

Experiences in Bhakti: the Science Celestial

O. B. L. Kapoor
(Ādikeśava Dāsa)

Edited, annotated, and introduced
by
Neal Delmonico

Blazing Sapphire Press
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Contents

Publisher's Preface	ix
Editor's Preface (Second Edition)	xi
1 What is <i>Bhakti</i>?	3
1.1 <i>Bhakti</i> , a Function of the <i>Hlādinī-śakti</i>	4
1.2 <i>Bhakti</i> , the Selfless, Loving Service of Bhagavān . . .	4
1.3 <i>Bhakti</i> , a Spiritual Gravitational Force	5
1.4 <i>Bhakti</i> , the Only Way to Attain Bhagavān	7
1.5 <i>Bhakti</i> , the Essence of All Religions	8
2 Is <i>Bhakti</i> a Science?	9
2.1 <i>Bhakti</i> is Science in a Higher Sense	10
2.2 <i>Bhakti</i> Properly Called a Science	11
2.3 <i>Bhakti</i> Alone Acquires Knowledge of God	12
2.4 <i>Bhakti</i> Alone Purifies the Understanding and Senses	16
2.5 The Laws of the Science of <i>Bhakti</i> Alone are Certain	18

3	The Laws of <i>Bhakti</i>	23
3.1	The Law of Gravitation	23
3.1.1	Examples	25
3.1.1.1	Bāla-gopāla served by Kṛṣṇa Prema	25
3.1.1.2	Śrī Kṛṣṇa Candramā served by Lālā Bābu	26
3.1.1.3	Gaura and Nitāi Served by Pisi Mā Gosvāminī (Candraśaśī)	27
3.2	The Law of Reciprocation	29
3.3	The Law of Subjugation	33
3.4	The Law of Unification	37
4	Are the Laws of the Science of <i>Bhakti</i> Verifiable?	43
4.1	The Laws of <i>Bhakti</i> Do Not Need Verification Because They Are Based on Revelation	43
4.2	The Validity of Revelation is Vindicated by Modern Science	44
4.3	Though Not Needed, the Laws of <i>Bhakti</i> Can Be Verified	45
5	Verification of the Law of Gravitation	49
5.1	<i>Bhakti</i> in the Hearts of the Devotees	49
5.2	Examples	50
5.2.1	Lokanātha Gosvāmin and Ṭhākura Rādhāvinoda	50
5.2.2	Sanātana Gosvāmin and Ṭhākura Madanagopāla	52

5.2.3	Gaurāṅga Dāsa Bābā and Girirāja	54
5.2.4	Jaikṛṣṇa Dāsa Bābā and Śrī Kṛṣṇa	55
5.2.5	Gauracaraṇa Dāsa Bābā and Dāujī (Balarāma)	58
5.2.6	Śrī Rādhāramaṇacaraṇa Dāsa Deva	59
5.3	Kṛṣṇa Attracted by Offerings	63
5.4	Examples	64
5.4.1	The Khīr of Pisi Mā Gosvāminī	64
5.4.2	Ṭhākura Madanamohana and the Gūjarī's Milk	66
5.4.3	Lord Jagannātha and the Khicuri of Karamā Bāi	69
5.4.4	Govindadeva and the Gardener's Pomegran- ate	72
5.5	Kṛṣṇa Attracted by Dance, <i>Kīrtana</i> and Talks	75
5.6	Examples	77
5.6.1	The Song of the Cowherd Girls and Śrī Kṛṣṇa	77
5.6.2	Stories about Kṛṣṇa	78
5.6.3	Recitation of the <i>Bhāgavata</i>	80
5.6.4	The <i>Saṅkīrtana</i> of Ṭhākura Candra Sinha . . .	82
5.6.5	The <i>Saṅkīrtana</i> of Harisevakajī	84
6	Verification of the Law of Reciprocation	87
6.1	Examples	88
6.1.1	Ṭhākura and Dhannā Jāta	88
6.1.2	Gopāla and Kṛṣṇaprema (Ronald Nixon) . . .	93
6.1.3	Gopīnātha and Govinda Ghoṣa	95

6.1.4	Gopāla and Durgī Mā	98
6.1.5	Raṅganātha and Āṇḍāla	103
6.1.6	Giridhara Gopāla and Mīrā	106
6.1.7	Śrī Viśvanātha Cakravartin and the Mañjarī Identity	111
6.1.8	Sacred Images and the Feelings of the <i>Bhakta</i>	114
7	Verification of the Law of Subjugation	117
7.1	Examples	118
7.1.1	Bhagavān as Barber Sena and Rāja Vīrasimha	118
7.1.2	Bhagavān as Parasarāma Khātī and Rāja Jaya- mala	119
7.1.3	Bhagavān as Boatman and Sanehī Rāma . . .	121
7.1.4	Bhagavān as Servant in the Temple of Ma- danamohana and Tāja Khān	122
7.1.5	Bhagavān as Demonstrator at Mahārāja's Col- lege, Jaipur, and Mādho Lāla Māthura	127
8	Verification of the Law of Unification	131
8.1	Examples	133
8.1.1	Kṛṣṇa Himself Fought a War for Rāja Jaya- mala Rāṭhōra	133
8.1.2	Girirāja Himself Brought Grace-food for Lālā Bābu	136
8.1.3	Rādhā Brought Food for Madhusūdana Dāsa Bābājī	138
8.1.4	Kṛṣṇa Pays Revenue for Kīśana Sinha Rā- ṭhōra	140

8.1.5	Śrī Rādhā Restored the Eyes of the Blind Bābā of Madanaṭera	145
8.1.6	Lord Jagannātha Lied to Save Jagadbandhu Mahāpātra	148
8.1.7	Lord Jagannātha Rendered Menial Service to Mādhava Dāsa Bābā	153
8.1.8	Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa Massaged Mā Maṇi	159

Publisher's Preface

Thank you God, Guru, and Vaishnavas for the opportunity to publish and write a few words about this fine book, written by a dear friend and mentor. I was fortunate to have spent a great deal of time with Dr. Kapoor during the years of the late 1970s and 1980s. After several years of friendship, he invited me one day to stay in an upper room of his house and thus I stayed with him for several months. We talked then about my translating his Hindi books into English for a Western audience. When I later realized my lack of commitment to spending the time necessary to master the language, I pleaded with him to translate them himself into English. I found out later that many years after my stay with him he had done exactly that. I thank him from the depths of my heart and am sorry I did not have a chance to see him in the latter years of his life.

The book republished here is one of my favorite books by Dr. Kapoor, and since it is now out of print, Nitai Dasji and I wanted to see it republished. We undertook the republication of this work with the permission and encouragement of Dr. Kapoor's son Śrī Gopesh Kapoor. The republication of this fine work is ninety-nine percent the work of Nitai Dasji who painstakingly typed the whole book into the computer and then carefully edited the work into its current state. I spent only a small amount of time proof-reading, giving suggestions here and there to smooth out a few rough sentences. So congratulations and great thanks go to him.

Dr. Kapoor was a great *bhakta*. He was instrumental in introducing me to many of the great *bhakta-sādhus* (devotee saints) of his own illustrious lineage, that of Śrī Rādhāramaṇ Caraṇ Dās Dev. This included meeting Śrī Chandrashekhara Das Babaji, whom Dr. Kapoor considered to be a great *siddha puruṣa* (a human being perfected in the realization of the tradition) and who lived in one of the forests of Vraja. It was a wonderful time for me, a time filled with great blessings!

In reading this book, I hope you will find great understanding and faith, and the inspiration to follow the path of selfless, loving devotion to Bhagavān. It is my sincere wish that we all reap the fruit of *bhagavat-prema* (divine love of God), taste it and nourish our life by it—and in so doing let its contagion spread to the others around us by our very existences!

In closing, I want to dedicate sincerely any merit this effort might generate to Dr. Kapoor himself—a great man and *sādhu* and a dear friend of my heart—to his illustrious lineage of gurus—starting with his own blessed guru-dev, Śrī Śrī 108 Gaurāṅga Dās Bābājī, his *parama* guru-dev, Śrī Śrī 108 Rām Dās Bābājī Mahārāj, his *parameṣṭhi* guru-dev, Śrī Śrī 1008 Rādhāramaṇ Caraṇ Dās Dev—and to all people who want to attain, with clarity and depth, selfless loving devotion to God and Guru.

Jaya Śrī Guru-Vaiṣṇava!

Jagadish Das
Kirksville, Missouri
September 1, 2006

Editor's Preface (Second Edition)

Dr. O. B. L. Kapoor was a brilliant man and a great devotee of Krishna. His earlier book, *The Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya*, has now become a classic, respected and studied by devotee and scholar alike. In that one volume, one could say, he accomplished more than others have in fifty. Though he was a devout Vaiṣṇava, he had the trained mind and sensitivity of a philosopher and a scholar, and thus he had a highly developed ability to think deeply about things. Certainly, his remarks about Śrī Caitanya, in the preface of the aforementioned book, apply equally well to Dr. Kapoor:

It is a mistake to suppose that the predominance of emotions in the life of a devotee renders him incapable of serious philosophical thinking. On the contrary, his understanding is so developed and purified that his grasp of things is more intuitive than ratiocinative and his knowledge of reality is more intimate and complete. His emotions are the natural outcome of his close apprehension of Reality.¹

While I am not sure how far many of us are willing to go in considering the devotee's knowledge to be "more intimate and

¹Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya*, "Preface," p. xi.

complete,"² one can concede that experiencing powerful, religious emotions does not necessarily disqualify one from thinking well philosophically. Dr. Kapoor's ability to think philosophically is what makes his works such a pleasure to read and also such great sources of edification and understanding. His works have a breadth and richness to them that is usually missing in works written to support a particular religious tradition, especially a tradition that foregrounds emotion. As in the present work, in which he cites the words and thoughts of several great twentieth century scientists, Kapoor often refers to the ideas of great thinkers of both the East and the West. This practice serves to bring Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism out of its shell and into the arena of world philosophical and religious discourse where it surely belongs. Moreover, his clear and insightful presentation of the ideas and practices of the Caitanya tradition makes them easily understandable to twenty-first century readers from a variety of cultures, religious traditions, and world views. This, too, he commented on in the preface to his *Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya*:

It is not necessary for a devotee, who is in direct and intimate touch with reality, to supplement his knowledge by undergoing training in one of the accredited schools of learning. But Śrī Caitanya had the additional advantage of high scholarship, which enabled him to express his thoughts with the precision, accuracy, and consistency that characterizes a system of philosophy.³

There is an intimate connection between the ability to express oneself and the ability to think. It is in this, surely, that Dr. Kapoor excels.

²Knowing the maker intimately does not necessarily entail intimate knowledge of what the maker has made. Both might remain essentially beyond the knowing capacity of the knower.

³ibid.

Apart from the classic work mentioned above, Dr. Kapoor has written many other books in English and his native Hindi. I will not list them all here. A complete list of his English works can be found in the bibliography. Some of his books are still available from various sources, but many are now out of print and hard to come by. It is, therefore, a great pleasure for us at Blazing Sapphire Press to announce that we are working with Dr. Kapoor's son Śrī Gopesh Kapoor to bring back into publication the books of the good doctor that have gone out of print. While Śrī Gopesh Kapoor is busily engaged in having the Hindi works of his father reprinted in India, we are re-editing and re-issuing his major works in English here in the USA and Europe. This volume is the first result of those efforts. Other volumes now out of print are currently being worked on and will be available in the future. Moreover, as copies of the older editions are exhausted, they, too, will be taken up for republication. Eventually we hope to have the whole corpus of Dr. Kapoor's works available in fine editions here and around the world. Śrī Gopesh informs me that this was one of his father's greatest wishes and deepest concerns during his last days here on earth.

On a more personal note Dr. Kapoor was a dear friend and a mentor of mine many long years ago. He was then a healthy man in his 60s, recently retired from a distinguished career of teaching philosophy at several colleges and his final position as the principal of the Government College at Gyanpur/Rampur near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. I lived in Vrindaban for a year or two back in the mid-1970s, and I used to visit him in the afternoons when I had some spare time. His timely intervention resulted in a profound change in the direction of my life, one which I have never had cause to regret.

We would sit in his parlor talking for hours about all aspects of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism and about his experiences as a practicing member of the tradition. He told me how he had started out as a young philosopher who embraced the non-dualist (Advaita) philosophical position of Vedānta and had seen that philosophy

profoundly critiqued during a series of lectures by the Vaiṣṇava teacher, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, in the 1930s. After that, he became a disciple of that Vaiṣṇava savant and took up the study and practice of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. It was later, in the 1960s, I believe, that Kapoor and his wife met the great Vaiṣṇava saint Śrī Gaurāṅga Dāsa Bābā, a disciple of Rāma Dāsa Bābā (1876-1953) of the *Nitāi Gaura Rādhā Śyām* tradition.⁴ Dr. Kapoor told me that as soon as they met the saint, he and his wife were overcome with powerful religious emotions and knew that he was the spiritual guide they had been waiting for. They became his disciples and visited him often at his *āśrama* on Ramanreti road in Vrindaban.

Every time we were together he would be busy reciting the names of Kṛṣṇa under his breath and moving a string of beads in a small bag to keep count of his recitations. He told me that his guru, Śrī Gaurāṅga Dāsa Bābā, and the tradition of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism to which he belonged recommended such constant and counted chanting. Also, unless I am mistaken, we discussed during that period many of the ideas found in this book. I believe he was in the process of writing it at the time, though it was not published until nearly twenty years later. That personal connection with the book is certainly one of the reasons I am so pleased to be able to present a new edition of *Experiences in Bhakti*, a book that is arguably among his finest.

This book is about *bhakti*, a difficult term and concept to translate into a non-Indic language. It is often translated as "devotion" in English and it does bear a similarity to that idea and to the idea of "piety." But, *bhakti* carries with it a lot more than is found in either of the ideas of devotion or piety. For example, it contains the idea of relationship between a devotee and whatever being that devotee recognizes as god. Therefore, Dr. Kapoor chose to leave *bhakti* largely untranslated in this book and I have continued that practice. The whole book is in fact an effort to elucidate or unpack

⁴This is a relatively modern movement or sub-sect of the Caitanya tradition that was founded in the 19th century by the saint Śrī Rādhāramaṇa Caraṇa Dāsa Bābā (1853-1905).

the idea of *bhakti*.

Dr. Kapoor provided a useful overview of his work in his preface to the first edition:

In the first chapter of the book the transcendental character of *bhakti* has been explained and it has been emphasized that *bhakti* is an essential part of every religious discipline that leads to God. In the second an attempt has been made to prove that *bhakti* alone is a science in the real sense of the term. Modern science has already ceased to lay claim to any knowledge of the Truth or the Ultimate Reality as such. It disbelieves in the very existence of matter, which nineteenth century scientists regarded as the ultimate reality. Its discoveries necessarily point to the existence of a conscious being behind what is called matter, which, it is humble enough to confess, it cannot know. It also confesses that its laws are not certain, but only probable to the extent that they make life possible.

The third chapter enunciates and explains the four fundamental laws of *bhakti*. The fourth states that the laws of *bhakti* do not stand in need of verification because they are of divine origin, but stresses that they are experimentally verifiable like the laws of any other science.

The last four chapters show how the laws of *bhakti* already stand verified by the experiences of the saints. One chapter is devoted to each law and numerous experiences from the lives of the saints have been adduced to prove it.

The experiences have been carefully selected from a wide range of biographical literature pertaining to the saints who pursued the path of pure *bhakti*. They reveal the inner workings of the spiritual world of *bhakti*

and inspire fresh hope and confidence in the hearts of people who have lost their way in the maze of *māyā* and stand badly in need of light and guidance.⁵

Thus, the early chapters place *bhakti* in a broader context, comparing it to modern science and placing it in the context of what we now call the History of Religions. In the later chapters, Dr. Kapoor organizes a plethora of Vaiṣṇava stories which illustrate *bhakti* as it is known in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, the tradition which identifies the supreme being as Kṛṣṇa.

What is *bhakti*, then? *Bhakti* is primarily a state of mind. To ordinary people it may even seem like a mad state of mind. Speaking to stone or metal images or to ethereal beings who cannot be seen by others, sometimes crying profusely, sometimes trembling violently, sometimes collapsing in faints, sometimes shouting out loud and laughing: these are some of the products of the *bhakti* state of mind. The stories Dr. Kapoor has gathered to demonstrate his four principles of *bhakti* are filled with such things and many more besides. Theologically speaking, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas believe *bhakti* to be the presence in a person's mind of an aspect of one of Kṛṣṇa's powers, called the *hlādinī-śakti*, the pleasure-giving power. Its presence in the mind of a person makes him or her a source of great pleasure for Kṛṣṇa and coincidentally gives that person great pleasure as well, causing that person to feel intense attraction for Kṛṣṇa and often to behave in ways considered insane in many cultures.⁶ That pleasure-giving power is not believed to be a natural product. Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmin describes it as being a special kind of pure goodness or pure being (*śuddha-sattva-viśeṣātman*).⁷ It comes from outside of the natural world, descends into the mind of a person and fills it like a fragrance.⁸ That fragrance, it so happens,

⁵Kapoor, *Experiences in Bhakti: the Science Celestial*, First Edition, Preface, xi-xii.

⁶Śrī Jīva Gosvāmin, *Prīti-sandarbhā*, para 65.

⁷Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmin, *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, 1.3.1.

⁸*ibid.*, 1.3.4.

is irresistible to Kṛṣṇa who is drawn to it like a bee to a blossoming flower. That power, therefore, is a supernatural power. Those into whom it descends become like persons possessed, and that to some degree explains the similarities between *bhakti* and madness.

Dr. Kapoor's dozens of carefully selected and sweetly told stories illustrate the *bhakti* experiences of saints in his tradition and in other closely related traditions, as hagiography records them. Because Dr. Kapoor is a fine rhetorician as well as an encyclopedia of Vaiṣṇava stories, his presentation is attractive, carefully organized, and (to the right audience) persuasive. But is *bhakti* a science? Because this is one of the major directions of Dr. Kapoor's argument in this book, it is worth looking at this question in the context of religious studies generally.

Bhakti certainly may play an important role in scientific endeavors. For instance, it has an important part to play in the scientific or academic study of religion, as do numerous other religious phenomena from around the world. One major methodology of the academic study of religion is called the History of Religions, a discipline that has its roots in the earlier European study of religion called in German *Religionswissenschaft*. According to Casell's German dictionary, *wissenschaft* means "science or knowledge." So the word *religionswissenschaft* means the "science of religions." This is, of course, an older usage of the word "science" in which it means a field or an area of study, a body of knowledge, more than a particular methodology of study. But, methodology was also a consideration in the "science of religions." Since the word science in English has largely lost that older meaning, those who introduced the "scientific" study of religion into the academic scene in the United States preferred to call it the History of Religions. Thus, there seems no question at all but that *bhakti* should form a part of the study of the History of Religions. One might even designate a sub-area of that discipline that is devoted to the study of *bhakti* and call it *Bhaktiwissenschaft*. This book by Dr. Kapoor would certainly be an important contribution to that field. Using a kind of informal phenomenology as his methodol-

ogy, Kapoor isolates four important features of *bhakti* as it has been experienced and written about in India. Continuing the metaphor of science, he refers to them as the Law of Gravitation, the Law of Reciprocation, the Law of Subjugation, and the Law of Unification. Using these terms, Kapoor attempts to unpack the relational dynamics that obtain between the two parties involved in *bhakti*, the devotee, called the *bhakta*, and the Lord, called Bhagavān. One could apply the dynamics of *bhakti* and its principles to aspects of many religious traditions in other parts of the world. But this is not quite what Dr. Kapoor had in mind when he argues that *bhakti* is science.

Dr. Kapoor wants to argue that *bhakti* is “real” science, suggesting that what currently goes by the name of science is less real science. In arguing this, he is employing one of the old informal fallacies of logic: the fallacy of equivocation. The fallacy of equivocation is explained thus by Irving M. Copi:

Most words have more than one literal meaning, as the word “pen” may denote either an instrument for writing or an enclosure for animals. When we keep these different meanings apart, no difficulty arises. But when we confuse the different meanings a single word or phrase may have, using it in different senses in the same context, we are using it equivocally. If the context happens to be an argument, we commit the Fallacy of Equivocation.⁹

Dr. Kapoor uses the word science in two different senses in the same context, the context of arguing that *bhakti* is science. One sense is the older sense of science mentioned above: a realm or body of knowledge. The other sense is that of science as it is used today for empirically verifiable, experimentally tested knowledge.

⁹Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, p. 113. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 7th edition, 1986)

One can agree with Dr. Kapoor that *bhakti* is science in the old sense but still disagree with him about *bhakti* being science in the modern sense. Why the equivocation? It is really science in the modern sense that has the prestige he wants *bhakti* to have,¹⁰ not science in the old sense which was a mixture of knowledge, opinion, and belief. Thus, he says:

But *bhakti* is science in a higher sense for the very reason that it is based on faith. It is a science just because, fundamentally and primarily, it is not the result of any experiments conducted by men, but because it is based on revelation or truths revealed to us by God himself, which are even more sure and certain than the conclusions of science, based on observation and experiments made by man with his limited understanding and senses.¹¹

However, if *bhakti* is not the result of any experiments conducted by men, then it is not modern science, because knowledge verified by experiments conducted by men is what we mean by today's science. Something based on revelation is based on faith. One needs faith to accept a text as a revelation from God. There is no way of verifying that a particular text is indeed a revelation from God. Thus, there is no escaping the importance of faith in discussing religious experience. As the great Latin theologian of early Christianity, Tertullian, said: "I believe because it is absurd; it is certain because it is impossible."¹²

¹⁰Kapoor, *Experiences in Bhakti*, Chapter 2, p. 9.

¹¹*ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, Chapter Five. His actual words were: "The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible." Translation by Dr. Holmes Kirby, Peter. "Tertullian." Early Christian Writings. 2006. 16 Nov. 2006 <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/tertullian.html>.

Faith, called in Sanskrit *śraddhā*, is considered fundamentally important by the classic writers on *bhakti*. Śrī Rūpa Gosvāmin says, for instance, *ādau śraddhā*, "at the beginning there is faith."¹³ Śrī Jīva, commenting on that passage, says: "In the beginning, that is, at first, through hearing the scriptures in the association of holy persons there arises faith, which means belief in the meanings of those texts."¹⁴ Śrī Mukunda Dāsa Gosvāmin commenting on the same passage says: "In the beginning, that is, first of all, by the appearance of some good fortune, there is faith in the *bhakti* of Kṛṣṇa."¹⁵ Faith operates in circumstances of uncertainty or doubt. In calling *bhakti* science, Dr. Kapoor appears here to be trying to replace faith in the face of uncertainty with the certainty of science. But, as he himself notes, empirical science is deeply and deliberately uncertain. That is, perhaps, its greatest strength and beauty. That is, indeed, its greatest lesson to those of us who are not scientists: one can be enormously successful and yet uncertain. In modern empirical science, nothing is accepted as true without repeatable testing and verification. Even one's pet theories if they turn out to not to fit the facts must be rejected or altered in order to bring them in line with the results of observation and experimentation. One can rely on those theories that pass the process of verification, and it is reliance on such theories and their practical applications that has so dramatically transformed the world in the last century or two. But, even those verified theories are considered only probable. For Dr. Kapoor, though, real science is the child of certainty, or vice versa.

Bhakti, on the other hand, is fundamentally unverifiable. I said previously that it was a state of mind, a type of pleasurable experience that comes from being in relationship with Bhagavān. As a state of mind, its results in speech, action, and physical reaction are indistinguishable from the results of other states of mind. And there is no way to be certain what is in someone's heart. It

¹³Śrī Rūpa, *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, 1.4.15.

¹⁴Śrī Jīva Gosvāmin, *Durgamasāṅgamanī*, on 1.4.15.

¹⁵Śrī Mukunda Dāsa Gosvāmin, *Artha-ratnālpa-dīpikā*, on 1.4.15.

may contain *bhakti* or it may contain some other motivating factor. There is no brain-wave unique to *bhakti* that can be identified and measured and that proves someone is in a *bhakti* state, a state of genuine relationship with the supreme being. If one cannot tell if someone has *bhakti*, one cannot tell if what that person does or says is an example or result of *bhakti*. If one cannot tell if something is a result of *bhakti*, one does not know if it is supportive of the laws of *bhakti*. Therefore, the evidence that Dr. Kapoor musters may not really be proof of anything. It is anecdotal, not the result of carefully controlled, experimental observations. Here again one needs faith, faith in the accounts of the lives of the *bhakti* saints that Dr. Kapoor draws his examples from, faith in the existence of *bhakti* as relationship, and faith in his interpretation and retelling of the stories.

How is it then that Dr. Kapoor, who was such a careful thinker, appeals to equivocation in making his case for *bhakti* as science? My sense is that Dr. Kapoor is here not wearing the cap of a logician. Instead he is practicing rhetoric, the art of persuasion. Thus, in addition to unpacking the idea of *bhakti* through his laws and the stories of the *bhakti* saints, he is playing the role of the rhetorician here, using the art to persuade his readers that they should become *bhaktas* or at least come to a higher appreciation of *bhakti*. The art of persuasive speaking is as old as history. Aristotle devotes a whole treatise to it as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.”¹⁶ Note that rhetoric requires the observance or application of all available means of persuasion for the chosen audience, even the appropriate fallacies. Rhetoric’s object is persuasion, not necessarily arrival at the truth. What one tries to persuade others of may indeed be the truth; certainly Dr. Kapoor’s project was to make *his* truth as attractive as possible.

Persuasion is achieved by three means, Aristotle tells us: the personal character of the speaker, putting the audience in a certain

¹⁶Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited with an introduction by Richard McKeon, *Rhetorica*, 1.2, p. 1329. (New York: Random House, 1941)

frame of mind and the "proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself."¹⁷ Dr. Kapoor uses all three of these means very effectively in this work. His character as a learned and trustworthy scholar and philosopher contributes to his ability to persuade his readers, and his ability to evoke the sentiments of wonder and astonishment in them through his storytelling adds to the effectiveness of his presentation. Finally, the proof he adduces in the book which centers around the enthymeme, "*bhakti* is certain, therefore it is science,"¹⁸ and the inductive evidence of the sheer volume of stories from the lives of the saints greatly enhances the persuasive power of the text.

In the final analysis, those who want to be persuaded will be swept away by Dr. Kapoor's book. Those who do not want to be persuaded will be charmed and maybe even tempted to persuasion. It is unfortunate that though Dr. Kapoor wrote this book in the 1970s and 1980s all the sources for his scientific understanding of the nature of reality were from the 1920s and 1930s. It would have been wonderful to see a mind as rich as his reflect on more recent scientific theories like string theory, parallel or holographic universes, big bangs and so forth. In the end, though, all of this book's readers, persuaded and unpersuaded, will find they have learned a great deal about *bhakti* and will have heard dozens of delightful stories.

¹⁷ibid.

¹⁸The whole syllogism from which the enthymeme draws its two parts would be: "everything certain is science; *bhakti* is certain; therefore, *bhakti* is science."

Experiences in Bhakti: the Science Celestial

Chapter 1

What is *Bhakti*?

Bhakti cannot be easily defined because it is transcendental. Śāṅḍilya describes it as intense, loving attachment to God (*sā parā-nuraktir īśvare*).¹ Rūpa Gosvāmin describes it as the harmonious pursuit of Kṛṣṇa, unenveloped by *jñāna* (the quest for knowledge) and *karma* (ritual action) and uninterrupted by desire for anything else.² Nārada describes it as indescribable love of God and the most sublime of all human experiences,³ on attaining which man craves for nothing else.⁴ He is maddened with joy and delights in his own self.⁵ He always swims in a ocean of nectar and is not drawn towards the enjoyments either of this world or of the next which are to him like the turbid waters of a muddy pool.⁶

¹Śāṅḍilya, *Śāṅḍilya-bhakti-sūtra*, 2.

²Rūpa, *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, 1.1.9:

*anyābhilāsitā-sūnyam jñāna-karmādy-anāvṛtam
ānukūlyena kṛṣṇānuśīlanam bhaktir uttamā*

³Nārada-*bhakti-sūtra*, 2-3: *sā tv asmin parama-premarūpā (2); amṛta-svarūpā ca (3).*

⁴ibid., 5: *yat prāpya na kiñcid vāñchati na śocati na dveṣṭi na ramate notsāhī bhavati.*

⁵ibid., 6: *yaj jñātvā matto bhavati stabdho bhavaty ātmā-rāmo bhavati.*

⁶*Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Bhāg.)*, 6.12.22.

1.1 *Bhakti*, a Function of the *Hlādinī-śakti*

These descriptions, however, give us only a general idea of the character of *bhakti*. They do not tell us what exactly it is. No one before Jīva Gosvāmin told us what it was. It was he who defined it for the first time as a function (*vr̥tti*) of the *hlādinī-śakti* of Bhagavān (the Fortunate One, the Supreme Lord), the *śakti* (power) that causes bliss (*hlāda*). Bhagavān places it in the hearts of his devotees so that they, as well as he, may be entranced.⁷

But how does one know that *bhakti* is the *śakti* of Bhagavān, not of the *jīva*? *Śruti* (the “heard” or revealed scriptures of India, also called the Vedas) says that Bhagavān is eternally unmanifest (*avyakta*). No one can see him without the help of his own *śakti*.⁸ Only he can see or know him [Bhagavān] whom he [Bhagavān] himself chooses — *yam evaiṣa vr̥ṇute tena eṣa labhyaḥ*.⁹ At the same time *śruti* says that *bhakti* alone takes the living being (*jīva*) to Bhagavān. *Bhakti* alone enables him to see him — *bhaktir eva enaṃ nayati, bhaktir eva enaṃ darśayati*.¹⁰

1.2 *Bhakti*, the Selfless, Loving Service of Bhagavān

Bhakti implies service. Selfless, loving service of the Lord is the essence of *bhakti*. Like the Kantian doctrine of the “categorical imperative” of duty for its own sake, *bhakti* implies a categorical imperative of service for its own sake. The devotee serves the Lord

⁷Jīva Gosvāmin, *Prīti-sandarbha*, 65.

⁸Cited in the *Bhagavat-sandarbha*, para. 45, as from the *Nārāyaṇādhyātma*:

*nityāvvyakto 'pi bhagavān īkṣyate nija-śaktitah
tām ṛte paramātmānaṃ kaḥ paśyetaṃṛtaṃ prabhum*

⁹*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.2.3.

¹⁰*Māṭhara Śruti* cited by Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa in his *Siddhānta-ratna*, 1.35.

for the pleasure of the Lord, not for anything else.¹¹ But unlike the Kantian imperative, which is dry and exacting and an imposition from without, the categorical imperative of service to the Lord is the natural function of the soul and therefore pleasant and satisfying in itself. Though the devotee serves the Lord for the pleasure of the Lord, pleasure comes to him automatically. Such is the very nature of *bhakti*. But if the devotee's attitude of *bhakti* is tainted in the slightest degree with a concealed desire for his own pleasure, he is deprived to that extent of the supreme delight that comes from *śuddha* or pure *bhakti*. Even the pleasure that automatically comes to the devotee from an act of service is condemned by him, if it in any manner causes obstruction to service.

It is regrettable that the idea of service is not properly understood and appreciated by those who find it difficult to reconcile with their egos. They think that the path of *bhakti* is meant exclusively for persons who are intellectually weak and temperamentally submissive. They cannot understand that in the spiritual world, where love reigns supreme, to serve is to love and to love is to rule. In love self-sacrifice is self-realization and self-effacement is self-fulfillment. In love there is reciprocity. Each member of the relationship of love feels deficient without the other. Each wants to draw close to the other and to win the other by love and service. The Lord being the other member in the relationship of love in *bhakti*, he feels deficient without his devotee. He [Bhagavān] draws himself close to the *bhakta* to realize himself more fully through love and service to him. He derives greater pleasure in being controlled by his devotee than in controlling his devotee.¹²

1.3 *Bhakti*, a Spiritual Gravitational Force

Bhakti is a spiritual gravitational force that works at two ends. In our hearts it roots out all egoistic impulses that carry us away

¹¹Bhāg., 6.12.22.

¹²Bhāg., 9.4.64 and *Māṭhara Śruti*: *bhakti-vaśaḥ puruṣo bhaktir eva bhūyasī*.

from the Lord and releases integrating forces that lead to complete surrender of all our faculties, so that knowledge, love, and will may act in complete harmony with the divine rhythm. In God it energizes his mercy and releases the forces of redemption which lead to the final integration of our being with Divine Will. This is confirmed by Kṛṣṇa's exhortation to Arjuna in which he asks him to surrender himself completely to his will and promises, on his doing so, to free him from all bondage and sin.¹³ This is the principle of divine grace necessarily implied in *bhakti*.

It may be asked how the principle of divine grace can be reconciled with the transcendental and self-sufficient character of the Divine Being, who remains unaffected by *prakṛti* (material nature) and is without any desire or motive. The answer lies in the nature of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is not something phenomenal. It is a function of the *hlādinī-śakti* (the potency that causes bliss) of Bhagavān. It energizes, as we have seen, both Bhagavān and the devotee (*bhakta*). Like a lamp which reveals itself as well as other objects, the *hlādinī-śakti* of Bhagavān that he places in the heart of a pure devotee causes him as well as the devotee bliss. In fact, Bhagavān, the supreme relisher of bliss (*rasika-śekhara*), enjoys the bliss flowing from his *hlādinī-śakti* in the heart of his devotee (*śaktyānanda*) even more than he enjoys the bliss flowing from his own nature (*svarūpānanda*). On account of the gravitational force of the *hlādinī-śakti* the devotee is drawn towards Bhagavān and Bhagavān towards the devotee. Thus the devotee surrenders himself to Bhagavān and Bhagavān surrenders himself to the devotee. Grace is nothing but the surrender of Bhagavān to the devotee.

The whole of spiritual life is governed by the Law of Harmony. Love is the Law of Harmony in its highest form. Self-surrender on our part and mercy on the part of God are the manifestations of the Law of Harmony. In the *yoga* of self-surrender the soul strikes a divine chord and relishes an inner harmony which is of the highest order and a poise and equilibrium which is much more than

¹³*Bhagavad-gītā.*, 18.66.

intellectual.¹⁴

1.4 Bhakti, the Only Way to Attain Bhagavān

Bhakti is the only means to attain the supreme Lord. Śrī Kṛṣṇa said to Uddhava:

*na sādhayati mām yogo na sāṅkhyam dharma uddhava
na svādhyāyas tapas tyāgo yathā bhaktir mamorjitā*

It is not possible to attain me through *yoga*, *jñāna* (knowledge), the performance of duty, the study of the scriptures, penance, or renunciation in the way it is possible through strong *bhakti*.¹⁵

He also said:

*sādhavo hṛdayam mahyam sādḥūnām hṛdayam tv aham
mad-anything te na jānanti nāham tebhyo manāg api*

The devotees are my heart and I am the heart of my devotees. They know nothing but me and I know nothing but them.¹⁶

*aham bhakta-parādhīno hy asvatantra iva dvija
sādhubhir grasta-hṛdayo bhaktair bhakta-jana-priyaḥ*

Like one who has no freedom at all, I am completely under the control of my devotees as if they hold my heart in their hands.¹⁷

¹⁴After O. B. L. Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya*, 183-84.

¹⁵Bhāg., 11.14.20.

¹⁶ibid., 9.4.68.

¹⁷ibid., 9.4.63.

bhaktiā mām abhijānāti

By means of *bhakti* one knows me fully.¹⁸

Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu says that *jñāna*, the way of knowledge, *karma*, the way of action, and *yoga* do not lead to the same goal as *bhakti*.¹⁹ *Jñāna* which consists of discrimination and contemplation leads to the realization of *nirviśeṣa* (formless and attributeless) *brahman* and the soul's immersion in it. *Yoga* which consists of the practice of *yama* (restraint), *niyama* (culture), *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), etc., leads to the realization of Paramātmān (the highest or supreme self), a partial aspect of Bhagavān. *Karma*, which consists of the performance of *nitya* (compulsory) and *nai-mittika* (occasional) duties (rites), leads to the attainment of heaven for as long as the effect of the good deeds performed is not exhausted. But none of them leads to the attainment of Bhagavān.

1.5 *Bhakti*, the Essence of All Religions

It is important to note that even for the attainment of their respective goals, such as they are, *jñāna* and *yoga* have to depend on *bhakti*.²⁰ *Yoga* cannot even begin without *bhakti*, because it implies faith in Bhagavān whom the *yogī* aims at realizing in his partial aspect as Paramātmān. No matter how long the *yogī* performs the yogic exercises and practices austerity, all his efforts will be set at naught if he lacks *bhakti*. Because the Paramātmān is qualified (*saviśeṣa*) and we cannot realize him through *yoga* without *bhakti*, *yoga* is sometimes regarded as a kind of *bhakti* and is styled as *yoga-miśra-bhakti* (*bhakti* mixed with *yoga*) or *śānta-bhakti* (the *bhakti* of the pacified).

¹⁸ *Bhagavad-gītā*, 18.55.

¹⁹ Kṛṣṇa Dāsa Kavirāja, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (Cc), Madhya 20.121.

²⁰ *ibid.*, Madhya, 22.14-5.

The necessity of *bhakti* for *jñāna* is recognized even by Śaṅkara. He says in his commentary on the *Gītā* that *jñāna-niṣṭhā* or fidelity to knowledge without which liberation is not possible is itself the result of *arcana-bhakti*, *bhakti* which consists of the ceremonial worship of the sacred images (the temple or home images of the gods).²¹ Again in his commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* he says that though liberation is the result of higher knowledge (*vidyā*), *bhakti* prepares the ground for higher knowledge by bringing the grace of God.²²

The realization of *nirviśeṣa-brahman* (unqualified, impersonal *brahman*) through *jñāna* is also not permanent without *bhakti*. Śrī Caitanya speaks of two kinds of men who follow the *jñāna-mārga* (the path of knowledge) — those who do not have faith in Bhagavān and who seek to realize *nirviśeṣa-brahman* independently and those who have faith in him but desire to attain *mukti* (liberation).²³ The former attain release (*mukti*) and the state of immersion in *brahman* after a great deal of effort,²⁴ but there is every possibility of their again falling prey to *māyā*.²⁵ The latter attain the state of immersion in *brahman* more easily due to the grace of Bhagavān. Bhagavān lets them enjoy this state for some time but ultimately lifts them up to his own *dhāma* (abode) so that they may enjoy a state of contiguity with him, which is much more pleasurable than the state of immersion in *brahman*.

The *jīva* (living being) is an infinitesimal part of the *tatastha-śakti* (marginal power) of Bhagavān who has come under the influence of *māyā*. The *jīva*'s power is limited. The power of *māyā*, as a *śakti* of Bhagavān, is unlimited. The *jīva* cannot, therefore, cross the bounds of *māyā* without the grace of God. *Jñāna*, *karma*, and *yoga*, involving independent efforts on the part of the *jīva* to over-

²¹ Śaṅkara, *Gītā-bhāṣya*, 7.56.

²² Śaṅkara, *Śārīraka-bhāṣya*, 3.2.5.

²³ Cc., Madhya, 24.16

²⁴ Bg., 7.5.

²⁵ *Vāsanā-bhāṣya* on the *Yoga-sūtra*, cited in the *Bhakti-sandarbhā*, para. 111: *jīvan-muktā api punar bandhanam yānti karmabhiḥ*.

come *māyā*, are of no avail. The only course open to the *jīva* is the path of *bhakti*. Kṛṣṇa himself says:

It is difficult, indeed, to overcome my *māyā* independently of me. Only they can overcome it, who are sincerely devoted to me.²⁶

Jñāna can, in a sense, lead to Bhagavān but not *jñāna* based on our limited understanding. Only *jñāna* which proceeds from the higher intelligence granted by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to one who is sincerely devoted to him, or *jñāna* which is the product of *bhakti*, the *hlādinī-śakti* of Bhagavān, can dispel the clouds of ignorance and enable the *jīva* to attain Bhagavān.²⁷

Thus, whatever be the path of religion, *bhakti* is essential for the realization of the goal. In fact, the path to realization is but one and that is the path of *bhakti*. This is the real teaching of the scriptures. Śrī Caitanya regards it (*bhakti*) as the very essence of the Vedas.²⁸ If people speak of many paths to realization, they do so because their intelligence is clouded by *māyā*.²⁹ The intelligences of different persons are differently conditioned by the three *guṇas* (qualities or strands) of *prakṛti* (material nature). Therefore they interpret the Vedas differently and speak of the paths to realization as more than one.³⁰ *Bhakti* is not only the essence of the Vedas but the essence of all religions.

²⁶Bg., 7.14.

²⁷Bg., 10.10-11.

²⁸Vṛndāvana Dāsa, *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, Madhya, 1.148 and 4.33.

²⁹Bhāg., 11.14.9.

³⁰Bhāg., 11.14.5-7.