

The Joy of Devotion

In the text *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, Shankaracharya, who in the East Indian tradition is regarded as a reincarnation of the Buddha, wrote the following words: “The great and peaceful ones live regenerating the world like the coming of the spring. Having crossed the ocean of embodied existence themselves, they freely aid all others who seek to cross it. The very essence and inherent will of Mahatmas are to remove the suffering of others, just as the ambrosia rayed moon of itself cools the earth heated by the intense rays of the sun.”

There are beings whose very essence and will is to remove the suffering of others, to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment. In accordance with the karma of a people, or of an age, teachings are given by these beings to help us move towards knowledge, light, compassion, happiness, and the joy of devotion.

True devotion is not an emotion, but rather, it is a steadfast anchor within the heart, an increasingly expansive attitude of mind. Devotion is progressive. In the end, one must forsake all to the Teachers in order to do their will. Devotion is not a mere state-of-mind or of heart, but overflows into pure joyous activity for the sake of the work of the Teachers. It can, of course, also apply as Shakespeare said, “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Another aspect of true devotion he characterized by saying, “readiness is all.”

“There is only One Real Being on Earth, sitting on High undisturbed. Correctness in attitude is all. Have no self apart from helping and serving Him. Do not try for any role except to be correct. Obedience, obedience, obedience.” These words were spoken by Raghavan Iyer and demonstrate the Joy of Devotion, as we will discuss herein.

Gautama, the Buddha, referred to himself as The Tathagatha, meaning one who follows in the footsteps of his Predecessors, thereby indicating that he was not the first and would not be the last. His statement also implies an immeasurable gratitude to those predecessors upon the Way. A Mahatma writing to a student in the nineteenth century stated, “Ingratitude is not one of our vices.”

The joy of devotion is a tree deeply rooted in the soils of gratitude. Everything that we have, that we know, that we can do was given to or taught us by others. The truly

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devoted find, if possible, the person who taught them their ABCs in order to thank them. The same may be said of expressing gratitude to all who have taught one along the Way, even when, perhaps, the teachings appeared to be negative.

Life is learning. Each of us stands on the shoulders of all – known or unknown – those who have preceded us. In a certain sense, nothing can be called our own, though it may be on one plane or another, in what we call our possession. Gandhi regarded everything he had, his mind, his heart, and his body as a loan from Nature. Being on loan, not his own, he regarded these gifts to be used on behalf of all, on behalf of the Nature from which he received them. He was a true exemplar of devotion to the whole since he did not regard himself as separate from anything. His devotion soared skyward, so to speak, towards Krishna and flowed downwards and outwards towards mankind. He was often heard to remark that this devotion had not come easily, had not come without great self-suffering (*tapas*), which he held to be absolutely necessary to a generation of pure devotion. His devotion was to the whole, not to any particular parts regarded as being more worthy than others. While he found great joy through his devotion, it remained the case that he was saddened to the point of tears when India and Pakistan became two rather than one country, predicting the violence which very soon followed. This exemplifies the truth that joyous devotion is, paradoxically, compatible with profound sadness. Thus, the joy of devotion, our title for this essay, is not an entirely simple notion to comprehend — let alone live.

Many people in many places are devoted to many things. These people, these places, and these things come and go. Therefore, many people suffer when the object of their devotion changes or altogether disappears. Such devotions are pale mirrors of true joyous and unconditional devotion, a devotion that is unaffected by any change, no matter how vast. It is taught in the *Bhagavad-Gita* that the sage, the joy of the sage, would be uninterrupted even were the entire universe to disappear.

If one chooses to move in the direction of such profound, changeless devotion, one must perceive and gradually overcome lesser devotions, devotions to the ephemeral. An ideal one can hold before the eye of the mind and the depths of the heart is contained

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in the following statement from the small text *The Light of the Path* by Mabel Collins: “Hold fast to that which has neither substance nor existence.” This in effect tells us to let go of our lesser allegiances, our lesser devotions. It also can provide an unfailingly accurate litmus test for one’s current condition of relative attachment or detachment from what appear to be the things and beings of this world.

Raghavan Iyer taught us that when meeting or thinking about a person, to realize that “it is ideas, not persons, forces, and not forms.” He also suggested that when meeting a person to visualize the person as a new born babe and simultaneously as a decrepit person facing death, realizing that one is meeting a mere cross section in a particular space – time “moment.”

Iyer also taught that we should regard all beings (ideas and forces) as immortal as not in any manner separate from ourselves. Thus, true devotion is always for the whole though its energies may be, when karmically appropriate, directed towards particular beings or situations. Perhaps paradoxically, we must be devoted to our own best interests before we can become truly devoted to the interests of others. Iyer called this “enlightened self-interest,” to distinguish it from egotistic, worldly self-interest. This is an extremely important idea on which to ponder, given a statement by the Dalai Lama, “I find it very difficult to understand the degree of self-hatred among the people of the Western world.” If one is an unhappy Westerner, and spiritually inclined, it would be well to assess the way in which one sees what one calls one’s self. This might be then contrasted with an example of a being full of the joy of devotion. Wherein lies the difference? The other being is no different from the first being in kind, but in degree. Given the access to the teachings of the ancients, there is no reason one cannot discover what may be the various causes of the unhappy view of one’s self. As one friend once remarked, as I was rattling off my woes, “Isn’t all this just a means of spending more time thinking about your own self?” Devotion, even so-called simple devotion, begins where thinking about one’s self, especially negatively, leaves off. In a certain sense, devotion has no subject, but is rather a force radiating from the heart through the purified mind.

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Devotion to the interests of mankind is far too demanding at the beginning. Devotion to the Self of All is far too demanding at the beginning. Devotion to a Teacher or a teaching represents a more accessible starting point, once one has realized one's devotion must move beyond mere self-interests, some mere form of salvation for one's self.

The Path of devotion (of *Bhakti*), one of the Paths taught in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, begins with the attempt at self-surrender, of becoming utterly devoted to the Teacher who in turn points beyond him or her self to Krishna. This is the theory, which must precede our attempts at practice, sometimes referred to as “the theory practice problem.”

As soon as a student decides to pursue this Path, he or she will quickly come to appreciate Krishna's statement that “It is difficult, but it can be done,” the first phrase ringing a louder bell, at least initially, than the second. This appreciation is the result of beginning to see the many obstacles to self-surrender, true devotion to the Path and to its Teachers. This beginning to “see” is a critical juncture. It may seem as if one must give up, renounce everything that one has known and loved, thought one knew and despised. It becomes evident, no teacher required, that there are, so to speak, many *gremlins* and *goblins* along the way ready to frighten one or to convince one to turn back around, to “just be normal,” to be “realistic” these obscurations (*vasanas*) are universal and must be faced by all seekers. Knowing them to be mere distracting “ideas and forces” developing the willingness to blindly, unknowingly cling to the feet of the Teachers is the talisman against these forces appearing to keep us from the Light streaming forth from the true object of our devotion.

If one has the unspeakably good fortune of being a natural seeker and, equally, the fortune of encountering a true Teacher, and asks to be taken on by the Teacher as a student (*Chela*), in this case what is referred as a “Probationary Chela,” and the request is granted, certain effects will ensue. The granting of the student's request necessarily and always requires the taking of certain pledges by the would be Chela. These pledges are explained verbally or in written form to the student, including a delineation of possible effects, should the student chose to take these pledges, in the presence of the Teachers.

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This will not occur until the student is deeply convinced of the depth of his or her commitment, especially given the phrase in the preliminary material that such pledges are taken “for life, and for lives.” It is also explained to the would be Chela that the pledges are taken to no outside being, but rather are taken only to “one’s own Higher Self.” The student, having been given these and other preliminary instructions, is told to take as long as he or she requires reaching a decision whether or not to take these pledges. It is made pellucid that should one choose not to take the pledges, there is absolutely no judgment or blame attached. The student is asked to keep these preliminary teachings secret as well as invited to once again seek out the teacher if so inclined, but only after much thought and soul searching.

It is made crystal clear that the taking of these pledges must come from a motive of becoming the better able to help and teach others, a motive on behalf of all, rather than merely for one’s self. If it is one’s *own* advancement and realization that one seeks, one is advised to look elsewhere. There is no lack of teachers who will aid one to walk the Path of Liberation, known to the true Teachers as the Path of supreme selfishness.

If, after all this (and more) the student chooses to take the pledges, a time and place for doing so will be indicated by the Teacher and the student is told that he or she will be taking the Pledges in the presence of others who have taken them previously, some as many as three or four decades previously. The student may or may not be told whether he or she has taken these Pledges in previous incarnations.

The student, arriving at the indicated place and time, is directed to a small ante-room with chairs and devotional books that may be read while waiting for admittance into the room where the Pledges will be taken. Others (known and unknown) to the student wait in the anteroom. At a certain point the Door Keeper announces, “The Room is now open.” The student is told to remain seated. After all the others have entered the Room, the Door Keeper comes for the student leading him or her into the Room where, for the first time, the student sees images of two of the true Teachers of humanity. The Teacher then enters the Room through another door and sits on the chair on a raised platform in the front of the Room. The student is asked to come forward. It is explained

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that the Teacher will read off the Seven Pledges phrase by phrase and that the student is to repeat back to the Teacher each phrase until the Seven have been completed.

Certain matters are then explained to the student including the fact that the existence of the Pledges, of the Room and of its inhabitants are to be kept absolutely secret, and that nothing said in the Room is to be discussed among fellow students outside of the Room unless so instructed by the Teacher. In effect, the student is left on his or her own to attempt to bring the Pledges taken to bear upon daily life. It is possible to fail, and it is possible to succeed. Depending upon each case, knowledge (by the student) of whether one has failed or succeeded may be a longer or shorter period of time. The student is also instructed not to be concerned with his or her own progress or its lack thereof – since he or she is not yet in a position to objectively evaluate the many operating variables. During this phase, the student is referred to as a “Probationary Chela.” Such a period of probation, such a notion, is to be found in any worldly pursuit requiring great effort and practice. This is why we have, for example, the notion of apprenticeship/internship in the trades of the world. Several of the possible mistakes that can be made during one’s probationary period are depicted in the animated movie “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” made by Walt Disney, himself upon the Path of which we speak.

Devotion to the cause of humanity, to the Teachers whom one, having taken the Pledges, now feels but does not yet see, to the teachings through which the Teachers can be known is the fundamental pre-condition of successfully navigating what can sometimes be the “raging waters” of probationary Chelaship. Lacking this devotion one will, usually in unsuspected manners, find that one’s *boat has been overturned in the rapids*. The warnings given in the preliminary material will be found to be accurate. Every aspect of one’s nature heretofore unknown (unconscious) will come to the surface and will be either mastered or become the master in which latter case one has to exert one’s self even more strenuously in order to regain the initiative in the probationary process. The student has been told, “the only failure is the failure to try.” This simple line has enabled many candidates who might have failed, to succeed. Again, we can

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readily see analogies to every day life. In this sense, success or mastery in the world mirrors success or mastery on the Path.

The student has been taught that the greater, the deeper the motivation and devotion, the more will be the trials one will have to face. In this sense when trials arise one might remember to see them as a good sign, as an opportunity to learn and to master greater forces. This phase of the spiritual Path can last for a few months, the rest of incarnation, a few lifetimes. In an ancient Hindu text a student asks a Teacher, “How many more lives until I become an accepted Chela?” The response was, “Twenty-five.” The student replied, “My heavens, that’s oh, so very many.” “Make it two-thousand, then,” retorted the teacher. Such stories point to the fluidity of the mysteries, even their probationary aspects.

The student, having been left to his or her own devices, receiving no further help from the Teacher, must fight the battles within, applying the teachings as best one can. The Buddha stressed the need for and value of “Right Companionship.” This becomes the student’s primary external area of help and encouragement. To the extent that the student can have faith in, even cognize, the Self of All, The Way, in spite of its trials, becomes happier, more joyful. There are said to be those who welcome with great joy obstacles to their development, opportunities to master and to learn.

A probationary Chela may become an accepted Chela and not know it. Similarly, one may fail and not know it. Such are the complexities of human self-consciousness. The less one comes to know, the closer one comes to the Teachers. Although teachings are given, under the seal of secrecy, the more they are studied, the greater the student’s awareness of his or her ignorance, the greater becomes the depth of love and devotion for those who truly know. To become an accepted Chela of a true Teacher is to have become nothing at all and thus, a suitable conduit for the Teacher’s work. To live solely, to do the work of one’s Teacher, as indicated, to one is the source of great unspeakable joy. This joy is, in an important sense, not personal, but rather a bright fragment of the joy of the whole of the Teachers, of the very heart of existence itself. Such joy transcends the

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ups and downs of the personal nature that endures until the death of the body. The difference, therefore, lies in the extent to which the ups and downs are assigned reality.

It is not necessary to move through the stages thus far indicated, in order to become a true servant of those who call themselves the Servants of Humanity. Some are born that way, though they may perhaps be few. It has been suggested by several Teachers in the last several centuries that we live in a vast “period of transition,” into which will be incarnated such natural, highly developed beings. Others may find the Path in any number of ways. The Koran teaches: “There are as many Paths to Allah as there are children of the breaths of men.” It is also taught, for example in *The Voice of the Silence*, “The Path is one, but the means to reach it must vary with the pilgrims.”

Humanity has been watched over and aided by countless Masters of Wisdom, seers, sages; Avatars from whom, it is taught, all our knowledge and development have come. This is far from the view of recorded history and those who believe humanities progress is in its own hands. Because we live in a manifold universe governed by known and unknown laws, these beings can only direct small currents here and there of human improvement, since they, too, are bound when working within the manifest by individual national and collective karma that must be allowed to run its course – “The karma sages dare not still.”

The deepest experience of the joy of devotion is perhaps the greatest mystery. How, for example, is one to maintain joy in the face of activities such as, the Inquisition or the Holocaust? How can the sage be undisturbed by anything that may come to pass? A hint of an answer to this mystery may be found in the fact that the joyful devotion of the true aspirant is laid at the feet of the Teachers with the fragrance of unconditional love and an equally unconditional willingness to do whatever may be asked. The further one moves, the greater becomes the humility, the more willing one becomes to heed the instruction once given by Raghavan Iyer, speaking on behalf of the Brotherhood of Bodhisattvas, “Leave the driving to us.” To be able to do this in full measure constitutes the deepest devotion, the greatest faith and the most mysterious of loves.

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Should this sound somewhat forbidding, it may be well to notice that you are devoted already to something, to someone. You know, therefore, something of the nature of devotion. You also know that your devotion can become more encompassing with effort. What might be called a “golden moment” occurs when you see devotion as one of the three-in-one of the whole. If one has had the grace to experience such a moment, nothing less will ever do. Just as a student might glimpse the Truth of a higher level, of music or mathematics, it remains the case that one must still do the work to convert the glimpse into on-going vision.

The joy of devotion cannot be separated from love. An ancient teaching says: “He who loves himself, lives in hell (the hell of loneliness and gloom); he who loves another lives on earth; he who loves others lives in heaven; but he who silently adores and loves the Self of all creatures lives in that Self – and that is eternal peace. The level of love determines the measure of joy.”

Much hope can be gained from contemplating the following statement by one of the Wise: “If you wish to know us study our philosophy. If you wish to serve us, serve our humanity. If you take one step in our direction, we will take one step in yours.”

Barrett Culmback

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