



# *Treading the Path of Love*

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**H**ow to love God and be loved by Him is the central theme of all religions of the world. In Yoga philosophy, this is the essence of Bhakti Yoga or the Path of Love.

Within the human personality there is always a deep-rooted need to love and be loved—to find objects of love and loving objects that provide complete fulfillment. While on this search, one continues to pass from embodiment to embodiment, trying always to find that perfection in love.

Actually, one never finds absolute fulfillment in the world. Any object (any person or thing other than oneself) that seems so wonderful at first usually

becomes ordinary or even cumbersome as time passes. Even if one does find a more sublime form of love relationship, it cannot be permanent. As one grows old, his feet eventually slip from this solid earth, and he passes on. Therefore, it is impossible to find any object that can be supremely fulfilling to one's heart. It is equally impossible to find any condition in which one is loved by someone else who is infinitely and eternally loving.

## **What Is Bhakti?**

Bhakti Yoga—the Path of Devotion—is the mystic path that helps an aspirant find the

love that his soul is craving. It explains the subtleties of human sentiments and gives profound insight into how they can become highly integrated and sublime through transcendence of the ego and communion with the Divine Self.

Religious scriptures share the evidence of the great Saints who have loved God and been loved by God—people who attained eternal communion with God and spoke with authority and supreme conviction of their fellowship with God. Like these Sages and Saints, it is possible for any human being to attain communion with God. Indeed, it is for this purpose that a person exists.

According to Bhakti Yoga, the perfect object of love that you have been seeking through many embodiments has been there all the time, deep within your heart. But because of certain impediments created by ego—attachment, hatred, anger and greed—one does not feel that Divine Presence.

We all know that a magnet attracts iron. But if there are certain impediments between the iron and the magnet, the iron will not move. Remove the impediments and the iron moves spontaneously. Much in the same manner, if you remove the impediments from your heart—the obstructions created by ego-consciousness—you will feel the irresistible pull of Divine Love.

One of the greatest teachers of Bhakti Yoga was Sage Narada, who was well-known for his excellence in the practice of devotion. Narada Bhakti Sutras is the definitive work that outlines the mystic science of devotion. In the second sutra of that book, Narada says, “*Sa twasmin param prem rupa*”—“Bhakti, or devotion, is of the nature of supreme love for the Divine Self.”

Shandilya, another great teacher who was an authority on the path of devotion, wrote a small work on Bhakti known as Shandilya Bhakti Sutras. In his definition, Shandilya states, “*Sa paranuraktiriti ishware*”—“Devotion is increasing attachment to God.”

**I**t is important to understand the difference between attachment or human love, and

Divine Love. In human love the mind becomes attracted to an object and the very sight of that object brings inspiration and joy. Therefore, the person wants to capture that joy by possessing the object.

Due to ignorance, due to a limitation in human mind, one develops the idea that happiness proceeds from the object itself. One leans upon the object in order to secure the vision of love. But as time passes by, that vision dwindles, and the burden of attachment grows. That’s called *raga* (attachment), which is described in Raja Yoga as a *klesha* (affliction). One should not allow this attitude to develop.

**I**n Bhakti Yoga, however, you are encouraged to form a different type of attachment. Due to purity and good association, your mind glimpses the beauty and grandeur of the Divine Self. Once your mind has tasted even a slightest trace of that Divine sweetness, it becomes attached to God instead of becoming attached to the objects of the world.

When you become attached to objects of the world, there is increasing entanglement. You depend more and more on objects and, as time passes by, your vision of love begins to fade. But when you become attached to God, the burden of the world fades and your vision of happiness increases more and more. Once you step on that path of Divine Love, your attachment towards God grows with increasing delight.

Further, the reality behind objects is God Himself. This is pointed out in Brihadaran-yaka Upanishad. When Sage Yajnavalkya was ready to renounce the world and give all his possessions to his family, his wife asked him, “Why do you give me wealth...the wealth that does not lead one to immortality? Why not give me the knowledge that leads to Liberation?” Yajnavalkya then said that he certainly would impart that knowledge. He thus began his instructions with the words: “*Atmanastu kamaya sarvam priyam bhavati*”—“All becomes dear for the sake of the Self.”

Everything in the world becomes dear only to the extent that you find yourself reflected in the object. If you are not reflected in the object of your love, it will be meaningless to you. However, the deeper essence in you is the Supreme Self. This being so, your love for yourself is a reflection of your love for the Supreme Self. Therefore, the Self within you is the object of your supreme love.

**V**edanta also explains that the Self within you is the ocean of nectar and is of the nature of infinite sweetness. That Self is known as *Ananda* (Bliss Absolute). Due to the impediments of anger, hate, and various expressions of ego consciousness, your awareness of Divine sweetness is lost. It is the task before you to remove those impediments and discover Divine Love surging in your heart. The joy of that discovery is beyond human imagination.

The human heart aches for so many trifles of this world. The sentiments of human beings are always caught in a maze of fleeting objects. So many tears are shed, so much agony experienced, so much suffering encountered, so much restlessness, yearning and longing—all for the sake of perishable objects. But you must ask yourself, “Have I ever longed, even for a moment, for a relationship with the Eternal Divinity, without Whom I cannot exist?” When such a sincere longing develops, when the heart aches for Divine communion, then you are truly advancing on the path of devotion.

### Five Attitudes towards God

According to his level of evolution, an aspirant adopts one of five attitudes toward God:

The first is called *shanta* (peaceful). This implies that you love God in a way that is not well-defined, a way that is hidden. The famous illustration of this devotion is Bhishma in the

Mahabharata. Those who have studied the Mahabharata know that Bhishma loved Krishna without any outer expression. His love was hidden peacefully, deep within his heart.

The second attitude you may adopt is *dasya*—the attitude of a servant to a beloved master. Such a devotee feels, “I am just an instrument in Divine Hands. I am just a servant.” This attitude was adopted by Lord Jesus Himself when He said, “I am doing the will of my Father Who sent me.”

The third attitude is *vat-salya*—which implies loving God as a father or mother would love their child. That is a unique attitude developed in Bhakti literature. In Srimad Bhagavat Purana, Krishna, the Divine Self, assumes the embodiment of a human child. Yashoda, His mother, holds Him in her arms and tries to train that small child while she enjoys his Divine sport.

This form of love does not have the expectation of a return. A mother does not expect that her child will protect her when

thieves come, or earn money for her when she is in difficulty. Rather, a mother goes through all difficulties only to secure the happiness of the child.

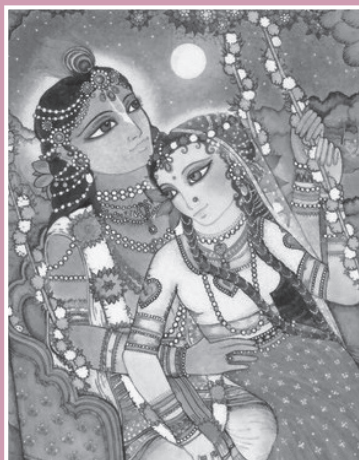
In the process of loving God, a person may begin with a certain selfish motive, but as his devotion advances, he just begins to enjoy the very act of loving God as selflessly as a mother loves her child.

The next attitude is called *sakhya* (the love for a dear friend). When your devotion advances, you develop the notion that God is your friend. A devotee even develops a certain type of boldness and asks God to do things for him. However, at this stage, the mind of a devotee is so advanced and purified that whatever he wants is in complete harmony with Divine Will. His will is the Will of God.

The last attitude is *madurya*, which is compared to the most sweet and intense love between a lover and a beloved. When that type of love develops for God, everything in this world is ignored and transcended.

The following example illustrates the poignancy of this form of love: One night an ascetic was practicing austerity as night was approaching and darkness was gradually blanketing the earth. At that moment, a lady rushed by and trampled over his wonderful prayer shawl.

The ascetic became very angry. “How dare you! This sacred sheet of mine is meant for devout meditation on God, you evil-minded creature!”



*Life flows on until you find the answer to this eternal question—  
Whom should I love, and how should I be loved?*



Startled, she replied, “I have become blind to everything but my beloved, just because of worldly love—a love that is so perishable, as you say. But what has spiritual love done for you? In all your spiritual love, all you see is your prayer shawl, and my rushing by!” Thus saying, she went on her way.

**T**he ascetic received a spiritual message from this encounter. He realized that he had been merely superficial in his spiritual practice and that he had not yet developed that all-absorbing Divine Love that is the ultimate goal of all austerities.

The parable points out to the fact that when Divine Love unfolds in human heart, it destroys all sense of difference and multiplicity. There is a famous saying by a great saintly poet in India: “I went to look for the beauty of my beloved, but wherever I turned I saw the beauty of my beloved—so much so that I myself have become my beloved. I have become one with him.” That is the highest climax of Divine Love.

Imagine the grandeur of discovering Divine Love in your heart. Even a little glimpse of Divinity makes one mad, not ordinarily mad, but mystically mad. In one of his sutras Narada says, “*Yajnatwamatto bhavati stabdho bhavati atma-ramo bhavati.*”—“Having known that (the highest love), the devotee becomes intoxicated (with divine bliss), quiet (stunned with the fullness of peace), and delights in the Self alone.” Contrast this experience

with the heights of tender feeling enjoyed by human beings pursuing the shadows of love—heights that are soon followed by a sense of despair, frustration, and sorrow.

**A**nother parable is told about a Sufi Saint who was intoxicated with Divine Love. One day he looked around him and saw that everyone was drinking alcoholic beverages and becoming drunk. So he went into a bar, bought a penny’s worth of wine, drank it and started dancing.

Some of his disciples came to him and asked, “Why is it that you have taken to drinking?” “Well, I don’t really drink. I have taken a penny’s worth of wine only to paint my mustache so people can know that I am also a drinker. But my intoxication comes from within. I do not depend upon alcoholic spirits. My spirit wells up from my heart.”

### Stages of Disciplinary Devotion

There are two types of *bhakti*, or devotion. One is called *mukhya bhakti*—primary devotion, which is based on a high state of mental purity. The second is called *gauni bhakti*—disciplinary devotion, which requires various forms of spiritual practices.

•The first stage of *gauni bhakti* is *shravana* (listening). An aspirant must find a source of *satsanga* (good association), a contact with someone whose heart kindles the fire of Divine Love. Then he must listen again and again to the inspiring teach-

ings that are shared in such a *satsanga*.

According to the *bhakti* scriptures, there is no way to catch the fire of Divine Love unless one comes into contact with a living personality who has tasted the joy of Love. Because of good karmas from the past, one is led to such a personality who conveys—by his experience, by his conviction, by his inner radiation of Love—that such a state is possible. Then under his guidance, one listens with devotion to teachings from the various scriptures that deal with the glory of God.

•The next stage of devotional practice is *kirtana* (singing). Things that delight one’s mind awaken the spontaneous inner urge to sing. Anyone who is happy—even one who is not a singer—finds it easy to sing when he is joyous. And so, as the vision of Divine Love begins to unfold in one’s heart, he develops the sublime tendency to sing the praises of God.

If an aspirant expresses goodness through his thoughts, words and actions, that too is singing the praise to God. Such thoughts and actions express the Divine reality that exists within his heart and convey the melody of Divine Love to others.

However, most practitioners of *kirtana* begin with the repetition of mantra, which is known as *japa*. Singing that Divine Name is called *kirtana*. Chaitanya, a great Saint in Bengal around the thirteenth or fourteenth century, was a great exponent of *kirtana*.

He sang and danced with joy. People were drawn to him, as if by magic, due to his strange, spiritual enchantment.

In one of his songs, Chaitanya sings about the qualifications of a devotee: “*Trinadapi sunichena tarorapi sahishnuna Amanina manadena kirtaniya sada harih*” — “A devotee should be humbler than a blade of grass and more enduring than a tree; he should give honor to those who lack it; and, as a result, he will truly sing the Name of Lord Hari.”

If one is to advance on the path of devotion, utter humility must develop in his personality as well as great endurance. Instead of seeking honor for himself, he must give respect to others. If one had these qualifications, then his heart would spontaneously sing the glory of God.

•The third mode of devotion is called *smarana* (remembrance)—the art of dwelling upon the joy of Divine Love. Whether one is engaged in action or sitting relaxed, his mind should turn inward and taste the delight of Divine Presence emanating from within his heart. He should be aware of being enfolded by the sweetness of God. Such remembrance is encouraged by repeating the Divine Name, praying, lifting the mind to God, and reflecting upon the meaning of the scriptures.

•The fourth is called *archana* (offering flowers). In the orthodox form of devotion, *archana* is a special ritual where flowers are offered to the Deity while chanting Names of God. Such

chants include, “Bliss is *Brahman*, Consciousness is *Brahman*, Compassion is *Brahman*.” These are the names of God, and the names are the attributes of God.

From an advanced point of view, *archana* implies the development of spiritual qualities such as humility, compassion, goodness of heart. Such qualities are like wonderful flowers that one offers to God within the heart. As a result of such an offering, life becomes permeated with the fragrant spirit of worship.

•The fifth, *padasevana*, means “serving the feet.” Again, from a ritualistic point of view, a devotee serves the feet of the Divine Form. From an advanced point of view, however, it refers to developing the spirit of service of God.

A devotee develops the attitude that he lives not for his own enjoyment, but for God’s enjoyment. He expresses it in serving humanity through actions of generosity and goodness. It is delightful to have the opportunity to serve, because all human beings have the Divinity dwelling within them. By serving human beings selflessly, one is serving God. Further, as one’s vision of love advances, even service to one’s self—such as eating, sleeping, bathing—is also a service of God, because one’s self is indwelt by the same Divine reality.

In Bhakti Yoga a distinction is made between the two terms *seva* and *bhoga*. *Bhoga* is enjoyment for the ego and is to be shunned if one wants to become a devotee. *Seva*

is abandoning egoistic involvement for the greater delight of God—“Not for me, but for God.”

A devotee strives to please God only for the joy of pleasing God, nothing else. Figuratively speaking, he serves God well and God comes to him and says, “Well, you have served Me well; I am very pleased. What do you want?” He replies, “Well, what I want is that You should be more pleased.” And God comes back and says, “Well, now I am very, very much pleased; what do you now want?” He replies, “Well, I want that You should be even more pleased.” Thus, in pleasing God, the pleasure of the devotee as well as the pleasure of God grow to immense proportions. This leads to a mystic dimension of Bliss unknown to normal human beings.

A parable is told explaining this point: Once Narada wanted to find out if anyone was, in fact, a true devotee of Lord Krishna. According to the plot they had worked out, Lord Krishna then pretended that he was suffering from an intense stomach ache. He sent Narada with a message that only drinking the wash water from a devotee’s feet would free Krishna of that stomach pain.

Narada went around asking devotees to dip their feet in water so that it could be brought to Divine Krishna. One after another, the devotees shrank from doing this, saying, “It will lead me to hell to give Krishna water that has been touched by my feet. I cannot do that. Impossible!”

But when Narada approached the most ideal devotee, Radha, she was ready with both feet. Narada said, “Oh Radha, aren’t you afraid of going to hell by giving polluted water to Divine Krishna?” She said, “I would prefer to experience millions of hells than to see Krishna in that state of pain.”

Like Radha, a devotee must be willing to negate the ego at all times. In a state of such profound love, it is easy to allow the ego to melt in service of God.

•Next is *vandana*, bowing down or adoring God. A devotee develops an increasing awareness of Divine Presence in every living being as well as in every object of the world. Inwardly he offers his adorations to the Divinity Who abides in all. He bows down (mentally) to God, even in those who are apparently crude in nature. This mystic art enables him to continue to draw Divine impressions from the world around him.

•The next two (*dasya* and *sakhya*) have already been explained in the five attitudes. *Dasya* is the attitude that you are a slave or servant of God. *Sakhya* is the attitude that you are God’s friend.

•*Atmanivedana*, the ninth and final method of devotional practice, is surrender. The ego is effaced and there is total surrender to the Divine Self. That is the goal of spiritual movement—to live in total surrender, with an awareness that, from the point of view of ego, you are nothing; you are one with God, and God alone is the Reality within you.

In Bhakti Yoga, this sublime attainment is represented by the term “*Dasoham*”—“I am the slave.” In Jnana Yoga, the same is presented by the term “*Soham*”—“I am That.” It is said in Bhakti Yoga that Lord Krishna is a thief. From “*Dasoham*” He steals the “*Da.*” But what is left is “*Soham.*” You begin with the attitude that you are a slave, a servant, but you end up with the awareness that you are one with God, because there is nothing left of you but the Self. That is the highest state to be reached through Bhakti Yoga.

### **A Sage Is the Greatest Benefactor of Humanity**

The scriptures say that when a person develops devotion, not only does he do good to himself, but he does good to all humanity. If a person becomes a Saint or a Sage, the whole earth rejoices in that attainment. There is no attainment greater than this. Seven generations of his forefathers (his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather, etc.) are uplifted.

The broader implication of this scriptural statement is that all humanity rejoices when one becomes a Sage and attains Enlightenment. Imagine what life would be like if there were no Sages, if the world were absolutely steeped in materialism. Imagine what it would be like to live only for the pleasures of the senses, knowing the simple, cold, scientific fact that those senses will eventually become cold, and the brain cells will degenerate, and the human personality itself will terminate.

But we are fortunate that there have always been Sages and Saints in our midst. They have been the Divine response to the prayers of devotees. The Divinity has responded to humanity by appearing in the form of great personalities who illustrate, again and again, the grandeur of Divine Love.

Therefore, may each and every one of you turn your steps to God, to the Divine Self, and develop the eagerness to enjoy the incomparable bliss of Divine Love within your very own heart!

*The Self within is the  
object of your supreme love.  
Everything else becomes  
dear only for the  
sake of that  
Self.*

