

What is Rasa?

Letter from Svami Sadananda Dasa
to Vamandas 16.4.1956

Footnotes and annotations in square brackets by the publishers

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The worldly rasa is dependent on a special technique of the poet, who himself experiences an aesthetic *pleasure* and whose work creates a pleasure in the reader. Whether the enjoyment incites sensuality or gives rise to a more subtle human emotion, it is still enjoyment (bhoga).

The Divine rasa is the very opposite. The bhakta – who has got bhakti, the power to serve God, and is without a vestige of expectation of happiness or even of accepting happiness for himself – serves with his eyes, heart, ears etc. etc.; the actor here on the bhakta-stage has this very same power of service. The performance of the bhakti-drama or the poem is in itself service without any expectation or acceptance of happiness. In other words, the bhakta does not want to experience, to taste rasa etc., but to SERVE, nothing but SERVE. Krishna wants to serve the bhakta, the bhakta wants to serve Krishna, without expectation or acceptance of happiness.

In the eternal realm, the hero is the *cit-character* Krishna and the heroines are the *cit-shakti-characters*, the gopis (observe the difference). The lila-situation changes every moment – every moment eager, new serving. In the eternal realm, in Goloka or in Vraja (visible on earth for a while), these lila-situations arouse certain reactions *for the sake of the one* who is the object of service (for Krishna: the gopis, for the gopis: Krishna). *This Prema-SERVING becomes rasa*. Neither Krishna nor the gopis “experience” rasa as an object of their experience; their service is rasa. The reactions to certain lila-situations are forms of service; joy, sorrow, dismay etc. are not different states of mind a person gets into, like here in this world, when someone stands in front of an

object of experience and experiences something, but joy, sorrow etc. are WAVES of rasa, waves of *actual SERVICE*.

The bhakta in the bhakta-drama doesn't really serve *in actu*, he still serves indirectly. Either he has a body formed of the gunas of Maya or he is a parishada [eternal coplayer] who believes he possesses a body consisting of gunas. At best the bhakta has got prema-bhakti which makes him worthy that God, attracted by this prema-bhakti, the will to serve, reveals Himself to him as the object of his service. When he listens to or performs the drama, he still serves indirectly. But when the lila or Krishna Himself become visible – due to the identity between the word Krishna [and Krishna Himself] or between the words that describe or express the lila [and the lila itself] – in that moment *the will to serve becomes actual service*, rasa. The bhakta, however, does not *experience* rasa as an object, but his *service* has become rasa.

Whether he experiences joy, ananda, he is not aware of it at all as he is not busy with himself, but with his service for Krishna. Note: not with *experiencing Krishna or the lila*, but with serving. He is “tanmaya”¹, i.e. he is no longer aware of himself. He is only aware of the object of service and the [process of] serving. When the drama is over he does not experience: “Oh, this was a wonderful bathing in ananda”, but as serving has wholly become his nature – as his heart, his intellect, his senses, his atma are fully, exclusively aglow with the power of service (cf. the definition of bhava-bhakti in Bh.R.S.)² – he immediately continues his service, even though indirectly, and has no time to reflect upon himself. At the best he cries, because he is not worthy to serve better and more.

¹ tat-maya: that-made = of the same nature; as a rod of iron, glowing red-hot, has become of fiery nature itself.

² In the translation of Svami Sadananda Dasa (into English by Katrin Stamm): „Bhakti as bhavabhakti is completely independent of any mental function and yet it is *revealed* within the *empirical* character and the mental functions of man (manovrittau avirbhuya) and *becomes one with his mind*, character, individuality (fire takes on the form of an iron rod, even though the fire exists independently and doesn't owe its power to any other source but itself).

If you thought that as a result of or a reward for service the experience of bliss followed, you would forget that the bhakta, and even more the *gopi*, are fully identical with their service, and as you know, the gopi fully consists of service. Prema or the Love of God is nothing but service – and it is not anything in addition to it. It is service that is based on the servant’s specific personal relation to God, a relation that corresponds with the respective shape, form, dress, behaviour and character.

The *worldly rasa* of mundane objects or of mundane poetry etc., however, is the result of the realisation of *selfish desire* which is realized when the object we want to exploit for the sake of our own pleasure presents itself to our lust for exploitation. An experience that does not elevate, enrich, intensify ourselves, our feeling of being alive, does never become (worldly) rasa – it is simply uninteresting. While experiencing worldly rasa – during orgasm as sexual animal or in poetry [or drama] through a fictitious (imagined) identification with the hero of the play, our consciousness experiences a situation of temporary holiday from its ego. Here, experience of rasa is like oil into the fire of lust.

In *bhakti-rasa*, however, not only the atma is awake since long, but he is uninterruptedly carried away by the stream of service. The parishada has a *body and mind consisting of the power of service*, which therefore *cannot but serve*. The premabhakta still on earth, and the eternal premabhakta, cannot do anything else but serve; while serving twenty-four hours a day, the thought just cannot cross their mind: “I want to experience, now I expect God to respond to my service and grant me joy.” Serving *is* happiness, even the suffering they experience when Krishna withdraws Himself from their service is happiness, because it isn’t (selfish) suffering due to the loss of one’s own happiness, as in the world, but suffering because of the fact that Krishna withdraws Himself from their service, which – as Krishna indefatigably emphasizes in the Shastrams – pleases Krishna Himself. The suffering of the bhakta, when he cannot serve Krishna, is suffering due to the fact that *God deprives Himself of His Own joy*.

While realizing an experience *devoid of bhakti* someone may desire rasa, but never a bhakta who serves. The bhavuka [bhakta on the stage of bhava] and rasika [bhakta on the stage of rasa], to whom the invitation of the Bhagavatam is addressed: “to drink ... the rasa of the Bhagavatam”, is someone who can no longer do anything but serve. He “drinks”, i.e. he listens to and understands how the bhaktas of the different stages serve HIM, he listens to and understands the rasa which is service, and in the centre of this service there is God for the bhakta and the bhakta for God.

This “drinking” is a form of service; he listens, as he cannot do anything else, in order to please God. This “drinking” is not the enjoyment or experience of a spectator who enjoys and rejoices and sheds tears of joy as someone does who enjoys a drama or a poem, but the very opposite. Only those who have reached this high stage of service can understand and estimate what SERVICE actually means. Among the others, the realization of actual service (rasa) is out of the question.

It would be a fundamental error to think that as a result of service the experience of rasa follows. No, service, bhakti in itself, becomes rasa. Service as rasa is never an object of experience, because service itself is what experiences the service as rasa. Service experiences service, rasa experiences rasa. As long as a person, through his service, has not yet fully become service, he cannot know anything about service and rasa, and when he has totally become service, he can even less experience rasa, because due to his service he hasn't got the time and possibility to think of himself and what is going on in his mind.

God couldn't care less about those who want to serve God (???) in order to experience happiness and expect that God in that way shall please *them*. The word bhakti means service; “nirguna-bhakti starts with belief in serving ME”. It would be fundamentally wrong to think that later, on a higher level, this suddenly turns into an expectation and a wish that God shall serve me by

giving me joy! All those who think like this are animals, according to Krishna's Own words (Bha. X.32.20).³

Rasa is SERVICE which becomes rasa when the object of service reveals itself to the service, it is REALIZATION of service. That is why it isn't called rasa but *bhaktirasa*, not just prema, but *premahakti*.

The individual bhakta only serves [God] in one way, whereas God serves the bhakta, who doesn't want anything but God's pleasure, in innumerable ways. He serves the bhakta not because He wants to give him happiness, but real service, which is happiness.

As soon as one experiences joy while reading or listening to rasa-texts one has gone astray, onto the path of sin, of God-lessness, and exploits the Shastrams. The bhakta hasn't got any time to feel joy; his service of God is his joy and he is unsatiated in his service, because the power of service is infinite, is nirguna, God's Own power. Daruka and others don't curse their joy, as they don't even know what joy actually is. They curse the fact that service in itself is joy and that the joy which is inherent in service sometimes disturbs the service; and the fact that the joy of service is experienced as disturbance of the service is a sign of genuine service. Consequently, those who have the slightest touch of the power to serve are never satisfied with themselves, and the more serving power they have, the less they think they do really serve. And this is the explanation of the fact that the bhakta normally, through the power of service, always speaks as *if he wanted* his own happiness. Only on the highest level of prema, called "Divine madness", where God, in order to incite the gopis to an even higher degree of service, wants to send them away or make Himself invisible, they reveal their real attitude.

³ *naham tu sakhyo bhajato 'pi jantun bhajamyamisham anuvritti-vrittaye, yathadhano labdhadhane vinashte taccintayanyannibhrato na veda.* — "My dear friends, I for one do not serve those who live like animals without proper realization, even if they served – I do this so they may develop the proper inclination for adequate service (i.e. endeavour to serve the way I appreciate it), so that they begin to think only about this and nothing else; like a wealthy person who after losing his fortune can think of nothing else." (X,32,20.) Walther Eidlitz: Krishna-Caitanya. The Hidden Treasure of India, page 130. Sadananda.com. (German: Krishna-Caitanya. Sein Leben und Seine Lehre. Stockholm 1968.) Translation by Mario Windisch 2010.

One must keep all this clear in one's mind, every day and twenty-four hours, until service has become one's very nature. One must be clear about why Krishna calls the love of the gopis irreproachable and what He says to them, and about them and Himself.

The person who doesn't have a clear concept of atma, Brahma etc. and to whom the inner and outer world have not since long become colourless (vairagya), cannot understand even a line of a passage in the Upanishads that deals with jnana. Those who lack the power of service cannot have the slightest idea of the rasa that God is, and that service itself is.

The Bhagavatam does not belong to a particular tradition. All Puranas etc. were delivered to the many rishis (from completely different traditions) in Naimisharanya. Each Purana has a certain subject of its own and several other Puranas praise the uniqueness of the Bhagavatam. The Caitanya-bhaktas have accepted that the *Revelation itself declares that the Bhagavatam is the highest authority of the Word-revelation.*

Caitanya has rejected the philosophy of Shankaracharya and his followers, as well as all attempts to confine God to the jail of human laws of thinking, and emphasizes that Krishna and the *Revelation* are the only authority and not the poor human brain of an ever so advanced bhakta.

When it says: HE *is* form, and yet this form is "vishnu", i.e. unlimited by space, time and the laws of reason etc., it doesn't mean that the Revelation contradicts itself. The Revelation only expresses *what* and *how* He IS. On the other hand, the jnanis and bhaktas don't experience different things in the *One*; it is always the eternal forms of being which present themselves to the jnani, yogi and bhakta, either as attributeless Brahma or as Paramatma or as Bhagavan (and also as Isha). These three are eternal forms of being of the Absolute or *Brahma in the full sense of the word.*