

# The Nature of Bhakti

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Bhagavān (Lord) Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who is full of eternity, knowledge and bliss, is the source of all the descents (*avatāra*), Primeval Beings/Souls of the Universe (*puruṣas*) and other expansions of God.<sup>1</sup> He is the source of everything that is, both material and spiritual.<sup>2</sup> Nothing exists independent of him.<sup>3</sup>

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is eternally blissful and therefore is self-satisfied. The Upaniṣads say that the Absolute Truth is *rasa*.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of increasing Śrī Kṛṣṇa's enjoyment, the bliss potency which causes the Lord's happiness has eternally expanded into two features: internal and external. The internal aspect is called *svarūpānanda* whereby the Lord enjoys bliss within Himself. The bliss potency also manifests outside the Lord's form and takes the form of the luscious flavor (*rasa*) of devotional love (*bhakti*) of God called sacred rapture or *bhakti rasa*. Bhakti rasa resides eternally within the hearts of the Lord's eternal companions who live with Him in His ever-existing, transcendental world. The internal bliss of Śrī Kṛṣṇa (*svarūpānanda*) and bhakti rasa are both forms of his internal potency. However, of the two, bhakti rasa has the power to draw or attract the Lord more than the bliss within Himself because of its higher level of enjoyment. This is not a contradiction to the previous statement wherein the Lord was said to be self-satisfied and eternally blissful because this bhakti is Śrī Kṛṣṇa's own spiritual potency expanded outward from within and is therefore not different from Himself. Therefore, the emotional flavors of love in the hearts of those he loves (and who love him in return) are actually of the same spiritual essence as He Himself. The bliss of bhakti rasa creates a craving within the Lord's heart to enjoy the love of His eternal companions.

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<sup>1</sup>Such as the *āveśa* or possessional manifestations of Kṛṣṇa.

<sup>2</sup>*Brahma-saṃhitā*, 5.1.

<sup>3</sup>See Rūpa Gosvāmin's discussion of the various forms of Kṛṣṇa, *svayam-rūpa*, *tadekātmā-rūpa*, and *āveśa*, this in his *Laghu-bhāgavatāmṛta*, 1.11-19.

<sup>4</sup>Chandogya Upaniṣad, : *raso vai saḥ*

Bhakti rasa is eternally manifest within the hearts of Lord's eternal companions who reside with Him and serve Him in various loving manners. These devotee companions possess bhakti in varying degrees of flavor, intensity and mood. These degrees of intensity and mood eternally shape the spiritual forms and psychologies of the Lord's devotees (*bhaktas*) in the eternal kingdom of His transcendental play. The flavorful moods and intensities of love manifest in the forms of his male friends, his adolescent girlfriends, his parents, the relatives of his parents, and so forth. The land of Vraja (Vraja-dhāma), the scene of God's play as an adolescent boy who frolics as the son of a king of a community of cowherders, is the highest transcendental abode of God. There the playful drama of God and His devotees reaches the pinnacle of spiritual bliss. Śrī Kṛṣṇa plays with his young male friends, the sons of cowherders and with the young, beautiful cowherder girls who are married to other cowherder men. In this divine play the Lord drinks the intoxicating flavors of blissful love with his eternal playmates, lovers, fathers and mothers within a pastoral setting filled with milk cows, fresh pastures, forests full of beautifully blossoming and simultaneously fruit-bearing trees, sweetly singing birds, cooling, slow-moving rivers and scenic lakes. The bhakti-rasa in the hearts of Vraja's inhabitants subdues and attracts the Lord more powerfully than the bhakti within the hearts of the Viṣṇu-jana, the residents of His kingdom of majestic beauty and opulence known as Vaikuṅṭha ("Free of Worry"), where God is served with reverential awe and magnificence in His four-armed form as Śrī Nārāyaṇa. The devotional love found within Vraja causes the Lord to be controlled by His devotees. There, the Lord sometimes lovingly gets chastised and scolded by His devotees. At other times He may lose Himself in grief over separation from one of His beloveds, a result of the powerful influence of the devotional love of that devotee. However, these intense emotional states that the Lord succumbs to do not diminish the Lord's supreme position because it is out of His mercy and kindness that he allows this play to happen wherein all those who participate enjoy the sweetness and bliss of loving Him.

The Lord's eternal companions are therefore the receptacles or containers of loving devotion. This devotional love is, of course, not of this material world. It is technically God's personal power (*śakti*), the essence of both pleasure (*hlādinī*) and consciousness (*saṁvit*). Although the words 'love' and 'devotion' are applied to the feelings of people of this material world, it is not the same as the 'love' and 'devotion' connected with bhakti. A mother has love for her child; a husband devotedly works to maintain his family which he loves; a soldier is devoted to serving his country by fighting the nation's enemies. However, these examples of love and devotion are not the 'love' and 'devotion' of bhakti. Nor is the 'devotion' or 'love' of God in the religions of this material world the same as those connected with bhakti. A person may be devoted to his or her religion and feel love for humanity and God, but this is not 'love' in the sense of bhakti. Bhakti in its true spirit is Śrī Kṛṣṇa's internal potency appearing in the body, mind and senses of a genuine devotee. Bhakti in

its fullest stage of manifestation is the rasa of *prema*, the experienced joy of divine love. When bhakti descends from the eternal realm of God into this material world and into the mind, body and senses of souls conditioned by material consciousness, it develops slowly within the heart. It must pass through 1) the active cultivation of bhakti (*bhakti-sādhana*), 2) the appearance of genuine feelings (*bhāva-bhakti*), and finally 3) the experience of pure, divine love (*prema-bhakti*).

It is important to understand how the wonderful treasure of devotional love of God makes its descent unto this world of illusory material existence. Bhakti descends unto this world through a channel or riverbed like the sacred water of the celestial Ganges. That channel is the disciplic succession, the chain of spiritual teachers connecting a disciple to the lotus feet of Lord.

One who aspires to bhakti must first learn about the excellence of devotional love for Śrī Kṛṣṇa from the sacred bhakti scriptures and/or through the mouths of bhakti saints. When a faith or deep trust has risen within the aspirant's heart, it propels the aspirant to learn more and eventually seek shelter at the feet of bhakti saints who are initiated into and who regularly practice bhakti, as described in the bhakti scriptures. The aspirant then accepts one of them as his Guru and is initiated into the path of bhakti practice.

It is only when the aspirant undergoes the ritual of initiation, receiving from his Guru the sacred and secret mantras, and takes up the practice of devotion as taught by his Guru<sup>5</sup> that the aspirant becomes a true bhakti sadhaka or practitioner. It is then that he begins truly to perform devotional service (in practice). Prior to that, activities such as hearing and chanting the glories of the Lord are only preliminary spiritual processes which, if performed for the sake of attaining Kṛṣṇa, will fructify in that person's attaining, at some point, the lotus feet of a genuine Guru. However, it should be understood that these practices of devotion prior to initiation are not counted as *sādhana bhakti*, real devotional service in practice.

One may wonder: if bhakti is divided into only three stages, *sādhana*, *bhāva* and *prema*, then where does practical devotional service performed prior to taking shelter of Guru and receiving initiation (*dīkṣā*) fit? If one jumps into practice without having properly received initiation from a genuine Guru along with instruction in devotional practice, then it is considered a reflection or semblance of bhakti (*bhakti-ābhāsa*). A reflection of sunlight on water has some power to distribute light and heat, but it is not the same as the real sun with its full power. Similarly, a reflection of bhakti can have purifying effects upon the heart of one who practices it. But practices like hearing, chanting, meditating, placing tilak on the body, performing circumambulation (*parikrama*), etc., will not qualify one to attain the higher stages of bhakti, i.e. *bhava* and *prema*.

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<sup>5</sup>An authentic guru comes within a genuine disciplic succession, in accordance with the instructions of the bhakti scriptures and the path traversed by previous saints.

One may think that *Harināma saṅkīrtana* (the loud musical chanting of the names of Hari, i.e., Kṛṣṇa, with musical instruments) is sufficient for one to attain the Lord's lotus feet without the need of surrendering to a Guru and receiving initiation. Those who avoid taking shelter of the Guru, however, commit the offence of neglecting the Guru<sup>6</sup> and that corrupts the mind and heart of the chanter, creating obstacles on his spiritual path.

Among the many Hindu and yogic systems of worship imported from India that have attained various degrees of popularity in the Western World, some have assumed a great likeness to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Their members have become attracted to the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* and they perform devotional activities such as hearing, chanting, worshipping images of the Lord within the temple, wearing tilak, and so forth. Unfortunately, they are often deceived into believing that they are properly initiated into a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava paramparā, when in reality they are not. Many perform difficult austerities like rising early in the morning, fasting and so forth, in hope of attaining entrance into the pastimes of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the spiritual world. Regrettably, without the merciful flow of bhakti down through the proper channels of disciplic succession their endeavors will bear no fruit. The fruit of *jñāna* (knowledge of the difference of self and non-self) and *karma* (ritual action) may be available to them, but the attainment of feeling and love are not. Not surprisingly, I have personally observed that many of them rejoice upon the acquisition material wealth, worldly status, recognition, and new recruits, mistakenly construing these to be the fruit of their bhakti.

According to the principles set forth by Śrī Rūpa Goswāmi, Śrīman Mahāprabhu's emissary for distributing His teachings throughout the world, the first and foremost principle is that bhakti comes from a bhakta. Consequently, it is imperative that one first take shelter of the lotus feet of a Guru within a genuine *paramparā* (succession) and accept initiation, recitation of the sacred mantras, tilak (markings on the body indicating connection with Kṛṣṇa), neckbeads, chanting beads, and devotional instruction from him. Then, one qualifies as a genuine devotee and then he or she can certainly make progress on the path of bhakti.

To be continued.

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<sup>6</sup>This is the third offense to the Holy Name: *guroravajñā*.