

Karma, Devotion, and the Guru

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In Hinduism, they say that there are four paths to awakening; *jnana yoga* which is the path through knowledge, *bhakti yoga* which is the path through love and devotion, *karma yoga* which is the path through work and service, and *raja yoga* which is the path through psychophysical exercise (Smith, 1991). The main focus of this article is a contemplation of two of these paths; *bhakti yoga* and *karma yoga*. Through this contemplation, the relationship and overlap between these two forms of yoga are considered. Moreover, these two forms of yoga are also considered in relation to the experiences some people have with a Guru. A Guru is an extremely rare being who is completely *awakened*. They have no egoic agenda other than to help people realize their divine nature deep inside.

Key Words: Love, Devotion, Service, Presence, Guru, Divine, Self

"It is foolish to think that we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves."

St. Teresa of Avila

If we have any sense of spirituality at all, we are most probably aware that there is a deeper part of us that is invisible to the physical eye. It is sometimes referred to as the *Heavenly Self*, the *Self* with a capital *S*, *Love*, or *Truth* (Walsh, 1999). It has many names. We can call it whatever we want because the important thing is the first-hand experience of it and not how we label it. The problem that many of us face is that it is so easy to forget about that part of ourselves. We become bogged down by the practicalities of everyday life and forget that there is something deeper within ourselves. Perhaps remembering that part of us consistently is our biggest challenge for us living in the modern materialistic world. It is very difficult to find good ways to remember this but perhaps we can look at some spiritual teachings for some clues. For example, the teachings of Hinduism provide some useful insights about this through the four paths of awakening. Although they are not mutually exclusive, the teachings suggest that we can choose from these paths depending on our temperament, social roles, and life circumstances (Smith, 1991). The following is a brief outline of the four paths.

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Four Types of Yoga

The first path is known as *jnana yoga* (sometimes spelled as *janana yoga*). It is a path through knowledge. This path is considered to be most suitable for reflective individuals. It involves reflecting on ourselves as the subject of observation. Exercises in this path may include contemplating the question, "Who am I?" during meditation. It also may include mindfulness practices such as open meditation and reflecting on the nature of the *Self* through the study of spiritual texts. They are essentially explorations of who we are at the level of the ego and then who we are beyond the ego. For example, when we notice we are thinking, we make a mental note, "That's a thought". Then we notice that the thought, "That's a thought" is also a thought. Then we notice that this next thought, "That's a thought" is also a thought again. And we keep stepping further and further back into deeper levels of awareness. It is a paradoxical method in which we use our own mind to go beyond our mind. By exploring the depths of our consciousness in this way, we move closer and closer to the *Heavenly Self*.

The second path is known as *bhakti yoga*. It is a path through love. It is the yoga of devotion. This path is considered to be most suitable for emotional people. It involves contemplating on our love and compassion toward the divine. Since the goal of this practice is to love God for no ulterior reason, many of these exercises are focused on experiencing our love for the Lord in all activities. Some of the exercises used in this path may include *japam*, the practice of repeating the name of the divine over and over during prayer or meditation. There are many variations of this in the Western world. One of these is the repetition of a phrase such as, "Lord have mercy on me" or "May all beings feel held in your unconditional loving presence". Some people may repeat these words or phrases as a chant that goes on for many hours. Through these exercises, we move closer and closer to the *Heavenly Self* that is residing deep inside of us.

The third path is known as *karma yoga*. It is a path through work. It is the yoga of service. This path is considered to be most suitable for active individuals. This involves engaging in all work as service. Work in this context does not exclude activities that we think of as play or recreation. When we are on this path, we regard everything we do as "work". Every activity is to serve the Lord disguised as ourselves, as other people, as nature, as our own bodies, as everything in the physical world. When we are on this path, everything is done with a deep reverence for the entire universe. By approaching our activities in this way, we move closer and closer to our *Heavenly Self*.

The fourth path is known as *raja yoga*. It is a path through psychophysical exercise. This path is considered to be most suitable for scientific people. It involves studying spiritual texts and experimenting with our own minds and bodies. Exercises in this path may include physical types of yoga exercises, breathing exercises, fasting, holy vigils, and closed meditation. Sometimes a meditative exercise known as "body scan" is used for people on this path. This is a meditation exercise that involves focusing on the raw physical sensations in the body. To engage in the body scan meditation, most people typically begin by focusing on a specific part of the body and sequentially move to adjacent parts (e.g., toes, feet, ankle, lower leg, etc.) until the entire body has been attended to. The essence of these exercises in this path is to experiment with ourselves by doing something to our bodies and minds and observing what happens. The experiences that unfold during and after these exercises are meant to move us closer and closer to our *Heavenly Self*.

All of these methods are wonderful methods. Many people practice a combination of them. For this article, however, I would like to focus on *bhakti* and *karma yoga*, the yoga of devotion and service, respectively. To begin with, I invite you to explore our basic human drives with me.

Getting high

We humans are built to get high. We have an innate drive for survival, control, adventure, love, freedom, inner peace, and many other experiences. When some of those needs are satisfied, we feel high. In the earlier stages of the evolution of our consciousness, many of us in the modern world get high from food, sex, drugs, boat cruises, driving fast cars and motorcycles, dancing, music, sports, receiving praise

for our accomplishments and deeds, being powerful (socially and/or physically) and all kinds of other experiences advertised in the mainstream culture. We accumulate and collect those experiences as well as the objects and people that allow us to have those experiences. We get high from those experiences and then inevitably come back down. And then we repeat it or go to another experience to get high again and then come back down again. To avoid coming down, we try to move from one experience that makes us high to another very quickly so that there are less moments of being down and more moments of being high. Eventually, after we have done this for long enough, we realize the futility of this game because regardless of how well we plan it all out, we always come back down (Dass, n.d.).

Bhakti yoga

When the futility of this entire game sets in, some of us become interested in spiritual growth, because many spiritual teachings seem to promise (even if this may be an illusion) that we get high, but we do not come back down. And some of us interested in spiritual growth go into *bhakti* yoga, the yoga of devotion. We try to get high from prayer, meditation (although meditation is only *bhakti* if you meditate on love or a divine image), kirtan (singing our adorations for the divine) and darshan with a Guru (receiving blessings from a Guru). If we don't have a Guru, we often search for one so that we can experience that high. When we find that inner state we have been longing for through any of these methods, we feel saved. We feel the high for a while but it doesn't last very long. So we try to go back to it over and over by praying, singing kirtan, visiting the Guru, etc. And here we go again, getting high for a while and then coming back down over and over. It's really the same type of thing, only the methods have changed. The only difference is that now we believe that we are "spiritual", and we move out from plain *physical materialism* and run into the danger of falling into the trap of *spiritual materialism*. *Spiritual materialism* is the use of our "spiritual" activities and knowledge as a way to feed our ego; chasing after our temporary highs through "spiritual" methods or creating a sense of superiority over others who are not "spiritual" or others engaging in other "inferior spiritual practices" (Trungpa, 2002). Unfortunately, all of this is just a new way to get a temporary high. Moreover, underneath this sense of superiority is the ego's sense of inferiority saying that we are not good enough and need the divine to save us.

Eventually, we become aware of this pattern that we are playing out over and over. We realize the futility of the whole game we are playing and get tired of the rollercoaster ride of highs and lows. When this happens, we begin to work on burning through those "spiritual" attachments. The ego is called out for the game it is playing and we become the witness of our own *spiritual materialism*. Whenever we catch our ego playing that superiority/inferiority game, we say, "I see you, my dear" and the ego sheepishly walks away with its tail tucked in between its legs.

At this point, we might keep praying, singing kirtan, and visiting the Guru but now we do this from a different place, with a different intention. As they say in India, "God, Guru, and Self are one". We engage in these activities knowing that the divine we are singing to, praying to, or seeking guidance, comfort, and security from is not someone out there. As many mystic saints have tried to tell us, God is not somebody else (e.g., Hafiz, 1999; Merton, 1966; Rumi, 1996). The divine is who we all are at the deepest level. At the deepest level, we are the divine, the unconditional loving space that can hold it all. We are the divine, the infinitely creative, intelligent, wise, kind, caring one that resides in the eternal present (Emerson, 1884). So in the beginning of the path of devotion and adoration, we are praying and singing to a divine entity outside of us. We sing and pray to *somebody else* who will comfort and save us. In the middle of the path, we sing and pray to the hidden place inside of our very selves, the *Heavenly Self*. It is all directed to the sacred and divine spirit inside of all of us because at that deepest level, we are all one. Before we discuss the end of the path, let us consider how the presence of a Guru fits into all of this.

The Guru

In many of his writings and lectures, Ram Dass, the beloved spiritual teacher, explained how he was first repulsed by seeing people gather around Neem Karoli Baba, the person who eventually became his Guru (Dass, 1971, n.d.). He thought that this whole thing was a suspicious looking cult and tried to stay away from it all. Eventually, Ram Dass felt Neem Karoli Baba's powerful unconditional love and became very attracted to the physical presence of this Guru. Then, gradually, as this Guru subtly guided him to the realization of who he is deep inside, he realized that the real Guru was not the person (i.e., Neem Karoli Baba) in that physical body (Dass, n.d.). Ram Dass realized that who he was deep inside, the *Self* with a capital *S* (i.e., the *Heavenly Self*), was both the Guru and the divine (i.e., God).

This might be a good place to discuss what a Guru is. There are many people in the world called "Guru" but most of them are merely spiritual teachers. A spiritual teacher is simply someone who is further along on the spiritual journey than ourselves. They may be helpful to us in a variety of ways but they are not "awakened" beings (Dass, n.d.). Because they are not "awakened" beings, they may be tempted to use their positions of power to control and manipulate others for their personal benefit. Some actually succumb to this temptation knowingly or unknowingly. I am sure you have heard of many stories like that through mass media. That being said however, as imperfect as they may be, there are many spiritual teachers who do wonderful work and are very helpful for others on the spiritual path.

In contrast, a Guru is an "awakened" being. A true Guru is a rare being with no egoic agenda other than to help people realize who they are deep inside. Their sole purpose in this world is to carve off all the obstacles that keep us from realizing our true *Self* with a capital *S*. These obstacles include our beliefs about who we are and holding on too tightly to them, forgetting that they are merely costumes we are wearing while we are on stage. It is easy to forget this because hardly anybody reminds us that the entire physical world is the stage. Those costumes include beliefs like, "I am a woman, I am kind, I am a good lawyer, I am Asian, I am a person with diabetes, I am intelligent, I am muscular, I am somewhat wealthy, I am a good person, I am forty-five years old, I am honest, I am athletic, I someone who hates math, I am a Buddhist, I am a human being, etc." And, of course, there is the biggest subconscious belief, "I am not good enough." At the deepest level, we are actually none of these. At the deepest level, we are the divine. When we truly know this in our hearts, our egos can just peacefully abide in the unconditional loving space of the divine. This is what the Guru's state of mind is like (Dass, n.d.).

Most of us are not fortunate enough to encounter a Guru in the physical world but Ram Dass (n.d.) has assured us that meeting one in the physical world is not necessary at all. After Ram Dass' Guru left his physical body, Ram Dass was still with his Guru. He knew that his Guru was inside of him, a little like an imaginary friend. He lived with his Guru. He confided with his Guru. He took directions from his Guru. When others told him, "But that's just your imagination!" He replied, "Exactly!" If we quiet down and really listen, the universe speaks to us in mysterious ways (Dass, n.d.). Imagination is just a term referring to all kinds of experiences that don't seem to correspond to our known physical world. The following is an excellent example of this: In the well-known novel entitled *Bluebeard* by Kurt Vonnegut (1987), Rabo, the main character and narrator, stated the following:

Much to my surprise, Father began to blossom as an artist, too. In all the guessing about where my artistic talent might have come from, one thing seemed certain: it hadn't come from him or from anybody on his side of the family. When he still had his shoe repair shop, I never saw him do anything imaginative with all the scraps lying around, maybe make a fancy belt for me or a purse for Mother. He was a no-nonsense repairman, and that was all.

But then, as though he were in a trance, and using the simplest hand-tools, he began to make perfectly beautiful cowboy boots, which he sold from door to door. They weren't only tough and comfortable: they were dazzling jewelry for manly feet and calves, scintillating with gold and silver stars and eagles and flowers and bucking broncos cut from flattened tin cans and bottle caps.

But this new development in his life wasn't as nice for me to see as you might think. It gave me the creeps, actually, because I would look into his eyes, and there wasn't anybody home anymore (Vonnegut, 1987, pp. 62-63).

Later in the novel, Rabo's friend Circe tells him the following about her late husband's last days:

"I never told you the very last thing Abe said before he died, did I?" she said.

"Never did," I agreed.

"That was what I was thinking about that first day -- when you came down on the beach," she said.

"O.K.," I said.

At the very end, her brain-surgeon husband couldn't talk anymore, but he could still scrawl short messages with his left hand, although he was normally right handed. His left hand was all he had left that still worked a little bit.

According to Circe, this was his ultimate communiqué: "I was a radio repairman."

"Either his damaged brain believed that this was a literal truth," she said, "or he had come to the conclusion that all the brains he had operated on were basically just receivers of signals from someplace else. Do you get the concept?"

"I think I do," I said.

"Just because music comes from a little box we call a radio," she said, and here she came over and rapped me on my pate with her knuckles as though it were a radio, "that doesn't mean there's a symphony orchestra inside."

"What's that got to do with Father and Terry Kitchen?" I said.

"Maybe, when they suddenly started doing something they'd never done before, and their personalities changed, too --" she said, "maybe they had started picking up signals from another station, which had very different ideas about what they should say and do" (Vonnegut, 1987, pp. 78-79).

When we live from the deepest places inside of us (i.e., where our Guru resides), our actions come out from somewhere beyond our reasoning egos, who we think we are. We are merely radios picking up signals from beyond. However, the source of the signal is actually closer than we typically think. The source is the deepest place inside ourselves. I apologize for skipping the part about the character called Terry Kitchen. It might have left you hanging without closure, but if you are truly interested, please feel free to read the novel. It is a great book!

Anyways, going back to Ram Dass... When we get to this stage of the game, we live our lives based on the will of the divine (i.e., the deepest place inside ourselves). Eventually our ego becomes completely transparent to us and we discover that the Guru inside of us is the one that is real and that we (i.e., our egos) are the imaginary ones. There is literally nobody home (Dass, n.d.). We realize that all of our beliefs about who we are are merely projections from our own consciousness. The only thing that is true is the *Self* with a capital *S*. As you might know, there are many names for this. Some people call it *Emptiness*. Some call it the *Heavenly Self*. Some call it the *Eternal Self*. Some call it *Love, Truth, or Freedom*. Others call it the *Tao*. Others call it the *Atman*. Others call it the *Sacred Mystery*. And yet others call it *God* (Walsh, 1999). It really doesn't matter what we call it. It is just a label we slap onto an internal experience that we have. The important thing is that we actually experience it first-hand.

Passing Show

Once we realize who we are at that level, we can just witness the ego getting high and then coming back down and repeating that over and over. We can just enjoy watching the whole show. Nobody wants to watch a movie where everyone is happy all the time. The drama is in the contrast of the highs and lows. That's what makes it interesting. It's the same with our own lives as well. The drama is what makes it all exciting and entertaining, but it is also useful to remember that it is all just a passing

show. When our hearts abide in that place of unconditional loving presence, we can just sit back and watch the whole show with a sense of humor and equanimity. As the famous quote from an unknown writer goes, "One to me is loss and gain, one to me is fame and shame, one to me is praise and blame, one to me is pleasure and pain." Eventually, if we can go through the peaks and valleys of life while maintaining that kind of equanimity in our consciousness, perhaps we will have mastered the art of devotion.

So... To summarize, in the beginning of the path of devotion, we sing and pray to the divine who is *somebody else*. In the middle of the path, we sing and pray to the divine place inside of our very selves. As we come to the end of the path, we *are* the divine place inside.

Story of Jai Gopal

Through the years, I have come to realize that the line between devotion and service is not only a very fine line but also quite a blurry line. In other words, sometimes *bhakti* yoga can also be a kind of *karma* yoga. Devotion can be a form of service and service, in many ways, is a form of devotion. The following is a story about Jai Gopal, a wonderful kirtan (devotional music) singer and his experiences with his wise spiritual confidant known as Siddhi Ma. In Parvati Markus' (2015) book entitled, *Love Everybody*, Jai Gopal was quoted as saying the following:

I've read in Tulsi Das about the value of "disinterestedly" repeating God's name. For years I thought, "What does that mean? Why 'disinterestedly'?" When we were in India recently, I started to get a whole new glimpse of what that meant when I said to Siddhi Ma, "I sing all of the time, and people say I'm great, blah, blah, blah, but a lot of the time all I feel is effort, work, stress . . ."

Smiling, she said, "Jai Gopal, what does it matter what you're feeling? You're doing your service. You are serving Maharaj-ji (their Guru) and touching people's hearts. You Americans think that service is eating a laddoo and blissing out under a tree. For us, service is often filled with a lot of worry and effort."

I started to see that the path of bhakti wasn't for ourselves, our own experience, our own bliss. Rather, it's for service, it's for Guru, God, the devotees, the visitors, the universe of suffering people. I saw how the older Indian devotees around the temple served, and it had a profound impact on me. I pray to be blessed with that kind of devotion (Markus, 2015, p. 317).

As we can see from this story, the path of devotion actually overlaps quite a bit with the path of service. And as you will see in the next section, the path of service is, in many ways, considered to be a devotional practice as well. Let us now focus on the path of service, known as *karma* yoga.

Karma Yoga

Karma yoga, the path of service, is about cultivating compassion. Like the message in the story of Jai Gopal mentioned above, even if we do not feel compassionate at first, we keep serving others. And if we are lucky, in the process of serving others, we eventually might begin caring more and more about those others. We first begin with the people who are closest to us, like our family members. And as our practice deepens, we begin reaching out more and caring more and more about a wider circle of beings around us.

I have found this to be an important way to check where I am in this developmental process. If I am only understanding this in my head (i.e., conceptual awareness) but not living it in my heart, the circle of beings around me that I truly care for does not grow. The awareness and understanding are just ways to feed my ego so that I can feel like an intelligent or wise person. It is just a form of *spiritual materialism*. If I sincerely begin feeling compassion for more and more people around me, I know I am slowly making some real progress.

Karma

The next question that I often ask myself is, what is true compassion? What is truly helpful for others? We all have had many experiences of others being a nuisance even though they are trying to help us. How do we help without becoming a nuisance? To explain this, it might be a good idea to explain the concept of *karma*. *Karma* in far-eastern cultures simply means "cause and effect" but when we look at interpersonal relationships, it is highly related to the creation and dissolution of emotion. When our actions create or amplify the emotions of others, we are creating more *karma* in the world. When our actions truly dissolve the emotions of others, we are absorbing *karma*. How do we dissolve other people's emotions? In many cases, we do this by holding the other person's emotions with a delicate balance of space and loving contact. Some would call this *holding the other person's emotions with unconditional loving presence* (e.g., Sato, 2019; Welwood, 2006). It involves getting in touch with the deepest place inside of us, the space of unconditional loving presence, and acknowledging, allowing, and gently holding the other person's emotions with the utmost reverence. This is how we absorb the *karma* that is being bounced around in the world. This is how we act compassionately.

Realistically, however, in most cases, we react to the other person's emotional expressions with our own emotional expressions and pass it on down the line. This continues forever until that emotional energy moving from one person to another is absorbed by someone. This is *karma*, the cause and effect of how emotional energy moves from one person to another in human interactions. So if we want to stop passing it down the line, what do we do? We are human too and we have emotional reactions to the things that happen in our lives. The answer that many wonderful spiritual teachers have given me is mindfulness (e.g., Brach, 2013; Goldstein & Kornfield, 2001; Gunaratana, 2002). When those emotions arise, we acknowledge them, allow them, and hold them with unconditional love for as long as they are there. Once the emotions are held in unconditional love for long enough, they dissipate. It is just like your cat, who sits on your lap for a while to feel held in your love. After your cat has had enough, it simply walks away.

Once we are able to do this for ourselves on a consistent basis, we become capable of being truly compassionate to others. When others express themselves in any way, we can acknowledge them, allow them, and hold their emotions with unconditional love for as long as they are there (Levine, 1982). Even if they are talking about an objective fact, they are expressing some emotion. They are expressing that they want to be heard and that they want someone to know what they think is important or interesting. There is a subtle emotional energy behind all human expressions.

Thus, as you can see from this, helping others without being in touch with the deepest place inside of ourselves may do more harm than good. Our own emotional reactions end up creating more *karma* than absorbing it. When we do that, we make our activities more about ourselves than others. This is what we are encouraged to avoid when we engage in service as a spiritual path (i.e., *karma yoga*). The difficulty is that most of us are not aware of the deepest place inside of ourselves. Even if we make a sincere effort to stay in touch with that place, it may be out of reach. I don't know about you but I am not in touch with that place in most moments of my life. I have anxiety, fear, doubts, anger, worries and moments of restlessness often coming from sources unknown to me that cover that space of unconditional loving presence that exists underneath it all.

Imperfect Service

If you are like me, a mere mortal not capable of staying in touch with that place, the space of complete unconditional love, what can we do? How do we serve and help others in our unenlightened state? My answer to this question may not be satisfactory to you but this is the best I can come up with at this point in my development. Ultimately, we really cannot know all the good and harm our actions can lead to in the long run. All we can do is reach into the deepest place inside that is accessible to us in that very moment and try to find the best possible response to the situation we are in. We just try our best to respond appropriately knowing full well that it may actually end up doing harm in the long run. As many of us know, there was a time when many of us thought that nuclear energy would solve all of our energy

problems. There was also a time when many people thought that plastic containers would help us by making the packaging and transportation of goods so much more efficient. Now we are confronted with the aftermath of these innovations, not knowing what to do with the waste and contamination that these innovations are creating on our planet. Sometimes a good idea has unforeseeable harmful effects in the long run.

Hmm... I admit that those examples were merely about the outer physical world. I will try to come up with one that is more about our inner world... Okay. The following is an example of well-intentioned service that caused some harm in the long run:

The famous spiritual teacher, Ram Dass, along with many good-hearted volunteers mainly from the United States, were helping to create a camp for Mayan refugees in Mexico. The back story of this goes like this: The members of the Guatemalan government were feeling threatened by the indigenous lifestyle and ancient beliefs and rituals of the Mayans and were persecuting them. Many of these Mayans fled to Mexico and ended up in refugee camps. Many well-intentioned people, mainly from the United States, came to set up a wonderful social system so that the Mayans could farm and build and maintain their homes in those refugee camps. Through these efforts, the Mayans learned how to create a non-profit equipment renting system so that everyone could afford to rent the farming and construction equipment. The rent money was set up so that they had just enough funds to buy a new replacement by the time the old equipment was worn out. It was a very well-organized co-op system. The problem was that the Mayan refugees were all dreaming of one day returning to their homeland in Guatemala. When the Guatemalan government started to allow some Mayans back into their country, however, they did not let the Mayans in these refugee camps back. The reason for this was the following: At this point, these Mayans in the refugee camps were well educated on how to administer these co-op systems and the Guatemalan government felt threatened by their knowledge and skills. Thus by "helping" these Mayan refugees, these well-intentioned people may have caused them harm in the long run. Now these Mayan refugees could not go back home (Dass, n.d.).

This is the predicament that most of us are in. We just don't know what the long-term consequences of our actions may be. So we do what we can from the deepest place we can access and if that turns out to be harmful, we do what we can from the deepest place we can access at that point in time again. Until we evolve enough to consistently remain in contact with the *Heavenly Self* inside of us, that space of unconditional loving presence, this may be the best we can do.

The Guru's Mind

Eventually, if we were to evolve enough to stay in touch with that space of unconditional loving presence all of the time, the story would look a little different. Neem Karoli Baba, the being known as the Guru of the legendary spiritual teacher called Ram Dass, was one such being (Dass, 2004). He was a highly evolved being that saw everything at every point in time in the present moment. His only purpose was to help people realize who they are at the deepest level and to absorb some of the *karma* circulating in the world. He was a person that saw straight through everyone's egos. He was someone that lived completely according to the *Tao* (i.e., the natural way of things). He saw the past and the future and knew exactly how everything would unfold. All he did was play his part in the unfolding process of the universe and therefore his ego (the rational part of our mind that believes that we are in control) had no decisions to make (Dass, 2004). Because he was known to help people learn and develop as well as absorb their *karma*, many devotees of this Guru came to him for his services. The interesting thing is that because he acted from a space of unconditional loving presence, his ego was not making any decisions. Because he knew exactly how the future would unfold, he helped the people who were supposed to be helped at the time and could not help those who were not supposed to be helped.

The implications of this was quite astounding. He could not help those who were not supposed to be helped even if they were suffering tremendously. He could not do that because, in the long run, he

knew that this suffering was necessary for the development of that individual's *soul* as well as the *souls* of the individuals around them. The reason why I use the word *soul* is because, in these traditions, physical death is not the end. Thus, even if the person physically died from the suffering, their *soul* would take this lesson to their experiences happening after their physical death (Dass, n.d.). The Guru sees the entire plan into the future. He sees that getting what we want and not getting what we want are both part of the plan. They are all learning experiences that each person needs on their path. The devotees' emotional reactions to the Guru helping them or not helping them is also part of the plan. People questioning whether the Guru really sees the entire plan is also part of the plan. People debating about whether we have free will or if everything is just running off according to a master plan is also part of the plan.

In the bigger picture, the plan is so big that we can never step out of it. The moments where we believe that we fell from *Grace* and stepped out of the master plan is also part of the plan. As they say in India, it is all part of the *Guru's Grace*. Once Krishna Das, the famous kirtan singer, asked his wise spiritual confidant, known as Siddhi Ma, something like the following: "If it is all the *Guru's Grace*, why do we even bother with our efforts? Why should we engage in spiritual practice at all?" Siddhi Ma replied, "From the place of oneness it is true that *karma* and *Grace* are one, but it is best for the devotee to act as if they were separate to do the spiritual work" (Das, n.d.). Even though it is all part of the plan, we worry and fuss over things and live like we have responsible choices to make. Our ruminations, confusions, efforts, and practices are all part of the plan. Our breaks, moments of procrastination, mistakes, digressions, and moments we *fall out of Grace* are all part of the plan. It is all necessary for the whole learning experience even though most of us mere mortals are just too dense to see that (Dass, 2004). As C. S. Lewis (1943) once wrote, "There seems no plan because it is all plan (p. 184)"

Trying our Best

So even if we feel like we did not do our best, it is actually the best we could have done at the moment. If we can cultivate this awareness behind the veil through mindfulness practice, we eventually see it all unfolding and see ourselves trying to make "good" choices, even though our egos do not know the long-term *karmic* consequences of our actions. We do what we do accepting that every action we mortals make will be a blessing in some ways and a curse in some other ways. And that's okay. That's the best we can do at the moment anyways. And whatever our meager egos end up doing, it is always held in unconditional loving presence (which is also the deepest essence of every single one of us).

Through this process of trying to do our best to serve whoever and whatever is around us, the veil that hides our true *Self* becomes more and more transparent. It is an extremely slow process. But until that begins to happen, we try our best to remember that everyone and everything is a manifestation of the divine spirit. If we can remember that, we will serve them just as we would serve the divine; with the utmost reverence and devotion. This is how some elements of *bhakti yoga* are hidden inside *karma yoga*. As imperfect as we are, as imperfect as our service may be, we try to serve with the spirit of reverence as much as we can.

As a way to conclude, I invite you to enjoy the following poem called, *Don't Worry, I Promise*. It is something I wrote a few years ago as I was preparing for one of my meditation classes. It was in one of my books (Sato, 2019). It ended up in my essay two years ago in this same journal (Sato, 2021). And now, right here again. I hope you enjoy it.

Do you think you can feel, think, desire,
or do anything that is beyond the will of the Beloved?

This universe is the school and playground
provided by the Beloved.

I have a vague memory
that right before I materialized,

the Beloved pointed to the universe
and said,

"You can play with anything you want here.

Don't worry.
All of the joys, sorrows, and horrors you get here are part
of the curriculum.

Don't worry.
At times, you might feel lost.

But as you get closer and closer to your graduation,
your mind will gradually become
less cluttttttered.

And you will start seeing me clearer
and clearer,
and for longer
periods of time.

Don't worry.
We will share a big hug
at your graduation ceremony...

I promise."

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