

# **Bhakti and well-being: A psychologist's perspective**

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**Abstract:** The paper examines *Bhakti* in light of the classical Indian depiction of emotions, viz. - the *Rasa* Theory. *Bhakti* is viewed as a movement in the emotional life of the aspirant, from minor devotional states (survival/pleasure/ego orientation), to major devotional states (love orientation). Drawing from Sri Aurobindo, a connection is then made between *Bhakti* and Psychic unfoldment. Devotional love provides the bedrock for a life lived in and from the Psychic. Further, years of observation, introspection, and reflection have lead me to conclude that one of the most essential pre-requisites for making an effective counselor/therapist is a groundedness in love, which ought to forever radiate from the being of the helping person. Traditionally in India, individuals turned to their *gurus* in times of crisis and suffering, and upon encountering the *guru*, the healing process began immediately because of the unconditional love and acceptance on the part of the guru, for the distressed individual. This paper thus focuses on the nature of (S)self work which takes one in the direction of becoming love (or more loving), and in this process better able to help others, and thereby also facilitate one's own evolution.

## **Introduction**

In Sanskrit, the term used to depict a state of well-being or good health is *swastha*, which means 'rooted in the self'. The self which is being referred to here is the deeper or higher self, and so perhaps it is more appropriate to use the term 'Self' (for convenience, I will continue to use the term 'self'). The self is our true identity, the hidden divinity within each of us, concealed under the outer sheaths of our being. We may also use the term soul for our divine essence, our essential core, which lends us our unique identity as an individual. Sri Aurobindo uses the term 'psychic' or 'psychic being', for the soul. What is unique in Sri Aurobindo's depiction is that, though in agreement with the pre-existing conception of the soul's immortality and its transmigration from body to body, the psychic is not a static entity, but immensely dynamic in the sense that it continues to evolve from lifetime to lifetime. The psychic is that part of us that responds to the true and the beautiful; joy and love being its essential nature. Perhaps the single

most defining characteristic of psychic consciousness is its groundedness in a deep and unconditional love, devotional in essence, accompanied by a state of sincere and total surrender to the Divine.

This brings us to the subject of *bhakti*. In *Bhakti Yoga*, the emotional life of the aspirant or seeker undergoes a gradual transformation, and (s)he begins to reside more and more in a state of pure and unconditional love of, and for the Divine. Looking at it from the *rasa sastra* perspective, the Indian meta-theory of emotions developed by Bharat in the third century AD in his treatise entitled *Natyashastra*, the aspirant attempts to reside more and more in the eighth and highest *rasa*, that of love (Paranjpe, 1998).

## **The Rasa theory of emotions and *Bhakti Yoga***

*Rasa* is translated into English variously as emotion / meta-emotion / sentiment / aesthetic mood. The details of the theory have been discussed by many authors in different contexts (e.g., Gnoli, 1956; Jain, 1994; Kapur, 1998; Lynch, 1990; Masson & Patwardhan, 1970; Misra, 2004; Pandey, 1959; Paranjpe, 1998; Shweder & Haidt, 2000; Sinha, 1961).

The literal meaning of the word *rasa* is essence or relish, and it is more commonly used to describe the aesthetic experience that follows from watching the expression of emotions in various forms of art. Bharat, whose main concern was developing guidelines for actors and directors of plays, identified eight major *rasas*, viz.- love (*sringara*), the comic (*hasya*), pathos (*karuna*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), horror (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bibhatsa*), and the marvellous (*adbhuta*). A later commentary on *Natyashastra* by Abhinavagupta adds a ninth *rasa* - the *santa* (quietude) or the mood of total freedom in which neither happiness nor unhappiness occur (Misra, 2004).

To enter into the state of pure unconditional love, the devotee commonly uses the aids of chanting the name of the preferred deity (Rama, Krishna, Durga etc.), and singing about his love for the chosen form of divinity. In so doing, the aspirant, or shall we say *rasika*, experiences a dissolution of his/her ego self, wherein everyday connotations and experiences in the mundane human realm around the emotion of love are transcended, and the devotee enters into a state of

pure and absolute universal love, devoid of any sense of “I” or “mine”.

In general, when we are immersed in an aesthetic experience via exposure to art (for example music or dance), the experienced emotions are located in a context far removed from one’s everyday personal life, and hence we are able to derive *rasa* or a sense of pleasure or delight, even if we are experiencing so called negative emotions like anger and fear. In a sense, the personal or “I” element melts away, and we find ourselves transported to the realm of pure emotion, devoid of any ego involvement.

An important development in understanding the nature of emotional experience came about when scholars in Bharata’s tradition recognized that spectators of a drama *collectively* share a specific aesthetic mood grounded in a basic emotion (Paranjpe, 2008). The *rasa* theorists thus proposed the concept of the “generalization” (*sadharanikarana*) of emotions. This apparently simple idea has profound implications for recognizing the nature of emotions as a phenomenon not restricted to individuals, let alone lodged in bodily tissues, but as belonging to a trans-individual domain of reality.

Now in *Bhakti Yoga*, the aspirant as seeker of the Divine, gradually disidentifies with all emotions except that of love. Thus Rupa Goswami offered a reinterpretation of the original *rasa sastra* perspective in terms of major and minor devotional states (Paranjpe, 1998). In this depiction, love is conceived of as the major *rasa*, the essential emotional state to be sought and attained by the *bhakta* (devotee). All other emotions, the minor devotional states, are to be understood as resulting from our seeking of love, which in the early stages of *bhakti* often eludes the devotee, resulting in a state of frustration in our seeking upon encountering failure, or loss of the love we thought we had possessed.

Over time, through continuous and sincere *sadhana* (sustained effort), the devotee begins to reside more and more in a state of universal love and *ananda* (joy/bliss) which is the very nature of the soul and the Spirit. Then out of the sheer joy and sense of completeness of the act, we surrender our entire being to the Divine. In other words, the attempts of the devotee to ground him/her self in universal love leads to the coming forward of the soul or psychic being, our

Divine essence. The coming forward of the psychic being results in a shift of power in terms of what element of our being exercises control over our life, from the ego to the psychic. This is accompanied by a major affective transformation in our life, as well as profound behavioural change. Our life becomes increasingly characterized by a feeling of goodwill towards all human beings, and we view all and relate to all in terms of unconditional love. And true love is not about taking or getting, only about giving; and thus selfless service becomes part of our very nature. Perceiving our ground in the Divine, and the ground of all other human beings, all of existence for that matter, in the Divine, we at last experience the truth of the Upanishadic tenet “*basudhaib kutumbkam*” (the entire world is one family).

The coming forward of the psychic being has another profound consequence. The search for direction in our life, for which we often seek a *guru*, comes to a close, with the inner *guru*, our psychic, now performing that function completely and perfectly. There is a certain knowingness about psychic consciousness, which acts as a sure guide in matters of truth and the good and the beautiful. In short, our life is transformed from the life human, to the life Divine.

## **Methodology in the Spiritual Realm**

Trained in modern Western models, for a majority of psychologists today, doing psychology has come to mean, most commonly, either of two types of approach (Paranjpe, 2008) : (1) “running subjects” in an experimental paradigm, and test results by analysis of variance, or (2) use “instruments,” mostly meaning paper-and-pencil tests to collect data and interpret these through correlational or multivariate statistics. Anything other than this does not seem to qualify as psychology; it lacks the kind of evidence one is accustomed to accept... . To the extent that emotions are a matter of individual experience, the problem of ascertaining their nature stumbles over what philosophers have termed the ‘the problem of other minds. The private nature of emotional experience would forever keep them out of the range of public verification. Access to *rasa*, however, is a different matter insofar as they are supposed to be generalized form of emotions which are brought into the public domain. Any spectator of a drama can share an aesthetic mood such as mirth or pathos and experientially verify its nature. The *rasa* theorists clarify, however, that such verification is limited to aethetes (*rasikas*) who possess aesthetic

sensibilities (*sahridayata*), and are not wrapped up in their own egoic concerns. Insofar as the devotional mood (*bhakti rasa*) is concerned, one could set up a program of presentation of such a mood in powerful singing of poems composed by highly acclaimed devotees (*bhakti sangeet*). Shared experience of the putative creation of the devotional mood in such a situation can be an experiential demonstration.

All knowledge-seeking endeavours can be understood with the help of three issues: (a) The assumptions about the nature of reality under study (ontology); (b) the relationship between the knower and that which is to be known (epistemology); and, (c) the methods to be used for acquiring knowledge (methodology). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, academic psychology emerged emulating physics, the queen of sciences. The natural science approach served as its model, and psychology aimed at objective, value-free, quantifiable, and generalizable knowledge. From the 1970's onwards it was increasingly felt that the natural science paradigm did not serve well the goals of psychology. Today the discipline consists of diverse research paradigms based on differing ontologies, and concomitant epistemologies and methodologies. No system of psychology can be complete unless it includes the spiritual dimension of existence, and contemporary psychology has begun to take this profound aspect of existence more seriously. Indian systems of psychological knowledge have for millennia emphasized the essential,

spiritual nature of human beings, and the need to integrate the spiritual with everyday life, in order to attain a meaningful and fulfilled existence.

The Indian tradition holds that there are two major planes (*satta*) of reality, viz.- (a) Transcendental reality (*paramarthika*) is considered to be non-changing and universal. It can be experienced in this lifetime under certain conditions of elevated consciousness, e.g., the *samadhi* state. This realm can approximately be termed as the spiritual praxis; and, (b) Empirical reality (*vyavaharika*) is that which is apprehended through the sense modalities. This realm can be approximately understood as the material praxis which includes all physio-psycho-social aspects of mundane existence. Outlined below are the contours of the Indian Paradigm on knowledge, one which holds the spiritual realm as an essential part of existence/reality.

## **Inquiry in the spiritual realm**

**Ontology:** Two major planes (*satta*) of reality :

(a) Transcendental reality (*paramarthika*) is considered to be non-changing and universal. it can be experienced in this life under certain conditions like *samadhi*. This can be approximately termed as the spiritual realm.

(b) Empirical reality (*vyavaharika*) is that which is apprehended through the sense modalities. This can be approximately understood as the material realm (which includes all physio-psycho-social aspects of mundane existence).

**Epistemology :**

(a) *Paramarthika* – Knower and known are one and the same (*aham brahmha asmi*)

(b) *Vyavaharika* – Subject and object dichotomy is upheld (knowledge of object is within the reach of knower).

**Methodology:(a)Experiential;(b)Empirical**

(a) *Paramarthika* – This involves *sadhana* (spiritual praxis) in the supervision of a *rsi* or *drsta* (seer). Ultimate authority in India is in practice, held to belong not to ancient books nor their learned expositions, but to those who have personal experience of spiritual truth. It is a living vision that transforms the inner life, faculties and powers of the person who attains it. *Sadhana* also denotes ‘making’, and thus implicates transformation of self. It involves detached truth seeking (*jijnasa*), sensitiveness (*aksipartrakalpata*), earnestness (*samvega*), maturity and wisdom (*viveka*), and realization of the constraints and limitations emanating from egoism and acquisitiveness.

In general, three ways (*marga*) of spiritual realization are in practice; knowledge, action and devotion (*jnana, karma and bhakti*).

(b) *Vyavaharika* – the major means of knowledge include the following:

- *pratyaksa* (perception)
- *anuman* (inference)
- *upaman* (comparison)
- *sabda* (verbal testimony)
- *arthapatti* (postulation) and
- *anupalabdhi* (non-cognition)

It may be further noted that certain aspects of the Indian paradigm continue to be living realities, and new frameworks continue to evolve, both in terms of theory and practice, for example, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga which emerged in the twentieth century. Sri Aurobindo (1972, pp. 524-525) identified and described four forms of knowing: "Our surface cognition, our limited and restricted mental way of looking at our self, at our inner movements and at the world outside us and its objects and happenings, is so constituted that it derives in different degrees from a fourfold order of knowledge... .A knowledge by identity, a knowledge by intimate direct contact, a knowledge by separative direct contact, a wholly separative knowledge by indirect contact are the four cognitive methods of Nature". Cornelissen (In Press) has elaborated these four types of knowledge as follows: (1) Knowledge by indirect separative contact (= scientific knowledge of the outer reality); (2) Knowledge by direct separative contact (= objective introspection of inner processes); (3) Knowledge by direct intimate contact (= experiential knowledge of inner processes); and, (4) Knowledge by identity (= Vedic knowledge).

## **The issue of verifiability**

The issue of verifiability has been discussed at length by the present author in an earlier publication (Varma, 2005). The lay person as well as most psychologists have a very limited understanding of the nature and workings of science. The analysis of the meaning and ways of science is offered by a group of philosophers who go by the name of "philosophers of science" and this sub-field of Philosophy is referred to as "Philosophy of Science". After the overthrow of

the tyranny of the Church in Europe by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, science had emerged as the new voice of authority, one based on reason. Philosophers and scholars were eager to find out the secret behind the success of Physics which transformed through its applications, in the form of technology, the very way of living. The first view of science which emerged goes by the name of Logical Positivism – to know positively by following a logical procedure. In this view, science consists of merely following a fixed formula-like procedure which leads to sure knowledge. This is the view held by the majority of us, that science is simply a matter of following a time-tested method.

Later analyses of science revealed that no such single absolute procedure of obtaining certain knowledge exists. The only aspects which are common to all scientific endeavours are the principles of induction and deduction – to be able to generalize on the basis of specific observations and then apply the generalizations to make specific predictions. But there is nothing special about these two procedures – humans apply them in most walks of life. Thomas Kuhn (1970) demonstrated that when we compare scientific activity existing in different periods of history, it turns out that they have a different nature altogether - both in terms of the assumptions about the subject matter that is being dealt with as well as concomitant methods appropriate to uncover the workings of the reality under study. Thus Einstein's conceptualizations of mass was radically different from that of Newton's (assumptions about subject matter) and whereas Newton carried out specific experiments (concomitant method) to test his ideas, Einstein engaged in what he referred to as "thought experiments" which involved no empirical observations as such. Yet, both are considered highly scientific. Here, we must note that Kuhn strongly emphasized that for a scientific theory to be held as valid, we must be in a position to verify the claims being made therein.

Still later Paul Feyerabend (1991) noted on the basis of his systematic analysis of the workings of science that:

1. *The events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure.*
2. *Scientific successes cannot be explained in a simple way.*
3. *The success of 'science' cannot be used as an argument for treating as yet unsolved*



*problems in a standardized way.*

4. *Non-scientific procedures cannot be pushed aside by argument.*

5. *There can be many different kinds of sciences.*

Feyerabend (1991; p.3-4) made a stronger a point thereafter – that what counts as valid knowledge is based more on political power structures, rather than actual validity of the offered viewpoint:

First-world science is one science among many; by claiming to be more it ceases to be an instrument of research and turns into a (political) pressure group...People all over the world have developed ways of surviving in partly dangerous, partly agreeable surroundings. The stories they told and the activities they engaged in enriched their lives, protected them and gave them meaning. The “progress of knowledge and civilization” - as the process of pushing Western ways and values into all corners of the globe is being called - destroy these wonderful products of human ingenuity and compassion without a single glance in their direction. ‘Progress of knowledge’ in many places meant killing of minds.

We have to be very clear about the basic issue at this point. The hallmark of scientific enquiry is that knowledge-claims are subject to verification. When a researcher asserts that a force called gravity exists, it can be apprehended or made available to experience. Any individual can drop objects from a height, measure the acceleration of the object as it approaches the ground and thus verify if it accelerates at the rate of 9.82 m/s<sup>2</sup>. Thus all claims to knowledge must be subjected to this procedure – it must be available to experience and through a systematic procedure multiple observers can access the same experience and come to a consensus about its characteristics. Now, when a yogi states that the experience of *Samadhi* (Oneness/Cosmic consciousness) is real, we tend to scoff at him, but when the scientist says that the electron exists we accept it as a matter of faith. The fact of the matter is that if we actually wish to experience an electron, that is, become convinced of its existence we will have to study Physics for many years (perhaps 10 to 12) and carry out a large number of experiments ourselves. The same procedure has to be carried out by every person who wishes to encounter the electron. In fact, consensus on the nature of all scientific knowledge is arrived at in this manner. But the startling fact is that the basic approach of the yogi is no different. To experience *samadhi* (the knowledge-claim) one has to follow as systematic a procedure involving meditation as well as the observance of various austerities, and after a long period of time (possibly 10 to 12 years)

one experiences the state characterized as *samadhi* in the concerned literature. Now this knowledge has found a place in the scriptures because a large number of individuals carried out the requisite procedures and eventually the experience of *samadhi* became accessible to their consciousness. Consensus was thus arrived at. In this way we can clearly see that the yogic methodology is essentially the same as what we call the scientific approach – the former attempts mapping of the outer world and the latter the inner world.

We may further note that modern science itself has informed us that we hear sounds in the frequency range of 20-20000 Hertz (approx.). Below and above that sound exists but we cannot hear it. But other species have access to frequencies which are inaccessible to us. Similar is the case with vision. Thus the range of the normal human senses is not a basis for generating a picture of what exists. The same argument can be extended to the realm of consciousness. We do not doubt that our range of awareness is qualitatively and quantitatively different from animals and there is a great deal of variation across species. In fact, there may be a great deal of variation in the very nature or “stuff” of consciousness within the human species itself. This would then explain why the mystic experiences the world in a different way as compared to others. Simultaneously this view would also be able to account for the difference in consciousness of the psychotic. On the basis of the arguments outlined above, the basic tenets of transpersonal psychology (new) assume a greater validity in contrast to the claims made about psychological reality in traditional mainstream psychology (old). These are as follows (based on Tart, 1975):

*1) Old: Physics is the ultimate science, the study of the real world. Dreams, emotions, and human experience in general are all derivatives.*

*New: Psychological reality is just as real as physical reality. And modern theoretical physics indicates that the two are not so far apart.*

*2) Old: The individual exists in relative isolation from the surrounding environment. We are essentially independent creatures. (And so we can seek to control the world as if we are not part of it.)*

***New:** There is a deep level of psychological/spiritual connection among all forms of life. Each individual is a cosmic creature, deeply embedded in the cosmos.*

***3) Old:** Our ordinary state of consciousness is the best, most rational, most adaptive way the mind can be recognized. All other states are inferior or pathological. Even “mystical states” are suspect, often seen as bordering on the pathological (e.g., “regression”).*

***New:** Higher orders of feeling, awareness, and even rationality are possible. What we call waking consciousness is really more like “waking sleep,” in which we use but a small fraction of our awareness or capacities.*

***4) Old:** Seeking altered states of consciousness is a sign of pathology or immaturity.*

***New:** Seeking to experience different states of consciousness is a natural aspect of healthy human growth.*

***5) Old:** The basic development of personality is complete by adulthood, except for neurotics, people with traumatic childhoods, and the like.*

***New:** Ordinary adults exhibit only a rudimentary level of maturity. The basic “healthy” adult personality is merely a foundation for spiritual work and the development of a far deeper level of wisdom and maturity.*

The last point above makes it very clear that an individual’s experiences of spiritual states are an indication of a higher level of growth taking place which is not only desirable but also necessary if we are to attain full personhood, and this does not preclude Divine possibilities.

## **The place of love in psychotherapy and spiritual healing**

Being a psychologist, I cannot stop at this point, for I must reflect on the fuller psychological consequences of the emergence of the psychic as the true centre of our being, and its impact on individual and collective well-being. Well, first of all, we become from a seeker to a 'finder'. In general, an individual who resides in a psychic consciousness radiates an aura of 'healthiness' and well-being. For the psychic ever guides us to what is good for our whole being, and the dominant emotion is that of love and joy, which by its very nature is integral and complete.

Consciousness is contagious, and psychic consciousness is more so. Thus, in my opinion, a psychologist or more accurately a counselor/psychotherapist who is chiefly concerned with restoring a state of health and well-being in his clients, must him/her self be a relatively permanent member of the abode of well-being, which in itself is a hallmark of psychic existence. In other words, to be an effective therapist, a tremendous amount of self work/*sadhana* has to be carried out on the part of the therapist (one who facilitates healing, and thus restores health). More than anything else, it is the consciousness of the therapist interacting with the consciousness of the client that brings about a positive change in the client, from a state of suffering to a state of well-being. In my opinion, to be a truly effective counselor/psychotherapist, the helping person must have first found his/her soul before s(he) helps others in the coming forward of their psychic.

In general, the Indian view of existence is that of the journey of the Divine in a person. All struggles and suffering in life represent a movement from an infra-rational (animal) existence, to a more rational (human) existence, and further, towards a yet greater supra-rational (Divine) existence and end-state of Truth and Bliss and Peace and Beatitude. This is the human journey; from a life of obscure beginnings in a half-lit animal-human consciousness, to an increasingly diviner humanity. And the counselor/therapist who can assist us in this journey is but of course a fellow traveler who has walked ahead of us from a life of relative darkness to a life of increasing Light. Only one who has mastered swimming to a high degree can save the one who is drowning, and so is the case with therapy.

For convenience, the process of psychotherapy can be divided into two stages. The first is the

movement from a weak ego state (low level of autonomy) to a strong ego state. This is the goal of most psychotherapy in the West. The second, and in my opinion the more important goal is the movement from the ego to the self, or the shift in government from the ego to the psychic. This is the more common goal in the context of spiritual healing. Thus Sudhir Kakar, the noted psychoanalyst, stated (in personal conversation) that “Psychoanalysis is undergraduate work, and spirituality is post graduate work”. Freud had stated that the goal of psychoanalysis is ‘To make the unconscious, conscious’. In the original German, Freud (in Sen, 1998; p. 111) said “*Wo es war soll ich werden*” – Where it (impersonal and unconscious) was, let the I (personal and conscious) become. Kabir Das has beautifully expressed the transformation that takes place on the spiritual path: “*Jab mai tha tab Hari naahi; Ab Hari hai, mai nahi*” – ‘When I was, God was not; Now God is, I am not’ (in Das, 1996). Thus from the vantage point of spirituality, the goal of psychotherapy/healing and growth is summarized, in my words, as such: “Where I was, let Thou become”.

In general, I can confidently state that the most essential pre-requisite on the part of the therapist/spiritual guide for healing to take place, is a posture of and groundedness in unconditional love. Without this, healing cannot begin, and thus the importance of self work/*sadhana*. This has been noted in the western context by the eminent psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1961) in his emphasis of the absolute necessity of the attitude of “unconditional positive regard” on the part of the therapist toward the client, and more explicitly by the eminent psychiatrist M. Scott Peck (1978) in his well known work, “The Road Less Traveled”. A moment’s reflection on healing in the traditional Indian context immediately reveals that when individuals in distress approach their *guru*, the healing process begins with the love and unconditional acceptance of the person in distress, by the *guru*. Thus, at the risk of overstating, I again underscore the key importance of self work on the part of the therapist/*guru*.

Love has an extraordinary transformative power which can heal all breaches and wounds in our consciousness, and eventually liberate us from fear, guilt, and egoism. It is via the showering of love from without that love awakens in our being (psychic consciousness), may it be love in the romantic human sense, or in the spiritual Divine sense. One of the greatest discoveries that we can make in our lifetime, is that of the source of love being within us, and not without. Till some

such time, we continue to roam about lost like the musk deer, forever seeking the fragrance of love all about, not realizing that the secret source of love lies within us hid deep in our very bosom, waiting to be discovered. Thus Huston Smith (1997, p. 334) notes:

It remained for the twentieth century to discover that locked within the atom is the energy of the sun itself. For this energy to be released, however, the atom must be bombarded from without. So too, locked in every human being is a store of love that partakes of the Divine – *the imago dei*, image of God, as it is sometimes called. And it too can be activated only through bombardment, in it's case, love's bombardment. If we too felt loved, not abstractly or in principle but vividly and personally, by one who unites all power and perfection, the experience would melt our fear, guilt, and self-concern permanently. As Kierkegaard said, if at every moment both present and future I were certain that nothing has happened and nothing can ever happen that would separate us from the infinite love of the Infinite, that would be the reason for joy.

In the context of the West, Smith (1997; p. 334) in his profound work on early Christianity, speaks of the impact of Jesus on his immediate followers, in explicit detail. He notes that “The people who first heard Jesus’ disciples proclaiming the Good News (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour), were as impressed by what they saw, as they were by what they heard. They saw lives that had been transformed – men and women who were ordinary in every way except for the fact that they seemed to have found the secret of living. They evinced a tranquility, simplicity and cheerfulness that their hearers had nowhere else encountered. Here were people who seemed to be making a success of the very enterprise everyone would like to succeed at – that of life itself. Specifically, there were two qualities in which their lives abounded. The first of these was mutual regard – a total absence of social barrier – a sense of genuine equality. Second, they had laid hold of an inner peace that found expression in a joy that was radiant. Life for them was no longer a matter of coping. It was glory discerned. They were released from the burdens of fear, guilt and the cramping confines of the ego”.

Smith (1987) notes that Paul’s famous description of Christian love in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is not meant to be interpreted in terms of an attribute one was already familiar with in the West. His words describe the extraordinary qualities of a specific person, Jesus Christ. In phrases of sublime beauty it describes the Divine love that Paul conceived Christians would feel towards others once they had undergone the experience of Christ’s love for them. Paul’s word’s (in Smith, 1987; p. 335) have to be interpreted as a description of a unique

capacity which fully manifested for the first time “in the flesh”, only in person of Jesus Christ:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (*I, Corinthians 13:4-8*)

## **Love and the transformation of human evil**

An equally or even more profound impact of love is its capacity to transform evil. As a therapist/spiritual healer, one encounters all sorts of individuals, even those who have a chequered past and may best be described as “bad” or even “evil”. These are individuals who have no regard for the happiness and well-being of others, and do not hesitate to hurt others, even those who are supposedly close to them. Upon encountering such persons, one feels disgust in their presence, and the first reaction is to distance oneself from them. As a therapist/spiritual healer, one may at times be unable to feel love for these individuals, and is thus unable to help them. In such cases, the person remains unchanged, the world remains the same, and evil continues to exist. Yet, perhaps the only truly effective way to deal with evil is to transform it through love. M. Scott Peck (1990, p.309) who has deeply reflected on this issue and has worked extensively in this area, points out that:

The healing of evil – scientifically or otherwise – can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required. The individual healer must allow his or her soul to become the battleground. He or she must sacrificially absorb the evil. Then what prevents the destruction of that soul? If one takes the evil itself into one’s heart like a spear, how can one’s goodness still survive. Even if the evil is vanquished, thereby will not the good be also? What will have been achieved beyond some meaningless trade-off? I cannot answer this in language other than mystical. I can say only that there is a mysterious alchemy whereby the victim becomes the victor. As C. S. Lewis wrote: “When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the table would crack and death itself would start working backwards.”

I do not know how this occurs, but I know that it does. I know that good people can deliberately allow themselves to be pierced by the evil of others, to be broken thereby, yet somehow not broken. To be even killed in some sense and yet still survive and not succumb. Whenever this happens, there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world.

## Conclusive Remarks

In this way we obtain a glimpse of the extra-ordinary transformative potential of *Bhakti*. To begin with, to reside more and more in a state of love is in itself an extremely positive state of being, one most conducive to health and well-being. And this also has a profound impact on one's dealings with others, as these are characterized by a posture of giving and serving, devoid of any ulterior motives of gaining something. Further, the increasing experience of universal love facilitates the act of complete surrender to the Divine, as a spontaneous and integral process. This is an extraordinarily empowering experience – the shift from a narrow ego-bound consciousness to a psychic consciousness grounded in the true Self.

A groundedness in love is perhaps the most essential quality which must be present in the being of a psychotherapist/spiritual healer. This quality cannot be obtained by any external study or degrees, and can be acquired only through intense self-work/*sadhana*. The role of love in the healing of psychological wounds and hurts, and the transformative power of love in its encounter with evil, is only beginning to be fully appreciated by psychologists, in India and elsewhere. The future of psychology as a truly useful, emancipating, liberating, and life-giving discipline lies in bringing back soul and Spirit to its rightful place at the centre-stage of psychology, and existence at large.

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