

The End Goal for a True Bhakta

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Many of us are genuinely serious about bhakti. Some of us regularly attend bhajans and some others attend classes where they learn devotional hymns and songs from a guru. Several others do service in temples, mutts and holy places regularly and consider it as devotion to God. A fraction of us change our life style, sport religious signs on our forehead, fervently do pooja, prayers and read scriptures and holy granthas daily. Serving the poor and downtrodden and the destitute is considered as a mark of devotion to God by some others. There are many more versions and all of these are accepted forms of devotion for a true bhakta.

The roadmap for a devotee

Each one of us may start with any of the methods described above to cultivate devotion. The first step in this process is to develop some regularity in these practices. Once we achieve this, we then concentrate on fine-tuning these practices, making them more sustainable and in some cases elaborate also. Our practices also evolve and become more meaningful and subtle at times. For example, we might have begun simply by reciting some *ślokas* (say Hanuman Chalisa or Vishnu Sahasranamam) daily. The first phase of this experience is more of trying to find out how to find time every day to do this and perhaps not to forget on some days. However, it will slowly get us involved in the exercise and we become very regular. After some time, there is some urge in us to know the meaning of what we are reciting and we start looking for credible sources. A few years of journey in this path completely transforms us even when the daily routine of recitation has not changed. The practice becomes more meaningful and satisfying.

This is undoubtedly a great start for a true bhakta and the journey must go on. However, for a true seeker, while these practices will become important and part and parcel of his/her life, a question will slowly emerge: What is the ultimate destination in this journey that the bhakta has embarked up on?

This question must not be misunderstood as lack of conviction or confusion arising in the mind of the bhakta. On the other hand, it is a true sign of progress that the bhakta is making. The desire to know what is the final destination for a true seeker is more an expression of the desire to take what he/she embarked upon to its logical conclusion. In order to clarify this doubt that is likely to emerge in the minds of a true bhakta, Shri Krishna offers some help in chapter 7 of *Gītā*.

The final destination for a devotee

According to Shri Krishna, a true bhakta will find his/her final destination. At the end of several janmas (*bahūnām janmanām-ante*) the realized person (*jñānavān*) attains the true and ultimate knowledge that everything, manifesting and unmanifesting, known and unknown (*sarvam*) are indeed nothing other than the divine manifestations of Vasudeva,

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the ultimate God (*vāsudevaḥ iti*) in various forms, shapes and attributes. Furthermore, such a bhakta eventually reaches unto me (*maṃ prapadyate*). He/she is the rarest of the rare among human beings (*saḥ sudurlabhaḥ*) and indeed is also the most evolved person (*mahātmā*).

बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते ।

वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः ॥ 7.19

bahūnāṃ janmanām-ante jñānavān maṃ prapadyate,
vāsudevaḥ sarvam-iti sa mahātmā sudurlabhaḥ.

What is perhaps implied in this *śloka* is that the ultimate goal of a true seeker pursuing a spiritual path is to understand the law of conservation of divinity (Vasudeva is everything, as mentioned in the *śloka*). This law is at the core of understanding the relationship between *jīva – jagat and īśvara*. The question that naturally arises is how come a bhakta realises the law of conservation of divinity even when he/she starts with a simple practice of reciting some *stotra* or doing a *nāma japa*? Perhaps by making this claim, Shri Krishna is making us reflect on the real meaning of devotion and its trajectory as we evolve as a bhakta.

True Devotion & True Bhakta

Devotion may start with many of the methods enumerated at the beginning of this write-up. But what is important is to keep track of the evolution of bhakti. For many belonging to specific religious sects and guru driven practices, progress in bhakti sometimes means hardening one's stand on what is the right way to live and right way to worship, the type of God to worship etc. They become very exclusive, denouncing other practices which are at variance with theirs and consider them as either unqualified or inferior to them. This breeds *bheda bhava* as opposed to *aikya bhava*. In extreme cases they become violent and start coercing others to follow their methods of worship and devotion.

If we consider what this *śloka* indeed points out to, then this cannot be the considered a forward moving step in one's journey on the path of devotion. On the other hand, it must be a retrograde step. True devotion invariably should take an individual through a few important steps:

- (a) Many versions of bhakti will invariably begin with some form of external socialization with like-minded people, as in the case of a bhajan, pooja or some satsang. However, a bhakta practicing true devotion to God must become more reflective and self-contemplating as opposed to being too outward oriented. Too much of outward orientation will take away the opportunities for self-reflection, which is very important for making further progress.
- (b) The God or the form of *upāsanā*, which started with external symbolism, idols and forms should slowly become internal and personal to an individual as he/she progresses in bhakti
- (c) The internalized God must get enlarged into a bigger, all-encompassing entity thereby embracing all forms of Gods available and seeing the oneness among all of them
- (d) Further progress will enlarge this idea even more and the bhakta will be able to see God everywhere around in people and living beings around him/her and in the rocks

and rivers. Only when a person reaches such a stage he/she is said to have reached the pinnacle of bhakti. When a person reaches such a stage, he will be able to point to anything and everything when asked where is God, as *Prahlāda* could do when his father *Hiranyakaśipu* confronted him with this question.

Bhakti is indeed a means for evolution of an individual and discovering the joy of oneness with everything that God has created. If we can understand this message from this śloka and indeed travel in this path, we will truly evolve as an individual and reach that ultimate stage of being one with God. Viewed from this perspective *Bhakti Marga* and *Jnana Marga* lead us to the same destination albeit with different starting points and different approaches.