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We Are Pure Spirit Souls

Long ago there lived a powerful sage named Astavakra Rsi. The sage was curved in eight parts of his body, and when he walked his movements were quite peculiar and awkward. He was also very ugly, and ordinary people often laughed at the sight of him. Although externally he was awkward and crooked, internally his heart was pure because he had realized his eternal transcendental identity. He knew and realized the difference between the body and the soul.

Once, Astavakra Rsi was invited by the great king Maharaja Janaka to attend an assembly of saintly persons. As he entered the assembly, everyone present began to laugh at him. Hearing them, Astavakra Rsi also began to laugh. The members of the assembly were surprised and said to each other, "We are laughing at him, but he is laughing even more loudly than us. Why is this?"

Janaka Maharaja rose from his throne and asked Astavakra Rsi, "Why are you laughing so loudly?"

The sage replied, "I thought I was coming to join an assembly of saints and sages, but instead I have stumbled into a convention of shoemakers. A shoemaker's interest is in leather and skin, and I see that all of you are just looking at my skin. Your interest is in seeing if someone is beautiful or ugly, healthy or disabled, young or old. Your minds are absorbed in these temporary things. You are not seeing my soul as saintly persons would. It is simply illusion to place importance on the external, temporary body while being oblivious to the eternal soul dwelling within."

Janaka Maharaja's heart was deeply penetrated by Astavakra Rsi's words. He realized that the sage was a liberated soul, and fit to sit on the throne. He very lovingly placed him on his own throne, bowed down to him, and accepted him as his instructing spiritual master.

We Are Not These Bodies

The body is not the self. What is this material body? It is a bag of bones, blood, urine and many other unclean substances. The mind is also part of the material body and is different from the soul. It experiences temporary mundane emotions as real, thus causing much anguish and only a little pleasure. We are individual souls, not these bodies or minds.

These bodies are mortal; all the doctors and scientists of this world cannot prevent old age. One day, twenty, thirty or fifty years from now, we will become old. Our beauty and power will disappear; we won't be able to walk without the help of a cane, and after some time we will die. At that time we will have to give up everything we have accumulated during this lifetime. Nothing in this world will be able to save us from continued suffering - only God can save us in all respects. If we realize this and engage in His loving service, we will become happy.

As spiritual souls we are all parts and parcels of the same God, the Supreme Lord. Souls in all species of life, from the lowest, such as plants and animals, to the highest, such as humans and demigods, are His parts and parcels. The ancient scriptures of India, the Vedas, say, "God is one. Everything in this world is merely an expansion of His power, or energy." Atheists, who don't believe in God, believe in the world of nature. They believe that everything comes from

nature and returns to nature. The world of nature in which they have placed their faith, however, is simply a part of the energy of that Supreme Lord.

We are like the Supreme in that we have been created in His image, but unfortunately we have turned away from Him and have forgotten who we are. We think that these material bodies are our real selves. We spend our days collecting money and securing positions, thinking that these things will make us happy - but this conception is totally wrong.

A King in Illusion

[The history of Astavakra Rsi illustrates that we are not these mortal bodies. The following history describes how another great sage, Visvamitra Muni, helped another righteous king to realize and correct his misconception regarding his own identity. In days of yore, kings greatly honored holy men, and therefore Visvamitra was able to help him.]

In ancient India there lived a great and very powerful emperor named Hariscandra. His wife's name was Saibya and his beautiful young son was Rohitasva. Hariscandra was extremely truthful; he never told a lie or tolerated any untruth, and he was renowned throughout the world for his generosity to all creatures. Although he possessed such qualities, an exalted sage named Visvamitra was concerned for his welfare.

Visvamitra thought, "The truth that Hariscandra follows is merely worldly truth, and worldly truth has no real value. Except for devotees of the Lord, no one in this world can speak the actual truth. If I ask him, 'What is your name?', he will say, 'My name is Hariscandra.' 'Who are you?' 'I am the Emperor.' 'Who is he?' 'He is my son.' 'Who is she?' 'She is my wife.' But in reality there is only one truth: We are not mortal bodies. We are spirit souls, servants of the Supreme Truth." Visvamitra Muni's concern grew. He was convinced that King Hariscandra's happiness and eternal well-being would lie only in a proper spiritual understanding, and he was convinced that his misfortune would lie in his lack of such understanding.

One night, by his mystic power, he appeared to the king - as if by entering his dream - and he told him, "You are an excellent king. You are very generous, a truthful speaker and you worship God. Because you are so pious I am confident that you will give me whatever I ask you for. I want something from you."

Hariscandra awoke from his sleep and replied, "Certainly, I will donate anything you ask for."

Visvamitra voiced his request, "I want your entire kingdom."

Hariscandra replied, "Of course, I will give it to you."

Visvamitra at once left, the king fell back asleep, and by the next morning he forgot what had happened. Later that morning, Visvamitra again approached him. He asked, "Do you remember any dream you had last night?" "Yes, I remember." "You gave me your entire kingdom." "I may have given it, but it was in a dream." "No, it was not a dream. I really came to you last night."

Aware that by divine power great sages can go practically anywhere and perform wondrous activities that would appear to ordinary people as magic, the king believed his words.

Visvamitra continued, "So now, in your fully wakened state, you should say, 'I vow to give you my kingdom.' "

Hariscandra said, "Yes, I declare that the kingdom is yours."

According to ancient Indian culture, if someone gives in charity, he gives some coins in addition to his gift. Visvamitra therefore asked Hariscandra to give him some additional money. "Without a donation of coins," Visvamitra said, "no vow is complete. Something has to be given - even if it is only one percent of the value of your gift."

"How much would you like?" Hariscandra asked.

Visvamitra replied, "Ten thousand gold coins."

Hariscandra immediately ordered his treasurer, "Give the sage ten thousand gold coins." Visvamitra smiled and said, "Liar, it seems that you are going back on your word. You gave me your entire kingdom. Since your treasury is now also mine, how can you instruct the treasurer to give me gold? You will have to think of another way to give me this donation."

Hariscandra agreed, and said that he would take a loan from someone in the kingdom. But Visvamitra said, "The citizens are also mine. You may not take a loan from any of them."

The king thought, "All I have left are my wife, my son and myself - everything else is gone." He told the sage, "I will sell myself, my wife and my son, and then I will pay you." Visvamitra replied, "You cannot sell yourself within my kingdom. You can do so only outside."

Since the kingdom of Hariscandra encompassed the entire Earth, he was now quite perplexed as to what to do. Visvamitra then said, "Although Kasi is within my kingdom, it is not considered part of this world. It is the abode of the demigod Lord Siva. If you go there you will be outside my kingdom. You can go there to sell yourself, but do not forget to pay me."

Hariscandra, his wife and his son had to go to Kasi by foot, because his chariots and horses now belonged to Visvamitra. After traveling for many days they finally arrived in Kasi and Hariscandra began calling out to the residents, to see who would purchase him. At that time a lowly person, the guard of a crematorium, told him that he would purchase him if he would perform duties at the cremation grounds. No one else had offered to purchase him, so Hariscandra accepted and was paid five thousand gold coins. To make up the other five thousand gold coins, he sold his wife and child to a very cruel person of the priestly caste and then he paid Visvamitra.

When someone sells a cow, he is no longer the owner of that cow. Similarly, Hariscandra was not the king now, nor was he the husband of his wife or the father of his child. However, he still somewhat identified himself as such. He thought, "I was a king. I am the husband of Saibya and the father of Rohitasva."

After some time, by the mystic power of Visvamitra, a snake bit Hariscandra's son and killed

him. It was late at night during the rainy season and bitter winds now blew along with a heavy downpour of rain. The cruel owner of Saibya told her, "Make your own independent arrangements to cremate your child. I have already purchased you and I will not spend any more coins to cremate your son. Take this dead body away from here."

So, on that dark night, the weeping Saibya took her son's body in her arms and carried him to the cremation grounds on the bank of the Ganges, the same cremation grounds where her husband stood guard. Hariscandra did not recognize her and, although she was poor and destitute, he told her, "You cannot cremate this child without paying the fee." She had no money with which to pay. All she had in the world was the dead body of her son wrapped in her veil.

Just then a lightening bolt flashed, and Hariscandra saw that it was his own wife standing before him. He never expected to see his son there - dead - nor did he expect to see his wife in her distressed and worn condition. His heart broke and he began to weep, crying out, "Oh God, what has happened?"

Now he was in a dilemma. He wept - but he tried to be true to his new identity as a guard at the cremation grounds. Being very strict in what he considered his sense of duty, he told Saibya, "Still you should pay me. I am the watchman of this crematorium."

"I have nothing to give," she replied, "except half of my veil." As Saibya began to tear that veil, Visvamitra, along with Lord Narayana (one of the incarnations of the Supreme Personality of Godhead), and demigods such as Yamaraja (the lord of death) and Lord Brahma (the creator of the universe and the head of the demigods) immediately appeared on the scene, calling out, "Rohitasva will be king!"

Visvamitra placed his hand on the dead body of the son and said, "Rise quickly, my child!" Within a moment the boy stood up, his eyes gazing toward the sky.

Visvamitra told Hariscandra, "I took everything away from you and now I am returning it. The kingdom is again yours. With your new realizations, you are now qualified to leave your worldly responsibilities and enter the forest to meditate on God. "In this world no one can speak the truth, in the real sense. You are not Hariscandra. This is the name of your physical body. And what is this body made of? It is a combination of blood, flesh, urine and stool. When you think, 'I

am a father, husband, king and so forth,' how is it the truth? You, the soul within the body, are the eternal servant of God. You are part and parcel of Krsna, the Supreme Lord. You are not of this world. Try to serve God and chant His holy name."

King Hariscandra had previously believed in some conception of the Supreme and had dutifully worshipped Him, but his heart was not devoted nor was he surrendered to Him. He was devoted to the false truths of this world. Therefore, even in his palace he could never experience any happiness in truth. By the mercy of Visvamitra Muni he achieved the full-fledged freedom of his transcendental nature, the freedom for which every living being is anxious. Moreover, an incarnation of the Supreme Lord, Sri Rama, later appeared in his dynasty.

What would have taken many lives of endeavor to achieve, he achieved in only a few moments by the arrangement of the powerful sage. And, by that same arrangement, others may learn from hearing this history from the Vedas.

We Are Part and Parcel of the Supreme Self

The Vedas instruct us, "Don't live in darkness; move toward the light." "Light" refers to knowledge of our true spiritual form, of the Supreme Lord of whom we are minute parts and parcels, and of the eternal relationship of loving service we have with Him. That Supreme Lord is known in the Vedas as Lord Krsna, which means the all-attractive reservoir of complete pleasure, knowledge and eternal existence. He has many manifestations and they are all non-different from Him. He is the supreme person we generally call God, Allah or Jehovah. To serve Him in our constitutional or spiritual form is light, and this service brings full and eternal happiness.

"Darkness" refers to the state of spiritual ignorance. To be in darkness or ignorance means to be attached to objects related to this body and to have a sense of possessiveness toward the things of this world. Everyone in this world wants to be completely happy and no one wants to suffer. We can see, however, that despite people's endeavors to attain happiness since time immemorial, they have not been truly successful. Medicines, trains, airplanes and now computers have been invented with the intention of creating convenience and happiness, and new forms of entertainment have been designed for this purpose. But has all this given anyone lasting inner happiness? It is especially thought that accumulating wealth can buy happiness, but who has ever become permanently happy by becoming wealthy?

There is, however, a transcendental science, a spiritual scientific process that leads one to eternal happiness and puts an end to one's cycle of birth and death. That science is called bhakti-yoga, or pure devotion to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Performance of bhakti-yoga does not require money, nor does it require us to expend much energy, but by practicing it we attain everlasting happiness. Just over five hundred years ago, the Supreme Lord Krsna descended to this world in the form of His own devotee, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, and He demonstrated the process of performing pure devotion to God. By that process one realizes his own self as part and parcel of God. He experiences love and affection for all living beings, knowing they are part and parcel of the same God, and he naturally attains true inner happiness.

In this world it is absurd to think that one can have love and affection for all living entities. If you get too close to a ferocious tiger it will attack you, and a poisonous snake may bite you. If you really want to love all beings, first love the Supreme Lord. That love will automatically be distributed to all beings and in this way everyone can be happy. This is true love and affection. In that realm of love even tigers and bears can be calmed and quieted. Great sages of the past who resided in dense forests were never attacked by tigers or other wild beasts. If we can attain that love for the Supreme, we can truly love all others.

The Nature of the Supreme Self

[In order to be attracted to love that Supreme Being, we first need to know who He is, what His nature is, and what His attractive qualities are.]

One who can create entire universes cannot be formless or without attributes. He must have all varieties of power and opulence. All the forms we see in this world have come from Him, so how can He Himself be formless? The Bible says that God has created man in His own image, and this is also confirmed in the Vedas.

He is ever-existing, and in the Vedas He is called Brahman (which refers to the impersonal effulgence of His body), Paramatma (His manifestation as the Supersoul in the heart of all beings) and Bhagavan (the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who embodies all opulence and powers). Of these three, only Bhagavan is complete. Brahman and Paramatma are His partial expansions. Everything is present in Bhagavan.

He is so large that complete universes are contained within Him. Simultaneously, He is so minute that He resides in each and every atom - in every atom of air, in every atom of fire and in every atom of water. He is everywhere and He can hear everything.

The Supreme Personality of Godhead is one without a second. He is the same God for the Christians, for the Muslims, for the Hindus and for all others. There are not different Gods. He is the same God, the same Allah, the same Christ. Just as there is one sun and one moon for the entire world, there is one God for all people. How can there be more than one God? There is only one God, but He appears differently according to individual vision.

For fifteen days the moon appears to gradually increase in size until it becomes full. Its size then begins to decrease until it becomes a new moon on the last day of the lunar month. In this way it appears that there are fifteen different moons. These "moons" are not different from each other; only their names and appearances differ: full moon, new moon, quarter moon and so on. Similarly, there is only one God, but people have, in ignorance, separated themselves from each other and from Him, due to their different languages and conceptions of Him.

All forms and incarnations of God are His manifestations and are non-different from Him. Some, being more complete, are more powerful; and some are less powerful - just as the full moon is always the same moon, perceived as full, new, quarter, etc. In reality the moon is always full, but we see it to be waxing or waning. In the same way Lord Krsna is one without a second, and He has innumerable manifestations who are all nondifferent from Him. He sometimes manifests in this world personally, and sometimes He sends His associates here to disseminate pure knowledge. In this world all souls are His eternal servants, but we have forgotten Him since the beginning of creation. He sometimes descends, therefore, and performs very sweet and powerful pastimes to attract us and engage us in His service.

No one doubts the existence of the sun, so why should one doubt the existence of the creator of the sun or thousands of suns? That personality can create millions upon millions of worlds in a moment, and He can also destroy them. He comes to this world only to save us from suffering, by establishing a relationship with us and by engaging us in His loving service. There is no other way to become happy in this or any other world. There is only one God, and ignorance of our eternal, individual relationship with Him is the only cause of our unhappiness. We need not fear serving Him, thinking it to be like serving someone of this world where the master gains and the servant loses. It is not like that in the realm of spiritual love. One receives great happiness in serving Him, a very relishable love and affection that is even more than one receives by serving

one's wife, husband, children, father and so on. There are oceans of love and affection in Krsna's transcendental realm. Have very firm faith in this. Do not doubt that we are spirit souls, parts and parcels of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and that we are His eternal servants.

The Process of Self-Realization

In the previous age of Satya-yuga, the Age of Goodness, mankind lived pious, peaceful and pure lives of thousands of years. At that time, great sages used to see Him by meditating upon Him. In this present age it is not possible to meditate so deeply, because our minds are unsteady. Such meditation can be achieved, however, by chanting His name, and by this process we can realize His mercy and actually see Him. The Vedic literatures recommend that to attain pure love of God in this current age, one chant:

In this age of quarrel and hypocrisy the only process to achieve God-realization and self-realization is to chant the holy names of the Lord, and this is easy to do.

Hare Krsna Hare Krsna
Krsna Krsna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama
Rama Rama Hare Hare

These names may be chanted by anyone of any language - whether one is English, Malaysian, Indian, Spanish or Chinese. People of all faiths call out to that one God, who is very beautiful, charming, powerful and merciful. He can come and play with you in any relationship as a master, friend, son or beloved.

For the chanting of these names to be truly effective, however, they should be chanted according to an authentic process, given by the Supreme Lord Himself. Otherwise, such chanting will not produce the desired result. Knowledge of this transcendental process and its goal has descended through a line of disciplic succession of pure spiritual masters, beginning from the Supreme Lord Himself. Those who have heard directly from Him appear in that succession of perfect masters, and a disciple of such a spiritual master can chant successfully.

The Bona Fide Guide



The bona fide spiritual master, or guru, tells us, "Give me your ears. I do not want all of your senses - only your ears." Among all the senses, only the ears can hear sound vibration, and thus transcendental words. The guru coming in disciplic succession helps us surrender to God by engaging our function of hearing. Through this vibration of sound, his transcendental words enter the heart of the disciple and reveal Krsna, God Himself, who is hidden in everyone's heart. No sense but the ears can perceive this transcendental sound.

There are two kinds of sound vibration. One is transcendental and is beyond this material world. It comes from the Supreme Personality of Godhead Himself via the disciplic succession. The other is ordinary material sound vibration, which comes from the vibration of the material tongue. One who has not extensively practiced bhakti-yoga and who is not perfect may give Krsna's holy name and various spiritual mantras to others, but the sound vibrations spoken by

him will have no spiritual effect. Although such sounds are by nature powerful and transcendental, they must be imbued with realization. Otherwise, they will manifest as worldly, mundane words. If a guru is not sufficiently expert in chanting transcendental sound and has no realization of its nature, that sound vibration will not produce any real fruit in the heart of the person who receives it from him. Self-realized souls perfectly utter that transcendental sound, and one should receive it from them.

The definition of bhakti, pure devotion, is given in the Vedic scriptures as follows: "Pure devotional service is the cultivation of activities that are meant exclusively for the pleasure of Lord Krsna, or in other words, the uninterrupted flow of service to Krsna, performed through all endeavors of the body, mind and speech, and through the expression of various spiritual sentiments. It is not covered by knowledge aimed at impersonal liberation or by reward-seeking activity, and it is devoid of all desires other than the aspiration to bring happiness to Krsna." (Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu 1.1.11)

The same Vedic scriptures contain many verses that explain the quality of a person who, because of his own pure devotional service, can actually help us. One such verse is as follows: "Any person who seriously desires real happiness must seek a bona fide spiritual master and take shelter of him by initiation. The qualification of the bona fide guru is that, having left aside all material desires, he has realized the conclusions of the scriptures by deliberation and is able to convince others of the Supreme Godhead." (Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu 1.2.97)

The following history illustrates how the heinous criminal Valmiki became a great devotee by associating with a self-realized spiritual master who had the above-mentioned qualities. Valmiki, though born into the priestly caste, associated with bad men. As a result he became a ferocious criminal, even murdering many sages. He once approached the exalted sage Narada Muni to kill him, but as he moved toward him Narada raised his hand and said, "Stop!" The astonished Valmiki was forced to freeze his movements and thus a mood of submission to Narada entered his heart. Narada then revealed to him the reactions that would come to him as a result of his abominable sins. Valmiki took shelter of Narada and inquired from him how to become free from those reactions.

Narada said, "Sit down here and chant 'Rama Rama Rama Rama Rama.' (Rama is the name of one of Krsna's incarnations.) Do this and nothing else." Valmiki tried, but the reactions to his sinful activities had fructified to the point that he was unable to chant that divine name. Narada cleverly told him, "If you cannot chant Rama, you can chant mara."

Mara (which in the Sanskrit language means "death") has the same syllables as Rama said backwards. When mara mara is chanted repeatedly, it automatically becomes "Rama Rama." Having given Valmiki these instructions, Narada left that place.

Valmiki was easily able to chant mara mara, and continued chanting for thousands of years while waiting for his guru's return. During that time he did not eat or even pass stool and urine. Ants ate his flesh, blood and other bodily substances, gradually enclosing him in an anthill. In this way his own body vanished, and it now appeared that he had a body made of earth. In due course of time, Brahma, the chief demigod and original guru of the disciplic succession of gurus, came to that place. Upon seeing the condition of Valmiki's body, Lord Brahma sprinkled water upon him from his sacred water pot while uttering mantras, and Valmiki's body then became that of a beautiful youth. Brahma told him, "Now you have perfected the chanting of your mantra; you have realized the Supreme Lord."

[Later on, in the course of his meditation, the great sage Valmiki composed the famous Ramayana, the authorized history of Lord Rama, whose name he was chanting. Written hundreds of thousands of years ago, the Ramayana is counted as one of the original Vedas and is considered the most famous spiritual epic in India. Valmiki compiled it just before Lord Rama descended to this world. -ed]

In this day and age it is not possible for us to perform such austerity. We find it difficult to refrain from eating, drinking or sleeping for just one day, what to speak of several years, and we cannot be fully absorbed in meditation for twelve hours, six hours or even one hour. But there is a process that we can easily follow, and this process is the essence of all Vedic scriptures. Take the seed of the perfect transcendental name of Krsna by accepting initiation from a bona fide guru. Chant the Hare Krsna mantra and you will very easily find happiness.

Hare Krsna Hare Krsna
Krsna Krsna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama
Rama Rama Hare Hare