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.]

** 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 (avaita). 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 (ad-vaita). 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 asṭānga 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 Viśnu, Śiva, Śakti, Kāli—or one of the divine incarnations/Avatāras—Rāma and Krṣṇa 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 Kāli 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 object-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 "himselH" 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 jñāna 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 Brahma"), 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 consciousnesses move, 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 [Hrdaya]. 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 jnānis. 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 Siva.[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-marga and jñāna-marga 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.), Mahanarayana Upanishad, Madras: Advaita Ashrama, 1908, i.3.
2. Mahanarayana Upanishad, i.11, and other Upanishads, passim.
4. Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, iii.35.
6. Ibid., p. 119.
8. Ibid., p. 217.
9. Ibid., p. 229.
10. Ibid., p. 378.
13. Ibid., p. 124,
16. Ibid., p. 151.
17. Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, op. cit., see, for example, p. 125.
18. Ibid., p. 228.
21. See Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, op. cit., p. 151; Conversations with Bhagavan Sri Sathyai Sai Baba, p.171.