

Bhakti

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Bhakti is devotion: the loving dedication of thought, feeling, and will to the Divine. In Professor Iyer's Theosophical exposition, it draws the person beyond a private demand for reassurance toward participation in a universal good. Its fulfillment joins love with truth and intelligent service. Devotion may begin through a particular form, teacher, sacred text, or act of worship, but its spiritual direction is expansive. What is loved becomes a means of recognizing a life greater than the personality and the claims through which it usually understands itself.

In "Eros and Kamadeva," Professor Iyer connects the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* and *The Voice of the Silence* with the highest love, directed toward the Absolute, Eternal Truth, and attributeless Compassion. This gives *bhakti* a metaphysical horizon. The object of devotion cannot finally be contained within an image produced by the personal mind. Images and forms can nevertheless help orient attention. Their value depends upon the quality they awaken and the direction in which they lead the devotee's thought and conduct.

A musical instrument offers a helpful image. Its capacity to sound clearly depends upon an attentive tuning that must be renewed. *Bhakti* similarly concerns the orientation of the whole person. The heart's response needs the discernment of mind and the fidelity of will if it is to endure beyond an uplifting occasion. The purpose is not to preserve a particular feeling indefinitely. It is to become more responsive to the truth that the feeling may have helped one recognize, and more capable of expressing that truth through action.

The forms of devotion discussed in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* are varied. Professor Iyer's account includes love of divine qualities, beauty, remembrance, service, friendship, self-surrender, and absorption. This variety matters because the inward approach cannot be judged simply by its outward expression. One person may be helped by sacred song, another by quiet remembrance, another by the daily service of a chosen ideal. Each form invites the same searching question: does the practice make love more truthful, less possessive, and more available to the good of others?

Human affection provides material for this education. Love often includes need, fear of loss, and the wish to be preferred. Recognizing these elements does not require contempt for affection. It gives the student something specific to understand and purify. Professor Iyer describes our loves as preparations for a more comprehensive devotion. A particular relationship can teach patience, gratitude, and respect for another's freedom. These qualities become spiritually

significant as they cease to depend entirely upon receiving the response that the personality desires.

The relation between *kama* and *bhakti* helps clarify this process. *Kama*, desire, can enlist the powers of mind in the service of acquisition or reassurance. Devotion redirects those powers toward an ideal that asks more of the person than gratification can provide. The change is learned through choices. One may refrain from using affection to secure agreement, or listen when a loved person expresses a need that does not suit one's expectation. Love becomes more capable of serving the actual being before it.

Krishna's place in the *Bhagavad Gita* gives devotion an inclusive character in Professor Iyer's interpretation. The divine teacher excludes none, while each person approaches according to their capacity and orientation. Such a view gives no warrant for contempt toward another path. Fidelity to a chosen form can coexist with reverence for sincere aspiration expressed differently. The devotee's task is to deepen the quality of the approach, allowing it to open the mind rather than making it a badge of superiority or an instrument of division.

Bhakti also requires discernment about human authority. Reverence for a teacher should strengthen truthfulness and responsible choice. A person's spiritual claim does not remove the need to examine conduct or to acknowledge harm. Devotion grows through an allegiance to truth that can survive disappointment in an image. Humility means a willingness to learn and to relinquish self-importance; it does not require the surrender of conscience. An ideal worthy of devotion must be capable of illuminating judgment as well as awakening affection.

Professor Iyer makes this relation explicit when he brings *bhakti* together with *Buddhi*, spiritual intuition. Through self-consecration, their union releases *jnana*, knowledge, which can deepen toward *dhyana*, sustained contemplation. The sequence joins the education of the heart with the development of understanding. A warm feeling alone does not establish spiritual knowledge, just as an accurate formulation alone does not establish devotion. The two mature through a life in which insight is tested by action and action is continually clarified by reflection.

Svadharmā, one's own duty or rightful work, becomes a field for this union. A responsibility can be performed with an inward remembrance of the purpose it serves. The care taken with an ordinary task then expresses something of the devotion that might otherwise remain confined to a special hour. This does not make every assigned duty sacred merely because it is assigned. Discernment must determine what is right. Once the obligation is recognized, devotion can give steadiness and generosity to the effort needed to fulfill it.

Consider someone visiting an older friend who has become less able to sustain a conversation. The visitor may wish to recover the lively exchange of earlier years. *Bhakti* would invite attention

to the person as they are now. The offering may be patient company, a familiar passage read aloud, or help with a practical task. Its value does not depend upon producing a particular emotional response. The visitor learns to give affection a form suited to the other person's present need and freedom.

Beauty can support this attentiveness. A flower, a carefully sung phrase, or a room prepared with quiet care may help recollect the dignity of the occasion. The outward form matters through the quality of attention it carries. An elaborate display can remain self-absorbed, while a simple gesture can be exact and generous. The devotee learns to let beauty serve remembrance and relationship. As with the tuned instrument, the question concerns the clarity of what passes through the form, rather than the prestige of possessing it.

Human Solidarity prevents devotion from stopping at the boundaries of familiar affection. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception asks whether the patience offered to a beloved person can begin to inform our response to those less easily loved. This does not require identical intimacy with everyone. It requires recognition of a shared dignity and a willingness to make some practical room for another's need. The education of love proceeds as concern becomes less dependent upon personal attraction and more responsive to the common life.

The Voice of the Silence gives this movement an ethical test through its insistence upon helping others. Fear for one's own spiritual safety must not become a reason for withholding needed care. Devotion acquires depth as it becomes useful, accepting the effort and uncertainty that service can involve. The student remains responsible for acting thoughtfully and learning from consequences. Love is strengthened when the willingness to offer is joined to the humility of discovering what an offering actually accomplishes.

Bhakti matures through this continuing consecration. The instrument is tuned again after distraction, disappointment, or an unnoticed return of possessiveness. No single mood completes the work. Yet each truthful act of remembrance and service can deepen the orientation of the whole being. The heart learns to love with greater freedom, the mind to understand with greater sympathy, and the will to remain faithful when feeling fluctuates. Devotion then becomes a sustained response to the spiritual life recognized within and beyond every particular form.

Glossary

Amor Dei — Latin for love of God; in the cited passage, devotion to the universal Logos.

Bhakti — Devotion; a sustained orientation of mind and will toward the divine.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Jnana — Spiritual knowledge or understanding; joined in the cited passage to devotion and contemplation.

Kama — Desire; the principle associated with personal craving and the psychic use of mind.

Mara — The tempter or personification of obstacles and illusion in Buddhist and Theosophical symbolism.

Pitri — An ancestor or progenitor; *Pitris* is the plural.

Svadharmā — One's own duty or rightful work; in Professor Iyer's account, an inwardly understood and self-consecrated responsibility.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — "Eros and Kamadeva" — p. 401

"The *Narada Bhakti Sutras* and *The Voice of the Silence* point to the highest kind of love which transcends the three qualities, the constant love of the Absolute, Eternal Truth, the attributeless Compassion which is the Law of laws, embracing the entire universe, ceaselessly filling the world with its benedictory and magical power."

Meditation thought: Contemplate love in relation to a truth greater than personal preference. Let the chosen form of devotion open attention toward the wider life it represents.

2. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — "Eros and Kamadeva" — p. 401

"The *Bhagavad Gita* warns us against the rajasic and downward tendency of *kama*, the constant enemy of man, but it also points to the process by which we could perfect our power of devotion and become worthy of the Divine Grace that flows from the Lords of Love who reflect the Power and the Compassion of the Creative Logos in the cosmos."

Meditation thought: Notice how desire directs the powers of mind. What change of motive would make an expression of love more generous and less demanding?

3. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 401

“The *Narada Bhakti Sutras* list the following eleven different forms of *Bhakti* or Divine Love: Love of the glorification of the Lord’s blessed qualities, Love of His enchanting beauty, Love of worship, Love of constant remembrance, Love of service, Love of Him as a friend, Love of Him as a son, Love for Him as that of a wife for her husband, Love of self-surrender to Him, Love of complete absorption in Him, Love of the pain of separation from Him.”

Meditation thought: Recognize the variety of ways devotion can be expressed. Let the quality of remembrance and service matter more than comparison between outward forms.

4. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 401

“If we wish to go beyond ‘love’ and ‘hate’, we must use all our loves as a preparation for *amor dei* or true *Bhakti*, the total and endless Love of the Logos in the cosmos, God in man.”

Meditation thought: Allow a particular affection to become a school of wider love. Practice one act that respects the other person’s freedom as well as your own feeling.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Flute of Krishna” — p. 102

“Krishna does not do this for everyone, but because he excludes none and loves each and all, he can give each one something. Therefore, we are told, ‘Those who devote themselves to the gods go to the gods; the worshippers of the *pitris* go to the *pitris*; those who worship the evil spirits go to them, and my worshippers come to me.’”

Meditation thought: Consider a divine generosity that excludes none. Fidelity to a chosen path can deepen without diminishing respect for sincere aspiration elsewhere.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Flute of Krishna” — p. 102

“So inexhaustible is the joy of the *Gita*, that any person, even late in life or after many tragic failures along the path, may turn to it and hear the regenerating rhythms and authentic accents of universal Wisdom.”

Meditation thought: Return to a sustaining teaching after disappointment. The capacity to learn and begin again need not depend upon a faultless history.

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Flute of Krishna” — p. 102

“Divine men, like Krishna and Buddha, and those of their tribe — the race of deathless kings, perfected beings, immortals from the Isle of the Blessed who move among men in many disguises — can help each and every man according to the manner of his devotion.”

Meditation thought: Let reverence awaken receptivity. Ask how your present orientation could become more truthful, patient, and available to guidance.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Buddhi Yoga and Svadharma” — p. 109

“All true soul-education is an unfoldment through worship and affection, and it is open to every human being to make all life a celebration of learning.”

Meditation thought: Bring affection into the work of learning. A responsibility undertaken with care can become an occasion for the education of both heart and mind.

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Buddhi Yoga and Svadharma” — p. 110

“When through self-consecration *bhakti* and *buddhi* come together, *jnana* is released. From *jnana* one may eventually rise to *dhyana*, ceaseless contemplation. Then it is possible to return to *svadharma* and understand it in the salvific sense expressed by Krishna in the eighteenth chapter of the *Gita*. There Krishna puts *svadharma* in terms of a universal formula, independent of birth, of early circumstances, of vocation and calling. It is the art of discovering one's true nature, and therefore becoming creative in one's capacity for self-expression.”

Meditation thought: Join devotion with discernment. Let insight return to daily duty, where its meaning can be tested through useful and unselfish action.

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Mahamudra of Voidness” — p. 395

“One must begin by honestly taking stock of oneself and learning to engage in a sufficient degree of self-surrender of the will, through humility, devotion, adoration and prostration, so that one may begin to attune oneself to the higher chords of one's being.”

Meditation thought: Offer a self-important claim to honest examination. Humility can make room for a truth the personality did not create and cannot possess.

11. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Light, Love and Hope” — p. 408

“One must educate the heart in the best truth that one knows. This truth includes the mortality of one's body, the immortality of the soul, and the means of making that immortal soul function within a mortal body.”

Meditation thought: Educate affection through the deepest truth you can responsibly contemplate. What would that truth change in the way you care for someone now?

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence* — p. 27

“To perish doomed is he, who out of fear of *Mara* refrains from helping man, lest he should act for Self. The pilgrim who would cool his weary limbs in running waters, yet dares not plunge for terror of the stream, risks to succumb from heat. Inaction based on selfish fear can bear but evil fruit.”

Meditation thought: Let concern for personal spiritual comfort yield to thoughtful help. An offering becomes real when it responds to another being's need.