Chapter: ii

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND PERSONALITY
OF GOD

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The term ‘Experience’ is not unfamiliar to us. It is one of the most precious faculties of feeling that God has graciously bestowed upon us. Jealousy and hatred, joy and sorrow, love and affection, bliss and ecstasy, all these and much more can be thoroughly understood only through experience.

It is not only the case with Ultimate Reality but also in case of the smallest possible day to day happenings that one is obliged to say that experience is the best testimony to acquire knowledge. For instance, if a person tastes sweet balls or he enjoys music or he observes natural scenery, no analysis or description for the same is required. There are many kinds of experiences, but they are classified into four i.e. sense experience, aesthetic experience, ethical experience and religious experience.

Religion is a matter of experience, contemplation, intuition and realization. “The Hindu attitude to religion is interesting. While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, Outer expression to inward realization. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstractions or the celebration of ceremonies, but a way of life or experience. It is insight into the nature of reality (darśana), or experience of reality (anubhava). This experience is not an emotional thrill, or a subjective fancy, but a response of the whole personality, the integrated self, to the
central reality.”¹ Thus, Hindu philosophy of religion is entirely based on experience.

Merely by becoming a member of a church, creed or sect, a person does not become eligible for this experience. Even by reading any number of scriptures and sacred books, he might never undergo this experience. Since, in this experience one needs a direct vision of the object he is destined for, there is no room for the slightest difference between means and ends, the knower and the known. It is the process of relishing blissful oneness, identifying oneself with the Supreme and getting merged in the divinity. Thus, every glimpse of Reality, dim or bright, if at all seeker has, he has it directly.

As the phenomenon of religious experience is a state of highest spiritual perfection, it is ineffable. If one tries to define or interpret the religious experience, one undoubtedly limits its scope. The inward guidance that Socrates experienced was not easily describable. He named it as ‘Daemon’. Plato too, did not believe in God directly. In his famous book *Republic* he only mentions about the idea of good that is final. He says, it is truth and what is truth? It is vision. The intuitive vision of the Supreme God is indefinable. That is the reason why the western mystic saint Plotinus says that ultimate experience—a flight of the alone to the Alone.

*The Śruti* also describes God as:

> “yato vācho nivartante, aprāpya manaāa saха”²  
> (Incomprehensible through the senses and the mind.)

The mind is an instrument with restricted ability; incapable to receive, absorb, assimilate the measureless metaphysical knowledge.

Religious experience transcends reason. Since it is the experience of infinite, our finite intelligence is too inadequate to analyze it. It is difficult to
Religious experience is the transformation of whole being into a divine existence. It is a transformation from plurality to singularity, diversity to unity, meanness to magnanimity, partialness to totality, transience to eternity, mortality to immortality, ignorance to knowledge, darkness to light, falsity to truthfulness and petty joys to ecstasy.

In fact, all these qualities are not alien to the soul. On the contrary these are integral qualities of the soul itself. It is because jīva has been accustomed to identify itself with physical body and indulged in materialistic activities, that it has lost its original form. The moment, one becomes aware of his original self in the light of pure knowledge one’s whole being fuses with the divinity. One realizes the divine presence in one’s own existence as well as the smallest particle of the entire creation. All of a sudden, the flow of unending terrestrial desires ceases, and the seeker feels contented at heart. His soul gets re-endowed with all the divine virtues. The seeker regains his lost originality. The religious experience is the discovery of divine within.

Rādhākrṣṇan has rightly said, “It is the function of religion to reaffirm the intuitive loyalty to life and solidarity of human nature, to lift us out of the illusion of isolation and take us back to reality. The religious soul does not seek for release from suffering in the present life or a place in paradise in the next life. His prayer, in the words of The Upaniṣada, is, Lead me from the unreal to the real, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality."

Thus, religious experience is personal, intuitive, transcendental, transformative, ineffable and self-evident in character.
As it is a natural human tendency to express what one has experienced, each religious genius spells out the mystery of God according to his own degree of realization. Thus, the expressions of realization differ from mystic to mystic.

Buddha too experienced what is said as Bodhi Jñāna under the tree of Bodhi. In his first lecture that he delivered in Vārāṇasi Buddha says, whether should I speak my experience to my disciples at all or not because if I speak there are all the chances of misinterpretations. So, better I keep silence. Then after great meditation, Buddha decided to speak the truth. Mainly, in the Buddhist literature, this experience is defined in the negative terms. Just as in the Upaniṣada it is said ‘neti... neti...’. Later on in Vedānta it was defined as apavāda that did not mean exception but something which can be transcended, one can go beyond. Just as dream experience can be transcended by waking experience. Waking experience can be transcended by deep sleep experience. A dream can be transcended in turyāvasthā. So by transcendence one can get the higher knowledge but that which cannot be transcended is the ultimate experience.

Buddha’s experience is also a religious experience but he did not believe in God. Instead he believed in Supreme experience that is dvandvāṭīta; beyond good and evil, right and wrong, activity and passivity.

Thus, God is not just an object of religious experience. In Jainism it is called Kevalī Jñāna. According to Čandradhar Šarmā, it is actually advaitic experience because it is kevalī; pure knowledge, pure consciousness. Like Plato, Jainism believes that soul is very simple, it is nothing else but pure consciousness. Soul is beyond pudgal means beyond matter and spirit. All the experiences of Buddha, Tirthankaras and Šankarācārya are transcendental. There are three main transcendental experiences.
SĀMKHYA EXPERIENCE

In śāmkhya philosophy, Purusa is beyond Prakṛti, beyond activity, beyond our twenty three evolutes (five tanmātras, five mahābhūtas, five jñānendryas, five karmendryas, ahamkāra, mana, mahat). Purusa that is consciousness, is an experience, all-doer and controller. Śāsānibhāva is a śāmkhya experience in which one lives merely as a witness to his surrounding and all the happenings of the world. One can have this experience either by penance or by devotion.

INTUITIVE EXPERIENCE (Aparokṣa Anubhūti)

Religious experience is the same in essence but differs in interpretation and perception. As the mystics of different faiths differ in their temperaments, their expressions and interpretations differ too. So, religious experience is termed differently such as samyaka darsana, ‘sāsānibkāra’ and turyāvasthā. Śankarācārya calls it ‘aparokṣa anubhūti’. In his advaitic experience, Śankarācārya describes Brahman as nirguna, nirākāra and nirvikalpa and thus, he too interprets his experience negatively.

There are three sources of attaining knowledge i.e. reason, revelation and intuition. It is difficult to determine which of the three assumes supreme importance in Śankarācārya’s philosophy. His philosophy is full of rational justifications. To know a thing means to have the knowledge of its quality. As human intellect is limited by space and time, it cannot know something that is attributeless i.e. beyond space and time. Śankarācārya’s Brahman is attributeless and it transcends all worldly qualities. Reason can know only phenomenal object, hence, through reason one can never know the Brahman.

So, Śankarācārya considered the Śruti as the most authoritative and reliable source of Brahma-jñāna. The experiences revealed in it are the intuitions of the sages and these intuitions are the results of a perseverant
and sincere effort to know Brahma. So Upaniṣadas are the record of the highest possible human experience namely intuitive experience. Svānumbhava (self-experience) is intuitional in character it is experienced all of a sudden but cannot be verbalized and communicated. So, empiricists reject intuitional experience.

The difficulty with this kind of experience is that though it is certain, it cannot be communicated clearly. It is here that Śakarācārya brings in, the importance of reason. The interpretation is done by man’s rational faculty. It is only the enlightened intellect that can give us a clear idea of Brahma. According to Śankarācārya to have knowledge of Brahma reasoning must culminate in experience.

With the revelation and reasoning one is still at the finite level of understanding whereas through experience one transcends the finite and passes on to the level of infinite. In this way reason is prominent in acquiring Brahma-jñāna. Thus, intuitive experience is more prominent than reason.

**VALLABHĀČĀRYA AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

Ultimate reality is beyond all negations. Then question arises, what is a positive reality? Positive reality is in fact Brahma and it can be described by three aspects; sat (truth), cīt (existence) and ānanda (bliss). The two main propounders of Bhakti cult, Ramanjācārya and Vallabhācārya agree that nature of ultimate reality is pure consciousness and it is related with the subject. As it is pure, there is nothing that binds it. It is related with image of the Lord, with Guru and it is personal. Ramanujācārya says, when one totally surrenders to the God, he becomes one with the Reality.

Vallabhācārya explains four ways of religious experience, sālokya, sārupya, sādharmya and sāyujya. All these four types of liberations are religious experience.
The relationship between devotee and God is related with different aspects of liberation like Sārupya, Sādharmya, Sālokya and Sāyujya. Sārupya means having the same form as God has. Sādharmya means having the same qualities as God has. Sālokya means being in the same plane of reality along with the God. Sāyujya means becoming one with God.

From this aspect, different forms of Bhakti like Premlaksanā, Mādhurya, Viraha evolved in Indian tradition. This means Ultimate Reality is sugunā means God has a personality of human form.

The God is sugunā means having many attributes. Upanişada says, satyam jñānam anantam brahma (Brahma is truth, knowledge and infinite). All these three attributes constitute personality of God. So, that which is impersonal and absolute becomes personal - sākāra. It is capable of manifesting itself. As it is absolutely transcendent, its capacity and power are also absolute. Transcendent does not mean it is a-cosmic or supra-cosmic but it is manifesting in the world. Just as the Sun is Supreme but because it is Supreme, it is capable of manifesting in the form of rays.

K. C. Bhattachārya says that there are alternatives in philosophy namely advaita, suddhādvaita, viśistādvaita. By adopting any alternative, one can attain liberation. In fact there are varieties of religious experiences. Śankarācārya would say that advaitic experience is a religious experience, Christ would say that love of God, surrender to personal God is a religious experience. Rāmānujačārya and Vallabhācārya would also hold that soul and God stand in personal relationship of religious experience. Samādhi as the culmination of the eightfold path of yoga propounded by Patanjali is also one of the religious experiences.

**YOGA—A MEANS TO SAMĀDHI**
Yoga is defined as: "yogaścittavṛttinirōdhaḥ" - control of all the mental faculties in order to attain the highest state of samādhi.

Any one can have the experience of ultimate reality or God realization, provided he is mentally and ethically prepared for it. Ethical and ego-free life is the prerequisite for the same. The eightfold path of yoga shapes his inner being in such a way that an aspirant attains the lofty goal easily. The physical, mental and spiritual disciplines of yoga ultimately lead to samādhi (the state where the meditator and the meditated, the thinker and the thought become one in perfect harmony). Thus, Religious experience can also be attained through yoga.

There are various types of yoga in Hinduism; jñāna yoga, bhakti yoga, karma yoga, rāja yoga, laya yoga and pūrṇa yoga. The Yoga system, advocated by Indian sage patanjali, seems to be the most practical amongst all. Its eightfold path consists of disciplines such as: 1. Yama or restraint, 2. Niyama or culture, 3. Āsana or posture, 4. Prāṇāyāma or breath control, 5. Pratyāhāra or withdrawal of senses, 6. Dhāranā or attention, 7. Dhyāna or meditation, 8. Samādhi or trance.

As J. P. Atreya states, “In religion, philosophy and mysticism, yoga means the practical method of uniting with the divine, realizing or actualizing the potentialities of human personality, or attaining perfection, freedom and peace here and now in this very life.”

When a person overcomes all his short-comings and explores the potentials of his spirit to its maximum, he reaches the peak of religious experience. Thus, by disciplines of yoga, an aspirant overcomes all the hurdles of his lower nature and enters into the state called Samādhi in which he experiences a union of his original self with the sublime truth.
Radhakrsnan elaborates the state of Samādhi in the most precise way: “In Samādhi or ecstatic consciousness, we have sense of immediate contact with ultimate reality, of the unification of the different sides of our nature. It is a state of pure apprehension, in which the whole being is welded into one.”

Among all the systems of yoga that are prevalent in Indian philosophy, the system of Bhakti yoga of Lord Swaminarayan is predominant in the theistic philosophy. He culminates yoga with the worship of personal God and proclaims it as the only way to attain samādhi.

Lord Swaminarayan says,

“The astānga yoga consists of yama, niyama, āsana, prānāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhyāna, dhāranā, samādhi. The astānga yoga is a means and its fruition is the nirvikalpa samādhi (thoughtless samādhi). When the nirvikalpa samādhi is attained, the citta is controlled by controlling the prāna. And if the citta becoming desireless (nirvāsanika) unites with the Lord, prāna is controlled by controlling the chitta. Thus, just as the citta is controlled by mastering astānga yoga, similarly, citta is also controlled by associating with personal form of God. Thus, one whose cittavṛtti is in union with the Lord, gets the astānga yoga accomplished without practicing it.”

SAVIKALPA SAMĀDHI AND NIRVIKALPA SAMĀDHI

Each mystic approaches the Ultimate Reality in his own unique way. Some mystics approach impersonal God whereas some approach personal God. Some believe in consciousness. Some believe in yoga. Consequently, religious experiences differ from mystic to mystic.
Two types of samādhi have been proclaimed – savikalpa samādhi and nirvikalpa samādhi. Lord Swaminarayan has clearly differentiated savikalp samādhi and nirvikalp samādhi. He says,

“He who has established rapport with the Lord, has no bad desires. He wishes, ‘let me become like Nārad, Sanak, Shukaji and others. Let me go to the hermitage of Nar-Nārāyaṇa and practice austerities together with the Munis of the hermitage. Let me go to the Śvetadvīpa, practice austerities and become śvetamukta’. If one has such thoughts, it is savikalp samādhi. He, who has no such thoughts, but identifies one’s self with the Aksarbrahma and remains immersed only in the Lord’s form (murti), is said to have nirvikalpa samādhi.”

In short, one who has the desire like sārupya, sādṛṣya, sāyujya and sālokya is bound to experience savikalpa samādhi. Moreover, savikalpa samādhi means samādhi with the triad of knower, knowledge and known. On the contrary, one who has no desire except the Lord, is bound to experience nirvikalpa samādhi. Nirvikalpa samādhi means the highest superconscious state where the mind and the ego-sense are completely annihilated.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS PER METAPHYSICS OF ŚIKŚĀPATRĪ

Lord Swaminarayan, too, in Vaścāṇāmṛta claims that,

“Whatever He has said about the basic principles of His philosophy and religion is the knowledge He acquired through direct and intuitive experience.”

As far as Lord Swaminarayan’s philosophy is concerned, religious experience is attaining oneness with Aksarbrahma – the ideal and perfect devotee of Parabrahma.
This supreme ideal which is the crux of Indian spiritual philosophy is clearly reflected in the following verse of Śiksāpatrī:

"nijātmānam brahmarūpam, dehatraya vilaksanam, vibhāvyā tena kartavyā, bhaktiḥ kṛṣṇasya sarvadā."\(^{10}\)

(Identifying oneself as Brahma, separate from three bodies, one should persistently offer devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa.)

Thus, the heart of Lord Swaminarayan’s philosophy is identifying oneself with Brahma – different from three bodies namely gross, subtle and causal is the stepping stone towards the journey of God realization. One who identifies himself with Akṣara experiences the same bliss of Lord's form as Akṣara does.

Lord Swaminarayan has explained the essentiality of becoming Brahmārūpa in a different manner. He says to become Brahmārūpa and offer devotion to Puruṣottama through swāmī-sevakhāv (master-servant relationship) is the eternal and fundamental principle.

Innumerable souls try to worship God but very few achieve the end result. Therefore, the question arises which is the surest method to reach the climax of worship and realize the God. Lord Swaminarayan explains:

One who is Brahmārūpa only has the privilege of offering dedicated devotion to God.\(^{11}\)

Lord Swaminarayan has explained the same philosophy in Vačanāmṛta saying that,

"The great preceptors like "Mādhvācārya, Nimbarkācārya and Vallabhācārya etc. have established that love for God means thinking oneself to be mere soul and being one with Brahma hence one should go beyond the attributes of Maya and love God. This the
same principle as being Gunātīt (beyond three qualities – rajas, tamas and sattva).”

In *The Bhagavad Gītā* Lord Kṛṣṇa too illustrates the characteristics of soul as being one with *Brahma*:

“brahmbhutah prasannātmā na śoḍhati na kānksati
samaḥ sarvesu bhūtēsu madbhaktim labhate parām”

(Soul being one with *Brahma* and fully blissful, neither grieves nor desires; bears equanimity towards all living entities, the great and the small, the good and the bad. Then after he obtains supreme devotion towards Me.)

Equanimity always coincides with oneness. A person who becomes one with *Brahma*, reaches a state of equanimity and remains undisturbed even in the most complex situations of transitory world and extreme dualities such as gain and loss, victory and defeat, honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, auspicious and inauspicious. For him, all are equal; friend or foe, poor or rich and like.

In *Vacanāmrta* Gadhāda III 13 *Lord Swaminarayan* describes the bliss that he enjoys, how the wealth of kings fail to allure Him and His love for God and His devotees in following words:

“I have fully realized the transcendental greatness of God. As I understand the exceeding glory of Lord the riches of king or their entire exuberance and royal wealth do not entice Me even amidst any happiness or misery, prosperity or adversity. I understand nothing is of greater importance than Lord and I have attached my mind unto the lotus feet of God.”

Moreover, He has absolute control over his body, mind, senses and power of speech. *Lord Swaminarayan* reveals the magnanimity of such realization by citing his own example:
"I see before Me My mana, buddhi, citta and ahāmrkār (the conscience) and can masterfully command over them just as a lion catches hold of a goat."\(^{15}\)

To highlight the super natural qualities of such a devotee, Lord Swaminarayan in Vaćanāṁrta says,

"One who keeps his mind consistently inclined towards divine form of the Lord and if he wishes, he immediately visualizes the form of jīva (soul), iśwara, māyā (illusion) and Brahma."\(^{16}\)

Expressing the same reality, the great mystic Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa said, "I see one in all and all in one. My teaching is almost finished. I cannot instruct people any longer; for I see the whole world is filled with the Lord. So I ask myself: ‘whom can I teach?’ "\(^{17}\)

In oneness with Brahma, all the faculties of an individual are naturally annihilated, all the distinctions, duality, multiplicity, adversity are revoked; and there remains nothing but only divine vision. His accords, feelings and actions are merged in the divinity and His whole being is one with Lord.

**TO KNOW IS TO BECOME**

Knowledge, in its ultimate form means identifying oneself with the object. Without such oneness, it is impossible to know the object entirely. Oneness is implicit in the true knowledge i.e. knowledge through experience as well as senses and conscience. It is said that the great mystic Rāmakṛṣṇan Paramahansa depicted through his life the fact that to know thoroughly and to become one with the object are the two sides of the same coin.

In the philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan it is indispensable to know Aksarbrahma because it is only through knowing Aksarbrahma that:
1. *māyā* can be eradicated.
2. *Parabrahma* can be known precisely in His absolute resplendent form, and
3. Ultimate liberation can be attained.

That is the reason why one who identifies himself with *Brahma* is also known as *Gunātīt*, a state that is beyond three qualities; *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*; the constituents of *māyā*.

The Śruti too echoes the similar truth, “*brahmvid brahmaiva bhavati*”18 (One who knows *Brahma* becomes *Brahmarūpa*.)

Night does not mean the extinction of the whole universe but it is merely the darkness that covers the existence only for the time being. As soon as the sun rises, things shine again as they were. So the night is defined as the absence of light and the day as the presence of light. Similarly, realization means the dawn of knowledge related to soul and Supreme.

The *Upaniṣada* also proclaims: “*brahmavid āpnoti param*” 19

(One who knows *Brahma* attains *Parabrahma*.)

To know *Brahma* is to know Him in its multi-dimensional aspects such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience. To know the attributes and glory of *Brahma* is indispensable to attain *Parabrahma*.

*Lord Swaminarayan* says,

“...to know the lord elementally means to know the manifest form of lord exactly by all the senses, the conscience and the experience.
And the one who knows this is called a perfect knower.” 20

Further, *Lord Swaminarayan* explains the state of the perfect knower and how he transcends all worldly infatuations by consciously remaining steady in the Lord. He says,
“I will tell you how one attains the state of highest spiritual realization through knowledge, the knowledge which is above the *prakṛti-puruṣa*. When one attains that knowledge, he transcends *prakṛti-puruṣa* and their creation. It is called the ultimate state of knowledge (*jñānapralaya*). A person in this state, experiences only homogeneous essence in which only the Lord’s *mūrti* (form) exists and no other form is seen.”

‘Virtue is knowledge’ is the main principle of Socrates’ philosophy. According to this principle, to know good is to do good. Evil, wrongdoing, or vices are due to the lack of knowledge. If virtue is knowledge, and if to know good is to do good, then wrongdoing comes only from failure to know what is good. So he says ‘No one does evil voluntarily’. If one knows the good, he would voluntarily never choose evil. Socrates states, “Happiness (eudaemonia), then, depends not on external or physical good but on knowingly performing right actions.”

**PERSONALITY OF GOD AS PER LORD SWAMINARAYAN**

Like Vallabhaścārya and Rāmānujaścārya, *saguna* and *sakara* aspect of God is the center point of religious experience of Lord Swaminarayan. This *saguna* aspect is further bifurcated into two realizations i.e. *nirguna samādhi* (realization without form) and *saguna samādhi* (realization with form).

Mystics from Islam, Buddhism, Christianity believes in formless realization. No doubt, the highest goal of human life according to different Sufi schools is to achieve union with God yet they have faith in impersonal God. In Islam, *saguna bhakti* is totally prohibited.

Explaining *nirguna samādhi*, Mohāpātra says that, “Buddhist spiritual realization is known as “*nirvāṇa*”. In Buddhism as the monk enters into the higher stage i.e. in the third stage of ‘formless’ meditation,
he concentrates on the formula -‘There is nothing’. Finally he reaches the stage of neither perception nor non-perception. This is the mystical experience of pure consciousness in which the Buddhist saint believes himself to have direct contact with the transcendent realm of nirvāṇa.”

“When that day comes, you will know that I am in my father and that you are in me, just as I am in you.” is Jesus’ way of expressing the same profound truth. The intuitive experience in advaita vedānta of Śankaraśārya too is the worship of nirguna (impersonal) Brahma. The central idea of his whole philosophy is soham i.e. to consider oneself as Brahma, a complete absorption of one’s existence in Brahma. For Vedāntist also it is said that ‘śivātmāni paśyanti, pratimāsu na yoginah’ – The mystics search God in the soul and not in a form or an idol. For them, worship of personal God or manifested form of God (incarnation) is inferior to the worship of formless (impersonal) Brahma.

Commenting on the worship of impersonal Brahma, Lord Swaminarayan says,

“Without upāsanā (the mode of worship) and dhyāna (meditation) of the Lord’s mūrti (form) one can not visualize the soul and Brahma (Parabrahma). The soul and Brahma can be seen only through the upāsanā and never without it. To wish to have a sight of soul and Brahma without upāsanā is like licking the sky with the tongue for a hundred year, and still one can never have a saltish or sour test. Similarly one cannot see the soul and Brahma without upāsanā, not even by any amount of great efforts.”

In the above Vačanāmrta, Lord Swaminarayan tries to say that worship of impersonal Brahma is like someone trying to catch something in vacuum. So He emphasized that he who wants to realize soul and God should meditate on the manifested human form of God.
S. Rādhākṛṣṇa too, criticizes impersonal Brahma of Śankarācārya. According to him, Śankarācārya’s Brahma is like the Tājmahal in India. People see the Tājmahal but the Tājmahal does not see and care for them. Same is the case with impersonal Brahma. It is worshipped by the devotees but Brahma never worships them. Brahma never knows where its worshippers are or who they are.

Vaiśnava ācāryas consider Bhagavat Purāṇa as a source of description for their philosophy. As they are theistic, they believe in the theory of emanation. They mention that the Supreme Brahma must exist both as infinite whole and also as finite parts. If He were merely infinite, He would not be able to reciprocate and respond to His devotees.

Thus, in nirguna samādhi, though a mystic or an aspirant loses his individuality and completely gets absorbed in the object, he cannot explore the possibility of either devotion or surrender or submission. But in saguna samādhi, an aspirant and God are related to each other. And devotee relishes unfathomable glory and bliss of the form. Devotee worships the Lord and vice versa. In the Bhagavad Gītā Lord Kṛṣṇa says with compassion that:

“ye yathāmām prapadyante tānstathaiva bhajāmyaham”

(In whatever way men surrender unto me, I reward them.)

The above quotation reflects Lord’s love and compassion towards His devotees. Devotees are so dear to Him that in whatever way, they invoke Him, either with selfish desire or with pure devotional heart, He is ready to reward them and serve them. He is the object of everyone’s realization without any barriers. The relationship is of reciprocation and not one sided. Devotee is at his liberty to worship Him as friend or as Master or as His son or as His lover.
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Such type of loving relationship can never be established either by impersonal and attributeless Brahma of Śankarācārya or ‘Unmoved Mover’ of Aristotle and absolute of Spinoza.

In saguṇa samādhi, the relationship and realization is quite different. Lord forgets His supremacy and descends to the level of the smallest devotee and thus, provides him with an opportunity to establish loving relationship with Him. For this very reason, the divine phenomena of incarnation is grandly celebrated in Hinduism.

Lord Swaminarayan enunciated the very purpose of incarnations thus:

“Having submitted Himself to the devotees, He assumes the form, wished for, by His very beloved devotees, to give them happiness. Then He fulfils all the wishes and desires of the devotees. The devotees are embodied beings, and have gross sentiment. So the Lord also assumes a body, and gross sentiment. He fondles his devotees. He conceals His power, and acts like a son, a friend, a companion, a relative with his devotees, according to their wishes.”

UPĀSANĀ (The Mode of Worship)

In saguṇa samādhi, two concepts of Upāsanā and Bhakti are significant and indispensable. In order to know saguṇa samādhi it is necessary to have thorough understanding of both upāsanā and devotion.

In the philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan, Upāsanā has a very distinguished meaning. Superficially, it means, to sit nearer God but Lord Swaminarayan delineates upāsanā in a very distinguished manner, thus:

“Upāsanā is the firm understanding that the Lord is ever incarnate mūrti. Though a worshipper becomes Brahmarūpa, he never leave this conviction. Though he listens to the scriptures propounding formlessness of the Lord, he ever believes the Lord to be having a
form. Whatever may have been written in the scriptures related to the form of God, he would only propound manifested form of the Lord. He would never allow his upāsanā to be transgressed. Such a devotee is called a true upāsaka.28

Upāsanā consists of four dimensions: personal form of God (sākāra), supremacy of God (sarvoparitā), All doership of God (sarvakartā) and eternal manifestation of God (pragat). It is obvious that for identifying oneself with Brahma, it is essential to firmly believe that God has form, He is supreme, He is all doer and He always manifests on the earth. One should try to know God from all these four angles simultaneously.

BHAKTI (Devotion)

In Vaṣanāmrta, Lord Swaminarayan distinguishes between the upāsanā and the bhakti. He glorifies the meaning of devotion as follows:

“śravaṇam kirtanam viśnoho smaranaṁ pādsevanam arcanam, vandanam, dāsyam, sakhyāmātmanivedanam”29

“Such devotion with its nine fold characteristic features is called Navadha Bhakti.” Śravaṇam - listening to the Lord’s discourses, kirtanam- extolling His glory by singing devotional songs, viṣnoho smaranam- recalling Him and His episodes, pādsevanam- physically offering service unto His lotus feet, arcanam- offering devotion using sandalwood paste, flowers, fruits etc., vandanam- bowing down or prostrating before Him, dāsyam- offering devotion as a ‘dāsa’- a humble servant, sakhyam- offering devotion as a close friend, ātmanivedanam- unconditionally sacrificing one’s self at His lotus feet.

The concept of navadha bhakti (nine fold devotion) is found only in Indian theism. This nine-fold devotion is the preliminary stages of devotion. Here, devotee experiences oneness with the form of Lord. Then as the
aspirant goes higher his love towards God intensifies. As the devotee engages himself in one or the other devotional activities, gradually his senses get disciplined to meditate and concentrate on God.

Therefore, *Lord Swaminarayan* says,

"Those who have earnest desire for liberation should not spent a single moment elsewhere other than devotion."

*Lord Swaminarayan* has also given the complete, precise and all embracing definition of devotion. He says,

"Unconditional love along with the knowledge and glory for Śrī Kṛṣṇa is called Bhakti."

- devotion is the surest path of experiencing divine love
- devotion is the path of consecration
- devotion is the path of total dependence on God
- devotion is the path of utter submissiveness and humility
- devotion is the path that starts from the heart and not from the head
- devotion is the path which qualifies us to be the recipient of God’s grace
- devotion sanctifies our body, mind and soul

Devotion is the surest path to attain the Supreme, the Ultimate and the Absolute.

Singing the glory and explaining the importance of devotion, *Lord Swaminarayan* says,

"Infinite spiritual means are described for the seeker. If one has the Lord’s devotion accompanied with the knowledge of the infinite glory of the Lord, all his faults disappear and all the virtues like jñāna, vairāgya, dharma come to him, if they may not be in him before. So this is the greatest of all the means."
Explaining the sheer importance of devotion, *Lord Swaminarayan* says that:

"The Lord’s devotee should put back self-knowledge, dispassion and religion, if they create obstruction in doing the Lord’s devotion. He should give more importance to devotion alone."33

Devarṣi Nārada in *Nārada Bhakti-Sūtra* says, “*Bhakti* is an experience pure and selfless, subtle, unbroken and ever expanding.”34 Furthermore he adds; “a man who loves God has neither wants nor sorrows. He neither hates nor rejoices nor strives with zeal for any ends of his own; for through devotion alone he is moved to rapture and through devotion does he attain peace and is ever happy in spirit.”35

According to Rādhākrṣṇa, “*Bhakti in the Bhagavad Gītā* is an utter self-giving to the transcendent. It is to believe in God, to love Him, to be devoted to Him and to enter into Him. It is His own reward.”36

Though Śankarācārya staunchly believed in impersonal *Brahma*, he, towards the end of his spiritual journey he agreed the importance of personal *Brahma* and disclosed the importance of devotion, saying,

“*bhaja govindam bhaja godindam*

*govindam bhaja mudha-mate*

*samprāpte samnihite kāle na hi*

*nā hi rakṣaṭi dukṛn-kārane*”37

(Just worship Govinda, just worship Govinda, just worship Govinda firmly. Your grammatical knowledge and word jugglery will not save you at the time of death.)

The element of intense love, unconditional surrender and unflinching faith makes the path of devotion easier. The accomplishment which a *yogī*, after undergoing severe penance, a *jñānī* after doing a deep scriptural study
and a tapasvi after undergoing severe austerities achieves, a devotee achieves the same in no time by the grace of God.

Prapatti

Rāmānuja ācārya too was a staunch advocator of Bhakti. In his ideology he has named it as prapatti - the path of total surrender. The reason why Rāmānuja ācārya opposes Advaita Vedānta is that it deprives an individual of his devotional rights. According to Rāmānuja ācārya, there are two paths of liberation; 1) markat nyāya (ape way). 2) mārjar nyāya (cat way). Markat nyāya implies that just as the baby monkey has to make an effort to cling to the mother, the sādhaka of the Advaita Vedānt has to make an effort in his upāsanā. Mārjar nyāya implies that just as the mother cat picks up the baby cat and it doesn’t have to make any effort, similarly, the sādhaka of the Bhakti cult is cared for by the Lord and reaches Parabhrahma effortlessly. Rāmānuja ācārya symbolizes the path of prapatti as mārjar nyāya. One who unconditionally surrenders to the Lord is bound to get the grace of God and thus, get liberated. This is the essence of prapatti.

Prapatti is the highest path of Bhakti yoga. It literally means aspiring the protection from God with the sound conviction that He is the only redeemer of this painful world. Seeking assistance from no other means, a devotee invokes God and believes that salvation could only be achieved through God’s grace. It is this belief that enables a devotee to act in accordance with the divine will unceasingly. It is also called parābhakti in Bhāgavat.

A complete surrender without any reservation is called Prapatti. The worshipper hands over himself entirely in the hands of God and thus experiences essence of fulfillment. Prapatti or Šaranāgati is a simple and direct approach to God through self-surrender, love and humility. No
external discipline is required to purify the sense organs for the devotee who chooses the path of Prapatti. For it is the simplest and the easiest way to realize God.

**WORSHIP OF THE MANIFEST FORM OF GOD (PRAGAT)**

Brahma is an all-pervading entity and it pervades in every creature of the existence. But by mere pervasion of Brahma, jīva cannot become Brahmārūpa. Just as fire present in the wood is not able to burn on its own without the contact of outer flame, by the knowledge of formless (nirākāra) and unmanifest Brahma, jīva can never overcome its ignorance (jīvabhāva) and cannot become Brahmārūpa. It is only when one contemplates, meditates and realizes the manifest form of God, one can overcome ignorance. Thus, by identifying oneself with the manifest form of the God one achieves qualities, grandeur, bliss that of the God.

Lord Swaminarayan in numerous chapters in Vačanāmrta reiterated that the Lord is pragat and a constant rapport with Him is the only means to achieve final redemption. He explains:

"The jīva can be redeemed, transgressed māyā and be Brahma-naized only if he obtains the knowledge and engages himself in meditation, kirtana (devotional songs), and kathā (religious discourses) of the manifest Lord Shri Vāsudev Puruṣottama. Only through this medium the soul transgresses māyā and rises to an exalted position and attains Aksardhām (the divine abode of God)."

Whenever God incarnates, Aksara also incarnates along with him. Aksara is the medium through which God manifests on the earth. Without Aksara, Puruṣottama could not manifest on the earth. Aksarbrahma as a manifest form is also known as ‘Gunātīt saint’. Gunātīt saint gives the same degree of bliss as the Puruṣottama Himself can because the Lord entirely
Religious Experience and Personality of God

dwells in such a saint. His powers and majesty are totally revealed in Aksarbrahma. Therefore, Guru paramparā is the most important aspect of Swaminarayan philosophy.

A true saint is one, who has acquired profound knowledge (śrotrya) and achieved realization of Ultimate reality (Brahmanīṣṭha). Just as one who is expert in swimming can save the life of a drowning person, likewise, only the one who has transcended his inner enemies like lust, anger, greed, delusion and ego, can help others transcend all their inner enemies. So, a realized saint only can help an aspirant to realize the God.

Lord Swaminarayan states the glory and attributes of such a saint as:

"The scriptures say that, niṣkāma (lust-free), nirlobha (greed-free), nirmāna (ego-free), niswād (free from gratification of the sense of taste), nisneha (attachment-free) are the attributes of a sādhu. The sādhu in whom one observes such attributes has a constant rapport with God."39

A saint is one who has a “face-to-face dialogue with the God. Such a saint only can introduce us to the God. From Upaniṣada we learn: “a saint is he who has been liberated from all the desires lodged in the heart- who has shaken off relative good and evil and is stainless and who has become immortal by attaining Supreme identity with Brahma.”40

When Swāmī Vivekānand asked Rāmkṛṣṇa Paramahansa, “Have you seen God?” The great mystic replied affirmatively, “I see God as clearly and distinctly as I see you.” A saint who has constant communion with God, and who has realized God is called the perfect spiritual Master.

Therefore, for any one who wishes to undergo the religious experience, association with such a saint becomes indispensable. Except such a saint, a religious experience that is transcendental in character,
becomes most difficult or rather impossible task for an ordinary man. So, 
Lord Swaminarayan shows the easiest way for such realization saying that,

“One who has firm conviction related to the knowledge of the glory
of manifested form of God and believes all his desires fulfilled just
with the darśana of God and does not desire anything else. To such
a devotee, God shows him His divine abodes, reveals His divine
powers and His divine forms even if the devotee does not have any
desire for the same.”

ŚIKSĀPATRĪ – A BLEND OF KNOWLEDGE, ACTIVITY AND
DEVOTION

Though the philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan is the perfect blending
of jñāna yoga (the path of knowledge), karma yoga (the path of activity) and
bhakti yoga (the path of love), bhakti yoga is the most prominent feature in
His philosophy. Knowledge and activity are no doubt important, but both of
them merge into devotion. If we subtract devotion from knowledge and
activity, there are all the chances of his ego being nourished. So, if we pour
the nectar of devotion in knowledge and activity, journey to God becomes
smooth and steady. Thus, devotion enjoys a supreme state through out Lord
Swaminarayan’s theistic philosophy. In one way or the other, all the
solutions to the social and spiritual problems lie in devotion only.

An aspirant who treads the path of knowledge may fall from the path
if he does not co-relate the devotion with his knowledge. History has
witnessed that the great spiritual luminaries despite having profound
knowledge, had fallen from their path just because they lacked devotion.
Therefore, Lord Swaminarayan warns:

“A devotee, so long as he is not so enlightened, is likely to face
obstacles. Śiva was lost in the seductive charm of Mohini, and
Brahma in Saraswati — his daughter. Nārada burst into a wild desire
to marry; Indra and Čandra too were disreputed because they lacked such spiritual state.”

In spite of having profound knowledge of Vedās and Upaniṣadas one may fall from the spiritual path if one lacks devotion. Mere scriptural knowledge never helps a devotee or an aspirant to remain steady on his path. Therefore, Lord Swaminarayan showing the significance of devotion emphatically says,

“It follows, therefore, that erudition knowledge and such other virtues of learned persons have their fruition if they are devoted to God and are associated with realized saints; for without devotion and satsanga (company of saint) even the learned would degenerate.”

The same is the case for the path of action. Karma (action) is important but it is not the sole authority. Lord Swaminarayan says that, it is Lord Puruṣottam who is sarvakarmaṇālpaḍātā – the rewarder of the all actions of all the creatures in the universe. He denies the sole authority of karma independent of God. Lord Swaminarayan pointed out that,

“Being atheist the Jainas regard karma itself as capable of giving the fruits of action and not believe the Lord as karmaṇālpaḍātā, are wrong in their belief. Karma, by itself, is something abstract, and the fruit, auspicious or inauspicious produced of that action is embodied. Therefore, one who calls action as embodied is an atheist because, action can never be embodied.”

So the path of action deviated from God or without devotion leads an aspirant towards dry atheism.

One should always be engaged in the activity with the spirit of sacrifice and devotion. Only such actions, leads one to the liberation otherwise, mere action may become the cause of bondage. This is the message of karma yoga in The Bhagavad Gītā. In the language of Gītā, it is
also called the feeling of yajña (sacrifice). Yajña means to dedicate our deeds for the well-being of others. Moreover, the whole essence of karma yoga is contained in the word ‘nimittabha’ (be an instrument). A true devotee always performs all the actions considering himself only the instrument and believing that God is working through him.

Lord Swaminarayan goes one step farther and states a remarkable ideology. He says,

“Jivas are habituated to perform any activity including devotion with a view to satiate the ego but he who wants to worship God should serve the Lord and His devotees with devotion, thinking that he is fortunate enough and should serve in order to please the Lord alone and for the redemption of his soul but not with the expectation of being praised.”

One should serve only to please God and not to nourish his ego. Only such act could be considered as worship. This is the ultimate meaning of action. Here, we can conclude that action without the spirit of selfless service or devotion leads one to inaction and atheism.

Only a man of true knowledge can discriminate the real and unreal, the transitory and the eternal and differentiate between the joy as experienced by a beasts, a man, a deities. He could also understand the supreme bliss of the divine abode of Lord; Aksardham. He never entangles in wealth and woman; the two great impediments on the path of liberation.

Devotion in the absence of knowledge is also misleading. “In the Bhagavad Gītā, Śrī Krṣṇa has mentioned four types of devotees, of these the one who is in full knowledge and who is always engaged in pure devotional service is the best for I am very dear to him, and he is dear to Me.”

Our three faculties of intellect, will and emotion are co-related with one another, so all the actions emanated from them are also co-related and
supplementary to one another. But as far as the religious experience is concerned, emotions is superior to intellect and will. Emotions are directly coordinated devotion. Therefore, it follows that devotion acquires the most eminent position in the philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan.

To recapitulate, from the metaphysical standpoint of Śīksāpatrī, religious experience is the state of pure knowledge and identifying with Aksarbrahma - the most ideal and perfect devotee of Parabrahma. Therefore, one who becomes who becomes Brahmārūpa attains the same attributes of Brahma and experiences the highest bliss, tranquility and oneness with Parabrahma. He could then offer the devotional services unto the Lord with utmost humility as a servitor eternally. Thus, intuitive realization is the devotion accompanied with the true knowledge and glory of manifested form of Lord – a Guṇātīt saint.

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To clarify the religious experience, I give the hierarchy of five eternal elements as per the philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan.

Transcendent to all other realities
One and unparalleled
Absolutely pure, unaffected and Unattached

Closest & choicest devotee of Supreme Lord (Parabrahma)
Always in the service of Lord in personified form

Cosmic conscious spiritual being of universe or at least a region of it
Indivisible, intangible & imperceptible
Finite individual self-conscious spirit

Power of God
Has nature of ignorance & darkness

The supreme personality of Godhead
Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent

The highest eternal reality, Divine abode of God
Formless homogenous absolute consciousness described as ‘Cidākāś’

Involved in creation, sustenance Taking care & destruction of the universe as willed by the supreme

Pervades the whole human body
Atomic subtle entity
Knows, enjoys & does

Trigunātmikā – constituting rajas, tamas & sattva