

The Seven Step Path of Bhakti

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If we should epitomize in one single word the pinnacle of human values, the most positive and yet so elusive of all human feelings—at times so pure and intense, heroic or noble, the immanent partner yet frequent challenger of death, the millennia-old nurturer of artistry, literature and music—we would whisper the short magic word, “love.”

It may seem strange that Yoga, the ultimate goal of which is to lead its adepts from manyness to oneness, should have dealt with love and expressed it in differing manners. The teachings of Yoga include both specialized paths based on renunciation (with partial or full isolation from lay life style) and a “Middle Way” path wherein Unity emerges via the many channels of mundane diversity.

The following short story illustrates spirituality’s two antagonistic approaches toward renunciation:

Two monks were making a pilgrimage to venerate the relics of a great Saint. During the course of their journey, they came to a river where they met a beautiful young woman – an apparently worldly creature, dressed in expensive finery and with her hair done up in the latest fashion. She was afraid of the current and afraid of ruining her lovely clothing, so she asked the brothers if they might carry her across the river. The younger and more exacting of the brothers was offended at the very idea and turned away with an attitude of disgust. The older brother didn't hesitate, quickly picking the woman up on his shoulders, carrying her across the river and setting her down on the other side. She thanked him and went on her way, and the brother waded back through the waters. The monks resumed their walk, the older one in perfect equanimity and enjoying the beautiful countryside, while the younger one grew more and more brooding and distracted. Finally, he could keep his silence no longer and burst out, "Brother, we are taught to avoid contact with women, and there

you were, not just touching a woman, but carrying her on your shoulders!" The older monk looked at the younger with a loving, pitying smile and said, "Brother, I sat her down on the other side of the river; you are still carrying her."

Analyzing love could be deemed uninteresting, redundant, speculative and perhaps even meaningless, were it not redeemed by the practical and applicable lessons which have been drawn on the matter within Yoga. Granting a degree of pragmatism, the yogic investigation of the nature, aspects, effects and the intensifying power of love are of great importance within many forms of Yoga practice, but perhaps most notably to followers of Bhakti.

Strictly speaking, the path of Bhakti (and other related spiritual paths such as Karma and Jñāna Yoga) falls under the umbrella of Raja Yoga, the so-called "royal path." However, the characteristic keynote of Raja Yoga – devotion – is also found in other yogic paths, such as in the ethical injunction *ishwara pranidhāna* of Hatha Yoga.

The path of Bhakti may not be for everyone. Its various stages are to be understood not so much intellectually as from the heart. Contrary to other areas where desired changes in one's behavior, intellect or toward the body occur by the application of determination and willpower, here only feeling will bring about an actual experience of Bhakti. If it is true that this kind of sublime experience can be had by the grace of the Divine, it is equally true that it also emerges through intense desire.

The sage Sandilya defines Bhakti as *Sâ parānuraktirishvare*, meaning, "Bhakti is supreme attachment to Ishvara".

The Daivmīmāṃsā Darshana defines it as *Sa anurāgarupa*, meaning, "Bhakti is in the nature of love."

Patanjali says *Samyoga jivātman paramātman* (II 225), meaning, "The union of jivatma and paramātma is yoga," and also *Ishvarapranidhānad vâ*, meaning, "Pranidhānad is bhakti that is attachment to Ishvara."

Union here is the maximum unfoldment at the highest stage. When this is

fulfilled, *jivatman* has reached the level of *paramâtma*. This corresponds to the very definition of Yoga—union. There, the appearance of one part disappears, leaving only the Whole. Previous to this, the influence of *mâyâ* concealed the Whole as an individual being (*jivatman*) that becomes individualized when manifested.

From yogic point of view, union occurs at the *sahasrâra* level in *samâdhi*. In *asamprajñâta samâdhi*, the *jiva* consciousness merges in the *paramâtma* consciousness – the individual melting in the Whole. As a result, all the *vrittis* disappear in *nirvikalpa asamprajñâta samâdhi*. Patanjali's definition of Yoga with its famous aphorism reads, *citta vritti nirodhah*. That is the same thing but differently expressed.

In defining Ishvara in Bhakti Yoga, it is said "*rasopau sah*," which means that Ishvara is himself "*rasa*", or the *ânanda* aspect of the Great Triune, *sat chit ânanda* (being-consciousness-bliss).

Anurâga* has its root in Man's spiritual nature. It is associated firstly with unmanifested desires, but also with negative feelings when the I is reluctant (*dvesha*) to project itself into some experience which is anticipated to be unpleasant. The feeling of *dvesha* is thus elicited by disliking, while *sukha* (pleasure) is guided by *râga*. *Dvesha* and *râga* are the two fundamental emotions which express as two clear or mixed opposites.

At the basis there is desire, of which the I is not the generator but merely the vehicle which carries it, gross or subtle, to consciousness. Tinged by *râga*, desires are in the nature of love, to which attachment is firmly anchored. Affected negatively by *dvesha*, desires may change from aversion to hatred.

Ânanda is the emotional background of mind, a power distracted in the sensory world. At the common level its expression is mundane; at the spiritual level it promotes Bhakti. Yogic tradition likens our subjective experiences to those of the blind men who sought to learn the nature of an elephant by touching its different members individually, without ever

having an experience of the whole body. Likewise, the I may feel quite isolated from the Whole. The wandering of the mind is caused by a deep-rooted want, the lack which is perceived after the connection with the Whole has been lost.

At the sensory level, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between *sukha* and *ânanda*, as great joy may also develop into real bliss. *Ânanda* may be likened to the fragrance which lingers on one's clothing when exiting a perfume factory. In Yoga, this kind of sensory experience is regarded as a limited expression of the vast, Supreme consciousness.

Classification of *rasa*

Bhaktas (practitioners of Bhakti) name the Supreme consciousness *rasa*, and via *rasa* they move along their spiritual journey towards *ânanda*, thus eluding both *râga* and *dvesha*. *Bhaktas* delineate *rasa* variously as *sthayi-bhâva*, *âlamvana viâva* and *uddipane-vibhâva*. The first stands for its fundamental character, the second for its main cause and the third for its stimulating or secondary cause. These three factors arrange themselves within the eight groups of expressions provided by the yogic classification of *rasa*:

Rati – love; *vira* – heroism; *raudra* – anger; *karuna* – compassion; *hâsya* – humour; *adbhuta* – wonder; *bibhatsa* – disgust; *bhayânak* – fear.

Mixed emotions in daily life are but a combination of the above factors, under the permanent influence of either *râga* or *dvesha*. When guided by spiritual principles and free from distrust, all of these expressions may manifest differently. When for instance anger (*raudra*) is spiritualized, a burning power is roused to allow the eradication of otherwise-insurmountable obstacles in one's practice. By the same token, humor (*adbhuta*) allows one to smile where others may feel irritated, and wonder (*adbhuta*) will fill the *bhakta* when contemplating the skies, nature, art, music or other beautiful souls. All of these will serve to bring the *bhakta* closer to God, That, the undivided Whole.

Bhakti commences when the flow of *anurâga* moves towards an unmanifested existence, Ishvâra. The evolution from the preliminary stage of *vaidhi bhakti* toward *râgâtmika bhakti* is characterized by an exclusive attachment to Ishvâra (God). Parallel to Karma Yoga, the aim of the seven-stage Bhakti path is to find God everywhere, in everyone and everything.

The spiritual flow of *anurâga* is Bhakti. It may take three different directions: *prema* runs horizontally, *sneha* moves downward and *shraddhâ* elevates to upper levels. *Prema* is the affective flow occurring between friends or lovers. Whether latent or manifested, the sexual energy is highly involved in love. A mighty incentive, stimulated or stimulating, gross or subtle, sexual energy and its swift vibrations may change the face of the world, sometimes eliciting terrible destructive actions and other times embracing the whole of mankind. *Sneha* is the flow directed to one's children and *shraddhâ* is respect, reverence and *anurâga* to one's parents or teacher.

Seven stages of *anurâga* in Bhakti:

- 1) *Dâsyâ-shakti* – the servant position;
- 2) *Vâtslyâ-shakti* – paternal love;
- 3) *Sakhyâ-shakti* – friendly love;
- 4) *Gunakirtanâ-shakti* – praising the Divine;
- 5) *Âtmanivedanâ-shakti* – Self-dedication to the beloved;
- 6) *Tanmayâ-shakti* – Standing fully absorbed in the beloved; and
- 7) *Kântâ-shakti* – Love between man and woman; full complete love.

To correctly appreciate Bhakti, we need a fair understanding of the *rasa* combinations, both in the mundane and the spiritual world.

Bhakti – The Sublimation of Feeling

The intellectual acceptance of God—whether as the Supreme, Impersonal That which is beyond the sensory world or whatever is venerated as a

personal God (*devatâ*)—supposes that both feelings and actions be involved. When the feeling commences to flow towards one's personal God (*ishta devatâ*), the need to serve emerges. As there is no practical possibility to serve God directly, the *anuragâ* flow is re-directed toward its manifestation. This is where our organs of action (*karmendriyas*) come into play. *Dâsya-shakti* manifests as unselfish service towards parents, other elderly, teachers, the needy or the society at large whenever an opportunity occurs. It is way of serving God by all means and throughout all manifested beings!

Transcending the dry intellectual assumption of a Divine's immanence within the Creation, *dâsya-shakti* makes it possible for the *bhakta* to actually feel the Divine's presence in the recipient of the unselfish service. In this way, Bhakti-oriented actions invariably remind the *bhaktas* of their Creator. One could call this dynamic Yoga. Whether carried out under certain conditions or spontaneously, these Bhakti-inspired actions are always directed by purposeful sincerity. At this stage, the *bhakta's* progressive attachment to God depends on the intensity and recurrence of the service rendered. Forgetting oneself and abandonment of selfish interests are, along with the feeling of harmony, what the adept *bhakta* may yield in a well-directed *dâsya-shakti* practice.

In the second stage of *vâtslyâ-shakti*, the actions of the Bhakti practitioner are done as if directed toward his or her own children. In India, the *bhakta's* personal deity (*ishta devata*) assumes the *balaka* shape—that of a child, irrespective of cast, creed or religion. The actions are here carried out with tremendous parental affection, but all along this affection is directed toward Ishvara.

The third stage, *sakhyâ-shakti*, is more difficult. The feelings of genuine friendship, affection, intimacy, confidences, and possible dependency may avert the main objective: seeing and experiencing God all through life.

At the fourth stage, *gunakirtanâ-shakti*, praise is expressed spontaneously whenever opportunities arise—Nature's revival in the fragrant blossoming

of a flower, an impressive banyan tree, a leaf on a bush, contemplation of the amazing dormant powers of the atom, the unrevealed enigma of uncountable universes around us, the mysteries of the deep oceans, the ineffable beauty of sunsets or the inexpressible beauty of music or poetry. Enthralled by these marvels, the *bhakta* may feel irresistibly compelled to express his God-related feelings in words, music or songs, fully attuned with the Divine. Songs of praise surge from within and are directed inwardly, not for the pleasure of others. The snake charmer sings to charm his snakes, but these songs are intended to charm the *bhakta*. At this point, the contact with the Divine comes closer and knowledge (*jñana*) of That arises.

At the fifth stage, *âtmanivedanâ-shakti*, worshiping in actions and knowledge is no longer satisfactory. It needs to be replaced by the feeling of surrender, fully dedicating oneself to Him. Here, the I (*ahan*) will enter a different channel; it no longer receives things for itself. Unconditionally dedicated to God, the I of the *bhakta* is still there but dissociated from and fully absorbed into the feeling itself.

At the penultimate stage, *tanmayâ-shakti*, the condition of *dhyâna* prevails, contrary to the previous stages where *karma* and *jñana* were predominating with a lesser involvement of *dhyâna*. It is difficult to explain a condition where action is non-existent, a condition saturated with the exclusive and intense desire of being absorbed into That, invariably accompanied by the utter feeling of want of something vital and essential.

At any rate, the various stages of Bhakti start from the *bhakta's* platform of action and knowledge and find their ultimate outcome in the seventh and final stage of *anurâga*, pure love.

* *approximatively, attractiveness, affection, attachment*