



Svaroopa® Vidva Ashram

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Focus on Enlightenment #

Enlightenment & Devotion

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Do these even go together, enlightenment and devotion? Enlightenment sounds quite heady: always thinking lofty thoughts, dissociated from the world. Devotion appears to be mindless: devotees always sighing or crying, with intermittent periods of religious ecstasy as depicted in paintings and statues of Catholic saints. Neither sounds that great.

The word enlightenment comes from the great thinkers of 17th & 18th century Europe. They wrote about God and humanity, proclaiming goals of knowledge, freedom and happiness. Their intellectual explorations bordered on yoga philosophy, especially Buddhist and other yogic systems that focus on the development of the intellect. Devotion was omitted, a useless relic from the Middle Ages.

Devotion to God is foundational to most religions. Yoga's devotional practices comprise bhakti yoga, an ancient system of spiritual development based on opening your heart to God. The goal is to live in the flow of Divine Love and Presence. In 16th century India, the tradition became concentrated on chanting to Krishna. Emphasis on intellectual understanding can, according to such bhaktas, inhibit spiritual experience.

How can these possibly go together, intellect and heart? Yet, according to tantra, both are necessary in order to maximize human capacity to its fullest. The highest level a human can attain is recognizing their own Divine Essence, then express it in loving service to the world. Mind and heart are interwoven in service to all, a tantric interweaving like the threads on a loom. This is called Self-Realization. The tantric pathway to the goal involves both your head and heart. If you leave either out, you're the one who loses out.

In a Shaktipat tradition, the first step is to have the experience that you seek. Shaktipat initiation is the awakening of your Self, your Divine Essence, an experience that is both fulfilling and motivating. Once you've been awakened, the inner goal is well-defined. Additionally, you are inspired to both practice and to study. You meditate again and again, so you can have the experience of your own Self again and again. You read articles like this, listen to discourses or delve into the Sanskrit texts, to better understand your inner experience and carry it into to your life.

Yet practice and study are not enough. Devotion is an important part of the process. You need to put your heart into it. Fortunately, the Shaktipat tradition makes it easy. Receiving this inner awakening from my Baba, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and love. It has never diminished, I am delighted to say. As I receive more and more of the gift he gave me, my devotion grows along with my understanding, with my heart and mind together in service to him.

The yogic texts recommend devotion to the Guru:

j~naana.m vij~naana-sahita.m labhyate gurubhaktita.h,
guro.h paratara.m naasti dhyeyo'sau guru-maargibhi.h. — "Srii Guru Gita 81
Knowledge and wisdom are obtained through devotion to the Guru.

Nothing surpasses Shree Guru. On this path, meditate on him.

Most religions worship a Divine Human. Some focus on an incarnation or a son of God. Others rely on prophets, those who speak God's truth for the benefit of humanity. Many worship realized beings, acknowledged as Masters within their tradition. Personally, I never met a Master that I didn't like. I've made a point of filling my life with people who've dedicated their life to God, regardless of the name they use. I've learned from every one of them. Yet the one who gave me my own Self is the one to whom I am most devoted.

The problem is that whomever you worship, you remain separate from them. In order to feel devotion, a sublime form of love, you must be separate from the object of your devotion. This works well in religion but not so well in yoga. Religion is about improving your life through getting blessings from an

external Divine Source. Yoga is about discovering the Divine Source within yourself, as your Self. These are quite different.

I was confused about this, especially in my years of living with my Guru. He used religious ceremonies to help propel us toward Self-Realization. The first Vedic fire ceremony I attended was overwhelmingly beautiful and intoxicatingly blissful. The flames of the yaj~na fire and the chanting of the Vedic hymns combined with Baba's unceasing emanation of Grace. The ceremony lasted three days. I didn't need sleep so I spent most of the night circumambulating the fire. The flames were like the life-blood coursing through my veins, the earth under my feet and the bones of my body, the light in my eyes and the love in my heart. The Vedic chants fed my soul.

Years later I learned that each of these ceremonies has a stated purpose; it's done for a specific worldly benefit. I had bumped into the religious aspects of this ancient fire ritual, how to harness the Divine force for material benefit. With my Baba, it was only about the experience of God within. Since then, I've been fortunate to lead many such ceremonies and share them with others. For me, it's always about the yoga of the yaj~na, the experience of Self that it invokes.

The yaj~na and other traditional ceremonies offer you choices. Are you going to worship the fire or burn up in it? Are you going to worship the Divine Human or become Divine yourself? Devotion is essential in either case. You cannot approach either with your mind alone; your heart is what makes it work.

A Zen koan says, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" Its meaning is that you must go beyond your concepts, even your concept of who the Buddha or any other Divine Human was or is. It is precisely what the Buddha embodied — getting beyond your concepts. He was incredibly charismatic. Wherever he traveled to teach, hundreds followed him when he left. They didn't try to kill him; they loved and adored him. They had good reason to do so.

It was the same with my Baba. In every town he taught, more people joined in to travel to the next town with him. The crowds got bigger and bigger. But he constantly reminded us, "Honor your own Self; Worship your own Self; Bow to your own Self; God dwells within you as you." He kept turning us back toward the right direction, inward. Yet he was captivating, fascinating, so inspiring and motivating, so full of knowledge and Grace.

In my teens, my girlfriends were devoted to the Beatles and hung their posters on their walls. I know people who are devoted to their dogs or to a beloved family member. I confess that none of that ever worked for me. In hindsight, I can see that I wasn't that enamored with unenlightened beings. But with Baba, it was a different story. It was different because he was different. While I tried to make it all about him, the bottom line was that the difference in him made a difference in me. When I was with Baba, I was better able to be me, deep inside to really be me. I could rest in my own Self.

That was the goal he kept turning our attention toward. And for that, I was devoted to him. Not hero-worship, not adulation or idolization — I didn't know what to call what I felt. But he gave me the words, the same words he used at the beginning and end of his discourses, "With great respect and with great love, I welcome you all with all my heart." That was it — great respect and great love. I'd never had both of them come together in my life before. Head and heart together, drawing from a cohesive inner force while being expressed in two different ways.

Living from your head, without devotion, life becomes dry and meaningless. Living from your heart, without intellect, life is unpredictable and erratic, even scary. When you apply both of them together toward one goal, the knowing of your own Self, life blossoms in its fullness precisely because of your own inner blossoming.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "FOCUS ON ENLIGHTENMENT"

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