

Devotion Depends on Your Level of Understanding

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2017-09-15

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/3388>

Seeker: Dear Sundari, I'm being exposed to the all the teachings of James and read the *Gita* and the *Upanishads*.

I'm watching some videos about *karma yoga* and practicing daily.

There is one point I need to be clearer about, which is the worship of the Deity. Does worshipping Krishna mean to be grateful to Krishna in "my own words" or is there is a more formal way to do it, like to repeat some specifics *mantras*?

Sundari: There is no way that is essentially better than worshipping the Lord, the self, in all things as your own divine self. In this way, any symbol is fine because anything can be a symbol of the self. As for *mantras*, it is important to understand the meaning of the words you chant. Vedantins chant *mantras* because we enjoy the bliss of the self, **but** we know that the bliss is who we are. We do not chant or perform any other ritual to gain anything. The purpose of the *mantra* is to deliver knowledge, not to have a blissful experience.

The same applies to any devotional practice. How you practise devotion depends on where you are at in your understanding. Here is the full teaching on *bhakti*, devotion:

Why Do We Need Devotion?

We need to understand the definitions of God/*Isvara* gradually and systematically until we can see the full vision, the whole Mandala of Existence. The way in which I define God will determine my *bhakti*, devotion. In the first level of understanding, my devotion will be to a personified deity: a personal God. In the second level of understanding, I will worship the Lord in everything, including nature. In the final stage of understanding, I see God as the formless essence of all, both manifest and unmanifest. The final stage does not negate the previous two; it simply completes the full picture. When we appreciate *Isvara* as both form and formless, we can happily worship the Lord/God/*Isvara* as a personified deity, as the totality of nature and as the formless essence of all things. Just as quantum physics does not displace Newtonian physics, both understandings are valid at their respective levels.

The three definitions of God can be broken down further to four stages of devotion. The first three stages are called *dvaita bhakti*; all three involve free will and the *jiva*, the person, which is why these stages are called dualistic worship. The purpose of these stages of worship, or *bhakti*, is that these practices reduce subjectivity and neutralize *vasanas* – likes and dislikes – as well as negate the doer. It takes care of the childish ego. **The last stage and fourth stage of devotion, non-dual *bhakti*, takes place once the doer is negated, and is based on knowledge.**

Four Stages of *Bhakti*

Bhakti, devotion, from the Sanskrit word “*bhaj*,” means “to worship.” It is more than a prayer, a supplication. Its desire is to serve and worship according to the qualities that condition the instrument of love: the mind and heart. If the heart/mind is dull (*tamasic*), superstition and fear inform one’s worship, for example, fear-based religious worship. If the heart/mind is passionate (*rajasic*), desire informs one’s worship. The devotee wants something. If the heart/mind is pure (*sattvic*), the *bhakta* loves for the sake of the object and for the sake of love itself. But even a pure mind sees the beloved as an object – as “other than.”

There is a doer, a lover. This doer/lover loves something or someone other than his or her self, even though in all cases it is for the sake of the self that one loves. A mature devotee knows that he or she is the self and worships all it sees as the self. But a *tamasic* or *rajasic* devotee is unaware of this fact because they feel incomplete and love an object to feel complete (God or some other symbol of divinity) because it makes him or her feel more secure, more complete, more “happy.” But there is always a sense of separation from the object.

The advantage that a *sattvic* devotee enjoys over a *tamasic/rajasic* devotee is that the object of worship (God, in whatever way it is conceived) is always available, whereas if you see God as a person or a thing, it is not always available. The object of fear/desire-based love is not always available to reciprocate, but the lover of God as awareness is never far from the beloved, because God is consciousness and consciousness is responsive. No matter how the self is invoked, it responds lovingly because consciousness is love. It does not matter whether consciousness is seen as a religious God or as another kind of symbol: an idol, a person, nature, a practice or ritual or as life itself. Consciousness does not discriminate, because it sees everything as itself. There is a beautiful saying in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna speaking to Arjuna says: “In whatever way you worship me (i.e. the self, or consciousness) I will respond to make your faith strong.”

Dvaita (dualistic), or stages 1 to stage 3 *bhakti* (devotion), are stages that all inquirers go through in their inquiry. Stage 1 is not essential, but it is a stepping stone to next stage of *bhakti*, explained in greater detail in *The Yoga of Love*.

Stage 1 is informal or undisciplined worship; it is totally subjective and emotional, “heart-based.” It is where all religions originate, where most *samsaris* worship a personal deity or god, seeing it as a HE usually, a Big Daddy who takes care of them and listens to their problems. It is worshipping God as a person. It is childlike or childish devotion. It’s about supplicating God in order to get results. This is where all religious fanaticism and dogmatism originate; it leads to sectarianism and fundamentalism. It makes people feel self-righteous, that they have “God on their side” and can act out whatever they believe “in His name,” that they are better than others and their way is the only way. It gives rise to all religious wars. It also makes ordinary people feel safe, providing guidelines that help sort out relationship and life issues. This is for people who are totally identified with being people and the world of objects.

Religion on the whole is based on an interpretation of truth by “the Church,” which is made up of people who believe God revealed truth to them personally, not through self-inquiry into reality by an independent, irrefutable and logical means of knowledge. Religion is based on an apparently infallible belief in a superior extra-cosmic deity to whom allegiance must be given to avoid punishment and gain salvation. Its basic contention is that we are flawed at birth and can only be redeemed by divine intervention. If we are saved, we will experience eternal bliss in the life hereafter; if not, eternal damnation is unavoidable. Unlike Vedanta, religion does not encourage

the individual to question and think for his or her self. It requires believers to mindlessly submit to unprovable doctrines.

Stage 2 of devotional practice, or *bhakti*, is also dualistic, emotional and intellectual. Here you start to practise *karma yoga* – surrendering the results of actions to *Isvara* (or God) with an attitude of consecration and gratitude because you have realized that the results of actions are not up to you. This is to help neutralize the idea of doership. Both stages 1 and 2 roughly corresponds to Chapters I to VI of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Stage 3 is still dualistic, but much less so. It is what Vedanta calls *upasana* (meditation) and is also compulsory for *moksa*. It corresponds to Chapters VII to XII of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is where worship of *Isvara*/God is objective: purely impersonal or intellectual. Knowledge of *Isvara* and the creation start to crystallize. There is still duality and you see *Isvara* in special forms (like icons or beauty) but gradually as knowledge becomes firm, this progresses into seeing and worshipping *Isvara* in all forms, the good and the bad.

Stage 4, *advaita*, or non-dual *bhakti*, *jnanum*, corresponds to Chapters XIII to XVIII of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is the final stage of *bhakti*; it is *advaita* – non-dual *jnanum* – or self-knowledge. It is non-personal, beyond subjectivity and objectivity, i.e. *moksa*. This is non-dual vision where you see everything as the self first, and second as the *jiva*, never confusing the two again. You still live as the *jiva*, and so follow *dharma*, your own and universal *dharma*, which requires following the rules of the Field of Existence, or *Isvara*, automatically. And you continue with *dvaita bhakti*, except it is no longer dualistic in that you know that everything is you, awareness – i.e. you have permanently discriminated between *satya* (what is real, i.e. always present and unchanging) and *mithya* (what is apparently real, i.e. what is not always present and always changing).

~ Love, Sundari