

A Comparison of Bhakti (Devotion) and Jnana (Wisdom) Yoga

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[My presumed readership for this essay will be those interested in the old dialectic exchange between the paths of *wisdom* and *devotion*, a dialectic that repeatedly shows up in our Great Spiritual Traditions of East and West—such as between: 1) the *bhaktas* (devotees) and *jnanis* (intuitive wisdom sages) in Hindu Vedanta, 2) those drawn to Pure Land devotional Buddhism and those drawn to Ch’an/Zen intuitive Buddhism in China and Japan, 3) adherents of devotional *Yidam* practices and adherents of the *Dzogchen / Mahamudra* intuitive view in Tibetan Buddhism, or 4) the devotional theists or intuitive *panentheists* in the Western religious and mystical traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. May this essay be useful and clarifying!]

[Note: *This paper was one of my first essays in this field, written on Nov. 29, 1979 during my initial Fall quarter in the East-West Psychology M.A. program at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, then known as the Calif. Institute of Asian Studies (CIAS). It was, as I recall, a term paper for a class on Yoga Psychology taught by an American Hindu renunciate sannyasini. As with some other papers written during that graduate-school period that I’ve recently scanned and uploaded to this website, I’ve made a few grammar changes for readability and replaced underlinings with italics, also adding a bit of boldfacing for emphasis. I’ve also reinserted diacritical marks, including for proper names the first time they occur. In the interests of saving time and preserving the “authenticity” of this verbal sharing from that period, I’ve refrained from adding lots more possible quotes and insights and instead left the rest of the paper pretty much untouched to stand on its own.*]

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In the Indian spiritual tradition it is often said that there are "many paths to the mountaintop," Some of the Indian paths, however, would appear to be so radically different that one wonders if they actually do all lead to the summit. It might even be wondered whether they belong to the *same mountain*. This seems to be especially true in the case of *bhakti-mārga*, the path or way of liberating *devotion*, and *jñāna-mārga*, the path or way of liberating *knowledge*. Over the centuries fierce debate has gone on between the advocates of the two paths, each side claiming that its path is more appropriate spiritually, leading to a "higher" summit. Every so often, a great master comes along and claims that "both paths lead to the same goal," yet, while this claim makes everyone feel good about one another for a time, sooner or later the contest and debate between the two sides resumes, each side saying, "But our path is better."

If the paths are as radically different as they appear, and as they are claimed to be by their advocates, if they do in fact lead to different goals—one goal "higher" than the other—then the sincere seeker who is looking for a path on which to commit him-/herself in order to attain spiritual realization is faced with a big, big decision: which is the better path to take? This, in turn, brings up another problem: will the path chosen really suit one's *svadharma*, one's unique, individual way of evolving, one's spiritual vocation?

It is commonly thought that one should go with the path with which one feels "comfortable." In doing so, one will more readily attune to it and be able to resonate with it (to use a musical metaphor). On the other hand, some people would say that choosing the comfortable path merely reinforces a fixation within a groove of particular karmic tendencies, personality traits, and behavioral habits from which one would do far better to extricate oneself. According to this line of thinking, one should pick the path that emphasizes qualities and disciplines that are foreign to one's habitual, chronic orientation—for this would serve to balance one's energies and broaden one's awareness,

Again we must ask—which path to take? This would seem to be a thorny dilemma.

In this paper I propose that the two paths—*bhakti* and *jñāna*, devotion and wisdom—are, in essence, *not* as different as we have been led to believe by the advocates of each and by our *prima facie* impressions, and that, in fact, the truly spiritual way to Self-realization, or God-realization, involves *both* of them.

This is a glib assertion, and I would do well to go no further without first listing the supposed differences between the two. Devotion-oriented *bhakti* emphasizes the personal relation between the human and God, and is thus said to be dualistic (*dvaita*). Wisdom-oriented *jñāna* is said to emphasize an impersonal (or supra-personal!) realization of one's identity in/as God. *Jñāna* is therefore said to be non-dualistic (*advaita*). Accordingly, *bhakti* is regarded as the path of love, involving the "heart"; whereas *jñāna* is seen as the path of intellect, involving the "mind."

A common accusation is that, because of their orientations, *bhakti* can tend toward emotionalism, sentimentality, and gushiness, and that *jñāna* can tend toward intellectualism, aloofness, and dryness. Finally, it is said that *bhakti* is the "soft" and "easy" way, the comparatively "undisciplined" approach to the mountaintop, while *jñāna* is the "hard, steep climb," the "rigorous" and terribly "disciplined" approach.

The picture painted here of the two suggests them to be irreconcilable, mutually exclusive, polar opposites. And yet, a moment ago, I proposed that they are essentially *not* that very different. My reason for saying this is based upon an analysis of *how the attention is actually employed in the two approaches*.

The *attention* is that aspect of awareness which is a) *directable*, moveable from one input or mode of input to another (e.g., from one visual object to another or from a visual to an auditory object); b) *sustainable* over time (this is the span of attention); and c) capable of being *selectively, clearly and precisely focused* on a specific input.

For most of us, however, our attention is largely out of our control, moving—nay, jumping around restlessly and rambunctiously according to our egocentric desires and conditioned tendencies. We have many blocks which hinder our being able to *direct attention* to certain inputs; our restlessness and incessant pursuit of novel thrills preclude our being able to *sustain* attention; and our overall muddled-headedness and lack of intensity keep us from really *focusing* in a clear, precise, one-pointed way on a given input.

In both *bhakti* and *jñāna yoga*, as well as in *yoga* generally [e.g., the systems of Patañjali's *aṣṭāṅga yoga*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s way of selfless *karma-* or *seva-yoga*, etc.], there is a basic emphasis on taking responsibility for attention, learning to direct it in a certain way, learning to sustain it for long periods of time, and learning to focus selectively, clearly, and, precisely. The really important issue is onto *what* one is directing, sustaining, and focusing one's attention.

Here we could say that both *bhakti* and *jñāna* attend to no conventional object or input but rather attend intuitively to God. And the *difference* between them is that in theistic *bhakti* one usually attends to God as "outside" oneself as "other," while in intuitive *jñāna* one usually attends to God as "inside" oneself, indeed, as one's true Self. This would appear to be the incompatible difference between the two. And it is an issue over which heated argument has sometimes occurred in the past. The *bhaktas* claim that love for God is the highest state one can attain to. The *jñānis*, in turn, claim that this is dualistic, relativistic, that the "really highest" state goes beyond all dualisms to the non-dual, absolute state of pure, objectless awareness. To this the *bhaktas* reply that the *mokṣa* or *nirvikalpa samādhi* of the *jñānis* and *yogis* is just the first step towards a still "higher" mode or realm of being in which one relates to God in a "transcendental way" that cannot be conceived by the rational mind or pejoratively labeled as "dualistic" and "relativistic." This "beyond" state is paradoxical, not to be rationalized or judged.

In daily practice this difference gives rise to the stereotypical image of the *bhakta* as extroverted, attending lovingly, lavishly, almost *rājasically* (passionately, agitatedly) to God in some *form* as one of the divine persons (e.g., Lord Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Kālī—or one of the divine incarnations/*Avatāras*—Rāma and Kṛṣṇa being the most beloved figures of the classical periods of yore, with more recent supposed *Avatāras* including Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, Meher Bābā, Ānandamāyī Mā, and the two Sāī Bābās). By contrast, the corresponding stereotypical image of the *jñāni* is the introverted, austere, tranquil, almost *tamasic* yogi who is attending to the depths "within," trying to realize the formless identity which subsumes his own physical and mental forms (i.e., body, thoughts, emotions and all other forms) and which stands at the root or source of his being.

I would suggest here that, despite these apparently radical, irreconcilable differences in metaphysics and daily practice, the two are really oriented to the same goal—**both approaches are trying to find the true Self of all**. The *bhakta* is looking outside, trying to discover the true Self, the Lord, behind the bodies and personalities of the external world. The *jñāni* is looking within, endeavoring to discover the true Self behind his own body and personality. The *bhakta* is asking, like Ramakrishna (1836-86) querying the unknown Mother Kālī behind the form of the statue of her, "Who are You?" The *jñāni* is asking, à la Rāmaṇa Mahārṣi (1879-1950), "Who am I?"

While the terms "You" and "I" are apparently different, they actually have the **same referent: a subjective presence**. In other words, "You" is an "I" that appears externally, in disguise, to this "I"; if I knew "You" as "You" truly are, then I would know "You" as "I"—is this clear?

So, asking "Who are You, really?" is essentially no different from asking "Who am I, really?" in that both questions are yearning for the discovery of the truly real subjective Presence. This is obviously so for the *jñāni*. The reader may find it difficult to see this as also true of the *bhakta*, for it is usually thought that the *bhakta* is oriented towards an objective presence, an external form, a "not-I." But this, I would claim, is a superficial view. The true *bhakta* loves and worships Krishna (or whomever), not because He (Krishna) is a lovable *object*, but because he is a lovable *subjective presence*.

In the classic Vedānta devotion-cum-wisdom text *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna emphasizes to Arjuna that the latter love and devote himself to "Me"—the purely subjective presence, not "my body, my eyes, my hair, (etc.)." (Incidentally, Krishna's "Me" seems identical to Jesus? "I Am" which is emphasized so much in the New Testament.) Why is it that we often feel repulsion towards the corpse of a recently deceased loved one? After all, the objective body is still pretty much the same. The reason we are repelled by it is because it lacks the *subjective presence*—there is no "I" at home in it, animating and enlivening it, directing it. If the *bhakta* is loving and worshipping Lord Krishna only because of Krishna's charming smile and wavy hair or some other *object-ive* feature, then tradition considers this person *not* a true *bhakta*; he has merely transferred his petty human desires for aesthetically pleasing objects from one object—e.g., the figure of a beautiful woman—to another—Lord Krishna's aesthetically-pleasing *objective* features. The true *bhakta* opens up to the glorious subjective presence of God and unites or "*ones*" (makes one) himself within this presence. If he is stuck on some objective characteristic or form of God, then he is no further evolved than the *jñāni* who is stuck on the mere *thought* of the "true Self" and who has not totally transcended thoughts and realized the Self which is at the source of all thought.

Thus, the truly realized *bhakta* actually practices what tradition calls *parābhakti* or "supreme devotion," and is totally united with or "oned" (merged as one) into a *profound, absolutely subjective Presence* in which there is no sense of "himself" vis-à-vis the "other," no thought of his own persona (ego-mask) or self-image or thoughts, moods, or body. For the true *bhakta*, there is no limited "i"—there is only "You," "You are all." Similarly, the *jñāni* has realized (found himself identical to) the *profound, absolutely subjective Presence* that transcends his persona or ego-mask, self-image, thoughts, moods, and body; for the *jñāni* there is no limited "i" or "you," but only "I," "I am all."

Ontologically, as well as logically, these two statements—"You are all" and "I am all"—are equivalent. They both involve a transcendence of the relativistic, dualistic world and a **realization of an absolute state of subjective Presence**.

The funny thing is that when one truly attains to this state *it doesn't seem to matter whether the subjective presence is felt as "I" or as "You,"* as "my I" or as "your I"—for, in an absolute, non-relative state of *pure subjective presence*, how can there be any sense of *boundaries* separating "I" from "You"? When two lovers attain to a state of real oneness, what distinguishes them? For us humans, although our mental and emotional bodies can overlap and share the same "psychic space," we still have our physical bodies which seem different and separating because they are spatially distinct on the physical level (yet even here it is possible for a human to get the intuitive sense of being both bodies simultaneously). But for the true *bhakta* or *jñāni* who has long since transcended all consciousness of his physical body (as well as his emotional and thought bodies) and has become united in, and dissolved in, the divine Self, *what distin-*

guishes him from the pure Subjective Presence? To put it metaphorically, how does a drop of water distinguish itself as different from the surrounding, interpenetrating ocean which consists of identical stuff?

In short, then, when the *bhakta* and *jñāni* attain to perfect realization on their not-so-different paths, they discover the *same absolute state of God as the Self, as pure Subjective Presence*, and in this there is no longer a sense of being a thing-like "me" relating dualistically to a thing-like "you" or "other."

There are still some more false notions needing to be cleared up concerning the differences between the *bhakti-mārga* and *jñāna-mārga*. One of these is the notion that *bhakti* involves only love, and that *jñāna* involves only wisdom. I think this notion can be rejected outright upon simply observing that the *bhakta* could never really attain to loving union in/as the God-Self without a discriminating wisdom which directs him beyond the "false idols" and empty, objective images to the real, pure absolute subjective presence of the Beloved. (This is St. Augustine saying that he can't love God until he *knows* God, until he can discern the Creator from His creatures.) And, similarly, the *jñāni* could never penetrate through the many, many amazingly subtle veils of thought, each of which pretends to be "I," unless he were motivated by a tremendous yearning and love for the ultimately true, real Self which exists before/beyond all thoughts and which is his own long-forgotten and denied Identity. In other words, both paths require perfect love for the True Self, and a wisdom that can discriminate the Self from the not-Self (or, at best, the limited disguises of the Self).

What about the commonly-held notion that the *bhakta* operates out of the heart, whereas the *jñāni* operates out of the mind? Here I will not try to argue that each of them operates out of the opposite faculty, but that each ultimately operates *only out of the heart*. This is, of course, true of the genuine *bhakta* (the superficial *bhakta* is often quite mental and argumentative about his devotion), but, surprisingly, it also turns out to be true of the *jñāni* as well. Allow me to quote some material on this point: in many of the earliest *Upaniṣads*, one frequently hears that the sages (i.e., the *jñānis* or "knowers of *Brahman*"), meditate on the Imperishable One in "the *ākāśa* [space or "aether"] of their hearts." In several places in the *Upaniṣads* we also hear, "Those who meditate on Him [*Brahman*, the Divine Reality] with their minds undistracted and fixed in the heart know Him; they become immortal,"[2] In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna: "The heart is the residence of the Supreme. It is the unmoved and Prime mover, while all other individual consciousness moves, as it were, mounted on the mechanism of the heart,"[3] In Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, it is written that awareness of the nature of the mind comes by virtue of doing *samyāma* on the heart, thus implying that the heart is ontologically superior to, and more real than, the mind.

We might wish to write all of this off as mere metaphor, the poetic ramblings of the ancients, except for the fact that several modern-era masters of evident spiritual authority—and masters of *jñāna* at that—claim that, indeed, if the omnipresent God or Self is to be dwelling in any particular region more powerfully, then He, this One, is in the Heart, not the heart-*cakra* or energy center associated with loving, interconnected relationships, but the Heart of Being-Awareness-Bliss Absolute.

Ramana Maharshi, the most famous *jñāni* of modern times, was most explicit about this point: "The Self is the Heart [*Hṛdaya*]. The Heart is Self-luminous. Light arises from the Heart and reaches the brain, which is the seat of the mind. The world is seen with the mind, that is, by the reflected light of the Self. It is perceived with aid of the mind. When the mind is illumined it is aware of the world. When it is not itself so illumined, it is not aware of the world. If the mind is turned in towards the source of light, objective knowledge ceases and Self alone shines forth as the Heart."[5]

"The seat of realization is the Heart.[6]... The Heart is the only reality. The mind is only a transient phase. To remain as one's Self is to enter the Heart.[7]... The whole cosmos is contained in one pinhole in the Heart.[8]... The Heart is not physical.... The Heart is the center from which everything springs. Because you see the world, the body and so on, it said that there is a center for these, which called the Heart. When you are in the Heart, the Heart is known to be neither the center nor the circumference. There is nothing else. Whose center could it be?[9]... Heart is only another name for the Self."[10]

You might wonder about the Maharshi's view of the relationship between *bhakti* and *jñāna*. Here it is: "*Bhakti* and Self Enquiry [the name for his *jñāna yoga*] are one and the same. The Self of the advaitins is the God of the Bhaktas." [11]

And here I might also quote Sathya Sai Baba, worshipped by millions as an Avatar for the present age [though, since 2000, revealed to be quite a flawed personality, not nearly as pure a vehicle for the Divine as the former Shirdi Sai Baba (d.1918)]: "Really, there is only the Heart. [12]... Heart is the seat. God is installed there. [13]... The *Ātma* is everywhere, but for the purpose of sitting in meditation, the life principle can be considered as being ten inches above the navel and at the center of the chest. An 'inch' in this measurement is the width of the thumb at the first joint." [14]

That is to say, the *Ātma*-Self is intuited in the region Maharshi described as the Heart.

With regard to the accusation that *bhakti*-devotion tends toward emotionalism, sentimentality, and gushiness, and that *jñāna*-wisdom tends toward intellectualism, aloofness, and dryness, it seems to me that this is true *only* of those who have *not really become genuine bhaktas or jnanis*. The great *bhaktas* and *jñānis* always seem perfectly balanced between the two extremes, showing qualities of each path. Ramakrishna, a real "bhakta's bhakta" after the way he acted in relation to Mother Kali and, later, Lord Krishna, nevertheless mastered *jñāna yoga* in one day under Tota Puri. In later years, he would speak authoritatively on *advaita* and formlessness, effectively "out-*jñāna*-ing" the *jñāni*-types who came to visit him or study under him. He once stated "The Knowledge of God and the Love of God are ultimately one. There is no difference between pure Knowledge and pure Love." [15] Again: "Let a *Bhakta* pray to God and it will be given to him to realize the Impersonal God, *Brahman*, in *samādhi* and thus reach the goal of *jñāna yoga* also." [16]

On the other side, look at two great *jñānis*—Ramana Maharshi and J. Krishnamurti. Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi was often composing devotional poetry and hymns to the sacred hill Arunachala as the embodiment of Lord Śiva. [17] When accusingly asked, "You are an advaitin. How do you then address God as a separate Being?" Maharshi answered, "The devotee, God, and the hymns are all the Self." [18]

J. Krishnamurti [1895-1986] in his early days was extremely devoted to the "ascended Masters," and even wrote a book instructing people on proper devotion to them. [19] After his major breakthrough into Self-realization (the Intelligence of Choiceless Awareness), he used to speak ardently of seeing and also being united with his "Beloved." [20] To this day he still emphasizes the need for right relationship, and the subject of "love" is one of his favorite topics of discussion.

Finally, with regard to the assertion that *bhakti* is the "undisciplined," "soft and easy" way, while *jñāna* is the disciplined one, the "hard, steep climb," we have to say, first, that they are *both* highly disciplined in the sense of taking responsibility for the use of attention, as I explained earlier, and they are both ardently dedicated to realization of God, the Self, the Absolute Subjective Presence. Now whether one path is easier than the other does appear to be a matter of legitimate "debate," if you will. The Maharshi and other *jñānis*, of course, advocate *jñāna* as actually the easier of the two, but that is probably because *jñāna* was, in fact the path which lead to their attainment.

Teachers like Ramakrishna and the older and more recent Sai Babas say that, in this age of the *Kali Yuga*, the way of *bhakti* is easier because people are not as in touch with the pure Self that transcends body and mind, they are more attached to objects. [21]

Having said all of this, I think I can safely reiterate the idea that *bhakti-mārga* and *jñāna-mārga* are essentially *not* different in the truly important aspects of spiritual realization: *realizing the profoundly subject-ive Divine Presence* and realizing this "most real Reality" *in the Heart*. Furthermore, the individual undergoing spiritual realization is sooner or later likely going to be involved in aspects of *both* the *bhakti* and *jñāna* approaches that are apparently so "different."

Now with regard to the choice of which path one should select if one is just beginning, (actually, we are *always* making a fresh start, a new beginning), which path is more appropriate for one's *svadharma* or spiritual vocation, all I can say is to direct, sustain, and focus attention on the Heart, open up to the sense of the pure Awareness-Self, of absolute, infinite, subjective presence, *and discover* what happens.

Namaste.

Notes

1. See Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan (Ed. & Tr.), The Principal Upanisads, NY: Harper & Bros., 1953, *passim*; also, Swami Vimalananda (Tr.), Mahānarayana Upanishad, Madras: Advaita Ashrama, 1908, i.3.
2. Mahānarayana Upanishad, i.11, and other Upanishads, *passim*.
3. Bhagavad Gita (passage translated by Rammurti Mishra), xviii.61.
4. Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, iii.35.
5. Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi (Tiruvannamalai, S. India: Sri Ramanasramam, 1972), p. 94.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 229-30.
12. John Hislop (Ed.), Conversations with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sri Sathya Sai Baba Society of America, 1978), p. 70.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
15. Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (Madras: Advaita Ashrama, 1934), p. 148.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
17. Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, *op. cit.*, see, for example, p. 125.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
19. J. Krishnamurti (“Alcyone”), At the Feet of the Master (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1910).
20. See Mary Lutyens, Krishnamurti: The Years of Awakening (NY: Avon, 1975), p. 267-8.
21. See Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, *op. cit.*, p. 151; Conversations with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, p.171.