

Devotional Practice

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Nicky: Thank you very much, Maa. It feels so much better after reading this.

~ *Om Namah Shivaya*

Sundari: You are welcome, Nicky, feel free to write anytime. The road to freedom is not an easy one, which is why so few are on it, but it is very worth it!

As long as you trust the knowledge and trust *Isvara* to unfold your life as a *jiva*, you will be fine. I recommend that you start a practice of devotion if you don't already have one. Here are some pointers:

Desire Is Not Love

Worldly love is called *kama*, and its nature is desire. A worldly lover (*kami*) loves an object with desire and does not worship the object. He or she wants something from the object, which produces limiting feelings caused by the behaviour of the love object. *Kama* is a high-maintenance kind of love and amounts to a sense of ownership. Owning an object makes the lover feel secure. *Kama* is called love, but it is actually the antithesis of love because real love is free and subject-dependent. The object is loved for its own sake, not for how the object makes the subject feel. Real love wants nothing and fears nothing. It is self-satisfied. Desire feels like love because when its needs and conditions are met, the mind is settled and blissful. When its needs and desires are not met, it is a veritable sea of storms. *Kama*, desire, is the coin of the realm of *samsara*.

Two Kinds of Spiritual Love

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. It does not want worldly things. But like *kama* it is object-dependent, not subject-dependent. It appreciates the goodness in the object – a child, a family or God – and desires to serve, not possess. *Bhakti* is a feeling of gratitude born out of the understanding that one is privileged to experience love. It manifests in three ways:

1. *Guna bhakti*: *Guna* means "quality," so *guna bhakti* is worship according to the qualities that condition the instrument of love: the mind and heart. If the heart is dull (*tamasic*), superstition and fear inform one's worship, for example, fear-based religious worship. If the heart is passionate (*rajasic*), desire informs one's worship. The devotee wants something. If the heart 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. *Guna bhakti* and *kama* have another thing in common: there is a doer, a lover. This doer/lover loves something or someone other than his or her self, even though in both cases it is for the sake of the self one loves. A mature devotee

knows that he or she is the self and worships it, but a *tamasic* or *rajasic* devotee is unaware of this fact. A *kami* feels incomplete and needs a love object to feel complete.

A devotee also feels incomplete and loves an object (God or some other symbol of divinity) because it makes him or her she feel more secure, more complete, more “happy.” With *guna bhakti* and *kama* there is always a sense of separation from the object.

The advantage that a *guna -bhakta* enjoys over a *kami* is that the object of worship (God, in whatever way it is conceived) is always available, whereas a person or a thing is not. Another advantage is that the object of a *kami*'s love is not always available to reciprocate, but the lover of God 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.

In the discussion on love it is always difficult to understand the equation between awareness/consciousness and love. This is because awareness is free of feelings, whereas love seems to be a feeling quite separate from awareness. But there is actually no difference, because reality is non-dual and feelings are never apart from awareness; they arise out of awareness and are made up of awareness, like the spider's web is made up of the spider.

2. *Parabhakti*: “In” *parabhakti* love is known to be you, your true nature – meaning consciousness. It is having all you could ever want and knowing that it will never leave you. It is love loving itself. It is limitless satisfaction – *parama sukka* is the phrase used in the texts. The nature of the self, awareness, or consciousness, is *parama prema svarupa*. *Parama* means “limitless”; *svarupa* means “nature” and *prema* is the “love the makes love possible.” It is the nature of awareness. In its presence even spiritual love comes alive. Spiritual love, no matter how pure, is dualistic, a transaction between a subject and an object, a feeling of love, for example. When I know I am awareness, I am *prema*, limitless love. This love is knowledge because awareness is intelligent. *Prema* is only known when the doer has been completely negated by self-knowledge.

All three *gunas* are always present in the apparent reality or one could not experience anything, but *parabhakti*, *prema*, exists prior to *rajas* and *tamas*, which have yet to sprout from the causal body. It is an experienceless experience. At this “level” experience and knowledge are one because one is experiencing at the very heart of creation, before the *gunas* have differentiated. What is knowledge? “I am awareness/I am love/I am pure bliss.” What is experience? Awareness/love/bliss.

Who Needs a Devotional Practice, and Why?

There are three stages to devotional practice:

1. *Karma yoga*: When self-inquiry begins, the main purpose is to negate the doer. *Karma yoga* is consecrating to *Isvara* all thoughts, words and actions on a moment-to-moment basis, knowing that the results of those actions are not up to you. It is taking the results as *prasad*. This is the most basic devotional practice. Companion practices such as prayer, chanting, *japa*, meditation, keeping an altar with symbols of the self, lighting a candle, etc. are very helpful ways to purify the

mind and negate the doer.

2. *Sanyassi yoga*: A *sanyassi*, or self-inquirer, essentially understands that he or she is not the doer, but still needs to render binding *vasanas* non-binding. Self-inquiry is the highest form of devotional practice. But for it to succeed, it should be practiced along with prayer, *japa*, chanting, meditation, etc. These are excellent means to gain the peace of mind in which love flowers.

3. *Parabhakti*, the *yoga* of no-contact: Once self-knowledge has permanently removed the ignorance of your true nature as whole and complete, non-dual awareness, you are pure love, *parama prema svarupa*. Your entire life is an outpouring of love, an effortless devotional practice, and everything is a reflection of you, awareness. This does not mean that you no longer pray, meditate or chant, but that your life itself is a prayer, a meditation, a song of love. Devotion is the self, a spirit of joyful union with all.

The self-actualised *jiva*, whose nature is *parama prema svarupa*, still apparently exists in the apparent reality, the domain of *Isvara*. However, even though its personal ignorance (*avidya*) has been removed by self-knowledge, it willingly submits to the universal laws that govern the apparent reality.