

(2nd Semester)

Bhakti Yoga

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What is Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti yoga is the yoga, of love and devotion. It is devotion to the divine, in whatever form or non-form you care to see him or her. It can be devotion to truth, God, the Supreme, Brahman, the Absolute Reality or any other name that you want to call the ineffable. It can be devotion to Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Krishna, Rama, Hanuman, Mahavira, Shakti, Shiva, Vishnu, Kali, Durga, Ahura Mazda or even Zeus if you wish. You can express devotion to any form which you regard as divinity incarnate. It can be a great saint, whether dead or alive. It can be your Guru. The specific form is unimportant. It is the devotion that you personally feel that is essential. Without this devotion, whether great or small, it is impossible to practice Bhakti yoga.

Bhakti can easily be labelled blind dogma and in many cases it has degenerated into exactly this. In the past and in the present day, Bhakti has been totally misunderstood and misused. This has led to fanaticism and intolerance. This is not what Bhakti is all about. Bhakti is not something that is easily acceptable to the modern intellectual world. Yet, this is a great pity, for Bhakti yoga is an incredibly powerful method that can lead to higher knowledge and Transcendence. Not only this, Bhakti yoga can help you harmonise your life and make life the joy that it should be. People have seen the misuse and corruption of Bhakti and have mistaken this for the essence of Bhakti yoga. Bhakti yoga has vast implications which can transform your life.

If you are sceptical, there is nothing wrong with this; we do not ask you to believe anything that we write with blind acceptance. Why should you? But it is amazing to see how people change, and the change does not come through blind acceptance, but through greater understanding and realisation of the deeper significance of Bhakti yoga.

Another thing to remember is that many great yogis, if not all, expressed Bhakti. This was either their path or Bhakti came as a result of other paths. Some of them could not stop talking; about Bhakti. "Were they misguided?" This is most unlikely, since these were the very people who were regarded by others as wise men. If wisdom can lead to Bhakti, or if Bhakti can lead to wisdom, then there must be something behind the path of Bhakti that is not immediately obvious. Furthermore, these great yogis were clear indicators and examples of what the path of Bhakti brings: tolerance, peace, understanding, love of fellow men and many other attributes. It is to these people that you should look if you want to see clear proof of the benefits of Bhakti yoga, not to those who become bigots and fanatics.

What is Bhakti?

Bhakti yoga implies two things: both the path and the experience. A person can be on the path of Bhakti yoga and yet have no positive experience of intense Bhakti. At the same time, a person can experience intense Bhakti and yet not profess to be on the path of Bhakti yoga. Let us illustrate this more clearly by taking two examples:

If one is devotionally inclined, then one can follow the path of Bhakti yoga. This involves intense concentration of one's entire being on an object of devotion. This method of Bhakti yoga can eventually lead to a transcendental experience of overwhelming Bhakti. Associated with Bhakti is transcendental knowledge. Bhakti will become stronger and stronger with time and more experience.

If one is not devotionally inclined, then the other paths of yoga can be followed instead. These other paths will eventually lead to spiritual experience. This in turn will automatically lead to Bhakti, for you will realise something that you did not know before. Whichever method you adopt, the result is the same. The paths of the devotional and the non-devotional individuals will eventually join.

Bhakti spans the infinite chasm between mere faith and divine realisation. It also covers the period when the bhakta attempts to live and express this realisation in everyday life. Bhakti bridges the abyss between lack of divine knowledge backed by faith, and the personal experience and knowledge of divinity. Bhakti is not a subject for discussion. It must be felt, known and experienced for oneself. Real

Bhakti arises spontaneously through higher awareness and knowledge, because of realisation of something not known before.

The Mechanics of Bhakti

The purpose of Bhakti is to develop intense concentration towards one object. This occurs spontaneously if there is a feeling of Bhakti towards that object. All of one's energy is focused in one direction. This in turn leads to higher sensitivity and receptivity of the mind-body to higher forces. One becomes a bhakta through experience and not merely through belief.

This method of Bhakti has been used by many religions, notably Christianity and Hinduism. In these religions, the whole purpose is to encourage the expression of Bhakti in the followers. To do this, specific figures are given as objects of adoration. If this adoration is sufficient, then one can know intense Bhakti, bliss and transcendental experience. The method and purpose of Bhakti is to take you away from identification with the little "I": the body-mind. The aim is to reduce personal whims, conflicts, disharmony, etc., which tend to imprison and severely limit awareness. The aim is to make the mind a perfect reflector, a perfect mirror of experience.

Bhakti - Balance for the Intellect

Bhakti is an excellent method of providing a balance to over-rigid attachment to the intellect. It is great help in removing intellectual constipation and is a means of giving direction and release to emotions and feelings. One of the biggest problems in the modern world is the inability for intellectual people to express their emotions. These emotions become pent-up and suppressed. People forget how to laugh and release their emotions in a positive way and non-destructive manner. Emotions are often expressed in outbursts and violence. The path of Bhakti provides a perfect method of expressing these unruly emotions. Furthermore, the emotions are not only released, they are channelled towards making the mind one-pointed. This is a positive utilisation of emotional forces. The emotions are directed towards the goal of higher awareness and experience.

Not Everyone is Devotionally Inclined

Those people who do not feel any form of devotion to an/ deity or person, do not need to cultivate devotion or belief. Why force or artificially created belief or devotion without substance? You would merely be fooling yourself, and it is not necessary. All you must do is to practise other forms of yoga with intensity. Eventually Bhakti will arise spontaneously as consequence of higher awareness and experience. Eventually you have no choice but to be it bhakta (devotee) because of what you know. It must happen, just as surely as night follows day. This applies to everyone without exception. It applies to those people who at present feel not even the slightest sign of emotion.

Those people who have some form of devotion or belief should definitely follow the path of Bhakti because of their very personality. They may lack any form of higher experience, but they spontaneously feel devotion towards something. If you are one of these people then you should direct your emotion towards the object of devotion. For you, Bhakti yoga can be the express train to expanded awareness. But make sure that you are honest with yourself. If you have to sit down and think, "What shall I be devoted to", then this is a sure sign that you do not really have an object of devotion. You should not need to sit down and ask yourself this question. If you feel devotion for something, then you will know. There will be no doubt; your heart will immediately tell you the object which captivates your Bhakti. If you feel strong devotion to one thing, without doubt, Bhakti is the path for you. If you do not feel this overwhelming devotion for something then at this stage Bhakti is not for you. Under these circumstances, Bhakti yoga will probably lead to mere ritual and self-deception, rather than transcendence. Practise other types of yoga and Bhakti will come in the future.

Bhakti and the Other Yogic Paths

All the paths of yoga lead to the same experience. The realisation is the same; it is only the means that is different. All the paths of yoga aim at reducing and eventually eliminating the compulsive grip of the mind-born ego. Bhakti does this by identifying and relegating all of one's impulses towards an outside object of Bhakti. Eventually one surrenders the ego to the Guru, the Supreme or whatever. This is not easy but it is the aim. Gyana yoga on the other hand attains the same results by intuitive realisation, that the ego is not the totality of our being. This automatically reduces the hold of the ego and eventually dissolves it.

Karma yoga attains the same end when one ceases to be the doer. Raja yoga reduces the power of the ego by exploring the mind. This leads to an understanding of the vast underlying substratum of each human being and every manifested object. This seemingly invincible ego automatically drops away when one starts to know the nature of the mind.

All the paths merge with each other, for they are like different petals on the same flower. Gyana (revolutionary knowledge) leads to Bhakti and Bhakti leads to Gyana. Karma yoga leads to Bhakti and vice versa. In the beginning the aspirant must tread that path (or paths) that suits his or her temperament.

Love of Everything

There is a state of Bhakti called Madhura (divine sweetness). This is love of the divine in everything. One sees beauty and perfection everywhere. Wherever one looks one sees the form of the divine. There is love for everything. One looks outwards and sees only the works and essence of the Supreme. This is an intoxication of bliss, for there is nothing that is not the Supreme essence. It can be compared to the love that a man feels towards a woman, his beloved; or the love a woman shows towards her beloved. But this love is directed towards everything, yet, and this is the strange thing, it is simultaneously love that is non-directional; it is mere Love and bliss in itself. It is not directed towards anything in particular, for this implies separateness and difference. It is both, love for everything and love for nothing specifically.

Bhakti is like making love to everything continuously, from humans to birds, flowers-everything; you have no choice, for you realise their real nature and the nature of yourself and with this "impossible" relationship, how is it possible not to feel love for everything?

Hypocrisy and self-deception

Do not become lost in fake feelings or superficial showy expressions of Bhakti. Do not try to impress other people with false displays of devotion. Only express and follow that which comes directly from your heart. Be true to your own personality. If you feel no Bhakti at the present time, do not worry, it is something that will

arise spontaneously if you sincerely practice other forms of yoga. As Shakespeare so wisely said: "To thine own self be true". This is important. Why express devotion to anything unless it springs directly from the depth of your being? If you express devotion without the corresponding inner feeling, then this is hypocrisy and self-deception, which are two of the greatest obstacles on the path of Bhakti yoga. They are major blocks on the path to expanded awareness.

Importance of No Expectation

Do not expect anything from your practice of Bhakti yoga. This also applies to any other form of yoga. If you practice asanas, pranayama, meditational practices and so forth, try not to expect anything. Because the more one expects, the less one will receive this is because expectation implies ego and the greater the ego, the less one will make progress in yoga. This is very important. This world is a playground. It is a school where you can learn about yourself, where you can recognise and eradicate your imperfections and inner problems. Every person and everything is your teacher. Without interactions with other people and situations you would never be able to know your own hang-ups and limitations.

Non-expectation is a fundamental aspect of Bhakti yoga. This was tersely stated by Chaitanya, the great Bengali bhakta. He said, "I pray not for wealth; I pray not for honours; I pray not for pleasure, or even the joys of poetry. I only pray that during my whole life I may have love and devotion... That I may have pure love to love Thee".

Shattering the Ego

As one treads the path of Bhakti yoga, self-interest automatically starts to fade. There is transformation into giving and more giving. This devotion grows more and more as the awareness of the bhakta increases, as he recognises and progressively removes his limitations and imperfections. The feeling of the Bhakti is intensified. The level of awareness is correspondingly intensified. The higher the level of Bhakti, the less the ego. Eventually there is a point where there is total identification with the object of worship. Once Bhakti starts to affect the heart, every experience becomes a lesson, a means to reduce pride and the power of ego. The ego is so easily inflated, but it is a strange thing that when one feels

egotistical, there quickly occurs something which deflates the ego. That is, while one is wallowing in a feeling of ego pride, something generally happens to highlight this false sense of pride so that one realises how the ego was playing games and how it overpowered one's being. On the path of Bhakti yoga something always seems to occur to prevent this ego complacency. This is the grace of being a bhakta, even if only slightly. This is the way events seem to flow, continually knocking the bottom out of egotistical mental status.

So in a sense, these feelings of pride, achievement, status, etc., are necessary on the spiritual path. It is through these that one's imperfections are realised. This leads to more humility, which in turn leads to greater Bhakti and communion. Strangely enough, it is often during periods of spiritual regression that one's Bhakti can be intensified. One is confronted clearly with a block or a misconception or a strong sense of ego which was not obvious before. One realises that one has come face to face with a further imperfection that can be purged.

Egoless and Ego-Centred Love

There are two distinct forms of love. Firstly, there is ego-centred love in which one loves another person, deity, or saint with expectation of love in return. This is the most common form of love and is really a love of oneself, not of someone or something else whether God, Guru or human.

Secondly, comes egoless love. This is love for the sake of love, without any expectation of love in return. This form of love is Bhakti and is felt even if it is not returned. This type of love may exist because of some inexplicable reason, or perhaps because of the realisation of the deeper nature of the other person, for other people, for a deity etc. In a higher sense, there cannot be love for another person, for other people, for a deity etc. because of the understanding that everyone and everything is really one's own self. Others do not exist. This is non-directional love; love that goes out from and return? to the bhakta.

Ego-centred love will chain one to the finite, whereas Bhakti, intense non-expectational love, leads to the infinite. Bhakti should be felt even if one is rejected. This is a test of the sincerity of devotion. The great Indian bhakta Rasakhan (born a Muslim, but who worshipped Krishna) said, "Bhakti is the fountain of all sweetness. It is not dependent on youth, virtue, beauty or riches, nor

is it tainted by self-interest or thoughts of personal gain". Ego- centred love tends to subside quickly with time, whereas Bhakti increases and grows with every passing minute.

One-pointed Bhakti

"What is the way to success in Bhakti yoga?" It is overwhelming devotion to your deity or Guru. The greater the aspiration, the quicker you are likely to transcend ordinary awareness and come face to face with something beyond everyday experience. According to Swami Ramdas, "Unless you have a burning aspiration for the Supreme, the mind cannot be fixed on That. Where your love is, your mind is also. Just as a miser thinks of money and of money alone, so a bhakta has exclusive devotion to the Supreme". This is the way to expanded awareness. One must try to act, feel and think while being aware of divinity, the deity or the Guru. Always know that it is divinity that makes you feel, do and think. You are not the doer. This recollection will reduce the hold and the power of the ego. This is called surrender, and it is the way to higher states of consciousness.

Strangely enough, it is anguish that can lead to intensification of Bhakti. Distress and torment at being separated from divine communion can lead to the upsurge of Bhakti and heightened awareness, but this anguish must come from the very depth of one's being. The dissatisfaction lends to this intensification. The bhakta accepts all that comes to him as a gift intended to lift him into the deeper realms of awareness. Whether it is anguish, joy or whatever, it is all intended to raise the level of awareness of the bhakta, to speed him along the path to higher knowledge. You too, must feel the pain of separation and have the same intense longing.

Bhakti - The Means to Heightened Sensitivity

The emotions heighten all experience. They intensify power in thought and action. Everyone knows this from personal experience. Normally, however, the emotions are scattered in all directions. They rarely have force, except in cases of intense anger or intense fear. They are generally expended on many interests and sentiments. On the path of Bhakti yoga the emotions are concentrated on one thing. Emotions are transmuted into devotion.

This concentrated emotion leads to heightened sensitivity. One's whole mind and body becomes highly tuned. It becomes like a radio antenna. This leads to heightened sensitivity to other people, their thoughts, Feelings and so forth. It also leads to sensitivity to the inner environment of the mind and peak experiences. Even one peak experience is enough to transform one's whole attitude and understanding of life. It moves through an angle of one hundred and eighty degrees. One realises that what seemed so obvious, true and acceptable before was totally wrong. One's relationship with life undergoes a total change. It is completely re-orientated. These peak experiences are on the route to perfection. They are signposts on the path.

Shakti and the Guru

If you have a Guru then Bhakti is essential, it is the essence of the relationship. Without Bhakti the Guru-disciple relationship cannot exist. If you have a Guru and you feel no devotion, then he is not really your **GURU**. It is better to find another one. Without Bhakti the disciple is not receptive to the instructions and vibrations of the Guru, and the Guru is not able to transmute the gross nature of the disciple into a more subtle form. At first this devotion may be unconscious; you may not recognise it, but it must exist. There has to be a natural attraction. The path towards perfection is difficult and hazardous. It has been aptly described as the razor's edge: if you go too far to one side or the other you fall into the chasm of delusion, The path is straight and narrow. It is the Guru who shows the disciple how to avoid or overcome obstacles and blocks. It is easy to become lost in false, unrealistic thoughts and feelings. This applies not only to Bhakti yoga but to all other paths as well. It is easy to become side-tracked into blind alleys. The Guru must lead the way, When you sit with any wise man or your Guru, be quiet and listen, for it is they who will pull you out of the quagmire of delusion. You may be a famous person, a noisy person, a clever person, or an argumentative person, but be quiet then, be still and listen. Every word that the Guru says is full of meaning and significance.