

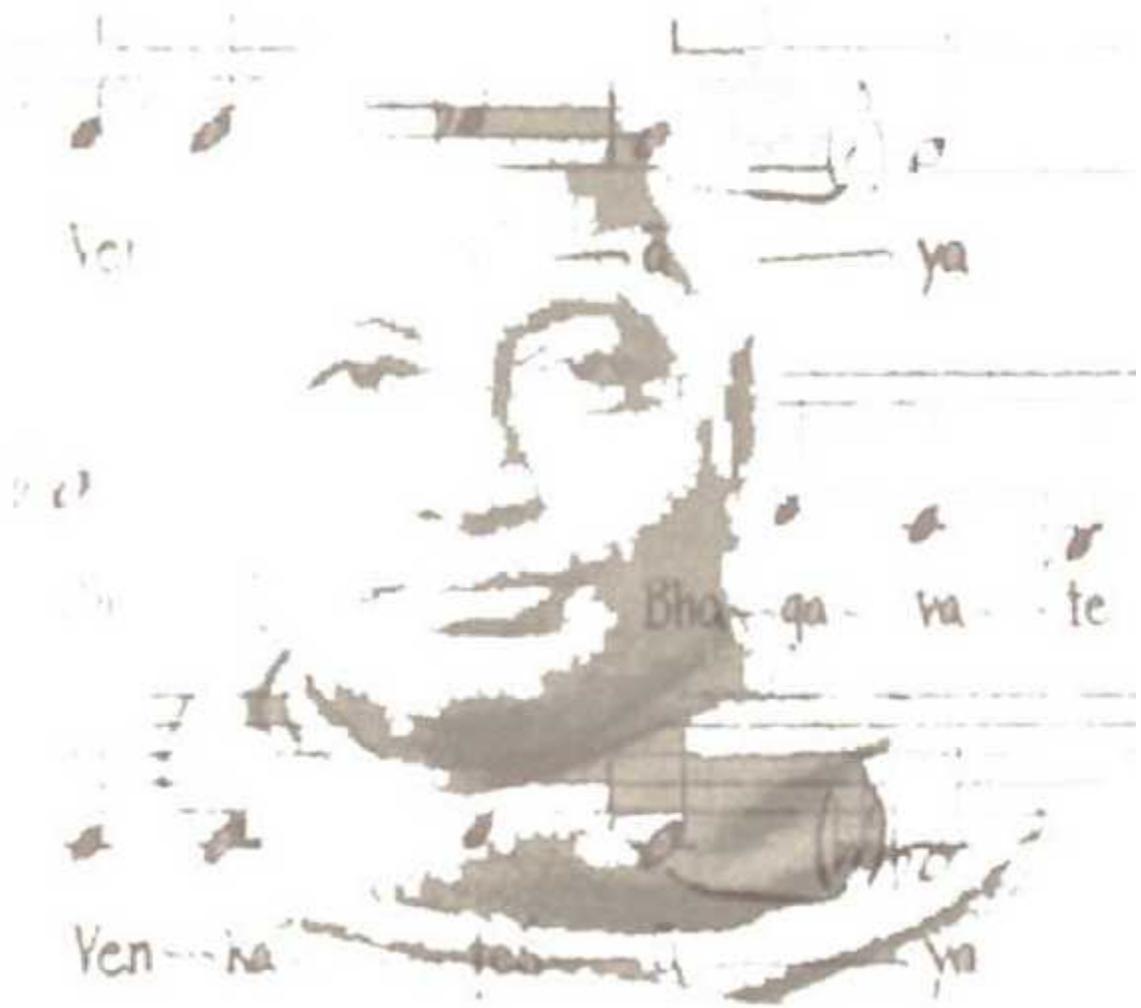
BHAKTI YOGA

[THE PATH OF GOD-LOVE]

BY

SWAMI VENKATESANANDA





Om Namah Venkatesaya
Om Namah Shivaya

Bhakti yoga

Swami Venkatesananda

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Bhakti Yoga

This is the second booklet in the series of Yoga books, which embodies in itself the notes kept by some students of lectures on Bhakti delivered in South Africa, and Sri Gurudev's "Categories in Bhakti Yoga".

Whereas my other book "Gospel of Love-Narada Bhakti Sutras" approached the subject from the point of a lover of God, this booklet is meant more for the seeker who wants to "understand" the subject.

This fulfils another of Sri Gurudev's commands and is humbly offered at His Divine Feet.

Swami Venkatesananda

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Offering

My Gurudev My Gurudev is Eternal. This Eternal Spirit embodies Itself again and again in order to enlighten our Path to God-realisation. The body changes. It comes into being and disappears. But not the Spirit.

Born on the 8th September, 1887, Sri Swami Sivananda dedicated His entire life to the service of Man. It is of this one Person that I can boldly declare that He had not a day to Himself, not a thought for Himself. Right from His childhood everything He had was every one's property, and He was always looking for its claimants! As a child, sweetmeats; as a young man, His energy; as a doctor, His services and His knowledge; as a mendicant Swami, all His faculties; as a sage, His supreme wisdom; as a Yogi, the fruits of His labours; as the President of the Divine Life Society, the entire institution - His very life, He laid at the feet of Man and claimed nothing in return.

As a young man, He levelled the different castes in His own home town; as a doctor, He revolutionised the relation between doctor and patient, making the former a servant of the latter whom the doctor should regard as God-in-disguise; as a doctor-Swami, He broke down the walls of pride and false respect that surrounded the Swami order, by falling at the feet of laymen-devotees; as the World Teacher (Jagadguru) He demolished the granite walls that separate peoples of different religions. Gurudev is Love. Unity is Sivananda, and vice versa.

During the seventeen years I had the supreme blessing of living at His Feet, this is all that I saw and learnt. Love is God, Premaiva Satyam.

May that Love, my Gurudev, dwell in our hearts for ever and ever!

Swami Venkatesananda

Kirtans to commence satsang

Om Om Om

Jaya Ganesha Jaya Ganesha Jaya Ganesha Pahi Mam
Sri Ganesha Sri Ganesha Sri Ganesha Raksha Mam
Jaya Sarasvati Jaya Sarasvati Jaya Sarasvati Pahi Mam
Sri Sarasvati Sri Sarasvati Sri Sarasvati Raksha Mam

Sivananda Sivananda Sivananda Pahi Mam
Sivananda Sivananda Sivananda Raksha Mam

Anjaneya Anjaneya Anjaneya Pahi Mam
Hanumanta Hanumanta Hanumanta Raksha Mam

Om Jesus Om Jesus Om Jesus
Om Om Allah Om Allah Om Allah
Om Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare

Ganesha is the Deity who protects us against failure and troubles.

Sarasvati is the Goddess of Wisdom.

Sivananda is my Guru.

Anjaneya or Hanumanta is the name of the Hero of Ramayana : the patron god of gymnasts and devotees.

Jesus, Rama and Krishna are incarnations of God - and Allah is a Name of God.

1. Work Without Worship is Waste

The Path of Selfless but Dynamic Action, in a spirit of worshipful contemplation of the Omnipresent God, Karma Yoga, is useless and perhaps impossible, too! without love of God.

There are those who proclaim that the end and aim of life is service of humanity; to them if there is a God, He is manifest as humanity, and is naught else. (The second, negative aspect is important; for the true Karma Yogi, too, accepts the view that God is immanent in humanity.) This "godless" Karma Yoga results, no doubt, in intense social service and humanitarianism. There is a wonderful sense of duty and dedication; there is rigorous moral discipline, and the cultivation (for the purpose of demonstration, though) of goodness.

Such selflessness creates a vacuum. Unless "God" is filled into it, the same "self" enters the heart through another avenue in another garb! What the psychologists call "fixations" develop, and the social worker who has learnt to sacrifice personal interests, selfish desires, and perhaps even family affections, gets involved in social, political or ideological limitations with which his new "self" identifies itself. New forms of vanity (vanity of even humility or meekness !), subtle hatred of those who do not toe one's own line, and worldly possessions and possessiveness as necessary elements (this is how the self re-interprets the returning luxuries now!), though one is "certain I am not attached to them!", creep in - thus defeating the very purpose of Karma Yoga. In its extreme form, this sort of Karma Yoga can lead us to "Hitlerism", a fanatic zeal spreading like a deadly contagion, bringing undivinity and destruction in its train.

Karma Yoga without God-love is useless. Even if it did not lead to such disastrous results, selfless service (e.g., of doctors and nurses in hospitals, and the social workers whom one meets in scores and hundreds, discussing in their own luxurious drawing rooms or at a cocktail party, the best way to ameliorate the conditions of the poor!), will not liberate us, unless accompanied by devotion to God. So long as the feeling "I do this service" remains, so long will such action continue to produce reaction; and the unliberated soul is bound to reap the harvest. Good : the social worker will certainly have a good time here, and in heaven, and in the next birth. But that is not the spirit or the aim of Karma Yoga. It is to warn us against this kind of work only does the Veda sternly proclaim "Not by works, not by progeny nor by wealth, but by renunciation alone is Immortality attained." Devotionless social service is useless. It does not liberate the social worker, and the service, of course, does not relieve anyone permanently of the conditions it purports to ameliorate.

When we find a place for God in our heart, then our hands and our head know how to function. Otherwise, they grope in utter darkness. Bhagavatham makes this rather dramatic statement: "A duty well performed is but labour lost, if it fails to generate love for the stories of the "Lord" (I. 2/8). Unless we have one or the other of the following attitudes to the world, we cannot do selfless service

(Nishkamya Karma Yoga) :

- (a) Recognise the universe as a manifestation of our own Self dwelling in all - which is Jnana Yoga,
- (b) Feel that God dwells in all-personalised God manifest in all these names and forms - which is Bhakti Yoga.

A true Karma Yogi therefore must lean towards devotion and knowledge! We have discussed above the popular notions about Karma Yoga. In fact, true Karma Yoga is impossible without devotion to God. "Yoga" is union with God, and without devotion to Him, and inward communion with Him, even the noblest action can only be Karma, and not Karma Yoga. Karma Yoga without devotion to God is a misnomer. Hence, the wonderful commandment of Lord Krishna in the Gita : "Therefore, at all times remember Me and do your duty" (VIII. 7).

It is for this reason that the Rishi Avirhotra describes worship of God itself as Karma Yoga! (Vide Srimad Bhagavatham XI/3-47 et seq.) This should be supplemented by the performance of the Veda - enjoined duties without desire for the Veda - promised reward.

That which does not lead us to God-realisation is not Yoga. The different Paths present different views of the Truth or God, lead us along different practices, but ultimately to the same Goal. Some say nothing exists but God; some say that the world is an illusory and relative reality; some say that a part of God has been transformed into this world; always, however, the common factor is undeniably that Truth is One and God is Real.

2. God Exists

God exists; and undeniably so! He existed before the "denier" was born, He exists as the very soul of the denier, and He will continue to exist in spite of the vehement declarations of the denier. Against Whom does this denier preach? He is God. God is. When a man says : "God does not exist," he only confesses his inability to feel or realise His Presence. In your own room, there vibrate the songs and speeches broadcast over the radio stations of the world. But, you are unable to hear them, because (like the receiving set) you are not tuned in. Similarly, His Living Presence surrounds you: if you tune in, you will know.

To you, when you are asleep, someone sitting close to you, does not exist! The moment you wake up, you realise that he not only exists, but is quite close to you. That is our relationship with God. We are asleep and dreaming the world-phenomena; we are not aware of God. When we wake up from this slumber, we shall realise Him-and know that He is very close to us, He is our very Self.

Sometimes we have to be rudely shaken out of this slumber. Here is an interesting story from Life magazine (Vol.34, No.1, page 98). James A. Michener, concluding his article on "Adventures of Men and Their Ships", (after describing an adventure in stormy sea) says : "I did not believe we could survive, but we did. And as our boat roared aloft toward the infinite sky, with tons of water cascading across the deck, I experienced a moment of exaltation such as I had never known before and may never know again. It was man and the sea, and for a brief moment I understood the relationship. Now that I am safe ashore, I have quite forgotten what it was like. All that I can recall is a terrifying speed, a darkness, a great rush of water, and a sense of God." In the stormy sea of life, such an experience is occasionally granted to man; but soon man "quite forgets" it and sails towards another.

Bhakti or Bhakti Yoga is the Path of God-Love, which keeps us constantly awake, with our face turned towards God, with an uninterrupted experience of the sense of God.

3. The Qualified Aspirant

Who is best qualified to walk this Path? He who feels "I am a drop, God is the ocean", "I am a spark, God is the fire". To him, as to the seeker who took up Karma Yoga, God is real, and the soul also is real (to begin with, distinct from God). But, the Bhakta and the Karma Yogi have a slightly different view of the world, whereas to the Karma Yogi, the world is a real manifestation of God, the devotee is not prepared to go all-out in such belief! The Bhakta is more of an introvert than the Karma Yogi; he does recognise that God is immanent in the world, but he also feels that there is a certain external glitter in the world that is illusory and, what is worse, deluding, of which he is to beware.

It is in this extremely delicate blend that we see the synthesis of paradoxes; Bhakti at once provides the basis for Karma Yoga and the point of departure from it! It is very true to say that Bhakti and Karma Yoga (love of God and service of humanity) are the two sides of the coin of Yoga, and that one cannot exist without the other. As we shall see, even the Bhakta cannot desist from selflessly serving humanity; but, the Bhakta is vigilant to avoid (as the Karma Yogi, too, should) the Mayaic aspect of "the world", and seeks through the practices, which we shall presently describe, the underlying substratum which is God. Hence, Bhakti has been described as the fulfilment of Karma Yoga.

To the student of Jnana Yoga, Maya is illusion and total delusion, to be vigorously denied. To the Bhakta, too, Maya is the deluding potency - but of the Lord, who is hidden in and by Maya! He does not run away from Maya, nor does he surrender himself to her. He neither accepts the world (in its appearance), nor rejects it off hand. He feels that the world is an appearance indwelt by the Lord. What exists when the names and forms are removed is God. He is devoted to God.

In order to arrive at the awareness of this "God-in-and-above-world", the Bhakta disciplines himself through diverse spiritual practices, to pierce the veil of appearance, and to perceive God. Idol worship and prayer are parts of such discipline. In and through the idol, in and through the name and form that he is, he should perceive God, severely excluding the appearance! If he succeeds, he will succeed in perceiving God in and through the world, too.

4. The Source-Scriptures

God-love is not an intellectual pastime nor a speculative philosophy. It is an affair of the heart, so real and powerful, that the limited powers of the argumentative intellect, or speculative understanding, fail to comprehend it. It is an irresistible force that perpetually attracts the individual towards God.

Hence, less value is placed on rationalising Bhakti than on feeding it more and more with the fuel of stories, legends and even myths concerning the Lord would sustain faith and devotion at high-pressure.

There are a great number of scriptures that deal with Bhakti in this fashion. They are mostly in the form of stories concerning the incarnational descent and life of the Lord. The hero is personalised God: the heroine is the greatest devotee of God. Radha and Krishna are one such divine pair. Krishna represents the magnetic power of God, i.e., the love of God for humanity. Krishna was attractive and drew everyone to Himself. Around Him has grown an enormous amount of devotional literature. He is always pictured as being, surrounded by the Gopis, who were devotees (women) extremely fond of Krishna. They were dwellers of heaven or the Kingdom of God. They were souls who had, by many lives of spiritual practices, attained proximity to the Lord, and who were thus on the last lap of their pilgrimage to union with Him. They had been sent down to the earth for a definite purpose, viz., that of exemplifying the characteristics of self-forgetful love of God. Amongst the devotees of Krishna was Radha, who had a position even superior to the Gopis. This girl was not among those who had come down from heaven, but was an ordinary mortal who had surrendered herself completely to Him, and earned for herself an enviable place among the celestials. She is the ideal devotee.

Srimad Bhagavatham, which is the main source-book on Bhakti, and which describes the Divine Play of the Lord (particularly the life of Lord Krishna), does not fail to provide the richest treat of speculative philosophy, rounding off every such abstruse philosophical discourse, with the stunning declaration that all that is the Play of the Lord who alone is the Reality.

Even the intellectually and analytically minded Indian does not bother himself with the questions concerning the historicity or fictitious character of these personalities. He might accept them as historical entities or, he might (without vehemently denying the historicity) regard them as personified spiritual truths and stories concerning them allegorical or esoteric. The wise Indian realises that (1) any attempt at establishing or denying their historicity is ridiculous and (2) their value lies in their power to mould the present world by their "life and teachings". The Indian Teacher therefore has adopted a unique attitude here - he accepts the Personality and His Life on faith, but critically analyses the Teachings. The latter have an eternal, moral value. Whether Sri Krishna lived or not, the Gita does! What is the sense in seeking proof of Krishna? Even a father's identity can be conclusively established only on the mother's testimony. Krishna's

historicity has to be accepted on the testimony of His devotees like Mira, etc., who have "seen" Him. After all, what is "scientific proof"? Is it not, again, the conjecture of another individual like you, based often on a skeleton, a skull or a scroll ? How does it deserve more faith than the Purana? John Lewis puts it beautifully in his "The Religions of the World Made Simple": "But legend after all is poetic history, and may teach us more about the Buddha than the bare facts of his life." Sri Suka is the author of the great scripture Bhagavatham, which has few rivals even in ancient Sanskrit lore.

Sri Suka was born-perfect, a sage of the highest type. Yet, here is a typical statement one often meets within the Bhagavatham : "The Lord is not so easily accessible in this world to embodied beings, or even to men of wisdom, as for those possessed of devotion to Him." (X.9/21). He puts these words into the mouth of Brahma, the Creator : "In the case of those who, neglecting devotion to You, which is the fountain head of blessings, take pains to attain mere spiritual enlightenment, such enlightenment ultimately proves to be no more than a source of exertion alone (sheer waste of effort) as is the exertion of those who pound mere husk." (X.14/4).

Srimad Bhagavatham provides the reason, too, while at the same time simplifying the evolution of God love, thus : "By resorting to holy places of pilgrimage, one obtains the privilege of waiting on exalted souls, and thereby successively develops a desire for hearing the stories of Bhagavan Sri Krishna, faith in, and a relish for such stories. Sri Krishna is a disinterested friend of the virtuous, and His praises sanctify those who listen to or sing them. He abides in the heart of those who hear His stories, and uproots the evil propensities of their mind. When the evil propensities are well-nigh eradicated through the constant service of His devotees (or the daily study of Srimad Bhagavata), there wells up abiding, devotion to the Lord of excellent fame. The mind is then freed from passions, such as lust and greed, which have their root in Rajas and Tamas, and established in Sattva, attains purity. In this way, when one is rid of all worldly attachment through loving devotion to the Lord, and the mind is filled with delight, one realises the truth relating to God as a matter of course. The moment a man sees God as his very self the knot of ignorance in his heart, is broken asunder, all his doubts are dispersed, and the entire stock of his Karmas gets liquidated. That is why, with utmost delight, the wise constantly practise devotion to Lord Vasudeva, which purifies the soul."

Yet, there are a few "text books of God-love" in India, giving a definition of love and the categories in Bhakti Yoga. The chief among them are the Bhakti Sutras, expounded by or attributed to two great sages, Narada and Sandilya. Narada is one of the greatest devotees of the Lord. He is a Deva-Rishi (divine or celestial sage), and is so fond of God, and of singing His glories, that even now he constantly moves from planet to planet, disseminating the glories of God and His Name. It is said that Saint Tyagaraja, who lived in the last century, actually met sage Narada.

5. What is Bhakti

Narada answers the question, "What is Bhakti or God-Love" in a laconic way, "It is supreme love for That."

"That" stands for God, Reality, the Ultimate Truth - whatever our concept of That Reality may be. Note the catholicity of Hinduism! John Lewis pays genuine tribute to Hinduism when he says, "It might be thought that these divergent philosophies might lead to violent controversies, ex-communication and persecution, as such differences have in other religions : but this is not so ... The Hindus do not believe that one interpretation of a universal truth is necessarily right, so that the others must necessarily be wrong. It does not matter what name is given to "That", or what religion one follows. If love for That is supreme, it is Bhakti.

This is not achieved overnight, though there are saints who assert that it is impossible for us not to love God. According to them, even love flowing towards earthly objects is in truth a manifestation of our love to the Omnipresent God, perverted and misdirected! We are ignorant of its real nature. In and through these people and objects we really love God. That is what sage Yajnavalkya told his wife Maitreyi : "Not indeed are these dear for the love of them, but for the love of the Self are these dear." But love of objects is finite and limited. God who is Infinite is "jealous", as the Holy Bible says, and hence does not permit us to get lost in finite love. Through various experiences and disillusionment, pain, separation and death, He leads us away from the finite love to the Infinite.

The ordinary human being has extrovert vision, and is not able to turn it within, so that love which ought to flow towards the God within (not only within oneself, but within all beings), externalises itself, and flows towards external forms (appearances) in the world. This externalisation is inherent in Nature, according to Katha Upanishad, and it is only a rare hero who is able to reverse the process, wishing to attain Immortality.

It is this extroversion that is the root-cause of human suffering. God-love is constantly pulling us up, towards Him : and our extrovert nature persists in dragging us down. The resulting tension tears our personality which suffers agony.

The true devotee actually suffers in pleasure! In sensual enjoyment, when the mind is externalised, the devotee suffers the anguish known as Viraha. This is compared to the anguish felt by the wife when the husband is away, though she may be surrounded by her own parents and other objects of her childhood (so, deluded and outworn) love. This concept of Viraha is one of the most important in Bhakti Yoga. It is Viraha that provides us with a sure sign of true love of God.

The devotee is eager to prevent this extroversion of mind which causes the anguish. Hence, "He who seeks liberation should eschew with one's mind, body

and senses the company of those who have taken to a married life and should never allow his senses to move out. Living alone in seclusion, he should concentrate his mind on the Infinite Lord and betake himself to pious soul devoted to Him, if at all company is desired." (Bhagavatham IX, 7/51). The devotee, therefore, prays, "If there be attachment in our heart, let it be for the loving devotees of the Lord, and on no account for dwelling, wife, children, wealth and kinsmen. For he who is contented with the necessities of life and self possessed, attains blessedness at no distant date, but no he who loves the objects of the senses." (Bhagavatham V. 18/10).

Yet, this Viraha should be felt. A heart that has not felt it, is not awake to the love of God! For, as we saw, love of sense-objects is an innate human tendency, and the man who is complacent and has never suffered Viraha, is obviously pleased with his own worldly life! The devotee would later avoid the external cause of this anguish; but he who has never felt it, is ignorant of the internal cause, viz., God-Love. Hence, the devotee loves this anguish.

This Viraha, once it has manifested in one's heart, might grow more and more intense and subtle! By stages, sensual enjoyment, desire for it, thought of it, company of those who think of it, all company, forgetfulness of God, interruption in God-consciousness - all these will cause Viraha. As the grosser external causes are avoided, subtler causes will cause the anguish; and here is the great truth, this ever-growing anguish itself is the best sign of progress in Bhakti.

For it is this anguish that leads the devotee to the highest spiritual experience. This spiritual truth illustrated in the interesting (though often misunderstood and much-maligned) story of the Rasa-Krida, or Lord Krishna's Play with the Gopis. The love-intoxicated Gopis, to whom all worldly pleasures minus His Living Presence are unbearably painful, hear His call and rush to meet Him. The anguish is gone in His physical proximity. But the Lord knew that it had no business to be put aside, until the ultimate spiritual union had been attained! He suddenly disappears from the midst of the Gopis. The anguish returns a thousand fold intensified! Deliriously raving on account of the Love of Krishna, the Gopis search for Him. The anguish grows still. "Imitating the dalliances and graceful movements of Sri Krishna, the women, who were His darlings and felt identified with Him, and whose frames had turned into replicas of their beloved Lord in point of gait, smiles, glances and speech, said to one another, "Indeed, I am Sri Krishna." (Bhagavatham X.30-3). It is clear from this that it is this Viraha that leads the devotee into the Inner Chamber or Upper Room of direct God-realisation or identity with Him.

This is devotion of the highest type. It is variously known as "Parama Prema" (supreme love), "Sadhya Bhakti" (that devotion which is the goal), "Mukhya Bhakti" (important or primary devotion), or "Ragatmika Bhakti" (devotion characterised by extreme love of God) or Para Bhakti (superior love).

No one can reach this stage overnight, as Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad

Gita (VII. 19), "After many births, the man of wisdom takes refuge in Me." And it will not do in Yoga to cheat ourselves into a state of wishful thinking that we have arrived at the goal! The presence or absence of Viraha will act as the infallible touchstone to guide us !

6. Ladder of Love

There is no reason to despair, either. The compassionate sages have constructed a ladder of Love, to help us climb step by step, and reach the goal or union with God. These together also represent devotion in its different aspects or degrees. We should beware of mocking at the devotee ascending this ladder. He, too, is a devotee of God, as great in his own way as the greatest of devotees. A beam of sunlight is not all of it, but not different from it. A cup of sea-water is not the whole of sea-water, but is as salty to taste.

The steps on the ladder, or the "lower form" devotion, is called Vaidhi Bhakti or Gauna Bhakti or Sadhana Bhakti. The devotee at this stage has to be very careful, and so he observes rules and is bound by them, hence his devotion is called Vaidhi Bhakti (devotio governed by rules). His devotion has got distinct characteristics and qualities, and therefore it is called Gauna Bhakti. It is the means to the end, which is Supreme Love, and hence it is known as Sadhana Bhakti. It is also known as Apra (not Supreme) Bhakti.

The devotee wakes up early in the morning, immediately starts loudly chanting the Lord's Names. There are specific verses to be recited at this time. Some of them express great grief at having wasted precious time sleep, etc.! From then on, however, his time is packed with rituals and rituals, all aimed at keeping his mind occupied with thoughts about God.

He is over-preoccupied with rules and regulations. He would not enter the Puja room or meditation room without first having a bath; else, he would incur "the wrath of God". Even if this is false superstition, it compels purity! He would not eat before ceremonially offering the food to the Lord; and all this must be done even if someone in the house is dying! It is interesting that the sin attached to a neglect of these rituals enables the devotee to rise above minor bodily afflictions and, forgetting them, engage himself in religious activities. These unwelcome intruders on his life (disease, etc.) get healed naturally, but he attributes the healing to God's Grace, which further strengthens his faith and devotion, which, in turn, intensify his powers of endurance and self-transcendence, which are manifested by him in still greater religious activity.

Unless we learn thus to discipline ourselves in this rigorous, steady, though gradual manner, we cannot rise to the higher stages of devotion. However childish and superstitious these steps may appear, it is unwise and foolish to condemn or to by-pass them; in the life of most of us, the latter course would lead us nowhere. These rules and rituals are the steps which must be deliberately and methodically ascended.

The devotee has a number of moral codes to govern his conduct. Narada gives a number of do's and don'ts in his Bhakti Sutras. The devotee must keep away from lust and gold (the two highly powerful forces that contribute to forgetfulness of God - true forgetfulness, which is characterised by the absence of Viraha or

remorse even). He must not associate himself with atheists, and must vigilantly avoid all worldly company. He is conscious that he is a toddler, and cannot afford to take chances.

At this stage, the devotee feels the presence of God only in His images, in the temples, in his Guru and in objects specifically associated with Him (e.g., the cow, the holy peepul or basil, sacred rivers). Evil does exist, and very much so in coming into contact with objects he regards undivine - people, literature, food, and such other objects. Incidentally, this is the problem which one who combines Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga (of the "lower" type) often has to face : and extraordinary discrimination is necessary to blend the two opposite viewpoints - the Karma Yogi should rise above pairs of opposites, but the Bhakta avoids the one and clings to the other.

Srimad Bhagavatham (XI.27) even gives elaborate instructions on the method of idol worship, the objects to be used, etc. In India (as in the churches of certain Christian sects, Buddhist sects, etc.) there exists an enormous volume of literature on this aspect of Bhakti.

Lord Kapila, in instructing His Mother Devahuti on Devotion, makes this threefold classification of "qualified" devotion : "A man who is given to anger, and views Me as distinct from himself, and who practises devotion to Me with a mind full of violence, hypocrisy and jealousy, is a devotee of Tamasic (dull) type. He who worships me through an image etc., as distinct from himself, with a view to acquiring objects of senses, fame and power, is a devotee of the Rajasic (dynamic, passionate) type. And he who adores Me as distinct from himself, aiming at the eradication of his sins, or with the intention of offering his actions to the Supreme, or again with the feeling that it is his duty to worship Me, is a devotee of the Sattvic (pure) type." It will not be out of place here to mention that Lord Kapila continues to give the characteristic of the higher form of Bhakti in the following words : "The uninterrupted flow of the mind-stream towards Me, dwelling in the heart of all, like that of the waters of the Ganga towards the ocean, at the mere mention of My virtues, combined with motiveless and unremitting love to Me, the Supreme Person, is spoken of as the distinguishing character of unqualified Bhakti Yoga." (Bhagavatham III. 29/8-12).

7. How Shall I Love God

That brings us to the next important and vital factor in all Yoga, particularly in Bhakti Yoga, viz., Bhava (Bhava is, "the state of one's inner being"). It is not so much what the devotee does that matters but the Bhava with which it is done. Hence, Sri Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gita (IX. 26) that even if the devotee merely offers a flower, a leaf, a fruit or a little water - if it is offered with devotion - He accepts it.

Bhakti stands or falls, depending on how strong this cornerstone of Bhava is. Bhava is inner attitude, feeling, faith, conviction, visualisation and many other kindred elements well mixed together, and it is very difficult to describe. It has to be felt. When you say, "I am", you are expressing a Bhava. Bhava does not demand proof, even as you will not want to prove to yourself "I am a human being" and will not touch your hindparts if someone said, "Ah, there, you are growing a tail, you dog!" Bhava is the intense feeling that, for, instance a mother has for her little baby, indescribable, a-logical, but all-powerful.

The sages who laid the path of devotion were great psychologists. They studied Man and noted the object towards which everyone's heart flows out in love. In every heart there is love. That love is directed towards someone falling under one or the other of the following categories : (i) unemotional or impersonal love or goodwill towards the man-in-the-street, (ii) love towards the: master, (iii) friendship, (iv) maternal affection, and (v) the lover-beloved relationship. The sages, therefore,, taught that these very loves, emotions or Bhavas could be transferred, transmuted, sublimated and divinised by directing them towards God, thus

Santa Bhava (a): the attitude of self-controlled and serene love or goodwill. Some regard this as the, highest and cite the great Jnani Bhishma as the exemplar. It is the attitude of a devotee who has, so to say, realised, God. Some others, however, regard it as the lowest of love, comparing it with the attitude we have towards the man-in-the-street, passive, unemotional and therefore peaceful (Santa). Chaitanya regards it as intellectual love - where the true love has not begun to manifest and operate! We shall not indulge in judging which is right. But it is interesting to note however, that even among devotees of Lord Jesus, these two (emotional and intellectual) types have prevailed. A Christian seeker (Mrs. Gerda Straubb) writes : "In Europe the Bhakti cult in Christianity is very noticeable. The northern races are mostly Protestant peoples who are ruled more by their head than by their heart (generally speaking, of course), not at all emotional by nature, more naturally reserved and not showing too much of their feelings. The Latin races on the other hand - especially the Italians and Spaniards (almost exclusively Roman Catholic), are very ardent and highly emotional, ruled completely by the heart. Their need is most beautifully answered by Roman Catholicism. While in Protestantism there is very little, the emotional aspect of worship almost completely done away with, and thus it gives little scope to people of emotional nature."

Dasya Bhava (b): the attitude of a good servant towards the master he loves and serves. It is not the attitude of the factory worker! But, it is the attitude of a domestic servant, for instance, who would often stake his life to save his master's. The devotee regards God as his master, and sees God in his own master. Hanuman is cited as the exemplar of this Bhava.

Sakhya Bhava (c): is the attitude of true friendship. "A friend in need". This is characterised by unselfishness and desirelessness, and also by great joy at the prospect of union and re-union. The devotee who adopts this Bhava regards God as his friend, does not pray for gifts, and looks forward to meeting Him in meditation, worship, etc. He loves his friends, too, for the sake of God, thus sublimating friendship into spiritual relationship. Arjuna had such an attitude of friendship towards Sri Krishna. In recent times, one of the Nayanar (South Indian) saints had such an attitude; Lord Siva was his "friend"!

Vatsalya Bhava (d): is parental (mostly maternal) affection for the Lord. Regard Him as your child. The unique feature here is that even the possibility of a selfishly motivated approach is avoided. The mother does not expect anything from the child and her love is, therefore, absolutely selfless. Regard all your children as the manifestations of God and love them for His sake, thus sublimating human relationship which can at times, lead to great misery.

Madhurya Bhava (e): is the lover-beloved relationship. It is regarded as the highest and the most difficult of cultivation, towards an intangible Object of Love like God. The devotee becomes God's beloved. God is the supreme lover. There is total self-surrender. The Gopis had this sort of love. It is not a physical attraction but a spiritual yearning. Lord Gauranga had this Bhava towards the Lord. Saint Mira of North India and Sri Andal of the South also entertained this supreme Bhava towards the Lord, and lived in actual communion with Him all their life. This is the culmination of devotion and involves total surrender. It leads to union with Him.

You have experienced these love-relationships in ordinary life. The worldly object has to be replaced by God, and the worldly object has to be sublimated into divine. Suppressing emotions is a double loss. The emotion itself is loss of energy - and more energy is lost in suppressing it. Devotion and selfless service utilise the first part itself and there is no loss at all! The energy generated by the emotion is utilised in service and the factor that generated the energy is turned towards God. Thus, the devotee sublimates the love of his heart in these five ways. God Himself is regarded as the master, friend, child and lover - and the corresponding human relationship is also sublimated. What we call "love" in worldly parlance is passion or infatuation when the magic wand of God-love touches it, it is at once transmuted into divine love. The woman who has inordinate attachment for her only child loves God as her child, and God in her child. Gradually the infatuation wears out and she truly loves her child, for the sake of God. Even if there is physical loss here, she is no longer tormented, for the

God in the child is Immortal. These five Bhavas effect a twofold miracle : (a) we are always thinking of God; and (b) the worldly attachment is cut and the torture machine is made inoperative.

It is necessary to remind ourselves of the difference between "kalpana" (imagination) and "bhavana" (visualisation or innermost feeling with conviction). Bhavana must enable us to experience His Living Presence in that towards which it is directed. Service rendered with Bhava reaches Him. Worship performed with Bhava pleases Him. The idol must not be felt as stone or wood, but as His Living Presence. It is then possible to extend the Bhava to other objects and eventually to everything. This is possible only for the Yogi or to one who has united his inner self with God. Hence, Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita : "Na cha ayuktasya bhavana" (The man who has not achieved Yoga cannot have the right Bhava). Hence it is that even Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras insists that the sacred Pranava, Om, should be repeated with Bhavana. In the Gita, Lord Krishna commands (XVIII. 62) us to resort to God with all the Bhavas : regarding God as our father, mother, friend, relative and lover, and loving these earthly relations for the sake of the Indwelling Presence which is unmistakably experienced as a fruit of the practice of Yoga.

It is needless to emphasise that this Bhava is reflected in physical behaviour and certain physical practices augment it. We know it is true in human relationship. The mother cannot long profess to love her child without touching it, cuddling it and suckling it, as the proper manifestations of her Bhava. Thus we see in the case of those devotees who have treated the Lord as their child, actually doing all these to the idol which, as the Bhava is intensified and perfected, "comes to life" and accepts such services. Sri Andal actually got wedded to Lord Ranganatha !

8. Nine Principal Practices

To help us grow in Bhava, we have been given elaborate instructions in our scriptures. These practices have been ridiculed by fools - their opinions have no validity. The seeker who walks the Path of God-Love realises the value of these devotional practices.

Young Prahlada's "discourse" to his father gives the standard ninefold devotional practice: "(i) To hear the names, praises and stories of the Lord, (ii) to chant them, (iii) to remember Him, (iv) to wait upon Him, (v) to offer worship to and (vi) to salute Him, (vii) to dedicate one's actions to or to serve Him, (viii) to cultivate His friendship, and (ix) to offer oneself in total self-surrender to Him. If devotion marked by these nine features is practised by a man as something already offered direct to Lord Vishnu, I reckon that to be the highest learning." (Bhagavatham, VII. 5/23. 24.)

The same Prahlada adds a few more practices in his discourse to his classmates, recounting the instructions sage Narada had given his mother: "Of the thousands of devices helpful to the destruction of the seed of ignorance, this alone has been recommended by the Lord, viz., the practice of virtues through which love may be duly and easily developed for the Almighty Lord. This can be accomplished by serving one's preceptor and by offering to him with devotion all that is got by one, nay, through the fellowship of pious devotees and worship of God, through reverence for stories of the Lord, by celebrating His virtues and exploits, through contemplation on His lotus feet and through the sight and worship of His images and so on. One should duly gratify living beings with their objects of desire under the conviction that the almighty Lord is present in all created beings. In this way devotion to the all-powerful Lord Vasudeva is practised by those who have subdued the six senses, devotion through which one fully develops love for Him." (Bhagavatham VII. 7/29-33.)

Various other authorities have given other practices but all of them are included in the above nine, as explained in the above two paragraphs. For instance, some saints add pilgrimage to the list, which is obviously included when Prahlada recommends 'fellowship of devotees' and 'sight and worship of His images', for which one has occasional need to visit holy places of pilgrimage. Study of holy books (specially those that treat of His Avatars or Descents) is included in 'to hear and chant the names, praises and stories of the Lord.'

A little reflection over these devotional practices will convince one that they thoroughly integrate the devotee's personality and entirely divinise it. No loophole is left for Maya to enter, and no quarters are given for ignorance to abide. The result is called "supreme love of God" or Para Bhakti. But it is non-different from the goal attained by other paths. It is supreme love of God which the wisest of men has and which he directs to His Omnipresence in loving worship in action (service), aided by God-vision.

In the initial stages, the intellect is overfed with stories of His glories. This is not meant to prove or convince oneself or another - but primarily to give the intellect, too, some food for thought, and secondly to let the conscious mind form a vivid image of God to pass on to the unconscious mind which will eventually realise it within itself. Sri Suka puts these sublime words into the mouths of the supreme devotees of the Lord, the Gopis: "Munificent are those men who extensively recite on earth Your nectar-like story, which is life-giving to the afflicted, has been celebrated by the wise and eradicates sins, which is auspicious to hear and is most soothing." (Bhagavatham X. 31/9). Sri Rukmini (the Principal Consort of Sri Krishna), too, gives a graphic description of the effect of listening to His glories, thus : "Having heard, O immortal Lord, most handsome in all the worlds, of your excellences - which, entering deep into the heart through the apertures of the ears, dispel the agony of 'the hearers ... " (Bhagavatham, X. 52/37). And, this is the vital truth in regard to this story-telling and listening : the spiritual truths (which are unpalatable to the outgoing sensual mind and senses) surreptitiously enter into heart via the two apertures which are always open (the ears) and safe from the destructive intrusion of the intellect, they (the spiritual truths winged by the breezy sweetness of lyrics) rob the heart of the pains inherent in life. The intellect would have rejected them, if they had aspired to ascend into it as concept or precept. But as stories they gain access to the emotion-base of the human personality (the heart), unhampered by the intellect which disinterestedly looks on, "Ah, it is just a story, let the heart revel in it if it needs a diversion!" But, lo, these stories are divinities in play-actors' garb, and when they thus enter the heart, they manifest their divine potency and rob the heart of its ageless sorrow. Now, the heart has the upper-hand, as it were, and the intellect is compelled to either keep silent or to rationalise and justify the situation!

Audience-participation is extolled by the present-day Western ministers of religion. This was an integral part of Bhakti Yoga, and it was known as Kirtanam. In its restricted sense it meant singing of the Lord's Names in chorus, led by a devotee, and this is a highly inspiring practice. Even where a learned devotee narrates the glories of the Lord, he resorts to this singing of the Lord's Name, and even if he does not do this throughout the discourse, he does use certain set formulae (e.g., Namah Parvatee Pathaye, to which the audience responds "tiara tiara Mahadeva") to sustain the receptive mood of the audience. Singing the glories of the Lord and singing His Names are regarded as the greatest and sufficient Sadhana in this age to achieve the end, viz., God realisation, which demanded much more strenuous efforts in the previous ages.

"Remembering Him" (Smarana) has been interpreted to mean "taking His Name constantly" - Nama-Smarana, which our Master stresses above all else. This practice is known in one word as Japa. Lord Krishna describes it as His own manifestations (Gita : X. 25). Sri Sukadeva says in Srimad Bhagavatham (XII. 3/52) : "What is attained in the Satya Yuga by one contemplating on Lord Vishnu, in Treta by one who propitiates Him through sacrifices, and in Dwaparathrough worship, is attained in the Kali age by chanting the Name and singing the praises of Sri Hari."

"Constant Nama-smarana" is possible if we diligently practise in this manner. As soon as we wake up we should sit in the bed itself for a few minutes and repeat the Mantra (the Name of God) with our breath, repeating it once during inhalation and once during exhalation. Not a moment should be wasted. We can then have a wash and again continue Japa. Thus, the mind must be taught to associate breathing with repetition of His Name. A "conditional reflex" is formed and the mind automatically repeats Mantra constantly. Of course, persistent practice for a few months is very necessary. Even during the day we should deliberately look within every hour or so and ensure that the Mantra repetition goes on in the mind.

Raja Yogis emphasise the mystic side of the Mantras, but suffice it to say here that every Name of the Lord is "filled with countless potencies" in the words of our Master.

People want to have explanations! Why is this God called "Rama" and the other "Krishna"? Ask back, "Why is this part of the globe called India, why is that called China?" It is true that the Names of God have their own significant meanings - but the task of a devotee is to approach God through the heart. He likes a particular aspect, form and name, and he uses them. Do not the scientists name even cyclones ?

Again, we should not forget that it is the Bhava which is most important in this practice, too. The devotee repeating the Mantra should entertain the confirmed conviction that He Whose Name I am mentally "calling out" will and does respond even more surely and fruitfully than a friend or relative whose name I use to draw his attention to me. The more vivid the visualisation of the Name, the Form and the divine aspect of the Lord, the surer and the sooner will be the realisation of God. Many saints and Yogis have realised God almost exclusively through Japa. Sri Narayandas Paramahansa who has revealed that he has had a vision of Lord Narayana has given the Sadhana in clear and minute details, and assures us that one who practises it will see God.

This is possible when the conscious mind is quieted and the unconscious mind is divinised, both of which are quickly and easily achieved by Japa. The very simple monotony of the repetition of a simple formula stills the mind (though it should not dull the mind). A parable illustrates this process. A little boy who had served a great Yogi obtained from the latter temporary possession of a ghost. The ghost agreed to serve the boy on condition that he would keep it ever busy. All his desires gratified with amazing speed, the boy found it an impossible task to find work for the ghost. The Yogi imparted a great secret : the boy, acting upon it, asked the ghost to go up and down a pillar "till I ask you to stop" - and this endless task silenced the ghost. The ghost in us is the desire-ridden mind. By continually throwing up desires, it effectively prevents us even from enjoying the objects we have! Beautiful houses hardly see their owners in daylight. Expensive furniture remain young and new while their buyers grow old and weary toiling for

the polish. Hard-earned human life passes unnoticed, for the ghost at our elbow will not let us pause and think, and we die slaves of our servants! This mind ghost can be conquered only by letting it go up and down the pillar of God's Name. When it is quiet, peacefully busy repeating His Name, we have the necessary time and mood to review our life, enrich our soul and enjoy the manifold blessings of the Lord.

There are three kinds of Japa : (i) Vaikhari, in which the Mantra or Name is uttered aloud, (ii) Upamsu, in which the Mantra is lisped, and (iii) Manasic, in which the repetition is mental. Each succeeding kind is said to be more efficacious than the preceding one.

"Loud repetition is ten times better than the ritual called yajna. Lispering is a hundred times better, and mental Japa a thousand times."

The Yogi Sri Narayandas Paramahansa recommends all three of these by stages! This is to avoid falling a prey to self-complacency and mistaking lethargy, sleep and phantasy for mental Japa. He even prescribes several years' practice of each of the three types, before going on to the next, assuring us that soon the Manasic Japa will become so automatic that our mind will unconsciously repeat the Mantra even during sleep!

The popular Mantras like "Om Namah Shivaya (Om, Salutations to Lord Siva) will, through the law of autosuggestion, remove the ego which is our worst enemy. It is noteworthy that the Mantra does not use the first person singular "I salute" to prevent the ego asserting itself in a different form!

The characteristic that distinguished Japa from Kirtan is that while the essence of the latter is loud singing (often with clapping of hands and dancing) the former is more effective when it is mental, accompanied by the meditative mood. Again, whereas Kirtan is of three kinds, viz., (i) Ekanta, where the devotee is alone, (ii) Sankirtan, in which many people participate, and, (iii) Akhanda Kirtan, in which there is continuous singing, without a break, Japa is best done alone, particularly if one is accustomed to even lisping the Mantra.

Lord Gouranga, the greatest of modern Bhaktas, who is in fact regarded as an incarnation of the Lord, gives us in his "Sikshashtakam" the following four qualifications if we wish to sing His Name and derive its fullest benefits : (a) Be humbler than the blade of grass (it is said that certain types of grass thrive on being trodden!), (b) Be more forbearing and enduring than the tree (specially the sandal-tree which gives of its fragrance to the very man who fells it anal even more to the one who grinds and pulverises it!), (c) Seek no fame for yourself, and (d) Honour all. "Such a one should constantly sing the Lord's Name", says Gouranga. Obviously, when the desires are renounced and when vanity is given up the restlessness of the mind ceases and in the tranquil 'heart and mind" when the Love of God constructs the Shrine of Japa and Kirtan, the devotee soon enjoys unbroken communion with Him.

Lord Gouranga advocated singing the Lord's Names and dancing without shame and fear. Our Master used to say that shyness is the greatest obstacle to Bhakti. We should have the courage (though not arrogance) to admit that we are His devotees, and not behave like the village school-master who was drawing water from a well and who, when a rich pupil approached him and asked him what he was doing, replied : "Oh, nothing, I was just looking into this well." The poor man lost his water-pot !

Our scriptures demand that we scrupulously avoid the following ten offences against the Divine Name (i) Vilification of saints and devotees, (ii) Considering one Name to be superior to another, (iii) Irreverence towards one's preceptor (Guru), (iv) Slighting the scriptures, (v) Rationalising scriptural glorification of Japa and Kirtan as mere hyperbole meant to encourage aspirants, (vi) Commission of sins under cover of the Name, (vii) Regarding that the chanting of the Name is equal to other virtues or mortifications like fasting, charity, sacrifice, etc., practised without chanting the Name, (viii) Recommending Japa and Kirtan to those who have no faith in it, who are of sinful temperament and are not ready for it, (ix) Want of genuine and whole-hearted Love for the Name, even after hearing of its glory, and (x) Persistence of the notions of 'I' and 'mine' and attachment to objects of sensual enjoyment. It will be noticed that all these more or less hinge on the single factor FAITH which is most important in Japa, and Kirtan. Even psychologists recognise the value of faith of which Harold Sherman says, in his "Your Key to Happiness": "(Faith) is the 'developing fluid' of your mind, the invisible chemical that unites your present achievement with your dreamed of future attainment." So, if your present Japa and Kirtan are to be crowned with God-realisation in the near future, you should fill your heart with this developing fluid of faith. This faith should be manifested in your daily conduct by the avoidance of these ten transgressions.

Worship of the Lord first takes the form of ritualistic adoration of the Lord enshrined in temples and idols, is then extended to Guru and saints, and by stages to the whole of mankind. In the later stages, it means and includes service of humanity.

We shall presently deal with idol worship. As a preliminary hint to that discussion, it is good to bear in mind that if I want to touch your body, I must use a part of my body (not my mind) - if I want to understand your thought-process, I must use my mind and not my legs - if I want to attain spiritual unity with you, I must use my spirit. We are embodied beings and when we want to worship God, we use Idols and Icons. These gross forms are necessary for us, gross beings. But a wise worshipper will, at the same time, use his spiritual insight to effect spiritual communion with the Indwelling Spirit, too.

Worship of God is as old as Time, symbolised in the Sun-God. Hermann Ferdinand Helmholtz said in a lecture at Heidelberg in 1871 : "All life and all motion on our earth is, with a few exceptions, kept up by a single force, that of

the sun's rays, which bring us light and heat. Need we wonder if to our forefathers of the Aryan race in India and Persia, the Sun appeared as the fittest symbol of the Deity? They were right in regarding it as the giver of all life-as the ultimate source of almost all that has happened on earth."

Worship of Indra, Varuna, Agni, etc., is derisively called "Worship of Nature-Spirits". It is worship of Nature, all right, though not of spirits! But it is worship of God's Nature. God Himself cannot be directly worshipped, because He is transcendental. Hence, the worship of His Nature, as the Visible Manifestations of the Lord Himself. This is true even of our relationship. When I touch you, I do not touch your soul, your 'I' or your psyche! I only touch the outermost cover of your soul - the body at the most. Even so, when we worship, His manifestations, we "touch" Him, worship Him. The Vedas went to the root of creation, of His Nature, and perceived that the elements constituted the inner layer of His externalised Nature. Therefore, they emphasised that "God is One and He is called variously - Indra, Varuna, Agni, etc. - by the wise." We shall deal with this aspect further when we discuss idol worship.

Waiting upon Him, has taken several forms depending upon the temperament of the individual. But, obviously, it involves physical and tangible service. There have been devotees who have taken the "Him" to mean the Lord enshrined in the temples and, therefore, waiting upon Him to mean rendering various services in the temple. Rationalists have ridiculed this - philosophers have treated such devotees as spiritual children! Result : temples stink today, with no one to sweep and clean them - and they have assumed a haunted appearance, because this eagerness to "wait upon the Lord enshrined in the temples has violently been uprooted by good-intentioned guides to hell. True : the human body is His abode and shrine, too, and waiting upon Him ought also to mean service of humanity. But sweeping the temples and waiting upon the Lord enshrined there are equally effective and where such service fits into an individual's temperament, nothing else can replace it. Rationalists ought ever to remember the warning of Lord Krishna : "Do not unsettle anyone's faith", for "a man's being is based on his faith". The idolator, cannot immediately see God in fellowman, and if you snatch the idol from his hands, he will serve mammon instead!

Salutation to Him can similarly have two aspects (i) saluting or prostrating to the symbols expressly and ostensibly associated with God, and (ii) prostrating to all beings in which God is enshrined. Prostration itself is a symbol of self-surrender : and this Sadhana, highly extolled by our Master, can generate and sustain humility which is vital in Yoga, especially on the Path of God Love. Sri Krishna asks Uddhava to prostrate himself even to donkeys, seeing Him in them. The Bhava is all important. Even the common practice of greeting one another with palms joined in front of the chest can bring harmony and blessedness into our lives if accompanied by the right Bhava, viz., "right and left, the opposites, come together in the middle and there is peace", "we are one in God who is seated in our hearts", and "I greet and salute that God who is seated in your heart". Lord Kapila thus instructs his mother Devahuti : "Treating all living beings with great

respect under the belief that it is the almighty Lord who has entered their body as the Inner Controller of the soul tenanting it, one should mentally bow to them." Our Master broke all convention and insisted that even Swamis should salute all, repeating the Lord's Name each time "Om Namō Narāyanaya", "Om Namah Shivaya" or "Hari Om" - and this is a wonderfully simple Sadhana for devotees of the Lord to help them remember Him constantly.

The devotee dedicates all his actions to the Lord, because He is the master and the devotee is but a humbleservant of the Lord and instrument. At this stage of the ninefold devotional practice the devotee is able effectively to combine service of humanity and worship, identifying one with the other. In fact, service with the attitude that the Lord is the Master and the devotee a servant and instrument, is the inevitable corollary to the practice of constant remembrance of God. The devotee who is steeped in this constant remembrance will not be idle - he cannot but do His Will - and since the remembrance is unbroken even during such action it is automatically directed towards Him, dedicated to Him, and its source in Him is also spontaneously detected and discerned.

If these seven steps have been purposefully ascended, the devotee will now find himself in a complex situation! It is part of mysticism, but there is no mystery about it. Is this not true even of a faithful domestic servant, that after a long period of faithful service he becomes part and parcel of the Master's household, the Master's friend and close relative? The devotee realises that God is his real and perhaps only Friend. He had His will done: through the devotee, not because he has something to gain, but because such service purified and ennobled the servant!

It does not end there! All these culminate in the last and final step of this ninefold devotion, which is total self-surrender and mystic union with the Lord as His beloved. The purified heart is helplessly (!) drawn to the Indweller! The iron with its rust removed flies to the magnet. This is not the function of the ego, let us never forget that. The iron does not surrender itself to the magnet, but the magnet makes it impossible for it to stay away! It is an inexpressible event. He who says, "I have completely surrendered myself to the Lord," has not even understood the mystery. He should engage himself in the preliminary ones of this ninefold devotional practice. At the conclusion of his daily devotional practices, he should mentally surrender himself to God. If we are sincere, God Himself will fulfil this surrender and accept us. At that stage, in accordance with His Gracious Promise in the Bhagavad Gita, He will rid us of all our sins and sinful tendencies. This final and total purification does not take place before the surrender is complete - nor can the devotee afford to renounce "all his Dharmas" (vide Gita XVIII. 66) prematurely. So long as the devotee is only trying to surrender, i.e., daily makes an attempt to say that he has surrendered himself to God, he has not achieved it! But, the Indweller knows the devotee's faith and devotion, and makes him His property! Now comes the acid test of self-surrender. The devotee is God's property. He may do what He wills with it. If there is even a trace of impurity, He may put it through the most terrible type of fire-ordeal, for purification. How

does the devotee react to it? On the answer to this question depends the sincerity of the surrender. If the devotee, in sincere and total surrender, joyously accepts everything as His Will, he is at once liberated from all sins, as promised by the Lord. Sin is only in the individual personality - when it is offered to God in whom there is no evil and no sin, it is instantly purified. The tiny and filthy rivulet flowing into the pure and holy Ganga, becomes Ganga, pure and holy.

In order to reach this culminating experience, the devotee combines all the preliminary practices to form his daily time-table. He meditates upon God, talks about Him, listens to His glories, chants or sings His Name, visits and serves the temples, and alternates all these until he reaches the stage of total self-surrender. All these combined keep the flame of God-love bright always.

9. The Mainstay of God-love

The devotee's entire life is built around God and God-love. Even a moment's heedlessness might lead him astray and result in hard-earned devotion being wiped out! It is not and will never be totally lost - but it is quite simple to understand that if the blacksmith leaves the iron out in the sun and rain, during the process of removing the rust, it might become more rusty again. More labour! More Sadhana.

Christian mystics were often adamant in their insistence that the devotee (the Bride of Christ) should have nothing to do with the world. It is interesting to note that the Indian, too, classified devotion as 1. Vyabhi-charini (similar to the conduct of an immoral woman) and 2. Avyabhi-charini (similar to the conduct of an extremely chaste woman). Whilst the Indian is not anxious to imprison the devotee in cloistered seclusion, Sri Krishna, Narada and even the Ajatavadin (a sage who held the no-creation theory) Vasishtha command the devotee or the seeker to resort to Satsang or company of the wise or kindred spirits. Lord Krishna sings the glories of Satsanga, during His discourse on Yoga, to Uddhava. He gives a list of all the practices commonly resorted to by seekers and concludes "None of these can capture Me as Satsanga alone can - and which puts an end to all attachments." "For thanks to the fellowship of saints", He continues, "people of all classes and castes, even demons, ascended to My realm in different ages." "Although they had never studied the scriptural texts, had never waited upon the most exalted ones, had not observed any sacred vows or practised any austerities, they attained to Me through the fellowship of saints", concludes Sri Krishna. (Bhagavatham, XI:12/1-7).

Though the following comparison and inference may be regarded as blasphemous, it is good to feel that even modern psychology recognises the power that blossoms as Satsanga in a divine field. Dr. Abraham Sperling, discussing mob psychology in his book "Psychology Made Simple", says : " ... the excited members of a mob may soon find themselves performing acts that none would do alone or by himself". Give it a devotional slant, you realise the magic of Satsanga. People sing and dance on the public roads when in company of devotees, but will not do alone. Satsanga promotes devotion wonderfully.

Brihannaradiya Purana says : "The sun, by his rays, removes the external darkness during day-time. But holy men constantly remove the inner darkness by their luminous words of wisdom." Sri Rup Goswami regards Satsanga (company of the wise) as the fundamental spiritual practice. He says in his Bhaktirasamritasindhu: "First there is faith and earnestness. This leads man to the company of saints. Then devotional, practices, Kirtan or singing of the Lord's Names and Glories. All evils are immediately removed. Then there is single-minded devotion, which leads to an intense taste for the love of God. The devotee then develops intense longing for the Lord, which leads to Bhava or wholehearted inner devotional attitude. Then arises Prema or supreme devotion to the Lord. These are the stages in the development of devotion in the heart of the seekers."

The famous story of rogue Ratnakar who later became Sage Valmiki reminds us that even the initial "faith and earnestness" are generated in the heart of the layman by the contact of holy men. Rup Goswami declares that all the other steps of God-Love follow company of holy men.

10. Descent of God

All the above devotional practices involve "concrete" manifestations of God. It is here that, the Puranas (myths or legends) enter into our (religious) life, giving us a number of interesting stories concerning the descent of God into the world of Man. The concept of Avatara is vital to Indian philosophy and even more so to the Bhakti-cult or the Path of God-love. It has been accepted explicitly by several occidental philosophical systems, while others allude to it as a possibility or desirability. Lucy Freeman and Marvin Small say in "The Story of Psychoanalysis" : "Freud while some may object to Freud's name being used here, others may justify it, for it was he who, in the west, took science to the world inside Man, responded to an unconscious need in himself and all other men for some way to keep the world from destroying itself ... Thus there was this need and there came a man to fill it." Similar statements are frequently made with reference to other great leaders and revolutionaries and reformers. India is not ashamed of them and venerates them as veritable manifestations of God. No one demands proofs of the divine origin of these "incarnations of God", for we firmly believe that it is not given to all to recognise them - even the nature of Lord Jesus was recognised by few in his own time, - and perhaps even now. Sri Suka says in the Bhagavatham (X. 12/11), referring to the cowherd-boys' privilege of playing with the Lord: "Possessed of a store of merit, earned by them, they sported thus with Sri Krishna who combines in Himself absolute existence, unmixed bliss and pure consciousness in the eyes of the wise, the supreme Deity in the eyes of those who have accepted His service, and a human infant in the eyes of those who are deluded by Maya."

The Puranas give us countless such incarnational forms of God. There is nothing puzzling about the Absolute and Infinite manifesting Itself in a finite form. Such manifestation does not exhaust Its Infinity. When invisible water-vapour in the atmosphere condenses into a cloud and assumes a form, the quantity of moisture is not reduced in any way. Even if the wind gathers into a cyclone (almost visible !), the sum-total of air around the earth is not diminished. Even so, though God may manifest Himself, or descend into this world in a thousand places, He will yet remain Infinite and Absolute.

The purpose of such incarnation or descent of God has thus been stated in the Bhagavad Gita: "Whenever there is decline of righteousness and seeming rise of evil, I incarnate Myself to protect the good, destroy the evil, and to re-establish Dharma." Hence, the Indian is ready, eager and advised to worship his own Guru (who promotes the good in the disciples and removes the evil in them) as an incarnation of God. Even a devotee of the Lord is asked by Vedanta Desika to worship the Guru "Adoration of God is more tasteful when done after the adoration of the blessed Guru: for milk, though naturally sweet, is sweeter still when sugar is added to it." (Stotraratna Bhashyam).

The three statements, "Krishna is an incarnation of God", "Jesus is the Son of God", and "Muhammad is the Messenger of God" mean the same to the devout

Indian. The simplest logic is enough to prove Jesus as an incarnation of God: the son of a man is man, the offspring of a dog is dog, the son of God is God. An equally simple analogy will enable us to see that Muhammad was an incarnation of God: from a huge conflagration "something" flies apart and we run away from it - what is it? Fire, not different in essence from the conflagration from which it proceeds. God is Light and the messenger of Light is nothing but that Light itself. One candle is lighted from another and the two flames are identical in nature.

India venerates the swan which is capable of separating milk from water and drinking only the former. The Indian seeks the essential Truth everywhere and discards the non-essential differences that may distinguish one incarnation from another. His is a living faith in God's Omnipotence: and to assert that the Infinite cannot assume finite forms is to deny God's Omnipotence.

I have heard zealous missionaries proclaim that "whereas Hinduism demands that man should perform the impossible feat of becoming completely pure and holy in order to realise God, in Christianity it is God who seeks Man, forgiving him and purifying him." While all schools of Indian philosophy and religion emphasise that Man should do all that lies in his power to keep away from evil (and such exhortations are contained in Christian religious literature, too), we do believe that God Himself descends into the world of Man in order to destroy the evil against which man has been unable to fight unaided by God and Guru, - the evil within the good seeker's heart and the evil that prevails in society. Whilst it is said here and there that this descent is brought about by the devotees' prayer, it is also admitted that this prayerfulness on the part of devotees is itself the gift of God, granted purely by His compassion. There is no difference even here between the different religions, except what has been created by the proselytizing fanaticism of the religious salesmen.

This process of the descent of God for the ascent of Man is further beautifully illustrated in the Krishna-Radha relationship (vide the Indian Song of Songs, Gita Govindam) where Krishna "restlessly" seeks Radha who is regarded as the greatest exemplar of a supreme devotee.

God descends into the heart of Man as devotion. God Himself descends into the heart of Man as spiritual aspiration. God Himself descends into the heart of Man as eagerness to fight evil and purify the heart for the reception of the Lord. Then, God Himself descends into the world of Man as his Guru or such other incarnation as Rama, Krishna, etc. And, finally, God Himself reveals His true identity to the devotee.

11. Idol Worship

The stories have been preserved in the Puranas which contain vivid portraits of the Heroes, viz., the incarnations of God. From these, artists have reconstructed idols and images and paintings.

In India we have, mainly, two types of idols. The first is symbolized philosophy and the second painted legend. Brahma, Vishnu, Siva who form the Indian Trinity are Eternal spiritual Principles, often personified and included in the legends, in a sort of "prologue" to them. The second types of divinities are the incarnations of the former. (Perhaps one could discover similar characters in the Holy Bible, too. Adam and Eve - Atma and Jiva - fall into the first category, viz., symbolized philosophy, and the later Prophets, into the second category.)

The first type is the Symbol of God: while the masses might accept them as idols, the rationalist might still derive philosophical truths from them. To some extent even the second type of idols yield to this treatment !

Before entering upon this discussion, let me state that the Indian sage does not want these idols or symbols to be "understood" by the head, but to be "felt" and "experienced" by the heart. Hence they play a vital role in Bhakti Yoga - the Way of the Heart. The symbols are to be treated as God, not only as symbols: and the devotion has in it the power to unveil the symbolism, within the devotee, while the symbol might remain unchanged. Intellectually understanding the symbolism might lead to disappointing results, just as studying the qualities and components of sugar will not sweeten the tongue.

Symbols have been used by all. The written word is a symbol. Geometry and Algebra are constructed on symbols. Even a Muslim scholar Amir-ul-Momineen says in his "The True Islam": "In ancient days, the language of symbols was in very common use and in spite of the development of spoken and written language and the advance of literature in modern times symbols are still extensively used and accepted for the communication of thoughts and ideas, especially in social matters. For instance, when two friends meet they shake hands and nobody questions the propriety of the action, nor does it occur to anybody to analyse the feelings underlying it... In ancient times when two men entered into an offensive and defensive alliance they used to clasp each other's hands in order to signify that the hand of the one would be hand of the other thenceforward, and that they were henceforth allies and would fight and defend together. In course of time the symbolical ceremony became the emblem of the expression of affection and friendship." Even "laughing" and "weeping" are symbols of inward feelings of joy and sorrow, respectively. Otherwise, what has baring one's teeth and producing giggling sounds with, throat got to do with one's feeling of happiness? And, what exactly have tears to do with sorrow! Are we trying to wash the injury to our foot by letting our eyes shed tears? These are symbols. And, man has always used them.

While an inner experience is not stable, the symbol is stable. When it is made to represent a truth or factor or an inner experience, these can be revived by and through the symbol. Religion is a realm of mystic experiences - not even of finer worldly experiences like those of friendship and alliance referred to above - and mystic experiences would be extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible without the aid of symbols. If these symbols are not utilised to revive those experiences, it would be necessary for each individual every time to start from scratch (the primitive man's concept) and arrive at the Experience. The symbol saves us from this labour and here they can be compared to mathematical symbols. Take, for instance, the Star (also called Shield) of David. It is made of two triangles, one into the other. One has its base above and the other has its base below. It is sacred to Judaism, and, significantly, to Hinduism, too! The Hindus regard it as a Yantra, very sacred and mystic. Scholars, philosophers and mystics can write volumes explaining the symbology of this apparently simple geometrical design! Glory to the sages who conceived of this Symbol.

This is a symbol of the fundamental factors of Nature and processes of life, i.e., Vedanta and Yoga. It signifies the descent of God (in His aspect as the Holy Trinity - Creator, Preserver and Saviour; or, as Sat or Existence, Chit or Consciousness, Ananda or Bliss Absolute) and/or for the ascent of Man. It is a symbol of the union of Spirit and Matter (Purusha and Prakriti). It is a symbol of the involution of God in the world, and the evolution of Man into God. These are only suggestive and not exhaustive.

The Symbol will reveal the truth only if the heart learns to love it and whole being is concentrated on it. Try to fix your mind on this symbol and you will realise how difficult it is. There are a blessed few who might achieve it: there were among the Jews and among the Hindus (the Tantriks particularly), too. But salvation is not only for the few, but for all.

Into this mystic symbol, the philosopher-poet-artist fitted a beautiful, captivatingly human (hence, humanattracting) form. The result is the "Idol" of Vishnu. Into the six angles, the artist fitted the Head, the four Hands, and the feet of the Lord. Now the miracle is wrought. The simple lay devotee can meditate on Him.

The Name Vishnu means "all-pervading"! Hence, He is not only in this picture-frame or idol. This meaning, though the worshipper may not realise immediately, will dawn in him when he loves God deeply enough. Then, the devotee will discover that the Divine Figure contains two triangles: the two Upper Hands and Feet forming one, and the two lower Hands and Face forming the other. The two upper Hands hold divine weapons (the Discus and the Conch, representing the "revolving time" in terms of days, months and years, and the Scripture respectively). The two lower Hands hold the Mace and the Lotus (representing the fruits of Karma and divine grace respectively, which are of vital significance for the ascent of man). The descending God offers His Feet for the salvation of man. The ascending Man beholds His face which is his salvation. In some

versions of this image (e.g., Lord Venkatesa), the two lower Hands are even more explicit in this symbolism. One points to the Feet and the other indicates that thus shall man be saved. Perhaps here we have a more striking parallel to the Christian ideal of saving Grace of total surrender to Jesus ("Come unto Me") and the supreme assurance of the Gita ("Renounce all fear and surrender to Me"). While the symbolism of Vishnu demands Perfection (the Lotus is sometimes regarded as the symbol of Unfoldment or Perfection), Venkatesa and the God-in-history like Krishna and Christ are ready to dispense with even that and promise salvation in return for surrender.

It is with regard to these symbols or idols that Dr. John Lewis says in his "The Religions of the World Made Simple": "The sharp-cut statue type of god is due directly to the work of the artists." It is philosophy in stone or picture. But I shall be grateful if the true devotee of God rejects this view completely and expunges these paragraphs from his copy of the book. To him, Lord Vishnu is and must be real, an existent Being, an entity, not a symbol. There is great psychological necessity for it. It can be disastrous to convince a child (which would refuse it any way) that the doll it plays with is not real and living. It has no other way of learning the first lessons of parenthood; and if by chance the child (before growing into an adolescent) is convinced that it has only been playing with a symbol, then it might be followed with the disastrous result in her adult life, when she might regard her real children as symbols of her fertility and would cold-shoulder them. Symbols should not even be discarded. They will drop away when they have served their purpose in spiritual life, when the inner experience of God's Living Omnipresence has become stable.

It is a sign of ignorance to reject these symbols offhand. They are "non-sense" only in the sense that their message is not for the senses! I was looking at a cartoon without caption, so vivid that it was self explanatory, in a Russian journal. That is universal language. That is exactly what the idol is. If we are not able to understand this universal language, it is because our heart is impure and small and we have not universalised our vision. It is a sign of our ignorance; and we had better get busy acquiring knowledge of the universal tongue, which is done by approaching this "non-sense", not through the senses, but by a loving heart, full of faith and devotion.

When the Bible talks of God's footstool, head, etc., and when Jesus said he would sit at the right hand of God, you say it is symbolism. Would you then regard him who paints this symbolism (not with words, but) with brush and color as an idolator? Recently, I heard an interesting lecture by a learned Muslim propagandist, who said that the Holy Quran is emphatic, that God is not an impersonal Being (which would obviously take Him beyond the reach of the common man), but that He is a Person. There is a trace of confusion here. "Personna" means "mask, appearance, manifestation". That is precisely what it is in Hinduism : every idol or "form" of God is a mask which hides a great philosophic Truth - ready to reveal itself to the one who would faithfully and devoutly approach Mask and worshipfully lift it. That is the idol. Faith is the life-

breath of devotion. And, they who do not enjoy it, do not have the blessings that faith alone can confer on us:

'Faith came singing into my room and other guests took flight,
Grief and anxiety, fear and gloom, sped out into the night.
I wondered that such peace could be, but Faith said gently,
Don't you see That they can never live with me?'

The second type of idols is really a gallery of portraits. "Are you sure this is how Krishna looked?" asks the foolish sceptic. This is an absurd question. I cannot be convinced that a picture said to be of my childhood is really a photograph of me! The scriptures contain some description of these historical divinities; and the artists have tried their best to give us a portrait. It is not whether Krishna was stout or thin that matters; these physical conditions change within a year in our own life! What matters in the case of these idols is "Does it remind me of Krishna?" Yes? Then accept it.

Shall we believe then that Krishna had four hands? Why not? The Siamese twins had two heads and that was very recently. Or, even this might have been an artist's idea of reminding us that Krishna was not a human being, but God descended into the mortal world; the two human hands are therefore supplemented by the two divine ones, in order to remind us of His Divinity. It is like the halo painted around the heads of Jesus, Buddha and the saints. It is not physical, but subtle or psychic, and also symbolic.

There are some who will reject the stories, and also the Divinities concerned. "The stories are myths, the fabrications of a fertile mind of a poet, and the idols are the creations of artists and sculptors," they say. We have no answer. "For those who believe no explanation is necessary. For those who do not, no explanation is, possible." Saints and sages have seen Them - Rama, Krishna, Jesus, Mary, etc. We have to rely on their word, and undertake the voyage; but if a young man wants convincing proof (e.g., I must see with my own eyes) of the existence of America, before he undertakes the voyage, well, you will only call him a fool.

These historical Divinities have their teachings associated with them. More than that. They themselves are regarded as symbols, Personalities, Incarnations of the Supreme Being. This fact should never be overlooked. In and through Krishna, Rama, Jesus, Mary, Buddha and a hundred other Divinities, we worship God.

In a word : We do not worship idols, we worship God through them. It was Swami Vivekananda who said: "No one from the dawn of creation has worshipped anything but an image." How to worship the subtle spirit? The Cross is not Jesus, but a symbol. I bow to Him, in it. I love Him, through it. This is true even of the earthly love. The wife loves the "husband" in a body - she does not love the body and will burn the corpse - and yet, while alive, the love envelops even the body. The Biblical statement "with part thereof he roasteth roast, maketh a fire, warmeth himself and the residue thereof, he maketh a god" (Isaiah

Ch 44) must be carefully interpreted and understood. Else, it might apply to the Cross, too! In the same way, the Commandment, "Thou shalt not worship a graven image." We do not make a god of the piece of wood; we make a symbol of God. We do not worship the graven image, but God in the image.

The so-called rationalist, however, can never be convinced; he does not want to be convinced! If we worship Rama, Krishna, etc., the rationalist is upset: "It is idolatry." If we, on the other hand, deify the grand objects of Nature (God's Nature), e.g., the sun, the ocean, etc. that is what the rationalist meant when he said, "God is all-pervading Spirit"- he turns round and says: "Oh, foolish people, they worship a sheet of water or burning element." The only possible answer to him is that we do not worship anything but God - even when we worship the Guru or the idols. We worship them as God - in recognition of the Indwelling Presence. That is what Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavatham "One can worship Me through whichever media, e.g., an image, he conceives a reverence for on a particular occasion : for, being the Soul of the universe, I dwell in all created beings as well as in the self of the worshipper." (XI. 27.48). If we realise that God is the Indweller in the image, we shall at once see that he who seeks God, but rejects these images, is like the fool who seeks gold, but rejects golden ornaments!

This is, in fact, the glory of Hinduism - total freedom of worship, as expressed in the wonderful verse of the Gita: "Whatsoever form any devotee desires to worship with faith - that faith of his I make firm and unflinching". Here is the plainest warning against proselytisation! It is human (or diabolical) vanity that makes one feel that he has the monopoly of Truth, and that others are far away from It, and that it is his sacred duty to rescue them from hell-fire by converting them to his faith. Worse blasphemy even the devil has not uttered. Each soul is close to God in some way, for God is the reality of that soul! The soul has to find (or be shown by a Master) that way. The Holy Quran agrees with this view when it says: "We task not any soul beyond its capacity." (7:43). The "Visible" manifestations of the Lord are called "Signs" in the Quran.

Christianity has it in the Eucharist. A young Jesuit priest was discussing this ancient universal custom of idol worship with me. I pointed out to him the Indian view and how it was always found necessary to clothe Truth in form, and, on account of the imperfection of this preposition, the mass tendency was to limit God to confinement in the form, and how, in the Kenopanishad, Lord Buddha's teaching, as also in Swami Dayananda's, there was a blow which swung the pendulum to the opposite direction, enabling us to find the balance. God is in the form - by virtue of His Omnipresence, though not confined to it. By virtue of the same omnipresence again, the form ceases to be a mere symbol but a living Presence. Here we found that our idol was similar to the Roman Catholic Eucharist, where the devout Christian believes that the Bread actually becomes the Body of Jesus, and the wine His Blood. My friend said that they felt not only His spiritual presence in Them, but an almost physical presence! - and it would be regarded a great sin to trample on Them, even by accident. That is the idol in

India which by virtue of the omnipresent omnipotence of God becomes a tangible living Presence to a devotee, speaking to him and guiding him and blessing him. It is unwise to disturb this faith. As recently Dr. Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, remarked, "It is utterly wrong and misleading to denounce the imagery of God held by Christian men, women and children, imagery that they have got from Jesus himself, the image of God, the Father in Heaven, and to say that we can't have any new thought until it is all swept away." Dr. Ramsey added that the Christian does not literally mean that God is in a place "beyond the bright blue sky", but was explaining in poetic language "which is the only serviceable language we have got, that God is supreme."

Faith is the vital factor here. Several movements in the modern West have revived man's faith in Faith, e.g., the Christian Science and the Religious Science movements. Faith (morale) in a soldier can be converted by the commander into fighting power! Faith in a nation or community's financial stability invites investment! Faith powers a rocket, not just its fuel. Faith is power.

This power is capable of turning an assumed hypothesis into a proven (experienced) conclusion. As Pratt says in "The Religious Consciousness": "By living as though God were present, they have and keep the constant assurance that He is present."

In the case of the Bhakta, however, this faith focusses his whole being on the Object of his Worship. Where doubt might dam the flow, faith forces it! Hence, a miracle takes place. Even though the worship of idols is meant only to exercise the mind to concentrate and meditate, it itself is able to unveil the Living Presence in the idol! To illustrate. A man is sitting in the sun and reading a paper. There he finds a paragraph printed in very small types. To get a better look, he holds up a magnifying glass over the paper. It catches fire! It is not governed or limited by his motive, but by the power inherent in the sun's rays, and in accordance with the laws of concentration, the paper begins to burn. Even so, the concentrated beam of the devotee's consciousness is able to unveil the Divinity present in the form meditated upon. Thus, the experiences of Mira, Ramakrishna, and the Christian mystics, are not hallucinations, but real; they have seen God's manifestations truly.

May I then take the idol to be God, only God and nothing but God and worship It? It is difficult to answer this question. The ripple is not the ocean. The wave is not the ocean. The vast sheet of water in front of me is not the ocean - its entirety. Yet, if you analyse this way and eliminate, nothing will be left to call 'ocean'. Perhaps the entire thing can be said to be the ocean. But what I see in front of me can never be the whole - but only the surface of a part of the ocean. Yet, it is the ocean. Even so, the idols, the concepts and the Gurus are God - not the whole - but God all the same! Again, as I sit in a room and look out through the window, what do I see? The sky. The sky? Is that all the sky? Oh, no. But is that not the sky? Yes, it is. No one has seen the whole sky. And, yet everyone has seen the sky. The same paradox applies to the idol worshipped. It is not God in His entirety -

no one has seen nor worshipped God in His Absolute Being. If the Idol itself were the whole of God, then if it is broken, God also would have been injured. No one goes into mourning for God when the idol is broken; it is discarded, and another one takes its place! God was and is in the idol. It is limiting God to the idols that Muhammad and Swami Dayananda revolted against.

Yet, we ought to know that people in a different stage of evolution cannot grasp or comprehend God in His Absolute Nature. However much the child may try, it cannot understand the genuine mother-child relationship. You cannot (and, as I have pointed out, should not) even try to convince the child that there is no life in the toy, and deprive it of its vital instrument of inner development. You must recognize the place of the toy in the child's life. The toy is not child, but in it the child-mind sees its own child; the doll is not a child, but serves the most essential purpose of training the future mother in the care of the child. The idol, similarly, trains the worshipper to open the chambers of his heart to the reception of the Light of God, by placing in it this little candle of the idol.

A nation's flag or the portrait of the King or the Prime Minister is a symbol, an idol. Anyone who shows disrespect to it disrespects the state or the Ruler.

Nor is this confined only to the child's play. What about the target that the new recruit to the army shoots at? What harm has a sand-bag or a piece of wood done to him that he should shoot it? But, it is the essential training-ground for the soldier. Incidentally, hunting wild animals - which are not so wild as the human enemy! - by warrior-class also seems to have had the same end in view. As in the field of battle, the "target" would be mobile and not immobile like the sand-bag, etc., the ancients taught hunting to princes and warriors; not is a sport or pleasurable pastime. If the soldier were to learn how to hold a rifle and shoot when he actually faced the enemy on the battle-field, there would be no need for it; the enemy would save him all that trouble! The idol is the training-ground for the seeker to hold his attention, to concentrate his entire being on, and to meditate. But, with this tremendous and vital difference, as I pointed out earlier, by virtue of His Omnipresence, God is in the idol, and God is the idol, even as what I see through the window is the sky. When the devotion of the Bhakta reaches the highest intensity of concentration, God reveals Himself, possibly through that idol.

As we shall see, sincere seekers do not limit God to the image, but realise that He is omnipresent, and therefore God is all-in-all, and that everything is God Himself. Swami Dayananda only condemned limitation : and that too, from the exalted stage of spiritual vision, he had reached. I am quite sure he would have realised that however much man may try, he cannot stand on his own shoulders; and that, if the idol is used as an aid to God-realisation, it is invaluable. Incidentally, this is a weakness common to the followers of great religious or social reformers: they cling to the "don'ts" but neglect the "do's". How many who follow Swami Dayananda, Prophet Muhammad, Lord Jesus or Karl Marx, live up to the positive ideals held by these great persons? You find more people who

know all about what these Reformers did not want us to do - the baser human nature invariably finds some excuses for not doing what they wanted us to do.

The injunction "You must worship only God Almighty and naught else, e.g., the graven images as God", has been misinterpreted to denounce idol worship. In the Upanishads, too, we are given the same warning, which is illustrated, for instance, in the life of Saint Tyagaraja who, when asked to sing in praise of a Raja, refuses - saying that he could sing only the glories of God - though he was a great idol worshipper of Rama. "You should worship and naught else" means: not these Kings, wealth and worldly objects. A great Muslim thinker, Alghazzali (1059-1111 a.d.) says: "What a pity it is that these who would find fault with those who worship stones, do not see that on their part they worship the pig and the dog in themselves! The pig of appetite begets shamelessness, lust, slander and such like - the dog of passion begets pride, vanity, ridicule, wrath and tyranny. These two, controlled by the Satanic power, produce deceit, treachery, perfidy, meanness, etc., but if divinity in man is uppermost, the qualities of knowledge, wisdom, faith, and truth, etc., will be acquired."

Weak man seeks external aid in this struggle for self conquest. He externalises the Inner Reality - for he sees that while he cannot see his own eyes, he can "see them" in a mirror. He is unable to see God in his own soul, but he can (it is easier to) see God and feel His presence outside, in an idol. The effect is within, though the provocative agent is without.

With this outside divinity, he associates the divine qualities he would develop, the strength and sense of security he lacks and needs; and, when he meditates on the Lord in his own heart, eventually, with this image of God, those qualities too come to reside there.

All this would immediately be cancelled if the worshipper feels that the idol is a symbol and not God! For the very purpose of idol worship is to stir the heart of the worshipper to the realisation of His Living Presence. The devotee must feel that the Idol is His Living Presence; and, as we saw, by virtue of His Omnipresence, this is actually true. Hence, Sri Ramanuja warns us: "Whoever looks upon the sacred images of God as mere stones, his own spiritual teacher as an ordinary human being, eminent devotees as high or low according to the caste of their birth, the holy water that has touched the feet of God and as a consequence has the power to purify and purge one of all sins as mere water, the sacred Mantras as a collection of sounds, and the Supreme Lord of the world as one not higher than the Devas - let him be considered as one fit to dwell in the infernal regions." These were his last words - the last Word on Devotion, as it were, from the sacred lips of one of the greatest modern devotees of the Lord.

All talk about "superior" and "inferior" in the realm of the manifestations of God - the Idols - is nonsense. Once we agree that the finite human mind can only approach God through a finite medium (idol), its form is a matter of choice, based on one's temperament and sentiment. Do not argue in this regard; one

form is as good as any other, as God is omnipresent. It is your business which form you choose, same as whom you marry. There is no sense in arguing about one's love! God is the centre - we are all points on the circumference, each one with his own personal path to the centre - the radius.

Idol worship, being worship of the Living Presence of God in a tangible object, involves endless ritual. It is called Puja, and it consisted of sixteen limbs (there are other more or less elaborate rituals): Asana (offering of a seat for the Deity), Swagata (welcome), Padya (water for washing His feet), Arghya (water for washing the mouth), Achamana (water for sipping), Madhuparka (a mixture of honey, ghee, milk and curd), Snanam (bath), Vastra (clothes), Abhushana (jewellery), Gandha (perfume), Puspha (flower), Dhupa (incense), Deepa (light), Naivedya (food), Tambulam (betel leaves and nuts), Namaskara (prostration).

When the modern rationalist sees idols decked in jewels and bathed with milk, etc., he feels that these are all stupid practices (though how the same jewellery on the living flesh which he calls his wife makes any difference is, not satisfactorily explained). Criticism of this sort betrays our foolishness or hypocrisy. If the idol is a Living Presence, then how can it be a waste adorning and bathing Him? If it is not a living Presence, why do you worship It at all? The experience of the Living Presence - that is the acid test of devotion.

Before buying clothes for himself, the devotee buys clothes for the Deity. Food is offered to Him first. Everything is offered to God and accepted as His gift, or Holy sacrament (Prasada - a token of His Grace). This is in accordance with the Lord's teaching to Uddhava in Srimad Bhagavatham (XI. 11/41): "One should offer to Me, whatever is most favoured with the world as well as whatever is most liked by himself for such an offering is capable of yielding immortality." In this simple practice is hidden a vital factor in Yoga-detachment. We buy everything and do everything for His sake, and we then partake of His Prasada. One who is sincere in this practice will soon find that his passion for worldly enjoyment is subtly though effectively toned down!

We shall not forget that the goal is realisation, not imagination. Here, again, as in Karma Yoga, it is the inner attitude that matters, not the grandeur or the number of rites included in the worship. It will be a thousand fold more effective if the symbolism of the rites themselves was understood and remembered. As we grind the sandal-paste, we should pray to Him - to bestow upon us forbearance, to do good even to those that do evil to us, even as the sandalwood gives fragrance to the man who cuts it and grinds it. As we offer flowers at His Feet, we should feel that we offer all our actions, our life itself, as flowers of His worship. As we wave the incense in front of the Lord, we should inwardly feel that He is all-pervading, as the scent of the incense pervades, though imperceptibly, the entire room. As we wave the single faced lamp, we should feel that we adore the Lord with the Inner Self or Soul. Similarly, the three-faced lamp represents the three bodies, the three states of consciousness, and the three Gunas - and the five-faced lamp represents the five Pranas, the five organs of action, the five

organs of knowledge, and the five elements that constitute our being. Through all these we adore the Lord. When the multi faced lamp is waved, we should feel that we adore Him with all our thoughts and emotions. With the camphor, we should melt and pray to Him that our individual personality may thus get absorbed in Him, without leaving the least trace of ego behind.

It is the Bhavana (inner attitude) that ultimately blossoms as Anubhava (actual experience) in due course. It is this Bhava that leads us gradually from idol worship to meditation on the Absolute. Idol worship is the first, necessary, and almost indispensable step in Bhakti Yoga. If it is done properly, it should lead us to the next one indicated by our ancient sages, who declared that "Manasic Puja (mental worship) is more powerful than the physical external worship." When we have understood what it is to be in the presence of God, this will supervene automatically, and we would want to enjoy that Presence, without the distracting influences of external formalities.

Instead of offering flowers, etc., to the idol in front of us, we offer them to the idol enthroned in our hearts. From the gross to the subtle, from external to internal, but the idol still remains. There are several advantages, too. The possibilities are limitless. The devotee does not have to worry himself about buying fruits and flowers. Mentally, however, he can offer tons of them to God. God is felt closer to oneself.

That was only the first part of the second stage. The second part is meditation, shorn of all rituals, even if they are mental. Idol worship should lead us on to meditation on God. Without the first step of idol worship, it is virtually impossible to ascend to the top rung of meditation. But, if we do not extend the frontiers of divinity beyond the idol, we may get stuck there - and the ladder defeats its purpose. Hence, even in the method of worshipping idols, our ancient sages had introduced elements of adoration of the Nameless and the Formless. In fact, they emphasised that we should superimpose the Absolute on the idol.

As Aldous Huxley says in his "Perennial Philosophy": "If exercises in concentration, repetitions of the divine name or meditation on God's attributes, or on imagined scenes in the life of saint or Avatar help those who make use of them to come to selflessness, openness and (to use Augustine Baker's phrase) that 'love of the pure divinity' which makes possible the soul's union with the Godhead, then such spiritual exercises are wholly good and desirable. If they have other results, well, the tree is known by its fruits."

Benet of Canfield prescribes, "The period of mental prayer is to begin with intense concentration on a scene of Christ's passion; then the mind is as it were, to abolish this imagination of the sacred humanity, and to pass from it to the formless and attributeless, Godhead which that humanity incarnates."

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, too, describes a similar technique of meditation: "Whoever thy tutelary deity may be, meditate upon the form for much time - as

being apparent, yet non-existent in reality, like a form produced by a magician. Then let the visualisation of the tutelary deity melt away from the extremities, till nothing at all remaineth visible of it; and put thyself in the state of the Clearness and the Voidness - which thou canst not conceive as something - and abide in that state for a little while. Again meditate upon the tutelary deity; again meditate upon the Clear Light; do this alternately. Afterwards allow thine own intellect to melt away gradually, beginning from the extremities."

Thus, the Indian sage-devotees discovered the possibility of five Bhavas in Puja or worship, viz., Bahya Bhava (external worship), Stuti Bhava (Japa or singing hymns), Dhyana Bhava (meditation), Brahma Bhava (oneness of the Self and God). One should lead to the other, though not artificially but automatically.

For, when the concentration becomes intense, the devotee is absorbed in God. The form disappears, leaving the Bliss of the Supreme Being in his heart - the Bliss which he vaguely experienced in the previous stages of worship.

But this is possible only if we are sincere in idol worship. Even if (as some proclaim) the image is not God, concentration will unveil the God within it. But, concentration of our mind on the idol, will not be possible unless we love that image. Put these two truths together, you will readily understand the vital factors of Sakara Upasana (idol worship). Hence, the Bhagavatharm exalts idol worship: "This much is the end to be attained by those invested with a body, viz., that giving up hypocrisy, fear and worry, they should cultivate through the sight of the Lord's images, the hearing of His praises, and so on that ecstatic mood which was felt by Akrura (X. 38/27). Fear and worry indicate absence of faith. Hypocrisy is the factor that keeps the experience of Bliss from us.

In order to ensure that we are not insincere and hypocritical in our worship, the following thirty-two acts were strictly forbidden: to ride into the premises sacred to a deity or to enter a place of worship with sandals on, failure to celebrate or attend sacred festivals, failure to salute an image of the Deity after beholding it, to visit a temple in an impure state, to salute the Deity by raising only one hand, to go on walking round the Lord without pausing a while before Him after every full round, to squat with one's leg stretched towards the Deity, to squat with one's knees up and encircled by one's arms in front of the Deity, to lie down before the Lord, to dine before the Deity, to tell a lie before Him, to speak loudly before Him, to talk with another before Him, to exclaim in front of Him, to quarrel in front of Him, to torment another before Him, to bless another before Him, to speak harsh words before Him, to cover oneself all over with a blanket before Him, to revile another before Him, to extol another before Him, to utter indecent words before Him, to fast before Him, to worship Him with ordinary materials even when one can afford better, to eat or drink anything that has not been offered to Him, failure to offer the Lord a fruit peculiar to the season before giving it to anyone else, to offer some fruit or vegetable with its front part removed from it for being cooked as food for the use of the Deity, to sit with one's back over against Him, to salute anyone else before Him, failure to greet one's

preceptor, enquire after his health and extol him, to indulge in self-praise and to revile any deity whatsoever.

Insincerity in Yoga, especially in devotion, is ridiculous and meaningless. Either you treat the idol as the Living Presence and observe these - or, you treat it as an image or a stone or a painting and leave it alone! There is no half-way house on this path.

But, sincerity can and will lead us to higher mysticism. When the idol jumps into our heart, we enter the portals of Raja Yoga, and have the vision of the all pervading God. The process of contemplation on God (still the Form) is thus described by Lord Krishna in Bhagavatham (XI. 14/42-46): "Withdrawing the senses from their objects with the help of the mind, and weaning the mind from all objects with the help of the intellect, a wise man should focus it on Me. Gathering that mind, he should concentrate it on one member (of the Lord's Body) alone. He should no more think of the other limbs and should fix his thought on the Face, wearing a winsome smile. Diverting the mind once it has gained its firm hold on My countenance, he should fix it on My all-pervading Self; and, transcending that, too, and becoming one with Me, he should cease to think of anything else. With his intellect thus established, he sees Me in himself and himself actually merged in Me, the Universal Soul like light in fire. The misconception regarding matter, knowledge and action will soon disappear from the mind of the striver who concentrates his mind through most intense meditation as aforesaid." That is the second part of the second stage.

The third stage is to regard our whole life as worship of God. This is called Para Puja - Supreme Worship or worship of the Supreme. The supreme devotee sees himself as a cell in the Cosmic Body of God, living in tune with His Will, worshipping (serving) the Indwelling Presence by doing his duty which in turn is to do His Will which means serving humanity. He may or may not perform external worship or even meditate. But he will certainly not denounce even the crudest form of idolatry; for (a) he realises its value, and (b) to him the idol is definitely not a piece of stone or wood, but the Living Presence as every atom of existence is.

It is at this stage that, in the words of Aldous Huxley again, "...the whole of a man's workaday life (is) transformed by him into a kind of continuous ritual, every object in the world around him (is) regarded as a symbol of the world's eternal Ground, all his actions (are) performed sacramentally." The very scripture which gives a very high place to image worship in the life of man, viz., Srimad Bhagavatham, also administers this stern warning: "A man who worships Me through an idol, showing disrespect to Me as abiding in all creatures, makes a travesty of worship. Ignoring Me, the Supreme Ruler, the Self present in all living beings, he who stupidly resorts to idol worship, alone throws oblations into the ashes." (III. 29/21,22). Again, "I am not pleased, even though adored through an image by means of formal worship carried on with costly or cheap materials by a man slighting other creatures." (24). Again, "sharing the affliction of others

constitutes the highest worship of the supreme Person, the Soul of the universe." (Bhagavatham. VIII. 7/44).

Worship of idols as a preliminary to contemplation and self-identifying service of humanity is "idol worship". Combining such worship with such service, in the right spirit or Bhava, is "ideal worship". Minus such service and such Bhava, it degenerates into "idle worship" at best.

12. Cosmic Love

Side by side with this threefold idol worship, to help accelerate the process of widening of his vision, the Bhakta practises what in the Bhagavad Gita is called the Vibhuti Yoga. He "sees" God not only in the idols, but in certain (special in the first instance and general later) manifestations of God. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna gives a "brief list" of His special manifestations - the sun, moon, intellect, beauty, splendour - which we come across in our daily life.

The Law of Association is brought into play to compel these commonplace phenomena to remind us of God. Incidentally, these "blind beliefs" had other benefits, too! Take for instance, the belief that sun is a manifestation of God. Even my grandmother knew what the sun was. But when she told us that the sun was God, we stood before Him and prayed. We bathed in His life giving rays. The scientist laughed at this. Our ego was hurt. We neglected the prayer. The doctor came along and after medical check-up, expensive and tortuous, displaying his skill and his ignorance-compelled dependence on numerous gadgets, asked us to expose our body to the sun! We took to sun-bathing. It became a cult : and, we are called (now by very sophisticated, fashionable and atheistic people) "sun-worshippers"! Only we lie in all kinds of postures, in performing this worship. My grandmother was wiser, without going to the college. Again, the Gita reminds us that to the sun was first taught the Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita. He demonstrates this Yoga, (a) by being all-light and no shadow - wisdom which is ever wise! (b) by having equal vision, bestowing his grace, and blessings on all alike, (c) by remaining unaffected by the evils which he faces, and by the opinions and derogatory remarks that people may hurl at him, and (d) by being diligent, methodical, non-egoistic and utterly selfless in the performance of his duty - all of which are the lessons of the Bhagavad Gita. The same is true of all the other special manifestations, listed in the Bhagavad Gita. They remind us of God and confer on us their (His) blessings in abundance.

The Quran calls these Vibhutis or manifestations, "Signs". Words and expressions do not matter : the spirit is the same.

First, certain objects, e.g., the sun, themselves remind us of God. Then, certain qualities in certain objects remind us of God - e.g., the brilliance of the intellectual, the strength of the strong, the austerity of the ascetic, and the qualities like victoriousness, industriousness. The other characteristics possessed by these people pale into insignificance! We learn to rise above the "world" and see God, gradually, in all. But the mind still retains a niche in which it stores "the totally bad". Even this has to be destroyed. Hence, Lord Krishna declares "I am the gambling of the cheat". By the time we arrive at this stage, our vision has been considerably purified by not only the practice of this Vibhuti Yoga, but the other limbs of Bhakti, and we instantly see that the soul of even the man we called evil shines as brightly and divinely as the soul of a saint.

In the Mandukya Karika, Gaudapada says that the Atman is unaffected by the

evils of the mind and the intellect, even as the sky is not affected by the dirt or the cloud floating in it. Thus reflecting, the devotee perceives only the Pure Godhead in all - and from his vision evil disappears. He thus overcomes, one of the greatest obstacles on the path of Yoga, viz., fault-finding which in turn leads to fault-meditating and fault-developing. He sees only God (good) in all: his own mind is thus constantly fed by good, and he is filled with goodness.

To strengthen this, the devotee's prayer now becomes : "May our speech be employed in recounting Your excellences, our ears in hearing Your stories, our hands in doing Your work, our mind in the thought of Your feet, our head in bowing to the world (Your abode), and our sight in beholding saints, Your embodiments." (Bhagavatham. X. 10/38). His whole attitude to the world and to life undergoes a drastic change.

In all this spiritual practice, the essence is constant remembrance of God and/through His Name. The whole world has to be realised as His Abode. Here, again, self-deception helps no one. Where this constant remembrance is interfered with, and "the world" enters in the guise of, or in the shadow of God, the devotee should quickly withdraw himself from the world, and strengthen the bond that links him with God.

Constant remembrance of God liberates us from worldly thoughts - and so, worries, fears and anxieties, and so, evils, sins and sinful tendencies. Our life is taken charge of entirely by God, without the ego-interference. He provides (in fact, has already provided) us with our needs. That is the meaning of the great Promise of the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita (IX. 22) : "I look after the welfare of My devotee who constantly thinks of Me." Is it necessary for you to see the road? - get into the backseat of the car and relax. The driver knows the road. Even so on a railway train. The Lord is in charge of your travel. Surrender to Him and rest in peace. Again, if you have faith in God, you will still make mistakes, but they will not be blunders. You will still shed tears, but they will not be tears of blood.

Here the devotee gradually breaks through conventions and rules (and hence should be careful!). He is at the threshold of Para Bhakti or Mukhya Bhakti. His characteristic is only that he constantly thinks of God. Sri Suka says in the Bhagavatham (X. 29/15), "Indeed, they who constantly cherish feelings of love, wrath, fear, affection, kinship or devotion towards the Lord, attain oneness with Him." Here, the key-word is "constantly". Thus, Kamsa who entertained hatred for God, but constantly thought of Him with fear, and the Gopis who loved Him, and constantly thought of Him, both gained Liberation.

This is a delicate stage in devotion. To the devotee himself, no problem presents itself : but the onlooker is puzzled. Well : a villager from the central Indian desert, sitting on the banks of the river Ganga, wondered why the boat with such a heavy load of people does not at once sink into the water, whereas even if he alone got into the water, he goes right into it! Do you think you can make him understand?

When the mind is saturated with God, whatever be the motive or attitude, the human personality is absorbed into God.

The following popular verse from the Bhagavatham (VII-1/30) declares, "The cowherd women of Vraja attained Him through conjugal love; Kamsa through fear; Sisupala and other kings through hatred; the Vrishnis through kinship; the Pandava brothers, through attachment, and we (Narada and others) through devotion." Of Kamsa, the Bhagavatham says, "Thinking of Lord Sri Krishna while sitting, lying down, standing, taking his food and walking on earth, he saw the world full of Him." (X. 2/24).

13. The Devotee's Motive

Even if our love of God and our motive are not pure, we should still learn to love God. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna mentions that four types of devotees approach Him (7.16)

Aarta (a): one who is in trouble and turns to God for redress. Prahlada (the greatest, pure, devotee of the Lord) taunts them in these words (Bhagavatham VII. 10/4) : "He who seeks worldly blessings from You is no servant. He is only a business-man." But, Sri Krishna concedes that even such a man is a devotee, inasmuch as he does not take the law into his own hands, but turns to God. Prayer for relief from suffering, with faith in God, enables us to forget the imaginary suffering (the psychosomatic part which is the greatest), and to seek appropriate remedy for any real trouble there may be. There is, however, this spiritual loss in praying to God for relief from suffering. If, by some miracle, the suffering is removed, then you will grow more sensitive to pain, and even lesser calamities will hurt you later. On the contrary, if you ask for strength to endure even real suffering, every suffering thus endured will make you stronger, and in time the greatest calamity will have no power to shake you. Gajendra and Draupadi are given as exemplars of this type of devotion. But though it might be partially true (because of the incidents that provoked the classification), these two were great devotees even otherwise, and naturally turned to God, as they would have done in any circumstance in their life.

Jijnasu (b): his curiosity has been aroused and he seeks knowledge about God. Of course, when he gains the knowledge, he would learn to love God, and eventually become a true devotee. Here again Uddhava is cited as an example. Only because he approached Lord Krishna towards the end of the latter's sejour on earth, for instruction on Knowledge. The classification of Uddhava as a Jijnasu-Bhakta should be restricted to this incident. Otherwise, he was also a Para-Bhakta. In fact, we are asked to regard him as identical with Krishna, as a Vibhuti of the Lord.

Artharthee (c) wants to acquire wealth, and be released from financial troubles, but seeks God's intervention. Even this man is regarded as a "devotee", since he resorts to God for the acquisition of wealth, and does not help himself from his neighbor's pocket! Praying for the fulfilment of our "needs" will remove the artificial "needs", as most of ours are, and enable us to find fulfilment of real ones. Dhruva is regarded as an exemplar of this type. But we shall go into the mystery of this presently.

Jnani (d) is one who knows that love between God and the individual soul (Jiva) is inevitable, natural, compelling, and based on the simple truth that they are not - never - two, but one. As Dr. John Lewis says in his "The Religions of the World Made Simple" while dealing with mysticism, "Another (religious road) is the recognition that Union with God is not something to be achieved, but something which simply is, and has only to be recognized. This is the path of mysticism."

The eyelid's love of the eye-ball it protects is not motivated, but spontaneous manifestation of the truth of unity. Hence some great saints even taunt God and lovingly declare "O God, You cannot neglect me, because neither of us can afford to do without the other. I have no other Lord, and You are the Self of Your devotee." We cannot help loving God. The Jnani has no ulterior motive for devotion. He does not regard Bhakti as a virtue at all it is natural. He sees this Divine Love pervade the entire nature, manifesting as magnetism, sympathy, compassion, affection, patriotism, force of gravitation, and also certain instincts found even in animals. All these - even inanimate objects, stars and planets - are bound by this divine love. Otherwise, as a Russian astronaut remarked, it is difficult to see who holds the earth "up there". The Jnani arrives, by a simple syllogism, at the great truth that God is Love. "God is universal. Love is universal. Therefore, God is Love." This Divine Love being universal is (a) what manifests in the individual as devotion to Him, and (b) by virtue of its proportions, is infinitely more powerful than the individual's love. Hence, the popular idea that God loves us more than we love Him. Hence, again we cannot help loving God! You see an iron piece in front of a magnet fly towards the latter. Not because it wants to, but because it is compelled to, it has no alternative, it can't help, it has no choice. We love God because God is all-powerful love (Bhagavatham. VII. 5/14). This again is the significance of the oft-repeated utterance of the Lord in the Bhagavad Gita, "such a devotee is dear to Me" (chapter XII). Not that He has any partiality. A rusted iron piece reacts differently to a clean iron piece, in the vicinity of a magnet. The magnet seems to be in love with the latter, and to neglect the former. Such is not the case. The iron piece which is clean is able to experience the force of magnetism. The Bhakta similarly is able to experience God's all-powerful love. Sukadeva is an exemplar of this type of love.

This classification has come in for a lot of criticism and misunderstanding, that it is good to have a closer look at it. The foremost virtue of this doctrine (viz., that even a selfish devotee is a devotee) is that it directs the mind of even such a man towards God. Turn all your desires Godward and see what happens. Whatever else may or may not happen, you will think of God. That is the greatest achievement.

Another popular misconceived criticism deserves refutation. When the suffering or the poor devotee turns to God for redress, does he go to sleep? Does this devotion or the prayer it probably involves justify lethargy? No. Even if the devotee wants wealth, etc., and prays to God for it - if he contacts God and is sincere in his prayer, God will not let the devotee sleep and promise to turn his bed sheet into a sheet of gold. But He will make him, from within him, do the right action, and get what he prayed for. Sincere prayer inevitably leads to right action (exertion). Prayer and the Divine Answer, thought and its fulfilment, Sadhana (spiritual practice) and Siddhi (Perfection) are two ends of the same stick, of one process. We see only the ends, but the intermediate process is often too subtle for our gross perception. Yet, it is nonetheless true. The Divine Answer, the fulfilment and the perfection will almost always manifest themselves in and through us, by what may be compelling right endeavour. Lethargy is the surest

indicator of a rebellious spirit, whose prayer is insincere, or contact of God humbug.

This may be a very unholy thought - but beating in mind the mischievous character of Lord Krishna, I have had it irresistibly thrust on me. This fourfold classification of devotees is given to us in the Bhagavad Gita in a wonderful verse (VII. 16), "Four kinds of virtuous men worship Me, O Arjuna, and they are the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of wealth, and the wise." "Noble indeed are these," says the Lord in verse 18 of the same chapter. But read all these verses again and again, and again if you like. Where does He say, "I will fulfil their demands?" Does He guarantee that He will remove the affliction or the penury? No. No. No.

On the contrary, the Lord says (Bhagavatham X.88/8), "Him on whom I shower My grace, I gradually deprive of wealth. His own people there upon forsake him when he is reduced to penury and stricken with sorrow. When, striving with intent to acquire wealth, he finds all his attempts abortive and makes friends with My devotees; that is the time I show My grace to him, whereby he attains that supreme infinite Brahman." Again, the Lord says (Bhagavatham VIII. 22/24): "I take away the fortune of whomsoever I show My grace to. For, intoxicated with wealth a person becomes stiff and disregards the world and Myself."

Sri Sukadeva, the author of the Bhagavatham is emphatic that, "He who, having duly propitiated the Lord, the Ruler of universal lords, who is so hard to please, asks for that which is desired by the mind is of perverted understanding because of his pettiness." (X. 48/11).

But, the supreme Love of the Lord is compassionate enough to prevent such a spiritual tragedy. It is said in Bhagavatham VI. 11/22-23, "The Lord does not of course bestow on His own people, exclusively devoted to Him, the riches that are available in heaven, on earth or in the subterranean regions, and from which follow hatred, fear, mental anguish, arrogance, discord, suffering and toil. Our Master frustrates the efforts of His servant for the attainment of the three objects of human pursuit (viz., Dharma, Artha and Kama). From such frustration is to be inferred the Grace of the Lord, which is the lot of those who have nothing to call their own, and is difficult to attain for others." On the face of it, this appears to be a counsel of despair. But let us have a closer look at this beautiful idea. Two theses emerge:

(a) As Aldous Huxley says in his "Perennial Philosophy", "The bad man in prosperity may, all unknown to himself, be darkened and corroded with inward rust, while the good man under afflictions may be in the rewarding process of spiritual growth. No, God is not mocked but also, let us always remember, He is not understood." The good man's devotion is strengthened, and his spiritual progress accelerated.

(b) Why does God single out good people and make them suffer? Well, it is His business. Our business is to share the suffering with the sufferers. We are one family. When the suffering is shared, it is greatly mitigated - and in the bargain,

you have no time to think of your own suffering. Two birds at one stroke.

Thus, on the one hand, it literally drives the devotee to the feet of God (if the sufferer is only a good man, suffering chisels him into a devotee of God !), and on the other, it provides an opportunity for others (even wicked people and philanthropic atheists) to purify their heart by serving the sufferers, and forget their own suffering.

This almost makes me read verse II of chapter IV of the Gita "between the lines"! The Lord says, "In whatever way men approach Me, even so do I reward them." May it mean, "If on account of poverty, the man comes to Me, I make him poorer, so that He may not go away from Me. If on account of suffering, I make him suffer more!" The idea being that He, the Lord Who is our Suhrid (Friend), knows best what to do, and what He does is always for our best.

Even if my interpretation of these two verses of the Gita be regarded far-fetched, wrong and blasphemous, it cannot be denied that this is the attitude of a devotee. Two exemplars are held before us in the Bhagavatham:

(i) Sage Narada, who in his previous birth was a poor woman's son, had earned the grace of some sages by his service. The mother was his sole support and prop in this world. One day she died of snake-bite and, Narada says, "I took it as a boon from the Lord who is solicitous for the welfare of His devotees" (Bhagavatham. 1.6/10).

(ii) Sudama (or Kuchela), a school-mate of Lord Krishna, who was extremely poverty-stricken, goes to the Lord to beg for a little wealth. When the Lord seemed to neglect this unuttered prayer of the devotee, the latter feels "He did not give me even a little wealth, because He thought, poor as I was, wealth would completely turn my head and make me forget Him. Oh, how merciful is the Lord to me." (Bhagavatham. X. 81/20).

Devotees are generally divided into two main categories: (a) they whose devotion is motiveless, e.g., Prablada, and (b) they whose devotion has an earthly motive, and the example given here is Dhruva. But it is said in the "Bhaktisudhodayam": (Dhruva replies to the Lord who grants him any boon of his choice): Eager to win my place on the lap of the King, my father, I practised penance, and as result I attained You, whom only the best among gods and sages can attain. I threw away a piece of glass and obtained a precious Jewel. O Lord, I am supremely contented, and do not ask for any other boon." (Note: The Bhagavatham-version is, however, different.) Thus, if the contact of God be genuine in the devotee's prayer, even the desire-filled heart of the devotee is purified, and filled by motiveless devotion to the Lord. The Bhagavatham (XI-2/47, 46 and 45 respectively) gives the following classification of devotees: "He who does worship to the Lord with faith in an image only, and does not serve His devotees and other beings, is an ordinary devotee. The votary who cherishes love for the Lord, is friendly to other devotees of the Lord, compassionate to the ignorant, and indifferent to the enemies, is a second-rate votary. He is the foremost of the Lord's devotees, who sees himself established in all creatures as

in the Lord, and sees all creatures established in his own self as in the Divine Soul." In the last stage, all earthly desires take leave of the heart of the devotee who does not even long or seek for God, for the very simple reason that he is ever conscious of His Living Omnipresence.

This inner transformation leads to three results (a) dropping away of the desires of the heart, (b) realisation of His Love which made the desires and the consequent prayers meaningless, (c) a change of heart towards those who might regard themselves our enemies and so try to harm us.

Contact of God purifies the heart of the desires that might have prompted such contact. Eventually all desires are wiped out. God's Grace manifests itself as relief from suffering, or as the power of endurance to bear that suffering. Man learns to accept His Superior Intelligence and Compassionate Will. When a businessman who is robbed of his wealth goes to God and appeals to Him, God may return his wealth or may rob him (second robbery) of his heart, too! The fire of God-love burns all that it touches. A piece of iron, when it comes into contact with fire, assumes the properties of fire - it will become red hot as fire. Even so, cold and base metal (our heart) is transformed and imbued with the characteristics of God, once we contact Him, whatever be the motive. Hence, the Bhagavatham says (X. 16.37): "Having secured the dust of Your Feet, people neither covet the uppermost heaven, nor the rulership of the entire globe, nor the position of the Creator, nor dominion over the subterranean regions, nor the mystic powers of Yoga nor final beatitude." (Also Bhagavatham III. 29/13-14). This attitude is beautifully reflected in the attitude of the Christian mystics. Watts writes in "Behold the Spirit": "Perceiving that the circumstances of this moment are the adorable will of God, and that to desire God's will is a higher thing than to desire even the Beatific Vision, the soul says 'Yes' with all its might to the whole of experience." Dr. John Lewis who quotes this, adds: "Even suffering is transformed, its meaning realized, when the sufferer affirms it as the divine will. To struggle against inevitable pain is only to intensify grief." His prayer now is only for God and "Thy Will be done".

The true devotee who contacts God in devout communion, realises with intense and immediate joy the nature of God as Omnipresent and Omnipotent Omniscience! He is at once thrilled (at this experience) and ashamed (at his past stupidity which prompted him even to pray). God is omnipresent - so you cannot say: "He is not here - how can I depend upon Him to come to my help?" God is omniscient - so you cannot say: "He does not know my needs. I have to provide them myself or let Him know of them." He is omnipotent - so, you cannot say: "Well, He may not be able to do this for me." As, for instance - if you are in a theatre when your son at home suddenly becomes ill, you cannot do anything, for you are not where he is. Again, if he has suddenly fainted, and you do not know he was starving, you cannot do anything, because of your ignorance. If both of you are travelling and the motor-car broke down in a desert, even though you are present with him and know he is hungry, you cannot do anything - you do not have the power, for you do not have anything. These contingencies do not apply

to God. Hence, prayer, except as a communion with God, is totally unnecessary. The "excuses" are valuable only for the sake of prayer they result in.

The devotee does not blame God or anyone else, nor does he entertain the least ill-will towards anyone. I had a vivid dream one day, and I heard a devotee say, good humouredly, "God can wipe out all my sufferings in the twinkling of an eye. But, He has a vast universe to protect. Perhaps He is busy just now with His other children. Soon, He will relieve me of my miseries." Good-humouredly, he learns to endure and possibly ignore his suffering. Thought of God itself is its best antidote.

In this attitude again is the magic wand, or divine alchemy which transforms our heart and our attitude towards the world, especially towards those who try to harm us (either by depriving us of our wealth, prosperity, fame or happiness). The Lord clearly says, as we have seen, that when He wishes to shower His Grace on us, He first deprives us of material prosperity and sensuous happiness. Then, those who cheat us or hurt us are undoubtedly His messengers or agents! The man who believed in Karma adopted the same attitude towards the world. The devotee too, rejoices in adversity and blesses his opponents and persecutors: "Terrible is the obstacle of attachment to body, wealth and glory - Kamini, Kanchana and Kirti. The Lord Himself, knowing that I am too weak to throw them off on my own has come in this form (of a so-called enemy) to do this for and in me. How wonderfully gracious is the Lord" - such is the trend of his thoughts.

Thus, we see wherever we start, the Yoga of Devotion leads us to Jnana or the Wisdom - filled Selfless Love of God. Soon we realise that Lord Krishna's inclusion of the others among the list of Bhaktas was a concession, not a sanction. Desire and selfishness or egotism have no place in God-love. If traces had existed in the beginning of the practice, soon the fire of God-Love burns them.

14. Incarnations of God

The devotee is certain (it is not merely a convenient faith) that the Lord, (All these incarnations are attributed to Vishnu, the Protector. Siva, the Redeemer of the Hindu Trinity, does not so incarnate Himself, but often appears and disappears suddenly.) in accordance with His Divine Promise in the Bhagavad Gita (IV. 7-8), incarnates in this world, "to protect the good and to destroy the evil". The traditional interpretation implies that this means destruction of demons and protection of good people. But I feel that it need not be so restricted. "Saadhonaam" in the second verse only means "those that are good" which shall be protected by Him. Similarly "dushkritaam" only means "the doers of evil" which shall be destroyed. This may be beings in the human kingdom, as the legend describes. And, it may be ideas, ideals and traits in the abstract world of every man's inner personality, which the inwardly "incarnating" Experience or externally manifest Divinity might purify.

To support this theory, the Hindus have in their Puranas the inspiring stories of the Lord's such incarnations. According to some accounts, Nine Avataras have so far appeared. According to another there have been twenty-three so far. The tenth or twenty-fourth, as the case may be, is Kalki yet to come. They are : (the ten common ones are given first.)

- (i) Matsya Avatara (the Fish or as some would have it, the highly intelligent Dolphin) rescued the Vedas. The Bhagavatham-account has its near-parallel in the Biblical story of the Noah's Ark.
- (ii) Kurma Avatara (the Tortoise) supported Mandara Mountain for the churning of the ocean.
- (iii) Varaha Avatara (Divine Boar) raised the earth from water, after destroying the demon Hiranyaksha.
- (iv) Narasimha Avatara (Man-Lion) emerging from the pillar destroyed the demon Hiranyakasipu and saved (blessed) Prahlada.
- (v) Varnana Avatara (the Dwarf) quelled the might of King Bali.
- (vi) Parasurama destroyed the haughty rulers 21 times and gave the dominion to Brahmins. In Israel they have found a city Hazor whose ruins indicate that it has been destroyed twenty-one times! Is the number just a coincidence, or may it be that the holy land had to be saved twenty one times from unholy rulers?
- (vii) Rama destroyed Ravana and other demons and established the famous Rama Rajya - the ideal Kingdom.
- (viii) Krishna destroyed Kamsa and many other demons, and taught the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna and gave similar teaching to Uddhava.
- (ix) Buddha was the Prophet of Ahimsa. In some accounts, instead of Buddha, we have Balarama, Krishna's own brother, as a co-Avatara - a notion which is very popular. Whilst there is no objection to bracketing Balarama with Krishna to form the complete manifestation of God, it is not necessary to betray this antagonism towards Buddha! Perhaps this "excision" was the Hindu retort to the Buddhist denunciation of the Hindu scriptures and approach to the Reality.
- (x) Kalki will appear at the end of the Kali (the present) age.
- (xi) Yajna was born of Ruchi and Akuti. It means "sacrifice" - the Spirit of

Sacrifice which, says the Bhagavatham, "relieved the great affliction of all the three worlds". Would that be we learnt this lesson at least now!

(xii) Kapila born of Kardama and Devahuti, founded the Sankhya system of philosophy, and taught his own mother, Devahuti. The wonderful teaching is found in the Bhagavatham. (xiii) Dattatreya born of Atti and Anasuya is regarded as the composite incarnation of Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Rudra (the Redeemer). The great teaching contained in the Avadhuta Gita is ascribed to Him.

(xiv) The Four Brahma-Kumaras (Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara) born of the mind of the Creator are regarded as the supreme Preceptors of the Science of the Soul.

(xv) Nara-Narayana born of Dharma and Murti shine even today in the hearts of devotees as the supreme conquerors of Lust and Anger.

(xvi) Sri Hari appeared to Dhruva and blessed him.

(xvii) Prithu "milked the earth and obtained its rich products for the benefit of the world".

(xviii) Rishabha, born of Nabhi and Sudevi, is an exemplar of the state of Paramahansa. (The first JainaTirthankara).

(xix) Hayagreeva (the Horse-Headed) Avatara revived Vedas and Vedic rituals.

(xx) Sri Hari saved the elephant-devotee Gajendra from the grip of the crocodile (an episode which has powerful appeal to all - even to animals).

(xxi) Hamsa taught Yoga to Narada.

(xxii) The presiding Deity of each Manvantara (age).

(xxiii) Dhanwantari expounded or revealed the science of Ayurveda (the Indian system of medicine).

(xiv) Vyasa, the author of the Puranas, and also the sage who gave the present order and shape to the Vedas.

A number of these Avataras can be seen to have expounded Knowledge or Dharma, though many of them have not actually destroyed wicked people. This confirms my more general interpretation of the Gita verse IV. 8.

Indians believe that at least Rama, Krishna and Vyasa are historical personalities, and identify places connected with them, which have now become places of pilgrimage. Here and there one comes across objects connected with them which the Indians believe literally, i.e, this is Krishna's foot-print or Rama's chariot, etc. Sometimes we even come across stone-idols which, the Indians believe, are the Deity self-transformed into stone. I had often doubted the veracity of such statements and ascribed them to the credulity of the Indian mind, till I read the following account by a great modern scientist Dr. Louis S.B. Leakey, in January 1963 issue of the "National Geographic" magazine, where he describes his search in Africa for clues about prehistoric beings. "When Mary or I pick up a fossil - the leg bone of an antelope, or the tusk of a hippopotamus - what we are holding in our hands is not the actual bone or tusk of that animal. The bone structure, and the proteins and gelatin within it, have long since been replaced very faithfully, to the last detail, by minerals such as silica, lime and manganese. I must have picked up a dozen stones when, without seeing it, I

sensed that one had a peculiar feel-it seemed to be a stone beetle. I looked at it closely, and nearly fell over backward. It was a stone beetle, something I thought could not exist. We have even added the fossilised breast of a bird to our collection, and one day Mary made the amazing find of the fossilised head of a large lizard. Its very eye-balls were preserved, the tongue was still sticking out of the mouth, and the creature's tiny scales were perfectly reproduced. I wanted to see whether we were dealing with mere casts, or with completely fossilised material. So I had some of the specimens (of fruits, etc.) cut into cross sections. It took a diamond cutter to get through them, but the insides of the fruits were as astonishing as the outsides. In some cases we found, preserved in stone, the whole inner structures and the seeds, just as you find them today when you cut into a fresh apple or pear. Leakey is sure that they belong to the Miocene Epoch - millions of years ago. Thank you, Dr. Leakey, you have revived my faith in the idols, and I would not blindly disbelieve in the actual idol, e.g., of Lord Venkatesa, if I am told that Venkatesa (an Avatara that took place not very long ago) actually froze into the image, and hence is still a living presence in it. Dr. Leakey also solves another problem that has faced the faithful. Even if these images are "fossilized divinities", often they far outsize the human being. Dr. Leakey's findings in the Olduvai gorge in Africa confirm the legendary belief in India that living beings were giant-sized in days of yore, and that we are gradually growing into midgets! The skull of the 200,000 year old rhinoceros Dr. Leakey discovered at Olduvai was twice the size of the modern survivor.

15. The Consummation of Love

In the Bhagavatham is retold the instructions which sage Narada gave the mother of Prahlada before the latter was born, and he sums up the entire Bhakti Yoga in four verses : "When, on hearing of the Lord's achievements, incomparable virtues and heroic deeds through His forms (Avataras) assumed for sport, the devotee sings loudly with an open throat and in a voice choked with tears, shouts and dances, his hairs standing on end due to excessive delight, nay, when he, like one possessed by an evil spirit, now laughs, now weeps, now sits in meditation, now greets the people and now, devoid of shame, exclaims: 'O Hari, O Lord of the Universe, O Narayana' with his mind fixed on the Lord, and heaving a sigh every now and then, all his bonds get loosened at that time, and his ignorance and latent desires are burnt. And, his mind and body being attuned to His, through contemplation on His pastimes, the man attains to Lord Vishnu by recourse to the highest device of devotion. The wise recognise communion with Lord Vishnu as a means in this world of putting a stop to the cycle of birth and death in the case of an embodied soul of impure mind, and they recognise it as identical with the bliss of absorption into Brahman. Therefore, worship that Ruler of your heart in your heart." (VII. 7/34-37).

From Vaidhi Bhakti arises Mukhya Bhakti. The Sadhana has blossomed into the Sadhya Bhakti. Here, the supreme love of God itself is often said to be the end, not only as a kind of glorification called "Arthavada" (extolling a spiritual practice, etc., in order to induce seekers to resort to it hyperbole), but on account of a valid psychological reason. Note that in the above quotation Bhakti is referred to as a means of getting rid of birth and death, and in another place in the same scripture, III. 29/13-14, it is said, "My devotee accepts not, in exchange for My service, the five forms of final beatitude (Moksha). The Bhakti Yoga has been declared as the highest goal : for transcending the realm of the three Gunas the devotee thereby becomes qualified for My state." Love which has a motive behind it - however exalted that motive may be - is not pure. The devotee who loves God will not run away from anything, no, not even rebirth! If he loves God because he is afraid of rebirth, then that love or devotion is not real, not for the sake of God Himself! The man in that case recognises "a rival God" as it were, from whom he wants to flee into the arms of the God he likes (not loves). That is not real Bhakti. Hence, Bhakti is spoken of as the goal itself.

There is no contradiction here. The Bhakta who rejects final beatitude attains it in any case - he does not seek for it - it is a bye product of devotion as it were. It is like saying: "I do not want to get drowned, but I want to lie down close to the bottom of the ocean for ever", "I do not want to burn myself to death, but I want to enter into this fire." The woman who accidentally gets burnt, and the woman (the great and noble Rajput princess) who entered the fire also got burnt. There is no difference here. But, what a tremendous and vital difference exists in their spirit! One goes through agony whereas the other is in bliss. Bhakti practised even with the desire for final beatitude is tainted by anxiety. Love of God as an end in itself is free from the least trace of anxiety. It is its own reward.

In Narada's description cited above we came across a number of rather puzzling characteristics of a devotee, which deserve a closer look. The Bhaktas (as also a sage) often behave like lunatics - they are not lunatics, nor are lunatics devotees of God! Scriptures dealing with devotion give us the following eight signs of Bhakti - cessation of breath, perspiration, horripilation, change of color, a husky (hoarse) voice, convulsion of the limbs, tears, and loss of consciousness. Another list is - shedding tears (ashrupata), horripilation (pulaka), tremor (kampana), weeping (rodana), laughing (hasana) perspiration (sweda), fainting (moorcha), and inability to speak (swarabhanga). Even modern psychologists have found that some of these at least do take place in an emotional state. Says Dr. Abraham Sterling in his 'Psychology Made Simple': "During strong emotion many changes occur in the organs of the body. The pupil of the eye dilates ... The speed and strength of heartbeat increases ... Blood pressure increases ... The resulting flush is one of the surest signs of emotion ... The hair tends to stand on end ... The rate and depth of breathing changes - Inhalation is slower than normal and exhalation is quicker ... The liver pours out more sugar for the muscles ... The sweat glands of the skin throw excessive amounts of perspiration ... The salivary glands are inhibited by emotion ... Emotion also stops the digestive movements ..." Though Dr. Sterling lists these as the symptoms of "strong emotion", they are weak compared to Bhakti, where all these symptoms are carried to their extremes, as it were, and the heart stops! A close study of these symptoms will also reveal several common (if crude) practices of devotees - like jumping, dancing, shouting, etc., not caused by Bhakti, but to induce it. It is an attempt to bring about the state of strong emotion by reproducing the external symptoms!

Devotion has also been compared to fire and been divided into this fourfold classification - smouldering and glowing, flaming, blazing. In the smouldering and glowing stages, the devotee practises Vaidhi or Gauna Bhakti. Flaming and blazing stages belong to Mukhya or Para Bhakti.

Another sage gives the following nine stages in Bhakti - study of devotional books and company of devotees, admiration, faith in God, devotional practices, Nishtha (steadfast love), taste for hearing and chanting the names of God, intense attachment (rati), steadiness in devotional Bhava (sthayibhava), and supreme love (maha bhava). Nishtha is also translated as firm faith - the Hebrew verb "to believe" means also "to be firm" or "to be constant", says Mrs Mary Baker Eddy. That seems to be the equivalent of Nishtha.

When, to the devotee, God is a Living Presence, either within himself or in an idol, he is no longer interested in or bound by rules and regulations which were necessary and indispensable in the earlier stages. The sapling cannot grow without the hedge - but to the fullgrown tree the hedge is nothing but a nuisance.

His attitude to that Living Presence is, as it should be, an intimate, personal relationship. He no longer regards God as some remote Being. He is not afraid, even of God. He may adopt any one of the following attitudes at any time -

- (i) Sneha : an attitude of friendship, in which one longs to meet the friend for whom he has intense affection;
- (ii) Maana : a type of self-consciousness which interferes with the enjoyment of a couple in love, though they are together - we should not forget that the devotees' self is not completely merged in God at this stage;
- (iii) Pranaya in which the lover identifies himself with the beloved;
- (iv) Raga-sneha is a kind of love attitude wherein the devotee is prepared to undergo any misery for the sake of the Lord;
- (v) Anuraga-raga is a stage in which the devotee discovers ever new sweetness in the Lord;
- (vi) Bhava is that stage of devotion which can be compared to the rays of the rising sun which herald the rising sun - similarly Bhava is that penultimate state which ushers in the final stage of Bhakti, viz.,
- (vii) Maha-Bhava or Parama Prema which is the culmination of Bhakti, where the devotee becomes one with the Lord.

Whatever may be the starting point, love of God eventually transmutes and sublimates all our emotions and liberates us. Ultimately we become one with Him, or rather we realise and experience our ever-present union with Him. As we ascend the ladder of Bhakti, each rung reveals the next higher one. Union with God reveals His true, essential, Nature - and at that stage the distinctions between Bhakti and Jnana (devotion and knowledge) vanish altogether.

To the Para Bhakta or the supreme devotee, as well as to the true Jnani or sage of wisdom, the idols, the symbols, the manifestations (special and general), human and subhuman beings, plants and minerals - all shine with the loving radiance of God. If Chaitanya went into rapturous ecstasy at the sight of the idol in the temple of Jagannath Puri, he went into equally intense ecstasy at the sight of the "blue" sea (which to him was his Beloved Krishna), whose waves were His hands beckoning Chaitanya to come to Him! If the image in the Srirangam temple in South India was the Living Presence of God to Sri Ramanuja, he did not fail to recognise the Presence in his own heart and sanction the worship of his own image.

Even in their behaviour the devotee and the sage are alike. As seekers, they are both humble - they may use different formulas (the Jnani says 'the little ego is unreal', and the devotee says 'the ego is full of evil, which must be crushed by total humility'). But the full-fledged Jnani declares : 'I am the Satchidananda Brahman', and the Para-Bhakta declares : 'The Lord, He is the sole reality in me'. Neither of them clings to the old notion of 'littleness'. To do so would be blaspheming against the Reality of God. The true devotee or the sage is neither a vain egotist, nor a man of sham hypocritical humility. He is truly humble in the realisation that the little personality is naught, but the Living Presence within is the All.

What is the nature of a true devotee? His characteristics have been inimitably described by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita, XII Chapter. This description

does not, need nor deserve (!) to be commented upon - and it would be presumptuous to do so. No aspirant, especially one whose "speciality" is devotion, should fail to recite this chapter of the Gita every day and the last eight verses (known as Amritashtakam) which describe the nature of a Bhakta must be on the devotee's lips every moment, or at least several times a day.

These characteristics of a true devotee are the same as those of a Karma Yogi or a Jnani or sage. In essence he is desireless, not attached to anybody or anything, is even-minded in the pairs of opposites, is devoted to God with all his being, loves and is loved by all, an expert in the art of living (and so is not a lazy, starry-eyed dreamer!) - and to this we should add another characteristic given elsewhere in the Gita, viz., that the devotee attains to Mat-Bhava (the Bhava of God Himself). In simple words: he is non-different from God Himself and does what He wills. He is the very Self and the greatest benefactor of all beings.

What are the fruits of devotion? As we have seen, the real devotee of the Lord declines even to think of anything other than love itself as worth attaining. He does not long for any other rewards, nor pray for them nor work for them - but automatically attains to the following five states of Beatitude:

(i) Salokya (residence in the Kingdom of God). On departing from this world (or during ecstasy) the devotee is transported to the Kingdom of God, where he continues his practice of God-Love which leads him to

(ii) Sarsti (enjoying the powers of God). This is omitted in popular classifications of the Beatitude, obviously for the simple reason that the devotee intent on attaining union with God will not even "look" at these powers, much less use them. It is mentioned in Srimad Bhagavatham, however, as one of the Beatitudes (III. 29/13). The five special powers of God are creation, preservation, redemption, veiling, and bestowal of grace. Also the six qualities that the word Bhagavan denotes are all divine powers (Aiswarya), righteousness (Dharma), wealth of all kinds (Sri), honor or glory (Yasas), knowledge (Jnana), and renunciation or dispassion (Vairagya). (Another version substitutes Bala or strength for Dharma, but it is strength of right, not of might.) It is easy to see that when these powers are granted by the Lord, to the devotee, his dispassion or spirit of renunciation makes him ignore them! Hence, too, popular scriptures omit this state of Beatitude.

(iii) In the Kingdom of God, as the devotee continues his practice of Bhakti, he gets closer to God : Samipya. He continually gazes on Him, as it were, and, in accordance with the Bhramara-keeta-nyaya (wasp-and-worm theory), he attains to

(iv) Sarupya (the form of God). This is the wasp-and-worm theory: the wasp picks up a worm and brings it to its hole, deposits it there and goes out to fetch more. As it leaves the hole, it stings the worm. The worm thus stung suffers agony and lives in constant and whole-souled dread of the wasp's return. This constant "meditation" on the wasp metamorphoses the worm into a wasp! The devotee meditating on God gets His Form. We are told in the Bhagavatham that the devotee rejects even this! The reason is this: even at this stage there is a trace of "separateness" from God - consequently there is the risk of a downfall. This risk is

illustrated in the downfall of the Gate-Keepers of Vishnu, who had acquired His Form, but since they had not attained total union with the Lord, bad traces of dual-consciousness which made them suspect the intentions of the great sages Sanaka, etc., who "sentenced" the gate-keepers to three births in the mortal world. Persevering his devotional practice even at this stage, the devotee becomes one with God.

(v) Sayujya (union with God).

Another special fruit of devotion which saints who have adopted this Path emphasise greatly is: the devotee becomes God's beloved. God Himself removes the obstacles on his path, showers His Grace upon him, guides him, and eventually reveals Himself to him. As Lord Rama said: "If one surrenders himself to Me and says but once with all his heart 'I am Thine, O Lord', I offer him omniprotection." Hence these saints compare devotion to crossing the ocean of transmigration on the ship of Grace, whereas the other paths, like Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga, are compared to swimming with one's own strength and resources, and against the heavy odds of inner and outer obstacles. The devotee is also regarded as the kitten (who are carried about by the cat - God), whereas the Jnani is like the young one of a monkey (which clings to the mother with its own strength, running the risk of dropping away from her).

The oft-quoted verse of the Gita wherein the Lord promises to look after the Yogakshema (welfare) of His devotee who thinks of Him constantly, is rather a statement of universal fact. Does the Lord look after the welfare of only His devotees? No. Who looks after the welfare of the atheist? The Lord only. Around that verse of the Gita have been woven countless instances of the miraculous ways in which the Lord has rushed to the succour of the devotee. That is true. But it is not for that sake that the devotee thinks of Him constantly! The devotee who thinks of the Lord constantly puts himself in total atonement with Him, so that every thought or wish that arises in him stimulates the Cosmic Power to fulfil it.

16. Practical Hints

Let us find a few practical hints which may be of use in the practice of Bhakti Yoga. In a famous verse, a sage holds up Bhakti alone as the requisite of Bhakti - what is needed to love God? Love of course. Translated, the verse means: "What was the conduct or behavior of the hunter! Was not Dhruva a young boy? Was the elephant Gajendra a learned being? Was Kubja the hunch-back woman very beautiful? Did Sudhama (Kuchela) offer great wealth to the Lord in devotion? Vidura (servant-maid's son) did not belong to a high caste. Ugrasena (the father of Kamsa) was not very mighty. (Yet all these earned the supreme grace of the Lord) Because the Lord is pleased only with Bhakti and does not count on other qualifications." And Ramanuja goes to the extent of proclaiming that even Jnana (the highest wisdom) is only a Sadhana (aid) to Bhakti! For you love intensely only that whose nature and qualities you know of.

Yet from the vast Bhakti-literature we can glean the following hints which will be of use to the Bhakta:

- (a) Our Bhakti should be
 - (i) Nishkamyā - without ulterior motive or selfish desires,
 - (ii) Ananya - one pointed, single-aimed and undivided,
 - (iii) Avyabhi-charini - whole-souled without letting our heart long for any other object in the three worlds,
 - (iv) Akhanda - unbroken and continuous, like the flow of oil from one vessel to another,
 - (v) Sadachara sahita - accompanied by noble qualities, character and conduct,
 - (vi) Shraddhamayi - full of faith, sincerity and seriousness.

- (b) The basic framework of Bhakti Yoga must become habitual - our daily programme should include repetition of His Name, singing hymns, worship of an image, study of His Life and Teachings, and discussing His glories with others. Whether there is the requisite Bhava or not, these should be gone through daily. Draw up a daily routine setting apart a couple of the early morning hours (4.30 to 6.30) for systematic and regular practice of these.

- (c) To these must be added such practices as are conducive to the growth of God-Love - occasional fasting, celebration of holy days, etc., on which the whole time must be spent in devotional practices.

- (d) Lust, anger, greed and pride should be kept far away from the heart.

- (e) The three Ishanas (desires) should be abandoned - they are
 - (i) desire for wealth,
 - (ii) desire for wife and children,
 - (iii) desire for name, fame, power and heaven.

- (f) By regular and diligent practice, we should endeavour to "imitate" the

characteristics of the Bhakta, enumerated in the twelfth chapter of the Gita. We should rise above the pairs of opposites. But, we should beware of self-deception. It will not do to imagine, when we are in the kindergarten-class that we have a 'doctorate' in philosophy - idol worship, study of scriptures, Japa, etc., are indispensable in the initial stages and, whilst endeavouring to feel the presence of God in all everywhere, we should never give up these wholesome practices.

(g) We should understand the power of the Lord's Maya and constantly remember the Lord's admonition that "only they who constantly resort to Me cross this Maya".

(h) From a little French boy in Tananarive I learnt a great lesson. We were in a doctor's house. The boy had defective vision. He used to come to us and play with us; but every few minutes he would run to his mother, touch her and affectionately call her "Mamma, mamma" without any rhyme or reason whatsoever, and then return to us. We can live and work in this world. But it is imperative that every few minutes or hours, we should deliberately and consciously withdraw the mind from the world and "go to the Lord's Feet". Here Japa of the Mantra and visualisation of His Form will help us.

(i) We should be reluctant to waste even a single moment of our precious life, and cultivate the habit of constant remembrance of the Lord, through His Name.

(j) The formula, "Thy will be done, my Lord - I want nothing" should be constantly on our lips and in our heart.

(k) We should combine selfless service of humanity with Narayana-Bhava, study of Advaitic scriptures which treat of the identity of the individual soul with the Supreme Being, and also meditation as taught by Patanjali Maharshi along with our practice of God-Love for quick progress.

(l) We should diligently practise the lower forms of Bhakti allowing natural and gradual growth from one stage to the other - from Gauna or Vaidhi to Ragatmika or Mukhya Bhakti, and then to Para Bhakti or Supreme Devotion which is the goal. That is the path to the realisation of the Reality of God. The man who started feeling he was a spark of God loses himself in God-Love and discovers He is a conflagration. The dew-drop slips into the shining sea.

(m) Chaitanya gives the following five as useful practices for devotees : company of sages, worship of the Lord, study of scriptures, taking God's Name and living in Brindavan (associated with the Life of Lord Krishna).

(n) We should serve all, specially the sick, the poor and the afflicted, feeling the Presence of God in them and in us. All the above must be systematically practised daily, and we should draw up a "daily routine" which includes all these items. Immediately on waking and before retiring to bed, we should spend a few minutes in repetition of His Names and prayer.

Concluding prayers

Om Trayambakam yajaamahe sugandhim pushtivardhanam, urvaarukamiva bandhanaanmrityormuksheeya maamritaat.

We worship the Lord; may He liberate us from death.

Om Sarveshaam Svasti bhavatu, sarveshaam shaantir bhavatu, sarveshaam poornam bhavatu, sarveshaam mangalam bhavatu.

May all be blessed with well-being, auspiciousness, peace, and fullness.

Sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu niraamayaah, sarve bhadraani pasyantu maa kaschid dukkhabhaagbhavet.

May all be happy and free from illness. May all see only good : and may no ill befall anyone.

Asato maa sadgamaya, tamaso maa jyotirgamaya, mrityormaa amritam gamaya,
O Lord, lead me on from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to Light and from mortality to Immortality.

Om Poornamadah poornamidam poornaat poornamudachyate poornasya poornamaadaaya poornamevaavasishyate,

Om shaantih shaantih shaantih !

The Lord is full ; the creation is also full. The latter has come out of the Lord, and yet the Lord is ever full.

Om peace, peace, peace.