



BHAKTI YOGA

THE PATH OF DEVOTION

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

BHAKTI YOGA

THE PATH OF DEVOTION

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THE FOUR PATHS OF **SELF-REALIZATION**

From ancient times, people of India have practiced spiritual disciplines designed to clear the mind and support a state of serene, detached awareness. The practices for developing this desired state of balance, purity, wisdom, and peacefulness of mind are known collectively as yoga.

“Yoga” means “yoke” or “union” — referring to union with the true Self, the goal described in the Upanishads.

The sages distinguished four basic types of people and developed practices that are particularly suitable for each type, in order that each man can attain the desired union with the Self.

- For rational people, there is the Path of Knowledge.
- For meditative people, there is the Path of Self-Knowledge.
- For naturally active people, there is the Path of Selfless Action.
- For emotional people, there is the Path of Devotion.

—*Living Religions*, 79

I. The Path of Knowledge

—Jnana Yoga

An attempt to realize the Brahman-Atman identity through the study of the Vedas (i.e. the sacred texts of the Hindu tradition) and direct contemplation of the self:

After negating [one's identity with the body, the senses, and the mind] as "not this," "not this," that Awareness which alone remains — that I am. ...

The thought "Who am I?" will destroy all other thoughts, and, like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed. Then, there will arise Self-realization.

—Living Religions, 81

II. The Path of Self-knowledge

—Raja Yoga

Various systems (such as those described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras or the later system known as Kundalini) that focus on the use of techniques (including the adoption of physical postures, breath control, mantras and visualization) to bring the mind to a state of one-pointed concentration, known as samadhi, in which union with the absolute is attained.

Words and language are imperfect to describe this exalted state. ... Mind, intellect and the senses cease functioning. ... It is a state of eternal Bliss and eternal Wisdom. All dualities vanish in toto. ... All visible merge in the invisible or the Unseen. The individual soul becomes that which he contemplates.

—Living Religions, 80

III. The Path of Selfless Action

—Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga originally focused on varnasrama-dharma — the performance of actions in accordance with the duties (dharma) associated with one's caste (varna) and stage of life (asrama). By acting in accordance with the principles of varnasrama-dharma, one gradually worked through the four stages of life (student, householder, forest-dweller, renunciate) towards ultimate release from the cycle of rebirth (moksha) — though the process might take many lifetimes to complete.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, however, Krishna redefined Karma Yoga by combining it with the fundamental insight of Jnana Yoga — namely the ultimate identity of the individual self (atman) and the Universal Self (Brahman) — leading to the conclusion that “it is the Absolute who performs all actions.” Through this realization, one is able to perform action “without any interest in its fruits and without any personal sense of giving.” By relinquishing one's own attachment to the fruits of one's actions, one attains “liberation from the self in the very midst of work”:

I pervade the entire universe in my unmanifested form. All creatures find their existence in me, but I am not limited by them. Behold my divine mystery!

... The foolish do not look beyond physical appearances to see my true nature as the Lord of all creation. The knowledge of such deluded people is empty; their lives are fraught with disaster and evil and their work and hopes are all in vain.

But truly great souls seek my divine nature. They worship me with a one-pointed mind, having realized that I am the eternal source of all. Constantly striving, they make firm their resolve and worship me without wavering. Full of devotion, they sing of my divine glory. ...

Whatever I am offered in devotion with a pure heart — a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water — I partake of that love offering. Whatever you do, make it an offering to me — the food you eat, the sacrifices you make, the help

you give, even your suffering. In this way you will be freed from the bondage of karma, and from its results both pleasant and painful. Then, firm in renunciation and yoga, with your heart free, you will come to me.

I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear. But those who worship me with love live in me, and I come to life in them. ... All those who take refuge in me, whatever their birth, race, sex, or caste, will attain the supreme goal; this realization can be attained even by those whom society scorns. ... Therefore, having been born in this transient and forlorn world, give all your love to me. Fill your mind with me; love me; serve me; worship me always. Seeking me in your heart, you will at last be united with me.

—*Anthology of Living Religions*, 66–68 (*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 9); cf. BG/9

IV. The Path of Devotion

—*Bhakti Yoga*

Bhakti Yoga is closely related to the notion of Karma Yoga as presented in the Bhagavad-Gita, since it is precisely by performing action in a spirit of “devotion” to Krishna (rather than as a means of generating “good” karma that will benefit one either in this or some future life) that one attains release from the cycle of rebirth. This “devotion” is manifest as an intense feeling of love for God that is frequently expressed through poetry and song, such as the following offering from Mirabai:

*Without Krishna I cannot sleep.
Tortured by longing, I cannot sleep,
And the fire of love
Drives me to wander hither and thither.
Without the light of the Beloved
My house is dark,
And lamps do not please me.
Without the Beloved my bed is uninviting,*

*And I pass the nights awake.
 When will my Beloved return home?
 ... What shall I do? Where shall I go?
 Who can quench my pain?
 My body has been bitten
 By the snake of "absence,"
 And my life is ebbing away
 With every beat of the heart.
 ... My Lord when will you come
 To meet your Mira?
 ... When, my Lord,
 Will you come to laugh and talk with me?*

—*Anthology of Living Religions*, 79

Since Bhakti Yoga is more easily pursued than either Raja or Jnana Yoga, it is by far the most common form of Hindu practice. Its appeal is nicely expressed in the following quote from Sri Ramakrishna:

As long as the I-sense lasts, so long are true knowledge and Liberation impossible. ... [But] how very few can obtain this Union [Samadhi] and free themselves from this "I"? It is very rarely possible. Talk as much as you want, isolate yourself continuously, still this "I" will always return to you. Cut down the poplar tree today, and you will find tomorrow it forms new shoots. When you ultimately find that this "I" cannot be destroyed, let it remain as "I" the servant.

—*Living Religions*, 83

BHAKTI YOGA

THE PATH OF DEVOTION

Chapter I

Prayer

स तन्मयो ह्यमृत ईशसंस्थो ज्ञः सर्वगो भुवनस्यास्य गोप्ता।
य ईशेऽस्य जगतो नतियमेव नान्यो हेतुर्वदियत ईशनाय॥
यो ब्रह्माणां वदिधातुर्पूर्व यो वै वेदांश्च प्रहर्षितस्मै।
तं ह देवं आत्मबुद्धिप्रकाशं मुमुक्षुषुर्वै शरणमहं प्रपद्ये॥

*He is the Soul of the Universe; He is Immortal; His is the Rulership;
He is the All-knowing, the All-pervading, the Protector of the
Universe, the Eternal Ruler. None else is there efficient to govern
the world eternally. He who at the beginning of creation projected
Brahmâ (i.e. the universal consciousness), and who delivered the Vedas
unto him — seeking liberation I go for refuge unto that effulgent One,
whose light turns the understanding towards the Âtman.*

—Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad, VI. 17-18.

Definition Of Bhakti

Bhakti Yoga is a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in love. One single moment of the madness of extreme love to God brings us eternal freedom. “Bhakti”, says Nârada in his explanation of the Bhakti-aphorisms, “is intense love to God”; “When a man gets it, he loves all, hates none; he becomes satisfied for ever”; “This love cannot be reduced to any earthly benefit”, because so long as worldly desires last, that kind of love does not come; “Bhakti is greater than karma, greater than Yoga, because these are intended for an object in view, while Bhakti is its own fruition, its own means and its own end.”

Bhakti has been the one constant theme of our sages. Apart from the special writers on Bhakti, such as Shândilya or Narada, the great commentators on the Vyâsa-Sûtras, evidently advocates of knowledge (Jnâna), have also something very suggestive to say about love. Even when the commentator is anxious to explain many, if not all, of the texts so as to make them import a sort of dry knowledge, the Sûtras, in the chapter on worship especially, do not lend themselves to be easily manipulated in that fashion.

There is not really so much difference between knowledge (Jnana) and love (Bhakti) as people sometimes imagine. We shall see, as we go on, that in the end they converge and meet at the same point. So also is it with Râja Yoga, which when pursued as a means to attain liberation, and not (as unfortunately it frequently becomes in the hands of charlatans and mystery-mongers) as an instrument to hoodwink the unwary, leads us also to the same goal.

The one great advantage of Bhakti is that it is the easiest and the most natural way to reach the great divine end in view; its great disadvantage is that in its lower forms it oftentimes degenerates into hideous fanaticism. The fanatical crew in Hinduism, or Mohammedanism, or Christianity, have always been almost exclusively recruited from these worshippers on the lower planes of Bhakti. That singleness of attachment (Nishthâ) to a loved object, without which no genuine love can

grow, is very often also the cause of the denunciation of everything else. All the weak and undeveloped minds in every religion or country have only one way of loving their own ideal, i.e. by hating every other ideal. Herein is the explanation of why the same man who is so lovingly attached to his own ideal of God, so devoted to his own ideal of religion, becomes a howling fanatic as soon as he sees or hears anything of any other ideal. This kind of love is somewhat like the canine instinct of guarding the master's property from intrusion; only, the instinct of the dog is better than the reason of man, for the dog never mistakes its master for an enemy in whatever dress he may come before it. Again, the fanatic loses all power of judgment. Personal considerations are in his case of such absorbing interest that to him it is no question at all what a man says—whether it is right or wrong; but the one thing he is always particularly careful to know is who says it. The same man who is kind, good, honest, and loving to people of his own opinion, will not hesitate to do the vilest deeds when they are directed against persons beyond the pale of his own religious brotherhood.

But this danger exists only in that stage of Bhakti which is called the preparatory (Gauni). When Bhakti has become ripe and has passed into that form which is called the supreme (Parâ), no more is there any fear of these hideous manifestations of fanaticism; that soul which is overpowered by this higher form of Bhakti is too near the God of Love to become an instrument for the diffusion of hatred.

It is not given to all of us to be harmonious in the building up of our characters in this life: yet we know that, that character is of the noblest type in which all these three—knowledge and love and Yoga—are harmoniously fused. Three things are necessary for a bird to fly—the two wings and the tail as a rudder for steering. Jnana (Knowledge) is the one wing, Bhakti (Love) is the other, and Yoga is the tail that keeps up the balance. For those who cannot pursue all these three forms of worship together in harmony and take up, therefore, Bhakti alone as their way, it is necessary always to remember that forms and ceremonials, though absolutely necessary for the progressive soul, have no other value than taking us on to that state in which we feel the most intense love to God.

There is a little difference in opinion between the teachers of knowledge and those of love, though both admit the power of Bhakti. The Jnanis hold Bhakti to be an instrument of liberation, the Bhaktas look upon it both as the instrument and the thing to be attained. To my mind this is a distinction without much difference. In fact, Bhakti, when used as an instrument, really means a lower form of worship, and the higher form becomes inseparable from the lower form of realisation at a later stage. Each seems to lay a great stress upon his own peculiar method of worship, forgetting that with perfect love true knowledge is bound to come even unsought, and that from perfect knowledge true love is inseparable.

Bearing this in mind let us try to understand what the great Vedantic commentators have to say on the subject. In explaining the Sutra *Âvrittirasakridupadesât*¹, Bhagavân Shankara says, “Thus people say, ‘He is devoted to the king, he is devoted to the Guru’; they say this of him who follows his Guru, and does so, having that following as the one end in view. Similarly they say, ‘The loving wife meditates on her loving husband’; here also a kind of eager and continuous remembrance is meant.” This is devotion according to Shankara.

“Meditation again is a constant remembrance (of the thing meditated upon) flowing like an unbroken stream of oil poured out from one vessel to another. When this kind of remembering has been attained (in relation to God) all bandages break. Thus it is spoken of in the scriptures regarding constant remembering as a means to liberation. This remembering again is of the same form as seeing, because it is of the same meaning as in the passage, ‘When He who is far and near is seen, the bonds of the heart are broken, all doubts vanish, and all effects of work disappear’ He who is near can be seen, but he who is far can only be remembered. Nevertheless the scripture says that he have to see Him who is near as well as Him who, is far, thereby indicating to us that the above kind of remembering is as good as seeing. This remembrance when exalted assumes the same form as seeing... Worship is constant remembering as may be seen from the essential texts of scriptures. Knowing, which is the same as repeated worship, has been described as constant remembering... Thus the memory, which has

attained to the height of what is as good as direct perception, is spoken of in the Shruti as a means of liberation. "This Atman is not to be reached through various sciences, nor by intellect, nor by much study of the Vedas. Whomsoever this Atman desires, by him is the Atman attained, unto him this Atman discovers Himself." Here, after saying that mere hearing, thinking and meditating are not the means of attaining this Atman, it is said, "Whom this Atman desires, by him the Atman is attained." The extremely beloved is desired; by whomsoever this Atman is extremely beloved, he becomes the most beloved of the Atman. So that this beloved may attain the Atman, the Lord Himself helps. For it has been said by the Lord: "Those who are constantly attached to Me and worship Me with love—I give that direction to their will by which they come to Me." Therefore it is said that, to whomsoever this remembering, which is of the same form as direct perception, is very dear, because it is dear to the Object of such memory perception, he is desired by the Supreme Atman, by him the Supreme Atman is attained. This constant remembrance is denoted by the word Bhakti." So says Bhagavân Râmânuja in his commentary on the Sutra Athâto Brahma-jijnâsâ².

In commenting on the Sutra of Patanjali, Ishvara pranidhânâdvâ, i.e. "Or by the worship of the Supreme Lord"—Bhoja says, "Pranidhâna is that sort of Bhakti in which, without seeking results, such as sense-enjoyments etc., all works are dedicated to that Teacher of teachers." Bhagavan Vyâsa also, when commenting on the same, defines Pranidhana as "the form of Bhakti by which the mercy of the Supreme Lord comes to the Yogi, and blesses him by granting him his desires". According to Shândilya, "Bhakti is intense love to God." The best definition is, however, that given by the king of Bhaktas, Prahlâda:

या प्रीतिरिविविकानां वषियेष्वनपायिनी। त्वामनुस्मरतः सा मे
हृदयान्मापसरपतु॥

*That deathless love which the ignorant have for the fleeting objects of
the senses—as I keep meditating on Thee—may not that love slip
away from my heart!*

Love! For whom? For the Supreme Lord Ishvara. Love for any other being, however great cannot be Bhakti; for, as Ramanuja says in his Shri Bhâshya, quoting an ancient Âchârya, i.e. a great teacher:

आब्रह्मस्तम्बपर्यन्ताः जगदन्तर्व्यवस्थिताः। प्राणानिः
कर्मजनतिसंसारवशवर्तनिः॥यतस्ततो न ते ध्याने ध्याननिमुपकारकाः।
अवदियान्तरगतास्सर्वे ते हि संसारगोचराः॥

From Brahmâ to a clump of grass, all things that live in the world are slaves of birth and death caused by Karma; therefore they cannot be helpful as objects of meditation, because they are all in ignorance and subject to change.

In commenting on the word Anurakti used by Shandilya, the commentator Svapneshvara says that it means Anu, after, and Rakti, attachment; i.e. the attachment which comes after the knowledge of the nature and glory of God; else a blind attachment to any one, e.g. to wife or children, would be Bhakti. We plainly see, therefore, that Bhakti is a series or succession of mental efforts at religious realisation beginning with ordinary worship and ending in a supreme intensity of love for Ishvara.

Notes :

- 1- Meditation is necessary, that having been often enjoined.
- 2- Hence follows a dissertation on Brahman.

Chapter II

The Philosophy of Ishvara

Who is Ishvara? Janmâdyasya yatah — “From whom is the birth, continuation, and dissolution of the universe,” — He is Ishvara — “the Eternal, the Pure, the Ever-Free, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, the All-Merciful, the Teacher of all teachers”; and above all, Sa Ishvarah anirvachaniya-premasvarupah — “He the Lord is, of His own nature, inexpressible Love.” These certainly are the definitions of a Personal God. Are there then two Gods — the “Not this, not this,” the Sat-chit-ânanda, the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss of the philosopher, and this God of Love of the Bhakta? No, it is the same Sat-chit-ananda who is also the God of Love, the impersonal and personal in one. It has always to be understood that the Personal God worshipped by the Bhakta is not separate or different from the Brahman. All is Brahman, the One without a second; only the Brahman, as unity or absolute, is too much of an abstraction to be loved and worshipped; so the Bhakta chooses the relative aspect of Brahman, that is, Ishvara, the Supreme Ruler. To use a simile: Brahman is as the clay or substance out of which an infinite variety of articles are fashioned. As clay, they are all one; but form or manifestation differentiates them. Before every one of them was made, they all existed potentially in the clay, and, of course, they are identical substantially; but when formed, and so long as the form remains, they are separate and different; the clay-mouse can never become a clay-elephant, because, as manifestations, form alone makes them what they are, though as unformed clay they are all one. Ishvara is the highest manifestation of the Absolute Reality, or in other words, the highest possible reading of the Absolute by the human mind. Creation is eternal, and so also is Ishvara.

In the fourth Pâda of the fourth chapter of his Sûtras, after stating the almost infinite power and knowledge which will come to the liberated

soul after the attainment of Moksha, Vyāsa makes the remark, in an aphorism, that none, however, will get the power of creating, ruling, and dissolving the universe, because that belongs to God alone. In explaining the Sutra it is easy for the dualistic commentators to show how it is ever impossible for a subordinate soul, Jiva, to have the infinite power and total independence of God. The thorough dualistic commentator Madhvāchārya deals with this passage in his usual summary method by quoting a verse from the Varāha Purāna.

In explaining this aphorism the commentator Rāmānuja says, “This doubt being raised, whether among the powers of the liberated souls is included that unique power of the Supreme One, that is, of creation etc. of the universe and even the Lordship of all, or whether, without that, the glory of the liberated consists only in the direct perception of the Supreme One, we get as an argument the following: It is reasonable that the liberated get the Lordship of the universe, because the scriptures say, ‘He attains to extreme sameness with the Supreme One and all his desires are realised.’ Now extreme sameness and realisation of all desires cannot be attained without the unique power of the Supreme Lord, namely, that of governing the universe. Therefore, to attain the realisation of all desires and the extreme sameness with the Supreme, we must all admit that the liberated get the power of ruling the whole universe. To this we reply, that the liberated get all the powers except that of ruling the universe. Ruling the universe is guiding the form and the life and the desires of all the sentient and the non-sentient beings. The liberated ones from whom all that veils His true nature has been removed, only enjoy the unobstructed perception of the Brahman, but do not possess the power of ruling the universe. This is proved from the scriptural text, “From whom all these things are born, by which all that are born live, unto whom they, departing, return — ask about it. That is Brahman.’ If this quality of ruling the universe be a quality common even to the liberated then this text would not apply as a definition of Brahman defining Him through His rulership of the universe. The uncommon attributes alone define a thing; therefore in texts like — ‘My beloved boy, alone, in the beginning there existed the



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BHAKTI YOGA

THE PATH OF DEVOTION

Bhakti Yoga, or the path of devotion, is based on the doctrine "Love is God and God is Love". The Bhakti yogi experiences separation and longs to meet or even just glimpse his beloved, God. Nothing else attracts him, nothing else holds his attention, all else is meaningless.

Bhakti Yoga appeals particularly to those of an emotional nature. The Bhakti yogi is motivated chiefly by the power of love and sees God as the embodiment of love. Through prayer, worship and ritual he surrenders himself to God, channelling and transmuting his emotions into unconditional love or devotion. Chanting or singing the praises of God form a substantial part of Bhakti Yoga.

Swami Vivekananda argues that Bhakti Yoga is the most direct and shortest way to experience the divine. There is nothing higher than love and Bhakti Yoga is the religion of love.



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