

Bhakti Yoga

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Within the tradition of Yoga there are four main branches of Yoga - Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga. As each person has their own unique demeanor and approach to life, different branches of Yoga appeal to individuals based on the concept of what each person's modality is. We each have our own predispositions towards one path or another of the four paths of Yoga, but every branch is equally important. Just as the branches on a tree work together to make up the whole. Each branch of yoga is a functional part of the whole which is Yoga. Here is a brief overview of each branch of Yoga;

Jnana Yoga: Jnana Yoga's realm is that of knowledge, wisdom, introspection and contemplation. Every person has a mind and at some point realizes that it is absolutely necessary to reflect and examine the true content of their mind. Through this reflection peace and stillness of the mind will come.

Bhakti Yoga: Bhakti is pure love and devotion to the divine. Where Bhakti Yogis cultivate and experience love, compassion for all other beings, through devotion. As well as devoting each action, thought and motivation setting with the intention to serve the Divine.

Karma Yoga: Karma Yoga is working with intention and devotion without an attachment to the end results, devoting all activity to the divine and the well being of all.

Raja Yoga: Raja Yoga is the path of stilling the madness of the mind through meditation. Naturally through this path the mind will calm and life experiences will be seen without the notion of dualism.

Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of devotion holds a crucial place on the path of Yoga. All the yoga traditions are described as spokes of a wheel that all lead to the same hub, which is spiritual enlightenment or ultimate connection with the divine. There are many paths to self/god realization, stilling the mind and cultivating compassion but there is only one pathway to "God", this is the graceful pathway of Bhakti.

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Nondualistic forms of a meditative higher state require you to go beyond and transcend your normal waking state, including thoughts and personality. With your full intent and focus on connecting and sending love to the divine. Allowing this space to open up so one can merge with the divine through this state, a direct pathway of liberation from Maya, the illusion of the mind and senses.

For the mind takes in and becomes whatever it dwells and mediates on. With mediation and through intense focus on a divine personality or Guru the mind begins to become

cleansed and the bliss of the Divine takes shelter within ones heart, transforming ones entire state.

Although Bhakti does require much direct intention and willpower to renounce impure thoughts, paths and abstaining from certain activities, anyone can begin the practice of Bhakti yoga, the only prerequisite is a deep longing for God and faith. Each Swami has their own tradition that they have been initiated into by a previous spiritual teacher. Most Swamis take a vow of renunciation and abandon social status and material gain. So depending on the particular tradition will reflect the Swamis position on Bhakti Yoga.

Srila Prabhupada was born in 1896 ad was the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and created the 1960's "Hare Krishna" movement. Srila Prabhupada would often translate the word, Bhakti as, pure devotional service to God. (The Sanskrit root of the word *Bhakti* is *bhaj*, which means "loving service.") "Bhakti is the relationship we souls have with Krishna. In material existence, our Bhakti is covered by our material consciousness and misdirected away from Krishna and toward the temporary things of this world. Therefore we are never fully satisfied. We can awaken our natural Bhakti by practicing Bhakti. In other words, we can awaken our love for Krishna by performing acts of love for Him. Since yoga means "connection," the process by which we connect with Krishna through acts of love is called Bhakti yoga." Srila Prabhupada.

A great modern day Bhakti Yogi is Bhagavan das.

" The path to enlightenment is not a group trip. It is between you and God. This means you have got to go inside. The fewer external distractions and the more concentration you have, the easier it is to get there."

What many of the teachers of Bhakti point out is the very important fact that the path to illumination and God is through devotional service and pure love of the divine. In the book "Bhakti Yoga", by Swami Vivekananda it has been written, "BHAKTI-YOGA is a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in Love. One single moment of the madness of extreme love to God brings us eternal freedom. "Bhakti," says Nârada in his explanation of the Bhakti-aphorisms, "is intense love to God."—"When a man gets it, he loves all, hates none; he becomes satisfied forever."—"This love cannot be reduced to any earthly benefit," because so long as worldly desires last, that kind of love does not come. "Bhakti is greater than Karma, greater than Yoga, because these are intended for an object in view, while Bhakti is its own fruition, its own means, and its own end."

One of the great advantages of Bhakti it is pointed out is that it is the easiest, and the most natural way to reach the great divine end in view. One of the dangers is that with Bhakti oftentimes in its preparatory stages you find those who fall into exclusive forms of fanaticism. You can find this in every religion where individuals loving to those of their own religion can be so ruthlessly hateful of others from alternative

traditions. It is amazing that in the late 1800's we had an inspired adept such as Swami Vivekananda speaking out against this.

"He the Lord is, of His own nature, inexpressible love" – "From Whom is the birth, continuation, and dissolution of the universe" – "the Eternal, the Pure, the Ever-Free: the Almighty, the All Knowing, the All-Merciful, the Teacher of all teachers, the Sat-chit-ananda (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss) of divine love and eternal awareness."

In Bhakti-Yoga the central secret is to know that the various passions and feelings and emotions in the human heart are not wrong in themselves; only they have to be carefully controlled and given a higher and higher direction, until they attain the very highest condition of excellence. The highest direction is that which takes us to God; every other direction is lower. An example given is of a person who is in pain for lack of wealth. Let them realize that pain as a lack of God and place that longing toward the highest aspiration.

The ultimate goal of Bhakti is to merge into absolute bliss and to love everyone and everything in the Universe. It is stated that the nearer we approach the divine, the more we begin to see that all things are infused with supreme love. Our devotion intensifies until worship is offered to everyone, to every life and to every being! Sri Neem Karoli Baba Maharajji was a teacher to many people including Ram Das and Krishna Das. He has said, "The best form of worship is every form" and "keep God in your heart like you keep money in the bank"

Bhakti Yoga is love. It is total immersion in the divine. Chanting plays an important role in Bhakti. Chanting is typically done by repeating holy names in a mantra form, this is called Japa. Mantras have been used for thousands of years. Using mantra is a way to focus mind, heart and body on the divine through the direct expression of one's thought in action. Singing and dancing open a pure door toward an experience of divine happiness. Many traditions have centralized the day around mantra.

Kirtan is a form of group meditation. It involves a call and response form of chanting and sharing in the holy names. It was widely spread by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the 16th Century in India in the form of Krishna sankirtan. Sri Krishna Chaitanya was a notable proponent for the Vaishnava school of Bhakti Yoga, based on the philosophy of the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavad Gita. He worshipped the forms of Krishna and popularized the chanting of the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra. The Suryavanshi Hindu emperor Orissa, Gajapati Maharaja Prataparudra Dev, regarded him as Krishna's incarnation. Chaitanya journeyed throughout India for several years, chanting the divine names of Krishna constantly and was reported to have spent the last part of his life performing pastimes of divine ecstasy (Bhakti).

There are many ways to practice Bhakti. In the Bhagavata Purana nine forms of devotion are mentioned; Shravana (listening), Kirtana (Chanting), Smarana (Remembrance), Pada Sevana, (Service at the feet), Arcana (Ritualistic worship), Vandana (Prostration), Dasya (Servant attitude), Sakhya (Friendship) and Atma-nivedana (Self-offering).

1. Listening to devotional songs, recitations and scriptures
2. Chanting prayers, songs, stories and repeating the divine names
3. Remembering by constantly bringing attention to thoughts of the divine
4. Serving the divine through humble recognition and surrender to those who are pure devotees
5. Ritualistic performances and devotional service to the divine
6. Prostration toward the divine through work or dedicated movement, dance or form
7. Servant attitude and acts of devotion in all activities, it is all for the glory of the Divine
8. Friendship with the divine. A personal relationship with the eternal.
9. Self-Offering and complete surrender, where the devotee worships and loves the divine without any thought of reward or personal gain.

The ultimate goal of Bhakti is to merge ones individual soul in the divine absolute. You can see in this list many forms of devotion that carry through every religion in fundamental ways. It is not always so clear when you get caught up in a religion what the intention is in that form of worship. It seems that the love of love is Bhakti and that a real understanding of Bhakti can unlock the true heart of every spiritual tradition. Bhakti Yoga is a passionate expression of love. It has no limit, it calls and calls and continues to offer its nectar in pure devotion. Bhakti eventually overcomes all obstruction as all activities become interactions with the ultimate divine all attractive all blissful sentient totality of being that is all love. This is for you, and for you alone to share with all as you practice and continue to sing the holy names. The tradition of Bhakti goes back more than 10,000 years it is said to the earliest ages of Humanity. The simplicity that it represents stands for years of practice and human endeavor. In today's world when we are seemingly on the cusp of a new horizon in the dawn of our collective occupation of our planet it isn't all that obvious that along with our gadgets and sophisticated modern capacities that we take for granted every day we are also heirs of the greatest of spiritual insights and methodology.

It is incredibly fascinating to me that as the word presses onward into the future one thing that will continue to enhance and truly enrich the lives of Earth's inhabitants is a practice that has been here with us all along -
Bhakti.

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