

## Do Not Waste the Gift of Human Life

By PARMARTHI RAINA

**S**RI Adi Shankaracharya says in his 'Vivekachudamani': "Three things are difficult to obtain, and if obtained, it may be taken as due to the grace of the Divine — human birth, desire for liberation, and guidance and protection of a spiritually enlightened person".

Most people believe in the existence of God, and also in the presence of a soul (atma) in every living entity. Yet not many consider it necessary to inquire into and understand the nature of God or of the soul. They pay perfunctory obeisances to God and occasionally seek mundane material favours from Him. They are quite content to go through life, with its fleeting pleasures and not so fleeting miseries, simply fulfilling the four activities common to all species of life — eating, sleeping, mating and defending. Finally time (kala) overtakes them and they succumb to death, without having realised the true value of human life.

There are two sides to human life: the material, which concerns the body, the mind and material nature; and the spiritual which concerns the soul and God, and the relationship between the two.

A majority of people spend their entire lives catering only to the needs of the body and mind. The most compelling of these needs is to please the senses (kama), for which one needs wealth (artha). To obtain sufficient wealth, many are persuaded to procure it by any means, fair or foul. Vedanta does not deny man the enjoyment of sense pleasures or the necessity of earning money. In fact Vedanta accepts man's requirement for both and has included them in the four purusharthas (pursuits or objectives) prescribed for him — dharma (code of values), artha (wealth) kama (sense pleasures) and moksa (liberation). Vedanta, however, cautions us not to chase kama and artha indiscriminately and recommends that these two pursuits are tempered by dharma. Dharma is thus placed before kama and artha as it regulates the two. These three purusharthas are called *trivarga* and they serve man's material quests.

Moksa, the fourth pursuit, is separate from the trivarga, because it is a spiritual quest. For moksa, knowledge and realisation of the soul is a prerequisite. Sadly, however, we completely neglect the obligation to understand the soul. Although several questions plague our minds, we

do not try and search for answers. What is the nature of God? And of the soul? What is the relationship between the two? What happens after death? How does the soul transmigrate from one body to another? Are there heaven and hell? What is the purpose of life?

Vedanta holds that human birth is very rare and, therefore, very precious and it should not be wasted. The Srimad Bhagavatam (11.9.29) states, "Having obtained, after many births and deaths, this rare human body, though ephemeral, affords one the opportunity to attain the highest perfection (liberation from samsara, the perennial cycle of birth and death). Thus the wise and heroic human being should earnestly strive for the ultimate perfection of life before death overtakes him. After all, sense pleasures are available even through the bodies of other life species".

Man is graced with a unique nature. He is distinct from and far superior to all other life forms. He is endowed with a highly developed consciousness (chaitna) and abundant intelligence coupled with the ability to discriminate (buddhi). Vedanta considers the discriminate



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faculty in the human being, when not under the sway of his sensory urges, to be truly unique. But man fails to manifest his unique nature because the animal tendencies (pasu bhava) in him are overpowering. If he can subjugate these tendencies, his real nature, humanness (manusya bhava), will come forth and his spiritual awareness will start to grow. He should, therefore, not waste this precious human body, which is the highest form of life among the 8.4 million species, and instead use its unique nature to inquire into and discover the higher spiritual dimensions of life.

The rarity and usefulness of the human body is once again highlighted, this time by Lord Krishna Himself, during His last discourse with His friend and devotee, Udhava, in the Srimad Bhagavatam (11.20.17). "The human body is very rare and available by one's good fortune. It is a most suitably built ship, which, when captained by a competent guru and favoured by the wind of God's grace can be used to cross the ocean of samsara. If a man fails to utilise all these favourable conditions, then he should be called a suicide, a killer of his own spiritual self".