SACRED TEXTS

Bhakti Yoga: The Narada Bhakti Sutras and the Practice of Devotion

The 84 sūtras of Nārada in Sanskrit with our translation, Gita chapter 12, the nine forms of devotion, japa, kirtan, a simple pūjā at home and twenty-one days of practice



भक्ति

bhakti

YOGIDE

Free sample

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Before you begin

At dusk on the east bank of the Ganga at Rishikesh, a crowd gathers on the steps of a ghat. Families from Delhi, sādhus in saffron, students on their first trip to India, a few people who are not sure why they came. A fire is lit, a hymn begins, lamps with many wicks are raised and turned in slow circles towards the river. Some sing, some cry, some only watch. When the flame is brought to the crowd, hands pass over it and touch the eyes. Nobody asks you what you believe.

This is bhakti: devotion, love turned towards the divine, expressed in song, in offering, in the repeated name. It is one of the most widespread forms of religious life in India, and in the Bhagavad Gita it is called a yoga.

This book does five things.

First, it says what bhakti means, and where the word comes from: the Upanishads, the Gita, the great Purāṇa of devotion, the poets.

Second, it gives the whole of the Nārada Bhakti Sūtra, the short classic of devotion: 84 sūtras, each in devanāgarī, in transliteration and in our own translation, grouped by theme, with notes. We say honestly which edition we follow and where editions differ.

Third, it gives a practice: the nine forms of devotion of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, repetition of the name (japa), singing together (kīrtana), a simple offering at home (pūjā) step by step, and a twenty-one-day programme.

Fourth, it tells the lives of three great devotees (Mirabai, Tulsidas, Chaitanya) with dated facts only, and describes the evening aarti on the Ganga as the places themselves publish it.

Fifth, it asks the honest questions a non-Hindu should ask: what can I take part in, what should I leave alone, what is respect and what is appropriation?

About the translations.

All translations of Sanskrit verses and sūtras in this book were written for Yogide from the Sanskrit. They are not copied or adapted from any modern published translation. The Sanskrit text of the Nārada Bhakti Sūtra follows the printed edition of Nandlal Sinha (second edition, 1917), checked sūtra by sūtra on the scanned page (Chapter 3); we take from it only the Sanskrit, never its translation.

Devotion and well-being.

Bhakti asks for no physical effort. Two cautions only. Practices with flames and incense at home need the usual care: a stable holder, nothing flammable nearby, never left unattended, a window open if you have asthma. And intense religious emotion, long vigils or fasting are not for everyone: if you live with a psychiatric condition, or if a practice leaves you frightened, sleepless or disconnected from people around you, stop, and talk to your doctor or to someone you trust. In an emergency: 911 (US, Canada),

999 or 112 (UK), 112 (EU, India), 000 (Australia).

How the texts are numbered

- **Nārada Bhakti Sūtra (NBS)**: 84 sūtras, numbered continuously, as in Nandlal Sinha's edition (The Bhakti Sutras of Narada, Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. VII, Allahabad, Pāṇini Office, first edition 1911, second edition 1917) and in most printed editions. Many editions also divide them into five chapters (1-24, 25-33, 34-50, 51-66, 67-84); some modern translations arrange the same 84 sūtras differently. We keep the continuous numbering.
- **Bhagavad Gītā (BG)**: critical edition of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), electronic text of GRETIL. For the verses quoted here, the numbering is the same as in popular editions.
- **Bhāgavata Purāṇa (BhP)**: GRETIL text, numbered by book, chapter and verse (7.5.23).
- **Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad**: GRETIL text (6.23).
- **Verses of Chaitanya**: GRETIL text of the anthology Padyāvalī compiled by Rūpa Gosvāmin, with the corresponding reference in the Caitanya-caritāmṛta (3.20).

How to use this book

Read Chapters 1 and 2 first: they give the frame. Read the sūtras (Chapters 3 to 6) slowly, a few a day; they are short on purpose, and a sūtra is meant to be remembered and turned over in the mind. Begin the practice (Chapters 7 to 10) whenever you like: the simplest form, a name repeated with attention, needs nothing. Read Chapter 13 before you take part in a ritual in India or at a temple near you.

This book does not repeat our Bhagavad Gita for Yogis, which gives the whole Gita chapter by chapter, nor our Sacred Mantras: Text, Meaning, Sound, which gives the mantras, their sources and the full method of japa with a mala. Where you need them, we say so.

Chapter 1. Bhakti: to share, to love

The word

Bhakti (भक्ति) comes from the verbal root bhaj (भज्), which means to share, to divide, to receive one's portion, and from there to belong to, to be devoted to, to honour, to love. The same root gives bhakta (भक्त), the devotee, and bhagavat (भगवत्), "the one who has the portion, the fortune", the Lord. Bhakti is therefore not first a feeling. It is a relationship: belonging to, taking part in.

The word bhajana (भजन), from the same root, names the devotional song, and the verb bhajate, "he worships, he loves", runs through the Gita. When Kṛṣṇa says ye bhajanti tu māṃ bhaktyā, "but those who worship me with devotion" (BG 9.29), the verb and the noun come from the same seed.

The first great sentence

The word appears with its full spiritual meaning at the end of one of the Upanishads, in a verse that is still quoted at the opening of many books of devotion:

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 6.23

यस्य देवे परा भक्तिर्यथा देवे तथा गुरौ । तस्यैते कथिता ह्यर्थाः प्रकाशन्ते महात्मनः ॥

yasya deve parā bhaktir yathā deve tathā gurau / tasyaite kathitā hy arthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanaḥ

Translation. For the great-souled one who has supreme devotion to God, and as to God, so to the teacher: to that one the meanings taught here shine forth. (Our translation.)

Two ideas are already there. Devotion is a condition of understanding: the teaching "shines" only for the one who loves. And devotion to the divine passes through a human relationship, the teacher.

From the Gita to the poets

The Gita is the first great text to call devotion a yoga, bhakti-yoga, beside the yoga of action and the yoga of knowledge (Chapter 2). The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, composed in Sanskrit, traditionally attributed to Vyāsa, a central text of the Vaiṣṇava traditions, makes devotion to Kṛṣṇa its theme across twelve books (Chapter 7).

Then devotion leaves Sanskrit. From around the sixth century, in the Tamil country, the Vaiṣṇava poets called Āḻvārs and the Śaiva poets called Nāyaṉmārs sing their gods in their own language. Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the movement spreads across North and East India: Kabir, Ravidas, Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas, Chaitanya and many others sing in Hindi, Rajasthani, Braj, Awadhi, Bengali. Scholars still discuss whether this "bhakti movement" was a social reform or a renewal of older traditions; what is certain is that it carried religious life into the languages people spoke, and opened it, at least in principle, to all, whatever their birth or gender.

Bhakti and the other yogas

Swami Vivekananda, in his New York lectures of 1895-1896, popularised the idea of four yogas: action (karma), devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jñāna) and meditation (rāja). The Gita does not separate them so neatly, and neither does the Nārada Bhakti Sūtra, which discusses the relations between devotion and knowledge (NBS 28-30). In practice, every path in India is soaked in devotion: the hatha yogi chants before practice, the student of Vedānta bows to the teacher, the karma yogi offers the act. In this book, bhakti is a yoga in its own right, and also the warmth that runs through all the others.

Practise: one minute of offering

Tonight, before you sleep, sit for one minute. Think of someone or something you love without reservation. Notice what this love does in the body: warmth, softness, a widening. Then, without changing anything, turn that same quality of attention towards whatever you hold as highest: God in the form you know, life, the good. Write one sentence about what you noticed.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 49 pages.

Get it here:
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