

1. The Love of God

*One may be a master of all the Scriptures
And competent to teach the Vedanta;
One may be a great ruler
Living in a many-splendoured mansion;
One may be a valiant hero
Who has vanquished his enemies;
Or one may be a pitiable
Victim of poverty and privation.
If he has no devotion in him
His life is devoid of meaning.
A servant who is filled with love of the
Lord Is more to be adored than the overlord of the world.*

"BHAKTI is service to *Hrishikesa*," it has been said. Service to God has been described as *Bhakti*. The heart of the devotee flows with love of the Lord through constant remembrance and recitation of His name. Out of this stream of love, devotion emerges. One who is nourished by the nectar of *Bhakti* will have no desire for anything else. To be unaffected by joy or sorrow, gain or loss, praise or blame, to remain steadfast and unwavering in faith, is the hall-mark of true devotion. Affection, attachment, desire are natural qualities in man. When these qualities are directed towards God and when one is continuously engaged in good deeds, these qualities acquire purity and sacredness. Then a man becomes not only a great soul but can become divine.

State of mind of a devotee

The devotee is ever conscious that the universe is a manifestation of the Divine and is permeated by the Divine. His life is based on the recognition of the immanence of God in everything. This state of mind is called "*Prema Advaitam*" (unity in Love.) Through this love the devotee experiences his oneness with the Divine. Enjoying the bliss of this experience, the devotee does not even desire *Moksha* (Liberation from birth and death). Unremitting love of the Lord is everything for him. Such devotion is known as "*Ananya Bhakti*" (Total devotion to One and One only.)

Bhakti indicates that man needs, in addition to the four *Purusharthas* (the objects of life--*Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha*)--a fifth object, devotion to God. Adi Sankara characterised this devotion as the mark of *jnana*. There is no need to bemoan the fact that one has not been able to perform the prescribed rites or forms of worship. "*Parama Bhakti*" (Supreme devotion to the Divine) encompasses within itself all meritorious qualities.

Vedanta proclaiming that Love of God is *Moksha*

The Puranas consider *Moksha* (Liberation) as mergence in the Divine. But the bliss that is experienced by constant contemplation of the Divine through devotion cannot be got even by merging in the Divine. Vedanta has proclaimed that the love of God is *Moksha*. The heart of the

devotee filled with love of God is tender and sweet. Sometime or other everyone is bound to make his heart such a shrine of love for the Lord. With the Lord enshrined in him, the devotee renounces the desire for liberation. Devotion itself will make him one with the Lord.

When a drop of water falls into the ocean, it achieves immortality and infinitude. If you hold a drop of water in your palm, it evaporates in a few moments. But when you join it with the ocean, it becomes boundless and one with the vast ocean. Only through Love can union with the Universal be realised. To a devotee who has achieved such a union with-the Eternal, everything appears as Divine.

The *gopikas* of Brindavan were such devotees. They experienced divine bliss through their intense devotion. Like a fish that cannot live out of water, the devotee, who is immersed in the nectarine ocean of divine love, cannot exist for a moment without the love of God. He cannot relish any other thing.

Every part of his body is so much filled with the love of God that each organ finds expression in proclaiming the glory of God or rendering service to God. This was the kind of devotion the *Gopikas* had for Krishna. It was something beyond the intellect and the power of reason. Krishna explained to Uddhava the true nature of the *Gopis bhakti*. Because such *bhakti* is incapable of intellectual analysis, it is dismissed as blind faith. Intellectual enquiry cannot explore what is subtle and can be known only through experience.

Develop steadfast devotion to God

A *Gopika* once asked Radha how she felt when she saw Krishna, how her heart responded, what transformation occurred in her and what joy she experienced. Radha replied: "The moment I hear the melodious flute of Krishna, my heart becomes still, and I forget myself when I learn that Krishna is coming. I am lost in the music of His flute and I am aware of nothing else. How can I describe to you my feelings when I am intoxicated by the magic of His melody?"

The God-intoxicated devotee cannot describe his blissful experience in words. One who attempts to express it, has no real experience of it all.

Those who regard themselves as devotees should recognise the vast difference between their narrow-minded attitude and the ineffable character of true devotion. They should resolve to shed petty attachments and develop steadfast devotion to God as the main object of their life. For this purpose, the company of the good is essential. Good thoughts are promoted only through association with the good. This means avoiding contact with the evil-minded and the unrighteous. Association with bad persons makes even a good person bad. There are classic examples of the evil consequences of association with the bad. Kaikeyi in the Ramayana and Dharmaraja in the Mahabharatha are examples of persons who suffered grievously because of their association with evil-minded persons--Manthara in the case of Kaikeyi and the Kauravas in the case of Dharmaraja.

Lover of God renounces everything

Everyone must strive to fill the heart with true devotion. Constant contemplation on the form of the Lord and frequent repetition of the Lord's name are the means by which the heart is filled with the love of God. When there is this love, the devotee is filled with inexpressible ecstasy. It was out of such ecstasy that Kulasekhara Alwar, the royal saint, exclaimed: "Oh Lord! People talk of *Moksha* as the means of redeeming life and getting rid of birth and death. I do not ask for

such redemption. I shall be content with loving you and serving you in countless lives. Allow me to love you and serve you--that is the only blessing I seek from you and not *Moksha*."

The universe is permeated with love. It is the embodiment of Vishnu. There is nothing in the cosmos, no place in it where He is not present. To regard the Universe as a manifestation of God and to experience it as such is real devotion. The Sage Narada was the supreme exponent of this doctrine. He observed: "*Thyago bhavati thrupto bhavati, Atmaaramo bhavati.*" ("The lover of God renounces everything; he is supremely content. He is immersed in the bliss of the Self. Endow me with such love, Oh Lord!")

Man today is behaving with less gratitude than what birds, beasts and even trees display. He is ungrateful to his parents, teachers, society and even to God. He makes a parade of his adherence to Truth, Righteousness, Peace, Love and *Ahimsa*, but does not practise any of them. Why is this so? It is because of intense selfishness and preoccupation with one's own concerns and interests. Only when man sheds his selfishness can he turn his mind towards God. The love of God will dispel the ignorance and conceit of man as the sun dispels the morning mist. The heart is the seat of love. That love must express itself, to begin with, in the home. From there it must extend to one's village or town, to one's state, nation and ultimately to the whole world.

***Bhakti Marga* is the path of Divine Love**

Love must expand from the individual to the whole universe. We must regard Love as God. The different forms attributed to God are products of fancy. But Love can be directly experienced. Whether one is a theist or an atheist, a hedonist or a recluse, a *yogi* or a materialist, he will have high regard for love. Love is the one form in which everybody is ready to accept God. The cultivation of love and achieving universal Love through love is the sublime path of Love---that is the path of *Bhakti*.

To realise the *Brahman* through continuous meditation on the *Brahman* is not an enjoyable path for all to take. This was why spiritual teachers like Ramanuja favoured the path of devotion, experienced themselves the bliss flowing from the love of God and propagated the love-principle as the easiest means to experience the Divine. There have been teachers who have emphasised the *Karma Marga* (the path of Action), the *Jnana Marga* (the path of knowledge), the different types of yoga or other means to realise the Divine. But the common under-current that flows through all of them is the path of *Bhakti*---the path of Divine Love. This is accepted by all of them. Love is God. The universe is permeated by God. To see God in everything, to love everything as a manifestation of God and to offer everything to God as an offering of Love--this is the way of Love.

True exemplars of *Bhakti Marga*

The *Gopikas*, the sage Narada and the child Prahlada are supreme exemplars of the path of *Bhakti*. Prahlada means one who is filled with infinite delight. The delight with which Prahlada was filled was the love of God. He saw God in everything. When his father Hiranyakasipu asked him whether God was in a pillar, he said God was in it. Hiranyakasipu smashed the pillar and the Lord came out of it in the form of *Narasimha* (Man-Lion) to vindicate Prahlada's faith in the omnipresence of the Divine.

Without firm faith in the omnipresence of the Divine, devotion has no meaning. By developing faith, devotion is nourished and devotion enables one to face all the vicissitudes of life with fortitude and serenity, regarding them as dispensations of Providence. Finally one-pointed

devotion for God leads to union with the Divine. Today devotion begins with the morning ritual of *yoga* (a form of worship), progresses towards *bhoga* (enjoyment) at mid-day and ends with *roga* (sickness) at night.

"*Satatam Yoginah*," says the Gita. Absorption in the Divine always is the mark of the *yogi*. This cannot be achieved in one jump. But through constant practice it can be achieved.

Self-realisation is the goal. Love is the means. It is through the cultivation of Love that life can find fulfilment. Everyone must strive to achieve this fulfilment by filling this human adventure with the sweetness of love and transforming it into an expression of divinity. This is my benediction for all of you.

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Discipline is important in life. It trains you to put up with disappointments. The path of life has both ups and downs. Every rose has a thorn. Now people want roses without thorns. They expect life to be one saga of sensual pleasures, a picnic all the time. When this does not happen, they turn wild and start blaming others.

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