

Bhakti Yoga

A Practical Guide

Loving God for God's Sake

Bhakti is love of God which is expressed in many ways and the expressions are seen as devotion. This love is quite different from the 'loves' we know in our normal relationships as the lover or devotee feels he stands inseparable with the loved or God. Through this pure love, the devotee overcomes the subject-object tangle which other seekers pursue by different methods and means.

In bhakti or love of God, one does not feel that he is loving God for something or anything at all. As long as there is this something that is wanted, however subtle it may be, there is no love as the wanting necessitates the subject-object relationship or separation. Love is a state where all division is abolished and the lover stands inseparably united with the loved.

God

That which is, That which alone exists is God. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali uses the word 'Ishvara', or the omnipresent, ever-existent reality or God and tells us that yoga or the discovery or the existing unity happens when there is complete, unreserved, total, energetic, dynamic and instantaneous surrender to the Divine Omnipresence.

Surrender

We talk about surrender but what we often mean is that we are stumped at the moment and beseech the help of God to sort out 'our' difficulties so that 'our' life can go on as 'we' would like. Examine yourself closely, the moments where you feel you were surrendering and you may see formidable situations and circumstances staring at you and 'you' feel trapped. Now, ask yourself honestly if some ploy 'out of' this defeat can be called surrender?

The 'you' still wants to be there, very much so, and it knows that the odds are stacked up very high now and things don't look good so we wave the white flag of truce to God and think this is surrender. It is a very clever and shrewd ploy of the mind, shrouded under the cloak of love and surrender but God is omnipresent, the indweller and only reality so these psychological acrobatics do not work.

Surrender, just like love, cannot happen if there are conditions—as conditions of any kind necessitate separation and love surges only in union. But, how does one surrender and to who? There is no office or intermediary—nothing in between, including yourself. So what to do and how to get started?

What has to be Surrendered

The 'I' cannot surrender as the 'I' has to be surrendered. There cannot be pure love if separation exists, as individuality will always assert itself at sometime or under some conditions. Love of God and surrender of the ego happen together as God is omnipresence and love for God must reflect this in full measure.

The practice of japa teaches you to look within and keep a steady flow of attention. The mind is rendered steady by this strong feeling of the heart and polished by the practice of karma yoga. When one does not feel the strong sense of separateness, one sees himself as a part of everything and one with everything. This mind that does not feel separate from things and has learnt how to live and love as a part of all things—knows how to love God naturally.

Karma yoga alone can repair understanding to a natural and healthy state. Most of what we do is centered around 'us' and each act strengthens the idea of individuality. Karma yoga shows a way of living in relationships and conditions without being self-centered. It trims and thins the ego to right size: a name and slight identity for functionality but not assertion of individuality as separate from everything everywhere.

Karma yoga enables the first stage of surrender by showing us the way to live, love, work and function without being self-centered. A good chunk of the ego is surrendered or let go when one finds a better way of living. Why would you cling on to ego's ways which are always limiting when you have found something new and freeing? You must find the new to let go of the old or it will cling to you subtly but tenaciously.

Bhakti yoga comes to use only when we have through karma yoga found a better way to live and get along—a way that is not 'my way'. Any amount of what we call devotional practices before learning the lessons of selfless action or life that is not self-centered will not do much good if any. You cannot love God if 'you' which is rooted in 'your interests' insists on being there. There cannot be any love if you are constantly doing *bu-sin-ess* with God as the better part of you will always lie in wait for the expected or hoped for and all of your efforts would be vain struggles that increase desperation.

In karma yoga, we learn that life is a steady stream of action and actions are a response to situations—nothing personal. We see that we can still be passionate about action or work, perhaps more than we were before, freed of selfishness and that what needs to be done can

get done without interference of the ego. Action or response to life is thus freed from ego's tentacles. Now, in bhakti yoga, the heart is freed from ego's icy grip and we learn to love God without asking, without wanting and without any expectation at all. Only a heart that is soft, pure and freed from inner agendas can love, never the shrewd business-driven heart.

Devotional Practices

The many devotional practices are expressions of love of God. Since love is an expression of the heart, emphasis on 'proper technique' is not necessary at all. You do not need 'proper technique' to love your children or parents—only a loving heart. But unlike our normal human loves, love of God is the heart's movement to discover its existing union and inseparability from God. Proper technique comes into play when something is sought as there is this subtle doubt that 'it may not come' if the technique is not proper. Love is not possible with these hidden agendas and fear.

In karma yoga, we learn to offer action and its fruit to God—action by not letting it be thought- or agenda-driven but a response to life's ongoing presentation of situations. Fruit by letting come what comes without worrying about it and a natural, willing eagerness to share what comes with others—not just 'our people' or families. This love of God through the path of action is expanded further in love of God through the heart or love itself by the different practices of devotion and aid self-surrender further.

Kirtan: Singing the name or names of the Lord with fullness of heart to a simple tune is a wonderful way to love or express love which are the same thing. When you sing, it must be with pure bhavana or feeling. You must love God for God's sake—just to love God.

First, free yourself from any competing interest, for at least 15-20 minutes, you must be both willing and able to love with all being. This means cell phones and other devices are left out of the room, not on vibrate nearby. Set a timer for the duration, keep it out of direct sight and sing the Lord's name with feeling. It is important to watch the mind while singing kirtan or it is not karma yoga. You must see it is possible to love with fullness of heart and being, while letting thoughts rise and fall in the mind and without being distracted by them. Each time you sing, it has to be afresh, keeping your attention on kirtan's sound will keep you attentive and avoid singing mechanically which does no use at all.

When the timer goes off, don't be in a hurry to get up as if 'I'm glad this is done'. Sit for a few moments in silent communion with God.

Kirtan can lead to meditation if you listen to the sound as That soundlessness from where sound emanates and dissolves into is also That from which all else appears and recedes back

into. This meditative kirtan is not noisy kirtan with acrobatics but the heart reaching for God within—bypassing the mind's faulty wiring completely.

Japa Yoga: Japa yoga is also an excellent way of loving God. We have already covered this earlier, please refer to the earlier writings on japa yoga.

Puja or Worship: It is best when you treat puja or worship as a demonstration of treatment of God's presence in your prayer area. Nothing special is needed but specialness of heart is requisite. God is omnipresent so it is not imagination to feel He is present in your prayer area in the form of the picture or little statue. The problem is when we feel that God is only in these forms and statues or in places of worship more than elsewhere. Being omnipotent, God is equally omnipresent, which is the Divine Omnipresence is the only reality. So, to feel God's live presence in your prayer area is not wishful thinking but you have to feel this in every cell of your being.

You can worship God by any means available to you locally. Lighting a small candle symbolizes your aspiration, the steadiness of flame in the windless room reminds to remain steady in aspiration. Some flowers and fruit symbolize the different hues of your own personality and fruits of actions done. Singing some kirtan while worship is letting the heart flow like a steady stream of oil from one container to another—here being to its own source or God.

It is important to sit for some time in silent meditation during physical worship to 'let things go' and plunge within the heart's abyss. Some closing prayers, verses or kirtan will enable you to leave the worship area without leaving the presence of God. If God is there in your prayer area, he is also everywhere as the indweller in all.

Inner Transformation

The little ego finds it impossible to do any mischief when it is absolutely not needed and sees that you are getting along fine without it and soon begins to realize that it has no independent existence. A great psychological correction starts happening through devotional practices, especially after tilling the soil by karma yoga.

Karma and Bhakti Together

Where the heart's pouring of itself to its source or worship in the prayer area ends, karma yoga once again resumes with seeing work as a means to continuing being in the presence of God through selflessness in action.

Karma yoga and bhakti yoga work together. Karma yoga shows us how to live with love and bhakti yoga shows us how to love in life. Thinning or trimming selflessness through karma yoga

enables us to love in bhakti yoga without selfishness and the pure love felt in devotion will impel the heart to continue living and acting in its glorious depths.

A rich inner life is possible when one allows the ego, self-centeredness and selfishness to evaporate. You don't have to struggle with dumping the ego, self-centeredness or selfishness, you just have to embark on the highway of heart's expansion. Karma yoga and bhakti yoga are the two sidewalks of this wide open highway. Karma yoga corrects and restores naturalness in action and bhakti yoga lets this restored heart soar high within.

Bhakti yoga helps me learn how to live better too as when I am able to love God as present in the picture or statue in the prayer area, I realize that God being the indweller in all can be worshipped through pure action as well.

I become careful in my relationships and interactions with all, without becoming paranoid—just being careful to not cause hurt. This vigilance paves the way for meditation and shows me to do what needs to be done or live without hurting myself or causing hurt to others. Life thus lived is a happy life and fear, remorse and doubt fall away being unused and thus unnecessary.

In a heart that loves, not just in the prayer area but in life as well—all that is not love or good falls away. There is a tremendous inner lightening and the heavy load carried for a long while is just abandoned as unnecessary. Confidence and courage come naturally in a heart that loves as it seeks to do no wrong and is careful to tread gently through life. This caring of the heart increases love as love is the fuel of inner caring.

Closing Thoughts

Much has been written on bhakti yoga and it has even been systematized and organized in some works. Here, I have simply tried to share the important principles that bhakti or the way of love is not something for any purpose except for love. When I learn to love without selfishness, I learn to live without selfishness.

Love is the fragrance of the soul and a heart without love is heartless. It does not matter what you start with—simple practice of kirtan, japa and worship your own way—let it be without ostentation and agenda. Let the heart sink back to its source and substratum through your practice and you will discover a way to live too without the heart ever being dislodged from inner association. Karma yoga and bhakti yoga are complementary and one continues where the other leaves off till it is only yoga or union—be it through action and life or love in one's little prayer area.

Nothing special is needed to flood your life with love, just the willingness to let go of all that is non-love or hurt. Karma yoga and bhakti yoga together are an unfailing remedy to restore our forgotten purity, innocence and love. Sure, life has challenges but struggle is not a part of life, it

is an add-on by the one who lives life without care and struggle, pain and sorrow can be abandoned the instant you chose love, peace and kindness.

The purpose of work is to be worked on. Practice is not *for* something, it is *the thing in itself*, but since we are not able to jump across the river in a single leap and actualize the truth—it is called practice. Practice diligently!

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