

Pathways to Enlightenment: The Twenty-Four Gurūs of Srīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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Abstract

Srīmad Bhāgavata is one of the most important Purāṇās among the eighteen Mahāpurāṇās. The description of the 24 gurūs is a very important part of the teachings of this Purāṇa, which contains 18,000 slokas in twelve Skandhās. The purpose of this article is to explain and discuss about the twenty-four Gurūs in Ekādaśa Skandha of Srīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the supreme principles that can be understood from them. The ideas and gurus in question are discussed during the advice to Uddhava in the eleventh chapter, which can be considered as the ultimate Vedāntic teachings of the Bhāgavata. Here, for the common people who are attached to the material world, the subtle supreme principles that need to be understood from things that are very familiar to them are explained. The lessons discussed here are based on commonly seen creatures and facts such as water, bees, spiders, seas, small children, and pythons, and help people understand the lessons they can learn from them and thereby reach higher levels.

Introduction

The Srīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa is one of the eighteen major Purāṇās of Hinduism, and is one of the most popular in Vaiṣṇavism. Written in Sanskrit and traditionally attributed to Veda Vyāsa, it promotes devotion to Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, and combines themes from the Advaita philosophy of Srī Śankarācārya, the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmāṇujācārya, and the Dvaita of Mādhvācārya. It is widely available in almost all Indian languages. Like other Purāṇs, the Bhāgavata discusses a wide range of topics, including cosmology, astronomy, genealogy, geography, mythology, music, dance, yoga, and culture. When it begins, the evil forces have won a war between the benevolent gods and the evil demons and now rule the universe. Truth re-emerges when Kṛṣṇa first makes peace with the demons, understands them, and then creatively defeats them, bringing back hope, justice, freedom, and happiness - a cyclical theme that appears in many legends.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is a central text in Vaiṣṇavism. The text presents a form of dharma that rivals the Vedas, in which devotion ultimately leads to self-knowledge, liberation (mokṣa), and bliss. However, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa argues that Krishna's inner nature and outer form are identical to the Vedas and that it is he who saves the world from evil forces. Some Krishna sects use an oft-quoted verse¹ to argue that it is Kṛṣṇa in literary form.

Bhāgavata Purāṇa, consisting of twelve Skandhās, has a total of 335 Adhyāyās (chapters) and 18,000 Ślokās. The tenth Skanda, with about 4,000 Ślokās, is the most popular and widely studied. By daily reading of this supreme book, there is no premature death, disease, epidemic, fear of enemies, etc., and even in Kali Yuga, man can attain Bhagavat (God) and attain ultimate salvation. It is the first Purāṇa to be translated into a European language, as a French translation of a Tamil version appeared in 1788, introducing many Europeans to Hinduism and Hindu culture in the 18th century during the colonial period.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is one of the most celebrated and popular texts in the Purāṇās, and some consider it to be a non-dualistic doctrine. However, Mādhvācāryā's dualistic school has a rich and strong tradition of dualistic interpretation portent devotional texts, presenting a fully developed teaching derived from the Bhagavad Gīta. While

classical yoga seeks to shut down the mind and senses, the Bhakti Yoga of the Bhāgavata teaches that the mind is transformed by filling it with thoughts of Kṛṣṇa.

In addition to various didactic philosophical passages, scholars say that one of the activities that leads to liberation from the Lord is listening to stories of Kṛṣṇa, meditating on them, and sharing devotion with others. They add that devotion is depicted in the Purāṇa as a powerful emotion and a rational, intentionally cultivated way of life.

Elements of Advaita

The Bhāgavata occasionally discusses Śaṅkarā's distinct non-dualist or non-dualist philosophy. The concept of mokṣa is explained as Ekata (oneness) and Sayūjya (absorption, intimate union), in which one is completely lost in Brahman (the Self, the Supreme Soul, one's true nature). This is a declaration of 'the individual soul's return to the Absolute and its merging into the Absolute', which is unquestionably Advaita. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa states in parallel with Śrī Śaṅkarā's Advaita. The aim of life is the search for truth, not the desire to enjoy heaven by performing religious rituals, those who have the knowledge of truth call the knowledge of Advaita truth, which is called Brahman, the Supreme Soul, Bhagavan.

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Elements of Yoga

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa describes all stages of yoga practice and portrays yoga as devotion. The text devotes several chapters to yoga, for example, Canto 10 (Chapter 11), which begins with the declaration that Siddhi arises from concentrating the mind on Kṛṣṇa, replacing the concept of a "personal God" in Patanjali's Yoga Sūtrās, and contrasts with Patanjali's view that Siddhi is powerful but an obstacle to samadhi. In other chapters of the text, Suka describes various meditations on aspects of Kṛṣṇa, similar to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. However, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa recommends the object of concentration as Kṛṣṇa, thus folding yoga into a form of devotion and "union with the divine".

The philosophy of the Bhāgavata is a blend of Vedānta terminology, Sāṃkhya metaphysics, and devotional yoga practice. The tenth Skandha elevates Kṛṣṇa as the highest and absolute personal aspect of divinity - the personality behind the word Īśvara and the ultimate aspect of Brahman.

Contents of Ekādaśa Skandha

The eleventh Skandha, with 31 Adhyāyās, continues the dialogue between Śuka and Parīkṣit on the banks of the Gangās River. Additional notable dialogues are between Nārada and Vāsudeva, and between Kṛṣṇa and Uddhava (as well as the dialogues between the Haṃsa (swan) Avatara and Brahman). Topics discussed include; -The curse and destruction of the Yadu dynasty in Prabhāsa to lighten the burden of the earth, The appearance of the Haṃsa Avatara to answer the questions of the sons of Brahman, Nārada's discourse to Vasudeva regarding the '9 Yogendras' instruction to King Nimi on devotion to Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa's final advice to Uddhava in Dwaraka (the story of a young Brahmin Avadhuta describing his 24 gurus to King Yadu), Krishna's disappearance after being shot by the hunter Jāra's arrow, The flood and destruction of Dwaraka.

Twenty Four Gurū's in Ekādaśa Skandha

The eleventh Skandha, which contains the final instructions given by Kṛṣṇa to his devotee Uddhava, is also called the 'Uddhavagīta' or 'Haṃsa Gīta'. Like the tenth Skandha, it has been translated and published separately, usually as a companion or 'sequel' to the Bhagavad Gīta. 'Haṃsa' means 'swan' or 'soul', and; -The name of a single class or order of

society in the Satya Yuga (compared to the four in the Kali Yuga), the first and purest of the four cyclic ages, In Hinduism, it symbolizes Brahman (the ultimate truth, the Self or the Ātman), is the mountain on which Brahma ascended, is the name of the tenth (i.e. Haṁsa) incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, who taught Brahma the Vedās (hence the symbolism of Brahma ascending the swan as a mountain).

Srī Śukadeva continued the conversation between Krishna and Uddhava. Kṛṣṇa confirmed that he was leaving the world. Since the Kali Yuga was about to begin, he urged Uddhava to take up Sannyāsa and plan his departure. Feeling humble and unworthy, Uddhava asked for an injection of transcendental wisdom to awaken his natural aloofness.

Kṛṣṇa first explained how an intelligent person can observe the world around them and learn powerful lessons to elevate their consciousness. To illustrate this, he narrated the story of an Avadhūta Brahmin (Dattātreya) who was wandering idly in deep spiritual bliss. When Mahārāja Yadu asked him how he had attained such an enlightened state, the Brahmin replied by describing 24 gurus from whom he had received deep spiritual instruction. Some of the key lessons from these gurus are given below.

पृथिवी वायुराकाशमापोऽग्निश्चन्द्रमा रविः ।

कपोतोऽजगरः सिन्धुः पतङ्गो मधुकृद् गजः ॥²

मधुहाहरिणो मीनः पिङ्गला कुररोऽर्भकः ।

कुमारी शरकृत् सर्प ऊर्णनाभिः सुपेशकृत् ॥³

एते मे गुरवो राजन् चतुर्विंशतिराश्रिताः ।

शिक्षा वृत्तिभिरेतेषामन्वशिक्षमिहात्मनः ॥⁴

The earth, the air, the sky, water, fire, the moon and the sun, the dove, the boa-constrictor, the sea, the moth, the honey-bee, the elephant, the honey-gatherer, the deer, the fish, Pingala (a courtesan), the osprey, the infant, the maiden, the forger of arrows, the serpent, the spider and the Bhṛṅga (a kind of wasp) these twenty-four have been accepted, O king, by me as preceptors. From the conduct of these have I learnt all that I had to learn in this life for my good.

First Guru: Earth

Mother Earth is the first Guru. She teaches us to hold those who trample on us/hurt us in our hearts with love. She teaches us to give our best to them, remembering that their actions are normal and natural from their perspective⁵.

Morality: Earth teaches us the path of Dharma, the art of tolerance, the art of doing our duty, patience and forbearance. Like mountains and trees, one should dedicate oneself to the welfare of other living beings.

Second Guru: Air/Wind

Air is pure and odorless. It blows without any discrimination or preference between sweet and foul-smelling objects. Although it may seem to momentarily accept the fragrance of its surroundings, within a short time, it reveals its pristine quality⁶.

Morality: Those with spiritual aspirations should live in the world of dualities with one soul. Whether it is happiness or sorrow, it should be accepted in the same way. Just as the air usually gives a comforting feeling when it blows, one should cool the mind without being influenced by external events, so that their actions also become calm.

Third Guru: Sky

The soul is like the sky, it is all-pervading. Sometimes the sky (or space) is thickly covered, or filled with dust or smoke. At sunrise and at night, it assumes different colors. But in reality, it always maintains its colorless nature, and nothing ever touches or stains it. The sky carries many objects like the sun, planets, galaxies, etc., but it is not always touched by them⁷.

Morality: The soul should never be affected by the impurities of the physical body. Like the sky, the soul is also omnipresent, pervading everywhere, and of infinite nature. The inner emptiness of the sky, i.e. space, teaches the Sanyāsi to be free from feelings from within.

Fourth Guru: Water

It quenches the thirst of all creatures. Thus, while it serves all living beings, it never prides itself. On the other hand, it humbly seeks the lowest places. Water teaches the virtue of purity⁸.

Morality: The Sanyāsi should be free from all impurities, his speech should be free like the flow of water, and he should descend to the earth without pride.

Fifth Guru: Fire

The element of fire is present in all beings with latent heat. Fire burns everything with its flames and is not touched by impurities. Although it does not have a specific shape, it shows the shape of the object it contains⁹.

Morality: Sanyāsi should be like fire that accepts food/anything given by others and consumes them with its power/knowledge. In other words, whoever the giver is, he should reduce the sins of others to ashes with his power.

Sixth Guru: Moon

The moon waxes and wanes continuously in a month. Every 15 days there is a full moon day or a new moon day. This nature teaches many things¹⁰.

Morality: Sage, he should not be touched by the circumstances he encounters externally. The day of the dead should also be Sanyāsa. It should be for the body, not for the soul.

Seventh Guru: Sun

The sun is seen differently in different objects, but the real existence is only one. The sun illuminates its surroundings and gives life to the earth. The cycles of life on earth are due to the Sun, but he does not associate himself with them¹¹.

Moral: The sage should illuminate his surroundings by the flow of his knowledge like the sun. Even though he is giving life to many he should not get attached to worldly relationships.

Eighth Guru: Pigeon

Once two pigeons lived in a cage with their three little brothers. One day, when the two birds went to get food, a bird hunter threw a net in the cage and caught the brothers. Seeing this, both pigeons jumped into the net and got caught. This shows love and affection¹².

Moral: If a sage gets involved in worldly relationships, he can never strive for salvation. Relationships/love do not lead to the spiritual path.

Ninth Guru: Python

A python does not wander around for its food. It sits in one place and waits patiently for its food to come. In weather when the food is not tasty or sufficient, the python competes with its food¹³.

Moral: A sage should not run after worldly pleasures. He should sit in one place and meditate regularly. He should learn to compete with what he gets in life.

Tenth Guru: Bee

A bee collects nectar from many flowers and collects it without harming them. It swallows the required amount for itself and converts the rest into sweet honey and keeps it in a beehive¹⁴.

Moral: A sage should collect information/knowledge from books and digest it. He should pass on its essence as per the need.

Eleventh Guru: Honey Thief/Honey Collector

After the bee collects honey and its hive is full of honey, the collector comes to collect the honey. He drives away the bees and collects the honey¹⁵.

Moral: When Yama comes, even after the sage has collected enough knowledge and distributed it to his fellow beings, the sage should leave everything and be ready to leave this world.

Twelfth Guru: Bird of Prey

Once a small bird was carrying its food to the nest. Seeing this, a big bird chased it. The small bird tried hard to escape, but the strong bird had to surrender and give up the food.

Moral: One should give up worldly possessions to live a happy and peaceful spiritual life.

Thirteenth Guru: Sea / Ocean

When more water flows into it from the rivers, the sea does not violate its boundaries. At the same time, it does not shrink in the summer. It remains calm and peaceful, without revealing the existence of pearls and wild animals in its stomach.

Moral: One should remain calm and peaceful. He should not be overwhelmed by joy and should not be discouraged by sorrow. He should not show everyone his knowledge and prove his greatness.

Fourteenth Guru: Moth

The moth is attracted to fire and jumps into it and burns. It does not even think before jumping.

Moral: Despite having supreme knowledge and the great opportunity to take the path of liberation, man does not use it properly. He becomes attracted to worldly pleasures and gets caught in the cycle of birth and death.

Fifteenth Guru: Elephant

To catch a male elephant (horn), a stuffed female elephant is first prepared and placed in a place where the elephant can see it. Seeing this, the male elephant runs into a trap (pit) dug in its path, thinking that he can reach the female and gets trapped.

Moral: One must conquer lust. Otherwise, they will get caught in its trap and will not be able to come out of it on the right path.

Sixteenth Guru: Deer

Deer are fond of music. When they are caught, hunters play sweet music to attract them.

Moral: Passion and sensual desires become an obstacle to spiritual progress.

17th Guru: Fish

A fish has no control over its tongue. As a result, it runs for a small bait and invites death. It never leaves its home, it cannot live without its own home (water).

Moral: A commoner should have control over his tongue in taste and speech. If the tongue is under control, all other senses will be under control. One should not abandon oneself.

18th Guru: Pingala (name of a prostitute)

Once the dancing girl Pingala waited for a man to come to her house and promise to give her money if he satisfies her desire. But she waited for him all night in vain. Finally, realizing that she was neglecting the soul and wasting time on external happiness, she went to bed.

Moral: Never expect material benefits from another person. The temptation to seek an object from others is the seed of sorrow and disappointment.

19th Guru: Child

A child is always cheerful and happy. He is not touched by the three qualities of nature, rajas and tamas. The child is free from worldly desires.

Morality: Like a child, one should be crystal clear in heart and actions.

Twenty-first Guru: Snake

A snake lives alone and avoids other living beings. It often sheds its old skin to get a new one.

Moral: The sage should live alone in the cave of his heart. He should understand that his next life is decided based on his actions or deeds in this life. He should not be afraid of death and should be ready to give up this life as easily as a snake sheds its skin.

Twenty-second Guru: Fletcher (Arrow Maker)

Once upon a time there lived a Fletcher who was famous for his arrows. While making a quiver of arrows, he did not even bother to greet a passing king.

Moral: Concentration and devotion are very important for spiritual discipline.

Twenty-third Guru: Spider

A spider creates its own home (web) with its mouth. It happily lives in it, plays, and finally pulls the web into itself for a whole day.

Moral: God created the entire world. The soul of humans is also a part of the Almighty, but is directed outward for a short period. So do not forget to return to the Almighty eventually.

Twenty-fourth Guru: The Worm

A bird hunts a worm and brings it to its nest as food. To paralyze the worm, the bird stings it and leaves the nest. The worm frightens the bird so much that its brain becomes empty. It thinks of nothing else except the bird. When the worm invests all its strength and thinks of the bird, it turns into a bird and flies away¹⁶.

Moral: The next life of a living being is decided by its own thoughts. Therefore, at the time of death, one should think of the lotus flowers of the Almighty. To practice that, one should always be in the thoughts of God. By this one day he will blossom into a spiritually developed person.

Concusion

Srīmad Bhāgavata is an epic philosophical and literary classic. The timeless wisdom of India is expressed in the Vedās, ancient Sanskrit texts that touch on all areas of human knowledge and provide illuminating answers to everything from the nature of self to the origin of the universe. Preserved through oral tradition, the Vedas were first written down by Veda Vyāsa, the "literary incarnation of God." Known as the "ripe fruit of the tree of Vedic literature," Srīmad-Bhāgavata is the most complete and authoritative exposition of Vedic knowledge.

The eleventh Skandha of the Bhāgavata, which is divided into twelve Skandhās, can be said to be the center of the supreme Advaita philosophy. The subject here is the twenty-four elements that Dattātreya advises to Yadu Mahārāja as part of Kṛṣṇa's advice to Uddhava and the lessons learned from them. Dattātreya advises the spiritual principles and lessons learned from each of nature's objects to remain calm.

The earth represents Dharma. The wind symbolizes the freedom of truth. The sun, moon, and ocean emphasize the unchanging nature of truth. The sky shows the infinite self. The spider reminds us of the transient nature of the material world. The moth, elephant, deer, and fish warn against distraction caused by desires. The dove, bee, kurari bird, and pingala warn against worldly attachment. The child awakens the joy of freedom from material cares. The python and bee emphasize the virtues of a simple life. Fire and water teach the power to purify the pollution of the material world. The snake teaches to avoid any distraction caused by unnecessary things. Archery teaches to focus and concentrate on the target. The caterpillar teaches that by focusing on God, one can return to the ultimate goal, God.

Sri Dattātreya's ancient teachings contain valuable messages for modern environmental education for sustainable development. His education encourages learners to reinvent themselves as spiritual beings living on a sacred earth. A patron to teachers on the path of knowledge, Sri Dattātreya offers a vision that Lord Kṛṣṇa, in his great teachings on the Uddhava and Bhagavad-Updeśa, extended into practical action. However, Srī Dattātreya's teaching on the 24 Gurus demonstrates a way of understanding the world and poses a challenge: Do you really understand what you see? Of course, the answer has nothing to do with the mechanics of creation. The embodied soul must see beyond its material cage and understand its true nature as an isolated drop in the ocean of the Supreme Soul.

End Notes

- ¹ S.B.P. 1.3.40
- ² S.B.P. 11.7.33
- ³ Ibid, 11.7.34
- ⁴ Ibid, 11.7.35
- ⁵ S.B.P. 11.7.42
- ⁶ Ibid, 11.7.41
- ⁷ Ibid, 11.7.42
- ⁸ Ibid, 11.7.43
- ⁹ Ibid, 11.7.44
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 11.7.46
- ¹¹ Ibid, 11.7.48
- ¹² Ibid, 11.7.49
- ¹³ Ibid, 11.7.50
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 11.7.51
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 11.7.52
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 11.7.64

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5. Keshavadas, Sadguru Sant. (1982). Sadguru Dattatreya. Oakland, CA: Temple of Universal Consciousness.