

## The Joy of Devotion

By Jennie Lee

**B**hakti is the practice of selfless devotional worship directed to one supreme divinity. If God is not in your belief system, then perhaps consider bhakti as devotion to the energy of universal love.

Emphasizing an all-surrendering love as the means for communion with the divine, bhakti is one aspect of yoga practice that can facilitate the state of unity consciousness, or *samadhi*, according to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The literal meaning of bhakti, according to Monier-Williams' Sanskrit Dictionary,<sup>2</sup> is "attachment, participation, devotion to, fondness for, homage, faith, or love, worship, piety to (as a religious principle or means of salvation)." Some outer forms of bhakti yoga that are popular today include *kirtan* (call and response) chanting, mantra repetition, and ceremonial dedications to one's preferred concept of the divine. These human rituals, like any religious rites, when infused with loving attention bring us closer to union, but if performed mechanically become void of meaning. Meditation too can be a ritual undertaken with deep devotion or it can be a perfunctory discipline.

Recently, several of my yoga therapy clients were struggling with their meditation practice. They are all committed practitioners, but each felt stagnant and wanted more than just a half hour of focused sitting. One of the clients had no formal religious belief system; one had a Catholic background but was not currently attending church; and one expressed that she experienced a limited sense of the divine through nature. All of them wanted to gain a greater personal sense of what the divine is, how they were connected to it, and how a deeper understanding might help them find greater peace and purpose in their meditation practice and in their lives. So, I decided to explore with them the practice of devotion, or bhakti yoga, as a way to enrich their experience.

The questions I focused on with each individual were "How do we practice devotion?" and "What does devotion require from us?" Prior to this exploration, I had thought of devotion as more of a feeling state that expressed itself naturally through the love that I held for a person or a passion. But in studying Sutra 2.1,

which teaches devotion as part of yoga in action (*kriya yoga*), I could see that just *feeling* devoted was not enough. It also requires right effort (*tapas*). This makes sense in terms of any relationship; love has to be backed up with intentional action. If we want to have a deep and fulfilling connection to someone, it is not



enough to simply love them from afar—a frustrating energetic divide remains if there is no communication or activity between us. For a satisfying relationship, we must spend time with them, listen to them, and take action to love them in ways that are meaningful to them. Our inner devotional focus fuels the outer expression of our love in personal and unique ways.

### The Yoga Sutra on Ishvara Pranidhana

To help my clients learn how to build this personal connection through the active yoga of devotion, we began discussing a few translations of Yoga Sutra 2.45.

*“Through wholehearted dedication (Ishvara Pranidhana) we become intoxicated with the Divine.”*

*“By total surrender to God, Samadhi is attained.”*

*“Absolute surrender and devotion to the Divine enables soul freedom.”*

## Following the Bhagavad Gita, we practice being even-minded in both joy and suffering, tranquil before friend and foe, equanimous with both praise and insult, pure in heart, and willing to see God at work in every moment of our lives.

Overall, this sutra indicates that the intended devotional focus is the divine essence, or God, and that bliss, expansion, and omniscience are the rewards of that devotion. Some secular translations express that pure awareness leads us to full integration. It is clear from the various translations that a big part of devotional practice has to do with surrender. But what does *surrender* mean here? And what exactly are we being asked to surrender?

### Aspects of Surrender

First, when we come to seated meditation practice, we surrender our bodily actions in the world; we give up our habitual

movement. We discipline ourselves to take time and energy away from the normal outward focus that commands the majority of our daily attention. We surrender our constant need for stimulation and pleasure by withdrawing the senses from the outside world (*pratyahara*) and we turn ourselves inward to experience personal communion with the divine (*dharana*). This inner focus is an essential companion to outer yoga practices. And it is a step in the direction of liberation from all suffering and the expansion of our individual consciousness that is *samadhi*.

The second aspect of surrender is in the realm of thought. Once physically still in meditation, we discipline the mind to get quiet through meditative techniques such as breath awareness or control, mantra repetition, and visualization. Another way to shift out of thinking and into heart-centered awareness is to focus on a spiritual quality such as compassion or a representation of the divine in order to inspire love. This is tricky because, although it is easy to think about the things or people we love, many yoga students don't have any

personal sense of the divine and therefore don't feel love for it. So the question arises, “How do we practice devotion to something that we don't even know? And this leads to the next aspect of surrender—surrendering the need to know.

From the standpoint of the limited human mind, it is impossible to know the infinitude of the divine. Yet we can have a personal experience of it if we surrender thought and the need to intellectually know into devotion. This is where all three of my clients had the most difficulty. It is human nature to want to comprehend our experience, yet in this case they were being asked to give up the possibility of

full comprehension in exchange for a seemingly intangible experience.

The client who perceived the divine through nature had the greatest result. I asked her to remember a moment when she felt suffused with joy in nature. She described a certain cast of light she had seen at sunrise one morning. Then I asked her to use this image as her point of focus in meditation for two weeks. She practiced concentrating wholeheartedly on a brilliant light within. By doing so, she began to connect to the same feeling of awe she felt in nature during her time of meditation. Following from this, she began to experience more open-heartedness and a general feeling of greater love.

The client with no religious background had previously practiced a mindfulness-based form of meditation that included a cognitive aspect. I asked her to try approaching her practice with the intention of opening the channel of divine connection. She worked on her inner willingness to receive and to be content with the mystery of what lies beyond known experience, without the need to understand it all from a cognitive perspective. She reported having moments of deeper peace during meditation and some strong intuitive messages that helped with career and relationship challenges.

Finally, the client with a Catholic upbringing noticed ways in which she fears approaching the divine. She has tried to incorporate the aspects of her religious background that feel true and loving as a bridge over to a bhakti meditation practice. I have encouraged her to focus on love in whatever way she experiences it and to hold that energy as her focus in meditation. She finds this practice enables her to be more open and receptive during meditation.

As all three of my clients are finding, the greatest devotional offering of all is the surrender of the personal self. We offer our desires, fears, attachments, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sense of being separate, and our need to know on the altar of meditative devotion to the higher Self.

## The Path of Devotion

Fortunately, since by definition the divine essence is understood to be within all, seen or unseen, there are innumerable ways to walk the path of devotion. Any way that we choose to keep our minds and our eyes fixed on and perceiving God is just fine, just so long as it brings us to inner peace and love, along with loving action. The Bhagavad Gita<sup>5</sup> explains that it is easier to comprehend and become devoted to God in manifested forms, to connect personally to the infinite through its expression as mother, father, friend, or guru. However, it is entirely possible to adore God in formlessness as well through the qualities of love, peace, compassion, or joy.

## The greatest devotional offering of all is the surrender of the personal self.

To create a living, working relationship with the divine that is meaningful to us, we might need to strip away old concepts of God that were passed to us from others. If your perception of God feels limiting in any way, it may be time to surrender that thought and open to the possibility of a new experience of the divine in your meditation practice. The release of limiting beliefs or dogmas with the intention of expanding awareness through devotion is powerful surrender practice.

### Inner Renunciation

Another way of practicing bhakti yoga is by inwardly dedicating all action to God. This inner renunciation can be performed by householder yogis as well as by renunciants or monastics. When we acknowledge God as the only doer of all actions, then we recognize that the divine is the only rightful recipient of all results of those actions and through this understanding we keep devotion in heart and mind throughout the day. In this way, we become masterful at nonattachment and contentment (*santosh*).

As we release personal attachments and expectations, we begin to see the pres-

ence of God in all beings and in all circumstances. Following the Bhagavad Gita, we practice being even-minded in both joy and suffering, tranquil before friend and foe, equanimous with both praise and insult, pure in heart, and willing to see God at work in every moment of our lives. In the quiet moments of meditation, we can more effortlessly slip into inner communion with the divine beloved and enjoy the bliss of bhakti. A fulfilling relationship of reciprocal love is formed and meditation becomes rich with ever-expanding joy and peace. This has been my experience of meditation since I began focusing deeply on the devotional aspect of practice. My clients have found that it was easier to remain committed to daily practice with this focus. They have also experienced

less pressure to achieve anything and more ability to receive through meditation instead. As a result of practicing the surrender of self as a devotional offering, we all felt greater joy and freedom from emotional attachments.

To summarize the process of establishing a meaningful, heart-centered bhakti practice or to help a client open to the bountiful blessings of devotion, consider these five elements:

#### 1. Be clear about what you are devoted to.

Ask yourself this question: "What am I most dedicated to?" For some, the answer may be a child or spouse, a creative passion or career. For others, it may be personal growth or spiritual evolution. Or it may be the divine in whatever form or faith they hold dear.

#### 2. Set your priorities.

Rank your answers to the question above in terms of how much time and energy you give to each. Is this a good balance?

#### 3. Determine your style of bhakti practice.

Experiment with different bhakti practices. When you find one that resonates in your heart and inspires joy and love, stick with it for an extended period of time to allow for full saturation.

#### 4. Use every moment as an opportunity.

If we keep devotional love in our hearts as we engage in daily life, it changes the flavor of all our interactions. Whether feeling joyful or challenged, we can ask ourselves, "How is this person or situation an opportunity to practice wholehearted devotion to the divine?"

#### 5. Enjoy the sweetness of surrender.

Within the practice of devotion is deep rest. We find that we can relax as we surrender the ultimate control over life and trust the flow of our unfolding to universal love. By letting go of the ego's constant demands, desires, and stories, we enjoy more of the blessings that bhakti yoga brings. Meditation becomes less of a discipline and more of a celebratory joy. As we offer our devotion to the divine source of all life, we are filled in return with bountiful love. **YTT**

### References

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