

The Practice of Yoga Part Two: Bhakti Yoga

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Bhakti Yoga, one of the six branches of Yoga, seeks Self-realization through devotion to any name and form of God. It is marked by practices such as prayer, chanting, song, ritual, listening to, or reading stories of divine beings, and loving remembrance of one's chosen form of God (*Ishta Devata*) as the indwelling presence in all people and objects in creation.

Bhakti Yoga offers a path that to the Absolute that is user-friendly. It is infused with all that is uplifting, nourishing, and healing in loving committed relationships. It cultivates loyalty, devotion, faith, and a one-pointed focus on the object of devotion.

Although bhaktas (devotees) recognize that the Absolute is beyond the grasp of the mind, they make use of meaningful and inspiring symbols to aid in focusing attention, affection, and the highest aspirations. They regard the name and form that they worship, not as an end to itself, but as a gateway to pass through in order to experience the transcendent Absolute.

Symbols and Imagery in Bhakti Yoga

Symbols are powerful images that reach the mind at the subconscious level. We are surrounded and affected by symbols everyday. National flags, wedding rings, and souvenirs are just a few examples of concrete objects that represent powerful truths.

It is these truths that we cherish and protect, not the objects. Photos of our loved ones connect us with the person pictured and call to mind feelings, thoughts, and memories that bring comfort and joy. Although a photo is only an image on paper, we would feel hurt if someone were to come along and step on it. Images are powerful links to truths. In many ways they are stronger and more fundamental to our psyche than words.

The use of symbols and rituals in spirituality helps us to explore our relationship to such mysteries as the purpose of existence and the afterlife. When understood properly as objects for contemplation and exploration, they are effective tools for helping us stretch beyond ingrained patterns of thought regarding the self and life.

But, when symbols are taken literally, they lose their true power and can even lead to serious misunderstandings. For example, we may be confused by the worship of the goddess Quan Yin who is often depicted pouring water from a vessel while riding a dragon. In our culture, the dragon is associated with Satan, so the imagery may seem frightening. The symbolism behind this image is powerful and positive. In the East, the dragon is the symbol of auspiciousness and Quan Yin rides it to distribute blessings to all beings. Misunderstandings such as this exist on the other side of the globe. There were some, unfamiliar with Christianity, who were dumbfounded when they witnessed Christians worship a seemingly dead God by consuming his body and blood. The bread and wine symbolize an invitation to share with Jesus in the dedication and sacrifice that leads to rebirth as a spiritual being. The images in both faith traditions hold universal teachings for living happy, fruitful lives. By being literal, we miss their beautiful messages.

The Easy Path

Bhakti Yoga is often referred to as the easy path because love and devotion open our hearts and energizes and inspires us, like nothing else. In the presence of love, fear evaporates, and faith transforms from mere belief to certainty based on direct experience. Meditation is natural to bhaktas, because the mind enjoys thinking of the beloved. And since we also wish to serve those we love, devotion to God - the creator - naturally manifests as selfless service to all creation.

Our senses are also more easily mastered through the practices of Bhakti Yoga. The senses, always hungry to be fed, are filled with delights that uplift the spirit and direct attention to higher truths. The mind is engaged with beautiful images to contemplate, charming tales that present great teachings, the sweet smell of incense, uplifting chanting and music, blessed food, and graceful, meaningful ritual.

Obstacles to Bhakti Yoga

Some are hesitant to commit to anything that reminds them of institutionalized religion, which at its worst, can be exclusionary and narrow. It brings up valid questions about paths filled with stories that can't be proven, invisible beings who grant wishes to some while ignoring others, and rituals that carry with them hopes and expectations of magical results.

Behind all these questions is the biggest obstacle to understanding Bhakti Yoga. It is that three-letter word that has provoked confusion, war, radical fundamentalism, and extreme behavior of all kinds – God.

The difficulty of allegiance to a Supreme Being is centered on questions of God's existence. Does God exist? Is there a being who created the universe, who governs its operations, and makes decisions that deeply affect our chances at happiness in life? The answer to these questions is further complicated by the fact that the word, God, can represent very different meanings according to the tradition, experiences, and capacities of the individual.

Scripture teaches that we are created in God's image. We can also say that the reverse is also true. We create a concept of God in our image. The mind, always on the lookout for concrete qualities that it can grasp, conceives of a Supreme Being who looks pretty much like us, but only bigger, stronger, wiser, and eternal. Usually, we also include some very human traits as well. God may occasionally seem to have a nasty temper, and bless or ignore us. Finally, we look to the Almighty to be the embodiment of the loftiest human goals: justice, mercy, and unconditional love.

After giving birth to this conception, we worship it as an absolute reality that exists outside ourselves. God, the Ultimate Reality, existence itself, the ground of being, the One who is beyond all beyonds, who is unbounded cosmic consciousness, is demoted by our conceptions to an object to be studied. In other words, the temptation is to shrink God to fit our notions rather than stretch – and eventually even let go of – our conceptions to experience union with the transcendent Absolute.

The core of every faith tradition contains the principle that God is transcendent and beyond the grasp of even its own philosophy and symbols. We can't shrink God to fit our ideas, but we can experience union with the Absolute by transcending the limitations of the ego. This state is attained when the heart is purified of selfishness, the mind is

made perfectly clear and calm and when we live the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. This is the core of spiritual life; it is what we call Yoga.

What does God look like in Yoga?

Perhaps the most commonly used term for God in Sanskrit is *Brahman*, the Absolute, beyond the beyond. Regardless of how subtle and lofty a conception of God is, the Absolute exists beyond it. This Highest Reality is a truth that cannot be disassembled, analyzed, or shrunk to fit into the mind.

Bhakti Yoga doesn't focus on Brahman directly. Instead, it turns its attention to Brahman as can be understood by the mind - Brahman within the confines of creation. When viewed this way, Brahman is commonly referred to as *Ishwara*.

Ishwara, God-as-seen-from-within-creation, has no name or form associated with it. It's like a blank screen onto which you can project any symbol that resonates deeply and that represents the Divine to you. To help us understand this idea better, we can turn to the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, where the main characteristics of Ishwara are listed.

Ishwara is:

- The Supreme Being, not affected by ignorance, afflictions, actions, fruits of actions, or desires.
- The complete manifestation of omniscience.
- The teacher of even most ancient teachers.
- Expressed through the humming sound (OM) of creation.

One of the things that is so wonderful about this understanding of Ishwara is its universality. Ishwara symbolizes the highest good, the loftiest human aspirations for unshakable peace, harmony, prosperity, immortality, and justice. Ishwara is where all ideas associated with God are concentrated. Any name and form can be Ishwara to you if you perceive in it the qualities listed above. To a Christian, Ishwara is Jesus, to a Hindu, maybe it's Krishna or Siva. For some, it can be a great master. In Bhakti Yoga, you are encouraged to worship wherever you perceive the Light.

The Personal Relationship with God

In Bhakti Yoga, not only are you free to choose whatever name and form of the Divine that resonates with you, you are free to cultivate your relationship with Ishwara in any way the suits your temperament. You can have a relationship with God as your:

- Father or Mother
- Master/Teacher
- Friend
- Child
- Beloved/Spouse

All these are equal. Over time, the devotee is drawn to the relationship that best suits them.

Bhakti Yoga In Practice

The following list forms the basic practice of Bhakti Yoga:

- Listening to mantras and stories associated with God
- Chanting/singing the praises and glories of God
- Remembrance of God's attributes/learning to perceive divine attributes in others

- Service to humanity/offering the fruits of service to God
- Performance of worship rituals
- Reverently acknowledging all images that symbolize God
- Cultivating an intense yearning to experience the reality of God
- Cultivating the feeling of friendship with God
- Complete offering of the self to God's will/self-transcendence

The Heart of Bhakti Yoga

The basic idea you see reflected in the list above, is to tap into that part of yourself that loves; that is inspired to do and experience great things, that knows the joys of relationships, that has the great capacity to enjoy the play of the countless names, forms and happenings in life. You'll also note that it requires commitment, strength, perseverance, and mindfulness to be a great bhakta.

Bhakti Yoga raises devotion from a mere feeling, to the loving devotion of time, energy, creativity, and resources in service to God and humanity. This inclination to selflessly serve is not rooted in acts of will power, but is the natural expression of love, our innate oneness with all creation.

Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Never idle, it always seeks the welfare of others. Love brings sweetness, strength, and comfort to those that bathe in its nectar. It breaks down all boundaries between peoples and between us and God. It burns all impurities of mind. Love overcomes hatred and fear. Love brings joy to the lover and to the loved.

The Divine Love Affair: The Highest Bhakti

With Bhakti Yoga's emphasis on the devotees' devotion to God, we might forget one incredible truth: God loves us. All the forces of the universe were brought together in just the right amount and at the precise moment to give birth to us. We are important to our Creator. We are loved, without limit and for all time.

The love from God to us is eternal and unconditional. When the devotees' love toward God grows and mirrors these qualities, there is a climactic experience of Oneness. The love of devotees consumes the name and form and all conceptions of the God they adored. At the same time, God's love for the devotee evaporates the egoism and ignorance. God and devotee are One.

Bhakti Yoga and Its relationship to Jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga

Jnana Yoga: The ultimate goals of Bhakti and Jnana Yoga are the same and in fact, they are complementary paths. Bhakti Yoga keeps us grounded, inspired and joyfully reaching out of ourselves. Jnana Yoga gifts us with principles and practices that won't let the mind get stuck in limiting images and symbols. Instead, the mind is set free to soar to limitless heights. As always, the best results are when the head and heart work together in harmony.

Raja Yoga: The experience of oneness that is the result of the highest Bhakti is essentially the same as this teaching from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*: *When the tranquil mind attains purity equal to that of the Self, there is Absoluteness, 3.56.* Again, the goal is the same.

The main point is this: it doesn't matter which path we take to Self-realization. It can be devotion, meditation, selfless service, study and self-analysis, or better yet, a holistic combination of all these ways. When we attain a still, clear mind and a selfless, dedicated heart, we will attain Self-realization. Suffering is gone and we will know only peace, joy, love, and light.