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The nine forms of Shakti teach us that life is honorable, beloved, and worthy of worship in all its colors. Religion is not about cutting life off, by prohibiting certain things, aspects, or colors. You can educate yourself to make your lips so rigid that they don't smile, to harden your eyes so that they don't cry, and to numb your mind so that it never waves. But this education is not religion. We have already imposed countless restrictions on ourselves, and adding to those restrictions is not what religion is about.

It is quite surprising that people who are already in bondage, and who seem unable to move beyond their chains, name those very constraints and shackles as religion. It's like a sick person naming the deepening of their illness as health. Religion is "complete liberation," and the concept of complete liberation is only possible in the context of bondage. Otherwise, what is the relevance of liberation? We often think in reverse, claiming, "Liberation means freedom from life." The true meaning of liberation from life is freedom from the bondages that bind life.

Jivanmukta has been a beautiful concept in our country, and it is often wrongly interpreted as "freedom from life." However, jivanmukta means "one whose life is free from bondage." It does not mean being free from life but rather living a liberated life. A jivanmukta is the one who lives a liberated life, and living a liberated life means having the courage and love to embrace all the faces of life. Often, people turn to religiosity because they want to give something up, to renounce something. If you observe so-called religious people, you will find a certain harshness in them. Their measure of height is based on what they have renounced, on how remarkable or extraordinary they are. To be extraordinary often means to distance oneself from everything that is ordinary, simple, and part of the natural flow of life; to regard it as inferior or worthy of rejection. This is a distorted definition of religiosity.

A truly religious person is one with life. They have broken down all the walls between themselves and life. They flow effortlessly in the natural rhythm of life, which will bring everything to them. A limited person, with a limited mind and body, will experience all that life has to offer. These experiences can cause you pain, or they can elevate you. They may be very interesting to you, or they may seem quite unpleasant and harsh. Living among these experiences and remaining free from their opposition is what religiosity truly means.

If you are sitting and reading the Upanishads and receive the news that your friend has died, and you say, "No, I'm still reading the Gita; Krishna is teaching that neither anyone comes nor anyone goes. There was no time when you weren't there, or I wasn't there. So, during the reading of the Gita, how can I give weight to death?" If you say this, you are profoundly irreligious. You have turned the Gita into a rule. For you, the Gita has become just words. You have forgotten that the one who spoke the Gita also played the flute, laughed, cried, and struggled in the agony of separation.

This is a story from Japan. There was a Zen master who passed away. His disciples began to weep. Throughout their lives, the master and his disciples had spoken about stability and detachment. They appeared to be embodiments of renunciation, yet today, upon the death of their guru, the disciples were seen crying. So, the people around them came and said, "Your guru and you used to say that everything is nothingness, that the body is duality, that the body is merely an illusion, and that there is an internal supreme nothingness, which is the only truth. So, why this crying now?"

They said, "Alright, everything is nothingness, but we are crying for the body. Who is crying for the truth, who is crying for the nothingness? The guru was dear to us; we cherished his body as well. The body has gone, and we are crying for the body. Don't we have that right?" This is religion. When you are surrendered before the truth, you gain the right to be part of the world without hesitation. But how often can we be part of the world without hesitation? We become fearful. Who is there who doesn't perceive the world as an enemy? Who hasn't built barriers for their own protection?

Religion is not just about chanting names. Religion is about breaking down the walls that have been erected around you in this world. You can sit amidst those walls, proclaiming, "I am Brahman, I am the Atman," and reciting verses from scriptures, but those walls will be a greater reality than all those verses. And if there are no walls, and under the open sky, free from boundaries, you are simply enjoying—whether in the world, in society, in the forest, among people, or in nature—then you are indeed Brahman.

Brahmatva is not merely about chanting "Brahman, Brahman." Brahmatva is about becoming boundless. The word Brahman is very close to the word vrihad, which means large, without boundaries. Those who are bound by limitations are in suffering. Those who are free from boundaries are in the joy of Brahman.

Now, whether or not words come from the lips, what difference does it make?

Brahman is not merely a matter of words. I request that you do not make religion

a disregard for life. Do not turn religion into an artificial seriousness. In the name of adulthood, maturity, and wisdom, do not make religion a burden. I see such people day and night, which is why I feel compelled to say this. In ordinary life, you give yourself the full right to laugh and play. When you sit with the Upanishads, give yourself the right to play with them too.

Religion does not mean to become lifeless. But I see that most of those who participate in religious events are either already dead or preparing to die. Religion is the essence of life. Understand the nine faces of Shakti as the infinite face of life. The nine forms of Shakti are expressions of life's infinite forms. One may be beautiful, and the other may also be beautiful. One may seem cruel, while the other appears charming; it doesn't matter. In one form, there is the mother, and in another, the destroyer. One form gives life, while the other takes it. One form grants knowledge, while another grants wealth. One form is a partner, and another is the mother of the universe. Can you see how closely these forms are related to you? Do you see how they connect to our personal lives?

When you go to worship them, understand that you are worshiping the various aspects of your own life. If you reach to offer your respects to Maa without honoring these aspects of your life, your offering will be in vain. You may be sitting at home, eating food—this is a form of life; learn to respect it. It is not something inferior. Do not seek extraordinary events to justify reverence, as if something is only worthy when it is miraculous, supernatural, or exceptional. We are simply sitting and eating bread and vegetables; this is significant. Understand that it is a supreme event, just as if you are in a temple.

When a child is born in your home, it is a supreme event. When death occurs, it is also a supreme event. And when I speak of birth and death, these are still rare occurrences that happen occasionally. The everyday, ordinary events—understand them as the dance of Shakti, the art of dance. If you are doing nothing, sitting in a chair reading the newspaper, or if you are tired and have gone to take a shower, this is the dance of life. You may be engrossed in conversation with a neighbor, watching TV, reading a book, talking to your child in the evening, gazing out of the window at the setting sun, or being with your partner—these events occur daily, and because they happen every day, we feel they are nothing special. Navadurga has come to tell you that everything special is contained within these moments, and there is nothing else that is special beyond them. And those who cannot see the truth in these moments will not find the truth at all.

I am repeating: You will find truth in the depths of the world, not in fleeing from it. And those who are afraid to dive into the depths of the world, 'jinn khoja tin paiyaan gehre paani paith'—this water, this flow, is what Buddha called life. You must sit deep in it; you must dive deep into it. And if you are afraid, "main baura doobna dara," if you are afraid of sinking, if any aspect of your life terrifies you, then truth is not for you, because the expression of Shiva is indeed Shakti.

The form of Shiva that can appear before you, which the mind can know, which the senses can recognize, is called Shakti. And the expression of truth is indeed the world. If the formless were to come before you, what would you grasp? Tell me, have your eyes ever seen anything formless? We are beings living in impurities; if something completely pure and unblemished comes before you, what relationship will you have with it? You must sit without complaint in the so-called impurities and distortions of life, and you will have the opportunity to complain because impurity is "impurity," and distortion is "distortion." You might feel like saying, "Look, this is all false, wrong, dirty."

It may seem false, wrong, or dirty, but do not run away from it. There is nothing here that is worthy of renunciation. If you must renounce, then renounce the feeling of renunciation. There is nothing here so inferior that you can say, "This is trivial; I have discarded it," or that you can claim your cleverness is greater than the Creator's. You say, "He created it, and we renounced it." God proposes, man disposes. And that's what we do, right? Am I touching you somewhere? The

Atman will be eternal; your relationship with the body is profound, and this body will not return; there is only one life for the body. And the opportunity is passing by; life is slipping away. Do not miss it.

You talk so much about Truth, so have a little faith in it. Nothing will happen that will cause you to break apart. No experience can be so overwhelming that it crushes you, and even if it does break you into pieces, what then? Just get through it. You will find that even after breaking, after becoming rubbish, after turning to dust, you still remain. Now, that is the truth; in the center of Shakti is truth. In reality, when Shiva and Shakti are depicted in images, it is done in a very misleading manner. It is often shown as—you may have seen the form of Ardhanarishvara—half Shiva and half Shakti. This idea is childish.

Shakti is all there is; Shiva is nowhere to be found, and the world is all there is; truth is nowhere to be found. Only Shakti should be reflected. There can be no depiction of Shiva, and if you are so eager to display Shiva, then show him as a point within the heart of Shakti. If Shakti is the complete expanse, then the point sitting in that expanse is Shiva. So if you wish to show, depict, or describe Shiva, do it as the heart of Shakti. It's rather strange that you have taken two images and joined them half-and-half to create Ardhanarishvara, to represent Shiva-Shakti.

Shiva and Shakti are not like that. I say again, only Shakti is Shakti. How will you reach Shiva? What sits in the heart of Shakti is called 'Shiva.' Now, if you want to reach Shiva, what will you do? Tell me, what can be done? And where will you find Shiva? He is in the heart of Shakti, in the embrace of Shakti, and Shakti means the world. Shakti means all aspects of the world, all its ups and downs; where else can you find him? Worshipping Shiva cannot be complete without Shakti. In fact, worship can only be of Shakti. Whoever has worshiped Shakti has found Shiva, and those who wish to bypass Shakti to reach Shiva will remain lost.

Written By: Acharya Prashant is a Vedanta teacher, social reformer, and a national bestselling author..!!

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