

The Transcendental Nature of the Holy Name

Part 1

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In Bhāgavata-sandarbhā Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī establishes on the basis of various Vedic scriptures that the birth and actions of the Lord are transcendental and distinct from those of mortal beings. Jīva Gosvāmī furthermore verifies that Kṛṣṇa's names are also spiritual. The Lord is called anāmā (lit. nameless), because He does not have material names. In this material world a child is given a name at birth and naturally belongs to a caste, class, tribe, sect or race. These bodily designations, of name, class and nationality, are material and temporary. They last only as long as the body remains, and at times, can change, even within the course of the same life.

As the Lord's birth is transcendental and eternal, so it naturally follows that His name is also eternal. His names are found in the Vedic mantras, which are eternal. His form is eternal and the Nyāya school of logic concludes, "The attributes of an eternal object are also eternal" (nityaṁ gataṁ nityaṁ, Tarka-saṁgraha, 3.6). Thus, the Lord's name and other attributes are eternal manifestations of His internal potency.

There is no one who can assign Kṛṣṇa a name, because He existed prior to everyone. As a matter of fact, He is the one who has given names to all objects, which are created by Him:

Knowledge of the names of various objects and the respective duties of various people was obtained by Lord Brahmā from the words of the Vedas, and thus he propagated the classification of names and duties. (Manu-smṛti 1.21)

Lord Kṛṣṇa is known as vedānta-kṛt (Gītā 15.15), author of Vedānta, and Veda-vid, the knower of the Veda. It is He who spoke the Vedas to Lord Brahmā (SB 11.14.3). The names and classes assigned to people are not part of their essential nature; they can be modified or replaced by new ones without causing any change of their essence. They serve only to assist in empirical dealings. A fool can be named paṇḍita-śiromaṇi (the crown jewel of scholars), and a blind man, padma-locana (lotus-eyed one), but this will not have any bearing on their nature. There is no factual relation between a person's name and his attributes. Such is not the case with the Lord's names, however, as Kṛṣṇa is nondifferent from His names, and therefore His complete potency also exists in His names. This is confirmed by Lord Caitanya Mahāprabhu:

O my Lord, You have unlimited names, and You have infused these names with all Your potencies. Furthermore, You have not enforced any rules, as to where or when these names are to be remembered. Such is Your mercy, O Lord, and yet I am so unfortunate that I have no love for them. (Śikṣāṣṭaka 2)

This fact can be realized by chanting the Lord's name without offense.

Lord Kṛṣṇa's names may convey an attribute He possesses, such as ghana-śyāma, "He who is blackish like a fresh monsoon rain cloud," or they may convey His pastimes, such as giridhārī, "He who lifted Govardhan Hill." Because He is inherently self-endowed with trans-conventional qualities and eternally manifests trans-egoic play (līlā), there is no need for Him to be assigned merely conceptualized names that are incapable of reflecting His true nature.

It was a practice in Vedic culture that after the birth of a child, learned brāhmaṇas would be invited to prepare the horoscope and assign an appropriate name corresponding to the child's prospective future. For example, one can allude to the naming ceremonies of Parīkṣit Mahārāja and Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam. This is the reason why names in the Vedic literature so precisely match the character of those they designate. The correspondence is so close, in fact, that it leads skeptics to interpret the stories as mere fable, reasoning that apt names must have been chosen by the author.

According to Vedic authorities, even letters have transcendental potency. Jaimini states in his Mīmāṃsā-sūtra, "Words are certainly eternal and their pronunciation conveys meaning to others," (1.1.18). Bhagavān Upavarṣa, a great Mīmāṃsaka, says that every letter is a word, and thus letters are eternal. For this reason, letters in Sanskrit are called akṣara, or "imperishable." Moreover, if words are considered eternal, their constituent parts must also be eternal. Again, logic dictates that it is not possible to have an eternal object with temporal components, because, "What is not in the cause cannot be in the effect" (Vaiśeṣika-sūtra 1.1.13).

According to Lord Kṛṣṇa, words are a manifestation of Brahman:

The Supreme Lord, who supplies life to all, reveals Himself in the chakras of the human body. Having entered the mūlādhāra-cakra along with the sonant prāṇa and assumed subtle forms composed of mind-stuff, He manifests Himself in a gross form [on the tongue] consisting of vowels, accent and consonants. (SB 11.12.17)

This is also the opinion of Tāntrikas and grammarians like Pāṇini.

An objection may be raised here. It is our common experience that words are spoken with the help of vocal chords, the tongue, palate, lips and so on, and are then lost immediately. So how can words be accepted as eternal? The answer is that the tongue and mouth do not create the words, they only pronounce them and convey them to others. Words exist eternally, and the action of speech only makes them audible. Speech can be compared to the light that makes objects in a dark room visible; it does not create them.

The Holy Name of the Lord is certainly eternal, being nondifferent from Him, self-existent and conscious in nature. In section 35.3 and 35.4 of Bhāgavata-sandarbha,

Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī selects a few texts from the Vedas and Purāṇas to establish the conscious nature of the Name.

Śabda is the only pramāṇa (or valid means of knowledge) adequate to ascertain knowledge of the reality that underlies and transcends material nature. Śrī Śuka has clearly explained the glories of the Holy Name in Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, especially in the account of Ajāmila. The Holy Name can liberate a person even if chanted incidentally—since an object’s power does not depend on the knowledge of its user. Fire will burn, whether one touches it knowingly or by accident. Similarly, the name of the Lord burns sins to ashes, whether chanted knowingly or unknowingly, with faith or without faith:

As fire burns dry grass to ashes, so the Holy Name of the Lord, whether chanted knowingly or unknowingly, unfailingly burns all reactions of one’s sinful acts to ashes. Just as medicine of the highest curative potency will surely act even on a person ignorant of its efficacy, even if taken by chance, so too the name of the Lord will act even if uttered as a matter of coincidence. (SB 6.2.18-19)

Scripture warns us that such statements should not be taken as mere eulogies (artha-vāda). Otherwise, as the Padma Purāṇa, warns us, we commit an offense against the Holy Name.