



Bhakti yoga

for sceptics

To those who like their yoga rational, scientific and straight, bhakti yoga – often translated as the ‘yoga of devotion’ – can be a challenge, especially if there’s mention of the word ‘God’. But as Swami Vimalratna explains, bhakti yoga practices offer powerful tools to help us open ourselves to positive emotions and taste the fulfilment of deep spiritual experience.

How could you reach the pearl by only looking at the sea?
 If you seek the pearl, be a diver: the diver needs several
 qualities: he must trust his rope and his life to the Friend's
 hand, he must stop breathing, and he must jump.

FIHI MA FIHI - 50, JALALUDDIN RUMI

Although often used, the word 'devotion' is an inadequate translation of what bhakti yoga is. Bhakti yoga works on feeling. We all feel emotions such as anger, jealousy or love, and there is powerful energy connected with these emotions. In bhakti yoga the aim is to harness, channel and direct the power of this emotional energy into a profound positive focus. When there is an understanding of bhakti yoga as a system of practice, this feeling can be consciously developed until it becomes a spontaneous source of inspiration and fulfilment.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati describes bhakti as 'an expression of bhavana, a deep feeling from the heart towards God', whatever form God happens to take. In bhakti yoga this form is something that attracts and holds one's mind and emotions. It could be a deity from any tradition. On the other hand, it could be nature, or life itself.

One of the difficulties for Westerners may be that when people begin to discuss bhakti yoga they also tend to mention the word God. The language of God is utilised in bhakti yoga, but bhakti and religion aren't the same thing. This is a subtle distinction but an important one. Like all other branches of yoga, bhakti is a system for the discovery of one's inner nature. In hatha yoga the vehicle for this journey is the body and energy, in raja yoga the vehicle is the process of meditative experience, in karma yoga it is one's actions, and in jnana yoga it is the intuitive search for truth. In bhakti yoga the mechanism for self-discovery is emotion. The subtleties of bhakti yoga involve directing emotions away from self to a focus on the spiritual. As a result of this one-pointed attention the entire personality can be transformed, as the

seeker embraces and then becomes one with this heightened experience.

Universal spirituality of bhakti yoga

What is there in bhakti yoga that is for everyone? It is undoubtedly concerned with the spiritual aspect of being human, but is this dimension of experience only for the religious? Undermining the claim of any particular religion or sect to the experiences associated with bhakti yoga, similar patterns of experience are recorded in many traditions, whether in Sufi poetry, the writing of Kabir, loved by many traditions, or the Christian mystics, such as in the writing of St John of the Cross or Saint Teresa of Avila. There is a link between mysticism and bhakti that suggests that there is an aspect of human experience that goes beyond cultural boundaries. We may all be wired for bhakti, whether we are aware of it or not. Bhakti yoga steps beyond the boundaries of religion, yet it is not a hindrance to those who are religious as it provides a set of tools to assist people from any religion to explore spiritual experience.

Exploring bhakti yoga may require us to break down barriers developed since childhood to the acceptance of mystery, and reawaken our faculty for suspending judgement. When we watch a movie or read a novel we are quite capable of suspending disbelief. However, in life we are less likely to alter our boundaries to accept experiences outside obvious shared realities.

But how do we create openness to subtle layers of experience when our cultural upbringing and thought processes automatically reject what we can't scientifically evaluate? The first step may be to doubt our own certainty. This requires humility and openness to what is actually happening. If we are as

alive to experience as we are able to be, who knows what may be revealed?

Many forms of God

For many of us in the modern world, our own spiritual traditions have been broken, and an exotic supernatural being is no longer attractive or believable. In this void, materialism and self-centred behaviour are understandable. This scepticism can be accommodated in bhakti yoga, for in bhakti the form is not absolute; it is a means to an end.

In the bhakti tradition what may be referred to as divinity, for want of a better word, may take many shapes, perfect or imperfect, and a person may give their attention to any form of divinity they relate to. It could be a traditional deity (see pull-out box), or it could be something as simple as a candle flame or a flower. It is a meditative focus. In the way a shape becomes more defined by continually tracing over it, or a song becomes spontaneous in the mind through continuous repetition, the chosen form becomes more and more alive.

However, this form, cultivated with such care, is also only an intermediate step. Whatever its name, the energy focused in the form is aimed at connecting with a universal experience. The focus on a particular shape is an essential step towards the breakthrough. This could be equated with the experience of samadhi in raja yoga where, after a process of concentration, there is a merging of the individual self with the universal. Whatever the ultimate experience of yoga, bhakti yoga, by utilising tangible forms, is a method that leads towards it.

God is everywhere

The form of the divine need not be supernatural or exotic. In bhakti yoga it



may take the form of nature, and it may be found in the most ordinary person or thing. Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh tells the story of how he 'discovered God'. He tells of seeing through his father's belief system to develop his own experience of the divine. As a child he enjoyed assisting his father at his daily rituals – chanting, offering flowers to the deity at the family puja table, or altar. Then he had an experience that changed his life. As a teenager growing up in early twentieth-

century India, he became fascinated with gymnastics. He found a teacher whom he found to be very skilled.

Unfortunately for Sivananda, a Brahmin (an upper caste Hindu), his teacher was of low caste. His family forbade him to see his teacher. Instead, Sivananda took him gifts and a garland of flowers and bowed down at his feet. This veneration of an ordinary human being became a pattern that formed his life. He became a doctor, and throughout his life he treated the sick

and poor with the aim of seeing the divine within them. Eventually he dedicated himself to spiritual life and developed this habit further. When greeting people he would prostrate himself fully on the ground before them. He did this as a way of cultivating atmabhava, seeing God in every being and establishing equal respect for all. Eventually he was able to look out over a crowd and see all, including himself, in an integrated experience of divinity.

[Using traditional deities in bhakti yoga practice]

God's names in Hinduism are colourful and multifaceted. It is said that there is a different god for every person in India. But the most well known of these include the elephant-headed Ganesha, bringer of good fortune and remover of obstacles; Krishna, as boy, flute player or lover; Rama, the epitome of nobility and duty; and Siva, covered in ash with a trident and garland of snakes, the remover of ignorance. The many facets of the goddess include Saraswati, the goddess of creativity and knowledge; Lakshmi the goddess of prosperity; and Durga, the great and powerful mother.

Each of these diverse figures represents an aspect of a spiritual panorama closely linked to life's experiences. The devotee may perform daily rituals, chant mantras, offer flowers and food, and dress and bathe their deity's idealised form. The deity is part of the household, and each member of the family may be connected to a completely different form. Jesus and Buddha, for example, may also be present alongside Rama or Lakshmi. The tolerant and many faceted nature of Indian culture is enlightening in a world of sectarian divisions.

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This state of seeing our whole existence as an aspect of divinity is a beautiful culmination of what may be achieved. It is a completely different way of seeing, where all differences are interwoven in an interconnected experience of bliss. This may be a long way from where we currently are, but it may be compared to a perfect day on the beach, where all life breathes as one, or the experience of looking out from a remote mountain, feeling oneself a tiny speck amidst the unity of earth, forest and sky.

Using love to redirect our emotions

In bhakti yoga, we do not have to create a connection with divinity; we simply have to give this connection a shape which makes it tangible and real. Love is an intense human emotion that holds us easily. As we love our child, partner or friend, so we can also develop a relationship with the divine. This relationship becomes a means of expressing the best part of ourselves, perhaps even every part of ourselves. As we grow in a love affair with a positive dimension, so we also grow in a love affair with the divine. As the best human love takes us out of self-centredness and towards selflessness, so does this divine love. This love is not limited by the constrictions typical of human nature. We tap into something beyond the entanglements of human relationships. It does not mean that we are able to do as we please. As this love develops, the divine voice begins to echo our true

nature and lead us towards our highest aspirations, at times challenging every comfortable thing we hold true about ourselves.

How to cultivate bhakti

As a relationship with a lover develops through continuous thinking about them, even when they are not present, so we also act to be close to the aspirational form that attracts us. Here are three simple practices in bhakti yoga that enhance this relationship.

Kirtan

Kirtan is a musical form that involves singing mantras. Singing in almost any culture is known for creating a link with the emotions and opening up the heart. Harnessing the uplifting quality of music, kirtan is able to create high meditative states that lift the individual out of their own worries and into a communion with higher states of being. On one level it is a pure human expression, on another it is a subtle science.

Japa

The repetition of God's name, whatever it may be, through japa (the repetition of mantra) is a powerful way to change patterns of thought. With repetition the mantra penetrates deeply into consciousness and distils the personality. Every day we choose what to place in our minds, whether it is television, conflict with others, emotional obsessions, house renovations or the concerns of work. These interests shape our personality and the vibratory pitch with which we live

and interact with others. A mantra is a means to alter negative patterns and enhance the positive. By holding the mind on a mantra and by contemplating the aspects of the divine associated with it, it is possible to be completely transformed. This process of developing one-pointedness can be again compared with practices of dharana (focus), dhyana (meditation) and ultimately samadhi (transcendence) in raja yoga. Although the process in bhakti yoga is more colourfully dressed, and the emotions more engaged, a similar progression is able to take place.

Learn from example

Another means to develop bhakti is by reading about the lives of saints from different traditions, or learning from those who have dedicated themselves to the service of others. This inspires us and subtly changes the way we see ourselves. People around us, in their ordinary acts of kindness or respect, may give us useful examples of how to proceed in life. Serving those in need also teaches us. It breaks down barriers and assumptions we have created in our lives and expands our understanding of who we may become. If all life begins to be seen as an expression of the divine, it becomes easier to see all life's experiences and difficulties as teachers, guiding us to greater wisdom.

The fulfilment of bhakti yoga

Bhakti is but one of the branches of yoga, and each of the other branches may become tools for the development

of bhakti. Although someone may begin with hatha yoga or raja yoga, it is not uncommon in the yogic tradition for these practitioners to undergo experiences which transform them into bhaktas (persons who live the path of bhakti yoga). Bhakti yoga is not simply about discovering the essence of our nature; it is about living and breathing this essence. It is a means of maintaining the highest states of yoga. The masters say that, in the end, the paths of bhakti and jnana (knowledge) are one. Whatever the path, it culminates in the bliss of experience and the joy of the divine.

Bhakti yoga has a reputation as the sweetest path: sweet at the beginning, the middle and the end. Whether it is complementary to other branches of yoga or the primary path, it has the potential to add great sweetness to one's yogic life.

Chapter twelve of the *Bhagavad Gita* gives a description over several verses of someone who may be recognised as a true bhakta: "He who is the same to foe and friend, and also in

honour and dishonour, who is the same in cold and heat, and in pleasure and pain, who is free from attachment. He to whom censure and praise are equal, who is silent, content with anything, homeless, of a steady mind, and full of devotion – that man is dear to me" (Gita chapter 12 verses 17-18).

These verses, and those that precede them, describe qualities associated with someone who dwells in the divine and accepts all experience and all people equally. This way of living may be hard to comprehend, even as an aspiration. However, bhakti yoga begins

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easily. We may start by looking for the essential beauty in life, nature, other people, and within ourselves. Once we raise our heads from our concerns and begin looking around in this way, it becomes possible to connect with divine beauty. We just have to start looking.

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