

Learning to Connect with God

Understanding Devotion and Spiritual Evolution

Four Types of Devotees in the Bhagavad Gita

There is a beautiful verse in the Bhagavad Gita that describes four distinct types of devotees. This verse is found in Chapter 7, Verse 16 and reads:

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जुन ।
आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥

*Catur-vidhā bhajante mām
janāḥ su-kṛtino 'rjuna
ārto jijñāsur arthārthī
jñānī ca bharatarṣabha.*

O best among the Bhāratas, four kinds of pious men begin to render devotional service unto Me – the distressed, the desirer of wealth, the inquisitive, and he who is searching for knowledge of the Absolute.

Categories of Devotees

These four types of devotees are:

- **Arta:** The distressed devotee, who approaches God seeking relief from afflictions, sorrows, miseries, tragedies, and various problems.
- **Artharthi:** The desirer of wealth, who seeks God for the fulfillment of worldly desires such as name, fame, wealth, and prosperity. This devotee is not troubled but motivated by ambition.
- **Jijnasu:** The inquisitive or spiritual seeker, who desires knowledge and seeks to deepen their understanding of spiritual truths.
- **Jnani:** The wise and enlightened devotee, who has attained spiritual wisdom.
- These four categories—*Ārta*, *Arthārthī*, *Jijñāsu*, and *Jñānī*—can be understood not merely as different types of devotees but also as stages in the evolution of devotion. They represent a gradual transformation in the individual's relationship with the Divine: from turning toward God because of suffering or worldly desires, to seeking

spiritual understanding, and ultimately to realizing the unity of the individual Self with the Supreme.

The Journey of Faith and Devotion

Initially, there may be individuals who do not believe in God. This category, rooted in sensory perception and ignorance, is not discussed here. Such atheism is considered a starting point in the spiritual journey.

The first category is the *Ārta*, the devotee who turns to God in times of distress. Such a person may be confronted by suffering, tragedy, illness, personal difficulties, or circumstances that exceed his or her capacity to resolve them through ordinary means. Having exhausted available resources, the individual may turn to prayer as a final recourse.

This initial movement toward God is often accompanied by uncertainty. If one has not previously experienced a relationship with the Divine, there may be little or no established faith.

For the person in distress, however, circumstances may create an opening for faith. Someone may suggest prayer, chanting the Divine Name, fasting, or visiting a place of worship. The individual, having tried other means without success, may decide to test this possibility. This can be regarded as the beginning of devotional practice.

The next stage is one of experimentation. The devotee is not yet certain that prayer will be answered, but the urgency of the situation provides sufficient motivation to try. When a prayer appears to be answered and a seemingly impossible difficulty is resolved, faith begins to develop. The experience is remembered, and when another crisis arises, the individual may once again turn toward God. Repeated experiences of this kind gradually strengthen trust and establish the beginnings of a relationship with the Divine.

The *Arthārthī* represents another closely related form of early devotion. Unlike the *Ārta*, who approaches God primarily because of suffering, the *Arthārthī* approaches God with worldly aspirations. These may include desires for wealth, prosperity, recognition, success, or other forms of worldly attainment. At this stage, the individual's relationship with God remains largely transactional: one turns to the Divine in the hope of receiving something desired.

The two forms may therefore be understood together as *Ārta-Arthārthī bhakti*, representing an early stage in which devotion is substantially motivated by personal circumstances and desires.

As prayers are answered, faith in God gradually strengthens. Initially, there is no faith, but repeated experiences of answered prayers build confidence and trust in God. This cycle may repeat—forgetting God until another problem arises and then turning back in faith. In the beginning, God fulfills prayers to encourage the devotee, much like a mother delights when her child seeks her.

God's Responses to Prayer

It is beautifully said that God answers prayers in four ways:

1. **Yes:** Whatever is asked is given.
2. **No:** The request is not granted, typically because it is not beneficial.
3. **Wait:** The response is delayed until the right time.
4. **Take, here is something better:** God provides something superior to what was requested, recognizing needs the devotee may not be aware of.

When prayers are answered in these ways, faith in God grows stronger. Testing God is not inappropriate in the beginning, since God may seem distant or unfamiliar.

The best way to test God is to bring problems to Him and observe whether they are resolved. Taking a resolve—such as chanting God's name, visiting a pilgrimage site, or fasting—helps remind the devotee of their request and fosters a relationship with God.

As trust and faith deepen through answered prayers, an intuitive sense of divine presence develops, leading to a desire to intensify one's relationship with God.

God's Expectations and Righteousness

As the relationship with God evolves and faith becomes strong, God begins to expect certain things from the devotee. The primary expectation is to walk the path of righteousness, or dharma. Dharma is interpreted here as goodness and truthfulness.

The Bhagavad Gita also emphasizes this through the following verse (Chapter 4, Verse 8):

परित्राणाय साधुनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मसंस्थानार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥ ८ ॥

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām
vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām
dharma-saṁsthāpanārthāya
sambhavāmi yuge yuge*

"Whenever and wherever, there is a decline in righteousness, O Arjuna, and a predominant rise of unrighteousness—at that time I manifest Myself."

To make one's relationship with God stronger, it becomes necessary to walk the path of righteousness. This marks the stage of a Jijnasu, where worldly desires fade and the focus shifts to pleasing God through righteous actions.

The highest priority in life becomes pleasing God, as one's happiness, welfare, and existence are seen as dependent on Him. The spiritual seeker, or Sadhaka, strives to live truthfully and righteously to please the creator.

Daily situations—doing good or bad to others, performing better or worse, finding faults, forming attachments—should be handled in ways that please God. This is the distinction between a God-centric and an ego-centric life. Ego-centric actions, especially those rooted in selfishness, are displeasing to God. Whenever we please God, we are happy and whenever God is displeased, we are miserable. In short, there is no way in the world to become happy other than by pleasing my creator.

God communicates His pleasure or displeasure through the state of one's mind. A peaceful mind indicates alignment with God's will, while a disturbed mind signals deviation from righteousness.

If we are disturbed, somewhere we are compromising with the higher values of life, and therefore we are wrong. The paths of righteousness and disturbance cannot go together. To notice this disturbance, our attention should focus on what is happening inside us. When the attention is focused inward, awareness of the situation automatically follows.

Handling Disturbance and Cultivating Right Thinking

Disturbances in the mind manifest in various forms—jealousy, hatred, revenge, infatuation—and indicate disconnection from God and compromise with higher values. Whenever the mind is disturbed, one is not walking the path of righteousness. The disturbed mind is brought back to the state of equanimity and peace when the wrong thinking is replaced by the right thinking.

To listen to God, attention must be directed inward. Meditation plays a crucial role here. The primary duty as a spiritual seeker is to overcome mental disturbance using a five-point technique:

1. Observe
2. Detect
3. Eliminate

4. Substitute

5. Strengthen

Negative thoughts are detected through observation and eliminated by substituting them with right, or righteous, thoughts. Righteous thinking should be prioritized over mere positive thinking, which may not always be aligned with truth.

When wrong thinking is replaced by right thinking, peace is restored. Peace is the sign that God is pleased and that forgiveness has been granted. Listening and obeying this inner guidance ensures protection by divine grace.

Divine communication is only possible when the mind is peaceful, which is the Sattvic state. Major decisions should be made only in this state, as a disturbed mind tends to lead to errors.

Improving the Relationship with God

By decoding disturbances and sincerely obeying the guidance received, one's relationship with God improves over time. Every situation becomes an opportunity to attune to God. Practicing the right way of handling situations and abandoning the wrong way are essential steps.

Success and praise should not be allowed to be boosted by the ego, as this leads to forgetting God and is based on untruth. All achievements belong to God, and egoistic joy is considered spiritual pain or "sweet poison."

The path of righteousness is a path of struggle and conscious effort. While the path of unrighteousness offers least resistance, true spiritual growth requires alertness, vigilance, and determination to overcome temptations and hardships.

Walking the path of righteousness develops spiritual strength and purity of mind. Spiritual "muscles" are only developed when one walks the path of righteousness. As purity increases, the devotee gains clearer discernment of right and wrong, greater responsibility, freedom, and attuning with the Divine.

Disconnection from God results in loss of all auspiciousness and is considered "hell" for the devotee. The sensitivity to negative thoughts increases as one evolves spiritually, and avoiding even a single negative thought becomes crucial.

The Final Stage: Oneness with the Divine

The journey culminates in the state of Jnani Bhakti, where one becomes united with the divine. The realization is expressed in Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.9: "*Brahmavit brahmaiva bhavati*" – the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.

At this highest stage, the distinction between individual and Divine disappears. One recognizes that only God exists, and the journey of the soul—from ignorance to knowledge, imperfection to perfection, individual Self to Supreme Self—reaches its goal.

This journey is inevitable for all, regardless of how many births it takes. Even those who ignore the path must eventually walk it, evolving from ignorance to knowledge, from imperfection to perfection, from the little i (individual self) to the capital I (the Supreme Self), from jivatma to Paramatma, from darkness to light.

Attitude Towards Fellow Travelers

Since everyone is at a different stage of spiritual evolution, compassion and forgiveness are essential attitudes toward those at lower stages. People are at different levels of evolution, and many births may be required for progress, and patience is necessary. Some may have started their journey in the human body after graduation from the animal kingdom and their behavior may be animalistic- only compassion, understanding and forgiveness should be our attitude towards them.

Toward those at higher stages, reverence and a willingness to learn from them are important for our own evolution.

These attitudes foster harmony and growth within the spiritual community.

Summary

In summary, four stages of devotion to God are described: turning to Him in distress, seeking worldly benefits, pursuing spiritual understanding, and ultimately gaining spiritual wisdom. As faith develops, devotion becomes less about personal desires and more about living truthfully and righteously. Inner peace is presented as a sign of being aligned with God, while mental disturbance signals the need to correct one's thinking and actions. The ultimate goal is to realize oneness with the Divine, while showing compassion, patience and forgiveness toward others on their own spiritual journeys.