or fear or hatred will go away. My mind then gets refinement also called *Daivī Sampat* [Divine qualities] and this is the removal of *Āsurī Sampat* [Demonic qualities]. This is the second stage of life called *Dharma Pradhāna*.

Third stage – *Jñāna Pradhāna* – Concept of non-difference God and Self

And if we have gone through these two stages, then we can go through the most important *Jñānam Pradhāna* stage. I should not get stuck with rituals. Religion does not mean rituals only. We have to come to the final *Jñānam Pradhāna* stage. This *Jñānam Pradhāna* stage is very abstract and hence will not be elaborated here. Only a hint or clue in that direction will be given.

In this *Jñāna Pradhāna* stage, when I see the entire universe as *Īshvara*, I include all my properties into *Īshvara*. There is no more question of “my” property, no more *Mamakāra* [mine-ness]. Property is also sacred but I do not have attachment or aversion. Family also is sacred and I do not have attachment or aversion with regards to family members. Body is also sacred to *Īshvara* and neither attachment nor aversion should be harboured. Mind is also sacred to *Īshvara* and no attachment or aversion is to be harboured. Hence property, family, body and mind all come under *Ātmā Nivedana Rūpa Navama Bhakti*. The ninth level of *Bhakti* is *Ātmā Nivedanam*. Once I dedicate all of them to *Īshvara*, then the question will come – WHO AM I ?

Who am I after dedicating everything to *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara* ? I am not the body. I am not the mind. Family and property do not belong to me. All of them belong to *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara*.

Vedānta gives that *Ātmā Jñānam* [self-knowledge], which we present in the form of five capsules. Briefly, the five capsules of Vedānta in which I am a *Jñānam Pradhāna Purushaha* are:

- ◆ I am of the nature of eternal and all pervading conscious principle, non-material *Chaitanyam*, I am awareness.
- ◆ I am the only source of permanent peace, security and happiness because everything else, being material, are all always unpredictable and uncontrollable and unsustainable. “I” is the eternal all-pervading consciousness

- ◆ By my mere presence, I give life to the material body and through the material body I experience the material universe. “My” here refers to the non-material spirit.
- ◆ I am not at all affected by whatever event happens in the material world or in the material body. I, the non-material spirit of consciousness, am never affected. I have to reach that destination. I am ever free unaffected by any event.
- ◆ By forgetting my higher nature I convert life into a *Bhāram* or burden. By remembering my higher nature, I convert life into an entertainment provided by *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara*. *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara* is presenting a cosmic show wherein my own body mind and family also are all characters coming and going – they are meant for my entertainment, let me not cling on to everything. I use everything and lose.

Thus just be detached, be non-judgemental. *Vishva Rūpa Ishvara* is presenting a beautiful drama where He Himself acts in every role. Watch and celebrate life. Don't think of escaping business. Life is beautiful and this is wonderful. I have to remember that religious life is not merely rituals and I have to come to this liberating *Jñānam*. On this auspicious Shiva Rātri day, we seek the grace of Lord Shiva so that I will successfully go through *Shraddhā Pradhāna Purushārtha* status into *Dharma Pradhāna Purushaha* status and into the highest *Jñānam Pradhāna Purushaha* status.



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