



The Path of Devotion

Swami Vivekananda

Only love for the Supreme Lord is true Bhakti. Love for any other being, however great, is not Bhakti. The “Supreme Lord” here means Ishvara, the concept of which transcends what you in the West mean by the personal God. “He from whom this universe proceeds, in whom it rests, and to whom it returns, He is Ishvara, the Eternal, the Pure, the All-Merciful, the Almighty, the Ever-Free, the All-Knowing, the Teacher of all teachers, the Lord who of His own nature is inexpressible Love.”

Man does not manufacture God out of his own brain; but he can only see God in the light of his own capacity, and he attributes to Him the best of all he knows. Each attribute is the whole of God, and this signifying the whole by one quality is the metaphysical explanation of the personal God. Ishvara is without form yet has all forms, is without qualities yet has all qualities. As human beings, we have to see the trinity of existence—God, man, nature; and we cannot do otherwise.

But to the Bhakta all these philosophical distinctions are mere idle talk. He cares nothing for argument, he does not reason, he “senses”, he perceives. He wants to lose himself in pure love of God, and there have been Bhaktas who maintain that this is more to be desired than liberation, who say, “I do not want to be sugar. I want to taste sugar; I want to love and enjoy the Beloved.”

In Bhakti-Yoga the first essential is to want God honestly and intensely. We want everything but God, because our ordinary desires are fulfilled by the external world. So long as our needs are confined within the limits of the physical universe, we do not feel any need for God; it is only when we have had hard blows in our lives and are disappointed with everything here that we feel the need for something higher; then we seek God.

Bhakti is not destructive; it teaches that all our faculties may become means to reach salvation. We must turn them all towards God and give Him that love which is usually wasted on the fleeting objects of sense.

Bhakti differs from your Western idea of religion in that Bhakti admits no element of fear, no Being to appease or propitiate. There are even Bhaktas who worship God as their own child, so that there may remain no feeling even of awe or reverence. There can be no fear in true love, and so long as there is the least fear, Bhakti cannot even begin. In Bhakti there is no place for begging or bargaining with God. The idea of asking God for anything is sacrilege to a Bhakta. He will not pray for health or wealth or even to go to heaven.

One who wants to love God, to be a Bhakta, must make a bundle of all these desires and leave them outside the door and then enter. He who wants to enter the realms of light must make a bundle of all “shopkeeping” religion and cast it away before he can pass the gates. It is not that you don’t get what you pray for; you get everything, but it is low, a beggar’s religion. “Fool indeed is he, who, living on the banks of the Ganga, digs a little well for water. Fool indeed is the man who, coming to a mine of diamonds, begins to search for glass beads.” These prayers for health and wealth and material prosperity are not Bhakti. They are the lowest form of Karma. Bhakti is a higher thing. We are striving

to come into the presence of the King of kings. We cannot get there in a beggar's dress. If we want to enter the presence of an emperor, would we be admitted in a beggar's rags? Certainly not. The lackey would drive us out of the gates. This is the Emperor of emperors and never can we come before Him in a beggar's garb. Shopkeepers never have admission there, buying and selling will not do there at all. You read in the Bible that Jesus drove the buyers and sellers out of the temple.

So it goes without saying that the first task in becoming a Bhakta is to give up all desires of heaven and so on. Such a heaven would be like this place, this earth, only a little better. The Christian idea of heaven is a place of intensified enjoyment. How can that be God? All this desire to go to heaven is a desire for enjoyment. This has to be given up. The love of the Bhakta must be absolutely pure and unselfish, seeking nothing for itself either here or hereafter.

“Giving up the desire of pleasure and pain, gain or loss, worship God day and night; not a moment is to be lost in vain.”

“Giving up all other thoughts, the whole mind day and night worships God. Thus being worshipped day and night, He reveals Himself and makes His worshippers feel Him.”

Vivekananda. Complete Works. Vol. VII (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979) 82-84.

Religion is realization, and you must make the sharpest distinction between talk and realization. What you perceive in your soul is realization. Man has no idea of the Spirit, he has to think of it with the forms he has before him. He has to think of the blue skies, or the expansive fields, or the sea, or something huge. How else can you think of God? So what are you doing in reality? You are talking of omnipresence, and thinking of the sea. Is God the sea? A little more common sense is required....

We are by our present condition limited and bound to see God as man. If the buffalos want to worship God, they will see Him as a huge buffalo. If a fish wants to worship God, it will have to think of Him as a big fish. You and I, the buffalo, the fish, each represents so many different vessels. All these go to the sea to be filled with water according to the shape of each vessel. In each of these vessels is nothing but water. So with God. When men see Him, they see Him as a man, and the animals as animal—each according to his ideal. That is the only way you can see Him; you have to worship Him as man, because there is no other way out of it. Two classes of men do not worship God as man—the human brute who has no religion, and the Paramahansa (highest Yogi) who has gone beyond humanity, who has thrown off his mind and body and gone beyond the limits of nature. All nature has become his Self. He has neither mind nor body, and can worship God as God, as can a Jesus or a Buddha. They did not worship God as man....

Therefore it is absolutely necessary to worship God as man, and blessed are those races which have such a “God-man” to worship. Christians have such a God-man in Christ; therefore cling closely to Christ; never give up Christ. That is the natural way to see God; see God in man. All our ideas of God are concentrated there. The great limitation Christians have is that they do not heed other manifestations of God besides Christ. He was a manifestation of God; so was Buddha; so were some others, and there will be hundreds of others. Do not limit God anywhere. Pay all the reverence that you think is due to God, to Christ; that is the only worship we can have. God cannot be worshipped; He is the immanent Being of the universe. It is only to His manifestation as man that we can pray....

So we have to realize religion, and this realization of religion is a long process.

Vivekananda. Complete Works. Vol. IV (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979) 30-32; 35-38.

Religion is realization, and you must make the sharpest distinction between talk and realization. What you perceive in your soul is realization. Man has no idea of the Spirit, he has to think of it with the forms he has before him. He has to think of the blue skies, or the expansive fields, or the sea or something huge. How else can you think of God? So what are you doing in reality? You are talking of omnipresence, and thinking of the sea? A little more common sense is required. Nothing is so uncommon as common sense, the world is too full of talk. A true to this all this frothy argument of the world. We are by our present condition limited and bound to see God as man. If the buffaloes want to worship God, they will see Him as a huge buffalo. If a fish wants to worship God, it will have to think of him as a big fish. You and I, the buffalo, the fish, each represents so many different vessels. All these go to the sea to be filled with water according to the shape of each vessel. In each of these vessels is nothing but water. So with God. When men see Him, they see Him as man, and the animals as animal?each according to his ideal. That is the only way you can see Him; you have to worship Him as man, because there is no other way out of it. Two classes of men do not worship God as man—the human brute who has no religion, and the Paramahansa (highest Yogi) who has gone beyond humanity, who has thrown off his mind and body and has gone beyond the limits of nature. All nature has become his Self. He has neither mind nor body, and can worship God as God, as can a Jesus or a Buddha. They do not worship God as man. The other extreme is the human brute. You know how two extremes look alike. Similar is the case with the extreme of ignorance and the other extreme of knowledge; neither of these worships anybody. The extremely ignorant do not worship God, not being developed enough to feel the need for doing so. Those that have attained the highest knowledge also do not worship God. God never worships God. Between these two poles of existence, if anyone tells you he is not going to worship God as man, take care of him. He is an irresponsible talker, he is mistaken; his religion is for frothy thinkers, it is intellectual nonsense.

Therefore it is absolutely necessary to worship God as man, and blessed are those races which have such a “God-man” to worship. Christians have such a God-man in Christ. This is the natural way to see God; see God in man. All our ideas of God are concentrated there. The great limitation Christians have is that they do not heed other manifestations of God besides Christ. He was a manifestation of God; so was Buddha; so were some others, and there will be hundreds of others. Do not limit God anywhere. Pay all the reverence that you think is due to God to Christ; that is the only worship we can have. God cannot be worshipped; He is the immanent being of the universe. It is only to his manifestation as man that we can pray. It would be a good plan, when Christians pray, to say, “in the name of Christ.” It would be wise to stop praying to God, and only pray to Christ. God understands human failings and becomes a man to do good to humanity. “Whenever virtue subsides and immorality prevails, then I come to help mankind,” says Krishna. He also says, “Fools, not knowing that I, the Omnipotent and Omnipresent God of the universe, have taken this human form deride Me and think that cannot be.” Their minds have been clouded with demonical ignorance, so that they cannot see in Him the Lord of the universe. These great Incarnations of God are to be worshipped. Not only so, they alone can be worshipped; and on the days of their birth, and on the days when they went out of this world, we ought to pay more particular reverence to them. In worshipping Christ I would rather worship Him just as He desires; on the day of His birth I would rather worship him by fasting than by feasting?by praying. When these are thought of, these great ones they manifest themselves in our souls, and they make us like unto them. Our whole nature changes, and we become like them....

So we have to realize religion, and this realization of religion is a long process. When men hear of something very high and wonderful, they all think they will get that, and never

stop for a moment to consider that they will have to work their way up to it; they all want to jump; there. If it is the highest, we are for it. We never stop to consider whether we have the power, and the result is that we do not do anything. You cannot take a man with a pitchfork and push him up there; we all have to work up gradually. Therefore the first part of religion is Vaidhai Bhakti, the lower phase of worship.

What are these lower phases of worship? They are various. In order to attain the state where we can realize, we must pass through the concrete—just as you see children learn through the concrete first—and gradually come to the abstract. If you tell a baby that five times two is ten, it will not understand; but if you bring ten things and show how five times two is ten, it will understand. Religion is a long, slow process. We are all of us babies here; we may be old, and have studied all the books in the universe, but we are all spiritual babies. We have learnt the doctrines and dogmas, but realize nothing in our lives. We shall have to begin now in the concrete, through forms and words, prayers and ceremonies ; and of these concrete forms there will be thousands; one form need not be for everybody. Some may be helped by images, some may not. Some require an image outside, others one inside the brain. The man who puts it inside says, “I am a superior man, it is idolatry, I will fight it.” When a man puts an image in the form of a church or a temple, he thinks it is holy; but when it is in a human form, he objects to it!

So there are various forms of thought through which the mind shall take this concrete exercise; and then, step by step, we shall come to the abstract understanding, abstract realization. Again, the same form is not for everyone; there is one form that will suit you, another will suit somebody else, and so on. All forms, though leading to the same goal, may not be for all of us. Here is another mistake we generally make. My ideal does not suit you; and why should I force it on you? My fashion of building churches or reading hymns does not suit you; why should I force it on you? Go into the world and every fool will tell you that his form is the only right one, that every other form is diabolical, and he is the only chosen man ever born in the universe. But in fact, all these forms are good and helpful. Just as there are certain varieties in human nature, so it is necessary that there should be an equal number of forms in religion; and the more there are, the better for the world. If there are twenty forms of religion in the world, it is very good; if there are four hundred, so much the better?there will be the more to choose from. So we should rather be glad when the number of religions and religious ideas increase and multiply, because they will then include every man and help mankind more. Would to God that religions multiplied until every man had his own religion, quite separate from that of any other. This is the idea of Bhakti-Yoga.

The final idea is that my religion cannot be yours, or yours mine. Although the goal and the aim are the same, yet each one has to take a different road, according to the tendencies of his mind; and although these roads are various, they must all be true, because they lead to the same goal. It cannot be that one is true and the rest not. The choosing of one’s own road is called in the language of Bhakti, Ishta, the chosen way.

Swami Vivekananda. Complete Works. Vol. IV (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1978) 30-35.

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