

BHAKTI OR JNAN?
DEVOTION OR KNOWLEDGE?

**(From *The Supreme Self* by Swami Abhayananda.
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“Of all the means to liberation, devotion is the highest.
 "To seek earnestly to know one’s real nature—this is said to be
 devotion.”¹

—Shankaracharya, *Vivekachudamani*

“Devotion consists of supreme love for God. It is nectar. On
 obtaining it, man has achieved everything; he becomes
 immortal; he is completely satisfied.

"Having attained it, he desires nothing else, he strives for
 nothing else. Having realized that supreme Love, a man
 becomes as if intoxicated; he delights only in his own intrinsic
 bliss.”²

—Narada, *Bhakti Sutras*

1. THE APPEARANCE OF DUALITY

The two quotations which preface this section—one by Shankaracharya, and the other by the legendary saint, Narada—recommend precisely the same devotion to the very same Reality; but see, how different are the words each of these men use! one speaks of earnestly seeking “to know one’s real nature,” while the other extols “love for God.” Shankaracharya defines devotion as “continual meditation on one’s own true Self”; and Narada, recognized as the greatest ancient authority on the philosophy of love, declares devotion to be “the constant flow of love towards the Lord.” These two paths, of course, are not in any way different from one another; meditation on the Self *is* the love of God. It is only that Shankaracharya identifies with the Self, while Narada prefers to identify with the soul (*jiva*). Both are methods of focusing upon the one Reality, and each, inevitably, produces the same result.

Nonetheless, this complementarity of identities necessitates two entirely different mental attitudes, or states of awareness. When we focus on the Self, we are focusing on our own identity, and become aware: *I am the one infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss*. But when we take the attitude of love toward God, we are focusing on That which is other and greater than our individual selfhood, and we become aware: *I am Thy creature and Thy servant, O Lord*. And it is the paradoxical fact that both attitudes are correct and valid which accounts for the confused oscillation many dedicated truth-seekers feel between the attitude of Self-knowledge (*jnan*) and the attitude of devotion (*bhakti*).

Devotion may be thought of as the love of the soul for God; i.e., a relationship requiring two parties. For that reason, devotion is considered a “Dualistic” practice. The entire Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as the Muslim and Hindu traditions in their popular form, are fundamentally dualistic in nature; that is, they take as their starting point the distinction between God and the created universe. This naturally implies a distinction as well between God and the created soul. These two they regard as intrinsically separate, and the objective of their practice is to unite the one to the other.

However, there are some other religious traditions, which seem to practitioners of devotion to be entirely alien to religion altogether, as they only profess to seek knowledge of the Self. Such traditions, like the yogic,

the Vedantic, and the Buddhist, in their esoteric form, are Nondual; that is, they take as their starting point the non-difference between the individual's identity and the Cosmic Identity. Their practice is intended to uncover or reveal the underlying unity of the individual self and the universal Self. Put a little differently, they seek to reveal the Divine Identity inherent within us all.

Both of these religious practices—the dualistic which aspires to union with the Divine Reality through prayer, and the nondualist which aspires to revelation of identity with the Divine Reality through meditation—are capable of bringing the practitioner to the realization of the Divine Reality, the ultimate Truth. Yet, how alien to each other are these two practices, or paths! How can we ever hope to reconcile these two, so fundamentally opposed to one another? The dualistic path of devotion (*bhakti*) is the path taken by the soul in search of God. Whereas, the nondualist path of knowledge (*jnan*) does not even acknowledge the reality of the soul but clings steadfastly to the identification with the one Divine Self, the true Reality. How different these two paths seem! How could anyone possibly assert that they have anything in common?

And yet, look more closely at the actual process that takes place within the devotee and the *jnani*. When we call to God, where is it we look for His answer? Is it not within ourselves? It is not in some external location high above that we seek God's presence, but rather we turn our eyes upward within ourselves to our own highest consciousness. At the initial, mental, level, the soul busily pleads and prays to God; but at a more profound level it simply calls His Name within, or merely searches the inner sky in silence, awaiting the balm of His peace, His love, to have its affect within.

The love of God looks to the center of one's own consciousness, raises to the greatest height one's inner gaze in search of That which is beyond the activity of the mind, beyond the critical intellect, beyond the searching soul, at the hidden core of being and awareness. This, too, is where the eye of knowledge looks for Him: Beyond the concerns for self that form within the mind as thoughts and dreams, in the silence of an inward wakeful gaze unobstructed by the clouded haze of memories or fantasies, it scans the heart of darkness, and becomes enraptured in the upward-streaming light.

At the mental, conceptual, level, the love of God, with all its moods and bargaining, is quite a different thing from the meditation on the Self, which

is quiet, empty, unwavering, and keenly discriminative. It is only when one reaches to a level of nonverbal sweetness, high above the bustling commerce of the mind, above the conniving of the intellect, and the self-involvement of the soul, that the two paths become single, “oned” in a common stream of upward-flowing joy which knows no separation, knows no duality of kind or purpose.

And so, while each of these methods of reaching to the ultimate Truth are separate and distinct, and manifest in extremely diverse ways at the mental level, their differences dissolve and their divergent methods converge as they near the object of their quest. In the high reaches of the mountain’s peak, all paths must come to a single point; likewise, when the lover and the meditator come to taste the silent Bliss that characterizes the approach to the pinnacle of Truth, they have entered the subtle and ethereal realm where love and knowledge are one. Here, there is no distinction such as lover and knower; here is only the eternally blissful and all-inclusive ‘I’, who is neither God nor individual soul.

During the time I spent in my Santa Cruz cabin, I had a photo of the *jnani*, Ramana Maharshi, on one wall, and a picture of the *bhakta*, Sri Ramakrishna, on the other wall. At one time, I would feel entirely committed to the continued awareness of my identity with infinite unqualified Consciousness, and would identify with Ramana, whose *sadhana* consisted of questioning within “Who am I?” At another time, I would feel certain that devotional love for God was the only attitude for me, and I would identify with Sri Ramakrishna, who was the simple child of God, crying for his Divine ‘Mother’. And although the duality between the soul and God is, ultimately, an imaginary, or artificial, duality, still it exists so long as the active mind dialogues with that other.

I knew, intellectually, that the duality between “me” and “God” was an artificial one. I knew that to take the attitude of love for God required a sort of pretense of “two-ness”; but the very existence of the active mind demanded such a relationship. In order to disengage my mind from its aimless wandering and to focus it on the eternal Silence, I had to have a point of focus, and that point of focus was that infinite Intelligence which I addressed as “Hari.” Yes, I knew that this ego-self was included in and inseparable from that greater Self, but I also knew instinctually that, if I was to truly *know* the eternal Truth directly, I had to turn away from conceptual

knowledge and concentrate with all the yearning of my soul on that pure and silent Awareness that lived beyond the active mind.

For me, it was love that ushered in the knowledge of the eternal Self; it was love that erased the sense of individual selfhood, allowing the true Self to be revealed. Previous to that unitive revelation, I sought God as a servant, as a soul at the feet of my Lord and Creator, feeling the delicious yet still distant presence of His love and guidance within me. “I” was this separate person, living in the wilderness, and “He” was the Divine Source of all, to whom I prayed, and who I sought to know through submission to His Will and through the continual remembrance of His presence in and as the world about me.

I had so often found great inspiration in the *Imitation of Christ*; but, after I was blessed with enlightenment on that November night, I tore that once favored book a handful of pages at a time from its binding and fed those pages to the fire in my stove. Why? Because it was now clear that the duality of “me” and “Him” was a charade, a flimsy myth of ‘two-ness’ that had been discredited and burst asunder by the revelation of the unitive Self. That illusion of duality had been necessary to bring me to the point of perfect love, to open my mind and heart to the “vision”; but once revealed, that Unity swept away all previous delusion of a separate individual identity.

I think that, for many of us mortals, the devotional path is the only way we can reach enlightenment. And yet, ultimately, it is a path that is false in nearly all of its assumptions. The experience of Unity reveals that there were never two, that the prolonged and agonizing dialogue and relationship with God was an “imaginary” relationship. The One we call “I” was always the only one who ever was.

However, long after the destruction of my beloved *Imitation Of Christ*, I came to see that, even after the realization of the eternal Self, there persists the stubborn habits of thought and the convincing sense of bodily separateness and individuality; and it is that false individuality (ego) which necessitates the re-establishment of the dualistic relationship with the true Self. So long as that ego exists, duality exists; and the devotional relationship between the soul and God must go on. And the occasions when the ego is dissolved in God, and Unity alone reigns, are few and far between. It seems that the Self, the One, insists on taking the role of both God and devotee in order to enjoy the relationship of loving soul to loving God.

Whether we like it or not, the One will not be denied the enjoyment of playing this game of duality with Himself; and so, there is no way to avoid this dualistic drama of devotion.

I had been shown that the consciousness that lived in this body, that animated the thoughts that arose as wisdom, and moved this body and all bodies—that consciousness was, and had always been, the one Consciousness that filled all things. I was not merely the wave; I was the Ocean. But the wave continued to exist! I was not simply the Ocean; I was the wave as well. I was a *jnani*, but I was still a *bhakta* as well.

I came to understand that there are two identities living within every individual: there is the eternal and unchanging Consciousness, the Witness, the true Self; and there is a superimposed ego-identity called ‘the soul’, which is a contracted and separate self with individual desires and goals. This superimposed self is of the stuff of dreams; it is real enough to go on evolving through numerous lifetimes, but it is ultimately imaginary, and must eventually be dispelled. It is dispelled only when the truth of the *real* Identity shines forth. Then the superimposed self disappears, the way a wrong conviction disappears when it is seen to be unfounded in truth.

And yet, even after the realization of the eternal Self, the stubborn habits of thought and the convincing sense of bodily separateness and individuality reassert themselves; and so, the duality of Self and soul continues to exist. However, the knowledge of the Self, once revealed, dissolves the foundation for belief in a separate identity, and continually erodes the self-centered habits that condition the ego-mind. The will and paramount desire of the projected self becomes the will and desire of the true Self; i.e., becomes universal and divine Love. Disillusioned, and no longer interested in separative attainments once it has known its own universality, the self has no other will or desire than the extolment of Truth for the joy and disillusionment of all beings.

Frequently, the clear realization dawns within me that there are not two, but only I AM. And at such times I embrace the nondual attitude expounded by the *jnani*s. At other times, I am the humble servant of God, trembling in His Light, asking only to fulfill the service I have pledged to my merciful and gracious Lord. These two paths, though they seem so contrary one to the other, are both necessary and true from their own perspectives. The unitive view is, of course, the truth, the final and only Truth. And yet, the world-

illusion has its own sort of reality, as it is produced by God, and the appearance of a separate identity also has its own ephemeral reality by God's design.

To say, "I am God," as Mansur al-Hallaj did, is offensive to the *bhakta*, for it denies the separate existence and fallibility of the individual soul; and to say, "I am the servant of God," does not satisfy the *jnani*, for it asserts a duality where none in fact exists. I am convinced that, if we are to speak truly and to live realistically, it is necessary to embrace *both* attitudes, and to relinquish the logic, which begs for an either/or approach to identity. The greatest contemplatives who've ever lived, having pondered this quandary, have come to the same conclusion, and have taken a position, which defies categorization into one classification or another.

The best example I know is that of Jesus of Nazareth. He had realized his true, eternal, Self; and had exclaimed, "I and the Father are one." And yet he taught his disciples to pray to "Our Father, who art in heaven." He embraced both his eternal Identity and his earthly creature identity. At times he identified with the eternal Self, and at other times he adopted the role of suppliant to God and advised his disciples to do likewise. To his close disciples he taught the truth that, "You are the Light of the world." But he knew that few could understand the fact that man's true Self is identical with God, and that many would react angrily to such a saying. So, he said to his disciples, "If they ask you, 'Are you It?', say, 'We are Its children; we are the elect of the living Father.'"

Another example is the Blessed Jan Ruysbroeck, a 14th century disciple of Meister Eckhart, who wrote:

Though I have said before that we are one with God, ... yet now
I will say that we must eternally remain other than God, and
distinct from Him. ...And we must understand and feel *both*
within us, if all is to be right with us. ³

Because the path of love and the path of knowledge are equally valid, it is possible to love God while being at the same time aware that God is the all-pervading Reality which includes one's own self. In the following song of that famous 15th century poet-saint of India, the incomparable Kabir, we can hear that perfect blending of the devotion of the *bhakta* and the unitive knowledge of the *jnani*:

O brothers, the love of God is sweet!
 Wherever I go, I offer salutations to the Lord;
 Whatever I do is an act of worship to Him.
 In sleep, I reverence Him; I bow my knee to no other.

Whatever I utter is His Name;
 Whatever I hear reminds me of Him.
 Whatever I eat or drink is to His honor.
 To me, society and solitude are one,
 For all feelings of duality have left me.
 I have no need to practice austerity,
 For I see Him smiling everywhere
 As the supreme Beauty in every form.
 Whether sitting, walking or performing actions,
 My heart remains pure, for my mind remains fixed on God.
 Says Kabir: "I have experienced the divine state
 Beyond joy and suffering, and I am absorbed in That."
 O brothers, the love of God is sweet! ⁴

More than seven hundred years ago, the great Maharashtran saint, Jnaneshvar, also spoke of this blending of knowledge and devotion. When he was but a youth, he spoke eloquently of the spontaneous love of God that arises even in the hearts of the enlightened. He called this "natural devotion." His poetic expression of this wisdom, from the 9th chapter of his *Amritanubhav* called "The Secret Of Natural Devotion," is unsurpassable:

Just as a nose might become a fragrance, or ears might give out a melody for their own enjoyment, or the eyes might produce a mirror in order to see themselves; ... just so, the one pure Consciousness becomes the enjoyer and the object of enjoyment, the seer and the object of vision, without disturbing its unity.

...One may purchase a necklace, earrings, or a bracelet—but it is only gold, whichever one receives. One may gather a handful of ripples—but it is only water in the hand. ... Likewise, the sensible universe is only the vibration of the Self. ...There is really no action or inaction; everything that is happening is the sport of the Self.

The undivided One enters the courtyard of duality of His own accord. Unity only becomes strengthened by the expansion of diversity. Sweeter even than the bliss of liberation is the enjoyment of sense objects to one who has attained wisdom. In the house of *bhakti* (devotion) that lover and his God experience their sweet union.

...God Himself is the devotee; the goal is the path. The whole universe is one solitary Being. It is He who becomes a God, and He who becomes a devotee. In Himself, He enjoys the kingdom of Stillness.

...Everything is contained in the Being of God. ...If a desire for the Master-disciple relationship arises, it is God alone who must supply both out of Himself.

Even the devotional practices, such as *japa* (repetition of God's name), faith and meditation, are not different from God. Therefore, God must worship God with God, in one way or another. The temple, the idol, and the priests—all are carved out of the same stone mountain. Why, then should there be devotional worship? [Why should there *not* be devotional worship?] A tree spreads its foliage, and produces flowers and fruits, even though it has no objective outside of itself.

...A wise person is aware that he, himself, is the Lord, Shiva; therefore, even when he is not worshipping, he is worshipping. No matter where he goes, that sage is making pilgrimage to Shiva. And if he attains to Shiva, that attainment is non-attainment. ... No matter what his eyes fall upon at any time, he always enjoys the vision of Shiva. If Shiva Himself appears before him, it is as if he has seen nothing; for God and His devotee are on the same level.

...This spontaneous natural devotion cannot be touched by the hand of action, nor can knowledge penetrate it. It goes on without end, in communion with itself. What bliss can be compared to this? This natural devotion is a wonderful secret.

It is the place in which meditation and knowledge become merged.

...O blissful and almighty Lord! You have made us the sole sovereign in the kingdom of perfect Bliss. ...We are Yours entirely. Out of love, You include us as Your own, as is befitting Your greatness. ...Would the scriptures have extolled You, if, by sharing it with Your devotee, Your unity were disturbed? O noble One! It is Your pleasure to become our nearest and dearest by taking away from us our sense of difference from You. ⁵

Just as the Self and the soul cannot be separated one from the other, neither can *jnan* and *bhakti* be separated; though mutually exclusive, they co-exist as complements in everyone. And as our knowledge grows, we must learn to adapt our vision of the world to accept and embrace apparently contradictory views. We must learn to feel comfortable with the notion that a quantity of energy is both a wave *and* a particle; that our lives are determined, *and* that we are free; that our identity is both the Whole *and* the part. We are the universal Self; we *are* the one Consciousness—and we are also the individualized soul, which consists of the mind and its own private impressions. We are the Ocean—but we are also the wave.

We are *Shiva*, but we are also *Shakti*. We are perfect, but we are also imperfect. We are the eternal Reality, but we are also the ephemeral image It projects on Its own screen. We are indeed the Dreamer, but we are also the dream. We are entitled to say, “I am *Shiva*,” but so long as the Shakti-mind exists, it must sing the song of love and devotion to its Lord. While we live and move in this phantasmagoria, we are His creatures, and are utterly dependent upon His grace. Therefore, if we truly understand our own double-faceted reality, we must learn to sing two songs: one, the song of Love; the other, the song of our own immortal Self. Neither, without the other, is complete.

THE SONG OF LOVE

Thou art Love, and I shall follow all Thy ways.
I shall have no care, for Love cares only to love.
I shall have no fear, for Love is fearless;
Nor shall I frighten any,

For Love comes sweetly and meek.

I shall keep no violence within me,
 Neither in thought nor in deed,
 For Love comes peacefully.
 I shall bear no shield or sword,
 For the defense of Love is love.

I shall seek Thee in the eyes of men,
 For love seeks Thee always.
 I shall keep silence before Thine enemies,
 And lift to them Thy countenance,
 For all are powerless before Thee.

I shall keep Thee in my heart with precious care,
 Lest Thy light be extinguished by the winds;
 For without Thy light, I am in darkness.

I shall go free in the world with Thee—
 Free of all bondage to anything but Thee—
 For Thou art my God, the sole Father of my being,
 The sweet breath of Love that lives in my heart;
 And I shall follow Thee, and live with Thee,
 And lean on Thee till the end of my days.

THE SONG OF THE SELF

O my God, even this body is Thine own!
 Though I call to Thee and seek Thee amidst chaos,
 Even I who seemed an unclean pitcher amidst Thy waters—
 Even I am Thine own.

Does a wave cease to be of the ocean?
 Do the mountains and the gulfs cease to be of the earth?
 Or does a pebble cease to be stone?
 How can I escape Thee?
 Thou art even That which thinks of escape!

Even now, I speak the word, "Thou," and create duality.

I love and create hatred.
 I am in peace and am fashioning chaos.
 Standing on the peak, I necessitate the depths.

But now, weeping and laughing are gone;
 Night is become day.
 Music and silence are heard as one;
 My ears are all the universe.

All motion has ceased; everything continues.
 Life and death no longer stand apart.
 No I, no Thou;
 No now, or then.
 Unless I move, there is no stillness.

Nothing to lament, nothing to vanquish,
 Nothing to pride oneself on;
 All is accomplished in an instant.
 All may now be told without effort.
 Where is there a question?
 Where is the temple?
 Which the Imperishable, which the abode?

I am the pulse of the turtle;
 I am the clanging bells of joy.
 I bring the dust of blindness;
 I am the fire of song.
 I am in the clouds and in the gritty soil;
 In pools of clear water my image is found.

I am the dust on the feet of the wretched,
 The toothless beggars of every land.
 I have given sweets that decay to those who crave them;
 I have given my wealth unto the poor and lonely.
 My hands are open—nothing is concealed.

All things move together of one accord;
 Assent is given throughout the universe to every falling grain.
 The Sun stirs the waters of my heart,
 And the vapor of my love flies to the four corners of the world;

The Moon stills me, and the cold darkness is my bed.

I have but breathed, and everything is rearranged
 And set in order once again.
 A million worlds begin and end in every breath,
 And, in this breathing, all things are sustained.

2. THE ULTIMATE UNITY

Even today, over thirty years after that November night in 1966, I continue to experience that same alternation between Unity and duality, between *jnan* and *bhakti*. There are times when the recognition of my own Self as the ultimate Reality bestows profound inner joy. My own consciousness becomes free of thought; and supreme peace, bell-like clarity, and an imperturbable happiness fills my whole being. The sound of my own breath becomes the mantra, *So-ham*, “I am That”; and my mind is bathed in the calm certain awareness of my eternal Identity.

Then, unexpectedly, the heart speaks, and once again duality raises its head. The image addresses the Imager; the projected soul, feeling powerless, reaches toward its governing Source, and the love of God is born anew. It is born of that inherent tendency in the unitive Divinity toward Self-division, toward the dualistic play of subject and object, of I and Thou.

At such times my heart is flooded with gratitude to my Lord, my God, and thrills rush through my body and my soul, causing tears of love to cascade down my cheeks. Such love of God is truly the awareness of my greater Self, and I am overcome by the fervent desire to praise Him and to express my love—even though I know that this poor mind is only pretending to be separate, and its babbling is only God’s grace expressing its own love in me. The soul loves, but it is His Love that carries on this play of lover and Beloved. He himself is the sweet song of love that sings in my heart.

Such alternation between *bhakti* and *jnan* will ever continue. It is not a product of indecisiveness but is a product of the complementary nature of Reality. For we live simultaneously in two frameworks of reality: that of the divisible world of multiple phenomena, and that of the eternal Self—the pure Consciousness of the unbroken Whole. All the great issues and arguments of science, philosophy and theology are solved in one stroke by the

understanding of this dual-sidedness of reality. From the standpoint of my *Shakti*-identity, my life in the universal drama is fixed and determined. From the standpoint of my *Shiva*-identity, as the eternal witness, I am ever free.

When I identify myself as *Shakti*, I am an individual soul guided by the hand of God; and the planetary configurations relating to my position on earth correspond to my mental, emotional and physical being. When I identify myself as *Shiva*, I am the one all-pervading Soul of the universe; I am the Cause of all, the one Consciousness in whom the stars and planets exist, and I remain unaffected by the changes taking place within the manifested world.

When I identify myself as *Shakti*, I am *Shiva's* servant; I worship Him as my Lord, and I am surrendered to His will. When I identify myself as *Shiva*, there are not two, but only one—and I am that One. These two identities are not a hair's breadth apart; for the one is superimposed upon the other. Our separative identity and our infinite Identity, the wave and the Ocean, are complementary aspects of the same one Reality.

God is always accessible to us as our own Self. We have only to quiet the mind to become aware of our eternal Identity. And even when we are active in the world we are continually in His presence. If we can refine our vision and become aware of the dual-sidedness of our own nature, we will then be able to see that not only are we the Self, but everything around us is also the Self. The subject is the Self; the object is the Self. Truly, no matter who or what I see or speak to, it is really only my own Self. If we could really grasp the truth of this, what a revolution would occur in our thinking and behavior!

Just as waves on the ocean are only water, just as golden ornaments are only gold, so all the various forms in the universe are forms of our own Self. Becoming aware of this, we would begin to revel in that joy which had been missing in our lives before. We would begin to drink the nectar of the unending Love for which we had been thirsting before. And we would begin to take delight in just being and living and acting in the world in a way we had been unable to before. The universal division into respective subjects and objects does not cease; the world goes on, even for the enlightened. It is just that she *knows* in her heart, with an indomitable certainty, that she and the universe are one.

Just as a chess-player retains the awareness that the antagonism between him and his opponent is merely a temporary game of role-playing, and that, at the end of the game, both the red and the black pieces will be thrown into the same box—in the same way, one who has clearly experienced the unbroken Whole retains the knowledge of the ultimate Unity, and sees the play of subjects and objects as the ongoing pretense or play of the one Self in whom all contraries must finally merge.

This is why, after more than thirty years since His revelation to me, I cannot forget Him: He is always in my thoughts; His name is sounded in my mind at every moment, and I see Him around me in every form, in every activity. When I walk, I walk in His presence in great gladness; when I sit, I sit in the awareness that all is perfect, all is His glorious play. I play out the role He has given me to play, and I watch Him in all His other forms playing out the roles destined for those souls: the mother, the businessman, the sports hero, the physicist, the druggist, the doctor, the artist.

Each soul is limited by its role; none can be all things, but each must accept the limitation required for success in the performance of its own purpose. And all are but that one bright Consciousness masquerading as individual souls. All is God; there is nothing here that is not Him. Listen, once more, to Jnaneshvar:

There is nothing else here but the Self. Whether appearing as the *seen* or perceiving as the *seer*, nothing else exists besides the Self. ... Just as water plays with itself by assuming the forms of waves, the Self, the ultimate reality, plays happily with Himself. Though there are multitudes of visible objects, and wave upon wave of mental images, still they are not different from their witness. You may break a lump of raw sugar into a million pieces, still there is nothing but sugar. Likewise, the unity of the Self is not lost, even though He fills the whole universe. He is seeing only His own Self – like one who discovers various countries in his imagination and goes wandering through them all with great enjoyment. ⁶

3. DEVOTION AND GRACE

Just as there are many religious devotees (*bhaktas*) who refuse to acknowledge man's supreme Identity as God, the one transcendent Self, there are also many philosophical Monists (*jnanis*) who refuse to open their hearts to the Love of God, protesting that the fact of unity precludes such an attitude, and that the preservation of an "I-Thou" relationship only prolongs the delusion of duality. I would like to point out to such people that so long as we are not lifted into the experience of unity by the grace of God, duality continues to exist for us—whether we admit to it or not. The grace of God is an experience of Love, a Love that draws us to the experience of unity. Without it, we can never know God as our supreme Self.

The Love of God is not a love between a subject and an object; for in this case, the subject, the object, and the Love itself, are one. Nor is this Love the result of a conclusion based on a rational premise; it is an inner experience. It is something quite real—breathhtakingly and intoxicatingly real. It stirs from within, and centers on itself within. It is not a thought-out construction based on philosophical reasoning, but a sweetness that is itself the object of devotion. It is this Love that *bhaktas* love. It has no location but the human heart, yet its source is the universal Being. It is His gracious gift, and only those who have experienced it know what it is.

It is of this Love that Sri Ramakrishna sang:

How are you trying, O my mind, to know the nature of God?
 You are groping like a madman locked in a dark room.
 He is grasped through ecstatic love;
 How can you fathom Him without it?
 When that Love awakes, the Lord,
 Like a magnet, draws to Him the soul. ⁷

Such love-longing for God always precedes the experience of enlightenment because it is the natural expression, the indicator, of a shift in the consciousness toward the transcendent Unity. All of the outer events as well as the inner ones will conspire to bring one's life to that point where enlightenment is experienced. When it is time for it to come, it will produce itself, and it will announce its coming by a great wave of love that steers the heart irresistibly to the source of that Love, and eventually reveals itself unaided from within.

Consider the great Shankaracharya's final message to the disciple in his *Vivekachudamani*:

Gurus and scriptures can stimulate spiritual awareness, but one crosses the ocean of ignorance only by direct illumination, *through the grace of God.* ⁸

No one has ever realized God except those to whom He has revealed Himself. On this point all Self-realized beings are unanimously agreed. As one commentator says, in the Tantric text, *Malini Vijaya Vartika*: "The learned men of all times always hold that the descent of grace does not have any cause or condition but depends entirely on the free will of the Lord." The case may be made, of course, that "grace" is the subjective reading of the influence of the planetary patterns evolving into effect at the time, and not a spur-of-the-moment volitional act by a supreme Being. But, we must object, is not the supreme Cause guiding the unfoldment of the evolving universe? Do not all things move together of (His) one accord? And is He not, therefore, ultimately responsible for every single event in this universe, including the movements of the planets, and man's ultimate realization of his eternal Identity?

Another Tantric scripture, the *Tantraloka*, states:

Divine grace leads the individual to the path of spiritual realization. It is the only cause of Self-realization and is independent of human effort. ⁹

What is grace, then, but God's unconditional gift, given of His own free will? Were it dependent upon conditions, it would not be absolute and independent grace. What, indeed, in all this universe of phenomena, could be considered apart from His grace? Can we imagine that His highest gift, His realization, is an accident outside of His doing? No.

The experience of Self-realization occurs when the mind is concentrated to a fine laser-point and focused in contemplation of God; but this happens only by the power of the universal Self, of God Himself. This is not a denial of the efficacy of self-effort, but merely an assertion that every effort or desire to remember Him, every intensification of concentration on Him, is instigated by Himself, for He is our own inner Self, the inner Controller. It

is He who inspires, enacts, and consummates all our efforts. If the planetary patterns also reflect the arising of divine Consciousness, and the dawn of mystical experience in our lives, that is merely additional evidence that “all things move together of one accord,” that He is indeed the Lord of the universe.

Among the Christian mystics, we find complete agreement on this issue; Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, says: “You would not seek Him at all, O soul, nor love Him at all, if you had not been first sought and first loved.”¹⁰ And Meister Eckhart acknowledges: “It is He that prays in us and not we ourselves.”¹¹ The Blessed Jan Ruysbroeck concurs:

Contemplation places us in a purity and radiance which is far above our understanding, ...and no one can attain to it by knowledge, by subtlety, or by any exercise whatsoever; but he whom God chooses to unite to Himself, and to illumine by Himself, he and no other can contemplate God.¹²

We find the same agreement among the Sufi mystics, the Hindus and the Buddhists. It is always so—always. And though the attempt is often made by charlatans to translate the description of the mental state of the mystic at the time of his experience of unity into a sort of “method” or “scientific technique” for the attainment of God, no one has ever claimed that the following of such a technique has actually produced the advertised result. For, by themselves, the practices of shallow breathing, fixed stares, and cessation of thought, will never produce the experience of unity. This experience comes only by the Will of God. Nanak, the great founder of the Sikh tradition, acknowledging this truth, wrote:

Liberation from bondage depends upon Thy Will; there is no one to gainsay it. Should a fool wish to, suffering will teach him wisdom.¹³

An even more telling remark is made by Dadu, a mystic-poet who lived shortly after Nanak, and who, like him, eschewed both Islamic and Hindu religious traditions:

Omniscient God, it is by Thy grace alone that I have been blessed with vision of Thee.
Thou knowest all; what can I say?

All-knowing God, I can conceal nothing from Thee.
 I have nothing that deserves Thy grace.
 No one can reach Thee by his own efforts;
 Thou showest Thyself by Thine own grace.
 How could I approach Thy presence?
 By what means could I gain Thy favor?
 And by what powers of mind or body could I attain to Thee?
 It hath pleased Thee in Thy mercy to take me under Thy wing.
 Thou alone art the Beginning and the End;
 Thou art the Creator of the three worlds.
 Dadu says: I am nothing and can do nothing.
 Truly, even a fool may reach Thee by Thy grace. ¹⁴

The desire for union with God or enlightenment is a very special grace, not given to all. When that desire arises, it fires the heart and fills the mind, just as other desires—such as the desire for a wife, children and other worldly objects—possess the minds of so many. And just as those desires precede and give impetus to their fulfillment, so does the desire for God precede the fulfillment of that desire, resulting in the soul's experience of union with God.

When He draws the mind to Himself, the mind becomes still automatically. It is not necessary to attempt to still the mind by austere practices or artificial methods. The body becomes still, the mind becomes still when the heart is yearning sincerely for Him alone. Everything happens very naturally by His grace. One begins to begrudge the mind any thought other than the thought directed to God. And with the aim of centering the mind continually on Him, one begins to sing His name in the inner recesses of the mind.

It doesn't matter what name is used; Christians call Him, "Father," Muslims call Him "Rahim," Jews call Him "Adonai," Buddhists call Him "Buddha", and Hindus call Him "Hari"; Love responds to whatever name is called with love. To one who loves, His name is nectar; it is like a cold drink of water to a thirsty man. It is no discipline, nor is it an austerity. It is the living of a joyful life. It is the sweetness of peace; it is the delight of delights.

Since there is really nothing else but that infinite Being wherever one may look, as one begins to sing the name of God, that awareness dawns, and the bliss of recognizing one's own Self both without and within begins to well up. The more one sings His name, the more one revels in that bliss, and the

more clearly one perceives His continual presence. Inherent in that perception is all mercy, all right-judgment, all tenderness, all loving-kindness. It is the *natural devotion* by which a man's heart is transformed, and by which he becomes fit for the vision of God.

It seems that everyone, sooner or later, in this life or the next, comes to experience the grace of God. It is experienced as an awakening of the soul, a prerequisite to the direct knowledge of God, one's eternal Self. This "awakening" very often coincides with the hearing or reading of the words of someone who has had an intimate experience of the Self, and who is able to communicate the understanding he or she has acquired. It is in this way, through our intellects, that God reaches to our hearts.

Speaking from my own experience, the moment I learned of the ultimate identity of man's self and the universal Self, and of the fact that many have actually experienced this truth, a delicious joy arose in me coupled with a certainty that it was indeed true. I *felt* that inner grace; I knew that I had found the truth of existence, and I rejoiced in that blissful knowledge! This, I believe, is a common experience, a universal symptom of the first flush of the soul's awakening to the Self.

Sometimes this awakening is accompanied by thrills of joy that run up the spine into the head. Sometimes there are interior visions, either of saints or temples or simply of a golden light. But it is unmistakable; it is truly an awakening of the soul and is known and experienced as such.

Eventually, each of us passes through a specific period in our lives during which our understanding is awakened to the eternal Self, when we are most keenly receptive to the awareness of God's presence and Love. Years later, our ability to experience that same sense of God's presence and Love may wane; perhaps we shall pass into a period of more mundane considerations during which we will learn to carry the understandings which we gained in those more ecstatic and spiritually receptive moments into our daily lives, and to remain obedient to that acquired wisdom. There is, as the author of *Ecclesiastes* tells us, to everything a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven; a time for sowing, and a time for reaping, a time for giving, and a time for receiving.

The point I wish to make is that the time of peak receptivity, the time of grace, is short; and should be cherished and utilized with care. Once that unmistakable awakening has occurred, find some time to enjoy a period of solitude with God. You will learn more in such moments than in a thousand congregational lectures. Forge your link with God, and He will lead you to Himself. He will draw you to love Him, for He Himself is that Love that has awakened in you as love for God. He will draw you to seek Him in prayer and in silent longing, for He is your own heart. Follow, and you will reach Him. Draw near to Him in the silence of the night and He will reveal Himself to you as your very deepest Self, your eternal Identity.

There are some who feel the need to follow closely in the shadow of some great spiritually aware personage in order to learn to live in harmony with their own Divinity; but they should be wary of surrendering their own innate intelligence in service to another, however holy he or she may seem. Teachers are often necessary, and their Divinity is worthy of honor; but dependence on another is full of danger and is to be avoided. Depend upon God; it is *His* grace you seek, and the awakening of Love within your own heart. *That* is the only fee for entrance into the kingdom of God.

Keep on loving Him, keep on trusting in Him to guide you, and keep on praying to Him. And when He puts it into your heart to know Him, He will lift aside the veil and reveal that all along, it was *He* who prayed, who sought, who sorrowed as you; and that, all along, it was *you* who forever lives beyond all sorrow, as God—forever blissful, forever free.

NOTES:

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3. Ruysbroeck, Jan, *The Sparkling Stone*, X
4. Kabir, adapted from Shastri, H.P., *Indian Mystic Verse*, London, Shanti Sadan, 1941; p. 49.
5. Abhayananda, Swami, *Jnaneshvar: The Life And Works Of The Celebrated Thirteenth Century Indian Mystic-Poet*, Olympia, Wash., Atma Books, 1989, 1994; *Amritanubhav*, IX: 1, 7, 12, 13, 15, 28, 29, 30, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 49, 53, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61, 65, 67, 70, 71.

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7. Nikhilananda, Swami (trans.), *The Gospel Of SriRamakrishna*, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942.
8. Prabhavananda, Swami (trans.), *Vivekachudamani by Shankaracharya*, Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1947; p. 131
9. *Tantraloka*,
10. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On The Song Of Songs*, Sermon LXXXIV.4.
11. Blackney, R.B., *Meister Eckhart, A Modern Translation*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1941; p. 109.
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13. Singh, Trilochan, *et al.*, (eds.), *Selections from The Sacred Writings Of The Sikhs*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1960; p. 42.
14. Orr, W.G., *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic*, London, Lutterworth Press, 1947; p. 142.

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