

The Role of Devotion in Yoga

By Bill Francis Barry

What do the classic yoga texts teach about the role of devotion in yoga practice? Is devotion to a higher force, deity or divine principle considered optional? What are the forms of devotional practice that are relevant to yoga? Answers to these questions are clearly stated in the Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Ramayana as well as less well known yogic texts such as the Yoga Yajnavalkya, and the Gheranda Samhita.

As a preface, here is some context which begins to answer the question: *devotion to whom or what?* Understanding of key verses from the Yoga Sutras, and other texts, will be aided by a brief look at the Sanskrit phrase *Ishwara pranidhana* which is frequently translated as ‘devotion to God’. The term, *Ishwara*, often translated as the Lord of the Universe, represents that primordial force that sustains order in the universe, as explained by Paramahansa Yogananda¹. *Ishwara* is translated as “Supreme Consciousness” by Swami Satchidananda². *Pranidhana*, means devotional submission according to Professor Edwin F. Bryant³. *Pranidhana*, as devotional submission, is often explained in terms of surrendering the fruits of all actions to God or to humanity. Humanity, in this context, is seen to represent “God in manifestation” according to Swami Satchidananda⁴.

A perhaps simpler alternative to understanding *Ishwara pranidhana* as devotion to God is offered by Swami Niranjana Saraswati who translates *Ishwara pranidhana* as “surrender to the highest reality”⁵. And for those who may not be comfortable with the term “surrender”, the respected author David Frawley explains that devotional surrender does not mean accepting a teaching as an end in itself, but as a means that can take us beyond all specific belief systems⁶.

Yoga Sutras

What does Patanjali teach in the Yoga Sutras about devotion’s role in attaining samadhi, the highest goal of yoga? Yoga Sutras, book 1 sutra 23, states that samadhi is attained by devotion with total dedication to *Ishwara*⁷. Elsewhere in the Yoga Sutras, Sage Patanjali reinforces this teaching, by presenting devotion as a required prerequisite for attaining the goal of yoga.

The Yoga Sutras teach about the ten Yamas & Niyamas. These ten principles are more than just rules to live by. They are taught as prerequisites to the advanced stages of yoga! In Yoga Sutras, book II sutra 32, Patanjali teaches that one of the niyamas, devotion to the divine (*Ishwara pranidhana*), is a mandatory prerequisite for the higher stages of yoga. Patanjali states clearly that devotion to the divine is one of the required practices toward the attainment of samadhi.

Now, just to be sure we didn’t miss it, Sage Patanjali, reinforces this teaching, in Yoga Sutras book II sutra 45, where he states: *From surrender to the divine comes the perfection of samadhi*. The great Swami Satchidananda sums up this sutra by calling this the easy path. Sri Satchidananda quotes the Bhagavad Gita verse where Krishna states “*do everything in My name, then you will get peace*”. Satchidananda emphasizes that by focusing on this one approach, you will attain all⁸.

Some yoga students may say that they have chosen to pursue the highest goal of yoga through the ‘path of action’, therefore they are less interested in devotion. Those students may want to be aware that Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras teach that devotion is one of the three requirements of the path of action. In Yoga Sutras book 2, sutra 1, *the path of action is explained to have three components: self-discipline, study, and dedication to the divine*. Most translations of this sutra state clearly that all three of these components are required in the path of action. (It is interesting to note that in this sutra, the term *Ishwara pranidhana* is translated as follows: Swami Satchidananda translates it as ‘*surrender to the supreme being*’; Edwin F. Bryant as “*dedication to the Lord*”; and Prabhavananda & Isherwood as “*dedication of the fruits of one’s works to God*”.)

Other Classic Yoga Texts

In the widely respected Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the first verse in chapter one, begins with an offering of reverence to Shiva as the source of yogic knowledge that is the *“first step to the pinnacle of raja yoga”*⁹. In this verse we have a clear demonstration of the importance of acknowledging, with humility, a transcendent universal consciousness represented in the form of Shiva, *“for those who wish to ascend to the highest stage of yoga, raja yoga”*¹⁰.

As with most scriptures, the quality of the translation is dependent on the clarity of consciousness of the translator! But whether that first verse in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika is translated as “reverence to Shiva, the Lord of Yoga”¹¹ or it is explained as an acknowledgement of the supreme cosmic consciousness which is known by many names¹², this verse teaches that acknowledgement of an extraordinary source of the special knowledge of yoga is an essential step in establishing the yoga student’s focused intention and receptivity. Such a sankalpa, a focused intention and receptive attitude, is a fundamental requirement of progressing on the path of yoga.

Another great source book is the Yoga Yajnavalkya discourse on yoga. Older and less well known than the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Yoga Yajnavalkya, in chapter 9 verses 12-44, describe the importance of developing a practice of dhyana (meditation) on the deity within, in order to achieve union with the Paramatman in order to achieve liberation. These verses, describe the image of the luminous being Narayana (known also by other names), experienced within the heart lotus with eight petals (the Hrit Padma) which has *“bloomed due to the practice of pranayama”*, described as *“the Supreme Being and the lord of the celestials, present in the heart of all beings”*. These verses further state that *“by this dhyana (meditation) itself, one attains unity with the Divine ... and becomes liberated”*¹³.

A similar teaching is found within the seventeenth century yogic text Gheranda Samhita. As explained in the translation and illuminated commentary by Swami Niranjananda Saraswati, we find instruction¹⁴ on meditating on one’s *ishta-devata* (one’s chosen form of deity) to provide methods to reach the inner chamber of the heart (the Hrit Padma, the hidden 8-petalled lotus beneath the Anahata Chakra). A teaching which, Swami Narayanananda explains will aid in developing turning the attention within (pratyahara) and focus (dharana) as a means to enable meditation (dhyana).

The Upanishads

Teachings of the spiritual essence of yoga practice has its foundation in the Vedic scriptures. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad contains one of the oldest references to yoga’s physical and devotional practices. Regarded as one of the authoritative Upanishads in explaining Vedanta philosophy, the Shvetashvatara Upanishad has a greater emphasis on the bhakti (devotional) elements than most other Upanishads¹⁵. The role of the Shvetashvatara Upanishad as an important link between modern yoga teachings and their Vedic foundation, is explained very well in the book “Vedic Yoga, The Path of the Rishi” by David Frawley¹⁶.

Jnana Yoga & Bhakti Yoga

It is somewhat well known that teachings in the Bhagavad Gita place great emphasis on the significant advantages of bhakti yoga, the path of devotion. Yet, the Gita also teaches that there exist multiple paths to achieving the highest goal of yoga. One of those other paths is called Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge. Some advocates of the yogic path of knowledge may assume that devotion has no role, and that by attaining the fullest experiential knowledge of the truth of our existence one achieves enlightenment. However, one of the greatest advocates of Jnana Yoga was the esteemed teacher Adi Shankaracharya who held a very high regard for the importance of devotion to the divine, as evidenced by his 8th century hymn Bhaja Govindam. *“In this prayer, Adi Shankara emphasizes the importance of devotion for God as a means to spiritual development and to liberation from the cycle of birth and death”*¹⁷.

The Nine Forms of Bhakti (Devotion)

Well the Yoga Sutras and these other esteemed yoga texts have told us how important devotion is. Let's now look to one last authority to understand some of the forms of devotion. In the epic story, The Ramayana, we have Sri Rama's teachings on the 9 forms of Bhakti, the Nava-Bhakti.

1. Satsang – keeping the company of saints, association with devotees with spiritual interests
2. Katha – listening to stories and positive attributes of God and the great masters
3. Seva – Service to guru, service to others, service to humanity
4. Kirtan – Group chanting of mantra, community singing in praise of God
5. Japa (mantra) and bhajan – chanting the divine names, the mystic mantras and bhajans
6. Dama & Birati – self-control, control of the senses and dispassion
7. Mohimaya Jaga Dekha – to see God in everything and everyone
8. Jathalabha santosha – contentment, finding no fault in anyone
9. Mama Bharosa – Depending on God for everything, surrender to divine will

The nine forms presented above are as taught by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, in his book Prema Yoga page 46-47. The source documents for the Nava-Bhakti are: Tulasi Das' Ramacaritamana¹⁸ and Valmiki's Ramayana¹⁹ (see footnote 19 for an abridged version of The Ramayana written by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas "Ramayana At A Glance"). A different list of the Nine Forms of Devotion, is found in the scriptures Srimad-Bhagavata and the Vishnu Purana.

In Closing

Devotion to the divine encourages humility, receptivity and a tendency towards service. As devotion is cultivated, one's orientation shifts from habits of self-centered thinking or being overly critical, to becoming inspired towards more unconditional love. Prema, the highest form of love²⁰, eventually begins to manifest and dominate one's outlook.

When we set our commitment to serve, and dedicate more of our actions to the divine, this will often lead to an increased awareness of, and attunement with, the divine forces of dharma (divine law). Taken further, when one's perceptions of life, perceptions which had been saturated by the dampening field of the phenomenal world, begin to be replaced by a presence, experienced within and all around, of an attunement to that 'Supreme Consciousness', something wonderful happens. There begins a transition to a place of increased trust in that divine 'Supreme Consciousness'. When this happens, our individual ego's control of our will begins to relax and the initial steps of surrender can begin.

As this process unfolds, those divine forces respond and begin to embrace, support and lift us up. This is Divine Grace. Divine Grace becomes a resource and guide to further the yogi's progress on the path of redefining our self-identity from the finite temporary individual personality to a recognition of, a remembrance of, our divine oneness with that 'Supreme Consciousness'. The distinction between the devotee and the object of devotion disappears when the yogi's individual consciousness transitions to an experiential identification with that infinite, immortal unbounded supreme consciousness.

The great master Sri Ramakrishna compared this Divine Grace "to an ever-blowing breeze; you have only to raise your sail in order to catch it"²¹. So, through the path of devotion, the yogi catches that wind of ever-blowing Divine Grace and then lets go, and the Divine Grace nurtures, helps protect and guides us on the path to Self Realization.

There is a teaching common to many yoga traditions which says that the last act before liberation is surrender. Although for most of us, the notion of surrender can be hard to fully imagine. For the advanced yogi, they eventually gain direct experiential knowledge of 'That' to which they will surrender to! 'That' being the 'Supreme Consciousness', the object of their devotion. They experience the great Vedic teaching *I am That, Thou art That, All of This is That*. Their identity has been transformed. They move from the realm of duality, to unity. And within such a context the surrender becomes a release which leads to unfathomable gain.

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End Notes

- ¹ Paramahansa Yogananda, God Talks with Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita. 1993, First Edition, p.480
- ² Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, 1978, YS I:23, p. 39
- ³ Edwin F. Brayant, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, YS I:23, p. 82, "...pranidhana, 'means to place one down, prostrate, submit, etc'".
- ⁴ Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, 1978, YS II:1, p. 82
- ⁵ Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, Origin of Yoga & Pashupata Yoga, 2011, p.50.
- ⁶ David Frawley, "*In some Bhakti movements, liberation is gained by surrender (the Ishvara pranidhana of Yoga). Surrender, however, is also not accepting a particularized faith as an end in itself, but only as a means of mergence into the deity. One could call surrender the highest act of faith, but it is also going beyond any particularized belief.*" 10th Stanley Samartha Memorial Lecture "Pluralism and Universalism Within Hinduism"
<http://www.hinduhumanrights.info/dr-david-frawleys-lecture-on-pluralism-within-hinduism-at-bangalore/>
- ⁷ Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, 1978, YS I:23, p.39
- ⁸ Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, 1978, YS II:45, p.151
- ⁹ Hans-Ulrich Rieker, translated by Elsy Becherer, The Yoga of Light, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 1971, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ Swami Muktibodhananda Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Light on Hatha Yoga, 4th edition, 2012, chapter 1, verse 1, p. 23
- ¹¹ Hans-Ulrich Rieker, translated by Elsy Becherer, The Yoga of Light, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, 1971, p. 23.
- ¹² Swami Muktibodhananda Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Light on Hatha Yoga, 4th edition, 2012, chapter 1, verse 1, p. 23.
- ¹³ A. G. Mohan, translator, Yoga Yajnavalkya, 2nd edition, 2013, pages 96-97
- ¹⁴ Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, Gheranda Samhita, Commentary on the Yoga Teachings of Maharshi Gheranda, chapter 6 verses 2-8, pages 459-461
- ¹⁵ Swami Nikhilananda, The Upanishads, A New Translation, Vol II, 2008, p. 37.
- ¹⁶ David Frawley, Vedic Yoga, The Path of the Rishi, 2014, pages 112-116.
- ¹⁷ wikipedia.org http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhaja_Govindam
- ¹⁸ Tulasi Das's Ramacaritamana, The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama, a new translation, by W. Douglas P. Hill, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 318 (book 3, "The Forest" *Aranyakanda* verses 34-35)
- ¹⁹ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas (abridged version of Valmiki's Ramayana) titled "Ramayana At A Glance", 1976, p. 124.
- ²⁰ Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Prema Yoga, 2nd edition 2003. See also kindle version on amazon.com published 2013
- ²¹ Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, How To Know God – The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali, 1953, page 37 (in comments section following YS I:24)