

What is Bhakti?

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Bhakti in general is “saṁvit-samavetā-hlādinī-śakti” or hlādinī-śakti combined with saṁvit, i.e. the same power through which Bhagavān knows (saṁvit) and experiences Himself as ānanda (hlādinī) is made available to a particular person. It affects his nature and his ātmā and returns to Bhagavān in the form of bhakti. One makes a distinction between:

1. *Sādhana-bhakti* or a method that in every way applies engages a person’s mind and body in serving Bhagavān. This method is given in the Śāstram-s and explained to the bhakta as a duty or *vidhi*. The bhakta follows this method based on a sense of fulfilment of his duty. At the next stage, this *sādhana-bhakti* can lead to *rāgānuga-bhakti*. Then it is not a sense of duty that spurs the bhakta, but *rāga*, passionate enthusiasm to follow, to serve in subordination (*anuga*) those who already serve Bhagavān since eternity. The bhakta has heard of the different co-players in the līlā and the wish arises within him to serve a certain co-player, whom he considers to be his ideal. This latter form of *sādhana-bhakti* leads faster than *vidhi-bhakti* to the next stage.
2. *Bhāva-bhakti*. At this stage the bhakta continues with the method of the first stage. He has, however, already overcome the guṇa-s and clearly realises the nature of the world, Bhagavān and His līlā. *Bhāva* is the first indication of the combined workings of saṁvit- and hlādinī-śakti, whereas only saṁvit was working before. At the conclusion of this stage *bhāva-bhakti* is almost identical with *sthāyī-bhāva* or the permanent, personal relation between one’s ātmā and Bhagavān.

3. *Prema-Bhakti* is characterized by an “I am Yours” or “You are mine” relationship with Bhagavān. In addition to the clear knowledge of Bhagavān, prema bhakti leads to the direct experience of Him, His līlā and one’s own participation in the līlā. Together with the saṁvit-śakti, the hlādinī-śakti is now at work. It is not possible to attain the stage of prema-bhakti in one lifetime. Strong bhakti-vāsanās from one or several earlier lives are required. On this stage the bhakta can still have his coverings; they are, however, no hindrance to him anymore. This prema is also called *prītī*.

The word *prītī* has a double meaning:

1. *Prītī* = sukham, mud, harṣa, ānanda, i.e. a particular state of consciousness, of the quality of joy; *ullāsa-ātmaka-jñāna-viśeṣa* = a particular (viśeṣa) state of consciousness (jñāna) of the nature of (ātmaka) enthusiastic joy (ullāsa). This form of *prītī* only occurs in the person who experiences this *prītī*, i.e. it has a subject but no object.
2. *Prītī* = priyatā, bhāva, hārda, sauhṛd or love. Its distinctive feature is *viṣaya-ānukulya-ātmaka* = of the nature of (ātmaka), being beneficial, conducive, agreeable to (ānukulya) the object (viṣaya); i.e. *prītī* in this sense wants to do everything that is agreeable to the object of love, from its point of view. This *prītī* is also an *ullāsa-ātmaka-jñāna-viśeṣa* or a particular state of consciousness, full of joy, but in addition to this it is based on the knowledge and experience that the loving efforts have really been conducive to the joy of the object of love. This *prītī* = prema needs a locative, to which it refers. One’s own experience of joy, which is merely reflexive, as *prītī* in its first sense, plays no part here at all. In prema-bhakti, *prītī* is the endeavour to serve in a way that pleases Kṛṣṇa, to do what is dear to Him, without the wish to experience any kind of reflexive feeling of joy for oneself, here or later.

Bhagavān Himself *is* the fullness of *prītī* in both senses of the word, i.e. from eternity He is in Himself absolute joy in the reflexive sense and needs no intensification of this joy. At the same time, however,

He *is* prīti in the transitive sense, i.e. just like the bhakta, God does not know any greater joy than to serve the bhakta who has prīti.

In addition to this, Bhagavān very often explains that there are many statements in the Vedas stating that His prīti for His bhaktas and His bhaktas' prīti for Him, give Him greater joy than the prīti He is in Himself. Therefore it is said that the ānanda Kṛṣṇa experiences in His *sva-rūpa* (own nature) is less than the ānanda He experiences through His śakti, i.e. bhakti or prīti. In addition to this, Bhagavān very often declares that the prīti the bhaktas in the world have for Him – those who have overcome their vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s and have dedicated themselves fully to Him – is more dear to Him than the prīti His Own eternal companions have for Him. This is fully understandable because His eternal companions live in the realm of cit, where existential security reigns, and where they experience the ānanda that lies in the prīti and in Bhagavān's nature.

The bhaktas in the world, however, have not yet felt this existential security and ānanda, and furthermore they are subjected to the temptations of the attracting world of Māyā, but they show their character as bhaktas by not desiring anything except Bhagavān's sevā. Now the question arises if from God's side, at a certain time, there is a need to grant one or more persons bhakti and prīti, in order to give Him even more intensive joy through the current of bhakti and prīti. If it were so, God would not be the epitome of completeness, of perfection. Then He would act from a motive, being in want. Here the Vedas say: Bhakti and prīti are not suddenly communicated to someone through a particular act of grace of God; as saṁvit-samavetā-hlādinī-śakti, bhakti and prīti are always and everywhere just as present as God Himself. Since eternity bhakti and prīti are simultaneously coexistent with God, just like Māyā and the ātmā-s. Accordingly, the radiation of grace in the form of bhakti and prīti has no beginning in time.

The fact that bhakti and prīti are omnipresent means that it only depends on the individual himself if he lets himself be affected by this śakti or not. This omnipresence breaks through in the bhaktas, gurus

and avatāra-s on earth, those who communicate this bhakti and prīti in the form of cit-vibrations dealing with God. The Vedic accounts, which seem to be a systematic accumulation of earthly śabda-s, are in fact cit-vibrations, identical with the cit reality. A person who does not have saṁvit-śakti only experiences the viparīta-pratibimba or the reversed and distorted reflection of the cit-śabda-s, non-identical with the nāmī or the object the word refers to. Although bhakti and prīti are omnipresent, they will not be perceived as long as the ātmā deals with Māyā's gross and subtle sense objects, owing to his vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s. When he turns to the cit reality of his own ātmā and Bhagavān, however, the Paramātmā, dwelling indirectly in his heart, leads him to the bhakta-s, the guru or the avatāra. The cit-vibrations expressed by them are the most important forms of saṁvit- and hlādinī-śakti.

The stages of bhakti

When the disciple listens to the words of the bhaktas when they recite or explain the Śāstram-s, śraddhā can arise. Here śraddhā means: certainty of belief, understanding the artha or the meaning of the Śāstram-s. This śraddhā thus comes prior to sādhu-saṅga. Sādhu-saṅga is a kind of communion with the sādhu-s or the noble, the bhaktas. This kind of sādhu-saṅga, however, is preliminary and happens mostly, seemingly accidentally, without the disciple's conscious intention. When śraddhā has arisen follows a much more intensive form of sādhu-saṅga, because by dint of his śraddhā the disciple now seeks communion with the bhakta, to hear more of Bhagavān and the methods of bhakti.

Accordingly, śraddhā is the first actual stage of bhakti.

1. Śraddhā

On this stage *śraddhā* is by no means merely a belief in God or the belief that what the Śāstram-s say is true, because this kind of *śraddhā* is required for those who tread the paths of karma or jñāna as well. Here *śraddhā* means *śraddhā* in Bhagavān's *sevā*. The precondition for treading the path of bhakti is that a person has the firm conviction that the true nature of his ātmā can only be fulfilled when the ātmā pleases Bhagavān through prīti in the transitive sense, and then gradually takes part in the līlā or Bhagavān's Self-unfolding consciously.

2. Sādhu-saṅga

Sādhu-saṅga is intimate communion with the bhaktas, i.e. to subordinate oneself to them, making oneself useful, conducting oneself in a way that is necessary for developing bhakti, thereby pleasing them, and over and over again consolidating one's recently acquired insights through meaningful questions (cf. Gītā IV.34). A famous example of *sādhu-saṅga* is a partial aspect of Nārada. This Nārada was born as the son of a maidservant, who shortly after his birth became a widow. His mother took him along when she worked in other people's homes. In one of the houses, belonging to a wealthy bhakta, wise bhakta monks were once invited for a longer time. The mother brought her boy along when she went to do the dishes and the laundry there. In his free time Nārada would stay close to these monks, listen to them and make himself useful. It made a deep impression on him when they talked of about the Bhāgavatam. Finally they communicated the complete Bhāgavatam to him and left the place. Nārada stayed with his mother until she died from the effects of a snakebite. Then he sought the solitude of the woods and devoted himself to the path of bhakti.

3. *Bhajana-kriyā*

Bhajana-kriyā is the actual practice of the nine methods of bhakti, which the disciple learns from the bhaktas.

4. *Anartha-nivṛtti*

Anartha-nivṛtti is the end or nivṛtti of all anartha-s or aims which actually are no aims. This means elimination of those vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s that urge people to follow other goals of life than bhakti.

5. *Niṣṭhā*

Niṣṭhā is to be firmly rooted in the principles of the life of a bhakta, making it impossible to give it up.

6. *Ruci*

Ruci is conscious joy in practising the methods of bhakti.

7. *Āsakti*

Āsakti is spontaneous joy in practising the methods of bhakti without the bhakta being aware of this joy.

8. *Bhāva*

Bhāva is the first indication of the combined workings of the saṁvit- and hlādinī-śakti, while only saṁvit was working before. It should be taken into consideration though, that from the very first stage the practice of the methods of bhakti does not take place through the empirical person of the bhakta and his guṇa-s, but through saṁvit-śakti, which is beyond the guṇa-s. The bhakta is not aware of this, and would, if he already knew this, rely on this śakti beyond the

guṇa-s, and become passive himself. Only when the knot of the I is cut and the ātmā no longer knows himself as a human being, but as a bhakta and future co-player in the līlā, he realizes that it was the bhakti-śakti that listened to, understood, recited etc. the Śāstram-s, and not his human ear, his mind and organ of speech.

At the stage of bhāva-bhakti, a particular personal sense of belonging to a certain group of the eternal co-players in the līlā is developed. This bhāva is identical with the fivefold *sthāyi-bhāva*, the permanent personal bhakti relation between the bhakta and Bhagavān.

9. *Prema*

Prema is identical with prīti. *Prema* is an intensified form of the *sthāyi-bhāva*, which turns into *prema-rasa*. There are nine different forms of *prema*, depending on the nature of the *sthāyi-bhāva*.

Who Can Tread the Path of Bhakti?

A person who through some extraordinary good fortune has received śraddhā in the sevanam of Kṛṣṇa and is neither too attached to the sense objects nor absolutely disinterested in them, he is truly qualified and entitled to tread the path of bhakti-yoga (a person who consciously or unconsciously has received a seed of bhakti to Bhagavān).

This includes:

- 1) A *Yes* to what is said about Bhagavān, what and how He is.
- 2) A *Yes* to sevanam, i.e. the methodology to perform sevā (the act of doing something) so that it pleases Bhagavān. First, to fulfill one's daily duties and to follow the Śāstram-s. The more the vāsanā-s drive us away from Him, the less we understand what the Śāstram-s actually say. (Bhagavān's sevanam = to do what pleases Bhagavān; to do what He has said; not to do what is forbidden; to understand the Śāstram-s.)

What a bhakta shall do to begin with

- 1) He shall tread the path of the noble. To try to tread the unadulterated path of bhakti without *following the regulations of the Śāstram-s* leads to disaster.
- 2) He shall ask about the right dharma, i.e. the true nature of our ātmā, which seems to alter as long as the ātmā considers himself to be body, mind or soul.
- 3) As far as possible, at least in one's mind, dwell on the sites where the avatāra-līlā took place.
- 4) Only strive for material possessions necessary for living. "Who strives for more or less, loses sight of his highest purpose of life."
- 5) One shall avoid close association with people who are atheists. One shall differentiate between *paramārthika-saṅga* = association based on the

common purpose and *vyāvahārika-saṅga* = practical dealings in daily life. I.e. in everyday life one has to deal with all kinds of people, but one shall not associate with non-bhaktas when it comes to ideology. One shall refrain from trying to attract people who are neither qualified for nor entitled to bhakti, in order to enlarge one's own group.

- 6) One shall not let oneself become overwhelmed by sexual lust, grief, rage, moha, i.e. false enthusiasm, pride and envy. "How could the ātmā and even God shine forth in a cittam which is overpowered by these things." (Pādma-Purāṇa)
- 7) Even when one factually serves God's highest mode of being, one must never disregard other modes of His being, not even the devas.
- 8) One must not cause pain to any living being.
- 9) One must beware of committing *aparādha-s*. These offences either refer to Godhead, His service or His name.

For example:

- a) To blaspheme those who are genuine saints.
- b) To consider God's other names, which one finds in other cults, to be independent of Bhagavān's name.
- c) To consider the true guru not to be better than oneself.
- d) To consider the Śāstram-s to be products of religious phantasy.
- e) To consider what is said about bhakti to be mere extolments to bring people to the path of virtue; that the meaning is not what it appears to be.
- f) To be of the opinion that the power and greatness of God's name is not as great as the Śāstram-s says.
- g) To be of the opinion that one can commit sins without anxiety, because the power of the name neutralizes the effects of one's sins.
- h) To be of the opinion that the other forms of the bhakti cult are just as good as the name.
- i) To give the instruction to sing the name etc. to those who do not have śraddhā in serving Bhagavān.

j) In spite of having heard of the power and greatness of the name, still not serve it.

- 10) Different forms of service of the mūrti, the Image of God or the avatāra, into which God was invoked to abide through mantras.
- 11) To reflect on and repeat what one has heard about Bhagavān, the world, ātmā and bhakti.
- 12) To pray for the grace of bhakti and recite and sing Bhagavān's praise.
- 13) *To always keep in mind that I am nothing (dainyam)* (cf. the definition of dainyam, sañcāri-bhāva).
- 14) To listen to the description of the avatāra-līlā-s.
- 15) To carefully think over these descriptions.
- 16) To regard everything that one is (ātmā, soul, body) and has, as God's property, and act accordingly, particularly dedicating that which is most dear to oneself.
- 17) To do all that one does and thinks etc. for His sake.
- 18) The decision of will to do what God wishes and refrain from the opposite.
- 19) To serve the Tulasī.
- 20) Śāstram-sevā. Those who study, listen to and recite the Śāstram-s are truly rich and Kṛṣṇa is pleased with them.
- 21) To do what pleases those who are the bhaktas of the bhaktas. "Those who are My bhaktas are not My bhaktas; the bhaktas of my bhaktas are My bhaktas."

The most important are:

- 22) Fondness for serving and pleasing Bhagavān's Image.
- 23) To reflect on and realise what the Bhāgavatam wants to say.
- 24) On the basis of the common supreme goal, join with those bhaktas of Bhagavān who are on a stage of inner progress similar to one's own, who understand one's position and are openhearted.
- 25) To utter Bhagavān's name *in the proper way*. (Neither Kṛṣṇa's name nor His qualities are possible to express, reflect upon etc. through our normal senses; on the tongue, in the ear, in the mind of someone who wants

Bhagavān's joy and sevā, however, they will be uttered, heard and thought upon spontaneously; the name itself takes the initiative and makes the tongue move.]

26) To dwell on the sites of the līlā in one's mind.

If one really comes in contact with these last five aṅga-s, they prove to be of such inner power that – if there are no aparādha-s – only a little connection with them leads to a higher stage of bhakti.

This higher stage is called “*bhāva*”. This bhāva is the *saṁvit-śakti*, i.e. Bhagavān's Own power to know Himself, which becomes manifest in antaḥkaraṇa, i.e. makes itself known and seizes the antaḥkaraṇa in such a way that it becomes a living unity with this śakti. At best the bhakta can come to this stage in one lifetime.

Another life as a bhakta, in one's next birth, is required to know who Bhagavān and His līlā-s actually are, and to be able to participate in His līlā as a subordinated ātmā.

The indications of *bhāva-bhakti* in a genuine bhakta, in his first life as a bhakta, are:

- 1) Even when the bhakta approaches death, he remains undisturbed.
- 2) He does not waste his time and strength on other (unimportant) things anymore.
- 3) The attractive force of the physical and mental objects of the phenomenal world completely loses its sway.
- 4) Although well advanced on the bhakti path, he *knows* he has achieved nothing.
- 5) He has a firm, deep-rooted conviction that he will reach the goal.
- 6) The bhakta on this level cherishes the distinct longing to one day reach the point where he will exclusively serve Kṛṣṇa.

7) To find delight and inner joy in continually repeating and singing Bhagavān's name, qualities and līlā-s. He is well aware of the joy in everything that deals with Bhagavān.

8) Joyful, *no longer conscious* attachment to the accounts and explanations of what Bhagavān, ātmā, world and līlā are.

9) He is full of inner joy to dwell, if not directly, at least in his thoughts, at the places of the inner līlā.