Daylight and darkness, dusk and dawn, winter and springtime come and go. Time plays and life ebbs away. But the storm of desire never subsides. (Hence) Worship the Lord, Worship the Lord.

—*Bhaja Covindam* by Adi Shankaracharya
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‘Doing is very good, but that comes from thinking. . . . Fill the brain, therefore, with high thoughts, highest ideals, place them day and night before you, and out of that will come great work.’

—Swami Vivekananda
Cover Story

Bhakti—The Path of Divine Love

‘Whoever with devotion offers Me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that I accept—the devout gift of the pure-minded,’ says the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita (9.26). God needs nothing from devotees. Yet when a devotee approaches God with his simple offerings, expressing his genuine and loving devotion, the Lord is pleased. Flowers, lamp and food offerings are often taken to be befitting means of expressing one’s devotion to God, though devotion is not restricted to these; one can offer anything to God (see Gita 9.27). Depicting through various articles the rich and varied tradition of Bhakti in Sanatana Dharma, including some thoughts on Bhakti in other traditions, this issue of The Vedanta Kesari is devoted to emphasise the importance of divine love in attaining inner peace and joy. In today’s world of rank materialism, violence and ever-growing spread of a listless culture that promote selfish love, it is important to focus on living a life based on divine love and spirituality. No wonder Sri Ramakrishna emphasised on Bhakti so much! Like flowers offered at the feet of the Lord, may our hearts be devoted to higher life and divine love always! 

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Glory of Bhakti

The important thing is somehow to cultivate devotion to God and love for Him. What is the use of knowing many things? It is enough to cultivate love of God by following any of the paths. When you have this love, you are sure to attain God. Afterwards, if it is necessary, God will explain everything to you and tell you about the other paths as well.

It is enough for you to develop love of God. You have no need of many opinions and discussions. You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes. Enjoy them to your heart’s content. You don’t need to count the branches and leaves on the trees. It is wise to follow the attitude of Hanuman: ‘I do not know the day of the week, the phase of the moon, or the position of the stars; I only contemplate Rama.’

—Sri Ramakrishna

May I think of You with that strong love which the ignorant cherish for the things of the world, and may that love never cease to abide in my heart.

—Prapanna Gita, 42

My Lord, should thousands of births fall to my lot, may I always still possess an unshakable and unflinching devotion to You.

—Prapanna Gita, 41

Glorifying Me always and striving with firm resolve, bowing down to Me in devotion, always steadfast, they worship Me.

—Bhagavad Gita, 9-14
Bhakti—the Path and the Destination

Approaching Bhakti

A path presumes destination. And if Bhakti is the path, what is the destination? Bhakti—itself. This is what Swami Vivekananda points out in his well-known work, Bhakti Yoga, quoting the Narada Bhakti Sutras, ‘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.’

A common understanding of the term Bhakti draws a portrait of temples, images, lights, flowers, Prasad, pilgrimage, Bhajans, festivals . . . well, the list is as varied as the traditions of Bhakti are. But Bhakti is not merely an external, tangible, visible expression of devotion and faith but has an inner, more profound core and that is what requires to be understood in order to be a true Bhakta. Is Bhakti about asking things of the world? To ask for health, wealth, to ask for setting right the circumstances one finds oneself in, to solve our problems? Does Bhakti mean offering things to Him in ritual worship? These are just baby steps towards recognizing the presence of Ishwara, the Personal God, and approach Him for fulfilling what one considers valuable. The real goal of Bhakti lies much above of all these.

Everyone is a natural Bhakta. Everyone in the world loves but the point is what one loves. Sri Krishna describes in the Gita four types of Bhaktas who worship God: those who are in some crises and in need of urgent help, those who are in need of wealth or its equivalents to solve the issues one faces, those who are interested in knowing the nature of God, and those who want nothing from God but love Him for nothing else is worth loving. All of them are Bhaktas, in their own way, but the real Bhakta is one who has rid himself of all desires and needs, and longs intensely, for God, the giver of peace and love. Unselfishness is the hallmark of such a devotee who has graduated from seeking worldly and urgent matters and all whose doubts have been removed.

Says Swami Vivekananda, ‘In this evanescent world, where everything is falling to pieces, we have to make the highest use of what time we have,’ says the Bhakta; and really the highest use of life is to hold it at the service of all beings. It is the horrible body-idea that breeds all the selfishness in the world, just this one delusion that we are wholly the body we own, and that we must by all possible means try our very best to preserve and to please it. If you know that you are positively other than your body, you have then none to fight with or struggle against; you are dead to all ideas of selfishness. So the Bhakta declares that we have to hold ourselves as if we are altogether dead to all the things of the world; and that is indeed self-surrender. Let things come as they may. This is the meaning of ‘Thy will be done’—not going about fighting and struggling and thinking all the while that God wills all our own weaknesses and worldly ambitions. It may be that good comes even out of our selfish struggles; that is, however, God’s look-out.

The perfected Bhakta’s idea must be never to will and work for himself. ‘Lord, they build high temples in Your name; they make large gifts in Your name; I am poor; I have nothing; so I take this body of mine and place it at Your
feet. Do not give me up, O Lord.' Such is the prayer proceeding out of the depths of the Bhakta’s heart. To him who has experienced it, this eternal sacrifice of the self unto the Beloved Lord is higher by far than all wealth and power, than even all soaring thoughts of renown and enjoyment. The peace of the Bhakta’s calm resignation is a peace that passeth all understanding and is of incomparable value.

‘Eternal sacrifice of the self unto the Beloved Lord’ is what a Bhakta ultimately wants to attain. He might begin with solving a mundane situation or need but if he is truly earnest on the path of divine love, he reaches the state of complete self-abnegation.

Meanings of Bhakti

The Sanskrit term Bhakti, etymologically has three meanings and all of them convey the path and the goal of Bhakti beautifully:

- **Bhajanam Bhakti** (to enjoy the Name and the Glory of God is Bhakti),
- **Bhago Bhakti** (to divide oneself from the world and to give oneself to God is Bhakti),
- **Bhanjanam Bhakti** (to destroy hatred and attachments towards all things, overcome delusion and ignorance is Bhakti).

So Bhakti, in a combined sense, means, to enjoy the very thought of God, to separate oneself from all that obstructs one from doing this and in the process give up worldly passions and be free from ignorance.

While comparing Bhakti with Jnana, sometimes it is said that Bhakti is like mother and Jnana is like father. Suppose a child returns home from his play and if he wishes to sit near his father, father would generally insist that the child should first get refreshed and then come to him. On the other hand, when the child approaches his mother, mother does not make any such demand. She lifts the child and helps him refresh himself. So is Bhakti, the mother. She removes all the dirt of the mind and fills it with sweetness of love and purity. Jnana, the father, demands conditions such as self-control, withdrawal of senses, right understanding, dispassion and so on. Sri Ramakrishna compares Bhakti to a woman who, unlike a man, has access to the inner apartment of a house. Bhakti thus enters the inner recesses of the mind.

It is not to undermine the importance of Jnana or the path of knowledge in the complete scheme of spiritual life. Both Jnana and Bhakti are needed. Swami Vivekananda cautions:

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.4

While Bhakti is of great importance, at times Bhakti aspirants seem to undervalue other paths of Yoga—Swamiji’s words would come as correctives in this context. Swamiji also includes Bhakti—the dualistic approach—in the broader framework of Vedanta. While Vedanta often means Advaita Vedanta, the comprehensive scheme of spiritual life includes Bhakti. He says,

We all have to begin as dualists in the religion of love. God is to us a separate Being, and we feel ourselves to be separate beings also. Love then comes in the middle, and man begins to approach God, and God also comes nearer and nearer to man. Man takes up all the various relationships of life, as father, as mother, as son, as friend, as master, as lover, and projects them on his ideal of love, on his God. To him

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4. Swami Vivekananda
God exists as all these, and the last point of his progress is reached when he feels that he has become absolutely merged in the object of his worship. We all begin with love for ourselves, and the unfair claims of the little self make even love selfish.

At last, however, comes the full blaze of light, in which this little self is seen to have become one with the Infinite. Man himself is transfigured in the presence of this Light of Love, and he realises at last the beautiful and inspiring truth that Love, the Lover, and the Beloved are One.

The Sole Condition for Bhakti

Bhakti requires self-sacrifice. Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Rama-krishna, narrates a story to illustrate it:

Once a man wanted to have Prema (intense love for God). Just then he saw a vendor passing by the street with a basket on his head, crying, ‘Ho, here is Prema. Who wants it? Who would buy it?’ Hearing this some boys cried out, ‘Oh, we, we will eat Prema.’ Some grown-up people also called out, ‘Oh, yes, we want Prema, we will buy it.’ At this the vendor lowered the basket from his head and said, ‘Come, let me know how much Prema each of you will have. I sell Prema by weight. How much do you want, a pound, eh?’ and with this he drew out a sharp knife and said, ‘Look here! Cut your head off with this, and I shall give you Prema, as much as your head weighs.’ If you want Prema you will have to give the price—your head! Verily, never has spirituality been attained by mummery—by empty words! Sacrifice, terrible sacrifice of one’s own life is the price for it. Have you not heard of Shri Radha? She gave up everything—everything that one could hold dear of life; and so she got Him.

The ‘sacrifice’ which Swami Premananda refers to is the sacrifice of lower tendencies of anger, greed, jealousy, and so on, including ego. Jnana too demands it, but giving them up in Bhakta’s case takes place gradually as Swamiji points out in his discussion in the chapter on the renunciation of a Bhakta in his well-known book Bhakti Yoga.

The practice of Bhakti hits hard at the very idea of ’I’—at ‘me’ and ‘mine’. Self-love cannot coexist with Bhakti. The much quoted phrase in Hindi says, ‘The road to Love is very narrow; two cannot pass through it together. Either ’I’ goes or the Lord goes.’ I and He become one in the ultimate state of Bhakti. Swamiji quoted:

You know the old Persian poem, translated into English: I came to see my beloved. The doors were closed. I knocked and a voice came from inside. ‘Who art thou?’ ‘I am so-and-so.’ The door was not opened. A second time I came and knocked; I was asked the same question, and gave the same answer. The door opened not. I came a third time, and the same question came. I answered, ‘I am thee, my love,’ and the door opened. Worship of the Impersonal God is through truth. And what is truth? That I am He.

Unless one reaches this sublime state of oneness with the Divine Beloved, one may get entangled in the web of rituals, practices and dress codes and be still far from the destination of Para-bhakti. Can the infinite be caught in these finite things! Of course they play a role in nurturing the young plant but sometimes the fence itself may an obstacle in the growth of the plant. Hence one must not forget the goal of Bhakti which is Para-bhakti or Supreme Devotion to God without any expectations and conditions.

Another caution that needs to be borne in mind about Bhakti, especially in its early stages of development, is the danger of fanaticism. While Nishtha, one-point loyalty to one’s chosen form of God is the bedrock of growth on the path of devotion, one should not develop it by hating or underrating or criticizing other forms of the Divine. All forms of Divine are, ultimately, His only. Not only...
all Forms are His, all those who worship those forms, too are His. So hatred and violence have no place in a true devotee’s heart.

**Bhakti—the Fulfillment of Life**

In *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the celebrated work on Bhakti tradition, the story comes about Sage Vyasa who, even after writing of Dharma in all its splendor by writing Mahabharata, was not content until sage Narada visits him and advises him that unless he write a book on the glories of the Lord, expound the greatness of His Being, and love, he cannot have peace and satisfaction that he was missing. The simple message of the story is that unless one develops or cultivates love for God, one cannot have inner peace and sweetness. Even the knowledge and exposition of Dharma does not bring the inner fulfillment that Bhakti does.

The Bhakta sees sweetness everywhere. He finds the *Madhurya*, sweetness of His Lord—who may be viewed as Mother, Father, Child, Beloved and so on—His eyes, face, walk, talk, dress and whatever is connected with Him, are sweet to him. This sweetness is not a temporary perception but a lasting inner state, at times alternated by pain of separation. After all, the Bhakta does not seek complete oneness with God—he wants to taste ‘sugar’, and not become sugar.

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**This Issue on Bhakti**

Swami Vivekananda in his famous aphoristic statement says, ‘Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature internal and external. Do this either by work, or *worship*, by psychic control or philosophy and be free. This is the whole of religion . . .’ Worship refers to the path of Divine Love or Bhakti. Besides his insightful book *Bhakti Yoga* and several lectures on Bhakti many places in his *Complete Works*, Swamiji, while explaining the meaning of the emblem of Ramakrishna Mission, said, ⁹

The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma; the *lotus*, of Bhakti; and the rising-sun, of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the swan in the picture stands for the Paramatman (Supreme Self). Therefore the idea of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Yoga, the vision of the Paramatman is obtained.

In other words, Swamiji wanted Bhakti as an essential part of the scheme of spiritual life that he taught. This Issue is devoted to this holistic ideal placed by Swamiji.

Divided into three sections, the Issue is an attempt to bring together many scriptural schools and traditions of Bhakti, besides focusing on how one can practice Bhakti in today’s context.

Our sincere thanks to all learned monks and others who have enriched the issue with their valuable writings.

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2. CW, 1.343
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6. *Religions and its Practice* by The First Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, p 48
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Significance of Love of God

Bhakti means love of God.

The term Bhakti is derived from the Samskrit root bhaj which means ‘serving with love’ (bhaj sevayam). Bhakti hence means loving service. It is the love towards God and serving Him with affection and respect which is the true meaning of real Bhakti.

Sri Ramakrishna says that God especially relishes the Bhakti—‘loving service’—of the poor and the lowly. In the Mahabharata it is narrated how Sri Krishna accepted the simple hospitality of the poor Vidura and not of the lavish one offered by Duryodhana who was the king. Indeed, God is fond of his devotees. Sri Ramakrishna says in his Gospel, 1

God very much relishes the bhakti of the poor and the lowly, just as the cow relishes fodder mixed with oil-cake. King Duryodhana showed Krishna the splendour of his wealth and riches, but Krishna accepted the hospitality of the poor Vidura. God is fond of His devotees. He runs after the devotee as the cow after the calf.

Bhakti is the one essential thing for attaining the highest spiritual enlightenment which means experiencing the Eternal and Infinite Love, Life and Joy. To love God, there is no necessity to know the glories or powers of God. Human life is meant to realise God and not to be wasted in trying to know the ways of God or to judge Him. Infinite are His ways of managing His limitless creation; how can our puny minds comprehend His ways? Can a baby understand the Einstein’s Theory of Relativity? We are all babies in the infinite and complex world of creation and how it works. We are too small to understand it. Nor, says Sri Ramakrishna, is there any practical use of knowing all this stuff. Spiritual experience is all that matters.

Sri Ramakrishna met many scholarly people who tried to ‘judge God’ and say that God was not right or proper. Sri Ramakrishna advised them that it was a futile exercise because it did not help them in the progress of their spiritual life of Bhakti. First of all our common sense says that one who judges others must have superior knowledge, power, etc., than the one whom he judges. Can anyone, even the greatest intellect or moral person, claim to be more intelligent or moral than God? In Sri Ramakrishna’s language can a vessel of one litre capacity hold four litres of liquid?

Once Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, a legend of Bengal in vast learning, philanthropy and strong character, complained that God was inactive and did not prevent the massacre of hundred thousands of prisoners of war by Chingsis Khan because he could neither feed nor release them! Sri Ramakrishna when he heard the complaint of Vidyasagar commented...
thus, ‘Can one understand God’s motive? The aim of human life is to attain Bhakti. We have come here to eat mangos (i.e. to attain the infinite joy of Mukti), not to count branches and leaves on the tree, i.e., waste our time and energy in futile reasoning, etc.

In order to attain that one has to follow what is called ‘Yoga’, the path of inner growth. While Sri Ramakrishna describes all the four Yogas—Karma, Jnana, Dhyana and Bhakti—he affirms that Bhakti yoga is the one best suited for this age of ours—the Kaliyuga. And that too the Bhakti yoga as advocated by sage Narada.

The Bhakti According to Narada

It is believed that Narada, the celestial sage mentioned in the Hindu scriptures, was entrusted the task of spreading Bhakti among one and all. The Narada Bhakti Sutras attributed to him describe various aspects of developing Bhakti. The Bhakti according to Narada consists of singing the Name and glories of God and praying to Him for knowledge, devotion and His vision.

Sri Ramakrishna asked a devotee to pray to God thus:

May my actions, O Divine Mother, be fewer every day till I attain Thee. May I perform, without attachment to the results, only what action is absolutely necessary for me. May I have great love for Thee as I go on with my few duties. May I not entangle myself in new work so long as I do not realize Thee. But I shall perform it if I receive Thy command. Otherwise not.

This is the core of Narada’s way of Bhakti—to seek unconditional love for God.

The Formal Bhakti

The beginner’s Bhakti is rather elementary. It consists of doing some chanting, Japa, worship, sacrifice, and so on for sometime. And when this does not seem to bear any fruits, the beginner gives up in disgust. He is impatient and fickle-minded. On the other hand, the real devotee is like a seasoned farmer who will not give up farming even if the rains fail year after year. Sri Ramakrishna says,

First one has to follow the rules of worship and formal adoration of God. It is called Vaidhi Bhakti. If one follows it sincerely, it leads to Raga Bhakti, passionate love of God.

Growing in Bhakti

Sri Ramakrishna further says that as you develop love for God, your worldly duties become fewer and fewer and after God-realisation they completely drop away. He said,

When the fruit appears the blossom drops off. Love of God is the fruit, and rituals are the
blossom. When the daughter-in-law of the house becomes pregnant, she cannot do much work. Her mother-in-law gradually lessens her duties in the house. When her time arrives she does practically nothing. And after the child is born her only work is to play with it. She doesn’t do any household duties at all.

God can be seen if one takes to the company of the holy people. Who are holy people? Those people who hold God realization as the goal of their lives and who do all other duties of the world to please God alone. They do not have any other motive. One should seek company of such holy people.

One should also constantly pray to God for keeping one away from temptations of sense pleasures, greed of wealth, name, fame and power. One should find a Guru as a guide and follow his instructions. Then one can see God.

In any spiritual path, an aspirant is tormented by the thoughts of the mistakes or sins one has committed, knowingly and unknowingly. Some religious people advocate that ‘confession’ before some religious person can remove the sins. But Sri Ramakrishna advocates that all sins go away by chanting God’s name. He says that one should firmly say this:5

One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: ‘What? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage any more?’

If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind, and everything become pure. Why should one talk only about sin and hell, and such things? Say but once, ‘O Lord, I have undoubtedly done wicked things, but I won’t repeat them.’ And have faith in His name.

Indeed, we must be able to tell God who is our own father and mother, ‘O Lord, I have no doubt committed sins but I won’t repeat them.’ This is the way of not getting tormented by them and be free of guilt feelings forever.

Sri Ramakrishna further tells that one should approach a holy man, accept him as his Guru and follow the instructions he receives from him. Sri Ramakrishna says,6

Everybody will surely be liberated. But one should follow the instructions of the guru; if one follows a devious path, one will suffer in trying to retrace one’s steps. It takes a long time to achieve liberation. A man may fail to obtain it in this life.

Three Types of Bhakti

Sri Ramakrishna speaks of Sattvik, Rajasik and Tamasik Bhakti. These three are the Gunas, the basic qualities, with which the whole creation is made of Sattva stands for purity and knowledge, Rajas for activity and Tamas for dullness and inactivity.

A Sattvik devotee, the one who has more Sattva in his nature, practices Bhakti in a very simple way. When he worships God, he does so without any show and fanfare. He uses simple things while worshiping his chosen form of God. The one who is of Rajasic nature makes a show of his Japamala, wears a silken cloth and tries to impress with external marks and so on.

The one who is of Tamasic nature shows a fiery spirit in his prayers to God. Sri Ramakrishna says,7

A man endowed with tamasic bhakti has burning faith. Such a devotee literally extorts boons from God, even as a robber falls upon a man and plunders his money. ‘Bind! Beat! Kill!’—that is his way, the way of the dacoits.

We can see here Sri Ramakrishna’s appreciation of the ‘dynamism’ of the Tamasic devotee. In another place also he actually praises this good side of a Tamasic devotee!
The Single-minded Bhakti

Another aspect of Bhakti is the single-mindedness. There are some devotees who are attached to a single aspect of God although they know that God has other aspects. Sri Ramakrishna mentions the case of Hanuman who would not see God in any form other than Rama. So also was Vibhishana who refused to salute Krishna in the Rajasuya sacrifice mentioned in the epic Mahabharata. Sri Ramakrishna narrates:

Once the Pandava brothers performed the Rajasuya sacrifice. All the kings placed Yudhisthira on the royal throne and bowed low before him in homage. But Vibhishana, the King of Ceylon, said, ‘I bow down to Narayana and to none else.’ At these words the Lord Krishna bowed down to Yudhisthira. Only then did Vibhishana prostrate himself, crown and all, before him.

So were the Gopis of Vrindaban who wanted the young cowherd form of Krishna and would not even look at Krishna in the royal attire wearing crown in Mathura!

Sri Ramakrishna compares this type of Bhakti to the attitude of a wife toward her husband. He says,

Do you know what devotion to one ideal is like? It is like the attitude of a daughter-in-law in the family. She serves all the members of the family—her brothers-in-law, father-in-law, husband, and so forth—brining them water to wash their feet, fetching their towels, arranging their seats, and the like; but with her husband she has a special relationship.

In social life also we see we love in a general way all but we shower love on some in a special way.

Sri Ramakrishna makes a special reference to the love of a perfect lover of God. He says,

The Paramahamsa realizes that all these—good and bad, virtue and vice, real and unreal—are only the glories of God’s maya. But these are very deep thoughts. One realizing this cannot keep an organization together or anything like that.

Further Glimpses of Bhakti

Bhakti is a passionate pursuit of an ideal God. Human nature sometimes cannot keep up the same enthusiasm and may get distracted. Then they may feel that they do not have enough time for practicing Bhakti. Sri Ramakrishna comes to our rescue when he says, ‘Devotion is well suited to Kaliyuga.’ This means one should constantly chant the name and glories of God. Sri Ramakrishna says:

If a devotee prays to God with real longing, God cannot help revealing Himself to him. . . . [Bhakti means] to adore God with body, mind, and words. ‘With body’ means to serve and worship God with one’s hands, go to holy places with one’s feet, hear the chanting of the name and glories of God with one’s ears, and behold the divine image with one’s eyes. ‘With mind’ means to contemplate and meditate on God constantly and to remember and think of His lila. ‘With words’ means to sing hymns to Him and chant His name and glories. . . . let those who have no leisure worship God at least morning and evening by whole-heartedly chanting His name and clapping their hands.

When Sri Ramakrishna wanted to practice Vedanta (Jnana yoga) under his Vedanta Guru Sri Totapuri, his Tantrik Guru, Bhairavi Brahmani dissuaded him from doing so. She thought that the Bhakti to Divine Mother she had taught Sri Ramakrishna would be destroyed by the Jnana of Guru Totapuri. Indeed, this is what many thought until Sri Ramakrishna appeared on the spiritual scene. Sri Ramakrishna practiced Jnana under Totapuri successfully and then said ‘One can attain the knowledge of Brahman too by following the path of Bhakti.
God is all powerful. He may give his devotee Brahmajnana also if he so wills. But the devotee generally does not seek knowledge of the absolute. He would rather have the consciousness that God is the Divine Mother and he the child.’

Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated this in his life. How many times he would go into deep Samadhi, i.e. experience of the oneness with Brahman, while listening to devotional songs on Rama or Shiva!

Once Sri Ramakrishna was returning to his room from the pine grove. He saw hypocrite Hazra telling beads. He said to the Divine Mother, ‘Mother, how small-minded fellow he is. He lives here [with Sri Ramakrishna] and still he practices Japa with a rosary. Whoever comes here will have his spiritual consciousness awakened all at once! He won’t have to bother much about Japa!’

Conclusion

We have numerous Bhaktas in our Indian spiritual history who have practised and attained to perfection by the path of Bhakti as discussed above. Yet in the modern times, Sri Ramakrishna has left the example of his life and the lives of a galaxy of his disciples—both monastic and house-holders—who attained to highest spiritual illumination through Bhakti. We have amidst them unlettered ones, aged ones, bereaved ones who lost their near and dear people, helpless women, child widows—all of them attained spiritual fulfilment.

Sri Ramakrishna taught them, in general, the path of ‘Servant-Master’ relationship (dasya) with God. He also exhorted them to consider and call on God as ‘Mother’ which would yield success easily. To people who felt very helpless such as Girish Chandra Ghosh (who was given to drinking and was a womaniser), or fallen women like Tara Sundari, Vinodini who were actresses in drama companies, Sri Ramakrishna prescribed ‘the path of self-surrender’ to God called Saranagati. These aspirants with the strength of their fiery faith and resignation to Sri Ramakrishna attained to unimaginable heights of moral perfection and spiritual enlightenment!

Thus Sri Ramakrishna, the greatest of the Incarnations (avatāravarīṣṭha), as called by Swami Vivekananda, demonstrated the truth of Bhagavad Gita that even the ‘worst of sinners’ (suduracharo) can attain to mukti by surrendering themselves to God.

He has also demonstrated the truth of Bhagavatam that one who has neither full dispassion nor too much attachment to worldly life (and its activities) but has developed a faith in My (God’s) life and works, can attain spiritual enlightenment through Bhakti:12

यद्वृत्त्या मतं कथादी जात्राद्रश्तु व: पुमानः
न निर्विभो नानानं सक्तो मक्षी। योगोपी शिक्षि:||

Lastly but not the least, comes the great teaching of Sri Ramakrishna that it is the duty of every man to serve God in man. He taught that by helping the poor and the needy, it is the helper that is benefited because he is rendering worship to the God in the poor and needy. He thus develops more and more unselfishness and love of God through such an action and eventually realises God. He thus attains to the same goal which a Bhakta would attain.

References

SECTION-I

STUDIES ON THE PATH OF BHAKTI
This idea of devotion and worship to some higher being who can reflect back the love to man is universal. In various religions this love and devotion is manifested in various degrees, at different states. The lowest stage is that of ritualism, when abstract ideas are almost impossible, and are dragged down to the lowest plane, and made concrete. Forms come into play, and, along with them, various symbols. Throughout the history of the world, we find that man is trying to grasp the abstract through thought-forms, or symbols. All the external manifestations of religion—bells, music, rituals, books, and images—come under that head. Anything that appeals to the senses, anything that helps man to form a concrete image of the abstract, is taken hold of, and worshipped.

From time to time, there have been reformers in every religion who have stood against all symbols and rituals. But vain has been their opposition, for so long as man will remain as he is, the vast majority will always want something concrete to hold on to, something around which, as it were, to place their ideas, something which will be the centre of all the thought-forms in their minds. . . . A man can be of gigantic intellect, yet spiritually he may be a baby. You can verify it this minute. All of you have been taught to believe in an Omnipresent God. Try to think of it. How few of you can have any idea of what omnipresence means! If you struggle hard, you will get something like the idea of the ocean, or of the sky, or of a vast stretch of green earth, or of a desert. All these are material images, and so long as you cannot conceive of the abstract as abstract, of the ideal as the ideal, you will have to resort to these forms, these material images. It does not make much difference whether these images are inside or outside the mind.

We are all born idolaters, and idolatry is good, because it is in the nature of man. Who can get beyond it? Only the perfect man, the God-man. The rest are all idolaters. So long as we see this universe before us, with its forms and shapes, we are all idolaters. This is a gigantic symbol we are worshipping. He who says he is the body is a born idolater. We are spirit, spirit that has no form or shape, spirit that is infinite, and not matter. Therefore, anyone who cannot grasp the abstract, who cannot think of himself as he is, except in and through matter, as the body, is an idolater. And yet how people fight among themselves, calling one another idolaters! In other words, each says, his idol is right, and the others’ are wrong. . .

In the heart of all these ritualisms, there stands one idea prominent above all the rest—the worship of a name. Those of you who have studied the older forms of Christianity, those of you who have studied the other religions of the world, perhaps have marked that there is this idea with them all, the worship of a name. A name is said to be very sacred. . . Can you think without words? Word and thought are inseparable. Try if any one of you can separate them. Whenever you think, you are doing so
thought brings the word, and the word brings the thought. Thus the whole universe is, as it were, the external symbol of God, and behind that stands His grand name. Each particular body is a form, and behind that particular body is its name. As soon as you think of your friend So-and-so, there comes the idea of his body, and as soon as you think of your friend’s body, you get the idea of his name. This is in the constitution of man. That is to say, psychologically, in the mind-stuff of man, there cannot come the idea of name without the idea of form, and there cannot come the idea of form without the idea of name. They are inseparable; they are the external and the internal sides of the same wave. As such, names have been exalted and worshipped all over the world—consciously or unconsciously, man found the glory of names.

Again, we find that in many different religions, holy personages have been worshipped. They worship Krishna, they worship Buddha, they worship Jesus, and so forth. Then, there is the worship of saints; hundreds of them have been worshipped all over the world, and why not? The vibration of light is everywhere. The owl sees it in the dark. That shows it is there, though man cannot see it. To man, that vibration is only visible in the lamp, in the sun, in the moon, etc. God is omnipresent, He is manifesting Himself in every being; but for men, He is only visible, recognisable, in man. When His light, His presence, His spirit, shines through the human face, then and then alone, can man understand Him. Thus, man has been worshipping God through men all the time, and must do so as long as he is a man. He may cry against it, struggle against it, but as soon as he attempts to realise God, he will find the constitutional necessity of thinking of God as a man...

The vast majority of men are atheists. I am glad that, in modern times, another class of atheists has come into existence in the Western world—I mean the materialists. They are sincere atheists. They are better than the religious atheists, who are insincere, who fight and talk about religion, and yet do not want it, never try to realise it, never try to understand it... We want everything but God. This is not religion that you see all around you. My lady has furniture in her parlour, from all over the world, and now it is the fashion to have something Japanese; so she buys a vase and puts it in her room. Such is religion with the vast majority; they have all sorts of things for enjoyment, and unless they add a little flavour of religion, life is not all right, because society would criticise them. Society expects it; so they must have some religion. This is the present state of religion in the world.
A disciple went to his master and said to him, ‘Sir, I want religion.’ The master looked at the young man, and did not speak, but only smiled. The young man came every day, and insisted that he wanted religion. But the old man knew better than the young man. One day, when it was very hot, he asked the young man to go to the river with him and take a plunge. The young man plunged in, and the old man followed him and held the young man down under the water by force. After the young man had struggled for a while, he let him go and asked him what he wanted most while he was under the water. ‘A breath of air’, the disciple answered. ‘Do you want God in that way? if you do, you will get Him in a moment,’ said the master. Until you have that thirst, that desire, you cannot get religion, however you may struggle with your intellect, or your books, or your forms. Until that thirst is awakened in you, you are no better than any atheist; only the atheist is sincere, and you are not.

A great sage used to say, ‘Suppose there is a thief in a room, and somehow he comes to know that there is a vast mass of gold in the next room, and that there is only a thin partition between the two rooms. What would be the condition of that thief? He would be sleepless, he would not be able to eat or do anything. His whole mind would be on getting that gold. Do you mean to say that, if all these people really believe that the Mine of Happiness, of Blessedness, or Glory were here, they would act as they do in the world, without trying to get God?’

As soon as a man begins to believe there is a God, he becomes mad with longing to get to Him. Others may go their way, but as soon as a man is sure that there is a much higher life than that which he is leading here, as soon as he feels sure that the senses are not all, that this limited, material body is as nothing compared with the immortal, eternal, undying bliss of the Self, he becomes mad until he finds out this bliss for himself. And this madness, this thirst, this mania, is what is called the ‘awakening’ to religion, and when that has come, a man is beginning to be religious. But it takes a long time. All these forms and ceremonies, these prayers and pilgrimages, these books, bells, candles, and priests, are the preparations; they take off the impurities from the soul. And when the soul has become pure, it naturally wants to get to the mine of all purity, God Himself. Just as a piece of iron, which had been covered with the dust of centuries, might be lying near a magnet all the time, and yet not be attracted by it, but as soon as the dust is cleared away, the iron is drawn by the magnet; so, when the human soul, covered with the dust of ages, impurities, wickednesses, and sins, after many births, becomes purified enough by these forms and ceremonies, by doing good to others, loving other beings, its natural spiritual attraction comes, it wakes up and struggles towards God.

. . . Where is love? How do you know that there is love? The first test of love is that it knows no bargaining. So long as you see a man love another only to get something from him, you know that that is not love; it is shopkeeping. Wherever there is any question of buying and selling, it is not love. So, when a man prays to God, ‘Give me this, and give me that’, it is not love. How can it be? I offer you a prayer, and you give me something in return; that is what it is, mere shopkeeping. . . That is not the language of love. What is the difference between love and shopkeeping, if you ask God to give you this, and give you that? The first test of love is that it knows no bargaining. . .

The second test is that love knows no fear. So long as man thinks of God as a Being
sitting above the clouds, with rewards in one hand and punishments in the other, there can be no love. Can you frighten one into love? Does the lamb love the lion? The mouse, the cat? The slave, the master? Slaves sometimes simulate love, but is it love? Where do you ever see love in fear? It is always a sham. With love never comes the idea of fear. Think of a young mother in the street: if a dog barks at her, she flees in to the nearest house. The next day she is in the street with her child, and suppose a lion rushes upon the child, where will be her position? Just at the mouth of the lion, protecting her child. Love conquered all her fear. So also in the love of God. Who cares whether God is a rewarder or a punisher? That is not the thought of a lover.

The third is a still higher test. Love is always the highest ideal. When one has passed through the first two stages, when one has thrown off all shopkeeping, and cast off all fear, one then begins to realise that love is always the highest ideal. How many times in this world we see a beautiful woman loving an ugly man? How many times we see a handsome man loving an ugly woman! What is the attraction? Lookers-on only see the ugly man or the ugly woman, but not so the lover; to the lover the beloved is the most beautiful being that ever existed. How is it? The woman who loves the ugly man takes, as it were, the ideal of beauty which is in her own mind, and projects it on the ugly man; and what she worships and loves is not the ugly man, but her own ideal.

External things furnish us with suggestions, over which we project our own ideals and make our objects. The wicked see this world as a perfect hell, and the good as a perfect heaven. Lovers see this world as full of love, and haters as full of hatred; fighters see nothing but strife, and the peaceful nothing but peace. The perfect man sees nothing but God.

What is it that attracts man to man, man to woman, woman to man, and animals to animals, drawing the whole universe, as it were, towards one centre? It is what is called love. Its manifestation is from the lowest atom to the highest being: omnipotent, all-pervading, is this love. What manifests itself as attraction in the sentient and the insentient, in the particular and in the universal, is the love of God. It is the one motive power that is in the universe. Under the impetus of that love, Christ gives his life for humanity, Buddha even for an animal, the mother for the child, the husband for the wife. It is under the impetus of the same love that men are ready to give up their lives for their country, and strange to say, under the impetus of the same love, the thief steals, the murderer murders. Even in these cases, the spirit is the same, but the manifestation is different. This is the one motive power in the universe.

The thief has love for gold; the love is there, but it is misdirected. So, in all crimes, as well as in all virtuous actions, behind stands that eternal love. Suppose a man writes a cheque for a thousand dollars for the poor of New York, and at the same time, in the same room, another man forges the name of a friend. The light by which both of them write is the same, but each one will be responsible for the use he makes of it. It is not the light that is to be praised or blamed. Unattached, yet shining in everything, is love, the motive power of the universe, without which the universe would fall to pieces in a moment, and this love is God.

Thus we come to what is called supreme Bhakti, supreme devotion, in which forms and symbols fall off. One who has reached that cannot belong to any sect, for all sects are in
him. To what shall he belong? For all churches and temples are in him. Where is the church big enough for him? Such a man cannot bind himself down to certain limited forms . . . 

Lastly, we find that all these various systems, in the end, converge to that one point, that perfect union. We always begin as dualists. God is a separate Being, and I am a separate being. Love comes between, and man begins to approach God, and God, as it were, begins to approach man. Man takes up all the various relationships of life, as father, mother, friend, or lover; and the last point is reached when he becomes one with the object of worship. ‘I am you, and you are I; and worshipping you, I worship myself; and in worshipping myself, I worship you.’ There we find the highest culmination of that with which man begins. At the beginning it was love for the self, but the claims of the little self made love selfish; at the end came the full blaze of light, when that self had become the Infinite. That God who at first was a Being somewhere, became resolved, as it were, into Infinite Love. Man himself was also transformed. He was approaching God, he was throwing off the vain desires, of which he was full before. With desires vanished selfishness, and, at the apex, he found that Love, Lover, and Beloved were One.

—The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 2:38-53

The Way to Raga-bhakti

It isn’t any and every kind of bhakti that enables one to realize God. One cannot realize God without prema-bhakti. Another name for prema-bhakti is raga-bhakti. God cannot be realized without love and longing. Unless one has learnt to love God, one cannot realize Him. There is another kind of bhakti, known as vaidhi-bhakti, according to which one must repeat pilgrimages, worship God with prescribed offerings, make so many sacrifices, and so forth and so on. By continuing such practices a long time one gradually acquires raga-bhakti. God cannot be realized until one has raga-bhakti. One must love God. In order to realize God one must be completely free from worldliness and direct all of one’s mind to Him.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Sri Ramakrishna on Bhakti
(A Brief Perspective Study)

SWAMI BUDHANANDA

I

On Tuesday, April 13, 1886, early in the afternoon thus was the discussion going on between devotees and Sri Ramakrishna in the Cossipore garden house, where the Master was being treated for his fatal illness, cancer in the throat.

Rakhal Haldar: ‘Dr. Sreenath studies Vedanta. He is a student of Yoga-vasistha.’

Sri Ramakrishna: ‘A householder should not hold the view that everything is illusory like a dream.’

Referring to a man named Kalidas, a devotee said, ‘He too discusses Vedanta, but he has lost all his money in law suits.’

Sri Ramakrishna (smilingly): ‘Yes, one proclaims everything to be maya, and still goes to the court! (To Rakhal) Mukherji of Janai, too, talked big. But at last he came to his senses. . . . Can one obtain jnana just by talking about it?’

Haldar: ‘You are right, Sir, I have seen enough of jnana. Now all I need in order to live in this world is a little bhakti.’

This devotee who said that he had ‘seen’ enough of jnana, and now all he needed for living in the world was a little bhakti, made no doubt a straightforward statement but not a very accurate one. True it was that he needed bhakti. But it was not true that he had ‘seen’ enough of jnana. He probably had heard what Acharya Shankara in the Viveka-Chudamani describes as ‘Vak-vaikhari sabda-jhari sastra-vyakhyana-kausalam’—loud speech consisting of a shower of words and skill in expounding scriptures—which some people indulge in, wanting to appear before others as jnanis, men of knowledge. But he had not ‘seen’ true jnana.

II

If the devotee had ‘seen’ enough of jnana he should have known enough of bhakti too, for, as Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘Pure knowledge and pure love is one and the same.’

How can they be the same?

When either jnana or bhakti is practised adequately as disciplines, the one result from both is the destruction of the ego: jnana burns the ego to ashes, bhakti fills it with God-consciousness. Either way, the ‘unripe ego’ dies.

When the ego is destroyed, what remains is God. This attained result, when expressed in emotional terms, is bhakti; when expressed in intellectual terms it is jnana. Sri Ramakrishna says:

The same Being whom the Vedantins call Brahman, is called Atman by the yogis, and Bhagawan (God) by the Bhaktas. One and the same Brahmin is called ‘priest’ when he conducts worship and ‘cook’ when he is employed in the kitchen.

It is significant that though, according to Sri Ramakrishna, pure bhakti and pure jnana...
Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna
is one and the same, he does not advocate the direct practice of jnana-yoga as a rule, never to householders. In the Gospel he is found repeatedly saying:

The best path for this age is bhakti-yoga, the path of bhakti prescribed by Narada: to sing the name and glories of God and pray to Him with a longing heart, O God, give me knowledge, give me devotion, and reveal Thyself to me.5

Swami Vivekananda says:

Devotion as taught by Narada, Sri Ramakrishna used to preach to the masses, those who were incapable of higher training.

He used generally to teach dualism as a rule, he never taught Advaitism. But he taught it to me. I had been a dualist before.6

In the Gospel and the Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, we find it recorded a number of times that Bhakti according to Narada is the most suitable path for this age. This special advocacy is not an accidental slip of tongue in his teachings, but a basic doctrine.

III

This doctrine turns out to be one of his cardinal teachings by virtue of two facts:

(a) that as a sadhaka Sri Ramakrishna himself, in effect, spontaneously practised Bhakti according to Narada’s teachings without being tutored by any one as far as we know;

(b) that as far as we know, not even for once is Sri Ramakrishna on record saying that jnana-yoga is the most suitable path for Kali-yuga.

When Sri Ramakrishna taught that the path of bhakti prescribed by Narada was the best path for this age, it might appear that he was propounding a theory. This teaching, however, issued out of the very stuff of his own life. This claim will be borne out by a close study of the initial stage of his sadhana (spiritual practices). When Ram Kumar, his elder brother, resolved to teach Sri Ramakrishna the elaborate procedure of the worship of Kali, Sri Ramakrishna, of his own initiative, received initiation from Kenaram Bhattacharya of Calcutta, who was noted for his devotion and experience, because it was not advisable to worship Kali without being properly initiated.

Besides this one information that Sri Ramakrishna received initiation from Kenaram Bhattacharya, there seems to be nothing on record as to what method of sadhana the Guru taught his disciple. Sri Ramakrishna usually reminisced about the methods of sadhana taught by his other Gurus like Bhairavi Brahmani and Totapuri. But in the case of Kenaram’s teachings on methods of sadhana there is hardly anything on record, so far known. So it may be permissible to conjecture that Sri Ramakrishna received from Kenaram the Bijamantra and learnt the elaborate ritualistic-part of Kali worship from Ram Kumar. This was no doubt enough preparation for starting the ritualistic temple worship of Kali.

But when this formal ritualistic worship got transmuted in Sri Ramakrishna’s inner life into the flaming agony of sadhana for realizing the Divine Mother, for having her direct face-to-face vision, Sri Ramakrishna was, as it were, alone in this universe with the unseen and unknown Mother. And for all intents and purposes he had to devise his own methods for the realization of the Divine Mother.

A close study of these methods will reveal this amazing fact that in the first phase of his Kali sadhana, the methods adopted by Sri Ramakrishna turned out to be Narada’s. It was not as if Sri Ramakrishna had studied Naradiya Bhakti Sutras, before undertaking this sadhana and yet by hindsight one could
see that the methods he was spontaneously adopting, turned out to be Narada’s method. This continued from the beginning of his Kali-sadhana in 1855 until Bhairavi Brahmani came in 1861. Practically speaking, during these five years, whatever sadhana Sri Ramakrishna practised on his own, was in broad generalities, details and substances identical with the teaching of Narada.

It was only when he started Tantra practices in 1861 under the guidance of Bhairavi Brahmani, that his method of sadhana changed. After the completion of his Tantra sadhana in 1863, Sri Ramakrishna turned to Vaishnava sadhana under Bhairavi’s guidance. During his Vaishnava sadhana he again took recourse to Narada’s methods of sadhana, now as directed by his guru. As soon as he had completed the Vaishnava sadhanas according to the injunctions of the scriptures and attained commensurate realizations, there came Totapuri in his life in 1864. Under Totapuri’s guidance, Sri Ramakrishna practised a completely different method of sadhana of non-dualistic Vedanta.

Even after being established in the experience of the non-dual reality, Sri Ramakrishna chose to dwell in the permanent disposition of a devotee of the Divine Mother, demonstrating the truth of Narada’s following aphorisms:

67. The highest class of devotees are those who have one-pointed love for God, and for love’s sake only.  
68. When (such) devotees talk of God, their voices choke, tears flow from their eyes, their hairs stand erect in ecstasy. Such men as these purify not only their families but the whole earth on which they are born.  
69. These great illumined souls, the lovers of God, sanctify the places of pilgrimage. The deeds they perform become examples of good action. They give spiritual authority to the scriptures.  
70. Every one of these devotees becomes filled with the spirit of God.  
71. When such lovers of God dwell on earth, their forefathers rejoice, the gods dance in joy, and this earth gets a saviour.

Thus we see that Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, ‘the best path for this age is bhakti-yoga, the path of bhakti prescribed by Narada,’ emanates from his life and being; it was not a mere theory propounded by him.

This raises some interesting questions: Was Sri Ramakrishna a dualist? If not, why did he emphasize bhakti-yoga in preference to jnana yoga?

In fact terms like dualist, qualified non-dualist, or non-dualist which may hold good in respect of Acharyas like Madhva, Ramanuja and Shankara respectively do not at all hold good in regard to Avatars like Rama, Krishna and Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna is all things to all men. He is like the man under the tree of his own parable, who had seen the chameleon having various colours at various times, and also having no colour at all at times.

Yet, on the basis of the report of his experiences and teachings there can be no doubt about the fact that as Swami Vivekananda puts it, ‘advaya-tattva-samahita-chittam’—Sri Ramakrishna was ever grounded in the awareness of non-duality. Having known the reality of Brahman and the unreality of the world through nirvikalpa samadhi he could not have preached even bhakti yoga from the dualistic awareness of Reality. That was psychologically impossible.

But he did preach bhakti-yoga in preference to jnana-yoga. We should never forget that Sri Ramakrishna was the most amazing practical spiritual genius the world ever saw. As a sadhaka and teacher of spiritual life, he always meant business. He was always
looking for what worked. He was not for wasting time and energy. He was always for ‘somehow’ realizing God, the Supreme ‘Truth’. And that in an abundant, plentiful manner. He was for vouchsafing to spiritual aspirants the fullness of spiritual experience through a means commensurate with their capacities and capabilities. From his intimate knowledge of what exacting demands jnana-yoga makes on an aspirant, and how rarely among men one was found who was able to meet those demands, he came to the definite conclusion that bhakti-yoga was the most suitable path for the modern age.

Why, for the modern age alone? Even Sri Krishna says so in the Gita about his times:

Arjuna asked Sri Krishna this very question in the Gita:

Those devotees who, ever steadfast, thus worship thee, and those who worship the imperishable, the unmanifested—which of them are the best versed in yoga? (XII.i) 13

Sri Krishna replied:

Those who, fixing their mind on Me, worship Me, ever-steadfast, and endowed with supreme shraddha, they in My opinion are the best versed in yoga. (XII.2) 14

Continuing, the Lord said:

But those also, who worship the Imperishable, the Indefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Unchangeable, the Immovable, the Eternal—having subdued the senses, even-minded everywhere, engaged in the welfare of all beings—verily they reach only myself. (XII.3-4) 15

Giving his definite view as to how difficult he thought it was for embodied beings to practise advaita, the Lord then said:

Greater is their trouble whose minds are set on the Unmanifested; for the goal of the Unmanifested is very hard for the embodied beings to reach. (XII.5) 16

We have to understand that, ‘no comparison between the worshippers of the qualified and unqualified Brahman is meant here—since by the context, both reach the same goal. The path of qualified Brahman, or Saguna Brahman is said to be superior only because it is easier. The path of unqualified Brahman is harder, because of the necessity of having to abandon all attachment to the body, from the very beginning of the practice.’17

Sri Ramakrishna held an identical view in the matter, and explained in great detail why he thought so. He says:

Knowledge of non-duality is the highest, but God should first be worshipped as a master is worshipped by his servant, as the adored by the adorer. This is the easiest path; it soon leads to the highest knowledge.18

Though the non-dualistic knowledge is the highest, you should proceed in your devotion first with the idea of the worshipper and the worshipped, (i.e., with the feeling God is the object of worship and I am His worshipper), then you will easily attain knowledge.19

It is to be noticed here that while Sri Ramakrishna is anxious to point out the easiest path, he is equally anxious to take us to the highest knowledge. Such is his sense of the practical. He does not want us to stop short of the Highest. But he knows all about our spiritual I.Q.!

Elaborating at great length the reasons why he emphasises the path of bhakti, he says:

Brahman Itself sheds tears of grief, being caught in the trap of the five elements. You may close your eyes and convince yourself saying repeatedly, ‘There is no thorn, there is no thorn’ but the moment you touch them, you feel the prick, and you draw your hand away in pain. Likewise, however much you may reason within yourself that you are beyond birth and death, virtue and vice, joy and sorrow, hunger and thirst—that you are the Immutable Atman,
the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute—nevertheless, the moment the body is subjected to ailments, or the mind encounters the temptations of the world and is overwhelmed by the transient pleasures of wealth and sex, and in consequence you happen to commit sin, you become subject to delusion, pain, and misery, become deprived of discrimination and good conduct, and get overwhelmed by utter perplexity. Know, therefore, that none can attain self-realization and liberation from all miseries unless God Himself shows mercy to him, and Maya unbars the door.

Have you not heard it stated in the Chandi, ‘This same Goddess, the bestower of boons, when propitiated removes the bondage of human beings!’ Nothing can be achieved unless the Divine Mother removes the obstacles from the path. The aspirant never realizes God unless Maya takes pity on him, and moves aside from his path. The moment She bestows Her mercy on the aspirant, he becomes blessed with the vision of God and escapes from all miseries. Otherwise, however much you may go on with your discrimination and other spiritual practices, they will be of little use.20

But it must be clearly borne in mind that though Sri Ramakrishna recommends the path of bhakti in preference to that of jnana, his goal is beyond all isms of religion or philosophy—dualism or monism. On the one hand he acknowledges that ‘Advaita knowledge is the highest’; on the other, after the attainment of the highest, he himself settles down in bhakti in his personal life, and in effect teaches that the daring aspirant should strive for the realization of God, personal as well as impersonal and settle down in the experience of Vijnana, ‘Knowing with greater fullness.’

He recommends the path of bhakti even to the aspirant who prefers jnana-yoga to bhakti-yoga. And why? Let us hear in his own words:

The jnana-yogi longs to realize Brahman—God the Impersonal, the Absolute, and the Unconditioned. But, as a general rule, such a soul would do better, in this present age, to love, pray, and surrender himself entirely to God. The Lord will save His devotee and will vouchsafe to him even Brahma-jnana, if the devotee hungers and thirsts after it. Thus the jnana-yogi will attain jnana as well as bhakti. It will be given to him to realize Brahman. The Lord willing, he will also realize the personal God of the Bhakta. The Bhakta on the other hand will generally be content to see and realize the Personal God, the Saguna Brahman of the Upanishad. Yet the Lord makes him the heir to His infinite glory and grants him bhakti as well as jnana, and realization of God Personal as well as God Impersonal...21

Sri Ramakrishna’s ideal man of spiritual excellence is he who has attained both bhakti and jnana, and experienced that pure knowledge and pure love is one and the same.

Those who are interested to study this point in greater detail may find many helpful hints in the following three books: (1) Aphorisms on the Gospel of Divine Love or Narada Bhakti Sutras, translation and annotation by Swami Tyagisananda. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras; (2) Narada’s Way of Divine Love by Swami Prabhavananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras; (3) Bhakti-Prasanga (Bengali) by Swami Vedantananda, Udbodhan, Calcutta.

V

There are certain distinctive features in Sri Ramakrishna’s advocacy of the path of devotion, which are not identical with or pronounced so explicitly in the aphorisms of Narada.

It is to be noticed in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna that while teaching the aspirants the disciplines of the path of Bhakti, often enough almost in the same breath, Sri Rama-
krishna also instructed them to practise one discipline of the path of Jnana. A typical example of this approach is given below:

M.: ‘How, Sir, may we fix our mind on God?’

Sri Ramakrishna: ‘Repeat God’s name and sing His glories and keep holy company: and now and then visit God’s devotees and holy men. . . [All these teachings are strictly according to the aphorisms of Narada]. To meditate you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest. And you should always discriminate between the Real and the unreal. God alone is Real, the Eternal substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind.’ [This emphasis on the practice of discrimination along with the disciplines of the practice of Bhakti is not so pronounced in Narada’s teachings].

Again, for practicing self-control Sri Ramakrishna was of the conviction that love of God was more helpful than practice of discrimination, as denoted in the following conversation:

A devotee: Sir, should one practise discrimination to attain self control ?

Sri Ramakrishna: ‘That is also a path. It is called a path of vichara, reasoning. But the inner organs are brought under control naturally through the path of devotion as well. It is rather easily accomplished that way. Sense pleasures appear more and more tasteless as love of God grows. Can carnal pleasures attract a grief-stricken man and woman the day their child has died?

Devotee: How can I develop love for God?

Sri Ramakrishna: Repeat his name, and sins will disappear. Thus you will destroy lust, anger, the desire for creature-comforts, and so on.

Emphasising the same point, he teaches elsewhere:

A poet has compared devotion (to God) to a tiger. As the tiger devours animals, devotion also swallows up all the archenemies of man, such as lust, passion, and the rest. Once the devotion to God is fully awakened, all evil passions like lust and anger are completely destroyed. The Gopis of Brindavan attained their state through their strong devotion to Krishna.

It is a strange irony of inner life, that when we sincerely desire to cultivate love of God, we are confronted with the hindering power of our lower nature also. What do we do in this situation? Sri Ramakrishna teaches us a creative strategy for solving this problem as reflected in the following conversation:

A Brahmo devotee: How can one realise God?

Sri Ramakrishna: By directing your love to Him and by constantly reasoning that God alone is real and the world illusory. The aswaththa tree alone is permanent; its fruit is transitory.

Brahmo: We have passions like anger and lust. What shall we do with these?

Sri Ramakrishna: Direct the six passions to God. The impulse of lust should be turned into the desire to have intercourse with Atman. Feel angry at those who stand in your way to God, feel greedy for Him. If you must have the feeling of I and mine, then associate it with God. Say, for instance, ‘My Rama, my Krishna!’ If you must have pride, then feel like Vibhishana, who said, ‘I have touched the feet of Rama with my head; I will not bow this head before anyone else.’

What happens to the devotee, in whom evil passions have been completely destroyed through the practice of devotion? Sri Ramakrishna brings us a profoundly helpful intimation in this regard:

The Kundalini is speedily awakened if one follows the path of bhakti. God cannot be seen unless she is awakened. Sing earnestly and secretly in solitude: Waken, O Mother! O Kundalini, whose nature is Bliss Eternal! Thou
art the serpent coiled in sleep, in the lotus of muladhara.26

This is an all-important and very rare hint for all aspirants irrespective of what religion he follows. God cannot be seen unless Kundalini is awakened. No doubt there are other authentic prescribed disciplines for awakening the Kundalini. But these disciplines are too demanding for common aspirants of the day. Practising these disciplines without the personal guidance of a competent Guru is fraught with real danger. Those who egotistically go it alone are apt to become spiritual cripples. And yet there is no need whatsoever for them to walk this perilous path when ‘the Kundalini is speedily awakened if one follows the path of Bhakti.’

In the fourteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, the comparable spiritual merits and demerits of the three gunas, substantive forces, are detailed. According to the teaching of the Gita:

Tamas is born of ignorance, it deludes all creatures. It binds fast by inadvertence, indolence, and sleep. (Verse 8) 27

Darkness, indolence, inadvertence, delusion—all these arise . . . when tamas prevails. (Verse 13) 28

If the embodied soul meets death when . . . tamas prevails, it is born in the womb of creatures devoid of reason.(Verse 15) 29

. . . the fruit of tamas is ignorance.(Verse 16) 30

From tamas springs inadvertence, delusion and ignorance. (Verse 17) 31

. . . those who are steeped in tamas, being weighted by the tendencies of the lowest guna, go downward. (Verse 18) 32

In these teachings of the Gita we find that the preponderance of tamas in the nature of an aspirant is a negative force in his life. It takes him downward and plunges him in darkness.

In his aphorisms on Bhakti, Narada teaches: ‘Preparatory devotion is of three kinds, according to the predominance in the minds of aspirants of one or another of three gunas—sattva, rajas and tamas; also according to the reasons for which they devote themselves to God—whether because they are world-weary or seeking for knowledge, or desirous of the fulfilment of some material desires.’33

(Aphorism No. 56) ‘Of these classes of devotees, the first is considered highest, after these come the less high, the middling, and the low.’34

(Aphorism No. 57) ‘So, according to Narada also, the predominance of tamas is a negative and obstructive factor in an aspirant’s life.’

In Srimad Bhagavatam (XI. 13.1-3), Sri Krishna teaches how rajas and tamas are to be

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subdued and the predominance of sattva is to be brought about in the nature of an aspirant so that through development of sattva one can attain that form of spirituality which consists of devotion to God. The Lord also teaches here how all the gunas, including sattva, are to be transcended, for the attainment of the state of spirituality, which is attainable only by going beyond the gunas.

Here an important question arises. What does the aspirant in whose nature there is obvious predominance of tamas, do to attain bhakti? Can he or can he not proceed Godward in his own fashion, or has to wait for the coming of the day when there will be predominance of sattva in his nature, before he can make a real start in the spiritual life?

On this important issue Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are unique. He devises a spiritual strategy by using which even the negative and obstructive guna, tama, can be transformed into a positively helpful instrument for the aspirant. The idea is to straight go to God in the fashion of our own being which may be dominated by tama, and to make that going most effective. He teaches:

As worldly people are endowed with sattva, rajas and tama, so also is Bhakti characterized by the three gunas.35

After giving the description of such devotees as are characterized by the predominance of sattva and rajas, Sri Ramakrishna says:

A man endowed with tamaic Bhakti has burning faith. Such a devotee literally extorts boons from God, even as a robber falls upon a man and plunders his money. ‘Bind! Beat! Kill!’ —that is his way, the way of the dacoits. Then he sang with fiery enthusiasm: ‘If only I pass away repeating Durga’s name, How canst thou then, O Blessed One, Withhold from me deliverance Wretched though I may be?’ Continuing he said:

‘One must, take the firm attitude: What? I have chanted Mother’s name. How can I be a sinner any more? I am Her child, heir to Her powers and glories.’

If you can give a spiritual turn to your tama, you can realize God with its help. Force your demand on God. He is by no means a stranger to you. He is indeed your very own.36

Elsewhere Sri Ramakrishna exhorts a devotee:

Assume the tamaic aspect of Bhakti. Say with force: ‘What? I have uttered the names of Rama and Kali. How can I be in bondage any more? How can I be affected by the law of Karma.’37

On the basis of the fact ‘God is our very own’ Sri Ramakrishna taught the aspirants to practise forceful and heroic devotion. And he brought us this most reassuring spiritual intimation:

Sometimes God acts as the magnet and the devotee as the needle. God attracts the devotee to Himself. Again, sometimes the devotee acts as the magnet and God as the needle. Such is the attraction of the devotee that God comes to him, unable to resist his love.38

This is the greatest source of aspirant’s hope that the loving God is truly the anxious God also.

VII

Further, Sri Ramakrishna teaches:

God sports through men as well. I see men as the embodiment of Narayana. As fire is kindled when you rub two pieces of wood together, so God can be seen in men if you have intense devotion. If there is suitable bait, big fish like carp gulp it down at once. When one is intoxicated with prema, one sees God in all beings. The Gopis saw Krishna in everything; to them the whole world was filled with Krishna. They said that they themselves were Krishna. They were then in a God-intoxicated state.39
This is the highest state of attained Bhakti which is made one’s own through seven stages. According to Sri Ramakrishna:

These are the stages of sadhana (devotional practices) for the purification of the soul:

1. Sadhu-sanga or company of holy men;
2. Shraddha or faith in devotion to things relating to the spirit;
3. Nishtha or single-minded devotion to one’s ideal;
4. Bhakti or intense love for God;
5. Bhava or the state of speechless absorption in the thought of God; and
6. Mahabhava—when bhava is intensified it is called mahabhava.

The devotee sometimes laughs and sometimes weeps like a mad man. He has completely conquered the flesh and has no consciousness of his body. The stage is not generally attained by ordinary souls but is attained only by mahapurushas or Incarnations of God.

(7) Prema or the most intense love of God. This goes hand in hand with Mahabhava. The two marks of this stage are: first, forgetfulness of the world; second, forgetfulness of self, which includes one’s body. This brings the devotee face to face with God, and he thus attains the goal of life.40

**VIII**

Narada says in his aphorism (58): ‘The path of devotion is the easiest way to attain God.’

From his own personal realization Sri Ramakrishna came to hold the same view and taught the aspirants:

. . . Bhakti-yoga is prescribed for this age. By following this path one comes to God more easily than by following the others. One can undoubtedly reach God by following the paths of Jnana and Karma, but they are very difficult paths.

Bhakti yoga is the religion for this age. But that does not mean that the lover of God will reach one goal and the philosopher and worker another. It means that if a person seeks the knowledge of Brahman he can attain it by following the path of bhakti, too. God, who loves His devotee, can give him knowledge of Brahman if He so desires.41

Narada also gives a broad hint that on attaining love of God the Bhakta may spontaneously realize the bliss of experiencing Brahman. As he says in Aphorism 5: ‘The devotee may first become intoxicated with bliss. Then having realized that, he becomes inert and silent and takes his delight in Atman.’

However, ‘the Bhakta as a rule’, as Sri Ramakrishna points out, ‘does not long for Brahmacjnana (the realization of the Impersonal), but remains content with realizing the Divine Person alone, the Divine Mother, or any of Her infinite forms of glory, such as the Divine Incarnations like Sri Krishna and Sri Chaitanya, the visible revelations of God. He is anxious to ensure that the whole of his ego is not effaced in Samadhi. He would fain have sufficient individuality left to enjoy the vision Divine as a Person. He would fain taste sugar, instead of becoming sugar.’ 42

Sri Ramakrishna, though a perfected Brahmacjnani, knower of Brahman, would sometimes pray to the Divine Mother saying:

Do not make me unconscious, Mother, with the knowledge of Brahman. Do not give me Brahmajnana. I am but Thy child. I am easily worried and frightened. I want a mother. A million salutations to the knowledge of Brahman! Give it to those who seek it. O Anandamayi! O Blissful Mother.43

**IX**

So, in trying to study Sri Ramakrishna’s approach to Bhakti, we come by the following principles:
1. That, according to Sri Ramakrishna one comes to God more easily by following the path of Bhakti than by following others.

2. That pure knowledge and pure love is one and the same.

3. That, generally speaking, Sri Ramakrishna advocates the path of Bhakti as taught by Narada, in preference to the path of Jnana. The reason for doing so is that common aspirants are incapable of fulfilling the demands of the path of knowledge. To a rare disciple like Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda) he taught the path of Jnana.

4. That Sri Ramakrishna’s advocacy of the path of Bhakti does not make him a dualist, for the simple reason that he was himself a Brahma-jnani who had realized Brahman by strictly following the path of Jnana-yoga.

Besides, as an incarnation of God, he transcends all isms of religion and philosophies.

5. That Sri Ramakrishna assures us, even the knowledge of Brahman is attainable through Bhakti, if the Bhakta would so desire, though as a rule he does not.

6. That Sri Ramakrishna instructs even the aspirant of the path of Jnana to practise Bhakti, in order to surmount his difficulties with ease and also for gaining abundance of spiritual experience.

X

Above all, what do we find exemplified in Sri Ramakrishna’s own life?

With all his Brahmajnana, he always remained the Mother’s Child except when he was immersed in Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

This was, in a manner of speaking, becoming sugar and tasting it too! By loving one knows, by knowing one loves.

Such is God’s own super-abundant spirituality.

References

2. Vide: Verse 58
4. Ibid., Saying No. 792.
7. This can be substantiated by quoting Narada’s aphorisms— vis-a-vis facts of the first phase of Sri Ramakrishna’s Kali Sadhana and his subsequent teachings to his disciples. But we cannot undertake this elaborate task in this article.
8. इत्यादि
9. केन्द्रोज्जरोपणातीश्चुषः परस्परं तत्पत्त: पवित्रस्वतं कुलाणि पुष्पादिरूपः
10. तीर्थीकृत्वाति तीर्थानि, सुक्रमीकृत्वाति कर्माणि,
Did the cowherd boys of Brindavan get Sri Krishna as their ‘own’ through Japa or meditation? They realized Him through ecstatic love. They used to say to Him, as to an intimate friend, ‘Come here, O Krishna! Eat this! Take this!’

The rich should serve God and His devotees with money, and the poor worship God by repeating His Name.

The Bhakti hedged round by the scriptural injunctions hardly justifies the name.

Through these spiritual disciplines [Japa and other spiritual practices] the ties of past Karma are cut asunder. But realization of God cannot be achieved without ecstatic love (Prema Bhakti) for Him. Do you know the significance of Japa and other spiritual practices? By these, the dominance of the sense organs is subdued.

Meditate on and pray to the particular aspect of the Divinity revealed to you. Worship ends with absorption in meditation. Start here (the heart) and end here (the head). Neither Mantra nor scripture is of any avail; Bhakti or devotion alone accomplishes everything.

—The Gospel of the Holy Mother
Swami Vivekananda—The Bhakta

SWAMI ABHIRAMANANDA

Introduction
Whenever an effort is made to explore and understand the unfathomable depth and profundity of the life of Swami Vivekananda, the spiritual luminary of many facets, a new perspective reveals itself, and then one realizes how little one can comprehend about his great life. But this much can be said that his life was perfectly and impeccably a synthesis of the four yogas that he advocated—Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Raja.

Swami Vivekananda had razor-sharp knowledge, experienced many soaring visions, was a champion of selfless action, possessed a majestic and graceful form, exhibited boundless courage and was virtuously peerless right from childhood. Yet, what appeals most when one ponders through his complete works is the personification of divinity in his personality that issued forth from his spontaneous inclination towards God.

An effort is made in this article to focus on the Bhakti aspect of Swami Vivekananda, the ‘tender devotion’ that was inherent in him, about which Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa Himself once remarked after minutely observing the physical features of his foremost disciple, thus: ‘Your eyes show that you are not a dry Jnani. In you tender devotion and deep knowledge are blended.’ Indeed, as one explores Swami Vivekananda’s life meticulously, one is bound to realize his expression of ardent devotion, explicit or implicit though it might be.

Devotion from childhood
The first education on bhakti that Narendra received was from his pious mother. It was a routine practice every noon for her or another member of the family to read tales from the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata in their home. In the small congregation
that gathered in the household, the usually turbulent Naren would be found sitting quietly throughout the reading and listening with rapt attention. On other occasions, his maternal grandmother used to narrate many anecdotes from the Bhagavatam. Certainly, the stories from the epics and Puranas, the ideals and values ingrained in them, had a tremendous influence on Narendra. In all probability, most of the stories that Swami Vivekananda later recounted to his audiences during his talks must have been recollections of the same tales that he had heard from his mother and grandmother. He profusely narrated stories of Dhruva, Prahlada and other Bhaktas to impress upon the extraordinary power and charm of bhakti.

Once Naren was told that Hanuman lived in banana-groves. Young Naren was so anxious to meet the monkey chief that he asked if he could see him if he went there. An optimistic reply so as not to dishearten the child was given. But the boy went to a banana-grove near his home and prayed to Hanuman to show himself. He had to be later consoled by saying that Hanuman must have gone on some urgent mission of Sri Rama!

Another interesting incident in his childhood reflects his intense devotion coupled with immense power of concentration. As a boy, he was captivated by the life of Sri Rama to such a great extent that one day, along with his friend Hari, he bought a clay image of Sita-Rama, went to a room on the terrace of the house, securely closed the door and sat for meditation. After a frantic search everywhere by the members of the family, the door of the room was finally flung open. Hari at once fled down the stairs, but Naren, an adept in meditation from his very birth, sat motionless in deep contemplation before the flower-decked image. He was probably five or six years old then!

Yet, as a child, he was naughty and beyond control on occasions. The only remedy that the mother found to pacify him was to pour cold water on his head while chanting the name of Shiva in his ears or threaten him saying, ‘Shiva will not let you go to Kailas if you do not behave.’ Only such a devotional reproach would quieten Narendra and bring him back to his joyous self again! Equally devoted was Narendra to his mother at whose feet his devotion to God blossomed. Throughout his life, Narendra loved his mother with all his heart and remembered her precepts. He used to say, ‘He who cannot literally worship his mother can never become great. . . I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge.’ Most certainly, that blossoming of knowledge had devotion at its very root.

Devotion to the Great Master

While Sri Ramakrishna’s brilliant intellect was hidden under the cover of devotion, Swami Vivekananda’s devotional heart lay hidden under knowledge. Perhaps Swami Vivekananda’s own words are the best guide to discerning his true nature. Comparing his own spiritual attitude with that of his Master, Swami Vivekananda once remarked, ‘He was all bhakti without; but within he was all Jnana. I am all Jnana without; but in my heart all is Bhakti.’

Swami Vivekananda’s devotion to the Great Master was a reflection of the immense love that the Master showered upon him. He said: ‘Shri Ramakrishna was the only person who, ever since he met me, believed in me uniformly throughout . . . It was his unflinching trust in me and love that bound me to him forever.’ The Master’s training
of Naren was a gradual process that led the disciple from doubt to conviction. Naren’s regard for the Master progressively increased a thousandfold and he accepted the Master as the highest ideal of spirituality.

An incident that exemplifies Narendra’s veneration of his Master, an expression of unconditional bhakti, is worth mentioning here. On one occasion, Sri Ramakrishna’s attitude to Narendra suddenly seemed to change and he began to treat him with utter indifference. Narendra initially thought that the Master was in a spiritual mood. But on his next few visits too, the Master’s mood towards Narendra did not change. At the end of about a month, the Master asked Narendra, ‘Though I do not exchange a single word with you, you still continue to come! How is that?’ Narendranath replied, ‘Do you think that I come here only to listen to you? I love you and want to see you. This is why I come to Dakshineswar.’ Shri Ramakrishna was highly pleased at the reply and said, ‘I was only testing you to see if you would stay away when I did not show love and attention. Only one of your calibre could have put up with such neglect and indifference. Anyone else would have left me long ago, never to come again.’6 So intense, passionate and adoring was Swami Vivekananda’s Guru bhakti! Narendra cherished Sri Ramakrishna as his Master primarily because he found in him supreme devotion and truth. Later, he exalted his Master as the best among Avatars.

Swami Vivekananda admired the manner in which Sri Ramakrishna reconciled bhakti with service. Once at Dakshineshwar, the Master said to the devotees: ‘How foolish to speak of compassion! Man is an insignificant worm crawling on the earth—and he is to show compassion to others! This is absurd. It must not be compassion, but service to all. Recognize them as God’s manifestations and serve them.’ Only Narendra understood the implication of the Master’s words. Leaving the room, he said to the others:

What a wonderful light I have discovered in those words of the Master! How beautifully he has reconciled the ideal of bhakti with the knowledge of Vedanta, generally interpreted as dry, austere, and incompatible with human sentiments! What a grand, natural, and sweet synthesis! . . . If it be the will of God, I shall one day proclaim this noble truth before the world at large.7

Cossipore Garden House, where Sri Ramakrishna spent his last days, was a place of intense spiritual practice for Swami Vivekananda. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes would send the young disciple to meditate and sometimes would ask him to sing devotional songs. While singing, waves of rapturous love for God would sweep Naren, carrying him to realms of ecstasy. Days and nights were spent in meditation, worship and prayer. The garden house transformed itself into a holy place of great yajna and sadhana, coupled with dedicated and devoted service to the Guru.

**Devotion to the Divine Mother**

As a youth, Narendra remained a staunch intellectual for a long time until he met the Great Master. In reply to Narendra’s question to Sri Ramakrishna on whether he should accept the Divine Mother just because he came to meet the Master, Sri Ramakrishna prophesied, ‘Before long, you will not only acknowledge my beloved Mother, but weep in Her name.’8 For, Sri Ramakrishna knew that the concept of God as Mother would make Narendra’s spiritual life fuller and richer. Swami Vivekananda observed in his later life,

How I used to hate Kali and all Her ways! That was the ground of my six years’ fight—that I would not accept Her. But I had to accept Her...
at last. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa dedicated me to Her, and now I believe that She guides me in every little thing I do, and does with me what She will! . . . She made a slave of me. . .
And Ramakrishna Paramahamsa made me over to Her.9

And how did the Divine Mother make a slave of him as Sri Ramakrishna had predicted? Familiar though it may be, it is fitting and relevant to narrate here the incident that led Swami Vivekananda to experience the living presence of the Divine Mother and forget all about the mundane things of life. And significantly this was the incident that revealed the zealous devotion that was inherent in Narendra. It was the point of time when Narendra’s father died suddenly, leaving the family in straitened circumstances. Not only was the family left with no means of sustenance, but there were also debts to be paid. Narendra did all that was honestly possible to get employment, but fortune was not in his favour. At last he went to Dakshineswar and entreated Sri Ramakrishna to pray to the Divine Mother for the removal of the sufferings of his family. In later life Swami Vivekananda recounted thus:

He (Sri Ramakrishna) said,

‘My boy, I can’t make such demands. But why don’t you go and ask the Mother yourself? All your sufferings are due to your disregard of Her’.

I said, ‘I do not know the Mother; you please speak to Her on my behalf. You must.’ He replied tenderly,

‘My dear boy, I have done so again and again. But you do not accept Her, so She does not grant my prayer. All right, it is Tuesday [a say sacred to Divine Mother]—go to the Kali temple tonight, prostrate yourself before the Mother, and ask of Her any boon you like. It shall be granted. She is Knowledge Absolute, the Inscrutable Power of Brahman. By Her mere will She has given birth to this world. Everything is in Her power to give.’

I believed every word and eagerly waited for the night. About 9 o’clock, the Master asked me to go to the temple. As I went, I was filled with a divine intoxication. My feet were unsteady. My heart was leaping in anticipation of the joy of beholding the living Goddess and hearing Her words. I was full of the idea. Reaching the temple, as I cast my eyes upon the image, I actually found that the Divine Mother was living and conscious, the perennial fountain of Divine Love and Beauty. I was caught in a surging wave of devotion and love. In an ecstasy of joy I prostrated myself again and again before the Mother and prayed, ‘Mother, give me discrimination! Give me renunciation! Give me knowledge and devotion! Grant that I may have the uninterrupted vision of Thee!’

A serene peace reigned in my soul. The world was forgotten. Only the Divine Mother shone within my heart.10

Coming to know of this, the Master asked Narendra to again go to the temple and offer
his prayer. But before the living presence of the Divine Mother, even on the second and third attempts, Narendra could not ask for anything but knowledge and devotion!

Glimpses of Devotional Ecstasy

An incident at Cossipore reveals the devotional ecstasy that Swami Vivekananda experienced now and then. Sri Ramakrishna initiated Narendra with the name of Rama, telling him that it was the Mantra which he had received from his own Guru. Narendra’s emotions were tremendously stirred. Towards evening, he began to circle the house, repeating the name of the Lord, ‘Rama! Rama!’ in a loud and animated voice. Outward consciousness had apparently left him, and he was full of ecstatic fire. 11

On another occasion during his travels, Swami Vivekananda announced his desire to make a pilgrimage along with pilgrims to the great image of Siva in the cave of Amarnath and asked Sister Nivedita to accompany him. Observing every rite of the pilgrimage as he came along, besides telling his beads and practicing other austerities with zeal and devotion, Swami Vivekananda was in a state of devotional ecstasy when they reached Amarnath. As he entered the cavern, his whole frame was overcome with divine consciousness and he seemed to be going through a profound mystical experience.

Sister Nivedita recounts thus:

And now, as he entered the Cave, it seemed to him, as if he saw Shiva made visible before him. Amidst the buzzing, swarming noise of the pilgrim-crowd, and the overhead fluttering of the pigeons, he knelt and prostrated two or three times, unnoticed; and then, afraid lest emotion might overcome him, he rose and silently withdrew. He said afterwards that in these brief moments he had received from Shiva the gift of Amar—not to die, until he himself had willed it. . . And for the rest of his life, he cherished the memory of how he had entered a mountain-cave, and came face to face there with the Lord Himself.12

Following the pilgrimage to Amarnath, Swami Vivekananda’s devotion became concentrated on the Divine Mother and his absorption on Her became more and more intense. During one of these days, he once told some disciples that ‘wherever he turned he was conscious of the presence of the Mother, as if She were a person in the room’.13 It was then that he wrote the poem ‘Kali The Mother’ in fervent inspiration. Shortly thereafter, he visited Kshir Bhavani leaving instructions that none of his disciples were to follow him. Here again, he practiced austerities, worshipped the Divine Mother with offerings, and told his beads like any other devoted pilgrim. When he returned after about a week, according to Sister Nivedita, he appeared before his disciples in a ‘transfigured presence’. Blessing them all with marigolds that he had offered to the Mother, he said at last, ‘It is all “Mother” now! . . . Everything is gone. Now it’s only “Mother Mother!”14

While relating about the experience to a disciple after his return to Belur, Swami Vivekananda revealed about the ‘divine voice’ that he had heard. He said,

Since hearing that divine voice, I cherish no more plans . . . as Mother wills, so it will be . . . Whether it be internal or external, if you actually hear with your ears such a disembodied voice, as I have done, can you deny it and call it false? Divine Voices are actually heard, just as you and I are talking.15

Devotion through Music and Poetry

To Swami Vivekananda, music and poetry were wonderful instruments of
adoration of the Divine. Gifted with a delightful voice that was so lively and sweet, whenever Swami Vivekananda rendered a devotional song, the spirit of it used to become incarnate as it were in cadence and beauty. The captivating singing of Swami Vivekananda revealed the fervent devotion that was natural in him. In fact, it was through music that his first communion with Sri Ramakrishna took place. The latter would often go into Samadhi on listening to Narendra’s enchanting singing. Swami Saradananda relates one such incident: ‘Many devotees gathered together at the temporary residence of the Master at Shyampukur and were enjoying in his company the bliss and the talks and songs about the Divine. Narendranath began singing devotional songs . . . All were charmed by those exceedingly melodious vibrations of tunes coupled with remarkable spiritual fervor, and lost themselves completely in them. The Master was sometimes having ecstasy . . . Some of the devotees lost consciousness in deep spiritual emotions. There flowed in the room a strong current of bliss, which was almost palpable.’

Poetry was another powerful medium for Swami Vivekananda to communicate his cherished feelings of divinity and devotion. Revealing the humane, passionate elements of his personality, the hymns of Swami Vivekananda form an integral relationship with his religious viewpoints and contribute to the spirit of Bhakti that was inherent in him. Quite ardently he muses in ‘A Hymn to Sri Ramakrishna’,

Devotion, aspiration and worship—all breakers of worldly bondage—are indeed sufficient to take one to the Supreme Truth . . . Thou art my sole refuge, O friend of the lowly and the lost!17

Expressions of devout thoughts are seen in his ‘A Hymn to the Divine Mother’, where Swami Vivekananda yearns for Her blessings thus:

Mother Supreme! Oh, may Thy gracious face
Never be turned away from me, Thy child!
. . .—the abode
Of fearlessness, worshipped by service true
There, at those blessed feet I take refuge!
. . . She, My Mother, She,
The All, is my resort . . .18

The ‘burning devotion’ in him is further portrayed in his inspiring poem ‘A Hymn to Lord Shiva’:

Salutation to Shiva! whose glory
Is immeasurable, who resembles sky
In clearness, to whom are attributed
The phenomena of all creation,
The preservation and dissolution
Of the universe! May the devotion,
The burning devotion of this my life
Attach itself to Him, to Shiva, who,
Is Lord of all, with none transcending Him.19

The inner workings of the mind of a seer-poet that Swami Vivekananda was are indeed beyond the reach of ordinary knowledge. Yet, quite undeniably, such poems must have been written in moments of great devotional ecstasy.

Glorification of Bhakti

To Swami Vivekananda, Bhakti is a real and genuine search after the Lord, which begins, continues and ends in love. An ideal yet unpretentious Bhakta himself, he expounded that Bhakti Yoga is the science of higher love, that it shows us how to direct, control, manage and use it, how to give it a new aim, as it were, to attain the highest and glorious result of spiritual blessedness. His life and message reveal that universal love results from an
intense state of Bhakti, where worship is offered to everyone, to every life and to every being. He cautions that it is really difficult to live truly the life of philosophy, whereas Bhakti Yoga is natural, sweet and gentle.

Yet he points out that the central secret of Bhakti Yoga is to realize that passions, feelings and emotions are not wrong in themselves as long as they are controlled and given a higher direction. Resolving the differences of opinion between knowledge and devotion, he elucidates that there is not really so much difference between the two as people sometimes imagine and reassures that in the end they converge and meet at the same point. He brilliantly reconciles the personal and impersonal aspect of God and provides a radical approach to bhakti. He questions and also clarifies thus:

Are there then two Gods—the 'Not this, not this,' the Sat-chit-ananda, 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. 20

Bhakti Symbolized in the Emblem

The supreme goal of human life, according to Vivekananda, is to manifest the divinity which is inherent in all beings. The ideal of synthesis of the four yogas propounded by Swami Vivekananda finds expression in the emblem of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. While the wavy waters represent Karma Yoga; the rising sun represents Jnana Yoga and the coiled serpent represents Raja Yoga; the lotus flower represents Bhakti Yoga.

Sri Ramakrishna used to pronounce Swami Vivekananda as a thousand-petalled lotus!

To the Indian mind, the lotus is more than a flower—it represents devotion, love, purity and non-attachment. Almost certainly, the lotus was chosen by Swami Vivekananda in the emblem to arouse in us the spirit of untainted absolute Bhakti and instill in us divine qualities of love, affection, adoration, worship and loyalty to God.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda lived to show that the path of love, devotion, and complete surrender to God and to one’s Guru has the potential to lead man to the attainment of the Supreme Truth. In this modern cynical age, spirituality, especially devotion, has come under grave scrutiny. Faith, a prerequisite to devotion, has come under mounting skepticism. The supreme values of devotion are being ignored by the youth of today and to make things worse, an outlook that Bhakti is antagonistic to modern science and development seems to be gripping their minds. Undeniably, a study of the life and message of Swami Vivekananda is mandatory for the present generation to recognize the relevance of devotion in one’s life and to appreciate the fact that it is through the path of bhakti and learning the secrets of divine love alone that we learn to transform the web of relationships of human life into oases of love and harmony.

Let us all recall and put into practice what Swami Vivekananda advocated, ‘This easy and smooth idea of Bhakti has been written and worked upon, and we have to embrace it in our everyday practical life.’ 21
Pitfalls In the Path of Bhakti

The one great advantage of Bhakti is that it is the easiest and 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 (Nishtha) 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. —Swami Vivekananda, CW, 3.33

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**The Central Theme of Narada Bhakti Sutras**

*A Frequently Asked Questions*

SWAMI HARSANANDA

**Question:** Who is Narada?

*Answer:* Narada, who is well known as the divine sage, is a very attractive person who is well reputed in our religious literature. According to information available from various sources, his character may be described as follows: This great Personage reached the most exalted station in life from the lowest, by self-effort as well as the grace of God and attained the position of Devarishi—the divine seer. Veda Mantras found expression through this pure mind. A great ascetic, he led his life according to the principles that he preached. He moved among the three worlds in order to propagate the Lord’s name and preach the glory of Bhakti.

**Question:** What is a Sutra?

*Answer:* Narada Bhakti-sutras is, like similar books of ancient times, in the form of sutras. The following is the definition of a sutra: ‘Those who know sutras consider a sutra as that (a brief sentence) which contains very few letters, gives rise to no doubt (has a clear meaning), includes the essence of all related topics and does not have any superfluous words.’

Sutra also means a thread. As various flowers are strung together by a thread to make a garland, or, as a necklace in which several beads are strung together, information in this area of knowledge is collected from various sources and is arranged in the form of a compilation. A Sutra that consists of very few letters can be easily memorized. Perhaps, because there was no script in those days, or, even if it were there, its use was not widespread, works of this kind were composed. Gradually, when writing became more popular, the expert disciples belonging to particular schools wrote explanation of various kinds like Bhashya, Vyakhyana, Tika, Tippani and Vritti on these Sutras.

**Question:** What is the subject-matter of Narada Bhakti Sutras?

*Answer:* It is a brief work consisting only of 84 sutras. It is a collection of Narada’s preachings taken from various sources and presenting them in the form of sutras. The author of this work is unknown. According to some scholars, this was composed in 12th century A.D. But this is not definite. There is no commentary on it in Sanskrit, perhaps because its language is simple, beautiful and direct; if there is any commentary, it is unknown.
Question: Why Bhakti Schools declare that Bhakti Marga is the path of liberation in Kali Yuga (the Dark Age)?

Answer: The Jnana Marga (path of knowledge) which, by means of listening about and reflecting on the Self that is beyond the limitation of the body and the senses, and by deep meditation on that Self, helps attain self-realization and liberation, is very difficult. The eightfold yoga (Ashtanga or Raja Yoga) which involves control of the mind and senses also is a hard path. Even the yoga of desireless work (Karma Yoga) is also not easy. The yoga of devotion, which consists of repetition of God’s name and singing of songs of His adoration, is the very natural and simple path to liberation in this Kali Yuga. This is the stand of the Bhakti Schools.

Question: Who is eligible for Bhakti Marga?

Answer: Everyone is eligible for this path of Bhakti. Caste, community, gender, education, innate ability (samskara)—none of these is an impediment to move along this path. Guha, Nanda, Chokkamela, Ravidas, Thiruppananalvar, Kannappa the hunter—these people were untouchables. Ajamila, Ratnakara, Thondaradippodi Alvar—these were sinners. Sabari, Radha, Mira and Goda were women. Kabir, Nanak and Tukaram had no bookish knowledge. Therefore, what is required is only love for God; this itself will help attain everything. An important characteristic of the practice of devotion is to count the beads according to a discipline, taking the mantra of the God given by a worthy guru through initiation and keeping in mind a form of God which is to one’s liking. It need not be emphasized that, as in other kinds of spiritual practices, the following of moral values, the practice of detachment, the company of noble souls and so on, are absolutely essential for this purpose.

Question: What is the nature of Bhakti?

Answer: The easiest (sutra 58) and the best instrument (sutrals. 25, 26, 30, 59, 60) to have God-realization is devotion. This Bhakti may be divided into two aspects—Parabhakti and Aparabhakti. Aparabhakti can be further divided into Gauni Bhakti and Mukhya Bhakti. While Parabhakti is the aim, Aparabhakti is the instrument to obtain it.

Question: What is Parabhakti?

Answer: Parabhakti is the manifestation of the great bliss that results from God-realization. It is of the nature of great love for God. It is full of bliss like nectar; also, those who obtain this attain immortality and liberation (sutrals. 2, 3). Since this has been described as of the nature of great love, could it not be considered as a form of desire like worldly love? No, it is that which holds and destroys all desires (sutra. 7). When Parabhakti...
is aroused in the heart, it may find expression in many ways; for instance—particular attachment to rites of worship, avidity to listen to stories about the Lord, surrendering the fruit of all the work done, and great longing (sutras. 16-19).

**Question:** What is Aparabhakti?

**Answer:** There are two stages in Aparabhakti. The initial one is Gaunibhakti and the higher one is Mukhyabhakti or Premabhakti.

Gaunibhakti is of three kinds: Sattvika, Rajasika and Tamasika; or Artabhakti, Artha-parabhakti and Jijnasubhakti (sutra.56). Practice of this Gaunibhakti is easy. It is the natural love that resides in the heart and needs to be directed towards the Lord and hence, it needs no proof. By practice, gradually one can attain peace and great bliss (sutras. 58-60).

**Question:** Now what is Mukhyabhakti?

**Answer:** The practice of Gaunibhakti gradually leads us towards Mukhya-bhakti. This is otherwise called Premabhakti or Ekantabhakti. This is the penultimate state of Parabhakti, the last but one step. If one gets this, the manifestation of Parabhakti will not be far away. This Mukhyabhakti or Premabhakti is experiencable inside the heart. But it cannot be described in words. This is like a dumb fellow eating a tasty dish (sutras. 51, 52). Though this is a rare experience, it finds expression in advanced practitioners (sutra. 53).

**Question:** What are the practices to develop devotion?

**Answer:** Various kinds of instructions and guidance on devotional practices are found aplenty in this work. The practitioner of devotion should always give importance to the scriptures because they have originated from the Rishis and Munis and great men.

The scriptures that the practitioners of devotion should give the greatest importance to, are the devotional scriptures.

The devotee should renounce those duties—whether worldly or scriptural—which come in the way of his practice and perform the rest with the conviction that they are an offering to God (sutras. 8-11). As the body is a valuable instrument to be used in the path of practice, he should protect it well (sutra. 14).

A great obstruction to spiritual life is the attraction towards sense objects. An easy solution to this problem is continuous prayer and remembrance as well as the company of great men and, thereby, their grace (sutras. 35-42). It is as much necessary to renounce the company of the wicked as cultivate the company of the great; in the company of the wicked, there is every possibility of bad samskaras (mental proclivities) like desire and anger in the devotee’s mind rising up (sutras. 43-45). Wicked company does not necessarily mean company of wicked persons. The sense objects that stimulate the mind and give rise to desire, greed, atheism, enmity and anger are also wicked company. We should not even listen to such things (sutra. 63).

**Question:** What is Maya and how to cross over it?

**Answer:** Maya or illusion is the captivating power of God; to cross it is very difficult. But, unless it is crossed, there can be no liberation. With this purpose, the devotee should, apart from shunning the company of the wicked and cultivating that of the noble, practise a few more things. Praying to the Lord in solitude, surrendering his thoughts about his security to God Himself, giving up actions born of desires and offering the fruit of the rest of the things he does to God, to free himself from the bondage of the world and so on—these are the other practices (sutras. 46-50). When he obtains through these, an unceasing devotion, he will not only cross Maya with the
grace of God, but achieve the power to help others to cross it too.

**Question:** What are the other devotional practices?

**Answer:** The devotee surrenders himself totally to the Lord. Hence he should not bother about this world or the next. This does not mean that he should give up worldly and scripturally prescribed actions. While engaging himself in these actions, if he offers their fruit to the Supreme Self, devotion gradually gets ripened (sutras. 61-62).

Desire, anger and such other passions are great obstacles on the path of spiritual practice. It is, indeed, very arduous to fight them directly and win. Hence, Narada suggests a solution that is easy and shrewd, to direct them towards the Lord Himself! The Gopis turned their cravings towards Krishna and killed them; in the same way, we too could destroy them (sutra. 64).

The devotee, who is engaged in this internal battle, should incessantly be praying to the Lord without wasting even a moment of his time. As an aid and complement to this, he should practise nonviolence, truth, mercy and such other noble virtues (sutras. 77-79). If he continues to pray to the Supreme Self in this way, the latter will appear before the devotee very quickly and grant him His experience, bliss and liberation.

**Question:** What are the characteristics of a liberated devotee?

**Answer:** The man who attains liberation (that is, Parabhakti) is a Siddha-purusha. As he is ever-contented, he doesn’t crave for anything. As he is totally blissful, there is no trace of sorrow in him. As he sees his Beloved Supreme Self everywhere, he does not hate anyone. As, again, he is contented always, he does not need to engage himself in any action to satisfy his desires. Sometimes, he becomes rapt in Parabhakti and like a bee that has sucked honey a little too much, he stands lost in himself. When he is conscious, he experiences that sublime love and sees the Lord everywhere. He listens only to things about Him; he talks and thinks about Him alone. When he meets other devotees, all of them converse about God alone; shedding blissful tears and thus spend their time (sutra. 68). As he has surrendered to God everything that belongs to him even after he has experienced Parabhakti, this devotee will continue to engage himself in worldly and religious activities in order to guide others. Scriptures and actions become holier because of this (sutras. 4-6; 55, 61, 32, 68).

These devotees do not recognize any differences among them as they belong to the ‘caste’ of the devotees, that is, the ‘caste’ of God. They do not recognize differences even with others (sutra. 72). Such great devotees sanctify their families. They make holy pilgrim centres holier when they visit them; not merely that, they make the whole earth more sacred. Looking at them, manes and Gods dance with glee (sutras. 69-71).

**Question:** What is the conclusion?

**Answer:** Narada has not preached this devotional scripture merely with his intellectual power. He obtained it directly from Shiva-Mahadeva Himself. There are very great men like Sanatkumara, Vyasa, Shuka, Shandilya, Bali, Hanuman and Vibhishana who belong to this great Bhakti tradition. For ever they live in God. Hence, with one mind they have spread broadcast their preachings unmindful of the frivolous criticism levelled against them by uncultured people. Those who have complete faith and trust in this devotional work and practise what is preached in it will definitely attain the Supreme Self dearest to their hearts. ☐
Sadhaka, Sadhana and Siddhi are the triumvirs of the realm of religion. Religion is realisation. Its attainment is Siddhi. Its means is Sadhana. The struggling soul is the Sadhaka. The soul is now in exile. It has to return home. Though condemned to exile the prodigal is fated to return to his Father. All human struggles are meant to prepare the soul to return home. The acts that lead to exile will one day make man realise the futility of straying afar and will urge him to beat a retreat. The struggles of the retreating aspirant are usually termed Sadhana, though the earlier going forth are the necessary preparation for it and therefore, that also is a part of the Sadhana. Those who never strayed need no struggle, and Sadhana means struggle to attain freedom.

There are several paths prescribed in the religious lore to attain the goal and they are all Sadhanas. The scriptures prescribe several ways to suit the various Sadhakas. Commenting on Arjuna’s query in the Gita regarding the Sthitaprajna, Sri Sankara remarks that the characteristics of a perfect one are described in order that the aspirant through spiritual struggle might attain to them. Thus it may be seen that the main refrain of all the scriptures is Sadhana, pointing out the path to perfection. All is grist to the mill of the spiritually hungry.

Sadhanas vary according to the need of the various types of Sadhakas. The types relevant in this context are the intellectual, the psychological, the emotional and the active. Of these, the intellectual and the emotional are the more fundamental. The psychological and the active approaches may be considered complementary to the other two. Hearing of the scriptures, deep thinking thereon and meditation on the truths they proclaim are the Sadhanas prescribed for the intellectual type. The Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras are the main texts for them. Hearing of the glories of God, chanting His names and glories, dedication to Him, ecstatic absorption in Him are the processes of progress in emotional illumination. Mainly the Puranas show the way in this line. Psychological steadiness is imperative in every path. The Yoga Sutras propound the practices essential for balance. Due performance of one’s duties keeps the body and the senses in healthy occupation and thereby wards off the onslaughts of adverse influence. The Gita, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana uphold the need of the due performance of duties. This is a very broad generalisation, for no man is compartmental. Similarly, all the scriptures contain more or less all the paths that every type may require.

Now to come to the Sadhana according to the Bhagavata which is our main theme.
Bhagavata is a book of devotion *par excellence*, and hence there is no doubt as to its predirection. Yet it is not dogmatic or partisan, but composite. It provides intellectual intuition, emotional ecstasy, mental poise and physical relaxation. It caters to the whole man. But it gives pride of place to emotional beatitude.

Let us attend a *Satsanga* which is highly extolled by all. The place is Vasudeva’s house in Dwaraka. Krishna is not seen in the forefront, but must be there within. Narada walks in. Some curse keeps him ever on the move. But this time he has set it aside and is decided to spend a few days with Krishna in Dwaraka, for the sage knew that the Lord was about to wind up His human sport. Vasudeva, the Master of the house welcomed Narada with all solemnity and then placed before him certain personal problems. He said: ‘O Saintly one, your very presence bestows peace on all. The doings of gods may spell ill or well for beings, but the actions of the God-centred bode benediction only to all. O Sage, deign to instruct me in the path of devotion, gaining which man becomes free from all fear. Of yore, I worshipped God, true, but fool that I was, I did so not for freedom, but for bondage. O Noble one, instruct us in the ways by which we may be freed from all fear and wretchedness.’ (Vide Bhagavata XI, 2nd chapter)

Pleasantly pleased with this request from Krishna’s father, the celestial sage spoke:

Well done, Vasudeva, well done. Your request is noble and will lead to the wellbeing of all. You have bestowed a blessing on me by giving me an occasion to dwell on God. In answer to your query, I will narrate to you an ancient episode. King Nimi of renowned Mithila country was once engaged in the performance of a great sacrifice. While the sacrifice was in progress, one day there came nine angelic sages. The king accorded them a very cordial welcome and spoke to them thus: ‘I feel your very august selves are the followers of the Great Lord and are on the
move to sanctify the sinful. It is a great boon and a rare privilege for mortal man to meet with a genuine devotee of God. Verily it is an invaluable treasure to be in the presence of one living in God. If you think us worthy, please tell us the ways and means of becoming a devotee of God.'

Mightily pleased with this request of the king, Kavi, the eldest of the nine told him thus: 'I think the only way for man to be rid of fear is to worship the lotus feet of the Lord ever and always, tormented in perpetuum as he is by horrible miseries consequent upon his identification with the corrupting cadaver'.

There is no short cut to heaven. The malady is chronic and so the remedy must be constant. For dehydration there is a prescription in Ayurveda called sada-kashaya, constant potion. Here also the case is identical. Samsara is a constant disease and hence the treatment for it also must be constant. Both the question and answer are ever old and ever new. This is the final conclusion of all scriptures regarding Sadhana. Narada proclaims in his aphorisms on devotion that one should dwell on God to the exclusion of every other thought with all one's being and at all times. 'Pray ceaselessly' said St. Paul. Religion demands total dedication from its votary.

Prescription is perfect, but how to start the treatment? Kavi gives the direction: 'Those directions the Lord gave to Arjuna for self-realisation, know them to be the best and the easiest for an ignorant man. And they are the disciplines meant for making one a devotee.

The reference is to the advice Krishna gave to Arjuna directing him to dedicate every one of his actions to God, whether it be eating or worshipping or gifting. Here there is no classification of actions into sacred and secular. Everything is transformed into sacred by dedicating it to God. The Whole life thus becomes spiritual. That is the secret of making Sadhana constant and continuous. 'The labour we delight in physics pain said Macbeth (Macb. II. 2 4s) and that holds good in every field. Love makes Sadhana a pleasure. And then it is sure to succeed.

The sage again spake:

O King, a man adopting this method will never stray away; even if he were to run blindfolded, he will not trip or fall.

Fall is likely only when the path is uneven or slippery. One who even breathes in and through God is always in the presence of God. To him even the so-called fall is in God. Can the fish trip and fall in water? But make no mistake, this assurance is applicable only to one whose dedication is total and complete.

Kavi continues:

Whatever you do impelled by your innate inclination with body, word, mind, senses, intellect or ego, surrender all that to the Supreme Lord!

This is the culmination and consummation of the path of Bhakti. Even the sense of surrender is surrendered. Thereafter the devotee merges in the Lord. He may remain a Nimitta, an instrument of God; or he is the parlour of God, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna. Until the devotee is thus merged in God-consciousness, there is every chance of straying again. The sage warns:

Sense of separation certainly entails cause for fear. One outside of His presence will be enveloped in Maya; he loses his contact with the divine and gets identified with dead matter. Therefore the wise one should, with one pointed devotion, worship Him following the instruction of the Guru who must be looked upon as God Himself.

Advaita alone is above danger. Even the least separation is fraught with fear. The fate
of Jaya and Vijaya, the sentinels of Vaikuntha, who incurred the displeasure of the Sanakas and were born as demons, is an instructive warning. Even Vaikuntha is not sufficiently secure, for there also the sense of difference between the devotee and the Lord persists. A slight slip may prove fatal. So, taking the help of an experienced Guide, one should ever remain awake in Him.

If God alone is real and the world unreal, how did all this trouble come about? Kavi explains:

Duality, though devoid of being, appears due to the observer’s imagination, just as dream and day-dream. The intelligent man should restrain the mind that evolves into imagination and multiplicity and thence will ensue freedom from fear.

The question regarding the origin of creation is a riddle. The only answer possible from the position whence the question arises is given here. It is an ignorant man’s question, because the illumined man has no question. It is the product of imagination and the mind is the matrix of imagination and the projection of the manifold. Dream and reverie are the classic examples for this possibility. Waking, dream and sleep cancel one another and it is illogical to invest more substantiality to one of them over the others. Though illusory, Maya’s potency for mischief is not small. The remedy lies in controlling the mind. And every kind of Sadhana is aimed at it. Once it is under control, all fear ceases. But how to bring the mind under control? The sage suggests a simple and at the same time sure Sadhana:

Hear the propitious exploits and birth stories of the Blessed Lord; without shame, sing His names that indicate His exploits and fare you forth without any attachment.

Let the tongue sing His glories; let the ear hear them, let the eyes see His forms and let the mind merge in Him. Sophisticated people are usually shy to chant aloud God’s name. God will be ashamed of him who is ashamed of Him. A devotee cannot serve two masters; his sole attachment must be to God alone. How does such a one appear to others? Hear Kavi’s words:

Such a one singing his beloved Lord’s hallowed names with a heart melted by love, at times roars with laughter, at times weeps his heart out and at times shouts at the top of his voice; sometimes he sings sweetly and anon dances about like a mad man unaware of the outside world.

Such are the mad men of God who cure mundane madness. These expressions are the overflow of their supreme joy. They cannot contain themselves. Even their weeping may be an expression of joy unbounded. Such scenes were frequent occurrences at Sri Ramakrishna’s Dakshineswar. What is his view of the world? Listen to Kavi:

He sees the sky, the air, the fire, the water, the earth, the stars, the quarters, the trees, the rivers, the seas—everything as the manifestation of Lord Hari and he prostrates before them as before the Lord.

For him all sense of difference has disappeared. Everything, everywhere, is God to him. The devotee sees the world as transformed into God and that is his Advaitic experience. What is that plenary experience that devotion leads one to? See through Kavi’s eyes:

He who surrenders himself to God gains simultaneously supreme devotion, attainment of at-one-ment with the Blissful Lord and dispassion for the world, just as a man gets pleasure, nourishment and abatement of hunger when food is partaken of.

At-one-ment with God is the goal of all Sadhanas; what then is special about the Bhagavata method? The devotee experiences
the *Ananda* aspect of the *Sat-chit-ananda*, because it is this bliss that flows from him as devotion to the source of all Bliss. It is only natural the lesser pleasures become insipid to one who has tasted Supreme Bliss. The experience is one; it is viewed from three levels. In itself it is Bliss. Supreme devotion is its means and detachment is its path-clearance. Kavi reiterates the conclusion in different words:

To that devotee, who thus constantly meditates on the lotus Feet of the Lord, O King, come detachment, supreme devotion and the realisation of God and thus he attains to perfect peace.

Peace that passeth all understanding is what the Sadhaka attains to. It is unalloyed bliss.

If we scrutinise the answers of the sage we will find that the goal and the emphasis on the need of uninterrupted discipline are the same in all kinds of Sadhanas. What is particular to the Bhagavata path is its method. Constant hearing of the glories of God and chanting of His names are the main practices inculcated. Surrendering every act to God makes it an act of worship which culminates in the surrendering of the actor himself. It is not the nature of any act that makes it an impediment but the attitude with which it is done. Do everything in the name of and for the sake of God. It is then possible to keep up constant remembrance of God.

Is it practical? Look at Parikshit. What was his Sadhana? Continuous hearing of the Bhagavata. Thereby he attained liberation. Prahlada has analysed for us this ceaseless prayer and suggested a detailed programme for its practice in his famous reply to his father. He said:

> Hear the glories of God; sing His hallowed names; remember His blissful form; serve His devotees; worship His forms; salute all as his embodiments consider thyself as His servant; consider Him as thy truest Friend; and surrender thyself to Him.

The secret of success in any path consists in one’s steadiness and constancy. The Bhagavata gives any number of beautiful sports of God. Hearing them will transport the mind to the celestial Vrindavan. This is the Sadhana advocated by Narada, proclaimed by Vyasa, practised by Suka and approved by Krishna, and recently reinforced by the realisations of Sri Ramakrishna. If one can go to Vasudeva’s house in Dwaraka in the company of Narada through the Bhagavata one may gain a glimpse of that charming child of Devaki in one’s heart.

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**The Beauty of Srimad Bhagavatam**

The Bhagavata amply fulfils the chief task of the Puranas, viz popularising the Vedic truths by means of narratives and such other aids. ‘It is’, as Shri Ramakrishna aptly expressed it, ‘fried in the butter of Jnana and soaked in the syrup of Bhakti.’ The study of such a book cannot but be of the greatest help to a seeker after Truth.

—**Swami Madhavananda** in his Foreword to his translation of *Uddhava Gita*
Insights of Sri Ramanujacharya in Bhakti

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

Acharya of Theistic Vedanta

Sri Ramanuja is the first major theistic interpreter of Vedanta. It was not as though bhakti was not part of one’s personal endeavours to gain Realisation, but it had not been given a space at the highest rung of the ladder. Adi Shankara, and his predecessors allotted the prime space to Jnana. As for those who considered Vedic ritualism as the way to gain highest results in spiritual endeavour, they had no place for personalized adoration. It was the correctness of ritualistic procedure that would achieve the transformation from humanhood to divinehood. Thus the Samhitas and the Brahmanas of the Vedic lore were considered the means to an end. A literal reading of the Vedic hymns does give us vignettes of the glory and grandeur of Nature, and the various gods. But this is wonderment, not bhakti, that soul-togetherness of love for one’s deity.

Adi Shankara who chose Jnana Yoga for Realisation has also given us soulful stotras. However, these are only sublime adorations of the Divine. Ultimately one leaves all that behind when the knowledge dawns upon us that what we see, feel or aspire for are but illusions, mithya. Once we realise the truth of Aham Brahmasmi, there is no more adventure. Karma yoga, again, is only the skilful and correct manner of performing works. It is only Bhakti yoga that needs something more than one’s own equation with the Brahman. It needs a Divine Personality and when one approaches this Divine with love, one gains ‘the greatest possible spiritual fulfilment’ (Sri Aurobindo). None of the other yogas is excluded from this path either.

This is the trinity of our powers, the union of all three in God to which we arrive when we start on our journey by the path of devotion with Love for the Angel of the Way to find in the ecstasy of the divine delight of the All-Lover’s being the fulfilment of ours, its secure home and blissful abiding-place and the centre of its universal radiation.¹

Sri Ramanuja’s Stand

With Ramanuja we have a marked departure from the Shankara Vedanta. His first work of philosophical import, Vedartha Sangraha tunes Bhakti with Jnana to gain realization. The Theos, the Divine Personality is here, seen as Vishnu, reclining on the primordial snake:

I offer adoration to Vishnu, the all-pervading supreme Being, who is the overlord of all sentient and non-sentient entities, who reposes on the primordial Shesha, who is pure and infinite and in whom abound blissful perfections.

Sri Ramanuja then goes on to submit his view in the background of some Upanishadic statements like Tat Tvam Asi and Ayam Atma
Brahma. He finds the Upanishads to be built on three basic ideas. These are:

1. An aspirant should learn about the relationship of the Supreme and the individual self (tattva);

2. he should engage himself in action like meditating, worshipping and saluting the blessed feet of the Supreme, _prama purusha charana yugala dhyaanaarchana pranaamadi (hit_)

3. and hold on to a disciplined life based on this knowledge that would gain him the Supreme (_purusharth_).

While Sri Ramanuja’s arguments are woven with logical reasoning as that of a Vedantin, the path of Upanishads is seen as bhakti by him. The _prama purusha_ is Vishnu-Narayana, and bhakti is the angel of the way for the aspirant to reach Him. This turn (not exactly a radical turn, as he had a precedence in the Pancharatra tradition) brought him closer to the masses for he was able to use the entire gamut of human emotions to help man gain Godward longings. The Alvars, the Tamil hymnologists, had prepared the way for him ‘to connect’ with the common man without giving up the Vedantin’s view. The moment Perialvar (Vishnuchitta) saw the Supreme as a babe in the cradle, a pathway had been cleared for man to draw close to the Divine.

Sri Ramanuja recognized this and all his writings are bhakti-tuned, not mere rationalist philosophy. Nor does he insist upon one form for the Supreme. He realised that mankind needs a variety of choice in seeking at-one-ment with the Divine. This variety could be drawn easily from the hymns of the Alvars who have sung about the various incarnations of the Lord and had prepared the heart of the aspirant at various levels. The Acharya went about his work in a systematic way. He trained seventy-four ‘Simhasanadhipathis’ to fan out and spread the message of Ubhaya Vedanta which based itself strongly on bhakti. These Acharyas were well versed in Sanskrit and Tamil. The Guruparamparas (Records of the heritage of teachers) speak of seven hundred renunciates who made up Sri Ramanuja’s entourage, as also twelve thousand ekankis (persons who were single and unattached to family), three hundred women teachers and several royal families who helped in spreading the Movement.

Naturally the Tamil hymns had an important part to play in these activities. Some of the lectures of these teachers (eleventh to fourteenth centuries) have been recorded with devotional care. Sometimes Sri Ramanuja, if he were nearby would add his explanations too to teachers who were his contemporaries so they could get involved
in the hymn. According to T.V. Gopala Iyer, the eminent Tamil scholar, there are nearly forty additional interpretations by Sri Ramanuja in the Manipravala commentaries. They give us an idea of the Acharya’s insights into Bhakti.

An Inspiring Instance

Here is an instance where Sri Ramanuja teaches his disciples how to become one with the object of devotion as it is seen, not as it has been described by others. Bhakti has to be totally experiential of the moment. This is Nammalvar praying to the Lord to give him the experience of at-one-ment, in his Tiruvaimoli (5-10-6):

The manner in which you had stood up, was seated,
And lay down are so precious; many are your illusions
As the One Form, and yet Formless; I keep Meditating upon all repeatedly; how shall I imagine thee?
Do give an answer to this hapless fellow.
The lone Brilliance that devoured the worlds!

Sri Ramanuja quietly stood by as the preacher explained the various postures of the Lord first with Ramayana associations. The manner in which he had stood with bow and arrows when Vali and Ravana were to be killed; how he was seated in the cottage built with leaves of grass by Lakshmana in Panchavati; and how he lay down on the beach looking eastwards with his hands in salutation to get Varuna give a pathway for the Vanara army to reach Lanka. As Krishna he had stood up raising the Govardhan hill; the loving manner in which he was seated with the cowherdesses just before dancing the Ras Lila; later on, how he lay on the lap of the cowherdesses under the autumnal moon. Again, the Lord standing in Tirumala, seated in Paramapada and resting in the milky ocean are also indicated in the hymn, said the speaker with scholarly erudition. It was all a fantastic lesson in enjoying the various feats and lila associated with the Lord.

Then Sri Ramanuja quietly intervened. He said we should remember that contextually, the hymn is about Krishnavatara. The first thing which comes to us with the evocation of the Lord in this incarnation is the Baby Krishna. So it is about Krishna standing up in the cradle, holding on to the cradle chain; when the tiny hands pained, He let go the chain and sat inside the cradle. Too tired even for that, baby Krishna lay down in the cradle. Again, he remained lying down till Yasoda went away from the room, then got up, and when he heard her steps again he sat back and as her shadow came nearer lay down quietly feigning sleep.

Such total involvement with the object, here the God-child, is to be conveyed by the speaker to his listeners. All the rest will come later. After all, it was when Periyalvar saw the Supreme as Baby Krishna in the cradle that a new age started for the Pancharatra tradition! Such experiential devotion gains the foreground in Sri Ramanuja’s commentary on the Gita.

Theos as Krishna in the humble role of a charioteer is also an Acharya. The steady manner in which Krishna calms down the agitated Arjuna and teaches him Vedantic truths would have appealed to Sri Ramanuja the teacher. So also the movement from Vedanta to sheer bhakti and the evocation of the Presence of the Supreme that transforms the disciple and then leads him to do saranagati to the Divine. Explaining Sri Ramanuja’s methodology in the Gita which begins from the second chapter onwards, S.S. Raghavachar says:
For Ramanuja the process of spiritual culture, the pathway to ultimate freedom, commences in an intellectual understanding of the real nature of the self. This is the Sankhya mentioned in the chapter. With this understanding as the base, Karma Yoga has to be practiced. When Karma-yoga develops to its fullness, it initiates Jnana-yoga or the condition of the steady-minded man. The goal and fulfillment of this condition is the immediate realization or perception of the self in its purity and essential character. This experiential apprehension of the self gives rise to Bhakti, which is the final and proximate means of Moksha.²

A Synthesis

As we progress and come to chapters in the Gita like Raja-vidya Raja-guhya Yoga we find the masterly manner in which Sri Ramanuja synthesizes the yogic pathways and assures us that devotion and surrender will never fail to gain God’s grace. If we transform our mundane life as a consecration to the Divine, remaining a devotee in heart, Grace will never fail to gather us in its embrace: Even if an evil fellow decides to pursue bhakti yoga, he gets transformed into a righteous person speedily: kshipram bhavati dharmatma! Sri Ramanuja comments that by continuously contemplating upon Krishna, rajas and tamas leave the evil one automatically. As the devotee meditates upon the Divine, automatically he surrenders to the Lord, as desired by Krishna in the charama sloka beginning, sarva dharmaan parityajya (18, 66). Once that happens he continues with his everyday tasks (here it is Arjuna’s taking up arms as a kshatriya defending one’s honour), and the Lord takes all responsibility for He is indeed the Way and the Goal.

Sri Ramanuja took the message of bhakti to the masses and helped them get rid of many purblind customs. He was himself an intense practitioner of bhakti yoga. There is a charming instance of how he was corrected by Goddess Ranganayaki when he was spontaneously inditing Sri Saranagati Gadya. As he was looking at the image of the Goddess and reciting descriptive terms as Padmavanayala, Bhagavati, Sri, Devi, Nityanapayini, Niravadya (who uses all her greatness only for the good of others), Devadeva Divyamahishi, and Akhilajaganmata, suddenly the Mother knitted her eyebrows. Akhilajaganmata? Just Universal Mother? Immediately Sri Ramanuja corrected himself and added,
Asmanmataram, my mother. The Divine Mother gives individual attention to each and everyone of the souls. For each one of us she is My Mother. That is how one should approach the Supreme.

Seeing God Everywhere

When a devotee is constantly meditating upon the Divine he sees the Lord in everything and so will not be able to stand any violence to anyone. Can I remain inactive when my mother suffers? Can I turn away heartlessly when my father goes hungry? This attitude of Sri Ramanuja made compassion to be the hall mark of Bhakti. Ramanuja did not stop with giving profound advice. He did what he preached. ‘Kaar-ei karunai Ramanuja’ (Ramanuja who is compassionate as the rain-bearing cloud) is a familiar epithet used for him. He brought together the different castes under the umbrella of bhakti. For instance when he took over the administration of the Srirangam temple more than a thousand years ago, he employed people from all castes for different works and ordered that they be given special honours for particular events. He was the first reformer who welcomed the Dalits to enter the Narayana temple at Melkote. Ramanuja’s bhakti yoga is best exemplified by Narsi Mehta (15th century):

Devotees of Vishnu are those
Who suffer when others have pain
Rush to the help of the sorrowing,
And yet never feel conceited.
For Vaishnavas all are equal born,
They eschew all greed; respect all women
As they would their mother.
They do not lie, nor seek the wealth of others.

Endnotes


Qualities Conducive to Purity

Purity is absolutely the basic work, the bed-rock upon which the whole Bhakti-building rests. Cleansing the external body and discriminating the food are both easy, but without internal cleanliness and purity, these external observances are of no value whatsoever. In the list of qualities conducive to purity, as given by Ramanuja, there are enumerated, Satya, truthfulness; Arjava, sincerity; Daya, doing good to others without any gain to one’s self; Ahimsa, not injuring others by thought, word, or deed; Anabhidhya, not coveting others’ goods, not thinking vain thoughts, and not brooding over injuries received from another.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 3.67
Bhakti According to Madhusudana Sarasvati

SWAMI BRAHMESANANDA

His Illustrious Life

Madhusudana Sarasvati is the fifth among the main Acharyas of Advaita Vedanta after Gaudapada, Shankara, Sureshvara and Vidyaranya.

He was the third son, Kamalanayana, of Purodana Purandarakarya, whose ancestors had migrated from Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh to Bengal to escape the religious persecution of foreign invaders and had settled at village Unasia in district Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. He studied Sanskrit grammar and prosody from his father and Nyaya from Pandit Hariram Tarkavagish at Navadwip. Despite his great desire, he could not meet Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who was then in South India. He then came to Kashi where he studied Advaita Vedanta under Rama Tirtha and Mimamsa under Madhav Pandit. He was ordained a Sannyasin by Visweswar Sarasvati. He settled down in the Gopala Math on the Chousatti Ghat in Kashi.

Madhusudana Sarasvati wrote many books, the important ones are: Vedanta Kalpa Lalita, Siddhanta Bindu, Bhagavadbhakti Rasayana, Advaita Siddhi, Sankshepa Shariraka Vyakhya, Bhagavad Gita Gudharth Dipika. He left behind three eminent disciples: Balabhadra Bhattacharya, Sheshagovinda and Purushottama Sarasvati. The creation of the sect of Naga Sannyasins who lived in akhadas, wielded weapons and were trained in martial arts for the protection of Hindus against the attacks of fanatical Muslims also goes to him. In later years he left Kashi and passed away at Hardwar at a ripe age of 107, probably in AD 1697.

A Great Bhakta and Jnani

The great Acharya, Madhusudana Sarasvati was not only an Advaita Vedantin but also an ardent devotee of Sri Krishna. It seems from some of his own utterances that he was more a Bhakta than a Jnani.

For example, in one of the verses, he says:
We are worshipped by those who tread the path of Advaita; we have ascended the throne of Self Realization. Yet we have been forcibly made slave by that prankster who used to sport with the wives of the cowherds (Sri Krishna).

And also,
Let yogis experience, if they so desire, the supreme, spotless and attributeless Light with the help of their minds made strong by the practice of Yoga. But bewitching to our eyes That Something of Blue complexion (Sri Krishna) is enough, who runs on the banks of Yamuna.

In his introductory verses to his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, too, his preference for Bhakti is evident:
Although the preceding stages are thus acquired (by impressions acquired in past lives) devotion...
to God should still be cultivated for attaining later stages. They cannot be attained without that (devotion).

But in the state of being liberated while still alive (Jivanmukti), no ‘result of devotion’ is to be imagined: Adoring Hari is natural to them, like their being devoid of hate, etc.’

Such is the greatness of Hari (Vishnu) that, though free from bondage, the sages who delight (only) in the Self, render spontaneous devotion to Vishnu.1

According to the sentence: ‘Of them, the man of knowledge (Jnani) excels since he is endowed with constant steadfastness and one pointed devotion’, etc.2 this one who is full of loving devotion is declared to be the highest.3

In his work Sri-bhagavad-bhakti-rasayanam Madhusudana Sarasvati has systematically presented his views on Bhakti.

Characteristics of Bhakti

According to Madhusudana Sarasvati, Bhakti Yoga towards Lord Mukunda [Krishna] is the supreme goal (Parama purusharth) of all human beings, since it is totally untouched by suffering and bestows superlative, unsurpassable bliss.4 He has defined Bhakti as the uninterrupted flow of thought waves (towards God) of a mind which has melted and has become fluid due to listening to the glories of God.5

To explain the melting and flowing of mind towards God, Madhusudana Sarasvati gives the example of lac. Mind, by its very nature is hard, but it melts and becomes fluid when it comes in close contact with objects which heat it.6 What are these factors which heat the mind? They are lust, anger, fear, love, joy, sorrow, etc. For Bhakti, getting the mind into a fluid state is important because such a mind can take the form of anything to which it flows into. Also, when something like a colour is mixed in a fluid, it remains in it always.

When such a fluid mind takes the form of an object, that state becomes stable (sthayi), and since God is of the nature absolute-superlative bliss, it experiences that bliss. Although a fluid mind can also flow towards such worldly objects like women, etc., and assume their form, these objects being covered with Maya do not give such supreme bliss.8

It naturally follows that when mind melts and takes the form of the object and then becomes stable, there are two objects: One the external and the other mental. After this, the mental object/form persists even if the external object ceases to exist or is concealed or removed.9 This is what happens with all Bhaktas. Indeed this mentally stable or permanent image of God is the most important part of Bhakti, and gives supreme bliss to the Bhakta. When the mind thus melted takes the form of all-pervading, eternal, blissful Lord, nothing else for it remains to be gained.10

Forms of Bhakti

Thus a Bhakta must make his mind hard as stone towards sense objects and molten and fluid towards God, with the help of means prescribed by the scriptures.11 These means, though elaborated in the Srimad Bhagavatam, Madhusudana Sarasvati has summarized into the following eleven steps in the ascending order:12

1) Mahat-seva: Serving the holy or the company of the holy. This again is of two types: service of the devotees of God and service of God Himself. The author has here described the virtues and characteristics of the holy men in details.

2) Taddaya-patrata: Obtaining the grace of holy sages. The saints bestow their grace when they find a competent aspirant endowed with virtues like humility, charity, forbearance, etc. This grace, again, is of two types. In one, there
is no effort on the part of recipient Bhakta, and it comes unsought as it were. In the other there is self-effort on the part of the aspirant. In either case, there must be at least some competence in the recipient to be able to make the grace fruitful.

3) Tesham dharmeshu shraddha: Faith in the values related to Bhakti (Bhagavad Dharmas) which consists in the feeling of interest in following and implementing in one’s own life the virtues found in the sages. When such a faith matures, the devotee becomes indifferent to everything concerned with this world or other world and practices devotional values only.

4) Hari-guna-shruti: Listening to the glories of Hari. This includes all the nine Bhagavad Dharmas, viz. ‘Hearing about Vishnu, singing about Him, remembering Him, serving Him, worshipping Him, saluting Him, being His servant, being His comrade, and surrendering oneself and everything that is one’s own to Him.’

5) Ratyankura-utpatti: Sprouting of love for God. ‘Rati’ means stability of devotion and deep impression of it in a mind which has flowed towards God. This devotion for God is, as it were, the sprouting of the seed of faith in the values of devotion. This fifth stage is the very nature of Bhakti. The succeeding six stages are the fruit of this stage, and are attained on the maturity of the fifth stage.

6) Swarupa-adhigatih: Realization of one’s real nature. The realization of one’s inner Self, free from the gross and subtle bodies, takes place in this stage. This is equivalent to the experiencing of the Atman as indicated by ‘Thou’ in the sentence ‘Thou art That’.

7) Prema-vriddhi: Increase in love for God. By such knowledge of one’s real nature which increases the spirit of renunciation (vairagya), love for God increases.

Up to this seventh stage spiritual practices have to be done. The remaining four stages are achieved without any self-effort.

8) Bhagavad saakshaatkaara/Tasya-sphuranam: God Realization. Due to exuberance of divine love, God realization takes place in this stage.

9) Bhagavad-dharma-nishtha: Establishment in devotional practices. A Bhakta who has ascended to this stage devotes himself or herself totally to devotional practices and withdraws completely from worldly activities. This dedication to devotional values is of two types: The first is gained by self effort, and the second is gained as fruit/result of earlier practices. In this ninth stage, Bhakti becomes spontaneous.

10) Swasmin-tad-guna-shalita: Imbibing the qualities of God in one self. In this stage the Bhakta gets the siddhis of God in himself and thus goes beyond death. He becomes like God.

11) Premno-paraakaashtha: The highest stage of love. In this stage the Bhakta is not able to bear the slightest separation from God and feels excruciating pain in such separation.

Catalysts of Bhakti

Madhusudana Sarasvati has also described in detail the emotional factors which act as ‘heaters’ and ‘melt’ the mind and make it fluid, which can then flow towards God and assume His form, which, when it stabilizes, becomes Bhakti .(Bh.R.I.5)

1. Kama: Lust. Madhusudan Sarasvati defines lust as ‘Intense desire for intimate physical relationship’. This is of two types: in proximity and in separation. When these two occur in relation to Shri Krishna they become love or devotion. The Gopis of Vraja had experienced both these manifestations of love.
2. **Krodha**: Anger. The burning of the mind due to hatred is called anger. The flow of mind towards God caused by it is called envy, according to Madhusudana Sarasvati. The restlessness of mind on seeing the hated person is of two types: That which desires to destroy him and that which wants to love him. The first is called envy, and the other love. The examples are of Shishupala and the Gopis who felt jealous when they saw Krishna with other Gopis. 15

3. **Bhaya**: Fear. The feeling of helplessness arising out of the consciousness of mistakes done by one or due to some other cause is called fear. This is often advocated for devotees, i.e., they must fear God. A Sufi saint has said ‘All are afraid of him who is afraid of God. One, who is not afraid of God, is afraid of all.’ The example of Kansa and Maricha can be cited. The latter used to remain constantly in fear of Rama after he was thrown many miles away by Rama with an arrow without the sharp tip.16

4. **Sneha**: Affection. The feeling of caring for the offsprings, or the feeling of a subordinate or a servant towards the master, etc., is called affection. The latter affection can be of three types: the attitude of a servant, of a friend or a mixed one of the two, towards God. This is seen in Yashoda and other associates and devotees of Sri Krishna like Arjuna and Uddhava. 17

It is said in *Srimad Bhagavatam* that the Gopis through lust, Kansa through fear, Shishupal and other kings through hatred, the Vrishnis and other allies through kinship, the Pandavas through affection and sages had attained to the Lord through pure devotion.18

5. **Harsha**: Joy. It is a feeling of elation. It is again of four types.19 The first, pure joy or elation arises due to meditation on the supremely blissful glories of Sri Krishna and leads to pure devotion to Him. The second is called *hasa* or hilarity. This arises out of the funny incidents, activities and physical features of Sri Krishna.20 The third type of joy consists in a feeling of wonder or *vismaya* due to the wondrous deeds of the Lord.21 Zeal or *uttsaha* is the fourth type of joy which arises in a valorous person from the valorous deeds of the Lord.22 This zeal has been considered of various types by some scholars: zealous compassion; zeal for making charities and zeal in following the path of righteousness.

6. **Shoka**: Sorrow. The feeling of sadness and pain due to separation from the beloved.23

7. **Daya**: Pity. The feeling of pity or repulsion on observing the evil and inferior nature of the sense objects. It is of three types: hatred, disgust and repulsion. Although such feelings are not the direct cause of Bhakti, they conduce to it through producing vairagya.24

8. **Shama**: Self-control. The flowing of mind towards God due to the spirit of renunciation and detachment, *vashikara vairagya* is called *shama*. This is considered as stable aspect of the peaceful attitude (Shanta-Bhava) towards God. Bhakti associated with total detachment conduces to absolute contentment. This is what is meant by *shama*.25
Apart from these, there could be various permutations and combinations of these attitudes.

**Bhakti and Three Gunas**

Madhusudana Sarasvati has also described the types of Bhakti according to the three Gunas. It can be of four types: Tamasika, Rajasika, pure Sattvika or a mixture of them. The first arises out of envy caused by fear; the second is due to envy caused by hatred; and the third is due to joy. A fourth one is due to the admixture of lust and sorrow.

Accordingly, there could be four types of Bhaktas, as mentioned by the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita. There is no bliss in the first two types of bhakti. In the other two there is bliss. If all these are purely and definitely for God, they may bear three types of results: immediate; not immediate but obtained later; or both immediate and not immediate. Initially, in the first two there is no bliss. Although the mind might flow towards God due to hatred, as in Shishupala and Kansa, they did not get immediate bliss in this life because of tamoguna and rajoguna. They did get liberated by being killed by the Lord and on giving up the obstruction caused by the body, they tasted the bliss of bhakti afterwards in Vaikuntha.

Purely Sattvika Bhakti is again of two types: first, in a spiritual aspirant, and second, in a man of realization (Sadhaka and Siddha). The spiritual aspirant gets bliss in the present life as well as in the next, whereas the Siddha gets bliss here and now because he is born no more. In the bliss after life also there are gradations. In Vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu there is mild-intense bliss, in Dwaraka there is medium intense and in Vrindavan there is intense-intense bliss.

**Conclusion**

We have thus tried to summarize some of the ideas of Madhusudana Sarasvati on Bhakti as presented in the first two of the three chapters of his book *Sri-bhagavad-bhaktirasayanam* without going into technical details. The author has written a masterly and detailed Sanskrit commentary on its first chapter. It is hoped that this short survey of his ideas will encourage interested readers to read themselves the original text.

Madhusudana Sarasvati’s views on bhakti are also found scattered in his beautiful and scholarly annotation of the Bhagawad Gita where he has unambiguously declared that the core message of all scriptures, including Gita, is self-surrender to God, which is the culmination of all spiritual practices. In his commentary on verse 18.66, he adds,

‘With the maturity of spiritual practice, three types of surrender to God come about: ‘I belong to Him indeed’, ‘He belongs to me indeed’ and ‘I am He indeed’. Among them, the first is mild, the second is medium and the third is intense. Thus Madhusudana Sarasvati has beautifully reconciled knowledge, devotion and yoga in the Gita.

One of his concluding verses is famous:

I do not know of any Reality higher than that of Krishna whose hands are adorned with a flute, whose colour is that of a new rain cloud, who wears a yellow cloth, whose lips are like a red bimba fruit, whose face is beautiful like the full moon and eyes are like lotuses.
The great sages and seers have tried to express the truth of God in varied ways. Some say He is personal, others say He is impersonal. Some say He is with form, others say He is without form. Some say He is endowed with divine attributes, others say He is attributeless.

Sri Ramakrishna, in the light of his own mystic experiences, resolved, in his simple way, all such contradictions. ‘Infinite is God and infinite are His expressions. He who lives continuously in the consciousness of God, and in this alone, knows Him in His true being. He knows Him as impersonal no less than as personal.’

‘Brahman, Absolute Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss, may be compared to an ocean, without beginning or end. As through intense cold some portions of the water of the ocean freeze into ice, and the formless water appears to have form, so through the intense love of the devotee the formless, Infinite Existence manifests Himself before him as having form and personality. “But forms and aspects disappear before the man who reaches the highest Samadhi, who attains the height of nondualistic philosophy, the Vedanta.”’

‘So long as there is still a little ego left, the consciousness that “I am a devotee,” God is comprehended as personal, and his form is realized. This consciousness of a separate ego is a barrier that keeps one at a distance from the highest realization. The forms of Kali or Krishna are represented as of a dark blue colour. Why? Because the devotee has not yet approached them. At a distance the water of a lake appears blue, but when you come nearer, you find it has no colour. In the same way, to him who attains the highest truth and experience, Brahman is absolute and impersonal. His real nature cannot be defined in words.’

The various ideals of God which devotees worship according to their spiritual tendencies or inclinations may be the Personal God with attributes, under the aspects of Vishnu, Siva, Kali, Jehovah, Allah and so forth, or incarnations of God, such as Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, or Ramakrishna. —Swami Prabhavananda

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An Exquisite Metaphor

In the prologue to *Sri Ramacharitamanas* (often called in Hindi area as *Manas*), Gosvami Tulasi Das, the greatest exponent of Rama-Bhakti, says that his poetry is the *Sarayu* river filled with limpid water of Rama’s glory. Passing through various hamlets, villages and cities, formed by three types of audience, it goes on to *Ayodhya* of the congregation of saints. Flowing further, it merges with Ganga of Rama-Bhakti in which dispassion and knowledge are blended. Joining the confluence is the charming stream of the mighty son of Rama-Lakshmanas’ auspicious battle-feats. This triple stream, destroyer of three afflictions, goes on to merge with the ocean of Rama’s Divine Self.

The mainstay of *Manas* thus is Rama-Bhakti in which Rama’s story and glory are so blended that they become one with Bhakti-Ganga. Jnana and Vairagya serve to promote the spirit of Bhakti. Without Bhakti, they are inconsequential. ‘Yoga is sinister, wisdom is foolishness if Rama’s love is not pre-eminent in them’.

And, in the epilogue of *Manasa*, the poet says, ‘There are seven lovely steps in it. They are the pathway to Raghupati-Bhakti.

Many Hues of Bhakti

Bhakti finds expression in many colours; in the joy of the proximity to the Lord; in anguish in his Viraha: ‘I am drenched in the colours of Giridhara’, Mira says, ‘donning the garment of rainbow colours, I shall play hide and seek with Him’; but in the very next breath, she cries in anguish, ‘My eyes have gone sore without seeing You, my Lord! I have not had a moment’s respite ever since you get separated from me.’

There are the other hues too. Though a universal sentiment, Bhakti finds expression in each bhakta in his unique, individualistic...
manner. In Manas itself, from Manu-Shatarupa to Ravana-Mandodari, Bhakti has been celebrated and expressed through a wide range of more than fifty characters mentioned by name in direct or indirect reference, each in her/his individual manner. Gosvamiji says, ‘Infinite is Bhagavan Rama. Infinite too are His Divine Plays and Glories.’

As mentioned earlier by the poet, Rama’s stories and glories are amalgamated with his Bhakti. This Bhakti has been described in myriad ways in Manas. Some of them, as examples, may be cited hereunder:

- The Navadha Bhakti mentioned by Prahlada in Srimad Bhagavatam has been alluded to by Sri Rama in His discourse to Lakshmana, while describing sadhanas of Bhakti.
- When Sri Rama meets Maharishi Valmiki and seeks his advice as to where He should make His home to spend the period of His exile, the Maharishi metaphorically suggest fourteen homes before advising that He should live in Chitrakuta. These fourteen homes are the veritable hearts of fourteen types of Bhaktas practicing their own variety of Bhakti.
- As the king of Kosala country, Sri Rama, addressing His subjects, describes the characteristics of Bhakti.

There are, however many more instances spread over the pages of Manas.

Navadha Bhakti

Sri Rama and Lakshmana arrive at Sabari’s Ashrama. Sabari is beside herself with Bhakti. After accepting her touching hospitality, the Lord expounds to her Navadha Bhakti which, more or less, is on the line of Adhyatma Ramayana.

First Bhakti: Fellowship with Saints

Companionship of the saints, Sri Rama says, is His first Bhakti. Sri Shankaracharya, in Vivekachudamani, has mentioned three things which are obtained only with the Divine Grace: to be born a human, longing for moksha and fellowship with the great souls.

Company of the saints is the first Bhakti because, in it, one perpetually remains connected to God. Unlike ordinary persons, saints do not indulge in worldly gossip. Every moment in their company amounts to living with God. Except for discharging essential material functions, they spend their time in spiritual or selfless altruistic pursuits. Guru Nanak says, ‘Even though the True Name comes on the lips with difficulty, I live only when I utter It, die if I forget.’ According to Kabir, ‘the sight of saints reminds us of God. Such moments are worth being counted. The rest of the days can be expunged.’

In Manas, Lord Shiva tells Garuda,

Without Satsanga, there is not Harikatha. Without it, infatuation does not vanish. Without getting past infatuation, uncompromising love in Rama’s feet cannot be cultivated. Without love, there is no meeting with Raghunatha, yoga, austerity, knowledge and dispassion, notwithstanding.

Second Bhakti: Fondness for the Lord’s Divine Stories

Having underscored Satsanga as the first Bhakti, Sri Rama says that listening and singing His Divine Katha is the second Bhakti. ‘Those who with unquestioned Shraddha sing Hari’s eulogies attain in the celestial spheres’. In the Gopi-Gita of Srimad Bhagavatam, Gopikas seek solace in the Lord’s Katha as his substitute:

Your Divine Stories are the ambrosia for those scorched by the heat of your separation. Sages have eulogized them. They wipe out sins. Listening to them brings auspiciousness
and benefaction. They are prolific, charming and exceedingly sweet. They are the true philanthropies of earth who sing your Divine Sports.20

Tulasi sings:

In the connoisseurs, Rama-katha brings peace to all the people, it is a source of joy . . . To light the fire of discrimination, it is aranai.* Rama-katha is the wish fulfilling cow in Kaliyuga. For the noble-hearts it is the beautiful reanimating herb. . . In the Kshirasagara of the saintly congregation, it is like Lakshmi. . . to grant mukti to jivas, it is as it were Kashi. It is the holy Tulasi plant loved by Rama and, of Tulasi Das, the mother Hulasi, his earnest well-wisher. It is as dear to Lord Shiva as Narmada . . . It is the final frontier of Rama’s Love.

Rama Katha is the Mandakini river [which flows by the mount Chitrakuta] and Love is the favourite forest for Sita-Raghuvir’s pastime.21

Third Bhakti: Service of Guru’s Feet without Conceit

Humble service of Guru’s feet is the third Bhakti, ‘The exalted power’, says Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna,

by which the Divine Mother removes ignorance and delusion from human mind is called guru-bhava or guru-shakti . . . (since) a worldly minded person who has first started to learn practice of devotion and respect cannot comprehend or love an incorporeal power; so the scriptures advise paying respect to the human guru who gives initiation in spiritual life.22

A Guru, Swami Vivekananda notes, is Shrotriya, he who knows the secret of the Shrutis, Avrijina, the sinless, and Akamahata, unpierced by desire . . . He is Shanta, the sadhu, who comes as the spring which brings the leaves and blossoms to various plants but does not ask anything from the plant for its very nature is to do good . . . who has himself crossed the terrible ocean of life and without an idea of gain to himself, help others to cross the ocean.23

Guru Nanak refers to God as Satiguru—the True Master—while Kabir places Guru at a still higher pedestal. Mira says that Guru has gifted her invaluable jewel of Rama’s name with which she would cross the ocean of samsara . . . ‘You cannot cross the ocean of Bhavasagara without Guru’s guidance, even if you are a Brahma or a Shiva.’24

Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘One should learn from the blessed Guru’s mouth the means and methods of realizing God’, but adds, ‘the Guru would be able to guide only if he is himself with perfect knowledge.’25

Sri Rama adds a word of caution: service has to be performed without arrogance, with complete and honest humility.

Fourth Bhakti: Singing Lord’s Virtues Guilelessly

By recalling your Ishta Devata’s virtues regularly, you imbibe them yourself and step by step cultivate them in your behavior. Thus, by singing His virtues the devotee comes closer to Him in character. This must be done without guile or pretence. Sri Rama says, ‘Only he whose mind is unsullied attains to Me’.26

The famous Sufi saint, Sheikh Farid has said, ‘Only those who loved God with unpolluted heart are the true lovers. Love is neither attachment to nor craving for the material objects. A person whose speech is not in sync with his mind, is not a true lover, he is fake.’27

There is no end to the Lord’s Divine sports, stories and virtues. There are the subjects of exposition by the saints and

* A wooden stick to light sacrificial fire. Flint
shastras. Listening, studying and singing them regularly keep the mind engaged with Him. A true devotee has faith in these Kathas. He is not a hypocrite and has genuine conviction about what the saints, scriptures and Guru says about the Lord’s Divine Play. It is the true faith that facilitates the sadhaka’s progress on the path of realization.

Yamalarjunas—Nalakubara and Manigriva—in Srimad Bhagavatam, therefore, seek the boon from Damodara Krishna, ‘May our speech be ever engaged in singing your virtues, our ears in listening to your kathas . . .’

Fifth Bhakti: Mantra-Japa with Unflinching Faith

‘Scriptures reveal,’ Sri Rama tells Sabari, that ‘Japa of My mantra, with unshakable faith is the fifth Bhakti.’ Kakabhushundi, the crow sage, tells Garuda in Manas, ‘Bhakti is impossible without vishvasa—faith. Rama’s heart does not melt without Bhakti and a jiva cannot attain peace even in a dream without Rama’s Grace’.

Sri Krishna says that among yajnas, He is Japa-Yajna. Japa consists in silent repetition of the mystic syllables or any of the many names of the Lord. Vishvasa is the key. A mantra, powered by the sadhana of a long tradition of gurus—guru-paramapara—has tremendous potential. Such is this power that if repeated with firm faith, even the syllables which do not seem to convey any meaning, yield amazing results. Gosvamiji refers to a string of syllables in a barbarous colloquy—the Sabara Mantras—evolved by Lord Shiva, the Supreme Guru and Girija. They are ‘meaningless mutterings, yet explicit in them is Shiva’s power which yields amazing effect if repeated with firm faith’.

Characteristics of japa have been described variously; space constraint does not permit us to go into those details. In his conversation with Sri Rama, Maharishi Valmiki, however, says, that the former should abide in the hearts of those who regularly do Japa of His king of mantras.

For Japa, a rosary is an important prop to regulate it and help concentration. The Holy Mother Sri Sarada devi also taught Her disciples to use the finger-tips to keep the count. In advanced stages, when Japa becomes an internal, automatic and uninterrupted process, counting may become unnecessary even as the devotee gets drenched in Bhakti. One must, however, be cautious and not delude himself that he has attained that state. He must pray to the Lord to protect him from such pretensions.

Sixth Bhakti: Sense-control and Attendant Characteristics

Control over senses coupled with nobility of character is the sixth Bhakti. Preoccupation with multifarious activities should be eschewed. In the Narada Bhakti Sutras it has been said that in Bhakti, there...
is not a shade implicit in it, is shama, mental quietude for unless there is mental tranquillity, dama would amount to repression. Such a forced control of senses would manifest in one or the other kind of perversion or morbidity. This Bhakti, therefore, speaks of dama with sheela—natural goodness. Not by repression, but by the mastery over the self.

This is virati—renunciation of multifarious activities. Only such activities, secular and sacred, as are essential, are to be carried out as duty. The other activities, even rites and rituals, that are performed with an eye on personal rewards, are to be renounced. Only those activities, except the essential physical ones, are to be performed that promote advancement on the path of God-realization. More important is action without attachment. All karmas are to be consecrated to the Lord. Narada also emphasizes on this aspect of Bhakti in which undivided Love for God is obtained. Manas says, ‘Unless dedicated to the Lord, all noble deeds are a wasted effort’.

Seventh Bhakti: Experiencing the World Equanimously, Instinct with the Lord

Sri Rama says that to see the world, instinct with Him, and with equal eye is His seventh Bhakti. Sridhara Swami, the famous scholar-sage, in his gloss on Gita, explains ‘equal sightedness’ as ‘seeing the same Brahman in things which are dissimilar.’

This concept, in fact, is one of the bedrocks of the Hindu thought. The Chandogya Upanishad says, ‘All this verily is Brahman’, while the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declares, ‘There are no diversities.’ From Upanishads to Gita to Puranas to Gosvamiji, this experience of intrinsic unity in the apparent diversities has been considered as the ultimate essence of all wisdom and insight. Gosvamiji says, ‘Realising that this entire world is permeated with Siya-Rama, I reverence it with folded hands’.

In Gita, Sri Krishna says, ‘I am the self residing in the hearts of all beings’, and ‘He who sees Me everywhere and all things in Me, I am not lost to him, not is he lost to me’.

The simple but profound statement that becomes the watchword of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Parampara, is ‘Shivabhave Jivaseva; serve each Jiva as Shiva.’ Implicit in it is the same simile of Siya-Rama-maya-sabajaga. It means that while service of Jivas is a noble act in itself—but with attendant pitfall of egotism—it becomes Bhakti if it is rendered as worship of God with the emotion of self-surrender.

One must, however remember in this vision of Brahman permeating the world, the practical behavioral aspect. A mother is a mother, a wife is a wife. Distinction between elders, youngers and equals; men and women; has to be maintained even while realizing the presence of Brahman in all.

Treating Saints as Greater than God

An integral part of the seventh Bhakti is ‘to treat saints as greater than Me’, says Sri Rama. It is only in the nature of a true saint to look upon all people and all things as Divine. An ordinary person attains saintliness once this vision is attained, then he happily endures all suffering while rendering service to Jivas and is gratified at getting the opportunity to do so. Gosvamiji says that the compassionate saints are like the birch-tree who always endure divest hardships to do good of others.

One may, while performing the worldly duties, forget God, but the moment one sees a saint, his thoughts immediately turn to Him.

‘Both a sinner and a saint’, Gosvamiji says, ‘cause immense pain, but with a difference: while the former inflicts it on meeting, the latter causes pain on separation’.
Eighth Bhakti: Contentment with Whatever One Gets

“A Bhakta’, Gita says, is one who is ‘always contented’. Sri Rama tells Sabari that a devotee is satisfied with what he gets. In his commentary on the Patanjala Yoga Sutras, Swami Prabhavananda explains santosha as ‘contended acceptance of one’s lot in life, untroubled by envy and selfishness’, but adds ‘as members of a community, we have a positive duty to help less fortunate neighbors towards better and fairer living conditions.’

Yatha labh santosha [being content with what one gets] of Manas and yadriccha labha santushtah [whatever comes to one, one is satisfied with] of Gita have been explained by Sridhara Swami as ‘aprarthitopasthiti labhah: what comes unsolicited.’ A Bhakta neither craves nor seeks.

Quickly comes to mind the example of Sri Kshudiram, the father of Sri Ramakrishna. Unperturbed by the most adverse circumstances, he remained steadfast in Raghuvir-Bhakti and helped others, going out of the way.

Never to Find Fault with Others

A devotee never, even in a dream, finds fault with others: This is the second part of eight Bhakti. If Bhakti means seeing God equally in all, then how a Bhakta will find fault in anyone? The Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi says that we should look at our own faults, not of the others. Kabir satirically puts in, ‘People take immense delight in finding fault with others. They, however, fail to recall their own faults which neither have a beginning nor an end,’ and advises introspection: ‘I went looking for wicked people, but found none. On searching my heart, I found I was the worst of all.’

In Manas, Valmiki advises Sri Rama,

He who, ignoring vices, picks up virtues of all... attributes all virtues to You and vices to himself... In his beautiful heart, abide with Sita.

Ninth Bhakti: Guilelessness, Uprightness and Straightforwardness

Rijutva is a beautiful Vedic word and stands for the virtues of uprightness and straightforwardness. Such a behavior stems from the intrinsic qualities and simplicity, saralata and guilelessness, nishchhalata, of heart. Sri Rama says that while a Bhakta, in behavior, is straight and upright, underneath it, flows the naturally sweet stream of simplicity of heart. This simplicity is expressed in genuinely straightforward but sweet language to everyone unexceptionally.

A word of caution from Sri Ramakrishna: ‘Be a Bhakta. Don’t be a fool.’

Faith in the Lord: Without Exuberance or Perturbance in the Heart

Unflinching faith in the Lord—the second part of the ninth Bhakti—is a prerequisite of uprightness and simplicity. Whether in material transactions or on spiritual path, guilelessness presumes that the devotee is guided by the belief that, being in God’s hands, he needs not to fear anyone and he is not exuberant with joy over success because he has consecrated everything to the Lord.

In the Gita when Sri Krishna chides Arjuna for ‘grieving where no grief should be’, he implicitly tells him that his faith in Him is weak. Having chosen Him as his steersman and declared his discipleship of Him, why should he still be ambivalent. At the end of His discourse, He instructs Arjuna not to grieve and take refuge in Him.

Conclusion

Concluding, Sri Rama tells the humble Sabari that if someone practices even one of the Nine Bhaktis—a woman or a man, a sentient or insentient—he or she is extremely dear to Him. He reassures her that she is blessed with the nine of them and, therefore, entitled
to a station scarce for the yogis. ‘The most incomparable reward of My darshana is that the Jiva attains to its original state’.52

The statement that even one of the nine forms of Bhakti endears a person to the Lord, suggests that there is no vertical gradation in them. Anyone is as good as others. In fact, the inescapable conclusion from a careful study of these Nine Bhaktis is that if a devotee concentrates on one, the other eight will make their home in his heart because their relationship is complementary.

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Sri Ramakrishna and Bhakti in
Adhyatma Ramayana
MC RAMANARAYANAN

Adhyatma Ramayana and Sri Ramakrishna

Adhyatma Ramayana is a book Sri Ramakrishna was fond of and cited frequently in his conversations. In his early days of Sadhana at Dakshineswar, he used to listen to his friend Krishna Kishore read the book, and to his cousin, Haladhari. The context for these references, mostly, was the question of the nature of God which his devotees often brought up. In Sri Ramakrishna’s time the chief contenders on the issue were the Brahmos, ‘the modern Brahmajnanis’ as he called them, who insisted that God was formless, and orthodox Hindus, who believed that God assumes many forms. Sri Ramakrishna’s great life and unsurpassed realizations infused new life into both groups.

However Sri Ramakrishna often seemed to be lending weight to the orthodox side pitted against the onslaught of missionaries and new generation educated in Christian institutions. The futile attempts of trying to speculate on the nature of God had been brought home to the author of the Gospel by the Master at the very beginning of their acquaintance. He had warned Mahendranath Gupta at their second meeting, ‘Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form. But hold fast to your own conviction.’

Much later he put his own position in a telling phrase: ‘Jnana and Bhakti are one and the same thing. The difference is like this. One man says “water” and another says “block of ice.”’

What endeared the Adhyatma Ramayana to him was this harmony of Jnana and Bhakti in it. When it was reported to him that Keshab’s disciples claimed that Keshab was the first harmonizer of Bhakti and Jnana he exclaimed: ‘How is that? What then of the Adhyatma Ramayana?’

Sri Rama—the Unique Incarnation

Adhyatma Ramayana achieves this harmony by accentuating, in equal measure, both the divine and human sides of Sri Rama’s personality. This is in contrast to Srimad Bhagavatam which presents Sri Krishna as God himself. His humanity, like the smudge in the full moon, only adds to his divine splendor. In Sri Rama’s case it is just the opposite. He is Brahman, ‘weeping ensnared’ in maya. Among the incarnations Hindus worship, he is the one who wears the crown of thorns. The Srimad Bhagavatam puts the idea in poetry with an elegiac note:

Rama withdrew Himself into His pristine state of light, leaving in the hearts of those who meditate upon Him, the imprint of His feet, tender like fresh leaves, all cut and torn with the thorns of the deep jungles.

There is a striking resemblance between Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Rama. He was Rama
first and Krishna only next. In both, humanity and divinity ebbed and flowed alternately, as the river and the sea in an estuary. Sri Ramakrishna asked M, ‘Well, why have I this illness?’ M replied, ‘People will not have the courage to approach you, unless you resemble them in all respects. But they are amazed to find that in spite of such illness you don’t know anything but God’. The Master answered with a smile: ‘Balaram also said: “If even you could be ill, then why should we wonder about our illness? Lakshmana was amazed to see that Rama could not lift his bow, on account of his grief for Sita. Even Brahman weeps entangled in the snare of the five elements.”’

The Master himself used to say that there are two persons in his body, the Mother and her devotee and it is the devotee who is ill. It is difficult to recognize an incarnation because of this very reason and it has engendered a major dispute between the Jnanis and the Bhaktas.

**We see God Himself if we but see His Incarnation**

The disbelief in God incarnating as man is older by ages than the skepticism of our times. The Adhyatma Ramayana begins with Parvati questioning Shiva on the truth of the incarnation:

It is well known that devotion to Rama is the ship that ferries one across the ocean of samsara. But I have some reservations about giving my heart’s love and devotion freely to him. . . . Rama is said to be the primeval reality transcending maya. Knowing him to be so, people worship him to attain to the supreme state. But others say that he did not know he was Brahman owing to the power of his own maya (Avidya) . . . [If he had known his own true identity] how could he be grieved at the loss of Sita, He being no better than any other man ignorant of his true self, Atman [how can he be a fit object for worship?]’

Parvati is not a skeptic like Dr. Sarkar, who was Sri Ramakrishna’s physician. He dismisses the very idea: ‘Incarnation! What is that? To cower before a man who excretes
filth!'8 Mother Parvati is more like the Brahmo
devotee Trailokya, who said: ‘There cannot
be a manifestation of infinite power. It simply
isn’t possible. It is impossible for any man to
manifest infinite powers.’9 The Brahmo Samaj
preached a God endowed with auspicious
qualities like love and mercy but without form.

To the agnostic Dr. Mahendra Sarkar
on the other hand God was an abstract
principle, the hypothesis of a prime mover,
which the empirical sciences he championed
had rendered unwarranted. He would rather
have the Buddha called the incarnation
of compassion rather than Vishnu, as he
remarked to Girish commenting on the latter’s
drama ‘Life of the Buddha.’ ‘If you seek God,
then seek Him in man; He manifests Himself
more in man than in anything else.’10

The human incarnation is the most
authentic and impressive manifestation of
the reality of God. ‘Do you know why God
incarnates as man? It is because through
a human body one can hear his words.’11
‘It is God alone who incarnates Himself as
man, to teach people the ways of love and
knowledge,’12 says Sri Ramakrishna.

Referring to hymns of Ahalya and
Vibhishana,13 addressed to Rama, Sri Rama-
krishna says, ‘Whole and part are like fire and
its sparks. An incarnation of God is for the sake
of the Bhaktas and not for the Jnanis. It is said
in the Adhyatma Ramayana that Rama alone
is both the Pervading Spirit and everything
that is pervaded.’ ‘You are the supreme Lord
distinguished as the vachaka, the signifying
symbol and the vachya, the object signified.’
Captain, a devotee, asks: The ‘signifying
symbol’ means the pervader, and the ‘object
signified’ means the thing pervaded. Master’s
reply: ‘The pervader in this case is a finite
form. It is God incarnating himself as a human
being.’14

The Master is unambiguously equating
all aspects of Godhead with the finite form of
Sri Ramachandra. In assuming a form He is not
altered; He is only reaching out to the Jiva in
his mercy. That is why Kausalya says: ‘Lord,
in your womb the many world systems appear
as atoms, yet you yield yourself to nature to
be born in my womb. I now see your great
concern on account of your devotees.’15

In his last days, when he could only
speak with difficulty, Sri Ramakrishna
conveyed by a gesture to Narendra that all
created objects have come from him. When
Narendra said he understood him and
repeated what the master said, his face beamed
with joy.16 Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘However
great or infinite God may be, His essence can
and does manifest itself through man by His
mere will. God’s incarnation as a man cannot
be explained by analogy. One must feel it for
oneself and realize it by direct perception. An
analogy can give us only a little glimpse.’17

‘The incarnation is the play of the Absolute
as man. Do you know how the Absolute
plays as man? It is like the rushing down of
water from a big roof through a pipe; the
power of Satchidananda—nay Satchidananda
itself—descends through the pipe’.18 This
is Sri Ramakrishna’s unambiguous answer
to Trailokya; it is a reassertion of Shiva’s
assurance to Parvati.

Both answers imply that Satchidananda
cannot be quantified into part and whole or
large and small. The form of Sri Ramachandra
does not limit the partless whole of Satchida-
nanda, as the wave does not limit the ocean
both being a continuum, but only conveys and
manifests it to the Jiva inescapably trapped
in a maze of sense perceptions. ‘God reveals
Himself to his devotees in a tangible form,
which is the embodiment of spirit,’ says Sri
Ramakrishna.19
Embodiment of Compassion

Not the Buddha alone but all great incarnations are incarnations of compassion which is the chief of God’s infinite attributes, for his creation. A Jiva feels overwhelmed, when God condescends to come to him unsought to deliver him from the bonds of maya, in his mercy. Ahalya was the daughter of Brahma, and was married to the great sage Gautama. In spite of the spiritually elevated company in which she was born and brought up she sinned. Rama redeemed her and overwhelmed by the mercy of Sri Rama, she declares ecstatically, ’I ever adore, of all the forms the Lord has assumed, that of the beautiful Rama, lotus-eyed and holding the bow, and none else.’20 A frail woman like her has been blessed with the grace of the Lord which is beyond the reach of even yogis.21 Ahalya’s sin was the Lord’s grace in disguise.

Rama sought out the cloistered hermit Sarabhanga who was longing to see him, of his own accord. The devotee said to himself, ’Who is more merciful than Rama, who has come to me, knowing by intuition that I have been thinking only of him.’22 Suteekshna, Agastya’s disciple, whom Rama meets next says the same thing. ‘You are beyond the knowledge of all beings. Bound by thy maya, I have fallen in this blind ditch of family life with affection for wife and children and to my own body filled with filth. Seeing my helplessness you have come to me of your own accord.’23

Harmony of Bhakti and Jnana

Harmony presupposes discord. There cannot be any discord between love of God and knowledge of God. Knowledge requires an object, and God is the eternal Subject, ’of the nature of pure witness consciousness.’24 One who tries to measure God, weigh Him and record facts about Him will only melt in Him and be He, as the salt doll that went to measure the ocean. To know God is to love God, to be God. Rama said to Lakshmana: ‘Brother wherever you find people singing and dancing in the ecstasy of divine love, know for certain that I am there.’25

Sri Ramakrishna says, ’By constantly meditating on God the Bhakta loses his ego; he realizes that God is he and he is God.’26 Sri Rama assures Sabari, ’The very instant bhakti is born in one, the truth about my nature also dawns. . . . So it is certain that bhakti is mukti.’27 ’If the spiritual seeker is not motivated by love for Me’, says Sri Rama at the very start of the epic, ’every scripture he looks up to for guidance will deceive him.’28 And Sri Ramakrishna says that that no scripture is necessary if the seeker has sincere yearning for God. The dispute is between those who lack that.

Ramaleela—The Play of Rama

The Great God Mahadeva said in reply to Parvati’s question about the truth of Rama:

Rama is the supreme self, the all comprehending Purushottama. Though he is inside and outside pervading all like ether, he is hidden from their vision, as He is their innermost self. He is the ultimate seer and witness of all this universe of his Maya’s creation. Before Him the whole universe whirls as iron filings round a magnet. The unintelligent with their minds covered by the power of ignorance, know this not. Ignorant Jivas superimpose their own ignorance and see him involved in worldly entanglements like themselves.29

There cannot be a story with the protagonist standing in the middle and all others whirling around. The action of a story should develop along a line, with a start and a finish.
It cannot go round and round in a circle. It should be the story of man going towards God or God coming towards man. ‘Rama does not come and go; he does not grieve; has no desire; does nothing. He is the very embodiment of changeless bliss.’

‘Just as the child playfully whirling round the pillar holding it with one hand finds the whole house whirling round, so do men superimpose the action on the supreme self and delude themselves.’

So the story is of all Jivas whirling about and clashing with one another not knowing that the happiness they seek is God alone until He comes and reveals Himself. He ever dwells in man’s heart. ‘Attached as they are to their own wife and children, and engrossed in the struggle to earn a living, they do not remember Rama dwelling in their hearts, as a man forgets the necklace he wears round his neck and looks for it everywhere.’ So the story is not of the Supreme Self, Sri Rama, but of the Jivas rushing toward Him through truth—‘from lower to higher truth’.

Who else but He who started the whole drama, deluding the Jivas with His maya? Sita tells Hanuman the whole secret at the very start of the epic: ‘I am the Primeval Prakriti and whatever I create by the power of his mere presence, is attributed to Him by ignorant people.’ Almost every hymn in the book ends with the prayer ‘let not thy maya delude me’, for if he wanted he could have willed it otherwise. Why didn’t he? Nobody has the final answer. But Swayamprabha has the answer that will please devotees, who do not care to know why: ‘You the birthless and deathless one took birth so that devotees may be saved listening to the story of your deeds. O Raghottama, let those who want to, learn your truth. (But for me) may this form of yours ever shine in my heart.’

How else could God, the truth beyond mind and speech, be contemplated upon?

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Devotion without and duplicity within—that is too dangerous. The Lord is far, far away from such mind. The minds of such people are full of selfish motives. So they make no spiritual progress. —Swami Adbhutananda
Bhakti According to Bhagavad Gita

An Approach

GOKULMUTHU N

The Goal of Unconditional Happiness

All creatures, including men, seek happiness. If asked when we want to be happy—morning, evening, Sunday, Monday—always. If asked where we want to be happy—office, home, road—we would say everywhere. If asked under what conditions we want to be happy—success, failure, favourable, unfavourable—we would say unconditional. Indeed, everyone wants to be unconditionally happy everywhere always.

The question is, ‘Is such happiness possible?’ The Hindu scriptures say, ‘Yes’. We will have to face problems in life. No one can be free from problems. We have to try to solve the problems. But, there is no problem that can overwhelm us completely. We always have the freedom to say, ‘OK, what next?’ and face the problem. Happiness and sorrow are in our hands. We are really free to be unconditionally happy everywhere always.

The question is, ‘Is such happiness possible?’ The Hindu scriptures say, ‘Yes’. We will have to face problems in life. No one can be free from problems. We have to try to solve the problems. But, there is no problem that can overwhelm us completely. We always have the freedom to say, ‘OK, what next?’ and face the problem. Happiness and sorrow are in our hands. We are really free to be happy or sad. We just need the strength to face life as it comes.

The full realization and manifestation of this complete freedom from sorrow is called moksha. The Gita starts with the verse 2.11, which says, ‘wise men do not have sorrow’. The ‘marks of a wise man’ (second chapter, verses 55-58, 61, 64-65, 70-71) is a detailed description of the everyday life—thoughts, actions, attitudes and feelings—of the person who has attained this freedom. This is the goal that the Gita wants to lead us to. This is beautifully summarized thus (2.71):

Free from all desires, the wise man moves freely among people, objects and situations in life without getting affected by them. He is free from the sense of ‘mine’ and ‘I’ regarding everything in this world, including his own body and mind. He attains to real peace.

What is the cause of our sorrow? Sorrow always comes from an unfulfilled desire. Desire is another name for sorrow and sorrow is another name for desire. Desire arises out of a sense of incompleteness. We feel that we need some people, objects or situations, without which we are not fulfilled. This sense of incompleteness comes from our identity as a limited individual, identified with this body and mind. As we are in reality free from sorrow, we are in reality not this limited body and mind. And, only freedom from this false notion can free us completely from all sorrow. Thus, moksha is possible only by dropping the identity with this particular body and mind. In fact, dropping this false identity is called moksha.

The identification with the limited individuality, represented as the body and mind, is very strong. The entire spiritual life is a struggle to gradually weaken and finally drop this false identity. Bhagavad Gita gives a graded approach towards this by making small corrections at each step in the pers-
pective of ourselves and the world around us. Bhakti—love towards Ishvara—takes us through this process in a smooth manner.

**Bhakti Stage 1—Sakama Bhakti**

We all have the idea that we are individuals. We experience the world using our sense organs and mind. We express ourselves in the world, using our decision-making capability, as words and action. Thus, bhokta (experiencer) and karta (doer) are the two roles of our identity.

Bhagavad Gita first introduces ‘Ishvara’ as the Supreme Being, who

1. knows the inner-most intentions and thoughts of all of us,
2. awards experiences in our life as the result of the decisions that we make, in an absolutely fair and impartial manner,
3. is the creator, sustainer and recycler of this material universe to aid the individuals to ‘do’ and ‘experience’,
4. is the ‘whole’ as compared to individuals who are ‘parts’. Every cell in our bodies is a living entity. But we identify ourselves as individuals, who express and experience through the body and mind. Similarly, Ishvara is that ‘person’, to whom the whole physical universe is the body and all the minds of all the beings put together is the mind.

Thus, there are three entities—Jiva (individual), Jagat (material universe) and Ishvara. Jivas do action in the Jagat and experience the results of their actions in the Jagat, as ordained by Ishvara.

To experience favourable situations in life in the long term, Jivas should do good actions, called dharma (which consists of Yajna—paying back our debt to nature, human beings and others, Dana—charity, and Tapas—living a life of discipline and self-cultivation). As Ishvara is fair and impartial, a person following dharma will feel secure because of Ishvara. An honest citizen will feel secure in the presence of a policeman, whereas a thief will feel afraid. So, adherence to dharma is important to be able to love Ishvara. Knowing that Ishvara is the ordainer of the results, the person will be grateful to Ishvara. This develops into love for Ishvara.

In reality, we merely want to be happy. We love only people and objects, which (we think) give us happiness. Thus, for someone or something to be lovable, it should give us happiness (like a sweet) or should be a means for our happiness (like money, which can buy a sweet). However, essentially, all love is self-centered. Even a mother shows that special love towards her ‘own’ child only. A person’s unconditional absolute love is only towards himself.

Love for Ishvara also starts first as a means to favourable situations in the world. World is the end and Ishvara is the means. We do work in the world aiming for some results. When we get a favourable result, we thank Ishvara. As a token of our gratitude, we offer a part of the result to Ishvara with love.

This is not wrong to start with. Ishvara welcomes this. In the verses 7.16 and 7.18, Gita appreciates the people who worship Ishvara to remove problems and to get desired situations in life. In verse 7.21, Gita says that Ishvara answers the prayers of the person to strengthen his faith. Gita says that such an offering can be made with simple things. Ishvara does not look at the grandeur of the offering. He looks only at the loving gratitude. Verse 9.26 presents this beautifully as:

I accept the devoted offering of a leaf, flower, fruit or water offered by a righteous (honest, disciplined, compassionate, etc.) person.

To deepen the love towards Ishvara, various forms and methods of worship are
presented. Human beings need forms and rituals as psychological tools. To show our respect and to deepen our positive emotions to the country, we need to use a flag and salute it. The flag is a symbol of the country and the act of saluting is a ritual. When we meet people, we shake hands, which is a ritual. Saying ‘hello’, ‘good bye’, ‘thank you’, ‘you are welcome’, ‘sorry’, ‘it is OK’, etc., are all rituals. Even when we really mean them, they are needed to express our feelings. To show our love towards another person, we give a flower. That is a ritual. Rituals are needed to express our emotions and to deepen them.

Ishvara can be worshiped through any of the various forms. The person can choose the form to his liking. As Ishvara knows the innermost thoughts, what we need is sincerity. The external form does not matter, they are needed to express our feelings. To show our love towards another person, we give a flower. That is a ritual. Rituals are needed to express our emotions and to deepen them.

Also, depending on the context, Ishvara can be worshiped in a relevant form. For example, while starting a financial endeavour, Ishvara is worshiped as Lakshmi. While starting a work, Ishvara is worshiped as Ganesha. Before taking bath in Ganga, Ishvara is worshiped as Ganga Mata. When showing gratitude for the light and energy given by the Sun, Ishvara is worshiped as Surya Devata. Gita says (7.21):

Whoever in whichever form or method wishes to worship Me with devotion, I accept the worship through those forms and methods, and strengthen the faith of the worshiper.

Bhakti Stage 2—Ananya Bhakti or Nishkaama Bhakti

Love exists in our lives in various forms. Love of money is called *lobha*—greed. Love of sense pleasure is called *kama*—lust. Love towards a friend is called *sakhyaa*. Love of a mother towards her child is called *vatsalya*. Love of Ishvara is called *bhakti*.

Bhakti is different from other forms of love because of various factors like the following:

1. Ishvara is a conscious being, unlike money or pleasures.
2. Ishvara knows our innermost thoughts, unlike other humans.
3. Ishvara is not dependent on us, unlike other humans.
4. Ishvara is infallible, unlike other humans.
5. Ishvara is infinite and can accommodate everyone, unlike humans or objects, which are limited.
Because of these, Bhakti makes a person honest, selfless, humble, forbearing, loving and dispassionate. These characters are the means and the result of bhakti. Also, because Ishvara is impartial and infinite, He is always available. The love of the person gets truly and fully reciprocated. It is like the light of the sun always being available to everyone. Whoever uses it gets benefited. The amount of benefit derived depends only on the user. Thus, to develop bhakti, Gita proposes an interesting method. It advises the person to follow a lifestyle such that he will become dear to Ishvara. This is presented in verses 12.13 and 12.14, and the few verses following them.

That person, who is without hatred towards any living being, being friendly and compassionate, free from greed, free from self-centeredness, having equanimity towards favourable and unfavourable situations, forbearing, being always contented, being self-controlled, having firm faith, and having offered his mind and intellect to Me, is dear to Me.

When a person follows this form of bhakti, slowly instead of doing actions for himself and offering the results to Ishvara, he will start doing actions for the pleasure of Ishvara. To reinforce this attitude, Gita says (9.24): ‘I am the recipient of all actions and offerings,’ and (5.29): ‘I am the recipient of all actions and austerities.’ The person develops the attitude, ‘Whatever I do, I do it for You.’ Verse 9.27 captures this beautifully:

Whatever you contribute, whatever you consume, whatever action you do, whatever donation or alms you give, whatever austerities and disciplines you follow, do them as an offering to Me.

When this attitude sets in, Ishvara is no longer the means for happiness. Ishvara becomes the primarily loved entity. Everything in the world become only means to please Ishvara.

Thus, out of the two roles—bhokta (experiencer) and kartaa (doer)—the former is given up. The person no longer considers himself as the bhokta. His desires for worldly objects and pleasures fade away naturally. His identity as bhokta becomes very weak.

As such a person does not care much about his worldly needs, Ishvara Himself ensures that his needs are met. Verse 9.22 gives this assurance.

To the people, who worship Me without caring about the world, I carry whatever is needed by them to live in the world and take care of their well being.

Even if the person who reaches this stage had done several bad deeds in his life, he can be considered as a saint. Versed 9.30-31 say:

If an unrighteous person worships Me without caring for worldly things, he should be considered as a saint because he has taken the right resolution. Soon he will become righteous and attain peace. Arjuna, I promise, My devotee will not be destroyed.

**Bhakti Stage 3—Vishvarupa Ishvara Bhakti**

At this stage, Gita presents two aspects of Ishvara: Ishvara is the material cause of the world. The material universe is not different from Ishvara. Though the world does not limit Ishvara, the world is not outside Ishvara. Ishvara is the essence of everything in the world. He is the life of the living beings, the strength of the strong, courage of the brave, austerity of the ascetics, smell of the earth, sapidity of water, light of fire, etc. These are presented in verses 7.4, 7.8, 7.9, 7.10 and 7.11, and almost the whole of 10th and 11th chapters.

Also, Ishvara is the single Consciousness principle that drives the entire world. Ishvara is the principle that powers our existence,
The intellect, mind, and senses. This is presented in verse 7.5:

"Know that apart from My material nature is My higher nature. It is this higher nature in the form of the Consciousness principle that sustains the world.

Just like electricity powers various appliances connected to the circuit, Ishvara powers all of Jagat (material world) and the Jivas (living beings). Just as various appliances behave differently based on their nature to give light, wind, heat, cold, etc., various aspects of the world and the living beings exhibit various characteristics based on their nature. Verse 7.7 gives a beautiful illustration:

There is nothing outside or beyond Me. Everything in the world is strung on to Me like beads on a string.

These two aspects of Ishvara are called aparaa prakruti (ingredient of matter and mind) and paraa prakruti (Consciousness). These two together constitute the entire existence. The individual person exists as a superimposition on Ishvara.

When this is understood, there exist only two entities—the person and Ishvara. Every moment of life is a play between the person and Ishvara. There is no third entity. Everything other than the person is merged into a single entity, which is Ishvara. This attitude is called Vishvarupa Ishvara Darshana.

Bhakti Stage 4 – Advaita Bhakti or Jnanam

At this stage, Gita presents the real identity of the person as pure Consciousness. With this, the individual identity of the person is given up in the Ishvara. The person surrenders himself completely to Ishvara. From the standpoint of Consciousness, there is no difference between Ishvara and the person, because both identify themselves as the same Consciousness.

As one’s unconditional love is only towards oneself, this identity results in the true love for Ishvara. Thus, the role of the person as karta (doer) is also given up. With the limited identity been thus erased, there is no locus for the effects of karma. There is only peace and bliss. There is absolutely no sorrow at all. This is highlighted in the famous verse 18.66.

Giving up all concepts of doership, surrender your limited individual identity into Me as the one single existing entity. By this, I will free you from the favourable and unfavourable effects of all actions. Do not grieve.

Conclusion

It takes several lifetimes to gradually develop to reach this stage. Verse 7.19 says:

At the end of several lives, the wise man knows Me as the material cause and the Conscious principle in everything. Such a person is a great one and is very rare.

This development continues across lifetimes, picking up from where it was left. This assurance is given in the Gita in verses 6.40 to 6.44. Thus, even death cannot deprive even the smallest progress made in this path. Thus, Gita leads us step by step from wherever we are to moksha through the path of bhakti.

When the person has dropped the bhokta (experiencership) and karta (doership), then the limited individuality of identification with the body and mind drops. The person leads a life of righteousness, purity, compassion and dispassion, full of peace and joy for the rest of his life. He is called a Jivanmukta—one who is free even when living. This is the goal of Gita, Veda and Hinduism.

Bhakti is a smooth path towards the goal. ❄️
SECTION-II

SPLENDOROUS OF BHAKTI TRADITIONS

SOME GLIMPSES
Sri Chaitanya’s Path of Bhakti

SWAMI ASHOKANANDA

I
Bhakti Means Seeking God

[When we look at the sincere devotees, we ask] Internally, what are such people seeking? Day and night they seek the Lord alone. They repeat His name, they look at His likeness. If a person is a devotee of Christ, he will look at his picture. The same symptoms appear in a human being who has fallen in love with another human being. He likes to have the beloved’s photograph, he looks at it again and again—discovers one thousand and one beauties—he sees beauty in every feature; even ugliness has become exquisitely beautiful. Then he would like to draw his beloved’s picture. Of course, only if you believe God has form, or if you are devoted to an Incarnation of God, can you paint His picture. But they say it is one of the signs of devotion and, therefore, one of the practices of devotion, a very effective practice. Just as composing devotional songs makes the mind dwell upon God, painting His picture also makes the mind dwell upon Him.

They sing unto Him, they dance unto Him, they want to have His image and decorate it. You may ask, ‘What is the sense of decorating an image or a picture?’ Well, you see, love is a sort of madness, isn’t it? A mother will take the picture of her baby and will kiss that picture. What is there in kissing a piece of paper? Does the mother think like that? No. If she thought she was kissing a piece of paper she would become startled. She was thinking of kissing her baby. But one thing you must remember here, and that makes the difference: a mother may not admit she is kissing a piece of paper; yet she will admit it is not the baby she is kissing but a picture of the baby. But about God this need

Excerpts

Swami Ashokananda (1893-1969) was a much-venerated monk of the Ramakrishna Order. He was ordained into Sannyasa by Swami Shivananda (the second President of the Ramakrishna Order), and was the editor of Prabuddha Bharata and was later the Head of Vedanta Society of Northern California, U.S.A. until his demise.
not be true. Why? Because, you see, the baby cannot come to the picture; the baby may be five miles away; he cannot enter into that picture. But when a devotee puts a garland around a picture or an image of God, He, being everywhere, has a tendency of entering into that image and taking that garland. He is a very greedy person, a very greedy person. He will come there so that He can enjoy that garland. You are singing before this image? He will come with all ears and sit in the image listening to your song. He doesn’t want to miss anything. And how wonderful that is for us!

The great teachers of devotion have always said that God, the object of love that He is, responds even to the slightest expression of love from anyone. You have to accept that as a fact. Just as the jnanis, the philosophers, say that everywhere, in everything, the supreme Being is equally existent, the bhaktas, the devotees, say that the object of their love is everywhere; where even the slightest devotion rises from the heart of the meanest of His creatures, He responds there equally.

So in various ways a devotee in the middle state wants to enjoy God. He wants to love Him. And then from time to time he will close his senses and in deep silence feel His presence and meditate upon Him. Friends, in the path of devotion almost all the teachers have emphasized one aspect of divine existence, which is that God dwells in the heart of every being. That is one of the essential points in this path. And it has been found that a devotee likes very much to meditate upon God, to feel His presence in his own heart as the Soul of his soul. Where else would he feel Him, where else would he embrace Him? Tell me where. If you say, ‘Why, outside’, well, even when he sees God in the outside and embraces Him, the action takes place within himself, because there is no such thing as ‘outside’. Everything is in consciousness, in the soul. If you say, ‘The world is outside’—never believe that nonsense! The world is in consciousness. Where else would it be? When you say, ‘I see a tree’, all you are saying is, ‘There is a tree in my consciousness’. Are you saying anything else? You become conscious of something only when it is in your own consciousness. There is no sense in saying, ‘There is a tree outside my consciousness’. Much less would it be true to say ‘God is outside my consciousness’. Devotee or jnani—whatever you are—all that takes place is in your soul. Why do you think a person in love wants to embrace the object of his love? He wants to put the other person inside his soul. That is what he’s trying to do; but he follows the wrong method. A mother clasps her baby to her heart; she feels deep in her heart a satisfaction. That is where the reaction takes place. The devotee wants to feel the presence of the Lord in his own heart; so from time to time he meditates upon Him as shining there in His blessed glory. If he finds that the Lord is not there, he will become frantic, as if his heart would break.

I sometimes quote from a poem by one of the great saints of India. He [Sri Chaitanya] was also a great Sanskrit scholar, and his verses are so pregnant with meaning that they are looked upon as having the same authority as scripture. In one of his poems he described a state of devotion:

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yugayitam nimeshena chakshusha pravrishayitam
sunyayitam jagatsarvam govindavirahena me
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—‘When I am separated from the Lord, one moment appears to me like an age, and my eyes begin to shed tears like a rain cloud heavily shedding rain, and the whole world seems empty, as if all substance has gone.’ May I add further that when that state comes, even
the brightest sun seems engulfed in darkness, all light vanishes from the face of the earth. That is the kind of grief that comes to the devotee’s heart. Sometimes you will find he cries his heart out in agony. And then comes peace, and his face is filled with joy. There is only one way to understand it: in terms of human love. Otherwise it will appear rather a strange state to go through. But you know, if we truly love, humanly speaking, all these symptoms come. The only difference is that in the realm of the senses and in terms of finitude the whole thing is doomed to eventual failure. Spiritual love takes you out of the realm of the senses, and instead of dooming you to failure will take you to success; you will be united with this object of your love from eternity to eternity. That’s the difference, but the symptoms are the same.

Some of you may raise this question, ‘What good will it do me?’ What good does it do anyone to fall in love? Go and ask a lover; he will look upon you with pity in his eyes. Love is the fulfilment of life. Neither earning much wealth nor gaining great fame nor knowing many things fulfills a man, but he is fulfilled when he can feel at one with at least one other being. That is love. Isolation is death; union is life. That is why you find men are gregarious: everyone wants someone to love, if not another person, at least a canary or a dog. Something to love. It is a symbol of his unification with the other existence, represented not by himself but by the rest of this universe. That is the answer: love is the fulfilment of itself. It is its own end.

If you want to be philosophical, then I say that love is also the realization of truth. If I speak philosophical, logical language, you will at once accept it. If I say our true nature really is infinite; everything is infinite; therefore we should feel at one with everything, you will say, ‘Yes, that’s right, that’s the truth.’ But we can also speak the language of love. I have always thought that monism could be spoken of in either of these two ways: in the language of love as well as in that of logic—the language of the heart as well as that of the intellect. Although, generally speaking, logical language is used to express truth, I think one should make an effort to use the language of the heart to express the same truth, in order to eradicate this misconception about the quest for truth. And isn’t it the same thing? The same psychological state applies to both ways.

What has happened? As I have already indicated, sense desires are false representations of the true desire for God, and when we discover this fact, our desires all become unified. All the emotions, all the forces of the mind just blend themselves into one, and this one becomes the longing for God. You see, when this tremendous longing was scattered in the form of many sense desires, our life was a poisonous swamp; but when we give those desires the right direction, then we find they all become joined together and become a mighty and powerful river, sweet, wholesome.

That is exactly what happens to a person who has reached that state of longing: the search for beauty, for sweetness, for love and affection, for power and security, for the perpetuity of existence, for the sense of harmony with all, possession of all, unification of all—all our aspirations are blended into that one great longing. And we know that the fulfilment of that longing is He who is the source of everything we seek here—infinte love, infinite life, infinite power, infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite peace, infinite harmony. Yes, He is the all.

Now, when one has reached this longing of the heart, one cannot stop there. From our standpoint that might seem a wonderful
achievement, but from the standpoint of the person who has reached that state, it is just the beginning of further effort. He or she wants to undertake all kinds of spiritual practices. If you have that longing, you can do a great deal; your body will accept it. Whether you eat or not, sleep or not, whether you are physically strong or weak, you can do a tremendous amount of spiritual practice. Before that, everything has to be regulated, everything has to be done according to form, but at that time you undertake unheard-of struggles. Why this struggle? Because although the gross form of disunion has been conquered in the mind, subtle forms are still there; they have not yet been conquered, and if one is incautious these subtle forms of division have a tendency to reappear. You sometimes hear of a very spiritual man suddenly turning worldly, and you wonder how it happened. Incautiousness probably has brought him down. It is these subtle desires that you are now conquering; you are trying to uproot everything. If you want to clear a plot of ground, you cut down the trees and also take out the main roots; yet perhaps some small roots have remained underground, and after a time sprouts come from them; these are the things you now want to root out for good. A person in that state is almost fearsome to an ordinary person. If you come near him, and if you have insight, you would be frightened by the tremendous intensity of his mind. You would not even understand him; such people are no longer like ordinary people, that you can judge them by your standards.

Well, as a result of that effort comes God-vision. The last traces of finitude disappear from the soul. Sometimes that state—the highest state of devotion—has been spoken of as the death of the mind. Mind is the symbol of finitude; Spirit is not. It is the Spirit that knows the Spirit; man the Spirit knows God the Spirit. That state is the worship of the Spirit by the Spirit, as Swami Vivekananda said. And, you see, that is the state indescribable. Of course, in one generation very few reach it, and rarely do we know them. Some of you might think that if a person has become a saint we would know about it. No. It is said in our books that sometimes they appear like fools or like dunces. How shall we know who has reached that state? Only a knower of God would be able to recognize such people. Some, of course, we do know, because, as I said earlier, they assume a mission among men; otherwise we are not apt to know of them. But in any case you should remember always that that state is not reached by a fluke.

II

What One Should Practise

Chaitanya said there are five things one should practice. Sometimes he spoke of only three things. You see, it is natural for teachers, particularly world teachers, to simplify matters. They come to the essentials and the things they tell you at once appear convincing to you; so you are able to practise them. He said if one practises three things—jive daya, name ruchi, vaishnava seva, then one will gradually attain to a state of high devotion and have a vision of the Lord.

What is jive daya? Compassion for all living beings. Be compassionate. Don’t harden your heart. Don’t worry about whether a person is good or bad; that’s not your job. Be kind. Be thoughtful. Kindness is not just a shallow, superficial impulse. A doctor who is very kind does not, when a patient comes, at once get the nearest bottle of medicine and pour it down his or her throat. He takes his time, diagnoses the trouble, and then he thinks of the right medicine and prescribes it. That is
If compassion is genuine, it goes very deep.

Second, name ruchi—repetition of the name of God and the singing of His praises. You feel a natural desire to do that. And the third practice—vaishnava seva—is service of the devotees of the Lord. These practices Chaitanya prescribed, and he said that anyone who would follow them would gradually become free of worldliness: the heart will become purified, the mind will become quiet, and a tremendous ecstasy will gradually build within; eventually he or she will have the experience of the Lord.

Now, when Chaitanya spoke about five practices, he further elaborated these three. He said, satsanga, krishnaseva, pratima, bhagavata shravana, vraje vas—pancha sadhana pradhan. These are the five principal practices in the path of devotion.

What are they? Satsanga—association with the good. Who are the good? Those who are not worldly. In the world, also, you will find good people, but for the purpose of attaining devotion it would not help you to associate with good people who are addicted to worldly ways. You can appreciate their goodness from a distance, or by coming in contact with them for a little while. But if you keep company with such good people, the danger is that their worldly ways might strengthen your worldliness. You are apt to be less cautious.

You might ask, ‘Where am I to find unworldly good people?’ Well, one way to find them is to associate with devotees, with this proviso, that you don’t allow them to talk about their wives or children or husbands and cousins and sisters-in-law or this condition or that condition and their operation and things like that. You have a clip and the moment they want to open their mouth about such things, you clip their lips. Then you find that the society of such people becomes stimulating, even if they are your equals, no better than you. It is said that in the path of devotion a person who tries to live a spiritual life is an inspiration. Of course, that is true in every path—although in the path of knowledge you do not get as much benefit, because that path is rather the path of silence. You want to go within, and the self-analysis that goes on is so subtle that you have to be by yourself.

But the path of devotion has this specialty—that if you keep the society of a devotee, even of the same calibre as yourself, you will benefit, provided you do not lapse into worldly talk. And the more devotees the merrier. You can associate with them, talk about God, sing His glory, and so on and so forth. It is very stimulating. You see, if you fall in love with somebody, you at once call up your friend and gossip about it. That’s the nature of love, to speak about it—not to anybody and everybody, but to someone who is very close to you; thereby you find your love grows more intense. In spiritual love the same thing is true, and that is called satsanga, association with the good.

Let us say, for the purpose of this discourse, that ‘the good’ is really a spiritually advanced person with whom you can sit and feel better for it. You will find that in his or her company all the good things in you are coming out. That is one effect of satsanga. Remember, the most important thing for us is to have a taste of the bliss of God, because once we have tasted that joy, all lesser joys will fail us; we shall find them falling short of what we want; they will appear as insipid, and we won’t go after them anymore. But you have to have a taste of spiritual joy first, and one of the ways in which you can have it is through another devotee. You may not have it, but you see it in
another person, and gradually you will find it within yourself. Once that has happened, you will go on making your own self-effort until you have possessed it. Another effect of association with the good is that the opposite things within ourselves, evil tendencies, unspiritual tendencies, become moribund; they die out.

Then there is *krishna seva*—that is to say, worship of the Deity. I think almost all religions believe that there are valid symbols of worship and images of worship. In India we have two names for them: one is *pratika*; another is *pratima*. *Pratika* is meditation on a symbol of God. For example, the sun is a symbol. The sun is all-effulgent, life-giving, and so on. One can meditate on the sun as God Himself—not as the sun. When you meditate on a thing, thinking of it as you ordinarily know it to be, then such meditation will not help you. But when you give that thing a symbolic turn, and then meditate on it, it becomes equivalent to meditating on God.

*Pratima* is worship of the Deity in an image. Say you have a painting or a statue of Christ, and you worship that painting or statue. That also is a valid practice. But you must not think that the image is dead stone or canvas and pigments. You should not think that. Although it may be just a painting, you must not think of it as a painting. All you should think is that it is the appearance of the Christ. That the Christ is here! Just as in ordinary talk we say: ‘Here is the founder of this institution.’ It might be just an oil painting or a photograph of him, but we don’t say, ‘Here is the photograph of the founder.’ You may think it is understood as such; no, it is not always understood as such. A representation of a thing very soon becomes the thing itself in our mind. Anyhow, in the paths of devotion prescribed by different creeds and religions, there is always an object of worship, whether it be a cross or the crucified Christ, or the Madonna with the Child in her arms, or whether it be Lord Buddha, or a Jina or whether it be the image or a symbol of a Hindu Deity; wherever there is a practice of devotion, there has to be this kind of thing.

So you could go to a temple, but you could also have a shrine of your own, a chapel where you have installed the object of your worship. You actually feel the presence of your Deity in this image. And if you say, ‘That is merely deluding myself; I know that the image is made of stone or of metal or of wood. How can I think it is God?’ Well, you’d better exercise greater wisdom. Haven’t you always said that the God whom you are seeking, whom you are loving and worshipping exists everywhere? Why should He not be in this wood or in this metal or in this stone? You think that the moment you erect something on your altar for worship God vacates the place? How could the infinite, all-pervasive God vacate any place? Don’t you see you have got Him where you want Him? You have got Him by the hair? He cannot get away from you.

We all say, ‘Oh, God is almighty, He is all-powerful’, all the time forgetting that He is quite helpless in our hands. He cannot get away from us. He is forever within us, in the heart of our hearts. If He were a finite creature, He could get away. I can run away from this hall, but God can’t do that. You have got Him. For your own convenience just set up an altar and say, ‘Lord, here You are. I am offering You some nice flowers. Be good to accept them.’

* The Jains do not believe in God but erect temples to their Jinas, or Teachers, who have attained to self-mastery.
Force Him! You have Him where you want Him; why should you not exercise some force upon Him? Those who have known God say that He likes being forced in this way. He likes the tyranny of love. Of course, if you have a tender heart and don’t want to feel tyrannical towards God, at least you know that He is there, and you offer things to Him.

You see, since devotion is a matter of heart, it is always personal. And in a personal approach, when the heart approaches someone, it wants to serve. Have you ever loved someone without feeling a desire to serve him or her? No. If you did not feel a desire to serve, then it means you did not feel any love for him. You cannot get away from it. A mother loves her child, and however fond of luxury and comfort she might be, when the child comes, all these things are forgotten—at least mostly forgotten—because the object of love is also an object of service to the extent of complete self-abnegation.

How do you serve God? There is a universal attitude about it: by offering things. These desires come: you want to offer light, you want to offer flowers. These seem to be the usual things devotees want to offer. But when you offer candy to God, many people don’t like it, although the same people will give candies to their friends or to someone they love; they think it is quite legitimate. They say, ‘I know that my friend likes to eat candy.’ How do you know God does not like to eat candy? Some people have the idea that because they are of the West, only those things to which the West is accustomed should be spoken of. On the whole, I like that idea and I try to observe it, but I also think the West could learn a few little new things from the East.

Our philosophers continually tell us that in all enjoyments the enjoyment is by the Lord seated in your heart. You have heard beautiful music? It has gone through your ears and has communicated itself to the brain. But it does not really stop there; it goes further inward and inward and inward until it reaches the very centre of your being, where God is, and there the music is presented. When you have eaten some nice candy and have enjoyed it, that enjoyment has not stopped with your mouth or your tongue. It has gone further on. It has gone to the mind, and then through the mind it has reached the Lord seated in the heart. Therefore, anything and everything that we think is enjoyable, we can offer to the Lord. The Lord will Himself also enjoy it. That’s a new thing the West could learn.

Now, I won’t insist that you offer candy; I am just giving an illustration. Whatever you like—you offer it to the Lord. You like flowers? You like the fragrance of incense? You offer them. Light? You offer it. Anything you like you offer. And of course you offer yourself, offer your heart, offer your love. You regret that you do not have enough love, or the purest love. You pray to Him that you can have it, and you offer it. This kind of worship is very enjoyable once you learn it.

You see, everything has to be learned. You might say, ‘That would be, then, an acquired taste.’ All improvement is an
acquired taste. Whenever you learn a new way, it first seems artificial, but as a matter of fact, it is proceeding from your higher nature, and once you have become established in it, you find that it is more natural than your earlier way.

Let there be no forcing of it; nor, on the other hand, let there be obstruction to it, no unnecessary prejudice against it. It may take many hours of the day; if it is according to your nature, you will get a great deal of benefit out of it. But you choose what you can do. That is *krishna seva*.

Then comes *bhagavat shravana*. *Bhagavat* means study of the scriptures. By *scriptures* is meant not only the holy books of all religions, such as the Bible, the Koran, the Vedas, and books like the *Bhagavad Gita*, but also philosophical literature, and the lives of saints and sages, and so on. Our teachers have laid great stress on such study for two reasons. One is that it gives intellectual conviction. In order to make a determined effort, you have to have true conviction behind your desire to make that effort. If conviction is not there, confusion or doubt will prevent you from pursuing your practice in hours of weakness or disinclination. So in every path you have to have a philosophy.

In India this attitude has been so pronounced, that even when the ancient scholars wrote a book on grammar, they always would try to prove in the beginning how a study of grammar can take one to the realization of Brahman. They thought they had to prove it; otherwise, why should anybody undertake the study of grammar? You probably will say, ‘I study grammar for the sake of learning the language better. I am not concerned about whether it gives me Brahman or not.’ No! A spiritual aspirant cannot be satisfied with that. Why should he be? Amongst the Vaishnavas—they are such clever people!—there is a Sanskrit grammar in which the rules were written in words that were synonyms of God. Every word was a synonym of God. Well, that certainly required intellectual gymnastics on the part of the writer, and you must admit that it was a superb achievement. You see, when the students were learning the rules of grammar, they were also repeating the name of God. Don’t you think that’s nice? Anyhow, there has to be a philosophy; you cannot get away from it. That is one of the things the study of scriptures gives you. And at the same time, you also learn a great deal about the path itself, the process and the method and the devotees. All scriptures are full of such knowledge.

Another reason for scriptural study is that it is itself a spiritual practice. Say, for example, you read the *Bhagavad Gita*. You may not find philosophy there, but everything in it will create vibrations of spiritual thought in your mind and heart. Scripture does that. There are many devotees who will recite the *Gita* every day from beginning to end. They have committed it to memory, and you hear them reciting it while they are bathing or while they are making preparations for worship. They will complete the recitation of the *Gita*, which takes more than two hours even if it is done rapidly.

So for these reasons study of the scriptures is very, very necessary. Moreover, if you want to occupy your whole day in spiritual practice, you have to have variation. You cannot just meditate, or just worship. The study of the scriptures is a wonderful variation. It may not be as intense as meditation, but nevertheless it will keep your mind on the track towards God.

Then there is *nam*, the name of God. This is one of Chaitanya’s first three practices,
but I shall elucidate it here. It is the practice called name ruchi or japa. Devotional singing is also included in it. There are songs that consist in just a string of the names of God; you sometimes sing these. Or sometimes you sing of the glory of God. God’s nature is so soul-satisfying, to remind oneself of it is itself a great spiritual elation. Just to think that all is one, that God pervades everything; He is the One; just to think of those things makes your heart leap up, and so you think about God’s nature, sing His glory.

But the specific practice under this category is japa, that is to say, repetition of the name. It is done in either of these three ways: You can repeat it loudly, as I am talking now, articulately; others would be able to hear it. Or you do it whisperingly—only those close to you can hear; or you do it mentally. This last is, of course, the best way, but if the mind has a tendency of wandering around, then better you do it whisperingly, but you should be very careful that you don’t do it where others can hear it. And if you find that even then the mind is not controlled, then do it loudly, but you should also be careful that others don’t hear it. Generally, it is done mentally.

Now, the beauty of japa is that a word produces within you its associated idea, and an idea, deepened, produces the sense of its reality. That’s the philosophical basis of it. There are different opinions about that philosophy, but as regards the effect of japa, there cannot be any doubt about it. As you repeat the name of God, the consciousness of God becomes clearer and clearer within you; eventually it becomes vivid.

You usually get a name from a teacher. Indian languages are very rich in the names of God, and each name represents God in a special way. The name the teacher tells you to repeat represents the way you want to think about God; and is just the right thing for you. So you repeat it and repeat it. It is said that if you don’t do anything but practise the repetition of the name of God, spending hours and hours doing it, your mind will become purified and calm, your senses will lose their appetites, and God will come nearer and nearer to you. Chaitanya said:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Chetodarpanamarjanam} \\
\text{Bhavamahadavagninirvapanam,} \\
\text{Sryreyahkairavacandrikavitaranam} \\
\text{vidyavadhujivanam.} \\
\text{Anandambudhivardhanam} \\
\text{pratipadam purnanritasvadanam;} \\
\text{Sarvatmasnapanam param vijayate} \\
\text{srikrishnasankirtanam?}
\end{align*}
\]

‘Such is the effect of the repetition of the name of God, it purifies the mirror of your heart, so that God becomes reflected in it, and this terrible fire of worldly existence, which has engulfed us, becomes extinguished. It emanates the light of goodness all around and knowledge comes alive through repetition of the name.’

If you have philosophical knowledge, it will remain dry knowledge. The knowledge of God will come alive through the repetition of the name.

‘And the ocean of joy begins to heave high. From time to time you begin to have upsurges of spiritual joy within. At every step you find more and more joy comes, and then you feel as if you have been bathed in the ocean of nectar. Victory be to such repetition of the name of God!’

That is what Chaitanya said. And every one of these expressions is to be taken literally. You practise this and you will see that these things happen to you.

** Chaitanya, Eight Slokas of Instruction [Shiksha-ashtama] verse 1.
In another verse Chaitanya describes the spirit in which you are to repeat the name of God. There has to be a way to do it rightly. He says:

Trinadapi sunichena tarorapi sahishnuna,  
Amanina manadena kirtaniyah sada harih.***

*Trinadapi sunichena*—you should repeat the name of the Lord with the attitude that ‘you are humbler than a blade of grass.’ The grass is lying low, beautiful to look at. People walk over it; it doesn’t protest; rather, it cushions their feet, and when they leave, it is the same as ever. No complaints. That’s the idea. Let all the troubles of the world come upon you, let people insult you, do anything to you; all your concern is for the comfort and happiness and good of others—not for yourself. If somebody insults you, feel sorry that the person lost his temper and went into such an ugly mood as to be abusive. Your natural feeling should be that you don’t want anybody to get into that condition; but that you were insulted, let there not be even the slightest thought about it, not even an acknowledgment of it to yourself.

*Tarorapi sahishnuna*—you should be ‘more patient than a tree.’ When the woodcutter cuts the tree, the tree will even then cast its shadow over him and give him shade. Even when a person hurts you, you do good to him, that is the kind of patience you have. Don’t complain, as the tree doesn’t complain.

*Amanina*—you do not have conceit; you do not have any pride or egotism, none of that, but you ‘honour everybody else’. That’s the attitude you have to have. Just as in the path of selfless action, you have to be constantly alert that you do not become selfish in any way, that no element of self-interest enters into your action, so in the path of devotion, there must be alertness that your ego does not find any scope. You say, ‘Not I, but Thou, my Lord. Who am I? I am nothing, I am nothing, Lord. You are the all.’

Why is it so? Because that is the nature of love. There is a kind of love in which you give me ninety-nine percent, and I may give you one percent. Well, that’s a most terrible thing. Whether you should call it love, I don’t know, but you must admit that there is love on one side, at least. Another kind of love is fifty-fifty. You love me, I love you; you don’t love me, I don’t love you. But spiritual love cannot be like that. No. It will have to be one hundred percent on my side. Whether God gives anything to me or not, it doesn’t matter; I give Him one hundred percent. I don’t ask for anything. You have to make sure that the ego does not seek anything for itself—that it does not raise its head. That attitude is the very basis of the practice of devotion.

If you say, ‘I think that is too humiliating. I think I should have some self-respect,’ I will

***    Ibid. verse 3.
reply, ‘Self-respect is bunk!’ For which self are you seeking respect? If you really mean the Self—the true Self—that Self, of course, is worthy of respect. That is God Himself. But to seek respect for your lesser self is just stupidity, one of those things which is good for worldly life. In worldly life a person should have that kind of self-respect, but not in spiritual life.

When you repeat the name of God with this attitude, you will find gradually your heart will be purified, worldly desires will leave. Some have said that if you have worldliness, if you have defects in your nature, you should pray to God and repeat His name, and everything will become just right. Have patience, and gradually you will find the thing has happened. But you have to have patience. It may not happen overnight, but it will happen.

Then, as the fifth ingredient in his five methods, Chaitanya prescribes *vraje vas*, that is to say, you should live in a holy place. That, of course, is hard in America. But all old countries have such prescribed holy places—cities like Benares or Vrindavan—where the important functions going on are worship and meditation. There are many such places like that. If you do not have them in your country, then create them. In a place where many people have thought about God, searched for Him and found Him, the very dust of that place, the very air becomes surcharged with spirituality. That is how holy places are created.

I think that nowadays there is a great desire in the West for retreats—places where people can go and think about God. It is very necessary. You see, we have to fight constantly against other influences and prevail against them. And in this fight, we lose a great deal of our own positive spiritual energy. If we did not have to fight, then we could use this energy in our further progress; our meditation would be better, our spiritual growth would be quicker.

Sources:
*Part II*—Swami Ashokananda, *Ascent to Spiritual Illumination*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, p.185-199
One Who Wants Bhakti!

Once when someone asked Swami Premananda to speak about premabhakti, he replied: ‘Who is going to listen? To whom shall I speak of prema, the highest devotion? Is there anyone competent to hear about it?’ Then he said:

A hawker was going around, shouting: ‘Will anyone buy love? Does anyone need love?’ Men and women, young and old—all were opening their door and coming out. They all wanted to buy love, and they enquired about the price.

Then the hawker said:
What would be the price of such a thing? It is priceless. Nevertheless, I can sell it at a price. The price is your head. Will anyone offer it?

Hearing the price, all the people went inside their houses and closed their doors. So, you want to hear about ecstatic love of God. Good enough!

But can anyone offer one’s head? Can anyone throw away one’s life?1

Even ordinary devotion for the Lord is not a small thing. But prema bhakti? That is something else altogether. Illustrating the difference between the two, Ramakrishna would sometimes sing in the mood of Radha: ‘Your Shyam is a word of the mouth; my Shyam is the pain of my heart.’2 That is to say, for ordinary devotees, Krishna is just the name they repeat, but Radha’s love is unbearable.

Is it possible that one can have such intense, ecstatic love for God that one is totally possessed by it and cares for nothing else? What could possibly drive such devotees to surrender their whole life to something that—for most people of this world, anyway—seems more like a ghost at best? To ordinary people living in this consumerist-dominated world, such divine love sounds like fiction. They cannot believe such devotees even exist.

Fortunately we not only have writings about such lovers of God—such as the Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga and the Chaitanya Charitamrita—but we also have songs and poems written by these devotees themselves—such as the ecstatic songs and poems of Hafiz, St. John of the Cross, Mirabai, and others of all religions. Thus we can get some glimpse of their divine lives.

The Great Alwars of South

Some of the earliest of these writings were written between the sixth and ninth centuries by the Vaishnava saints of Tamil Nadu, known as the Alwars (‘those who are immersed in God’—also spelt at Azhvar). The songs of the Alwars, written in Tamil, were later collected and compiled in a volume called the Nalayira Divya Prabandham. Like the Rishis of earlier times whose writings were based on their own realizations, the Alwars also revealed their spiritual experiences in their songs, and thus they inspired a new path towards God—that of ecstatic love.
It is not that devotion was not recognized in India before this. Loving devotion for a Personal God was very much there. But never before was there such intensity in the devotees’ love for God, and this ecstatic devotion dissolved all barriers of caste and gender. Of the twelve Alwars, one was a woman, one was a so-called ‘untouchable’, and only about half of the rest were brahmmins.

There are many elements that make up the devotional path of the Alwars which shows what an important role this movement had in the history of India’s devotional life. We shall look at a few of these elements here, as revealed in their songs. First of all, we know from the biographies and names of the Alwars that at least a few practised yoga (including hatha yoga). For instance, the first three Alwars are often referred to as Sarayogi, Bhutayogi, and Bhrantayogi. We also get a hint of it in a song by Tirumangai Alwar, the last Alwar. In a single verse we find an extremely short, but subtle, verse on meditation:

Seated firmly without fatigue or fidgeting, bring your upper eyelids close to the lower. Subdue the five senses, fill your heart with love for the Lord alone. Let thought flow freely on that one alone. There in the effulgence emerging, you will see the Lord who is a body of light. Those who do so, do surely see the truth. [Tirukkuruntandakam, 18]²

Again, the Alwars were the inspirers of the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta philosophy, which was later expounded by Ramanuja. Here God contains the whole universe within Himself, and He is also the inner controller within it. He is the container and what is contained. On such points, Nammalwar’s poems are unparalleled. Deceptively simple, they are also beautiful and quite profound. Just one glance at his Tiruvaimoli reveals how subtly and brilliantly he conveys this idea. In verse 8.7.9, he says:

Becoming me he became the worlds and the souls and filled them, then himself became this me and praised himself. Sweet as honey, milk and sugarcane sap, my lord of Malirumsolai—he became all these after devouring my soul.³

The Alwars were probably also the first to adore God using an intimate human relationship—that is, by identifying themselves as a parent, servant, friend, or lover of God. And they did this through the use of

Images of some of the Alwars
mythology, by identifying themselves with a character in a story or myth. Through such identification they could fully realize the emotions and mood of that character, and this naturally intensified their love for the Lord.

We can give some examples here: Both Periyalwar and Kulasekhara Alwar took up in their songs the relationship of a parent towards the Divine Child—Periyalwar towards the child Krishna, and Kulasekhara towards both Rama and Krishna. Kulasekhara added to it the most intense emotion—that of love in separation. In the following song, he takes the role of Devaki, who laments that she has been denied the joy of bringing up her own child, Krishna. Confined in a jail in Mathura, Devaki knows that Krishna has been brought up by Yashoda in Vrindavan:

O Krishna! I can only see and enjoy your infancy through my mind—your moon-like radiant face, your well-formed hands, arms and chest, your flowers-and-sprig-bedecked-dark hair, your crescent-marked forehead and your large lotus-eyes. Alas, within the span of thinking that I was your mother, I lost the joy of begetting you. O my Karma! I fear I shall not live. [Perumal Tirumoli, 7.4]5

Though two male Alwars—Nammalwar and Tirumangai Alwar—took up in their songs the relationship of a female lover towards the divine Beloved, such as the Gopis’ love for Krishna, this mood came naturally to Andal, the only woman Alwar. As the daughter of another Alwar, Periyalwar, she was drawn to the Lord from her infancy. It is said that she disappeared into the Lord’s image at Srirangam in a mystical marriage. Unlike Nammalwar’s songs, which deal with both union and separation, Andal’s Nacchiyar Tirumoli describes the intense pain of separation from the Lord.6 Here, she begs her friends to take her to Vrindaban:

No use fighting shy, now all the folks have come to know. If at all you wish to do me good—I swear—if at all you want to see me alive, take me now to Ayypadi [Vrindaban]. If I see the beautiful bachelor [Vamana] who took the earth, I may live. [Nacchiyar Tirumoli 12.2]7

Again, in her other song, Tiruppavai, she imagines herself in Vrindaban, calling other Gopi girls early in the morning to come and awaken Krishna. In verse 28 she says to him:

Let us follow the cows to the forest and eat togethers while they graze. We are privileged to have you born among us simple cowherd folk. O Faultless Govinda! Our bond with you is eternal. Artless children that we are, out of love we called you petty names; pray do not be angry with us. O Lord, grant us our boons.8

It is this very intimate, personal love of God that particularly sets these saints apart. How does one attain such love? According to saints of all religions, it comes when one gets a taste of God. Just one taste—that’s all. One then realizes that God and His love are insatiable. His beauty, His divine attributes—everything about Him is unlimited and impossible to describe. But the price of such a taste is one’s head, one’s very life. As we find in the lives of the Alwars, after getting a
taste of this love, one cannot go back to ‘life as normal’ ever again.

Once a devotee said to Ramakrishna at the Cossipore garden house: ‘One never feels satisfied by beholding God. There is no satiety.’ Hearing this, Ramakrishna replied: ‘How can it be? One can never have too much of Him. I have beheld His form since my birth. Yet my eyes are not satisfied.’

For this very reason Nammalvar has given the Lord a very beautiful and poetic name—Aravamude, which means ‘Insatiable Nectar’. In one of his verses Nammalvar says:

Insatiable nectar! First Lord! My body melts in love for you.  
You make me flow like restless water.  
I see your resplendent form in Tirukkudandai,  
Reclining amid fertile waters, fanned by whisks of golden paddy. [Tiruvaimoli V.8.1]

It is said that a North Indian brahmin, on merely hearing this one name of God—Aravamude—from a South Indian pilgrim who was visiting the north, left everything then and there and went to South India to live, simply because such an exquisite epithet of God existed there. Just hearing that divine name gave him a taste of God’s insatiable nectar.

And we see this in the songs of all the Alwars. As much as they think of Him and see Him, they cannot get enough of Him. No wonder it seems they are possessed by Him. In one song Periyalwar says:

Like churning the ocean and filling the pot with ambrosia, I melted out my body, opened my mouth, drank deep and filled myself with you. [Periyalwar Tirumoli 5.4.4]

In addition, the Alwars describe singing and dancing in temples in devotional fervour, which was long thought to be a later development in devotional practice in India.

Kulasekhara was a king, yet he longed to renounce everything and join the devotees in Srirangam. His ministers thought he was crazy. But, as Kulasekhara asks, who is really mad?:

With tears welling in their eyes—the hairs of their bodies standing on end—they stand yearning for their lord and dance in frenzy, then again sing and dance and fall prostrate at his feet calling, ‘My Lord,’ ‘My Father,’ and ‘My Ranga,’ taking refuge in him alone. They are not mad; only the others are mad. [Perumal Tirumoli 2.9]

Again he says:

To the world I am mad. To me the world is mad.  
Alas! What use dilating on this? ‘O Cowherd lord!’ I call, mad with love for the lord of Arangam, my master. [Perumal Tirumoli 3.1 & 3.8]

Yet Kulasekhara, like other Alwars, also puts much stress on surrender to the Lord:

O Lord of Vittuvakkodu! Even if you do not save me from despair, my heart melts for your grace alone. Alas, I am like the lotus flower that opens to the rays of the rising Sun, whose very heat in the day makes it wilt. [Perumal Tirumoli 5.6]

As said before, after one glimpse or taste of the Lord, life can never be the same again. In fact, for Tiruppan Alwar life in this world could not even continue anymore. Though extremely devoted to Lord Ranganatha at Srirangam, Tiruppan was not allowed to enter the temple, as he was considered an untouchable. But the Lord knew the longing of the devotee’s heart, and He himself arranged for Tiruppan to be carried inside the shrine on the shoulders of a priest. Seeing his beloved Lord before him, Tiruppan sang his only recorded song, Amalan Adipiran. He then merged into the Lord after singing this last verse:

The dark-hued lord is the lord who came as a cowherd-lad and stole butter. He is the lord of gods, and the lord of Arangam also. He
has stolen my heart. After seeing the lord of ambrosial delight, my eyes will see naught else. [Amalan Adipiran, 10]15

The Alwars knew that God is beyond all forms and qualities, and again, that He pervades all forms and qualities. At the same time, they adored Vishnu in all His Personal aspects—as the Lord of the myths and incarnations, as the Lord in the various temples, and as the Lord in their own hearts. In fact, it was the Alwar’s use and development of mythological imagery, as well as their love for temple deities, that helped to shape and preserve the devotional life of Hinduism. But, more important, they showed how love of God for its own sake is all that matters in this world. With the Alwars, devotion found the deepest recess of its heart. □

Notes and References

4. Ibid., p. 611.
5. Ibid., p. 142.
6. There is one song describing her dream marriage to Vishnu, but she knows it is just a dream.
12. Ibid., p. 133.
13. Ibid., 134 & 135.
15. Ibid., p. 188.

Sweetness of Bhakti

Vachanam Madhuram, Charitham Madhuram, Vasanam Madhuram, Valitham Madhuram, Chalitham Madhuram, Bramitham Maduram, Madhurathipather Akhilam Madhuram

Sweet are thine sweetest words, Krishna, So is thine divine story.
Sweet is the place of your stay, Krishna, So is thine greatness,
Sweet are thine movements, Krishna, So is thine confusion.
Hey king of all sweetness in this world, Everything about Thee is sweet.
—Excerpts from Madhurashtakam
Bhakti in Tamil Saivism

SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

Tamil Saivism

The aspect of Bhakti in Tamil Saivism that will immediately come to the minds of many is the vast scriptural heritage of Tamil Saivite devotional songs that are sung regularly today in temples, concert halls and homes. The major compendium containing them is called Tirumurai, which was compiled by Saint Nambiyandar Nambi around 1000 CE. Of the twenty-three saints whose songs it contains, four are revered as most important: Saint Tirujnana Sambandar (ca 600); Saint Tirunavukarasu (Appar), a contemporary of Sambandar; Saint Sundaramurti (ca 800) and Saint Manikkavasagar (9th century).

The works of the first three are known collectively as Thevaram. Manikkavasagar’s two works, of which Tiruvasagam is the major one, stand alone. These four works are so central to Tamil Saivism that renowned Saivite revivalist scholar Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879) referred to them as the Tamil Vedas, writing the following in his Hindu catechism, Saiva Vina Vidai. He said,

What are the Tamil Vedas which inform the meaning, as it is, of the jnana part of the Vedas, without being contrary to the Saiva Agamas? They are two, namely, Thevaram and Thiruvasakam.

‘Who were the gracious authors of Thevaram? They are three, namely, Tirujnana Sambandar, Tirunavakarasu Nayanar and Sundaramurti Nayanar.

‘Who was the gracious author of Thiruvasagam? Manikkavasagar Swamigal.

How are these four, starting with Tirujnana Sambandar Nayanar, called? They are called Saiva Samaya Kuravar (Saiva religious preceptors).

These hymns contain poetic descriptions of God Siva, offer praise, sometimes describe His sanctum at a specific temple and offer advice in how His blessings can help us in life. Some are related to an interesting story of how the song came about. For example, in the song Kolaru Pathikam, Tirujnana Sambandar says that by singing its verses and praying to God Siva any negative effects indicated by the astrological planets will be removed. Here are verses one and two.

One who has a woman with bamboo-like shoulders as a part of His body, One with the throat stained by the poison He ate, and One who plays the veena faultlessly while wearing the blemishless moon and the Ganga river on his head—He has entered my heart. And because of this, for devout people (like me), the forces of the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and the snakes Ragu and Ketu will not cause anything evil, but only good, the truly good.

One who wears the garland of bones that bestows bodily strength, the sharp bones that
give the mental courage to combat, the turtle that allows the exploring of the dark ocean of the unconscious unafraid—He has also implanted Himself. Riding the bull with the woman as His equal half, wearing golden chains on the neck and Ganges in the tuft—He has entered my heart. Therefore the different astronomically calculated days, times and seasons can only be good and loving, and can do only good for devotees of Siva."

The song’s origin is interesting. In the 7th century in Tamil Nadu, Jainism was on the rise in the Pandya kingdom and even the king had become a Jain. There was a lot of discrimination against Saivites. The queen, Mangaiyar Karasiyar, and the chief minister, Kulachiraiyar, were perturbed by these events. They learned about the greatness of Tirujnana Sambandar and became convinced he could show the Pandyan king the right path. They sent a message to Tirujnana Sambandar explaining the situation and requesting him to visit Madurai.

Sambandar was with Tirunavukarasar in Thiruvengadu when the request reached him. Sambandar (who was only seven years old at that time) agreed to go to Madurai. But Tirunavukarasar, who himself had been persecuted by the Jains in the past, feared that young Sambandar would be harmed. Further deducing that astrologically it was not an auspicious time for the venture, he tried to dissuade Sambandar from going. Tirujnana Sambandar responded that no harm will come to an ardent Siva devotee like him. He then sang the verses of Kolaru Pathikam, literally ‘Removing the Negative Effects of the Planets.’

Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy

A deeper understanding of Bhakti in Tamil Saivism can be grasped by looking at the philosophy on which it is based—Saiva Siddhanta. The spiritual path that Saiva Siddhanta propounds consists of four progressive stages, or padas: charya, kriya, yoga and jnana. They have many similarities to the four yogas of Vedanta: Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga. However, there are two key differences:

First, whereas in Vedanta you can choose to follow just one of the yogas, in Siddhanta we must progress through all four padas. A simple analogy will illustrate the difference. Our goal is to walk across a shallow stream on a path of river rocks. Vedanta gives us four discrete rock paths to choose from, the four yogas, each of which leads across the river.

Second, whereas in Vedanta you can choose just one way of performing the yogas, in Siddhanta we must follow all four stages of spiritual practice. Vedanta allows you to focus on just one path, whereas Siddhanta requires you to follow all four paths in sequence. This is why the Saiva Siddhanta path is often referred to as the ‘royal road’ of spiritual practice. 

The Saiva Siddhanta path is characterized by a deep devotion to Lord Śiva, the Supreme Being. It emphasizes the importance of personal experience and direct realization of the divine. The path is divided into four stages: charya (preliminary), kriya (active), yoga (contemplative) and jnana (knowledge).

The charya stage involves following the codes of conduct and rituals prescribed by the Vedas and other ancient texts. The kriya stage involves the performance of specific rituals and practices as prescribed by the Saiva Siddhanta agamas. The yoga stage involves meditation and other contemplative practices to achieve deeper states of consciousness. Finally, the jnana stage involves the direct realization of the Supreme Being through self-realization.

The Saiva Siddhanta path is practiced through the study of the Saiva Siddhanta texts, such as the Śrīvaiśnavam and the Tattvabodhīnī-mālā. The path is also characterized by the practice of the Śrīvaiśnava bhajana, or devotional songs, which are used to唱 the praises of Lord Śiva.

The Saiva Siddhanta path is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition of bhakti, or devotional worship. It emphasizes the importance of personal devotion to the divine and the direct experience of the Supreme Being. The Saiva Siddhanta path is practiced in many Saiva temples and by Saiva ascetics throughout India.

Saiva Siddhanta teaches that the ultimate goal of life is moksha, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death. This is achieved through the direct realization of the Supreme Being through self-realization.

The Saiva Siddhanta path is a path of personal experience and direct realization of the divine. It emphasizes the importance of personal devotion to Lord Śiva and the direct experience of the Supreme Being. The Saiva Siddhanta path is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition of bhakti and is practiced in many Saiva temples and by Saiva ascetics throughout India.
Siddhanta gives us one path for crossing the river consisting of four stones: charya, kriya, yoga and jnana.

The second way the padas differ from the yogas of Vedanta is that the four padas of Siddhanta are cumulative, meaning that each builds upon the preceding stages. An alternate name for Saiva Siddhanta is Nalupadasaivam, which the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon defines as ‘the doctrine that the initiate should pass successively though charya, kriya, yoga and jnana stages and thence obtain moksha.’

In Saiva Siddhanta, bhakti is not a separate pada. It is an integral part of all four. In fact, it is the foundation. Said another way, as we progress on the Siddhanta path our love of God Siva is constantly deepening as we become closer and closer to Him by advancing from one pada to the next. Saiva Siddhanta posits that Siva is love itself, Anbe Sivam, and that his creation is an expression of that divine love, Anbe Sivamayam. It naturally follows that the more love we awaken in our consciousness, the closer we come to God.

The Tirumantiram, the work of Rishi Tirumular, book ten of the Tirumurai, is an authoritative Tamil scripture on Saiva Siddhanta written around 200 BCE. Based on its verses, each of the four padas and its relationship to bhakti will be briefly described.

Charya, literally ‘conduct,’ is the first stage of religiousness and the foundation for the next three stages. It is also called the dasa marga, meaning ‘path of servitude’, for here the soul relates to God as servant to master. Tirumantiram verse 1502 explains,

The simple temple duties—lighting the lamps, picking flowers, lovingly polishing the floors, sweeping, singing the Lord’s praise, ringing the bell and fetching ceremonial water—these constitute the dasa marga.

Kriya, literally ‘action or rite’, is the second stage of religiousness. In kriya, our sadhana, which was mostly external in charya, is now also internal. Our relationship with God in kriya is as a son to his parents, and thus this stage is called the satputra marga. Tirumantiram verse 1496 describes the kriya pada, or satputra marga:

Puja, reading the scriptures, singing hymns, performing japa and unsullied austerity, truthfulness, restraint of envy, and offering of food—these and other self-purifying acts constitute the flawless satputra marga.

Yoga, literally ‘union,’ is the third stage of religiousness. It is the process of uniting with God within oneself, a stage arrived at through perfecting charya and kriya. As God is now like a friend to us, yoga is known as the sakha marga. Tirumantiram verse 1457 offers this description:

The course of kundalini through centers six, to singleness of aim direct the mind, like a wooden stake they sit, immobile, impervious to tickle or to thrust. To the wise yogins who thus set their purpose high, the Lord His grace grants.

Jnana, literally ‘wisdom’, the fourth stage of religiousness, is the fruition of yoga tapas. It is divine wisdom emanating from an enlightened being, a soul in its maturity, immersed in Sivaness, the blessed realization of God, while living out earthly karma. It is also called the san marga or ‘true path’ in which God is our dearest beloved and which leads ultimately to an experience of identity. Tirumantiram verse 1470 describes the jnana pada:

Brahmam shall be his impregnable abode, the universe his kith and kin; all the diverse paths the world presents shall be his, for, verily, he has realized the pure jnana, free of doubt.

Verse 1507 highlights the fundamental nature of bhakti in all four padas, pointing out
that we move closer to God Siva as our bhakti deepens in each successive stage.

In charya, the soul forges a kindred tie in ‘God’s world’ (salokya). In kriya, it attains ‘nearness’ to Him (samipya). In yoga, it attains ‘likeness’ with Him (sarupya). In jnana, the soul enjoys the ultimate bliss of identity with Siva (sayujya).

In the Tirumantiram’s various explanations of the padas, the primary focal point for religious practice is the temple. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, encouraged Saivites to attend a puja at least once a week. Practice at the temple is not limited to attending puja. Beyond that devotees are encouraged to perform acts of charya, assisting the priest by providing flowers, cleaning, etc. This naturally leads to a desire to deepen our practice, in acts of kriya, by performing, in addition to attending, puja. We do so in our home shrine ideally on a daily basis, which becomes a spiritual extension of the temple. Other practices in the home shrine are japa and scriptural study. To deepen our practice still further, we perform acts of yoga, taking up internal worship, meditation, which leads the rare few to the realization that Jiva indeed is Siva, the glorious state of jnana.

_Tirumantiram_ elucidates the natural movement from one pada to another in verse 1445 by showing the relationship of each to life, _uyir:_

- Being the Life of life is splendid jnana worship.
- Beholding the Light of life is great yoga worship.
- Giving life by invocation is external worship.
- Adoration that displaces anger is charya worship.

_Bhakti in the Tamil Yoga Tradition_

A third area we cannot fail to mention in this brief discussion of bhakti is the wealth of writings and songs of other great yogis of the tradition, profound outpourings of divine love based on meditative experience. Saint Tayumanavar (ca 17th century) is a prime example, as shown in his song, ‘Let Us in Meekness Worship.’

_That which is Nondual,_
_That which is the unique Light of Word,_
_That which the scriptures loudly proclaim,_
_As the Wisdom of wisdom,_
_As the bliss that fills,_
_As the Primal One,_
_As the Ancient One of tattva form,_
_That which faiths contend after,_
_That which is sought for support,_
_That which is permanent,_
_That which is fullness,_
_That which is without support,_
_That which is our support,_
_That which is peace,_
_That which is the state of void,_
_That which is eternally pure,_
_That which is untouched by the materiality of the universe,_
_That which is unaffected by events,_
_That which is changeless,_
_That which shines as impassive neutrality,_
_That which is blemishless,_
_That which is formless,_
_That which is in thought_
Without thought cognizing it,
That which is divine light effulgence,
That which is uncreated,
That which flourishes in the jnana void,
That God Supreme,
Let us in meekness worship.

The great sage of Sri Lanka, Satguru Yogaswami (1872-1964), provides a contemporary model. He taught that God Siva, you and love are an inseparable unity, as expressed in this letter to a young man named Yogendra Duraisamy:

I am with you and you are with me. There is no distance between us. I am you. You are I. What is there to fear? Look! I exist as you. Then what must you do? You must love. Whom? Everyone. To speak more clearly, your very nature is love. Not only you, but all are pervaded by love. But there is no ‘all,’ for you alone exist. All are you!

My own guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), ordained by Yogaswami in 1949 to continue his parampara, considered love of God, and God’s love for us, so central that he placed it at the center of Saivism’s affirmation of faith in his own Saiva catechism, Dancing with Siva:

‘God Siva is Immanent Love and Transcendent Reality,’ is what we have when we take the milk from the sacred cow of Saivism, separate out the cream, churn that cream to rich butter and boil that butter into a precious few drops of ghee. ‘God Siva is Immanent Love and Transcendent Reality’ is the sweet ghee of the Saivite Hindu religion. In the Sanskrit language it is ‘Premaiva Sivamaya, Satyam eva Parasiva.’

In the sweet Tamil language it is even more succinct and beautiful: ‘Anbe Sivamayam, Satyame Parasivam.’

Form and Formlessness of God

How can you say that the only truth about God is that He has form? It is undoubtedly true that God comes down to earth in a human form, as in the case of Krishna. And it is true as well that God reveals Himself to His devotees in various forms. But it is also true that God is formless; He is the Indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. He has been described in the Vedas both as formless and as endowed with form. He is also described there both as attributeless and as endowed with attributes.

As long as God keeps the awareness of ‘I’ in us, so long do sense-objects exist; and we cannot very well speak of the world as a dream. There is fire in the hearth; therefore the rice and pulse and potatoes and the other vegetables jump about in the pot. They jump about as if to say: ‘We are here! We are jumping!’ This body is the pot. The mind and intelligence are the water. The objects of the senses are the rice, potatoes, and other vegetables. The ‘I-consciousness’ identified with the senses says, ‘I am jumping about.’ And Satchidananda is the fire.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Bhakti in Vachanas of Shaiva Sharanas

K B PRABHUPRASAD

The Tradition of Vachanas

Vachana means ‘saying’. In Kannada, the term is specifically used to mean a saying uttered by a saint mostly belonging to Veerashaivism. A Vachana is more or less like a soliloquy that serves the purpose of a precept or introspection.

Before undertaking our study of Bhakti in Vachanas, it is important to know about the historic Bhakti Movement of the 12th century in Karnataka led by Sri Basaveswara or Basavanna. It was a bloodless revolution on rational level which brought about a drastic change in the social system, breaking all differences and discrimination among people in the name of caste, class, gender and profession. It established a new social order based on equality and human values such as truth, righteousness, non-violence, love and compassion. It upheld the dignity of man and dignity of labour (or one’s profession).

Basaveswara with his immense faith in Shiva, the God supreme, and matchless devotion nurtured the Shaiva tradition of Karnataka and surrounding areas and introduced revolutionary changes in social and religious system. He totally rejected the meaningless customs and rituals of the orthodoxy and also the blind-superstitious beliefs.

He declared that the gates of spirituality were ever wide open for any aspirant, including those engaged in the lowliest of profession. He held all, including women, have a right to spiritual practices and salvation. It is not the privilege of only the high caste men. So broad was his heart and so noble was his thinking. Basaveswara also introduced harmony of all other paths such as Jnana, Dhyana and Karma, in Bhakti.

Understanding Vachana

As stated earlier, Vachana means saying. In the context of spiritual literature, a Vachana is a unique form of poetic prose, used exclusively by Veerashaiva Sharanas [saints] of the 11th and 12th centuries. Jedara Dasimayya of this period, a great Shiva Sharana set a model of Vachana form. Basaveswara found this form of expression very convenient and effective to communicate his thoughts, ideas, feelings and mystical experiences to the common unlettered people. Thus it became the medium of communication among all his contemporary Sharanas.

Some of the Vachanas, for instance that of Allama Prabhu, use the language of riddles and imageries. The Vachanas of Basaveswara and Akka Mahadevi especially are pleasing, simple and poetic.

Every Sharana uses the name of his / her personal deity in his / her Vachana, with whom he / she speaks out his / her
thought, feeling or experience. Thus a Vachana is identified with the help of that name. Basaveshwara’s Vachana is identified with the name Koodala Sangama, Allama with Guheswara and Akka Mahadevi with Chenna Mallikarjuna. All these are names of Shiva signifying His various aspects and characteristics. Most of the Vachanas are very simple and easy to understand, using spoken Kannada.

The Sharanas show that even the most exalted mystical experience can be expressed in simple spoken words. They also use this form to convey whatever they thought or felt about the art of living in the world—right from good manners and social courtesies to be observed by everyone, up to personal, social and religious values that make an ideal society.

**Bhakti Tradition of Vachanas**

One needs to look into the Vachanas of Basaveswara to know about Bhakti tradition in Veerashaivism. Basaveswara himself was rooted in Bhakti and the very epitome of devotion. We see in him all the stages of Bhakti beginning with the belief in the existence of God, Shiva (the good of all creation). So the Vachanas of Basaveswara are representative of the Vachanas of all Sharanas, the Shaiva devotees, saints and mystics.

Going through his Vachanas is like taking a dip in the sacred river Ganga and come out fresh and sanctified. It is even appropriate to call the Vachana literature as Bhakti Ganga. There are many Vachanas of Basavanna about Bhakti and its associate values of right living that may be read again and again.

In the Shaiva tradition, Bhakti begins in belief and faith that there is one and the only God, without a second, namely Shiva. He is the ‘Truth absolute, the Good absolute and the Beauty absolute’. The very belief that there is someone who looks after us and takes good care of us is very comforting. It brings immense solace to us, and we can feel free from any sort of fear and anxiety.

Thus Bhakti begins with the belief in the existence of a Cosmic Mind, one and the only, without a second, which has created this beautiful and mysterious world floating in the space of incomprehensible mysterious universe. Divinity is inherent in everything, an atom or the biggest stellar body, and also in every living being.

The belief grows into faith and faith rouses intense longing to see Him. Basavanna thus stresses the importance and power of faith: ‘The people of the world call him without faith or trust, if called in full faith does he not respond and answer positively?’

The voice within is His, hearing which the whole body vibrates with joy and thrill.
And greater intimacy with God develops. In a saying Basaveswara says.

Thou art my father, thou are my mother, thou art my kith and kin; I have none other than you, O' Lord Koodala Sangama dip me in milk or dip me in water!

This faith takes the next step of desire to see Him. It develops into incessant longing. God is pleased only with this kind of love, intense, pure and selfless i.e., Bhakti, and not any talent or Vedic scholarship. 'Neither melodious music nor chanting of Vedas pleases Him. Only Bhakti is dear to Him.'

Aspects of Devotion In Basavanna’s Teachings

True devotion is in modest offering of one’s heart. There is no need of performing rituals or ostentatious worship of idols or pictures of God.

For Basaveswara just as divinity is within every living being, so is Bhakti in the depth of the heart. He calls it the hidden treasure more valuable than any earthly wealth. Only one has to discover it. Even then he feels sad about his poverty in Bhakti. He supplicates, ‘I am so very poor for I don’t have Bhakti,’ and declares ‘if one wants to discover this Bhakti, the hidden treasure, one has to rely on anjana (collyrium) of Shiva Prema (love of God)—the most reliable potion.’

Bhakti cannot be just in talking about it. Basavanna holds that the path of Bhakti had already been set by great devotees of the past like Dasayya (Jedara Dasimayya) Siriylala, Sindhu Ballala and Bana. He remembers their matchless Bhakti, with a desire to emulate them. He goes round to beg each of the exemplary devotees such as Dasayya, Channayya and so on, to give a bit of their Bhakti as alms; and when they obliged, his bowl was filled to the brim. He wishes to be a true devotee at any cost. He assures himself that he would surely become a Bhakta by and by:

By and by I shall qualify myself to be a Bhakta,
By and by I shall be fit enough to be called Bhakta.

He even hopes to become a Sharana (a devotee of a higher order by totally surrendering to God) overcoming all obstacles and hindrances—‘I shall merge myself in Linga, O Lord Koodala Sangama, I shall excel you’. He is so confident!

Basavanna had great regard for devotees of Shiva. In all humility he said: ‘There are none lower than me and none greater than Shiva’s devotees.’

Though all his contemporary devotees praised him calling him Bhakti Bhandari (The chief custodian of Bhakti), he was full of modesty. He never showed himself off either as Minister-in-chief or as Bhakta. He remained unassuming and soft spoken. He mixed freely with all common people—the poor and the untouchables. He was loved and respected by all who endearingly called him Anna (‘elder brother’ in Kannada).

Basavanna, as an elder brother and leader would guide them on the path of Bhakti, not by teaching or sermon but by his own modest example. By looking at him one could know the distinct characteristics of a Bhakta.

Characteristics of a Bhakta

The first characteristic is that a Bhakta must be kind to all beings. Love and compassion are the basic qualities of every religion and every man. He / she must be truthful and righteous, the his speech should be soft, sweet and full of courtesy and upright in matters of truth and justice.

Soft and sweet words are all kinds of holy chanting.
Politeness wins the love of Sadashiva.

The second characteristic of Bhakta is selflessness. He should be completely free from ego. Basaveswara and his life are examples of genuine bhakti, selfless and egoless.

He prays for nothing—not for name, fame or riches. He is totally surrendered to God’s will. He says:

I do not want the position of Brahma or the position of Vishnu, or the position of Rudra. Nor do I want any other position. O, Lord Koodala Sangama grant me only the great position of one who knows the feet of your good devotees.

Bhakti is intense love for God and Bhakti is said to be the easiest of the other paths—Jnana, Karma and Yoga. But many times, a devotee faces many adversities of life and God Shiva is not easily pleased. Bhakta is often put to severe tests.

A devotee should be prepared for this. Difficulties, sorrows and troubles in life are mere tests meant to strengthen one’s intensity of devotion and shape one’s character. When a devotee comes out of such tests with unfailing faith in Shiva and equanimity of mind, Shiva is pleased and hugs him affectionately.

Basavanna implores constantly and entreats Shiva to overlook his innumerable follies and shortcomings and accept his devotion. Whether Shiva is pleased or not, he would never give up holding on to Shiva’s feet. He says,

If you kick me off with left foot
I will hold on to the right foot
If you kick me off with right foot
I will hold on to the left foot.
O Save me; fault is mine and clemency yours,
O Lord Koodala Sangama I am child of Your compassion.

More than assuring Shiva, he assures himself by way of determination and says:

I will never stop remembering you, never.
While I am alive, never cease to surrender.

Basaveswara knows for certain that Bhakti needs rejuvenation from time to time. It needs the company of good devotees right from the beginning. Company of the spiritually minded persons (Sat Sanga) is even more important than worship or personal prayer. He says,

To make a pot, mud is needed first.
To make an ornament, gold is needed first.
To know the path to Shiva, guru’s path is needed first.
To realise our Lord Koodala Sangama the company of Sharanas is needed first.

Even in the midst of routine worldly activities, a true devotee engages all his five senses in the remembrance of God. Yet he chides himself saying:

Enough time is there to earn money but there is no time for worshipping Linga (Shiva).

Though Basavanna regrets being too much occupied with the worldly matters, he is also aware that deep within, through all his actions and senses, he is still connected with the thoughts of Shiva. He says,

My words are filled with the nectar of your name.
My eyes are filled with your beautiful figure,
My ears are filled with your glorious fame
And mind is full of your remembrance
O Lord Koodala Sangama, me always be (e) in your Lotus feet.

Thus with the help of all the five senses, hints Basavanna, he will be ever merged in the thoughts of Shiva in blissful ecstasy.

In another Vachana he wishes to be crippled, blind and deaf to worldly matters that he could always be engaged in thinking of Shiva. So he prays.

Make me O Father, cripple so that I may not go hither and thither
Make me, O Father, blind so that I may not see any other worldly matter
Make me, O Father, deaf so that I may not hear any other thing
Keep me in such a state that I may not desire anything other than the holy feet of your Sharanas, O Lord Koodala Sangama.

In one of the moving Vachanas, Basavanna presents a magnificent picture of a temple, eternal and imperishable:

The haves build temple of Shiva
But what can I do: a poor man?
My legs are pillars, my body a temple
And my head is its golden dome!
O Lord Koodala Sangama
Just listen, please!
The static is destroyed
And the dynamic is indestructible.

Of course even the body of a saint has an end but the indwelling soul, the conscious principle within, is immortal. As long as the light of consciousness is present in the form of life-principle, human body itself is a beautiful and wonderful temple that even a poor man can be proud of.

The body mind and soul all are abodes of God Shiva. It is this attitude of a Bhakta that makes him to experience the sense of fulfillment.

Conclusion

True Bhakti, as expressed in all the Vachanas of Shiva Sharanas, should be fortified with purity of mind, heart and body, with stainless, unimpeachable character, the character formed out of Love for God, and compassion for all living beings.

Bhakti is not only undiminishing love for God Shiva but also ever ready, and voluntary service to fellow beings, seeing God Shiva in them.

All the Shiva Sharanas and Basaveswara, their leader, practised what they preached. Their lives, rooted in the mystic consciousness express, through the Vachanas Bhakti in all its splendour. Imbued with deep reverence and love for Shiva Sharanas for their greatness, Basavanna speaks of it in one of his Vachanas:

Can we say the vast sea is great? But it forms only a part of the earth!
Can we then consider the earth, great? But it is placed on the effulgent gem on the hood of Nagendra, the divine serpent.
Can we then consider Nagendra, great? But Parvati the Consort of Siva the supreme wears Nagendra as a ring on her last finger!
Then can we call Parvati great? She is just a better half of Parameswara;
Can we then say that Parameswara as Great?
But he is seated on the tip of our Lord Koodala Sangama’s Sharana’s mind.

Thus we see how the stream of Bhakti flows through the Vachanas of Shiva Sharanas in abundance. ‘Bhakti’, as Swami Vivekananda rightly said, ‘is a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing and ending in love.’ This love, unconditional and ever-present, is the core of Bhakti and this is what Vachanas lay before us in their timeless wisdom.
Bhakti in Shakta Tradition

SWAMI SWAHANANDA

‘Brahman and Shakti are identical. Him who you call Brahman, I call Shakti,’ said Sri Ramakrishna. But this conception of the Mother as the Supreme Reality took a long time to develop fully, though here and there some Sadhakas or Rishis might have found out the clues or inklings, as is evident from the Rigvedic Devi-sukta, ‘I am the empress of the whole universe’. In fact all the later thoughts in the Puranas and the Tantras have been traced back to the Vedas which are the sources of knowledge.

About the origin of Mother Worship, Swami Vivekananda says (CW, 8:252):

Mother worship is a distinct philosophy in itself. Power is the first of our ideas. It infringes upon man at every step. Power felt within, is the Soul, without, nature. And the battle between the two makes human life. All that we know or feel is but the resultant of these two forces. Man saw that the sun shines on the good and the evil alike. Here was a new idea of God as the Universal Power behind all. The Mother-idea was born.

The Historical Development of the Mother Idea

This conception of the Mother developed through the process of history. The Rigvedic Ganas or the fertility goddesses or the Devapatinis like Dhishana, Sarasvati, Hotra, Bharati, Indrani represent the earliest conceptions of Shakti. The goddesses of plenty are gradually identified with Lakshmi, the goddesses of the river with Sarasvati and the Gna goddesses merge in Vak. The creative functions of Sarasvati in the Brahman as under a motherly conception is the precursor of the later Shakti-tradition. The Vak-Shakti fully developed in the Shvetasvatara Upanishad which is considered to be the main source of the personalistic conceptions. This view of the relation of Shakti to Shaktiman, Ishvara, was adopted by the later schools of philosophy.

The Kashmir School of Shaivism developed the idea of Shakti. The great Adyanatha supplied the definition of Shakti as the power by which Shiva externalises His consciousness as the object of His self-enjoyment. The Vira-shaiva idea of Shakti was much influenced by the Kashmir School and it added the idea of Mahamaya.

Among the orthodox schools, Mimamsa discusses Shakti only in connection with the idea of Adrishta, the idea of causality, and in connection with the capability of words to show class-idea. Samkhya admits Shaktiin connection with Prakriti as at best the source of matter, gross and subtle. Shankara in Advaita Vedanta admits Shakti as a determinative category in the cause and also in connection with the description of Maya. These orthodox schools do not view Shakti as the ‘Supreme Divine Power’ belonging to God as developed by the Shaiva-schools. But the idea of Shakti
as the Mother who creates, sustains and destroys and bestows grace as well, was developed by the Tantrika worshippers called the Shaktas.

**The Shaktas**

The Shaktas are so-called because they are the worshippers of Shakti. Their rule of conduct is called Shaktadharma, their doctrine, Shaktivada or Shakti Darshana, even though Shakti had important roles in the Tantras of the Shaivas, the Vaishnavas and the Buddhists. According to the Shaktas, Shiva is the unchanging Consciousness and Shakti is Its changing Power appearing as mind and matter. Shiva-Shakti is therefore Consciousness and Its power. The former is God as He is, and the latter is God as He appears to us. This then is the doctrine of the dual aspects of Brahman acting through its threefold powers of will, knowledge and action. In the static, transcendent aspect (Shiva) the one Brahman does not change and in the kinetic, immanent aspect (Shakti), it does. There is thus changelessness in change.

In creation a change is produced without change in the producer. The Shakti ‘goes forth’, in a series of emanations or transformations which are known in the Shaiva and Shakra Tantras as the 36 Tattvas as against the 24 Tattvas of Samkhya.

All possible conceptions have been identified with the Devi, Who is the Mother Supreme. Thus She is the great Shakti and is the ordainer of the Universe. *Kubjika Tantra* says, ‘Not Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra create, maintain and destroy, but Brahmi, Vaishnavi, Rudrani. Their husbands are but as dead bodies.’ Shankara writes in *Saundarya Lahari* (sloka 1), ‘If Shiva is in union with Shakti, He becomes the Lord of the Universe; if not He cannot even move.’ This is quite in keeping with the Rigvedic idea, ‘I am the empress of the whole universe.’

She is all-pervading, says the *Chandi*. Devi shows grace to Rama and Arjuna as recorded in the two great epics.

She is not simply a goddess with names, but is the very essence of all the gods, as shown in the creation of Chandika in the *Chandi*.

**Mother’s Forms**

Mother has two sets of forms—a set of gentle forms in which She is surpassingly beautiful and another set of terrible forms in which She is surpassingly fearful. A Sadhaka must be able to see Her in both. This is a very peculiar conception of the Tantra. Swami Vivekananda wanted to introduce this worship of the Terrible. Kali is the symbol of the
Terrible who requires sacrifices. She is called the lover of sacrifices, of blood (Balipriya, Rudhirapriya). We must give our blood to satisfy Her. This is nothing but complete self-surrender at the feet of the Mother, which is variously known as the Death of the Old Man or Manonasah or Chittavritti-Nirodhah. This is true in our everyday life. That man is successful who can sacrifice the attraction of the moment for an ideal.

Mother is Trigunamayi as well as Gunatita. The different conceptions vary according to the preponderance of the Gunas. Thus Kali is Kaivalya-dayini, Tara is Sattvagunatmika, Tattva-dayini. Shodasi, Bhuvanesvari, Chhinnamasta are Rajopradhana Sattvagunatmika, the givers of Gaunamukti and Svaarga. Dhumavati, Kamala are Tamopradhana whose action is sought in magical Shatkarma. Mother is the meeting ground of all the opposites. Nay, She Herself is all the contradictory things, both good and bad.

She is Maya, for of Her the Maya which produces the Samsara is. As lord of Maya She is Mahamaya. As Maya She binds, as Mahamaya She liberates when pleased. As Avidya Shakti, she puts snares; as Vidya Shakti, She frees from snares. She is Prakriti, and as existing before creation She is the Adya (Primordial) Shakti. She is the Vachaka-Shakti the manifestation of Chit in Prakriti, and the Vachya-Shakti or Chit itself.

‘Mother is in all manifestations’, says the Svetasvatara Upanishad. But She is more manifested in the female forms. She is famous as Ten Mahavidyas and stays in fifty-one holy places in different forms. Like Sri Krishna in the Gita, She also promises to incarnate when vice prevails. Thus in the Chandi she says: ‘Whenever there is trouble of this kind caused by the demons, I shall incarnate myself and destroy the enemies.’ The whole conception of Navashahti (nine manifestations of the Goddess) is based on this idea of incarnation.

Mainly, Mother has three forms viz.: (1)’Para’ which none knows, says Vishnu Yamala; (2) Sukshma (subtle) form which consists of Mantra; (3) Sthula (gross) form which She takes up for the convenience of the devotee’s meditation.

There are various conceptions of the Devi, but to the devotees She is popular as the Mother with infinite grace. Thus Bhairavi Stotra (SI.5.) says that some think of Her as Shthula, some as Sukshma, some as the guardian of speech, some as the cause of the Universe, but the devotee considers Her as the ocean of infinite grace. And the Mother with great grace is worshipped with various rituals which are given by the Tantra Sastras . . .

In Shakta Upasana, the Karma is the ritualistic expression of the teaching of Jnana-kanda and is calculated to lead to it. There is nothing in it which contradicts Brahmajnana. This doctrine became very popular in Bengal, and in fact most of the upper class people of Bengal are Shaktas. Advaitavada, of course, is a little adapted according to the Shakta definition. Thus to a Shakta, Soham is actually Saaham.

The Shaktas claim the highest place for their method of Sadhana in the Kaliyuga. According to the Kularnava Tantra, religious practices are to be done according to Shruti in Kritayuga, Smriti in Treta, Purana in Dwapara and Agama in Kali. Nigama Kalpataru says, ‘As among castes the Brahmanas are foremost, so amongst Sadhakas are the Shaktas.’ Niruttara Tantra says that salvation does not come without the knowledge of Shakti. Amongst the Shaktas again the foremost are said to be the worshippers of the Kali Mantra.
Shaktas have four Sampradayas: Kerala, Kashmira, Gauda and Vilasa. Each Sampradaya has separate systems—Shuddha, Gupta and Ugra—according to the preponderance of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sadhakas vary according to moods which are mainly three. Divya, Vira and Pasu. As a result there are different Acharas or rituals which are mainly seven, viz.: Vaidika, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Dakshina, Vama, Siddhanta and Kaula. These are the successive stages in the ascending order. In Siddhanta stage the Sadhaka has realisation, but he is fully established in that in the Kaula stage, which is the highest stage as the Kularnava (II. 8) says, ‘There is none higher than a Kaula.’ A Kaula is verily Shiva. In the Nitya Tantra the description that is given of a Kaula is exactly similar to that of Brahmajnani. This Kaulachara is the essence of the Vedas and Agamas and is called the fifth Ashrama by the Shaktas. To a Kaula all action is the play or Lila of Shiva-Shakti. In this realization nothing remains secular; everything is spiritual and the expression of the Mother.

Symbology and Rituals

Symbols are an essential necessity for all religions. This is especially true of the Tantras. In fact the major portions of the Tantra books are busy in giving the details of Sadhana through symbols. Symbols are of different kinds including the images and the diagrams called the Yantras. But it must be remembered that symbols are not merely symbols; to a sadhaka they are the forms of the Mother Herself.

For imparting the highest conceptions Tantra has formulated a methodical system of worship which is the synthesis of Pratikopasana and Yoga method, resting on Vedantic basis. ‘It is customary nowadays to decry external worship, but those who do so presume too much,’ rightly observes Sir John Woodroffe, the great authority on Tantra. Most people require these external helps to go to finer aspects. Tantra admits that Dhyana is better than external worship, but we must proceed step by step. Thus Shaktirahasya summarises the stages: ‘A mortal who worships by ceremonies, by images, by mind, by identification, by knowing the Self, attains Kaivalya.’

Puja is based on the psychological fact that repeated suggestion to the mind with proper physical movements affects the mind profoundly and slowly purifies it which is the aim of all Sadhana. Puja has three parts: (1) Stopping the wastage of energy by different external processes (2) Meditation on the
Mother, (3) Sacrifice of oneself to the Mother. Thus the Sadhaka forgets his separate ego and gets merged in the Mother.

No discussion is complete without an estimate of the social influence and effect of the principle and its practice. In Bengal it produced a unique literature on Mother. Ramprasad, Kamalakanta and a good many Sadhakas composed soul-enchanting songs which are famous as ‘Shakta-padavalis’. Mother is viewed not only as mother but as daughter also as in the Agamani songs which are very human and very appealing.

The glorious feature of the Shakta doctrine is the honour it pays to women. ‘Women are gods, women are vital breaths’ says the Sarvollasa Tantra, ‘You are the women, you are the men,’ says the Chandi. Tantra allows women to be Gurus, which is denied by others and asks all its followers to bow to women without distinction as Mother. This worship of women as the Devi Herself had a tremendous social effect.

**Shakta Dharma—And Honouring the Women**

In the West the status of women was raised after the introduction of the Christian worship of Mary the Mother. But the predominant note is worship of youth and beauty. India through the ages established the worship of the Mother in the family and in the society, which evidently is the result of the worship of God as the Mother. The new world order is coming. The barriers of country and culture and race are slowly being obliterated. Swami Vivekananda believed that the contact of the Eastern Motherhood and the Western Wifehood will be harmoniously developed to the advantage of both. Tantra accepts both the Motherhood and the Wifehood of women, which must be the total attitude of a balanced culture.

Another important feature of Tantra is its sympathy for all. There may be classes and castes in social relation, but there is no such thing in religious pursuits. It is open to all.

With the Mother, as mother to all, how can there be difference among Her children? So it is found that though Tantra could not bring complete equality in society, it succeeded in bringing equality in religious relations.

‘No nation can rise without the worship of Shakti’, Swamiji used to say. Saints like Sri Ramprasad and Sri Ramakrishna, heroes like Shivaji and Guru Govinda Singh, poets and writers like Bankimchandra and Bharati and saint-philosophers like Sri Shankara and Swami Vivekananda were all worshippers of Shakti. Our country is Matrubhumi [mother-land]; we worship her with the mantra, Vande Mataram. The whole atmosphere is saturated with this Mother-idea. And this is the contribution of the Tantrikas, the Mother-worshippers of our Mother country.

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Shri Ramakrishna used to say that pure knowledge and pure Bhakti are one and the same. According to the doctrine of Bhakti, God is held to be ‘All-love’. One cannot even say, ‘I love Him’, for the reason that He is All-love. There is no love outside of Himself; the love that is in the heart with which you love Him is even He Himself. In a similar way, whatever attractions or inclinations one feels drawn by, are all He Himself.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 5-336
When Bhakti enters Life . . .

When Bhakti enters Food,
    Food becomes Prasad,
When Bhakti enters Hunger,
    Hunger becomes a Fast
When Bhakti enters Water,
    Water becomes Charanamrita (or Tirtha),
When Bhakti enters Travel,
    Travel becomes a Pilgrimage,
When Bhakti enters Music,
    Music becomes Kirtan,
When Bhakti enters Actions,
    Actions becomes Seva,
And
When Bhakti enters a Man,
    Man becomes a Bhakta.
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

‘**Bhakti is the one essential thing.**’

— Sri Ramakrishna
Satchidananda is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of bhakti, one sees forms of God in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for the Bhaktas, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before. Water above and water below, everywhere nothing but water. . . But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn’t melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz. —Sri Ramakrishna
One obtains love of God by constantly chanting His name and singing His glories. . . God is unknown to the mind attached to worldly objects . . . Therefore it is necessary to seek the company of holy men, practise prayer, and listen to the instruction of the guru. These purify the mind. Then one sees God. Dirt can be removed from water by a purifying agent. Then one sees one’s reflection in it. One cannot see one’s face in a mirror if the mirror is covered with dirt. After the purification of the heart one obtains divine love. Then one sees God, through His grace.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

Is it possible to understand God’s action and His motive? He creates, He preserves, and He destroys. Can we ever understand why He destroys? I say to the Divine Mother: ‘O Mother, I do not need to understand. Please give me love for Thy Lotus Feet.’ The aim of human life is to attain Bhakti. As for other things, the Mother knows best. I have come to the garden to eat mangoes. What is the use of my calculating the number of trees, branches, and leaves? I only eat the mangoes; I don’t need to know the number of trees and leaves . . . God cannot be realized without purity of heart. One receives the grace of God by subduing the passions—lust, anger, and greed. Then one sees God. —Sri Ramakrishna
In the Kaliyuga the best way is Bhaktiyoga, the path of devotion—singing the praises of the Lord, and prayer.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

One kind of Bhakti has a motive behind it. Again, there is a motiveless love, pure devotion, a love of God that seeks no return... In this love there is no desire; it is nothing but pure love of the Lotus Feet of God.

—Sri Ramakrishna
You may indulge in thousands of reasonings, but still the ‘I’ comes back. You may cut the peepal-tree to the very root today, but you will notice a sprout springing up tomorrow. Therefore if the ‘I’ must remain, let the rascal remain as the ‘servant’. As long as you live, you should say, ‘O God, Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant.’ The ‘I’ that feels, ‘I am the servant of God, I am His devotee’ does not injure one. Sweet things cause acidity of the stomach, no doubt, but sugar candy is an exception.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

One cannot see God if one has even the slightest trace of worldliness. Match-sticks, if damp, won’t strike fire though you rub a thousand of them against the match-box. You only waste a heap of sticks. The mind soaked in worldliness is such a damp match-stick . . . One cannot see God without purity of heart.

—Sri Ramakrishna
A man can see God if he unites in himself the force of these three attractions: the attraction of worldly possessions for the worldly man, the husband’s attraction for the chaste wife, and the child’s attraction for its mother. If you can unite these three forms of love and give it all to God, then you can see Him at once.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

Bhakti is the one essential thing. To be sure, God exists in all beings. Who, then, is a devotee? He whose mind dwells on God. But this is not possible as long as one has egotism and vanity. The water of God’s grace cannot collect on the high mound of egotism.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Dive deep, O mind, dive deep in the Ocean of God’s Beauty;
If you descend to the uttermost depths,
There you will find the gem of Love.

Go seek, O mind, go seek Vrindavan in your heart,
Where with His loving devotees
Sri Krishna sports eternally.

Light up, O mind, light up true wisdom’s shining lamp,
And let it burn with steady flame
Unceasingly within your heart.

Who is it that strees your boat across the solid earth?
It is your guru, says Kubir;
Meditate on his holy feet.  —Sri Ramakrishna
To love God is the essence of the whole thing. Bhakti alone is the essence. Narada said to Rama, ‘May I always have pure love for Your Lotus Feet; and may I not be deluded by Your world-bewitching maya!’ Rama said to him, ‘Ask for some other boon.’ ‘No,’ said Narada, ‘I don’t want anything else. May I have love for Your Lotus Feet. This is my only prayer.’

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

What is Bhaktiyoga? It is to keep the mind on God by chanting His name and glories... Bhakti, love of God, is the essence of all spiritual discipline. Through love one acquires renunciation and discrimination naturally.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Gems of Bhakti from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

A devotee observes many rites because of the injunctions of the scriptures. Such devotion is called Vaidhi-bhakti. But there is a higher form of devotion known as Raga-bhakti, which springs from yearning and love for God. When the devotee develops that love, he no longer needs to perform prescribed rites.

—Sri Ramakrishna
[It is not that] the lover of God will reach one goal and the philosopher and worker another. It means that if a person seeks the Knowledge of Brahman he can attain It by following the path of bhakti, too. God, who loves His devotee, can give him the Knowledge of Brahman if He so desires.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Who can ever know God through reasoning? I want love of God. What do I care about knowing His infinite glories? . . . One jar of water is enough to quench my thirst. I don’t need to know the amount of water there is on earth.

—Sri Ramakrishna
Bhakti in Varkari Tradition

The Path Royale for the Masses

ARPANA GHOSH

Pandharpur Beckons

Pandharpur, also called Pandhari, at the holy river Chandrabhaga in the Indian state of Maharashtra, has come to represent the long tradition of Maharashtrian culture, and each Maharashtrian has a special heart-connection to this place. That is because Pandharpur is the goal, the innermost core, of its 700 year old Bhakti tradition with thousands of devotional songs—the abhangas—which are loved, sung and memorized by imnumerable people even now.

And the very centre of Pandharpur is the Vitthal temple, where Krishna is worshipped in a unique, black stone idol, said to be self-manifested, standing with joint feet on a brick and both hands at the hip. This Lord Vitthala, also called Vithoba and Panduranga, was the inspiration of many great devotees ('the Sants') whose lives and songs are forever etched in the psyche of the Maharashtrian people.

Pandharpur is an entirely unique place—in Pandharpur the Bhajan overwhelms you! People sing Bhajans all the time and everywhere! You hear the clanking of tal (brass-cymbals) and the high-drawn wistful tunes of the abhangs from the brittle, old-fashioned buildings, from the Maths (ashrams), in the riverbed, in the temple—and more so on Ekadashis, the holy fasting days of the Vaishnavas, when people flood Pandharpur and hold ‘Jagarans’(night-watches), singing all night through!

And what strikes next in Pandharpur is the happiness and carefreeness, the simplicity of Vitthal’s Bhaktas in their washed out white dhotars, kurtas and tupis, their innocent guilelessness and lack of ego—in Pandharpur people fall constantly at each other’s feet!!

The Vitthal Sampraday is an exclusive Bhajan Sampraday—the tradition of singing devotional songs. Bhajan takes here the place of puja and meditation. The Bhaktas meet Vitthal in the Bhajan knowing that God’s name and God’s form are one. The beauty of it is that the path is so easy and open to everybody. There is no single other requirement than overwhelming love!

Sant Namdev says: ‘with a garland of love I won Gopala!’—and Sri Ramakrishna stated likewise that everything could be achieved through bhakti alone!

The Vitthal-bhakti tradition is called the ‘Varkari Sampraday’, and the name ‘Varkari’ is derived from the great pilgrimages on foot,

Arpana Ghosh, a German, married to a Bengali Bharata Natyam dancer, is settled in Chennai since 25 years. She has embraced Vitthal Bhakti and is Vitthal’s German Varkari.
called ‘Varis’, starting from various places in Maharashtra and converging in Pandharpur on specific Ekadashi days (the 11th day of the waxing moon)—attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. Among them the Ashadi Vāri (June/July) and the Kartiki (November) are the most important. Those who pledge to go every year on at least one of these pilgrimages, are called ‘Varkaris’—those who do (kari) a regular pilgrimage (vari).

There are numerous other festivals celebrated throughout the year in Pandharpur—‘a place where there’s always Diwali!’ It’s an entirely living tradition, and as Sant Tukaram describes in an abhang, just so it can be experienced even now:

There’s playing, singing and dancing—a permanent festival! All bad qualities like krodha (anger) and abhiman (pride) fade in the air! The Vaishnavas are adorned with Tulsi malas and Gopichandan, Tal is clanking, the Mridangam drums, flags are waved—an incomparable feast of joy where all get washed away in this wave of love! All are welcome—men, women, dull-witted, yogis, pundits, sinners ... there is no ‘me’ and ‘you’, no caste or gender-differences, everybody’s heart becomes as soft as butter, repeating the Name of the Lord.

And Vitthal leaves Vaikunth, he leaves his temple and the elaborate rituals to dance with his Bhaktas in the river sand. Therefore Pandharpur is called ‘Bhu-vaikunth’—Vaikuntha, heaven, on earth!

**Sri Krishna Comes to Pandharpur**

Yet Vitthal has not always been there! Many centuries before, there lived this legendary Bhakta Pundalik in Pandharpur, who served his parents in such an outstanding manner that Krishna on his way from Dwarka stopped to take a look. Fully absorbed in his filial devotion, Pundalik couldn’t welcome Krishna but instead threw him a brick to stand on and wait. This gesture amused and pleased Krishna so much that he granted Pundalik the wish to remain forever in Pandharpur—
and there Vitthal still stands waiting for his Bhaktas!

Supposedly the ‘All-pervader’ manifested himself from the river sand into a black stone image. So we owe it to Pundalik that Vitthal remains in Pandharpur. It is the rule for anyone visiting Pandharpur to first take bath in the Chandrabhaga, then have darshan of Pundalik in his Samadhi shrine in the river bed and then meet Vitthal in his temple. The shouts of ‘Pundalika Varade Hari Vitthala’, ‘Victory to Hari Vitthal, the benefactor of Pundalik ever so often rent the air.

The Darling of the Heart

Vitthal is worshipped in Pandharpur with his consort Rukmini (who is called ‘Rakhumai’ in Maharashtra). There are many elaborate pujas conducted throughout the day, right from the early morning Kakada-arati with a daily abhishekham until the Shayan-arati at midnight. Vitthal is also called ‘Pandhariray’—the king of Pandhari, and that’s how he appears! Elegantly dressed in various colours, with a crown and makarakundal (fishshaped earrings), a big peepal leaf shaped namam on his forehead, tulsi-and vaijayantimalas (yellow flower garlands) around his neck, his hands majestically resting on his hips—he is quite the stealer of hearts!

And most important: his ‘samacharan’—his joined feet on the brick!

Vitthal’s main characteristic is his overwhelming love for his devotees, and in Pandharpur devotees can directly touch Vitthal! The idea that God could become contaminated and that only ritually cleansed priests could be near him, does not crop up here. Vitthal looks out for his devotees’ inner yearning and love, and every pilgrim will line up for this ‘padasparshdarshan’ and touch the head on his lotus feet (charan or pada). Of course one should not stop there—Vitthal’s beautiful form has to be drawn into the heart in a continuous embrace! People see in Vitthal their father and mother or their friend (sakha Panduranga). A child knows nothing but its mother, depending on her for its every need— in this mood the Bhaktas take refuge in Vitthal.

The Sants—the Pillars of Varkari Tradition

Between 13th and 17th centuries, many wonderful devotees of Vitthal appeared in Maharashtra. They were poet saints and were themselves Varkaris. All of them had a singular devotion to Vitthal and wrote an immense treasure of devotional songs—the ‘Abhangs’ (unbroken). Their teachings contained in these abhangs are the very core of this tradition. They were not pundits, but
commoners whose immense faith in Vitthala and unbounded love for him elevated them.

The Sants came from different castes and social backgrounds and challenged at a very deep level the social inequities and priestly ritualism. They preached and composed in the vernacular language Marathi, which even the most simple, uneducated (including women) could understand. Thus they brought the masses in direct contact with God—no priestly mediator was needed, no Sanskrit, no mantras, no rituals! God could be attained easily by repeating his name with longing and love!

In the 13th century there appeared the fascinating young Jnaneshvar, the son of a socially ostracised brahmin, and his three siblings Nivritti, Sopan and Muktabai, who suffered humiliation by society until their high spiritual level was recognized. Though Jnaneshvar was well versed in Sanskrit, he wrote only in Marathi in order to enlighten the uneducated masses. At the tender age of 16 he composed the most outstanding book in Marathi literature, Jnaneshvari, a Marathi translation of the Bhagavad Gita in his own words. This book is most venerable to the Varkaris!

Endearingly known as ‘Mavuli’—‘Mother’, Sant Jnaneshvar is one of the most beloved Sants. Worshipped as an avatar of Mahavishnu and credited with laying the foundation of the Varkari Sampradaya, he was a rare combination of Yogi, Jnani and Premabhakta. He asked Vitthal for jivan-samadhi at the age of 22 and had himself entombed alive in a state of meditation. His Samadhi sohala (festival) is celebrated every year in December in Alandi (near Pune). His 28 verses extolling the greatness of God’s name—‘the Haripath’, are faithfully recited by the Varkaris every day in temples and in their homes.

There was Sant Namdev, a tailor, who felt himself in the mood of a child, depending for every single need on Vitthall. He wrote much heart wrenching abhangs and his yearning was such that he felt he could not survive a second without feeling Vitthall’s presence. If darshan was denied, he would threaten to dash out his brain on Vitthall’s feet. Sri Ramakrishna also used to emphasize: ‘You should force your demands on God—he’s your mother and father, your very own!’

In his later age he spread the Vitthall bhakti in the Punjab, and 61 of his abhangs are integrated in the Guru Granth Sahib. Sant Janabai was a maidservant in Namdev’s household, and people are in awe at her very intimate relation with Vitthall. It seems he helped her in every of her household chores—whether it was grinding grains, fetching water, making cow dung cakes, etc. She also composed wonderful abhangs and it is believed that Vitthall himself wrote them down for her since she was unlettered.

There was Chokhamela, a disciple of Namdev, an untouchable, who was not allowed in the temple. Seeing his Bhakti, Vitthal came to his house and even shared his frugal meal. Another Sant, Savata Mali the gardener, lived not far away from Pandharpur and saw Vitthall pervading the whole creation in each leaf and vegetable. In Ter, near Solapur, there lived Gora Kumbha, the potter whose life story is amongst the most touching. Taking Vitthal’s name in ecstasy while preparing clay, he trampled his own child which accidentally strayed into the mud. It is believed that Vitthall later revived the child and also restored Gora’s hands which he had chopped off himself.

There was Narahari Sonar the goldsmith, who lived in Pandharpur just in front of the temple but refused to see Vitthall, being a staunch devotee of Shiva. Vitthall played
his Lila and manifested himself as Shiva. In fact there is a Shivalingam on top of Vitthal’s head when we remove his crown. Vitthal unites all faiths and in his abhangs it is stated so many times: Harihara bheda nahi! There is no difference between Shiva and Vishnu (Hari and Hara)!

There is Kanhopatra, the dancing-girl, who left everything and took sole refuge in Vitthal. She gave up her body in the Pandharpur temple and a miraculous tree sprang up from the stone wall—unfed by water. The tree of Kanhopatra is still there in the temple, venerated by pilgrims.

Sant Ekanath appeared in the 16th century in Paithan near Aurangabad. Known for his humbleness and great guru bhakti, he was the ideal householder. He made his whole life a living example of what he taught—to remain in one’s own family and yet to reach God. His literary contributions are many. It is believed that Vitthal stayed 12 years incognito in his house as the Brahmin servant Srikandya—just to cherish the company of his Bhakta!

The crest-jewel of the Varkari Sampraday is Sant Tukaram (17th century), a simple grocer from Dehu village (near Pune), who struggled a lot to come even with his poverty and worldly affairs and his fervent longing for God. But he made Vitthal one-pointedly the centre of his whole being, that eventually even those who had criticized and persecuted him, came to acknowledge his spiritual greatness. Those days it was forbidden to pronounce the message of the holy Vedas in a vernacular language. He was charged with blasphemy and forced to drown his whole life’s bhakti outpourings, his abhangs, in the Indrayani river. Miraculously they re-emerged dry and intact after 13 days! This was a symbol of revival of Marathi literature. He is the common people’s poet and over the past 300 years his devotional influence has been deeply felt by the local people. His 4500 abhangs have become part of Maharashthra’s public memory, and they are sung in every village and home.

**Meeting with Vitthala**

All these exceptional Bhaktas had made Vitthal their very life’s breath and they embraced his form every moment in their heart, their each and every step was a ‘Vari’ (pilgrimage) towards Vitthal, towards Pandharpur. The stress here is on ‘every moment’ (kshana kshana) and it is this yearning which they picture in their abhangs with the frequent expression: ‘Looking out for you on the road day and night, Vitthal! When will you meet me?’

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘Nothing whatsoever in spiritual life can be achieved without yearning! There has to be a perpetual restlessness of the mind for God’s darshan! This longing (vyakulata) is the only prerequisite to meet God.’

More than seeing (darshan), the abhangs speak of a ‘meeting (bheti) with Vitthal’; and this ‘meeting’ has almost a physical touch to it
and is described in the most intimate terms like ‘embrace’, ‘blissful togetherness’, endearing whispers, tears, etc. The Bhaktas meet Vitthal in the Bhajan, knowing that God’s name and God’s form are one.

The Sants in the Varkari tradition laid out the path step by step in their abhangs—repeat his name all the time and you will see him everywhere—everything will become Hari! Bad qualities will fly off and good qualities like compassion, forgiveness, and love will enter you automatically—you don’t even have to strive for them! Sing His name and all worries will leave you! Once you have crossed over the duality of ‘me and you’, you will see everything in the form of God! His name is all in all!

The Sants admonish again and again not to get entangled in ‘useless efforts’ like performing laborious rituals, difficult yogic practises, mantra, tantra... these are of little help without the name and love for God! Further they warn us that studying the Vedas would lead to pride, delving into the endless ocean of ‘puranic’ lore would confuse the mind, and for studying the Shastras a lifetime would not be enough! And did not Sri Ramakrishna likewise sing ever so often: ‘what need is there of penance if God is worshipped with love? What is the use of penance if God is not worshipped with love?’

Varkari Sampraday

Derived from the great pilgrimages on foot, called ‘Varis’, the Vitthal bhakti tradition is called Varkari Sampraday. There are many Vitthal Bhaktas who come for darshan to Pandharpur, but Varkaris are only those who pledge to go yearly at least on one of the ‘varis’ (pilgrimages). The ‘Varis’ are the most intrinsic part of Vitthal Bhakti where the equality of all beings is celebrated on the sacred walk to Pandharpur.

Vitthal-bhakti is not a world-renouncing path—all Varkaris are householders, they practise their bhakti within their work and family life. One hardly comes across sadhus and yogis in saffron. Sri Ramakrishna confirmed so many times that the very natural, comfortable and easy relation with God was that of a child towards his mother and that to see God as a lover was difficult and risky. He also recommended wearing the white garb of a householder—if the outer saffron cloth does not correspond to the inner thoughts!

Sri Ramakrishna answered the much debated question whether God is Saguna or Nirguna (with or without form and qualities) in much the same way the Sants do. The Varkari Sampraday has a Saguna approach. They would reject Mukti and Brahmajnana—they want only Premasukha [the bliss of love]! They want to see Vitthal and draw him into their heart. In many abhangs the Sants exclaim: ‘I have seen him, I have seen him! The one who pervades the universe is standing here on a brick!’ Even Sant Jnaneshwar, who was a Jnani, recommended meditation on Vitthal with form: ‘I thought Him to be formless, there I found that He also has a form—Saguna and Nirguna are one Govinda!’ much in the same manner that Sri Ramakrishna ascertained to have seen his Divine Mother.

The Varkari Sampraday is compared to a royal road, where people walk at ease and the stress is on joy! Anybody is welcome; anybody can become a Varkari who takes Vitthal as his Ishta Devata and who pledges to go on the annual Varis. A Varkari has to be a vegetarian and fast on the two monthly Ekadashis. He has to lead a moral life, imbibing the good qualities of the Sants and—as an outer sign—accept the Tulismala from one of the Varkari-gurus to wear on the neck. Much stress is laid on simplicity and Bhajan.
Sacred Journeys—Varis

The most outstanding display of the Varkaris’ devotion to Vitthal are the four big annual pilgrimages on foot for the past 700 years—the Varis, culminating in Pandharpur on particular Ekadashis (the 11th day of the waxing moon). Out of them the Ashadi-Vari (June/July) is the biggest and most important—from the Samadhi places of their Sants all over Maharashtra people leave, walking different routes, but all converging in Pandharpur for the Ekadashi.

Varkari is not an esoteric cult, but one that it is open to all. They are ordinary people, who live and work in the everyday world, who look forward and make themselves free to fulfil this beloved commitment to Vitthal every year—to join the Vari. It is a great unifying movement with people from different backgrounds and castes joyously walking together for at least 20 days, singing from morning to evening the songs of their Sants. Everything is done together; eating, sleeping, and singing Bhajans. The feeling of oneness, equality and brotherhood makes the ‘Vari’ hugely popular.

It is believed that the bygone Sants are still present in a spiritual way for the good of the community. People take their Sants along represented by their Padukas (their silver sandals) set in a beautifully decorated palanquin, ‘the Palkhi’, which is the centre of the many kilometre long procession. Varkaris enthusiastically carry saffron flags—the symbol of the Varkari Sampraday, some play the Pakhvaj strapped over their shoulders, the majority play tal (cymbals) and sing. All men are in white, women walk separately in colourful saris, some carrying on their heads Tulasi plants grown in a pot. Apart from singing of abhangs which goes on the whole day, the main chants are: ‘Jnaneshvara Mavuli Tukaram’, ‘Jai Jai Vithoba Rakhumai’ and ‘Rama Krishna Hari’.

Peculiar to the Varkaris and Pandharpur is the Gopalkala which is celebrated three days after the Ekadashis—on the full moon day! It is an imitation of Krishna’s picnics with the cowherd boys in Vrindavan. Some Gopas had brought many nice food items, the not so affluent ones, only frugal parcels. Krishna didn’t want to sadden anybody and so he mixed all up and distributed it equally. There will be a ‘Kala-kirtan’, the Varkaris bring puffed rice which is collected in a cloth, mixed and redistributed. In a heart-warming gesture all exchange the puffed rice or stuff it in each other’s mouth and then fall at each other’s feet—it’s the final culmination of the Vari and a symbol of total equality and oneness!
The Abhangs

We don’t have today all abhangs which Sant Namdev pledged to Vitthal, but there are more than 4000 in the Namdev Gatha and equally many in the Ekanath Gatha and Tukaram Gatha. Sant Jnaneshvar contributed about 900, the other Sants lesser. It mounts up easily to 15000 abhangs!

Most of the abhangs are intensely personal supplications to Vitthal, the majority of them are short—just 3-4 lines. From the thousands they have many hundred popular ones, which many sing by heart. Various Varkari-Maharajs have made a compilation of abhangs of all the Sants—the ‘Varkari Nityanema’ (daily routine of the Varkaris). Varkaris get up very early and sing abhangs for many hours every day. If they are too busy, they sing doing their household duties. Thus all drudgery of work gets sanctified.

The essence of all the abhangs is the mantra ‘Rama Krishna Hari’ or ‘Vitthala’ or any name of God close to your heart. The abhangs are transcendental offerings of the Sants conveying their deepest feelings. The language is so simple, that anybody can understand them. The knowledge others get by studying the Shastras, the Varkaris imbibe from the abhangs. Singing with full bhava and meaning can melt anybody’s heart—Vitthal’s as well as your own! Bhava takes the highest pedestal! It is just like speaking to Vitthal!

The abhangs have many topics, both instructive as well as heart-wrenching supplications. How they were sung centuries ago, we don’t know—there are no existing annotations. The traditional accompaniments are only Tal (cymbals) and Pakhvaj (drum). In the previous decades many abhangs were set to beautiful ragas by classical Hindustani singers, but the Varkaris have developed their very own style of singing which is very interactive. One will lead, the others repeat. Their dance consists of a few steps only, but people get very happy—it’s a festival of the holy name.

Conclusion

On a concluding note it is left to mention that the Varkaris have really struck an ideal balance integrating the precepts of their Sants and the bhajans in their daily lives. With much enthusiasm they visit Pandharpur as often as possible and every time they go on Vari they get recharged spiritually. They face the same problems and difficulties of life as anybody else, but they manage to stay detached. They know that the body has to be left behind sooner or later and that their only means is to cling to Vitthala. Many of them are villagers, not very educated, but they seem to have understood the essential thing in life!

With ever a smile on their face you can hear them utter great truths. Says Tuka: ‘Wisdom and knowledge are rolling at the feet of the simple, guileless Varkaris!’
Bhakti in the Tradition of Purandaradasa

HN MURALIDHARA

Purandaradasa, a Multifaceted Personality

The name of Purandaradasa (C.E.1480-1564) stands at the top of the Haridasa tradition of Karnataka. Primarily a spiritual seeker and a devotee of the Lord, Purandaradasa brought about significant changes in the fields of literature and music and became a source of inspiration for future composers. His was a special voice and he sang differently. He is even regarded as the 'father of Carnatic or South Indian tradition of Music'.

From the spiritual stand point, Purandaradasa gave literary expression to the tenets of Sri Madhvacharya (C.E.1238-1317), who wrote commentaries on the Prasthanatrayas (Gita, Upanishads and Brahma-sutras—three foundational scriptures of Hinduism) from dualistic philosophy. From the literary point of view, Purandaradasa explored the various possibilities of kirtanas or padas, a popular song form, in a way that he infused new life into them. His compositions have not only become a part and parcel of popular devotional culture of Karnataka, but have also transcended the language barriers to reach the other states as well.

Since no authentic material is available regarding his earlier life, it has become inevitable to depend on prevalent legends to reconstruct his life.

His earlier name was Srinivasa Nayaka. Though a very rich man, he was a miser to the core. His wife was a sincere devotee of God. It is said that Lord Narayana wanted to test Srinivasa Nayaka and came to him in the guise of a poor Brahmin, seeking financial

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Dr.H.N. Muralidhara from Bangalore has many poems and writings in Kannada to his credit. His doctoral thesis focused on the compositions of Purandaradasa, the great saint-composer of fifteenth-century Karnataka. A long-standing devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, the author was the Visiting Professor, Vivekananda Chair, Department of Philosophical Studies, University of Mysore, Karnataka.
help for the sacred thread ceremony of his son. Srinivasa Nayaka refused to help him outright. Then the brahmin went to his wife and narrated his plight. Filled with compassion, his wife gave away her nose-ring. The brahmin took it to Srinivasa Nayaka and asked for some money in return. The sight of the familiar jewel shocked Nayaka. However, without asking about its source, he simply asked the brahmin to come the next day, and rushed home to verify. Fearing a hard punishment, the wife decided to end her life by consuming poison. Miraculously she finds her nose jewel in the cup of poison and hands it over to her husband. By further enquiry Srinivasa Nayaka comes to understand that it was the Lord Himself who had come to him. This brings about a great transformation in him. He relinquishes all his riches and comes to Vijayanagara with wife and children and takes dasadiksha (initiation into dasatva) with the name Purandaradasa bestowed by Vyasaraya (C.E.1447-1539).

He has emotionally acknowledged the part played by his wife in his transformation thus:

Whatever happened, happened for good. It paved the way for the service of the Lord. To hold the dandige [a kind of string instrument] in my hand I used to hang my head in shame. May the likes of my wife increase! She succeeded in making me hold the dandige.

The Philosophical Background

As mentioned earlier major aspects of Haridasas tradition is based on the philosophy of Sri Madhavacharya. Madhva divides all existence into two basic entities: one independent and the other, dependent. Ignorance causes these ‘dependent’ entities to assume themselves to be independent and this is the bondage.

At this stage, two types of veils cover the real nature of souls. One is Ishvracchadika, that which covers the real nature of God; and the other is Jivacchadika, that which covers the real nature of the soul. The way to come out of this bondage is to become a slave or dasa of the Lord. According to Haridasas it is by completely surrendering oneself at the feet of the Lord and eliminating the false ego, that one can get deliverance from ignorance or bondage.

One more distinctive feature of the Haridasas is that, more than anything else, they adhered firmly to the concept of Bimbopasana expounded by Madhvacharya. According to this, when the all-pervading Lord (Vishnu) resides in the heart of the souls as indwelling spirit, he is called Hari. This Hari...
is the *bimba* or the source of reflection. The individual soul is the ‘reflection’ (*pratibimba*) of this *bimba*. This *pratibimba* is always subordinate to and controlled by the *bimba*. The ignorant soul, by constantly contemplating on the concept of *bimba*, attains freedom. Even the term ‘*Haridasa*’ has its conceptual connotation in this context.¹

According to Haridasas, *dasatva* is not a mere nomenclature or designation. Nor is it a state of inaction or inertia. It is a very positive process by which an aspirant consciously loses his ego and surrenders himself completely to the Lord. Even in this process the devotee does not proclaim, ‘I will become a dasa of the Lord’. His contention is that if the Lord *accepts* his *dasatva* out of his infinite compassion, he may become one. Hence, this elimination of ego is not only an end, but is also a means. To quote a famous composition of Purandaradasa,

> Make me Thy slave, Venkataramana, Thou, the Lord of thousand names. Eliminate my bad qualities; Fix your shield of compassion to my soul; Grant me the service of Your feet; Bless me by placing Your lotus like hand on my head.

This *dasatva* of the Haridasas has other dimensions as well. At the spiritual level the *dasa* actually becomes a master of his own senses, while those who claim themselves to be masters are slaves to their desires. At the socio-political level the Haridasas may be considered as free souls who declined to be ruled by human superiors. They virtually challenged the kingship with their spiritual courage. ‘Whose fortune is greater—yours or ours? Come, let us decide by compare and contrast! Your treasure, gold and money, is always endowed with fear. But with our treasure, the name of the Lord, we are always fearless!’ Thus challenges Purandaradasa the kings of Vijayanagara empire who had held him in great esteem for his spiritual attainments. Completely surrendering oneself to the Lord and desiring nothing has been the main feature of the spiritual discipline of Haridasas. In fact, one cannot draw a line of distinction between what constitutes sadhana and what does not. The very existence, in all its totality, becomes spiritual practice.

An interesting feature of this sadhana is that the devotee not only takes on some responsibility on himself, but also fixes an equal amount of accountability on the Lord Himself! Both the devotee and the Lord enter into an ‘agreement’ to his effect. Says Purandaradasa:

> O Krishna, let there be an oath to Thee and an oath to me; and let us both have the oath of your devotees. If I do not utter Thy name, let the oath be on me; and if Thou dost not protect me, let it be on Thee. If I adore others leaving Thee, let the oath be on me; if Thou dost forsake my hands, let it be on Thee. If I deceive Thee by my mind, body and wealth, let the oath be on me; and if Thou dost not fix my mind in Thee let it be on Thee. If I associate with the wicked let it be on me; if Thou dost not make me free from this worldly affection, let it be on Thee. If I do not make friendship with the virtuous let it be on me; and if Thou dost not dissociate me from the wicked, let it be on Thee. If I do not resort to Thee let it be on me; if Thou dost not protect me, O Purandara Vitthala, let it be on Thee.”²

For Haridasas the practice of devotion is not something abstract and conceptual. It is that which brings in transformation in an aspirant and keeps him in divine communion every moment.

**Glory of the Divine Name**

In the socio-religious history of Karnataka the Haridasas’ was a distinct note. They saved religion from lifeless rituals and the
control of the so-called scholastic circles, and brought it closer to the common man. From this point of view their concept of devotion has a revolutionary dimension. They not only recreated various incidents from the Puranas like Bhagavata, they redefined them as well. They established the primacy of repeating the name of the Lord in all spiritual practices as an alternative to the Vedic ritualistic tradition.

On the one hand, this divine name of the Lord brought each and every one into the spiritual fold, and on the other it unified the community erasing the distinctions of caste, class and creed. Purandaradasa observes:

O mind, do not forget to repeat the name of Lord Hari. Why need one perform sacrifices and rituals? Why become a mendicant or a monk? Loudly call the name of the Lord who rests on Adisesha, praised by the sage Narada.

Ritualistic performances are external in nature whereas the repetition of the holy name is internal. According to Haridasas it is this ‘shift’ from the external to the internal which makes the spiritual practice more meaningful. In this type of sadhana there is no scope for ‘middlemen’. Ritualistic practices, though they include a few into the fold of religion, leave out the majority. On the contrary the ‘Nama-sadhana’ of Haridasas includes everyone and excludes none. It prescribes no preconditions for sadhana Purandaradasa. declares:

In this age of Kali if one chants the name of Hari, generations and generations will get liberated. Remember Him who is easy to obtain by easy devotion. . . . Find a means by which to remember Him whose glory has no ends.

Rituals demand specific time and place for their performance. One cannot observe them according one’s own conveniences. But this is not the case with the holy name. It bridges the gap between the so-called secular and the spiritual. It also accepts the day-to-day activities in their entirety and urges one to spiritualize every single moment. This view is aptly illustrated in this famous composition of Purandaradasa:

Why not chant ‘Krishna’ when by doing so all the difficulties will vanish?
When you have attained the human birth and are endowed with a tongue, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
While waking up from sleep why not chant ‘Krishna’?
Moving hither and thither in the household why not chant ‘Krishna’?
Losing control of your tongue while talking, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
While treading a path carrying burden, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
While you smear your body with perfume and enjoy the taste of betel leaves, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
When in the joyous company of the sweetheart, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
While conversing in a lighter vein, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
Considering this too a duty amidst many others, why not chant ‘Krishna’?
When you are caressing your child why not chant ‘Krishna’?
Seated on a luxurious bed why not chant Krishna?

This composition gives a long list of daily activities and ties them with Nama-sadhana. What Purandaradasa stresses is this internal attitude more than anything else. Purandaradasa dismisses all ritualistic practices that a a person engages himself in, as an act of mere show—if it goes without sincerity of purpose.

Devotion and Aesthetics Fused Together

The contribution of Purandaradasa to the Haridasa literature is immeasurable. He gave new dimensions to Devaranamas as a
form of literary expression. Devotion is fused with literary beauty in his compositions. By his mastery over the language and the medium, and by his unique technique, he has been a household name in Karnataka for centuries.

Thematically, the compositions of Purandaradasa are multidimensional. He composed many songs praising the glories of the Lord. In many others we find a dialogue between the devotee and the Lord, wherein the trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows of the inner life of an aspirant are vividly expressed. A majority of his compositions recreate the episodes from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata. Especially those dealing with Krishna, Yashoda and Gopis of Brindavan have varied dramatic narrations. Compositions with a social message are also many in number. Purandaradasa is known for his deft use of words. Here is an example to show how effortlessly he uses his similes.

When I meditate on you, O Lord, what harm can others do to me? What can they achieve by their jealousy when I am surrounded by your boundless mercy and when I repeat your name constantly? Do ants lay siege upon fire? Will the dust, that a scampering horse throws up, envelop the sun? Is there anything that can go against one who has patience? Will the mountain tremble when the wind blows? If a thief tries to break open and seize the money which he sees in a mirror, can he get hold of it?3

In another song he equates the name of the Lord with sugar candy and this is how he urges people to get a taste of it.

O, buy sugar candy, my candy so good!
For those who have tasted say naught is so sweet
As the honey-like name of the godlike [sic] Vishnu.
My stock is not packed on the backs of strong kine;

Nor pressed into bags strongly fastened with twine.
Wherever it goes it no taxes doth pay;
But still is most sweet, and brings profit, I say.
It wastes not with time; never gives a bad smell;
You’ve nothing to pay, though you take it right well;
White ants cannot eat the fine sugar with me;
The city resounds as its virtue men see.
From market to market ‘tis needless to run;
The shops know it not, the bazar can have none.
My candy, you see, is the name of Visnu,
So sweet to the tongue that gives praise as is due.4

The People’s Poet

The study of the Haridasa tradition in general and contribution of Purandaradasa in particular amply demonstrates how a devotional movement can take people nearer to God. Even today, we have thousands of Bhajana Mandalis (singing troupes) across the State of Karnataka which sing Haridasa compositions in chorus, and a majority of these troupes are of women.

Moreover, it is not just singing but a sort of ritualistic performance wherein a definite system is followed in the rendering process. It has become a part and parcel of the daily routine of the common folk. Each and every chore is associated with some song or the other of a Haridasa wherein major share belongs to the compositions of Purandaradasa. For instance, there are countless songs of Purandaradasa depicting mother Yashoda waking up, bathing, adorning, feeding and playing with child Krishna. Mothers perform similar activities with their children singing these songs, thereby elevating the mundane to the level of divine.

Several passages, proverbial statements, idiomatic expressions and punch lines of Purandaradasa have found their way into
the Kannada diction, and can be heard in the routine conversations of even the illiterate. Even without knowing the author, people recall a line or two from a song and say ‘we should live thus’. In the true sense of the term, Purandaradasa has become people’s poet. Rightly did his guru Vyasaraya praise him in a song—‘If at all anybody is worth calling a Haridasa, it is certainly Purandaradasa!’

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Swamiji’s Note of Caution

Don’t think that Kirtana means dancing only. It means singing the glories of God, in whatever way that suits you. That vehement stirring up of feeling and that dancing of the Vaishnavas are good and very catching no doubt; but there is also a danger in practising them, from which you must save yourself. The danger lies here—in the reaction. On the one hand, the feelings are at once roused to the highest pitch, tears flow from the eyes, the head reels as it were under intoxication—on the other hand, as soon as the Sankirtan stops, that mass of feeling sinks down as precipitately as it rose. The higher the wave rises on the ocean, the lower it falls, with equal force. It is very difficult at that stage to contain oneself against the shock of reaction; unless one has proper discrimination, one is likely to succumb to the lower propensities of lust etc.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 5-346-347
Spiritual Significance of Gopis of Brindavan

PREMA PANDURANG

Love Incarnate

To all the devotees of Sri Krishna, Srimad Bhagavatam is the book form of Lord Krishna. It is not an exposition but it is an ecstatic experience of God’s love for man and man’s yearning for God. It rouses passionate devotion for the divine, a natural intuitive transvaluation wherein one feels gold is tinsel, human bonds no more throttle immortal longings, everything created by God is beautiful, nothing is dearer than Krishna, no desire equals the overpowering desire to see Him, meet Him and dissolve in divinity. Life to such a devotee is a beautiful opportunity for the divine quest.

Among the several incarnations portrayed in the Srimad Bhagavatam, Sri Krishna Avatar is dealt with in delectable detail—90 long chapters elaborately describe His power and glory. Right at the beginning of the Bhagavata, the listeners are addressed as rasika Bhuvi bhavukah—‘drink heartily the nectar’ (that is Bhagavatam).

There is already an indication of the cosmic dance that is to follow. Only men and women of spiritual taste can listen to the Rasalila. He is, as the Taittiriya Upanishad describes God, raso vai sah—‘of the nature of bliss’. He is—rasanam samuho rasah—the very embodiment of various modes in which joy can be experienced and expressed. Sri Krishna stands for music, dance, martial arts, poetry, beauty par excellence, humility, greatness, accessibility, metaphysical insight, bravery, compassion—all put together. He is sweet in every way.

Sri Krishna incarnation is loved by one and all. He charms and fascinates all. A parrot can perch on His shoulder, a peacock can offer its plume, a Gopi can make Him dance for a ball of butter for an hour! His mother can tie Him to a mortar with a rope! Arjuna can make Him a non-paid chauffer; mother Draupadi can make Him a textile mill. Infinite are the ways of His divine play!

Unless One is Unselfish . . .

Everyone who loves Krishna knows what agony and ecstasy are! The Gopis are God-mad women as Swami Vivekananda calls
them. They are the very embodiments of pure, unselfish love. Swamiji says [CW, 3:259],

So long as there is selfishness in the heart, so long is love of God impossible. Ay, forget first the love of gold and name and fame, and for this trumpery world of ours. Then, only then, you will understand the love of the Gopis, too holy to be attempted without giving up everything, too sacred to be understood until the soul has become perfectly pure.

The sage Narada declares that when that pure devotion arises the unholy becomes holy, the impure becomes pure and it saves the whole dynasty of that devotee! The Lord is sat, chit and ananda, pure Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, and when you love Him, you begin to feel the bliss within.

Swami Akhandananda Sarasvatiji (1911–1987), renowned exponent of Sri-mad Bhagavatam and diverse spiritual traditions, opines that there are two forms of God as Love: one is the thirst, the other is contentment. Thirst means that languishing of the soul for the Lord and the agony accompanying it. Then when one listens to His glory, one performs acts to please Him, one experiences rasa [a spiritual feeling] in one’s heart, that is contentment. A devotee longing for God says, ‘Pyas na bhuji dil na bhara, Bedard logo vraj chodna pada (my heart’s longing for God’s love never got quenched; I had to leave the land of Krishna, Vraja—the Hindi song composed by the author).

Bhakti depends on these two aspects Samyoga and Viyoga—meeting and separation! Swami Akhandananda Sarasvatiji asks a simple question: ‘Have you ever experienced separation from the Divine? Oh! you man—you have, in all the births that you passed through, cried for man, for woman, for children, for wealth, for a disease to be cured, you have known the agony of crying—do you know the joy of crying! You will know it when you cry to attain the Lord, when these tears roll down your cheeks you will feel the joy of crying.’

To be a theist and a devotee is not same. There are many things that differentiate them from one another. A theist merely believes and just bows down in front of every shrine! A devotee is full of deep love for the Lord. He loves Him and longs for Him.

Understanding Gopis’ Love for God

The Gopis that one finds mentioned in the divine play of Krishna Avatara are Sadhakas, spiritual aspirants, of a different sort. Their running towards Krishna is not an impulsive running away from home or a romantic elopement. At first they listen to His glory, come to know about His powers, begin to love Him, they perform Devi Katyayini’s Vrata [a vow of Divine Mother] and long for Him. They pray to the Divine Mother who is Yogamaya (the delusive power of the Lord) for She alone can remove illusion. They pray, ‘Nandagopa sutam devi patim me kuru te namah. He is their master, boss and all. Further, through the garment stealing episode given in Srimad Bhagavatam, the Lord frees them from their ego and they learn their lessons in humility. The maker of the world is far above all needs and imperfections that humans experience. He is the Truth Transcendental!

In the Bhagavatam tradition it is said that there are two types of Gopis—Nitya Siddha (the ever-perfect) and Sadhana Siddhas (those who attain perfection through spiritual practices). And Sri Radha is Krishna’s Ahladini Shakti—His Power of Bliss. It is a profound concept that requires much spiritual contemplation and understanding.

Lalita, Vishakha, Rupa Manjari, Anange Manjari and others are Nitya Siddhas. They
are powerful and spiritually perfect. Nobody can stop them.

Who were Sadhana Gopis? It is said that they were the sages who wanted to enjoy Lord’s blissful play. The sages of Danda-karanya, the spiritually significant forest in central India, had taken on the Gopis’ form. Some of them had yet not completed their Sadhana and were born as women. They had entered their respective homes when the flute music was heard. Their husbands shut the doors and they had no way out. They shut their eyes and with great devotion dissolved themselves in the memory of His Divine Lilas.

Some were burning in the fire of separation from the beloved Lord and in that fire were burnt whatever inauspicious Samskaras left in them. They concentrated on Krishna; they embraced the Lord in their minds and in the process all their meritorious actions (punya) too was also gone and as a result they attained Mukti.

Raslila—the Play of Divine Love

Sadhana is a steep and difficult path. After several births one begins to tread this path. The climb is steep and what matters is the attitude. The greater the height, the greater the vertigo and vertigo in spiritual Sadhana is perilous! One needs grace. Proximity to the divine is a gift of grace and not one’s own merit. Each one has to realize that. But the Gopis when called to touch the Lord and experience the bliss thereof felt proud. Whereas Sri Krishna wanted the multiplication of Ananda, pure bliss, this [ego] meant restriction of bliss. Hence, He disappeared for a while; no union is sweet without the preceding separation; He had planned a trick; the Gopis had felt proud of themselves—instead of looking at the object of their adoration Sri Krishna, they began to adore themselves! He became Antarhita which has two meanings: to disappear and being a well-wisher from within.

The Gopis are the incarnations of God-love. As long as that love was secret, all was well! Now it is being exposed. They kept their devotion secret; hence their name was Gopi, ‘to be secretive’. They had kept the Lord from revealing Himself or else King Kamsa would send emissaries to kill Him.

Thus enjoying the presence of the Lord through various ways, the Gopi lives:

With her eyes she drinks His beauty
With her ears she drinks His flute music
With her skin she enjoys divine touch

It is said that there are various ways to enjoying the presence of the Lord. There are those who meditate and find Him in meditation. There are those who know Him through knowledge—they realize Him. And finally are those who see Him actually, realize Him through their bodies. Gopi is one such.

Although the Gopis were known for their capacity to keep their devotion secret, overcome with divine love, they began to sing. The song that they sang was not the composition of a poet but the outcome of their devotion. When there is devotion in the heart it emanates as music; the gait of love is dance! Where there is devotion there is sweet, sweet sonorous, sonorous joy!

The Lord had disappeared. But they knew He was an artist par excellence; He knows music, He knows dance! He can play on the flute! He is a connoisseur of music too. In these secluded bowers of Vraja, when the moon is shining bright the Sharad Ritu (autumn—mid-September to mid-November) wafts the fragrance of jasmines in the breeze. Thus they say, ‘Let us sing together. He will hear us from somewhere. His ego will go, His heart will melt and He will appear before us!’ The whole
song of supreme devotion begins with the victorious word *jayati*—glory to you!

Swami Akhandananda Saraswatiji says, revealing the spiritual significance inherent in this event, that Mother Lakshmi wanted to celebrate her wedding and hence a big drama was enacted. The great churning of the milky ocean took place. Out of it were born or appeared a white horse, a white elephant, a kaustubha gem and then a radiant goddess Mother Lakshmi, like the lightning in the sky. She had a garland in her hand seeking an eligible bridegroom; one who was faultless and full of virtues she chose Him.

All want Lakshmi (wealth) but few understand Her ways. She who is known for Her unpredictable nature, unstable appearance, however, decided to stay permanently in Vraja, the place where Her eternal husband Sri Narayana is born as a child. To be with him, she clears the earth and she mingles with the mud—is not it Lord, as Balagopala, plays His divine sport and eats a handful of it!

She on whom Lakshmi showers grace become popular, become beautiful and becomes respectable. Yet that Mahalakshmi has come not to be served as in heaven but to serve! She touches each creeper, each garden, each tree and makes it beautiful! She is not swamini or master here; she is sevika, a servant.

As Krishna has yet not revealed Himself, the Gopis implored, this sacred land of Vrindavan, the great Vraja, is superior to even Vaikunta because here your own queen, Mother Lakshmi, is a sevika! Hence, O Lord. They pray, ‘please cast a glance on this place where your Gopis are looking for you! This is a place where your Lakshmi has taken shelter. We are yours and we are searching for you.’

According to the devotional scriptures, there are three types of devotion—Tadiyata, Twadiyata, Madiyata.

❖ When the Lord is in Vaikunta, we have not seen Him and yet have the feeling ‘I belong to Him’, this is called Tadiyata.
❖ When God is before you and you say that you belong to Him, it is Twadiyata.
❖ And when you simply say to the Lord, ‘you are mine’, that is called Madiyata.

The divine and the intimate love of Gopi allows them to feel that they own Him. In this divine play, God seems to forget His Godhead, His divinity! It is like the case of a king who wears His royal finery presides over the court and when he comes home, His queen helps him to take off the crown, the jewels, etc. In the same way the Lord becomes a small idol in the hands of His devotees. The Gopis place a pink dress, He wears. They place small little ornaments and He wears them. In pride the Gopis said you are ours, now in humility they say we are yours!

It is said that in dispassion, in Vairagya, there is presence of disappointment but in love, in prema, there is hope. No wonder, it is said that yearning of loving God is a mystery. It cannot be attained by meritorious acts of millions of births. That is core of Gopi Lila of the Lord.

The Gopi is not a person; she is a concept personified—she is devotion, surrender, beauty, creativity, imagination, humility, sacrifice, all put together. She has no identity of her own; she lives in Krishna; conscious of Him all the time. She waits for Krishna to come into the world. She watches His Lila. She complains to Yashoda about little Krishna’s mischiefs because she loves His divine mischief. She knows the impact of the flute music and takes part in the cosmic dance.
Sage Narada opines that Bhakti is a total surrender to the Lord and forgetting Him is absolute agony, ‘as in the case of the Gopis of Brindavan’. When the Lord’s incarnation takes place and then He moves on to Gokula, the gopis rush to Him. They are beautifully decked with ornaments and anklets. This is a wholesome haste on the part of Jivatma to see the Paramatma. When they behold the Lord, their love for Him grows manifold. He becomes the centre of their lives thereafter. In the Rasa-lila episode, they are educated in humility. Finally they are the recipients of this magnificent grace.

When they cry out in agony, the Lord appears before them. In his inimitable words, the author of the well-known work in Sanskrit popular in Kerala, Narayaneeyam (69.1) describe the Lord’s beauty.

\[
\begin{align*}
Kesha & \quad Pasha \quad drita \quad pinchikavitati \\
Sanchalan & \quad makara \quad kundalam \\
Hara & \quad jala \quad van \quad malika \quad lalitam \\
Anga & \quad raga \quad Ghana \quad sourabham \\
Pita – chela – drita – kanchi – kanchita \\
Mudanch – damshu – mani – nupuram \\
Rasa – keli – paribhushatam – tava – hi \\
Rupamisha – kalayamaye
\end{align*}
\]

A bunch of peacock feathers adorning the crown; a pair of fish-marked pendants dangling from the ears; innumerable necklaces intermingled with floral wreaths adorning the neck; sandal paste and other unguents smeared over the body and emitting a strong fragrance; a golden girdle hemming the yellow wearing cloth; gem-studded anklets glowing and jingling—on Thy form radiant with such decorations appropriate for the Rasa dance, we meditate.

Such is the mystery of the Raslila that each Gopi is rewarded with her own Krishna! Each aspiring soul has the Paramatma exclusively to himself or herself.

The climactic compliment paid to the gopis comes from the hyper-educated Uddhava, the Prime Minister who is sent as the Lord’s emissary to the cowherdesses. He is zapped by their exemplary devotion. He got his degree from Brahaspati but his doctorate in Bhakti from the Gopis! He returns to Sri Krishna and confesses,

I bow down not to the Gopis but to the dust of the feet of the Gopis who purify the three worlds with their devotion to Sri Krishna.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, the nectarine record of the Great Master’s lively conversations and interactions with devotees, is replete with numerous references to the Gopi’s divine love.

To meet the Gopis in Srimad Bhagavatam is a privilege. To read about them is a punya, an act of merit. To talk about them is purification. To remember them is a Sadhana. To emulate them is a tall order and yet the most delectable goal to be set before man. As Swami Vivekananda says (CW, 3: 259),

That is the very essence of the Krishna Incarnation. Even the Gita, the great philosophy itself, does not compare with that madness, for in the Gita the disciple is taught slowly how to walk towards the goal, but here is the madness of enjoyment, the drunkenness of love, where disciples and teachers and teachings and books and all these things have become one; even the ideas of fear, and God, and heaven—everything has been thrown away. What remains is the madness of love. It is forgetfulness of everything, and the lover sees nothing in the world except that Krishna and Krishna alone, when the face of every being becomes a Krishna, when his own face looks like Krishna, when his own soul has become tinged with the Krishna colour.

‘Gopis of Brindavan’ is a huge topic. It is indeed impossible to do justice to this vast subject. This was just a sip of nectar from the ocean of Bhagavatam. It is a privilege to contemplate over this divine subject! □
Bhakti Sangeet and Its Place in Bhakti Sadhana

A Historical and Applied Perspective

SWAMI SARVASTHANANDA

Music, the Highest Art

‘Mon chalo nija niketane’ [O mind let us return to the real home]. That was the soulful outpouring of young Narendranath when he first met Sri Ramakrishna who was deeply moved by the song. Not only during the first meeting, later, on many occasions, Sri Ramakrishna would enter into divine ecstasies triggered by Naren’s melodious singing.

Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna came not only to rejuvenate religion and spirituality, but also arts and culture, especially devotional music, which when understood and practiced perfectly, could be used as a form of worship of the Divine. Music to Swami Vivekananda, was an expression of his inner spiritual urge, and was best understood by his spiritual Master Sri Ramakrishna, who would be often transported into deep Samadhi, on hearing spontaneously sung compositions, in his (as also others) rich, vibrant and melodious voice with a divine fervour. Speaking of the role of music in spiritual living, Swami Vivekananda once wrote.1

Music is the highest art and, to those who understand, is the highest worship.

Swamiji further said,2

‘The greatest aid to this practice of keeping God in memory is, perhaps, music. The Lord says to Narada, the great teacher of Bhakti, ‘I do not live in heaven, nor do I live in the heart of the Yogi, but where My devotees sing My praise, there am I.’ Music has such tremendous power over the human mind; it brings it to concentration in a moment.

Music in Indian Spiritual Tradition

In India the highest form of music has predominantly been considered as part of our religious traditions. The Hindu deities appear often with musical instruments. Sarasvati with Vina in her hands, Shiva dancing with Damaru, Krishna playing the flute, Narada with his Tanpura and so on—Hindu iconography is replete with deities symbolizing the role of music in spiritual life. India also gave birth to innumerable saints who have demonstrated the spiritual significance of music through their lives and immortal song compositions. Music opens up the fountain springs of Bhakti through Nada, the sound as God. In the Indian classical music tradition invariably all musicians consider themselves sadhakas of Nada-brahma.

According to Sangita-ratnakara, an authentic text on Indian Music:

Nada Brahma is of the nature of Consciousness and Bliss and pervades all living beings. By

The author is the Adhyaksha of Ramakrishna Ashrama, Rajkot, Gujarat, and has written books and articles on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda in English and Gujarati.
worshipping It one worships Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara who are unified in It.

Thus there is music in every deep truth, in every higher emotion or bhava, nay in every movement of life. True music should make one feel that the individual is only a fleeting tone in the great world symphony, that nothing can be isolated, and that every objective existence is only the glimpse of a musical note in the current of mysterious and overflowing melody of cosmic life. In his lecture on Ramayana delivered in America, Swamiji says about Indian music:3

Drama and music are themselves held to be religion. Any song, if one’s whole soul is in that song, one attains to salvation; one has nothing else to do. They say it leads to the same goal as meditation.

**Bhakti Sangeet**

What is Bhakti Sangeet? Any music which is an adoration of the Divine in any form—God with form or without form, with qualities or without qualities, in the form of an idol or deity or even adoration of incarnations or exalted saints and divine personages can be termed as *Bhakti Sangeet*. Here Sangeet can cover singing, instrumental music and dancing. A definition says, ‘geetam, vadyam, nrityam trayam sangeetam-uchyate’—‘singing, playing music and dance are three forms of Sangeets.’ In such music the inexpressible or abstruse mystical truths of the Divine Reality and an intense craving in the human heart to reach out to the Divine are expressed through poetic imagery, chaste and melodious words and elevating music with appropriate *ragas*, rhythm and tonal quality.

Of the nine forms of Bhakti mentioned in the *Bhagvatam*, Kirtanam or singing the glory of the Lord has a place of great esteem. Sri Ramakrishna used to often fall into a deep Samadhi while singing or even hearing songs sung with divine emotion, with correct notes and tunes. He could elevate the minds of the listeners to a transcendental plane. But he used to feel disturbed if musicians distorted the melodies and notes or broke the rhythm. Bhava or higher feeling is the life of true music and without it music cannot be called Bhakti Sangeet. Speaking of Indian music, Swami Vivekananda remarked,5

There is science in Dhrupad, Kheyal, etc., but it is in Kirtana, and other like compositions that there is real music—for there is feeling. Feeling is the soul; the secret of everything . . . The science of Dhrupad, etc., applied to the music of Kirtana will produce the perfect music.

**Origin and Growth of Bhakti Sangeet**

Though the roots of Bhakti Sangeet can be traced to the natural outpourings and
prayers of the primitive man, it is in Sama Veda that we first find sages intoning mantras in beautiful and resonant music. The Sama Veda begins with 'agnya a yahivitaye—O Agni come to the feast'. Originally this is a line from the Rig Veda and in Sama Veda it is transformed by addition of more vowels and sounds called Stobha which have no meaning of their own but add to the melody and rhythm.

In the earlier portions of the Vedas we see how prayers were mono-tonic and how they evolved into di-tonic, tri-tonic and so on till a full septa-tonic scale was reached. There was a form of music called Pathya Sangeet, which, according to Bharata, was systematized and had Saptaswaras, Sthanas, Varnas, Alankaras and Angas. By the time of the Mahabharata the seven notes or Shadja were well established and music was a subject of study, as Gandharva Shastra whose musical text was called Dattilam. The Dattilam smoothens the way from Sama Gayan to Raga-based music by introducing 18 melodic structures called Jatis.

The Harivamsha (2 to 5 C.E.) introduced in the Mahabharata refers to the Chalikiya genre of songs in the Gandharva tradition and the Hallisakha dance [native to Gujarat]. Buddhist and Jain traditions refer to music with their devotional compositions like the Therigatha and Sthanagasutra.

The Natya Shastra (3-5 C.E.) of Bharata Muni traces the origins of music to Brahma himself. This great text introduces the idea of rasa or aesthetic rapture as manifesting due to the conjunction of causes. Initially there were only eight rasas which included aesthetics, humour, anger, compassion, disgust, horror, valour and wonder; to this was later added shanta bhava, tranquility, by the ninth century. With the advent of the Bhakti theology by Rupa Goswami in the 16th Century, Bhakti became a separate overarching rasa which influences and seeps each of the above rasa for the seeker.

When Narada wrote his Shiksha (2-3 C.E.) it is believed that Deshi music with its full seven notes was already prevalent. Narada is held as the foremost Acharya of Bhakti as well as music. When music becomes an instrument in the hands of a Bhakta or saint, art gets converted into sadhana. The outpouring of a saint’s heart will be better assimilated and propagated if delivered through the sweet medium of ennobling music.

In the late 6th century Matanga wrote the Brihaddesi and was the first to distinguish Margi or classical from folk and popular music—the Deshi tradition. It is believed that the formal periodisation of the Bhakti movement was born in south India around the sixth century of present era—through the songs of the Alvars and Nayanmars. Later it spread in other parts of India being nurtured by the innumerable Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, Natha traditions of Hinduism and even Buddha and Jaina sects which sprang up during different periods of Indian religious history.

Bhakti Sangeet of Various Indian States
From thirteenth century onwards, one sees the influence of Islam and other religious sects which thrived in India during that period. The Alvars of the south spread Vishnu Bhakti along with their mystic experiences through Tamil Prabandhas, lyrics enhanced by melody and rhythm. The Alvars, meaning ‘those immersed in Divine Love’, sang praises of Vishnu as they travelled from one place to another. Andal, the sole woman among the twelve Alvar saints, was like Mira, dedicated to her chosen Deity Ranganatha from a very young age. Her immortal composition, Thiruppaavai, is sung with great fervour to this day. The great Acharya of Vishishtadvaita Sri Ramanuja ordained the beautiful rendering of Prabandhas in temples across south India.

Shiva Bhakti was spread throughout south India by the great Nayanmar saints through their immortal Tirumurai, a compilation of hymns on Shiva by sixty-three Nayanmar poet-saints.

Thiru Jnanasambandar, a Nayanmar, is depicted like a dancing child singing with cymbals in hand. Karaikkal Ammaiayar, is one of three women Nayanmars and is considered the first saint poetess of India. Tiruvachakam of Manikkavacakar is said to be the greatest testament of love and it is often said that if one is not moved by reading it one will not be moved by anything else in world literature. Some women saints like Akka Mahadevi of the Veerashaiva tradition have composed songs known as Vachanas full of spiritual import and are popular among the Kannada speaking devotees.

One finds in Buddhist tradition some glimpses of Bhakti. The Charyapada is a collection of mystical poems, songs of realization in the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism composed around the 8th century in the eastern part of India and set to beautiful tunes. Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda uses the same poetical structures employed by the Charyapada and appears to have employed some of the same ragas. There were also notable musical poets like Vidyapati and Chandidas in the east who contributed to this repertoire.

The Natha tradition (dedicated to Yoga) with its influence through the entire northern and western parts of India up to Rajasthan and Maharashtra also used music (treatise Shivavtarodaya) to spread their tradition. Both Matsyendranath and Gorakhnath were good in music and were experts on the Pakhawaj (a kind of accompanying drum).

The 15th century saw a great revival of Bhakti traditions that are attributed to Swami Ramananda at Varanasi and important bhakti poets that he inspired included Tulsidas who’s Ramcharitmanas remains central to the Hindi heartland. There was also the great Nirguni saint-poet Kabir whose songs continue to inspire generations, as also Ravidas, Dhanna and other Ramanandis.

The great Bhakti movement led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his disciples like Rupa Goswami popularized Bhajan and Hari Kirtana as a means to realize God in the northern and eastern parts of India. The movement also spread to the south and has taken deep roots under the name Nama-sankirtana Sampradaya. In his famous treatise Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu, Rupa Goswami elaborately describes gradations of Bhakti from its lowest stage of shraddha (faith) up to its highest stage of Maha-Bhava (ultimate ecstasy in love of Godhead). The Bhagavatam also was popularized through musical recitals in places of worship.

The equivalent of Kirtana in Kannada is called the Devaranama. Purandaradasa, Kanakadasa and Vijayadasa are some of
the very prominent among the composers of Devaranamas. Purandaradasa is also considered to be the father of Carnatic classical music. The name of Tyagaraja as a musician saint is very well-known and his immortal Kritis are very popular throughout south India and he is one of the golden trinity of Vaggeyakaras or composers that included Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri. His Kritis have left an abiding influence upon the people of all ranks of life; the sweetness and sublimity of his compositions have enraptured many hearts, and has guided many a soul on the path of real Bhakti through the medium of music. Indeed almost the entire corpus of Carnatic classical music is devotional.

As Bhakti movement grew in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan, great poet saints and their followers used the medium of music to spread Bhakti and left behind immortal compositions which are popular to this day. The equivalent of Kirtanas in Marathi language is known as Abhangas. Prominent among the composers are Jnanadev, Namadev, Ekanath, Tukaram, and others. There were several women saints of the Varkari tradition like Janabai, Bahinabai, Soyrabai, Muktabai and Kanhopatra whose songs are sung in congregations accompanied by graceful dance even now.

The tradition of Vitthala, though of Karnataka origin, was made popular by them in Maharashtra, as it was done by Purandaradasa, Kanakadasa, Vijayadasa and other saints. In Gujarat, Rajasthan and northern parts of India Kirtanas is also known as Bhajan. Mirabai with her immortal Krishna Bhakti has inspired countless devotees through her Bhajans full of the bhavas of Viraha (separation) and Milana (coming together). They are sung not only in folk traditions but also by classical musicians.

Surdas, the blind saint, poet and musician, known for his devotional songs dedicated to Lord Krishna, is said to have written and composed a hundred thousand songs in his the *Sur Sagar*, out of which only about 8,000 are extant. He is the foremost among the eight disciples of Vallabhabhacharya who gave rise to the Ashta-chhaap stream of music that was systematized by Goswami Vitthalnathji and also formalized ritual singing called Haveli Sangeet.

Due to the influence of Chaitanya and his disciples, the Vaishnava poet saints of Bengal and eastern part of India, are many and their compositions are vast. Though the Shaka poet saints are few they have left a deep influence on the people and even attracted Muslim devotees and disciples. Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of singing the inspired songs (sometimes referred to as Shyama Sangeet) of Ramprasad, Kamalakanta and others and often passed into an ecstatic mood while singing or hearing them. Though both Ramprasad and Kamalakanta were Shaktas, they had Vaishnava gurus and therefore Vaishnavism and Shaktism have wonderfully blended in their lives and compositions.

Another tradition of musicians called Bauls have harmonized in their compositions traces of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism. Their songs embrace the essence of the scriptures of all sects in a very spontaneous way. They form an important class of Bengali folk songs rich in mysticism as well as musical content.

In Sikhism, Bhakti of Nirguni (devotion to divine without attributes) is emphasized. Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru and the founder of Sikhism, was a Nirguni Bhakti saint. The Sikh Gurus composed elevating Bani which are set to different ragas. *The Granth Sahib* also includes the songs of other saints, several Hindu and some Muslim.
In India music has helped to transmit Sufi Islam too. In Sufism, the term music is called ‘sa’ma’ or literary audition. This is where poetry would be sung to instrumental music; this ritual would often put Sufis into spiritual ecstasy commonly seen in whirling dervishes dressed in white cloaks. Sufism spread widely through their popular songs known as Qawwali. One of the biggest contributors to the Sufi musical tradition was Amir Khusru, a disciple of Nizamuddin Chishti. Amir was known as the most talented musical poet in the early Muslim period of India and is said to have founded a system of musicology, the ‘Chaturdandi Sampradaya’. He is considered the founder of Indo-Muslim devotional music traditions.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda was as great a poet and musician as a spiritual teacher and has left behind quite a few hymns and devotional songs. Some of them, like the famous Arati song ‘Khandana Bhava Bandhana’ sung in chorus in all monasteries of the Ramakrishna Order as well as in the homes of numerous devotees the world over, were set to tune and perfect rhythm in the Dhrupad style of music. The rich music tradition of Bhakti finds its rightful place in various centres of the Ramakrishna Order.

If we read the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, a large part of Ramakrishna’s teaching was done through music. How often he would burst into a song, in his sweet ambrosial voice to impress upon the minds of devotees some important spiritual truth! We also find him telling again and again that ‘singing the name and glories of God’ is an easy way to attain true Bhakti.

Sri Ramakrishna’s injunction, ‘Bhakti is the only essential thing. One obtains love of God by constantly chanting His name and singing His glories,’ establishes the importance of Bhakti Sangeet as a sure means of realizing the Divine in the present age.

References
1. CW.5, 125
2. CW.4.93. CW. 4.74
3. CW: 7.407
4. Bhagvatam, 7.5.23-24

Bhakti-Yoga is the path of systematised devotion for the attainment of union with the Absolute. It is the easiest and surest path to religion or realisation.

Love of God is the one essential to be perfect in this path.

There are five stages of love.

First, man wants help and has a little fear.

Second, when God is seen as Father.

Third, when God is seen as Mother. Then all women are looked upon as reflections of the Mother-god. With the idea of Mother-god real love begins.

Fourth, love for love’s sake. Love for love’s sake transcends all qualities.

Fifth, love in Divine-union. It leads to oneness or superconsciousness.

God is both Personal and Impersonal as we are personal and impersonal.

Prayer and praise are the first means of growth. Repeating the names of the God has wonderful Power.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 6: 90
Bhakti in Sri Guru Granth Sahib

APN PANKAJ

Sri Guru Granth Sahib

A brief introduction to Sri Guru Granth Sahib is considered necessary before we proceed with the subject of Bhakti in it.

As we know, Sri Guru Nanak Dev is the founder and the first Guru of the Sikh religion. He is followed by Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Har Gobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Har Krishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of Khalsa Panth [the Path of Khalsa], with whom the line of Gurus ended. He declared that he would not have any successor and installed the Adi Granth as the final and the permanent Guru.

Originally, the Adi Granth had the compositions—called Bani—of the first five Gurus and 36 saints and bards called Bhagats, who were either Guru Nanak’s predecessors (13) like Farid, Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas or the contemporaries (23) of different Gurus. The fifth Guru, Sri Arjan Dev, brought together compositions from various sources and got them committed to writing by Bhai Gurdas, a poet himself and an ardent devotee who also supervised the construction of the Golden Temple at Amristar. Later, the tenth Guru—Gobind Singh—added the Bani of the ninth guru (with one shalok of his own) and named the book, Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

There are, in all, 5894 compositions, classified under 25 Ragas (with variants of some of them). While every composition of each of the Gurus bears the title ‘Nanak’, and not the author himself, compositions of the Bhagats are identified by their names (6th, 7th and 8th Gurus did not write anything). Author of each of the compositions is identified in the caption ‘Mahla’ and the serial number of the successive Gurus. Thus, Mahla 1 refers to Guru Nanak, 2 to Guru Angad, 3 to Guru Amar Das and so on. The highest numbers of hymns have been contributed by Guru Arjan followed by Guru Nanak. The first hymn, Japuji Sahib, preceded by the Mul Mantra, is by Guru Nanak. It is not classified under a Raga and is considered holiest of the holies.

There are 1430 running foolscap pages and this enumeration is sacrosanct for all editions. Opening and closing lines on each page has also to be identical in all editions.¹

Readers will appreciate that it is not possible to do even a resemblance of justice to the subject which extends through a work of such enormous proportions in terms of range,

□ The author is a devotee from Chandigarh and is known for his scholarly and insightful writings on spiritual matters.
depth and extensity, within the limited space and the author’s limited ability. Only a partial coverage of the subject is possible and that is what has been attempted here.

**Bhakti in Sri Guru Granth Sahib**

‘... It must be stated firmly,’ says Balwant Singh Anand, ‘that the Marag [path] that Guru Nanak advocated was Bhakti Marag. He believed that the Supreme Reality could be realized through Bhakti Marag and not through Karam Marag or Jnan Marag. . .’

According to Nanak, Love, devotion, Simran and Self-surrender constitute Bhakti. But what is Love?

1. **Love**

Narada in the Bhakti Sutras (2) says that while Bhakti is of the nature of supreme Love of God, it is impossible to precisely define the intrinsic nature of Love (51). The essential characteristic of this loving devotion, Narada says, is complete self-surrender to Him and extreme anguish if He were to be forgotten (19)^3. Guru Nanak explains by illustrations:

Love, my heart! love Hari as lotus loves water. Waves knock it away, still with Love it blossoms... O my heart! how can you find absolution from the snares of transmigration without Love? In the shrine of the heart of the Lover of the Guru abides He and bestows upon him the treasure of Bhakti.4

In the similar strain, he refers to the love of fish for water. Deeper the water, greater the joy of fish whose mind body and spirit the water satiates. Even for a moment, it can’t survive without water. Then he talks of the love of chatak (hawk cuckoo) and its love for cloud. Chatak would prefer death to drinking any other water than the rain-drop released by the cloud under the Svati nakshatra (star arcturus). Guru Nanak also speaks of the love of water with milk. When the latter begins to boil, water sacrifices itself to sustain the milk. Giving another example, that of a chakavi (female ruddy goose) who eagerly awaits the sun so that it may meet its mate.5

The refrain of all these similes is that Love for the Lord means extreme anguish, a soaring restlessness, a deathlike pain—parama vyakulata—to see Him, be in His company, to keep repeating His Name.

But, Nanak says, ‘It is not easy to utter the True Name’.6 He says, ‘If you are eager to play the game of Love, come to my lane with your head in your hand. Step on to this path, if you are ready to sacrifice your head and do not shirk.’7

It may be mentioned here that for Guru Nanak Guru, or Satiguru, the True master, is the Karta Purukh, the All Pervading Creator while all the Gurus following him, treat him as the Guru. So when Nanak refers to Guru in his Bani, he is, in effect, referring to God.

2. **Devotion**

By devotion what is meant here is worship and service—Puja and Seva. But this...
Puja is not the performance of rituals, Guru Nanak says, ‘The essence of the entire jnan [knowledge] flows within, the Guru’s wisdom is the holy place for ablution and the centre of Murari’s worship where light merges with Light is the innermost shrine of heart.’ And Kabir says, ‘The house where neither the saints nor Hari are served, is like a crematory where ghosts live’. And Guru Nanak, in a positive support, says, ‘One who serves Him is honoured; Nanak says, we should sing praises of Him who is the repository of all virtues.’

‘Always remember Hari’, says Guru Ram Das, ‘O my heart! meditate on His Name. You will obtain the fruit that you desire; then no affliction shall come near you. His alone are japu (quiet remembrance of His name), tapu (mortification), brata (vows and fasts) and puja (worship) who has established Love with Hari. Without Love for Him, all other attachments are false and they vanish in no time’. Guru Arjan says, ‘Guru is the dispenser of bliss, he pulls and wipes all vices out’.

3. Simran: Remembering the Name

Guru Tegh Bahadur, in a mood of contrition, reminds us how we waste our life without remembering Kanhaiya’s Name,

O Mother! what shall I do now? I have wasted all my life by indulging in the sense-objects and did not remember Kanhai.

When death caught my neck in its clutches, I lost all my memory. In moment of crisis who else but Rama’s Name will come to my rescue? Wealth and fortune that I thought were mine, went in no time to someone else. Nanak says, I now repent that I never sang Hari’s praise.

The sentiments expressed above remind us of what Sri Madhusudana Sarasvati, the noted sage-scholar of Varanasi, had said, ‘When life is about to depart, my throat will be choked with phlegm, wind and bile; how would then I be able to remember you: kantha vardohana vidhau smaranam kutaste?

Simran is remembering the Name of God. Nam Simran is accorded the highest priority in Sri Granth Sahib. ‘The essence of the Nam is harmony and through this discipline the faithful devotee progressively unites himself with the divine harmony.’ The term ‘Nam’, or the Name, itself reminds us of the True Name—‘Sati Nam’ or ‘Sancha Nam’. Even though He is beyond all names and forms God has been addressed in Granth Sahib by many other names, e.g., Ram, Raghunath, Raghupati, Raghurai, Narain, Hari, Isha, Iswell, Sharangpani, Gobind, Gopal Rai, Murari, Beethal (Vithala), Bisumbhara (Vishvambhara), Allah, Khuda, et al. Most of these Names remind us of Sakara Ishvara—God with form. And the essence of Bhakti lies in constant Simran of the Name.

4. Self-Surrender: Sharanagati

‘O Thakur! I come to seek refuge in you’, says Guru Arjan.

All doubts of my mind have been erased after I had your darshan. Without my expressing, You understood my agony and made me remember your Name. All my miseries have disappeared, all the joys entered me on their own. I sang the virtues of the Infinite Lord. You have pulled me out of the blind-well of maya and accepted me as your own. Nanak says, the Guru has chopped off my fetters and made me meet the One who I was missing.

Guru Ramdas seeks Sharanagati; Guru Ravidas (the pioneer Guru of Ravidasia sect whose Bani is included in Granth Sahib) says that high or low, whoever surrenders himself to the Lord, does not suffer from bad karmas and crosses over the samsara: Guru Nanak says that he who is devoted to Hari and
surrenders himself to Him is, by the grace of Guru, redeemed18.

In Ramacharita-manas,19 Vibhishana, seeking refuge in Rama’s feet, says,

On hearing with my ears, your renown that have I come. [You are the eliminator of the fear of samsara]. Protect me, O destroyer of all distress, protect me. You are the dispenser of delight to those who come in your refuge.

Pages of Guru Granth Sahib are filled with these aspects—Love, Devotion, Simran, Self-surrender—of Bhakti. These indeed are so well integrated and interlinked that one cannot practice any of them in isolation.

Nadir or Kripa, Grace

‘For Guru Nanak’, says W.H. McLeod, ‘the meaning and purpose of human existence centres in the divine existence of the Eternal One, He who creates, sustains and destroys, He who having created reveals Himself in His Creation, He who by His grace communicates to man the ways of salvation and calls forth the response which enables him to appropriate the salvation’, and, McLeod continues, ‘the creation does indeed provide a vital revelation of God but the physical phenomena which impart this revelation are to be regarded as expressions of a God of grace who dwells not only in creation but also beyond it.’20

It is His grace, kripa, that He reveals Himself and communicates to man the ways of salvation. And how? Guru Ram Das says,

The Lord in his immense grace has accepted me in His refuge and called me to meet the dear

* Sa bhumin visvato vritva-atyatisthad
dasangulam II (Pervading the earth on all sides, he transcends the ten directions);
Etavanasya mahima to jyayanscha purusah II
(such is His glory, but Purusha is greater than this), Rg Veda X 90.1,3

The term Nadir has frequently been used in Granth Sahib. It means kripa-drishti, a look of grace or mercy. Guru Nanak says, ‘Raiments one gets by one’s karma, but for entering the gate of moksha, his nadir—grace—is required’22. Guru Amar Das says that it is by His grace that one is blessed with the True Name and His Virtues.23

Says the Sikh scholar Balwant Singh Anand,

. . . notwithstanding Simran and meditation, Guru Nanak has given a high place to nadir, the grace of God. Moksha, which is the ultimate goal of a human life, is obtained through the grace of God. Patiently one must wait; the Infinite One will find His own way to emancipate him.24

It implies that Bhakti is not an activity or a set of activities which tend to nurture a sense of ego. It is a state of abiding Love and constant concentration on Him and His name.
A true Bhakta does not even knock but leaves it to God to open the door of moksha in his sheer grace. ‘I love You, because I love You’.

Navadha Bhakti in Sri Guru Granth Sahib

Guru Arjan says, ‘bhagati navai par-kaaraa’25; ‘There are nine types of Bhakti.’

In Srimad Bhagavtam,26 Prahalada too enumerates Navadha Bhakti (nine types of bhati) thus:

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<td>(viii) sakhaa sahaae pooran paramesur milu kade na hovi bhanganaa</td>
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<td>(ix) manu tanu arapi dharee hari aagai II</td>
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Conclusion

Thus we find a spiritually rich and elevating treasure of Bhakti in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. There are many more gems of Bhakti, Jnana, Vairagya and Viveka spread through the pages of Granth Sahib from which devotees of the Lord, irrespective of the language they speak and the background they come from, can derive spiritual succour and insights. Compiled more than three centuries ago, Sri Guru Granth Sahib has an eternal and engaging appeal for all spiritual aspirants, especially those on the path of Bhakti and Seva. □

Notes & References

N.B. The author has used the Devanagiri Recession of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Part I. Part II, comprises complete index of lines and words, which have been referred to sparingly. (These parts have been compiled by Callweart, Winanad M.; Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1996)
1. For the literary aspects of the Adi Granth, see author’s article, ‘Place of the Adi Granth in Punjabi Literary tradition’ (*Prabudhha Bharata*, Sept-Oct 2009; Advaita Ashrama, 5, Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata). Also see Pankaj, Pran Nath: *Sach ki Bani Akhai Guru Nanak* (Hindi) (New Delhi, Rupa & Co. 2001)


4. *Astapadi*, Mahla 1, Raga Siri, p. 59-60)

5. p.60

6. Rag Siri, Mahla 1, p.349

7. Salok, Varan te vadheek Mahla 1, p.1412

8. Asa Mahla 1, p 411

9. p 1374

10. Japuji, p 2

11. Bairradi, Mahla 4, p. 720

12. Siri, Mahla 5, p 43

13. Maru, Mahla 9, p1008


15. Sarang, Mahla 5, p.1218

16. Rag Nat Narain, Mahla 4, p 975

17. Bilavalu, p 858

18. Asa, Mahla 1, p. 433


21. Rag Nat Narain, Mahla 4, p 980-81

22. Japuji, p. 2

23. Siri, Mahla 3. P.27


25. Siri Mahla 5, P71

26. *Srimad Bhagavatam*, VII 5 23

This [Punjab] is the land which is held to be the holiest even in holy Aryavarta; this is the Brahmavarta of which our great Manu speaks. This is the land from whence arose that mighty aspiration after the Spirit, ay, which in times to come, as history shows, is to deluge the world. This is the land where, like its mighty rivers, spiritual aspirations have arisen and joined their strength, till they travelled over the length and breadth of the world and declared themselves with a voice of thunder. This is the land which had first to bear the brunt of all inroads and invasions into India; this heroic land had first to bare its bosom to every onslaught of the outer barbarians into Aryavarta. This is the land which, after all its sufferings, has not yet entirely lost its glory and its strength. Here it was that in later times the gentle Nanak preached his marvellous love for the world. Here it was that his broad heart was opened and his arms outstretched to embrace the whole world, not only of Hindus, but of Mohammedans too. Here it was that one of the last and one of the most glorious heroes of our race, Guru Govinda Singh, after shedding his blood and that of his dearest and nearest for the cause of religion, even when deserted by those for whom this blood was shed, retired into the South to die like a wounded lion struck to the heart, without a word against his country, without a single word of murmur.

—*Swami Vivekananda*, CW, 3.366
Tradition of Bhakti: A Sufi Perspective

B. SHEIK ALI

Introduction

Hinduism and Islam are two great religions whose essence is to be seen in Bhakti and Sufism respectively. These are the two springs bubbling from the purest, the finest and the highest source of the love of God that forms the sum and substance of all great religions. Religion is indeed a point of contact between the Supreme and the sublime on one side, and the mortal soul on the other. The aim of both Bhakti and Sufism is to explore the possibility of the mortal becoming immortal. If you concentrate more and more on a thing of beauty, you would become a part of that beauty. This is the principle on which both these movements are based, which have so much in common that they flow like two parallel streams only to mix and mingle in the higher truth of Ultimate Reality, where terms like Hindu or Muslim are irrelevant.

Bhakti and Sufism are two names of one and the same process to know God, to love God, to seek God, to feel God, and if possible, to merge in God, which is the highest ideal. At no time was the need to understand these two great spiritual forces greater than at present when matter has seized so much of man’s conscience that the quest for Absolute Truth has been totally forgotten.

The quest for higher truth would reveal that both Bhakti and Sufism are identical in several respects. In both, love and liberalism reign supreme; both assert the superiority of the path of devotion; both stress the love of God; both denounce rituals, formalities, dogmas and outward religious appearances; both need a living teacher to train the seeker in the proper method of attaining God-vision; both demand complete surrender to God; and both are free from pride, prejudice and bondage to any particular caste, creed and class. In short, both purify the heart. The purpose of both is to make one adhere to spiritual values, to ascend to higher regions through divine knowledge, to be occupied with that which is eternally the best, and to motivate all to seek the path of higher truth. The attempt in both is to gain the personal experience of God, and to be lost in the love of God. Both make one die to oneself in order to be alive in God. The same principle of internal combustion works in your automobile whether you own a German or a Japanese car. Whether you follow Bhaktimarga or Sufi thought, the motivating energy is the same love of God.

Similarity of Scriptures

Bhakti-Yoga, according to Swami Vivekananda, is ‘a real, genuine search of God, a search beginning, continuing and ending in love’, ‘Bhakti’ says Narada, ‘is intense love of God; when a man gets it, he loves all, hates none; 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.’ Sufism is defined as the religion of intense devotion; love is its passion; song and dance are its worship; and passing away in God is its ideal. The Sufis believe that ‘otherness’ is an illusion, and therefore attachment to created things and fruits of good actions are all utterly vain. Abul Hasan Kirkhani, a Sufi, says, ‘I do not say that heaven and hell do not exist, but I say that they are nothing to me, because God created them both, and there is no room for any created object in the place where I am.’ How similar is the thought process of Narada in his explanation of the Bhakti-aphorisms and of Kirkhani in his Sufi love of God!

It is said in Bhaktimarga that meditation is a constant remembrance of God, flowing like an unbroken stream of oil poured out from one vessel to another. 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. Similar is the experience of Sufi Junaid Baghdadi (C.E. 910) who says, ‘So in a manner we are united, O Lord, we are one, although from my gaze your face is hidden.’ To the Sufis the entire creation is said to be pervaded by the presence of God, and that is what the entire monism of Shankara is all about. In Shankara’s mysticism, the union of the Atman with Brahman abolishes all duality. In Ibn-ul-Arabi’s Sufism, man and God are always one, even though we are seldom aware of this. In the Gita the Lord says, ‘Mankind comes to Me from many roads, and by whatever road they approach Me I welcome them, because all roads lead to Me.’ In the Quran we read, ‘For unto everyone did we appoint a law and a way and that He might try you in what He gave you, therefore strive with one another to hasten to virtuous deeds.’ If one were to suppress prejudice, one would find both Bhaktas and the Sufi saints marching on the same path of unitive experience.

**Vedanta and Sufi Thought**

Islam has the philosophies of both Shankara and Ramanuja. Shankara’s monism is equivalent to Ibn-ul-Arabi’s wahdat-ul-wajud, and Ramanuja’s Vishishta-advaita comes closer to Shuhab-ud-din Suhrwardy’s wahdat-us-shuhud. If Ibn-ul-Arabi’s monism, like Shankara’s Advaita, stresses all phenomena are nothing but a manifestation of being, which is one with God, Suhrwardy’s Sufism coincides with Ramanuja’s view that individual souls are not essentially one with the Supreme.
Being, and that although they emanate from Him as sparks from fire, the Supreme is not purely abstract but possesses real qualities of goodness and beauty.

Suharwardy has elaborated this idea. He has equated God with Absolute Light and non-being with darkness. Absolute Light is the source of the whole universe, whose distant ray is the human intellect. The superior radiance prompts man to resist the attractions of the material world, and avoid a fall into a lower state. Vedanta also says that unless the absolute light is fully lit in man’s soul, he runs the risk of degrading himself to the lower levels of creation.

Yet another Sufi, Abu Ali Sena (Avicenna) has another version to explain Ultimate Reality which supports the view of Vishishta-advaita. He says that Ultimate Reality is eternal beauty, whose nature being self-expression, got itself reflected in the mirror of the universe out of love. Love is appreciation of beauty; and beauty is perfection. Here the emphasis is all on love. Love is the nature of God; love reveals the inner relation to reality; love is the moving energy of the world; love is the divine manifestation of the Absolute in the human heart; love is a movement towards the idea of perfect beauty; love purifies the soul of earthly temptation; and love is not a passing sentiment or a feeble emotion, but an attitude involving the mind and will, strong, deep and enduring. Those who assess Islam as a religion of the barracks need to study Avicenna.

Al-Ghazali (1057-1112 C.E.) is yet another great name in Sufism whose thoughts come close to Vedantic philosophy. He says that the only true source of knowledge (jnana) is ecstasy and direct intuition. He made the direct realization of ‘inner light’ the proof of religion. The approach and communion with the Ultimate Truth are the essential preliminaries to true devotion or bhakti. God says, ‘I am not so much in the earth and heaven as in the hearts of my faithful servants.’ There is a technique to become God-intoxicated souls, which is called yoga in Hinduism and tariqat in Islam. The auditory and visual powers must undergo a radical transformation to hear and see phenomena which are beyond the scope of ordinary human organs.

Stages of Spiritual Development

The entire mystical thought is based on the theory that there is a divine spark in man, and he is not conscious of it. It requires rigorous training to comprehend its full implications. Mystical endeavor is the generation of light from the soul and its return to the soul. The liberation process which is called moksha in Hinduism and najat in Islam is quite elaborate. It is a pursuit of being a ‘Perfect Man’ (Insan-e-kamil) for which Sufism prescribes stages, states and stations. There is a similar procedure in Bhakti yoga.

According to Sufism the process of ascent or spiritual perfection involves five stages. In the first stage man has to completely surrender himself to the will of God. He has to conquer ignorance, pride, jealousy, envy and anger. In the second stage (shariat), he has to acquire faith, observe cleanliness, and perform prayers. The third stage (tarikhat) is the stage of knowing the technique or methodology of moving up the ladder to spiritual experience. The fourth stage (ma’rifath) is of gnosis or spiritual knowledge, where reasoning is discarded and intuitive perceptions are acquired. The last stage is hakhikat or the highest stage of complete unity with Divinity. It is the transformation of the whole of man, his will, his intellect and his emotions into a state in which a unitive condition with reality
is attained. In this stage the mystic passes away from the self and becomes a perfect man. Law and religion lose their meaning at this stage, and he exclaims with Mansur, the only Sufi who confessed his experience, ‘I am God; I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I; I become that which I love, and that which I love becomes mine. We are two spirits in one body; to see me is to see Him, and to see Him is to see me.’ This is the stage of perfection wherein a man is completely absorbed in God.

This stage was illustrated with an example by a Sufi himself. He asked his disciple, ‘Go and strike each of the three men you see sitting there.’ He did. The first retaliated, which is the first stage (shairiat) or the stage of law. The second attempted to retaliate, but restrained himself, which is the stage of tarikhat or the way to become perfect. The third took no notice of the blow, which is the stage of hakhikat or truth where he feels no pain.

Testimony of Saints

Apart from religious doctrines, the moral and social code stressed service to humanity and self-discipline, both in Bhakti and Sufism. Islamic influence seems to be very great on Kabir, Namadev, Ramanand and Nanak. Kabir was the greatest exponent of Bhakti. He was a disciple of Ramanand. Being a strong critic of formalities and rituals, he believed that the right to approach God was not the monopoly of any man, much less that of the priests and mullahs. Even common man with sincerity and devotion would gain spiritual experience if he pursued the path of the love of God. He said:

I am neither in temple nor in mosque
I am neither in Ka’ba nor in Kailash
Neither am I in rites and ceremonies
Nor in Yoga and renunciation
Lamp burns in every house, Oh blind one

And you cannot see them
Your Lord is near, yet you are climbing
The palm tree to seek him.

Emphasis was on the conquest of the self. The human heart was regarded as the citadel of God. Kabir’s message was, burn the Ka’ba, destroy a temple, but don’t hurt a human heart.

The moon shines in my body, but my
Blind eyes cannot see it. When all the
Love of I and mine is dead, then
The work of the Lord is done.

He further says:
Hari is in the East, Allah is in the West
Look within your own heart
For there you will find both Karim and Ram.

This is an echo of what Avicenna had said earlier:
I searched for Him among the Christians and the Cross;
On the Christians’ Cross, I found Him not;
I searched Him in the temple and the Pagodas;
In the Pagodas and the Temple, I found Him not;
In the mountains of Herat and the heights of Qandhar both hill and dale; I found Him not;
With a set purpose, I went to the top of Mount Qaf;
There the Phoenix dwells; but I found Him not;
In the Ka’ba I went with an expectant heart;
In that shrine of young and old I found Him not;
Avicenna, I plied with questions galore, beyond
His range He was; I found Him not;
Even two bows length distance from God, I tried;
In that Exalted Court I found Him not;
Then I searched for Him in my own heart;
There did I find Him; elsewhere I found Him not.

Social Concern

The Sufi teachings of equality, brotherhood, love and service appealed to the lowest classes of Indian society. Islam spread in India not because of the Sultans but because of the
The Atman is the fearless. When we pray to a God outside, it is good, only we do not know what we do. When we know the Self, we understand. The highest expression of love is unification.

‘There was a time when I was a woman and he was a man. Still love grew until there was neither he nor I; Only I remember faintly there was a time when there were two. But love came between and made them one.’—Persian Sufi Poem

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 7.30
Use and Abuse of Religion

We live in a world where much blood is shed each day in the name of religion. Religion is often used as a tool to legitimize violence against others who have a different ideology or others who profess a different faith. Today people are increasingly divided all over the world and difference in religion is one among the major reasons that divides people.

In our present age of advancement and scientific innovations plurality is often interpreted as threat and difference is seen as deviation from what one thinks as the accepted norm and hence should be stopped or corrected.

If we turn the pages of history, within Christianity too people have used violence as an expression of one’s own devotion to God. This was in complete contravention to what Jesus preached, practised and taught all through his life. Jesus summarised his whole teaching in the verses in Mathew 22:37-40, Mark 12: 30, 31 & Luke 10: 27. Summary of Jesus’ teaching is found in Jesus’ commandment to love, in Mathew chapter 22 verses 37 to 40 when a question was asked to Jesus. The question was; according to Jesus which was the greatest of all the commandments and to that question Jesus gives the following answer:37

He (Jesus) said to him,
‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Today there is division between people who advocate Love as the essence of Bhakti on the one hand. On the other hand there are others who vehemently support and advocate the use of violence to oppose differences and it is seen as one of the means to express one’s genuine Bhakti to God. Religion is used to both legitimise as well as oppose violence. In this context of conflicting claims and definitions of what is Bhakti, it would be a pertinent exercise to explore what Bhakti or devotion means. This brief article would endeavour to explore Bhakti from a Christian perspective.

The Christian Perspective

The Webster’s encyclopaedic unabridged Dictionary of the English Language gives the following meaning to the word ‘Devotion.’ Devotion means profound dedication, consecration, or earnest attachment to a cause or a person. Thus Devotion can be understood as complete ‘love and loyalty to a person or an activity.’ In religious sense devotion is seen as complete love and loyalty to God. For Swami Vivekananda Bhakti or devotion is ‘A real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing and ending in Love.’
In our attempt to understand Bhakti from a Christian perspective, it is important to search from the words of Jesus what is meant by devotion or Bhakti. Gospel according to St. John, chapter 15 verses 1 to 13, is a very profound text where Jesus essentially talks about what it means to be a disciple or devotee of Christ:

I am (Jesus) the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

‘Abiding’ in Christ: the Essence of Christian Bhakti

The allegory of vine is a very common expression for the people of the Biblical times. In this passage Jesus uses a very familiar imagery to speak about a very important aspect of Christian Faith. Here the relationship between a disciple and Christ is pictured in terms of the relationship between ‘the vine and the branches.’ This text clearly tells that being a disciple of Christ is not just about gaining more knowledge about the Bible or knowledge about Christ but it is about ‘abiding in Christ.’ It is to be in deeper communion and be connected with Christ just as the branches as they have no life without being connected with the vine.

Verse four emphasises the importance of abiding in Christ. The verse goes on to say that just as a branch cannot bear fruit or cannot survive without being connected with the trunk or stem for its nourishment and strength, similarly without being connected with Christ or without abiding in Christ one cannot bear fruit. In verse 5 we can see that a disciple can do nothing by himself or herself without
abiding in Christ. The allegory clearly states that any branch that is disconnected from the plant will wither away and die and will not have life.

Hence being a Christian is definitely more than practicing rituals. It is about making a choice to build a deeper relationship with Christ or to abide in Christ. ‘The allegory of the vine and the branches is the most complete expression of the mystical union between Christ and Christian in the Gospel.’ This union with Christ is a prerequisite for fruitful life.

Another way of understanding the word ‘abiding’ is to remain united. The branch cannot survive without being connected with the vine. This also means that the disciple of Christ has to live a life of complete dependence and constant communion with Christ. Building an intimate relationship, remaining united and abiding in Christ is the essence of Christian Bhakti.

Deeper Mystical Union

Bishop A. J. Appasamy, an indigenous Christian theologian, understood and advocated Christian Bhakti in terms of a deeper mystical experience. For Appasamy experience should precede theology, and theology being an intellectual activity should not precede experience. For he believed receiving theological formula from outside or from others and deriving benefit from them is not a sham but the experience would be shallow. While talking about people who derive their religious experience from pre-formulated theological ideas Appasamy states:

Theology they have; religious experiences they have; but these are not living and fresh. If they were living, their theology, though often nebulous, would have a distinctive note and their religious experience would possess deeper reality. At present it is theology which very largely produces experience: that is, the experience is moulded in the religious belief accepted from outside. But if experience could precede theology, then not being trammelled by any preconceived notions of what ought to be felt and done, it would grow spontaneously, enriching itself in innumerable ways. Theology, being an intellectual statement of such living experience, would then possess a power and genuineness all its own. (A. J. Appasamy, Christianity as Bhakti Marga (The Christian Literature Society, 1930), 6, 7.)

Appasamy puts across the idea that true and genuine Christian life is possible only through mystical union with Christ. He critiques the distinction between mystical and ethical type of Christianity. Ethical type of Christianity is based on the ‘emphasis on right living as the distinguishing mark of every real Christian.’ Here the ethical type of Christianity emphasises on the outward form of Christian faith but it ignores the fact that ‘such a life of character ultimately derives its origin from a life lived in Christ,’ for ‘right living is essentially based upon the believer’s right relation to Christ.’

Appasamy does not advocate dualistic approach of putting mystical against ethical. But for him without a deeper union and relationship with Christ one cannot live a life of love. According to Appasamy mystical faith is the starting point and ethical expression of faith is but a natural outcome of the mystical union with Christ. By mysticism he states that God is not understood by us as the result of careful thought but rather as the object of love and devotion on our part. We do not argue and reason about matters of the Spirit but see them, feel them, experience them.

Thus mystical union or deeper communion with Christ is the starting point
for faith affirmation. Christians who are mystical by temperament and training regard this fellowship with a deeper reverence than others and strive for it with more patient toil.

Thus Christian Bhakti should be understood as deeper mystical union with Christ.

**Love for Others: The Fruit of Christian Bhakti**

Two important things are emphasised in this text from John chapter 15, first abiding in Christ and second bearing fruit as an expression of abiding in Christ. Bearing fruit is a natural outcome of abiding or remaining in Christ. To answer the question what does it mean to abide in Christ? John chapter 15 verses 10, 11 and 12 state that,

> If you keep my (Jesus’) commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

In order to abide in Christ one has to follow Jesus’ commandment. And verse 12 goes on to state that Jesus’ commandment is the command to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. And verse 13 states that greatest of all love is to lay down one’s life for one’s friend just has Jesus laid down his life for other. A Christian theologian Dietrich Bonheoffer states that ‘Jesus Christ was a man for others,’ for Jesus Christ lived a life for others. Abiding in Christ too requires us to become man and woman for others.

As disciples of Christ our devotion to God or our Bhakti should transform our life as a life of love and service to others.

Like many other Bible verses the following Bible verses points to the importance of becoming man and woman for other.

*James 1: 27:* Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. In the epistle of James we are reminded that true and undefiled religious practices are to care for the vulnerable and weaker ones in our society. And *Micah 6: 8* states He has told you, ‘O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’

Prophet Micah reminds us that practice of justice, kindness and humbleness is what God requires of us. In Mathew 25: 40

The King (God) will reply,‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

This Gospel text comes as part of the larger biscope which starts from verse 31 and ends in verse 46 of Chapter 25 and it is titled as ‘Judgement of the Nations.’ Verse 40 carries a powerful message for in God’s final judgement of the nations and the separation of the righteous and the unrighteous. Those who loved and cared for others and choose the path of love and service were considered as righteous.

Thus in our present context of religious fundamentalism, parochialism, indifference and violence, our Bhakti or devotion to God should transform us and make us bear fruits of love and compassion to God and to others.
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- Bible: New International Version.
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- Webster’s encyclopaedic unabridged Dictionary of the English Language

References: 1. Ibid., A. J. Appasamy, 7. 2. Ibid., 8, 9.

The Story of An Unknown Saint

Raghunath Dass had been dead two months, when the Swami [Swami Vivekananda] reached his ashrama. He had been a soldier originally in the British service, and as an outpost sentinel was faithful and good, and much beloved by his officers. One night, however, he heard a Ram Ram party. He tried to do his duty, but ‘Jaya Bolo Ram Chander ki jai!’ maddened him. He threw away his arms and uniform, and joined the worship.

This went on for some time, till reports came to the Colonel. He sent for Raghunath Dass, and asked him whether these were true, and if he knew the penalty. Yes, he knew it. It was to be shot.

‘Well,’ said the Colonel, ‘go away this time, and I shall repeat it to no one. This once I forgive you. But if the same thing happens again, you must suffer the penalty.’

That night, however, the sentinel heard again the Ram-Ram party. He did his best, but it was irresistible. At last he threw all to the winds, and joined the worshippers till morning.

Meanwhile, however, the Colonel’s trust in Raghunath Dass had been so great that he found it difficult to believe anything against him, even on his own confession. So in the course of the night, he visited the outpost, to see for himself. Now Raghunath Dass was in his place, and exchanged the word with him three times. Then, being reassured, the Colonel turned in, and went to sleep.

In the morning appeared Raghunath Dass to report himself and surrender his arms. But the report was not accepted, for the Colonel told him what he had himself seen and heard. Thunderstruck, the man insisted by some means on retiring from the service. Rama it was who had done this for His servant. Henceforth, in very truth, he would serve no other.

‘He became a Vairagi,’ said the Swami, ‘on the banks of the Saraswati. People thought him ignorant, but I knew his power. Daily he would feed thousands. Then would come the grain-seller, after a while, with his bill. ‘Him!’ Raghunath Dass would say, ‘A thousand rupees you say? Let me see. It is a month I think since I have received anything. This will come, I fancy, tomorrow.’ And it always came.’

Someone asked him if the story of the Ram-Ram party were true.

‘What’s the use of knowing such things?’ he answered.

‘I do not ask for curiosity,’ urged the questioner, ‘but only to know if it is possible for such things to happen!’

‘Nothing is impossible with the Lord!’ answered Raghunath Dass. . . .

—Sister Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, p.157-159
SECTION-III

Practice of Bhakti
Training of the Heart

SWAMI BHASKARANANDA

Our Mind

There is something in all of us that helps us to know things. That ‘something’ is none other than the mind. It’s the conscious mind that knows everything. Truly speaking, knowing is the only function of the conscious mind. Even when you say, ‘I don’t know anything’, you must know that you don’t know anything.

Thinking, feeling and willing are all functions of your mind. If you analyze, you will discover that they are no other than ‘knowing’. Thinking and knowing are identical. When you say, ‘I am thinking’, you must have the knowledge that you are thinking. It is impossible for you to think without knowing that you are thinking. It is the same with feeling or willing. Nobody can feel or will anything without knowing that he or she is feeling or willing.

Yet there is some superficial difference between feeling and willing. When your thoughts are associated with your emotions you say that you are feeling. Willing is a feeling of strong determination to achieve something.

The Heart Component

When we use expressions like ‘training of the heart’ we are referring to such thoughts of ours that are associated with our emotions. When you say, ‘I feel in my heart great compassion for those who are suffering’, you are obviously not talking about your anatomical heart that pumps blood all over your body. By the word ‘heart’ you must at that time mean that kind of thinking that is called ‘feeling’.

Feeling can be of various kinds, depending on your thoughts associated with your different emotions. Love, compassion, sympathy, happiness, grief, anger, hate, lustfulness, greed, jealousy, envy, etc., as well as devotion to God or any higher ideal, are some of the emotions. Sometimes we divide them into two classes—positive and negative. But such classification is totally dependent on how we interpret them. For example, the emotion love can be either positive or negative. As you belong to a society of human beings, love of your fellow human beings is considered a positive emotion. But love of something that is detrimental to society as well as to yourself is considered a negative emotion. Love of higher learning is a positive virtue, but love of narcotics is surely not so. Similarly, every emotion can sometimes be interpreted as positive and at other times as negative depending upon how it relates to society or the individual.

In the context of social as well as individual behavior, the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ can easily be substituted by the terms ‘helpful’ and ‘harmful’.

The author is the Head of Vedanta Society of Western Washington, Seattle, USA. He is the editor of Global Vedanta, a quarterly published from there and has several books to his credit.
As the title of this article is ‘Training of the Heart,’ we will have to dwell on how we can get rid of our harmful emotions and replace them with helpful ones.

Purifying the Mind

As discussed earlier, emotions are none other than thoughts, and such thoughts are all located in our minds. Therefore, the expression ‘heart’ can safely be replaced by the word ‘mind.’ For example, the famous statement of Jesus, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,’ can be replaced by the statement ‘Blessed are they whose minds are pure, for they shall see God.’

There is no difference between the heart and the mind. According to the ancient teachings of Vedanta, Divinity is equally present everywhere, but it is not equally manifest in all places. Manifesting our inherent Divinity in the fullest measure is called experiencing God. The only way to transcend suffering in this world is to experience this Divinity. And Divinity can be experienced only by the pure mind. Purification of the mind is called in Sanskrit ‘Chitta-shuddhi’. Without Chitta-shuddhi or the ‘purification of mind’, no God-vision is possible. Following this line of thinking, the title of my article, ‘Training of the Heart’ should mean training of the mind. And the purpose of this training is God-experience—or experiencing God as a palpable Presence.

Now let us try to find out how the mind can be trained to develop that emotion which will enable us to have God experience. And the most helpful emotion that can help us to experience Divinity is intense love and yearning for God.

How can we develop such intense love of God? Can we develop this emotion by suppressing or annihilating all harmful emotions or thoughts? The answer to this second question is ‘No.’

Once a young man named Harinath came to his great saintly teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, and said, ‘I want to get rid of lustfulness; I hate the company of women!’

Sri Ramakrishna said to Harinath, ‘Hating women won’t help; it will only harm you. You can’t get rid of lustfulness that way. Instead, learn to direct your lustful emotion toward God.’

Through these words Sri Ramakrishna taught his disciple Harinath the secret of how to transform lustfulness into love of God. Following his guru’s instruction, Harinath eventually became a spiritually illumined soul—a genuine saint. In the Ramakrishna Order of monks he is highly respected as Swami Turiyananda.

This example shows us how, by training the mind, we can transform all negative or harmful emotions into positive, helpful emotions, such as love and devotion to God. According to Vedanta, love of God is identical with love of the Ultimate Truth. In the scriptures of Vedanta, God has been mentioned as Satyasya Satyam—the Truth of all truths.

The Bhagavad-Gita, the famous scripture of Hinduism, tells us how the emotion expressed as love of sense objects, if obstructed, can successively become transformed into anger, delusion and confused thinking, thus causing great harm to the individual’s mind. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the emotion or thought of lustfulness cannot be suppressed, repressed, or annihilated with the thought of hatred toward the opposite sex. We have to learn the art of transforming lustfulness into love of God.

This is ‘the training of the heart’; worded differently, this is learning to think ‘helpfully,’
and not ‘harmfully,’ to perceive the divine Truth in all of us.

We know that as long as an average person’s mind is conscious, it will have thoughts, either helpful or harmful. There cannot be any conscious mind from which all thoughts can be totally annihilated.

**Dealing with Thoughts**

The first thought that arises in a conscious mind is the ego or the thought of ‘I’. This thought or ego enables us to separate ourselves from everything that we are not. It is this ego that performs all kinds of action, mental or otherwise. Behind all kinds of physical and mental activities is the ego as the doer of such activities.

Once a western young man came to see me in our Ashrama in Seattle. He said to me, ‘Swami, I would like to talk to you about a new technique of meditation that I’ve developed.’

‘What’s that new technique?’ I enquired.

He replied, ‘I make my mind free from all thoughts—this is my new technique of meditation.’

‘But when you have made your mind free from all thoughts don’t you know, “I have made my mind free from all thoughts”?’

‘Yes, I do!’ said the young man.

‘In that case, your mind is not free from all thoughts,’ I argued, ‘because you still have one thought in your mind, which is: “I have made my mind free from all thoughts”’.

The young man was puzzled, thanked me nervously, and left shortly thereafter.

He could have argued: ‘This thought of mine acts like a broom; it cleanses my mind of all other thoughts. After that, I throw away the broom—my last thought. Thus my mind becomes free from all thoughts.’

Even then, he couldn’t have denied that his ego would still linger on behind his last thought, as the thinker of his last thought. Ego is a thought, so as long as his ego persisted, the young man wouldn’t really be able to make his mind free from all thoughts.

An average person’s mind and body are closely connected to each other. If something bad happens to the body the mind becomes affected, and vice-versa. Then again, our bodies are the product of the food and drink that we take. The gross portion of our food and drink form our physical bodies. Our minds also derive strength from the subtle portion of the food and drink that we take. So, in order to develop a pure mind we have to learn to take the right kind of food and drink. Food or drink that excites the mind should be strictly avoided. This will help us to acquire a serene and pure mind.

**Making the Mind One-point**

One also has to learn how to control the mind and make it one-pointed. When the entire energy of the mind is concentrated on just one thought, that thought becomes the most intense thought. It becomes like a laser beam in which all the photons have been controlled and concentrated in order to flow in a straight line. A beam of dissipated light cannot penetrate even a thin layer of opaque paper. But a laser beam can easily penetrate through a plate of the hardest steel.

When love of God becomes that intense, it becomes like a laser beam. It penetrates through the barrier of unknowing and enables us to reach our inherent Divinity. When that happens, we transcend this world of time and space. We transcend the mind and the ego. Only Divinity—the eternal state of infinite Knowledge, never-ending Bliss and Consciousness—remains. This is experiencing God by becoming one with Divinity. This is the goal for which we should learn to train our hearts. □
Before dwelling upon what Sri Ramakrishna prescribed for developing Bhakti, let us look at an important aspect of all spiritual practices.

Three Questions of Philosophy

According to Indian tradition, any philosophy worth its name must deal with three questions: tattva, hita and purushartha—the Truth it seeks, the Path it delineates and the Goal or the good it will bring. All the three are a kind of ‘knowledge.’ To understand this further:

**Tattva:** It refers to the fact that before one takes up any course of action, one must know what one wants to obtain. Without that the very desire to attain or struggle to attain that will not arise in our mind.

**Hita:** It refers to the means or the path by which one can reach the goal. In philosophical tradition of Vedanta, for instance, there are many statements understanding which one can reach the goal of spiritual pursuits.

**Purushartha:** It refers to knowing the benefits one derives from such a pursuit. The greater the gain the greater would be the motivation.

Bearing these three in mind, when we read Swami Vivekananda’s teachings, we find him brilliantly summing up the core of Vedanta through the following succinct statements:

1. ‘Each soul is potentially divine’—that is the Tattva. Vedanta believes that all beings are in essence divine. The intrinsic nature of all living and even material objects is atman, the divinity. The differences are only in manifestation, not in essence. The nature of atman is *sat* (pure existence), *chit* (pure consciousness) and *ananda* (pure bliss). While we are all divine, we have temporarily forgotten our divinity due to the inscrutable power of avidya (ignorance).

2. ‘The goal is to manifest this divinity, by controlling nature—external and internal’—is the Purushartha. If our true nature is divine we have to manifest it sooner or later; there is no alternative!

3. ‘Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy, by one, or more, or all of these, and be free’—that is Hita. The Avidya that covers the Reality can be removed only by sincerely following any of the four yogas. All Yogas ultimately lead to the same goal of spiritual realisation. ‘This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.’

This was a reconfirmation of what Sri Ramakrishna had said repeatedly: ‘the goal of life is to realize God—to love God, and love for God, Bhakti, is the one essential thing.’

The path of Bhakti has been rightly eulogised as the easiest and most effective in
the present times. Devotion to God as a path to experience our divine nature finds its places in the Upanishads itself. The Shvetasvatara Upanishad refers to this and speaks of the importance of self-surrender:

He who has supreme devotion (bhakti) towards God, and towards the teacher, to him verily, all these things declared (thus far) will reveal themselves.²

**Defining Bhakti**

*Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu* of Madhusudan Sarasvati says: the emotion which thoroughly sooths the heart, in which one intensely feels a sense of ‘own-ness’ or oneness is called ‘love’—Bhakti—by the wise. Likewise in the *Narada-pancharatra* we find that Bhishma, Prahlada, Uddhava and Narada have termed Bhakti to be the feeling of ‘my own’ towards God. Bhakti is deep and strong attachment towards God, to the exclusion of everything else. Sage Narada defines Bhakti in his Sutras as of the nature of supreme love for God. Sage Shandilya calls Bhakti as utmost attachment to God.

Swami Vivekananda defines Bhakti in his own inimitable way by quoting Prahlada’s famous prayer (given in the *Vishnu Purana*). He calls it as ‘the best definition of Bhakti’. Prahlada’s prayer is as follows:

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

Swamiji points that Bhakti does not kill out our tendencies; it does not go against the common human nature, but only gives it a higher and more powerful direction. Everyone is naturally drawn to the objects of senses. The path of Bhakti tells us to turn that love for sense-objects Godward. This re-direction
of our innate love towards God is called Bhakti.

Sri Ramakrishna says in his Gospel again and again that the best path for this age is Bhakti—the path of Bhakti as laid down by Narada. This involves singing the Name and Glories of the Lord and praying to Him with a longing heart, ‘O God, give me knowledge, give me devotion, and reveal Yourself to me.’

In the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna a devotee asks Sri Ramakrishna, ‘How can I develop love for God?’ Sri Ramakrishna replied, ‘Repeat His name, and sins will disappear. Thus you will destroy lust, anger, the desire for creature-comforts, and so on.’ Emphasising the point further he says, ‘A poet has compared devotion (of God) to a tiger. As the tiger devours animals, devotion also swallows up all the arch enemies of man, such as lust, passion, and the rest. Once the devotion to God is fully awakened, all evil passions like lust and anger are completely destroyed.’

A devotee asks, ‘We have passions like anger and lust. What shall we do with these?’ Sri Ramakrishna answers,

Direct the six passions to God. The impulse of lust should be turned into the desire to have intercourse with Atman. Feel angry at those who stand in your way to God, be greedy for Him. If you must have the feeling of I and mine, then associate it with God. Say, for instance, ‘My Rama, my Krishna!’ If you must have pride, then feel like Vibhishana, who said, ‘I have touched the feet of Rama with my head; I will not bow this head before anyone else.’

When one is intoxicated with prema, one sees God in all beings. The Gopis saw Krishna in everything; to them the whole world was filled with Krishna. They said that they themselves were Krishna. They were then in a God-intoxicated state.

This is the highest state of Bhakti one can think of. Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are replete with many similar sublime passages on Bhakti.

**Is Bhakti Yoga Really Easy?**

Of the four Yogas, it is generally stated, Bhakti Yoga is the easiest and the most natural. That is what Sri Ramakrishna said: in the present Iron Age (Kali Yuga), the path of Bhakti as preached by Narada is the best and the most suited. But then is Bhakti really so easy?

The fact is that no yoga is easy; all yogas are difficult. They are challenging and require much hard work and sacrifice. Nothing great can be achieved easily. The ‘easy-ness’ of the Bhakti Yoga only stems from the fact that it deals with emotions and most of us are more emotional than iron-willed or calm in mind or sharp enough in our thinking and that is why Bhakti is somewhat easier. Every path of Yoga involves a particular faculty like intellect, will, concentration and emotions. Someone with more intellectual bend of mind will find Jnana Yoga more appealing and so on. To the emotional person, surely Bhakti Yoga is more appealing and relatively easier. But one should not forget one has to exert oneself in spiritual practices, irrespective of the path of Yoga one follows.

Each one is a potential Bhakta. Emotions are inbuilt in us. Swami Vivekananda gives a brilliant argument in this regard. He says that love itself is God. God is omnipresent, and so is love. Like God’s omnipresence, love’s omnipresence is also a fact. Therefore, everyone is a potential Bhakta. Everyone is capable of loving God. Generally we love a thing or somebody. Love is naturally present in everyone. Bhakti means turning this power of love towards God.
To turn this inherent love towards God requires practising certain spiritual disciplines prescribed by Sri Ramakrishna and other great teachers; they help us acquire Bhakti.

When we love something, it is a kind of worship. Says Swami Vivekananda,

The question was asked: How to worship [God]? Worship Him as dearer than all your possessions, dearer than all your relatives, dearer than your children. [Worship Him as] the one you love as Love itself. There is one whose name is infinite Love. That is the only definition of God. Do not care if this . . . universe is destroyed. What do we care as long as He is infinite love? [Do you] see what worship means? All other thoughts must go. Everything must vanish except God. The love the father or mother has for the child, [the love] the wife [has] for the husband, the husband for the wife, the friend for the friend—all these loves concentrated into one must be given to God. Now, if the woman loves the man, she cannot love another man. If the man loves the woman, he cannot love another [woman]. Such is the nature of love.

My old Master used to say, ‘Suppose there is a bag of gold in this room, and in the next room there is a robber. The robber is well aware that there is a bag of gold. Would the robber be able to sleep? Certainly not. All the time he would be crazy thinking how to reach the gold.’ . . . [Similarly], if a man loves God, how can he love anything else? How can anything else stand before the mighty love of God? Everything else vanishes [before it]. How can the mind stop without going crazy to find [that love], to realise, to feel, to live in that?’

**Five Commandments of Sri Ramakrishna**

One of the instructions given by Sri Ramakrishna for developing devotion, of love for God is that an aspiring devotee must assume a *definite attitude* towards God. Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘A devotee must assume toward God a particular attitude. One must think of God as one’s father, or mother, or child, and so forth.’ We all have experienced love for all these earthly relations, and now the same love is to be directed towards God. The scriptures also say: ‘You are my Father, my Mother, my Friend, and my Beloved. You are my wealth, my scholarship, my everything.’

Sri Ramakrishna spoke of Jnana-mishrita Bhakti—Bhakti mixed with Knowledge. For an easier understanding of Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings for living spiritual life and developing Bhakti, his teachings may be classified into five commandments:

1. ‘Repeat God’s name and sing His glories.’ (tattva and purushartha)
2. ‘Keep holy company; and now and then visit God’s devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities.’ (that is Bhakti yoga)
3. ‘It is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude. When a tree is young it should be fenced all around; otherwise it may be destroyed by cattle.’ (that is Raja yoga)
4. ‘And you should always discriminate between the real and the unreal. God alone is real, the Eternal Substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind.’ (that is Jnana yoga)
5. ‘Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all—with wife and children, father and mother—and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you.’ (that is Karma Yoga)

On his second visit to Sri Ramakrishna, M., the chronicler of *The Gospel of Sri
Ramakrishna, received these five commandments from Sri Ramakrishna. M. practised them to perfection all his life and taught them to devotees who used to visit him.

The first of these commandments indicates tattva and purushartha. ‘God exists and the realization of God is the only goal of life’—until a devotee is convinced of this fact he will not feel an intense yearning for God-realization. The rest of the four commandments point out the ways one can realize God (hita).

These five commandments are of supreme importance for those who wish to progress in spiritual life. All aspirants, especially the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, must remember and assess their spiritual progress in the light of these commandments. If followed faithfully, they are sure to lead to the highest realisation. To the extent the devotees are able to put them into practice, to that extent they may be said to progress in spiritual life.

Prapatti—the Path of Self-surrender

What counts ultimately is God’s grace. Without His grace our efforts do not bear fruit. Realisation of God can be got only by His grace. No spiritual discipline can ever bring it. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna tells Arjuna that this Maya which keeps us in bondage is divine. Only through the worship of the Lord, by His grace alone can it be overcome. And the way to receive God’s grace is through complete self-surrender.

It is not that God’s grace is waiting somewhere. The breeze of His grace is blowing day and night over your head. Unfurl the sails of your boat (mind), if you want to make rapid progress through the ocean of life. Sri Ramakrishna was very emphatic about surrendering oneself to God. He says:

Can one know God through reasoning? Be His servant, surrender yourself to Him, and then pray to Him. Surrender to the Divine Mother.

God incarnates Himself as man to teach the path of devotion. He exhorts people to cultivate self-surrender to God. The devotee surrenders himself completely to his Divine Beloved and in the end becomes one with Him. Two things necessary for the realization of God are faith and self-surrender.

In order to love God, one must pray to God and surrender oneself entirely to God. The essence of Bhakti consists in unceasing prayer for light and love, and surrender to the Divine Master or the Divine Mother. God saves one, only if one surrenders oneself completely to Him.

Prapatti or self-surrender has six aspects:

1. To take a vow that one will act according to what is pleasing to God.
2. Never to do what displeases God.
3. Tremendous faith that God alone can save one; God never forsakes one who has taken refuge in Him.
4. Choosing God alone as one’s protector.
5. Total surrender at the feet of the Lord.
6. Thereafter to remain as a humble devotee with the awareness that it was possible to surrender to God only through His grace (one may recall here Girish Ghosh’s offering the power of attorney to Sri Ramakrishna). Sri Krishna says in the Gita, ‘give up all cares and duties (dharma) and take refuge in Me.’ This is the way of self-surrender.

Growing in Bhakti

How do we know we are progressing in spiritual life and becoming real devotees? Madhusudana Saraswati, the great saint-composer of 16th century India, in his commentary
on this last verse of the Gita quoted above (called charma shaloka) describes three stages of the Bhakti-evolution. He says, in the first stage a devotee is firmly convinced, ‘I belong to God’. In the second stage he strongly feels, ‘God belongs to me’. In the last stage he knows ‘I am God’.

‘Bhakti is the one thing essential,’ said Sri Ramakrishna. When one sincerely strives to love God, one is sure to obtain God’s grace and ultimately realise the real purpose of human life which is God experience. That is the way to blessedness and peace. May all of us be blessed with Bhakti! □

References:
1. CW, 1:124  
2. Shvetashvatara Upanishad, VI.23  
3. Gospel, 220  
4. CW, 6:73  
5. Gospel, 106  
6. Gita, 18.66

Repeating God’s Name

God’s name should be repeated with the utmost love, sincerity, and self-surrender. ‘Before commencing your daily meditation, first think of your utter helplessness and then slowly begin to meditate as directed by your guru.’

A disciple asked if the effect of karma performed in previous births could be cancelled by the repetition of God’s name. ‘One must experience the effect of past action,’ the Mother replied. ‘None can escape it. But japa minimizes its intensity. For example, a man who, as a result of his past karma, is destined to lose his leg, may instead suffer from the prick of a thorn in his foot.’

She asked the disciples to be careful about the practice of breath-control and postures. ‘The mind,’ she said, ‘is restless by nature. Therefore at the outset one may begin meditation by regulating the breath a little. This helps to make the mind steady. But one must not overdo it; otherwise the brain gets heated. Be careful about yogic postures. If you continue these exercises a long time, the mind may be diverted to the body. Again if, once having started them, you give them up, your health may be affected. Therefore you should use discretion.’

Love of God is essential for spiritual progress. ‘If you love a human being, you will have to suffer for it. He is blessed, indeed, who can love God alone. There is no suffering in loving God. Be devoted to God and take shelter at His feet. It is enough to remember that there is someone—call Him Father or Mother—who is always protecting you.’

—Holy Mother by Swami Nikilananda, p. 239
Distinguishing Characteristics of Bhakti

SWAMI ATMARUPANANDA

Definition of Bhakti

What is Bhakti? In his celebrated work Vivekachudamani, Adi Shankara famously defines it as svasvarup-anusandhanam, or ‘the search for one’s own true nature’.1 That is a very good definition for the path of knowledge, Jnana Yoga; but it doesn’t speak for the path of Bhakti. For that, we have to go Sage Narada, who defines Bhakti as sa tu asmin paramapremarupa, or ‘it is of the nature of supreme love for Him,’ for God.2 Sage Shandilya says almost the same: sa paranuraktirishvare, or ‘it is supreme attachment to God.’3 Bhakti in the context of Bhakti Yoga, then, means love for God, nothing less.

For this discussion, however, let us start with the most generalized definition possible of Bhakti, so generalized that it is not even specifically religious, but includes the definitions of Narada, Shandilya, and Shankara, includes the concept of bodhicitta4 of the Buddhists, and indeed it includes any type of devotion, secular or religious, worldly or spiritual. There is a value in such a generalized definition: it gives a vast context for understanding the specific, even if it doesn’t address the specific.

For instance, if we speak of women in general, we are speaking of a specific subset of human beings. But if we abstract out the quality of ‘femininity’, then we can see how it exists also in men, in animals male and female, and even in inanimate objects. That isn’t enough for understanding women, but it does allow us to relate essential qualities of womanhood to a vast field of experience, and then to understand something of women within that vast context.

Goal Orientation and Bhakti

For this article, we will define Bhakti, devotion, in very general, non-religious terms as ‘goal orientation’, that is, aspiration towards a goal. That works in business, in education, in sports, and in religion. No, it isn’t yet helpful for understanding much about Bhakti Yoga, but we are taking it as a starting point.

When we apply this general definition—’goal orientation’—to Bhakti Yoga, the goal is God, and the nature of the orientation is love. How does this differ from ordinary forms of goal orientation in society?

In ordinary goal orientation, the goal is objective, limited, and definable; and it is attainable by the ego-self, resulting in a degree of satisfaction. The purpose is to acquire, or to conquer, or to comprehend, or to accomplish. And the nature of the orientation is often competitive, even if one is competing against oneself (as in trying for one’s own satisfaction to better one’s score in a single-player computer game).

None of this is true of Bhakti. Bhakti is not the search for a limited, definable goal that is objective; it is a meeting of consciousnesses, the apparently limited with the Unlimited,
the apparently flawed with the utterly Pure and Perfect. And it is a meeting beginning and ending in love. It is undertaken not in a competitive spirit but in a spirit of longing, a longing which is a very special type of aspiration called vyakulata by Sri Ramakrishna: the longing of a lover to be united with the Beloved.

Moreover, in Bhakti there is no possession, no acquisition, no conquest of the Divine Object. There is the sacrifice of self into the Divine Self, a sacrifice of love.

Thus, though Bhakti is certainly a type of goal orientation, we find that it is in almost all respects different from non-religious orientation, and in some respects different even from other types of religious orientation, like the search for Self-knowledge in the path of knowledge, or like the bodhichitta of the Buddhist.

God

Bhakti begins as a search, not for an object, but for the Divine Object, a very unique Object: God is the antaryamin, the Inner Controller; He is the Soul of the soul. This means that He is within the subject, the Infinite ‘I’ within the limited I, the very Source of all the infinite number of limited I’s, the Original of which they are all images. And He is consciousness itself, not a thing. He is objectified for the sake of love, and for the sake of accessibility. How can I love the innermost Self of the self, the I of the I? How can I think of it, how can I meditate on it without objectifying it?

Therefore, God is the Divine ‘Thou’. Though for the sake of discourse we speak of God as He or She or It, God is one who can never be experienced as third person. When in speech I use the third-person grammatical construction, I am objectifying whatever I speak about—treating it as an object, even if I’m speaking about another person. But God is not a thing, not an object, and can never be approached in the third person, can never be approached as a thing.

To address one as ‘thou’ is to enter into a face-to-face relationship, as it were, with another consciousness. Except in the poetic imagination we never speak to a wall or a stone or a stick as ‘thou’. We say ‘thou’ to a person, and personhood has consciousness as its defining characteristic.

What then is personhood? The essence of personhood is relational consciousness: consciousness that can relate to another consciousness. A person can relate to another person, can understand, can sympathize, can console, can love.

In Brahman there is no world, no person, no other with whom to relate; Brahman is unaware of any world, unaware of any Jiva or individual soul, because there is no Maya within Brahman. Therefore we don’t pray to Brahman, don’t worship Brahman, don’t build temples to Brahman. We worship God. God, according to the Vedanta, is Brahman seen in relationship to the world. God is the infinite, universal consciousness in which this and all possible universes exist, utterly awake, utterly aware, which is why Sri Ramakrishna used to say that God hears even the footfall of an ant; will He not hear the sincere prayers of a devotee? That’s why millions of people belonging to different religions and living in countries all over the world can pray to God at the same time, and know that God has heard.

The ‘God Problem’

A hurdle of understanding presents itself to those who have a background in Advaita philosophy: Advaita makes God seem like a temporary illusion that we accept in order to
realize Brahman. Can anyone dedicate himself to an illusion, if he knows it to be an illusion? Can one surrender one’s all to a temporary illusion, assumed just for the sake of practice? Can one, like the moth, sacrifice one’s being into the Fire of an illusory God? Can one maintain vigil, spend hours in daily prayer and meditation, face all of the struggles of self-transcendence for an expedient means which will have to be discarded if we want the real Truth? No.

Then how to understand statements like the Swami Vivekananda’s, that the Personal God is the highest reading of the Absolute from within Maya?5

By understanding the implied meaning. The Swami made this statement in the context of the path of knowledge, Jnana Yoga, and so the emphasis was on Brahman, the Impersonal Reality, not on the Personal God.6 It was a merging of the Personal into the Impersonal. But the Impersonal can as well be merged into the Personal if we take the implied meaning of the Swami’s statement. That is, there are not two Realities, the Personal and the Impersonal. It is one Reality, seen in two different ways. Why do we put the emphasis on the unreality of the Personal God, when the actual emphasis should be on the oneness of Reality, appearing in two ways? The problem is caused by thinking that Maya means illusion, which we think therefore to mean that the Personal God is illusory. No, the Personal God is the same reality as the Impersonal Absolute, in relationship to the universe and all of its beings.

Let’s take an analogy, helped by the poetic imagination. If I am a devotee of God and I approach God closer and closer, I gradually become intoxicated with the beauty of God, lost in the love of God, mad with the joy of God, as we see from the lives of saints. Then, like the fabled moth that loves the candle flame so much that it incinerates itself in the fire of love, I plunge into God, offer my very being into the infinite Being of God and find that I have become one with Love itself, one with Beauty itself, one with Joy itself. By doing that, have I realized that the flame was a convenient illusion and the inside state is something else, the real Reality? No, as I approach the Flame of God, I fall more and more in love with its fascinating beauty, so much so that finally I want to lose myself in it. The Flame I worship and then the state of oneness with it are experiences of one Reality from two standpoints. It is I who have changed my standpoint, not God.

That is why many Christian saints who experienced union with God, said that in such union they lost themselves in the very being of God, where all distinctions, even the Trinity, disappeared. They didn’t proclaim that they had been wrong earlier in worshipping God, that they had been worshipping an illusion, that now they knew better and had cast aside the Personal God in order to realize the real Reality. No, in truth, it was One Divine Reality: the God they approached with worshipful devotion, and the depths of the abyss of God (as some of them called it) into which they lost themselves. That is the Personal/Impersonal Reality.

Of course, it is true that the closer we get to God, the more we understand and the clearer our vision; but that is not the same as worshipping a convenient illusion until we can cast it away.

**How does Bhakti differ from other Yogas?**

One can practise all the other yogas without even believing in a Personal God, but Bhakti Yoga requires faith in God. If we don’t have it? We have two choices: we can take up another yoga and avoid the question, or we
can do as Sri Ramakrishna used to suggest: we can pray to God, ‘If you exist, please show yourself to me.’ At first that sounds irrational. Yes, it may be irrational from a purely intellectual standpoint, but it doesn’t contradict the logic of experience. Experience follows its own logic, sometimes quite different from intellectual logic. If we can pray sincerely as Sri Ramakrishna suggests, we will find faith growing in us—God’s answer to our prayer; and that will be enough to begin.

Each yoga has its particular method, its particular way of describing the goal, and what it sees as the primary source of our bondage. For instance, Jnana Yoga sees ignorance of our true identity as the source of our bondage, and direct knowledge of the Self as the goal; Karma Yoga sees attachment as the source of our bondage, and unconditioned freedom as the goal; and Rāja Yoga sees ignorance as the source of our bondage, and direct insight into the truth through a perfectly controlled mind as the means to enlightenment.

Bhakti Yoga, however, begins and ends in love. It sees the cause of our bondage as forgetfulness of God. Therefore the essence of all practice in Bhakti Yoga is remembrance of God. The goal is the full realization in direct experience of the God of Love, whereby the world and its bondage fall away and God alone remains as the Heart of our heart, the Soul of our soul, the I of our I, the Ocean of love in which we are waves.

Of the four yogas, Karma and Raja Yogas are concerned more with method than with the nature of Reality: both can be practised from the standpoint of Bhakti or of Jnana. Bhakti and Jnana Yogas, on the other hand, are concerned primarily with the nature of Reality, and the practice in each follows from that. Therefore let us look at the differences between the paths of Bhakti and Jnana.

Jnana is a search for oneself, that is, for one’s own Self, the source of the sense of ‘I’, which takes place by turning awareness back on itself, as it were, and seeking its source, not as an object but as one’s own subjective identity. Bhakti, on the other hand, is a search for the Divine Object—God, the Beloved.

For the Jnani the central question driving the spiritual quest is ‘Who am I?’ He seeks to know himself, to know the Self, as unrelated and unconditioned. Bhakti, however, is a search for the God of Love, and therefore it is a relational search: I seek, in the words of Swami Vivekananda, ‘the eternal relation between the eternal soul and the eternal God.’ My primary question is not ‘Who am I?’ but ‘Who art Thou, my Love?’ And I come to know myself in relationship to God.

In the path of knowledge, one begins by denying the reality of the world; one tries to see its dreamlike nature, to see that it exists within consciousness only. The Bhakta, however, need not reject the world as unreal (though to reject its reality is not contrary to devotion). The Bhakta usually follows the advice of the Isha Upanishad—to see everything in and through God, to ‘cover over everything with God.’ Most Bhaktas, then, begin the path without questioning the world’s reality. In time, however, by following the advice of the Upanishad, the world is seen as real only because it is God’s Lila, His play, not real in itself.

In the path of knowledge, self-effort is stressed. There is a place for grace also, as seen in the Katha Upanishad. Sri Ramana Maharishi also speaks much about grace on the path of knowledge, and there is the first verse of the Avadhuta Gita which says, ‘Only by the grace of God does one acquire the desire for nonduality.’ Moreover, the grace of the guru in the path of knowledge is praised very

T h e  V e d a n t a  K e s a r i  ~ 6 2 1 ~  D E C E M B E R  2 0 1 5
highly. Yet, compared to Bhakti Yoga, grace seems almost an after-thought in the path of Jnana. In Bhakti Yoga, grace is central. Why is that so?

Bhakti is a path of self-surrender. God is the Doer, the Performer of all action; through His will countless universes come into being and all that happens within them happens accordingly to His will. Therefore I seek His grace rather than reinforce the illusion that I am the doer.

The Beloved is the repository of all knowledge, all power, all blessedness. What then do we have that we can surrender? The ego, the sense of doership, the sense of separation. That is, we surrender only limitation posing as individuality, insufficiency posing as self-sufficiency, separation posing as independence, and that in return for the Ocean of Blessedness, the Ocean of Love, the Ocean of Wisdom, the Eternal Ocean of Light which illumines every heart. Therefore the great Sufi Bhakta Rumi says:

I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on: all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind ever conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
Proclaims in organ tones, To Him we shall return.11

Advaita Bhakti

We have distinguished the path of Bhakti from that of Jnana, but let us now bring Bhakti together with Advaita, nondualism, and indicate how it is that Advaita is compatible both with the path of Jnana and of Bhakti. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are only the latest in a long line of teachers in India who combined Advaitic knowledge with the highest Bhakti. This combination is also beautifully illustrated in some of the great Sufi masters and Christian saints.12

Let us first be clear that it is not necessary to combine the two: one can follow either path separately. Many, however, are nowadays intellectually attracted by the philosophical clarity of Advaita, but emotionally attracted by the beauty of Bhakti. For them, we give these last few words.

The Jnani seeks knowledge of the Self through direct experience of identity with the Self. The Bhakta seeks love of the personal God. Sri Ramanujacharya says that Bhakti is a special type of knowledge—jnana-vishesha—knowledge inflamed with love. Both Jnana and Bhakti are, then, searches within consciousness.

The Jnani seeks the Self, rejecting all objectivity as Maya, whereas the Bhakta seeks the Divine Object. But as we have said, God is a special type of Object: He is the Self of the self, the ‘I’ of the little ‘I’, the Inner Controller or antaryamin, objectified for the sake of love. Or better, God is beyond the distinction of subject and object, but it is He alone who appears as both.

The Jnani seeks to rend the veil of Maya through the sword of knowledge, while the Bhakta prays to God to unlock the gate that leads beyond Maya.

Jnana Yoga is the impersonal path, Bhakti the personal. But as we progress along either path, we find that we lose the sense of personality and individuality—the Jnani by becoming the witness of the body and mind and thereby dissociating from them, and the Bhakta by surrendering the sense of self to God, thereby forgetting it.

Therefore, the paths have different emphases, but those emphases are not
mutually exclusive or mutually contradictory, and both paths are compatible with Advaita.

_How_ one combines Bhakti with an Advaitic outlook is a different and much larger question: there are as many answers as there are people who do it. But it has been done by many, many aspirants and has led many to illumination. To give one example of how it has been done, Sri Ramakrishna says in the _Gospel_, placing his hand on his heart:

There are two persons in this. One, the Divine Mother . . . Yes, one is She. And the other is Her devotee. It is the devotee who broke his arm, and it is the devotee who is now ill. Do you understand?13

If some object that Sri Ramakrishna was an Incarnation of God, and therefore he speaks so, then listen to Swami Vivekananda, who says by way of teaching others:

What becomes of God and worship[?] . . . I have divided myself into God and me; I become the worshipped and I worship myself.14

Isn’t that what we do in ritualistic puja? We visualize the luminous and ever-conscious Self as taking form as the Deity within the heart. Then we take the Deity from the heart and place Him or Her on the altar for the sake of worship: that is, we objectify the infinite Self for the sake of worship.

Another example, perhaps easier for most, is to think of oneself as a wave on the ocean of God: God is all, I am just a wave. Eventually, as we see in the lives of great saints, even the sense of identity as a wave disappears. Swami Vivekananda says that we should let all be I or all Thou, but let there be no second.15 The result of that is beautifully illustrated in the life of the Sufi mystic Mansour al Hallaj (858-922 CE), famous for saying _ana 'l-Haqq_—‘I am the Truth,’ for which he was executed in Baghdad. It is said that he would point to his cloak and say, ‘There is nothing within this cloak but God.’ In a poem he said:

_I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart. I asked, ‘Who are You?’ He replied, ‘You.’ _

References

1. Verse 31. _व्यवसापानुसारां भक्तिरितियभिधीयते_.
2. _Narada Bhakti Sutra_ 2.
3. _Shandilya Bhakti Sutra_ 2.
4. _Bodhicitta_ is the firm and lasting resolution to seek enlightenment for all sentient beings birth after birth, postponing one’s own merging into nirvana until all beings are liberated.
6. In the lecture ‘Reason and Religion’, where this statement is found, the Swami was making the case for a religion based on the demands of reason, which also explains his approach.
8. _ईशानायानं सर्वं यज्ञिकं जगत्यां जगत्_ Isa _Upanishad_ 1.
9. _यं एवं वृण्येत स्तन्तं तपयः_ _Katha Upanishad_.
10. _इशारानुग्रहदेव पूर्वाभ्ययत्वाभास_._ Avadhuta _Gita_, 1.1.
12. Sufis were sometimes persecuted by the orthodox Muslim authorities for their views, and Christian Church authorities never allowed the full expression of nondualism. But among the Sufis one finds clear statements of nonduality, and those Christian saints who experienced the nondual state found ways to express it that stayed within the bounds of orthodoxy, such as speaking of losing themselves in the abyss of God where they were so enraptured that they ‘forgot’ all distinctions.
15. Ibid., cf.1.323 .
Man is an Emotional Being

Existentially, we humans are emotional beings.

Somehow we have been blessed by the creator or the creation with this special feature—emotionality. We generally respond to things happening in and around us emotionally. In dealing with situations all of us also experience the fact that our emotions sometimes are high and some other times low. Is it something outside us that is driving changes in our emotions, or do we ourselves have a share in it? Arguably the outside has its share; but can it be rationally said that it is solely responsible for bringing about changes inside us?

Daniel Goleman, the celebrated writer of Emotional Intelligence and some other best-seller books, says in an interview:

If your emotional abilities aren’t in hand, if you don’t have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can’t have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.¹

The phrase ‘self-awareness’ used by him needs to be underscored. Else we will not know how to handle this huge store of emotional treasure in us. As dealing with situations mechanically does not make us any better than robots, even so unbridled emotions not only harm others, but also us. Most of the times, we ourselves are the loser. When we use this dynamic force for a constructive purpose we would gain. There is a well-known saying in the management circle, thanks to Emotional Intelligence, that CEOs generally ‘get hired for high IQ and get fired for low EQ’. Swami Vivekananda has said,

When there is conflict between the heart and the brain, let the heart be followed, because intellect has only one state, reason, and within that, intellect works, and cannot get beyond. It is the heart which takes one to the highest plane, which intellect can never reach; it goes beyond intellect, and reaches to what is called inspiration. Intellect can never become

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inspired; only the heart when it is enlightened, becomes inspired. An intellectual, heartless man never becomes an inspired man. It is always the heart that speaks in the man of love; it discovers a greater instrument than intellect can give you, the instrument of inspiration. Just as the intellect is the instrument of knowledge, so is the heart the instrument of inspiration.²

This faculty has to be used in a positive way.

**Bhakti, the Supreme Emotion**

Bhakti or devotion for God is also a form of emotion. But it is not devoid of ‘self-awareness’. This self-awareness comes from establishing a relation with God. If God is our Father then we are His children. This is our self-awareness. We are aware of our dignity with reference to our relation with God. Let us discuss three aspects of our topic: God, self-awareness and Bhakti.

1. Two Approaches to God
   i) *The Personal God Debate*

   Humanity faces multi-pronged challenges. And most of the challenges cannot be solved in isolation. Challenges have taken global form and dimensions. So there is a tendency to under-estimate individual problems and bother about collective and big questions. In this way, our spiritual quest and for that matter our quest for God skips its individual spiritual dimension. We ask questions like (i) Why is there so much suffering? (ii) Why can’t God stop natural catastrophes?

   In dealing with the first question we may remind ourselves of what Gautama Buddha, the ambassador of peace, says. He says that life is nothing but suffering. That seems to be the general message of such great teachers! To our mind, modern Science does not say anything better than that! However, by saying that, Buddha does not mean that there is no end to suffering. That is why he preached the four noble truths: there is suffering; there is a cause of suffering; there is an end to suffering; and there is a way out of all suffering. Maharishi Patanjali thinks that for a discerning person life is nothing but suffering³. Hence one should follow a way in order to go out of suffering. The question ‘why’ is in no way going to change the situation.

   As for the second question we would like to remember that the natural phenomena are but natural. When we have been living on an Earth the inside of which is boiling at more than 6,000 degree Celsius, and outside is floating without a hook in what scientists call a ‘Goldilocks zone’, how do we expect to be free from observable natural happenings? But looking at the second question we may discover a clever effort on our part to hide another corollary to it, and that is, ‘Why can’t God stop man-made calamities and destructions?’ The answer will be perilous for us! If we are rational, we will try to find out a solution to the problem ourselves. If we are able to stop such man-made disasters, we may be less interested in raising such questions.

   What are small questions, then? Yes, there are small questions and yet sometimes the most difficult ones like: Do we feel the pains and sufferings ourselves? Do we feel to be one with others when they are suffering? Do we feel helpless in the face of calamities?

   If we say, ‘Yes’, then there are innumerable ways out of these things as suggested by the great benefactors of humanity, the saints, and the universal messages in the holy books. Even as we are concerned with big questions of global dimensions, even so we are bothered about narrow outlooks presented by religions, holy books, and exclusivist theories and practices.
Actually speaking, there is distaste for Personal God in those who are ego-centered and materialistically minded. Moreover, this phenomenon seems to be an outcome of our reactions to some parochial teachings of holy books and also to privileges demanded and enjoyed by some in the name of religion. It is an unwilling distaste! Therefore it is ‘difficult’ for some to accept Bhakti as a valid path.

In order to follow the path of Bhakti one has to accept God as the goal. According to some religious views God is personal God, and to some others God is impersonal. To some God cannot be an object of seeing, and to some others God can be seen. Some dogmatic people will not accept that God can be seen or God can be a personal God! They would rather fight others tooth and nail to stick to their dogmatic ideas, than accepting the fact that others can also be right! Obviously they fight at the level of theory. After hearing that some people were publicizing that Sri Ramakrishna was an Incarnation of God, he reacted saying, ‘One is a doctor and another is a dramatist. What do they know about God?’ Such theoreticians are the breeding ground of fanaticism!

Conflicting Interest

(a) Some religions present a Personal God as someone who has the right to punish and reward. We love rewards anyway. So there is no question regarding: Why should He keep me in peace? Why should He make me rich? Why shouldn’t He make me lame, etc.? On the other hand, we have no interest in punishment. Hence we love to form our so-called ‘rational’ questions. It is rather an irrational approach to think: let God fulfill His duties, but we are not ready to perform our part.

(b) What do we, as devotees of God, need? We need protection from Him. Well and good. On the other hand, let us ask, ‘What does God need from us?’ Undoubtedly, God needs surrender. For a ‘modern’ soul, that is asking for too much!

ii) The Guru Debate: There is difficulty in appreciating the role of a Guru. This trend is ever on the increase! A guru does not control a student; she or he helps her or him. At the same time we see that all of us like to be a guru or a teacher in our own way, without any practical experience in the field! There is a wonderful word in German language, *Ausbildung*, i.e. practical training. Everybody (an electrician, a sweeper, a helper, a gardener etc.) needs an *Ausbildung*-certificate in order to get a job. How do people get practical trainings? There must be some (Why ‘some’, but many!) trainers or guides to train them up! These trainers are the gurus in their field.

2. The Importance of Self-awareness

Daniel Goleman’s message quoted earlier does imply the idea that we need to be masters of our emotions, not slaves. The Upanishads of the yore called upon us to know our own Self first (*atmanam viddhih*). This is one of the great lessons we have been neglecting to learn for ourselves and are, therefore, failing to impart it to our future generations. The result is obvious everywhere! Jesus Christ tried to instill this self-awareness in his disciples by calling them ‘salt of the Earth’ and ‘light of the World’.

Sometimes we think that ‘self-awareness’ is a matter for the Jnana Yogis, those who tread the path of knowing the Self. They use their self-effort, while Bhakti-Yogis walk through the grace of God. But Narada-Bhakti-sutras and Sri Krishna in the Gita make a combination of both, self-effort and grace. Sri Krishna says, ‘One’s body which is the seat of action, the ego claiming to be the actor, the several Instruments of actions (like the senses, the mind etc.), the varied and the distinct types of
movements involved, and finally the unknown factor (or the deities presiding over the senses) as the fifth—these are the five causal factors [as prescribed by Vedanta].’

Someone asked Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi how much Japa or meditation one is required to do in order to realize God. Mother replied, ‘It will happen by God’s grace.’ We know that God is capable of showering unconditional grace, which He really does! But unconditional grace cannot be a rule. Hence grace should be dependent on our self-effort which is called devotion in the Bhakti-literature! And we are free to use our self-effort being aware that we are capable of doing something and that we are endowed with the potential.

The Bhagavatam mentions:
Even saints who revel in their own Self and who have cut asunder all wordly bonds still have unselfish devotion to the Lord; such are the noble qualities of Hari (the Lord).

3. The Practice of Bhakti

For the purpose of answering the query promised in the topic under discussion we may say in short that love and faith is the quality needed for following the path of Bhakti. Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘Bhakti can arise only when there is whole-hearted devotion to God . . .’ Swami Vivekananda calls it, ‘Love for love’s sake.’

What is Bhakti? According to Narada-Bhakti-sutras it is ‘supreme love of God’ (sa tu asmin parama-prema-rupa). Swamiji calls this love ‘unparalleled love’. He says, ‘Bhakti has no rival’, i.e., this love is the highest. The reason? The nature of Bhakti is immortality (amritasvarupa), says Narada in his Bhakti-sutras.

The incarnations of God, the chosen Prophet of Islam, the Son of God of Christianity and a host of saints and sages have strongly recommended the path of Bhakti or devotion to God (personal or impersonal) as the easy means to God-realization. Holy books on Bhakti and the list of nine types of Bhakti in the Bhagavatam draw our attention to the following qualities that one should possess to embark upon Bhakti:

a) A desire for God-realization: In Vedantic parlance it is called mumukshutvam. This has much to do with our samskaras (impression) from earlier life or lives. Otherwise many great examples of children having natural inclination to devotion cannot be explained. Our upbringing and environment do play a great role in rousing our interest in the path. But they too have been chosen by none else than us! At the same time we have the right to undo what we have ourselves done! That is our free will. We need to use it.

God can be approached in many ways. Swami Yatiswarananda, an eminent monk of the Ramakrishna Order, used to say that it is
necessary that one establishes a relationship with God or one’s chosen ideal (Ishta-devata) like a relation as one has with one’s master, with one’s friend, with one’s child, and with one’s lover. The ‘God-devotee’ relation or the relation of ‘the savior and saved’ is a very wide-ranging and varied one. In most of the cases this relation turns out to be a relation between the giver and the receiver! Even though Sri Krishna counts such a relation as valid (artah and artharthih, the afflicted and people desirous of worldly succor), it keeps a devotee at the level of a beggar! Sri Ramakrishna would recommend the relation between a master and servant as a common approach to God.

b) Faith in the redeeming power of God: A devotee thinks of God not only as one who keeps our material supplies hassle-free, but also one who is the only redeemer to save our souls! Does it sound like an irony? Let us quote Sri Krishna to answer our question. He says:

Four kinds of pious people adore me. They are the distressed one (artah, those who want to get rid of suffering), the Knowledge-seeker (jijnasuh, those who want to know me), the wealth-seeker (arthaarthih, those who want something), and the knower (jnani, the knower). . . All of them are certainly noble. But I cherish the knower as My very self.’

So we need to know that it is God only who is the savior.

c) Love of God and prayer to Him. While enumerating the nine types of Bhakti in the Bhagavatam, Prahlada, the great devotee of God, speaks of the means as to how one should pray. He says: Hearing about Vishnu, singing about Him, remembering Him, serving Him, worshipping Him, saluting Him, being His servant, being His comrade, and surrendering oneself and everything that is one’s own to Him—these are the nine aspects of Bhakti or God-love. The Acharyas of Bhakti endorse prayer as one of the potent means to Bhakti. One does not need much to learn about prayer and how to pray. Swami Shivananda, a direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, advised one of his disciples as to how to pray to Sri Ramakrishna:

Lord, you incarnated yourself to save the world, and you suffered all kinds of pain for the good of humanity. Here am I, a pauper in spiritual life, without spiritual practices, adoration, knowledge, devotion, faith, love, and purity; make my human birth fruitful. Be gracious enough to reveal yourself in my heart; grant me your vision. One of your spiritual sons taught me to pray like this. Take pity on me.

d) Surrender to God: Prayer helps us to surrender ourselves and all that we may claim as our own to God. He is the owner of His creation. Nothing belongs to us. Surrender actually means surrendering our ego to God. Patanjali speaks of surrender of the fruits of our actions to God and also continuous awareness of God (ishvara-pranidhana) as the first and presumably the most important alternative to ‘stopping the modifications of the mind (chitta-vritti-nirodhah)’ for Self-realization. Remembering God in all our actions is real surrender. Is it something difficult for us?

e) Dispassion: The Bhagavatam calls it dispassion for things that distract us from our goal (viraktih-itiareham). For most of us the word ‘dispassion’ or ‘renunciation’ sounds scary! We feel safe in the present arrangement of our security in this world. The practice of dispassion may take away that security from us! Anyway, the worldly security may not last forever because it ends with our death. It does not secure us beyond that. Actually speaking the meaning of dispassion is not asking us to practise detachment to things but to be
detached from the idea that changing things are the permanent reality! This type of habit we do possess. So it is not difficult to extend it further and further.

**Conclusion**

We close our discussion with two quotes from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

Nothing can be impressed on smooth glass, but when the surface is coated with proper chemicals, pictures can be impressed upon it, as in photography. In the same way, on the human heart coated with the chemicals of Bhakti, the image of Divinity can be impressed.

The insect flies from darkness as soon as it sees a light. The ant loses its life in the syrup without leaving it. So does the Bhakta [devotee] cling to God forever, and leaves all.

That is how one embarks on Bhakti path to cross over the ocean of relativity, the samsara.

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**References**

3. *duhkham eva sarvam vivekinah*, Yogasutras 2.15
5. *Bhagavatam*, 1.7.10
8. *Bhagavatam*, 7.5.23-24
9. *For Seekers of God*, p. 351

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**Unconditional Love**

Bhakti is therefore supreme love and also immortal. It is not only parama prema, it is also amrta prema, of the nature of immortality. That is, it never comes to an end. Now, any kind of earthly love that we can think of has a beginning and an end. There is no earthly love which can continue uninterruptedly, forever. There is no such thing possible. This is because, for one thing, the person who experiences it is limited and the person towards whom this love is directed is also limited. So, it is bound to be a temporary thing, limited by time, circumstances, and by the objects towards which love flows. That is the reason why ordinary love is not interminable. This is a very important point which distinguishes divine love from any other kind of love that we can experience. All our earthly experience of love has got a beginning and an end. There are also limitations of intensity, duration and quality. Divine love, on the other hand, is unlimited in all these respects. Once that love is realized, it continues for ever. The reason is, such a pure love does not depend on any extraneous circumstances.

—Swami Bhuteshananda, *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, p.31
Self-surrender in Bhakti and Jnana Paths
—Sri Ramakrishna’s Teachings

SWAMI ÂTMAPRIYANANDA

is at once the means as well as the goal. In this sense, it has been described as the surest,

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Self-surrender in the Path of Bhakti

Sharanaagati or prapatti, often translated as surrender or self-surrender, is an attitude of mind that enables the sadhaka to directly intuit the Supreme Reality as an overwhelming Divine Presence that is the acme of spiritual attainment in the path of Bhakti. Interestingly, self-surrender to God is considered not so much as means to the attainment of the ultimate goal of mukti or liberation, but self-surrender in itself is the ultimate goal and is synonymous with mukti. Thus, self-surrender quickest and easiest of spiritual practices by Bhakti Acharyas like Ramanuja.

Every one of the Divine Incarnations (called Avatars) has taught Sharanaagati or Prapatti as the highest form of sadhana, at once easiest and quickest. Sri Krishna’s exhortation to Arjuna, his dear friend and disciple, to take refuge in Him after having relinquished all other pursuits, is well known. (Gita, 18.66). Jesus the Christ said, ‘Come unto Me, ye that are weary and heavy-laden,
I will give thee rest.’ Also, ‘I am the Goal and I am the Way.’ Sri Ramakrishna revealed and declared himself as the Avatar, the Divine Incarnation, openly and loudly, on the famous Kalpataru Day, the first of January 1886. Swami Saradananda, in the famous biography of Sri Ramakrishna that he christened as *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* (literally meaning, *Of the Divine Play of Sri Ramakrishna*), chooses to call this day not so much as the Kalpataru Day, but as ‘Day of bestowal of freedom from fear through revelation of Himself as an Avatar or Divine Incarnation.’ Sri Ramakrishna taught his disciples and intimate devotees (as told by Mahendra Nath Gupta, who styled himself as M, the recorder of Sri Ramakrishna’s immortal Gospel) the secret of self-surrender in the following words:

Just contemplate, think of, ‘this place’ (which is the way that Sri Ramakrishna would refer to himself, avoiding the phrases, ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘mine’) and nothing else needs to be done. Whatever spiritual practices you need to do shall be got done through you at the right time. Whoever thinks of ‘this place’ inherits all the wealth of ‘this place’ just as a child inherits his father’s wealth.¹

M, who was narrating this touching assurance of the Avatar of this age, added:

Do you know what his wealth is? It is jnana-bhakti, viveka-vairagya, shanti-sukha, prema-samadhi (meaning, knowledge and devotion, discrimination and dispassion, peace and joy, love for God and ultimate union with God).²

In the path of Bhakti, surrender is the acme of spiritual realization as well as the supremely powerful path as well. The individual aspirant loses himself in the bliss of union with his Beloved God, his own ego melting away and getting reduced to zero. There being no two entities in this realization, it is in a sense the Advaita anubhuti (non-dual realization) that is considered the highest in the path of Jnana (Knowledge).

Sri Ramakrishna’s illustration in this context is so telling: A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. The moment it entered the ocean, it just melted away and became one with the ocean. The individual ego that is the basis of name and form which forms the individuality vanishes and God alone remains as the one Reality. Call it Advaita realization if you like.

The devotees of God feel an ineffable sweetness, a transcendental bliss, in this union of the individual self (*jivatman*) with the Supreme Self (*paramatman*) and are supremely glad to lose their individuality in the Infinitude of their Beloved God. Merging of the individuality of the Jivatman with the Supreme Paramatman which the devotee-Jiva likes to conceive as the Beloved Ishwara is the Goal of Bhakti and self-surrender is the means to the attainment of such a union. Since there is no hiatus between the devotee’s self-surrender and the union with God, self-surrender is both the means (*sadhana*) as well as the Goal (*sadhya*). This makes it a ‘direct, infallible, easy and eternal path’—*pratyakshavagamam dharmyam susukham kartumavyayam* as Sri Krishna teaches (Gita 9.2).

**Self-surrender in the Path of Jnana**

We often think of self-surrender as belonging to Bhakti Marga (the path of Devotion). Interestingly, self-surrender belongs no less to Jnana Marga (the path of Knowledge) as to the Bhakti Marga. How? What does a Jnani ultimately achieve? Oneness with the Ultimate Reality in the form of Supreme Truth. The nature of the Ultimate Reality has been described in Jnana Marga as Sat-Chit-Ananda Swarupa (that is, Reality in essence, is Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, or
Truth-Awareness-Joy). The Ultimate Reality can be realized through any of these aspects—Sat or Chit or Ananda. Whereas Bhakti Marga emphasizes the Ananda or Bliss aspect, Jnana Marga focuses on the Chit or Pure Awareness aspect. Jnana Margas of the type of Ramana Maharishi in the modern times and Ashtavakra in the ancient times emphasized the Sat or Truth aspects, although Chit or Pure Awareness gets interpenetrated with Sat or Truth as the two are non-different. We may say, in effect, that the pursuit of the Supreme Reality in its Sat-Chit aspects is Jnana Marga, while the pursuit of the Reality in its Ananda aspect is Bhakti Marga.

How does self-surrender come into this path of Jnana Marga as we normally and naturally take it to be the sweet and joyful merger of the little individuality of the Bhakta with the Immensity of his Beloved God Whom the Upanishad describes as rasa-swarupa (the Embodiment of Joy or sweetfulness)? Ramana Maharishi, one of the greatest and most outstanding Jnanis of the present age, always used to preach the path of self-enquiry (atma-vichara) as the highest and the most direct paths to the Ultimate Reality. When sincere sadhakas (spiritual aspirants) used to express to him their helplessness in continuously pursuing the enquiry ‘Who am I’ through atma-vichara, he used to smile and say, then practise self-surrender to the Higher Power.

He used to say that there were just two paths: the path of self-enquiry (Jnana Marga) and the path of self-surrender (Bhakti Marga). Just as the aspirant in Bhakti Marga longs to merge his little individuality in the Immensity and Infinity of his Beloved God, and enjoy the bliss of union, the aspirant in Jnana Marga discovers, through self-enquiry and inwardness (antarmukhinata) which the Katha Upanishad calls avritta-chakshuh (senses and the mind turned inward) and agryaya buddhya, sukshmaya (sharpened, subtle Buddhi or higher intuitive faculty), that what he thought his individuality, his ahankara (I-ness), is in reality a myth and the Supreme Awareness, Infinite Consciousness (chaitanya) is alone real. It is not so much merger of the jivatwa (little individuality) with the Beloved God as in Bhakti Marga, but the realization of the non-difference of the Jivatman and the Paramatman. By the fire of Jnana (Knowledge of oneness) gets burnt, destroyed, the false notion engendered through ajnana (ignorance) that the Jivatman is different from Brahman.

The subtle difference, if at all, between the two Margas, Bhakti and Jnana in respect of self-surrender is that in Bhakti Marga, there is a sweet union of the individual self with the Supreme Self that the Bhakta enjoys and rejoices in, whereas in Jnana Marga, the separateness of the individual self and the Supreme Self is realized as a false notion, a myth, arising from ajnana or ignorance and there is no question of union or merger as there never was, there never is, there never will be, any separateness between the individual
and the Supreme. Bhakti Marga therefore is sweet and joyful with the Bhakta ‘rejoicing and feeling exceedingly glad’ as Jesus the Christ said speaking about the imagery of the joy of union of the bride (jivatman) with the Bridegroom (Paramatman).

On the other hand, Jnana Marga is austere and blazing—the Sun of Knowledge arising in the Jnani’s heart destroys the darkness of ignorance that is the false notion of separateness of the Jivatman and the Paramatman arising from ignorance.

Illustrations of Ramakrishna Vivekananda

We give below illustrations by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda (which in fact is Sri Ramakrishna’s only, as Swamiji never spoke anything but what he received from his Master, Sri Ramakrishna)—illustrations that may be understood from both the Bhakti and Jnana angles of vision, for Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda never made any distinction between Bhakti and Jnana as both of them involve destruction of the little individuality (which Swamiji called the ‘puny ego’).

Whereas in the path of Jnana this puny ego is burnt in the conflagration of the Fire of Knowledge or destroyed in the blaze of the Sun of Knowledge, this little ego melts away, in the path of Bhakti, in loving abandon in the Infinite Reservoir of God’s Love, passionately and joyfully.

(1) Sri Ramakrishna’s first illustration: in the Infinite Ocean of Satchidananda, the water gets frozen into ice in several places here and there, frozen as it were by the cooling influence of Bhakti. Again, when the Sun of Jnana arises, these blocks of ice melt away into the ocean by the blazing heat of Knowledge. In either case, the freezing through Bhakti and melting by Jnana have one common feature, namely, the little individuality disappearing and the Infinitude of the Supreme Reality revealing Itself as an Unbroken, Indivisible, Homogeneous Ocean of Consciousness (Chaitanya samudra).³

(2) Sri Ramakrishna says:

Do you know what it is like? It is like the peeling of an onion. As you go on peeling the onion in search of a kernel, you will ultimately find that there is no kernel in the onion. Similarly, through the path of discrimination (vichara marga), if you go on searching for the ego or ‘I’ within, you will ultimately find that there is no ego or ‘I’ at all. Just like there is no kernel within the onion, there is no ‘I’ within you. It is all He (God) or Brahman.⁴

(3) The following anecdote from the life of Swami Vivekananda, besides illustrating the meaning of self-surrender we have been discussing so far, both from the points of view of Jnana and Bhakti, further show how Swami Vivekananda himself could powerfully impart the truth of self-surrender as vanishing of the ‘puny ego’, to anybody who came to him, even those absolutely uninitiated into Vedanta or any Indian philosophy or thought:

Emma Calve, was a great opera singer, a celebrity, in France, and she was intensely unhappy as most celebrities are. They live a very sad life inwardly although they are celebrated everywhere. Emma Calve was so depressed, so frustrated, did not know what to do, even thought of ending her life. Somebody told her to meet the great Indian Yogi, Swami Vivekananda, staying at Paris at that time. She made an appointment with Swamiji. At the appointed hour, she entered the room, Swamiji was in his study, didn’t even look up, but merely said, ‘O my child, what a troubled atmosphere you have brought with you. Calm down, my child! Calm down!’ She came and sat down facing Swamiji. Swamiji looked at
her tenderly and compassionately, began to speak to her about the innermost secrets of her life which she had not shared with anybody. She was flabbergast, confused, dumbfounded! Was it a miracle, was it some magic? ‘Swami’, she cried out, ‘How did you know all this? Did anybody talk to you about me?’ Swamiji smiled and said, ‘Is it necessary, I can read you like an open book.’

Then he gave some spiritual advice which was more of imparting of a powerful spiritual impulse that went deep down her consciousness. He told her that she was not a small entity enslaved in a little body, she was Divine, one with Infinite Divine Source, the Infinite Reality. This spiritual impulse was so powerful that she was shaken to the very depths, about to lose her individuality.

She cried out: ‘Swamiji! You are taking away my individuality. I seem to be vanishing, I am becoming a zero!’ Swamiji was fond of poking fun at the westerners saying, ‘You Westerners are so fond of clinging to your i-n-d-i-v-i-d-u-a-l-i-t-y. But you are not individuals yet, you shall be when you become universal.’ Swamiji then told her a story of a water-drop. A water-drop was falling into the ocean and the drop started crying. The ocean asked the drop, ‘Why are you crying my child?’ The water-drop answered: ‘O, I am going to lose my individuality as the drop.’ The ocean laughed and said, ‘My child, you are not going to lose your individuality as a water-drop, you are going to regain your individuality as the ocean. You were one with me and you were taken away from me by the sun’s rays. Now you are coming back to my bosom to join me and the billions and trillions of your brothers and sisters, who were little drops like you. You are not losing your individuality as the water-drop, but regaining your real individuality as the ocean!’5

That is a great message for all of us—this message of self-surrender from the points of view of Jnana or Bhakti. In the path of Bhakti, it is not a weak, meek, powerless, helpless, servile submission to a superior Power—it is, as we have repeatedly said above, loving abandon, passionately and joyfully, by the lover, the Bhakta, in the Beloved God Who he realizes as the Infinite Reservoir of Divine Love.

We may quote a few examples of self-surrender of the Jnana type, of the Bhakti type and of the Jnana-Bhakti type. We are doing this with trepidation, realizing the stupidity of our little minds that dare to classify and pigeon-hole the spiritual moods and attitudes of gigantic minds of extraordinary spiritual immensity, the only justification, if any, being their infinite compassion and forgiveness that match the vastness of their spiritual stature:

(1) Jnana type:
Vyasa, Valmiki, Gaudapada, Shankaracharya, etc in the ancient times, and Ramana Maharishi, Swami Turiyananda, etc in the modern times.

(2) Bhakti type:
Lakshmana, Vibhishana, Sri Radha, the Gopis of Vrindavan, Tulasidas, Surdas, Mirabai in the ancient times, and Swami Ramakrishnananda, Swami Shivananda (among the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna) etc in the modern times.

(3) Jnana-Bhakti type:
Hanuman, Mahavir, Uddhava, Arjuna, Kunti Devi, Ramanujacharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, etc in the ancient times and Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda (among the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna) in the modern times.
Swami Vivekananda’s Divine Call

Swami Vivekananda was convinced that this great message of the Schools of Vedanta and Bhakti, the message of self-abandonment, self-abnegation, self-effacement, in the language of Bhakti, and in the language of Jnana, the realization of the Divinity of the human soul as Infinite and Absolute, as Existence-Knowledge-Bliss in its true nature (Satchidananda Swarupa) along with the realization of Oneness, Identity, of this individual divinity of the human soul with the all-pervading infinite Divinity interpenetrating all of Existence which we call the Universe, will usher in a new world Order, a new weltanschühuang (world-view), a new civilization. Swamiji therefore exhorted all to realize this Divinity within and without as one homogenous, unbroken continuum of Divinity as the ancient Rishis exhorted:

\[ \begin{align*} & \text{Purnamadah purnamidam purnat purnamudachyate} \\
& \text{Purnasya purnamadaya purnamevavasishyate} \\
& \text{That Reality [Brahman] is Full, Infinite. This Reality [the world] is Full, Infinite.} \\
& \text{The Infinite emanating from the Infinite, Infinite Alone remains.} \\
\end{align*} \]

May we close with Swami Vivekananda’s immortal words, which is an eternal call to the Infinite Blessedness:

Call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come! Glory will come! Purity will come! Greatness will come! And all that is good and excellent will come, when the sleeping soul awakens in its self-conscious activity.

Now that humankind is most stress-torn, strife-ridden, conflict-prone, may we all be blessed by listening to and responding to this call, this Divine Music of the Spheres perpetually arising from the Kingdom of Heaven that is nowhere except within the recesses of each human soul! □

References

1. c.f. God Lived with Them, p.188 (ref.no.21)
2. c.f. Gospel, p.589
3. c.f. Gospel, p.148
4. c.f. Gospel, p.446
5. Life of Swami Vivekananda, 1: 449-451

At Peace with Himself

A kite with a fish in its beak was chased by a large number of crows and screaming kites, pecking at it and trying to snatch away the fish. In whichever direction it went” the flock of kites and crows also followed it. Tired of this annoyance, the kite threw away the fish which was instantly caught by another kite. At once the flock of kites and crows turned to the new possessor of the fish. The first kite was left untouched; it calmly sat upon the branch of a tree. Seeing it in this quiet and tranquil state, the Avadhuta saluted it and said, ‘You are my Guru, O kite; you have taught me that so long as man does not throw off the burden of worldly desires, he cannot escape from worldly distractions and be at peace with himself.’

—Sri Ramakrishna
The Path of Bhakti

Bhakti Yoga or the path of devotion is a much recommended method of spiritual striving or Sadhana. While in other Yogas—such as Jnana, Karma and Raja Yogas—the means and the goal are distinctly different, in Bhakti Yoga, as Swami Vivekananda points out, they are same. He says, ‘Bhakti is its own fruition, its own means and its own end’. This means it is a ‘win-win situation’ for the Sadhaka or spiritual aspirant all the way. It is a path of continuous growth for the spiritual seeker.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, Naradiya Bhakti—the path of devotion espoused by Sage Narada—is the most suitable mode of Sadhana for Kali Yuga. He says that in the Kali Yuga, when people are conditioned by the idea of body and mind, it is not proper to boast of an attitude ‘I am Brahman or Atman or Undivided Consciousness’. Hence he strongly recommends the path of devotion. Sage Narada defines Bhakti as ‘Supreme Love for God.’

While all these go to prove that devotion or Bhakti is a wonderful spiritual discipline, there are steps and stages in this method of striving for spiritual excellence, namely prayer, worship and meditation. Prayer eventually leads the Sadhaka to meditation. Here by meditation we mean constant remembrance of God like an unbroken flow of oil when poured from one vessel to another. Prarthana or prayer can be stated as a devotee’s attempt to communicate verbally with God. The intermediate step or connecting link between prayer and meditation is worship.

Philosophy of Puja

Puja or ritual worship symbolizes a special relationship between the Sadhaka (worshipper) and the deity (worshipped). The underlying idea of Puja is ‘Devo Bhutva Devam Yajet’ ‘worship God by becoming God.’ True spirit of worship is worship of the Spirit by the Spirit. By constantly thinking of his own divine nature, the worshipper slowly elevates himself and becomes fit for performing Puja. Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, elaborates this idea beautifully in his extraordinary biographical work Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master thus:

When you sit to worship a particular deity you have to think at the very outset that, the coiled up power, Kundalini, is raised up to the thousand petalled lotus, Sahasrara, in the head, and that you have become identified with the Paramatman in non-dual consciousness. Then you should think that you become separated from Him and assume the nature of a Jiva again and that the Supreme Light of Paramatman becomes condensed and manifests itself in the form of the deity to be worshipped and that you have projected the deity out from within you and then sat down for worship’.1
The Kularnava Tantra states that Puja is capable of annulling the effects of the Karmas of the past births, ultimately ending the cycle of births and deaths. The Mahanirvana Tantra goes to the extent of saying that Puja is the oneness of the worshipper and the Ishwara. Thus it is clear that it is possible to reach the supreme goal of life through Puja or ritual worship.

The worshipper through an elaborate process coupled with an outpouring of intense love and longing for his chosen ideal slowly marches towards his spiritual goal. The method of worship followed in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Tradition is very conducive to such a spiritual evolution. It is largely based on Tantra and includes both internal and external worships. It is important for the worshipper to know all the meanings of the Mantras used for various Kriyas or actions. Further a continuous attempt to strengthen the loving relationship of the worshipper with his Ishta Deva or chosen deity through every ritual is very necessary.

Various Steps in Ritual Worship

Let us look at the various steps involved in the process of ritual worship largely followed in Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Tradition. The Puja involves various small and big rituals, all aimed at preparing oneself for ‘worship of the Spirit by the Spirit’:

1. Aachamanam (rinsing the mouth): This is the first thing a worshipper does after taking his seat for doing Puja. Aachamanam is done along with Vishnusmarana (remembering Lord Vishnu—the All-pervading Reality). This simple act is a combination of internal and external purifications. While sipping and then rinsing the mouth with drops of water, the worshipper chants the mantra—Yah Smaret Pundarikaksham Sa Bahyantara-shuchi’—‘one who remembers the lotus-eyed Lord becomes pure externally as well as internally. This refers to the purifying power of the God’s Name. A drop of water is sipped ceremoniously thrice, while chanting the name of Vishnu. ‘Thrice’ is reference to the three bodies that Vedanta holds all living beings have—gross, subtle and causal. Aachamanam symbolically purifies all the three.

2. Samanya-arghya (general arghya): This ritual is performed to purify the water used for Puja invoking all the holy rivers by chanting the following mantra:

Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godavari Sarasvati
Narmade Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannidhi kuru.

By mentioning the names of various holy rivers in the water meant for Puja, a spirit of sanctity and devotion is awakened in the worshipper’s mind.

3. Sankalpa (taking resolve): In all major and elaborate Pujas, generally done on special occasions, the act of stating the purpose for which it is being performed is done. It aims at deeply impressing upon the mind of the worshipper the real purpose of worship. The mantras which are used such as devata preeti kama (for the love of the deity, the devata) point out and remind one of the true aim of worship—to please God and to earn His grace.
The worshipper prays for further strengthening of dispassion, knowledge and devotion. He prays for himself as also others assembled for Puja. He prays, *Vairagya-jnana Bhagavad-bhaktanam Bhagavad-bhakti sphuranash cha*—for the upsurge of dispassion, knowledge, devotion to God.

4. *Guru Pranam* (offering salutations to the Guru): After worshipping the deities guarding the doors (entrances) and purification of the place of worship and the seat (*aasana*), the Sadhaka offers salutations to the Guru or preceptor. This is to acknowledge the fact that the grace and guidance of the Guru is indispensable for spiritual progress. While doing so, the deity (Ishta Devata) being worshipped is also saluted indicating ultimately oneness of Guru and the deity.

5. *Shuddhi*: An integral part of worship, the ritual purification aims to divinize everything associated with Puja. Thus are done the rituals of *Kara Shuddhi*—purification of hands, *Pushpa Shuddhi*—purification of flowers, *Devata Evam Pujadravya Shuddhi*—purification of [the image of] deity and articles of worship, *Mantra Shuddhi*—purification of mantras and *Dehamarjanam Atmaraksha cha*—purification and protection of the body-mind. The mantras used in doing these rituals remind the worshipper the purpose of Puja which is to evolve on the path of Bhakti. Purification actually means divinization of all that is involved in doing Puja—vessels, mantras, self and even the image of the Lord being worshipped.

6. *Vanhi-prakara-chintanam* (visualizing the wall of fire): After praying for the removal of the earthly and celestial obstacles, the worshipper visualizes a protective wall of fire surrounding him, shielding him from obstacles that might bother him. It is recorded that while doing Puja, Sri Ramakrishna would actually see an impenetrable wall of fire with a hundred tongues spread out, protecting the place of worship where he sat doing Puja.

7. *Pranayama* (control of Prana): Simple forms of breathing exercises are an essential part of Puja. They are done to regulate the movement of Prana, the powerful all-pervading creative power, and help in self-control, concentration and alertness.

8. *Nyasa* (consecration): The Puja involves the rituals of consecration such as *Vyapakanyasa, Jivananyasa, Matrikanyasa, Karanyasa, Anganyasa*, and so on. These are performed to rid the worshipper of the feeling of agency with regard to the body and instead develop a feeling of divine presence in what he does. Nayasas involve chanting of various combinations of Sanskrit alphabets. These are kind of mantras representing various deities associated with various limbs of our body. This is a Vedantic principle where it is held that all organs and functions of body and other forces have presiding deities. So when one does *Nyasas*, it helps in awaking divinity in various limbs of the worshipper. For instance, through *Jivananyasa*, the *Ishta Devata* of the worshipper is established in his heart. Nyasas as if divinize the worshipper’s body-mind, making him fit for the Puja (*Devam Bhutva Devam Yajet*).
This bears testimony from Sri Ramakrishna himself. He would say that at the time of performance of Nyasas, he would actually see the letters of the mantras in bright colours, in various parts of the body. He could feel the coiled power (Kundalini) coming up in the form of a snake through the Sushumna to the Sahasrara. Swami Brahmananda, the first President of Ramakrishna Order, was once present at Varanasi Advaita Ashrama during Kali Puja. He was observing the worshipper performing Nyasas by touching various parts of his body with his fingers. Swami Brahmananda saw the letters of the mantras come alive, shining and glorious.

9. Dhyanam (meditation): After going through all these steps, the worshipper now contemplates on the divinely enchanting form of his Ishta Devata in his heart. He deeply thinks of the divinity inherent in his heart, and then visualizes as if he is bringing that form of divinity, the Ishta Devata, infused in a flower kept in a vessel in front of him. Thus he begins to do the external worship of the inner divinity.

10. Manasa Puja (mental worship): Before actually doing external worship the worshipper does the inner or mental worship. He visualizes that the Ishta Devata is seated on a fully blossomed lotus in his heart. As a mark of adoration and love for God, he washes the deity’s feet with the nectar falling from the thousand-petaled lotus in his Sahasrara (the highest chakra located in the head). He offers his mind as Arghya (flower-leaf offering) and once again offers nectar for washing the mouth as well as bathing. He offers the principle of Aakasha or space as cloth and the principle of earth as sandal paste. He then offers Chitta or mind-stuff as flowers, Prana or life force as incense, the principle of fire as light (arati-lamp) and nectar as food offering. He offers Anahata or unstruck sound as bell and the principle of air as chamara or whisker-fan. More such subtle offerings follow, at the end of which the worshipper feels a tremendous sense of devotion and surrender to the chosen deity.

11. Upacharas (Offerings): Following mental worship, the devotee offers various articles to the deity. This depends on the occasion and duration of Puja being performed. The attitude behind these offerings is one of profound love and adoration for the Lord. The deity is considered living and present in human form and treated as a much loved and respected guest. Hence, articles such as water for washing feet (padya), rinsing mouth (achamana), a mixture of honey, curd and ghee (madhuparka), again water for washing mouth, oil and water for bathing, cloth and sandal paste are offered. Then incense and lights are waved. Finally fruits and sweets are offered as Naivedya along with water for drinking, rinsing mouth, etc., are followed by Tambula or betel. All these offerings are done with appropriate mantras with an attitude of loving adoration. Every article is purified and divinized before offering.

12. Aratrikam (vesper service): Although Aratrikam is not considered as an essential part of Puja, this ritual is usually performed with light, water-filled conch, cloth, flower and flywhisk (chamara) to express the devotee’s loving adoration of the Ishta Devata. The five articles represent the five elements. According to devotional texts, by waving lights before the deity all the Tamasic qualities of the worshipper are destroyed, leading to mukti or liberation. Another important idea behind Arati is complete self-surrender at the feet of the deity.

13. Japa and Pranam (repetition of mantra and prostration): At the end of Puja, the
The worshipper has to repeat as many times as possible the main mantra used during Puja and then surrender the same to the deity with a prayer to accept it and grant him success in his spiritual striving. Finally, he prostrates before the deity signifying complete self-surrender and self-effacement.

We thus find Puja as a complete procedure, internal and external, aimed at building up a deep loving relation with the Lord. Various steps in Puja help the worshipper to purify the mind and develop Bhakti.

**Significance of Puja**

Puja or worship has a very special place in cultivating Bhakti. This is particularly of importance in the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Tradition of Sadhana.

Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda have demonstrated the extraordinary dimensions of worship as a spiritual discipline. They have shown that the most important ingredient of worship is a relationship of supreme love between the worshipper and the worshipped. It is supremely real and living relationship. The Holy Mother, for instance, who would worship Sri Ramakrishna daily, used to say that Sri Ramakrishna would accept the Naivedya or food offering made to him in three ways: either he would physically come down and partake of the offering or a ray of light emanating from his eyes would touch all the offerings signifying his acceptance or his presence would be tangibly felt in the room indicating his acceptance of the offerings.

In this context the name of Swami Ramakrishnanananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, must be mentioned. He was a staunch votary of ritual worship. Right from the early days of the Ramakrishna monastery at Baranagore, he took up ritual worship of the relics of Sri Ramakrishna. Later on when he had to shift to Madras and start the Ramakrishna Movement there, he continued his ritual worship of the Master there. Sri Ramakrishna was such a living presence for him that he would spend hours in the shrine on hot afternoons and sometimes the whole night fanning the picture of Sri Ramakrishna. Once when it was raining and water leaked from shrine roof, he stood guard of the picture of Sri Ramakrishna from getting wet, by holding an umbrella for hours.

Sri Ramakrishna himself provides an astonishing example of the culmination of ritual worship. Describing the culmination of his wonderful worship of Sri Sarada Devi as Shodashi Swami Saradananda writes,

> The worshipper lost in Samadhi became completely merged and identified with the Goddess who too was lost in Samadhi.4

**Conclusion**

Inculcating Bhakti is the ultimate purpose of ritual worship. As delineated in
the discussion above, ritual worship can go a long way in cultivating Bhakti in the practitioner.

Ramakrishna Vivekananda Tradition, while emphasizing the harmony of Yogas, firmly believes in the efficacy of ritual worship for inculcating devotion or loving relationship with the Ishta Devata. When a seeker constantly tries to feel the living presence of his Beloved, he grows in the spirit of devotion. The scriptures state that through such intense spiritual practice, one can have the vision of one’s Ishta Devata—even attain the highest Samadhi. 

References
1. Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, tr Swami Jagadananda, Chennai, Sri Ramakrishna Math, iv.1
2. Kularnava Tantra, 17.70
3. The Mahanirvana Tantra, 14.123
4. Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, p.335

Meditation Done As Part of Formal Worship

Take a flower touched with sandal paste. Holding it near the heart in Kurma-Mudra, meditate on the deity, chanting the following verse from the Gita:

Yada samharate chayam kurmonganiva sarvasah;
Indriyanidriyarthebhyas-tasya prajna pratisthita

The Kurma-mudra is the symbol of tortoise. The tortoise is a symbol of the ability to withdraw the faculties into oneself, which has to be done during meditation. The Kurma-mudra symbolizes this. Further, in the Bhagavata narration of the Kurma-avatara one gets the impression of the tortoise as an allegoric representation of the ultimate reality, which validates itself and all other valid evidence. The mountain Mandara represents Pramana evidence, with which Vichara, represented by the churning of the ocean of experience, becomes possible. When the validity of evidence itself is questioned, it is found to sink as the mountain did, unless it can rest on something which itself does not need any validation. This self-evident principle does not require validation and is represented by the huge tortoise which was able to hold up the mountain on its back and itself remain floating in water without the need of any other support. The tortoise is thus a symbol of the ultimate reality and of deep meditation. The Kurma-mudra is to take the mind to that reality through meditation. The worshipper should cultivate and hold this frame of mind during the ensuing Dhyana.

—Meaning and Significance of Worship,
Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Yadavagiri, Mysore – 570020.
Aratrika—An Act of Loving Honour

The Act of Doing Arati

Vesper service in the Hindu tradition is called Aratrika. Another name for it is Nirajana. Popularly known as Arati, it is a ritual meant to please and honour the deity by waving light, a conch filled with water, a piece of cloth, a flower, and a fan before an image of the Deity. The glory of Aratrika is sung by the scriptures in the following words:

The worship of God—even if it is defective due to incorrect procedure or faulty utterances of mantras—becomes fruitful when Arati is performed before the Deity.1

Whoever worships the Lord through the Aratrika ritual is blessed with a long life both here and hereafter.2

Even to see the Aratrika is highly beneficial, says the scripture:

Whoever witnesses with devotion the Aratrika performed before the Supreme Lord is reborn seven times under favourable circumstances and then attains to the highest Goal.3

Aratrika is not an indispensable part of any worship, unlike pranayama, nyasa, achamana, and other purificatory rites. In fact, it is more reasonable to say that Aratrika is in itself a complete, symbolic worship of God. If we observe the procedure adopted in the Hindu modes of worship, we find that after completing the preliminaries, the Deity—the form of God being worshipped—is invoked and invited to sit before the worshipper and then worshipped and served with flowers, sandal-paste, incense, lights, and food-offering. It is clear that the Deity is served and honoured as if He or She were a human being.

We see the same idea—superimposition of the human on the divine—in the Aratrika-ritual too. ’The process called Aratrika,’ says Swami Nirvedananda, ’appears to emphasize the glory of the Lord after He has been entertained in a human way. Aratrika seems to be a kind of symbolic worship.’4

It is said in the Kalottara Tantra that the following items are to be waved before the Deity in the given order: ’first light (cotton wicks soaked in ghee), then water (in a conch), then a clean cloth, then the leaves of the mango or the asvattha, etc, ending with a full prostration’ (sastanga-pranama).5 But it is permitted by scriptures to substitute a bilva-leaf, a flower, camphor-light, incense and chamara6 for mango leaves or ashvattha leaves.

The procedure is to light the cotton wicks of the lamp and place it in front on a triangle drawn on the floor, and then offer it to the Deity by sprinkling on it the consecrated water. The wicks must be of odd-number (one, three, or five, etc).7 After the lamp is consecrated and offered, the worshipper stands up and waves the lamp before the Deity.

We see the same idea—superimposition of the human on the divine—in the Aratrika-ritual too. ’The process called Aratrika,’ says Swami Nirvedananda, ’appears to emphasize the glory of the Lord after He has been entertained in a human way. Aratrika seems to be a kind of symbolic worship.’4
with the right hand, while ringing the bell with the left hand. The worshipper does japa or chants the hymn of the Deity mentally during Aratrika. The scripture also instructs how the waving of lights is to be done: begin with the Deity’s feet (4 times), and then move upwards to the navel (2 times), the face (once), and finally the whole body (7 times). The general practice, however, is to wave the light around the face of the Deity not once but three times.

The goal of Aratrika is the same as the goal of any worship: obtaining the grace of God by pleasing Him, and the merging of the worshipper and the Worshipped into the one Supreme Self. What do the five items—light, water, cloth, flower, and fan—normally used for Aratrika, stand for?

These appear to stand for the five elements (bhutas), namely, fire, water, ether, earth, and air. The cloth having numerous pores symbolizes ether; and smell being the special property of earth, the latter is best represented by a flower. The whole universe represented by its elementary constituents is thus offered symbolically to the Lord by way of His worship. What a majestic form of worship of the All-pervading One is prescribed for lifting up the devotee’s mind from the humanized view of the Lord to the supercosmic view!

The five elements (pancabhutas) are the basic constituents of the universe, these bhutas are earth, water, fire, air and ether. They are the symbols of the Karya-brahman or the Manifested Reality in the form of the universe. To reach Para-brahman or the Supreme Reality it is necessary to transcend the limitations of this Karya-brahman in the form of the universe. By offering the pancabhutas at the feet of the Deity through the Aratrika-ritual, the worshipper merges himself into the cosmic, all-pervading aspect of the Deity. That is the fulfilment to which Aratrika is said to bring the worshipper.

Aratrika can also be performed with only the lighted lamp, without using the other items. This too has a meaning. The Padmapurana says that the Supreme Self is self-effulgent like light:

Thou art the Light. Thou art the sun, the moon, the lightning and the golden stars. Thou art the Light of all lights. It is Thou who existest in the form of the light of the lamp.10

In Haribhakti-vilasa (8.137) it is said that when beautifully arranged lights are waved before the Lord, all the effects of tamas (such as lust and anger) and all the effects of ignorance (such as egoism, etc.) are overcome and, when these are fully destroyed, how can there be rebirth (and consequent suffering)?11 The light of knowledge which destroys the darkness of ignorance, inspires in a natural way the mind of the worshipper to attain the knowledge of the Supreme Self. It is, of course, well known that with the attainment of this knowledge the complete destruction of all suffering takes place. The seeker gets permanently liberated from the bondage of relative existence.

Self-surrender—the End Purpose of Arati

The Vaishnava tradition gives another beautiful interpretation of the Aratrika-ritual. We are presented with a charming picture of the Lord sporting on this earth as the child Krishna. He has been out since the
morning, grazing the cows in fields. Now it is almost twilight, the ‘cow-dust’ hour. An anxious Yashoda is waiting at the doorstep, straining her eyes to see whether her beloved child is on his way back. Just at the twilight hour, the Divine Child returns.

Darkness has begun to set in and it is difficult to see Krishna’s face clearly. So the first thing Yashoda does is to light the lamp and look at the enchanting face of her darling child to her heart’s content. She waves the lamp around him to check if his tender body has been hurt or has been smeared with the dust and dirt of the woods. Then she gives him a good wash with cool scented water. Next she wipes him dry and clean with a piece of soft cloth. She then decorates her Gopala with fragrant flowers and garlands. Decoration over, she gazes at him lovingly, with one-pointed attention. Simultaneously, Yashoda fans her Child with a chamara (fly-whisk) to remove his fatigue. Then, all on a sudden, she perceives in the Divine Child the presence of the Supreme Lord, the Primal cause of all creation, and, overwhelmed with devotion, respect and awe, she falls at His lotus feet and salutes Him.

The important point to note here is that, no matter with what attitude the Aratrika is performed or with what items, self-surrender at the feet of the Deity is the true end of Aratrika.

References

1. मन्त्रहोनं क्रियाहोनं प्रकृतं पूजनं हरे:।
   सर्व संपूर्णतामेवति कृते नीराजने चिन्दे॥
   —Haribhakti-vilasa, 8.136

2. नीराजनेन य: पूजनं करती वर्णिणिनि।
   अमृतं प्राप्यायाम सोपथिः इहोके परम च॥
   —Yogini-tantra, 2.9.164

3. नीराजनस्य य: पश्येदेवदेवस्य चक्रिण:।
   समज्ञानी विग्रह स्वादले च परम पदम॥
   —Haribhakti-vilasa, 8 (Nirajana-mahatmyam).

4. Swami Nirvedananda, Hinduism at a Glance
   (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Calcutta

5. पंचनीराजनं कुर्यापि प्रथमं दीपमालयः
   द्वितीयं सोदकारणं तृतीयं धीवावसानं।
   चुताब्धायदि पद्मं चतुर्वेदि परिकीर्तितं
   पंचमं प्रणिपातनं सामालं यथाविधः॥

  —Worship of Sri Ramakrishna, ‘Science of Worship,’ the article by Swami Prameyananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai – 600004, Tamilnadu. Pp. 36-42

6. A whisk made of the bushy tail of the yak, and used for fanning.

7. प्रज्वाल्ये पदय: तं करिण धूतेन वा।
   आरात्रिकं शुभे पात्रे विमानकर्तर्तिकम्॥
   —Haribhakti-vilasa, 8.133.

8. आदी चतुर्वेदवटले च विणो:।
    द्वी नामिदेशे मुखमण्डलेकम॥
    सर्वेणु चंगोत्त्विः सत्सवारात्
    आरात्रिकं मक्कनस्य कर्णिः॥—Sabda-kalpadruma.

9. Swami Nirvedananda, op.cit., p.211

10. त्वं ज्योति: श्रीरविव्रहद्री विख्यतं-सीर्वदाराका:।
     सर्वेश्व ज्योतिः ज्योक्तिंद्रियज्योति: स्थिता तु वा॥
     —Padma-purana, Uttarakhanda, 122-123.

11. कृष्णा नीराजनं विणो:प्रणालयं युध्यय।
     तथावै मिर्य कर्णिः ज्योतिः अस्मिनं को भव॥

—The Vedaanta Kesari ~644~ December 2015
‘O mother! I am so afraid to go to school through the woods alone; other boys have servants or somebody to bring them to school or take them home—why cannot I have someone to bring me home?’—thus said Gopala, a little Brahmin boy, to his mother one winter afternoon when he was getting ready for school. The school hours were in the morning and afternoon. It was dark when the school closed in the afternoon, and the path lay through the woods.

Gopala’s mother was a widow. His father who had lived as a Brahmin should—never caring for the goods of the world, studying and teaching, worshipping and helping others to worship—died when Gopala was a baby. And the poor widow retired entirely from the concerns of the world— even from that little she ever had—her soul given entirely to God, and waiting patiently with prayers, fasting, and discipline, for the great deliverer death, to meet in another life, him who was the eternal companion of her joys and sorrows, her partner in the good and evil of the beginningless chain of lives. She lived in her little cottage. A small rice-field her husband received as sacred gift to learning brought her sufficient rice; and the piece of land that surrounded her cottage, with its clumps of bamboos, a few coconut palms, a few mangoes and lichis, with the help of the kindly village folk, brought forth sufficient vegetables all the year round. For the rest, she worked hard every day for hours at the spinning-wheel.

She was up long before the rosy dawn touched the tufted heads of the palms, long before the birds had begun to warble in their nests, and sitting on her bed— a mat on the ground covered with a blanket—repeated the sacred names of the holy women of the past, saluted the ancient sages, recited the sacred names of Narayana the Refuge of mankind, of Shiva the merciful, of Tara the Saviour Mother; and above all, (she) prayed to Him whom her heart most loved, Krishna, who had taken the form of Gopala, a cowherd, to teach and save mankind, and rejoiced that by one day she was nearer to him who had gone ahead, and with him nearer by day to Him, the Cowherd.

Before the light of the day, she had her bath in the neighbouring stream, praying that her mind might be made as clean by the mercy of Krishna, as her body by the water. Then she put on her fresh-washed white cotton garment, collected some flowers, rubbed a piece of sandalwood on a circular stone with a little water to make a fragrant paste, gathered a few sweet-scented Tulasi leaves, and retired into a little room in the cottage, kept apart for worship. In this room she kept her Baby Cowherd; on a small wooden throne under a small silk canopy, on a small velvet cushion, almost covered with flowers, was placed a bronze image of Krishna as a baby. Her mother’s heart could only be satisfied by conceiving God as her baby. Many and many a time her learned husband had talked to her of Him who is preached in the Vedas,
the formless, the infinite, the impersonal. She
listened with all attention, and the conclusion
was always the same—what is written in
the Vedas must be true; but, oh! it was so
immense, so far off, and she, only a weak,
ignorant woman; and then, it was also written:
‘In whatsoever form one seeks Me, I reach him
in that form, for all mankind are but following
the paths I laid down for them’—and that was
enough. She wanted to know no more. And
there she was—all of the devotion, of faith,
of love her heart was capable of, was there in
Krishna, the Baby Cowherd, and all that heart
entwined round the visible Cowherd, this little
bronze image.

Then again she had heard: ‘Serve Me as
you would a being of flesh and blood, with
love and purity, and I accept that all.’ So
she served as she would a master, a beloved
teacher, above all, as she would serve the apple
of her eye, her only child, her son.

So she bathed and dressed the image,
burned incense before it, and for offering?
—oh, she was so poor!—but with tears in her
eyes she remembered her husband reading
from the books: ‘I accept with gladness even
leaves and flowers, fruits and water, whatever
is offered with love’, and she offered: “Thou
for whom the world of flowers bloom, accept
my few common flowers. Thou who feedest
the universe, accept my poor offerings of fruits.
I am weak, I am ignorant. I do not know how
to approach Thee, how to worship Thee, my
God, my Cowherd, my child; let my worship
be pure, my love for Thee selfless; and if
there is any virtue in worship, let it be Thine,
grant me only love, love that never asks for
anything—‘never seeks for anything but love’.
Perchance the mendicant in his morning call
was singing in the little yard:

Thy knowledge, man! I value not,
It is thy love I fear;
It is thy love that shakes My throne,
Brings God to human tear.
For love behold the Lord of all,
The formless, ever free,
Is made to take the human form
To play and live with thee.
What learning, they of Vrinda’s groves,
The herdsmen, ever got?
What science, girls that milked the kine?
They loved, and Me they bought.
Then, in the Divine, the mother - heart found her earthly son Gopala (lit. cowherd), named after the Divine Cowherd.

And the soul which would almost mechanically move among its earthly surroundings—which, as it were, was constantly floating in a heavenly ether ready to drift away from contact of things material found its earthly moorings in her child. It was the only thing left to her to pile all her earthly joys and love on. Were not her movements, her thoughts, her pleasures, her very life for that little one that bound her to life?

For years she watched over the day - today unfolding of that baby life with all a mother’s care; and now that he was old enough to go to school, how hard she worked for months to get the necessaries for the young scholar!

The necessaries however were few. In a land where men contentedly pass their lives poring over books in the light of a mud lamp, with an ounce of oil in which is a thin cotton wick—a rush mat being the only furniture about them—the necessaries of a student are not many. Yet there were some, and even those cost many a day of hard work to the poor mother.

How for days she toiled over her wheel to buy Gopala a new cotton Dhoti and a piece of cotton Chadar, the under and upper coverings, the small mat in which Gopala was to put his bundle of palm leaves for writing and his reed pens, and which he was to carry rolled up under his arm to be used as his seat at school -- and the inkstand. And what joy to her it was, when on a day of good omen Gopal attempted to write his first letters, only a mother’s heart, a poor mother’s, can know!

But today there is a dark shadow in her mind. Gopala is frightened to go alone through the wood. Never before had she felt her widowhood, her loneliness, her poverty so bitter. For a moment it was all dark, but she recalled to her mind what she had heard of the eternal promise: ‘Those that depend on Me giving up all other thoughts, to them I Myself carry whatever is necessary.’ And she was one of the souls who could believe.

So the mother wiped her tears and told her child that he need not fear. For in those woods lived another son of hers tending cattle, and also called Gopala; and if he was ever afraid passing through them, he had only to call on brother Gopala!

The child was that mother’s son, and he believed.

That day, coming home from school through the wood, Gopala was frightened and called upon his brother Gopala, the cowherd: ‘Brother cowherd, are you here? Mother said you are, and I am to call on you: I am frightened being alone.’ And a voice came from behind the trees: ‘Don’t be afraid, little brother, I am here; go home without fear.’

Thus every day the boy called, and the voice answered. The mother heard of it with wonder and love; and she instructed her child to ask the brother of the wood to show himself the next time.

The next day the boy, when passing through the woods, called upon his brother. The voice came as usual, but the boy asked the brother in the woods to show himself to him. The voice replied, ‘I am busy today, brother, and cannot come.’ But the boy insisted, and out of the shade of the trees came the Cowherd of the woods, a boy dressed in the garb of cowherds, with a little crown on his head in which were peacock’s feathers, and the cowherd’s flute in his hands.

And they were so happy: they played together for hours in the woods, climbing trees, gathering fruits and flowers—the
widow’s Gopala and the Gopala of the woods, till it was almost late for school. Then the widow’s Gopala went to school with a reluctant heart, and nearly forgot all his lesson, his mind eager to return to the woods and play with his brother.

Months passed this wise. The poor mother heard of it day by day and, in the joy of this Divine mercy, forgot her widowhood, her poverty, and blessed her miseries a thousand times.

Then there came some religious ceremonies which the teacher had to perform in honour of his ancestors. These village teachers, managing alone a number of boys and receiving no fixed fees from them, have to depend a great deal upon presents when the occasion requires them.

Each pupil brought in his share, in goods or money. And Gopala, the orphan, the widow’s son!—the other boys smiled a smile of contempt on him when they talked of the present they were bringing.

That night Gopala’s heart was heavy, and he asked his mother for some present for the teacher, and the poor mother had nothing.

But she determined to do what she had been doing all her life, to depend on the Cowherd, and told her son to ask from his brother Gopala in the forest for some presents for the teacher.

The next day, after Gopala had met the Cowherd boy in the woods as usual and after they had some games together, Gopala told his brother of the forest the grief that was in his mind and begged him to give him something to present his teacher with.

‘Brother Gopala,’ said the cowherd, ‘I am only a cowherd you see, and have no money, but take this pot of cream as from a poor cowherd and present it to your teacher.’

Gopala, quite glad that he now had something to give his teacher, more so because it was a present from his brother in the forest, hastened to the home of the teacher and stood with an eager heart behind a crowd of boys handing over their presents to the teacher. Many and varied were the presents they had brought, and no one thought of looking even at the present of the orphan.

The neglect was quite disheartening; tears stood in the eyes of Gopala, when by a sudden stroke of fortune the teacher happened to take notice of him. He took the small pot of cream from Gopala’s hand, and poured the cream into a big vessel, when to his wonder the pot filled up again! Again he emptied the contents into a bigger vessel, again it was full; and thus it went on, the small pot filling up quicker than he could empty it. Then amazement took hold of everyone; and the
teacher took the poor orphan in his arms and inquired about the pot of cream.

Gopala told his teacher all about his brother Cowherd in the forest, how he answered his call, how he played with him, and how at last he gave him the pot of cream.

The teacher asked Gopala to take him to the woods and show him his brother of the woods, and Gopala was only too glad to take his teacher there.

The boy called upon his brother to appear, but there was no voice even that day. He called again and again. No answer. And then the boy entreated his brother in the forest to speak, else the teacher would think he was not speaking the truth. Then came the voice as from a great distance: ‘Gopala, thy mother’s and thy love and faith brought Me to thee; but tell thy teacher, he will have to wait a long while yet.’

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**Some Direct Disciples of Sri Ramakrishna on Bhakti**

To have faith in Him, to be devoted to Him, to praise His glories—these are the only duties in life. —**Swami Brahmananda**

There is the path of devotion and there is the path of knowledge. In the end, the devotee and the man of knowledge become one. —**Swami Brahmananda**

To sing the glory of the Lord in the company of devotees is a means to devotion, if the right mood and proper atmosphere is kept up. —**Swami Saradananda**

God is a lover of His devotees; He is satisfied with love and devotion alone. He reveals Himself wherever there are yearning and love. —**Swami Shivananda**

Life is useless, if it is not devoted to the service of God and is spent only in amassing wealth. —**Swami Shivananda**

True devotion is selfless. Whether the Beloved is rich or poor, still the devotee’s whole soul is for Him and no one else. He does not want anything but God. Like the Gopis of Brindavan he does not like to know, whether God is all-powerful or not. He knows Him to be his Beloved; that is all. He always wants to give something to God; but never wants to get anything from Him. —**Swami Ramakrishnananda**

Devotion and faith are unique. Man is always intent on outward things—name, fame, honor, and so on. We want intense, maddening love for God, firm and unshakable faith, and infinite confidence. —**Swami Premananda**
In Praise of Bhakti

WILLIAM PAGE

Bhakti means one-pointed love for God. It prunes away everything that is not God and focuses on him alone. Bhaktas hold him in the forefront of their minds. Everything else fades into background shadows. Some people pray for long life, good health, riches, fame, power, enjoyment. Bhaktas don’t want any of that. They want God alone.

This is beautifully expressed in the Shema, the maha-mantra of Judaism: Adonai elohenu Adonai echad: ‘The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.’ The next verse adds, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.’ (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, as translated in Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text, The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.) These two verses are a perfect encapsulation of Bhakti.

Bhaktas may ‘want’ God—but how do they ‘get’ Him? God can respond to our wanting. If our love is intense enough, and if God is favorably disposed, he can reveal himself. He can speak to us, give us visions, ecstasies, samadhi.

Some of us don’t get any of those things. We have to ask ourselves if we’re worthy. A highly revered and beloved senior swami once told me, ‘You have to polish yourself.’ The craving for visions and samadhi is still a craving, and the only thing we should be craving is God himself. Maybe our devotion is insufficient, or maybe we harbor deep-rooted moral flaws we don’t even recognize. We may be like the farmer in Sri Ramakrishna’s parable: we are trying to irrigate our field, but all the water is running out through the rat-holes of our cravings and attachments.

Whatever the case, for us God has prepared a consolation prize. This is the sense of his abiding presence mentioned earlier. It may seem to be a smiling presence standing by our side. Or it may well up as bliss from within, till it floods our consciousness. Sometimes it may surround us, envelop us, and engulf us from outside. At its most intense, we feel as if God’s spirit is embracing us, drawing us into him, merging us into him. This sense of his presence often persists long after the embrace has ceased. It leaves our minds uplifted, enriched, and purified.

A Gift from Hinduism: The Chosen Ideal

People will ask, ‘What do you mean by God?’ Hinduism counts 330 million gods. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam count only one. Then there are all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of Buddhism, and the myriads of deities worshipped by other religions. Which of these should we worship?

The answer is: Any one you like. For God is one, as the Vedas reminds us; people call Him by various names. They also worship Him through various forms. We believe that God has...
provided all these names and forms to suit the tastes of His devotees. Sri Ramakrishna tells the parable of the mother who prepares the same fish in different ways to suit the tastes of her different children. In the same way, God reveals himself through different names and forms to suit the tastes of His devotees. He’s a divine shape-shifter, the ultimate user-friendly deity.

Here we have a wonderful gift from Hinduism: the concept of the Ishta Devata, the Chosen Ideal. Take a favorite deity, Hinduism says, and worship it with special fervor—but also pay respect to all the others. Sri Ramakrishna gives the example of the dutiful wife who honors and serves her in-laws and relatives, but reserves her greatest love and service for her husband.

A Gift from Vaishnavism: The Bhavas

Vaishnavism has also given us a wonderful gift: the idea of bhavas, or attitudes. By adopting a certain attitude, or relationship, to God, we can deepen our devotional life. Take the average man. He has different relationships with various people. To his wife he is a husband, to his children he is a father, to his parents a son, to his boss an employee, to his subordinates a superior. In each of these roles he behaves differently, in each relationship he shows a different face—but still he is the same man. So also with God in the various bhavas he enjoys with his devotees.

Vaishnavism counts five bhavas:

Shanta, the peaceful relationship. Shanta Bhaktas assume a peaceful, serene attitude toward God, although no specific relationship is prescribed.

Dasya, the servant relationship. Dasya Bhaktas regard God as their lord, creator, or parent—and seek to serve him as such. This is the attitude most often assumed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Sakhya, the friend relationship. Sakhya Bhaktas regard God as their dearest friend.

Vatsalya, the parental relationship. Vatsalya Bhaktas regard God as their beloved child. Christians who worship the Baby Jesus and Hindus who worship Krishna as the child Gopala follow this bhava. Sri Ramakrishna was following it when he worshipped Ramlala, the metal image of the boy Rama.

Madhura, the lover relationship. Madhura Bhaktas regard God as their lover. That was the attitude the gopis had toward Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna believed that this bhava is dangerous for ordinary people, and likely to lead to a fall; so he forbade his disciples to practice it.
Now, the wonderful thing about these bhavas is that they are capable of infinite variations, adaptations, and combinations. In his relationship to Krishna, Arjuna was at once a friend, servant, and disciple. Sita was Rama’s wife and lover, but also his servant and friend. Christians might regard God as their creator, lord, and father, as Jesus did—but also as their dearest friend. They might regard Jesus as their elder brother.

Worshippers of Kali will regard her as their mother, as Sri Ramakrishna did, but also as a terrifying cosmic power. They might regard Sri Ramakrishna as their elder brother. Sri Ramakrishna’s own devotees may regard him as lord, teacher, or friend. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi comes with a built-in bhava: always she is the mother and we are her children. Whatever bhava we may choose, its purpose is to heighten, strengthen, and deepen our love for our Chosen Ideal.

The Image as Living Deity

We usually use an image of our Chosen Ideal as a focus for devotion. To increase that devotion, we treat the image as the living deity. We enthrone it on an altar, pray to it, meditate in front of it, offer flowers and incense to it. We may sing and talk to it, wake it up in the morning, offer food to it at mealtimes, and put it to bed at night. All of this is intended to impress upon our minds the realization that the image is much more than an image: it is the living deity itself.

Critics may object that bhakti can degenerate into a squishy and maudlin sentimentality. It can, but we don’t have to let it. We’re free to seek a more robust mode of devotion. Bhakti has a thousand arrows in its quiver. If other Bhaktas can benefit from sentimentality, who are we to scold them? Mount Realization is not a single peak, accessible by a single trail. It’s an entire massif, with many trails. We pick the trail we like and give others the right to do the same. What seems to be a stumbling-block for us may be a stepping-stone for others.

Bhakti and Beyond

Bhakti is frankly dualistic. Its primary practices are prayer, Japa, and meditation. Prayer calls the Lord from the heavens to the heart, Japa invites him to stay there, meditation tries to keep him there, and bhakti makes him never want to leave. No prayer, no progress; no Japa, no joy; no meditation, no meaning; no bhakti, no bliss.

Bhakti is based on a sense of otherness. There will always be a veil of separation, however thin and transparent, between Bhaktas and their Chosen Ideal. They don’t want to become one with the object of their devotion, but just to experience it close up. How can a lover enjoy gazing at the face of his beloved if he’s become a part of her? So, as Sri Ramakrishna says, quoting Ramprasad, Bhaktas want to taste sugar; they don’t want to become sugar.

Despite this, some Bhaktas may chafe at the separation. They may not be content to behold the face of their Chosen Ideal; they may want to become one with it. In such cases, they have to go beyond bhakti. In such cases, too, as in so many others, Sri Ramakrishna is the trailblazer: he shows the way. In many of his sadhanas, he first beheld the vision of the deity he was seeking, then merged into it, then merged into the formless Absolute.

For some of us that may never happen, and may not need to. But if it does, Bhakti is no longer necessary; it has already done its job. Then the Bhakta merges into the Chosen Ideal, the Chosen Ideal merges into the Absolute, dualism segues into monism, and Bhakti into Jnana.
Bhakti . . .

Bhakti is the elemental sentiment of love. The sentiment of love is potent and can have decisive impact on one’s life. Unregulated and misdirected love towards worldly objects, degenerates, sooner or later, into lust or greed or infatuation and, albeit initially gratifying, leads, eventually, to bondage and misery. But when the raw sentiment of love spontaneously flows towards the Supreme Being (conceived as one’s Chosen Deity, Ishta Devata), it is a force for enlightenment, exaltation and emancipation.

What are the conditions for the raw sentiment of love to blossom into bhakti? First, it should, spontaneously and unconditionally, flow towards God like a river to the ocean. Second, its flow should be steady and uninterrupted much like the flow of oil into a vessel into which the oil is poured. Third, it should have the adamantine power and steely will to break all hurdles and ward off all temptations. Fourth, it should be so all-consuming that the mind and the sense-organs willingly become its henchmen to help achieve the consummation of its bursting into a Conflagration of God-love. Fifth, it should hold delirious love of the Divine as both the means and the end. Sixth, it should have a horror of even the slightest prospect of separation from the Divine. Kapila’s definition of Bhakti in Bhagavata is all-comprehensive. It runs thus:

When all the powers of man’s senses, which are ordinarily frittered away through external contacts, are purified through devotional practices and dedicated action, and they get naturally focussed on Ishwara exclusively, without any extraneous and self-centred motivation, and with a firmness which no obstruction can overpower—that state of mind is called Bhakti.\(^1\)

Is It Easy!

Is Bhakti, then, as easy as swallowing sweet grapes, as it is commonly supposed? No. It is fallacious to call Bhakti the easiest of the paths to beatitude. It demands nothing less than the perpetual wrestling with the powerful dragon of ego and its eventual extirpation. The magnificent Mansion of Bhakti can be raised only on the charred remains of ego.

The ways of Bhakti are as many as its practitioners. Srimad Bhagavatam is a vade mecum on Bhakti and is also a superb Grammar of God-love. It is a marvellous Kaleidoscope of Devotion which offers arresting glimpses of the colourful and variegated patterns of devotion, as practised by the super-devotees who adorn its pages. Let us consort with a few of those towering devotees and study them at close quarters.

Dhruva and Prahlada

\(^1\) The author is a devotee of the Lord from Madurai, Tamilnadu. He writes and reviews books for various magazines.

Nothing gives us as deep an insight into the dynamics of devotion as an appraisal of the devotion of the Spiritual Twins of Bhagavata—Child Dhruva and Child Prahlada.

These two colossuses of devotion are poles apart in many respects. Dhruva is the scion of the noble dynasty of Swayambhu Manu—a dynasty in whose veins Bhakti flows as naturally as scarlet blood. Prahlada is the lotus of pure devotion emanating in the mire of Asura dynasty—a dynasty on which Hiranyakasipu, with his pathological abhorrence for God, is a blot.

The spark of Bhakti is a mere flicker initially in Dhruva and needs the sharp verbal shafts of his step-mother to spur it into the raging blaze of devotion. Prahlada is a garbha shriman (one with the opulence of devotion even while in the womb of his mother). Dhruva has a positive and congenial ambience for the practice of his devotion. His devotional exercises are, essentially, an instance of swimming downstream. Prahlada’s devotional life is, basically, a case of swimming upstream. He encounters such grim obstacles as an atheistic and arrogant father who frowns on his impulse of God-love, a worldly schooling which practises noxious indoctrination of heresies repugnant to him, a set of minatory teachers bent on infusing into him blasphemous doctrines, a bunch of Asura classmates impervious to spiritual truths and a ghastly grind of tortures inflicted to cure him of his malady of devotional frenzy.

But, both Dhruva and Prahlada have the rare good fortune of having their lives decisively oriented towards spiritual goals by no less a sage than Narada. The spiritual sermon of the Sage to Dhruva, while on his way to the forest to do penance and to Prahlada, while he is still a foetus in the womb of his mother, set the boys firmly on the trajectory of devotion. Prahlada is born a full-fledged Bhakta and Jnani while Dhruva evolves into a mature Bhakta and Jnani by sheer dint of his rigorous austerities. Dhruva earns his vision of graceful Mahavishnu and also his powers of hymning by the touch of the divine conch due to his inflexible spiritual resolve. Mahavishnu presents Himself before Prahlada in the hideous form of Man-Lion (Nrisimha) to oust Hiranyakasipu. Hiranyakasipu in his scurvy trick, makes Prahlada’s words true and eventually gets decimates.

The climax to Dhruva’s devotional exercises is benign and soothing while that of Prahlada’s devotional adventure is a melodrama of grisly destruction of Hiranyakasipu by Nrisimha. At the end, Dhruva, a victim of momentary machinations of Maya, accepts the boon of attainment of the superb realm of Dhruva, the eternal luminary, and Prahlada, after much prodding by Mahavishnu, opts for the boon of absolute absence of craving for any boon. Prahlada eternally shines as the formulator of the formula of nine-limbed devotion constituted of shravanam (hearing), smaranam (remembrance), kirtanam (singing), archanam (worshipping), vandanam (saluting), paadasevanam (service of the Lord’s feet), dasyam (the mood of being the servant) sakhyam, (mood of comradeship) and aatma-nivedanam (mood of self-dedication).

The devotional saga of the twin child-devotees has for us certain sublime messages. (a) Devotion knows no fear either of trials and tribulations or of punishments and reprisals as the devotee has absolute faith in the Lord’s redemptive power. (b) The Upadesha of a genuine guru is the surest passport to divine grace. (c) The boons we seek of God are a sure index of our spiritual maturity. (d) Episodes,
apparently inimical and minor (like the cruel verbal darts of the stepmother aimed at Dhruva) can be turned into opportunities for Spiritual Odyssey by resolute devotees and (e) Unflinching devotion to and impregnable faith in the Divine are precious assets in spiritual life.

Ambarish and Sudama

Can a Prince and a Pauper be paragons of devotion?

The hallmark of devotion is utter humility and self-abnegation. Power and pelf, the badge of royal sovereignty, fatten one’s ego and cripple humility. Grinding poverty demeans and bludgeons one into jettisoning one’s innate obligation to the quest of the Divine. But, King Ambarisha and indigent Sudama are notable exceptions to this rule.

King Ambarisha’s spiritual wisdom regards his kingdom as a clod of earth. His instinct for Karma Yoga converts his duty of governance into a selfless act of consecration. His formidable devotion to Mahavishnu effaces the last vestiges of his ego and makes him deem himself a mere instrument of God. As for Sudama, his very penury becomes his spiritual asset. Being a poor Brahmana with absolute contentment, he avoids the all-too-common frailty of falling into the materialistic trap. His very freedom from the tyranny of materialism aids and intensifies his devotion to Krishna, his erstwhile classmate, whose divinity his unsophisticated mind has unerringly intuited.

These two contrasting characters of Bhagavata clearly demonstrate that surfeit of wealth and searing poverty are both powerless to stem the swelling tides of supreme devotion. Devotion, practised in the midst of glittering opulence, pleases the Lord all the more. He stations His invincible Sudarshana Discus as a sentinel in King Ambarisha’s palace. He protects His king-devotee from the imprecations of the choleric Sage Durvasa. He declares openly, ‘It is as if I am not free, subject as I am to my devotees’.2

The plea of Sudama’s wife to him to approach Sri Krishna for succour is lapped up by Sudama not because of the sure prospect it holds of a swift end to his abject poverty but because of the opportunity it affords him to regale his eyes with the divine form of Sri Krishna. His devotion-soaked mind keeps brooding not on the material gains sure to accrue to him due to his rendezvous with Krishna but on the anticipated ecstasies of hobnobbing with divine Krishna. Sudama herein exhibits a vital feature of delirious devotion. A true devotee willingly lets the Lord invade his mind and lord it over. The heart-throne of the devotee is meant exclusively for the Lord to occupy. As the Lord is, for the devotee, neither a mere human personage nor an anthropomorphic deity but the very embodiment of the universe, the true devotee of Sudama’s type perceives the universe as a manifestation of the Lord and therefore brims with the plenitude of universal love.

Ambarisha neither detests Durvasa for his hostile act of rousing a goblin against him nor gloats in glee over the sad plight of Durvasa when the dreadful Discus chases him. He pines for the Sage’s precarious predicament and is shocked and pained when
Durvasa seeks refuge in him. He is the same Ambarisha, humble, calm, benign and loving both in times of weal and woe. He proves by his unruffled equanimity that devotion is, ocean-like, majestic and absorbs all dualities with the least ripple.

The same spirit of equipoise is displayed by Sudama (also known as Kuchela) both when he is abjectly poor prior to his meeting with Krishna and when he is catapulted to the pinnacle of prosperity subsequent to his interaction with Krishna. For a devotee, the Lord is the be-all and end-all and all the other happenings, either auspicious or adverse, are of no consequence at all.

**Gajendra—the Elephant Rescued by the Divine**

Can a pachyderm chant lofty hymns, panegyrizing the Impersonal Absolute (*Nirguna Brahman*)? Can the illiterate rustic maids (the gopis) of Gokul wrest from the spiritual world the sobriquet, ‘Everest of Devotion’? The miracles in devotion recounted by Bhagavata are mind-boggling.

The mighty tusker, sporting self-conceitedly with his consorts of she-elephants in a deep lake, is caught by a powerful crocodile and dragged into the lake to meet his doom. Unable to escape from the stranglehold of the crocodile, the elephant utters the sacred name of the Lord and cries, ‘O! The Primeval Source, My Lord!’ On hearing the doleful plaint of the elephant, the Lord rushes to rescue him from the impending danger of death, ensconced on His Garuda vehicle. On beholding the Lord, the elephant utters such a soul-stirring hymn pregnant with Vedantic verities that it is extolled by devout scholars as incomparably holy and profound.

The elephant was a devout King called Indradyumna in his earlier birth. His latent *vasanas* of devotion manifested and made the elephant sing the paens of praise of the Lord in immortal terms. This episode underscores the encouraging message that devotion practised in one birth suffers no disruption at the end of life but continues in the subsequent births, only to mature more and more. Gajendra’s self-surrender and spirited chanting of a hymn in praise of the Lord are, perhaps, the precursor to the twin exercises of *prapatti* and *naama-sankirtan* that are treasured by the devotees as infallible means of combating the evils of Kali Age and reaching the Divine.

**The Gopis’ Divine Love**

True devotion needs neither pedantry nor pomposity. What is needed for true devotion to arise and swell in the heart is guilelessness, uncluttered by the encumbrances of worldly *vasanas*. The true devotee is ‘pure in heart and poor in spirit’. This dictum is exemplified by the Gopis whose love for Krishna transcends all rules of ethics, convention, custom and tradition. Their pangs of separation from Krishna, their rejoicings over their reunion with Him, their utter inability to efface Krishna off their memory, their relinquishment of all conventional constraints of ethics, their outbursts of anger against their perceived adversaries and their eschewal, in His presence, of even the sense of shame, the mightiest bar to union with God, constitute unimpeachable evidence of
their towering devotion. They adopt Madhura Bhava, the Queen of Bhavas, in their bid to woo Krishna.

The Everest of Devotion is also the Everest of Wisdom. Unaware of their essential identity, immature devotion and incipient wisdom play hide-and-seek. With the discovery of their essential identity, the game ends and cathartic God-experience supervenes. The unlettered gopis, mad with Krishna-prema, are also the ultimate in spiritual wisdom.

Kunti and Rantideva

Sagacious Kunti, Krishna’s aunt, is convinced that loving and constant remembrance of Him is All-Bliss. She knows that the surest insurance against the risk of oblivion of Him and loss of Bliss is to ever remain besieged by a sea of sufferings. She shrewdly calculates that the Bliss of Krishna-smriti will take the sting off her sufferings and hers will ever be unalloyed Bliss. Her memorable words of prayer to Krishna run thus: ‘Let repeated misfortunes be our lot, O Mentor of all the worlds, if they will bring us a glimpse of Thee, which will suffice to put an end to this endless cycle of birth and death!’

King Rantideva, a super-devotee endowed with the integral experience of Vishnu pervading all, prays for the ‘privilege’ of entering into all suffering creatures and sharing their pains. The way Bhagavata portrays a true devotee as a cornucopia of selfless love and compassion is amazing.

Conclusion

For all their self-effacement, the devotees are a resourceful tribe. Wearing the collyrium of intense devotion, their inner eye detects and decodes the mysteries of the Supreme such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and passion for reciprocity of the love of devotees. How, then, are the Lord’s acts of benevolent intervention in the critical predicaments of a Dhrusa or a Prahlada or a Gajendra or an Ambarisha or a Sudama otherwise explicable? A true devotee is not only an adept in detecting the divine mysteries but also in precipitating them into forceful play when the situation warrants. This is the meaning of the statement of the Sufi mystic Jalal-uddin Rumi in terms of a scientific metaphor, ‘The astrolabe of the mysteries of God is love.’

Swami Vivekananda’s remarks on the ‘Triangle of Love’ are a succinct summing-up of the quintessence of Bhakti. To quote Swamiji,

The first angle of our triangle of love is that love knows no bargaining . . . The second angle of the triangle of love is that love knows no fear . . . The third angle of the love-triangle is that love knows no rival.

Srimad Bhagavatam is a Book of God and God-intoxication. Each one in the galaxy of devotees the Holy Book presents epitomises one or more of the insignias of devotion. The more we quaff the nectar of Bhagavata, the deeper will be our insight into the Ways of Bhakti and the sturdier will grow our devotion to God.

References

1. Srimad Bhagavatam (SB), Sk. II, Ch.25 Sl.32 Tr. by Swami Tapasyananda.
2. Ibid, Sk IX – Ch. 5- Sl. 63
3. SB, Sk.1, Ch. 8, Sl. 25 Tr. by N.Raghunathan.
5. CW, 3:87-88-89
Bhakti: Seeking Everlasting Love

It is our common experience that most of our actions are motivated by a thirst for happiness. From the Vedantic viewpoint, bliss (ananda) is part of our real (divine) nature and this divinity is trying to manifest itself through every one of our acts. Therefore, the highest goal of life is to manifest this divinity as completely as possible. The path of Bhakti or divine love seeks to lead us to this goal by directing all the energy coming from our emotions towards God through unconditional love. Some questions naturally arise in our minds; why should we direct love this way, and how can we do it?

In our ordinary lives, we often love other persons or objects because we have something to gain from them. In fact, the very idea of love without expectations seems both silly and impracticable; why should I (and how can I) love someone if that person would not give me something I want? This is answered by Sri Ramakrishna through the beautiful example of a child asking for its mother. A child may be distracted with toys for some time, but after finishing its play the child can be satisfied only by the mother taking it on her lap. We experience a genuine feeling of joy in being with someone whom we love deeply, whether or not that person gives us something material. Moreover, it is our own love for the other person that truly brings us this joy, far more than the love (or anything else) that the person gives us back (which is never guaranteed and could lead to joy or sorrow). It is also a fact that due to the ever-changing nature of our lives, we may not always have the company of humans or other objects of our love, often leading to great misery. Therefore, we are advised to develop a deep and unconditional love directed towards God, who is ever-present and ever-near.

However, even if we intellectually accept the value of unconditional love for God, the question of how to develop it remains. For many of us, God is at best a conjecture or imagination, whereas the persons and objects and goals of worldly life seem much more...
real and engaging. Here, the path of Bhakti suggests the simple solution of regarding God as one of our nearest and dearest, i.e., a personal relation such as parent, child, friend, etc., so that our minds can attach to Him easily. Concurrently, all the actions that we perform could be continuously offered to God. This could motivate us to perform actions in an exemplary manner but also gradually lead us away from being disturbed by successes and failures that otherwise wear us out quickly.

The promise is that through repeated practice, each action of ours becomes a joyous act of love, and God to us becomes a living reality rather than an imagination. And one day, we would truly swim in that boundless ocean of bliss within our hearts.

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The Final Goal of Bhakti

Realizing that God alone is, and that He is both the intelligent and the material cause of the entire cosmos, and crucially, also constitutes what arises as ‘I’ within oneself, is the one goal of human life. Till this all-sweeping unity becomes a matter of unbroken experience, we all continue to act as if the “I” in us were a separate entity functioning in a world of billions of such separate entities.

Our forefathers have handed down to us time-tested paths to awaken our consciousness to this grand unity. The chief among such paths is Bhakti: one regards God as the loving and lawful ruler of the universe, and acts accordingly. This includes readily praying to God especially when afflicted, feeling powerless, heart-broken; lovingly and humbly soliciting God’s help to come out of difficult situations, to do well in exams and interviews, to safely recover from an illness; being grateful to all that God has given and being humble in the face of success by seeing God’s hand in it.

One often hears complaints that if God were to answer only those who pray to him or beg him for pardon, He should be a lawless ruler. It is true that the law of Karma (i.e., the law of cause and effect) is binding. However, it is also true that genuine repentance and penitence amount to good Karma, and act as effective deterrents from the painful consequences of our bad Karmas. Thus, those who pray to God, and hence inevitably go through the self-imposed punishment of penitence, certainly bring down the intensity of the punishments they would have otherwise received. If one thinks this is unfair, it is important to note that penitence, repentance and devotion are open to all. More importantly, such purpose-oriented meditation on God gradually intensifies, taking us to the final goal: an unwavering consciousness of our identity with the universal spirit.

Given this ultimate purpose of devotion, it is only natural that the law of Karma
provides incentives to take up devotion/Bhakti: while realization is an incentive in itself, it takes time to materialize. These temporary incentives are necessary to get one started and sustain one’s effort and finally reach the goal of life—to experience the joy that is God. This is what Bhakti finally leads to.

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Nine Ways of Bhakti

Divine love! What is this divine love! We all know about love, but divine love! Divine love is different from our love for worldly objects. This can only be felt but cannot be described. Many of us born in a spiritual tradition would have grown up memorizing, chanting divine names for various reasons. As children, for instance, we might have prayed to God for success in our examinations; as a grown-up youth, for good job, money and similar things. Somehow most of us pray only for fulfillment of desires. Hence the term divine love becomes difficult to understand.

The term divine when added to love makes love transcend all the material barriers. It is raising the power of love to spiritual, universal love, and that is called Bhakti. One should start cultivating Bhakti right from the very early stages of life. It is said in Srimad Bhagavatam that the great Bhakta Prahlada developed, even as a boy, utmost and unconditional love for the Lord. Despite all obstacles and trials, Prahlada always prayed, chanted and remembered his beloved Lord Vishnu. Thus we find Prahlada speaking of nine forms of Bhakti. He says one can develop Bhakti by listening to God’s inspiring stories, singing His glories, remembering His name, doing seva to Him, worshipping Him, praying to Him and so on.

Cultivating Bhakti makes a person mature and wise. When we practice the nine forms of Bhakti described by Prahlada, we become mature and wiser. The more we grow in our Bhakti practice, the more we understand the transient nature of life and clinging to worldly desires. This purifies our heart and mind. It also helps face difficult situations in life in better ways. Swami Vivekananda emphasized the fact that we must always pray to God for strength to face the situation. Bhakti alone makes us strong and attain true happiness in life.

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The Journey of Bhakti

The term ‘Bhakti’, has many meanings woven into it—love, reverence and devotion. Keeping these in mind when we look around, we find that India, like no other nation (though there have been many mystics in all countries) has been blessed with numerous great ‘Bhaktas’.

Intense love and diligence of Mirabai, passion and agony of Surdas, unflinching devotion of Tulsi Das, the bliss of Chaitanya and yearning and ecstasy of Sri Ramakrishna are examples of personified Bhakti.

Intense desire to expunge ones identity and deliquesce/dissolve into the ocean of bliss is Bhakti. It is a state of mind when in every scene, every object and every act there is God. A Sufi saint has beautifully said ‘yaar ko hmne ja-baza dekha, kahi zahir kahi chhupa dekha’—‘I saw the Beloved One everywhere, sometimes well-revealed, sometimes well-hidden.’ Indeed when the Bhakta, looks into the mirror, he sees only his beloved. He becomes ‘mad’ for God; nothing comes out of his mouth but the God’s name.
His consciousness becomes one with God, he becomes one with God. This is Bhakti. Yet all this is just ‘knowledge’—acquired by intellect or brain. It is all theory without any experience. As a simple devotee, I have reverence for God but not intense enough to call it Bhakti. Often, while listening to devotional songs, I get a totally different feeling, a spark in the body-mind that is incomparable to any other experience. Sometimes tears might roll down my eyes and I feel blessed at that moment. All this ends up in no time, alas, it’s like a stone on the surface of water. Thoughts of the worldly cares and desires engulf my mind and I am back to work and worries. That perhaps is the state of most of us.

Born in India, and that too in Varanasi, from my childhood I have been listening to the stories of great sages and their extraordinary devotion to the Lord. A Bhakta offering his eyes to lord Shiva because he did not have flowers to offer; someone offered his body to feed hungry bird/animals. Mirabai turning snakes that were sent to bite her into flower garlands and so on—these and many stories point out to what extent one can have the intensity of devotion. Do we have intensity of devotion towards the Lord that we worship? To what extent can we go, what can we do for Him? In a personal sense, do I have slightest of such feeling? The instinctive and honest answer is no. I lack the courage to offer my eyes. This creates an avalanche of thoughts. Do I believe in God? Do I have faith? If yes, what kind of faith is this? Faith does not have ‘degree’; it is more like ‘digital quantity’, either it is or it is not. Being a beginner, I can only fancy such intensity but surely, sincerity is what matters most.

With all these questions in the mind, when we read Swami Vivekananda’s Bhakti Yoga, we find there how beautifully the whole idea of Bhakti is expounded. He speaks different stages that a seeker passes through, different practices, to attain Para-bhakti. Thus we begin to understand that these stories are of perfected Bhaktas who have struggled for a life time or many lives to attain such states of devotion. Bhakti is seeing God, talking to Him, living with Him. It may be a long way to go before I reach that state of bliss, but the journey should begin!

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The Role Pure Buddhi in Attaining Supreme Bhakti

‘Modern’ education teaches, evaluates and gives importance only to sharpen the intellect (buddhi), not caring much for finer or emotional aspects, and literally not touching the spiritual aspects of the mind (antahkarana).

The word Bhakti comes from root word bhaj and one of its meanings is ‘a part of’. So, Bhakti can be understood as ‘a feeling that you are a part of one thing or one being’. Can we use sharpened Buddhi to develop Bhakti? The Hindu scriptures say that there is ‘only One existence and you are That’. If you want to realize that One in fullness, the way is, as Krishna says in Gita ‘you can know Him (that One) through parabhakti (supreme devotion).’ Bhakti at the preparatory level is called Vaidhi Bhakti and the Bhakti which is ripened is called Para-bhakti. One needs this Parabhakti to realize that oneness. That One can be called as ‘God’. As the word ‘God’ does not convey any aspect or property of that being, we use the names representing aspects of that One as Ishwara (who looks
after), *Brahman* (hugeness), *Atman* (essence), *Nirguna* (without properties) and so on—these terms enable our mind to grasp the concept intellectually. This is the way we use Buddhi to clarify the idea of ‘God’.

Another thing is about our self-identity. When we are only focused on our ‘I'-ness (*ahamkara*), we have a sense of separation from others. As we get intense feeling of whatever we identify with, to get supreme feeling of the One, we need to expand our identity from I-ness to One-ness.

Once we have intellectual understanding of the One, this well-directed Buddhi helps us in realizing it. While we are doing any action in the world, we will have choices to choose from. Our Buddhi says (generally called ‘inner voice’) something and the other voice, guided by our desires and attachments, says something else. As the voice of desires is louder, our mind follows the louder one, ignoring the voice of our Buddhi. Hence, the first requirement toward higher life is to develop the will to listen to the voice of Buddhi and follow it. This faculty of well-directed Buddhi with willpower to listen to it is called *viveka*. Use of Viveka helps us reduce our attachments and desires which is necessary to develop true Bhakti.

Along with this, one needs to spend some time, deliberately, in thoughts of One-ness. This process helps us assimilate the intellectual understanding of One-ness—viewing all aspects of life in this line of thought. As the human mind has the capacity to get attached to any thought repeated over some time, we will get attached to this thought of One-ness. This attachment will start shifting our Ahamkara from I-ness to One-ness. This process works as a positive feedback and will help us in having the feeling of One-ness, independent of external conditions.

Practicing this over time will make this thought natural to us resulting in complete absorption of mind into that thought, even without willpower. This will lead to the idea of One-ness with God which is what Parabhakti in essence is. Once we get this and if He (that One) wants us to know Him, we will know Him.

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**Towards King-size Love**

Sri Ramakrishna says that one should be done with all desires before we can have supreme devotion. May be one was a king in previous life and that is how one has unconditional devotion to the Lord in this life!

What does this mean? King has many materials and things. Some common things which a king has are wealth, respect and comforts, entertainment, achievements to boast, challenges to engage in life, name and fame. Comparing these things to our life today, we have reasonable access to resources, respect from peers, family and friends whose circle is ever growing. We also have comforts in the sense of variety of foods available and dressing, travel in modern car, bus and aeroplane, other amenities of good living such as hot water to bathe, our electronic servants to fan and so. We also have means of entertainment in dish TVs, movies, smart phone and internet. The freedom to choose professions, name and fame with likes of Facebook, ‘upvotes’ and re-shares on Twitter and Quora, and viral videos.

But does this kingly life give us peace and lasting happiness? Do these quench our kingly greed for happiness? No! Our relation with God is still that of give and take. He gives, and we want to Him to go on giving.
always, and we want to be receiver always. And yet when we go to a temple, we hesitate while putting offering in the donation box. It is like asking for infinite fresh water ocean by offering a teaspoon full of water resembling our meager donation! The business Bhakti!

Sri Ramakrishna would advise us to look for the infinite Lord, than seek fulfillment of such trifling desires, however ‘kingly’ they may look!

One should prepare oneself for Bhakti. Mere sentimentalism is not sufficient. In order to produce a lasting change in our life and personalities, we need to purge ourselves of all trivial desires. One should be consistent and determined. Unless we overcome hankering for desires of lust and greed, our seeking is short-lived.

The bedrock of Bhakti is inner purity. Only strong character, renunciation and self-restraint, which require much effort and training to develop, can take us to unconditional love for God. Despite failures, we must continue our journey of self-purification and love. One needs the right balance of logic and emotion, head and heart, in order to build a firm foundation for spiritual living.

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Channelling Love Godwards

Human life is precious, both in aspects of time as well as resources. It is a prized opportunity to experience infinite bliss but we waste it running after petty enjoyments. Such is our way of life!

Some dwell in planes of grossest pleasures, some in art, some in science, some in romantic love, some in philosophy and some in religion. Whatever may be their interest, everybody is seeking happiness, only oblivious of better—the best—way of obtaining it. There may be some happiness in all things that people seek; the ultimate and sweetest way to achieve infinite happiness is the path of Bhakti or divine love.

When we look to saints, the highly developed personalities, it is always a wonder —how can they love God so madly? What drove them into unconditional love? How can we simply live off ignorantly when this uncanny concept of Bhakti (divine love) is echoing all over in their lives! It simply doesn’t fit in because all the various manifestations of love we experience are inherently conditional and every love directed towards worldly things gives sad results ultimately. Even the love of parents is not completely unconditional, because it is reduced when certain hardwired expectations are not met. Whereas the divine love of these Bhaktas only seem to grow day by day and gets more intense even if we can’t see any tangible results (in a materialistic sense). A slight misunderstanding leads to breakups and divorces in ordinary lives whereas these ‘crazy people’ stand outside the domains of misunderstandings because they are far from desires. The only desire they possess is ‘have more Bhakti’.

Man can live without almost any possession. But he cannot live without love being reciprocated. He loses purpose. And yet we forget that love of things and fellow humans are impermanent, variable and tends to get painful whereas love of God is eternal, ever increasing and sweetest. Realising such a simple thing itself is a gargantuan task.

Love is like energy, it has to be conserved in order to use it well. So, when we freeze our worldly desires and cut the conditional bonds asunder, there will not be left any avenue for it getting dissipated. But the best way to
conserve and multiply love is to turn to God. That source of infinite bliss is the lotus feet of God. Love channelled in this way is called Bhakti.

Sai Thejas  
Undergraduate, IIT Madras

Bhakti is Meant for All
Here is this story from Srimad Bhagavatam:

Once upon a time, Dhruva sought refuge in the feet of Lord Narayana who is the refuge of the entire universe. He began to perform his penance on the banks of the Yamuna. For the first month, he lived on the fruits. The second month he sustained himself by eating grass and dried leaves. In the third month, only water held his life in the body. During the fourth month, he denied himself even that. The air he breathed was the only food he was taking. Immensely pleased with Dhruva’s earnestness, the Lord in his magnificent form appeared to Dhruva and thus Dhruva—a mere kid had the Darshan of God in just a few months!

Dhruva was neither a scholar of the scriptures nor an exponent of Yoga. All he had was pure, intense, devotion to the almighty. Dhruva stands as a role model for all those who wish to develop Bhakti. If he, a kid, can attain That, cannot we too!

The path of devotion is simple even in this cyber age. Bhakti simply means to think of the Divine in all possible ways. Bhakti is not just praying for good results in exams or for health and wealth. Bhakti is beyond the fulfilment of earthly desires. It is beyond unending applications and requests to God to fulfil our desires. Bhakti is the firm ever-unchanging, faith that the Lord will take care!

The path of Bhakti is not only through prayer, meditation, and thinking of stories of the glories of the Lord, but even through contemplating on the Lord and admiring his creation of the universe, while going through Newtonian and Einsteinian laws. It is Bhakti to be amazed the way He energizes each and every cell in a human body to generate energy to play sports and games. It is Bhakti to think how He enables what we study to stay in our mind so that we can perform well in the exam. It is Bhakti to think how He enabled the computer scientists to make all information fly from every corner of the world to our computers when we work using the internet. It is Bhakti to think about how much better a friend the Lord is by being with us right from the beginning till the end—even while we are ‘time-passing’ with our friends and classmates. The Lord carries us on his shoulders when we walk through the darkest valleys of our lives. He is ever-compassionate, merciful, showering His unconditional love on us throughout.

Why does God do what he does? Well, it is his responsibility to take care of his children. It is our birth-right to ask for His care, to ask for salvation. This ‘right’ is more fundamental than any fundamental rights! To whom else should a child go to seek guidance, care and nurturing if not Mother? Mother definitely comes to a crying baby. It is our responsibility to cry for the Lord loudly enough for Him to come running right through the seven doors of His abode. O Lord! Don’t contradict your own promise mentioned in scripture. Take care of us! Nurture us! Guide and ever-enlighten us in your path of pure-devotion for we are your children.

Karthik Rao  
Software Engineer, Mysore, Karnataka

Bhakti, the Intense Love
Bhakti is intense ‘love’ for ‘God’. So, questions come: What is love? Who is God? Why love God?
Usually when we love someone, what do we do? We are ready to do things for the person we love—things which otherwise we wouldn’t. Since we value those whom we love, we think of them often, and we want to be with them. We value their things. We admire them, and in a way, we wish to be like them in some measure at least.

Why do we love others? We love someone because of certain qualities—beauty, knowledge, behavior and so on. They have qualities which we love, or wish to have. Not just the person, but the qualities possessed by him are the object of our love. We like the tea but not necessarily the cup.

Keeping this in mind, let us try to understand the idea of divine love. Divine, or God, is the source of everything that we have or will have. He is the creator, sustainer and the dissolver of all that is. He is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent—Satyam, Jnanam, Anantam! Not only this—God is the Ultimate Repository of all human qualities—He is Virtues Personified.

Anyone loving virtue—and who does not!—will have to love God. Yes! Virtues! We like Strength, we like Power, we like Compassion, we like Intelligence, we love Forgiveness, and on and on. When we interact with someone who has these virtues, we are moved to the core. These qualities make a man great, an ordinary man a saint. It is these virtues that make a person strong and great. And God! The great sages have sung that God is someone who has all the virtues to the fullest degree possible! Who would not love Him!

Another thing. God is Infinity. Infinity in mathematics is that which is greater than any number. Imagine any positive number. Add one to it. We get a bigger number. If we keep doing this and we will soon get tired. Now, Infinity is that which is greater than any number. Now you say a number, I can always add one and get a bigger one! Hence, Infinity is not tangible, not reachable! Yet in the heart of our hearts we feel it’s, God’s, Infinite’s, presence, grandeur.

Swami Vivekananda calls love a triangle, with ‘no expectations from the loved’, ‘fearlessness towards and for the loved’ and ‘prioritizing the loved’ as the three angles. That is the core of Bhakti—‘intense love for God.’

Bharadwaj Bankupali
UG Student, IIT, Madras

Our devotion must not be dependent on any particular action, quality, or form of His; our devotion must be without any motive. It is extremely bad if our devotion increases when He is kind and it takes to flight when He is cruel or does not heed our prayers. But I concede that for the beginners, devotion cannot be free from motives altogether.

—Swami Trigunatitananda
Emblem of Holistic Spirituality
The official emblem of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission
Conceptualized by Swami Vivekananda in 1901

Harmony of Four Yogas

Rising Sun (Jnana yoga)
Lotus (Bhakti yoga)
Swan (Paramatman)
Wavy Waters (Karma yoga)
Encircling Serpent (Raja yoga)

कर्मेः प्रबोधनम्
‘May the Divine impel us towards the Supreme Light!’
(Tarttiriya-aranyaham: 4.10.41-44)

‘The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma; the lotus of Bhakti; and the rising-sun, of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the swan in the picture stands for the Paramatman (Supreme Self). Therefore the idea of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Yoga, the vision of the Paramatman is obtained.’

—Swami Vivekananda, (CW, 7:204)
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‘Let the Lion of Vedanta roar, the foxes will fly to their holes.’
—Swami Vivekananda

Managing Editor: Swami Gautamananda
Editor: Swami Atmashraddhananda
Printed and Published by Swami Vimurtananda for

SRI RAMAKRISHNA MATH
MYLAPORE, CHENNAI 600 004
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<td>Navajeevan Atharvana Veda Pathasala</td>
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