Navadha Bhakti – The Nine Ways of Connecting with God
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Bhakti is the foundation of all spiritual practice. It is both a means and an end in itself. What is the nature of Bhakti? The Narada Bhakti Sutras say: ‘It is of the nature of supreme love towards God’ (2nd Sutra). How does this love towards the divine manifest itself? The Srimad Bhagavatam (7.5.23), delineates the nine ways (Navadha Bhakti) in which we can lovingly connect with God:

1). Hearing about God (Shravana)
2). Chanting His Name and Glory (Kirtana)
3). Remembering Him (Smarana)
4). Serving His Lotus Feet (Pada Sevana)
5). Worshipping Him as per the Scriptures (Archana)
6). Prostrating before Him (Vandana)
7). Being His Servant (Dasya)
8). Befriending Him (Sakhya)
9). Offering Oneself to Him (Atma Nivedana)

1). Shravana:

Listening to His divine name, His divine form, His Qualities, Actions, Mysteries etc., and getting lost in His glorious Lila is known as Shravana. From should we hear about God? Shri Krishna says in the Gita: "You can get that knowledge by humbly prostrating yourself before a Jnani Guru" (4.34).

Therefore, the first step in Shravana is to take recourse at the feet of a Guru. The Shravana aspect of Bhakti is exemplified most completely in King Parikshit, who listened to the Srimad Bhagavatam from the great sage Shukadeva. What effect did this listening have on Parikshit? At the end he said: "Respected Shukadeva Ji, you have made me experience the highest, fearless state. As a consequence I am now totally at peace. I am not afraid of death; let it come to me in any form now. I am totally fearless (Abhaya)" (12.6.7).
2). Kirtana:

Kirtana consists of chanting aloud God’s divine name and glories of His form, His qualities, Mysteries, and Lilas; and, in the process of chanting, experiencing extreme thrill culminating in tears and a lightening of the heart.

An instructive manual on chanting is presented in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali which say: ‘The name of God is OM. One should chant OM while meditating on its meaning. By doing so, one overcomes all obstacles and reaches God’ (1.27-29).

The very embodiment of Kirtana is the revered sage Narada. In fact, so engrossed is Narada in the act of Kirtana that he was actually happy when a curse was placed on him that he would not be able to stay in one place and would have to roam around the three worlds. Instead of lamenting this curse, he welcomed it saying that it would enable him to spread the Lord’s name and glory all over the three worlds.

3). Smarana:

Smarana means the constant remembrance of God. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita:

"The one who sees Me in everything and everything in Me, I am always present for him and he is always present for Me" (6.30).

"Therefore, always keep Me in mind and then enter the battle of life. Undoubtedly you will attain unto me" (8.7-8).

"The one who does not ruminate on anything else but constantly remembers me only, he finds it easy to reach Me" (8.14).

As per the Srimad Bhagavatam:

"The mind which thinks of material objects becomes attached to those very objects. However, the mind which constantly remembers me, merges into Me" (11.14.27).

An inspiring example of Smarana is Prahlada, who due to his constant remembrance of God was able to perceive Him everywhere. In fact, when his evil father ridiculed him saying that if God was everywhere, why did He not show
up in the pillar in front of them? The father then kicked the pillar, out of which sprang Lord Narasimha, validating the truth of Prahlada’s conviction.

4). Pada Sevana:

The Srimad Bhagavatam says: ‘Only till we have not taken recourse to the lotus feet of the Lord is there any cause of concern from money, family etc, which otherwise are a cause of fear and Dukha (3.9.6). The obvious example of this kind of Bhakti is our mother goddess Lakshmi, who is seen in constant service of Lord Vishnu’s lotus feet.

5). Archana:

Archana consists of the physical worship of God in the form of an idol etc, using the correct rituals (upacharas) as prescribed in the scriptures. These rituals consist of procedures like bathing and clothing the Deity, and also offering Him scents, food etc. An essential requirement of Archana is the presence of faith (Shraddha) in the devotee. As Shri Krishna puts it in the Gita: “Whatever is offered to me, whether it be a leaf, flower, fruit or water, if it is done with Bhakti, I accept it” (9.26).

An example of Archana Bhakti is that of King Prithu in the Srimad Bhagavatam, who satisfied Shri Vishnu with the selfless Vedic sacrifices he performed, so much so that the Lord presented Himself in person before the king (4.20).

6). Vandana:

Vandana means prostrating oneself before the Lord. An illuminating example of this Bhakti is Akrura, another great personality in the Srimad Bhagavatam. The great Bhakta Akrura could not contain himself when he entered Vrindavana. He was overcome with emotion and the consequent surge of affection for Krishna made his hair stand on its end and the overflowing eyes began to shed tears. Akrura jumped onto the land of Vrindavana and rolled around on the earth saying: “Oh! This is the dust touched by the feet of my beloved Lord” (10.38.26).

On going further, he saw Krishna milking the cows. The physical beauty of the Lord overwhelmed Akrura so much that he rushed down and prostrated himself at the feet of Krishna. Understanding Akrura’s mental state, Krishna helped him to his feet, drew him to His heart and then embraced His beloved devotee” (10.38.34).
7). **Dasya:**

Being in selfless service of God, fulfilling His intentions and unquestioningly obeying all His orders is known as Dasya. The most powerful embodiment of this kind of Bhakti is undoubtedly Shri Hanuman, who as soon as he caught a glimpse of Shri Rama, declared himself to be the latter's servant. Being a servant of God means leaving aside one’s most important work to respectfully do the Lord’s bidding; leaving all of one’s own desires to fulfil His desire; considering even the greatest effort done for Him to be miniscule; thinking His ownership over our body to be greater than even our own; understanding that our wealth, life, body etc is useful only as long as it is in the use of God and so on. Hanuman had all these qualities, and no wonder that Shri Rama embraced him saying: “You are more dear to me than even Lakshmana” (Ramayana of Tulsidas).

8). **Sakhya:**

Sakhya means personal friendship with God, a friendship in which there is a constant desire to stay in His company, and one enjoys conversations only with Him, and becomes extremely pleased on the mere mention of one’s friend from a third person. Krishna Himself tells us who His friend is: “O Arjuna, you are both my friend and Bhakta” (Gita 4.3).

Stories about the friendship of Krishna and Arjuna abound in the Mahabharata and Bhagavatam. Narratives show how they indulged in light banter, sports etc, which provide us with ample glimpses into the nature of their mutual friendship.

9). **Atmanivedana:**

Offering oneself wholly, including all of one’s material possessions, with firm conviction, is known as Atmanivedana. The example of such surrender is king Bali, who was asked by an adolescent Brahmin for a piece of land equivalent to the distance measured by the latter’s three footsteps. The Brahmin, who was none other than the Vamana Avatara of Lord Vishnu, measured out all the worlds with only two of His steps and finally there remained nowhere to place the promised third.
Seeing that there was no place left for Vamana’s last step, Bali, bowing before Him, requested Him to place it on his head. In the end, after having thus given up everything, did the king feel any remorse or bitterness? No. In fact, this is what he said: “Thank you God for your grace. Indeed, when we become blind with pride due to our wealth, you, by taking away our money, give us back our eyes” (Srimad Bhagavatam 8.22.5). This was the glorious Bali who gave up his all to the Lord.

**Conclusion:**

These are the nine ways in which we can relate to God. We are free to select the particular connection with God which suits our personal temperament. However remember that all these nine qualities existed together in the Bhaktas mentioned above. Did Arjuna not have Pada Sevana, Smarana etc? Of course he did. For us this means that once we have imbibed even one of these virtues properly, all others will follow suit, and the person becomes a Shuddha Bhakta, one whose each and every action can be deemed as Bhakti.

**References & Further Reading:**

- Karanbelkar, Dr. P.V. Patanjala Yoga Sutras: Lonavla.

**This article by Nitin Kumar.**

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