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The Path of Grace

Fulfillment through joyful service to Sri Nathji, the youthful Lord Krishna

DURING THE 12TH TO 16TH CENTURIES' "BHAKTI RENAISSANCE," five great schools of Vaishnavism arose, founded by saints Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. One among these, the Pushti Marg ("Path of Grace") of Sri Vallabhacharya, is followed today by tens of millions of people, mostly from North and West India. This school is unique in Vaishnavism for its philosophy of suddhadvaita, "pure nondualism." Among those who worship Krishna, only this tradition teaches that Krishna is everything, and everything is Krishna. The acharya's suddhadvaita affirms the existence of the world, holding it to be good, pure and joyful, indeed not separate from the Divine. However, this nondualism is distinct from the better-known advaita of Adi Shankara, which denies the world's existence. The Pushti Marg differs from Madhva's dualism in affirming that souls are one with God and that the three qualities of Brahman--eternality, intelligence and bliss--are also attributes of the individual soul. Sri Vallabhacharya differed, too, from Ramanuja, who taught that although indeed everything is united with God, there are real differences between God, souls and world. The following summary is the work of a Pushti Marg initiate, Shyamdas.

Devotees on the Path of Grace have always celebrated the nectar of Sri Krishna's presence with their various refined sensitivities. This path is the uncontrived spiritual route, and

Sri Vallabhacharya has taught that the means and the reward should be seen as one. Each level of realization is a part of the divine lila (play), and Sri Krishna is the master of ceremonies. Therefore, the result is always perfect. The Path of Grace sees everything as Krishna and nothing but Krishna. Since illusion, or maya, is a subject of perception, all objects in the world and the world itself are flawless. It is the pure nondualist path that embraces a positive and devotional worldview where creation is seen as a perfect manifestation of God. Maya arises only when the world is not cognized correctly. The blessed devotee is not obsessed with liberation or any other form of yoga besides the pleasing service to Sri Radha and Sri Krishna.

Sri Vallabhacharya, affectionately referred to by his followers as Mahaprabhuji ("Great Being"), was born in 1479 as the son of Laxshman Bhatt, a Telugu Brahmin of Southern India. Laxshman Bhatt's forefathers had performed many Vedic soma sacrifices, and the Lord Krishna came and announced that He would appear in their family when Laxshman completed the hundredth sacrifice. Soon after he did, his wife, Illamagaaru, became pregnant. They lived in Banaras at the time, but were forced to leave because of an impending Muslim attack. In the forest of Champaranya, in Madhya Pradesh, she gave birth to a still-born child. Sadly, she placed the infant's body into the hollow of a tree. As they progressed along the path, both heard a melodious voice saying, "Why are you going? I am here." Immediately they returned to the tree to find their son alive and joyfully playing with a divine fire that surrounded him. The mother stepped through the blazing circle and took her son.

The element of fire played an important role throughout Sri

Vallabhacharya's life. He is seen as the incarnation of agni, or fire (from the face of Sri Krishna). Fire is also the devata (deity) of speech, and so he is called Vaka Pati, the Lord of Speech. The famous teachings found in his Sri Subodhini, Anubhasya and numerous other devotional and Vedantic works have shed brilliance upon the inner meanings of Srimat Bhagavatam, a central Vaishnava scripture, as well as various Vedantic texts. He not only embodied the inner beauty of Sri Radha and Sri Krishna, but was a perfect witness to Their lilas (divine sports, recounted in Srimat Bhagavatam). His attainment allowed for rare empowerments that have been and continue to be passed on to us through his devotional teachings.

Mahaprabhuji's life itself was a lila. As a child, he mastered all the scriptures. At the tender age of ten, he was determined to go on pilgrimage. Although his mother was distressed by his request, she saw his determination and finally consented. One night, while stopping to take rest in the dense forest of Jarkhanda in Bihar in east-central India, Lord Krishna appeared to him and said, "I am waiting for you. Come to the Govardhan Hill and perform My seva, My blessed worship." Sri Vallabhacharya proceeded to Govardhan Hill near Vrindavan (where Lord Krishna lived as a child) and established Sri Nathji's seva. At that time, the temple was a simple structure made of bricks and mud. Later, he arranged for a stone temple to be built. Sri Nathji resided there till 1669 when the Deity was secretly moved to Nathdwar in Rajasthan because of growing Muslim antagonism which was resulting in numerous temples being razed. There in Rajasthan, where He resides today, a large, new temple was constructed after the fashion of a Rajasthani king's palace. Today, in its bustling darshan chambers one can view the refined modes of Sri Krishna's worship, or seva.

The Pushti Marga is actually a continuation of Sri Vishnu Swami's ancient bhakti lineage. It is said that Sri Vishnu Swami waited for Sri Vallabhacharya's appearance in order to give him the lineage. Once it was done, Sri Vishnu Swami left for the eternal abode. The Vallabh lineage also originates from the line of Rudra. The word rudra means literally "to cry." Sri Vallabhacharya's intense path of love contains the essence of the divine tears that the Gopis, the blessed dairy maids, shed while they sought their blessed Lord's presence in the bowers of Vrindavan.

Mahaprabhuji undertook pilgrimages throughout India to teach his unconditional, nondualist, purely grace-filled devotion to Sri Krishna. He claimed that to serve Sri Krishna in one's home, in the loving mood of total dedication, is the highest form of worship. His devotional movement quickly spread over much of Western India. Lineage holders and their followers today live mostly in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. The largest concentration is in Mumbai.

Devotion is the path: Sri Vallabhacharya stressed that devotional practice should be done in the home, which is why the Path of Grace has remained almost entirely a householder lineage. It is the devotee's duty to honor Sri Krishna as the Lord of Gokul, the Supreme Brahman (God), and also as a member of one's household. One must always serve Him with bhava, the unconditional loving attitude. Sri Mahaprabhuji taught that devotion is perfected by offering one's body, wealth and mind-heart to the Blessed Lord. In this state of dedication, true renunciation develops.

He fashioned his teachings to fit in the world, which he taught is Sri Krishna's perfect creation. Sri Vallabhacharya saw the world as Sri Krishna's playground and urged his followers to offer Him things of the highest quality. This inspired oceans of art, music and poetry to emerge around his Path of Grace, and Sri Krishna clearly began to respond to his blessed devotees. Very sensitive poets, artists, writers, kings, Muslim mystics, pundits and even a few animals have gained entrance into the Path of Grace and have tasted the nectar of devotion. This path of intense Radha-Krishna worship was embraced by the greatest poets of his era, such as Surdas and Paramandadas who have sung: "Nectar has overflowed from Sri Krishna's body and rushed towards Vrindavan where it merged with the Yamuna River and the Gopis of Braja. A few more drops scattered about the three worlds but never touched those merely engrossed in karma (action) or knowledge. It abides only in those who can savor the divine mood."

On the subject of practice, Sri Vallabhacharya is concise, "The attainment of Sri Krishna can never be dependent upon any formula. Sri Krishna, who is perfect bhava, is attained through the precise emulation of those who have already attained Him." And so, the Gopis of Vrindavan, who attained Krishna, are the grace-filled gurus of the Path. He also explained that if God could be captured by a particular formula, then such a prisoner would no longer be God. After Krishna stole the butter, His mother, Yashoda, could only tie Him up when He allowed her. Although Brahman cannot be confined, Sri Krishna allows Himself to be bound by the devotees' cords of love. Sri Krishna responds to devotion, and that is why Sri Mahaprabhuji has said, "He is the Lord of Sweetness."

Lineage: The blessed Path of Grace was further developed and enhanced by Sri Vallabhacharya's son, Sri Vitthalnathji (1516-1586). Once, when Sri Vallabhacharya was on pilgrimage, Lord Vitthalnathji (a form of Sri Krishna) appeared to him and told the great acharya that he should get married so that He could appear as his son. Sri Vitthalnathji, Sri Vallabhacharya's second son, became that incarnation and carried on his father's grace-filled tradition. Father and son each had four great poet-bhakta disciples, collectively known as the Astha Chap, of whom the most famous was Surdas.

They all sang spontaneously composed poems in front of Sri Nathji, the youthful form of Sri Krishna, during the eight darshan (viewing) periods of His day, a central aspect of Pushti Marg devotional routine. This day revolves around the divine child's day as it was in Vrindavan. The first period is Mangala, where the Lord is awakened with lullabies and given His breakfast. In the second period, Sringhar, He is adorned from head to foot. In the third, Gwala ("Shepherd"), He is honored as a cowlad. The fourth darshan is Raja Bhoga, the most elaborate of the day, which opens after the Blessed Lord has taken His lunch with His companions in the forest. Then after a nap, Krishna awakens for the Uttaphan period. At Bhog darshan, the fifth, He is offered fruit in the forest. The Sandhya period is when He returns home from the forest with His cows at twilight, and the final darshan, Sen, reveals His evening lilas and bedtime. Additionally, the worship is adjusted according to the seasons of the year. At the main temple in Nathdwar, these eight darshans and their seasonal variations are observed with great devotion and sensitivity.

Sri Vitthalnathji, like his father, wrote many Sanskrit works on

devotion and is praised as a beacon of the Path of Grace. He had seven sons through whose descendants the teachings and initiations of the lineage have enjoyed an unbroken tradition. The current head of the lineage is the Tilkayat at Nathdwara. His seat is in direct succession from Sri Vitthalnathji's oldest son, Sri Girdharji. The present Tilkayat is Goswami 108 Sri Dauji Maharaja. There are over 150 other lineage holders, all direct descendants of Sri Mahaprabhu Vallabhacharya. The main temples of the Vallabhacharya tradition today are found in Gokul, Banaras (in Uttar Pradesh), Nathdwara, Kamvan and Kankaroli (Rajasthan), and in Baroda and Surat (Gujarat).

Once when Sri Vallabhacharya was in the sacred town of Gokul, Lord Krishna appeared and instructed him to initiate divine souls into the Pushti Marg by means of the Brahma Sambandha mantra (ritual formula). This is given to devotees by a direct descendant of Sri Vallabhacharya, and everything thereafter is offered to the Blessed Lord. After the consecration, the bhakta lives on the prasada, the grace of God. After this initiation, the devotee is enjoined to perform daily worship of the Lord.

Akbar and Sri Vitthalnathji: In the Pushti Marga tradition, stories about Sri Vallabhacharya, Sri Vitthalnathji and their disciples are read by the followers every day. The following account gives the pulse of the path. Once, Emperor Akbar told his chief minister, Birbal, to go to Vrindavan and ask the saints how he could attain God quickly. The Emperor gave his minister three days. The minister proceeded to the holy land and conversed with many distinguished religious men who expounded upon their various methods. When they failed to produce anything likely to please the Emperor, the minister

returned home dejected. When his devoted daughter came to know of her father's situation and of the loss of honor he would face upon seeing Akbar on the following day, she advised him, "Father, why worry? Explain to the emperor that you cannot tell him the answer to his question directly, but that Sri Vitthalnathji will."

The next day, the minister told the emperor that his question would be resolved by Sri Vitthalnathji in Gokul. Akbar, anxious to unmask the greatest of mysteries, dressed in ordinary clothes and discreetly proceeded to Gokul. When he arrived, he found Sri Vitthalnathji performing his prayer by the banks of the Yamuna River. Recognizing the emperor, he called him forward. Akbar said, "I have come here to know how I can see God." Sri Vitthalnathji simply replied, "In the same way I see you." He then explained, "Great ruler of men, how many guards, ministers and advisers would I have to please before I could have a private audience with a man like yourself? It would truly be a tedious procedure with no guarantee of success. Now, if you wanted to see me, think of how easy it is for me to see you." The essence of this story is that the path to God can be long and difficult, plagued with countless obstructions such as pride of practice or even incorrect aspirations. So instead of seeking Him out, according to the Path of Grace, it is better to invite Him here; make your abode so inviting that He cannot resist coming and granting you His presence.

Krishna will come: Since Krishna is to be invited here, then there is no need to renounce the world. Once, when Sri Vitthalnathji was going to take sannyasa and become a renunciate monk, his child Krishna (Sri Navanita Priyaji),

knowing of his intentions, informed the acharya that He was also taking sannyasa and dyed all of His child Krishna clothes orange. At that moment, Sri Vitthalnathji renounced the idea of sannyasa. In the Path of Grace, renunciation is developed by loving Krishna and by facing Him.

Sri Vallabhacharya has instructed: "Focus the mind on Sri Krishna by means of Brahmavada, the teaching that everything is Sri Krishna. One who is established in the Path of Sri Krishna is free from the world. Therefore, one should reflect upon Him Who is in the ocean of joy within one's atma (soul)." Sri Krishna is nirguna (transcendent, impersonal, without qualities) in that He is totally free of all material attributes, yet saguna (immanent and formed) because He is replete with divine qualities.

Today Sri Vallabhacharya's teachings and spirit are perpetuated in his lineage and, with the Indian diaspora, followers reside all over the world. His Path of Grace inspires us to worship Sri Krishna as depicted in the Srimat Bhagavatam. There, Sri Krishna's multi-dimensional aspect is clearly demonstrated. When He walked into Kamsa's wrestling stadium, His parents looked upon Him as their son, while the women in the stands saw Him as Love incarnate. The yogis attending observed Him as the absolute, unblemished Brahman, while the cowherd lads saw Krishna as their friend. The wrestlers merely saw Him as a mighty foe, while King Kamsa viewed the divine cowlad as death personified. Through each view, they all became liberated. Mahaprabhuji describes Krishna's lila-presence: "Krishna plays within the many manifestations of name and form and from their variations, the world appeared." Sri Krishna graciously fulfills His devotees'

desires.

The practice of devotion to Krishna is transforming. Like gutter water that spills into Ganga becomes Ganga, similarly in the Path of Grace, once all things are offered, they become like Krishna--free of bondage. In the devotional process, everything leads to the Blessed Lord. First there arises the subtle and blessed understanding that Sri Krishna is Brahman and deserves ultimate adoration. Then, a desire for a specific relationship with Him arises, followed by practice. When Sri Krishna responds, the fruit is attained.

In the Shiksha Patri scripture of the Swaminarayan movement it says that Sri Vitthalnathji's worship of Sri Krishna should be emulated. Sri Vallabhacharya's era was a time of devotional revival. We read of many friendly meetings between Sri Vallabhacharya and Sri Krishna Chaitanya. Together, their two movements swept Northern India with Krishna's names and forms.

When Sri Vallabhacharya was 52 years old, Sri Krishna requested him to return to His abode. The acharya retired to Banaras. After several weeks, he called his sons there to give them his final teachings. He silently wrote his teachings in the sandy banks of the Ganga: "If you ever turn your back on Sri Krishna, this age of struggle will consume your body, mind and consciousness." Then Lord Krishna appeared and gave the blessing that He would look after all the faithful followers. Sri Vallabhacharya entered the Ganga, singing the "Gopi Gita," the Song of the Gopis. In the presence of thousands of people, he merged into the divine fire from which he once appeared.

He entered the lila with his body and left us with the auspicious message: to remain before the Blessed Lord and live gracefully in the world.

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Contacts and Further Reading

TILKAYAT (THE PRESENT LEADER): SHRI NATHJI TEMPLE NATHDVARA RAJASTHAN. BOOKS: THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF SHRI VALLABHACHARYA BY J G SHAH. THE OCEAN OF JEWELS BY LALU BHATT, (TRANS. SHYAMDAS). THE ASTHA CHAP BY GOKULNATHJI (TRANS. SHYAMDAS). FOR ADDITIONAL BOOKS, CONTACT SHYAMDAS AT 1916 ARDEN DRIVE, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47401 USA.